

KODANSHA



化物語

バケモノガタリ

上



Illustration / VOFAN

西尾維新

NISIOISIN

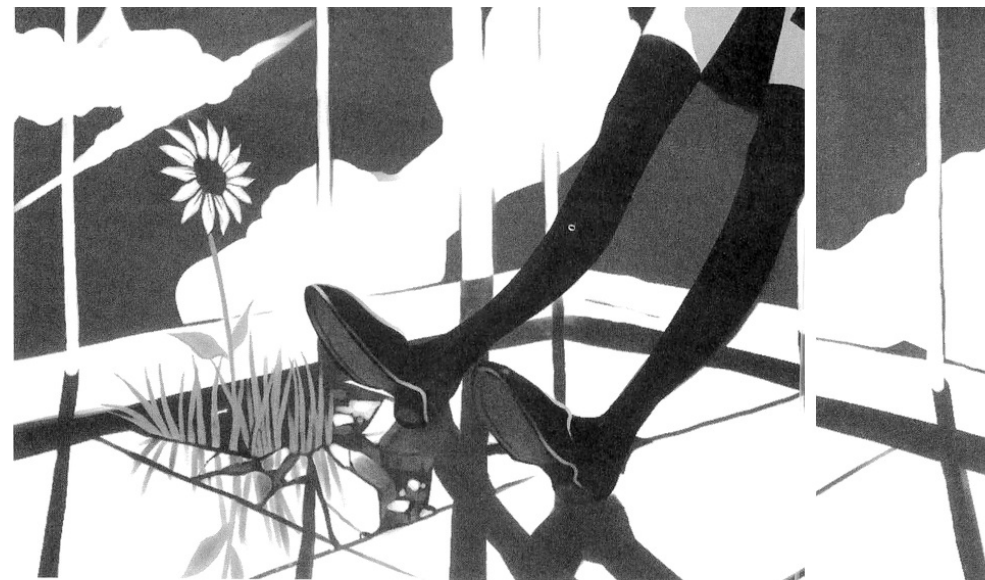
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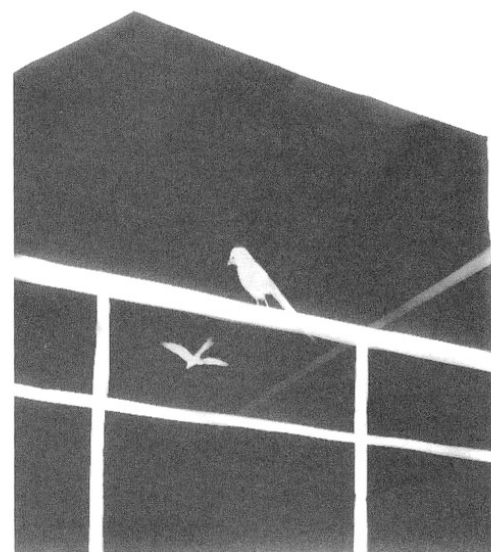
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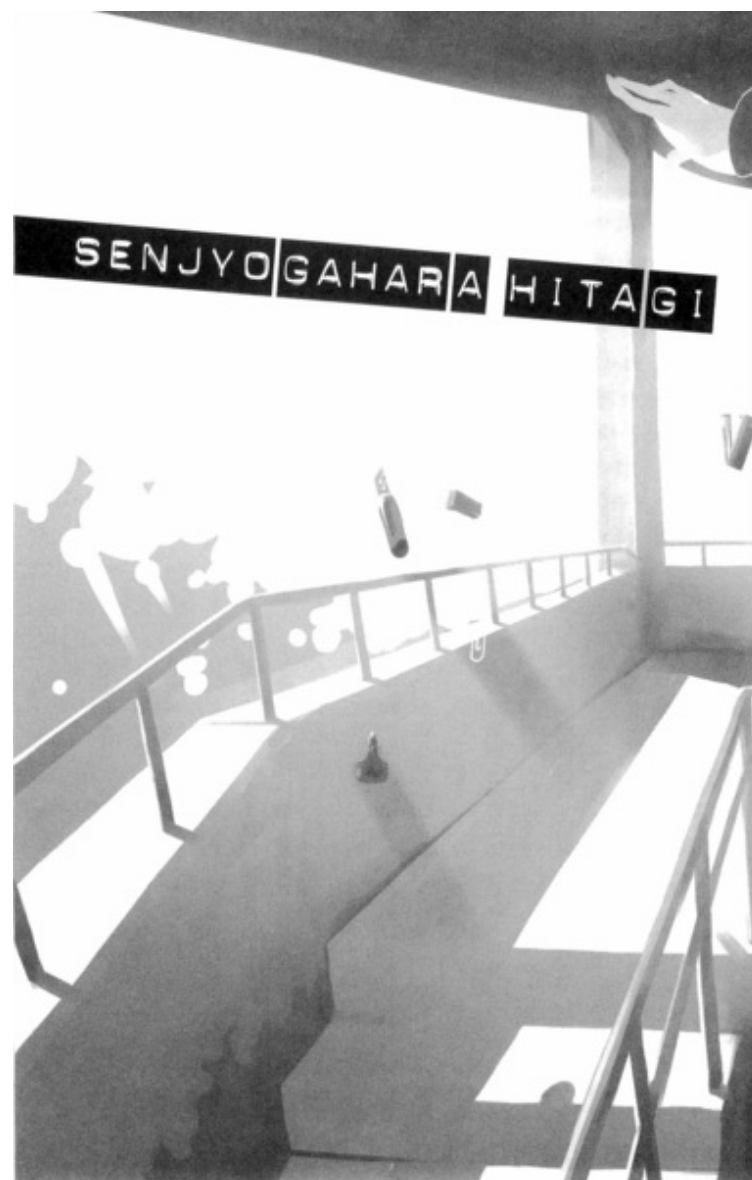
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KANBARU SURUGA





Hitagi Crab

Senjougahara Hitagi was widely known to be a sickly girl; so it is not surprising that she would be exempt from physical education classes. Even during morning assemblies, she would sit in the shade because of her anemia. Although I've been in the same classes as her for three years in high school, I've never seen her move so actively. She frequently visited the nurse's office, and because of hospital checkups, she often either came to class late, left early, or was absent altogether. Many of my classmates joke that the hospital is her home.

Even though she's sick, she's far from insubstantial. As if she was as thin as a thread, she gives off the impression that she would break at the slightest touch. For that reason, perhaps, the boys in our class half-joked that she might be the heiress to some big company. It seemed almost plausible. Even I think that suits Senjougahara.

In the corner of the room, Senjougahara always read by herself. Sometimes it would be a hard cover book, but sometimes it would be one of those comics that lower your IQ. She seemed to be quite indiscriminate in her choice of books. Maybe because she reads anything with words, though there may be quality in her choice in books.

She's intelligent and at the top of the class.

She's always in the top ten on the ranking list announced after examinations, in every subject. Although it's presumptuous to compare her to someone like me (who fails every subject except mathematics), it must be because our brains are constructed differently.

It seems like she doesn't have friends.

Not a single one.

I've never seen her talking with anyone. From my point of view, the sight of her reading a book — the very action of her reading a book — may have created a wall around her. Because of that, though I've been seated beside her for a little more than 2 years, I can confidently say that I have never talked with her. Unfortunately. With regards to her voice, I've only heard her say "I don't know" in reply to the teacher's questions in class. (Though I don't know if she really knew the answer or not, she always replied with "I don't know".) In the specialized domain of the school, it was common for people without friends to form groups with other people without friends (in other words, a colony). Actually, I was in such a group until last year. However, Senjougahara is an exception to this rule. Of course, she's not being bullied either. For better or worse, I've never seen her being a victim. I've always taken for granted that she would always be in that corner of the classroom, reading her books. She had created a wall around herself.

Her presence there was a given.

Her absence here was expected.

Well, it doesn't matter.

After spending three years in high school, with two hundred students per level between first years to third years, senpais, kouhais, classmates, and all the teachers making up nearly a thousand people together in the same space, I've begun to wonder how many of these people I know personally. I think anyone would find my answer depressing.

Even if a miracle happened and you shared the same class with someone for three years, I don't think that you'd feel lonely not exchanging any words with that person. It just ends up as a memory that such a person had existed. Even though I don't know what will happen to me a year after I graduate from high school, I probably won't have a reason to remember Senjougahara's face, nor be able to do so.

That's fine with me. It should be the same for Senjougahara as well. Not only for her, but it should be the same for everyone in the school. It must be wrong to even think about such a thing as depressing.

That was what I thought.

But.

On one particular day.

To be truthful, I'd just ended a hellish excuse for a spring break, became a third year student, and saw the end of a nightmarish Golden Week. It was the 8th of May.

As previously mentioned, I had a tendency for tardiness, and was therefore rushing up the stairs of the school building. At that moment, a girl fell from the sky.

The girl was Senjougahara Hitagi.

To be truthful, she probably didn't fall from the sky. She'd probably tripped on the stairs and fell backwards. I could have dodged it, but I chose to catch her and break her fall.

It seemed like a better choice than dodging.

No, it was most probably a mistake.

Because.

Because Senjougahara, whom I caught and hence stopped her fall, was very—impossibly light. No kidding, she was mysteriously, eerily, light.

As though she wasn't even there. That's right. Senjougahara was so light, it was as if she had no weight.

"Senjougahara-san?" Hanekawa tilted her head to the side, puzzlement in her eyes. "What about Senjougahara-san?"

"You know - " I hesitated. "I'm just, curious."

"You don't say."

"You know, like, she has a weird name, doesn't she?"

"Senjougahara is the name of a place."[\[1\]](#)

"Well, it's not that, I'm talking about her first name."

"If I'm not wrong, her first name is Hitagi, isn't it? It's not really weird. If I remember correctly, it's a term related to public works."[\[2\]](#)"

"You really know everything..."

"I don't know everything. I just know what I know." Although Hanekawa did not seem satisfied with my answer, she did not persist, but only commented offhandedly. "It's quite rare for Araragi-kun to take notice of other people."

I told her it was none of her business.

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

She's the class representative.

She is a girl with the air of a class representative, with proper glasses, rule-abiding, awfully serious and popular with teachers, one of the rare breeds that only exist in anime and manga these days.

She has been the class representative all her life, and has an air about her that suggests she will continue to be a class representative all her life, and is the representative of all representatives. There are rumours that she might have been chosen by a god to be a class representative (just me, actually.)

We were in different classes for the first and second year of school and only ended up in the same class for third year. Even before we were in the same class, I had heard about Hanekawa's existence. It was a given; if Senjougahara was in the top of the class every year, Hanekawa was the top student. She attains full marks for all five or six subjects as if it was a walk in the park, and even now, I can remember her inhuman feat. In the term tests of the first semester of our second year, including Physical Education and Fine Arts, the only mistake she made was on a trick question in History. She

was so famous, even if I didn't want to, I would have ended up hearing about her.

And.

Unfortunately, no, it might be a good thing, but it doesn't discount the fact that it's irritating. Hanekawa is a kind human being, good at taking care of people. And it is honestly unfortunate that she is a determined person as well. She is such a serious person that she doesn't budge once she has made up her mind. During the spring break, just because of a little incident that should have been over by now, even though she didn't know whether we would end up in the same class or not, she had declared: "I will definitely change you for the better."

For someone like me who was neither a delinquent nor a problem child, more of an ornament in class than anything, her declaration came as a shock. No matter how hard I tried to dissuade her, she forced me to become the assistant class representative.

That was why today, the 8th of May, the both of us stayed back after school to plan the Cultural Festival that was to be held in the middle of June.

"Though it's the Cultural Festival, we're third year students. We can't afford to do anything big, because we'll be having examinations soon." said Hanekawa.

As expected of the representative of all class representatives, she places more importance on examinations than cultural festivals.

"Instead of wasting time on gathering opinions with surveys, how about we think of some ideas and let the class take a vote on them?"

"It sounds good to me. Democratic."

"As usual, you make it sound so negative. As if you are already defeated."

"I'm not defeated. Don't target my weak points."

"Anyway, just for reference, Araragi-kun, what did you do for the Cultural Festival for the past two years?"

"A Haunted House and a Cafe."

"I see... the normal. Too normal. One could even say mundane."

"I guess."

"Mundane might be good."

"Don't say that."

"Ahaha."

"Most of the stalls will be mundane, but is it such a bad idea? Not only do we have to entertain the guests, we have to keep things interesting for ourselves.... That reminds me, Senjougahara - she doesn't participate in Cultural Festivals, does she?"

Not last year - and not the year before that either.

It's not only for Cultural Festivals. Senjougahara probably does not participate in anything outside normal class time. Sport festivals were a given, but she does not participate in class outings or camps. The excuse being that the doctor has forbidden any form of physical exertion, or something of the sort. Now that I think of it, it's weird. Physical exercise is understandable, but to exclude any forms of physical activity -

But, what if -

What if I had been mistaken.

What if Senjougahara had no weight.

Other than normal classes, indeed, in situations where she'll be surrounded by large numbers of people, such as physical education classes, there will be an increase in the chance of being touched, and she most definitely cannot be able to participate.

"Are you very concerned about Senjougahara?"

"Not really."

"Guys prefer weak and sickly girls after all. That's so perverted." Hanekawa teased.

It was a comparably preferable moment.

"Sickly, huh..."

I suppose you could call her sickly.

But does that count as an illness?

Is it all right to pass that off as an illness?

It's easy to understand why the body would become lighter during illness, but that was way beyond the level of illness.

From the topmost staircase, almost as if she was dancing, a slim girl fell. It was a situation where the person who attempted to catch her would most definitely be injured.

Despite that, there was no impact.

"Shouldn't you know more about Senjougahara than me? After all, you've been in the same class as

Senjougahara for three years running."

"You could say that - but girls would know more about other girls."

"I wonder..."

A cynical laugh.

"If a girl has problems, she wouldn't talk to guys about it, wouldn't you agree?"

"That's true."

Of course it's true.

"That's why... just think of it as a question from the assistant class rep to the class rep. What kind of a person is Senjougahara?"

"Well."

Hanekawa, who had not stopped writing even as she spoke to me (she wrote and erased and rewrote "Haunted House" and "Café" as the first items on the list of "Item to be presented during Cultural Festival"), stopped and folded her arms.

"Senjougahara, well, her family name seems rather dangerous at first glance, but she's an honor student with no problems. She's clever and doesn't avoid cleaning duties."

"I'll bet. I already knew that. I'm asking about things I don't know."

"But I've only been in the same class with her for a month. It's a given that there are many things that I don't know. There was Golden Week, too."

"Oh right, Golden Week."

"Was there something about Golden Week?"

"Nothing. Please continue."

"Ah... That's right. Senjougahara isn't someone of many words, and she doesn't seem to have any friends either. Even though I've tried to approach her, she gives the feeling of having built a wall about her..."

"..."

As expected, she sees through everyone.

Of course, I had expected that answer to my question.

"That - is really difficult," said Hanekawa.

With an ominous right.

“It might be because of her illness, I suppose. During middle school, she was more energetic, and bright.”

“When you say middle school – Hanekawa, you were in the same middle school as Senjouhara?”

“Eh? Didn’t you ask me because of that?” She looked surprised. “We are from the same middle school, Kiyokaze Public Middle School. Even though we weren’t in the same class, Senjouhara was famous.”

More than you, you mean, was what I wanted to say, but didn’t. Hanekawa hated being treated like someone famous. Though I think that she isn’t self-conscious enough, she seems to think of herself as “a normal girl whose only redeeming feature is her diligence”. In her opinion, studying is something that anyone can do.

“She was really pretty, and good at sports.”

“Good at sports...”

“She was the star of track-and-field. She also broke several records, I think.”

“Track-and-field...”

That means.

She wasn’t like that in middle school.

Energetic and bright – that means, to be direct, it’s entirely unimaginable when you look at Senjouhara to be direct; it’s entirely unimaginable when you look at Senjouhara right now.

“That’s why, I heard so much about her.”

“Heard?”

“That she was a really considerate girl. That she doesn’t discriminate and treats everyone equally well, and that she came from a good family. Her father was one of the top people in a foreign capital company, she lives in a mansion, and although she’s really rich, she’s not snobbish at all. She’s above us, and aiming even higher.”

“She sounds like a superwoman.”

“Well, it’s probably half-true.”

Rumors are rumors.

“Of course, that’s what they were saying at that time.”

“At that time.”

“After we entered high school, I heard that she became ill. Despite that, I was shocked when we ended up in the same class this year and I saw her. After all, she wasn’t the type to stick in a corner of the classroom.”

It was what she had assumed selfishly, said Hanekawa.

It was definitely a selfish assumption.

People change.

From middle school to high school, it’s a given that people will change. I changed, and Hanekawa must also have changed. That’s why it’s understandable that Senjougahara had changed. She must have had her own problems, and maybe she really became ill. That might be the reason why she had lost her cheerful self. She must have lost her energy. Anyone would be depressed when they’re sick. Especially if they had been lively in the past. That’s why, my conjecture must be correct.

If that had not happened this morning.

That’s what I can say.

“But – I probably shouldn’t say this about Senjougahara.”

“What?”

“Compared to the past, she’s a lot prettier now.”

“....”

“Her existence is – really fragile.”

Silence – She had hit the bull’s-eye.

That.

A fragile existence.

She had no – presence.

As if she was a spirit?

Senjougahara Hitagi.

A sickly girl.

A girl with no – weight.

An urban legend.

The subject of gossip.

The stuff of rumors.

Half-true, was it.

“Ah, I just remembered something.”

“Eh?”

“Oshino called me.”

“Oshino-san? What for?”

“Something – Well, he probably wanted me to help with his work.”

“I see.” Hanekawa’s expression was unreadable.

The sudden change in topic – more like, the conspicuous attempt to round up the issue, she seems distrustful. Saying that I had to “help with his work” was on a spur of the moment. That’s why I don’t get along well with smart people.

She can probably tell what I’m thinking.

I stood up, forcibly trying to keep my tone light.

“So, I gotta leave like, now. I’ll leave the rest to you, Hanekawa?”

“If you agree to compensate for today, then it’s all right. There isn’t much left, so I’ll let you off for today. You shouldn’t keep Oshino-san waiting.”

Hanekawa had said that for my sake.

Seems like using Oshino’s name was a good choice. Oshino was a benefactor to both of us, and we didn’t want to appear ungrateful. Well, of course, I had taken that into account, and it wasn’t exactly a lie.

“Then, for the cultural festival item, is it all right if I make the decision? Though we’ll get the approval from the rest afterwards.”

“Yeah. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Give my best to Oshino-san.”

“I will.”

And I stepped out of the classroom.

I stepped out of the classroom, shutting the door with one hand, and had taken a single step, when, from behind me,

“What were you talking to Hanekawa-san about?”

A voice asked.

I turned around.

As I turned, I was still unable to ascertain the identity of the person behind me – it was an unfamiliar voice. Though I had heard it before... That’s right, during class, it was that feeble voice that always answered “I don’t know” –

“Don’t move.”

From those two words alone, I realized that it was Senjouhara.

In the instant that I faced her squarely, I also realized that she had inserted a cutter-knife into my mouth, as if she had aimed for it, as if she had cut through space and time.

The blade of the cutter-knife was.

Touching the inside of my left cheek.

“I”

“Ah, let me correct myself. ‘You may move if you want to, but it’s dangerous’ would be more accurate in this situation.”

Though she had given me no allowance to move, it wasn’t yet violence, but on the verge of it – the blade was touching the inside of my cheek.

I stood, like a fool, mouth wide open, quivering, but frozen in place.

I’m afraid, I thought.

Not of the cutter-knife.

But of Senjouhara, who, whilst threatening me with a cutter-knife, stared at me coldly, unmoving. Had she –

Had I ever seen her wear such an insecure expression?

I'm confident now.

From Senjouhahara's eyes, I'm confident that, though she didn't cut me, the side of the cutter-knife touching the inside of my left cheek was not the back of the blade.

“Your curiosity is like that of a cockroach – digging into people's secrets persistently. It's unbearably irritating. You've touched my nerves, you boring excuse for a bug.”

“H-hey...”

“What's wrong? Is your right cheek feeling lonely? You could have told me so in the first place.”

Senjouhahara raised her left hand.

That swiftness of movement, as if she was going to slap me. I braced myself, but it didn't come. No, that wasn't it.

She was holding a stapler in her left hand.

Before I could ascertain the identity of the object, she had already slipped it into my mouth. Of course, she didn't put the entire stapler into my mouth, but held it in a way that suggested that she was going to staple my right cheek – as if she was going to bind something, she put it into my mouth.

And, loosely, she pressed down.

As if she was going to staple something.

“...ah”

The bigger and heavier end of the staple, that is, the pointed ends of the staples, the fully loaded side, was inserted into my mouth, and of course, resulted in my inability to produce speech. With only the cutter-knife, I hadn't been able to move, but I had been able to speak – but now I didn't even dare to try speaking. I didn't have to think about it.

First she had me open my mouth with the thin cutter-knife, and followed up with the stapler – the level of premeditation in her plan was frightening.

Damn, the last time I had things stuck into my mouth was when I was undergoing treatment for a tooth infection. So that I never had to repeat that experience, I brushed my teeth every day, I chewed gum to remove parasites- But now, I was faced with a situation just as bad... but this time, I didn't have any gum that might somehow get rid of a stapler. Or a knife.

What a way to trip someone up.

In an instant, I was completely trapped.

In the corridors of a private high school, I was in a situation so absurd, it was unimaginable that on

the other side of the wall, Hanekawa was deciding the class activity for the Cultural Festival.

Hanekawa...

What do you mean, “her family name seems rather dangerous”?

She is extremely dangerous.

It’s unexpected that Hanekawa misjudged her.

“After you ask Hanekawa-san about my life in middle school, do you intend to ask my form teacher Hoshina-sensei? Or do you intend to skip the form teacher and go straight to the school doctor Harukami-sensei?”

“...” I couldn’t speak.

I didn’t know what Senjouhara thought of the me who couldn’t speak, but she sighed deeply.

“What a careless mistake. Even though I had been paying attention because I was ‘climbing the stairs’, that happened. It’s one of those little farts they preach about.”

“...”

I might be a good guy for not commenting about her talk about farts, which most girls would have been rightly embarrassed about.

“I never thought there would be a banana peel on the stairs.”

“...”

My life is in the hands of a girl who slipped on a banana peel. More importantly, why was there *a banana peel* on the stairs in a school?

“You realize it, don’t you?” asked Senjouhara, with that insecure look in her eyes.

She must be the daughter of some rich family.

“That’s right. I have no weight.”

Weightless.

“Well, even though I said that, it’s impossible for me to have no weight. From my height and body structure, my expected weight should be in the range of the forties.”

She’s probably fifty kilograms.

My left cheek was forcefully stretched outwards and pressure put on my right cheek.

“...!”

“I won’t forgive any weird imaginations of yours. You must have imagined me nude, didn’t you?”

She was entirely off the mark, but the result was just as sharp.

“I must be in the later range of the forties,” she asserted. She stood her ground.

“But my weight at this moment is five kilograms.”

Five kilograms.

It wasn’t very different from a newborn baby.

An image of a five kilogram dumbbell came to mind, and it wasn’t anywhere close to zero. But for five kilograms to be spread out in the volume of a human being, the density – to her, it must feel as if she has no weight.

It would be easy to catch her as she fell.

“Well, even though the scales say that I’m five kilograms, I don’t feel it. I don’t feel any different from when I was in the later range of the forties.”

Does that –

Does that mean that gravity doesn’t work on her? Not weight, but volume – since humans are made up of mostly water, specific gravity, assuming density is one whole – put simply, Senjouhara is only one-tenth of that density.

If the density of the bones is one-tenth of the actual weight, she’d suffer from osteoporosis before long. Her organs and brains would not be able to work properly.

That’s why, it’s completely impossible.

It’s not about the numbers.

If she was as light as this, she would be dead.

“I know what you’re thinking about.”

“...”

“To keep staring at my breasts, you’re disgusting.”

“...!”

I swear I wasn’t staring!

Seems like Senjouhara is a rather self-conscious girl. It's not unexpected, given her looks and beauty – I just wish that Senjouhara had even a thousandth of Hanekawa's virtues.

“That's why I hate shallow people.”

It doesn't seem possible to clear the misunderstanding between us – but more important, I was of the opinion that Senjouhara wasn't really sick, but that it was only a façade. With a weight of fifty kilograms, she's neither sick nor ill. If you say she's strong, she must be an alien from a planet with ten times the gravity of that on Earth, and must be pretty good at sports. Especially since she was in the track-and-field. Though she doesn't seem suited to fighting...

“It happened after I graduated from middle school, and before I entered high school,” said Senjouhara. “In that odd period when I was neither a middle schooler nor a high schooler, even though it wasn't even spring break, I became like this.”

“ ... ”

“I met - a crab.”

C-crab?

Did she say crab? Crab as in – the crab that you eat in winter?

With a shell and ten legs – an arthropod?

“It stole my weight.”

“ ... ”

“Well, you don't really have to understand. It'll be problematic for me if you continue asking questions, so I'm telling you now. Araragi-kun. Araragi-kun, hey, Araragi-kun.”

Senjouhara called my name, repeatedly.

“I don't have weight – I don't have mass. Nothing that's remotely related to weight. It's not problematic for me at all. It's just like in ‘Yousuke's Mysterious World’. Do you like Takahashi Shousuke?”

“ ... ”

“The only person in this school who knows of this is Harukami-sensei, the school doctor. As of this moment, only Harukami-sensei. Not the principal Yoshiki-sensei, not the senior teacher Shima-sensei, not the level headed Irinaka-sensei. Only Harukami-sensei – and you, Araragi-kun.”

“ ... ”

“So now, what should I do so that you will keep quiet about my secret? For my sake, what should I

do? Other than ‘tearing apart your mouth’ so that you can’t speak, what should I do so that you will swear to ‘keep your mouth shut’?”

Cutter-knife.

Stapler.

Is she all right? What a forceful approach to her classmate. Is it all right for someone like her to exist? When I think about the fact that I’d been sitting in the same room, beside such a scary human being for more than two years, shivers run down my spine.

“According to the doctors at the hospital, the reason is unknown – or rather, there should be no reason. After doing what they wanted with my body, what an insulting answer. That it must have been like that from the beginning, that it was the only thing they could say,” said Senjougahara self-deprecatingly.

“Don’t you think that it’s absurd? Even though I was a perfectly normal, perfectly cute girl until middle school.”

“ ... ”

Let’s ignore the fact that she called herself cute.

She really had been going to the hospital.

Tardiness, leaving early, absences.

And – the school doctor.

I wonder what he thought about it.

Like me, just like me, only not in the short space of the two weeks of spring break, but always.

What had she given up on?

What had she forsaken?

Enough time had passed.

“Are you going to pity me? How kind of you.”

As if she had seen into my thoughts, she spoke insultingly. As if everything was filthy.

“But I don’t want your pity.”

“ ... ”

“What I want is your silence and your indifference. Do you think you’re capable of that? You want to

treasure your unblemished cheeks, don't you?"

Senjouhahara smiled.

"Araragi-kun, if you can promise me silence and indifference, nod twice. I will treat any other action as an offensive move and will attack accordingly."

What a one-sided speech.

Left with no choice, I nodded twice.

"I see."

Senjouhahara seemed relieved by my choice of action. Even though I had been left with no choice, even though she had been the one bargaining, even though her request was one that I could not deny – she seemed relieved by the fact that I had accepted it.

"Thank you." As she said that, she removed her cutter-knife from my mouth, not carefully, but excruciatingly, slowly. She put away the cutter-knife.

Next was the stapler-

"...Urgh!?"

Snap.

Unbelievable.

Senjouhahara closed the stapler forcefully.

And before I could respond to the pain, she removed the stapler.

I collapsed onto the floor.

Clutching the side of my mouth in pain.

"O...ouch"

"You won't scream. How admirable," said Senjouhahara, looking down with an uncaring face.

"I'll let you off with this. If you hate your own incompetence, you may keep your side of the bargain without an ounce of sincerity."

"...Y-you"

Snap.

As I was about to say something, Senjouhahara pressed down on the stapler, as if she was going to

bind something together.

The staple fell before my very eyes.

Naturally, I shivered.

A conditioned reflex.

With just one attempt – she created a conditioned reflex.

“All right then, Araragi-kun, from tomorrow onwards, please make sure to ignore me. I’m depending on you.”

After saying that, without waiting for my response, she went down the stairs. Before I could get up from my crouch, she had turned the corner and disappeared from sight.

“Ah, what a devil-like woman.”

Our brains are definitely constructed differently.

Even though all of that had happened, despite that, in some part of my brain, I'd thought she wouldn't do it. The fact that she chose the stapler instead of the cutter-knife should give me hope.

I stroked my cheek, not to ease the pain, but to ascertain its state.

“ ... ”

All right.

She hadn't pierced through.

And then, I inserted my finger into my mouth. My left finger, because it was my right cheek. I felt my way in.

The pain was not gone, nor was it so weak that I couldn't find the staple – but there was only one of it. As expected, it was only meant as a threat, and it could still be considered a peaceful attempt... though truthfully, I had been hoping for that.

Oh well.

The fact that it hadn't pierced through my cheek meant that the staple had not bent... it was still in its original shape, with the sharp ends pointed outwards. That meant that she had not used her full force.

With my thumb and forefinger, I pulled it out in one go.

The sharp pain was mixed with the iron taste of blood.

Blood was spurting out, it seems.

“Ow...”

It’s all right.

If it’s only this, I’ll be fine.

As I licked the two holes on the inside of my cheek, I folded the ends of the staple and slipped it into the pocket of my jacket. I picked up the staple that Senjougahara dropped and repeated the action. It’ll be dangerous if someone who wasn’t wearing shoes stepped on it. I couldn’t help but treat these staples as dangerous objects like Magnum bullets.

“Eh? Why are you still here, Araragi-kun?” said Hanekawa as she stepped out of the classroom.

It seemed like she’d finished the papers.

That took quite a bit of time.

Or should I say, nice timing.

“Shouldn’t you hurry to Oshino-san’s place?” asked Hanekawa.

It was like she hasn’t realized anything.

She had been on the other side of the wall. It was a very thin wall. Despite that, without letting Hanekawa notice anything, she managed to pose such a threat. Senjougahara Hitagi is truly someone to be feared.

“Hanekawa... Do you like bananas?”

“Eh? Well, I don’t hate them. They’re nutritious, and if I had to decide, I guess I do like them.”

“No matter how much you like them, don’t eat them in school!”

“W-what?”

“Well, it’s fine if you eat them in school, but if you leave the peel on the staircase, I’ll never forgive you!”

“What on earth are you talking about, Araragi-kun!?” said Hanekawa, looking exasperated.

That’s to be expected.

“More importantly, Araragi-kun, what about Oshino-san –”

“I’m heading there now,” I said.

As I said that, I left Hanekawa and dashed off. “Ah, hey, Araragi-kun! You shouldn’t run in the corridors! I’ll tell the teacher!” I heard Hanekawa shout behind me, but I ignored her.

I ran.

In any case, I ran.

Turning the corner, the staircase.

This is the fourth floor.

She can't be too far away.

Hop, step, jump, I flew down the stairs, landing as softly as if I was dancing.

The shock of the impact on my feet.

The impact of gravity.

Even this kind of impact –

Senjouhara couldn't feel it.

No weight.

No mass.

Her doubtful footsteps.

A crab.

She had talked about a crab.

“This way – nope, this way.”

She wouldn't try to hide. She wouldn't think that I would chase after her, so she should be heading straight for the school gate. She has no club activities, so she must be one of those who head straight home after school. Even if she did have something on, it won't be starting at this time. Once I had come to that conclusion, I went down the staircase, past the third and second floors without hesitation. Leaping down.

And from the second floor to the first.

Senjouhara was there.

From the noise I was making, she must have already known that I was coming, and even though I was approaching her from the back, she was already turning around to face me.

With those cold eyes.

“Astounding,” she said.

“No, I should truly be flabbergasted. You are the first to rebound so quickly after that, Araragi-kun.”

“The first...”

That meant that there had been others.

Though she made so much fuss about it.

But, it was true, once I thought about it, that her secret of “having no weight” was one that would be exposed upon contact. It was realistically speaking, impossible.

Come to think of it, she had said “as of this moment”.

She might really be the devil.

“In any case, I had not thought you would be able to recover from the pain in your cheek. Normally, you wouldn’t have been able to move from that spot.”

The voice of experience.

Too scary.

“All right, I get it. I understand now, Araragi-kun. Your attitude of ‘an eye for an eye’ doesn’t sit well with me. I hope you’re prepared for this,” said Senjouhara, as she stretched her hands out by her side.

“Let’s fight.”

Starting with pen knives and staplers, all sorts of stationeries appeared in those hands. Sharpened HB pencils, compass, multi-coloured ballpens, mechanical pencils, superglue, rubber bands, paper clips, gachuck(ie. paper shark) , marker pens, safety pins, fountain pens, correction fluid, scissors, cellophane tapes, sewing kits, isosceles triangle rulers, thirty-centimetre rulers, protractors, glue, carving tools, drawing tools, paper weights, ink pots.

...

I got the feeling that I would be persecuted in the future for no other reason than having been in the same class as this person.

Personally, I felt that the instant adhesive was the most dangerous.

“...you’re mistaken. I’m not here to fight.”

“You aren’t?” She sounded disappointed.

But she didn’t relax her arms.

The assorted weaponry glistened.

“Then, what business do you have with me?”

“This is just a possibility, but,” I said, “I might be able to help you.”

“Help me?” I could tell from her tone that she was laughing at me.

No, she might be infuriated.

“Don’t joke. I’m sure I told you that I detest people who pity me. What do you think you are capable of? It’ll be sufficient if you shut your mouth and stay away.”

“...”

“I’ll treat your kindness as an act of hostility,” she said, as she took a step towards me.

Her lack of hesitation was a fact that I knew only too well, from the previous skirmish. One that I did not want to know about.

That’s why.

That’s why, without saying anything, I peeled back my lips with a finger and showed her my cheek.

With my right finger, and showed her my right cheek.

Exposing the inside of my cheek.

“Eh?”

As expected, Senjouhara was shocked. With a clatter, the weapons in her hands fell onto the floor.

“You – how is that –” she could not complete her question.

That’s right.

There was not even the smell of blood.

The wound that Senjouhara had made with her stapler had already healed without a trace.

It all happened during spring break.

I was attacked by a vampire.

In a time with mobile phones and cars, and when it was normal to travel overseas for a school trip... It's rather embarrassing to say this, but I was attacked by a vampire.

She was a breathtaking beauty.

A beautiful monster.

A very – beautiful monster.

It's usually hidden under the collar of my school jacket, but on the nape of my neck, her bite marks remain. Before it gets warm, I'm thinking of letting my hair grow to cover it up, but more importantly - there are probably lots of stories where when one is attacked by a vampire, people like vampire hunters, specialists in killing vampires, or a special division of the Christian Church, or a group of vampires who hunt their own kind will appear to save you- but, in my case, I was saved by a passing stranger.

Because of that, I was able to return to being a human being – I'm fine with sunlight, crosses and garlic – but there were side-effects; my physical abilities had improved. Though I say that, I don't mean my physical abilities, but my metabolism has increased; my ability to heal myself. I don't know what would have happened if my cheek had been ripped apart by that cutter-knife, but it takes less than thirty seconds to heal the wound made by the staple. Compared to other living creatures, that's pretty fast.

“Oshino – Oshino-san?”

“That's right. Oshino Meme.”

“Oshino Meme, you say... it certainly sounds like a moe name.”

“Don't get your expectations too high. He's a thirty-plus year old man.”

“I see. But he must have been a moe character when he was young.”

“Don't judge real people like that. More importantly, you understand what "moe" and "character" are?”

“It's common knowledge,” said Senjouhara, looking composed.

“They call my character ‘tsundere’, don’t they?”

“...”

I think they call your character a ‘tsundra’.

Small talk.

From Naoetsu High, where Hanekawa, Senjouhara and I go to, it takes about twenty minutes to get to a cram school that was located outside the residential area.

Was located.

A few years ago, because of the sudden influx of famous cram schools, this particular school had closed down due to financial problems. By the time I came to know about this four-floored building, it had already fallen into an awe-inspiring state of disrepair, so what I know of its history is only from rumors.

Dangerous.

Private property.

Access prohibited.

Though the building was surrounded by a safety fence and a mess of poster boards, holes in the fence were aplenty, so entry and exit was both possible and easy.

And in the midst of that rubble was where Oshino lived.

Where he decided to make his home.

Including spring break, it had been about a month.

“In any case, my butt hurts. And there are wrinkles on my skirt.”

“It’s not my fault.”

“Stop making excuses. I’ll chop it to pieces.”

“Chop what to pieces!?”

“Shouldn’t you be nicer to me because it’s my first time riding a bicycle with someone else?”

Didn’t you propose that kindness is an action of hostility?

Her words and actions contradict each other.

“All right then, what should we do?”

“Well. As an example, how about lending me your bag as a cushion?”

“Don’t you care about others?”

“Don’t address me so casually. I said it was an example, didn’t I?”

What did I answer to that?

An excellent question.

“Tsk. Compared to you, Mary Antoinette was probably more humble and modest.”

“She’s my pupil.”

“What happened to the years between you two!?”

“Can you please stop interrupting me? You’ve been overly friendly. If others didn’t know better, they’d think that we were classmates.”

“But we are!”

To what extent is she going to deny our relationship?

It just seems too much to me.

“Geez... It’s going to take quite a bit of patience to deal with someone like you, isn’t it...”

“Araragi-kun, that sentence makes it sound as if it’s my character, and not yours, that’s problematic, you know?” said Senjougahara.

“More importantly, where’s your bag? You’re empty-handed, aren’t you? Don’t you have one?”

That reminds me, I’ve never seen Senjougahara carrying anything.

“The information in the textbooks is already in my head. That’s why I leave everything in the school locker. If I have all my stationery with me, I don’t need a bag. Since I don’t need a change of clothes for physical education classes either.”

“I see.”

“If I don’t have my hands free, I won’t be able to fight when the time comes.”

“...”

Her whole body is a weapon.

A human weapon.

“Though I’m against leaving sanitary items in school, that’s about the only thing that bothers me. I can’t borrow from others, since I don’t have friends.”

“Don’t say that so casually.”

“What’s wrong? Since it is for sanitary purposes, there’s nothing to be embarrassed about. Hiding it would be more disgusting, don’t you think?”

I think hiding it is also rather problematic.

Well, it’s up to the individual.

It’s not my place to comment on it.

More importantly, what had caught my attention was the way she had dismissed her lack of friends.

“Oh, that reminds me.”

Not that I really cared about it, but the previous issue about skirts had brought to my attention the fact that Senjouhara was a girl after all and wouldn’t want to dirty her clothes. Because of that, I made some effort to search for a bigger entrance and upon reaching it, I turned to her.

“I’ll hold your ‘stationery’.”

“What?”

“I’ll hold them for you, so take them out.”

“What did you say?”

She looked as if I had made an unreasonable request to her. As if there was something wrong with my head.

“Though Oshino is kind of a weird guy, he’s my saviour.”

Besides.

He’s also Hanekawa’s saviour.

“I won’t let him meet someone dangerous, so I’ll hold onto your stationery.”

“I didn’t expect you to say that after we’d arrived.” Senjouhara glared at me. “You tricked me, didn’t you?”

“...”

Do you have to put it that way?

Senjouhahara did not say anything, but her expression was a mixture of serious contemplation and conflict. She stared at a point near her feet, but turned her head to glare at me several times.

I thought that we might leave without going inside, but after a while, Senjouhahara said “I understand” as if she had made up her mind.

“Hold out your hands.”

With that, the stationeries fell from her as if they were a thousand petals, as if it was a magic show and she was pulling off a trick. The stationery she had threatened me with back in the corridor had barely been the tip of the iceberg. Her pockets might be four dimensional. It might be a twenty-second century technology. Even though I had said I would hold them for her, the amount made me worry if they would fit in my bag.

The government must be neglecting public safety allowing someone like her to be walking freely about in public.

“Don’t misunderstand. It doesn’t mean that I trust you now,” said Senjouhahara, when she had finished passing me all her stationeries.

“What do you mean, trust...”

“If you’re thinking of leading me on, bringing me to such an isolated ruin, thinking to pay me back for the stapler wound, then you’re making a huge mistake.”

“...”

Well, I think it’s a mistake too.

“Listen carefully. If I don’t call them every minute, five thousand of my minions would go after your family.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“Are you saying that it’ll only take a minute?!”

“Do you take me for some boxer?”

More importantly, how dare you threaten my family.

How outrageous.

Five thousand people, what a huge lie.

A daring lie for someone who doesn’t even have friends.

“You have two younger sisters in middle school, don’t you?”

“...”

She knows about my family.

Even if it's a lie, that's not a joke.

Anyway, I had shown her my invincibility against injuries and it seems like she doesn't trust me at all because of that. In view of the fact that Oshino had said that trust was important, this was not a good situation.

Well, it can't be helped.

From now on, it's Senjougahara's personal problem.

I'm only the guide.

Past the wire netting, we entered the area and into the building. Even though it was only evening, it was pretty dim. Because the building had been left in disrepair for so long, the footing was bad, and if one wasn't careful one would stumble.

It was then that I realized.

If an empty can fell, it would be only an empty can, but to Senjougahara, it would be an empty can with ten times its normal weight.

If we think in relative terms...

Ten times the gravity, one-tenth of gravity, is a problem that, unlike in manga, cannot be clearly defined. The simplistic thinking that light weight equals high physical ability is wrong. Moreover, this is an unfamiliar place for her. It can't be helped that Senjougahara is like a wild animal on guard.

Even if she is ten times faster, her strength is only one-tenth of what it was.

I understand why she was so reluctant to let go of the stationeries.

Also, why she doesn't carry a bag.

“It's this way.”

I stretched out my hand towards Senjougahara, who had stopped at the entrance, grabbing her wrist, and showing her the way. Senjougahara looked bewildered by my sudden movement, and muttered “what”, but she followed me closely.

“Don't even think that I'll thank you.”

“I get it.”

“Instead, you should be thanking me.”

“I don’t get that.”

“After all, I purposely planned for that wound to be on the inside of your cheek so it wouldn't show.”

“...”

No matter how you think about it, that sounds like something an attacker would say: “so it doesn't stand out so much, I’ll punch you in the stomach rather than the face”.

“In any case, if you had pierced through my cheek, it would have still stood out.”

“But you had thick skin to begin with, so I somehow concluded that it would be fine.”

“I can’t be happy about that. And what’s with that ‘somehow’?”

“My intuition is about ten percent accurate.”

“That’s low.”

“Well~” said Senjougahara, keeping her distance from me.

“But it seems like it was an unnecessary precaution after all.”

“...seems like it.”

“Would it hurt if I said immortality is convenient?”

Senjougahara’s question.

I answered. “Not anymore.”

Had it been during spring break.

If someone had said that to me... I would have died. It might have been a fatal wound.

“If you say it’s handy, it is. If you say that it’s not handy, it isn’t. That’s all there is to it.”

“You mean it’s neither, don’t you? That’s quite difficult to comprehend.” Senjougahara shrugged.

“It’s similar to whether ‘a possible danger’ is dangerous or not.”

“The ourai in that “possible danger” is all right, isn’t it?” (T/N: "possible danger" is pronounced as "ou rai ki ken", in which "ou rai" sounds like "all right".)

“Is it?”

“Anyways, I’m no longer immortal. I’m just a human with faster healing than normal, that’s all.”

“Hmm. I see,” said Senjougahara in a bored tone.

“Even though I was intending to try out all sorts of things. How disappointing.”

“Seems like you had made all sorts of weird plans without informing me...”

“How insulting. I had only planned to ____ to ____ you, that’s all.

“What’s ____!?”

“I just wanted to try out *this* and *that*.”

“Explain the italicized parts!”

Oshino was usually on the fourth floor.

There was an elevator, but as expected, it wasn’t working. Therefore, the only options were to break into the ceiling of the elevator and follow the wires to the fourth floor, or to take the stairs. No matter how one thought about it, the second option was better.

Holding Senjougahara’s hand, we climbed the stairs.

“Araragi-kun. I have one last thing to say.”

“What is it?”

“Though I may look like this, under my clothes, my body is unexpectedly not worth the jail time.”

“ ... ”

Senjougahara Hitagi seems to be quite suspicious of me.

“Can’t you understand a roundabout expression? Then I’ll say it directly. If you reveal your base nature and decide to strip yourself and try to rape me, no matter what happens, I’ll definitely get my revenge on you like they do in BL.”

“ ... ”

She has zero prudence and no sense of shame.

What a terrifying person.

“It seems to me, not just from what you say, but from a general point of view, you seem to be overly self-conscious, as if you think of yourself as a victim?”

“How unpleasant. There are things you can say and things you can’t?”

“You’re fully aware of that!?”

“Still, that Oshino person of yours sure lives in a rundown building, doesn’t he?”

“Ah... He’s quite an eccentric person.”

I still find it difficult to answer Senjougahara’s questions.

“Shouldn’t we have contacted him beforehand- though it’s a bit late saying that now- since we’re the ones asking him for a favor?”

“It’s surprising to hear something like common sense from you, but unfortunately, he doesn’t have a mobile phone.”

“It seems like he’s not one to reveal his true character. He sounds rather dubious. What does he do for a living?”

“I don’t really know the details, but he’s an expert in situations like ours.”

“Hmm.”

Though my explanation wasn't much of an explanation, Senjougahara did not press the issue. She may be thinking that she’d be meeting him anyway, that there wouldn’t be any point in asking. Both seemed to be the correct interpretation.

“Ah, Araragi-kun, you’re wearing your watch on your right wrist, aren’t you?”

“Hmm? Ah, yeah.”

“Are you warped?”

“Can’t you just ask if I’m left-handed!”

“I see. So, are you?”

“...”

She’s the one who’s warped.

Fourth floor.

Since it was originally a cram school, the rooms were divided into three classrooms – for each of the classrooms, the doors were broken and had blended into the corridors. I peeked into the first classroom, looking for Oshino,

“There you are, Araragi-kun. I’ve been waiting for you.”

Oshino Meme was there.

He was sitting cross-legged on a makeshift bed created from several worn-out tables that had been stacked and tied together with plastic strings, facing them.

As if he had known that I was coming. As usual – he can see through everything.

And, Senjouhara was – clearly, repulsed. Even though I had told her about Oshino, Oshino’s dirty state must be quite shocking to a modern high school girl’s sense of fashion. Anyone who lived in such a dump would certainly become quite ragged, but even a guy like me would say that Oshino is far from clean. One could only say that he wasn’t clean, if one wanted to be truthful. And more important than that, the psychedelic Hawaiian shirt was the last straw.

It always comes as kind of a shock that this person is my saviour...

He doesn’t seem anything like Hanekawa.

“Ooh. I see that you’ve brought a different girl today. I never see you with the same girl twice, do I? Really, I couldn’t be happier for you.”

“Cut that out, don’t make me sound like that kind of character.”

“Hmm – aren’t you?”

Oshino was staring at Senjouhara with a far-sighted look.

As if he was staring at something behind her.

“Nice to meet you, ojou-chan. I’m Oshino.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Senjouhara Hitagi.”

In any case, the self-introductions were done.

At least she hadn’t tried to insert any insults. Looks like she has some respect for the older generation.

“I’m Araragi-kun’s classmate, he was the one who told me about you.”

“Ah – I see,” said Oshino in a meaningful tone of voice.

Casting his eyes downwards, he took out a cigarette and held it between his lips, without lighting it. The windows, which were already unable to function as windows, contained only shards of glass, and Oshino seemed to be pointing at the far distance.

And after a long silence, he turned towards me.

“Do you like girls with straight bangs, Araragi-kun?”

“As I said, don’t make me sound like that kind of character. Only lolicons like straight bangs. Don’t

mix me into your generation where adolescence was when Full House was on.

“Of course,” laughed Oshino.

At that, Senjougahara frowned.

She seemed to have been insulted by the term ‘loli’.

“Well – I guess it’ll be better if you ask her directly, but anyways, Oshino – two years ago, she –”

“Don’t talk about me so informally,” said Senjougahara resolutely.

“Then how do you want me to call you?”

“Senjougahara-sama.”

“...”

Is she sane?

“...Sen-jou-ga-ha-ra-sa-ma.” Long, drawn-out, and sarcastic.

“I don’t like the way you pronounced that. Say it properly.”

“Senjougahara-chan.”

She jabbed her fingers into my eyes.

“I’ll go blind!”

“That’s because you were rude.”

“What’s with that equivalent exchange!?”

“My abusive words are filled with forty grams of copper, twenty five grams of zinc, fifteen grams of nickel, five grams of embarrassment and ninety seven kilograms of spite.”

“That’s mostly spite, isn’t it!”

“By the way, the bit about embarrassment was a joke.”

“You just took out the most important ingredient!”

“You sure are noisy. If you don’t keep it down, I’m going to give you the nickname ‘menstrual pain’.”

“That sounds like a suicide monster!”

“What’s your problem? It’s just as the word suggests, so there’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“That and being spiteful are different issues!”

Senjouhahara seemed satisfied with that and turned to face Oshino.

“I’d like to inquire about something.” Rather than just Oshino, her tone of voice suggested that she was addressing both Oshino and me, as she pointed to the corner of the classroom.

In that corner, there was a young girl – young enough that she wouldn’t have entered high school yet – hugging her knees. She looked about eight years old, wearing an old pilot helmet and goggles, with white skin and blonde hair, hugging her knees in the corner.

“What on earth is that child?”

“What”, rather than "who", she asks, which meant that Senjouhahara was perceptive. Anyways, even if it had not been Senjouhahara, most perceptive people would have noticed that there was something different about the girl, especially since she stared at Oshino with an insecure look.

“Ah, you don’t have to worry about her,” I explained, before Oshino could say anything.

“She’s just sitting there, she won’t do anything so – it’ll be fine. She has neither a shadow nor a shape. A child without a name, without existence.”

“Oh, no, no, Araragi-kun,” interrupted Oshino. “You’re right that she has neither shadow, shape nor existence, but I gave her a name yesterday. Since she was pretty useful during Golden Week, and it would be inconvenient if she doesn’t have a name. Also, as long as she doesn’t have a name, she’ll remain an atrocity.”

“Hmm – a name. What did you name her?”

“Oshino Shinobu.”

“Shinobu – hmm.”

A truly Japanese name.

Though it doesn’t really matter in this case.

“A heart under a blade. A good name, fitting for her, don’t you think? I gave her my family name. It happens that the Kanji character for “Shinobu” is also part of my name. Serving two purposes and having threefold meaning. Quite a tasteful name, don’t you think? I quite like it myself.”

“Does it really matter?”

More like, it doesn’t matter to me.

“I considered quite a few, and narrowed it down to Oshino Shinobu or Oshino Oshino, but I picked the one that sounded better instead of the one that played with phonetics. I think Ms. Class

Representative would be quite happy with the choice of the Kanji too.”

“It’s fine.”

I really don’t care.

Though ‘Oshino’ is out of the question.

“Like I said.”

In a tone of voice that suggested that she had had quite enough of this inscrutable talk, Senjouhara asked,

“What on earth is that child?”

“Like I said – nothing.”

The ruins of a vampire.

The hollow remains of a beautiful monster.

No matter what I said, it couldn’t be helped, could it? Anyways, it wasn’t related to Senjouhara, but my own problem. As long as I live, it’s a burden that I will have to carry.

“Nothing, you say. Fine.”

“ ... ”

What an indifferent woman.

“My paternal grandmother often said that it doesn’t matter if I was indifferent, as long as I was brought up to be wakumashiku, it’s fine.”

“What’s wakumashiku?” (ie. yakumashiku = insignificant)

She mispronounced it.

Just like pronouncing oosodokkusu(orthodox) as oodosokkusu.

“More importantly.”

Senjouhara shifted her gaze from the ex-vampire, a girl with white skin and blonde hair, aka Oshino Shinobu, to Oshino Meme.

“I heard that you could help me.”

“Me? That’s impossible,” said Oshino in a joking tone of voice.

“Only you can help yourself, ojou-chan.”

“ ... ”

Wow.

Senjouhara’s eyes narrowed to half their normal size.

She’s plainly suspicious.

“Till today, there have been five people who’d told me those exact words. They were all conmen. Are you one of them, Oshino-san?”

“Hahhaa. Ojou-chan, you sure are energetic. Did something good happen to you?”

Why on earth are you using such provocative words? There are those on whom those words will work, like Hanekawa, but it won’t work on Senjouhara.

She’s the type who'd step up to the challenge.

“All right, all right.”

I reluctantly stepped in to mediate.

I forcefully inserted myself between them.

“Don’t interrupt. I’ll kill you.”

“ ... ”

Right now, this woman, rather casually, talked about killing me.

Why am I always in the line of fire?

She’s like a bomb.

Good god, I don’t have the words to describe her.

“Well, in any case,” said Oshino rather offhandedly, in contrast to the tense situation.

“If you don’t tell me about your situation, we won’t be able to get anything done. I’m not very good at reading people’s minds. If you don’t talk, I won’t be able to get at the heart of the problem. I’ll keep your secret for you, so don’t worry.”

“ ... ”

“Ah. Well. I’ll explain a bit first – ”

“It’s okay, Araragi-kun.”

Senjougahara interrupted me again.

“I’ll do it myself.”

“Senjougahara.”

“I can do it myself,” she said.

Two hours later.

I was at Senjougahara's apartment, leaving Oshino and Shinobu behind in the abandoned cram school.

Senjougahara's home.

Tamikura-sou, it was called.

A two-story wooden apartment building, built thirty years ago. Tin mailboxes by the door. A shower and flush toilet included, grudgingly, in each apartment. One six-mat room with a tiny sink. Twenty minutes walk to the nearest bus stop. Rent ran from thirty to forty thousand, depending on the room (including upkeep, utilities, and neighborhood association fees.)

Not exactly what Hanekawa had led me to believe.

It must have shown on my face. Without me even asking, Senjougahara said, flatly, "My mother joined a cult."

Like that was an excuse.

She was clearly glossing over a lot.

"Not only did she hand over all our money to them, she ran up huge debts donating to them. Your house goeth before a fall."

"A cult?"

One of those dangerous new age 'religions.'

They all led to the same results.

"They finally agreed to divorce at the end of last year. My father got me, and we live here. At least, I do...but all the debt is in my father's name, so he's working night and day to pay it off, and almost never makes it home. I pretty much live here alone. With all the freedom that entails."

Sounded great.

"But the official address on the school rolls is the old one, still. Hanekawa-san wouldn't have known."

Um...

Shouldn't you change it?

"I prefer potential enemies not know where I live."

"Everyone's an enemy, hunh?"

Usually, that would sound like an exaggeration. But with a secret you were desperate to protect, it may well have been a reasonable level of caution.

"Senjouhahara. When your mother joined this cult...was she trying to help you?"

"What an awful question," she laughed. "I don't know. Maybe not."

An awful answer.

Probably what I get for asking.

It had been an awful question. The thought alone made my stomach churn. I should not have asked, and because I did ask, Senjouhahara was absolutely right to unleash the full power of her tongue.

Of course her family would have noticed their daughter no longer weighed anything. Especially her mother. Family wasn't like school, where we each owned a little space around our desks. If something terrible happened to your only daughter, you'd notice at once. And when the doctors had no idea how to help, and the tests went on and on, no one could blame her mother for seeking help in other places.

No, perhaps we could blame her.

It wasn't my place to say.

I shouldn't talk like I understood anything.

At any rate.

At any rate, there I was in Senjouhahara's house, Tamikura-sou room 201, sitting on a cushion staring at the steam rising off the tea she'd given me.

Given her personality, I had assumed she'd make me wait outside, but she waved me inside, and even made tea. This came as something of a shock.

"I'm going to torture you."

"Um..."

"I meant welcome you."

"Right..."

"No, maybe I did mean torture."

"I much preferred welcome! No other option is acceptable! Not everyone can correct their own mistakes! Well done, Senjougahara-san!"

And that's all the conversation we really had. I wound up just sitting there, flustered. I couldn't very well admit I felt awkward entering the house of a girl I'd just met. All I could do was stare at my tea.

Senjougahara was taking a shower.

Cleansing her body, purifying herself.

Oshino had told her to wash her body in cold water, and then change clothes -- they didn't need to be new or anything, just clean.

And I had accompanied her back. She'd ridden my bike from school to Oshino's, so there was that, but Oshino had also left a few other instructions.

I looked around the room. It was really bare bones -- hard to believe a teenage girl lived here. I leaned back against the chest of drawers behind me.

Reflecting on Oshino's diagnosis.

When Senjougahara finished telling him of her condition, Oshino nodded, stared at the ceiling for a long moment, and finally said, "A Crab of Burden."

"And that is?" Senjougahara pressed.

"Folk legend in the mountains of Kyushu. Some places call it a Crab of Burden, some places a Heavy Crab, or a Deadweight Crab, some places even call it a God instead. Kami and Kani don't sound that different, after all. The details of it vary, but the one thing they all have in common is that they take away people's weight. People that meet them -- that meet them the wrong way -- it's like they don't exist the same way they used to."

"It changes the way you exist?"

You became fragile.

Delicate.

And more beautiful.

"In some cases, people cease to exist at all. If you go higher up the country there's something called the Rock of Burden, but I don't think they're related. One's a rock and one's a crab."

"So...is it really a crab?"

"You are dumb, Araragi-kun," Oshino sounded completely disgusted with me. "We're talking Miyazaki Prefecture...maybe Oita, too. They don't even have crabs. It's just a story. And things they don't come across often are easier to make shit up about. Just like it's easier to get worked up about delusions and gossip."

"Are crabs even all that Japanese?"

"You may have eaten the American kind. But you should read up on your old Japanese stories, Araragi-kun. You never heard The Crab and the Monkey? Russia has a famous story about a crab, and China has some too. Japan is no exception."

"Oh, right. I've heard that story. Or I've heard of it. But...why Miyazaki?"

"Who was it who got attacked by a vampire in a dozy country town? The place doesn't really matter. Only the conditions that were born there."

Although even Oshino admitted the local climate played a factor.

"Didn't have to be a crab, really. Could've been a rabbit. Some stories even have it as a beautiful woman -- not like Shinobu-chan or anything, but the stories exist."

"Hunh...like the patterns on the moon."

Were we calling her Shinobu-chan already?

Suddenly I felt sorry for her.

Once a legendary vampire...

Now addressed as -chan.

"But if you say you met a crab, then let's assume it was a crab. Most common type, after all."

"But what is it?" Senjouhara growled. "I don't give a crap what the thing is named."

"But you do. The name is everything. Like I just told Araragi-kun, they don't have crabs in the mountains of Kyushu. They have some up North, but not a lot of them made their way down to Kyushu."

"They have freshwater ones."

"Maybe so, but that's not the point."

"Then what is the point?"

"That it didn't used to be crabs. It used to be gods -- kami, not kani. The god of burden evolved into a crab. I mean, this is just my personal theory. Most people would assume it went the other way around."

Or at least insist they were both around from the beginning."

"Either way, I've never heard of them."

"Of course you have," Oshino said. "You met one."

That silenced her.

"And it's still with you."

"Can you...see it?"

"I can't see anything," Oshino said, chuckling merrily. An inappropriately pleasant laugh, that clearly rubbed Senjougahara the wrong way.

It had a similar effect on me.

He was clearly mocking her.

"Isn't that your job?"

"Is it? The whole point of chimi-moryo is that no one can see them. Can't see them, can't touch them. That's only normal."

"Normal. But..."

"Ghosts ain't got legs, vampires don't have reflections, but that's not the point, is it? Things like that can't be pinned down. And tell me this, girl -- if no one can see them, and no one can touch them...do they exist?"

"Do they...you just said they did!"

"I did. But nobody can see them and nobody can touch them, then scientifically speaking, they don't exist. Doesn't matter if they're real or not."

That was his point.

Senjougahara did not seem satisfied.

It was sound logic, but not something she could just accept.

Not in her position.

"Well, girl, you may have bad luck, but you're on the lucky side of bad luck. Araragi-kun here didn't just meet his; he was attacked. And attacked by a vampire. Is there anything more embarrassing for modern man?"

Drop it.

Drop it now.

"You're much better off than he was."

"Why?"

"Because gods are everywhere. They're everywhere, and nowhere. It was with you before your present condition arrived...but you could also say it wasn't."

"Is that some sort of Zen?"

"Shinto. Shugendo, specifically," Oshino said. "You need to understand, girl. You didn't wind up like this because of something else. You just changed your point of view."

She was always like that.

Almost exactly what the doctors said, as they threw in the towel.

"My point of view? What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying, you need to stop acting like a victim, girl," Oshino snarled, sudden heat behind his words.

He'd been like this with me.

And like this with Hanekawa.

I was worried about how Senjouhara would react, but she didn't say a word.

She just accepted it.

This seemed to impress him a little. "Well done. Guess you aren't just a selfish little girl after all."

"What made you think I was?"

"Most people who encounter Crabs of Burden are. Not the kind of thing you can meet just by wanting to, and not the kind of harmful god. Not like vampires."

They don't harm?

They don't harm you...so they don't attack?

"They don't possess you. They just exist. Unless you want a change, then nothing will change. Now, I'm not wanting to pry into other people's business. I don't want to help you, after all."

She would have to save herself.

Like Oshino always said.

"Stop me if you've heard this. It's an old story from overseas. Once upon a time, there was a young man. He was a good man. One day, this young man met a strange old man in the village. The old man asked the young man to sell him his shadow."

"His shadow?"

"Yeah. The shadow that sprang from his legs when the sun shone upon him. Sell it for ten coins. The young man did, without a second's thought. Sold his shadow for ten coins."

"...so?"

"What would you have done?"

"Dunno. Wouldn't know without that actually happening to me. Maybe I'd sell, maybe I wouldn't. Depends on the price."

"That's the right answer. If I asked you which was more important, your money or your life, well...that question's wrong to begin with. 'Money' doesn't mean anything. There's a big difference between one yen and a trillion. One is worth more than the other. Life means more to some people than it does to others. All life is equal? I loathe the very idea. Anyway, this young man didn't think his shadow was worth more than ten coins. Why would he? What would you miss out on, if you had no shadow? What problems could that possibly cause?"

Oshino shuddered.

"But once he lost his shadow, everyone in town, even his family, hated him. He couldn't get along with anybody. Having no shadow...was creepy. Of course it was. Hella creepy. Shadows themselves can be pretty creepy, but not having a shadow is even creepier. The absence of something you're supposed to have. In other words, the young man had sold something he was meant to have...for ten coins."

He let that hang for a moment.

"The young man went looking for the old man, to get his shadow back. But no matter where he went, no matter who he asked, he never did find the man. The end."

"So," Senjouhara said, not batting an eye. "What of it?"

"Well, nothing, really. Just thought it might be a story that struck a chord with you. The young man may have sold his shadow, but you lost your weight."

"I didn't sell it."

"No. You did not. You traded it. Losing your weight may not be as big a problem as losing your shadow...but it causes just as many problems, socially. That's it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I'm done talking," he said, and clapped his hands, once. "Okay. If you'd like to get your weight back, then I'll do what I can. Araragi-kun introduced you, after all."

"You'll help me?"

"I will not. I'll just do what I can," Oshino said, glancing at his watch. On his left wrist. "Sun's still out, so head on home. Wash your body in cold water, put on some clean clothes. Got some preparations on my end. If you're in Araragi-kun's class, you're probably a pretty serious student, so I should ask...are you able to come out at night?"

"Yes. If the occasion demands."

"Then we'll meet up again here at the stroke of midnight."

"Fine. By clean clothes, you mean...?"

"Don't need to be new. Not your uniform, though. You wear that every day."

"And what do I owe you?"

"Mm?"

"Don't play dumb. You're not doing this on a volunteer basis."

"Oh, hmm..." Oshino glanced over me, as if appraising me. "Well, if that makes you feel better about it, then a hundred thousand yen."

"A hundred thousand," she said, as if confirming it.

"Work part time at a fast food place a month or two, and you ought to earn that much easily. Seems fair."

"Quite a bargain, compared to mine."

"Is it? I charged class-rep chan a hundred grand as well."

"And you charged me five million!"

"Well, you were a vampire."

"You can't blame everything on vampires! Who cares if they're trendy right now!"

"Can you pay?" he asked, ignoring my cries.

"Of course," she said. "No matter what I have to do."

And then...

Two hours later, in her room.

Senjougahara's apartment.

I looked around again.

A hundred thousand yen might not be that much normally, but judging from the state of her room, it was probably quite a lot to Senjougahara.

A chest of drawers, a tea table, and a little bookcase. That was it. For all the books she read, there were surprisingly few in her room. She must get the bulk of them from used book stores and libraries.

Like an impoverished student.

Which, I suppose, Senjougahara was.

She'd said she was attending school on a scholarship.

Oshino had suggested Senjougahara was luckier than me, but I had my doubts.

Certainly, her life wasn't in the same kind of danger, and she was less of a danger to those around her -- few things came close to vampires on those two fronts. I lost track of how many times I'd wished I'd just died instead, and that was an easy trap to fall back into, even now.

So, yeah.

Senjougahara might be on the lucky side of bad luck. But in light of how Hanekawa had described her life in junior high, it was really hard to see it that way.

It definitely wasn't a fair comparison.

Hanekawa...how did Hanekawa Tsubasa compare?

There was a woman with a powerfully strange experience.

I was attacked by a demon, Senjougahara met a crab, and Hanekawa was transfixed by a cat. Over Golden Week. What transpired was so overwhelming it felt like something in the distant past. But it had only been a few days before.

Although Hanekawa herself retained no memories of Golden Week. All she really knew was that Oshino had managed to take care of it some how, so perhaps she had no real grasp of just how bad things had been. But I remembered everything.

It was an absolute mess.

Even after surviving the demon. I had never imagined a cat could possibly be more terrifying than a demon.

Again, in light of risk to life and limb, Hanekawa's experience was worse than Senjouhara's. But in light of how long Senjouhara had suffered in silence, things weren't that simple.

It all mattered.

It was all worth considering.

How bad did things have to be for you to consider kindness the act of an enemy?

The young man who sold his shadow.

The girl who lost her weight.

I could never know.

I could never hope to understand.

"Done with my shower," Senjouhara said, stepping out of the bathroom.

Naked.

I shrieked, cowering.

"Move aside. I can't reach my clothes."

Senjouhara pointed at the chest of drawers behind me. She appeared to be more annoyed by her wet hair than she was concerned about me seeing her.

"Put some clothes on!"

"I plan to."

"You plan to!?"

"Would you prefer I didn't?"

"Why haven't you already!?"

"I forgot to bring some in with me."

"Then wrap a towel around yourself or something!"

"Ew, that would just be sad."

I didn't know how she could be so blasé about it.

It was plain as day there was no point in arguing the point, so I scooted out of the way, and plunked myself down in front of the bookshelf, studiously counting the spines in front of me. Trying to focus

my gaze and my thoughts.

Augh.

I'd never seen a naked woman before...not in real life, anyway.

It wasn't quite what I'd imagined. I still maintain I had pretty grounded ideas about what it would be like, but what I'd imagined was not this...stark nudism, this frank indifference.

"Clean clothes...you suppose white is better?"

"No idea."

"All my underwear has patterns."

"None of my business!"

"I'm just asking for advice. No need to get so loud. Honestly, it's like you're going through menopause."

I heard the drawer open.

Clothing rustled.

This was bad.

It was burned into my brain. It wouldn't go away.

"Araragi-kun. You aren't turned on by me being naked, are you?"

"If I hypothetically was, it would not be my fault."

"Go ahead and lay a single finger on me. I hear biting off tongues is always fatal."

"Yes, yes, you're very protective of your body."

"I was planning on biting your tongue."

"That is duly terrifying."

Sheesh.

She seemed incapable of seeing the situation from my point of view.

Was it impossible for any human being to understand another?

Was this a notion I should just learn to accept?

"Don't worry, you can look now."

"Okay. Good."

I turned around.

She was still in her underwear.

Not even wearing socks.

"What are you trying to accomplish here!?"

"What do you think? I'm rewarding you for your help today. Be happy."

"....."

A reward?

Baffling.

I'd rather have an apology.

"Be happy!"

"Now you're mad!?"

"Manners dictate you express an opinion!"

"A-an opinion?"

Manners?

How should I answer?

Um...

"Y-you have a great body...?"

"...pathetic."

She gave me the sort of look usually reserved for rotting refuse.

But with a trace of pity.

"You'll always be a virgin."

"I'll always be...? Did you come from the future!?"

"Try not to spit. Virginity is contagious."

"It's not a disease!"

Once lost, it never came back.

"For that matter, why have we simply assumed that I'm a virgin?"

"Because you are. No child would ever sleep with you."

"Two objections! First, I am not a pedophile! Secondly, I definitely think I could find a few if I looked hard enough!"

"If the first is true the second can't be."

"....."

Good point.

"But I admit it was presumptuous of me."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"If you've used a professional..."

"Okay, okay, I admit it! I'm a virgin!"

The most humiliating thing I had ever confessed to.

Senjougahara seemed very pleased.

"You should have said so in the first place. You've used up half the luck the rest of your life had allotted to it, so keep still and appreciate."

"Are you secretly a shinigami?"

Make a deal with a shinigami, see a naked girl.

Best shinigami eyes ever.

"Don't worry," she said. As she spoke, she took a white shirt out from her chest of drawers, and put it on over the light blue bra. It seemed ridiculous to count the books on her shelf again, so I just watched. "I won't tell Hanekawa-san."

"Hanekawa...?"

"You have a one-sided crush on her, right?"

"Not true."

"Oh? You talk so often I simply assumed. Hence the leading question."

"Who uses leading questions in real life?"

"Hush. Do you wish to be erased?"

"Just how much power do you wield?"

I was a bit surprised to hear Senjougahara had actually paid that much attention to the rest of us. I'd actually wondered if she even knew I was assistant class-rep. Or maybe she had just assumed we would one day be her enemies, and scouted us.

"It's less that we talk and more than she keeps talking to me."

"Who do you think you are? Are you trying to imply Hanekawa-san has a crush on you?"

"That's absolutely not true," I said. "Hanekawa is just...looking after me. She's a busybody, really. Overprotective. She's got this hilarious idea that it's worth feeling sorry for losers. And she wants to help fix them."

"That is a hilarious idea," Senjougahara said. "Losers are losers because they were born stupid."

"...I wouldn't say that."

"But it's written on your face."

"It is not!"

"I thought you'd say that, so I wrote it there a moment ago."

"Nobody's that prepared!"

Frankly.

I didn't need to say much here; Senjougahara should understand Hanekawa as well as I did. Judging by what she'd told me after school, Hanekawa was paying more than a little attention to Senjougahara.

But perhaps that explained it.

"Oshino-san helped Hanekawa-san too?"

"Mm. Yeah."

Senjougahara finished buttoning her shirt, and proceeded to don a white cardigan on top of it. Apparently she planned to fully dress her upper body before putting anything else on the lower half. I suppose everyone had different ways of getting dressed. Senjougahara did not seem at all concerned

that I was watching. Actually, she seemed to have deliberately placed herself in front of me.

"Hmm."

"So...I mean, you can trust him. He's not the most serious guy in the world; jaunty and cavalier and what have you, but he knows his stuff. Don't worry. You don't have to take my word for it. He did the same with Hanekawa."

"So you say, Araragi-kun," Senjougahara said. "But I'm afraid I only half trust him. I have been tricked too many times."

"....."

Five people had said the same thing.

They'd all been liars.

And...

That did not seem like the end of it.

"Even the hospital -- I only go out of inertia. Honestly, I've pretty much given up."

"Given up...?"

What had she given up?

What had she cast aside?

"This world may be bizarre, but it has neither Mugen Mamiya or Kudan Kumiko."

"....."

"The best it can manage is Touge Miroku," Senjougahara said, voice dripping with disgust. "So Araragi-kun, I'm simply not carefree enough to cheerily accept that I just happened to slip on the stairs and the classmate that just happened to catch me just happened to have been bit by a vampire over spring break and the person who just happened to save him also just happened to help the class-rep and now he just happens to be attempting to help me."

And with that, Senjougahara began taking off her cardigan.

"Finally you had some clothes on -- why are you taking them off again?"

"I forgot to dry my hair."

"Are you actually a bit of an idiot?"

"Don't be rude. What if you hurt my feelings?"

Her dryer looked expensive.

Apparently she took pains towards her appearance.

Looking her over again, even her underwear was carefully chosen. It was odd how what had, a day before, been a major focus controlling a significant portion of my thoughts now seemed like little more than a few scraps of cloth. I shed a silent tear inside.

"Carefree...?"

"I'm not that."

"Maybe. But what if you were?" I said. "What if you were carefree?"

"....."

"It's not a bad thing to be. You've got nothing to hide, after all. Just be confident, like you are now."

"Like I am now?" Senjouhara said, baffled.

Apparently she was unaware just how amazing her performance here had been.

"It's not a bad thing...?"

"Is it?"

"Suppose not," she said. Then, "But I might be hiding something."

"Mm?"

"Never mind."

With her hair finally dry, she put the dryer down, and began putting clothes on again. Since she'd put them on over wet hair, her first outfit was damp, so she hung the shirt and cardigan up on hangers, and began hunting through her chest of drawers for something else.

"In my next life," Senjouhara said. "I want to be Sergeant Major Kululu."

"....."

This seemed like a non sequitur, yet it also made a certain kind of sense.

"I know what you want to say. That seemed like a non sequitur, and you don't see why I would."

"Uh, about half right."

"Thought so."

"I mean, at the least, you could have said Lance Corporal Dororo."

"His trauma switch hits a little too close to home."

"Okay, but..."

"No buts. Or mutts."

"Mutts?"

I couldn't even work out what she'd mistaken that for.

I'd totally lost track of her larger point as well.

Presumably she agreed, since she immediately changed the subject.

"May I ask you something, Araragi-kun? Not anything important."

"Okay."

"What did you mean by 'patterns on the moon'?"

"Hunh? When did I say that?"

"Earlier. To Oshino-san."

"Um..."

Oh.

Now I remembered.

"Right, Oshino was going on about it being a crab or a rabbit or a beautiful woman -- those. In Japan people generally say it looks like a rabbit with mochi but other countries have it as a crab or a woman's face in profile, or so on."

I hadn't verified this in person, but so I'd heard. Senjougahara appeared to have never come across the information before.

"I'm astonished you bothered retaining such useless information. For the first time ever, you've actually managed to impress me."

With useless information.

Kind of a backhanded compliment.

I decided to show off.

"I know a lot about astronomy and space. I was pretty into it for a while."

"Don't bother bragging to me. I see right through it. It's not like you know anything else."

"Words can hurt, you know."

"Then call the word police."

"....."

Even the real police were no match for her.

"I do know things! Like, um, for example, do you know why there's a rabbit on the moon?"

"There is no rabbit on the moon, Araragi-kun. You're in high school now, you should know these things."

"Say there is."

Wait, was that right?

Say there was?

Confusing.

"Once upon a time there was a god, or a Buddha maybe...same difference. There was a god, and for that god a rabbit threw itself onto a fire, and burned to death -- sacrificing itself to the god. This god was touched by this act of self-sacrifice, and put the rabbit on the moon so we'd never forget it."

I'd just seen the story on TV as a kid, and I didn't remember it all that well, so it wasn't exactly an exhaustive bit of knowledge, but I had the gist of it.

"Wow, that god is a prick. Made a mockery of that poor rabbit."

"That's not really the point."

"And the rabbit too -- you can totally see it trying to get on god's side by sacrificing itself. Scheming little shit."

"It's really not about that."

"Well, I certainly can't understand it," she snapped, and started taking off her clothes again.

"Okay, you're really just flaunting your body at me, aren't you?"

"I don't have a body worth flaunting. It was just inside out and backwards."

"That's quite an accomplishment."

"I'll admit I'm not great at getting dressed."

"You're like a child."

"No. They're heavy."

"Erp."

Missed that one.

If her shoes were heavy, her clothes would be too.

At ten times their regular weight, clothes were not to be trifled with.

I was ashamed.

It had been a careless remark, completely lacking in tact.

"I might get tired of this but I do not get used to it. But you are more learned than I expected, Araragi-kun. Allow me to express mild surprise. There may actually be a brain inside your skull."

"Of course there is."

"Of course...? That a brain can form inside the skull of your ilk is a miracle."

"Now you're just being mean."

"Don't worry, I'm just stating the truth."

"At least one person in this room clearly deserves to die."

"? Hoshina-sensei isn't here."

"Did you just wish death upon our beloved homeroom teacher?"

"Is the crab the same?"

"Hunh?"

"Did a crab throw itself on the fire like the rabbit?"

"Oh, um, no, I don't know the crab's story. Must have one somewhere. Never thought about it. Because the moon has seas?"

"The moon has no seas. And you seemed so sure you were saying something clever."

"Eh? It doesn't? But they --"

"Your knowledge of astronomy astounds. They are only seas in name."

"Oh."

Hmm.

I guess I couldn't compete with actual smart people.

"So your true identity is revealed, Araragi-kun. It was sloppy of me to expect anything but ignorance from you."

"You really do think I'm an idiot, don't you?"

"How did you know!?"

"You seem genuinely surprised!"

She thought she'd hidden it?

Really?

"This is all my fault. Because of me, you have realized what a mess your little mind is. I feel responsible."

"Hang on a minute, am I really this abysmally dumb?"

"Never fear. I do not judge people by their grades."

"You've already judged what mine are!"

"Try not to spit. Bad grades are contagious."

"Look, we go to the same school."

"But will both of us graduate?"

"Erp..."

That was actually in doubt.

"I will move on to grad school. You will drop out of high school."

"I'm third year! I just have to finish it out!"

"Yet soon you will be begging me to let you quit, tears running down your cheeks."

"I've never heard anyone talk like that outside of manga!"

"Compare standard scores. Mine is 74."

"Argh."

She'd already won.

"Only 46."

"That rounds down to zero."

"What? No it doesn't, it's a six...wait, you're rounding down the tens place! What have you done to my standard score!?"

She had me beat by nearly thirty but had to whip the corpse!

"I don't feel I've won unless the margin is at least a hundred."

"You've rounded your own tens place, too!?"

Ruthless.

"Good, from now on, please remain at least twenty thousand kilometers away from me at all times."

"I've been banished from the Earth!?"

"Did that god even bother eating the rabbit?"

"Hunh? Oh, back to the story. Did he eat it? If the story covered that, it would be pretty grisly."

"It already is."

"I dunno. I'm stupid, remember?"

"Don't sulk. You might make me less happy."

"You have no pity at all, do you?"

"Pitying you will not bring peace to this world."

"If you can save a single soul, don't start talking globally! Extend a helping hand to those in front of you! I'm sure you can do it!"

"Okay, all done."

Senjouhara was now wearing a white tank top, a white jacket, and a white flare skirt.

"If this all goes well, a trip to Hokkaido to eat crab is in order."

"We can eat crab without going to Hokkaido, and it's out of season anyway, but if you want to, then go ahead."

"You're coming too."

"Why!?"

"Didn't you know?" Senjouhara smiled. "Crab is delicious."

Our home town was on the fringes of the suburbs.

At night it was very dark. Pitch black. The abandoned building was so distant from daylight it seemed the same inside or out.

I'd been born and raised here so this did not seem strange, did not seem mystifying in any way -- in fact, it was the normal order of things, the natural way of the world -- but Oshino had traveled far and wide, and he said that discrepancy was the root of many problems.

It was nice having the roots so easily found.

According to him, anyway.

At any rate...

It was just after midnight.

Senjouhahara and I rode back to the ruined cram school. She had taken a cushion from her home and attached it to her seat on the back of the bike.

We'd eaten nothing, and were hungry.

I parked the bike in the same place, and we slipped through the gap in the fence. Oshino was waiting for us outside the door.

As if he'd been there the whole time.

"...eh?"

Oshino's clothing seemed to surprise Senjouhahara.

He was wearing white holy robes -- jōe. He'd even combed his hair; he looked like a different person. One not at all slovenly.

Clothes make the man.

Why did he seem creepier like this?

"Oshino-san...you're a priest?"

"No, not at all?" he said. "Neither priest nor monk. Went to school for it, but never got a job. It was complicated."

"Complicated?"

"Personal reasons. Boils down to just getting sick of it all. The clothes serve the same function as yours. I just didn't have anything else clean. We're meeting a god here, so I've got to clean up, same as you. Set the right tone. Tone is important. When I fought Araragi-kun, I had a cross in one hand, a bunch of garlic hanging off me, and some Holy Water. Fit the situation. I may not have much use for manners, but I know what I'm doing here. You won't catch me waving a wand around and scattering salt on your head."

"O-okay," Senjougahara said.

It was certainly a surprise seeing him like this, but her reaction seemed a bit too strong. Why?

"You look nice and purified. Good. Just to be sure, you're not wearing make-up?"

"I didn't think it would be a good idea, so no."

"Good. Right decision. You took a shower too, Araragi-kun?"

"Yeah. No problem there."

It was a necessary step if I was going to sit in on things. I avoided mentioning Senjougahara's attempt to peek on me in the shower.

"Yet you look exactly the same."

"Yeah, yeah."

Since I was just an observer, I had not changed clothes at all. Of course I looked the same.

"Let's get this over with. Prepared a space upstairs."

"A space?"

"Yes."

Oshino vanished into the darkness inside. Even in white clothes he was swallowed instantly. Once again, I took Senjougahara's hand, and led her after him.

"Let's get this over with?' Not exactly taking this seriously, then?" I asked.

"What's that supposed to mean? I've dragged two young kids out to a deserted location in the middle of the night. It's my responsibility to get you back home and in bed as soon as I can."

"I was just wondering if we can really kick this crab's ass that easily."

"What a violent proposition, Araragi-kun. Did something good happen?" Oshino said, not even

glancing back. "It's not like you and Shinobu-chan, or class rep-chan and the sex cat. And don't forget, I'm a pacifist. I normally avoid violence at all costs. You and class rep-chan were both targeted maliciously, but that doesn't apply to this crab."

"It doesn't?"

If there was a victim, didn't that imply malice, imply hostility?

"Like I said, we're dealing with a god. Gods are just there. They don't do anything. They simply exist. Just like you simply go home after school. It's her own fault this happened."

No harm. No assault.

No possession.

'Her own fault' was not the nicest way to put it, but Senjouhara said nothing. Either it made sense to her, or she had steeled herself to take whatever he might say, mindful of what we were about to do.

"So we won't be banishing it or kicking its ass, Araragi-kun. Put that kind of thing out of your mind. We are going to ask it for a favor. Ask for its mercy."

"Ask it...?"

"Yes."

"Will it agree to that? Will it just give Senjouhara her weight back?"

"Can't say for sure, but probably. Not like wandering by a shrine on New Year's, after all. They're not so indifferent they'd ignore an earnest entreaty. Gods are always looking at the big picture. Japanese gods are particularly out of it. They care about humanity as a whole, maybe, but as individuals? They don't really notice us. We don't matter at all. They can't tell me apart from you apart from Shinobu-chan. Age, gender, weight -- doesn't matter. We're all just 'human.' We're all the same thing."

The same thing.

Not just similar. The same.

"Hmm. Very different from curses."

"So," Senjouhara said, as if she'd been trying to work up the nerve to ask. "Is the crab...nearby?"

"Yeah. Nearby, near to everywhere. But to make it come here, we need to do some things."

We reached the third floor.

And went into one of the classrooms.

The entire room was covered in Shinto holy ropes. All the desks and chairs had been removed, and in front of the chalkboard was an altar. An offering placed on the stand. It didn't look like something hastily thrown together while we were gone. Lamps were lit in the corners, bathing the room in soft light.

"A barrier, basically. Makeshift holy ground. Nothing fancy. You can relax," he said, looking at Senjouhara.

"I am...relaxed."

"Good to hear." We stepped inside. "Both of you -- lower your gaze, and keep your head down."

"Eh?"

"You're before a god."

We all stood before the altar.

This was so different from how we'd dealt with mine, or with Hanekawa's. I was the one who wasn't relaxed. The air felt tense -- so tense it could drive a man mad.

I hunkered down.

Ready for anything.

I was not religious; like most people my age, I could barely tell the difference between Shinto and Buddhism, but there was a part of me, instinct or something similar, that reacted to times like this.

To this time.

And place.

"Um, Oshino..."

"What, Araragi-kun?"

"I was just thinking...given the situation and this whole space you've made...should I even be here? It just feels like I'm in the way."

"You won't be. I doubt there'll be any problems, but just in case there is... You gotta think about what might happen in a just-in-case scenario. That happens, you'll need to shield her."

"I will?"

"What else is that immortal body for?"

"....."

That certainly was a good line, but I was pretty sure that wasn't what it was for.

And I wasn't immortal any more.

"Araragi-kun," Senjouhara said. "You will protect me, won't you?"

"When did you become a princess!?"

"Oh, come on. You were planning on killing yourself tomorrow anyway."

"That didn't last long."

That was the sort of thing you wouldn't even say behind someone's back, but she'd just said it to my face. I might have to give some serious thought to figuring out what terrible sin I'd committed in a previous life to deserve such vicious spite.

"I'm not asking you to do it for free."

"What'll you give me?"

"You want a material reward? How shallow. I'm not exaggerating when I say that single question encompasses all your failings as a human being."

"...so what'll you do for me?"

"Let's see...I suppose I'll abandon my plan to spread a rumor that you're such a creep you tried to equip Nera with the slave clothes when you played Dragon Quest V."

"I never did!"

And she'd planned to tell everyone?

How heartless.

"It should have been obvious you couldn't put those on her. Even a monkey would know that. No, I suppose in your case it would be 'even a dog', right?"

"Hang on! You might be acting like you just said something terribly clever, but has there been a single description of me this entire time that suggested I resembled a dog in any way?"

"True," Senjouhara laughed. "It wouldn't be fair to the dog."

".....!!"

Even a cliché line like that could be devastating when used with such impeccable timing. This woman truly was a master insulter.

"Very well. Be a coward, run away with your tail between your legs. Go home and do what you

always do: sit alone and pretend to be tasered."

"What kind of sick pastime is that!?"

How many malicious rumors was she planning to start?

"When you reach my level, the likes of you cannot hope to hide anything. I know all your deepest dullest secrets."

"You used the wrong word and somehow made it worse!? Are you blackmailing the universe!?"

I wouldn't put it past her.

I'd definitely rather have dark secrets than dull ones.

"Anyway, Oshino, instead of using me, you could use the vamp...Shinobu. Like we did with Hanekawa."

"Shinobu's already gone beddy bye," Oshino said.

"....."

A vampire that slept at night.

That was so sad.

Oshino took the offering of sake off the altar, and handed it to Senjougahara.

"Um...what do I...?" she stammered.

"Drinking alcohol decreases the distance between us and gods. It'll help you relax a little, anyway."

"...I'm underage."

"No need to drink that much. Just a sip."

"....."

She stared at him for a long moment, and then took a drink. He took the cup from her hands, and placed it back on the altar.

"Okay. First, let's calm ourselves."

Facing forwards...

His back to Senjougahara, Oshino spoke.

"We begin by being calm. Mood is important. If we create a proper space, the ritual itself is not a

problem -- it all boils down to how you feel."

"How I feel...?"

"Relax. Let your guard down. This is your place. A place where you belong. Put your head down, close your eyes, and count. One. Two. Three."

Perhaps...

I didn't need to follow suit, but I chose to. I closed my eyes, and counted with her. As I did, I realized...

This was all to set the tone.

Oshino's clothes, the ropes, the altar, the shower -- all designed to put Senjougahara in the necessary frame of mind.

Hypnotic suggestion.

He was basically hypnotizing her.

Take away her self-consciousness, relax her guard, and convince her to trust him -- his approach was different, but he'd had to go through much the same process with me and with Hanekawa. Salvation was for those who believed -- in other words, the first step was to get Senjougahara to accept things.

Senjougahara herself had said...

She only half trusted him.

But...

That wasn't enough.

She needed more.

Trust was important.

This was what Oshino meant when he said he would not save her, but she would save herself.

I opened my eyes.

Looked around.

Torches.

Flickering in the corners.

Wind from the window.

The lights flickering, ready to vanish in the first strong gust.

But they did not.

"Are we calm?"

"Yes."

"Then time for some questions. Answer the questions I ask you. What's your name?"

"Senjouhara Hitagi."

"Your school?"

"Naoetsu High School."

"Your birthday?"

"July 7th."

His questions were pointless, their contents without meaning.

Question after question.

The pace never changing.

Oshino's back to her.

Senjouhara's eyes closed, her head down.

Her face turned towards the floor.

The room so quiet you could hear us breathing, almost hear our hearts beating.

"Your favorite writer?"

"Yumeno Kyusaku."

"A mistake you made as a child?"

"I don't want to answer that."

"An old song you like?"

"I don't listen to music."

"What did you think when you graduated elementary school?"

"I was just moving to a different school. Public school to public school."

"What was your first crush like?"

"I don't want to answer that."

"What was the most painful moment," Oshino said, his tone never changing, "in your life?"

"....."

Senjouhara failed to answer.

She did not refuse. She just fell silent. I could tell this was the only question that had mattered.

"What's wrong? The most painful thing you can remember."

"...my..."

Clearly, she could not stay silent.

She could not refuse to answer.

The mood did not allow it.

This space did not permit it.

She'd been led here to answer.

"My mother..."

"Your mother?"

"Joined a cult."

And a particularly bad one.

She told me earlier...

...how her mother emptied her bank account, took out loans, drove them into financial ruin. How even after the divorce, her father was working overtime every day, barely sleeping, trying to pay off those loans.

Was this her most painful memory?

Worse than losing her weight?

Of course.

Of course it was worse.

But...it...

It was...

"Is that all?"

"...all?"

"It's not very much. Japanese laws guarantee religious freedom. Freedom to believe what you want is a fundamental human right. Whatever your mother believes, whatever she worships, the only difference is methodology."

"....."

"In other words...it's not enough," Oshino insisted. "Tell me what happened."

"What hap...m-my mother...for me. She joined the cult, they tricked her..."

"What happened after your mother joined the cult?"

After.

Senjougahara bit her lip.

"S-she brought a man from the cult home with her."

"A man from the cult. What did he do?"

"A-a purification ritual, he said."

"Purification? Purifying what?"

"He said he...had to purify me." She could barely get the words out. "Th-then he assaulted me."

"Assaulted. Violently? Or...sexually?"

"...sexually. Th-that man..." Senjougahara forced herself to say it. "He tried to rape me."

"...I see," Oshino nodded.

The way Senjougahara...

...was so oddly protective of herself.

Trusted no one.

Was so defensive and so aggressive.

This explained all of it.

And why she'd reacted like that when she saw Oshino in those robes.

To her eyes, they must not have been that different from what the cult wore.

"Even though he was a priest."

"That's a Buddhist perspective. There are religions that allow murder, within the family. Beliefs are not universal. But you said 'tried' -- was he not successful?"

"I grabbed my cleats, and hit him."

"...brave."

"He started bleeding. Writhing in pain."

"And you were safe?"

"I was safe."

"Good."

"But my mother didn't help me."

She'd watched the whole thing.

Senjouhara's voice never wavered.

Never faltered.

"She yelled at me."

"Is that all?"

"No. Because I hurt that man...my mother..."

"...was penalized?" Oshino cut ahead of her.

Even I could have guessed the answer, but...it seemed to work on Senjouhara.

"Yes," she said, nodding solemnly.

"Her daughter hurt a church official. Not surprising."

"Right. That's why...all our money. Our home. Our property. All the loans. She destroyed our family.

Completely ruined it, ruined everything, but she kept on destroying things. She still is."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know."

"You must know."

"I'm sure...she's still with them."

"She still believes."

"She never learned. She feels no shame."

"That hurts?"

"It does."

"Why does it hurt? She's not your mother any more."

"I keep thinking. If I hadn't...if I hadn't fought back. Then...none of this would have happened."

Her family would still be together.

They'd never have been torn apart.

"Do you think that?"

"I do...think that."

"Really?"

"...I do."

"Then that...is what you think," Oshino said. "No matter how much it weighs, you have to carry that burden. You can't make others carry it for you."

"Make others...?"

"Keep your eyes steady. Open your eyes...and look."

And...

Oshino opened his eyes.

Senjougahara did the same.

Torches in the corners.

Their flames flickering.

Our shadows...

...our shadows wavering.

Wobbling.

Swirling.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Senjougahara screamed.

Her head was still lowered, barely; her eyes wide like she could not believe them. Her body trembled. Sweat poured down her face.

She was panicking.

Senjougahara was panicking.

"Do you...see something?" Oshino said.

"I do. It's the same...a giant crab. I see a crab."

"Okay. I don't see a thing," he said, turning around and looking at me. "Can you see it, Araragi-kun?"

"...no."

All I could see...

Were flickering lights.

And writhing shadows.

Almost the same as seeing nothing.

I could not make it out.

"I can't...see much of anything."

"See?" Oshino turned back to Senjougahara. "You don't really see a crab, do you?"

"I do. Clearly. I can see it."

"A trick of the mind."

"No. It's here."

"Okay. Then..."

He followed her gaze.

As if there was something there.

As if there was something there.

"Then there's something you need to say."

"Say...?"

Then...

She must not have been thinking.

It wasn't a conscious choice, I'm sure.

But Senjougahara raised her head.

I suppose...

This was all too much for her.

Just a mistake.

But the reason for it didn't matter.

Human reasons didn't matter.

The instant she looked up, Senjougahara went flying backwards.

She was flung backwards.

Like she weighed nothing at all, her feet never touching the ground, very fast. Until she slammed into the chalkboard at the far end of the room.

Slammed into it...

...and stayed there.

Not falling.

Pinned to the wall.

Crucified.

"S-Senjougahara!"

"Tch. I told you to shield her, Araragi-kun. You always did trip up when you were most needed. What are you standing there for?"

He looked disappointed. It had all happened in the blink of an eye, so I'm not sure I deserved it.

Senjougahara was plastered against the chalkboard as if gravity had changed direction.

Her body pressing into the wall.

Cracks had appeared on the wall around her.

Like she was being crushed against it.

She groaned, unable to scream.

In pain.

But I still couldn't see anything.

She was just plastered against the wall, held there by nothing. But she could see it.

The crab.

A giant crab.

The crab of burden.

"Oh well. Man, what a picky god. Hadn't even greeted the thing yet. What a nice guy. Did something good happen?"

"Uh...Oshino..."

"Yeah, yeah. Change of plans. No help for it. Either way works for me. Always did."

He sighed, and shuffled over to her.

Looking fed up.

Then he reached out...

...and grabbed the air a few inches from her face.

And yanked.

"Hokay," he muttered, and slammed whatever it was into the floor, hard, like a judo throw. There was no sound. No dust scattered. But he slammed it to the ground just as hard as it had Senjougahara -- maybe even harder. And without pausing for breath, he jumped on top of it.

Stomped on a god.

Violently.

Disrespectful and sacrilegious.

This pacifist was not in awe of any god.

"....."

From where I stood, it looked like Oshino was performing a mime routine. A particularly frenzied one. Currently he was standing on one leg, maintaining his balance perfectly. But to Senjougahara's eyes...

It must be quite a sight.

Her eyes had nearly popped out of her head.

Whatever was keeping her fixed to the wall must have let go, because she slid to the ground. It was not that far a fall, and she weighed next to nothing, so it would normally not have been much of an impact, but it took her completely by surprise, and she landed awkwardly.

"You okay?" Oshino called out, staring fixedly at his own feet.

His eyes narrowed, as if measuring the value of something.

"Crabs. No matter how big they are -- actually, the bigger the better -- once you flip them over, they're done for. Flat bodies were made to be stomped on, if you ask me. What do you say, Araragi-kun?" he asked. "We could start over. Would take time. Might be faster for me to just crush it."

"Crush it? Well...all she did was raise her head for a second."

"That's enough, though. More than enough. We're led by feelings, here. If we can't ask nicely, we've got to play a more dangerous game. Like we did with the demon and the cat. If words won't work, we have to fight. Same way governments work. If I crush it, well, her problem resolves. Technically. Can't recommend it; the root of the problem remains. Treating the symptoms. Like cutting a weed instead of digging it out. But maybe that's enough..."

"Maybe?"

"You see, Araragi-kun," Oshino said, grinning. "I really hate crabs."

Too hard to eat.

He leaned forward.

Putting his weight on it.

"Wait."

A voice behind him.

It belonged to Senjougahara.

Patting her grazed knees, she sat up.

"Wait. Please, Oshino-san."

"Wait?" he said, looking back at her.

His smile not fading.

"Wait for what?"

"I was just surprised," she said. "But I can do this. I can handle it."

"Hunh."

He did not take his foot away.

It kept the crab pinned down.

But he didn't crush it.

"Then go ahead."

And Senjougahara...

Did something I found extremely hard to believe. She knelt down, straightened up her back, put her hands on the floor, and slowly, with deep respect...bowed to the thing under Oshino's foot.

Her head nearly touched the floor.

Senjougahara Hitagi had voluntarily humbled herself before it.

Without anyone telling her to do so.

"I'm sorry."

First, she apologized.

"And...thank you."

Then, she expressed gratitude.

"But...it's gone on long enough. These are my feelings. My thoughts. My memories. I will take them

back. I should never have lost them."

And finally...

"Please. Please. Give me back my weight. My burden."

Her last words were a prayer, a plea.

"Give my mother back to me."

With a thud, Oshino's foot hit the floor.

Not because he had stomped on it.

It was just not there any more.

As if it had never been there.

It was gone.

Oshino Meme said nothing. He just stood there.

Even though she knew it was gone, Senjougahara Hitagi did not sit up. She simply started crying. All Araragi Koyomi could do was watch.

And begin to wonder if Senjougahara really, really, really was a tsundere.

The time line.

I'd got the time line confused.

I'd assumed Senjouhahara met the crab, lost her weight, and that led to her mother being crazy enough to join a cult. But it was the other way around; Senjouhahara's mother had joined the cult long before Senjouhahara encountered the crab, and it took her weight away.

I should have guessed.

While staplers and utility knives were things you might have lying around the house, cleats were definitely not. The moment she mentioned them, I should have realized that this had happened when she was still on the track team -- in junior high. By the time she started high school, and did not participate in PE, let alone track team, she would never have owned a pair of cleats.

Apparently her mother had first joined the cult when Senjouhahara was in the fifth grade. Well before even Hanekawa knew her.

At the time, she'd been a frail kid.

Actually sick, not just believed to be.

She had something bad -- you'd know the name if I mentioned it. Her odds of surviving it were less than ten percent, and the doctors were ready to give up.

Things were so bad...

Senjouhahara's mother needed some respite.

They took advantage of it.

Senjouhahara's operation defied the odds -- a fact that most likely had nothing to do with the cult, although Oshino pointed out that we had no way of being sure. When I was at Senjouhahara's house, if I had chosen to inspect her naked body closely, I might have noticed the faint operation scars on her back...but obviously, I had done no such thing.

And the way she'd faced me, and put her shirt on first...well, I guess I'd been wrong to suggest she was showing off her body.

She'd asked for my opinion.

At any rate, when Senjouhahara's life was saved, her mother...sank even deeper into the cult's

clutches.

Believing they had saved her daughter's life.

They had her hooked.

A classic pattern.

But the family stuck together. I knew nothing about the cult's actual practices or beliefs, but for the most part, they did not seem to upend their follower's lives. Her father earned enough, and they'd been rich to begin with, which helped; but as the years passed, her mother's beliefs deepened, and their hold on her increased.

They were a family in name only.

Senjouhara was no longer speaking to her mother.

When she was still in elementary school, they'd remained close, but things had grown increasingly strained after she entered junior high. From the way Hanekawa described her then, it was hard to imagine something like that eating at her.

Perhaps it created her.

Made her great.

Forced her to try and be as perfect as she could be.

To show her mother how perfect she could be, to prove she could be great without help from any cult.

Despite not talking to her.

She had not naturally been inclined towards sports.

Certainly not when she'd been sick.

She must have forced herself.

But her efforts had backfired.

Made things worse.

The better Senjouhara did, the more perfect she managed to be, the more convinced her mother was it was all the cult's influence.

And the final result...

In her third year of junior high.

With graduation looming just ahead.

She'd joined the cult for her daughter, but her priorities had grown so out of whack she offered up her daughter to one of the cult's leaders. Perhaps she even thought it was for her daughter's own good.

Senjouhahara fought back.

The cleat's spikes drew blood on the leader's forehead.

And the result...

...destroyed their family.

Ruined them.

Everything was taken away from her.

Money, house, land. Huge loans were taken out.

The divorce was finalized last year, she said; she'd moved to that apartment with her father when she started high school. Everything was over before she graduated junior high.

Over.

And...

In the interval, the space between junior and senior high...

...she met the crab.

"A crab of burden (*omoshi kani*) actually means a god (*omoishi kami*) of," Oshino explained, "thoughts, feelings (*omoi*), and bonds (*shigarami*). You could say that losing your weight is like you're no longer really there. When something traumatic happens, people's minds seal away the memories -- you see it all the time in movies or TV. It basically works the same way; the god takes what's troubling you away."

In other words, when she met the crab...

She severed her bonds with her mother.

She stopped thinking about how her mother had offered her to the cult leader, how she had not saved her, how this had destroyed their family. She stopped wondering if she should have let it happen.

She set down her burden.

She lost what weighed her down.

She chose...

...to hide it.

She needed some respite.

"A simple trade. An even exchange. Crabs have all that armor, they're pretty tough, right? We think they are, anyway. Got a shell on the outside. Protect what really matters in that exoskeleton. Blowing bubbles. Can't eat them easily."

He really seemed to hate them.

Oshino could get oddly hung up on things.

"The kanji for crab is understanding over insect. Same understanding as in the word for dissection. Anything living in the water gets classified that way in kanji, but these ones have two big claws."

In the end...

Senjougahara lost her burden -- her weight and her feelings. She was freed from suffering, no longer tormented. She threw it all away.

And this...

...made things much easier.

It really had.

Without her burden, she had no real problems. But like the boy who sold his shadow, there was never a day that went by when Senjougahara did not regret it.

Not because she did not get along with other people.

Not because her life had few luxuries remaining.

Not because she no longer made friends.

Not because she'd lost everything.

Simply because she had lost her feelings.

Five con artists.

None of them had anything to do with her mother's religion, but like Oshino, she'd only half trusted them...but the fact that she trusted them at all shows how much she regretted it. The fact that she kept going to the hospital did as well.

All wrong.

I'd been wrong about everything.

Ever since she lost her weight, Senjougahara...

...had not given up on anything.

...had not tossed aside anything.

"She didn't do anything wrong. Just because something bad happens doesn't mean you have to face it. Facing it doesn't make you better. Running away is always a valid option. Especially with a mother that abandoned her in favor of her religion. Given the circumstances, recovering her burden won't change anything. Only difference is her burden weighs on her again. Her mother won't come home, and her family won't recover."

It changed nothing.

Oshino did not say this to mock, was not being sarcastic.

"A crab of burden takes your weight, takes your memories, takes your identity. But it isn't like vampires or the sex cat. She chose this fate, and it was granted to her. A fair exchange. The god was always with her. She never once lost anything. And yet..."

And yet...

Even then.

All the more.

Senjougahara Hitagi wanted it back.

Wanted it all back.

Everything she remembered about her mother.

Her memories, and the pain they caused her.

I could not really know what that meant, and I would probably never know, but like Oshino said, little would come of it. Her mother would not come back to them. Senjougahara would suffer more than ever.

It changed nothing.

"It does change something," Senjougahara said.

Her eyes red and swollen.

"It was not a complete waste. If nothing else, I've found a good friend."

"Who?"

"You."

I knew the answer. But I was taken aback by how simple, direct, and unembarrassed she was about it.

"Thank you, Araragi-kun. I am very grateful to you. I apologize for anything I've said or done. I'd be happy if you'd continue to be my friend."

Despite myself...

This unexpected sentiment sank deep into my heart.

We'd promised to eat crab together.

Winter seemed a long way away.

And the next day, the punch line.

My two sisters, Karen and Tsukihi, beat me awake as usual. My body felt sluggish. I forced myself out of bed. It seemed harder than usual. My muscles ached, like I had a fever. This wasn't like Hanekawa's incident; I hadn't done any grappling or running, so I hadn't done anything to strain my muscles, but each step hurt. I made it down the stairs, but nearly toppled down them instead. My mind was clear, and it wasn't flu season, so what was going on?

I thought about it, and an impossible idea tugged at my brain.

I took a turn into the bathroom.

And stepped onto the scale.

My weight was 55 kilo.

But what the scale displayed is 100 kilo.

"...Seriously?"

Like he'd said...

Gods are pretty out of it.

Mayoi Snail

I happened to meet Hachikuji Mayoi on the fourteenth of May, and it was Sunday. Nationwide it was Mother's Day. No matter if you loved your mother or hated your mother, no matter if you are on good terms with her or on bad, as long as you're a Japanese citizen you are given equally the right to enjoy Mother's Day. Well, I suppose Mother's Day originates from the U.S.A. That probably should make you wonder if Christmas, Halloween, Valentine's etcetera go in the same line like that, too, but anyway, fourteenth of May was the day boasting top carnation expenditure recorded among the year's three hundred sixty five days, the day when all at the same time in families all over, "Shoulder Rub Coupon" and "Helping with Chores Coupon" were being used. Wait, I'm not sure whether that custom is still around or not, either way, it was fourteenth of May, dubbed Mother's Day of that year.

It was that day.

That day, 9am in the morning.

I was sitting on a bench of an unfamiliar park. Gazing like a fool upon a foolishly blue sky, without anything to do in particular, sitting on a bench in an unfamiliar park. Moreover, I didn't even care where this place was, all I knew was this was, a park.

Park 浪白, read the gate.

If you asked me whether that's spelled "Namishiro", or "Rouhaku", or something completely different, I wouldn't know. The origin of the name, well, again obviously, I wouldn't know. Of course nothing would change if I knew. Not like there's a problem with that. I've come here without any fixed goal in mind, I just randomly moved where I felt like going, where my legs led me, riding a mountain bike, and ended up in that park, and that's all there was to it, okay?

There is a difference in visiting and arriving with this place.

But other than me, there probably isn't any difference.

My bike was parked at the parking lot near the front of the gate.

In the parking lot, being neglected, exposed to winds and rained on too much, you just couldn't be sure if it were bicycles or piles of rust, there were two such things there, and other than that no other bikes other than my mountain bike have been parked there. In cases like this a man would perceive deeply the vanity of riding one's mountain bike upon an asphalt-covered road, but, hey, that was a vanity you could perceive at any time, without it being a case like this.

The park was pretty broad.

However that being said, it was simplistic and poor as for equipped playgrounds, so it probably just

felt that way. It only looked spacey. A swing in a corner and a cat's brow-sized sandbox was all; no see-saw, no jungle gym, not even a slide. To me, a high-schooler in his third year, this park place could have become a nostalgia-inspiring location, but, surely enough, I couldn't help feeling the opposite.

But, why was it so empty, probably because of that kind of reason. Maybe it was that sort of place where the playgrounds were deemed potentially traumatic for children and rendered safe so the equipment once installed was removed and so it was like that? Even so, my initial thoughts wouldn't have changed, but I think, speaking of that, swings definitely should be the most dangerous, but, anyway, this kind of thing is unrelated to me, towards the miracle that I have a normal body without any deficiency, it's not like I never had such an experience.

I surely was pushing my luck a lot when I was a child.

That's what I thought, with a feeling different from nostalgia.

But.

The me on the fourteenth of May, from a month and a half ago since, I already had lost the body you could call normal-- the sentiment ingrained in my heart still couldn't quite catch up with the reality of that. Seriously, that wasn't something you get over in a few months. I was probably never going to.

But, I thought.

Even taking the scarceness of playgrounds into consideration, the park felt unduly lonely. Indeed, there's not a single person here but me. Today was supposed to be a Sunday all over the country. Of course the park lacked in playgrounds, but in such a broad place, kids could be playing baseball with a ball of rubber and a plastic bat, I think. Or, is it that grade-schoolers these days already don't play baseball, or the next-popular soccer?. Probably they're just playing video games at home--or busy attending cram school maybe? Or the neighbourhood children might spend the day for the sake of Mother's Day, being all good kids.

Either way, this Sunday park seemed like I was here alone, as though I was alone in the whole world--go pick any exaggeration at that extent, because it really seemed like I was the owner of the place. I felt like I was free to never go home again. Because it is just me, just one person here... hm. Wait, actually, there is one. Not just me. Cutting straight across the open space from my bench, in a corner of the park, by the metal billboard with a map--the nearby residential area on it--there was a grade-schooler examining it. I can't tell what she is like just from her back. The impression she had was the large rucksack she wore. For a second I felt like I'd found a pal and my mind loosened vaguely, but, said grade-schooler, after spending some time staring at the map, seemed like she remembered something, and left the park behind. Then I became alone.

Not again, I thought.

...Onii-chan, you... I suddenly got reminded of my little sister's words.

The words tossed casually after me as I rode my mountain bike from home.

...Onii-chan, that's why you are...

Yeah.

Oh darn, I muttered as I changed my pose where I was looking up at the sky to another, where I was staring at one point on the ground, my head between my hands.

A dark mood comes flooding over me, much like a tidal wave.

I was looking up, pretty calm and and relaxed, and this time I feel petty and hate myself for that. Self-loathing is probably the right word--normally, I'm not the sort to brood, I'm not the sort whose head the word "anguish" ever crosses, but, ever so seldom, like on the fourteenth of May, yeah, on such eventful days I often come down to this condition for some reason. Special situations, unique settings. I'm really damn sensitive to those. I lose my relaxedness. I even feel like fleeing.

Sigh, normal days are the best.

Please let it be tomorrow.

So, from this rare condition--a snail-related episode began. Looking back at it, if I had not been like that, the whole episode might not have even started.

"Oh my, look at this! I thought somebody had left a dead dog lying on a park bench, and it was just you, Araragi-kun."

Feeling like I had just heard a greeting so novel it could as well have just become first ever endeavoured throughout the history of man, I raised my eyes from the ground to discover my classmate Senjougahara Hitagi there.

Obviously, as it was Sunday, she wasn't wearing her uniform. I'd thought I had something to say in regard to being called a dead dog right off, but as I saw her in plain clothes, and moreover, having that straight hair she would always leave hanging during school bound in a ponytail, that fresh visage of Senjougahara made me swallow my words that had been well on their way to my tongue and out.

Wow...

Definitely not so exposed, her breast was strangely emphasised in the upper part--and the culotte skirt of a length unthinkable for the usual school clothes. You couldn't even call that a skirt, and the black stockings were even more captivating than bare legs.

"What now? I just said hi. I was kidding. Don't make a seriously daunted face, if you please. Isn't your sense of humour positively lacking, Araragi-kun?"

"Ah, uh, well..."

"Or, what, was it that our naive Araragi-kun got fascinated by my so charming usual clothes and had his moment of felicity?"

"..."

Her expression was like after a bad pun, but anyway, as she hit the bull's eye, or anyhow really close to the truth of what I was feeling, I couldn't quite call up a good riposte.

"By the way, the 蕩 part of 'fascinated' is quite a word. Did you know? You write 'grass crown' over 'hot water'(湯). So inside me, in the bright sunshine(明) by the grass crown, the moe(萌) goes up a notch, shouldering the future generation itself which grass symbolises, a sensitive word like that that gathers expectations on me. You can also coin up pretties like maidinated, or cat-earcinated."

"...Your clothes have a really different impression from the usual, so I was surprised. That's all."

"Oh, that may be so. Back then I was wearing my milder clothes, you see."

"Really? Heh."

"That said, however, this set, top and bottom, is something I just bought yesterday. To celebrate my recovery partially."

"Recovery..."

Senjougahara Hitagi.

A girl from my class.

Until just recently, she had been dealing with a certain problem. That problem, until just recently--and ever since she entered high school.

For more than two years.

Incessantly.

Because of that problem she never made friends, she could touch nobody, she was leading a torturous school life not unlike being locked in a prison cell--but, happily, the problem faced its basic solution last Monday. I took a part in solving it, too--me and Senjougahara have a long history of neighbouring desks in the same class throughout the first, the second, and this, third year, but that time was the first we actually talked. As well as the first time you can say a connection was born between me and her, who had seemed quiet and smart, so beautifully weak and frail and sickly.

The problem was solved.

Solved.

That said, looking from Senjougahara's perspective, the problem she had been walking along for years hadn't been all that simple, of course--it had been bad enough that Senjougahara has been skipping school until Saturday, yesterday. Apparently she spent that time in a hospital undergoing an examination or maybe a work-up.

Then yesterday.

She was freed from all that.

Apparently.

After all.

Or, on the contrary, at last.

Or, the other way, finally.

"Well, although I said so, the root of the problem is in no way fixed, so to me, it's a touchy matter whether to just let it go and be happy or not."

"The root of the problem--hm."

Yeah, her problem wasn't the sort that just gets solved.

But there aren't many phenomena you call problems out there which are the sort, it seems--because things end first, and the true face of what you call problems is how we interpret it later.

Same goes for Senjouhara's case.

Same goes for mine.

"Don't mind it. It's fine with just me brooding over it."

"Heh. Well, yeah."

That was true.

True, for both of us.

"Yes. Absolutely. Also, that means I am happy as much as I have the sanity to brood."

"...The way you said that implies there's somebody somewhere who's unhappy not even having the sanity to brood."

"Araragi-kun is stupid."

"So you said it directly!"

Ignoring the context completely, too.

So you just want to say I'm stupid by that...

It's been almost a week, yet there's no change in her.

Although she probably did gain some curve.

"But I'm glad," Senjouhara said with a faint smile. "I was just going to get accustomed to the clothes, but first of all I wanted you to see me wearing it."

"...Hmm?"

"Because solving my problem allowed me to choose my fashion freely, see. Now I can wear any clothes, whatever they may be, without a limit."

"Ah... Guess you can."

Unable to choose clothes.

That was one of Senjouhara's problems, as well.

At her age when she would want to look good.

"So you wanted to show off to me first, well, uhh, Providence is favourable... Anyway, really nice of you."

"It's not 'show off', Araragi-kun. I wanted you to see it. The nuance is completely different between those!"

"Really..."

Though, she was having me see more intense clothes than those "milder" on Monday... However, the clothes she was wearing now, with an exceeding emphasis on the breast, were thoroughly, surely, charming enough to actually keep my eyes firmly nailed in. Her taste was probably to blame that I felt attracted as though by a powerful magnet. She was giving herself out as a sickly girl, but, quite in opposition to those words, I couldn't deny a positive inclination in her. Since she'd tied her hair up, the upper body line became apparent. Especially around her breast--uh, why am I talking about her breast all the time... It's not even that exposed... or rather, considering the middle of May and her wearing a long-sleeve jacket and long stockings, quite underexposed, but, well, exotic. Why, what does that mean? Maybe the case of Senjouhara Hitagi which took place on Monday and then the case of the class rep, Hanekawa Tsubasa which took place during the Golden Week have both empowered me to feel more eroticism in a dressed woman rather than naked or wearing lingerie...

That sucks...

I don't need that sort of power at the high school stage...

And thinking calmly, giving an eye like this to a classmate girl is a simple rudeness, in my opinion. It felt like I was hard at work embarrassing myself.

"By the way, Araragi-kun. Just what in the world are you doing here? Have you grown a habit of skipping classes while I was on my leave? And you can't talk to your parents about that, so you pretend you're attending, and really killing time in this park or something... If that is the case, it would feel like what I was fearing happened at last!"

"Sounds like I'm some downsized pops..."

And it's Sunday today.

Mother's Day, too.

That I had wanted to mention, but gave up just the moment before. Senjouhara lives with her father for certain reasons. As for her mother, she was in a hairy situation. It's probably worse to over-analyse my own words like this than not, but it's still not something I should mention freely, I guess. The words "Mother's Day" shall be taboo for Senjouhara from now on.

Neither did I--

Neither did I want to go deeper in that direction.

"Not really. Just killing time."

"A man who can answer 'killing time' when asked what he's doing isn't worth much as a rumour has it. Although, I would rather that notion had had no relation to Araragi-kun."

"...I'm touring around."

By bike, I added.

Senjouhara listened, nodded with a curious "hmm", and turned towards the park entrance. Right where the bike parking lot was.

"So, that bicycle was yours?"

"Hm? Yeah."

"It was so rusted you'd think it were iron oxide coating, its chain broken and in pieces, and there was no saddle nor the handle bar, it is a wonder a bicycle like that can still move."

"Not that one!"

That's the dumped bicycle.

"Aside from two bicycles like that, there was the cool one, right? The red one! That's mine!"

"Hm... Ahh. That mountain bike."

"Yeah, that."

"MTB."

"Heh. Yeah."

"MIB."

"No."

"Hmm. Oh, it's you, Araragi-kun! Anyway, it's weird then. Its build is quite different from what I rode with you, I think."

"That one's for school. Like I'd ride a granny bike out of hobby."

"That figures. Because you're a high-schooler..." Senjouhara nods, humming in agreement knowingly. "High school, mountain bikes."

"You're saying it like there's more to it..."

"High school, mountain bikes. Middle school, butterfly knives. Grade school, skirt-lifting."

"What is that ominous sequence supposed to mean!?"

"Without conjunctions or adjectives, you can't tell if it's ominous or not, can you? Don't yell baseless conclusions at a girl, Araragi-kun. Intimidation is a form of violence, you know that?"

And verbal abuse is not?

Which I won't say, though, because it'd be of no use...

"Okay, try adding conjunctions and adjectives."

"High school having mountain bikes is more improbable than middle school's butterfly knives or grade school's skirt-lifting."

"So you aren't going to keep on topic, are you!"

"Oh you, Araragi-kun! You were supposed to point out that "having" is neither a conjunction nor an adjective, but a verb in present participle tense, right?"

"Who'd tell that right off from what you washed me with!"

That's the school's top scorer for you.

Or is it actually just me not knowing...

Literature isn't my cup of tea.

"You know, lay off me. It's not even like I like mountain bikes so much, and it's too late anyhow, so I decided I'd be more patient about your verbal abuse. Or not patient, flexible. But there're 50,000 highschoolers riding mountain bikes all over the world, right? So you're willing to set them all against you?"

"The mountain bike is really great. A gem for every high-schooler to admire."

Senjougahara Hitagi in Turn Back on Old Times.

Uncharacteristically wise in self-protection.

"As the sort of greatness shown was not anything like Araragi-kun, I just ended up saying something ad lib."

"And shifted the responsibility..."

"Oh jeez, you like nitpicking, don't you? If you want to get murdered that much, I'll give you half of

that any time."

"I'll claim cruel treatment!"

"Araragi-kun, do you come around here often?"

"You're sure quick to getting back to the track. Okay, no, it's the first time, I guess. I was just riding my bike, and there was a small park, so I was just taking a rest."

Frankly speaking, it felt farther away--I thought I had just legged on all the way to Okinawa, but the fact that I happened to bump into Senjouhara nonchalantly, obviously enough, means that just by bike, I can't even get out of the town I live in. Like a ranch cow.

Sigh.

Maybe I should get a licence.

But that's after graduating, eh.

"What about yourself? You mentioned getting accustomed, well, does that mean rehab walks?"

"I mentioned getting accustomed to my clothes. You, being a boy, probably don't do that? You still would walk around to get used to shoes, at least. Well, let's just call it going for a walk, yes."

"Heh."

"This place used to be my territory a long time ago."

"..."

Her territory...

"Ahh. That's right, you moved during the second year. So, you used to live around here before that?"

"Well, I did."

So she did.

Aha--that means it's not just a simple walk, nor just getting accustomed to clothes, but in actuality, as her problem has been solved, she was feeling nostalgic, too. So she could be humane, as well.

"It's been a while, though, and this place--"

"What? Did you mean to say, hasn't changed at all?"

"No, the opposite. It's changed completely," she instantly replied.

So her stroll must be over in a way.

"It isn't really like I would become sentimental on that much--yet, when it is your former home, and it changes, you just feel your motivation abate for no reason in particular."

"Can't change, don't bother, right?"

I've been growing up around the same place all the time, though, so, frankly, I couldn't feel for her at all. And I don't have what they call "home town" someplace country, either...

"True. You can't change it," without a fitting rebuke, which wasn't like her, Senjouhahara said. It's seldom that she wouldn't backlash on anything like a personal opinion. Or, she could have thought that talking to me about it would solve nothing.

"Say, Araragi-kun. As it's come to this, would you mind me over there?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'd like to talk to you."

"..."

The way she said that was really frank.

Her intentions, simple and clear.

Direct, right to the point.

"Sure. I've occupied a four-person bench alone, so I was beginning to feel guilty somewhat."

"Oh. Then I'll do that."

So said Senjouhahara as she sat beside me.

About as close as our shoulders touched.

"..."

Ehh... Why would she, on a bench for four, sit as if it's for two...? That's a bit too intimate, Senjouhahara-san. Just at the brink of, well, two bodies touching, not quite, but any minute gesture would suffice--this really fine balance is, us being classmates, or rather even friends, just a tad bit really minutely fine, it seemed. Still, if I were to try and distance myself away now, it could leave the impression as though I were avoiding Senjouhahara. Should she have thought about it that way, even though I wouldn't have meant that, just thinking of what persecution Senjouhahara would unleash on myself was easily enough for me, for one, to not move a muscle. As a result--I froze in place.

"It's about the recent events."

In a situation like this, in communicating positions like this.

Senjouhahara said in a level tone.

"I thought I should once again say thanks."

"...Oh. It's nothing, really, I don't mind. Thinking back, I haven't served any purpose there."

"True. You haven't even served as garbage."

"..."

It technically was the same thing, but the expression was crueler.

Actually, this woman is cruel.

"Then go say thanks to Oshino. I think that'll do."

"Oshino-san is a different story. That and Oshino-san provided that I am to pay him for work. 100,000 yen, was it?"

"Yeah. You were going to part-time?"

"I was. That said, however, my personality isn't good for labouring, so I'm still at the stage of taking measures to work around that."

"Being aware of yourself is a better thing than not."

"It's not something I could just trample over..."

"So you were working around that."

"I was kidding you. I'm serious about money. Well, this makes Oshino-san stand apart from this--there you go. Now, I would like you, Araragi-kun, in a way different from Oshino-san's, to accept my gratitude."

"Well, you've essentially said it, so enough about me. 'Cause if you keep repeating words, no matter how sincere, their meaning decreases."

"Oh, I didn't mean it from the start."

"So you didn't!?"

"Just kidding. I did mean it."

"You're chock full of jokes, huh?"

I was chock full of frustration.

Ahem, Senjouhahara cleared her throat.

"I'm so sorry. It's just, whenever you tell me anything, I just can't help rebuking it, wanting to cross it."

"..."

What's the point in adding that after an "I'm sorry"?...

I just felt like she said, "We're incompatible."

"I'm sure it's, well, you know? You're likely to bully somebody you're keen on. It might be that kind of a childish mental state."

"Nah, more like you're likely to torment somebody weak, that kind of a big adult's mental state..."

Hm?

Did Senjougahara just call me somebody she's keen on?

Ah, no, that's a figure of speech...

Thinking that every girl that smiles at you is also into you, like a middle schooler would, isn't really sensible (smiles are free), so I get back to the topic.

"Well, actually, I don't even think anyone did anything for you that'd make you feel this obliged, and, as Oshino would say, you 'just saved yourself alone', so to me, all the obligations and what not aren't worth mentioning. They just complicate relationships in the long run."

"Relationships..." Senjougahara repeated in the absolutely same intonations. "I-- Araragi-kun. Does that mean I may think of you as someone close?"

"Huh? Sure."

We're as good as those each with a problem that they had faced and revealed to each other. This isn't the stage of "unrelated" any more, much less "just classmates" by now, I guess.

"Oh... Yes, we're as good as those who learned each other's weaknesses."

"Eh?... Our relationship had that tension?"

That's got to get cold...

"Just think it's not about weaknesses, but that we just naturally got closer... That would be right, no? Then I'll do the same."

"But Araragi-kun, you don't seem the type to have many friends."

"That used to be true up to the last year. Types aside, that was my motto. I just happened to have a paradigm shift during spring break... And you?"

"For me it used to be until last Monday."

So Senjougahara says.

"If you want more--until I met Araragi-kun."

"..."

What's up with her...

Actually, what's up with this situation...

It's just like Senjougahara's about to confess to me... It's too hard to breathe, too meaningful a silence, well... I feel like I'm not braced for it. Had I known things would come to this, I would have picked better clothes, combed my hair...

No, wait!

Agh, now I'm awfully embarrassed of myself, beginning to seriously think of getting confessed to! Also, as I was thinking about that, why have my eyes ended up on Senjougahara's breast!? Was I this predictable!? Was Araragi Koyomi a man so shallow as to make decisions about a girl based on her looks (her breasts)?...

"What's wrong, Araragi-kun?"

"Uh, um... I'm really sorry."

"About what?"

"My thoughts made me realise my existence was a sin..."

"I see. A sinful bastard, are you?"

"..."

Na.

Once again, it meant the same but had the wrong nuance.

"In short, Araragi-kun..." Senjougahara said, "whatever you say, I think I'd like to pay returns to you. Otherwise, I think I'll always be feeling something like a weakness with you. If we want to improve our relationship, it's after we're through that and capable of being friends on equal terms."

"Friends..."

Friends.

Why...

It's supposedly a touching idea, no matter how you look at it, yet, as I had excess expectations, I feel down inside, how do I put this--it's like something was disappointed inside me...

No, that's not quite it...

That's really not the case...

"What is it, now, Araragi-kun? I'm sure I said something rather cool for myself, yet your expression is despaired."

"It's not, it's not. Upon having learned you were thinking that way I feel like dancing a French cancan which I'm desperately trying to suppress, so it may look diametric."

"Oh."

She nodded, apparently satisfied.

She probably thought I had ulterior motives.

"Well then. Either way--Araragi-kun. Is there anything you want me to do? I'll do any one thing you tell me to."

"A-any?"

"Any."

"Right..."

A girl of the same age just told me she'd do anything for me.

It felt like reaching an unexpected achievement.

...

But I'm adamant she knows what she's saying.

"I'm serious, anything. Whatever you wish--I'll grant it for you. World domination, eternal life, wish to defeat Saiyans soon to come on Earth, whatever."

"Does that mean you've got more power than Shén Lóng!?"

"Sure does."

She affirmed it.

"I would rather you didn't think I would at such a dire moment not only turn out useless, but even turn to the enemy side. ...Well, yes, I would prefer a more individual wish, true. Something simpler."

"Figures..."

"Are you, naturally as it is, confused by me suddenly saying that? Then, you could go with the usual, as well. In this situation, there are a few oft-used standard wishes. Like, 'I wish you grant me a hundred wishes'."

"Eh? Does that work? Are you all right with it?"

In this situation, the oft-used standard wish would be about doing something shameless and very tabooish, no?

And she said that herself.

That's just asking for it.

"Just tell me anything. I'd like you to have me do something as long as I can. Like keep ending sentences with "-nyu" for a week, or attend school wearing no underwear for a week, or follow an enema diet for a week, I'm sure you have your preferences."

"Damn, what's that level of maniacal fetishism to assume of me!? I'm forgiving, but that's just too rude!"

"Ah... no, I'm really sorry, but I don't think I could keep up for my whole life..."

"It's the other way! I'm not angry because you underestimated the level of my mania!"

"Oh, really."

Senjougahara's face was that of a Buddha.

She's got me completely around her finger...

"Actually, Senjougahara, you sure you would swallow stupid desires like those?..."

"I'm that resolved."

"..."

That's a resolve you'd do better without.

"As part of brainstorm, I'd personally recommend having me wake you up while wearing nothing but an apron every day. I'm good at getting up early, too, actually, it's long my habit. Heck, I could cook you a breakfast while I'm at it, too. While wearing just an apron, of course. Isn't it the very man's spirit to enjoy the sight from behind?"

"Don't toss expensive words like 'man's spirit' around like that! Man's spirit is greater, cooler than that! And, if done in a family environment, that's going to ruin said family at the maximum

instantaneous wind speed!"

"Sounds like you wouldn't mind if not for the family. Well, care to try living at my place for a week? Although it's effectively the same thing, I suppose."

"Listen, Senjouhara." I finally mustered up the will to have her do something. "Even if that kind of negotiation were to reach conclusion, I don't think our friendship would be possible afterwards."

"Ah. That is true, now that you mention it. Yes, that's right. Let us cross out the sexual content."

Okay, fair enough.

Wait, was having her say "-nyu" sexual for Senjouhara?... She's sure got pretty special tastes for her deadpan style, there.

"But I did not think you would have wishes of sexual content, either way."

"Oh, that's a serious trust."

"Because you're a virgin."

"..."

We've had that discussion before, have we not?

Oh yeah, last week.

"Virgins are good to deal with because they aren't too greedy."

"Uh... Senjouhara. Wait a second there. You have been saying every sort of thing about my virginity like that, but aren't you without any particular experience, either? The way you still say it I'm not, uh, impressed..."

"Oh please. I do have experience."

"Oh, really?"

"Heaps of it."

So Senjouhara said without twitching a brow.

She... really likes rebuking anything I say, regardless...

That "heaps of it" expression included.

"You know what... I'm not sure how to put it, but what if, just let's assume for a second that you really did, then what good is there in it for you to be telling me that fact?"

"...Hmm."

Blushed.

Was what I did, though, not Senjouhahara.

I've so had enough of this conversation.

"Okay... Here's your correction," Senjouhahara soon said. "I have, no experience. I'm a virgin."

"...Sigh."

A confession being such, it still was one load of a confession.

Then again, she forced me to say it right out, too, so that's a fair deal.

"Which means!" Senjouhahara firmly rambles on, sticking her index finger out at me, yelling out at me in a strong voice almost echoing within the park. "Nobody would talk to an uncool virgin freak like Araragi-kun, but a late-to-get-married mentally unstable virgin such as myself!"

"...!"

She... regards abusing me so highly she's ready to disparage herself...

In a way, she has my hat off before her; in a way, she has my white flag out.

All-fronts capitulation.

Well, with Senjouhahara's high morals and rigorous demeanour, the last week's events must have left her feeling so keenly hurt it could become traumatic; thus, in this case of all, it's wiser not to dig in too deep; because for her, this could have by now become less of a personality and more of a pathology.

"But we digress," Senjouhahara said to me, back with her calm voice. "Really, isn't there anything, Araragi-kun? Something simple, like helping you out with something."

"Helping me out--hmm."

"I'm a poor talker, and I can't really phrase it, but believe me, I want to be of use to you."

No, I don't think you're a poor talker.

I even think you're blabbering too much--but hey, Senjouhahara Hitagi...

Doesn't--seem inherently bad.

And those needlessly crossed-out wishes, well.

This isn't the situation to wickedly and triflingly come up with filthy wishes.

"Or like telling you how to stop being a recluse."

"I'm not shutting myself away. In what world do recluses have freakin' mountain bikes?"

"You don't know for sure that no recluse has one, do you. Just because somebody is a recluse, you still can't impose your prejudices on him, Araragi-kun. He may take the wheels off and pedal all the time indoors."

"As in an aerobic bike?"

That is a healthy shut-away.

Provided he exists.

"But I can't instantly think of anything I'm having troubles with."

"That might be true. Your hair doesn't look like you just woke up today."

"Does that mean the worst of my worries would be a curl in my hair!?"

"Don't over-analyse. Your guilty conscience is surprisingly strong... Araragi-kun, there isn't that much written between these lines, you know?"

"How else am I supposed to interpret that..."

Darn.

She is like a rose, whose very petals have thorns.

"I think I could also help with problems like that girl who's kind to everyone in class but yourself."

"So cruel!"

As long as I don't tell her to do something, even against my will, this development of events threatens to last for all eternity.

Sigh...

I've had quite enough.

"Alright... My trouble, eh... Well, I won't vow this is something that really bothers me, mind you."

"Oh. There was something!"

"Everybody has something."

"I'm listening, what is it?"

"You look decisive."

"Well duh! This is the brink of whether I can return the favour to you or not. Or is it something hard to mention to others?"

"No, it's not..."

"Then say it! Talking about it makes it easier on you--or so they say."

...

You, formerly the most secretive person I've met, saying so doesn't really add to the verity of that.

"I, uh... had a fight with my sister."

"...Doesn't sound like I could help."

There you got a woman real quick to give up.

I just started, damn it...

"But finish the story, just in case."

"In case!..."

"Then, finish the story the first thing."

"That's about the same thing."

"Thing is, the thing with first things is, any first thing you say goes first."

"..... Ahh, okay, yeah."

I just swore to never say that.

But, well, not with where we were going.

"You know, it's Mother's Day today."

"Hm? Oh, indeed it was." Senjouhara nodded in a common manner.

I guess I was worrying too much about her.

Meaning that the rest is--my problem.

"So, which sister did you have a fight with? I reckon you had two, right?"

"Yeah, so you knew? More with the older one--but really, it was, like, both. Whatever, wherever, when-, why and however they do it, they do it together, perfectly snug."

"They're the Two Fire Sisters of Tsuga Tree, after all."

"You even know their nickname..."

I don't like that for some reason.

Though I like my sisters having a popular nickname even less.

"Both of them stick to Mum as well--so she treats them as kittens, pets them and all. So--"

"I see," Senjouhara interrupts me, as if to show she has reached full consent. She wouldn't wait for me to finish speaking, almost not wanting to hear too much. "The dull first son, on today being the very Mother's Day, is out-of-place in his own home."

"...That about covers it."

With the dull first son part being supposedly usual abusive rambling for Senjouhara, but also being a non-hyperbolic non-anything fact, I couldn't help but admit it.

Not to mention being out-of-place.

I did feel uncomfortable there.

"And so, you've been touring this far off. Heh. Still, I don't understand. How did that turn into a fight with your sisters?"

"Back early in the morning, I was sneaking out, and when I saddled the bike, my sisters caught me. An argument ensued."

"An argument?"

"Apparently they wanted to celebrate Mother's Day with me, but--well, look, I just can't help it, so there."

"You can't, huh. So there, eh."

Senjouhara repeated after me meaningfully.

Or she wanted me to think again.

Just how much luxury my troubles were.

Given Senjouhara's father-and-kid family--it was probably that.

"It often happens that a middle school girl would hate her father--would a boy not be able to bear

being with his mother in the same way?"

"Sigh... No, not that I can't bear being around her, nor do I hate her, but it feels, uh, awkward, well, since I have younger sisters, they're the same, mostly--"

That's what being the older brother means.

That's why every time things go the way they do--

"...But eh, Senjougahara. That's not the problem. Fights with sisters, Mother's Day and all are fine with me per se--not just today, it happens every event-ish day, somehow. It's just..."

"Just what?"

"Look. I could mention a lot of things, like I can't go celebrate just one Mother's Day, or that I get all-out angry at what my sisters four years younger than me tell me, all that stuff is, well, things showing how petty a human I am, no matter how that pisses me off, there's no helping it."

"Heh--that's a complex trouble," Senjougahara says. "You go all around, and your trouble goes meta. Something like the goose and egg problem."

"The egg was first, by the way."

"Oh, really?"

"It's not complex, just miniature. Like, alas, I'm a petty human! But, still, when I think I'd have to apologise to my younger sisters, I suddenly really don't care about going home. Feels like I could just live in this park forever."

"So you don't care about going home--hm." Senjougahara sighed. "Regrettably, doing something about your pettiness as a human is outside my ability..."

"..."

Yeah, she stated the obvious, but her directness and her chagrin voice made me feel down even more. Well, it's not so deep as to count as feeling down, but the very amount of lacking deepness of what I felt had a bad side of its own.

"Or, 'I'm so boring'. I want to worry about world peace, or how to keep everyone happy, if I am to worry at all. But here it is, my worry, tiny like this. That's--what I hate."

"Tiny--"

"Or you could say 'shabby'. It's like, uh, taking a fortune cookie and getting 'slightly good luck' all the time, that sort of shabbiness."

"You shouldn't deny your own charm, Araragi-kun."

"My what!? You mean my charm was getting 'slightly good luck' all the time!?"

"I'm kidding. And, your shabbiness isn't like getting 'slightly good luck' all the time."

"Let me guess, you'll tell me it's like getting 'greater bad luck'."

"Oh, no. That would be something awful...ly nice. Araragi-kun's shabbiness is all about..."

Senjougahara held a pause to add weight to what she was going to say, then continued. "...When you get a 'great luck', but read the small text and find out the contents aren't that lucky. That's more like it."

I masticated and ruminated upon the idea thoroughly.

"Damn shabby!" I yelled.

I've never even heard of such shabby people... And if I might add, she made it up too well... One thing after another--or rather, one rebuttal after another, this woman was all the more ominous.

"But disregarding your mother, the fight with your sisters may actually be minor. Although, Araragi-kun, you're supposed to love and pamper little sisters."

"It's fights through and through."

Even among those--today's one may fit.

But today it wasn't the usual.

"So they're uncute no matter how you look, disturbing little sisters?"

"My sisters aren't disturbing at all!"

"Or it could be the reversal of love. You, Araragi-kun, are surprisingly into your sisters, I presume."

"No. Little sister-loving is a wild fancy of those who have none. That's absolutely impossible in real life."

"Oh! You, who have them, sound so condescending to those who don't, which attitude doesn't amuse me, Araragi-kun."

...

Just what does she mean?...

"People who say stuff like, 'Money is not a problem~', or, 'I'd rather not have a girlfriend~', or, 'Your academic background doesn't matter~'... these haughty people. Ew."

"Little sisters don't fall into that sort of stuff..."

"So. You don't feel unbrotherly love to them. You wouldn't fall in love with your actual little sisters."

"Who would?"

"True. You seem like a sororate type."

Solo rate?

No, I don't think that's it.

"I mean the sororate marriage. The opposite to levirate marriage, that is to say, should your wife die, you would marry her sister."

"...An erudite as usual, you keep earning my admiration, except why do I have to be that sororate or whatever?"

"In your case, you'll first have the daughter of a non-blood-related woman call you "Oniichan", then marry the daughter... so she'll keep calling you "Oniichan" even after your marriage, which is truly the very real, original-meaning--"

"That sounds like I'll kill my first wife!"

The "straight man" comical part wasn't given to me originally, but Senjouhara's phrase just made me react before she could finish it.

"So, sororate Araragi-kun--"

"Please, I beg you, just call me a sister-lover!"

"Well, you said you wouldn't fall in love with your actual sister."

"Not that I would fall in love with my sister-in-law, either!"

"Then, you might fall in love with your lover-in-law."

"I just said... Wha? What law handles lovers?"

What was that?

No, calling a couple "-in-law" would, on the second thought, seem to fit, as "in-law" means duty, obligation; but what are the real lovers called, then?... And we so digressed...

"You are tiny indeed, becoming dumbfounded at a low-level crack."

"What you're talking about is not low-level."

"Right now I was just testing you."

"Testing me for what... or, did that mean you've just been playing the whole time!?"

"If I were going for real, I'd have transformed."

"Transformed!? Damn, I want to see that!"

No, I'm not even sure I do...

Senjouhara sighed, looking pensive.

"You overreact big-time, but you're tiny as a human... What if that's karma-related? But, however petty a human you may be, I will not sweep you away. I'll be there for your human-pettiness."

"That was another weird expression."

"I'll be there for you no matter what. From western peaks to eastern seas, I'll be your solace in Hell itself should you desire."

"...Right, you know, you may sound cool saying such phrases, just..."

"So, beside things related to your human sizes, is there anything troubling you?"

"..."

What if she hates me?

What if I'm getting severely bullied right now?

I'd like it to be just a persecution complex...

"Still nothing comes to mind..."

"Nothing you want and nothing you're having problems with--hmm..."

"What abuse do I get to be showered in this time?"

"You're a big guy, that's great."

"That's a forced praise, don't."

"You're exorbitantly great, Araragi-kun."

"No forced pra... Er, come again? Eggs or beat antler?"

"It's a hyperbole to "great". You didn't know?"

"I didn't... And why are you dragging expensive words around like this just to praise me, what are you scheming?"

And she said I was a big guy, of all things... And while we've just talked I was a petty human.

"Nothing, I just thought you might wish that I stopped my verbal abuse for a week, so thought I'd practice ahead."

"I don't think you could, either way."

That would have been on par with telling you not to breathe, to stop your heartbeat.

And if we suppose she would stop talking abuse for a week, that would no more be the Senjougahara I know, and it won't be fun for me as well--wait, why does it look like I'm becoming unable to part with Senjougahara's poison now?

That was close...

"Okay, okay... By the way, it's amazing how you exclude sexual content and instantly run out of ideas."

"That's true, except I had had no ideas before that restriction, either."

"Very well, Araragi-kun. Let's say it can be just a little bit sexual. By name of Senjougahara Hitagi, I shall agree to unseal thy desire."

"..."

Am I expected to do something, perchance?

Ahh, hyper-self-consciousness this time... That's swaying.

"Are you sure there isn't anything? Like helping you study."

"I've given up on it by now. As long as I can graduate."

"So, you want to graduate?"

"I'm sure I'll do it normally!"

"So, you want to do it normally?"

"You're just asking for it."

"So, let's see--"

Senjougahara holds a seemingly timed pause, then chooses a good moment, and says:

"Do you want a woman?"

"..."

Is this--still hyper-self-consciousness?

That ought to be meaningful, that.

"What if I said 'yes'?.. What would happen?"

"You'd find a girlfriend," Senjouhara says with a poker face. "That's all."

"..."

Yeah...

Though, if I think of the deeper sense of that, it's a valid phrase.

Just what the hell kind of situation is this, I really can't tell--but whatever I pick, never mind the progress, having somebody obliged to myself do it is, after all, not right. I don't mean anything ethical or moral, it just doesn't feel right.

Lovers-in-law--is what we aren't, either, though.

I somehow felt I understood what Oshino once said.

Save yourself...

From Oshino's stand, what I did was--be it for Senjouhara or for our class rep, or for that spring break woman...that vampire, it seemed pretty but it wasn't right.

Because Senjouhara's problem got solved because of nobody else but Senjouhara, her own sincere feelings.

In that sense--it really wouldn't be pretty.

Whoever I would rely on.

"No, nothing like that, really."

"Hmm. Okay."

Ultimately, whether there was a deeper meaning or not, and if there was, which sort of meaning it was, all became unclear now--but Senjouhara just said that, never showing a sign of anything having happened.

"Okay, just buy me juice or something this time. Then we'll call it even."

"Oh. Unselfish, are we."

You are really a big guy, Senjouhara adds in a concluding way.

Expressing her will to end the topic there.

Thus.

I turned my head up front. I felt I've spent quite a lot of time seeing Senjouhara's face, so it was intentional, or maybe I was averting my eyes out of discomfort, so I just looked before me--where.

Where, a girl was.

A girl carrying a huge rucksack.

The girl looked around nine or ten, standing in a corner of the park, by the metal billboard with a map--the nearby residential area on it, facing it. There she stares away from me, so I can't tell what she looks like, but her large rucksack was pretty impressive--so, I could remember. Indeed, this very girl had been looking at that neighbourhood layout even before Senjouhara got here. Back then she left soon--well, it seemed like she was back again. Seemingly comparing the board with something like a note in her hand.

Hmm.

I guess she is lost. I'm sure her note has a hand-drawn map or an address written on it.

I look at her rucksack.

There is a sewn-on name sign on it--"5-3, 八九寺真宵", denoted in fat marker strokes.

真宵, "early" "twilight"... should read, "Mayoi"(sounds like "hesitation", "lost").

But 八九寺... How do you read a surname like this? "Yakudera"... or not?

I suck at this language.

I think I'll ask somebody fluent.

"Hey, Senjouhara. Look, by that billboard, there's a grade-schooler, right? How do you read the surname on her rucksack name sign?"

"What?" Senjouhara said slowly. "I can't see that."

"Oh..."

True.

I just forgot.

My body is no longer normal--and yesterday, on Saturday, I let Shinobu drink my blood. Even though it's not as bad as it used to be during the spring break, right now I've got remarkably high capabilities. My vision wasn't an exception. If I forget the borderline just a little--I can see stuff across impossible distances and not notice. That by itself not a problem, but being able to see what nobody around can--doesn't feel particularly right.

A discord with the surroundings.

Though, that was Senjouhahara's worry as well.

"Er... well, the kanji read 8, 9, and shrine..."

"...? Well, that would be Hachikuji."

"Hachikuji?"

"Yes. Can't you read kanji compounds of that level, Araragi-kun? I'm amazed you've graduated out of kindergarten."

"You can graduate from that blindfolded!"

"You're overpricing yourself too much, I have to say."

"Finding faults in a corrective rebuttal!?"

"I am not amused by conceit."

"Now I'm amused by you..."

"Seriously, Araragi-kun, if you just had a bit of interest in history or classic books, that is, if you were a man of intellectual curiosity, you would have known. In your case, I feel it's a shame for life, no matter if you ask someone or not."

"Sure, sure. So I have no education."

"If you think being aware of yourself is a better thing than not, you're making a big mistake."

"..."

I think I have done a bad thing to her.

Because she was supposedly talking how she wanted to pay me back, but...

"Oh you... Okay. Anyway. So that reads Hachikuji Mayoi... Heh."

That's a strange name.

Well, that said, it may be more normal than "Senjouhahara Hitagi" or "Araragi Koyomi". Anyhow, it's rather improper dissing people's names.

"Um..." I steal a look at Senjouhahara.

Hm-m.

No matter how you think of it, she's not the type to melt in front of kids... I can imagine a ball coming rolling, and her just tossing it in the opposite direction, though. Or kicking a crying kid away because

it's being noisy.

And so, it's easier to just go alone.

Or if it wasn't Senjouhara but somebody else, it could have been better for the child's wariness if I went up together with a girl.

Oh well.

"Hey, could you wait a bit here?"

"Sure, but, Araragi-kun, where are you going?"

"To talk to the grade-schooler."

"Don't. You would only end up hurt."

"..."

Seriously, she says the worst things like it's nothing.

No, I'll tell her off later.

Now, the kid.

Hachikuji Mayoi.

Off the bench, I go to across the park area--to where the map stands, and where the rucksack girl is, in a quick pace. The girl is so desperately busy checking her note against the map, she doesn't even notice me coming up behind her.

Leaving a step of distance between us, I call her up.

As friendly and cheerfully as possible.

"Hey. What's up, did you get lost?"

The girl turned around.

Her hairdo was twin tails and a short forelock, leaving brows visible.

The girl's features implied intelligence.

The girl--Hachikuji Mayoi gave me a long, exploring stare, then opened her mouth.

"Don't talk to me, please. I hate you."

"..."

...

I got back to the bench, shambling like a zombie.

Senjouhara looks curious.

"Well? What happened?"

"That hurt... I just ended up hurt..."

I took more damage than I would have thought.

Tens seconds before I've recovered.

"...I'll go once more."

"But what for, whence?"

"Obviously enough," I said.

And, to the rematch.

This Hachikuji girl was once again looking at the billboard, and it felt like our sudden encounter had never happened. Apparently comparing it with her note. I try looking over her shoulder--so it wasn't a map, but an address. I'm not local so I can't recognise it, but, well, it is around here.

"Hey, you."

"..."

"You're lost, aren't you? Where do you want to get to?"

"..."

"Let me see that note of yours for a moment."

"..."

"..."

...

I shambled back to the bench like a zombie.

Senjouhara looks curious.

"Well? What happened?"

"She ignored me... A grade school girl just didn't care..."

I took more damage than I would have thought.

Tens seconds before I've recovered.

"This time...I'll go do it."

"Araragi-kun, I'm not even sure what you want to do, or what you are doing..."

"Never mind..." I said.

And, on to another rematch.

This Hachikuji girl is facing the billboard.

The first strike decides the battle, eh. I slapped the back of her head. Apparently Hachikuji really hadn't seen that coming, because as a result, she hit the billboard full-force with her open forehead.

"W,what are you doing!!"

You turned to me.

Thanks.

"Anyone would when they're hit from behind!!"

"Uh... Yeah, sorry about that." My feelings have changed due to repeating shocks. "But you know? In the "life"(命) kanji, "hit"(叩) kanji is a part."

"What are you getting at!?"

"Life especially shines up after you get hit."

"I felt very sparky!"

"Yeah..."

I couldn't brush it off.

Too bad.

"Just that you looked troubled, and I thought I'd be able to help."

"Somebody who hits a little girl's head out of the blue and then gets to help her does not exist in this world!! Absolutely none!!"

She was really cautious now.

Can't blame her, though.

"Ugh, so I'm sorry. I'm apologising for real! Eh, I'm Araragi Koyomi."

"Oh, Koyomi. Oh, that's a girly name."

"..."

Way to go.

I don't get usually told that on the first meeting.

"You smell woman!! Please don't come near me!!"

"Can't let that pass from a woman, even so little, telling me that..."

Wait, wait.

Calm down, calm down.

Trust comes first--right?

Gotta soften the air a bit, or there won't be a talk.

"So, what's your name?"

"I am Hachikuji Mayoi. My name is Hachikuji Mayoi. It's a Mum and Dad-given name which is very dear to me."

"Aha..."

Apparently, the reading was correct, but...

"Anyway, please don't talk to me! I hate you!!"

"Why is that?"

"Because you hit me from behind!"

"You already said you hated me before getting hit."

"In that case, it's karma from the previous life!!"

"That's a fresh way of being hated."

"We've been sworn enemies in our preexistence!! I was a glorious princess, and you were the evil lord!!"

"You're getting carried off alone."

Do not follow strangers.

Ignore strangers trying to talk to you.

The times aren't pretty, and kids get such teachings drilled in down to the bone... Or maybe it means that my looks simply aren't the sort a kid would like.

Either way, it's depressing when a child hates you.

"Let's just calm down. I'm not meaning you harm. I just live in this city, and I'm man or beast-friendly like no one else here, you know?"

Okay, that was too much to say, but to deal with her, that should be the right level of exaggeration. The best plan with kids or not is having people think you're easy to deal with. Whether Hachikuji has been convinced or not, she hummed in a way very fitting to her, then said, "All right," and added, "I won't be that suspicious."

"That helps."

"Then Man-or-beast-san..."

"Man-or-beast-san!? Who is that person!?"

Oh wow...

The expression itself wasn't much, but she merely left the first half out, and I've become some half-assed despicable creature... Sure, she misheard, but what if it's something people mishear a lot? And I've been using it, even calling myself that...

"He's yelling at me!! I'm scared!!"

"Look, my bad I yelled, but it's awful calling someone Man-or-beast! Anybody would yell!"

"Really?... But, you called yourself that first. I've but complied in due sincerity."

"The world doesn't work like anything goes as long as it's done with sincerity... And you misheard."

Actually, the expression makes perfect sense, it's only when people try shortening it that it begins sounding like a mutant... But nevertheless.

"So I'm saying you mustn't shorten that expression even given you don't understand it."

"Right. Is that so? I see. So, it must be like the word "wild"... So it's the same thing as, whilst you accept characters who get excited and yell, "Wild!" in a delirious voice, you can't accept a character who would be introduced in narrative as, "He was prone to letting himself go wild..." Isn't it?"

"I'm not sure... I, for one, really can't accept a character that would get excited and yell, "Wild!" in a delirious voice..."

"So, how do I call you?"

"Normally would be fine, obviously."

"Very well. Araragi-san?"

"Yeah, that's normal, go normal!"

"I hate you, Araragi-san."

"..."

The air was stiff.

"You smell!! Please don't come near me!!"

"It's gotten worse than me smelling woman!?"

"Um... Indeed, "smell" may be a cruel description. I'll correct myself."

"Yeah, if you could."

"You smell stranger!! Please don't come near me!!"

"You're incoherent, we're officially not strangers!"

"Whatever, I do not care!! Please, promptly go elsewhere!!"

"Nah... So, are you lost?"

"This isn't much of a dire situation to me!! This much trouble is well-familiar to me!! It's a very usual thing for me!! For I'm a travel maker!!"

"A travel agent or a troublemaker?" If that were true, it would mean she wasn't lost, but alas. "...Wait, what are you acting all obstinate about?"

"I am not!!"

"I can tell."

"Have at you!!"

So Hachikuji shouted as she put her weight in a high kick that hit me. I hadn't thought a grade school girl capable of a kick like this, in a perfect position, feeling like my spine got clubbed. However, on hear and wail, there is an obvious difference between a grade-schooler and a high-schooler's body

length. That's a difference you just can't step over. Hachikuji's high kick that could have well been aimed at my face, only hit my side at most. Surely, a damage will be taken either way if somebody lands their boot tip at your side, but that has no "unbearable" quality. Quickly, as soon as Hachikuji's leg hit me, I caught that leg in a hold around the ankle.

"Oh noes!" Hachikuji yells, but it's too late. ...I'll ask Senjouhara later about how grammatically correct the "noes" was, I decided, never letting Hachikuji, who was now standing on one foot, get any ideas before I, much like pulling out a radish in the field, pulled her other leg up. In jūdō, this was a form of one-armed shoulder throw. In jūdō, though, there's a rule against holds like this one, but alas, this is a street-fight. Hachikuji went airborne, and at the same time I saw the insides of her skirt right before me, at quite a daring angle too, but I, not being a pedophile, wasn't distracted this little. I jerked her across my back.

But, our difference played the other way this time. Hachikuji was small, and, while all it takes to hit the mat is a split-second in the air, a guy like me would have that little distance, too--just a little. However, in that little time, that little distance, Hachikuji could switch her thoughts, and used a free hand to grab my hair. I was, for a reason, growing it, so--even Hachikuji's small fingers could easily hold the clutch. As pain ran through the skin on my head, I let Hachikuji's ankle out of my hands.

But Hachikuji wasn't so naïve as to run. Still on my back, not waiting for touchdown, she turned, using my shoulder-blade as pivot, and proceeded attacking my head. It was a rebuff. She hit. However--shallowly. As her feet weren't steady, the power conveyance wasn't normal. Differences in age, in street-fighting experience became clear. I didn't rush with the finale; I calmed down and could have ended the fight with a single strike right now. Had I done that, it could have been my retaliation scene. An alley to my triumph.

I managed to catch her arm she had hit me with--it felt like left--wait, we're back-to-back, so it should be her right arm, so I caught her right arm and from that stance moved on to complete the new shoulder-throw!

This time--it worked.

Hachikuji hit the ground and was on her back.

I take my distance, accounting for a kick-back--

But it didn't look like she'd get back up.

I won.

"Damn, you stupid bitch--did you really think a grade-schooler could beat a high-schooler! Fuhahahahahhahah!"

One could then witness a high-school boy who fought a grade-school girl all-out, sent her over his shoulder full-force, and actually laughed haughtily, victorious.

That is, myself.

So Araragi Koyomi was somebody capable of bullying a little girl and laugh with joy... I got sick of myself.

"...Araragi-kun," an ice-cold voice called.

I turned around to face Senjougahara.

I think she couldn't stand watching and came over.

With an expression of utter suspicion.

"I did say I would follow you to hell, but, seeing how petty a human you were, my, eh, pain is absolutely another thing, so don't misunderstand me about that."

"...Please allow me to make an excuse."

"Sure."

"..."

I didn't make any.

There weren't any to be found.

So I toe the mark again.

"Well, leaving what's in the past for later, it's about her--" I point my finger at Hachikuji, who's still there biting the dust. I mean, she fell on her back, so not exactly, and then there's her rucksack that had cushioned her, so she should be okay. "She must have lost her way. I'm guessing she hasn't been with her parents or her friends, either. Uh, I've been here, in this park, since morning, so it's been a good while, and she was here once before you came, staring at the same billboard. I didn't think anything about her back then, but a lot of time passed and she came back, so she should be actually lost, right? It's not funny if someone's waiting for her around, so I thought I could help her."

"...Hmm."

Senjougahara nodded, which was something, but her dubious expression didn't change. Well, I could well see she was chock full of the question how that intention had come to blows, but I can't really explain that. I can but say it was two warrior souls crying out at each other.

"Oh."

"Yeah?"

"I mean, that makes sense... I understand the situation now."

I wonder about that part.

It could be she had just pretended that she did.

"Oh, yeah. Senjouhara, you mentioned you lived around here? Then you should know the place by address, right?"

"Sure... Well, as much as anyone."

That specification didn't bode well.

I wondered if she wasn't seeing me as a child abuser per chance. That was supposedly a step worse than even being a pedophile.

"Ullo, Hachikuji. I know you're actually awake and playing dead or something. Show this lady here that note of yours."

I bend and peek into Hachikuji's face.

Her eyes are white.

...She's actually unconscious...

A girl showing the whites, well that's disturbing...

"What's wrong, Araragi-kun?..."

"Nothing..."

Using my back to shield the sight from Senjouhara's eyes, I nonchalantly slapped Hachikuji's cheeks twice, thrice. Not adding up to the violence, naturally, but to wake her up.

Presently Hachikuji comes to.

"Ngh... I was seeing a dream of sorts."

"Aw, really? What sort of dream?" I try being very kind. "Tell me, Hachikuji-chan. What kind of a dream was it?"

"A dream of a barbaric high school student boy abusing me."

"...Ah, isn't it a dream that means the opposite?"

"Oh. It was that kind of dream, wasn't it?"

Obviously that had been real, right before she lost consciousness.

I felt a heart-rending regret.

I took the note from Hachikuji, and handed it right to Senjougahara--except Senjougahara didn't move to take it. Instead, she stared at me, her eyes colder than the freezing point of water.

"What? Take it."

"...Somehow, I don't want to touch you."

Ugh.

Her poison, which I was supposedly used to, really hit the mark...

"But you're just taking the note."

"I don't even want to touch the things you have touched."

"..."

She hates me...

Senjougahara hates me in the commonest way now...

Huhh... It's weird, it had felt surprisingly good talking with her just recently...

"Okay, I got it, then... I'll simply read it aloud, okay? Umm..."

I read the address written on the note. Thankfully, there weren't any ambiguous characters in it, so I was able to read it fluently. Senjougahara heard me and said,

"Hm. I know where that is."

"That helps."

"Go past the place where I used to live then go a bit further. I'm not sure about the precise place, but once we're there, I can feel the right place. So, shall we go?"

No sooner said than done, Senjougahara turned on heels and started walking towards the park gate in a large pace. I had thought she would grumble more about how she didn't want to guide children, but she, surprisingly, just abided--no, rather, as Senjougahara hadn't even introduced herself to Hachikuji, hell, she hadn't looked in Hachikuji's eyes, so, somehow, Senjougahara hating children was probably a good prediction on my part, though. Or, as she'd said she wanted to do "one thing" for me, it could be she heeded my call there.

Ahh.

If that's true, it feels like a total waste...

"Oh well... Let's go, Hachikuji."

"Eh... Go where?"

Hachikuji seemed honestly puzzled.

Can't she assume things on other people talking?

"The place marked on your note, of course. That lady knows it, so she's going to guide you. Lucky you."

"...Sigh. A guidance, then..."

"Hmm? Weren't you, like, lost?"

"Yes, I am," Hachikuji admitted clearly. "I'm a lost snail."

"What? Snail?"

"No, I--" She shook her head. "I, it's nothing."

"...Okay. Uh, so, let's just follow that lady! Her name is Senjougahara, as in battlefield. Her crabiness is on par with her name, but you just get used to it, then the extremeness of it becomes your habit, and then, deep inside, she's a comparatively frank, good person. A bit too frank, even."

"..."

"Oh jeez. Come on..."

Hachikuji still wouldn't move, so I got firmly a hold on her hand, and, pulling, or rather, dragging her, chased Senjougahara's back. Hachikuji was squeaking, "Ah, auh, au, ouuou," like a seal or a sea lion, but despite several tough moments, she managed to follow me without falling.

I decided I'd go pick my mountain bike up later.

For now, we left the 浪白 park behind.

Me still none the wiser as to how that reads.

I suppose it's about time I talked about spring break.

Over spring break, I was attacked by a vampire.

I say attacked, but really I stuck my head where it didn't belong. In fact, I pretty much literally stuck my head out, revealing my neck for those sharp fangs. At any rate, in this age where science is seen as all powerful and people think no darkness cannot be illuminated by it, I, Araragi Koyomi, was attacked by a vampire in the back country suburbs of Japan.

I was attacked by a beautiful demon.

Hers was blood-chilling beauty.

My blood was squeezed from my body and I became a vampire.

It sounds like a joke, but wasn't funny at all.

I gained a body that would burn up in the sun, loathed crosses, was vulnerable to garlic, and would melt from holy water. In exchange, I gained tremendous physical abilities. What awaited me afterwards was a hellish reality. I was saved from that hell by a middle aged man who happened to be passing by, Oshino Meme. Oshino Meme was a hopeless adult who went from trip to trip without a permanent residence. He brilliantly drove out the vampire and dealt with everything else too.

As a result, I returned to being human.

I retained a small fraction of the physical abilities (namely, a bit of heightened recovery speed and a heightened metabolism) and I was once more fine with the sun, crosses, garlic, and holy water.

Really, it wasn't much.

It wasn't even anything worth ending with "and I lived happily ever after".

It had already been resolved, so there isn't much to talk about. The only real remaining problem was having my blood drunk once a month and getting superhuman vision and such afterwards. However, those were all my own personal problems and I merely had to spend the rest of my life facing them.

In my case, I was lucky.

For me, it only lasted for the duration of spring break.

The hell was only about 2 weeks long.

It was different for Senjougahara.

For Senjougahara Hitagi, when she met that crab, she had to deal with the inconvenience to her body for over 2 years.

Most of her freedom had been taken by that inconvenience.

I had to wonder what it was like living that hell for over 2 years.

Given that, it may not have been all that surprising that she admirably felt more of an obligation toward me than was suitable for the little I had done. The physical inconvenience was one thing, but having the emotional inconvenience removed must have been more important to her than anything.

Emotional.

Mental.

Yes, those types of problems left you with no one to discuss it with and no one who understood you. It may be that they chained you up much more heavily and drove wedges between you and others much more deeply than physical problems.

For instance, I may have recovered, but I continued to be afraid of the morning sunlight coming in through the gap between the curtains. In that case, she may have similar lingering effects.

I knew one other person who had been helped by Oshino like Senjougahara and I, Class Rep Hanekawa Tsubasa. However, for her, it had been even shorter than for me at only a few days and she had lost the memories from that time. In a way, she may have been the luckiest of us all. However, in about every other way, Hanekawa had not been saved at all.

“It was around here.”

“Hah?”

“The house I used to live in was around here.”

“The house...?”

I looked in the direction Senjougahara was pointing, but all I saw was...

“...That’s a road.”

“Indeed it is.”

It was a wonderful road. From the color of the asphalt, it was clearly newly paved. Which meant...

“So the land was developed?”

“Actually, it is known as rezoning.”

“Did you know?”

“I didn’t.”

“Then you should look a little more surprised.”

“I do not show my emotions on my face.”

True enough, her expression had not changed in the slightest.

However, the way Senjougahara stood staring at the place could be interpreted as her feeling forlorn over having lost that destination.

“Everything really has completely changed. It’s hard to believe all this happened in less than a year.”

“.....”

“How boring.”

After coming all that way, *that* is what she said.

And she truly did sound bored.

That had been one of the major reasons she had decided to break in her new clothes in that area and now she was done with it.

She turned around.

Still hiding behind my legs, Hachikuji Mayoi peered out at Senjougahara. In her caution, she remained silent. Despite being a child – or perhaps *due to* being a child – she must have instinctually seen Senjougahara as the greater threat than me. For a while, she had been avoiding Senjougahara by using me as a barrier. It was obvious that the living human that I was made a poor barrier and it was also obvious that she was avoiding Senjougahara, so I felt really awkward as the third party. However, Senjougahara showed no sign of engaging Hachikuji (when she said “this way” or “down this road” it was always only to me), so they were even.

It was still hard to bear as the one caught between them, though.

Oddly enough, from the way Senjougahara was acting, it seemed like she would say “I don’t really know” instead of “I hate them” or “I dislike them” if I had asked her how she felt about children.

“The house had been sold, so I didn’t expect it to be exactly the same, but I certainly did not expect it to be a road now. That does leave me a little blue.”

“Yeah, I suppose it would.”

I had no choice but to agree.

I could certainly imagine what it would be like.

On the way here from the park, the old roads and the new roads had been all mixed together. Also, the guide map and the residential map on the sign at the park had seemed completely different from reality. It was enough to somehow wear down my motivation and I had no real attachment to the area.

Not that anything could be done about it.

The cityscape would change just as people would change.

Senjouhara let out a long sigh and said, “That was pointless and it ate up a lot of time. Let’s go, Araragi-kun.”

“Hm? You’re ready to go?”

“I am.”

“Oh, okay. Let’s go, Hachikuji.”

Hachikuji wordlessly nodded.

She may have thought saying something would reveal her location to Senjouhara.

Senjouhara started walking on head.

Hachikuji and I followed.

“How about you let go of my legs, Hachikuji? It’s hard to walk like this. Honestly, just quite clinging to me like Dakko-chan. You’re gonna make me trip.”

“.....”

“Just say something already.”

At my coercion, Hachikuji said, “Araragi-san, I am not clinging to your giant leg because I *want* to.”

I then forcibly pried her from my leg.

As I did so, a nice ripping sound effect...was not actually made.

“How could you! I’m going to complain to the PTA!”

“Hehh. The PTA, you say?”

“The PTA is an amazing organization! A minor citizen with no influence like you stands no chance! They can toss you aside with just one finger!”

“Just one finger, huh? How scary. By the way Hachikuji, do you know what PTA stands for?”

“Eh? Um...”

As I had suspected, she did not, so she fell silent again.

Not that I knew.

At the very least, I managed to keep it from developing into an annoying argument.

“PTA stands for Parent Teacher Association,” answered Senjougahara from ahead of us. “It also stands for the medical term percutaneous transluminal angioplasty, but I doubt that is the answer you wanted, Araragi-kun, so Parent Teacher Association must be the correct answer.”

“Hehh. I had a vague idea that it was a gathering of parents, but I didn’t know it included the teachers too. You sure are knowledgeable, Senjougahara.”

“No, you are merely severely lacking in knowledge and incompetent, Araragi-kun.”

“I won’t complain about the lacking in knowledge part because it flowed from what I was saying, but incompetent was just plain unnecessary.”

“Was it? Then I will change it to pathetic.”

She did not even turn around.

She must really be in a bad mood...

A normal person may have been wondering what was different about that from her usual abuse, but after all the abuse she had sent my way, I could instinctually tell the difference. There was simply no edge to her words. If she had been in a good mood, Senjougahara would have showered me with much, much more abuse.

Hmm...

I wonder what the problem is.

Was it finding out her house is a road, or is it me?

Both seemed likely.

Whichever it was, even if you ignored my child abuse and all, our conversation had been cut short by Hachikuji’s trouble. Even if it that had been the natural flow of events, it was natural for Senjougahara to not be at peace in her heart.

In that case, I have to get this Hachikuji Mayoi to her destination as quickly as possible and then work to put Senjougahara back in a good mood. I can treat her to lunch, and go shopping with her.

If there is still time after that, we can go somewhere else for fun. Yeah, that should work. Thanks to my sisters, I can't just go home, so I can spend the day attending to Senjougahara. Luckily, I have plenty of money on me, so-... Wait, why am I so intent on doing things for her!?

I surprised myself.

“By the way, Hachikuji.”

“What is it, Araragi-san?”

“About this memo.”

I pulled the memo from my pocket.

I had not yet returned it to Hachikuji.

“What is at this address?”

And why are you headed there, I wanted to ask.

As the one guiding her, I wanted to know. Especially since she was an elementary school girl out on her own.

“Hah. I won't tell. I'm going to make use of my right to remain silent.”

“.....”

She really was an impertinent little girl.

Who was it that said children were pure and innocent?

“If you don't tell me, I won't take you there.”

“I never asked you to. I can go on my own.”

“But I thought you were lost?”

“What about it?”

“Hachikuji, for future reference, there's nothing wrong with asking others for directions.”

“Maybe for people like you who have no confidence. You can rely on others all you want, but I don't need to do that. For me, this kind of thing is no harder than using an everyday vending machine!”

“Hehh...So it's sold at a set price?” was my odd response.

Well, from Hachikuji's point of view, I was probably meddling. When I was in elementary school, I believed I could do anything on my own. I believed I did not need anyone's help for anything and that

I would never need someone else to rescue me.

And yet there was of course no way that I could truly do everything.

“Understood, young lady. Please, would you kindly tell me what is at this address?”

“Your words have no sincerity behind them.”

She was quite stubborn.

Both my middle school-aged sisters would have certainly fallen for that, but Hachikuji had a clever-looking face, so I decided she would not be dealt with as easily as some dumb kid.

Honestly, the trouble I go to.

“...Okay.”

A brilliant idea came to me.

I pulled my wallet out of my back pocket.

I had plenty of money on me.

“Young lady, would you like some money?”

“Yahoo! I’ll tell you anything!”

What a dumb kid.

I mean, that is just really stupid.

I had a feeling that no child had ever been kidnapped using that method, but Hachikuji seemed to have the makings of being the first.

“Someone named Tsunade-san lives there.”

“Tsunade? Is that a family name?”

“It is an excellent family name!” shouted back Hachikuji, seeming to have taken offense.

I understand that it wouldn’t feel good to have someone you knew’s name referred to in that way, but it was nothing to get mad about. It made her seem emotionally unstable.

“Hmm, so how do you know this person?”

“Tsunade-san is a relative of mine.”

“A relative, huh?”

I concluded that she must have been using that Sunday to head to her relative's house. I did not know whether she had fairly laissez faire parents or if she had snuck out on her own, but it seemed that elementary school girl's weekend adventure had failed.

"Is Tsunade-san a cousin you get along well with? From the look of that backpack, I'm guessing you've come a fair ways. Honestly, you should have done this over Golden Week instead. Or is there some reason that it had to be today?"

"Something like that."

"You should at least spend Mother's Day with your parents."

That was not really something I should have been saying.

—Onii-chan, it's because you're like this.

What's wrong with being like this?

"I don't want to hear that from you, Araragi-san."

"What do you know!?"

"I can just tell."

"....."

It seemed that she had no real reason. She simply physiologically did not like having me lecture her.

How cruel.

"And what were you doing, Araragi-san? I don't think any decent person would be sitting blankly on a park bench on a Sunday morning."

"I wasn't really doing anything. I was just-..."

I almost said, "killing time", but I stopped myself at the last second.

That's right. A guy who says he is killing time when asked what he is doing is worthless. That was close.

"I was just doing some touring."

"Oh, some touring? How cool."

She praised me.

I expected some horrible words to soon follow, but none came.

I see. So Hachikuji is capable of praising me...

“It was only on my bicycle, though.”

“I see. Well, a bike is standard for touring. It is a bit disappointing though. Do you not have a license, Araragi-san?”

“Unfortunately, my school’s rules prohibit getting a license. But a bike really is more dangerous, so I’d prefer a car.”

“I see. But then it would be fouring, wouldn’t it?”

“.....”

Wow, now that’s a funny mistake. She thinks touring is spelled “two”-ring. Should I correct or her let it slide? I’m not sure which one is the kinder option.

By the way, Senjouhara gave no response to this as she walked on ahead.

She made no attempt at all to enter the conversation.

I wondered if she was simply unable to hear such a low intelligence conversation.

Incidentally, that was when I saw Hachikuji Mayoi’s carefree smile for the first time. It was quite charming and it seemed to open my heart. The usual way of describing that type of smile was to say it was like a blooming sunflower, but it was also the type of smile that most people stopped making after getting much older than her.

“Sigh. Oh, god.”

That was a close one. If I was a lolicon, I would fallen for her there. I really am glad I’m not a lolicon.

“The roads around here really are a tangled mess. What kind of structure is this? How did you think you could navigate through all this on your own?”

“This isn’t my first time doing this.”

“Oh, I see. But then why are you lost?”

“...Because it’s been a while,” said Hachikuji, sounding ashamed.

Yes, what you think you can do and what you can do are two different things. What you think is nothing more than thoughts. That is true for elementary schoolers, high schoolers, and people of every other age.

“By the way, Araragi-san.”

“You added an extra ‘ra’!”

“Sorry, I bit my tongue.”

“Don’t bite your tongue in such an unpleasant way...”

“It can’t be helped. Everyone says things wrong sometimes. Or have you said everything perfectly from the moment you were born, Araragi-san?”

“I can’t say I’ve done that, but I know I don’t say people’s names wrong.”

“Then say Basu Gasu Bakuhatsu^[3] three times fast.”

“That is not someone’s name.”

“Yes, it is. I know three people named that, so it must be a fairly common name.”

She was brimming with confidence.

I was shocked at just how obvious children’s lies were.

“Basu gasu bakuhatsu, basu gasu bakuhatsu, basu gasu bakuhatsu.”

I ended up saying it.

“What animal devours dreams?” asked Hachikuji as soon as I was done.

When did this become the ten-times quiz^[4]?

“...The baku?”

“Nope. Wrong,” said Hachikuji with a triumphant expression. “The animal that devours dreams is...” She put on a fearless smile. “...the human.”

“This is no time to be clever!”

I shouted louder than I meant to because I subconsciously really did think it was clever.

Anyway, the residential area was very quiet.

As we walked along, we did not pass by anyone else. The area seemed to be one of those where the people who had to leave left in the mornings and those who did not need to leave stayed in all day. Well, the area I lived in was pretty much the same. The main difference was that the houses here were much larger. It must have been an area populated by mostly rich people. I recalled that Senjouhara’s father was a big shot in a foreign investment company, so I surmised that that was the type of people that lived there.

Foreign investments, hm?

It was not a term that really seemed to fit that back country area.

“Hey, Araragi-kun,” said Senjouhara, speaking up for the first time in a while. “Could you tell me the address again?”

“Hm? Sure. Are we close?”

“Perhaps, or maybe...” she said vaguely.

Not understanding what she meant, I read off the memo once more.

Senjouhara nodded and said, “It seems we overshoot it.”

“Eh? We did?”

“It seems that way,” she said calmly. “If you wish to rebuke me, do so as much as you like.”

“Um, I’m not going to rebuke you over something like that.”

Why does she get so serious like that?

She was so honorable that it seemed more like she did not know when to give up.

“I see.”

With a composed face that showed no impatience, Senjouhara turned around to face the path she had just come down. To avoid her, Hachikuji made the exact opposite movements in order to keep me in the center between them.

“Why are you so afraid of Senjouhara? She hasn’t done anything to you. In fact, while it may be hard to tell at first glance, she is the one guiding you, not me.”

I was merely following her.

I really was in no position to say anything self important.

Even if she disliked Senjouhara due to some child’s intuition, she was going too far. Not even Senjouhara was made of steel. Even she would be hurt if Hachikuji continued to avoid her like that. And even if I set aside my concern for Senjouhara, Hachikuji’s attitude toward her was wrong from a moral standpoint.

“I am at a loss as to what to say in response to that,” said Hachikuji with surprising modesty and despondency.

She then lowered her voice to a whisper and said, “But can’t you feel it, Araragi-san?”

“Feel what?”

“The fierce animosity emanating from her.”

“.....”

It seemed to be something more than intuition.

The worst part was that I could not say she was wrong.

“She seems to hate me. I can feel her will strongly telling me to disappear because I am in the way.”

“I doubt she’s actually thinking that, but...Hmm.”

Here goes.

I was afraid, but I decided to ask.

The answer was obvious to me, but it still seemed that I had to ask.

“Hey, Senjouhara.”

“What?”

As usual, she did not turn around.

It might have been me that she thought was in the way and wanted to disappear.

We both thought of the other as a friend, so it was strange how we were simply unable to get along.

“Do you...hate children?”

“Yes. I absolutely loathe them. I wish every last one of them would die.”

She showed no restraint.

Hachikuji let out a short cry of terror and shrank down behind me.

“I have no idea how to approach them. A while back – I think it was in middle school – I bumped into a child of about 7 while shopping in a department store.”

“Oh, did you make the kid cry?”

“No, it wasn’t that. It was what I said to the 7 year old child. I said, ‘Are you okay? Are you hurt? I’m sorry. I really am.’”

“.....”

“I had no idea what to say to a child, so I lost my cool. That led me to give such a horrible response. It was such a shock that, ever since, I have endeavored to turn my hatred toward the things known as children whether they are human or not.”

It was something like an outburst of anger.

I understood her reasoning, but I could not understand how she felt.

“By the way, Araragi-kun.”

“What?”

“It seems we overshot it again.”

“Hahh?”

Overshot what...? Oh, the address.

Eh...? Really? Twice?

With an unfamiliar area, it was not uncommon for the address to not quite match up with the actual layout of things, but this was the area Senjougahara had lived in until recently.

“If you are able to rebuke me for this, then do so as much as you like.”

“I’m not going to rebuke you over something like-...wait. Senjougahara, did your line change slightly from before?”

“Oh, did it? I didn’t notice.”

“What’s going on? Oh, right. You mentioned rezoning before, didn’t you? Come to think of it, if your house is now a road, it isn’t too surprising that things have changed so much from what you remember.”

“No, it isn’t that.” Senjougahara checked her surroundings. “The number of roads has increased, old houses have disappeared, and new ones have been built, but none of the old roads are completely gone. I should not be getting lost like this.”

“Hmm?”

But the fact was, she actually *was* getting lost. It was possible she simply did not want to admit her own careless mistake. She could be fairly obstinate in her own way.

“What?” asked Senjougahara. “From your expression, you seem to have some kind of complaint. Araragi-kun, if you have something to say, then be a man and say it. If you like, I will strip naked and prostrate myself before you right here and now.”

“Are you trying to make everyone think I’m the world’s worst man?”

How could I let her do that in a residential area like that?

Also, that wasn’t the kind of thing I was into.

“If it would show the world that Araragi Koyomi is the world’s worst man, then nude prostration is a cheap price to pay.”

“What’s cheap is your pride.”

I couldn’t figure out whether she had too much or too little pride.

“But I will keep on my socks.”

“Even if you end this with a lame joke, I don’t have any strange fetishes like that.”

“When I said socks, I meant fishnet stockings.”

“Going farther toward crazy isn’t going to help.”

Actually, even if my tastes don’t lie there, I wouldn’t mind seeing her in fishnet stockings. She doesn’t even have to be nude otherwise. Hm, if she was wearing stockings like that...

“I can tell from your face that you are thinking indecent thoughts, Araragi-kun.”

“Of course not. Does a person who endeavors to hold up the principles of purity such as myself seem like he would be the owner of such a vulgar personality? I am truly shocked that you would think that, Senjougahara.”

“Oh? Whether there is any basis or not, I try to always say such things to you, Araragi-kun. The fact that this time you simply denied it without any kind of retort seems suspicious.”

“Uuh...”

“Well, if nude prostration is not enough for you, I suppose you must be intending to use a permanent marker to write lewd words on every inch of my flesh.”

“My thoughts didn’t go that far!”

“Then how far *did* they go?”

“More importantly, umm, Hachikuji.”

I forcibly changed the subject.

I had learned how to do that by watching Senjougahara.

“Sorry, but this looks like it’s going to take longer than I thought. But if you recognize this area...”

“I do not.”

Hachikuji’s tone was surprisingly calm. In fact, it was an emotionless and mechanical tone that sounded like she was reciting a formula she had memorized.

“It is probably impossible.”

“Eh? Probably?”

“If probably isn’t enough for you, then it is definitely impossible.”

“.....”

It wasn’t that probably wasn’t enough for me.

Nor was it that definitely *was* enough.

Even so, I was unable to say anything.

It was that tone of voice.

“No matter how many times I try, I will never get there.”

Hachikuji...

“I will never get there.”

Hachikuji repeated herself.

“I will never get to my mother’s place.”

She was like a broken record.

She was like an unbroken record.

“After all, that is what happens with the lost snail.”

“The lost cow,” said Oshino Meme in a low, annoyed groan that made it sound like he had been forcibly woken up midway through 1000 years of being peacefully sealed away. He didn’t have low blood pressure, but it seemed he had a difficult time waking up. The difference from his normal sociability was striking. “That would be the lost cow.”

“Cow? No, not a cow. She said snail.”

“If you write it with the kanji, it has cow in it. Oh, Araragi-kun, were you writing snail in katakana? You must have a low IQ. It takes the kanji for spiral^[5] and changes the water radical on the left to the insect radical. Just add the kanji for cow^[6] at the end and you have snail^[7].”

“Spiral...to snail, hm?”

“On its own, it’s pronounced ka or ke, but it’s really not used often outside of the word snail. A snail’s shell does have a spiral on it after all. It’s also similar to the kanji for calamity^[8]...and maybe that’s a little more symbolic. There are countless monsters that lead people astray, but when it comes to ones that obstruct one’s path...well, surely even you are familiar with the nurikabe, Araragi-kun. If it’s that type and is a snail, then it must be the lost cow. In this case, the name refers to its essence not its form, so a cow and a snail are essentially the same. As for its form, art of it with a human form remains. Araragi-kun, most of the time with monsters, the person who came up with the name and the person who did the art are different people. You can pretty much say that’s true for all of them. Generally, the name comes first. I say the name, but really it’s more of a general idea. Well, it’s kind of like the illustrations for a light novel. Before the visual form of a character is made, a general idea about the character exists. It is often said that a name represents the body, but the body being referred to there is not the physical body or the outer appearance. It refers to the essence of what it is...Yawwn.”

He really did sound tired.

However, that eliminated a lot of the superficiality of his personality, so it made him easier to talk to. Speaking with Oshino could be truly tiring.

The snail.

A terrestrial pulmonate with a spiral shell of clade Stylommatophora.

Slugs were much more common to run across, but that was a type that had retrogressed away from having a shell.

If you sprinkled salt on them, they melted.

After we left off, Senjougahara Hitagi, Hachikuji Mayoi, and I had retried and continued five more times. We tried everything from shortcuts that led directly there to overwhelmingly long and out of the way detours, but every single one of them turned out to be magnificently wasted effort. We knew for sure that we were near our destination, but we were simply unable to reach it. In the end, we even tried going from door to door, stopping at each and every house, but even that was fruitless.

As a truly last resort, Senjougahara used some special function of her cell phone (I didn't really understand) that was a navigation system using GPS or something.

However, her phone lost its signal just before she could download the data.

It was at that point that I finally, reluctantly, and much too late truly understood what was going on. She had not said anything, but it seemed Senjougahara had sensed this much earlier and Hachikuji likely understood the situation much more deeply than either of us.

For me, it was a demon.

For Hanekawa, it was a cat.

For Senjougahara, it was a crab.

And for Hachikuji, it seemed to be snail.

That meant that I could not simply give up on it all. If it had been a normal case of a lost child that we had been unable to resolve on our own, we could have taken her to a nearby police box and felt good about how we had helped out. However, *that side of things* was involved...

Senjougahara was also opposed to simply bringing Hachikuji to a police box.

Senjougahara had been immersed in that side of things for years.

If she felt that way, there was no mistaking it.

However, that also meant it was a problem that Senjougahara and I could not deal with on our own. Neither of us had special powers to that end or anything like that. All we were able to do was *know* that it was a problem on that side of things.

It is said that knowledge is power.

However, merely knowing left us utterly powerless.

It was a quick and dirty solution and we didn't particularly like having to take it, but at the end of our discussion, we decided to consult Oshino.

Oshino Meme.

He had saved me...no, us.

However, he was certainly the type of person you would want to avoid being around as much as possible if he had not saved you. He was over thirty yet had no permanent residence, and had been sleeping in an old abandoned cram school ever since he first came to this town over a month ago. That alone would be enough for a normal person to draw back.

—For now, I have an interest in this town.

That was what he had said.

As such, he was a true wanderer who could easily disappear at any time. However, we had met him the past Monday for Senjougahara's issue and on the Tuesday to settle things afterwards. Also, I had met Oshino just the day before, so he was surely still in that abandoned building.

That left the issue of how to contact him.

He had no cell phone.

That meant the only option was to head there to speak with him directly.

Senjougahara had only just met Oshino the week before and she really barely knew him, so I was the natural candidate to go, but Senjougahara herself volunteered.

“Would you lend me your mountain bike?”

“Sure, but do you know where to go? I could draw you a map, if you like.”

“Araragi-kun, you are not going to make me happy by worrying about me if you assume I have as poor a memory as you. In fact, it will upset me.”

“...I see.”

Her words upset me.

They truly did.

“To be honest, I had wanted to ride this mountain bike from the moment I saw it in the parking lot.”

“So you were being honest when you said it was the best... I had assumed otherwise because you aren't the most honest person.”

“Also,” said Senjougahara, whispering into my ear. “Do not leave me alone with that child.”

“.....”

“I won't know what to do.”

Well, I guess that isn't too surprising.

And I bet Hachikuji wouldn't like it much either.

I handed the mountain bike's key to Senjougahara. Senjougahara had previously said that she did not own a bicycle, so loaning my precious bike to her might have actually been a bit dangerous, but I had a feeling that the bike would be fine with her.

And so I ended up waiting for Senjougahara to contact me.

I had returned to the bench in that park of unknown pronunciation.

Hachikuji Mayoi sat next to me.

She sat far enough away that another person could sit between us.

She could run off at any time if she wanted to.

In fact, her position made it look like she was about to.

I had explained to her the issues that Senjougahara and I had held as well as our continuing circumstances related to those problems, but that seemed to have only made her raise her guard even further. I had hoped to lower her guard a bit, but my failed attempt had just made things worse. I had no choice but to start back from square one.

After all, trust was incredibly important.

Sigh...

I guess I should try talking to her.

One thing had caught my attention before.

“I thought I heard you mention your mother before. What did you mean by that? I thought Tsunade-san was a relative of yours?”

“.....”

No response.

Apparently, she was once again making use of her right to remain silent.

I doubted the same method would continue to work, and that method had only been any fun because it had been a joke. If I continued to use it, it would start to seem – even to me – like I was serious about it.

And so...

“Hachikuji-chan, I'll let you have some ice cream, so could you come a little closer?”

“Sure thing!”

Hachikuji immediately slid herself closer to me.

...Apparently whether I actually make good on my promises doesn't matter.

In fact, I had not even given her a single yen before, so she was quite an easy person to manipulate.

“Anyway, about what I was saying before...”

“What was that again?”

“Your mother.”

“.....”

And the right to remain silent was back.

I continued speaking anyway.

“Were you lying when you said it was a relative's house?”

“...That wasn't a lie,” said Hachikuji in a peevish tone of voice. “My mother is one of my relatives.”

“Well, I suppose that's true, but...”

Isn't that just splitting hairs?

And why would a girl be out on a Sunday with a backpack, heading for her mother's house?

“Also,” said Hachikuji in the same peevish tone. “Even though I called her my mother, she unfortunately isn't my mother anymore.”

“Oh...”

Divorce.

Living only with one's father.

I had heard a similar story quite recently.

That was the story of Senjouhara's family.

“Tsunade was my name up until I was in third grade. When I was taken in by my father, my family name changed to Hachikuji.”

“Hm? Wait a second.”

Things had started to get a little complicated, so I started organizing the information in my head.

Hachikuji is in fifth grade, her family name was Tsunade up until the third grade (that must be why she got so angry about what I said about that name), and her family name changed to Hachikuji when she was taken in by her father. ...Oh, I get it. When her parents got married, her father must have taken on her mother's family name. The married name doesn't have to come from the guy. So then they got divorced and her mother, Tsunade-san, left the house and moved here...Actually, it was probably to her parents' house.

And then Hachikuji set out this Sunday, on Mother's Day, to visit her mother.

That name was a precious name her mother and father had given her.

“Ahh, and here I was acting all superior and telling you to stay home with your parents...”

I could see why she hadn't wanted to hear that from me.

“No, this is not because this is Mother's Day. I always want to head to my mother's house if I have a chance.”

“...I see.”

“But I can never reach it.”

“.....”

Her parents had gotten divorced and her mother had left the house.

She could no longer see her mother.

She wanted to see her mother.

And so Hachikuji had tried to visit her mother.

She had put on that backpack and...

And she had...

“So you met it then.”

“Met it? I don't know what you mean.”

“Hmm.”

No matter how many times she had tried to visit her mother after that, she had never once made it to her house.

Simply hearing that she had tried countless times and failed every time may have made her sound

stupid, but I felt it was wonderful how she had not given up even after all that.

However...

“.....”

It was not really right to compare, but her trouble seemed quite a bit safer than the troubles Hanekawa, Senjouhara, or myself had dealt with. She had no physical trouble and no mental trouble. Instead, she only had the phenomenal trouble of not being able to do something she should have been able to do. The problem was not something within her.

The problem was external.

Her life was not in danger.

She could live her everyday life without any real difficulty.

Even if that was true, I decided that – no matter what – I would not speak about her problem like I knew what I was talking about. No matter what had happened to me over spring break, I had no right to say that kind of thing to Hachikuji.

And so I aimed to say nothing unnecessary.

“You certainly have it tough,” was all I said.

That was what I really, truly thought.

In truth, I wanted to rub her head.

And so I tried to.

“Grr!”

I ended up getting my hand bit.

“Oww! What the hell was that for, you brat!?”

“Grrrrr!”

“Ow! Ow ow ow!”

This was no joke, play-bite, or way of hiding her embarrassment. She truly was biting down as hard as she could. I could feel Hachikuji’s teeth ripping through my skin and ripping through my flesh. Without even looking, I could tell blood was spewing out. It really was nothing to joke about.

Why is she doing this!? Wait, don’t tell me I fulfilled the requirements for this event without even realizing it!

Does this mean the battle has begun!?

I took my other hand and clenched it into a tight fist. It was as if I was trying to crush the air. I then drove that fist into Hachikuji's solar plexus. The solar plexus was one of the vital areas of the human body that nothing could be done about. As her teeth remained deeply embedded in my hand despite that blow, Hachikuji was quite something, but for an instant, the strength of her bite lessened. I used that opening to use the ridiculous strength of my arm. Hachikuji was digging into my flesh, but that left the rest of her unguarded. And luckily, Hachikuji was standing up slightly from the bench seat.

I took the hand I had punched her with, opened the fist, and held her up with it. In the process, I felt something surprisingly filled-in for a fifth grade girl, but I was not a lolicon, so it had so little effect on me that you might as well say it was nothing. I used momentum to swing her completely around and upside down. As she was still biting my hand, the area around her neck was all twisted around, but that was no problem. As long as she was biting my hand, any attack near her head had the danger of coming back to bite me...literally. Due to flipping her over, Hachikuji's body was displayed before me like a pile of tiles to be broken with a karate chop, and that was my target. More specifically, my target was her solar plexus where I had already punched her once.

“Khaahhh!”

It worked perfectly.

Hachikuji's teeth finally let go of my hand.

At the same time, she coughed up something that looked like gastric juices.

And then she lost consciousness.

“Heh...Actually, I guess this isn't funny.”

I shook my bitten hand to loosen it.

“After the first time, this kind of victory is so empty...”

Standing there was a high school boy who had punched an elementary school girl twice in the most central of the human body's vital spots, knocking her unconscious, and who had then started putting on airs of nihilism.

And as before, that boy was me.

.....

Striking, grabbing, and throwing were one thing, but out and out punching a girl was out of the question.

Araragi Koyomi had done more than enough to be deemed the world's worst man without even needing Senjougahara to prostrate nude before him.

“Ahh...But it’s because she bit me all of a sudden.”

I looked down at the bite wound.

Gehh...Wow, I can see the bone... I didn’t know a human could do this much damage with a bite...

However, even if I could feel the pain, that level of wound would heal before long *even if I just stood there.*

As the wound closed up fast enough to see, it looked like a video being fast-forwarded or rewound. It reminded me just how different an existence I was from the norm. Being reminded of that put me in a bit of a dark, bitter mood.

Honestly, you’re pathetic.

You think you’re the world’s worst man? Don’t make me laugh.

Do you really think you qualify as human anymore?

“That is a scary look on your face, Araragi-kun,” said a sudden voice.

For an instant, I thought it was Senjougahara, but it couldn’t have been. Senjougahara would never speak in such a cheerful voice.

Standing before me was the class rep.

It was Hanekawa Tsubasa.

It was Sunday and yet she was wearing her school uniform. Although I suppose that was normal for her. An excellent student like her enjoys being dressed like that. With the same hairstyle and glasses as always, the only difference from when she was at school was the handbag she was holding.

“H-Hanekawa.”

“You look surprised to see me. Well, I suppose that’s for the best. Heh heh heh.”

Hanekawa showed me an excellent smile.

It was a very carefree smile.

In fact, it was the same as the one Hachikuji had made before...

“What are you doing here?”

“U-um, what are *you* doing here?”

I was unable to hide my agitation.

I had to wonder just how much she had seen.

If that mass of diligence, that living example of proper conduct, that pillar of innocence that was Hanekawa Tsubasa had seen me acting violently toward an elementary school girl, that would be very, very bad in a completely different way than if Senjouhara had seen.

I didn't want to be expelled after making it all the way to the third year.

“Why do you need to ask me? I live around here. If either of us being here is odd, it's you Araragi-kun. Are you in this area for any particular reason?”

“Um...”

Oh, right.

Senjouhara and Hanekawa went to the same middle school.

Since it had been public school, they must have been in the same school district. In that case, Senjouhara's old domain being within Hanekawa's area of activity was not surprising. Since they went to different elementary schools, they must not have lived in the exact same area though.

“No, not really. I'm just here to...y'know... kill some time or-...”

Whoops.

I just said I was killing time.

“Ah ha. I see. Killing time. How nice. Not having anything to do is wonderful. It's so freeing, isn't it? I guess I was killing time too.”

“.....”

She really was a different being from Senjouhara in every way.

They were both smart, but I suppose that is the difference between top class and the top.

“You know how difficult it is for me to be at my home, right, Araragi-kun? Since the library isn't open, Sundays are my walking days. It's good for my health.”

“I'd say you're worrying too much.”

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

The girl with the strangely shaped wings.

At school, she was a mass of diligence, a living example of proper conduct, a pillar of innocence, the class rep among class reps, and impeccable, but she had some discord in her family life.

Some discord and a distortion.

Due to that, she had been possessed by a cat.

She had been possessed through a slight gap in her heart.

That may have been a good example of the fact that no one could be truly perfect, but when that problem had been resolved and she had been freed from the cat, her memories had been lost. And so the discord and the distortion had not been dealt with.

The discord and the distortion remained.

“The library not being open on Sundays seems to display just how uncivilized the area we live in is. Ah ha. I really don’t like that at all.”

“I don’t even know where the library *is*.”

“C’mon now. Don’t say things like that. It makes it sound like you’ve already given up. There’s still time until the entrance exam, so you can do it.”

“Hanekawa, sometimes baseless encouragement can be even more painful than direct abuse.”

“But you can do math, right, Araragi-kun? If you can do math, there’s no way you can’t do the other subjects.”

“Math is easy because you don’t have to memorize anything.”

“You certainly are uncooperative. Well, whatever. I’ll just leave you with a “c’mon, now” for that. By the way, Araragi-kun, is that your little sister?”

Hanekawa pointed toward Hachikuji who was lying on the ground next to the bench.

“My little sisters aren’t that small.”

“Oh.”

“They’re in middle school.”

“Hmm.”

“Umm, she’s lost. Her name is Hachikuji Mayoi.”

“Mayoi?”

“It’s spelled with the first kanji of truth and the first kanji of dusk. And her family name is-...”

“I know how that must be spelled. You often hear the term Hachikuji in the Kansai area. That’s a very historic and pompous sounding name. Come to think of it, I think the temple in Shinonome Monogatari

was named...no, wait. The kanji are different.”

“...You know everything, don’t you?”

“I don’t know everything. I only know what I know.”

“Oh, I see...”

“Hachikuji Mayoi, hm? Now those are two names that go together well. Oh? I think she’s woken up.”

I looked over at Hachikuji and saw her blinking her eyes. After hesitantly looking around as if to check on her surroundings, Hachikuji sat up.

“Hello, Mayoi-chan. I am this boy’s friend. My name is Hanekawa Tsubasa.”

Her tone of voice was straight out of Taisou no Onii-san.

Or in her case, I guess it would be Taisou no Onee-san.

Hanekawa was probably the type that would have no problem talking to cats or dogs in baby talk.

In response, Hachikuji said, “Please do not talk to me. I hate you.”

Does she say that to everyone?

“Oh? Did I do something to make you hate me? You shouldn’t say that to people when you first meet them, Mayoi-chan. Uri uri.”

However, Hanekawa showed no sign of being affected by Hachikuji’s words.

She also easily managed to pull off what I had not: rub Hachikuji Mayoi’s head.

“Hanekawa, do you like kids?”

“Hm? Do you not?”

“No, it isn’t me that doesn’t.”

“Hmm. Well, yes, I do like children. When I think about how I used to be like this, it gives me a nice warm feeling inside. Uri uri.”

Hanekawa continued to rub Hachikuji’s head.

Hachikuji tried to resist.

But it was useless.

“U-uuhhh...”

“You’re so cute, Mayoi-chan. Ahh! I just want to eat you up. Your cheeks are so squishy and soft. Kyahh!! Oh, but...”

Her tone suddenly changed.

It was now the tone she occasionally turned on me at school.

“You shouldn’t bite people’s hands like that. In this case, he was fine, but a normal person would have been seriously injured! Meh!”

She hit her. With her fist. Like it was nothing.

“U-uuuh?”

The quick transition from kindness to being struck left Hachikuji in utter confusion and Hanekawa used that opportunity to forcibly turn her to face me.

“Okay! Now say you’re sorry.”

“I-I’m sorry, Araragi-san.”

She apologized.

That impertinent brat whose tone of voice alone would be polite apologized.

It was quite a shock.

Wait, this means Hanekawa had been watching for a bit before she approached... I see. I get it. Normally thinking, when you’re bit to the point of your flesh being torn out, self defense is justified. And come to think of it, she’s the one that attacked first with the fight from earlier too...

While Hanekawa was not all that flexible, she was still not *that* much of a stickler for the rules.

She was merely fair.

From the way she had handled that, Hanekawa seemed used to dealing with children. I was pretty sure she was an only child, so she had done quite well indeed.

Incidentally, I had already realized that Hanekawa treated me like a child at school, but let’s not think about that too much.

“And Araragi-kun, what you did was wrong too!”

She used the exact same tone on me.

She seemed intent on forcing me to think about how she treated me.

However, she actually realized what she had done and cleared her throat before starting over.

“Well, anyway, that was wrong.”

“You mean...punching her?”

“No, I mean you need to properly scold her.”

“Oh...”

“Of course, you also shouldn’t have punched her, but if you’re going to strike a child – or anyone for that matter – you need to tell them what they have done to deserve it.”

“.....”

“That is what it means to talk it out.”

“Whenever I speak with you, I always learn something.”

She really had a way of draining the poison out of a situation.

She proved that there were good people in the world.

That alone made me feel like I had been saved.

“So you said she was lost? Where does she want to go? Is it nearby? If so, I can probably show her the way.”

“Umm, Senjouhara went to get someone to help, so...”

Even if she had a connection to that side of things, Hanekawa had no memories of it. She knew, but she had forgotten. I felt it was best not to pick at those memories like a scab.

I appreciated her offer, but...

“It seems to have taken a lot of time, but she should be done soon.”

“Huh? Senjouhara-san? Araragi-kun, you were with Senjouhara-san? Hmm? Senjouhara-san has been absent from school recently, but...Hmm? Oh, come to think of it, you were asking about her the other day...Hmm?”

Ah.

She’s getting suspicious.

Hanekawa’s powers of misunderstanding were about to explode.

“Ahh! I see! So that’s it!”

“No, I’m pretty sure you have the wrong idea...”

I knew it was wrong for an idiot like me to deny the answer given by a genius like her, but...

“Your powers of delusion outdo even those of those girls that are into yaoi.”

“Yaoi? What’s that?”

Hanekawa tilted her head to the side in confusion.

The genius student did not know this.

“It’s an abbreviation of ‘Yama nashi Ochi nashi Imi shinchou^[9]’.”

“That sounds made up. Fine, I’ll look it up on my own.”

“You certainly are diligent.”

.....

What if this leads to Hanekawa straying down the wrong path?

It’ll be my fault.

“Since I seem to be interrupting, I will be going. Say hello to Senjouhara-san for me. Also, today is Sunday so I won’t say too much, but make sure to restrain yourselves some. Also, we have a history quiz, so don’t forget to study. Also, the major preparations for the cultural festival are about to begin, so work hard. Also...”

After that, Hanekawa added on 9 more alsos.

She may have been the next great user of “also” after Natsume Souseki^[10].

“Oh, Hanekawa. Can I ask you one thing? Do you know of a Tsunade-san that lives around here somewhere?”

“A Tsunade-san? Hmm...well...”

She seemed to be searching her memory. I got my hopes up that this meant she might know, but...

“No, I don’t,” she said.

“So there *are* things you don’t know.”

“Didn’t I tell you? I only know what I know. For everything else, I am no help at all.”

“I see.”

It was true that she hadn’t known what yaoi meant either.

It seemed things would not be resolved so easily.

“Sorry I was unable to meet your expectations.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Then I will be going. Bye bye.”

And then Hanekawa Tsubasa left the park.

I wonder if she would have known how to pronounce the park’s name.

Maybe I should have made that my question.

And then my cell phone started to ring.

An 11 digit number was displayed on the screen.

“.....”

Sunday, May 14th, 14:25:30.

That was the instant I obtained Senjouhara’s phone number.

“So what kind of monster or apparition is this lost cow? And how do we drive it away?”

“Araragi-kun, why are your thoughts always so violent? Did something good happen?”

Apparently, Senjougahara had woken up Oshino. He had complained that she was horrible for interrupting his Sunday morning rest, but it was already the afternoon and for Oshino every day was Sunday and it was summer break year round. I really did not feel the government had given him the right to say something like that.

Oshino did not have a cell phone, so he had been forced to use Senjougahara's to call me. However, the reason he did not have a phone was not merely his principles or a lack of money. It seemed Oshino was terrible with electronics.

When I had heard him say, “Hey, Tsundere-chan, what button am I supposed to press when I want to talk?” I almost hung up right then and there.

It's not a two-way radio.

“But what is going on? This goes beyond unusual. It's abnormal. You really have met a lot of monsters in this short time, Araragi-kun. I'm quite pleased. Just getting attacked by a vampire would have been more than enough, but then there was Class Rep-chan's cat, Tsundere-chan's crab, and now you've met this snail.”

“I'm not the one that met it.”

“Hm? You're not?”

“How much did Senjougahara tell you?”

“Oh, I think she told me everything, but I was still half asleep. It's all a bit vague, so I must be misremembering something. Oh, but I have always wanted a cute high school girl to wake me up. This was like a wonderful dream. Araragi-kun, thanks to you, the dream I've had ever since middle school has been fulfilled.”

“...And how does that feel?”

“Hmm, I'm still too tired to really tell.”

Fulfilled dreams were often like that.

It really didn't matter who you were or what the circumstances were.

“Oh, Tsundere-chan is giving me a frightful look. My, my. How scary. Did something good happen?”

“Who knows...”

“You don’t know? You really don’t understand girls, do you, Araragi-kun? Well, whatever. Heh. It is true that once you get involved in this world, it’s easier to get dragged back in, but this is still too concentrated. Class Rep-chan and Tsundere-chan are your classmates and, from what I heard, this is where they’re both from, right?”

“Senjougahara doesn’t live here anymore, though. But I don’t think that matters. I don’t think Hachikuji lives here.”

“Hachikuji?”

“Oh, you hadn’t heard? Hachikuji Mayoi is the name of the kid who met the snail.”

“Oh...”

He paused for a second.

It did not seem to be simply due to his drowsiness.

“Hachikuji Mayoi, hm? Ha ha. I see. It’s all coming together. What I was told is coming back to me now. I see. It almost seems like fate. It’s pretty much a pun.”

“A pun? Oh, you mean that Mayoi is pronounced the same as “lost”? And then a lost child meeting the lost cow. That’s a surprisingly unfunny joke, Oshino.”

“I would never make a joke that crappy. I don’t laugh at nothing. As they say, a smile can hide a blade. I’m talking about Hachikuji being paired with Mayoi. Are you unfamiliar with the term Hachikuji? It comes from the fifth stanza of Shinonome Monogatari.”

“Hahh?”

Hanekawa had mentioned that, too.

Not that I knew what they were talking about.

“You really don’t know anything, do you, Araragi-kun? That does give purpose to my explanations, but I really don’t have time right now. I’m pretty tired. Hm? What’s that, Tsundere-chan?”

Senjougahara seemed to have said something to Oshino, so the conversation was cut off for a short bit. I of course couldn’t hear what she was saying and it almost seemed like she was purposefully speaking quietly enough that I would not be able to hear.

I doubted there was some secret they were keeping from me, but I was still curious.

“Ah...Hmm.”

I could only hear Oshino’s words of confirmation.

And then I heard a long, heavy sigh.

“Araragi-kun, you really are worthless.”

“Hah? Where did that come from all of a sudden? I didn’t say a thing about killing time.”

“If you have Tsundere-chan do this much for you, she’s going to feel responsible. Having the girl fix your problems for you is just pathetic for a guy. What the girl is supposed to fix up is the guy himself, not his troubles.”

“Um, uh... I do feel bad about getting Senjougahara wrapped up in this. And I do feel responsible. Her issue was only just resolved last week and now this...”

“No, not that. Honestly, Araragi-kun, I think you’re getting a bit full of yourself after resolving three monster problems in a row. Just so you know, not everything you see or feel is real.”

“...I wasn’t trying to be.”

I instinctually shrank back from those harsh words. He had hit me where it hurt. And unfortunately, a few such things did come to mind.

“Yes, you aren’t the type that would, Araragi-kun. I know you well enough to know that. I’m just saying you need to be more watchful of your surroundings. But if you really aren’t getting full of yourself, you must at least be pushing yourself. Listen carefully. Not everything you see is real and not everything you can’t see is real either, Araragi-kun. I recall telling you something similar when we first met. Did you forget?”

“I remember, but this isn’t about me, Oshino. So can we get back to the lost cow? Please tell me how to deal with that snail. How are we supposed to drive it out?”

“I already told you not to think of it in terms of driving it out. You just don’t understand anything. If you keep saying things like that, I expect you will eventually come to regret it. Make sure to take responsibility for what you’ve done once that time comes, okay? Anyway, about the lost cow. It...hm...” Oshino hesitated. “Ha ha. It’s just *so simple* it’s almost hard to say anything. Pretty much anything I could say would end up saving you, Araragi-kun. And I can’t do that. You have to save yourself, Araragi-kun?”

“It’s simple? Really?”

“This is nothing like a vampire. That was a truly rare case. I suppose it isn’t too surprising that you’re a little mixed up with that being your first time...Oh, I know. I suppose the lost cow is a bit similar to the crab Tsundere-chan met.”

“Hmm.”

The crab.

That crab.

“Oh, right. There’s also the issue of Tsundere-chan. Ugh, I hate this. My role is as an intermediary between humans and that side of things, so acting as an intermediary between two people is outside my area of expertise. Ha ha. Hmm, what am I doing? I think I’ve gotten a little too close with you, Araragi-kun. Or rather, I never expected for someone to so readily rely on me or to have to resolve anything over the phone.”

“...Well, this seemed like the simplest method.”

It may have been simple, but we still did not like it.

However, the fact remained that we had had no other option.

“I’d rather you didn’t contact me so easily. Most of the time when you meet a monster, you aren’t going to have someone like me around. Also, this is more of a common sense type of issue and not my normal kind of advice, but you really shouldn’t be sending a teenage girl alone to some old ruins of a building where a suspicious man lives.”

“Oh, so you’re aware that you’re suspicious and that you live in the old ruins of a building...”

However, he had a point. Senjougahara had so readily agreed – in fact, she had volunteered herself – that I had been a bit lacking in that kind of consideration.

“But I know you won’t do anything to her.”

“Normally, I would appreciate the trust, but certain lines need to be drawn. That’s what we have rules for. A comfort zone that casually crawls around is something we cannot have. Know what I mean? No matter what, we need a cordoned off area of things that are unacceptable. Otherwise, the territory of what we *can* do just shrinks and shrinks. It’s often said that all rules have exceptions, but if it’s a rule, it shouldn’t have exceptions. Then again, exceptions can’t exist without rules. Ha ha. I’m starting to sound like Class Rep-chan.”

“Nn...”

He was actually right.

I decided to apologize to Senjougahara afterwards.

“Anyways, it seems Tsundere-chan does not trust me as much as you do, Araragi-kun. She has a tentative trust for me due to your trust, so if something were to happen, the blame would lie with you. Don’t forget that. No, I’m not going to do anything! Really, I’m not! Wah! Put down that stapler, Tsundere-chan!”

“.....”

She still has that stapler?

Well, I suppose habits aren't usually broken in just a few days.

“Hoo...Now that was a fright. That is one scary tsundere. She really is unequalled when it comes to being a tsundere. Umm, anyway...agh, I hate using phones. It's so hard to talk.”

“Hard to talk? Oshino, how bad with electronics can you be?”

“While there is that, my point is that while I'm being completely serious on my end, for all I know you could be sipping on a drink and reading a manga. When I think about that, it just seems so empty.”

“You're surprisingly sensitive...”

I suppose there are people who worry about that kind of thing, though.

“Let's do it this way. I'll tell Tsundere-chan what to do about the lost cow, and you just wait there for her.”

“Is this really something I should be hearing second hand?”

“The lost cow itself is a piece of folklore so really all of this is second hand.”

“That's not what I meant. I was wondering if any kind of ritual is needed like with Senjougahara's case.”

“Nope. It's a similar type, but the snail isn't as much of a problem as the crab. For one, it isn't a god. If I had to put a name to it, I suppose I would call it a ghost. It's more of a ghost than a monster or a bizarre phenomenon.”

“A ghost?”

To me, a god, a ghost, a monster, and a bizarre phenomenon were all pretty much the same in this kind of situation, but I could tell the difference was important to Oshino.

But...a ghost?

“A ghost is still a type of monster. The stories of the lost cow are not mainly told in one particular region. They are told all over the country. It's a rather minor monster and it has various names, but it originated as the snail. Oh, one more thing, Araragi-kun. Hachikuji was a term used to refer to a temple in a bamboo thicket. However, back then the ‘Hachiku’ part was spelled with the kanji for ‘pale’ and ‘bamboo’. Add ‘temple’ to the end, and you get ‘Hachikuji’. If you recall, there are two types of bamboo, hachiku and moso. Now the hachiku variety is pronounced the same as ‘splitting bamboo’ in the phrase ‘with the force of splitting bamboo’, but that doesn't really have anything to do with this. Now the reason the spelling of Hachiku changed to the kanji for ‘eight’ and ‘nine’

was...well, it was really a sort of play on words. Araragi-kun, are you familiar with the 88 Temples of Shikoku and the 33 Western Temples?”

“Yes, I know that much.”

I can't believe he had to ask.

“Yes, I suppose even you would know that much. Anyway, if you don't divide them up between the well-known and less well-known, you end up with a really long list. In a similar way, some temples were added to the list as ‘89th temples’. Of course, as I said before, Hachiku can be spelled with the kanji for 8 and 9, so that name was given to those temples later to signify that they were extra temples beyond the 88.”

“I see...”

So this has to do with Shikoku.

Wait, I thought Hanekawa said something about Kansai?

“Yes,” said Oshino after I asked about it. “Most of the temples chosen as the ‘89th’ were Kansai temples. In that way, it may seem more like the 33 Western Temples than the 88 Temples of Shikoku. And now we get to the crux of the issue and the beginning of the tragedy. You see, together the kanji for eight and nine can be read as ‘yaku’ which can mean disaster. Now, that isn't exactly a title you want for your temple, is it?”

“...? Come to think of it, I initially thought it was pronounced ‘yaku’ when I saw her name. But that isn't what the term really means, right?”

“The meaning came along with it nonetheless. Words can be scary things. That kind of thing can become set whether you intended for it or not. You could call it the ‘soul of the word’, but that's an idiom I'm sick of because of how often it gets used. Anyway, as that interpretation of the name became more widespread, the title stopped being used. Now, a lot of those ‘89th’ temples were destroyed during the anti-Buddhist sentiments during the Meiji Restoration, so only about a quarter of them still exist. Also, most of the ones that do exist try to cover up the fact that they were once known as a Hachikuji.”

“ ... ”

His explanation was overly vague and that made it easier to understand, but it also made it seem like I would end up embarrassed if I tried to repeat the information to someone else.

At any rate, that information seemed like something I would not get a single hit for on an internet search engine, so I was conflicted as to how much I should believe.

I decided to take it with a grain of salt.

“If you understand that long history, seeing a name like Hachikuji Mayoi seems oddly meaningful and

troubling. The family name and the given name fit too well. It's like Ooyake no Yotsugi or Natsuyama no Shigeki. Surely you've studied the Great Mirror, Araragi-kun. But the given name of Mayoi is still an issue. I mean, it's so straightforward. It's just so simple. It makes the entire name seem suspicious. Heh, this would have been a lot easier if you had noticed that right away, Araragi-kun."

"What do you mean this would have been easier? Also, she..."

Hachikuji was sitting on the bench, obediently waiting for me to finish the conversation. She did not really seem to be listening in, but I was sure she was. After all, we were talking about her.

"She only got the family name of Hachikuji recently. Before that, it was Tsunade."

"Tsunade? Hehh, Tsunade of all things. All the threads are wrapped together a little *too* tightly. They're starting to fray. It's gotten to be too perfect to say it was just fate. It feels like a plan going off without a hitch when that shouldn't have been possible. Hachikuji and Tsunade...I see, I see. And then Mayoi on top of that. I suppose that is actually the real deal. The true dusk^[11]. Hah hah. Honestly now. That's just ridiculous."

Oshino muttered the last part almost absent-mindedly.

It seemed like he was speaking to himself, and yet he was still speaking to me.

"Oh, I suppose it doesn't really matter. This city truly is interesting. It's like a melting pot of all sorts of interesting things. It doesn't look like I'll be able to leave for a while. Anyway, I'll give the details to Tsundere-chan, so you just ask her, okay, Araragi-kun?"

"Oh, okay."

"Although," Oshino said in a teasing tone. I could see that thin smile of his in my mind's eye. "That is of course if Tsundere-chan tells you everything."

And then he hung up.

Oshino was not a man to give parting words.

"Okay, Hachikuji. It looks like we can deal with this."

"From what I heard of that conversation, I do not think I can expect much."

Apparently, she had been listening in.

Although if she had only heard what I had said, she would not know anything of actual importance.

"Leaving that aside, Araragi-san."

"What?"

“I happen to be hungry...”

“.....”

So what?

Don't say it like you're beating around the bush about a duty of mine I haven't fulfilled.

However, I did realize she had a point. Due to the unresolved issue of the snail, we had not let Hachikuji eat any lunch. And Senjougahara had not had lunch either. I realized it was possible Senjougahara had stopped to get something to eat on the way to see Oshino, but I had been inconsiderate of the two of them nonetheless.

I could sometimes forget because my body did not require me to eat all that often.

“Okay, when Senjougahara gets back, we can go get something to eat. Although there only seem to be houses around here... Wait, can you go to places other than your mother's house?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Oh, that's good. I suppose Senjougahara would know the closest place to eat. What kind of food do you like?”

“I like any kind of food.”

“I see.”

“Your hand was delicious.”

“My hand is not food.”

“No need to be humble. It truly was delicious.”

“.....”

Since in all likelihood she had truly at least swallowed some of my flesh and blood, that was not something that could be taken as a joke.

She was a cannibal girl.

“By the way, Hachikuji. Is it true that you've gone to your mother's house before?”

“Yes. I do not lie.”

“I see...”

However, she hasn't gotten lost simply due to it having been a while. It was only after she met the snail that...wait? Why did Hachikuji meet the snail?

There had to be a reason.

There was a reason I had been attacked by that vampire.

Hanekawa and Senjougahara both had their reasons.

In that case, Hachikuji must have had a reason as well.

“Hey, your goal isn’t reaching the destination in and of itself, right? You merely want to do meet your mother.”

“Saying ‘merely’ seems a bit insulting, but more or less.”

“Then can’t you just have her come meet you? Even if you can’t reach the Tsunade household, your mother isn’t trapped in the house, right? Even after a divorce, a parent has the right to see her child.”

That was the knowledge of an amateur.

“Right?”

“That’s impossible. It would be no use,” replied Hachikuji without hesitation. “If I could do that, I would have done so long ago. I cannot even call my mother.”

“Hmm..”

“Visiting my mother is the only option left to me. Even if I can never, ever reach her.”

The way she said it was a bit ambiguous, but I supposed the situation in her household was rather complicated. In fact, at the point that she was heading out on her own into a strange town on Mother’s Day, that should have been obvious. But even so, there had to be a more rational way of dealing with this. For instance, if Senjougahara went off on her own to the Tsunade household and...but that would likely not work either. That kind of direct attack was unlikely to work against a monster. Just like how Senjougahara’s phone had lost its signal when she tried to use the GPS function, Hachikuji’s goal would never be achieved. I had only been able to speak to Oshino over the phone because it had been Oshino and not this Tsunade-san.

After all, monsters were part of the world itself.

Unlike normal living beings, they were connected to the world.

Science alone could not tell you everything about monsters. That was why humans continued to be attacked by vampires in this day and age.

Even if no darkness in the world could not be illuminated, darkness would still exist.

And so, we had no choice but to wait for Senjougahara to arrive.

“I really don’t know anything about monsters. What about you, Hachikuji? Do you know much about ghosts and monsters and things?”

“Nnn...no, not at all,” she replied after an odd hesitation. “I only know about the noppera-bo.”

“Oh, Koizumi Yakumo’s...”

“Najimu^[12].”

“I don’t think you want to grow accustomed to it.”

It was of course, the mujina.

I doubt there are many people who didn’t know that, though.

“It’s pretty scary.”

“Yes. But I really don’t know any others.”

“Yeah, that’s how these things are.”

Speaking of monsters, my vampire was really more of a...no, I guess it doesn’t matter.

To humans, it’s pretty much the same thing.

That’s just an issue of the general idea.

The deeper issue is...

“Hachikuji, I don’t really get it. Why do you want to see your mother so much? I honestly don’t see what reason you have.”

“I thought it was normal for a child to want to see her mother. Was I wrong?”

“Well, no...”

She was right.

If there had been some kind of unusual reason, I thought I would be able to find the reason she had met the snail, but it seemed she did not have any real reason. It was just an impulsive and instinctual desire that could not be put in words.

“You live with your parents, right, Araragi-san? That is why you do not understand. There are things about people who lack things that those who do not lack them do not realize. People desire what they lack. If you lived away from your parents, I am sure you would want to see them, Araragi-san.”

“Maybe so.”

It probably was so.

My worries were those of one who lives in luxury.

—Onii-chan, it's because you're like this.

“From my standpoint, I am jealous of people like you who have both your parents, Araragi-san.”

“I see...”

“I'm ‘next’ written below ‘sheep’ jealous^[13].”

“I see...But you got both of those a bit wrong.”

I wondered what Senjougahara would have said if she heard what Hachikuji was feeling. But I then realized she would likely say nothing. She would not empathize with Hachikuji despite being much, much, much closer to being in the same position.

A crab and a snail.

Those kinds of family issues seemed to lead to that kind of thing.

“From the way you have been speaking, I get the impression that you are not too fond of your parents, Araragi-san. Is that so?”

“Oh, not really. It's just...”

I trailed off because I suddenly realized that was not something to speak of with a child. However, I had already heard a lot about Hachikuji's issues, so it would have been wrong to stop just because she was a child.

“I was a really good kid.”

“Liar.”

“I'm not lying.”

“Is that so? Then perhaps it isn't. Lying is a type of dialect, you know?”

“You mean for the villagers of the lying village?”

“I am a villager of the truthful village.”

“I see. Well, anyway, I may not have spoken as ridiculously politely as you, but I was reasonably good at my studies, reasonably good at sports, and I didn't really do any bad things. Also, I did not pointlessly rebel against my parents like the other boys did. I was thankful that they had raised me.”

“Ohh? Most admirable.”

“I have two little sisters and they were pretty much the same, so we were really a pretty good family. However, I pushed myself a little too hard when it came to the high school entrance exam.”

“Pushed yourself too hard?”

“.....”

She was a surprisingly good listener.

Little comments like that were satisfying for the speaker.

“I forced myself to take the exam for a school well above my level...and I passed.”

“But that is a good thing. Congratulations.”

“No, it was not a good thing. If I had forced myself and it had ended there, everything would have been fine. However, I was unable to keep up. Falling behind in the smart kids’ school is nothing to joke about. Also, everyone who goes there is extremely diligent. People like Senjouhara and me are the exceptions.”

For a mass of diligence like Hanekawa Tsubasa to take time to deal with a student like me, I truly had to have been quite the exception. She just happened to have the excess ability to cover for my lack of ability.

“And then I received a great recoil from how good a kid I had been up until then. There of course wasn’t any specific incident you can point your finger at, and my parents and I try to keep things the same at home, but there is still a wordless awkwardness. And once something like that appears, it has a tendency to stick around. That’s why we’ve ended up being overly considerate of each other. And...”

My sisters.

My two little sisters.

—Onii-chan, it’s because you’re like this.

“Because I’m like that, I feel like I’m not growing up. It feels like I will always be a child and never be an adult.”

“A child?” said Hachikuji. “So you’re the same as me.”

“I don’t think I’m the same as you. I mean that even as I grow physically, I will stay the same on the inside.”

“Araragi-san, you have a way of saying very rude things to ladies. I may not look it, but I am one of

the most grown kids in my class.”

“It’s true that your chest is quite something.”

“Hah!? You touched it!? When did you touch it!?”

Hachikuji’s eyes opened wide in shock.

Shit, that slipped out.

“Um...when we were fighting.”

“That’s more of a shock than that you punched me!”

Hachikuji held her head in her hands.

It must have been quite a shock indeed.

“Y’know...it wasn’t on purpose. And it was just for an instant.”

“Just for an instant!? Really!?”

“Yeah, and I only touched it about 3 times.”

“Then it wasn’t just an instant! And from the second time on, it had to have been on purpose!”

“Not true. It was just an unfortunate accident.”

“I’ve had my first touch taken from me!”

“Your first touch...?”

Is that really a word being used these days?

Elementary schoolers have come a long way since I was a kid.

“I can’t believe my first touch was before my first kiss. You’ve turned Hachikuji Mayoi into a dirty girl.”

“Oh, right. Hachikuji-chan, I just remembered that I forgot to give you the money I promised you.”

“Please don’t bring that up now!”

Still holding her head in her hands, Hachikuji’s entire body writhed around like she had a paper wasp inside her clothes.

It was quite pathetic.

“C’mon, calm down. It’s still better than having your first kiss be from your father, right?”

“That’s completely normal, though.”

“Then it’s better than having your first kiss be with yourself in the mirror.”

“No girl in the world has done that.”

Yeah.

She was probably right about that.

“Grr.”

Just as I thought she was about to remove her hands from her head, she lunged her snapping jaws out toward my neck. She went for the exact same location the vampire had bitten me over spring break, so a chill went down my spine. I somehow managed to hold Hachikuji back by the shoulders and prevented a tragedy from occurring.

“Grrrrrrr,” she threatened as she tried to bite me.

I was reminded of an enemy character from an old video game (one that was a metal ball connected to a chain) as I tried to pacify her.

“C-calm down, calm down. There’s a good girl.”

“Don’t treat me like a dog! Or is that a roundabout way of calling me a naughty bitch!?”

“If anything, I’d say you’re like a rabid dog.”

Her teeth really were a sight to behold. She could bite down hard enough to reach the bone and, despite the fact that some of them were surely her baby teeth, not a single one was missing or loose. Not only did they look nice, but they were strong too.

“Araragi-san, you have been quite shameless! I haven’t seen a single hint of remorse! Surely you have something to say after touching a girl’s delicate chest!”

“...Thanks?”

“No! I want you to apologize!”

“Yeah, but we were in the middle of a fight. It was clearly a force majeure. In fact, you should be glad it was only your chest. Also, as Hanekawa said, you were at fault for biting me so hard.”

“This isn’t about who was at fault! Even if I was at fault, I still underwent a great shock! A grown man apologizes whether he was wrong or not when faced with a girl who has undergone a shock!”

“A grown man does not apologize,” I said in a low voice. “It lowers the value of his soul.”

“That’s so cool!!”

“Or are you saying you won’t forgive me unless I apologize? Saying you will forgive someone if they apologize isn’t being tolerant when they are not on a lower level than you.”

“You’re criticizing me!? How dare you talk back when you’re the one in the wrong. I truly am mad now. I may be gentle, but if you push me, I’ll turn you into a punching bag!”

“How is that kind?”

“And I won’t forgive you even if you apologize!”

“What does it really matter? It’s not like you lost anything.”

“Ah! Araragi-san, what is with this sudden defiance!? And this isn’t about if I lost anything. Not to mention that they’re still growing, so losing some would be a major problem!”

“They say they grow if you have them massaged.”

“Only guys believe in that kind of superstition!”

“Wow, the world really has become a boring place...”

“What? Araragi-san, you’ve been massaging girls’ breasts like crazy based on that superstition? You’re horrible.”

“Unfortunately, I haven’t had a single opportunity to do that.”

“Oh, so you’re a virgin.”

“.....”

Does this elementary school girl know what she’s talking about?

I thought elementary schoolers had come a long way, but that’s just too much.

The world’s isn’t boring; it’s horrible...

I may have been lamenting over the trend the younger generation seemed to be displaying, but when I thought about it, I had been aware of that kind of thing when I had been in 5th grade as well. That was just how one’s uncertainty about younger generations tended to be.

“Grr! Grrr! Grrrrrr!”

“Ah, no, s-stop that! You’re really gonna hurt me!”

“I was touched by a virgin! I’ve been defiled!”

“It doesn’t matter who touched you!”

“I wanted my first person to be skilled! But instead I got you, Araragi-san! My dream has been destroyed!”

“What kind of fantastic delusions do you have!? I was just starting to feel some guilt and now it’s all gone!”

“Grr! Grrrrrrr!”

“Ahh! Enough of this already! Maybe I was right about you being a rabid dog! Damn you and your short bangs and your play bites! I’m going to grope you so hard you stop caring about any firsts or kisses or whatever!”

“Kyaahh!?”

Standing there was a high school boy who had lost control of himself and was approaching an elementary school girl to use his greater strength to sexually harass her. I want to believe that he was not me.

He was, of course.

Luckily, Hachikuji Mayoi put up a much stronger resistance than I had expected, so I merely ended up with bite marks and claw marks all across my body and our exchange did not reach its ultimate destination. For five minutes afterwards, an elementary school girl and high school boy sat wordlessly on a bench, breathing heavily and dripping with sweat.

I was thirsty, so I started looking around to see if there was a nearby vending machine.

“I’m sorry...”

“Yeah, I’m sorry too...”

We both apologized.

It was a shabby compromise.

“You seem surprisingly used to fighting, Hachikuji.”

“I often fight at school.”

“In scuffles like that? Oh, that’s right. In elementary school, it doesn’t really matter if you’re a boy or a girl. But that still makes you pretty rough for a girl...”

And yet she had such an intelligent-looking face.

“You seem pretty used to fighting yourself, Araragi-san. I guess this kind of battle is pretty common for a high school delinquent.”

“I’m not a delinquent. I just can’t keep up in school.”

Correcting that kind of difference seemed pointless.

I basically hurt myself in doing so.

“It’s a college-prep school, so you don’t end up being a delinquent just because you can’t keep up. In fact, we don’t even have a delinquent group.”

“But in manga and such, the student council presidents of elite schools are stereotypically quite bad in secret. The smarter they are, the more vicious a delinquent they make.”

“That’s one of those stereotypes that ignores reality. I’m just used to that kind of scuffle due to my little sisters.”

“Oh, your little sisters. You said you have two, right? Are they about the same age as me?”

“No, they’re both in middle school. But mentally, they might be more on your level. They’re quite young mentally.”

Of course, even they don’t bite me.

One of them practices karate, so our fights can get quite serious.

“They might get along well with you. It isn’t that they like kids; it’s more like they’re kids themselves. I could introduce you to them if you like.”

“No, that’s okay.”

“Oh. For how well-mannered you speak, you’re pretty shy. There’s nothing wrong with that, though. ...I suppose this kind of fight usually does end when one side apologizes.”

Today’s fight was one of willpower.

It too would end once I apologized.

And I knew it.

“Is something the matter, Arararagi-san?”

“This time, you doubled the other ra.”

“Sorry, I bit my tongue.”

“No, that was on purpose.”

“I bitw my tonwgue.”

“It wasn’t on purpose!?”

“It can’t be helped. Everyone says things wrong sometimes. Or have you said everything perfectly from the moment you were born, Araragi-san?”

“I can’t say I’ve done that, but I know I don’t say people’s names wrong.”

“Then say Namamumi Namamome Namamamamo^[14] three times fast.”

“You’re not even saying it right.”

“Ah, namamome sounds so dirty!”

“You’re the one that said it.”

“Ah, namamamamo sounds so dirty!”

“I can’t see how...”

It was quite an enjoyable conversation.

“Y’know, I think namamamamo is actually harder to say than the original term.”

“Namamamama!”

“.....”

All that tongue biting certainly is keeping her busy.

“Anyway, is something the matter, Araragi-san?”

“Not really. I was just feeling a bit down after thinking about how to apologize to my sisters.”

“What are you apologizing for? Groping their chests?”

“I wouldn’t grope my sisters.”

“So Araragi-san will grope an elementary school girl but not his sisters? I see. So that’s where you draw the line.”

“Ohh? You have guts to say that. That’s an excellent example of taking something out of context to slander someone.”

“I didn’t take it out of context.”

Really, she hadn’t. In fact, I had built up the perfect context for her, so I felt I probably needed to give

quite an apology.

“Let me rephrase it then. So Araragi-san will grope an elementary school girl but not a middle school girl.”

“This Araragi-san you speak of seems to be quite the lolicon. He’s certainly the type I wouldn’t want to be friends with.”

“You seem to be implying that you are not a lolicon.”

“That’s because I was.”

“From what I have heard, a true lolicon does not view himself as a lolicon. This is because he sees the innocent little girls as fully grown women.”

“Now that’s a useless piece of trivia…”

Information you would never need to know was just a waste of space in your brain.

Also, that was not something I wanted to be taught by an elementary school girl.

“In any case, I do not see why them being your sisters would prevent an accident from occurring in a fight.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore. My sisters' breasts don’t count as breasts. They count even less than an elementary school girl’s. Just think of it like that.”

“So that is the way of the breast. I will use the knowledge well.”

“Please don’t use that knowledge. Ever. Anyway, we had a bit of an argument when I left today. It wasn’t a physical fight. It was an argument. I think I need to apologize even though I didn’t do anything wrong. If I do, this will all be over. I know that’s what I have to do.”

“Indeed it is,” agreed Hachikuji with a sage look on her face. “My parents would always fight. Not physical fights, but arguments.”

“So that’s why they got divorced.”

“I may just be their daughter, but it seems they originally got along very well. Before they got married, it seems they were madly in love with each other. However, I have never seen them getting along. They always did nothing but fight.”

Even so, Hachikuji had not thought they would get divorced.

In fact, she had never even considered it. She had assumed families stayed together forever. She had not even known such a thing as divorce existed.

She had not known that her parents would split up.

“But that is completely normal. People argue and they fight. They snap at each other, fall in love with each other, and grow to hate each other. All of that is completely normal. That is why they should have worked a little harder to continue to love what they loved.”

“Work to continue to love what they loved? I won’t go as far as to say that’s dishonest, but it certainly doesn’t seem innocent. You make it sound like love is something that simply requires hard work.”

“But Araragi-san,” said Hachikuji without giving in. “The emotion we call love is a very proactive thing.”

“I suppose so.”

She was right.

Perhaps it *was* something you had to put hard work into.

“Growing tired of or growing to hate things you love is a painful thing. It’s a boring thing. Normally, if your love for something is at a 10, your hate for it will be at a 20 once you develop a hatred for it. That is just so sad.”

“You love your mother, don’t you?” I asked Hachikuji.

“Yes, I love her. Of course, I love my father as well. I understand how he feels and I understand that this is not how he wanted things to end up. Due to everything, my father had it tough. Even if he only had to be the Daikokuten for one family.”

“Was your father one of the Seven Gods of Fortune...?”

Her father had been a great person.

That had to have made many things difficult.

“My parents fought and eventually broke up, but I love both of them.”

“Hmm, I see.”

“And that is why I am worried.”

The way Hachikuji cast her gaze down really did make her look worried.

“My father seems to have truly come to hate my mother. He will not let me see her. He will not let me call her and he said I must never see her again.”

“.....”

“I am worried that if I never see her again, I will forget about my mother and cease to love her.”

And that was why.

That was why she had come all the way to this city.

She had no real reason.

She simply wanted to see her mother.

“...A snail, hm?”

Honestly, why can't a small wish like that be granted?

What's wrong with it?

I may not have known much about monsters or the lost cow, but I kept wondering why that snail would get in Hachikuji's way.

She could not reach her destination.

She could only continue to wander.

...Hm?

Come to think of it, Oshino said the lost cow is similar to Senjougahara's crab. What did that mean? That crab was not trying to bring calamity to Senjougahara. It ended up doing just that, but that was only because, in a way, Senjougahara had wanted that.

The crab granted Senjougahara's wish.

If this is similar, what does that mean? What if the snail Hachikuji met is not trying to keep her from her goal?

What if it is trying to grant her wish?

But then what is the snail doing?

What does Hachikuji Mayoi desire?

Looking at it like that, it almost seems like Hachikuji does not want to have the lost cow driven out.

“.....”

“Oh, is something the matter, Araragi-san? Why are you staring at me like that? You're going to make me blush.”

“Oh...it’s just that...”

“If you fall for me, you will only get burned.”

“...What kind of line is that?”

My number of meaningless ellipses was increasing.

“As you can see, I am a cool biz, so that kind of cool line just sounds good coming from me.”

“It’s obvious you meant to say ‘cool beauty’, but other than that, I’m not sure what to point out first. Actually, if you’re ‘cool’ then why would I get burned?”

“Hm, you have a point,” said Hachikuji with a serious expression. “In that case, if you fall for me, you will only get low-temperature burned.”

“.....”

“That was really lame!”

“And it’s still too hot to be ‘cool’.”

It made it sound like she was the temperature of a hot-water bottle.

It made her sound like a really good person.

“Oh, I know. I just have to think outside the box. Araragi-san, what I need to do is change my catchphrase from ‘cool’ to something else. The title of a cool woman just isn’t working out. I need to cut my losses and change it.”

“I see. Yes, if you do that, you will be getting closer to something like a catchphrase. In fact, that’s pretty much the standard way of doing it. It’s about as common as the title page of a manga’s second chapter already saying it’s popular. Okay, let’s test this out. You’re switching out ‘cool’, so...”

“I’ll call myself a hot girl.”

“That’s a relief^[15].”

“That makes me sound like a good person!”

Just as she made that over the top reaction, Hachikuji seemed to realize something.

“Araragi-san, you’re trying to change the subject.”

So she’s finally seen through me.

“Araragi-san, we were talking about why you were staring at me. Don’t tell me you really have fallen

for me.”

“.....”

She hasn't seen through me at all!

“I don't really like having people stare at me, but I do have to admit that my upper arm is quite attractive.”

“That's oddly specific.”

“Oh, you don't feel anything? Even when you look at *this* upper arm? Can't you see the beauty of its shape?”

“Your body has a beautiful shape?”

A healthy beauty maybe.

“Oh, you're hiding your embarrassment. You can be surprisingly cute, Araragi-san. Hm, I need to give you a proper understanding of this. If you like, you can keep that understanding. Perhaps I will give out numbered tickets.”

“Sorry, but I have no interest in a shorty like you.”

“Shorty!”

Hachikuji stared at me with eyes that looked like they were about to pop out of her head.

Then her head started wobbling like she had anemia.

“What an insulting term... It's so horrible that they should ban it in the near future...”

“You actually might have a point there.”

“I'm hurt. I was telling the truth when I said I was one of the most grown kids in my class! Honestly, you say some horrible things, man-beast.”

“Man-beast? Did you just now remember that? And I think that needs banning first.”

“Then I'll change it to man-like beast.”

“That makes it sound like I'm not actually human!”

As someone who had been attacked by a vampire and was now half-immortal, that was not really something to joke about. It was a little too on the nose.

“Fine, fine. We just have to think outside the box again, Araragi-san. In this case, we have to change the terms to foreign words. When terms offend people, they will inevitably be banned. However,

once the Japanese word is banned, a foreign one can be used to continue on.”

“I see. It’s true that a foreign word tends to have a softer nuance to it. It’s like how lolicon sounds a lot better than pedophile. Okay, let’s try it. If we change them to English, shorty and man-beast become...”

“Shortness and the Human Beast.”

“Damn! I think we’re on the verge of a new era here!”

“Yes! The scales have fallen from my eyes!”

We were quite the painful duo.

“Anyway, I’ll take back calling you shorty. ...In fact, you really are quite something for a fifth grader.”

“Are you talking about my chest?”

“I’m talking about all of you. But even so, you’re still not quite grown enough to be considered past the elementary school level. You’re not some super elementary schooler or anything.”

“I see. I suppose from a high schooler’s perspective, an elementary schooler like me would seem quite slider.”

“It’s true that you would probably corner well.”

I was not about to say it outright, but she was quite well grown.

And I’m fairly sure she meant to say slender, not slider.

“So Araragi-san, why were you looking at me with such passionate eyes?”

“I was just...wait, passionate?”

“If you look at me like that, it makes my diaphragm pound.”

“That’s the hiccups.”

That was a difficult set up.

She may have been testing my ability as the straight man.

“Anyway, it was nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“Oh. Are you sure?”

“Yeah...I suppose.”

Was it actually the opposite?

Despite what she says, deep down does she actually not want to see her mother? Or does she really want to but is afraid her mother will reject her? Maybe her mother has already told her not to come see her. From what she's told me of the situation regarding her family, that seems plausible.

If that was the case, the situation would not be easily resolved.

I would have thought so even if I did not have Senjougahara's example as reference.

“...I detect the scent of another girl.”

Senjougahara Hitagi appeared out of the blue.

She had entered the park on my mountain bike.

She's already gotten used to riding it. She sure is skillful.

“O-oh, that was fast, Senjougahara.”

Getting back had taken her less than half the time it had taken her to get there.

It had been so sudden I did not even have time to be surprised.

“I made a few wrong turns on the way there.”

“Yeah, that cram school is surprisingly hard to find. I guess I really should have drawn a map.”

“I am a bit embarrassed after the boasting I did.”

“Oh, right. All that about your memory...”

“And now you have shamed me, Araragi-kun. You must be a truly horrible person to gloat like that.”

“I didn't do anything! This was your own fault!”

“I was not aware that you were the type to be aroused by embarrassed girls, Araragi-kun. I will forgive you, though. For a healthy boy, that much is to be expected.”

“No, I think that would be decidedly unhealthy!”

When I thought about it, I recalled that Oshino had said something about a barrier around the location of the cram school, so maybe I really should have been the one to go.

However, Senjougahara Hitagi was boldly playing the role of the embarrassed party. I doubted she was actually embarrassed though. After that comment about being aroused by embarrassed girls, I was the embarrassed one.

“I will accept you, Araragi-kun. I will put up with whatever you would do to me.”

“Don’t all of a sudden pretend to be the exact opposite of your usual character! It won’t do you any good! The range of your character can’t expand any further than it already has! And if you were actually doing this for my sake, you should instead warn me whenever I do anything even slightly unhealthy!”

“It is true that I was not doing it for your sake, Araragi-kun.”

“I knew it!”

“As long as it is amusing, I am fine with it.”

“Now that’s more like it!”

“Also, Araragi-kun, to be honest, taking a few wrong turns is only one of the reasons I took so long getting there. I also stopped and ate some lunch.”

“I was right. You really aren’t one to betray expectations, are you? Well, that’s fine. It’s your decision.”

“I ate enough for you as well.”

“Oh, I see. ...Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I detect the scent of another girl.” After the slightest possible response to my thanks, Senjougahara returned to her original line. “Was someone else here?”

“Um...”

“From the scent...I’d say it was Hanekawa-san.”

“Eh? You can tell?”

I was honestly surprised.

I had thought she was merely guessing.

“By scent...do you mean makeup? But I don’t think Hanekawa was wearing makeup...”

She had been in her school uniform after all. Knowing her, she probably restricted herself even from lip balm while wearing it. When wearing that uniform, Hanekawa would never even accidentally break school rules. She was like a soldier wearing a military uniform.

“I am referring to the scent of her shampoo. Hanekawa-san is the only one in our class that uses that brand.”

“Eh, really? Girls can tell that kind of thing?”

“To a certain extent,” said Senjougahara as if it should have been obvious. “Just think of it as the same as how you can tell girls apart from the shape of their hips and ass.”

“I do not recall ever using a power like that!”

“Eh? You can’t do that?”

“Don’t act so surprised!”

“But don’t you remember what you said to me the other day? ‘You have excellent child-bearing hips, so you will surely have healthy children. Ueh heh heh heh.’”

“That’s just a pervert!”

Also, it would take something extraordinary indeed to make me laugh in such a disturbing way. Not to mention the fact that she did not have excellent child-bearing hips.

“So Hanekawa-san was here.”

“.....”

I was afraid.

I wanted to run away.

“Yes, she was. She already left, though.”

“Did you call her here, Araragi-san? Come to think of it, she lives around here. Did you call her to help guide us?”

“No, I didn’t call her. She just happened to pass by. Just like you.”

“Hmm. Just like me, you say?”

Just like me.

Senjougahara repeated that part.

“I suppose that is just how coincidences are. When one occurs, more are likely to come. Did Hanekawa-san say anything?”

“About what?”

“About anything.”

“...Not really. She just said a few words, rubbed Hachikuji’s head and headed off to the library...no,

it wasn't to the library. She headed off somewhere though."

"Rubbed her head...hm? I see. Well, I guess that isn't too surprising with Hanekawa-san."

"You mean that she likes kids? Unlike you."

"It is true that Hanekawa-san is quite unlike me. Yes, she isn't like me. Not like me at all. Now, excuse me, Araragi-kun."

Senjougahara then brought her face in close to mine. For an instant, I wondered what she was doing, but it turned out she was smelling me. Or rather, she was smelling...

"Hmm."

She backed away.

"It does not seem you had a love scene here."

"...What? Were you checking to see if Hanekawa and I had embraced? Can you tell how strong the scent is too? That's amazing."

"That is not all. I now have your scent memorized, Araragi-kun. You should assume I am monitoring your actions at all times from now on."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that..."

I doubted a normal human could actually pull that off though. Even if Senjougahara did have a stronger than usual sense of smell, it seemed unlikely.

Wait, did Hachikuji's smell not rub off on me during our two fights? Senjougahara was there during the first one, so she should know even if I don't mention it. Maybe Hachikuji uses a scentless shampoo. Well, I suppose it doesn't matter.

"So did Oshino tell you everything we need to know, Senjougahara? Hurry up and tell me what we have to do to get her to her destination."

To be honest, Oshino's last words had stuck with me.

—That is of course if Tsundere-chan tells you everything.

That had led to me being a little forceful as I asked her. Hachikuji was looking up at Senjougahara with a worried expression.

Finally, Senjougahara said, "It seems we had it backwards, Araragi-kun. Oshino-san says there is something I must apologize to you about."

"Hah? Why are you changing the subject? You really are skilled at altering the direction of a

conversation. What do you mean we had it backwards? And what do you have to apologize for?"

"To borrow Oshino-san's words," continued Senjouhara nonetheless. "Even if there is only one proper truth, a different conclusion can be reached when it is viewed from two different points of view. In those cases, there is no way to determine which point of view is correct. There is no way to prove that you are right."

"....."

"But it is still wrong to simply assume you are wrong. He really has a way of seeing right through you. I hate it."

"What are you talking about? Or rather, what was Oshino talking about? I don't see what that has to do with this situation."

"It seems the way to free oneself from the snail – from the lost cow – is quite simple, Araragi-san. If you explain it in words, it is almost too simple. Oshino-san said you are lost because you go with the snail. As such, you will no longer be lost if you leave the snail."

"You are lost...because you go with the snail?"

It was so simple that I did not understand. It seemed like there should be more to it. In fact, it sounded as if Oshino missed the mark in a few places. I looked over at Hachikuji, but she showed no reaction. However, her tightly sealed lips made it seem that Senjouhara's words had had some kind of effect with her.

She said nothing.

"No exorcism or supplication is necessary. This isn't a case of possession or interference. It is the same as with my crab. And in the case of this snail, the target is actually the one that approached the monster. It is not something done subconsciously or preconsciously. It is something done of the target's own conscious will. The target is merely sticking with the snail. The target is following the snail of his own free will. That is why he is lost. So Araragi-kun, you merely need to leave the snail."

"Um, it's not me. It's Hachikuji. And that doesn't make sense. Hachikuji doesn't want to follow the snail. There's no way she does."

"As I said, we had it backwards."

Senjouhara's tone did not change. It was her usual flat voice. I could not read any emotion in it.

No emotion showed on her face.

However, she somehow seemed in a bad mood.

In a very bad mood.

“The monster known as the lost cow does not make one unable to reach one’s destination. It makes one unable to return *from* one’s destination.”

“R-return from?”

“It blocks one’s return path rather than one’s path there.”

It isn’t on the way there. It’s on the way back?

Returning...to where?

To your home?

Your visit and...your arrival?

“Eh? But that doesn’t make sense. I mean it makes sense on its own, but Hachikuji isn’t trying to return home. She’s only trying to reach the Tsunade household.”

“And that is why I must apologize to you, Araragi-kun. But at least let me explain why I did it. I meant no harm and I did not know what I was doing. I merely assumed that *I* was wrong.”

“.....”

I had no idea what she meant.

But I could tell it had some horribly important meaning.

“But can you blame me? For over 2 years, I was not normal. I only returned to normal just last week. It is only natural that I assumed I was wrong when something happened.”

“Um, Senjougahara?”

“Just like with my crab, the lost cow only appears before those with a reason. And that is why it appeared before you, Araragi-kun.”

“I already told you, the snail appeared to Hachikuji, not me.”

“Hachikuji-chan, was it?”

“.....”

“Araragi-kun, things were awkward on Mother’s Day, you had a fight with your sisters, and now you do not want to return home. The thing about this Hachikuji-chan is...”

Senjougahara pointed at Hachikuji.

Or I assume that’s what she intended to do.

She was actually pointing in the completely wrong direction.

“I cannot see her.”

In shock, I looked over at Hachikuji.

She was a small, intelligent-looking girl.

Her bangs were short enough to see her eyebrows and she had pigtails.

She also had a large backpack on her back.

She somehow looked a bit like a snail.

Once upon a time...well, it wasn't that long ago. It was only about 10 years ago. Anyway, at that time the end approached for a certain couple's relationship. One husband and one wife. That made two. At one time, everyone around them had been jealous of them and no one around them had doubted that they would live happily ever after. However, in the end, their marriage turned out to be a short one. It did not last even 10 years.

I do not think it was an issue of right and wrong.

That course of events is fairly normal.

The couple had a young daughter. That was normal as well. As a result of an argument I cannot bear to repeat, that daughter was taken in by her father.

At the end of those long, drawn out issues, the couple's relationship did not merely come to an end. It utterly failed. If they had continued to live in the same house for another year, they might have even tried to kill each other. At the end, the mother was made by the father to swear she would never let the daughter see her again. It did not matter what the law had to say.

She was half forced to swear that.

However, the daughter had a thought.

Was she truly forced?

The daughter was also made to swear by the father that she would never see her mother again. And that daughter had a thought. The mother had come to hate the father who she had surely loved so much before. As such, was it possible that she had come to hate herself? Otherwise, why would she have sworn that? Even if it was half forced, what about the other half? But at the same time, the daughter had said the same thing herself. She too had sworn to never meet her mother again.

That was it.

Just because she was her mother.

Just because she was her daughter.

That did not mean their relationship would last forever.

Whether they had been forced or not, those words could not be taken back once they had been sworn. The daughter had been taught that it was shameless to refer to one's own actions in the passive voice. She had been taught that by none other than her mother.

She was then taken in by her father.

She was made to abandon her mother's family name.

However, those feelings faded.

Even the sadness faded.

After all, time was equally kind to everyone.

It was so kind it was cruel.

Time passed and the daughter aged from 9 to 11.

The daughter was shocked.

She realized that she could no longer recall her mother's face. No, it was not that she could not recall it. She was perfectly able to do that. However, she was no longer sure that the person she saw in her mind's eye was her mother.

It was the same when she looked at photos.

She was no longer sure that the woman in the photos she kept in secret were really of her mother.

Time.

Time would make any feeling fade.

It would degrade any feeling.

And so...

The daughter headed out to meet her mother.

It was the second Sunday of May of that year.

It was Mother's Day.

Of course, she did not tell her father of this. Nor did she contact her mother ahead of time. The daughter had no idea what situation her mother was in.

What if her mother hated her?

What if her mother felt she was a nuisance?

Or what if her mother...had forgotten her?

That would be quite a shock.

To be completely honest, the daughter did not tell anyone – even her friends – about visiting her mother so that she could choose to abandon the plan and head back home up to the very last second.

And so she headed off to visit her mother.

She neatly bound her own hair and filled her favorite backpack full of old memories hoping to delight her mother with them. As she headed out, she gripped a memo with the address written on it in her hand to make sure she did not get lost.

However, the daughter never arrived.

She never arrived at her mother's house.

Why?

Why?

Really, truly...why?

The light had been green...

“That daughter was me,” explained Hachikuji Mayoi.

Or perhaps it was more a confession than an explanation.

That apologetic expression and the way she looked like she could break down into tears at any time left no other word in my mind.

Senjougahara watched.

Senjougahara's expression did not change.

She truly did not show her emotions on her face.

Surely she felt something in that situation.

“So you've been lost and wandering ever since?”

Hachikuji gave no response.

She did not even look at me.

“The one who did not reach her destination now prevents others from making their way back home. Oshino-san did not say so, but I am guessing she is something like a ghost haunting a specific area. That explanation should be good enough for amateurs like us. The way there and the way back. There and back. A pilgrimage back and forth. That is what Oshino said Hachikuji is.”

The lost cow.

That was why it was the cow that was known as *lost* and not something that led others astray.

That was why that was the only thing it could be called.

The monster itself was lost.

“But...what about the snail?”

“Listen,” Senjougahara said as if lightly admonishing me. “She must have become a snail after dying. Oshino did not specifically say anything about haunting a specific area, but he did say she was a ghost. I suppose that is what he must have meant.”

“But then...”

“But I think that is exactly why she is not like a normal ghost. She is different from what we normally think of as a ghost. And she is different from the crab as well.”

“But...”

But it made sense. Just as it was called a cow but was not actually a cow, it being called a snail did not necessarily mean it was in the form of a snail. She had taken on the essence of a monster by mistake.

The name represents the body.

The essence of what it is.

—Not everything you see is real and not everything you can't see is real either, Araragi-kun.

Hachikuji Mayoi

Hachikuji the Lost.

The word Mayoi meaning lost originated from the idea of the warp and the weft becoming frayed together. That was why one kanji for Mayoi had the thread radical in it and was used to refer to a strong delusion that prevented the dead from resting in peace. Also, the second kanji spelling Mayoi in her name referred to any evening hour but especially those of dusk or what was known as twilight. If you added the first kanji from her name, the one that meant true, you ended up with a rare case of it being used as a negative prefix. In that case, what looked like “true dusk” was actually an archaic term used to refer to 2 AM. Yes, the same time known as the Time of Three Oxes. From there, you were only a step or two away from cow or snail.

But...then...it's just like Oshino said...

It's so...straightforward.

“Can you really not see Hachikuji? I mean, she's right here.”

I forcibly grabbed Hachikuji's shoulders as she hung her head down. I then turned her toward Senjougahara. Hachikuji Mayoi was right there. I was touching her. I could feel the warmth of her body. I could feel how soft she was. When I looked at the ground, I could see her shadow. When she bit you, it hurt.

When you spoke with her, it was fun.

"I cannot. Nor can I hear her."

"But before you were..."

No, wait.

She hadn't.

Even at the very beginning, she had said "I cannot see that".

"Araragi-kun, what I saw was you muttering by yourself over by the sign and finally performing some kind of wild pantomime. I had no idea what you were doing. However, once I asked you..."

Once she asked...

I had explained it all to her.

Oh, that's right. So that's why she didn't take the memo with the address on it when I tried to hand it to her.

She couldn't see it.

For her, it wasn't there.

"But why didn't you say something?"

"Like I said, I couldn't say anything. I just couldn't. When you were seeing something I could not, I naturally assumed that I was the one that was wrong."

"....."

For over 2 years, the girl known as Senjougahara Hitagi had had a monster with her.

The thought process of assuming she was the strange one or assuming she was the one with something wrong was very strongly rooted in her. Any person that met a monster even once tended to carry that with them for the rest of their life, for better or for worse. Usually for the worse. Once you knew that kind of thing existed in the world, it was impossible to pretend otherwise even against something powerless.

But that was why Senjougahara had done what she did. She had finally been freed from her problem,

so she did not want to think that something was wrong with her once more. Nor did she want *me* to think something was wrong with her once more. And so she pretended to see Hachikuji despite not being able to.

She followed my lead.

So that's what happened...

That had been why Senjougahara had seemed to ignore Hachikuji so much. She had been literally unable to see her. And that was also why Hachikuji had hid behind my legs to avoid Senjougahara.

Senjougahara and Hachikuji had not exchanged a single word.

“Senjougahara, is that also why you volunteered to go to Oshino's place?”

“I wanted to ask him what was going on. When I did ask, he rebuked me...or was he just shocked? No, maybe he laughed.”

It was true that the idea seemed almost laughable.

It was so ridiculous, I was actually unable to laugh at it.

“So...*I* was the one that met the snail.”

First I met a demon...and then a snail.

Oshino had even said that at the beginning.

“It seems monsters that take the form of children – especially little girls – are quite common. I have even seen examples in our Japanese textbook. A kimono-wearing ghost that leaves travelers stranded in the mountains. A girl that joins in playing with other children without the children noticing and takes one away with her after they are done playing. I merely knew too little to have heard of the lost cow. Araragi-kun, Oshino-san said that the condition to meet the lost cow is to not wish to return home. That desire is one that – to be a bit pessimistic – everyone has at some point or another. Everyone has issues at home.”

“...Ah!”

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

She had been the same.

Due to the discord and distortion at her home, Sunday was her day for taking a walk.

She had the same desire as me. In fact, she might have desired it even more than I did.

That was why Hanekawa had been able to see Hachikuji.

She had seen her, touched her, and spoken with her.

“A monster that gives you what you desire...”

“When you put it like that, it does sound nice. However, you could also say that it takes advantage of our human weaknesses. For instance, I doubt you truly wished you would never return home, Araragi-kun. That is why I think it should be called a reason rather than a desire.”

“.....”

“But, Araragi-kun, that is why the way of dealing with the lost cow is exceedingly simple. I already told you, remember? You just have to stop following it. You have to leave it. That is all.”

You follow it of your own free will and get lost.

It made sense. If you followed the snail that would never arrive anywhere, there was no way you could ever return home.

If you explained it in words, it was so simple.

You just had to leave the park exactly as Hanekawa had.

If you left, you could leave.

Only those who went with her could not leave.

Even if people said they did not want to return home, they had nowhere to return but home.

“It is not all that terrible a monster, nor is it all that powerful. It causes no major harm. That is what Oshino-san said. The lost cow is nothing more than a slight prank, a slight mystery. And so...”

“So?” I asked, cutting her off.

I could not bear to hear any more.

“So what, Senjougahara?”

“.....”

“That isn’t it. That isn’t it at all. I understand what you’re saying, Senjougahara. It nicely resolves the odd feeling all of this gave me. But that isn’t what I wanted to ask Oshino about. I’m grateful for everything he told us, but that isn’t what I truly wanted to know. That isn’t why I had you go all the way to see him.”

“Then what did you want to know?”

“I wanted...” My hands holding Hachikuji’s shoulders tightened. “I wanted to learn how to get

Hachikuji to her mother's place. That's all. From the very beginning, that was all I wanted. I don't care about all that useless knowledge. All that trivia is a waste of space in my brain. All of that isn't what's important."

It was not about Araragi Koyomi.

It was all about Hachikuji Mayoi.

It was not an issue where I could just leave her and be done with it.

I could not leave her no matter what.

"Don't you understand, Araragi-kun? She is not actually there. She does not actually exist. This Hachikuji...Hachikuji Mayoi-chan, was it? She is already dead. She is no longer normal. She has not been possessed by a monster. She *is* the monster."

"So what!?" I shouted.

I shouted at Senjougahara.

"She's not normal? Who is!?"

"....."

You, me...and Hanekawa Tsubasa.

Nothing lasts forever.

And yet...

"O-ow, that hurts, Araragi-san."

Hachikuji struggled helplessly in my arms. As my grip had strengthened, my nails seemed to have dug into her shoulders.

It seemed to hurt her.

And so she spoke.

"U-um, Araragi-san. That Senjougahara-san is right. I...I..."

"You be quiet!"

No matter what she said, it would not reach Senjougahara.

It would only reach me.

However, in that voice that could only reach me, she had even tried to tell me she was the lost snail

from the very beginning.

She had tried her best to tell me.

And she had said something else.

The very first thing she had said to me.

“You couldn’t hear it, Senjougahara, so I’ll tell you. The first thing she said to both me and Hanekawa was quite something.”

Please do not talk to me.

I hate you.

“Do you understand, Senjougahara? She does not want anyone to follow her, so she has to say that to everyone she meets. Do you understand how that must feel? Even when someone tries to rub her head, she has to bite their hand. I can’t imagine how that must feel.”

She could not rely on anyone else.

She could not say that she was the monster.

She could not say that she was the strange one.

She simply could not.

“But even if I can’t, both of us have still experienced similar things. It may not be exactly the same, but we know what it is like to be all alone and to not know what to do. Even if it isn’t exactly the same, we have felt the same pain. I became immortal and you had your body altered by a monster. So I don’t care about this lost cow crap or this snail crap. Even if she says it herself, it changes nothing. You can’t see her or hear her or even smell her, but that is why it is my duty to see her safely to her mother’s place.”

“...I thought you would say that.”

Shouting at Senjougahara had been completely illogical and my head had gradually been cooling ever since I had begun, so I was aware what I was saying was ridiculous. However, Senjougahara’s expression had not changed in the slightest.

“I have finally seen the real you, Araragi-kun.”

“...Eh?”

“It seems I was mistaken about you. No, maybe I wasn’t. I vaguely – or perhaps strongly – knew this already, but I had an illusion covering it. That illusion has disappeared. Araragi-kun, last Monday, my slight mistake led to you learning of my problem. And within the same day, you called out to me.”

I had called out to Senjouhara, telling her I might be able to help her.

“To be honest, I was unable to work out the meaning of that action. Why had you done that? After all, you gained nothing from it. You had no stake in saving me, so why? I wondered if perhaps you had done it because it was me.”

“.....”

“But that was not why. That seems clear now. Araragi-kun, you will simply save anyone.”

“Save? That’s too strong a word. Don’t exaggerate. Anyone would have done the same. And as you said before, I just so happened to have had a similar problem and happened to know Oshino, so...”

“Even if you had not had a similar problem and even if you had not known Oshino-san, you would have done the same thing, wouldn’t you have? From what Oshino-san told me, you would have.”

What did that bastard tell her?

I’m betting it was some kind of half-truth.

“At the very least, I do not think I would go up and talk to a strange elementary school student just because I saw her in front of a map twice.”

“.....”

“When you are alone for so long, you begin to think you are special. When you are alone, you are indeed not a part of the masses. However, you are merely not a part of them. That does not make you special. It’s almost laughable. Plenty of people learned of my problem in the two years after I met that monster, but the only one that actually did anything about it was you, Araragi-kun. You were the only one that was like you.”

“Well, no one else is me.”

“Yes, exactly.”

Senjouhara gave a slight smile.

Also, while she had likely only just so happened to get the angle right, Senjouhara Hitagi looked directly at Hachikuji Mayoi.

“I have one last message from Oshino-san. He predicted that you would say what you did, so – because he claims to be very, very kind – he gave me a secret trick to use for this situation.”

“A-a secret trick?”

“He really does see right through us. And yet I cannot tell what that man is thinking at all. Well, let’s go.”

Senjouhahara then straddled the mountain bike. Her motion was smooth as if to say the bike was already hers.

“Go? Go where?”

“To the Tsunade household of course. As good citizens, we must see Hachikuji-chan on her way. Come with me. I will lead the way. Oh, and Araragi-kun...”

“What?”

“I love you.”

“.....”

Her tone had not changed even slightly.

.....

After thinking for a few more seconds, I realized I was the first boy in Japan to have a classmate confess her love for him in English.

“Congratulations,” said Hachikuji.

In about every possible way, that comment had been out of place and had missed the mark.

And an hour later, Senjougahara, Hachikuji, and I arrived at the location of the address on that memo. We arrived at the place the girl Hachikuji Mayoi had been in life had headed for on that Mother's Day.

It had taken quite some time.

And yet it had been so easy.

“But...this is...”

However, it did not seem out of place.

The sight before my eyes did not seem out of place.

“Senjougahara, are you sure this is the place?”

“Yes, I am sure.”

Her assertion left no room for argument.

This was Hachikuji's mother's house, the Tsunade household.

It had become a completely empty lot.

It was surrounded by a fence and signs saying “Private Property” and “No Unauthorized Entrance” were staked into the bare ground. The rust on the edges of the signs made it clear that they had been sitting there for quite some time.

Land development.

Rezoning.

It had not been turned into a road like Senjougahara's old house, but since no trace of the house remained, it was essentially the same.

“...How could this happen?”

What that shut-in Oshino Meme had suggested as a secret trick for our situation had been something so simple it made you think “Is that all?”. Whether you called it the lost cow or the snail, the classification of monster it fell under was a ghost. For that reason, she essentially did not accumulate informational memories.

Apparently, it was standard for that kind of monster to not exist.

She was an existence that did not exist as an existence.

If no one was here to see her, she was not there.

To explain it using what happened today, Hachikuji had suddenly appeared and begun to exist the instant I sat on that park bench and looked over toward the sign. Or so Oshino had said.

In the same way, Hachikuji must have suddenly appeared when Hanekawa had looked on the bench next to me when she passed by the park. As a monster, she did not have a continuous existence. Instead, she appeared the instant she was seen. In that way, the lost cow was not something you “met” in quite the same way as other monsters.

She was only there when someone was looking there. The observer and the observed. Hanekawa would likely have given a detailed and apt analogy from her scientific knowledge, but I could not think of anything appropriate. Senjougahara probably could, but she did not mention it.

At any rate, she had no informational memory. In other words, no knowledge.

She had of course been able to lead someone unfamiliar with the land like me astray, but she had also been able to do so to Senjougahara who could not even see her. She had even been able to cut off the signal of Senjougahara’s cell phone. And as a result, the target would forever be lost.

However.

She did not know what she did not know.

And even if she did know, there was nothing she could do about it.

For instance, the rezoning.

The cityscape had changed so much in just the past year, so the differences from 10 years before had to have been quite something. We did not take a shortcut, we did not take some roundabout way, and we did not head straight there.

By choosing a route made up entirely of new roads a monster like the lost cow was unable to deal with it.

Monsters did not age. A little girl monster would always be a little girl.

She would never grow up and be an adult.

—So you’re the same as me.

Hachikuji had been in the 5th grade 10 years before, so she should really be older than Senjougahara and me. And yet she spoke of her memories of fighting at school like they had happened yesterday.

She truly did not have standard memories.

She did not.

They were simply not there.

And so...

Apparently, Oshino had said it was like putting new wine into old wineskins.

That unpleasant man had seen through to the truth. He could not see Hachikuji, he had not heard that much about our issues, and he did not even know much about this town, and yet he had acted like he knew everything.

Nevertheless, his words had led to our success.

We chose an amidakuji-like path following the newly constructed roads that had the nice dark asphalt. As much as possible, we avoided the old roads or the roads that had merely been newly paved. We even used the road that passed through where Senjougahara's house had been. We finally reached our destination after an hour.

The area should have been only a 10 minute walk from that park and it was probably only 500 meters as the crow flies, but it still took us over an hour.

We made it to the destination.

We finally made it.

But it was merely an empty lot.

“I guess everything can't go perfectly...”

Yes.

With how much everything had changed, it would have simply been too perfect for the destination alone to remain unchanged. Even Senjougahara's house had become a road in less than a year. Also, our strategy to get there would have been useless if there had been no new road right up next to the destination. The possibility of the destination itself having changed should have been obvious from the beginning. But at the same time, having it not go so perfectly seemed to make it all a waste. It felt like it had lost all meaning. If the very end was a failure, it had all been a failure.

I guess not everything goes the way you want it to.

I guess not every dream comes true.

If the destination is gone, won't the lost cow truly be forced to wander forever? Won't she truly be a lost snail that circles around and around and around without end?

How horrible.

Oshino, that bastard with the psychedelic Hawaiian shirt, might have seen this very ending coming. And yet – or perhaps *because* of that – he had...

Oshino Meme had such a frivolous way of speaking. He would never give parting words, he would never give you an answer to a question you did not ask, he would not act unless you asked him to, and he would not necessarily do so even if you did.

He was fine with not saying things he really should have.

“U-uuhh...”

I heard Hachikuji sobbing next to me.

I had barely been able to contain my shock at the sight before me, so I had completely forgotten about Hachikuji. When I should have been concerned with her, I had been lost in thought. I finally turned toward her.

Hachikuji was crying.

However, her head was not hanging down. She was staring forward.

From the angle of her gaze, she seemed to be looking at the house that was no longer there.

“U-uuhh... Ahhh...”

And then...

Hachikuji moved from my side and ran forward.

“I’m home!”

Oshino had likely seen all the way to that ending and would likely say it had been obvious.

He was a man who did not say what he really should.

Honestly, I just wish he had told me from the very beginning.

I wondered what Hachikuji could see now that she had arrived.

Senjouhara and I could only see an empty lot. The area had completely changed, but what did the lost cow, Hachikuji Mayoi, see there?

What had appeared there for her?

Development and alterations to the land meant nothing.

Not even time mattered.

The girl with the large backpack quickly dimmed, grew hazy, thinned, and then suddenly disappeared from my vision.

I could no longer see her.

She was gone.

But the girl had said “I’m home”. That place was no longer her separated mother’s house and it no longer had any connection to her. It was now nothing but her destination, but she had still said “I’m home”.

It seemed she had arrived home.

I felt that was a lovely end of the story.

A truly lovely end.

“Well done, Araragi-kun. You were fairly cool,” said Senjougahara finally.

Her voice had almost no emotion in it.

“I didn’t really do anything. Really, you were the one that did all the work this time, not me. I wouldn’t have even been able to pull off that secret trick alone. Your knowledge of the area was necessary.”

“That may be true, but that is not what I meant. I was surprised that it had become an empty lot, though. Perhaps the entire family moved when the daughter was killed in a traffic accident on her way to visit. Of course, I can think of plenty of other reasons.”

“Yeah, and come to think of it, we don’t even really know if Hachikuji’s mother is even still alive.”

Or her father for that matter.

I suddenly realized that Hanekawa might have actually known. It had seemed the Tsunade household had perhaps rung a bell with her. If she had known that the house no longer existed for some reason, she was the type to keep silent about it. At the very least, she was not an extreme stickler for the rules.

She was merely fair.

At any rate, the issue seemed to be resolved.

It seemed to have ended much too quickly. I then noticed the Sunday sun beginning to set. It was mid May, and the days were still short. I had to get home soon.

Just like Hachikuji had.

I also realized that it was my turn to make dinner.

“Well, Senjougahara. Let’s head back to get the bike.”

Senjougahara had originally tried to lead us on the mountain bike, but she had quickly realized the uselessness of a mountain bike when travelling with those walking and that it became something she just had to push along as she walked. And so she had left the bike at that park.

“Yes. By the way, Araragi-kun,” said Senjougahara who was still looking toward the empty lot. “You still have not given me a response.”

“.....”

A response?

For that, you mean?

“Um, Senjougahara. About that...”

“Just so you know, Araragi-kun, I hate romantic comedies where it is obvious the two will get together at the end but lukewarm developments keep them at an in-between more-than-friends-less-than-lovers state chapter after chapter just to keep the story going.”

“...I see.”

“Incidentally, I also hate sports manga where each match takes an entire year and yet you know they are going to win in the end. I also hate battle manga where it is clear they will defeat the final boss and bring peace to the world, but the battles with weaker enemies go on forever.”

“I think you just covered every shounen manga and shoujo manga in existence.”

“So what will you do?”

She was not giving me a chance to think.

The atmosphere made it clear I could not evade giving a proper answer. I am betting not even a boy who is confessed to by a girl who has all of her friends around her would feel as oppressive an atmosphere.

“Um, I think you’re a bit mistaken, Senjougahara. Or maybe you’re being a bit impatient. It is true that I helped to resolve your problem last Monday, but if you act like you owe me some huge favor...”

“Oh, are you perhaps worried about that ridiculous theory that says people are more likely to fall into a romantic relationship in dangerous situations while ignoring human reasoning and giving no thought to the fact that extremely dangerous situations have a way of revealing the true nature of one’s comrades?”

“Ridiculous? Well, I suppose you’re right. You’d have to be an idiot to confess your love to someone while on some dangerous suspension bridge or something. But I still think you’re feeling too much of a debt of gratitude toward me. To be honest, whatever the situation or circumstances were, I don’t feel right having you feel so indebted to me.”

“That was just a pretext. By giving you the initiative, I hoped to get you to confess to me. That was why I said that. You lost your chance, you foolish boy. That is the last time I will set someone up like that.”

“.....”

Now that was a bold statement.

And is that what she was doing?

Was she trying to tempt me?

“Do not worry. I do not actually feel such a great debt toward you, Araragi-kun.”

“...Is that so?”

Eh?

Are you sure?

“After all, you would save anyone. This morning, I did not have quite as strong a grasp of who you are as I do now, Araragi-kun,” said Senjougahara smoothly. “It is clear now that you did not save me because it was me, but that does not matter to me. Even if it had not been me that you saved – for example, if you had saved Hanekawa-san and I had only watched on from the sidelines – I believe I would have still felt that you are special. Even if I am not special, knowing that you are special is just so much of a thrill. Well, that might be exaggerating a bit, but if anything, you are certainly fun to speak with, Araragi-kun.”

“But...we haven’t talked all that much yet.”

It was worse than that.

Because of the very concentrated amount of time we had spent together last Monday, last Tuesday, and that Sunday, I almost overlooked the fact that we had only ever spoken on those three days.

It had only been three days.

Even if we had been in the same class for three years...

We were practically strangers.

“That’s right,” said Senjougahara with a nod of agreement. “And that is why I want to speak with you

more.”

She wanted to spend more time with me.

So that she could get to know me better.

So that she could fall in love with me.

“I do not think this is anything quite as cheap as love at first sight and I am not patient enough to build up all the necessary groundwork. However, I still feel a desire to put effort into loving you, Araragi-kun.”

“...Is that so?”

When she put it like that, she was right.

I could find nothing to say in return.

You had to work to continue to love someone. Love was a very proactive emotion. In that case, doing things as Senjougahara suggested was fine.

“I believe this is an issue of timing. Merely becoming friends might have been enough, but I am greedy. I only want to go for the absolute extreme. Just think of it as having gotten stuck with a horrible girl,” she said. “It is because you are kind to anyone and everyone that this is happening to you, Araragi-kun. This was your own doing. Oh, and you need not worry. I am perfectly capable of distinguishing between gratitude and certain other feelings. After all, I have imagined all sorts of things involving you over the past week.”

“Imagined...?”

“It has been a very fulfilling week.”

She had a very blunt way of saying things.

I had to wonder just what I was doing and having done to me in these imaginings of Senjougahara’s.

“If you prefer, you can think of it as being unfortunate enough to have caught the eye of an easily love-struck fairy tale maiden who is starved for love and will do anything for anyone who is even slightly kind to her.”

“...I see.”

“You were unlucky. You should curse your normal actions.”

Does she not even hesitate to put herself down?

And after having all that said to me...

Even that...

...God, I'm lame.

I'm just pathetic.

“And Araragi-kun, now that I have said all that...”

“What?”

“If you refuse me, I will kill you and then run away.”

“That’s just a normal murder! You need to die too!”

“That’s just how normally serious I am.”

“...Sigh. I see...”

As I thought over what she said, I sighed from the bottom of my heart.

Honestly...

She is quite fun to be around.

It felt like a waste to have spent only those three days of the past three years with her. I, Araragi Koyomi, had wasted so much time.

I was truly glad that I had been the one to catch her back then.

I was so glad that Araragi Koyomi had been the one to catch Senjougahara Hitagi.

“If you cowardly ask for time to think about this, I will forever hold you in contempt, Araragi-kun. You should not embarrass girls any more than is necessary.”

“I know, I know. It might not be my place to do so, but can I add a single condition to this?”

“What would that be? Do you want to watch me shave my excess hair for a week?”

“Of all the things you’ve said so far, that is certainly the worst!”

And that was due to both what she said and when she said it.

After a few seconds, I spoke to Senjougahara.

“I say a condition, but I guess it’s more of a promise...”

“A promise? What would that be?”

“Senjougahara, never, ever again pretend to see something you do not see or pretend not to see something you do see. Never again. If anything seems odd, say so. Don’t try to be considerate. Due to what we’ve experienced and what we know, we will likely have to bear this burden for the rest of our lives. We know of these things’ existence, so promise me you will tell me on the spot if it seems there is a discrepancy in how we view something.”

“I promise.”

Senjougahara had her usual composed face with no readable expression, but I could still sense something from that short, immediate response that could be taken by some as having been made without proper consideration.

It was my own fault.

It was due to the normal actions I took.

“Okay, let’s go. It’s gotten pretty dark, so...um...I guess the normal protocol would be for me to see you home.”

“Two people cannot ride on that bike.”

“It has those rods, so two should be fine even if three would be impossible.”

“Rods?”

“The rods you put your feet on. I don’t know what they’re called, but they’re attached to the back wheel. One of us can stand on them and put their hands on the other’s shoulders. We can decide who sits in front with a game of rock paper scissors. The snail is gone, so we should have no problems returning home. The way we came was way too complicated to remember, so Senjougahara...”

“Wait, Araragi-kun.”

Senjougahara was still standing in the same place.

While standing there, she grabbed my wrist.

Senjougahara Hitagi had restricted herself from coming into contact with others for so long, so that was the first time she had ever reached out and touched me like that.

We touched each other.

We looked at each other.

And that showed that we were there.

We could each tell the other was there.

“Perhaps we should actually put it in words.”

“Put what in words?”

“I do not want an assumed relationship.”

“Oh, that.”

I thought.

For a girl that desired the absolute extreme, merely replying in English would have lacked something. However, my limited knowledge of other languages would have made any other language seem half-hearted and it would still be a rehash.

And so...

“I hope it catches on.”

“What?”

“Senjouhara tore [\[16\]](#).”

In a general sense, that made Hanekawa’s delusion 100% accurate.

It seemed that class rep really did know everything.

This is the epilogue, or rather the conclusion, to this story.

As usual, my two little sisters, Karen and Tsukihi, woke me up. That they came to wake me up showed that my words of apology that were almost an unconditional surrender had been successful and their anger had been quelled. In the end, I had been unable to do anything that year, but I promised I would definitely not leave the house all day next Mother's Day. That may have been a good thing. At any rate, it was Monday. A wonderfully normal weekday on which nothing would occur. I ate a light breakfast and headed for school. I was not on my mountain bike. I was using the ladies' bike. As I thought about the fact that Senjougahara would finally be attending school again, my feet felt light as they pedaled. However, on a downslope not far from my house, I almost ran into a girl unsteadily walking along. I frantically braked.

The girl had bangs short enough to see her eyebrows and had pigtails.

She was wearing a large backpack.

“Oh, Araragi-san.”

“You got the two ra's backwards.”

“Sorry, I stuttered.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Oh, um, how to put this...”

The girl had the confused expression of a ninja that had failed a camouflage technique and then gave an embarrassed grin.

“Well, you see. Thanks to your help, Araragi-san, I moved up from being a ghost that haunts a specific area to being a wandering ghost. I got a special promotion up two levels.”

“Hehh...”

I was shocked.

That wonderfully absurd logic was so vague and arbitrary that an expert like Oshino (as frivolous and flippant as he could be) would probably faint if he heard it.

It may have meant nothing to her, but I was in a position where I had to constantly be thinking about my attendance rate, so I needed to get to school before I was late. As such, I said “see ya” and got back on my bike after we had exchanged only a few words.

And then she said one last thing.

“Um, Araragi-san. I am going to be wandering around this area for a while,” said that girl. “So call out to me if you see me.”

In the end, it was quite a wonderful story.

Suruga Monkey

Kanbaru Suruga was so well known in our school that I doubted a single student had not heard of her, so I of course had heard about her a few times. If we are merely talking about being well known, my classmates Hanekawa Tsubasa and Senjouhara Hitagi may have been even more so than her, but that was only within the third year. Yes. Kanbaru Suruga was in the second year, a year below Hanekawa Tsubasa, Senjouhara Hitagi, and myself. And yet she was so well known that even someone as ignorant of the current gossip as me had heard of her despite being in the third year. Normally, that would be unthinkable. If I jokingly said she was quite something for her age, I would be a little too close to the truth for comfort.

Also, in Kanbaru Suruga's case, calling her a star may give a more accurate nuance of meaning than just calling her well known. Hanekawa Tsubasa and Senjouhara Hitagi were known as excellent students with superb grades and wonderful behavior (even if the latter was not actually that way at all), but Kanbaru Suruga was not seen that way in the slightest. As the term star would suggest, neither was she well known for being a bully nor a delinquent girl. While Hanekawa Tsubasa and Senjouhara Hitagi excelled mainly at academics, she excelled at sports. Kanbaru Suruga was the ace of the basketball team. Soon after she joined the team in her first year, she became a regular. Now, that could be explained away by the fact that the girls basketball team was completely unknown and weak when she had joined it. In fact, it had never won a single game. However, she had created a monstrous legend by leading that unknown and weak basketball team that had never won a single game to the nationals starting with the first regular game after she joined. After that, it was hardly surprising she was treated like a star. That legend had seemed to practically appear overnight, so it seemed like she had almost literally "created" it and it made you wonder what exactly she had done. Our school's girls basketball team was now such a strong team that the requests from boys basketball teams from nearby high schools no longer seemed like jokes. Their rapid rise to prominence had been due to the strength of a single girl.

She was not particularly tall.

Her physical condition was not all that different from a normal high school girl.

If anything, she was a little petite and slender.

Graceful was about the perfect word for her.

However, Kanbaru Suruga could *jump*.

Last year, due to a bit of socializing, I had just once seen a bit of a game she played in. She had quickly and nimbly slipped past (or rather, right through) the opposing team's defenses and easily landed a slam dunk just like that shounen manga that had once swept across Japan. She had calmly and easily done it over and over again with the invigorating smile of a sports girl. As she did it dozens of times, she had truly seemed to be enjoying it. How many high schoolers get to see someone

dunk in a girls basketball game where shooting with both hands is the norm? Even as a spectator, I had been overwhelmed. I had been unable to continue to watch the poor opposing players who had lost all motivation due to also being overwhelmed. I distinctly remember having no choice but to leave because it was so hard to watch.

Anyway, even if our high school was a college prep school that gave academics the primary focus, it was still a school attended by emotional youths partway through their teenage years. It was only natural that a flashy sports hero garnered more attention than an excellent student that was good at her studies. The things Kanbaru Suruga did or the actions she took became gossip that spread around the school whether they were things that mattered in the slightest or not. If you gathered up all of that gossip, you could probably write an entire book. Even if you didn't particularly care or if you actively tried to avoid it, you would still hear things about Kanbaru Suruga. Any student at our school regardless of year could quickly learn what she had eaten for lunch if he cared. It was simple. You just had to ask anyone around you.

But gossip was filled with rumors.

And with half truths.

Nothing guaranteed that these things were true.

The rumors that managed to make their way all the way to me were especially lacking in credibility and difficult to accept at face value. In fact, oftentimes rumors that were the exact opposite of each other would be making their way around the school at the same time. She had a wild temperament...no, a calm one. She was very caring of her friends...no, she was cold and unfeeling. She was very modest...no, she was very boastful. She had intense romances...no, she had never even dated a guy. If anyone was able to fulfill all of those things, I would only be able to say that their personality was completely broken. I had never spoken to her even when I did catch sight of her and had never actually been within 5 meters of her, so I had no choice but to leave it all to my imagination. Although to be honest, I really felt no need to go to the effort of imagining anything about her. She was in a different year, a sports star, and the ace of the basketball team (our school only allowed club and team activities through the second year, so the rumor that she had been designated the team captain was probably legitimately true), so she had no connection whatsoever to a third year student who had fallen behind in his studies.

She had no connection or relation to me.

In all likelihood, she probably had never even heard of me.

There was no reason she would have.

That was what I had thought.

That was what I had been convinced of.

I learned that I had been mistaken near the end of May when the time to switch over to our summer

uniforms in June was approaching fast. It was during the time when I was considering putting a bandage on my neck for about half a month because the back of my hair I was growing out did not quite come down far enough to hide two small holes there. It was about 10 days after Senjouhara Hitagi and I had started going out after that sudden opportunity.

When Kanbaru Suruga had first approached me with those loud footsteps, she already had that white bandage wrapped around her left hand.

“Oh, Aryaryagi-san.”

“It’s Araragi.”

“Sorry, I bit my tongue.”

While returning from school on a Friday, I caught sight of a small pigtailed girl wearing a backpack, namely Hachikuji Mayoi, ahead of me as I pedaled my bike along a slope. I braked and called out to her as I stopped to her left. Hachikuji blinked and looked surprised before misspeaking my name as usual.

I was a bit impressed she was still coming up with new ways of saying my name wrong, so I politely corrected her.

“Don’t say people’s names like you’re Ukkari Hachibei.”

“I think it’s cute.”

“It makes me sound utterly incompetent.”

“Hmm. Well, that’s surprisingly fitting.”

That fifth grader had a way of saying horrible things without a second thought.

“Araragi-san, I’m glad you seem to be doing well. I am glad I am able to meet you again like this. Has anything happened since then?”

“Hm? Oh, not really. That kind of thing doesn’t happen too often. I’ve had a nice, peaceful life. Things have been quite calm. Although we do have an exam coming up, so it really isn’t that peaceful or calm.”

About two weeks before on May 14th aka Mother’s Day, I had met Hachikuji Mayoi in a certain park which led me to being caught up in a bit of an incident. Nothing of enough substance to really call it an incident may have happened and nothing abstract worth mentioning had happened, but I did have a bit of an *unusual experience*.

By unusual, I simply mean unusual.

Thanks to that unpleasant man Oshino and Senjouhara’s help I saw the issue resolved without further problems. However, if I viewed the events of May 14th as inevitable rather than something that happened by chance, then the two peaceful and calm weeks of nothing happening afterwards also seemed to have been inevitable rather than happening by chance.

From what I could see, Hachikuji was fine too. That meant the events of that Mother's Day had been resolved without leaving any loose ends. For such unusual experiences, that was actually quite rare. For Hanekawa, Senjouhara, or me, dealing with the aftereffects of the unusual experience was much harsher than the experience itself. You could even call it cruel.

Hachikuji Mayoi.

In that way, I was a bit jealous of her.

"Oh, what seems to be the matter, Araragi-san? Why were you looking at me with such passionate eyes? It's so indecent."

"...How are my eyes passionate?"

And they're indecent?

That isn't a kind of passion I want.

"If you look at me like that, I'll get the hiccups."

"You have an odd diaphragm."

It surprised me.

If you thought about what Hachikuji had been through, it was not something I should feel only jealousy toward. If you looked at it in a certain way, Hachikuji may have even had a harder time than Hanekawa, Senjouhara, or me. I'm sure a lot of people would feel that was the proper way to look at it.

As I thought, two high school students passed by the left side of my bike. They were both girls. They wore the uniform of a high school different from my own. They were clearly looking at Hachikuji and me suspiciously. The whispering voices I heard as they passed left me with an unpleasant feeling. Apparently, the sight of third year high school student Araragi Koyomi speaking with fifth year elementary school student Hachikuji Mayoi appeared very strange to people with normal tastes.

But I did not care.

The cold glare of the world meant nothing to me.

I had not called out to Hachikuji thoughtlessly and she and I were the only ones that needed to know the truth. The friendship we had developed would not be shaken by such prejudice.

"Oh, dear. It seems those girls have figured out that you are a lolicon, Araragi-san. They have seen through to your true desire."

"I don't want to hear that from you!"

“There is no need to be embarrassed. There is no law against liking little girls. People are free to have whatever tastes they wish to have. As long as you do not actually carry out any of your abnormal desires, there is no problem.”

“Even if I did like little girls, I would hate you!”

It seemed we had not developed a friendship after all.

Everyone around me was like that.

I glanced over my shoulder.

I did not see anyone there.

For the moment at least.

“Really... Everything you say and do makes it seem you have great promise. Anyway, Hachikuji, what are you doing wandering around here? Were you trying to get somewhere and got lost again?”

“That is a very rude thing of you to say, Araragi-san. I have never once gotten lost from the moment I was born.”

“You have quite the wonderful memory.”

“Stop, you’re going to make me blush.”

“Yes, it truly would be wonderful to forget anything you find to be unfavorable.”

“No, no. By the way, who are you?”

“You forgot me!?”

That was a nice retort.

She had good taste.

“I mean, even when I know it’s a joke, having someone forget you is fairly depressing, Hachikuji.”

“It can’t be helped. I forget anything I find to be unintelligent.”

“I’m not stupid enough that you have any right to say anything about it! And I said unfavorable, not unintelligent!”

“It can’t be helped. I forget anything I find to be unfavorable.”

“Yes, yes. You’ve got it now...wait! No, you don’t! Don’t call other people’s mere existences unfavorable!”

“You’re the one that said it.”

“Quiet. Don’t try to make this my fault.”

“You sure are selfish, Araragi-san. But okay. I will be more careful about what I say in the future. For instance...”

“For instance?”

“I will instead say you are anti-favorable.”

“.....”

It was an enjoyable conversation.

In truth, I did have a slight issue with the fact that I, the third year high school student named Araragi Koyomi, was speaking on the same level as a fifth grader. However, it did not feel too different from speaking with my middle school aged sisters. And if you did not get too worked up over the difference between middle school and elementary school, my conversations with Hachikuji progressed much more smoothly than those with my sisters.

With a sigh, I got off my bike.

I then walked along pushing the bike via the handlebars.

Speaking with Hachikuji was enjoyable, but if we merely stood around joking, it could ruin my later plans. It wasn’t like I was pressed for time, but I still felt it was better to keep moving while I spoke with Hachikuji. Hachikuji did not seem to be wandering around because she had a set destination, so she walked alongside my bike without my needing to say anything or urge her along in any way. She really did not have much to do.

There was one other reason I was remaining on the move, but another glance over my shoulder put that other concern at rest for the time being.

“Where are you headed, Araragi-san?”

“Home for now.”

“For now? Are you headed out again later?”

“More or less. If you recall, I mentioned that I have an exam coming up.”

“Yes, it will test your ability and therefore your value, right?”

“That’s taking it a bit far. The point of the exam is merely to see if I can graduate or not.”

“I see. So it’s seeing if you will fail to graduate or not.”

“.....”

It meant the same thing, but the nuance was a bit different.

Japanese was a tricky language.

“After all, your intelligence is anti-favorable, Araragi-san.”

“Now I would rather you simply called me unintelligent.”

“Even if it is true, there are some things you can say and some things that go without saying.”

“So there’s nothing you can’t say!?”

“Don’t worry, Araragi-san. My grades are not too good either, so we’re really the same.”

“.....”

An elementary school girl was consoling me.

I was the same as an elementary school girl.

I could also sense Hachikuji Mayoi’s casual deception in the fact that she changed “unintelligent” to “poor grades” when referring to herself.

“Honestly, this is a pretty serious issue. If I do poorly on this exam, I could be in a really bad situation.”

“Will you be expelled?”

“It may be a college prep school, but it’s not crazy enough to expel people for doing poorly on their exams. In fact, does such a school even exist? That sounds like a bad joke. Anyway, I think the worst that could happen is having to repeat the year, but I still would rather not have to do that.”

If I could avoid it, I would.

No, I had to avoid it at all costs.

“Hm. Then, Araragi-san, wouldn’t that be a good reason to not head out today? Shouldn’t you be staying home and studying?”

“You say some surprisingly serious things, Hachikuji.”

“Araragi-san, I would rather you did not say I say serious things.”

“You’re fine with me saying it was surprising!?”

She was quite the entertainer.

“You don’t need to worry, though. In fact, that makes a good segue, Hachikuji. Needless to say, I am not headed out for fun or to go shopping. I’m headed out to go study.”

“Hm?” Hachikuji tilted her head to the side solemnly. “So you are headed to the library or somewhere to study? Hmm... Personally, I feel studying in the comfort of your own room is much more effective... Oh, Araragi-san, are you attending a cram school?”

“I guess it’s more like a cram school than a library,” I said. “Do you remember Senjougahara? Her grades were at the top of our year last year, and she has promised to help me study at her place.”

“Senjougahara-san...”

Hachikuji folded her arms and looked down.

She hasn’t forgotten her, has she?

If so, it was more likely due to fear than finding her unfavorable.

“Her full name is Senjougahara Hitagi. She was the girl with the ponytail that was with me before. She helped...”

“...Oh, that tsundere.”

“.....”

Well, it did seem she remembered her.

It seemed that eight letter word that begins with a T and ends with an E was becoming widely used for her behavior, but I was not so sure that was a good thing. I decided I needed to ask her about it at some point. How I responded to her being called that would change depending on her answer.

“She was a wonderfully open-minded person. She showed me the way while giving me a piggyback ride the entire way.”

“You’re beautifying your memories!?”

It seemed Hachikuji’s memories of Senjougahara had been a tad traumatic. Well, given both of their issues, that isn’t too surprising.

“Hmm,” Hachikuji murmured with her arms still folded. “But if I recall, you and Senjougahara-san were...how should I put this...umm...”

Hachikuji seemed to be trying to choose her words carefully. I had a good idea what she was trying to say, but Hachikuji must have been hesitant to say it directly, so she was searching for a different way to say it. It may not have been to the point of curiosity, but I was a little interested as to how much option a fifth grade vocabulary would give her, so I merely watched her without offering any help.

Finally, Hachikuji said, “You two entered into a romantic contract, did you not?”

“That’s a horrible choice!”

As expected, I ended up shouting at her.

The exchange had been perfect enough to be straight out of a textbook.

“Huh? Araragi-san, did I say something odd?”

“Even if none of the words you used were odd on the surface, I think most people would sense an unpleasant shade of meaning lurking below the surface.”

“If you do not like the term contract, Araragi-san, how about transaction. A romantic transaction.”

“That’s even worse! Just say it like a normal person!”

“Fine, I will do as you wish and say it normally. Saying things normally is a piece of cake for me. Here goes, Araragi-san. You and Senjougahara-san entered into a romantic relationship.”

“I guess that’ll do.”

A romantic relationship?

That’s a fairly old-fashioned term.

Is that what you consider normal?

“You may have said you were headed there to study, but isn’t that just an excuse? Are you perhaps actually having a secret romantic rendezvous?”

“.....”

Yet another old-fashioned way of saying it.

There was something seriously off about her vocabulary.

“Heading to your lover’s house just before an exam that will decide if you have to repeat a year seems suicidal, Araragi-san.”

“It decides if I get to graduate or not.”

She must have thought I was quite an idiot.

I felt sorry for myself.

“And don’t call it suicidal.”

“Then it seems like suicide itself.”

It appeared I was being bullied by an elementary school girl.

I felt sorry for myself.

“Just so you know, you’re grown up enough for me to settle things once and for all if you push me far enough.”

“Grown up enough? You mean in the chest and ass? Araragi-san, what are you hoping to get from an elementary school girl’s body?”

“Shut up. Don’t try to twist my words around like that.”

I struck Hachikuji’s head.

Hachikuji kicked me back in the shin.

It ended as a draw due to injuries.

We both agreed not to continue to prevent further pain on our own part.

“Anyway, you don’t need to worry about that, Hachikuji. Senjougahara is very strict about this kind of thing.”

“She’s strict about studying? So she’s a harsh teacher? Come to think of it, she does seem the type that would hate idiots.”

“Yes, she did say she hates them.”

And that was why Senjougahara disliked children.

And that included Hachikuji.

It was possible she disliked me as well.

Also, while we’re on the subject, Senjougahara was not merely strict when it came to studying. But I guess that’s just how excellent students are.

“So she’s just like Sergeant Heartful.”

“That is one kind-sounding army officer.”

“Umm, speaking of Senjougahara-san’s house, isn’t it near the park from the other-...?”

“No, I’m pretty sure we mentioned it at some point, but Senjougahara moved from there a while back. I had been to her place once just a bit before meeting you. It’s a good distance away. I’m headed home to switch out bikes before heading there. Actually, I might be a little more pressed for time than

I thought.”

“If you are in a hurry, I will not hold you up.”

“No, I’m not running late or anything.”

Also, even if I was headed to Senjougahara’s house, I was headed there to study, so I was not exactly motivated to get there in a hurry. I had no idea how much verbal abuse Senjougahara would send my way if I let her know about that.

But on the other hand...

Senjougahara Hitagi.

Hachikuji was one thing, but Senjougahara had her own way of being...

“Hey, Hachikuji,” I started to ask.

And then I heard a noise coming from behind.

A noise.

Specifically, footsteps.

Instead of hearing a series of steps coming toward me with a quick rhythm, it sounded more like the person was taking a long jump with each step.

I did not even have time to turn around to check.

Oh, right...

There had actually been one other problem besides the exams ruining the peace and calm of my life lately.

I had thought I had lost her.

Step step step step step step.

The footsteps grew closer and closer.

As I said, I had no time to turn around.

But at the same time, I couldn’t just *not* turn around.

Step!

As I slowly and reluctantly twisted my body around, she jumped.

She jumped.

Kanbaru Suruga jumped.

Her running long jump sent her farther than just a meter or two. Her ideal form and perfect arcing trajectory through the air seemed to ignore the law of universal gravity. As she flew through the air, she passed directly by the right side of my face.

And she landed.

In that instant, her disheveled hair fell back down to rest on her head.

She was wearing her uniform.

Needless to say, that would be the uniform of our school.

Her scarf was the yellow of the second year.

By the way, making such a leap in her uniform had caused her skirt (which was already shortened according the current style) to flip up about as far as it would go. However, she was wearing spats that reached down to her knees, so I gained no joy from this fact.

After a slight delay, the skirt fell back down to its normal position.

I suddenly smelled the scent of burnt rubber.

It seemed to be due to the bottom of the very expensive-looking sneakers she was wearing causing so much friction with the asphalt of the road. I had to wonder just how ridiculous her athletic ability was.

And then Kanbaru Suruga, the ace of the basketball team, turned around.

She had a bit of youthfulness left, but her expression held a gallant air to it that was a rare sight even in the third year. Her sharp eyes were looking directly at me.

She held her hand up to her chest as if she was about to make an oath.

And she gave me a gentle smile.

“Hey, Araragi-senpai. What a coincidence.”

“No coincidence could be this clearly planned!”

It was obvious she had been chasing after me.

When I looked around, I realized Hachikuji had completely disappeared. For how blunt and straightforward she was with me, Hachikuji Mayoi was a surprisingly shy girl. She had quickly made

up her mind and escaped with extremely light footwork. Really, anyone would probably run away if they saw an unknown girl charging their way at full speed. (And from her point of view, it had likely looked like Kanbaru had been charging straight for her.)

Some friend she is...

Well, whatever.

I looked back toward Kanbaru fully absorbed in nodding repeatedly in an admiring way.

“...What?”

“Oh, I was just recalling what you said Araragi-senpai. I want to inscribe it deeply into my heart. ‘No coincidence could be this clearly planned’... It so excellently sums up the situation and sounds both like it was thought up on the spot and like it wasn’t. I guess this is what they call a quick wit.”

“.....”

“Yes, you are right,” said Kanbaru. “The truth is, I chased after you, Araragi-senpai.”

“...Yeah, I could tell.”

“I see. So you could tell. That’s Araragi-senpai for you. You can see through everything an underclassman like me would be doing. I am both embarrassed and ashamed, but I am also quite impressed.”

“.....”

She was hard to deal with.

I had no idea what kind of expression was on my face at that point, but whatever it was, Kanbaru Suruga paid it no heed and pointed a lively smile my way.

Three days before, I had heard those reverberating footsteps approaching me as I walked down the hallway. Kanbaru Suruga had then called out to me like it was normal. She had done it so normally that I had replied normally without even thinking. It was only after I replied that I realized I was speaking to that well-known star of the second year. Even someone as detached from the current gossip as me had heard of her. However, there was no common point between us. I could think of no connection between us, so I was quite surprised.

But what had truly surprised me was her personality. It is a bit difficult to describe, but she has this strange personality or character that I have never seen in anyone else.

Ever since – so, from three days ago to now – Kanbaru Suruga had been following me around. No matter where I was, what time it was, or how many people were around, I would hear those footsteps chasing after me.

“Breaks between classes are one thing, Kanbaru, but don’t you have practice after school? Should you really be here?”

“Oh? You’re a sharp one, Araragi-senpai. You don’t let the slightest doubt go by without question. You’re like the protagonist of a detective novel. You’d send even Philip Marlowe running off in shame.”

“Don’t praise me so much for pointing out that it’s odd for a national-level basketball player to be here at this time of day.”

I had no interest in reading a detective novel starring a detective that would be sent running off in shame by something like that.

“Those words were filled with such deep self discipline and you have not lost sight of a modest attitude as being your second greatest weapon. I have a bad habit of fooling even myself so there is much I must learn from you. Ha ha. It has been said since ancient times that you are influenced by those around you and I feel myself growing as a human just by being around you, Araragi-senpai. I guess this is what it means to follow in someone’s example.”

Kanbaru continued to smile.

There was no ill will in her smile.

I had always thought of someone like Hanekawa as being the representative example of a good person, but perhaps Kanbaru was what you would get if you took the idea of a “good person” to its extreme.

In short, she was worse than Hanekawa.

She was more of a bother than that class rep.

“With my hand the way it is, I can’t practice,” said Kanbaru as she pointed to her left hand.

Her left hand had a white bandage wrapped around it. Everything from the tips of her five fingers to the wrist was wrapped up without a single gap. The long sleeves of her uniform covered it up so I could not see, but apparently the bandage reached all the way to her elbow. Shortly before Kanbaru had first called out to me, I had heard a rumor that she had sprained it weirdly or something while doing some independent training.

But then, rumors were only rumors.

I had taken it with a grain of salt. After all, it had been hard to believe that someone with such great athletic ability and flexibility would get a sprain while training. However, upon actually seeing the bandage, I decided it may have been true. A scribe would sometimes miswrite, a kappa would sometimes get swept away, and a monkey would sometimes fall from the tree.

“Since I can’t play, I would only be in the way if I was in the gym, so I am choosing to not participate

in practice for now.”

“But aren’t you the captain? And even if you aren’t, won’t the team’s morale fall without you there?”

“I can’t believe you would think my team is so reliant on a single person, Araragi-senpai. My team is not so weak as to lose its spirit just because I am not there,” said Kanbaru in a strong tone.

“Basketball is a harsh sport. It is too much for the strength of a single person. I will admit that I stand out given the role I have with my position, but I must point out that I can only stand out because of everyone else’s strength behind me. As such, all the praise given to me should be split up among everyone on the team.”

“...Yes, I suppose so.”

That was the kind of person she was.

You can call her good or virtuous or whatever word you think is best.

From what I had heard, that was not the first time Kanbaru had been extremely sensitive to insults pointed at her teammates (even if the comment had not been intended that way). When she was in the first year, an upperclassman had said something rude in a newspaper interview and she had flipped over that upperclassman’s desk...or so the rumor went. (By the way, that rumor itself was actually untrue, but something similar had supposedly happened.)

“Ha ha,” laughed Kanbaru. “I get it, Araragi-senpai. You were testing me to see what kind of captain I am, weren’t you?”

“.....”

What is with that triumphant look?

Please don’t look at me like that.

“Honestly, Araragi-senpai, if your words were to be written down for the benefit of future generations, they would have to be written in all bold to properly capture them. The weight of each one of your words is just so much greater than that of everyone else. Saying that persuasion comes from *who* says it rather than *what* is said is usually meant in a negative way, but it would be meant in a positive way if it was used in reference to you. You need not worry. I have no intention of skipping out on my duties as captain. I am not so conceited as to be that negligent. Whether I like it or not, I am well aware that I am the ace of the team. I left after instructing everyone what they were to practice. In fact, without me, they can be much more at ease as they practice. As they say, when the cat’s away, the mice will play.”

“The cat, hm? ...Well, that is a relief to hear.”

“It may be a sport, but we are still primarily students. And ours is a college prep school. The clubs and teams are primarily meant to create good memories during one’s teenage years, so it is best for them to be friendly, carefree, and open. You really are a considerate person to not only worry about

the issues of someone unrelated to you like me but also my teammates. I am truly thankful for your heartfelt concern. You have such an open heart. I can't believe you would go so far as to play the part of the hated insulter for the sake of the basketball team. That is a truly kind thing to do for your underclassmen. I have never met someone as kind as you, Araragi-senpai."

"And I've never met someone quite like you..."

I was fairly certain a character that unwittingly made such insulting compliments had never before existed.

"I see. It is such an honor to have you say that, Araragi-senpai. Ha ha. Praise from someone as gracious as you is so inspiring. I feel courage I know I did not have before welling up within me. I feel like I could do anything now. If I am ever feeling down about something, I will make sure to come talk to you. I am sure having the pleasure of speaking with you will give me the motivation to do anything."

Kanbaru's smile never disappeared.

Her smile almost made her seem defenseless, but the strong core I could feel behind it showed that was not so. That smile originated from the absolute confidence she had in herself.

She was from a completely different world than me.

She was a completely different type of person from me.

That alone was immediately evident. Even without getting into personality, a sports star like Kanbaru was from a different world than Araragi Koyomi. I was well aware that she was a different type of person from me, but one question remained. Why had Kanbaru Suruga called out to me?

And she had done more than that.

She had repeatedly called out to me.

Why had she continued to call out to me?

I was fairly certain that it was not what Kanbaru had said. There was no way she was speaking to me because she was feeling down about something and needed motivation. I did not have that kind of supernatural power. If I did, I would have been using it on myself.

I proceeded to ask Kanbaru the same question I had asked her countless times over the past 3 days.

"Kanbaru, what do you want today?"

"Oh, right..."

While she had responded so promptly and without delay before, Kanbaru now hesitated. But after an instant, the smile was back on her face and she spoke.

“Did you read the international section of the newspaper this morning? I want to hear your opinion on the future political situation in Russia.”

“You’re going with current events for the topic!?”

And her choice of current events was horrible.

My knowledge of Japanese politics wasn’t that great and she was asking me to cross the ocean to Russia.

“Oh, would you prefer to talk about India, Araragi-san? Unfortunately, I am a very sports-minded and outdoorsy person, so my knowledge of the IT field is relatively limited. The issues Russia is dealing with now seem much more realistic to me.”

“...I didn’t read the newspaper this morning.”

I used an excuse I doubted could fool anyone. I actually *had* read it, but not closely enough to have a proper discussion on it.

“I see,” said Kanbaru in response with a gentle narrowing of the eyes. “I suppose it isn’t too surprising that someone as busy as you would not have time to read the newspaper in the morning. And yet I said something as insensitive as that. I apologize. I’m thinking we can put this discussion off until tomorrow. Is that okay with you, Araragi-senpai?”

“Sure...”

“You’re so big-hearted. I didn’t think you would forgive me so readily. You surely must have thought I was a horrible person to say something so shallow and yet you responded so generously without giving voice to those thoughts. I guess this is what they call having a broad mind and a large heart. I just grew to like you even more than I did before, Araragi-senpai.”

“I see. Thanks...”

“Please, I don’t need any thanks for that. I was just speaking my honest feelings.”

“.....”

Another thing about her was that she was actually pretty smart.

It really did not seem fair that some people were both good at sports *and* smart. Not that Hanekawa or Senjougahara were particularly un-athletic, but they were nothing compared to that underclassman. Senjougahara had been the ace of the track team in middle school, but the giant blank during her high school years had surely had an effect. Especially if you considered what she had experienced due to her special circumstances.

Anyway, I obviously did not think Kanbaru truly wanted to have a debate over the political situation in Russia. That was clearly just a means to an end.

I had tried to ask her what she wanted countless times, but she had never given me a proper answer.

She had to have some other reason.

The problem was that I could not even guess what that could be.

Why had she so suddenly started to follow me around like this? What common point was there between Kanbaru, the star of the school, and me, a third year falling behind in his studies?

I could think of nothing.

“By the way, Araragi-senpai, has anything strange happened today?”

“Ahn? Not really. It’s been a normal day.”

Except for you.

No, I’ve actually gotten used to you by this point.

“I just feel like I’m about to get a headache with this exam coming up.”

“The exam, hm? Exams give me a headache, too. They’re especially bad for people who have team or club activities. For a week beforehand, the school bans any practices, so independent training is our only option.”

“I see.”

I had a hard time understanding why you would start independent training during the time when you’re actually given a break, but I was not a part of the world of sports.

“But for you personally, it’s actually a good thing, right? Your sprained left hand can heal in that time.”

“Hm? Oh...Yes. That’s right.” Kanbaru’s gaze dropped to her left hand. “There you go again, Araragi-senpai. You see the world in a different way. It’s like you are always thinking about how to make other people happy. Such wonderful positive thinking.”

“My positive thinking would be nothing compared to yours even if I worked at improving it for 100 years.”

How exactly would you have to raise a child for her to grow up like that?

She was so very strange.

“Well, it may be trite, but studying is the primary role of a student. Even if it’s a pain, we still need to work hard on our exams.”

“It’s a good thing you didn’t hurt your right hand.”

“No, I’m actually a southpaw,” said Kanbaru. “In most everyday situations, being left-handed is inconvenient, but in the world of sports, it often gives you an advantage. Thanks to that, it is a priceless attribute.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. That holds true for almost every sport in which people are put in direct competition. In modern Japan, most natural born left-handed people have that corrected as they grow up, so only about 1 in 10 athletes are southpaws. Araragi-senpai, what effect do you think those odds have on the game of basketball? Basketball is played 5 on 5, so only one person on the court is likely to be a southpaw. In this case, that one is me. That is one of the reasons that I became an ace.”

“I see...”

I sort of understood but did not at the same time.

“Even if it was due to my own carelessness, once something like this happens, the purely inconvenient side of it gets a whole lot worse.”

“Left-handed, hm? Well, I don’t play any sports so I don’t know too much about that, but just the idea of being left-handed seems pretty cool to me.”

I gave my honest impression.

I may have just been a bit biased, but left-handed people’s actions always seemed smarter than those of normal people.

“So I take it you’re left-handed too, Araragi-senpai. Ha ha. I could tell immediately because you have your watch on your right arm. Left-handed people are good at spotting other lefties.”

“.....”

It was only a coincidence that I had my watch on my right wrist, but I couldn’t bear to tell her. From that moment on, I decided I had to write and hold chopsticks in my left hand whenever I was around her. I may have thought their actions seemed smarter, but I had no intention of correcting my own behavior until I was one myself.

“Isn’t your exam going to be tough? You can’t take the Japanese portion with your dominant hand like that, can you?”

“With this kind of exam we don’t have to write an essay for any of the subjects and my handwriting being a bit messier than usual won’t be too much of an issue. I’m sure the teachers have taken it all into consideration. I apologize for bringing up something that made you worry needlessly, Araragi-senpai. You really do care for your underclassmen, don’t you? If you have time to spare to worry about me, you must be quite prepared for this exam.”

“No, I’m not actually all that prepared.”

I really wasn’t.

I was not worrying about my underclassman because I was prepared. In fact, I was anything but prepared at that moment.

“I’m actually about to head out to a study group.”

“A study group?”

Kanbaru seemed puzzled.

Apparently the term study group was not enough of an explanation for her.

“Y’see...Well, to put it simply, my grades so far have been pretty bad and my attendance was miserable in the first and second year...”

Why do I have to explain this?

And to an underclassman no less...even if she is a star.

“So this exam is my only real chance to restore my standing.”

In the end, I used a more pretentious wording.

It was an excellent example of how pathetic I was.

“Hm, I see,” nodded Kanbaru. “I’m the type that does not get very worked up over studying for exams, so I don’t really understand. But, well, I think my classmates do sometimes gather at someone’s house before an exam.”

“Yes. It’s something like that.”

“I see. So you’re about to head to over to a friend’s house. But...” Kanbaru hesitated for an instant. “Studying isn’t like sports. Gathering everyone’s abilities together isn’t necessarily going to help...”

“Don’t worry. While I called it a study group, it’s just me and the other person and it’ll really just be me getting help with my studying. I guess you could say I’m getting tutored. I’m getting help from a classmate with really, really good grades.”

“Hmm...Oh,” said Kanbaru as if she had just realized something. “So it’s Senjouhara-senpai.”

“...Hm? You know her?”

“You said it was someone in your class with good grades, so who else could it be? I’ve heard rumors about her.”

“Hmm. Well, yes. It’s her.”

I guess she’s pretty well known, too.

It isn’t that odd that an underclassman would know about Senjougahara.

Hm?

But wouldn’t the person in our class most well known for good grades be Hanekawa? She hasn’t given up the top position of our year to anyone. And even if you did think of Senjougahara first, you wouldn’t say “who else could it be”. Also, the term “study group” is usually used to refer to groups of the same sex, so wouldn’t you first think of a guy’s name rather than a girl’s?

Why did she immediately think of Senjougahara?

“Well, I shouldn’t be keeping you then. I’ll get going for today.”

“Sure.”

Kanbaru Suruga made sure to add the “for today” while announcing her intention to leave.

She lowered her hips and stretched out her legs.

She was warming up.

After making sure to properly stretch out her Achilles tendon...

“Good luck, Araragi-senpai.”

In an instant, Kanbaru disappeared the way she had come, leaving behind only the sound of her footsteps. She was not merely a good runner or quick on her feet; she reached her top speed unnaturally quickly. If you timed her 100 or 200 meter speed, you probably would not get some outstanding record, but she would likely do rather well against a regular of the track team over a very short distance like 10 or 20 meters. Kanbaru Suruga very much seemed specialized for the sport of basketball where one had to move back and forth along a limited court. Before long, she had completely disappeared from view. Her quick motions had sent her short skirt flipping up again and again, but she was wearing long spats that were normally visible extending below her skirt, so it wasn’t worth focusing on.

She should really wear a track suit when she runs. That way, she wouldn’t get people’s hopes up in vain.

At any rate, I felt like a great weight had been placed on my shoulders.

It had ended relatively quickly today, but I still had no idea why she was following me around. That did not leave me in a very cheerful mood because it meant the situation could possibly continue indefinitely. That said, it was not like any real harm was being done and I felt I could simply ignore

it, but dealing with someone like her was exhausting for someone like me. In fact, I doubted anyone could speak with Kanbaru Suruga without being worn out. The only possible person I could think of was...

Well...

It was Senjouhara.

“Rararagi-san.”

“That certainly seemed closer to correct than last time, Hachikuji, but don’t sing my name like we’re in a musical. My name is Araragi.”

“Sorry. I bit my tongue.”

“No, that was on purpose.”

“I bitw my tonwgue.”

“It wasn’t on purpose!?”

“I caught a glimpse^[17].”

“Of my true talent!?”

At some point, Hachikuji had reappeared next to me.

She must have returned after seeing Kanbaru leave. With Hachikuji, I could not be sure, but it was possible she had returned so quickly because she felt a bit guilty about running off and leaving me alone. In that case, she must have actually intentionally mistaken my name this time to cover up her embarrassment.

“Who was that?”

“You couldn’t tell?”

“Hmm, deducing from the fact that she called you ‘Araragi-senpai’, I suppose she must have been your underclassman.”

“...An excellent deduction.”

Kanbaru would likely have compared Hachikuji to Marlowe or some other old detective and praised her like crazy, but I could not. I considered doing so for an instant, but something inside me would not allow it.

“I was only listening in, but it seemed like her conversation had no real main point. Even at the end, I could not grasp what the conversational theme was. Did she run after you only to chat?”

“That’s the thing, Hachikuji. I really don’t know.”

“You don’t know? That opinion paints quite the watercolor painting.”

“Are my opinions in the art club?”

She must have meant it lacked vividness.

I decided to be honest with Hachikuji.

“She’s actually stalking me.”

“Stalking? You mean the thing girls wear on their lower body?”

“That would be a stocking.”

“Oh.”

“Does the word stalking not work for you? What I mean is, she’s a stalker.”

“Stalker? You mean the thing girls wear on their lower body?”

“Are you referring to a skirt? Why do you think I am so fascinated with the things girls wear on their lower body?”

While we were at it, I tried to think of a term Hachikuji could mistake for “spats”, but my vocabulary was too poor to come up with anything. I gave up and moved the conversation along.

“I don’t know why, but she’s been blatantly following me around for the past 3 days. It seems every time I turn around, she’s calling out to me. And it’s always her doing it. I have never once called out to her. And every time, it’s exactly as you said. The conversations have no main point. She always just chats with me and I honestly can’t tell what she wants.”

She must have had some reason.

But I could find no clue as to what that might be.

She was likely keeping it hidden from me.

The only place used by both third years and second years was the outdoor sports area, so we would almost never run across each other by chance. That meant Kanbaru had to be going out of her way to search me out during our short breaks between classes. I knew that much, but that was all I knew.

“Hmm. But isn’t there an obvious answer to this? Isn’t it possible that she simply has a crush on you, Araragi-san?”

“Hah?”

“If I recall, she mentioned something about liking you.”

“Come to think of it, she did. But I seriously doubt it. It was a figure of speech; she didn’t mean it like that. I’m not the protagonist of a galge, so I’m not going to just suddenly be popular one day.”

“That’s true. If you were a galge protagonist, that would make me one of the target girls and that simply is not happening.”

“.....”

Does this elementary school girl know what a galge is?

Not that I’ve ever actually played one.

“But if I was, I would definitely be one of the hardest characters.”

“No, I think you’d actually be pretty easy...”

If you could get past her shyness, everything else would fall into place little by little. If there were six heroines, she seemed like the type that would be completed 4th.

Well, given the issue of her age, she might indeed be one of the hardest ones.

“Kanbaru isn’t that kind of-...Wait, there was a rumor about her having intense romances. But there are almost literally zero things in common between us. Unlike them..Unlike Kanbaru and the like, I’m a complete nobody.”

Come to think of it, she already knew my name and what class I’m in when she first called out to me.

Why did she know that?

Did someone tell her?

“Did she see you take in an abandoned cat?”

“I’ve never taken one in.”

In fact, I had never even seen one.

Also, what kind of cat would just sit there in a cardboard box saying “please take me in”?

How long would you have to train it to do that?

“Then did she see you pick up some litter?”

“You just treated cats and litter as if they’re the same, didn’t you?”

“Now *that* was a figure of speech. Please don’t intentionally misrepresent my words. You truly are a sick person to enjoy putting words in the mouth of a helpless little girl.”

“You should apologize to cats. They can be pretty scary.”

“That wasn’t my point, Araragi-san. Apparently love at first sight really does exist. And apparently relationships between people are decided based on their first impression of each other. Couldn’t that explain why this girl is following you around?”

Hachikuji seemed to be enjoying herself and she could not stop laughing.

In that way, she really was an elementary schooler.

“That has to be it. The girl in me is telling me that is definitely it. What will you do, Araragi-san? It seems she is currently only testing things out, but she could confess her love to you in the near future. What will you do? What will you do?”

“Listen up. I’m not too fond of how some people insist on explaining everything away with romantic feelings. Y’know, that power of love you see in old foreign movies. If everything could be solved that way, life would be so much easier. It can’t be that. I find it much more likely that she simply has some secondary reason. Also,” I said. “I have already unlocked the route of the most difficult character of all.”

“I have the feeling something unpleasant was said about me,” said Senjougahara Hitagi suddenly.

It truly had been sudden and without context, so my pencil stopped moving across the notebook I was writing in.

However, it seemed she had been speaking to herself because Senjougahara then changed the subject.

“At any rate, teaching someone how to study is rather difficult,” she said.

In the end, Hachikuji had walked with me all the way back to my house while we talked about Kanbaru and other things. That was where we had parted ways. Hachikuji was always wandering around somewhere, so I was sure I would run across her again sooner or later. I put my backpack down, changed clothes, filled a travel bag with textbooks, notebooks, and reference books, switched over to my mountain bike, and headed for Senjougahara’s place. My sisters had already returned home, so I had expected to get thoroughly grilled on where I was going, but I lucked out and managed to escape unnoticed.

As I had mentioned to Hachikuji, Senjougahara’s place was a good ways away. I normally would not bike that great a distance, but taking the bus would end up increasing the amount I would have to walk, so I decided biking would be fastest. I had to make a judgment call because, even though it was my second time heading to her house, it was the first time heading there straight from my house.

The Tamikura Apartments, a two story wooden apartment building.

Room 201.

A small room and a small sink.

Two high school students of a standard build sat facing each other with a tea table between them and tools for studying spread out to the left and right. That was all it took to fill up the room. The Senjougahara family was just a father and daughter, Senjougahara was an only child, and her father would work late into the night, so we were of course alone.

Araragi Koyomi was alone with Senjougahara Hitagi.

Two healthy teenagers were alone in a small room.

A boy and a girl.

And they were officially dating.

They were boyfriend and girlfriend.

And yet...

“...Why am I studying?”

“Eh? Because you are an idiot, right?”

“You don’t have to put it like that!”

She was right, of course.

But I still wished *something* would happen.

We had started dating on that May 14th Mother’s Day on which I had met Hachikuji Mayoi, but nothing even slightly sexual had happened in the 2 weeks since.

.....

Wait, have we even gone on a date?

Come to think of it, we haven’t.

We met in the morning at school, we talked between classes, we ate lunch together, and we walked together after school until we had to part ways to head to our respective houses. Those with some knowledge of the world would probably think that sounded more like what friends did, not lovers.

It wasn’t that I greatly desired some kind of sexual situation to occur, but I still felt we could act a little more like lovers.

“I have never once had to work hard at the activities known as ‘studying’, so I have no idea what has you so troubled or what you are having difficulties with, Araragi-kun. I do not understand what you do not understand.”

“I see...”

She had a way of saying things that depressed me.

I had to wonder just how much of a gap there was between our academic abilities. It certainly felt like a canyon of unfathomable depth.

“One theory I had is that you are only pretending to not understand in order to receive special treatment.”

“That would be sacrificing a lot in an appeal for attention... But, Senjougahara, you weren’t this smart from the moment you were born, right? Surely you must have put a lot of hard work into keeping your grades so high in the class.”

“Do you think the people putting so much effort into this are aware of it?”

“...Is that so?”

“Oh, but make no mistake. I do feel sorry for people like you who do not merely receive nothing from their hard work but do not even know how to carry out that hard work.”

“Don’t feel sorry for me!”

“I despair for you.”

“Ghh! Is there some rule saying you have to change it to something worse if I comment on it!? Now I can’t even beg for mercy carelessly!”

What kind of game is this?

“While there is no specific plant known as a weed, there is a specific animal known as a vermin.”

“No, there is not!”

“While there is no specific plant known as a weed, there are specific people known as vermin.”

“If they’re known as that, someone has to be calling them that!”

“If I succeed in having you pass this exam, Araragi-kun, I feel that I will have taken a step forward as a human being. When I think about it that way, I can work up some motivation.”

“Don’t think of my grades as a test of yourself. Also, I think the area in which you need to take a step forward as a human being lies elsewhere.”

“Quiet. I strangled you to death.”

“In the past tense!? Am I already dead!?”

It may have been a mistake asking her to help me study. It may have been better to just ask Hanekawa.

However...

As Hachikuji had pointed out, something could indeed happen if I was alone with Senjougahara and I could not deny that my decision had involved an embarrassing bit of an ulterior motive to that end.

I glanced up from my notebook and at Senjougahara.

Her expression was as composed as ever.

It rarely ever changed.

Even now that we were dating, she did not show me any kind of special expression that she let no one else see. In that way, she really may not have been a tsundere.

Her attitude had not changed at all, either.

Hmm...

It's possible I was merely expecting too much as usual. I had some vague idea that becoming boyfriend and girlfriend would lead to having some sort of special conversations, but it turned out that change in relationship did not really give you anything more to talk about than before. The sweet conversations of lovers may have been nothing more than a foolish delusion.

“.....”

With everything Senjougahara had experienced and the situation she had been in, another problem was her sense of chastity and virtue. Not only that, but she was likely satisfied with the current state of the relationship.

She had said she did not want an assumed relationship.

Since she had said it, it must have been true.

But...

Even so...

I doubted Senjougahara herself felt nothing about the situation we were in. Also, my previous visit to the Tamikura Apartments had ended up being much more sexual than this one. Surely she was not so ignorant of the world to not think anything of inviting her boyfriend over while her dad was out of the house. When I thought about it that way, the clothes Senjougahara wore as she sat across the tea table from me did somehow look like she had put effort into choosing them. However, her skirt was oddly long for that. She was not wearing stockings so her legs were bare, but the long skirt kept most of those bare legs from view. It seemed she was cautious about the situation more than anything.

Sigh...

As the guy, am I supposed to be more assertive in my advances? But I've never gone out with a girl before, so I don't know how to do that.

“What's wrong, Araragi-kun? You've stopped writing.”

“Nothing. I was just musing over how high the difficulty level is.”

“Of a problem like that? We might be in trouble.”

Senjougahara merely looked dumbfounded and showed no sign of trying to understand what I was feeling. Hers were the eyes of someone used to looking down on others.

“I guess that's enough,” she said dejectedly.

“Eh? Wait a second. Why are you setting your mechanical pencil aside and sitting there so sluggishly? Senjouhara, don’t tell me giving up on me is one of the options you see for yourself!”

“It is there,” she said resolutely. “It is at 6:4...no, maybe 7:3.”

“Regardless which side is 7 and which side is 3, that’s quite a realistic ratio...”

I would have felt better had she said 9:1.

Really, though. Which side is the 7?

“I am rather conflicted. Not trying at all would preserve my pride better than if I tried and failed.”

“Please don’t abandon me.”

It was looking like going to Hanekawa for help was my only option.

But for some reason or another, I did not want to do that.

I simply could not stand being taught by that class rep that fearlessly viewed academics as something anyone could do if they tried.

“If you insist, I suppose I will not abandon you.”

“That would be a huge help.”

“Think nothing of it. I bar no one from coming to me and allow no one to escape.”

“That’s a frightening way of thinking!”

“Don’t worry. If we are going to do this, I will make sure to work you to death.”

“You don’t need to work me to death! Just giving it my all should be enough! How much are you planning to force me to do!?”

“But, Araragi-kun, you can do math, can’t you?”

“Eh? Well, yes.”

How does she know that?

Before I could speak my question, Senjouhara said, “I heard that from Hanekawa-san.”

True enough, Hanekawa would know my grades better than anyone.

“Wait. Hanekawa doesn’t seem like the type to tell people about others’ grades.”

“Oh, did my wording give the wrong impression? I meant that, while secretly listening in the other

day, I heard you and Hanekawa-san discussing that.”

“...You’re right. I did get the wrong impression.”

Instead of hearsay, it was eavesdropping.

“Is that so?” said Senjougahara as if she truly did not care.

She was quite the troublesome girl.

“I can manage math because it doesn’t require memorization. The formulas and equations are also great. They’re like your special attacks, y’know? Like the Specium Ray or the Kamehameha or something. I wish all the other subjects had special attacks like that.”

“If such things existed, no one would have any trouble. However, if we ignore the methods of studying for individual subjects and think only of how to study for an exam itself, there are certain surefire methods even if there are no special attacks.” Senjougahara picked up the mechanical pencil she had set down next to her. “The one I am about it bring up is a bit of a gamble and its possible payoff may sound tempting, but it must not become a habit. For that reason, I hesitate to recommend it, but we need a makeshift method and it seems to be our only remaining option. Essentially, we just have to ensure that you do not fail, Araragi-kun, so let us make the border be half the average...”

She quickly wrote two numbers in her notebook.

One was the expected average and the other was half that.

When it was put like that, it certainly seemed like an achievable score, but you had to think of it like a perfect score.

“In the subjects that rely more on memorization, the teachers have a few problems that they absolutely must put on the exam. It is important to aim for those. Rather than taking broad aim over everything, you need to focus your efforts over a smaller area. You do not want to end up fussing over problems you cannot solve to the point of overlooking problems you can solve. Araragi-kun, do you understand what I am saying?”

“...Yeah, I guess.”

Smart people definitely had a completely different way of thinking about exams. I had never once thought about what the teachers would be thinking as they made the exam. Well, I might have in middle school when I was still getting good grades, but that was so long ago I wasn’t quite sure.

I did not miss my middle school years.

“Okay, let us begin with an easy subject like world history.”

“World history is easy...?”

“It is. You just have to memorize all of the important terms.”

“.....”

“As I said, I am not expecting that much from you this time, Araragi-kun. If you let me help you prepare, you should be able to pass this exam, so what do you think about your future?”

“My future?”

“What will you do after high school?” said Senjouhara as she pointed her mechanical pencil toward me.

“I don’t know. That’s kind of a sudden question.”

“You are a third year high school student at the end of May. Surely you have thought of something. Before, you said you would be satisfied as long as you graduated. Does that mean you intend to start working when you graduate? Do you have a specific plan? Do you have connections at a place of employment?”

“Umm...”

“Or do you intend to start off as a freeter? Or maybe a NEET? I do not like those terms because they seem to oversimplify the problem, but I of course wish to give priority to your intentions and views, Araragi-kun. Oh, I suppose there is also the option of going to a technical school.”

“Are you my mother...?”

She was obsessing over a bunch of trivial things.

There was no way I could give an answer while she showered me with so many questions. And she had to know that my hands were already more than full with the upcoming exam.

“Your mother? Don’t be ridiculous. I am your girlfriend.”

“.....”

That blunt manner of speech.

In a way, it was more of a special attack than her verbal abuse.

At least it was when used on me.

“I suppose you’re right. I do need to decide on my plans before long. By the way, what are you going to do, Senjouhara?”

“I can probably get a recommendation.”

“...Is that so?”

“Was the term ‘probably’ too modest?”

“For you it was.”

“Anyway, I will be going on to college.”

“College, hm?”

She said it like it was obvious.

But then, it probably was for her.

I would likely never know, but I had to wonder what it felt like to be smart.

“Due to tuition issues, the paths open to me are limited. It would be a bit self-insulting to say ‘luckily’, but the fact remains that there is nothing specific I wish to do, so I can match where I go to what works.”

“I’m sure you won’t change no matter where you go.”

“True,” said Senjouhara. “But if possible, I would like to head down the same path as you, Araragi-kun.”

“Yeah, but that...”

I was of course glad to hear that, but it was more or less physically impossible.

“Yes,” agreed Senjouhara. “Ignorance may be a crime, but being stupid is not. Instead, being stupid is a punishment. If you had been as virtuous as me in your past life, this would not be happening to you, Araragi-kun. I feel sorry for you. I am vividly feeling just how the ant must have felt as it watched the grasshopper freezing in the cold of winter. You are quite something to make me feel like an insect.”

“.....”

Have patience.

Objecting now will only open the wound further.

“Things would be so much easier if you would only die. The grasshopper’s corpse would provide the ant with so much valuable nutrition.”

“The next time I see you will be in court!”

My patience did not hold out.

I was not a very patient person.

“But, Senjougahara, even if we do different things after graduation, we won’t necessarily be walking down separate paths, right?”

“Yes, that’s true. But what if I have a change of heart while living my college days of group dating?”

“What, you’re planning to really live up the campus life!?”

“What will we do? Will we live together after graduating?” she said suddenly. “If we did that, our time together would actually increase even if we were doing separate things.”

“That’s...not too bad, I guess.”

“It’s not too bad? What does that mean?”

“...I want to. Please let me.”

“Oh, I see,” she said and naturally lowered her eyes to the textbook.

She had said it as if it were nothing and with such timing that it could have been taken as a joke, but even someone as unperceptive as me had figured out that she was not the type to joke at a time like that.

That was who Senjougahara Hitagi was.

She had really planned everything out.

Or perhaps it would be best to take it as her having seriously thought about me. Normally, a high school couple did not give that much thought to the future of their relationship.

What does it actually mean to be going out?

It’s just a verbal promise. There’s no guarantee.

I sighed.

I had never gone out with a girl before. Not only did I not know how to take the initiative, but I had no idea how I was supposed to react to that situation.

In fact, I couldn’t even take a guess.

If only I had played some galges.

That would have at least given me something to reference.

But unlike in a game, the routes had no end in real life.

“You sure are sighing a lot, Araragi-kun. Did you know that every time you sigh, you are letting a piece of happiness escape?”

“Then I must have already let thousands of pieces of happiness escape...”

“I have no interest in how much happiness you have let escape, but I would rather you did not sigh in front of me. It makes me sick.”

“You say some horrible things.”

“And by sick, I mean lovesick.”

“...Hm, now that’s a difficult one to respond to.”

She seemed slightly happy.

She must have set that up as a trap.

“By the way, Araragi-kun,” said Senjougahara. “Did you know that I have never broken up with a guy?”

“.....”

Now that was an example of how to soften what you were saying.

At first glance, it sounded like she was a very popular girl, but she was actually announcing that she had zero experience with guys.

“So,” she continued. “I have no intention of breaking up with you.”

Her composed expression did not change. Not a single eyebrow moved. It made you think she had no feelings whatsoever. However, she had to have felt something about it.

It had lasted 2 years.

Ever since that time between middle school and high school that was not quite spring break during which she had been neither a middle schooler nor a high schooler, Senjougahara Hitagi had been unable to make any contact with other people. It wasn’t surprising if she had forgotten how to make contact with others in that time. If she had become more negative than most and more reserved than necessary, that was to be expected. It was like dealing with an extremely cautious stray cat. Well, if anyone was a cat, it was Hanekawa.

Neither of us knew how to take the initiative.

“...Hey, Senjougahara.”

“What?”

“Do you still carry that stapler and other stuff with you?”

“Come to think of it, I haven’t of late.”

“I see.”

“How careless of me.”

“Careless, you say?”

But that was still a step in the right direction.

You couldn’t exactly call her a tsundere for such a small change, but if that was her personality...

Hm?

Speaking of Senjougahara from two years ago...

“You were the ace of the track team in middle school, right?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to go back to that?”

“No. I have no reason to,” she responded quick enough to be called instantaneous. “I have no intention to returning to what I was back then.”

“Hmm...”

From what I had heard, in middle school Senjougahara had been the ace of the track team as well as sociable, kind to everyone, hard working, and not at all pretentious. She had been an active student that had given everything her all. None of that was anything more than rumors, but as rumors go, they were fairly reliable.

Just before high school, that had changed.

That change had lasted for two years.

And then what had changed was returned to normal.

Even if she herself had no intention of going back to how things were, the change had been corrected.

“I see no need or necessity to return and, more importantly, returning now would do no good. I have gained much more I must bear. Not to mention that we are already in our third year. Why do you ask, Araragi-kun?”

“Oh, I was just curious what you were like back when you played sports. ...Well, with such a long time of not playing, it really probably isn’t worth going back.”

Just as the term “cat” made me think of Hanekawa Tsubasa, the term “sports” made me think of Kanbaru Suruga, so that underclassmen had appeared in my mind’s eye as I asked.

She really was trying to stay positive, but could she truly be called positive if she refused to face her past?

Senjougahara was actually...

“Don’t worry. Even if I do not play sports, I intend to maintain this figure.”

“...That wasn’t why I asked.”

“But, Araragi-kun, you were drawn to me by this highly elastic and selfish body that has never broken up with a guy, weren’t you?”

“Don’t make it sound like I’m just after your body!”

Also...selfish body?

Surely you can come up with a better way to put that.

“I see. So you are not after my body,” said Senjougahara as if she were playing dumb. “Then you can wait a while for that part, can’t you?”

Is that what she wanted to say?

If so, she had taken a horribly roundabout and indirect way of saying it. That was quite like her.

A sense of chastity.

I doubted that was all there was to it, but...

“Oh, right. Araragi-kun, you are not the kind of shameless person that says narrow-minded things like ‘I ate my money’s worth’ or ‘it would be a waste if I did not eat more’ while at a buffet despite the fact that you pay the same amount no matter how much you order, are you?”

“.....”

I had no idea what kind of implication she was trying to get across, but I knew her intent had to be to put some kind of restraint on me.

She was reserved in her relationships.

However, she took her relationship with me very seriously.

In that case, I was willing to go along with it.

I still had no idea what it meant to be going out, but once you were, you had to stick with them on

everything.

“...Oh, right.”

I suddenly had a thought. I decided to ask Senjouhara about Kanbaru Suruga. The reason I had not yet mentioned that issue to her was not that I did not want to worry Senjouhara. Instead, it had been because I did not consider it worth mentioning and did not want to annoy her. However, in the off chance that Kanbaru Suruga’s driving force was exactly as that elementary school girl had interpreted it, I felt it would be unfair not to tell my (supposed) girlfriend.

Kanbaru had just appeared in my mind’s eye and there was one other thing that bothered me about it.

“Hey, Senjouhara.”

“What?”

“Do you know Kanbaru Suruga?”

“.....”

In response, I only received silence.

Or rather, I received nothing.

Speaking of unfair, the way I had asked that had been quite unfair. After all, Kanbaru Suruga was a star known throughout the school, so everyone would know who she was. I was unsure if it had happened yet, but rumors of Kanbaru stalking me would be circulating the school by the start of the next week at the very latest. That was not really a problem because I could just treat them as false. At any rate, that was why my question naturally held a different meaning. Instead of giving clarification, I endured the silence.

“Hmm,” said Senjouhara. “Kanbaru Suruga. Now that name takes me back.”

“...I see.”

As I had thought, they were old friends.

That was why Kanbaru had first thought of Senjouhara rather than the top of the year Hanekawa when I mentioned the study group. Not to mention the slight nuances of meaning I could occasionally glimpse in Kanbaru’s words. The reason I had never thought of the possibility Hachikuji had mentioned was that the hints of a different possibility had been rather blatant. Namely, the possibility that Kanbaru was after someone other than me.

“Is that why you asked about when I was in middle school? She was my underclassman back then.”

“She still is. You go to the same school. Oh, wait. Do you mean that Kanbaru was on the track team in middle school?”

“No, she has been in the basketball team ever since middle school. ...Kanbaru? That certainly is a familiar way of referring to her.”

In an instant, the look in Senjougahara’s eyes turned to something threatening. Those eyes that normally held no emotion suddenly emitted a dangerous light. Before I could give any words of explanation, the top of the mechanical pencil in her right hand moved accurately toward my left eye with tremendous speed. Immediately, I reflexively tried to avoid it, but at the same time as she had moved her right hand, she had brought one knee up onto the tea table, scattering the notebooks spread out atop it in the process, and grabbed the back of my head with her left hand to prevent me from moving.

The end of the mechanical pencil stopped not just barely away from my eyeball, but so ridiculously close that I could not even blink. She pulled it off so well that the hand on the back of my head seemed as much to ensure the steadiness of her own hand as to ensure I did not make any unnecessary movements.

...S-Senjougahara Hitagi.

Even without the stapler, you haven’t changed at all!

“What about that girl, Araragi-kun?”

“.....!”

Wait, wait!

Since when did she get this jealous!?

This level of jealousy just sounds like a joke! Also, I didn’t refer to her that familiarly, did I? What’s wrong with referring to an underclassman with no honorific? If merely getting to know another girl without her knowledge gets this kind of treatment, what would she do to me if I actually cheated on her?

While what I was currently experiencing was bad, it was at least a relief to learn about it early like that. I was truly glad that I learned of that aspect of Senjougahara while I actually had a legitimate excuse.

“Araragi-kun, your wounds heal very quickly, do they not? So what happens if an entire eyeball is destroyed?”

“Stop, stop! An eyeball would be very bad! I’ve done nothing wrong, I don’t feel familiar with her at all, and there’s no one for me but you!”

“Is that so? That is a relief.”

She gently pulled back the mechanical pencil. After spinning it twice in her hand, she placed it on the tea table and put the notebooks and textbooks back in order. I watched her while trying to control my

racing heart.

“I may have gotten a bit carried away. Did I frighten you, Araragi-kun?”

“...One day, you’re definitely going to kill someone.”

“When that happens, I will make sure it is you. I want my first to be you. I will choose no one but you. I promise.”

“Don’t say something so scary like it’s a good thing! I may love you, but I’m not willing to let you kill me!”

“Being killed by one who loves you enough to kill you sounds like the best possible death to me.”

“I don’t want that kind of twisted love!”

“You don’t? Too bad. I’m shocked. I thought you of all people...”

“Would be fine with you killing me?”

“...Hm? Hm, yeah, I suppose.”

“What kind of vague response is that!?”

“Oh...yeah...I guess that’s a bad thing.”

“You’re still being vague!?”

“What’s wrong with it? If I kill you, that means I will be the closest person to you when you draw your last breath. Isn’t it romantic?”

“No. I’d rather be killed by anyone else. I have a feeling no matter how someone else would kill me it would still be better than having you kill me.”

“I can’t have that. If anyone else kills you, Araragi-kun, I will kill that murderer. I keep my promises.”

“.....”

Her love was already quite twisted.

It did give me a good sense of how much she loved me though...

“Anyway, about Kanbaru.”

With the much more dangerous topic over, Senjouhara naturally returned to the previous subject.

“We may have been on different teams, but as the aces of our respective teams, we still spent a lot of

time together despite being in different years. Also...”

“Also?”

“Well, after all this time it is hardly worth mentioning, but even outside of sports, I put her through a lot. Or rather, had her help me out a lot. But, Araragi-kun,” she said, turning her attention back toward me. “First, I would like to know why you brought her up here. If you have done nothing wrong, then surely you can give a proper explanation.”

“S-sure.”

“Of course, even if you have done something wrong, I will require a proper explanation.”

“.....”

As she might have actually killed me had I tried to hide anything, I told Senjougahara all about how Kanbaru Suruga had been stalking me over the past three days. I told her I would hear those rhythmic footsteps from behind, have an utterly pointless conversation, and then Kanbaru would leave without showing any kind of purpose in approaching me. I told her that Kanbaru surely had some kind of objective, but that I had no idea what it could be.

As I gave my explanation, I had a thought.

Kanbaru must have purposefully approached me while Senjougahara was not there. When I had been with Hachikuji was an exception. Normally, she only approached when I was alone. In other words, it was no coincidence that Senjougahara was unaware of Kanbaru’s stalking.

And I had another thought.

Senjougahara had said I referred to Kanbaru familiarly, but the way she had spoken about their time in middle school had seemed much more so. It may have been nothing, though.

Just as she did not show any emotion on her face, Senjougahara showed no emotion in her voice. Whatever she said, she said with a steady, level voice. When I thought about how much pure will that would take, a chill ran down my back.

“I see,” said Senjougahara after hearing my general explanation. As usual, her expression did not change and her voice was flat. “Araragi-kun.”

“What?”

“What has a flood above and a fire below?”

“...?”

Why the riddle all of a sudden?

I had no idea why Senjougahara had suddenly become a riddle-telling character, but I answered anyway. Luckily, that was a riddle I knew the answer to.

“A bath heater, right?”

“No, incorrect,” said Senjougahara in the same flat voice. “The answer is Kanbaru Suruga’s house.”

“What are you planning to do to the star of the school’s house!?”

You scare me!

I can see the anger in your eyes!

“Well, enough joking around.”

“You shouldn’t joke about that kind of thing. I could actually see you doing something like that.”

“You could? Well, I will do as you say and make sure to only speak my jokes.”

“That would be the normal way of doing it...”

“Kanbaru learned of my secret a year before you did, Araragi-kun,” said Senjougahara. She said it normally as if it really did not matter, but at the same time sounded somehow gloomy. “When I entered the second year was when Kanbaru first entered Naoetsu High School. Given the location of the school, I had expected some of the new underclassmen to know me, and I had put together my own means of dealing with that. However, I let my guard down a bit with Kanbaru.”

“Hmm.”

Senjougahara Hitagi.

Her secret.

I had learned of that secret when she had slipped on the stairs and I had caught her. It had been a complete coincidence. But that also meant that it was a secret that could be revealed due to a small coincidence like that. Senjougahara had previously told me that I was not the first to learn of her secret. Kanbaru must have been one of those.

Given Kanbaru’s personality...

“She...Kanbaru tried to help you, didn’t she?”

“Yes, she did. I refused of course,” said Senjougahara coolly. It was as if she thought that was the obvious syntax, as if she thought that was the proper way to speak Japanese. “I used a similar method as when I dealt with you, Araragi-kun. You stuck with me regardless, but she never returned. I suppose that shows the limits of the relationship we had.”

“...She didn’t return.”

That had happened a year before.

Senjougahara had likely very thoroughly refused her. As Kanbaru knew of Senjougahara’s past self, of her time in middle school as the ace of the track team, Senjougahara had certainly rejected her with a severity that was similar and yet dissimilar to my case. Otherwise, someone like Kanbaru would never have backed off so easily. On May 8th, when I had learned of her secret, Senjougahara had said that the only person in the school that currently knew of her secret was Harukami-sensei from the school infirmary.

That *currently* knew.

In other words, Kanbaru Suruga had in the past learned of Senjougahara’s secret and become one of the poor victims...no, sacrifices that were forcibly made to forget by Senjougahara. But had Kanbaru really forgotten about Senjougahara?

“...She was your friend, right?”

“In middle school, yes. No longer, though. We are complete strangers.”

“But you aren’t in the same situation you were in a year ago. Your secret has been-...”

“Didn’t I tell you, Araragi-kun?” she said, cutting me off. “I have no intention of returning to what I was back then.”

“.....”

“This is the way of life I have chosen.”

“I see...”

If that was the way of life she had chosen for herself, it was not my place to interject...That was my opinion in theory. Also, I knew Senjougahara was not selfish enough to say she wanted to make up with the person she had so harshly rejected now that the issue had been resolved.

“Okay, I understand your relationship with Kanbaru now, but that doesn’t really explain why she’s following me around.”

“She has likely learned that you and I are dating, Araragi-kun. We started dating two weeks ago and she started stalking you three days ago, so the timing fits perfectly.”

“What? So she wants to know what kind of guy your boyfriend is and is investigating me?”

“More or less. What a troublesome girl. I have no real explanation, but it seems it is my responsibility for not settling things with her once and for all.”

“Settling things...?”

I did not like the way she said that.

It was decidedly *unsettling*.

“Do not worry. I will take responsibility and...”

“You don’t have to! You don’t have to! I have no idea what you’ll do! I can take care of something like this on my own!”

“No need to hold back. Don’t be so wishy-washy.”

“I’d rather be wishy-washy than washing blood out of my clothes...”

Hmm...

One thing still doesn’t add up.

“You harshly rejected Kanbaru in her first year, right? And she never returned, right? Why would she be so interested in your boyfriend after all this time?”

“If this were a standard case of hearing an old friend had a boyfriend, you would be right. However, this case is different, Araragi-kun. You did what Kanbaru could not, so this is not all that surprising. Kanbaru views what you did as what she had been unable to do.”

“Oh...So that’s it.”

When she had learned of Senjougahara Hitagi’s secret, she had been rejected. She had been harshly and mercilessly rejected. As I was her boyfriend, it was only natural that Kanbaru would assume I too knew of Senjougahara’s secret. As she would see me as one who was able to be with Senjougahara *while knowing her secret*, Kanbaru would definitely be interested.

However, I doubted Kanbaru had realized that the secret itself had been resolved. If she had, she would likely have contacted Senjougahara directly rather than coming to me.

“It may not be right for me to say so, but Kanbaru looked up to me,” said Senjougahara as she looked to the side. “I realized I was in that position and I played that character for her because I wanted to, so it really could not be helped. That is how I view it anyway. That is why I made sure to warn her against causing any trouble in the future when I rejected her, but it seems she did not forget me after all.”

“Don’t make her sound like a nuisance. She isn’t doing any of this out of ill will. Not to mention that being forgotten by someone is fairly depre-...”

“She is a nuisance,” said Senjougahara decisively. She had not hesitated at all. “It has nothing to do with whether it is being done out of ill will or not.”

“Don’t say it like that. If Kanbaru looked up to you and if she is still worried about you...well, it might be a bit weird to make up after that, but it’s still a possibility, right?”

“No, it is not. It all happened a year ago, we were only friends in middle school, and it would indeed be weird for us to make up. Didn’t I tell you I have no intention of returning to what I was back then? Or are you suggesting I go to her and apologize for making her wait for so long? Nothing could be more foolish.”

To show that she was done with the subject, Senjouhara then changed the subject as if it had suddenly entered her head. Her skill in that area was as brilliant as always.

“Oh, right. By the way, Araragi-kun, do you plan to see Oshino-san anytime soon?”

“Oshino? Hm, I guess so...”

While I had no reason to see Oshino, I did have to stop by that old cram school before long to have Shinobu suck my blood. It was Friday, so I decided to make some time over the weekend.

“I see. Then...”

Senjouhara silently stood up, grabbed an envelope from the dresser, and returned. She held the envelope out toward me. It had a postal mark on it.

“Could you give this to Oshino-san?”

“What is-...Ohh.”

I realized the answer before finishing my question.

Oshino Meme.

It was the fee for the job that Hawaiian-shirt-wearing man had done.

Compensation had been required for removing the calamity that had fallen upon Senjouhara and been her secret for so long.

If I recall, it was 100,000 yen.

I checked the contents and it indeed contained 10 ten thousand yen bills. The ten crisp bills had likely been newly withdrawn from the bank.

“Hehh... You got this faster than I expected. Especially since you said it was going to take some time given your situation. I thought you weren’t working?”

“I did work,” said Senjouhara nonchalantly. “I helped out with my dad’s work just a bit. More accurately, I made him let me help, but this is the money I made there.”

“Hmm.”

Senjouhara’s father worked for a foreign investment company, but that was probably still the simplest option. With her personality, Senjouhara could not work a normal part-time job very easily. Not to mention that our school prohibited them.

“Personally, I feel it was cheating to get help from my father, so I did not like doing this, but I wanted to pay him back as soon as I could. I was raised in a family with lots of debt, if you recall. There was a bit extra, so you can use that to buy yourself lunch at school, Araragi-kun. Our school’s food is both high quality and reasonably priced, so you can order anything you want.”

“...Thanks.”

School lunch, hm?

A weekday lunch at school.

She really has no intention of ever going out on a date, does she?

“But wouldn’t it be better if you went by and gave it to Oshino yourself?”

“No. I do not like Oshino-san.”

“I see...”

Is that really something to say about the man that saved you?

It was not that she felt no gratitude toward Oshino, and that really showed her true worth.

Not that I was all that fond of Oshino either.

“If possible, I would rather never see him again. I never again want to deal with someone who can see right through people like him.”

“Yeah, the two of you aren’t all that compatible. His frivolous, mocking manner just doesn’t fit your personality.”

As I spoke, I put the envelope next to the cushion I was sitting on. I tapped the top of the envelope and nodded at Senjouhara.

“I get it, I get it. I won’t say anything more. I’ll just take it for you. I’ll take responsibility and give it to Oshino when I next see him.”

“Thank you very much.”

“No problem.”

I then had a thought.

Compatibility.

Manner.

Personality.

Kanbaru Suruga, that underclassman with the hard to explain revolutionary new character, was perhaps something like the opposite of Senjouhara's character. If you took her compatibility, manner, personality, and everything else...

In middle school, Senjouhara had been the ace of the track team.

Not only that, people had looked up to her. Surely, Kanbaru had not been the only one looking at her with respect in their eyes. She had played the part of one in that position. She had played the part that was the complete opposite of her current verbal abuse-spewing self.

Verbal abuse and sweet words.

Insults and praise.

Opposites.

Two sides of the same coin.

In other words...

“Okay, Araragi-kun,” said Senjouhara with those emotionless eyes. “Let us continue studying. Do you know Thomas Edison's famous words? Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety nine percent perspiration. An excellent adage befitting of a genius. But I am sure Edison felt that one percent was the most important part. After all, they say the difference between the DNA of humans and monkeys is about that much.”

For Senjouhara, it was two years. For me, it was two weeks.

For Hanekawa, it was during Golden Week.

For Hachikuji...well, I don't know for sure about her.

If you're wondering what I'm talking about, it's the length of time we spent in contact with a monster. The length of time we had *a strange experience*. The length of time we had a horrible experience that was most certainly not normal.

Take me, Araragi Koyomi, for example.

It embarrasses me enough to want to crawl into a hole and hide, but I was attacked by an old type of vampire during this civilized society of the 21st century. I felt blood-chilling fear and panic, and the traditional and legendary vampire sucked out all the blood of my body.

I was sucked dry.

And I became a vampire.

I feared the sun, I hated crosses, I avoided garlic, and I disliked holy water. In exchange, I received physical strength tens, hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands of times greater than a normal human. And in exchange for that, I felt an absolute hunger for human blood. I became one of those night walkers seen often in manga, anime, and movies. I really felt such a realistic vampire was unfair. The popular vampires these days walk around fine during the day, wear crosses as accessories, eat gyoza, and drink holy water. Only the physical abilities remain.

Even so, the need to suck human blood remains for vampires even in modern popular culture.

A blood-sucking demon. A vampire.

In the end, I had been saved from that hell by a middle aged man passing by. He was not a vampire hunter, he was not part of some Christian special forces, and he was not a vampire that killed his own kind. Oshino Meme was merely a flippant Hawaiian shirt-wearing man who had been passing by. However, that did not change the fact that those two weeks had in fact happened.

A demon.

A cat.

A crab.

A snail.

There was one thing different between myself and the other three that I had to keep in mind. The difference was greatest when it came to Senjougahara Hitagi.

This was not the difference in the length of time.

It was how much we had lost.

She had said she did not intend to go back to how she was.

But that was not absolutely necessary. Wasn't it just that Senjougahara did not want to go back?

After all, Senjougahara had cut off any and all socializing with others for two years. She had not made contact with anyone in the class for those two years. Even now that those two years were over, she had not changed.

Other than her dealings with me, nothing had changed.

Araragi Koyomi had merely become a special exception for Senjougahara, but everything else had stayed the same.

No difference could be seen between before and after.

She merely no longer had to go to the school infirmary.

She merely could join in during PE.

She still quietly read in the corner of the classroom. It was as if reading in the classroom was her way of constructing a solid wall between her and her classmates.

She really had only started to talk with me.

She only ate lunch with me.

Her position in the classroom was still that of the quiet, sickly A-student. The rest of the class only saw it as her mood and illness improving slightly.

Hanekawa, the class rep, had innocently rejoiced and said it was a wonderful improvement, but I could not view that scene and feeling positively.

She had not lost all that.

She may have cast it aside herself.

But the result was the same.

I don't mean to sound like I knew what I was talking about. I had no idea what our relationship would

be like from then on, and I did not think it was a problem I should interfere with.

I did not feel that interfering or meddling was the right thing to do.

Even so, I couldn't help but have a certain thought.

What if Senjouhara-...?

She currently was not carrying around a stapler. That was a step forward and a change, so couldn't she *continue to* head down that path?

What if she opened up to others and not just me?

“Hello?”

“Hello, sorry about the wait. This is Hanekawa.”

“.....”

While that was the proper way to answer a telephone, was it really right to say that with a cell phone?

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

The class rep and a high end student.

She seemed to have been born to be a class rep.

I had originally joked about her being the class rep among class reps chosen by god, but in the two months I had worked with her as the vice class rep, I had learned that she matched that so well it was no longer funny. It was greatly important for humans to acquire knowledge, but that was one thing I wish I had not learned.

“What is it? It is rather unusual for you to call me, Araragi-kun.”

“Oh, it's nothing really. I just wanted to ask you something.”

“You want to ask me something? That's fine. Oh, is it about what our class is doing for the cultural festival? Really, it would be best not to think too much about the cultural festival until the exam is over. You have your hands full with that, right, Araragi-kun? I will of course take care of all the minor tasks for the time being. Or are you saying we should change what we are doing? We decided it by survey, so that would be difficult. Oh, or is there some kind of problem meaning we have to change it? If so, we need to deal with that as quickly as possible.”

“Could you not get so off topic?”

She really was the type to move the conversation off somewhere on her own.

Not only did she jump to the wrong conclusions a lot, but she talked a lot and quickly.

It was hard to get a word in edgewise.

It was 8 PM.

On the way back from Senjougahara's home in the Tamikura Apartments, I was walking along an asphalt road while pushing my bike rather than sitting in the seat. This was not because Hachikuji was next to me or because Kanbaru was running toward me. I had simply wanted to think.

In the end, we had studied until 8PM.

It was dinner time, so I had gotten my hopes up that Senjougahara would cook some food for me, but she showed no sign of doing so. I had finally run out of patience and had complained about my empty stomach.

"I see. Then we can end this here. I am sure you remember, but there are very few streetlights in this area. Be careful on your way home. See you later, alligator."

She had readily driven me out. As her father often worked late into the night, Senjougahara Hitagi essentially lived alone, so she had to have been able to cook.

Her difficulty level just kept getting higher and higher.

But then, I did not get hungry much, so my complaint of hunger had been mostly a lie.

I said I had been thinking, but I was the person Senjougahara had given up on trying to teach to the level of getting an average grade. For me, thinking did not produce all that much. It was mostly just for my own satisfaction. However, there were some things it was okay to have end at the level of self-satisfaction and some things that were not. This was the latter.

And so I called Hanekawa's cell phone while walking along and pushing my bike with my right hand. It was half past eight at night, so I was unsure whether that was an appropriate time to call a girl I did not have all that close a relationship with. However, from Hanekawa's reaction, it must have been in the acceptable range. Hanekawa was the personification of diligence and was stricter about morals than most, so she would have told me if I should not have been doing what I was doing.

"Um, this might end up being a long conversation. Do you have time, Hanekawa?"

"Hm? Yes. I was just doing a bit of light studying."

"....."

She truly must have been the class rep among class reps chosen by god to give that answer so readily and without sounding displeased by it.

What qualifies as "light" studying?

“Well, I’ll try to keep it as short as possible. Hanekawa, you went to the same middle school as Senjougahara, right? What was it...? Oh, right. Public Seifuu Middle School.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Then do you know Kanbaru Suruga who is one year below us?”

“Of course I do. In fact, is there anyone who does not know who she is? Even you do, right, Araragi-kun? She is the captain of the basketball team and seen as a star throughout the school. Even I have gone to some of her games with friends to cheer her on.”

“Well, I’m not really interested in the present. I want to know about when Kanbaru was in middle school.”

“Hmm? You do? Why?”

“I just do.”

“Hmm. Well, she was not all that different in middle school from now. She was the ace of the basketball team. From the latter half of the second year on, she was the captain just like now. What about it?”

“Oh, um...”

I could not tell her.

I could not say it.

She would not believe me.

Who would believe that the star of the school was all but stalking me of all people?

There was also the issue of how much of the situation it was okay for me to tell her. But, well, it was Hanekawa, so I decided I could tell her a certain amount. Of course, I would be indirect about the parts I should keep hidden.

“I’ve heard Kanbaru and Senjougahara got along well in middle school. Is that true?”

“Hmm? I believe I told you this before, but even though I was in the same middle school, I never actually had any physical contact with Senjougahara-san. She was popular, so someone more plain like me had just heard about her.”

“That modesty of yours always moves me, but could we do without it for once?”

“The Valhalla Combo.”

“Hah?”

“I just remembered. They were called the Valhalla Combo. Senjougahara-san of the track team and Kanbaru-san of the basketball team were the Valhalla Combo.”

“The Valhalla Combo? What does Valhalla mean? The term sounds sort of familiar. And why were they called that?”

“The ‘baru’ of Kanbaru and the ‘hara’ of Senjougahara were put together to get ‘baruhara’ or Valhalla. Valhalla is the heavenly temple Odin lives in in Norse mythology. The spirits of warriors that died in battle are invited in, so it is known as the holy ground of the god of war.”

“Oh, so it also takes the ‘god’ from Kanbaru and the ‘battlefield’ from Senjougahara.”[\[18\]](#)

“And that was the Valhalla Combo.”

“I see...”

It fit too perfectly.

Some people did come up with clever names even if it was just for a nickname, but the difficult level for this one was so high and it had such a lovely ring to it that most people would simply be impressed upon hearing it. This left me at a loss as to what to say, but I suppose that’s just the cruel way you end up looking at it when you’re in charge of the witty retorts.

“Well, since they were a combo, I suppose they at least got along to a certain extent. Senjougahara-san was on the team right up to the point she graduated, so at the very least they had an association through both being on sports teams.”

“You know everything, don’t you?”

“I do not know everything. I only know what I know.”

That was our usual exchange.

At any rate, I felt like I was now better able to read between the lines of what was going on.

But what was I to do now that I had read between the lines?

What was I going to do about the lines themselves?

“This may be repeating a question I asked you before, but Senjougahara was a completely different person during middle school, right?”

“Yes, she was. Still, even she has been changing a bit lately. She is still very different from back then, though.”

“I see...”

She was changing.

She was changing, but only in things related to me.

And that was why she was different from the past.

“Was she popular with her underclassmen?”

“Yes. She was popular with the boys and the girls both. Also, it apparently was not limited to the underclassmen. When she had upperclassmen, those upperclassman were quite affectionate toward her, and she was of course well-liked by her classmates.”

“So she was popular with everyone be they young or old, man or woman, hm?”

“This is only a difference of upperclassmen and underclassman, so I do not think it is a matter of ‘young or old’. Even so, if I had to choose, I would say she was most popular with the underclassman girls. That is what you wanted to know, isn’t it, Araragi-kun?”

“...I’m glad you’re so perceptive.”

The problem was she could be *too* perceptive.

It wasn’t as bad as with Oshino, but it felt like she saw straight through you.

“But Araragi-kun, it is the current Senjougahara-san that you love, not the old one, right?”

“.....”

You’re just like that fifth grader.

Incidentally, despite neither of us having ever told anyone, everyone knew that Senjougahara and I were dating. Senjougahara held the position of the docile A-student and she intended to remain in that position, so she did not have any classmates to whom she would tell something like that. The same could be said for me but for different reasons. People had no reason to openly mock the idea, so it wasn’t something that spread like wildfire, but at some point it had become something everyone was assumed to know.

Rumors could be frightening things.

It seemed to have taken some time for it to breach the wall between the third year and the second year where it reached Kanbaru. However, given that Senjougahara was well-known and that Kanbaru had reason to take extra interest when it came to Senjougahara, it seemed like it should have happened even quicker than that, but I guess that is just how things are when it has to go between classes.

“You may be sick of hearing me say this, but make sure to keep a proper and pure attitude toward your relationship, Araragi-kun. Do not do anything that would even begin rumors that something immoral was going on. Well, Senjougahara-san seems a proper girl, so I doubt this will become

anything untoward.”

“Oh...A proper girl, hm?”

Come to think of it, Hanekawa still doesn't know about Senjougahara's true character...

Our other classmates were one thing, but Senjougahara was quite something to delude even Class Rep Hanekawa of the Strangely-Shaped Wings who had known we were dating before we even started dating. In that way, Senjougahara had indeed shown me a side of her she had shown to no one else, but that did not make me all that happy. When I said I wanted to see a side of her that was special or exclusive, I was referring to something else.

But really, that sort of summed up the state of our relationship. She would not even cook for me, so it certainly seemed unlikely it would develop into anything untoward.

.....

Yes.

Kanbaru had been rejected, so she knew of Senjougahara's true character regardless of what may have happened in middle school. And since she had called out to me while knowing that, Kanbaru must have...

“Senjougahara-san is difficult,” said Hanekawa suddenly.

I recalled that Hanekawa had said something similar before. Of course, this was Hanekawa speaking, so she was not talking about the difficulty of completing Senjougahara Hitagi's route.

“I do not intend to claim I really know what I am talking about, but Senjougahara-san has created an impregnable field around herself.”

“.....”

“Araragi-kun, you have one too. Everyone has a field around themselves in the form of privacy. The main difference is how strong this field is. You and Senjougahara-san have built that field into thick castle walls to hide behind. Most of the people who do that find social interaction itself to be irritating. Can you think of anything like that?”

“For me? Or for Senjougahara?”

“For both of you.”

“Well, I can certainly think of something.”

It was definitely true.

But in that case...

“But Araragi-kun, not liking social interaction and not liking people are not the same thing.”

“What? Aren’t they, though?”

“ ‘In this world of ours / people’s comings and goings / can be quite tiresome’, ” said Hanekawa in a calm and composed voice. “ ‘But I happen to feel that / you are the one exception’ ...No matter how bad at Japanese you are, surely you can understand what that means. Do you understand what I am trying to say now?”

“...Yes.”

I had no choice but to respond that way.

I resented being treated like a child, though.

However, I could not think of anything to do but to thank her.

“Thanks. Sorry about taking up all your time for these nonsensical questions.”

“Oh, they are not nonsensical. Wanting to know about your precious girlfriend is completely normal,” said Hanekawa.

She had no problem saying something as embarrassing as that.

She really was the class rep among class reps.

“However, I do not think you should be digging too deeply into your lover’s past. Make sure you are not doing this purely for fun, Araragi-kun, and also make sure you only do this in moderation.”

With that last obvious warning, she said “bye bye” and fell silent.

I was a bit confused as to why she had said bye but not hung up, but I then recalled that I had taught her over spring break that phone etiquette dictated that the one who called should hang up first.

She’s so much of a stickler for the rules that it scares me...

With that thought, I said “See you at school tomorrow” and hit the end call button. I then closed my cell phone and put it away in my back pocket.

Now, what was I to make of all that?

I had a certain level of understanding regarding how Senjouhara spoke and how she acted. This was due to having been in a similar position to her once and having experienced something similar to her. So why did I sympathize more with Kanbaru?

There was something I wanted to do if I could.

If I only I had been able to.

At some point Senjougahara had begun to view kindness as a hostile act. She would say it was none of the person's business, that they were meddling, or that they were a bother. She had displayed that aberrant philosophy of thought to me, but what I wanted to do was not necessarily a kindness.

After all, I would be doing it for (hastily) calculated reasons. That impudent side to it kept me from speaking it and even kept me from openly thinking it.

But I could not help but think it.

I wanted Senjougahara to regain what she had lost.

I wanted Senjougahara to pick back up what she had cast aside.

After all, *that was something I could absolutely never do.*

"Discussing this with Oshino wouldn't help. That cheerful bastard isn't the type to take care of things after the main problem is solved. Well, I guess I'm not really one to talk.....Wait a second."

Suddenly remembering something for no real reason after you had completely forgotten it was not all that unusual, and that was precisely what happened here. I unzipped the travel bag hanging from my shoulder and checked the contents. I knew I would not find what I was looking for, but I could not help but put up that vain struggle. As expected, the envelope Senjougahara had given me was not in the bag.

It was the envelope that had the money for Oshino.

"Did I leave it on the floor next to the cushion I had been sitting on? ...Ahh, what should I do?"

Since it was money, it would be best to take care of it as soon as possible, but it was also not *that* urgent an issue. I could just have her give it to me the next day at school. I doubted it was the case, but it was possible I had put it in my pocket and it had fallen out at some point as I was walking and speaking on the phone with Hanekawa. For that reason, I considered calling Senjougahara to check... but no.

I had been walking while pushing my bike, so I had not covered all that much distance. If I returned on the bike, I would arrive at the Tamikura Apartments in no time at all, so heading back right then was the best option. Given how late it was, that might mean running into Senjougahara's father if worse came to worse. However, given how busy he seemed from the things Senjougahara had said, the odds of that seemed slim enough to ignore.

It was true that a phone call could have solved it all, but I wanted to take advantage of every chance I got to see Senjougahara.

I may not have known how to get it across to her, but I did want to feel a romantic atmosphere even if just slightly.

“Well, anyway.”

I climbed onto my bike and turned it around.

As soon as I did, I began to wonder if it was raining.

But not because a raindrop had hit my cheek or anything like that. Once I turned the bike around, I saw someone standing there as if they had been following me this entire time.

That person was wearing a raincoat.

The hood was up and completely covering their head.

They also wore black rain boots and rubber gloves.

They were perfectly decked out for rain, but I couldn't feel a single drop when I held out my hand.

When I looked up, I could see the stars in the sky.

In this rural town even more remote than a rural city, only a few scattered clouds were rude enough to cut across the sky and block the moonlight.

“Um...”

Yeah...

I knew exactly what was going on here. I knew far too well. Far, far too well. It was the exact same thing I had experienced all too much over spring break.

I couldn't help but give a half smile that did not suit the situation in the slightest. It was out of place, but this felt so familiar it almost felt nostalgic. I was also reminded of my experience with Hanekawa over Golden Week.

If there was a problem here...yes, it would be that, unlike during spring break, I was no longer immortal or a vampire.

I could hardly remain calm with this going on, but remaining calm mattered most when it came to determining just what kind of opponent I was dealing with here. In other words, I had gained a bit of experience with these things over the past few months and had grown somewhat accustomed to them.

To Oddities, that is.

I was fine if this was a physically harmless Oddity like the snail with Hachikuji on Mother's Day, but my instincts were telling me to flee. No, it wasn't *my* instincts. It was the instincts of the legendary vampire that still lived inside my body to some small extent.

I made a split-second decision and jumped – more like fell – from my bike in order to turn it around

again.

That decision proved wise, but in exchange I forever lost my precious, precious mountain bike. The raincoat leaped toward me too fast to visually follow and their left fist slammed into the center of the mountain bike's handlebars just after I jumped out of the way. The mountain bike bent, dented, and was blown away like weightless scraps of paper caught in an intense whirlwind. It slammed into a telephone pole and stopped, but it had already lost any hint of its original form as a mountain bike.

If I hadn't dodged, that would have been me.

Right?

The pressure of the wind whipped up by the fist was enough to tear my clothing.

Similarly, the strap of my travel bag tore and it fell from my shoulder to my feet.

“Th-this is completely different.”

Even my bitter smile tensed at this.

Even if it hadn't hit me, simply being nearby had brought such an astounding presence. Even if it couldn't hope to match the legendary vampire, the whirling pressure was still enough to remind me of it. This Oddity came with physical fear.

This was nothing like Mother's Day.

It was definitely more like spring break.

I had lost my bike, but could I maybe run away on foot?

Based on what I had seen of the raincoat's movements (or rather, what I *hadn't* seen), they moved too quickly to see and escaping on foot would be an impossible task.

Also, even if I could run away, I doubted I could turn my back on this Oddity. Turning my back on and looking away from this raincoat scared me more than anything else. It was a primordial fear of which I couldn't hope to rid myself.

I take back what I said.

I wasn't accustomed to this sensation in the slightest.

It didn't matter how much experience I had.

I don't even like thinking back on it.

The raincoat spun around to face me. The hood was pulled so far over their head that I couldn't see the face within. In fact, before even thinking about the face, it looked more like a deep cave. It was so

very, very deep that I couldn't see anything inside.

It seemed missing from this world.

It seemed lost to this world.

Then the raincoat faced me and raised their left fist again.

I couldn't hope to dodge something that fast with my reflexes alone, but just like when they had destroyed my mountain bike, it was an utterly straightforward movement. Gathering my resolve and reacting at that first movement allowed me to just barely dodge it and that dodged left fist easily and simply punched right into the cement block wall behind me. It was like they had been launched by an aircraft catapult.

That destructive force seemed like a bad joke. In my shock, I decided to use the time it took the raincoat to pull their hand from the cement block wall to stand back up. In other words, I assumed I would have a few seconds of safety while they acted like a monkey with their hand stuck in a jar, but that assumption was far too naïve. It didn't apply here. Starting from where the left hand was piercing it, several meters of the wall noisily crumbled like a dam bursting from a single hole.

It was a familiar scene.

I didn't even get an instant of safety.

As if twisting their body, that left fist flew directly toward me. There was no initial movement or motion this time; they simply punched at me with all their might from where they were.

It was the same catapult-like attack.

I couldn't dodge or even defend in time.

I couldn't even tell where I had been punched.

My vision immediately rotated once, twice, thrice, and then four times. As if my thought pathways had been shaken, intense gravitational acceleration poured down on me from every direction, the entire world around me grew more and more distorted, and I was finally slammed face-down into the asphalt.

I felt my entire body scraping along the ground.

I felt like a grated radish.

However, it hurt.

And if it hurt, I was still alive.

My entire body hurt. The most pain was in my stomach, so that may have been where I was punched. I

quickly tried to get up, but my legs were trembling far too much and all I could manage was to roll onto my back.

The raincoat was quite far away. Or it seemed so, anyway. I thought it might have been an illusion, but it wasn't. They really were that far away. I had apparently been knocked that far with just the one attack. It really was a catapult.

The contents of my gut felt...ill.

I recognized this type of pain.

It wasn't my bones.

Most likely, a few of my organs had ruptured.

But even if some of the contents had been destroyed, I checked and found that the overall *shape* of my body had survived.

Oh, I get it. Bikes and people aren't constructed the same, so the same exact punch isn't going to turn me into scraps like that. Way to go, joints. Viva muscles.

That said, I wasn't going to be moving anytime soon with this kind of damage.

And the raincoat was approaching me. This time, it was a leisurely movement that almost seemed to burn the image into my retinas. Another attack – or two or three just to be sure – and this would be over, so they had no reason to rush.

It made sense. It was a good decision.

But what was this?

This Oddity almost seemed to be attacking random people. After crushing my bike and breaking that cement block wall, it was already clear this was not a “person”, no matter how humanoid they looked. But then, why was this Oddity attacking me?

Oddities always had an appropriate reason.

They weren't complete mysteries.

They were logical. They had rules behind them.

That was the greatest thing I had learned from Oshino and from my time with that beautiful vampire. Therefore, I could conclude that this Oddity also had some reason for what it was doing, but I couldn't think of anything.

What was the cause?

I thought back on what had happened that day.

I thought back on who I had met that day.

Hachikuji Mayoi.

Senjouhara Hitagi.

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

My two little sisters, my homeroom teacher, my classmates whose faces I couldn't quite remember, and...

As I went over the names in my mind, the final name on the list was Kanbaru Suruga.

“...!”

At that point, the raincoat turned.

That humanoid body faced the exact opposite direction.

They immediately took off running and vanished.

It was so sudden that I was left speechless.

“Eh? Ehh?”

Why this all of a sudden?

As the pain ruling my body shifted from dull to sharp, I looked up into the sky. I could still see the stars and moon beautifully shining there. The scene seemed horribly at odds with the faint scent of blood coming from my body.

The strong flavor of blood filled my mouth.

My organs had definitely been damaged. My guts had been mixed up quite nicely. But, well, this wasn't going to kill me. It didn't require a trip to the hospital either. Even if I wasn't immortal anymore, I still had some healing power remaining. If I rested for the night, I would recover well enough. I had escaped this one with my life.

But...

The memory of the moment just before being punched came to mind for no real reason. The raincoat's left fist had flown toward me. This flashback zoomed in on that fist. The rubber glove must have torn from the friction when punching the bike or piercing the wall because four holes had formed at the base of the fingers. Those holes looked as much like a cave as the inside of the hood. They seemed missing or lost.

But I could see the left fist inside. It looked just like a *beast's* hand.

“Araragi-kun.”

I heard a voice from overhead.

It was a flat voice so cold it had dropped below freezing.

I looked up and saw similarly icy and emotionless eyes staring down at me. It was Senjougahara Hitagi.

“...Hi, long time no see.”

“Yes, long time no see.”

It had been a long, long less than an hour.

“You forgot something, so I came to deliver it.”

She held out her right hand to shove an envelope in front of my eyes. I could tell without having it quite so close, but it was the envelope containing the one hundred thousand yen she needed to pay Oshino.

“So blatantly forgetting what I gave you is a crime worthy of the ultimate punishment, Araragi-kun.”

“Yeah...sorry.”

“Apologizing will not convince me to forgive you. I ran after you, planning to torment you with all my might, but it would seem you have already punished yourself. That is an impressive level of loyalty.”

“I'm not really the type to punish myself.”

“There is no need to hide it. In light of that loyalty, I will half forgive you.”

“...”

She was going to lighten my sentence but not pardon me.

It seemed the Court of Senjougahara operated under some strict rules.

“But joking aside,” she said. “Were you hit by a car? I saw what seemed to be the destroyed remains of your beloved bicycle. More than destroyed, it was stabbed into a telephone pole. I don't see how that would happen unless you were hit by an entire convoy.”

“Umm...”

“You remember the license number, don't you? I will take revenge for you. I will start by fully reducing the car to scraps and then I will torture the driver until they bow down and beg me to hit and

kill them with a bicycle.”

Senjouhara Hitagi had no problem making such dangerous claims.

I was relieved to find everything was so normal. It was strange and kind of funny that Senjouhara’s sharp tongue was what made me truly realize I was still alive.

“No, I fell all on my own. I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going...I was on the phone while pedaling...and I ran right into the telephone pole...”

“Oh, I see. Then...yes. How about I at least destroy that telephone pole?”

That was only an outburst of anger.

It wasn’t even getting back at anyone.

“That would cause problems for the local residents, so how about you don’t?”

“I see... But those injuries seem light for slamming into that sturdy-looking cement block wall hard enough to destroy it. Araragi-kun, you have a very soft body. I am impressed. I am sure that softness will come in handy someday. Let’s see...you don’t need an ambulance, right?”

“Right...”

Had Senjouhara gone out of her way to bring that envelope to me because she too wanted to take advantage of any chance to see me? She had probably intended to take a bus and drop it off at my house. That possibility made me honestly happy, even if it still wasn’t quite to the level of a tsundere.

And she had saved me by showing up here.

Even if she hadn’t done it intentionally, the raincoat seemed to have vanished when she had shown up.

“I’ll be able to move after I rest a little.”

“I see. Then I will provide a generous service for you.”

Senjouhara placed her feet on either side of my head as I lay on my back. I had already touched on her fashion that day, but she was wearing a long skirt. She was not wearing stockings, so I could see her bare, slender legs. And from my angle, the length of her skirt didn’t matter much.

“Enjoy yourself until you can move again.”

“...”

To be entirely, honest, I was pretty sure I could already stand up if I had tried, but I decided to lie there and think for a while longer. My thoughts weren’t going to be very productive, but I still did it.

I thought about Senjougahara and about the following day.

Kanbaru Suruga's house was at a distance from our school that took about 30 minutes to travel by bike. Or half an hour at a running pace. At first the thought crossed my mind to ride by bike with Kanbaru sitting at the back, but that seemed implicitly banned between the two of us. Having two people on a bike is dangerous, and in any case it's illegal. Well, maybe that was why, or simply because Kanbaru was reluctant to consider that possibility of sitting in the back and ending up holding on to me. If so, I considered not riding and just walking alongside her, or just leaving my bike at school, however Kanbaru simply said "I don't really care, just ride your bike". As I was just thinking "So what should I do then?", Kanbaru simply said "Then let's go, follow me" and dashed off. She was like this too when she was stalking me but, out of the numerous means of transportation available such as by walking, bicycle, automobile, or train, Kanbaru always chose "dashing", thinking it no different than any of the others. I doubt that even among the more athletically inclined, that there were many like her. Kanbaru guided my bicycle with the brisk tap, tap tap rhythm of her feet and her left arm wrapped up in a white bandage. As we arrived at our destination, Kanbaru appeared to have barely broken into a sweat and didn't even need to catch her breath.

Before us stood a magnificent traditional Japanese manor. The kind that seemed to have a long history. Despite the plaque on the gate reading *Kanbaru* clearly indicating that this was, without a doubt, Kanbaru's residence, I was hesitant to enter into the manor with its stately atmosphere.

Well it's not like I had much of a choice now.

It felt like a Buddhist shrine that I would go visit on a social studies field trip, and I entered the manor with its hard to describe atmosphere. At the end of a hallway looking out on a traditional garden with a shishi-odoshi, Kanbaru opened the sliding door of her room and we entered.

... I was quite surprised that she would let her senpai, who she wasn't even on particularly good terms with, into her room in its current state.

Her futon was left spread out on the floor, clothes (including panties) were strewn all around, as were books of all sort, textbooks, novels and manga, some open and some closed. It almost seemed like her storehouse, with cardboard boxes piled up into mounds in the corners. The worst atrocity was the garbage casually left not in garbage bags but just on a random tatami, or sometimes, to the best of her ability, shoved into the plastic bags from the neighborhood convenience store and then left lying around. Rather, it seemed as though the concept of a container for housing garbage was entirely foreign to the room.

Even with its expansive 12 tatami space.

Not even a single space to start going in from.

"Sorry that it's a little messy"

Kanbaru said clearly, turning around, with her left hand in front of her chest and an innocent grin on her face. I see, it might have just been a reactionary comment to the situation depending on how I interpret it, but don't people usually say that to be modest when letting guests into an at least somewhat organized room?

Flooding on top and burning on the bottom. *a riddle usually used to describe a bath*.

It fit the picture of the room perfectly.

Wow...

Even her hygiene products were lying all around.

I instinctively looked away.

I feel like if I kept looking, more things that were not meant to be seen by my eyes would come out. I think it's great to have self confidence, that's not the same as not having any shame, Kanbaru Suruga...

Ah.

I wonder if Senjouhahara has something like this. But then again, in Senjouhahara's case, there wasn't even a single speck of dust in her room... I feel like her character, along with her personality, got influenced quite a lot by Senjouhahara during junior high, but actually got worse and turned out like this.

"Make yourself at home. I admire your sensitive side when you're a little nervous going into a the room of a girl you don't know that well, Araragi-senpai, but now's not the time for that."

"... Kanbaru"

"Mhmm?"

"I know now's not the time, but can I ask you for a favor."

"Sure. Say anything you want. I wouldn't refuse a request from you, Araragi-senpai."

"One hour, actually, half an hour's fine... Just give me some time to clean up this room. And a big garbage bag."

It's not like I'm a clean freak, I don't really even keep my room that clean, but this was just too horrible, one could even call it cruel. Kanbaru stood and started at me with a puzzled look on her face, as if she didn't even understand what I had just said, however, without any particular reason to refuse, she simply said "OK" and left to get a garbage bag.

Fast forward.

I suppose.

Of course, the disastrous wreckage that was Kanbaru's room wasn't so soft that much could be done about it in a mere half an hour. And in any case, this still being the room of a girl who I didn't know that well, there were areas that I could and couldn't ethically, or rather morally, touch. So, I gathered up the garbage and organized (simply sorted by size, as there weren't even any bookshelves in Kanbaru's room) the various books and magazines in an admittedly random way, cleaning the square room into more of a circle. The room was at least at a state where I could look at it after the futon was folded and stowed in the closet and clothes folded and placed in a corner. At the very least, there was space for Kanbaru and I to sit and face each other.

"Most impressive, Araragi-senpai. So this was what color the tatamis in my room were. I wonder how many years it's been since I've seen the floor."

"You count that by years...?"

"Sorry."

"Next time let's agree on a day... actually, maybe a day and let me sleep over to work on it the next day, just let me clean this room up. I'll bring some detergent and bleach and all the rest of the stuff and give this room a serious cleaning."

"Sorry for having to make you go through the trouble, Araragi-senpai. I don't really have any skills except for basketball so, I'm not really good at things like cleaning up."

"..."

It was quite awkward hearing her say that still with her confident smile... In the half an hour I was cleaning, seeing Kanbaru just sit idly looking quite bored and not even attempting to help, it seemed as though Kanbaru wasn't lazy or found cleaning troublesome, she was simply just bad at it. Even though it wasn't something that I should really concern myself with, this was definitely something that could not, and should not be shown to her fans at school who treated her like a sports star. I wonder if she never invites any of her friends from class to her house... I guess even her friends wouldn't be as bad as her kouhais from clubs. In the worst case scenario, this might be a source of psychological trauma for them. Among the pieces of garbage now inside garbage bags, there were numerous empty crushed soft drink cans, candy wrappers and instant noodle cups... How the hell does someone who eats like this become an athlete at the national level?

Famous people often become even more popular with these sort of absentminded episodes, but this was way too much. There was no way this could be moe...

"Well, now then"

It was the next day.

The day after Friday.

Saturday.

Having two days off at the end of the week had already been accepted as common sense all around the world, however in our well known university feeder school, Naoetsu Private High School, there were normal classes even on Saturday. Even as tomorrow became today, I was unable to come a conclusion, and so in the break time between first and second period I headed to the second years' building. In any case, with Kanbaru being such a celebrity, it was the obvious choice to see which class she was in. Second year second class. The students in the classroom were quite excited by the arrival of a third year (as a third year this was both a nostalgic and new experience). Just as I expected of Kanbaru, she came over to where I was waiting in the hallway in her long majestic strides.

"Yo, Araragi-senpai"

"Hey, Kanbaru. I have a little favor I want to ask you"

"I see, then"

Without a single question, Kanbaru replied.

Almost as if this was pre-established harmony.

"After school, I want you to come to my house"

So—

Kanbaru's house, a traditional Japanese manor.

If we were just going to talk, it didn't need to be at Kanbaru's house, it could have been in an empty classroom, or the on the roof, or on the sports track, or even on some fast food restaurant around here. I had told Kanbaru, but it seemed as though she had some specific reason to talk at her house.

If there was a reason, then I would go along with it.

No need to ask.

"So, how should we start, Araragi-senpai. I'm not great with people so I'm not sure what I should say but, anyway"

Kanbaru quickly crossed her legs and bowed her head towards me.

"I'd like to apologize for yesterday night"

"... Uh"

I had recovered in that one day, but I still felt some remaining pain. After gently touching my stomach, I nodded.

"So that *was* you"

Raincoat.

Rubber gloves. Rubber boots.

I had found them in the pile of clothes when we cleaning.

Without even having to say.

"So that *was* you', you sure sound impatient, Araragi-senpai. You certainly are impressive. You saw through it right? Otherwise you wouldn't have visited me."

"Not really. I was just guessing. I just looked at stuff like your build, outline and silhouette. And among the people who would've known that I had gone to Senjouhara's house to study. Narrowing it down from those conditions and thinking about it... Well, it wouldn't have been a big deal even if I came to visit and I was wrong."

"Hmm, I see. Most intelligent"

Kanbaru appeared genuinely impressed.

"Is it like how some guys can tell girls apart just from their hips?"

"That's completely different!"

How the hell could I tell what your hips looked like under that raincoat anyway!

"Sorry, that's not what I meant"

Kanbaru, once again, bowed her head.

It seemed like quite a sincere apology.

But, if that's not what she meant, then what did she mean? That was clearly targeting me— but, could it be something else entirely?

"... Well, apologies aside, I just want to know the reason. Actually, the reason's— anyways"

The reason.

I already had an idea.

Considering the situation, I wouldn't say it but, it was the first clue that lead me to think that Kanbaru was the person in the raincoat.

But—

"Anyways, I want to ask you about that"

That superhuman strength.

Kaii.

Able to destroy a bicycle like ripping paper.

To destroy a concrete wall in a single strike.

"I wanted to ask you. What exactly, are . . ."

"Hmm. I guess if we had to start it would be with that huh. But first ... Araragi-senpai, I want to ask you, are you the type of person who can believe in crazy things?"

"Crazy things?"

So like— aah, I see.

Kanbaru doesn't know about my body's condition. She wouldn't have been able to see my wounds on my immortal body healing in the span of a couple minutes, so there's no way she would know. So that must be why she asked my that— no, that's not it.

Even if she didn't know about me, Kanbaru knows about Senjougahara. She knew about Senjougahara's crazy secret even before me. So she knows that there's no way I don't know about Senjougahara's secret now that I'm her boyfriend. That means, right now, Kanbaru might be scoping me out.

"Do you get what I'm asking you? I mean, can you believe things that you haven't seen with your own eyes?"

"I only believe things that I have seen with my own eyes. So I believe everything that I've seen. Of course including Senjougahara's case."

"... Really? You knew that too?."

"However," Kanbaru said, looking neither particularly embarrassed or guilty.

"I don't want you to misunderstand. I haven't just been following you around because I wanted to know about Senjougahara."

"Huh...? Really?"

I was sure that was it.

I thought for sure that she was seeing whether the rumors that Araragi Koyomi and Senjougahara Hitagi were going out were true or not. And that after hearing that yesterday I went to Senjougahara's house for a one on one study session her suspicions were confirmed.

Well, that's probably the case.

I don't think that there would be any errors in that line of thinking.

But now, is she saying that there was another reason she was stalking me?

"Weren't you and Senjougahara called the Valhalla Combo, when you were on the basketball team and Senjougahara was on the track team?" *Valhalla in Japanese is Baruhara. *Kanbaru* and Senjougahara*

"Yeah, that's right. I'm impressed that you knew that too. I must have underestimated you, Araragi-senpai. Up until now I'd thought that I held you in the highest esteem possible, but it seems as though I was still underestimating you. You may even be too impressive for me to even comprehend with my sense of values. I feel like the better I know you, the further apart we feel."

"... I was just asking you a question you know?"

Managing to not sound sarcastic or like a suck-up after calling me all these things almost seems like an art in and of itself.

"I've heard about the name's origin. Flows surprisingly well doesn't it?"

"Of course it does. I thought of it."

Kanbaru appeared puffed up with pride.

... She thought of it herself.

It's been a while since I've felt this sad...

"I worked really hard to come up with that you know. By the way I also thought of the nickname *Kanbaru Suruga-chan* for myself but unfortunately that never caught on."

"I'm disappointed too."

"I see. You can sympathize with me."

Sure.

I'm disappointed in your sense of what you thought would catch on.

"You truly are a compassionate person, Araragi-senpai. Well now that I think about it, it's a bit long for a nickname. I guess it never would have caught on."

"I don't think that's the problem."

It seems like Kanbaru had nice friends during junior high

Including Senjouhara back then...

"Moving on from the Valhalla Combo, it seems like your intuition is quite good, so you might already know what I'm about to explain to you. During junior high, Senjouhara and I— actually, before we talk about that, there's something I want you to see, Araragi-senpai. That's what I originally planned to use some of your precious time and have you go through the trouble of coming to my house for."

"Something you want me to see? Ah, I get it. That thing you wanted me to see was at your house so that's why we couldn't talk at school."

"Actually, that's not why. I guess, it would stand out at school, and I'm worried about other people seeing... As much as I can, it's something I don't want other people to see."

Saying that, Kanbaru began unwrapping the white bandage on her left arm. She took off the fastener holding the bandage around her arm and starting from the side closest to her fingers, she—

I remembered.

That night.

When the person in the raincoat destroyed my bike, or when they smashed through the concrete wall, or when they ripped apart my organs—

It was all, with the fist in their left hand.

"To be honest, it's not something that I like other people seeing. After all, I'm still a girl."

She unwrapped the entire bandage— and folded up the sleeves of her uniform.

And what I saw, extending from beyond the elbows of Kanbaru's slender and feminine soft looking arm was— **the arm of a wild beast**, angular and covered in thick black fur.

Sticking out of the broken rubber gloves.

The smell, of a beast.

"Well, this is it."

" ... "

Those sort of gloves couldn't be something from Muppets— clearly. The length and the slenderness of the gloves was clearly unnatural, and apart from simple physical observations, I had witnessed something similar, similar but so different, during Golden Week. So I understood what I was seeing.

This was, a kaii.

Kaii.

It looked like the arm of a wild beast— however, I had no idea what kind. It appeared like it could be from any animal, and yet not from any. While looking like everything, it was a part of nothing. However, if I had to say, judging from the five fingers and the rather long nails at the end of each—

I don't think that this is good way of describing a part of a girl's body however but I said

"A monkey's arm."

"It looks like— a monkey's arm."

Monkey.

The common name for the primates, excluding humans.

"Ooh"

From her expression Kanbaru appeared, for some reason— impressed.

She slapped her knees.

"Araragi-senpai, you truly have unfathomably keen insight. I'm in awe, your eyes must be different from the rest of us. To be able to discern the nature of this arm with just a single look, I'm at a loss for words. Your knowledge must be of a different caliber than that a mere commoner such as myself could ever accumulate. So it appears— no other explanations are necessary."

"Don't be convinced just because I said it!"

Like I'd let you stop explaining here!

We've just started!

"I just said what I saw, I haven't made any conclusions."

"Really? *The Monkey's Paw* was the title of a short story by William Wymark Jacobs. The idea of a monkey's paw has been used in all sorts of media and it's split off into lots of—"

"I didn't know about that at all."

I told her the truth.

"Really?", said Kanbaru.

"To be able to see the truth without knowing a single thing, Araragi-senpai, you must have been chosen by someone up there."

"... Well, I have been told that I have a pretty good intuition."

"I see. I think rather highly of myself, although not nearly as highly you, Araragi-senpai, for having the

good sense to place my trust in you at first sight."

"I see..."

I don't think you have very good sense in your standards.

Uh, I looked back at Kanbaru's left arm.

A beast's paw— a monkey's paw.

"C-Can I touch it?"

"Sure, **right now** it should be fine."

"I-I see."

With Kanbaru's permission, I gently put my hand on her wrist.

Timidly, full of fear.

Texture, feeling... warmth, pulse.

It was alive.

I knew it, this must be **a living type of kaili**.

... Even being completely fine with having her room seen while it was like this, Kanbaru seemed uncomfortable having her left arm seen. Of course she would be, with the excuse that she sprained her arm while training being so convenient. The bandage was not to protect her injury, but to hide her arm. She had never shown any of clumsiness with her left arm or unconscious habit of protecting the left side of her body that would be expected from a person who had sprained their left hand, which I had thought was strange, but looking back at that now and saying that doesn't seem very convincing.

But.

It was certain that she couldn't play basketball with that hand.

Without thinking, I squeezed her wrist.

"Don't make weird noises!"

She instinctively pulled her hand away.

"It's because you touched it in a weird way!"

"I didn't touch you in a weird way at all!"

"I'm ticklish!"

"That doesn't mean you should make weird noises that mess with how your character's been so far!"

Now that I think of it, Senjougaraha also acts out of character a lot. Of course, Kanbaru's way was completely different from how Senjougaraha does it now, but if Kanbaru goes out of character like this, does that mean that this was Senjougaraha's gag in junior high?

"You might have forgotten, but Kanbaru, this is your room, in your house. What do you think would happen to me if your parents heard you making noises like that?"

"Ah, don't worry about that."

Kanbaru said in her lighthearted tone.

"Don't worry about my parents."

"... Ok then"

What...?

What was with that expression, like she didn't want to touch the matter, or blatantly did not want to have that issue be probed into further. But she said those words, which were out of character more than anything else before, in her usual lighthearted tone.

"Anyways," Kanbaru broke the ice while flexing her hand open and close.

"As you can see, right now I can control it according to my will, but there are times when it doesn't. No. Rather, it moves against my will, I guess—"

"It moves against your will?"

"I guess against my will, or my feelings. I guess it's hard to understand. Having it be explained by me when I don't even fully understand it. It might be pretty obvious but, while it was definitely me who attacked you yesterday night, I have almost no recollection of that."

Kanbaru explained.

"I guess it's like being half asleep, or a daydream, it's not like I don't remember at all but, it's like watching something out of a TV, like I'm not actually there."

"A trance."

I interrupted her explanation.

"It's called— a trance... Kaii that possess humans split apart the body and the mind."

In my case it wasn't like that— in Hanekawa's case, in Hanekawa's cat's case, it was just like that. That's why Hanekawa barely remembers anything about the Golden Week when she came into contact

with a kiai. I guess the current situation is close— when it happened to Hanekawa, there were also changes to her body.Y

"You sure know a lot, Araragi-senpai. I see, so they're called kiai, these sort of things—"

"Well I'm not exactly an expert myself. It's just that recently I've been running into these sort of experiences a lot, and I know a guy who knows a lot about—"

Oshino.

This was Oshino's territory.

His domain.

"— this sort of stuff."

"OK. I see, I'm lucky that you're such a good person. We wouldn't have been able to talk if you had driven me out as soon as you saw my arm. And, I would have been quite hurt."

"It's fine. Relax, I've seen enough crazy things to get used to them by now. Including Senjougahara's case too."

At this rate, I suppose that afterwards I should explain that I had been involved with kiai and that I had temporarily become a vampire... Normally in terms of accountability, I should have explained that beforehand, but now there were still too many things that I didn't understand about Kanbaru's left hand.

"Although, I would say that I was still a bit surprised. Or that it gave me hiccups, if I were a fifth grader. But now with the biggest shock out of the way, I'm pretty confident that nothing afterwards will surprise me."

"I see, of course that's exactly why I showed you my arm first. Getting the hardest part out of the way first. Now that we're done with that, let's get to the real issue at hand."

Kanbaru continued on with her smile.

"I'm lesbian."

"..."

My chin fell to the floor. Like in one of Fujiko Fujio's mangas.

"Uh, oh"

Seeing my reaction, Kanbaru said "That might have been a bit blunt for you, Araragi-senpai, since you're a boy. Hmm—" while tilting her head.

"Let me rephrase that. I like yuri."

"That's the same thing!"

I shouted, trying to act like myself.

Wait, what? What's going on?

So Kanbaru and Senjougahara were called the Valhalla Combo in junior high? Just as senpai and kouhai? And Senjougahara called Kanbaru "that *girl*"? And yesterday Senjougahara said that she had never broken up with a *man*? So did she mean *that*?

"Wrong. Senjougahara-senpai was just my unrequited love. To me, Senjougahara-senpai was my pure and perfect, ideal senpai. It was enough just being by her side."

"Just being by her side..."

That *sounds* nice.

That sure *sounds* nice.

But she just called it her unrequited love like it was perfectly normal. This girl...

Hachikuji, the "girl in you" was completely wrong... Wait, calm down, I can't just deny everything without hearing Kanbaru's side of the story first. Right, maybe that's normal for girls nowadays. Maybe I'm just out of date. I should think about this more lightly, more liberally.

"So, yuri... I see."

"That's right, yuri."

Kanbaru seemed happy for some reason.

But, all things considered.

Whether it's vampires or cats or crabs or snails, class presidents or sick girls or elementary school kids, catgirls or tsunderes or lost kids, or everything just turning out to be about yuri. This world is, how should I say it, sure tries hard, or maybe it's just greedy...

It just does whatever it likes.

I wonder if Senjougahara knows that Kanbaru's lesbian... Judging from how Kanbaru talks about her, she probably doesn't. Well, whether she knew or not, it probably didn't make much of a difference to Senjougahara in junior high.

The stars of the track team and the basketball team.

The Valhalla Combo.

"Senjougahara was popular with everyone, but I think that the way I loved her was different from everyone else. I'm proud of that. I could have even died for her back then. Dead or alive."

"..."

I'm not really sure whether that sounded cool or not.

"Wow, I just said something pretty cool. Mixing up "I love" and "alive" was pretty good if I may say so myself. Wasn't it, Araragi-senpai."

"At first I wasn't really sure, but after adding that on the end, I'm pretty sure about my score."

It wasn't cool at all.

Anyways.

I asked Kanbaru to continue her story.

"Continuation isn't really a great word, this didn't even happen that long ago. It guess this is where the story joins up with the present. The reason I chose Naoetsu High School in the first place was to follow Senjougahara-senpai."

"I thought as much... I guess I'm more convinced that surprised by that."

Depending on how she interprets it, that might have sounded insulting to her current basketball teammates, so I'll just keep this in my head. Being the ace of her junior high basketball team, she should have been able to get into a more sports oriented school and played more seriously. I wondered why Kanbaru would choose Naotsu High School, it being a university feeder school which was best, completely apathetic about any of its clubs, including the basketball team. What motivation would she have?

Undying love.

I guess that's a bit much.

"I was so attracted to Senjougahara-senpai that I would have eaten a candy that she had spit out."

"..."

Is that something you should really be telling people?

"But, Araragi-senpai. That one year after Senjougahara-senpai graduated from junior high and I was a third year, was completely grey."

"Grey?"

"My grey yuri life."

"..."

She sure likes using the word "yuri", doesn't she.

Whatever.

"Thinking about my grey yuri life with my grey brain cells."

"That wasn't funny at all."

Stop trying to insert random puns whenever you talk.

She's way too calm while we're talking about this sort of stuff.

"You sure are strict, Araragi-senpai. Your standards are too high for me. But it's strange, when I think of it as you just trying to help me by saying, I find that I can accept it."

"So... what happened during that year of your grey yuri life?"

"Right, during that one year, I came to know just how important of a person Senjougahara-senpai was to me. Actually, that one year when we were apart might have been much more important to me than the two years we were together. So I decided that, if I got accepted to Naoetsu High school, I would confess to her. And after that, I spent all my days and nights studying to get in."

Kanbaru spoke in her usual tone full of confidence, but she seemed to be blushing a little. I guess this is just her getting embarrassed—Crap, she was pretty cute. I was just confused when she started stalking me, but this was the first time I thought of Kanbaru as my cute kouhai. I felt a new "yuri" region of moe sprouting inside me...

Somehow, I don't really even care about Kanbaru's left arm anymore... Wait, her left arm was supposed to be the main topic in the first place...

"Not even just a candy. Gum. I would chew a piece of gum that Senjougahara-senpai had spit out. I was that attracted to her."

"I don't get your standards at all..."

Couldn't you find a better way of explaining this?

"But,"

She said, her tone dropping conspicuously.

"Senjougahara-senpai changed."

"Ah..."

"Completely."

A crab.

Senjougahara Hitagi met a crab. She lost many things and threw away many things— and rejected everything. Hanekawa was like this too, but looking at it from the perspective of someone who would have known Senjougahara in junior high, she had changed so much that they could mistake her for a different person. To Kanbaru, who put so much faith in her, she must not have even wanted to believe how much Senjougahara had changed.

So much that she couldn't even believe what she had seen with her own eyes.

"I heard that after she started high school, she got pretty sick, some long term illness, and she quit the track team. I already knew about that before. But, I never even imagined that she could change so much. I thought it was just some bad rumor."

Serious. A heavy illness...

Well, that explanation isn't wrong... But to Senjougahara that illness still isn't completely cured. Sort of like a chronic illness.

"But— I was wrong. The rumors themselves were wrong, but they weren't even close to how bad it actually was. I realized that something serious must have happened to Senjougahara-senpai's body, and I knew that I had to do something. I thought I had to save her. Didn't I? Because I never forgot how much Senjougahara-senpai helped me in junior high, how much I owed her. We were in different years and different clubs, but she was so kind to me."

"That kindness..."

I wonder what meaning that kindness had for Senjougahara. But I guess this isn't the time to talk about it, or ask.

"So I tried to help her. I wanted to help her. But she completely, unequivocally, rejected me."

"I see."

I guess she wouldn't tell me how exactly she got rejected. She's probably still trying to protect Senjougahara. Kanbaru would never, no matter what happened, even if her mouth was getting torn apart, say anything bad about Senjougahara.

As I thought, she had faced something as bad as, even more horrible than what happened to me. That much was easy to deduce but... Honestly, I didn't even want to ask.

For my sake, and Kanbaru's.

For Senjougahara's sake too.

A stapler.

"I thought that I could do something."

She said. She seemed like she couldn't even bare the shame anymore and regretted what she had done from the bottom of her heart. But still, she spoke in a forced casual tone.

"I thought that I could do something about whatever it was that Senjougahara had. Even if I couldn't get rid of what was causing it, even if I couldn't make whatever was happening to her any better, I thought that by being by her side— I could heal her heart."

"..."

"I sure was stupid wasn't I? I was naive. But thinking about it now, it's quite funny."

Because Senjougahara wasn't looking for that at all—

Saying that, Kanbaru looked down.

"I never even thought of you as my friend, or my kouhai— Not then and not now'. She said straight to my face."

"Well..."

She would say something like that. Back then. She was fully loaded with a weapons even more dangerous than her stationary, her words.

"At first, I thought that meant that she thought of me as her lover. But, that wasn't the case."

"You sure are positive."

"Right. But continuing, she made it even more clear to me. 'I just pretended to be good friends with you because it would make me more popular being friends with my nice underclassman. That's why I was nice to you, that's why I played the part of the nice senpai.'"

"She sure says some cruel things."

She wanted to hurt her.

So she would stay away.

But yesterday, Senjougahara called her "that girl" and called her her kouhai from junior high, and admitted that they were friends in junior high even if they weren't anymore. That might just be a convenient explanation for me, but, still.

"I was pretty happy that she called me her nice underclassman."

She sure is positive.

Through and through.

"But, I realized how powerless I was. I was so conceited, thinking that I could heal her just by being with her. Senjougahara-senpai never wanted anyone by her side."

There really are people who aren't lonely, even when they're alone.

Normally, I would think that Senjougahara definitely fit into that category. At least, she wasn't the type of person who would get hang around a big group for no reason. I'm sure she was like that, even when she was a sociable junior high student.

The difference between not being lonely even when you're alone.

And wanting to be alone.

Like the difference between being unsociable and hating people.

"So after that, I never approached Senjougahara-senpai again. Because that was the one thing that she wanted from me. Of course, there was no way I could forget Senjougahara-senpai— But, if by letting go, and doing nothing and staying away from her, Senjougahara would be saved, even just a little bit, I could live with that."

"... You,"

I wasn't sure what I should say. I was so impressed not with her attitude, which you could even call pure, but by her describing her choice not as "inevitable" or that she "had no choice" but as being able to "live with it". She said that Senjougahara had changed, but she let go of her by her own will.

She really was serious.

About Senjougahara.

From when she was in junior high to one year ago, her feelings only grew stronger.

Even now.

"I was careful not to run into Senjougahara-senpai. I changed everything I did to not run into Senjougahara in the hallways, not to see each other during the morning assemblies, not to pass by each other in the cafeteria. I took care of everything so that Senjougahara-senpai wouldn't have to mind me, and I wouldn't have to mind her. I knew that if I did well in any club's rumors about me would get around, so I mixed fact and fiction into my own rumors and controlled them."

No wonder her personality's so messed up. The rumors about her never fit with each other.

I was convinced.

But still, being that thorough, it's almost like reverse stalking.

"That's how I spent my first year. It wasn't even grey, more like my black yuri life. But after that, I got more reckless and into basketball, I'm not sure whether it was for the better or not, but after that one year, I found out about you, Araragi-senpai."

"..."

She seemed to have found out about me rather late considering how much she worried about Senjougahara. It probably wasn't because it took place over the course of two school years, but because she was deliberately avoiding conversations about Senjougahara.

Nevertheless.

She found out about me, Araragi Koyomi.

"I couldn't hold myself back any longer, so for the first time in a year, I approached Senjougahara-senpai by my own will. Or, I tried to. Of course, over that one year there were a few careless mistakes, but this was the first time I intentionally saw Senjougahara-senpai. I saw Senjougahara-senpai and you, Araragi-senpai, talking away in the classroom one morning. And she was smiling happily like I'd never seen even in junior high."

"..."

I wonder how she was verbally abusing me back then when she was smiling... That's about the only time that woman's expression ever changes, let alone smiles.

"Do you understand?"

Kanbaru turned to face me.

"You were doing what I wanted to do so badly but I could never do... like it was the easiest thing in the world."

"Kanbaru... that's"

"At first, I was jealous."

She spoke, emphasizing every word.

"I tried rethinking it,"

I could hear the overflowing emotion she was trying to control in her voice.

"but in the end, I was still jealous."

She brought it to a close.

"..."

"Why couldn't it have been me? I was jealous of you and I completely gave up on Senjougahara-senpai. I thought it'd have worked if I were a man. And that it didn't because I was a woman. I thought that even if she didn't need a friend or a kouhai, I could be a lover. Then,"

Then, Kanbaru said, staring at me.

She looked at me, her eyes full of blame.

"Then, why couldn't it have been me?"

Even though I knew that she was my kouhai and a girl younger than me, and that she probably wouldn't go crazy and grab at me, I flinched.

I was afraid.

"I was jealous of you and I completely gave up on Senjougahara-senpai. And I was dumbfounded. What was I thinking, 'healing Senjougahara-senpai', 'letting go'. Those were all lies. That was all just my ego. 'If I was fine with it then it was fine the way it was'. Did I think that Senjougahara-senpai would praise me for that? I was stupid. I was such a hypocrite. But, even still, I wanted Senjougahara-senpai to be kind to me like she used to. I didn't care if it as my ego or whatever, I just wanted to be by her side."

Kanbaru touched her left hand with her right hand.

Her hand of a beast.

"So, I wished on this hand."

There's probably no need to go into depth about the plot of William Wymark Jacobs' story "The Monkey's Paw", but from my point of view, knowing nothing about it, it seemed to be well written as a monster, or maybe horror story. A by the books horror story, an antique with a long history. From my point of view, knowing nothing of it, it seemed slightly familiar, like it reminded me of something.

I guess that's how classics are.

Kanbaru would probably say that, although it wasn't on the scale of vampires, the monkey's paw was a pretty major item, arranged and used in a variety of media in a variety of ways. Splitting off and splitting off again, like a chart showing the genus and family of a species, but despite the various differences between the versions, at the base of all the variations, the single point tying them all together, in other words, the most important factor that made the monkey's paw what it was, was that.

Apparently, it granted the owner's wish.

But apparently, in a way not according to the owner's will.

It seemed it was those two points.

It was that sort of item, with a long history and story.

For example, if you wished to be rich, the next day someone in your family would die and you would get the insurance money. For example, if you wished to get promoted, the company would fall into a slump and the top brass would get disposed of, and as a result, you would get promoted into a company that fell into a slump.

Like that.

Apparently, the monkey's paw was created in India by a miracle worker in order to teach man to submit to and live according to fate, lest they face horrible calamities. It boasted the ability to be able to grant three men each three wishes each.

Upon hearing of it granting three wishes, the first thing that I was reminded of was Arabian Nights, but I can't really remember what kind of story that was, or how it ended. Of course throughout the world, other versions of this story exist. The concept of a story about an item that could grant any wish might just be quite fundamental to humans, who are so controlled by their massive but impossible dreams. Even among stories of the supernatural, "the monkey's paw" is still the oldest.

"So that person you were talking about, his name's Oshino Meme? Meme's written in katakana right?"

"Yeah. He's not as cute as you might think from his name though. I'll tell you now, he's just an old dude who like aloha shirts so don't expect too much. In any case, he doesn't look like *that* so just

prepare yourself."

"No... that's not what I meant. His name already leaves quite the impression. Well, whatever. But "Meme" seems like a hard name to find a nickname for."

"Now that you mention it, I'm a little interested in what people called him when he was a kid... Actually, I can't even imagine him ever being a kid."

Oshino's current residence were the ruins of four floored cram school located a little bit away from a residential area, or more simply, an abandoned building. Like most abandoned buildings, it was the sort of place one wouldn't want to go to even if dared, and wouldn't be regarded as a building by most people. More like a part of the landscape. An old building that had weathered many years, the kind that would topple to the ground completely destroyed if an earthquake came along. Although despite it's appearance, it had been at most a few years since a well known university prep school opened up in front of the station and it had to close down. The building brought it into clear focus how badly buildings decayed even if not used by humans for a few years. The place couldn't even really be called Oshino's residence, he was just an illegal squatter. He had been living in this building covered in signs saying "Private Property" and "Entrance Prohibited" since spring break for about 2 months now. Sleeping on a makeshift bed made of the desks remaining inside the abandoned building and roaming around this town all day.

Roaming around.

He didn't stay in one place all the time.

So, even as we went to see him, whether he was actually inside the building or not was completely up to chance. There was quite an element of chance to meeting Oshino, who had no cellphone to be contacted at.

It was about an hour's ride from Kanbaru's Japanese manor.

Of course, for Kanbaru it was an hour's dash.

I looked up, staring at the abandoned cram school.

"By the way, Araragi-senpai, when you were attacked by a vampire... that was your first time meeting a kiai right?"

"Yeah, probably."

I might have met one before and just not noticed.

So that was the first time I actually realized it.

"So that was during spring break, then Senjouhara, then me... nothing's happened before, but now three in a row all of a sudden. It seems like it's hinting at something."

"Maybe."

Actually, including Hanekawa and Hachikuji, it's been five in a row but I'll just leave it at that and try to respect their privacy.

"Apparently, after you meet them once, they get easier to run into. So I guess it'll just be like that for me from now on."

"That seems tough."

"Not entirely... it's not all bad. There are things that I've learned and gotten because I've encountered kائي, because I've had these strange experiences."

I meant to give my point of view but it turned out more like I was just trying to change the subject.

But in reality, just thinking about what happened during spring break makes me think that I'm just lying to myself and putting it in a nice way.

With that unpleasant feeling, I looked at Kanbaru's left arm and the white bandaged wrapped around it. I still have no idea what the arm actually is, but having seen it, its length and shape did certainly look strange even looking from the outside. It looked like Kanbaru had wrapped the bandage over the same place a few times to make it harder to tell though.

"I always thought that you and Senjougahara-senpai at least knew each other since you've been in the same class since the first year all the way up to third year. But from hearing your story, the first time you've talked was about three weeks ago right, Araragi-senpai?"

"Well I'm not sure if that was the first time we'd ever talked, but if she hadn't made that careless mistake I would have never found out about her secret and we would probably have never started going out. And if I hadn't known Oshino, I wouldn't have been able to help Senjougahara in the first place... So I guess it was all a big coincidence. Maybe I just had good luck. Or my bad luck wasn't working very well. Kanbaru, it's just that you ended up finding out about the monkey's paw and I ended up finding out about vampires."

One year ago, when Kanbaru found out about Senjougahara's secret, she was probably able to accept it so easily because she had already known about the monkey's paw, like I had already known about the vampire and the cat. So really, the biggest difference between me and Kanbaru was that I knew Oshino, who helped me combat the kائي that I ran into.

So, I couldn't help but think.

What if, Kanbaru had known Oshino, no, not necessarily knowing Oshino, if she just had some way of helping Senjougahara, or knew someone who could, and she solved Senjougahara's problem one year ago. Would Kanbaru be in the position that I'm in now? Apart from differences in age and gender though...

I guess it was all just a coincidence.

Fate, or just pure chance.

"I'm happy that you're looking out for my feelings, but don't say things like that, Araragi-senpai. Senjougahara-senpai's not that kind of person. She wouldn't confuse being in someone's debt with being in love. You saving her was just what brought you two together."

There was a slight loneliness in Kanbaru's tone.

"And that's exactly why I regret my choices. When Senjougahara-senpai rejected me, I pulled away. But you chased after her. If there really is a difference between us, it's not between a vampire and a monkey, or who knew Oshino and who didn't, I think it would be that."

"Definitely."

Kanbaru muttered.

Talking with her like this, I realized that she does have quite the introspective side. A personality completely different from her lively sporty girl image. But if that's simply guilt, I feel like I have something like that too.

I wonder what it is.

This feeling like a needle stabbing my heart, like guilt. And even though she didn't need to, Kanbaru ended up saying something else to follow up.

And I felt even more guilty.

"I really am happy that Senjougahara-senpai's problems were solved. It might be weird for me to thank you, but I really do want to, from the bottom of my heart."

"Honestly I didn't even do much, it was Oshino. No, I don't think that's right either. Senjougahara saved herself. She saved herself, all by herself."

That's just how it was.

There was only so much that I or Oshino could have done.

Without a doubt, that was all there was to it.

"I... I guess so. But, let me ask you one thing, Araragi-senpai."

"Sure, what?"

"I think I know why Senjougahara-senpai fell for you. I was so jealous and disappointed, and to be honest, I felt like you two didn't make a good couple, but I think I know now. But I wonder, Araragi-senpai, what part of Senjougahara-senpai did you fall in love with? You spent two years as classmates and never even spoke to each other." It's a bit hard answering such a direct question. Also

I'm a little embarrassed but more than that, I'm not sure that there is a clear answer or reason. It's just, that day, on Mother's Day at that park...

Ahh, I see.

That makes sense.

That's what my guilt really was.

"... Why do you want to know? Kanbaru."

"It's just that, if you're only after Senjouhara-senpai's body, I think that I could take her place."

"..."

One hell of an offer.

Kanbaru grasped her chest with her right arm and her bandaged left arm and came up close to me. In her school uniform, Kanbaru gave off a strangely alluring air of indiscretion. A rather seductive pose.

"I think that I'm pretty cute."

She called herself that.

"I think that I'll look more girlish if I grow my hair out, and I have a pretty good complexion. I've been playing sports for a long time so I have a slim waist. My whole body is pretty slim. People have complemented me on my body too."

"Bring me whoever said that. I'll kill him."

"It was an adviser from a club."

"This whole world is already beyond saving!"

"I can't die yet. I won't be able to go to tournaments then."

Then Kanbaru asked me "So are you up for it?" again.

Appearing neither flat out joking or half joking and half serious, Kanbaru stubbornly pressed me for an answer with a look of complete seriousness on her face.

"I'm being serious, Araragi-senpai. If you want, I'll be the bottom to your top any time you want."

"Top? Bottom!? Why would I want that!?"

"Oh, I see. You don't know about BL? That's surprising."

"I don't want to talk about BL with a younger girl!"

"BL stands for Boy's Love you know."

"I knew that! That's not what I'm misunderstanding!"

Ahh, I already noticed.

When I was cleaning up Kanbaru's room, there were tons of books with covers that seemed like that sort of thing in lying around!

I didn't want to bring it up!

I was just going to pretend that I didn't see them!

"So you really didn't misunderstood anything? I thought for sure that you did from what you said. So, Araragi-senpai, what are you angry about then? I don't think that I've said anything to upset your mood have I? Or, are you actually into being on the bottom instead?"

"We're not talking about this anymore!"

"I only like being on the bottom, so I can't be on top."

"Hmm... What? I'm not sure I get what you're saying now."

Bottom?

I feel like this conversation is going into dangerous territory.

On thin ice.

"Besides, Kanbaru, why would a man and a woman have to do stuff from BL anyway? There's no need."

"Actually, Araragi-senpai. Have I ever told you that I want to give my virginity to Senjou"

"I don't want to hear this!"

That thin ice is already cracked and now we're drowning underwater.

Senjougahara Hitagi and Kanbaru Suruga, are the two of them trying to team up and destroy every last one of my dreams about women?

I'm sure about it, my crisis management sense is telling me, you two were just old acquaintances and knew each other from school!

I sigh, feeling all my happiness drain out of my body and escape at full speed.

Seriously... talking about whether I'm only after Senjougahara's body or how all the boys love her flexible body, the conversations she brings up are always about suggestive make me feel like my mind

and my body are being shaved into pieces. Hachikuji's a "precocious child" in her own right, but the conversation we had yesterday was actually pretty innocent and fun. And so I reminisced about my conversation with an elementary school kid.

I guess it's already the end for me isn't it.

"I'm afraid that I'm going to have to be rather forward with you, Araragi-senpai. You won't be able to survive in society if you can't even enjoy having dirty conversations with younger girls. You should throw away your delusions about how women actually are."

"That's exactly the kind of thing that I don't want a younger girl to convince me of."

And I don't really like her using the word "dirty".

Not that there's any other good way to put it though.

"Whatever you say, Araragi-senpai, but if you cling on to such cheap fantasies about women like pure maidenhood, no one's even going to say hi to you. This is just how it is. Even girls like to talk dirty."

That just brings up a whole other set of fantasies... But I think in her case and Senjougahara's, it's a bit different.

"Well then, let's get back to our discussion of whether you prefer briefs or trunks, Araragi-senpai?"

"We weren't even talking about that to begin with!"

"So were we talking about whether I'm wearing panties under my bike shorts?"

"Kanbaru-san, are you not!?"

I was so shocked I suddenly got really polite.

"S... So, are you saying, under those bike shorts sticking out from your skirt, you're..."

"Even if I wasn't, it's nothing to be surprised about. Bike shorts have always been a type of underwear anyway."

"Then that's even worse! That means you're constantly showing off your underwear!"

But when you're running or jumping, your skirt getting blown up is at the mercy of the wind.

"Well you could put it that way, but I prefer to think of it as a stylish gift from a sporty girl."

"Wrong! That's just perverted exhibitionism!"

"Right, now I remember, we weren't even talking about that. We were talking about whether I could replace Senjougahara-senpai..."

"Wait, don't change the topic before we get to the bottom of this! Tell me whether you're really wearing any or not!"

"Why don't we just leave out those vulgar details, Araragi-senpai. It's nothing important anyway."

"Of course it's important! This is the difference between my kouhai being a sporty girl or an exhibitionist!"

And so our not only dirty, but completely pointless conversation continued.

"I suppose so... Why don't I put it this way, I'm both a sporty girl and an exhibitionist. A sporty girl to those who think of me as a sporty girl, and an exhibitionist to those who think of me as an exhibitionist."

"Stop playing with words! Saying "I'm X to those who think of me as X and Y to those who think of me as Y" is only cool while you're in junior high! What are you, my little sister?!"

This conversation was as pointless as it could get.

There's no way it could get even more pointless.

"But seriously, Kanbaru. No matter how hard to try, you'll never be able to replace Senjougahara."

"..."

You'll never be able to replace Senjougahara.

That's not all I meant to say.

"You're not Senjougahara in the first place. No one can really replace someone else. And no one can become someone else. Senjougahara Hitagi is Senjougahara Hitagi, and Kanbaru Suruga is Kanbaru Suruga. No matter how much you love them, no matter how much you look up to them, no matter how much..."

"You're right."

After a period of silence, Kanbaru nodded.

"You're right, Araragi-senpai."

"Alright, stop wasting our time chatting and let's go. And get out of that pose, it looks like I've been talking with a high school girl who's just been holding her own chest. You think that sort of surreal scene could exist?"

"Hm. I didn't notice that."

"You should've noticed that sooner."

There are so many things that you should've noticed sooner.

"If we don't hurry up the sun's going to set. Your left hand get's bad at night right."

"Well on the other hand, as long as the sun's out, there's no problem. At the very least, we'll be fine for a couple more hours."

"Wow... only active at night. Really reminds me of vampires..."

We walked along the wire mesh fence surrounding the building until we arrived at a large hole in the fence. The same one that Senjouhara and I had entered through three weeks ago.

This time it was with Kanbaru though.

I thought that we had nothing to do with each other, but it seems like fate disagrees.

Whatever that was about all coincidences being fate.

"Watch out for you feet."

"Thanks for the concern."

Kanbaru advanced while trying to push away some of the rampantly growing grass as if to clear a path, but at this rate I wondered what would even happen to this building by the summertime. The building appeared to be on the edge of destruction, or even already destroyed. And so we entered the building.

Things were scattered all around.

Pieces of concrete, empty cans, signs, broken glass, I couldn't tell what some of the stuff that was scattered around even was. It was just all scattered around. The building obviously had no electricity, and the already dark and gloomy building looked like it had decayed into ruins even more than usual in the setting evening sun. Why doesn't Oshino try to clean up at least the interior of the building since he's got so much free time. Isn't it depressing living in this sort of place.

Still a bit better than Kanbaru's room though...

Senjouhara seemed uncomfortable at the building's condition and Oshino's indulgent neglect, but it seemed Kanbaru had no problems with it at all.

"It's so dirty, I can't say that I approve. If he's going to live here, why doesn't this Oshino guy clean up the place."

"..."

She really is strict on people in strange places.

Or does she really have no idea about her own condition... I thought that she was just that bold because she had a lot of self confidence, but she really can be strict.

That part of her was completely different from Senjougahara.

She's way too self conscious.

Oshino mainly stayed on the fourth floor.

I walked along in the dim light.

It became darker the further away from the entrance we went. I've already come here so many times, how could I have forgotten to bring a flashlight. I had the envelope Senjougahara gave me with the hundred thousand yen inside, so clearly I had intended to come here no matter what ended up happening with Kanbaru so I really should have remembered.

Depending on the time and place, I'm fine even in the dark, so I guess I just got used to it and completely forgot about it over time.

The remaining traces of when I was a vampire.

"..."

When I reached the base of the stairs, I turned around to see Kanbaru timidly walking behind me, almost like she was lightheaded. She didn't seem to be doing well because of the dark. Despite how firm on her feet she usually was being such a sporty girl, her steps seemed filled with uneasiness and almost hopeless. It seemed cruel to make her climb the stairs with her like this now. With her left hand already like it was, what would happen if she hurt one of her legs... When I came with Senjougahara we held hands going up though...

That was the first time Senjougahara and I held hands. Hmm... Kanbaru turned down my offer to ride on the back of my bike, was it because she was thinking about this? I experienced first hand how serious Senjougahara's standards about cheating were yesterday so...

"Hey, Kanbaru-kouhai."

"What is it, Araragi-senpai?"

"Stick out your right hand."

"Like this?"

"Ok, combine."

I pulled her hand and had her hold on to the belt holding up my school slacks.

"There are stairs here, so we're going to go up slowly so you don't fall. Watch out."

"..."

There's no that this sort of physical contact could count as cheating by Senjougahara's standards, my plan was perfect. This was really just playing with the definitions, but at least now I had an excuse to tell Senjougahara.

"You're a nice guy you know, Araragi-senpai."

Kanbaru said, while tightly holding on to and pulling the belt as if to test its strength.

"Don't people ever tell you that? That you're a nice guy and a great person."

"I wouldn't really want people complementing me with those sort of vague compliments like they're trying to make up for my lack of individuality."

"I'm really grateful that you worry so much about my relationship with Senjougahara-senpai even when it comes to just leading me along in the dark. So this is what people mean when they talk about people being so nice it's annoying."

"... You said that out loud you know."

Still, she sure is sharp.

Normally people wouldn't have figured that out.

But even if you figured it out, seriously, don't say it. That's just embarrassing. The more she acts all goofy, the more I can't stand being around her."

"Can I ask you something, Araragi-senpai?"

"Sure, anything except for top or bottom stuff."

"Ahh, I guess we'll save the stuff about top and bottom for later."

"Is that what you wanted to ask me about!?"

"Also about my panties and whether I'm an exhibitionist."

"Don't try to bring that conversation back!"

"Honestly, there's nothing I want to talk about except perverted stuff."

"As if there are actually people like that! Hurry up and tell me what you were going to ask me about."

"Judging from our conversations up until now, it seems like you haven't told Senjougahara-senpai anything about me."

"What? I talked to her about it. That's how I found out about you and her being the Valhalla Combo

and all."

Technically I found out about the term "Valhalla Combo" from Hanekawa, but I wouldn't have understood the relationship between them without having confirmed with Senjouhara anyway. Even if I could have made a guess, I would've never had a chance. And I didn't even think to ask Hanekawa.

"That's not what I meant. My right hand. About my right hand attacking you..."

"Oh, that. I haven't really had the time to talk to her about that and... Well yesterday night wasn't really a good time. And I didn't really know the whole truth then. I didn't know what your right hand was like. I wasn't even entirely sure that you were the one who attacked me. It really was just a guess. Right now she just thinks that I hit a telephone pole on my bike."

"But the area around got destroyed so badly. Were you really ok?"

"Well that's one of the perks of being a former vampire, and I couldn't really go to the police or a hospital. It'd be bad for me too if I went public. Of course I know I can't Senjouhara in the dark about you forever... But I think you should be the one to tell her, not me."

"It's not that I'm being a really nice guy, or a great person. It's just that, after telling me everything."

Your unfair way of looking at things.

Your black-hearted reluctance and attachment.

I could never...

"... Woops."

In the landing between the third and fourth floors, was Shinobu.

Oshino Shinobu.

Looking about eight years old with skin so white it seemed almost transparent and wearing a helmet and goggles. A young blonde haired girl sat on the landing holding her knees to her chest. She was childlike, like a zashiki-warashi guarding a house, except for her blonde hair.

I was surprised seeing her sitting there and let out a little sound.

Shinobu just sat completely still on the landing staring at Kanbaru and I as we climbed the stairs. There was a complex look in her eyes; bitter, unsparing, as if she had some complaint, or she was unsatisfied with something.

"..."

I ignored her.

I headed for the fourth floor looking away from her and tried to avoid any sort of contact with her. I couldn't think of anything else to do in that situation... But why was she on this landing anyway? Did she have a fight with Oshino?

"Hey, hey! Araragi-senpai. Who's that girl?"

Kanbaru asked as we reached the fourth floor in a rather frivolous tone having lost her cool composure from before. I guess it would be more unreasonable to tell her to just ignore a young girl sitting in an abandoned building without any explanation... Part of Kanbaru's body had become a kiai, could she sense anything from Shinobu?

"That girl was so cute!"

"Why is that the happiest I've seen you today!?"

"I want to hug her... No, I want her to hug me!"

"You sure are fickle."

Didn't you say you could have died for Senjougara?

And she's still a kid...

"Could you just keep those thoughts to yourself..."

"I don't want to keep any secrets from you, Araragi-senpai."

"You're way too revealing with this stuff."

"Revealing?"

"Don't get excited just because I said 'revealing'! Can't I just use a word with more than one meaning!?"

I guess she doesn't discriminate, or she's not just yuri for Senjougahara. It's like she's trying to carpet bomb all my fantasies about everything, not just women, into oblivion. I silently promised that I would never introduce Hachikuji to her then told my dark feelings to Kanbaru.

The mere shadow of...

A vampire.

The remains of...

A vampire.

That was that blonde haired girl, Oshino Shinobu.

We could relax while that was all she was...

"Hmm. I see... That's too bad."

"Now I've seen the saddest you've looked today. And by the way, we're here Kanbaru. Now the question is whether Oshino is here. We can't exactly just call it a day and come back tomorrow if he's not here. My life's on the line here."

"... Sorry about that."

"I wasn't trying to be bitter. Don't worry about it."

"Still, my conscience won't let me leave it at that. You have to let me do something to make it up to you. I got it, Araragi-senpai, what's your favorite color?"

"What, my favorite color? Are you going to give me something? Nothing in particular but, if I had to say it's blue."

"Blue. Got it."

Kanbaru nodded.

"So, I promise that when I meet you, I'll try to wear blue underwear to the best of my ability."

"Don't involve me in your perverted fantasies! You're making it seem like it's my fault now. You're just frustrated!"

On the fourth floor, out of the three classrooms, all of their doors were broken. If he really is here, Oshino would be inside one of these three classrooms.

The first one was empty.

And inside the second one, was Oshino.

"What took you so long, Araragi-kun. I got so bored waiting for you I almost fell asleep just now."

Those were Oshino Meme's first words as he lay on a sheet of cardboard whose color had changed like it had rotten, spread across a linoleum floor covered all over in cracks. The cracks presented such as danger that tripping wasn't even the main concern, you'd probably cut yourself pretty deeply on the soles of your feet if you walked barefoot on it. As always, he seemed completely unconcerned and uninterested in his surroundings and his first words gave the impression he already understood everything.

His psychedelic aloha shirt was covered in wrinkles, and his hair was unkempt, all together his appearance was unclean. The very words 'cleanliness' and 'freshness' were probably words from a completely different dimension to his man. One could say that his appearance fit the inside of this abandoned building perfectly, but then I couldn't even start to imagine what Oshino looked like before

he started living here.

Oshino hung his head as if incredibly bored.

I noticed Kanbaru was hiding herself behind me and still holding on to my belt although we had already arrived, either out of anxiety or out of caution after seeing Oshino who looked rather suspicious.

"What's this, Araragi-kun, you brought a different girl today again. Every time I meet you you're always with a different girl. You have my congratulations."

"Shut up. Stop using the same line."

"It was the same situation so of course I would use the same line. I don't have that many lines in the first place. And another girl with straight bangs. Looking at the uniform, she's in your grade right? Your school has rules on what kinds of hairstyles are allowed? That's quite old fashioned isn't it. Interesting."

"As if we have those sorts of rules."

It's just a coincidence.

Apart from the difference in length, Kanbaru's hairstyle probably looks the same as Senjougahara's because she was trying to copy her. I'm not really sure about why Senjougahara keeps her hair the way she does, but from what Hanekawa said, it's to look serious. Or something like that.

"So I guess this is your type, Araragi-kun. When I get a chance, I'll cut Shinobu-chan's hair like that too. She's just been letting her hair grow so it's a good time to get a haircut anyway. Next time why don't you bring along a girl with a bob cut. Might be a bit tough, but I'll just put it out there."

"I saw Shinobu out on the stairwell. What's she doing there?"

"She got mad when I ate one of the donuts I got her for a snack from Mister Donuts. She's been like that since yesterday."

"..."

What kind of vampire is she?

And what kind of old man are you?

"I tried to be nice and gave her the Pao de Ring donut but, she really does hold a grudge. I should teach her the phrase 'Quality over quantity.'"

"Who cares... Seriously, who cares. Anyway Oshino, there's one thing I have to correct you on. She's not in my grade. Look, her skirt's a different color than Senjougahara and Hanekawa. She's one year below them. Her name's Kanbaru Suruga. *Kan* from 'god' and *baru* from 'fields'. The 'Suruga' part

is..."

Uh.

I know the kanji but it's a bit hard to explain...

I guess I'm just bad at Japanese.

"*Suruga* from 'Suruga questioning.'"

Kanbaru helped me out.

Thank goodness... But what's Suruga questioning anyway?

I don't know the word, but it sounds like some famous test. Maybe something mysterious like the Sphinx's riddle.

"Ahh, Suruga questioning. I see."

Oshino nodded, having understood what Suruga meant.

Dammit, if Oshino didn't know, I could have just waited for Suruga to explain it to him and listened... I was a little annoyed at not knowing so I asked Kanbaru 'What's Suruga questioning?'"

"It's a well known torture method from the Edo period. They would tie a person's arms and legs behind their back, hang them from the ceiling, then place a heavy rock on their back and spin them around."

"Don't explain your own name like a torture method!"

"It's a type of torture that I've always wanted to have done to me."

".....!"

First yuri, then boy's love, then being on the bottom, then lolis, now masochism!? How much shit is she in to?

It appears our school's star was already morally bankrupt, even without all the rumours going around about her.

I lost my words.

"Anyway, it's Kanbaru Suruga."

The conversation seemed to have eased the nervous atmosphere and Kanbaru let go of my belt and showed the half of her body that she was hiding behind me to Oshino. And in her usual dignified tone filled with confidence and without a speck of doubt, placed her right hand in front of her chest and

introduced herself.

"I'm Araragi-senpai's kouhai. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too. I'm Oshino Meme, young lady."

In response to Kanbaru's bright smile, Oshino simply smirked.

Smiling and smirking, the words are so similar, but the impression I got from them was completely different. More like complete opposites. I guess a smile isn't just as simple as a smile. Oshino has his own rather invigorating way of smiling but Kanbaru's seemed too invigorating and actually ended up being unpleasant. In Oshino's case, it looked fake, like a model.

"... Hmm, you're Araragi-kun's kouhai, so that means you're also tsundere-chan's kouhai right?" said Oshino, as if looking at Kanbaru's back, with his gaze far in the distance and out of focus; in a way that seemed as though he was alluding to something other than the obvious fact that Senjougahara and I were both third years so Kanbaru would also be Senjougahara's kouhai.

Or it might just be my imagination.

"Oshino, first off, I have something for you. It's from your tsundere-chan, Senjougahara."

"Hmm? What's with that envelope. Ahh, the money. Money, money, money. Great. I was just getting a little tight with money. I can make it to the rainy season with this. I thought that I would just have to wait for the rain to drink something."

"Don't tell your unpleasant stories to sensitive kids."

I see the sort of situation they were in, fighting over donuts. I can see why Shinobu would get mad. Even as a vampire, she was of noble birth. And now she's living in this abandoned building with a dirty middle aged man. She really has fallen pretty far... I'm not sure how I feel being one of the reasons she's living like this now.

Oshino checked the contents of the envelope.

"Ok, 100 thousand yen. Now there's nothing between me and tsundere-chan. Going through you instead of coming to give it herself, I must have grown on her. Seems like tsundere-chan gets how things work around here."

"What? Isn't that the opposite? Wouldn't it seem more she's more grateful, or more sincere if-"

"That's the same whether she shows me or not. Anyway, I don't intend to debate this with you Araragi-kun, we'd just be going back and forth. Alright then, what's with the young lady over there." said Oshino, stuffing the envelope into the pocket of his aloha shirt (crumpling the nice new bills) and tilted his chin up at Kanbaru.

"You didn't just bring her to here to introduce me to your cute kouhai right? Or did you just bring her

to show off? If that's how it is, that would mean I really underestimated you as a man, Araragi-kun... Haha, that's pretty hard to imagine though. So that means... Hmm, got it, those bandages right? Hehe..."

"Oshino-san. I-"

Kanbaru started talking but Oshino just waved his hand slowly as if to get a hold of the conversation.

"Let's start from the beginning. Doesn't seem like a very pleasant story. The ones about arms never are, at least for me. Particularly that left arm it seems."

As I was cleaning up Kanbaru Suruga's room, among the crushed soft drink cans and candy wrappers and instant noodle cups, there was one thing that seemed strange and out of place. It was a thin and long wooden box. It looked quite aged from its color, and probably because of Kanbaru's rough way of handling things, it was scratched and nicked all over. Despite that, it was a bulky and sturdy looking box. I thought that there was probably some antique, like an old flower vase inside. Considering the grandeur of Kanbaru's Japanese manor, I wouldn't be at all surprised if an article of matching grandeur were inside the box.

However.

The box was empty.

Of course, just because it was empty, I couldn't throw it in with the trash, so for the time being I piled it up on top of a cardboard box. However, as we approach the real question at hand, Kanbaru reached out her hand to the box and solemnly placed it between us. She then asked me what I thought was inside the box. I told her what I thought was in the box, some flower vase or something.

"Even you make mistakes sometimes, don't you Araragi-senpai... This may be slightly impolite, but I'm actually quite relieved. I feel saved. I feel like I could you the humanity in you for a brief moment."

"... So, what's actually in the box?"

"A mummy." Kanbaru immediately answered.

"Inside that box... there's the left hand of a mummy."

"....."

The mummy of a left hand inside that wooden box.

The first time that Kanbaru had used it was when she was in elementary school, so she said. Eight years ago. Apparently back when she was only in third grade, her mother entrusted her with this box.

That was also the last time she would see her mother.

A few days after receiving the box, almost as if she had foreseen what would happen and gave her the box beforehand, Kanbaru's parents both died in a traffic accident. While Kanbaru was in school during math class, her parents died instantly in a massive pileup on highway far away. Apparently the car caught fire and the bodies were barely recognizable.

Kanbaru was taken in by her grandparents on her father's side.

Taken in to live in this Japanese manor.

Until then she lived with her parents in an apartment, also apparently because of her parents' elopement. Nobody had approved of or blessed their marriage. A father from a family of long tradition and history, and a mother from a family with absolutely nothing to do with those things... Her story made me wonder if these sorts of things still happen nowadays. Of course, it's not even particularly uncommon, replied Kanbaru.

"My mother had it quite tough. My father, it seems like he was trying to sail against the tide. But it didn't work out. They were essentially alienated by their families. Actually, until my parents' funeral, I had never even met my grandparents. I didn't even know their names, and they didn't know mine. The first thing they asked me, was my name."

"Hmm..."

Flooding on top and burning on the bottom.

Don't worry about my parents.

As if I could.

Given that there was discord between Kanbaru's grandparents and her mother, Kanbaru was still their son's daughter, in other words, their granddaughter. Of course they would take her in. And so Kanbaru left the place where she had lived until then and of course, transferred out of the elementary school she had been going to.

She couldn't get used to it.

"Probably because I spoke differently. I speak like this now but, it seems like my parents tried to pick a place as far away from this house as possible, it was somewhere in the southern part of Kyushu, so the dialect was pretty different. I didn't quite get bullied but, they played pranks on me and I couldn't make any friends."

"So... the elementary school you went to was different from the one Senjougahara went to right?"

"Right. I only met Senjougahara in junior high."

"I see."

Well, looking at it geographically, I suppose it would be like that.

It was probably also different from Hanekawa's elementary school.

"Looking back at it now, it's now like I wasn't guilty at all of causing some disharmony in my new surroundings. It seems obvious but, my parents' death really did affect me. So I closed off my heart. But it's not like I could just tell everyone around me to treat me nicely just because I had closed off my heart. But, this is also something I can only talk about now. At the time, I was just trapped by my

feelings about my parents' death. But I also couldn't lose myself in my memories of my parents. I couldn't indulge in my memories. My grandfather and grandmother disposed of all of my parents' belongings, they didn't leave a single thing. They probably wanted to raise me so that I would have nothing to do with my parents at all."

"Thanks but no thanks." added Kanbaru.

"My grandfather and grandmother are both great people, I respect them and I'm really grateful to them for raising me. Their relationship with my parents has nothing to do with me."

Really.

It seems a bit too long to have been just some discord. And now all that was left to Kanbaru of her parents' were her memories, and that wooden box entrusted to her by her mother.

Despite the solemnness and seriousness of the box, Kanbaru had never been told not to open it. So she did. And inside was the left hand of a mummy.

However, it seems that when she opened it, the hand only went up to the wrist. Inside the box along with the mummy, there was a letter from her mother. Really, it wasn't long enough to call a letter, more like an instruction manual on how to use the left hand.

Explaining that it was a tool that granted wishes.

That it could grant any wish.

Any three.

At the time, Kanbaru had just gone up a grade and become a fourth grader, nine or ten years old. Regardless of her exact age, she was at a strange age where one just might or might not believe such strange story. An age where she might just barely believe it or just barely not believe it. About the age where half the kids believe in Santa Claus and half don't, right? Or maybe that was just a fantasy looking at it from my generation... at least I don't think I believed in Santa Claus when I was in fourth grade. I might have believed in Doraemon's secret gadgets though.

Kanbaru was right on the half way borderline.

In other words, in half belief and half doubt, with around the confidence to test some magic charm published in a magazine, not taking it very seriously, Kanbaru told her "wish" to mummy.

The contents of her first wish weren't really important.

After all, it was just like testing some charm in a magazine.

It was just to test it out.

"If my first wish gets granted, I know what I'll wish for in my second wish." said Kanbaru.

It goes without saying.

Her second wish was regarding her parents.

Regarding her parents' life.

"I want to be able to run quickly."

Kanbaru, in fourth grade at the time, wished to the mummy. Apparently Kanbaru was also known for how slowly she ran... Apart from her accent, that was another reason she was made fun of. Thinking about it as a high schooler, it's as stupid as a reason as having an accent, but even if it weren't, wanting to be able to run quickly would be a serious, pressing concern to an elementary school kid. Around that time, it just so happened that there was a small athletic meet at the school Kanbaru was going to. It seems she wished to the mummy thinking that if she got first place in the race, everyone would see her in a different light.

"At the time, I was absolutely horrible at athletics. I was 'slow' or maybe 'dull'. I would trip even when I walked."

"Hmm.. But now,"

She's the ace of the basketball team.

A star.

"... Wait, does that mean,"

"I wish it turned out like that."

"In fact," Kanbaru started.

"That night, I had a dream. A dream where kids were being attacked **by a monster in a raincoat**. I dreamt that a kid all wrapped up in his futon was mercilessly attacked by a monster's **left hand**."

"....."

"I'm sure you already know how this story ends, having such a good intuition. Right Araragi-senpai? The next day, when I woke up and went to school, four students were absent. All four of them were the kids I was going to race against in the athletic meet."

The monkey's paw.

Apparently, it granted its owner's wishes.

But apparently, in a way its owner didn't intend.

"I was horrified. In a panic, I investigated the true nature of the mummy at the library. Right away, I

found *The Monkey's Paw* by Jacobs. I shivered at how terrifying it was... If I had also told my second wish to the hand, what would have happened I wondered. Actually, those four students could have died depending on the situation... Luckily nothing major happened to them, but it easily could have."

Kanbaru returned the mummy to the box, sealed even more solemnly than before it was opened and placed it into the very back of her closet. Both the second wish and the third wish were preposterous. She wanted to look away from everything. She wanted to forget about everything.

But.

She couldn't.

However much she wanted to forget, there was no way she could. There was still some time before the athletic meet. So, on the day after that, Kanbaru was placed into another group during class.

This time there were five people.

She would be running, with another five people.

"What do you think I did?"

"....."

"What do you think I should have done?"

Obviously, doing nothing at all, the results would have been clear as day. The same thing would happen. The same thing would repeat. So, the normal thing to do would be to wish to the mummy. All she could do was wish to the mummy to cancel her first wish. But, she was afraid to do that. Having already investigated into the mummy, Kanbaru was afraid to do that. The hand granted its owner's wishes in a way its owner didn't intend. There was no way of knowing in what twisted way her second wish would be granted.

So, Kanbaru ran.

She ran and ran and ran.

She was slow.

So she put in the effort so she could be fast.

"All I could do was grant my wish by myself. That way, the mummy would have no reason to attack those students. Luckily, as soon as I started, I got the ropes of it. There was no physical reason that I was slow like being heavy or having hurt my legs. Even if I couldn't train my reflexes right away, I could dash. I got first place in the meet. That way I started making some friends in my class. It did take a little time though, obviously."

And so, having succeeded in granting her wish with her own effort, Kanbaru never slacked off even

after the meet. It might be a bit rude to say that she had some innate talent, but her dedication eventually bloomed and bore fruit. So much so that as soon as she entered sixth grade, she got an offer from her junior high's track team.

Going tap tap tap.

But, Kanbaru couldn't enter join the track team. She couldn't place herself in a place where **there could be people faster than her**. She didn't know how far the mummy's effects would extend. It might have already been over as soon as she got first place in the athletic meet. Or, it might stay with her for her entire life. There was no way to check. There was no way she couldn't have been afraid of the latter possibility.

From Kanbaru's perspective.

She had already figured out that she wasn't suited to long distance running. Not just on the level of her marathon's in elementary school, she already couldn't keep up during junior high. Even if by a little bit, if there was anyone faster than her, she'd have to start everything over again. It would all be over. That's probably why Kanbaru joined the basketball club in junior high. There was no one who could keep up with Kanbaru on a field divided into and limited to a court.

"There was also the option of not joining any clubs at all, but it wasn't just that I couldn't let my body get weak just in case, exercise had become a place to lean on for me. If I wasn't doing anything, I felt like I was being crushed. You might call me a sporty girl, but I'm not as great as that. I was just driven by fear.

However.

It seems like she enjoyed basketball.

She started liking it.

That was because, she was finally able to use her legs, which had just been a place for her to lean on, to walk forward, positively. She was able to use her feet which had just been a means to run away from the mummy with, as a means for something else, or rather as a goal.

Besides that.

By becoming the ace of her team.

She was able to Senjougahara Hitagi.

"Senjougahara-senpai was the ace of the track team, so she came to see me after she heard my reputation of being fast. She might have already forgotten, even if she does still remember, she probably doesn't care anymore, but at the beginning, it was Senjougahara-senpai who approached me first.

"He..."

That was a little, surprising.

Not for the current Senjougahara, but even for Senjougahara back in junior high, that was a little surprising.

"She challenged me to an unofficial hundred meter race. It was really tough, having to turn her down. She was such an amazing senpai. I didn't fall for her at first sight, but I had already fallen for her three days after we started talking. I started thinking that I wanted to be beside her. I was healed by Senjougahara-senpai."

Healed.

That word is as distant from Senjougahara now as Pluto is from the Sun, but it seems after meeting Senjougahara, Kanbaru really was able to stop thinking about the mummy entrusted to her by her mother, about the wooden box shoved into her closet.

She was able to forget.

She was able to forget what she had always wanted to.

However.

"But really, it was still there deep in my consciousness, remaining there unconsciously. After that, I still sporadically felt the urge to use the mummy several times. I felt the urge to rely on the mummy. Like when we were facing off against a good team in basketball. Like when I had an awful fight with my friend. Like when I tried to get into Naoetsu Private High School to be with Senjougahara-senpai... Like when Senjougahara-senpai rejected me."

She held herself back through all of it.

She did something about it by herself.

Of maybe, she just gave up on everything.

At that time, Kanbaru understood the reason her mother had entrusted her with that wooden box. It was because her mother had wanted her to become the sort of person who could solve her problems by herself when she had to. She had wanted to teach Kanbaru not the lesson from *The Monkey's Paw*; that you should just accept fate, but that if you're going to change fate, you should be able to do it by yourself. Her mother had been taught from her mother, and her mother's mother from her mother, and her mother's mother's mother from her mother, passing through the generations, that fate was something to be changed by your own hands, and wishes were something to be granted with your own hands. That was passed down through the generations. So, being able to run fast, or being smart, those were both things that she gained by herself.

She wasn't born with these things.

They lay at the end of a path of blood, sweat and tears.

And she always remembers that.

That's why.

If Kanbaru had wished to the mummy, she might have been able to solve the secret, the problem that Senjougahara held, but she didn't.

She stayed silent.

And pulled away by herself.

She gave up on even being beside Senjougahara.

She squeezed her hands and bit her lips, and gave up.

I could die for Senjougahara.

She had said that clearly. Kanbaru Suruga had.

All for Senjougahara's sake, Kanbaru killed herself.

She let her own wishes die.

She forgot the things she didn't want to.

And the things that she couldn't.

"But a year after that, I found out about you, Araragi-senpai. I found out about you, Araragi-senpai. I saw you, Araragi-senpai, beside Senjougahara-senpai."

She couldn't hold herself back.

She couldn't do something about it.

She couldn't give up.

When exactly she opened her closet, when exactly she took out that wooden box, when exactly she opened that envelope, when exactly she made a wish to the mummy, Kanbaru no longer knew. Kanbaru thought nothing of **why the hand of the mummy which was only supposed to have been up to the left wrist, now extended up to the elbow**. And when she finally noticed.

Kanbaru's left hand had become a kiai.

Her arm, had become that of a beast.

For the first time in seven years, Kanbaru was horrified. Apparently.

"... So that's when you started stalking me... Now that I think about it, every time we met, you'd

always ask me if anything had happened or not."

So that's what she meant.

It wasn't just some casual talk.

She wasn't trying to find anything out about Senjouhara. That hand that she could no longer play her beloved basketball with, even with that hand that she would never wanted anyone to see, she went as far as to hide it with a bandage to make sure I was safe. She was that concerned for me.

But, on the fourth day after she started stalking me.

The night of the fourth day.

Something happened.

Apparently Kanbaru had a dream.

A dream where a monster wearing a raincoat attacked me.

And so, today, when I entered the Year-2 Class-2 classroom, Kanbaru seemed so relaxed.

She understood everything.

What had happened.

She thought that something quite different from what I thought had happened. She understood that kaii were involved, but she wasn't aware of what phenomena were occurring... She wasn't aware of the fact that it was the mummy's doing.

Apparently, the monkey's paw granted its owner's wishes.

But apparently, in a way its owner didn't intend.

The mummy thought that in order for Kanbaru to be able to be beside Senjouhara, eliminating the person currently going out with Senjouhara, Araragi Koyomi, would be the quickest method.

Most likely.

Fearing that Kanbaru began stalking me.

However, Kanbaru's prediction was spot on.

In reality, if I wasn't me, if Araragi Koyomi wasn't Araragi Koyomi, if I wasn't a former immortal vampire, I would definitely have been killed. I wouldn't have been able to dodge the first or the second attacks, and even if I could have, the third one would have been fatal. That was how ridiculous the hand's destructive power, its destructive capabilities were. By conjecture, when

Kanbaru was in elementary school, the only reason the victims weren't hurt too badly was because at that time in fourth grade, Kanbaru was still devoid of athletic capabilities. The polar opposite of Kanbaru now. Ironically, the very body she had trained in order to avoid the effects of her first wish, made the effects of her second wish ever the more horrible. She only attacked with her left hand, her lightning speed faster than the eye could see, was Kanbaru Suruga's real ability. The upgraded version of her ability.

Her ability, her destructive ability.

Violence.

And.

As a matter of fact, her problem's still not over. As long as I'm still alive, it'll never end. As soon as the sun sets and it becomes night, that monster in the raincoat will attack me. And Kanbaru will dream of me being attacked by that monster in the raincoat.

It'll keep on repeating until I die. Over and over again.

Until her dream is fulfilled.

Until her wish is granted.

Until Kanbaru's second wish is granted.

And even though Kanbaru's wish was only that...

"The very existence of people in this world, I find tiresome. But not you."

"Hmm?"

Kanbaru opened her eyes looking like she didn't entirely understand my quote.

"What's that?"

"Nothing really... I was just thinking about whether the person we're about to go see will welcome us or not."

And so.

Just like that, without changing or eating lunch, I on my bike and Kanbaru dashing, we headed to the abandoned cram school slightly off of a residential area where Oshino Meme and Oshino Shinobu lived.

And so, finally we arrive at the present.

The present.

On the fourth floor, Kanbaru and I faced Oshino. Even after hearing a brief outline of the situation, Oshino showed no signs of a reaction and simply looked up at the fluorescent lamp hanging from the ceiling (of course, the building had no power so it was quite literally, just hanging) while swinging the unlit cigarette he had put in his mouth partway into Kanbaru's explanation from side to side, all the while saying nothing. We had already said everything that we could including everything about Senjouhara so there was nothing left for us to do...

Still it felt, somewhat awkward.

Oshino Meme was usually so talkative one would think that he was born from a tongue, but from time to time he would grow quiet like this. He was truly a difficult man to deal with. It's times like these that I think that although he looks like a really lively guy usually, maybe he's actually a really gloomy guy.

"Your bandage."

Finally, at last Oshino spoke.

"Your bandage. Would you mind taking it off and showing me young lady?"

"Ahh, sure."

Kanbaru shot a glance at me as if seeking help. I told Kanbaru "It's fine." to calm her down. Hearing my words, Kanbaru started taking off the bandage with her right hand. And then.

And then, the hand of a beast appeared.

Rolling up her sleeves, Kanbaru exposed up to her upper arm. As if to show the joint between the arm of a beast and the arm of a human, Kanbaru bent her elbow took a step forward and said to Oshino "Is this ok?"

"... Sure, that's good. I see, I thought as much."

"You thought as much? What did you have in mind? Oshino. I can never understand your attitude, you always act like this trying to provoke us. Acting omnipotent isn't really that fun is it?"

"Get off my case man, you seem lively today, Araragi-kun, did something good happen to you?"

Oshino spit out the cigarette which he never ended up lighting. Actually, now that I think about it, I don't think I've ever seen Oshino with a lit cigarette in his mouth. I turned to face that frivolous bastard's ever snickering grin.

"Araragi-kun, and you too young lady. First off I'd like to correct one of your misconceptions, that isn't a monkey's paw."

"What?"

All of a sudden, Oshino overturned all of our assumptions up until now. I was surprised. Kanbaru seemed caught off guard as well.

"The monkey's paw has diverged into so many different variants since Jacobs' time that it's impossible to tell what the real one was like, but I don't remember anything in my admittedly limited information about it fusing with its owner's arm. With tsundere-chan's crab, if yours was a crab it'd be all it took for this to be a nice classic Japanese folktale but the world doesn't always work out like that. You did a bit of research on your own didn't you young lady? I'm quite sure you wouldn't have come across anything about the monkey's paw fusing with its owner's arm. If you did though, I guess it'd just mean that there are still big gaps in my insufficient knowledge."

"... Well I did look into it, but that was back when I was in elementary school."

"Thought as much. But if that's the case, why did you think that it was a monkey's paw? I'm sure your mother **definitely** never talked about it like it was. Probably because it fit the majority of the conditions right?"

"Conditions? What do you mean by that?"

"In other words, those two "**apparently**"s, Araragi-kun. Apparently, the monkey's paw grants its owner's wishes. But apparently, in a way its owner's didn't intend. Those two right?"

Hmm, Oshino smiled disgustingly.

He seemed like his personality was just bad, or rotten to the core.

"That must have been a convenient explanation for you, right young lady? Or should I say that it must have felt good? Whatever, it doesn't matter either way. But what's important is that definitely isn't the monkey's paw. You said that it used to be a mummy right? So it gained life by assimilating into you, right? Meaning, it should be the Rainy Devil."

"Rainy...?"

Oshino continued the conversation saying "So, allowing me neither the question following my reaction to the word "Rainy" as well as any time to do so.

"Araragi-kun, have you read *Faust*?"

"What?"

"So I see you haven't. It seems more like you were never even aware that it existed. I'm not even surprised. I've decided to just get used to your reactions, Araragi-kun. So, young lady, what about you? Have you read *Faust*?"

"Ahh, wait."

Kanbaru was surprised by Oshino's sudden question, however she quickly responded "No, I'm not a

very good student so I haven't read it yet." like it was an automatic reflex.

"Of course, I know the how the story goes though."

"I see. It's enough if you know how it goes. Most high schoolers should know at least that much. Haha, Araragi-kun, embarrassing isn't it."

"Don't make fun of Araragi-senpai! Obviously he just happened to not know about that one book! He's just not the type that likes reading books in the first place!" shouted Kanbaru, suddenly raising her voice in protest at Oshino's words.

Oshino was stunned at Kanbaru's reaction which seemed normally impossible and looked to me apparently seeking an explanation.

I looked away.

... Kanbaru.

I'm happy that you'd get that angry for me but...

I had never thought that having someone who would get angry for me would be so reassuring, but yelling at Oshino just makes me seem like an idiot...

"Kanbaru... That joke's only funny the first time. It's sorta funny, but if you do it every time Oshino takes a jab at me we'll never finish here..."

"Hmm. I see. Those are the wise words of a man who can be impartial with anyone, aren't they Araragi-senpai. Honestly, as a person devoid of moral character who is easily angered, I may find it difficult to heed your wise words, but if you say so, I shall restrain myself and bear this offense." Kanbaru nodded and bowed her head to Oshino.

"My deepest apologies."

At least she knew how to apologize.

What a polite kid.

"... It's fine. It was pretty fun. But really, even with your arm like that, you sure are lively, did something good happen to you young lady? Anyway, let's get back to *Faust*. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was the representative author of the Sturm und Drang movement, and his culminating and representative work was his play *Faust*. Well about the play's story... young lady, whatever you know's fine, could you fill Araragi-kun in?"

"Uh, sure."

Kanbaru shyly looked at me.

Her gaze seemed strangely apologetic.

She was like this when she explained the summary of Jacob's, it seems like Kanbaru felt a sort of apprehensiveness when explaining anything to people she saw as superior to herself.

An athletic type through and through.

"Well, Goethe's representative work was just like Oshino-san said... I guess the easiest to explain feature is that it's composed of two parts. *The First Manuscript Faust* and *Faust, A Fragment* comprising *Faust Part One* and *Faust Part Two*. It's writing spanned more than sixty years, it was a massive literary work. I take my hat off to the author. Goethe had a bunch of other famous works such as *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *Elective Affinities*, but any literary critic would agree that his most important work was *Faust*. Essentially, for an introduction, the protagonist; Doctor Faust, sells his soul to the devil Mephistopheles in exchange for all the knowledge in the world. I won't say too much because I don't want to spoil it for you but, the first part is about his romance with a young common woman named Gretchen. The second part is about establishing an ideal country. People most commonly interpret it as philosophical thought or a story of a quest for knowledge. I'm sure you already know but, there exists a concept called the *Faustian Urge*, in other words, a desire to know and experience all there is in the world."

"..."

I wonder why exactly my very athletic type-like kouhai expects me to know what a *Faustian Urge* is when I didn't even know what *Faust* was.

"The main pivot of the story is Faust selling his soul to the devil. He sells his soul in order to try to grant his wish based upon his *Faustian Urge*... And the ending, I'll leave that to you to go to a book store and find out, Araragi-kun. Well, up the point that the young lady explained is all common knowledge. Knowing this much should make my job a lot easier. I have to say that I'm impressed you could explain a book that you haven't even read so well. If there's anything I'd like to add on to your explanation, it would be... that's right. It's actually surprising how few people know this even though you could find this written in any commentary book on Goethe. Well I guess no one reads these old books anymore. I'd not talking about you, young lady, but a lot of people feel like they've pretty much read these famous books even if they haven't, so they end up not bothering to reading them. So I guess you couldn't really expect people to know it anyway. But getting to the point, the story *Faust* was actually based on a real person."

"What? Really?"

Kanbaru seemed surprised.

I've never read *Faust* so I don't know what she'd be surprised by.

"His name was Johann Faust. It's said that he lived during the Renaissance... Well even as a real person, different readers have different opinions, but his story became a sort of folk legend. It's said he lived as either a doctor or a magician, wandering the earth. But in any case, they say he sold his

soul to the devil Mephistopheles in exchange for all the knowledge and all the experiences in the world, promising to become the enemy of all Christians, from then living 24 years living as his *Faustian Urges* would call him. But soon as his contract was ended, he too faced his tragic end. If you want to know the details, read it yourself, it's all in *Doctor Faust*."

"Hmm... Is that so."

Kanbaru appeared impressed at the extent of Oshino's miscellaneous knowledge. Well apart from what he might know about *Faust* and so on, anything involving folk legends is definitely Oshino's field, I'd expect him to have a ton of sources backing him up, but I wonder if Kanbaru's going to start praising him now. I'm not really sure about her standards when it comes to these things anyway, but it seems like she doesn't just shower everyone she meets with praise no matter who they are...

"I thought for sure that Goethe made the character up himself. So he actually based him off the word on the street?"

"Goethe added his own touch to the story, so it's more like Goethe's version of *Doctor Faustus*. It's like Dazai's *Run, Melos!* or Akutagawa's *Rashoumon*. The impression you get from *Konjaku Monogatari* and *Rashoumon* is quite different. It's the same as that. Lots of people other than Goethe turned the legend of Faust into their own stories. A famous example would be Marlowe from England. Have you heard of Marlowe? I'm not talking about Philip Marlowe from Raymond Chandler's stories. I'm talking about Christopher Marlowe. He's often introduced as a man who had a great influence on Shakespeare's works. You know, the guy who wrote *Doctor Faustus*."

"I find it a little funny that Faust would be a doctor." Kanbaru said with a strange bashfulness in her voice.

"Hmm?" said Oshino as he tilted his head to the side seemingly puzzled. It seems like Oshino didn't quite get the meaning behind Kanbaru's bashfulness.

"But... Oshino"

Somewhere along the way, it seemed like their conversation had gone off topic, so I decided to try and join in, still not fully understanding what *Faust* was about.

"So what's your point? I'm fine with your long winded explanations, I have to hear them all the time anyway, but I don't understand how is this supposed to help with Kanbaru's situation. Aren't we getting off topic here? The part how Faust trades his soul in exchange for the devil granting his wish is similar to the Monkey's Paw, but it's not like Kanbaru's arm is the arm of the devil Mephistopheles that appears in *Faust* right? You said that it wasn't a monkey's paw but a devil's hand but..."

"Actually, that's exactly what I meant, Araragi-kun. You're pretty sharp today, aren't you."

Oshino pointed at me tensely.

"It almost seems too convenient for the young lady, whose last name has the character for 'God', to have a devil's hand, it's not as convenient as a fight between a monkey and a crab or that girl who was

lost from a while ago. In this case, it just feels like a coincidence. Mephistopheles wasn't some especially horrible devil like fear incarnate, he was more of a common devil. He was a low ranking devil, or maybe he didn't even have a rank. Sort of like an expendable familiar. That would normally make it quite difficult to identify what kind of devil he was, but now that we know he had the arm of a monkey and that he was wearing a raincoat, we can narrow down the number of possibilities. And the only one that fuses with its owner, is the Rainy Devil."

The Rainy Devil.

"Just think of it as a devil's hand, not a monkey's paw, it's easier to understand that way right? You start to wonder why a monkey would grant a human's wish without any kind of compensation. People might tell you that it was because of that old miracle worker in India who infused the hand with mysterious powers if you asked them why a monkey's paw would grant wishes in the first place, but if it were a devil, it wouldn't need that kind of explanation. All it wants is a soul in exchange."

"A soul..."

"In exchange for a soul, it'll grant you three wishes. Seems perfectly normal for a devil."

"Hmm" Oshino laughed a little through his nose.

He was clearly making fun of me.

"Besides, if it were a monkey's hand it would be the right arm, not the left."

"... Really?"

"When you use the monkey's hand you hold it with the right hand. Then obviously it'd be the right hand. But a devil's hand... Even considering that it isn't a run of the mill devil, this is definitely surprising. There's not much that would surprise you anymore, having already met a vampire and all, but in Japan, this sort of devil is a big deal. It's worth collecting. It's not like Japan doesn't have it's own share of youkai that can grant wishes though. Just look at the class president, or tsundere-chan, or that lost girl, when you look at it this way, they're all the same. This is one strange town. We just might end up summoning Yama, the god of death. Young lady, you said your mother passed that hand down to you right? Kanbaru was your father's last name wasn't it. Do you know your mother's maiden name?"

"If I remember correctly... it was a bit of a weird name." Kanbaru replied, slowly searching through her memories.

"It should be 'Gaen'. Written like 'Ga' from a proverb meaning to do whatever it takes to get what you want, and 'En' meaning smoke. Gaen Tooe was my mother's name before she was married."

"... Hee, I see. And 'Tooe' is from 'To' meaning far and 'E' from the Yangtze River. You could also read it like 'Toutoumi' like Toutoumi Province. And young lady, your name; 'Suruga' is from Suruga Province. Haha, your parents sure had good taste."

"After they were married obviously, her name was Kanbaru Tooe. But Oshino-san, what does this have to do with anything?"

"What does this have to do with anything?' Did you just ask me that? Nah, it doesn't have to do with anything, I was just passing time. And that background info doesn't have to do with anything either. So, Araragi-kun, and young lady, now that you've heard everything, even if it doesn't matter whether it's really a monkey's hand or a devil's hand you guys came to me for help. So what are you planning to do now?"

"What are we planning..."

"Well, Araragi-kun, of course, I'm just as good as any other expert. With my random trivia knowledge and phony qualifications, I wouldn't mind lending you a hand in these situations you know."

"Can..." Kanbaru leaned forward.

"Can you save me?"

"I can't save you. All I can do is lend you a hand. You have to save yourself. Young lady, if you're looking for someone to save you, you're barking up the wrong tree. That isn't my role in the first place. But, in this case... Araragi-kun, what should I do?"

His tone was sinister, but he wasn't expecting an answer he already knew, but like he really was waiting for me to answer, he said nothing afterwards. I wonder why? Isn't it obvious what he should do?"

"Oi, Oshino..."

"In other words, I was asking how I should help, Araragi-kun. Should I help the young lady grant her second wish? Or should I help her cancel it? Or should I help the young lady turn her left arm back to normal? Or all of those? I guess all of them would be asking for a bit too much though... But what I can say is that none of those are going to be easy."

"No... uh"

If I said "all of them", would he actually do that?

But.

"There are two simple ways to solve the current situation. The first is for Araragi-kun to be killed by the monster in the raincoat, the Rainy Devil. Then the young lady's arm will go back to normal and her wish will be granted. The other option is to completely cut off that beast's left arm which has assimilated with the kiai."

"Cut it off?" I was caught off guard by Oshino's rather dangerous suggestion.

"... Is it possible to only cut off the monkey's, I mean the devil's part? And then afterward, will the

arm grow back?"

"It's not like a lizard's tail. there's no way things would work out so conveniently. Honestly, losing one arm to solve the whole problem seems like a pretty sweat deal to me." Oshino was casual as ever, but it was no joke.

This isn't a question of a good or bad deal.

Normally it might be, but it's more serious in Kanbaru's case. She'd never play basketball again. Just thinking of how much basketball saved Kanbaru, and how much she still leaned on it, even if he had just thought of it, he shouldn't have said it out loud.

"U-Uhh, that might be kind of bad for me."

"You tried to kill someone you know? Don't you think this is the least you can do make up for that, young lady?"

Oshino paid no heed to Kanbaru's troubles with his strict words. In times like these, Oshino doesn't have a speck of compassion or mercy. Just like with Hanekawa and Senjougahara...

"Well, Araragi-kun dying would also work just fine in terms of solving the problem."

"O-Oi, I know what you're saying but wait a second, Oshino. She did try to kill someone... you're talking about me right? But that's not what Kanbaru wanted. She only wanted to be with Senjougahara..."

"She just wanted to be with her? Funny." Oshino spoke to me, his tone as grave as before.

"You're such a nice guy, aren't you Araragi-kun? Such a nice and good person... Such a nice and good person. You make me sick. Really. How many people do you have to hurt being so nice before you'll be happy? Just like with Shinobu-chan. 'I just wanted to be with her', do you really believe that sappy bullshit?"

"... Are you saying she's lying." I objected to Oshino as I looked at Kanbaru.

Kanbaru was silent.

"Oi, Kanbaru..."

"Just as an example, Araragi-kun. Don't you think it's weird? When she was in elementary school and she made her first wish, why do you think the left arm beat up all the other kids instead of just letting the young lady run faster?"

"That's because... well, the monkey's paw grants its owner's wish in a way they didn't intend, so..."

"But, that isn't the monkey's paw." Oshino laid out the facts.

"It takes your soul, and in exchange it grants your wish, just how you wanted it. The Rainy Devil is a low level devil, and it's in its nature to use violence, but a contract is a contract. A deal is a deal. If she wished to run fast, she should have just become fast normally. Would messing up all the other kids make her run faster? Don't you think the relationship between the cause and effect is weird? Don't you think it's obvious that if it just beat up all the kids she was going to race with, she'd just be put into another group?"

"..."

He's right.

"... Then why. Why did the monster in the raincoat..."

"Because it wanted to. Our young lady had just transferred into a new school, couldn't make any friends and all the kids were making fun of her. She said it wasn't really as bad as bullying, but that's what everyone who gets bullied says. Being persecuted by her classmates right during the hard time when her parents died, who wouldn't want to get revenge? You'd be weird if you didn't want to."

"I..." She broke off mid sentence and fell silent again.

I wonder how Kanbaru would have tried to explain it.

And why she stopped.

What did she realize?

"It was all subconsciously, obviously. I think it was her subconscious that wished for that. She'd know if she wanted it consciously. In terms of what she aware of, it's the same as her thinking she just wanted to run fast. But, that's just what's on the surface, underneath, it's a different story. Behind that wish, there was a dark desire. She wanted to beat her classmates. She wanted to beat them up. Even if it was just subconsciously, that's what our young lady wished for. The devil saw through to that desire. It figured out what was beneath that wish. But you should have known that all along, right young lady? Even if was your subconscious, those were your own feelings. But you didn't want to admit that, so you looked for a different explanation for the phenomena... 'The Monkey's Paw'. The important part wasn't that it **granted wishes**, it was that it granted them **in a way its owner didn't intend**. It was all a psychological excuse that she didn't want to attack her classmates. Well, that's important."

A psychological excuse.

The problem of how to explain it.

"Not just the monkey's paw, but with most kiai that grant wishes, usually the protagonist meets a tragic fate and the story ends. That means when our young lady was researching kiai in elementary school, she must have come across other kiai. And the one she chose just happened to be Jacobs' *The Monkey's Paw*. But how has that turned out for you young lady, have you actually met a tragic fate? Is

your life full or sorrow now that your wish has been granted? Can you say to Araragi-kun that your classmates getting beat up made your life a tragedy? Don't you think it's normal to just say that you had it coming and you got what you deserved?"

"... Normal? But, Oshino"

"Haha, Araragi-kun, are you wondering what proof I have to back me up? Isn't it obvious if you listened to what she said? It's plain as day. What do you think happened to our young lady's arm in elementary school?"

Now that he mentions it.

Back then the mummy's left hand only extended up to her wrist, so what happened to it?

"She didn't mention anything about a bandage did she. The next day, she didn't realize that anything had happened until she got to class and noticed that the four of them were missing. She would have realized that something had happened if her hand became like it is now. So, what do you think happened? In other words, that night, when she beat up those kids, her wish had already been granted. In that one night, the kiai had already assimilated itself with the young lady's left arm without her even noticing, and it left her left hand also without her noticing. It left, and using the part of her soul that it acquired in exchange for granting her wish, it matured, and it extended from her left wrist all the way to her left arm."

"... You're saying... Oi, Oshino, that means..."

I already knew that.

But that tone.

"What I mean, Araragi-kun, is that your first guess was right on the money. It's not often that you actually figure out the right answer. I said it didn't it? You're pretty sharp today. We should have just thought reasonably, without making things more complicated than they have to be, normally, even obviously. You're really a nice person aren't you, to even believe the aggressor's excuses. There's no way you could be on the jury. After all, you're the man who stole her beloved senpai. Don't you think it's obvious she'd be so jealous she'd want to kill you? Did you really believe the young lady when she said that it wasn't intentional? It was all what she wanted. Do you think that that left hand really has its own will?" said Oshino.

The Rainy Devil was apparently an incredibly violent demon. Most of all, it loved all negative emotions such as malice, hostility, hatred, regret, jealousy, and envy. It saw through to people's dark sides, provoked them, drew them out, and brought them to fruition. Just like some sort of harassment, it would ask for someone's wish and, also just like some sort of harassment, it would make that wish come true. The contract itself was to grant three wishes in exchange for that person's soul. Once those three wishes had been granted, the person supposedly had their life and body taken. In other words, the human themselves became a demon. That was apparently how this one worked. If, when Kanbaru had learned of Senjougahara's secret a year before, she had made a wish to solve the issue, that wish probably wouldn't have been granted. The Rainy Devil could only grant violent and negative wishes.

The demon read the hidden side of the wish.

Every wish had a hidden side.

She had wanted to be faster because she had hated her classmates.

She had wanted to be by Senjougahara's side...because she had hated Araragi Koyomi.

Yes, it read that hidden side.

Yes, it saw that hidden side.

It saw through to the subconscious desire.

This demon saw through everything.

She had felt no regrets over giving up that position, but she had not been able to stand seeing someone else there. If someone was going to be there, it might as well have been her.

And so she decided it should have been her.

The Rainy Devil was a demon told of since ancient times in Europe.

It was often depicted as a monkey in a raincoat.

In that way, it was not entirely wrong to call her left hand a monkey's paw, but at any rate, her first and second wishes had come from what she had subconsciously either explicitly or implicitly wished for.

First, it had been the classmates who had teased her.

Then, it had been me.

Her classmates during elementary school had only been injured while I had nearly been killed. That difference may have come from the difference in Kanbaru's feelings...the difference in her negative emotions. The growth of her athletic abilities may have played a direct or indirect role, but the psychological side would have been even more important.

Of course, Oshino may have been exactly right that I hadn't given it enough thought.

If Kanbaru truly had wished to the Rainy Devil that that she could be by Senjougahara's side, it made no sense for her to be worried for my safety. After hearing her story from elementary school, I could see why she would be worried that her violent left hand would try to eliminate me, but how had she known with such certainty that would happen? She had no way of knowing exactly how the paw would grant her wish and how it would go against her wishes in doing so.

She had subconsciously known what she had subconsciously wished for.

She had known I was in danger.

She had not immediately appeared in front of me as a raincoat monster with the Oddity fused with her left hand, but Oshino had said that was likely because she had resisted the urge. She had created enough friction to just barely hold it back.

"Working hard to make yourself faster was the greatest excuse to yourself. It's laughable to think the mummy did nothing because you had granted the wish yourself. You may have believed that or *wanted* to believe that and you may not have been entirely wrong, but the Rainy Devil violently granted your hidden wish, not your stated one. However, your work to handle it all yourself has paid off nicely here. Even now that the Oddity has fused with your arm, you can restrain it. In that way, this Oddity really is more like an item. It can be influenced by its owner's will... Of course, to be realistic, what we're calling a demon is just the one arm, so the Rainy Devil probably can't use its full power. It couldn't draw out enough of your subconscious mind to overpower your conscious mind. Basically, your left arm didn't activate while you were worried about Araragi-kun. Stalking him over the past four days did have its effect. You may not have seen it that way, but it was all happening subconsciously. But...was it yesterday? You learned about Araragi-kun and Tsundere-chan being all alone together for a...study group, was it? Until then, them dating was only a rumor and a possibility, but that finally confirmed it for you. After that, you couldn't hold back. Just as Araragi-kun guessed."

Had the demon slipped in through the gap in her heart?

Oshino never put it that way.

He thoroughly despised that kind of indulgent weakness.

But...

Kanbaru had indeed said that it began as jealousy and ended as jealousy.

"Okay, that should about do it."

After having my blood sucked to the very limit, I spoke to Shinobu while we sat together in what amounted to an embrace. I lightly patted her small back. She gently removed her fangs from the two holes on my neck and a few drops of blood dripped down, so she neatly licked them up with her tongue.

Whether embracing Shinobu like this qualified as cheating in Senjouhara's book was something I would have to think about in the future, but I could only hope she would have mercy since it was the only way of accomplishing what needed to be done. Shinobu's current body was impossibly small and unreliable compared to spring break. I barely felt anything in my arms, like I was embracing fog or mist.

“...Oops.”

I stood up from my crouching position and wobbled a little. It should hardly have been surprising, but just after having my blood sucked, I was afflicted with some anemic symptoms. This time was especially bad because I had given quite a bit of blood.

It was nearly five times the default.

I lightly hopped up and down.

That said, my own senses didn't change all that much. All of my body's parameters were enhanced, so I didn't really know what was different from normal.

Shinobu returned to her previous sitting position.

She wrapped her arms around her raised knees as if embracing herself to ensure that she was still there.

She no longer looked in my direction.

“...”

A kind and nice person, huh?

No matter how much I insisted I was neither kind nor nice, the one who had fallen victim to that the worst of all was this blonde vampire, so I could see why Oshino wanted to say that.

It had less to do with me and more to do with Shinobu.

I grabbed her goggled helmet from the top and shook it left and right. She still didn't respond for a while, as if ignoring me, but it must have gotten annoying because she violently swept my hand aside.

Good.

Satisfied with that, I copied Oshino by not saying a word in parting as I turned my back, walked to the

stairway landing, and descended to the third floor. As I continued right on down to the second floor, I thought about bringing her a D-Pop from Mister Donut next time I saw her.

Oshino Meme waited for me in front of the classroom door all the way down the hall. He was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed and one leg cheerfully dangling down.

“Oh, I was waiting, Araragi-kun. That took longer than expected.”

“Yeah. I didn’t quite know where the borderline was. This might not even be quite enough...but I guess it’s better than having her drink too much. For both us.”

“Hmm. Well, I suppose that’s true, but you don’t need to worry so much about Shinobu-chan. She’s bound by my name, so nothing’s going to happen. To name is to tame, after all. In fact, I’d be more worried about her starving. And you need to put on an act of having a big fight with this demon, so I don’t think it’s a good time to worry about that. Worry too much and the only act you’ll be putting on is a comedy. If you only just barely drew out enough, you aren’t going to have good odds of winning this. Even if you are only up against the left arm.”

We had a plan to deal with the Rainy Devil.

An exorcism was usually a major undertaking requiring lots of time and effort, but even with a low-level demon like the Rainy Devil, not even Oshino could pull that off. The truth of that was questionable since I only had his word to go on, but at the very least, he wasn’t going to help this time.

This was different than with Senjougahara.

While her crab could be called an Oddity that granted wishes, it had been a god while this one was a demon. Even an amateur like me could tell we couldn’t just do the same thing here.

The “Kan” of Kanbaru meant “god”, yet she had a demon.

It felt more like irony than a hint.

But we didn’t have the time for anything major.

If we didn’t deal with this soon, I could lose my life this very night. Our options were to let Kanbaru kill me or to chop off her left arm. Unfortunately, I had enough of an attachment to my life that I couldn’t choose to end this story with the former option. And chopping of Kanbaru’s arm was even more out of the question.

That meant we needed a third option.

“A contract, huh? I just hope that gets the demon to obediently return to the demon world or spirit world or whatever.”

“Yes, but both the demon world and spirit world aren’t some different world. They’re right ‘here’. ...

Well, the details would probably turn into an argument much like one we've already had, so I'll leave that for later. But don't worry. I can guarantee you this, Araragi-kun. *If the contract can't be completed*, it's rendered null and void. There's no cooling-off period, but the young lady's wish will also be rendered null and void. And the incompetent demon that couldn't complete its pitiful job will leave without saying a word."

The demon would leave if it could not complete its contract.

"In other words, *if the demon can't kill me*."

"That's right." Oshino grinned. "Of course, you'll only have gained so much power by giving your blood to Shinobu-chan. ...If you think of it as having about a tenth of the your power as a vampire during summer break, you'll still be overestimating yourself."

"...That's still quite a lot."

"But this is only because that Rainy Devil is *just the left arm*. If it was the full body, you wouldn't stand a chance, but with an entire human's worth of 'weight' hanging off of it, you have reasonably, wonderfully, perfectly good odds of victory."

The Rainy Devil was a completely different sort of Oddity to the monkey's paw. Granting wishes was the only overlap. It was generally viewed as a raincoat demon because it normally had an entire body. (In this case, how one defined "an entire body" changed one's viewpoint of the issue, but that will be omitted here.) Oshino had speculated that it was only a left hand and that it was mummified because a powerful seal had been placed on it.

"Well, it seems the young lady's mother's family was the problem there. That may have been why her parents were forced to elope. Well, I'm not about to expose or peek at other people's family issues with groundless speculation. A mummified demon is actually quite a big deal. I've heard of mummified mermaids, but not this. If it was only to the wrist when she was first given it, I'm incredibly curious what happened *to the rest of it*."

Her mother.

Both Senjougahara Hitagi and Hachikuji Mayoi's Oddities had been related to their mothers.

It seemed the same was true of Kanbaru Suruga.

Then again, just like Kanbaru's father, it seemed her mother had also cut off all ties with her family when she had eloped. Kanbaru herself had no connection to her mother's family, so we had no way of looking into that at the moment.

"By the way, what would happen if all of the demon's parts were gathered? Would even Shinobu in her prime be no match for the Rainy Devil?"

"Don't be ridiculous. It's just a low-level demon. It wouldn't stand a chance against a true vampire. It would be one thing if she was up against Mephistopheles, but that fight would be over in two

seconds. The gathered body would be pulverized, every last drop of fluid would be sucked from its body, and that would be that. Have you forgotten just how dreadful a legendary vampire Shinobu-chan was? You can't stand up to her. You just don't stand a chance. The Rainy Devil's rank would be far weaker even than Class Rep-chan's sex-obsessed cat. Oh, but that doesn't mean you can think about getting Shinobu-chan's help. You could do that if you were simply trying to exterminate the thing, but that would mean chopping off the young lady's arm would be the only option. This only has meaning if you do it, Araragi-kun."

"The Rainy Devil hijacks the person's body by granting their wishes, right? With each wish, they grow closer to being a demon. ...The mummy was originally just a hand, but it grew to the elbow after granting Kanbaru's first wish. Then what about this, Oshino? What would happen to her if her hateful wish to kill me and some third wish were granted? Would the hijacking only reach her shoulder at the most?"

"I can only give the bureaucratic answer of 'I do not know as there is no precedent'. But based on what I've seen, you're probably right that it would only hijack her body up to the shoulder. But that makes no difference. It means having it hijack her up to the shoulder is the same as having it hijack her entire body. It's like controlling thirty percent of a publicly traded company's shares."

"...I had a feeling."

"She'll lose her soul either way. There's not much you can do once you only have an empty shell of a body leftover. Oh, you can leave your bag and valuables with me, Araragi-kun. They'd just weigh you down."

"Yeah...thanks. Wait here for me."

I pulled my cellphone from my back pocket and my house key from my jacket pocket, tossed them into my rucksack, and handed the rucksack to Oshino.

"Good," he said while placing the sling over one shoulder. "But can I ask one thing, Araragi-kun?"

"What is it?"

"Why are you trying to save someone who tried to kill you? Even if it was subconsciously and even if it was *the hidden side of her wish*, she still hates you. She sees you as her hated rival in love."

He always spoke in a cruel, light tone.

But this was different.

"In fact, why did you try to talk to her about this once you realized the raincoat was her? Normally, someone would have pushed her away and come running to me without asking her a thing."

"Everyone hates someone at some point. And while I'm not going to let her kill me, she was doing it because of her feelings for Senjougahara."

Oddities always had an appropriate reason for their actions.

And if that was the reason here...

“I can forgive her.”

If Oshino was right and my initial thinking had been accurate, then nothing had changed. We were back to square one. The monkey’s paw and Rainy Devil issues were irrelevant. I certainly hadn’t expected to be her rival in love, but still.

Underhanded calculations.

Black-hearted regrets.

While I may have been a kind and nice person, I wasn’t an impeccably good person like Hanekawa.

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

The girl with the bizarre wings.

She alone I was truly and distinctly jealous of.

I really did envy her.

“I see. Well, if that’s what you’ve decided, that’s fine by me. It’s not a problem and none of my business. So, anyway, Araragi-kun, go give that young lady some help. Just to be clear, once you go in there, you can’t leave until it’s over. The door will be impossible to open from the inside. Keep in mind that the option to flee is off the table from the beginning. You need to build your resolve and think back to spring break to remember just what it means to be in a situation where you can’t turn back. ...And of course, Shinobu-chan and I aren’t going to show up to save you no matter what happens. Don’t forget that I’m a pacifist who’s strayed from the standard path and a humanitarian who’s strayed from the path of opportunity. Once I see you enter this classroom, I’m going back to the fourth floor to sleep, so I won’t even know what’s happening. You and the young lady don’t need to say goodbye when you leave, either. Shinobu-chan will probably be asleep by then too, so just leave.”

“...Sorry about all the trouble.”

“It’s fine.”

Oshino removed his back from the wall and opened the door.

I entered without hesitation and he immediately closed the door behind me.

Now I couldn’t leave.

I was in the farthest back classroom on the second floor. It was made just like the previous one on the

fourth floor, but it was the one classroom in the abandoned cram school that's windows weren't destroyed. However, that did not mean the glass had not been shattered. It meant the broken windows had several thick wooden boards nailed over them like someone had been preparing for a typhoon. There were so many boards it made me wonder why whoever had done it had been so thorough. So once the door was closed, not a single ray of light made it inside. It was already late at night, but not even the starlight made it in.

It was pitch black.

However, I could see.

After giving plenty of blood to Shinobu, I could see right through the darkness. In fact, I could see better in the dark than the light at the moment. And I slowly moved my eyes.

I found her right away.

The classroom was not that large and just the one person stood there.

They wore a raincoat.

“...Hi.”

I called out to them, but they did not respond.

They were apparently already in a trance-like state.

The body was Kanbaru Suruga's, but the left arm and the current soul were the Rainy Devil's. Incidentally, the raincoat was one Kanbaru had bought after running to the nearest store while I was letting Shinobu drink my blood. The raincoat wasn't technically necessary and it was really more like an optional item, but it helped set the scene and the mood for the ceremony.

The classroom's desks and chairs had been in the way, so we had removed them. That meant Kanbaru and I were the only things in the classroom. Only the Rainy Devil's *left arm* and a vampire-like *non-human*.

We were both in an in-between state, so it was sure to be a decent match.

Oh, but this couldn't just be a match. I had to utterly overwhelm the demon.

Just like the previous night, the inside of the raincoat's hood looked like a deep cave, so I couldn't see her expression or anything else inside.

“...”

The standard way of fighting back against the Rainy Devil or any other Oddity that granted wishes was to wish for something the Oddity could not grant.

A far too large wish.

A contradictory wish.

An utterly impossible wish.

A wish that placed them in the dilemma of a double bind.

Oshino had compared it to a bottomless ladle. It would allow us to repel the Oddity and anticipate the Oddity.

But in this case, Kanbaru had already wished to be with Senjougahara. And since that feeling included her hatred of me for being in the way, she had subconsciously wished to kill me. The Rainy Devil was trying to grant that subconscious wish.

We could not cancel the wish.

Once she had felt that desire, it was too late.

That meant we had to turn around our reasoning.

We just had to make that wish impossible.

We just had to turn Araragi Koyomi into something a mere Rainy Devil could not kill.

“I guess it’s true that you can make a decent argument for anything. It sounds a lot like sophistry and like complete monkey business, but I suppose it makes for a fine-...whoops!”

I don’t know what triggered it, but the rain coat suddenly leaped toward me. Kanbaru Suruga’s jumping strength had been increased by the power of her grudge. Normally, it would have been too fast to follow, but not right now.

I could see it.

And I could re-

“-act! W-wah!”

It used centrifugal force to twist my own body away from the raincoat’s left fist. I only just barely dodged it. I continued spinning as I moved away. It was pathetic, but I decided I needed to regain my footing for the time being.

What had just happened?

I had a feeling she was even faster than the night before, but I decided my eyes just hadn’t grown accustomed to this yet. I needed to dodge the left hand’s attack, find an opening, grab Kanbaru’s body that was really just a weight to the raincoat, and restrain it.

“...!”

It had already caught up to me.

I couldn't believe it. I hadn't expected to overwhelm the raincoat when it came to speed, but I was still far, far more powerful than the night before thanks to Shinobu. And yet the raincoat easily swung its left fist. Dodging to the left was out of the question, so I tried to circle around on the right side.

The exposed arm covered in black fur grazed my cheek and flew through empty air. The wind pressure seemed to tear at my body, but I focused on throwing a kick into the raincoat's unguarded side.

...*Sorry, Kanbaru!*

I apologized to her in my heart.

As expected, only the left arm was so abnormally powerful. The raincoat's body flew in the direction I had kicked it. It then lost its balance and half collapsed onto the linoleum floor.

Only controlling the left arm really did seem to be a bottleneck for the raincoat. It had awful balance and the rest of the body clearly could not keep up with the arm.

But then how could I explain that speed from before? Had the raincoat not been going all out during the attack the night before? Had it raised its speed to match my increased power? But why would an Oddity feel the need to hold back like that?

I didn't know.

And before I could figure anything out, the raincoat stood up.

Even if I ignored that this was Kanbaru's body, I didn't have it in me to literally kick someone while they were down. I knew I had to, but I still hesitated. And yet I knew this was no time to be hesitating.

I was a kind and nice person.

I hated being called that.

That was what you called a bland, uninteresting person.

The raincoat's left fist took the shortest path to me. This time, that catapult-like punch struck me near the right shoulder. The raincoat had probably been aiming for the center of my body, but I somehow managed to shift out of the way. Unfortunately, I hadn't managed to dodge it entirely. I couldn't follow it; it was just too fast. I was knocked about three meters back. I used my physical sense of equilibrium to spin through the air and land. The raincoat's fist had turned my bike to scraps and destroyed a cement block wall, but this time I wasn't knocked an impossibly long distance and I didn't have decisive damage done to my body. There was of course damage, but not so much that I couldn't move. My shoulder was dislocated and the bone seemed to have at least cracked, but I recovered almost

immediately thanks to my vampiric healing power. The sharp pain receded in an instant. It was a nostalgic sensation. I was looking forward to sunrise the next day. Just how badly was I going to be burned?

However, I didn't have time to think about that. The raincoat made another attack as I landed. It attacked again and again. It did not hesitate. The left fist flew toward my face this time. My eyes still weren't entirely accustomed to the increase in ability and I took the blow straight to the face. I heard my nose breaking. If that had happened to me, then a normal human's head would have been smashed to smithereens. It scared me to even imagine what kind of destructive force the blow had held. I pathetically crawled along the floor to move away from the raincoat. My broken nose recovered as I did so. It was a truly unpleasant sensation. It felt like I had become an amoeba or something. If this was only one-tenth, how hellish had my spring break been?

I managed to dodge the next punch, but the edge of the next one grazed me.

“...Dammit!”

Why?

Why can't I dodge?

Even if it was a direct attack with no wasted movement, it was a simple movement with so much force behind it that I thought the arm was going to tear off at the shoulder like a rocket punch from a robot anime. Just because there was little preliminary motion shouldn't have meant I couldn't see it coming, so why couldn't I keep up? Why couldn't I escape? Its speed had clearly risen several times over from the day before. The power didn't seem to have and not even being hit by a few of these attacks...no, a few dozen of them would bring this to an end thanks to my current body, so why was the speed alone so incredibly different?

What was different between today and yesterday?

She wore a raincoat.

Her exposed left arm was that of a beast.

Her right arm was also exposed, but it had the same deep, hollow aura as the inside of the hood and I couldn't seem to see it even though I clearly could see it. The day before, the raincoat had worn rubber gloves, so neither of her arms had been exposed. But what did that matter? Rubber gloves weren't going to slow her down any.

That was when it hit me.

I realized my mistake.

It wasn't the rubber gloves. It was the boots!

Kanbaru had only bought a raincoat at the store. She hadn't bought gloves and boots as well. It wasn't

that she had deemed that unnecessary for setting the mood; in all likelihood, she simply hadn't thought of it. Even I had only just now noticed, after all. I didn't know how the Rainy Devil was depicted, but since Oshino had thought of the Rainy Devil based on just the raincoat, that probably represented its personality well enough. And if that was enough to represent it as an Oddity, then neither Kanbaru nor I had been wrong.

But without the boots, the raincoat was wearing sneakers. That was obvious at a glance. The raincoat did not have bare feet to match its exposed hands. It was still wearing the shoes Kanbaru had been wearing.

The sneakers looked quite high quality.

They allowed for speed on an entirely different level from rain boots.

Especially for an athlete on Kanbaru Suruga's level.

"I screwed up."

Any obvious shackles or other bonds made to weigh down Kanbaru's body from the beginning were out of the question based on our strategy and our objective. However, rain boots may have been an acceptable handicap. Why had I gone out of the way to create a situation that allowed the raincoat to draw out 100% of its power? Kanbaru Suruga's body was supposed to weigh her down – well, weigh her left hand down – and yet it was nimbly keeping up with that arm.

Damn.

I never seemed to go quite far enough.

This meant I couldn't just dodge. I could only just barely pull it off and oftentimes I didn't even fully dodge the hit. Since the damage wouldn't build up in my body, I wouldn't be worn down like in a fighting game, but I also wouldn't be able to accomplish my goal of earning *an overwhelming victory*. And it didn't look like giving my eyes time to adjust would solve this. It looked like my only choice was to take the raincoat's attack head-on to get in an attack of my own. I lowered my hips and held my hands forward like a goalie during a penalty kick. Or maybe in this case it would be better to compare it to a man-to-man defense in basketball.

Regardless, the catapult, which would clearly be a foul in basketball (what kind of foul, I don't know), flew straight toward the base of my neck. In order to stop the punch with both hands, I tried to grab the raincoat's fist with my right hand, its wrist with my left hand, and its arm with my entire body, but I didn't make it in time. No, it wasn't that I didn't make it in time. My hands arrived in time, but they couldn't stop the catapult. A sensed a few of my fingers breaking just before the fist hit my collarbone. My body tilted backwards, but I somehow managed to hold my ground. I hadn't stopped the punch, but I had likely worn down its power before it reached my body.

Before the raincoat could pull back its fist, I used my hands (and the already-healed broken fingers) to grab the arm. I had finally stopped the raincoat from moving as I had initially planned. I had finally

managed to grab it.

Okay. And now...

“Kanbaru, sorry!”

This time I apologized out loud. As the raincoat’s left arm violently tried to break away, I held it in place with both hands and sent the outer edge of my foot into its leg, gut, and chest in quick succession. The structure of the human body would not have allowed for that sort of attack in a normal state. While the raincoat could only use its left fist to attack, I could use my entire body and I needed to use that difference and that advantage to its fullest.

The raincoat’s left arm moved like mad.

I had damaged it.

Oshino was probably right that I wouldn’t have stood a chance if the Rainy Devil had been the entire body, but as long as I kept the left arm from moving, I could overwhelm it. As long as I wasn’t hit by the fist too rapidly, I could recover from its damage in an instant, so the real danger was Kanbaru’s increased leg strength. The sneakers issue was truly unexpected, but as long as I could restrain that as well, I only had to keep kicking the Rainy Devil until it gave up. And if it didn’t give up, I’d keep at it until it gave up the ghost. It was a lot like the Surugadoi torture and it wasn’t pleasant, but since I couldn’t tear off Kanbaru’s left arm and certainly couldn’t end her life, I could only keep attacking and tormenting the demon until it left.

The raincoat’s legs crumbled below it.

I assumed my persistent low kicks had finally started paying off, but I was wrong. The crumbled...no, the bent legs hopped up along the shortest route toward my jaw. This wasn’t the left arm. The raincoat’s left leg – Kanbaru’s lithe leg – performed a raised roundhouse kick that struck my temple as accurately as threading a needle. The blow was of course nowhere near as powerful as the left arm, but it still directly transformed Kanbaru’s leg strength into attack power. It had also been a complete surprise to me, so my brain was rattled and my vision wavered. Damage to the sensory organs was effective even to the body of a (pseudo) vampire. That had been an important lesson during spring break.

I let go of the raincoat’s left arm.

I did so to defend against the raincoat’s next kick.

The kick hit my crossed arms. It wasn’t as much as the catapult punch, but the shock left my thoughts in an unexplainable and confused state.

It could use more than just the left arm?

But Oshino had said the rest was just a weight.

“Is *that* what’s going on here?”

I could only think of one answer.

If the Rainy Devil’s source of energy was negative emotions, then it would be consuming Kanbaru Suruga’s jealousy toward me. If the left fist was the catapult, then Kanbaru’s body was the aircraft carrier itself. Her heated thoughts and feelings were compressed inside her body like pressurized steam, so the body was not being dragged around by the left arm as a mere weight. Well, that was still essentially true, but when the Rainy Devil felt it was in danger as it had back then, was it willing to use the rest of the body for defense?

No, that was dodging the issue.

If I wanted to say I could forgive Kanbaru, then I couldn’t skirt the truth now. It wasn’t fair to refer to her like frog legs moving on spinal reflex when given a jolt of electricity.

In other words...

Kanbaru herself was moving her feet.

Kanbaru Suruga’s will was in charge here.

On a subconscious level, she was rejecting this.

She was rejecting the possibility of losing the Rainy Devil’s left arm.

She was rejecting the possibility of not having her second wish granted.

She was rejecting the possibility of not killing me.

She did not want to give up on Senjougahara.

“Black-hearted...regrets, huh?”

I knew that feeling.

I knew it all too well.

I knew it painfully well.

Because I too had lost it...had thrown it away.

Because I would never get it again.

For some reason, the raincoat had stopped moving. It stood there with its left fist held straight out like a magnet obeying magnetism. It almost seemed to be lost in some kind of complex thoughts.

Or like it was hesitating.

The raincoat had shown no hesitation before, but now it stopped.

This was Kanbaru Suruga.

She was Senjouhara Hitagi's underclassman.

She was the basketball team's ace.

She had asked to have her arm cut off.

As soon as Oshino had unnecessarily revealed that it was not the monkey's paw but a demon's hand and that it had granted her wishes as she had wished them, she had closed her eyes for a few seconds, firmly raised her head, looked to Oshino and me, and then spoke.

"I don't need this hand."

Her usual smile had of course not been present then.

She had spoken with the same flat, plain, and emotionless tone of her beloved upperclassman's current personality.

"Chop it off. I want you to cut it off. I beg you. It will be trouble for you, but please. I can't cut off my own arm."

"S-stop that."

I had quickly pushed her proffered arm back toward her. The furry sensation had been unpleasant. I had shuddered.

It had given me a chill.

"Don't be ridiculous. We can't possibly do that. How would you play basketball?"

"As Oshino-san said earlier, I tried to kill someone. This is the natural price to pay."

"W-wait, Kanbaru. I don't mind at all..."

How foolish a clown I'd been.

Those words couldn't have been more off target.

It had nothing to do with whether I minded.

In fact, whether I would forgive her or not was utterly irrelevant in this case. It was all about whether Kanbaru Suruga could forgive herself.

She had continued running because she had not wanted to harm her classmates.

She had restrained and overwhelmed all of her negative emotions.

She had sealed them away.

And that powerful will was binding her now.

It was punishing her.

“B-besides, we can’t just cut off your arm. Stop being so ridiculous. What are you thinking? You’re an idiot. You really are. Why do you jump to conclusions like that? We can’t take that idea seriously.”

“I see. You’re right. I shouldn’t have asked someone else to cut off my arm. No one’s going to just say ‘okay’ and do it if you ask them that. Understood. I’ll think of a way to do it on my own. I can probably pull it off with the help of a car or train.”

“You mean...?”

A car or a train?

That sounded like suicide.

Not just suicidal. Suicide itself.

“If you want to cut it off, we have a handy method here. Why wouldn’t you tell her, Araragi-kun? It’s not very nice to ignore someone in need. You can just get Shinobu-chan’s help. She is the heart under the blade, so you can use her precious blade to sever your left arm so quickly you won’t have time to feel any pain. As she is now, it won’t have the edge it once did, but cutting off your skinny arm like tofu would be a piece of cake.”

“Be quiet, Oshino! Hey, Kanbaru! You don’t need to worry about this so much! And you don’t need to feel even an ounce of responsibility! We’ve already shown that this is all about the monkey’s paw... no, the Rainy Devil!”

“The Oddity only granted her wish, didn’t it?”

Oshino had refused to be quiet.

In fact, he had spoken all the more eloquently and all the more fluently.

“It only gave her what she wanted, didn’t it? Wasn’t it the same with Tsundere-chan? This isn’t like what happened to you during spring break. It’s completely different from what happened with Shinobu-chan. *You didn’t wish for anything from the Oddity*, Araragi-kun.”

“...”

“So you can’t understand how she feels. You can’t understand her self-condemnation or regret. You can’t in the slightest,” he told me. “By the way, in the original monkey’s paw story, the first person

who used the monkey's paw wished for their own death after their first and second wishes were granted. Do I really have to explain what exactly that wish means?"

"Oshino..."

What he was saying was right.

But he was wrong.

I continued to face the raincoat in something like a stalemate and I slowly reminisced as neither of us moved.

I did understand.

I understood painfully well. Until the wound in my heart ached.

I understood how Senjougahara Hitagi felt.

And I understood how Kanbaru Suruga felt.

Or maybe I didn't really understand.

Maybe I was only being arrogant and conceited.

But we held the same pain inside.

We shared it.

How could I say for sure I wouldn't use a wish-granting item if I came across one? Impeccably good Hanekawa's situation may not have been based on a wish any more than my spring break had, but the ever-so-slight discord and distortion inside her had allowed her to be enchanted by a cat.

My relationship with Shinobu was really no different from Senjougahara's with the crab or Kanbaru's with the demon.

"I don't mind, Araragi-senpai."

"You should mind. You have to mind. What are you talking about? And what about Senjougahara? I want you and her to-..."

"I don't care. I don't care about Senjougahara-senpai anymore."

Kanbaru had uttered those biting words.

"I've given up on her, so I don't care anymore."

Of course you care.

You can't just give up like that.

Didn't your mother leave you the demon mummy to tell you that wishes are meant to be granted with your own power? It wasn't to tell you to give up on your wish.

So don't give me that look.

Don't give me that deep cave-like look.

How can you say you've given up when you're on the verge of tears?

The Rainy Devil was also a crybaby demon.

It had its origins in a child who got in a fight with his parents over something stupid, ran away from home on a drizzly day, got lost in the mountains, and was eaten by a pack of wild monkeys. Strangely, no one in the village, not even the child's parents, could remember the child's name.

“Dammit!”

Unable to mentally bear the stalemate and unable to bear my racing thoughts that seemed to flash my life before my eyes, I ran toward the raincoat. Including the previous night, this was my first time making an attack instead of being on the receiving end. You could say I couldn't stand the pressure of my stance any longer.

A standing position wasn't going to work. Even if I did restrain the left arm, it would immediately send a kick my way. That meant I had to tackle the raincoat while trying to hold down its entire body like a pinning technique in judo or wrestling.

I spread my arms in order to grab the raincoat's body, but I failed to do so. I might have been able to respond if it had moved left or right, but it did not. That said, it didn't duck down either. If it had, I would only have needed to take a few more steps.

The raincoat jumped up.

It jumped to the classroom ceiling and planted its feet there. Then it ran across the ceiling. I could hear the “tah, tah, tah, tah, tah, tah” of its footsteps as it seemed to disobey gravity and ignore the law of universal gravitation to run along the ceiling.

Then it dropped from the ceiling and landed on the floor.

Immediately, it jumped to the side.

Immediately, it landed on the blackboard that was about to fall from the wall. Immediately, it jumped from there. Immediately, it landed on the thick boards nailed to the window. Immediately, it jumped from there. Immediately, it was back to the ceiling.

It moved in every direction and all the diagonals in between.

The raincoat jumped dizzily around.

Like a pinwheel firework, it used its legs to jump from wall to wall, wall to ceiling, ceiling to floor, and floor to wall. The raincoat used Kanbaru Suruga's trained legs to jump around.

It reminded me of a super ball fired at high speed.

It was like a wild dance sent through a wild series of reflections.

Leap led into leap.

I couldn't follow it with my eyes anymore.

It was moving far faster than my eyeballs could move.

Like an object undergoing gravitational acceleration, acceleration led into acceleration and its speed gradually, boldly, and noticeably grew with each jump. Worrying about the difference between rain boots and sneakers almost seemed silly now. My vision was gradually, boldly, and noticeably overwhelmed.

Who would have thought a shift from two dimensions to three could change things so drastically? Oshino had set up a barrier around the classroom to ensure the damage would not spread and to ensure this would be settled here. That had been based on the simple idea that a narrow field would be better than a wide one when up against this quick, nimble, and clever raincoat, but it had had the opposite effect. It had completely come back to bite me.

How had I not realized this would happen?

Kanbaru had chosen basketball over track because she was faster than anyone on the restricted field of the basketball court and she could use her legs to their fullest there. Her height and her build allowed her to easily make slam dunks, so I should have known how her leg strength would be used in this limited space with a low ceiling.

Everything I had done was coming back to bite me.

How many miscalculations could I make? Was I stupid?

I was making mistake after mistake.

Even as the raincoat jumped all around me, I could not move a step, as if my heels were nailed to the floor. The hardest movements to follow were the vertical ones from the floor to the ceiling or vice versa. It was a design issue. The human eye was physically made to move side to side, not up and down. My field of vision couldn't keep up with the raincoat.

It circled around behind me.

From the ceiling, it finally leaped toward me. It rotated vertically in midair like a rolling spike in

Sepak Takraw and it used the force to stab its claws into the top of my head. I could feel my skull being crushed. By the time the force of impact caused me to pitch forward, the raincoat had landed on the floor and sent a Muay Thai knee kick into my jaw. The Sepak Takraw and Muay Thai combination only had a few moments between, so it felt a lot like I was being sandwiched between two simultaneous attacks and something more than pain assaulted me. My head and the brain inside seemed to have been crushed, so I lost consciousness for just a moment.

But I didn't die.

The wounds soon healed.

It truly was hell.

The Sañjīva hell to be exact.

That was one of Buddhism's Eight Greater Hells, in which one was smashed to pieces but restored to normal with a gust of wind only to be smashed again and restored again in an endless loop of eternal torture. It really was my spring break all over again.

"Tch..."

I reached out my hand...and the raincoat dodged it. When it raised its left fist, I reacted. No, it wasn't a reaction. Only a reflex, really. I had been so focused on that left arm that I had grown extra sensitive to its movements. However, I should have thought more carefully about the fact that it had just *proactively* sent two kicks when I wasn't keeping it from using its left arm. I should also have thought about the meaning of the dreadful footwork allowing it to suddenly and dizzyingly move in three dimensions of confusing acceleration. I should have thought about what it meant for it to use its entire body and not just the Rainy Devil's left arm.

Play with a devil and you too will become a devil.

The wish had not needed to be granted, she had not needed to sell her soul, and it had not needed to hijack her body.

Make a wish to a demon, and you too will become a demon.

The left fist was a feint.

The raincoat had only used straight-line attacks before, but now it had started using simple combat techniques like footwork, combinations, and feints.

No, but it wasn't a feint.

It would better be called a fake.

This was a technique the raincoat could only pull off with Kanbaru Suruga's help.

While I focused on the left fist, my opposite side was an utter blind spot, so the raincoat's toes slammed into it three times in a row and in the exact same spot each time. I doubled over from the raincoat's relativistically impossible attack which simultaneously hit me three times in the exact same spot. At that moment, the sole of the other foot slammed into my chest.

Like a catapult.

Unable to hold my ground, I collapsed backwards, but I placed my hands on the floor like a handstand and quickly flipped back onto my feet while putting some distance between us. The raincoat quickly erased that distance.

A kick reached my lungs.

They had probably been crushed.

I had trouble breathing.

The damage did not immediately heal. That meant the raincoat's kick now had more force and destructive power behind it than the left fist.

Kanbaru's feelings had surpassed the demon.

Her jealousy.

Her hatred.

Her negative emotions.

The thought that it should have been her.

"It..."

I spoke despite my crushed lungs.

"It couldn't have been you, Kanbaru Suruga!"

No one could replace someone else and no one could become someone else. Senjougahara was Senjougahara Hitagi and Kanbaru was Kanbaru Suruga.

Kanbaru and I were different.

One of us hadn't known Oshino and the other had.

One of us had backed off and the other hadn't.

One of us had been a monkey and the other had been a vampire.

It was nothing but chance and coincidence.

I could not rid myself of the guilt.

I felt guilty toward Kanbaru and toward Senjouhara. But that did not mean I wished someone else could have done it for me. Nor did it mean I was going to give up my current position.

That's right.

If I was her hated rival in love, then she was my hated rival in love. I needed to hate her.

Then was that one of the sources of my guilt?

I hadn't viewed Kanbaru as an equal.

I had looked down on her.

Underestimated her.

From a position of absolute safety and confidence, I had suggested Kanbaru and Senjouhara make up and recover their old relationship. How disgusting could I be? Just how kind and nice a person was I? Just how cruel and awful a person was I?

Wishes were meant to be granted with one's own power.

On her own, she could have given up.

As long as she had not forgotten, she could have given up.

“...! ...! ...!”

The raincoat sent out surging attack after surging attack and each one was powerful enough to transform the shape of my body. I failed to dodge about one in four. The destroyed body parts were automatically restored in order, but the raincoat continued the barrage at an even quicker pace.

I suddenly realized I had been driven into the corner of the classroom. I could not move back, right, or left, so I was essentially bound by an invisible thread. At this point, the raincoat no longer used any footwork. It kept its feet flat on the ground as if infighting during boxing. It was incredibly one-sided infighting. I had held some faint hope based in wishful thinking that even her high-quality sneakers would have the soles burned and worn out by friction if she kept up that ridiculous acceleration, but I now had to rethink even that optimism. The fist, elbow, knee, shin, toes, heel, and any combination of the above fiercely tortured my body in rapid succession. This ultimate barrage did not even give me time to scream.

It had left the category of physical blows.

It was now pure pressure.

I no longer escaped with just broken bones. The spots I was hit in would break open and the skin and

[illegible]

“...”

This hatred was far too much for a single person to hold.

This malice and hostility were the true negative feelings hidden inside that positive underclassman.

It overflowed from the within the raincoat like a whirling maelstrom.

The surface tension was at its limit.

“How dare you how dare you how dare you how dare you how dare you how dare you how dare you!”

The voice continued with the blows.

That voice of hatred continued.

“I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you!”

“I’m sorry, Kanbaru.”

I spoke again.

I apologized to Kanbaru.

“But I don’t hate you.”

She may have been my rival in love.

The two of us may have been horribly mismatched.

But couldn’t we at least be friends?

“■■■■■■■!”

A shrill voice, much like a scream, escaped the depths of that cave and the raincoat’s kick pierced my stomach. It pierced straight through. This went beyond ruptured organs. My joints and muscles were completely ignored as its heel literally, truly, and impressively pierced right through my gut, smashed my ribs and spine, and reached the wall behind me.

This damage far exceeded my healing ability.

It slowly pulled the leg out.

I felt like my digestive organs were being pulled out with it.

And afterwards, my body had its own deep cave.

This cave was truly empty.

“Kanbaru...”

This was bad.

With the giant hole in my stomach, the slightest twisting of my body felt like it would tear my body into an upper and lower half. That meant I couldn't take any careless actions. I was still conscious, but the next attack would end it. I was completely worthless. Why was I letting the raincoat overwhelm me? At this rate, Kanbaru's second wish would come true, even though I was supposed to avoid that at all costs.

Or was that an option after all?

This was still just the second wish.

If Kanbaru could restrain herself from making a third wish, wasn't this good enough? Her arm would return to normal and a wish was a wish. She would surely find herself by Senjougahara's side in some form or another to grant that wish.

I had no intention of giving up my position.

I had no intention of giving up my position.

But I did intend to forgive her.

And I should have died during spring break anyway, so, just as Oshino had said, wouldn't that be the simplest option?

I had an attachment to life, but I had no fear of death.

“Ah...ahh.”

I groaned.

It simply let out a meaningless groan.

As if forced out during my death throes.

I wouldn't have to worry about ruining a uniform ever again.

“Kanbaru...Suruga.”

And at that moment, when a single instant seemed to last an interminable half an hour, the raincoat's barrage came to a stop.

It came to a sudden stop.

This was the opening I had been waiting for.

But I could not pin down the raincoat as I had planned. That was partially because the hole in my stomach showed no sign of healing and because my consciousness had faded too far for that, but it had even more to do with how my body had frozen up.

I had frozen for likely the same reason as the raincoat.

“You two certainly are enjoying yourselves.”

The classroom door had opened.

That door could never be opened from within, but someone had opened it from without.

And who was it that stepped inside?

Senjougahara Hitagi in her casual clothes.

“You seem to be having quite a lot of fun without me, Araragi-kun. I don’t like it.”

Her expression was emotionless and her voice flat.

She only narrowed her eyes a little upon seeing the carnage.

She always appeared without warning.

She wore jeans without a belt, innerwear of the same color, and a largish hoodie. Her hair was also loosely tied back, so she looked like she had left home without bothering to change.

“S-Senjougahara...”

I couldn’t speak very well with the hole in my gut, so I had difficulty calling out to her in what barely qualified as a voice.

I wanted to ask why she was here.

But I knew the answer without asking. Oshino had obviously called her here. What other answer could there be? But how? He didn’t have her contact information. She hated him, so she would never give him her cellphone number. And she hadn’t had a chance to regardless.

Cellphone?

Oh, so that’s it.

That bastard hadn’t given the slightest thought to protecting personal information, so he had completely ignored my privacy and used my cellphone. My phone had been in the rucksack I had left with him before entering the classroom, and it had not been password locked, so even if he had

trouble with electronics, he would have been able to check the address book or call records given enough time. Plus, he had received something of a lecture on using a cellphone from Senjougahara on Mother's Day.

But why?

Why had Oshino called Senjougahara here of all places in this of all situations?

Suddenly, the raincoat jumped backwards, jumped off the ceiling and walls two or three times each, and moved from corner to corner to reach the exact opposite end of the classroom from me.

Why?

It was only one attack away from winning.

It would have granted the wish.

Had Senjougahara's appearance caused Kanbaru Suruga's conscious mind to temporarily restrain the subconscious mind controlling the raincoat? Was that why Oshino had called her here? But that was only a temporary measure. The Rainy Devil fed on people's negative emotions, so nothing would change if those emotions weren't dealt with. We couldn't solve everything with the power of love like some old foreign movie. If you're going to call Senjougahara, then come help yourself, Oshino Meme!

But Senjougahara showed no interest whatsoever in what the raincoat was doing. Her cold eyes stared straight at me as I lay there nearly on the verge of death. They were the eyes of a hawk eyeing its prey.

"Araragi-kun. You lied to me."

"...Eh?"

"You tricked me, saying you ran into a telephone pole, and you kept Kanbaru a secret from me. When we started dating, didn't we promise not to do that? Didn't we promise not to keep any secrets from each other at least when related to Oddities?"

"Oh, um..."

That may have been true and it wasn't like I had forgotten.

"That warrants ten thousand deaths."

She gave a cruel smile.

All of the fear I had not felt when being pummeled by the raincoat suddenly raced through my body like a jolt of electricity. I was afraid...seriously afraid of this girl. Was she Medusa? How could anyone look at another person like that? Not to mention their own boyfriend. And was she serious?

Was that really what she should be telling me right now? Could she not at all tell what was going on here?

“But, well, it looks like you already died about ten thousand times.”

With the door still open, she began walking toward me where I was curled up in the corner.

“Perhaps I should forgive you just this once.”

Wait.

I really don't think I've died ten thousand times.

The raincoat reacted to her movement and began running toward me. By chance, they began the race between Senjougahara Hitagi and Kanbaru Suruga that had not happened during their middle school days. Purely looking at the distance, the raincoat was over twice as far away from me as Senjougahara, but even if Senjougahara had been the ace of the track team, she had a gap of over two years. Plus, the raincoat was borrowing Kanbaru's power...no, it had become a demon itself. The first to arrive at my unmoving position was of course Kanbaru.

It raised its left fist to take this chance and get in the finishing blow. But at that moment, Senjougahara belatedly arrived and cut in between the raincoat and me.

I did not even have time to realize she was in danger.

Just before the blow landed, the raincoat was knocked backwards. Knocked backwards? Who had done that? I couldn't have done it and Senjougahara was even less able. In that case, it hadn't actually been knocked back. It had most likely jumped back of its own accord. Even if that meant awkwardly falling backwards afterwards.

I was left speechless.

It had almost seemed like the raincoat was afraid of getting Senjougahara wrapped up in this and like it wanted to avoid harming her more than anything else. What was the meaning of that unnatural action?

Was Kanbaru Suruga's conscious mind really taking over? No.

This wouldn't be that convenient.

Oddities were logical.

There had to be some logical explanation somewhere.

It was just that the logic was not always apparent to humans.

But in that case...

“Araragi-kun. Knowing you, you were stupidly thinking of solving all of this with your own death, weren’t you?”

Senjougahara still paid the raincoat no heed and spoke to me. She had her back to me and she did not look my way, but it was obvious that was not because she was hesitant to look at my tragically bloody and injured state.

“What a joke. Shallow self-sacrifice is not called for here in the slightest. If you died, I would obviously use any means necessary to kill Kanbaru. Didn’t I tell you that? Are you planning to make me a murderer, Araragi-kun?”

She had seen straight through me.

Honestly, what a compassionate girl.

Now I couldn’t carelessly let myself die.

Her love was so twisted it became earnestly straightforward.

“What I like the least about this is that it tells me you would do this exact same thing even if you did not have that body of yours. If you want to do these ridiculous things while fully relying on your immortal body, then go right ahead, but if you start turning in that direction out of habit and end up like this as a result, then I do not like it one bit.”

“...”

“Then again, if it’s coming from you, unwanted help, an unasked-for intrusion, and an unwelcome favor might not be all that bad.”

To the end, Senjougahara did not so much as glance my way and she took a single step toward the raincoat as it struggled to stand back up. It crawled backwards as if afraid of her.

It seemed afraid of her.

It seemed afraid of her...but why?

Once I started thinking about it, I realized the previous night had been the same. The raincoat had suddenly vanished after knocking me away. That had been due to Senjougahara’s appearance with my forgotten envelope, but why was that a reason for it to flee? Now that I thought about it, that was unnatural. If it had been a human attacker or human murderer, it was perfectly natural, but an Oddity didn’t need to worry about witnesses. And with the power of that left arm, Senjougahara alone wouldn’t be much of an obstacle.

Then why had it fled?

Because it had been Senjougahara?

But why?

Was it really the power of love?

Were Kanbaru Suruga's feelings for Senjougahara conveniently enough to overpower the demon? Were her earnest feelings enough brush aside an Oddity, which was the world itself, and to reach heaven from earth?

No.

That wasn't it. But it had been her feelings.

Even after Kanbaru had made her second wish to the Rainy Devil's left hand and had her left hand transform into that bestial one, it had taken four days for it to activate. That was because she had just barely restrained her feelings of hatred toward me. She had restrained the demon's violence using her stance of making wishes come true with her own power. Oshino had mocked that stance which she had kept for the seven years since making the first wish, but he had not meant it in such a superficial way.

He had called it laughable, but he had also said she had not been entirely wrong.

Kanbaru's feelings.

Kanbaru Suruga's wish.

The Rainy Devil saw through to and revealed people's dark emotions. It read and viewed the hidden side. The demon saw the hidden side of people's wishes. She had wanted to be faster because she had hated her classmates. She had wanted to be by Senjougahara's side because she had hated Araragi Koyomi.

But that was only the hidden side.

Every wish had a hidden side.

But if there was a hidden side, there was an unhidden side.

If the Rainy Devil harmed Senjougahara Hitagi, Kanbaru's *unhidden wish* would not come true regardless of whether she killed me, the target of her hatred. This wasn't some moving and sentimental issue concerning the power of love. It was a more realistic and primitive issue.

This was a contract.

It was a deal.

The Rainy Devil only granted the hidden wish, but that did not mean it neglected the unhidden side. In elementary school, the demon had granted her hidden wish to take revenge on her classmates, but she had also ultimately granted her unhidden wish of becoming faster. When ignoring the causal

relationship, it really had come true. It was laughable because doing so had only been playing into the Rainy Devil's hand. The Rainy Devil had only read the hidden behind the unhidden, but it had not found that hidden wish in isolation. The hidden only existed because the unhidden existed. And if Oshino was telling the truth, then the left hand did not have a will of its own. It all came down to what Kanbaru Suruga subconsciously wanted. The hidden and unhidden should never have been able to coincide, but that causal contradiction had been achieved.

A contract with a demon.

In exchange for her soul.

A cooling-off period.

Wishing for an impossible wish.

The dilemma of a double bind.

The dilemma of the hidden and unhidden.

That was why the Rainy Devil had been unable to lay a hand on Senjougahara. That was what the contract said, what the deal said, so as long as she was acting as my shield, it could not lay a hand on me no matter how much Kanbaru hated me.

It could not lay that left hand on me.

Having me overwhelm the demon and thus making it impossible to fulfill the hidden was one strategy, so making it impossible to fulfill the unhidden wish would work just as well.

And just now, Senjougahara had sworn before the demon's eyes that she would kill Kanbaru if I died. The Rainy Devil could not claim it did not know, so that clinched it.

He had seen through it all.

He had seen through it all even more than the demon.

Oshino, you...you really are a far, far more cruel and awful person than I am!

"It's been a while, Kanbaru," said Senjougahara. "I am glad to see you are doing well."

As the raincoat...no, as her old friend Kanbaru Suruga crawled backwards on her back, Senjougahara slowly leaned over her and pinned her down.

She had done what I hadn't managed even when trying so hard I was left in this sad state.

It was something I could never have done.

She squeezed the bestial left hand and the human right hand as if to comfort it.

Did she pull out her stapler?

No, she no longer carried it with her.

“Senjougahara-senpai.”

A pleading whisper escaped the hood.

However, that hood was no longer a deep cave. The face there was not on the verge of tears. No, not on the verge. It was covered in tears. I clearly saw a girl’s smiling and teary face.

“I...” she sobbed.

She put her feelings to words.

“I love you.”

She put her wish to words.

“I see. I do not particularly love you.”

Senjougahara flatly and bluntly spoke her mind in her usual tone of voice.

“But will you still stay by my side?”

Sorry for making you wait so long.

Her voice was so very flat as she said that.

How foolish.

Nothing could have been more foolish.

Honestly, I really was just set up to lose, wasn’t I?

And as always, I’d put on a comedy act. It was almost impressive how useless I had been.

I was a good boy who knew when to say I was sorry.

I had long since known just how greedy a girl Senjougahara Hitagi was. I had long since known just how much she disliked giving up.

If it was something truly important, she would never give up on it.

It was unwanted help, an unasked-for intrusion, and an unwelcome favor.

But, well, I was still amazed at just how much of a contrarian every last one of us was.

We all had our hidden sides and our unhidden sides.

And those two sides were one and the same, like a Mobius strip.

So interpreting this as the power of love was perfectly fine.

After all, being forgotten was pretty depressing.

While thinking about that and waiting for the giant hole in my gut to heal, I simply watched the yuri scene developing before my eyes without making any crass comments. If I was Oshino, I probably would have put on a nihilistic act that didn't suit me, held an unlit cigarette in my mouth, and asked the two of them if something good had happened, but unfortunately, I was a minor.

You could call this the epilogue or the ending of the story.

The following day, my two sisters, Karen and Tsukihi, woke me up like usual. As I rubbed my sleepy eyes, I started toward Senjouhara's house for the promised study group that would last all Sunday. I was in a good mood as I held a faint hope that she would feed me some of her cooking this time. Just as I climbed aboard the bicycle I usually rode to school (which was now my one and only machine) and left the front gate, I met a girl who apparently had nothing better to do than perform stretches in front of a telephone pole. She was wearing casual clothes, but the short pleated skirt and the bike shorts sticking out provided the exact same impression as the uniform usually worn by Kanbaru Suruga, my underclassman and the star of Naoetsu High School.

“Good morning, Araragi-senpai.”

“...Good morning to you too, Kanbaru-san.”

“Oh, I appreciate the polite greeting. When you're so polite and courteous, it makes you feel like a superior human being compared to the likes of me. Are your injuries okay?”

“Yes... The sunlight is a little harsh right now, but it isn't anything worth worrying about. I recovered from all the damage and now I'm doing just fine. Now, why do you know where my house is, Kanbaru?”

“Come on, Araragi-senpai, you know perfectly well why. Or are you giving me a chance to show off? I was stalking you, so of course I'd located your home address.”

“...”

I wasn't quite sure what to say when she said that with such a cheerful smile.

“So what do you want?”

“Well, Senjouhara-senpai called me this morning and asked me to come pick you up. Oh, let me carry your bag.”

Before I could say anything, she snatched my rucksack from my bike's front basket and held it in her left hand.

“I also oiled that bicycle's chain,” she told me with an innocent smile. “If you have anything else for me to do, feel free to ask.”

She had gone straight past “friend” and reached “gofer”.

I had no intention of letting the school's star follow me around doing my bidding, but if that unhealthily jealous Senjouhara was letting Kanbaru play this sort of role, would I be reading too much into it to think the two of them had mended their relationship and recreated the Valhalla Combo? Yes, it probably was reading too much into it.

“How about a massage before heading out? You might say you're fine, but you have to be exhausted. I give a pretty good massage, you know?”

“What about basketball? Don't you have practice on Sundays too? We need to start studying for exams soon, so you need to focus while you can.”

“Well, I can't play basketball anymore.”

“Eh?”

“It's a little early, but I've retired.”

She held her left hand in front of me while still holding my rucksack. That arm was wrapped in white bandages all the way up to the elbow. Even through the bandages, I could tell its length and shape were a little off.

“There wasn't a clean ending to it all. The demon left, but my arm didn't go back to normal. And I can't exactly play basketball with my arm like this. Still, it's pretty powerful and convenient.”

“Give my bag back right this instant.”

How should I put it?

Her wish had been granted, even if only halfway.

So this may have been the natural price to pay.

Afterword

Sometimes, I actually feel like writing a normal afterword, so I think I'll give some commentary on the three stories contained in this book. Since this will touch on a lot of what happens in the stories, I apologize to anyone who wants to read the afterword before finishing the actual book, but I recommend you stop right here and read the book first. Then again, all I really wanted to write was that boilerplate warning and I'm not actually going to give any kind of commentary. But now that I think about it, commentary by the author isn't as simple as it sounds. People can't express what they're thinking with 100% accuracy and less than 100% of what is expressed is going to get through to whoever reads it. Even at the best of times, it's probably only 60% on both counts, so only 36% of what the author was thinking is going to be conveyed to the reader. The remaining 64% is a misunderstanding, so it isn't uncommon to find yourself disagreeing with more than half of what an author says in their commentary. You think, "Eh? That's what you were going for?" This comes down to the difficulty of communication, but that misunderstanding does spice things up nicely. For example, when I recommend someone a book I love, I might tell all about this scene that really moved me, but sometimes when I go back and reread the book, I find that scene doesn't exist. Humans are such careless creatures, so whenever we feel something, over half of it as a complete misunderstanding. But perhaps we shouldn't interpret that in a negative way. Perhaps we should see it as that author or story having the power to give the reader that kind of misunderstanding. I'm sure any reader has reread a book that really shocked them long ago and found that it really wasn't anything worth getting worked up over. And I'm sure everyone has recommended a current teenager a book we loved in our teens and told them they're sure to love it, only to find they didn't love it. That's the misunderstanding or our imagination at play. Instead of being disappointed, perhaps we should thank it for letting us dream like that. Also, there have been times when I reread a book, didn't find the moving scene I remembered, and later discovered that scene in a different book altogether. In that case, it's entirely a problem with my memory, so the author and story aren't responsible at all. This book might seem like three stories centered on Oddities...but it's not. These are three stories I wrote because I wanted to write an enjoyable novel filled with silly conversations. When they were being gathered in this book, I asked VOFAN-san to do the illustrations. For one piece of commentary, this story was born of the following syllogism: "Tsundere sounds a little like Gelände, doesn't it?" → "Gelände makes me think of Bogen^[19]." → "Written in kanji, Bogen would mean 'verbal abuse'." And that's what led to Hitagi Crab, Mayoi Snail, and Suruga Monkey for Bakemonogatari 1. Part 2 will have even more silly conversations, so look forward to it.

100% of my thanks goes out to everyone except for me.

-Nisio Isin

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ It was a mythical battlefield between the gods of Mt. Nantai and those of Mt. Akagi[\[1\]](#)
2. ↑ "Public works" is written 土木 (soil + tree)
The name "Hitagi" in kanji can only be written as 肥田木 (fertilizer + field + tree)
By the way, the name of Bakemonogatari's character is written in hiragana, therefore it has no meaning associated
3. ↑ Means "Bus Gas Explosion".
4. ↑ A Japanese game in which someone is asked to say a word repeatedly and is then asked a simple question that they will often get wrong due to a close-but-not-quite-right answer being very similar to the word repeated.
5. ↑ 渦
6. ↑ 牛
7. ↑ 蝸牛
8. ↑ 禍
9. ↑ Means "Without climax, without resolution, with profound meaning".
10. ↑ An author who wrote a book called "Sorekara" which is what Hanekawa kept saying.
11. ↑ The kanji of Mayoi mean True Dusk.
12. ↑ Najimu is Japanese for "to grow accustomed to".
13. ↑ Next = 次. Sheep = 羊. Jealous = 羨.
14. ↑ The correct version is Namamugi Namagome Namatamago which means "Raw Wheat, Raw Rice, Raw Egg".
15. ↑ "Hotto" can mean both "hot" or "relief".
16. ↑ This is the improved version of moe she came up with in part 002.
17. ↑ "I caught a glimpse" = "Kaimamita" and "I stututted" = "Kamimamita".
18. ↑ The "Kan" of Kanbaru means god and the "Senjou" of Senjouhara means battlefield.
19. ↑ Both are German words that the Japanese use in the context of skiing.