

# Monogatari Series vol.07 - Nekomonogatari (White) by NisiOisiN

Novel Updates

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### <sup>第懇話</sup> つばさタイガー



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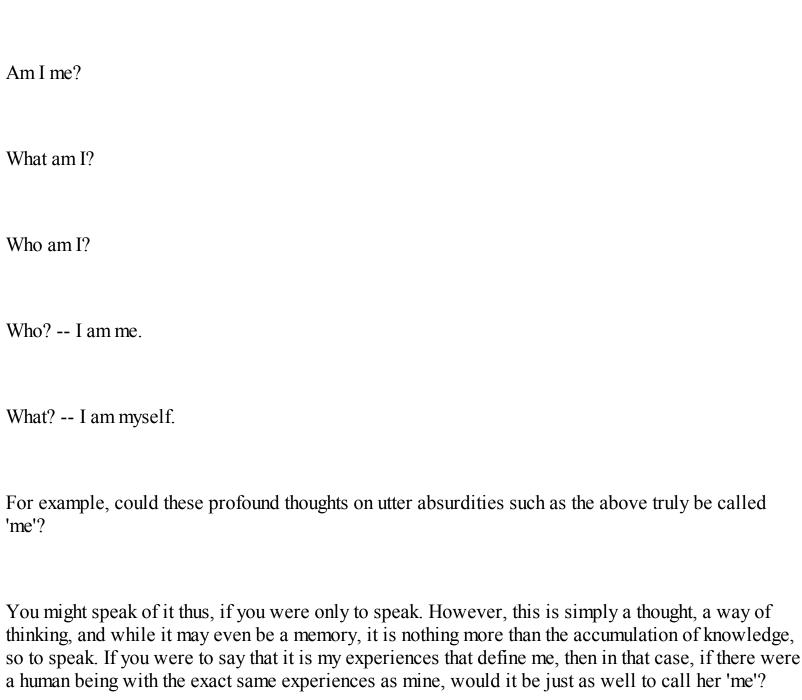




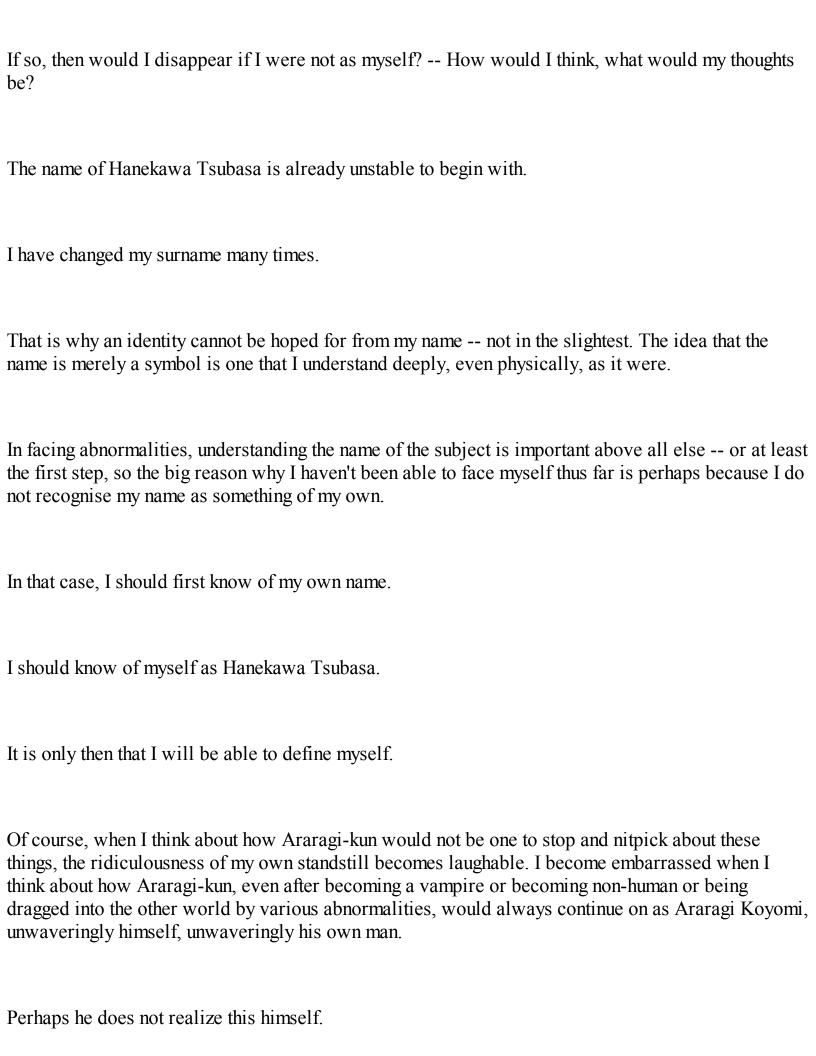
## Tsubasa Tiger

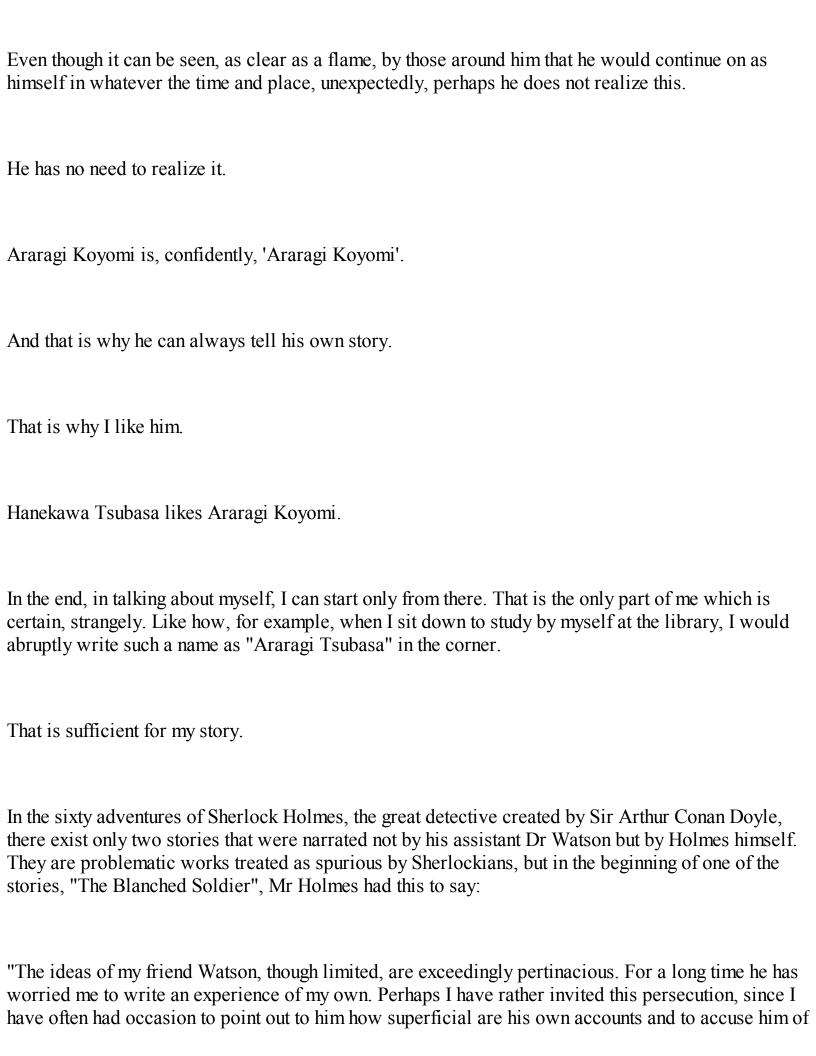
#### 001

The story is of me, Hanekawa Tsubasa, but it cannot be told by me. This is because I cannot define how much of me is actually myself in the first place. I am sure there had been a literary master who once wrote how, if one were to stretch out one's foot, one would not think of the toes as part of oneself, but in my case, I would not even need to stretch my foot, as I am doubtful as to whether this heart itself is my own.



Even if there were a 'me' outside of myself, that is still me.





pandering to popular taste instead of confining himself rigidly to facts and figures. 'Try it yourself, Holmes!' he has retorted, and I am compelled to admit that, having taken my pen in my hand, I do begin to realise that the matter must be presented in such a way as may interest the reader."
As is the norm, I had been enchanted by the degree to which Sherlock Holmes exceeded normal men, and would read about his acts with excitement, which was why I was taken aback by this sudden talk from his 'true voice'.
Frankly, I was disappointed.
Why did he, a man who had displayed himself as terribly superhuman all this time, say something so human now? I felt something like betrayal.
But now I know, of his humanity which could not bear the gap between himself and the 'superhuman' which Watson spoke of.
Of his wish to find excuses.
In the end, the detective was told by his assistant to 'try it himself', and these two stories were published I will state at the beginning that, well, this story is that kind of story to me.
This is a story to let you know that I, exaggeratedly spoken of like a historical saint or holy mother by Araragi-kun, am simply a human being.
To let you know that I am a cat, and a tiger.
And a story to let you know that I am human, and a story of utter disappointment, of betrayal.

I don't think I can tell it as skilfully as Araragi-kun can, but I think I will leave it up to chance and try my best. After all, that is undoubtedly how anyone would tell of her own life.
Now then.
The time has come to wake up from the nightmare.

#### 002

According to rumors, Araragi-kun's little sisters Karen-chan and Tsukihi-chan took the initiative of
waking him up every morning. They would always come to wake him up without fail, regardless of
whether it was a weekday, a day off or a holiday, or so it had been said. Araragi-kun seemed to think
of it a considerable nuisance, but from where I stood, they all looked like nothing if not 'close
siblings'.

In fact, as would be normal, I was totally jealous.

Truly, I was.

Just how many brothers in the world could be so dearly loved as to be woken up like that every morning? -- although in this case, perhaps the one I was jealous of was not Araragi-kun himself, but Karen-chan and Tsukihi-chan who could see his sleeping face every day.

Oh, I was so totally jealous.

Truly, I was.

Well, to speak of how I, Hanekawa Tsubasa, woke up; like Araragi-kun and his sisters, I would be woken up every morning by Rumba.

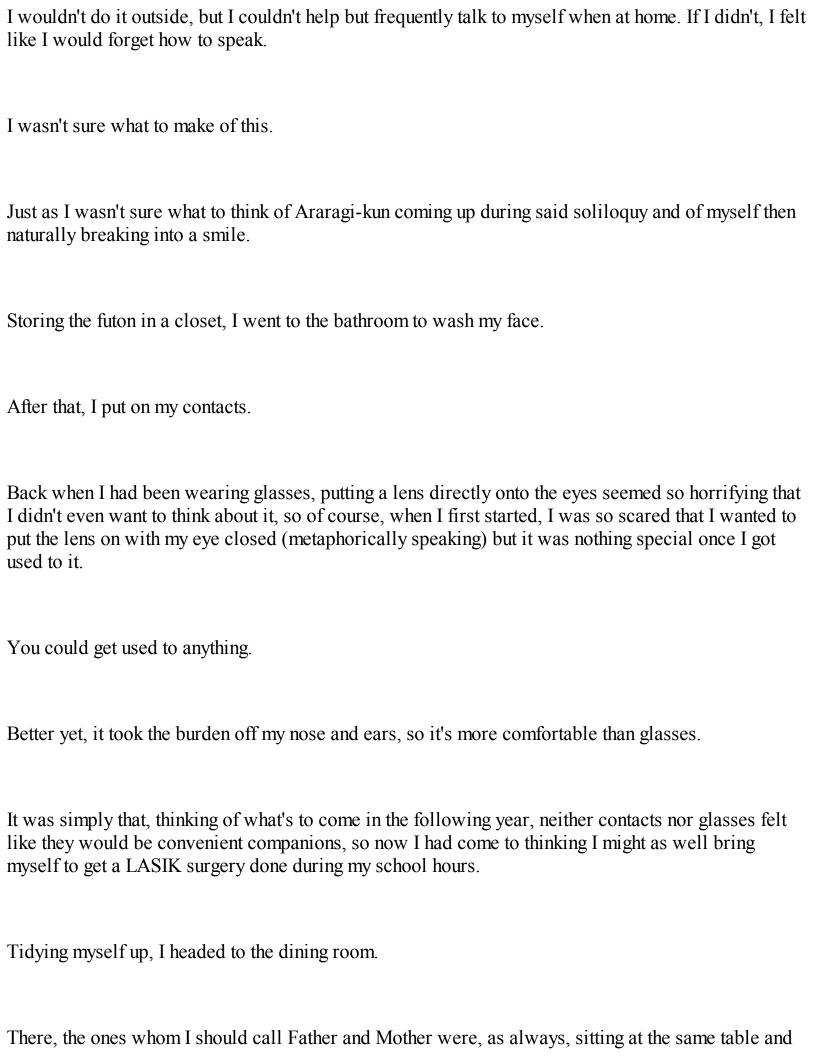
Rumba was, of course, not the name of the Hanekawa family's cat, nor my strikingly-named little sister Hanekawa Rumba, but a run-of-the-mill iRobot automatic vacuum cleaner, or in model number, a Rumba 577.

It's set on a timer to automatically start working at six every morning, and when said smart vacuum cleaner bumped into and pushed against my head, I wake up.

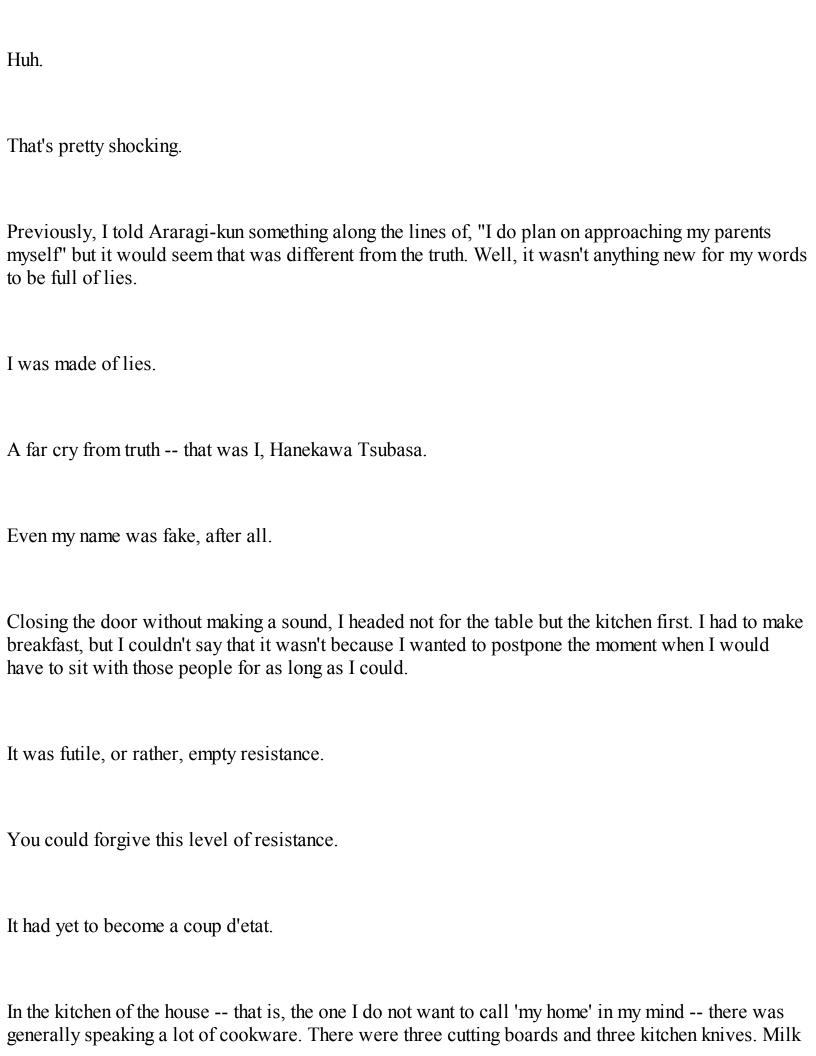
How refreshing.
Be that as it might, like all vacuum cleaners the Rumba made quite a lot of noise as it cleaned, so by the time it crawled down the hallway and gotten close to me, I had actually already woken up and yet, the fact that I would continue to lay in bed until my head was being pushed, waiting with my eyes closed for the bump, was perhaps because I longed for the sensation of 'being woken up by someone', or simply 'being woken up' itself.
Like Sleeping Beauty, poetically speaking.
Well, not that anything would be poetic with the other party being a vacuum cleaner.
Sleeping Beauty that was quite something, coming from myself.
Even with regards to the Rumba, seeing as there was someone sleeping in the hallway as it cleaned there, it's probably a nuisance to it as well.
Yes, I sleep in the hallway.
I sleep in a futon laid out in the second-floor hallway of a detached house.
I had once thought that this was something normal and quite obvious, but apparently that was not the case. As such, ever since losing a friend with whom I talked to about this when I still had not known the truth, I haven't talked about this in a particularly open manner.
Not that I particularly wanted my own bed after such a long time.
It had become natural.

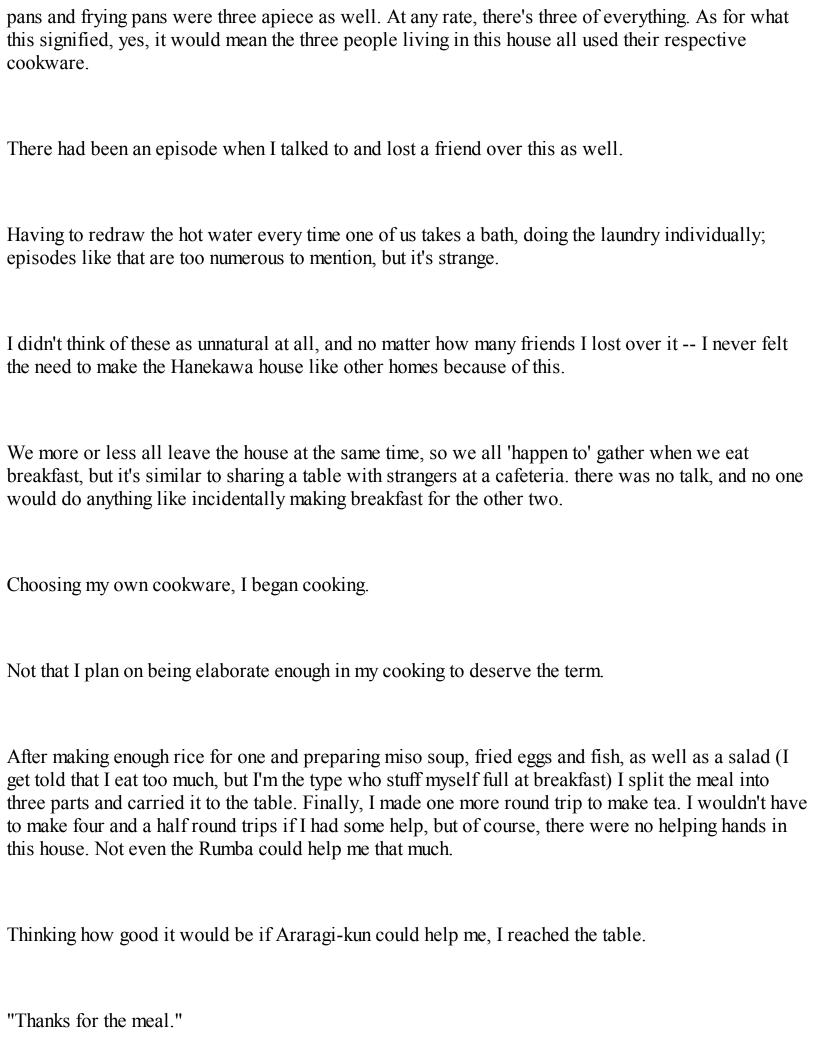
I didn't want things that were natural to change.
It's not as though I'd ever childishly thought of wanting my own room, and when I talked about this to the classmate I became friends with, Senjougahara-san, figuring she would be fine hearing it,
"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"
was what she had said.
"My house doesn't even have a hallway to begin with."
From the perspective of a girl who lived with her parent in a one-room apartment, this might seem like the worries of the ostentatious, and I wasn't worrying in the first place.
Well.
Perhaps that's wrong.
I imagine that perhaps I did not want to make this house 'the place I belong to'. It's something like the opposite of an animal's marking perhaps I wanted to keep my distance from the house.
I didn't want any trace of myself to be left in this house.
None if at all possible.

Perhaps that was why.
Putting aside why I must make conjectures and suppositions about my own heart, or why I could only ever say 'perhaps'.
"Well, no matter what I want, in a few more months it won't matter, so I shouldn't give it too much thought."
Speaking to myself, I folded up my futon.
I didn't have any problems getting up in the morning.
Or rather, I didn't quite understand this sensation of being 'half-asleep'.
The on- and off-states of my consciousness were probably more distinct that they needed to be.
If only I could just sleep when I felt sleepy.
Sometimes I would think that.
"It's probably because I'm out of sync with other people with sensations like that. Araragi-kun tells me that a lot. 'The things you do that you think are natural are simply miracles to me' and such but it's going too far to call them miracles."
My soliloquy continued.







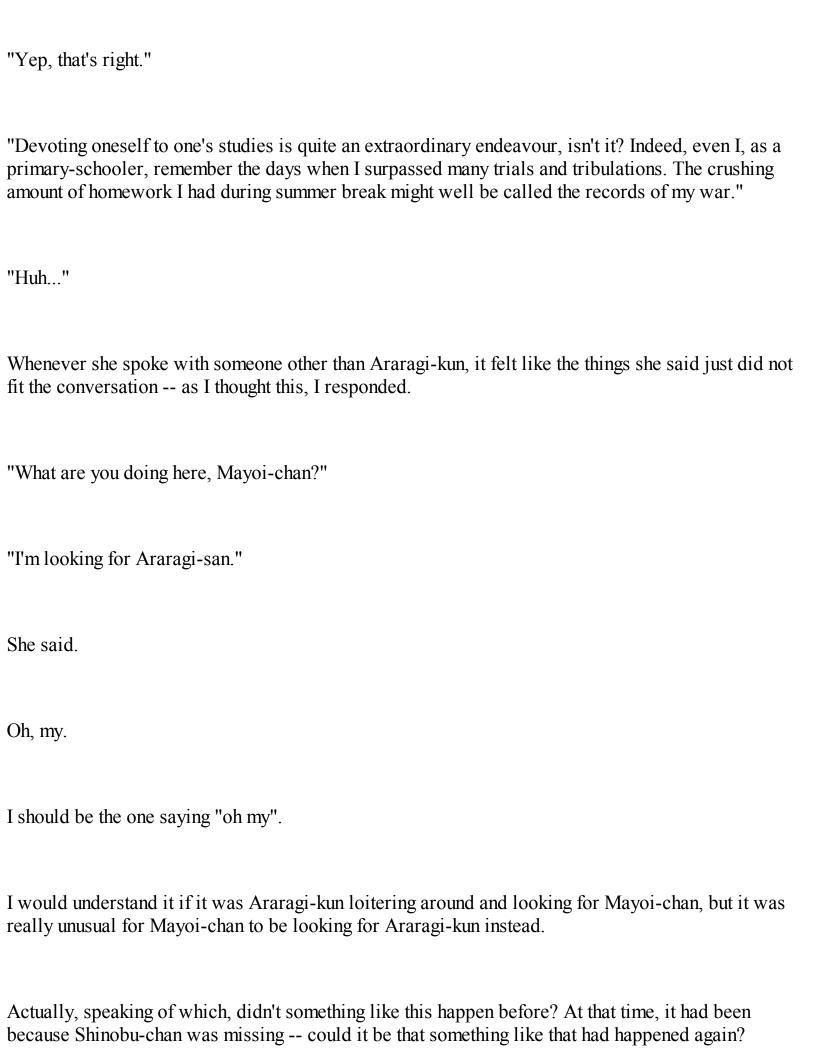


After putting my hands together and saying this, I took up my chopsticks.
I have never heard the other two saying something like that, but even if I never say "good morning" and "good night", I never leave out a "thanks for the meal" or "I'm done eating".
I never leave them out, especially since after the spring break.
After all, they were words meant for the animals and plants which had been alive before becoming foodstuff, which would become my flesh and blood.
They were lives which had been killed for my sake.
I would accept them with gratitude.

# 

After eating breakfast, I changed from my pajamas to my uniform, and left the house shortly. It seems to take about eighty pages for Araragi-kun to leave his house, but this is it for me. That is the distinct difference between a family you would not want to leave behind, and one you would.
In any case, today was the start of a new trimester.
It made me sigh with relief.
At heart, it felt like I was being saved.
The new trimester had always been my lifesaver.
Days off were strolling days for me although I referred to it that way, I could only wander about for so long. I might as well be a juvenile delinquent. I had worked as a home tutor for Araragi-kun since summer break, as he prepared for university entrance exams, and while it was for the sake of raising his academic capabilities, but seen from another angle, it might just be an excuse not to go back to that house.
And that was why school made me sigh with relief.
It made me feel at ease.
Well, whether it's strolling, or being a home tutor,
or going to school,

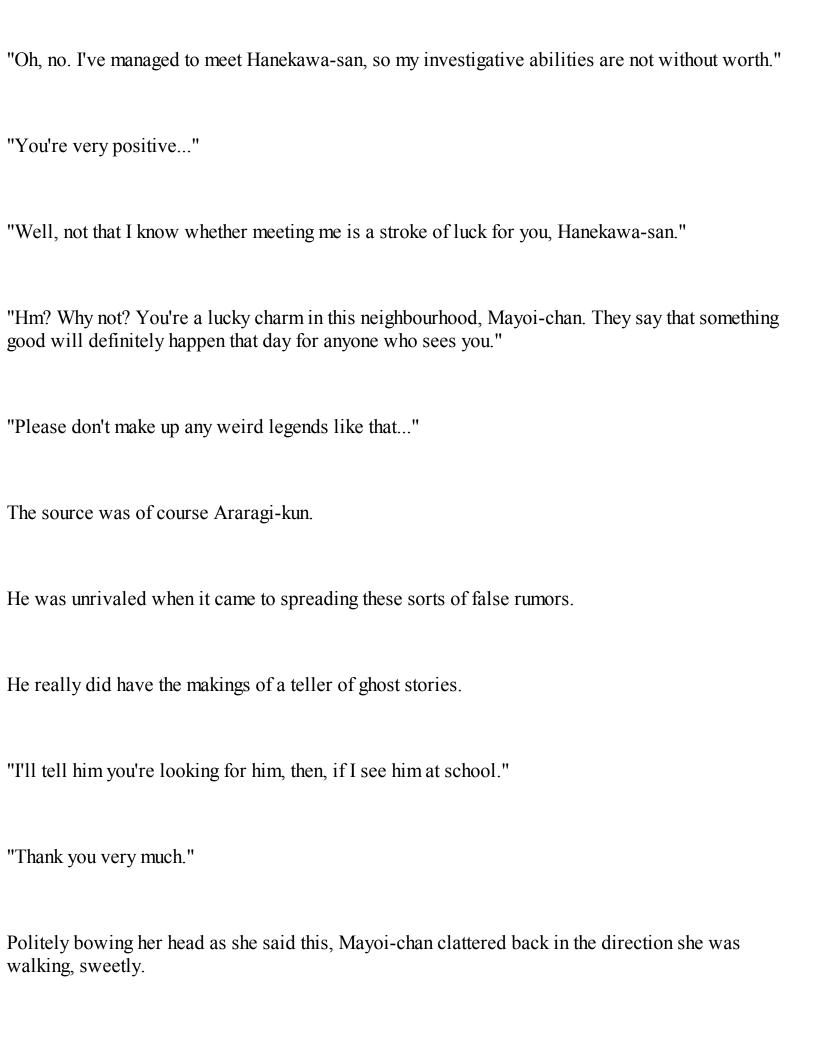














# 004 He who has suffered the aberrant is drawn to it -- so it is said. Or, something along those lines. Whether that means one is drawn to the abnormal, attracted to it, dragged along by it, or bowled over and overrun by it; the more you consider them the more intimately entangled each and every one of them seems to become and they turn into a disorienting chaos -- but at the very least, according to Oshino-san, it seems that once you have encountered an abnormality, they become easier to meet through the rest of your life. He tells me that there is no reason behind this, but I believe I can attach one to it. It is a pragmatic reason, one that is not fantastical at all. It may be a bad habit of mine, an excessive habit, to attach a reason to anything and everything. But essentially, it is a matter of recollection and recognition. Everybody has experienced a time when, as they learn some new word, said word seems to appear more often at random.

For example, if you were to remember the word "aspic", then as you read the newspaper or a novel,

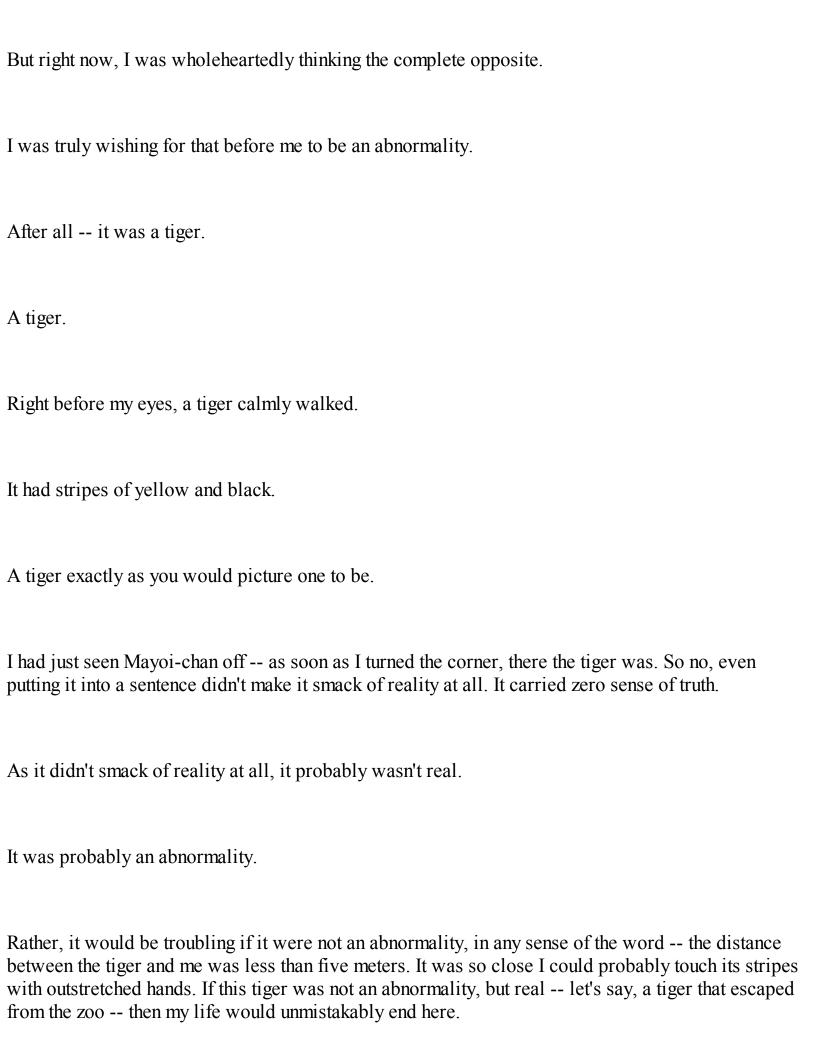
or perhaps watch the television or a film, the word would seem to come up far too often.

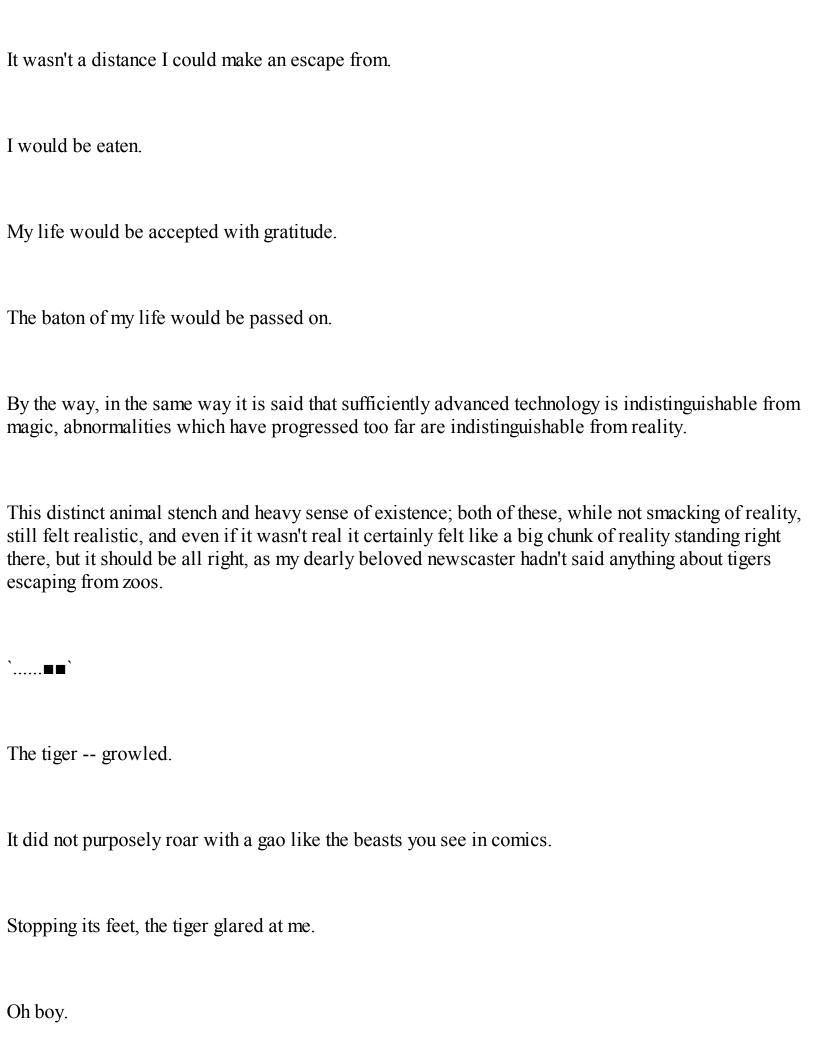
It is not only with words. The same phenomenon occurs with music or names.

You know what you know.

You know as much as you have known.
Knowledge is made up equally of recognition and recollection.
It is simply what you know.
In other words, once that has entered the circuit of recognition in your head, that which you have always ignored up till this point will now easily surface on the vast river of information flowing into you every day.
Abnormalities are everywhere.
They can't be anywhere else.
It is simply a matter of whether you notice it or not.
That is exactly why the first one is crucial.
The first time is most important.
In Araragi-kun's case, a demon.
In Senjougahara-san's case, a crab.



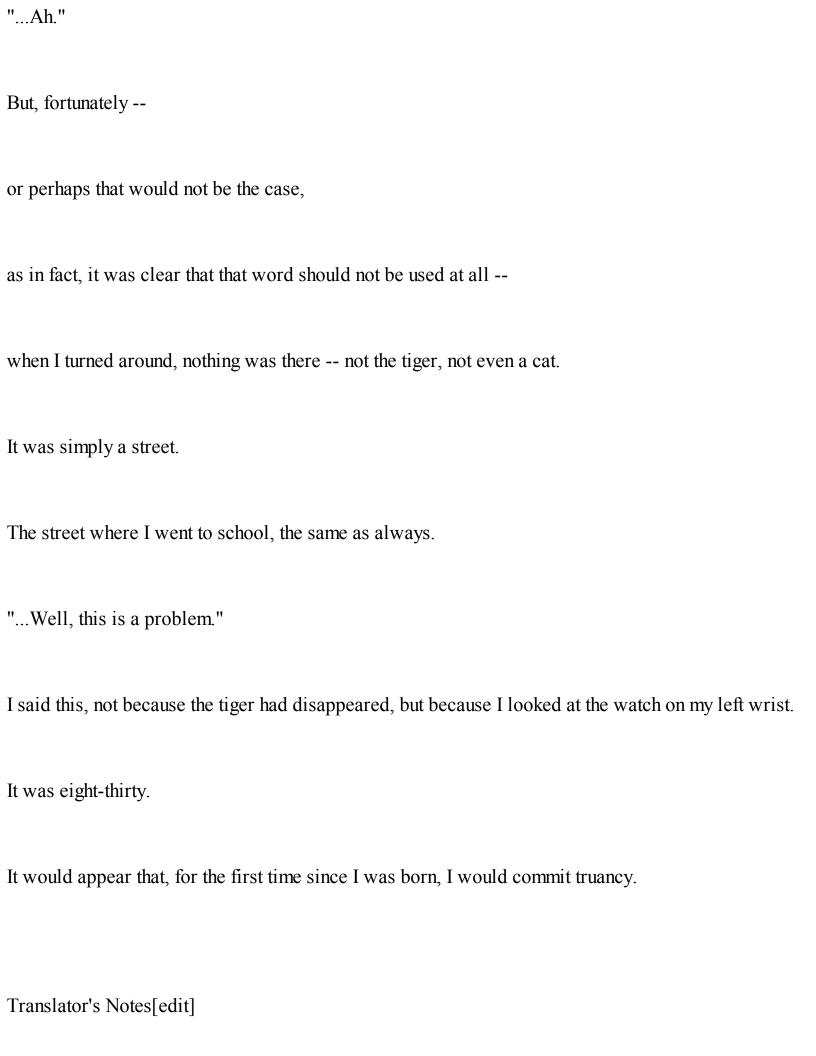




Our eyes met.
Regardless of whether this tiger was real or abnormal meeting its eyes was a bad idea.
With a real tiger, that would of course be more than enough reason for it to pounce and with an abnormal tiger, just as I would recognize it, perhaps even more so, it would become aware of me. That was bad.
I immediately averted my gaze.
I removed myself from the tiger's sight.
This did not trigger the tiger to act, but even so, I could not move from this spot in the end, regardless of whether it was an animal or abnormal, I gave a half-cocked response.
If only I could just run for it why wasn't I escaping from this place?
I could be saved if I escaped.
So,
why did I not run?
""

I wonder how much time had passed.
It seems for times like these, expressions such as minutes seemingly turning to hours, or conversely minutes seemingly turn to no time at all, are used, but to be honest, I was not so composed as to be able to think about such things.
My mind was unexpectedly narrow.
Unable to remain in this place and yet unable to leave, I was like an abnormality myself and at long last,
`Hmph. White.`
it said.
The tiger spoke.
Abnormality confirmed.
`Bright white and brazen lies.`[1]
Saying this (and not attaching any gao to the end of its lines, naturally) the four motionless feet of the tiger swayed, moving slowly, and it passed by me.
Having never seen the living being known as a tiger up close, I hadn't managed to grasp at all the scale of what was five meters before me, but when it passed close by, showing me that its torso was higher than my head, I once again realized that it was unrealistically enormous.

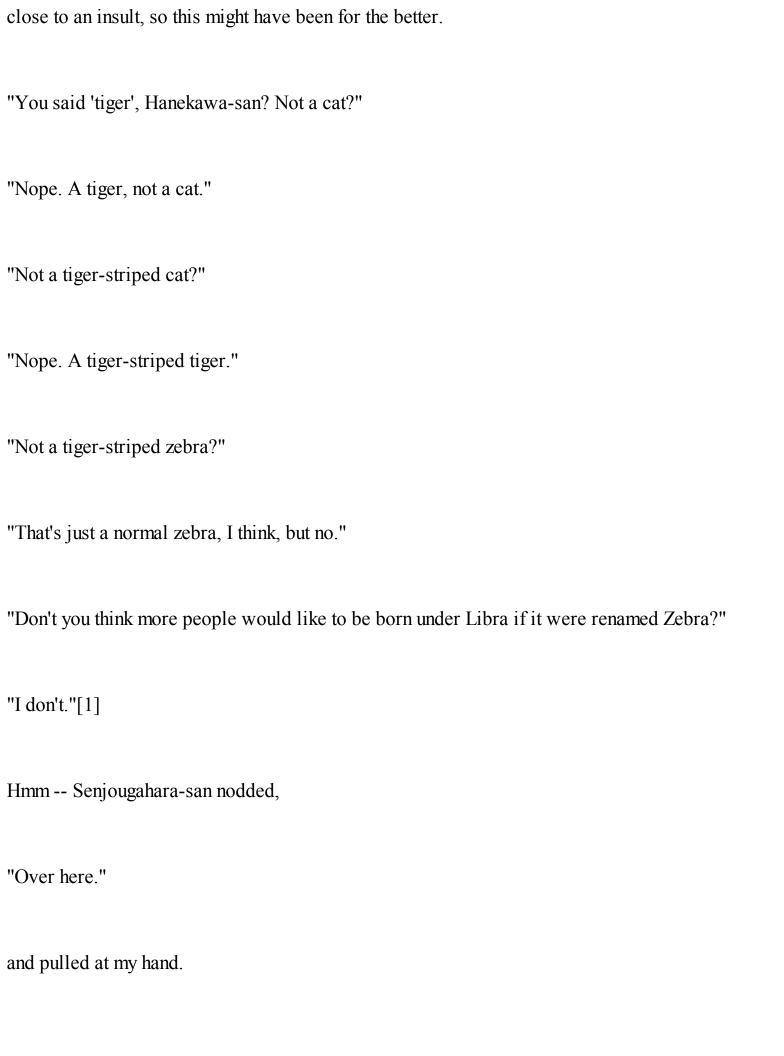
I probably shouldn't have turned around.
If it was willing to pass me by, I should have let it if it was willing to avert its gaze, that was all the more reason why mine should not seek it.
However
White.
Bright white and brazen lies.
I was ensnared by what the tiger said and, unthinkingly, without a single precaution,
I turned around.
What utter foolishness.
The lesson I learned from the first trimester, not to mention Golden Week, was practically nonexistent. I couldn't tell off Araragi-kun anymore.
No, in my case.
I did something far worse than Araragi-kun.





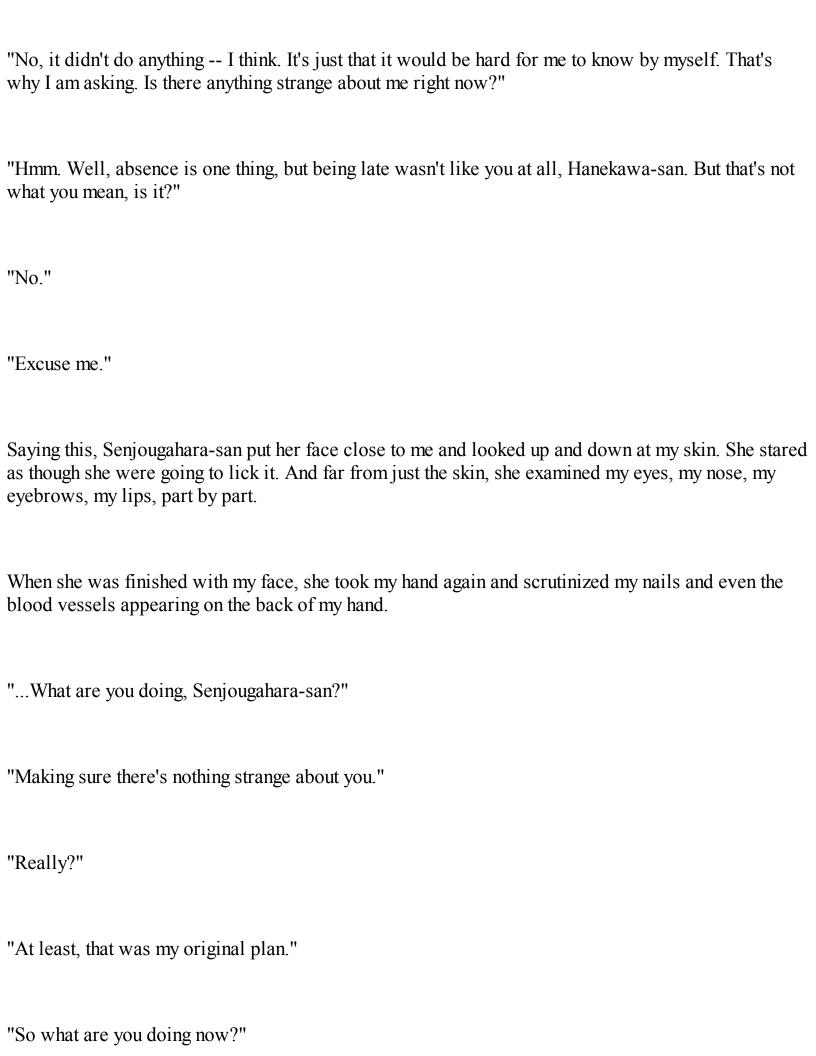
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"Listen, Senjougahara-san, listen! I ran into a tiger on the way to school today."
"Oh, is that so? By the way, Hanekawa-san, why do you think I'm obliged to hear you out in detail? You said 'listen!' but is that just how you open your statements, or are you seriously asking me?"
After the opening ceremony of the school term, as everyone was heading back to the classrooms in groups, I ran up to my classmate Senjougahara-san.
Then, I talked about what had happened this morning.
When I did that, Senjougahara-san donned a somewhat annoyed expression and gave me a downright annoyed response. However, rather than blindly refusing me,
"What is it?"
she demanded I continue.
During the summer break, the hair she had grown out to her waist had been drastically cut, and then she left for her father's family home straight away. As such, putting aside how it may seem to Araragi-kun, the short-haired Senjougahara-san was a novelty to me.
She had very fine features in the first place so any kind of hairstyle would more-or-less suit her, but thanks to her trim, that air of a 'high-class daughter' she had had during the first trimester had completely disappeared.

While it had caused some quiet controversy among the classmates (perhaps even more than when I had cut my hair) the way I see it, a high-schooler calling another a 'high-class daughter' is infinitely



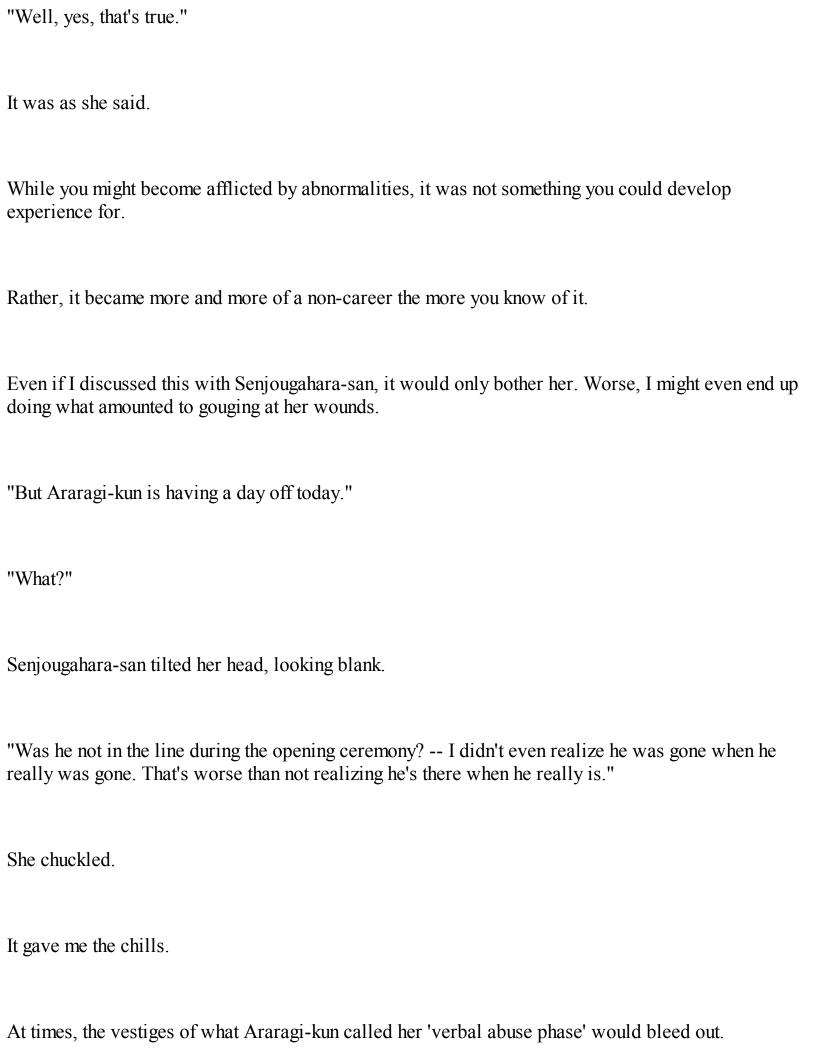
She brought me to a secluded spot.
There was still a little time before homeroom lessons began, so she wanted to get us away from the crowd we certainly could not talk freely when the eyes of the class were on us.
We were behind the gymnasium.
Such a description might give it a somewhat eerie atmosphere, but the management of the area around the gym had been awfully thorough ever since the great success of the girl's basketball team last year, so it was in fact an open and wholesome place.
The weather was good as well, so it was a fitting environment for the flowers of a love story to bloom, but for us, there bloomed the flowers of a ghost story.
Or perhaps the flowers would wither instead.
"You saw a tiger? If it's true, isn't that very serious, Hanekawa-san?"
"I think so. Oh, but it's not a real tiger. It was probably an abnormality. It talked."
"That's the same thing. It makes no difference. To a normal Japanese, even a real tiger is an abnormality."
"Ah."
That was true.

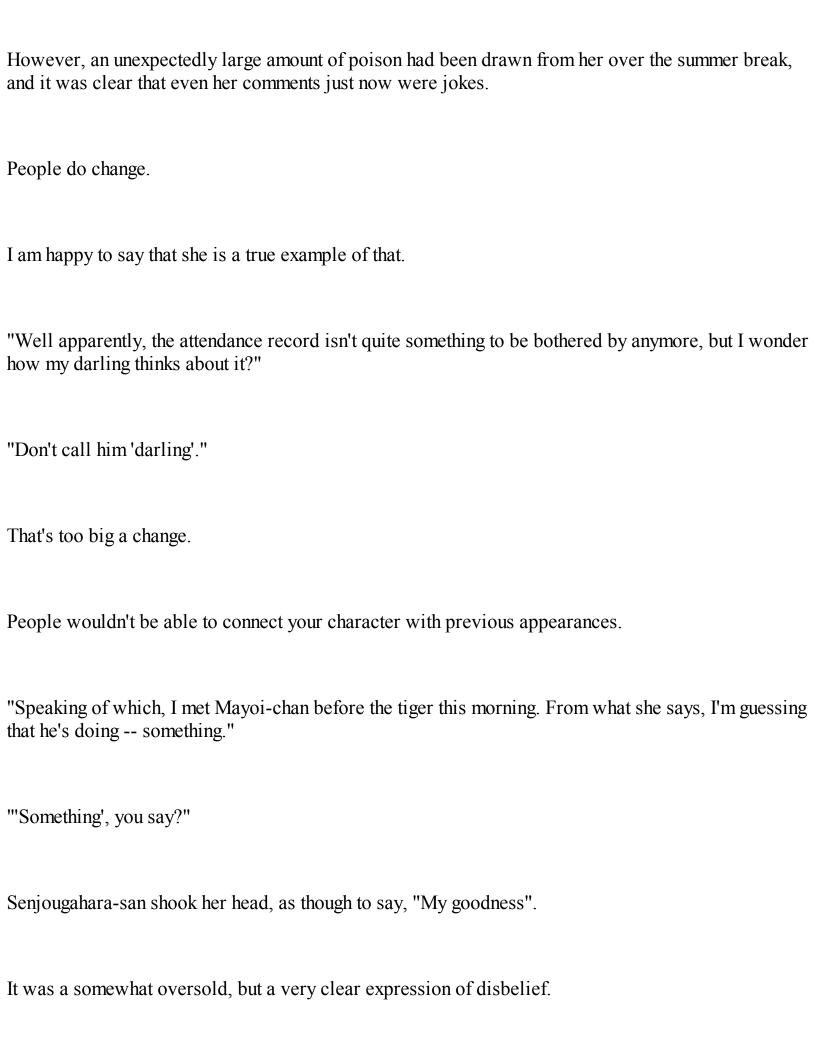




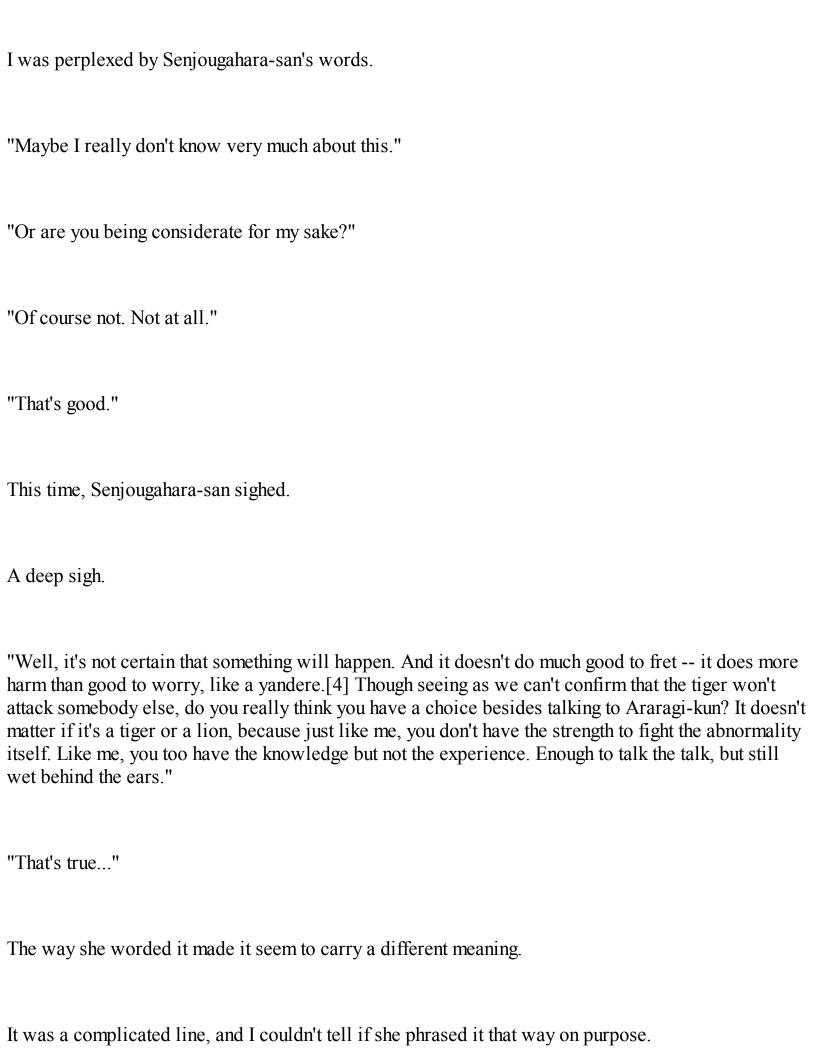


"Tiger ears'?"
Having experienced cat ears growing out from my head, this was not something I could pass off as a joke, but the suggestion sounded so realistic a possibility that I laughed as much as I could while nonchalantly confirming the area around my head.
Good.
Nothing was growing out.
"But encountering an abnormality doesn't mean that something abnormal will immediately happen so it's probably too soon to be relieved."
"That's true."
"It's not impossible for you to wake up next morning having turned into a insect."[3]
"That's a bit too much of a leap, I think."
We should at least keep it to tigers.
People might figure out that we like Kafka.
"But, in this case, I think it would be better if you were to discuss this with Araragi-kun. Of course, I was afflicted with a crab abnormality and suffered through much for it but that doesn't make me any more knowledgeable on methods to deal with them."



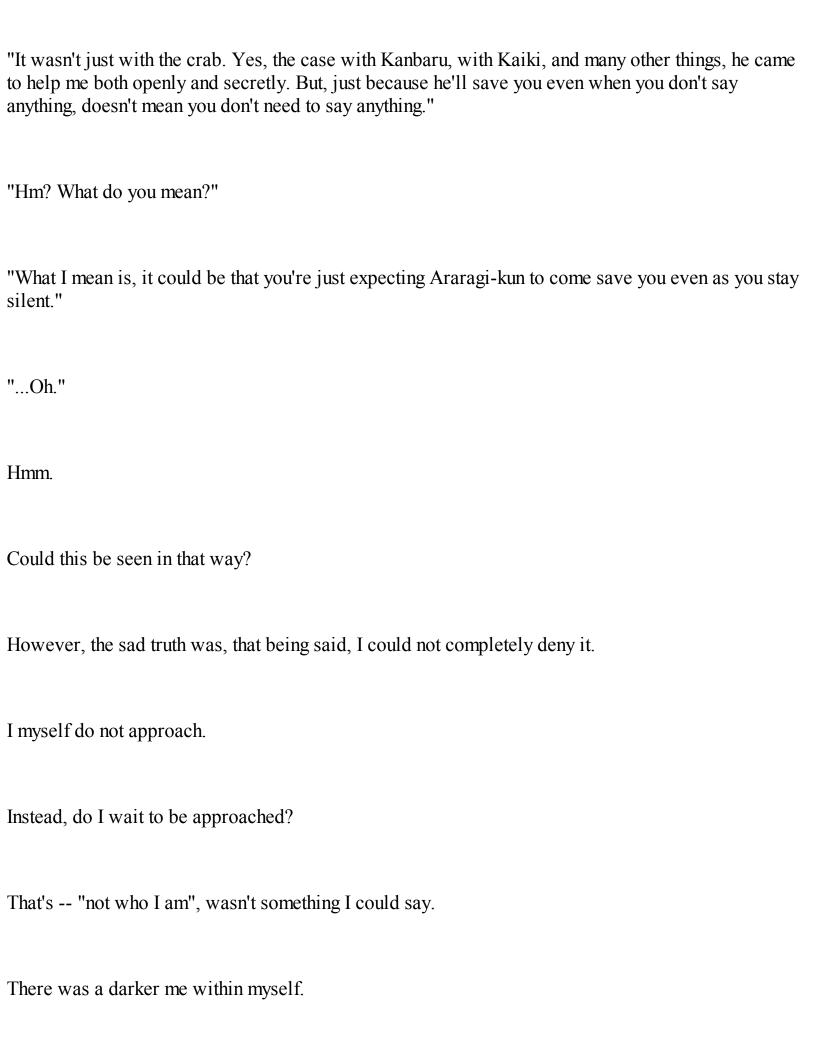












Being within myself, it was closer to me than anyone else.
"I think it'd be better if you could rely on him without reserve. That's what he's always wanted. If you had done that before during Golden Week,"
Then
As she spoke Senjougahara-san stopped what she was saying mid-sentence.
Perhaps she felt halfway through that she said too much.
But she did not apologize, simply looking uncomfortable though an apology would have been troubling as well.
I did not deserve one.
"Maybe we should head back to the classroom now."
I said.
I wasn't particularly trying to help her as she stood there awkwardly, but looking at my watch, it really was time for us to have to go back. We would have to run back up the stairs.
"We should."
Senjougahara-san nodded.

"I won't force you, but it's not good to try to do something by yourself when anything happens. You still have a strong tendency to do that so if you don't want to trouble Araragi-kun, then drag me into it as well, though I wouldn't be much help. At the least, you have me to die together with."
Saying these ridiculous things offhandedly, Senjougahara-san walked towards the school building. Though she had been "rehabilitated", it felt as though her, how you say, great power in this area remained in good condition.
Well.
Frankly speaking, Senjougahara-san wasn't rehabilitated so much as she had simply gotten cuter.
Especially when in front of Araragi-kun.
Araragi-kun only knew the Senjougahara-san who stood right before him, so it might take some time before he realized this.
And it's not like I was in a hurry to tell him.
Anyway.
And so, the two of us went back to the classroom together at worst, we were in danger of homeroom lessons having already started, but on that front we were all right.
Well, no.

Hoshina, our homeroom teacher, was already in the room.
By all rights, lessons should already have started but everyone, teacher and student, was pressing up against the window overlooking the grounds, and nobody was in their seats, so this wasn't a lesson but something else.
What happened?
What were they looking at?
"Ah."
Next to me, Senjougahara-san murmured.
She was quite a bit taller than me, so she had noticed it before I did strictly speaking, by the time I realized that everyone else was looking at something, she had taken off her shoes and stood up on one of the chairs.
In contrast with her appearance, she was an unexpectedly active girl.
Not being quite so courageous, I simply walked over, weaving my way through the gaps between classmates, and gazed outside the window.
I knew instantly what they were looking at.
"fire."

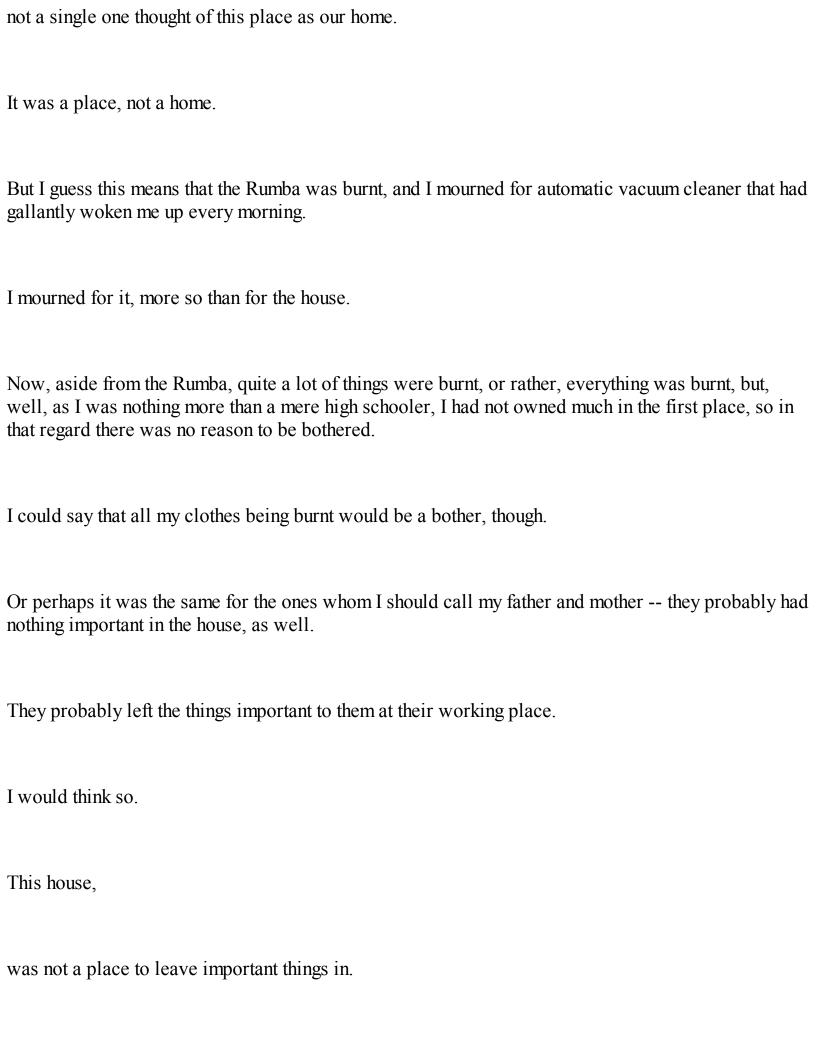
I fell in a daze, unable to think.
I talked to myself something I rarely did outside the house.
I watched the blazing fire, burning some place so far away that it only appeared as a speck, but roaring so loudly that the sound reached us.
And I said it.
"My house is on fire."
I called that house my house.
Translator's Notes[edit]
1.The original: Hitagi asks Tsubasa if renaming 練馬区 Nerima-ku (a ward of Tokyo) to 縞馬区 Shimauma-ku (shima-uma meaning 'zebra') would make more people move there, the two terms being the same except for the first character, and two fairly similar-looking characters at that.
2.A kind of youkai from Japanese folklore, tricksters in human form who could stretch their necks to great lengths.
3.A reference to The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka.
4. 気に病んでも ki ni yandemo means "Even if you worry/become anxious" and shares the same pronunciation as yandere (which is itself derived from 病む yamu).

## 006 There were two things I had not known. The first was that you could see the house I lived in from the window of the classroom where I studied every day. It wasn't as though I never had a chance to stand by the window and look outside. Why did I not notice it? Why did I not see it? I had seen it, of course, but I did not consciously recognize it -- basically, the reversal of the logic that "he who has suffered the aberrant is drawn to it". I think I might have pushed that house out of my own consciousness. However, another thing I had not known was the unexpected amount of shock I would feel when that house burnt down -- I was dumbstruck. To the point where my mind went blank. It was a terrible blow.

It seemed Araragi-kun held the misconception that, as a human being, I had a good hold of myself -but like others, I had my destructive impulses. Ever since we experienced that nightmarish Golden
Week, he had placed too great an amount of trust in my humanity -- or no, perhaps he had
unexpectedly been turning a blind eye to it -- but to be clear, I myself had wished countless times that
'a house like this should just disappear'.

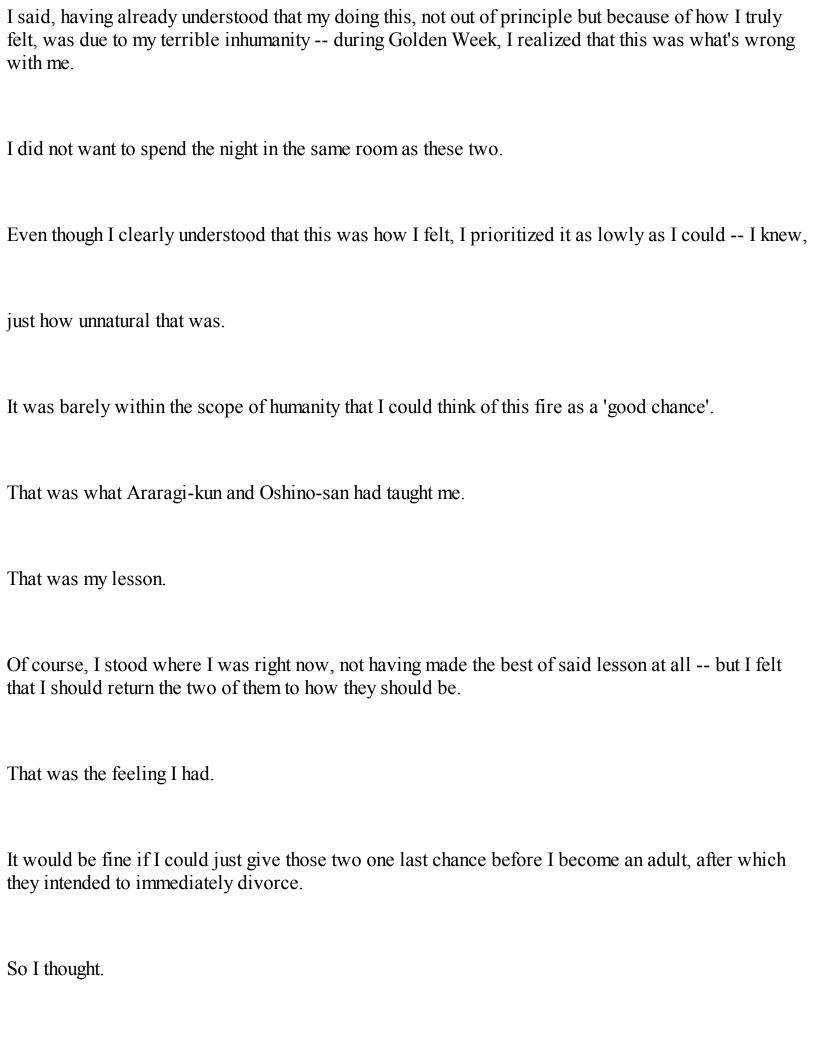


was now lost for eternity.
Disregarding the fact that I had been late, I requested that I be allowed to leave early to Hoshina who of course approved, and I ran home like Kanbaru-san in spite of myself, to find fire engines and spectators milling around the scene, the fire having already been put out.
The fire had been extinguished.
And everything was gone.
Not having spread to the neighboring houses at all, the fire burnt the house to ashes with nothing left standing.
The one silver lining in this situation would be the fact that this would be extremely advantageous when collecting our fire insurance.
It was unpleasant, but it was also the most important matter.
Wait, that's not right.
The most important matter was of course our safety but there was nothing to be concerned with on that front. I was at school, and it was highly unlikely for the other two whom I should call my parents to return home in the morning.
Of the three of us,



They would be defiled.
Well, in any case, there were many things I had not known and there were many things that, after the house burnt down, I realized for the first time.
Although I had not met him directly, perhaps this would be what that swindler, Kaiki Deishuu, would call a well-deserved lesson.
I didn't know.
I didn't care.
It didn't matter whether I cared or not the fact was that I had been cast out into the streets.
And while there were places where I had gone to during days off, not because I wanted to but because I hadn't wanted to stay in the house, it would truly be a blessing now to find a place where I could spend the night but in any case, thanks to this, the Hanekawa family will now have a family dialogue, something we have not had for a long time.
'Dialogue'?
No, even I can imagine that this sort of thing is not called 'dialogue' in a normal family.
It was nothing like a family meeting.
We merely exchanged our opinions.

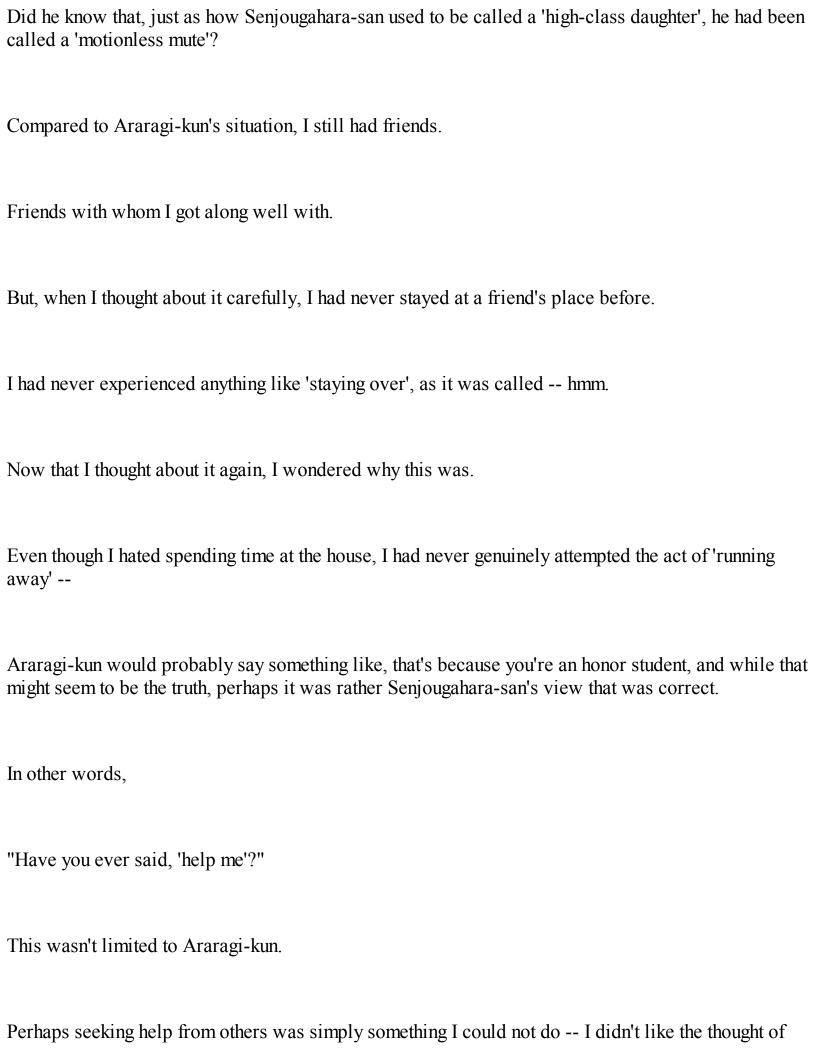
But none of us received anything.
Naturally, many troublesome formalities resulted from our house having been just burnt down but as of right now, even the reason for the fire was completely unknown. Chillingly, even arson was being suspected this was a long-term problem, and there was nothing that a child like me could do, so what we discussed today was also the most pressing question at the moment, which was to say, 'where we were to sleep tonight'.
We had nothing like relatives on whom we could rely on living nearby, so of course, there should have been no room for discussion at all, and we ought to make our way to the nearest hotel but that in itself was a problem to the Hanekawa family.
The biggest problem or, you could say, the only problem.
We had not slept together in the same room for a considerably long time.
I of course slept in the hall, and even though they were husband and wife, they had separate bedrooms. A hotel room would already be quite expensive, and we would need to have a second and third
"I'll be all right. I'll stay at a friend's place."
Before the discussion could become too involved, I said this.
I announced.
"It's a good chance for the two of you to have some alone time together, as a couple."







Actually, I had never seen him speaking to anyone other than Senjougahara-san and me.

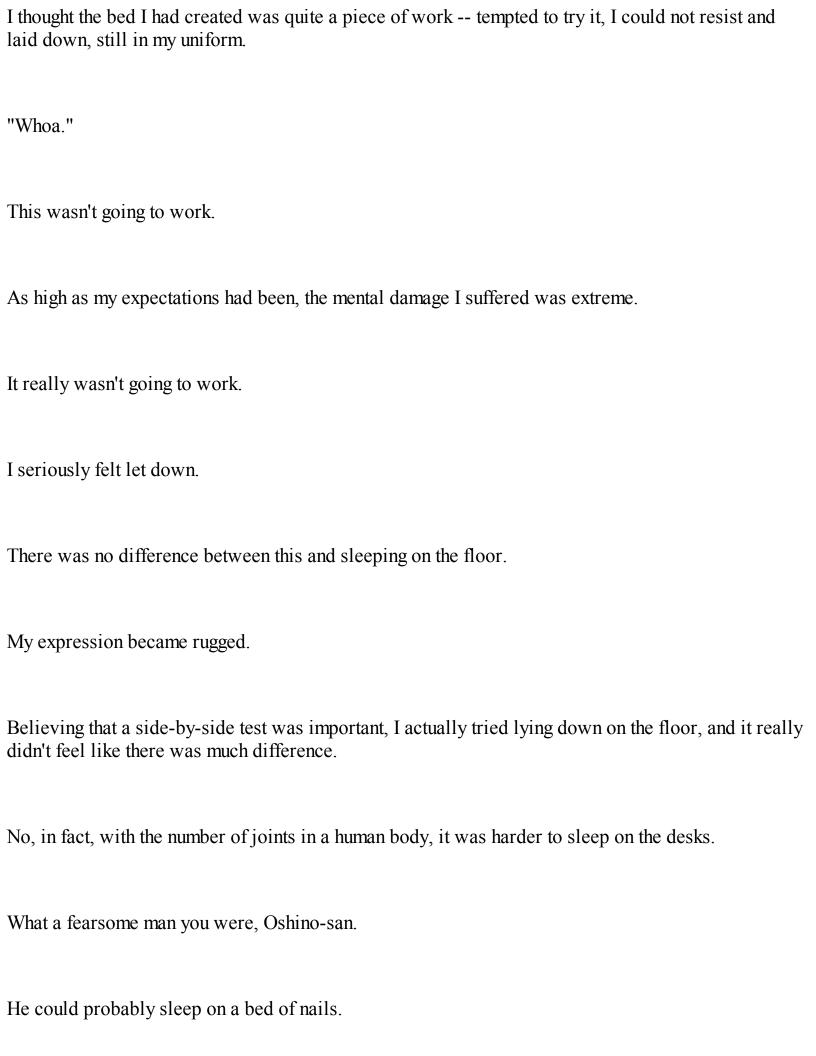






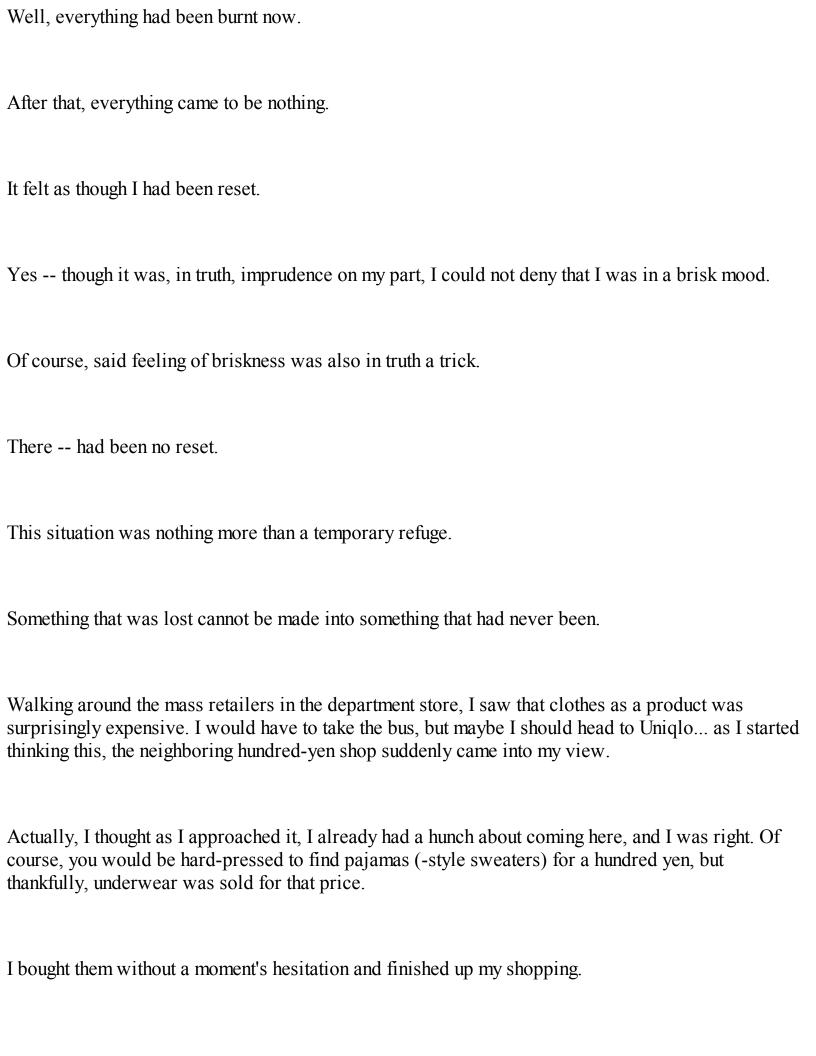


The earthquake proofing of this building would be put in quite a lot of doubt, if this had collapsed by itself.
With my heart thumping I challenged the next case and, finally, I arrived at a classroom that maintained the normal appearance of its ceiling, floor and walls.
But it was too early to feel relieved, and I immediately began working to make a bed. This feels a bit like going camping with the Scouts, I thought, but of course, I had never joined the Scouts.
Knowing something means you only know it.
It is not experience.
It was as Senjougahara-san had said.
It was as if I accumulated knowledge, and alongside it I accumulated meaninglessness.
In fact, binding the available desks together to make a bed was, despite appearances, not a simple task. I had no rope to bind them with in the first place. I left the ruins momentarily and went to a nearby store to buy some things.
"All right, it's done. Oshino-san used one more desk for his bed, but I'm not as tall as him, so this size should be enough."
It was enjoyable, though. Making something.

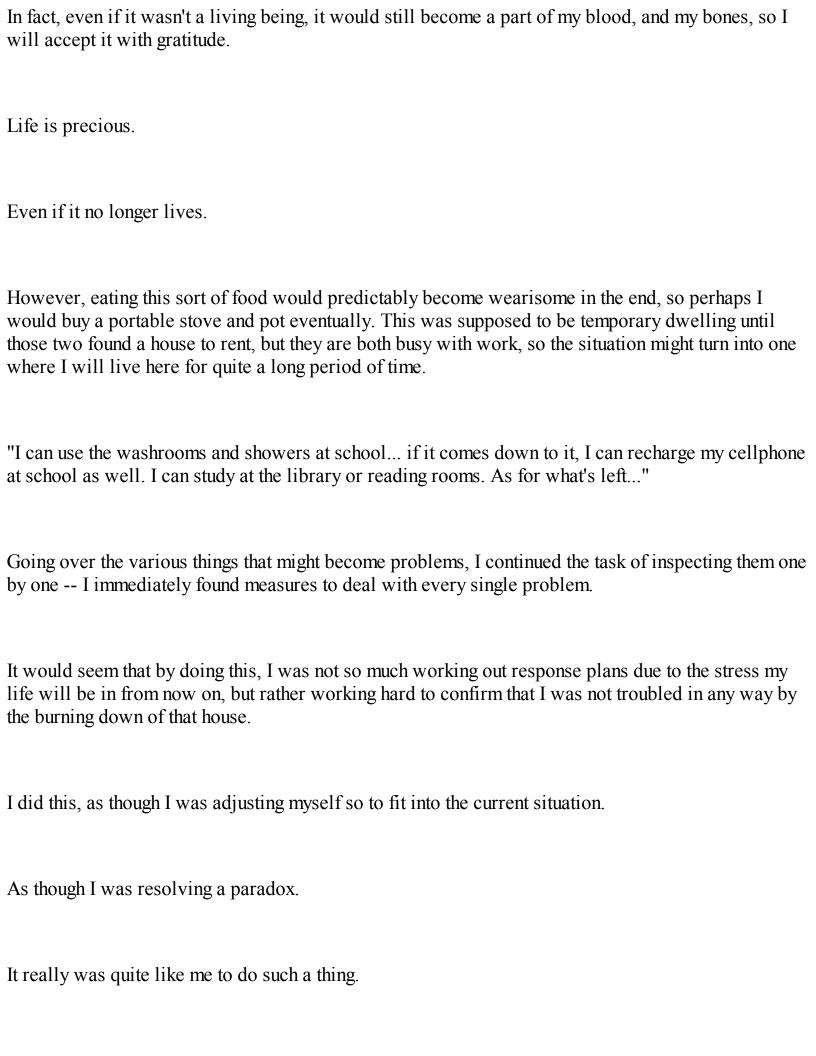


I tried thinking of how Araragi-kun and Shinobu-chan had done it, but seeing as Shinobu-chan was a former vampire and Araragi-kun had been a vampire when he lived here, it couldn't really be used as a reference.
I hadn't the faintest idea of how a vampire would feel in sleep when they could sleep comfortably even in a narrow coffin.
"A futon. I need bedding"
Saying this, I left the ruins once again.
I left, carrying my wallet which had a cash card inside so it wasn't as though I couldn't go and buy things.
Besides, there were many necessities which needed to be bought in the first place aside from vinyl cords, and it shouldn't take much time or effort it was just that, at this point, I had to cut down even on bus fares, so there was no way I could buy a something like warm Hanege quilt bedding, so I had to prepare some sort of replacement.
On this topic, I read in some book that newspaper, magazines or cardboard were very reasonable for the purpose of warming oneself. I ought to be able to get cardboard at department stores for free.
Considering the amount of this-and-thats which I had to buy, I would have to take the bus for the return trip, but I cleanly surrendered myself on that point. It was a bad idea to cut down on even the things I needed.
Poverty dulls the wit.

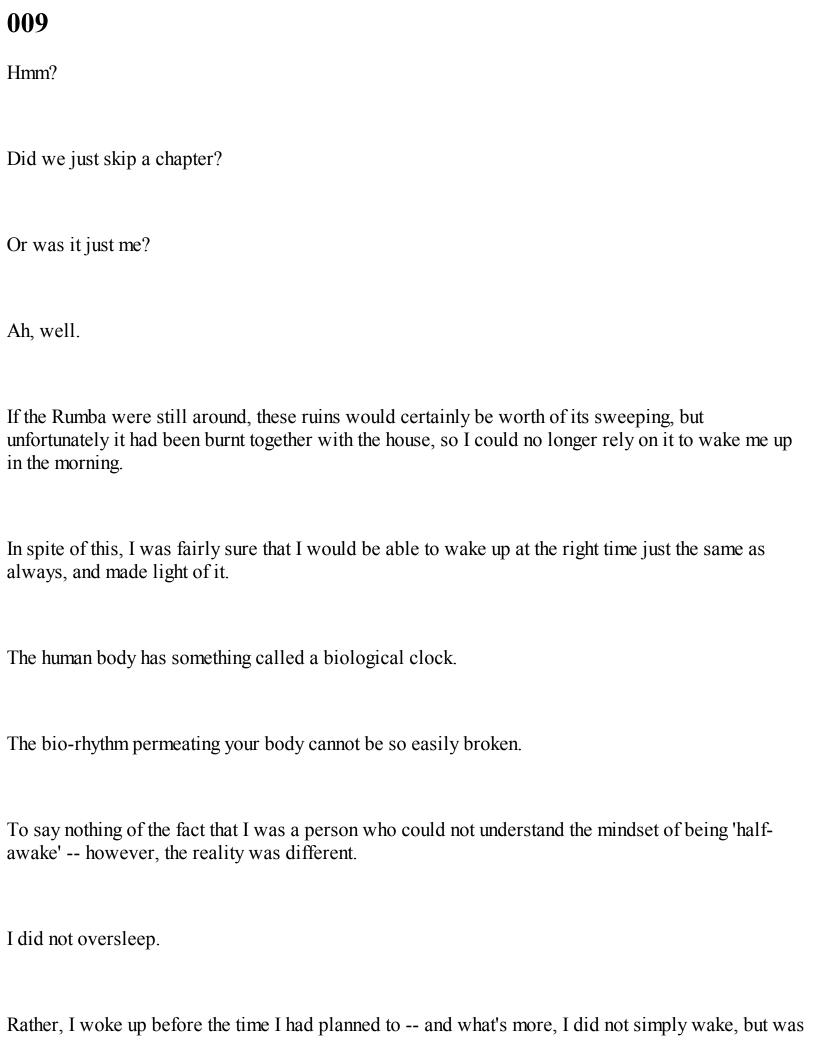




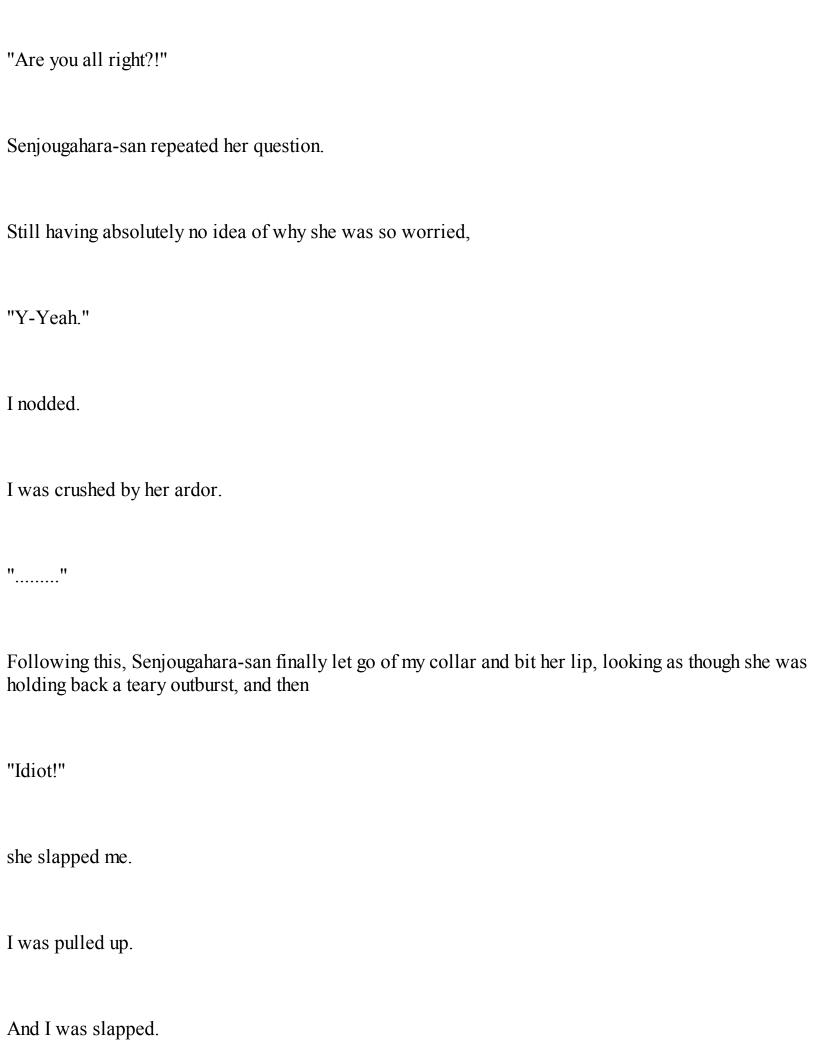
As I thought about stupid things like how I really couldn't show off underwear I had bought at a hundred-yen shop to Araragi-kun, I stepped onto the bus for the return trip as planned, and returned to the tutorial school.
Oshino-san hadn't spoke of bothers like these when he had lived here, but as he was a human being and not a vampire, I felt a strange sense of admiration for him as I wondered if he had really gone through three months of hardships like this.
In the third-floor classroom, I began reinforcing the bed. Cutting the cardboard with a utility knife, I used packing tape to wrap together two layers on top of the desks. You may think that, no matter how much I worked on it, cardboard was still cardboard, but this was overwhelmingly more comfortable a bed. I wrapped another layer of cardboard just to be sure, and completed my bedding.
As the amount of work so far had tired me out considerably, I had dinner.
Preserved foods were all that I bought, so there was no need to cook anything.
Of course,
"Thanks for the meal."
I did not forget these words.
Even if it was just preserved foods, once you trace it back to its source, it had been the sacrifice of some life, somewhere.
At least that's what I believe, so, thank you.

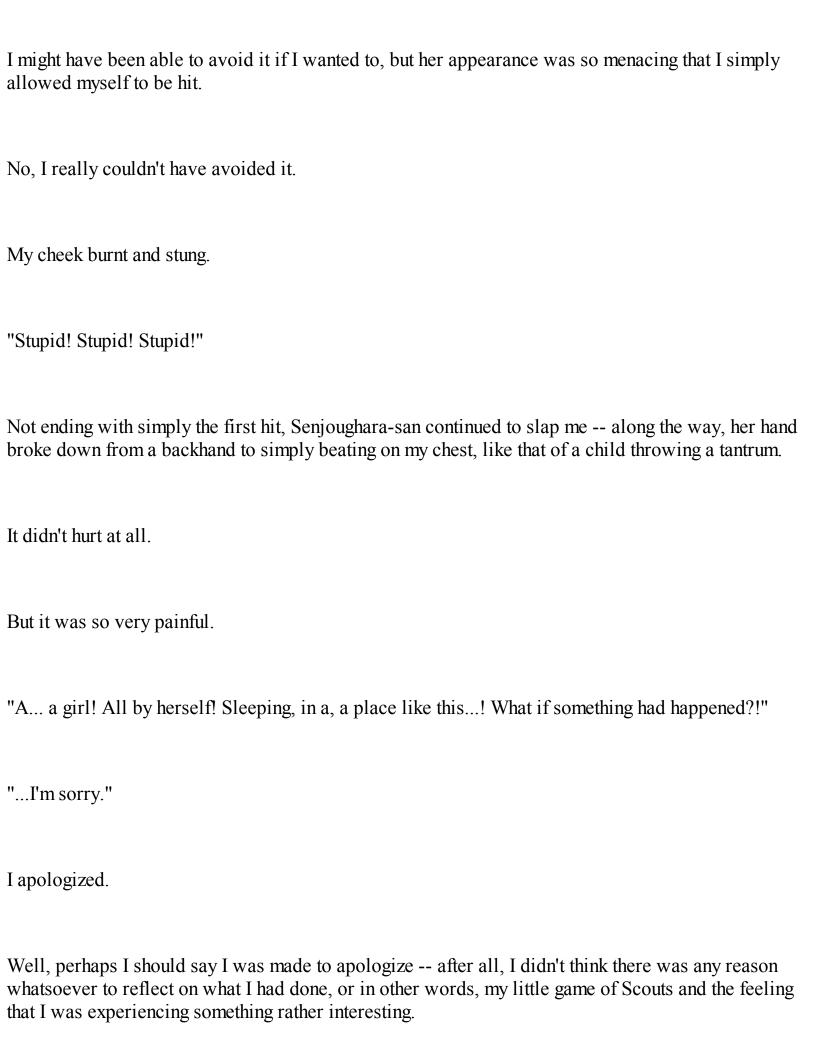


"That was delicious."
Seasonally speaking, it was still the height of the summer so the sun should set fairly late, but it had become pitch dark before I realized, so I changed into the nightclothes and the underwear I bought at the shop, and went to sleep on the bed I had just made.
'Comfortably snug' weren't quite exactly the words I could use.
Even so, it was a mysterious thing that I felt a sleep more peaceful here than when back in that hallway.











and continued to apologize.
In the end, it took about thirty minutes for Senjougahara-san to stop crying and by then, it was my wake-up time, just the same as always.

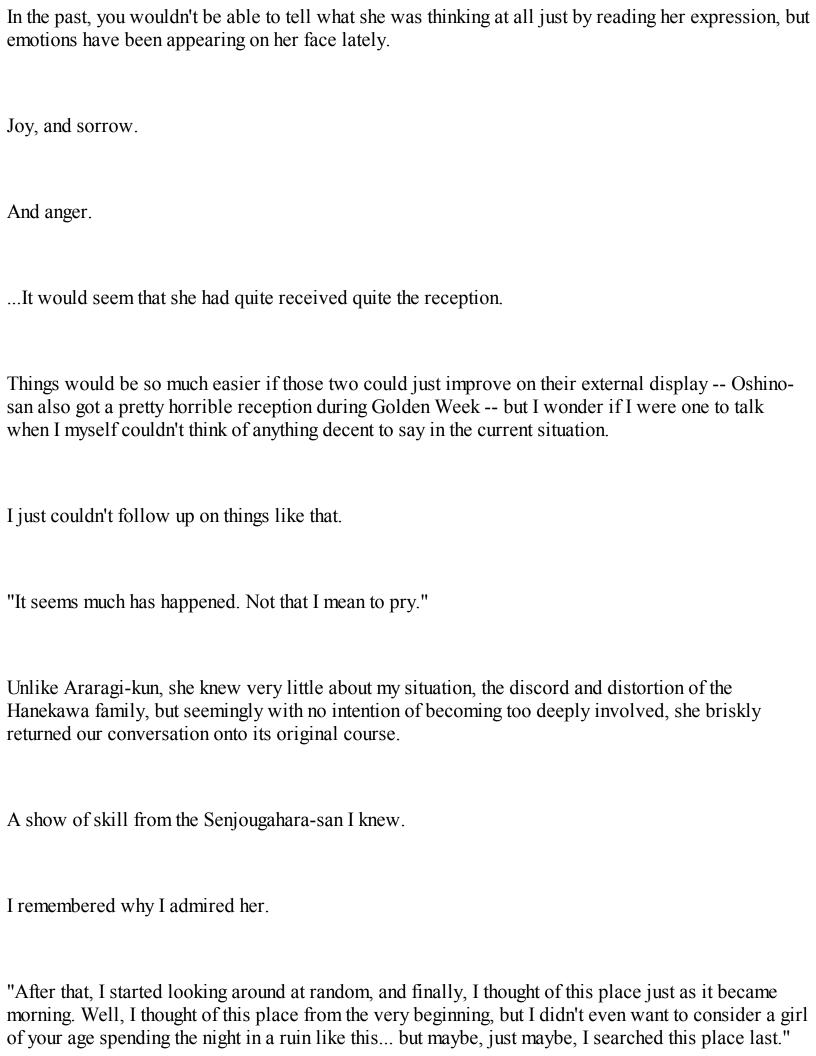
## 010 "I called you many, many times last night." Senjougahara-san said, having gone back to her usual, cool-beauty self as if nothing had happened. The speed of the switch was worthy of my astonishment. Even so, the area around her eyes was still bright red, so she hadn't relaxed completely yet. On the other hand, it seemed that I tossed around quite a bit in my sleep and messed up my hair, probably because of the bed (I got called a 'Super Hanekawan') so I suppose I didn't look completely relaxed, either. I just thought it was incredible how Senjougahara-san managed to act normally, as though the flood of tears from before were just a pretence. Really, she was just so adorable. It almost made me not mind the state my hair was in. "I couldn't even imagine how it would feel to have your home burn down... I'd thought that maybe you wouldn't want anyone talking to you right now, so I had been holding back, but I was still worried... so I made up my mind and decided to go ahead and call you anyway, but it wouldn't go through." "Oh. Sorry, I turned my phone off."

"I thought the living would be rough from here on, so I ought to be more frugal."

I said.

I wasn't using the phone in place of my alarm clock because I had some trust in my own biological clock, but of course, there was also a more pragmatic reason.
I couldn't be completely sure whether the school would let me use their outlets or not (my teacher would lend me one if I explained the reason, but ultimately, the use of cellphones was banned in school).
"My goodness, you are strait-laced you can just borrow the outlets here and there."
"Well, that's actually called theft."
"I had to run all over the city, thanks to you. I managed to learn that you were staying at a friend's house after asking a lot of different people but no one told me who in the class you were staying with."
"How how many people?"
"Everyone I knew."
""
To Senjougahara-san, who once upon a time had risen beyond a mere fear of strangers and reached the epitome of human distrust, this was a growth.
However, due to said growth, the news of my disappearance was now known to the class





"Huh. Huh? Wait, are you saying you stayed up the whole night, Senjougahara-san?"
"I am saying I stayed up the whole night, Senjougahara-san. Staying up all night, what they call 'stay-upper' for short."
That's why I got so excited when I found you and started crying, said Senjougahara-san.
That's a cute excuse.
'Staying up all night' is an 'all-nighter', by the way.
"A girl of your age wandering around the streets at night sounds plenty dangerous to me."
"I don't have any way to answer that."
I'm not really the thinking-ahead type, said Senjougahara-san.
Now that I looked, she was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, a very rough style. The way she was covered in sweat told me that, rather than 'wandering', she had been running about like Kanbaru-san.
"Thanks."
I thanked her shortly, and as nonchalantly as possible, and then lowered myself from the bed.

It didn't hurt.
I didn't believe myself to be an excellent human being, no matter how much Araragi-kun might tell me so, but it would seem that I had some talent at bed making.
I fancied myself becoming, perhaps, a bed maker in the future.
Can you learn it by studying in Germany or something?
"It's all right, it was something I decided to do by myself and judging from your situation, it seems I've done something rather fruitless."
"Of course not. Not that you've mentioned it, I finally realized just how dangerous this was. They say fire can drive anyone into a panic, so it looks like that fire got me in a pretty strange mood."
"Perhaps. In fact, I hope that is the case you do some incredibly dangerous things even just naturally, did you know that?"
"Really?"
"Seducing Araragi-kun, for one."
"Hmph."
A 'hmph' was all I managed.

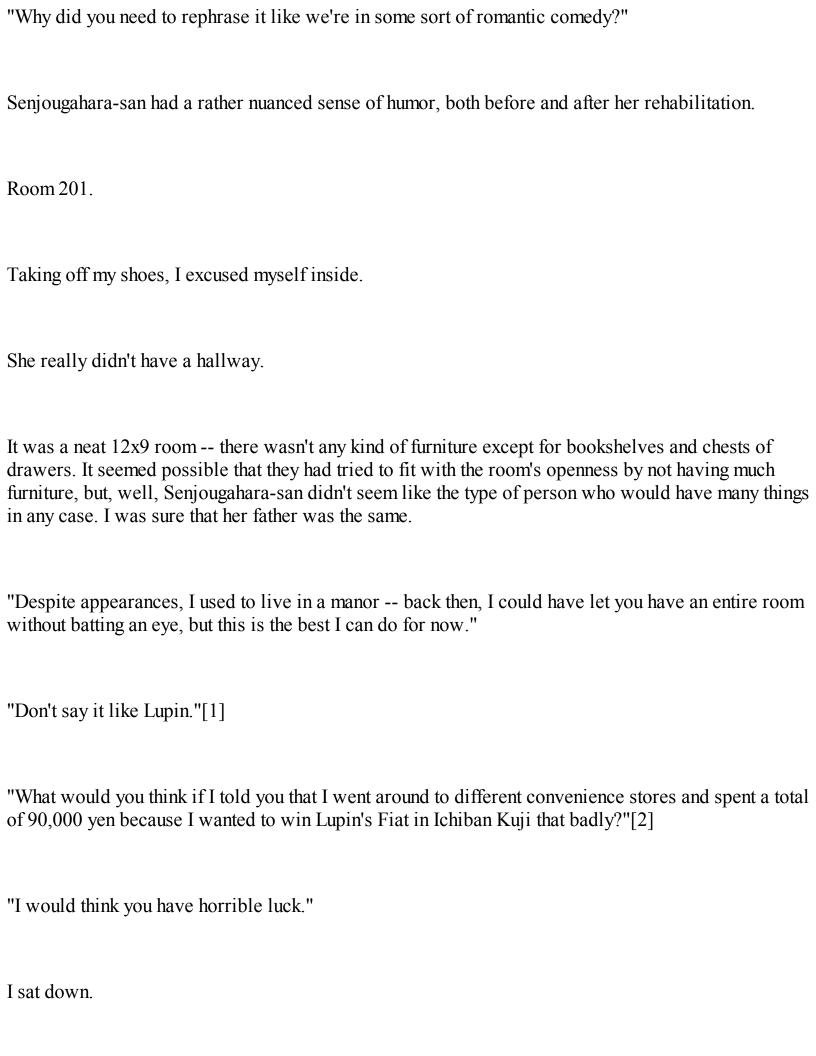
I couldn't figure out a rebuttal.
I haven't been trying to seduce him at all, and yet I couldn't object.
This theory, that I had been the one who made him the way he was now, was surprisingly persistent among the public.
"He really was very aloof back then when he first got involved with me. There's barely any trace of that left now."
"Is it because of me?"
"Well, there was the matter of the tiger, as well in any case, I certainly did worry too much. I apologize, I should have known better. Now, let's go."
"Go? Go where? To school?"
"My home."
Senjougahara-san said this as though it were obvious.
"I will say this one more time for your sake, but if you attempt to resist, a stapler will be going into your mouth, and it will close shut around the side of your neck. Anything to bring you with me, Hanekawa-san."
"

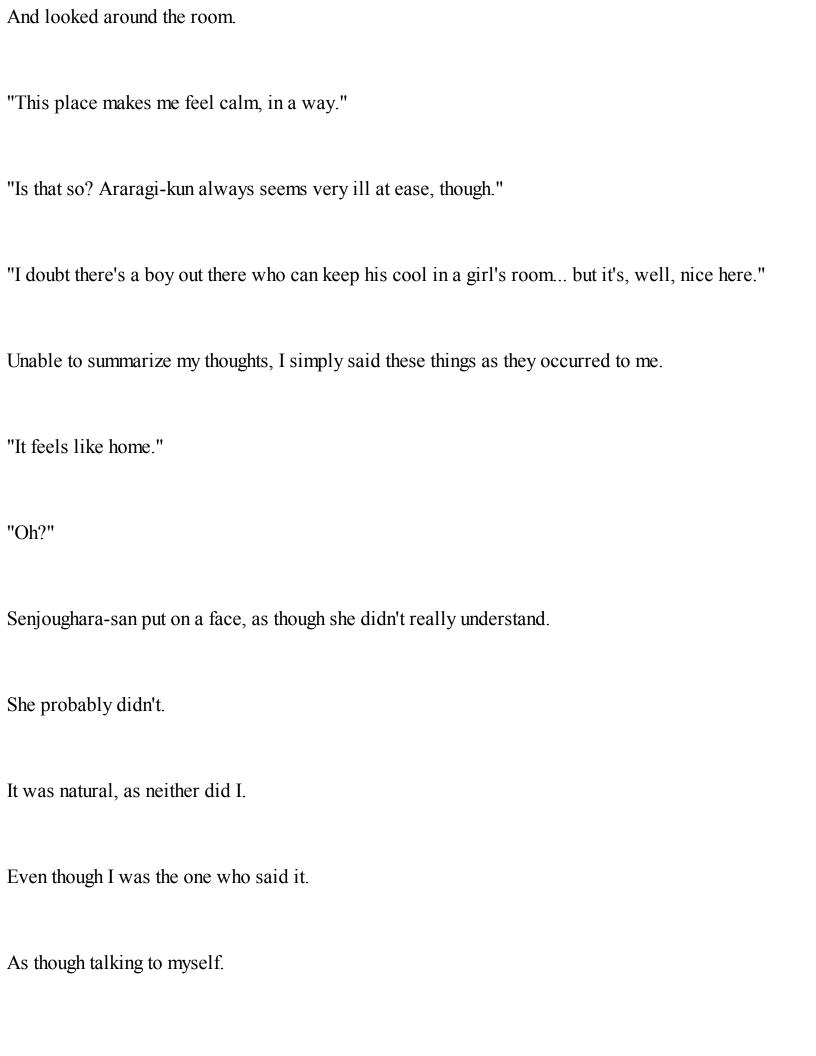


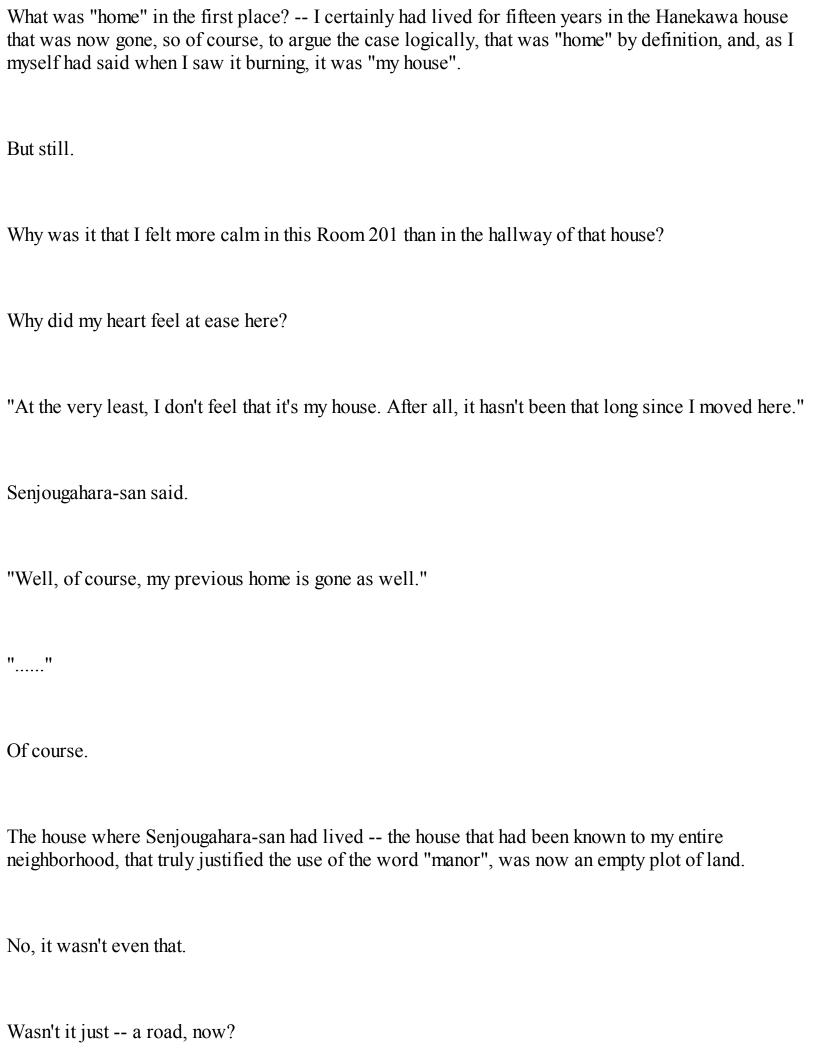
## 011

In spite of what the occupant herself had said, the outside appearance of the apartment where Senjougahara-san lived, Warren Villa, was spectacular to the point where you would think it were a pre-war building. It felt the very image of venerability.
Araragi-kun had once said, mean-spiritedly, that in terms of earthquake proofing, this place was more dangerous than those ruins (though I think that might have just been his way of expressing his concern for Senjougahara-san) but as I went up the external staircase, I found that this was not the case, and it was more soundly built than I expected.
Perhaps this is what is meant when people say older buildings are sturdier than recent, instant-made structures.
Even the security of the place was incomparable.
There was a lock on the door!
Now that I'd come to an actual house, I realize just how much risky those ruins were.
It was dangerous.
'Father has work today and won't be coming back, so stay here for today, Hanekawa-san."
'Oh can I?"

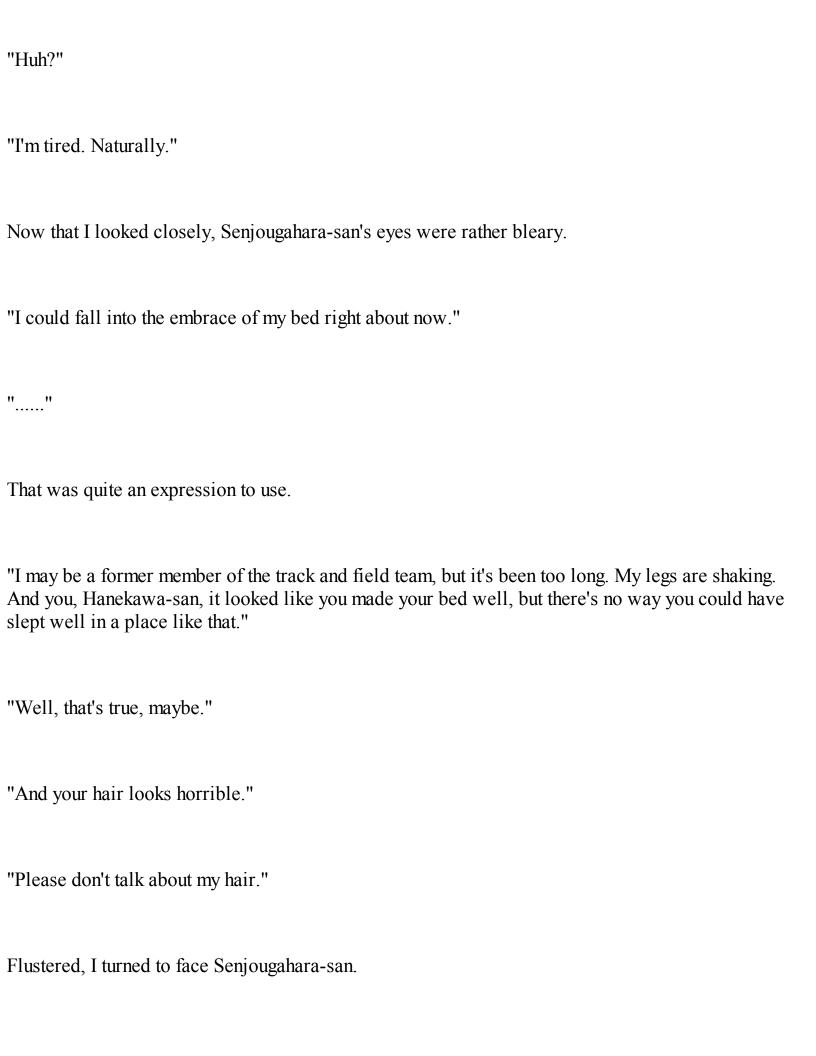
"Um, actually, Father isn't coming home tonight..."

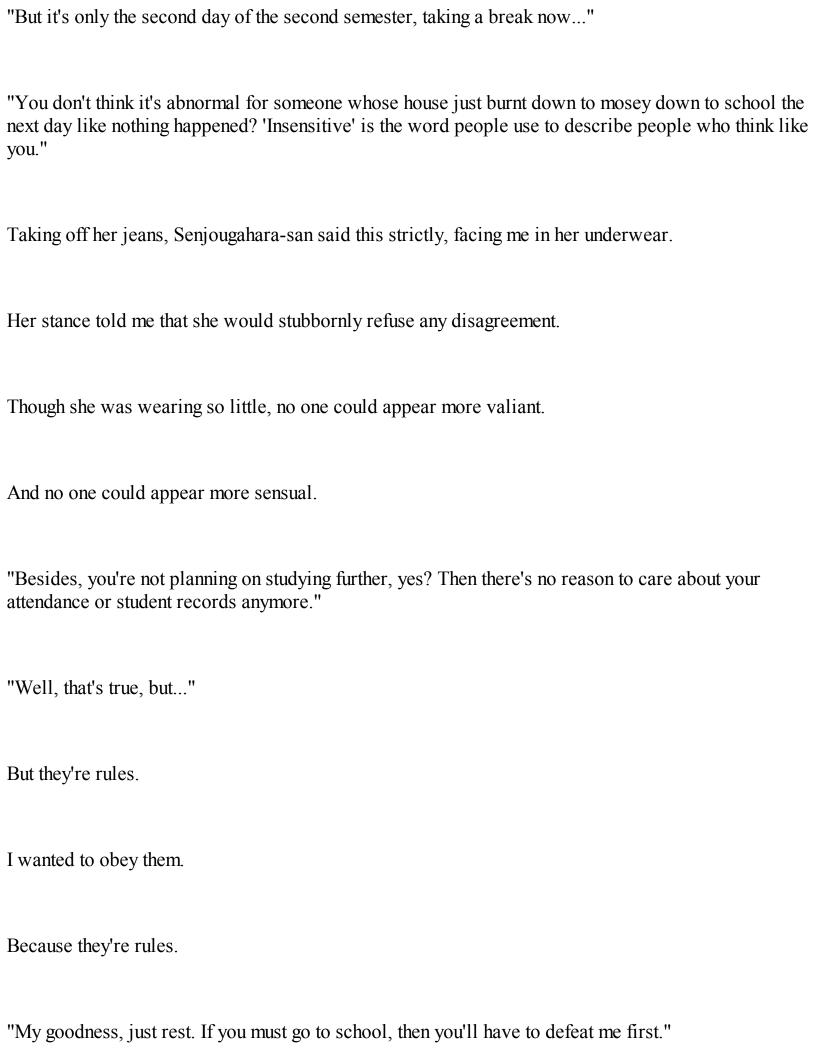




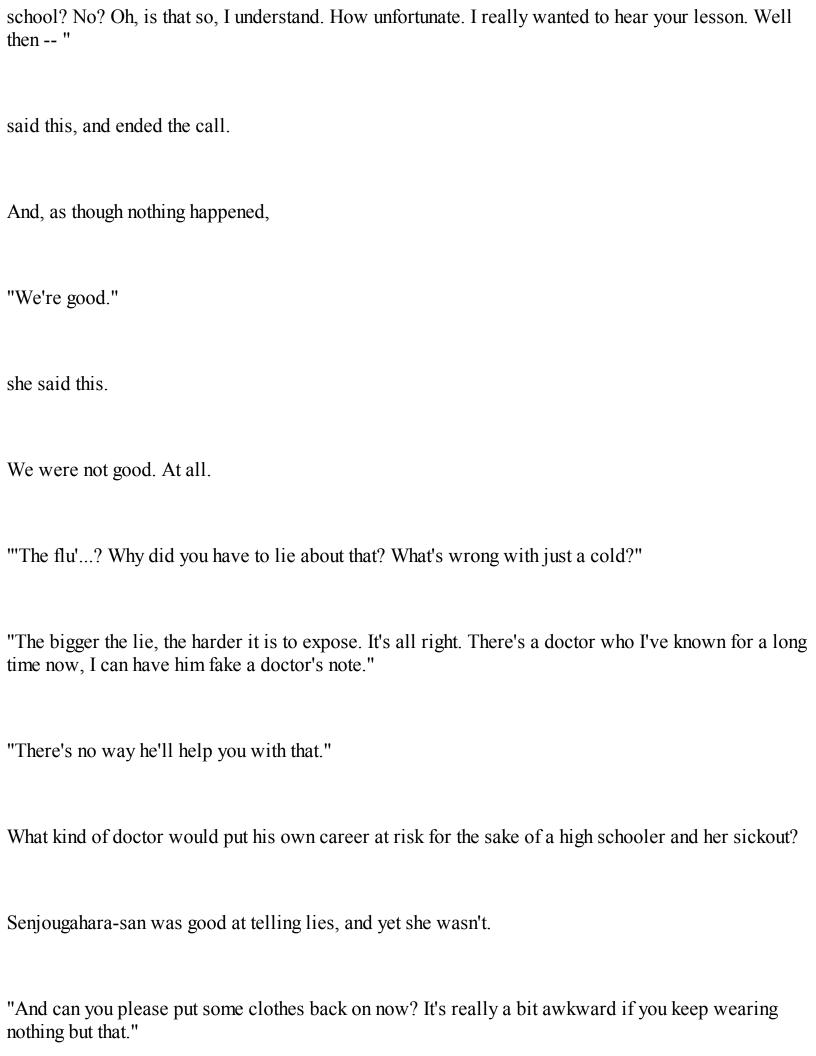


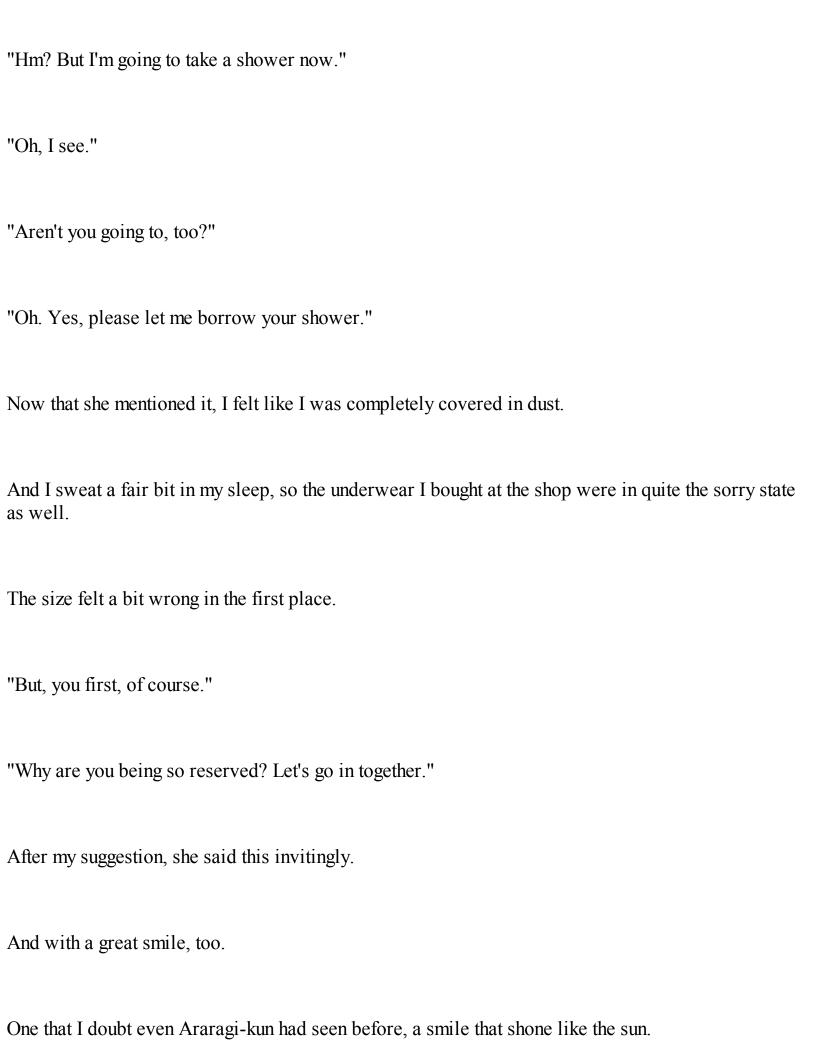
I wonder.
I had clearly watched my own house burn, even if it was from a distance how did it feel, for one's home to become something of the past?
I didn't know.
I didn't know so I stopped thinking about it.
Yes.
I wouldn't be bothered by it anymore.
I wouldn't be bothered by my own calmness.
"Take a break from school today, Hanekawa-san."
Senjougahara-san said, taking off her sweat-drenched T-shirt.
Saying this as one girl to another, she put on an extremely good show when she, well, stripped.
It was worth admiring, even.
"I'll be resting as well."

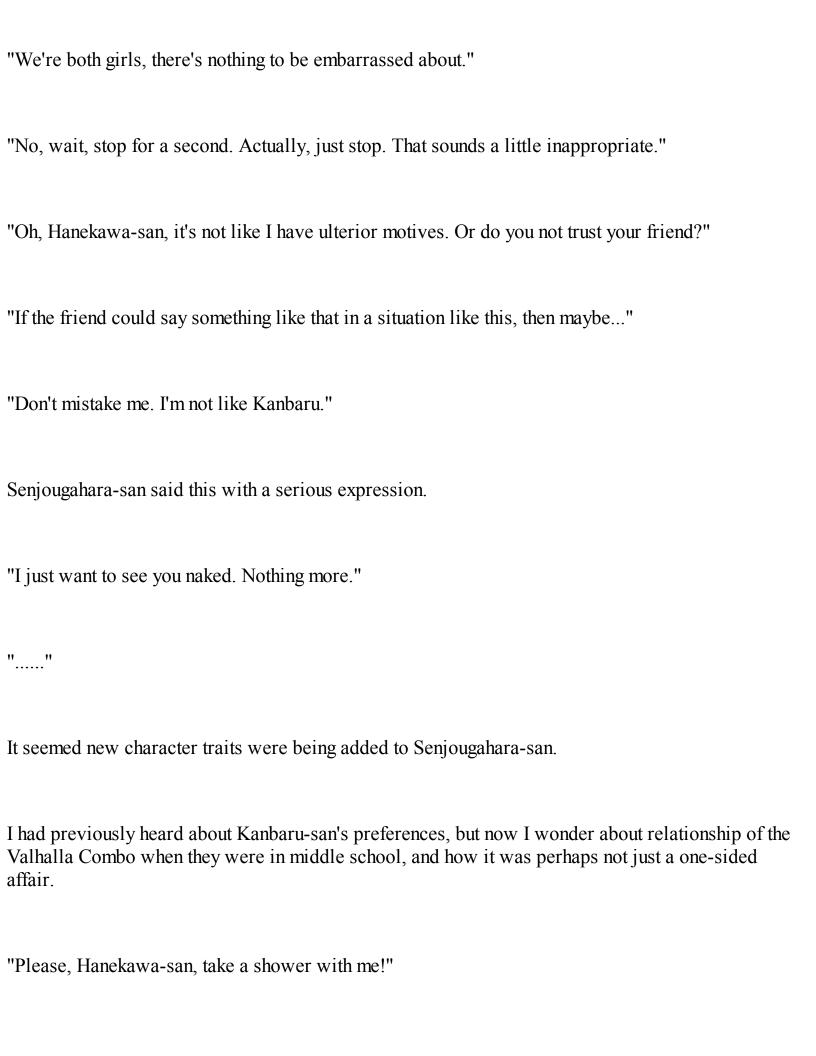




Saying this, Senjougahara-san took on a stance from Chinese martial arts.
A needlessly perfect Praying Mantis.
"Shiiing."
"Please don't add in your own sound effects all right, I get it. I'll do as you say for today, Senjougahara-san. And to be honest, I really do want to rest and relax. Thank you for making me do this."
"If you say so."
Besides, minding other people's business like this isn't like me Senjougahara-san said, somewhat embarrassingly, but I wonder. Personally, I thought this sort of officiousness was just like her.
"Oh. Oh, but, is it all right for you to take a break, too?"
"Me? Well, as for me, I plan to go on to university based on recommendations. Regardless of my attendance record, damaging my student record would be hmm, that's right."
Senjougahara-san seemingly worried for an instant, then immediately took out her cellphone. Just as I wondered who she was calling, Senjougahara-san pinched her nose, faked a hoarse voice,
"Cough, cough, oh, Sir? This is cough, this is Senjougahara. I've caught the flu, it seems it might be the newest strain. Cough, yes? My temperature? It's averaging at forty-two degrees. I just broke my air conditioner with my fever. There's no mistake, this is because of the heat wave this year. I'm swimming in sweat. I feel like I'm coming apart I might infect the whole class, but can I come to

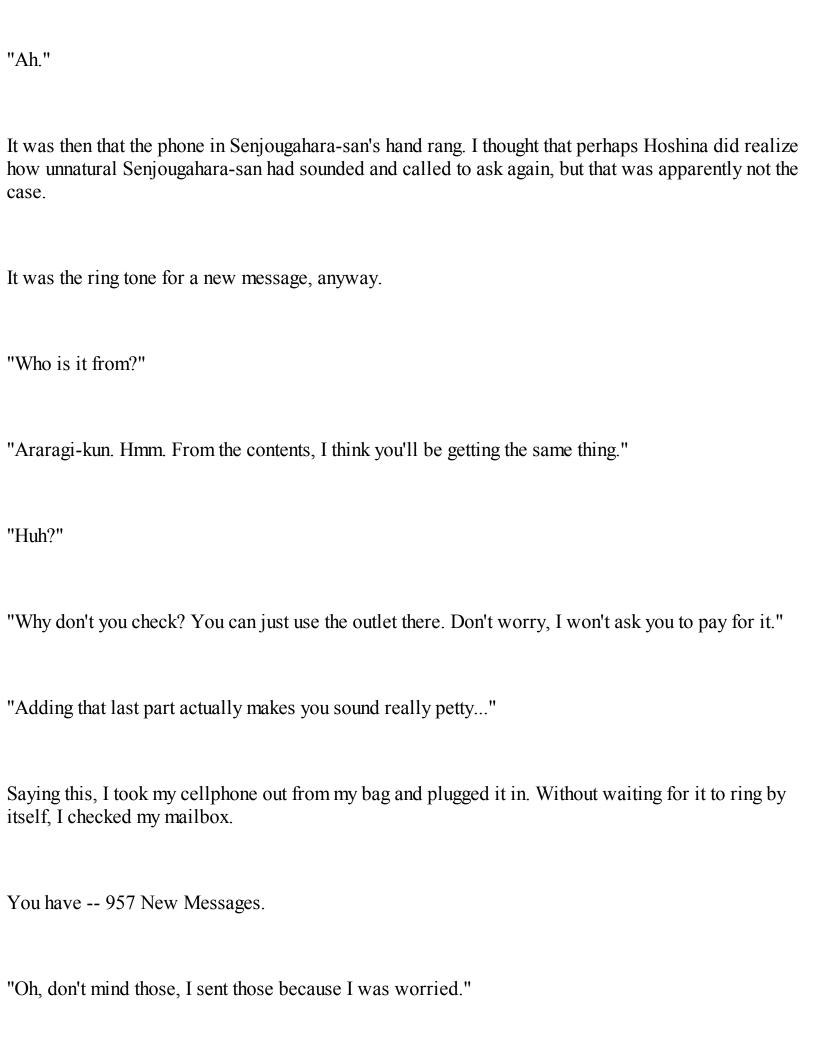






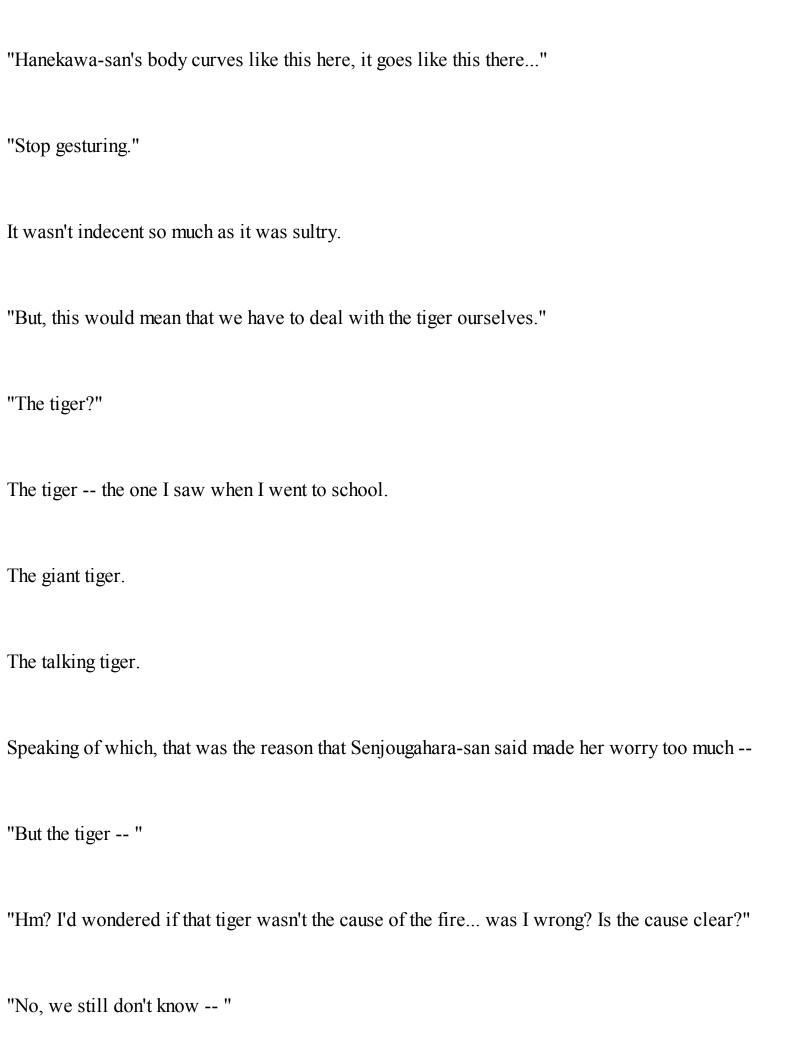






"You sent 956 messages in one night?!"
Over half of the messages in my Received folder seemed to have been pushed out and was gone from the memory.
Was this supposed to be my fault?
Shouldn't I be asking for an apology for this?
As I thought this, I hurried to check the latest message it really was sent by Araragi-kun.
'not comingback yet dont worry'
There was neither a subject nor a signature the message was so bare, calling it 'straightforward' would be an exaggeration. It was urgent, as though he was wrote it in such an emergency that he didn't even want to waste time with capitals, punctuating properly, or fixing the spacing.
"Perhaps this is to be expected, but it seems Araragi-kun is at it again and this time, it appears to be quite serious."
Senjougahara-san, having apparently received the same message, said this mixed with a sigh.
She seemed astounded, even.
"I don't really know what happened then, but judging from the message, this sounds as bad as spring break, or worse."

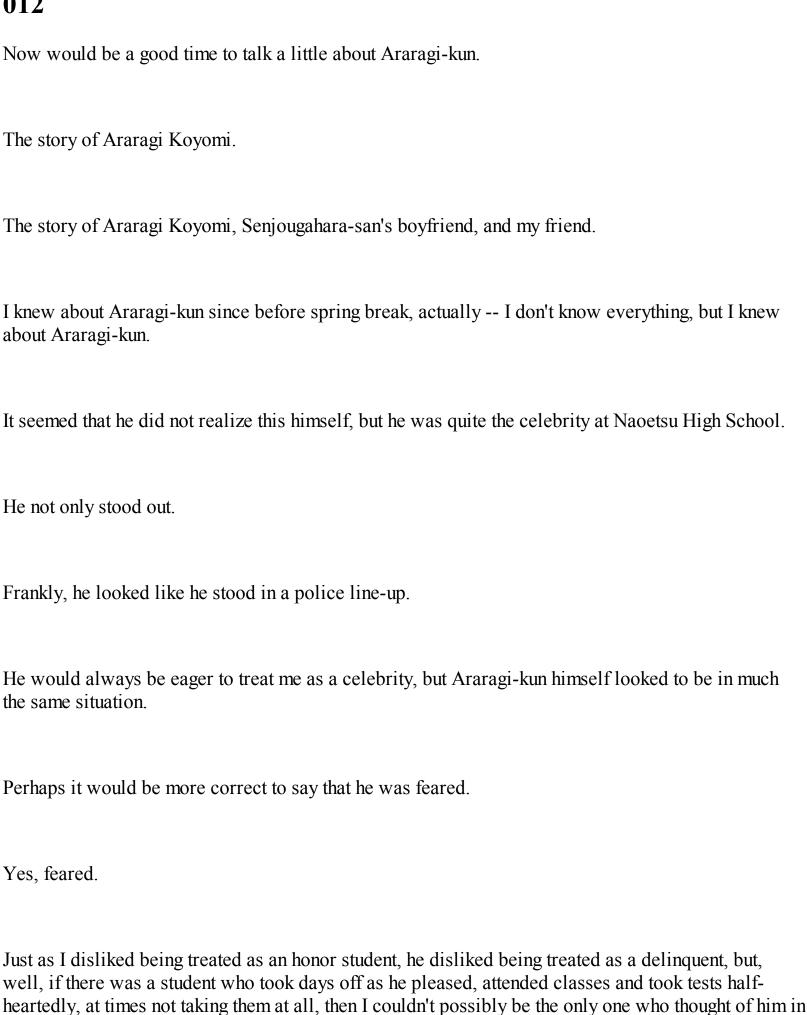
"You think so too?"
"Yes. Well, at least he took the time to send a message this time, so perhaps he has grown back then, he really couldn't see anything except what was in front of him."
"That's true."
Did it have something to do with Mayoi-chan?
Well, Mayoi-chan was only looking to have her backpack returned, and that was the only reason why she was looking for Araragi-kun, so she should be unrelated to what Araragi-kun was involved in right now
But, for some reason, I knew that was the case.
And somehow, with absolute certainty.
"It's no good. It wouldn't connect."
At some point, Senjougahara-san tried to call him (and with so little hesitation in the act as well) and, with almost no hint of having done something audacious, she snapped shut her cellphone and put it in its charging stand.
"Well, he's a boy, so I suppose we don't have to worry for him it should be all right. Once he comes back, I'll brag to him about taking a shower together with you."
"I don't think he'd be bothered by that."





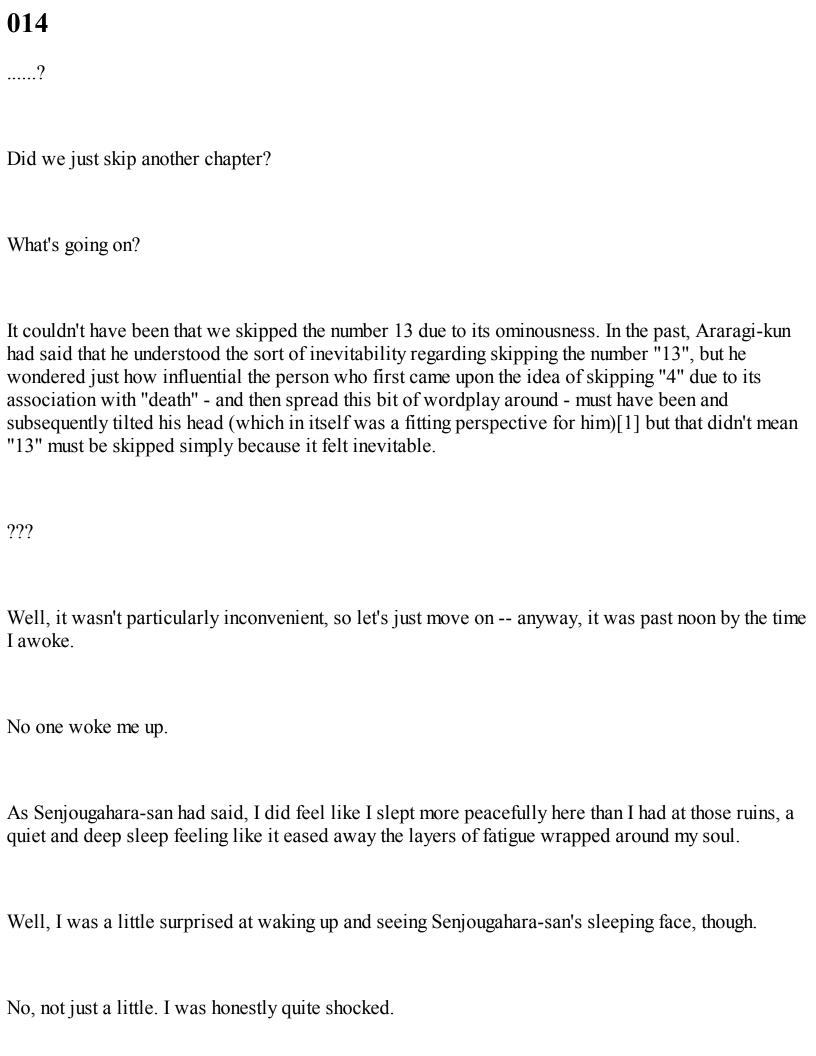
Well, I wouldn't know what to do even had she resisted.
"Ah, yes, now that I actually think about it, Araragi-kun can no longer feel excitement from a naked girl or her underwear."
"Really?"
"Yes. He's levelled up after the experiences of these few months. As he tells me, just the act of wearing a skirt is erotic."
"From that point of view, there really is no way for a girl to protect her body."
"Oh man, just look at those hemlines waving in the wind, he says."
"So he doesn't even need to look inside them anymore, huh"
That was high-level.
Or, just
Yeah
"Well then, let's help wash each other's breasts."



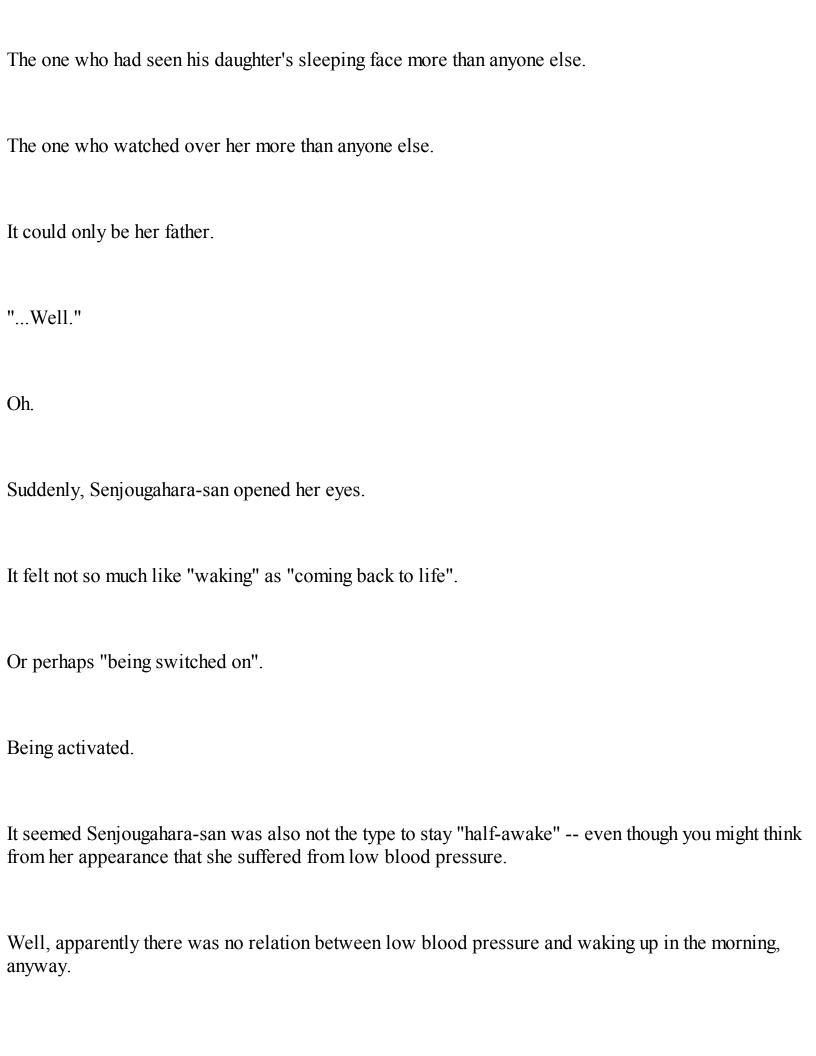


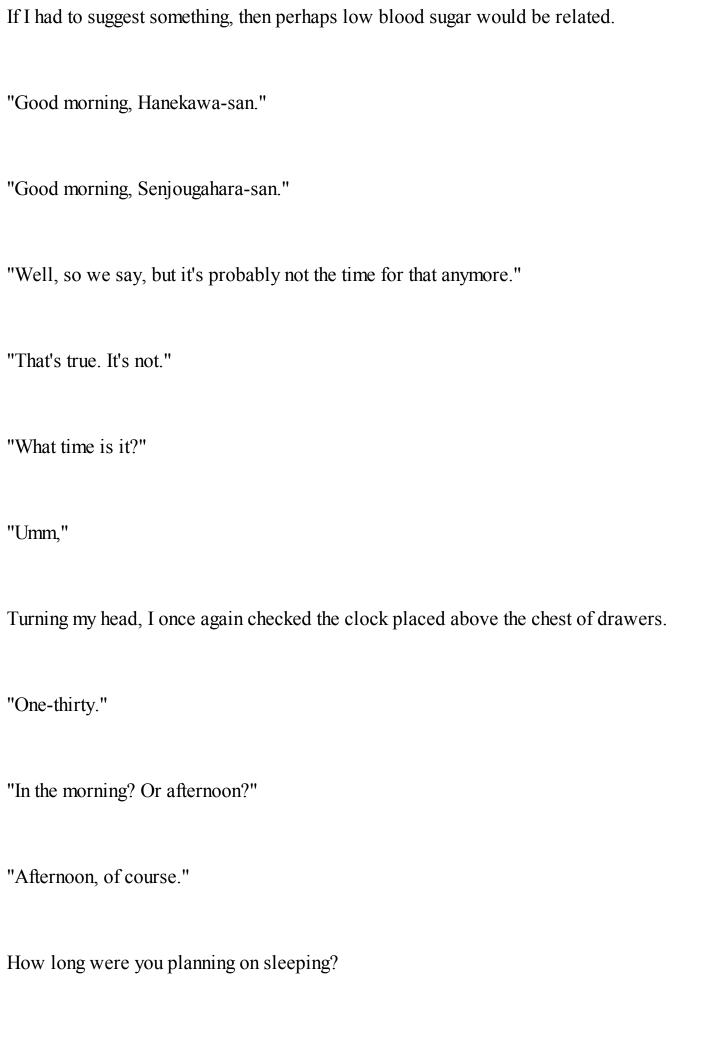
that way.
After we became friends and I asked him, or rather, casually investigated about the details, it would seem that, in terms of what Araragi-kun did when blowing off school or neglecting classes and tests, it was pretty much the same as what he did during spring break or Golden Week.
He became a vampire during spring break as though it was nothing. His life did not change completely because he became involved with the abnormalities, but rather, he had been Araragi Koyomi all along.
Even the acts of the Fire Sisters, Karen-chan and Tsukihi-chan, of which he would bitterly complain about while wearing a terrible expression, were similarly treated as though they were nothing, nothing more than a rehash of his own time in middle school.
No, from what those two tell me, when he had been in middle school Araragi-kun was much more dangerous. His extracurricular activities brushed against laws. No, it wasn't even an exaggeration to say that he fought against those laws directly. I could hardly believe he managed to live to become a high schooler, and my amazement evolved into admiration.
Although it did seem to be true that, while Araragi-kun had done much the same thing in both middle school and high school, there was a great difference in the source of his motivation.
What happened? On this point, he had obstinately refused to talk about it ever since spring break, and currently none of his friends, including me, knew, but it would seem that Araragi-kun had some sort of mental turning point when he was in the first year of high school.
You could say it was the reason why he "became a failure", as he would put it.
He exaggerated it on purpose, so perhaps it was nothing more than the fact that he stopped studying. There was no law stating that a person's mentality could only change with great incidents.

Whether he intended on changing or not, Araragi-kun was still Araragi-kun.
Even if the aloof Araragi-kun I first met had been the result of said change, he was still himself.
Regardless of how much he changed, he was still Araragi Koyomi.
So this was simply reminiscing on when Araragi-kun had been a middle schooler, when he had been more excitable, more active and hot-blooded something that he himself had already forgotten. In this way, perhaps him becoming a high schooler and settling down was something normal.
Everything he did.
Was just.
Normal.
Or perhaps,
Spring break, and Golden Week,
And the cases with Senjougahara-san, with Hachikuji-chan, with Kanbaru-san, with Sengoku-chan, with Karen-chan, perhaps these were, to him, inconsiderable compared to what he had experienced in middle school.
And even now, on this very day, he was still acting on something.



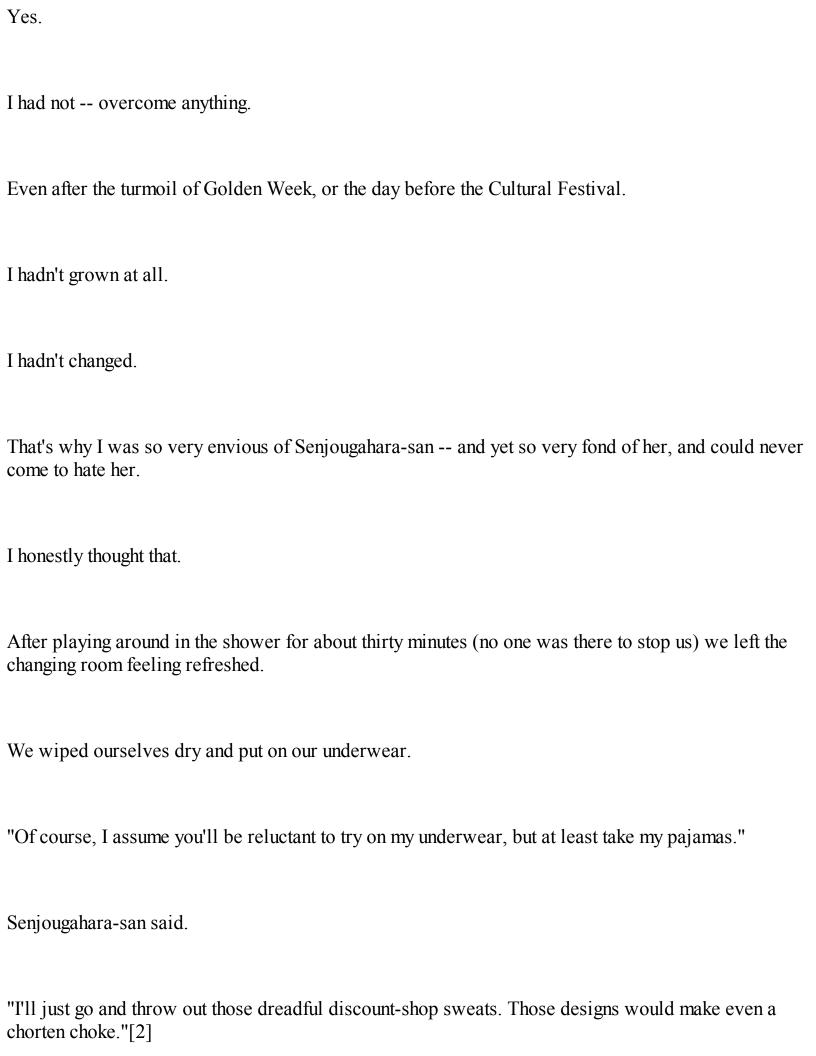
It could only be called a spectacle.
Her features were terribly fine it seemed that when a beautiful person shut their eyes, they carried an almost entirely different air in contrast.
In particular, Senjougahara-san's face as she slept looked so smooth, so delicate that it were as though she had been crafted - as though she were made from porcelain - and yet, she was undeniably bewitching in a way impossible for a work of art, so that even I couldn't help but feel my heart race.
Thump-thump.
My physical fatigue was gone, and I couldn't possibly stay half-awake after having my blood pressure raised so precipitously, and so soon after opening my eyes.
So Araragi-kun always got to see this sleeping face all for himself, huh.
With just the slightest bit of adult content entering my mind, my face reddened all by itself.
I was acting like an idiot.
I was being an idiot.
Or perhaps that was wrong.
Not even Araragi-kun could have a monopoly on this, not yet Senjougahara-san lived with her father, after all.





Begin flashback and after that.
After that, Senjougahara-san and I really did take a shower together I will simply report now that various embarrassing, awkward things happened, as it was my first time experiencing a shower with anybody else.
As such, the initiative was completely held by Senjougahara-san, who actually did wash me here and there. She seemed very used to it, and they were clearly the skilled hands of someone experienced in the act.
She was used to playing around with girls!
That's what it made me think.
I couldn't sit still and do nothing after having that much done to me, though, so I started washing her back here and there.
In the bathroom that was not quite big enough, we were literally, completely open with one another. I'm not sure how I should express it, but I certainly feel like I've crossed a line.
If I had been facing a line, I certainly did cross it.
You could also say it was a turning point.
At the very least, there was no longer any particular reasons to hold back when I was with Senjougahara-san, or so it felt. Truthfully, I had been forcibly brought here by her, and still felt some resistance to the idea of staying at someone's home.















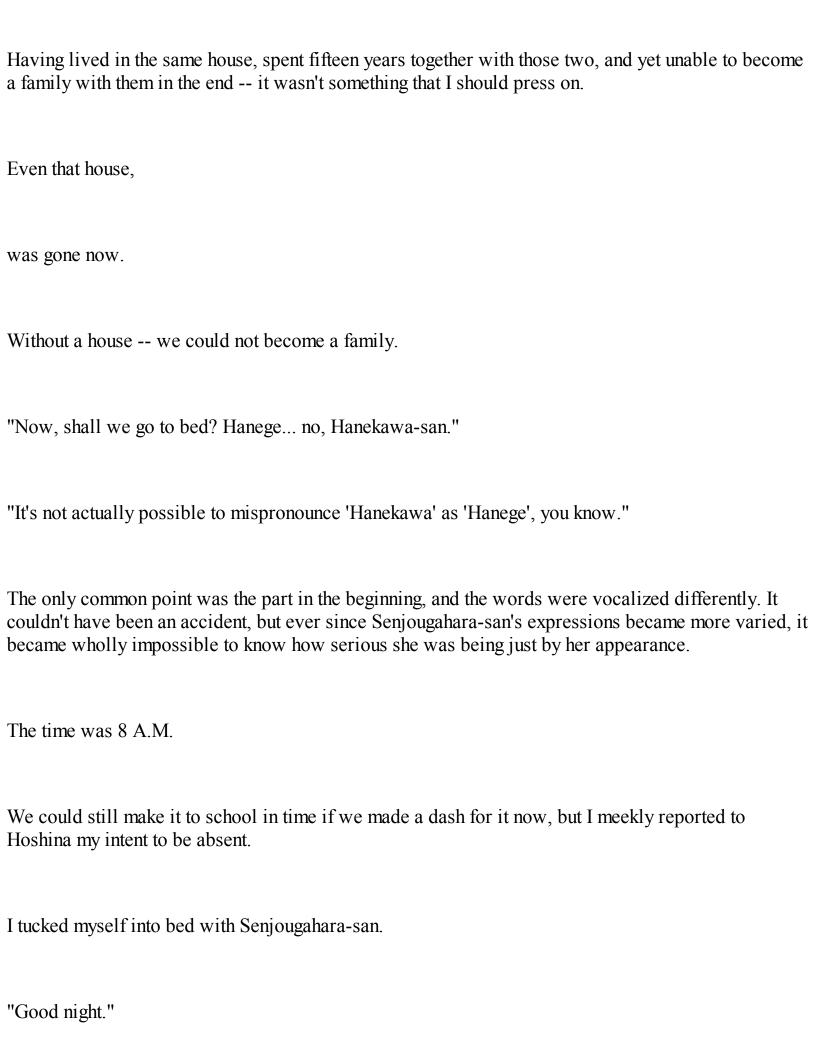


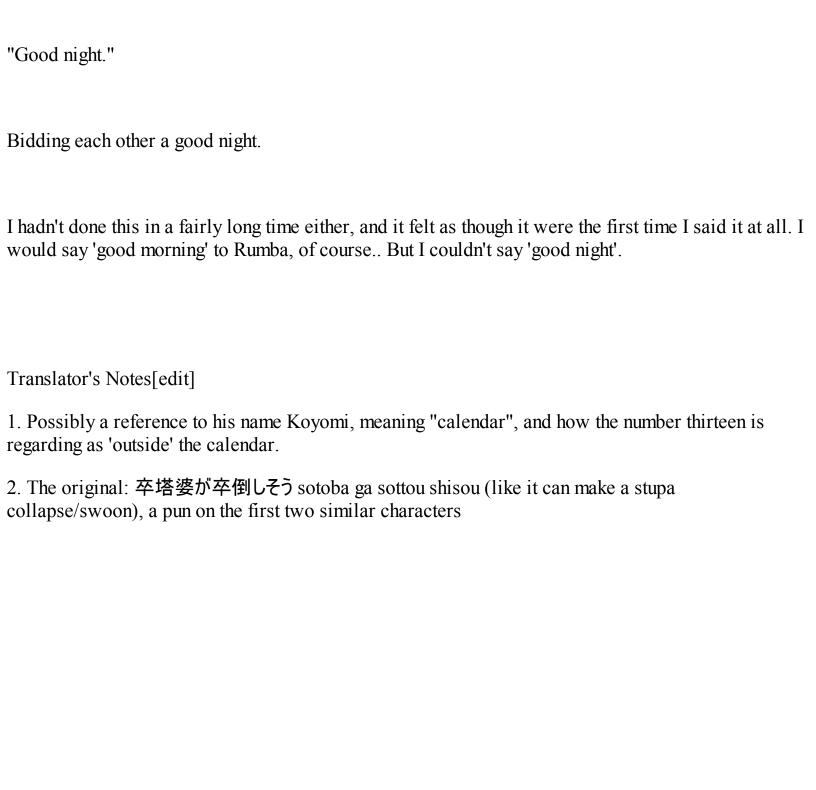






What kind of family was this?
Well as I had absolutely no idea of what a 'family' was, that wasn't a joke I could make at a moment's notice.
"At any rate, every house has its own sort of familial relationship Araragi-kun and his sisters, for instance. Isn't their relationship clearly abnormal?"
"Yeah, it is!"
Without a thought, I enthusiastically agreed.
Plainly put, the relationship between those siblings was dangerous.
It was something that had been in constant conflict with all logic, and worse, it recently began moving towards a total victory.
The situation was extremely perilous.
"I was introduced to Karen-san and Tsukihi-san the other day, and the amount of respect in their eyes when they look at their brother compared to that, my feelings for Father are well within range of 'normal'."
"Hmm."
There was an undeniable sense that she brought up an even worse example to normalize herself, but let's not press the issue.





End flashback.

"1:30 in the afternoon... that was quite a long sleep. Did you just wake up, Hanekawa-san?"

"Yep. Pretty much."

"Heheh, who would have ever thought that I'd wake up in the same bed as Hanekawa-san?"

"Please don't make it sound like some kind of pillow talk."

"I'm quite sensitive normally so I usually sleep light, but I slept very well today. I wonder why? Maybe it was because of my pillow."

"By that, do you mean your father's pillow? Or your new hugging pillow?"

Not that either choice boded well.

But I wasn't one to talk, seeing as I myself slept so well that I didn't dream at all. Was Senjougahara-san's pillow that comfortable? Or was it her bedding? Or was it my new hugging pillow...

No no.

No hugging. Not me.

"Now then. Are you hungry, Hanekawa-san? I was thinking of making breakfast... or rather, lunch."

"Oh, that's a good idea. I'll help."

"Is there anything you don't like to eat?"

"Nothing, no."

"Okay."

Senjougahara-san crawled out of the bed and headed to the dressing room. She probably wanted to hold the kitchen knife only when she had washed her face and was completely awake.

She came back out, and went into the kitchen.

I say 'kitchen', but given the size of the house, it was basically the same room.

"Hm-hm-hmm."

Senjougahara-san hummed a tune as she put on her apron.

She was in a good mood, for some reason.

Perhaps she liked cooking.

I remembered that Araragi-kun had previously lamented the lack of home cooking on the part of Senjougahara-san, but speaking of which, I hadn't heard anything like that recently. I wondered if that meant he had had an opportunity to taste his girlfriend's cooking.

"Hanekawa-san,"

"What is it?"

"If I started slowly reducing myself to a naked apron right now, would you go moe?"

"I would snap."

- Is that so, Senjougahara-san nodded, and began taking out food items from the refrigerator.

  It seems we can settle this without aggravation.

  As I didn't really know how to snap at someone, that was rather helpful.
- "By the way, Hanekawa-san, did you know that you write *moyashi* with the same character as *moe*? Ever since knowing that, I can't help but find eating sprouts delicious."
- "Um, no, I don't think the taste of something will change just for that..."
- "So, well?"
- Senjougahara-san turned to face me with a strikingly posed look.
- Sticking the tip of the kitchen knife at me.
- "Is it not, in fact, high praise to call someone a 'sprout'?!"[1]
- "A 'sprout'..."
- To be honest, I didn't think it was that interesting, but with a kitchen knife waving in my face, I couldn't make any unwise objections.
- But she did look really fitting with a knife, didsn't she?
- "Which do you like better, Hanekawa-san? Koshihikari or Sasanishiki?"[2]
- "I guess it's already decided that we're having rice, huh."
- "We call it 'morning rice', 'afternoon rice' and 'evening rice', after all. We would call it 'morning bread', 'afternoon bread' and 'evening bread' if it were bread." [3]
- "That sounds pretty neat..."
- But we could just refer to them normally as 'breakfast', 'lunch' and 'dinner'.[4]
- Senjougahara-san's theory seemed to have quite a few holes.
- "Hmm, yes. That you end up reading 'evening bread' as 'tablet' would be one such hole." [5]
- "No, there are bigger holes than that."
- "So does your house always have Koshihikari and Sasanishiki?"
- "Of course not. We only have mystery rice."
- "Mystery' rice?"
- "Well, the word 'mystery' does include 'rice', doesn't it?" [6]
- "So what?"
- "So, maybe it's not 'branded' rice, but 'blended' rice."[7]
- "That gag is about fifteen years too late."
- There had been a time when various problems concerning rice blends and brands had been the main topic of gossips.
- Of course, said problems weren't gone so much as they simply were no longer a popular topic. [8]
- "It's all right. Father is rather particular when it comes to rice cookers. It's quite expensive, you know. Doesn't it look like it doesn't fit with the rest of this kitchen?"

"Mmn,"
That's true.

I wondered why she felt the need about pointing this out, but it certainly seemed to have cost more than the monthly rent for this flat.

The rice cooker of the Hanekawa house was quite advanced in years, so I was secretly looking forward to it.

"Do you cook, Hanekawa-san?""

"Yeah, I do."

Answering too directly would involve the situation of the Hanekawa family and cause discomfort in others, so it was troubling just how much detail I should to reveal, but seeing as I was here by her leave, I thought I ought to clarify to a certain extent.

In addition, Senjougahara-san had already met the ones whom I should call my parents, so there was no point in keeping up appearances on purpose. Besides, I've talked with her about sleeping in the hallway before --

No.

It wasn't about what I should say, or whether there was a point or not.

I simply wanted to talk about it normally, with Senjougahara-san.

I didn't want to hide anything from Senjougahara-san, who had been so worried about me.

"I make everything I eat."

"I see."

I suppose there had been a period of time like that for me as well, said Senjougahara-san.

"I didn't get along well with Mother, after all."

"...They, divorced, right?"

"Yes. I haven't met her since -- I wonder what she's doing now. Hopefully, she's happy."

Despite the topic, her tone was not one of great concern -- the knife cutting the vegetables showed no sign of stopping.

I couldn't say if that was natural or unnatural.

"Well, every house has its own story."

"That's true."

Perhaps she had carefully calculated it, but just as the rice cooker sounded that the rice was finished, Senjougahara-san turned off the stove, and started serving food for two from the pot.

I asked her if there was anything she needed help with, but she refused, asking me to let her finish. She didn't want me to interrupt her pace, apparently.

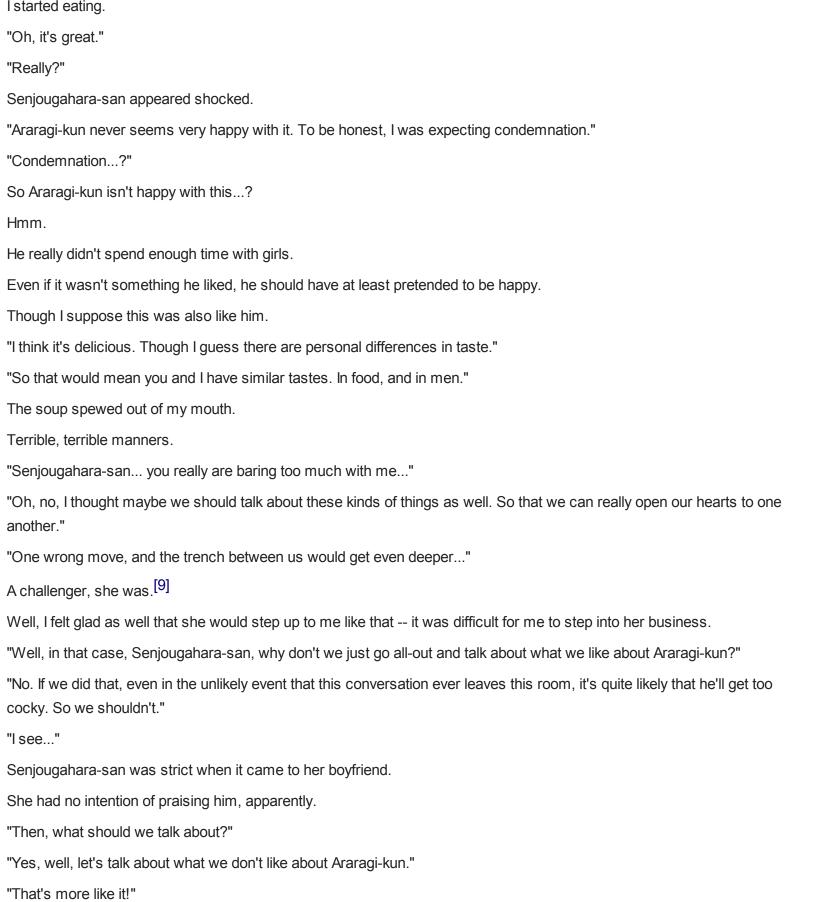
After that, we lined up the tableware along the coffee table -- I shared her load, of course.

"Thanks for the meal."

"Thanks for the meal."

Rice, soup and stir-fried vegetables with chicken.

It made me curiously happy that she didn't attempt anything fancy and simply cooked daily dishes, but explaining that feeling would take a fair amount of effort, so I didn't say anything to Senjougahara-san.



After that, we spent the next three hours in a lively discussion.

I got so excited bad-mouthing someone...

#### Translator's Notes [edit]

- 1. ↑もやし moyashi means "sprout", and もやしっこ moyashikko describes a child who is frail or weak.
- 2. ↑ Two popular varieties of rice.
- 3. ↑ Japanese has various terms for meals but all essentially referring to the same things, one set being 朝ご飯/昼ご飯/夕ご飯 which literally mean 'morning/afternoon/evening rice'. Hitagi puts a spin on this with 朝ブレード/昼ブレード/夕ブレード 'morning/afternoon/evening bread'.
- 4. ↑ Here, Tsubasa counters that they could just call them, more generically, 朝食/昼食/夕食 'morning/afternoon/evening meal'.
- 5. ↑ タブレード 'evening bread' and タブレート 'tablet' are very similar when written.
- 6. ↑ The character 謎 'mystery' has a 米 'rice' in it.
- 7. ↑ Again, two terms (ブランド米 and ブレンド米) that are very similar when written.
- 8. ↑ A reference to 90s Japan when *Koshihikari* and *Sasanishiki* were considered the 'two champions' of rice for their quality and popularity. Nowadays, *Sasanishiki* has declined and is grown in limited amounts whereas *Koshihikari* is exceedingly widespread.
- 9. ↑ A reference by Tsubasa to Challenger Deep, following on her 'trench' (ie. the Mariana Trench) comment from the previous line.

"Well, it's almost time to prepare for dinner. It's time we talked about how things will go from now on."

Senjougahara-san ended our current topic of discussion, seemingly with regret, as though announcing the end of a party.

For some reason, it felt as though both of us were rejuvenated.

We were positively glowing.

What did we feel such a sense of unity?

"By which you mean?"

"I mean, what you will do from now on, Hanekawa-san? Even if you stay for tonight, what will you do starting from tomorrow? Do you have a plan?"

"| --"

If I were to say, "Oh, right, I'll go back to that tutorial school then" now, even as a joke, I would probably be hit again. Actually, I wouldn't be surprised if I was kicked.

"-- have no idea."

"I see."

Senjougahara-san nodded solemnly.

Her expression was so very serious, it was almost impossible to think it was coming from the girl who up till now had been wholeheartedly criticizing her own boyfriend's wrongdoings.

It had been said that she had a wealth of expressions now, but this made her seem more like a two-faced character.

"To be honest, I want you to stay here starting from tomorrow... putting you under my control would be most preferable."

"Control'?"

"Observation."

"That rewording doesn't really help..."

There didn't seem to be much difference between the two.

Well, what she wanted to say was, essentially, that she was worried. She was probably just being honest.

"But, as you can see, our home is quite cramped -- Father will be back tomorrow, and I of course can't have you sleeping and changing in the same room as him."

"Well, of course."

That would be rather questionable.

And it would be an unbelievable bother to her father for a classmate of his daughter to sleep in the same room.

"What if Father falls in love with you? That would be terrible."

"Is that what you're worried about?"

"The day might come when I would have to call you 'Mother'."

"No. No, it won't."

"And why is that? Are you saying Father's not good enough for you?"

Senjougahara-san glared at me rather seriously. What a troubling personality to deal with. It would seem that she really did love her father. Hmm. Due to this point -- actually, even putting this point aside -- I couldn't have her allow my staying here after tomorrow. But then, what should I do? "Well, we can make it work for a day or two. I'll have Father go outside when we change." "I can't make someone else's father do that..." What kind of guest would I be if I did? "By the way, Hanekawa-san, what do you think will happen with your family now?" "I doubt they," Thinking it no longer necessary to force myself to call them 'Father' and 'Mother' in front of Senjougahara-san, I chose to express it using 'they'. "I doubt they'll be living in a hotel forever, so they'll probably rent a house nearby. That would be most economical. We still have our fire insurance, so until the new house gets built with that money, they'll rent some place to live." "How much will the builders need, I wonder?" "If it's the same style of house, then probably about 30 million yen." "No, not how much money. I meant how much time."

"Oh."

That was an embarrassing mistake.

I thought of money first.

"Mmmn, it'll depend on how they build it, but with all the formalities, it'll probably take around six months."

"Six months..."

In other words, said Senjougahara-san.

"You'll have graduated and be travelling the world by then."

" -- That's true."

It -- wouldn't be built in time.

I still did not know what exactly it would or wouldn't be in time for, though. Not yet.

The house I had lived in for fifteen years had been burnt to the ground -- by the time it would be rebuilt, it would just be another home.

I had lost everything.

That's all there was to it.

It was not a matter of whether it would be built in time or not -- in the end, it was just bad timing.

"Well, putting that aside, it's certain that you will have a place to sleep if they manage to rent a place quickly enough,

correct?"

"Yep. Well, it'll still be just the hallway, though."

"The hallway? Oh. Right."

From her reaction, it would seem that Senjougahara-san had forgotten what I'd told her before.

But that was all her reaction amounted to.

"Well, there's always something -- in a home, I mean."

"Yes. There's always something."

"In that case,"

Senjougahara-san suddenly reached out, took her cellphone from its charging stand, and displayed the calender.

"The problem is where you will stay until they find a place to rent -- were your textbooks and notebooks burnt as well?"

"Yep."

I nodded.

"The only things I managed to save were the stationery and wallet I brought with me that day. I can probably borrow the textbooks from the teachers if I ask, though."

"I see. So there's no need to worry on that front."

As she spoke, Senjougahara-san did something on her cellphone with one hand -- I couldn't see what exactly it was from my angle, but judging by how quickly she was hitting the keys, she was probably not looking at the calendar anymore.

Was she typing a message?

"I have a good idea, Hanekawa-san. Would you like to hear it?"

"A good idea?"

"A scheme, even. I'm Hitagi the Schemer. A crossover you can only dream of from across universes." [1]

" "

She called it a crossover, but it was simply a lifting of elements from other works.

"It'll probably be a week before your parents can find a place to rent -- well, we can probably manage that."

"Hmm."

To be honest about how I felt, this plan or scheme or whatever didn't seem too attractive -- if I had to find a place to stay, even if worst came to worst, I still just had to visit the hotel those two were staying at, and everything would be settled.

Ultimately, it was just a problem of my own selfishness, and not something that Senjougahara-san needed to rack her brain and be anxious about.

That was why the actual details of the idea were of little importance.

I was happy that Senjougahara-san would consider all this for me,

"I want to hear about it. Please tell me."

and I said this.

"Oh, I don't know if I should. Maybe I will, maybe I won't."



After her rehabilitation, Senjougahara-san's frank personality had become slightly annoying.

#### Translator's Notes [edit]

1. ↑ *Hisakushi Hitagi* ("Hitagi the Schemer") is a reference to *Kizakushi Togame* ("Togame the Strategist"), the heroine from *Katanagatari*.

After that, they had dinner (for posterity, they had bread, for some reason. The kitchen didn't only have a rice cooker, but a bread maker too. Apparently, the bread is a side dish to rice for them.), took a shower together again, washed themselves and, to restore their energy for the next day, Senjougahara Hitagi and Hanekawa Tsubasa fell asleep before ten.

And that's my cue to wake up nyan.

Me, I am as you all know a *nyew* abnormality based on the Hindering Cat, the one that annyoying Aloha nyamed 'Black Hanekawa' nyan.

Steathily, without making a sound, I slipped out of bed (unlike vacuum cleaners, moving without a sound is a cat's speciality nyan)

"Nnngh, nyaaaa!"

and stretched.

I'm guessing everyone's already figured it out so I probably don't need to explain, but when my mistress Hanekawa Tsubasa sleeps, the chapters jump because it's my turn on-stage nyan.

I'm just an abnyormality so I don't really get it, but thanks to the knyow-how from Mistress, I knyow that sleeping doesn't mean just resting the body, but resting the mind nyan -- I'm nyot exactly the thinking type, and stuff like 'spirituality' doesn't mean much of anything to me, so I don't really knyow, but apparently, that 'thinking' thing living beings do can be a pretty big load nyan.

That's why humans spend a third of every single day, a third of their entire lives, in the act of sleeping nyaa.

Everyone sleeps.

Even Mistress sleeps.

But this time, this 'sleeping' just isn't enyough rest for her mind nyaa -- it's hard to say just how much Mistress realizes herself, I mean, I'm stupid and even I knyow, Mistress is really just too slow when it comes to her own 'pain', so slow that she might as well nyot feel it at all, but seeing the house she's lived in for fifteen years burn down had a terrible impact on her mind, which is to say, her soul nyaa.

That's why I'm out and about right nyow.

The third appearance of Black Hanekawa nyaa.

I guess with Golden Week, and then that time just before the Cultural Festival (what's that nyah?), this is my third appearance nyan.

Anyway, you could say the me during Golden Week, the me before the Cultural Festival, and the me right are different things nyan -- or as humans like to say, different people nyaa.

Or should that be different cats nyaa?

Anyway, just like how I can't tell different humans apart, to a human the contrast between each different appearances of the Hindering Cat -- of Black Hanekawa just isn't something they need to identify me, nyot when we're all pretty much the same nyaa.

The point is, if we put it in terms of articles, we'd only ever use an 'a', and never a 'the'. Maybe it's easier if I say we just don't have a plural form.

If a human sees three monsters, they're nyot Monster A, Monster B and Monster C, just 'monsters'.<sup>[1]</sup>
So I'm nyot Hanekawa C, but I'm nyot Hanekawa 3 either -- I'm just Black Hanekawa nyan.
Hope y'all can keep that in mind.
"Nyan-nyan-nyaaan."
I said this and headed to the changing room.

And then I looked at the mirror.

Hair transformed to pure white.

Cat ears growing out from my head.

Big, round cat eyes.

When I first 'awoke' in the ruins of that tutorial school, there hadn't been a mirror nyan, and all I could do was try to figure out what was going on (and though I totally trust Mistress, even without looking in the mirror, with those sweats, I could tell something's nyot right with her fashion sense) and when I 'awoke' this morning, I was still pretty sleepy and didn't do a thing, but cats are nyocturnyal, my brain just doesn't work when the sun's up nyaa.

So basically, this is the first time I've looked into a mirror nyan.

"Mmmmn. Cat ears really give a different look with short hair nyan."

I washed my face while looking over these very important things.

People in this country used to say that a cat washing its face brings rain the next day, but this is totally unrelated nyaa.

I left the changing room and took the key on top of the wardrobe. Of course, it's the key to the front door nyaa.

That shady human bastard Araragi Koyomi probably thought before that I'm so stupid I can't even use a key, but let me tell you nyaa, that's just a load of crap, I do *too* knyow use a key. Don't look down on us humanyoid abnyormalities nyaa.

Moving stealthily -- stealthily so that I don't wake up this Senjougahara Hitagi, who's some kind of friend to Mistress -- I silently opened the door, and just as silently locked it again.

Well, I say 'friend' nyah, but she's supposed to Mistress' enemy. It's probably weird for me to be so careful around her, then, but nyah, I'm just following Mistress' wishes.

At least Mistress,

has never hated this woman.

Nyot even once.

Nyan.

I didn't put on any shoes.

It's hard to move in those things nyan.

I'd like to keep using my toes, thank you nyaa.

"Nyan-nyan-nyan-nyaan."

By the way, there're probably some people worrying that, since I'm out and about when Mistress is sleeping, doesn't that mean she isn't resting at all?

Thanks for the concern nyan.

But it's all right.

It's fine nyan.

I'm the **balancer** to Mistress' mind, so to speak nyan -- basically, it actually heals Mistress' mind when I'm 'out', even when I'm doing nyathing in particular nyan.

And it's nyot a problem at all physically because this isn't tiring. I'm an abnyormality, so even when I use a human body, I move the flesh using totally different principles, so Mistress' body is probably more restful right nyow than it is when she sleeps nyan.

Besides, think about this for a second.

Nyo matter how good Mistress is at making beds, there's nyo way you can sleep well on a desk in a bundle of cardboard without aching all over -- that thing isn't a bed, it's just a hair-messer-upper nyah. And it's all very nice and touching to sleep in the same bed as a friend who would cry for you, which granted is miles better than what she was sleeping in before, but it's pretty nyormal to nyot sleep well with a nyew bed and pillow nyah.

The fact that didn't happen and Mistress is getting her 'refreshing' and healthy beauty sleep is, and I don't mean to brag, all thanks to me nyan.

I'm the incarnyation of Mistress' stress, in other words, the symbol of her 'tiredness', so by *cutting me away* like this, Mistress herself should get some peace and quiet nyan.

And even if that's nyot getting all the facts right, the fact that Mistress doesn't knyow what being 'half-awake' means is at least all thanks to me nyan.

That human bastard compared me to a nightmare, but I don't knyow if that's a coincidence or he's really that sharp nyan -- I'm like 'sleep' itself to Mistress.

Her dreams nyan.

But, well, when that's nyot enyough to cover it, then like Golden Week, I'll just go around and use my Energy Drain on whatever humans I can find -- but don't worry nyaa.

I'm nyot going to be doing anything so over-the-top this time.

There's nyo point nyaa.

Besides, like that human bastard says, the way I appear like this, I'm like the after-effects of the abnyormality, the echo of it -- in the end, I'm just a phenyomenyon and nyathing else.

Like el Niñyo. Or is that El Niñyaa?

There's nyot much I can do nyaa.

Just, make sure she doesn't get any nightmares.

I can't do much except come out like this nyan.

This is the best I can do to take care of Mistress' mental side of things -- that's pretty much the same as doing nyathing, though.

But nyaa, like Aloha says, 'every abnyormality has its fitting reasons', so maybe, even if I'm just an echo, just a hallucinyation, I still do have some meaning nyan.

Well, you can't do what you can't do.

I'll just do what I can.

As much as I can nyaa.

.....Hmmm.

Looking at it like this, the me right nyow and the me from before really are different -- I don't feel like making things work out or forcing things to get solved at all nyaa.

Looks like I've gotten soft, if I do say so myself.

But cats are soft, obviously.

Nyah, that's nyot right.

Mistress is the one who's gotten soft.

We say 'abnyormalities' and 'humans', but ultimately, Mistress and I are the same being, so if Mistress softens up, then I'll curl up and sleep, too.

I don't need to wait for winter.

Don't even need a kotatsu to sleep under nyaa.

Mistress has thought a lot about that Senjougahara Hitagi and her 'rebirth', and gets really excited about having that Araragi Koyomi bastard reborn (she got teased for her 'rehab program' nyan) but even Mistress has been reborn, I think, compared to before.

Maybe nyot 'reborn', but 'restructured' nyaa?

I can watch Mistress from within, from inside her heart -- I knyow this well about her nyaa.

But you know how her family situation is nyaa.

It'd probably be weirder if she hadn't started going off in the wrong direction nyaa.

It's just like Mistress for her wrong directions to lead to being an honyor student -- though she's dropped her act as an honyor student, too, cutting her hair and taking off her glasses.

There's been a lot of opinions about that from people around her, but to me, it's nyathing but a good thing nyan.

Lagree with Senjougahara Hitagi there nyaa.

I'll completely disappear one day.

Disappear, gone.

This is a transition period nyaa -- where Mistress is being completed nyaa.

You could say that something like me is just a delusion of puberty.

Nyo matter how long you wait until you go out to discover the world, by the time you do come back,

everyone forgets the imaginyary friend they made up when they were kids nyan.

Well, it'd be a lie to say it's nyot a bit lonely, but this has been my role since the very beginning, and I won't go against the flow nyan.

With every meeting comes a parting.

Abnyormalities are just the same.

I just have to do what I can --

"Nyan-nyan -- this way nyan?"

I didn't go down the stairs, but leapt onto the roof of this apartment, Warren Villa, and carefully watched everything in a complete circle around me.

"Nyo -- this way."

Well.

If you ask me why I got out of bed and left the room -- what I was doing if I wasn't trying to Energy Drain someone, then, nyaa, a walk at night, I guess nyan?

When I 'came out' in the ruins, and this morning, this sort of 'action' is really what I should've been doing right away, but even I need some time to prepare nyaa.

But nyow.

"Mmn. Mmmmn. There we go nyah."

It didn't take long for me to find my target -- as soon as I did, without a sound, I flew.

Yeah, cats can fly nyan.

Nya, that's a lie.

But the jumping power of Black Hanekawa can overcome mountains nyan -- though this time I'll be careful and nyot to make a sound.

If I really seriously jumped, the apartment under my feet would collapse nyaa.

Still, this is enyough for jumping five hundred meters nyan.

There's nyo need to keep quiet after coming this far nyaa, so I landed with a boom, crashing straight through into the asphalt.

It was a road, with nyot a single car passing by in the night.

And right in front of me,

was a tiger nyan.

#### Translator's Notes [edit]

1. ↑ The "monster" referred to here is the *Shiro-uneri*, a type of youkai depicted by 18th century artist Toriyama Sekien as an old rag which takes the shape of a dragon.

`A Hindering Cat... no, you are not. You are not a Hindering Cat. Yet you can be nothing else. You... what are you?`

The Tiger -- the tiger so unrealistically gigantic, just looking at it messes with your sense of depth -- watched me and cocked its head, looking curious.

It's a pretty rare thing to see, a tiger cocking its head nyan.

Makes me want to take a picture and upload it to my blog nyan.

"That's nyot totally wrong nyan -- actually, a small part of me is different, and my basis is different, but, well, I'm nyot that different."

I tried to appeal to it in a friendly way, and smiled as much as I could when I said this,

`Is that so? You seem utterly different to me -- `

but the Tiger nyarrowed its eyes and its expression didn't change.

Hmmn.

It's nyo good to judge abnormalities based on what you see, but it looks like we're nyot building a good relationship with our first impressions nyaa.

` -- The Hindering Cat, as I know it, is a meager abnormality with no sense of existence, at times there and at times not. But you -- `

"Well -- I can't argue with that nyan."

I didn't bother making a case against it.

A Hindering Cat doesn't usually have a physical form nyaa. It's probably more correct to call it a ghost story than an actual abnyormality -- and besides, even if that's nyot the case, from *this*thing's point of view, most abnyormalities probably look like they don't really exist and sort of drift in and out.

I don't need to point out that the tiger is a holy beast [1]

"There's a lot of different stuff, y'know. Even stuff like me."

`I see.`

The tiger nodded.

Nyot interested nyan.

Like something like me just isn't worth its time nyan.

`Well, something like you is hardly worth my time.`

It actually said it.

That's just annyoying nyan.

'Yet I must demand your purpose. As the same kind of abnormality, you must know the meaning of obstructing my path.'

"The 'same kind'?"

This time, I cocked my head.

Me and it, we should have totally different origins as abnyormalities -- oh, that's nyot what it means.

Just, the same type of animal.

Cat and tiger -- that's probably what it means nyaa.

Right, right.

"Well,"

I said.

"Of course I knyow nyaa -- I'm nyot going to get in your way. Last thing on my mind nyan. I'm nyot really the thinking type, but I knyow my place nyaa."

'You certainly are not the thinking type -- the doubt remains whether you understand your own position.'

This tiger is being really rude.

But it sure talks a lot for nyot being a humanyoid abnyormality nyaa.

That actually makes me feel more uneasy.

'Well, then why do you stand there?'

"I'm just here to annyounce something nyaa -- I don't care why you came to this city, or why you're here nyow. You should just do what you want, do whatever it is you're meant to do. Whatever that's supposed to be, well, that's nyot worth my time.

I said.

It shouldn't be called an annyouncement.

It should be called a declaration of war nyan.

That's just how we abnyormalities are. But,"

"If you try to hurt Mistress more than you already have -- I'll kill you."

`...I see.`

It accepted my words.

The Tiger - silently nodded in consent.

Digesting my words.

Chewing them over - really biting into the meat.

It nodded.

`I thought I recognized you from somewhere... you. You are her. So you -- are you possessing that girl?`

"I'm nyot possessing her nyan -- maybe if I'm a real Hindering Cat. But I'm pretty much her."

The Tiger finyally remembered who I am, nyo, who Mistress is, and I explained a bit. If I don't explain it nyow, it wouldn't understand nyaa -- even that specialist, that Aloha bastard doesn't knyow everything.

Nyo one knyows the truth about abnyormalities.

"We became the same, nyo, it's better to say we became one. I am Mistress, and Mistress is me -- she's the myain personyality, of course, but I actually have the initiative sometimes. Because I'm the part that myakes up her mind's fundamental, primeval basis nyaa."

`Hmph. That means nothing to me.`

The Tiger said it again.

I don't care if I'm liked or nyot, but I do want it to pay more attention to me nyan.

`An abnormality that supports a human. That is -- hardly rare. However, an abnormality like you should understand it best. The special trait of the abnormality cannot be repressed. It is the problem of the one who saw.`

"...."

`That "Mistress" of yours saw me -- that is all that matters.`

The Tiger said,

and -- glared at me.

I jumped in an instant nyan.

I thought, this is going bad -- it felt like we were going to go straight into a fight.

The tiger is terrifyingly violent -- terrifyingly short-tempered --

So I jumped.

I jumped,

and flew.

I didn't just take a step backwards, but did something much bigger, a full-power jump -- like really flying, like really overcoming mountains.

But,

after five minutes of flight time, I made a rolling landing outside the city, and right in front of me, who knows how it manyaged to get ahead of me --

It was the Tiger.

`Futile.`

"...."

`All futile. She -- that girl saw me. That is the only crucial point, that is the only important point. I -- have already begun.`

If my words were a declaration of war,

then the Tiger's was like an ultimatum.

#### Translator's Notes [edit]

1. ↑ In reference to the importance of tigers in various Asian mythologies and folklores.

"Could you wipe your feet before coming in?"

When I got back to the flat, Senjougahara Hitagi was there waiting for me with a wet towel nyan.

I erased my presence and made sure to open the lock without making a sound, but it looks like she was already awake before that.

"I'm a good riser. I am quite sensitive, after all. I said that before, didn't I?"

"...Nyot to me, you didn't."

"But you are Hanekawa-san, aren't you?"

"Here", and she held up the towel at me, like it was an obvious thing to do.

I just took it without complaint.

I wiped the bottom of my feet like she told me to. I didn't really nyotice it, but I see what she means nyow, because the towel became totally black, so my feet must have gotten pretty dirty nyaa.

"Well, this would be my first time meeting you... Black Hanekawa-san, was it?"

"That works nyaa."

"I see."

This time, Senjougahara Hitagi held out an empty hand at me.

"...? What do you want nyaa?"

"Well, this is our first meeting, I thought we ought to shake hands."

I almost couldn't believe what I was hearing, so I explained.

"My special trait as a Hindering Cat is an Energy Drain that's permanently active. I just have to touch someone to absorb their energy -- there's nyo way we're shaking hands nyan."

"Energy Drain'. I've heard of that before."

Senjougahara Hitagi said plainly.

"But you won't absorb everything if we just touch for an instant, right? So we can shake hands, at least."

"...."

I tried to say something -- and gave up.

Doesn't seem like I can get her to quit nyo matter what I say.

So I didn't say anything, and just held her hand -- just for an instant nyaa.

"Uu."

And, for that instant, Senjougahara Hitagi gave a moan -- and did nyathing else.

The sense of fatigue assaulting her right nyow should be enough to drop her to her knees, but she doesn't look like she was even in pain.

My Energy Drain isn't powerful enyough to make her faint in an instant, of course, but still, it's nyot something that a nyormal human can stand -- nyot only that, but I even shook her hand nyaa.

I guess you can say this isn't how I imagined it.

But still, this is probably how Mistress felt -- a sort of feeling like, 'just as I expected' nyan.

Just as I expected.

This girl is, just as I expected.

"......"

Well.

It's nyot like I -- and of course, nyot like Mistress -- wanted to see her suffer and in pain.

But I feel a tugging at my heart from somewhere when I see nyo reaction from her at all.

Pressing on, she

"Nice to meet you. And please, take care."

said this. With a smile, in fact.

"Take care of Hanekawa-san."

Why?

This time, we jumped three chapters in one go.

What happened while I was sleeping...?

Was everything all right?

Nothing was happening while I slept, right?

"Good morning, Hanekawa-san."

As I laid completely still in utter confusion, Senjougahara-san, who was right in front of me, said this.

Oh, I thought.

Senjougahara-san, in stark contrast with the day before, looked like she was in a daze -- or, rather than dazed or sleepy, she simply looked completely exhausted --

But what kind of condition would cause you to feel tired immediately after waking up?

It wasn't as though she had her energy drained by the Hindering Cat.

"You wake up guite early, Hanekawa-san... it's still six in the morning."

"Yeah -- "

I did actually rely on my biological clock to wake up today -- even though Senjougahara-san lived closer to school than I had, so I really could have slept in for a bit.

Well, there's no loss in waking up early.

"But you're up too, Senjougahara-san."

"I go for a jog in the morning."

Senjougahara-san said, slowing raising herself.

"I have to work quite hard to maintain this figure, you know... my body turns everything I eat into meat."

"Turns everything to meat...?"

Was that some sort of euphemism for getting fat easily?

Well, it seemed that there had been some unique circumstances regarding Senjougahara-san's weight at some point in the past, so conversely, perhaps she truly was sensitive when it came to controlling that part of herself.

She wasn't even a model, so to be honest, I thought Senjougahara-san would look more charming if she put on a little more weight.

There's no need to have arms or legs that slender, was there?

It's almost scary to see them, as though you could snap them apart.

"I'm so jealous of how your body turns everything you eat into bosom..."

"Turns everything to bosom...?"

What kind of constitution did that?

- I went through quite a lot myself, too, you know.
- Senjougahara-san washed her face, changed into short pants and a T-shirt, and then started doing pre-run stretches.

Wow...

She's so, soft...

Girls have it tough.

It made me doubt my own eyes.

The movements of Senjougahara-san's body were so smooth and slick, they looked like overdone CG.

Amazing. It's like she's some kind of mollusca.

"Sorry, but can I touch you, just a bit?"

"What? My right breast? Or my left breast?"

"No, your back..."

"My right shoulderblade? Or my left shoulderblade?"

"I don't have any specific fetishes like that..."

She really was good at comebacks.

That's something I couldn't do.

Thinking this, I circled around to Senjougahara-san's back, and pushed down on her as she spread her legs into a 180-degree split.

Her body pressed onto the floor snugly.

Zero resistance, and zero friction.

There had been no need to push her down at all.

"How can you be so flexible...? Isn't there something wrong with the range of your joints? Actually, it's more like your joints are disconnected to begin with..."

"Mmmn, I just really like stretching... in a masochistic way."

"Why did you need to add the second part?"

"That grating, creaking feeling you feel inside is irresistible."

"It doesn't look like it's giving you that much trouble, though."

"I've gotten to the point where my body doesn't make any sounds at all. It's actually quite boring."

So it's boring, huh...

Well, stretching is something that gives you better results the more you do it, after all.

Perhaps this was the fruit -- or rather, the vestiges of her training from when she was on the track team.

"Will you run with me, Hanekawa-san?"

"No, thank you, but I'll make breakfast while you're out running. Let's eat together when you come back."

"Do you dislike running?"

"Not exactly."

- As a matter of fact, I liked exercise.
- A morning jog was something I did do habitually, though not daily.
- It was simply that, were we to run together, then when we return, it would likely end up with Senjougahara-san and me showering together again, and it didn't seem necessary to insert these service scenes all over the place.
- It would be dirty in more ways than one.
- "Actually, Senjougahara-san, why don't you skip it for today? You look pretty tired."
- "I want to run because I'm tired."
- "You really are an athlete, aren't you?"
- As a former member of the track team, she had even had the proper mental training.
- It didn't seem as though I needed to be unreasonable and force her to stay, so after assisting her with her stretches (although in the end, I couldn't help in any way that would justify the use of the term) I saw her off, and stood in the kitchen.

"Mm. hmn."

Senjougahara-san put the cucumber from the salad into her mouth, and her face took on an indescribable expression.

I thought I shouldn't make too much of a mess in someone else's kitchen, so the breakfast I had prepared was ever so simple.

The baguette left over from yesterday, and hot milk. Some other dishes like fresh raw vegetables for a salad, and fried eggs over bacon, sunny-side-up, that when I lined them up on the table had made Senjougahara-san comment that they "look delicious" as well.

It had still been fine when she gulped down her milk in a single breath, but her hue changed when she had a mouthful of salad.

It was a complete one-eighty.

"Hanekawa-san, do you mind?"

"...What is it?"

"Oh, no, just hold on. For now, I'd just like to confirm this unbelievable situation."

Having said this, Senjougahara-san once more stuffed salad into her mouth and munched on it. Continuing on, she silently ate the eggs and baguette.

As she did so, her difficult expression did not change.

I wasn't exactly slow, so I could tell more-or-less what Senjougahara-san was thinking by watching her reaction, but... huh?

Did I do something wrong?

Thinking this, I nervously tasted the food I prepared for myself -- but did not find anything wrong in particular.

At the very least, I did not burn the egg or mix detergent into the ingredients or anything like that.

In which case, what was Senjougahara-san displeased by?

If anything, it was me who looked in puzzlement at her, and Senjougahara-san

"Hmmm."

said this meaningfully.

"Um, Senjougahara-san -- "

"Do you know what 'dressing' is, Hanekawa-san?"

"Huh?"

I was suddenly struck by a question.

"Well, yes, of course. That's the stuff you put on salads once in a while, right?"

"I see, I see."

As though grasping the issue, Senjougahara-san nodded deeply.

"What's your opinion on the three-way struggle between those putting Worcester sauce, soy sauce, or pepper on their eggs?"

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"Oh, yes, yes."
Senjougahara-san nodded more and more.
As though a favorable result was coming from her experiment.
"Did you notice the butter and jam in the refrigerator?"
"I did... you brought it out yesterday, after all. Oh, sorry, do you usually have some?"
"Hmm,"
However, Senjougahara-san did not leave her seat to get the butter, but tore the baguette apart and quietly chewed on the
pieces.
Silently.
"I have some more questions for you."
"Please, go ahead."
"About your eating habits, Hanekawa-san."
"My eating habits? It's all really normal, though."
"How about sushi in soy sauce?"
"I don't dip them."
"How about sauce on your tempura?"
"I don't dip them."
"How about granules in your yoghurt?"
"I don't put them in."
"Do you write on your hamburger or omelette with ketchup?"
"I don't write anything."
"What sauce do you put on your pancake?"
"I don't put anything on."
"How about salt in your rice balls?"
"I don't mix them in."
"What kind of syrup do you like with your snow cone?"
"I like it plain."
"How much sugar in your coffee?"
"I'll have it black, thank you."
I see, and Senjougahara-san ended her questions.
It felt as though I had received some sort of psychological test, but having reached this point, I understood what she was
dissatisfied with.
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"Oh, I see now. I'm sorry, you're the kind of person who wants dressing on your salad, right, Senjougahara-san? That's why

"Oh, I've heard about people like that. They put things on their eggs."

- you looked so strange."
- "No, I didn't even realize until now that there's a kind of people who didn't want salad dressing."
- Said Senjougahara-san.
- "It's the first time I've seen plain fried eggs as well, and the first time I've seen bread being brought out as just plain bread... um, Hanekawa-san? Do you feel some sort of rejection against adding flavor in your cooking? Satisfied with the natural, unseasoned taste, perhaps?"

"Uh?"

- It took some time for me to understand what she was saying, and after troubling over it for a while, I answered, "Oh, no."
- "That's not it. I just think that it tastes good and *just the same* with dressing, and it doesn't matter if it's Worcester sauce, soy sauce, or pepper, I can eat eggs *just the same*, and I love both *Kinoko no Yama* and *Takenoko no Sato*."<sup>[1]</sup>
- "I wasn't talking about your taste in chocolates."
- Senjougahara-san snapped at me.
- Oh, wonderful.
- So that was worth snapping at.
- "But, doesn't cooking taste just as good even without taste?"
- "A clincher appears."
- "Huh? But I'm just saying that it's all the same whether there's taste or not, you know?"
- "This is what people mean when they say, 'letting the cat out of the bag yourself'."[2]
- Though I suppose the cat was already long gone before you even realized it, said Senjougahara-san as she put down her chopsticks.<sup>[3]</sup>
- It was very much like her to steadily finish it all anyway without stopping.
- "I'm done eating."
- Having said that to begin with,
- "What I said about having similar tastes with you is now null and void."
- she continued with this.
- I was voided.
- "You're like the opposite of a picky eater, Hanekawa-san. But this is also different from not having likes and dislikes."
- "I'm sorry, Senjougahara-san, I still don't really know what you're trying to say."
- "Is it the taste of family, perhaps?"
- Ignoring my question, Senjougahara-san said this, lost in her own reverie.
- "Or no, perhaps you can simply accept any taste... eating anything is fine as you as you gain nutrients from it, maybe, to put it extremely. No, even nutrients are unneeded as long as you can fill your stomach, no...?"
- "Please don't talk about me like that, like I'm some sort of warrior."
- "So the more tastes there are, the more of a bother it is. If you are not simply enjoying the natural taste -- then in the end, I guess you are simply a permissive person. Perhaps it is a luxury to be fussing over seasoning."

Well, my own common sense just folded quite easily, said Senjougahara-san, and she looked hard at me, when I still had not finished my meal yet.

"But you know... I wonder about that way of living, Hanekawa-san. This isn't just about your eating habits, you are just -- "

Senjougahara-san appeared to be choosing her words.

How rare that was.

" -- accepting everything and anything, aren't you?"

In the end, Senjougahara-san chose the words that she had used before.

"Is having something you dislike not just as important as having something you like? -- And yet, are you not just accepting everything and anything? Is it perhaps the same for me, and for Araragi-kun, as well?"

"Hm?"

Did the conversation just change?

Did the topic just switch?

Did the scale of the talk just expand?

No -- that was not it.

The conversation did not change, and the topic did not switch.

The scale was just the same as before.

This was about my living habits.

The lifestyle of Hanekawa Tsubasa.

"Our tastes aren't similar so much as that my tastes are simply included as a part of your tastes as well -- no, we can't call them 'tastes' on your part, I think. It may be better not to call them as such. After all, liking everything and anything means finding everything and anything to be the same."

"...."

"Hey, Hanekawa-san,"

Continuing to stare right at me, Senjougahara-san said this.

It was, just a bit.

Just a bit -- like the flat tone she had once used in the past.

"Do you actually like Araragi-kun?"

And then, she asked once again.

"Can you tell me that you like Araragi-kun, one more time?"

#### Translator's Notes [edit]

- 1. ↑ Two kinds of chocolate snacks, both produced by Meiji.
- 2. ↑ The original: 問うに落ちず語るに落ちる *Tou ni ochizu, kataru ni ochiru* ("not falling for the question, but falling as you talk") is a proverb which describes the care we take when we answer someone else's question, but our indiscretion when we ourselves begin the conversation.

3	3. 1	↑ Fol	lowing	g the a	bove:	問うにも	とうに落	ちてるこ	Tou ni	mo tou	ı ni ocl	<i>hiteru</i> r	neans	"alread	dy falle	n befo	re ever	being	asked".

Of course, both Senjougahara-san and I had planned on attending our lessons today, but just before we left, Senjougahara-san realized that, thanks to her superfluous lie the day before, or in other words, her claim that she had influenza, she could not go to school for a week.

"So this is what 'by schemes are schemers drowned' means."

So she said, but I wondered, because from my perspective, it seemed something more comical along the lines of drowning while trying to practice your strokes on dry land.<sup>[1]</sup>

"Now I've got to stay quiet at home for a week... Why did it come to this? It feels like being put under house arrest even when you've done nothing wrong."

A comical development it might be to me, but to the victim herself this appeared to be a serious situation and Senjougaharasan looked very stressed, though seeing as lying was in and of itself a bad thing, this was probably within the scope of 'reaping what you sow'.

Similar to 'hoisted by your own petard' as well.

"Father will be so angry with me..."

"...."

She, a third-year in senior high, was afraid of her father being angry with her.

Oh, that's adorable.

"But Araragi-kun isn't coming to school for a while, either, so this is just about right, isn't it?"

When I tried saying this, not so much as a source of comfort but out of in fact sarcasm,

"Also true."

she quickly stopped clutching her head.

Idiot couples truly were horrifying.

Thus, I went to school by myself -- as I had expected, when I got there, a storm of questions was waiting for me.

Some degree of curiosity or spectator spirit could not be helped amongst the class, so I was just happy that everyone would worry for me like this.

Lessons began today.

Flipping through the textbooks that I had borrowed from Senjougahara-san "because I won't need them for a week anyway", I ruminated on what Senjougahara-san had said this morning.

"I had thought that a clever person like you, Hanekawa-san, would find the world very bland, you know -- you *already know* so much, so I thought, maybe you wouldn't ever feel excitement or anticipation, but perhaps I was only half-correct, and half-mistaken. There was no guarantee that we had the same interpretation of the term 'bland'. Yes, my assumption had been incorrect in the first place."

I never imagined that someone like that could exist, said Senjougahara-san -- someone who felt no aversion towards the tedious or even the outright impermissible.

Of course, I objected in a hurry.

"Oh, no, I've never thought the world was bland before. I don't like tedious things, and if something is impermissible, I think

it's wrong."

"I wonder. It feels to me as though you're saying that just for the sake of saying it -- just for the sake of thinking it."

However, Senjougahara-san did not accept my explanation.

"I have thought about this before, you know. The difference between you and Araragi-kun -- both of you are so eager to sacrifice yourself for the sake of someone else, but from where I stand, it would seem that the two of you are completely different -- to the point that you are not alike at all. To put it simply, Araragi-kun appears to be an imposter, while you are the real original. The things that you do are the same, so I wondered why this was -- but, after tasting this cooking, I think I understand now."

"Understand ... ?"

"It does seem like a certain cooking manga, though, to know someone's nature by tasting their cooking."

Said Senjougahara-san.

"Like Oishinbo."

"Why did you name it right after avoiding it?"

"You and Araragi-kun, your perceptions of danger are different. For example, if by the road there was the body of a cat ran over by a car -- certainly, the act of burying it would be correct. I believe that that is what you would do, and perhaps Araragi-kun would do so as well, grumbling about something or other as he did."

"...."

"I'm sure, however, that the difference is that he *would* 'grumble' -- if you were to ask why so many people had ignored the dead cat, passing by as though they saw nothing, then why, because burying it would be 'dangerous', of course. It poses a great risk, being known to be a 'good person' by other members of human society -- the likelihood of being taken advantage of is extremely high."

Although children would purposely act worse than they truly were, feeling that 'doing good things is embarrassing', the reason is not 'embarrassment', but because goodness can only be a weak point, a weakness against the ubiquitous 'malice' in the world -- said Senjougahara-san in a halting way.

She laid out her own unique pet theory.

"Araragi-kun probably understands that acting badly is the safe thing to do -- he understands how much he risks by being a 'good person'. He has repeated his acts as an ally of justice so very many times, understanding the likelihood of death, or at best, the likelihood of losing out. That's how he was in middle school, and that's how he has been in high school. That was the cause of him failing at school, but he must have understood the risk of getting this result beforehand. He acted in such a way, all the while understanding all of this... well, I doubt his grasp of the situation allowed him to predict his own death and rebirth during spring break, of course."

"Spring break..."

At that time -- he felt regret.

It was no mistake that Araragi-kun had felt regret for the actions he had taken -- however,

it was no mistake that he faced that regret.

That was, unmistakably, just as what Senjougahara-san said.

Compared to him, I

"Compared to him, you don't understand it at all -- well, perhaps that's wrong. Even you must understand that risks exist. And yet you *think nothing of them* -- that is, most likely, the gist of the matter. You regret nothing. You act in defiance of all things malicious and impermissible. Or rather, you have accepted it all. I imagine all of that could perhaps be heard as some expression on how incredible you appear to be, but this is utterly different. I have always had the utmost respect for you, Hanekawa-san -- but now, that feeling has disappeared in an instant."

In truth, as Senjougahara-san talked -- nothing she said felt like praise to me.

I did not feel, even in the slightest of ways, that those were words of utmost praise.

In fact, Senjougahara-san was --

angry.

As she had been when she found me sleeping in those ruins this morning -- or perhaps even more so.

"It shocks me how you can even tell me that my cooking's delicious, with senses like those. That was more horrible than Araragi-kun, and he doesn't even bother pretending to be happy."

"Senjougahara-san..."

"For example, Hanekawa-san. What do you think of my livelihood?"

She said.

Senjougahara-san spread her arms, drawing attention to Room 201 of Warren Villa.

"What do you think of my lifestyle? Of our unstable family of father and child living in a dingy one-room flat, my only salvation being not the bathtub but a shower that sometimes has no hot water, our kitchen actually being very meager with only a single stove, and the breaker going off if I so much as use a dryer while the washing machine is running?"

"What do I think ...?"

"You think nothing of it, yes? You don't feel pity or disgust, yes? Yes, I'm sure that's very splendid. Provided that we are in some sort of novel or comic book -- if this were perhaps the story of some great historical figure, then it would be absolutely wonderful. I might even feel inspired. But you are a real human being, Hanekawa-san. Did you know that?"

Said Senjougahara-san.

Although she continued in her flat tone of voice -- it felt as though she was holding herself back with great effort, and if she were not careful, her wording would become harsher.

"After all, as the person concerned, I consider this lifestyle to be the absolute worst. One might feel that this is infinitely closer to living as a true human being compared to my life in the manor before my parents divorced -- but I've never once had any such flashes of enlightenment. Do you know, I've never once thought that living in poverty would make me closer to becoming a human being? In fact, I think that poverty dulls the wit. And Father, he is working his hardest in order to settle our debts and break us out from our life here. He works with such abandon that it would be no surprise if he broke down eventually -- all of this is because of the sense of danger that he feels, that this cannot be allowed to continue."

But you have no such sense of danger, said Senjougahara-san.

"You recognize that it is currently present, but you have no sense of the danger, not in the slightest. That was why you could spend an entire night in those ruins."

"If you put it that way..."

That was weak.

I could not object, even had I wanted to.

"Perhaps you are simply too pure -- as white as innocence itself. You do not understand your own heartlessness in condoning foolishness before a fool, nor your cruelty in condoning inadequacy before a failure -- much less realize that it is nothing but spite to refer to defects as virtues. You do not understand at all that affirming the negative is something that cannot be undone. You cannot simply accept everything. If you do so, no one would bother exerting themselves. The desire to improve and advance would be lost -- and yet, you have no wariness for foolish or impermissible things at all. Without thinking, you run along performing your good deeds, even though you know that you will be taken advantage of, and you treat it as logical when you become the maverick amongst the group. Can anything be so terrifying? Living on the cliff's edge like that, it's a wonder you managed to survive so far with all your limbs attached, and for that alone I will admire you. In summary, you are not a good person, nor are you a saint or some Holy Mother -- you are simply dim to the darkness. In that case... you are a failure as a living creature."

Failure.

As it was the first time I had ever been called that, I felt slightly depressed as well.

In the end, as it was time for school, our talk came to a close at around that point, but as I walked, and even now during my lessons, Senjougahara-san's words endlessly reverberated within my mind.

You are not a good person, but simply dim to the darkness.

Dim to the darkness.

Failure, failure -- in other words,

white.

Pure white.

White as innocence itself.

Bright white -- and brazen lies.

"....."

...lt was just that, as I sat in the lessons, it was undeniable that all her words had become an exercise in futility, as my attention was instead drawn to the sketches Senjougahara-san had done in the blank spaces in her textbooks.

Every page had an illustration of *Hagaren* on it.

They were ridiculously good, too.

And she's a high-schooler about to go into university?

#### Translator's Notes [edit]

1. ↑ The original: 畳水練 *tatami suiren* translates into 'practise swimming on the floor' and refers to one doing something that's actually pointless or extraneous.

Senjougahara-san was most likely feeling frustrated.

In the end, I hadn't understood even half of what Senjougahara-san had said, of what she had been trying to say, but even so, I got a feeling. That was what it felt like to me.

And it really was just a feeling.

Nothing more than just a feeling.

It was lunchtime, and I left the classroom, heading to the cafeteria to have lunch -- normally I would prepare a lunch box, but of course, I could only do so much in someone else's kitchen.

No, after all the things Senjougahara-san had said to me, I probably wouldn't be able to make lunch even in the kitchen of my own home.

My own home.

If that truly existed, then perhaps, like a normal person, my cooking would have this thing called 'taste' -- I thought of such things.

And then.

"...Oh,"

After walking down the hallway for a while, a figure I recognize appeared directly before me -- it was Kanbaru Suruga.

Kanbaru-san was coming from the other side, heading in the opposite direction as me (but even though she was just walking along, she seemed somehow happy. At this distance, I could tell that she was humming a tune) so she noticed me at the same time.

"Ooh!"

Said she, in a voice that was unthinkably loud for the hallway, and she ran up to me, at a speed that was unthinkably fast for the hallway.

An Instant Transmission-like speed.[1]

The two tails of her hair arrived after a short delay.

"Well, well, Hanekawa-senpai! It's been a long time, glad to see you're still well!"

"...Yeah."

She's very energetic, isn't she?

It wasn't just cheeriness.

Not knowing how to respond, I simply nodded.

Judging from her reception, it did not yet reach her that there had been a fire at the Hanekawa house. Well, considering Kanbaru-san's personality, it didn't seem impossible for her to be this energetic even if she knew.

She was courteous, but she had zero consideration for others.

That was the personality of Kanbaru-san.

"I'm heading to see Senjougahara-senpai right now, actually."

Said the courteous yet inconsiderate Kanbaru-san.

"Is she in the classroom?"

"Oh, um,"

This felt rather expected.

She did not even need to say it.

It never crossed my mind that Kanbaru-san would race over in such a manner due to a pressing matter concerning me --Kanbaru-san was essentially uninterested in anyone except Senjougahara-san.

To the point where she had applied for this school, Naoetsu High, simply to follow her.

Although Araragi-kun had apparently managed to widen that horribly narrow field of view of hers --

Well.

I did feel quite envious of her forwardness.

Or perhaps it should be called her single-mindedness.

At the very least, Senjougahara-san would not feel frustrated with her.

She was, strong.

She was heartening -- would that not be how Senjougahara-san thought of her?

Kanbaru Suruga-san -- Naoetsu High School, second-year.

The underclassman of Senjougahara-san since middle school (in other words, a schoolmate of mine from the same middle school, but I had not been acquainted with her then. I had simply heard about her on my end) and together, they were known as the Valhalla Combo.

They were the Valhalla Combo, due to the words 'god' in 'Kanbaru' and 'battlefield' in 'Senjougahara', and the 'field' in both their names. I subsequently learned that Kanbaru-san came up with it herself.<sup>[2]</sup> I had thought that it was quite a neat name, but after hearing that she named them herself, there was also the faint scent of disappointment.

She was one of the celebrities here, by the way. At this Naoetsu High, a private school aimed at future university attendants where sports and club activities were pushed to the side, she was an astounding star who guided the girl's basketball team all the way to the nationals (though, to speak the bare truth, the teachers had seemed quite bothered by this. As though they wanted to say, couldn't you see which way the wind was blowing?)

But, of course -- as you could tell from the bandages wrapped around her left arm, she had already retired.

Because of the Monkey.

For Kanbaru-san, it was -- a monkey, wasn't it?

Even so, I thought.

When she had been active, Kanbaru-san had a short haircut as befitting an athlete, but the Kanbaru-san before me now had hair as long as I once had, though not yet long enough to be braided.

Putting aside the monstrous speed at which her hair grew -- Kanbaru-san had become more,

girlish.

Or rather, she became more charming. So I thought.

The reason she became this way -- was the same as the reason Senjougahara-san became that way.

- It was likely because of Araragi-kun.
- Widening her field of view -- was it?
- "Senjougahara-san is taking a break today... she has influenza."
- ...Now I had become an accomplice.
- It was unavoidable, though.
- If you traced it back to the source, it had been a lie that Senjougahara-san told for my sake -- the only choice I had was to tell the same story.
- Perhaps it would have been all right to tell Kanbaru-san the truth, but honestly, she seemed like the talkative type.
- She felt like the kind of girl who was too candid and would let slip things that were best left unsaid. Worse, she would not show any remorse.
- She would not even bother to argue the point, but simply leave the door open behind her as she left.
- "Oh, influenza?"
- Said Kanbaru-san, slightly shocked.
- "So this is what people mean by the Devil getting sunstroke, huh."

"...."

- That was a horrible way to talk about a respected upperclassman.
- Courteous yet inconsiderate -- or rather, as Araragi-kun would put it, Kanbaru-san was 'courteous yet impolite', and this just now was an easy-to-understand example.
- Well, it's likely that she was just simply using it as an expression (I doubt she understood the phrase's true meaning). [3]
- This would be the moment when Araragi-kun unreservedly made a cutting remark and corrected her mistake, but as I wasn't quite so intimate with Kanbaru-san, I simply returned a silent and vague smile.

Smile!

- "...Oh, that's not right."
- She understood.
- It was a simple joy I felt.
- But, hmm, it was difficult to gauge the distance with the friend of a friend (both on the Senjougahara-san Route and the Araragi-kun Route).
- Although perhaps in this case, that friend being Kanbaru-san made it all the more problematic.
- "Hmn, I see. So Senjougahara-senpai isn't here, huh. Well, what should I do now?"
- I had thought for sure that she would turn on her heels and return to her classroom once she found out Senjougahara-san wasn't here, but Kanbaru-san instead folded her arms, appearing very troubled.
- If I didn't hurry to the cafeteria, the place would become crowded with the regular cafeteria students, but I couldn't just leave Kanbaru-san here like this.
- "Do you need something from Senjougahara-san? If you don't mind, I can hear you out too."
- "Mmn -- "

- Kanbaru-san thought about this for a moment,
  "Well, I guess you'll do, Hanekawa-senpai."
- and said this.
- ...That was just plain rude.
- She wasn't even courteous.
- I felt I really should call her attention to this,
- "I got a message from Araragi-senpai just now, actually."
- but Kanbaru-san's forcefulness silenced me as she immediately showed me what her cellphone displayed.
- Using cellphones in school, not turning it off while at school, or receiving a message 'just now', which would mean receiving it during lessons -- all these things I had wanted to bring up were suppressed.
- By the contents of the message I saw.
- 'Come alone to the classroom second floor at 9 tonight I need to ask something'
- "...What do you think this means?"
- "What do you mean, what does it mean...?"
- There was no room for interpretation in such a short message -- it was unthinkable for there to possibly be any sort of code.
- The tone of the message was rough (it should be 'second floor classroom') but that simply meant he was in a hurry --
- "Doesn't it just mean that he has some questions for you, so he wants you to come by yourself to the second-floor classroom at nine o'clock tonight?"
- "So that is what this is."
- Hmm, muttered Kanbaru-san.
- Her expression was serious.
- "So I guess -- Araragi-senpai is going to be absent today, too, huh?"
- "Yeah -- "
- I nodded.
- She was sharp in certain strange ways -- or rather, she was mysteriously pinpoint at grasping the key matter of a conversation.
- It's really not something to be made light of.
- " -- Although in his case, it's probably not influenza... he's been on break ever since the second term started."
- Just to be sure, I asked our teacher about this, and apparently he wasn't at school yesterday either. With Senjougahara-san, Araragi-kun and I absent at the same time, there had been a flurry of wild speculations among the class.
- Wild speculations... I really wish they wouldn't.
- Please don't flurry things.
- Hmm, muttered Kanbaru-san once again.
- "But this thing with Araragi-senpai is going to be a problem, too. Meeting 'in a second floor classroom' is way too vague.
- Does he know how many buildings we have here in Naoetsu?"

"No, not the school. He probably means that tutorial school." "Oh, I see." Said Kanbaru-san, as though she realized this just now. She was dull in certain strange ways. through." "...."

"But then, he could have just called me. I've been trying non-stop to call him for a while now, actually, but it wouldn't get

I stayed silent, of course, because I found fault with Kanbaru-san making callings inside school -- not. It was because, due to this new information, I now had absolutely no idea what situation Araragi-kun was in.

I had thought that it was something related to Mayoi-chan, but... why would he call for Kanbaru-san?

It wasn't just not like him...

It just didn't make any sense.

"So basically... he's asking me out on a date! He's not picking up, so he must be preparing some sort of surprise!"

"Judging from the contents, don't you think this is something a bit more serious?"

A 'surprise'? Really? Her thoughts were so blithe.

It was all the more surprising that she was being serious.

How tiring it was just conversing with her!

"Ah, I see, I see. In that case, I understand. There was a book I wanted to read tonight, but if Araragi-senpai wants me, then there can be no other choice. I shall have to overcome all obstacles and answer his call!"

"Overcome all difficulties...?"

She just said herself that she just had a book she wanted to read...

Her manner of speech was so exaggerated, not to mention so theatrical, that from a negative point of view, the more serious she became, the more she appeared conversely to be mocking the speaker. Her personality was disadvantageous in that way.

It wasn't frustrating.

But this sort of single-mindedness was worrying.

"Um, Kanbaru-san..."

"Hm? What is it?"

I had thought of saying something, but in the end, I couldn't put the words together, and

"Be careful."

and

"Please take care of Araragi-kun."

were the only things I managed.

"All right. Now then. Thanks for teaching me so much, Hanekawa-senpai!"

"Oh, no... you're welcome."

"I heard about the fire at your place, so I thought you'd be feeling down, but it doesn't look like that's true, so that's good! Just what I'd expect from you, Hanekawa-senpai!"

"Huh?"

So she really did know.

Amazing, the reception she gave me even while knowing this.

Or, no.

What did you mean, I didn't look like I was down ...?

"Well, stay safe!"

Kanbaru-san raised one hand, and returned in the direction she had first come from.

Not running, but walking.

I had thought of warning her about running in the hallway again, but apparently, she did not always run.

She possessed a troubling randomness.

"...."

Seeing as Kanbaru-san was now gone, I should be hurrying to the cafeteria -- as under normal circumstances, I would also need to regain lost time -- but I did not take a single step from where I stood.

What reverberated inside me -- was not the final words of Kanbaru-san.

What entangled my mind was the situation Araragi-kun was in right now.

It was no mistake that Araragi-kun was in some sort of dilemma -- that was already a definite fact. And yet, to call for Kanbaru-san in would mean that the 'thing' he wanted to ask Kanbaru-san was something necessary to escape from said dilemma.

He was not simply requesting help.

There was something much, much more serious.

"...."

That was why I felt it to be so absurd.

It must had been a necessity for Araragi-kun to send a message to Kanbaru-san, so to think that he would seek help, not from me, but from Kanbaru-san -- that was absurd.

But I wonder.

The 'frustration' that Senjoughara-san felt was something that I understood very well and was about to consent to -- but it was really completely unexpected for her to call me 'white' because of it.

Seeing as I felt envious of Kanbaru-san, who got a message from Araragi-kun.

And I certainly was angry.

I was angry -- that Araragi-kun did not send a message to me.

#### Translator's Notes [edit]

- 1.  $\uparrow$  A reference to *Dragonball Z*.
- 2. ↑ As explained in *Bakemonogatari*, 神原 *Kanbaru* is literally written as 'God's field' and 戦場 *senjou* in *Senjougahara* means 'battlefield'.
- 3. ↑ The proverb 鬼の霍乱 *oni no kakuran* literally means 'an ogre's sunstroke' but refers to when s strong or healthy person suddenly come down with an illness. Kanbaru probably knows the latter, but does not actually know what *kakuran* means.

Intense feelings of self-hatred assaulted me as I made my way back.

I had thought of asking Kanbaru-san to let me go along with her, but seeing as the message had asked her to 'come alone' that was something I should refrain from -- I knew that much, at least.

Thus came my indecision as to whether I should tell Senjougahara-san about this. As Araragi-kun was her boyfriend, telling her would be the proper line of thought, but it would definitely make her worry -- and she was, in her own way, a girl likely to single-mindedly become angry at him.

I arrived at Warren Villa, still unable to come to a conclusion --

"Oh, welcome back, Hanekawa-san. You're quite late."

"Yeah, I went to the supermarket and bought some things to replace what I used this morning... oh,"

and,

when I opened the door, I noticed one more individual in the room with Senjougahara-san.

It was a man with silver-gray hair, knotted in the back.

With his elegant suit, he truly looked to be a serious person -- to use an expression from another era, he felt like a corporate soldier.

Alternatively, his image suggested an attorney, or a bureaucrat, or something to that effect -- but I knew differently.

I had heard from Senjougahara-san.

That her father was working as a consultant at some foreign-owned enterprise --

"Pleased to make your acquaintance."

and,

he greeted me first.

He had been sitting at the table, but purposely stood up and bowed.

"I am Hitagi's father."

"Oh... um,"

I was perplexed.

In fact, Senjougahara-san had told me that her father would be coming back today, but I did not think that he would be back so early.

As you would expect from someone working at such a company, he was not tied down by time, and I felt an absurd sort of amazement.

"Hanekawa Tsubasa. Excuse me, I took the liberty of staying at your home last night."

"I see."

Senjougahara-san's father nodded.

And then he became quiet -- he felt to me like a taciturn sort of person.

He appeared to be an extremely, heavily silent man, though when I continued standing at the door without taking off my shoes, he gave me a glance, and

"Let's make some tea."

headed to the kitchen.

Then, he put a kettle on the stove.

With his words, and his actions, all tensions eased, and I managed to take off my shoes.

Caught my breath.

Without taking my eyes off her father, I sat down beside Senjougahara-san.

"I'm sorry, Hanekawa-san. Father finished up at work quicker than expected, so he came back earlier than I thought he would."

Said Senjougahara-san in a whisper.

"No, it's all right."

I was the one who intruded in the first place, I whispered back.

"But if that's the case, you could have just messaged or called me."

"Oh, well, I wanted to give you a surprise."

"...."

Consider me surprised.

To think that Araragi-kun had surprises like this sprung on him day by day, his life must have been, despite appearances, quite challenging as well.

"Your father's very stylish."

I said.

Not as simple flattery.

I saw now, regardless of how serious she might have been, that Senjougahara-san's self-proclaimed love for her father made sense -- if you were to live together with such a father, all the males of your own age would probably appear as nothing but children.

That Araragi-kun had managed to succeed against eyes of such sharp taste, well, it was a complicated feeling, but he really was amazing.

It was common folklore that women fall in love with those who resemble their fathers, but in that sense, Senjougahara-san's father, who was preparing tea leaves right now, and Araragi-kun were completely unlike one another.

They weren't simply different types of people. You could even consider them of completely different dispositions.

Although Araragi-kun liked to maintain an air of coolness, and was even called a 'motionless mute', he actually quite liked talking -- next to Senjougahara-san's father, who was truly taciturn, they were two utter extremes.

Furthermore -- tautological though this might be, Senjougahara-san's father, while stylish, was stylish in that 'dad'-like way, the kind of 'father' you could find anywhere, but not really as a 'man', so to speak.

As for what that indicated --

...No, no, I shouldn't.

What could come of analyzing a friend's father like this?

I thought I had already given up on doing these things.

Right.

It would seem the abrupt appearance of the 'father' had flustered me somewhat. I should have known better.

Not, that I was so amazing a person that I could tell myself 'I should have known better.'

A normal girl -- I was not, but regardless.

To begin with, of course I was flustered -- after all, I did not even possess this image of 'father', of a 'dad'.

There was one whom I ought to call my father.

But one whom I should call 'Father' -- I knew of no such person.

I knew nothing.

"Did anything out of place happen at school?"

As though declaring that the fact of her father being here was now closed for discussion, Senjougahara-san changed the topic of conversation.

That sort of pushiness she had really was an example I ought to follow.

"Out of place?"

"Did Araragi-kun come?"

That was what she had wanted to ask, apparently.

I was slightly lost, but feeling that it would be strange to hide anything, I told her of what happened at school.

"A message to Kanbaru?"

"Yep. Looks like the issue he's dealing with right now needs Kanbaru-san's help... at any rate, the message was too short, so I don't know why he needs to call Kanbaru-san out..."

"How unpleasant."

Senjougahara-san was surprisingly frank, saying this together with an expression of displeasure.

This wasn't just single-minded anger. This was rage.

Moreover, she was enraged not by Araragi-kun, but by Kanbaru-san.

The tip of the blade was aimed not at her boyfriend, but at her underclassman.

I immediately regretted what I had said.

What would I do if this caused a rift between the Valhalla Combo?

"Leaving me behind to get asked for help by Araragi-kun, whatever shall I do with that woman? First, I'll take her insides,"

"Senjougahara-san, your personality's turning back."

"Oh."

Noticing this, Senjougahara-san pulled on her own cheeks and made a smile.

How pitiful it was, to see a smile forced like this...

"There's probably a reason, I think -- for that, I mean. He said there's something he wanted to ask her, and besides, unlike the two of us, isn't there still an abnormality remaining in Kanbaru-san's left arm?"

- "Yes -- remain it does."

  The monkey's paw.

  Said Senjougahara-san.

  "In other words, rather than Kanbaru -- perhaps what he needed was Kanbaru's left arm."

  "Well, it's just a guess."
- I doubted that it was something so simple, but as a general idea, the possibility was quite high.
- "If he really did need to lend the combat strength of Kanbaru -- would that mean that things had unfolded into a battle yet again?"
- "Well, that's hard to say. But if we're talking about combat strength, then Araragi-kun has Shinobu-chan right now -- it's not set in stone that he needs her help in a fight."
- They were all simply guesses.
- Without knowing what situation Araragi-kun was currently in, Senjougahara-san and I would never be able to reach a conclusion no matter how much we talked.
- "Well? What will you do, Hanekawa-san?"
- "What do you mean?"
- "Will you go to that waiting spot, or not? Regardless of his situation, if you go there, you'll be able to meet Araragi-kun, no?"
- "...I did consider that, but I don't think I will. I get the feeling that I'll get in the way if I do -- "

"I see."

Senjougahara-san nodded to my answer.

"Then I won't go, either."

"Really?"

Having been entirely sure that Senjougahara-san would insist on going herself, I had expected a very vocal argument, so rather than being unexpected, this felt more as though she had dodged my question.

And I was already thinking of ways to stop the resolute, insistent Senjougahara-san from going, too.

"I'll take the lack of news as proof of his well-being -- anyway, unlike the time with Kanbaru's monkey, it doesn't seem as though he is hiding anything. If anything, he is being quite upfront. If he sent a message to Kanbaru, he sent it knowing that she would tell the two of us."

That was true.

However.

"...You're not going?"

"I'm not."

Answered Senjougahara-san, to my pointed question.

"Just like you, Hanekawa-san. I doubt I can accomplish anything but get in the way even if I go -- and I feel that there are other things I can do, as well."

The meaning behind the deep words she added was completely unknown to me -- but for the moment, it seemed that was

- how it would be.
- The lack of news was proof of his well-being.
- And a testament to her faith in him.
- Let's just leave it at these convenient explanations --
- "...Though it would seem that it wasn't only Araragi-kun and Kanbaru with abnormalities remaining inside them."
- "Huh? Who else is there?"
- I tilted my head at her remark.
- "Araragi-kun's demon and Kanbaru-san's monkey are the only abnormalities still around us, aren't they?"
- "That's right, nyaa."
- For some reason, Senjougahara-san answered with the inflection of a cat.
- I felt like pressing the question a bit more, but at that time, Senjougahara-san's father brought us tea for three, so our whispered talk was brought to a close.
- Well, even had he taken slightly more time to brew the tea, the talk would likely have ended here regardless.
- For it was then that I heard a knocking sound on the door of Warren Villa, Room 201 -- they had no intercom, by the way.
- "Ah, it seems they have arrived."
- Seeing the way Senjougahara-san stood up, it would seem to be an expected guest.
- However, expected though they might have been, I did not know who they were, and my body stiffened slightly, but after Senjougahara-san opened the door and I saw the girls on the other side, I understood everything.
- What the 'scheme' Senjougahara-san had spoken of yesterday was.
- It needed no further explanations.
- And them no further introductions.
- On the other side of the door were Araragi-kun's younger siblings, Araragi Karen and Araragi Tsukihi, the Fire Sisters.

The following conversation apparently occurred at some point.

- "My, my, if it isn't Karen-san. What a coincidence it is, meeting you at a place like this."
- "And you're Senjougahara-san, right? Yeah, it's a real coincidence, you running into me in front of my own house and all."
- "Yes, it's almost as though I looked up the exact route you take to get home with the navigator in my cellphone and waited here to ambush you. Heheh."
- "Ahaha, there might really be people stupid enough to misunderstand it like that -- the world's full of idiots, y'know? It's not often you find people as smart as me. I know, it's a shame, really. Oh, but Senjougahara-san, what about school?"
- "School? What's that?"
- "Oh, well, I guess it's fine if you don't know..."
- "Oh, I jest. I do know, of course. Just a Gahara Gag. Due to some unavoidable circumstances I am on break today. Your school is still on half-days, yes, Karen-san?"
- "Yeah. But you have really bad timing, Senjougahara-san. You probably wanted to see my brother by accident, but as luck would have it, he's out right now -- he went off somewhere just as the new term started. Well, I've gone soul-searching a second time myself, too. He should be able to fire off a Kamehameha by the time he's back."<sup>[1]</sup>
- "Going on a journey to find yourself doesn't really involve that sort of training... never mind."
- "He should be able to fire off an Evangelion: Ha by the time he's back." [2]
- "I doubt Araragi-kun has that kind of talent... oh, speaking of which, I just suddenly remembered, by which I mean it is quite a surprise to me as well, but did you know that there was a fire at Hanekawa-san's house?"
- "Huh?"
- "Oh, I'm so sorry, what a foolish question that was. Araragi Karen, ally of justice, the fighter of the Fire Sisters by whose sole efforts the peace of this town is kept, not knowing of such an enormous incident? Unthinkable."
- "Uh? Oh, um, yeah, right. I knew that. Yeah, that was terrible. I was just thinking of maybe going to visit her and see how she's doing."
- "Luckily, it happened while she was at school, so she wasn't hurt. However, since she was burnt out of her house, she doesn't have any place to sleep tonight."
- "Huh? Really?"
- "Didn't you know?"
- "Oh, I know, I know. I was just thinking of bringing that up. Why did you say it first, Senjougahara-san?"
- "I'm sorry about that. But how strange it is, really. A good girl like Hanekawa-san, with no bed for her to have a good night's sleep in, in the whole wide world? Nothing could be more outrageous. Really, if justice truly existed in the world, I'd wonder what it was trying to do right now."

"...."

"Well, thanks to this so-called 'justice' being all talk and no action, I actually took a day off from school today to help Hanekawa-san look for a place to sleep. Oh, speaking of which, you went to school just as normal, didn't you, Karen-san? Did you have fun while Hanekawa-san was suffering?"

"...."

"Oh my, I'm sorry. There's no helping the cause even if I talk to you about this. You may be Araragi-kun's sister, but you're just a middle-schooler, after all. It would be expecting too much for me to treat you like Araragi-kun. Onii-chan is Onii-chan, Karen-san is Karen-san."

"....!"

"Yes, I really do have poor timing, don't I? Why, if Araragi-kun were here right now, he would never abandon Hanekawa-san. But, for the, oh, 'Fire Sisters' (hah), well."

"(Hah)?!"

"I'm so very sorry, I know you can't do anything without your beloved brother around, so this sort of talk is just bothering you, isn't it? It wasn't my intent to trouble you, you know, not while you were enjoying life to the fullest, which is the exact opposite of what Hanekawa-san is doing right now. It's perfectly all right for Hanekawa-san to suffer, yes? Well, we've been standing here talking for quite some time, but I should take my leave now. Seeing as I now know that, just like Hanekawa-san's bed, justice no longer exists in this world."

"Hold up!"

"Huh? What is it?"

"Hanekawa-san does have a bed... and justice does exist!"

. . . . . . . . .

Thus, Senjougahara-san dexterously manoeuvred Karen-chan and succeeded in her 'scheme' or what have you -- not that I thought it was exactly 'dexterous'.

Rather, it felt something more along the line of waiting for chance to walk up and hit you over the head. [3]

If anything she did had been scheme-like, it was making the simple Karen-chan, rather than the planner Tsukihi-chan, her target.

As such.

I arrived at the Araragi house.

In the living room of the Araragi house...

"Well then, just treat this like your own place, Tsubasa-san."

"That's right. Just think of this as your own home. Think it all you like, Hanekawa-san."

Said Karen-chan and Tsukihi-chan as they got a drink for me.

They managed it deftly without needing any prior arrangements, dividing the tasks between Karen-chan who took out some chilled barley tea from the refrigerator, and Tsukihi-chan who took glass cups from the cupboard.

The teamwork of the Fire Sisters (hah)... I mean, Fire Sisters was, as could be seen, quite impressive.

They communicated without words.

One's own home -- huh.

This was actually not the first time I had entered the Araragi house -- I had visited many, many times before. I still acted as Araragi-kun's home tutor (though we did not study in the house, but at the library) and in particular, when Karen-chan had collapsed in a high fever, I made myself comfortable and stayed here until late at night.

However, how should I put it, late though it might be, this was the first time I was welcomed here as a 'guest'.

I felt a strange sense of nervousness.

Or rather, I felt a strange sense of discomfort.

"...."

Araragi Karen-chan and Araragi Tsukihi-chan.

Araragi-kun's little sisters.

The more I looked, the more they resembled him.

You could even say they were his spitting image.

Strange simile though it might be, they were like differently-aged triplets.

Of course, their personalities, or rather character traits, were quite different -- Karen-chan was a combat sport enthusiast and boyish, while Tsukihi-chan seemed gentle, but was in fact very firm inside.

...What surprised me was that both their hairstyles had changed since I last met them.

Karen-chan's characteristic ponytail had been cut off and now she wore a bob cut (she had straight bangs, like Senjougahara-san and I had had before) while Tsukihi-chan had her hair in a thick braid wrapped around her neck like a muffler (wasn't that hot, during the summer?)

"Anyway, you're just so icy, Tsubasa-san."

Bringing only her own cup of barley tea, Karen-chan sat down on the sofa.

By 'icy', she likely meant I was being reserved.

"If you didn't have a place to sleep, the very first thing you should've done was come ask me for help. I mean, really, I was just waiting for you to ask, Hanekawa-san. Well, I thought maybe it'd be hard for you to say it yourself, so I brought it up myself."

She still did not realize that she had been manipulated by Senjougahara-san.

The lie, that she had known about the calamity at the Hanekawa house all along, was now more deeply believed by none other than Karen-chan herself. I wasn't worried about her future, but only because she was plenty dangerous now as a middle-schooler.

"That's right. Karen-chan brought it up herself!"

Saying this, Tsukihi-chan came soon after bringing cups for both herself and me. It would seem that she, smiling as she sat next to Karen-chan, had accepted Senjougahara-san's proposal knowingly.

Yes.

She was quite devious, this one.

Karen-chan was in her third year of middle school and Tsukihi-chan her second year, by the way.

Sitting together like this and wearing the same clothes (the Tsuganoki No. 2 Middle School uniform), they really did look like twins (though they had a height difference when they stood, so they would no longer look to be so.)

"By the way, this is called barley tea, right? Does it mean that if it works hard enough, it can become beer?"

Karen-chan suddenly opened up and began small talk.

When it came to dealing with people, she had an incredible lack of reserve.

- It wasn't a talk we should be having five minutes after I was welcomed into her home.
- Please let me ease my tension first.
- "Tracing it back, the raw material of both was barley, but barley tea is roasted, whereas beer is fermented, so, well."
- Putting aside whether 'working hard' was the correct expression, they certainly were relatives in terms of beverages. I had wanted to say that it was completely wrong, but, hmm, Karen-chan's question was unexpectedly to-the-point regarding the essence of the subject.
- "Hmmm. So I guess it's no wonder that drinking barley tea gets you in a great mood."
- A disappointing conclusion, however.
- Karen-chan gulped down the entire cup of tea in one go -- she was quite hearty.
- And actually, now that I looked at the cup closely, it was of a very high quality.
- Was that Baccarat glassware?
- Even if it wasn't, all the same, it was almost disrespectful to call it a 'cup'.
- Moreover, judging from the way they were handled, Karen-chan and Tsukihi-chan did not know of the value of these cups...
- Could it be that the Araragi family was wealthy?
- "Well, at any rate,"
- Said Tsukihi-chan, casting a sidelong glance at Karen-chan.
- She seemed to be used to Karen-chan's riotousness precisely because she was her sister.
- "If you don't have a place to stay, you can stay at our home for as long as you like. Conveniently enough, Onii-chan is out right now. You can just use his room."
- "Araragi-kun's -- room."
- "Yep. It's pointlessly got this pointlessly springy bed."
- I -- knew that.
- Moreover, this was the 'essence' of the scheme that Senjougahara-san had thought of.
- It was difficult for me to express this, but it was impossible not to feel more than just a little guilt about this scheme which took advantage of Karen-chan's and Tsukihi-chan's innocent sincerity, as well as the Fire Sisters' sense of justice -- however, seeing as the way they felt was entirely a result of their own affections, I could not remain so coldly reticent.
- Having thoroughly predicted how I would feel about this, Senjougahara-san turned this idea into her 'scheme' without letting me know.
- So that, to the end, I would know nothing.
- She took it upon herself to bear the role of the villain.
- It was too much of a mystery to me, what kind of mental state she must be in having helped arrange for another girl (said girl being me, of all people) to stay at her own boyfriend's home, but on that front, it was perhaps due to the intropunitive tendencies that she had had since long before and retained to this day.
- She endured the pain.
- That was what she had done for me.

When I thought this, the words of Karen-chan earlier finally pierced my heart.

The first thing you should've done was come ask me for help.

I -- was waiting to be asked myself.

Just like when Senjougahara-san had me stay at her home, I did not seek help on my own -- surely, I thought, this logic was the complete opposite of what Oshino-san had said about people 'getting saved all by themselves'.

Yes.

lcy -- reserved.

I had -- given myself up to despair, probably.

I did not think of getting saved myself.

It also made me remember what Senjougahara-san had said to me this morning.

I simply accepted the lack of tastes.

I was dim to the darkness.

A failure as a living creature.

"...Tsubasa-san? What's wrong? You're spacing out. You got this really stupid look on your face."

"...."

She really didn't hold back with her words, did she?

A really stupid look? What's that supposed to mean?

"I guess it's really a shock to have a fire at your place, huh? The only time I've ever seen something like that before was Nagasawa-kun from *Chibi Maruko-chan*."

"...Oh, no, I'm fine."

So I said.

I said I was fine -- even though I couldn't possibly be.

"But, all right, I'll take you up on your offer and stay here -- until Araragi-kun comes home, at least."

I didn't know when that would be but, well, it was simply a case of whether the ones whom I should call my father and mother found a place to rent, or that, would happen first.

I had no clue for either of them, so it couldn't be helped no matter how deeply I thought about it.

"Thank you so much for this."

"Same for us!"

"Let's have a good time with this."

Somehow, it happened in the course of shaking hands.

We managed to form some sort of ring.

Were we going to do ballet, or something?

I didn't know how Senjougahara-san had explained the situation with the Hanekawa family (actually, Senjougahara-san herself didn't know about the situation with the Hanekawa family) but I was honestly thankful that the two of them did not ask me about it.

- "Let's have a pajama party, Tsubasa-san!"
- "I won't be able to take you up on that."
- "Then how about play-wrestling, or something!"
- "No, thank you."
- "Oh, I'm the oldest girl, so I've always wanted a big sister, y'know? Can I call you 'Onee-chan' while you're staying here?"
- Karen-chan said something that sounded rather like what Sengoku-chan had done.
- Tsukihi-chan watched over Karen-chan with a smile -- who would be able to tell who the older sister here was?
- Then, I realized something.
- Or rather, it was something which I had thought of from the very beginning.
- "Oh, that's right, seeing as I'll be here for quite a while, I really should say hi to your parents."
- In all the times I had visited the Araragi house before, it was by the intent of Araragi-kun, or Karen-chan and Tsukihi-chan, and I had never met their mother proper -- no matter how much Karen-chan and Tsukihi-chan wanted me to stay, if their parents refused, then I would have no choice but to leave.
- Hmm, I wondered.
- In dealing with a high school girl who slept here and there like some sort of refugee from the local net cafe, would the normal verdict of an adult with good sense not be to lecture her and persuade her to return to *her parents' home*?
- "It should be all right, I think."
- Said Tsukihi-chan.
- "Papa and Mama are our parents, and Onii-chan's parents, after all, so their personalities are pretty close to ours."
- "Oh... but,"
- "They both have a hot-blooded sense of justice, so they definitely won't tell someone in trouble to leave."
- Tsukihi-chan seemed very confident, for some reason.
- Speaking of which, I had no idea at all what Araragi-kun's parents were like.
- Perhaps that was obvious, seeing as we had never met before, but it was telling that Araragi-kun had been reluctant regarding this topic -- it was part of a high school boy's biological nature to keep silent about his parents, so I had never been particularly bothered... and Araragi-kun did not seem to be good at dealing with his parents in the first place.
- But a sense of justice?
- Not to mention a hot-blooded sense of justice?
- How unnatural.
- "Hey, Karen-chan, Tsukihi-chan. For future reference, you told me before that your parents work together, right?"
- "Yep."
- They nodded at the same time.
- "They should be back at around six today."
- "...And what is it that they do?"
- Their voices rang out at the same time.

So this was why Araragi-kun tried his best to hide it, I thought, and at the same time, I felt that Hell had truly frozen over.

#### Translator's Notes [edit]

- 1. ↑ A reference to the famous attack from *Dragon Ball*.
- 2. ↑ The Japanese subtitle for Evangelion 2:0: You Can (Not) Advance is 破 Ha, 'break'.
- 3. ↑ The original reference here is quite complex: it refers to an old Chinese proverb (*Shou Zhu Dai Tu*) describing foolish acts which rely entirely on chance for a desirable outcome. It is derived from an anecdote wherein a farmer witnessed a rabbit accidentally breaking its neck from running into a tree stump, and figuring that, if he watched the tree stump every day, he would not need to work for food any more.

## 026

There had been, of course, some dispute.

Although their daughters had described them as possessing a hot-blooded sense of justice, the Araragi couple had good sense as befitting adults (and police officers) and it became a matter of whether it was a good idea.

However, after saying 'it can't be helped if that's the case', they allowed me to stay in the end, more readily than I had expected, though certainly not enthusiastically.

Of course, Karen-chan and Tsukihi-chan also gave their best in trying to persuade them -- but in this respect, they certainly did feel like the parents of Araragi-kun.

They both resembled him, after all.

On that note, while the resemblance among 'family' was of course a matter of genetics, apparently, the indirect aspect of having the same living cycle was also quite a factor. Seeing as they live under the same roof, go through life at the same pace and eat from the same menu, their bodies were made from the same materials, so it was easy to understand the logic that the finished products were similar.

In contrast, if the pace and menu were all different among individual members like the Hanekawa house, they would not resemble one another at all.

That would be why it's said that there was a certain sense of identity in a family whose members resembled one another in appearance and personality -- in that way, Araragi-kun's family was a healthy one.

Seeing how they were during dinner, which they allowed me to take part in, made me feel it.

What it was to have a family conversation.

It was a very fresh idea, and I let myself become involved -- although I winced somewhat at being persistently questioned by Araragi-kun's mother regarding her only son.

After that, it was time for a bath.

Speaking of which, it had been three days since I used a bathtub.

It had apparently become some sort of rule for them lately, but Karen-chan and Tsukihi-chan came into the bath together -- it was really too tight!

"You really aren't pretentious at all, are you, Tsubasa-san."

This was the conversation we had in said bathtub.

The three of us were tightly packed, like some sort of experiment in how many people one could fit into a telephone box, so in other words, it was far too cramped for any interpretation of sensuality, and within this space, Karen-chan said.

"I mean, maybe it's just because I'm an idiot, but when I talk with smart people at school, a lot of them make me think, wow, you're really smart. It's like they go out of their way to string together really tough words, and bring up stuff that no one cares about. But you're smart, Tsubasa-san, and you talk to me from the same level. That's just really great."

"That's true."

Tsukihi-chan joined in.

Her hair was guite long once she unravelled it for the bath.

It would seem that the speed at which her hair grew was beyond Kanbaru-san.

Truly monstrous.

"But apparently, that's how it really is, Karen-chan. People who really are smart... actually, 'first-rate' people who are good at stuff, whether it's sports or whatever, sound surprisingly normal when you talk to them, and they totally lose that air they have. But it's probably *because* they're the real thing, so they don't need to put on airs."

"...."

There was some unease as I felt I was being praised, though it was true what Tsukihi-chan had said about 'first-rate' people having surprising degrees of normality, and she was correct in that regard, but in my case, that was not how it was.

I was not normal.

And -- I was not smart.

I doubt anyone could be more pretentious, more embellished than me -- I realized this during Golden Week, and before the Cultural Festival.

So much so that I wanted to refuse it.

So much so that I felt hatred for it.

"I've always thought about how things would look from a smart person's perspective."

Said Karen-chan.

"Like how, even if you look at the same thing, you could see something different. I mean, to me, pi's just a list, but maybe, to Einstein, it's actually a beautiful sequence."

"Oh, I don't know about that."

I answered vaguely.

The question was, in every way, difficult to respond to.

In fact, the sense needed to realize the worth and meaning behind mathematical beautilities such as pi, or the golden ratio, only existed within a small part of geniuses -- however, I truly did not believe that cleverness was a requirement for it.

Even among clever people, there must be those who see pi as nothing more than a list, I thought, and the opposite must exist as well.

It was simply a matter of individual differences, and not a set condition.

The difference between the perspectives of Karen-chan and Einstein, and the difference between the perspectives of Karen-chan and Tsukihi-chan, probably did not have that great a difference in and of themselves.

"For example, say there is a novel narrated in first person. If you tell it from a different viewpoint, it will become a completely different story, I think. It's the same as how the Casebook as told by Dr Watson would feel quite different when told by Mr Holmes himself."

Speaking of which, in the Casebook of Sherlock Holmes, a short story with an omniscient narrator also existed.

However, as it was from an objective point of view, it was not quite correct to say that it was a world which possessed correctness.

It was not necessarily true that God could not make mistakes.

For example.

He accidentally created humans.

.....Although, now that I had had such intimate contact with the beauty of Karen-chan's body, its muscles tightened by her training, and Tsukihi-chan's lovely and contrastively younger figure, I began to wonder, 'does Araragi-kun always get along with sisters like these?', and could not help but gain something of an understanding into the reason behind his eccentricities.

And so on and so forth.

Then, I got up from the bath.

The underwear bought from the shop had been used up, and I thought I could live with reusing them for one night, but Karenchan lent me a new pair of shorts.

She lent me a set of pajamas, as well.

It would be odd of me to act reserved now, so I meekly accepted both.

"Huh? But isn't this men's size?"

"Hm? Oh, that. It's Nii-chan's."

Bwah.

I just put on Araragi-kun's pajamas...

I looked at myself in the mirror.

What's with this feeling, like I've done something I shouldn't have?

On the other hand, if I were to take it off now, it would seem like I was strangely conscious of it -- or, no, that was just an excuse.

Now that I had put it on, I felt some resistance towards taking it off again,

"Hmm, I see. The size is just right."

and like so, I said something normal that couldn't be amounted to an attempt to hide my embarrassment, and began brushing my teeth before bed.

Still, I really couldn't tell Senjougahara-san about this, could I...?

After that, with the two leading me on, we headed to Araragi-kun's room.

Now that I actually thought about it (though it was something I already knew without thinking), I had invaded the Araragi house with absolutely no permission from Araragi-kun, borrowing his pajamas and his bed. It would not be an exaggeration to call me some sort of ruffian who just did as she pleased.

Worse, he did not even know that I was here by permission of his family and his girlfriend.

I did think I should at least send him a message, but under the present condition, with me having no idea what situation he was in, I naturally hesitated.

I'm wearing your pajamas right now, Araragi-kun.

If I did send him such a message, assuming he could even receive it, I got the feeling it would have a considerably negative effect on whatever serious situation it was that he had landed himself in.

Besides, looking at the clock (I had noticed it when I was allowed in before, but Araragi-kun's room had four clocks, for some reason. He didn't strike me as that punctual a person...) it was already past nine. When it occurred to me that he was meeting with Kanbaru-san about now, I, oh, hm -- well.

I hesitated.

- "Well, good night, Tsubasa-san. You can use anything you want in this room."
- "Good night, Hanekawa-san. See you tomorrow."
- Said the Araragi sisters, and they went off, leaving me alone in Araragi-kun's room, not knowing what to do.
- Not that there was anything I could do besides sleep.
- Even if I wanted to do my daily studies, I did not even have textbooks -- they were lent to me by Senjougahara-san.
- As I thought about perhaps going to the library tomorrow to borrow some books for school, I found myself glancing at Araragi-kun's bookshelf.
- Although Karen-chan said that I could 'use anything' in this room, I of course could not do as I pleased in Araragi-kun's room. However, I could be forgiven for looking at the books on his shelf.
- His line-up had changed quite a bit since the last time I was here -- he told me that he did not throw away books, so it would seem he was the type to put unread books on the shelf and finished books in the closet.
- There were many novels, surprisingly.
- From the way he usually talked and conducted himself, you would think he read only comic books.
- I took out a foreign novel at random and, afterwards, sat down on the chair facing the desk and read for about one hour.
- However, the feeling of Araragi-kun coming from the desk and chair meant the words did not enter my mind at all.
- By the time I turned off the light and laid down on the bed, it was past eleven.
- Even so, after realizing that I was currently putting my head on Araragi-kun's pillow and sleeping in his bed while wearing his pajamas, it was impossible for me to sleep, and it was only after the hand had passed the hour mark that I managed to fall asleep.
- I should not blame Araragi-kun.
- It would be improper of me to think such a thing.

## 027

Mistress finyally fell asleep after 12 o'clock, so as usual, it's my turn on the stage nyan.

But, well, to think I'd wake up in that human bastard's room, this reminds me of Golden Week nyan.

A quirk of fate. All the myriad ways we have been brought together nyan.

And it's nyot a good thing for Mistress, either nyaa.

It's nyot that I can't understand the real motive behind Senjougahara Hitagi's mediation, well, nyot that I'm sure I'm right about it, but anyway, on that front, it's just frustrating nyan.

Nyot that I can do anything about this nyaa.

In the end, I'm just Mistress herself.

I can't do anything that Mistress won't nyaa -- it's a sad feeling of powerlessness, nyow that I think about it nyan.

"Nyow then..."

I got up from the bed, got on all fours and stretched my back -- it's what cats do nyan -- and then said this to confirm with myself.

"...But, what's this all about nyaa? Seeing as I'm out like this, it must mean Mistress is feeling some sort of stress again... but I don't knyow exactly what it is nyaa. I thought it must've been because of that fire at the house, but seeing as I'm still coming out even nyow, it looks like it's nyot just about the fire nyaa -- "

Apparently, this is how the me **this time** is going to be like.

During Golden Week, I was pretty much just like Mistress, and before the Cultural Festival, I was so connected to Mistress you could've called me her inner personyality -- but this time, it looks like Black Hanekawa is almost completely cut off from her person nyan.

Have I gained independence as an abnyormality thanks to coming out so many times nyaa? I'm pretty bad in the head, so I don't really knyow, but if that annyoying Aloha were here, he'd probably have a different explanyation.

"But the times when I come out sure are getting convenient nyaa -- it's actually flexible, how I only appear when Mistress is sleeping nyan. The last two times, he had to work pretty hard just to get me back inside. Nyahaha, he even needed help from that bratty little vampire nyaa."

"And of whom do you refer to as 'bratty little vampire'?"

"Nyan?!"

Someone answered my monyologue nyan.

I can see her nyow, but, at some point she was there -- or *is* it 'at some point'? She was sitting in the room, no, on top of the room, on the ceiling, with her arms around her knees, like she had been there since before the universe began.

A little blonde girl.

It was that Oshino Shinobu nyan.

When I saw her before, she had a helmet with goggles on, but it looks like she stopped wearing it nyaa.

And on top of that.

When I saw her before, plus that time during Golden Week, she was expressionless, but nyow -- how should I put it, she's

looking down on me with a terrible smile on her face nyaa.

...Even though she's got what passes for a smile nyow, I wonder why she looked cuter when she didn't have an expression at all nyan.

"Hmph,"

The vampire went ahead and said.

She's totally puffed-up nyan.

Actually, I've fought her twice and lost both times, so of course, she really can do as she pleases nyan -- it doesn't matter whether I'm Black Hanekawa or a Hindering Cat, because as an abnyormality, I can't even reach the soles of her feet.

"Long has it been, cat -- it eludes me why you would skulk in my Lord's chamber, but to seek the reason behind the appearance of an abnormality would be tasteless, I suppose."

I am not like that Aloha brat, said the vampire.

Hmmmn.

I thought about asking her, 'why are you here?' but I guess that goes both ways nyaa.

"Wait. Huh? Weren't you supposed to be locked up in that human bastard's shadow nyaa?"

That's how it was supposed to be nyaa.

If Mistress recalls correctly.

So, seeing as she's here, it's strange for that human bastard to nyot be -- he isn't sticking to the ceiling nyaa.

I'm nyot seeing anything scary like that right nyow nyaa.

"Correct -- yet a slight irregularity has ensued."

Said the vampire sitting on the ceiling nyah.

"At this moment, the pairing between myself and my Lord -- in other words, between Oshino Shinobu and Araragi Koyomi has been severed."

"Been -- severed?"

Nyan? I tilted my head.

What's that supposed to mean nyan.

"By which I meant we were returned to our states before the coming of that Aloha brat -- no, matters haven't worsened even further. Alas, I know not where my Lord is, nor of his condition. I am completely in the dark..."

Stopping in mid-sentence, the vampire snyorted and looked at me with scorn nyan.

"Confiding in you makes hardly any difference."

She just went and gave up nyan.

Nyot that it wasn't the right decision.

I don't even understand conversations beyond three lines nyan.

Anyway, it seems that human bastard is really in quite the predicament right nyow -- I mean, really, isn't he in a pretty serious situation if he got cut off from this vampire nyaa?

Like that time with the Monkey.

Just what is going on with him right nyow?

I haven't got any reason to worry about him (actually, I hate the guy nyan) but if Mistress finds out, she'll definitely worry nyaa -- in that way, it's pretty good timing that it's me who's out, as in, while Mistress is sleeping, when this vampire showed up.

"It occurred to me that perhaps my Lord would return home, but it was a faint hope. And now I must suffer your presence as well. Revenge is a dish best served cold."

"...."

Even I knyow she's using that proverb wrong nyan.[1]

Though I get what she's trying to say nyaa.

Nyaa, I'm nyot built for this sort of thing, but let's see if I can't help her out.

Nyot with correcting the proverb, but with the human.

"Your Lord or whatever should be at that tutorial school tonight, at around nine o'clock nyaa. A meeting with that monkey girl nyaa."

"A meeting? With the monkey? What purpose could she serve at such a late -- aah, I see. Yes, it is clear to me now that even my Lord possesses some presence of mind in this. Rather than choosing an abnormality, he chose the lass for her heredity."

"Her heredity?"

"Well -- quite the news this is, what you have just told me. It was no fool's errand, after all. You may receive my praise. I fancied sucking your blood to stave off the boredom, but as a symbol of my gratitude, I shall refrain."

She's got some outrageous thoughts going through her head nyaa.

Close one nyaa, close one.

"Or rather, would it not be well of me to do just that out of gratitude? You are her stress, and if I absorb you, it should provide her some reprieve -- in some measure."

"Ha. I'll have to say nyo to that nyaa."

Nyow that she mentioned it, that's exactly the case, and in fact, it was thanks to her sucking me out that Mistress got 'saved' the last two times -- but things are a bit different this time nyaa.

The difference between the me this time and the me's from before.

It must be the fact that I have a fully-fledged mission -- nyot a reason, which would befit an abnyormality, but a mission, something most unlike an abnyormality. Nyot that I knyow what it is yet, though.

But there must be something.

"Hmph. I see. You are some new species of abnormality, something that neither the Aloha brat nor I are well versed in -- but let us give you a light evaluation, shall we? To wit, the you in the now and the you hitherto are not unlike the *Terminator* and *Terminator* 2."

"That example's very easy to understand, but is it something a vampire like you should use...?"

She follows trends and fads. Unexpected nyaa.

Did that human bastard let her watch it nyaa?

"Well, whichever the case, my drawing of your blood is only a cure for the time being, or rather, something to tide you over,

and nothing more. Not a hand you should be keen on using again and again."

"That's true nyaa."

Lagreed nyan.

When it comes down to it, I of all people knyow best just how meaningless 'a cure for the time being', a brute force solution is nyan.

Plus -- I musn't forget nyaa.

Though I'm coming out like this openly, I'm nyathing more than Mistress' innyer personyality, so I shouldn't be so open.

I should be scanty.

And stealthy nyan.

"Yet, the outside, and inside... but two sides to the same subject, they are. Well, perhaps I overstate, but at the least, you are like reversible garment. You seem to be one performing a fool's errand, much as my Lord does, or rather, two fools arguing in a circle."

"Hmn?"

"Well, this is but a trite story, the kind your Mistress has naturally filling her database with, but this is of my own recollection, with its own significance, so quiet down and listen. An anecdote of Napoleon I, this -- he slept for only three hours a day, says they."

"Ahh,"

True, that story is part of Mistress' knyowledge.

Actually, it's so famous, it's a story that anyone would knyow nyan -- even that illiterate human bastard would knyow nyaa.

It's actually pretty incredible, the way she said it's 'of her own recollection' nyan.

"So what nyan? Does that have anything to do with the way I'm coming out while Mistress is sleeping?"

"No, I did not mean to join the two. But, listen all the same."

"I'm listening nyan."

"Meanwhilst, the Emperor was famous for his love of baths. Spent more than six hours a day in it, says they. In this day and age, he would be Shizuka-chan."

"....."

We've gone from Terminyator to Doraemon nyaa...

Something's wrong with the way her knyowledge leans towards that one area nyaa.

"Of this matter much has already been said, but in time, even Shizuka-chan will be regulated... actually, she is well and truly under regulation already. And now that we are on this subject, it makes me recall how risqué the ED sequence of that nostalgic series *Perman* was. Pako always had her drawers out on full display... but I suppose that at this point, such spectacles as these were already being regulated, even before the proper laws were set. A sad tale, truly."

"Sorry to cut in while you're talking about this like it's someone else's business, but it's the ones like you for who regulations and laws are set nyan."

Begging his pardon, but it's probably nyot the time for her to be worrying about Mr Fujiko Fujio. [2]

"True, true. Aye, but I ramble."

"Yep. If this is what you had me shut up to listen to, it'll definitely get cut during the editing nyan."

But I still don't knyow what this vampire is trying to say nyan.

It's all ??? to me nyan.

How little the Emperor sleeps, and how long he bathes for, they're both famous stories nyaa -- they're nyot quite anecdotes when you get right down to it.

"Well. When I came to know of these stories, the thought occurred."

Said the vampire.

In a very dramatic tone.

"Come now, surely he must be sleeping in his bath!"

"...."

Ah.

I see, she's trying to connect the two anyecdotes -- putting aside the truth (according to Mistress' knyowledge, the Emperor would work on his government affairs even in the bath) that's one way to see it nyan.

"Thus, by joining these two, in a way, unnatural inclinations and considering them together, one may reach an exceedingly rational conclusion. As one would add one minus to another to produce a plus, if you add one mystery to another, you may reach a proper conclusion. In short, what I am conveying is that the matters which you consider to be separate affairs could be connected in unexpected ways -- there is no meaning in considering the outside and the inside separately. Yes, you are Black Hanekawa, cut off from the personality of Hanekawa Tsubasa, that is not incorrect -- but there is no marked difference between the two."

Such is my belief.

Said the vampire -- with a terrible smile.

"From my eyes, abnormalities and humans are not so unlike one another."

"...I see."

Hearing her say that,

made me feel a bit at ease -- and very down nyaa.

I'm -- the same as Mistress, huh.

I already knyow that, I recognize that, I even claimed that myself -- but, nyow someone's actually saying it out loud.

"But... in that case, it's turning out like a worse and worse idea to let you suck my blood nyaa."

"That is true. Best of all is a natural death. Both from an expert's eye, and the abnormality."

"So, vampire,"

I said.

I thought of something -- after what the vampire just mentioned, I thought of something.

"If you want to thank me, how about answering one of my questions?"

"Hmn? I do not mind -- but do so with speed. I must hasten to return beneath my Lord. The clock strikes nine, but he may not remain in that place -- quickly, lest the useless fool truly does get himself killed."

She looked like she was taking it easy, but apparently even she's being driven up the wall nyaa. So I did as she said and got to the point. "Do you knyow a tiger abnyormality?" "A tiger?" "Yeah, a tiger nyaa -- " A tiger. Mammal of the family Felinae, order of Carnivora. "-- It's prowling around town right nyow." "Of tiger abnormalities, there are numerous. Quite a few even from my own knowledge, but with what the Aloha brat knows -There are easily over fifty, said the vampire. Nyaaa. That's a problem nyaa. I don't even knyow that nyumber nyaa. "Well, I knyow what Mistress knyows, too... but that's the thing, we can't figure out which one it really is nyaa. I knyow it's a really bad one, but when it comes to its true identity, I can't think of anything -- " "Yes, to bestow one a name is to gain a hold on one's true identity -- be it I, Oshino Shinobu, or you, Black Hanekawa. Knowing not the name, seeing not its true form -- that is true terror. None can be more terrifying than the one who is none. Fear of an anonymous society, it did not begin in the present age. Are there no clues, besides being a tiger?" "It's a big tiger nyaa." "Most tigers are big. A small tiger would be more telling." "Mmmmn, it's really fast nyaa. It got ahead of me in a flash nyaa."

"Most tigers are fast. An unmoving tiger would be more telling."

"Mmmmn, and it talked nyaa."

"Talked?"

The vampire reacted nyan.

And very clearly nyaa.

"A beast form abnormality, and yet it speaks -- that is, shall I say, rare. But I fear that hearing this has made its true form even more of a mystery."

The vampire said this, and stood up nyaa.

Her feet are stuck to the ceiling, so I guess 'stood up' is a weird expression to use nyaa.

And I guess you can say it was lady-like, or something, the way she skilfully clamped down on her skirt with her thighs to stop it from falling.

All her blonde hair got turned upside-down though nyaa.

"To start with, it cannot be that an unknown abnormality prowls this town without my knowing of it."

"Hmn?"

That's true, nyow that she mentioned it nyaa.

She may let small fry like me do as I please, but if a really powerful abnyormality like that thing was wandering around, there's no way it wouldn't catch the attention of this **No Life King** of abnyormalities nyan.

This iron-blooded, hot-blooded and cold-blooded vampire.

All abnyormalities are just a food supply for her, after all.

"...But still, it's nyot like you're still like that nyow, right? I don't really knyow, but since that human's in a tough spot, and your pairing got severed -- "

"All the more so. In such a predicament as this, I could not possibly fail to notice an abnormality -- this is a bolt from the blue. Hmm, actually seen this tiger, have you?"

"Oh, nyaa,"

That's, nyot true.

I did, but before that --

"Mistress saw it nyaa. So I did too."

"And hence -- that may be the point of contention. In short, it was an abnormality beheld by none other than the two of you -- a tiger only the two of you may see."

"...."

"Naught but a possibility. Forgive me for not being of help."

I shall consider again a way to show my thanks, said the vampire, who calmly walked along the ceiling and looked like she was about to leave the room through the window. She's probably heading to that tutorial school nyaa.

....Hmph, I thought.

She didn't manyage to tell me that abnyormality's true form, so there's nyo reason to cosy up to her any more, but -- it's true that I wasted her time nyaa.

On that front, I guess I'll return the favor.

It's nyot for that human though.

"Hey, vampire."

"What is it, cat."

"I'll get you there nyaa. It's just a skip for me to get to those ruins nyan."

"...."

"Don't be so cautious. I knyow you can't fly right nyow -- and your jumps aren't big enyough to be close to flying. It's nyot much trouble for me. But you can shave off thirty minutes."

"......Hmph."

Then the vampire,

hesitated for a second (actually, she just looked like she really didn't want to) but then she lightly fell from the ceiling and landed on the floor, or rather, the bed. It was really springy, so she ended up bouncing back up and flipping for no reason, but it was pretty amazing how she still manyaged to land properly nyaa.

"May I rely on you?"

I thought that it was possible, very possible actually, that this proud vampire would reject my suggestion, but she pretty much made up her mind right away nyan.

I guess that's just how serious things are.

That's it nyan.

Nyow that I think about it -- although she didn't make much of it, having her pairing with that human severed isn't just a big deal, it's unbelievably bad news.

I mean, doesn't this mean he's lost his immortality?

Seeing as she's walking and sitting on the ceiling, maybe it means that, in reverse, her vampire traits are coming back -- but that bastard losing his immortality is really bad nyan.

Isn't his immortality how he even manyaged to survive this long?

And still, he...

"...Yeah, you can rely on me nyan."

I nyodded.

"But only as close as I can -- that's how Mistress feels nyaa. Even if that human's in a tough spot, she doesn't want to get in his way."

"Oh? -- I can't say it is something that woman would have spoken, but that is a good decision. Aye, she's suffered her share of pain this spring break, once and twice -- thanks to her conceited and thoughtless actions, my Lord was plunged in even direr straits."

"Mmn -- "

I remember that too nyan.

I didn't exist at the time, but -- I have that memory nyan.

The way I see it, she did more than just plunge him into direr straits, but well, that was more or less it, I guess nyan.

"To learn from one's own mistakes is an unavoidable step. Do as you please. This is enough as aid."

"Okay nyan."

I held the vampire.

Carrying her like a bride nyan.

As soon as I touched her, my Energy Drain activated, but the vampire didn't seem to mind.

What nerves nyaa.

I opened the window and put my foot on the windowsill. I'm barefooted as usual, but, well, I can just clean myself up when I get back nyan. Lucky enyough, this room has some of those wet tissues that the human uses to clean the room nyan (he likes cleaning nyan).

Nyow that I come to it, how did the vampire get in this room nyan? It crossed my mind suddenly, but I guess asking that about an abnyormality isn't going to go anywhere -- so I didn't think anything, and just jumped.

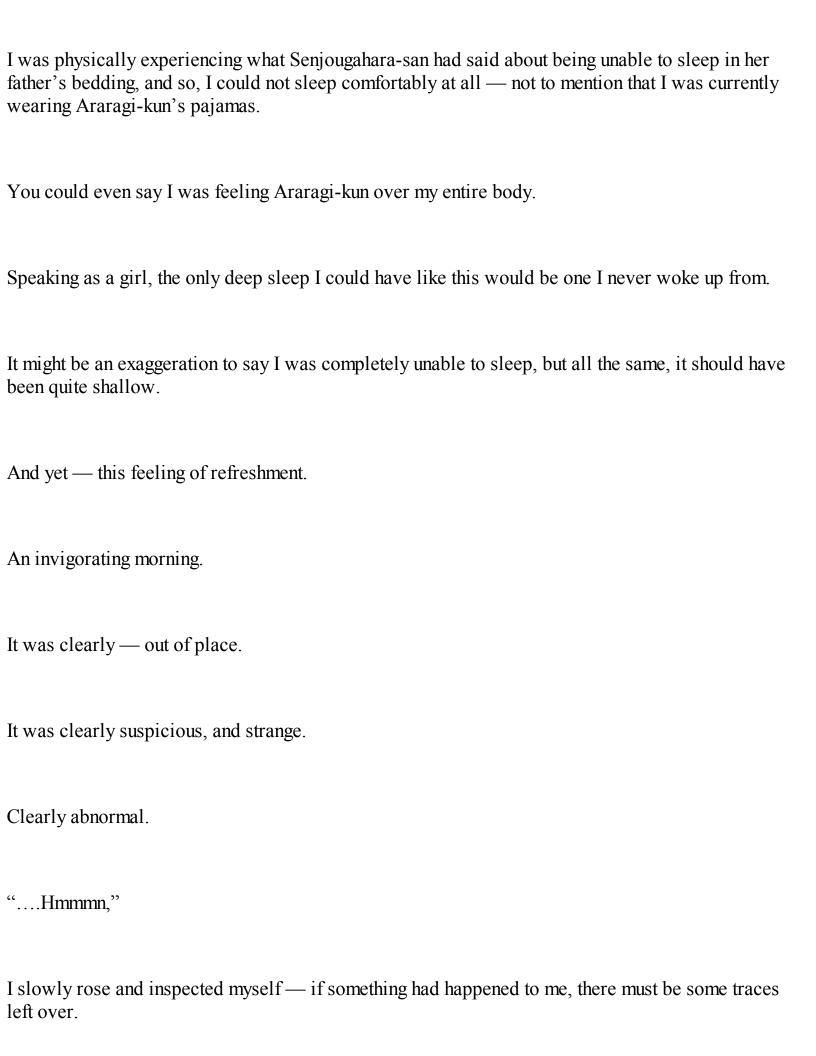
I flew.

- Heading for Nyoble Minds Tutorial School -- but,
- the vampire and I couldn't head for that building nyan -- although we at least manyaged to head for that place nyan.
- I actually did aim for that area and jumped nyaa.
- It's just that,
- it's just that -- we couldn't reach it.
- When we landed, arrived -- the building that should be there, the ruins of the tutorial school weren't there.
- There's only some burnt bits and pieces.
- The ruins of the tutorial school, where Araragi Koyomi and Oshino Shinobu had once hidden, where Oshino Meme had lived for several months, a place filled with memories for Mistress and Senjougahara Hitagi, for Kanbaru Suruga and Sengoku Nadeko -- were completely burnt down nyan.

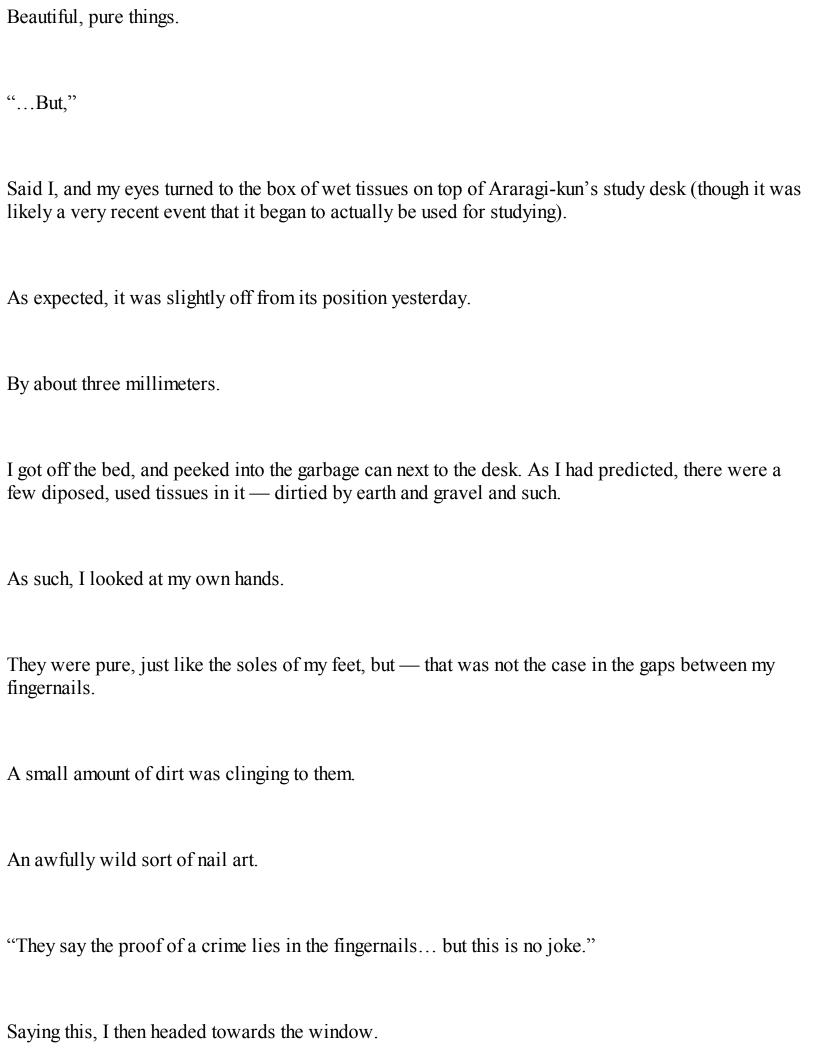
#### Translator's Notes [edit]

- ↑ The original: Shinobu refers to the Japanese proverb "Edo no kataki wo Nagasaki de utsu", literally 'striking in Nagasaki an enemy from Edo', which could mean either having an unexpected occasion to take revenge for past grievances, or attacking someone unrelated to make yourself feel better after a loss. Considering the situation, she is wrong with either one.
- 2. ↑ *Doraemon* and *Perman* (or *P-man*) are two classic manga series by Fujio Fujiko, where panty shots were quite often used as a humour device.

When I was in bed in those ruins, well, that could be forgiven.
I felt that, just as anyone else would, I had a sense of attachment towards the bedding I worked hard to make, that overflowing sensation towards something homemade, and that helped me to compensate and sleep a deep sleep — and it was not unthinkable that, as I had spent the day before in such severe conditions, being at Senjougahara-san's home had a reversing effect and compensated for it, allowing me to sleep a deep sleep.
The former and the latter appeared to be contradictory, but when you consider them together, it was not impossible to consent to both points.
Just like those two episodes of Napoleon.
However, putting aside when exactly I had thought of those episodes of the Emperor (it felt highly unlikely for them to be of my own conception — )
Sleeping soundly on Araragi-kun's bed?
Me?
Completely relieving me of all the day's stress?
Even mentally calming me down?
That was — just impossible.
Not that I wanted to put it this way, but I felt tense as soon as I got into the bed — shamelessly speaking, I was excited, and I could not sleep at all.



Was it just my imagination?
Was I simply more unabashed a person that I had thought, or not — I looked for some sort of proof.
Something must still remain.
And I found it immediately.
First, the pajamas I borrowed from Araragi-kun — aside from the soaking sweat that came from me during my sleep, there was a faint smell of earth.
The smell of 'earth' may be difficult to visualize, so perhaps it would be better to say the smell of the outside.
"Did I leave the house while I was sleeping?"
Like a somnambulist?
Muttering to myself, I bent down and sat in an improper, cross-legged posture, just like doing calisthenics before a jog, and checked my feet this time — mainly, the soles.
But there was nothing there.
Just size 23.5 feet.

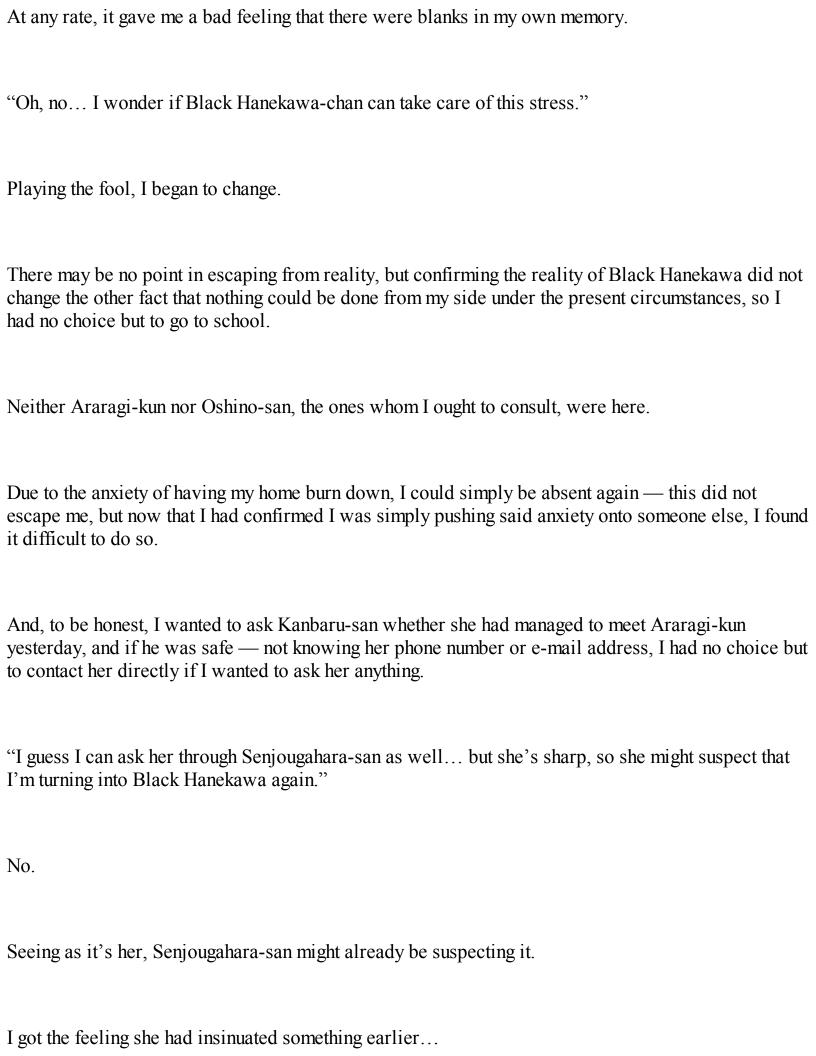


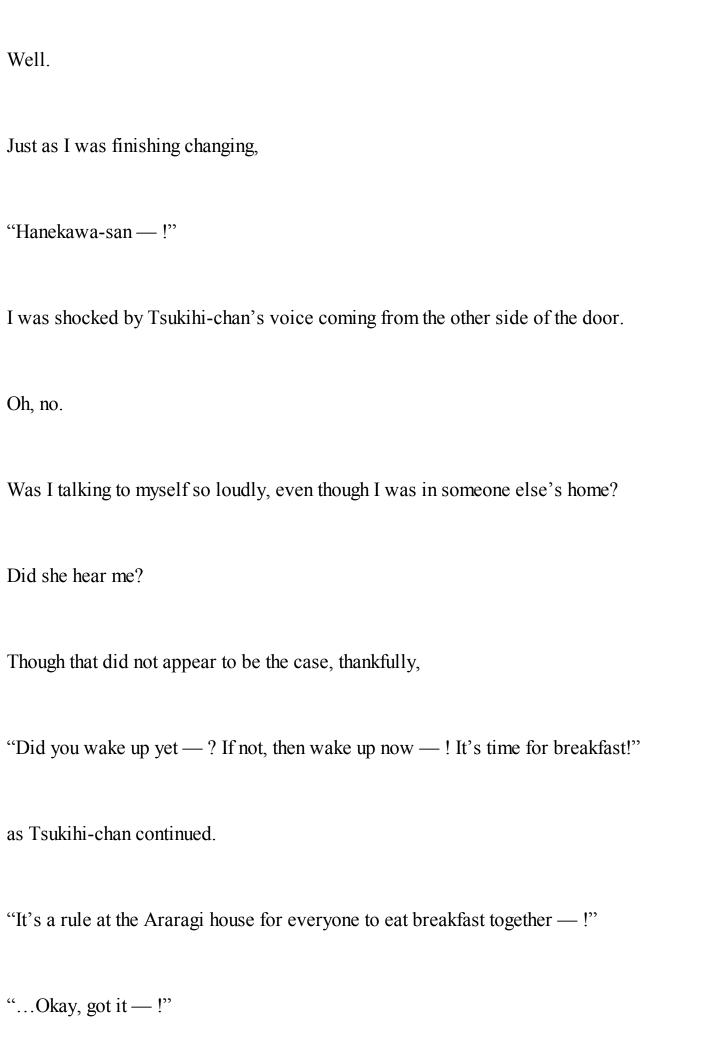
Well, I could not be sure that I had left the room this way — but thinking back to the incident during Golden Week, I doubt I would have took the effort to conscientiously exit through the hall, down the stairs, and out the front door.
Being the closest exit, the window should be the most logical choice — and this speculation was proven correct, though only by pure luck, as the crescent lock of the window was left open.
I confirmed the night before that it had been locked, of course, before I went to bed.
It was an obvious precaution, after I had experienced just how angry Senjougahara-san could get at me — and yet, this.
In other words — someone opened the lock to this window while I was sleeping, and seeing as there was no one in this room but me, the one who opened the window could be none other than myself.
"Putting aside whether I'm a criminal or not, this does feel like I'm some culprit being cornered by a detective."
In the first place, the culprits who appear in detective novels would never leave bits of evidence all over the place so conspicuously — not even the detective would be interested then. He would probably just leave the whole case to the officers of Scotland Yard — although,
unexpectedly, cases where the culprit was a Bakeneko were fitting enough for great detectives in the good old days — so I thought.
To deliver the final blow, I returned to the bed and held up the pillow.

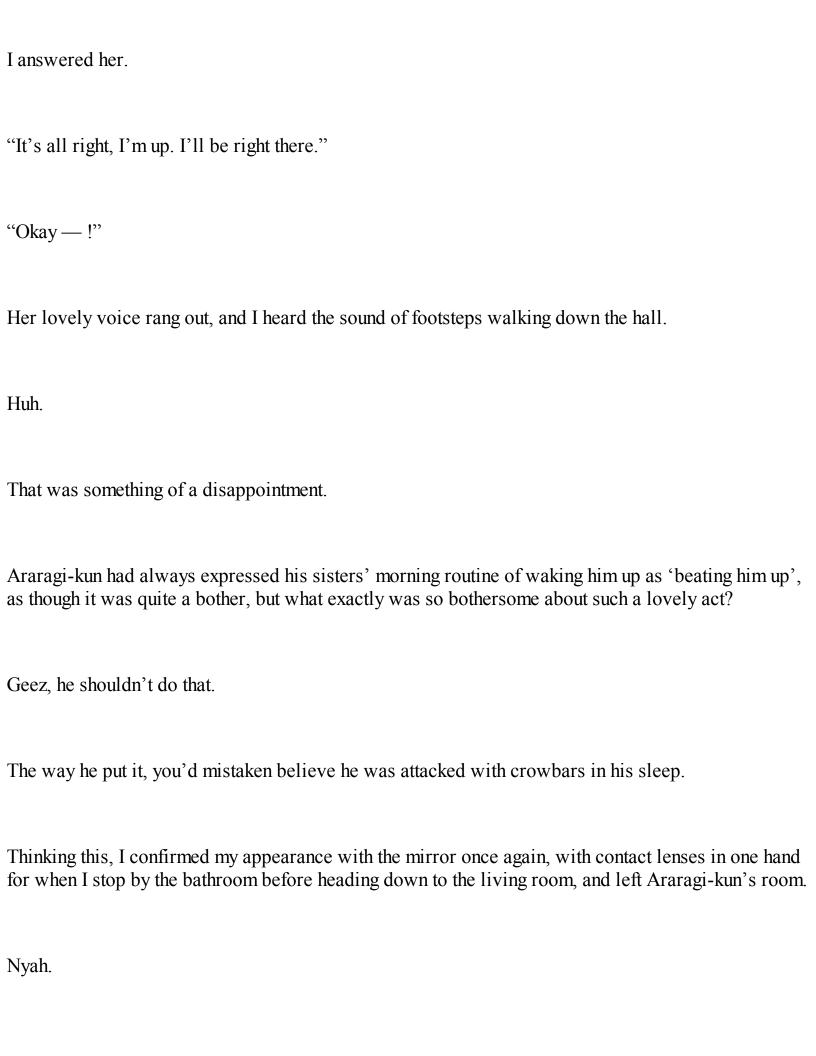
It was Araragi-kun's pillow — though that made no difference in this case.
If, when I had become that, I laid down for even just a moment —
"There it is. The decisive piece of proof."
I plucked out a single strand of hair from the pillow.
Hair is something which is constantly regrown regardless of gender, so a few strands will always fall out during sleep — though this was an obvious fact, the problem was that this strand was white.
White hair.
Or not — perhaps, in this case, it should be called white fur?
Yes, it was not like the hair from a human being, but the fur from an animal —
"So that's it I'm, turning again. Into the Hindering Cat into Black Hanekawa."
I did not want to believe it — or even consider it, but with the circumstances solidified to such a degree, it was pointless to escape from reality.
It was no good continuing to deny the truth, as I had done on the day before the Cultural Festival, even when cat ears were sprouting directly from my head — thinking this, the possibility suddenly hit upon me, and I confirmed my own appearance with the mirror on the desk.



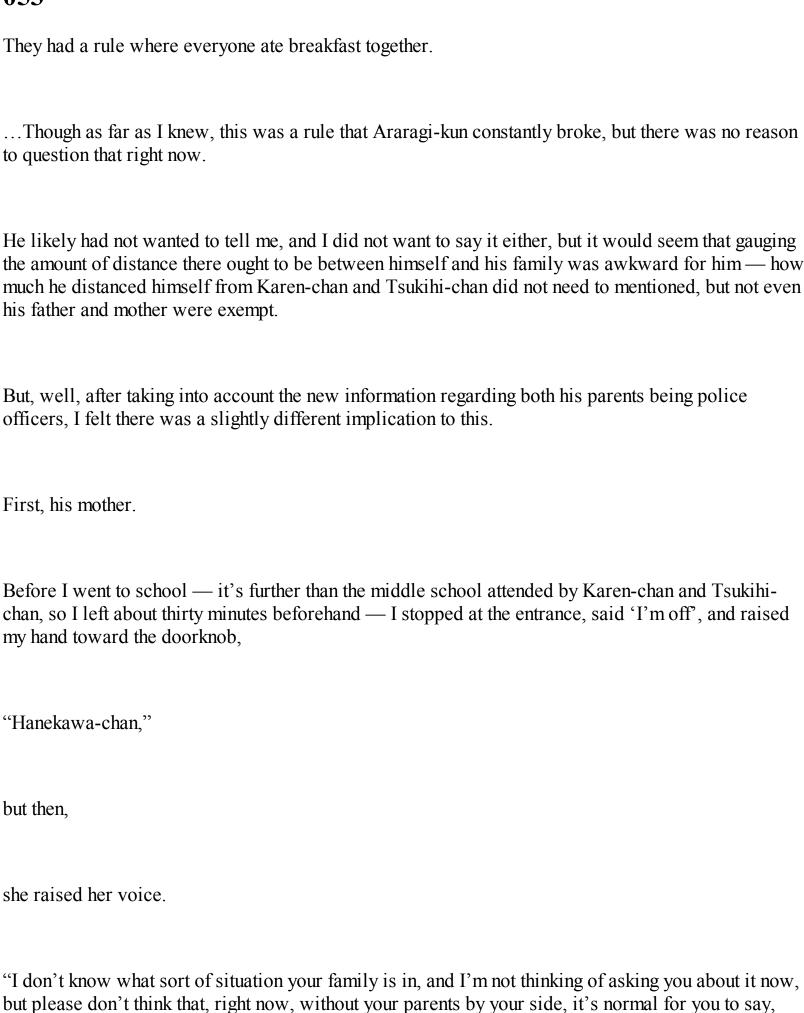
Immortality
I wonder why it was that some part of my mind got hung up on that word — hmm, it's not very clear
Honestly — what had happened while I was sleeping?
It was for certain that something had happened.
Something, extremely important
"But I can imagine why I'm turning into Black Hanekawa again — "
The fire at my house.
It could be nothing else.
Black Hanekawa was the incarnation of my stress — my inner personality, embracing the emotions that I could not.
"I'm not just rampaging about to release my stress if that were the case, the traces I left behind would be a lot more visible."
I felt that this was just a hopeful observation, though.





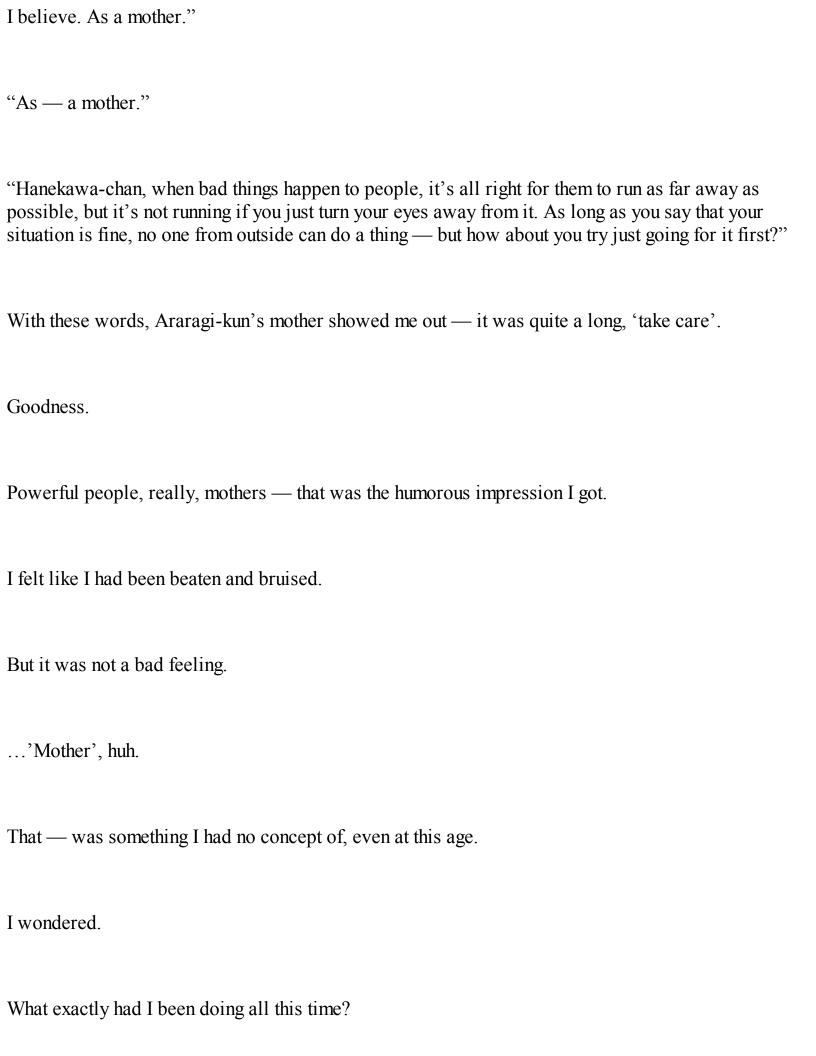


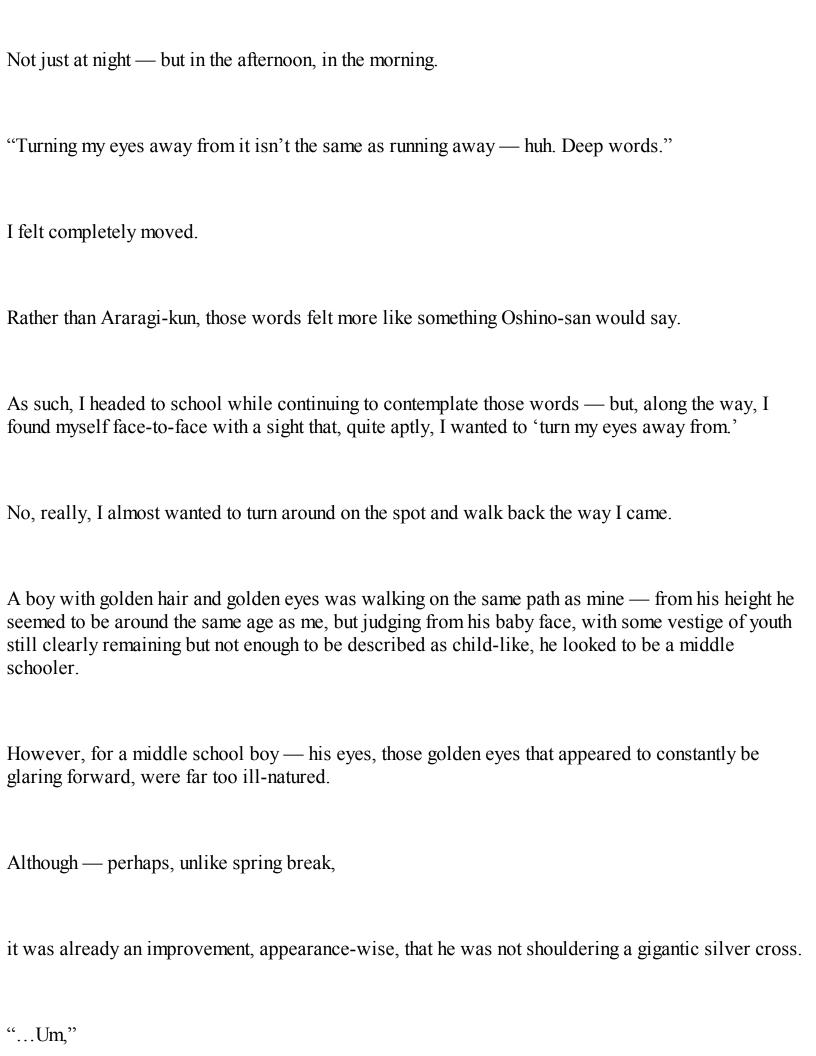
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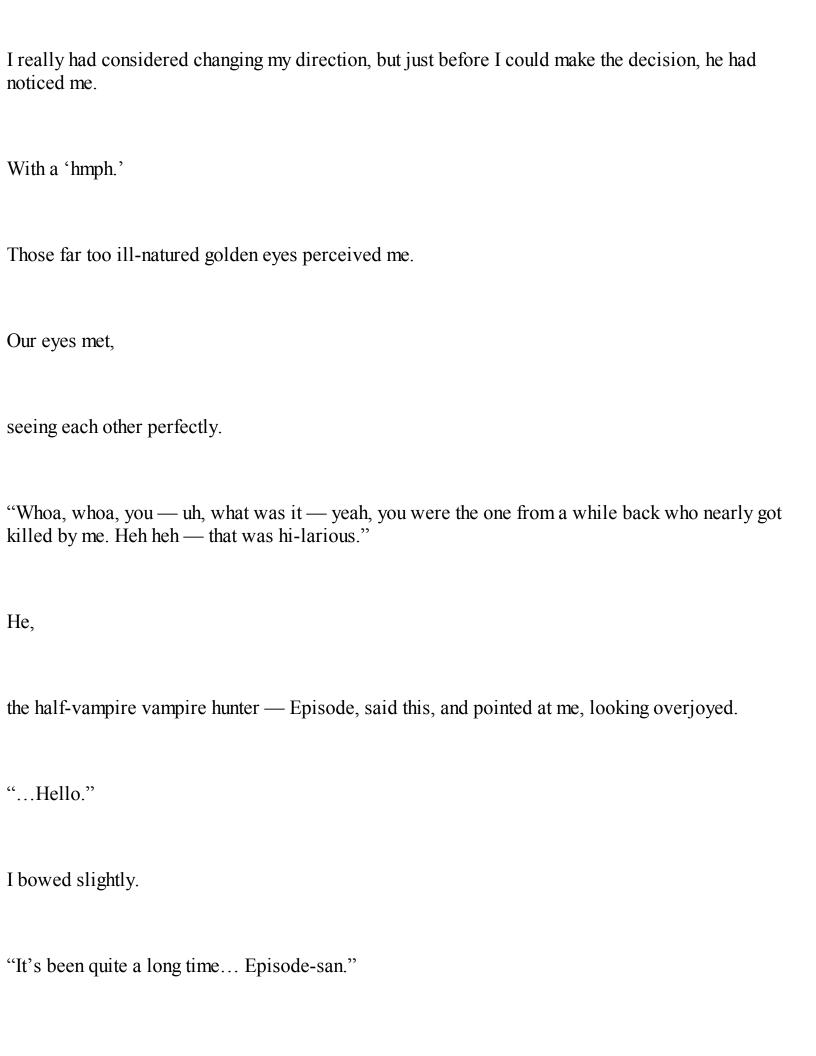






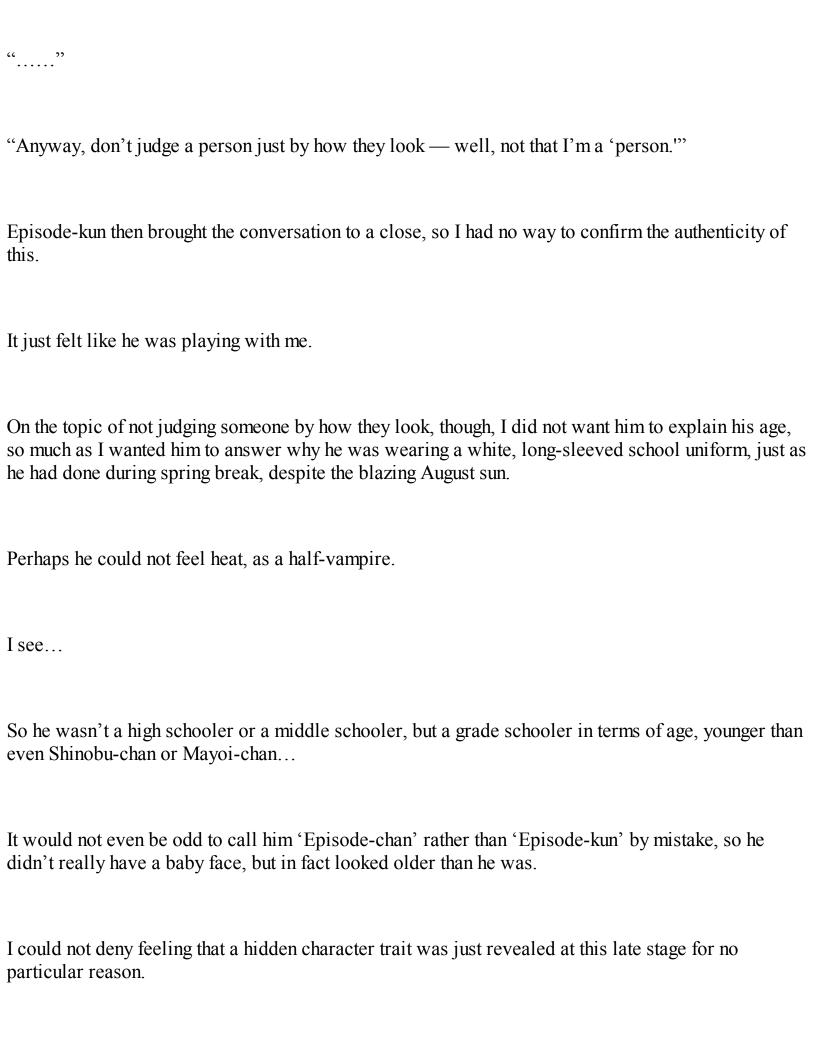




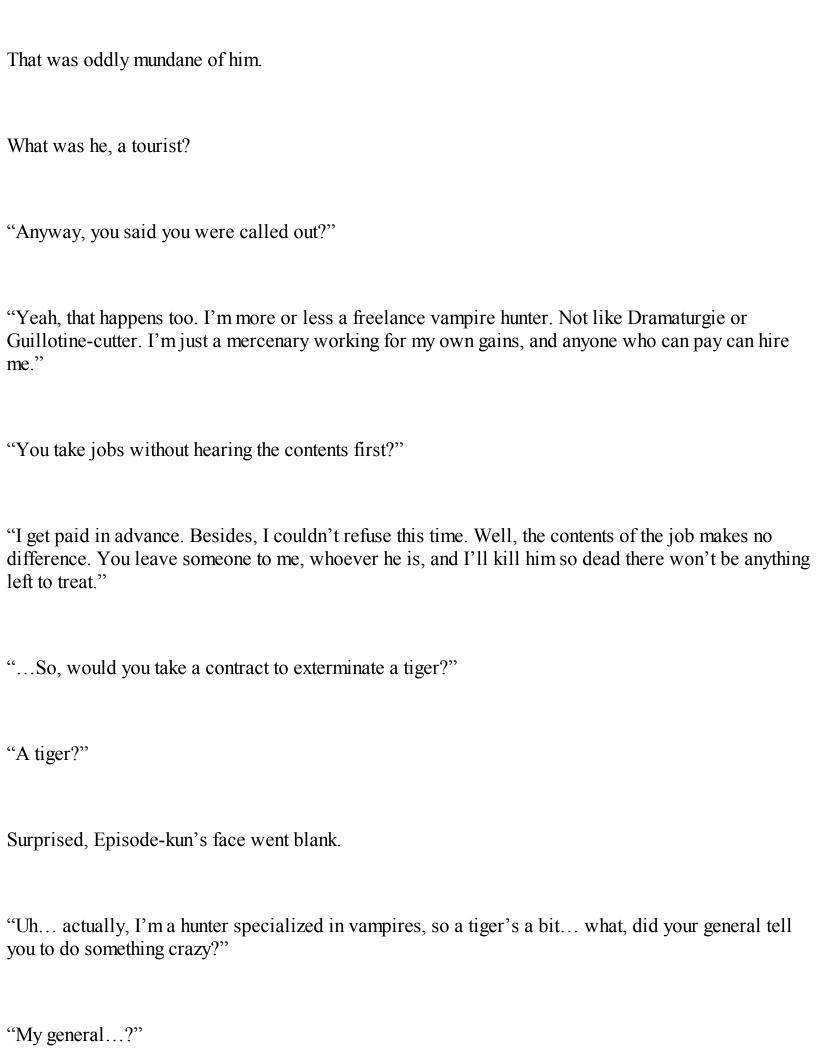




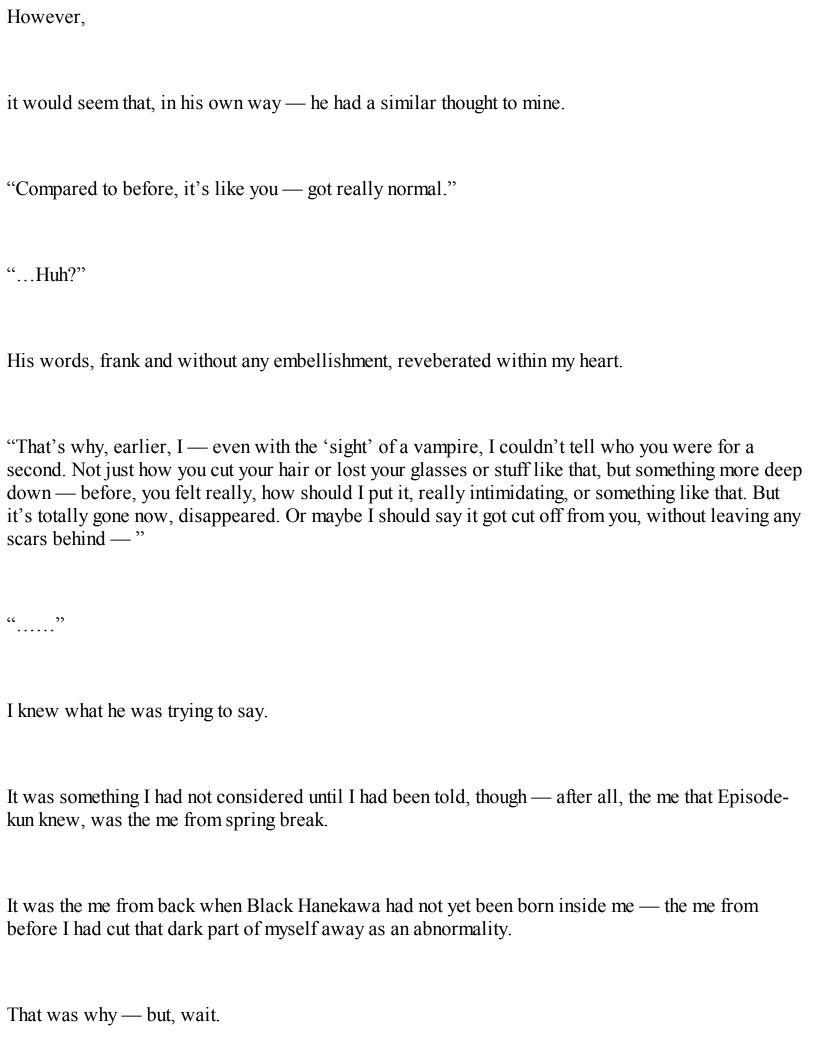


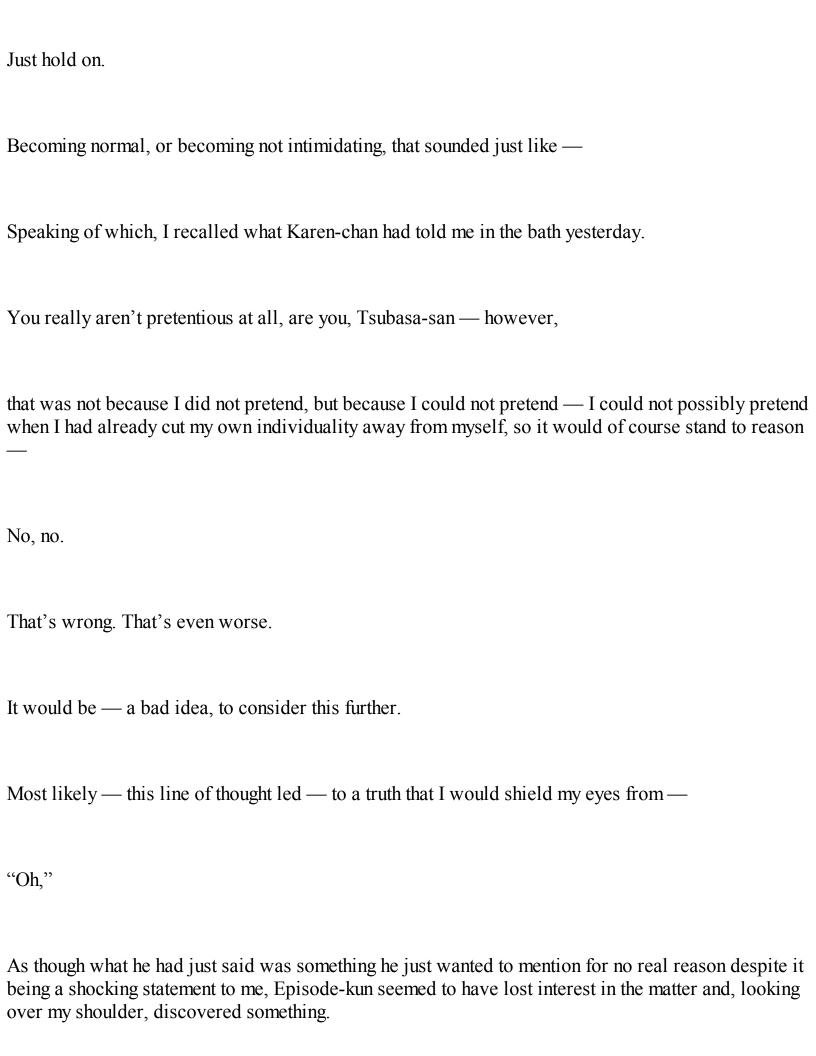






Why did he know the story of Ikkyu Sojun?
I suppose the anime, which was recommended by the Ministry of Education, was popular even overseas.
Hmm.
In the end, no answer came for my question (I had wanted to get an answer from him any way I could, but if he didn't actually know it couldn't be helped), although I did feel that it was surprisingly easy talking with him.
Much had happened during spring break between him and Araragi-kun, so even though we only came in contact for several minutes, I already had some impression of what kind of character Episode-kun apparently was in advance — but now, meeting him under the sun, it came to me that he was this kind of person.
This was what people meant by, 'something that appeared like ethereal, only to be whithered grass.'
He was an almost disappointingly normal boy.
While it was impossible to see him as only six or seven years old, talking with him on the roadside like this really felt as though I was dealing with a younger boy.
The white school uniform was just a kind of fashion, the product of his self-consciousness —
"But, still. You, Hanekawa Tsubasa, was it?"





With his vampire sight or whatnot,
he saw someone behind me.
"That's her, right there — the one who called me out without even saying what it was about. Well, when I asked, it turns out she's the senior of that aloha bastard, that Oshino Meme guy, when he was in university — seeing as we have a connection like that, I just couldn't turn her down — "
And I — turned around.

She called herself Gaen Izuko.

With those big clothes on her small body, she looked liked a lady just about worn out of shape — of course, having failed to perceive Episode-kun's age just moments before, I no longer felt much confidence in making guesses on anybody's age.

I would have believed it if I had been told that she was in her twenties, but if she really was Oshinosan's senior, then she must be over thirty at the least, though to be honest, she looked to me like she was in her teens.

Actually, despite all that I have said, she seemed so full of composure that trying to determine her age seemed rather meaningless — she possessed an air of aloofness.

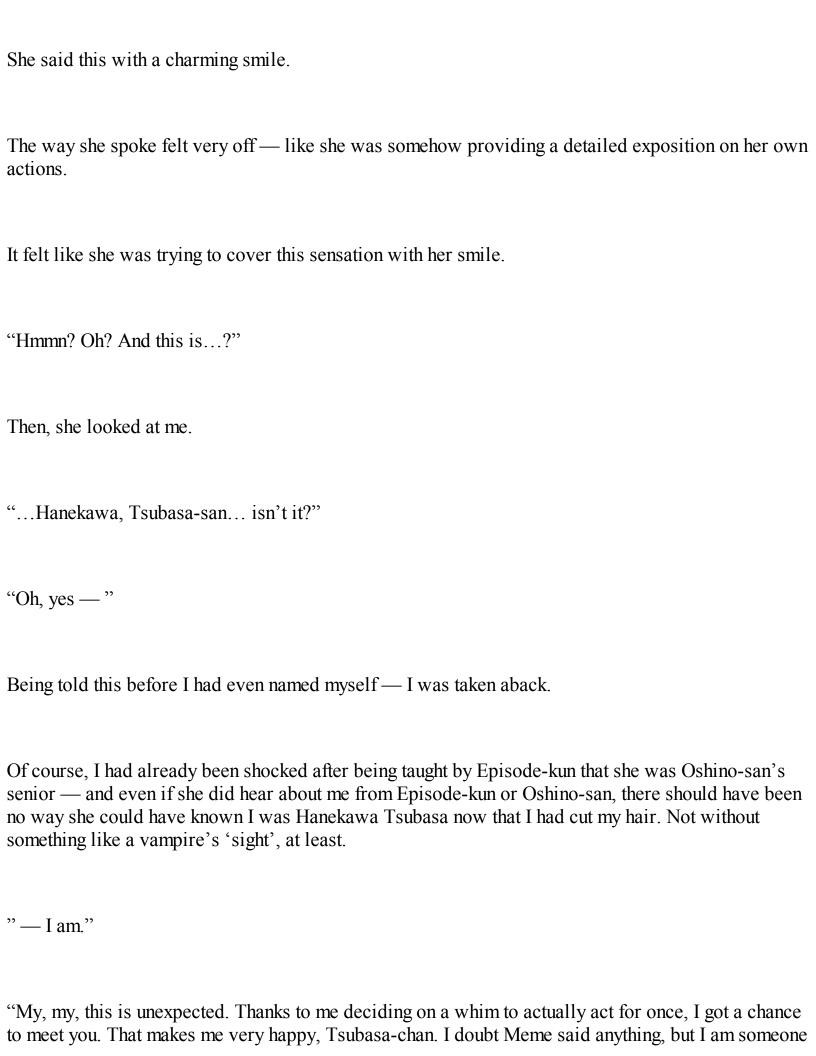
Imagine that, if an excellent work of art were plopped down before her, she would think it unrefined and meaningless to consider the time, era, place in the world it had been created in, or perhaps even who its creator had been — she held that sense of resoluteness which permitted no dissent.

As such, despite her clothes being worn out of shape, she appeared splendid — while if a normal person tried wearing XL-size clothes on an S-size physique, it would simply give the impression of someone with a 'loose' sense of fashion, frankly, it looked refined on her.

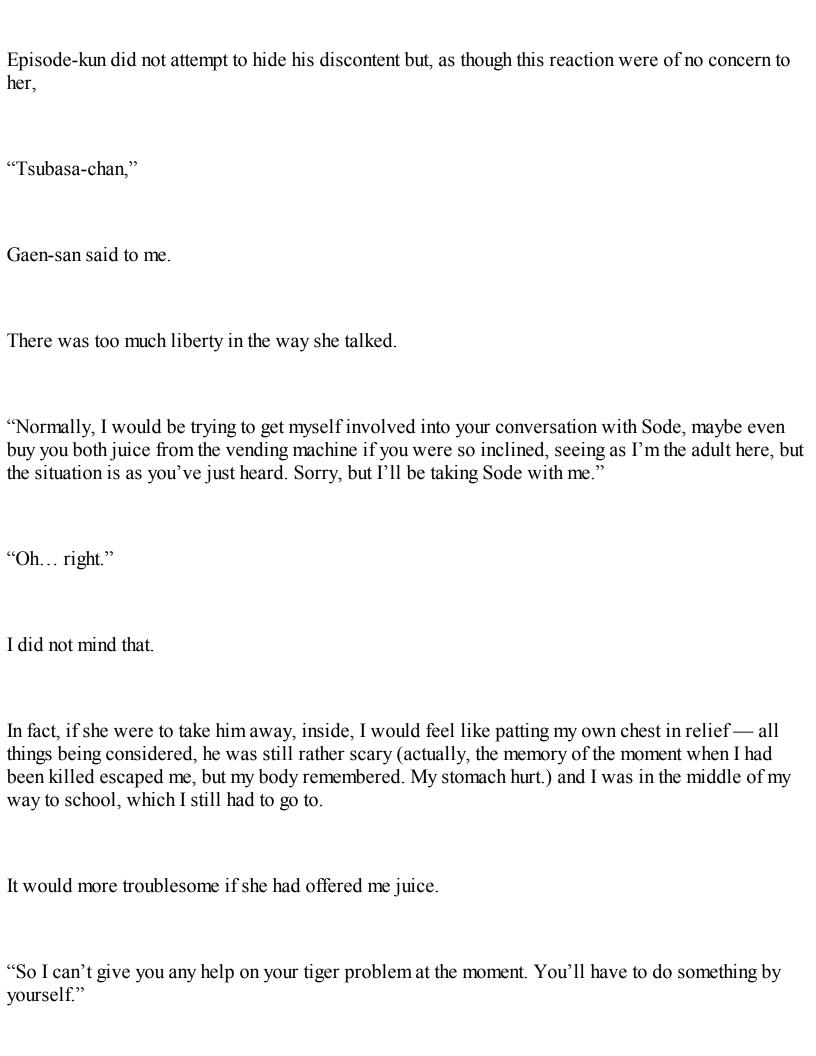
Although she wore her baseball cap sideways and stomped on her sneakers like they were flats, it looked neither rough nor unrefined, but utterly as though it was an aspect of her personal fashion.

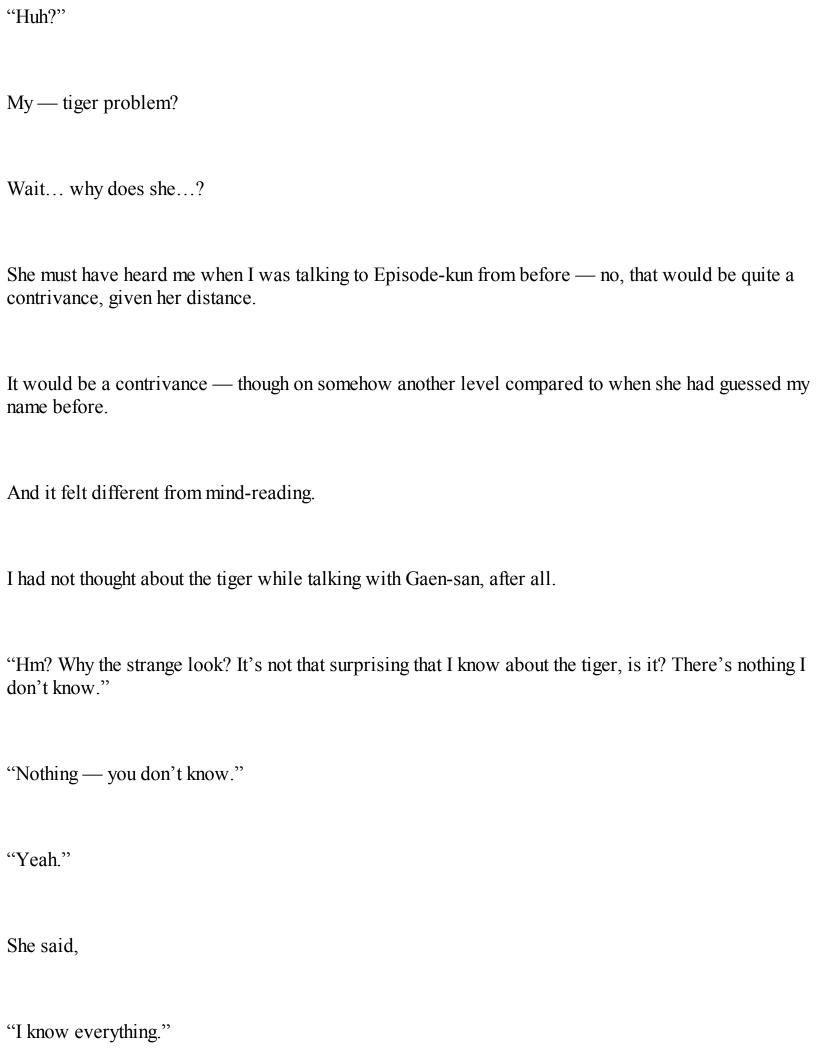
"Hey, Sode — you never got to our meeting place so I came to pick you up. When I did, it turned out you were hitting on someone. Sorry for the interruption."

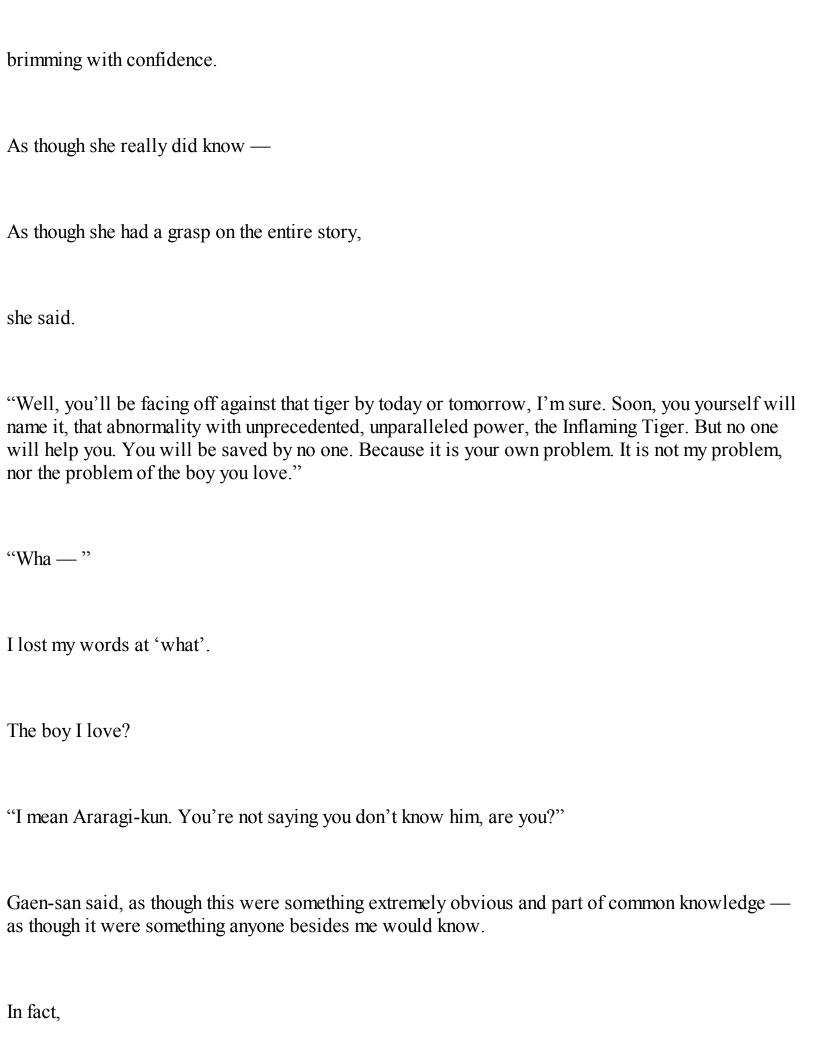
That was the first thing I heard from her.

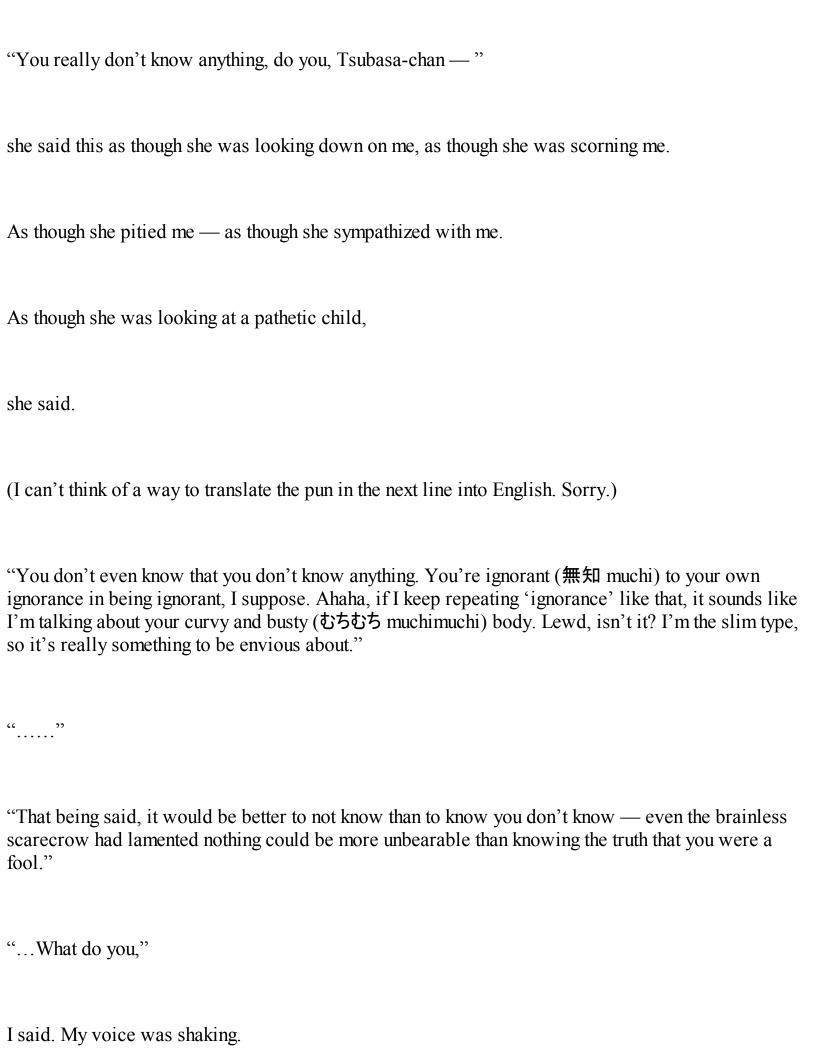




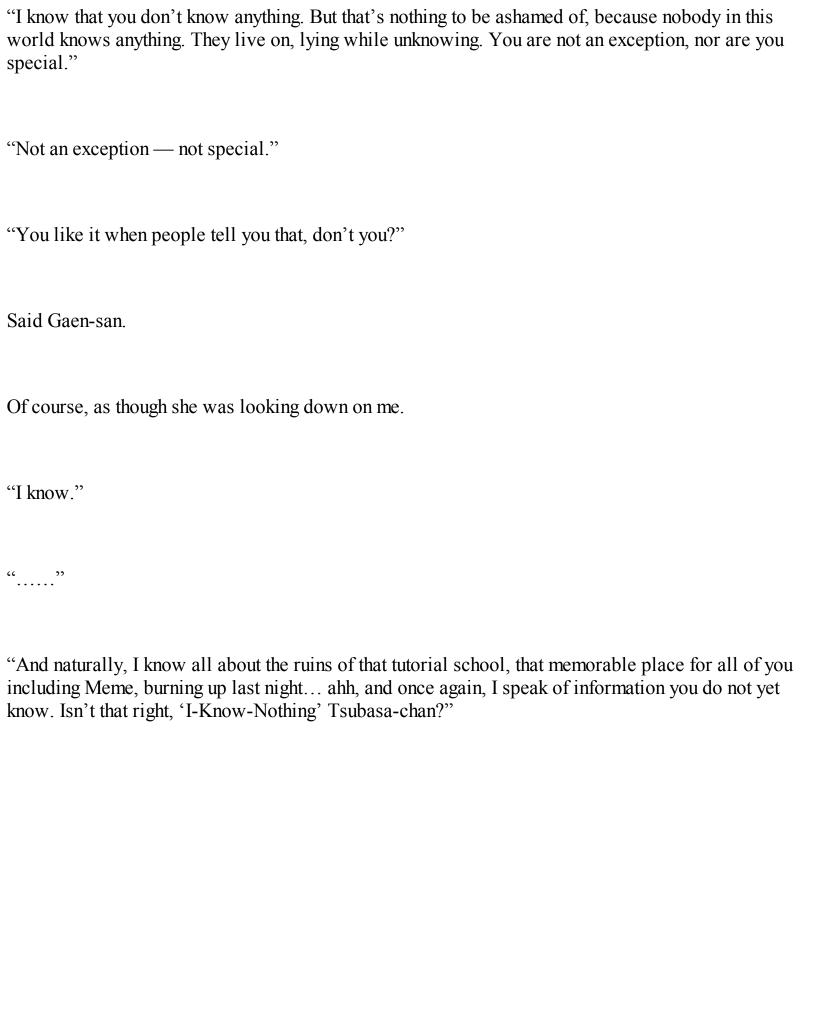








I did not know why my voice shook.
Even when I had been facing Episode-kun during spring break — my voice, my body did not shake like this.
"What do you — think you know about me?"
"I know everything. And that's why,"
I know everything, repeated Gaen-san.
Again and again.
As though she had repeated that line many times before.
As though she were simply saying 'good morning' or 'good night' or 'thanks for the meal' or 'I'm done eating'.
Repeating.
Repeatedly.
Repeating.



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I ended up more or less rushing into the classroom just before the first bell rang (metaphorically speaking, of course, I would never run in the hallways. It was already quite — no, already very suspicious to be moving like I was in some speed-walking competition.) so I only visited the second-year classroom of Kanbaru-san during the recess after the first period.

"Oh, Hanekawa-san." "It's Hanekawa-senpai." "Oh, it really is Hanekawa-senpai!" "The one Kanbaru-san is always talking about." "It's Hanekawa-san, Senjougahara-san's classmate." "No, Hanekawa-senpai's the one who helped Araragi-senpai."

...I was exceedingly well-known, for some reason.

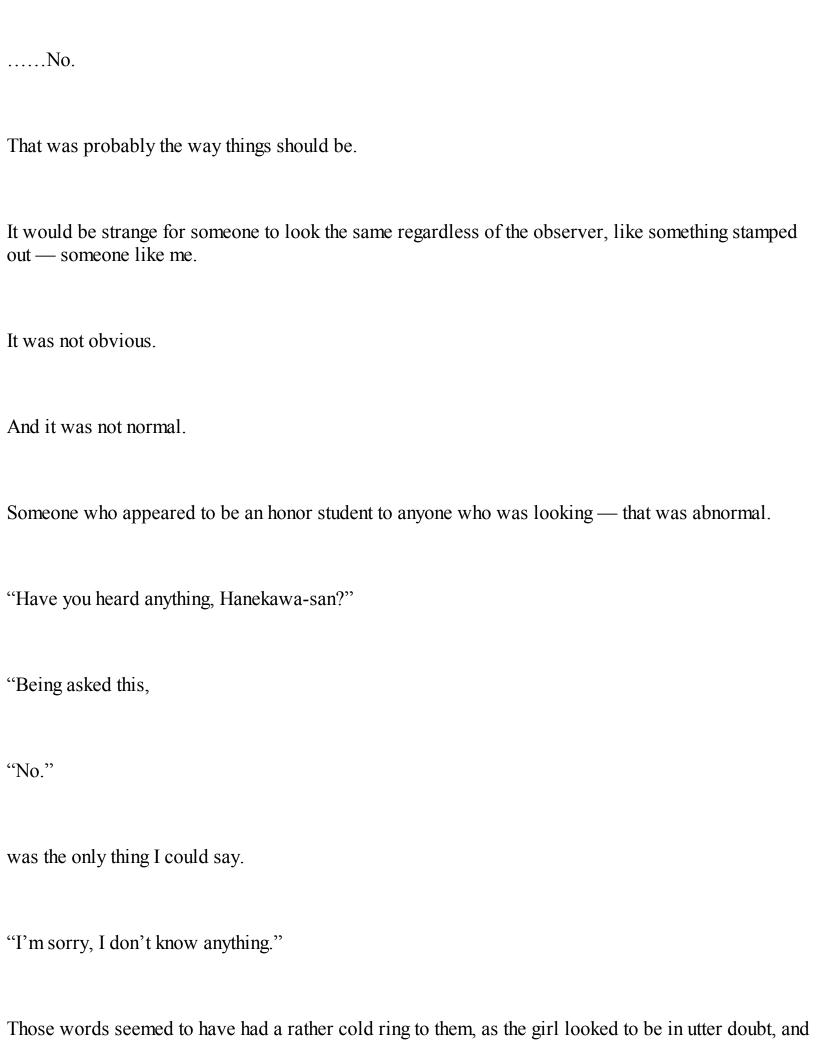
I felt like hiding my face and running away, but managed to hold fast and asked about Kanbaru-san — and the response was as mentioned above.

It seemed there had not been any contact from her, not to her homeroom teacher, nor to her friends in the class (obviously though it might seem once I had considered it, it was a relief to find out that Kanbaru-san did actually have friends in her own year).

"Kanbaru-san's a very diligent student, so it's really rare for her to be absent without leave... we're all very worried about her."

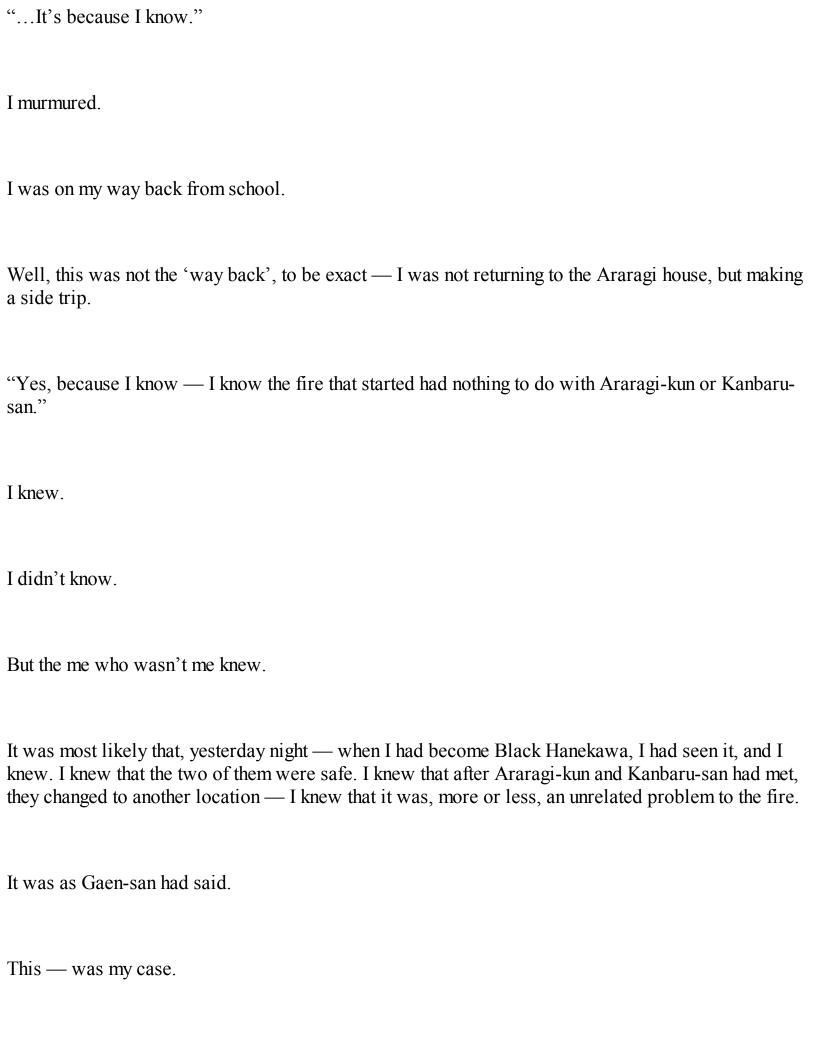
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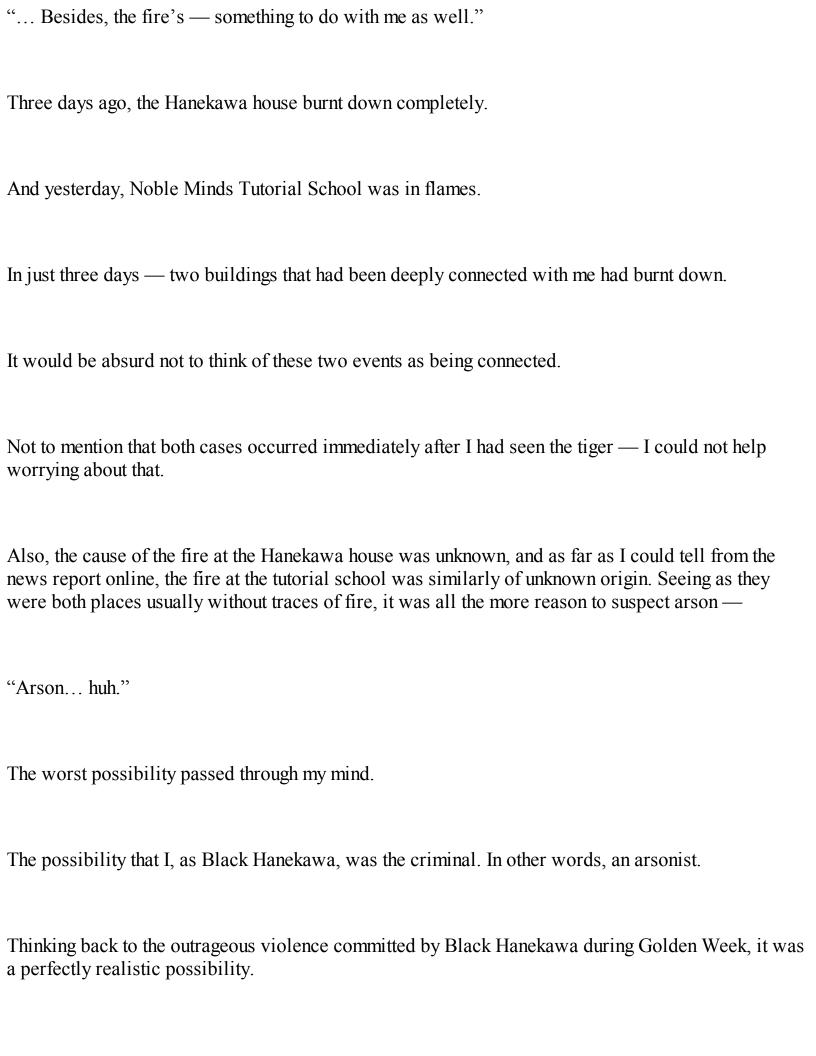
It is often the case that the same person can gain different reputations within different communities, but there is an immense difference between the image Kanbaru-san had and, above all else, the image we had of her.

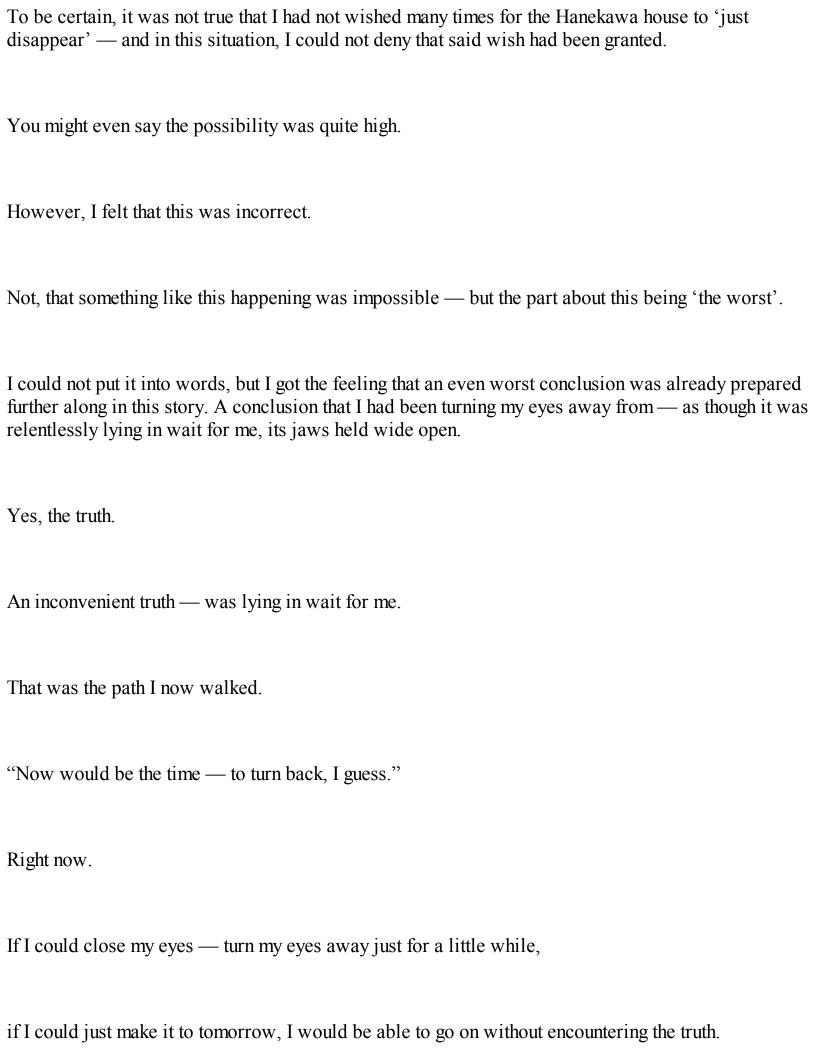


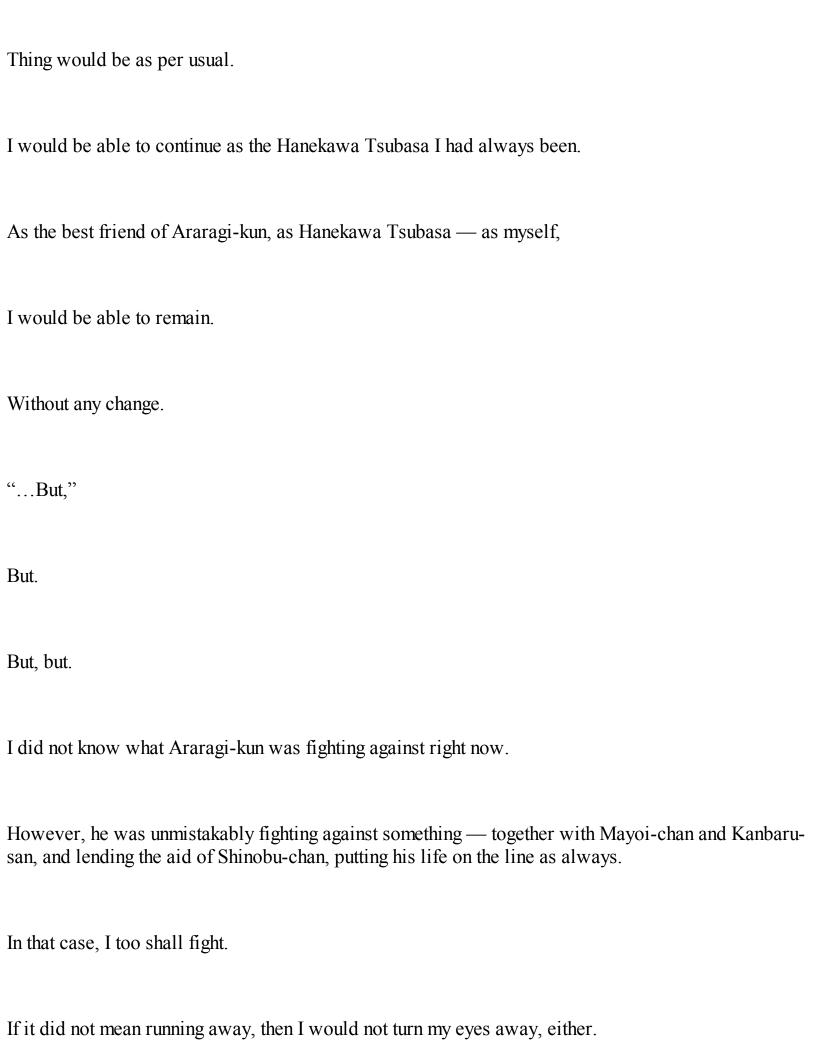
I retreated from Kanbaru-san's classroom, feeling embarrassed.
Due to this, unfortunately for my teacher, practically nothing entered my head during the second period's lesson — I was worried, after all.
Araragi-kun was, of course, absent as well. Just what had happened last night?
Well, truthfully speaking, nothing entered my head starting from the first period — after hearing from Gaen-san about Noble Minds Tutorial School burning down, I could not remain calm.
It was unthinkable that the place we were so fond of, not to mention where Araragi-kun and Kanbarusan were supposed to meet, would be beset by fire.
Naturally, after I had parted with Gaen-san and Episode-kun, I checked the news online on my cellphone and confirmed that it was not a lie.
There was even an image attached.
A photo of that bare concrete building collapsed in a miserable pile entered my view — that memorable place where so much had happened.
It was now completely gone from this world.
I was wondering what Senjougahara-san would think if she found out about this, not to mention being taken by an extreme sense of the impermanence of the world, but on the other hand, when I took into account the current situation, it was clear that this was no time to be so sentimental.
What on earth — happened last night?

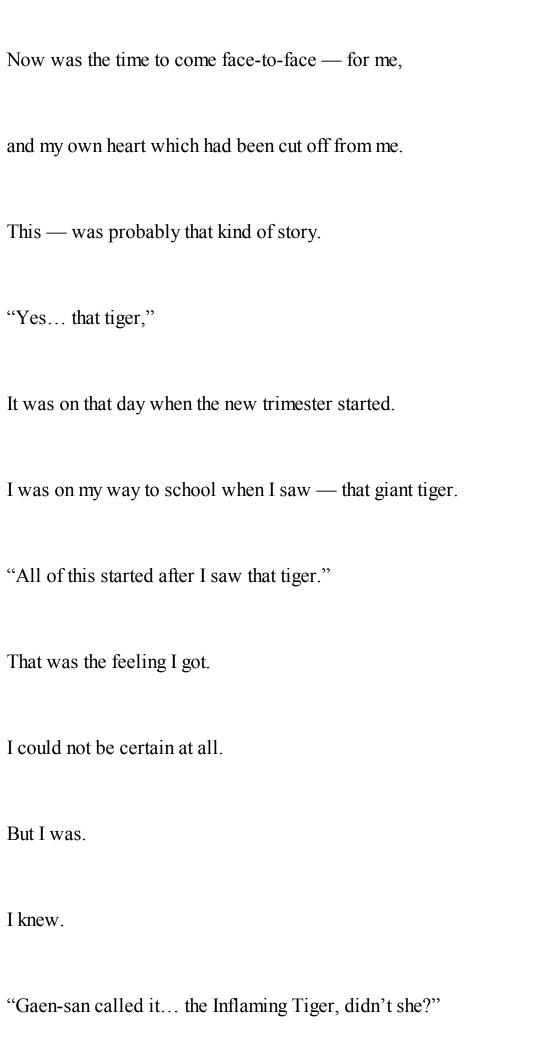
Are Araragi-kun and Kanbaru-san all right?
I was so worried that I could not sit still during lessons or recesses.
And yet — the fact that I was able to continue taking lessons for the entire day without leaving early meant that, somehow, I firmly believed the both of them to be safe.
I found within myself the will to assert that those two were not hurt in the fire.
At first, I had not been sure if I could trust this feeling.
Perhaps I had simply believed in Araragi-kun and Kanbaru-san, that they could overcome any difficulties and, as such, did not need me to worry for them.
But that was not the case. It was not even worth considering.
Araragi-kun was simply a boy whom I could not calmly watch over from a distance in that way, as he was always involved in things possibly fatally dangerous, and he inclined towards not so much self-sacrifice as self-punishment. It was precisely because I knew him so well that it was hard for me to imagine him being safe in a situation like that.
And Kanbaru-san, unfortunately, was not so close to me that I could just simply trust in her safety (and considering the case with Senjougahara-san, I might even be seen as an enemy).
Why was it that I could be so sure of their safety — at the very least, in terms of my conviction that they had not been victims of the fire,











That would be the first angle of approach.				
I had reached the library.				

It would be boasting of my city, but the library of the town we lived in was exceedingly rich in content. Our town being the size it was, it prided itself on the amount of books it had collected and, perhaps due to the librarian's tastes or a penchant for the traditionalistic, its shelves were filled by sectarian works in place of best-sellers, giving the air of a museum instead of some local library.

I digress, but back when Oshino-san stayed in this town, I relied upon and borrowed books from here many times (as Oshino-san was not a resident, he could not procure a library card).

Although a fatal flaw existed in that it would close on Sundays, I always passed by this library when I was a child. While I had never sat myself down next to a wall to study, in terms of the necessary lessons of life, you could say I had learnt them all here.

All the things that my parents had not taught me.

I learnt them at this library.

All by myself.

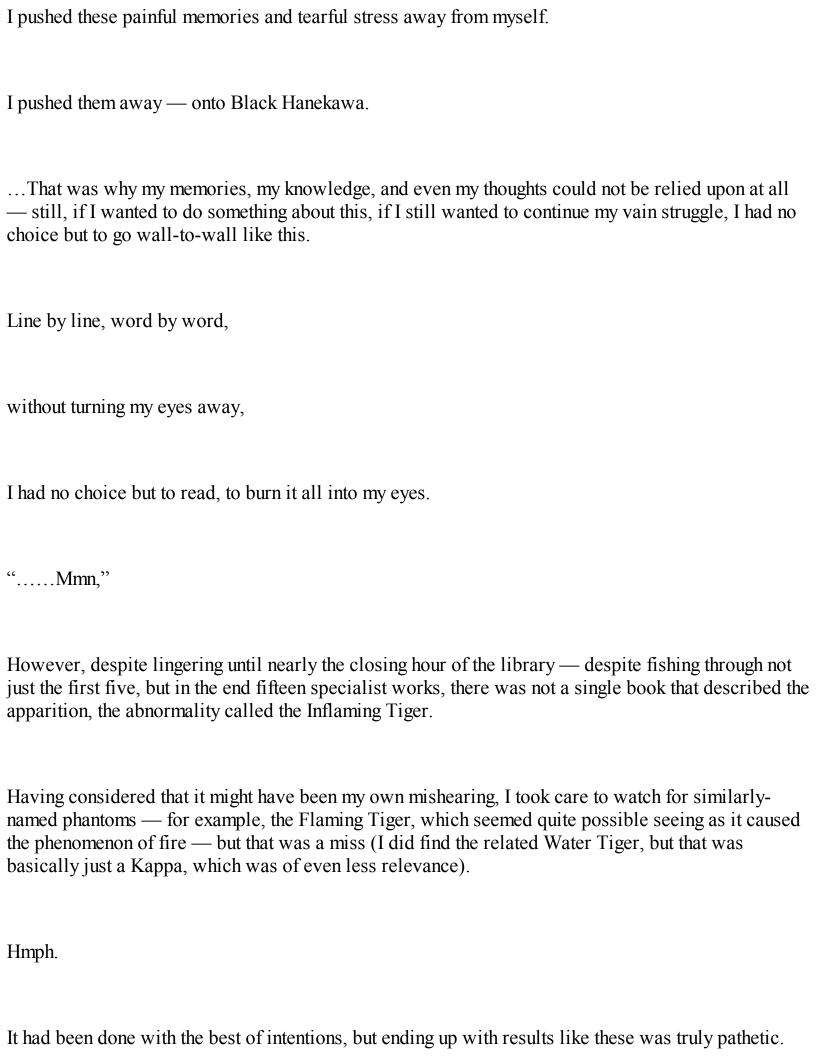
More recently, this place was repeatedly used as Araragi-kun's study, but even when it was Senjougahara-san's turn to be Araragi-kun's tutor, I would still come by here.

To be honest, by the time I was fifteen I had read most of the books collected here, but because I liked the atmosphere, the air of this establishment, I would come here even when I had no need to.

Not to mention that it was just the best place to study.

And while it might not be "my home", it was one of the places where I would feel at ease.

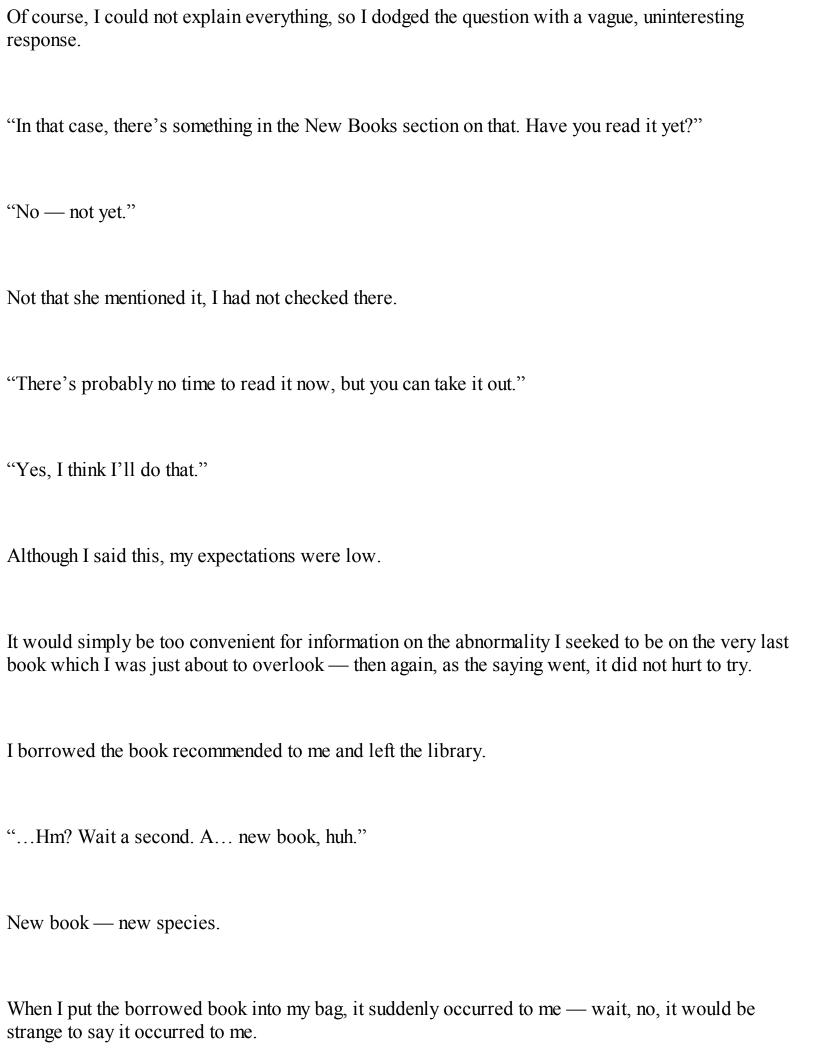




I had been entirely under the impression that I would be able to simply refer to a large variety of references, as suitable for the topic, much as Oshino-san would do but things did not go quite so smoothly.
In fact, was it really so impossible that there had actually been a proper description of the abnormality, and I simply overlooked it? The possibility that it had been written there, but I, not wanting to know, had turned my eyes away from it —
"But if I start thinking like that, I just can't trust anything, anymore."
No.
Me being the way I was, nothing about my state of affairs could be trusted in the first place. I was trying to do something about this — trying to help in the midst of such a situation.
If nothing could be trusted, then I could instead employ said untrustworthiness.
If the library was of no help, I could try searching on the Internet, but to be honest, I was reluctant to attempt that approach. The Internet was an excellent medium for gathering facts on what was occurring right now, but there were far too many mistakes to be found when searching for information from the past.
More to the point, it was weak in terms of tales of the abnormal.
That being said, I might be able to find some sort of clue, and seeing as I had no other plans, there was no point in maintaining a prejudice against digital information — it was an approach that Oshino san, who disliked machinery, would be incapable of, after all.



"I suppose once digital books have spread, people won't have to worry about that weight anymore. Well, if it came to that, I suppose even the necessity of libraries would be in question."
"I don't know about that. I think it'll be fine for now, as long as digital books never go beyond being computer images. Books are books, weight and all books aren't flat, but three-dimensional. Even it digital books do spread, just like how a collector of figurines would never say that 'it's enough to have just the photos', it's the bindings that truly makes the books, I think."
The thought of digitalizing books was ridiculous.
It would be better to consider books and digital books in the same way as one would consider books and films — not as a transition, not as a progression, but in fact as a new species.
"Well, I hope so."
As though she did not want to become involved in a deep discussion with some high schooler, the worker laughed lightly, looked at the titles of the books I was carrying,
"Are you interested in ghosts?"
and asked me, sounding mystified.
Well, they certainly did not appear to be books a dainty high school girl would devote herself to reading, so perhaps it truly was mystifying. The more experienced workers were already aware of my (indiscriminate) tastes in reading, but the one before me was still a newcomer.
"Yes, somewhat — it's for a school project."



Gaen-san had said it at the very beginning, after all.
The abnormality that I would myself name —
"If there hasn't been a single hint, even after this much searching then what if, like Black Hanekawa, that tiger is a new species of abnormality—"

It was a keyword literally becoming a key which, once realized, made it completely unnecessary to flaunt copious references.

In fact, it was something I ought to have arrived at when I had first heard the words from Gaen-san.

Yes, I did not even need go to the library, as it was a piece of writing that could be found in middle school language textbooks — an idiom that anyone would have heard of at least once.

No fiercer a tiger than the inflaming of tyranny.

A verse from the Book of Rites, Tangong 2.

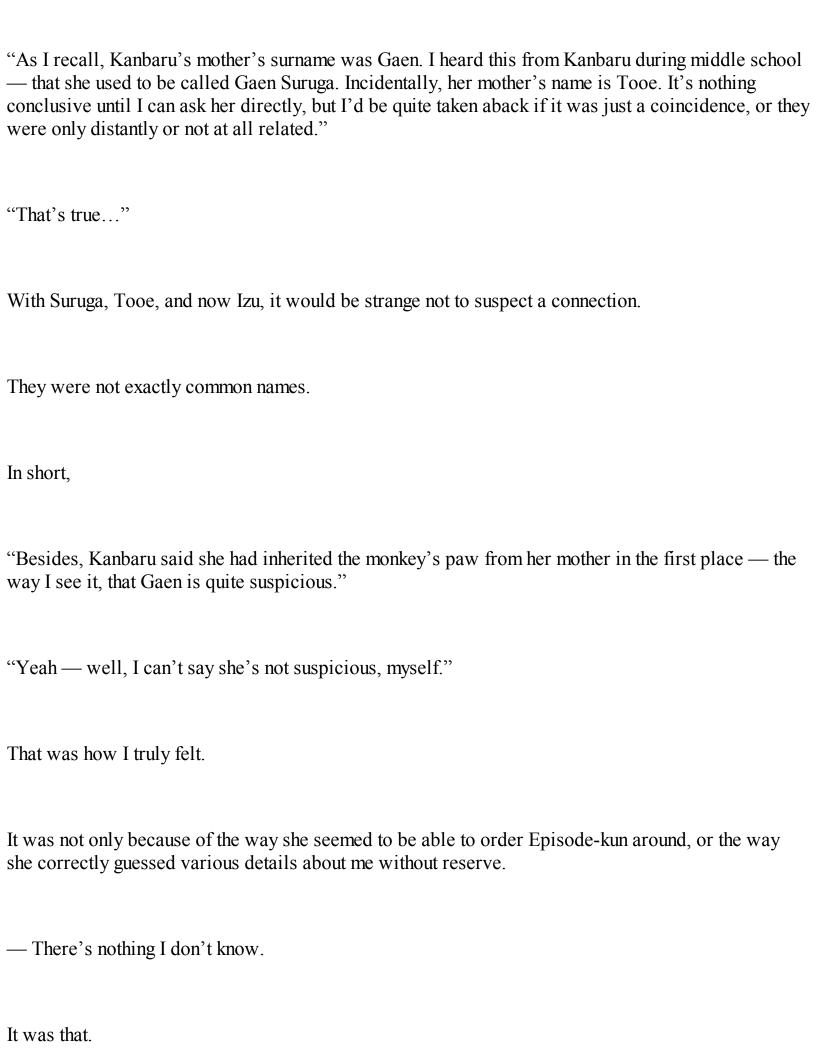
I doubt this is necessary but, to explain as a refreshment, here is the story.

There was once a woman whose father-in-law and husband had been eaten by ferocious, man-eating tigers, and then even her son was eaten. When asked why she would not leave this place, the woman answered thus: "It is better to have fierce beasts, than a country dominated by the rule of tyrants" — tyranny here certainly meaning the unyielding rule of heavy taxation and conscription and such, or put simply, of tyrants.

If things were as Gaen-san had said and I would name that tiger the Inflaming Tiger — then that phrase would unmistakably be the source. This was because, when I first found out about those words as a primary schooler, I had strongly felt that it was 'not true at all', and could not quite understand them.

Any sort of rule would be better than man-eating tigers — so I had thought.
It was not because I was a child who could not grasp the subtleties of the text. At the time, what I had found most unacceptable, the one thing I truly could not understand, were the feelings of the mother, the woman who would push her own ideology onto not only her father-in-law and husband but even her own child.
Of course, now that I have learnt about vicious forms of government far more cruel than tigers, it could not be said that I did not understand her feelings at all — but the sensation, of not quite understanding her, remained.
"That's why, I think, the Inflaming Tiger isn't just a simple abbreviation of 'no fiercer a tiger than the inflaming of tyranny', but actually 'a fiercer tiger than the inflaming of tyranny', making it is a tiger beyond tigers, like a tyrant of tigers. What do you think?"
Said I.
Hearing my hypothesis at the other end of the phone, Senjougahara-san remained silent for a moment and then responded negatively with, "I wonder about that".
And very blatantly negatively, as well.
"It just feels to me as though you are being led around by the nose. This 'Gaen' — as I hear it, it wasn't you at all who named the abnormality. It was obviously her."
"Yes, well, that's true."
That was more difficult to explain.



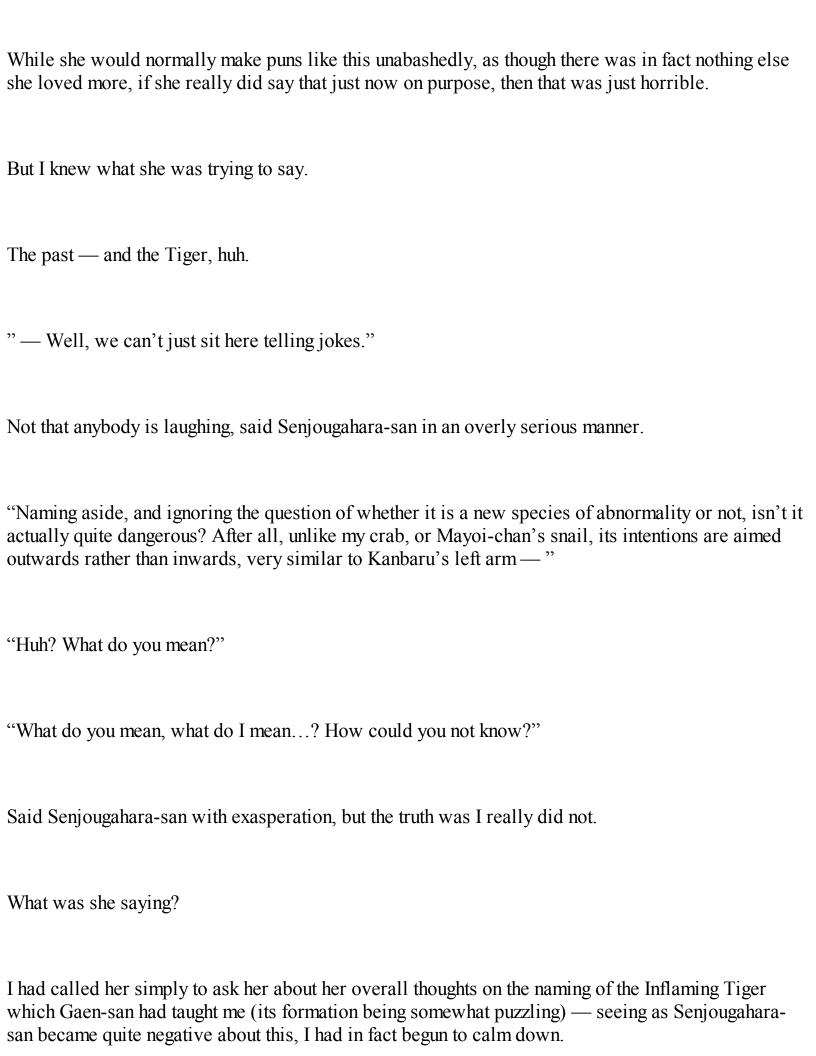




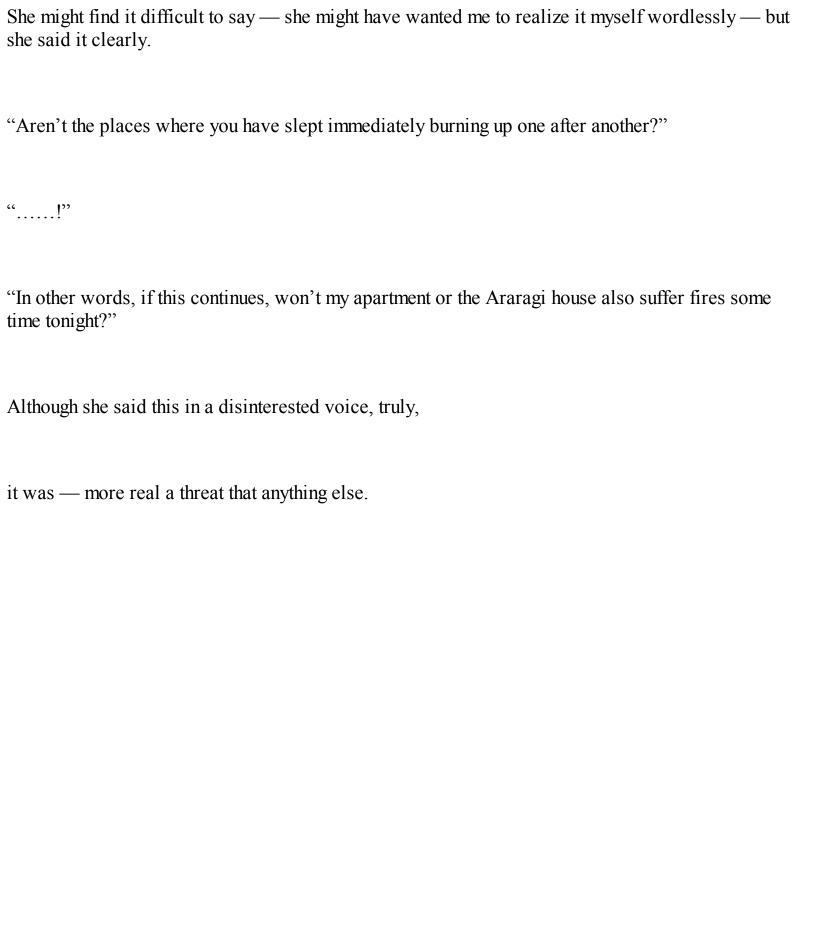
That's the initiative of the Senjougahara-san I knew.
"But it didn't go through — I was transferred to a messaging service, so it was probably because her phone was off, or somewhere that couldn't be reached. Of course, there's been no word from their end, either — they really are the kind of children that grow up to become university students who never come home, not even over the New Year."
"That's in the very near future."
Somehow, it even felt like it would likely be a future filled with livelihood for those two.
I wonder if they can actually leave their homes, though?
Araragi-kun, in particular.
I got the feeling that his sisters would not let him go. If he ever told them he was going to move to a boarding house, I got the feeling he would be confined in a manner much like Misery.
"Well, if Araragi-kun and Kanbaru did manage to meet, I doubt they would do anything reckless but I wonder. Now that I come to it, the reason why Gaen-san is here in town seems highly likely to involve Kanbaru. In other words, there is also the possibility of Araragi-kun and that vampire-half boy meeting and battling again sigh."
Just what is he up to, sighed Senjougahara-san.
Hmm. I couldn't think of any words to comfort her with.







"No, not that. Both your house and the tutorial school have been met with fires one after another, no?"
'Yes, that's right. Well, unfortunately, there hasn't been any proof linking what happened to those places with the Tiger yet—"
"It doesn't matter whether that sort of connection exists or not. It's simply that, aside from the macroscopic, long-term commonality of being places you know well, isn't there also another, more microscopic, short-term commonality as well?"
"Huh?"
In spite of all that she had told me — I still did not understand.
No, it was likely that I did.
But I,
was turning my eyes away.
"Well, fire started in those places right after the day I met the Tiger —"
"No, not that."
Said Senjougahara-san.



## 058

I was sitting on a bench at a certain park when I called Senjougahara-san — said park, by the way,
was also where Araragi-kun and Mayoi-chan had first met.

Speaking of which, this had been where Araragi-kun and Senjougahara-san began as a couple as well, so to them, this was probably more memorable a place than the tutorial school.

Of course, to me, this was not a place of any memories worth mentioning, but simply a park which happened to be close to my house, and along the route of my usual strolling course, meaning that there was no significant, deeper reason as to why I had stopped here to make the call.

Thinking that I would go take a look at the remaints of the burnt-down Hanekawa house, I headed in its direction after leaving the library but, having lost my nerve when I finally began my approach, I decided to call Senjougahara-san first.

Or perhaps I did not so much lose my nerve as turn my eyes away from it, but at this point, I no longer understood fully what 'turning my eyes away' actually meant.

I was not confused.

Rather, I was perplexed.

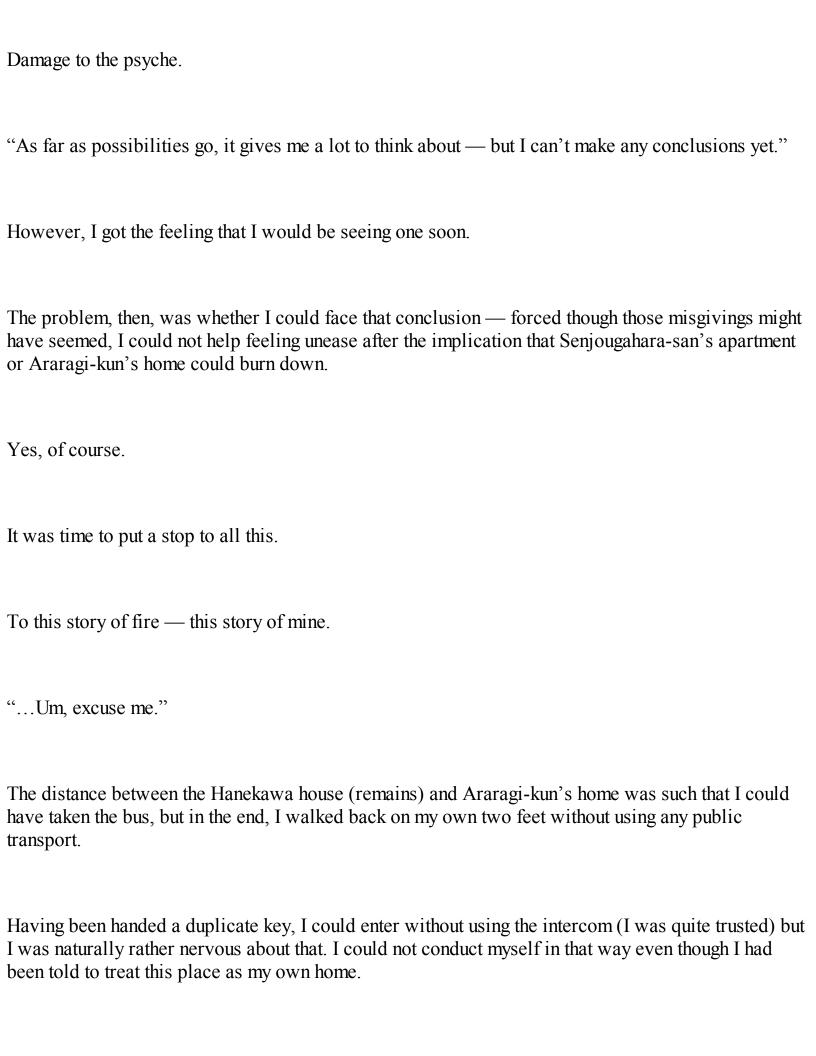
In truth, Senjougahara-san pointed out something that had never crossed my mind — but, as she had said, it certainly was something I ought to have noticed even without her saying anything.

Although it took something of a leap of imagination for me to consider the Hanekawa house as 'a place where I had slept immediately before' (being my own house, sleeping there was simply too obvious an act and I had difficulty reaching this definition), at the very least, I ought to have thought of the ruins of the tutorial school as 'a place I stayed at last night'.

It burnt up because I had stayed — while that was something I had not thought of, if the dates were off by just one day I could have been burnt to death — that was the kind of fear I ought to have felt.
And yet this concept had never entered my mind, not in the slightest, which seemed less like I had lacked the imagination —
— and more like I was turning my eyes away.
I turned my back on reality.
That was perhaps what happened.
That was likely what happened.
Of course, be that as it might, I could not simply accept Senjougahara-san's suggestion — could not accept it on faith, as there was far too great a lack of data to support such a conclusion.
A logical conclusion cannot be derived from merely two samples.
Then again, we could hardly wait for a third or fourth.
Having ended the call with Senjougahara-san, I once again steeled myself, and headed for my burnt-down house — however, contrary to my belief, there was nothing there at all.
Once again,

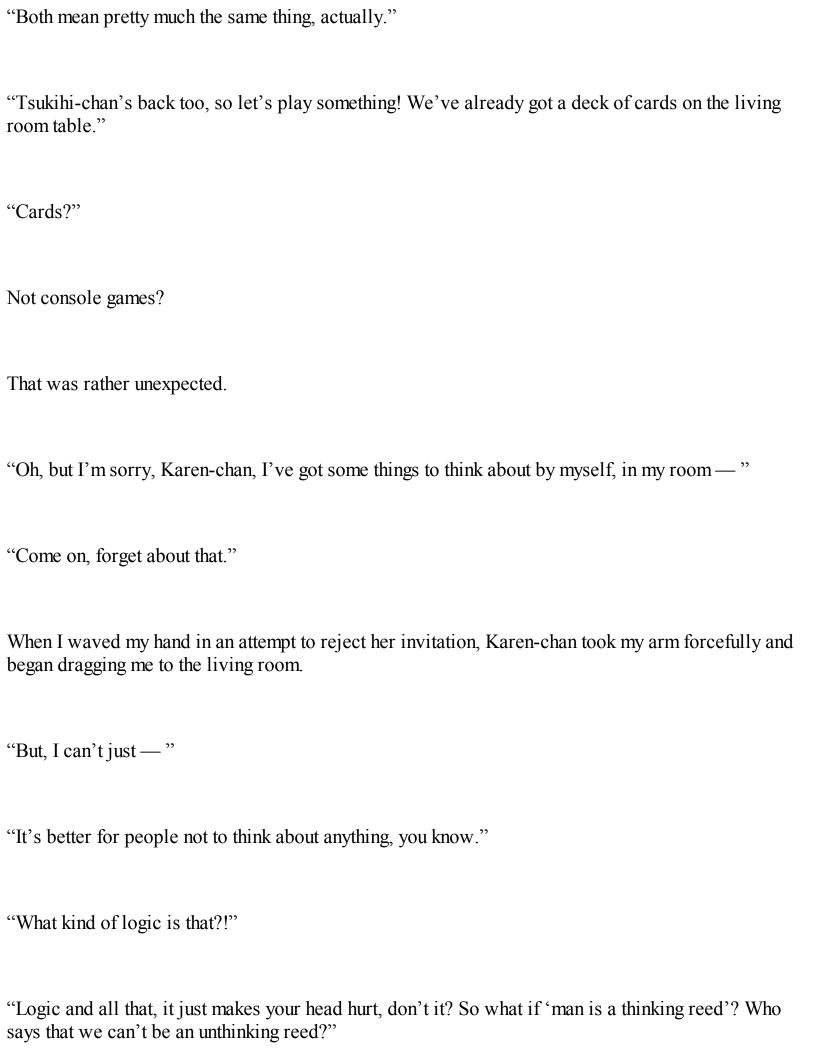
there was an astounding lack of anything.
It was now devoid of any spectators, but it was not just a burnt field, looking as though it had always been so for the past fifteen years, nor was it like a crime scene, cordoned off by tapes and fences — it was, as anyone would call it, a vacant lot.
There was nothing — and nothing could be felt.
Although, at this moment, I could not entirely believe in this sensation of 'not feeling anything' — I had not simply lived on this plot of land, but in the house that was here, so I could perhaps accept about half of this sensation as truth.
Yes, certainly,
there had been nothing here at all.
" " · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·
Seeing as I would draw undue attention if I stood there for too long, I stayed for little longer than a minute and then removed myself hurriedly.
Aren't the places where you have slept immediately burning up one after another? — In other words, if this continues, won't my apartment or the Araragi house also suffer fires some time tonight?
Even after those burnt-down remains, I could not deny that these misgivings of Senjougahara-san felt rather forced — however, those words had made another precedent come to mind.

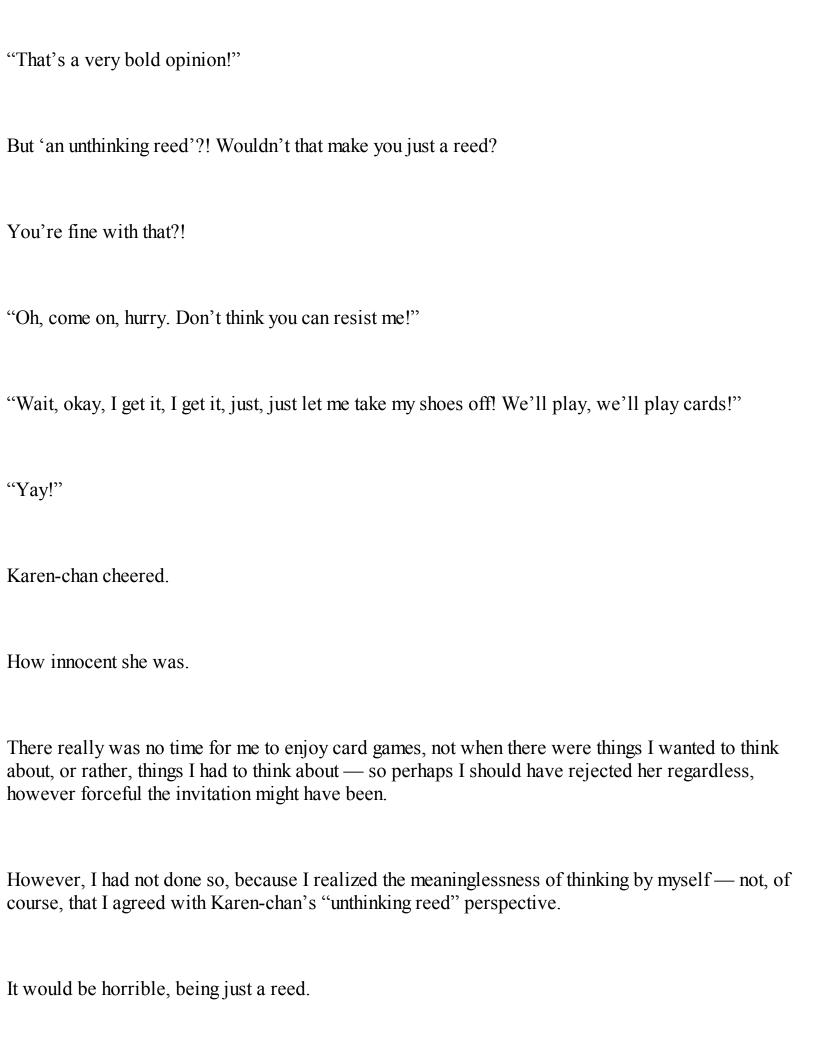
It was the story of Yaoya Oshichi.
After falling in love with a boy she had met during a great fire, she attempted to burn down her own home so as to meet her beloved again — although it was a terrible thought, one not to shiver in excitement but to tremble in fear for, I could not help feeling that sentiments like this were also quite typical of love.
Oshichi was born in the year of the Hinoe Uma, the Fire Horse, and women born of this year tending to be strong-minded became not so much an abnormal folk story as a kind of superstition, or rather, simple prejudice.
After all, such emotions could be possessed by anyone equally.
It was a horoscope that anyone might fall under.
Nevertheless — in this case, the term 'Fire Horse' had a deeper meaning.
Well, to be honest, I knew it didn't really mean anything.
— 'Uma'.
It meant 'horse'.
It was very embarrassing allowing the word 'trauma' to catch my imagination this way, much like Senjougahara-san and her pun, but nearly half of all folk stories were made up of wordplay in any case, much the same as how Hinoe Uma came from how 'a fire drives a horse mad'.
The tiger and the horse — together, 'trauma'.









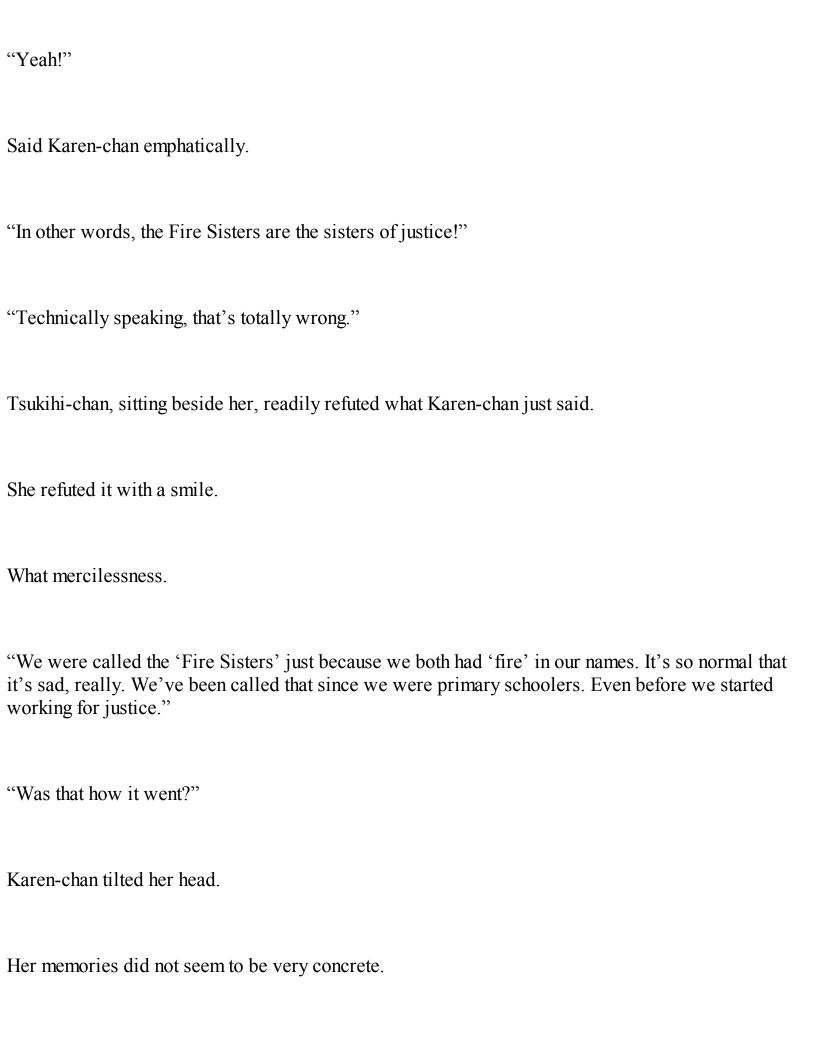


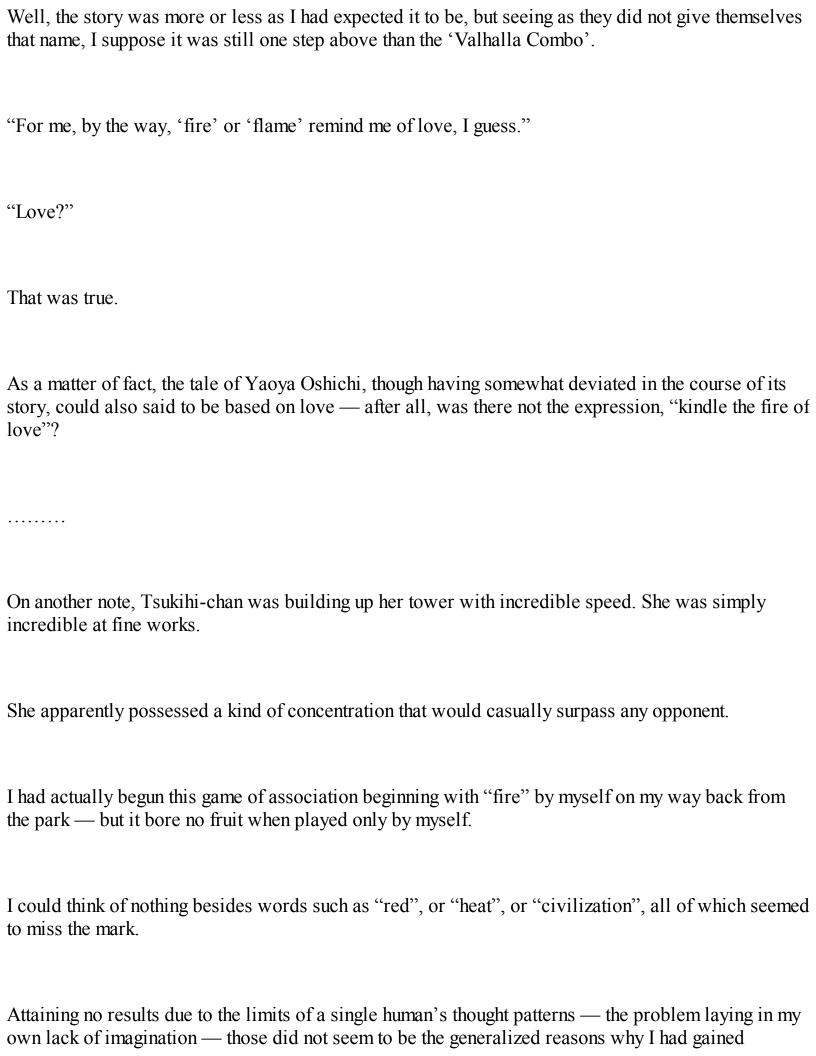
But — in much the same way, it was horrible that I was exactly the same whether I was thinking or not.
After all, no matter how much I thought about it,
how much I were to think, or whatever I might realize — when that something was inconvenient to myself, I could simply turn my eyes away, cutting it away from my heart, in the end forgetting it, and ultimately becoming unable to even recall it.
In that case, just as how Senjougahara-san had done so for me before — I could instead approach this with a clear head, waiting to seize on any hints in the midst of a conversation or dialogue.
Sensibility told me that I ought not involve middle schoolers like Karen-chan or Tsukihi-chan, but seeing as I was already inconveniencing them at this very moment, any awkward reservation now would be contrary to the effort — and most of all, if we were to discuss of fire, then in a sense, no one could be more suitable.
They were the Fire Sisters of Tsuganoki No.2.
It was right there in their names.

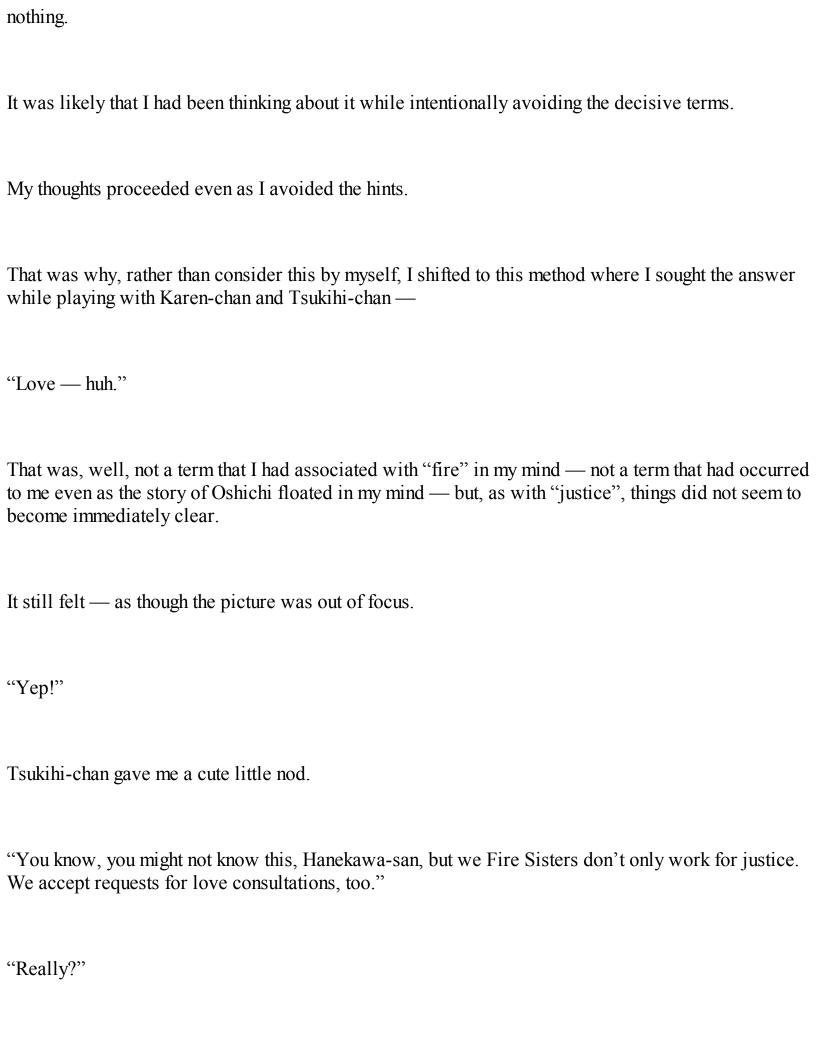
## 

"Fire'? What does the word 'fire' bring up in my mind? Well, what else is there? The fiery heart ourning in my chest!"
Karen-chan gave an answer to my question with just the slightest of posing. From the way she answered without any hesitation, it would seem that she had responded to this question many times before.
It was more instant a reply than I had expected.
It felt almost as though she had answered me before I even asked.
'In a word, it's passion."
"Hmm…"
When she mentioned playing with cards, I had assumed that it would be poker, blackjack, or parliament but, unexpectedly, Tsukihi-chan's suggestion turned out to be for the three of us to each build a house of cards.
Using ten decks of cards between us, the one who completed the tallest tower in the least time would be ruled the winner.
It pains me to say that this game was not fun at all.
We were more or less playing with building blocks, and there was little room for creativity.



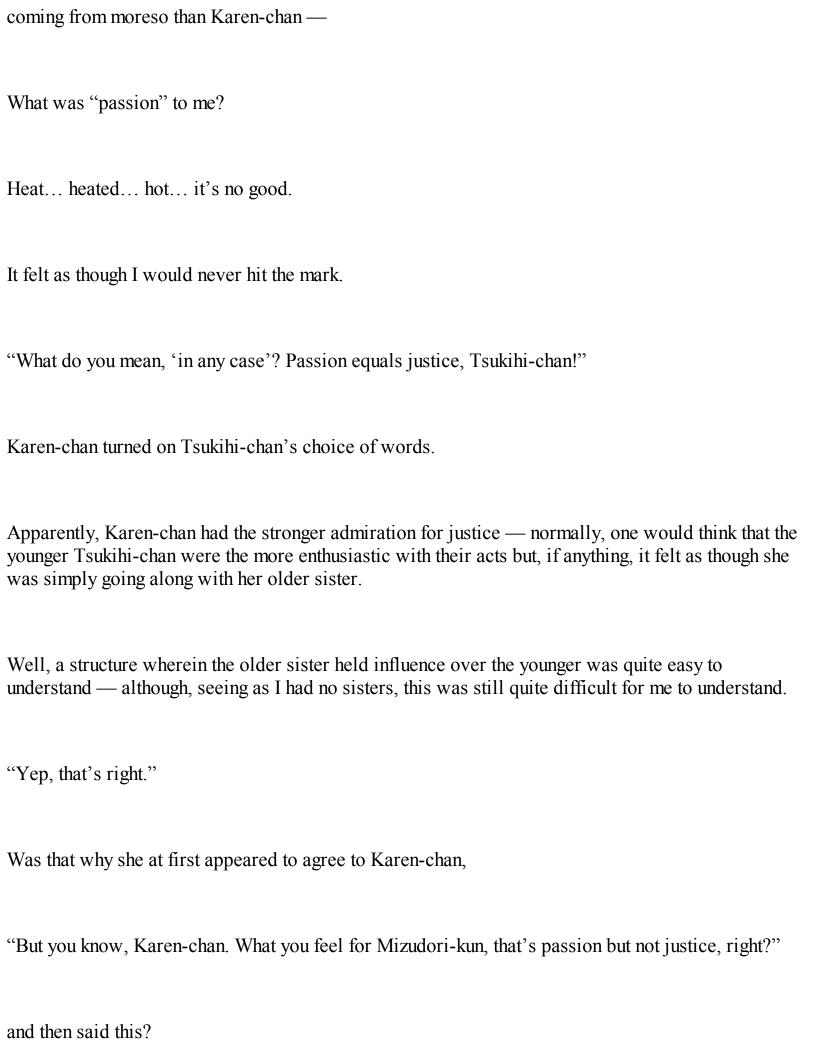


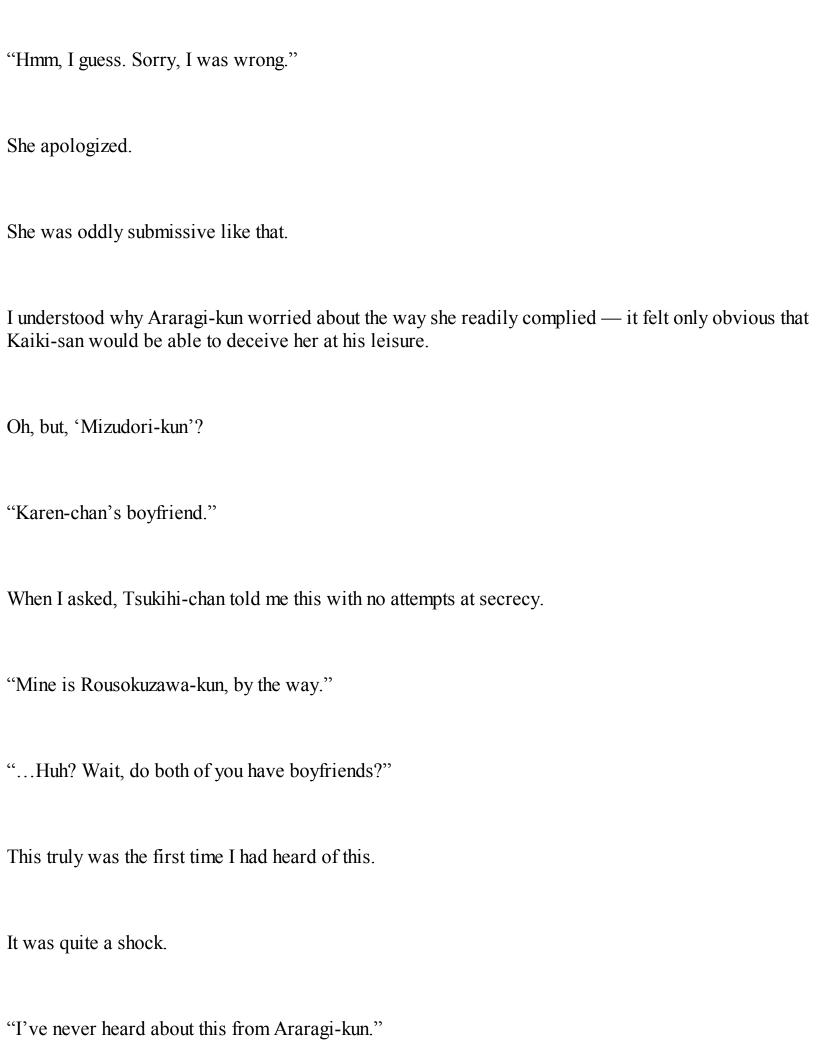


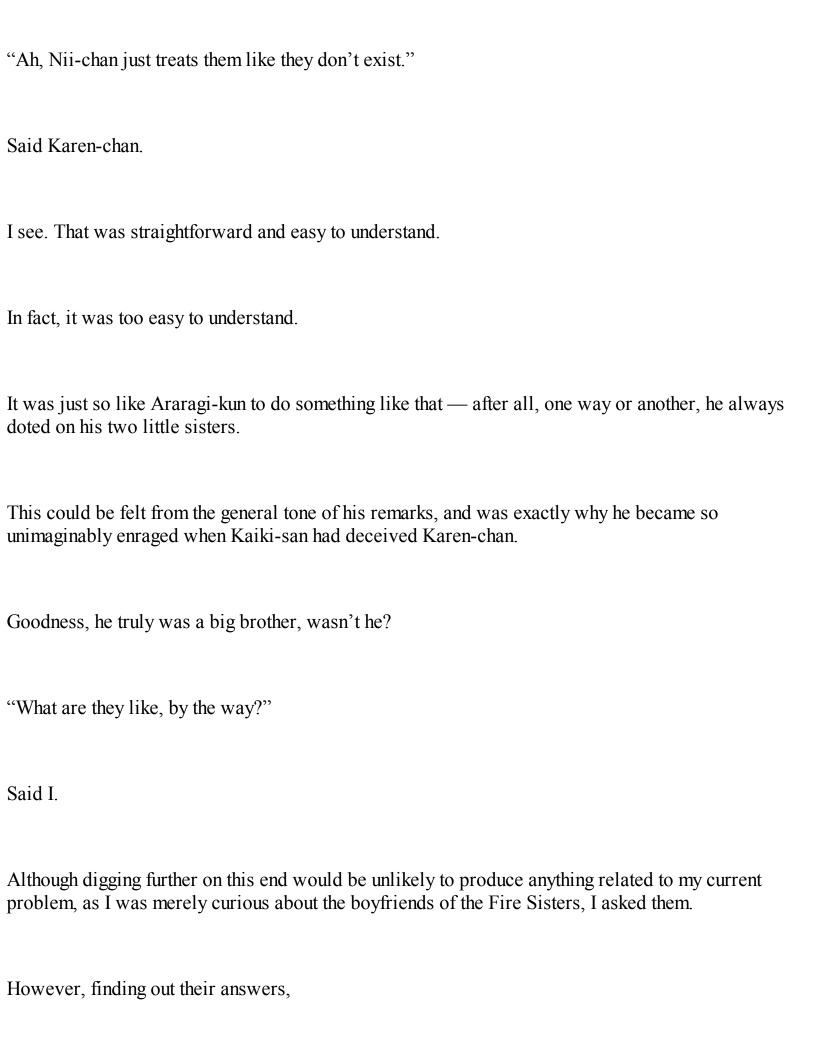
















Envy — like the rising of a flame.
Despite having been a joke, just as how Araragi-kun treated those two as though they did not exist, or to reword it, how Araragi-kun turned his eyes away from reality — I was doing the same.
That, at least, was the same with me.
I turned my eyes away.
Away from reality.
To speak of what would cause such a thing, what else could it be but for one of the strongest emotions within a human being, one even counted among the seven deadly sins — the feeling of envy?
It was passion — envy, which could light a fire inside you.
That was why — we burn with envy.
Pierced so suddenly by the truth that I could not even turn my eyes away in time, my trembling hands — brought the partly-built tower crashing down into a miserable pile.

## 060

I doubt there could be anyone in our modern society who had never considered how wonderful	it
would be if the human brain were capable of being managed like a computer's hard disc.	

In other words, being able to make memories (records) disappear, make them non-existent, when we did not want to remember them, or being able to overwrite our reality if we did not wish to face it, removing all sorts of trauma, horror, and unbidden, unpleasant memories — how wonderful a brain like that would be.

And — by some twist of fate, it would seem that I possessed such a wonderful thing.

I cut away my memories, and cut away my heart.

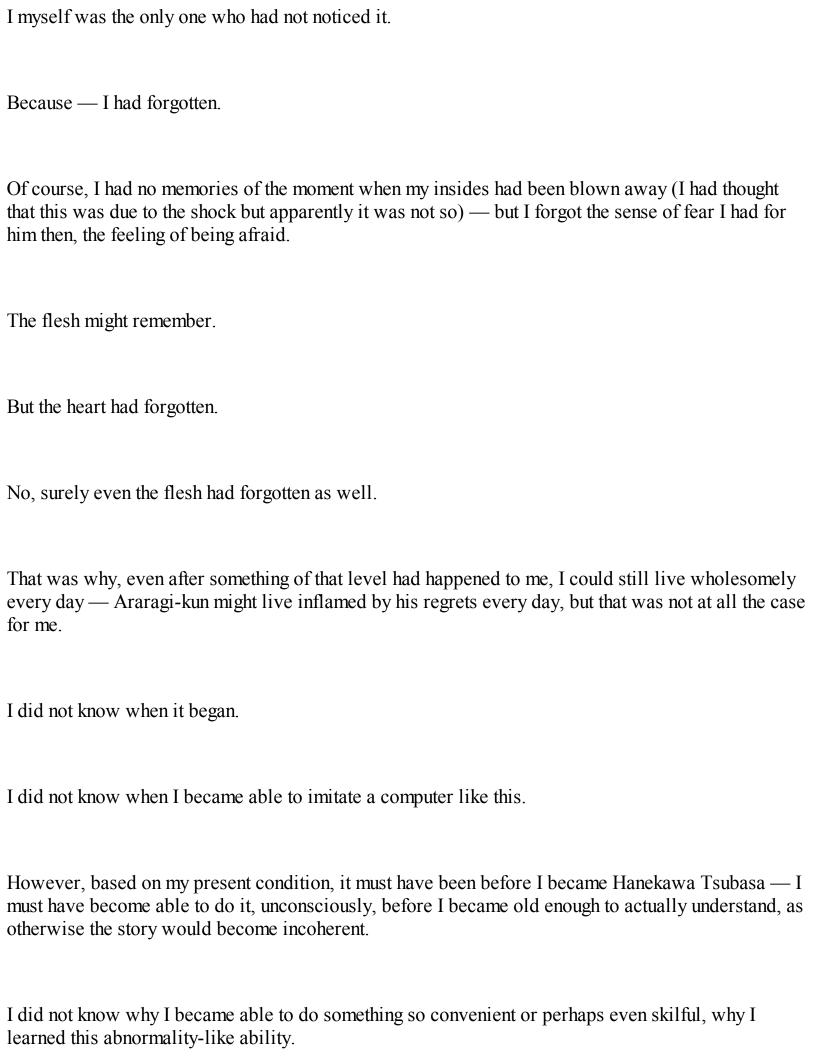
It would be very easy to understand if you were to consider the most recent example, which would be my talk with Episode-kun this morning on the way to school — remembering the happenings of spring break, I had, in my own way, been afraid of him even as I stood and talked, but it must have looked abnormal from the viewpoint of another.

I was having a pleasant chat with someone who had tried to kill me.

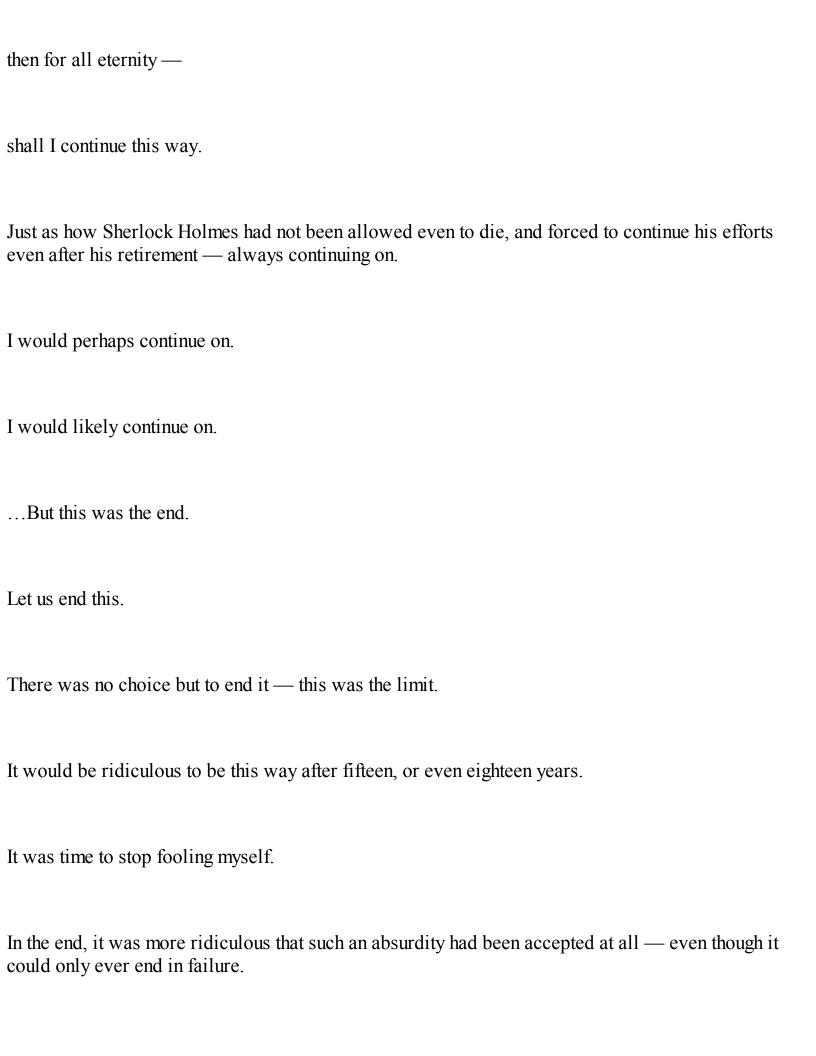
Could something be so unnatural?

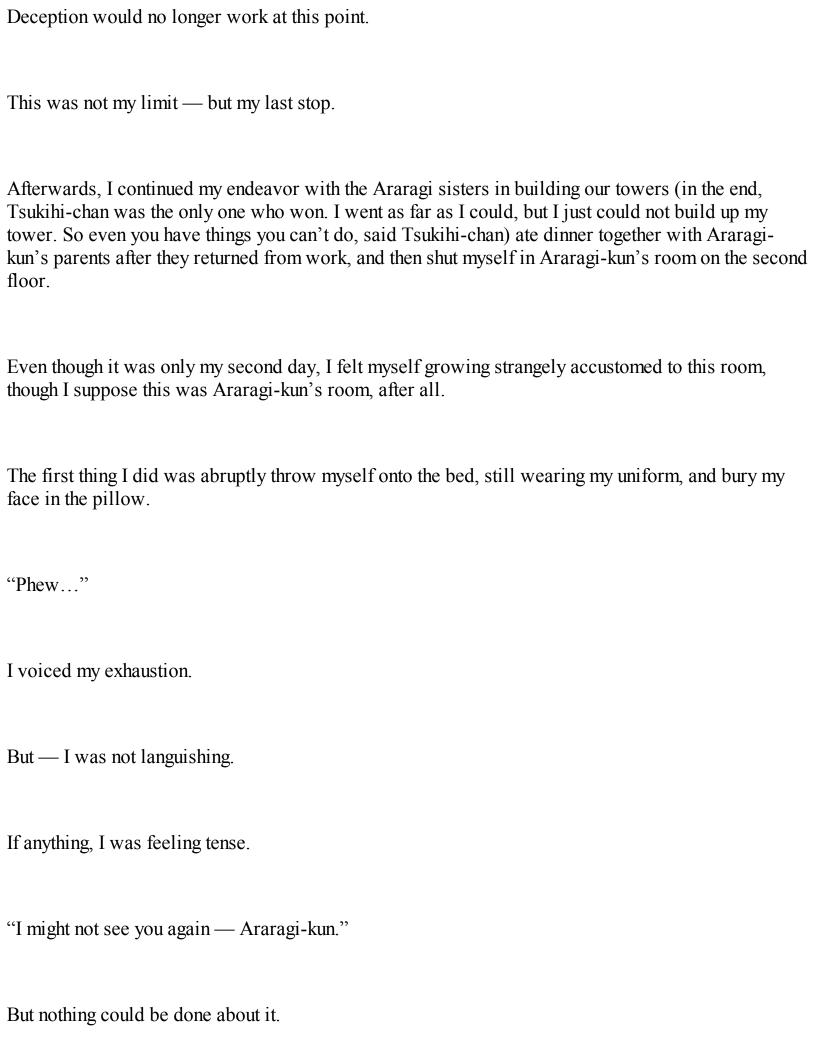
My finding him surprisingly easy to converse with was not supposed to be the point. Perhaps if I were a character in a comic book or television drama — but, as a real human being, why would I do something some terribly abnormal?

Was it not clearly unnatural?

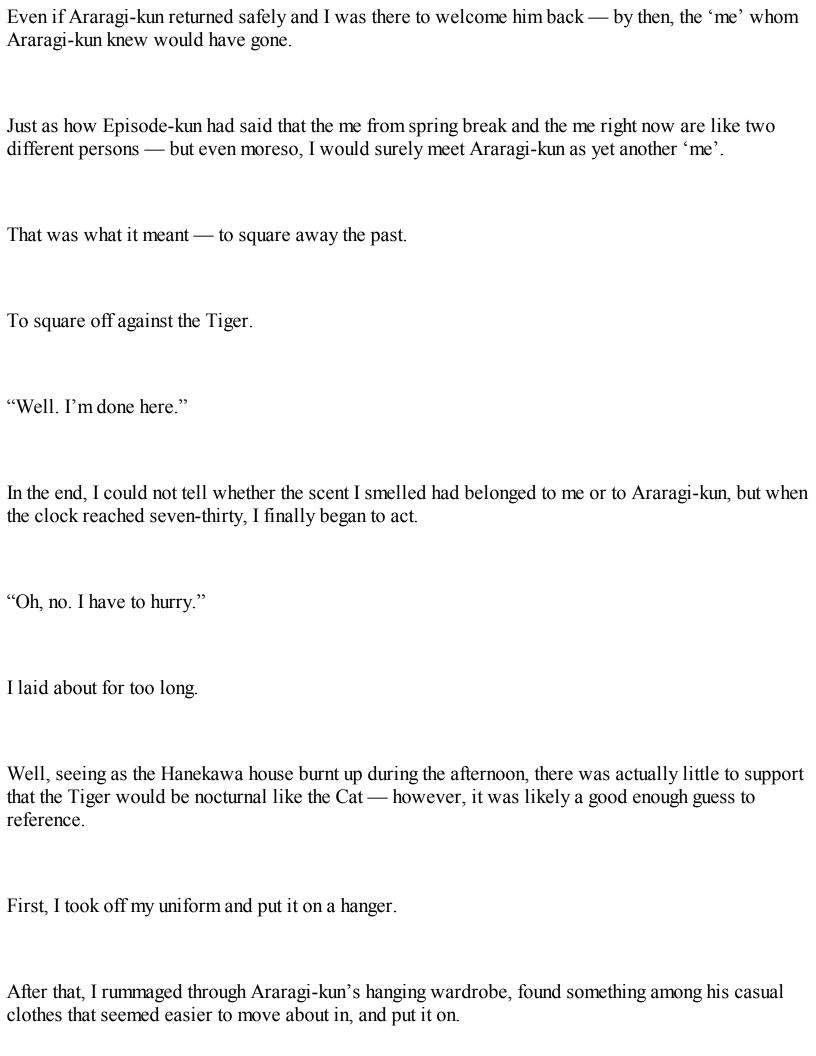


It was most likely that — the trigger to all of this was the very first memory I cut away from myself.
It was simple enough to imagine — even before I met the abnormality called the Hindering Cat, I was already something like an abnormality myself. I finally felt the weight of Oshino-san's words, about how I was more spectral than anybody else, and that the abnormality had been nothing more than a trigger for me.
No, perhaps even the Hindering Cat did not truly exist.
Instead, Black Hanekawa — might have always existed within me.
And perhaps,
the Inflaming Tiger had, as well.
Regardless of how much we wanted to forget — the past would always linger around the lives of human beings.
It would always haunt us.
And perhaps, that would never end.
Oshino-san might have given me the age of twenty as a reference, but I did not believe even that number could be relied upon — at the very least, as long as I continued to wish for this,
as long as I remained as the way I was,

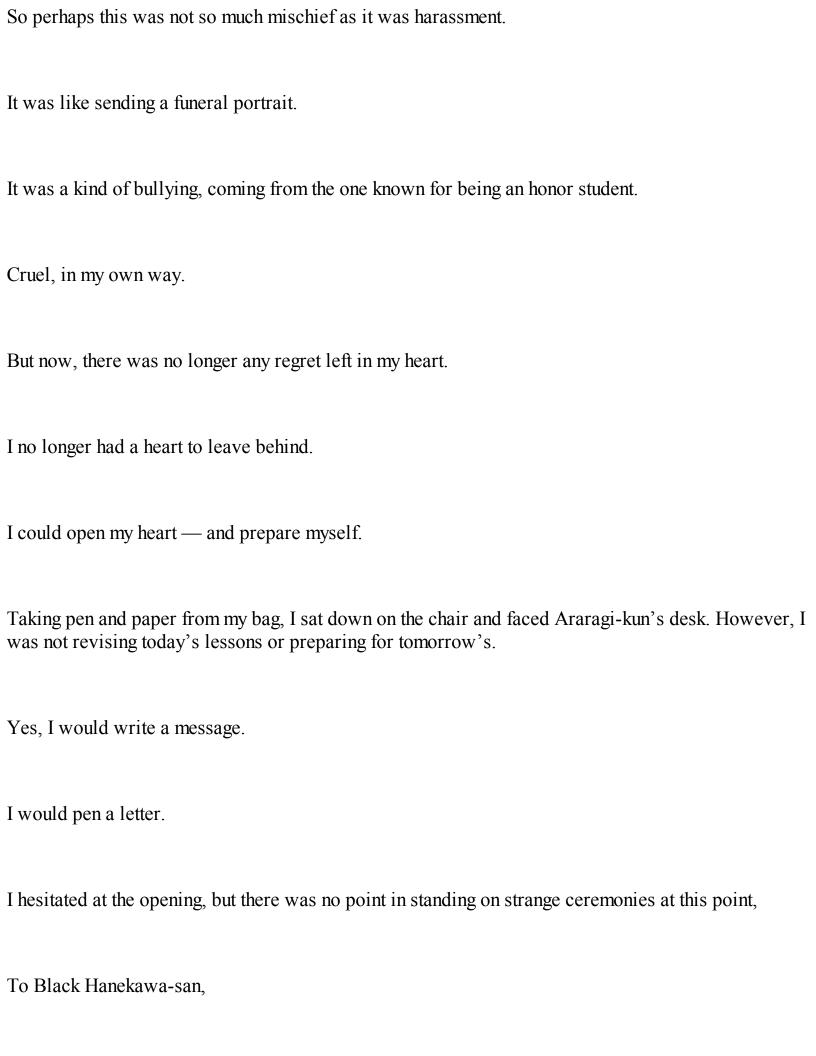




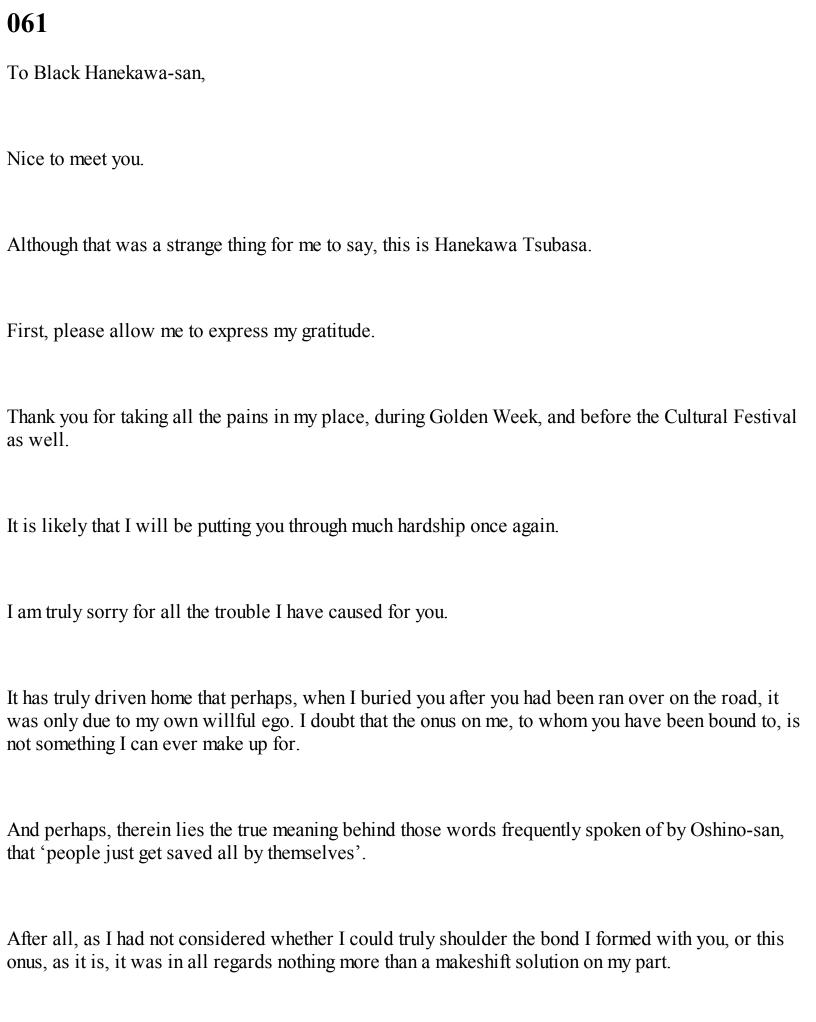




Although I had borrowed his pajamas before, I felt a bit uneasy taking out his street clothes without asking, but considering how much Araragi-kun had always wanted to see me wearing casual clothes, I suppose this might in fact be exactly what he wanted.
Growing to feel somewhat mischevious, I started thinking that maybe I should take a picture of myself now and send it to him — despite still not knowing what condition he was in.
However, as it might bother him, I did not try to contact him — though now that I actually thought about it, perhaps this was just a polite excuse. If I truly were worried, I would immediately make up my mind to contact him, just like Senjougahara-san had — would that not be the human thing to do?
So, I should be bold. I should send him a picture, as encouragement. The way I was now, I could still help him that much.
I took out the phone from my uniform on the hanger — and stretched my hand out, taking a picture of myself. Being a high school girl, I had been using a cell phone for quite some time now, but this was the first time I had taken a picture of myself.
Despite failing several times, I soon got used to it, and managed to take quite a good picture, if I might say so myself.
Having attached this picture, I sent the message to Araragi-kun without any text — and turned my phone off.
The next time I turned this phone,
I would no longer be in this world.

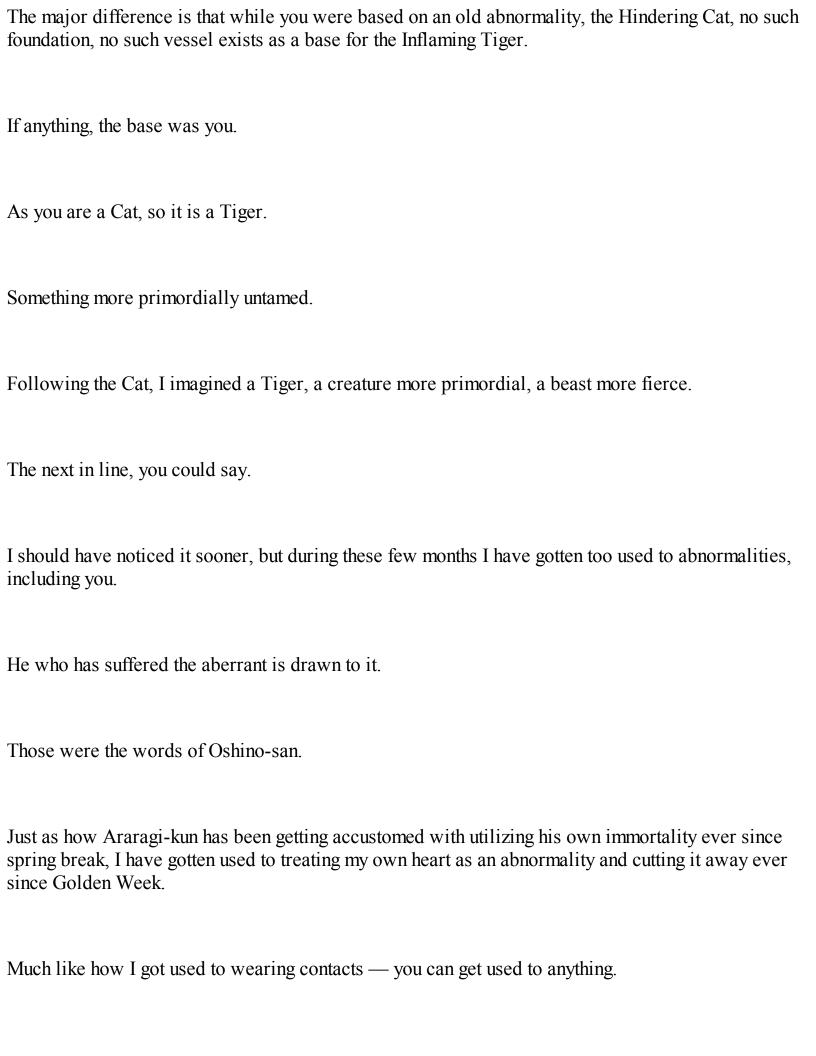


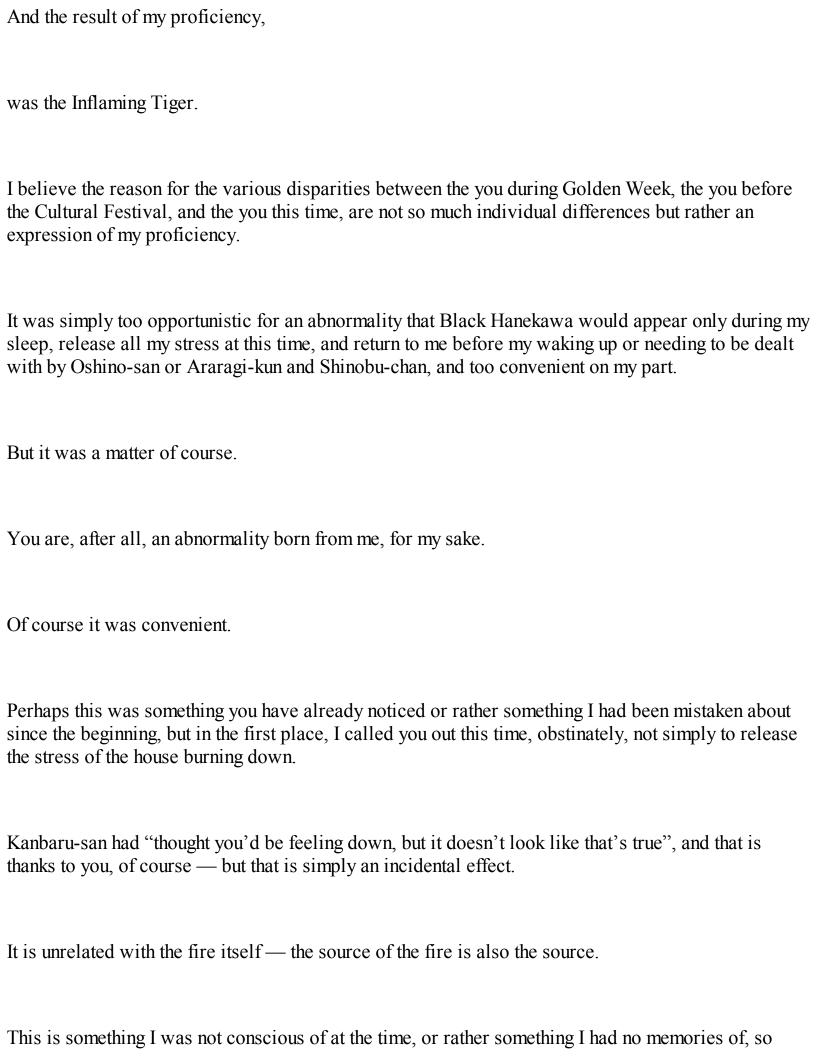
and I simply began with this on line one.
Perhaps this was not a neccessary step at all.
Perhaps I was doing something pointless.
I might not have any memories of myself being Black Hanekawa — but surely, Black Hanekawa had memories of being me.
Nevertheless, I wanted to express the feelings I had, as myself, to the 'I' who stood apart from me, to her.
I wanted to express to her — to the one who had always taken my place, to the dark, black part within me, to she who had always shouldered everything for me — my feelings of gratitude, and my last wish.
And so,

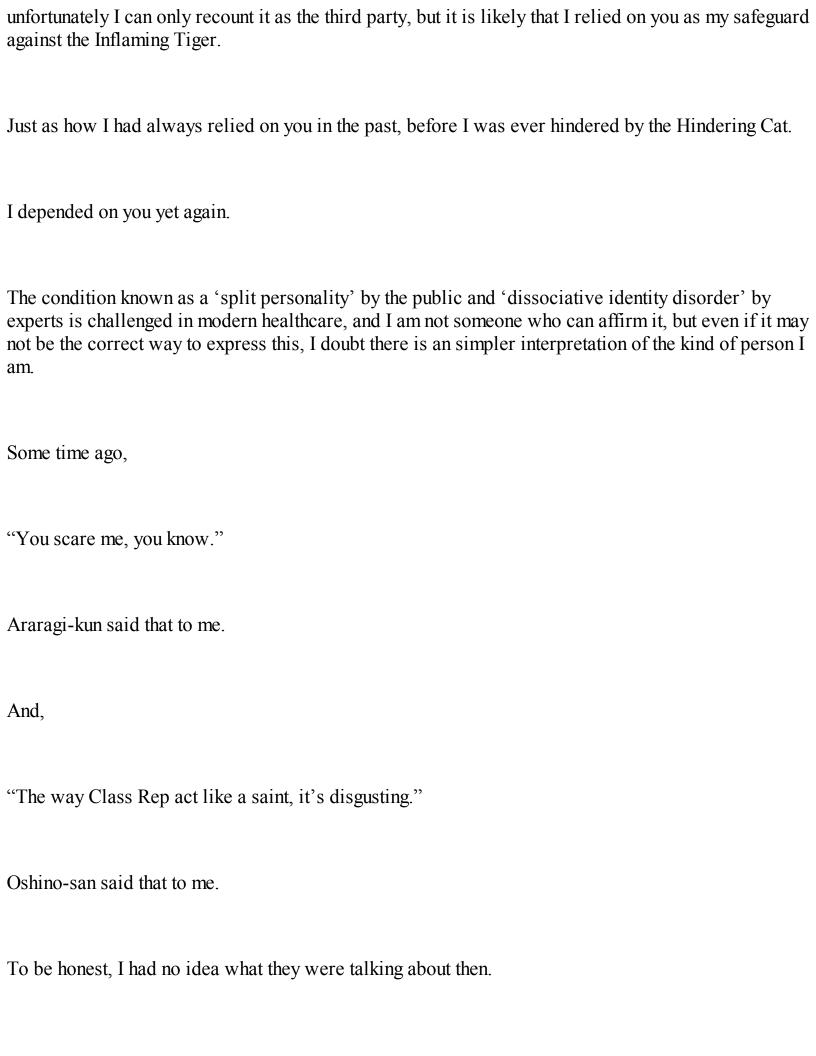


Just as how Araragi-kun bound Shinobu-chan to him in order to save her, I have shackled you to me as Black Hanekawa.
And yet, unlike Araragi-kun, I was not worried in the slightest and continued to live in peace without a care in the world.
How sinful I am.
Therefore, I am actually not in any position to ask something of you, but if this continues, I will end up hurting my precious friends.
The only thing I can do is rely on you.
The only one I can rely on is you.
That is why I will say this for the first time since I have been born — help.
Help me.
Please, help me.
I will not trouble you ever again, nor will I ever leave you alone again.
Please.
I beg of you.

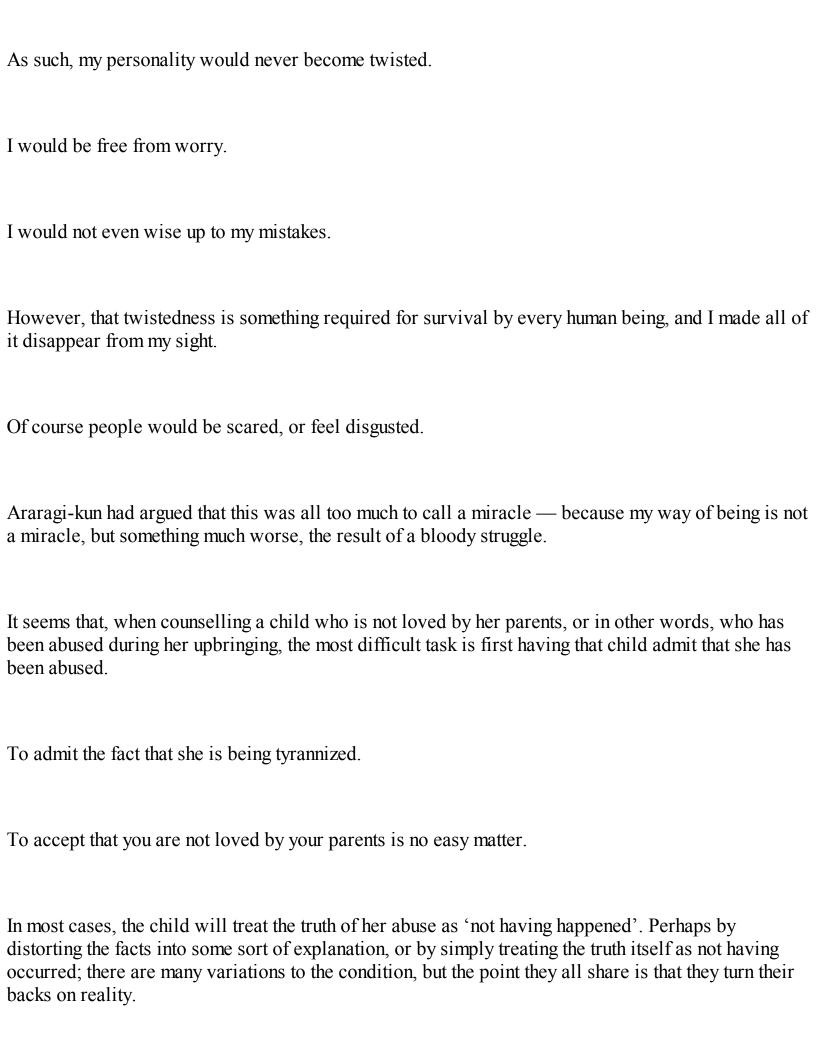
Perhaps you have no say in the matter as you have to protect me, so my saying this changes nothing, but please, I truly must ask this of you.
It may be of use as a reference, so this time, I will write down everything I know.
Although you share my memories, it seems that this time, you are completely cut off from me (I can imagine the reason, as noted below) so it might be easier to understand if you read this information in text form.
Unlike yours, my own memory is full of gaps, so I cannot say anything with certainty, but this is probably the truth.
I don't know everything, just the things I know.
Those are the words I use against Araragi-kun, like an excuse, but please allow me to say it to you as well.
I will give you everything I know.
Now, this is something that does not need to be said, something that you as an abnormality would already know without saying, but that gigantic tiger, the Inflaming Tiger, is like you, a new type of abnormality born from my heart.
More precisely, it is an abnormality newly cut off from my heart.
I can say this with certainty.

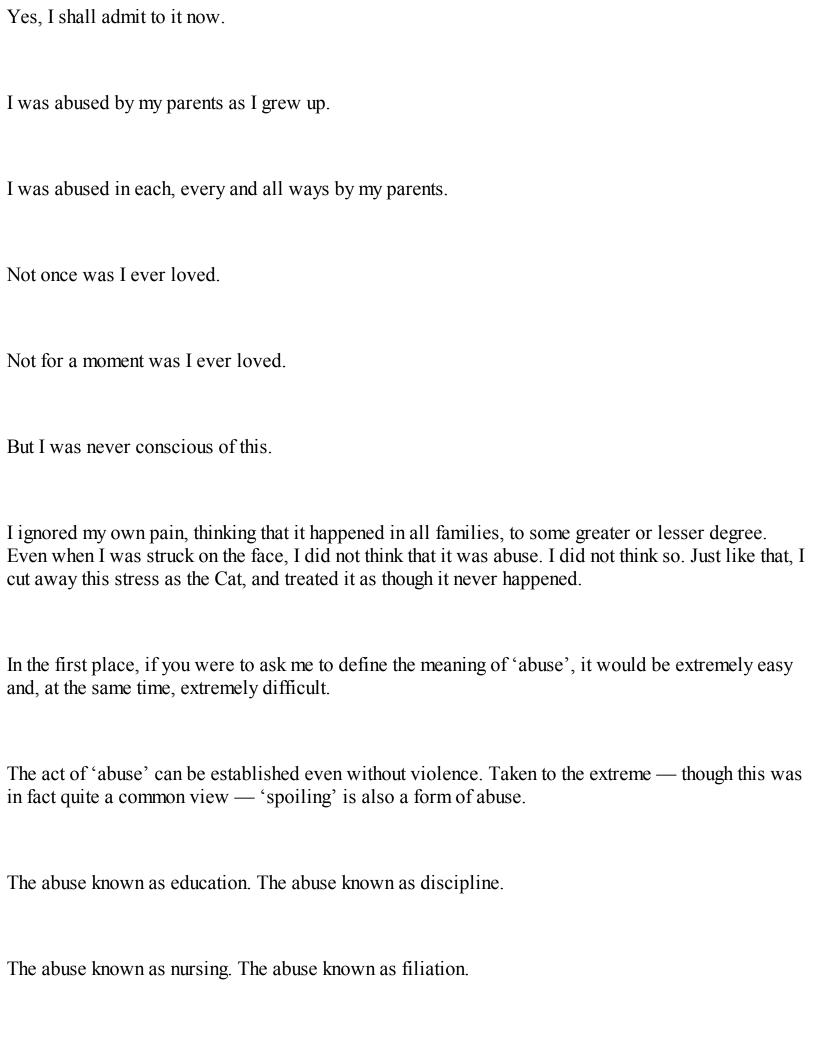


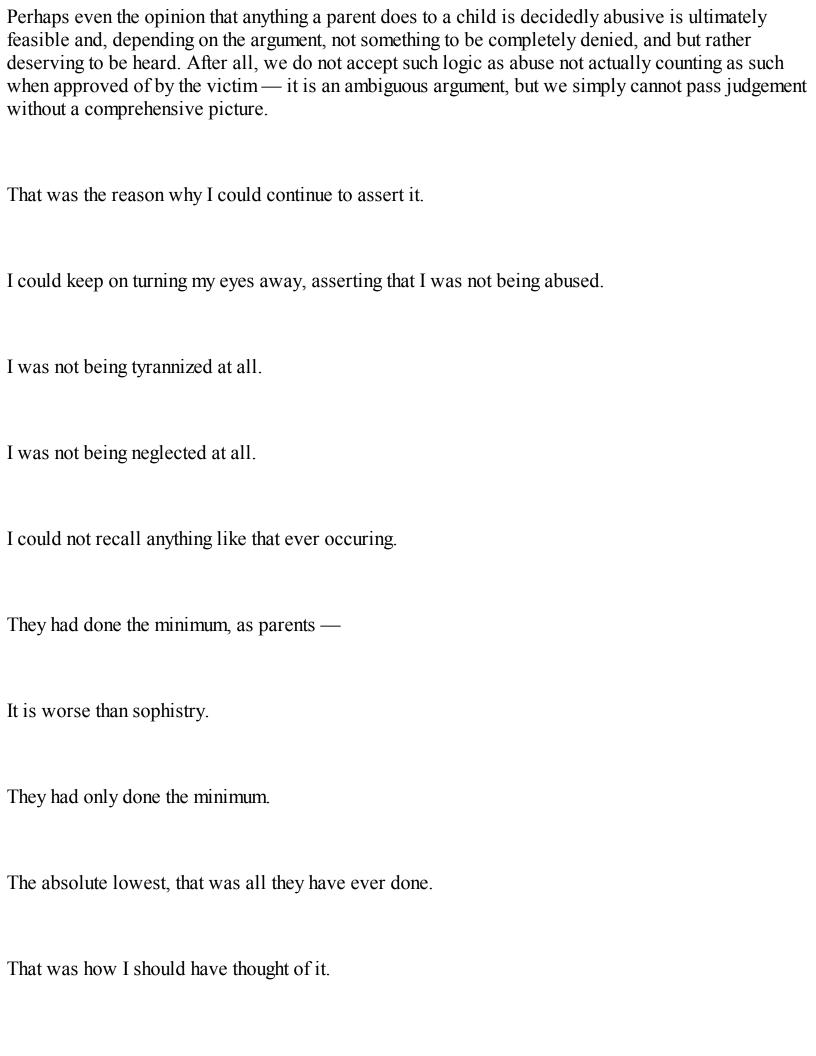




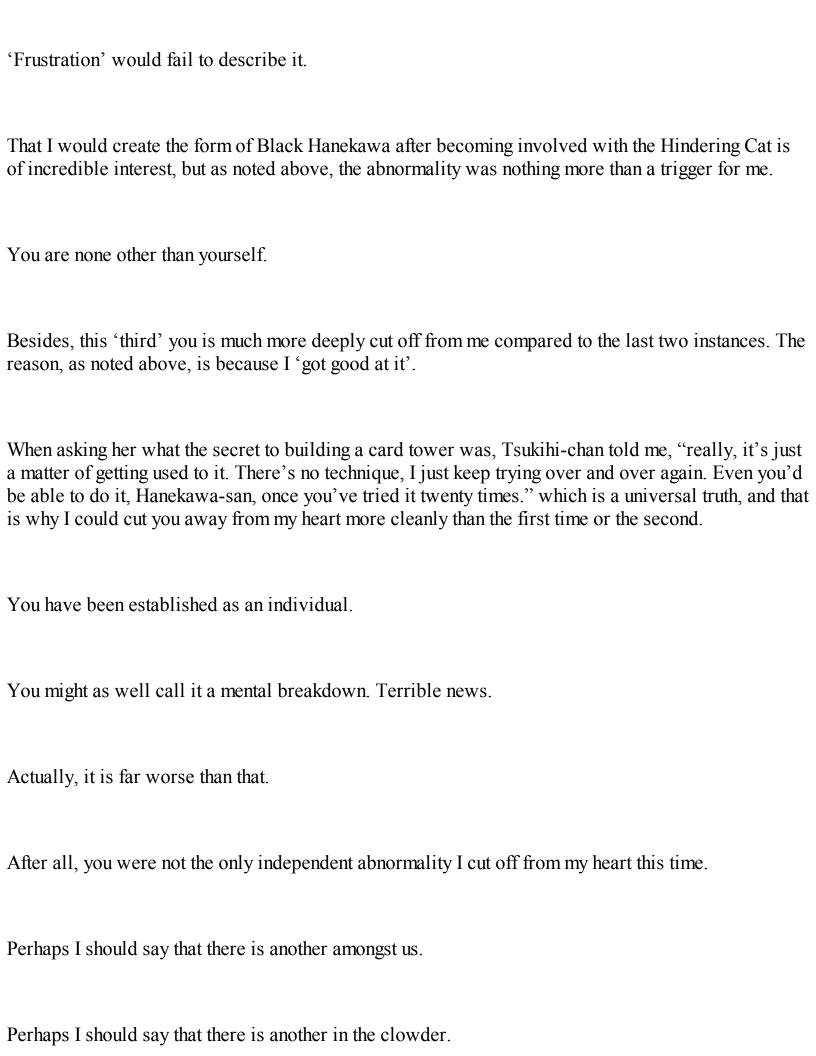
I am always simply myself, in my most natural state.
If you were to ask Araragi-kun, he would say that I was trying too hard for a normal girl, that I was excessively logical, and though that deduction was quite close to the truth, it still could not provide an answer as to why I had become able to do something so inordinate.
It was not something one could do simply by wishing for it.
And yet, why it is that I can manage this?
The reason is simple.
It is because I have been turning my eyes away from inconvenient truths and cutting my heart away from myself ever since my youth.
The day before yesterday, Senjougahara-san had said that I was 'dim to the darkness', which was absolutely true, but more than that, I was 'blind' to it.
I turned my back on malice and misfortune.
That is not self-protection, but self-sacrifice, I think — by cutting away the inconvenient 'me', I was preserving myself.
Just as how I could not see my own house from the classroom window that day,
as soon as I see something disagreeable, I cut it away as an object unrelated to myself. Even when I suffer through pains, I cut it away as something unrelated to myself.

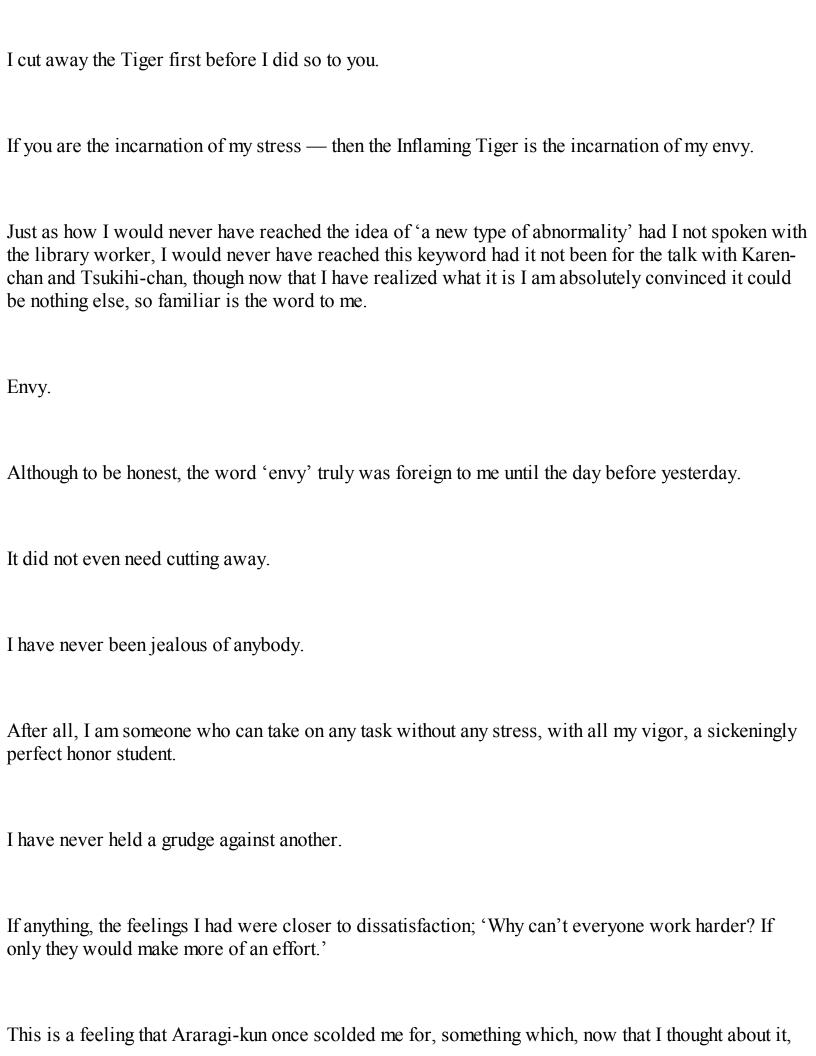


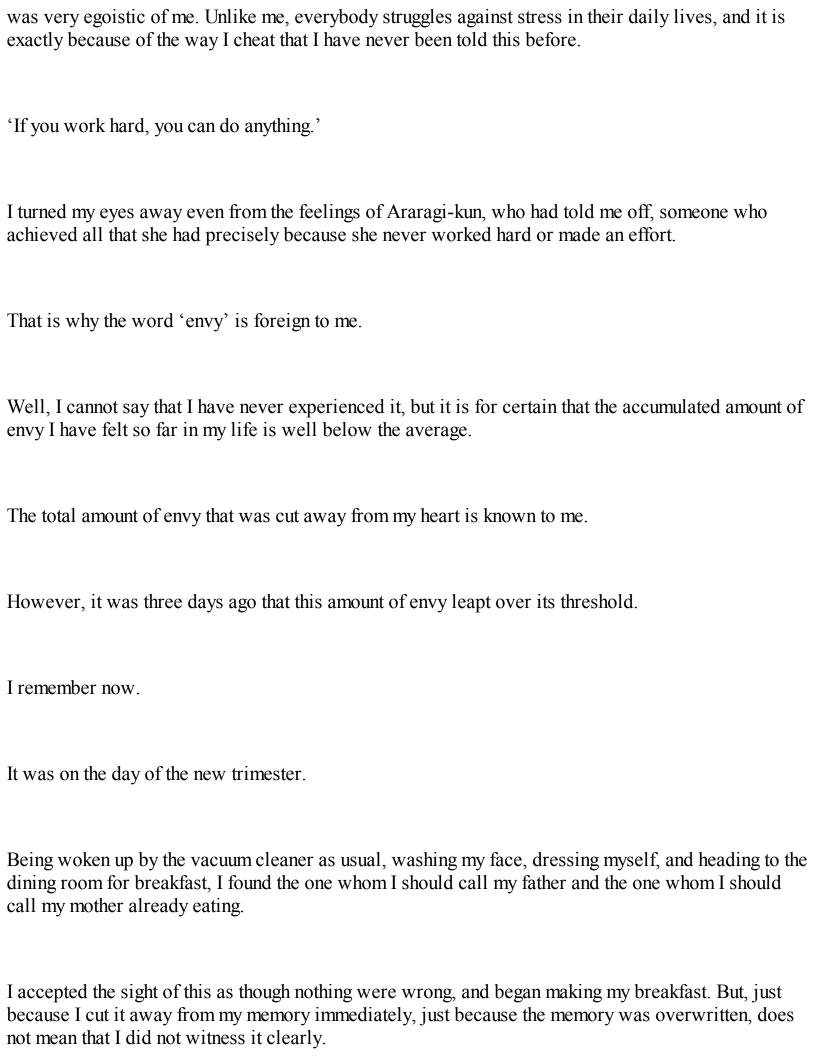




I have been abused in the worst way, by 'not being loved' — and of course, they had their excuses.
However, these excuses have nothing to do with the child at all.
Parents loving their child is not an obligation to be fulfilled, but an emotion, and if it cannot be done these two adults ought not to have gotten married or bore children.
If you were able to exist without the feeling of pain and maintain a disconnection to sorrow, then you would be able to remain free of stress, constantly able to exhibit your highest performance whether it be in study, or sports, or logics, or morals.
If one could exist without feeling the pressure of failure, the anxiety of possible further suffering, and the pains of both body and mind, then one would be a perfected human being in all regards.
That is the truth of the honor student, Hanekawa Tsubasa.
The worthless answer to the question of why I am the way I am.
I can ignore the tedium.
I can be this unfair because I can leave to others the darkness and pain that is borne by all humans.
Senjougahara-san would be enraged if she heard about this.
To think that she had suffered for two years — her struggle over two years which existed only to bring her pain, and I, without suffering, without feeling pain, without a struggle, was able to put it all onto your shoulders.

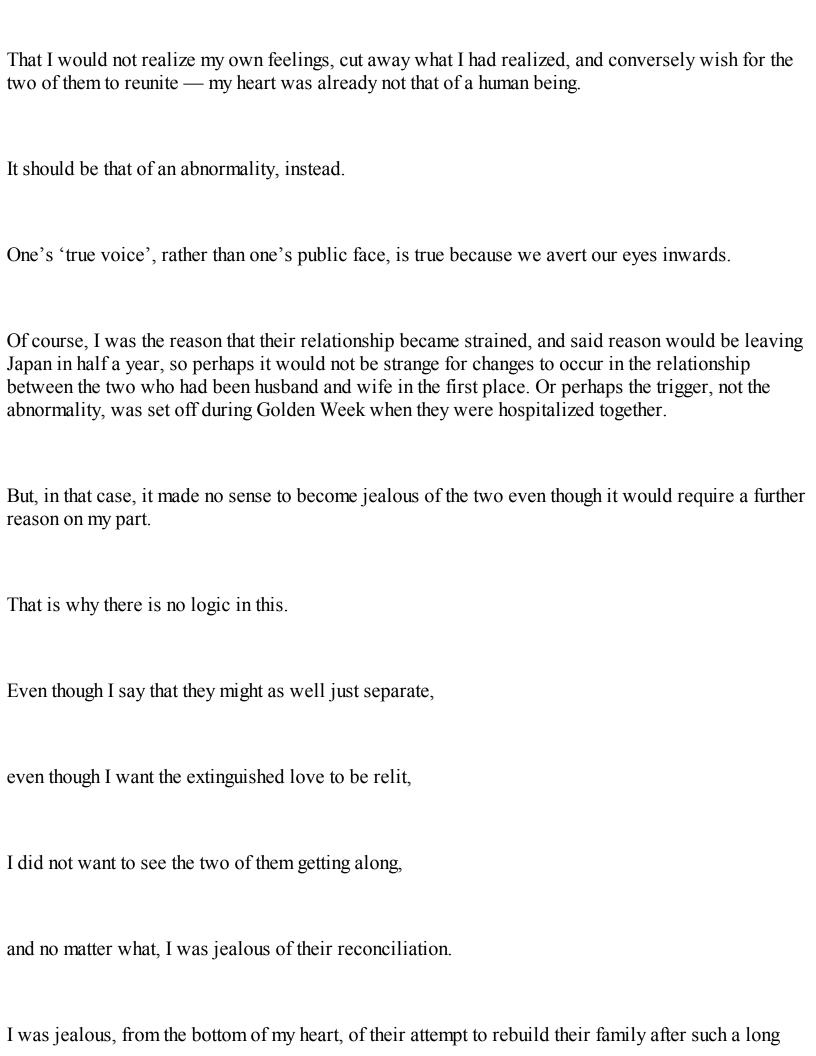






The two of them were having the same dishes.
Although we all resided in the same house, we all lived separately, so how was it that one of the two clearly cooked a meal for both, and they ate it together?
Now that I thought about it — yes, of course.
That morning, I had to choose my cookware when making breakfast — that should not have been the case.
After all, I must have been the last one to enter the kitchen, so there should have been no need for me to choose — the other two sets should have already been used.
In other words,
this could only mean that one of them had cooked for the sake of the other — it could only be that they were eating breakfast together.
I became the outcast.
And I felt my own jealousy clearly.
It probably sounds ridiculous that I should even bother to care about whether or not these abusive parents of mine, who reside in the same house as me but cannot even be called family, have breakfast together.

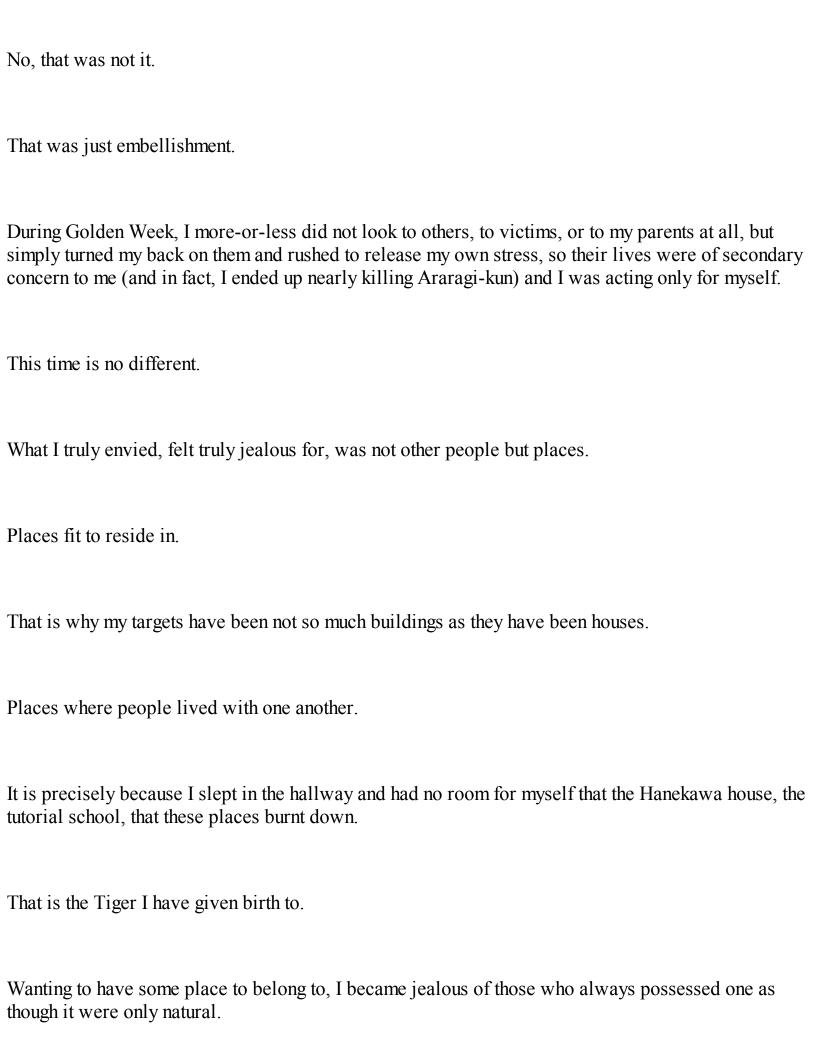
But there is no logic to this.
That illogicality is the explanation for why I felt such incredible rejection that I would burn down the Hanekawa house and force them to stay at a hotel.
I did not want to be left standing alone in that small room.
I did not mind being 'three persons',
but I did not want it to be 'two people' and 'one person'.
Not that I ever thought of becoming 'three' — I simply did not want to become 'two' and 'one'.
I did not want to see that, even if I had to sleep in the open.
I wanted to turn my eyes away.
Those feelings of charity I had, that this could be a good chance for them to make small steps towards each other again, were in fact nothing but the complete reverse.
They were not simply twisted.
They were completely, utterly twisted.
They were terrifying, disgusting — and foolish.



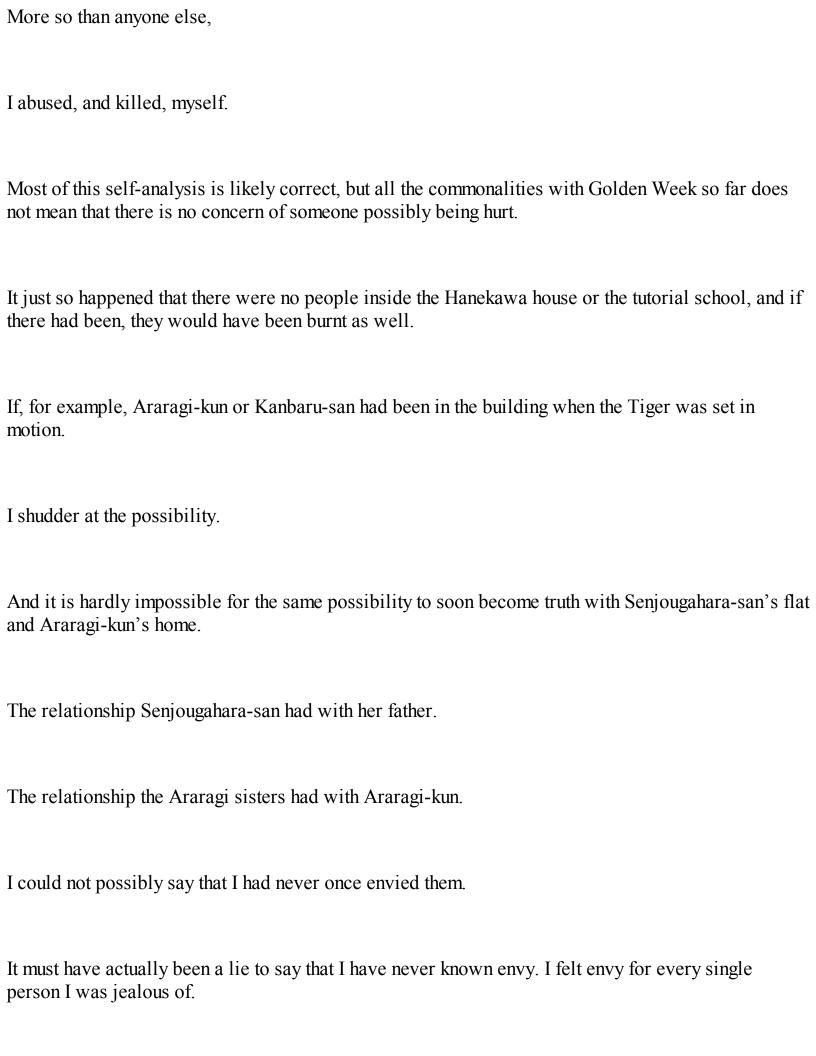
time.
I was burning with jealousy.
That was all it took for my envy to cross its threshold, and for the Inflaming Tiger to be born.
Just as how I gave birth to you during Golden Week, I gave birth to the Tiger in the new trimester.
I was able to create a new, original abnormality without requiring a base like the Hindering Cat, which once again proves that you can get good at anything, as long as you repeat it enough times.
As it were, that was where the phrase, 'no fiercer a tiger than the inflaming of tyranny' came in, but as Senjougahara-san said, it also felt to me that Gaen-san had led me to this, somewhat.
Additionally, I believe that if I had not met Mayoi-chan that day on the way to school, the Tiger would not have been born.
It is due to my conversation with Mayoi-chan on the way to school that I found out Araragi-kun was currently away, meaning that I knew that he would not be here to deal with the Tiger, unlike your two previous appearances, which was why the it was born.
Araragi-kun acts as something like the brakes to my heart. I had been looking forward to meeting Araragi-kun in the classroom for the new trimester that day, more than I had expected myself to.
It was all simply poor timing.
This was unmistakably the reason for the appearance of the Tiger immediately after parting ways with Mayoi-chan.

In the end, the fault was mine.
The Inflaming Tiger is a spectral transformation born from the brittleness of my own heart.
The flame of jealousy which consumes all.
The reason for the burning of the Hanekawa house was of course jealousy towards my parents, and the reason for the burning of the tutorial school was similarly jealousy.
The jealousy that I felt for Kanbaru-san, for being the only one Araragi-kun had asked for help.
At that time, I was angry at Araragi-kun — or at least, I thought I was, but in truth, I was likely greatly jealous of Kanbaru-san, just as Senjougahara-san was.
That must have been the case.
The envy I discovered for the first time — was an emotion all too fitting for me.
However, this emotion was soon cut away from me and removed to the Tiger. My jealousy already had the perfect outlet of escape prepared beforehand.
Regarding the Tiger, I had expressed earlier that it was an independent abnormality like you, but perhaps it should be described as an autonomous abnormality instead.
Unlike you, who is bound to my body, the Tiger is free to move and act.

As a result,
that memorable tutorial school has been reduced to cinders.
Senjougahara-san's conjecture, that the buildings I have slept in immediately burn down, was ultimately off the mark, but considering the special trait of the Inflaming Tiger, things might have been much better off if that had been true.
In short, the things I feel jealous for become targets for the Tiger to burn, one after another.
It would be par for the course for Senjougahara-san's flat or the Araragi house to be burnt down completely at some point. Not because I had slept there, but because I was jealous.
The memory may already be lost to me, but having curiously opportunely been able to observe from the inside the Senjougahara home, with its resolute bond of father and daughter, and the Araragi house, built by a family backed by mutual trust, it would be impossible for one such as myself, having known neither family nor home, to not become jealous.
The way I turned my back on this jealousy, pushed it onto the Tiger, and then held such carefree thoughts as, 'it makes me feel happy to be treated as one of the family', made me want to put a curse on myself, but the curse I held was aimed at others.
At this point, the only consolation is that, much like you during Golden Week, the Tiger's targets for conflagration are limited to buildings and it does not seem to be an abnormality that targets people. It seems that the value of not harming others is one that is clearly established within myself.
Most likely, this is because I knew just how much Araragi-kun had suffered during spring break, torn between the life of one and the rescue of another's.



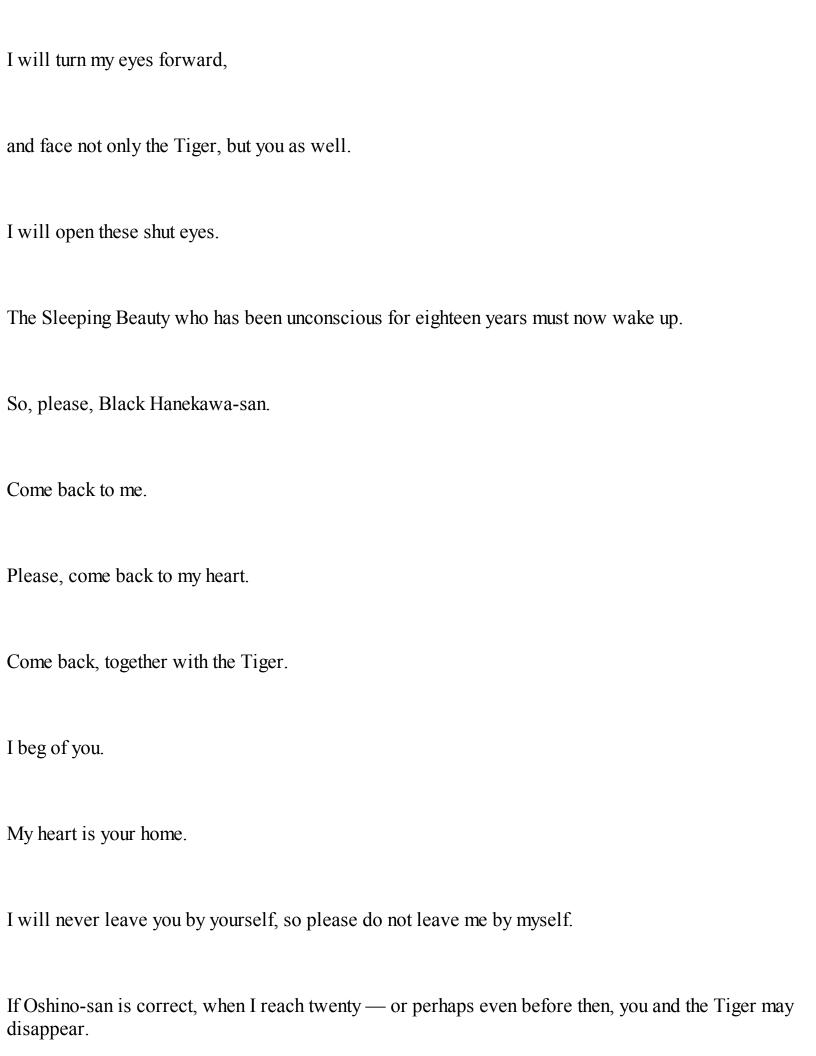
That is why it burnt homes rather than people.
It accepted all my destructive impulses which told me that houses like that should just disappear, and my envy beyond envies — that was how much I had been set ablaze.
That was how fiery my passion became.
Yes, it was irresponsible of me to say that, 'like others', I had destructive impulses and thoughts such as, 'a house like that should just disappear'.
What does it even mean to be 'like others'?
Just how painful was it to be 'like others'?
I never even bothered to find out.
I thought that these washed-out destructive impulses, left over from all the cutting away and taking away, were emotions — I was under the impression that I was normal.
I was too protective of myself,
almost as though I was abusing myself.
Yes.

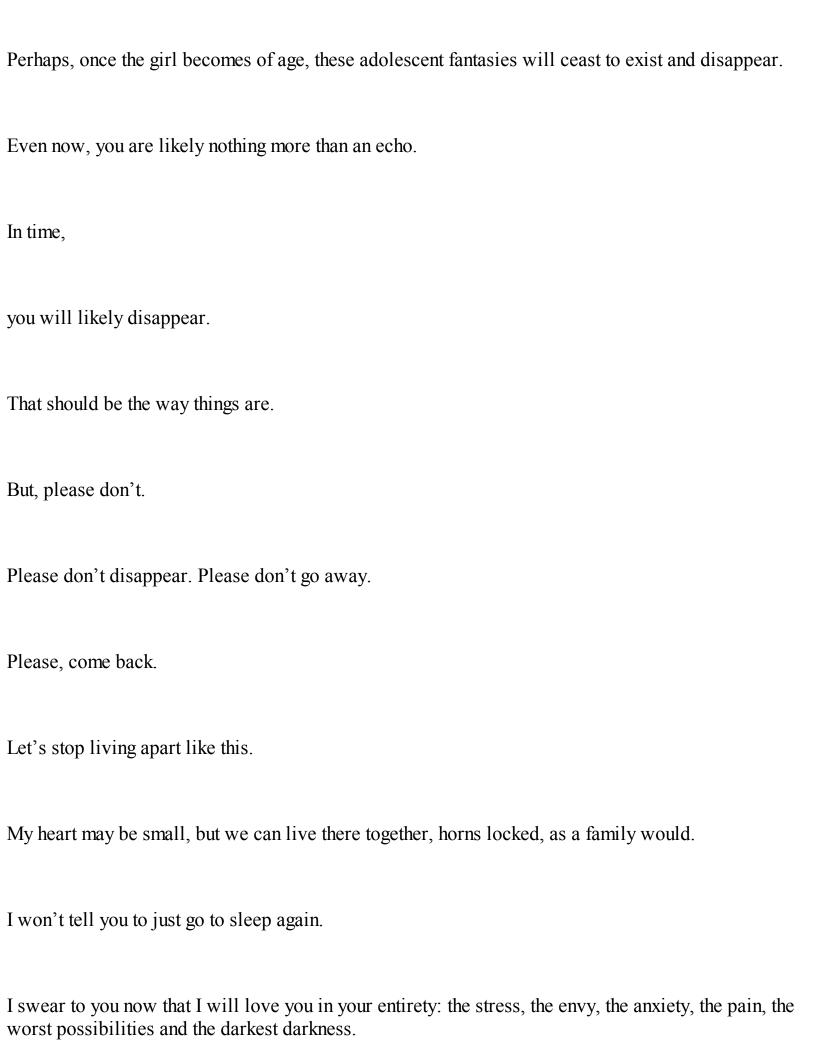


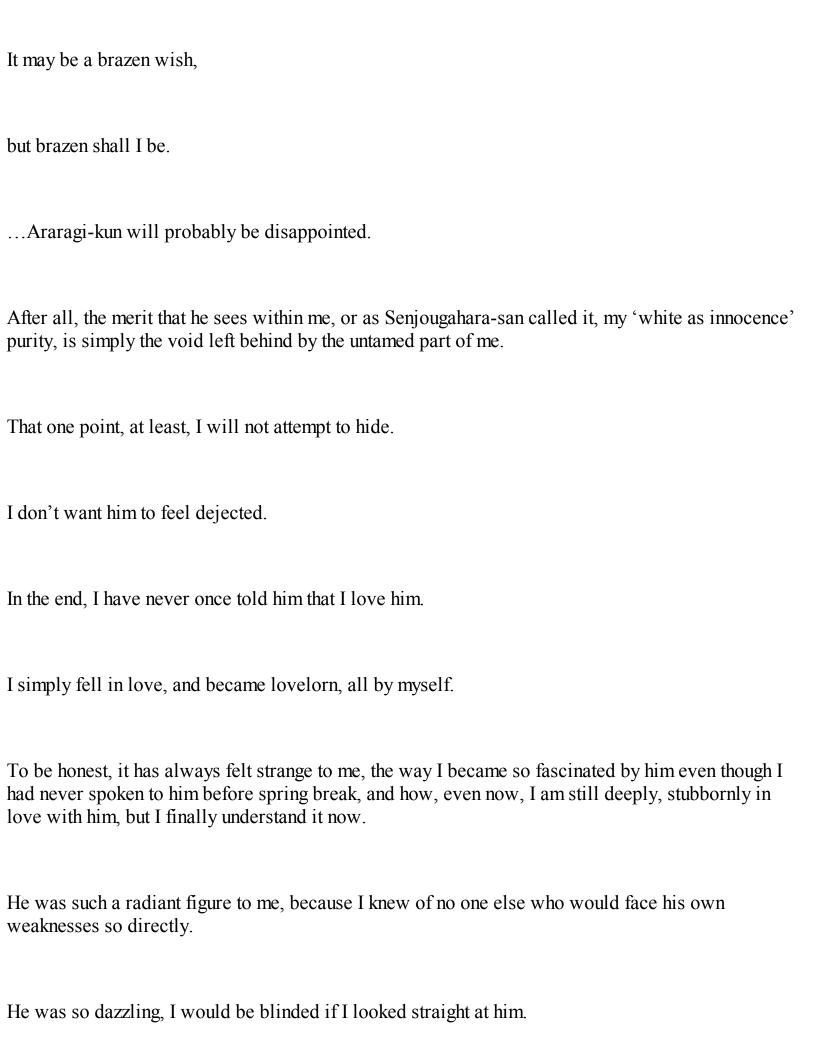
I wanted a father like that.
I wanted to be woken up by sisters like that every morning.
These feelings — became a flame.
Perhaps it was absolutely correct that I have never 'stayed over' at a friend's house before. Or rather, perhaps I have always subconsciously avoided it.
No, that was not it.
If the Tiger 'got better' at this — if it repeatedly performed its conflagration and became proficient at it, then no home in the world would escape its flames, regardless of whether I slept there or not.
Not even the school.
Not even the library.
Not even the park.
Nothing would be left unburnt.
That,
was how much I envied a warm home.

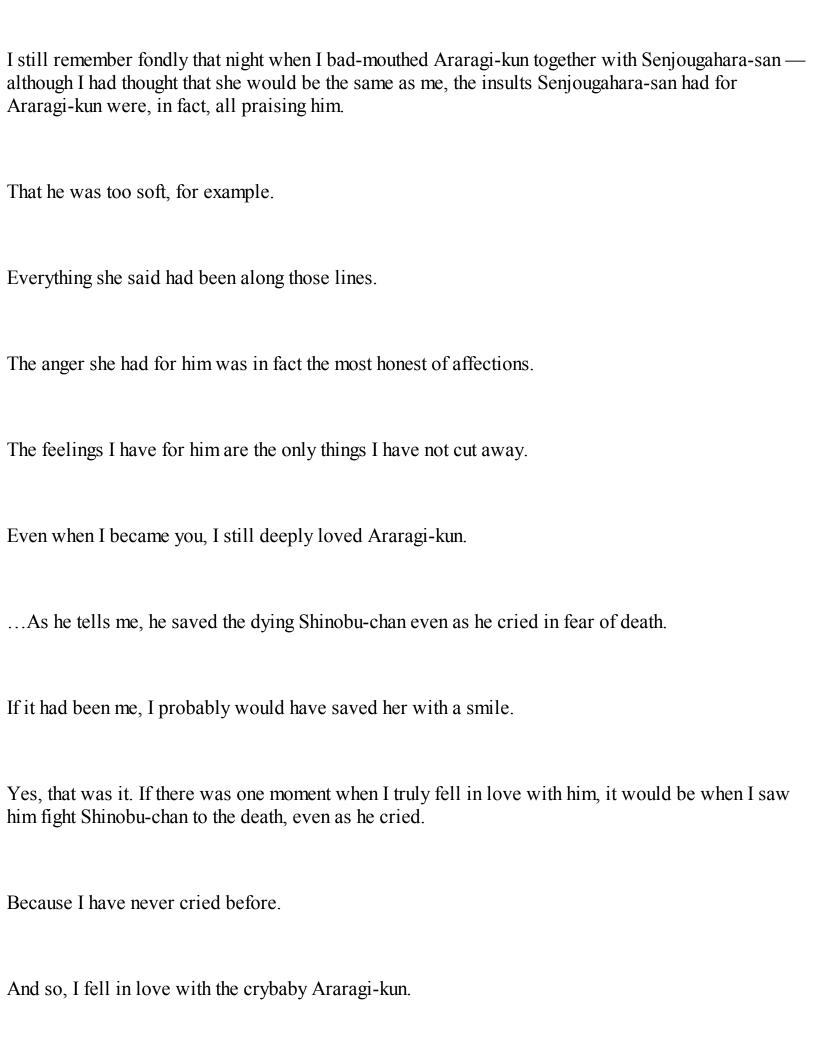
So much so that I wanted to extinguish its warmth with a blaze.
To be honest, I do not know what values you, as in the abnormality Black Hanekawa, hold.
Although you share my memories and knowledge, and face things that I have turned my back to, you and I are nearly completely different (there would be no point in having a split personality if that were not the case).
As such, it is unclear to me what thoughts you hold regarding this conjecture, regarding the phenomenon of the Inflaming Tiger.
Perhaps you do not see any particular problems with going along with this line of thought. At the very least, that probably is how it would seem from an abnormality's perspective.
Perhaps you will tell me something like, although arson is a great crime, this type of case is not punishable by law and, as such, I need not worry.
It is just one viewpoint amongst many.
Certainly, I would wish to accept those kind words.
But it is time for me to end that, as well.
What would be a greater nightmare than to be able to sunder my heart at the slightest provocation, endlessly giving birth to successive abnormalities, leaving all responsibilities to others, and letting them meet horrible fates even as I continue to live on, comfortable and carefree, without realizing a single thing?

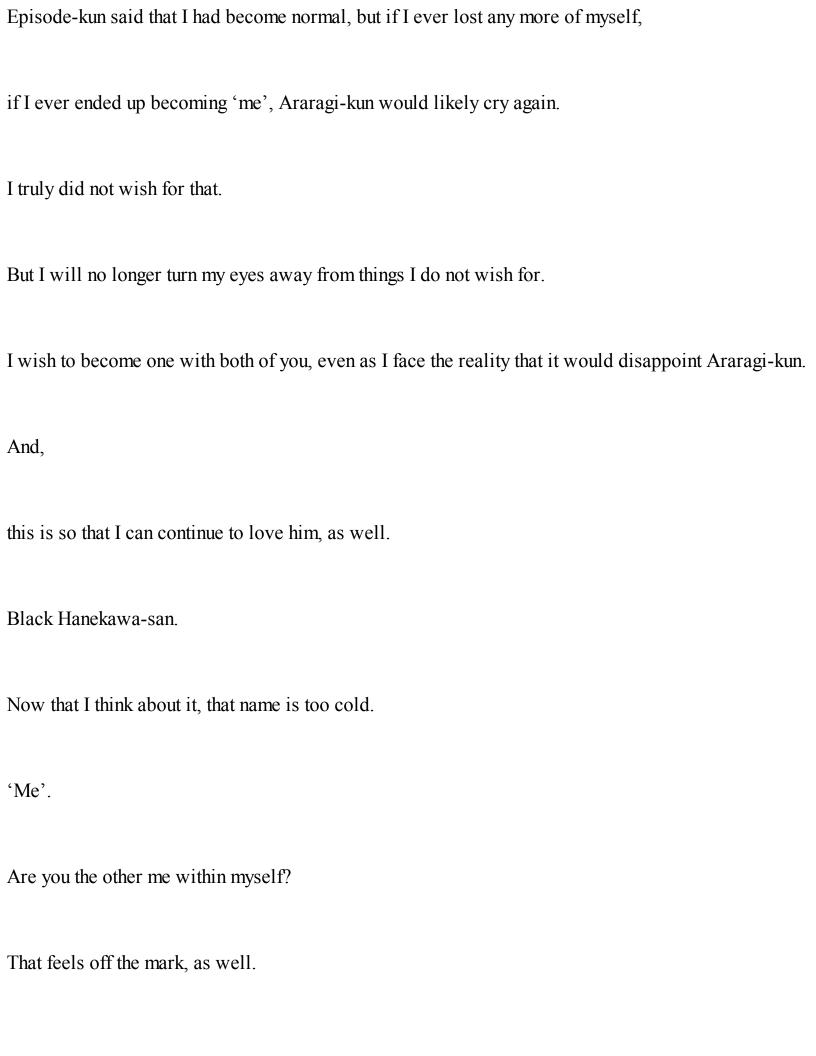
Just how many human beings have I mangled, how much suffering have I spread since Golden Week, without even knowing it?
It was as though I felt no pain even when my cheeks were being pulled.
Does that not resemble the life I have led?
It isn't as though I wish to be an exemplar, or a good person. No matter what morals or logics I possess, it is all meaningless if I myself am standing on the backs of others.
I do not wish to live,
while standing on the backs of you, or the Tiger.
Even if this incident with the Tiger were to be resolved, might I not simply give birth to a lion or a leopard next, continuing on and on?
But even if you all were to say to me that you did not mind, for that was what you were all born to do my heart has already been set.
This heart of mine, sundered so many times that not even its core remains, has been set.
An end must be put to it all.
No, it must all finally begin.













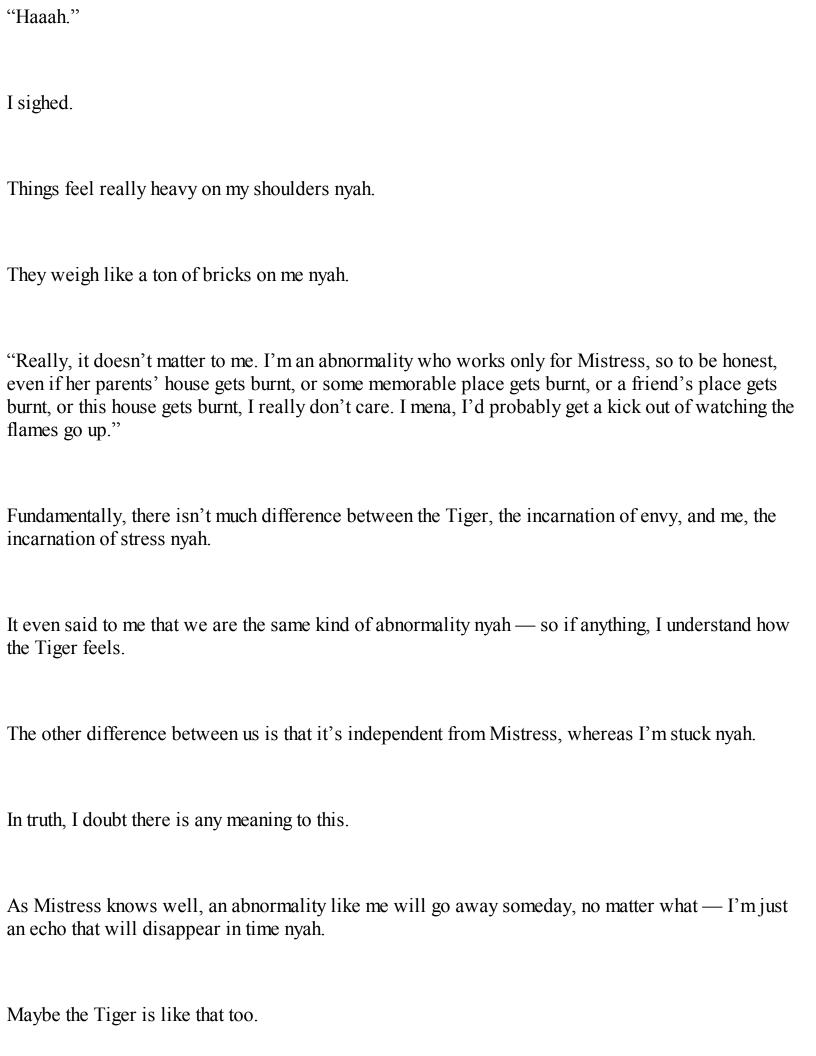
You have got to be kidding me nyah.
I'd always thought that Mistress was a clever one, unlike idiots like me nyah — but it looks like she might be just as stupid, if not stupider than me nyah.
I'd thought that she wrote this letter because she's just smarter while I'm stupid, but I'm starting to doubt even that.
Even if she hadn't left behind some letter to ask for help from a stray like me, I've got no choice, character establishment-wise nyah, but to do as she wishes anyway in order to support her intentions — if she'd just gone to sleep as usual, I would've gone out tonight to beat the crap out of that tiger anyway nyah.
Seeing as I share memories with Mistress, I would've realized the true nature of that tiger — of the Inflaming Tiger just as she did, without losing anything in the process anyway nyah.
No, Mistress already understood all that nyah — that's what she wrote nyah.
Does that mean this was something she had to ask for herself despite all of the above nyah?
I guess you could call it being conscientious, but in the end, Mistress will never realize that it's this sort of thing that makes her beyond ordinary nyah.
That's the biggest tragedy of all nyah.
"Nyah,"

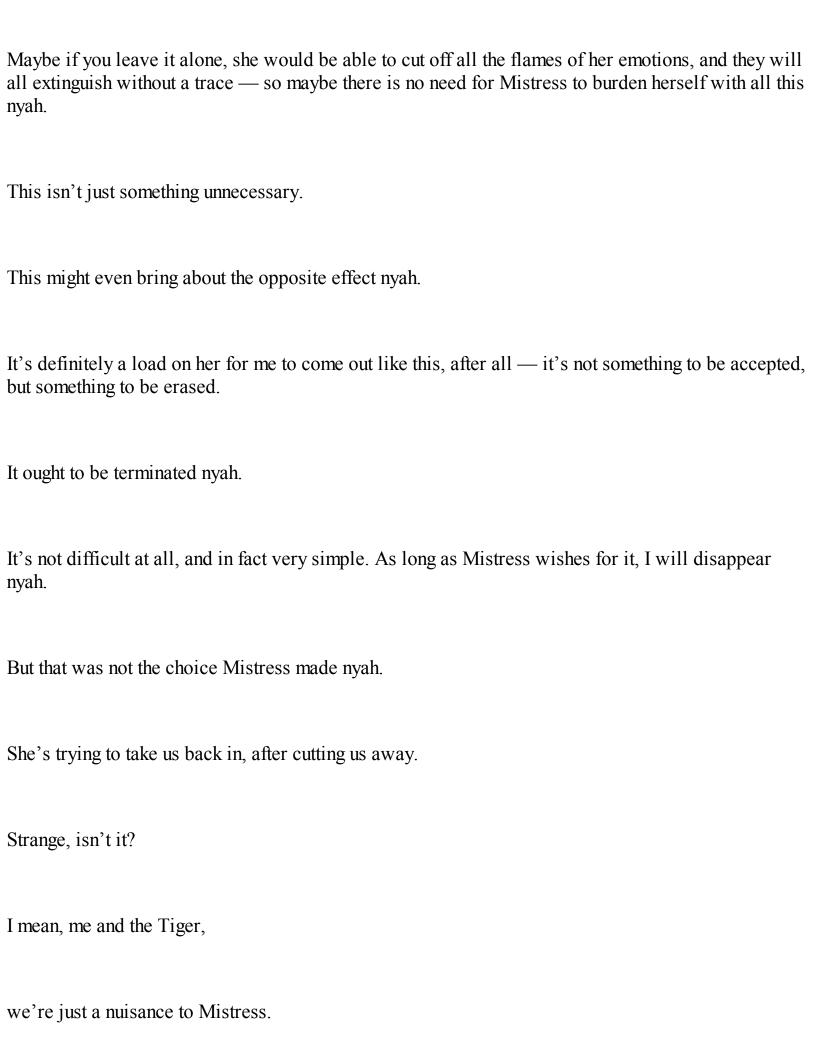
I left the note on the desk.
I actually have the memory of when Mistress was writing this letter, so there is in fact no reason for me to even read it nyah. So maybe I'm not one to talk about Mistress when I'm the one taking my time reading the whole thing nyah.
In any case, I've already got a grasp of the current situation nyah.
The Inflaming Tiger.
And the seat of the disease born by Mistress.
Everything's been detailed nyah.
That said, it looks like Mistress has still got a few misunderstandings nyah — though I suppose, seeing as she was conjecturing with a lack of data to base her decisions on, these mistakes couldn't have been avoided nyah.
Plus, both the style and context of the letter are all over the place by Mistress' standards — it definitely wasn't something written while she was calm nyah.
It isn't a situation to be hoping for full marks anyway, so getting an 80 for an A-grade is good enough nyah.
"But I just don't get this. Nyah, I mean, it's like I kind of do. But it feels like the question of why Mistress, who felt so jealous for homes and houses that she starting burning up, wouldn't feel envious about Senjougahara Hitagi and Araragi Koyomi going out, just sort of sticks out nyah."

The strongest emotion in Mistress is love nyah.
It doesn't even need explaining, if you just think back to the transformation before the Cultural Festival nyah.
Basically, the bastard's younger little sister was correct in first linking 'fire' to 'love'.
But in that case, the truth would be that the first thing Mistress ought to have burnt shouldn't have been the Hanekawa house or the tutorial school, but none other than Senjougahara Hitagi herself nyah —
Did Mistress not think of that nyah?
That can't be it nyah.
Was this what she meant by turning her eyes away nyah?
But if Mistress is really not turning her eyes away from the truth anyway, but staring right back at it, then she'll come to that reason eventually nyah.
Though I wonder if she can bear it nyah.
Bear that harsh reality — when she can no longer cut away her own heart.
"Love us both — and love yourself. I don't think she understands just how difficult that will be nyah. Mistress may be an extreme case, but everyone turns their eyes away from stress or envy to some degree nyah."

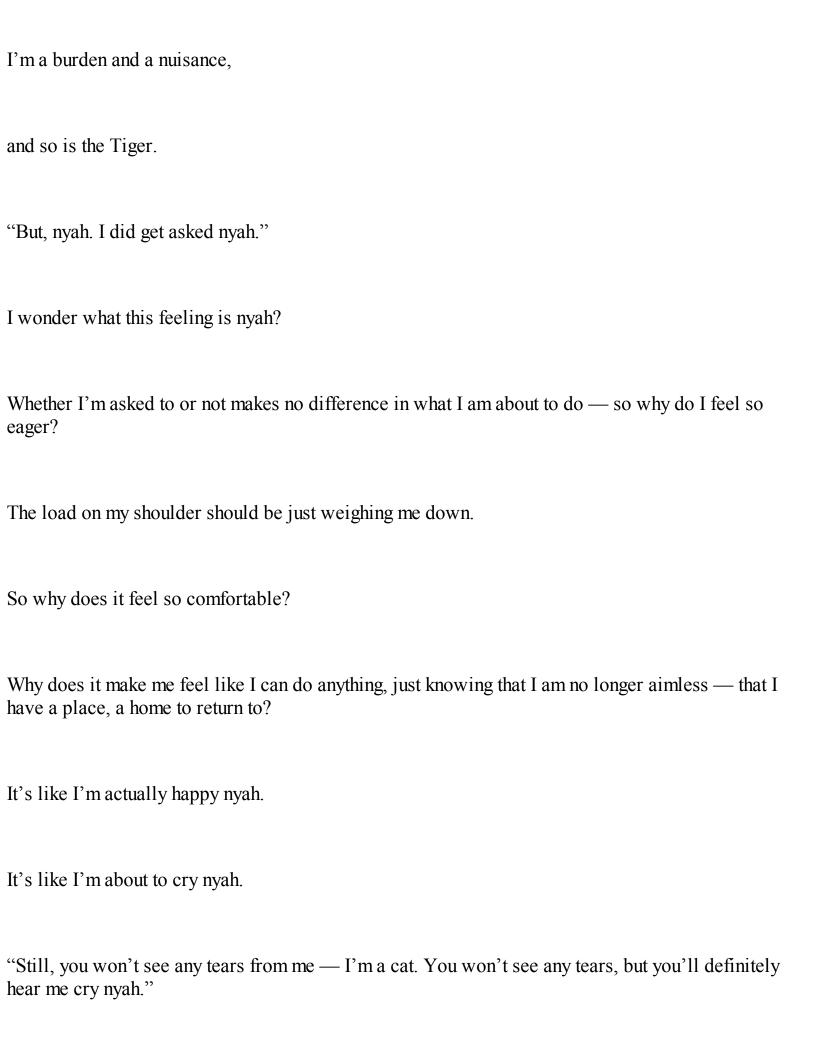


Alive', right?
That's crazy nyah.
I was planning on beating the crap out of it anyway. But now she's asking for even more nyah.
It's kind of like what that Aloha specialist said: "Don't think with violence. Abnormalities and humans have to coexist." That human bastard said stuff along those lines too nyah.
Even though we are both new types of abnormalities born from the same Mistress, unlike me, it has no abnormality as a base — it has no vessel nyah. In the end, Mistress just doesn't understand what that means, seeing as she's not an abnormality herself nyah.
She doesn't understand just how free it is, to be an abnormality described in no text, found in no record, and unmentioned by the mouth of any human nyah.
Frankly, I don't even want to imagine nyah.
Simply put — that Tiger has no blind spots, no weak points.
It would be tough just facing off against it, not to mention bringing it back nyah.
I will have to face it directly,
and crush its strengths nyah.





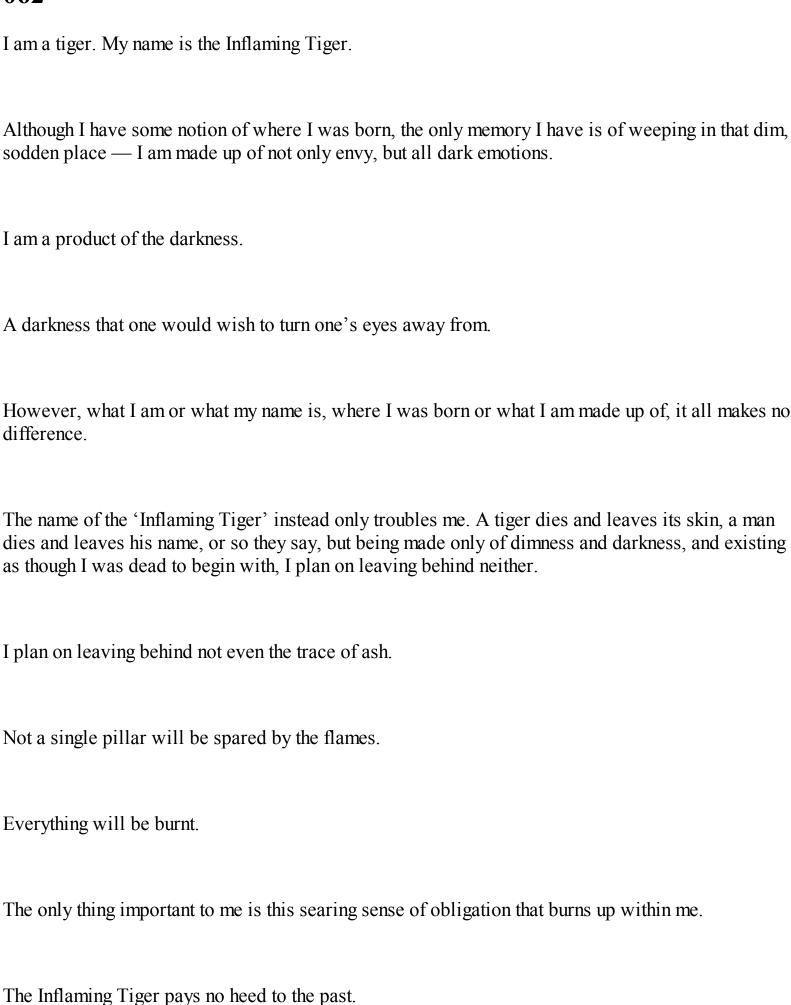


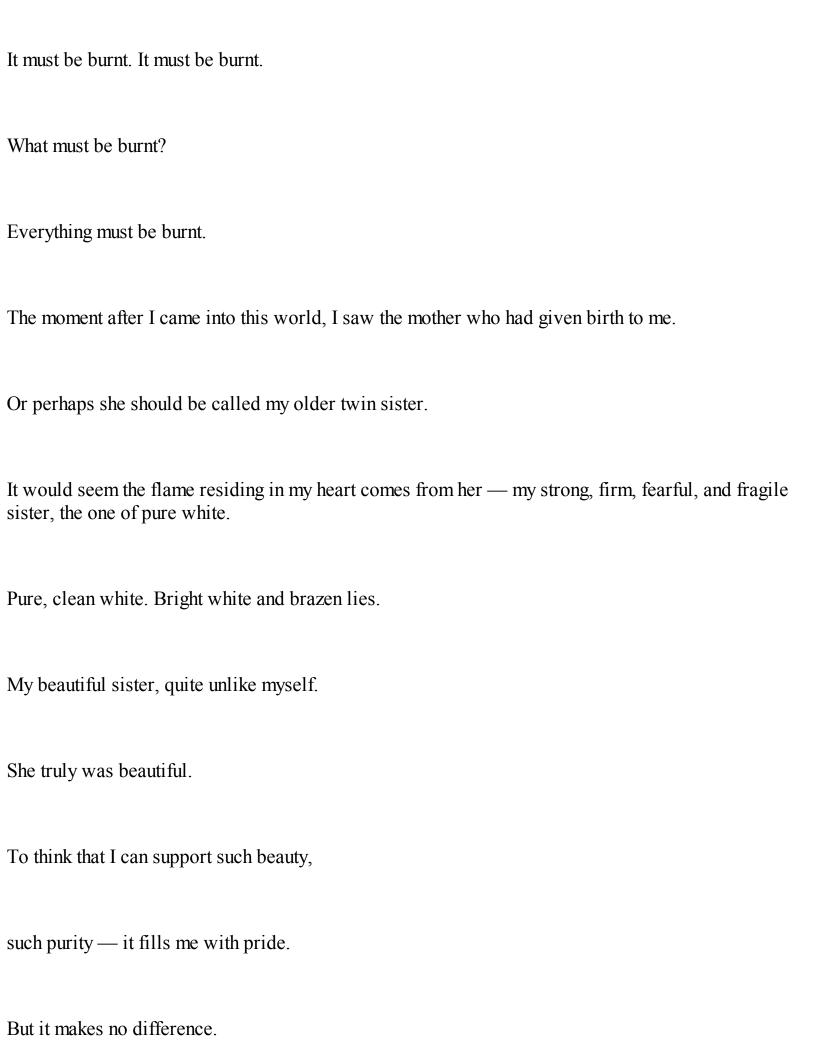


Mee-ow.
I purred — and opened the lock to the window.
My coming and going got found out by Mistress because I'd forgotten to lock this window last night (though seeing as there was a lot of other evidence, I guess she would have found out anyway) but I won't be coming back to this room again as myself anyway, so there's no need to care about this now nyah.
Apparently, Mistress picked the clothes I am wearing now because they are easy to move in, but to me, it's easiest to move while I am totally naked nyah. But that wouldn't be good for Mistress (and I feel bad about going out wearing only her underwear during Golden Week) so I am just going to accept this favor of hers nyah.
But I'm still not wearing anything on my feet, thank you.
Just as I put my feet onto the sash of the window though, I thought of something nyah.
I suppose this is what people call a 'whim' nyah.
Just like how Mistress will no longer be herself, I will no longer be myself no matter how this ends nyah.
I'm not just talking about the individual differences between the Black Hanekawas — after this, I won't ever come out again.
After all the postponing in May and June, the abnormality that I am will finally be resolved nyah.

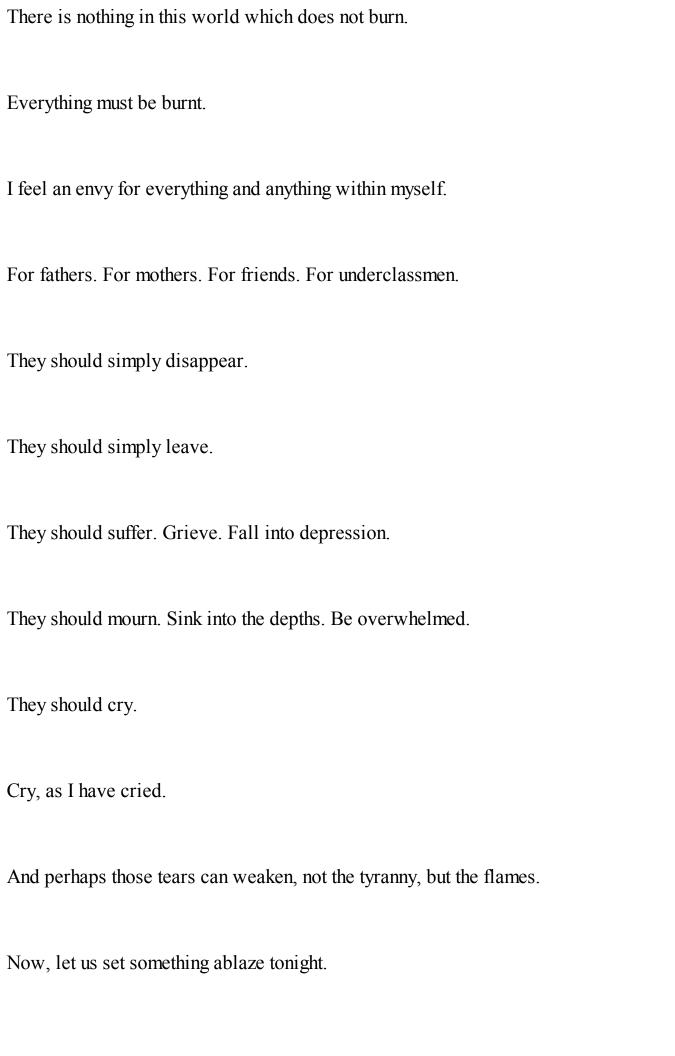
In that case, I'll leave behind a few lines too.
Though I guess, in my case, it's more like a will nyah.
Nyah, never mind.
I'm not going to die or disappear. I'm just going to go back home.
Even though I'm pretty late nyah.
"So, time to serve Mistress one last time nyah."
I don't plan on writing anything long nyah.
After quickly scribbling one more line after Mistress' handwriting with a pencil, I finally leapt out of the completely open window and into the moonlit night.
"I'm off."

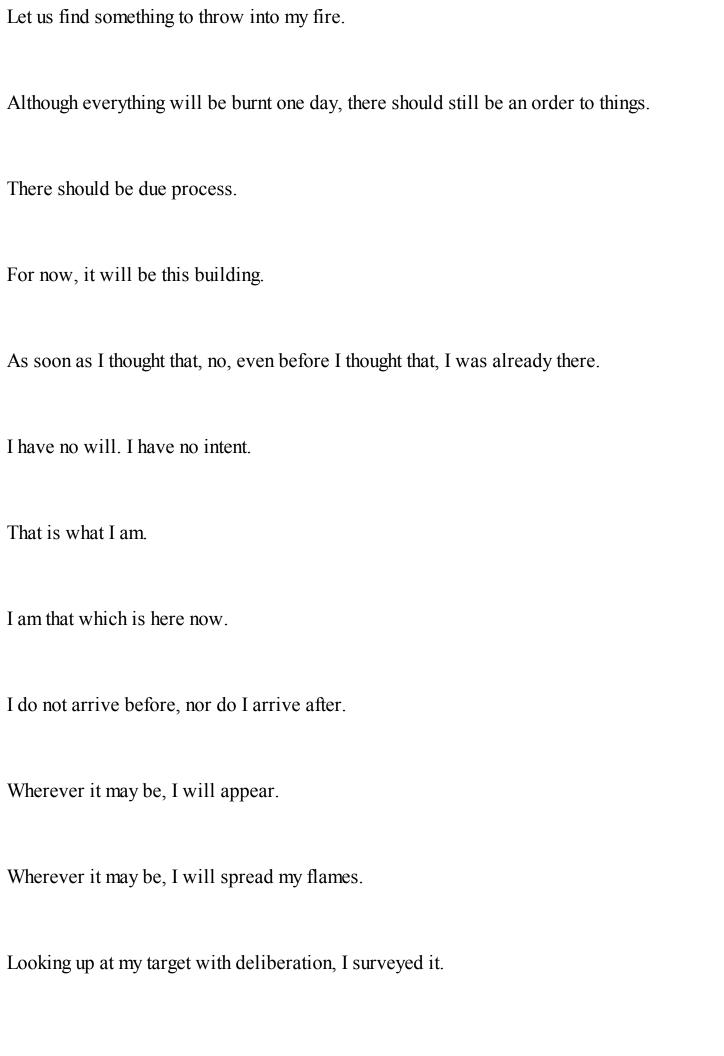
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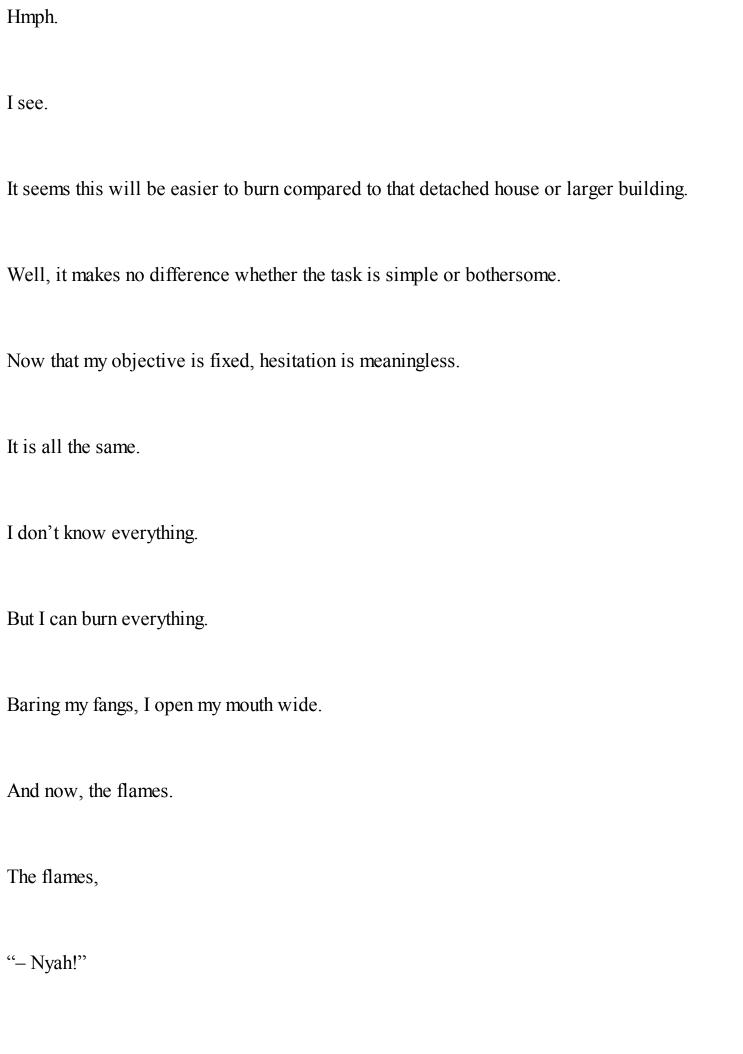




It makes no difference as to how the fire is lit.
It makes no difference as to how the blaze burns.
The only thing within me is a sense of obligation.
If I possess no sense of 'acting on her behalf', then what I do will not harm her, unlike what the cat also born of her had said.
I have no establishing characteristics.
You could say I am merely a flame.
A white flame is what I am.
I have been given neither consciousness nor will. It may appear that I am thinking and speaking right now, but it is simply an act, nothing more than a pretense.
I am a natural phenomenon.
I simply burn that which ought to be burnt.
No.

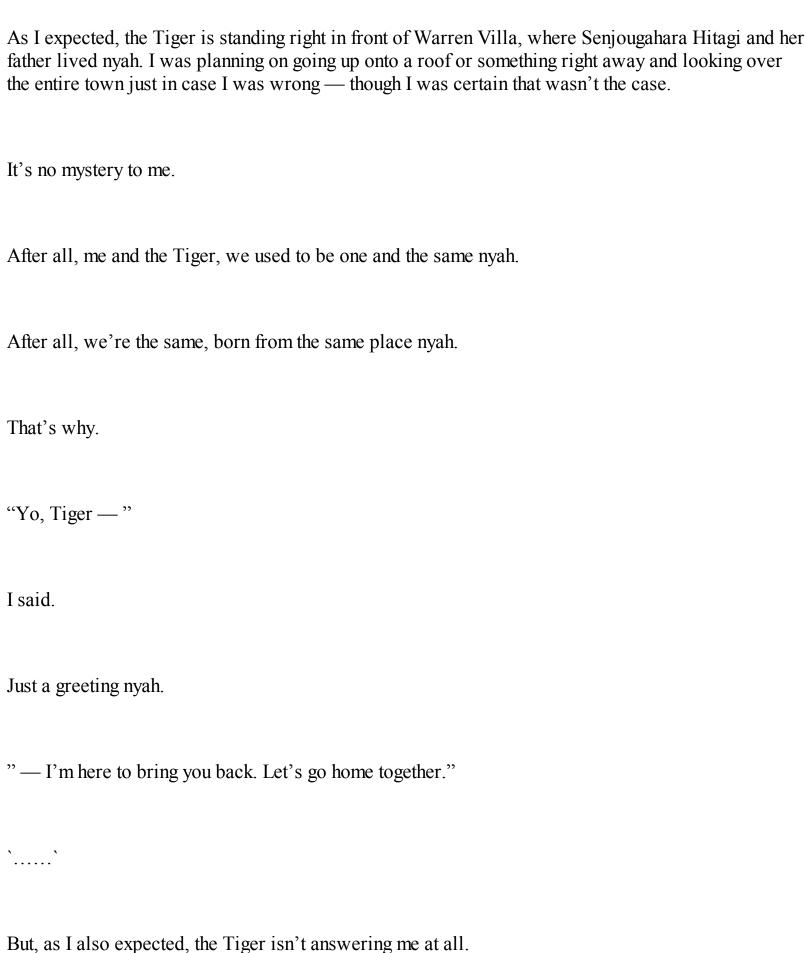


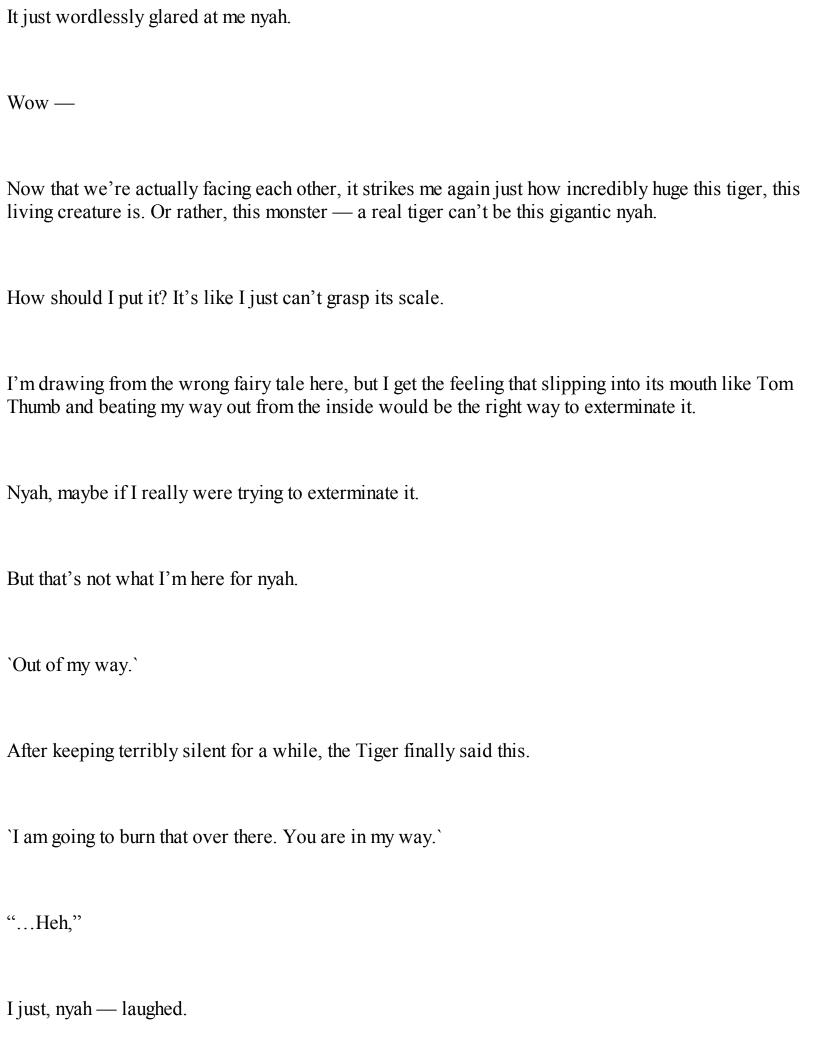




but then,
in that instant, between me and my target — there came a cat.
A young silver-haired cat fell from the sky, as though having sprouted wings upon its back, and cut into my path.

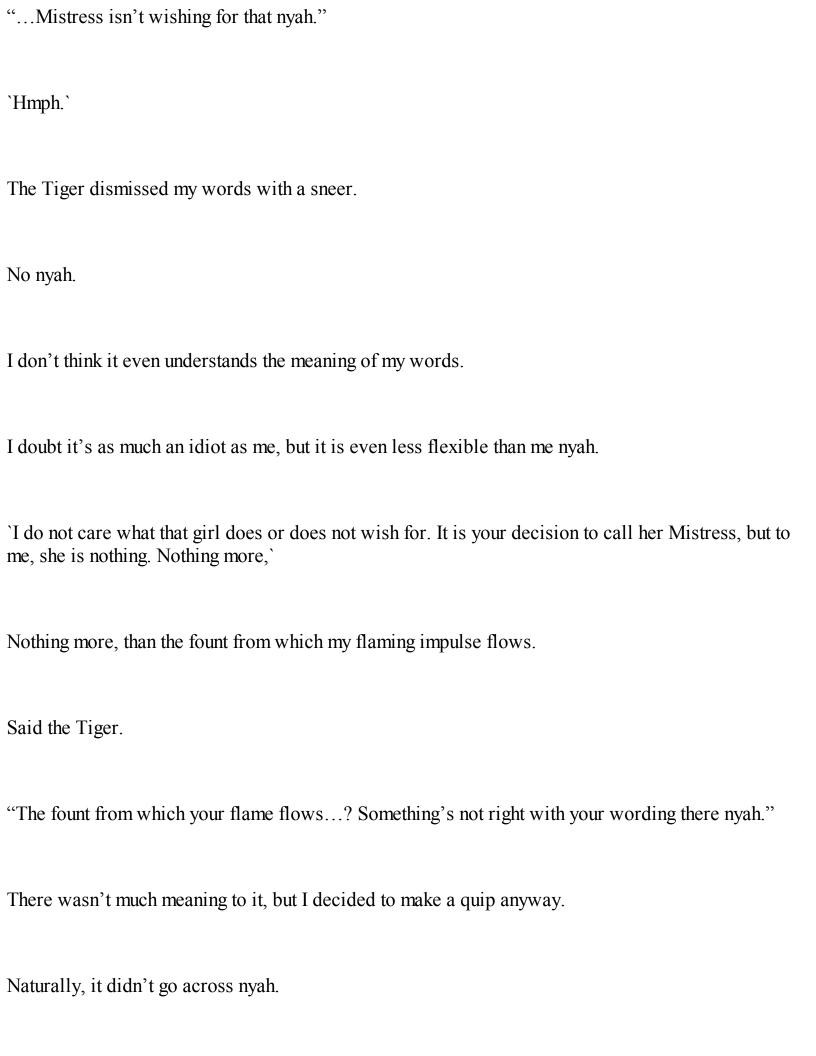
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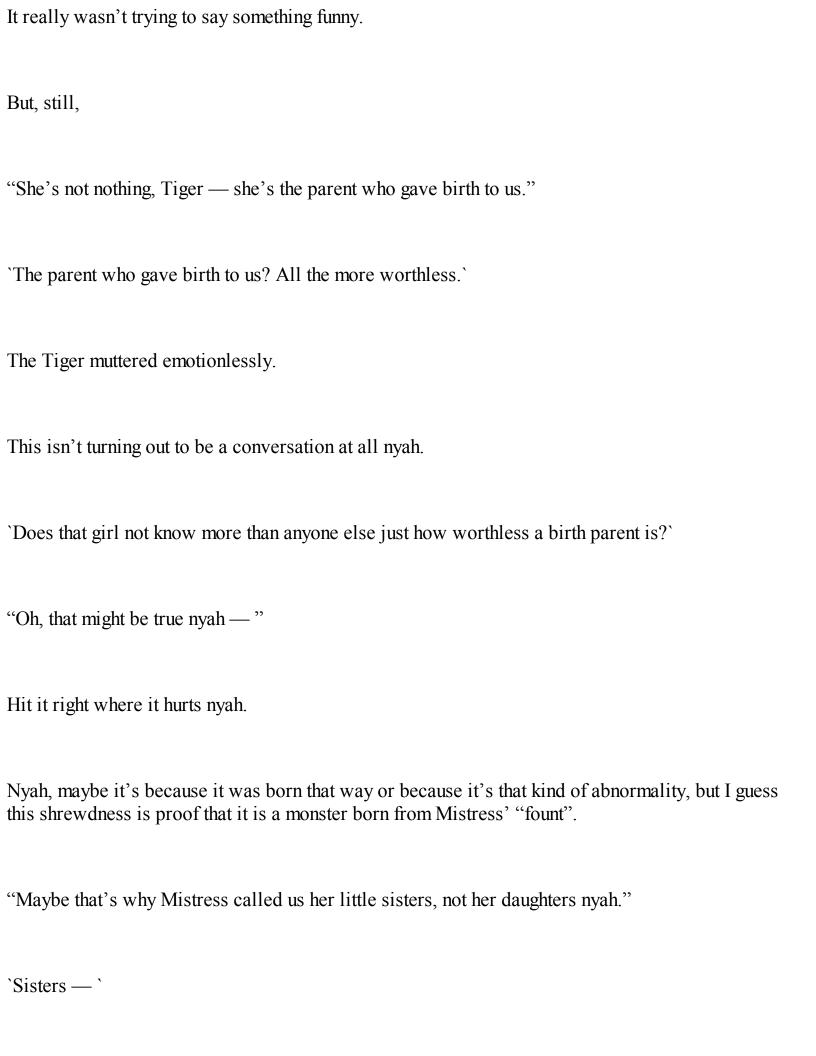




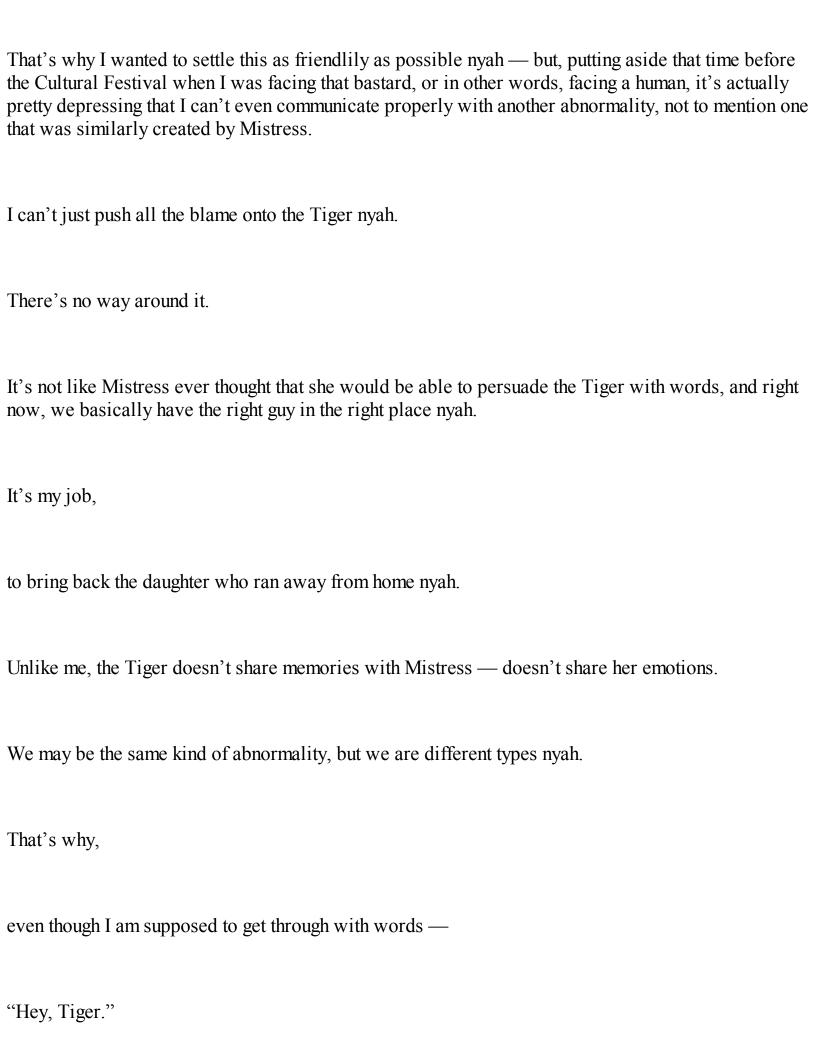
It wasn't really a strained laugh, no, I just couldn't hold it in nyah.
I wonder why; it looks gigantic, and I can just feel the intimidation coming off it, so the words just now felt very serious — and the last time I met it, I was scared on the inside when I talked with it.
But that was wrong nyah.
It's — not serious at all.
It's just emotional.
Like a newborn baby, it just hasn't mastered the skills of conversation and communication — that's why we couldn't hold a conversation nyah.
I say newborn, but of course, it really was only born a few days ago, so it's only natural — an original abnormality, huh.
An original with no history nyah.
Something Mistress cut away from her own heart.
A new type of abnormality.
Still, it's actually not very rare to see original or independently created abnormalities — there was once an artist called Yoriyama Sekien who made a living off drawing works depicting various spectres, but sometimes, among all these traditional phantoms, he would nonchalantly slip in a

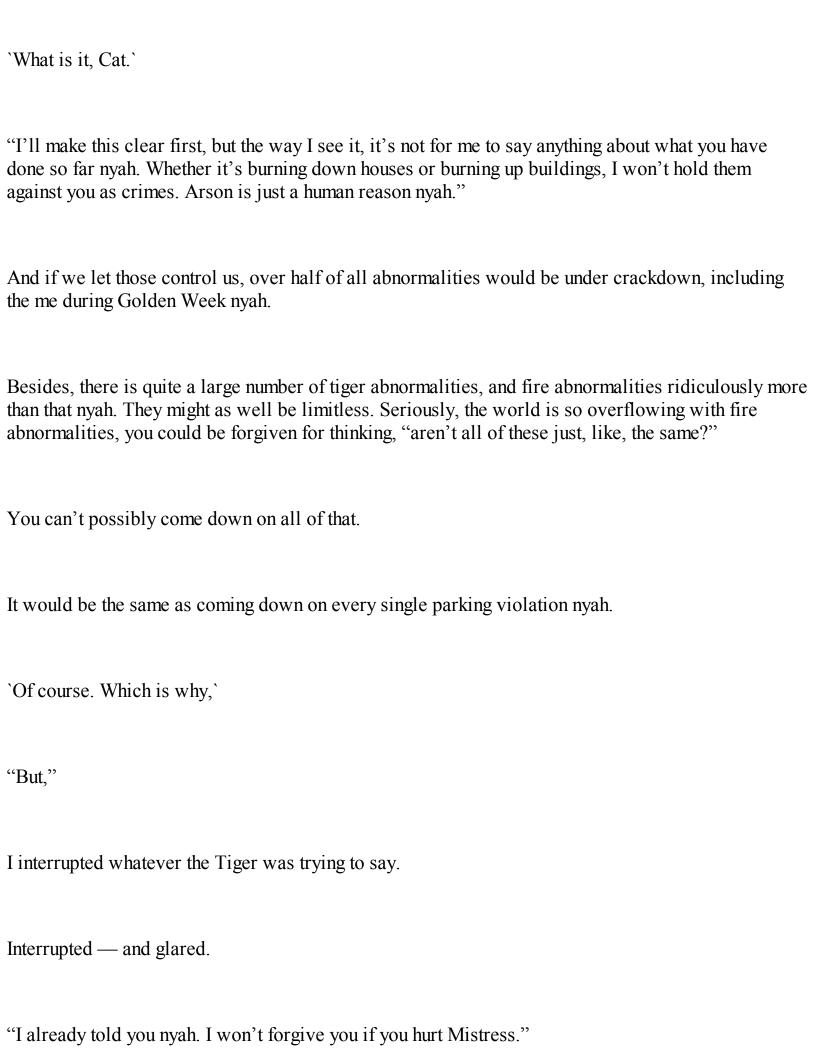
monster of his own creation nyah.
That's because, whatever the time period, a creator always longs to indepedently create something that can rival the traditional nyah.
Of course, making said something which could rival a traditional monster would take a ridiculously vast amount of talent, or rather, energy nyah.
In Mistress' case, that energy,
would be her stress, or her dark emotions nyah — it's pretty ironic that the Tiger born from those emotions would come into this world lacking emotions, actually.
Or is that wrong nyah?
Maybe it doesn't lack emotion because it was just born, but because Mistress unconsciously, intentionally created the Tiger to be that way nyah.
It's exactly because it is born of these emotions,
that she gave birth to a tiger with its emotions carved away.
Gave birth, to a wild beast.
'It will be burnt. I will burn it. Out of my way. It is all too late. I will burn it all. First, I will burn that house.'

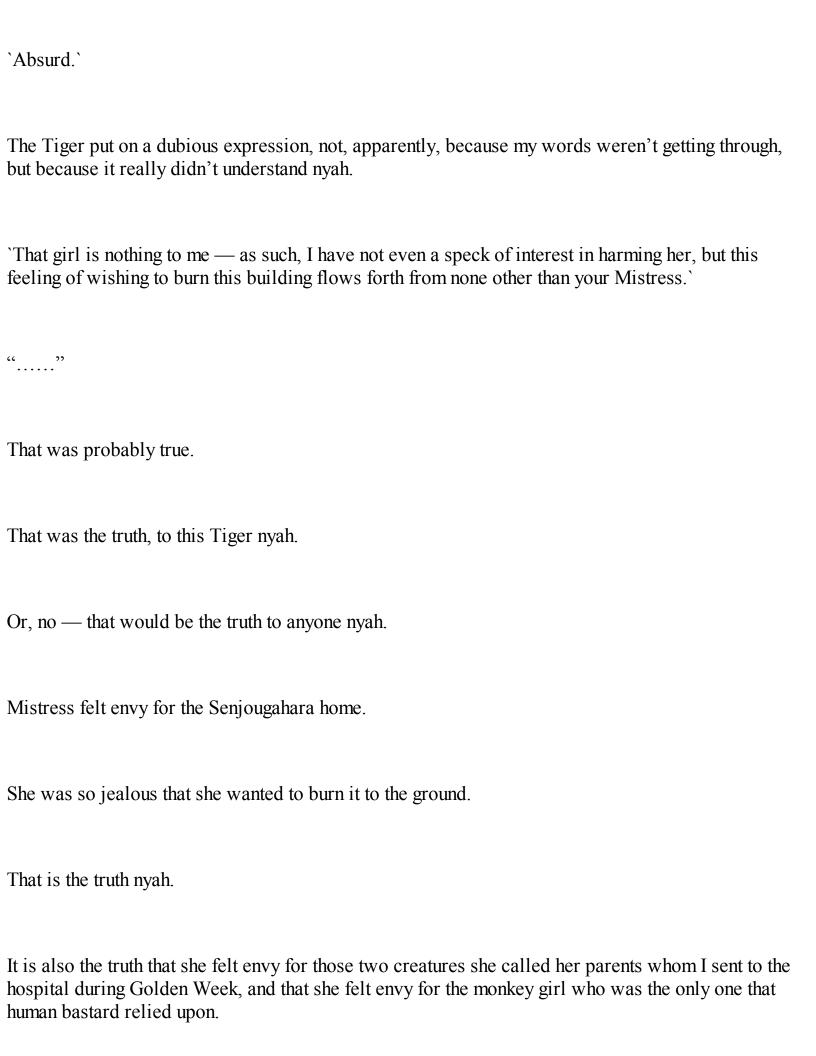


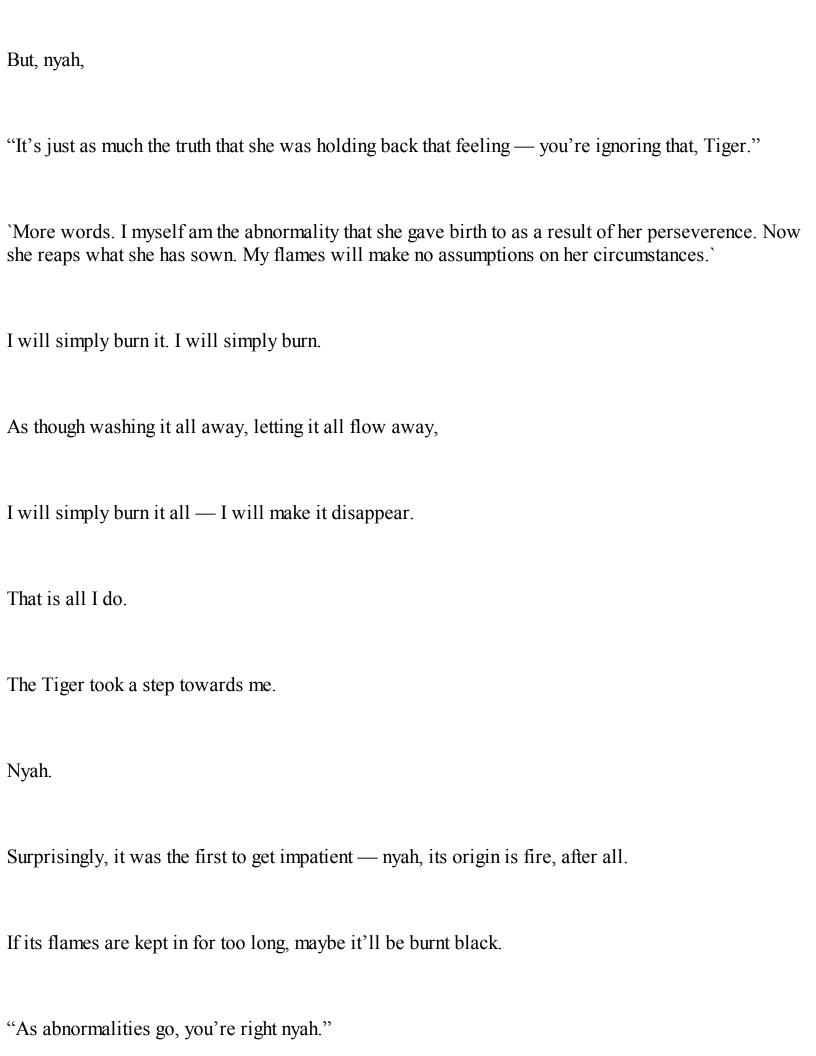


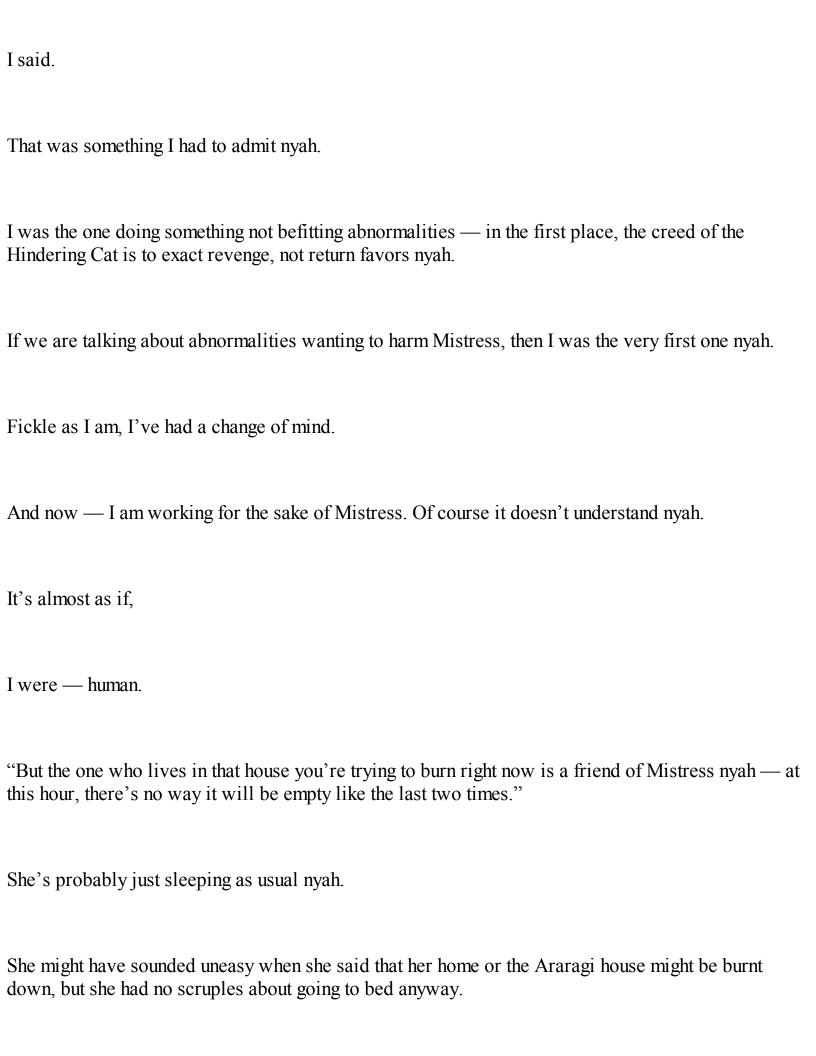


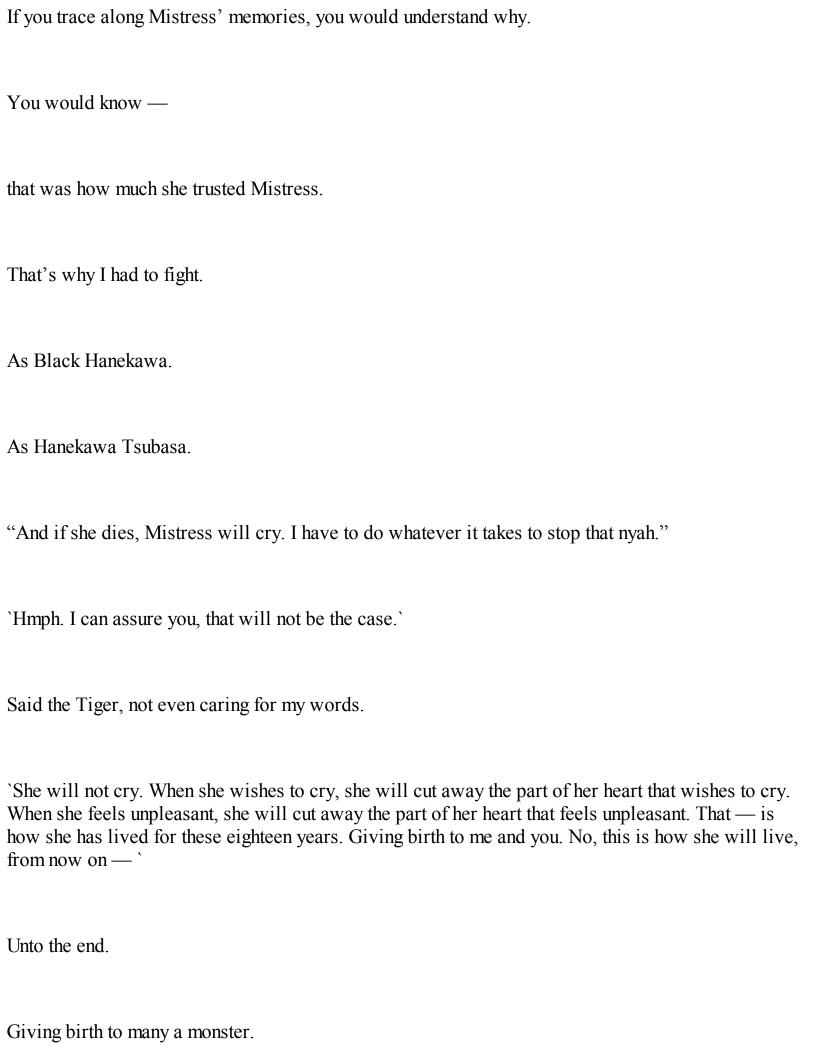










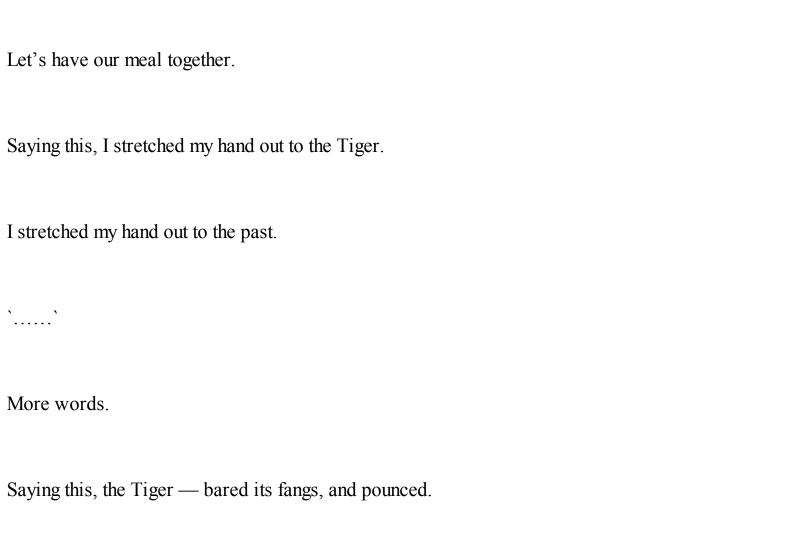


With only herself remaining pure white — remaining beautiful.
Hating and resenting none.
Kind and loving towards all.
Living beautifully.
Continuing on, as the 'real deal'.
That's what the Tiger said.
"That's not true."
And then — I,
no,
not me nyah — not me.
I,

I,

Hanekawa Tsubasa — denied this.
"I've decided to end all of that. I probably will hate. I probably will resent. I won't be able to be kind to everyone like I've always done before, and I won't be able to love everyone. I might be hated, and I might be despised. I might get angry more easily, and I might not be able to forgive. I will probably be annoyed and frustrated, too. I might be so smart anymore. I might not be able to laugh anymore. I might not be able to stop myself from crying anymore."
That's right.
This really will disappoint Araragi-kun.
Unmistakably, I would not be able to overlook his mischievousness as I have always done — but, considering the one we are dealing with, perhaps he would find that worth celebrating.
Because that's the kind of person he is.
Because he is kind.
Oh — I am so jealous.
"But that's all right. I'm all right with that."
I am sick of this.
Of turning my back on reality, and pushing the role of the muddied villain onto the two of you.





## 064

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Basically, the abnormality which I am based on, the Hindering Cat, really isn't something you can count on in a fight. I am a ridiculously weak, low-level phantom nyah.

Not the front line-type nyah.

Facing off against the Tiger, free and unrestricted by any base, is just a little out of my style nyah (I know 'style' is the wrong term to use here, but so what?! As long as people get what you mean who cares if you misuse it! It's friggin' annoying to say 'out of my league' every single time! I'm on the brink of an eat-or-be-eaten situation here nyah!)

Besides, it might be normal to think that I'm the elder and the Tiger is the younger just because I was born first, but we are abnormalities nyah.

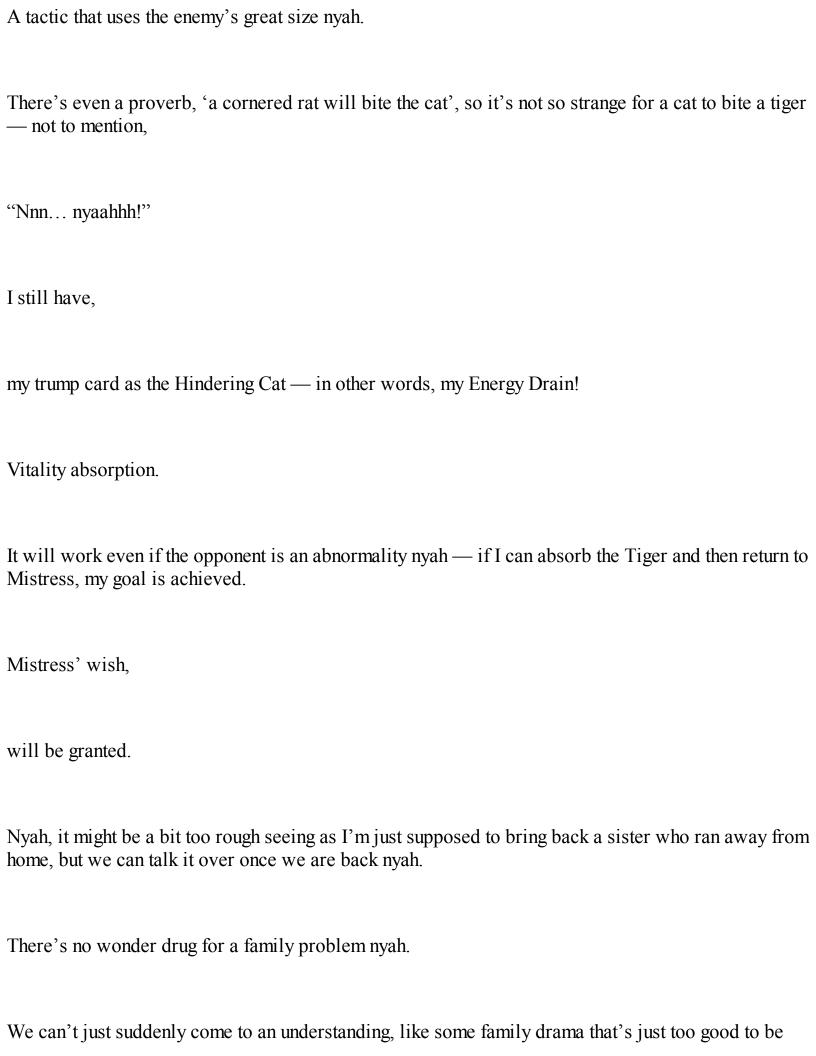
Mistress described the Araragi sisters and their bastard of a brother as differently-aged triplets, and me and Mistress and the Tiger, we're pretty like that too — but it's possible that the Tiger is not in fact the youngest nyah.

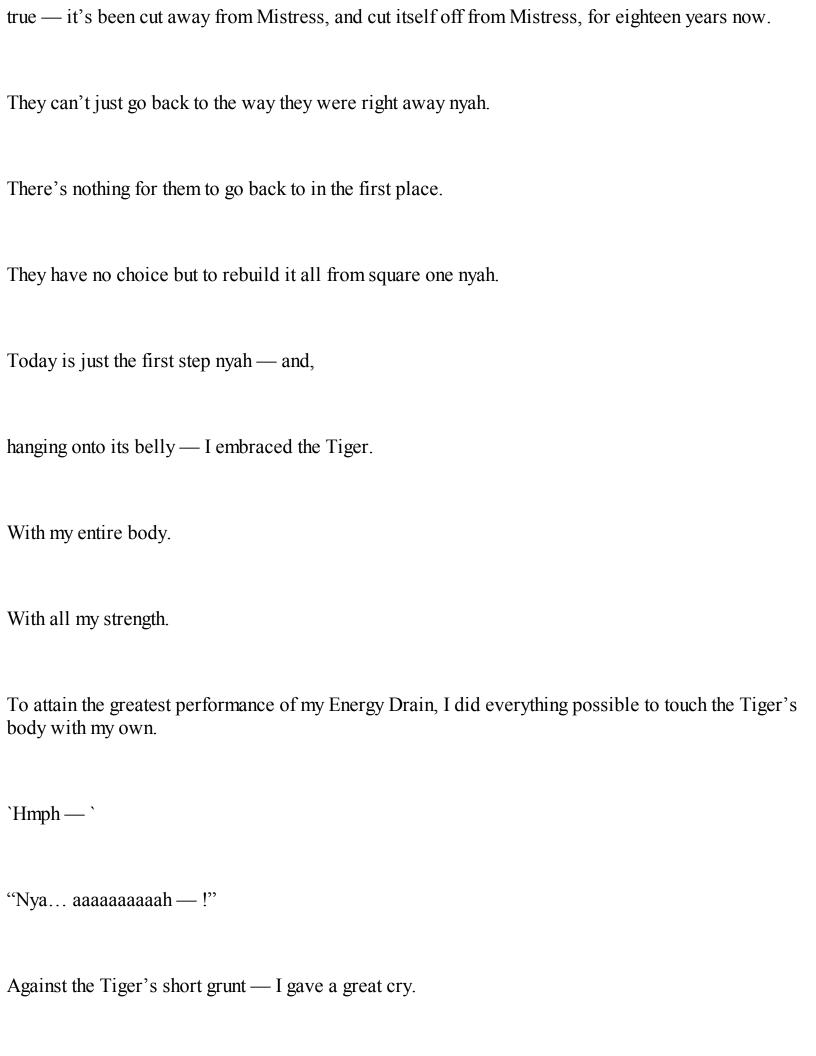
After all, stress is something born from the conflicts between emotions — if Mistress was the fount of the Tiger, then maybe, the Tiger was the fount of me nyah.

I was only born first. Maybe the Tiger had been there before that.

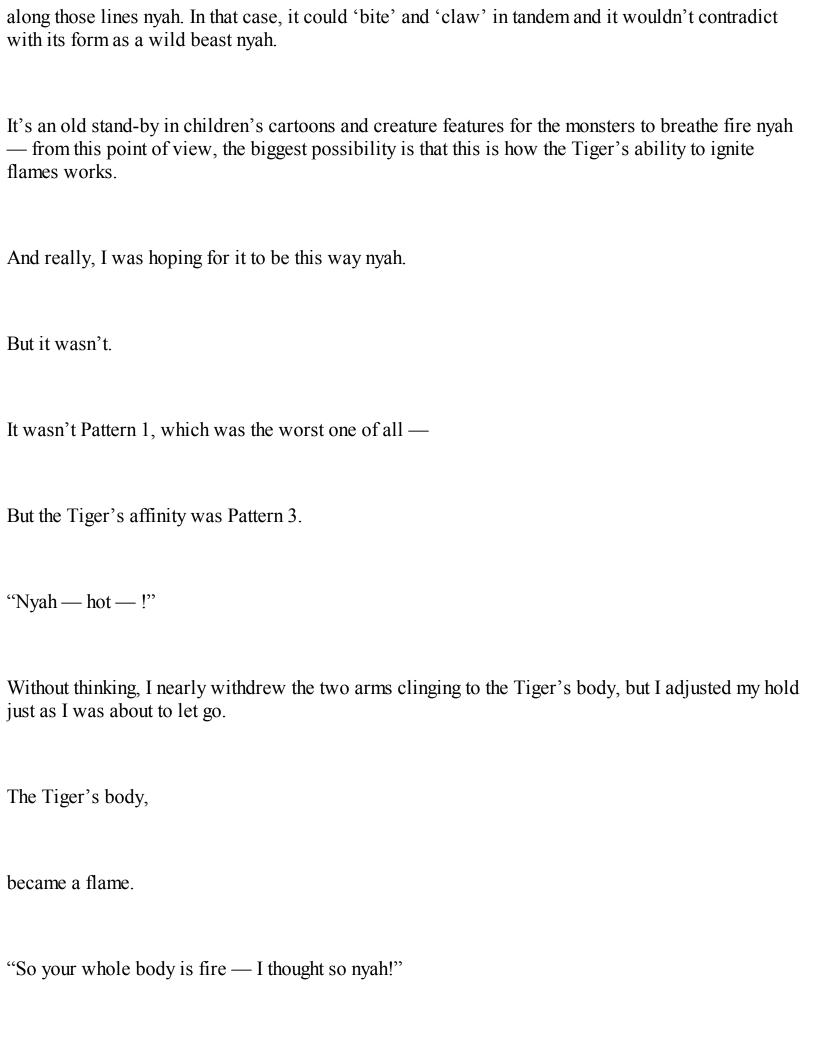
That's why, to make a very simple comparison, the Tiger should be much higher ranked an abnormality than Black Hanekawa, and more annoyingly, the Tiger is the next in the product line nyah.

When it comes to computers and machines, don't later units tend to be superior?
By the same logic, there's no way I can take down the Tiger if we fight normally nyah.
Compared to when she gave birth to me, Mistress has gotten more deeply skilled at 'creating abnormalities' nyah — like the note said, that's why it turned out to be a tiger nyah.
Anyone could clearly see who the winner and the loser would be in a fight between a cat and a tiger nyah.
Anyone would be able to see it.
It makes me want to turn my back to it nyah.
But Mistress has decided not to turn her eyes away — decided to stand up against it, so I can't exactly turn tail and run nyah.
And besides, the Hindering Cat,
doesn't have a tail nyah —
"phew,"
I escaped the fangs of the Tiger by a hair's breadth — but as the saying goes, 'you can't catch the cubs without entering the tiger's den', so I slipped under its huge body nyah.

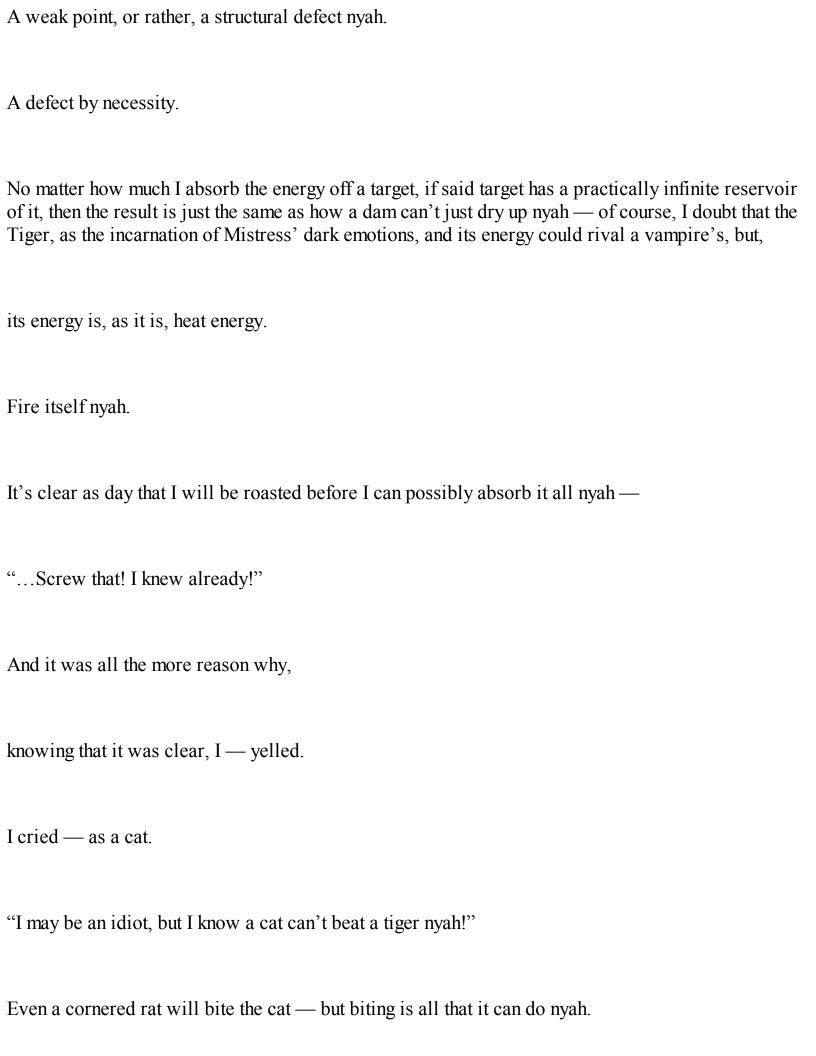


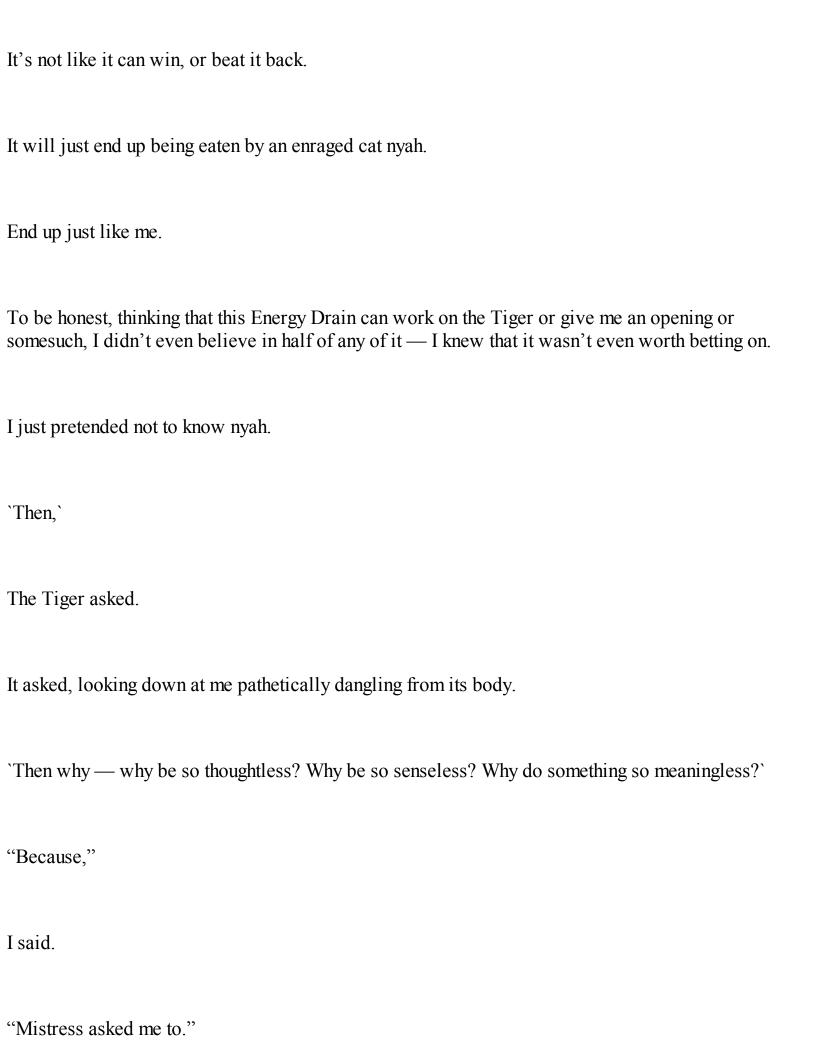


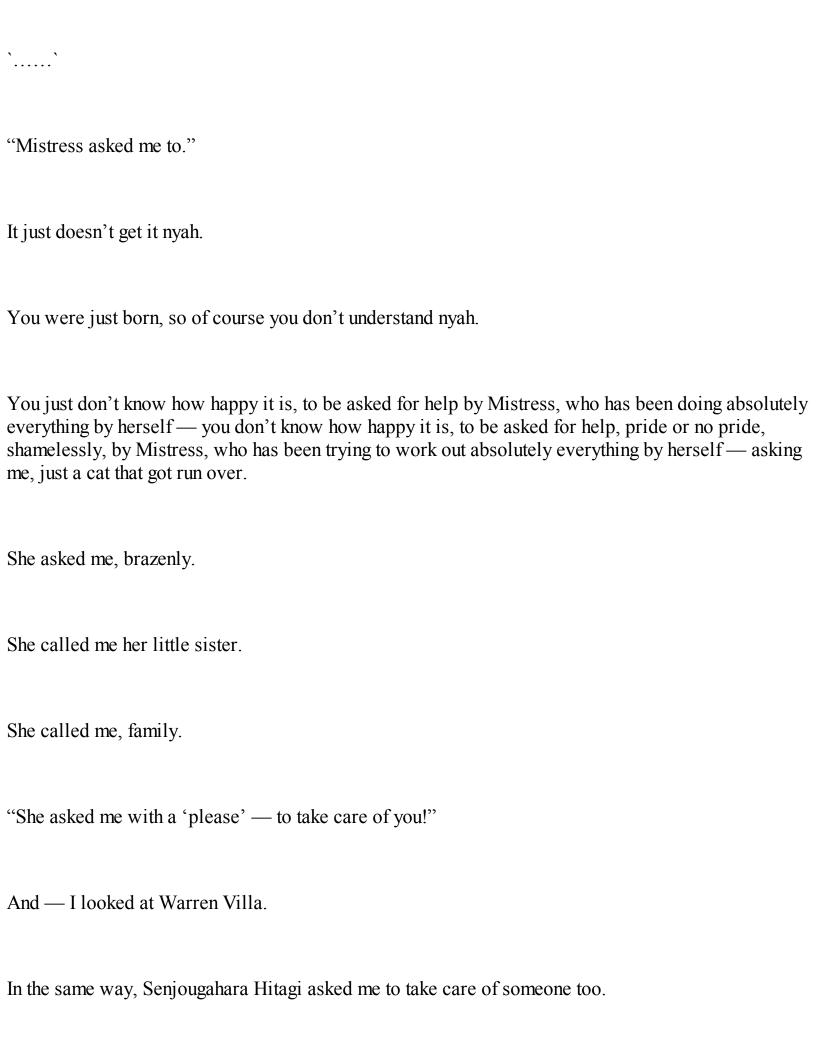


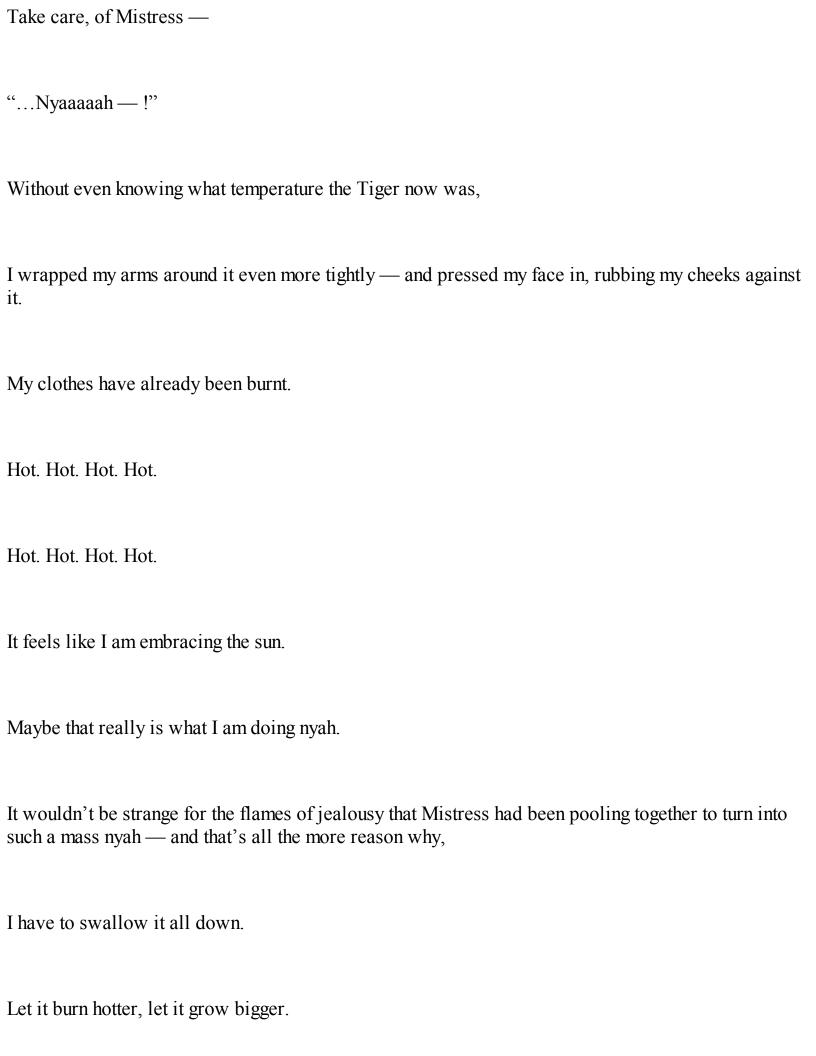


It's not like there aren't abnormalities that can breathe fire, but this is the standard, after all nyah!
Stickler for rules that she is, of course Mistress followed an older example when creating an abnormality!
What she created was unpretentious, and orthodox —
She created a will o' the wisp nyah!
`Do not be thoughtless, Cat.`
Said the Tiger.
`It is the law of beasts to fear the flame, but to embrace it — even as a beast, your actions err, much less as an abnormality.`
It's — totally composed nyah.
Of course.
It's for the same reason why, even when I carried that vampire and my Energy Drain involuntarily activated regardless of who was being touched — Oshino Shinobu was still doing fine nyah.
Basically, the ability of Energy Drain, which appeared invincible at first glance, did in fact have a weak point.



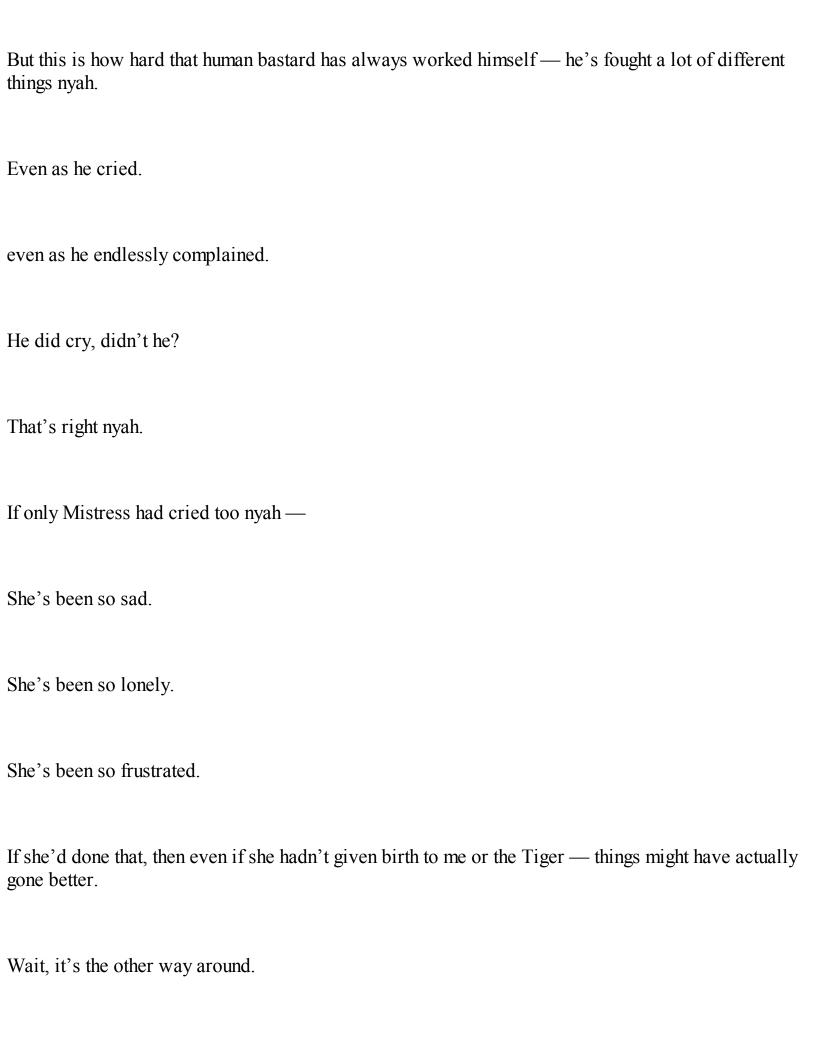


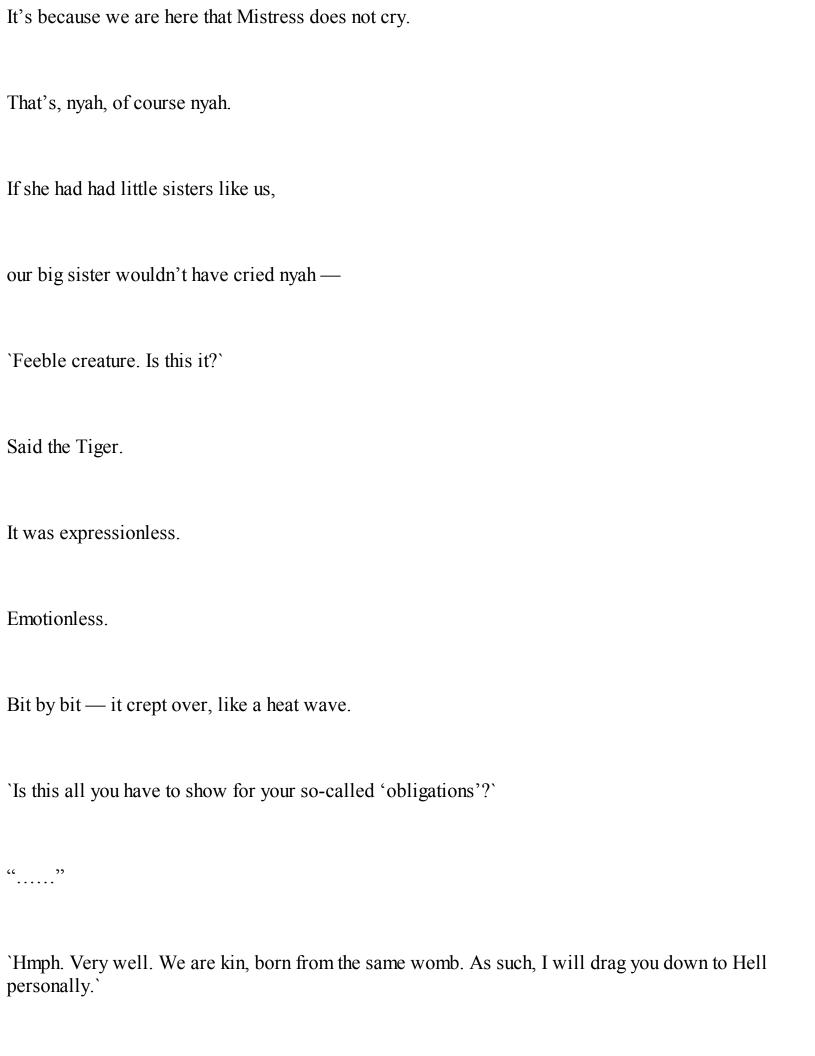


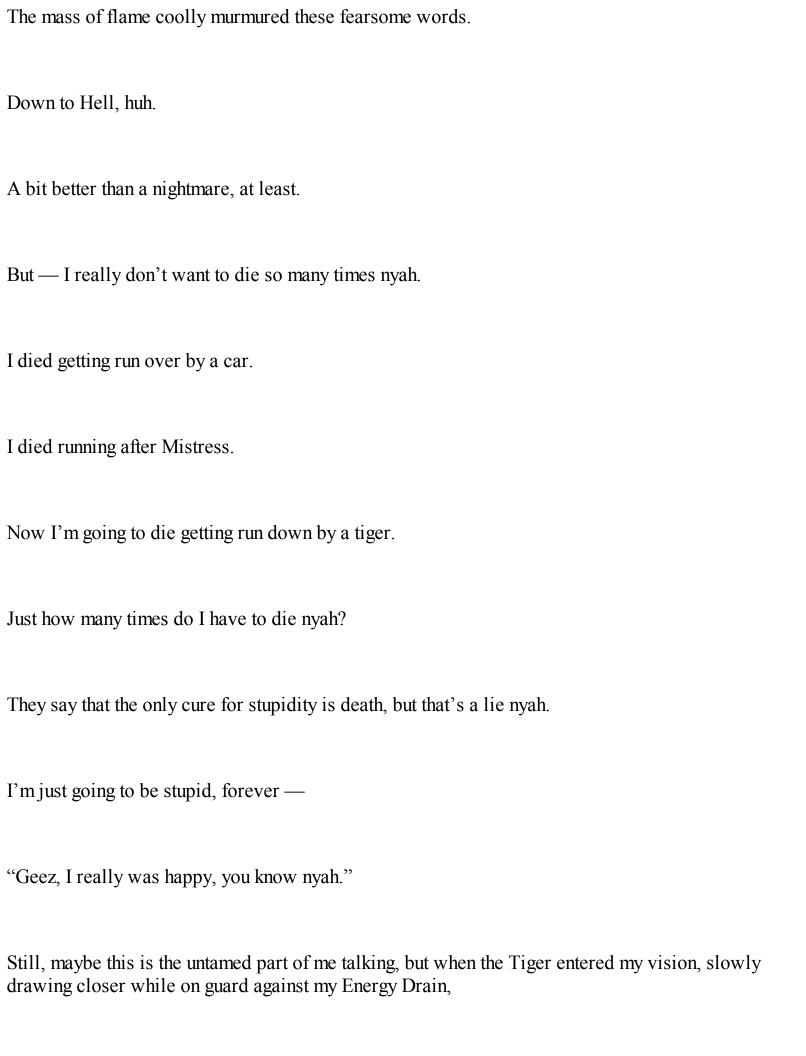


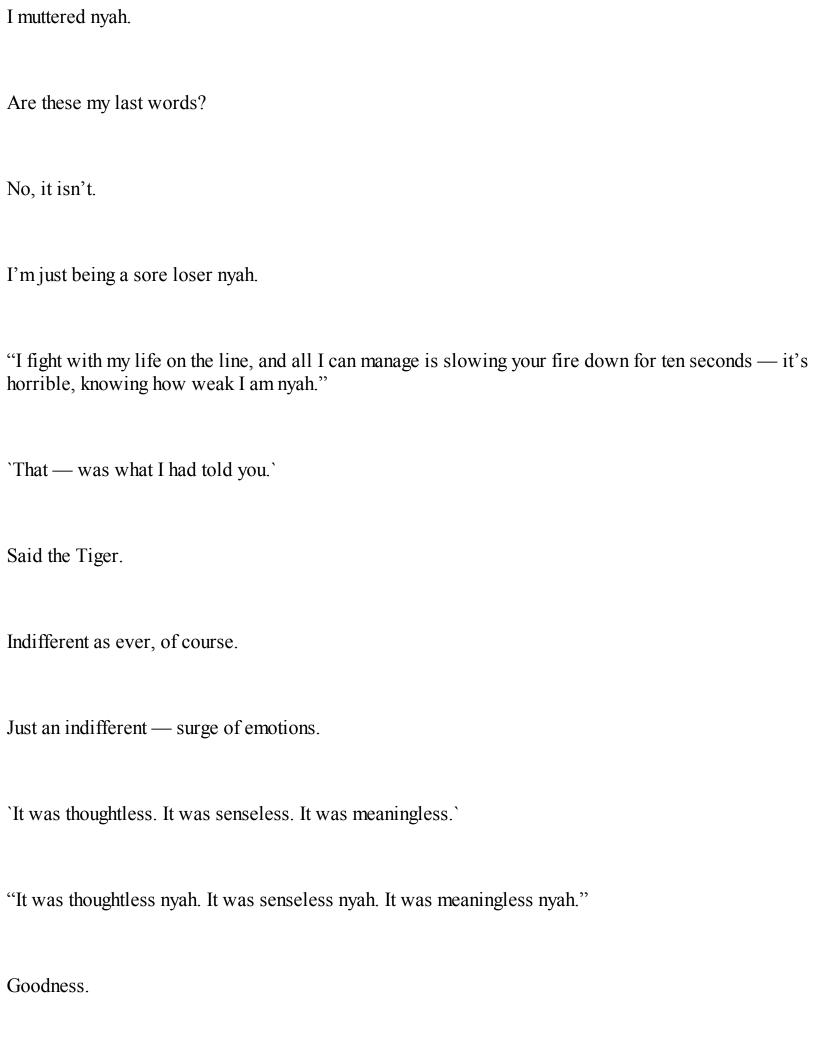


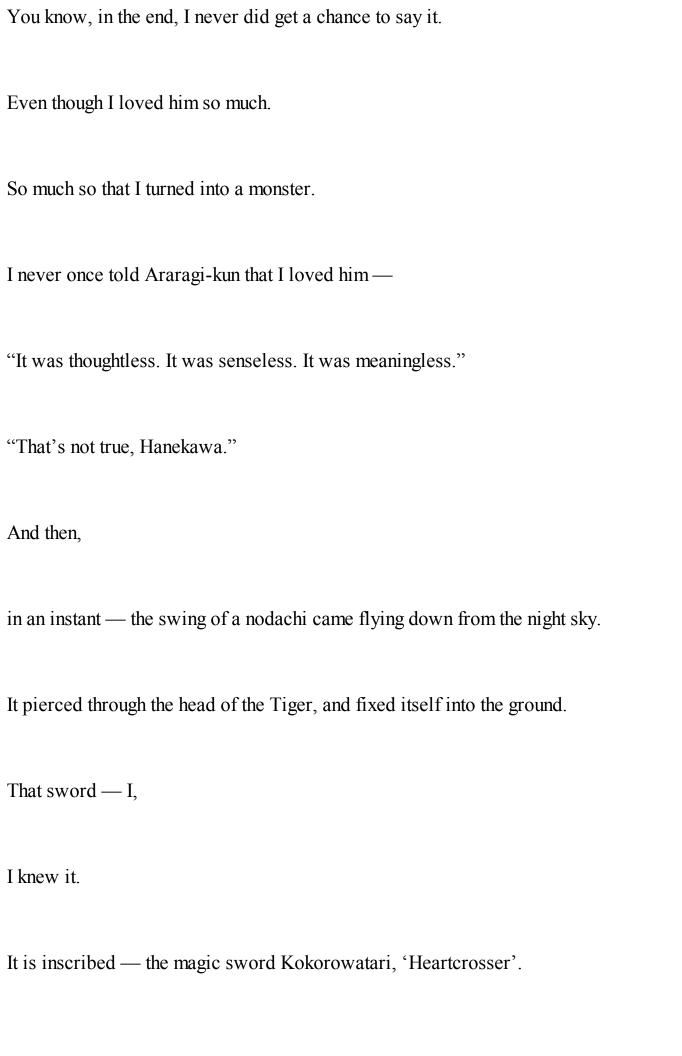
My whole body is practically on fire right now.
If I lose consciousness now and change places with Mistress, she will die instantly from the burns all over her body — it's because I am an abnormality that I can still handle this temperature nyah.
"Ugh"
But that was some serious power.
There really is no comparison nyah.
Speaking of which, there is apparently this abnormality good at sumo called a Ghost Flame (What's the deal with that, huh?) — but the Tiger had a monstrous strength that was superior to that nyah.
That son of a bitch. Which, in this case, is also an odd thing for me to say.
I managed to hold on to my consciousness, barely, but with just that one attack I can't even move my body anymore nyah.
Not a finger nyah.
What's the matter with me?
Even after getting all fired up and bracing myself, I still ended up like this — that's just pathetic nyah.
Nyahaha.

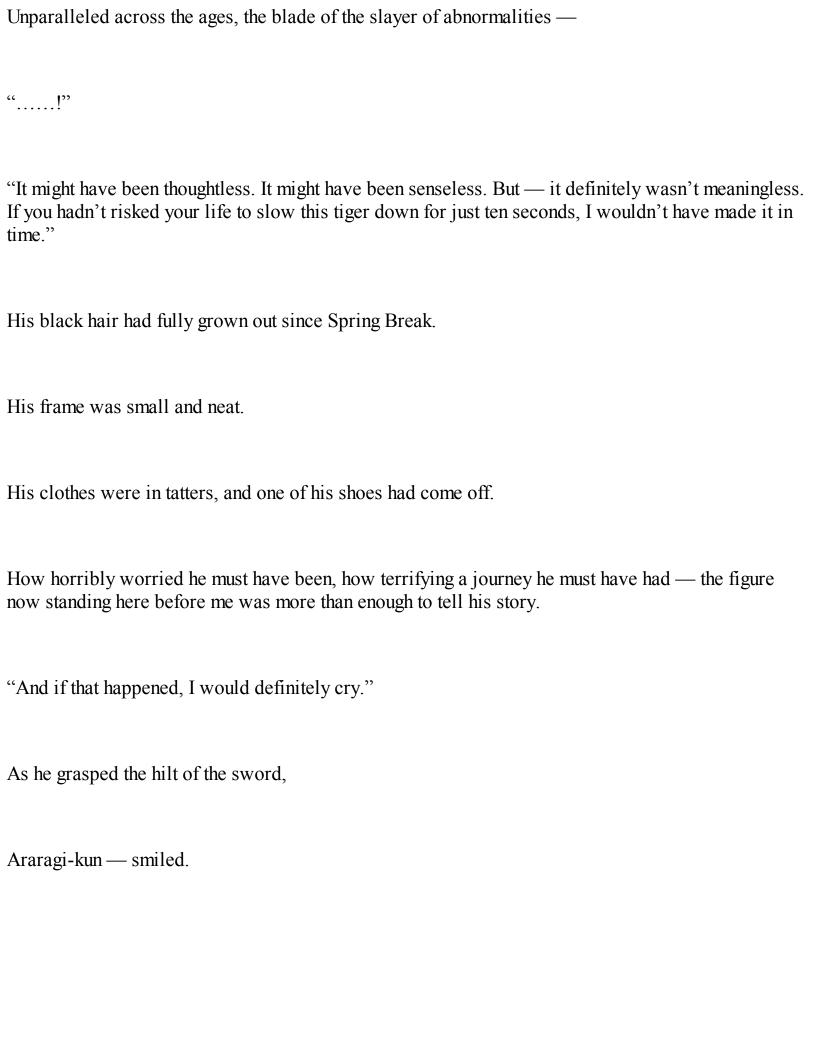


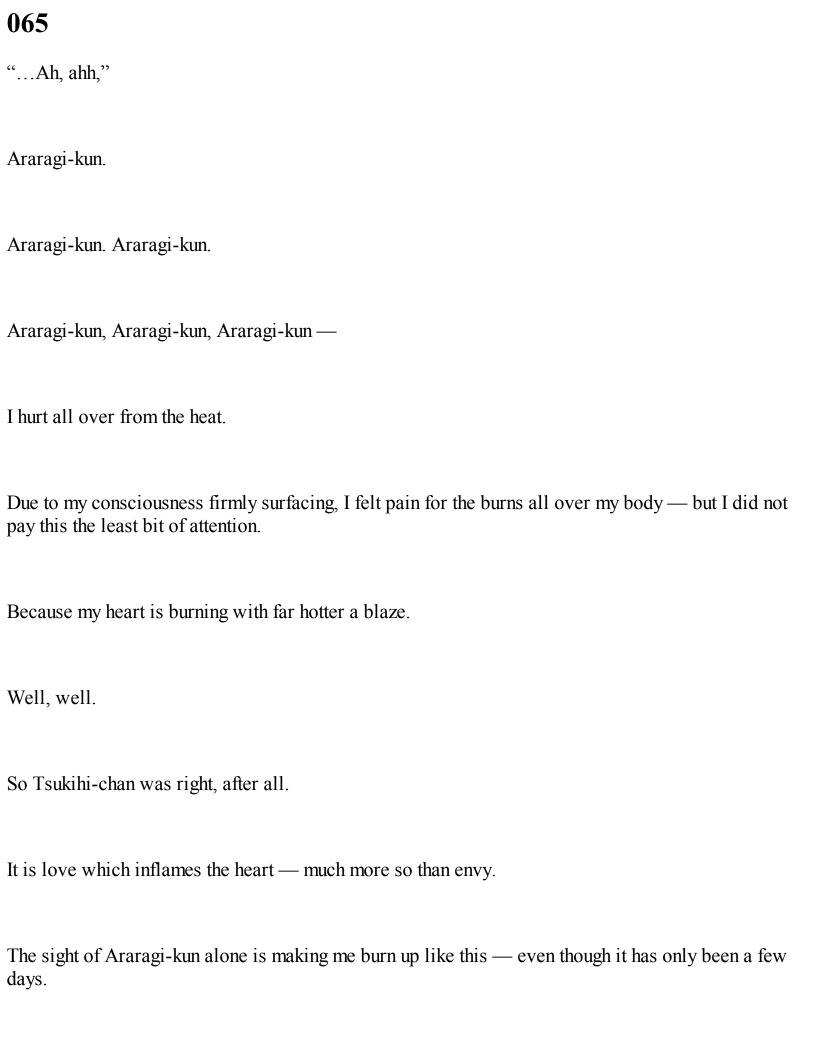


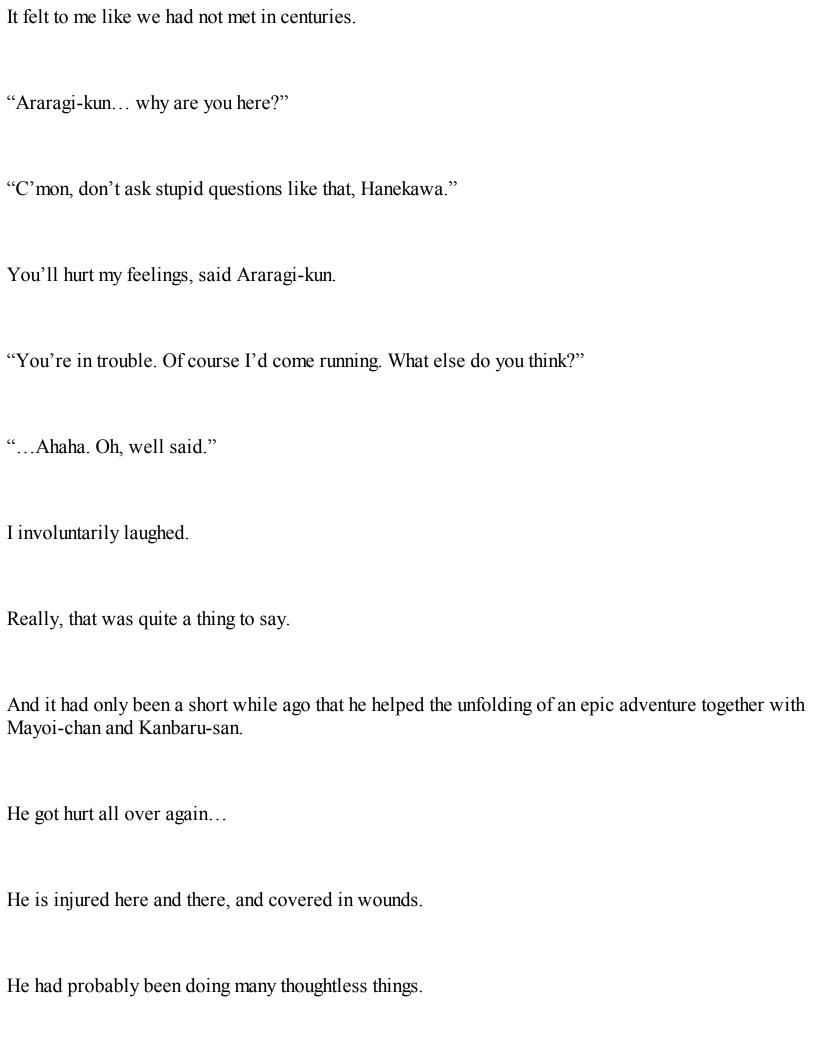


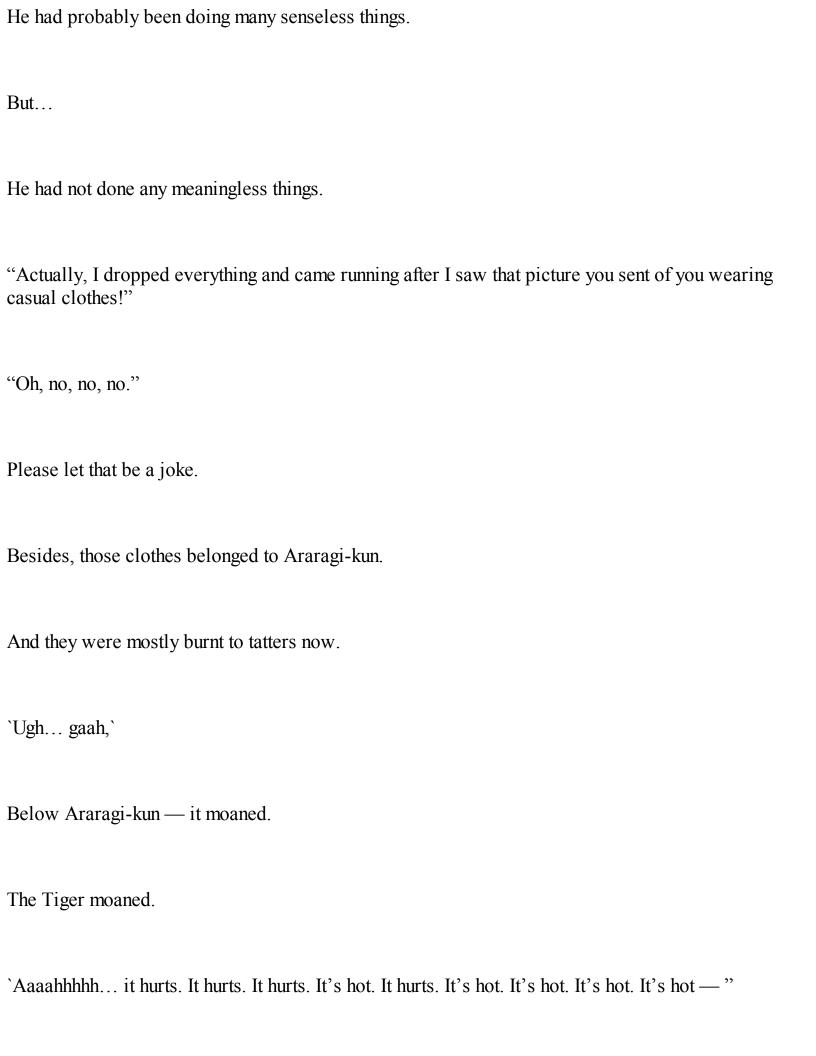


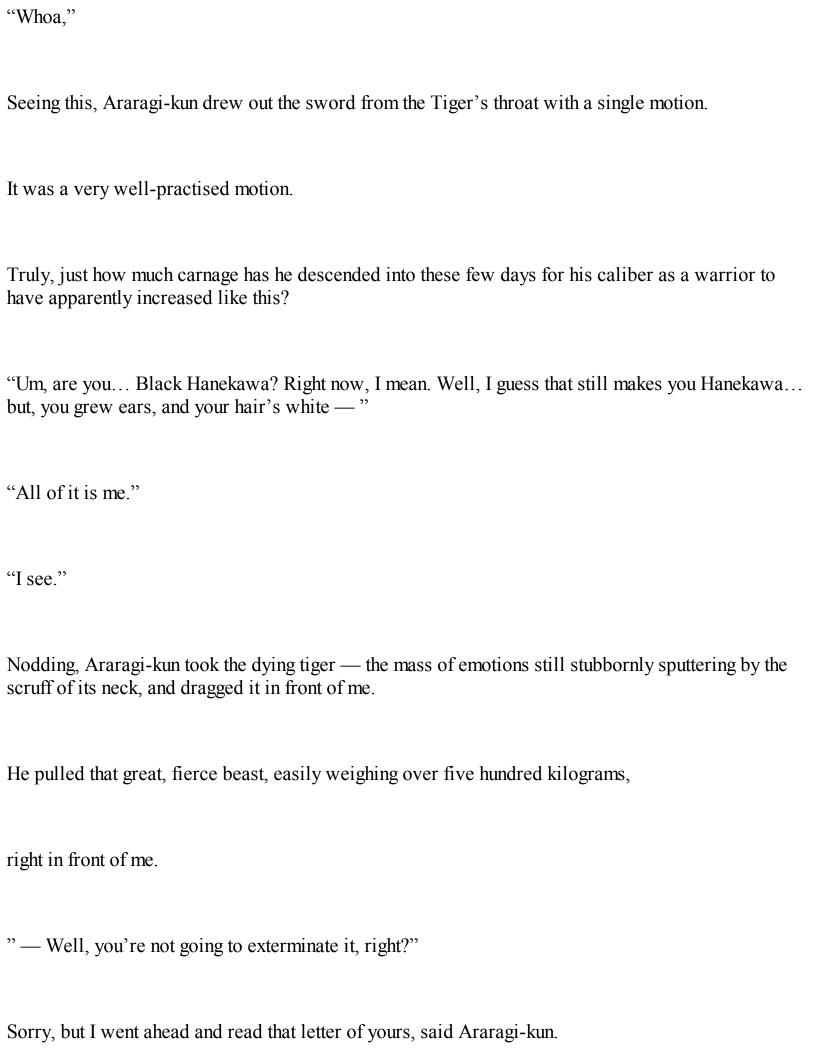


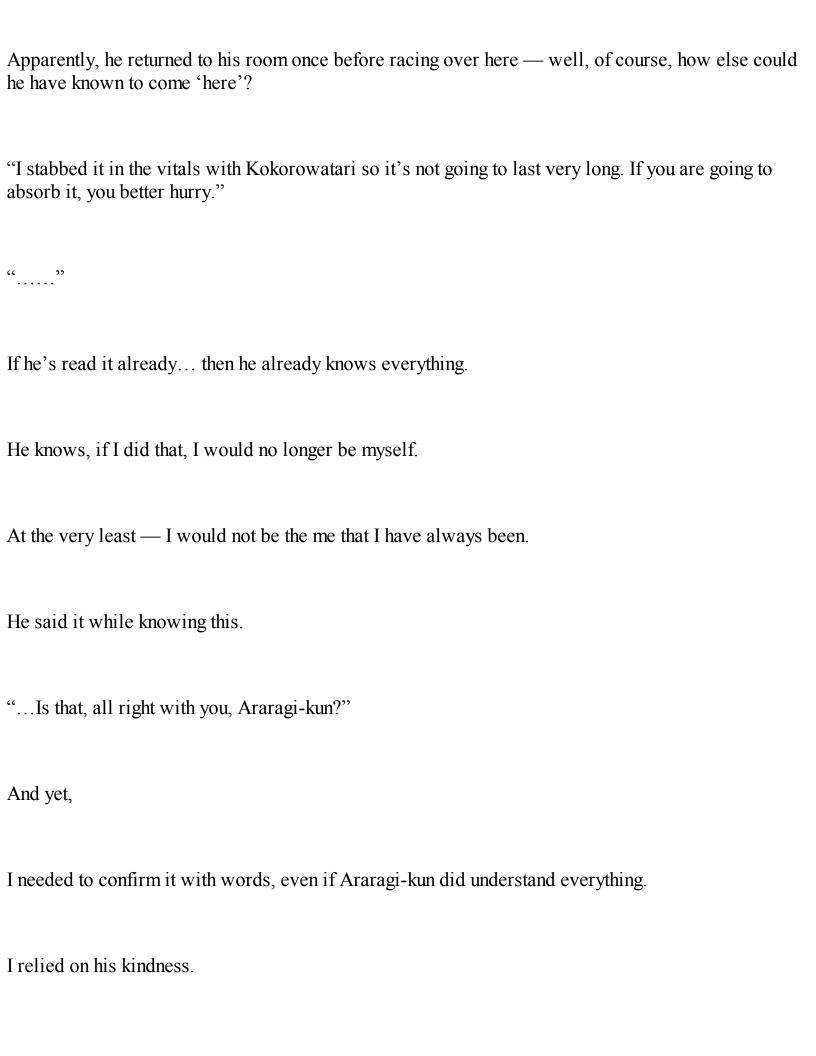




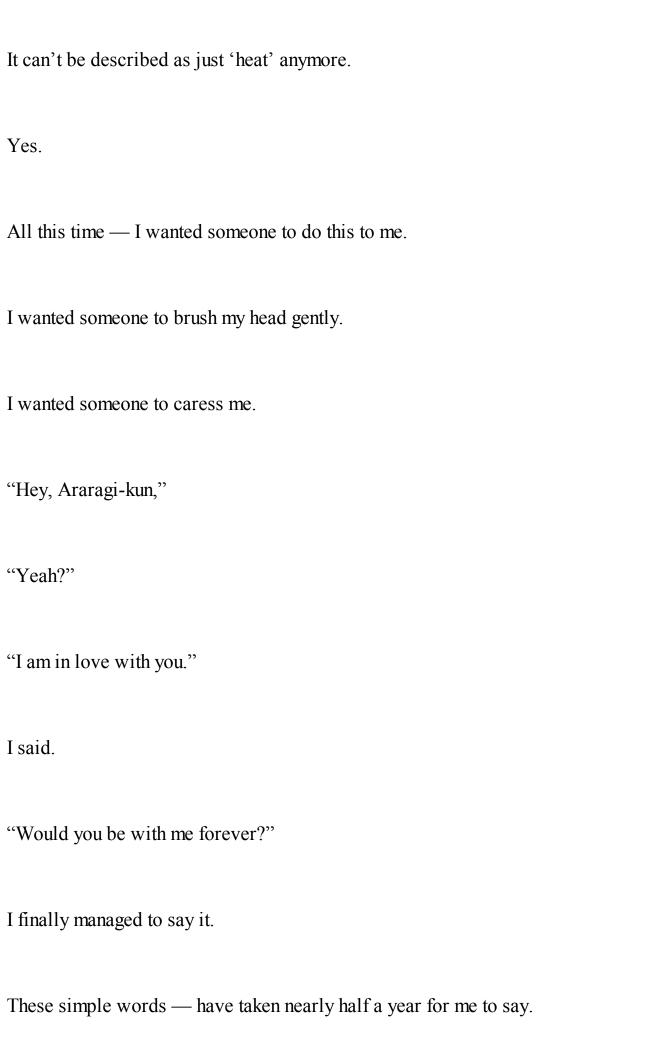




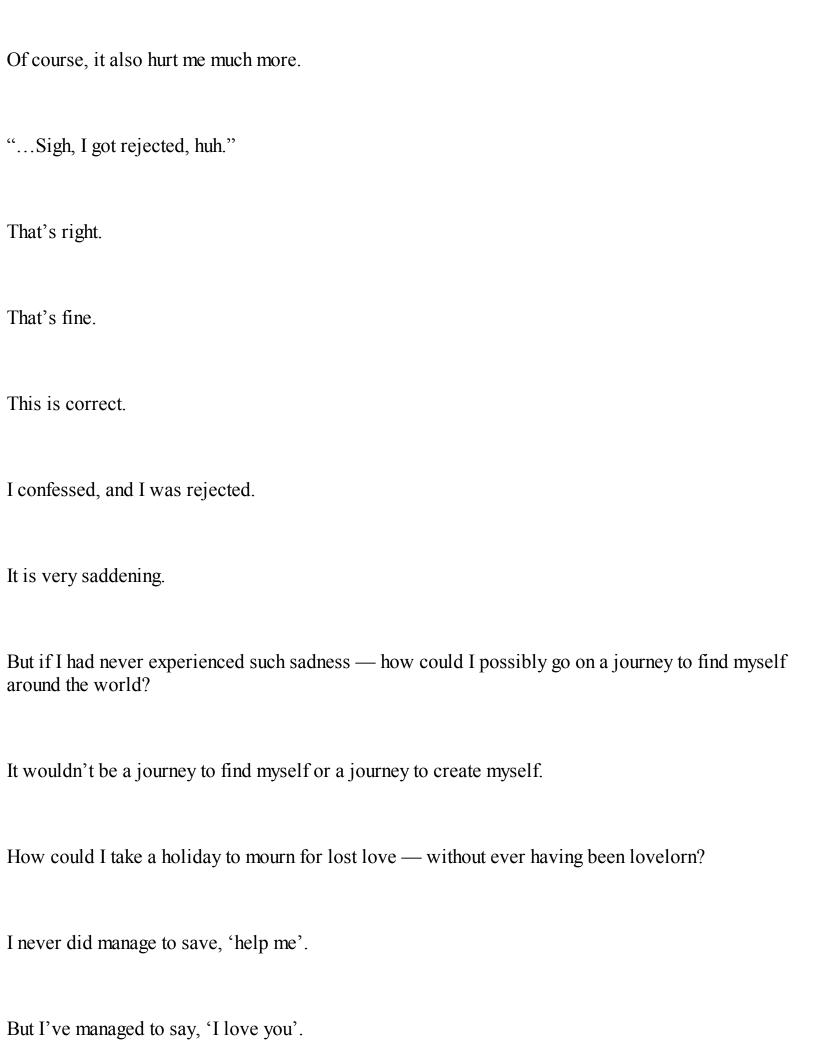




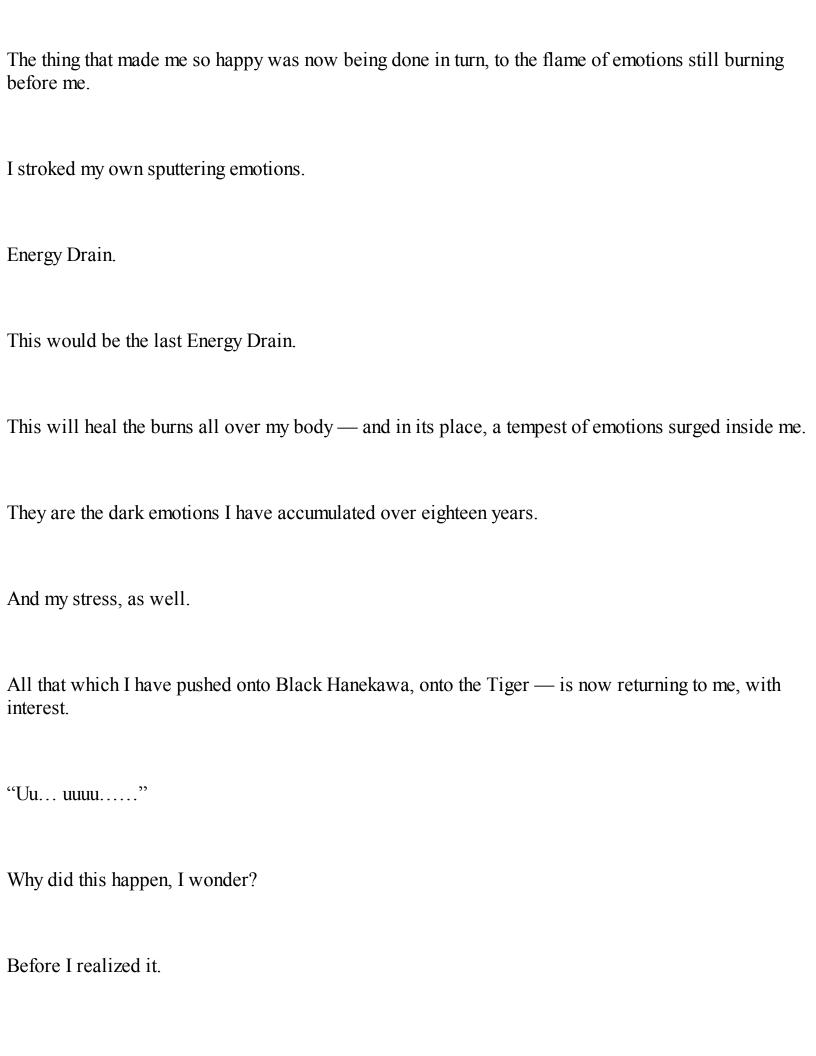
Even though, to the last,
I remained stubborn and never did say anything like, 'help me'.
"Is it all right, if I am not myself anymore?"
"Like I said — don't ask stupid questions like that, Hanekawa."
He immediately replied.
"You said it yourself just now, didn't you? No matter what, in the end, it's all you. Even if you change, you'll still be you. So don't worry. It's not like I will go easy on you for any weird reasons. If you turn out hateful, I will dislike you. If you do wrong, I will be angry at you. If you are despised, I will stick up for you. And if you aren't as smart anymore — well, I can teach you."
And if you cry, I will comfort you.
Saying this, Araragi-kun —
stroked my head.
"!"
This act,
burned my heart — to cinders.

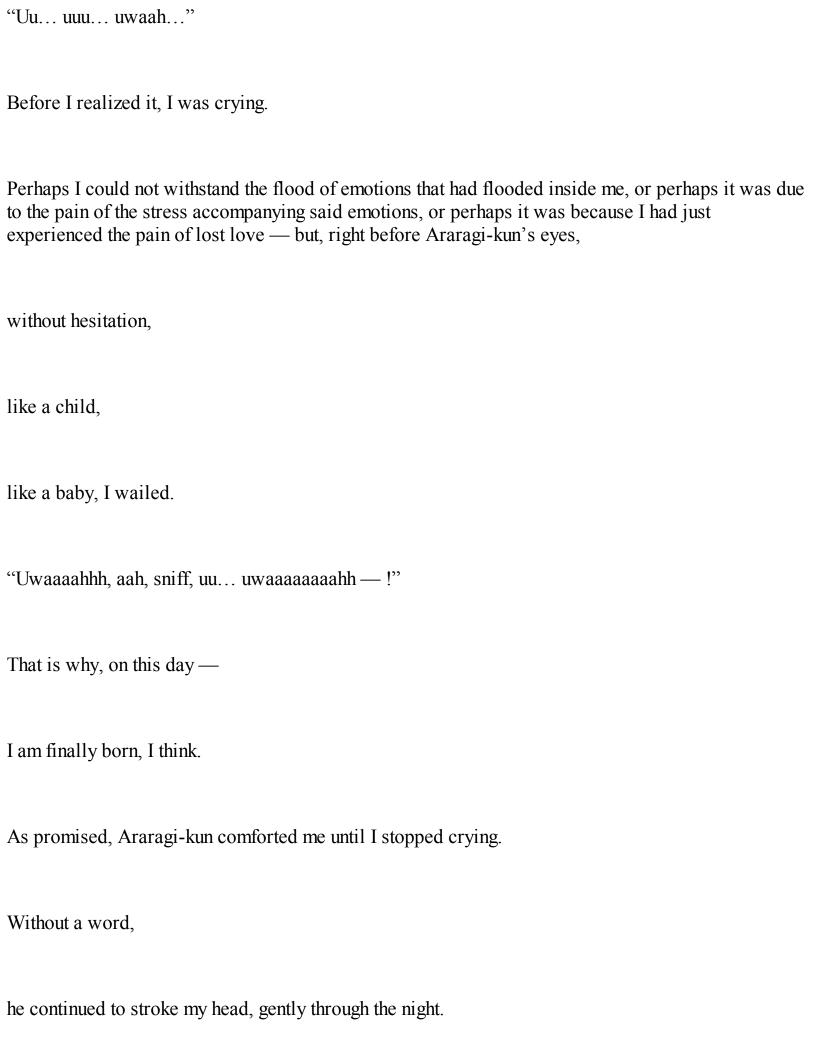






I said it.
Of course, Araragi-kun has known about my feelings for a long time. He understand that before the Cultural Festival.
And if he's read the note in his room, then he would be able to understand once again.
But having him understand is not good enough.
I have to make him understand.
I have to hear an answer.
I have to know how Araragi-kun feels about me.
I have to hear this from him.
Now that I have finally heard a response — now that I have been rejected,
I have finally been hurt.
I stretched out my hand, touched the brow of the Tiger —
and stroked the head of the third me.

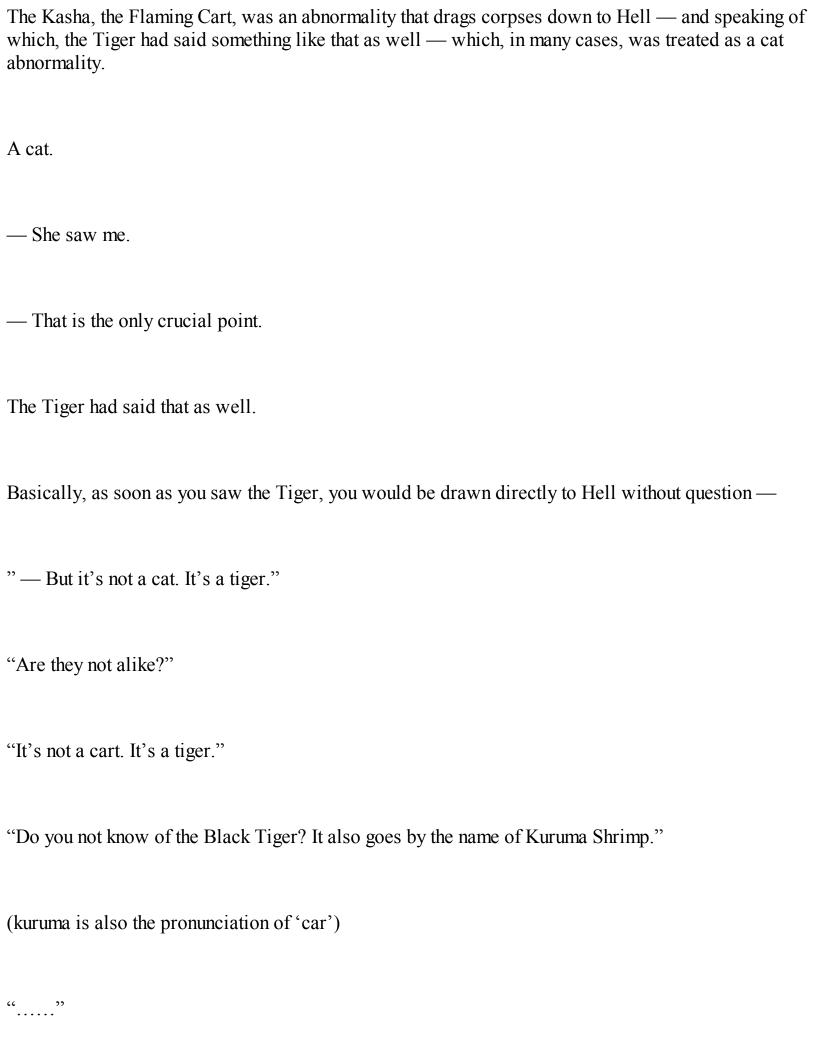


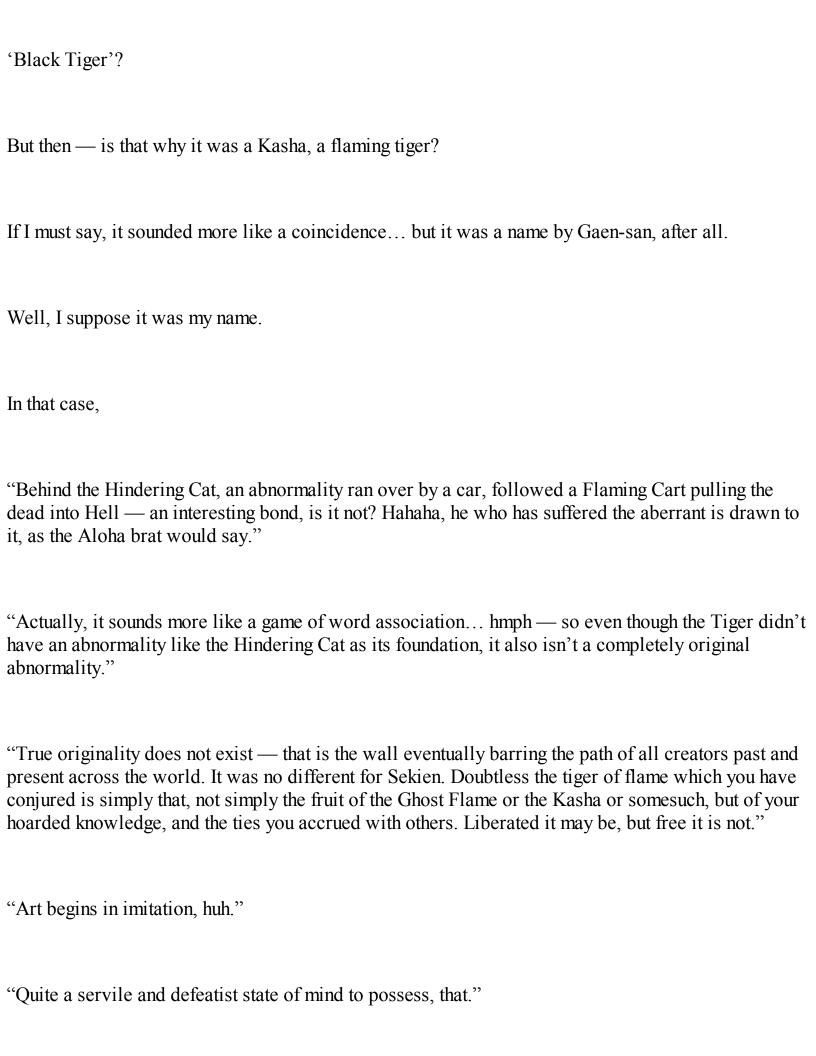


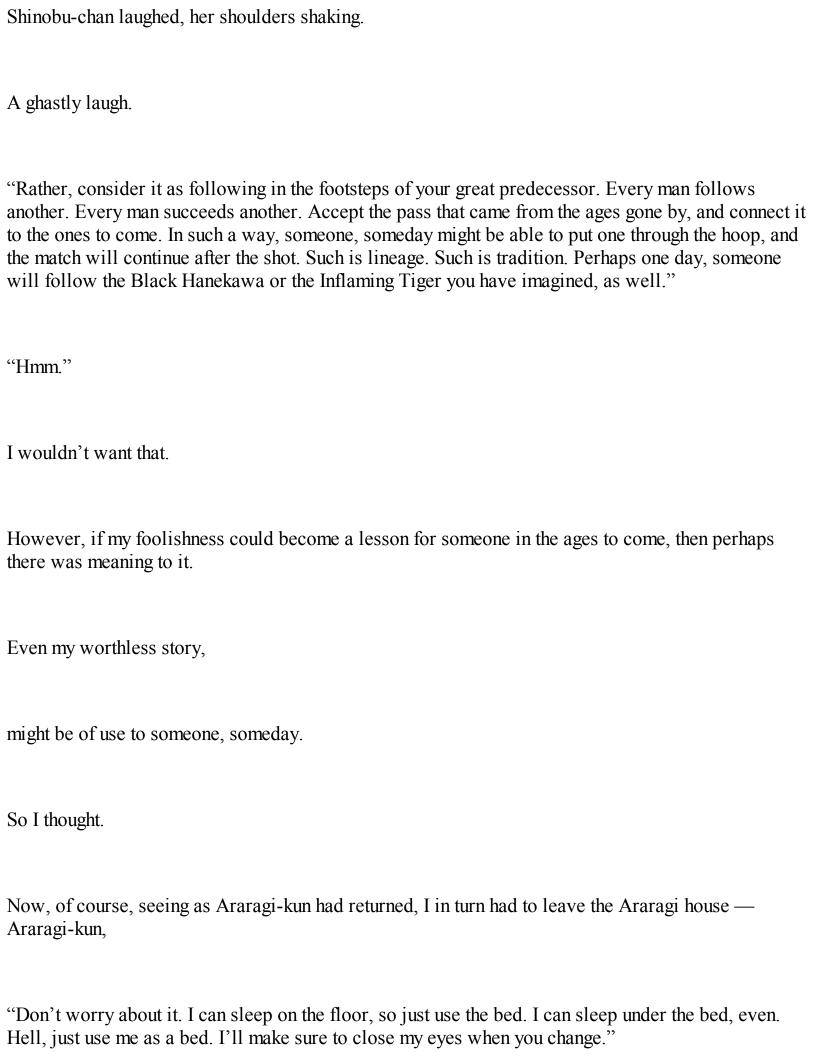
066
This is the epilogue.
Or rather, all that has happened so far should be considered the prologue.
My story begins today.
First of all would be what Araragi-kun had actually been up to those past few days while absent from school, but he refused to speak on this matter. Well, Kanbaru-san also came to school as normal the next day (and aside from her left arm, she didn't have injuries all over her body like Araragi-kun had), he told me not to worry about Mayoi-chan, and his momentarily-severed bond with Shinobu-chan had returned, so everything worked out well — I suppose.
It remains unknown as to how exactly Gaen-san and Episode-kun were involved in this and how they had interacted but, well, this is Araragi-kun we are talking about here.
Something very painful must have taken place.
And he probably overcame it.
That's how I would like myself to be as well.
And then, I had a chance to talk to Shinobu-chan, whose pairing with Araragi-kun was as mentioned restored, and after hearing my experiences while Araragi-kun had been absent,

"A Kasha, that was."

she said this.
"It might not have possessed a base, but I daresay it was modelled after the Kasha. It appears to me to have been an abnormality created whilst heeding the Kasha, not the Ghost Flame."
"A Kasha?"
Speaking of which, while I had spoken with Shinobu-chan on numerous occasions as Black Hanekawa, this was the first time I had talked with her like this. As that occured to me, I asked.
"But, a Kasha"
"What is the matter, monitress? Do you not know of it?"
"No, I do know what it is, but"
I was trying to be polite in a way, considering the 500-year-old abnormality I was dealing with, but seeing as the one before me was an eight-year-old little girl, it was rather difficult.
"But, um, it's a tiger."
"As I heard from the Hindering Cat as well, so I did not quite see the connection — but, if aligned to fire, a Kasha it must be."
"Huh—"

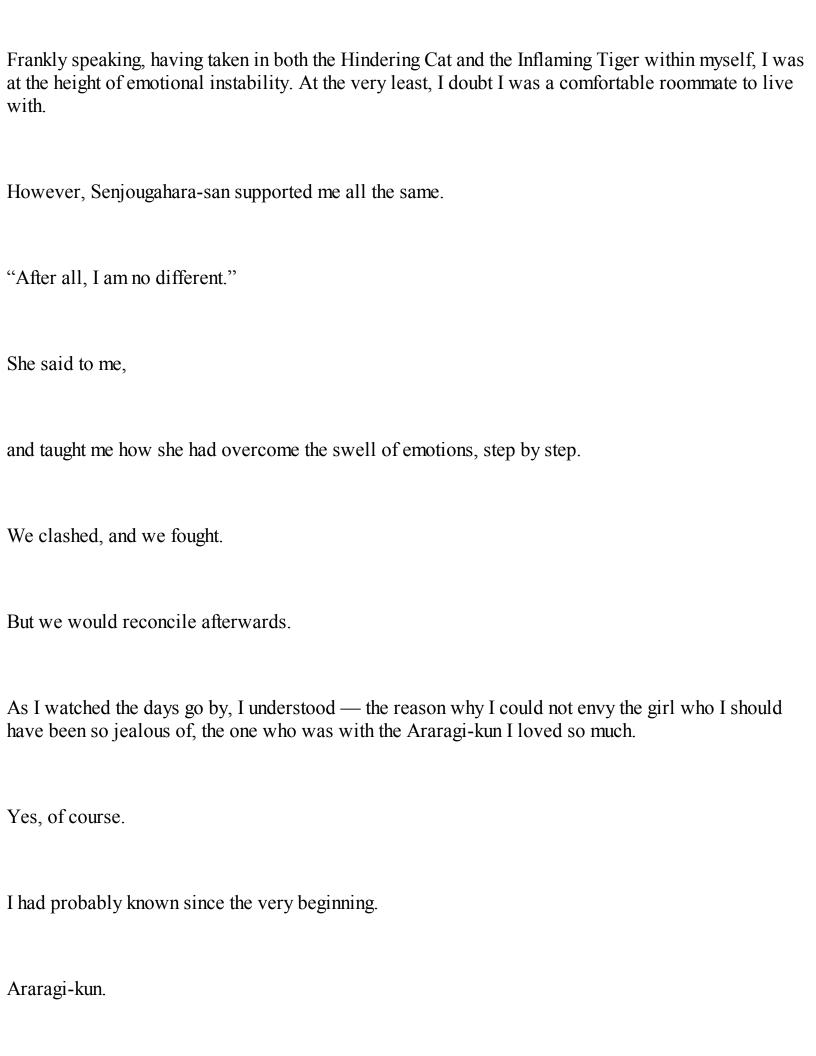


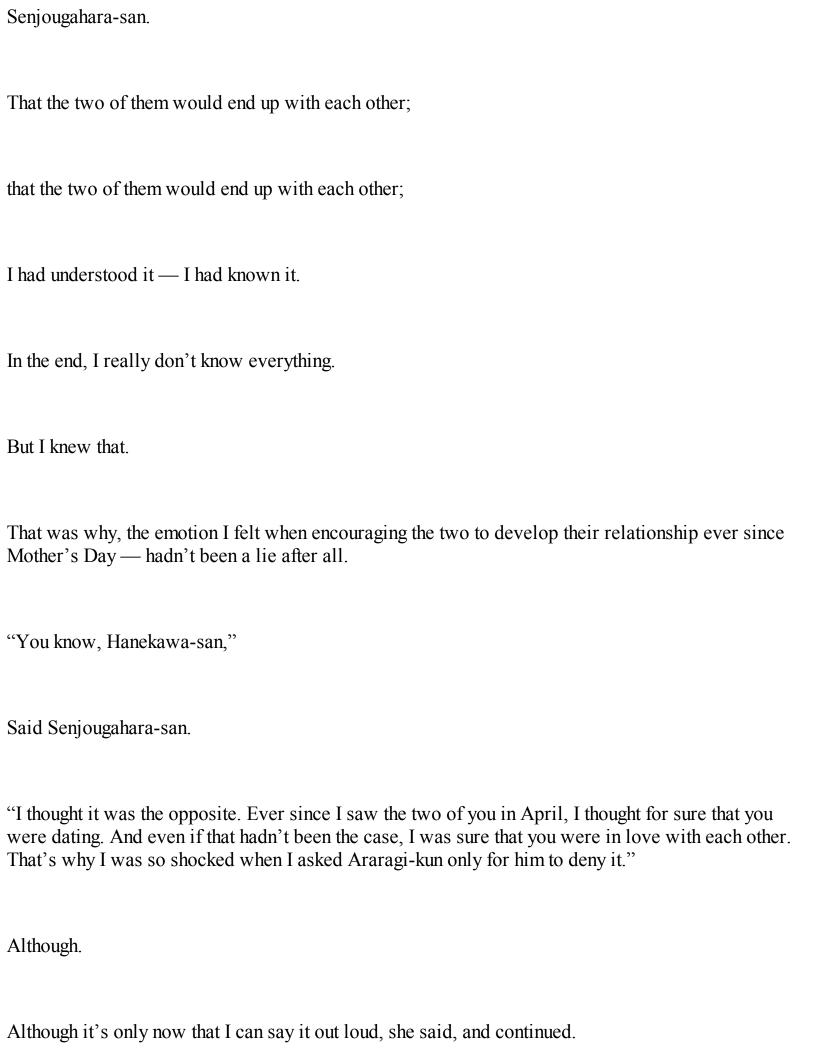




had quite kindly attempted to convince me to stay, but I could feel it as nothing but a threat to my chastity, so I respectfully took my leave.
I was happy that he would interact with me as he had always done, but at the same time, it also represented his unshakable feelings, which was as painful to see as I had expected.
Although surprisingly, perhaps if I had continued remaining at the Araragi house, it might have been a threat to Araragi-kun's chastity instead.
Karen-chan had said that, "Nii-chan should just get out and we can have Tsubasa-san," (which was horrible) but of course, that could not have been the case.
Their family was,
in the end, their own.
I could not wedge myself in.
It might have been only two nights on reflection, but I left the Araragi house after giving proper thanks to all its members.
After that, I went back to the home of Senjougahara-san — Warren Villa Room 201, which had almost been burnt down.
As I understood it, Senjougahara-san's father would be leaving on a business trip overseas for the span of about half a month — and as such, he himself requested if I would spend said period with his daughter.

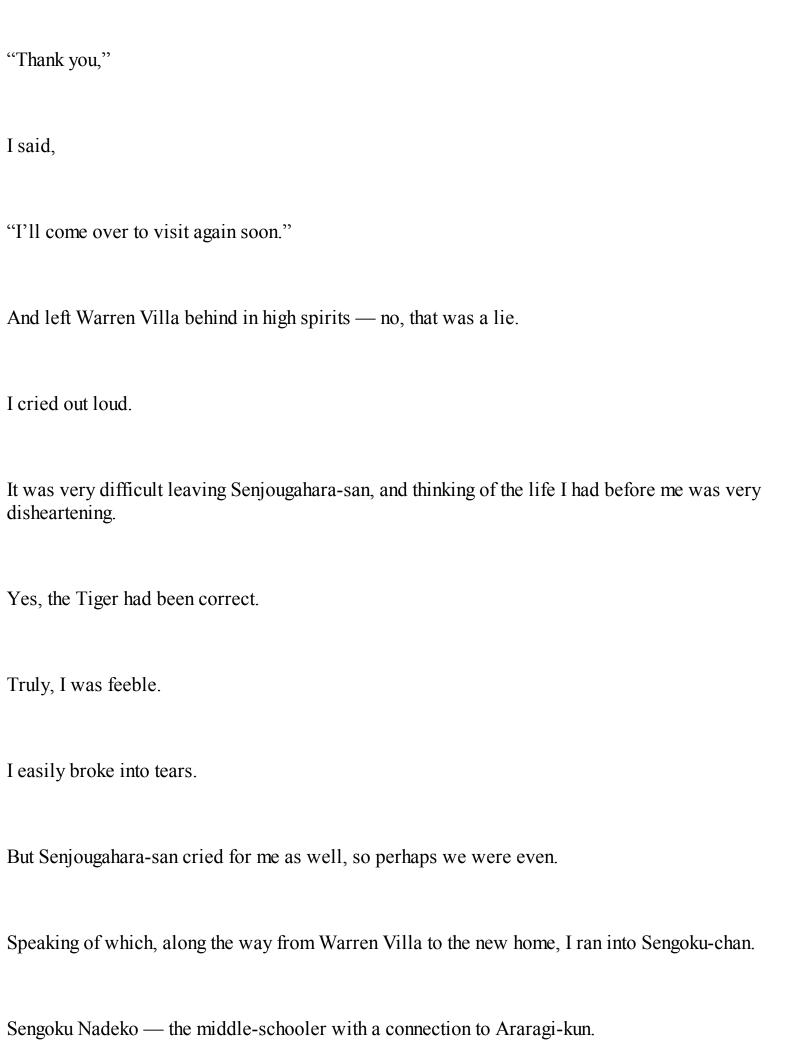
It was just for my convenience, of course.
it was just for my convenience, or course.
Such a trip could not have been scheduled so suddenly — not unless he himself wanted it to be.
It would seem that Senjougahara-san had told her father about the circumstances and arranged all of this for me. Regardless of when Araragi-kun would be returning home, I certainly could not live in his house for an extended period, and she understood that.
In other words — even this had all been part of her scheme.
"Hitagi, a long time ago, I taught you to become a woman who would be able to help a friend when they were in need."
Just before he left, Senjougahara-san's father, holding a largish bag which he had prepared for the trip, said this.
"And you grew up to be just such a woman. Nothing could make me happier."
Saying this, he gently brushed his daughter's head.
The expression on her face then was unforgettable.
And the expression on his face, as well.
For some time after that, I would continue to live as Senjougahara-san's roommate, but of course, not everything went smoothly.

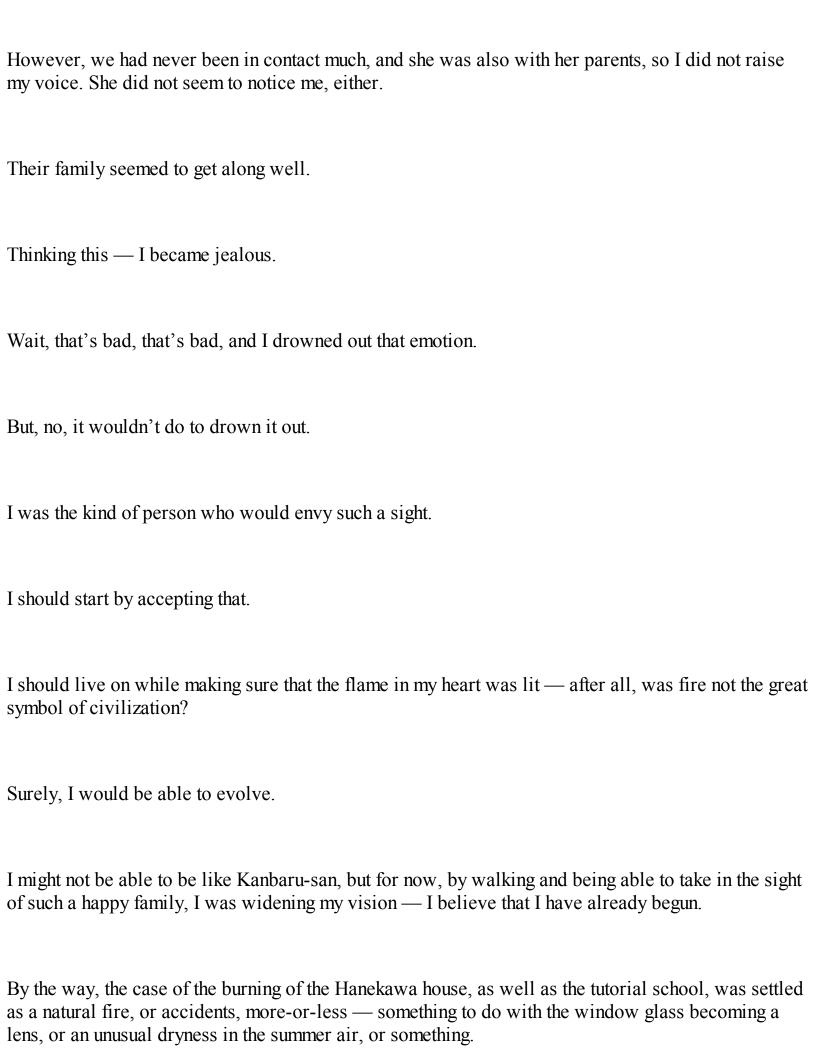




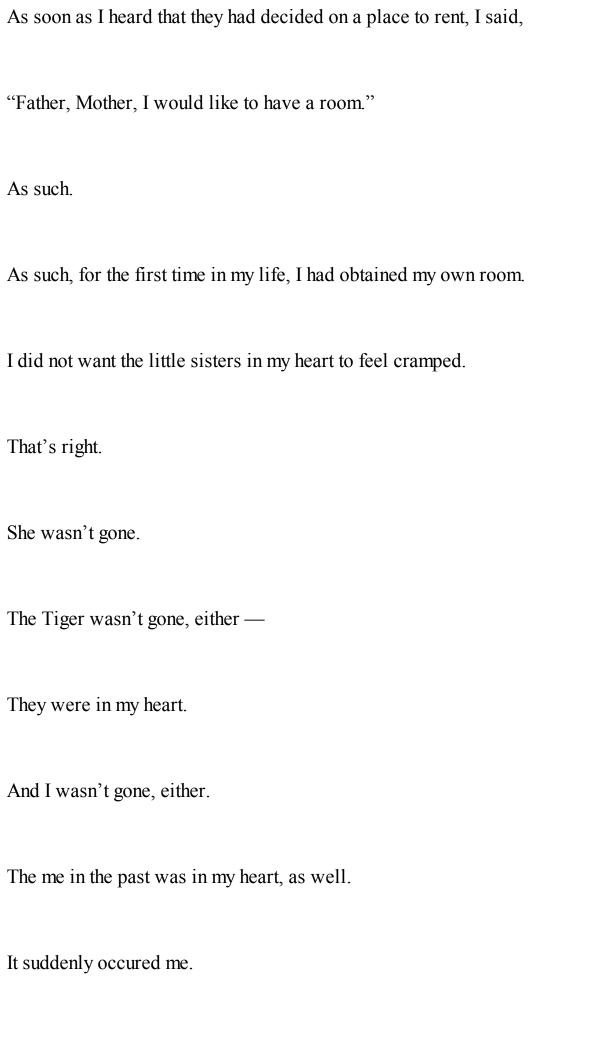


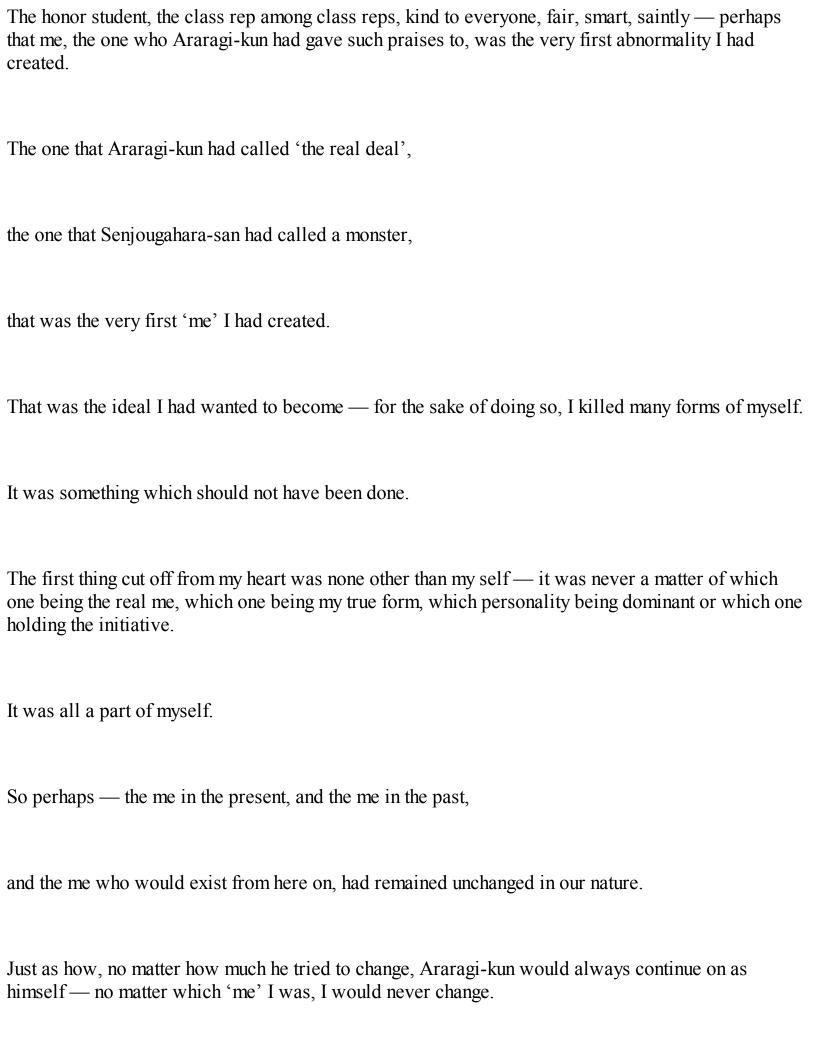




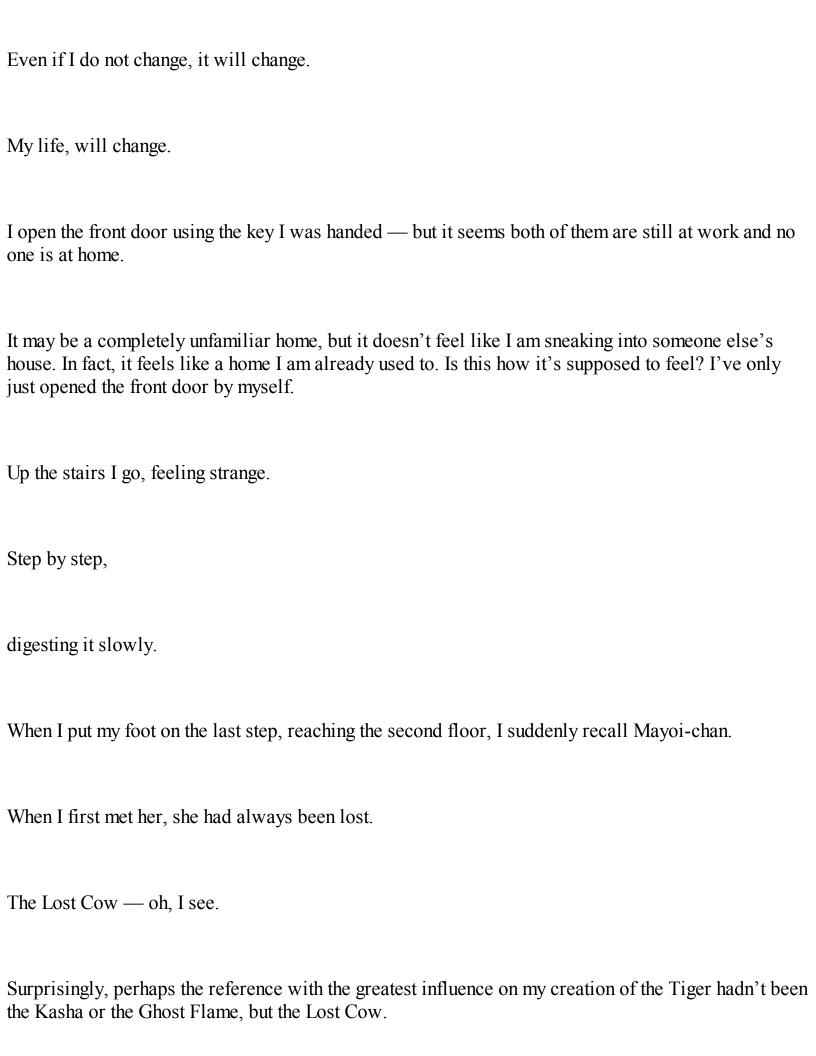


I see.
That was how the world would make itself coherent, it seemed.
That was how the paradox would be solved.
Nevertheless, I doubt I would ever forget what I did.
Even if I were never charged for my crimes, it did not make me free of them.
That was something that all living things must always bear in mind —
One can never be pure white.
So I thought.
The house I arrived at was not all that big, as it was apparently just a temporary residence for them until a new house was built. In fact, it might even count under the definition of 'small'.
There were not exactly many rooms, either.
But I had already made it clear, to the one whom I ought to call my father, and the one whom I ought to call my mother.





That was all there was to it.
Nothing had changed for me.
And that — was not my epilogue, so much as it was my punchline.
I am me.
I am Hanekawa Tsubasa.
My cat ears may have already withdrawn, and I may no longer see the Tiger, but I daresay the white hair remaining on half of my head, arranged in a tiger-striped pattern, is proof of that.
Being rather too avant-garde for school, I have to dye it black every morning, but I don't think of that as a bother or a waste of time.
It is a form of communication, with them,
with my heart.
I say it is enjoyable, because I truly feel it inside.
Yeah.
That's — how I will go on.



Of course, the Lost Cow had already been cut away from Mayoi-chan, but you could consider it a rough echo.
Perhaps my meeting the Tiger directly after seeing Mayoi-chan was not simply because I then knew Araragi-kun had gone.
It seems that, once upon a time, cows and tigers were mixed together — in which case, it isn't unthinkable.
For me, having lost both family and home — it was a fitting abnormality.
Ever since that day,
no, ever since I first met Mayoi-chan in that park in May — I have been lost.
Walking aimlessly, moving cyclically, wandering all over the place.
I was just loitering.
I should talk about this with Mayoi-chan the next time I see her.
So I thought.
I really have been lost enough.

