

KODANSHA

BOX

終物語  
オワリモノ ガタリ

何度でも、  
趣向未だ  
書きたい  
物語。  
西尾維新

KODANSHA  
BOX

Illustration / VOFAN

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NISIOISIN

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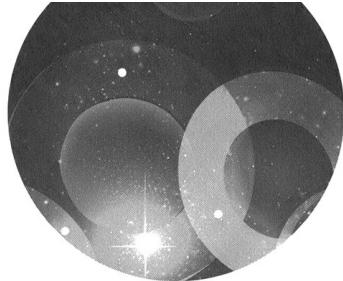
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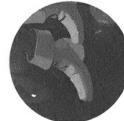
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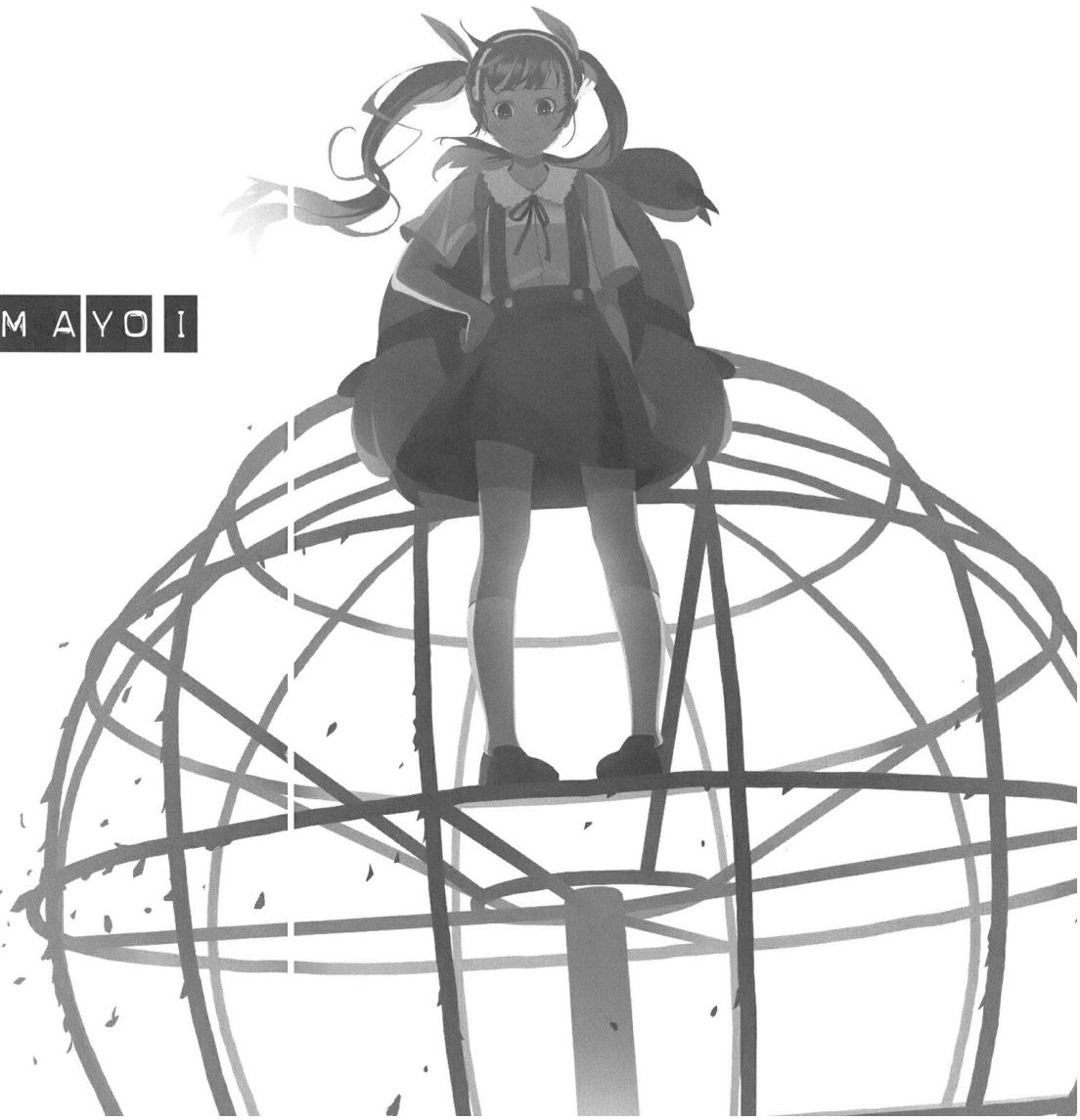
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# Mayoi Hell

## 001

“I’d gladly die just to see Mayoi Hachikuji one more time.” Would it be surprising if I said that the thought had crossed my mind? The truth of the matter, however, is that it’s no exaggeration. There was a time when I truly thought that in order to see that cheerful girl one more time, I’d happily throw away both my life and my immortality—which, of course, raises the question of why I never did just that.

That’s because as much as I was willing to die—or perhaps even more strongly than that—I also felt that I wanted to live, and that there were things I still had to accomplish while alive. That feeling was rooted in the presence of my family and my lover, of my saviors and my friends. Of course, you could claim that trying to calculate human feelings in terms of addition and subtraction, or even ratios, is misguided and indiscreet, and you’d be right. I wouldn’t be able to argue with that. However, it’s just as true that people—or at least I—don’t have enough self-discipline to sacrifice themselves for just one feeling. As hopelessly narrow as my field of vision is, and as inclined as I am to brood and agonize, I’m just as easily distracted. I can easily go back on my word, and I twist my convictions at the drop of a hat. He who grasps all and loses all—that’s me. That’s Koyomi Araragi.

“I won’t make friends, because my strength as a human will decrease.”

The way that phrase feels almost nostalgic now speaks to how weak I’ve become. I’ve become weak as a human. Hopelessly, desperately weak. And weakest of all is that I don’t even hate how weak I’ve become—I can’t bring myself to despise my weak self. How very spineless. I can’t say that it doesn’t aggravate me, but I can firmly declare that this is who I am. I can assert that this is Koyomi Araragi. Not without shame—but *with* shame, I can proclaim that.

But I’m sure there are others who can’t accept how weak I’ve become. There must be someone who considers me, a person who’s continued to survive in spite of how weak I’ve grown, to be an unforgivable sinner. I’m not one to miss that there’s someone looking at me, who managed to survive that hellish spring break and keep living on, like they wish I’d just die. For example, I’m sure a certain transfer student, the one always gazing at me with pitch black eyes, would say this:

“Honestly. You’re such a fool, Araragi-senpai.”

Honestly. That’s exactly right.

Only death can cure stupidity.

But then again, if it only takes death to cure it, perhaps stupidity isn’t such a serious affliction, after all.

“H... Hachikuji?”

“Yes.”

“Hachikuji?”

“Yes. It’s me.”

“Mayoi Hachikuji?”

“Yes, hi. Mayoi Hachikuji, you got it.”

“High Mayoi Hachikuji... What does that mean? Are you a Hachikuji of a higher order than the Hachikuji I know? Like a high elf instead of a regular elf...?”

“No, I’m just a regular Hachikuji. The commonplace Hachikuji that you’re well acquainted with... ‘High elf’? I think you might be stuck in a different decade.”

“Mayoi Hachikuji Z?”

“No. As I said, I’m just a plain Hachikuji, without any affectation or pretense. Z? Well, I suppose if you take into account that this is the last volume, I wouldn’t feel any shame in being compared to a certain Z-ton that unleashes one trillion degree fireballs.”<sup>[1]</sup>

“You should definitely feel shame in that. Z-ton, really? Don’t extrapolate such an influential character from that ‘Z’... You’d pale in comparison if you stood side-by-side with him. Mayoi Hachikuji R?”

“If the ‘R’ stands for ‘Returns,’ then yes. That would be quite appropriate.”

“...”

...

No, wait just a second. Don’t panic. Don’t jump to any rash conclusions. I can’t get ahead of myself here. Has there ever been a point in my life where I got ahead of myself and everything turned out well? It’s always been followed up by something horrible, hasn’t it? As soon as I’m filled with false hope, it’s always met with a harsh vengeance, right? Though, I get the feeling that the harsh vengeance comes whether I get ahead of myself or not... (What kind of life have I led?) But either way, people should always remain calm in the face of a supernatural occurrence.

Those days are so distant now that it feels almost like something out of a legend, but there was a point when Koyomi Araragi was considered calm and collected. Why don’t I call on that old Koyomi Araragi and deal with this situation in a cool-headed and reasonable fashion? I can do it. This is my

comeback. I will become my best self.

That's right, I need to remember. Exactly what situation am I in, again? If you're going to play out a situation comedy, the first thing you need to understand is the situation that you've been placed in. Otherwise, the story can't go anywhere.

In other words, here comes your standard "recap."

My name is Koyomi Araragi. I'm an average Joe, a plain Jane—just a nameless high school senior living in a provincial town in Japan. I'm preparing to take my college entrance exam.

That's right. Today, March 13, is none other than the day of that examination. After just barely making the cut of the National Center Test<sup>[2]</sup>, almost like slipping through a closing shutter at the last second, today should have been a turning point in my life.

However, if I think about what kind of person I was until recently, that in itself is a bit of a miracle. Around the same time last year, the March of my junior year, I never could have imagined that I'd be taking an entrance examination. In fact, there was a serious question of whether or not I'd even be able to graduate. After I somehow managed to worm my way into Naoetsu High School, a school focused on preparing students for college exams, I hit rock bottom—falling behind, failing, and receiving F after F as a matter of course. It wasn't even a steady decline, but more of a straight drop. A perpendicular descent.

That was the making of the man who "doesn't understand anything," as Sodachi Oikura would put it—but, at any rate, I felt that I had made a mistake along the path of life. I had been too careless. After all, if I hadn't pushed my luck, if I had just known my place and chosen a school suited to my academic abilities, none of that would have happened.

As important as it may be to this flashback, I don't especially want to discuss the details of what those first two years of high school, constantly plagued by those thoughts, were like. "For details, review the previous chapters."

What caused me to stray even further from that track of failure—or as one diligent class representative would put it, that "path of delinquency"—happened during March of last year. I managed to fall even further from rock bottom. You have to hand it to me, my reckless driving is a sight to behold. Or maybe my car just doesn't have a steering wheel?

That's right.

I met Tsubasa Hanekawa—the cat.

I met Shinobu Oshino—the vampire.

I met Hitagi Senjougahara—the crab.

I met Mayoi Hachikuji—the snail.

I met Suruga Kanbaru—the monkey.

I met Nadeko Sengoku—the snake.

After all of that, I finally became the college-minded student I am today. I became the me that I am today. Thinking about it, it was practically the ideal rehabilitation of a high school delinquent. Hanekawa once told me, “I’m going to rehabilitate you”—either at the end of spring break, or maybe at the opening ceremony—and as you can see, she scored a resounding success. That’s the class rep of class reps for you. The class rep chosen by God Himself.

Of course, if I gave Tsubasa Hanekawa all the credit for my reformation, Hanekawa herself would probably be the one to get angriest with me. My dramatic leap in academic ability was thanks to the devoted care of Hitagi Senjougahara (while you could call it “tutoring” for the first half of the school year, by the second half, it was certainly more appropriately described as “care”), as well as the assistance of people like Shinobu and my little sisters, who helped clean up my messes when things got rough. I’m not so narrow-minded as to overlook all that, nor is my field of vision quite that narrow—or so I’d like to think. Though, as far as Kanbaru goes, it doesn’t feel like she’s done much but get in the way of my studies...

But above all else, there was the situation with Sengoku.

During Sengoku’s second encounter with a snake, the time I messed up—the time I failed miserably, with a capital “F”—I was able to continue fighting without falling into despair only thanks to the support of everyone around me. I can’t let myself forget that. I wasn’t able to accomplish anything in the end—but still, because everyone was there for me, I avoided making the irreversible mistake of dying. That’s why I’m here now. That’s why I’m here, heading to take my exam on March 13.

...Hm?

Wait, I’m still forgetting something important—something so important that if I can’t remember it, I might as well not remember anything at all. That’s right, before heading to the grounds of my university of choice—the university my girlfriend, Hitagi Senjougahara, was already accepted into by recommendation—I had made a brief stop along the way. It wasn’t a one-time detour, but rather a place I’ve been visiting frequently as of late. Since February, I’ve been climbing a certain mountain almost every day, as if it were a part of my daily routine.

It’s not that I suddenly developed an interest in hiking. By that time, my body had already undergone a transformation into something literally superhuman, which would maintain a healthy condition whether I bothered with hiking or not. Leaving that bit aside, so as to avoid facing that reality—I wasn’t hiking, but visiting the empty shrine at the top of the small mountain in my town. Visiting that forgotten shrine that has been so deeply intertwined with our fates.

The reason I kept going to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine was to fulfill a promise to meet someone there. Thinking about it now, it was a bit of a one-sided arrangement—but I’ve been stood up for almost a month now.

Right. That brings us to today. March 13, early in the morning.

The person I was waiting for never showed up, but there was someone else waiting for me on the shrine grounds. There, I stood face-to-face with Izuko Gaen, the head of the specialists...

“...”

And then what? How does that lead to Hachikuji? Where does Mayoi Hachikuji come into the picture? I did my best to remember everything, but none of that ties in to the current situation. That summary didn't sum everything up at all. It was Gaen-san that I just saw, so why is Hachikuji suddenly here?

I look at the little girl before my eyes one more time. I stare her down, scrutinizing her closely. Her hair is tied into perfectly even pigtails. She's fairly tall for a fifth grader, but still carrying a backpack big enough to look out of place on a girl of her size. She's feigning innocence, looking over at me with big, bright eyes.

There's no mistaking it. There's no way I could be mistaken. No matter what angle I look at her from, she's definitely Mayoi Hachikuji. She's the same lost child I met at that park on May 14 last year. Even if I could mistake anyone else on sight—well, excluding Tsubasa Hanekawa—I could never mistake anyone else for this girl. Whether she were to have a twin, or even a clone, I'm absolutely confident that I'd be able to see through it.

“Hahaha. In other words, you could even pick me out from my opening in the first season of the anime. That sounds like quite the game of ‘Where's Waldo.’”

“...”

A meta joke like that wouldn't come from the mouth of anyone but Hachikuji herself, either. But in that case, that's really what this comes down to.

“...Heh.”

Good grief, I've found myself in quite the pickle. In this situation, I'm sure everyone expects Koyomi Araragi, faced with an unexpected reunion with his beloved Mayoi Hachikuji, a girl he hasn't seen in months—or more accurately, a girl he never thought he'd see again—to jump for joy, be choked up with tears of happiness, tremble with emotion, start babbling nonsense in delight, and run to hug her.

I know everyone's waiting for me to live up to those expectations.

Aah, these are some heavy hopes I'm carrying. I don't think my shoulders can bear the weight.

No, no, I get, I do. I understand the feeling. You have my sincerest sympathies. I've spent a long time in the business, and as the key player of sorts, I'm aware of the importance of a certain flow of events. There's a need for things like routines and clichés. So don't get the wrong idea—it's just that, as I said before, I'm a high school senior now. And what's more, I'm a high school senior about to graduate. I can't be moved to tears by every little thing that comes up anymore. I simply accept

phenomena as phenomena. I'm no longer so emotionally volatile as to react with “!” or “?!” or even something that abuses ellipses like “.....!” at every turn.

If this were an old light novel, this is probably the moment where I'd suddenly start yelling in a huge font with bolded letters, but this is the 21<sup>st</sup> century—plus, I'm an early bloomer, so it feels like it might as well be the 22<sup>nd</sup>. In other words, I'm living in the age of Doraemon, not Astro Boy. I left my emotions in my 4D pocket.

So, if I had to put what I'm feeling into words right now, it'd be, “Oh look, it's Hachikuji.” That's about it. That might seem cold of me, but it's the truth, so there's nothing I can do about it. No matter how anyone sees me, lying is the one thing I can't do.

Wait, but seriously, don't get the wrong idea. It's not that I'm not happy to see her. I never said that. Of course I'm happy. I'm perfectly pleased. She was a friend, after all. A friend, more or less. Yeah, if I recall, we had some reasonably fun times together. Like, uh, drinking juice together? I don't really remember it that well. Oh, didn't she used to stutter on my name? I think I heard about that once. That sort of banter doesn't seem very entertaining now that I've become an adult, but I get the feeling I really enjoyed it at the time. Yeah.

Still, when a friend you never thought you'd see again—in other words, someone who you've already categorized as an “old friend” in your mind—suddenly shows up again, it's hard to figure out how to react. Generally speaking. Just as a fact of life.

I've never transferred schools before, so I wouldn't know much about it, but I've heard anecdotes about being thrown a farewell party, only for things to get awkward upon learning that the transfer's been delayed. That's exactly what this is like.

It's like something you'd see in the last chapter of a children's manga: the main character says his farewells to everyone when he has to move, but it turns out that he just moved into the house next door, and so their adventures will continue. While that might work out in a manga, if that happened in real life, you'd be a little taken aback. The ties you cut before would be left hanging.

You could even say it's like you just finished cleaning your room, only to find there's a single piece of cardboard left in the middle of the floor—or like you took apart a mechanical pencil and put it back together, only to realize you have a piece of lead left over. Where am I supposed to shuffle away this awkward feeling? Those metaphors really hit home.

Hachikuji, huh...? Wait, her name *was* Hachikuji, right? I'm not sure if it was Hachi or Nana, and I can't remember if it was Mayoi or Koyoi<sup>[3]</sup>, but, well, let's just go with “Mayoi Hachikuji” for the time being.

Apparently, when people go to a class reunion and see their old friends from elementary school sometimes, their impressions will be completely different, and they'll think to themselves, “They didn't used to be like this.” While this isn't exactly the same, I'd wager that it's a pretty similar feeling.

Well, I've become an adult now, so there's nothing for it. I've grown up. I've been forced to undergo extraordinary emotional growth since I parted ways with Hachikuji in August, so I'm a completely different person than I was at the time. I'm a completely different person than I once was. I'm pretty sure that's what happened.

That's why something feels off—or should I say, that's why this reunion feels a little strained, why I feel a little stiff. Humans are creatures that grow, so this was inevitable. We grow. We have no choice but to grow. Rather, it would be disturbing if we always stayed the same, wouldn't it?

That innocent Koyomi Araragi, who would launch like a rocket towards Hachikuji when he saw her walking down the street, no longer exists. That childlike version of me is gone. Looking back on it now, I can't even understand why I used to do that, or what I thought was so fun about it. Running towards a little girl and scooping her up in an embrace on sight? That's just a criminal act. I can hardly believe that I used to be that kind of guy, but in a sense, that guy is no longer me. He is not Koyomi Araragi. Even if, at a time, that *was* Koyomi Araragi, he's already dead. He is an ex-Koyomi Araragi. A man like that is better off dead—and so he is. He reached a fitting end.

And so, as the new Koyomi Araragi, when faced with a 10-year-old Mayoi Hachikuji who doesn't seem to have grown a bit since I last saw her, I can't help but feel a pang of disappointment along with the joy of being reunited. I could hardly expect her to have matured the same amount I have, but I'd hoped she would have grown up a little in the half-year we spent apart. If she's hoping for me to interact with her the same way I used to, I'm afraid I'm at a loss.

She probably wants to engage in the same idle chat that we used to, but now that my vocabulary is filled with so many philosophical and technical terms, I can't help but worry that we won't be able to communicate properly. I'm not confident that I can dumb down the conversation to a level appropriate for someone her age. Even if I tried, as someone whose mind and soul have ascended to a noble stage, the most unrefined conversation topic I can think of is politics. How am I supposed to dumb that down? You could call it the tragedy of someone who has achieved enlightenment; I haven't the slightest idea of what's considered common knowledge nowadays.

But, well. Even so. (Here comes the part you've all been waiting for.)

If I trace back those distant memories, I really do owe Hachikuji a lot. If it weren't for Hachikuji—if I hadn't met Hachikuji—I wouldn't be here now. I mustn't forget the eight Confucian virtues: benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, fidelity, loyalty, filial piety, and service to elders. Debts have to be repaid, and it's expected to show gratitude towards those who have helped you. Instead of giving up before I try, as someone who's grown so much as a person, it's my duty to do whatever I can to bring myself down to her level.

If I've made up my mind, then on we go.

As a ceremony... As an initiation, it's time to regress to my childhood years—yes, just like an uncle playing along with his niece's game of house—and, overflowing with paternal tenderness, play out our old routine once more.

But this really is the last time.

I have my expectations set low, or rather, I can't hope for much, but I suppose I might be able to take something away from this... Umm, how does this go again? I only have a faint memory of how this was done, but, well, I'm sure I'll remember while I'm doing it. Even if it doesn't all come back to me, that shouldn't be a big deal.

Alright, then let's head straight into the main act.

I don't need a warm-up.

Ready, set...

!!?!!!?!!!?!!!?!!!?!!!?!!!?!!!?!!!?!!!?

**“Hachikuji.....!”**

!!?!!!?!!!?!!!?!!!?!!!?!!!?!!!?!!!?!!!?

I leap towards her. I leap towards her with bolded letters in a huge font, while throwing around tons of “!!”s and “?!”s and abusing ellipses.

“Ahhh!”

“Hachikuji! Hachikuji! Hachikuji!”

“Agghhh! Agghhh!”

“What are you doing here, what brings you here?! Wait, no, I don't care about the reason, it's fine as long as you're here, oh I don't have words for everything I'm feeling right now, waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Aaaggghh! Aaaggghh! Aaaggghh!”

Hachikuji struggles against me. I hug her tightly with tears of joy in my eyes.

“Oh, this feeling to the touch, the sensation of holding you, the way you fit right in my arms—it really is you, Hachikuji! I'm blessed, so blessed! The more I rub our cheeks together, the more you're Hachikuji! The more I lick you all over, the more you're Hachikuji! 'Tis the taste that tells the Hachikuji! These eyeballs, these lips, the nape of this neck, these collarbones, these breasts, these upper arms, these ribs, these thighs, the backs of these knees, these ankles—their texture, their taste, they all belong to Mayoi Hachikuji! How smooth, it's almost like they've been polished with wax! I'll never let go of you again, I won't let you go anywhere, I won't let you get away! I'm going to stay just like this, hugging you close until the day I die! You're confined to my arms for the rest of eternity! Aw, dammit, our bodies are getting in the way of my embrace! If only we could just dissolve into liquid and melt into each other! Everything's been so awful since you went away, I'm at my limit! Listen to all my complaints, come heal my wounds! Come on, let me touch you more, let me hold you

tighter, let me lick you all over!"

"Aaaggghh! Aaaggghh! Aaaggghh! Aaaggghh!"

"Hey! Quit struggling! You're making it hard for us to get naked!"

"Aaaggghh! ...Grr!"

She bit me. She bit me with every ounce of her little girl strength.

"Aghhh!"

It's my turn to scream this time. After just having sworn to not let go until the day I die, I immediately pull back my arms in pain—but this time, it's Hachikuji's teeth that won't let my hand go.

Wait, forget not letting go, she's going to bite it off! Did she grow fangs or something?!

"Grr! Grr, grr, grr, grr!"

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow! What are you doing, you brat?!"

Of course, the one who's painful to look at right now, and the one actually doing something outrageous... is none other than me.

In any case, leaving aside all the little details and explanations... After a little more than half a year, it would seem that I've found myself in an unexpected reunion with my best friend, Mayoi Hachikuji.

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[1] Z-ton (also spelled "Zetton") is a monster that appeared in the last episode of the famous Tokusatsu series, *Ultraman*. He's appeared in many other *Ultraman* series since then, often showing up in the series finale.

[2] In Japan, all students applying to public and some private universities must take a standardized test called the National Center Test. After making the cut of the Center Test, students will then be asked to take a test specific to whatever university they're applying to (generally).

[3] "Hachi," the first kanji in Hachikuji's name, means "eight" in Japanese, while "Nana" means "seven." "Koyoi" is the word for "tonight," and ends with the same kanji as "Mayoi."

“Right then... So, seriously, what’s going on here?”

“Don’t change the subject, Mr. Pervert.”

“Mr. Pervert? Hey now, Hachikuji, how could anyone manage to stutter like that? That doesn’t sound a thing like ‘Araragi-san.’ Seems like you’ve gotten rusty during our time apart. Did your bottomless well of vocabulary finally run dry?”

“I didn’t stutter. It may not sound like your name, but ‘Mr. Pervert’ is exactly who you are. Araragi-san and Mr. Pervert are one and the same.”

“Heh. I see you’re just as harsh as ever.”

“Don’t try to wrap things up neatly with a cool-sounding line. There are plenty of things that still aren’t neat here. Like my disheveled clothes, for one.”

She doesn’t know when to give it a rest. Isn’t it the rule that once the chapter changes over, you’re supposed to act like the previous chapter never happened? Just because you’re a ghost doesn’t mean you’re allowed to break the rules.

Come to think of it, didn’t things end badly for you *because* you broke those rules? ...Of course, that’s not the sort of thing I can bring up while we’re joking around.

“No, we are not joking around. This is a serious crime. I could take this to court. I really wish you’d grow up a little in that regard, Araragi-san. What do you think you’re doing, right at the beginning of the last volume?”

“Oh, shut up. If you thought I’d start things off on a somber note just because it’s the final volume, you were sadly mistaken.”

That’s not how I do things, after all. I’d like you all to consider this Koyomi Araragi’s general policy speech: Let’s laugh all the way to the end.

“You’re truly hopeless. Well... I suppose it wouldn’t be like you to act otherwise. Though that certainly doesn’t make it any easier to deal with,” Hachikuji says with a nod, shrugging her shoulders.

She really gets it. Now that’s how you wrap things up smoothly.

Banter like this makes it feel like we’re picking up right where we left off... Well then, if I may say my honest feelings now that we’ve started a new chapter, on a visceral level, I’m ridiculously happy to see Hachikuji again. Still, if I said I didn’t have any lingering questions about all this, I’d be lying. Logic has its importance, too.

Why is Mayoi Hachikuji here? She should have already passed on and gone to heaven. What is she

doing on the grounds of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine? That happened back on August 23, and today is March 13... so to be precise, it's been, uhh, six months and 21 days since we parted ways. So why has she come back now?

I already mentioned this, but I'm really happy about it. I'm so thrilled that nothing else even matters right now—but still, something wouldn't feel right if she came out and said, "The truth is, I never actually passed on back then!" after all this time.

For example, there's the possible explanation that Gaen-san, who gave us advice back then, took some measures to shelter Hachikuji. I'm sure it's something she could devise on the spot, but as far as the specialists go, that seems more like the kind of thing the ever perceptive Meme Oshino would do. It's hard for me to imagine Gaen-san arranging something like that. She's definitely a schemer, and when I think about everything that happened after that, it wouldn't be strange if she had some ulterior motive regarding Hachikuji's ascension—but I can't think of her as someone who would plan this kind of surprise. You could say that she's too strict, or maybe too much of a realist... Thinking about it, although she may have been his upperclassman in college, she's a completely different type from Oshino, who's a bit of a romanticist under his flippant exterior.

So, if it's that not the answer... What's really going on here?

I suppose I should interpret this as Hachikuji having returned to Earth from the heavens... Still, while I've encountered all sorts of oddities over the past year, I've never once heard that it's possible for a ghost that already passed on to return to the real world, so I can't be sure about that. After all, it's called "passing on" because it's irreversible, because there's no coming back from it. Although, I guess it *is* possible to return to secular life from priesthood, and people *do* welcome back the spirits of their ancestors during Obon...<sup>[1]</sup> Even Senjougahara went to visit her grandparents' house during Obon, didn't she?

Of course, I'm pretty sure it's not that time of the year at all... But despite my plans to go to college, I'm a pretty poor student, so there could be an annual event taking place in Japan right now that I just don't know about.

Then, could this really be happening? Could I really be reunited with Hachikuji like this? Could something so wonderful—so convenient—really happen to me?

"..."

"You seem to be deep in thought, Araragi-san. Allow me to take a guess at what's going through your mind right now... When you were going wild just earlier, you mentioned that things have been awful ever since I left. Could it be that after suffering all those trials, you've become something of a misanthrope at the ripe age of 18?" Hachikuji asks, then adds, "Of course, as a ghost—an oddity—I don't really count as part of humanity."

Hmm, judging from that comment, it would seem she hasn't been brought back to life, after all. And here I'd been considering that a possibility, since I was able to touch her.

Once my speculation falls back in line with the logic that people can't come back from the dead, I'm able to regain my composure a little. Even something that obvious felt like it could be in question right now.

That said, wait a second. Hold on, hold on... I really need to think back. There has to be a ton of stuff I still haven't remembered. I reminisced about all sorts of things, but I still haven't finished connecting the dots. The scene where I met Gaen-san and the current scene with Hachikuji are still completely disconnected. Even setting aside the pipe dream of Gaen-san having kept Hachikuji in custody, it's clear that she had a hand in this.

"That's no good, Araragi-san. No matter how long it's been since the release date, you can't just cleanly forget about something like *that* happening to you. Really, how egregiously gracious."

"..."

Ignoring that blatantly meta remark...

If this is a part of one of Gaen-san's schemes, I can't afford to lose myself in happiness right now. I'd like to lose myself in happiness, but sadly, I can't. I have to figure out an explanation for this.

I look up at the sky. The sun is high above the horizon. As I'm overwhelmed by those dazzling rays of sunlight, I realize that it's far too late to make it in time for the start of the exam. Getting there a little bit late... clearly isn't an option at this point. Without even bothering to check the exact time, I can tell that I've pretty much forfeited my right to take the test. This isn't a simple absence, but an abstention. I've made a complete waste of all that time Senjougahara and Hanekawa spent coaching me. Thinking about that, I feel a sense of exhaustion, or maybe disappointment... or just the feeling that I really blew it.

What keeps me from falling into despair is that, at the same time, I can't help but feel a sense of inevitability about it.

That's right.

Ever since I parted ways with Hachikuji... too many awful things have happened. Enough to make me a misomaniac, not a misanthrope. Enough that I can hardly believe in anything anymore. Thanks to that, I'm sure my heart has become paralyzed—numb to pain, numb to sadness. It seems I still have enough spirit left in me to feel joy, but I'm sure that eventually, even that will end up numbed by the venom of suffering. I've been poisoned.

"I dunno, what can I say...? You're right. After you left, Shinobu's first servant showed up, Oikura came back, there was the disaster with Sengoku at this shrine, Kaiki and I crossed paths, I started turning into a full vampire, and I even forced Ononoki-chan to kill one of her own creators... Oh, right, that also happened here. Plus, speaking of this shrine, this is where Kagenui-san went missing too. It was just too many horrible things, all in a row... It all went by in a flash, and it's not like nothing *good* happened either, but it was a half-year full of experiences no one could take anything away from—or more like, experiences that were nothing but harmful. I always described those two

weeks of spring break as hell, but the true hell might've been these past six months..."

And it all started when Hachikuji disappeared. My life collapsed in on itself, almost like a house that drove out a zashiki-warashi falling to ruin.<sup>[2]</sup> And while I'm not in a position to be demanding, if I were going to see Hachikuji again, I wanted to be someone who could be proud to face her. I wanted to meet her under different circumstances. I wanted to meet her as a different version of myself.

"You've got it all wrong, Araragi-san," Hachikuji interjects. "You're wrong, Araragi-san."

"Huh... About what?"

"Aralucky-san."

"If you look at it one way, since we haven't seen each for half a year, it's natural that you might want to stutter in a way that was appropriate six months ago—but Hachikuji, I just finished telling you how unfortunate I've been, so if you really have to stutter on my name, don't pick something that sounds so positive. At least call me *Unlucky-san*. Also, my name is Araragi."

"Sorry, I stuttered."

"No, you did it on purpose..."

"I stutttered."

"It wasn't on purpose?!"

"I stutter-her-were-blur-fur-purr-sir-slurred."

"How did you manage to say that without slipping up?! That skill of yours has me tongue-tied!"

"I'm not striving to become a voice actress for nothing."

"That's never been established as a goal of yours, has it? Don't make it up on the spot."

"You've got it wrong, Araragi-san," Hachikuji restates.

The two of us have the knack of beating around the bush in our conversations.

"You're wrong."

"Wrong...? About what? Did I make some sort of mistake?"

I mean, I've made a ton of mistakes. Still, it's no mistake that I wish I could've been reunited with Hachikuji as a different man.

"Oh, that's not what I meant. I wasn't commenting on your feelings or emotions, but just pointing out a factual error... To put it plainly, you're wrong about where we are."

“Where we are? What do you mean...?”

“You kept mentioning ‘this shrine,’ but this place isn’t Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.”

“Huh?”

At that, I take a look around. Now that she mentions it... Until now, I hadn’t been looking at anything but Hachikuji and the sun, but now that she mentions it, we’re not on the grounds of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine at all. We’re not at the top of a mountain.

This is... This is the place where I first met Mayoi Hachikuji. It’s that same park.

“Huh... What?”

Naturally, I start to panic. Meeting with Hachikuji like this was already enough of an impossibility, but changing locations without any memory of it is too much. My mysterious teleportation from Kita-Shirahebi Shrine to this park is enough to make me completely lose my calm. I lose every bit of the composure I’d finally regained.

“W... What’s going on? Why did I wake up in a totally different place...? Huh? Did someone carry me here while I was asleep?”

Hachikuji...? No, it couldn’t have been. I’m not exactly a big guy, but I’m still not petite enough that an elementary school student could carry me anywhere. It’s a pretty long distance from here to the park—wait, I mean, from Kita-Shirahebi Shrine to here. Hachikuji couldn’t move me such a long distance by herself.

But if it wasn’t Hachikuji, then... Gaen-san? No way. She doesn’t seem like the type to exert that kind of physical effort. In that case, does that just leave Ononoki-chan, the doll who works for her? She certainly has the strength to pull it off. Still, I have no idea why she would need to do that.

“Why would Ononoki-chan carry me to Namishiro Park...?”

“That’s wrong, too, Araragi-san.”

“Hm? I’m wrong all over the place today... Do you mean that Ononoki-chan isn’t the one who carried me here? Well, you’re probably right...”

“Correct, it wasn’t Ononoki-san. Also, this isn’t ‘Namishiro Park.’”

“? Oh, I see. That’s right, I never did figure out how to pronounce the name of this park...<sup>[3]</sup> Huh? Wait, Hachikuji, do you know what this park is really called? If it’s not ‘Namishiro,’ then what it is? ‘Rouhaku’?”

“It’s not ‘Rouhaku Park,’ either.”

“?”

It's neither "Namishiro Park" nor "Rouhaku Park"? Then how do you pronounce it? The name of this park... Wait, no, that doesn't matter right now.

"That's not true. It matters very much. But before we address that point, Araragi-san, while they may look identical—in other words, while this may be a recreation of it—strictly speaking, this isn't the same park where we met."

"Huh?"

That only adds to my confusion. What exactly is the truth here? Thinking back, it's hardly unusual for me to be thrown about every which way by the things Hachikuji says, but this is on a whole different level. I have no idea what she's trying to say. If this isn't "Namishiro" Park, then where is it? What on earth is happening right now?

"Araragi-san. Please listen and stay calm," Hachikuji says, in the tone of an experienced doctor informing their patient that they have an incurable disease. "Araragi-san, you probably—no, you definitely believe that I've returned to where you are after passing on, but that isn't what really happened."

"What?"

"I didn't appear before you. You appeared before me."

"Wait, what?"

"Let me be blunt, Araragi-san. I wanted you to remember it on your own, if possible... But Araragi-san, today, the morning of March 13, you visited the aforementioned Kita-Shirahebi Shrine and came face-to-face with Izuko Gaen-san.

"And then, you were killed," Hachikuji states. She states the truth.

When she says that, I remember. On those shrine grounds, on the road to the shrine... I was cut into pieces by Gaen-san. I was killed.

*"The solution is for you to die."*

That was what she said.

*"If you die, everything will be resolved. Everything will come to an end."*

She said that, and then sliced me to bits using the demon blade "Kokorowatari." Using that oddity-slaying sword. I don't know why Gaen-san had that long sword that the legendary vampire wielded—or, if you trace it back to its origin, that the legendary vampire's first servant wielded, but regardless.

Gaen-san killed me. She heartlessly slaughtered Koyomi Araragi.

And if I'm here now as a result of that... huh?

Umm, I'm still here after that, so... I was killed, but I was brought back to life...? I was brought back to life, and then I appeared before Hachikuji? Wait, no, then that becomes a question of where Hachikuji was in the first place. Doesn't that mean that, putting aside its correct pronunciation, this really is "Rouhaku" Park?

"You got so close, Araragi-san. I really would have liked to wait for you to reach the full answer, but if we let the last volume get too thick, people will think we don't know when to let go. So for the sake of keeping the page count low, allow me to wrap things up."

"Considering it was already split into three volumes, it's a little late for that... But if you're willing to wrap things up, please do. I'm not that concerned with figuring out the answer for myself."

"That's no attitude for someone taking his college exams to have."

"Just give up on the questions you can't figure out—that's the best test-taking strategy there is."

"That makes it sound more like a battle than a measure of knowledge. That's hardly a way to gauge ambition. Well, I suppose the Center Test will be scrapped eventually, and they'll find a better way of assessing the academic skills of high school students."

"Don't start talking about college exams. Start talking about the situation I'm in."

"I do apologize for pouring salt into your wounds; however, you said that things have been terrible for you since we parted ways, so I find it heart-wrenchingly pitiable that things are going to be terrible for you even after we've reunited. After you met with tragedy after tragedy, enough to call the past six months the 'true hell' compared to your spring break, I'm sorry to have to corner you even further."

"Hey, all that build-up is starting to scare me..."

"You ought to be scared. After all, Araragi-san," Hachikuji says. "This is Hell."

"What?"

"This is the lowest of all the levels of Hell—the Avici Hell."

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[1] Obon is an annual Buddhist event for commemorating one's ancestors. It is believed that the spirits of said ancestors come back to their homes during this period. For this reason, it's an important family gathering time in which many people return to their hometowns. It is celebrated somewhere around August 15 in most places in Japan.

[2] Zashiki-warashi are mischievous house spirits believed to bring good fortune and riches to the houses they haunt. It is also said that a house that drives *away* a zashiki-warashi will fall into decline and ruin.

[3] The name of the park is written in kanji, which can have many completely different readings for the same characters.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

I scream. I shriek with all my might.

“Hell?! Hell?! The Avici Hell?!”

“Yes, that’s right. The Avici Hell. It’s Raurava that’s the ‘screaming’ Hell, so I would appreciate it if you’d stop that. It’s a bit noisy.”

“Do you seriously expect me not to scream?! I feel like I belong in the ‘great screaming’ Hell right now!”

“As I’ve been telling you, this is Avici. You’re going to get in trouble if you spread false information.”

“You’re not helping!”

Hell, seriously...? And the Avici Hell, of all places!

By the way, here’s some trivia about the different levels of Hell (source: Tsubasa Hanekawa).

There’s a concept called the Eight Greater Hells—essentially, there are eight levels of Hell, and the further down you go, the worse they get. From the highest level to the lowest level, they are: 1) Sañjīva, the “reviving” Hell; 2) Kālasūtra, the “black thread” Hell; 3) Samghāta, the “crushing” Hell; 4) Raurava, the “screaming” Hell; 5) Mahāraurava, the “great screaming” Hell; 6) Tapana, the “heating” Hell; 7) Pratāpana, the “great heating” Hell; and 8) Avici, the “uninterrupted” Hell.

There are another Eight Cold Hells that parallel the aforementioned hot ones, but I’ll omit that part of the explanation for now. The lowest level of the Hells, Avici, is said to be more horrible than the other seven combined—the ultimate Naraka, the Hell of Hells. In other words, among all the sinners who are sent to Hell, only the worst of the worst end up there. You could call it the ultimate education to be found in Hell. That’s Avici, in a nutshell.

“Oh, come on! I wasn’t exactly an upstanding person, and I never thought of myself as the kind of guy who could get into Heaven, but I don’t deserve the lowest level of Hell! If you have to send me somewhere down here, at least leave me around Sañjīva! This is totally removed from reality!”

“Well, I think we were already removed from reality once Hell came into the picture.”

Hachikuji seems to be in a good mood. She must be having fun watching me freak out—what a nasty little girl. Well, I *have* heard that when people see someone else panicking, it’s easier for them to step back and look at the situation objectively...

“No, seriously, don’t go too crazy just because it’s the last book. Hell? What? Was our universe even

supposed to have a Hell, or any form of an afterlife?"

"I think it's crazier for there to be no Hell in a world that has oddities..."

"..."

Shinobu said something like that to me once. "If there are oddities, then there can be time travel." At least Hell makes more sense than hopping through time...

Still, it's hard to deny that nowadays, concepts like "Heaven" and "Hell" have a supernatural, or rather, a fantastical ring to them. Of course, that may only apply to Japan, where many different religious beliefs have all blended together...

"Though, I suppose that sort of thing isn't uncommon. Like a world where there's magic, but no one believes in fortune-telling. This one is more of an issue with the balance of the setting than the workings of the universe, but there are also worlds where there are talking animals, but people still eat meat."

"I mean, I get what you're trying to say here... But still, if you just come out and tell me I'm in Hell, it's a little hard to believe. After all..."

"You certainly like to get hung up on details. Can't you be a little more open-minded?"

Look. I'm not going to get sent to Hell with an open mind.

"Araragi-san, rather than running off your mouth and losing your head in a disgraceful panic all the time, you need the ability to adapt to new situations. Right, just like an Izumi Kawahara character."<sup>[1]</sup>

"Don't give such a specific example."

"What, are you one of those people who deny the existence of an afterlife? And even after dying in such an over-the-top fashion, too..."

"Not exactly..."

If I stop to think about it, it doesn't make much sense to deny the existence of an afterlife while acknowledging the existence of a "ghost" like Mayoi Hachikuji, or even a "zombie" like Yotsugi Ononoki. I guess I should regard that as an implicit acceptance.

Though when it comes to vampires, at least, I've heard that—strictly speaking—they just live on without dying rather than coming back from the dead, so that one doesn't contradict anything...

"But, I dunno, if there's another life after death, it sort of muddles things up..."

"Hm? What does it muddle?"

"Well, the meaning of life, I guess... It makes it so that your life is only a prelude to what comes next.

Whether you end up going to Heaven or Hell, if there's more to life after you die, there's less of a reason to live with everything you've got... It kind of, you know, weakens the severity of life and death.”

“And what's so bad about weakening the severity of life and death? Or are you a fan of stories written by the ‘I know the world ain't rainbows and sunshine, kiddos, I'm just writing it like I see it’ crowd?”

“...”

That sounds like *some* kind of story. Or should I say, that's *some* way of putting it.

“Oh, but there are plenty of stories like that. You know, ones where characters get killed off by the dozen, and young girls suffer, and kids get put through the wringer, and pure evil descends upon the world, and everything is cruel and unreasonable, all in order to make the story more ‘realistic.’ That class of story.”

“I get what you're trying to say, but that use of the word ‘class’ shows such obvious disdain that, to be perfectly honest, I don't really want to argue with you about it...”

“It's a scientific classification.”

“Wrong.”

“My point is that instead of writing about the sleazy truth, we might as well write a charming fantasy. There's no harm in dreaming.”<sup>[2]</sup>

“Seriously, stop bringing Izumi Kawahara into this.”

“It's never too late. We, too, can aspire for that kind of world.”

“It's not happening!”

It's too late! We can't do it in just one volume! We couldn't even do it with one hundred more volumes! No matter how much we struggle, a pure world like that is totally out of our reach!

“I suppose you're right. Perhaps the distinction between pure and impure lies in whether a little girl like me is described as a ‘colobockle’ or a ‘loli’.”<sup>[3]</sup>

“Like hell it does.”

“Still, can't we start working towards it little by little? The times are only getting tougher.”

“We're already at the end, anyway, so there's no point. Putting that aside, let's examine the issue of me getting sent to Hell. Let's delve a little further into that discussion.”

“Tragically, there's no further Hell to delve into past this one...”

She's exactly right. This is the lowest level of Hell. The very bottom—Avici.

"You say 'tragically,' but I'd say 'ironically.' To think that the 'A' in 'Araragi' stood for 'Avici'... It never occurred to me that the foreshadowing could be set up so far in advance, but it's been there since the day I was born."

"I think you might be reaching a little there..."

"I've heard that Avici is all flames as far as the eye can see, so maybe having the Fire Sisters for siblings counts as foreshadowing, too."

Hm?

That said, this park doesn't particularly appear to be engulfed in flames... Hachikuji said it was a "recreation," too. Why would there be a recreation of "Namishiro" Park in the Avici Hell? Just what kind of backdrop is this supposed to be?

...No, that's not all. If this is the Avici Hell... there's one big issue that comes to mind.

"A big issue? Oh, you're wondering about why you were sent to such a low level of Hell, aren't you? I think you can figure that one out if you give it some thought."

Uh, how did it go? Let me pull from my encyclopedia—source: Tsubasa Hanekawa—a little bit more.

The Avici Hell is where the most heinous of sinners go, but what specific sins can get you sent here, again...? Wasn't it stuff like killing your parents? Sure, I turned into a pretty bad son after I got into high school and started down the track of failure, but I certainly never killed my parents, or even thought about doing it...

"Not that. Think about it—you're a vampire, aren't you?"

"Hm."

"You went and rescued a vampire. You certainly have plenty of other sins to answer for, but that's the one that landed you here in Avici. You saved a demon. Of course that'd be a straight ticket to Hell."

"It's much like how Taro Urashima<sup>[4]</sup> saved a turtle and was whisked away to the Palace of the Dragon God at the bottom of the sea," Hachikuji says, but I'm pretty sure that was an entirely different scenario. What a terrible analogy. "This has nothing to do with anything, but it's quite amusing to swap the genders of the story and imagine the tale of Hanako Urashima.<sup>[5]</sup> She'd have a hunky Dragon King waiting on her hand and foot."

"Don't bring up something that has nothing to do with anything. C'mon, 'Dragon King'? He sounds like a powerhouse."

I see, so it was my vampirification...

Oh, right, I think killing a saint was another way to get sent to Avici... Indirect as it may have been, I was involved in the deaths of Guillotine Cutter and Tadatsuru Teori, so my ending up here might be justified by that logic, too. Not that I really want to think about it that way...

“Geez-a-loo. No matter what the reason, getting sent to Hell sure is depressing. It feels like a straight dismissal of everything I’ve done with my life...”

“My condolences. You truly have my deepest sympathies.”

“...”

Wait, forget about whether or not I feel depressed right now. The big issue I had wasn’t about what my own sin was. Let’s stop thinking about me for a second.

It was about Hachikuji. It was about Mayoi Hachikuji, the little girl standing before me, the little girl I was just reunited with. Call her a “loli” or a “colobockle,” I don’t care—but what is she doing in a place like this?

Wait, what?

No, seriously, what are you doing here?!

“‘What,’ you ask?” Hachikuji, who had been happily watching me freak out, looks a little ruffled when the topic gets changed to herself. A little ruffled, or maybe just insolent.

“Well, you know, I went to Hell.”

But she comes right out with it. She says it nonchalantly, without a trace of heaviness in her tone. And yet, that was about the heaviest statement I could imagine...

“*I went to Hell.*”

That’s freakin’ heavy!

“Indeed, it makes for a pretty funny gag.”

“It’s not funny, it’s just dark!”

“This was foreshadowed when I mentioned Z-ton’s one trillion degree fireballs back at the very beginning.”

“Now *that’s* reaching! Whaaaat? You’ve gotta be kidding me! You went to Hell after making such a touching show of passing on?! Seriously?! It’s all ruined now! What the heck do you think you’re doing?! This is unbelievable!”

“Whether you think it’s unbelievable or not, here I am. If you’re going to act like someone who threw a farewell party for an upperclassman with dreams of becoming a musician, only to meet them again

ten years later and find that they actually became a hard-working businessman, I'm afraid I'm as much at a loss for a response as a businessman would be."

"You going to Hell isn't as believable a scenario as that! What do you mean, business?! What kind of career change is this?! I never could have seen this coming! This is on the level of a bankrupt aristocrat—how could someone whose innocence was played up as much as yours get sent to Hell?! Did you commit some kind of horrible crime while you were alive that I've never heard about until now?!"

The eleven years she spent wandering our town as a lost child shouldn't count. That all happened after she died, and it's only the sins you committed during your life that get judged in Hell.

But how could a 10-year-old girl even commit a crime terrible enough to get her sent to Hell? Though, wait, apparently it's possible to end up in Hell over surprisingly trivial sins, or for completely unfathomable reasons. Of course, that's just another thing I learned from source: Tsubasa Hanekawa.

"I suppose you could call it a horrible crime," says Hachikuji, as she tries to pacify me. "I didn't know this until I ended up down here myself, but if a child dies before their parents, they're thrown straight into Hell, no exceptions."

"Ah..."

Disrespect towards one's parents by leaving the world before them... is it? Right, right, it's that whole thing about piling rocks by the riverbed Sai no Kawara.<sup>[6]</sup>

Hachikuji left her father's house on Mother's Day in order to go see her mom... and after venturing out all by herself, met with a traffic accident and lost her life before ever reaching her destination. That happened 11 years ago, so I'm not certain what the status of Mayoi Hachikuji's parents is at the present, but they were, at the very least, still alive when she died. In other words, Hachikuji passed away before both her mother and her father.

Therefore. She ended up in Hell—she was sent to Hell.

"...You've got to be kidding me."

And yet, those are the only words I can utter.

I may have worked out the reason, but it's hard to accept logically—it's impossible to accept.

In the past, there may have been a tendency to consider dying before one's parents to be a form of disobedience—and maybe there still is even now—but that way of thinking holds no consideration for the regrets of the child who died. It's not like Hachikuji died before her parents because she wanted to. Being forced to pile rocks all day is too harsh a penalty for that... Even if you *could* consider it a kind of sin, the fact that she died should be considered more than enough punishment in and of itself...

“...”

“Hm? What’s wrong, Araragi-san?”

“Well, I was shaking with rage over the unbelievable injustice of it all... but to notice, in spite of that, that there’s something else wrong here is my tragic fate as a master detective.”

“You don’t have a single quality of a master detective. Every time you’ve been presented with a riddle, someone else has always done the mystery solving for you.”

That’s harsh. She’s exactly right, though.

“So, what did you notice?”

“I still want to stress my concerns about you ending up in Hell after that emotional farewell, but if I generously beyond generously concede that point and let that slide for now, that’s still not serious enough a sin to land you here with me in Avici, is it? You should be piling rocks by the Sai no Kawara riverbed... right?”

I don’t know much about it myself, but if I stretch my memory to its limits and remember what Hanekawa said, that’s how it’s supposed to work. Sai no Kawara is a riverbed of the River Sanzu, and a place you could call the entrance to the entrance of Hell. Children build stone towers in honor of their parents, and each time they do, a demon—an ogre, not a vampire—comes and destroys it. Of course, it’s a rather severe Hell to put small children through, but the Jizo Bodhisattva will come rescue them before too long, so you could say it’s a Hell with a bailout plan. The watered down version of Hell. When compared to the cruelty of Sañjīva, where people experience the torture of being killed by the devils of Hell and brought back to life over and over, it’s sugar-coated enough to be equated to a mere scolding.

I’ve already endured a battle of brutally dying and reviving as a vampire, so I get that in that sense, Sañjīva may be too lukewarm a Hell to throw me into, but isn’t it strange for Mayoi Hachikuji, whose only sin is “dying before her parents,” to be here in the Avici Hell?

“Impressive. You’re quite sharp, Araragi-san. I just said that you don’t have any of the qualities of a master detective, but you might actually be Sherlock Holmes reborn.”

“I’m dead, though.”

Also, I’m not *that* sharp. Anyone could realize that after giving it some thought. For example, I’m sure the very source of my knowledge, Tsubasa Hanekawa, would have noticed it the moment she came face-to-face with Hachikuji.

Well, I guess there’s no way Hanekawa would end up in Hell in the first place... Or wait, maybe I shouldn’t be so sure about that? If Hachikuji and I were sent down here with no room for argument, it’s hard to say whether she’s reserved herself a ticket to Heaven after all the things she did as Black Hanekawa.

“Maybe calling this Avici was just a bad joke of yours, and my sin was actually just dying before my parents like you, so this is really Sai no Kawara?”

Of course, this is a park, not a riverbed—but it sure doesn’t look like a maelstrom of flames, either.

“Please don’t try to worm your way out of your situation at the first opportunity you see. Avici is the Hell where you belong.”

“When you stress it that strongly, you make it sound like it was a given that I’d go to Hell...”

Was I that bad? I can’t imagine a more depressing conclusion to reach after 17 volumes.

“Yes, that’s right, Araragi-san,” Hachikuji says once more. “I knew that this was where you would end up—I saw it coming ahead of time. It was a given. So I took a business trip away from Sai no Kawara, where I ought to be, in order to come pick you up.”

“P... Pick me up?”

“Yes. It’s a bit like a welcoming reception. I was even planning to bring you a lei like a Hawaiian would, but I gave up because it seemed like too much trouble.”

“It was a psychological reason like that that stopped you?”

Well, I guess I wouldn’t know what face to make if I were welcomed into Hell with a lei of flowers. If she made me a lei of red spider lilies,<sup>[7]</sup> it’d be too much trouble for *me* to come up with a reaction.

“I managed to slip out by explaining that a friend was staying nearby, so I’d be taking the day off from stacking stones.”

“Is Sai no Kawara really that lax?!?”

“These days people have started popping by for a casual visit during their near-death experiences, so it’s turned into something of a tourist spot.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I have a lot of influence among the devils of Hell. They’ll let me through on sight. Oh, oops, this is Hell, so I suppose I should say that they’ll let me through on *smite*.”

“I haven’t been here long enough to get Hell jokes, so please stop making them”

I don’t know how much of what she’s saying is a joke... but the remark about her knowing ahead of time catches my attention. Of course, she couldn’t have come to get me if she didn’t know I was coming beforehand... but she really saw this coming?

“Yes,” says Hachikuji. “Though perhaps it’s not right to say I saw it coming—I ‘knew’ about it.”

“Knew?”

“Yes. I knew that you would be killed by Gaen-san and end up down here.”

“...You... knew about all of that?”

“No, more accurately, it’s the person who told me about it that knew.

“That person knows everything—apparently.”

Mayoi Hachikuji says that, as if retracing memories of the past.

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[<sup>1</sup>] Izumi Kawahara is a famous 80s shoujo manga artist. Her works are generally very heartwarming and idealistic, largely filled with sweet, good-hearted characters.

[<sup>2</sup>] This is another Izumi Kawahara reference. “There’s No Harm in Dreaming” (or in Japanese, “Yume datte ii ja nai”) is the subtitle of a spin-off story to her most famous manga, “Warau Michael.”

[<sup>3</sup>] In Izumi Kawahara’s aforementioned manga, “Warau Michael,” one of the three main characters is a short girl who is nicknamed “the Colobockle.” The Colobockle are a race of tiny people in folklore of the Ainu people of the northern Japanese islands.

[<sup>4</sup>] The story of Taro Urashima is a very famous Japanese legend. It’s the tale of fisherman who rescues a small turtle. It turns out the turtle was actually the daughter of the Emperor of the Sea, who wants to see him and thank him, so Taro is brought to his castle (the Palace of the Dragon God) at the bottom of the sea. There, he spends his time with Otohime, the turtle he saved who is now a beautiful princess. While he believes he only spent three days down there, when he returns to the surface, he finds that 300 years have passed and everyone he knew is long dead.

[<sup>5</sup>] “Taro” is an extremely generic name for a boy in Japan (think along the lines of “John Smith”), and “Hanako” is its female equivalent.

[<sup>6</sup>] Sai no Kawara is the “Children’s Limbo” of Japanese culture. It’s a riverbed of the River Sanzu, the river that dead souls cross on their way to the afterlife. The children must pile up a tower of stones each day as penance, only to have the demons of Hell come and destroy their work before it can be completed. The cycle continues until the Jizo Bodhisattva, known as the guardian of children, comes and rescues the child from the demons.

[<sup>7</sup>] The red spider lily—or in Japanese, “higanbana”—is commonly associated with Hell in Japanese culture.

“Alright, now that all of the mysteries have been fully explained, we ought to be on our way. Let’s go, Araragi-san.”

“Huh? Go where...?”

All of the mysteries have most certainly *not* been explained, and it feels like the ones that *were* explained were sort of skimmed over, and really, you could probably go as far as to say that the majority of the conversation so far has just been pointless banter!

I would like to request the establishment of an Exposition Headquarters.

“Now, now, I can fill you in on the details along the way. We don’t have to sit around talking in this park all day. This isn’t an anime commentary track, so there’s no need to sit still. I am, fundamentally, a child, so staying in one place for too long goes against my nature.”

“Hah... I see you’re still the same old free spirit, completely unhindered by the borders between media... I mean, not that I really care where we talk.”

“It *is* par for the course for our conversations to happen on the move, you know. Although you’ve lost both of your bicycles, you still might as well come walk with me on a spiritual journey every now and then.”<sup>[1]</sup>

“...”

Whether it’s “every now and then” or “for the first time in a while,” I have no problems with that proposition and of itself, and it’s not like we can’t walk and talk at the same time, so I don’t really mind... but where exactly are we going?

“Oh, no, you see—it would seem that things went a little off track, so we’re going to fix that. That’s the role that was assigned to me.”

“Role?”

“Hehehe. What an ironic twist of fate that I, who once made a livelihood leading people astray, would be serving as a guide.”

After making that confusing remark, Hachikuji starts walking, her big backpack swaying from side to side. If you accept the theory that this Hell (a way of phrasing that shows I don’t know when to give up, in more ways than one), it would seem this girl brought that beloved backpack of hers all the way with her to the next world.

Well, I wouldn’t particularly want to see Hachikuji wearing a burial shroud, so I won’t bother nitpicking about that. Besides, I’m still dressed in my school uniform, too.

There's no trace of it having been sliced into pieces. There's not a single sign left that Gaen-san turned me into mincemeat—but rather than attributing that “recovery” to my vampirification or the encroachment of my vampiric traits, I should probably assume that it's simply thanks to this being a Hell where you're revived even after you die... It would take a hellish amount of time and effort to change clothes each time you were killed.

“Hm... Come to think of it, Shinobu didn't end up here with me. Since I died, doesn't that mean that she must have regained her original vampire powers...?”

“Most likely. I believe that's just another part of you-know-who's plan, though.”

““You-know-who’?”

As I follow behind Hachikuji, as we walk out of the park together, I repeat that word back to her. Even after leaving the park, we're greeted by the same sidewalk, the same trees, the same road, the same pedestrian crossing, and the same stoplight that we would always see outside the park. In other words, the town appears exactly the same as ever.

Not that I'm really familiar enough with the area around “Namishiro” Park to say for sure what it usually looks like—but at the very least, it gives the impression of a pretty regular town. It doesn't seem like we're in Hell at all. If anything... maybe the complete lack of passersby feels a little strange?

“...If I remember right, you're sentenced to spend 2000 years falling through a pit of flames at the entrance to the Avici Hell. Could it be that all the criminals are still in the midst of falling, so nobody's actually made their way down to this Hell yet?”

No, that can't be it—here I am as we speak. And according to the results of that experiment of Newton's, there's no way I could've fallen faster than everyone else, either.

“You'll understand soon enough—I'll make you understand. Don't worry, you could very well consider me to be all-knowing and all-powerful for the moment; that person told me almost all there is to know, after all. To be completely honest with you, I've even heard a brief outline of everything you've been up to lately.”

“Again...Who is ‘that person’?”

“That personage.”

“Okay, now they're giving me ‘final boss’ vibes.”

“That peregrinator.”

“Now you're using words from a different age. You were referring to them normally before. So who are they? That person of yours who knows everything...”

Wait. That alone should make it plenty obvious who it is. If it isn't Hanekawa, then it has to be her—

it has to be the very person who cut me into pieces, the head of the specialists, Izuko Gaen.

But how could Hachikuji, who ascended—correction, went to Hell—be in contact with Gaen-san?

“I’m all-knowing and all-powerful through delegated authority.”

“Pretty sure you can’t call that ‘all-knowing and all-powerful.’ You’re taking ‘an ass in lion’s skin’ to a whole new level here. Hey, Hachikuji, you’ve been charging on ahead pretty confidently, but can you at least let me know where exactly we’re going? Your mother’s house—probably isn’t where you’re headed, right?”

“Correct. My mother is evidently still alive and well, you see. Her house may be gone now, but it would seem she just moved elsewhere. Thank goodness, truly.”

“...”

“If I may answer your question by telling you what we’re going to *do* rather than where we’re going to do it—it’s my job to bring you back to life, Araragi-san. Earlier I said we’re going to ‘correct what went off track,’ but that wasn’t the most accurate way of wording it. What I should have said is that we’re going to ‘alter what went right,’” Hachikuji responds, only managing to complicate it further.

I don’t understand any of this.

Well, thinking about it, the things I don’t understand tend to outnumber the things I *do* understand these days. I’m constantly getting thrown around by my surroundings, always the one getting dragged into things... I’m sure that someone more resourceful than me could have dealt with those situations more smoothly, though.

“Bring me back to life... huh? I can come back to life?”

“Of course you can. Where’s the point in staying dead?”

“But Gaen-san...”

“*The solution is for you to die.*” That’s what she said.

Gaen-san said it, so I figured she must be right. Of course, it wasn’t something I could readily accept, and I didn’t understand the reasoning behind it at all—I *still* don’t know what Gaen-san was really thinking, but if that was the course of action she took, then no matter how detrimental it may be to me, I can be certain that she had the needs of the many in mind. I can believe that.

And so, I don’t intend to reject the “righteousness” that she carried out. If the solution is for me to be killed by her, then that can’t be taken back.

“Goodness, get a hold of yourself, Araragi-san. The long and short of it is that this was all a part of that one’s plan, killing you and bringing you back to life included.”

“Killing me and bringing me back to life...?”

That was all a part of her plan? What kind of unproductive plan is that? That’s worse than an arsonist putting out his own fire; it’s as meaningless as multiplying by 2 and then dividing by 2 right afterwards. It accomplishes nothing beyond giving me a scare.

Did she just want to prove the existence of Hell? Why would she need to do that *now*? Besides, if it does exist, Gaen-san surely would have known that already... hm?

Did Hachikuji just say “that one”? Not “that person”? ... Maybe I’m the one who’s being nitpicky about wording now.

“It’s not multiplying by 2 and then dividing by 2.”

Without addressing my internal question, Hachikuji keeps chattering on. Talking on the move really does seem to suit her better, judging from the way she’s getting more and more talkative by the minute.

“There’s subtraction involved, too.”

“Subtraction?”

“You’ll understand *that* soon enough, too.”

“...”

It feels like she’s putting off all the most important parts... Though, I’m sure Hachikuji has an agenda she has to stick to as my tour guide, so I don’t want really want to press her too hard for answers, either...

Still, after being told I’m going to be “brought back to life,” I can’t help but feel a little discomposed. I’ve spent all this time getting swept along with the circumstances and thrown about by the current, so I hadn’t thought this far ahead yet—I got too caught up in thinking about Hachikuji—but now that I’ve been informed I can “come back to life,” it’s having trouble sinking in.

“What’s wrong, Araragi-san? You’re going to come back to life. Aren’t you happy?”

“Well... To be perfectly honest, I hadn’t thought that far ahead yet... I still haven’t really accepted the fact that I’m dead to begin with, so it’s a little hard to wrap my head around the thought of coming back to life...”

“Hahaha. What, that again? If you accept a universe where people can come back from the dead, it’ll dilute the meaning of life?”

“It’s not that...”

Or is it?

No, it's not.

That's not it. It's that deep down, there was a part of me that felt like a load had been taken off my shoulders. That sounds almost like a line straight out of a manga, but, well, you know...

"Hmm. I suppose I can understand that. You've been fighting for your life non-stop, after all. Surprisingly enough, it seems gamblers on a winning streak will often subconsciously wish for their own defeat. Is it a natural desire to want to even out a life biased towards victory, I wonder? I'm willing to buy that those are your honest feelings, rather than a lame attempt at sounding cool."

"What's with that condescending attitude...?"

"But unfortunately, I doubt that person is generous enough to indulge those honest feelings of yours. This way."

Hachikuji rounds the corner.

The moment she does, the scenery changes. Rather, we end up right where we should around the corner—what changed in this case was the color of the sky.

It was broad daylight until a second ago. Now, the two of us suddenly find ourselves standing in a nightscape. The streetlight, which wasn't serving any function mere moments ago, is brightly illuminating the night road as naturally as if it had been for hours now.

"...? What happened? Did someone cast Tick-Tock?"<sup>[2]</sup>

"I wonder... Oh my, do you see that, Araragi-san? There's someone slouched on the ground over there."

"Hm?"

Just as soon as I more or less accept the transformation of the sky—anything goes in Hell, I figure—I glance over in the direction Hachikuji pointed, and see that, indeed, there certainly is a person leaning against the streetlight, bathing in its glow as if it were a spotlight shining down on her.

No, not certainly—uncertainly.

And not a person, but a monster.

The one collapsed there—the one drenched in red, lying in a pool of blood—is a vampire on the verge of death, with all four limbs cruelly ripped from her body. A vampire of legend, left lying about in a gruesome state.

It is none other than the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, and cold-blooded vampire herself: Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade.

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[1] The actual phrase Hachikuji uses is “dougyou ninin” (literally, “both walking together”). This a phrase often written on the hats of travelers on the Shikoku Pilgrimage—a pilgrimage that involves visiting 88 temples around Shikoku that are associated with the Buddhist monk Kobo Daishi. The phrase is a reference to the fact that although the pilgrim may be traveling alone, Kobo Daishi is always with them in spirit.

[2] “Tick-Tock” is a spell in the video game series *Dragon Quest* that instantly switches between day and night.

“Sh... Shinobu!”

I run towards her. I don’t have to stop to think about it—the minute I catch sight of her, I just start running. I don’t have the composure to consider why she’s here, or why my fateful encounter with her from that spring break is being recreated in this Hell—I just run.

Run towards her... and then do what? Now that I think about it, I have no clue.

Nevertheless, regardless, I run towards her, without sparing a thought for what comes next. Have I lost my mind, I wonder? I was so convinced that I deeply regret the actions I took back then... I surely haven’t forgotten about the tragedy I bore witness to after I was captivated by her beauty and recklessly rushed to save her, have I?

But in spite of that, I run over to her—or more accurately, I try to run over to her.

Our eyes meet.

That is, the moment I think they do... Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade—while flashing a smile even more horrifying than the state she was left in—disappears.

She vanishes.

In the same moment, as if it left together with her, the darkness in the sky fades away, and the scenery that had spontaneously changed spontaneously goes back to how it was before. That ostentatious midnight road, almost like a stage that was prepared specially for her, goes back to being a regular old street.

“...”

A hallucination? An optical illusion? A mirage?

No, no way... I wouldn’t hallucinate in Hell. Let alone about the ghost of a vampire.

The possibility crosses my mind that Gaen-san murdered Shinobu with “Kokorowatari” after she was finished with me, and that’s why she was in that condition... But if I remember right, it’s not possible for a bona fide vampire to end up in Hell. Unless it’s as one of Hell’s devils, maybe...

Then, what was that all about just now?

“Did your body just move on its own, Araragi-san?”

Hachikuji rushes ahead to catch up with me after I took off on my own. She doesn’t seem at all surprised about what just happened—it’s almost like she saw it coming ahead of time.

She *did* see it coming. Or should I say, she knew? She was told.

“How strange. With how deeply you regret having saved Shinobu-san during spring break, why did you try to repeat the same course of action when faced with the same situation?”

“Well... uh, I mean, I don’t know how to explain it besides my body moving on its own...”

Hachikuji didn’t particularly sound like she was criticizing me when she said that, but I instinctively start trying to justify myself regardless.

“W-Well, just because I ran towards her doesn’t necessarily mean I was going to save her like I did back then. You never know, I could’ve been rushing forward to deal her the finishing blow.”

“That’s an obvious enough lie for even a child to see through... Don’t forget that this is Hell. Go around telling lies, and you might get your tongue ripped out.”

Hachikuji says that teasingly as she walks past me—and takes the lead. Flustered, I follow after her.

“...Well, even if you take putting her out of her misery off the table...”

Perhaps if I had done that, it would have provided some form of salvation to that noble vampire with a death wish—and yet still, taking that off the table...

“Even now, I think about what would have happened if I had just ignored Shinobu back then... if I had just run away, frightened by the sight of that bloodstained beauty. I envision it in my dreams.”

I never thought I’d envision it in Hell, though.

Instead of meeting a Buddha in Hell, I met a demon—quite literally.<sup>[1]</sup>

“Now that I think about it, Shinobu’s first servant had been gathered up in this town as a cloud of ash by that point... You never know—maybe right when Shinobu was about to be killed by those three vampire hunters, that armored warrior would have completed his resurrection and sprung back to life in response to his master’s crisis. If that had happened... maybe those two, who parted on such bad terms, would have finally been given a chance to reconcile 400 years later.”

“Now *that* story sounds too good to be true.”

“Yeah. And I might’ve been the one who stopped that pipe dream from becoming reality... When I think about it like that, it’s enough to drive me crazy.”

“This way.”

It’s hard to tell whether Hachikuji is actually listening to what I’m saying—or rather, what I’m complaining about—from the way she just keeps charging on ahead. Her background being what it is, it seems she isn’t very fit to be playing the role of a guide. Since she said she’s going to bring me back to life, I have no choice but to follow behind her like a baby duckling, but if she can’t guide me along a little more gently, I’m never going to get a grip on what’s happening.

As concrete proof of her poor aptitude as a guide, the next place she steps foot into is somewhere that you could never mistakenly wander into while strolling the city: the inside of Naoetsu High School. No matter which direction you walk, there's no way that a sidewalk could lead directly into the hallway of a school—no, seriously, this is getting crazy. This can't be explained away as simply “getting lost.”

Though, I guess things were already crazy enough when it turned from day to night in an instant...

“So this is your school, is it...? Well, to be precise, I suppose it's just a recreation of it. Still, I may have wandered all over our town, but school hallways are a bit like a sacred ground to me. This is the first time I've ever set foot inside a high school. If one of the teachers spots me, I might get yelled at.”

“I think *I'd* be the one in trouble if a teacher spots me dragging around a 10-year-old girl... Exams would become the least of my worries...”

I'd be faced with an *investigation* instead of an examination. Heaven forbid.

That said, there don't seem to be any devils here in Avici, let alone any other sinners, so I highly doubt we'll run into any teachers... Still, I wonder what the point is of having an uninhabited Hell. Maybe they changed up the system, and now Avici is a Hell designed to give its sinners a taste of true solitude? That *would* make for a fairly unpleasant Hell, but since Hachikuji came to pick me up, it's already transformed into something of a paradise... I've been given a mentor instead of a tormentor, perhaps.

“But why did the path lead right into my school? I can't see the street we just came from behind us anymore, either. There's just the regular old hallways...”

“A path can lead anywhere, you know.”

“Hmm... But...”

“Oh dear, Araragi-san. There's a pervert coming this way. Be careful.”

“A pervert? That sounds serious. Quick, Hachikuji, get inside me—I mean, get behind me!”

“You just said ‘get inside me’ the first time.”

We take refuge in a nearby classroom to avoid the pervert coming our way, but the supposed “pervert” making his way down the empty hall appears to be none other than me. Koyomi Araragi.

In that case, he's hardly a pervert—he's a handsome gentleman. Was Hachikuji just seeing things?

While stupid thoughts like that run through my head, I notice one other person walking alongside “me.” It's Tsubasa Hanekawa—and the early version of her, to boot. It's Tsubasa Hanekawa, wearing glasses and a braid.

Her hair is tied into one braid rather than two, so it's the very, very earliest version of her. In reality, Koyomi Araragi has never once walked side-by-side with a single-braided Tsubasa Hanekawa through the corridors of Naoetsu High School. Once spring break was over, Hanekawa split her hair into two braids—and these days, not only has she stopped wearing glasses and cut her hair short, but her hair is streaked with black-and-white tiger stripes. But regardless, Hanekawa is Hanekawa—no mistake about it.

...But, hmm, you know...

Araragi-kun, do you always make such a dopey face when you're talking with Hanekawa...? I always thought I looked more dignified, but that's about as far from it as you can get.

While I'm thinking that, I lose sight of the two of them. They might have gone into a classroom to hold some sort of meeting as class president and vice president. Maybe a meeting about the school festival or something.

"You could say that your life descended into chaos ever since you saved Shinobu-san... but your meeting with Hanekawa-san right before that was just as big a turning point. She's had an enormous impact on your life. What do you think about that?" Hachikuji suddenly asks.

It's so out of the blue that it takes a moment for me to wrap my head around what she's trying to get at—but what the heck? In other words, is she asking me whether I would've been better off if I'd never met Hanekawa?

"If I recall, Hanekawa-san is the one who instigated your encounter with Shinobu-san... Plus, you were personally put through the wringer twice at the hands of Black Hanekawa."

"..."

"If you hadn't become friends with Hanekawa-san, you wouldn't have gotten wrapped up in all that trouble... or at the very least, no one could blame you if you thought about it that way."

"...Well, I won't deny that I went through a lot because of Hanekawa. Thanks to that girl who only knows what she knows exposing truths that didn't need to be exposed, and forgetting about truths that she shouldn't have forgotten, we ended up going through some dangerous shortcuts and making some unfathomable detours... But still."

If anyone other than Hachikuji had brought it up, a question like that might have been enough to make me lose myself in a rage. But since it *is* Hachikuji asking, I'm able to respond to it in an amazingly calm and reasonable manner.

Without losing myself.

I'm able to answer it as me.

"I'm still genuinely glad that we became friends."

“...”

“I think I can see where this spiritual journey of ours is going... So, what next? Should we go ahead and follow after those two?”

“Hmm... There isn’t really a set course we have to follow, but we might as well, I suppose. This way. If we likened this to the story of *Alice in Wonderland*, I would be the rabbit holding the pocket watch.”

“Wonderland, huh...?”

At this point, this really does feel more like Wonderland than Hell—though I don’t remember the original book that well, so I might be off the mark on that one.

She said they were recreations. “Namishiro” Park—and Naoetsu High School.

Recreations, and reenactments.

It’s a reenactment of everything from spring break to this point—I follow behind Hachikuji and step out of the classroom, but the Koyomi Araragi-kun and Tsubasa Hanekawa-san duo has already disappeared from sight, with no sign of where they went.

If we want to go after them, we have to take the stairs. No matter what kind of meeting they’re planning to hold, they’re sure to have it in our classroom on the third floor—as I think that, my gaze shifts over to the staircase.

And then.

I spot a high school girl frozen in midair. Her pose could give the impression of someone soaring through the sky, but that girl suspended in stop motion is somebody I know well.

“Senjougahara...”

“I’d say you also had the option not to catch Senjougahara-san when she lost her footing here... It’s certainly not as pressing a decision as choosing whether or not to save a pretty young girl dying on the hallway floor or what have you. Catching someone as they fall puts *yourself* in a fairly dangerous position—and depending on how you catch them, you might end up hurting the other person, too. Even if you had simply stepped out of the way, Senjougahara-san had no body weight at the time, so she probably wouldn’t have been injured. Apparently, particularly light animals and insects won’t get hurt even if they fall from a great height—like that.”

“...”

“But, of course...”

“I’d catch her. I’ll catch Senjougahara when she comes falling down—each and every time.”

She told me that she's glad I'm the one who caught her back then—so I feel the same way. I'm truly glad that I'm the one who caught her. It was just a coincidence, a product of chance—but in that case, I'm not averse to calling that coincidence an act of fate.

I'd even say it's my calling.

"...Hypothetically," Hachikuji says, without any particular weight to her words, as she moves up the stairs past Senjougahara, still stuck in her exceedingly odd mid-fall—suspended fall—pose. "If you hadn't caught Senjougahara-san back then... Hmm, let's suppose that even if she had been slightly injured, it wasn't anything serious. And let's say, after that, she continued living her life as she had been—stern, sharp, and held up by her pride. Before long, that con man would come to this town, wouldn't he?"

"The con man... Deishuu Kaiki."

"Correct. Their fates are intertwined—and perhaps that fate would have led them to a confrontation. You prevented that destined confrontation of theirs when it was about to become a reality during summer break... But if you hadn't gotten in the way—if there hadn't been a boyfriend to step in—I wonder what would have happened."

"What do you mean by that...?"

"Perhaps they might have gotten back together. Senjougahara-san tries to hide it, but I'm sure you've guessed that there was something between them in the past," says Hachikuji.

I mimic Hachikuji and walk past Senjougahara.

Even if she's completely frozen, that's an awfully precarious position to leave her in, so I feel like I should gather her up in my arms and move her somewhere else; but I dunno, I'm afraid that the moment I touch her, it'll break her balance...

"If things had gone differently, those embers might have ignited into a flame—when you think about it that way, both life and love truly have a mind of their own."

"Don't talk about love. It's not credible coming from you."

"Oh dear. Shall I take that as an indirect inquiry about my love life? You clearly don't know how far elementary schoolers get with one another these days."

"I don't really want to know... and I *seriously* don't want to hear about your love life."

"So, what do you think, Araragi-san? What if you were the one who stood in the way of Senjougahara-san and Kaiki-san's romance?"

"What do I think? That he had it coming, obviously."

His situation is pretty different from the First's. That's not something I can talk to Senjougahara about,

though...

“It’s true that he helped resolve the situation with Sengoku... but that has nothing to do with this. It’s completely unrelated. I still genuinely wish I had never met him.”

“Hah. Of course, there are bound to be some people like that in your life—not everyone can get along, after all. Right then, since you just brought her up, why don’t we finish up by making our way over to Sengoku-san? Let’s bon voyage.”

“‘Let’s bon voyage’...? It gets the meaning across, so it’s hard to correct you on it. Hm... huh? What about Kanbaru?”

“Hm?”

“Like I said, Kanbaru... Suruga Kanbaru.”

I had figured that this whirlwind tour, starting from “Namishiro” Park and going who-knows-where, was a form of judgement in Hell—something like the Johari Mirror. You know, that mirror that reflects back all the actions you took while you were alive (source: Tsubasa Hanekawa).<sup>[2]</sup> I assumed that was why I was looking back on all my actions, or perhaps all the things that happened to me—all the things that assailed me—on this miniature pilgrimage of sorts.

We started with Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade from spring break, moved on to Tsubasa Hanekawa during Golden Week, and then went on to Hitagi Senjougahara when school started up again. Mayoi Hachikuji is already standing right next to me, so I can see why we might just skip over her turn; but if we’re supposed to be going in chronological order, I met with Suruga Kanbaru before I came across Nadeko Sengoku.

King Enma supposedly judges sinners by looking into the Johari Mirror, so the reason why Avici seems so tame at the moment is simply because my punishment hasn’t been decided yet; I’m still in the midst of being evaluated, so the flames of judgement have yet to be brought down upon me—or that’s the explanation I came up with for all this.

But if that explanation is correct, it means that I’ll be sentenced to tumble through the flames of Hell for 2,000 years once this pilgrimage is over, so I would by all means love to be proven wrong...

“Oh, right. Kanbaru-san is an exception, you see.”

“An exception?”

“You could say we’re skipping ahead, or you could say we lose a turn here... Kanbaru’s case was a bit different from everyone else’s, after all.”

“Her case was different...?”

*That sounds more like something that would apply to Sengoku, who Hachikuji just proposed we go see. Kanbaru—or rather, the oddity in her left arm—was actually pretty standard as far as oddities*

go...

"Oh, no, it has nothing to do with the oddity itself. The issue here is how you got involved with it. It was impossible for you to stay out of the problem with Kanbaru-san, wasn't it?"

"...What do you mean?"

"Kanbaru-san was the one who set out and began stalking you in that trademark assertive way of hers—and what's more, she came to murder you of her own accord. No matter how many times you were faced with the same situation, you'd have no choice but to deal with the matter," Hachikuji responds, with exasperation in her tone. I can tell she's silently adding on, "Or what, would you consider 'give up and let her kill you' to be one of your options?" ...Hmm, she has a point.

Her actions couldn't be so simply summarized as "stalking" or "attempted murder"—but when faced with an expert communicator who's pretty pushy in her approach of you, whether you change up some of your initial choices or not, you'll still end up getting involved with her in the long run.

Kanbaru had the initiative.

Of course, if I had never chosen to date Senjougahara in the first place, Kanbaru subsequently wouldn't have started stalking me; but since I already declared my intention to catch Senjougahara each and every time she loses her footing, my relationship with Kanbaru is practically as inevitable as a family tie.

In that sense, I can understand why Sengoku would be our last stop—there wouldn't be any point in going to see Karen and Tsukihi.

Still, even knowing the logic behind it, it doesn't feel right to just leave Kanbaru out. She may be a little different from the rest, but I don't want it to seem like I'm excluding a beloved friend of mine.

"But you know, Kanbaru-san's personality is rather one-of-a-kind among the Araragi Harem. Honestly, it seems like a bit of a miracle that the two of you get along so well. You're like an isolated state when it comes to interpersonal relationships, and she's like a tax haven—just what do you two have in common?"

"A tax haven...?"

A haven, huh?

But she's not *really* such an innately cheerful person—she has a lot of struggles of her own she has to deal with. Otherwise... she never would have made a wish on the Monkey's Paw.

"Her upbringing was pretty unique, too."

"Oh, was it?"

"Yeah. I told you about it, didn't I? Her parents eloped—and after they did..."

As such, when she was a little girl, Kanbaru was raised as neither a part of the Kanbaru family nor a part of the Gaen family. She never knew her “lineage.” And that’s the reason why she has no ties to her own aunt, Gaen-san. In August of last year, Gaen-san got Kanbaru involved in a job of hers, and even then she never revealed her own identity to her sister’s daughter.

“Hmm. Life truly is difficult, if someone with Kanbaru-san’s mentality and physicality can still feel like things aren’t going her way. In that case, I have to wonder if there’s anyone in the world who *does* feel like their life is going exactly the way they want it.”

“I dunno… If we get too profound here, this discussion is gonna get a little heavy for a high schooler like me. But at the very least, I’d say that everyone in the world has some kind of stress they have to deal with.”

However, I can’t deny that part of that conjecture is founded in the jealous hope that even people who come out on top have to suffer a little. Though of course, if someone complained about how “oh maaan, I’m having so much trouble saving up ten billion yen, this is awful, I’m totally stressed,” it’d be really hard to sympathize with them…

“Though by that logic, someone could consider *your* worries to be relatively trivial, too. You have been awfully blessed—or should I say, you’ve received awfully special treatment as you’ve worked towards taking your exams.”

“Well, yeah. Nothing I can say to that.”

“You can give that some proper consideration once you’re among the world of the living again. You’ll have plenty of time to think it over.”

As she says that, Hachikuji twirls around the landing of the staircase, then starts heading for the next floor—or so it seemed, but before I know it, we’re no longer walking up the stairs of Naoetsu High School. We’re spontaneously surrounded by new scenery, on a stairway buried deep within a steep mountain. It’s a stairway that, as of late, I’ve traversed even more often than the stairs at school.

It’s the long-winding set of stairs that leads to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

This is more along the lines of a warp than teleportation—it’s like the space around us was distorted. It’s a scene change a little more reminiscent of genuine fantasy literature than a YA magic story—and it doesn’t even surprise me anymore. I’ve become numb to it… or perhaps it’s more accurate to say I’ve gotten used to it.

It’s pretty strange to say I’ve gotten used to *Hell*… but anyway, I remember now. Back in June, I passed by Nadeko Sengoku on these very stairs. …If none of this has anything to do with the Johari Mirror, it seems possible that I’m still just watching my life flash before my eyes after dying at the hands of Gaen-san.

Maybe I’m just looking back on everything I did—and what I regret.

…Yeah, that’s right.

When it comes to Shinobu, when it comes to Hanekawa, when it comes to Senjougahara, and of course when it comes to Hachikuji, I know I'd take the same course of action no matter how many times I'm faced with the same situation—but I still can't deny that I wish I'd done a better job.

“You did a perfectly good job, Araragi-san. In my case, at the very least.”

“Hearing you say that does make me feel a little better—but at the very least, I failed when it came to Sengoku.”

“True enough. And to have your archenemy, that con man of all people, be the one to clean up after you must have been truly humiliating.”

“Yeah, and so...”

I start to say that as I continue climbing the stairs—and then, as expected, or perhaps as it was meant to be, Sengoku comes making her way down the stairs from the top of the mountain: a small girl wearing a waist bag, with a hat pulled all the way down over her eyes. She's rushing down the mountain in a hurry, as if she were running away from something. And that *is* an accurate way of describing how she felt at the time.

She was running away.

She wanted to run away.

...Of course, at this point—not in the recreation of it now, but on the actual mountain, when I passed by Nadeko Sengoku—I still hadn't realized who she was.

I didn't understand what she was going through.

If there's anything that I “wish I'd done better” in regards to Nadeko Sengoku, maybe it has something to do with that...

“I wonder about that. I think you're setting the bar a little too high for yourself. You aren't all-powerful, you know. You ought to come to terms with that, just like Hanekawa-san has.”

“If I were anywhere near Hanekawa's level, I'm sure I'd have humility down pat, too—but when you're like me, you can't help but demand a little bit more of yourself.”

“Sengoku-san had gotten into a fight with her friend, hadn't she?”

“Yeah, that's what happened. ...Although the root of the problem may have been those ‘charms’ that a certain conman circulated for a quick buck...”

No.

The “charms” themselves were inconsequential in the long run. The root of the problem went much

deeper than that...

“There’s still the question of whether you can call someone who places a snake curse on you a ‘friend.’ I remember Oshino had something to say about that, too. ‘This is why I don’t make friends,’ or something like that.”

“That’s certainly some philosophy... Well, Sengoku-san may have messed up, but don’t they always say that the trouble you get into during elementary school and middle school will make for a good memory when you get older?”

“I’m not so sure about that. I’d say that childhood trauma sticks with you enough to keep dragging you down even after you become an adult. I mean, I’m not an adult yet, so I can’t say for sure... but the way I screwed things up with Oikura in elementary school and middle school is nothing but a painful memory for me now.”

“Oikura-san...”

“Oh... That’s right. It was after you and I parted ways that Oikura came back to school. Have you heard anything about her yet? You know, from ‘that person.’”

“Well, yes, a little bit... But she and I have never actually met, you know. It’s hard to get a sense of what she’s really like through a glorified game of ‘Telephone.’ I know what I know, and that’s the end of it,” Hachikuji says.

That line would’ve been the clincher if Hanekawa had said it, but regrettably, when Hachikuji says it, her knowledge really does come off as superficial.

...But wait, did she say “Telephone”? If she really heard all of this directly from Gaen-san, I don’t think she would use a metaphor like that... It makes it sound like there was someone else acting as an intermediary between them.

Am I reading too far into it?

“Come to think of it, you grew up in an awfully unique home environment, Araragi-san. I’ve heard a bit about all of *that*, too—about how your parents would often provide shelter for unfortunate children, how you spent many of your elementary school days around those kids, things like that. Perhaps that environment is what gave birth to the strong sense of justice that you and the Fire Sisters share.”

“...Thinking about it now, Sengoku might have been someone like that for Tsukihi-chan, too. Not that Sengoku had any problems at home or anything...”

“Do you really think there’s a family out there that doesn’t have any problems at all? Only someone who’s part of a home knows what it’s like on the inside, after all. Just so you know, your relationship with your sisters is pretty off-putting to a third party organization.”

“Don’t bring a third party organization in to investigate this. Just leave it at ‘a third party.’”

As we talk, Sengoku walks right past us—without seeming to pay us any mind. This is just a recreation, so I suppose it's entirely possible that she just can't see us... Hmm, back when this really happened, did Sengoku notice I was there? I can't remember. Even if she had recognized me, it wasn't a situation where she easily could call out to me, and I was with Kanbaru at the time...

Anyway.

Missing my chance to call out to Sengoku here... is another “repetition.” A little bit later—the next day, I think—I ended up following her after catching sight of her in the bookstore instead...

“...Well, I may have failed, but I can’t really think of a better way I could’ve handled it, either. I wasn’t in any danger myself, but it was still a pretty urgent matter to deal with.”

“True enough. We often think about hypothetical situations in which we could ‘do our lives over,’ but if that really happened, it’s likely we’d just end repeating the same actions over and over. Here I thought we might be able to get ourselves into one of those time loops that are all the rage these days.”

“No, that fad’s died down now...”

“Trends circle back around. Now that’s the real loop here. People often say that history repeats itself, too.”

“We’ve spent all this time talking about me, but what about you? If it were you—if you could do your life over again, what would you want to do differently?”

“Hmm, I wonder. I suppose that in the past, I wanted to repair the relationship between my mother and father. However, when I think about it now, I’m not sure if it would be right to set them up again after their falling out. It’s sad that they broke up over a fleeting emotion, but it would be a problem of its own if they got back together over another fleeting emotion.”

“...You know, if we go by what you’re saying, there wouldn’t be any room to build relationships between people in the first place.”

“As their daughter, I *do* have to complain that if they were going to get divorced, I wish they’d never gotten married in the first place—but then I suppose I wouldn’t exist. Well, I realize that’s a rather extreme argument.”

“...”

“I suppose at the end of the day, people just have to play with the hand they’re dealt. The same goes for you. Each and every time, you fought with everything you had—and so even when you look back on it now, no matter how many times you were to repeat it, you’d likely just do the same things over and over.

“Even if you didn’t take the most appropriate course of action, you took the ‘best’ one.”

That's what she says.

"Besides... When it comes to the matter of Sengoku-san, I believe there was a lot of outside interference. There were aftershocks... I suppose you could say."

"...? Outside interference? Aftershocks?"

"Right, I suppose you wouldn't be able to understand that part. In that case, don't pay it any mind. I simply meant that if you try to do too much, there's always a backlash."

"Hey, actually," I start to ask, finding it strange, "Why are we still climbing up this mountain? We just passed by Sengoku, who you said was the last one, so haven't we done everything there is to do on this spiritual journey? Haven't we reached the finish line of the pilgrimage?"

"No, no. I already told you what the goal of Mayoi Hachikuji's 89 Temple Pilgrimage<sup>[3]</sup> is: to bring you back to life. We can't stop here—in fact, it'd be more correct to say that everything until now has just been a detour."

"A detour?"

"Perhaps you could even say we were lost."

"..."

"No need to worry. This is all a necessary ritual of sorts—though I suppose it's more of an initiation than a ceremony."

"When you mentioned bringing me back to life... I assumed that would be done using the sword that opposes the demon blade 'Kokorowatari,' the short sword 'Yumewatari'... Was I wrong?"

Gaen-san chopped me up with the demon blade "Kokorowatari." It's a sword that kills oddities, once wielded by a specialist in slaying them—a sword that can cut things that don't naturally exist, things that shouldn't exist.

The sword that stands in opposition to it is the other demon blade, "Yumewatari." If you *had* to give it a matching nickname, it'd be the "oddity reviver." It's the second demon blade, one with the power to "revive" oddities that were killed by the sword "Kokorowatari"—or that's what I heard from Shinobu.

Hypothetically, if Gaen-san's true goal—if the point behind her uncharacteristic barbarism was really to "kill me and bring me back to life"... I assumed that the only way she could pull that off would be to use the "oddity reviver."

Of course, I have no idea how Gaen-san could get her hands on a sword that was supposedly swallowed up by the Darkness four hundred years ago... Mm, wait, didn't someone mention something about that to me once? My memory is a little hazy...

“No, you’re correct. However, that’s the part of the ceremony that has to be carried out on Earth—we have our own way of doing things here in Hell.”

“You make it sound pretty cool...”

All we’re actually doing is going for a stroll, though.

We’re just walking alongside each other.

Walking with Hachikuji like this brings back so many memories and leaves me enveloped in such a dreamy state that this hardly feels like reality—though I’m in Hell, so of course it wouldn’t feel like reality.

Still, it doesn’t feel like Hell, either.

“Anyway, there’s no need to worry. There aren’t any trials you have to undergo to come back to life, nor any obstacles you have to overcome. There isn’t any catch to it like ‘You can’t look back,’ either. Your resurrection is already 100% set in stone, so simply sit back and prepare yourself for what comes next.”

“...”

“Hm? What’s wrong? That’s an awfully dreadful face you’ve got.”

“Dreadful...?”

I think you meant to say “dreary.”

No, maybe “dreadful” wouldn’t be totally wrong—at the very least, I’m *feeling* pretty dreadful.

Why, you ask? Because as we walk up these stairs to the Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, my memory starts to slowly, dimly piece itself back together—and link itself up to the morning of March 13, when I was cut to bits by Gaen-san.

Knowing that, it follows that we’re going to climb the stairs all the way up to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, where Gaen-san will be waiting for me, and she’ll slice me up one more time using the demon sword “Yumewatari” in order to revive me. I’m not exactly thrilled about getting chopped up again.

I’m a little anxious about this supposed way of doing things in Hell.

“Come to think of it,” Hachikuji pipes up. “Is Ononoki-san doing well?”

“Mm?”

“The two of us are kin, in a sense. Due to that, that person took care to speak very little of her, but seeing as I owe her a lot after all her help during the incident with Darkness, I was hoping I’d be able to ask you about her when I saw you.”

“Ononoki-chan...”

Oh yeah, that’s right.

Hachikuji and Ononoki-chan only ever had a chance to interact during the few days of the Darkness incident, but maybe because it’s natural to form bonds on the run together, or maybe because they had some sort of mutual understanding as two oddities of the same generation, I recall that they seemed to get along especially well. A complete contrast to Shinobu and Ononoki-chan, who are always at each other’s throats.

...Of course, Ononoki-chan is a bit of a mystery, so even though they “get along,” she’s still not someone to let your guard down around. In fact, while she’s saved my life so many times now that I tend to forget about it, when we first met, we were bitter enemies. Shinobu’s probably the one in the right here for not letting up her hostility.

*I’m the one who’s crazy for living together with her in spite of all that—I’m the one who should be called abnormal. I’m the one who should be called out.*

“Yeah, she’s doing well—though she’s dead, so I don’t know if ‘well’ is really accurate here. She’s still going strong, anyway.”

“I see. As the one who appointed her as my successor, it’s a relief to hear that.”

“Ononoki-chan is your successor?”

“Yes. Officially. I’m sure she’s been partaking in playful banter with you in my stead,” says Hachikuji, and it doesn’t necessarily sound like she’s just joking around, either. “During that perilous journey of ours, I asked her to look after you if anything were to happen to me.”

“I had no idea you two talked about something like that...”

I don’t know for sure whether Ononoki-chan actually took that conversation to heart, but if she really *did* decide to take up that “request,” then she’s already done more to fulfill it than Hachikuji probably could’ve imagined. And not just on the banter front, either.

“...Now that I think about it, Ononoki-chan isn’t included in this 89 Temple Tour, huh?”

“Due to time constraints.”

“It’s because of *time* constraints?”

“Yes. It was a difficult decision Hachikuji P had to make.<sup>[4]</sup> It’s okay, Ononoki-san gets plenty of close-up shots in the anime, so it all balances out.”

“That’s not much of a trade-off here...”

Trade-off. Balance.

The minute the word comes out of my mouth, I get caught on it. No, rather than getting caught on it... I guess you could say that it suddenly occurs to me—that is, what I couldn't put my finger on when Hachikuji was telling me all that about coming back to life... Even after finishing our tour, after getting closer to my resurrection by the second, I couldn't process it and I couldn't wrap my head around it. But as soon as I say that word, it finally dawns on me this late in the game.

I get it now. So that's what was bothering me... Balance.

"Thinking about it, you truly are fortunate, Araragi-san. You have a pretty girlfriend, a smart and kind friend, a talented underclassman, two lively sisters, and now even a reliable little girl living with you."

"..."

"I'm almost envious. You're truly living it up. With a life like that, I think you ought not to be so self-flagellating... It goes past humility and straight into disagreeability. It's hardly any different from saying 'I can't become a billionaire, I want to die.'"

I can't imagine that anyone would be jealous of me living with Ononoki-chan... But still, it is true that I've been really blessed in a lot of ways.

But that's exactly the problem.

That's exactly why I want things to be balanced.

I want my feelings to be balanced.

A balanced design—wasn't the one who originally advocated for that Meme Oshino? I was worried that Hanekawa let herself get too influenced by that middle-aged man when she made plans to travel the world, but it looks like I might've been infected by his ideals myself.

"...Doing the right thing..."

"Huh? What's up, Araragi-san?"

"It's just that I had an argument about that once with those justice-obsessed Fire Sisters... I suddenly remembered it just now. I guess it's 'cause this is Hell. I start thinking about justice, even though I don't really want to."

"Hmm. Well, we're almost at the peak of the mountain, so if you want to talk, keep it short. This will probably be the last conversation we ever have, you know."

"Huh...?"

Then I'd rather talk about something else.

Still, it's a topic that I thought of specifically *because* I'm in Hell at the moment, and I'd sort of like

to hear Hachikuji's opinion on it, so I keep going with it regardless.

"It was about how it's hard to do the right thing."

"It's hard, hm? In this particular case, what does 'the right thing' refer to? I believe there are plenty of different standards for what counts as right and what counts as wrong."

"In this case, it can be something simple enough that all those standards don't even have to come into play... Even when something is unquestionably the right thing to do, there are a lot of times when we don't actually follow through with it, right? No question of moral relativity or anything..."

"Oho. So you're arguing that human nature is inherently evil. Oh, I find that sort of talk simply charming."

"No, I didn't mean it in that edgy teenager sort of way... How do I put it? It's not that we're evil—more that we're just immature."

"Immature... is it?"

"I think that's exactly why people put their all into the same sort of thing the Fire Sisters do, more or less. Well, maybe the Fire Sisters are a kind of extreme example... But still, most people get more enthusiastic about righting wrongs than doing the right thing, right?"

"...Are doing the right thing and righting wrongs two different things?"

"It's close but not quite, so it's easy to get them confused... The word 'tadasu' means 'to set something right,' but it can mean 'to examine' when written with a different kanji. That might actually be the right meaning of the word in this context."

"...Perhaps it's hard to express in speech," Hachikuji comments with an ambiguous expression. True enough, it's probably as hard to communicate what I'm trying to say as it is to tell what Hachikuji is thinking right now.

What's hard for me to express isn't the kanji, but what exactly I mean. Although we're discussing topics like good vs. evil and right vs. wrong, it feels like we're just lightly touching on the subject, wading around in shallow depths, which might actually make it harder to get my point across.

"In other words, rather than doing the right thing themselves, people tend to get more hung up on criticizing the faults of others?"

"Hm... Well, maybe something like that?"

That's still not *quite* what I mean. But it's close enough.

The most important thing here is that "righting wrongs" gives people the feeling that they're "doing the right thing." That's why the two blur together, and why it's hard to tell them apart. Not just for the person in question, but for the people around them, too.

Even a third party organization might not be able to make the distinction between “righteousness” and “setting things right”...

“What do you think, Hachikuji?”

“What do I think? From what you’ve said so far, ‘Wow, it’s been so long since I’ve heard Araragi-san being cynical, business as usual, I see, at least he’s still himself’ is about all that comes to mind.”

“Now I’m a little worried about what kind of image you have of me...”

“If you’re saying that as criticism, I’d have to point out that you’re contradicting yourself by flaunting your own sense of justice through ‘righting the wrongs’ of people who mistake ‘righting wrongs’ for justice.”

She’s making things complicated. Now I’m starting to get confused.

Well, if that’s what I really meant, it *would* be quite the self-contradiction, but fortunately enough, that’s not the main point I’m trying to make.

I didn’t mean it as criticism. I was approving of it.

“If people keep on righting wrongs... if they keep fixing one mistake after another, will we eventually reach a pure white slate of ‘righteousness’? I guess that’s more likely to bring us to a pitch *black* sort of righteousness instead, but to boil it all down, that’s what I’m wondering about.”

“...”

“Hachikuji, it was probably wrong for you to remain on Earth... It was something you shouldn’t have done. That’s why the laws of nature came into play.”

Through the Darkness.

“That’s why nature retaliated against you. You nearly ended up unable to go to either Heaven or Hell, forced to spend the rest of eternity as a wandering spirit.”

“Rather, I was nearly obliterated. That really was a close call.”

She says that nonchalantly, but it really *was* a big deal—enough to make her feel indebted to Ononoki-chan for sure.

“Oh, no, no. The part I’m most grateful to Ononoki-san for is the time she let me ride on her shoulders so I could kiss you.”

“Have a little tact, would you?!”

I was doing my best not to bring that up! Didn’t we have a tacit agreement to pretend like that never happened?!

“That line of thought is sort of like... you know. It’s like saying that rather than achieving something, the easiest path to success is simply to avoid failing. It’s a very Japanese way of thinking.”

“...”

Well, a lot of people actually think like that overseas, too.

“As a student dealing with exams that deduct points for wrong answers, it’s not surprising that you’d be taken in by that ideology, and I’m not entirely opposed to that way of thinking in and of itself, either. However, if you do things that way, you’ll never be able to get what it is that you really want.”

“You’ll never get... what you really want?”

“It makes everything dependent on someone else’s approval. You’ll only be able to get the things that people give you that way. Of course, that’s not necessarily a bad thing—but for someone like you, who always wants things that are out of your control and out of your reach, it just doesn’t work.”

You have to make a lot of mistakes. You have to fail again and again. You have to do things over, and try them again one more time. You have to hesitate, you have to get frustrated. You have to learn by trial and error. You have to withstand a slew of criticism, and at the end of it all...

“...You just have to succeed, right?”

“Well... I wasn’t really talking about myself specifically, you know. Still, you might be right... No, that’s how it *ought* to be.”

“If you live just by ‘righting wrongs,’ you might unwittingly start to hope for mistakes from the world and the people around you. If that’s where it takes you, it’s a rather dangerous ideology. I can’t approve of it.”

“Hmm...”

“You just said you weren’t talking about yourself. Then who were you talking about?”

“...”

I’m not sure how to respond to that.

Was it those heroes of justice, the Fire Sisters? No—they don’t put enough thought into their actions to warrant this kind of discussion.

Then was I talking about... Oshino?

Did I want to talk about that man who values balance, who acts as the mediator between right and wrong, between good and evil, between us and them... that man who always said that people can only save themselves?

No.

Probably, the one I was referring to, the one I wanted to talk about... was her.

That transfer student. Meme Oshino's niece.

Ougi Oshino—I wanted to talk about her.

Why hadn't her name crossed my mind until now? Why couldn't I remember her? It's strange—she's been a key figure in the past half year of my life.

...Is Ougi-chan another exception on this pilgrimage? Hachikuji hasn't so much as mentioned her.

Well, Ougi-chan's standpoint in regards to me is pretty different from Senjougahara's or Hanekawa's... She acts all unassuming, but she's pretty persistent in her approach of me. In that sense, she might be in the same class as Kanbaru.

...The same class as Kanbaru?

I hadn't thought about it... but now I see, so Ougi-chan is in the same category as Kanbaru... She called herself a fan of Kanbaru's, so I'm sure she'd be happy to hear that.

Hoping to have a more in-depth discussion about Ougi-chan, I try to think of a good way to bring her up, but time runs out before I manage to come up with any good ideas.

The stairs come to an end. We walk through the Torii gate of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

Upon walking through the Torii gate, the space around us—does *not* warp into a new location. Kita-Shirahebi Shrine stays the same as ever.

However, it's the Kita-Shirahebi Shrine from before it was rebuilt. Worn out and ruined, rotting away, withered up, a miserable sight—a forgotten shrine that you wouldn't even know was a shrine unless you were told.

It's in almost the same exact state it was when I first came here with Kanbaru—the only real difference is that there aren't any snakes crucified on the nearby tree. Since Sengoku just came down the stairs, the fact that it wasn't copied over might be a flaw in the system, but seeing a bunch of crucified snakes wouldn't exactly be pleasant, so I'm pretty grateful that that part was omitted.

But even without that, I've gotten used to seeing the rebuilt—newly built from scratch, to be more precise—version of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, so seeing it in its old, ruined form is still enough to make my blood curdle.

Just after I'd relaxed a little from chatting with Hachikuji, I tense up all over again. Since the gate didn't lead to a new location nor a new dimension, that must mean that the last stop on this bewildering trail is indeed Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

We're going to correct what went off track.

Wait, no, Hachikuji said some confusing thing about how we're going to alter what went right instead. Is she going to start explaining that soon?

And then.

Up ahead on the path that leads to the shrine, just in front of the crumbling building—I see someone near the offering box.

Someone is waiting for us.

This person is different from Shinobu and Senjougahara, or Hanekawa and Sengoku, or anyone we've seen thus far—they're clearly staring right at us, waiting for us.

However, I'd expected that there would be someone at the shrine—or I'd just had a hunch, perhaps.

Or maybe it was a sense of *déjà vu*.

After all, on March 13, I climbed up these same stairs and was cut to pieces by Gaen-san, who was lying in wait at my destination—but wait, maybe there was a part of me that *didn't* expect anyone to be there, too.

Last month, I came here to meet up with Kagenui-san, just like we'd agreed—but when I showed up at our meeting place at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, I was completely stood up.

Yozuru Kagenui.

That brute force onmyoji<sup>[5]</sup>... is still nowhere to be found.

With Ononoki-chan's personality being the way it is, she doesn't appear to have much to say on the matter—of course, she doesn't technically *have* a personality to begin with—but as the one who was left hanging, and as the one with her shikigami<sup>[6]</sup>, Ononoki-chan, left in my care, I can't help but be a little concerned for her well-being.

And that's why.

Regardless of whether this place is just a backdrop in Hell, I had the hunch that someone would be lying in wait for me at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, *and* the hunch that no one would be there at all—though of course if I had both hunches, it's a given that at least one of them would be correct. However.

However, I'm still surprised by what I see—I can't help but be shocked at the identity of the person waiting there.

On top of that creaking, crooked offering box that seems just about ready to spill its contents, there sits someone who is neither Izuko Gaen nor Yozuru Kagenui.

It's a specialist, just like them.

But a specialist who isn't like them.

...A specialist who should be dead.

A puppet user who was blown to bits and died.

It's Tadatsuru Teori.

“Hello, Araragi-kun. I've been waiting for you.”

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[<sup>1</sup>] “Meeting a Buddha in Hell” is a Japanese proverb that refers to fortune when you least expect it.

[<sup>2</sup>] King Enma is the Lord of Hell in Japanese mythology. He has a mirror in his palace called the Johari Mirror, which he uses to show the deceased all the sins they committed while alive.

[<sup>3</sup>] Piggybacking off of the “dougyou ninin” note from the last chapter, this is a reference to the 88 temple pilgrimage around Shikoku. It’s changed to 89 as a pun on Hachikuji’s name, as the first two kanji in her name mean 8 and 9.

[<sup>4</sup>] “Hachikuji P” is short for “Hachikuji Producer.” It’s a joke from the anime commentary tracks that came about when Hachikuji claimed she has sway over the production of the anime.

[<sup>5</sup>] Onmyodo, literally “The Way of Yin and Yang,” is an ancient Japanese system of magic that came into prominence during the Heian period. Methods range from Yin/Yang, the Five Elements, shikigami, and divination to ofuda and alchemy. Onmyoji is the term for a practitioner of onmyodo.

[<sup>6</sup>] A shikigami is a summoned spirit controlled by an onmyoji.

“Wha...”

As I stutter that, I instinctively draw back—enough that I come close to tripping back down the stairs. If I got tangled up with Hachikuji and we both came tumbling down, this might’ve ended with the two of us switching bodies.<sup>[1]</sup>

“W-What are you doing here...?”

*You should be dead.*

He should have taken a direct hit of Yotsugi Ononoki’s “Unlimited Rule Book,” suffered retribution, and met with a dramatic death, leaving not a scrap of meat behind—and so I go absolutely speechless in surprise at the sight of him.

But when I think about it, that’s a strange way to react. It’s an overreaction.

After all, this is Hell.

Speaking of the deceased, *I’m* dead myself. The fact that there’s a dead man here—the fact that I’ve been reunited with him after his death is perfectly natural.

That still leaves the question of why a specialist like him would end up in Avici, but I suppose that even though he *was* a specialist, he was one of the deviant variety, removed from Gaen-san’s network... When I think about what he did to Kanbaru, Tsukihi, and Karen, I personally can’t help but feel that Avici is better than he deserves.

Still, what is it?

Something feels wrong here.

The uncomfortable feeling I get upon reuniting with him is different from the one I got when I met Hachikuji at the bottom of Hell—rather than something feeling “off,” it’s more like I feel everything coming together(?) in a strange way, like the pieces of a puzzle assembled into a shape I wouldn’t have expected...

Or not. In the end, I basically just have no idea what’s going on.

“You oughtn’t make that face, Araragi-kun—although it’s good to be expressive. A lot has happened between the two of us, but that’s all from when we were alive. I would appreciate it if you could let bygones be bygones.”

Tadatsuru speaks, appearing completely aloof.

Somehow, I think *that’s* what feels different from how I remember him... We were caught up in a

pretty tense situation back then, so it's a given that my impression of him now would be a little different, but since we're presently at the bottom of Hell, I'd say the current circumstances aren't exactly lacking in tension, either...

Why is he so... Yeah, that's it.

That's what's bothering me.

Why does he seem like he's already used to this place?

I met with him on Earth—I faced off against him at (the renovated version of) Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, too, but he looks even more at home sitting on top of the offering box here than he did back then. Though from the way it's crumbling away, it doesn't look like a very reliable place to perch...

“Why don’t we get friendly, as two poor souls who were both sent to Hell? ...Just kidding. That was a joke.”

He's even relaxed enough to be fooling around... But wait, a joke? What does he mean by “joke”? Which part of what he just said was the joke? How much of it was a joke?

I guess the whole thing sort of sounded like a tasteless joke... He *was* part of the same club as Oshino and Kaiki back in his university days, so he might actually have a decent sense of humor.

It's a little questionable that he's showing that off in Hell of all places—but anyway, as someone who has experience interacting with Oshino and Kaiki, I can assume that nothing productive will come of pressing him for answers, so I have no choice but to turn to the fifth grader next to me for help.

“Hey, Hachikuji.”

“What is it, Aaagi-san?”

“That's nice and simple, but don't make my name sound like a half-assed one someone entered for their RPG protagonist. My name is Araragi.”

“Sorry, I stuttered.”

“No, you did it on purpose...”

“I stuttuted.”

“It wasn't on purpose?!”

“I sssstuttered.”

“Don't half-ass that part too! Explain what's going on here. Why is he here—what is Tadatsuru Teori doing over there? Was ‘that person’ you were talking about before actually Tadatsuru?”

“Oh, no, that was Izuko Gaen, as you suspected. No need to worry, the two of us are on the same wavelength.”

“...Then, what is he doing here?”

I look over at Tadatsuru again.

How to describe it? He’s watching our conversation—or rather, my panic—with an almost fond look in his eyes. Hey, I don’t recall giving him a reason to look at me that way.

Similar to how Kaiki is a specialist who works for money, Tadatsuru is supposedly a specialist who works to satiate his “aesthetic curiosity,” so maybe he finds there to be some sort of inherent beauty in my dismay, or Hachikuji’s composure, or maybe the back-and-forth between the two of us.

“You were right that ‘that personage’ is Gaen-san, but...”

“You said ‘that personage’ again.”

“The one who relayed ‘that personage’s’ noble intentions—I mean, ‘that person’s’ intentions to me was Teori-san over there.”

“R... Relayed?”

A game of “Telephone”... She mentioned that before. Is this what she meant?

But, uh, wait... that doesn’t make any sense chronologically speaking, does it? Wait, forget chronologically, it doesn’t make sense on any sort of level. To begin with, Tadatsuru is supposedly a specialist removed from Gaen-san’s network, so he’s in no position to relay messages from Gaen-san to Hachikuji...

“I told you not to make that face, Araragi-kun. Unlike that senior of mine, I *don’t* know everything, so I can’t speak of every aspect in detail, but I will explain everything to you given my own understanding of it. We may be cut from the same cloth in your eyes, but I’m much kinder than Kaiki and Oshino—as long as it’s in my own interests.”

“...This isn’t in your interests, is it?”

Tadatsuru talks in a friendly, almost ingratiating way, which only makes me even warier of him—but as if I’m protecting Hachikuji, I move forward the step I had retreated earlier.

“After all, you’re a specialist in exorcising immortal oddities... aren’t you? I’m an enemy in your eyes, someone whose existence you can’t accept. Basically like a pest who needs exterminating, right?”

“Don’t you think ‘pest’ is an awfully self-deprecating way of putting it? At any rate, you have the general idea—but, Araragi-kun. If *that’s* what you’re worried about, then there is no need to fret.”

“Huh?”

“After all—the way you are now, you don’t have a trace of vampirism in you. Not in any sense.

“You’re a normal human.

“A normal human who went to Hell,” says Tadatsuru. “Your vampirism... was ‘subtracted’ from you.”

“Subtracted...”

Oh... I get it now.

That’s what Hachikuji was talking about before. That’s what she meant when she said that it wasn’t just “multiplication,” but also “subtraction”...

So the part that was subtracted... was my vampirism.

From my point of view, it’s just natural to be the way that I am, so I’ve never noticed anything unusual or different about my body either on Earth or in Hell—but if there’s a rule that oddities can’t go to Hell, then the fact that I’m here now must mean I don’t have a drop of vampire blood in me.

In other words... I’m human.

I’m 100% human, and thus not a target for the specialist Tadatsuru Teori—so that’s how it is.

“...”

Of course, that doesn’t mean that it’s safe to trust him or carelessly get close to him. I don’t know what’s going on here, but if nothing else, he’s still the same man that hurt my underclassman and little sisters...

“Don’t worry, Araragi-san,” says Hachikuji from behind me, patting me on the back to calm me down. “I can take a guess at what you’re feeling right now, but if you stop here, it will impede on the progress of my tour, so please keep going. This is something that needs to be done in order to bring you back to life as a human.”

“...”

“If you refuse to do it, then the subtraction will all have been for nothing, and I won’t know how to face Ononoki-san.”

I have to wonder why Ononoki-chan of all people is coming up here—but still, when I think about it, this is coming from Hachikuji, who in spite of all our playful banter together is actually a pretty shy girl deep down.

Tadatsuru Teori.

If all I have to do is talk to him... it should be fine, right?

At any rate, just maintaining this strained situation isn't going to accomplish anything...even leaving aside the progress of the tour or whatever.

If I don't move forward, we won't get anywhere.

I say, "Stay behind me" to Hachikuji and walk down the shrine path, still positioning myself to protect her—man, there's definitely something messed up about having a shrine in Hell.

Of course, trying to stand between him and Hachikuji at this point is probably a pointless gesture, since she already came to get me on his instructions, but I feel like I have to do it nevertheless.

"You're almost like a prince, Araragi-kun—of course, the deity of this shrine being what it is, I suppose you'd be riding a white snake rather than a white horse."

I don't know if he's just trying to be clever or if there's something else entirely that he's trying to get at, but at any rate, I close the distance between us and Tadatsuru while listening to him speak.

As I do that, I try to recall his profile in a bit more detail. Thanks to the shock of seeing him killed on top of the shock of being in Hell, my memory is still pretty hazy, and I don't know if remembering it will actually do me any good, but even if I don't know everything, I ought to at least know what I know.

After all... people have to play with the cards they're dealt.

Tadatsuru Teori is the puppet-user of the specialists. He utilizes origami in his work. Tracing back his origins, he was part of the same group as Kaiki and Oshino—a member of the Occult Research Club, which was also joined by Yozuru Kagenui, as well as a college-aged Izuko Gaen, who probably served as the group's leader.

And then, while they were still in school... they created a "doll" named Yotsugi Ononoki.

Using the corpse of a human who had lived 100 years, they made a shikigami in the form of a little girl. Then I think there was a falling out over the ownership rights to her, particularly between Kagenui-san and Tadatsuru?

After that, Tadatsuru broke off his ties with Gaen-san... and then, as each specialist continued down their own path, Tadatsuru alone branched off in a different direction from the rest...

I crossed paths with him at the same time a change had occurred in my body—back when I was starting to turn into a full vampire, without it having anything to do with Shinobu...

And at the end of our conflict, he was murdered by the doll he himself had created. You could say that he reaped what he sowed, but that was too dramatic a death to be entirely attributed to karma. It was a death that I'd suspect even a half-baked vampire wouldn't be able to come back from, a final moment almost on par with Danjo Matsunaga,<sup>[2]</sup> which is why it was so bewildering to see him here... I guess

this is like the real world version of that line you often see in manga and stuff: “Let’s meet in Hell!”

Obviously, it’s not very fun in real life...

However, this doesn’t appear to be as simple as two mortal enemies reuniting in Hell. If this is all a part of Gaen-san’s plan, what in the world is going to happen here? Will I really be able to swallow the explanation he’s supposedly about to give me? I know I’m beating a dead horse here, but I still haven’t even swallowed the fact that I went to Hell.

I’m still a little reluctant to talk to him up close, so I leave a little room between us, stopping about five steps away from him. Hachikaji follows suit, and Tadatsuru seems to accept that.

“Is Yotsugi,” he starts to ask, “doing well? I do hope she isn’t upset about killing me.”

“...You’re one of her creators, so I’m sure you know. She doesn’t care at all—she’s just eating ice cream like nothing happened.”

“I’m sure. Of course, I’m one of her creators... one of her manufacturers, so I know that well. Rather than concern, just consider it a parent’s love—I’ll always worry, even when it isn’t needed. Nobody informed her of the circumstances, after all,” Tadatsuru says.

The circumstances?

“Circumstances... What circumstances?”

“Mm. She’s a shikigami created to simply follow orders, so she’ll follow them even if she doesn’t know the circumstances behind them. That’s what’s so good about her—that’s her strong point. Of course, Yozuru herself is much the same—though in her case, I suppose she simply doesn’t take the details of the situation into consideration. Gaen-senpai did quite the job of figuring out how to control such an uncontrollable existence.”

“...Do you have any intention of explaining those circumstances?”

Tadatsuru Teori is way too professional to be compared to the frivolous Oshino, but his roundabout way of talking still brings that old specialist to mind. I’m pretty sure I used to get this annoyed when talking with *him*, too—people have a tendency to beautify their memories of the past, so I hold Oshino in high regard as a specialist, but my mind hasn’t beautified that one aspect of him in the least.

“I do. If don’t revive you in a timely manner, Gaen-senpai might get angry with me. She’s awfully scary when she’s mad, you know.”

“...”

“To put it briefly—back then, in that scenario, getting killed by Yotsugi was the true task that had been entrusted to me,” Tadatsuru says.

He says that, with a completely straight face.

“Getting killed by Yotsugi, ending up in Hell before you, and carrying out the preparations for your resurrection—that was my job as a professional specialist.”

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[<sup>1</sup>] This is a reference to the 1982 movie *Tenkousei*, about a boy and a girl who fall down some temple steps together and switch bodies.

[<sup>2</sup>] Danjo Matsunaga is another name for Hisahide Matsunaga, an infamous feudal lord from Japanese history. His dramatic final moments came after losing a battle with Nobunaga Oda. He destroyed a priceless tea kettle that he knew Nobunaga wanted to get his hands on, then committed suicide after ordering his head be destroyed in order to prevent it from becoming a trophy.

“...Huh?”

For a moment, I have no idea what he’s saying, and once that moment is over and another second passes, and then another minute, I still don’t get it. It probably takes a full five minutes before I think I’ve just barely figured out what he’s saying—Tadatsuru and Hachikuji patiently bear with me through my slowness of wit.

Unfortunately, after making them wait all that time as I racked my brain, the response I finally manage to come up with is:

“...S-So, you just played dead?”

Even *I’m* a little disappointed in myself.

What am I talking about? This is Hell—it’s not a place you can get to just by pretending to be dead.

Still, if you lay common sense and the circumstances side-by-side and try to draw a conclusion here, I bet most people would come up with something similar. Nobody’s going to jump straight to the right answer when faced with such a baffling situation.

Maybe Hanekawa could, but that’s about it.

“Played dead...? No, not quite,” Tadatsuru says, dutifully evaluating my response.

It almost comes full-circle to being nasty... Well, if he’s part of the same group as Kaiki and Oshino, it’s probably safe to expect he has a mean streak.

“I truly *am* dead, you see. However, you’re not completely off the mark, either. It *did* have similar connotations to ‘playing dead’—much like one would do upon crossing paths with a grizzly.”

“A... A grizzly?”

“Or perhaps something grislier.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Tadatsuru presses onward, making some sort of a pun—at first I thought there might be some deeper meaning to it, but despite his young looks, he must be well past 30, so it’s possible that he just likes making puns.

Speaking of something grisly...

“I wonder how I ought to go about explaining things... Unlike that glib talker Oshino or the articulate Kaiki, I don’t have much experience talking with other people. I was the sort of child who always played alone with his dolls.”

“...”

“Regardless, to muster up some enthusiasm and begin from the simplest part of it: I had already been dead for quite a long time, as far as my life as a human goes.”

He says that without a hint of pause. When you consider what he’s saying in conjunction with that tone of voice, while he may not be such a poor speaker, he certainly *does* seem to be a poor explainer.

Also, it would be *really* depressing if his reason for becoming a puppet-user was that he used to play with dolls all by himself, but putting that aside...

“You were already dead? Huh... what?”

“The ‘me’ that Yotsugi killed back then was merely a puppet under my control. It’s a trick of the trade for puppet-users—call it the art of ‘substitution,’ or perhaps ‘sidestepping.’”

“...”

“Hm? I expected you to cut in with a question around this point, but now you’ve simply gone quiet. I suppose real conversations are never quite as easy as talking to figurines.”

Playing with dolls and talking to figurines may seem similar on a surface level, but they give off awfully different impressions—but putting *that* aside, the reason I went quiet is, of course, because I was at a total loss for words.

If Tadatsuru hoped I would have an immediate reaction to that, I’m afraid he expected too much of me. Most people, when faced with an unexpected situation, will simply freeze up on the spot, unable to utter a word.

But still.

In hindsight, as a run-of-the-mill high schooler who loves modern entertainment like manga and anime and TV, the fact that I never once considered that possibility would be more than enough ground for me to be criticized as foolish.

A substitute doll.

That’s a go-to routine for puppet-users.

So back then, he was playing dead...? Or not. Playing alive?

He pretended to be alive so he could be killed?

“You said... that Ononoki-chan didn’t know about that, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. And not just Yotsugi. Yozuru didn’t know, either—though in her case, it might be more accurate to say that she never bothered to find out. As someone who only seeks out the strong,

I'm sure she held too little interest in a scrawny man like myself... What a sad love."

"Love?"

"Oh, that's a story from long ago, so pay it no mind. I'm sure that the stories of an old man's past—and the tales of his unrequited love—would only bore a young man like yourself. I can't say for sure about Kaiki—he *is* a liar, after all—but as far as I know, the only people who knew about this method of mine... were Gaen-senpai and Meme Oshino."

"..."

Gaen-san, who knows everything... and the man who can see through anything, Meme Oshino. Now that he mentions it, those two are definitely the type to catch on to another person's secrets—but the real question here is just how long Tadatsuru had been *keeping* that secret.

It may seem unrelated, but that *is* something that concerns me.

After learning about this shocking truth that overturns everything I understood about his position as a specialist, everything that happened on the night of February 13, exactly one month ago, is sure to take on a completely different meaning as well.

That kidnapping incident—and his blackmail. That showdown, and that tragedy...

How will they all be overwritten now?

"A doll destroyed another doll. That's all there is to it... And so, Araragi-kun. We spoke of Yotsugi's feelings earlier, but if *you* were upset about being indirectly involved in my death, you ought to take this opportunity to relieve yourself of those worries."

"...It's not that simple."

Well, to be perfectly honest, it *is* a bit of a relief.

If, theoretically, what he's telling me now really was the true purpose behind that incident, then I wouldn't even be indirectly involved with Tadatsuru's death—I would be directly responsible for it. I'd be lying if I said that wasn't bothering me, and while I wouldn't quite call it reassuring, I can't deny that knowing that the person I saw blown to bits back then was just a doll *is* something of a consolation.

Still, that leaves the lingering concern over what the point of all that was, plus the question of why he still ended up in Hell regardless. Until those questions are answered, this anxiety will remain settled in my gut.

"In that case... what was that all about? What was the point of that whole charade? What did you want to do so badly that you had to kidnap three people I love?"

"Charades? Oh, but I'd call it more of a party trick than a party game."<sup>[2]</sup> Tadatsuru smiles. "Dying

and reviving... From a certain point of view, you could say I'm even more versed in that than a vampire.”

“Versed...”

“Well, strictly speaking, I've never actually come back to life. I possess a doll, using it as a medium to return to Earth—but my real body always remains on this side.”

This side.

Since he's saying that in Hell, he must be referring to “the other world.” The denotation is starting to get confusing, but anyway, the reason why he seemed so used to this place... must have a lot to do with that. If his real body is always here, then “the other world” must be “this world” for him.

“Oh, but don't be mistaken; I'm not a denizen of Avici. Being thought of as someone likely to end up in Hell would be even more depressing than the reality of being sent there.”

“Yeah, I experienced that for myself not too long ago... In fact, I'm still getting a taste of it right now.”

“Typically, I can be found living a life of leisure up in Heaven.”

“...”

All my feelings of guilt just vanished in an instant...

The fact that a kid like Hachikuji went to Hell after such a touching send-off was pretty disillusioning, but assuming that there's a paradisiacal afterlife like Heaven would take away the motivation to live in its own way, too. After all, rather than blundering around in life and racking up all sorts of sins, wouldn't it be easier to just kick the bucket early on...? Of course, I have no idea whether Tadatsuru was being serious about that or not.

“...For how long? How long have you been living that life of leisure—or, how to put it, living your life coming and going between one world and the next?”

“It's not just living my life. It's part of my job,” Tadatsuru answers. “Think of it like working away from home—or a job transfer, if you'd prefer. Not to worry; during my college years, I was solidly human, a sound soul in a sound body. I became a puppet-user... only *after* creating the doll named Yotsugi and parting ways with the others.”

“This might be a pretty personal question, so I dunno if I should ask... But was your motive for becoming a puppet-user related to how you created Ononoki-chan, and how you were forced to give her up to Kagenui-san afterwards?”

“The word ‘motive’ makes it sound like it was some sort of crime, but I suppose that isn't too far from the truth... From my point of view, that is. Gaen-senpai and Yozuru may have different accounts of the matter—oh dear.”

Tadatsuru looks up at the sky as he says that. I follow suit, turning my head upwards, but there's nothing in particular to see. It's a twilight sky, right on the border between day and night. There's not a single cloud to be seen—and not a single bird, either.

As such, I have no idea what Tadatsuru is actually looking at, but having apparently spotted something, he says: "It seems I have to hurry up. Unfortunately, it looks there isn't enough time to go over my reasons for becoming a puppet-user in much detail. You'll have to wait for the spin-off movie for that."

A spin-off is one thing, but don't set your sights on a movie. Just how dramatic do you think your backstory is?

"So I'll keep my explanation brief. If you're truly that curious, you can always ask Gaen-senpai about it after you've been revived. She knows everything, so perhaps she could disclose the information in even more detail than I can. Of course, there's no guarantee that she'll actually tell you... Gaen-senpai has hated me ever since I quit college and started walking down this path, so things never quite go my way. My business never gets off the ground. What I came up with as a hasty countermeasure for that—and I think it was quite foolish of me now—was a forbidden art of sorts. Something of a cheat for specialists, or more accurately described as a charm."

"A charm..."

A curse.

I think I've heard that word mentioned somewhere before, too.

"I tried to turn myself into an oddity, more or less. Of course, the inspiration for that idea came from none other than the doll I created in college, Yotsugi Ononoki. I thought that if the 100-year-old corpse of a human could be turned into an oddity, perhaps the same could be done using the corpse of the human Tadatsuru Teori.

"I tried to create a puppet oddity by the name of Tadatsuru Teori. I tried to use my own corpse—and make a doll of myself."

"...Did you succeed?"

If he did, that would be unbelievable.

Pulling that off would mean he made an immortal body for himself all on his own. Since this is a world where humans can be turned into vampires, immortality can't be blown off as something outside the realm of possibility... but still, to succeed in turning a human into an oddity would hardly seem like the work of a human.

What inspired him to go that far? His aesthetic curiosity?

"I failed—and the results are as you see. I drift about in the gap between life and the afterlife as some sort of half-human half-demon existence... No, rather than drifting in the gap, perhaps it would be

more accurate to say that I'm caught in-between the two, unable to move."

"...Don't tell me that petty resentment over that is the reason you go after immortal oddities now..."

"That isn't entirely off the mark."

"So it *isn't*..."

"This is the part where I should say, 'If it were me, I'd be completely *off track*,'" quips Hachikuji from behind me.

That's really the first thing you're going to interject into this conversation? It's not like we have a quota for gags we have to meet here... I see she's as dutiful as ever, even in Hell.

"Well, a failure as it may have been, I'm still able to keep living through my dolls... I did manage to succeed in mobilizing my puppets after that, so I really am immortal in a certain sense, and I really am an oddity in a certain sense. I'm a vengeful spirit—or a half-ghost, perhaps. I decided to throw myself into my business, making the most of this idiosyncrasy of mine."

"..."

It's *because* of that quirk of his that he's managed to get as far as he has, even outside of Gaen-san's network... Is that what I should assume here?

"And that's the history of the man Tadatsuru Teori... Is that enough for you, Araragi-kun? Or would you like to hear more of my life's story?"

"Uh..."

Honestly, I'm not really that interested... That's pretty hard to say to the guy himself, but I already understand what I need to about his idiosyncrasy.

Yeah, I get it now.

Of course, I'm sure that the story up until he became a full-fledged puppet-user and beyond contains heaps of drama and all sorts of twists and turns, but my interest—or rather, my concern—lies elsewhere.

"Okay, so just to double check, you weren't actually affected back when Ononoki-chan blew you to bits?"

"Now, I wouldn't go quite that far. I lost a precious doll of mine, you know—but if you're simply inquiring about my well-being, then there's no need to worry. I was already half-dead long before that."

"Then why did you pretend to die...?"

Or pretend to be alive, I guess. What was the point of that whole charade?

“I told you, it wasn’t a charade. Yozuru and Yotsugi really didn’t know about the truth. And for me, it was more of a cold reading than a rehearsed performance. Looking back, it all started a month ago,” Tadatsuru says, still gazing up at the sky. What in the world does he see up there? “I received a certain request as part of my job. …Araragi-kun. It was a request to take care of a phenomenon occurring inside your town.”

He suddenly gets straight down to business… or at least that’s how it feels to me, but thinking about it, I guess Tadatsuru has been on this subject from the start. He was waiting here in order to tell me all of this—there’s no other reason he would have asked Hachikuji to bring me here. There’s no way he would’ve called me here just to catch up, or to apologize for what he did back then—though I can’t deny that my hostility towards him has faded a bit over the course of our conversation.

“A phenomenon occurring in the town…? Is that about the Kita-Shirahebi Shrine… no, it can’t be that. That had already been resolved by the time last month rolled around…”

Technically, the situation just went back to being *unresolved*, but there’s no need to nitpick about that.

“Right. Put more simply, the client requested a hit on you and the former Kiss-Shot. You two have been acknowledged as harmless within Gaen-senpai’s network, but that didn’t matter to me. In fact, an oddity protected through the network would be highest on my priority list, a target to go after whether I’m requested to or not.”

“...”

Right, that’s how it was.

He was targeting me and Shinobu, and for that purpose, he went the unthinkably crafty, inhumane route of taking my underclassman and two sisters hostage. He said it wasn’t a charade, so I was listening with bated breath to hear what the real reason behind it could be, but if he received some sort of request, it’s pretty much exactly like what I had already assumed.

Of course, if he just received the request and then took measures to exorcise me and Shinobu, then he really wasn’t lying when he said “it wasn’t a party game” or it was like “a cold reading”…

“Yes, you’re exactly right.”

Tadatsuru nods, aloof and unabashed. He seems almost like a magician who’s having fun revealing the secrets behind his tricks—though I guess a magician that explains his tricks would be terrible at his job.

“If someone hadn’t taken measures beforehand… that’s exactly how it *would’ve* been. Oh yes, I’m sure we all would’ve been much worse for the wear. I can’t say whether your sisters and underclassman would have gotten away unharmed…”

“...Don’t start scaring me like that.”

“I’m the one who’s scared by the idea. To think that Suruga Kanbaru was a daughter of the Gaen family... I shiver to think about what would’ve happened if I’d ignorantly done her harm. I’m truly glad I heard about everything in advance.”

“...?”

Well, Kanbaru *is* Gaen-san’s niece—we all surmised that he kidnapped her because he didn’t know that—but saying he shivers at the thought is going too far, I think. Gaen-san isn’t the kind of person to dote on someone just because they’re her niece—or wait, since he said “daughter,” maybe the one he’s actually afraid of is Kanbaru’s deceased mother?

“You just said you heard in advance—and that someone took measures beforehand—so does that mean that Gaen-san explained things to you before you got the request? Like about what was happening in our town...”

That sounds like a possibility.

From what I’ve heard, Gaen-san almost never goes out and does hands-on work—but either way, she’s been going about trying to subjugate our town, or maybe govern it... She even called in an awfully dangerous specialist, Episode, to help with that, so it’s just as possible that she’d call on Tadatsuru Teori, an old acquaintance outside her network...

“No, that’s an impossibility. It’s true that the two of us have reached a temporary truce for the time being, but we only re-established contact *after* I heard about what was going on. The one who approached me... was a separate party, someone who served as a mediator between the two of us.”

“...”

A mediator.

Once he says that, I have a hunch as to who he’s talking about.

It’s similar to the finely tuned gut instinct a student builds while preparing for exams—but strangely enough, I feel almost certain of it. My intuition tells me the name of that man, more eloquently than a hundred logical arguments ever could...

“...Oshino?” I ask, without even having to think about it. “Was the person you heard everything from—was the person who took measures beforehand... Meme Oshino?”

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[<sup>1</sup>] In the original Japanese, Tadatsuru makes a pun on “kuma” (bear) and “akuma” (devil).

[<sup>2</sup>] In the original Japanese, Tadatsuru makes a pun on “chaban” (farce/charade) and “ohakoban” (favorite trick/specialty/forte).



Of course, there are plenty of other possibilities.

For example, even just pulling from the list of people I already know, Kaiki knows about what's going on in this town, too—it's a bit too big of a leap to jump to a conclusion based solely on the word "mediator."

But Tadatsuru's response is: "Correct."

"Yes, it was that oh-so-astute man—I thought him as unfettered as ever, reaching out to an outsider despite being one of the upper echelons in Gaen-senpai's network. Well, I suppose he's never exactly matched the image of 'upper echelon' to begin with..."

"..."

If you put it like that, Gaen-san doesn't seem like much of a "boss," either—she comes off more like an old tie you just can't get rid of than some big authority. Still, Oshino and Tadatsuru share a similar sort of unfortunate bond... It's not unthinkable that Oshino would go see him.

Placing it on the timeline, that must have happened after Oshino left town... I wonder what exactly Oshino would have told him at that point.

Just what did that oh-so-astute man have to say? What measures did he take beforehand?

"He told me that there was something I could do precisely because I was outside of Gaen-senpai's network—though of course, he said it in the way that only a man as skilled at underhanded, borderline rule-breaking tricks as him could."

"..."

"However, that wasn't done out of a desire to lazily find a shortcut. Rather, he's always of the mind to take every single measure possible and acquire all the insurance he can, so his efforts end for naught more often than not—he's a specialist positioned at the height of excessive brilliance, a waste of brainpower. From his point of view, the ball actually landing in my court was likely a rare case, a possibility outside even the insurance for his insurance."

Well, I can see *that* part of it.

In my experience, he even accounted for the possibility that Shinobu and I would come over from a different timeline—he's most certainly not the type to let an exam come down to pure guesswork. He might actually be a lot more diligent than his flippant exterior lets on.

"Besides, he doesn't like to reveal too much, either. He's not the type to say anything concrete. When he first came to see me, I thought he merely came for the sake of some idle chit-chat. I simply thought that his penchant for playing the fool was as strong as ever—and in truth, it probably wasn't meant to

be more than a precaution.”

“...I’ve got a lot to say about his knack for insinuation, too... So basically, you heard about Kanbaru’s family and all that stuff because he mixed it into the conversation?”

Now that I think about it, Oshino had been concerned with Kanbaru’s lineage... I’m sure he never expected to come face-to-face with his senior’s niece.

He even went out of his way to ask what the name of Kanbaru’s mother was.

“Yes. And what’s more, he talked about you, Araragi-kun—or should I say, he talked about the two of you.”

“The two of us... Me and...”

Me and who? In this case... Shinobu, I guess?

“Thanks to all of that, I had an idea of... I knew what was happening in this town before the request came my way. Back when he said it, I had no idea what Oshino was trying to get at... but thinking about it now, I’m sure he was trying to convince me that you two weren’t dangerous.”

“...”

“He was setting out his preparations. You two aren’t worth wasting a doll on—that’s what he came to tell me. For the record, that was also when I found out that he knows I’m really a doll. ...Actually, thinking about it now, perhaps it was just a threat? Maybe he was trying to say, ‘If you lay a hand on my friends, I’ll tell everyone what you really are’...”

Tadatsuru laughs, a bit cynically.

Hearing that, I’m at a loss for words, or I guess I just plain don’t know what to say... I can’t believe he managed to lay out a plan like that, anticipating the events yet to come.

Since he knew that the network’s acknowledgment of us as benign would only make a difference to those within it, he took steps to protect us from the people outside of it... In his eyes, he might’ve just been tying the loose ends on a job he took on for a suitable price, but that’s generous enough a follow-up service to leave me overwhelmed with emotion. That’s something I can’t do, something I couldn’t do—wait, hold on just one second.

But in the end, he still came to this town, and he still went after me and Shinobu... Hmm? I know about the arrangements Oshino made beforehand now, but it’s still not adding up.

What in the world happened after that?

“As I said, it was insurance. Almost everything he said was just an insinuation he made while chewing on an unlit cigarette, so what I’m about to say is merely my own interpretation, but as long as you understand that, hear me out. With this, I believe most of your doubts will be cleared away—

you'll be able to revive without any regrets."

"Revive without any regrets...?"

"Consider it a gift to take with you to the other world," says Tadatsuru. "What he had to say was this: 'Koyomi Araragi and Shinobu Oshino. As things stand, those two are essentially harmless—if you leave them alone, there shouldn't be any problems. But there is the chance things could stray from the norm—and that's if Araragi-kun conspires with Shinobu-chan and repeatedly turns himself into a vampire.'"

"..."

"In other words, if—unrelated to the former Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade—you started walking down the path of the vampire all by yourself, you would be outside the bounds of the benign labeling he requested."

"That's..."

That's precisely what's happening to me right now—my God.

In that case, everything is going exactly as that oh-so-astute man predicted.

"Perhaps it would be more accurate to say it's going exactly like *one* of his predictions? Although, rather than it being the utmost of the utmost precautions, I believe he had more concrete concerns about that possibility."

"Concerns... He was concerned that I would thoughtlessly rely too much on Shinobu's power? Wait, no..."

No, it's not that.

If he was really concerned about that possibility, then he wouldn't have left Shinobu in my care and skipped town. In fact, I had assumed that it was precisely because he thought—because he believed—I wouldn't do that that he had quietly traveled onwards to his next town, without so much as a word and without a single goodbye.

"Right. What he was actually wary of was the possibility that something might happen that would *force* you to make use of it—it's probably safe to assume that was the real reason behind his visit to me. Of course, he's no prophet. In reality... I'm sure that many of the calamities that assailed your town after that were completely outside the realm of his predictions... It's not as if he knew what sort of disaster might strike that would force you to act with reckless abandon. He simply knew that if something like that *were* to happen, you wouldn't shy away from recklessness."

"...Good for him."

My instinctive reaction is to badmouth him. I'm not so great at being honest with my feelings myself.

“If things went that direction, it was possible a request would come my way—that’s what he told me. A request that would drag me into all of this. A request to exterminate a vampire. He said that if that were to happen, I should set aside my long-standing grudge, overlook my long-established animosity, and get in contact with Gaen-senpai. She’d be waiting to hear from me—Gaen-senpai has her position to worry about, so she can’t initiate things from her end. …At the time, I didn’t understand what he was telling me… but that’s exactly what ended up happening.

“Perhaps he’s no prophet, but he has clear enough vision to make you think he’s some kind of clairvoyant,” Tadatsuru says. Perhaps I shouldn’t be saying this about my apparent benefactor, but I agree with that statement completely.

“And so, when the request to exterminate you two did indeed come my way… I was chilled to the bone. And at the same time, I found it quite strange. If he had been so wary of this development, why didn’t he try to do anything about it himself? Why would the man who always asserts that people can only save themselves rely on an old friend for help? I was very curious about that—and so I opted to get on board with his scheme. I made contact with Gaen-senpai.”

And thus the curtains rose on that farce of a play.

That’s the story—though I still don’t know what it all means.

Tadatsuru once again raises his lowered gaze back towards the heavens. The sun is going down and it's just starting to get dark, so I thought he might be searching for the very first star in the night sky, but when I follow his gaze this time around, I can clearly see what he's looking at.

Well, maybe not *clearly*—I can only vaguely make it out, but I can still tell for sure what it is.

From up in the sky—or rather, from the heavens—there hangs a long, dangling piece of string.

“It might be more accurate to call it a thread rather than a string, Araragi-san. That’s your light at the end of the tunnel. Well, that phrasing might make it sound like you’re about to die, but in this case, I mean it will take you back to the world of the living.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Despite Hachikuji’s explanation, rather than a light at the end of the tunnel, the first thing I think of when I hear the word “thread” is the story of the spider thread that the Buddha lowered down into Hell from the heavens.<sup>[2]</sup>

Well, spider silk is apparently durable enough to be used in space engineering, so I wouldn’t think of it as unreliable... But what was the guy’s name, Kandata? As I recall, when he tried to climb up the spider thread and get into Heaven, all the other sinners tried to go with him, and the thread ended up snapping the moment he told them to get off...

In that sense, you could think of it as a thread meant to test people—and when I consider that Gaen-san might be the one dropping it down, that rings all the more true.

“We really are running out of time now. If you don’t grab a hold of that thread, you truly *will* be condemned to spend an eternity burning in Avici. You’ll be endlessly tormented by demons with 89 eyes.”<sup>[3]</sup>

“89 eyes? Are you talking about yourself?”

“Sorry, that was my mistake. I meant 64.”

“Pretty scary either way...”

Those are two pretty big extremes.

“As such, I’m terribly sorry, Teori-san, but could I ask you to end that conversation here?”

“Wait a second, Hachikuji, that’s no way to wrap things up. Like hell I’m letting the explanation cut off at the halfway point... Tadatsuru. Is the thing that you could do as someone outside the network what I think it was? Was it that you could accept the request to exterminate me and Shinobu—or at least pretend to?”

In an attempt to press Tadatsuru for answers before the thread(?) descends all the way down from the

sky to the shrine, I try to anticipate the next point of his explanation. I'm not being a very polite audience, but it seems I made a lucky guess, as: "I suppose you could say that—the pretense of a living man pretended to accept it. I can't say for sure whether that was what Oshino wanted to happen, however," is his response.

"With the situation as it was, Yozuru Kagenui was truly the perfect person for her role in all of it, as someone who exists within the network, but outside of Gaen-senpai's control. If I were to make an illegal move, she was sure to mercilessly take me down, without being the least bit swayed by emotion. And so as soon as the problems with your physical condition arose, Gaen-senpai sent her into the fray..."

"..."

Gaen-san had dispatched Kagenui-san and Ononoki-chan immediately, almost like she knew about the change happening in my body—my lack of reflection—before I could even tell her about it. At the time, I figured that was yet another demonstration of how she "knows everything" and shuddered in terror of her clairvoyance—but now that the trick behind it has been revealed, there was hardly anything to it. She had simply predicted the turn of events beforehand and had it on her timetable in advance.

Of course, the fact that her timing managed to be so spot on is still very much like her...

"But why bother...? Couldn't you have just turned down the request?"

"There was no reason to turn it down, and even if I did, the same request might have simply gone to another specialist. Gaen-senpai and I concluded that it would be best to go along with the 'enemy's' plan here."

"E... Enemy?"

Not... a client?

In this case, that must be referring to the person who requested that Tadatsuru exterminate me and Shinobu. Wouldn't the only people who could really call that person an enemy be me and Shinobu, the two people in question?

"Not so. At the very least, Deishuu Kaiki went missing from this town. Neither I nor Gaen-senpai is quite so cold as to remain emotionless in the face of that."

"Kaiki...?"

Come to think of it, I think Gaen-san mentioned that—she said that the information surrounding it was a tangled mess and it was hard to tell what was the truth, or something like that.

I believe that he's the kind of guy who wouldn't die even if you killed him, and I'm sure that Gaen-san and Tadatsuru, his former colleagues, believe that even more strongly... Still, it's not the kind of thing they can just let slide.

“I say that we went along with the enemy’s plan, but it’s not as though we knew what the ‘plan’ was—the point of it all was to find that out. What’s more, it also served as a vital measure towards stopping your vampirification from progressing further. I would make my way down here first in order to serve as your guide—though of course, I only just finished playing the villain, so I had to call on Hachikuji-chan here for assistance.”

“I was happy to help out,” says Hachikuji. “It was a cameo role. I’d be one of the names that shows up at the very end of the credits. I heard that I’d be able to see you again, Araragi-san, so I worked at no charge.”

“It would be absolutely depressing if you were getting paid to do this... Even more depressing than ending up in Hell.”

So I get killed and reset from scratch, and then only the “human” parts of my body are resurrected... is that it? If that’s the case, it seems like they could’ve told me beforehand, but since they didn’t...

There must’ve been a reason they couldn’t tell me. Maybe it has something to do with their strategy to beat the enemy.

I have no way of knowing what that might be, though.

“Of course, there was a chance that after you were killed with the demon blade ‘Kokorowatari’ and revived with the demon blade ‘Yumewatari,’ you would simply come back as your vampire self, in which case we would be right back where we started. That’s why, in order to prevent that, it was necessary to have a specialist like me cut ahead of you into Hell.”

As he says that, Tadatsuru jumps off of the offering box—I don’t take my eyes off him for a second, but by the time he lands on his feet, he’s dressed in a completely different get up. I used a casual word like “get up,” but the outfit he changed into is full of dignity and about as Japanese as it gets—and it’s highly appropriate, considering where we are right now.

He’s dressed like a Shinto priest.

...Having an ethereal body must be pretty handy, if he can arbitrarily change clothes in an instant like that. I’m not exactly jealous, but he might not have been lying when he said he was living a life of luxury.

“Gaen-senpai and I both came to the conclusion that if we can’t fix that, we won’t have any way to strike back at the enemy. ...It feels strange to be in such agreement with my bitter rival, but I suppose I ought to just praise Oshino’s skills as a mediator here.”

“...Were your questions answered?”

There are a lot of other things I’d like to ask—but that’s what I *most* want to know right now.

“You said you got on board with Oshino’s plan because you didn’t know what he was thinking—you made it sound like that was the deciding factor for you, but did you ever get an answer to that?”

“Unfortunately, no. But I do have a theory—though it would be quite presumptuous to call it a theory of my own. The credit for this one should go entirely to Gaen-senpai. Gaen-senpai believes that the reason Oshino is staying hidden from us, even now—or from my point of view, the reason for his disappearance—is exactly the same as the reason Yozuru fell off the map.”

“...?”

What the heck? Isn’t that just a tautology? It’s basically the same as not saying anything at all. It goes without saying that Kagenui-san disappeared in the same way Oshino did—wait, no, that’s not quite right.

When you put it like that, Kaiki went missing, too. Then he should be included in that statement, too—but he’s an exception, and only Oshino and Kagenui-san are shoved together in the same category.

There’s a chance to strike there—or at least Gaen-san is trying to find one, I guess? Stuck in this situation in which we don’t know what we’re fighting against, she’s trying to find a plan of attack...

“That’s where Gaen-senpai and I see things differently. You heard me back then, didn’t you? I told you to ‘find Oshino.’ I can see you’ve made no progress in that regard, however.”

“...Well, my friend *is* looking for him.”

More accurately, Hanekawa is the only one who still has tricks up her sleeve she can use to find Oshino. Senjougahara and I already used up all our connections—and we still haven’t the slightest idea as to where he is, or if he’s even still alive. She’s the only one who hasn’t given up.

I’d written it off as an impossibility, but the only option really left is that he’s overseas, which is where Hanekawa is searching now...

“...But basically, that one line wasn’t part of an act, huh? Despite the whole part where you made it look like Ononoki-chan killed you...”

“It wasn’t just that one line. It may have just been a doll of mine that was killed, but nearly everything I said back then was what I really felt. The humiliation, as a puppet user, of being manipulated by someone else—of your fate being in someone else’s hands—is not particularly pleasant, after all. It wasn’t a fun role to play—and it felt to me like things went almost *too* smoothly. Of course, half of those feelings might have been directed at that oh-so-astute man, Oshino.”

“...”

“I do feel as though I should apologize to Yozuru, however. I had to play the villain, but she’s the one who had a truly unpleasant part to play. After using her shikigami to kill me, I’m sure even someone like her would be a bit upset... a little bit upset...”

The priest is trailing off.

Well, I won’t comment on that. It’s a bit hard for an amateur high school student like me to

comprehend what goes through Kagenui-san's mind... Still, if I were to be totally honest, I think there's a chance she might care about it even less than Ononoki-chan.

“...Is it okay for me to tell them?”

“Hm?”

“Ononoki-chan... and once we find out where she is, Kagenui-san, too. Is it okay for me to tell them that you were controlling a puppet, and you didn't really die back then... about how you played dead and played alive? Taking a guess, it's not something you really want people to know about, right?”

“That's true, but after all that happened, they're going to find out eventually. You could say it's a good opportunity, or perhaps it's just time for me to pay the piper. Apologize to them for me, if you would.”

“No way.”

Why should *I* have to apologize?

People say it all the time, but when you think about it, “apologize to so-and-so for me” is a completely unreasonable demand. Now *that's* what I'd call the art of substitution.

“If you want to apologize, do it yourself. You may not be able to come back to life, but you can return to the world of the living using another puppet, right?”

“Unfortunately, it's not so simple. Dying, you see, is quite the grave offense. I won't be let off the hook simply by landing in Hell. A punishment must fit the crime... I suppose.”

“...”

So I guess the trick isn't as simple as I thought—while I'm not quite sure it was an *agonizing* decision, letting one of his vessels get crushed to bits probably wasn't an easy choice to make, either.

“You, on other hand, are quite lucky that you can be revived in an instant by the demon blade ‘Yumewatari.’ As her junior, I ask that you forgive Gaen-senpai for murdering you without explaining any of this. She thought it would be easier to fill you in on the details once you were already in Hell...”

“...Well, I'm already used to being tossed around without any proper explanations, so whatever. But...”

“No need to worry,” Tadatsuru responds right as I try to say something, as if he wants to allay my concerns before I can put them into words. “Gaen-senpai isn't going to coerce you into helping with a ridiculous job of hers after this. If she was telling me the truth about what she plans to do, then you'll have played your part in everything if you just come back to life as a human. Consider this pilgrimage through Hell to be like a short-term hospitalization to extract your vampirism—Gaen-senpai isn't going to demand too much of you during your recovery period. Her plan is to remove all sources of

distress in light of the upcoming confrontation with the enemy—or, well, if I were to assume the worst of her, perhaps she wanted to test out the demon blades ‘Kokorowatari’ and ‘Yumewatari’ as well.”

“...”

I’m sure there was that sort of ulterior motive behind it... Or should I say, when Gaen-san is involved, it’s actually more worrying if she *doesn’t* have an ulterior motive.

However, while he wasn’t completely off the mark, that’s not exactly what I was going to ask about...

The priest who just came down from the offering box starts walking at a leisurely pace, then comes to a stop once he’s positioned himself right underneath the thread dangling from the sky. Then he beckons me over.

“Come on, Araragi-san.”

Hachikuji gives me a push from behind, too—and with that, I have no choice but to start moving. Indeed, “I have no choice but to move”—that’s honestly how it feels to me right now.

The thread has come down low enough that I could jump and grab hold of it—though, uh, as it turns out, what I thought wasn’t a string isn’t a thread, either.

It’s a white snake.

There’s a snake’s tail hanging down.

...Am I supposed to grab hold of that?

I guess I should just be glad it’s not the head that’s hanging down, but hmm, I see, a white snake *is* the deity of this shrine, after all... I suppose a snake is more appropriate than a spider here.

“What’s wrong, Araragi-san? You look like you’ve lost your nerve. Did the snake give you a fright?”

“I mean, I can’t say it didn’t... Snakes bring back some pretty traumatic memories for me, you know.”

“If you’re still worried about what happened with Sengoku-san, I think you ought to be a little easier on yourself.”

The trauma I was referring to was simply from being torn apart by the poison fangs of a snake over and over, driven to the verge of death, but Hachikuji brings up something else—she reaches further into the depths of my heart.

“In the end, that con artist may have been the one to save Sengoku-san, but if he hadn’t gotten involved, perhaps it would have taken a bit longer, but you could have saved her in the end. I believe that.”

“...”

“Just think of it as him stealing all the credit for himself. Don’t worry, I can vouch for you. You’re the strongest.”

I’ve never considered it to be a competition over who’s the strongest... And to begin with, I don’t think of it in terms of winning or losing or who gets the credit... But hearing that from Hachikuji *does* give me a little peace of mind.

Enough peace of mind that I have no problems grabbing hold of a snake.

I reach out my hand—and grab hold of the white snake’s tail.

It gives a small jump. Are you telling me this thing is *alive*?

“I concur with her opinion in regards to that, Araragi-kun. In fact, I’m sure that’s what the ‘enemy’ would have preferred to happen—not so much the part about saving Nadeko Sengoku, but the bit about taking more time. You could say that it’s precisely *because* Kaiki interfered and threw the plan off course that the ball ended up in my court. Originally, I believe you were meant to continue fighting Nadeko Sengoku for a longer period of time. You were meant to continue turning yourself into a vampire in your attempts to save her. My entry into the fray was insurance for Oshino, but it was likely insurance for the enemy, as well,” says Tadatsuru from beside me.

Now that we’re speaking extremely up close and personal like this, I’m starting to feel nervous for an entirely different reason.

“...Oh yeah, I forgot to ask you. Why did I go off track?”

“What?” asks Hachikuji.

“The reason why I needed you to guide me, I mean. How come I was cut up at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine in the real world, but I woke up at that park in Hell? You mentioned we were correcting what went off track—or altering what went right. What did that actually mean?”

“Hmm... There isn’t much time, so I wasn’t going to bother explaining all that, but is it bothering you that much?”

“I wouldn’t say it’s *bothering* me...”

No.

I get it. I’m just drawing it out.

Climbing up the white snake—and coming back to life... I keep putting it off further and further.

“Still, I am curious. Well, forget all the stuff about going off track and whatnot. You went ahead and fixed that for me, after all—but if you know the name of that park, I’d like to hear it. It’s the park

where you and I first met, but I still don't know how its name is pronounced."

浪白 Park. It could be "Namishiro," it could be "Rouhaku"... If neither of those is correct, then I honestly haven't a clue. This is too difficult a reading to even show up on a Japanese test... I guess if you really stretch it, it could be "Roubyaku" or "Namihaku"...

"It's Shirohebi Park."

Tadatsuru is the one who answers.

"Shirohebi Park is the correct pronunciation, if you trace it back to its origins."

"...Huh? Shirohebi—meaning 'white snake'?"

"It's written with the radical for 'water' (氵) rather than the radical for 'insect' (虫). So the character for 'snake' is written as 沢 instead of the usual 蛇. It's the same character you can find in the term 'a flood of tears' (滂沱の涙)... Shirohebi, written as 沢白. That's what this area was called, a long time ago. Due to a misspelling, at some point the 沢 in the name became 浪. That's why it's so hard to read now."

"澤 and 浪..."

I guess... you *could* say they look pretty similar.

Misspelling it might be a bit much, but just glancing at them, it'd be easy to mistake one for the other. At the very least, if you looked one of them up using handwritten input on an electronic dictionary, the structure of their right side is similar enough that the other one would probably appear in the list of results.

The last kanji in the word being read first isn't unheard of... After all, the trend of reading words from left to right only just started relatively recently.<sup>[4]</sup> It's not unthinkable that the name would end up so complicated after all this time... So, Shirohebi?

Speaking of white snakes...

"Kita... Shirahibi Shrine."

"Right. It's exactly what you're thinking. That's where Kita-Shirahibi Shrine was originally built—and that's why you ended up there. The shrine was later taken apart and reconstructed in a new location... Have you heard that story?"

"Oh, yeah..."

I forget who I heard it from, but someone did tell me about that. If I remember right, they 'messed up the transfer,' or that ended up being the source of the distortion, or something like that...

"Yes, 'messed up the transfer' would be an accurate assessment. It was as bad as bringing an ocean

god up a mountain. Although, strictly speaking, I shouldn't say ocean... I ought to say lake."

"Lake?"

"That's why the left side is the radical for 'water.'"

He ties it all together with that, but my attention gets caught on something new—a lake? I've heard about *that* from someone, too...

But before I can remember it myself:

"Well then, you ought to be on your way, Araragi-kun," Tadatsuru says, urging me along. "Give Gaensenpai my regards—and Yotsugi, as well. I wouldn't be able to say this to Yozuru, but I'd appreciate it if you would dote on Yotsugi a little extra in my stead."

"Yeah, got it," I respond reflexively, giving my word before I can actually stop to think about what I just agreed to, and under the pressure, I finally say what I've really been thinking all this time:

"...But is it really okay for a guy like me to come back to life?"

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[<sup>1</sup>] In Japanese, Hachikuji used the term "omukae." "Mukae" by itself is usually used to refer to a driver or someone who comes to pick you up or your ride home, but if the polite honorific "o-" is added to the beginning of the word, it usually refers to the being that comes to take you to the next world after you die.

[<sup>2</sup>] This is a reference to *The Spider's Thread*, a short story by Ryunosuke Akutagawa. Buddha looks into the depths of Hell one day and sees Kandata, a cold-hearted criminal who has one good deed to his name: he decided not to crush a spider under his foot when he was walking through the forest one day. Moved by this act of compassion, Buddha lowers a spider thread into Hell to give him a way out. However, after Kandata starts climbing the thread, other sinners flock to it and start climbing up as well; afraid that the thread will snap, he yells at them that the thread is his and his alone. Due to his selfish action, the thread snaps and he is condemned to Hell once more.

[<sup>3</sup>] It's another part of Avici lore that it is inhabited by terrifying, fire-breathing demons with 64 eyes. The 89 remark is another pun on Hachikuji's name.

[<sup>4</sup>] Horizontal writing in Japanese was originally read from right-to-left. It was after WWII that the usage was changed to left-to-right, like Western languages. (Vertical text is still read from right-to-left, though.)

“Hi-yah!”

She punched me.

Hachikuji just punched me.

Without getting a running start, still shouldering her backpack, she jumped into the air and hit me in the face with a closed fist.

She packs a pretty damn crazy punch for an elementary schooler when hitting me at full strength, enough to send me flying pretty damn far back as I hold onto the snake’s tail—I reflexively grip the tail harder as a way of bracing myself, hard enough that I’m afraid I might rip it off, but fortunately, thanks to its elasticity(?), the tail simply grows out the length I stagger back.

“That one was for me!” Hachikuji shouts in the exact same moment she lands on her feet.

It was for *you*? Then it was just a regular old punch, wasn’t it?

Tadatsuru’s eyes have gone wide—he might not have known she had such an assertive side to her. Guess she was playing innocent.

“Wha... Hachikuji!”

“Don’t worry. I didn’t hurt my fist.”

Hachikuji clenches and unclenches her fist.

That’s definitely *not* what I’m worried about.

It’s true that if you don’t know the proper way to make a fist, you’ll probably break a bone if you hit someone as hard as she just did—but, you know, this is Hell. We’re all immortal.

I was the one who got punched, but even my cheek isn’t in all that much pain—this is an environment where you’d revive even if you were hit with an iron club,<sup>[1]</sup> much less an elementary schooler’s fist.

But still.

This is a pretty trite way of putting it, but that fist resonated more in my mind than my body—it’s not my face that was hurt, it’s my chest.

“Next, I’m going to get in one for Senjougahara-san, one for Hanekawa-san, one for Kanbaru-san, one for Sengoku-san, one for each of your sisters, one for both of your parents, one for Oikura-san, and one for Chiрайдима-san.”

“I’m personally a little happy that you’re concerned about Oikura, who you only just learned exists,

but I've literally never heard of the last person you mentioned. Who's that?"

"And then there's one for Oshino-san, one for Kaiki-san, one for Kagenui-san..."

Hachikuji counts the names off on her fingers—and then her opened hand turns back into a fist once more.

Wait, you're going to hit me for *Kaiki*?

"As for Ononoki-san... Go let her punch you herself once you've been resurrected."

"If I get punched by Ononoki-chan, there won't be a scrap of me left. Her powers of destruction are literally top tier."

"Is it okay for a guy like me to come back to life?" What kind of question is that?"

As she says that, she really does punch me in the stomach with her closed fist.

Pow, pow.

That said, she seems to be holding back a little this time. ...Or maybe it's that she only used her full strength for the "one for herself."

"You're lucky I'm the one who heard you whining like that. If it were Senjougahara-san, she'd have relapsed to how she was before reforming, and you'd be caught in a storm of stationery right now."

"..."

Pow, pow, pow, pow.

She keeps punching me.

I get the feeling we've gone past the number of names she mentioned by now, but I just stand there and let her beat on me.

"If it were Hanekawa-san... I'm sure she'd do what she always does and give you encouragement by letting you rub her breasts or some such, but I won't spoil you like that."

"Wait, forget 'what she always does,' Hanekawa hasn't done that even once... For both her reputation and mine, could you please not phrase it like it's an old custom?"

Something *close* to that may have happened, though.

"What's wrong, Araragi-san? Did you lose your nerve? Are you afraid of coming back to life and going through painful experiences? Are you all worn out?"

Painful experiences... Well, sure, I don't want to go through them.

Tadatsuru said that Gaen-san won't force me to take on any ridiculous jobs after I've been resurrected, but I don't really believe that (she's shown an incredible aptitude for making use of other people), and even if you remove Gaen-san from the equation, just thinking about the amount of things I have to deal with after I've come back to life is enough to burn me out.

My entrance exam happens to be one of those things. Whether I come back to life or not, I can't make it in time by this point, and even if I did, I'm pretty sure this adventure through Hell wiped all the knowledge I'd crammed into my mind clean out of my memory.

But it's not about that.

I may feel burnt out, but I haven't lost my nerve because of that—if anything, saying "I'm tired of it" would be a little more accurate, but that's not it, either.

"Come to think of it, you said something at the start about how 'a load had been taken off your shoulders.' So is that it, you don't want to be troubled anymore? You'll select 'no' at the continue screen? You'd be going against the arcade rules by game hogging?"

"Well, I can't deny that it feels like a string of tension finally snapped..."

As I stare at the snake's tail I'm gripping in my hand—as I stare up at the sky it connects to—I speak. I don't think I can properly explain what I'm feeling right now, but I do my best to put it into words.

"...And part of me does feel a bit relieved that 'I finally managed to die.' So when faced with a continue screen, yeah, I am gonna hesitate a little. It feels too little too late, it feels exhausting..."

Learning about Heaven and Hell, about the existence of an afterlife, obscured the meaning of life... No, that isn't quite it, either.

"In other words, you want to remain a ghost, and just settle down in a position where you can watch over everyone from the skies?"

"Position...? No, that's not it at all."

"You're only saying that because you don't know the anguish of Hell, you know. If there were enough time, I'd like you to try experiencing Sai no Kawara for a day. You're truly quite fortunate that you have the option of coming back to life."

"..."

Fortunate.

Yeah—that's it.

The first thing I said was pretty much exactly what I feel.

Most likely, it's not that "I don't want to come back to life"... I'm truly thinking, "Is it okay for a guy

like me to come back to life?"

Do I have the right?

"How to put it... I'm wondering if it's really okay for me to come back to life, when I'm sure there's a ton of other people out there who deserve it more. It's not that I don't want to come back to life, but it feels like I'm cutting in line, or taking someone's spot, or cheating the system... It's like I'm taking someone else's turn when I shouldn't be."

It's just like everything I saw on this pilgrimage through Hell.

Seishirou Shishirui should have been the one to save Shinobu.

It would've been fine if Hanekawa had just been saved by herself—by Black Hanekawa.

Senjougahara had Kaiki.

Despite what Hachikuji said about it, even Sengoku's predicament might have ended as a simple quarrel between friends if I just hadn't gotten involved—and even if it that didn't pan out, simply leaving things up to the Fire Sisters might have led to a better ending.

It's like what Kanbaru mentioned—the feeling of being second.

I've gotten a good taste of that these past six months.

*I might have been the one cutting in and taking all the credit.*

Calling me a "pinch-hitter" might be blowing my horn a bit too much—but the feeling that "it didn't have to be me" has been drilled into me.

I really think that.

Even so, I know I would never let someone else take over my role in saving those girls—if faced with the same situation, I would repeat the same actions, without stepping back for my predecessor or the man who was there first. In that case, before I can push my way in and make might right... I can't help but feel it might be right for me to stay behind in Hell.

I already once tried to offer my life to a legendary vampire, and I once tried to die for Hanekawa.

And now that Senjougahara has reformed... she should be able to live on, even if I die.

In that case, perhaps I ought to know my place.

Perhaps I ought to quietly... let myself die here.

"You do," says Hachikuji, suddenly. "You *do* have the right to come back to life. You definitely have that right. I mean, look at all the great things you've done! Oh, yes, I know all about it!"

“...”

“You’ve gone through many painful experiences in the six months we were separated, but I know you wouldn’t let that break you. If you shouldn’t come back to life, then just who do you think should? You ought to be first on the list, hands down! If you keep moping around like that, I’m going to take a disliking to you,” Hachikuji continues, and then takes a long, deep breath.

She’s getting ready to give a long speech.

I steel myself, too, getting ready to listen. No matter how stern, how harsh a lecture it is, I’m prepared to hear everything she has to say.

“Listen here, Araragi-san. The Araragi-san I know loves little girls, loves young girls, love small girls, loves the lining on a skirt, loves a girl’s backside, loves big breasts, loves being treated like garbage, loves his big little sister, loves his little little sister, loves mature ladies, loves topless girls, loves bloomers, loves girls who talk like boys, loves cat ears, loves sporty girls, loves girls wearing bandages, loves undies, loves licking eyeballs, loves groveling on the ground and getting stepped on, loves porn magazines, loves giving rides on his shoulders and getting them from other people, loves being abused by his girlfriend, loves cleaning up his underclassman’s room, loves cutting a girl’s hair, loves taking a bath with someone else...”

“Hold it, hold it, hold it, hold it, hold on just one second, you’re going to break me!”

I wasn’t quite prepared for *that*.

That guy sounds like a total pervert. Wouldn’t he be better off dead?

This was supposed to be a pep talk, but I’m dreading coming back to life more than ever... She better say something to turn it all around at the end, or I’m never gonna change my mind.

C’mon, I’m begging you here.

However, in a betrayal of my hopes, what Hachikuji says at the end of that long speech is so straightforward that it’s almost a letdown, or maybe an anti-climax—it’s a preference of mine that goes without saying, a predilection of mine that’s only natural.

“And he absolutely loved being alive!”

But... that’s all I need to hear.

She said something that goes without saying as if it went without saying.

And that’s all I need—that’s plenty.

It was so obvious that I had forgotten.

I've brushed with death over and over and over again—and through narrowly escaping death each time, I had completely forgotten.

I had forgotten—even though I'm always thinking, "I'm so glad to be alive."

Glad enough that I can put up with life, no matter how much I disparage myself, no matter how sorry I feel for myself—and it's not like I'm just being humble or anything.

"You're right... If I'm not alive, I won't be able to cherish any little girls."

"Um, no, that's not quite what I was trying to get at."

Hachikuji draws back, repulsed. She sure knows when to push and when to back off.

But I guess that's just how it is. Whether there's a Heaven or Hell... that doesn't erase the meaning of being alive.

"I can't believe I said it'd obscure the meaning of life—just the act of living has more than enough meaning in and of itself. If I liked being alive, then that's all that matters. After all, it gave me a chance to love so many things, and so many people."

"That can sound a bit misleading in this context."

"Hmm," I reply, and adjust my grip on the snake's tail once more. This time I grip it with both hands. Then I turn to Tadatsuru, who's been patiently waiting for us to finish, and ask, "You're not expecting me to climb my way up this thing, right? I definitely don't have that much arm strength."

"No need to fret. You heard that you don't need to overcome any trials in order to be revived, correct? Once I send the signal, Gaen-senpai will start pulling up the tail from her end, essentially. You just need to hold onto the tail and not let go—but you only have one chance, so I ask that you be careful not to let your hands slip."

"...What happens if my hands slip?"

It's a scaly surface, so it seems like that could happen pretty easily...

"Who knows? You'd fall, I suppose. You'd fall through a pit of flames for 2000 years, I suppose—so hold on tightly with both hands, and do not let go."

"Got it. ...Thanks for all your help, Tadatsuru. ...Tadatsuru-san."

"Oh, there's no need to get formal now. Besides, none of this changes the grudge I hold against immortal oddities. As long as you continue to shelter Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade... you are my enemy."

"...Even so," I say, "I really do owe you for all your help this time. ...I never imagined I'd be able to talk with you like this. Whenever we both have the time, I'd like to sit down and have a more casual

chat.”

“...As long as you don’t mind having it as we fight to the death.”

“Sure... Hachikuji,” I say, shifting my gaze back to her. “What are you going to do after this?”

“Hm?” she asks, tilting her head and playing dumb. “Who, me? My work is finished with this, so once I’m done seeing you off, I’m back to my days of piling rocks by the Sai no Kawara riverbed.”

“...Piling rocks...”

“Hahaha, please don’t pity me like that. It certainly isn’t fun, and to be perfectly honest, it *does* feel completely uncalled for, like someone’s being too much of a stickler about the punishment for the sin. But still, although it may not have been something I did as a human, I do carry the weight of having wandered the Earth for 11 years. I’ll carry out the task, considering it my repentance for that—I’ll reflect and regret. Don’t worry. The Jizo Bodhisattva will come for me soon enough, and I’ll be happily reincarnated.”

Repentance... She can call it that, but she wasn’t meant to be judged for those 11 years she spent lost. More than that, those 11 years must’ve been an even more Hell-ish experience for a 10-year-old girl than Sai no Kawara...

“You never know, perhaps I’ll even be reincarnated as the child you have with Senjougahara-san.”

“That sounds heavy.”

“Oh, does it? Would you say around 5000 grams, to be exact?”

“No, I wasn’t talking about the newborn kid’s weight...”

“Well, if you by chance end up in Hell before I’m reincarnated, let’s play around together again when that happens.”

“Don’t phrase it like me going to Hell is a given...”

Though since I’ve already ended up here once, it probably *is* a given. Well, if I’m definitely going to Hell after I die, I guess that’s all the more reason to be enthusiastic about life.

“Well then,” says Hachikuji, waving her hand. “To tell you the truth, I’d like to see you off with a kiss one more time, but since Ononoki-san isn’t here to help, I’m afraid I can’t quite reach your height.”

“I told you not to bring that up...”

Can’t you see the dubious look on Tadatsuru’s face? Now he’s doubting my character.

Not to distract from that or anything, but as if to belatedly urge him on, I say, “Go ahead. Send it off whenever you’re ready. The signal. And me, too.”

“Alright. I’m sure there are still a couple things I’ve failed to mention, but you can have Gaen-senpai fill you in on those after you’ve come back to life. In that case, let us begin the countdown. 10, 9...”

I have no idea where he got it from—or maybe it was just a part of his outfit change—but Tadatsuru starts swinging an onusa<sup>[2]</sup> back in forth in time with his countdown.

When he does that, it starts to feel less like this is a spider thread hanging down from the heavens, and more like I’m about to do some kind of reverse bungee. Maybe instead of holding it in my hands, I should have fastened it around my waist.

Well, I guess depending on the way you say the numbers, a countdown can be a type of purification ritual, too...<sup>[3]</sup>

“8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1... Ignition.”

For some reason, he makes it sound like the code for a rocket launch at the very end—and in reality, I start getting pulled straight up with a comparable amount of momentum. I really do come close to letting my hands slip. My legs dangle uselessly underneath me.

It immediately brings to mind Ononoki-chan’s “Unlimited Rule Book.” Rather, I think it’s precisely because I grew more or less used to this sensation through that... that I’m able to withstand the shock of being yanked up.

I withstand it.

And in that moment, I get the feeling that my eyes meet with Hachikuji’s.

“...Ah.”

She’s seeing me off with a smile. She looks satisfied, as though she accomplished what she set out to do. She carried out her job—but wait, her “job”?

She said she was doing this at no charge.

Leaving aside the way she phrased it, that basically means that she helped out with my resurrection even though there was absolutely nothing in it for her. It’s not like this is going to help *her* come back to life.

Yeah, that’s right.

Hachikuji said I was first on the list of people who should come back to life—and at the very least, putting Hachikuji aside, I *will* come back to life.

“Ha...”

How many times does this make it?

How many times will I have said goodbye to Mayoi Hachikuji now?

“Ha... Hachikujiiii...!”

The moment I think that, I reach out with my legs. Both of them.

I haven’t put any real thought into it, and I haven’t read that far into anything—it’s not like I reflected on the story of the spider thread and decided to act out the reverse of it.

If I had to say anything...

It’s that my legs just grew a little bit longer.

“Huh? Agh, aghhh!”

Hachikuji screams.

Anyone would scream if their torso were suddenly caught in a pincer attack, whether they’re a little girl or not—even more so if they were being caught up in a reverse bungee headed for the distant heavens.

And thus, with a pigtailed girl wearing a gigantic backpack tangled up in my legs, I’m pulled up towards the sky. Before I know it, Kita-Shirahebi Shrine and the town I know have become so small that it’s as if I were looking at an aerial map.

“Oh, Araragi-kun, one more thing!” comes a voice from the ground far below.

It’s Tadatsuru’s voice—I can’t see him anymore, but for whatever reason, I can still hear his voice. Either the volume of his voice far surpasses that of the average person, or it’s thanks to him being half-human half-demon.

“One more thing—from me! Let me tell you the name of the person who requested that I exterminate you and Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade!”

Gripping a white snake with both of my hands, and holding a little girl with both of my legs, I listen to that name. It echoes strangely, almost like some kind of Doppler effect.

“Ougi... Ougi Oshino...”

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[<sup>1</sup>] This is probably a reference to the manga *Reiketsu no Hoozuki*, a story about a demon who runs all the different levels of Hell. The titular demon can often be found wielding an iron club.

[<sup>2</sup>] An onusa is a wooden wand used in Shinto rituals. It has many zig-zagging paper streamers hanging from it.

[3] Shinto purification rituals involve chants or prayers that use more archaic and poetic Japanese.

Now for the epilogue—or perhaps I should call it the conclusion.

But it's a reboot rather than a conclusion, and as far as the "epilogue" part goes, not a single day has actually passed. I checked my watch immediately upon coming to my senses at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, and it seems not a single minute has gone by since Gaen-san sliced me up.

It's March 13, just past 7 AM.

"Really now, to whisk Hachikuji-chan away like that—to *wisp* Hachikuji-chan away like that... You always go above and beyond my expectations, Koyomin. So long as you came back to life in one piece, I was planning to keep you out of my way, but now you've gone and given me such high hopes for you."

When I turn in the direction of that familiar, aloof voice, lo and behold, the one sitting there is none other than my murderer in the flesh, Izuko Gaen-san.

However, she isn't in as laid-back a situation as her carefree tone would suggest—there are two hands, a total of ten long-clawed fingers around her neck.

Behind Gaen-san, who's smiling and sitting cross-legged on the stairs of the shrine building... there stands a tall, fair-skinned vampire, ready to tear out her windpipe at a moment's notice.

One with golden hair and golden eyes, beautiful beyond description.

One with long, slender arms and legs peeking out from a gorgeous dress.

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

The oddity slayer—the monster among monsters, one who has lived for 600 years.

It's Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade—in her full-powered form.

"For the time being, Koyomin, would you mind asking this scary beauty to put away her claws? I got her to postpone my execution on the strict condition that I bring you back to life, at least... Goodness, I didn't think she would get quite *this* angry," says Gaen-san, without losing an ounce of composure despite her life-or-death situation.

Shinobu—well, maybe I shouldn't be calling her that anymore, but anyway, Shinobu looks over at me, seeing that I've woken up, and says, "Well met, my master," with the finest of horrifying smiles on her face.

...That's right. If all my vampirism was "cut off" from me... naturally, Shinobu would regain her full powers as a result. There was a time when our link was cut off, and there have been times when we both heightened our vampire powers to their limit... but seeing it now, the intensity of Shinobu at her

full power really is something else.

It's not that the link with my shadow or whatever was cut off. This time, our master-servant relationship itself has been completely severed.

It seems like she's still calling me "master" in spite of that... But still, seeing Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade in her full form for nearly the first time since spring break, I can't help but feel a little nervous.

Nervous.

Maybe it would be more accurate to rephrase that as "tense."

"Ka... kaka. Whatever is the matter, my master? Aren't you going to play around with my rib cage like you always do?"

"I mean, that would make for a pretty strange image like this... wait, no, I've never done that even once!"

"Hmm. At any rate, 'twould seem I managed to avoid committing any useless murder or inflicting any pointless wounds. 'Twas the first time I've seen 'Yumewatari' in action..."

As she says that, she removes her hands from Gaen-san's throat.

It looks like she really was going to kill Gaen-san if I didn't come back to life... Man, I can't take my eyes off her for a second.

She starts walking towards me with long strides—walking in a way that emphasizes her chest, almost like a model, then says:

"Fool. You had me worried," as she pats me on the head.

...I get the feeling this is the first time that Shinobu's ever been the one to pat *me* on the head.

"And after all that worrying you caused me, you went and kidnapped a little girl from Hell... What a mess you are."

"U-Um, well you know, it's like my hand just reached out instinctively..."

"Aren't little girls the number one thing in this world you mustn't 'instinctively' lay a hand on?"

I can't argue with that.

"Well, it was technically my *feet* I laid on her," I reply, and then shift my gaze to Hachikuji, who's still caught between my legs. Apparently she couldn't withstand the shock of the reverse bungee jump, given that she's currently out cold. It seems she's just as weak as ever in the face of adversity.

Though, seriously, what should I do here...?

I really went and dragged her out of Hell.

“Hey, Shinobu, this is pretty bad no matter how you look at it, huh...?”

“Of course. If you’re planning to turn yourself in, you can do it alone.”

“Don’t be so cold. I didn’t mean it like *that*, I meant that I made it so the Darkness is going to come after Hachikuji again, didn’t I...?”

“And *I’m* saying that was a fine play on your part, Koyomin.”

Gaen-san comes over, sticking the two demon blades in her belt—it’s a strangely becoming look on her.

“Originally, I had only sent you over there to extract all the vampirism from you, like removing a lesion... but thanks to the miracle you pulled off, I should be able to make us an upper hand in the upcoming fight. The lost little girl—I really wanted this piece.”

“...”

“Oh, was it rude of me to call her a piece? I didn’t really mean anything by it. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to reword that as ‘weapon’—a weapon to fight with. And so, I just can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done... but in light of all this, I’m going to have to ask you, the no-longer-former Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, and of course Hachikuji-chan herself to help me out a little bit more. But for the time being,” she says, “why don’t you go take your exam, Koyomin?”

“M-My exam...”

I wasn’t quite ready to be thrown back into my daily life at a shrine with a vampire, a ghost girl, and a dual-wielding specialist.

“It’s the role of a student to study, after all. You should be able to make it in plenty of time if you leave now. Knock ’em dead.”

“W-Well... I mean, I’ll do my best...”

I never expected that no time would’ve passed here while I was in Hell... If I can make it in time, there’s no getting out of it. I’ve got to put all the knowledge that Senjougahara and Hanekawa drilled into me to good use.

I can’t say I’m in my best condition, though...

But I suppose people just have to play with the hand they’re dealt.

“I’ll put you to work come tomorrow. No need to worry, everything will be over by the time of your

graduation ceremony. All our weapons have been assembled. I've been getting played for a good long time now, but my preparations are finally complete. Let's put an end to this, Koyomin—and what a coincidence, tomorrow is White Day. What a perfect time to bring an end to the story of a town where a white snake once reigned supreme.”

Gaen-san speaks, with an uncharacteristically predatory grin on her face.

“Here comes our counterattack.”



# Hitagi Rendezvous

## 001

I love Hitagi Senjougahara. I can declare that without the slightest bit of shame—and if you were to ask me why, the answer would be, “because I do.” I don’t need any other words to describe it, and I don’t need any logic to back it up; that feeling is clear as day, enough so that it would be ridiculous to bother explaining it.

However, I’m sure that one year ago, I never could have guessed that I would feel this way about another person. I’m sure that would’ve been even harder for me to believe than the existence of vampires, than the existence of Hell. Or to get to the heart of it, it might have been harder for me to forgive.

The idea that I could love someone would have seemed even more fake than an urban legend.

Having feelings for someone, falling in love with someone—I was terrified of that. Not to put too fine a point on it, but I even went out of my way to avoid any situation where that could possibly happen. I’m terrible at forming interpersonal relationships even now, but if you were to frame it as though I purposely evaded contact with other people back then, you would likewise be able to say that I pulled it off quite splendidly.

Why was I so afraid of loving someone else, you ask? There’s a simple, obvious answer to that: it was likely because I cared too much about myself. I was afraid of losing the self that I cherished so much.

I didn’t want to change.

I didn’t want anyone to change me.

That’s what I believe my reason was—and just so you know, that feeling itself hasn’t changed much even now.

I realize that’s what happens when two people get involved with each other—I believe that’s just as much the case when it comes to love as it is when it comes to hate.

By nature, it’s impossible to love someone else unless you give up on your own vanity.

Hitagi Senjougahara herself might believe that even more strongly than I do—and I think that’s just fine. Her love... is likely too strong to be directed at just one person. She has plenty left over to give to me.

People often say that if you don’t intend to lift something up yourself, you won’t be able to manage it with the help of another person, but I believe her love is something that was meant to be shared that way.

And upon picturing that, I suddenly think to myself.

I love Hitagi Senjougahara.

I can declare that without the slightest bit of shame—but because of that.

Did I lose my self-regard somewhere along the way, I wonder? Do I still love myself, the same way I love her?

If I don't...

It's essentially the same as being dead.

“We’re going on a date,” says Senjougahara—though, this is probably so abrupt an opening that no one understands what’s actually going on, so first let me set the stage in a little more detail.

It’s March 13.

In other words, it’s the same day that my past actions caught up with me and I ended up in Hell, only to be resurrected immediately afterwards thanks to all the good karma I built up. To elaborate even further, it’s also the evening of the day that, in a thoroughly worn out condition (I wonder if my little sister Karen would call that my “best condition”), I went to my university of choice to take the entrance exam, managing to see it through with the assurance that “at least I filled in the whole answer sheet!” After finishing the first real “exam” I’ve taken since applying to Naoetsu High School, I returned home tired to the bone—almost enough so to make me think I would have preferred another trip to Hell over *that*—only to find none other than Hitagi Senjougahara waiting outside the Araragi household.

None other than my girlfriend.

For the record, this isn’t my first time seeing Senjougahara today; we were together in the morning, too. More accurately, in order to keep me from getting wrapped up in any trouble along the way, she accompanied me to the university like some kind of bodyguard. I want to believe that the reason she had her right hand in her pocket the whole time was *not* because she was carrying a weapon... Besides, by the time she stuck around as my escort, I had already been caught up in a decent amount of trouble in the form of getting cut up by Gaen-san—but still, thanks to Senjougahara seeing me off, I at least managed to avoid any *further* trouble along the way. As I just said, I was able to fill in the entire answer sheet, at the very least.

Thinking back, Senjougahara was the one who helped me along in my studies for the last year, together with Hanekawa—not to mention that for a guy like me, who used to always say, “I just want to graduate,” about 90% of my motivation came from the goal of going to the same university as my girlfriend, so it certainly wouldn’t be flattery to say that I was able to take the exam all thanks to her.

So no matter how tired I was feeling, no matter how braindead I was, I had planned to call Senjougahara as soon as I got home—but to my surprise, it looks like she was one step ahead, like she beat me to punch, seeing as she’s loitering around outside my home.

Based on what I’ll hear from her later, she was apparently hanging around with all the intentions of the faithful dog Hachiko,<sup>[1]</sup> but in the moment, it feels more like I’ve come across a bandit who was lying in wait to ambush me. After all, from this particular angle, the glint in her eyes doesn’t seem to be saying, “Nice work, Araragi-kun!” so much as it seems to be screaming, “Look what the cat dragged in.” I cannot deny that I shrunk back in fear in front of my own house.

What happened? I haven’t mentioned it to her yet, so who told her about my trip to Hell this morning...? Did Gaen-san tweet about it or something? (That seems like something she would do.) I

had planned to tell her once my exam was over since I didn't want her to worry—or more simply, because I figured she'd get mad—so I haven't said anything about it yet... Well, I guess it would be pretty shocking to find out that your boyfriend went to Hell, so I can understand the stern look on her face.

I steel myself, ready to fight one last battle, and start walking over to her, formulating an apology by the name of “an explanation” in my head. Then Senjougahara speaks, in a tone just as harsh as the look in her eyes—or perhaps it's the same tone that used to be her standard, that flat tone devoid of intonation or accent. She says:

“We're going on a date.”

I've heard that line once before.

That's right. She approached me the same way when she asked me out on our first date back in June...

“No, that's not right. This isn't how it goes.”

She keeps going, and as far as I can remember, this might be turning into an exact reenactment of that conversation.

“I-It's not right?” I respond, all in a flutter.

That's Araragi-kun for you, the man who never runs out of fresh, new reactions. What a precious boy.

“Oh, it's nothing. It's simply been so long since I've had proper screen time that I've forgotten what kind of character I was.”

“...”

Don't talk like you're Ononoki-chan.

Of course, she's a rare kind of side character, one who loses her characterization whether she has screen time or not...

I wonder which one has it better: a side character with plenty of screen time, or a main character with hardly any screen time?

“Who am I, again?”

“That's a heavy thing to ask...”

“If I remember correctly, wasn't I a cool beauty who would brandish staplers and box cutters?”

“If you're going to go that far back in this reenactment, I'm going to have to think on patterns and strategies to tackle the problem presented by *you*.<sup>[2]</sup> And I just finished my exams...”

Since I brought up the exam, I figured Senjougahara would take this opportunity to ask, “Oh, by the way, how did your exam go?” and since there’s no point in taking a negative attitude about it now, I’d answer, “Well, I did the best I could,” and thank her. I run through the simulation in my head, but I never get the chance to put it into practice.

Almost as if she couldn’t care less about my exam, Senjougahara just repeats, “Go on a date with me, or else.”

I say repeat, but her way of phrasing it changed a little—and her tone sounds a lot rougher this time around. Even before she reformed, when she brandished staplers and box cutters and possessed a characterization that sort of pushed the envelope, she never took such an oppressive tone of voice.

“Go on a date with me, or else”? That’s just a plain old threat.

“Y-Your characterization’s going off the rails, Senjougahara-san.”

“It’ll be tomorrow.”

My retort—in other words, my attempt to salvage my girlfriend’s bizarre comment as a gag, to be discerning in response to her wording—goes completely ignored, tossed to the wayside.

“Tomorrow,” Senjougahara says. “We’re going to use tomorrow to the fullest and have six months’ worth of a date, Araragi-kun. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“No, unfortunately not...”

We may be boyfriend and girlfriend, but it seems we don’t have an unspoken understanding between us quite yet—I picked a challenging girl to build a partnership with. Since it also means conversations with her are never boring, I’d usually be more than happy about that, but in a situation as tense at this one, it becomes more of a liability for an accident.

“Then I’ll break it down for you. Just as if this were an anime commentary track.”

“...”

I don’t usually get to take part in those, so I don’t know all that much about it, but I’ve heard through the grapevine that not much actual explaining goes on in them...

And instead of going over the current situation, I’d rather go over the answers to the test I just took... but that’s not something I can say with this kind of mood in the air. Actually, it feels more like a chill than anything. We’re in the middle of March, but it’s still awfully cold...

However, it would seem Senjougahara hasn’t *entirely* forgotten about my college entrance exams, as she says, “First things first. Well done, Araragi-kun,” finally throwing me a few words of appreciation.

I say “appreciation,” but there’s a hint of sarcasm in her tone, making it almost seems like she’s mad

at me...

“You worked hard to get to this point, so even if you come up short, there’s nothing to be ashamed of. You saw it through to the end.”

“Could you please not phrase it like it’s a given that I’m going to fail? What you just said wasn’t encouragement, it was consolation. Don’t allude to me *needing* consolation. I haven’t even said anything about it yet. It’s not over until the results come out.”

“No, it’s over now,” she persists.

It looks like Senjougahara has already firmly decided on the direction things should go, and no matter what I say, it’s impossible to get her to change course. Then perhaps it’s just best to sit back and watch.

When there’s no point in saying anything, people ought to keep their mouths shut.

“Your fight ends here.”

“...”

“To that end, it is my desire that the two of us partake in a date, Araragi-kun. Let’s make use of all the points we’ve saved up. And coincidentally enough, tomorrow is March 14. White Day. There couldn’t be a more ideal holiday for a rendezvous.”

“...”

“You just thought to yourself that you hate holidays, didn’t you?”

I didn’t even say anything. How she did she know?

Why is the unspoken understanding between us completely one-sided?

Still, even my worn-out brain is starting to process what she’s getting at... I see, so that’s what she wants. Senjougahara isn’t proposing anything off the wall—rather, she’s coming to me with an incredibly reasonable appeal.

The fact that she’s approaching me with that request immediately after I finished my exam shows she hasn’t become any less nimble since reforming—but true enough, while we’ve spent a good amount of time in each other’s company through her services as my home tutor and such, we’ve only gone on a proper date a handful of times now. On top of that, almost all of those happened during the first term, and to be more specific, we haven’t gone on a single one since my studies began in earnest. You could even go so far as to say that ever since the second term began, we’ve been partaking in an awfully platonic relationship for a high school couple.

Of course, thanks to her tutoring and all that, we’ve been together a lot both at home and at school—but we’ve never really gone somewhere to hang out, or traveled anywhere together, or anything like

that.

I had my position as a university applicant to keep in mind, and Senjougahara had *her* position as the instructor of an incompetent boyfriend-slash-student to keep in mind, so we both held ourselves back as much as we could. Moreover, we had Sengoku to deal with during the middle of our second term, and with both of our lives in mortal danger, going on a date was the furthest thing from our minds.

Just as soon as that situation was resolved (thanks to a certain detestable con artist), my body started morphing into that of a full-fledged vampire... It was a rush of trouble that didn't even leave me time to breathe, let alone time to take a breather from my studies.

"Our graduation ceremony is the day after tomorrow, Araragi-kun," says Senjougahara. "In other words, the halcyon days of our youth are about to come to an end, and we've hardly gone on any dates. Doesn't the thought of that sadden you?"

"Well, when you put it like that..."

"We had school off for most of the third term, too. It went by in a flash. This must be what they mean by 'January jaunts, February flies, and March makes off.'"

"Yeah, the third term really did go by quickly."

"This must be what they mean by 'April absconds, May marches on, June jogs, July jets, August advances, September sprints, October outruns, November navigates away, December holidays.'"<sup>[3]</sup>

"Hey, that last one is cheating!"

"If we graduate from high school without doing any of the things a couple should, what are we going to tell our future daughter?"

"Okay, that question is putting on a little too much pressure. Our *daughter*, seriously?"

"Oh? Would you prefer a son?"

"No, no, I wasn't commenting on the kid's gender."

"And I'd already decided on a name, too..."

"This is some serious pressure..."

It was a statement that bore down on me so heavily, you would never believe it came from the girl once tortured by her lack of weight.

"Let me ask, just out of curiosity. What name did you pick?"

"Tsubasa."

“Too much, too much, too much, too much, too much!”

Even Hanekawa would feel the pressure! You have the wrong idea about how to make a display of female friendship!

“And so,” says Senjougahara, as she returns to the subject at hand. She has a very unique sense for conversation. “Tomorrow, we’re going to make up for all the dates we missed out on these past six months, Araragi-kun. Consider it the digest version. We will perform a clip show of our high school days.”

“A clip show...?”

I don’t think you can have a digest version of something that never happened in the first place, but I get what she’s trying to go for here. Put simply, now that my exam is over, she wants to have the date we’ve held off on all this time, and White Day is the perfect opportunity for it.

“The jig is up, Araragi-kun.”

“Huh?”

I mean that “Huh?” more like “Why would you say it like that?” than “What’s the jig?”, but it seems Senjougahara interpreted it as the latter, as she says, “It looks like your body is back in good form,” explaining what she was referring to.

“...? Oh, well...”

I get caught on the phrase “good form” for a moment, but I immediately realize she’s referring to the disappearance of my supposedly irreversible vampirism, my return to a human body after that trip to Hell.

It’s my own body, so of course I can tell.

But how did Senjougahara know?

“When I escorted you to campus, I could see your reflection in the mirrors on the street corners.”

She’s got a sharp eye.

I had kept quiet about it, planning to just explain everything later, but it seems Senjougahara had been keeping quiet about it herself, knowing that it wasn’t something to ask me about right before I was about to take my exams. The two of us are surprisingly considerate people.

“In that case, all of your unresolved issues—your exam and your body—have been tied up neatly, haven’t they? They’ve reached a conclusion, correct? Then you have no excuse to hesitate about going on a date with me. If we’re going to resolve this cursed date situation, now is the time.”

“Cursed date situation...?”

It's amazing how she can make such a clunky phrase roll off the tongue so easily. Was she trying to rhyme it with "first date"?

But still... While it's true that those two issues of mine have been taken care of... No, hold on. There's no point in bringing that up now.

This shouldn't be a matter of having excuses or not—I want to go on a date with Senjougahara, plain and simple. I'm a healthy high school boy with healthy needs, but I've managed to hold myself back for a long time now—so I almost feel like I'd be ready to head out on our date right this second.

Of course, if she actually invited me to do that, I'd probably have to ask for the rest of today off (on top of being exhausted, I'm not a vampire anymore, meaning my stamina recovery is incredibly slow—or rather, it's normal), but if we're going to do it tomorrow—in other words, as long as I get a good night's rest—I feel like I'd be ready to go anywhere.

Gaen-san.

Kagenui-san.

Hachikuji.

Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade.

And... "her."

I still have all those loose ends hanging around that I should be thinking about, and similar to how teachers always say, "The field trip isn't over until you're home safe," I'm a bit of the mind that my exams aren't truly over until the results come out, but I also want to value that desire to do typical high school activities before graduating high school.

If I've already made my resolve, I can't keep dragging my feet about it—I have to respond to my girlfriend's feelings like a true man among men.

"So with that said, go on a date with me, Araragi-kun."

Senjougahara says it one more time, as if she finally remembered the proper way to phrase it—well, no, that isn't really the proper way to phrase it either, but it reminds me of when we first started dating, and I can feel my heart start pumping.

"If you won't go on a date with me, I'm going to bite off my own tongue right here."

"..."

Well, that killed the mood...

"You'll never be able to French kiss me again."

“If you bite off your tongue, I think it’ll turn into a more serious situation than that…”

Still, in the past she probably would’ve threatened to bite off *my* tongue, so thinking about it, it really shows how sweet Hitagi Senjougahara has become.

I still wouldn’t exactly say she’s “mellowed out”… But I see, so neither I nor my girlfriend can remain in the same place forever.

We have to graduate.

And we have to move forward.

I really *do* hate holidays, but I’ll let that go just for tomorrow—this will probably be the last date I go on as a high school student, so I may as well play the part to the fullest.

“Got it, Senjougahara. Rather than a clip show, we’ll make this the final cut—let’s use up tomorrow in full and have six months’ worth of a date.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. ‘In full’ won’t work for me. I have plans for the evening.”

*Slump.*

That’s the sound of soul-crushing disappointment.

“As such, let’s settle for early in the morning to early evening. Don’t worry, I already have all the plans right here.”

As she says that, Senjougahara taps at the temple of her forehead. It’s a gesture that makes her look quite smart, but I can’t help showing a tinge of uneasiness at the thought of a date plan devised by her. After all, our first date was a total fiasco… That said, asking her to change a plan she already came up with would be pretty insensitive, so I’ll just have to hope that she’s become “sweet” in that regard, too.

Anyway, if that’s how it is, I’ll use tomorrow night to start taking action, just as planned.

Right, just as planned.

“Roger that, roger that… Araragi, over and out. By the way, what are your plans for the evening?”

“Well, tomorrow is White Day, right?” Senjougahara starts, and as if she’s stating the obvious, continues with: “So in the evening, I’m going to have dinner with my father…”

“...”

That is yet another heavy answer to catch.

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[1] Hachiko is a Japanese dog famous for his loyalty; he came to wait for his master every day at the train station for 10 years after his death.

[2] “Patterns and strategies”—or more literally, “trends and countermeasures”—is a phrase that often comes up in relation to preparations for Japanese entrance exams. It refers to the frequency of certain types of questions on past tests, and the best way to deal with them.

[3] “*Ichigatsu wa iku, nigatsu wa nigeru, sangatsu wa saru*” is an alliterative Japanese proverb that literally translates to “January goes, February runs away, March leaves.” Senjougahara extends this proverb for each month of the year, finding a synonym for “go” or “run” that starts with the same sound as each month. For December, however, she ignores alliteration and just uses an archaic term for the month, “Shiwasu,” which happens to have the kanji for “run” in it.

“A date? Tomorrow? Hey now, you can’t just spring that on me without warning. I have a schedule of my own, you know. But I guess there’s no getting around it; I can make some time for you, *Onii-chan*.”

“Wait, why are you assuming that you’re invited? What exactly do you think your position is here?”

After seeing Senjougahara off, going inside my house, and trudging my way up to my room on the second floor, the one lying in wait for me this time was my roommate, a freeloader in the Araragi household, the shikigami girl Yotsugi Ononoki-chan.

As a doll, she was meant to be staying in my house under the guise of my little sister’s stuffed animal, but lately she seems to be moving around without much inhibition, and today in particular she seems to have let herself into my room, lounging around on my bed and reading some comics I bought before I’ve even had a chance to look at them myself.

Forget “making time,” I don’t think I’ve ever seen a girl with more free time in my life.

She asked me, “A strange girl seemed like she was waiting for you outside the house, so I left her alone, but what was that about?”, so I answered her question honestly—but Kagenui-san left her at my house to serve as my bodyguard, so if there was a strange girl waiting around outside my home, she probably *shouldn’t* have left her alone.

More pertinently, there are a lot of other things I should be telling Ononoki-chan right now, so it’s a bit strange that the first thing I’m reporting about is my newly scheduled date.

But I don’t know where I should start or how much I should say… Gaen-san didn’t really act like she wanted me to keep my mouth shut, and Tadatsuru even asked me to apologize in his stead… but if I tell Ononoki-chan about my pilgrimage through Hell this morning down to the last detail, will it get in the way of whatever Gaen-san is planning right now? There’s still that lingering uncertainty.

Still, since she was so directly involved in his death, I feel like I ought to let Ononoki-chan know all that about Tadatsuru… Well then, how do I go about this?

“? What is it, *Onii-chan the oni*?<sup>[1]</sup> *Onii-chan* for short. You’re staring at my face. Is there something ‘odd’ about it? Pun intended.”

“No, it’s just...”

I gather my resolve and speak—before Ononoki-chan has the chance to make another joke. It might not be possible to clear away *all* of my lingering concerns, but I’d like to settle whatever I can before tomorrow’s date.

“Ononoki-chan. Can I talk to you about something serious?”

“I’m always serious. I’ve never talked about anything that isn’t serious. I’m so aggressively serious

that people call me Straightjacket Crossface.”

It doesn’t sound the least bit sincere when she says it in that expressionless monotone, and if people are calling her “Straightjacket Crossface” that probably means she’s the opposite of serious, plus it’s probably a total lie to begin with, but I decide to simply ignore all of that and briefly recount my adventure that started at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine this morning, covering only the essential details—I figured it would get too long if I just came out with the whole story, but once I sum it all up, my explanation actually finishes pretty quickly.

It may have felt like a journey that could have spanned 2,000 years to me, but in reality, it *did* all happen in an instant, so I guess when I tell someone else about it, this is all there is to it—the emotion associated with something isn’t always directly proportional to the amount of time spent on it.

“Huh.”

But Ononoki-chan barely shows a reaction.

My tale of adventure is absolutely wasted on an audience like her.

“That’s what you get for making a stuffed animal your audience. I’m a little cheersed that you got wasted the minute I took my eyes off you, but I don’t have much of an opinion beyond that.”

“Wait, come on. Hearing all that about one of your creators, Tadatsuru, doesn’t make you feel *anything*? He told me to send you his regards, you know.”

“I don’t really care. Haven’t I told you before? Don’t expect human emotion from me. Whether he was dead to begin with, whether he was immortal in a sense, or whether he was a living puppet, it doesn’t change the meaning of what I did.”

Ononoki-chan shrugs her shoulders.

“What it meant to you, that is.”

“...”

“Well, I’m sure it gave you a lot to think about it, and you probably feel like you’ve been redeemed, in a sense... But if you had to ask my opinion, hmm, personally, I’d say it doesn’t pass the smell test.”

“Hm? The smell test?”

I’m not sure I completely understand what the term “smell test” means (what smell?), but I can at least tell it’s not a good thing—Ononoki-chan is completely deadpan, meaning I can’t read her expression, so conversations with her require exceedingly high communication skills.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was just wondering how much of it was part of Gaen-san’s plan. I pretty much only interact with Gaen-san through Onee-chan, so I honestly don’t know the true depths of her

shrewdness... It's possible that she actually expected you to bring Hacchy along, and she was only pretending to be surprised by it."

"Hacchy?"

You guys are pulling way too much from the commentary tracks. Quit having the time of your lives while I'm not around.

"Well, to be frank, there's probably more canon in the commentary tracks by now."

"Stop. Don't be frank."

"To begin with, I don't even believe in the concept of Hell... Maybe it was all just a hallucination you saw on the brink of death."

"A hallucination? Like a near-death experience? But..."

"Or maybe it was a hallucination Gaen-san showed you herself... Isn't it scary to think of all the possibilities?"

"..."

It *is* scary... But why is she going out of her way to say things that might scare me? What's so fun about freaking me out?

"Hmm, but don't you think freaking people out is fun in and of itself?"

"You're downright despicable. You better lay off before I get mad."

"Making people mad is the most fun of all. It really makes my day. Whenever I get lectured or whatever, I think to myself, 'Wowee, this guy sure is mad, he sure has lost his cool,' making a remorseful face while I'm really smiling on the inside."

"Nobody in the world deserves to be yelled at more than you!"

Yeah right, like she's ever made a remorseful face or smiled. She's more than just expressionless, she's in a perpetual state of rigor mortis.

She's a real problem child—but if I look like I have a problem, I'm sure she'll just enjoy it.

"Anyway, to put it the other way around, I'm also not particularly put off by the idea that I might see Tadatsuru again one day. So I'll give you my thanks for telling me."

"I see... Well, hearing you thank me makes it feel like it was worth it."

"I am forever in your debt."

“That’s an awfully dramatic ‘thank you.’”

“However, I feel there’s a more important matter at hand.”

Ononoki-chan changes the subject with that—and she might be right. If we’re going to talk about one of Ononoki-chan’s “creators,” Tadatsuru, we can’t avoid bringing up another one of those same “creators,” her master as a shikigami, Kagenui-san.

And she is still missing as we speak.

I couldn’t even find her in Hell.

With the situation as it is, it’s hard to feel particularly celebratory—or, that’s what I assumed Ononoki-chan was thinking, but it seems I was completely off the mark.

“I’d like you to tell me all about Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade’s full revival, in detail,” Ononoki-chan says. “This has a direct bearing on my personal safety.”

“...”

“I’ve mercilessly bad-mouthing her because I thought she was a washed up little girl, but now that she’s in her full form, it’s time to make an about-face. *Onii-chan*, can you teach me how to speak formally?”

Oh, *now* I get it.

She was right that there’s a little thrill in watching someone else freak out—all the more when it’s a certain cheeky shikigami girl.

“Does Heart-Under-Blade-sama most graciously abode within your shadow at the moment?”

“You aren’t using the word ‘abode’ correctly.”

It would seem she really *doesn’t* know how to speak formally.

I’m pretty sure she’s just asking if she’s in my shadow—well, as long as she’s getting the meaning across, I shouldn’t nitpick about whether she’s being grammatically correct. That’s what I believe, as a man who has put his exams behind him.

“No, she’s not here,” I answer.

I thought about giving her a little bit more a fright, but too much bullying won’t get me anywhere.

“Shinobu’s with Gaen-san, along with Hachikuji. They’re figuring out what we’re going to do from here on out—some sort of meeting, I guess, or a maybe a discussion.”

“Or maybe a destination.”

“Don’t use a word as commonplace as *that* incorrectly. Leave the confusion for formal speech.”

“Forget misusing it, I really don’t know what it means. I wonder if it has to do with fate.”

“That’s ‘destiny.’”

Destination. The place to which someone goes or is sent.

...I always wondered about when I would actually apply the knowledge I gained while studying for exams, but it’s actually pretty useful.

“I’m curious about ‘what we’re going to do from here on out.’ You finally returned to being a normal boy, and what, now you’re going to get yourself involved in something else? Even if it means you’re dancing in the palm of Gaen-san’s hand?”

“Well, no, I still haven’t agreed to anything yet...”

But still.

I can’t just cover my ears and pretend like I don’t know what’s going on—and besides, no matter what I decide to do from here on out, I’m going to need Gaen-san’s help to figure out what to do with Shinobu and Hachikuji. Gaen-san doesn’t believe in the principle of borrowing without returning—so I have to pay her back whatever I can.

“...Besides, there’s Kagenui-san to think about, too.”

Ononoki-chan has failed to bring up Kagenui-san whatsoever, so I’m forced to timidly mention her name myself. I’m way too considerate...

Anyway, while I couldn’t tell you why I’m being so considerate towards a doll, it’s not like I’m indifferent about what happened to Kagenui-san myself. In fact, you could even call it my number one concern.

Yozuru Kagenui.

And... Meme Oshino. Where are they now?

“As far as Oshino-onii-chan is concerned, isn’t he just living his usual vagabond life? That’s what I think, anyway.”

“Nah, it’s gone far past the point that he would be taking it easy somewhere... After all, we’ve pooled all our resources trying to find him, and we still don’t know where he is, you know? Hanekawa herself is out looking for him, and we *still* haven’t found him, you know?”

“Oh, right. That girl who doesn’t grow everything.”

“She doesn’t *know* everything.”

"It's not as though she's a professional at tracking people down herself... Well, I don't really intend to argue with your opinion," Ononoki-chan says, and then adds, "By the way, as far as Onee-chan is concerned, it's my theory that she went on a journey to hone her skills," and goes back to reading her comic book.

Hold it, you can't end the conversation with that. You're taking *nihil admirari* way too far.

She lost her interest way too fast once she found out Shinobu isn't here. Look, I'm just saying, when she's in her full form, she can teleport anywhere in the world in an instant, okay?

"I'm a free woman. Just so you know, I can't do anything without orders from Onee-chan, so I'm not going to help you out no matter what you're planning to do. Hope you understand."

"..."

I knew that before she even had to tell me, but why did she have to go out of her way to say it in such an irritating way...?

"But if you insist, I don't mind accompanying you on your date tomorrow."

"Why are you so insistent on coming along? Stay out of my love life already. This is going to be the first heartwarming episode we've had in a while."

Strictly speaking, as much as I'd like to hope for a heartwarming episode... I'm honestly not sure how much I can expect from a date penned by Senjougahara.

"Aww. But other people's dates are hilarious. There's nothing as dumb as someone else's love life."

"I have absolutely no doubt that your current characterization was influenced by my little sisters, so it's a little hard to criticize you..."

Still, the fact that there's now one more person out there with that kind of personality is just as sad as it is painful... As an older brother, I have to wonder where I went wrong to raise sisters like that. The both of them are pretty bad, but my littler sister in particular, the one that's Ononoki-chan's owner, seems to get worse with each passing day.

"How to put it... When you're looking on from the sidelines, don't you think it's hysterical to watch people get worked up over the silliest things? 'You may be taking it completely seriously, but I couldn't care less about it.' Nothing gets me more pumped up than situations like that."

"As the person Kagenui-san entrusted you with, I'm starting to feel the responsibility to get you away from my sisters ASAP. ...By the way, Ononoki-chan, what things do *you* take seriously?"

As a specialist specializing in immortal oddities, Kagenui-san seems awfully committed to exterminating said immortal oddities, so I tend to just assume that Ononoki-chan holds the same antipathy towards them... But when I take into consideration the fact that she's an immortal oddity herself, it's hard to imagine that being her motivation.

In that case, what *does* this girl take seriously?

“Don’t you have anything you want to do, or something you want?”

“Nope, nada.”

“A simple ‘no’ would’ve been enough.”

“I’m a combat machine that exists only to fight, just like Onee-chan always says. You’ve gotten a taste of that firsthand, haven’t you?” Ononoki-chan says, without taking her eyes off the comic book.

It really feels like I’m talking to my sister...

“The question you just asked is like asking a mug cup if it prefers being filled with coffee or tea.”

“...”

She’s terrible at analogies. I get what she’s trying to say, but now I feel like I understand it a little less.

“At any rate, I’m going to make the most of the slow life for now. Dance well, *Onii-chan*—whether it be in the palm of Gaen-san’s hand or someone else’s altogether.”

“...Of course, it’s not like I want to cause trouble for you, either.”

But at this point, there’s something I want to clarify. I want to clarify her intent—or if a doll doesn’t have intent of its own, then her function.

“But Ononoki-chan. What are you planning to do if Kagenui-san never comes back? What if she never comes for you?”

That might be a cruel question to ask depending on how she takes it, and it hurts me to ask, but it’s something I’d have to ask sooner or later—and the girl in question responds with complete composure.

“If that happens,” she answers in a monotone, “then I guess I’ll have to stay in this house forever. Though obviously, if you get married and leave home, I’ll have to go along with you.”

“Drop the crazy life plan, would you? What do you mean, *obviously*? ”

“Should I have said ‘shockingly’?”

Ononoki-chan whips her head around, acting surprised, but her expression remains completely blank while doing so—it’s a surreal image. How come I can get such a good reaction out of her, but her face is the one thing that never changes? That’s taking “poker face” to a whole new level.

“Still, watching over you is the task that was entrusted to me... I can’t leave your side until that order

is revoked. In other words, if Onee-chan never comes back, we're going to be together for the rest of our lives.”

“The rest of our lives...”

“Hey now, don't look so put out. I'm the one who's baffled by the job that's been given to me. It feels like I've been placed in a cage with a wild animal.”

“Funny, that's exactly how *I* feel about it... We have a lot in common.”

I really need Kagenui-san to return as soon as possible... Yeah, that's right, I guess things really *can't* stay the way they are now.

For the sake of my own future, too.

“By the way, *Onii-chan*. By the way, by the way, *Onii-chan*. How did your exam go? I've been awfully concerned for your sake, you know.”

“So you were concerned about it... It's a little annoying that you said it in such a condescending way, but whatever, I'm still happy to hear you were worried for me.”

After all, Senjougahara ended up going home without asking a single thing about how well the exam went—I wonder whether I should take that as a sign of trust or not.

“Well, I did the best I could. Thanks for all your help.”

For whatever reason, I end up saying the line I was saving for Senjougahara or Hanekawa to Ononoki-chan—well, as someone living under the same roof as me, it's true that she showed a certain amount of consideration towards me while I was studying for my exams, so it's not like there's anything wrong with thanking her.

“You're quite welcome. Hmm, in that case, why don't we go ahead and check your answers? Go ahead, tell me what questions were on the test. I'll calculate your score.”

“...”

There's no way you can do that.

While you may have plenty of specialized knowledge, I hate to say it, but your academic ability is probably no better than what you'd expect from the 12-year-old girl you appear to be.

“You have to go over the answers the same day you took the test, or else you won't remember them.”

“Don't make it sound like you know what you're talking about...”

“You'll be better off if you start preparing for next year as soon as possible.”

“Don’t assume that I’ll have to take it again next year.”

I wish everyone would stop acting so anxious for my future.

“But really, how did it go? Since you went on that over-the-top journey through Hell in the morning, didn’t you end up taking it in pretty poor condition?”

“I can’t deny that, but I guess with all that, I’m just lucky to have been able to take it...”

“You make it sound like you took it just for the sake of taking it... Those exams aren’t free, you know. Don’t cause too much trouble for your mother and father.”

“Great, now you’re lecturing me like you’re my mom. Still, this may sound like I’m bragging, but I actually feel pretty good about how it went. I even did alright on the subjects that weren’t math...”

“Hmmm.”

“Well, I was blessed enough to have Senjougahara and Hanekawa helping with my studies, so it’d be beyond lame if I didn’t have anything to show for it... I did my best not to drag their names through the mud.”

“Mud wrestling is actually pretty enjoyable, though. I forget, will the results be announced before the graduation ceremony, or after?”

“After.”

“Hm. Then it probably is a good idea to have the date right away. If one of you ends up failing, it’d make things awkward.”

I would like to believe that Senjougahara didn’t plan the date for tomorrow with that in mind...

“She said it was because it’s White Day? And you really believed that white lie?”

“It wasn’t a white lie. It was the honest-to-god truth.”

“Well, I guess all girls look forward to triple the return.”

“Triple the return? Oh, yeah, I forgot about that custom.”<sup>[2]</sup>

I have no interest in holidays, so I don’t know about all the intricacies of White Day—but I did indeed receive honest-to-god honmei chocolate<sup>[3]</sup> from Senjougahara last month.

Triple the return.

That seems like an awfully steep interest rate for just a month, but if that’s the rule, I can’t go against it... I don’t have the backbone for that. But does that mean I have to go buy something in time for tomorrow?

“I should buy candy or marshmallows or something, right?”

“I’ll take ice cream.”

“Hold it, I didn’t get any chocolate from you last month. Triple the return of zero is zero.”

“Are you sure? Have you ever actually tested that?”

“...Uh...”

Hesitating for a moment when asked that is the sad fate of someone who loves mathematics. Still, you don’t have to test it to know the answer is obviously zero.

“I’m meeting up with her tomorrow morning, so I guess I have to go buy it today... I’m tired enough that all I want to do is take a nap, though.”

“I’m sure. And instead I’ve occupied your bed, you poor thing.”

“I can just make you move by force, so I don’t care about that. ... What should I do here? Should I ask one of my sisters to go buy something for me?”

“But then it won’t be a gift from the heart. Presents are something you really have to pick out yourself.”

“I mean, I can’t argue with that...”

In fact, I probably ought to have prepared for White Day much earlier, but Senjougahara herself is the one who told me to focus on my exams. For someone who’s technically been free since summer break, she’s really been keeping herself in check. I’d like to pay her back with an equal amount of consideration—but what to do?

“It’s not like I have to get hung up on sweets here, right? This isn’t Halloween or anything.”

“You might have to get hung up on ice cream, though. You should pay attention to its milk content in particular.”

“You’re talking about your *own* preferences.”

“Can you believe that all the Häagen-Dazs stores are closing?<sup>[4]</sup> I don’t mind having ice cream in a cup, but where am I going to eat those delicious cones now?”

“I don’t know... Overseas, I guess?”

Thinking about it, though, Halloween spread throughout Japan before anyone saw it coming. Perhaps to Oshino, who—unlike me—values ritualistic holidays, that may have been cause for celebration.

At any rate, I figure I’m not going to draw any meaningful conclusions by talking with Ononoki-chan,

but as soon as I start scheming about which of the 48 techniques of sumo I should use to remove her from my bed, she suddenly falls flat on her face. She lets go of the comic book she was reading and sinks into the bed face-down and spread-eagle, as though someone suddenly flipped her off switch.

She collapsed almost as if an unseen enemy got in a hard punch to her jaw—here I'd just been thinking about sumo, but was Ononoki-chan boxing with an invisible opponent?

Of course, that's not what it is.

As a shikigami oddity, her senses are hundreds of times sharper than the average human—in other words, me as I am right now—so she detected someone approaching the room long before I did.

In short, Ononoki-chan went into “stuffed animal mode.”

In the next moment, I hear the cry of: “Onii-chan...!” and, after kicking in my door like some kind of special ops team, in comes none other than my littler sister—that is, Tsukihi Araragi.

She is dressed in Japanese-style clothes and sporting extremely long hair.

It's frighteningly long, enough to make her look like some kind of ghost whenever she gets out of the bath—and enough that she could trip over her own hair if she's not careful.

“You took my stuffed animal out of my room again, didn't you?! Oh, there it is, I knew it! Geez, would you stop going into my room without my permission?!”

She rages like so, entering *my* room without permission as we speak. Of course, I can't say I've never gone into my sisters' rooms without asking—though as far as this one time goes, it's the *stuffed animal* that came into my room without permission.

The doll in question remains deeply immersed in her stuffed animal act. She's collapsed in a way that would be impossible for anyone who possesses a body with a mind of its own.

“You even have her laid out on your bed, too. You better not be using my precious stuffed animal for anything weird, Onii-chan.”

“Actually, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say I was treating her quite hospitably...”

“I'm not usually the type to have stuffed animals, but weirdly enough, I feel like I have a special affinity for this one. That's why I've told you over and over that you're not allowed to take her out of my room.”

“An affinity, huh?”

Since I know things about my sister that the girl herself doesn't, I know exactly what Tsukihi Araragi and Yotsugi Ononoki have in common, and so I can't deny that if she feels a sense of affinity there, it means she's got pretty sharp instincts.

Still, while this is another circumstance that the girl herself has forgotten, there was a time when Tsukihi was nearly killed at the hands of Ononoki-chan, so if she's going to put her instincts to work, I think they ought to pick up on that first.

"But hey, Tsukihi? You keep calling her 'your stuffed animal,' but if you really care about her that much, isn't it about time you at least gave her a name?"

"Hm? No, you see, if I give her a name I'll get too attached to her, and then I'll end up hesitating when it's time to throw her out. It's precisely because I feel an affinity for her that I have to think about what I'm going to do when that affinity goes away."

"..."

This sister of mine, I tell you...

On top of showing no emotion to begin with, Ononoki-chan is maintaining her "stuffed animal mode" right now, so I have no way to tell for sure what she's thinking, but she seems more than a little appalled after hearing her current owner's true intentions.

I may be projecting my own reaction onto her, though...

"Well, as long as you don't mind my old hand-me-downs, I could just give her to you instead of throwing her away."

"Would you call that a hand-me-down...? Since when were you on top?"

"I see you're back, Onii-chan."

Tsukihi transitions straight from her temper tantrum into total composure—this special brand of instability is a trait you can't see anywhere else, completely unique to her.

"Now that you're done with your exams, you're free to play all you want! Wow, I can't believe you're going to be a college student starting next month! We should celebrate! I'll start getting everything ready! Tonight I'll gather up a bunch of junior high girls from around town, and we'll have a big party!"

"You're really optimistic..."

Surprisingly enough, this sister of mine seems to be the one who has the most faith in me with regards to my exams—though on the one-in-a-thousand off chance that I *do* fail, holding a party with all the junior high girls from around town would make the blow unfathomably devastating, so I'd appreciate it if she would hold off on that.

"Karen-chan's going to be a high schooler starting next month, too... I feel like I'm the only one getting left behind. Ooh, maybe I should just skip a grade!"

"Can you just skip grades on a whim like that?"

Actually, I'm pretty sure we don't have any way of skipping grades in Japan to begin with. It might be doable with Tsukihi's level of academic ability, though.

"All joking aside, how about it, Onii-chan? Tomorrow we could finally get together, just us siblings, and go hang out as a combined celebration of your graduation plus Karen-chan's graduation."

"Hrm. That isn't such a bad proposal, but unfortunately for you, I already have plans for tomorrow."

Of course, I only just made them thirty minutes ago.

"However, if you could settle for doing something today, I don't mind making some time for you."

It seems Ononoki-chan's way of talking is contagious.

I'm essentially talking to Tsukihi while being influenced by Ononoki-chan who was strongly influenced by Tsukihi—what a weird Ouroboros-like set-up.

"Wooow. You've really matured, Onii-chan. Not too long ago, if I'd invited you out to play, you would've punched me on the spot."

"Was I that severe a brother?!"

I don't recall that.

Still, it's definitely true that I get along a lot better with my sisters than I used to. I guess people—and their relationships—really can't stay unchanged forever, can they?

A lot has happened over the past year in particular.

Both with Karen and with Tsukihi.

With Tsukihi in particular, during summer break... As I think that, I turn to look at Ononoki-chan, but she's still immobile, playing dead on top of my bed.

Though I guess it's not "playing" dead when she really is dead.

"Then let's go somewhere today."

"Great. I'll leave all the planning to you."

That seemed like the right thing to say in the moment, but leaving the plans to Tsukihi makes me almost as nervous as leaving the date plan to Senjougahara—those two are strangely similar in some ways.

"Generally speaking, Onii-chan, would you rather go to the ocean or to the mountains?"

"I'd rather go to a mountain in the ocean."

“What, you want to go to Castle of the Undersea Devil?”<sup>[5]</sup>

That was a good retort.

“But I see... So you’re going on a date with Senjougahara-san tomorrow... Must be nice, being all madly in love. Me, I’ve been dating Rousokuzawa-kun so long now that I’ve sort of cooled off on it, and when he asked me to go out with him on White Day, I just kinda turned him down...”

“...”

I think it’s only a matter of time before my sister breaks up with her boyfriend. You just kind of turned him down...? I can’t help but feel sorry for the guy.

“...Huh? Hold on a second. Did I tell you that my plans were with Senjougahara?”

“You didn’t have to say it. If you have plans for March 14, they’re either with your significant other or with Einstein.”

“We’d all be in trouble if it were with Einstein. That incident would go down in history as a whole new memorial day. He *is* someone I’d like to talk to if I were able to communicate with him, though...”

There’s an anecdote about how Einstein’s last words were in German, so his nurse couldn’t understand what he was saying, but even setting aside the complications created by the language barrier, I don’t think a guy like me would be able to have an intelligent conversation with him.

While thinking to myself that if it were Oikura, she’d probably say she’d rather chat with Euler, I say, “Well, you’re not wrong.

“Hey, just in case, I’d like to also... I’d like to hear your opinion. What would *you* want to get as your gift on White Day?”

“Money filled with love from the heart.”

“...”

My sister is pretty damn greedy.

That doesn’t help me at all.

However, rather than a joke serving as an appetizer before the real answer comes, it seems that was the main dish of her feelings, as Tsukihi then changes the topic and says, “Alrighty, then I guess I’ll use tomorrow to go see Nadeko-chan. She’s out of the hospital now, but she’s still holed up in her room recuperating. She says she’ll start going to school again once the new term starts up. I bet she’d be lonely being stuck at home all alone, so I’ll head on over to liven things up!”

“...You’ve been going to see her pretty often.”

I say what's honestly on my mind. These are my frank impressions.

"Honestly, I'm a little surprised. You two may be friends, but you and Sengoku never seemed quite that close."

"That's not true! We're totally besties!"

Tsukihi says that with a thoughtless laugh, making it hard to believe she's saying that in any seriousness, but still, it's no doubt thanks to Tsukihi that Sengoku is more or less ready to reintegrate into society after all she's been through.

It's definitely not the accomplishment of that con artist.

Of course, I haven't done anything for her—I couldn't. How admirable.

Still, it's no wonder that this sister of mine, the strategist of the Fire Sisters, has gathered support from all the junior high girls in the area... I guess.

"Plus, she told me a secret of hers the other day."

"A secret? What's that?"

"It's a secret, so obviously I can't tell you."

"...?"

"Now, now, you can just leave Nadeko-chan to me and go be all lovey-dovey with Senjougahara-san! I'll take care of your alibi!"

"I never asked you to make me an alibi..."

"Make sure to change trains a bunch of times!"

"You want me to eliminate the use of the time table trick, huh...?"<sup>[6]</sup>

What kind of date would that be? I guess a railroad enthusiast might enjoy that sort of thing—I have no idea how much Senjougahara cares about trains, though.

"By the way, is Karen-chan doing anything tomorrow? With, uh, what's-his-face."

"Mizudori-kun."

"Right, is she going on a date with what's-his-face?"

"You don't even *try* to remember the names of your sisters' boyfriends... Mm, no, she said she's going to the dojo tomorrow. It sounds like it's going to be a different kind of graduation ceremony? Thanks to the discretion and arrangements of her master, the owner of the dojo, she's going to have a

go at the 100-man kumite or something.”<sup>[7]</sup>

“Why is she doing that on White Day of all days?”

My sisters don’t have a shred of sex appeal.

This is making me look bad, like the older brother is the only one going out having the time of his life. Putting Karen aside, when I think about Tsukihi going to visit Sengoku, I can’t help but feel a little guilty...

“It sounds like she’s actually done the 100-man kumite before, but this time she’s aiming to win every single round. She says that if she scores a complete victory, she gets the right to challenge her master to a serious match.”

“That sounds like it’s going to have a story to it...”

Shouldn’t we just make *her* the protagonist?

With me, I’m always just getting thrown about by the circumstances in a story that’s almost entirely ad-lib, making me seem more like some kind of professional improviser than anything.

“Well, it looks like both you and Karen-chan are slowly but surely growing up, and like you’re both moving forward, too. As the youngest sister of the bunch, I couldn’t be prouder.”

So says Tsukihi.

“I guess I’m the only one who never changes...”

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<sup>[1]</sup> An *oni* is a creature from Japanese folklore, variously translated as demon, devil, ogre, etc. In the Monogatari series, vampires are considered a type of *oni*, so Yotsugi’s nickname for Araragi is a combination of the words “oni” and “onii-chan.”

<sup>[2]</sup> On White Day, men give return gifts to the girls who bought them chocolate for Valentine’s Day, typically expected to give gifts three times as valuable as what they received (thus, “triple the return”).

<sup>[3]</sup> There are many different types of chocolate you give to people on Valentine’s Day depending on their relationship to you. “Honmei chocolate” is the chocolate you give to someone you have romantic feelings for.

<sup>[4]</sup> While they still sell pre-packaged ice cream in supermarkets and convenience stores, the last Häagen-Dazs shop in Japan closed its doors in 2013.

<sup>[5]</sup> This is a reference to the movie *Doraemon: Nobita and the Castle of the Undersea Devil*. It’s

based on the myth of Atlantis.

[6] The “time table trick” is an alibi trick that shows up in a lot of Japanese mystery novels. It involves using public transportation just the right way to make it look like there’s no way you could’ve gotten to scene of the crime in time.

[7] The 100-man kumite is an intense test of physical and mental endurance in karate. It involves 100 rounds of sparring, typically against similarly or higher-ranked opponents.

And with that, the next day rolls around.

March 14.

White Day, also known as Einstein Day.

The day I go on my very last date as a high school student.

Some of you may not know, or perhaps some of you may have forgotten, so let me note the reason why I'm so nervous about a date planned by Senjougahara: when she devised our first date back in June, in a shocking turn of events, she decided to have her dad accompany us.

It was a long way to the destination of our date, so Senjougahara justified it by having him act as our driver, but I think I need not explain how being shut up in a closed space with my girlfriend and her father, who I was meeting for the very first time, felt akin to undergoing the most stressful of all stress interviews. The three of us weren't even together the whole time, either; at one point, I actually ended up alone with her dad. Shivers *still* run down my spine just thinking about it now.

Of course, the date wasn't *all* bad—in fact, I would say it turned out to be a good memory, all told—but there's no mistaking that it left me with a few mental scars.

Still, I doubt that Senjougahara of all people would use the same plan twice, and even if she *does* have a surprise like that in store, I've already met and talked with her dad quite a few times since then, so I'm confident that I'd be able to handle myself more smoothly this time around.

Indeed, I've grown.

It's not as though I spent the six months I was banned from dates with Senjougahara asleep—whether she brings along her dad this time, or whether she invites her grandmother and grandfather and turns it into a full family outing, I swear to remain as cool as a cucumber.

I have nothing to fear from Hitagi Senjougahara.

And so with high spirits, at 9:00 AM on March 14, I arrive at Tamikurasou, the apartment building in which Hitagi Senjougahara currently resides. As both of the two bicycles I own are currently out of commission, I left early to give myself enough time to arrive on foot, and I also spent much of trip making sure that Ononoki-chan wasn't following me, so you can assume that it took me quite a bit of time to get to this point, but today's main act starts from here, so let us omit all those details for now.

For the record, Karen, ready to take on her 100-man kumite challenge, left the house even earlier than I did, while Tsukihi plans to head over to Sengoku's house in the afternoon.

It would seem the Araragi siblings have engagements all around town today—but, in any case, I arrive at Tamikurasou ready for anything, so I am not particularly perturbed when I notice an

unfamiliar vehicle parked in front of the building.

Judging from the plate number, it's a rental car.

“...”

I am not perturbed, but I do go silent.

*Goodness gracious... This date is going to be yet another adventure,* I think to myself, bracing myself once more. Still, after all I've done to make myself look pretty lame in front of Senjougahara as of late, I'll take this chance to make her fall for me all over again by showing the open-mindedness to accept whatever she comes up with.

Of course, “fall for me all over again” assumes she fell for me to begin with, but, well, no matter what kind of date she has in store for me, I ought to have at least that much faith in her. Though, after all this time, I'm still not entirely sure what compelled her to pursue a relationship with me on that day, in that park...

While feigning ignorance—in other words, while acting like I didn't see anything—I make my way past the four-wheeled vehicle, head up to room 201 on the second floor, and knock on the door to the Senjougahara family's apartment. (They don't have an intercom.)

“Welcome to the wonderful world of today.”

Senjougahara steps out of the house with that mysterious, flowery line, and she appears to be all dolled up for the occasion. Her outfit is completely coordinated, based around a white color scheme. Although she cut her hair short back during summer break, it grew out again over time, and today I'm seeing her in pigtails for the first time in months.

Braided pigtails, at that.

That's new!

“I decided to imitate Hanekawa-san's old look.”

“Look, I'm telling you, the way you do friendship is a little overwhelming.”

“I thought you might prefer that I emulated Hanekawa-san yourself.”

“The fact that you'd say that is pretty overwhelming, too...”

I don't want to read too much into that. It's too deep a world view for me to comprehend.

“Well, I aim to let loose and have fun today. In light of that, I'd like my remarks to give off a sense of freedom and no future.”

“Freedom is fine, but let's avoid the ‘no future’ bit... We're just about to set off on our path to the

future, aren't we?"

"That's assuming you managed to pass your exam. If you didn't, there's the possibility that we'll be headed towards the past."

"..."

Coming from someone who was accepted into university by recommendation without the least bit of trouble, that jab packs quite the punch.

"Oh, let me have my fun. I only have the few days before the results are announced to crack these light-hearted exam jokes."

"If I really do end up failing, it won't be funny anymore. The exam gag will become the exam drag."

"Well then, let's be off. We have to be back here by 7 or I'll be late to meet Daddy for our dinner, so we should get to it. Time is of the essence."

"Um, could you please not treat dinner with your dad like *that's* today's main event? I mean, you *can*, just don't say it out loud."

"Ha. Then why don't you shut me up with a kiss?"

"..."

Maybe I really will...

The moment I think that, however, I zero in on the implicit meaning behind what she just said, and it doesn't match up with what I've been assuming. "We have to be back here"? "Meet" him for dinner?

I had prepared myself for Senjougahara's dad to join us as the driver of the car parked out front—is that not what's going to happen here? In the worst case scenario, I figured all three of us would spend the day together, only for me to get kicked out once dinner time rolled around... but apparently not?

In that case, was that car just rented by one of the other residents here, completely unrelated to the two of us? Well, that would be the most reasonable assumption here... but this Hitagi Senjougahara we're talking about. Reformed or not, she's still as unpredictable a woman as ever. She always goes above and beyond any worst case scenario I can imagine—and after coming out of her room, she twirls a car key around the tip of her finger.

So that means we really *are* taking that car somewhere—but in that case, who in the world is supposed to be the one driving it?

"Go on, get in the passenger's seat," says Senjougahara, as she gets in the driver's seat.

She gets in the driver's seat.

And then she fastens her seatbelt.

I see, so she takes traffic safety rules to heart, like a truly respectable driver—and, ah, yes, she *was* the one holding the key, so of course she would be the one to get in the driver's seat. I should have guessed as much.

But still! But *still*!

“What? Whaat? Whaaaat?! Hold it, Senjougahara-san, hold it, hold it, hold it, hold it! By perhaps some possibility, does this by any chance mean *you're* going to be driving the car today?! You're going to be the one controlling the steering wheel?! Hitagi Drive-o-gahara?!”

“Yes.”

She nods, straight to the point.

Her response made it clear that she doesn't want to delve further into this conversation, but if this were something I could let pass with a “oh, I see, then drive safely out there,” I wouldn't be having this level of an overreaction.

In a way, this is even more shocking than being sent to Hell.

Driving? *You*?

I was ready for your dad to be driving the car, but not *this*!

“What's your problem? I fastened my seatbelt.”

“Um, I'd like to express that this is too much ‘cutting loose’!”

I'm so riled up that I can barely articulate myself.

All that resolve of mine went straight out the window. There's no one else in the car, so I have to assume we're the only ones going on this date, but at this point, I'm desperately hoping for a third person—by which I mean a different driver—to show up.

“You're going *too* wild, driving without a license! This is a joke, right? This is just a figurative welcome drink, a warm-up to get a rise out of me, and you're going to get out of the car now, right?! We're just going to take the bus like normal high schoolers, right?!”

“You ought to know better than anyone that I hate jokes, Araragi-kun.”

No.

I know better than anyone that you love jokes, and tasteless ones, at that...

“Besides, I'm a bit offended that you assume I don't have a license.”

“Huh?”

“Dun-dun-da-dun...”

After providing her own drumroll, Senjougahara takes a small card out of her pocket.

It's an object most often referred to as a driver's license.

*Hitagi Senjougahara.*

Her name is printed clearly on the card, along with her portrait—and it looks like the license isn't even restricted to automatic vehicles.<sup>[1]</sup> It's a card that signifies that its owner is permitted to drive on public roads, abiding by traffic safety laws.

“Heheh, surprised? While you were busy hitting the books, I was studying for an exam of my own, all so I could get this driver's license.”

“...!”

Well, yeah, I *am* surprised—I'm so shocked that all the knowledge I crammed for my exam and all the words I could use here go flying out of my brain.

A driver's license?!

She went and got that behind my back?!

“Passed on my first try,” she boasts, with a complacent smile on her face.

She's emitting an aura that's just begging for praise—and as her boyfriend, I would very much like to compliment her on her accomplishment, as well as to share a sense of solidarity in the fact that she was struggling with an exam at the same time I was, but unfortunately, I have to prioritize common sense here.

Wait a sec, wait a sec, wait a sec, wait a sec! Driving without a license would better than *this*!

“A-A-Are you aware of the regulations on driving?!”

“Of course I am. I got a perfect score on the written test. For example, I can tell you that a highway is defined as a roadway that doesn't have any stoplights and generally requires a toll.”

“I wasn't quizzing you on your basic knowledge of traffic laws!”

She's talking about general driving regulations. I'm talking about the regulations imposed by our school—or, well, I'm pretty sure this is the case for almost all high-level schools in general, but anyway, we're strictly forbidden from obtaining driver's licenses.

It's true that as a high school senior born on July 7, Senjougahara is currently 18 years old and thus of

the age where she is legally able to obtain a license... but she should still know how dangerous it is to do that while she's still a student.

It's an act of barbarism that not only puts her in danger of having her college recommendation revoked, but could very well keep her from graduating altogether. My God, could a person who would pull this kind of stunt really exist? And is that person really *my* girlfriend?

Wow. I've been saying over and over that she's reformed, but somehow or another, it seems this woman has reached new heights of delinquency that I could never hope to achieve.

"Wooow. You really are aiming for 'no future.' I might be the only one of us who ends up going to college. This is so awful that it actually loops back around into being a little impressive, but Senjougahara, can I ask why you decided to do this in the first place?"

"Well, I didn't have to go to school during the third term, so I had nothing better to do..." Senjougahara answers, tilting her head to the side.

It would seem my girlfriend is the ultimate example of the proverb "an idle brain is the devil's shop" in practice.

"Besides, I figured you wouldn't be able to get a license of your own, so I thought I'd get the drop on you—though in the end, it would seem that was a needless worry."

"?"

I'm not really sure what she's talking about.

*Why does she think I wouldn't be able to get a license, that's so rude*—is what I start to think, but I immediately catch on to what she's trying to say.

Up until yesterday, my body was turning into that of a full-fledged vampire, and one of the symptoms of that was that I couldn't show up in photographs. In other words, it meant that I could never be issued a driver's license—and it would seem that Senjougahara was planning ahead for that eventuality.

When I think about it like that, it makes it a little hard to reprimand her for her misconduct—or, you know, *not*.

Don't think I'll be swayed by emotion.

I won't even be swayed by love.

Even considering all that, getting your license while you're still in high school is jumping the gun... If you end up not being able to graduate, it's like putting the cart before the horse.

"Don't worry. If that happens, I'll just break up with you and get cozy with Kanbaru."

“Don’t talk about breaking up with me so casually. And even Kanbaru would be a little taken aback if she ended up in the same class as you.”

“Really? I imagine she’d feel nothing but innocent delight.”

So says Senjougahara, without a hint of remorse in her voice—and in fact, I should probably assume it’s impossible to make her feel any regret for her actions in this scenario. I think I just have to give up.

There’s only one day left until our graduation ceremony… I’ll just have to pray that no one finds out about her violation of the school rules before then. I’m not sure I *can* after things have gotten off to this kind of start, but for now I should just try to focus on having fun today.

I may have simply abandoned my thoughts, but there are plenty of thoughts in this world that we’re better off abandoning.

“Araragi-kun. Don’t forget to fasten your seatbelt.”

“I know, I know… Trust me, I don’t have the guts to ride in a new driver’s car without my seatbelt on. I’m often called a raging bull, but just for today, I’ll be a chicken. I’d even ride in a booster seat, if I could,” I say, and then after the thought strikes me, I ask, “By the way, this time around you’re going to tell me where we’re going ahead of time, right? It’s not that I don’t trust you, but if you’re planning to drive as far out as the observatory we went to last time, I’m going to have to stop you with everything I’ve got. I might be forced to break off that steering wheel.”

“This is a rental, so I would appreciate it if you don’t break anything. Don’t worry, I’m not planning to drive us quite that far. *Die* would we go to an observatory in the middle of the day?”

““*Die*” would we go?”

“Why would we go.”

“...”

The sense of freedom in her remarks is getting a little scary… I get the feeling she might just be abandoning herself to her circumstances.

“So where are we going? Where’s our destination, so to speak?”

“We’re going to go see an orrery.”

I thought she’d string me along a little bit longer, but Senjougahara gives me a straight answer—though apparently that’s just because she couldn’t continue to hide it, seeing as she has to enter the name of the place in her GPS.

“An orrery?”

“Yes. We’re going to a planetarium.”

While explaining the meaning of a word I’ve never heard even while studying for exams, Senjougahara steps on the accelerator.

And thus, the drive of terror begins.

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[<sup>1</sup>] When you take the test to get a license in Japan, you can choose between a limited automatic-only license or a manual license.

I dubbed it the drive “of terror,” but fortunately enough, Senjougahara’s boasts about passing on her first try weren’t for nothing, as her driving seems perfectly adequate—at least as far as I can tell from the passenger’s seat.

It’s perfectly adequate.

In fact, it would be more accurate to say it’s just perfect. It’s hard to notice with someone like Hanekawa around—not to mention that the first impression she gives is so intense that it’s hard to think of her that way—but Senjougahara is something of a flawless superwoman herself.

The way she shifts gears makes it look like second nature.

Her bold demonstration of confidence in renting a manual instead of an automatic is perhaps her one point of difference from the humble, unassuming Hanekawa.

As far as her shrewdness goes, after pressing her for answers in more detail, I found that in spite of what she originally said, Senjougahara *did* have some semblance of a plan for what to do if the school found out about her license. Specifically, in case of an emergency, she was planning to throw around the excuse that she “did it to help her poverty-stricken family make ends meet.”

To be perfectly honest, her determination to use even her own complexes to her advantage made my impression of her all the more favorable... Great, turns out *I’m* the one falling in love all over again.

I figured it would be best not to talk to her while she’s focused on the road, so I’ve been keeping quiet in the passenger’s seat, but apparently she has no problem with having a conversation while driving (yet another way in which she is a model of perfection), so she speaks up first.

“It would help calm my nerves, so I’d actually prefer that you chat with me, my dear Watson.”

“Watson...? I may be sitting in the passenger’s seat, but I don’t want to be the one who has to recount your tales of adventure. And you’re not a thing like Holmes, to boot.”

“True enough. Perhaps Holmes would be Hanekawa-san, rather than myself—oh, speaking of which, Araragi-kun. I received a call from Hanekawa-san last night.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes. She said she should be able to make it back in time for the graduation ceremony.”

“Hmm...”

Tsubasa Hanekawa.

She is a mutual friend of mine and Senjougahara’s, currently traveling abroad. While boasting an

intellect that puts her not only at the top of the nation, but could make her one of the leading minds of the world, she intends to forego a college education for no particular reason or purpose, instead planning to head off on an aimless journey after graduating. As such, for the entirety of the third term of our third year, during which attendance is not mandatory—or more accurately, ever since around halfway through the second term—she's been hard at work scouting out potential travel locations.

...Location scouting, though?

Maybe she's so smart that she lost a few of her screws. Her precarious plans for the future might be even more anarchic than Senjougahara's acquisition of a driver's license.

It's a little ironic that I was supposed to be more of an anarchist than anyone, yet amazingly enough, I'm the one currently walking the most standard post-graduation course. Though I'm not sure who or what the irony is directed at.

Of course, since Hanekawa's trip is simultaneously a journey to hunt down Meme Oshino, in a way you could say that she's traveling almost entirely for my sake, so there wasn't anything I, the man in question, could say to stop her.

Well, now that the issue of Sengoku has been resolved, *and* the issue of my vampirification has been resolved, there's probably no real need to search for Oshino anymore...

But still, Tadatsuru said it himself.

Oshino will become the key to what happens next...

"It feels like I haven't seen Hanekawa in ages... I haven't called her much while she's overseas because I figured it might be a nuisance, but what's this now? So you're saying she called you, but she didn't bother to call me?"

I'm shocked.

If she's going to be back in time for the graduation ceremony, I really wish she would've told me... I had just assumed she wouldn't show up for it.

"I suppose so. Hmm, I wonder why she didn't call you. Perhaps it's because I told her I'd relay the information to you myself."

"What *else* could it be?"

"Perhaps it's because, more specifically, I asked her not to call you."

"You went that far, huh. You specifically went that far, huh. Why would you do that?"

"Don't worry. I went ahead and told her that your vampire problem was dealt with."

"I'm not worried, but I kind of want to give you an earful... Man, I really wanted to tell her about that

myself. I wanted to thank her for all her help in getting me through the exam, too.”

“Now *that* I naturally didn’t tell her myself, so you can thank her when you see her at the graduation ceremony. …Oh, that’s right. I have been humbly entrusted with a message from Hanekawa-san.”

“Humbly?”

What’s with the random formality?

Perhaps Ononoki-chan isn’t the only one who doesn’t know when and how to speak formally… Well, Hanekawa *was* largely responsible for reforming Senjougahara, just like she did to me, so I suppose the two of us both can’t respect her enough.

In my case, it was more like she gave me a complete overhaul than a simple reformation—when you think about it like that, Tsubasa Hanekawa is a pretty scary woman. Who can even guess what kind of adult she’s going to turn out to be.

“So, what’s the message?”

“She said she found Oshino-san.”

“Hmmm… Wait, what?!”

For a moment, I was about to let that slide.

It’s a good thing I’m not the one driving—if I’d been gripping the steering wheel just now, there would’ve been an accident for sure.

In contrast, Senjougahara doesn’t look the slightest bit ruffled, and she’s currently operating the steering wheel one-handed—no, seriously, why didn’t you tell me something that important *yesterday*? When it comes to news, speed is everything, you know.

“For real?”

“For real. Oh, though to be more precise, I believe she said that she discovered where he was hiding out… I don’t remember it very well.”

“I’m begging you, *please* try to remember. Put your all into it.”

“Hiding out” makes it sound like he’s some kind of criminal… So in other words, she found out where he is, but she hasn’t actually found *him* yet—though that’s still plenty incredible on its own.

“It’s apparently a bit dubious whether she’ll have time to bring him back with her and still make it to our graduation… Well, there isn’t much left for Oshino-san to do even if she does bring him back here, so perhaps she won’t go out of her way to go get him.”

So says Senjougahara.

I still haven't explained all details of what happened yesterday morning—my trip through Hell, that is—so that's probably how she perceives the situation.

I probably ought to tell her about all that before we get too far into our date—though I'm not sure how to gently break it to her that I might get wrapped up in another one of Gaen-san's jobs...

Of course, saying I might get “wrapped up in it” makes it sound like I’m the victim, something Oshino would never agree with—after all, there’s no question that I’m the key player in all of this.

Still, now that Ononoki-chan brought up the possibility, I can’t tell for sure whether Gaen-san had been including me in her plans from the beginning or not—but even Gaen-san couldn’t have predicted that Hanekawa would find Oshino, right? While it’s not quite on the level of antagonism, I’ve heard that there’s a bit of tension between Hanekawa and Gaen-san—so I wonder if this will end up being Hanekawa’s way of striking back, in a sense.

Of course, going by what Senjougahara said, she hasn’t apprehended Oshino just yet—so there’s still a chance that she might be on the wrong track.

When I ask about that, Senjougahara answers, “I suppose so. It sounds like she isn’t certain of anything just yet—however, she told me that after reasoning things out, she narrowed the list of places that Oshino-san could be down to two.”

“Two places...?”

“Yes. I was completely uninterested, so I didn’t press her for details, but I believe that’s what she said.”

“...”

Please show a little interest.

That said, looking back on it, Senjougahara has always hated people with personalities like Oshino’s—and in that case, it only makes sense that she would take such an indifferent stance now that she believes she has no need for him.

Two places... I wonder where they are.

The reason she might not make it in time for the graduation ceremony could be that there are two different places to check—though of course, there’s the possibility that neither one is correct.

“She reasoned it out, huh... She really is just like a famous detective.”

And she’s the type of detective who does her own footwork, to boot. That’s a rarity these days.

“So she didn’t tell you where the two places were?”

“No. But don’t get the wrong idea, Araragi-kun. It’s not that she was putting on airs like some kind of

storybook detective. Hanekawa-san tried to tell me herself, but I told her not to bother because I didn't care."

"I *really* want to know Hanekawa's reaction when you said that."

A detective's work has never been more thankless. You called the wrong person, Hanekawa-san.

I'm sure she would've gotten a better reaction out of me—but then again, I was all worn out from my exam (and from talking with Ononoki-chan), so my reaction actually might've been similar to Senjougahara's...

There was no way she could know how my test went from overseas, so taking that into consideration, she probably decided to call Senjougahara first, after which she was instructed not to call me—in which case, Hanekawa very well might be under the impression that I failed my exam.

She always has been one to make assumptions.

"Oh, what was it she said, again...? I believe she told me she had it backwards."

After seeing how bummed out I was getting, Senjougahara pushes her extraordinary memory to its limit and forces herself to remember at least one more part of what Hanekawa said.

"Backwards?"

"Yes. She said her approach was backwards. She's a bit of a tease sometimes, that girl."

"She only ended up sounding like a tease because *you* wouldn't hear her out. ...Backwards? I wonder what that means..."

If you think about it like a mystery novel, I guess it would be one of those solutions that was right under your nose the whole time? She went all the way overseas, but maybe she realized that Oshino was in Japan all along... and right near our town, at that?

No, I doubt it's anything that simple.

Or should I say, I'd be seriously pissed if we spent all that time looking for the guy and it turned out he was hiding out in our town all along—and besides, Hanekawa would be able to come home right away in that scenario, so she wouldn't be caught in a dilemma trying to make it back in time for our graduation.

"As I recall, I had the honor of being told something or other about '*disu izu a pen.*'"

"Had the honor...? '*Disu izu a pen*'?"

What's *that* about...? That sentence wouldn't even show up on the English section of an exam.

Hmmm.

There's a lot of things to think about, and I *am* a bit worried, but it doesn't seem like there's much I can do right now—I just have to have faith in Hanekawa's self-reliance.

Regardless, I probably ought to keep this all a secret from Gaen-san.

Tsubasa Hanekawa, the one who doesn't know everything.

Izuko Gaen, the one who knows everything.

I may not know anything myself, but I know the two of them well enough to determine that their contact with one another should be kept to a bare minimum for the time being.

"Anyway, guess I should just be glad my friend doesn't need to be rescued from her rescue mission. It's Hanekawa we're talking about, so I figured the worst case scenario wasn't gonna happen, but I can't help being just a little worried about a girl traveling around the world all by herself."

"Yes, I suppose. ...By the way, Araragi-kun. Do you know what you're supposed to do when you get lost?"

"What you should do when you get lost? Not what to do when you're looking for someone who's lost?"

"Yes. That's another hint Hanekawa-san teased me with..."

"Like I said, it's *your* fault she only gave you the hint," I reply. "When you get lost, you're supposed to 'stay where you are,' right? Otherwise you might end up making the situation worse."

"Yes. That's the idea—but she said that the reality isn't quite that simple. If you end up straying from your companion, there are apparently times when you'll run into each other faster if you both go searching for one another."

"? Really? Seems pretty inefficient to me."

"Well, it certainly would be inefficient if you were both searching at random—but in practice, people don't wander about aimlessly when they're looking for someone, do they? They think about 'where the other person would be' and look around based on that reasoning. In other words, you'll both be searching within a narrow range of locations, so it'll go faster if you both start trying to find each other—or that's what she said. Of course, that all assumes that you won't make the wrong guess about where your partner might be," says Senjougahara.

That's a good point.

In fact, you could say that someone ends up "lost" when they aren't able to do that—so is that what she meant by her approach being backwards?

Well, it's still just a theory.

No matter how hard a simple guy like me tries to theorize, I'll never be able to follow Hanekawa's thought process—the best I can do is stay where I am and wait for Hanekawa to return for the graduation ceremony.

"Did she have anything else to say? I mean, did she talk about anything besides Oshino?"

"International calls are expensive, so we didn't have time for a very in-depth conversation—oh, though I did ask for her help in planning today's date. I must confess, going to a planetarium first was actually Hanekawa-san's idea."

"It was?"

"Yes. I had initially planned for us to go see a volcanic crater."

"..."

I wouldn't say I'm uninterested in craters, but I'm pretty grateful to Hanekawa right now... What kind of outrageous plan did this woman have in mind?

"I knew she would try to stop me if I told her about it, so I didn't mention that I would be the one driving the car."

"I really wish you would've consulted her about that, too..."

"Hanekawa-san recommended several planetariums to me, and I picked one out from the list. So don't worry, Araragi-kun. In spite of that nervous look on your face, I have almost no surprises in store from here on out. Everything was vetted by Hanekawa-san herself."

Vetted...?

That doesn't seem like an appropriate word to use in relation to a date, but it *is* a little reassuring to hear that everything has undergone Hanekawa's inspection.

"She got quite angry with me, and I grew quite disheartened. The angrier she got, the harder it was to tell her about my driver's license."

"I get the feeling, but I think you needed to be lectured for the sake of your own future..."

"I frequent planetariums on a fairly regular basis, so personally, going to one doesn't feel like much of an occasion. But I suppose visiting one with you makes it a bit of a novelty."

"Hmm... But still, won't this date be kind of boring for you, then?"

So I ask, while wondering to myself whether the Valhalla Duo used to hang out at planetariums together, since Kanbaru also told me that she likes going to them. But Senjougahara answers, "Well, I tend to go to the planetarium for homework rather than my own enjoyment—so every and now and then I'd like to simply relax while I gaze up at the artificial night sky. I'm not unenthusiastic about the

idea, so don't worry about it.”

“You usually go for homework? ...Oh yeah, that's right, you're one of the more acrobatic ones among our student body who chose geoscience as your science elective...”

I don't even get what exactly it is that you study in geoscience... but it looks like Senjougahara, who always used to visit that observatory with her family as a kid, must feel a special connection to the celestial bodies.

I'm not totally uninterested in the stars and planets myself, but I don't have the same fascination with the night sky that Senjougahara does, either...

“Right. That's why, in my original plan, I had intended for us to get in some outcrop observation when we went to see the crater.”

“Give me a break. So you're saying we'd be going purely for educational purposes? You're saying we'd just be doing fieldwork? *That's* the date you were planning to rope me into right after finishing my exams?”

“But it would've been interesting. It's true that my date plan was made more conventional and wholesome thanks to Hanekawa-san's input, but I can't deny that it lost a bit of its charm in the process. I know how much you love it when I toy with you, so I'm afraid it may not be thrilling enough to arouse your interest.”

“If nothing else, stop using the word ‘arouse.’”

“Uprouse?”

“Is that even a real word...?”

“Put in the doghouse?”

“You realize that's a bad thing, right?”<sup>[1]</sup>

“Of course, planetariums are often just annexes to science museums, and the one we're headed towards now is no exception, so it wouldn't be inaccurate to say we're going there to learn. Well, it might be bad for your heart if you were to just stop studying all of a sudden, so perhaps it's for the best that you cool down by interacting with some cutting-edge science.”

“It didn't occur to me that studying would affect my heart rate...”

I see. This is definitely a date plan Hanekawa would think up. A science museum is a destination that combines both education and entertainment—one has to wonder if this is something a normal high school couple would do, but it might just be the perfect choice for people like me and Senjougahara, who aren't especially good at making merry.

And with a few of Senjougahara's personal touches added (through driving the car), there's still more

enough than enough thrill to go around. No matter how reliable Senjougahara's driving abilities may be, it's already a little nerve-wracking just riding in an unfamiliar car.

"I don't stop by science museums often, so I'm looking forward to that part. I wonder what kind of flying cars will be on display."

"I think you're expecting too much from this museum..."

Though I've heard that flying cars aren't just a thing of fiction anymore.

"Still, they might not be able to fly, but cars are pretty amazing nowadays, don't you think? I don't know if the one we're in now has any of this stuff, but I hear there are cars that'll automatically put on the brakes if they detect danger, cars with sensors in all directions, and even self-driving cars, too..."

"You're right—they're already cars of the future. They're regular little Buggies,"<sup>[2]</sup> says Senjougahara, adding on an afterthought she didn't need to add.

Castle of the Undersea Devil.

"Perhaps one day, we'll even have a system that automatically drives you to the location you enter in the GPS—and just like how the takeoff and landing of a plane are done manually, only the ignition and parking will require manpower."

"Machine versus manpower, huh? I hope that *does* happen, 'cause it'll save me the trouble of taking yet another exam to get my license..."

If someone does invent a car like that, I'm not sure legislation will be able to catch up fast enough to the technology.

You can truly feel the inability of human society to keep up with scientific and technological advancements. The fact that I still have no idea how to use a smart phone could be considered yet another example of that.

Cars likewise draw together many aspects of cutting-edge science, so it might not be long before I forever lose my chance to sit in a driver's seat.

"What are you saying? I expect you to obtain your own driver's license during spring break. And I expect you to be the one driving on our next date. It would be a shame to waste the opportunity, now that you can appear in photographs again," says Senjougahara.

"You already know how to drive, and yet you're going to force me to be your chauffeur, Senjougahara-san?"

"All girls dream of sitting in the passenger's seat as their boyfriend takes them for a drive."

That's an awfully girly thing of her to say.

“We dream of it as much as we dream of a reverse harem.”

“That *is* another girly dream, but I’m not sure those two are comparable.”

“One day, I hope you’ll drive us to a volcanic crater to do some outcrop observation.”

She might actually be serious, but it’s hard to say, “Yeah, let’s go” in response to that proposal...

“Just out of curiosity, what exactly do you study in geoscience, Senjougahara? You do more than just learn about celestial bodies, right?”

“Strictly speaking, it involves all sciences related to the Earth. So I suppose the main focus is studying the Earth as a celestial body—but of course, my interest always ends up wandering to space as a whole. It’s my dream to draw a complete space map and make a name for myself as the second coming of Tadataka Inou.<sup>[3]</sup> That’s what I plan to do in college.”

“...The second coming of Tadataka Inou?”

“Well, I’ve heard the unfortunate account that Tadataka Inou drew his completed map before he knew the Hokkaido region very well, so I don’t plan to cut corners like he did. I’ll go to the ends of the universe to observe the outcrop of its every nook and cranny, and then draw my map.”

“If you traveled that far, I don’t think it’s outcrop observation you’d be doing.”

Forget the map, if she managed that, she’d deserve a good clap.

...And besides, I’m pretty sure Inou-san didn’t cut any corners.

This is the first I’ve heard of it, but I guess my girlfriend is aiming to become an astronaut... Eh, I wonder if she’s being serious. Seems like it might just be part of the banter.

“Hold on, actually, what do you mean, ‘space map’? Is that a real thing? Do you mean that figure you see all the time? The one where all the planets are lined up around the Sun and stuff...”

“No, that one is more of a conceptual diagram. I’m referring to a map that illustrates the entirety of space... I suppose that if you’ve never taken geoscience, it might be difficult to conceptualize.”

“Yeah. I’ve never even heard of that.”

“Space is almost entirely a vacuum with a few galaxies and star systems sprinkled here and there. Based on probability, it’s easy to think that the stars would be scattered evenly throughout the vacuum, but that’s not the reality of it; the stars exist in unbalanced clusters. Depicting those clusters in a diagram gives you a space map... heheh. I suppose stars are much like humans; they get lonely easily.”

“I know you expected me to take something away from that, but I’ve never actually seen one of those space maps, so I still can’t really picture it.”

“For your information, a space map isn’t rectangular like a world map or a map of Japan.

“It’s shaped like a fan,” says Senjougahara, in an even tone.

A fan—”ougi.”

When she says that word... I show no reaction.

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[1] A quick explanation since the original Japanese joke didn’t translate well: Senjougahara uses an unusual and outdated kanji for the word “*yorokobi*” (to be pleased/delighted). When Araragi corrects her, she uses another inappropriate kanji. After he corrects her again, she morphs it into “*nana korobi*” (seven falls), the first half of a proverb that translates to: “Fall seven times and stand up eight.” Araragi berates her for only saying the first half of the proverb.

[2] “Buggy” is a red talking car that appears in the movie *Doraemon: Nobita and the Castle of the Undersea Devil*. It has a lot of futuristic features and goes super fast.

[3] Tadataka Inou was a Japanese surveyor and cartographer known for completing the first map of Japan.

“Well hello there, Araragi-senpai. Ougi Oshino here. Let’s learn a bit about constellations, shall we?”

With a big smile on her face and a laser pointer in her hand, Ougi-chan points to the starry sky reflected on the hemispherical dome. My first instinct is to question why a first year student—soon to be second year—of Naoetsu High School would be working at a science museum’s planetarium, but it soon occurs to me that this is a dream.

After Senjougahara, without relying on any of the car’s special features whatsoever, flawlessly parked in a parallel space in the museum’s parking lot, the two of us entered the planetarium annex no worse for the wear; however, I must still be tired from yesterday, not to mention from waking up so early this morning, since—as inappropriate as it may be for a young man on a date—I appear to have dozed off in the pitch dark planetarium.

Piggybacking off the expression “out like a light,” this is a planetarium, so you could say I’m “out like a star”... Ugh, this is bad. Even now that I’m dreaming, I’m still too sleepy to say anything witty.

“Please don’t fall asleep on me, Araragi-senpai...! I’ll throw chalk at you...! I don’t have any chalk, so I’ll be forced to make do with this laser pointer...!”

Don’t do that. If I get hit with that thing, I’ll be knocked unconscious and wake up...

“Haha... And once you’re awake, you’ll wonder. Is your date with Senjougahara-san happening in the present real, or was the time you’d just spent flirting with me the true reality? It’ll be just like the Butterfly Dream scenario, leaving you to ponder whether you’re a human, or whether you’re a butterfly.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Even in a dream, Ougi-chan never changes.

“Well then, let’s broaden our horizons, shall we?”

Speaking in terms of the distinction between dream and reality, it’s likely that in reality—in the planetarium in reality—there’s a similar lecture going on. I’m probably hearing it from within my light slumber, and it’s having an influence on my dream. Well, in that case, I’ll just have to hope that Ougi-chan explains things thoroughly enough that I’ll have an alibi to give Senjougahara when I wake up.

“As I’m sure you’re aware, there are a total of 88 constellations that can be seen from Earth—you’re likely familiar with them from Saint Seiya.<sup>[2]</sup> Can you name all of them?”

Don’t ask the impossible.

Besides, it’s not like all 88 constellations show up in Saint Seiya.

“True. Besides, I’m sure it would be difficult for you to identify the constellations in the southern sky, given that you live in Japan—though perhaps my rival, Hanekawa-senpai, is gazing up at them in Australia as we speak,” Ougi-chan says cheerfully.

Despite the smile on her face, she no longer makes any effort to hide her antagonism towards Hanekawa.

“But truly, there are a great deal of constellations in the southern hemisphere we never get to see, so it’s quite interesting to learn about them. Like the Chameleon, for example.”

The Chameleon? That’s cool...

“There’s also Pictor, and Veda...”

Ougi-chan points out each of the constellations she mentions with her laser pointer—she seems to have settled nicely into her job as a guide. Then again, she might just be suited to giving lectures to begin with—she might just enjoy explaining things to people.

Well, no, if this is a dream, it just means I subconsciously think of her that way...

Ougi-chan keeps dragging on and on about strange constellations—well, I guess they’re pretty commonplace for anyone who lives in the southern hemisphere—but anyway, she continues listing off the names of constellations I only have a dim recollection of, until she says, “Hydrus.”

Also known as... the Water Snake.

“It’s the more southern counterpart to our Hydra. You’re familiar with Hydra, aren’t you? It’s the largest of the 88 constellations.”

The night sky reflected on the dome shifts over to a new image.

It changes into the sky I’m used to seeing.

Ougi-chan points out the area around Hydra.

“Of course, it’s difficult to say how we should measure the size of a constellation. After all, if we visualize them three-dimensionally, the stars are actually quite far apart from each other. Still, Hydra’s sense of presence is a bit reminiscent of Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade...”

She’s started mixing exposition on oddities into her explanation of the constellations. I can’t imagine this part is linked to reality—I doubt that the name of a vampire I know well, one who experienced a complete revival yesterday and is known as the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, and cold-blooded vampire, would be brought up so nonchalantly in a science museum’s planetarium.

Am I subconsciously under the impression that Ougi-chan would say this sort of thing, too? Then in a way, you could say the link to reality only grew stronger...

“The constellation is also known simply as ‘the Sea Serpent,’ but the name ‘Hydra’ refers to the beast of legend—you’ve heard of it, haven’t you? It’s a monster that could very well be called immortal, one that regenerates over and over no matter how many times you cut it down. It’s quite similar to the Japanese legend of Yamata no Orochi<sup>[3]</sup>—although the hero that slays the Hydra is not Susanoo-no-Mikoto, but the ever famous, ever fearless Hercules. No matter how many times Hercules chopped off its heads, they would grow back again and again—that’s the legend of Hydra,” explains Ougi-chan.

She seems to be enjoying herself.

I’m sure Kagenui-san would know the answer if it has to do with beating immortal oddities, but in that case, how did Hercules ever manage to slay the Hydra? I highly doubt the story just ends in vain, with the hero unable to vanquish the creature.

“Oh, the method he ends up using is actually quite orthodox. I doubt you’d be able to defeat Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade this way... but he cut off each of the Hydra’s nine heads in turn, sealing the wound with fire each time to prevent a new head from growing back. With that strategy, he managed to chop off its heads one by one—and thus defeated the Hydra.”

That *is* pretty orthodox.

Ougi-chan said that wouldn’t work on Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade—and she might be right about that, but “exorcising it with fire” could be seen as the proper way to deal with a vampire.

Immortal oddities... ought to go up in flames.

Just like how I was sent to Avici, where there’s said to be nothing but fire as far as the eye can see...

“I suppose it might take a legendary hero to defeat a legendary vampire. Oh, as an aside,” Ougi-chan adds, “during the battle between Hercules and the Hydra, the crab of Cancer acted as the Hydra’s ally and attacked Hercules—it slashed at the hero with its large pincers.”

The crab... of Cancer?

“Unfortunately, the pincers of a crab weren’t enough in a pinch<sup>[4]</sup>; they failed to get through to the legendary hero Hercules, and the crab was instead met with its untimely demise. It was thoroughly crushed underfoot—with some accounts saying it was rendered completely flat by the impact. But nevertheless, the goddess Hera praised its bravery in challenging Hercules, and the crab was immortalized as a constellation in the night sky,” says Ougi-chan.

As she tells the story, the screen zooms in on Cancer.

This sort of flexibility is one of the advantages to a planetarium. In the real night sky, the number of stars you can see at one time, or even during one season, is limited, but in a planetarium, with just the push of a button, you can see all the stars you want—whether they’re in the northern sky or the southern sky, whether they’re summer constellations or winter constellations, whether they can be

seen late at night or just before dawn.

“The audacity to challenge a monumental enemy with a tiny weapon is just like Senjougahara-senpai. When you wake up, you ought to tell her this story; I’m sure you’ll have her swooning.”

Swooning...?

It is pretty interesting, but I can’t imagine Senjougahara would enjoy a story that ends with a crab getting crushed to death...

I don’t know how directly this dream is linked to the lecture going on in the planetarium, but if this same explanation about Cancer is happening in reality, I wonder what Senjougahara is feeling right now... Then again, Senjougahara may have been held captive by a crab, but it’s not like she particularly likes them or feels a strong attachment to them.

But still, Senjougahara was born on July 7.

That makes her a Cancer.

Regardless, it might be a bit overbearing to read a deeper meaning into that. As far as I can remember, Senjougahara has never once taken Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade’s... a.k.a. Shinobu Oshino’s side in a fight. In fact, back when Shinobu went missing, Senjougahara was the only one who didn’t help in the search for her—both before and after her reform, she’s remained consistent in her dislike of children.

Even if she came across Shinobu in a life-or-death situation, I doubt she would jump to her aid at the risk of being trampled to death herself...

“You’re probably right. I don’t know all the details, but when Senjougahara-senpai faced off against Sengoku-chan, the one she truly put herself on the line to defend was you, with the former Heart-Under-Blade merely being part of the package,” Ougi-chan agrees with a nod. “It’s truly interesting to think about. Who would have won in a fight between the snake goddess—that is, Nadeko Sengoku after she was instated in Kita-Shirahebi Shrine—and Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade as she is now, in her fully restored form? Logically, it would most likely be the oddity slayer who was capable of destroying the world, but in terms of immortality, the snake goddess would make for an even match—though she’s a snake that lives on land, not in water.”

Snake versus Hydra.

Since both of them are venomous, it makes for a lethal scenario... Ougi-chan is talking about it like it’s some kind of dream match, but to me, it sounds like it would be nothing more than an unproductive, pointless mudslinging contest between two immortals.

It would simply amount to never-ending mutual destruction.

“True enough. The constellation Serpens, ‘the Snake,’ is no Hydra, but it’s considered a symbol of immorality itself,” she says, and the nightscape shown on the dome switches over once more.

This time, she points out Serpens with her laser pointer.

“After all, Serpens possesses an unusual feature, one that you could very well say is unique among the 88 constellations. Do you know what it is, Araragi-senpai?”

*I don't, I think to myself.*

But if this is a dream, it would be strange for Ougi-chan to be explaining things I didn't already know—and I get the feeling that this presentation involves too much talk of oddities to be based on the real lecture I'm hearing in my sleep. Was it supposed to be this kind of program?

Serpens' special feature.

I doubt her elective is geoscience, but does Ougi-chan know the answer?

“I don't know anything,” Ougi-chan responds, with a dark smile. “You're the one who knows... Araragi-senpai. The truth is, you already know the answer. See, look here,” she says, and waves the light of the laser pointer right and left—or in terms of cardinal direction, east and west. “Serpens is the only constellation that is divided into two parts to the east and west. It's a snake... cut in two.”

So she says.

“It exists in two separate parts, with its head lying to the west and its tail lying to the east. In other words, one look at it will tell you that it's immortal. It clings to life even after being cut in two, after all... Hm, though it seems *you* get cut in two quite often yourself, Araragi-senpai.”

Forget getting cut in two, I was completely sliced and diced yesterday... but leaving that aside, this is the first I've heard about Serpens being separated into two parts in the sky, and it's a bit of a surprise.

Why was it placed in the sky in that form...? Is there a story behind it similar to the one surrounding Cancer? Just like how the crab was crushed flat, maybe there's a legend about how the snake was split in two... As if to answer my question, Ougi-chan says: “Yes.”

“Actually, there's a different constellation in between the two separate halves—and I'm sure you'll have already heard of this one. It's Ophiuchus, the Serpent Bearer.”

Ophiuchus.

That's the one known as the thirteenth zodiac sign.

I remember it well, because Kanbaru nearly died laughing at me when I told her that story a while back—actually, it's pretty fresh in my memory, because Kanbaru still gives me a hard time about it to this day.

“The full picture depicts the serpent tamer grasping the snake's head in his left hand and its tail in his right. Going into the nitty-gritty details takes away some from the fantasy, but it seems Serpens was there first, and Ophiuchus was wedged in afterwards. Quite the inconvenience for the serpent, I'm

sure,” says Ougi-chan—and indeed, rather than being tamed, that sounds more like being painted over and killed.

Wait, no. I suppose it’s *because* that didn’t kill it... that it became a creature with enough mystique to be revered as a god.

A creature... as well as a monster.

Come to think of it, all that about Serpens being split to the east and west was news to me, but I still had some basic knowledge of Ophiuchus—oh, right, doesn’t the Serpent Bearer represent Asclepius, the ancient god of medicine?

“Correct. You’re quite the scholar, Araragi-senpai.”

Ougi-chan’s response sounds a little sarcastic, but regardless, it seems like I had the right idea.

“And while we associate the constellation with a snake tamer, it would be more accurate to say Asclepius studied under the serpent—after all, it was after witnessing a snake come back from the dead that he started down the path of medicine in earnest.”

Really? Now *that* I didn’t know.

“But of course... you could also call that a curse. Or his misfortune, perhaps—or I suppose you could say he was stifled to death by his own talent. Asclepius polished his healing arts to a fine shine, and finally, he was capable of even bringing the dead back to life. Resurrection could be considered the ultimate form of regenerative medicine—but with that, he had gone too far. He went too far,” she repeats, stressing the most important point. “He broke the rules. He went against the way of the world, you could say... After incurring the wrath of Hades, god of the underworld, Asclepius was struck by a bolt of lightning and literally ascended to the heavens. You could very well say that he lost his life because he caught a glimpse of that immortal snake. When you put it like that, it’s almost like the forbidden fruit...”

The forbidden fruit.

It’s hard to say who got the better deal: the ones expelled from Paradise, or the one who ended up as a constellation...

Still, considering his role as a doctor, pursuing regenerative medicine doesn’t seem all that unreasonable to me. Why did Hades get so angry over that? Speaking as someone who was just resurrected from the pits of Hell, I think an oddity’s immortality and mortality achieved through treatment are two very different things...

“Well, naturally, if all the dead came back to life, the underworld would be left completely empty—oh, wasn’t the Hell you went to completely uninhabited, as well? But if there’s no one there, it stops being Hell and becomes a mere ghost town.

“At any rate, Asclepius himself wasn’t immortal, given that he was struck down by lightning, but it

goes to show that bringing people back to life—mass producing immortality—is quite the heavy sin.”

Ougi-chan pauses for a second, then speaks again as if she just remembered something.

“Yotsugi Ononoki,” she adds, “is another who was resurrected after her death—however, all the people responsible for bringing her to life were hit with a curse in retaliation.”

Hm? What’s she talking about?

A curse?

I do recall Tadatsuru saying that Kagenui-san never touching the ground was a form of a curse...

“I can’t say which is worse, being hit with lightning or being hit with a curse—however, I wonder what that means for us. What retribution will Gaen-san suffer for resurrecting you from Hell, I wonder? I know you aren’t pleased with the way you’re being bent to her will, but you ought to remember that she’s bearing quite the risk herself.”

Why would Ougi-chan say that, I wonder? It’s almost like she’s defending Gaen-san.

Of course, if I’m going to question that, there’s also the matter of why Ougi-chan knows that I went to Hell in the first place, or why she knows that I was resurrected by Gaen-san...

“Haha...”

Laughing, Ougi-chan tucks the laser pointer away in her pocket—and then leisurely makes her way over to where I’m sitting.

And then she makes to sit down next to me.

Since it’s still before noon, it’s nearly a full house in the real planetarium, but I’m the only member of the audience in this dream—and so Ougi-chan, taking advantage of the vacancy, attempts to take the seat next to me.

“Ougi-chan. Take the seat to my left instead.”

“? May I ask why?”

“That’s Senjougahara’s seat.”

“Oh, dear me. I have absolutely no intention of threatening the seat of main heroine. Perhaps I could set my sights on the little sister role—although, while Karen-chan is one thing, I have no desire to fight it out with Tsukihi-chan.”

As she says that, Ougi-chan takes the seat to my left, as instructed—it looks like she’s done playing the part of planetarium guide.

“Incidentally, Araragi-senpai, what was your zodiac sign again?”

Perhaps for that reason, she shifts the topic away from the histories behind constellations and starts making idle gossip—well, a casual conversation like this is a lot easier on me, so that works.

“Hmm... Er, I think it was either Taurus or Aries.”

“That’s awfully vague.”

“That’s how it goes when you don’t care about the horoscope. Believe it or not, there are a lot of people out there who don’t know their own blood type, either.”

“I suppose so... So you don’t believe in fortune-telling, Araragi-senpai?”

“I dunno... I didn’t used to believe in it, but if I’m going to acknowledge the existence of oddities and the existence of Hell, it seems a little silly to only deny fortune-telling...”

“Haha... In mystery novel terms, it would be like the inconsistency of accepting a detective with psychic abilities, but rejecting the existence of supernatural phenomenon.”

Ougi-chan frames it in terms of her beloved mysteries—and that may well have been the best analogy to get the point across.

“Knowing you, I’m sure your first thought upon ending up in Hell was that having an afterlife would render life itself meaningless. Am I right?”

“I didn’t go quite *that* far... I did think something pretty similar, though. But...”

“Of course. You decided that wasn’t really the case, and that’s why you came back to life, correct? Well, it’s not unusual for fools to live in disgrace. However, from my point of view, it feels like merely covering up a mistake with an even bigger one,” Ougi-chan says from my left, gazing up at the nightscape reflected on the dome. “Not making matters worse, but making a mistake worse.”

“...”

“Then again, Gaen-san is trying to lure me in with that worsened mistake; it’s an obvious setup, but I have no choice but to throw myself headfirst into her trap. It’s much like an instinctual urge. That’s a specialist for you. She really thinks of everything...”

Ougi-chan giggles. Her mannerisms make her look the epitome of a first year high school girl.

But she... She really...

Tadatsuru Teori said it.

He told me in the depths of Hell.

He told me the name of the client who ordered me and Shinobu exterminated...

“Araragi-senpai. What do you believe ‘righteousness’ is?”

Ougi-chan finally puts the topic of the stars completely aside... and asks me that question.

Wait, no, this conversation is happening in my dream, so it’s not like I’m talking with the real her... But who *is* the “real her”?

What do I even know about Ougi Oshino?

She’s Meme Oshino’s niece.

She comes from a line of specialists.

She’s the transfer student who was introduced to me by Suruga Kanbaru...

“Oh, you don’t have to reflect on it too deeply. The meaning of ‘righteousness’ can change at the drop of a hat, after all. People like to say ‘justice will always prevail,’ but in reality, it often loses out. That said, the saying ‘might makes right’ is much more shallow than one might expect. Hm, I suppose the question of ‘righteousness’ is rather complicated, so perhaps downgrading it to ‘righteousism’ would make it easier to debate.”

Even so, I still have no idea.

I don’t usually live my life thinking about righteousness, or perhaps “righteousism,” or mistakes or wrongdoings—but I can’t deny that it’s precisely because I *don’t* think about those things that I dig myself into a hole when faced with situations like the one I’m in right now.

If I were usually more thorough, if I’d always made decisions that took into account righteousness, or perhaps prudence, or elegance or style... I wouldn’t have ended up in such a difficult position.

I don’t wish I had done things that way.

But I do think about what things could have been like if I had.

“It’s hard to do the right thing, after all,” says Ougi-chan. “It’s particularly hard to ‘only do the right thing.’ Often when one tries to do the right thing, they have to commit a wrongdoing or make a mistake along the way. Just looking at the newspaper, you can see plenty of examples of people who went too far in their pursuit of justice and fell into crime. Working from the expression ‘justice always prevails,’ hmm, it essentially means that in order to prevail, it’s necessary to lose somewhere along the way. It’s impossible to win every battle...”

Gaen-san said the same thing. She compared it to shogi—no matter how renowned a player you are, no matter how much of a beginner your opponent is, it’s impossible to win without losing a single piece.

Of course, since she sliced me up right after she said that, I'm pretty sure I was the "loss" she was referring to...

"And so you see, Araragi-senpai, in order to be righteous, you shouldn't do the right thing—because in the end, trying to do the right thing always invites mistakes along with it, cancelling everything out to zero."

In that case, just what am I supposed to do?

I haven't acted at all righteously up until now—but exactly because of that, I've always held a strong admiration for righteousness.

Take someone like Kagenui-san, for example.

Or perhaps the Fire Sisters.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't look up to the way they live, believing in their own righteousness and carrying it through without hesitation.

"Yes, I suppose so—and you see, while Kagenui-san and the Fire Sisters may claim to be justice, it's not as though they're 'doing the right thing.' In order to be righteous, they don't do the right thing..."

"They right wrongs. They correct injustices. That's the way of life they've chosen."

So says Ougi-chan.

This is... an extension of the conversation I had with Hachikuji in Hell.

An extension, as well as an extra inning.

"In this context, the Japanese word '*tadasu*' might not mean 'to make right,' but 'to examine,' or perhaps we should be saying '*toitadasu*,' 'to question'...<sup>[5]</sup> In other words, the enemy of an enemy may not be one's friend, but by becoming the enemy of evil, one can become its antonym, thus taking on the mantle of justice. One false step, and you'll merely be complaining about things you don't like... but regardless, it allows you the opportunity to be intoxicated with your own sense of justice."

Intoxicated with your own sense of justice, huh?

That's something I often say to the Fire Sisters... and it's true that their pursuits of justice most often involve taking down "bad people," such as a certain comnan, or cleaning up in the aftermath of "bad things."

Whether it's Karen, Tsukihi, or even Kagenui-san, none of them act just—none of them act righteously in terms of character. In that sense, the most righteous one would be the old Tsubasa Hanekawa—which would mean it's just like Ougi-chan said. In order to maintain her righteousness, Hanekawa had to create the oddity Black Hanekawa.

She had to do something wrong.

I couldn't set that wrong right. On the contrary, I chose for her to keep doing what she had been, leaving the mistake as a mistake—which means, in the end, I was being far from righteous back then.

According to Ougi-chan, that is.

“And I am yet another one who pursues righteousness by correcting mistakes. Forcing those who break the rules to leave the stage is the role that was given to me.”

Breaking the rules.

Leaving the stage.

Those words remind me of something—but perhaps because this is a dream, I can't seem to collect my thoughts.

They diffuse—they disperse.

“Of course, I’m hardly a demon—I’m no vampire, nor am I a devil of Hell. I won’t dismiss anyone over one or two transgressions, and I believe I give a rather generous grace period. …Araragi-senpai. The program is right about to end. You ought to wake up now.”

When she says that, I reflexively check my watch.

I don’t know how much credibility a watch has inside a dream, but it indeed looks like 30 minutes have passed since the program started.

“If you’re peacefully sleeping when the lights come back on, Senjougahara-san will be thoroughly disenchanted with you. After nodding off on your long-awaited date, it wouldn’t be surprising if she dumped you on the spot. So come now, rise and shine.”

As she says that, Ougi-chan reaches out to give my body a gentle shake—she’s being a little more casually physical than a girl ought to be, but she’s doing it to help wake me up, so there’s no reason to scold her for it.

“You’re on a date with the girl you love, so go enjoy the rest of the day to the fullest. But since I already have you here, Araragi-senpai… Whenever you have a free moment, think about your answer to my question of what righteousness is. Let’s talk about that next time we meet in the real world.”

*Yeah, got it. As long as I remember this conversation when I wake up,* I respond in my mind.

And then, almost as an afterthought—without the least expectation that she’ll give a straight answer—I ask Ougi-chan.

*But who are you, really?*

“I’ll tell you *that* the next time we see each other, as well. The past several months I’ve spent with you have been quite fun, but regrettably, I don’t exist in order to enjoy myself. But if I were to say as much as I’m able…

“I am... the laws of the universe.”

With the utmost nonchalance, Ougi-chan offers that lofty answer.

A map of the universe.

In the shape of a “fan.”

Unbalanced galaxies—in a pitch black vacuum.

“Don’t reflect too deeply on that, either. Now that you’ve been resurrected from Hell and turned back into a normal human, I may not even have to concern myself with you any further—if luck is on my side.

“And so.

“I’m begging you, don’t fall for Gaen-san’s honeyed words,” Ougi-chan implores. “I’m counting on you to make the right decision regarding Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, who has been restored to her full form, and Mayoi Hachikuji, who has returned to walk—to wander the Earth even after passing on. I’m counting on you to finally make the right decision and ‘forsake’ them both, Araragi-senpai.”

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[1] This is a reference to the most famous story from the Chinese text *Zhuangzi*, “The Butterfly Dream,” wherein the philosopher Zhuangzi wonders if he is a man who dreamed of being a butterfly or a butterfly who is dreaming of being a man.

[2] *Saint Seiya* is a manga/anime about warriors called the “Saints,” each of which have armor based on one of the 88 constellations.

[3] Yamata no Orochi is a legendary 8-headed 8-tailed Japanese dragon. In the Orochi myth, a god who was exiled from heaven, Susanoo-no-Mikoto, slays the beast after weakening it by getting it drunk on sake.

[4] In the original Japanese, Ougi makes a pun between “a praying mantis’ axe”—a Japanese proverb which refers to courageous but doomed resistance—and “a crab’s pincers.”

[5] As mentioned in Chapter 006 of Mayoi Hell, “*tadasu*” has an entirely different meaning when written with different kanji.



I wake up.

I wake up?

Crap, I guess I dozed off—no matter how tired I am, and no matter how cozy this planetarium is, falling asleep in the middle of a date is over the line. How unbecoming of me... or should I say, this is too much even for me.

It seems I managed to wake up just as the program ended, but I have absolutely no memory of what was projected on the screen, or what kinds of stars were reflected on the dome.

I had a deep, dreamless sleep.

How embarrassing.

I'm not sure what I should say to Senjougahara, who's currently sitting to my right: should I act like I was awake the whole time, or should I come right out with the truth and apologize for ruining our long-awaited date?

Still unable to decide, I turn around to face Senjougahara, but...

“...”

Senjougahara is fast asleep, too.

She's sleeping without making a single peep.

She's showing so few signs of life that, for a moment, I almost had to wonder whether she was dead... By pure chance, it seems I've finally witnessed Senjougahara's slumber for the very first time, but is this really how she sleeps...?

Frankly, it's kind of scary.

She's no Sleeping Beauty or Snow White, yet all the same, she looks like she's in some kind of deathlike coma.

Wait, she's not *actually* dead, is she...?

“Senjougahara...”

“I wasn't sleeping.”

Without any warning whatsoever, Senjougahara's eyes both open with a snap.

It's more reminiscent of a “revival” than waking up after a nap. She's like some kind of computer that

can start up in a second.

“I didn’t fall asleep. I didn’t fall asleep at all. I was just thinking about something with my eyes closed.”

“...”

That’s as cliché an excuse as they come, but when she says it with such a straight face, I have to wonder if it’s really the truth...

Still, just how light of a sleeper is she that quietly calling out her name is all it takes to wake her up?

Well, if you consider her past experiences—plus the length of time she spent perpetually tormented by a sense of impending danger—it’s understandable that her sleeping habits would resemble those of a wild animal.

“Sorry. I did fall asleep.”

Perhaps realizing that it would be impossible to run with that lie, Senjougahara comes right out with an honest apology—and, truly, that she can bring herself to apologize now speaks to how honest she’s become compared to the old days.

She used to be the kind of person who would die before apologizing. Talk about too much force of personality.

What I can’t believe even now is that I resolved to start dating Senjougahara back when she was still like that...

At any rate, if Senjougahara fell asleep, it feels like it offsets the nap I took myself, so I’m actually more grateful than anything... But reassuring myself while leaving Senjougahara to be tormented by guilt would feel wrong, so I confess, “Don’t worry, I drifted off, too.”

It was more like falling fast asleep than “drifting off,” but I ask that you accept my compulsion to downplay it as a charming flaw.

“I see. I suppose we were both tired—perhaps this was a bit of a rush job, throwing ourselves into a date right off the heels of yesterday,” Senjougahara says as she stretches.

It doesn’t seem like these seats were very good for sleeping in—I follow her lead and give my muscles a stretch.

“We probably let ourselves relax a little too much, as well. Your exam and your little vampire issue were both dealt with in one day, after all.”

“Yeah... Probably.”

Senjougahara might have been even more concerned about those things than I was. Thinking about it,

I've caused her an awful lot of worry over the past six months.

I'm a terrible boyfriend.

It's true that back in May, I caught Senjougahara after she tripped down the stairs, and I helped her resolve her affliction—and it might be that she feels indebted to me for that, but if you look at the bigger picture, she's done far more for me in all our time together.

I may have been the one to receive triple the return.

In that case, it's hard to imagine a more unbalanced couple—gifting her with marshmallows wouldn't be nearly enough to repay her.

“What should we do, Araragi-kun? It would throw off our plans a bit, but since we both fell asleep, do you want to give this one more go?”

“Nah...”

I shake my head.

“We'll have plenty of chances to come back here in the future, so let's try again some other time. For today, let's focus on carrying out the plan you came up with.”

I try to say it with an emphasis on “in the future”—I have no idea whether or not I managed to make my intention clear, but Senjougahara responds, “True. Plus, who knows if we can still get seats for the next showing,” and gets right to her feet.

From the briskness of her movement, you'd never guess she'd been sleeping until just a few minutes ago—I ought to learn from her example, I think to myself as I follow suit.

“So what's next on the schedule?”

“Like I said in the car, we're going to educate ourselves about state-of-the-art science in the attached museum. Perhaps there won't be any flying cars, but it seems they have plenty of hands-on exhibits to explore.”

“Hmm. Well, you've got a point that we can't let ourselves forget how to study... We'll have to keep it up once we're in college, after all.”

“Yes, of course. How else will I become an astronaut?”

Senjougahara says that with a smile.

When she says it with a smile, it's honestly impossible to tell how serious she's being... But still, while we don't yet know for sure whether I passed, if I'm going to be a college student soon, it might be time for me to start thinking about those things.

The future and all that, I mean.

In my case, it's not like I'm going to college because I have anything in particular I want to do, so it'll be four years spent searching for that—but still, when I think about how many times I came close to losing any kind of future over the past year, those four years sound almost like a dream.

“Do you have any dreams for the future, Araragi-kun?”

As if she read my inner thoughts, Senjougahara asks me that as we leave the planetarium.

Dreams for the future. A phrase that makes me want to squirm.

“No, not especially...”

“Or a dream job, perhaps?”

“Nah. I've never even dreamed of being a baseball player... The environment I was brought up in didn't really nurture an aspiration towards any particular career.”

“Well, your parents both do rather specialized work... I suppose I have no room to talk, though. ...I would prefer you don't end up like Hanekawa-san, following in Oshino-san's footsteps out of admiration for him and ending up a demon hunter.”

She doesn't push it too strongly, but Senjougahara puts forth her opinion.

Well, I suppose that's understandable.

Senjougahara suffered at the hands of five different oddity specialists, so there's no denying that she holds a natural distrust towards all things of that field. She may have accepted Oshino's help in getting her reintegrated into society, but her personal feelings on him are an entirely different matter.

“There's that, as well, but I can't forgive him for the bad influence he's had on my angel, Hanekawa-san. I haven't been able to fool around with her for almost half of the school year, all because of that location scout she went on.”

“...”

That sounds like a misplaced grudge...

Her *angel*?

Besides, her plans to travel the world after graduating are one thing, but I'm not sure that Oshino is the one to blame for Hanekawa leaving on a location scout during the school year. They may share the same last name, but if I had to say, it's more likely it was *Ougi* Oshino—yeah, that's right.

It's plain as day now.

Just like with Meme Oshino's disappearance... many incidents seem to have deliberately weaved their way through the period of Tsubasa Hanekawa's absence.

"It may be too late for Hanekawa-san, but if it can be avoided, I don't want that kind of life for you."

"Well... I don't think I'd be able to live that kind of life myself."

The reason I give a somewhat vague answer is that I think it would be difficult—absolutely impossible, even—for me to live out the rest of my life without getting entangled with oddities.

As long as I have Shinobu Oshino, that is.

When I consider my relationship with her, there's no way I'll ever be able to break off all ties with the supernatural—even if that means I'm destined to go to Hell after I die.

"If it means you'd have to live like that, I'd rather you not work at all. I'll support you for the rest of my life."

"...Isn't that what people would call a 'deadbeat'?"

"And I'm what people would call a magnanimous woman."

"Uh, just so you know, I don't think they'd call you anything that flattering. I'd be pretty worthless, but you'd be considered plenty worthless for enabling me, you know?"

"Oh, it works out. A deadbeat and a degenerate: wouldn't we make the perfect couple?"

"Maybe, but..."

That screams of "every Jack must have his Jill."

Hmm.

Yeah, even now that I've accomplished my goal of getting into university (theoretically), I guess I have a lot of things I still need to think about after that. It's a reminder that all we have in life are checkpoints; there's no finish line.

That's why it's hard to keep winning all the time, and so we have to lose somewhere along the way—hm? Where'd that come from?

Is that something Gaen-san said?

No, it feels more like something I just dreamed about... but what kind of dream did I have? I thought I had a dreamless sleep...

"After we go around the museum, we'll grab lunch. While we won't be going to a fast food chain, expect it to be a rather light meal. If I eat too much at lunch, I won't have room for dinner tonight."

Senjougahara goes back to explaining her date plan.

What's noteworthy here is that the dinner Senjougahara is referring to will be with her dad, and she thinks it is perfectly normal to hold back on lunch with her boyfriend in light of that.

...Well, it is what it is.

In fact, I really should be happy for her. Her relationship with her dad was still a bit strained when we went on our first date back in June, so if they've gotten that much closer, as her boyfriend, I ought to put up with being thrown to the wayside for a bit and just be glad for her.

Just like Tsukihi mentioned yesterday, despite how poorly I used to get along with my sisters, we've mended our relationship enough to even go on outings together. I'm certainly not unhappy about that, so I understand it completely—how wonderful it is to be at peace with your family, that is.

I want it to be like that for Senjougahara, too.

Especially now that she's already lost her mother, she ought to treasure the bond she has with her father—though, all that said, I still can't rid myself of some dissatisfaction.

I'm not quite *that* understanding.

So I'll just have to hope that the rest of her afternoon plan makes up for the lightness of the lunch—and if she reveals that she held back on the afternoon plans because she didn't want to tire herself out before evening, I might just have to ignore the onlookers, disregard my surroundings, and flip my lid.

However, it seems there was no lie in Senjougahara's desire to have a typical high school date while we're still high schoolers, as she explains, "Since the morning plan is largely educational, I've set aside the afternoon for play. We'll drive a little bit outside town, spend the first half of the afternoon bowling, take a break for tea time, and then finish off with karaoke."

"Ooh..."

Impressive.

Bowling is one thing, but karaoke doesn't really fit with Senjougahara's usual image, so I faltered a little in spite of myself.

"Mm. Well, the bowling was my idea, but the karaoke bit came from Hanekawa-san's advice."

"Advice..."

"According to what she said, you two often go out for karaoke together, no? So I decided we should go because—how to put it—as your girlfriend, I don't want to lose to anyone, not even Hanekawa-san."

"..."

If that's what inspired it, I wouldn't consider that taking her advice...

When she's proposing karaoke based on that reasoning, it's a little hard to look forward to it... Well, I'd like to hear Senjougahara's singing voice, so I guess it's alright.

"What about the bowling part? Are you much of a bowler...?"

"I haven't gone bowling since I entered high school, but back in middle school, I went quite often as part of celebrations with Kanbaru and the track team. I made my mark with quite the artistic scores. As such, I felt like it might be fun to revisit the good old days. What about you, Araragi-kun?"

"Hm?"

"I'm asking about your bowling experience. What's your high score?"

"Oh, no, I'm a total beginner at bowling. I don't think I've ever even done it before... So if you don't mind, I'll be relying on your guidance."

"Understood. The loser takes a penalty."

"Don't go setting up a penalty right after you confirm that I'm a beginner."

"The loser has to unconditionally obey one order from the winner."

"That's a serious penalty!"

To sum it up...

Senjougahara's timetable for today's date seems to go: "Drive -> planetarium -> science museum -> lunch (a light meal) -> drive -> bowling -> drive -> tea time -> drive -> karaoke -> go home." No matter how light a lunch we end up having, that schedule is tightly packed enough to leave us feeling plenty full.

"In truth, there were many more places I wanted to go and things I wanted to do... but there's nothing to be done for it. Unlike love, time is limited."

In spite of the fact that she slotted in a dinner with her dad after everything, Senjougahara murmurs that, apparently not completely satisfied with the fully packed schedule she came up with.

"Oh well. This may be our last date as high school students, but we're free to go on as many dates as we like in the future. We're free to go on dates every day and every night, from morning until evening, all the way into the night. Isn't that right, Araragi-kun?"

"..."

When asked that question, there's only one way for me to answer.

“Yeah, you’re right. Of course we are.”

And yet, I’m not quite as confident about that as I claim to be. When I think about what’s still to come...

When I think about Ougi Oshino...

It’s hard to say anything for certain.

Despite committing the unseemly blunder of falling asleep in the planetarium, the rest of the date is free of mishaps, and Senjougahara and I—or at least I—manage to have an enjoyable time.

As far as the science museum goes, while it helps that my expected value of entertainment was relatively close to zero, it is my honest opinion that it turned out to be surprisingly fun. By their nature, these types of institutions generally have content aimed more towards elementary school students (and their families), so I was worried that 18-year-olds like me and Senjougahara were of the worst possible age to get something out of it, but I suppose it really shows that the idea came from Hanekawa's advice, as it turned out to be a pretty fascinating museum.

I'm starting to regret falling asleep in the planetarium more and more—but I guess I can write that off by saying that a chance to see Senjougahara's precious sleeping face was worth any of the stars in the sky.

Of course, I'm not the only one who was fascinated, as Senjougahara got pretty excited herself. Well, I guess the way she acted was pretty typical for a girl in the sciences, but given how in the past, she would never drop pretenses and make merry in front of other people or in public (hell, not even in front of her own boyfriend), just seeing her having so much fun was a delight.

“Do you want to give this another go?!” she proposes rather forcefully, in an entirely different way than she did in the planetarium, but unfortunately, I have to tell her no... Her ability to make swift, impromptu decisions could be considered one of Senjougahara's strong points, but it shows its inevitable downside, manifesting itself as a shortcoming, in the way she doesn't even stick to her own plans.

It might've been an option to just go with the flow and take her up on that, but as a wholesome high school student, I think staying in a science museum until closing time would be a little *too* wholesome, so I somehow manage to persuade her.

After throwing out a line that has become something of a staple—or a steady certainty—today, “We can come back however many times we want,” Senjougahara gives in, and then it's time for lunch.

Since I was told in advance that it would be a light meal, I set the bar for my expectations pretty low, but that might have been part of Senjougahara's strategy all along, as she brings me to a restaurant with a pretty nice atmosphere.

All she had to say for it was that it “wasn't a fast food chain,” but my only complaint would be that it's a café geared more towards girls (all the customers aside from me are young women), as the food is both delicious and incredibly inexpensive.

For the record, we're splitting the bill evenly throughout the date. That isn't something limited to this one particular outing, either, and while I feel that as the man, I ought to be footing the whole bill (all the more so when you take the Senjougahara family's circumstances into account), Senjougahara is the type who refuses to take charity from anyone, no matter who it may be.

If I had to guess, that part of her personality was probably influenced by the time she spent with a certain con artist. Surprisingly enough, Senjougahara might have been influenced by that (would-be) specialist even more strongly than Hanekawa was by Oshino.

By which I mean she took him as an example of what *not* to do.

Anyway, it's not like we're calculating things down to the yen, but I'm splitting the expenses with Senjougahara 50–50—although, when you take the cost of the rental car and gas into account, she might be spending more than I am.

I'm afraid that might foretell my future as a deadbeat, so I ought to venture through life with a newfound determination.

Well, I guess Senjougahara doesn't seem like much of a degenerate yet... At any rate, the lunch serves as a reminder that, even when they don't seem like they would be interested in this kind of thing, girls are the life's blood of restaurants like these.

And then, the afternoon.

Play time.

In the first half, we go bowling—and while I had that terrifying bet imposed on me, as far as the scores are concerned, I turn out to be the winner.

“Curse you... I can't believe you would lie to me... You weren't a beginner at all, were you...?”

I'm showered with words of resentment.

Senjougahara glares at me, and while I find it lovely that she's become so expressive (Ononoki-chan's line about how she loves making people mad comes to mind), all told, it's incredibly frightening in that it reminds me of the old days.

Besides, it's not like I actually lied.

*I am* a beginner—or should I say, while it's the undisguised truth that I am a complete amateur at bowling, the fact of the matter is that I was able to win regardless—and, to be perfectly honest, if I'd known I was going to get that kind of look for it, I would've just thrown the freakin' match.

Look, nobody asked for the right to order you around.

Rather, you could say that Senjougahara dug her own grave—it would seem she had glorified her memories of the past.

Artistic scores, my foot.

She glorified her memories—or to put it a little more harshly, she only remembered her better moments.

No, in fairness, she put up quite the showing in the first five frames. It was such perfect pitching that it wouldn't have been a surprise if she owned her own personal bowling ball. I don't know the exact terminology to describe it, but the first half of the game was filled with strikes and turkeys, or whatever you call it when you take down all ten pins in one hit.

She put on an excellent enough performance to make me want to quip, "Wow, this is serious business," so much so that I was starting to feel generous enough to listen to one of her orders (by the way, contrary to Senjougahara, I simply racked up incredibly ordinary scores that were neither good nor bad, neither impressive nor comical), but the sixth frame marked a turning point in her play—a complete 180.

Simply put, starting from the sixth frame, Hitagi Senjougahara rolled nothing but gutter balls.

By the end, her throws were so flimsy that it was dubious whether the ball would make it all the way to the end of the lane—yes, that's right.

In other words, Senjougahara wore herself out.

It would seem her arm went numb.

She used to be a sprinter, so it's possible that she lacks stamina and endurance—though, while that could be part of it too, it appears that it came down to a simple lack of physical strength. Halfway through, she demonstrated her quick wit in attempting to throw with her left arm instead, but she couldn't control the ball very well that way.

As a result, I managed to steadily gain on her through a simple accumulation of numbers, until I finally overtook her score in the end.

A true "make miracle" situation.<sup>[1]</sup>

It would seem baseball doesn't hold a monopoly on plotless dramas.

"Very well. I'll acknowledge my loss."

As one would expect from Kanbaru's direct senior, Senjougahara is a bit of a sore loser, but in light of the fact that she'll soon be a college student (provided that the school doesn't find out about her driver's license), in the end, she gracefully accepts her defeat.

"You can order me to do whatever you like. Now then, I wonder what sort of sexy demands will come my way. I have only the highest of expectations."

You're asking too much of me.

Out of curiosity, I try asking Senjougahara what demand she was planning to make if she'd won, but she just snaps back at me with, "A sexy demand, obviously!"

*In that case, doesn't it work out the same for you either way?* I almost have to ask—while

pondering over the funny feeling that something similar to this has happened before, I settle for proposing that we walk all the way to tea time arm in arm.

Even now that we've left the museum behind, it seems the theme for today remains "wholesomeness."

Now, tea time.

If I want to sound truly British, then "afternoon tea."

I realize it's bad form to talk about the price before anything else, but to my surprise, this turns out to be more expensive than lunch. I guess that's just how things are, but that explains why Senjougahara was treating this part as the main event.

As we elegantly sip at tea and savor fashionable pastries, I take this opportunity to explain precisely what happened yesterday—I confess to Senjougahara why the progression of my vampirism suddenly came to halt, why that supposedly irreversible progression was reversed.

Of course, there are some parts of it I can't talk about, so it's not like I come forth with *everything*, but I share all the information I'm able to say.

"Hmm... Who would have guessed that you would embark on that sort of adventure on the very day of your exam? That's surprising, or perhaps I should say that's just like you... or perhaps I should wonder what you were thinking."

As I expected, she seems a little bit angry.

Well, I suppose there's no tutor in the world who would be happy to hear that their pupil took on their exam with such a cavalier attitude.

However, perhaps realizing it's unfair to be too hard on someone who just spent yesterday in Hell of all places, she finishes off with: "That must've been a trial. You can relax now."

Sympathy sort of leaves me at a loss for how to respond, though.

Besides, now that she's told me "I can relax," I have to explain that everything isn't over just yet—I haven't heard the details of Gaen-san's plan yet, but there's no doubt that I'll be playing some sort of part in it.

"I suppose so. Taking your blonde loli slave and Hachikuji-chan into consideration, I'm sure that will be the case. With Hachikuji-chan in particular, the reality of things is that Gaen-san is more or less holding her hostage."

I'm not sure I like the way she phrased that (I don't like the way she phrased "blonde loli slave" either), but she has a point.

Indeed, that stands to reason.

“Well, if we were to frame it terms of a loan, you’d be the borrower right now, so you have to be sure to pay her back... Much like how I had to pay Oshino-san his fee, no matter how much I hate him.”

Just how much *does* he hate him? This is going a little overboard. In fact, I think she hates him even more now than she did in the past... Is she really that upset that Hanekawa left to go location scouting?

In that case, she might as well have formed a new duo with Hanekawa instead of Kanbaru... So what’s *their* team name?

“But leaving aside the issue of loans... there’s something I don’t quite understand. What exactly does this Gaen woman hope to accomplish? What objective is she working towards—is it just a part of her job, I wonder?”

Once I’m asked that upfront, I’m at a loss for how to reply—of course, it’s not that I don’t know the answer. I’ve heard her objective—nay, in her view, her purpose—countless times from the people around her and the woman herself.

But that purpose is too lofty... or in a way, too noble for someone like me to understand. Put simply, she is trying to subjugate this town that’s teeming with oddities, but that makes her almost like a hero of justice.

Justice.

Righteousness.

And that which is born of righteousness—mistakes.

Sacrifices.

...Huh, why do I get the feeling that I’ve talked about that with someone pretty recently?

“If I may say, as someone who was once constantly on damage control... with a perpetual mindset of risk management, the scariest people in the world are those whose objectives you can’t pinpoint. No matter what kind of big shot they may be, what kind of villain they may be, they’re easily dealt with if you know the objective they’re trying to accomplish... what their hopes and desires are. Of course, it’s possible that as an adult, she simply sees the world in a different way from us whippersnappers,” Senjougahara muses, looking worried.

I’m still making her worry.

It pains me to realize that.

The reality that I’m causing my girlfriend anguish causes *me* anguish. That said, I’ve promised her I would keep as few oddity-related secrets as possible, so I can’t just hide these things from her, either.

She's being put through an awful lot of trouble, all because she's stuck dating a guy like me—though if I put it like that, it might loop all the way around from self-deprecating into a regular old persecution complex.

“There’s no telling what Gaen-san is fighting against... but it’s possible it might be you, Araragi-kun.”

Hm? What does she mean by that?

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean anything particular. It’s more of a hunch... It’s just that your tendency to only see what’s in front of you seems like it would clash with Gaen-san’s more macroscopic view. Clash with—or to put it more harshly, perhaps ‘oppose.’”

...Now that she mentions it, it’s hard to deny the possibility... Rather, it’s a reality that already came to pass. Back when Gaen-san had been planning to instate Shinobu as the new deity of the empty, godless Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, I revolted against her. As a result, an unrelated junior high student, Sengoku, got wrapped up in the matter, so if we were to deem that a confrontation between me and Gaen-san, it would be one that ended in Koyomi Araragi’s complete defeat, and a lasting defeat at that...

But still, even if Gaen-san is scheming the same thing this time around—if she’s planning to instate the full-powered Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade as the god of that shrine—I will oppose her the very same way I did the first time.

...It’s a very valid line of reasoning.

If Kita-Shirahebi Shrine was previously built on Shirohebi Park, and the name of that land was originally written with the radical for water...

Then that denotes a “Water Snake.”

If “the Sea Serpent” is another name for Hydra, then that’s likely no hidden hint or secret code, but a simple testament to history...

And in that case...

Mm... Wait, where did I learn that “the Sea Serpent” is another name for Hydra? I thought those were two entirely different creatures... What am I talking about?

“...Well, I happen to be Team Araragi, so there’s not much I can say about it. But for the sake of encouragement, allow me to say this: while most people might favor the far-reaching, bird’s-eye view of things Gaen-san has, it’s just as important to have people with a more short term perspective. Planning a New Year’s feast while forgetting to feed yourself now is nearly the same as delusion, after all.”

That was more consolation than encouragement, yet with those words, I feel I can confidently, optimistically head towards my confrontation—although it’s still unclear *who* exactly I’ll be

confronting.

“Well then. Now that we’ve enjoyed some black tea, why don’t we head to karaoke, Araragi-kun? For the record, we won’t be ordering any food there. I need to save room for my date with Daddy.”

At long last, her dinner plans with her dad have outright turned into a “date.” What kind of double date is this? Though at this point, it’s less like a double date and more just a double booking.

“Personally, I would consider it a doubleheader.”

Senjougahara uses baseball terminology, something you don’t often hear out of a girl’s mouth; however, the place we head to is not a batting cage, but a karaoke room.

My nervousness from sharing a dim, cramped room with Senjougahara speaks to how I haven’t forgotten the spirit I started with, but I would like to put that aside for now and instead focus my attention on observing Senjougahara’s singing skills—oh, and for the record, that promising candidate for chairman of the world, Hanekawa, was insanely good at singing.

It felt like I was listening to a CD.

As she not only exercises perfect control over her studies, but can make even games bend to her will, it served as a reminder that—playtime or not—Hanekawa is never someone to let your guard down around.

Well, I guess it would be cruel to expect that level of a performance out of a regular date, and besides, I’m sure Senjougahara has done karaoke with Hanekawa before, so I doubt she would try to compete with that…

Or so I carelessly thought, but it turns out the one I can’t let my guard down around—playtime or not—is Senjougahara. Fumbling with the remote control in a way that clearly demonstrates her unfamiliarity with it, she sets the karaoke machine to “Scoring Mode.”

Why would you corner yourself like that...?!

She wants it to give her an objective grade!

…Apparently, people’s impressions of whether a song is good or bad often don’t match up with the score a machine will give, so it might not be as telling as it seems—but still, once her results are displayed in number format, it’s not gonna be easy to reassure her.

So I think to myself, when she says, “We’ll have a two hour competition. The one with the lower total score at the end has to unconditionally obey one order from the winner,” adding on that condition once again.

So you were the one I was fighting all along, huh?

Did she always love competitions this much...? Or should I say, has she not learned a thing from the

way our bowling contest turned out?

I could probably learn a thing or two from her aggressive attitude, but with how much time she's spent throwing down the gauntlet, it raises the question of whether this can still be considered a "date."

Suspicions that I'm being treated like a practice partner for her evening date with her father have begun bubbling up, but regardless, there's no way I could turn down her demand for a rematch.

When I have guilt, or perhaps a weak point, I sure get spineless.

Maybe I should just chalk it up to the power of love.

"I'm first up to bat. Listen well."

Senjougahara takes the mic in her hand.

In a way, she looks like a person who has abandoned themselves to their fate.

"What are you talking about, Araragi-kun? I'll commend your bravery in accepting my challenge, but you're going to regret it. Just how many of the anime's openings do you think I've sung?"

That only applies to the anime version. Sadly for you, that doesn't carry over into the world of printed text.

And there's no way they're going to animate all the way up to this volume.

For the record, Senjougahara's choice of song was cutthroat—it could get us in legal trouble, so I won't mention the title of the song, but for all her boasting, she went with one that was not particularly challenging and easy enough to sing, both in terms of key and pace.

How badly does she want to order me around?

I get the feeling she's riding on her bitterness from losing the bowling match—and then, the result.

"82 points."

Pretty average.

I mean, I've never actually used the scoring mode at karaoke before, so I can't say for sure whether 82 points *is* average, or whether that's actually a pretty good or bad score. However, it appears to be a very disappointing score for the person in question, as she gapes at the screen in astonishment.

"No way... 82 points? But that's a failing grade. This is the first time in my life I've scored in the lower 80s."

What an honor student...

What kind of test has an F of 82 points?

“Did you really spend the majority of your high school years feeling like this...? So this is what it feels like to score in the low 80s. I can’t believe it. I should have been more understanding. I should have treated you more kindly. I can’t believe all the horrible things I’ve said to you.”

She’s saying horrible things right now.

In fact, that might be the most horrible thing she’s said to me to this day... I almost never scored in the lower 80s for the majority of my high school years.

What I got were bonafide Fs.

At any rate, putting aside the karaoke machine’s score, there was no particular inadequacy in Senjougahara’s singing—in terms of her ability to flawlessly pull off any task, she’s truly no less talented than Hanekawa.

And thus I tell her my honest impressions, but she simply responds with: “No one asked for your munificence,” an unforeseen dismissal.

I was dismissed with a word I’ve never heard before... What does “munificence” even mean?

In any case, there we had Senjougahara-san, only growing more intense with each passing competition—and next up is my turn, but we can omit the details of this part. It’s poor form to describe your own singing ability, so it should suffice to simply portray my song in a machine-like way, representing my results as a number.

82 points.

That was my grade.

As a couple on a date, there’s something meaningful in the two of us getting the same score, so it’s surely possible to find some charm in that... but right when I try to say something, I see Senjougahara grinding her teeth with a fierce look on her face and lose all words.

She takes competitions way too seriously...

Or perhaps, disregarding the competition, she’s more annoyed that her pupil’s grade coincides with her own.

Either way, at least in the eyes of the machine, my singing and Senjougahara’s singing make for an even match.

This isn’t limited to the first turn, as from the second round onwards—while we of course don’t keep up the perfect tie—we continue racking up pretty similar scores.

If this were a sports match, it would surely be considered a neck-and-neck game between two worthy

opponents, but at the end of the day, this is karaoke, making it a pointless struggle—a miserable contest where the results are to be decided by a mere margin of error.

And so, thanks to that margin of error...

I end up winning again.

It was a difference of three points—as close a contest as they come.

“Impossible... I never dreamed I would lose to Araragi-kun twice in one day...”

From that remark, I can deduce that my girlfriend has been looking down on me quite a bit—well, if I’m always making myself look lame in front of her, I guess that’s to be expected.

I propose that we settle for calling it a tie, but the competition fiend Senjougahara refuses to relinquish her loss.

“Come, order me as you see fit,” she says.

How resolute.

And I’m telling you, your resolution is just a hairbreadth away from self-abandonment...

“I suppose this is divine punishment for underhandedly hoping that if I went first, we might hit the time limit after one of my songs.”

She nonchalantly reveals her unscrupulous scheme.

Maybe it really *was* divine punishment. The gods are always watching—okay, no, the gods probably wouldn’t be paying attention to as insipid a scheme as that.

And besides.

If we’re going to bring gods into this, there *is* no god currently presiding over this town—but in any case.

The date comes to an end.

Our last high school date.

After pitting ourselves against each other in two competitions in the afternoon, and after I scored two consecutive victories, the atmosphere has become a tad bit menacing, but in the sense that we carried out our plan from start to finish, things progressed quite smoothly, or perhaps I should say we managed to end the day with a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

“Stop right there, Araragi-kun. What do you think you’re doing, acting like everything is over? We’re not ready to wrap things up. You haven’t given me an order yet. Why don’t you try bending me to your

will?"

...

Well, a promise is a promise, I guess...

It would be silly to keep dragging this out.

That said, thinking up any demand beyond “walking arm in arm,” let alone a wholesome one, is asking a bit too much of my vocabulary.

“How about we do a bridal carry all the way to the parking lot?”

A suggestion just came from the one taking the orders.

*I'm telling you, if we do things this way, it doesn't make a difference whether you win or lose,* I once again have to think, but perhaps this is the most appropriate solution.

“To clarify, I don't mean that I will bridal carry you, but that *you* will be bridal carrying me.”

Well, duh.

If we did it the other way around, it would be a *groom* carry. What kind of weird penalty would that be? Though I guess a bridal carry is already plenty enough like a punishment.

But Senjougahara will be the one to suffer the most damage in this scenario, so I guess it works out alright.

“If you say I'm heavy, I'll kill you.”

That's the first time I've heard the word “kill” out of Senjougahara's mouth in a while... This doesn't feel all that romantic.

Senjoughara's weight aside, I have my doubts about my physical strength now that I've lost every bit of my vampire powers, so I first tell her to wrap her arms around my neck so I don't drop her, and then I proceed to bridal carry her the several hundred meters to the parking lot.

“Impressive, Araragi-kun. All that time you've spent holding a little girl in your arms has really paid off.”

People are going to misunderstand if you phrase it like that. I must ask that you refrain.

“But now that Shinobu-chan is of a more busty size, it's going to be much harder to hold her, or give her piggyback rides, or let her sit on your shoulders. I suppose you'll have to start training.”

Now that she's in her full form, I don't think I'm going to be carrying Shinobu around like that anymore... but it makes for quite the mental image.

While talking about such things, and while being showered with curious glances, Senjougahara and I arrive back at the parking lot where we parked the rental car this afternoon—and I convince her to at least let me pay the parking fee.

“Hah. That was embarrassing.”

Senjougahara says that the moment she sits in the driver’s seat.

That’s all you have to say about being bridal carried? I mean, I guess that’s about what I would expect...

“It was like staring into the pits of Hell.”

You’d really go that far?

Well, I suppose you could say it was more hellish than actual Hell.

And *now*, for real this time, all that’s left is to go home. Watching Senjougahara in the driver’s seat, I start to feel like getting a license of my own, and not just because she told me to. Though it’s possible that the reason she looks so happy is not because she enjoys driving itself, but because her heart is fluttering in anticipation of the plans she has after this, her date with her dad...

Still, even if you have a license, if you don’t have a car of your own, you can’t really go out freely... It’s not like we can rent a car every single time we have to go somewhere.

All that’s left is to go home—that’s what I said, but at the last second, I remember that there’s something I have to say before we go our separate ways for the evening.

It’s something I should have said today, this morning, at the very start, but regrettably, I was so overwhelmed by the scandal of Hitagi Senjougahara’s driver’s license that I completely lost my chance to say it.

She hasn’t said anything about it herself, so for a moment, the devious thought that I could get through the day without ever bringing it up crosses my mind, but of course, I can’t let myself do that.

“Senjougahara,” I suddenly begin. “I need to ask you something important.”

“If you’re asking for my hand in marriage, sure thing.”

“No, it’s not *that* important. And that was too quick an answer. Actually, it’s about my return gift for the chocolate you gave me on Valentine’s Day... I don’t have anything yet.”

I thought about dozens of different ways to say it, but in the end, I just tell her the honest truth.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t have time to get anything ready. While I was thinking about what to do, I started overthinking it... If I really pushed it, I figured I could make it in time with some store-bought marshmallows or something, but that didn’t seem right, either... And while I was overthinking it, I

started overthinking overthinking it, until I left myself without any options...”

I had the idea to take advantage of an opening and buy something today, but said opportunity never came up—and to begin with, waiting for Senjougahara to show an opening is absolutely absurd. The one chance I might have had was when we were in the planetarium... but I fell asleep, too.

“So could you wait two or three days for me? Naturally, I plan to pay you back with according interest.”

“What, so you were worried about that? You needn’t fret over that in the least. Interest, honestly? I’m already fully aware of the fact that you hate holidays, you know.”

In contrast to my sincere plea, Senjougahara’s response is incredibly nonchalant.

“It would sound mean to say ‘I wasn’t expecting anything,’ but I wasn’t waiting to get a gift, so just accompanying me on this date today has been plenty. If you ever feel like getting me something, you can just give it to me then—I didn’t give you chocolate because I wanted a return gift.”

I never would have expected that opinion from Senjougahara, a stickler for repaying loans, but perhaps that’s what gift-giving is all about.

“In fact, you could say it was precisely because you hate holidays that we were able to form the relationship we have now—do you remember that? We started dating on Mother’s Day, yes?”

“Oh, now that you mention it...”

I do remember that part.

But now that I think back on it, I recall that everything started when I fled my house that day after a fight with my sisters over whether or not I’d celebrate Mother’s Day. Looking back on it, I was being awfully immature... but the park I ended up at, Shirohebi Park, is where I coincidentally crossed paths with Senjougahara.

And soon after that, she confessed to me.

I see.

In that case, you could certainly say that it was because I disliked Mother’s Day that I was able to start dating Senjougahara—and at the same time, it serves as a reminder of the curious connections that can bring people together.

I never would have expected a quarrel with sisters to hold so much importance... Now that I’ve started getting along relatively well with my sisters, I often wonder why things couldn’t have always been this way, but if we’d had a better relationship back then, I never would have met Senjougahara or Hachikuji that day...

What a curious thing.

It's not so different from how it's impossible to avoid mistakes when trying to carry out righteousness, so it's precisely *because* we make mistakes that we're able to eventually reach something right.

...Wait, where did I hear *that* idea from?

“Don’t worry. I don’t intend to become an annoying woman who never lets my boyfriend forget our anniversaries... I’m the only one who has to remember them. For instance, how the day you caught me was May 8, how the day I confessed and we started dating was May 14, how the day of our first date and first kiss was June 13, how the day of first French kiss was...”

“You’re being plenty annoying!”

Forget annoying, that’s just scary.

Maybe it’s just that she has an especially good memory, though.

“The real shame is that although we’ve been classmates since our freshman year, I never had a very strong first impression of you... About all I can remember is that you often fought with Oikura-san. I’d like to alter my memories so that I was always madly in love with you, but is there any good way to do that, I wonder? Perhaps I should forge my own diary.”

“I remember you during our freshman year pretty well, though... Since you seemed like a sheltered noblewoman.”

“What’s this? So you were madly in love with me?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say *that*...”

Either way, there’s no way to change the past, so we just have to put our hopes in the future—at any rate, I was less concerned about having her complain or making her mad and more worried that I might hurt Senjougahara’s feelings if I didn’t have a present ready for her, so it’s a relief to hear that.

“Daddy will be sure to give me a White Day present, so don’t worry about it.”

That remark leaves me feeling a little bit anxious, but even taking that into consideration, let’s just say that things thankfully managed to resolve themselves without incident.

Of course, she may have said “if you ever feel like getting me something,” but *not* feeling like it isn’t really an option, so I’m just grateful she gave me an extension—though in truth, since I also received obligation chocolate from Hanekawa, I need to think about *her* return gift too (do you still have to give triple the return for obligation chocolate?), and if Hanekawa is coming home for the graduation ceremony, that means I also need to prepare Senjougahara’s gift by then, so in reality, it only amounts to an extension of one or two days.

“Hm.”

It happens the moment I let my guard down.

Senjougahara looks like she just hit upon some brilliant idea—and as soon as she does, her movements are quick as lightning, slamming on the brake and stopping the car on the side of the road.

However, I have no way of telling what she hit upon from the passenger's seat—my breath is taken away by this impetuous, chaotic turn of events.

"Araragi-kun," says Senjougahara—and the tone of her voice has changed.

It's gone deep, deep, deep, resoundingly deep.

"This is unforgivable."

"Huh?"

"Of all things, to not prepare anything for your lover on White Day, one of the three biggest events for couples... I have to doubt whether you truly love me."

"Huh? What?"

"I'd heard that some men stop showing consideration for girls after they start dating them, but I never would have guessed you were one of them, Araragi-kun. You've betrayed my expectations. I can hardly hide my disappointment. I spent all day heart a-pounding, stomach a-fluttering, trembling in excitement, wondering what kind of surprise you had in store for me, so to hear you have absolutely nothing to give me is an utter letdown. And here I was sure you would, at the very least, gift me with a cruiser."

"I-Isn't that a pretty mega-sized gift to hope for?"

"Ahh, maybe I'll just kill myself..."

Senjougahara droops against the steering wheel—now that she's putting on this much of an act, this is starting to feel like watching some kind of skit...

She could learn a thing or two from Tadatsuru, who pulled off a stunningly realistic farce.

I wonder what flash of enlightenment would cause her to put on this sort of one-man show... Despite thinking that to myself, I know I can't just leave her like this, so:

"S-Sorry. But see? I'm apologizing," I respond. "Please don't kill yourself. I-In that case, what should I do to make you forgive me? I can't get you a cruiser, but I'll do whatever I can..."

While it's a total mystery why she suddenly did a 180 on something she already forgave me over, there's no doubt that I'm the one in the wrong regarding this particular matter, so I have no choice but to bow my head like a sycophant.

“You’ll do whatever you can? Is that what you said just now?”

Senjougahara pounces on the opportunity.

Almost as if that’s exactly what she’d been waiting for.

This is the happiest she’s looked all day... If she’s happiest *now*, it makes me wonder what the point of everything else was.

“You swore you’d give me your unconditional obedience?”

“N-No, I didn’t actually say that...”

“...”

“I said it. I said it. With these very lips, I swore I’d give you my unconditional obedience.”

For the record, during the “...” part, Senjougahara looked like she was about to cry... Now that she’s become this expressive, she’s almost like a quick-change artist.

But now I see. So Senjougahara wanted to make me obey her that badly, huh...? She’s taking advantage of this chance to pull off what she couldn’t manage back during bowling and karaoke.

The linking arms bit aside, if we consider the bridal carry, one of your wishes has basically already been granted... Is there really something you want me to do so badly that you’d take back the forgiveness you already offered me...? What frightening tenacity.

Does she intend to make a sexy demand of me?

No, thinking back on it now, that was probably just a joke she made up on the spot...

“I see. How generous of you; I’d expect no less from the man I fell in love with. I’ve fallen for you all over again.”

“...”

It seems I finally succeeded in today’s goal of making my lover fall for me all over again at the very, very end... but depending on how things go, this may become *my* end, so it’s hard to feel entirely happy about it.

“To think you’d unconditionally obey one request of mine for the rest of your life, without even knowing what it might be.”

“For the rest of my life?!?”

If it’s something I have to obey for the rest of my life, hasn’t it gone beyond the level of a simple “request”? I’ve basically just handed Senjougahara a slavery contract, or perhaps a blank check, or at

least *some* kind of overwhelming authority to... N-No, wait, I have faith in her.

I have faith in my girlfriend, Hitagi Senjougahara.

She's not the same person she used to be.

I'm sure she won't demand anything too crazy!

Although, from the moment she started calling for my lifelong obedience, it already got pretty crazy...

“Y-Yeah, for the rest of my life. Got it. So, what do you want me to do?”

“Call me by my name. For the rest of your life,” says Senjougahara—and her face...

It's simply bright red.

“Say my name.”

“...Huh? I say it all the time. ‘Senjougahara,’ I mean.”

“No, I mean my first name. Without any honorifics.”

“...”

I see now.

That must be something we never managed on our first date—and never managed throughout all of high school. The two of us, a pair of lovers.

So that's why she instated a penalty during bowling and karaoke... She was trying to create an opportunity for us to say that.

That is indeed a lingering regret from our high school years.

And it does indeed feel awkward to say after all this time.

Without an opportunity like this, it's something we may never have said—and so, I must unconditionally obey that order, for the rest of my life.

I must continue to say that name for the rest of my life.

And there's nothing... I could desire more.

There's nothing more I could ask for.

“Hitagi.”

“Thank you, Koyomi.”

Before I even have to say anything, Hitagi guesses what I'm feeling—and calls me by that name.

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[<sup>1</sup>] “Make drama” is a term that was coined by baseball player Shigeo Nagashima, referring to a come-from-behind victory in the Central League pennant race. An off-shoot of that term, “make miracle,” later came about when people were hoping for the Yomiuri Giants to score a similar come-from-behind victory.

Now for the epilogue—or perhaps I should call it the conclusion.

After escorting Hitagi home—well, I was just sitting in the passenger’s seat, so in truth, it’s more like Hitagi dropped me off—I walk all the way back to the Araragi household in what’s become the dark of night, only to experience a sense of *déjà vu*.

It’s the feeling that something like this happened yesterday, too.

To be more precise, there’s a figure lying in wait for me outside the Araragi household—it’s too dark to tell who it is from here, but of course, there’s no way it could be Hitagi, who I just parted ways with.

*What, did Ononoki-chan come out of the house because she was worried about me? Or is it one of my sisters?* I think to myself as I move closer to get a better look.

But that pitch black figure... is none other than Ougi Oshino.

It’s Ougi-chan.

“Hey there, Araragi-senpai—I’ve been waiting for you. I’ve grown tired of waiting for you. Waiting for you really tired me out.”

That greeting is exactly the same as what her uncle used to say—and that facetious and flippant smile on her face is equally reminiscent of him.

“How did it go? Did you enjoy your final date with Senjougahara-senpai? Out of consideration for you two, I refrained from cutting into it in the real world. You ought to appreciate that,” Ougi-chan says with a shrug.

“I do appreciate it... but calling it our ‘final date’ gives the wrong impression. This was only our final date as high school students.”

“Is that so? Oh, yes, I certainly hope so... I certainly hope you two have a future.”

“...”

“Oh, no, I truly do feel that way. Please don’t misinterpret that. I really do, believe it or not. I just foolishly worry that a few things could get in the way of that... you see? Regardless, with this, you should have no lingering regrets.”

Haha, she laughs.

“Say, Araragi-senpai,” Ougi-chan then continues. “I’d like to ask you something, simply for my own reference... What do you intend to do from here on out?”

“...? What do you mean?”

“I mean exactly what I said. Please don’t overthink it—though perhaps you could consider it a twist, or curveball, or extension on my question of what righteousness is.”

“An extension...”

“And an extra inning, I suppose.”

What is righteousness?

Yeah, that’s right. She asked me that question—and she said that we should continue the discussion the next time we met.

When did she say that?

If it wasn’t in the real world... was it in a dream?

Or was it in Hell?

“...Ougi-chan. Did you try to have me exterminated? Did you seek out a specialist in order to do that?”

“Oh dear, who told you that groundless rumor? That is a tragic piece of misinformation—please allow me to explain myself. I would never do anything to hurt you, Araragi-senpai,” Ougi-chan says.

She says it with complete composure, without seeming the least bit perturbed.

“I told you, didn’t I? I’m counting on you to make the right decision—to back out of this, rather than falling for Gaen-san’s honeyed words.”

“...Did you say that?”

Oh well. If she claims she said it, then she probably did.

Besides, even if she *didn’t* really say it, my response doesn’t change. Whether it’s right or wrong, I have only one answer to give her.

“But y’know, I can’t do that—forsaking Hachikuji or Shinobu isn’t an option for me. I don’t have any choice—I don’t have any room in my heart for that. I don’t know what righteousness is, but I do know what path I’ve chosen.”

“I do wish you wouldn’t rush to a decision like that... but I suppose it’s no surprise. I only bothered asking because I had nothing to lose. That said, it’s quite a shame,” Ougi-chan says, not seeming especially disappointed. “Personally, I would prefer that you bowed out here—but I suppose that putting too much pressure on you would be overstepping my bounds. ...Hey, Araragi-senpai. I’d like to correct a mistaken impression you might have.”

“A mistaken impression? What do you think... I’m mistaken about?”

“*I am not the Darkness.*”

“!”

That surprises me—but I think I managed to hide it.

But still, it’s difficult to maintain my composure.

More than being surprised at what she actually said, I’m shocked that Ougi-chan came out and said it herself.

She’s always been an underclassman with a knack for treading on thin ice—but this statement breaks straight into the core of things.

It sounds almost like a declaration of war.

Like a signal that the battle has begun.

However, Ougi-chan herself doesn’t seem to think she said anything that important, as she says, “By the way, Araragi-senpai,” and swiftly changes the subject.

It’s a smooth enough topic change to make me wonder if I misheard what she said just now.

“Don’t you have anything for me?”

“Hm... uh... Have what?”

“A return gift for White Day. Don’t you remember? I gave you chocolate on Valentine’s Day. Godiva chocolate.”

“Godiva...?”

Was I really given something that expensive?

I don’t remember that at all... but since Ougi-chan herself says that she gave it to me, I must have just forgotten—but to completely forget that he was given chocolate is behavior one could call pretty unbecoming of a man.

“Haha... Judging from the look on your face, I suppose you don’t have anything to give me. That’s a shame.”

She actually *does* look disappointed this time.

It pains me to see her looking like that.

“In that case, perhaps I’ll have you listen to a request of mine instead, just like Senjougahara-senpai

did... How does that sound?"

I don't know when she learned about that private agreement we made as a couple, but now that she's come to me with that proposal, it's hard to refuse her. No matter what she asks of me, I can't blow her off.

Though of course, if she tries asking me to stay out of things, I fully intend to turn her down.

However, the request she makes of me is of an entirely different variety—no, perhaps it's along the same lines, but the direction the line extends is the complete opposite of what I expected.

"You've gone to Hell, and you've gone on a date, so perhaps you no longer have any lingering regrets—but as things stand now, *I still have one thing left to do in this town.*"

"...Something left to do?"

"Yes, something left to do. A lingering regret—I was born in order to do this. I have an unshakable objective, as well as a purpose. Though perhaps that will come as a surprise to you," Ougi-chan begins.

I listen quietly.

I listen to hear about her objective. Her purpose.

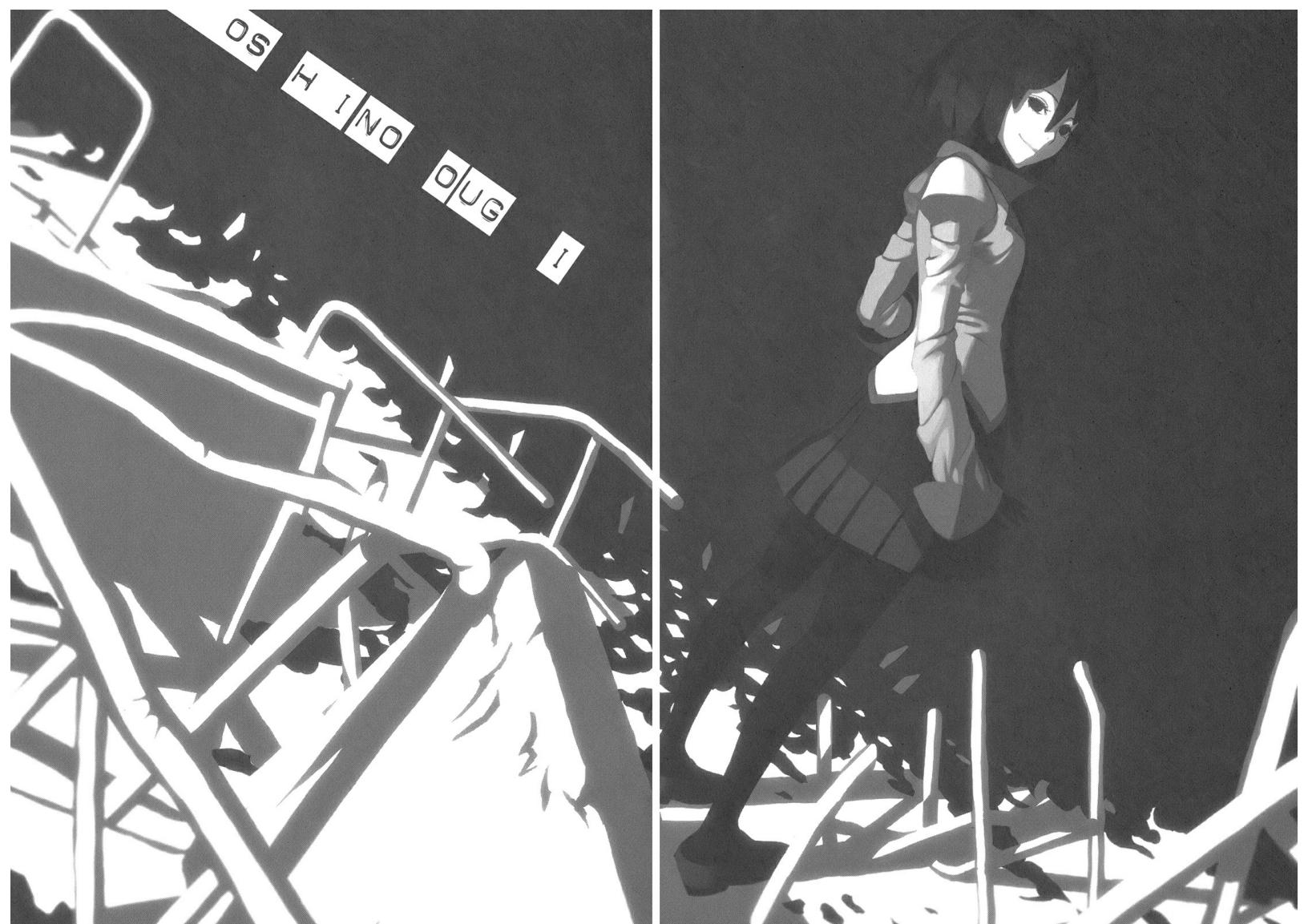
"I would gladly die in order to accomplish that. Do you have a goal that you'd give your life to achieve, Araragi-senpai? I do. I have one more left. So I must be sure to accomplish that, no matter the cost—but if the boss of the specialists, Izuko Gaen, plans to lay a trap for me, that is where she'll do it. Oh, yes, I'm fully aware. I'm fully aware, but I have no choice but to get caught in her trap—I have no choice but to resign myself to her counterattack."

"..."

"In other words, I'm about to engage in a point blank fight, devoid of trickery, with that lady who knows everything... And so, Araragi-senpai. When that time comes, will you take my side?

"Please save me."

Ougi Oshino asks that with an untroubled smile.



# Ougi Dark

## 001

It's because of Ougi Oshino that I'm here today. It's because that mysterious girl, a veritable bundle of the unknown, showed up in our town, that I—that we are where we are today.

We have today—and we have a future.

I'm sure the day will come when I'm able to think of it that way—I'm still not ready to do that, and thinking about all the things she did, thinking about all the messes she made, it's hard to believe that day really *will* come, but regardless, I'm sure that in the future, I will come to remember her that way.

That's how I am.

And that's what she is.

Ougi Oshino.

I will remember her... as a symbol of my youth.

That's right—in days to come, when I think back on the high school years of Koyomi Araragi, I'm sure the first thing to come to mind won't be Hitagi Senjougahara, Tsubasa Hanekawa, or Suruga Kanbaru, nor will it be Shinobu Oshino or Mayoi Hachikuji. It will be the smiling face of Ougi Oshino.

A smile that shows no indication of what she's thinking.

A smile that makes you wonder what she's so amused by.

A smile worn by one whose intentions and history are unknown.

It will be that very smirk she always wore.

Having said that, in the present, from my present standpoint, the reason why she was always smiling is quite evident—I'm sure she was amused by my foolishness. I'm sure she found a fool like me, who failed to realize who she was for so very long, utterly laughable—and in truth, it's difficult to hold back a snicker.

I almost want to laugh at myself.

I want to burst into hysterics.

And so, in the end, perhaps it was all just a comedy.

Those days of my youth.

The last year I spent as a high school student.

The year that began when I encountered a legendary vampire—it was a year full of pain, full of sadness, full of suffering, full of ugliness, full of hopelessness, yet still, perhaps when I look back on it one day...

When I talk about it to someone, when I tell everyone about it...

When I speak of it... for all I know, it will just be a funny story, one I ought to tell with a smile, filled with a foolish fondness for myself.

“For all you know? Oh, but you *do* know—though I don’t know anything myself.”

I’m sure that’s what Ougi-chan would say.

“You’re the one who knows... Araragi-senpai.”

That’s right.

I knew—I’m sure that from the very beginning, I knew full well who Ougi Oshino really was.

What a laugh.

If I close my eyes and think back, an assortment of surreal scenes I've encountered over the past year come to mind—I'm not going to bother listing them all off at this point, but today, that is, the evening of March 14, after finishing my date with Hitagi Senjougahara, I have found myself face-to-face with one final romp of surrealism that could give all those instances a run for their money.

Shirohebi Park.

That's the setting. I didn't know how to pronounce the name of the park for a long time, but yesterday, in the pits of Hell, after tracing back several misreadings and misspellings over the ages, I discovered that its name is neither "Rouhaku" nor "Namishiro," but "Shirohebi"—but at any rate, this scene is unfolding in that very park.

It's a game of baseball.

Well, there aren't enough players, so it might be more accurate to say it's a game of *pretend* baseball... but either way, three people—filling the roles of pitcher, batter, and catcher—are acting out a baseball match.

Baseball in the park.

That in itself could be considered perfectly conventional, but the characters in play and the tools they're using make for quite the surreal image. It's pure surrealism without a dash of reality.

The pitcher is Izuko Gaen-san.

She may be wearing a baseball cap, but she looks like the very antithesis of an athlete, possessing a slender frame wrapped up in loose, baggy attire—and no matter how young she may look, she's a respectable adult lady, far past the age to be innocently playing around in the park.

The batter is Shinobu Oshino.

It would be one thing if she were still the tiny girl she had been until just other day, but as a tall, slender, long-haired blonde in a gorgeous dress, an unparalleled beauty so dazzling it makes you want to avert your eyes, not to mention one wearing stilettos, her gripping a metal bat and awaiting the ball with one foot forward is akin to a sewing machine on a dissecting table.<sup>[1]</sup> The image is unbalanced enough to be a dissecting table on top of a sewing machine.

Oh, I made one mistake there. A careless mistake.

It's not a bat. The object she is currently gripping much like an oar isn't a metal bat—it's a Japanese longsword.

A fine sword even an amateur could identify on sight.

The sword dubbed “Kokorowatari,” also known as the “oddity slayer.”

It’s “giving a demon a metal rod”<sup>[2]</sup> in action—as an honest-to-goodness vampire who has fully regained all the properties that entails, she’s in good health and high spirits during the nighttime, leaving her truly invigorated as she goes through the motions of a night game.

That said, the King of Oddities here seemed to be doing just fine yesterday morning at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, so it would seem the true form of a rare, legendary, super strong species of vampire—the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, and cold-blooded vampire—can actually withstand quite a bit of sunlight if she strengthens her defenses enough.

“Hey, hey! The pitcher’s scared stiff!”

And finally, pounding on her mitt while—for some inexplicable reason—heckling the one who ought to be her dearly beloved in this scenario, the pitcher, is the only one here of an appropriate age to be playing baseball in the park, a young pigtailed girl—Mayoi Hachikuji.

She’s playing the role of catcher in a skirt, squatting down with her knees spread apart, which means her underwear is on full display.

She really let her guard down.

Now that’s a pair of panties I really didn’t need to see.

To begin with, as a fundamental attribution, I think she should at least put down her backpack while playing baseball—though maybe she’s using the backpack to maintain her balance in that precarious position.

Everything I’ve described is already surreal enough as it is, but to make matters even worse, the object they’re using as a ball is a conveniently sized rock.

A rock?

So they’re throwing a rock and hitting it with a sword...?

What kind of baseball *is* this?

It looks less like a baseball game and more like an outdoor kendo match.

It’s a spectacle that, as an upstanding citizen, I sort of feel like I should report to the police upon witnessing, but there are people I personally know involved—actually, there’s nothing *but* people I personally know involved, so I wonder to myself if I should at least pretend I didn’t see anything, turn around and leave, and see if I can join in on the Senjougaharas’ father-daughter date, but...

“You can’t,” says the young girl next to me.

Ononoki-chan holds me back. She tries to stop me through the adorable gesture of tugging on my

sleeve, so even a man as renowned for his audacity as I am has no choice but to come to a halt.

Of course, even without that, contrary to her adorable, doll-like appearance, Ononoki-chan possesses incredible, Herculean strength, so her just tugging on my sleeve is nearly as effective as holding me in place with a stake.

“You’re going to settle things tonight, aren’t you?”

“Well, yeah...”

“There’s nothing I can do as long as Onee-chan isn’t around—but I’ll at least watch over your fight. So c’mon. Go get in the loop,” Ononoki-chan urges. I think getting in *that* loop will take an inordinate amount of courage, but regardless, if I’m hearing that from a girl who—putting aside the stuff she’s made of—is about half my height, I can’t very well chicken out.

I step onto the diamond—I mean, the park grounds.

“Oh! There you are, my master!”

Shinobu is the first one to notice me.

Seeing that beautiful, elegant, lovely, radiant—at any rate, that blonde beauty with a first-rate figure, who there could never be enough flowery words to describe, innocently waving her hand (actually, she’s waving the sword) and calling out to me like that feels a little awkward, or rather, disorienting.

“That took you long enough! We’ve been waiting for you—we were growing bored, so we decided to partake in a game of croquet to pass the time!”

So it was croquet...

I’ve heard that croquet was the prototype for baseball, but I have close to no knowledge of what the sport actually entails.

“Ha! “Haha! “Hahahaha!” she laughs.

After rushing up to me, Shinobu lifts me up and spins me around in the air—it’s a motion almost like a Giant Swing, or maybe reminiscent of an adult horsing around with a small child, but given our current height difference, it’s become perfectly doable for her.

It’s the height reversal phenomenon.

But man, you’re in awfully high spirits, Shinobu-san.

You could say this is the most spirited I’ve seen her since spring break.

I seem to remember her enthusiasm back then came from her delight at having her true form restored... Maybe it *would* be a delight, having your true body back.

While I'm being literally tossed about by Shinobu, Hachikuji and Ononoki-chan look on with indescribable expressions. Perhaps to them, watching me undergo the same treatment I give *them* on a regular basis—more than it evokes any sense of satisfaction at seeing me get my just deserts—is just a depressing sight to see.

It's like seeing a scary upperclassman kowtowing to an even scarier upperclassman... Still, in that sense, Shinobu handling me this way serves as a fitting revenge.

What a truly satisfying tale of vengeance.

Enough so that even *I* feel good about what's happening to me.

Either way, considering how I always handled Shinobu in her little girl form, I'd have no grounds to complain even if she gave me the full course of hugs and piggyback rides right here.

However, it would seem Shinobu has become big-hearted enough to match her new size, as she lets me go once she's had her fill of jerking me around.

She told me she's influenced by her outward age, so as much as it saddens me, I suppose I really can't describe Shinobu the same way I did when she was a little girl.

...Well, I guess if she had the outward appearance of a 27-year-old, but her personality remained that of a young girl, it would surpass even the realm of surrealism.

I've never actually had this experience, but this feels a bit like meeting an incredibly energetic cousin during summer break.

“H-Hachikuji...”

After being swung about and wrung for every drop of enjoyment I'm worth, I reach out towards the little girl in front of me, despite having completely lost my sense of balance. Thinking about it, Hachikuji passed out immediately after I forcibly abducted her from Hell, so it truly has been six months since I stood face-to-face with her in the real world.

It's a terrible shame that I'm too dizzy to catch her in my customary embrace.

“Don't you think we did quite enough of that in Hell, Baragaki-san?”<sup>[3]</sup>

“Okay, that sounds pretty cool, but Hachikuji, don't make me sound like I'm the childhood version of Toshizou Hijikata. I have no hope of living up to that name. My name is Araragi.”

“Sorry, I stuttered.”

“No, you did it on purpose...”

“I stutttered.”

“It wasn’t on purpose?!”

“I stooped.”

“That fits with the catcher theme, but still!”

Thankfully, *that* exchange went well enough that you’d never be able to tell we went so long without practicing it.

Though I guess we did that one in Hell, too.

“I was sure we’d just about run out of variations on your stutters, but it turns out there’s no end of ways to twist my name around...”

“But you know, doing this IRL truly has a whole different feel to it.”

“Don’t call the real world ‘IRL.’”

Why are you treating Hell like it’s a virtual world?

It’s just like how kids these days call their local bookshop a “brick-and-mortar bookstore.” That’s not a trend I can get on board with.

“It’s good to see you, too, Ononoki-san. Thank you for all your help back then.”

“Mm. I’m pleased to see you’ve returned.”

That’s how Ononoki-chan responds.

I’m not sure what position that response is supposed to put her in (I can’t even tell if she’s acting superior)—but I see, I guess it’s been six whole months since Ononoki-chan, Shinobu, and Hachikuji were all gathered in the same place like this.

Back then, I reveled in my own delight at having a tiny girl, a little girl, and a young girl all lined up (what was wrong with me?), but thanks to Shinobu’s sudden growth spurt, they’ve been reunited in a slightly different form this time around.

Oh, now that I think of it, I’m a little curious—there’s something I need to check. Of course, it’s something I really should’ve gone ahead and confirmed yesterday.

I reach a hand towards Hachikuji’s chest.

Hey, she ran away.

“What’s wrong, Hachikuji?”

“What’s wrong with your *brain*? Would you care to explain why you suddenly tried to get a handful

of my developing breasts?"

"No, it's just that I was wondering what state you're in right now—I dragged you out of Hell without thinking about it, but does this mean you've come back to life just like I did? Or else..."

"It's that 'or else,' Koyomin."

After watching over our little skit for a while as the resident adult, Gaen-san speaks up from atop the mound—though it's not like the ground is actually raised or anything—and cuts into our conversation.

Given our current positioning, it feels like I was just thrown a pickoff attempt.

"I'm sorry to say that Hachikuji-chan's body was cremated—ahaha, if she'd been buried, we'd be looking at a much more grotesque image right about now. She'd be a zombie, or maybe a Jiangshi—in any case, her current state is just the same as when you first met her in this park. She's a spirit. A ghost."

As she explains that, she drops the rock she was holding unceremoniously to the ground.

"There was a small chance that wasn't the case, so I looked into it during the day. While you were off on your lovey-dovey date with Senjougahara-san, that is."

"Lovey-dovey date...?"

What an expression.

Besides, it wasn't anything that saccharine. It was a little bit more hair-raising, and a little bit more bizarre.

But I see now—I guess things never work out quite that neatly. Actually, depending on how you think about it, I'm not sure whether Hachikuji coming back to life would be a good or bad thing here—she's been dead for 11 years, so even if she were resurrected now, she wouldn't have a place to stay as a human any more than she does as a ghost. Rather, if she came back to life, it would just bind her to a physical body, leaving her more out of place than ever.

But still.

It would at least be better than Hell... right?

"...I'm sorry, Hachikuji."

Despite thinking that to myself, I have to bow my head.

It wouldn't be inaccurate to say I'm hanging it in shame.

"I dragged you along with me on the spur of the moment—but thinking about it now, I just wasted six months of your hard work piling stones. If you'd just kept at it, the Jizo Bodhisattva would've let you

reincarnate..."

But I...

Simply because I couldn't bear to see it, I forced Hachikuji to desert her post—but the one to bear the punishment for that won't be me; it'll be Hachikuji.

She won't even be paying for her own mistakes this time.

"It's alright, Araragi-san. Please don't worry about it too much—Gaen-san and I have already come to an agreement regarding that."

"? An agreement?"

With Gaen-san?

That stirs up a bit of uneasiness within me—I instinctively glance over my shoulder at Gaen-san, but she just shrugs her shoulders, playing dumb.

"I don't consider it an inconvenience that you rescued me," Hachikuji continues. "Hell was, after all, Hell itself. As a matter of fact, when that thread dropped down from the heavens, I secretly considered pushing you out of the way and climbing it myself."

"You sure have some outrageous thoughts."

She's worse than Kandata.

Of course, she's probably just cracking a joke—hearing that from her isn't quite enough to clear my conscience.

"Now, now, I'll be sure to touch on all that business, so why don't we get started on our briefing, now that we've got you here with us? We're putting an end to everything today, so let's move things along nice and quickly. In the meantime, Koyomin... would you mind ordering that grown-up, gorgeous slave of yours to stop bullying my junior's shikigami?"

I look over...

And there I see Shinobu Oshino throttling Yotsugi Ononoki, completely devoid of context or purpose—it looks like she's in the midst of repaying Ononoki-chan for all the verbal abuse she was subjected to over the summer, just as Ononoki-chan feared.

I take back everything I said.

Regardless of whether she's in her full form or whether she's an adult, it would seem my partner's personality remains as vindictive as ever.

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[1] This is a reference to a famous quote by Comte de Lautréamont, an influential surrealist poet, where he describes a young boy as “beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella.”

[2] “Giving a demon a metal rod” is a Japanese proverb that refers to making a strong person even stronger.

[3] “Baragaki” is a nickname that was given to Toshizou Hijikata, vice commander of the Shinsengumi, when he was a child. The nickname meant “a boy so violent that to touch him hurts like a rose’s thorns.”

Calling us bitter enemies banded together by fate would be a stretch, but it's hard to deny that we make for a bit of a motley crew—however, if you think about what an incredible lineup we have here, you could very well consider this a gathering of notabilities. Nevertheless, the reason for the ragtag impression our team gives is that we each clash with one another—we clash with every other one of us.

Shinobu Oshino—the full form of a legendary vampire who flew in from overseas.

Mayoi Hachikuji—a ghost who was resurrected from the depths of Hell.

Yotsugi Ononoki—a corpse doll shikigami whose master ran off.

Izuko Gaen—an oddity-exorcising specialist, and head of said organization.

And I, Koyomi Araragi, am a former formerly human vampire, currently a human. It doesn't look like we'd have much to gain from one another, and it doesn't look like we'd be on the same page about anything, so I guess from an objective standpoint, we would just look like a group of oddballs hanging around in the park.

"I put up a barrier, so don't worry; I don't forget to take precautions. No outsiders allowed. We've reserved the area for a bit," Gaen-san states cheerfully.

A barrier, huh...? I've gotten used to hearing that word.

We all move from the open space of the park to a nearby bench.

Gaen-san sits Ononoki-chan on her lap.

It's hard to tell because she's expressionless, but Ononoki-chan seems a bit uncomfortable—I can't say for sure whether dolls actually have emotions or not, but I can understand that feeling of hers quite well.

As someone who is currently being held on the adult Shinobu's lap in a similar fashion, that is.

...To my regret, I've done this to Shinobu plenty of times before, so I can't think of any excuse to refuse our current positioning, but still, as someone of the age to be graduating high school, being held in the arms of an older woman like this feels rather awkward, or perhaps I should say embarrassing, or perhaps I should say "stop it Hachikuji please don't look at me like that."

Shinobu, on the other hand, has her arms wrapped around my torso like it's the most natural thing in the world, holding me tightly as if to stop me from falling out of her arms—with her chin resting on top of my head.

Gaen-san is holding Ononoki-chan, Shinobu is holding me, and Hachikuji alone is seated by herself

on the bench. Well, there's five of us here, so if we group ourselves into pairs of two, I guess there's always going to be someone left over. Still, now that it's come to this, I'd like to at least hold Hachikuji in my lap as I'm held in Shinobu's arms myself, but it seems she was wary of that, as she took advantage of being the odd one out and sat herself down a little ways away, where I can't reach her from my immobile position.

"Alrighty, then it's time for big sis here to reveal the plan I worked all yesterday and today to come up with—I'd like it if you all went along with it, but of course, I won't force you. Oh, but there's one thing I'd like to confirm first. Koyomin, did you bring what I told you to?"

"...I did. But Gaen-san, I only brought 'it' along to give it back to you, since it was yours to begin with... I don't know what you're thinking, but please be aware that my bringing it along doesn't mean I consent to whatever your plan is."

As I say that, I produce a long envelope and hand it over to Gaen-san—in truth, it's an item that I've nearly torn up countless times, yet I never managed to go through with it. I didn't have the guts, and I didn't have the ability.

Perhaps now that she's in her full form, it would be possible to have Shinobu "eat" the contents of that envelope—but that, too, would be an awful feat.

After all, the thing sealed inside "that"... is a "god."

"I know. That's fine by me, Koyomin. I have high hopes for those illogical miracles of yours, anyway."

While the lady who knows everything acts like a know-it-all, she takes the contents out of the envelope. It's a talisman.

A talisman with a snake painted on it.

It's not any old talisman either, but one whose power is certified and proven in practice—after all, it's the miracle-making talisman that once elevated a run-of-the-mill junior high school student, Nadeko Sengoku, to the level of snake god.

It's the slip of paper that Gaen-san entrusted to me immediately following our little adventure after the end of summer break—and the one I never managed to put to use.

Saying that I refused to use it would make it sound pretty cool, but in truth, it would be more accurate to say that I simply chickened out, having lost my nerve.

"Yep, that's for sure... It's in pretty good shape. I can tell you took good care of it."

Gaen-san takes the talisman I handed her and crams it into her pocket. She's being awfully rough with it—she isn't taking good care of it at all. Well, being a specialist and all, I guess she has nothing to fear from it... Wait, but if she's a specialist, shouldn't she be paying it all the more respect?

I really don't get her stance on these things.

"Hmph," Shinobu sighs.

She looks the slightest bit offended. Back when she was in the body of a little girl, Shinobu had a pretty bad time thanks to that talisman, so maybe she was reminded of that.

Or so I thought, but it would seem that isn't the case, as she follows up with, "Ay... Now that you mention it, that truly was the case. On the contrary, I was a fool not to notice. 'Twas quite a long time ago, at any rate—and 'twas not something I wished to remember."

I'm not sure what she's talking about.

It would appear Hachikuji isn't the only one Gaen-san came to an "agreement" with today during my date with Hitagi. I'm starting to feel like a bit of an outsider in this conversation.

Turns out *I* was the odd one out all along.

I wonder for a moment if Ononoki-chan might be feeling the same way, but she's as expressionless as ever, with perhaps even a vacant look in her eyes.

She might not care at all.

"Fear not, my master—'tis not as though we've heard the whole of it. We've only heard the highlights—and in particular, we have not yet heard the details of what this specialist plans to do next. We left that bit aside for after you joined up with us," says Shinobu, as if she picked up on my feelings of alienation—even though our connection has been severed, and there should no longer be a physical or emotional link between the two of us.

"Yep, that's right. Of course, my strategy was still in the works earlier in the day, so it's just as true that there wasn't much I could say about it until now. I only finished planning just now, after hearing what Hachikuji-chan and Shinobu-chan had to say."

So says Gaen-san, but unfortunately, that's a little hard for me to believe. It's even dubious whether the plan she's about to reveal, the one she "worked all yesterday and today to come up," was really made on such short notice. If I heard that she'd been planning all this ever since August, I wouldn't even be surprised... Was Ougi-chan the one who influenced me to think that way?

Ougi Oshino.

"Ougi Oshino."

Gaen-san broaches the subject.

"That is the 'enemy' we are about to face—and the opponent we must fight. A target we must exterminate, and a target we ought to despise—isn't that right, Koyomin?"

“ ”

Being told flat out that she's the “enemy,” I can't help but feel that it doesn't sound quite right—it's hard for me to think of her as anything but an underclassman of mine.

No matter what Tadatsuru says.

And... no matter what the person herself says.

“You don't seem particularly surprised, my master. Then you really had realized it all along?” inquires Shinobu as she holds me in a tight embrace, but unfortunately, she's totally off the mark. She's severely overestimating me—I never suspected Ougi-chan even once.

But still.

Maybe I really *had* known.

I don't know anything.

But maybe I knew about Ougi-chan.

I think that to myself as I feel Shinobu against my back.

“ ”

Ononoki-chan maintains her silence.

She might just be holding back, making herself seen but not heard, given that she's currently being held on the lap of her master's senior... but I feel like that doesn't really fit with Ononoki-chan's personality.

Particularly now that she's been strongly influenced by the wild personalities of my sisters, whether she's seated on Gaen-san's lap or not, I can't imagine that she would hesitate to poke fun at our conversation.

“However, and this is important... we mustn't forget that Ougi Oshino is merely a name used for convenience. It's an exceedingly half-baked alias—ah, wait, calling it an ‘alias’ isn't totally accurate. It's more like a user ID set up in order to avoid being bound by a name.”

Bound by a name?

I've... heard that mentioned before.

If I recall, when Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade lost her very existence... she was given a new name, Shinobu Oshino, a name that bound her hand and foot. Even now that she's regained her existence once more, it would appear that the binding itself is still pretty effective...

“Ougi Oshino’s very constitution is formed in the unknown, after all—losing her true identity is the one thing that makes her who she is. …Of course, there’s no real significance in calling her ‘she,’ either, aside from having a pronoun to use.”

“…You’re talking about Ougi-chan like you know her, but you’ve never actually met her, have you?” I ask.

It’s something I’ve wanted to ask her for quite a while now.

As far as I can tell from the sequence of events up till now… and as far as I can tell from what Ougi-chan herself said, those two have never met face-to-face.

Of course, it might be perfectly natural for Gaen-san, the one who knows everything, to speak of Ougi-chan that way regardless—but I can’t deny that it feels a bit unpleasant to hear her talking about an acquaintance of mine as if she knows her better than I do.

Then again, that feeling might just be closer to an inferiority complex than anything.

“I haven’t. She’s been avoiding me—or should I say, an existence like that wouldn’t appear before someone like me, who lives life without deviating from the job I’m meant to fulfill.”

“…?”

“That said, while I’ve never met her, *it’s not as though I don’t know her*. I have a bunch of things I need to explain to you, that included, but let’s go through things in order. Since we don’t have much time, I’m only going to explain things once, so you better listen up.”

As she says that, Gaen-san takes out a smallish tablet. Just like always, it looks like she’s going to explain her plan or whatever while writing notes on the screen.

This takes me back to August.

If I remember correctly, back then she gave us a lecture on Shinobu’s first servant on the grounds of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine—but it seems like the explanation is going to be even more complicated, more convoluted, and larger in scale this time around.

“I’d like to make this discussion quick so we can get to ‘the scene of the crime’ as soon as possible. Of course, I know full well that things in life rarely go exactly according to plan… but I’ve got to draw a line somewhere, at least for reference.”

“…There’s one thing I’d like to confirm. Or rather, please confirm this for me. Are you certain that Ougi-chan is going to make her move tonight? No matter what kind of trap you have set up for her, if she doesn’t make a move, that’s the end of it, right?”

“She’s going to make her move. That’s less a question of my confidence and more just a simple fact—she has to do it tonight. You could say that if she doesn’t move now, she will cease to be herself. The threat would eliminate itself…”

Gaen-san responds without the slightest bit of hesitation.

She doesn't communicate the basis for what she's saying, or in other words, she leaves out all the important parts, but she's so confident about it that I no longer feel the need to question her further. It's enough to make me think that Gaen-san's greatest strength lies not in her wealth of knowledge and information, but in the unshakeable confidence she has in herself.

Such strong conceit that it allows no room for counterargument.

It's a complete contrast to her casual aura.

...At any rate, despite tossing out a question about it, I'm confident about this particular matter myself—I have unwavering confidence that Ougi-chan will make her move today, March 14.

After all...

She told me so herself.

She told me not too long ago—right before I came here, outside the front gate of the Araragi household.

*Araragi-senpai.*

*Will you take my side?*

*Please save me.*

“...”

“Hm? Something wrong, Koyomin? You've got a troubled look on your face. Oh, you don't have to get so worked up; I'm not planning to talk about anything that complicated. In fact, now that you've already made it past your college entrance exams, this ought to be little more than an easy reading comprehension problem. I'm just going to lay out this bizarre and mysterious state of affairs in clear terms. I'd hate to say I'm checking your answers, but think of it like the solution at the end of a mystery novel.”

Revealing the solution at the end of a mystery novel.

Now *that...* ought to be Ougi-chan's role.

Or it might be Tsubasa Hanekawa's role, but she isn't here—Tsubasa Hanekawa didn't make it in time for the finale.

Still, the fact that she managed to hunt down Meme Oshino already makes her quite the detective. In any case, I probably ought to have informed Gaen-san of the possibility that her underclassman has been found, but for whatever reason, I've hesitated to do so.

I don't want to get her hopes up for nothing—is what I'm telling myself for the sake of appearances, but that's simply to cover up the truth that I don't fully trust Gaen-san.

It's not like... I'm taking Ougi-chan's side or anything.

“Well then,” Gaen-san says with a smile.

She smiles like a grand detective.

“First, I suppose I'll talk about the connection between this park and Kita-Shirahebi Shrine. That's the very source of the tragedy we've found ourselves in now. It all starts with the tragedy that befell Shirohebi Shrine, the predecessor to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, 400 years ago...”

“That said, after the lecture that novice Tadatsuru gave you in the pits of Hell—or a place *like* it, anyway—you might have already guessed some of what I’m about to tell you. It’s an answer someone quick on the uptake could reach simply after hearing the official name of this park.

“Still, it would be terrible if a deduction based on random guesses led you to a mistaken conclusion at this critical juncture—so allow me to explain everything from start to finish, just in case. You might believe this has nothing to do with Ougi Oshino, but this is where it all began and how things came to be, so I’d like you to listen carefully.

“400 years ago.

“What event comes to mind when I say that?

“I’m sure you’re not dumb enough to answer *this* question incorrectly—yes, it’s when the legendary vampire, Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, came to Japan. Nowadays, her arrival would likely stir up quite the fuss at the airport, but unfortunately, we didn’t have airports back then.

“That said—and I don’t mean this as some silly metaphor—she refrained from venturing over the sea in the Age of Discovery, instead traversing the long distance by flight.

“You’ve already heard all that from the woman herself. Since she’s sitting right here, I suppose we could just have her explain everything for us one more time, but after all the efforts I’ve gone to, I’d appreciate it if she’d allow me the honor. It’s probably not a story Shinobu-chan—or Shinobu-san, should I say—wants to tell, anyway.

“As a brief summary... Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, about 200 years old at the time, had too much time on her hands and decided to travel to various places around the world. Most immortal vampires start to grow tired of living at around the 200-year mark, so perhaps that had something to do with it.

“The incredible part in her case is that she wound up in Antarctica on her round-the-world trip—but of course, that ended up being her undoing.

“That’s because in the South Pole, there was no one else around to perceive her as an oddity. Oddities can only exist when they’re perceived by humans—and so, it was impossible to maintain her existence for an extended period of time on a gigantic uninhabited island like Antarctica. Even Heart-Under-Blade, who can become an exception to so many rules, was no exception there.

“And so, she fled from Antarctica in a panic.

“She fled with a joystick and hard jump combo.<sup>[1]</sup>

“She was so uncharacteristically flustered that she jumped without even considering where she would land. She wouldn’t act so carelessly under normal circumstances, I’m sure, but this was a dire

emergency with her very existence on the line. Besides, even if she were to land in a volcanic crater, it wouldn't pose a real problem to an ironclad immortal such as herself. To illustrate it in human terms, it would be like running out of the house barefoot in a rush. Or maybe it would be the reverse: like walking over the floor with muddy shoes while going back to get something you forgot. It was just a question of her 'footing,' no more and no less.

"Or so it should have been.

"Oh, no, that's really all it was—but there was much more in store for the area she landed in. There was more in store—or perhaps I should say she dramatically scattered something that had been stored there.

"A vast quantity of water had been stored in one region of the country we call Japan.

"And she scattered that lake—she sent it flying.

"In terms of probability, I think it's incredible that she managed that. It's like throwing a dart at a rotating globe and coincidentally managing to hit Japan—and a lake, at that. Normally you'd assume the dart would hit the ocean, or if it *did* strike land, it would be one of the Americas or Europe.

"Well, I guess you could say she had Lady Luck smiling on her. That's Heart-Under-Blade for you.

"And to top things off, that lake wasn't an ordinary lake—it was a sacred lake where that region's entire religion was concentrated, making it all the more tremendous a feat.

"A holy ground, in other words.

"Scattering *that* about is akin to leaving a giant mess in the wake of a banquet... and it's an action you'd expect to incur God's wrath, but I suppose Heart-Under-Blade eventually *did* suffer quite the punishment, so it's amazing how things work out sometimes.

"The world has a good sense of balance.

"After jumping nearly halfway across the world from Antarctica, almost like some kind of Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, Heart-Under-Blade landed on that divine lake—and utterly destroyed it.

"She dried it all up.

"Of course, she didn't sustain a single injury herself—and even if she had, it would've healed instantly—but that unfortunately wasn't the case for the land she touched down on, made impact on; I told you as much just now. However, while that after-party mess may have been worthy of condemnation in the eyes of the occult, in a more pragmatic sense, it served as a great boon to the area.

"After it soared through the air in the impact of her landing, the water of the lake just so happened to fall down upon a land that had been suffering from drought, becoming a blessed rain.

“To the residents of the land who revered the lake, it must have seemed as though a miracle had occurred. It was a fruitful rain, a result of the ‘prayers’ they recited every day and every night. And there, at the very bottom of the dried up lake, came along a gorgeous young woman with golden hair.

“She came along, or perhaps she came into creation.

“You could hardly blame them... for believing she was the manifestation of a god.

“In fact, it would be strange if they *didn’t* believe that.

“And thus, a western oddity—the vampire Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade—usurped the land’s religion.

“You could say that she kicked the old god out and took his place.

“Even before she became known as the oddity slayer, she had already murdered a god. Focusing on that part of the story makes it all the more shocking a tale.

“You’ve already heard this story plenty of times before, so I’m sure you’re getting tired of it, but have you ever tried analyzing the story from that perspective, Koyomin? As a result of Heart-Under-Blade’s chance promotion to divine status, someone was evicted from their place as a god.

“Really makes you think, doesn’t it?

“Hey now, Shinobu-san, don’t hug Koyomin so tightly. Right now he’s just a frail li’l human, so if you grip him *too* firmly, you might end up splitting him in two.

“I’m not really criticizing you, you know. It’s a story from once upon a time, long, long ago. There’s no point in saying anything about it now. If I *must* say something, however, it’d be that you refused to become a real god, despite allowing yourself to be treated as one... and that egoism of yours, unbecoming of an oddity, made matters worse.

“I’d just like to point out how it made matters worse...

“And invited the Darkness.

“As a result, Heart-Under-Blade was once again driven back to Antarctica... and I’ll omit the rest of her story after that.

“What we ought to be discussing here is the land that had its god kicked out and its fake god chased away—in other words, the land now left without a god at all.

“The land had once been blessed with rain, and its fake god had continued to bring them rain for a long time after that—but now that god was gone, the population had dwindled drastically thanks to the Darkness, and the land was on the verge of ruin.

“But nevertheless, people will continue to be born, and people have to continue living their lives—

and so, they needed a religion in order to live. That wasn't even a product of its time, really. Even now, people need to believe in something in order to keep living, don't they?

"Even I can't live life without believing in anything.

"As long as you're alive... As long as you live life as a human, you have to believe in something, and you have to believe in *someone*—but of course, whether that 'something' ends up being a god, or common sense, or the Devil, or irrationality all depends on the person in question.

"I wonder what it is for you, Koyomin?

"Knowing of oddities, knowing of vampires, and now even knowing of Hell, what will you believe in as you live out the rest of your life? What will you need to believe in to keep living on?

"In any case, having lost the lake they worshipped, and having lost their god... they needed to find themselves a new god.

"No.

"They needed to *make* themselves a new god.

"And to do that... they decided to reconstruct their shrine.

"They decided to move to a new spot.

"And that's where you can spot their mistake.

"This *is* a very old story, so we can't say this part for sure unless we go back in time to check... but it would seem the townspeople who had lost both their population and their religion chose to survive by merging together with the indigenous religion of a nearby area.

"In a way, that indigenous religion ran counter to the lake-based faith they'd held up until that point: it was a faith focused in the mountains. But you see—if I may irresponsibly point this out from the irresponsible future—bringing something that belonged in a lake up a mountain like that was totally nonsensical. Talk about amateur grafting... Still, I suppose nearly all the citizens who had worshipped the lake—or in other words, worshipped Heart-Under-Blade—had already been swallowed up by the Darkness. And the lake was all dried up at that point, too.

"The ones who moved the god's dwelling place probably didn't know any of the details. In a sense, they'd been cut off from all the old traditions and legends.

"The new generation had been left in the dark, but still they worked hard to revive an old religion—a religion that had apparently been quite effective in the past. I can't laugh them off as fools over that.

"Besides, they weren't completely off-the-mark. They had the tie they needed to perform the grafting.

"A tie.

“They had an axis—a thread to tie the mountain and the lake together.

“Though perhaps I should call that not a thread, but a coil.

“It was a serpent—or in other words, a snake.

“Let me make things as clear as the bottom of that dried up lake: the tangible vessel of the god they’d worshipped at the lake came in the form of a water snake—and the vessel worshipped by the small, indigenous mountain religion held the form of a mountain snake.

“A water snake and a mountain snake.

“They were linked by snakes.

“Have you ever heard the proverb ‘a thousand years in a sea, a thousand years in a mountain’? It refers to the legend that if a snake lives in the sea for a thousand years and a mountain for another thousand years, it will become a dragon... Miraculously enough, that was made a reality through this set up.

“However, the indigenous religion of the area was already on the decline itself, so even after the merger, all they managed to establish was a thin, drawn-out religion befitting a snake... In the end, that illogical grafting just couldn’t cut it.

“It’s like trying to forcibly cram a piece into a puzzle just because it has the right color. It may have looked like it worked at a glance, but it’s hard to deny that something feels distorted.

“That distortion... that unbalance created an air pocket. An air pocket where ‘unsavory things’ could gather. But despite that side effect and countereffect, the religion managed to stay afloat for almost 400 years, to be exact. Well, to be honest, I’m exaggerating and overselling it to make it sound more dramatic. In reality, trivial blunders like this happen all the time.

“After all, it’s the work of humans.

“It’s a given that there are going to be mistakes.

“We’d never be able to keep up if we criticized every little thing that went wrong. As long as the mistake isn’t a lie, as long as it’s not a falsehood, it’s worth it to just let it slide.

“To be more specific, although the Darkness wouldn’t permit Heart-Under-Blade to masquerade as a god, it would seem the tie between the lake and the mountains fell outside the range of its duties.

“Right-o.

“There’d be no end to it if I went into all the nitty-gritty details here, or rather, there’s a bottomless pool of things I could go into, but I think we’ve heard enough old stories for now. To sum it up, Koyomin...

“The former site of the lake that Shinobu-chan demolished with her joystick and hard jump combo is Shirohebi Park, and the shrine I just told you about, the reconstructed place of worship in the mountains, is Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.”

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[<sup>1</sup>] The phrasing here is a reference to a Japanese *Darkstalkers* (or in the Japanese version of the game, simply titled *Vampire*) meme. A gaming magazine misprinted “joystick and hard punch combo” as “joystick and hard pinch combo” in a *Darkstalkers* article, and the typo really took off.

Her conclusion is so sudden that I lose sight of what she's saying for a moment—but it's true that I had more or less inferred that ever since hearing Tadatsuru's explanation.

A snake holds properties of immortality.

It makes sense for that religion to be usurped by a vampire who possesses that very same immortality. I similarly recall hearing about the legend of a sea serpent by the name of Hydra, a monster that would keep reviving no matter how many times the hero Hercules cut it down.

There's consistency there.

However.

It's *also* true that I had never considered the story of Shinobu inadvertently being treated as a god in relation to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine—or should I say, until I heard all that from Tadatsuru, I had assumed they were two completely unrelated tales.

After all, that would mean Shinobu had already visited this town 400 years ago—and no one's ever mentioned anything about that.

Never mentioned it?

Is that really true?

Wasn't I already told back in August that this place was Shinobu's first servant's... Seishirou Shishirui's hometown?

If this was his hometown, it would inevitably mean that the town Shinobu came to 400 years ago must have been somewhere around here.

But still, I'm pretty sure Shinobu herself never said anything about that. Thinking that, I turn back to look at Shinobu, who is still holding me in her arms, but that bewitching beauty just stares at me with an expression lacking a trace of youth in it...

And goes, “??” while tilting her head to the side.

...Don't you tilt your head at me.

Now that you're not a child anymore, you just look like an idiot.

She looks like an adult now, and what's on the inside should have grown along with her appearance, but it would seem her basic personality hasn't changed much at all. This must be what they mean by “the child is father of the man.”

Besides, she possesses the incredible ability to plunge her fingers into her brain and erase her own

memories at will (and restore them, too), so she might honestly not remember unpleasant events or anything else she doesn't wish to recall.

"By the way," Gaen-san begins, as if to add on to what she just said, "after just barely scraping by for years and years whilst slowly dwindling away, Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, formerly Shirohebi Shrine, finally collapsed about 15 years ago—I told you that bit before, too. When Shinobu-san's first servant... when 'his' ashes finally found their way home, they devoured all the 'unsavory things' that had gathered here in one big gulp, swallowing up the god along with them. That's when the snake god that had been serving as a stand-in was eradicated. It was absorbed, becoming a step towards 'his' resurrection. Of course, that ended up being yet another underlying cause for what happens later."

"...I understand what you're saying, but it's a little hard to believe."

I tell her what I honestly think.

Actually, I'm not entirely confident I *do* understand what she's saying. I might not understand anything at all, even after all that.

It's not that I have my doubts about what she's saying. In fact, it feels like a lot of things are coming together.

But still, the way things are coming together sends shivers down my spine. It's a weirdly unpleasant feeling, almost like I'm being toyed with in the palm of someone's hand.

Ononoki-chan told me the same thing. But even if that *is* true, and I *am* in the palm of someone's hand, whose hand is it? Is it Gaen-san's, or perhaps Ougi-chan's, or is it someone else's altogether?

"I can take a guess at what you're thinking, but Koyomin, you've got it backwards. You might find it an unbelievable coincidence that Heart-Under-Blade once came to your town, but from the perspective of an outsider like me, it's precisely *because* this is the town that Heart-Under-Blade once visited that the situation inevitably came to be what it is now. Though of course, I can't say *that* for certain, either."

"..."

I think I've heard *that* before, too.

I heard that Shinobu came to this town because she was called here by Seishirou Shishirui, who had turned into ash. In that case, I suppose it really *was* inevitable, and that Shinobu and I would meet in this town was yet another inevitability.

I'm sure the townscape has completely changed over the course of 400 years, so even if Shinobu were a more attentive person, she probably wouldn't have been able to notice that this is the same area she had once visited. There's not a single trace of the lake left, either.

"And you see, *that's* why I wanted to instate Shinobu-san as the new god of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine after the matter of her servant was all taken care of."

So says Gaen-san as she takes out the talisman she just shoved away in her pocket.

“She took the place of the water snake that had originally been worshipped here. Since it would double as a way of taking responsibility for what she did, I figured she was just the woman for the job, or at the very least that she was quite suited to the role. Either way, so long as we don’t fill in that air pocket, mayhem will never stop breaking out in this town. Meme chose to sweep the trouble under the rug and let things be, but as a specialist who values prevention over inspection, I wanted to work on the root of the problem. To rebuild the ruined shrine, I wanted to set up a pillar—I wanted to set up a god. But unfortunately, I was quite adamantly refused,” Gaen-san says, almost teasingly.

She can tease me all she wants, but even now, I don’t think that’s a laughing matter... I can’t even fathom how much damage I caused by refusing to turn Shinobu into a god.

“If you’d just explained your full reasoning to begin with...” I start to say, but even if she *had* explained her reasoning, I doubt I would have used that talisman on Shinobu.

Shinobu isn’t cut out to be a god? No, that’s not the reason.

Speaking in terms of suitability, although it was for a short period of time—not to mention that she was just a fake—Shinobu *has* already served as a god before, so one could claim she is plenty qualified for the job.

I simply didn’t *want* to make Shinobu into a god.

There’s no point in subjugating this town if it means forcing something on Shinobu against her will—that’s the selfish reasoning I gave.

And that selfish reasoning of mine still hasn’t changed.

Whether everything’s been explained to me or not, I’m sure I’ll still insist on having things my way. After all, even after hearing all that, I still don’t have the slightest intention to make Shinobu swallow that talisman.

“You see, Koyomin?”

“...But what are we going to do, then? Actually... if you already knew that, why are you even bringing it up again? If you know there’s no point in saying anything, then...”

“To put it simply, it’s because there *is* a point in saying something now. ...Koyomin. Why don’t we take a short break for the both of us to plainly declare what we’re thinking?”

“Declare what we’re thinking?”

“Declare our objectives, if you will. Or perhaps our purpose.”

“...”

That brings to mind what Hitagi said yesterday.

The scariest people in the world are those whose objectives you can't pinpoint.

She said that Izuko Gaen is a perfect example of that—so is she really going to tell me that objective of hers of her own volition?

That would be more than I could have asked for—but it seems almost too good to be true, to the point that I'm more wary than anything. It's not like we're working against one another, so why do I feel so on edge whenever I talk to her?

Gaen-san isn't supposed to be my enemy.

However, after hearing the rest of her explanation, I come to something of an understanding.

Her explanation is as follows:

“Your objective and mine likely don't match up. Nor are they in line with Shinobu-san's or Hachikuji-chan's. Despite the roundtable discussion we're having, we haven't formed any sort of pact here. I have high hopes for the miracles you make, so I included you in the plan... but I can't deny that it's a risky move that could lead to further disaster. After all, the last time I left the decision of what to do with Shinobu-san—Shinobu-chan at the time—up to you, things somehow ended with an unrelated junior high school girl being enshrined as a god.”

“...I don't have anything I can say to that.”

In other words, Gaen-san likewise wants to learn the objective, or perhaps the driving force, of someone *she* can't trust—namely myself.

No, if she knows everything, there's no way she wouldn't know what drives me... so she just wants me to say it.

She's telling me to at least stick to my own words, if nothing else.

“Okay, then let me say it... My objective is...”

I try to formally put it into words, but I'm immediately confronted with the issue of what my objective actually is in this scenario. What needs to happen... for me to be happy with the outcome?

“For now... I want to do something about Hachikuji and Shinobu. As things stand now, Hachikuji in particular is in danger of getting devoured by the Darkness... Just to check, would she be able to pass on a second time?”

“She *can*, but she would just end up back in Hell. She might be sentenced to an additional punishment for escaping, too. I doubt she'd be sent to Avici, but I can't guarantee that she'd go back to Sai no Kawara, either. That would lead to yet another question of how we can satisfy you,” answers Gaen-san.

Of course, I could never condone Hachikuji getting sent back to Hell. There's no way I could; it's completely out of question. But still, what other options are there?

Do I make the call that getting devoured by the Darkness is better than Hell? I don't think there's a solution that could make me happy here...

"I already told you I have a plan regarding Hachikuji-chan, remember? So let's hear your concerns about Shinobu-san next. When you say you want to do something about Shinobu-san, what specifically do you mean by that, Koyomin?"

"I mean... Right now she's, well, you know..." I stammer, indicating Shinobu behind me.

I indicate Shinobu, in her full form—a monster.

While I've been calling her Shinobu Oshino, as things stand, she is in fact the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, and cold-blooded vampire, Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade herself.

Which means, in other words... she no longer meets the criteria for the certification of nonmalignancy she currently holds, meaning she will once again walk a blood-stained path, staving off all the vampire hunters who stand in her way.

And that—as someone who grew sick of that life to the point of wanting to die, she couldn't possibly want that... or so I arbitrarily assume, at least.

I don't know what Shinobu's opinion regarding that actually is.

Maybe she would prefer that sort of life to being trapped in my shadow as a little girl—in fact, that's what one would normally expect.

She seems pretty happy to be in her full form, too.

But still, there's a danger in letting that happen. After all, in her full form, she possesses such fearsome influence that she could destroy the world in just ten days.

At the very least, I'm sure Gaen-san won't let that stand.

Besides... more pressing than Gaen-san herself is the master of the corpse doll she's currently holding in her arms: Yozuru Kagenui. Given how much she hates immortal oddities, I'm sure she won't be happy to hear the news—wait, no.

Kagenui-san's whereabouts are currently unknown...

"Of course, I also want to figure out where Oshino and Kagenui-san are..."

Hanekawa might already have a theory about Oshino, but that doesn't extend to Kagenui-san... Hanekawa and Kagenui-san have never even met before, so one could hardly expect the girl who "only knows what she knows" to track down Kagenui-san, too.

"So as long as *that* matter isn't decisively settled as well, you won't be able to start out on your new life as a college student, hm? Assuming you passed your test, that is," Gaen-san muses aloud, then says, "As always, you only see what's in front of you..."

And she laughs.

"I'm almost jealous, really. I like to think I live my life pretty freely, but I *do* have my position to worry about—so I can't speak with quite as much freedom as you. My objective is to bring peace to this town. I want to subjugate this town that has been thrown into chaos by the supernatural over and over. I don't need anything other than that."

"..."

Her goal is so grand in scale that I almost have to wonder if she's lost all human emotion—but as they say, "Ask not the sparrow how the eagle soars." That's exactly the impression I get after hearing Gaen-san's say.

Still, after sharing this many conversations with her, even I'm starting to get some minuscule picture of what drives Gaen-san. From her point of view, I bet subjugating this one town is nothing more than a smaller one of her goals.

"I mean, of course I'd like the town I live in to be peaceful... but I'm not extraordinary enough a person to make that one of my objectives. The most I can think of is what to do for the people close to me."

"And *I'm* telling you that's dangerous—but that should make it easy enough for us to reach a compromise. This time around, at least."

"...? What do you mean?"

"Even if it's the people close to you that you're worried about, in the end, that means you're only thinking about other people. *As long as you don't care about what happens to yourself*, the two of us should be able to come to an agreement this time around."

So she says. She looks a little bit relieved, but I'm not sure what she's relieved about.

What happens to myself?

Now that the issue of my body turning into a vampire has been resolved, I don't think I need to worry about any more danger befalling me...

"I know I'm being a pain, but let me pester you to confirm this one more time: You have no objections to my subjugation of this town in and of itself, correct? In fact, if I meet the right conditions, you'll even help me out, correct?"

"...Well, of course I..."

“And you, Shinobu-san?”

I was still in the middle of responding, but Gaen-san cuts me off and changes the subject of her question to the blonde beauty holding me in her arms, Shinobu Oshino.

“What’s *your* objective? What are you thinking right now? What do you want to do?”

“I shall simply abide by my master. If my master chooses to help you, I will do the same—and if he chooses to stand against you, so shall I.”

Shinobu answers without the slightest hesitation. She’s extremely clear about what she wants. She isn’t wishy-washy like me—and what’s more, she’s kind of...

“Shinobu-san, hasn’t your loyalty towards Koyomin kind of gone up since you became an adult? I sure didn’t account for that... In fact, I figured that once your connection was broken and your master-servant relationship was severed, the most likely scenario would be that you brutally murder Koyomin.”

That was her most likely scenario?

That means she probably had some scheme to prevent it from actually happening, but it’s still a pretty frightening thought when put out in the open.

“Kaka. A master-servant relationship can be bound by more than mere blood. Or perhaps I should say... you, specialist. If I may state my desire, if ’tis possible...”

Shinobu speaks.

She murmurs right into my ear.

“I would like you to turn me back into a little girl.”

It goes without saying that Mayoi Hachikuji and Yotsugi Ononoki have no objectives to put forth in this discussion; of course they wouldn't.

Hachikuji is an entirely unrelated party, essentially just someone I dragged into the affair when I forcibly abducted her from Hell, and Ononoki-chan is a doll who I'm not even sure has a will of her own, let alone a purpose.

If anything, Hachikuji needs to find a way out of her current “out of the frying pan and into the fire” situation, unable to return to Hell yet just as unable to remain here much longer—caught between a rock and a hard place.

Well, I'm talking about it like it's someone else's problem, but again, the responsibility for that lies largely with me...

“Alrighty. Now that we've got everyone's position out in the open, it's time to explain what we're actually going to do from here on out. I'm going to explain the minimum requirements we need to meet in order to simultaneously accomplish both of our objectives, as well as Shinobu-san and Hachikuji-chan's while we're at it.”

Gaen-san says that as if she's going over a routine protocol, but I can't imagine those conditions actually exist—though if she's calling them the “minimum” requirements, it's possible there are other conditions she's not bringing up...

“There are two minimum conditions we need to meet. One is the reinstatement of a god at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine—and the other is the extermination of Ougi Oshino.”

Extermination.

Hearing it laid out in plain terms, I tense up a little bit. I'm careful not to let that tension show on my face, but given my current positioning in her arms, Shinobu might have picked up on it thanks to the phenomenon of bone conduction.

*Please save me.*

She might have picked up on the fact that Ougi-chan said that to me not too long ago.

However, when it comes to Shinobu right here and right now, the issue lies not with the second condition, but with the first.

“Gaen-san. If you're planning to make Shinobu into a god—”

“I was. That's why I originally planned to keep you out of the picture once I brought you back to life—however, the situation changed after you brought Hachikuji-chan back from Hell. There was no longer any need to coerce Shinobu-san into becoming the god of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine. After all, an

even more suitable stand-in for the god... no, an even more suitable *successor* to the god had finally appeared.”

“A successor... to the god?”

“Hachikuji-chan.”

And with that, Gaen-san points to the young pigtailed girl who hasn’t contributed much to the conversation thus far. Hachikuji herself doesn’t look particularly surprised at the gesture.

In other words...

They’ve already come to an agreement.

However, this is all news to me, so I can’t hold back my own surprise—Hachikuji, really?

You’re going to put Hachikuji... in that shrine?

“W-Wait! T-That’s even worse! Hachikuji is just...”

“She’s just...?”

She prompts me to continue, but the words don’t come. It seems so obvious to me that the proposal is no good, completely out of the question, but now that she asks me, I have no answer as to why exactly that is.

It was so sudden that my first instinct is to object, but... no, I mean, it’s true that I can’t think of any reason to oppose it, but I can’t think of any reason to agree to it, either.

It’s not just that I want to preserve the status quo out of a fear of losing something—I think. It’s not just because I still have scars from losing Hachikuji the first time.

I doubt Shinobu herself is all that attached to Hachikuji, but even so, the fact of the matter is that this is a discussion about who is the best candidate to be her successor. It would seem she can’t remain wholly indifferent towards the subject, as she says, “Perhaps she *does* have the qualifications for the job,” contributing to the conversation while leaving her personal stance on the matter unclear. “The moment she returned from Hell alive, that lost little girl had indisputably performed a miracle.”

She has a good point.

“Coming back from the dead” is inarguably a type of miracle, so if creating miracles is one of the requirements for being a god, one could argue that Hachikuji has already fulfilled that condition.

But if that’s the case, both I and Ononoki-chan have met the same requirement—er, that is, I don’t think of either Ononoki-chan or myself as the least bit suited to serve as a god, but the same ought to go for Hachikuji...

“It’s not the same. It’s totally different. You and Hachikuji-chan and Yotsugi may have all come back from the dead, but the conditions were entirely different. You two came back to life with your bodies intact, but Hachikuji-chan is a ghost.”

“So if you have a physical body, you can’t become a god?”

“No. Nadeko Sengoku becoming one is enough to tell you that that isn’t the case. There *is* such a thing as a living god—but the difference here is that if Hachikuji-chan doesn’t become a god here and now, she’ll be swallowed up by the Darkness.”

Oh, that’s right.

Getting chased by that Darkness was the whole reason Hachikuji chose to pass on in the first place. It would be one thing if she came back in her own body, but if she remains on Earth as a ghost, it’s a matter of course that it will come after her once again.

“She has three options,” says Gaen-san. “1) Go back to Hell; 2) allow herself to be swallowed up by the Darkness; or 3) become a god. Of course, I make it sound like a big deal when I say she’ll ‘become a god,’ but in practice, she’ll just be switching career tracks as an oddity. Oddities are already a lot like gods to begin with, after all. That’s another point that makes this a different scenario from deifying you or Yotsugi. By becoming the new god of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine... Mayoi Hachikuji will be allowed to exist on this Earth.”

She’ll be granted citizenship.

She’ll be given a certificate of residence—more or less.

“For Hachikuji-chan, this scenario is about as good as it gets... Of course, I’ll need her to do her job, but so long as she manages the air pocket, that should be enough to prevent things from getting out of hand. I don’t plan to ask for much more than that, and I don’t plan to make any unreasonable demands.”

“There you have it,” states Hachikuji concisely.

Judging from her expression, she’s already made up her mind and has no intention of changing it. If she’s consented to it, there isn’t much room for me to protest.

In fact, that idea so cleanly fixes up the mess I made through kidnapping Hachikuji out of Hell that not only do I have no room to complain, I ought to be downright *grateful*... But regardless, I can’t help wanting to play it safe when it comes to Hachikuji.

Another part of it is probably that the little girl Hachikuji and the word “god” just don’t match up in my head. Oh yeah, and speaking of things not matching up...

“B... But, isn’t it a snake that’s meant to be worshipped at that shrine? If a snail oddity like Hachikuji is enshrined there, won’t it cause another distortion...?”

“And *that*’s why it’s such an unbelievable miracle that you pulled this off without putting any thought into it. If you hadn’t done what you did, even I might not have thought to put Hachikuji-chan in that shrine. No matter how much of a stretch it is, there needs to be a reason for something to become the object of worship at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine. Just like the link between snakes served as a reason to take something from a lake up a mountain, and just like the link of immortality allowed Heart-Under-Blade to masquerade as a god. We need to have a reason just as compelling as those, or perhaps even more so.”

“R-Right? So...”

“The snail,” Gaen-san says, “is backwards compatible with the snake.”

“...What?”

“Well, no, calling them ‘backwards compatible’ is a self-serving overstatement—but Koyomin, you’ve heard of the three-way deadlock, haven’t you? It’s pretty common knowledge, whether you’re a specialist or not.”

“The three-way deadlock...?”

I mean, that term can also be used to refer to games like rock-paper-scissors. But if we’re talking about what it originally referenced, then...

“The snake, the toad, and... the slug.”

It’s a term that refers to the standoff where the snake eats the toad, the toad eats the slug, and the slug eats the snake<sup>[1]</sup>—wait, slug?

I feel like I’ve heard that mentioned somewhere.

“Oh yeah, that’s right. The slug tofu—that was the counterfeit oddity that Kaiki used on Sengoku...”

“Right. It’s an effective oddity to wield against a snake—the slug.”

And then, Gaen-san continues her explanation.

“The slug and the snail are close relatives.”

“Ah...”

That’s right.

That hadn’t even occurred to me; the moment Gaen-san brought up the three-way deadlock, I should have realized what she was getting at. The snail is the one that has a shell, and the slug is the one that doesn’t. It wouldn’t be altogether incorrect to consider a snail that’s devolved into a shell-less creature to be no different from a slug.

In that case, not only do the snail and the snake have a connection...

The snail is capable of keeping the snake in check.

She won't go berserk like Sengoku, and she won't be overwhelmed by the snake like Sengoku was—in fact, *she'll* be the one overtaking the snake.

“You can just call me Mayoi *Namekuji*.<sup>[2]</sup>”

Hachikuji nods sagely.

Now that's... too convenient a pun.

“Of course, if we were aiming for the ideal solution, we would have found a snake to link with the snake... But in a way, this turned out to be even more ideal a situation than we could have imagined. It's like we started out on the Shikoku Pilgrimage from the 88<sup>th</sup> temple.”

“...”

When she puts it like that, the fact that I met Hachikuji here at Shirohebi Park—in other words, the former site of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine's predecessor, Shirohebi Shrine—could be seen as a form of destiny.

Though perhaps that's... also a bit of a stretch.

Still, it's because of all the similar mental gymnastics we've had to do and all the acrobatic feats we've pulled off that we are where we are today—miraculously enough.

“If anything, the one thing that really nags me as a specialist is that the ‘*ji*’ in ‘Hachikuji’ means ‘temple,’ when it’s a shrine *she’ll* be living in... but let’s just chalk that up to the syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism. It wouldn’t do any good to go changing her name... Besides, Hachikuji-chan’s last name used to be Tsunade<sup>[3]</sup>... didn’t it?”

Despite how easygoing she appears, it seems Gaen-san can get hung up on awfully minor details when it comes to her work. Looking at it another way, if it’s an issue even a total amateur like me could point out, it goes without saying that she would have already taken it into consideration and given the matter some deep thought.

Moreover, Gaen-san just said that “*she’ll* be living there”—living.

Of course, it's blatantly obvious that she used that word on purpose in order to sway my opinion—yet still, I can't help falling for that trick of hers.

Whether it be a shrine or a temple...

To Mayoi Hachikuji, who wandered aimlessly for 11 years—and then after that, met with the inexplicable misfortune of endlessly stacking rocks by a riverbed—I can't even begin to guess how

much it would mean to have a place to live, a “home” to return to.

Gaen-san presented three possible solutions, but we have no other choice besides this one.

And what’s more, there’s no time to look for a fourth option.

In that case, there’s nothing to be gained from me dragging my feet about it—but...

“Hachikuji, are you okay with this?” I can’t help but ask.

I’ve been focusing on Gaen-san this whole conversation so as to avoid questioning Hachikuji herself—but it’s not something I can put off forever.

“Yes, it’s fine. ‘A god.’ Talk about lifting the spirit.”

Despite my somewhat comical positioning in a beautiful blonde woman’s arms, I intended that to be a rather serious and weighty question, but Hachikuji’s response is disproportionately light-hearted and nonchalant.

Lifting the spirit...?

“Sorry. The cat *god* my tongue,’ I ought to be saying.”

“If you keep saying things like that, you’re going to turn this into some kind of gag, so stop that. Don’t take on such a serious task as part of a joke.”

“This goes beyond a posthumous two-rank promotion. It’s a huge leap up the ladder.”

“I don’t think you understand what you’re agreeing to here...”

Her response is kind of proving my worries valid.

One could argue that *I* don’t understand anything about it myself, but at the very least, I know two people who previously stood in that position and found themselves trapped in a harsh and unforgiving situation.

Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade.

Nadeko Sengoku.

The truth is that deep down, I simply don’t want to add Mayoi Hachikuji to that list—even if that’s the only solution here.

“I understand it perfectly well,” responds Hachikuji nevertheless.

She seems to be brimming with confidence, or perhaps I should say she seems to hold a sense of pride about her job already.

“Really...? You understand what becoming a god means and what it entails, the importance of the role and the duty that comes with it?”

“Oh, no, I don’t have a clue about any of that.”

“You don’t?!?”

“But,” she begins with a broad smile.

I couldn’t imagine a smile more characteristic of Hachikuji.

“I do know that if I agree to this, I’ll be able to play with you all the time, Araragi-san.”

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[<sup>1</sup>] The toad > slug > snake > toad set-up was a popular belief in the old days in Japan.

[<sup>2</sup>] “Namekuchi” is the Japanese word for “slug.”

[<sup>3</sup>] The Japanese folklore tale *The Tale of the Gallant Jiraiya* is one that heavily draws on the idea of the three-way standoff. The main character, Jiraiya, is a ninja who possesses toad magic. He falls in love with Tsunade, a beautiful woman who has mastered slug magic. His archenemy is Orochimaru, a master of serpent magic.

I'd hate to give the impression that I stopped arguing the moment I heard I'd be able to play with Hachikuji, but it's true that I was so touched by those words as to be momentarily rendered speechless.

Gaen-san, never one to miss an opportunity, takes advantage of my moment of silence and says, "So with that, we've already fulfilled one of the two conditions. Once Hachikuji-chan swallows this talisman, we'll witness the birth of a new god at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine," concluding the discussion about the first condition.

Uh, I'm pretty it's too serious a matter to be wrapped up that simply...

"Oh, though to put it Hachikuji-chan-style, I suppose she'll 'bite it down' rather than swallow it."

"The exact wording of it isn't what I have a problem with here..."

I don't want to be swept along towards a conclusion while I'm still feeling undecided. Still, I know full well how impossible it would be to find a solution I'm completely satisfied with.

"Of course, if you'd prefer that Hachikuji-chan be swallowed up by the Darkness, I'll let you make that call. My only concern is how we get to the end result. This is one scenario where you can't just offer to take her place."

"Indeed... In any case, although I plan to abide by your decision, 'twould weigh heavily on the conscience to allow a child so much to your tastes to be devoured by the Darkness, now that you've already brought her here from Hell."

As she says that, Shinobu, who already has me in her arms, wraps her legs around me, too. She's now sitting cross-legged with my body at the center, awfully unrefined posture for an adult to assume—or so you would think, but when it's Shinobu doing it, it turns into a pretty manly and cool pose. No fair.

I'm positive I never looked this stylish when *I* held Shinobu.

At any rate, now that I've been admonished by Shinobu, it's become even harder to object. In the first place, I've completely lost sight of the basis for my argument. There were perfectly good reasons why Shinobu and Sengoku "failed" as gods—Gaen-san, the specialist here, already lectured me all about that, proving there's truly no flaw in her teaching module.

"That's right, Onii-chan the oni. Quit being such a whiner. You may think you're hot shit, complaining about every little thing other people try to do, but if you haven't got any better ideas, you should keep your mouth shut. Is getting in the way of useful people the only thing you're good for?"

"You know, Ononoki-chan, when it's coming out of *your* mouth, I have about a thousand things I could say to that..."

She's so rude. Makes me think of Tsukihi when she's lost of her temper.

"We talked about this back in August, didn't we?" Ononoki-chan, who is being held in Gaen-san's arms much like I am (given that she's a doll, it looks a lot like ventriloquism), adjusts her tone a bit and continues. "What are you going to do if Hachikuji-san gets eaten by the Darkness while you're here dreaming and dragging your feet?"

"Oh... That's right."

It's not like I thought up an argument just because Ononoki-chan lectured me, but after hearing Gaen-san, Shinobu, and Ononoki-chan all say that name one after the other, I'm suddenly reminded of something.

Well, no, it's always been there at the back of my mind, but it never felt like there was a good chance to bring it up. Since I've been hiding the fact that I met Ougi-chan outside my house before coming here, I've been keeping quiet about it by association, but it's a truth I likely should have revealed at a much earlier point in the conversation.

I should have revealed it so she could judge if it *is* the truth.

I let the chance slip... no, if anything, now that Gaen-san is moving the discussion along to the second condition—that is, moving on to the topic of Ougi Oshino—this might actually be the perfect time to bring it up.

"Gaen-san."

"What is it, Koyomin?"

"Um... about the Darkness... I think there's a chance we may have been gravely mistaken," I say in hushed tones. "*Ougi Oshino is not the Darkness*—or at least I think so."

"I know."

She responds immediately.

The effort to conceal my voice was all in vain.

I even went and italicized it for emphasis. God, I feel like such a moron.

Forget three strikes, it feels like I bunted a foul ball and struck out. Do they have anything like that in cricket, I wonder?

"For real?"

The one to pipe up in surprise—although it sounds like quite irreverent surprise—is none other than Ononoki-chan. That said, it's not as though Ononoki-chan has been working alongside Gaen-san, so it's only to be expected that their viewpoints would differ.

“She’s not? No way. I was foreshadowing it all over the place ’cause I was so sure that was the case.”

“...”

Then you should have spared yourself the trouble. Don’t *deliberately* set up foreshadowing.

She has such a difficult personality—or maybe she’s just a difficult person.

Meanwhile, Shinobu doesn’t say anything.

I’m pretty sure Shinobu had been under the same impression... so her aim is likely to avoid letting anything slip that would expose that.

Hachikuji doesn’t really know Ougi-chan in the first place—Ougi-chan didn’t transfer to Naoetsu High School until after Hachikuji had passed on—so she has no real thoughts on the matter, a blank expression on her face.

“What made you think that in the first place? That Ougi Oshino was the Darkness, I mean.”

“Uh, I mean...”

“Ah, I phrased that question poorly. Don’t get the wrong idea, Koyomin. I didn’t mean to criticize you or to mock you. In fact, it’s only natural that you would think that,” says Gaen-san, indeed as if it’s only natural. As if to say this whole conversation is going exactly according to her calculations.

Still, if this is going exactly according to her calculations, I can only imagine that she was standing off to the side listening in on my whole conversation with Ougi-chan prior to this...

“It’s only natural that I would think that... What do you mean by that?”

“I’ll explain that part later,” responds Gaen-san, prioritizing her own timetable even in this scenario. “What I want to know right now is when exactly you arrived at that conclusion. Our course of action might change depending on your answer... That said, I think I have a pretty good guess already.”

“...It’s not a question of ‘when.’ Upon observing her words and actions, I just naturally thought, you know... I mean, she even went around looking for Hachikuji. And then there’s how she got involved with Sengoku, and how she got involved with Tadatsuru...”

And before all of that...

There was the first time I got involved with Ougi Oshino.

The first time I met her after she transferred here, throughout the whole sequence of events regarding Sodachi Oikura... it seemed about as blatant as could be.

No, when it all comes down to it, rather than having anything to do with that accumulation of facts, I

just came to that conclusion based on intuition. After all, that pitch black aura of hers...

Isn't it the perfect picture of the Darkness?

A dark void that honors the rules.

A jet blackness with a reverence for balance.

"But if you say it's only natural that I would think that... does that mean that Ougi-chan gave me that impression on purpose? And she was just trying to mislead me..."

I could see it.

She's definitely the kind of girl who would do that.

She's the kind of girl who would do that just for the hell of it, even.

But of course, I doubt she asked Tadatsuru to exterminate me just for hell of it...

"No, that's not it."

However, Gaen-san just shakes her head at my evaluation of the situation. Even in this scenario.

"It would be more accurate to say that she thought that about *herself* at first—and even now, we can be sure that she's imposed a similar duty upon herself. Ougi Oshino is not the Darkness, but she does the same things the Darkness does. She carries out the same role as the Darkness," she says.

"The same role as the Darkness..."

That "natural phenomenon" that once assaulted the vampire revered as a fake god, Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade... as well as the girl who remained on Earth despite losing her reason for existence, Mayoi Hachikuji.

The Darkness.

That thing which, depending on where you live, could be called a black hole or Augoeides<sup>[1]</sup>, in a word, the phenomenon—or perhaps the concept—that cracks down on oddities who have strayed from their intended path.

When it came after Hachikuji back in August, I was so panicked that I had no room to think on it too deeply—but later on, when I made a flimsy attempt to reflect on what happened, I came to the conclusion that it is neither the natural enemy of oddities, nor some kind of judicial agency.

It's the rules of the universe.

It's a law much like gravity, or Newton's third law, or natural selection or survival of the fittest, or even mathematics—it's merely something meant to be followed and never defied, and it's not as

though “something” lies inside that black mass suspended in space.

Yes.

That’s what I believed—until I met Ougi Oshino.

Until I met her, who exists in the flesh.

...But it seems that was just one of my typical misunderstandings and a hasty conclusion so characteristic of me, and in the end, I had been completely off-the-mark, caught in a standstill as I faced forward only to turn back around again.

“Oh, come now, there’s no need to get so down on yourself. I just told you, didn’t I? Ougi Oshino carries out the same role as the Darkness, so honestly, it’s not that far off the mark to consider her the same as the Darkness. Just in case, let me clarify something,” says Gaen-san as she looks at Hachikuji. “The Darkness that we’re worried will descend upon this town once more if we leave Hachikuji-chan in her current state is, without any misrepresentation, the real Darkness. It’s the same Darkness that assaulted Heart-Under-Blade, and the same Darkness that came after Hachikuji-chan back in August—the genuine article.

“On the other hand, the one likely to come after Hachikuji-chan even after we set her up in Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, even after we enshrine her there... is the one who carries out the same role as the Darkness, Ougi Oshino.”

As Gaen-san says that, she tears her eyes away from Hachikuji and focuses her gaze back on me, but despite the way she’s staring straight at me, what she just said and the turn the conversation just took are both so abrupt that it’s hard for me to react right away.

The best I can do is repeat back what she just said.

“Even after we enshrine her there... she’ll still come after her?”

Huh?

After saying it back to her, I finally digest the meaning of what she said—and I can’t help raising an eyebrow. Even if it isn’t Gaen-san’s ultimate goal, we’re supposed to be deifying Hachikuji so she can *avoid* the Darkness. If she’s going to be attacked whether she becomes a god or not, it defeats the purpose of making her into one in the first place.

What’s even the point?

She won’t even be able to play with me if it’s like that.

“That’s why I said there are two minimum requirements. *Just* making Hachikuji-chan into a god won’t be enough. We’ll have one half of the work done, the other half left over. If we don’t exterminate Ougi Oshino, we aren’t going to get anywhere.”

“You keep saying ‘exterminate’...”

I speak up, unable to bear it any longer.

That may be a term Gaen-san uses on an everyday basis, a word that doesn’t hold any deep implications for her, but still, regardless of whether she’s my enemy, and regardless of whether or not she’s really the Darkness, it’s hard to listen to someone talk about my underclassman—not to mention a young girl—in that way.

I can’t stand it.

*Will you take my side?*

*Please save me.*

It’s not that I’m getting caught on those words of hers or anything—I just don’t like the way Gaen-san is putting it.

“Could you please stop using that word? When you say ‘exterminate,’ you make it sound like Ougi-chan is some kind of oddity.”

“She is.”

Another immediate response.

“She’s nothing but your *average* monster.”

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[1] This is a reference to the manga *Bastard!!*, in which an Augoeides is a powerful war-form an Angel or a Devil can have. The word for the Devil form is rendered in Japanese with kanji that literally translate to “body of darkness.”

Before I know it, time has marched on.

I couldn't say whether that march is another part of Gaen-san's plan—the facts are steadily coming together, and moreover, we're grower closer to exposing the truth, yet for me, the situation is only growing worse, and the truth more indiscernible.

A monster.

Your average... monster.

If we're going to split hairs, one could argue that she's no longer "average" at the point that she's a monster, however, given that we have lineup of irregulars including the full form of Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under Blade, the man-made oddity Yotsugi Ononoki, and a ghost about to become a god, Mayoi Hachikuji, all gathered here, it might be a necessary descriptor.

And so, overlooking that...

"Ougi-chan is... an oddity?"

Well.

Now that you mention it, is that really anything so unnatural...? Given that I was halfway certain she was the Darkness until just a few moments ago, I'm not sure I have room to say anything... but the way she appears at the most unexpected moments is certainly reminiscent of a phantom.

At the very least, if I already suspected she might be the Darkness, it wouldn't be out of bounds to suspect her of being an oddity, either.

Or a monster, I guess.

I feel like this sets me back to square one, though...

I know I shouldn't keep running myself into the same wall, but still, could a monster—in other words, an oddity—really transfer into a high school? Could a monster really go to school, take classes, and study?

"Hold it right there, Koyomin. You've never actually *witnessed* her going to school, taking classes, or studying, have you? It's just that most of your interactions with her have been at school."

Well, that's... true.

Hold on a second. This calls for a complete overhaul of my thought process, so I need a moment to gather my wits. If I could, I'd even like to go back to my house and take a short nap—but of course, this is no time for that.

It's time to think back.

I need to recall all the conversations I've had with Ougi-chan up until this point—however, the memories that come to mind are all so superficial that I can't trace back our time together.

The harder I try to remember...

The fuzzier my memories get.

No, that isn't something limited to this instance—it's always like this when I interact with Ougi-chan. Whenever I talk with her, my memory is sent into disarray. I'm forced to remember things I never wanted to remember, and no sooner than I strike upon something, I lose track of what I was just thinking, and I'm implanted with memories that never could have happened.

Almost like... it's the work of something inhuman.

But still...

“Say she *is* hypothetically an oddity. Even then, isn't her identity a little *too* shrouded in mystery? It'd actually be easier to explain if she *were* the Darkness... What grounds do you have for calling her a monster?”

“Let me pose the same question. What grounds do you have for calling Ougi Oshino ‘Ougi-chan’?”

“?”

Does she mean that it's creepy for me to refer to her with “*-chan*”?

Now that the two of us are unambiguously enemies, maybe Gaen-san thinks it's poor form for me to refer to her so familiarly... Still, it's hard to change what you call someone right on the spot.

*Hitagi.*

Um.

Memories of last night come flooding back to me, and while it's not unheard of for people to smile to themselves over a stray memory, here I am *blushing* to myself.

“What are you blushing about? Gross.”

Ononoki-chan doesn't let anything slide.

She's mean-spirited to the core.

Come to think of it, it's pretty weird that I refer to *you* with “*-chan*”... But regardless, it seems that wasn't what Gaen-san was getting at, as she cheerfully continues with, “You just took it at face value when she introduced herself as ‘Ougi Oshino’ and started calling her ‘Ougi-chan,’ didn't you?”

“...Are you saying she gave me a fake name?”

“A fake name or an alias, whatever you want to call it—no, it doesn’t even hold that much meaning. It’s just a name she came up with on the spot, and one she totally phoned in, at that. You might as well have laughed in her face when she called herself that. If it were me, I would’ve burst into hysterics.”

“...?”

Despite what she’s saying, I can’t even begin to guess what’s so funny about the name “Ougi Oshino.” If we’re going to talk about eccentric names, the guy who shares a last name with her, Meme Oshino, and the one he gave a name to, Shinobu Oshino, have much more imaginative names, taking into account the characters they’re written with...

“You’re not usually this slow, Araragi-san.”

Hachikuji jumps in to take over the explanation from there. It’s a little surprising to me that Hachikuji thought I was someone quick on the uptake—however, the explanation she gives is probably something I should have picked up on sooner.

As someone who’s spent so much time duking it out with Hachikuji over the matter of “names,” that is.

Still, given that all *she* knows about Ougi-chan is what’s been mentioned in this conversation, her ability to hit the nail on the head proves her no less than a seasoned warrior.

“If I were to guess, this Ougi Oshino-san was introduced to you by Kanbaru-san, correct? She was introduced to you as a fan of Kanbaru-san, the former MVP of the basketball team, correct?”

“Yeah... That’s pretty much how it happened.”

“A fan. And ‘Ougi’ means ‘fan.’”

It’s so silly I think I might faint.

Indeed, it’s hardly outrageous for that to be a fake name—it’s similar to an effortless username like “Aaaa” or “Bbbb” or even “1234,” halfhearted and lacking in love, an alias someone can tell is a lie the moment they hear it.

What’s outrageous here is how gutsy a move that was...

“Wha... Wait, but what about her last name? It’s Oshino... Ah, I see, that means her being Oshino’s niece was a lie, too, wasn’t it...?”

“The matter of her last name is a little more complicated. Or perhaps I should say it’s a little more out of our way... However, her being Oshino’s niece was definitely a lie. To the best of my knowledge as his senior, he doesn’t have a niece—supposedly. Of course, Meme isn’t some inanimate object, so biologically speaking, he must have blood relatives, but as far as I know, he’s never had a family,”

asserts Gaen-san.

“Then... Was she trying to gain our trust by using the last name Oshino? But why—what did she hope to accomplish by appearing before us and faking her lineage, her credibility?”

Oddities.

They must have worthy reasons for what they do.

Unlike the Darkness, they aren’t unconditional.

In that case, what necessity was there for the oddity called Ougi Oshino to appear before us—to send our lives into such disarray?

“If Ougi Oshino isn’t really Ougi Oshino... then what *is* she? What... is her true identity?”

I’ve become a real disgrace of a man, asking to have every little thing explained to me, but no matter what Gaen-san says, it’s hard for me to accept that Ougi-chan is an oddity right off the bat.

I need her to make me understand.

“Her ‘true identity,’ as things currently stand, is that she is unidentifiable. Thanks to that, the easiest way to exterminate her is quite apparent. ...My original plan was to use the demon sword ‘Kokorowatari’ to take her out. But that was hardly the most appropriate method—in fact, it would be something of an emergency measure, even bordering on foul play. Really, a sword that can tear apart any kind of oddity is quite a cheat in the hands of a specialist. It’s no wonder he became the first servant of Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade... Of course, it’s because he was who he was that he met such a twisted end. I can’t deny the irony in that.”

“...You were going strike down Ougi-chan with the Oddity Slayer?”

“Hey now, don’t glare at me like that. Whose side are you on?”

She says that like she’s cracking a joke, without any particular implication in her words, but the way she phrases it leaves me taken aback. It’s like she stabbed a needle straight into all my built-up tension.

Regardless, if asked whose side I’m on, I can’t definitively say I’m on Gaen-san’s—even if I *hadn’t* had that conversation with Ougi-chan in the evening.

“You strike down an oddity with the Oddity Slayer. Normally, there’s no contradiction in that—it’s what specialists are meant to do.”

“...And that’s why you made the demon blade ‘Kokorowatari’?”

When she sliced me to bits at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, I wondered to myself how she had it—but as things stand now, the manufacturing process is quite evident.

She made it by restriking the armor worn by the first servant—Seishirou Shishirui—that had mysteriously disappeared back in August.

...I don't know how I managed to deduce that, but I'm certain of it—however, does that mean that Gaen-san had been planning to cut down Ougi-chan from the moment she took the armor?

That's impossible.

Whether she's an oddity or a transfer student, Ougi-chan first showed herself before us in October—therefore, there should have been no reason for Gaen-san to forge the Oddity Slayer back in August.

At that point, Ougi-chan hadn't done anything to warrant extermination...

"Or could it be, seeing as how you 'know everything,' you've had this very discussion penciled into your notebook planner for today, March 14, ever since August?"

"Of course not. I don't use a school calendar at this age."

She missed the point of my question.

I wasn't asking about whether her notebook planner starts counting the year from January or April.<sup>[1]</sup>

"When I say I know everything, I don't mean that I have powers of precognition. While it pains me to not live up to a friend's expectations, I'm not so transcendent that I could predict all of these future events back in August. This is a common misconception, but I'm omniscient, not omnipotent."

"...But in that case..."

"I wasn't planning to cut down Ougi Oshino—however, I anticipated that Ougi Oshino would make an appearance. I figured there was a chance that could happen—and so I retrieved the First's armor and helmet. Of course, that was just me preparing for the worst case scenario."

"Hah. Just like a bandit at the scene of a fire. No wonder it wasn't enough to fill me up," Shinobu remarks sullenly.

It's really startling when she suddenly speaks right next to my ear like that. The way I can feel the warmth from her breath is incredibly flustering.

"Oh, don't be like that, Shinobu-san. Didn't I give it back to you already?" says Gaen-san. Judging from that remark, I can assume that the demon sword "Kokorowatari" that Shinobu used during their cricket game wasn't the one Shinobu herself possesses, but rather the replica Gaen-san made.

She swallowed it down before foisting me onto her lap earlier, so that must mean she's carrying two demon swords inside her right now—or if you include "Yumewatari," which was probably given to her as part of the set, is it actually three swords?

"I don't need them anymore. Now that you've agreed to help me out, Koyomin, I don't have to resort

to such hardline measures. I can exterminate Ougi Oshino through perfectly respectable means as an oddity exorcist, using an incredibly standard method.”

“...What do you mean when you say you anticipated Ougi-chan’s appearance?”

More than I want to know about what the respectable means or standard method she’s talking about is, I’m curious about that part of what she said. If she had already anticipated Ougi-chan’s appearance at the time, doesn’t that mean she really *was* planning to cut down Ougi-chan from the start?

“Oh, no, it was more of a rule of thumb. You see, I once encountered an oddity exactly like... well, perhaps that’s an exaggeration, but one that was very *similar* to Ougi Oshino.”

Oh, so that’s what it was.

She has just the wealth of experience you’d expect from the head of the specialists—it may hit *me* like a bolt out of the blue, but it’s just one of many cases for Gaen-san.

Or so I thought, but it seems I was wrong.

“I encountered *it* when I was in elementary school—so, while it may be a strange way of putting it, this case is almost a little nostalgic for me.”

“Elementary school...?”

I’m having serious trouble imagining Gaen-san’s loli days—but I doubt she was the big boss all the way back during elementary school. She couldn’t have been the Gaen-san who “knows everything” all her life.

“Yep. Technically, the one who encountered it wasn’t me, but my older sister—Tooe Gaen. The mother of Suruga Kanbaru, who you’re so well acquainted with.

“As her younger sibling, I watched my sister’s experience from up close. Actually, that may have been my very first run-in with the supernatural,” reflects Gaen-san, as if she truly does find it nostalgic. “My sister... encountered an unknown oddity. ...Incidentally, Koyomin, exactly how much do you know about my sister?”

“Um, not a whole lot... Pretty much just that she bequeathed the Monkey’s Paw to Kanbaru...”

I don’t really talk about serious stuff like that with Kanbaru... The two of us always just screw around. All I know is that she eloped with only son of the Kanbaru family, gave birth to Kanbaru, and later died in a car accident—I think?

I’ve heard a vague account of the facts, but if someone were to ask me what kind of person she was, I’d have no answer.

I wonder if her personality resembled Kanbaru’s. Not that I want to believe there was another woman out there just like Kanbaru...

“If you can’t become medicine, become poison. Otherwise you’re just water,” says Gaen-san, imitating someone else’s voice. “She was the type of sister who would say that to her younger sibling. To be perfectly honest with you, I had a hard time dealing with her.”

She confesses that she found a family member “hard to deal with.”

Hearing that, I feel like I’ve discovered a human side to Gaen-san for the very first time—but then again, a person who would say that kind of thing intimidates even *me*, and I’m just hearing about her secondhand.

However, in the same moment I sympathize with her feelings...

“She was a lot like you, in a way.”

She says *that* to me. That’s some egg on my face.

“My sister was no demon, but she acted a lot like one. That’s not to say she resembled your vampire self, per se, but even as an elementary school student, I knew my sister was bad news. I could tell she was a dangerous person. How to put it...? She wasn’t a monster, but she was reminiscent of one.”

“...”

“She was hard on herself and hard on others. The stricter she came down, the more righteous she believed she was. That’s what she was like. Really, if you ever have the chance, you should ask Suruga more about her. It’s true she was just a little girl when my sister passed away, but I’m sure she has quite a mix of feelings left over from living as her daughter—but anyway, that’s a digression. What I’m getting at right now is that you remind me of her.”

Hard on myself and hard on others...?

Is that really what I’m like?

It’s a little humorous that Hachikuji is the one wearing the most dubious expression right now, but Gaen-san doesn’t expound on that any further, instead continuing with, “And so,” and pushing the conversation along.

“And so, I anticipated that you might go down the same path my sister did—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I was wary of it. I had been ever since I first worked with you in August. I thought you were bound to encounter the same kind of oddity my sister did someday—and, of course, my concerns turned out to be right on the mark... so as you can see, it never hurts to be cautious.”

“...Cautious, is it?”

If *I* spent my whole life being that cautious, I’d probably lose my mind—but then again, I’m sure it’s because I’m so careless that I end up in situations like this one.

“Just for reference, what did your sister end up doing? Obviously, neither of you had the demon blade

‘Kokorowatari’...”

“As I was saying, she went with a frontal attack. I’d like to use the same method this time around—I want you to do the same thing my sister did.”

“...? You want *me* to do it? Not you?”

“You’re the only one who can do it.”

Gaen-san nods.

A firm nod.

“There’s no point if I do it. Nor is there any point in Shinobu-san doing it—and as far as this one matter goes, Meme and Yozuru wouldn’t be able to do it, either. You’re the only one who can do it, and you are the one who *has* to do it.”

“You have to do it.

“All by yourself.”

So says Gaen-san, emphasizing “by yourself.”

“Do you mean it like... people can only save themselves?”

“That’s Meme’s doctrine. It isn’t mine... but you know, when used in this context, the phrase really *does* ring true. True enough, it wouldn’t be wrong to say that there’s absolutely nothing I can do to help you this time around.”

“...”

*Go challenge Ougi-chan to a one-on-one showdown*—it’s easy to read that suggestion from Gaen-san’s words, but having that sprung on me out of nowhere just throws me for a loop.

My duel with Seishirou Shishirui.

Something like that is easy enough to understand—and what’s more, I’ve engaged in countless battles over the course of the past year, and ones with my life at stake, at that. Sorry to brag, but if you’ll allow me to mark my own test here, I don’t think it would be an exaggeration to say I managed to make it out alive from a veritable storm of bullets. Starting from spring break, when I exchanged fatal blows with the bewitching beauty by the name of Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, currently holding me in her arms with her fingers now creeping across my ribs, I’ve weaved my way out of certain death almost too many times too count.

Still, it’s exactly *because* of all I’ve been through that the thought of a showdown with Ougi-chan just doesn’t click. It feels like I was just told an anecdote without a punchline, and I can’t glean any substance from what she said.

Showdown, putting an end to everything, life-or-death... The words sound dramatic, but given the reality of the situation, they're as hollow as they come.

"Hmm. If we were to liken it to something, do you feel like you were shown a five-minute anime with a completely open ending, Araragi-san? And the actual content of the episode was less than one minute long, at that."

"Please keep your jokes to yourself, Hachikuji-san."

That metaphor was depressingly easy to understand, but this isn't the time to fool around.

Most likely, the reason I can't wrap my head around the idea is that, regardless of whatever she really is, I can't imagine Ougi-chan as the fighter type of high school freshman.

However mysterious she may be, it would feel absolutely criminal to slice a cute-looking high school girl in half using a samurai sword.

"Geez, I told you we aren't going to use that. That plan is dead—thanks to you, we don't have to use it anymore. Even I don't like the idea of cutting up something in the form of a high school girl, or should I say, in the form of a human."

"..."

Pretty sure you already did.

Pretty sure that when you sliced and diced me in cold blood until there was no trace left of my original form, on what could be considered sacred shrine grounds to boot, *I* was in the form of a human.

I can't determine whether she was being tongue-in-cheek or serious, but there's no point in going into a discussion on something over and done with. I'd like to know why it's "thanks to me" that we don't have to use the old plan, but since I already failed to follow up on it earlier, I probably ought to ask about what the new plan is before anything else.

If I'm supposed to carry out the plan all by myself, that's all the more reason to find out—I have things I can and can't do, after all.

In fact, there are fewer things I *can* do, and if I am, for example, asked to do something as difficult as slicing Ougi-chan in two with a samurai sword, regardless of how far Gaen-san is willing to go for Shinobu and Hachikuji in exchange, I'll have to refuse.

"I won't ask you to do anything difficult. In fact, it'll be about as simple as it gets. Anybody could do it—it simply won't have any effect unless *you* do it."

"...You're really making a show of this. For all you're trying to make it sound simple, you're about to force some impossible task onto me, aren't you?"

“Hardly. I’m just going to have you do the same thing my sister did some ten years ago.”

“Again, you make it sound so simple, but didn’t you just finish telling me your sister was an extraordinary person? Hard on and herself and hard on others, almost like a demon—I don’t think I’m capable of whatever such a formidable person did.”

“Oh, no, no. In a way, I’m sure it will be an easier task for you than it was for my sister—after all, you’re the boy who threw away your own life to save a vampire on the verge of death.”

“...?”

I don’t really get the connection.

Why would she bring up the time I rescued Shinobu during spring break now? Don’t tell me she wants me to repeat my actions, this time saving the oddity that is Ougi-chan? That’s almost like...

*Please save me.*

It’s almost like she’s making the exact same request of me.

However, there’s no way Gaen-san would say that—she’s completely removed from such sentimentality. I won’t be fooled by her easygoing façade. I know her policy as a specialist.

And it’s to seek out the most optimal solution, to an unforgiving degree.

When Nadeko Sengoku was enshrined in Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, she *did* prepare some countermeasures, but that was merely because Sengoku was unfit to be a god.

“Ultimately, the true threat of the unknown quantity that is Ougi Oshino... lies entirely in the fact that she is unknown.”

And then Gaen-san says it.

She says what I have to do.

“Therefore, if you expose her true identity, she will come apart at the seams.”

“Come apart at the seams...?”

“Or you could just say she’ll be annihilated, I suppose. What matters here is that she is an impostor who’s been lying about her true form. Shocking as it may be, she’s a big ol’ liar. As for what will happen when her lie is exposed... well, Shinobu-san and Hachikuji-chan can attest to that.”

I know.

I can attest to it myself.

“The Darkness...”

“...The Darkness...”

“...The Darkness.”

All three of us say it in unison.

“Right. Oddities that misrepresent themselves will be engulfed by the darkness—and she in particular masqueraded as the Darkness itself. I’m sure the punishment for her transgression will be most severe. Consider it her comeuppance. Everything she did over the past six months—all of the havoc she wreaked around you will be thrown right back at her.”

Gaen-san grins.

It’s a devious expression unbecoming of the good-humored young lady—but still, while she called it Ougi-chan’s “comeuppance,” perhaps it would be more appropriate to consider it a comedic final act.

It sounds almost like the ending to a fairytale.

Her true identity is revealed.

And that’s all it takes to put an end to her existence. Of course, to Ougi Oshino, who’s made mystery her modus operandi, it’s an inevitable weakness.

“Well, that’s pretty much the case for all oddities—that’s why I called Ougi Oshino ‘your average monster.’ Given that the first oddity you encountered was a rarity of a vampire, Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, and then you experienced a great number of life-or-death battles after that, not to mention that you made the acquaintance of the unprecedented brute force onmyoji, Yozuru Kagenui, you probably have the dangerous idea in your head that oddities are best dealt with through combat—however, the Japanese word for ‘monster’ literally means ‘that which disguises itself,’ and that’s all they are at their core. They’re akin to a fox or a tanuki.<sup>[2]</sup> If you reveal their true nature, they will cease to exist. That’s all there is to it.”

“...”

“Once you explain a supernatural phenomena with science, it becomes mere superstition, doesn’t it? It’s the same as that. It might seem old-fashioned to a modern-day kid like you, but as matter of fact, our job as specialists generally involves taking the urban legends we’ve investigated and boorishly, bluntly, and thoroughly picking them apart, thus rendering them ineffectual. There are some things in the world that can’t be explained with science—that’s *not* what we believe. Rather, steadily whittling down the number of things science can’t explain is our trade. Creating explanations for the unexplainable and breaking them down so anyone can understand is how we put food on the table. In that sense, our field of work is bound to die out eventually. Much like an octopus eating its own leg,” says Gaen-san, with a hint of self-deprecation—I’m reminded that Oshino told me pretty early on that

trying to settle everything through fighting is a violent way of doing things.

*You've got an awfully violent way of thinking, Araragi-kun. Did something good happen?*

That's what he said to me.

Now I see.

If we go along with Gaen-san's logic, I won't be facing off with Ougi-chan in a one-on-one confrontation—it will be a completely one-sided exorcism.

It will leave a bad aftertaste.

I'm pretty certain that part won't change much compared to slicing her in half with a samurai sword—but it seems just as certain that it's the most optimal solution here, and the best plan for resolving the town's current predicament.

“Did your sister exorcise the oddity like Ougi-chan—not the Darkness, but a pseudo-Darkness—the same way?”

“Yep, that's right. My sister wasn't a specialist, nor was she much older than you at the time, but she did her own research and overcame the crisis all by herself. She's really... a strong person. She *was* a strong person,” she says, correcting herself with the past tense. “I guess that just goes to show that even the strongest person can't do anything in the face of a car accident. Oh, but perhaps that's a touchy subject for Hachikuji-chan?”

“Uhh... huh. Vehicles are quite a convenient means of travel, though. Without them, people wouldn't be able to function in modern society.”

Mayoi Hachikuji, the girl who crossed the street on a green light and was hit by a car 11 years ago, responds by playing dumb.

That's playing dumb to an extreme... At least be a *little* traumatized by what happened.

“Koyomin. You may have just used the term ‘pseudo-Darkness’ on the fly, but it’s spot on. It gets the idea across perfectly. However, I need to point out that you’re making a big mistake if the word ‘pseudo’ gives you the impression that she’s a watered down version. In fact, precisely *because* she’s just an impostor, she’s more trouble than the real thing. As my unworthy junior Deishuu Kaiki would say, in its deliberate attempt to be real, the fake is more real than the real thing.”

“...Once we put Hachikuji in Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, the real Darkness won’t come after her, but the fake pseudo-Darkness might... Is that what you mean?”

“Right. From my point of view, the pseudo-Darkness is more dangerous than the actual Darkness. She won’t allow for such an opportunistic solution—she’ll take the stance that an answer where everyone becomes happy is just a cheat.”

“...”

“So by all means, I’d like to put an end to things today, tonight. In order to fulfill both my job and your wishes, the second requirement is Ougi Oshino’s extermination. If we don’t fulfill the second condition, the first condition will be rendered invalid—that’s what I meant when I said that.”

*Please save me.*

*Will you take my side?*

*Please save me.*

Whether I like it or not, I find myself ruminating on Ougi-chan’s words—I still don’t know what she hoped to accomplish by saying that.

Were those her true feelings?

Or was it another part of her role as the “unidentifiable” pseudo-Darkness? Nevertheless, whichever of the two it was, or even if her aim was something else entirely, it doesn’t look like I’ll be able to lend an ear to that request of hers.

Perhaps I’ve just let Gaen-san talk me into it. Perhaps I’ve just fallen for the conversational wiles of an adult.

Still, leaving Hachikuji to be devoured by the Darkness...

Allowing another tragedy to befall the people around me...

Abandoning them... isn’t something I can do.

Too many things have happened over the past six months.

Right or wrong.

Like it or not.

I have to exterminate Ougi Oshino.

No matter what kind of smile she has on her face.

I glance black at Shinobu over my shoulder. She’s watching me quietly with golden eyes.

I once denied Heart-Under-Blade her request.

*Save me.*

She begged that of me—and this is how I responded.

*I won't save you.*

Right. I didn't listen.

Now it's time to give Ougi-chan the same answer.

"Alright. I won't save Ougi Oshino—so."

Steeling my resolve, I ask.

"So please tell me, Gaen-san. Tell me the true form of the mysterious transfer student, Ougi Oshino."

"Her true form is..."

She gives me an immediate reply—and it would seem, to the bitter end...

Gaen-san knew everything.

And in the end, I knew nothing at all.

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[<sup>1</sup>] The Japanese school year starts from April.

[<sup>2</sup>] In Japanese folklore, both the fox and the tanuki are known for being masters of disguise and shapeshifting.

Tsukihi Araragi is an oddity.

She is the youngest daughter of the Araragi family, a junior high school student who will begin ninth grade the coming school year, the strategist of the Fire Sisters, a girl who often changes her hairstyle—and a phoenix.

If we were to properly classify her—if we were to classify her not through biology, but through monsterology, she would be a type of cuckoo known as the “Dying Bird.”

The cuckoo is a bird that comes and goes between the land of the living and the land of the dead—in a few words, a symbol of immortality. As it is, the perfection of Tsukihi Araragi as an immortal oddity surpasses even that of a vampire.

She is more invulnerable than a vampire, more skilled at resurrection than a zombie, and more enduring than a ghost. She will never die from sickness, nor from poison, nor from an accident.

She possesses none of the special abilities incident to oddity-kind; she will simply live life as a human, complete the full length of her life span without ever realizing what she is, then move on to her next life as though nothing happened.

She will reincarnate.

They say a phoenix is reborn from the flames, but in truth, it is a thoroughly plain oddity, wholly removed from such flamboyance; yet still, there can be no mistake that she *is* indeed an oddity, and as a result, a pair of specialists paid the town a visit in August with the intent of exterminating her.

Yozuru Kagenui.

Yotsugi Ononoki.

There is no longer any telling how that duo specialized in fighting immortal oddities had planned to eliminate Tsukihi Araragi, the girl who cannot be killed by any means—but to merely state the end result of the encounter, the specialists agreed to overlook her.

Of course, the girl in question was completely unaware of what transpired.

But she was allowed to continue living as an oddity.

She was allowed to continue living as a human.

She was allowed to continue living as a member of the Araragi family—she was permitted to continue living as Koyomi Araragi’s little sister.

She was acknowledged as such.

And gaining acknowledgement is the function of an oddity.

And thus, she is who she is in the present—she is who she is today.

Tsukihi Araragi exists here and now, on Wednesday, March 14.

“I’m off!”

So declared Tsukihi Araragi as she set out first thing in the afternoon, though perhaps “first thing” is not entirely accurate, seeing as she was the last person to leave the house. Both of her parents had left for work; her brother, who had just finished his exams, was on the very last date of his high school years; and her sister, slated to become a high school student the coming school year, had left immediately after finishing breakfast, heading for her 100-man kumite in high spirits. The way Tsukihi Araragi saw it, the two had slipped out while she wasn’t looking, but being the freewheeling girl she is, she hadn’t been keeping a particularly close eye on what her siblings were doing to begin with.

Moreover, among all three siblings, the one whose actions are the greatest mystery and the one who presents the greatest cause for concern is none other than the very youngest child in question—she is notorious for being too dangerously unpredictable to leave to her own devices.

Today was no different, as she relayed to her family that she would be “visiting a friend recovering from illness” as part of her freshly begun spring break schedule, but that was not the whole fact of the matter.

She lied.

She deceived her family without the slightest bit of guilt.

That notwithstanding, what she said did not conflict with the truth in a broader sense, as she did indeed head over to the Sengoku’s house, just as she had informed them. She visited the house of her elementary school friend, Nadeko Sengoku.

They had parted ways and fallen out of contact upon starting junior high, but they were once so close as to call each other by nicknames. They had recently regained contact via Tsukihi Araragi’s older brother, and rekindled their friendship since.

Out of concern for her friend who, starting from the end of the previous year, had been spirited away for several months, she had been checking up on her regularly following her discharge from the hospital—or so the story goes (of course, Tsukihi Araragi is completely unaware that her friend was not so much spirited away as she became a spirit herself), but in truth, Nadeko Sengoku recovered long ago, at least to a point that there would be no need to check up on her three times in one week.

While it is true that she had been going there to meet Nadeko Sengoku, she had not been doing so to nurse her back to health. Tsukihi Araragi had been visiting Nadeko Sengoku to help her with a project, and today’s White Day was no exception.

What sort of project, you ask?

“Thanks, Tsukihi-chan. I should be able to meet the deadline, thanks to all your help.”

Upon hearing that from Nadeko Sengoku up in her room on the second floor, Tsukihi Araragi replied, “Aww, it’s nothing.”

She was sitting at a writing desk, in the process of inking in a manga manuscript. Depending on her mood, the ever volatile Tsukihi Araragi can be liable to fly off the handle if interrupted in the middle of something, but in this instance, she maintained a placid demeanor.

That likely had less to do with the words of thanks putting her in a good mood, and more to do with her delight at seeing how much her friend had changed. Not too long ago, Nadeko Sengoku would have been more likely to say “sorry” than “thanks” in such a scenario.

She had always found that feeble attitude quite irritating.

If they weren’t friends, she likely would have punched her for it, and she had often felt all the more tempted to punch her because they *were* friends—but her childhood friend seemed to have changed since coming back from her mysterious disappearance.

What in the world could have happened?

Tsukihi Araragi was not concerned with such questions.

She didn’t bother with such conventions.

Instead, she merely focused on the work she had in front of her—helping Nadeko Sengoku finish her manuscript in time to enter the Rookie of the Year contest, or in other words, playing the role of her assistant.

Back during one of the genuine hospital visits following her return and hospitalization, Nadeko Sengoku had confessed to Tsukihi Araragi that drawing manga was a hobby of hers.

Tsukihi Araragi had been angry that she’d kept it a secret for so long—furious, in fact—but when Nadeko Sengoku asked for her help in purchasing art supplies, as well as in working on the actual product, she couldn’t stay mad.

And thus they slowly but surely arrived at the present.

Nadeko Sengoku herself had never imagined that the renowned strategist of the Fire Sisters—and as such, the likely incredibly busy Tsukihi Araragi—would continue to help with her manga work for such a long period of time, and in that sense, it did make her feel somewhat pushy and demanding.

However, if we look at it from Tsukihi Araragi’s point of view, it was refreshing and intriguing to see Nadeko Sengoku, who used to form nothing more than superficial and impassive relationships with others, take the initiative and start out on a creative endeavor.

She was happy to immerse herself in the role of assistant.

Of course, given that Nadeko Sengoku had not yet recovered enough to go back to school, Tsukihi Araragi was not entirely devoid of concern and a desire to check up on her (and naturally, as the de facto leader of all the junior high girls in the area, she was fully aware of the trouble Nadeko Sengoku had caused at her middle school, 701 Junior High); however, looking at the content of the draft she was working on, it felt like a needless worry.

No doubt she had made a clean break from all sorts of things plaguing her.

So it seemed to Tsukihi Araragi.

One indication of that was Nadeko Sengoku's current hairstyle. Previously—or rather, ever since she was an elementary school student—she had hidden her face behind long bangs, but now she—who more than being shy or awkward or even anxious around strangers, had been deeply anthropophobic—wore her hair cropped short.

She had gone to see a hairdresser immediately after being discharged from the hospital. Her old self likely wouldn't even have set foot inside a salon. So of course, when Nadeko Sengoku—who had always, with only one exception, had her parents cut her hair for her—suddenly asked to be introduced to a good hairstylist, Tsukihi Araragi was thrown for a loop.

Seeing as she would get referral credit, she had no reason to refuse, but when she heard (from the seat next to her) that she wanted all her hair cut off, she had to question her friend's sanity. That said, thanks to Nadeko Sengoku's natural beauty, while it made for a complete image change, it didn't come out looking strange.

At the very least, it looked significantly cuter than it had the time Tsukihi Araragi had forcibly chopped off her bangs (that was the one exception), but evidently, rather than going for a cute look, she had changed her style for the extremely pragmatic reason that long hair would get in the way while drawing manga.

The fact that she was wearing an outfit it would be no problem to get ink on, her school's designated jersey, lent credence to her claim, but Tsukihi Araragi, who was very particular about how she wore her hair, assumed that the haircut was at least partially motivated by heartbreak.

She assumed as much, but she refrained from saying anything about it.

While Tsukihi Araragi subscribed to the doctrine of bluntly speaking anything on her mind, she was not entirely insensitive.

“You know, I don’t really get manga or whatever.”

That remark, however, was somewhat insensitive.

“But Nadeko-chan, how much confidence would you put in this? Won’t you get prize money and stuff if you win?”

“Hmm... I’m not sure,” replied Nadeko Sengoku, looking over her shoulder with a troubled smile.

Not too long ago, that expression would have been hidden behind long locks. “I decided to stop worrying about stuff like that.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Someone told me I just might have talent—but these things don’t always work out, even for people who *are* really talented.”

“If you don’t believe in your own ability, you’ll never get really good at it. Once you can’t put in the effort anymore, you won’t have any crutch to support you. People who get by purely on hard work get disillusioned when they can’t work hard anymore,” commented Tsukihi Araragi, relaying her thoughts without any filter.

In the past, Nadeko Sengoku likely would have backed down from the conversation right then and there, but she instead replied, “It’s less about believing, and more about being tricked into it,” diligently catching the ball thrown into her court. “It’s just like you once said: trying to become a manga artist is a lot like buying a lottery ticket.”

“What, did I say that? …Well, no problem with that, right? If nobody buys a lottery ticket, there won’t be any jackpot for the winner.”

Who knows whether that response provided any reassurance—it seems more likely that it didn’t—but Nadeko Sengoku smiled at Tsukihi Araragi all the same.

“I’m just doing what I want to do. I don’t care how lame or embarrassing it is. Aren’t you the same way, Tsukihi-chan?”

Asked that question, it was Tsukihi Araragi’s turn to be left at a loss for words. Perhaps unexpectedly, she did not perceive herself as “doing what she wanted to do” as much as the people around her seemed to think.

And so, she put those feelings of hers into words.

“I don’t really have any big goals or things I want to do. So maybe that’s why I love supporting others in what they want to do, like I’m doing right now? Even the Fire Sisters started out more like a mutual aid society for middle schoolers than a group of heroes.”

“Really…?”

Nadeko Sengoku gave her a curious look. Upon discovering a side to her friend she hadn’t really seen before, she stopped moving the pen in her hand.

“Honestly, I can’t think of anyone with a clearer outlook towards life than you.”

“Hahaha! I’m flattered to hear you say that. That’s too great an honor to cede to lil ol’ Tsukihi! You might as well call me *Cedehi-chan*—wait, don’t call me seedy!”<sup>[1]</sup>

Despite replying with an attempt at humor, she was quietly reminded how her friend used to refer to herself in the third person. She could faintly recall pointing that out once upon a time, but really, whenever had she switched over to using “*watashi*”?<sup>[2]</sup>

“Still, I tend to be a *little* bit more nihilistic, or I dunno, maybe destructive. I always get pulled along by people who actually have something they want to do, y’know?”

“Are you talking about Karen-san and... Koyomi-san?”

Her pronunciation of “Koyomi-san” sounded odd.

Odd, and a bit strained.

However, she refrained from pointing that out. She judged that it was still too delicate a topic to poke fun about.

“Yeah, pretty much. Plus, the reason I’m helping you with your job like this is ’cause I got pulled along by your determination.”

“Job...”

Nadeko Sengoku blushed.

Being that she is, of course, no machine, in spite of the “clean break” she had made, it appeared that she hadn’t completely rid herself of her bashful nature.

“It’s not my job. Not at all. Not yet.”

“Man, what’s someone like me going to do in the future?”

Depending on her intonation, it could have made for quite the gloomy question, but true to her personality, Tsukihi Araragi presented it quite candidly.

“I could pull off most things, but I’m actually *less* motivated to do stuff I know I’d be good at. It’s just boring to do things that come naturally. That’s no good, obviously, so that’s why I’m always letting other people decide what I should do...”

“It’s not that you don’t want to do anything, right?” asked Nadeko Sengoku, as if drawing a parallel to her former self—and again, in the past, she never would have dared to ask such a personal question.

“Right. I want to do something. I want to be active. I want to throw myself into things. So if I see anything that interests me even a little bit, I’ll give it a try. But no matter what I do, I always lose interest right away—I get bored of it right away. I don’t have a very good idea of what kind of person I am. I dunno... Things are fine now that I’m bursting with youth and energy, but when I become an adult, there’s a good chance I’ll get myself stuck with some loser who always babbles on about some stupid dream.”

“That’s a scarily realistic thought...”

“I need to start thinking about my future plans now to make sure that doesn’t happen... Besides, Karen-chan is about to become a high schooler, and Onii-chan is about to become a college student. This will be the first time since sixth grade that I’ll have to deal with getting left behind, so it’s the perfect time to decide what I want to do and what I want to become. Just like you, Nadeko-chan,” she said.

*Just hearing that from Tsukihi-chan makes all my hard work feel worth it,* thought Nadeko Sengoku, and with a broad smile on her face, she went back to inking her sketches.

“You know, even if people can’t become happy, good things will still happen—as long as they keep on living.”

“Huh. Yeah, I guess.”

*Was she trying to console me?* she wondered.

The two continued chatting as they inked in the pages, eventually partook of dinner together, and once it had grown completely dark outside, decided on a date for their next session (she had promised to continue helping until the manuscript was finished), and then, finally, Tsukihi Araragi left the Sengoku’s house.

“My, isn’t that Araragi-senpai’s little sister?”

Just as soon as she had left the Sengoku residence—as if to take advantage of her moment of indecision, when she was deciding whether to go straight home or make a stop along the way—she heard a voice. A voice that seemed to blend in with the darkness, a voice that seemed to creep in through the cracks of her heart.

Someone’s voice.

When she looked over, she saw a high school girl who was wearing the uniform of her brother’s school and straddling a bicycle. Her black eyes shone with a distant glow, enough to give the momentary illusion that all the lampposts along the street had blacked out at once.

She wore the most questionable of smiles.

While too young to be called bewitching, her appearance could hardly be considered innocent; she was a high school girl with an obliquely unsettling aura about her.

Despite the fact that she was riding a rather stylish bicycle, she did not give the impression of being especially athletic.

“We ran into each other yesterday, too. Hello.”

“...Hello.”

Had they really seen each other yesterday?

She wondered as much to herself, but dipped her head in a bow regardless. It was the product of an instantaneous decision, figuring that if this was one of her brother's friends, she couldn't risk being rude.

"My name is Ougi Oshino," the other girl offered in response to that. "I've heard a lot about you from your brother—he said he's really proud of you. Goodness, I'm so jealous of you, having Araragi-senpai for a brother."

"Uh huh..."

She wasn't sure how to respond to that.

What's more, she highly doubted that her brother had claimed to be proud of her—Tsukihi Araragi was absolutely certain that her brother would never say that, not even with a gun to his head.

"It's pretty late, so I'll give you a ride. Just hop on the back," said Ougi Oshino, indicating the rear end of her bicycle. She had to be an awfully friendly person to offer a seat to someone she was meeting for the first time (or had they met yesterday?), and Tsukihi Araragi was a bit surprised that her brother had such a sociable friend.

The Sengoku household and the Araragi household weren't so far apart that it was necessary to hitch a ride, but there was no real reason to refuse her offer—thinking as much, Tsukihi Araragi was about to happily accept, but when she looked closer, she noticed there was no seat on the back of the bicycle Ougi Oshino had indicated.

It was a single-seater BMX.

"Oh, don't worry, I've got a rod—a rod that makes it into a two-seater."

After saying that, Ougi Oshino temporarily dismounted her bicycle and swiftly began preparing it for a second rider—not just swiftly, but skillfully.

"Okay, all done. Hop on, hop on! You can put your hands on my shoulders to keep your balance."

"I can keep my balance without doing that, you know."

"Haha, surely you jest."

She could.

She did exactly that.

As she lived in the shadow of Karen Araragi, the sister one year her elder whose muscle was among the best in the world, it wasn't always apparent, but she was second to none in terms of physical prowess. Standing on the bar equipped to the rear wheel with her arms extended to both sides (she

(had wrapped her overly long hair around both of her arms so it wouldn't get caught in the wheel), Tsukihi Araragi served as Ougi Oshino's rearguard.

Though of course, all she was doing was riding behind her.

It was just like her to increase the risk of riding double, which is already dangerous enough on its own, for no particular reason. Steering a vehicle with someone practically doing stunts right behind her must have been rather nerve-wracking, but Ougi Oshino didn't seem to mind.

Of course, Tsukihi Araragi was wholly enjoying her trick riding experience—it was her philosophy to enjoy things to the fullest.

“I bet Onii-chan would love this kind of bike.”

“Oh, now that you mention it, Araragi-senpai *is* quite fond of bikes—although he lost both of the ones he owned in unfortunate accidents. Mm, yeah, that’s part of the reason why I’m riding one now.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“I didn’t really mean anything by it—it was a sort of metaphor. If you just make a mental note of it, it might come in handy later.”

“Yeah...?”

“How was Sengoku-chan doing?”

Judging by that question, it appeared Ougi Oshino was acquainted not only with her brother, but with Nadeko Sengoku as well. *Maybe she was hanging around in hopes of seeing Nadeko-chan, and then I showed up and cut her in line,* Tsukihi Araragi thought to herself.

The thought didn’t particularly concern her, which was also very much like her.

While it was a part of her moral code not to deliberately cut someone in line or steal their place, she wasn’t so self-critical as to feel guilty if it inadvertently happened as a result of her actions.

“Perhaps that’s where you differ from your older brother.”

“Huh? What is?”

“Oh, nothing. Nothing at all. More importantly, tell me about Sengoku-chan’s condition. How were the results of her electrocardiogram? Were they electrifying? Or is she electridying?”

“...She’s doing fine.”

She’s doing super great!

That’s what she had been about to say, but given that her friend was currently skipping school, she

figured it would be a poor idea and instead helped make her an alibi—she had always been a rather attentive girl in such respects.

She was not only clever, but crafty.

“She isn’t dying. I guess you could say the one who died is the person she used to be.”

“Maybe so. Mm, well, that just goes to show that there’s no one out there who’s nothing but cute—the way I see it, girls like that are cuter when they don’t act very cute.”

What she said was a bit confusing.

However, Ougi Oshino evidently thought that to be perfectly sound logic, as she refrained from delving into any further explanation and instead said, “That’s good to hear,” appearing satisfied with the report. “Sengoku-chan’s cute looks ended up being little more than a blade for her to hurt herself with—I find that sort of thing really saddening.”

“Saddening? Isn’t she lucky to be so cute?”

In response to Tsukihi Araragi’s naïve—or perhaps insensitive—question, Ougi Oshino explained, “Take, for example, how people can’t choose the families they’re born into. It’s easy to feel jealous of those born into nobility, or those born into wealthy families, but from the perspective of the one born into that household, they were forced to carry a heavy burden from the moment they came into this world—even if they wanted to become, say, a manga artist, they might not be allowed to. That could be considered pretty unlucky.”

Unfortunately, that explanation was a bit difficult for Tsukihi Araragi to digest—though that would likely be true of any 14-year-old girl.

Sensing as much, she shifted the topic a bit, following up with, “It’s the same line of logic that says people’s futures are decided based not on what they can do, but on what they *can’t* do. If there are too many things a person can do, they’ll end up spreading their focus too thin. Now that she’s been confronted with a lifetime’s worth of shame and lost all other alternatives, Sengoku-chan is finally able to devote herself to chasing her dream—that’s what it comes down to.”

“...?”

“Sengoku-chan’s cuteness was much like a chain tying her down, but it was too valuable a feature to relinquish of her own will—the situation called for drastic measures.”

“Drastic measures? Uh, what are you talking about?”

“Who knows?”

Ougi Oshino spread her hands.

In other words, she let go of the handlebars.

The pair of riders both had their hands freely removed from the bike—one could say they held the freedom to cause an accident.

“I don’t know anything—Araragi-senpai is the one who knows.”

“...?”

“Rather than drastic measures, perhaps it was more of a lesson on what not to do. All the same, I did quite an awful thing to that con artist... I didn’t mean for things to go quite that far. But no matter how much I may regret it, I doubt Araragi-senpai will forgive me...”

As she said that, she gripped the handlebars once more, and then continued, “So, it seems that Sengoku-chan wants to become a manga artist in the future.”

Ougi Oshino then increased the speed of her pedaling.

“Tsukihi Araragi-chan. What do you want to become?”

“Me...?” While thinking about how she had just had a similar conversation with her friend, she responded, “Nothing in particular.”

It suddenly occurred to her that her friend was supposed to be keeping quite a tight lid on the fact that she was drawing manga. Had she talked to this girl about it?

“I just care about having fun in the moment. And I figure stacking up enough of those thrills could lead me to a future someday.”

“You’re not the type who knows everything, but you *are* the type who can do anything. You’re not omniscient, but you are omnipotent. Thanks to that, you have too many options, and so your goals get spread too thin. That’s why you’re always content to play second fiddle. It’s easiest for you to live life dragged along by someone else. You spoke of your future,” lectured Ougi Oshino, awfully knowingly—just how much had her brother said about her to this girl?—concluding with, “but your future is far too grand in scale,” letting those last words slip with a wry smile.

“...? Do you mean that I’m too dependent on other people?”

She had no idea what the girl had meant by “your future is too grand in scale,” so she ignored that part entirely—however, the part about playing second fiddle bothered her, and so she felt compelled to delve a little further into that topic.

But perhaps that was simply an extension of the conversation she’d had in Nadeko Sengoku’s room.

“Well now, I wonder. If you consider that the cuckoo is a brood parasite, perhaps it would be more appropriate to call it ‘parasitism,’ rather than ‘dependence’... But you’ve developed quite the unique personality in spite of that nature of yours. Perhaps that’s due to your brother’s influence?”

“The cuckoo?”

“Tsukihi-chan. There’s no doubt that you’re living through the support of those around you—that you’re being kept alive. If it weren’t for the consideration of people like your brother and sister, you very well could have died during summer break.”

“...? During summer break?”

What did that mean?

Was it another metaphor?

Interpreting that in her own way, she tried throwing around an old hackneyed phrase, “It’s like how people always say ‘no one can live alone,’ right?”

“People can live on their own.”

But Ougi Oshino contradicted her without a moment’s hesitation.

“The ones who can’t live on their own... are monsters. *Just like you and me,*” stated Ougi Oshino—the meaning of her words was unclear.

At first, Tsukihi Araragi had thought her an unusual type of person to make friends with her brother, but after talking with her for a bit, she seemed exactly what one would expect, or that is to say, she was just the right kind of mysterious to mix well with her brother.

“...Wait, huh? Hey, Oshino-san—”

“You can call me Ougi-san.”

“Ougi-san, we’re going in totally the wrong direction!”

Thanks to her strange positioning as a second rider, the surroundings had looked completely different—or in reality, she just hadn’t been paying any attention. But regardless, they had, at some point, strayed from the route leading to the Araragi household.

To begin with, the two houses weren’t a large enough distance apart to allow for such a long conversation. Where were they?

“Uh-oh. Sorry, looks like I got a little lost. Let’s stop here for a moment, and I’ll check the map on my smartphone.”

Unabashed, Ougi Oshino looked for a good place to park her bicycle. Before very long, she decided to stop in front of a certain building and put her foot on the brake.

However, Tsukihi Araragi didn’t think this an ideal place to park. It was a rundown and desolate—or perhaps just seedy—area, and the building itself was a derelict one that showed no signs of being in current use.

If Ougi Oshino hadn't been a girl, she would have suspected she'd been abducted by a scoundrel claiming to be her brother's friend (and in that scenario, the scoundrel would have been the one in trouble), but she didn't sense that sort of danger from the way the girl was fiddling with her smartphone, and so, with a sense of curiosity, Tsukihi Araragi looked up at the abandoned building.

It wasn't something she got to see very often, after all.

It was a place she likely never would have come to if they hadn't gotten lost—the thought instantly ignited her interest, which spoke to the way she always lived in the moment.

“...Mm? Huh?”

However, it then occurred to her.

Strangely enough, she recognized the building—despite the fact that it was her first time coming here, and it should have been her first time seeing it.

“Oh... That's right. Isn't this the building that burned down back in August...?”

She had seen it on the news.

Being one of the Fire Sisters who maintained peace and order in the town, such information naturally came her way. Quite a few small fires had broken out during that time, but the one that burned down this building had been huge enough to leave an especially lasting impression.

Before and after the fire.

She had seen both photos of the building.

Now that the trick behind it had been explained, it appeared it wasn't the result of arson or anything so dangerous, but a simple case of spontaneous combustion—but all the same, it had caused grave damage to the property, leaving not even a single pillar behind.

But in that case, how could the building that had supposedly gone up in flames be standing there now, plain as day? Had it been reconstructed? No, of course not. Why would it be rebuilt back into its former derelict state?

“Tsukihi-chan, I figured out where we need to go. I won't get it wrong this time, so don't worry. While we're at it, do you want to try taking the wheel? You can even ride backwards on this BMX, it's really exciting and—oh my. My oh my. What's wrong? Why are you staring up at this perfectly run-of-the-mill building with such curiosity?”

“No, um... you see...”

Tsukihi Araragi explained the situation. Of course, even if she asked Ougi Oshino, who had merely wandered there by accident, there was no way the girl could know why a building that had supposedly burned down was standing right there, but she wanted the two of them to share in the

confusion.

“Hmm... How very strange. I wonder if that makes this the ghost of a building. Want to check it out?”

No sooner than she had proposed it, Ougi Oshino fastened her bicycle to a nearby tree using a chain (it didn’t have a kickstand, so there was no choice but to lean it against a tree) and started off towards the grounds of the building—she was truly quick to act.

Unlike Tsukihi Araragi’s brother, who had a tendency to overthink everything, this girl seemed to be the daring sort. Tsukihi Araragi likewise wasn’t one to hesitate in these situations, and so, without even taking a moment to glance after the girl, she immediately followed suit.

“Ougi-san, are you a ruins enthusiast?” questioned Tsukihi Araragi, inferring as much from the girl’s light steps.

“Oh, no, I’m not particularly drawn to ruins in and of themselves. I get the creeps, just like any normal girl. However, pondering and probing such mysteries is, well, what you could consider my job.”

“Your job... is it?”

Recalling how it had made Nadeko Sengoku blush, Tsukihi Araragi parroted the word back. That said, it didn’t seem like the girl meant it was a part-time job of hers.

“Yeah.”

And then they stepped foot inside the building.

They were technically trespassing, but the inside of the building was so dilapidated that it was hard to imagine it had an owner or landlord.

Despite how unsteady the ground was underfoot, they couldn’t hope for any light to illuminate their path at that time of day, so they had to take extra care not to trip at risk of getting seriously injured.

“It looks like it used to be a school... or wait, maybe a cram school.”

Straining her eyes in the darkness and observing the surroundings, Tsukihi Araragi came to that conclusion—as they were climbing the stairs, since, naturally enough, the elevator was broken.

“Hmm, so it would seem. Dear me, I’d gotten myself all hyped up, but the truth behind it was revealed just like that. Now that we know what it really is, it isn’t the least bit scary.”

She hadn’t seemed particularly scared to begin with, but Ougi Oshino said as much as she rounded the landing—evidently, she intended to conduct her investigation starting from the top floor. Some people claim it is most efficient to search through a chest of drawers from the bottom up, but she seemed to be operating on the opposite logic.

“That’s how all things are, in the end—no matter what it may be, something is scary when it’s an

unknown quantity, when you don't know its true nature. If someone feels uneasy about the future, it's because they can't envision their future self. People with a clear vision don't fear growing up."

"..."

"Once you open it up, Schrodinger's cat box is just a box—you'll find it was only natural that you wouldn't know whether the cat was alive or dead when the box was closed. Mystery novels are the same way—the reason you read them heart aflutter and aquiver is because you don't know the culprit. Once the mystery stops being a mystery, once the list of suspects is narrowed down to one person... quite frankly, everything after that is a bit of a killjoy. The scene where the solution is revealed might as well end with one line.

"Once you learn something's true form, its terror and its appeal both vanish in an instant."

As she spoke, Ougi Oshino continued to ascend the stairs. Up and up she went.

Her words were pregnant with meaning—in what was a rare occasion, Tsukihi Araragi found herself honestly impressed, thinking to herself that her brother had a lot of smart friends, but it was her lot in life to feel compelled to find fault with anything that impressed her.

"You think so?"

"Mm... What's this, a counterargument? If you have one, I'd like to hear it. For my own sake, and for yours as well."

"Well, not exactly a counterargument... I mean, what you said may be true for mystery novels, but in real life, isn't it even scarier after the culprit is caught? It means the thing you'd been afraid of all this time was confirmed to really exist."

"...Oho."

"It's like, things have just begun once you find out the culprit's true identity, I guess... Don't all the procedures that come *after* you've apprehended the criminal actually take a way longer time? Like the trial, and the imprisonment."

The argument had strayed a bit from the original point, but that was evidently a fresh and novel viewpoint to Ougi Oshino, and the loquacious girl went quiet for a moment.

And then, Tsukihi Araragi continued, "Besides, even if you learn something's 'true form,' there's no way to know if that really is true. There could always be a bigger twist in store. Just like in a mystery novel."

"Perhaps so. Yes, I see—in the end, a form is just a form. You really got me there. I'd expect no less from Araragi-senpai's little sister.

"All the same, I doubt that view of yours will do you any good, nor will it do me any good," said Ougi Oshino, and in the same moment, she reached the top floor.

Given that she wasn't the least bit out of breath after climbing four flights of stairs, she must have been a good walker—but of course, the same would go for Tsukihi Araragi, who caught up to her right away.

She had more than enough vigor to go around.

Enough vitality, too.

That was Tsukihi Araragi in a nutshell.

“Tsukihi-chan, you might be able to accept your true form—or you might even find it amusing, but I’m afraid I won’t be able to do the same. My true form... is ugly.”

“...?”

“Like a demon drowning its cares in sake. Although, demons *do* love sake, just as much as any god.”

“Because the word ‘ugly’ is written with the character for ‘demon’ next to the character for ‘sake,’ you mean? But that leaves the radical for ‘water’ left over.”<sup>[3]</sup>

“That’s fine. That radical hints at water—a lake. Or perhaps a sea serpent.”

After that explanation, Tsukihi Araragi understood even less—she could only assume the girl had no real intention to explain things.

“Tsukihi-chan.”

As she began walking towards the door furthest to the left out of the three classrooms on the floor, Ougi Oshino addressed the other girl.

“I’m sorry to say that you don’t have anything that could be called a future—it’s not that your future is uncertain, you just don’t have one. No matter how many things you stack up, it won’t lead you to any prospects down the line. All you have is an eternal now. Knowing that... heedless of the future, unmindful of the times to come, will you be able to simply live in the moment?”

“Probably, yeah.”

Failing to understand the meaning of the question, Tsukihi Araragi answered with an air of nonchalance.

“I’m pretty good at living.”

“...It’s amazing that you can say that. I’m jealous.”

*I’m jealous.*

Once again, Tsukihi Araragi wasn’t sure how to respond to that—but after saying that, Ougi Oshino

put her hand on the door.

She daintily turned the knob.

And she opened it with a smile.

“You’re late, Ougi-chan.”

*And then... I call out to her.*

In the middle of the classroom she just opened the door to, I stand up from the chair I’d been sitting on all this time, and in an imitation of the man she once called her uncle, I say that line.

“You kept me waiting.”

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[<sup>1</sup>] In the original Japanese, for those who care, she first said “*myouri ni tsukiru yo*” (“It’s more than I deserve”), then took the kanji for “*tsukiru*” (to use up) from that phrase and made a pun on her name: Tsukihi, written with the characters for “used up” and “fire.” After that, she delivers her own tsukkomi in the form of, “Wait, why am I burning myself out?!”

[<sup>2</sup>] There are many different first-person pronouns in the Japanese language. Nadeko used to use the third person (calling herself “Nadeko”), a very childish way of referring to oneself, but she now uses “*watashi*,” the standard personal pronoun for girls. As a note, since this was cut from the anime, Tsukihi actually pointed out Nadeko’s use of third person in the novel version of *Otorimonogatari*, and after some self-searching, Nadeko realized that she referred to herself that way because she lived like a spectator to her own life.

[<sup>3</sup>] To better explain with a visual aid: the kanji for “ugly” is 魁. The right side of that character is 鬼, or “demon.” The left side looks similar to 酒, the character for “sake.” However, “sake” has an extra water radical (氵) that “ugly” doesn’t have.

“Tsukihi-chan, you can go ahead and take my bike, so I’m sorry, but can you head home by yourself? I have to talk with your big brother about something important. The combination on the bike lock is ‘1234.’”

With that, Ougi-chan has Tsukihi exit stage left. That uninspired pin combination now seems almost characteristic of her.

Only the two of us are left in the classroom.

I’ve stood face-to-face with Oshino countless times in this abandoned building—but I never thought the day would come that I would greet someone else from Oshino’s position.

More than that, I never imagined that I would once again set foot inside the ruins of a cram building that had burned to the ground—or perhaps it’s that bringing everything to an end in the place where one could say everything began seems so far-fetched.

Excessively staged, perhaps.

“Ougi-chan. How did you create this building? Was it the same technique you used to recreate class 1–3 back when we first met?”

“Oh, no, the principles in play are slightly different this time around. That classroom was properly constructed. This ruined building, however, was created through a simple use of my matter creation skill. It’s the same ability Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade—Shinobu Oshino often uses.”

As she talks, Ougi-chan inspects the various chairs and desks lying around the room, and after finding a chair that meets her standards of cleanliness, begins dragging it over to the floor next to me.

“I would say the craftsmanship is a bit lacking in the details, or perhaps the edges are a bit rough, but it was something of a rush job, so I ask that you overlook those imperfections. Just appreciate the sense of warmth from this handcrafted work of papier-mâché. …Oh, right, speaking of Shinobu-chan, what is she doing right now? I realize she must have been restored to her full form, but she didn’t come with you? Is she hiding in your shadow, perhaps?”

“Not yet. We decided that we’d restore our link—that we’d bind ourselves to each other once again after everything is finished.”

“Oh?” hums Ougi-chan, and she sits down on her chair directly across from me, her feet turned inwards. “I see, I see—I was purely inquiring as to whether she was here or not, but I see, so Shinobu-chan desired to set herself back to square one. And you, Araragi-senpai—after going all the way to Hell for an exorcism to stop your vampirification in its tracks, and finally turning back into a regular human—you’re going to go back to being a quasi-human-slash-washout of a vampire, are you? You’re going to bind yourself to Shinobu-san once again, are you? What a masochist you are.”

“I just like little girls,” I reply.

All while thinking to myself that this is a pointless conversation.

“So you’d throw away your life for a little girl, would you? Exorcising you was an exercise in futility, was it? And, what do you plan to do about the other girl?”

“We’re going to set her up in Kita-Shirahebi Shrine. But we’re leaving that for after everything is over, too.”

“Hm. Everything came together where it should, I see. Figuring out what to do about the gaping hole left in that shrine—in this town—was quite a task, but I see you settled it quite conveniently.”

“A task... Part of your job, was it?”

“Yes, more or less. I did mention that once, didn’t it? Though of course, you best not take every little thing I say so seriously.”

Haha, she laughs cheerfully.

Even in this situation, her attitude doesn’t appear to change much—Ougi Oshino is the same as ever. From the moment I first met her in October, she has always remained unwavering and consistent in her approach to life.

“Speaking of your job, let’s talk about my sister.”

Unsure of how to lead the conversation, I try bringing up the girl who just went home, Tsukihi Araragi, in hopes of getting a better feel for the situation.

“Just what were you chatting with her about?”

“You caught us right in the middle of our conversation—I didn’t get far enough along to try anything, so you need not worry. To my greatest regret, it seems my work will be left unfinished.”

“Guess I did a cruel thing there.”

“No, you did the right thing. I was trying to do the right thing myself, of course—but it seems I won’t be able to see it through. Well, either way, it was likely a futile effort. We exchanged quite a few words on our way here, but she’s a hard nut to crack. That’s a phoenix for you; she’s more than I can handle. I do have to wonder how Yozuru Kagenui intended to exterminate a creature of such longevity.”

“Monsters... can be exterminated by revealing their true nature, right?”

“What I’m saying is that I doubt revealing her true nature would be enough to eradicate her. She *does*, after all, have a big brother who obstinately continues to love her, even knowing what she really is.”

“...”

“Mm. Perhaps *that* is why Yozuru Kagenui gave up on her—but of course, I doubt *I* will be so lucky.”

“...”

“Isn’t that right? You’re here to expose my true form and exterminate me. That’s how this is going to go, yes?”

As she says that, Ougi-chan gazes straight at me—as if, in contrast to the resignation she expressed, she’s appraising me with those black, black eyes.

“Well, I made a pretty good showing, at the very least. No, you see, if we consider that I had already predicted I would fail where Tsukihi-chan was concerned, although I may not have succeeded in everything, one could argue I haven’t left anything undone. In that case, perhaps there was some point in my having been born... My apologies for pressing the point, but Shinobu Oshino really isn’t here right now, correct?”

“She’s not.”

“Yotsugi Ononoki has already been rendered powerless—and if Mayoi Hachikuji hasn’t been deified yet, it’s safe to leave her out, so... The main stair, Izuko Gaen, isn’t here either?”

“Of course—”

That’s a strange way for me to answer that question, but regardless, I’m the only one here right now. That’s probably all Ougi-chan is trying to confirm here, but...

“It’s a one-on-one showdown.”

I go and say something I’m not really thinking.

Hearing that, Ougi-chan replies, “Oh, that gets my heart racing,” and breaks into a broad smile—though of course, a smile is just her standard expression, no different from usual.

I had always thought it an expression of her complacency, but in this moment, I wonder if it was perhaps a smile filled with resignation all along.

A pessimistic smile reflecting the evanescence of life.

Perhaps it was just a heartbreaking expression like that.

“To engage in a one-on-one duel with a veteran warrior like Koyomi Araragi is more of an honor than I deserve... Goodness gracious. There was a good possibility that Izuko Gaen would stand before me with the demon blade Kokorowatari in hand, and if she had done so, I might have won. But I suppose foisting the most vital tasks onto her friends is how she’s made it this far in life.”

“I’m sure that was part of it. But in this case, I really do believe that this is something I need to do. It’s something only I can do—and something I want to do on my own.”

“Something you want to do... is it? Are you sure you don’t just think that because an adult talked you into it? You may intend to work yourself to the bone for the sakes of Hachikuji-chan and Shinobu-chan, but how is that any different from force of habit? You’re such a fool,” Ougi-chan says. “People have a tendency to put disproportionate value on things they’re in danger of losing—but if we allow ourselves to be bound by such nostalgia, we’ll never make our way to the future. Oh, just to clarify, this is me pleading for my life.”

“...Pleading for your life?”

“I asked you before, didn’t I? ‘Will you take my side?’ ‘Please save me.’ It would seem, however, that my request fell on deaf ears. Perhaps I was too lacking in charm,” she ponders.

She almost seems to be enjoying herself.

As things stand now, that amusement hurts to watch.

“Oh well. That’s correct, Araragi-senpai—you made the right choice. See? You can do the right thing if you put your mind to it. Too bad for you, I was actually hoping you would turn me down. Hmm, let’s see... Araragi-senpai, do you have any plans after this?”

“I told you, didn’t I? I’m going to put Shinobu back in my shadow and oversee the procedure to enshrine Hachikuji—and there’s still a lot of stuff I have to take care of in the aftermath, so I need to have another talk with Gaen-san.”

“I see. If you were free, I was planning to ask you out to dinner—but you seem to have a lot on your plate, so sorry to interrupt the not-quite-festivities, but could you wrap things up for us?”

“...Yeah, I will.”

I don’t want to drag things out.

That would just be cruel.

I’ll put an end to her with one blow—with one sentence.

I couldn’t take her side, and I couldn’t save her, but if there’s one thing I can still do for her, it’s that.

“Oh, that’s right. Araragi-senpai. I have one more thing to say to you. It’s about your university entrance exam... You may be under the impression that you made a fairly good showing, but you know your best subject, math? From about halfway through that section, you were one line off on the answer sheet.”

“What?!”

“You must’ve been in a tizzy, what with everything going on—my condolences. After a disaster like that in your best subject, surely your prospects of passing are dismal. Try again next year,” Ougi-chan teases mean-spiritedly.

It feels like she got one last punch in—but at the same time, those words of encouragement could be taken at face value, too.

Next year.

I’ll *have* a next year.

“Ougi-chan. Your true form is...”

And then I say it.

Whilst vividly recalling all that’s happened since I first met Ougi Oshino.

“Your true form is me.”

“Ougi Oshino’s true form is Koyomi Araragi.

“If I just come out and tell you that, I bet it will feel completely out of the left field and a little hard to accept, so of course I’ll give a more in-depth explanation. Oh, don’t worry, it’s nothing too complex—though I don’t think I can afford to be lax about it.

“Things have gotten complicated, and things have gotten all mixed together.

“I’ll have to go about this in an orderly way if I want to untangle everything.

“Try as I might to reveal Ougi Oshino’s true form, she’s a bit complicated and mixed together herself. Just like a convoluted secret code, she’s a cluttered composite. Much like how you were formed through the influence of many different people, it would be a bit heavy-handed to simply say that Ougi Oshino equals Koyomi Araragi.

“All the same, if I were to explain it as simply as possible, it would be quickest to say this: Ougi Oshino is an oddity Koyomi Araragi created.

“Just like my older sister, Tooe Gaen, made the oddity known as the Rainy Devil. When I say ‘made’ here, I don’t mean it in the same way that the five of us once ‘made’ Yotsugi in our college years. It’s closer to how Tsubasa Hanekawa-chan ‘made’ Black Hanekawa and Kako—and that’s why I was already a bit wary of this back in August. Considering the way you hold her up as a guiding light, this was a very real possibility.

“Anyway, let me start by explaining the precedent.

“I hate to reveal the skeletons in my family closet, but this is a story about my sister.

“I mentioned the Rainy Devil without any explanation, but you remember it, don’t you, Koyomin? It’s the oddity Suruga Kanbaru, my sister’s daughter, my niece, made a wish on... the formal name of the ‘Monkey’s Paw.’

“But originally, it wasn’t a Monkey’s Paw, nor was it the Rainy Devil. By giving her mysterious creation an ‘identity’ by the name of Rainy Devil, my sister was able to turn it into a mummy.

“At the start, it was more of an unidentifiable supernatural phenomenon.

“It was the grand sum of many mysterious occurrences.

“To sum it up briefly: my sister often lost things. She’d look around and realize she’d lost track of all sorts of items she had sitting around. It happened frequently enough that when I was in elementary school, I thought that for all she came down hard on other people, she was an awfully careless person herself.

“But she eventually caught on to a certain trend.

“The items my sister lost seemed random and disconnected, but they shared one common thread—the things she lost were always entertainment goods or luxury items.

“Games and books and snacks. Her pager. Trendy clothes, expensive bags, or fashionable shoes that could hardly be called ‘austere.’

“Put simply, I guess they were ‘things she didn’t need, but wanted anyway’—or maybe even ‘things that got in the way of what she should be doing.’

“They were all things that a strict parent might take away from their kid—and my sister figured that out before too long. And at the same time, she figured out the reason why all those belongings of hers kept disappearing, as if they were being swallowed up in some kind of black hole.

“She wasn’t losing them. She was throwing them away.

“The perpetrator was my sister herself.

“She always tried to come down hard on herself, and that heart of hers created a Darkness that refused to tolerate anything unrighteous—or to be more precise, it created a strange sort of pseudo-Darkness.

“It was an oddity she herself gave birth to and she herself raised in order to suppress the desire to mess around that was typical of any adolescent, of any young girl. When I was in elementary school, it seemed like the weirdest kind of one-man show, and I couldn’t really wrap my head around it, but looking back on it now, it made perfect sense for that self-critical sister of mine.

“To sum it up, that supernatural phenomenon of unknown origin...

“That mysterious oddity Tooe Gaen had created was an embodiment of her own self-discipline.

“Leaving the story at that would make for an unsatisfying end, so to talk a bit about what happened after that: while she had been at her wits’ end up until that point, the moment she learned its true nature, *she* was the one in control, and that uncompromising sister of mine denied her self-discipline a will of its own, refused to show mercy to even her own severity, and exterminated that pseudo-Darkness.

“She threw away her unrestrained sense of restraint.

“She put an end to things by filing it away as a western oddity, the ‘Rainy Devil’—she brought the story to a close by bestowing her dark side with the name of a crybaby devil.

“And they all lived happily ever after.

“I explained it all in pretty broad terms, but that black hole tried to devour my sister’s friends, as well as her boyfriend at the time, so if she hadn’t resolved the matter when she did, the story likely would

have taken a grim turn. If you're interested, I'll tell you all about that little side story another day.

"Eventually, she took a part of the mummy that was left over and bequeathed it to her own daughter as if it were some kind of family heirloom that had been passed down for centuries. Now *that's* why I say she had a difficult personality—but anyway.

"Just think of it as Ougi Oshino being to you what the Rainy Devil was to my sister.

"In short, Ougi Oshino... is Koyomi Araragi's self-criticism.

"...Oh, don't you make that face at me, I'm just stating the facts. Be grateful I had enough tact not to call it your self-hatred.

"Besides, when you think of it like that, doesn't everything start to make sense? Ougi Oshino knew the ins and outs of your troubles, your circumstances, your relationships. Things you had forgotten, things you had kept hidden, things you never wanted to remember—she knew them all.

"She claimed that she didn't know anything...

"But she knew everything there was to know about Koyomi Araragi.

""You're the one who knows, Araragi-senpai"—that oh-so-profound catchphrase of hers was meant to be taken literally.

"Not only did she know everything, but she condemned it. Your lies, your tricks, your evasiveness, your wishy-washiness, your moderation, your irresponsibility—she was always there to question if you were really alright with all that, to reprimand you.

"When I told you that the real Darkness would probably let the convenient solution of making Hachikuji-chan into a god slide, but the pseudo-Darkness Ougi Oshino wouldn't, that's what I meant. After you so selfishly dragged Hachikuji-chan out of Hell, you can't accept a solution that was contrived with such ease, and Ougi Oshino will act based on those feelings of yours—on your harshness towards yourself.

"Of course, like I said before, she's made up of more than *just* your self-criticism—it would take more than that to make the cute little underclassman you've described.

"I told you, didn't I? She's a blend of a bunch of different things.

"And there are some pesky circumstances involved.

"I'm not totally free of blame in all that, so I'd like to treat this topic with the utmost gravity.

"But, well, it goes without saying, you know?

"Putting aside outliers like Tsubasa Hanekawa and my sister... oddities aren't something that can be formed by the likes of one mere high schooler.

“Just like how Sengoku-chan couldn’t bring that Mr. Serpent of hers into existence... you see?

“In reality, Ougi Oshino’s creation rested on a few fateful factors—a few characters needed to show up and a few inevitable incidents needed to occur. If even one of those factors had been missing, I’m sure the last half of your senior year would have been a little more glamorous.

“Still, you did, essentially, sow the seeds yourself—and those seeds were sown in August of last year.

“It was when we first joined forces—or in the aftermath of the incident, rather.

“It was when Hachikuji-chan was assailed by the Darkness.

“The first phase was you learning about the existence of the Darkness—of that phenomenon that ‘corrects mistakes.’

“If it’s not allowed, it’s not allowed.

“If it’s wrong, it’s wrong.

“You learned about the existence of something that makes those judgements for us.

“Naturally, you hated that phenomenon for trying to devour the ever lovable Hachikuji-chan—but at the same time, given your masochistic tendencies, you were enthralled by the thought of something that might punish you for your own deceit, for everything you did since depowering Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade.

“There’s another thought that might have crossed your mind, too.

““It didn’t let Mayoi Hachikuji off the hook—so there’s no reason *I* should be let off the hook.”

“You wanted to be punished the same way Hachikuji-chan was.

“If *that*’s not allowed, this shouldn’t be, either; if A is wrong, then it’s bad all the way to Z—your knack for wanting to protect everything around you means that if even one thing goes wrong, you feel compelled to write the whole thing off.

“That feeling... was planted into you.

“Still, all that was just a problem of your mindset.

“People can think whatever they want deep down, and it’s not like they’re going to create an oddity that way—however, to declare you ‘one mere high schooler’ would be a bit of a misnomer. After all, you’re a quasi-human who keeps the remnants of a legendary vampire in your shadow.

“Now then. The second phase was, of course, what came right afterwards: your showdown with that legendary vampire’s first servant, the original Oddity Slayer. Now *this* is where I need to take my

share of blame... for Suruga.

“This is where my niece gets involved.

“During your first encounter, the First used his energy drain on Suruga’s Rainy Devil left arm, yes?

“When he did, he absorbed the effects of that Monkey’s Paw. The First was basically a synthesis of all the oddities in this town to begin with, so he must’ve had a good affinity for it, too.

“However, it wasn’t the Rainy Devil that got mixed into the First, but the unidentifiable compound my sister made, and the result, as you can see—oh, no, this isn’t me going off on a tangent.

“I get that you see the First as a rival, but you two are connected via Heart-Under-Blade—via Shinobu Oshino.

“And that’s not to mention that Shinobu-chan ate the First’s remains—and thus a piece of my sister’s legacy made its way down the food chain and into you.

“The precedent.

“I called it as much, didn’t I?

“What’s more, if I’m the top of the specialists, the First was like the tap for supernatural phenomena—in this particular town, anyway. And thus was born a ‘mystery’ in possession of all the supernatural phenomena that have occurred in this town, as well as all the anecdotes surrounding them.

“Given her origin and her nature, just as you were arguing, she’s not exactly the fighting type—but all the same, she ought to have full command of Heart-Under-Blade’s matter creation skill, at the very least.

“She’s a hybrid of various monsters, one that can bring about almost any kind of supernatural phenomenon—so there’s no shame in being utterly outmatched by her.

“Having been born through the First, who could very well have been considered a manifestation of all the oddities in this town, even her wealth of knowledge was on par with a monster—but then again, it seems her stats were so far off the charts that it took an according amount of time for her to master her own abilities.

“By the way, Hachikuji-chan already talked about how the name ‘Ougi’ was an uninspired alias derived from her description as Suruga Kanbaru’s fan, but we left the explanation of her last name ‘Oshino’ for later, didn’t we? Now’s the time for me to shed light on that.

“Basically, the last name ‘Oshino’ doesn’t come from Meme Oshino, but from Shinobu Oshino. If you take into consideration that you and Shinobu Oshino are essentially one in body and soul, you could consider Ougi Oshino to be your joint production.

“Of course, it would’ve made more sense if she just called herself ‘Ougi Araragi,’ but I suppose that

would have been *too* obvious. The idea to call herself Meme Oshino's niece probably came from me, shamefully enough; I set a bad example when I called myself his sister back in August.

“Sorry.

“...Y’know, just wanted to give apologizing a whirl.

“This is a minor detail, but as for why she called herself Suruga Kanbaru’s fan—why she had Suruga introduce her to you as her underclassman—that was due to the part her left arm played in all of this, if you trace everything back to the start.

“It was a necessary part of the equation.

“Of course, Suruga herself didn’t know about any of this.

“She had no way of knowing; she barely even knew her own mother. And she’s probably better off not knowing—my sister would have preferred it that way, too.

“That’s why I used a fake name and called myself Meme’s sister back then. It’s not that I just felt like messing with you guys or anything, see? ...It backfired on me pretty spectacularly, in any case.

“Whatever, there’s no use in crying over spilled milk! ...Yeah, as amusing as it would be for me to start acting all defensive like that, at this point of our story, nothing truly out of ordinary has happened yet.

“With how hard Shinobu-san has exploited her matter creation skill up ’till now, it would be totally feasible for her to create an oddity, a high school girl, or whatever else.

“Compared to the example I gave earlier of Tsubasa Hanekawa-chan’s Black Hanekawa and Kako, it’s easier to understand the logic in play if you consider the oddity my sister made as the starting point. Plus, there was Suruga Kanbaru, who made her unconscious mind manifest using the left arm of the Rainy Devil itself, and Nadeko Sengoku, who—even if it never managed to become a true oddity—gave birth to a delusion by the name of Mr. Serpent within her own mind, too.

“You didn’t do anything special or unheard of. However, compared to the rest of those girls, what was unique about your case—what was unique in the same way my sister’s case was—was that you created an oddity meant to attack *yourself*.

“Not out of self-importance.

“Out of self-criticism—self-criticism to an extent that it could very well be considered a form of autotoxemia, from a certain point of view.

“When it came to Sodachi Oikura...

“When it came to Mayoi Hachikuji...

“When it came to Nadeko Sengoku…

“When it came to Hitagi Senjougahara…

“When it came to Shinobu Oshino…

“When it came to Yotsugi Ononoki…

“Not as your ‘Black’ self, but as your ‘Dark’ self, Ougi Oshino relentlessly held you accountable—she forced you into predicament after predicament. Are you really alright with things as they are? Can you let yourself off the hook just like that? Are things truly resolved? Aren’t you just covering up your own mistakes? Are you going to live like that for the rest of your life? She was always there, whispering those questions into your ear.

“Not as a monologue, but as dialogue… she was always there nestling up to you.

“…If I put it like that, it makes it sound like, in your innermost of hearts, you just desired to keep yourself disciplined, which comes across as terribly admirable and all that. I think the same goes for my sister, but you know, put in plain terms, it’s essentially just living life while making excuses for yourself. You’ve always extended a hand to strangers without any care for appearances, taken action for the sake of other people, and adopted helping others as your *raison d'être*—and this is the emotional defect that was born as a result of you reaching one of your limits.

“It’s hardly anything praiseworthy.

“Quite frankly, it’s basically just a roundabout version of self-harm.

“But at any rate, you wanted to repent, and you wanted someone to condemn you. Ever since spring break, deep down both in both body and in soul, you’ve felt keenly aware of your own underhandedness.

“You saved Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade out of a sense of pity—and you wanted to suffer the consequences.

“You formed a friendship with Tsubasa Hanekawa—but since you couldn’t return her feelings, you always worried about whether you were really entitled to do so.

“You saved Hitagi Senjougahara from the distress that had plagued her for years—so when you started dating her afterwards, you couldn’t help wondering if you were just ‘taking advantage of her weakness.’

“You respect Suruga Kanbaru—and the fact that you can’t live *your* life so candidly makes you feel inferior to her.

“You saved Nadeko Sengoku—but she wasn’t the only one you wanted to save back then.

“You came to a reconciliation with Shinobu Oshino little by little—but can you be forgiven for doing

so? Speaking of forgiveness, the First was ‘forgiven’ by Shinobu-chan back in August... Does the fact that *you* can’t forgive Shinobu-chan even now make you narrow-minded? And aren’t you hoping to be forgiven yourself, in spite of all that?

“You acted so sure of yourself that time you chose a little girl over your lover and your savior, but that decision of yours is still eating away at you even now, isn’t it?

“And to begin with, isn’t it cowardly of you to wield your immortality so freely? Shouldn’t there be consequences for it?

“Aren’t you... a horrible person?

“...Based on what I heard from Hachikuji-chan, you were even whining about things like that all the way down in Hell. Ougi Oshino, the girl we might as well call ‘Dark Koyomin,’ is the complete and total manifestation of that self-criticism of yours, and so, using the Sodachi Oikura incident as a springboard, she got to work on crushing you, slow and steady, one affair after another—just like the Darkness.

“To add to that, Ougi Oshino is an autonomous incarnation of your mind, so you’re not the only person she dealt with. She spared no effort in creating an environment where you could more easily be punished.

“Meme Oshino and Yozuru Kagenui.

“And after the matter of Nadeko Sengoku was settled, probably Deishuu Kaiki, too.

“She *locked them out* of this town. It goes without saying, but their ‘work’ as professionals would almost surely get in the way of her own ‘work.’

“Oh, no, it’s not that hard to do. It’s no different from what I’m doing to this park right now—she just had to set up a barrier.

“And if she went even further and *got them lost*, there would be no way for us to help guide them in from the inside. The First invoked a supernatural phenomenon that caused people to lose their way, remember? Her origins are nearly identical to his, so naturally, she’s capable of the same.

“So you can set your mind at ease, Koyomin.

“Meme and Yozuru are probably doing just fine.

“I can’t make any guarantees about Kaiki, and there’s no telling the details of how everything went down... However, while it seems you were awfully worried about them, the only reason they aren’t here right now is because you yourself refused their help.

“I have no idea of their current whereabouts, but once we exterminate Ougi Oshino, they should be easy enough to find.

“Hm? Oh, right. *I’m* still here right now because I’m of a much higher caliber as a specialist—not.

“It’s because I have the ultimate rule breaker when it comes to combating oddities.

“It’s because I cut through the barrier using the demon blade Kokorowatari and snuck inside, obviously. I forged this sword so I could slay a new pseudo-Darkness if one ever came about, but it came in handy in a way I never expected.

“Or perhaps I should say, if I hadn’t finished making this sword in time, I wouldn’t be here to help you guys right now. I really cut it close there.

“Everything went as I expected? No, no, not at all.

“Even if you *did* give birth to a pseudo-Darkness, I assumed it would be one of a much smaller scale. I made light of you, in that sense.

“If I had known things would escalate to the point they’re at now, I would’ve acted earlier, and I would’ve handled things a bit differently.

“That’s why we got played.

“A whole slew of us specialists did, and by you, a total amateur—so I wouldn’t blame you if you feel like boasting a bit.

“But save it for *after* Ougi Oshino’s been exterminated, okay?

“In the right circumstances, your self-criticism could be admirable, or even something deserving the whole world’s encouragement—but a godless town like this can’t handle all that turbulence.

“I said as much yesterday, but I can’t predict what you’ll do next now that you’ve finished your exams—so, in other words, I can’t predict what Ougi Oshino will do next, either.

“That’s why I have to set a trap.

“If I want to exterminate her, I have to put up an offense—I have to put up a fence.

“I have to set up an ambush now, while I can still predict her actions—and that part is exactly as I already explained. If she’s going to make a move, she’ll do it today.

“Tonight.

“I’m sure Ougi Oshino doesn’t want you pulling something unexpected any more than I do. We ought to assume that the announcement of your exam results—or perhaps your graduation ceremony—is the deadline for finishing her work.

“You understand what I’m talking about, right?

“If Ougi Oshino is Koyomi Araragi’s self-criticism... if she is the guilt you feel towards society as a whole brought to the surface, then she still has one thing left to do.

“She has one task that she has yet to carry out.

“Right. Tsukihi Araragi—your little sister.

“An immortal oddity—the Dying Bird.

“Yozuru Kagenui and Yotsugi Ononoki tried to take her out, but thanks to your unabashed, unreasoned intervention, she lives on to this day. There’s no way you don’t feel the slightest niggling doubt about whether you should just leave her to live out the rest of her life camouflaged as a human.

“That doesn’t mean you feel the slightest hesitation about protecting your sister.

“But your ideals aren’t firm enough that you won’t beat yourself up for *not* hesitating.

“And so, I’m going to use your little sister as bait.

“The plan is to catch Ougi Oshino at the scene of the crime when she attempts to harm your sister, and to expose her true form then and there. To put it in terms of the mystery novels Ougi Oshino so loves to reference, we don’t have any evidence, so we’re hoping to catch her in the act.

“Yeah.

“That’s right, we don’t have any evidence. Everything I’ve said so far is just speculation. It would explain all the mysteries and fill in all the holes of the story; that’s all. So if you were to counter with, ‘No way, that can’t be true, I refuse to believe that girl is me,’ then I would have no means of convincing you.

“But you understand, don’t you?

“You know, don’t you?

“You know better than anyone else.

“You know what Ougi Oshino’s true form is—and so, *you* have to be the one to expose it.

“I can’t do it.

“...If I had forcibly carried out my original plan to make Shinobu-chan into a god, I probably wouldn’t have been able to turn to you for help, but now that you’ve brought Hachikuiji-chan back from Hell, I can relax and trust you to take care of the problem.

“I can relax.

“No, seriously—I can.

“Koyomi Araragi is a man hard enough on himself to give birth to an oddity that embodies his self-criticism, his self-hatred. There’s no way he would hesitate to exterminate the very person he hates so much.

“Go fight yourself and come back victorious.

“It should be simple enough, shouldn’t it?

“To this day...

“To help Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, to help Tsubasa Hanekawa, to help Hitagi Senjougahara, to help Mayoi Hachikuji, to help Suruga Kanbaru, to help Nadeko Sengoku, to help Karen Araragi, to help Tsukihi Araragi—and if you trace things back to the beginning, to help Sodachi Oikura—you’ve straddled the line of life and death time and time again.

“You’ve sacrificed yourself.

“You’ve killed yourself.

“You’ve killed yourself over and over—and you’ve even gone to Hell.

“You’ve been selfless and altruistic to the point of looking downright insane from anyone else’s perspective. To someone like you, exterminating Ougi Oshino, essentially Koyomi Araragi in the flesh, should be as easy as taking candy from a baby—as easy as taking candy from yourself.

“In order to save others, you’ve continually tossed away your own life as if it were a piece of trash; you’ve thrown it away the moment the thought strikes you. You just have to do the same thing this time around: kill yourself without the slightest thought.

“Mutilate yourself and take your own life.

“Kill yourself for the sake of everyone else.

“It’s what you’ve been doing day in and day out.

“There should be nothing difficult about it.

“Perhaps actively killing yourself is a bit more extreme than what you’re used to, but just show off your good old sense of self-sacrifice. The person you’re about to confront is not a high school girl, nor your underclassman, nor your benefactor’s niece—she’s none other than you yourself.

“The person you despise more than anyone else in the world, Koyomi Araragi.

“And so... *you* have to put an end to it.

“You have to put an end to it with your own hands.

“That will be... the conclusion of your youth.”

“Your true form is me.”

You are me.

Ougi Oshino... is Koyomi Araragi.

The moment I say that...

The moment I proclaim that... “it” appears.

“That” which I remember seeing once before—although in truth, it’s hard to say if I can truly see it. All that’s there is a pure blackness, a void that sucks in all around it, complete and utter absence of light, and darkness—nothing but darkness.

Darkness.

“Nothing” stands right before us.

Nihility and naught.

And yet, such an intense black that it could hardly be described as “blank space.”

The blackest blackness—enough to overwrite and blot out all the misspellings of the world.

Black, black.

A black... that devours the abnormal.

“My, that was fast. The star of the show already makes its appearance, hm? Is it due to the magnitude of the lie I told, of the sins I committed, I wonder?”

Reminded of my adventures on the run once upon a time, I’m rendered speechless, caught up in the sudden flashbacks; in contrast to me, Ougi-chan is calm and collected. There’s even a faint smile on her face.

Of course, I knew this would happen.

I was told.

It’s all part of Gaen-san’s plan that if I expose Ougi Oshino’s true form—or to put it another way, if I expose my own deceit, the Darkness will appear to swallow her up.

And so, I had thought I was ready for this—but the Darkness I’ve found myself face-to-face with for the second time appeared with more than enough immediacy to leave me astonished.

“And to think I attempted to play the part of something so formidable... Really, there must have been something wrong with me. I had thought I was operating on more stringent criteria than the real thing... but I see I didn’t even come close. I was hardly even a pale imitation. I suppose, from the start, it was rather unrealistic to strive to be more authoritative than the rules of the world—no matter if I claimed to be the laws of the universe or what have you. Still, I did hope to reach the level of dark matter, at the very least...”

I’m at my utmost limits, unable to take my eyes off the Darkness so overwhelming as to distort the sense of perspective in the classroom, but Ougi-chan easily tears her gaze away to look over at me and start up a conversation.

Through that composure of hers, implicitly...

It’s as though, even at a time like this, she’s criticizing my own weakness.

“You need not worry, Araragi-senpai. I will neither run nor hide; after all, I am an avid reader of mystery novels. I believe there’s nothing more unseemly than a cowardly and ungraceful culprit. And if I may add to that, I’m an old-fashioned reader who believes a mystery ought to end with the culprit’s suicide.”

“...”

“Oh, but that’s not to say I’m completely unfazed, mind you. If the culprit remains utterly complacent even after having the truth thrust before them, that in itself is a bit of a killjoy, or to put it bluntly, it’s simply irritating. Knowing that I’m about to be annihilated, I’m trembling on the inside. Mm, I’m going to be destroyed in the collision of matter and antimatter—pair annihilation, as it were. I’m just putting up a brave front and trying to look cool because you’re here, Araragi-senpai. Oh, dear me, I wonder what it feels like, annihilation? Is it somewhat preferable to Hell, at the very least?”

Haha, laughs Ougi-chan.

In contrast to me, who is halfway up on my feet, she makes no attempt to stand up from her chair.

“Suicide...”

I ask Ougi-chan a question, with a voice that is, indeed, trembling.

“But you knew this was going to happen, didn’t you? If you’re really me... you should have known that I would be here waiting for you, and that I had seen through to who you really are. So why did you come here in spite of all that? Couldn’t you have given up on ‘criticizing’ me about Tsukihi-chan and just run away somewhere?”

“Run away? Where would I go? Even knowing it’s a futile effort, I do what I have to do. I said it before, didn’t I? I may have left some things unfinished, but I have nothing left to regret. In that sense, this truly *is* a suicide,” Ougi-chan says with a smile. “There are times when one must fight, even if it’s a losing battle. The two of us won’t be in agreement on the matter, of course... but if I may say what are, in effect, my last words, I believe I did a fine job of rectifying your life. In a good way, I mean.

Oh, but it was only six months, and only a revision of the course of those six months, so perhaps I would be exaggerating to call it your life. In that case, let me rephrase that to your ‘youth.’ Even if I didn’t make your youth *better*, I do believe I made it more righteous.”

“If that’s what you call righteous... I don’t need righteousness. Just how many people do you think you’ve troubled?”

I had resolved not to berate her for anything—after all, the one who made her do those things is none other than myself.

Nonetheless, the words just slip out of my mouth.

I come down critically on my own self-criticism.

Despite the fact that the Darkness, ready to engulf everything, is right before our eyes. Despite the fact that the non-existence exists right within our reach.

Despite the fact that only tens of seconds remain in my last conversation with Ougi-chan.

“Senjougahara, Kanbaru, Sengoku, Hanekawa, Shinobu, Oshino, Kagenui-san, Ononoki-chan... even Kaiki—just how much trouble do you think you’ve caused them? Just how much do you think you’ve hurt every single one of them, no exceptions?”

“If I’ve caused them any harm, then that was their just deserts. It’s not about what I’ve done or haven’t done. You realize that deep down, don’t you? Things like trouble, harm, and misfortune aren’t always so black-and-white. And the more complicated things are, the harder it is to make the distinction.”

“...Is righteousness black-and-white, then? Are you saying *you* can make the distinction between what is right and what is wrong?”

“Of course not; that’s impossible. That’s why I banded together with you to deal with everything that came our way. Even if we can’t determine what is right, we can determine which one of *us* is right, can’t we?”

“...”

“When it came to Sodachi Oikura, I was wrong. When it came to Nadeko Sengoku, I was right. As for Tadatsuru Teori, I suppose we could consider that a draw on account of injury. I knew that Tadatsuru Teori and Izuko Gaen were connected, but I *had* thought that I could at least win the battle, if not the war... I didn’t cause as big of a rift between you and Yotsugi Ononoki as I had hoped, either.”

Battle.

That’s the word Ougi-chan used.

I see... So my showdown with her had started from the moment we met. I’m sure it’s not limited to the three battles she just mentioned, either; every single conversation between the two of us has been

like a duel.

Not to determine what is right.

But to test which one of the two of us was right.

That is her version of “righteousness”... True enough, it’s closer to true righteousness than righteousness achieved by correcting mistakes—however.

“So what did the total score end up looking like? In the end, who was right? Me or you?”

“I’m about to be extinguished, so I suppose that means you were the one in the right. Congratulations, Araragi-senpai.”

And then.

At long last, Ougi-chan stands up from her seat.

“Everything you’ve done until now wasn’t a mistake.”

*You were right.*

Hearing that... does not, however, make me feel any better.

Rather, I feel like a whole bottle of salt was just poured into the wound.

*It’s like you’re trying to get off the hook by refusing to be happy—the one who so harshly pointed that out to me was Ononoki-chan. It’s like you’re pleading for sympathy to avoid being criticized—if it is was that attitude of mine that gave birth to the girl who’s gone around wreaking so much havoc, then I still made a pretty big mistake.*

Perhaps, though, it’s not fair of me to call what she did “wreaking havoc”—perhaps it’s not right. She was working to subjugate this town in her own way.

In the sense that she wanted to set up a new god in Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, she’s no different from Gaen-san. Consistent with the way she admonished me for only seeing what’s in front of me, Ougi-chan looked at things from a broader perspective.

If she was always there to correct my mistakes, I really ought to be thanking her, if anything—however, I just can’t do that.

Even if this is goodbye.

Even if we’ll never see each other again.

I must never thank her. Koyomi Araragi and Ougi Oshino can only exist in opposition to one another, can only exist through criticizing one another.

It is only through denying the other that we can affirm our own existence.

And that existence... is about to be extinguished.

It will disappear—as atonement.

The pseudo-Darkness... will be swallowed up by the Darkness.

“Mm, this is the end of your youth. Or the end of this story, perhaps. Come now, it’s not such a big deal. It’s not as though it’s the end of your life, and it certainly isn’t the end of the world. One small part of your story has reached a conclusion, that’s all—this isn’t even the final chapter. I’m glad I was able to disappear before your graduation.”

At the end, she says something I don’t fully understand—and then lowers her head in a quick bow.

“You did well. Goodbye, Araragi-senpai.”

“Goodbye, Ougi-chan.”

And then, Ougi Oshino...

Ougi Oshino, who made her entrance as Suruga Kanbaru’s underclassman; who shook up the second half of my senior year for all it was worth; who prowled the town pulling the strings; who dug up all the foreshadowing that was buried away between the lines; who dragged up matters that were over and done with; who demanded awareness and atonement, self-punishment and silence; who was undaunted by opposition and unafraid of conflict; who, as if to sneer at any and all attempts to gloss matters over, never let anything slide; who let nobody off the hook.

Ougi Oshino, who always showed up wherever I was, almost like a shadow—who was everywhere.

The girl I could always see whenever I wanted, Ougi Oshino, on charges of having her true form exposed, for the crime of falsifying who she was, in the same fashion as all the various forms of deception she has condemned and convicted to date, yet still as if she had never existed to begin with, will be swallowed up by that which is as good as nonexistent, the true Darkness—and be annihilated without leaving the slightest trace behind.

Her righteousness and my mistakes...

My mistakes and her righteousness... will annihilate each other. Pair annihilation.

They will disappear... and cease to exist.

Everything she has done ends here.

So allow me to say it one more time. I would never thank her under any circumstances, but at the very least, if nothing else, allow me to deliver my words of farewell and see “myself” off.

Goodbye, Ougi Oshino.

Goodbye, my youth—

“...Forget it, I can’t do this!”

I leap forward.

Despite being unable to move a muscle until moments ago, I force my human body into action, spring up from the chair on my human legs, put my body weight to work like a human, run like a human—in short, like a human, just as I am...

I spring myself at Ougi Oshino and push her to the ground.

In an attempt to narrowly evade the Darkness, which had moved in only a few centimeters away from her, I pushed a high school girl down onto the floor of an abandoned building. The Darkness, although it’s hard to say whether it’s truly moving or not, passes over the top of my head.

I... saved Ougi Oshino.

“A... Araragi-senpai?! W-What are you...?”

For the first time...

For the very first time in this conversation... Ougi-chan lets out a panicked voice. No, thinking back, this may be the first time I’ve *ever* seen her truly flustered.

“What are you thinking...?!”

No.

Perhaps it’s that she’s angry.

However, I can’t respond to that anger of hers—that criticism of hers. Not because I can’t put my feelings into words, or anything like that.

The pain is so intense that I’ve lost my voice.

“...Ugh!”

Although I attempted to narrowly evade the Darkness just now, I didn’t pull it off in practice—my right arm was just barely grazed.

In that one light brush, the whole thing was taken. Everything from my upper arm down was annihilated, as if it had never been there to begin with.

The blood won’t stop flowing.

And of course, it doesn't regenerate.

Right now, I'm a human. The real deal.

Pain of this level isn't much worse than anything I experienced when I was still part vampire, so it's nothing I shouldn't have built up a tolerance to—however, the sensation of loss is like nothing I've ever felt.

It feels like a part of my body was just torn away from me—though that's precisely what happened, so I suppose that doesn't make for much of a metaphor.

"You would dare try to save someone else, when you're not even immortal anymore...?"

Ougi-chan's indignation knows no bounds.

From her position on the ground underneath me, she glares with those black eyes.

"I... Is that just who you are, then? If it's for the sake of someone else, you would simply throw your life away like it's nothing? You'd even save someone like me, who only ever criticized you, who only ever condemned you? What's the point of you dying here? What will become of it if you die here? What point is there in saving me...? It's just as I thought. You're wrong. Everything about you is wrong. You're the worst kind of..."

"I didn't..."

My consciousness is fading in and out due to the blood loss, but just barely managing to hold on to it thanks to her stern lecture, I cut her off and speak.

"I didn't save someone else. Just now, I saved *myself*."

Gaen-san miscalculated the situation.

She who knows everything made a big mistake.

Hard on others and hard on myself?

That's not me.

I've been self-sacrificing, self-critical, and self-punishing.

I've always thrown my life away for the sake of other people—and now, for the first time, self-centeredly...

Selfishly...

I have saved myself.

Without consideration for anyone else's circumstances, without any care for appearances, in accordance with my own desires, in accordance with my own instincts, self-servingly... I saved myself.

I revealed my true colors.

Looking back on it, that was quite the one-man show.

But that's all it was.

I'm not anyone that admirable, and I'm not anyone that impressive. But still, precisely because I'm such a feeble guy...

If I don't save myself... I'll die.

"Hitagi... and," I mutter deliriously, "Hanekawa... Shinobu... and Ononoki-chan... all saved my life... So many people saved my life... If I don't protect it... that just wouldn't be right..."

"..."

Ougi-chan goes silent.

That loquacious girl goes silent, then reaches out to gently touch my wound—and with that, the process of hemostasis is complete. I have no idea which of the powers inherited from Seishirou Shishirui, or perhaps Tooe Gaen, she used... but either way, the bleeding has stopped.

Perhaps that was yet another pointless gesture.

Perhaps it was just as pointless as my attempt at shielding her. After all, we may have dodged the first strike, but now that I've been rendered unable to move, there's nothing left I can do but get swallowed up by the Darkness together with Ougi-chan.

All the strength has been drained from my body.

Even if I were to suddenly change my mind, awaken to my own staunchly uncompromising spirit, and decide to abandon Ougi-chan and run, it would be too late—and thank god for that.

If you look at it another way, after how hard she's worked for my sake, the least I could do is disappear with her.

"Oh, dear. I had planned on going it alone, but now it's turned into a double suicide... Araragi-senpai. Just for the record, I'm not a little girl."

"I don't care... You're still... pretty much a... six-month-old infant... aren't you?"

Gaen-san said that for me, exterminating Ougi-chan should be as easy as taking candy from a baby.

But babies aren't something you're supposed to steal from.

They're meant to be protected, just like I'm doing now.

"If everything I've done until now wasn't a mistake... then what I'm doing now can't be a mistake, either," I declare. "I'm not wrong."

Yeah.

Just like *you* aren't wrong, either.

She must have done a good job sealing the wound, as I'm able to articulate myself with miraculous clarity, and upon hearing those words, a smile finally returns to Ougi-chan's face.

No, wait.

This is another first.

It's a kind of smile I've never seen on her face until now—an awkward smile, one that seems somehow bashful.

"Honestly... You're such a fool."

"Now, that's not true."

Then comes a voice that makes me doubt my ears.

It belongs to a third person, neither me nor Ougi-chan. When I look in the direction of the voice—that is, towards the open door that Ougi-chan came through when she entered the room—I have to doubt my eyes, too.

At first I thought that maybe Tsukihi had come back, but the person standing there doesn't bear the slightest resemblance to that sister of mine, an adorable junior high school girl at least as far as appearances go—they're in a Hawaiian shirt.

It's a middle-aged man wearing a Hawaiian shirt.

"You're nobody to be scoffed at. So you finally fought for yourself, huh? I take my hat off to you, Araragi-kun."

So quips the man as he chews on an unlit cigarette.

So quips Meme Oshino.

"...!"

I have to wonder to myself if it's a hallucination—I have to wonder if, on the brink of death, I'm just

seeing the illusion of a man who couldn't possibly be here. However, from her position underneath my body, Ougi-chan likewise looks over in that direction in total surprise, proving this isn't any convenient delusion of mine.

Or, no...

If Ougi-chan and I are the same person, it's surely possible for us to hallucinate the same thing in a dire situation—it's surely possible for us to see the same convenient mirage, as if desperately searching for an oasis in a desert.

However, after glancing behind that old scoundrel's back and spotting the second arrival, who is wobbling on shaky legs like a newborn fawn—or perhaps more like a dying fawn—I realize that this is no convenient delusion or mirage, but simply the well-earned fruits of someone's hard work.

The fruits of someone's hard work.

And it's the hard work of the girl with striped hair who looks ready to pass out; who looks ghostly pale; who has bags under her eyes so huge that I can see them all the way from here; whose warm winter clothes are a disheveled mess; who looks worn down, beat up, and burned out in every respect—the logic-defying efforts of Tsubasa Hanekawa.

“Pulling ten all-nighters in a row sure isn't fun...”

However, after saying that, Hanekawa musters up the last of her strength to force a victorious smile onto her face, point a finger at the girl pinned underneath me in provocation, and announce:

“I win.”

And with that, she collapses in a heap.

She collapsed so dramatically that I have to wonder for a moment if she died—but it would seem she simply fell into a deep sleep.

“I can't believe this... Hanekawa-senpai really did bring him back... all the way from Antarctica. How did she even get there?”

Ougi-chan whispers that in a voice so small and hushed I can barely hear it—hm? Antarctica?

Antarctica.

The frozen wasteland that even an exception among oddities, Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, was forced to evacuate for fear of fading out of existence—*a place where there are absolutely no oddities*.

In other words, a place that a specialist would never go.

She mentioned she had it backwards... Is that what she meant?

Did she mean that we had been searching for Oshino in places that we thought he might go—but we should have been searching for him in places that we *didn't* think he would go? It's like how the best place to hide a leaf is in a forest—is how the saying goes, but hiding a leaf on the bottom of the ocean is actually the smartest thing to do. Still, it's human nature to start looking for the leaf in the forest regardless. No one would think to dredge the ocean, with the sole exception of Hanekawa.

Rendered absolutely speechless, I think to myself: *Hitagi, she didn't say "disu izu a pen."*

*She said "dépaysement."*

In that case, the two places she narrowed it down to must have been Antarctica and its opposing region, the North Pole. It's hard to believe she guessed right on a 50–50 chance, located Meme Oshino, and came all the way back to Japan in just one day.

“She’s not right in the head.”

I somehow doubt Ougi-chan is referring to the black-and-white jumble of stripes in her hair—and that comment could be considered Ougi Oshino’s concession of defeat to Tsubasa Hanekawa.

Come to think of it, Ougi-chan was always on guard around Hanekawa—but of course, that was only natural, because I know the power of Tsubasa Hanekawa better than anyone else.

If Ougi-chan is the Dark Koyomin to Hanekawa’s Black Hanekawa, their dislike of one another starts to make sense.

It was Gaen-san and Hachikuji’s interpretation that the name Ougi came from its meaning of “fan”—that was their stretch of an interpretation, but in this moment, it finally occurs to me that that was more like a postscript than a stretch, that it was like a misdirection in a mystery novel, and that perhaps “Ougi” was really just the first character in Hanekawa’s name under the radical for “door.”<sup>[1]</sup>

In the end, that caution of hers and all those intricate countermeasures she devised, while not entirely ineffective, ended up doing little more than buying some time, and now those efforts have been utterly smashed apart and rendered fruitless—by Tsubasa Hanekawa.

How Tsubasa Hanekawa can one person be?

“Araragi-kun.”

Paying no mind to the girl who just fainted right next to him, Meme Oshino, the man I’m seeing for the first time in ages, speaks with a grin.

“What do you think you’re doing,” he begins, “throwing *my cute niece* onto the ground in a deserted place like this? Geez, you’ve got a lot of spirit. Did something good happen? You’ve already got a girlfriend, so don’t go around committing lewd acts with an underclassman.”

*Quit screwing around, you know this isn’t the time or place*—I was just about to retort with that, a response reminiscent of our heated back-and-forth in this classroom in days past.

But before I could say that, it was over.

However, it wasn't Ougi-chan that disappeared—it was the Darkness.

The laws of nature, poised to devour us whole, vanished without a trace—that nonexistent existence which couldn't be seen or felt to begin with, gone.

The “nothingness” turned to nothing.

“Ah...”

Niece? That's what he called her just now. Ougi-chan.

*Meme Oshino* called her that.

In other words, Meme Oshino just acknowledged Ougi Oshino as a relative. What does that mean, you ask? It means he just affirmed the *existence* of the being that is Ougi Oshino.

The girl here and now is no longer a lie.

And so... the Darkness disappeared.

“...”

Ougi-chan is completely dumbfounded, at a total loss for words.

She may act like she sees through everything, but even she had never imagined that Meme Oshino, the man she repelled with a barrier and forbade from coming home in order to conceal her own identity, would end up coming to her rescue in a situation like this.

But that's just who Meme Oshino is.

He's the original flavor.

He's the man who sees through everything.

“You're a lifesaver... Oshino.”

I say that in the place of the speechless Ougi-chan—though if I'm saying it “in the place” of Ougi-chan, I'm essentially just conveying my own feelings.

“Nah, I didn't save you. You saved yourself, Araragi-kun.

“Well done.”

After hearing that...

I finally reach my limit, lose the strength to support my own body weight, and crumple to the ground.

Ougi-chan, forced to bear the full brunt of that weight, lets out a small “gweh.” Perhaps that utterly unattractive and true-to-life groan is proof of her existence—of her substance.

In the moment her true form came to light, she gained substance.

Ougi Oshino became Ougi Oshino.

And thus, the youth of Koyomi Araragi came to an end. The curtains closed on those days in which he would sacrifice himself to save someone else, those days in which he believed neglecting himself equated to cherishing others, those days marked by weak and frail self-absorption, that era of gentle lies.

Nevertheless, my battle with Ougi-chan—our evenly-matched, beyond fierce, gruesome battle—has only just begun.

Never explicitly affirming ourselves.

But neither indiscriminately condemning ourselves.

Never letting ourselves stop thinking, never afraid to take action, repeating the trial and error process for as long as it takes, never hesitating to do things over enough times to grow sick of it, regretting and repenting down to the most insignificant detail, yet beyond all that, continuing to challenge ourselves and continuing to gamble, winning back anything we lose three times over, we will fight a never-ending battle to attain happiness... that right here and right now, has only just commenced.

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[<sup>1</sup>] For a visual aid: take the first character in Hanekawa’s name, “*Hane*” (羽). Put that under the radical for door (戸) and you get Ougi (扇).

Now for the epilogue.

It's the next day, March 15.

On the morning of my graduation ceremony, after being loudly awoken by my two sisters Karen and Tsukihi in the typical fashion, I walk the path to school for the very last time—no, I ride my bike down the path. My feet on the pedals... Oh, how I missed this feel to the touch. It's the BMX Ougi-chan lent to Tsukihi. Of course, I'll have to return it to her later, so today is the only day I can ride it, but the sensation of riding a bike after so long feels, I dunno, almost like a lavish reward for making it to my graduation day and reaching the future that is today.

For the record, Tsukihi had forgotten about “the case of the burnt down cram school resurrected” by the time I saw her this morning. At first I had to wonder how bad her memory could possibly be, but it would seem she filed the incident away as “just one of life’s many mysterious episodes.”

It would seem my littler sister’s daily life is more deeply seeped in trouble than I had imagined—it’s like she can’t resist getting wrapped up in one low-risk venture after the other. I’m honestly pretty worried about what will happen to her once she and Karen start going to separate schools in April.

I had clung to sweet dreams of dorm life, and living together with Hitagi at that, but considering that sister of mine, I doubt I can afford to leave home right away.

After all, when it comes to Tsukihi’s existence as the Dying Bird...

Nothing has been resolved yet.

I’m sure Hitagi won’t want to leave her dad yet, either—and besides, figuring all that out is for *after* the exam results have been announced.

Given what Ougi-chan told me about filling in the answer sheet wrong, leaving home might be out of the question—I might have to jump straight into the workforce.

Of course, that’s discounting the possibility that my parents kick me out of the house for failing to get into a university...

“Oh, by the way, Tsukihi-chan. You said you were growing out your hair to make a wish, right?<sup>[1]</sup> What was that for, anyway?”

Not that I’m one to talk, but she’s been growing out her hair for a pretty long time now, so I brought it up before heading out this morning.

It was one of many plot threads that had yet to be tied up.

She told me a while back that she was growing her hair to get a wish granted, but I never found out

what that wish actually was. Of course, since her hair is still growing, it was plenty likely her prayers hadn't been answered just yet.

"Oh yeah, *now* I remember saying that. I guess I can go ahead and cut it already... I forgot I had a reason for keeping it long, anyway."

"Seriously, how bad *can* your memory be?"

"I was actually praying for you to pass your exams and for Nadeko-chan to get better... You know, a hair prayer. Assuming there's a god to pray to, that is."

My, my.

I had faintly suspected that it had something to do with me, but it hadn't crossed my mind that Sengoku would be included as well. My sister's dedication to her friends is really something; as her brother, I ought to be taking notes.

"Your exams are over and done with, and Nadeko-chan is in pretty good shape right now... hmm. Maybe there really *is* a god."

"Yeah. Since yesterday."

"Hm?"

"Oh, nothing. Forget about it."

"Yeah, okay."

She let it go without a second thought. I was trying to act all enigmatic, but she couldn't have cared less.

She may be little, but she sure operates on a large scale.

"Maybe I should wait for the results of your exam, then cut it short to match with Nadeko-chan. It's almost time for the Fire Sisters to break up, so maybe I could form a team with Nadeko-chan and... Hey, Onii-chan, are you ever going to cut your hair?"

"Oh, y'know..."

I gave a vague, evasive answer—whilst touching the fang marks deeply engraved on the back of my neck, near the nape.

At any rate, whether Tsukihi will cut her extra long hair or not apparently depends on the results of my entrance exam—but I'm not going to think about that for today.

Today is my graduation day.

Considering that, for a time, I had seriously considered dropping out of school, simply making to this day is enough to make my breast swell with emotion.

...Come to think of it, I talked with Karen this morning, too.

Healthy communication between siblings is a beautiful thing.

“Nii-chan, Nii-chan. We won’t be able to flirt with each other anymore after I become a high schooler next month, so let’s try feeding each other mouth-to-mouth one last time!”

“...”

I was worried about this sister for different reasons.

Maybe she took one too many beatings during her 100-man kumite.

For the record, I haven’t asked whether she won all her matches. I don’t need any more reason to be terrified of my sister.

“And let’s brush each other’s teeth!”

“The only thing *you* ought to be brushing up on is your smarts... Er, by the way, Karen-chan. Even after you become a high schooler—even after the Fire Sisters of Tsuganoki Second Middle School split up, do you plan to keep up with your work as a champion of justice?”

“Yep, dubiously!”

So declared my sister as she puffed out her chest, which happens to have grown quite large in recent times—I guess *her* breast is swelling, too. That said, I think the right word to use there wasn’t “dubiously,” but “indubitably”...

That would be the *right* word, anyway.

“Karen-chan. In that case, I think you should use this as a stopping point and reflect back on your third year of junior high. In the end, how would *you* define righteousness?”

“Say wha?”

“Righteousness. Justice. What is it all about?”

Is it doing the right thing?

Is it righting wrongs?

Is it deciding who is in the right?

I took the question Ougi-chan threw my way and passed it right along to my sister—I tossed it over to

the next generation.

It was my understanding that the Fire Sisters operate on a poetic sense of justice all about “beating the bad guys,” but I wanted to know how the girl in question actually views the justice she carries out—and I wanted to ask what she plans to do from now on.

“Helping people.”

Karen, most likely without understanding what my question actually meant, gave a reflexive answer. It was short and to the point, making it difficult to argue with, but it was an answer equally difficult to execute in practice.

That was her answer.

“I see.”

Saying that, I climbed on top of a nearby chair, reached out my hand, and patted Karen on the head (I can’t reach the top of her head if I don’t stand on a chair).

It may be a gesture of submission in the world of vampires, but in this instance, it was nothing more or less than a show of affection towards my mess of a sister.

“Then work on taking care of yourself first.”

Yeah. That goes for you, too.

That was our conversation. Whatever the future brings, it looks like that bigger sister of mine won’t have to worry about undergoing a high school experience quite like mine.

If there is anything I would wish for, it’s that Karen Araragi can live the rest of her life without ever shrinking back from righteousness...

Right then, as I’m peddling this unfamiliar bike with such joyful enthusiasm, I spot an immediately recognizable figure up ahead—a pigtailed fifth grader shouldering a gigantic backpack.

If her back were facing to me, I could have shown off my famed routine by spending another five pages pretending to drag my heels before running up to hug her, but alas, she is facing front and walking in my direction.

There is no opening for poor Araragi-kun.

“Hey, Hachikuji.”

All I can do is call out to her normally like that.

In response, Hachikuji knits her brows in very open displeasure and says, “Please don’t talk to me. I’m a god now.”

She's totally gotten a big head about it!

Her characterization reset back to her very first appearance!

“If you absolutely insist on speaking to me, then hand over an offering after two bows, two claps, and another bow,<sup>[2]</sup> and talk to me like you’re addressing a god.”

“Who would go through all that just to talk to someone? I’m gonna start giving *you* the cold shoulder.”

Besides, she may have become a god, but as far as I can tell, she looks no different from before. She’s not dressed in the garb of a shrine maiden, nor has she transformed into any kind of traditional kimono.

Well, that could always change in the future. No one changes overnight, and that goes for both humans and oddities.

They change gradually.

“Anyway, what’s a god doing loitering around town? Are you lost?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. As things stand now, I am, unironically, the one who delivers the lost.”

“You sound pretty ridiculous yourself, but that *is* a pretty big step forward...”

“At any rate, while I don’t appreciate being accused of ‘loitering,’ watching the insignificant mortals go about their daily lives is indeed one of the more trivial duties of a god.”

“You’ve seriously let your godhood get to your head, huh? Don’t go changing into a different person after just one day. I was *just* talking about how people change gradually.”

“Is today your graduation day, Araragi-san? Congratulations,” says Hachikuji, finally commending my hard work with a small bob of the head. “Under any other circumstances, I would like to attend the ceremony in person to celebrate, but the common rabble might make a fuss if a god were to show up, so I shall refrain out of consideration.”

“No one’s ever gonna visit your shrine, you know. This place’ll turn into a godless town again.”

“Hahaha. Oh, don’t be like that; please stop by whenever you feel like it. Kita-Shirahebi Shrine has no restrictions on worship, so you really can come visit whenever.”

“Yeah. I’ll be sure to come hang out all the time—at your place,” comes my response.

“Yes. At my place.”

After saying that, Hachikuji walks off in the direction I just came from. It looks like she wasn’t joking about observing the town, at least.

“...”

I silently gaze after her.

Well, I guess she never *was* the type to just stay put at home... There's something nostalgic about our banter, but at the same time, it feels completely routine.

A routine obtained at the end of a long struggle.

In any case, it would seem that Gaen-san's extraordinarily thuggish plot to enshrine Mayoi Hachikui as a god went off without a hitch. I had honestly been a bit worried about whether such a heavy-handed solution would really work out, but I guess the head of the specialists really showed her stuff there.

“*You're* the one who showed your stuff here, Koyomin—I never could've foreseen this turn of events. Please, and I'm seriously begging you here, don't go spreading any rumors about how I planned such a topsy-turvy ending from the start.”

...That's what she said to me last night.

But honestly, she didn't need to tell *me* all that.

“Honestly, the last time I remember feeling this shocked was the time I brought up the prophecies of Nostradamus in an effort to seem hip and young, only to get the response ‘I wasn’t even born yet in 1999.’ Gosh, I’m getting old.”

“...I don’t really get it, but okay.”

“There’s nothing to get. We’re living in a future that didn’t come to an end back then—that’s all.”

“Uh huh... But Gaen-san. I’m pretty sure we made it to this topsy-turvy ending thanks to Hanekawa, more than anyone else.”

To be perfectly honest, if it hadn’t been for her, the story likely would’ve ended with a double suicide between me and Ougi-chan—not a particularly thrilling conclusion.

“True. I’ll have to give my deepest regards to Tsubasa-chan for dragging back that fledgling junior of mine—I wave my white flag to her. What’s really amazing isn’t that she managed to find him, but that she found him and then managed to bring him back.”

“...That she was able to break through the barrier, you mean? But she was a resident of this town to begin with, so I don’t think the barrier had any effect on her. The Lost Cow isn’t supposed to work on those who want to return home.”

In response to my amateur conjecture, Gaen-san said, “No, that’s not what I meant,” and gave a shake of her head. “It’s that she convinced Meme Oshino to come back.”

“...”

“As far as I know, he’s not generally interested in making cameo appearances... and if it’s ‘as far as I know,’ then that’s how it is. ...By the way, are you sure about this, Shinobu-san?”

Upon saying that, Gaen-san glanced over and addressed the lady standing next to me, the golden-haired and golden-eyed child-turned-babe.

“Honestly speaking, I really appreciate this decision of yours as a specialist—but I have to admit that I don’t totally understand why you’d want to seal yourself inside Koyomin’s shadow all over again. If you’ve got some sort of scheme in mind, please do share with the class.”

“I am not scheming anything—I have long since tired of fighting, and I wish to gain your acknowledgement as harmless once again. Is that truly so difficult for a specialist to understand?”

She went from a child to a babe.

And now she wished to become a child once again.

“Kaka...”

Even without our bond, I knew that Shinobu, who answered that question with a gruesome smile on her face, had not uttered a single lie.

“Of course, after successfully ridding his body of all its vampire elements, if my master no longer wishes to become a vague existence neither human nor vampire, I shall retract my wish. After healing that arm of his, I shall hide myself away in a mountain to live the life of a hermit.”

“Not happening.”

Before Gaen-san could respond, I spoke my piece.

“There aren’t any Mister Donut stores in the mountains, Shinobu.”

“Ah, true.”

After that exchange, we swore never to repeat the mistake of accelerating my vampirization via our habit of blood stealing-turned-blood dealing, and we then restored our link for the third time.

Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, who had regained her full form for the first time since spring break, was once again sealed inside my shadow as a harmless 8-year-old girl by the name of Shinobu Oshino.

During spring break, she had been given no choice in the matter—but not this time.

This time, it was of her own free will.

She chose to seal away her own existence—and there was no lie or deception in that choice.

She who had refused to become a god 400 years ago, 400 years later... made the choice to become a little girl.

No, perhaps she really did have no choice in matter. After all, I, at the very least, can no longer envision a future without Shinobu in it.

Of course, that doesn't mean we've forgiven each other. Perhaps in 400 years' time, there will come a day when we can forgive one another, and a day when we can forget about everything, but for now, call it complacency or call it compromise, call it collusion or call it clowning, that's how it is between the two of us.

"If you were to die tomorrow, I would be ready to end my own life tomorrow—and if you care to live for today, then so will I."

"If you were to die the day after tomorrow, I would live until the day after that—and I would tell someone else your story. I would proudly tell them tales of my master."

I arrive at school.

I pass through the school gates, decked out in honor of the graduation ceremony, and head for the bicycle parking lot. Waiting for me there is none other than Tsubasa Hanekawa.

I guess a model student is a model student even when it comes to physical stamina. Despite how worn out she looked last night, she seems like she's made a full recovery this morning, at least as far as appearances go. What's impressive is that she even managed to get rid of those huge bags.

"Good morning, Araragi-kun."

"Good morning, Hanekawa. You made it to the graduation ceremony, huh? I thought you were going to be down for the count today."

She's more than just tough... She might have been the most invulnerable person around this whole time.

"What are you doing in the bike lot?"

"I was waiting for you, of course. There are a lot of things I want to talk to you about."

"Yeah?"

"Once the graduation ceremony is over, I have to head out right away, so, you know, this is pretty much the only time we can have a one-on-one chat."

"..."

She sure is active.

But if it's that how it is, there are a lot of things I want to talk to Hanekawa about, too—more things than I can count. Though maybe it's less that I just want to talk, and more that I want to go over my answers with her.

“How come you have to leave so soon? Did you book a flight or something?”

“Mm. Mmm. Well, you see...”

Hanekawa looks like she's having trouble finding the right words.

As she deliberates, she brushes back her hair, which has grown considerably since she cut it back at the beginning of the year—though of course, given that we're at school right now, it's dyed completely black, without a stripe in sight.

“When I was working to bring Oshino-san back from Antarctica, I had to sell my brains, you could say.”

“Sell your brains?”

What does *that* mean? It has a sinister ring to it.

“I think it's what they call being a ‘jet setter’? Anyway, I had to do that, or there was no way I could have chartered a fighter jet—oh, don't worry. I sold myself to a relatively ethical organization.”

Just what kind of adventures are you having overseas?

She really *is* incredible when you let her out into the world.

It almost feels wrong to see someone like her wearing a uniform and coming to school—though today will be the last day I ever get a glimpse of her in that uniform.

Thinking about it like that, I'd better be sure to get a good look.

A *real* good look.

“Don't make me knock you over.”

“Geez!”

I guess she learned to stave off threats while she was overseas, too.

If Hanekawa learned how to fight, I don't think there's anything left she can't do.

“Speaking of fighting... We confirmed that Kagenui-san is up in the North Pole. Once she found out where Oshino was, Gaen-san tracked her down in five minutes.”

“I see... My intuition told me to go with the continent, but even if I’d chosen the North Pole, I guess I wouldn’t have gone to the wrong place, per se.”

As she says that, Hanekawa lets the tension out of her shoulders. Well, I suppose that’s the one part of her plan that really was just a gamble.

Still, if Ougi-chan theoretically wanted to keep Oshino and Kagenui-san split up, it was inevitable that Kagenui-san would end up at the North Pole. After all, she can’t walk on the ground. In that case, Ougi-chan had no choice but to send her to the North Pole—a place composed of floating hunks of ice in lieu of earth.

“Ononoki-chan went to go get her, but she was smack dab in the middle of some suspiciously familiar knight-errantry that involved fighting polar bears, so she told her to leave her there.”

“She’s something else... I suppose it’s a good thing I didn’t go to the North Pole, after all. Wait, then where’s Ononoki-chan? What’s she doing now? Did she leave town, like Oshino-san and Gaen-san?” she asks, but I shake my head in response.

“She’s still staying at my place.”

“Oh...”

Hanekawa makes a dubious expression.

I mean, it’s not like I don’t understand why she feels that way.

Speaking of which, it turns out Ononoki-chan’s prediction that Kagenui-san went on a journey to hone her skills wasn’t that far off the mark, so at the end of the day, she might’ve been the one closest to the truth.

That’s really hard to admit...

“To be fair, Gaen-san and Oshino left without a moment to spare. I guess adults have got a lot of stuff on their plate.”

It all happened so fast.

It’s one thing that Gaen-san enshrined Hachikuji at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, sealed Shinobu in my shadow, and then left with a simple, “Okay, see ya,” but Oshino didn’t even say goodbye. Before I knew it, he was gone—it was almost like he disappeared together with the abandoned building Ougi-chan had constructed.

It was almost like he himself was a phantom.

He disappeared in under ten seconds—an understated exit.

Our second farewell didn’t even give me time to feel nostalgic—but still, considering that we

managed to meet again after he went all the way to Antarctica, I'm sure that one day, not too far in the future, the two of us will cross paths once again.

That said, I'm a little mad he left before I even had time to thank him for everything, especially all the strings he pulled with Tadatsuru.

So, given everything—though I'm not sure exactly what “everything” encompasses here—it seems I'll be taking care of Ononoki-chan for a little while longer, at least until Kagenui-san finishes her training and comes back.

Unless Gaen-san has forgotten about that pretext, it could perhaps be considered a continuation of her surveillance.

In that case, there's not much I can say about it.

I've done more than enough to warrant it.

I'd like to think that I've *accomplished* more than enough to warrant it—but not everyone in the world is going to see it that way.

More than anyone else, I'm sure *she* won't see it that way—my other self won't see it that way.

“Adults...? We're *all* adults starting tomorrow, remember?”

“Hitagi and I are still students. You're the only one becoming an adult.”

“Hitagi?”

I had been gunning for a punchy response, but I made an unfortunate slip of the tongue—and Hanekawa cheerfully refuses to let it slide.

“Ooh... I see. I *see*. Things have really progressed while I was gone...”

“Hold it, hold it, hold it. Don't jump to conclusions. Things might not have progressed as much as you're thinking.”

“Whew, I'm glad. Now I can head out without any worries.”

As she says that, Hanekawa walks on ahead of me.

Did she want to have a one-on-one chat before leaving Japan just so she could ask me about Hitagi? If that's the case, she must really care about her best friend... She's such a worrywart, really.

Thinking back on it, one could say that this whole matter—or rather, everything that happened since August—was resolved by Hanekawa's efforts alone. She doesn't just deserve her fair share of the credit, she might very well deserve all of it.

It's been exactly one full year now.

I sentimentally reflect on how different my last year of high school might have been if I hadn't met Hanekawa back then.

*I won't make friends, because my strength as a human will decrease.*

I may have graduated quietly and in solitude, leaving only those words behind (or I may not have graduated at all).

Perhaps that wouldn't have been so bad.

But now that I've made it this far, I can't imagine things being any other way.

"Oh... That's it."

"Hm? What is it, Araragi-kun?"

"Oh, no, something just occurred to me really belatedly... It's about why Gaen-san was so sure that Ougi-chan would act against Tsukihi-chan on the night of March 14..."

Ougi-chan said it herself.

She wanted to put an end to things before I graduated—maybe that meant "before my youth came to an end."

It was something she wanted to accomplish while I was still a high school student.

Of course, while she had to find an opening in my schedule, more pressingly, Ougi-chan had to wait for an opening from Tsukihi... but Tsukihi has nothing *but* openings, really.

I suppose that's a phoenix for you: holding onto life without even having to try.

As I'm on my way to the classroom, walking side-by-side with Hanekawa... there stands Hitagi Senjougahara at the entrance to the school building. The moment she catches sight of me and Hanekawa, a frustrated expression briefly passes over her face, accompanied by a light "tch." Looks like it just dawned on her that Hanekawa anticipated where she would be waiting and beat her to the punch.

Hey, enough with the weird competitions between friends...

It makes things awkward.

Well, I figured that it would be hard to ever completely rid Hitagi of her complex towards Hanekawa, but still, given that Hanekawa has soared off to heights that neither of us could ever hope to reach, I personally think it would behoove her to let those feelings go bit by bit...

Then again, I suppose I have no room to talk. I may talk like I revere Hanekawa, but if I created Ougi-chan, who holds such instinctive antipathy towards her, that means, deep down, there must be some part of me that sees her as a rival, too.

“Good morning, Araragi-kun.”

“Huh? You aren’t going to call him Koyomi?”

Hanekawa asks that before I have time to respond.

Throughout her various experiences around the world, it looks like she’s developed a bit of a mean streak.

Perhaps realizing that resistance is futile, Hitagi corrects herself with, “Good morning, Koyomi,” her face reddening in mild embarrassment.

“And welcome home, Tsubasa.”

In the confusion of the moment, she ends up calling Hanekawa by her first name, too. Hanekawa looks surprised for a moment, but quick-witted as she is, she quickly recovers with:

“It’s good to be back, Hitagi-chan.”

Hitagi-chan... What an adorable name.

Hanekawa must be planning to spare a bit of time for some leisurely girl talk later, since she doesn’t say anything about how she’ll be leaving Japan immediately after the ceremony, the three of us simply heading towards the classroom together.

Somehow, the atmosphere of the school feels different from usual. It must be a matter of mindset.

“Koyomi. Kanbaru told me that she got us a gift to honor our graduation.”

“She did? A gift from Kanbaru... Now *that* makes me nervous.”

“Come now, she knows better than to give us anything inappropriate at a time like this. I interrogated her about it, but evidently it’s just a typical bouquet.”

“Flowers, huh?”

If she interrogated her about it, Hitagi must have been at least a little nervous herself... At any rate, she simply explains that to me, and as usual, doesn’t ask me any questions herself—she doesn’t ask me anything about what happened to me last night, or how things were resolved.

She’s simply waiting for me to tell her.

It’s not exactly anything I can brag about, and it might not be a story I should be telling myself—but

it's a chain of events I really do have to talk to her about.

I sure hope I can write it off as a funny story.

I sure hope I can tell it with a smile.

"By the way, Araragi-kun," says Hanekawa. "How many more points did you need to get a perfect score on your exam?"

I've never heard that question before in my life.

Well, that was *probably* just a joke.

I tell her about how I was apparently one row off on the answer sheet for the math section. Hearing that, Hanekawa ponders over it for a moment, then responds, "I don't think that's true. I asked Oi... another applicant to the same university about what the questions on your exam were like, and from what I heard, it wasn't the kind of answer sheet you could fill in wrong."

She's taking "proactive" to an extreme. Just how much time has she spent worrying about me?

However... it wasn't the type you could fill in wrong? I mean, I *had* thought it was kind of weird that I could mess up that many answers, but then why would she...?

I was sure it must have been true because Ougi-chan was the one who said it.

"Ougi-san was probably just teasing you, like she always does," says Hitagi.

"Of course, it definitely doesn't seem like the kind of joke you'd ever make, Araragi-kun."

Is that really true?

No, perhaps I never would make that kind of joke, and that's precisely why *she* did—after all, doing the things I can't, and the things I wouldn't, is the role she has been forced to undertake.

That's how it's been, and most likely, that's how it will continue to be.

In that moment, my mind suddenly turns to the girl who bought flowers for us, Kanbaru—Suruga Kanbaru, who indirectly helped cause the birth of Ougi Oshino. She's never come face-to-face with the Darkness herself, but when it comes to possessing a mindset geared towards self-discipline, she leaves me in the dust.

What's more, she is the direct descendant of Tooe Gaen. No matter how the talent may manifest itself, the predisposition to create oddities is surely something that's been passed down through the Gaen family for generations.

In that case... perhaps she too will one day come face-to-face with a representation of her youth.

Perhaps Kanbaru's very own Ougi Oshino will one day appear before her. If that time ever comes, I'm sure I'll be able to lend her a helping hand.

Just like Hanekawa did for me.

...Well, I suppose I can only do what I can.

I am no one but myself.

I can't be like Ougi Oshino, nor like Tsubasa Hanekawa, but I will help someone else in my own way.

I will help someone to save themselves.

Then, it happens right as I'm pretentiously thinking those oh-so-enlightened thoughts to myself, having just finished ascending the stairs.

We pass by a lone schoolgirl—a schoolgirl who pays us no heed as she comes down the steps. Judging by the color of her scarf, she's a first year student. She probably came to school today in order to attend the graduation ceremony, but why was a first year student walking around the area where the third year classrooms are?

However, the pale look of her face is more than enough to put that question out of mind. Her weak, tottering steps don't give the impression of a physical ailment so much as a mental burden.

She looks extraordinarily tired. Almost as if she were possessed by something.

As I think that, I find myself coming to a halt.

Hitagi and Hanekawa look back at me, then shrug their shoulders in resignation. They must be close indeed, judging by their perfectly synchronized movements.

“See you later.”

Even their words come in unison.

“Yeah. Pick up my diploma for me, okay? See you,” I respond, then hand my bag over to Hitagi and fly back down the stairs in one big jump, chasing after the first year we just saw. I land on my feet and make a turn around the landing, and then, sensing the gaze of the two girls watching me go, continue running down the rest of the stairs.

As I'm running down the hall of the first year classrooms, searching in the direction she must have gone, I pass by another student—a young girl with pitch black eyes.

That girl, reminiscent of darkness itself, speaks with a derisive smile.

“You never change, Araragi-senpai.”

Nah. I'll change.

But no matter how much I change, I will always be myself.

“Once upon a time, there was a strange young man by the name of Koyomi Araragi—and he still exists to this day. The end.”

A voice rings out from within the shadow running along beside me, narrating the tale aloud.

I can't wait to hear the next part of that story.

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[<sup>1</sup>] In Shinto and Buddhist tradition, growing your hair for a long time without cutting it (thus using your own hair as an “offering”) is one way of making a wish to the gods.

[<sup>2</sup>] Bowing twice, clapping your hands twice, and then bowing once more is the traditional way to worship a god at a Shinto shrine.

# Afterword

Ahem. There's the term "irreversible mistake," but if you really think about it, a "reversible mistake" wouldn't make much sense. Once you miss a mark, or once you take a loss, those experiences won't be undone just because you score some kind of success later. However, even if it's impossible to undo a mistake no matter how much you may regret or repent, I believe one could make the argument that people are at least capable of forgetting about their failures. In other words, maybe a "reversible mistake" refers to someone achieving enough success to forget about the error they once made? Perhaps coming-of-age stories that use a character's tragic past as a starting point aren't about using misfortune as the sustenance for happiness so much as they're about piling up enough of a future to erase those memories of the past. Conversely, there's always the chance that someone could pile up so much misfortune that all their current happiness will inevitably amount to nothing, so in reality, happiness and misfortune don't share much of a cause-and-effect relationship. "They ain't antonyms" is essentially what I'm getting at. I think I've begun to overcomplicate things, so to put my thoughts in order—though all I'm really doing is rambling on about the definitions of success and failure, or happiness and misfortune—I'm trying to say that happiness doesn't really depend on one's way of thinking, as the saying goes, but simply on one's memory. In short, a person's greatest ability is actually their power to "forget." However, that doesn't mean it's a power that should always be used, and that's a lesson that I hope Koyomi Araragi-kun, Hitagi Senjougahara-san, and Tsubasa Hanekawa-san have demonstrated over the course of one year in-universe and ten years in the real world.

With that said, this has been the *real* final volume of the Monogatari Series Final Season, part three of *Owarimonogatari*. Thinking back, *Hitagi Crab* was first published in the September 2005 issue of *Shousetsu Gendai* special edition *Mephisto* magazine. It was originally supposed to be a one-off short story, but here I am still writing in the year 2014. It's not "unbelievable" so much as simply shocking. And with that, this has been *Owarimonogatari 3*, consisting of Episode 5: *Mayoi Hell*, Episode 6: *Hitagi Rendezvous*, and Episode 7: *Ougi Dark*.

The cover illustration is a braided Senjougahara-san in a planetarium. Exquisite. I'm extremely grateful to VOFAN-san. No matter what else I may forget, I will always remember this feeling of gratitude and strive to keep doing my best.

Thank you for reading.