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ネコモノガタリ


KODANSHA

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## vol.06 - Nekomonogatari (Black)

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# Novel Illustrations



KODANSHA



# 猫<sub>ネコモノ</sub>物<sub>ガタリ</sub>語<sub>[黒]</sub>

西尾維新

Illustration / VOFAN



第禁話

つばさファミリー



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西尾維新  
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第戀話

つばさタイガー

猫  
ネコモノ  
物  
ガタリ  
語  
白

2010年10月発売!!

KODANSHA  
BOX



# Tsubasa Family



I fooled around with Hanekawa Tsubasa to my heart's content during that Golden Week that I am now going to recall, though late. I am going to recall those bitter, sour, in some respects even bittersweet memories, that nevertheless if I could I'd like to forget, that even if impossible I wish to get out of my mind, those golden glittering nine days.

Hanekawa Tsubasa. 17 years old. Female. Third year high school student. Class rep. Honor student. Braids complete her front hair. Glasses. Serious, to a fault. Goodness. Very bright. Equally kind to anyone. However, even if I listed what makes up her character using symbolic information easy to understand like this, I'm not dreaming at all to convey that exceptional girl. Yes, if you haven't actually faced her, if you haven't actually been in her presence, you won't understand. It's the sort of thing that can't be expressed in human language. In truth, if you want to pass word of the girl called Hanekawa Tsubasa, you necessitate speaking in the tongue of the gods.

Or maybe that of the devil.

For this reason, candidly speaking, really, I'm sorry from the bottom of my heart, but even if I told all there is to tell about that Golden Week in detail, thoroughly, from A to Z, omitting nothing, the truth of those nightmarish nine days, or something that infinitely closely resembles the truth of those nightmarish nine days, won't actually reach anybody, and from the start I give up on trying. Abdicating all responsibility on the delivery, I am the avatar of resignation, the personification of resignation.

By no means I have any intention to transmit my thoughts to somebody.

Solely.

Simply -- plainly.

I just want to mutter an incessant monologue about Hanekawa Tsubasa, my savior and my friend.

Perhaps, it's meaningless.

For certain -- it's useless.

For everyone, for me too, it's meaningless and useless.

It's null and void.

If I look at it from the point of view of Senjouhara Hitagi or Kanbaru Suruga, whom I met later -- If I look at it from the point of view of girls endowed with the strength to go at length to achieve their purpose, who spare no sacrifice to themselves, who will even crush under their feet the apple of their eyes without hesitation should the situation requires it, there is no doubt that my present attempt at revival of the good old days will come out as a sterile backward-looking action: shallow and

nostalgic, deserving a snigger but not so much of scorn.

People should live life facing forward. If not positively, at least actively. Even with nothing to boast, they have to live life to the utmost. These are the values of these strong yet delicate girls.

It's okay if it isn't pretty.

It's okay to be rough.

It's okay to be greedy.

These values -- are not mine.

I am different.

The weak, yet also frail, and inept to boot Araragi Koyomi is different.

Such a pseudo-human being, faint hearted and wimpy, who, without looking not only left and right, but also backward once, won't even walk over a pedestrian crossing -- is different from those girls.

And.

Hanekawa is by my side.

We are lumped together.

Surprisingly, should I say.

Like I desired, should I say.

Although the mere thought of putting together the immensely brilliant girl who to an extent transcended human intellect and me sounds so awesome, after that Golden Week passed, the only impression that asymptotically came infinitely close to a lesson was that. Lesson, as if it were the comment of a swindler, but that is an unshakeable fact, so it can't be helped.

And if it can't be helped -- I give up.

The point in common between me and her.

The thing that Araragi Koyomi and Hanekawa Tsubasa have in common.

Is an identical piece inside the heart.

Now I understand -- just after time passed from the Golden Week and the second semester began. Now, this late, with great pain, I can see the reason.

Literally, I am painfully aware of it all.

The reason why Hanekawa Tsubasa called out to me.

The reason why Hanekawa Tsubasa met with me.

The reason why Hanekawa Tsubasa saved me.

However, as expected, saying that 'now I understand', 'I saw it late', means that at this point there is nothing I can do about it. It's water over the dam. What's done is done and cannot be undone. There is no undoing.

If I noticed, I won't say immediately after I met her, but at least by the time of the Golden Week the circumstances of her surroundings, possibly something could have worked out.

The weak, yet also frail, us.

Something could have formed between us.

Therefore this, in the end, is a monologue muttered in a classroom during the after school while nobody is here and, sat on a plain chair, a retrospective essay following the standard format of a numbered list.

Letters of regret clawed with crabbed handwriting on the desk just before graduation.

I am retrospecting, but I'm not regretting anything -- I dare not say such fancy beautiful words.

I am retrospecting, and also regretting.

I want to get things out of my mind, and redo what I can redo.

That Golden Week for me was so frustratingly inevitable. Why couldn't it have gone better? Why, why, why? It's so frustrating that if I hadn't an immortal body I would want to die. I would cry out of frustration. Even now I see it in my dreams.

Those are, unmistakably, bad dreams.

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

A girl that possesses odd-shaped feathers.<sup>[1]</sup>

Chronologically speaking, it would be about a month later after I experienced Hell on Earth during the two weeks of the Spring Break between the second and the third high school year -- in the present-day Japan, of all things, I was assailed by a vampire. A very romantic experience for this foolish me, who somehow returned to his daily life while still dealing with the side effects<sup>[2]</sup>. Hanekawa mistook me for an anachronistic delinquent and forced me to become the assistant class representative with a ruse. I don't remember well if it happened while still being worried about how I should face her, or if by that time I had already learned how to cope with that -- anyway, it happened then.

She was charmed by a cat.

A cat.

A mammalian carnivore of the cat family.

That's why, since that Golden Week -- I came to dislike cats.

Cats frighten me.

And -- Hanekawa is equally as frightening.

The preface might have been a bit long, but there is really no need to be in a hurry -- the duration of the after school is surprisingly long.

Now then, I'd like you to listen to the dream I had last night.

Afterword, or to better say, the punch line.

The following day, like always, I was roused out of bed by my two sisters, Karen and Tsukihi. For them it didn't matter whether it was an ordinary day, a Saturday, a Sunday, or a national holiday, so it didn't matter in the least that that April 29th was the first day of the Golden Week, and that they woke me up early in the morning. Such courtesy, which made me want to tell them it shouldn't be easy not even for nocturnal nightbirds like you two to rise so early, was not caring for the older brother's life cycle out of concern; perhaps by disturbing my sleep they meant to show their power. It should have been even called a force demonstration, something like a domestic turf war.

By the way, as for how my sisters woke me up, I had never mentioned it in details so far, but the reason was mainly because it was not something worthy of mention.

In the anime edition they were two sisters who approached me with plenty of techniques to wake me up, like throwing me down the stairs, holding me with a camel clutch, or immobilizing me with a Kinniku Driver, but well, let's say that was a TV dramatization. Sorry to destroy the image you had of it, but unfortunately in reality cute sisters who did things like that didn't exist.

Well, I couldn't talk for other families, but in my house Karen and Tsukihi just called out to me with a gentle voice saying "How long are you going to sleep, let's wak--

"Are you going back to sleep? Die."

A crowbar was swung down on my pillow.

"Whoooooh!"

I dodged it with a jump.

Actually, I didn't dodge it completely, it carried away a tuft of hair.

And, together with that tuft of hair, the tip of the crowbar pierced my pillow.

An explosion of feathers.

That scene looked like the descent of an angel. I thought I had died, but as my heart pulsing 32 heartbeats per minute inside my chest told me, it seemed somehow I was still alive.

I looked around.

There was, with a fiendish look, my second year middle schooler sister Araragi Tsukihi in a yukata, frantically trying to extract the crowbar which seemed to have pierced not only the pillow but even

the bed below.

Something like a crowbar.

No, it was really a crowbar.

The best crowbar in the world.

"Tsu-Tsukihi!? What are you doing!? Do you want to kill your brother!?"

"A brother that goes back to sleep should just die. I don't know how you could sleep after Karen and I woke you up. Just die just die just die!"

"Your character becomes bananas from the very beginning, you know!?"

How was this related to the previous work!?

"Compared to all the other characters, I wasn't standing out, so I tried to become a yandere."

"Yandere, do you mean a sicko!?"

"But brother, if you were able to dodge, it means you were pretending to sleep."

"In fact, I was sound asleep....."

It seemed that human beings, even while sleeping, were surprisingly able to react to danger.

Someone said we were at an evolutionary dead end, but humans are a living form with a lot of potentialities.

"You worry about your character standing out. Really, it's like you were a second year middle schooler."

"I am a second year middle schooler."

"Were you?"

Well, I was in no position to talk about middle schoolers either. No, maybe it was something I had to say precisely because I knew from experience.

"Anyway, knock it off. Just be a sister who comes to wake me up early in the morning. That will do as a character."

"That's totally minor character-like."

No thanks, she said.

Well, everybody would hate to be the spin-off of an older brother.

"I wish I could be a character as flashy as Karen. That's the ultimate form for a younger sister."

"Actually, rather than being an ultimate form, that would be a 'If I become like that I'm done for' character. Listen. I still have hopes for you. Hang in there and you can become a decent character."

"I aspire to become a good younger sister character."

"That's right."

There was no one here who noticed that the moment one aspired to become a younger sister character one was not really decent anymore.

"Concretely, you should aspire to become Marilla from 'Anne of Green Gables.'"

"Marilla!?"

"Well now."

I replied with the voice of Matthew.

I had just woken up.

"No really, Marilla is truly an ideal younger sister. I wanted a sister like that. She is really a tsundere among tsundere. 'I wanted a boy! A girl would be of no use to us!' wasn't she? But in the end she became deredere with Anne."

"Ah, a tsundere according to the original meaning of the word"

"She is a tsundere even with the current meaning. Even after she became dere with Anne she had a sharp tongue, she is super moe."

"Brother, have you read Anne of Green Gables with that perspective?"

"Yes. When I read Anne of Green Gables, inside my head Marilla's VA was firmly Kugimiya Rie-san."

"Don't mention personal names."

How many years old is Marilla, said Tsukihi.

What an idiot, she wasn't getting it.

Younger sisters became the real thing after they were 15 years old.

"When I think of that, Matthew is the real winner. He has lived with his sister for a long time, and he brought up a blood unrelated braided girl. He surpassed Shinji-kun, the aspiration of gloomy shut-ins."



"Don't speak of Matthew like he were a gloomy shut-in boy....."

"Scenes like when he went to buy a Christmas present for Anne moved me to tears when I read them, I could sympathize deeply with him. I--I thought it might come in handy sometime, he said.<sup>[3]</sup>"

I was keenly reminiscing that famous book.

"Therefore Tsukihi, just be like her. If you do, we can live and get old together in a future Green Gables."

"Brother, that's close to a proposal."

"Oh, it's not a proposal. It's a polonaise."

"A marriage dance!?"

Oh my, how will I look when I read Anne of Green Gables from now on, Tsukihi clutched her head in her hands.

What a troubled sister, I lightly shrugged my shoulders, got down from the bed and started undressing.

Of course, I wasn't going to pull something indecent in front of my sister, I simply changed my clothes from sleepwear to loungewear.

"Hmm. What's up with Karen-chan?"

"Come again?"

I turned to her and Tsukihi, as if contented with having fully fulfilled her duty once she prevented me from going back to sleep, had started idling sloppily on my bed.

A long way from Marilla, it seems she gave up on pulling out the crowbar.

What will I do tonight.

Maybe if I got out of the room everything would be fixed when I come back, like in a game.

However I must say the figure of Tsukihi rolling left and right, not caring if her yukata opened, was just like that of a hornworm.

I'll call her the sisworm.

"Brother. Don't give your sister a gross nickname."

"Don't read the narrative part. More importantly, answer my question. I am asking what's up with the flashy sister who stands taller than me that is always hanging around with you like a soul in two bodies. Is that ponytail head not with you?"

"She is jogging now."

"Jogging? Do you mean she is running? That's new. She's not the type who would do something like that."

"Today is special. Karen-chan said it's celebration for the beginning of the Golden Week."

"What kind of celebration?"

"I think she is imagining to be an Olympic flame runner."

"I see. Even today she is being an idiot."

"I think she mixed up Golden Week and the Olympics inside her head."

"Ah. She mixed up words that have in common only the first syllable<sup>[4]</sup>, that's really her usual idiocy."

How heartwarming.

I see, so that was why Tsukihi came waking me up a second time alone.

They had come together to wake me up while I was catching some Z's in the early morning (that was to say one hour ago), but Tsukihi had seen through my ruse of waiting for them to be away and going for a second sleep, and she had resolved herself a second time to go back for a second wake me up (what's that?) on her own.

Therefore the crowbar, huh.

We must not let her act alone.

Between Karen and Tsukihi, the brutal one is Karen, who has a vocation for martial arts, but the the more dangerous one is Tsukihi, who doesn't know restraint.

"Ah. At any rate, today is the first day of the Golden Week, huh. There's not a good thing about it."

"You are suddenly pessimistic from the very first day, brother."

April the 29th, Saturday.

Greenery Day.

"Not even 9 hours have passed since the beginning of the Golden Week."

"Experts like me can get the general outline from just nine hours."

"Whether it's national holiday, event day or Sunday you hate them all. You are a weekday lover weekperson."

"What's a weekperson?"

Sounded dull.

I couldn't feel any charm from it.

Indeed I was dull though.

"It's not like I hate them. I just cannot stand them."

"That's the same thing."

"It is not."

I believed hating and not standing something were two different things.

If she told me they were the same thing, then it must be so, though.

I felt like when I said I was retrospectively, but I was not regretting anything, someone had retorted that retrospection and regret were the same thing, and, well, I didn't know where I could start from to refute that.

"Anyway, the Golden Week, just by being Golden Week, won't change anything for the better. The morning comes as always, my sisters come waking me up as always, my fingernails grow as always, my height won't grow as always."

"Indeed. You just don't go to school, that's all."

"Man won't cease waging wars, and there is still no end for the countless betrayals and lies."

"Eh? Why is the scale getting grander?"

"There is no doubt today too somewhere in the world someone will die, you know? What there is to celebrate today while brushing that aside!? Dress for mourning!"

"Brother, what are you angry for and for whom?"

The sister was really drawn back by the brother who was enraged about rest days (because I didn't do such thing) on the reason he didn't know what to do with free time.

I could understand how she felt.

However, I became more and more involved by this, so I continued. I was not the kind of brother who felt concern for his sister.

"I always feel like I'm mourning. I never give out New Year's cards."

"Isn't that just because you don't have friends to give them to?"

"Don't talk like you knew! What do you know of me!?"

"At least I know the number of New Year's cards you receive every year."

"Oh, right."

"More precisely, I know the number of New Year's cards you don't receive."

"Oh, right."

After becoming a high schooler I had been receiving less and less New Year's cards from the others. I didn't receive any even from the guy who sent New Year's cards to everyone in the class. In other words it was not a matter of mood, I had been in mourning every year.

"Now I get it. I hate holidays because I don't have friends to play with. That's a new discovery."

"You noticed something that was better if you didn't."

Tsukihi was looking at her real brother with sad eyes filled with deep compassion. By the way, Tsukihi (and Karen) possessed a network of friends whom they must give New Year's cards measured in the hundreds, it was really taxing for our home's finances and mailbox.

We were really extreme siblings.

It was difficult to find a barycenter.

"Anyway, it is indisputable that national holidays, as days go, aren't any different or better compared to weekdays. No matter how much you dream, reality won't yield. Even letting aside my personal reasons, there is no change for the better. It's the usual everyday life, why should we call it Golden Week? In what ways does it have the color of gold? I'll catch you in the rye -- that's Holden, though. The morning comes as always, my sisters come waking me up as always, my fingernails grow as always, my height won't grow as always, man won't cease waging wars, there is still no end for the countless betrayals and lies, and your panties are white as always."

"Don't bring up my panties."

Tsukihi's riposte when taken at face value could be interpreted as a young lady feeling embarrassed, but she was a second year middle schooler in the middle of puberty unconcerned that the parts near the hem of her yukata were bare and completely visible.

More than having a shoulder exposed, it's more like both shoulders were exposed<sup>[5]</sup>.

She was really bold in wearing out her clothes.

It was true for Karen too, but she was a sister that crushed ideal females with a thousand fungo drill.

"Gregor Samsa would have like it. He woke up in the morning turned into an insect, you know? What

a metamorphosis. Having a younger sister as he did, I cannot envy him more. Hey, sisworm."

"Don't try to make a gross nickname for your sister take root."

"Hm."

Well.

That said, If I compared it with the experience of metamorphosing not in an insect but a vampire, I was not simply and only envious of Mr. Zamza though.

Right.

It had already been a month from Spring Break.

So many things happened -- actually, this was not the scene for thinking something that looked like taken out from a final episode, however, if I suddenly looked back, I got caught by a feeling of surprise.

My Spring Break experience left me an extraordinary impression, it was so intense that I had thought of those two weeks as the climax of my life.

If there was a peak in my life, it was that Spring Break.

Therefore it was surprising.

The fact that even after that Spring Break ended my life went on.

On and on, eternally.

It continued.

I was told life was not a game because there was no reset button, but if I had to say it, life was not a game because it didn't end, did it?

Recently there'd been even games without an end like net games, passerby communication or whatever, but I could say it was the games that resembled life and not vice versa.

Anyway whatever happened, unless one died, life didn't end -- life continued.

There was no ending theme or credit roll.

I became a high schooler.

I became a dunce.

I had no friends.

I became a vampire.

I turned back into a human.

And life continued.

Continuation was strength.

Or maybe continuation was absence of strength.

"They even call it Golden Week. I want to advise people not to swallow whole what comes out of the movie industry, you should be ashamed of yourself"

"You want to give advice {tei shitai}."

"I want to suspend it {teishi shitai}."

"Do you want to stop it?"

"There is not a single good thing about it. Speaking of suspension, presses and distributors stop too, so I must go with the fast forward."

"Why is my brother speaking as if he were in the publishing business?"

"It's Golden Week's fault if books that should have come out in April came out in July."

"What a concrete example."

By the way, beside the publishing industry, even during the Golden Week there were many jobs that had no holidays, therefore a certain national broadcaster, rather than using the spectacular and dazzling name of Golden Week, reworded it simply as long holiday.

Either way I couldn't rest, though.

"Speaking about business, Christmas and Valentine Day are like that too. I don't know how the White Day came out. Is there a proper origin like with Jesus Christ, something like Saint Valentine?"

"It doesn't seem so."

"Then it's not White Day, it's White Lie."

"Hm?"

She tilted her head, puzzled.

I thought I'd swept her off her feet, but to no avail.

"I'm repeating myself, but Golden Week is from every point of view an exaggeration. Gold

consecutive holidays. Its length varies according to where the days of the weekend are placed, why is it compared to one of Earth's most stable materials?"

"I don't think it's a detail that needs to be criticized so much, but certainly gold might be an exaggeration."

"Tell me, what are you thinking about, now.....?"

"Don't suddenly become the king of Distortion<sup>[6]</sup>."

Quit it with the cool quotes, scolded me my sister.

I deeply reflected on it.

"Gold consecutive holidays, as if one should be happy for a succession of holidays. Certainly long ago consecutive holidays in a year might have been unusual, but now we even had Happy Monday<sup>[7]</sup>"

By the way, in the publishing world that was Unhappy Monday. It was a business world where they'd like for even weekends to disappear.

"Even taking away my hate for holidays, I think it doesn't live up to its name."

"Uhhh. More than living up its name, it's an image strategy. To make it sound like it's an enjoyable event. It's not the labeling effect, but people like a nice naming. Did you know it? Greenland is an area with an intensely cold tundra, but they wanted many people to come there, so they gave it the name of Greenland, which has an image of green everywhere."

"Don't look down on your brother. Even I knew that much. And that's not all. The capital city was called Godthåb. God's hope.<sup>[8]</sup>"

"I know, I know. Now it's called Nuuk."

Brother and sister pretended to apparently get along, but in fact a serious and tense trivia showdown was taking place while smiling.

Although the match was won by Tsukihi with this.

"By the way, Greenland belongs to Denmark."

and I ended up losing.

For real?

Was it Denmark's?

I guessed somehow or the other she was really bright.



If I confronted not with trivia but with general knowledge I would have no chance either.

"Uhm. We started from Greenery Day and ended up talking about Greenland."

"I think you are confused, April the 29th is now called Showa Day. Greenery Day is May the 4th."

"Eh. Isn't that a national holiday?"

"Exactly."

"Time flows for sure. I don't even know what AD year is now. Are they still doing analog broadcasting? Anyway, it's like you say, in the case of Golden Week, more than not living up to one's name, one should say it made a name for itself. Even with Japan being called 'Sun's origin' is too good for a mere far East island country. Everywhere people are frantic over image strategies. However, whether or not it lived up to its name, ultimately it's crying wine and selling vinegar. I think it would be fine to just do like that certain national broadcaster and call it long holiday. Of course, if during these nine days Tsukihi's panties were to become of a dazzling golden color, then the story would be different."

"I don't wear such bad taste panties."

"It's white, huh."

"It's white."

Said Tsukihi, and she opened wide the bottom hem of the yukata, displaying boldly what was completely visible from the start.

It was the action of a pervert.

Though even if I saw it, the underwear of my sister who after a bath walked inside the house in underwear at this point didn't make me feel anything.

It didn't feel any different from seeing a color sample.

However I thought that a brother nowadays shouldn't react as if he were hard to please, so on the contrary I clapped hands with all my strength and praised her loudly.

"Pheeww! Sister panties are the best!"

"Why, thank you!"

Tsukihi joined me.

What a pair of siblings.

I felt it was highly questionable, however Tsukihi, with no hesitation at all, got further worked up.

"Indeed panties must be white. I personally think if they aren't white they are not panties."

"Ooh. This high spirits. Here it comes, here it comes. From this point it begins your panties talk spanning a two-page spread."

"That's right. People who don't like it please skip this part."

Even the conversation we had until now had mostly been not very decent, so I felt it was too late for that, but Tsukihi added that (note).

"It's not just panties, I think even bras and the rest of the underwear basically must be white, brother."

"Yeah. You are really doing a two-page spread."

It can't be helped, I will humor you.

I prepared myself.

Since I was in the middle of a conversation I hadn't been making any progress with changing my clothes, I was wearing the bottom part while still naked above the waist, but I stretched my muscles by intertwining my fingers behind my back, moving my arms up and down and twisting my shoulders left and right, and I sat cross-legged on the spot.

Now, let's speak frankly.

"Tsukihi-chan, I'm very sorry to quibble over it while you got so worked up, but I can't consent to this opinion."

"Hm. So you are my enemy, huh."

"If I have to your foe, so be it. However, my name will be foe-rmidable."

Since I'm dealing with my sister I could say words that weren't cool or funny like nothing. I wished you took in consideration the fact I just woke up, and overlooked it.

Or possibly don't look at me.

"In other words a formidable foe."

"Don't misunderstand. I'm not saying white underwear is a turn-off. Rather, I greatly welcome it. Araragi Koyomi opens wide his doors to panties. It's just that there should be some variation in the color, you know? There are colors so they should be colorful, since they are colorful then colors. If everyone wore underwear of the same color, not necessarily white, wouldn't that make the world a brutal place?"

"That's not what I meant though."

"Colorfulness might possibly be what will save the world -- no, it's not just a possibility!"

"That's not what I meant though."

It's not like I want to disallow other colors, said Tsukihi.

It seemed she too had a personal opinion that was not just a whim. Well, her interests were overwhelmingly biased towards Japanese clothes, but fundamentally she was a smart dresser. As the fashion leader of female middle schoolers, it would be no wonder if she'd had a fixation about underwear.

"I'm just saying I think that among the many countless colors that exist, white ranks the highest. If there were a hierarchy of colors, undoubtedly white would be at the top. I would even like to change the word ranking with whitening from now on. This week's whitening top ten."

"Hmmm..... in terms of absolute color, certainly the rival of white becomes black, however I can understand why people wouldn't think to paint everything with a darkness-like black color."

Based on how one was listening, this could be heard as a serious conversation between fellow art majors, but what we were actually talking about was panties.

Panties talk.

"One thing though, Tsukihi-chan, I think it's time people would speak up against a prevailing view."

"About what?"

"Black underwear is not really erotic."

"You're right!"

High five.

A mutual understanding with my sister about underwear taste.

"Yay!"

"Yahoo!"

It was a tasteful cultural conversation.

You could even register it to the cultural heritage.

"I talked about living up to one's name. On that line, even colors have various images associated to them."

"Various.<sup>[9]</sup>"

"Cut it, don't point it out."

Now that I mention it, Tsukihi before had skillfully dodged it by saying many colors. She was shrewd.

"There are cold colors and warm colors. If you paint an iron dumbbell white it will seem lighter, and so on."

"You are wrong. White is the color of seriousness, purity and cleanness."

Tsukihi corrected the course of a conversation that had almost started to stray. She has quite the sharp eye, anyway I guess the original topic was not a very important subject.

"Look at me, brother."

Said Tsukihi, and she untied her sash and took off her yukata. She exposed even her brassiere beside her panties. She folded the yukata on the side and turned this way, and not just the panties or brassiere but even the knee socks she was wearing were uniformly white. Total coordination.

And then Araragi Tsukihi posed on her knees.

"How is it? I look serious, pure and clean, right?"

"No, you look not serious, impure and unclean....."

If you carelessly take that pose they will make a figure of you.

That pose will become a Nenpuchi<sup>[10]</sup>.

With the pillow pierced by a crowbar on the back as a good option, it looked like a gravure picture brimming with indecency.

"Isn't that because you hold preconceptions and prejudices against me as a person? Look, I'll hide my face with my hand, erase my individuality and feign anonymity!"

Tsukihi hid half of her face with the fingers of her right hand.

It was like the censor bar over one's eyes.

She was posing in that condition.

"....."

The indecency increased even more.

She was really an idiot.

She should really have good grades at school.

She should be that close to have All 5<sup>[11]</sup>.

I guessed in the end school grades were just one aspect of the overall intelligence. But if a person like this got good grades, it would rob her classmates of the will to study.

"I have to say though that that striped pattern trunks looking like a prison uniform you are wearing, now that I see it, make me think it's striped because you are a wicked person."<sup>[12]</sup>

"Who is the wicked one!"

I was worrying about my sister's cerebral condition, but come to think of it I was currently in my underpants.

I said I was wearing the bottom part, I didn't say I was wearing pants!

Let me say this was a example of description tricks.

Mystery's live example.

Araragi Koyomi.

"If you showed it to me, it must be white underwear or you will be misunderstood."

"Be it white or striped, once I showed my underwear I am already misunderstood."

Rather than a sad misunderstanding, it would be a correct understanding.

"That is to say, it never happens that one shows one's underwear."

"Eh? Not really. I have actually seen male underwear a lot of times."

"What?"

Just now I was thirsting for blood.

If in the life of a second year middle schooler sister it happened so many times, as a third year high schooler brother I had no choice but to mobilize.

"Oh no, I didn't mean in a dirty way. What are you imagining, brother."

While rubbing her hand over my face, Tsukihi soothed me, composed.

Like a jockey who soothed a horse.

"Look, though they don't wear low rise pants, boys do sag their pants. When they do and they crouch, the shirt's hem raises and they become visible."

"Aah."

"Also, when doing PE, they are visible under the hem of shorts."

"Ah, so it was that."

I felt relieved.

Thank goodness, it ended without a murder.

I was nearly going to slaughter Tsukihi's male friends.

"Many people since the past noticed a problem with the shortness of female skirts, but from a female point of view, I'd like for someone to address the problem with the looseness in male dressing style. I think gym shorts are infinitely more erotic than bloomers. I can't look at leg hair anymore."

"Doesn't that problem lies in the motivation of the person who looks?"

Well, it meant that for girls and boys the shameful parts and the parts that were lusted after were different.

On that line, I was in no position to talk seriously about this, but males might have more overall freedom. If I were asked now to go around the neighborhood with this striped trunks, I couldn't say I wasn't able to.

"Besides, if you want to have a serious discussion about it, even if males are lusted after by females, it's hard to think of what they could be forced to do. Women's shyness, in a way, may be an essential survival instinct in order to protect the body."

"Enough with the serious discussion. Let's keep talking about underwear."

"....."

I had a hunch that in the near future I would get to know a character like you. A fujoshi whose strong point was basketball. I felt like we were doing a rehearsal of that now -- might be my imagination.

It better be my imagination.

"Survival instinct, huh. Well, from that point of view, people like Karen-chan who is much stronger than ordinary males might be defenseless in that area."

"May-be."

"Karen-chan changes into her gym uniform in front of males."

"Tell me the number of her class, I will slay all the males."

"It's ok, it's ok. When Karen-chan starts changing clothes the males turn their head and flee in all directions."

Once again Tsukihi soothed me.

Pat pat.

She seemed to be in a cold sweat.

"Really? Is there no need to slay someone?"

"If you actually did it it would be worse..... I shouldn't be talking of my sister like this, but Karen-chan is low on female charm."

"Well, I can agree."

It was because she was a martial artist.

Even taking away the fact she was my sister, you didn't perceive her as a woman, and also the person herself was not bound by old-fashioned values like being feminine. Seeing her activities as Fire Sisters, I even feared she aimed at becoming a man among men.

"Being defenseless, in a way, might be necessary, on the contrary. I can't even imagine that tracksuit woman who aims at becoming a man among men wearing short skirts or low-rise pants."

"Ah, but Karen-chan has even a cute side. She said that when in front of her boyfriend she fears the outline of her underwear might be visible, therefore she doesn't wear panties under the tracksuit."

"What a pervert!"

The girls in this house are all pervs!

A bundle of perverts.

"Even I who love kimono in my daily life have always worn underwear. I can only take off my hat to Karen's way of thinking."

"There is no taking off a hat to one who took off her underwear. Well, letting aside that lucky underwear doesn't really exist, normally she is quite colorful. Full color. About that, your opinions are in conflict."

"Indeed. Karen-chan in fact tends to hate white. When sharing the underlying reason, she said 'I don't like white because it looks too serious.'"

"Oh."

She couldn't stand seriousness.



Well, she was at that age.

She pretended to be an ally of justice, but in that regard she was a normal third year middle schooler.

However.

"Oh boy, you two are still children. You are bound by such stereotyped sense of values. Why are you such poor thinkers. It would be no overstatement to assert that seeing white as serious is as a narrow prejudice as seeing black as erotic."

"What? Are you saying white is not serious? I'll kill you."

"What's with that short temper against your brother? That's not what I was saying, I was saying that no matter the color of the underwear you put on, in the end seriousness exudes forth from--"

I started saying,

Suddenly, I hit upon it.

No -- it hit me, I should have said.

The problem that during this month constantly, without pause, had continued to afflict me -- the predicament over which I had continued to agonize, and with which I had been unable to make any progress.

Finally, right now I was having what I could call a suitable conversation, and I could try discussing it with Tsukihi -- that was what hit me.

"Hm? What? Brother. Exudes what?"

"Ah, no -- I was saying seriousness is nothing more than something that exudes from the personality. In other words, a serious, pure and clean guy could wear indifferently white or black and still look serious, pure and clean."

"Hmm. Just like me now!"

"You wish."

I should have said you are the exact opposite.

One-eighty off the mark.

She was a wonderful sister who didn't listen to a word of what I said.

Although, exactly because she was this kind of sister, in this case she was on the contrary very suitable as someone to consult with -- I could say anything and tomorrow she would have forgotten it.

"Tsukihi-chan. Enough with panties."

"Eh? Is it already over?"

"The two-page spread was over a long time ago."

In fact, we went on too much.

I'm sure there are a lot of people who followed Tsukihi's (note), skipped the page, and were taken aback by the fact we were still talking about panties.

It's all right.

Everybody loves talking about panties, right?

"Besides, to begin with, a girl in her puberty shouldn't keep yelling panties panties."

"Eh? Brother, you mean you are now one of them?"

Tsukihi made a face like she has been betrayed.

It was a severe betrayal.

That was really what they call leaving someone high and dry.

However this betrayal was an interlude meant to switch topic, so I'd like you to overlook it.

"Rather than talking about panties, let's talk about love, Tsukihi-chan."

"Love?"

Tsukihi knitted her brows. She was openly displeased.

"No way. I want to keep talking about panties."

Tsukihi collapsed backward, and flailed her limbs as if throwing a tantrum over the bed, as if she were even swimming.

Not even tatami swimming<sup>[13]</sup>, just bed swimming.

.....Putting me aside, it would be too pitiful if a young girl like Tsukihi were to be misunderstood, so let his brother add another (note). I would like to emphasize once again that for her the panties talk held thus far was, without any further intention, purely a conversation of fashion involving underwear.

"Shut up. We are talking about love now. And get dressed without making a fuss."

"The same goes for you."

"You're right."

There was no need to tell me.

For house rules this incident was no big deal and within the regulations, but this scene of a half-naked brother and a sister in her underwear inside a small room was not something that let me hold my head up high in front of society.

And the curtains had been left open.

Both me and Tsukihi got up in order to get dressed -- Tsukihi wore her yukata again, and I restarted changing clothes with my loungewear.

Once dressed with clothes, baring one's heart became impossible, but from now on I will really spill my guts.

Seppuku talk.

I sat in the same position of before.

As if she read the mood, Tsukihi too got down from the bed and sat down cross-legged facing me.

.....This is unrelated, but I think there aren't many girls who are able to sit cross-legged, probably it depends on the skeleton.

On that regard Tsukihi was praiseworthy, but it might be because her body was soft. She didn't train her body like Karen, she was so squishy it was like half of her flesh was liquefying.

"You are as soft as a macaron."

"Brother, shouldn't you say as a marshmallow?"

Why are you mixing up a well-known pastry with an unfamiliar one, said Tsukihi.

A perfect score comeback.

Well, in the first place, the softness of the meat was completely unrelated to the softness of the joints.

Perhaps the difference between men and women was a question of manners.

"Well, so you want to talk about love, brother?"

"Actually, to be more correct is not about love, but about something that might be love."

"Hm? Something that might be love? What is this brother saying. Are you dying?"

"Don't wish me death at every opportunity. Well, it's something I can ask only to you, who has a boyfriend in a middle schooler way, and probably is battle-hardened from offering lots of love

advice to your peers."

"Can't you ask it to Karen-chan? She too has a boyfriend in a middle schooler way, and she too offers lots of love advice to her peers. She is battle-hardened."

"I don't have anything to discuss with that idiot."

I said clearly.

It was a tone void of hesitation, if I do say so myself.

"No matter how much advice that literally battle-hardened<sup>[14]</sup> tracksuit woman was asked for, in the end she just turned to you, right?"

"Not at all. You are greatly mistaken if you thought Karen-chan was just a fighter bent on violence. She offers proper love advice. Simply, it always ends in a failure."

"That's the worst."

If you couldn't do it, you should have said so.

It was because she was unable to do that that she was a kid.

"By the way, what is the success rate in the love counseling you offer?"

"Of course it's 100%."

Being that a magnificent result, Tsukihi threw out her chest with pride. Being bragged by a younger sister sucked, but yes, certainly that was a personal history one could only be proud of.

100%.

Well, maybe she was exaggerating it though.

"No, it's not an exaggeration. It's for real. Once I'm asked for advice, no matter who the other person is, I always without fail forge him a bond of love."

"....."

That was scary.

That was a threatening outcome that on the contrary made me hesitating about asking for advice -- in fact, I felt it was a big mistake to try to discuss it with my sister in the first place.

Still -- love counseling.

Well.

To begin with, I still didn't know if *this* was love or not -- so I tried talking about it with the blitheness of when one spilled an aqueous solution on a litmus paper.

"To tell the truth, in my class there is a girl I'm interested into {ki ni naru}."

"Do you mean like Momotaro?<sup>[15]</sup>"

"She didn't turn into a tree!? {ki ni naru}<sup>[16]</sup>"

I dare say that was a high level dialogue, though extremely low level in content, that wouldn't work out if we weren't siblings.

Although Tsukihi wasn't the funny man on purpose, it seems she was half serious, and

"Eh? Eh? What do you mean?"

she said, looking puzzled.

While feeling some sense of superiority for puzzling my sister, I grinned and

"In other words, perhaps I might be harboring affection for a girl who ended up in my same class after the class shuffle."

I explained in a way easy to digest.

Who knows why I had to grin.

"Holy smokes!"

Tsukihi showed an exaggerated reaction of surprise. If it was this exaggerated dramaticism the source of her popularity, then I would have liked to study it.

But now it was not the time for that.

Or to better say, was it really something that surprising?

"I'm surprised..... more than surprised, I'm capsized! The brother who declared such sick thing as 'if you make friends your strength as a human decreases' managed to find a person he likes."

Shivering, Tsukihi placed a hand in front of her mouth.

She was really startled.

"This is a shock like seeing a dog talking."

Maybe you should say like seeing a dog standing on hind legs.

Talking was biologically a bit of an impossibility for dogs.

What sort of loner did she think her blood brother was?

Well, it was not like she was wrong, though.

By the way, I didn't show it but in her aforementioned utterance the 'sick' hurt my feelings.

"What should I do, what should I do, I must cook red rice<sup>[17]</sup>. Let's see, red rice, is it prepared by mixing chili pepper on rice?"

"What have you been learning at domestic science lessons?"

That said, it seemed she was really a good cook.

"Besides, don't jump to a wrong conclusion. I'm only interested into her, 'perhaps', 'might be', there is nothing definitive yet."

"Uh?"

"That's why I am discussing with you something I'd rather not. Assuming there is a person of the opposite sex, how does one decide whether he likes her or not?"

".....Err, I'm sorry, brother."

Tsukihi's body suddenly stopped shivering, and she apologized. I didn't understand what she was apologizing for, but anyway it felt great having your sister apologizing to you.

"What was it? Can you say it once more?"

"What, did you miss it? Pull yourself together, Miss Fire Sisters' staff officer. Give me a break, there is a limit to how much one can be inattentive. Are you ready? Hear me out this time! How can one decide if a person of the opposite sex is the one he likes? In other words, the emotion you harbor for the other person up to what point is normal, and from what point onward is affection?"

Tsukihi.

Stood silent and folded her arms.

I didn't think I could explain it in a way easier to digest than this -- if this didn't work there was only liquid style baby food left to try out.

"I'm sorry, brother."

Tsukihi apologized a second time.

Even without understanding the reason, and no matter how many times she did it, it felt great having

your sister apologizing to you.

It was so refreshing that I was not even bothered by the fact she wasn't getting what I was saying -- although it seemed the same didn't hold true for Tsukihi who had apologized (well, if Tsukihi or Karen started saying incomprehensible things like 'it feels great to apologize to my brother' I would immediately take them to the hospital),

"I offered close to infinite number of love counseling, but unfortunately nobody has ever asked me something like that before."

She disclosed the details of her apology.

What?

It was that?

Then this was a counseling breakdown.

I had to claim compensation.

"You were bragging so much, don't tell me this is the extent of your power."

I got up and looked down on Tsukihi even with body language (I'd like that you thought of it as an action from an American soap opera). Looking down on a younger sister was the next best thing after receiving her apologies.

I felt even inclined to forgive her for betraying my expectations.

"Well, fine. Indeed it's probably my fault for having asked a middle schooler a counseling which level was a bit too high."

"In fact, I had never been asked such low level advice."

Araragi Tsukihi looked at me with the eye of a dead fish -- no, with the eye one looked at a dead fish.

It was a gaze that just by being at the other end of would make you want to die.

More than a gaze, it was a beam.

"Comebacks are fundamentally your thing, not mine, but just for this one time let me say my two cents. 'I don't know if this feeling is love or not', you say."

Tsukihi as if pursuing me got up,

"Are you a pure maiden!?"

Like a comic duo of the good old days she hit my chest with the back of the hand<sup>[18]</sup>.



Receiving a comeback from a younger sister, being called names by her, receiving her backhand blow, I have to say it felt quite good, but since I was under the illusion that somehow my idiosyncrasies made me look really too much like a pervert, from now on I will try to ignore emotions like this that made my chest throb.

Be careful not to forget that fundamentally Araragi Koyomi as a character pretended to be a pervert so that people could have a lot of fun.

"A pure maiden..... like a female middle schooler like you could talk."

"There are no pure maidens among female middle schoolers!"

I was rebutted.

That could be the simple impression of a girl who has climbed over so much consultations as if they were corpses, but if I were to ask deeper I might end up distrusting women, so knowing my place I refrained.

"Sit!"

Tsukihi yelled.

Toward me.

She had such an air of importance I on the contrary wanted to defy her, however her intensity made my body sit down on the soles on its own. What a servile nature.

In any case, what was with her?

What was she angry about?

What had enraged her? What had infuriated her?

Tsukihi, with me sat in front of her, without sitting herself, folded her arms and raised her chin, looking down on me.

"Brother. I will ask this first, were you serious?"

"I'm serious, I'm serious. I have always been serious."

"Mind the way you speak."

I received an order.

From my younger sister.

"Speak with respect. And don't lose focus."

"Y-Yes ma'am. I will."

I abode.

Things like, I was made to sit by my younger sister, I was looked down by her, and also I received an order and I was made to use honorific forms, from now on will be omitted.

Ignore ignore.

"Please explain to me from the beginning what this is all about, you son of a brother."

Son of a brother.

It was a word in which I sensed new potentialities.

Here comes Sister Princess<sup>[19]</sup>'s 13th sister.

"Err, that is, I can't be that specific but....."

If I mentioned the details, a privacy (mine) will be violated.

I didn't want to hand over personal information to my younger sister.

".....Anyway, we went through a lot. For the moment, let's call the target H-san."

"H-san."

It's somewhat specific, said Tsukihi<sup>[20]</sup>.

Well, it was just her initial.

It was natural to be that specific.

"After we ended up in the same class at the beginning of this month, I found myself thinking about H-san. And it's not just something inside my head. While in class, if my eyes fall from the blackboard, I'm looking at her seat. And it's not just something inside school. On the way to school I try to look for her. When I go to the bookstore to buy things, I start thinking that this is a small town so maybe we could meet by chance. And while reading the book I bought at the bookstore, I think things like 'Ah, H-san might like this sentence'. When I try to buy an ecchi book, I start thinking 'Ah, if I buy this book H-san will hate me', and I quietly put the book back on its shelf."

"Brother. Don't speak so candidly. I don't want to get your personal information."

That is, I don't want to hear the story of my brother's qualms in buying ecchi books, said Tsukihi.

Crap, I turned H-san into kana, and my words got jumbled up.

By the way, ecchi is the first letter of hentai {pervert}.

"That is, brother."

"What is it?"

"This is love."

She asserted. She concluded.

She did it not with a serious look but with a flabbergasted one, conversely I could feel a great persuasive power, but how could I say, when something was arbitrarily decided like that, somehow it made me want to defy it.

I was a real contrarian.

"How do you know? One could feel that much even for a person he hates. If I leave such vague feeling alone I might get used to it."

"No. You do, but you don't..... how could I say it."

Tsukihi, arms folded, tilted her head while thinking.

"There are plenty of things I would like to say, but I don't know how to say them."

"What? You shouldn't even need to think about it for something like this."

So she was like the centipede who was asked how it walked, huh. As one could guess from the name, it was a creature with a hundred legs, that when asked in what order it moved its legs it was unable to answer.

Not only that, despite it could walk normally before, the moment it received that question it didn't know anymore how to walk, and became unable to walk.

That was terrible.

Because I made a stupid question, Tsukihi might not be able to enjoy romance anymore. She might have to share her worries with me.

.....

Well, I felt it would be all right in the end.

"That's why I told you this isn't a high level discussion."

This is a low level discussion, says Tsukihi.

"And the centipede doesn't have a hundred feet."

"W-What!? What do you say, the centipede doesn't have a hundred feet!?"

Of course even I know that much, I wanted to try an amusing reaction of an improbable exaggerated surprise toward a common trivia, but I was hit by Tsukihi's blizzard gaze, and I sat back in low spirits.

What's with this Freezer-sama.

"On that subject, if Freezer and Vegeta were to do the fusion, wouldn't they become elite warrior Freeter-sama?"

"Freezer and Vegeta have completely different body figures, so they can't use the fusion together."

Without giving up I boldly charged forward, but my sister's reaction was unexpectedly calm, in addition she had read Dragon Ball.

"It has nothing to do with centipedes, simply, it's like teaching pre-schoolers the concept of multiplication."

"Multiplication? How absurd, are you saying it's something so simple?"

"Yes. Please imagine me now as a sister who is at loss with an older brother who can't do multiplication."

"....."

A heroic image.

That would be the worst for a little sister.

How pitiful.

"Ah, but I think I get it. See, err, who was the person who invented the light bulb? It's not Thomas the Tank Engine....."

"Thomas Edison."

"Yeah, it's him."

"Why is it Thomas and not Edison that came out first, brother?"

"Ah, sorry. I became well acquainted with that man, so unintentionally I call him with his first name."

"Though you confused him with the Tank Engine."

"You know, Thomas."

I insisted.

I was stubborn with gags.

"When he was in grade school he asked his teacher 'Why  $1 + 1$  equals 2?', a question about the fundamentals of things. Not multiplication, addition. He couldn't understand what he was taught the way it was taught, so he keep asking until he could grasp it."

"Oh, but with that way of talking it's like there is some mutual understanding between you and Edison, surely that's not so."

Tsukihi waved her head.

"Through the world whatever the epoch there have been maaany children who asked the teacher such precocious question like 'Why  $1 + 1$  equals 2?', but there has been only one Inventor King Thomas Edison."

"Eh?"

That denied dreams and ambitions.

What a kill-joy.

Don't thwart precocious children who might become future Edisons.

"But even Edison himself when he was a child played while saying 'I will become the Invention King!', you know?"

"If at the time he said that, that means he invented a time machine."

In the end, it's just a simple thing hard to explain, Tsukihi went back on topic.

"Well, since you are serious in your own way I can't look down or make fun of you, but if you let me say my personal thought, I think that when you are at a point where you don't know if you like one person or not, you already like her."

"Is that so?"

"If you hated her, you wouldn't thinking so deeply about it to begin with."

"Actually, it's not like I'm thinking so deeply about it."

I was feeling fuzzy.

I was agonizing.

It was like a fog or a mist that won't clear up -- just that.

I felt fluffy.

I had never faced my own heart, and that was why I couldn't for the life of me grasp my emotions.

However.

I had been mistaken -- I thought, now.

Now I could think.

Therefore this time -- I wanted to face them for real.

My heart, my emotions, this type of things, I wanted to face them for real.

"I wonder. I have never liked a person in my whole life."

"Never?"

"Not even once."

Like Tsukihi did before, while remaining sat, I threw out my chest with pride.

"Thus far I have never loved anyone."

.....

.....

How could I say.

When I said it, it felt terribly false.

I felt like a large hole was opened in the chest I threw out. No, that might have originally been Naraku's hole<sup>[21]</sup>.

Eh?

Was I that kind of character?

Isn't that dangerous?

The upper body half puffed with pride drooped in low spirits, and I stooped. Well, either way, throwing out one's chest or drooping is not a spinal posture good for sitting.

"On school trips' nights, after the pillow fight ends and it's past the time to sleep, in the assembly for a pillow talk-like love talk, if there's a guy who says 'No, I don't have I girl I like at the moment' it's me."

"I feel like the reason why you don't have friends is related to that."

It was none of your business.

Now we weren't talking about friendship, we were talking about romance.

Not being able to make friends because one was not able to love, what was with these new generations.

"Now, let me justify myself."

"I don't want to hear your justifications."

"Listen!"

"I don't want to!"

"It's a brother order!"

"Ugh..... if it's a brother order then it can't be helped."

Sister gave her consent.

It seemed she would have heard my justifications.

"School trips' nights are a good example of it, but don't you think inside the school there's a weird pressure, like, 'I must like someone'?"

"Uhm."

Tsukihi had a slight reaction. It seemed what I said had been surprisingly acceptable, and she wasn't expecting it.

"I call it the love pressure. It may be the same for your female friends who came asking advice, but, how can I say it, there is an abusive atmosphere that forces people to get intimate, and I don't like that."

"I feel like you are too much of a contrarian, but probably you are right when you say that inside schools love has the upper hand. I think it's natural when you shove into the same place a large quantity of male and females. However."

Tsukihi temporarily agreed.

Or rather, she pretended to agree.

"That may be the reason why people are interested in love, but it is not the reason why you can't love people."

She said.

"You had some oppressive thoughts, but that's not the reason why you can't love people."

"It is not, huh."

"It's an excuse."

"Indeed."

"Apologize."

"I'm sorry."

I apologized.

She extorted an apology from me.

I who never once bowed my head to anyone since I was born!

"Don't tell lies."

"Ah, yes ma'am. I'm sorry. I constantly and again and again cause nothing but trouble for Tsukihi-san."

"Let's get back on topic."

"If you please."

We got back on topic.

I was saying Araragi Koyomi has never liked anyone.

I felt like in this conversation between me and Tsukihi we had to get back on topic an extraordinarily high number of times.

"Indeed. Now that you mention it, you had never brought home a girl once -- though you never brought home a boy either."

"May be. That's why I don't know well if I like someone or not. It's like language of a different world."

"But when you see it in manga, anime or dramas don't you understand it somehow?"

"It's not like I don't understand it, but that's fantasy. It's like being told to believe in the existence of dragons. When you see an artist's stylish love story do you think 'Oh, that's cool. I will do like that'?"

"Hmmm. You are right."

So said the person who put himself on par with Edison, groaned Tsukihi. It seemed the dragon simile lacked persuasive power somehow, so I pressed on with another simile.



"After you read Harry Potter, do you think you too can use Kafrizzle?"

"Judging from those words, you never read Harry Potter.<sup>[22]</sup>"

I failed to press on.

Regrettably, fire type spells didn't work with Fire Sisters.

It was just that with series if you missed the timing they became hard to start.

"Or maybe, the opposite could be true."

"Eehh?"

"In other words, in manga, anime or drama you typically find love stories that are very stylish, or at least dramatic, right? Therefore I might spontaneously be imprinted with the notion that if it's not something on that level it's not love. Because I ask for too much glitter or showiness, I might overlook a minor small love lurking inside daily life. I could say I am a victim of modern society's information overload."

"It's not like I don't understand what you are saying and what you want to say, but that manner of speaking looks so much like shifting responsibilities it makes my blood boil."

Who is a victim, you hypocrite.

Said Tsukihi, and she raised a foot and placed it on my shoulder. In truth, she wanted to place it on my head, but she couldn't raise her foot so much.

Tsukihi grinded her foot on my shoulder.

Normally I would have busted her up for this, but the situation being what it was, I was broad-minded and let it pass.

I did feel like I was confusing the point about which I should have been broad-minded, though.

"Don't turn to sophistry, brother. Inside this information overload, people fall in love normally."

"Ummm. You attack the argument."

"In other words, summing up this topic of discussion, is it fine for you to be a person without love?"

"Oh no, that's wrong. I'm full of love. You could even call me a proselytizer of love. You understand it even from the fact I'm being called Naoe Kanetsugu.<sup>[23]</sup>"

"When have you been called Naoe Kaetsugu?"

I wasn't.

Not even once.

"However, loveless brother."

Tsukihi said.

By the way, she still had the foot placed on my shoulder. The situation of having a sock right beside my face, how could I say it, was a bit complicated. I wanted to rub my face on it.

"Loveless {ai naki} brother, say."

"Hey sister. Don't make me sound like a fat greenling {ainame<sup>[24]</sup>}."

"Loveless brother, say"

Tsukihi implicitly dismissed my objection, and she continued probing.

Despite living under the same roof for some ten years, I didn't know her standards for when retorting or not retorting.

"You don't hate girls, right?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"I mean you are not putting on airs of a misogynist."

"Yeah, I never did it. Many times I put on air of a misanthropic pessimist, but I stated I was making an exception just for girls."

"Mankind's majority would be an exception."

"It's true."

For your information, that paragraph was meant to be a joke. I never stated such thing, and to begin with I never put on airs of a misanthropic pessimist.

In the conversations with my sister someday it was better not to lack seriousness and factuality. I was unable to remain serious.

But well.

That said--

I never put on airs of a wild macho either.

I didn't hate girls, and I didn't even have problems dealing with them -- I thought, at least (I was not sure enough to assert it).

"Uhm. Well, that's true. Despite you never brought someone with you, in the past you often played with mine and Karen-chan's friends."

"Really?"

"Sure. You were popular {motemote} among our friends."

"What? I was Timotei {Teimote}?"

I could be in the CM of a shampoo then.

I would get rich quickly.

"That was the first and last time you were popular"

"I had that kind of period, huh..... oh well"

Now that she mentioned it, I remembered that in the past Tsukihi brought friends like it were a feudal lord's procession, and I played with them at The Game of Life or something. When the friends she brought, her included, were an odd number, I was dragged in to make the number even.

However that was a long time ago.

I didn't even miss those times.

"Anyway, I don't hate girls. In my life I have never been picky about girls."

The fact that a person like me.

Cool and dry, possessing a human nature I could define as Tottori sand dunes<sup>[25]</sup>, was currently shaking, if one thought about it meant this was a major event. It could have overturned heaven and earth.

"And that's why you asked me for love advice."

"Yes. Precisely. Well, I said many things, but it's not like I wish for a clear-cut answer. I thought I'd try listen to your case as a reference. Your boyfriend, err, Rousokuzawa-kun, was it?"

"Yes. You remembered him."

"Just the name."

I never met him.

More than remembering just his name, I didn't know anything but his name.

"At what stage did you decide you 'liked' him? The truth is, I want you to tell me that"

"Well, I--"

Tsukihi hesitated, pouted her lips, stayed silent for a while.

More than hesitating to say it, she may have been simply embarrassed.

She was a cute rascal.

I wanted to kiss her.

"--For no reason."

"For no reason."

"Yes. Something fuzzy. Whimsical."

"Is it fine like that?"

"It's fine. It's that kind of thing."

Her last remark was somehow even hasty. That too may be her hiding her embarrassment, however in a way it looked like she quickly aborted her explanation.

Did she give up?

Did she give up on her brother?

Then that was a sad news.

Not knowing when to give up, I showed resistance.

"Well then, for the present let's put aside what was the step, let me hear first what was the reason. Why did you fall for that Rousokuzawa-kun?"

"That too for no reason."

This time she answered immediately.

However that was indeed a hasty, annoyed reply.

Maybe she didn't want to talk about herself -- not like I didn't understand her, but now that it had become such a deep conversation (?), it would have been selfish on her part.

"It was really for no reason at all. For no reason for no reason for no reason at all."

Tsukihi said pouting.

For no reason for no reason for no reason at all.

"I thought I like him, I felt I liked him, I understood I like him. Like that."

"There's a limit even to nuances."

What was with this three step conjugation.

Even if I was told it was like that, I couldn't really get a feel.

"What I like about him, huh. I can distort it in many ways, you know? Like he's cool, or gentle, or tall, or rich, there are many possible reasons I could attach to it."

"....."

One could think mixing 'rich' among her favourite types showed Tsukihi's human nature in a way easy to understand.

The important point was not there though.

It was in her follow-up,

"However, all these are lies."

These words.

"I could say these would be self-aggrandizements in order to understand your feelings with reason. More than attaching a reason, it's a distortion. You have concluded you like him and you try to build a ladder to get to that conclusion."

"A ladder."

"Maybe not a ladder, a rocket. Yes, it feels like building a rocket."

Tsukihi clapped his hands -- it seemed it was a good simile she could agreed with. Agreeing with oneself was cheating.

"If you think you want to stay with her forever, then it's love -- Did you know these words, brother?"

"Which words?"

"The person who loves a toad, sees a toad on the moon."

".....No, I never heard those words before."

However I understood the meaning on the spot.

There was no proverb about love easier to understand.

Likewise, I could grasp even what Tsukihi said -- when you like someone, the reason is not

important.

To build a rocket to get on the moon, huh.

Indeed, 'Why do you like him?' 'What do you like about him?' might have been off the mark of the question. Similarly, even asking at what stage one did 'like' someone probably was misleading sensibility.

It was not something that strict.

It was more fuzzy.

".....Well, I see, because of a kind of theory that was seeping in my thoughts, I have never liked anyone"

"Well, it is an exaggeration to call you a loveless person. Loving other people and loving a specific person are two sides of the same coin."

"Are they?"

"Yes. Philanthropy, in the end, is the same thing as not liking someone. Fairness and equality may be love but not affection. Choosing one irreplaceable someone is, to say it all, discriminatory. Philanthropy and discrimination cannot coexist."

You probably are a philanthropist, says Tsukihi.

Hm.

Somehow, I didn't feel like I was being praised.

Even if I was told something nice, how could I say -- for some reason, I recalled Spring Break.

The result my philanthropy led to in Spring Break.

I was forced to recall it even if I didn't want to, like a harassment.

"People who love all mankind become saints -- but can you picture a saint being nervous for a new love?"

"I can't"

I had the impression that would be giving oneself over to worldliness.

Hrm.

Well, even if discrimination could have been an overstatement, love had to be a worldly thing.

It was different from philanthropy.

Completely.

"If a person were able to love all mankind as an individual, he would be the strongest."

"To yearn for mankind itself -- huh. That would be difficult. More than difficult, just absurd."

"I guess it's more like a fickle adulterer."

"Hmm."

It was just that even an extreme discussion like this solved nothing.

Let's temporarily leave aside concepts and definitions.

If the discussion were to broaden too much I would be unable to gather everything.

It was about H-san in my class.

"It's as you say, I'm a lonely guy who never loved anyone since he was born, but I, such a kind of person, I, Araragi Koyomi, right now that I'm 18 years old, have finally fallen in love, most likely."

"No! Don't say most likely, it's time to settle it!"

Tsukihi, stooping her torso, with a slap placed firmly her hands on my shoulders, to encourage me.

And with a really vigorous smile declared.

"Most certainly!"

"Most certainly....."

"You fell in love! It is decided!"

"Is it decided!?"

"Yes! The decisive point has been deciphered!"

At once Tsukihi got her face close to me, and hit my forehead. It was a terrific distance where I was feeling even her breath.

"You like H-san! I decided it"

"If you decided for me then it can't be helped.....!"

I was overpowered by such intensity.

I had no choice but to agree.

No, it was more than being a choice.

"....."

She was right. Yes.

It was as Tsukihi said.

In fact, I really didn't understand at all in the least if it was as she said -- but let's pretend it was.

Might like her means I could like her.

I think I like her.

I feel I like her.

I understand I like her.

I think I want to stay with her forever.

Like that.

"Indeed. Allright, I overcame my worries, Tsukihi-chan. Getting one who was called an overcalm kid to overcome is quite an accomplishment. It seems that until now I have been looking down on you"

"Oh no no no, I did not do such thing."

Tsukihi got bashful.

She waved her open hand in front of her face, smiling.

To see such lovely reaction and wanting to make her even more bashful was human nature.

Or maybe it was brother nature.

A bashful younger sister was so cute!

Moe moe!

"You are best sister in the world, Tsukihi!"

"No way, surely I'm not."

"I always thought one day you could do it. That day is today. You are at Marilla's level without having to wait until being 50. Really, the speed of your evolution surprised me. You have so much sense of presence that from now on if someone mentions Karen-chan I won't understand who he is talking about."



"Ahahaha."

"Not for nothing you are my sister."

"Eh? Did you switch to self-praise?"

Tsukihi came to her senses.

I have been found out, she had sharp eyes.

I was planning to use this mood to train Tsukihi being 'a sister who is overjoyed when praised by her brother', but it didn't go very well.

Also, maybe I should report as problem point that I nonchalantly tried to exalt Tsukihi by lowering Karen, but she ignored it altogether.

Jokes aside.

"Let me express my gratitude. Thanks, Tsukihi-chan."

"You'd better do."

This was the first time I was asked such basic question, anyway, said Tsukihi feeling relieved.

"I said this and that, but in the end liking another person is as something as natural as a dog barking, so it's nothing to worry about, brother."

"I see. It is natural."

"Yes. It's normal."

"It is normal that in my class there is a girl I am interested in."

"Normal!"

"It is normal even that during lessons my stare fell from the blackboard to her spot."

"Normal!"

"It is normal even that on the way to school I look for her, even that I wonder if we could meet by chance, even that when I go buy books I imagine this and that!"

"Normal!"

"Even that I want to rub her breasts"

"It's not."

The conversation stopped.

"Hm?"

"Hm?"

We mutually exchanged one glance as if searching what we were up to.

Neither of us knew why the conversation had stopped.

"Eh? What? Tsukihi-chan. What in the world are you saying?"

"Eeeh? I-I'm the one at fault?"

"Isn't it better for you to sit down?"

"Ah, yes. I will."

Still bewildered, Tsukihi sat down.

A brother and a sister sat down facing each other.

What was this, a tea session?

It was a trait of the character that tended to be forgotten, but Tsukihi was in the tea club.

"I was saying, H-san's breasts are extraordinarily attractive, so I want to fondle them, I want to rub them, do you get it? That's what I am saying."

".....Eeh? Maybe I'm dumb, but for some reason I grasp what you are saying and yet I can't understand it. The impression in my mind after hearing your words is only 'I'm not listening' and 'I'm not asking.'  
[26]"

"Eeh? You are really hopeless. Good grief, an inept sister is going to give her brother a hard time."

I overturned my evaluation a second time.

These quick attitude changes were frankly terrific, if I do say so myself.

"I think not many know about it, or perhaps it's something only I know in my class, but that girl in fact has two bazongas, at this point I have no choice but to rub them, you know!"

"Excuse me brother, wouldn't you mind stop using blunt words like fondle or rub?"

"Hm? Ah, I see."

I tolerantly accepted my sister's request.

"Well then, I have no choice to touch them, you know!"

"It's not blunt anymore, it became cute though.<sup>[27]</sup>"

I don't know, said Tsukihi surrendering to dejection.

I had the impression that the eyes she was looking at me with were not the eyes with which one looks at a brother, but at a pervert, though it must have been a hallucination.

It had to be.

She was doing something like a trick art.

"In other words, to put it simply, the fact that I find myself wanting nothing but to touch H-san's breast is love."

"It is not."

Tsukihi firmly denied it.

Despite being concise, it was such an obstinate tone that made me lose the will to claim my righteousness on the matter.

Hmmm.

She was really stubborn.

However, I clenched my fists and boldly challenged Tsukihi.

"But I never find myself wanting to touch the breast of someone I don't like. Therefore I think this feeling is unmistakably love"

"If that's what you have been thinking for real, then I can't help but feel responsibility for having allowed you to hold such conviction....."

Tsukihi showed a facial expression like that of an archeologist who awoke a demon of destruction sealed by ancient people.

Just because you felt responsibility for it you didn't have to think that you must deal with it with your own hands, though.

"Even your beloved Rousokuzawa has been wanting to touch your breast for a long time."

"Might be, but that's only true in a set theory sense, he wants to touch all female breasts through the world, me included!"

"....."

Not a guy I'd like to meet.

In fact, how come you could state that loudly?

"Wanting to touch girls' breasts is a normal emotion for boys, so you don't pay any mind to it."

"....."

Somehow it seemed a different type of counseling has begun.

From love counseling to sex education time.

"I said it was not, but with a different meaning even that is normal"

"Is it?"

"It's natural."

"Natural."

"That's not love, it's sexual desire."

"Desire!"

Desire, huh.....

That's no good.<sup>[28]</sup>

"Actually, I have lot of desire though."

"Don't try to sound like an old stand-up comedian<sup>[29]</sup>. That's an awful play on words."

"I even think it was such a neat punch line that we could start a new chapter, don't tell me the story continues."

"Sure. It can't end like this."

Tsukihi said.

"Though in a certain sense there's already the end in sight. For my brother, that is."

"What are you saying? My life starts now."

"That's as far as you go as a human. Aah, though half for joke, in the other half I was pretty serious in giving advice. I never thought my brother would have consulted me about his overflowing libido."

"It's rude to call my earnest request for advice libido."

Moreover, it was half for joke.

Don't joke with me, I wanted to say.

"But it's that. You are interested in the breasts of a girl in your class, during lessons you look at her breasts rather than the blackboard, on the way to school you just look for her breasts, when you go to the bookstore you just think about her breasts. If that isn't sexual desire then I don't know what it is."

"Wait a second. Many words have been substituted."

A daring editorial change was carried out.

What a renewal.

"If I'm told this, even I would think that's not love but sexual desire, and that's not a brother but a pervert, but Tsukihi-chan, you shouldn't make light of the intensity of your own prejudices. Surely you are now unmistakably making some kind of misunderstanding."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Don't misunderstand. For argument's sake, let's say the pure feeling of wanting to touch H-san's breast is sexual desire. Let's say it is pure sexual desire. If that's the stance you take, then I'm willing to acknowledge this case possesses such side in no small measure. I'll let you save face as a sister. However, Tsukihi-chan, think about this."

I paused for a moment.

And then I said the words I prepared putting strength into them.

"Without sexual desire there wouldn't be any love, would it?"

"Just shut up. Ah, I'm sorry, there was a mistake in the reply I selected. Just die."

Don't make nonsense sounds as if it were words of wisdom, said Tsukihi, clicking her tongue.

She was not refined at all.

What had become of her setting of belonging to the tea club.

"I won't die. Sorry but your brother is immortal."

"If you are immortal then I'm immortal too."

Good grief, she said.

Good good grief, she said.

Without hesitation Tsukihi, while still seated on the soles, skillfully rubbed her knees together and

closed the distance on me.

The correct expression would be that she sidled up to me<sup>[30]</sup>.

"What is it?"

"I want to test you."

"Testing me? Are you saying you dare to test your own brother?</ref>"

"Yep. I'm going to test such brother."

When our kneecaps were about to collide Tsukihi stopped moving, and with a jerk she stuck out her chest at me.

"Fondle them."

I fondled them.

Without a word. Without a facial expression.

Promptly, I touched them on the spot.

"Gyaaah!"

As if surprised by my speed, which rivaled the speed of light, Tsukihi screamed and collapsed backward, but since if she fell with that force she would have hit her head on the headboard in the rear of the bed, I put strength in my hands and somehow held up her upper body.

That is.

In other words, I gripped her so firmly my fingers were squeezing her breast.

This was not touch, it was catch.

"It hurts!"

Talk about ingratitude.

I just barely saved her from a pinch as she was going to hit her head on the bed, I was so called life savior, and yet she raised her upper body toward me with a terrific force, as if she were a pendulum, and she gave me a headbutt.

Forehead and forehead collided.

In my field of vision sparks scattered.

And yet I didn't release my grip on her breast.

Her breast as a lifeline prevented me from being blown backward.

"I said it hurts! Let me go let me go! Won't you let me go!? {Hanasanka} "

"Hanasanka? Ah, the old man that made cherry trees blossom by sprinkling the ashes of his dead dog {Hanasaka<sup>[31]</sup>} "

"If you have enough composure to make a pun that sounds like an accusation then immediately get your hands off me!"

"Do you mean it in the get your hands off me common sense of the word?"

"Common sense already got his hands off you {omae}! I mean it in the most trite meaning!"

There was no need for my sister to address me with omae<sup>[32]</sup>.

I raised my body, which was falling backward, and I opened my fingers that were grabbing her protrusions.

"What a brother what a brother what a brother. Are you a stagnating brother?<sup>[33]</sup> Ah, geez, I got my words mixed up."

Tsukihi-chan was in a huff.

She was actually pretty.

"Just now you really had no hesitation at all. The moment you were told to, with a reflex that didn't pass through the brain you went and rubbed them."

"How rude. A brother doesn't rub his sister's breast."

"Just now you rubbed them to your heart's content!"

"You are wrong. It was the opposite. The reverse expression. Your breast rubbed the palm of my hands."

"What's with that revolting sentence!?"

"Touching your brother's hands with your breast, you really are a perverted sister."

"Reverse or something, that expression is unbelievable....."

To rub hand palms with breast.

Tsukihi facepalmed.

Now that I noticed, maybe an effect of our slapstick quarrel, both me and Tsukihi were not sitting on

the soles anymore.

At last the balance collapsed.

"Ah geez! Brother, you touch your sister's breasts too much!<sup>[34]</sup>"

"What's with you? Why are you mad? You were the one who told me 'Fondle them', weren't you? You lured me into temptation, so to speak."

"Temptation."

"By the way, if you write 'temptation' {誘惑} and 'nuance' {語感} in kanji they look the same."

"A keen observation, but don't try to change the subject! You are greatly mistaken if you thought I would simply cry myself to sleep. I'll report this incident to Karen-chan!"

"Please don't. I won't be able to return to my original shape."

She would come at me at full power.

Karen got mad when you bullied Tsukihi.

"Are you fine with Karen-chan grazing her knuckles as a result!?"

"What's with this dignified tone for such uncool thing....."

Said Tsukihi glaring at me.

The eye of a murderer.

"It's no big deal if you aren't able to return to your original shape. Tomorrow morning I'll come wake you up with a crowbar again"

"Futile. Sorry but lethal weapons won't work on me."

I laughed scornfully at Tsukihi's threat.

"I am a fictional youth. I am protected by regulations."

"So cool!?"

Well.

There was nothing I feel ashamed for in my actions, but I feared a misunderstand here.

More than a misunderstanding, what I feared was Karen though.

"Well then, without changing subject, let's bring it up once again. You were the one who tempted me



by saying 'Fondle them', though"

"First of all I am mad for such imitation that didn't resemble me at all!"

Araragi Tsukihi was in hysteric mode.

What a hysteria novel<sup>[35]</sup>.

.....

I failed, we are still not at the punch line, huh.

I'd like to go to the next corner now, but the chapter won't change.

"My voice sounds more like Iguchi Yuka<sup>[36]</sup>!"

"Don't throw out personal names!"

"And also I don't tempt my brother!"

"You did. You stuck out your chest like this. 'Fondle me pliz', you said."

"Don't turn me into a dull airheaded character! I don't want to be such kind of character! Stop it, there are people who started reading from this book!"

"That's news. If such people existed I would worry about my impression on them."

I thought that with five books under the belt I would be in a safety zone for jokes. It was an outrage with the assumption of having made well known my good points.

"There are readers even in the M-78 Nebula<sup>[37]</sup> now, brother, so be really careful about your behaviour."

"You are right....."

It became a galactic problem.

It would have been no exaggeration saying the peace of Earth fell on my shoulders.

"Hey brother, would you fondle the breast of everyone to told you 'Fondle them'?"

"Hey hey, do you think I am such unprincipled person? That hurts."

Oh man, I said.

"No matter the suggestive words, in the end the breasts I fondle will be only H-san's and yours."

"I'm in the same special exception as H-san!?"

"Ah no, even Karen-chan's."

"Do you want to stick your poison fangs even on Karen-chan? Eeh? Please wait, can we really call such a person our brother?"

"You got it wrong. It's exactly because I'm your brother."

I explained in a way easy to understand to my sister who was slow in comprehension.

"Letting aside H-san, in your case it's because I'm your brother."

"W-what do you mean.....?"

"For a brother a sister's breast doesn't count as a breast. To put it another way, no matter how much he fondles his sister's breasts, for a brother that's not fondling breasts. It doesn't count. In other words I can fondle them as much as I want"

"With that syllogism the question is not whether or not I can call you a brother, it's such an unbelievable way of thinking I'm not sure whether or not I can call you a human....."

Before reversing it you make leaps in logic, said Tsukihi hanging her head, crestfallen.

It seemed she could not understand.

That was so sad.

Maybe fellow humans wouldn't ever be able to understand each other.

Even in modern society where communication grew so much, there was nothing that got through people, people didn't trust each other.

However, not discouraged from my societal satire in the descriptive part, Tsukihi, stout-hearted and in high spirits, suddenly raised her hanging head. Her eyes weren't dead yet. It seemed she still wanted to object.

She was obstinate.

Why didn't she just die?

"Even accepting your breast is an inviolable existence that must not be touched, if the owner herself, that is you, grants me permission, there is nothing to blame me for"

Before Tsukihi told me to shut up, this time I made the first move. In the end, the slapstick of some time ago came down to the fact it was Tsukihi the one who brought it up.

Anyway, it started there.

"That's not it!"

However, Tsukihi was unyielding.

"That's not it, that's not it! Right now I was just being tsundere!"

"Tsundere?"

When was she?

Even without taking Marilla as a reference, I was fairly knowledgeable about tsunderes, but I thought that in Tsukihi's words before there was no such element.

"That's what was the reverse expression. I don't adhere to regulations!"

"Adhere to regulations"

The established ones.

I'm telling ya it's dangerous.

Recently they have been strict on many things, so let's do something erotic within the rules.

"In other words I am a reverse tsundere!"

"Reverse tsundere? What do you mean?"

"In other words, normally I am in Dere mode, you can approach me and get very intimate with me, and I won't mind you getting physical, like placing a hand on my shoulder and bringing your face near, but the moment it makes you think 'Eh? Don't tell me she likes me' and you confess, I suddenly change into Tsun mode and coldly thrust you away with something like 'Ah no, that was not what I meant. Please stop. You are misunderstanding, please don't get carried away.'"

"....."

No no, rather than a tsundere or a reverse tsundere.

Isn't that a normal girl you can see relatively often?

"In other words as a reverse tsundere I say something like 'Fondle them' as a joke, but if you actually do it I snap 'Did you take that seriously, are you stupid?'"

"That's the worst."

Reverse tsundere were scary.

I didn't know how to approach them.

".....That is, initially what was your real intention? How did you think the conversation would have turned out when you stuck out your breast in front of me?"

"Well, it was a bit of a joke, it was a test, I told you I wanted to test you, didn't I? My plan as the staff officer of Fire Sisters was that, if I stuck out my breast, my brother would have said, uninterested 'Actually, I have no interest in your breast', proving the legitimacy of my theory, at that point I would have retorted 'Because it's the breast of your sister, right?', that would have been the scene where my spectacular rally began<sup>[38]</sup>"

"Ah. That was what you meant to"

"And yet you returned me a spectacular return ace.<sup>[39]</sup>"

Really, said Tsukihi puffing her cheeks.

It seems the sense of distance between brother and sister went slightly off.

"However, I must say that such more normal development would have been too ordinary, me ending up touching my sister's breast was more funny"

"Ummm. Well, you are right. I'll forgive you."

I was forgiven.

It might have been because of her unbelievable unifying force, or her popularity as a leader, but her broad-mindedness was worrisome.

"Hey, how was it?"

"Hm?"

"I said, how was it?"

"Ah. I see, you are asking my impression on the breasts of my sister."

She wanted to ask it.

It was natural to be interested in how other people would judge your possessions, which you built up taking long month and years.

I thought it wasn't the place to for benevolent lies, and after a bit of thought I stated, frank and concisely, my impression.

"76 points, rank B!"

"That's vague!"

I had expectations for her future.

Though I should say that in this case, as the one giving marks, I had touched only my sister's breast, so I lacked credibility in my marking criteria.

"Say, in the end, what's the result?"

"The result of what?"

"Well, after you told me 'Fondle them' I actually did it, though."

"I told you I hate your imitation of me!"

"What conclusion did you draw from that 'testing'?"

"Well, let's see."

Tsukihi, after receiving my question, started thinking. It made me feel even like she was so careless she thought nothing until I asked her, it was a curious reaction.

Didn't she just want to have me rub her breasts?

I didn't do such thing, though.

It was actually her breast that rubbed my palms.

What a massage.

"Brother, aren't you frustrated?"

"What!"

She drew the worst conclusion.

"Now that you mention it, before you told me you can't buy ecchi books, you can't buy ecchi books, you can't buy ecchi books, didn't you?"

"I didn't say it three times."

As if I would repeat it.

That was a simple slip of the tongue.

I just carelessly revealed my real feelings about it.

"That's a backfire. A complete backfire. You, who mistook sexual desire for love, are causing in that

way an inflationary spiral on frustration."

"Inflationary spiral....."

What was that.

I had heard people talking deflationary spiral, though.

"That's terrible..... the inflationary spiral..... you are saying such 007-like phenomenon is occurring inside my brain....."

"Yes. That's why you touch even your sister's breast indiscriminately."

"To touch..... a breast that's like a touch panel."

"A touch panel is flat!"

She hit me.

If the other person were Karen I would have been blown back to the wall, but since the attack came from Tsukihi's thin arms it didn't even feel like being bitten by a mosquito.

Therefore I insisted.

"Hah. I mean that with a touch panel you can enter the PIN of love."

"That's not nice!"

"And then you can withdraw your bank account."

"That's nice!"

She had a heart of anger, but as expected from my sister, she was a fair judge.

"It's a problem."

Said Tsukihi.

"You can be glad it was still my breast, but if your frustration progresses any further, you might lay your hands even on your sweetheart H-san's breast."

"Hrm, I might literally lay my hands on her..... I mean, I can be glad it was your breast."

"You are glad, right?"

"It wasn't that bad."

What a conversation.

"However, if things went this way, then H-san would have to stick out her breast to me while saying 'Fondling them', though....."

H-san won't say such thing.

I can't even imagine it.

"No no, I'm saying that even if she doesn't you will bravely go touching her. You will play tricks. You will say things like 'Let's play a game of tag, if I touch you, you will become it.'"

"That's a flimsy trick....."

"You could also play color tag<sup>[40]</sup>. You will choose H-san's brassiere color."

"More than flimsy, that trick is shaky at best."

No.

I tried to remember, and indeed that was the kind of trick I would play.

I slowly bit back my words and nodded in assent.

I see, frustration, huh.

It was a cruel word, it truly hurt me a lot (cry), but now that she mentioned it, I could agree to it.

In fact, I even felt that was really how it was.

I could even say she hit the jackpot.

A culprit who had the truth discovered by a great detective must have felt like this -- they were indeed all extremely sportsmanlike.

She made me feel refreshed.

I see, this feeling was frustration.

"You are right. It was that."

"Yes. You were close, brother. You were almost under the false impression of being in love with a classmate whom you don't like or anything, she just has an attractive breast."

"I see, I see. This is really what one means with 'Don't misunderstand.'"

"In this case, from H-san's point of view, it was a pressing request."

"Uh-huh."

Indeed.

After mistaking a frustration out of control for love for so long, and if something went wrong in the day I even confessed to her, I might have gone on a rampage.

I could only call it a disaster.

And yet.

And yet, *taking into account H-san's personality* -- she might have grinned and born even such disaster.

Therefore.

I had to discipline.

I had to discipline myself.

"Indeed, you saved me from a close call, Tsukihi-chan. I almost fell to evil ways"

"Evil ways, you say."

"Kakakakaka. Probably I got it all wrong -- this demon king of the sixth sky<sup>[41]</sup>, Araragi Koyomi, must not fall in love for one who is just a woman!"

"I have the impression you don't need to fall, you are already a great warlock that walks the evil ways....."

By the way, what's with that laugh, said Tsukihi.

It's Ashuraman<sup>[42]</sup>'s, I replied.

"Well then, the conclusion came out, next we need to devise a counter-plan. If we leave my frustration as it is something terrible will happen. We must protect H-san from my evil hands."

"That's right."

"I should say it's a blessing we could notice the truth from the difference in touch."

"That's right."

I tried saying the first thought that came to my mind, but it was ignored.

It seemed that just because she was my sister not everything flew.

"We have to prevent that, after you stuck your poison fangs on H-san, you are arrested by a policeman and it ends with you crying 'Waaah! I'm through with boobs.'"



"If a policeman arrests me, things won't end with such heartwarming mood."

"Even I don't want a criminal in my family. It would be a disgrace for the Fire Sisters. It would ruin the trust that we have built up."

"Uhm. I often hear that what you really fear is not a competent enemy, but an incompetent ally."

"The ally in this case is harmful rather than incompetent, though."

"There is even that point of view."

Actually, I was not Fire Sisters' ally to begin with.

It seemed sometimes I was treated like the sixth member in a sentai squad (I heard I was called the Fire Brother. That was so plain!), but I had no recollection whatsoever of becoming a silver warrior.

"It can't be helped. As a makeshift remedy, whenever I feel like it I will rub yours and Karen-chan's boobs, and that will clear my mind."

"I won't let you put such remedy into practice!"

"Hey hey, you Fire Sisters are soldiers of justice, you should be glad to sacrifice yourself for my sake."

"I feel like justice is to sacrifice you."

As if I'd let you touch my boobs just because you want to kill time, said Tsukihi.

"What should we do, then? The one who gets touched will be the innocent H-san, or my sisters, which do you choose?"

"If those are the alternatives....., kuuh! Ok, touch us!"

They were sisters full of self-sacrificing spirit.

It made me feel bad.

"You can do as you like with our breast, so promise you won't lay your hands on H-san!"

"Alright, I promise. No, not just about H-san. Provided you sacrifice yourselves, then I hereby swear that even if in a near future I will spot a stray loli with twintails carrying a backpack, I won't absolutely hug her from behind."

"Why are you so specific?"

"I don't know."

Go figure.

I couldn't help but be puzzled by it.

I felt the will of the universe.

"Anyway, it's better to make a promise as specific as possible. That way it is easier to keep it."

"I see. Then it means you will never break that vow."

"Exactly."

Why.

It was a promise about a future I had no proof of, and yet somehow it felt like I was lying.

"Anyway, it's not like there are only two alternatives."

"Indeed."

It would be no wonder.

Things like touching your sisters' breasts were penalty games.

"To begin with, there are plenty of methods to work off frustration, without the need to fixate on my sisters' breasts. My sisters' breasts are the last resort."

"I feel like this is the last resort you must never use."

Well then, the problem we should think about here is: among the many ways to work off frustration, which should I choose?

"You could try with sports, you could try with hobbies you could devote to even indoor, well generally that's how it goes."

"Sports, huh. Maybe I could jog together with Karen-chan."

"A three-legged race."

"Yeah, a three-legged race -- hey, wait a sec!"

Perhaps I will be dragged on the ground.

I will have to go through what a wedding veil goes through during a wedding.

"No no, we are talking about Karen-chan, she will run at super speed so that you won't be dragged on the ground"

"Am I supposed to just float?"

That would be like ninja training.

Well, in the future she was more likely to become a ninja rather than a bride.

Good grief, it had been a long time since my last nori-tsukkomi.

"Sports are rejected. I don't want to harbor an even bigger inferiority complex toward Karen-chan."

"You are a small brother....."

Tsukihi leaked a comment seemingly out of scorn.

Did she mean it in the mind sense of the word, or in the body sense of the word?

Perhaps both.

"Then it's indoor hobbies."

"Right. Brother, have you been playing some of the recent games?"

"Ah. Recent games, huh. The latest games, you mean. People have been making just wireless and net arcade games, that if you play them alone you can't taste even half of the fun authors intended to."

"Ah. What about passerby communication games?"

"Those included."

Well, this is a rural area, so you wouldn't find passerbies playing your game anyway.

An assembly at the game corner of a department store.

What a Hero Show it would be.

"When I think that from the beginning the fun will be limited, my interest disappears."

"We could try to set up a LAN, so we could play on the first floor."

"You got it all wrong. I want to play games alone."

I could say I hated arcade machines.

There was no trespassing<sup>[43]</sup> in my heart.

"A person who doesn't want to play games if not alone cannot possibly fall in love--"

Tsukihi thoughtfully brought up again an old topic, and then-

"Then there's no other way," she said.

"Rub your sisters breast."

"We are at the last resort already!?"

"My mistake. A slip of the tongue."

"I feel like we have been mistaking every possible thing."

"Then there's no other way."

Tsukihi restarted.

"You could buy an ecchi book."

"....."

In the end that was what it came down to, huh.

"Because of a misunderstanding you became conscious of her eyes in this month and you refrained from purchasing some, right? Since we are talking about you, you thought of straightening your heart out ,and so you bound with a string the treasure you accumulated thus far and threw it away, right?"

"W-why do you....."

My sister had good intuition.

Or maybe my actions were easy to predict.

"That only increased your frustration. Therefore, if you buy some new ecchi books, this problem should be solved."

"Hmmmmmm."

When I heard it I was drawn back, however, now that she mentioned it, that was not a makeshift remedy, it may have been a treatment for the underlying cause.

I could aim at a complete cure.

Indeed.

If you had ero books you didn't need love.

All problems solved.

I and Tsukihi have found world's answer.

Precisely because it was world's answer though, it was an idea that with a wrong move could destroy mankind.

"I see..... that's what they mean with books of wisdom."

"Yes. And read between the lines. You must read till there are creases in the pages."

"Once again, you helped me realize something. As expected of Araragi Tsukihi who boasts a 100% success rate in love counseling. I thought this chapter would have lasted for a lifetime, but finally I saw the end of it."

"That's right. We made a conversation that in anime would last three episodes, but here we can finally change the chapter. Now that it's decided, we must strike while the iron is hot, brother. The bookstore is about to open, how about you go buy some now? If you want I can go with you."

"No, I don't need you to help me that far. You have been helpful enough. I can't be indebted to you any further."

The one ahead of me is a one man's battle, I tried saying looking cool, however there I noticed a fact.

"Ah crap. Maybe it can't work."

"Eh? Why? Is there some flaw in my nice idea?"

"No, your idea has no flaws, but I lack the bills. {sakidatsu mono}"

"Bills? Like, children committing suicide?"

"Those are wills. {sakidatsu fukou<sup>[44]</sup>}"

Uhhmm.

This system where if we didn't fool around the conversation doesn't progress sure took time.

"I mean money."

"Money?"

"Currently I lack funds."

I would call it cyanosis.

Anyway I have only 377 yen in my purse-- it was said that the person who accurately knew how much money he had in his purse was a future potential rich, but in my case I had so little money it would have been difficult not to know its amount.

"How did you waste it? The other day at the birthday granpa gave you some allowance, didn't he?"

"If you buy games the money disappears."

"You bought a game."

It didn't escape her attention.

Well, complaining while I did what I had to do was my way of life.

"What game did you buy?"

"Ice Climber<sup>[45]</sup> {aisukuraimaa}, disguised as Idolmaster {aimasu}"

"Why was it necessary to disguise it..... really, you are a burdensome brother. Good grief, an inept brother is going to give his sister a hard time"

Tsukihi said, as if it was a revenge for before.

She had a smug look.

However I would say that, since buying a game and remaining with 377 yen in the purse was my achievement, she should have thanked me for being able to act all big.

"It can't be helped, I will offer you a book from mine and Karen-chan's prized collection."

"....."

I didn't want to receive an ero book from my sister!

Be it a hand-me-down or a hand-me-up.

If our tastes didn't match then it would be pointless, if they did it would be the worst.

".....Well, just in case I'll ask. What are the contents?"

"Well, we meant it to be varied, but fundamentally it's pretty boys."

"Ok, that's enough."

I aborted it.

I aborted a discussion that was rotting<sup>[46]</sup>.

"Won't you listen to the end?"

"I didn't want to listen from the beginning."

"Hey brother, turning down other people's tastes without listening is bad, you know?"

"Turning down other people's tastes is bad, but turning down other people's bad tastes is fine."

"You have never even read them."

Tsukihi booed me.

Pouting.

It seemed she was dissatisfied with my philosophy.

"I don't speak with such prejudice. I checked one by one your tastes, and I was drawn back."

"Don't check them! And don't be drawn back!"

I thought you had good intuition!

You just searched my room!

"Your tastes, to be frank, are awful."

"Quit it!"

I didn't want you to tell me.

And no matter what you say, my tastes were extremely normal!

Damn, I must think of a new hiding place.....

"Besides, you say that I have never even read them, but on the converse what about you, if I read your kind of books, could you as a sister overlook it?"

"A yaoist brother is moe!"

Tsukihi stuck out her finger.

No good.

She was rotting, I was too late.

And then Tsukihi, while saying "Really, burdensome burdensome. Being the Fire Sisters we get burns<sup>[47]</sup>" she got up and briskly got out of my room. Seeing as she didn't say anything, perhaps she was going to come back immediately.

I didn't think she got angry all of a sudden.

For a reason like, I'm mad at your plain clothes!

Even if that was the case, our relationship as sibling was pretty brutal, but luckily that was not the case, Tsukihi immediately got back. Her hand was holding 3 neatly folded 1000 yen notes.

And then Tsukihi offered them to me.

"Here, I'll lend it to you."

"E-Eeh!? A lowly human being like me will be bestowed your gift!?"

In a moment's notice I abased myself.

There was a limit even to shamelessness, even if I do say so myself.

"Sure. Well, this is a loan, though. It's not like with a touch panel you could withdraw the bank account. You have to pay it back!"

"O-Of course! I will pay back with interest! Within the legally allowed interest!"

"You are very punctilious....."

"I am a man who always return his debts."

"Those words are not cool if the debt is about money....."

Come to think it, this scene of me, kneeling in front of my sister to borrow money, was the most pathetic I had ever seen.

As if elated by my pathetic state,

"I won't ask for interest, though."

Tsukihi said.

"In exchange, maybe you could show me feelings of gratitude."

"Feelings of gratitude?"

"I am saying I'd like you to show me a heart whose voice is: thank you Tsukihi-chan, I love you."

Said Tsukihi, and she slowly took out her sock.

The way she took it out was pointlessly erotic.

And then, standing on one leg like in Kung-Fu movies, she thrust the other foot at the tip of my nose.

And she said in a threatening tone.

"Lick it."

I licked it.



"You always have no hesitation at all!"

Like in Kung-Fu movies, I was kicked on the tip of my nose.

This really hurt. I took a blow so strong it wouldn't have been weird if rather than a nosebleed I got a broken nose.

"What are you doing!?"

"That's my line!"

"No, it's my line! I won't hand it over to anyone!"

"Hand it over!"

Disgusting disgusting disgusting, Tsukihi was wiping the foot I licked as if washing away unpleasant memories at the same time.

"Hey you, that hurts me, you treat another person's tongue as if it were foul. It's because you were pestering me with 'Lick it' that I reluctantly licked it."

"It was a decisiveness in which no reluctance was felt! And it's not even an imitation anymore! It's an unwarranted slander depicting me as if I pestered!"

"If you don't want me to lick your feet any further hand over that money."

"That's an extortion!"

Tsukihi tossed the 3 1000 yen notes.

Like children flocking around rice cakes, I catch them while they are still flying.

Catch catch catch.

I checked them like a bank employee would have.

"Ok, Ok. These are indeed 3000 yen."

"I just lent you some petty pocket money, why does it look like I returned a debt?"

"You probably don't trust me, so I will tell Dad and Mum to automatically subtract 3000 yen from this month's allowance and give it to you."

"I am thankful for the concern, but if that's what you think, then I wish you would behave a little more as if your sister trusted you."

"I'm prepared for the worst."

Saying that, I looked at my watch.

10:00 AM.

It was a good hour for cycling.

I opened the wardrobe and changed my clothes once again -- from loungewear to outdoor wear. Somehow this had been looking like a fashion show for a while.

"Hey, brother."

I just put on my jeans first, when suddenly Tsukihi, who was idling fiddling over the desk, called out to me.

What could have been.

She already gave me the money, she should have already disappeared.

Like, from this world.

"When did you build your body?"

"Huh?"

"You have a turtle belly."<sup>[48]</sup>

Said Tsukihi, pointing a finger at my stomach.

"Now that I think about it, it's been a while since I last saw you naked, but previously your abs weren't so ripped."

"Ah."

At the moment I had a six pack. Now that she mentioned it, this was the first time I undressed on front of my sister in this state. I became *like this* during Spring Break -- it meant I haven't been naked in front of Karen and Tsukihi for a month.

How careless of me!

I am embarrassed not having show myself nude to my sisters!

.....Err, no.

What a pervert.

I felt like for a while I had kept telling myself comebacks like 'What a pervert', but that might have been the proof of being a pervert.

"To tell you the truth, now I have become a fanatic of abs exercises."

"You sure are fanatic."

"Really. I'm doing just the abs program in Billy's Bootcamp."

"Why such bias in bodybuilding.....?"

Of course I couldn't tell her the truth, so I came up with a suitable excuse, and replied evasively.

"I came up with gag so funny we will laugh our belly off, so I am doing some preparatory work until I show it to you."

"It's so funny even the one who says it laughs....."

"Yes. If you don't want to die, you'd better train your abs."

"With Billy's Bootcamp or weight-loss exercises, you mean?"

"Actually no, my recommendation is Moterecchi<sup>[49]</sup>"

"Moterecchi!?"

It suits a fashion gang leader like you, I said, and with this excuse it looked like I deceived her, "Hmm, I see", nodded Tsukihi.

She was really bright (this part of her character was still valid), but she was not someone who pried into my every movement.

This time she just responded because I had asked for advice.

"Well, thanks for today."

After finishing putting on my long sleeved shirt for going outside, at last I thanked Tsukihi normally.

Someone would say it would have been better to do that in the beginning.

"Oh no, you are welcome."

"See you later."

"See you."

Looking back, Tsukihi was lying again on my bed. It seems she was going to sleep like that. I always thought disturbing another person's second sleep was an inconsiderate action, but well, she helped me in one way or the other, so I could offer her a bed. Hoping she would deal with the crowbar.

As last thing, I asked this to Tsukihi.

"Tsukihi-chan."

"What is it?"

"Well, this time we concluded that it was a misunderstanding, but do you think a human being like me can fall in love one day?"

"You can, can't you? You are human."

"I see."

Sleep well.

Receiving Tsukihi's answer, I closed the door of my room.

And then I smiled.

A faint smile.

Human, huh.

How can I say, since Spring Break -- I have started to fret over a category that should have simply been the natural one for me.

Like with the abs.

It was really a story to laugh one's belly off.

"The strength as a human, looking back, was really a humorously painful story."

Being strong.

The strength.

Even the concept I had of it was crushed in Spring Break -- by no other than H-san.

H-san. H-san. H-san.

"Ka--"

While I was on the verge of switching from the faint smile to a loud laughter Ashuraman-style,

"I'm home."

I heard.

It seemed Karen had returned from jogging. She has been surprisingly quick. As one could understand from the fact she was the only one in the family to have been called bullet, when she happened to go

out of home she never came back.

She scored her longest record when she was in sixth grade, she said she was going to walk nearby, and then she didn't come back for three days -- by the way, during that period she was sighted at Okinawa.

Don't take a stroll over the sea.

We had to call the police.

"Welcome home."

She was a nuisance of sister even at home, however, in these times of chaotic tumult, maybe I should have welcomed her early return home.

It couldn't be helped, let's have a little face to face.

Not knowing where my heart was going, I said a greeting quickly descending the stairs, and I went toward the entranceway. There I found a soaked tracksuit woman, Araragi Karen, who was taking off her shoes in the entranceway.

.....?

Dripping wet?

"Eh? Is it raining outside? I was going out"

I wasn't paying attention to what was going on outside the window, but there was no sound of rainfall, and I thought that before the sun was shining as usual.

A sun shower?

"Oh. My brother. Did you wake from your second sleep?"

Once finished taking off her shoes and temporarily putting them in order, Karen stepped on the entranceway mat. She drenched the entranceway mat.

"I was a little uneasy in entrusting to Tsukihi alone the important task of waking up my brother whose sleep rivals that of Estark<sup>[50]</sup>, but it seems things went well."

"In fact, well, I wonder if they went that well....."

The objective of waking me up in itself was accomplished, but I felt like Tsukihi had paid quite the price for that.

She had to pose in her underwear, she had her breast rubbed and her foot licked, and in the end she even got 3000 yen taken away.

Who made my precious sister go through that?

I would not forgive him.

"Uh-huh, Tsukichi-chan is becoming more and more independent. As her sister I feel lonely, but I have to go praise her."

"If you want Tsukihi-chan, after accomplishing her duty she has been sleeping in my room, so be quiet. You can praise her after she wakes up. More importantly Karen-chan, didn't you bring an umbrella with you?"

"Meow<sup>[51]</sup>?"

Karen narrowed her eyes, puzzled.

"Brother, what's with you? It's rare for you to call us with our names. You were embarrassed to call us with "-chan" by mistake, so you call us large sister and small sister."

"Yeah, that roundabout expression was annoying, so this time I got rid of it."

Anyway, it's not a setting people were looking for.

It was better if I was the only one who had to bear it.

"Uhhmm. I feel like the chronological order got all, like, garbled and jumbled up, but well, it's alright"

Karen's brain had the regrettable feature of not being able to think about something too complex, and in most cases she let it end with a 'It's alright', so she didn't investigate much on the way I called her, and

"It's not raining."

She said.

"There is a fine weather appropriate to Golden Week's first day."

"Eeh? Then why are you so wet? Did you fall in a swamp?"

"I go higher, I don't fall."

Said Karen-chan with a posed look.

She was a sister more annoying than a roundabout expression.

"Even a pig will get as high as a kite when you flatter him<sup>[52]</sup> was a maxim invented because of me!"

"....."

Are you fine with words like that invented because of you?

There are no words for being so physically and mentally masochist.

"I don't care whether you fall or go higher, just tell me why you are so wet. Don't tell me you have been chastised in the name of Mars by Sailor Mars."

"Don't say something absurd, brother. She is my team-mate."

"You are the one who says absurd things"

"This is just sweat"

Look.

Said Karen hugging me.

I felt like my body have been wrapped in a sponge that had absorbed plenty of water.

In other words.

"Disgusting! Discomfort index at maximum! You stink of sweat!"

Sweaaat!?

All of it!?

"Whoa, brother. It's cruel to say to a pubescent girl she stinks."

"Let me go! Gyaah! It's really uncortable, I mean uncomfortable!"

I struggled with all my might, but in vain.

Unlike Tsukihi, she was Karen-chan, the sport-oriented power type.

Even with all my strength I couldn't pull apart.

"Coochi coochi coo."

Karen rubbed our cheeks together. Her sweat as lubricating oil, it became a smooth cheek rubbing, but for me this act was more akin to rubbing sweat's salt on my face.

What a scrub massage.

"S-Stop, Karen-chan! Bear in mind the difference in our heights! Now you are putting my face between your breasts!"

"Eh? Really? Oh my, how em-bar-ras-sing!"

That moment I pointed that out, she quickly detached from me, and showed an expression of shyness.

My life has been saved, but I don't understand your criteria for shyness.

After such passionate hug, what is there left to feel shy about?

"Is it all sweat.....? For real.....well, certainly this is sweat....."

Though not soaked, because I have been embraced by Karen even I became awfully wet. I checked that moisture by dipping my tongue into it and it was really authentic sweat.

"Don't lick your sister's sweat. Gross brother."

"The one who is gross is the sister who returned home looking like a monster that appears on the riverside."

What was that monster called?

Was it the wet woman<sup>[53]</sup>?

If it was that, then what a slipshod naming.

"Did you sweat so much while jogging? Did you fight with Godzilla around here?"

"I don't do much jogging, so I didn't notice my condition. It seems I got my pace distribution wrong."

"Oh."

Despite saying it was jogging she sprinted at full force.

I see.

However, I felt like the volume of moisture she was covered with surpassed Karen's body weight.....

"It was unexpectedly long. 42.195 km."

"Did you run a full marathon!?"

"You see, I was jogging to celebrate the fact today the Golden Week begins, so I had the image of the Olympic flame runner in mind."

"Not even the Olympic flame runner runs 42.195 km!"

You are confusing it with the Olympic games marathon!

"Eeh? But they connect countries together, don't they run at least that much?"



"They break it into sections and a lot of people run, if that's what you were thinking then it would have been too short!"

Her sense of distance between countries was too narrow.

What a neighborhood athletic meeting.

"But brother, 42.195 km was long."

"Of course it's long. So long you are soaked with sweat."

"Yes. I'm realizing it. I couldn't realize it any better. Even if they were 42.195 km, I just thought they were at most ten times 100 meters."

".....!"

Scary scary scary scary scary!

Her stupidity was scary!

I was shivering!

"Gotcha, gotcha, I'm spent. At last I've understood the reason why I became so limp."

An idiot who didn't understand anything started saying things like I've understood.

I was very worried.

"Hey, brother. Where's the goal tape? You got it ready, right?"

"I don't. How could I think that while I was getting my little second sleep my sister was running a little full marathon, I didn't foresee it"

"What? How weird. I asked Tsukihi-chan to do it."

"Not even Tsukihi-chan thought you were serious....."

Or maybe she intentionally ignored it.

They were close sisters, but in this regard Tsukihi had cold moments.

I could say she was bad at humoring.

"Can't be helped. Tsukihi slacks off toward the end. I guess she still needs me to be around"

"Even Tsukihi wouldn't like to be told this by someone whose has an empty head not filled with anything like you"

"But if I don't cut the goal tape, my run doesn't end"

Karen said once again "Can't be helped", then faced me, and

"Brother. Make a halo over your head."

she said.

"A halo? Like an angel?"

"Not that. With your arms, like this."

"Ah"

Taking what Karen showed me as an example, I did as she said. I made a zero with my arms and shoulders. I didn't know why she wanted me to do this but--

"Wah!"

Karen jumped on the spot.

And with a belly roll after the running long jump, she slipped through the ring I made with my arms.

Like a dolphin.

Or like a lion who jumps through a ring of fire.

While grazing the top of my head.

Like passing through the eye of a needle -- with the mobility of a hornet, she slipped through.

"Ta-da!"

And then she landed magnificently.

"I went through my brother! With this I reached the goal."

"Don't do something so scary!"

Although I tried to be brave and yelled, my voice was rattling.

I imagined having goose bumps all over my body.

"Ah, I'm so tired. And I'm so thirsty. Water, water!"

"Wait! We still haven't finished talking!"

That is, don't walk in the hallway while you are dripping wet, I wanted to say, and I pursued behind

Karen who went toward the living room, possibly to rehydrate.

I caught up with her, and she had plunged her head in the kitchen sink, gulping down water directly from the faucet.

She was manlike.....

Wasn't she already a man among men?

Despite being a sister.

"Glug, glug, glug, glug, pfwah!"

Karen drank what I guessed to be five liters of water, and finally her mouth left the faucet.

"Now then, you said I smelled and that hurt my maiden feelings terribly, so I'll go take a shower."

Said Karen, and she started taking off her tracksuit.

On the spot.

In other words in front of me.

.....What is there of maiden feelings to be hurt in that behaviour..... since we are sibling I don't mind, but you should take off your clothes in the dressing room.

"....."

But still.

Like Tsukihi, she too had a boyfriend.

Mizudori-kun, was it?

I didn't know him.

In other words, maiden feelings aside, she knew the feeling of love.

"Hey, Karen-chan."

I said.

I felt like it was pointless from the beginning, but if I were very lucky she could give me a sweet answer.

"What is it, brother?"

"There is something I want you to teach me."

"Oh, finally you want to walk the way of karate."

"No, what I want you to teach me are not the secrets of an art."

I assumed a serious tone, and then revealed the contents of the question.

"How do you decide whether or not you are in love, whether or not you like someone?"

"Eeh?"

Is this love counseling, she said.

Karen, naked above the waist once taking off tracksuit and shirt, deftly slinging a sports bra over the shoulders as if it were a towel,

"If you look at his face and you want to bear his children, that means you like him."

She answered.

.....It was a very manlike answer, however, unfortunately, I couldn't use it as a reference.

Since I carelessly spent time equivalent to eighty pages, close to a quarter of the assigned space, just by playing with my sisters, from now on I will go with the fast forward. The Araragi beginners who came here from the anime might have already dropped out, but I'd like the people who are still reading to endure and stick with me. Don't give up, hold on!

After I squeezed -- I restate, I borrowed from my beloved sister Tsukihi the sum of 3000 yen (she might insist to be repaid later on), and I received from Karen an effective advice (an effectiveness unlikely to be exploited later on), I headed towards this town's one and only large bookstore riding my favorite, the mountain bike.

Of course, I was going to buy an ero book.

I felt even kind of deeply moved by my stoicism in going out for such an ordinary reason, without letting my heart panicking clumsily just because it was the Golden Week, and while immersed to the shoulder in my own narcissism, I spun the pedals with all my might -- when suddenly.

I caught sight of H-san.

I restate.

I caught sight of Hanekawa Tsubasa.

HANEKAWA-san.

"....."

Without much thought, I slammed the brakes like a spinal reflex, bending the bicycle diagonally while wearing out the tires (two wheels drifting?), and I came to a halt.

"Who.....ooooa"

I was surprised. What a timing.

Sure it was an unbelievable coincidence that after I had an intense argument over Hanekawa with my sister, and established the fact that my growing feelings for her were not love but frustration, for some reason I happened to catch sight of her while she was taking a stroll.

What was she up to.

Was she going to the library again -- no, during Golden Week the library was probably closed.

That could have meant she might be heading to the bookstore to buy some reference books -- if I met

her that would suck.

I had no choice but to put a stop to my plan.

This determination and the feelings of Tsukihi in lending me some pocket money went nowhere. To waste the feelings of my sister who was more important than my own life, this was more serious than putting a stop to the construction of a dam.

".....Hm. Maybe there's no problem"

Looking well.

The direction Hanekawa was going to was the exact opposite from the bookstore. With no sign of having noticed me, without changing the pace, she was in the middle of crossing a semaphore.

It seemed her place of destination was not the bookstore.

Hmm.

Then where was she headed?

"....."

Just in case here I'll explain who Hanekawa -- Hanekawa Tsubasa, is.

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

The class rep of our class.

A class rep among class reps -- a girl who is the embodiment of an honor student.

Her exterior of braids and glasses perfectly lines the inside. Even today, despite being the Golden Week, she was wearing her school uniform, complying to school regulations I believe.

She is terrifically bright, and she always managed to get top grades of her school year -- and like it was no big deal. The name of the girl who have been easily taking the top in each exam is well-known at school among her year.

And she also has a nice personality, she is fair and she is a personal magnetism, how could I say it, this fearsome female high schooler was like a perfect superhuman.

I personally believe that the concept of perfection was conceived by ancient fortunetellers who predicted Hanekawa's birth through ESP and took her as a model.

Compared to a dunce like me, she was like the dweller of a different dimension. I shouldn't have had any connection with her -- however, during Spring Break, I made a connection with her.

That is to say.

She rescued me.

She saved my life.

I can say her kindness stroke a chord in my heart -- therefore from that moment I became her friend.

.....She seemed to have mistook me for a delinquent (inside Hanekawa for some reason dunce and delinquent had the same meaning. She was making a leap in logic in considering a dunce to be truant), so she was doing everything she could to rehabilitate me, and because of her influence I ended up being appointed the vice class rep, though that had been amusing.

In this month since the Spring Break, Hanekawa got along extraordinarily well with a common ordinary person like me.

So much.

I mistook that for love.

"Hmph. Well, I'll ignore her"

After I had become a high schooler I hadn't been blessed with many friends, in that sense I was a person who was extraordinarily bad at grasping the sense of distance with other people, but I still knew that if you met a friend on holiday, normally you should call out to them.

That was being friends.

I never took it very seriously -- however, today was unlike any other day. I had a big mission. I had to carry with me my sisters' feelings (though Karen didn't say anything in particular) and pedal the bike to the bookstore.

Spin and spin.

Doing so as a result would have also protected Hanekawa -- I thought so even while talking with Tsukihi, but, letting aside the part about the breast, even if I wasn't really planning to do it, if things went wrong because of a misunderstanding and I ended up confessing to her, certainly Hanekawa would have been greatly embarrassed.

In fact, rather than being embarrassed, certainly she would have preached me a sermon, trying to correct that misunderstanding.

Confessing and receiving a sermon in return, sounded depressing.

It would have been fun though.

Being told things like 'Not a chance!'.

Even excluding my expectations, I really wanted so much to call out to Hanekawa, but enduring it and stoically leave was what being a man was about.

Farewell, Hanekawa.

Let's meet again in class once the Golden Week ends.

By that time I will have become a size bigger as a human -- you might even fall in love by mistake with the grown me.

As I was stepping on the pedals once again.

For a second time, my feet stopped.

More than the feet -- my movements stopped.

".....Eh?"

Hanekawa, suddenly, turned the corner and changed her direction -- because of that change of direction I was looking at Hanekawa from the front, whereas until now I could have only seen her side.

From the front.

By doing so -- I noticed a bulky gauze covering the left side of her face.

I was lost for words.

Those were -- signs of a medical treatment, pitiful to look at, and for which one could only be lost for words.

The left half of her face wasn't visible.

That evidently was not the medical treatment for a level of injury like if she had a little scratch, or she had hit a wall -- the white gauze kept in place with tape was completely hiding Hanekawa's left side of the face.

More than pitiful.

It was literally painful.

It felt painful just by looking at it.

As if a throbbing pain was directly transmitted--

No.

If that was an ordinary injury, now I should have immediately rushed over to Hanekawa and called



out to her.

I should have worried.

I should have asked if something happened, how did she got an injury.

I should have kept asking her if she stumbled and fell, hit a telephone pole, or things like that.

However -- my body was completely frozen.

Because -- no, maybe I was overthinking it.

Was it all due to my memories stained by the battles I experienced in Spring Break conjuring up violent ideas?

For example that the majority of people was right-handed, and if you hit with the right hand a person's face, you would injure only the left side of the face--

"....."

Except for that gauze, Hanekawa looked like usual -- her braids and glasses, even her school uniform looked like usual, and were on the contrary heroic.

On the contrary heroic.

In actuality intense.

With her in my field of vision, I was frozen and I couldn't move, and then Hanekawa noticed me. She noticed my presence.

I was found out.

It was natural -- she didn't turned sideways, she was facing me from the front. I noticed Hanekawa, so there was no way she wouldn't have noticed me.

I thought that was my first blunder in the Golden Week -- I thought that was a mistake. I was planning to leave without calling out to her, I was planning to pretend not having seen her, so I should have disappeared immediately.

A guy like me.

Should have disappeared and get lost.

Because I didn't do that and froze in place as if I was mentally slow -- Hanekawa ended up recognizing me.

"Ah"

Hanekawa said.

She pointed at me.

"Yoo-hoo. Araragi-kun"

Saying so, she cheerfully came closer with a half run.

"Yay, how is it going?"

Even her attitude -- was too much like that of the usual Hanekawa, and for this reason.

The gauze on the left side of her face stood out like a black cloud.

".....Yoo-hoo. Yay. How is it going....."

The voice I replied with, therefore, couldn't be the same as usual. My voice sounded hollow, and despite they were just a few words, perhaps I stuttered.

"Hm. Ah"

Hanekawa, at that point, made the face of one who committed a mistake.

She noticed my unenthusiastic reaction, more mechanical than a monotone, and she realized -- how she currently looked like.

Of course, it was not like she had a grain of rice on the tip of the lip. There was no way she didn't notice the gauze on her face.

Therefore,

There was no way she didn't know what caused my poor reaction -- if I made a blunder, then Hanekawa too did one.

Even Hanekawa, like I was doing -- shouldn't have called me out, once she noticed me.

That was all there was to it.

Hanekawa was perfect -- but it was not like she didn't make any blunder.

Actually, that might not have been a blunder.

Maybe Hanekawa, in her own way, was trying to forget that painful wound -- so she kept at it, and she just ended up perfectly forgetting it for real.

It meant.

That the one who made her remember it -- was me.

It was my poor ability to react.

Instead.

"Hm -- well"

It was rare to see Hanekawa faltering that way. She was wondering how to really clear this insurmountably difficult situation -- or to better say, she looked simply confused.

However I knew.

I knew why Hanekawa, now, was confused -- that was because the awkwardness that came from having been seen in that state was not *trifling*, she was now worrying *that she was making me confused*.

She was thinking about how to follow through and ease my feelings.

In this situation, this girl.

Was concerned over me.

She was not thinking about herself, she was thinking about other people.

It was because I knew this all too well -- that I was unable to endure a second longer.

"Well, Araragi-kun"

"Hrmph"

Trying to explain me something, or just to break the enduring silence by tying some words together, Hanekawa called my name, but I interrupted her -- I acted.

Though I say I acted, to be frank it was not like there was some deep thought behind -- to be even more frank, there was no thought behind at all.

It was not even shallow thinking.

It was just my extremely personal desire to not be able to see that painful and pitiful Hanekawa.

I didn't want to see the gauze on her face.

I didn't want to see her worried over me.

Therefore.

Therefore I, while imagining to be a famous pitcher whose submarine pitch, if it really existed, would be expected to conquer the world of baseball<sup>[54]</sup>, with a motion like I was scooping up with my right

hand -- I came up with the bizarre action of rolling up Hanekawa's knee-long skirt.

Commonly referred to as skirt flipping.

"Ahyawh!?"

For my bizarre action, Hanekawa gave me a slap on the cheek -- it was a natural reaction for a girl. A wonderfully prompt response, however, thinking calmly, she shouldn't have done it.

Though I rolled up her skirt, we were so close that we could touch each others cheek by stretching a hand (in other words a slap would reach). If she didn't hit me, in other words if she didn't make me kneel down from the shock, from that angle I practically shouldn't have been able to see what was under her skirt.

However, her slap was at full strength, with nothing to call mercy in it, and as a matter of fact I didn't kneel down -- I fell flat, hugging the ground and tasting the pebble. As a consequence, I came to be in a position from which I could see from almost directly below all the inside of the rolled up skirt, the skirt I rolled up.

More than I came to be, I should say I got to be.

I literally saw<sup>[55]</sup>.

It was a scene that made me want to fold my hands.

Actually, I really folded my hands and prayed.

By reflex, without doing it on purpose.

If this was actually a shrine, I would do a hundred visit ritual everyday -- no, just by getting to see this view, it would be no exaggeration to say all my prayers had already been granted.

It was really a miraculous prodigy.

And I hereby took back one of the things I had said to Tsukihi this morning.

The color of the underwear Hanekawa was wearing was a black like darkness that swallowed everything -- I was not knowledgeable about cloth textures, so I couldn't even imagine how one could create something so black.

Such kind of dark black.

A vivid black.

Putting imagination to shame -- silencing rumors, such was the level of its eroticness.

And if I took back my words, Tsukihi too had to -- though I tried to tell her it seems she didn't get it,

but it was just a stereotypical opinion that white gave off a serious, pure and clean image, if Tsukihi could see this scene, even she would agree.

Whether it was white or black.

If the person who put it on was the same -- then it had the same result.

That dark black, that black adhering to Hanekawa's body, was so serious, so pure, so clean -- it dazzled the eyes.

And I and Tsukihi should take to heart that erotic, serious, pure and clean could coexist, that such color existed.

That even such person existed.

Both brother and sister should seriously reflect on this.

That time the topic was switched from panties talk to Hanekawa thanks to the rich variety of the gorgeous underwear Hanekawa wore, which during Spring Break I had the chance to see twice, thrice, many times -- even so, your tastes went as far as including black, Hanekawa Tsubasa.

Oh dear -- undoubtedly a fearsome girl.

".....In fact, I strongly believe the fearsome one is you"

Said in an extremely cold tone Hanekawa, who had already regained her composure, to me who was still collapsed on the ground while thinking this and that like a revolving lantern inserted in a turbo engine, and showing no sign of getting up.

"Flipping skirts even after you became a high schooler..... what are you thinking, Araragi-kun?"

Harumph.

She got mad at me.

When I got scolded head on, I was surprisingly at loss for words.

If I had to say what I was thinking I couldn't but say I was not thinking anything.

What the heck was I doing.

Skirt flipping.

Nowadays not even grade schoolers did it.

"Hey, Hanekawa"

"I understand"

Here, said Hanekawa offering me her hand.

In the grab this! nuance.

Though I was on the ground, I didn't receive much damage, so even if she didn't lend me a hand I could have gotten up on my own, but I couldn't refuse the hand Hanekawa offered to me.

I grasped that hand like in a handshake.

I got up.

"....."

What was that?

When I grabbed her hand like this, when I joined hands with her, I had this slight palpitation -- was it simply the effect of frustration?

I didn't know.

"You are kind, Araragi-kun"

Hanekawa said.

With a smiling face.

With a smiling face half hidden by the gauze.

"You are kind, and you are a good person"

"....."

What should I say.

Her smiling face -- was scary.

It was honestly scary.

Hanekawa able to smile at me in that state -- made me realize the 'difference' between her and a dunce like me.

That difference was not diffidence.

It was close to awe.

In other words fear.

Now that I mentioned it, that Oshino guy more bluntly -- said that that side of Hanekawa 'made him

feel disgusted'.

"I like that side of yours"

I couldn't believe she said that quietly.

That would be the usual Hanekawa, but -- I wondered why.

Of course I was glad when Hanekawa said she liked me, but for some reason I felt like I was wounded.

It was like being gouged by a soft knife.

I felt loneliness.

I really wondered why.

And then Hanekawa said

"Let's walk a little."

She asked, and without waiting for a reply she started to walk.

She was confused, but she didn't have any hesitation -- I flipped up the kickstand of my bicycle parked close by, and while holding the handle I pushed the bicycle, immediately catching up with Hanekawa.

And I lined up with her.

I heard that when a man and a woman walk it would be manners for the man to walk on the roadside, however, in this case, if I did that I would end up on her left flank, so out of necessity I lined up on her right side.

Of course, if a car were to plunge on the sidewalk, I would protect Hanekawa with my body -- still, I thought Hanekawa now certainly didn't want me to stand by her left flank.

She didn't want me to stand by the side with the gauze.

So I thought.

"Hanekawa"

Now that we lined up, first I broke the ice with something harmless.

"Were you going somewhere?"

"Hm? Hmm"

Hanekawa in response to that

"Not really."

she replied.

"Holidays are walk days. I just walk around to kill boredom."

".....Anyway, do you have a destination at least?"

"I don't. I wasn't really going anywhere."

"....."

"It's not like I could go somewhere."

"....."

"I can go nowhere."

After saying so, Hanekawa

"Araragi-kun -- you have sisters, right?"

She asked back.

It didn't sound like she abruptly changed the topic.

"I think I heard it during Spring Break."

"Ah....."

You remembered it well -- though I didn't think it required admiration.

Her memory was so good you could say she was like a super computer. It would be no surprise if she remembered all the conversation we had held thus far.

Then again, I remembered all of her underwear I had seen thus far!

"Araragi-kun, are you thinking something weird?"

"Not at all"

After denying it,

"Yeah, I have sisters."

I answered. Probing. While trying with all my might to come up with the reason why Hanekawa was



doing such conversation.

"Two sisters whose existence was unneeded."

"Unneeded, you say?"

Hanekawa was smiling as if teasing me, "no, really" I claimed to be quite serious. It would be regrettable if she thought I was saying so because I was hiding my embarrassment.

I am no tsundere or reverse tsundere.

If I had to say it, I am an anti-dere.

"In this world, those sisters are second to none in annoyance -- or to better say, there is nobody like them. If I think how much my life has strayed from the right path because of them, how much it was shred to pieces, I am baffled. If I think of the respectable life I would have led if they didn't exist, I even feel dizzy."

"You don't say. Despite saying that, you seem to get along well"

Hanekawa's grin did not disappear.

It actually became more pronounced.

"It looks like you flaunt each others underpants."

"....."

What does she know of me!?

It was not like I flaunted..... but it was a manner of speaking like she saw through the exchange between me and Tsukihi this morning.

If that was the case, she might have have seen through what I was going to do what with my bicycle..... that was frightening.

The satori monster<sup>[56]</sup>.

Nickname, Sathy.

"I absolutely don't do such things."

I replied decisively, with a face like that of an alpha man.

Drawn in the style of Hara Tetsuo-sensei<sup>[57]</sup>.

"There's nothing but fights. In these five years, we never spoke to each other. Even if they tried to talk

to me, I ignored them."

"All lies."

"No, it's true. We converse using only body language."

"You get along well."

"Actually, in these ten years we never even met. We converse by leaving notes. We call each other pen pal."

"As I said, you get along well."

Indeed.

For a bystander we were close siblings.

"It happened even today. Even today, right this morning, I had a fight with my youngest younger sister. She rubbed my hands with her breast, it was terrible."

"She rubbed your hands with her breast.....?"

"Yeah! Really, it was some serious handrubbing!"

I showed a strong indignation, however, unfortunately, it seemed I couldn't obtain Hanekawa's support.

In fact.

She had her eyes open wide from the astonishment.

All white.....

The bantering tone completely disappeared.

I tried to start again.

"Anyway, it's family. We can't turn hostile. However it's true that they cause me many troubles -- although sometimes even I cause them a bit of trouble"

"You help each other, you mean? That's fine, that sounds like a family"

"A family?"

"Yes, a family."

Hanekawa's walking pace was constant like it was all premeditated. I matched that while pushing the bike.

"Have I told you I am an only child?"

"No -- I think I never heard it."

Although, now that I heard it, I can agree, I thought. Hanekawa really didn't look like she had siblings.

"That's why, Araragi-kun -- I don't have a family."

Hanekawa continued those words with a normal tone.

It was so normal I almost missed it.

I was going to just nod absent-minded.

She didn't have what?

"Hey Hanekawa -- even if you don't have siblings, it would be an exaggeration to say you don't have family. Don't you have a father, a mother, grandfathers, grandmothers--"

"I don't."

This time it was not the normal tone.

Hanekawa said that with a decisive, stubborn tone.

An obstinate one.

"I don't have a father or a mother. I don't have anyone."

".....?"

Though it was embarrassing.

At this point in time I didn't really know what Hanekawa meant with her words. I couldn't guess it -- it seemed something I would understand if I racked my brain a little, and yet.

That was in complete conflict with the image I had of Hanekawa.

Both the contents.

And the way she spoke.

"You must cherish your family, Araragi-kun."

"Hanekawa..... hey."

"Ah no, don't misunderstand."

Hanekawa said typical tsundere words, though in this case, of course, she meant it in the literal sense.

"It's not like I am a person without a single relative. You are right, I'm sorry, it was an exaggeration. Though an exaggeration, it was not an overstatement. I have a father and a mother. We three live under the same roof"

"Ah..... Is it so? Well, but--"

"It's just not family."

Just that.

While saying so her gait -- didn't change.

"My father and mother are not my real father and mother, just that"

".....Real, you say."

"In other words they are fake."

Hanekawa said, strangely quick.

More than her doing so, it was like her body couldn't pronounce it otherwise.

"Well now."

Hanekawa's feet didn't stop.

"From where I should start -- for the moment, let's say 17 years ago there was one lovely girl."

"A girl?"

"Please think of her as a 17 years old girl, the same as me."

"Yeah....."

I nodded despite not understanding well, Hanekawa continued the story.

"A certain day, that girl became pregnant."

Quietly.

Hanekawa said such an unexpected thing.

"Pre-pregnant?"

"Yes. She was gravid. By the way, she didn't know who was the father. It seems she was a girl with many lovers -- the child she gave birth to was me."

"Wa....."

I was confused, in a panic I rushed with the bike in front of Hanekawa, and I stopped her.

"Wait a moment. The conversation took a sudden turn and I couldn't follow you -- Eh? Was it you?"

"It was me."

"....."

There was really no change in Hanekawa.

It was truly the normal -- the usual Hanekawa Tsubasa.

"I am an illegitimate child. Therefore, yes."

"Wait -- it's a weird story. It is weird you don't know who is your father. Didn't you say before you lived with your father and mother?"

"Ah, sorry. That father is a different father. What I was saying is that I don't know who is my biological father, my blood father"

Strictly speaking it's not like I couldn't find it out, but there would be no use in investigating it -- Hanekawa, tilting her head, nimbly sidestep me as I blocked her way, and proceeded forward.

She didn't have a place of destination.

And yet she walked forward.

"By the way, my current mother is a different mother. The woman who gave birth to me immediately committed suicide."

"Suicide?"

"Suicide. She tied her neck with a rope. As a suicide technique it is very common -- that it happened right above the crib and was a little novelty, though."

She looked like a mobile.

Hanekawa said.

As if it was a trivial thing.

As if she was talking about the outline of a TV drama seen long time ago.

She was talking about her past.

About memories of a period which no memories should have been left of.

"However, just before committing suicide, she got married. Because she had no relative and she was growing a child, her economic situation was bleak -- she was aiming at money."

"Money....."

"Even a loveless marriage depending on the circumstances can't be criticized, though I wonder if it's true for this case. For the man it was tragic. More than tragic, troublesome maybe. Anyway, he had to adopt a child whose father was unknown. That person was my first father."

"First?"

"Even that person is different from my current father."

"....."

A different father -- huh.

Though different, how much -- different was he.

"Frankly, I don't know the cause of my mother's suicide. I heard she was originally mentally frail, a very sensitive person -- it seems she was a little too much romanticist about love for living a married life aiming at money."

I still think the victim was my first father, though -- Hanekawa stated her personal opinion.

That cold manner of speaking.

That cold hearted manner of speaking was very unlike her.

It was making my heart crackle.

"My first father, well I almost don't remember him, but his main talent was being a serious person, the very picture of a workaholic -- he was a person who couldn't raise a child so he married again. This time, he married for raising a child -- he should have just hired a baby sitter"

Well, he must have thought the child couldn't receive a good education without a mother, since he was a serious person -- Hanekawa then described the following action of her 'first father'.

"That father, in the end, died from overwork. The mother who was left was my second and current mother, my current father is her second husband."

That's all.

Hanekawa said, finishing with a smile.

It was a guilelessness that if she said right after "just kidding. It was a lie. When I go back home there is a hot soup, a gentle father and a birdbrain mother waiting for me", I would have believed that.

In fact.

It was a very unconvincing -- absurd story.

Incomprehensible, I could say.

A family tree not so much complicated, that if you drew it it would be actually easy to understand.

However.

If that was true, Hanekawa's father and mother, who were not her family -- who she was currently living with.

"Yes, the father and mother I am currently living with, are not blood related to me. I could say I am a complete stranger. Ahaha, not blood related and yet a complete stranger<sup>[58]</sup> -- if a vampire heard it he would laugh."

".....He wouldn't laugh."

I was the one who said it -- so it was true.

Of course, even that little girl that even today is sitting on the floor in that abandoned building would certainly not even smile.

But then since Spring Break I never saw her laugh, though.

"What's this about? What kind of story is this?"

"It's The Adventures of Hutch the Honeybee<sup>[59]</sup>. Oh no, of course, on the family register they are my father and mother. They are father and mother. However, those two never behaved like a father or a mother to me"

*And I tried so much.*

*To behave like a daughter.*

Those words, which could be heard as if adding something in passing, possibly were a mishearing.

I didn't think Hanekawa could say such unilateral complaint.

But what else.

If not a mishearing, then it was a misunderstanding.

What did I know of Hanekawa?

Did I even think that someone like Hanekawa -- was never worried or troubled?

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

Did I even think she never got hurt?

That someone like her never retrospected or regretted?

That she didn't have things she disliked or she wasn't good at?

Did I think that it was natural for Hanekawa to be happy?

Such pushy opinions.

"Even if we are not blood related we can become family -- even I in the past thought so. Since it was the household I ended up after being handed around many families, I thought I would do my best to get along. It was impossible, really."

It was impossible.

And it was irksome.

After saying so, Hanekawa suddenly turned around, and this time it was her who went around and blocked the way,

"I'm sorry, Araragi-kun."

she said.

"Just now I said something mean."

"Er -- ah, that kind of thing."

Not understanding why Hanekawa was apologizing to me from the flow of the conversation, I was confused.

And so Hanekawa said,

"This was a fit of anger"

"You don't know how to react if you are suddenly told these things, right? So you are puzzled, and to begin with it has nothing to do with you -- but somehow it seems you have sympathized a little with me, and a misplaced sympathy makes you feel guilty, right? Like you did something bad, it felt..... bad, right? Peeping into a friend's private life felt distressing, right?"

The feeling of regret overflowed from Hanekawa, who spoke as if talking on and on.

Suddenly, her expression became fainthearted -- she seemed broken from being unable to undo a mistake in the interaction -- it was an atmosphere that didn't allow me any objection.



The gauze on her face promoted that atmosphere.

"That's why I talked with you."

Hanekawa said.

"It was on purpose. I used you to forget my troubles."

"....."

"I tried to make you feel bad, to forget my troubles and to refresh myself -- I wasn't even complaining."

It was unbearable to look in the eyes of Hanekawa who was really apologetic.

"I was working off my frustration."

"Frus -- tration."

If I had to say the truth.

At this point in time -- I had a rough guess.

I had a rough idea of the rightness of the conjecture I originally feared -- and *of what came first than being right*.

The reason a gauze was covering Hanekawa's face.

*If it hadn't been the reason I was thinking of* -- Hanekawa wouldn't have suddenly begun talking about her life.

If it hadn't been that, she wouldn't use me.

She wouldn't use me to forget her own troubles.

"But -- you know it well, isn't that something one wouldn't say to the person in question? It should be a secret until the 20th birthday<sup>[60]</sup> or something--"

"They are two very frank parents. I heard it before I entered grade school. It seems I am really a bother for those two."

".....Hanekawa."

I mustered my resolve -- and I asked.

I was unable to wink at that.

I thought in this case it would have been the best if she did that, if she didn't give a clear answer, if

she didn't answer.

But it was too late.

I had become deeply involved with Hanekawa's story.

With her heart.

With her -- family.

I had intruded rudely<sup>[61]</sup>.

*"Who hit you in the face?"*

I had no proof.

If I thought calmly, it wouldn't take much to realize there are plenty of other reasons for a wound on the face -- it was a very arbitrary decision she was hit by someone.

However.

"Why do you ask me?"

She said.

She didn't even reject my question, she just uttered something she found weird as it was, a child-like expression.

"Why, Araragi-kun?"

".....That's"

I faltered.

Perhaps Hanekawa gave me a -- no, nothing as optimistic as a chance.

If I wanted to withdraw, the moment was now.

She presented me a letter of warning -- the last notification.

Or possibly a warning shot.

However -- I didn't withdraw.

"Perhaps it's because I am your friend."

".....Friend."

"A friend would listen to your story. In a case like this. I guess."

Anyway Hanekawa had been my friend for a long period of time.

I couldn't grasp -- the sense of distance.

It was like in a 3D movie, you didn't know where you were -- there was the parallax.

"Hm, I see. Indeed. Might be."

Hanekawa nodded to my words. She nodded without pressing me further for questions.

"Indeed. If I stop talking now, I would have just used you to forget my troubles -- It wouldn't be worthy of your skirt flipping."

"....."

Oh no, it was absolutely worth it.

I would even show you my trunks as change money.

But I didn't say that.

"Can you promise me you won't tell anybody?"

"Yeah."

"Nobody. Really nobody. A secret even to your sisters -- your family."

That manner of emphasizing it seemed half for joke -- however it could also be taken very seriously.

Seeing through her words.

She was trying to making me take a pledge.

It was such kind of tone.

Losing to the pressure -- I nodded.

"I..... promise."

"This morning, my father hit me."

Hanekawa's answer was almost simultaneous with my agreement.

Promptly, with a cheerful smile.

She -- spoke like it was very natural, like it was an incident that often happened in every family.

"That's"

My voice -- trembled.

Of rage. Of terror.

"That's impermissible--!"

Of course.

Judging from the flow of the story, that fact itself was an obvious conclusion that didn't need any surprise -- at best the only amount of variation possible was to switch the one who hit her from her father to her mother, or to have her hit by an object rather than by hand.

"They never behave like parents to me -- but I never thought they would do something a parent wouldn't. I was surprised."

"Surprised, you say....."

I couldn't hide my confusion.

".....Weren't they a cold family!?"

"They are not family. They are cold, though."

Hanekawa said.

With a cold tone.

"Maybe they got too cold -- maybe they froze. Maybe I was still trying to meet halfway. I had finally managed to bring a balance. That means I'm the one at fault."

"There's -- no way. No way you are at fault--"

Because.

You are always -- correct.

"Why did your father hit you?"

"There was no big reason. I carelessly poked my nose into the work my father brought home, so he hit me. Mother watched without saying anything. Just that."

"Just that -- you say."

That was -- no big reason.

It was indeed just that.

It was so clearly 'just that' no word was needed.

However.

"How could it be that for such no big reason a father hit a daughter?"

"Look, try thinking about it Araragi-kun. Imagine you were forty -- imagine a 17 years old child you are unacquainted with spoke to you like like she knew what she was talking about. Don't you think it couldn't be helped if you were a bit offended and annoyed by that?"

"----"

*A 17 years old child you are unacquainted with?*

What's with -- that masochistic way of speaking.

It was scarier than the fact Hanekawa had been hit.

No, in fact this -- wasn't fear.

I understood the reason why my body shivered.

I understood the reason why my heart was noisy.

I -- felt disgusted.

I was not borrowing Oshino's words.

This was the emotion inside me now -- my words, my actual feelings.

Hanekawa Tsubasa made me feel disgusted.

Despite she didn't call it family, despite she said they were fake parents and not the real ones, despite saying they were cold to her -- now, Hanekawa Tsubasa still wanted to defend her parents.

I didn't know if it was from me, from the public eye or whatever.

Anyway.

She wanted to defend -- a parent who was not a parent.

A parent who hits a daughter.

This Hanekawa.

As her friend -- she honestly made me feel disgusted.

What's with her.

What in the world.

"Violence couldn't be helped -- what are you saying. Are those words you should say? Isn't that the most unforgivable thi--"

"It's fine -- it happened just once."

Hanekawa said.

*No.*

*I let her say.*

"On that subject, I remind you just a while ago I hit you, Araragi-kun. Are you angry at me?"

"No -- that."

That was my fault.

Though it was a reason worthy of being called a just cause, it couldn't be helped if a boy who flips up the skirt of a classmate got hit.

"Right? Therefore it couldn't be helped."

Hanekawa made an innocent broad smile -- she wasn't pretending to be strong or win my sympathy, she said it as if she just thought so from the bottom of the heart.

"Because of the way I am -- it can't be helped if I get hit."

"....."

It wasn't like I was at loss for words.

I had no words to lose.

I had nothing to say to Hanekawa this moment.

I wondered how Hanekawa was taking my being speechless, and

"Remember you promised, Araragi-kun."

she once again emphasized.

She got one step closer to me.

She spoke as if to give me instructions.

"You promised, Araragi-kun. You promised me you would tell nobody."

Nobody.

Not to my sisters. Not to my family.

Or possibly -- not to the school, not to the police.

No.

I got it wrong. Not just this.

I had promised -- not to bring up this topic once again *to Hanekawa herself of all people*.

That was what Hanekawa was saying.

By speaking the truth in full, Hanekawa was conversely restricting my actions.

Hanekawa was trying to make me promise, to trip me up -- for her parents' sake.

In order to protect.

The father who hit her.

The mother who watched that.

Two complete strangers.

"Bu-But -- how can I"

For some reason my voice became a gasp, I think perhaps it was shaking.

"Can I -- keep such promise?"

".....Please, Araragi-kun!"

Hanekawa said.

To me, whose reply was inarticulate.

Hanekawa Tsubasa who was always sincere -- bowed down her head to an insincere person like me who had no qualms with breaking a promise.

She bowed very deeply.

So bowed her braided head<sup>[62]</sup>so deep I worried her back would break, so deep as if she sank into darkness.

"Don't tell it to anybody."

"Hanekawa..... but, I....."

I still showed some reluctance, but Hanekawa, repeated the same words of before "Don't talk of this matter to anybody" like a machine.

"If you stay silent about it, I will do anything."

"Eh!? For real!? Hanekawa will do anything for me!? Hooray!"

I took the bait.

"A.....Araragi-kun?"

I struck a triumphant pose with both arms while jumping on the spot and shouting for joy, Hanekawa stared at me in wonder without trying to hide her astonishment, and she withdrew the step she made before. Actually, two or three steps. At least that much.

As if her heart was much more distant.

However in this moment I didn't care.

Hanekawa would do anything for me?

Hanekawa Tsubasa?

Just by staying silent about it!?

"Whoa, what should I do? What should I make you do, what should I make you do? What would be best to make you do? Ah, wait wait, don't be impatient. Don't become agitated, at times like this you have to be cool. You have to be solemn. Make the most of this unprecedented chance"

"W-What? That's your reaction? Is this that kind of scene? Wasn't this the scene where you were touched by my sincerity and while reluctantly you would promise to keep your silence?"

"Sincerity? What's that, do I care?"

Feed it to a cat!

Unable to contain myself, I went back and forth without purpose, I started to walk in circles. A third person would have seen it as a perfectly suspicious behaviour, but I didn't care about the public eye. I didn't even care about Hanekawa's frown.

"Everything, huh. If I'm told that I don't know what to choose. Damn, my indecisiveness is troublesome, at times like this a man among men would be able to decide on the spot"

"I think that would be the worst kind of man, though....."



Hanekawa was literally horrified.

Even now she was almost running away.

"Say Araragi-kun. Do you remember the contents of our serious and important discussion we made before?"

"I don't."

"You don't?"

"Who is Araragi-kun?"

"Did you even forget your own name.....?"

This was an unforeseen development, Hanekawa sighed while holding her head. I was glad she received such a shock from the fact I forgot my own name, but it didn't matter who this humble fool was.

The only things worthy to remember were the words Hanekawa spoke before.

"Yes, Hanekawa's 'Tsubasa-sensei is going to coax Araragi-kun, I will do everything you tell me to ☆'"

"I didn't say that!"

Hanekawa got mad.

Getting scolded didn't affect me at all.

"Who is this Tsubasa-sensei?"

"Hm? Ah, sorry. I was considering a pattern in case I had you play the part of a female teacher, and by mistake I said it out loud."

"What the heck are you considering?!"

"Hey Hanekawa, what was it that you said?"

"Ugh....."

Despite oozing an infinite distress, her sincerity didn't allow her to go back on her own words, so she couldn't refuse my request.

".....Don't tell it to anybody."

"Not that! What comes after!"

What's this it thing she mentioned!?

It's the first time I heard those words.

They have a fresh sound, hey!

"If you stay silent about it, I will do anything....."

"I couldn't hear well because of electromagnetic waves from the space! Repeat it another time the second half!"

"....."

Hanekawa's stare, rather than a frown, were already a glower<sup>[63]</sup>.

Uhhmm.

If possible I'd have liked she said it while full of shyness with her cheeks blushing, but I won't ask for extravagance. Even being vowed absolute obedience despite being disdained inside her heart is fine.

.....Maybe it's my imagination, but I feel like the stare that is now disdaining me doesn't belong to Hanekawa alone..... I even feel like I've heard the sound of the people who got here from the anime leaving that stare and suddenly closing the book.

Whatever.

Someone, perhaps an important looking figure from the past, told me it was important to live like yourself despite what other people thought of you. Thank you, figure from the past.

"I will do anything"

Hanekawa repeated.

It was an impressive monotone.

"....."

As expected, a monotone won't do.

"Please put in more emotions"

The one who demanded absolute obedience was strangely making the request while bowing low.

"Please think of that monotone as including all my emotions towards you"

"No way. Hanekawa, believe in yourself. You can put more spirit in it"

"I·will·do·a·ny·thing"

This time it was not monotone, it was a spirit called rage, those were truly malevolent words.

It seemed she wouldn't do anything for me.

It seemed extremely unlikely she would stick out her tongue for me.

"Guh..... I won't lose"

I won't yield to her aggressiveness.

With this she clearly made a promise.

It means later I can do what I want.

I'm on stage.

This is Araragi Koyomi's one man show.

"You will do anything, huh..... but really, what could I make you do? There are so much choices I am at loss! It would be better as a short essay! Right now, I am required articulateness!"

You should have made me study more!

Despite attending an elevator school, how is it that I am always late!?

They said a blessing too big would make people fall into panic, right now I was precisely in that situation. If I didn't calm myself down, it might result in a colossal debacle.

"Wait!! Come to think of it, the number of requests Hanekawa will grant has not been specified! In other words, according to how one takes her words, it could mean she will do what I tell her to without limits!!"

"Just one time!"

Hanekawa amended without a moment's delay.

"I will do anything you tell me to 'just once'!"

"Guh..... I let her explain it"

The world is not so kind, huh.

Well, fine.

I liked Earth's Shenron more than the Namekk one. Being able to resurrect dead friends all at once is handy.

"Really, I'm having a headache....."

Hanekawa said, and she really held her head.

"My head hurts more than the cheek hit by my father"

"A headache, huh"

"Yes. Since I got involved with you during Spring Break I kept having headaches"

"Hmmm"

I was really worried about that.

But for the moment I would leave that aside.

"For the time being let's go to a place without people around, Hanekawa"

"I think this is already a place considerably inhuman....."

"I didn't say inhuman, I said without people"

This way, I beaoned her.

"Haa.....yeah yeah. Understood. I don't have anywhere to go, anyway.

She ostentatiously sighed, and followed my back.

Hrm. Planning to make me feel guilty by sulking like that is useless.

In this moment Hanekawa was in the palm of my hands -- I was not so inexperienced to let this chance pass. This was my make-or-break, my sink-or-swim, it was time to show my manliness.

I parked my bike in a safe place (it was a good mountain bike, so I had be careful against theft), and I took Hanekawa to a nearby thicket.

"....."

I took Hanekawa to a nearby thicket.

I took Hanekawa to a nearby thicket.

I took Hanekawa to a nearby thicket.

.....what's with the criminal sound of these words..... I am trembling!

No!

Since both parties consented, this is not a crime!

It may be even more correct to say that this is Hanekawa making me take her to a nearby thicket!

Is she a tempting bottom<sup>[64]</sup>!?

Or maybe a tsundere bottom!

.....well, Hanekawa didn't seem to have a tsundere component at all, but somehow just now she was sulking {tsuntsun}, so it surprisingly seemed so.

A time-limited tsundere.

"Well, now what, Araragi-kun?"

As if she had turned serious, it was Hanekawa the one who broke the ice.

She leaned on the trunk of the tree behind, somewhat as if she was an older sister who was playing house with the children of a nursery school.

An older sister who nodded to everything.

"What's this, Hanekawa? It's like there's no risk for you."

"I am safe."

Hanekawa said like she was provoking.

As safe as houses, she said.

"I can already see how this will unfold. After all Araragi-kun, whatever you ask me to do, even if I met your demands fair and square, in the end you will get scared and do nothing, right?"

"W-What did you say!?"

I will get scared!?

What an insult!

When in the world did I ever get scared!?

"Spring Break. The PE storehouse."

She returned a concise reply.

I couldn't but stay silent.

When an angel<sup>[65]</sup> stayed perfectly silent, he must have felt like this.

If that's the case then in front of me there's an amazing lovely Eva.

A Yoshizaki Mine<sup>[66]</sup> design, I guess.

"Ah, I remember it well, your chicken behaviour during Spring Break. Even if I didn't know the life form called chicken, just by looking at you back then I would be able to roughly grasp what it was."

Hanekawa was unusually full of sarcasm.

Despite saying she remembered it well, it seems she didn't want to even remember it.

"Hey, chicken Araragi-kun. What do I have to do? I could as well do nothing, but just in case I will ask. What? Take off my clothes? How many clothes?"

"....."

Uhhh.

It seemed that for Hanekawa the value of my manliness was extraordinarily low.

As a man there was no bigger humiliation -- still, Hanekawa was misunderstanding.

Indeed during Spring Break I had been a chicken.

I would concede that.

However, she was greatly mistaken if she thought a chicken would always stay a chicken. As a chick would eventually turn into a chicken, even I would -- what, that would still be a chicken.

I got it wrong.

A chicken was a chicken, but I was a Nagoya cochin chicken<sup>[67]</sup>!

Right now I had to deal with this situation with the outlook of getting back from my Spring Break failure.

Hmph.

God is quite merciful for giving right to me a chance for settling the score.

.....

'Right to me', indeed.

Hey God, aren't you too kind?

"Hmmm....."

I put my chin in my hand, and pondered. I slowly crept my gaze all over Hanekawa's body, from her

tiptoes to the tip of her head.

"Uh....."

Hanekawa showed a reaction like she was flinching, however she firmly crossed her arms behind her back, as if to straighten her back, trying to showing me her body better.

Hmmm.

This was nerve.

Or maybe she was really thinking from the bottom of her heart that I was a chicken.

.....The latter I guessed.

If so then I would take advantage of her carelessness -- there was no worry for this series to be adapted into an anime up to the sixth volume, so even if I did as I pleased it wouldn't be widely known.

If I did this scene on TV it would be dangerous, but doing it on print shouldn't affect my public image!

Novels are not regulated!

"What is it, Araragi-kun? Aren't you putting on airs -- or maybe you have no ideas? Or maybe what you want to do is staring at my body like that, as if you were licking it? The so called eye-rape?"

"....."

Hm.

Ah -- I see.

*Those* for Hanekawa were just meant to be words she said to provoke me, or on the contrary to dampen my spirit -- however, on the other hand, they became a big hint for me.

That was a clue.

I see.

I was pulled in from Hanekawa's 'I will do anything', and I unintentionally thought only of what I could make Hanekawa do -- but in this case, the reverse approach was also valid.

Not just what I could make Hanekawa do -- what I *could do* to Hanekawa was also valid.

In other words, complying with the context, I could make her 'bear it' -- uhhh.

Highly valid.

And that was not the only hint inserted inside Hanekawa's words -- how foolish, how unladylike.

It was as if Hanekawa herself had taught me the way to capture her<sup>[68]</sup>. Or maybe she was really a tempting bottom -- in which case there was no need to hold back.

The last fragment of conscience inside me disappeared -- no wait, isn't that serious?

My conscience.

My conscience vanished.

"Hanekawa"

"What?"

"Watching your body as if licking it is not what I want to do"

"Well, I thought so....."

Hanekawa said, bending her head.

"Because that's what you normally do to me."

"I was found out!"

She found out that during class I send glance to her (breast), I want to commit suicide!

"As a friendly word of advice, I think you should watch the blackboard. The teacher will teach you a lot of things."

"Guh-----"

She was gently admonishing me.....!

It would be better if she tortured me..... my heart is breaking!

Hold on me!

Hold strong your heart!

Reinforce a damaged heart!

If I overcome this the paradise will be waiting for me..... maybe!

"And as a reference I will teach you one thing, girls are surprisingly sensitive to gazes, so be careful when you look"

"Damn....., even setting your heart on breaking my heart with words like that is useless....."



I somehow firmed up my knees which were starting to crumble, and I raised my body.

"Hanekawa. Watching your body as if licking it is not what I want to do."

"Well, I guess so."

"I"

Looking at her straight in the eyes, I said.

"--I want to lick your wound under the gauze"

Now then.

This is a topic that has kept coming up frequently as a hint, so just in case, I'll explain in a way easy to understand what happened during Spring Break.

To be honest, as it was all my fault I am not really eager to talk about those two weeks, but in narrating this Golden Week I decided it's a topic I can't unfortunately avoid.

Spring Break.

I was assaulted by a vampire.

In these days where Maglev trains are put into practical use, and there is nothing abnormal in going oversea for a field trip, it was such a humiliating mistake I can't show my face outside from the embarrassment, anyway I was assaulted by a vampire.

A vampire -- the king of kiai.

She made your blood freeze. She made your blood boil.

The Iron-Blooded Hot-Blooded Cold-Blooded vampire.

The Kaii Killer who held a countless number of monikers.

That beautiful vampire with golden hair and eyes, glowing so much it dazzled the eyes, glowing so much it blinded the eyes, bit my neck, and sucked all my blood -- and then I *became* a vampire.

Immortal. Invincible. The strongest -- vampire.

Be it was huntsmen specialized in vampires, that is vampire hunters, or fratricide vampires that hunted vampires while being vampire themselves, or Christian special forces, they gave me no quarter -- my Spring Break, therefore, became a strife to turn back into a human.

I'll reveal the outcome, I received the help of a passing dirty old man and the class rep, and ultimately I was able to turn back into a human.

Lucky.

Unlucky.

Some side-effects still remain.

At least, I was able to turn back into something asymptotically close to a human.

And they all lived happily ever after.

Happy end.

Well, in this world and life there is no such easy to understand conclusion, not to mention there is nothing like an ending. If there is ever an end, I could say it all ended when I was bitten by that beautiful vampire.

That aside.

If I had to say why it was necessary to insert this story here, it was because of those 'some side-effects' I mentioned -- vampire side-effects.

The most conspicuous side-effect is the regenerative power, the healing power -- well, Vampire's immortality is as you are familiar with from manga and anime at the peak of their popularity.

For example, if I tumble on the road and skin my knee, or cut a finger with paper, or even if I receive a wound from a fight with my sister Karen, according to the situation, in other words it depends also on the strength of my vampirism, a wound like that heals in the blink of an eye.

It heals.

Back as it was before.

It's literally a superhumanly regenerative power -- and this regenerative power, depending on the circumstances, can be utilized even on *other people*.

It can heal even the wounds of other people.

By spilling body fluids like blood or saliva on the wounds of other people -- by *smearing* it, it is possible to cure those injuries. In other words you can think of it as some kind of Oronain<sup>[69]</sup> or Mentholatum.

*If I put some saliva on it.*

*If I lick it -- it will heal.*

And that was it.

"Thanks!"

Hanekawa thanked me after the fact.

In other words my plan was found out immediately.

I was pretending nonchalantly, so nonchalantly as to sacrifice my own likability, that I just wanted to satisfy my own desires, and she admirably found out that I was scheming to cure what was under the gauze.

Since if I proposed to cure her, Hanekawa would have most likely refused, my tactics was to use her own words to trip her up, but it seemed I was transparent.

How embarrassing.

I want to commit suicide.

That is to say that the fact Hanekawa, once she saw through my plan, said nothing and surrendered to me, seemed to strongly imply more than she wanted to cure her wound, that she had allowed me to save face.

Uhmhm.

This was like a fixed game, so sad.

"For the time being, put back your gauze."

I said, looking like I was hiding my embarrassment.

Actually, I was hiding my embarrassment.

"It would be weird if your wound suddenly healed. If you don't pretend there is still a wound--"

"My parents would suspect something?"

Hanekawa anticipated my words.

And in addition,

"I don't think so."

She said.

"They are not that kind of person. Those two wouldn't even notice if I cut my hair drastically. Perhaps those two -- don't even remember my face."

.....As a note I will add that what I, a coward chicken, actually did was not licking Hanekawa's face, did the extremely healthy action of stabbing a finger with a safety pin attached to the bag, and then smearing Hanekawa's injury with the blood that came out.

The day I will become a Nagoya cochon chicken and will be able to flap my wings is still far.

Anyway, it might have been possible during Spring Break, but currently as a pseudo-vampire with my

body fluids a complete recovery, a complete cure was impossible -- however, looking at the eventual progress, I think I was able to treat her in a way no scars will be left.

Conversely.

If I didn't heal her--

It was such a severe injury there would have been conspicuous scars left.

It made me wonder how much strength he hit her with to get this.

Nastily.

Spitefully.

Her father beat his daughter's face -- Hanekawa's way of speaking had a nuance like he just hit her once on impulse, but it really didn't seem that way.

It was as if he beat her repetitively -- unrelentingly, many many times.

Such was her condition.

The 'reason she was hit' Hanekawa spoke of might have been a terrible trivial thing -- but fundamentally, no matter in what way she 'spoke like she knew what she was talking about', it didn't seem something a sufficient reason for a father to hit a daughter, or at least for an adult man to hit a girl.

And yet.

"Do you want me to take you home?"

my offer,

"No, I'm fine."

was quickly -- adamantly refused with those words.

That was an attitude like she didn't want other people to meddle -- it was natural.

Because Hanekawa was not seeking my help.

We just met along the way.

Just the result of a coincidence.

No, even if she sought my help, it was not like I could help her -- because.

Because people just save themselves on their own--

That was why.

And after that, we walked together for a bit while making silly conversation like usual, and when it seemed appropriate, for some reason or the other, without an express word, we parted. I had the impression we had buried a white cat run over by a car along the way, but I can't remember well.

Well, this and that.

In the end, I couldn't but greatly change my plans for later -- the dam construction was put to a stop. I didn't feel like going to the bookstore anymore. After we parted I straddled on my bike and I immediately returned home.

"Oh. Brother, you are back early."

When I returned home, Karen was in the middle of going up and down the stairs in a handstand -- what was this sister doing? What an absurd training.

"....."

Didn't feel like making a comeback either, so I passed through and went to the bathroom to wash my hands.

"Hey, don't ignore me, brother. At least say I'm home to your cute sister. Did you buy something?"

"Buy? Ah -- buy"

I didn't buy anything.

Rather than relieving frustration, I just felt more gloomy.

The thoughts in my head just grew more bleak--

The next day.

In other words April 30th.

Although for my senses perhaps it was still the night of April 29th (if my sisters didn't wake me up I didn't feel like the new morning had come) -- when my parents, as well as Karen and Tsukihi who had stayed up late because it was a national holiday, finally went to bed, I stealthily went out home. I straddled on my mountain bike, and I slowly turned the pedals, stealthily, trying to not make a sound. For a while I prudently didn't turn the lights on, though even I felt that was going too far.

Nightlife.

Nothing of the sort.

I had no such bold independence -- judging from my grades I was an extraordinary dunce, but even though I may have not looked it I was a very serious male high schooler.

It was vexing being treated as a delinquent.

Now, if I had to say where I was going pushing sleepiness aside, that would be in the outskirts of this town, to an abandoned building which was formerly a tutoring school. It was a building on the brink of collapse that was not even used for tests of courage, it even resembled a ruin -- certainly it didn't make a good impression heading there in the middle of the night.

If I was told that was misconduct, I wouldn't be able to object.

However I had a reason for it.

Both a reason to go to such kind of place -- and for doing so in the middle of the night.

A sound reason.

I stopped my bike in front of the fence that surrounded the abandoned building. Judging from the lack of signs of life around I guessed it wasn't really necessary, but just to be sure, or simply out of habit, I put the chain lock on the rear wheel. And then I entered the premises from a gap in the fence, and I entered inside the building.

Though I said it was not even used for tests of courage, actually for entering like this at midnight, though this building was like a second home for me, chills run down my spine -- not to mention.

Not to mention inside this building there was even a real monster -- to top it all.

A monster.

A demon.

The king of kiai.

A vampire.

A nocturnal nightwalker.

"Well, by now it's an old story, though--"

Once upon a time, in a certain place.

Something like that.

What lived here was not a vampire -- it was the vestige of a vampire.

The residue of a vampire -- the pomace of a vampire.

A pseudo-vampire little girl.

Inside the building that appeared desolate, I climbed the stairs going directly to the topmost floor, the fourth floor, while avoiding the pebble and the trash.

In the fourth floor there were three rooms -- they were all formerly used as classrooms -- I opened the door of the closest one without big expectations.

It seemed today I was unlucky.

Both the first and second door were misses.

It was hard to say the third door was a success either -- although the pseudo-vampire little girl was there, the other, the man who should have been there, wasn't.

"What..... That Oshino. Where did he go in the middle of the night?"

Did he go out?

As always, he was an unpredictable guy -- at this late hour, of all things. It was even possible he was resting on a lower floor in a bed made with old desks. It was also possible he predicted my visit and he avoided in advance the fourth floor so that I wouldn't disturb his dose of sleep. It was not like I announced the precise date and time, but he was a man that saw through other people -- he might have foreseen I was coming.

Well, in that sense I was a bothersome guest. It was really lack of common sense to visit in the middle of the night. I was wrong in thinking he would always greet me with a "Araragi-kun, you're late".



Since I associated with a vampire who was beyond common sense, it was natural that my actions lacked common sense -- still.

While closing the door with a hand behind my back and watching that former vampire little girl sitting in a corner of the pitch dark classroom -- I gulped down my saliva.

I was visibly tense.

Come to think of it.

This was the first time I and her were alone together since Spring Break.

Until now, when I met her *here, like this*, there was always Oshino around -- though I said alone together<sup>[70]</sup>, the little girl was certainly not a human, and even I was certainly not a human either.

A halfway kiai -- a halfway human.

And the responsibility for me and the little girl, for us to be like that -- was mostly mine.

I was tense.

My heart tightened.

The feeling of guilt -- sprouted.

It was moe<sup>[71]</sup>.

"....."

Ah no, though I said moe as a quasi-synonym for sprouting it certainly didn't mean I was fascinated by the lightly dressed blond girl's cuteness.

She was about eight years old sitting innocently.

She had voluminous but individually silky delicate golden hair.

She wore a lovely dress -- she got thin bare legs, with a skin that was like transparent, and didn't walk around this building that much.

But she was not cute.

There was no need to add other words..... it was really self-explanatory.

It would be enough to just describe her strong glaring at me with a sharp, spiteful gaze.

".....Don't watch me with those eyes. You'll spoil your good looks"

While saying that as a joke, I got close to her -- careful at every step.

"Why don't you try laughing? A smiling face suits you the best"

There was no reply.

As if she was simply a corpse -- well, maybe she was like a corpse.

On the other hand, though I called out to her, it was not like I expected a reply. I wasn't a person who would envision a development as convenient as having her, who had not spoken a word since Spring Break ended, suddenly starting to talk, at this point, with this timing.

Simply.

If even I was silent -- my heart would break, so even if it was just me I had to be talkative.

Especially today that Oshino wasn't there.

That said, I was honest when I said a smiling face suited her the best.

I sat down in front of her, who was sitting on the floor in a corner of the classroom, looking like she was getting assimilated by the mold, and opened my jacket.

.....Well, although I was slowly undressing in front of a lightly dressed blond girl, it was not like I was trying to imitate Lupin the 3rd.

Even as a novel I wouldn't be able to get published.

Not everyone would listen to the excuse that strictly speaking she was not a little girl, she was a kiai, and she was 500 years old so there was no problem.

Despite it was still chilly at the end of April, I became half naked inside a ruined building -- to give a meal to this little girl.

A meal?

Then why did you undress?

Do you plan to make her eat food placed on your naked male body?

I could hear such kind of questions, but there was no need to explain (well, the people who came up with the third question should ask other questions first, I think).

Needless to say.

The meal of a vampire -- was blood.

".....Hey, at least say thanks for the food. Otherwise it is not good table manners"

I wrapped my arms around her small body, and while forcibly lifting her I guided her mouth towards my neck -- like we were hugging, this was a posture I couldn't get used to no matter how many times I did it.

A meal. Bloodsucking.

Well, for her maybe this was not even a meal, more like an emergency intravenous drip -- after all at the present time she had lost what was her original bloodsucking ability.

Oshino Meme, the authority on kiai, took a hand in remodelling her constitution, and her body became unable to accept blood other than mine -- conversely, if she didn't drink my blood periodically, she would quickly die, she would quickly disappear, she was such fleeting existence.

Now she's basically your slave -- said Oshino.

I thought it was me, who had to keep giving her blood, the one who was actually the slave here, though.

I was her servant, I thought.

*My servant.*

She called me, domineering, haughtily -- when I remembered the time when she called me so, my chest hurt at the sight of her currently frailness.

Each time I gave her blood.

What got stabbed by her double fangs, her barely remaining vestiges as a vampire, was not my neck -- but my chest.

My heart hurt.

It throbbed. it throbbed.

Yearning.

However, for that very reason that pain -- could only gave me relief.

Because as long as she absorbed my body fluids -- she was at least trying to live.

Because the vampire who once attempted a suicide.

The vampire who was like dead from the beginning.

Was trying to live *for my sake*--

".....What?"

Now that I said it.

I noticed that today she wasn't biting my neck -- we were hugging, she was putting all her weight on me, she was twining around me not just with her thin arms, but also with her stick-like legs, our upper bodies were clinching, she was assuming a position that made her look somehow like a koala, and yet, she still wasn't biting me.

".....?"

I couldn't guess her intention.

Could it be that she was refusing to suck my blood -- that she didn't want to live anymore, in an instant I trembled with fear, and spontaneously the arms I hugged her with were filled with strength and I almost broke her back -- but it was not that.

I was mistaken.

Looking better -- if I followed that vampire little girl's gaze.

She wasn't looking at my neck.

She was looking at my luggage which I laid aside when I embraced her.

A luggage which emitted a sweet fragrance.

"Err....."

I brought it for the free spirit Oshino Meme, a vagrant unaccustomed to a wealthy life, who even now was living in this abandoned building. It was a present, something like provisions.

It was an assorted box from Mister Donut.

It was sold 10 pieces for 1000 yen over the counter.

Golden Chocolate, French Cruller, Angel French, Strawberry Whip French, Honey Churro, Coconut Cruller, Pon De Ring, D-Pop, Double Chocolate, Coconut Chocolate.

It was making a sweet fragrance.

I originally bought them as a present for my sisters while going back home after meeting Hanekawa.

However Karen and Tsukihi said in chorus "we are dieting" or some other nonsensical thing, and they wasted their brother's courtesy.

Growing girls don't diet, you should become plumper, it became an intense quarrel that could create a serious hindrance to our subsequent personal relationship, however in the first place that assorted box from Mister Donut was bought with the money I borrowed from Tsukihi, so I was at a disadvantage

on that quarrel.

In the end I was made to apologize.

An outrageous sibling sensitivity.

That said, 10 pieces would have been too much to eat alone, besides with doughnuts the more time passed the more they lost their flavor, so having no choice I brought them to Oshino who lived day-by-day, in need of the meal of yesterday more than the meal of today.

That rascal had been barely keeping out rain and dew with this ruined building, or maybe he had even been drinking rain and dew, I had enough compassion to let him eat something sweet once in a while.

.....

Because of the Spring Break incident I owed that man a large sum of money, namely 5,000,000 yen, it baffled me how I was able to feel so grand with what was at best a 1000 yen set of doughnuts.

5,000,000.

That was a debt that would have made an adult hang himself.

I had no idea on how to pay it back, I didn't even want to discuss about it.

Should I sell my organs?

Using my immortal constitution I could generate organs any number of times.

"Scary"

Anyway -- that was how here there was the assorted box of sweet-smelling doughnuts which the vampire little girl was staring at intently, still embraced by me and yet completely ignoring me.

A gaze of fire.

In other words she was giving off a passionate gaze.

"But..... can't be"

Can't be.

No way.

Though she was the mere shadow of herself, though she was the pomace of herself.

Though what she was had been mostly stolen -- without shadow or shape left, she was deprived even of her name, but still she was a proud vampire.

Moreover she was not a normal vampire.

She was the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, with a noble lineage.

A so-called vampire thoroughbred.

That was the kind of person she was.

She was offered her staple food, that was to say blood, in front of her very eyes, and yet of all things she was paying more attention to the doughnuts, how could it be.....

Slurp.

She made that sound.

Taking one look at her, she was drooling.

"Don't ruin a dream!"

Together with those angry words I threw away the little girl.

The little girl hit the head on the wall behind and cringed.

Oh no, without thinking I made a rude comeback. In addition to the discomfort of having been drooled directly on my bare shoulder.

Well, about that, though just an attempt, I did try to smear with saliva the face, not even the bare shoulder, of Hanekawa, so certainly even I was not one to praise.

"A-Are you ok?"

I offered a hand to the little girl who knocked her head quite hard and was stroking it, and I was driven away violently.

It seemed she got mad.

Her golden hair was standing on a end.

.....In fact, she looked like an animal.

She was like a cat who wouldn't let you touch or get close to it.

It was bad having made her angry though -- if I didn't make her refill her tank of blood, her body wouldn't really hold up. Lately I had been swayed by a bizarre problem, and I couldn't come here for a while. The cause could even be said to be that the bizarre problem was mistaken for a love problem, but thanks to Tsukihi it was all cleared, and that was why I meant to gain back that wasted time, so if possible I would have liked to make her drink tonight.

Even sneaking out of home in the middle of the night without my sisters noticing had certainly not been easy -- on the other hand I couldn't say it would be easy to come here during daytime either. The reason was that vampires were nocturnal, and daytime was fundamentally their sleepy time.

There was no living being who was in a good humor after being woken up during their sleep -- even making her suck my blood would be a pain.

In the end the middle of the night was the best period of time for bloodsucking.

.....I was treating her really like an animal.

Or like a baby.

Breast-feeding mothers maybe felt like this.

Now then, what should I do with her -- I folded my arms and pondered.

If Oshino was here I would ask for his advice, but he was absent. Even if he was sleeping in another classroom, it was not something worthy of waking him up. In the worst case it would be possible he even charged me money for the advice. As if I could increase my debt.

In fact.

I decided to take care of this vampire for all my life.

What should I do if I wasn't even able to solve this sort of difficulty on my own.

"In a case like this I should stroke her head, was it..... no, that would become proof of obedience....."

Uhmhm.

Ah, right.

It's cheap, but since it all started from Mister Donut, I could settle it with Mister Donut.

That's right, quarrels are to be solved all with food.

Like in Oishinbo<sup>[72]</sup>.

Hahaha, like, you can't but sheathe your anger once you see food.

I took out the Mister Donut box from the vinyl shopping bag, I placed it on my knees, and I slowly opened it so that the vampire little girl could see.

And then I picked the one most close, the Golden Chocolate, I held out my arm and offered it to her.

I offered it to her.

At the very same time, it had already been snatched.

She snatched it with a super speed as if she didn't really lose her abilities as a vampire.

And then the little girl without inspecting it bit into it.

With the same super speed, the little girl ate the Golden Chocolate in three mouthfuls. It was a meal so intense it was like she was eating even her own fingers.

No no no no.

What a greedy way to eat.

I might repeat myself, but you never drank my blood as if it was that delicious -- that was a little shock.

--Uh-oh!"

Right after having finished eating, this time the vampire little girl aimed without a moment's delay at the remaining 9 doughnuts left over my knees.

I barely dodged with the box.

It was no joke, she moved in an arc and she would have gouged my abs as a collateral damage.

"Sit!"

She was going to pursue further, and without thinking I yelled that to her.

I didn't know why I yelled sit.

She was not a dog.

However the vampire little girl, obedient to my words, sat down on the spot -- and not grasping the knees as usual, she squatted down, a beautiful posture of sit.

And then she gazed at me with a dead serious expression.

"....."

I couldn't get what in the world was happening, however I thought that if I stayed silent there would be no progress, so for the moment as a test I picked up from the remaining nine doughnuts the one I thought was the best, the French Cruller, and I gently held it out in front of the vampire little girl.

Remembering the Golden Chocolate from before, when I felt like she was going to eat even my hand, I put it down in front of her who was still sitting.

Of course, since not even in flattery you could say the floor of an abandoned building had had a



scrupulous cleaning (the vampire little girl is barefoot, but I and Oshino were walking around with shoes on), first I spreaded the included paper napkin, and then I placed the doughnut over that.

I thought she would have immediately jumped at it, but the vampire little girl was just drooling, without abandoning the sit posture.

She was staring at me with the eye of a devil, literally<sup>[73]</sup>, though.

It was an intense upward gaze that made the glare of before look like smiling -- in fact, if a gaze could kill people, I would be already dead. While making a weird scream.

In fact, depending on the tribe vampires could really kill with just a gaze.

The so called evil eye.

Now that I mentioned it, during Spring Break she seemed to have broken concrete just with her gaze - was I in a fatal pinch now?

".....Shake"

For some reason.

I tried holding out my hand.

The vampire little girl without hesitation put her palm over my palm. It was like the E.T. from the movie, but, maybe as a minimal revenge, it was a powerful shake, like the high five of a homerun batter.

"Well then, err... eat"

In karuta<sup>[74]</sup> there is a thing called the winning word<sup>[75]</sup>.

For example musumefusahose<sup>[76]</sup>.

It would be no exaggeration to say that a good hearing ability that allows to move right after hearing the winning word decides the match -- unfortunately I didn't have much knowledge about karuta, but if that was true then I had to acknowledge this vampire little girl would be really talented at karuta.

Before I finished saying eat she had already moved -- no, she had already finished moving.

Like a wild beast, she thrusted her fangs at the French Cruller.

It was not wrong to say a wild beast.

She did have aspects of a pet dog.

The image of the blond child, whose estimated age was 8 years old, licking the floor on all fours and

stuffing her cheek with the French Cruller together with the paper napkin was already in many ways borderline.

Even the paper napkin.... as I thought it was the right choice not giving it to her from the hand.

That said, it seemed she couldn't digest the paper napkin, so she skillfully sifted it inside her mouth and spat that thing alone out.

You couldn't say she had good manners.

In fact, you couldn't say she had good manners anymore the moment she ate a doughnuts on all fours.

Well -- even during Spring Break, she was not one who had good manners while eating. If I remembered her words, it seemed vampires and humans had different table manners.

That time she told me something like staring at people eating was a breach of etiquette -- however now she was intensely staring at me not because I committed a breach of etiquette, it was unmistakably because she was simply aiming at the remaining 8 doughnuts.

"Actually, I brought these for Oshino--"

In fact, no matter how delicious were the doughnuts she ate, for the vampire little girl those would not become nourishment. The nourishment for this vampire little girl -- the unique perfectly nutritive food -- was only my blood.

"--Well, maybe another three would be fine"

Originally there were 10 pieces.

If I splitted them between Oshino and her, the calculation was 5 pieces to each -- thinking about it, just like me for Oshino alone eating all 10 doughnuts would have been hard.

"Which do you want? Choose three"

I showed to her the contents of the box.

"Point at them with your finger"

Then the little girl moved a finger of her left hand -- and starting from the first in order, each piece, she pointed out all of them.

From the first to the last, each doughnut.

"....."

All of them.

Greedy.

Seemingly with no intention to yield, with a sour look the vampire little girl did it one more time, from the first to the last without skipping anything, she pointed at each of them.

As a caution she expressly pointed at each of the six-pieces of the D-Pop set<sup>[77]</sup>.

"Uhhh"

I see, so she has a sweet tooth..... but still, all of them would be too much. Where in that small body would she absorb so much sweetness.

The vampire little girl fixed her eyes on me -- I felt the pressure. The pressure that could break concrete.

Really, I felt I was being crushed.

Well -- what was now crushing me might be the feelings of guilt. After all it was my responsibility that this vampire little girl was being forced to live this life. The fact the once sublimely proud beautiful vampire was now groveling on her hands and knees eating doughnuts was really something that pained my heart.

Since Spring Break she never spoke a word.

Despite she laughed so much, now she had only a downhearted sour look.

I knew though that when thinking of what she did, of what she came to do, I shouldn't have felt any natural pity -- any natural pity as a human.

"Allright. I'll give you all of them"

I said.

Generously, nicely, I put the box with the doughnuts on the floor.

As if it was an offering.

"Now spin three times and say woof"

Ah.

Crap, I went with the flow and unintentionally requested a performance out of her -- the time I thought that, before I revoked the order, she had already did a splendid triple axel on the spot, as if she was a spinning top.

More than a spinning top{koma} she looked like a robin{komadori}.

However in the end she looked away peevishly without saying 'woof', that might have been her last pride as a former noble -- that pride sure had appeared quite late.

Hmm.

The fact she didn't talk didn't change.

I thought I could force her to utter something, but as expected I was unsuccessful.

Well, if she had talked with this gag scene even I would have been disappointed.

Such farcical development would be unbelievable.

I slid the doughnut box on the floor and said "eat". At that point the vampire little girl, as if she was waiting for that, went on all fours once again and started eating the 8 doughnuts together with the box.

A trance-like greed, or rather, it was like with that momentum she could have eaten even the floor.

Rather than a dog, she was a malnourished child.

"Amazing. This ring-like food is really yummy. It is really a treasure box of rings packed with sweetness."

"Did you just speak now!?"

I had started to look away, I turned my head surprised, but the vampire little girl wasn't doing anything particular, with an expression infinitely close to expressionless she was just stuffing her cheeks with the floor -- not, with doughnuts.

Was it an auditory hallucination.....?

Whoa, my heart throbbed.

Good grief, this kind of surprise was underhanded.

"Ummm..... well, getting to know her favorite food is a godsend..... I guess."

Establishing a favorite food worthy of hearing auditory hallucinations would improve the future relationship between me and her, so I guessed that as a news that was a plus.

However.

She -- still didn't talk.

Even I wanted it so much I heard auditory hallucinations -- she obstinately wouldn't speak to me.

Despite we had a master and servant relationship, though now a thing of the past.

"Sigh. I don't think the reason you can't speak well is because you have the throat and tongue of a 8 years old--"

Actually, I never thought about it, but maybe it could be that.

But even if that was the case I wish she spoke, even with prattle.

Like Genshiken's Sue<sup>[78]</sup>.

Like Genshiken's Sue.

Like Genshiken's Sue!

"What are you doing, Madaragi-kun<sup>[79]</sup>?"

Being suddenly addressed from behind I startled as if ice water had been poured on me, and I got up.

I turned around and Oshino was there.

Without the sound of footsteps, without any sign.

"You are a surprise....."

I said, while feeling relieved.

For a while I had used this place as a lair, so it had become familiar, but an abandoned building was still an abandoned building -- if in this situation someone suddenly stood behind me, even I would get surprised.

".....Don't appear so suddenly. Don't creep up just because your name is Oshino<sup>[80]</sup>"

"Hmph. What about you Madaragi-kun, just because of a Spring Break grudge you shouldn't abuse vampire-chan like that."

"I didn't abuse her."

"I think treating a little girl like a dog fulfills plenty the qualifications of abuse, Madaragi-kun."

Good heavens, Oshino affectedly shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess you brought that Mister Donut box for me as a present -- hmm, I didn't get to eat it."

"....."

He grinned, talking as if he had seen through as usual.

And don't call me Madaragi.

For some reason I couldn't help but feel this was the style of a different character.

He spoiled a future joke.

Anyway -- Oshino Meme.

A middle-aged man in his thirties.

He appeared on the scene.

All year round wearing an Aloha shirt, a visibly flippant no good middle-ager. A specialist of kiai, an authority of demons and ghosts, a technocrat of bakemono monsters -- always holding true to those titles, a very suspicious character.

According to a mysterious report in the anime adaptation he was made to look and sound cool, as if I couldn't care less.

For me he was a fishy old man.

A freaky old man, you could say.

"Araragi-kun, maybe I didn't tell you, but I love sweets. The next time by all means leave something for me too. My favorite is Old Fashion. Because I am old fashioned man"

"Don't put on airs of being an old-fashioned man, you're a nuisance."

Nobody was as annoying as an adult who fancied himself as being behind the times since the classical period -- though certainly the Old Fashion was delicious.

Looking at her, the vampire little girl had already finished eating the Old Fashion and the Pon The Ring lumped together, and with an expression like 'Eh? What's that? Mister Donut? I didn't know it', she returned to her previous position in a corner of the room, in her basic position of sitting while holding the knees.

Because of what happened during Spring Break -- she didn't want to look unseemly in front of Oshino.

Even if she kept up the appearance, she didn't hide the stains around the mouth.

Anyway.

The target of comparison was just that, but still, the simple thought that, beside Oshino, she could have had some consideration left even for me gave me relief.

.....Though maybe she couldn't care less.

"Okay. Then next time I'll buy you an assortment of Old Fashion -- In a bit I will even reach a good amount of Mister Donuts points. Anyway, Oshino. Where did you go in the middle of the night?"

Reading the atmosphere, I judged he wasn't sleeping in another classroom, so I asked that.

"Hm. I was working"

Without putting on airs, yet as always playing the fool, so answered Oshino to me.

"The reason why a rootless person like me keep staying in this city, as well as the reason why I came here in the first place, was gathering kaii tales -- although the cleaning up of what you did is now my most important work."

"Cleaning up?"

With a sidelong glance, I peeked at the vampire little girl sitting on the floor grasping her knees.

The vampire little girl seemed already indifferent to our conversation.

"You mean you are looking after her?"

"That too, but not only that -- as a matter of fact vampires are troublesome. They are the kings of kaii after all -- just by being there, they can cause various phenomena. They keep stimulating and influencing the surroundings. Taking care skillfully of the loose ends is the work you entrusted to me."

"Are you carrying out several works at the same time? Just like Boogiepop. A thriving business is wonderful, isn't it?"

Although, putting aside my five million yen, the other kaii tales didn't seem 'works' that brought much money.

"Unfortunately I am not as neat as Boogiepop -- my head is not able to think several things at the same time, in parallel."

Anyway, said Oshino.

"Back to what I was saying -- Araragi-kun. Don't bully vampire-chan too much. That action will lead to troubles."

"I told you I'm not bullying her."

Well, I had the impression I had gone a little too far with the jokes, but basically it was something she did on her own. I wouldn't say I was dragged into it, but it was like she made me humor her.

"By the way, this is something I have been thinking since Spring Break, but could it be that even her mind somehow became childish?"

Even if her appearance ended up to be that of a 8 years old, she originally looked like a young lady -- no matter how much vampires might be *influenced* by their appearance, the fact she was 500 years old didn't change.

Besides, even a 8 years old wouldn't eat like a dog.

"Ah, that can't be helped, Araragi-kun -- and it's not just vampires. The kiai are created by human beliefs."

"Human beliefs?"

"That's right. They are there because people think they are there -- that's what a kiai is. They say the ghost, when examined closely, was withered silver grass, but before you examined it closely, the withered silver grass was really a ghost"

"Hm? I don't really understand. Well, the meaning is that of faith can make a sardine sacred, but how does it relate to her?"

"The reason why the vampire is the strongest kiai, is because everyone is thinking the vampire is the strongest kiai. The kiai are as people know them to be -- they behave as people expect them to."

They are that kind of thing, said Oshino.

While talking, he looked at the vampire little girl.

Even if there was a gaze which could kill a person, that was just a gentle gaze that wouldn't kill even an insect, without pressure or anything.

"Ah, vampire-chan is there -- right now you are the only one who knows this vampire, Araragi-kun."

"....."

"Strictly speaking there are also me and class rep-chan as well, but still, the one from whom vampire-chan is receiving the strongest influence is you. That's because at this point you are the one and only source of nutrition for vampire-chan. That influence is super direct."

"Then -- you could say that now she is like that *because that's how I think of her?*"

No.

Maybe she liked Mister Donut because I was influencing her, but things like eating like a dog..... if I had expected that kind of behaviour from a vampire I would admit to be quite mentally ill. I would need a serious counseling for real. It was still the middle of the night, but I should book an appointment immediately.

"Since I am not as human as you or Hanekawa I may indeed see her as an 8 years old -- still, this was not what I expected."

"A child doesn't necessarily grow up as the parent wanted, right? And yet she does receive the influence of expectations -- something like that."



"The expectation -- of a parent"

The influence.

Of a family.

"I have no intention of preaching at you saying things like become a good person, but if you only joke around you might give her not an influence but a bad influence. In addition."

Oshino there stopped talking.

And he didn't continue.

It wasn't like Oshino didn't continue because he was concerned about me. Oshino was not the kind of man who would show concern this way. Simply, he just didn't say it because there was no need to say it -- in fact, for me it was something I didn't need to hear.

In addition.

In addition to the fact that proud vampire had been degraded into this innocent child -- what should I do if I even gave her a bad influence.

That was all there was to it.

However there was something in Oshino's words I wasn't able to agree with -- though he said one not necessarily follows the expectations, this vampire lived up to at least one of my expectations.

That would be -- that she didn't forgive me.

She didn't laugh, she didn't talk.

The vampire -- didn't forgive me.

The same way I didn't forgive the vampire.

"Say, Araragi-kun. Seeing as you made her eat the doughnuts, I guess you have already done your bloodsucking duty, right?"

"Bloodsucking duty, you say"

Don't make it sound as if it was a cafeteria duty.

"I still haven't. It's rare for you to miss your predictions. Doughnuts came first, bloodsucking will be next. It seems she likes doughnuts more than my blood. This fact has crushed my spirit."

"Hmmm. Well, your blood is not that sweet. I can understand vampire-chan's feelings."

Uh-huh, Oshino nodded by himself.

What is he so sympathetic about?

"That aside, Araragi-kun, I have raised this topic before here and then, but is class rep-chan doing well?"

"Ah?"

It was all of a sudden.

He said it as if he foresaw that I met with Hanekawa during the day, was it another instance of his specialty, seeing through -- I thought, but thinking very carefully it was nothing of the sort.

Thinking again, now that I remembered Oshino was always weirdly worried about Hanekawa.

Now and then, if there was a chance, he asked me about Hanekawa.

No, rather than being worried about Hanekawa -- it would be more correct to say he was worried about Hanekawa's tendencies.

It stands to reason, one could say.

Because of what happened during Spring Break, Oshino had been very wary of Hanekawa -- regardless of how serious he was at it, from Oshino's point of view a person like Hanekawa was a bother.

"That girl is a bother for everybody."

Oshino slightly corrected my unuttered thought.

This was the so called seeing through.

"Of course that's true for you too -- the visit of vampire-chan has considerably warped the state of this town's kiai, paraphrasing that, the residence of class rep-chan here has accordingly warped the state of this town's people."

"That's an exaggeration if I ever know one."

"It's right to exaggerate. To boldly overstate. It's the truth, in that girl's case."

Well, how is she.

Oshino asked.

"How -- well, she's fine."

"Really?"

How stubborn.

In fact, if he faced me so stubbornly, it meant Oshino was doubting my perfunctory reaction (that was to say my offhanded deception).

The truth was that it was not true.

It really was a lie.

But it was about Hanekawa's family, I thought it was not something I could disclose.

The gauze on the left side of the face too -- what was behind that too.

Because I promised I wouldn't tell to anybody.

Not even to Oshino.

"Hmm, I see. You can't say it, huh."

However Oshino, as expected, just by seeing me puzzled over whether I should refuse to reply or not, seemed to have guessed my situation of 'being unable to say it'.

"Then -- is it valid to think something happened to that girl's body that you can't say? That would make me worry."

"--It's not something for you to worry about."

And of course.

It was not something for me to be worried about either.

"It's Hanekawa's problem. I can't interfere. Even if something happened, she can only save herself on her own -- it's the only way she can be saved."

"Ummm. Then I won't investigate."

I thought he was definitely going to press me more -- but unexpectedly, Oshino withdrew easily.

"Indeed, the way you flirt with class rep-chan is not something the likes of me can interfere with."

"It's not like I was flirting with her."

"I can't interfere with skirt flipping or whatever you do."

"How much do you know!?"

"Then I will take the reverse approach."

Oshino said, without listening to my vindication.

"Tell me *anything other than what you can't say*. It's not like you can't mention anything at all in regards to class rep-chan, right?"

"....."

Well -- with that approach, I reckoned I could not remain silent.

Even if I had to omit Hanekawa's family circumstances, or the fact she was hit by her father -- it was not like I had to keep secret all the rest.

It wouldn't be a problem if I said at least, that today -- in terms of date already yesterday -- I met her by chance on the road, and talked with her a little.

In any case, Oshino would not pull back.

Not easily, at least.

With that thought, I skillfully -- didn't know how much, though -- omitted the parts I was forbidden to speak about, and I talked about what happened today.

While hiding what I had to hide.

I was woken up by my sister this morning.

I met with Hanekawa.

And lastly -- I buried a cat run over by a car.

I mentioned all.

"Araragi-kun."

Thereupon -- Oshino.

Oshino Meme.

While taking out a cigarette from the breast pocket of his Aloha shirt and holding it in his mouth without lighting it up -- Oshino Meme.

"Don't tell me -- that was a tailless silver cat--"

said.

He had been holding back until now.

Thanks.

Now, the real issue.



It was not something pleasant to say, but it was true that I had not viewed *it* as something important.

After all -- if you did it together with Hanekawa, holding a memorial service for a cat squashed on the road, probably run over by a car, to be frank, was something akin to a daily routine.

It happened many times.

Like when she saved me in Spring Break.

Hanekawa -- buried that cat.

Very naturally.

"Araragi-kun, can you help me?"

She said.

With her usual behaviour and her usual smiling face, as if she had forgot again about the gauze applied on her face.

She carried in her arms that dead cat whose fur, originally so white it shone, after having been run over so many times, for the red of blood and black of dirt became indecipherable.

As if she pitied it.

As if she cherished it.

She held it in her arms.

Similarly to how we had the expression affection for cats {=doting on someone}, there were many people who liked cats -- even I didn't dislike them -- however, even if it hadn't been squashed, I think not many people would have been able to embrace that corpse.

So I reflected.

So I thought.

And my heart -- once again, got noisy.

As if it wanted to say something.

And yet, it couldn't say anything.

"Hindering Cat"

Was it fate or something else -- to tell the truth, after providing blood to the vampire little girl and doughnuts to Oshino, I had planned to quickly go back home and catch some Z's, but I couldn't afford to anymore.

I got stuck with lending a hand to Oshino with his job.

Well, maybe I shouldn't say I got stuck, as if I was a victim -- as someone who had a 5 million yen debt I should grant him a small favor, especially considering Hanekawa was involved in the matter.

Rather than lending a hand.

I wanted to bear the brunt of the work, actually.

"A mammalian carnivore of the cat family"

Said Oshino.

Cat.

"The Hindering Cat is one of the kiai tales I was collecting in this city in these days -- to tell the truth, before I went out exactly to run after *it*. I wonder if we could call it a coincidence -- it's really an unpleasant coincidence. To borrow the words of an old friend of mine, I can't but feel there is some evil intent here<sup>[81]</sup>"

"But -- wait a minute, Oshino"

Oshino's words threw me in some disarray -- or to better say, I was barely understanding anything, and I just objected by reflex, without thought, only for appearance's sake.

"Did I not explain it well enough? The cat I and Hanekawa buried was not a kiai. It was an actual live -- formerly alive cat. It was a real corporeal cat, not an incorporeal one. It was run over by a car -- as you say it was indeed a tailless cat, and if I remember well its fur was silverish white -- but it's not anything like a kiai or a ghost -- essentially."

"Indeed. It's not."

Even I would think so.

Were it in normal circumstances.

Said Oshino.

He would never emotively deny my objections -- he was the usual flippant Oshino. Always wanting to keep the balance, always wanting to stay neutral, this was the Oshino-like behaviour of the Oshino called Oshino Meme.

It was the usual Oshino -- however.

Still, I felt like the mouth in which he held an unlit cigarette -- had a just a little trace of earnestness.

I felt like it had a trace of veracity.

And maybe this sensation was not just my imagination.

If I had to say it -- it was because Hanekawa was involved.

"However, Araragi-kun -- *class rep-chan is not normal*. We discussed over this point a lot, and I don't want to fight with you any further -- but that girl is dangerous for real."

".....Well, I get it that you mistrust her."

"It's not mistrust. Take vampire-chan."

Oshino, skillfully, pointed at the little girl sitting in a corner of the classroom with the tip of the cigarette he held in his mouth.

"It was your responsibility that she ended up that way, not alive, not killed, half-dead -- but at the root of it all, there was also class rep-chan's intercession"

"That's -- true, I guess."

In Spring Break.

Certainly I was saved by Hanekawa -- nobody helped me, she was the only one who saved me. I would never feel enough gratitude about that.

However -- still.

On a logical standpoint, one could also say that if Hanekawa wasn't there, the Spring Break incident *would have never happened*.

It was really not her will or intention -- it was not her judgement, and it was not her purpose -- and yet, I too couldn't but acknowledge that Hanekawa was a double edged sword<sup>[82]</sup>.

"Yeah. A double edge sword. Exactly. She's a terrific girl who's like the embodiment of the butterfly effect -- while even chaos has a limit, she is actually a skillful director. A terrific producer. Even a trivial, commonplace, heartwarming to boot everyday episode like burying a cat run over by a car, when she is involved, might become a major incident that will shake the heavens and the earth"

In particular, cats are an ill omen -- Oshino said.

"*The Hinderer Cat -- fits class rep-chan to a T*"



"....."

I didn't listen in detail about the kiai Oshino was currently after, the Hinderer Cat. The main reason was that there was no time, however, somewhere in my heart I also felt I didn't want to listen.

I too.

I too -- thought the same.

I had an unpleasant premonition from the beginning.

Since when?

Since I buried that cat? No.

Since I saw the gauze on the left side of her face? No.

Perhaps -- *it was since I first met Hanekawa.*

I should have understood it.

Therefore

"Oshino"

I said, omitting any superfluous objection.

There was no room for arguments.

"What should I do? Let's suppose right now something is happening--"

"Oh no, there's a 80-90% probability nothing is happening at all"

Therefore we will try to keep it this way -- said Oshino.

"We just want to be safe. Better safe than sorry, they say -- it's not even a 90%, it's a 99,99%. Considering the risk, we'll just take a needless precaution. No need to look so uneasy, Araragi-kun."

Oshino said that last thing as if making fun of my attitude, but somehow I thought those words were just for peace of mind. As if Oshino himself wasn't thinking so at all -- as if he wasn't thinking it was a 90% or 99,99% probability.

No, in terms of probability it might have actually been like that.

However -- whether it was a 1 in 10 chance or a 1 in 10000 chance.

It was already common sense between me and Oshino that the girl called Hanekawa Tsubasa was able to casually beat those odds.

*She and only her.*

She was dangerous for real.

"Those headaches are worrisome -- from my point of view. They better be meaningless foreshadowing. Well then, Araragi-kun, here we split. I'll go dig up the white cat you buried. In other words, I'll defile a grave."

"De-Defile a grave, you say."

"Well, in itself it's a sacrilegious act -- still, I want to try that at least. If the cat that has been buried was simply a cat, then we can relax. At that point we all live happily ever after, happy end. It will be no problem for me to be hit by punishment. I will quietly accept it. Because I am by nature a drum-like man<sup>[83]</sup>"

"I couldn't care less about you being a drum -- I didn't even get what you meant with it. In short, I just tell you where we buried that cat? Do I have to bring you there?"

"Of course I'll have you tell me the place, but I don't need your guide. Just teach me orally the general location, and I'll get to the cat's grave on my own."

"Hmmm--"

He had not been living as a vagabond just for show, huh.

He didn't need familiarity with the land from the start -- not for nothing he turned into his headquarter this abandoned building whose existence even the locals weren't well aware of.

"Of course, I'm willing to tell you -- but it's outside my area, so it would be difficult to explain it accurately. I can really tell you only the general location, is that fine?"

"Sure"

Oshino nodded.

Despite I was undependable, he didn't even try to utter a complain or a sarcasm -- conversely, it was as if that directly showed in a way easy to understand how pressing the current situation was.

However -- a pressing situation, huh.

Maybe nothing at all was happening -- and yet it was already a pressing situation.

It was like we were in times of war.

"In exchange, I'll assign you a different, important mission"

"Eh?"

"Didn't I tell you? That's why we split -- I'll have you *directly* approach class rep-chan."

"Di-Directly?"

"*You will now visit class rep-chan's house.* And when you'll meet with her, looking at her face and eyes while talking, you'll check if she's alright."

Oshino blazed away as if natural -- I couldn't but be at loss for words.

Eh? Visiting her house?

"Hey -- don't be absurd, Oshino. What time do you think it is now?"

"It's night. The middle of the night, even. Exactly because it's the middle of the night -- in a sense, it would be meaningless if it wasn't the middle of the night. Without bringing out the hour of the Ox<sup>[84]</sup>, as a general rule, this is the time period where kaiti are active the most. In other words, it's when the distinction between the positive and the negative is at its clearest"

"I experienced that firsthand in Spring Break, so I know that well--"

But there were things like common sense and lack of common sense in this world. The action of visiting the house of a classmate of the opposite gender in the middle of the night was evidently to be included under the expression lack of common sense.

"This is an emergency so it doesn't matter if the action lacks common sense. It's actually better this way. In the worst case, class rep-chan will despise you and that will be all."

"That's the very worst!"

Well.

It was possible she already despised me for what happened this day, not to say it wouldn't be weird if she had despised me from Spring Break, so now that he mentioned it was a wonder how I could even perceive it as something sudden.

Being disliked from the start.

A very sad possibility.

"Besides, we can't even invert our duties -- it would be impossible for me to see whether the buried cat is just a cat or not--"

"Exactly. And -- you are the best suited to *see whether class rep-chan is abnormal or not*"

Because you're a friend.

That word, added incidentally, seemed to contain some cynicism or sarcasm -- however, even if it

was sarcasm, it was a wonderful word that bolstered my motivation.

That was right.

Kaii aside -- if it was about Hanekawa.

Then I was the specialist, not Oshino.

"Ah. Oshino, I don't know where Hanekawa's house is, though."

"Eh? What? That's weird. You and class rep-chan are in the same class, right? Doesn't the class have an address book or the like?"

"How many years ago was that? Nowadays people are careful in the management of personal information -- even with friends it's very common knowing only the mobile phone number and e-mail address, while not knowing the place where they live or even the station".

"What horrible days to live in. This analog Aloha old man cannot keep up with this."

The analog Aloha old man frowned, looking really disgusted. From his point of view as someone hopeless with machines, who didn't carry neither cell phone nor handy phone, these must have been certainly horrible days to live in.

"Anyway, that aside, starting with Spring Break for a month you have been close to her, don't tell me you don't have the slightest idea about it. From fragments of her conversations, the time it took her to the meeting place and the like, you can grasp approximatively the place where she lives, right?"

"Don't make me sound like a stalker....."

Well.

I could grasp it, though.

Talk about obvious (nonchalantly).

If I couldn't do at least that, it would be a disgrace for Araragi Koyomi.

The blond vampire little girl, really not interested at all, with her face buried in her knees paid no heed to the conversation between me and Oshino -- and like that.

I speeded with my mountain bike through the city at night.

I had turned the light on just in case, but at the moment I didn't need it. On they way out of the abandoned building I didn't forget to provide some blood to the vampire little girl (somehow, I felt like she savored the doughnuts more. It was really a shock), so in my body at the moment the vampire factor was pretty high. No matter how dark the night was, I could see far off in the distance.

Well, the light of a bike was also a sign to make pedestrians know that a bike was passing by, so even if I could see in the distance it would have been dangerous not turning the lights on.

"Oh boy, this turned into something serious -- that is to say, how can I face Hanekawa visiting her house at this hour?"

Thought it was better the earliest -- though it was better at night.

This was really nuts.

It would stand true even with a normal family, but in Hanekawa's family there were friction and strain -- judging from what I heard during the day, it didn't seem an environment that would welcome a classmate who came to visit in the middle of the night.

Assuming the worst.

"I did hide that part to Oshino, after all -- besides, even if he knew, I guess I would still have to do this."

It was impossible for us to switch our duties, at any rate. Leaving aside the issue of whether he could see abnormalities in Hanekawa or not, the task of visiting the house of a girl in the middle of the night would be too much even for a sly old fox like Oshino.

He was already a suspicious old man from the start, after the experience of living for long in an abandoned building, his appearance had become considerably dirtier than when I had met him in Spring Break.

He was quite the suspicious individual.

Maybe he was a wanderer.

Maybe he was the successor of the Hiten Mitsurugi style<sup>[85]</sup>.

Compared to him, in my case even if I was reported it would just be considered a child's prank. I would take full advantage of the privileges of a minor.

"Besides, as Hanekawa said I am a chicken -- from the start I wouldn't be able of something as foul as defiling a grave."

In the end, it was the right person in the right place.

As I managed to be at peace with myself, I stopped the bike.

Judging from the address under the traffic light, this was what I guessed to be the area where Hanekawa lived -- Hanekawa's home area.

The proper etiquette for the visit, something already left to improvisation -- was still a problem that

came second.

First I had to find Hanekawa's house.

.....What was I saying.

As if the first step was that easy.

There was a tremendous distance to cover.

Though this was just a rural town, it was unmistakably a residential area -- while speeding on my bike I had underestimated the distance to cover, thinking I just had to search door to door looking at nameplates, but when I went at it, I understood it was really quite a toil.

It was like trying to open a four digit lock through sheer perseverance.

My heart would definitively break down midway.

In fact, with the lock I would have at least the guarantee that eventually I would find the solution, but in this case there was the great possibility that my first estimation had been wrong -- it was just my personal assumption that Hanekawa's house was in this area.

We were talking about Hanekawa after all.

There was even the possibility that she acted in a way to not let me understand it -- no, if that was the case, just how much was I mistrusted.

This was being treated like a stalker for real.

"Good grief. A tailless cat, huh -- whether it got it or not, in the end it's just a cat's tail."

Saying that, I straddled over the mountain bike once again.

Since great care was required, I should have proceeded more slowly, carefully, dropping the pace to check the nameplates, but as I was now I didn't need to be painstaking about it.

The might of vampire eyesight was basically dynamic vision -- even my field of vision somehow became wider. Obviously it did not become a form of cheating, but I had confidence I wouldn't miss even one of the nameplates on the houses lined up on both sides even pedaling seriously.

Fired up enough to try a lap around, leaving not stone unturned in the area, checking all doors from end to end, I kicked the ground.

It was just a one-man door-to-door check.

I couldn't care less if my heart would break down.

Compared to what Hanekawa had done for me in Spring Break, a compound or comminuted fracture in my heart was really no big deal.

My determination though, in the end was in vain.

My determination always and everytime ended up as running in circles.

A belated effort.

If I had been really worried about Hanekawa, if I had really wanted to do something for her -- during the day, regardless of whether she refused or I was refused to speak, even if I was despised -- at that point I should have forcibly marched into her house.

It was really.

Too late.

"--Ah"

It was directly after I had finished speeding through the main street, and had turned the corner.

The time period being what it was, I had pushed my bike without crossing anybody, when in front of me suddenly.

Suddenly.

Like a surprise attack.

Abruptly.

Without any cause -- she appeared.

Defying any logic -- she appeared.

No, *she* was just there -- *it* was just there, so presenting it that way, as if she chose to appear in front of me, as if she was lying in wait for me, even, wouldn't be fair.

That would be a very self-centered way of thinking.

There was no such convenience.

It was neither inevitable nor a coincidence.

Simply, our reciprocal courses by force of circumstances collided, that was all -- I, for *her*, was nothing more than a really insignificant, microscopic existence, not worthy even to be aware of.

Just like -- a human for a kiai.

In the middle of the night, when even the illumination from the street light was unreliable.

What the LED light attached on the handle of my mountain bike was shining on -- what are you hiding, who is she.

You already know her, it was the class rep among class reps.

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

--Ah..... but"

But even so.

Nobody would look at her and consider her to be Hanekawa.

Even her parents would not recognize her.

This adjunct, in this case, was really full of irony--

".....Are you.....Hanekawa?"

She was white.

She was white.

She was white.

Her existence -- was pure white.

She was white like a bridal kimono.

It was not a metaphor on par with the Golden Week, but this was what people meant with fooling the snow<sup>[86]</sup>.

Hanekawa's beautiful hair, black as a crow's wet feather<sup>[87]</sup> was white as if it was transparent -- Hanekawa's skin, which even under normal circumstances had a pale pigmentation turned sickeningly white.

She had been transformed.

Only the brassiere and the panties, thought overwhelmed by that figure that looked as if she rushed out of the bathroom as she was, wearing neither shoes nor even socks -- just the color of that underwear was contrastively uniformly black.

It stood out.

Exceedingly -- black.



However, personally I recognized that black.

That was unmistakably the color Hanekawa was wearing during the day -- no way I would have forgotten it.

It was a dark black that sucked you in.

That was not the deciding factor, however I had confidence the entity in front of me was Hanekawa Tsubasa.

The shape of her hips -- no, that didn't matter.

And even if it did, I will stop here.

The problem was.

Rather than the fact that she was in her underwear, or that the color of her hair completely changed, looking too natural for her to have simply died it -- the most noticeable problem was.

--Nyaon"

The fact that on her head -- *cat ears* had grown.

Hindering -- Cat.

--Nyaon"

She -- purred.

She was vibrating her throat.

"Ha-Hanekawa"

"Ah -- what is it? Are you a friend of *mistress*?<sup>[88]</sup>"

Hanekawa -- no.

The Hindering Cat said.

That tone and type of voice, her facial expression too -- was light years from Hanekawa.

It didn't bear any connection with her.

The Hanekawa in front of me, while being Hanekawa, was not Hanekawa at all.

Hanekawa would never use that spoiled child coaxing voice<sup>[89]</sup>, and she would never show that fiendish facial expression, as if she was going to bite me any moment, totally in contrast with that

coaxing voice.

What was going on here.

What was this phenomenon.

While being Hanekawa -- she was completely different from Hanekawa.

She was so contrasting from her, so extremely different.

It was even not a contrast, she was her antipode.

Completely turned upside down -- and for this they were identical.

"Nya ha ha -- I thought I'd already seen you before. *You were there when mistress buried me* -- hmph. Then it's just perfect nya."

The Hinderer Cat said with a faint smile, indifferent to my confusion.

While her eyes thinned glaring me.

"I don't really get what it means, but friends help each others, right? Then I'll leave *them* to you nya."

She said.

With a thump, she threw something at my feet.

No, since she had thrown two things, the sound effect was thump thump -- was it two?

But it was like a single bundled mass.

A mere lump.

"Eh--"

As shocking things kept happening in succession, my mind was losing its normal functions -- that on the contrary might have been a good a thing.

It would end without me getting shocked for things like this.

Exactly.

For things like -- having two persons thrown at my feet.

".....!"

No, in the end I got shocked.

So shocked I couldn't speak.

I thought I was going to fall with my bike.

That was to say -- *where* on earth did the Hinderling Cat bring those two from?

Was she carrying them from start?

Looking at the situation, that was the only thing I could think, but -- in that case, was it all due to the impact of seeing Hanekawa in underwear and cat ears being so strong I didn't notice the two persons the Hinderling Cat was dangling?

Or.

Was it due to the fact those two persons even now weren't moving, as if they had been dead -- as if those were corpses, so I unconsciously drove them away from my consciousness?

"Lemme see. What was it -- ah, yeah. Seems those two are mistress' 'parents'. Or something."

The Hinderling Cat said.

With an evil laugh.

She seemed to be having fun, but -- it just seemed.

Nothing else.

"Anyway, in a word *they are unneeded* nya. No value in killing them. Not worthy harassing them. Completely worthless. That's why I'll ask you, friend, to dispose of them for me -- kill them if you wish to. Blame and get angry at masters."

And then the Hinderling Cat turned her back on me.

Imagining that since she grew cat ears she had grown even a cat tail might have been the negative influence of anime and manga -- sadly, to my regret, her buttocks were smooth and gently-sloping.

That was fitting.

Because the Hinderling Cat -- was a tailless cat.

"H-Hey! Wait! Hanekawa!"

I said, getting off my mountain bike like I kicked it away -- calling out to her. I stretched a hand. She looked like she was normally going back the road she came from, and I immediately run after her -- but it seemed it was not necessary.

Hanekawa.

She.

The Hindering Cat -- suddenly turned around.

"Wait, he dared to say."

She murmured.

She murmured, actually spitefully -- with killing intention.

All of a sudden she got furious at my instinctive words.

A blood vessel popped in her temple -- her pupils turned red.

She bared her fangs.

"Don't expect all sort of things from mistress, dummy!"

It's because you guys are like that that mistress is like this!

The instant she said it -- the Hindering Cat jumped at me.

No, depicting it as if she jumped at me would be too much of a lie, as barefaced<sup>[90]</sup> as a cat -- one could even call it bragging. The correct expression would be that I perceived when *she had finished jumping*.

However, this was also a terrifying truth.

It was a truth so terrifying I wanted to avoid the correct expression -- because as mentioned before I had just provided blood to the vampire little girl, in other words my body, eyesight included, had been strengthened -- the Hindering Cat unleashed a speed not even I was able to perceive.

There shouldn't have been anything I wasn't able to perceive now.

And the terrifying fact was not just that speed.

Her power was also incalculable.

Like a cat that captured a mouse -- she bit into my left arm, and just with the power of her fangs and jaw, together with the sleeve of my cloth, as if plucking a ripened fruit, she tore it off from my shoulder.

"Ah.....GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Unseemly and ungracefully, right in the center of a residential area, I raised a scream like that of a girl assaulted by a degenerate, but I hoped no person would blame me -- in Spring Break I had gone through many, really many mishaps, but my arm had never been torn off by brute force.

Besides, in Spring Break the level of my immortality had been different.

At the moment I didn't have a healing power that could regenerate a lost arm in an instant -- a large volume of blood overflowed from the shoulder like a water fountain.

It was such a volume of blood that would make people surprised that a human body could contain so much of it.

"Y.....YEEEEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!

"Don't kick a fuss for something like that"

Even if no person would blame me.

It seemed there was a cat who did -- while I was crouched prostrate under the streetlight, with my arm still in her mouth, she trampled on my head with a bare foot.

I couldn't move.

I couldn't resist.

I couldn't even shake off her foot from my head.

As if being subjected to that made my strength disappear -- I even felt a strange sensation.

In fact, it was as if being trampled on made the pain from my left shoulder calm down -- unbelievable!

Hanekawa trampled on me and my pain calmed down, what a pervert I was!

And more than having calmed down, it was as if the pain grew dull--

"If we compare *a pain like that* to what mistress had to bear, it's like being bitten by a mosquito."

".....This mistress of yours"

Is it Hanekawa, I tried to ask an obvious thing -- but I couldn't.

The reason was that I didn't have the strength to talk anymore -- but anyway, it was something so obvious I had no need to ask.

It was so clear.

It was so pure.

It was so innocent<sup>[91]</sup>.

It was completely evident -- it was all too clear.

"Ah, that's right. Hey, human"

The Hinderer Cat, therefore -- without I had to ask, answered me.

"Mistress has me now. You are unneeded. Parents, friends, all are unneeded. *Even mistress herself -- is unneeded.*"

And then she spat out my arm she was holding in her mouth -- as if it was garbage. That arm fell in front of my face, dropping blood.

"U-Unneeded, you say."

"I'll make mistress free -- more free than anyone else. You knew, right? This is what you guys were unable to do. You only bind mistress, you only put shackles on her--"

As first thing.

Let's start by relieving her from a planet-sized stress -- the Hinderer cat said.

And she jumped.

She flew, would be more correct to say<sup>[92]</sup>.

That was certainly more a flight than a leap.

Without bending much her knees, in an instant she lowered her barycenter, and with a small hop -- she passed over the lightpole, over the power cables, and over the roof of the house in front of her -- and she disappeared in the dark of the night.

That was not jump power.

It was not an action possible with the abilities of a human -- it was late to say this, but that was clearly the act of a kiai.

It was as if she grew wings.

Not wings on a tiger<sup>[93]</sup> -- wings on a cat.

".....Hanekawa"

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

A girl who possessed odd-shaped wings.

I really had no idea of what had happened to her and why it turned out like this, but one thing I was sure of was that Oshino's fears had been strikingly accurate.

He hit the bullseye.

All hits.

And -- in addition.

Once again I didn't make in time.

I was -- too late.

"Ah..... guh"

Sluggishly, I raised my body -- I picked up the left arm the Hinderer Cat dropped with my remaining right arm, and while surprised of how heavy it was, I stuck together the sections, though they were rough and not exactly clean cross-sections, anyway the mouths of the wounds, and I attempted a recovery.

Since I couldn't expect a self recovery, I could only use this *scrap* -- it was a healing technique I never used during Spring Break, but drawing on my miscellaneous knowledge of anime and manga vampires, by doing this, flesh, nerves and the like should connect.

"....."

Both Hanekawa and the Hinderer Cat had left my field of vision hazy like a haze -- there were just my mountain bike, lying on the side, and two persons likewise lying down.

Two persons.

Two parents -- father and mother.

Hanekawa's parents.

Hanekawa Tsubasa's father and Hanekawa Tsubasa's mother.

Not related by blood -- not related by heart, her family.

Family.

But I wondered why.

During the day, I had been so full of resentment against them, and now that I saw them lifeless, collapsed as if they were dead -- no strong emotions arose in me, I wondered why.

My anger didn't increase.

I was not overjoyed by their sorry state.

I didn't feel anything, nothing at all.

I couldn't blame or get angry at them.

I only thought -- they were just normally pitiful.

I only wanted to feel pity for them.

Strangely, those two should have only been Hanekawa's offenders -- but for some reason, to my eyes they only appeared as terrible victims.



After this point my memory lapsed for a while.

In other words, I lost consciousness due to the pain from having an arm torn off and the anemia from the massive blood loss -- however, in an episode that would make you think `surprisingly, Araragi-kun has some will-power!` or `You are pretty cool`, it seemed that, just before fainting, I still managed to take a number of actions that I should have taken.

I didn't remember any of that, though.

I heard that the human brain was built in a way that the memories you had right before losing consciousness would be completely erased, and that was exactly what had happened to me then.

I wished therefore to warn you in advance that hereupon blank and faint memories will be mixed together with shaky conjectures and doubtful rumors.

Anyway.

After the cat had left, what I considered the most important thing to do was to clean up this messy situation.

To clean up -- in fact nothing had ended yet, but just in case I dealt with the scene.

I used the cellphone and called an ambulance -- though I wasn't using my own cellphone. I used the one in the pocket of Hanekawa's father, who was lying down in front of me.

It might have been excessive caution, but I wanted to avoid leaving my own number in the first aid center. Even with a withheld number, I wasn't completely sure it could be concealed, and it was an emergency.

My voice would be recorded, but that was unavoidable -- or to better say, I thought my head had not been working that well. The blood which should have circulated in my brain had been completely spilled on the road.

On the other hand, there was a vampire there.

Usually -- setting aside if this was usual -- when dealing with a situation in which you sprinkled blood on the street in a residential area, you would need a large volume of water and a deck brush, but this phenomenon had to do with the kiai whose existence transcended physics.

My scattered blood, by the time I had finished explaining the address to the emergency department (although I believed that, not knowing when to give up, I had used a fake voice. An alien-like voice. Very unconvincing), was completely evaporated.

Still not having blood returning to my head, my reaction to that phenomenon was

"....."

I just stared absent-mindedly at the result, it didn't raise any big questions in me.

Questions.

No, of course I didn't feel any question about the blood evaporating -- it was a sight I got tired to look at in Spring Break.

Instead.

*The fact that the evaporation of the blood took a very long time* -- this should have raised a question in me.

The phenomenon of the street being drenched in my blood for the long period of time until I had finished my phone call -- this *bizarre phenomenon* was evidently anomalous.

"....."

However, I was also hopelessly certain that I had no time nor composure to wrack my brain. The ambulance I had called turned up in the blink of an eye. I heard those ambulances often made the rounds before delivering to a hospital, but as for the speed they arrived at the scene, they deserved to be gaped at.

And thus I had to flee without further ado.

My body (especially at this moment) did not have a constitution I could show to people doctors -- if I really had to, I'd try animal doctors.

For an operation like forcibly sticking an arm that had been torn off, I could only see someone like Doctor Kamiya<sup>[94]</sup> working on a day off.

With unsteady feet, somehow I picked up my mountain bike, straddled it, and ran away at full speed.

Obviously at that point I was already unable to remember my mental state, but if I had to dub my state with a monologue, it would be

"Waaah! I'm through with kiai!"

and as I fled with my bike, my back would be enclosed by a black circle -- unfortunately, nothing had ended yet.

There was not even an ad break.

Horrible as it was, there was no interruption..... it was all going on.

I completely forgot what happened along the way, but seeing as my clothes, which didn't receive any particular blow from the Hinderer Cat, had torn spots -- for example the knees, or the sleeve of the right arm -- it seemed that while pedaling I had tumbled with my bike a few times.

*Since those scratches were completely healed by the time I woke from the swoon --* I didn't realize it until Oshino pointed it out to me afterwards.

It meant I had been so dazed that I couldn't even be aware that I had fallen over.

That I couldn't think anything.

That I didn't want to think anything.

Inside such cloudy thoughts, I turned the handlebar of my mountain bike -- not toward my home where my sisters were sleeping, but toward the abandoned building of the cram school ruin.

You could say at that point I had unconsciously renounced to be woken up by my sisters the next morning -- and then.

And then.

And then at last, my consciousness bridged with the present.

It was connected.

In other words, as I arrived at the abandoned building, I had completely fainted -- though not a tenacity worthy a 'You were great', I could receive at least the 'You did very well' seal.

".....Ah"

It was not an unknown ceiling<sup>[95]</sup>, it was a ceiling I recognized.

Since I kept being woken up and I rarely had woken up on my own, waking up spontaneously was a sensation I wasn't familiar with.

Since Spring Break, at least.

Right now though -- rather than this unfamiliar sensation, what was more intense was the pain running through my left shoulder the instant I twisted my body trying to get up, so I couldn't let myself indulge in that surreal feeling.

"Ugh..... this place"

No need to utter those melodramatic words.

This place was the fourth floor of the abandoned building.

It was the classroom where I had let the vampire little girl eat doughnuts last night--

"But, whoa"

I was quietly surprised.

To tell the truth, I wished to have a bigger reaction (I wanted to bend backward and do a handstand), but the cramp pain in my left shoulder wouldn't let me.

Lying down right beside me there was the aforementioned vampire little girl.

She was right beside my head.

She was squatting, grasping her own knees.

It was an angle where I was able to completely see the inside of the bottom part of her dress -- by the way, according to the anime, disturbingly, under her dress she -- but let's leave that aside.

The question was rather the gaze the vampire little girl was sending me.

It wasn't the usual gaze full of resentment and hate -- of course, it was neither the greedy gaze of when she saw Mr. Donuts.

How could I say.

It was -- a scornful gaze.

Rather than a gaze which could kill, it was a gaze that made you want to kill yourself, it was that kind of expression.

It would never give the impression she had worried because I didn't regain consciousness for a while, and stood right beside me looking after me -- she had no reason at all to nurse me.

In fact, it was like her gaze was saying this.

`Pathetic`

`A shame to your kind`

`You are in these miserable conditions for just a cat`

`Are you still a vampire subordinate--`

.....How ridiculous.

`Saying this`, really.

As if -- she would say something to me.

As if she would speak.

I gave the impression we could communicate without words. If I looked more carefully, it was just the usual sour look.

Simply, she was nearer than usual, and I was looking up from below, so I perceived a different feeling from usual.

A vampire was a vampire.

A human was a human.

We were two eternally endlessly parallel straight lines.

Because me and her -- in Spring Break broke up for ever.

There was no way now she would treat me as a subordinate.

She wouldn't do it for me.

At most, she was just wondering whether to suck my blood while I wasn't awake or not -- currently for her someone like me was only a source of nutrients that maintained her existence.

Or maybe something like a battery charger.

Even so.

I must be satisfied that she was at least wanting to live.

"Are you awake, Araragi-kun?"

As if waiting for the right timing -- the door of the classroom opened, and the Aloha old man, Oshino Meme, entered inside.

"You are quite the late riser -- I got tired of waiting for you. The sun had already sunk"

"Eh?"

The sun sank?

Eh? Don't tell me it was already this late?

Did I sleep for so long, so deeply? In a flurry I checked the cell phone, and the date displayed was indeed `APR 30th PM 5:20`.

Eeeh?

Have I slept for more than 12 hours?

"More than sleeping, you should say you were comatose -- you could even call it an impairment of consciousness. I thought you were going to die"

Ha ha, Oshino had a little laugh.

Contrary to his words, he laughed as if he was really mocking me for simply being a late riser.

It was the usual behavior of Oshino, but, right now--

"Ah -- Oshino! Hanekawa!"

"Yeah, I already know. I have heard about it -- class rep-chan had *become* a cat, right?"

Turns out my fears were accurate.

said Oshino, and after nodding he turned to the vampire little girl and

"Vampire-chan, it's enough"

he said.

Hearing those words, the vampire little girl got up, sluggishly, like a rock covered by moss, and with a forced, unsteady, disoriented gait got out of the classroom.

She didn't even close the door.

"Eh.....?"

My head was full of question marks.

"What's this, Oshino? Why is she awake at this hour? It's because she was awake that I was sure it was just before dawn....."

"Oh no no. It's because your wound was very severe -- I had her collaborate with me just a little"

Oshino pointed at my left shoulder.

Now that I looked at it, that part was wrapped in a bandage -- it was a bizarre bandage, written all over with weird brush writing as if it was a charm, but a bandage nonetheless.

"You two are connected even too much -- you could say you are linked. You're a pairing. Even for the regenerative power you are working together. Accordingly, the shorter the distance, the more the strength of that skill increases -- therefore, by having her stand nearby, your regenerative power is raised"

"Oh....."

So it was that.

It meant that for my sake she was forced to pull an all dayer (?) -- the reason why I felt the atmosphere was different from usual might have been because of that.

Though indeed it was not like she looked after me.

The one who had been charged was me, huh.

And I had even thought something cruel like she was undoubtedly wondering whether to suck my blood or not.

"Thank her, afterwards. If she wasn't there, perhaps that arm would have gone necrotic"

"Necrotic..... you mean that necrosis?"

Anyway, if she hadn't been there, I would have been done for the moment it was torn off by the Hinderling Cat in the first place.

"I must say I really didn't expected it. Even though I shouldn't wish for Spring Break's recovery power, it was right after I provided her blood -- I thought I should have had more regenerative power. Preconceptions are scary. I was convinced that if I glued back my arm it would have immediately been restored"

"Really? Did you challenge the Hinderling Cat planning to sacrifice an arm from the start?"

"Ah no, I didn't mean it like that--"

I hadn't challenged.

I hadn't even had the intention to fight -- before I could notice she had torn it off, that was all.

"--but if this arm had healed more quickly, I wouldn't have let the Hinderling Cat escape, I think. I guess I was wrong in expecting so much from my degree of immortality"

"Oh no -- what's wrong, in this case, is your knowledge about the Hinderling Cat, Araragi-kun"

Thereupon Oshino said.

"Right now your immortality power should be able to withstand considerable wounds. Because, as you said, it's immediately right after. Except for fatal wounds, you should be able to regenerate in an instant -- however, in this case, you fought a tough opponent"

Maybe it was the match more than the opponent.

It was a tough match.

While I was half raised on the bed, Oshino got closer, and while unwrapping the bandage (-like thing) on my left shoulder, he continued.

"The Hindering Cat -- is out of your league"

"O-Out of my league, you say"

"A wound received when the Hindering Cat hindered you -- when it touched you<sup>[96]</sup> won't be simply damage. Don't touch a cat or you will get cursed<sup>[97]</sup>. Let's see. Araragi-kun, do you know what energy drain is?"

"Energy drain.....?"

I had heard of it before.

But then again, it was something I knew from anime and manga, so I couldn't say I was an expert about it--

"But, isn't energy drain more like a special characteristic of vampires? I think that during Spring Break I heard that blood sucking is an action meant to extract the life force of humans"

"That's true. However, it's not like vampires have the monopoly over that -- spiritual hindering, we could call it. Since it doesn't create subordinates, it has a slightly different implication compared to the vampire one. In itself, that's the Hindering Cat's original skill"

"Hmmm -- in other words, when my arm was torn off, *even my immortality* was torn off--"

That was why the regeneration had been slow.

Even the evaporation of the blood flown out had been slow.

A tough match.

Our powers -- meshed and clashed with each other.

It made sense.

It was not just the arm -- Hanekawa's parents too. They were debilitated, motionless and senseless like they were dead, but there was no visible wound.

I had called the ambulance without understanding what had been done to them, what had been done to them in the first place, what was it that had debilitated them so much -- them suffering energy drain damage would explain that situation.

They had been incapacitated.

What had sapped their strength -- was the effect of energy drain.

"Unlike vampire energy drain, there is no need to directly suck blood, so in a sense it's an indirect type -- as you have experienced with your body, the way it works itself is primitively direct, and it's a



real threat. Fangs are not the only things you need to be careful about -- if it touches you, you are out"

"That's -- the Hindering Cat, huh"

That was crazy.

Oshino had finished peeling off the bandage, and I looked at part in question -- from its appearance, it seemed it had healed without leaving scars.

It was not just the vampire little girl stood close, it seemed even the strange bandage had had its effectiveness.

.....

I had helped him in his work in order to write off my debt, could it be that as a result with this my debt had further increased?

That faint suspicion passed through my mind, but I shook it off from my head. Anyway.

"I didn't know much about this kiai, this Hindering Cat, but this energy drain that can defeat the immortality of a vampire is certainly a threat. I am lucky that it was the arm that got bitten off, if it had been my head I wouldn't have been even able to tie it back and I would have died"

".....Ah, oh no no, sorry if my words misled you, Araragi-kun"

In my murmur I had leaked even some relief, but Oshino waved his hand and replied.

"When I said it was a tough match, I meant it in the sense that it was tough for you, Araragi-kun -- not in the sense that in terms of abilities the Hindering Cat rivals the vampire"

"Eh?"

"After all, the vampire is the king of kiai -- the monarch, the ruler. Even if they have both the energy drain, their rank is different. The gap between them is absolute. The monster society is a society more vertical than human society. There is absolutely no competition between the Hindering Cat's energy drain and the vampire's blood sucking. The threat is just a threat for humans -- for the vampire it's just a small fish"

"Small fish--"

And that -- would be a small fish?

*That thing?*

It didn't look like that at all, though.

However, if a specialist like Oshino said so, then it had to be true.

"Araragi-kun, right after you give blood to vampire-chan, you partly become a vampire, but in the battle that extent came to light. You are definitively a human. There is no way you can win against an actual kiai"

"An actual -- kiai"

"If you had the immortality you had in Spring Break -- if you had preserved it, even if vampire-chan was the shadow of her former self like now, the Hinderer Cat would be no match for you. Whether you got torn off an arm or a head, in an instant you would regenerate, and you wouldn't get torn off by sheer strength in the first place"

"....."

Well.

She was a Hinderer Cat and at the same time -- she should have been Hanekawa.

If that was the case, then like it had happened for me in Spring Break -- Hanekawa too was not possessed or the like -- her existence had *become* a kiai.

She turned into a kiai.

She turned into a monster.

"It is certain that this kiai brings out body changes, but I don't know it well. I have to investigate it -- at any rate, it's certain that I was too late"

Oshino said.

"I easily defiled the cat grave you told me about -- *nothing was buried in it*. Unless I got the place wrong, this is practically the worst it could get"

".....I see"

The worst, huh.

I couldn't be bothered to confirm the place Oshino dug up -- it would be no use.

Because the proof he was too late.

I had already seen it.

I had already ogled it.

I had already overlooked it.

"Hmm. That said, it seems your injury is progressing well -- looks like the *inside* has yet to connect

completely, but at this pace by tomorrow it'll be healed"

Oshino said, and tapped the top of my left shoulder -- it was a light tap, and yet I felt a pain (a fair pain) permeating inside the body, but it seemed that that was `progressing well` according to the specialist.

It seemed, it seemed.

I wasn't sure at all about it.

"Vampire-chan -- ah, she is already sleeping, so thank her the next time. Well, for her it would be a trouble if you died, so it's natural she would at least attend upon you for a day"

".....Still, I was glad to hear. She deemed me, her source of nutrients, necessary, and that means she is trying to live, at least"

"Naah. It didn't mean that"

Poor fish, murmured Oshino.

What's that.

I feel like I was rebuked for no reason, you know.

"Oh well. Anyway, Araragi-kun, get home before your relatives get worried about you"

"Eh?"

"The cell phone inside your pocket buzzed quite a lot. That's the vibe function, I think"

Since he had mentioned it, I checked once again the screen of my cell phone -- before I was interested only in the date, so I hadn't noticed, but when I looked at the unanswered calls and received mails, things got crazy.

Calls : 146

Mails : 209

Scaryyyyyyy!

Whoa..... I had suspected it before proceeding forward, but perhaps they were all from Karen and Tsukuhi.....

Scary, scary, scary, scary!

Last thing, they were all one ring call and empty mail, weren't they!?

"This is harassment level"

Good grief.

I was indeed one who didn't wake easily.

As a result of being shaken like that while resting, I had been unable to sleep quietly. Though they had not managed to, my sisters really deserved praise for trying to wake me up even when we were that far away. Why don't they just die.

"*Unlike class rep-chan*, you have a family that worries about you -- you have to go back, Araragi-kun"

"Ah, no -- this was not worrying or the like--"

Hm?

What, `unlike class rep-chan`?

What did he mean?

I believed that not even when I had got back here in this abandoned building by the skin of my teeth and still dazed I had reported the damage I had talked about Hanekawa's family situation to Oshino -- was it a figure of speech, or a conjecture?

Was it the usual seeing through?

Was it that he thought of Hanekawa's parents as victims, so that sort of words would get out even if he didn't know anything -- no, how?

As a nuance -- no.

More importantly -- first of all.

"Give me a break, Oshino -- this wound is nothing. There's no way I can go back with my tail between my legs when Hanekawa has become that thing. Hindering Cat or whatnot, I have to quickly catch it and exorcise it--"

"In Spring Break"

Sighing, Oshino interrupted what I was trying to say.

He interrupted me with words.

"In Spring Break, class rep-chan saved you -- so this time you want do the same and save her? Am I right, Araragi-kun?"

".....You are"

I hesitated to agree with the way he put it, weirdly tinged of confirmation and conviction, with plenty of sarcasm and malice -- but in the end I agreed.

In my heart it was as he said, if nothing else.

Somehow, wording it like that felt like it strayed from the truth -- but certainly it was as he said.

No, even if it wasn't that.

"When friends are in trouble, saving them is the natural thing to do"

I said.

While remembering a conversation with the Hinderer Cat that was not really a conversation.

"Hmm. Those are not your words, Araragi-kun -- they come from class rep-chan. What was it? If I can't die for him, then I won't call myself a friend -- I think. Class rep-chan has a sense of values that belongs to the three kingdoms period. We vow that even if our day of birth was different, the time and place of our death will be the same<sup>[98]</sup> -- was it? If she lived in that period, she could have become a great commander, I think"

".....Don't liken a girl to a commander"

"However, Araragi-kun, that's impossible"

Flatly, clearly.

Oshino said, like an ultimatum.

"You can't do what class rep-chan does. And it's not just you -- neither can I, neither can anyone. Nobody can do what class rep-chan does"

You have to realize it now.

Touching once again my shoulder, Oshino continued.

"When friends are in trouble, saving them is the natural thing to do, in itself might be true. However Araragi-kun, it's a prerogative of the chosen ones to make natural things natural. It's not something an ordinary person like you or a mediocre like me can do. Wanting to be like class rep-chan, wanting to pay her back, wanting to imitate her, I understand these feelings. However -- that's *something one mustn't do*"

"Something -- one mustn't do"

"It's a forbidden game"

Oshino said.

"That girl is more kawaii than a kawaii. More monster than a monster. If you carelessly try to imitate her you'll get yourself hurt"

"Imitate her -- Oshino, what I was saying was not"

"*What I am saying is this.* Anyway, psychological argument aside"

Oshino moved the hand placed on my shoulder over my head.

As if.

An adult who was patting a child.

"The real problem is that things had already started. From here on it's a pro's job. It's not the rising curtain for an amateur, especially a minor"

"....."

"Araragi-kun. Perhaps you are feeling some responsibility. I should have stopped her from burying the cat, I should have listened more, maybe you are thinking something like that. Personally I think there is no responsibility for those things, but I do not think there is absolutely nothing you won't regret or retrospect over either. However -- even if this situation was all your responsibility, it doesn't mean you have to be the one who must resolve it"

"Eh....."

"As a neutral balancer, I respect the place where responsibility lies, but in human society, to not say the world, not everything works that way. You must not think that what you say is righteous. Even if the responsible guy didn't assume his responsibilities, things would get solved by accident. That's a common opinion, anyway"

It's not like you always have to give your all every time.

You don't have that obligation.

Said Oshino, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Even in Spring Break, when you became a vampire, you really gave your all -- but even if you didn't, and secretly shut yourself in this ruin, by accident everything might have been resolved normally"

"There"

I -- couldn't accept Oshino's words.

"There's -- no way it might have. And even assuming it might have -- that was something I had to do. The same as this time"

"Something you have to do? Might be. However -- you are not able to do it"

"....."

"This time there is nothing you can do, Araragi-kun"

Oshino said, strongly emphasizing it.

"I am a frivolous person, so it may not seem that way, but -- I'm sorry that you had to receive such a serious wound. I think that even though it was just the prevention step, I shouldn't have had you help me. I am a failure as a balancer. I disregarded the theory and went against the policy. The damage you received this time was largely my mistake. I apologize to your parents"

Araragi-kun, you have already fulfilled plenty your duty.

He didn't look like he was comforting me, and he didn't seem very serious either.

It went without saying that instead he looked like he was amused by my sense of powerlessness, however Oshino solemnly declared.

"Araragi Koyomi-kun. From here on -- there is nothing you can do. You can do nothing for class rep-chan. Even if you want to, you can't. It's not a matter of feelings, it's about skill and power. If I had to say it, your most important work will be not getting in my way"

In no way able to put up big objections, let alone small ones, to Oshino's really blunt, if not even harsh words of rebuff, after that I left the abandoned building with my tail between my legs.

Nothing surprising.

After *only* having become a vampire for a mere two weeks, though a hellish two weeks for me nonetheless -- with only the side-effects barely remaining in my body, in a case like this, there was nothing I could do.

Talk about reducing someone to silence.

I was not a specialist and neither a professional -- from here on this territory belonged only to him, Oshino Meme.

*A mere friend.*

Could have done -- nothing.

.....No, that was another excuse.

A vindication.

I was just putting on airs.

I was just putting on airs, and unseemly so.

The truth was more simple -- in the end, the key thing here was that Hanekawa herself was not seeking help from the likes of me.

Oshino didn't.

Oshino didn't refuse mine -- Hanekawa did.

Back then, Hanekawa certainly -- refused my aid.

Don't get involved.

Don't even act like you knew.

She obstinately, harshly -- refused it.

No room for negotiation or hints of compromise.



Therefore, as Oshino said, if there ever was something I could do -- that would have been not getting in his way.

Ability-wise, emotionally-wise and obligation-wise.

At the moment it was not what I should do.

It was stay out of it.

That said -- even though I understood it with my head, even though I meant to accept it, I couldn't but feel a fuzzy prickliness remaining inside my chest, and after I exited the abandoned building, suddenly I lost the will to go back straight home.

Without obediently turning back home -- not feeling eager at all to go back to the house where my sisters would have warmly welcome me, far from it, I turned the handlebar towards the completely opposite direction.

That was to say -- I headed to the place where I encountered the Hindering Cat before.

To do what?

I wasn't trying to do anything.

I was not thinking that if I headed there, I could meet again the Hindering Cat -- Hanekawa.

I was not planning another meeting.

I was not crying over spilt milk -- simply, I wanted to at least accomplish a mission that got terminated midway.

In other words finding Hanekawa's house.

It was completely obvious even to me that at this point doing so was pointless, but for some reason I couldn't keep myself from doing so.

Maybe I was still confused.

Maybe things like Hanekawa getting harmed by a kaii, or being able to see her in cat's ears and underwear, made me lose my calm.

If nothing else, I was not the sensible kind of man who paid any mind to the fact that, now that Hanekawa had disappeared in the night, and her parents had been carried to hospital, her uninhabited house didn't have the doors locked.

I arrived immediately in the place, and after searching absentmindedly left and right through the residential area, I found Hanekawa's house supprisingly easily.

Hanekawa's nameplate.

Under the nameplate, there were the names of the two parents; near them, slightly distanced -- slightly distanced, there was written the name 'Tsubasa', so the possibility this was just an homonym was remarkably low.

A very normal ready-built single house.

It seemed.

It didn't look like domestic violence or neglect were perpetrated inside this two-storied house, at least.

However, the fact that 'Tsubasa' was written in hiragana, denoting a very young girl<sup>[99]</sup> -- seemed to exude a little strain.

For how long.

For how long had this nameplate not been replaced -- for example.

How come they didn't remake it in accordance to her growth -- for example.

Was the mere dismantling of it that bothersome -- for example.

I thought.

I thought some unnecessary things.

I thought some infuriating things.

Despite I couldn't do anything even if I thought.

Despite there was nothing I could do.

I opened the door, and I headed toward the entranceway as if guided -- however, when I tried to pull the handle, I found the door was locked.

".....?"

Here comes the question.

That Hindering Cat who called Hanekawa her mistress -- how could I say it, it didn't look like it had much brains.

I mean, I couldn't perceive in it not even a glimpse of intelligence.

I think even beasts are actually more clever.

You could say it didn't even had a fragment of brightness.

That Hinderer Cat didn't seem able to handle a culture peculiar to humans such as keys -- no, maybe it didn't have to pass through the entranceway.

It would actually be more natural for a cat to pass through a window.

I left the entranceway and clocked around the house, looking for open windows. Each window was shut tight though -- even the shutters were closed.

What does this mean, I started tilting my head in doubt -- then I noticed the existence of windows on the second floor.

That's right, its jump power.

Its jump power which could seemingly reach the moon.

It didn't necessarily passed through the first floor. Noticing that, I went around the house another time, and finally this time my speculations were right, I had discovered an open window on the second floor.

Hmm.

Hmm hmm.

Since I came thus far, there was no jumping this ship now.

Luckily, at the moment my physical power had been somewhat improved -- even if jumping to the second floor with a cat-like leap was impossible, I could crawl up the wall.

Put your will into it and your mind won't falter -- once sure to avoid people's attention, I started climbing.

And then I arrived--

".....?"

--and I tilted my head.

I put a hand on the open window, nimbly moved aside the curtain bent by the night wind, look inside, and tilted my head.

No.

I was certain this open window was the window of Hanekawa's room -- since by elimination the Hinderer Cat could have jumped out grabbing Hanekawa's parents by the scruff of the neck only from this window, that conjecture seemed appropriate. In fact I didn't recognize it as a conjecture, I was

really believing that.

However I was wrong.

This room here was something like a study.

Perhaps it was the room of Hanekawa's father.

I couldn't tell.

To begin with, I never heard what was the job of Hanekawa's father.

Anyway, this kind of workroom at least was not the room of a female high schooler.

"Uhhmm"

While still clinging to the wall like Spider-Man, I skillfully, if I do say so myself, took off my shoes and trespassed Hanekawa's house.

That was a full blown trespassing, but by clinging at the wall I was already a plenty suspicious figure, no jumping this ship -- though in fact I was practically a stowaway.

However.

I should have considerate the possibility this ship was a slave ship.

To put it another way -- going with the flow of the story, without any real purpose I perpetrated the criminal offense of trespassing, an unprecedented divine punishment awaited me.

An unprecedented divine punishment.

I.

Araragi Koyomi, with his shoes in one hand, took a tour inside Hanekawa's house -- the uninhabited Hanekawa's house -- a second tour, a third tour, a fourth tour--

"----!"

I ran away.

Though I could have gone out from the entranceway, that idea didn't even come to my mind, and went back to the window of the room the looked like a study from which I had went in, as if blindly believing that tracing my actions backward would have rewinded time and would have made everything as if it never happened. I dove from the open window.

Naturally I fell.

It was a direct fall to the asphalt, without any landing stance or anything, with my left arm finally

connected back risking to pop out again -- you could call it a crash, but I didn't care about the pain.

Almost in a panic, without a moment's delay, I ran on all fours toward my mountain bike parked in front of the house, and with a speed that could have worn out the chain I left the place.

I left Hanekawa's house.

As if it was repulsive.

As if it was evil -- no.

I purely felt disgusted -- I even felt like I was going to vomit.

I couldn't but regret I did something unnecessary. I didn't even know which road I took, which indirect detour I took, but I noticed I had arrived at home -- and I wasn't even thinking of going back.

In any case.

I just wanted to run away.

Instinctively -- I went back home.

"Ah. Brother. Welc--"

As I opened the door, with a puzzling sense of timing, Tsukihi was there -- guessing from her casual attire of a thin T-shirt over her underwear, perhaps she was just out of the bath or something -- she seemed to notice me, but before finishing saying 'ome home', I entered the corridor with my shoes on, and I hugged her tightly.

Tightly, tightly, tightly.

"Whoaa! Unexpected passionate hug! What's with this pervert brother!"

"....."

Tsukihi was shocked by the eccentricities of her blood brother and was openly disgusted, however I couldn't help but doing so.

Not because she was Tsukihi.

Be it Karen, be it everyone -- I couldn't have helped but hugging the first person I met.

No, it was not hugging.

I couldn't help but -- clinging at her.

I couldn't help but -- holding on to her.

If I didn't, my existence would crumble.

My mind would collapse.

I was like a drowning man clutching a straw.

In fact my shivering, my clattering, my helpless vibration was perfectly transmitted to her.

I got the jitters.

Call me a chicken, call me anything.

What's wrong in having the jitters from terror.

What's wrong in shivering and freezing.

Such -- was the intensity of the impact from that house.

A single house.

In terms of size, it might be even bigger than the house where I live.

There were six rooms.

And yet -- in that house.

*In Hanekawa's house, there was not a room for Hanekawa--*

"WWWWWWWWW"

Scary. Scary. Scary.

So scary not even Spring Break could compare -- so scary those hellish memories had been rewritten as something extremely idillic, so scary that Spring Break had been repainted as two weeks where nothing really changed.

She didn't have a room.

And -- there were no traces of her.

Even though as a child she had been handed around from person to person, it should be close to 15 years she had been living in that house -- and yet, no matter how much I wandered inside that house, I had not been able to find any trace of Hanekawa there.

Each house has its own peculiar scents.

The longer people live there the more scents -- however, among those scents, Hanekawa's one was not blending in -- Hanekawa Tsubasa was so separated from that house that I thought I got the wrong

one.

No.

Of course -- if I took into consideration things like the school uniform hanged on the wall of the dining room, the textbooks and reference books lined up in the library-like room, the underwear shelved in the bathroom, the folded futon in the corridor, the phone battery charger plugged in the consent under the stairs, or the school shoes place beside the entranceway -- I would think Hanekawa had really been living in that house.

Just think.

However -- she lived there as if it was a hotel.

She was not even a freeloader.

I had been naive -- I was still viewing things optimistically.

Despite seeing her face hit by her father, a part of me still believed that Hanekawa was all right, that Hanekawa was all right because she was Hanekawa, that she was certainly all right, that there was no way Hanekawa was not all right.

Even now that she had been possessed by the Hinderling Cat.

All right -- what an idiot I am.

"WWWWWW"

She was ruined.

Hanekawa was already ruined.

That kind of thing.

Was insurmountable -- it was impossible to amend.

To say it with one word, it was madness.

A frenzied frenzy.

By leaving it to Oshino, certainly before long Hanekawa would be secured, and the Hinderling Cat would be quickly exorcised by that Aloha old man -- but this story at least would not have a happy end where Hanekawa would reconcile with her long time estranged parents, dispelling a long standing discord and live happily ever after.

There was no end.

There was no end to the worse.

That house.

That household.

That family.

Was already finished -- excessively so.

"WWWWWWW -- WAAAAAH!"

".....Good grief. It can't be helped, brother. There there, now it's all gone"

My body kept increasing its shivering and my voice was close to a scream. Tsukihi, my sister 4 years younger, patted my head with a tolerant smile.

And then she closed her eyes and gently protruded her lips,

"Here. Go for it"

She said,

"How disgusting!"

I thrust away my sister.

Violently.

"Kyaan! Is that the way to treat a sister's devotion, brother!?"

"Educational coaching time! Just how much do my sisters live on the spur of the moment!?"

"Can't be helped, I'm your little sister!"

"Ugh!"

That put me on the spot.

Nobody lived on the spur of the moment as much as me.

However, I felt like I lived using my head more -- anyway, I swear that I don't live on spinal reflexes alone, to say nothing of a life similar to that of a spineless unicellular organism.

That was what I believed, at least.

In any case, due to the disgusting devotion of my younger sister, for the time being I had stopped shivering.



What you need is a family -- they say.

A family.

A family, huh.

I inevitably associated that word with Hanekawa's father and mother who had been carried to hospital, and probably were still hospitalized even now -- and I became gloomy.

The reason for sympathizing with them was really nonexistent -- still, I thought of them that way.

Living in that house for nearly 15 years.

Was certainly not a happy family environment even for them--

"Anyway, I was worried"

Tsukihi said.

While putting on on the spot the yukata she was carrying under her arm, which she probably meant to wear after going up on the second floor.

"Because you weren't coming back"

"Eh?"

Though late I closed the entranceway door left open.

I even took off my shoes.

"Ah, I'm sorry for staying out overnight without telling you, but it's not something you need to worry about, at this point"

"Indeed, it can't be compared to your self-discovery journey in Spring Break"

"....."

Ah right, the Spring Break incident inside the Araragi family became known as that.

There was no way to correct them.

My sisters even now sometimes called me 'self-discovery-kun', but I had to grin and bear it.

"But Karen and me were worried you met a monster by chance"

".....A monster?"

I got startled for an instant because she had nailed it, but -- no, no way, it's not possible, I tried to hide

my panic.

"Monster, you say..... what's that? You believe in that stuff even in middle school?"

"Hm"

I said that as if teasing her -- but Tsukihi's reaction was quite the ambiguous one. She placed one finger on her small chin, with a pensive look.

"By monster I mean a bakeneko<sup>[100]</sup>"

"Bake -- neko?"

I -- repeated Tsukihi's words.

I simply repeated them like an idiot.

Bakeneko?

"Yes"

Tsukihi said.

It was not the face of one saying a joke -- it was a serious face.

An honest one.

It was the face of the staff officer of the Fire Sisters, who bragged to be justice itself.

"At this stage is still a rumor, so I can't say much, but -- *a cat monster in the shape of a human* has been assaulting people in this city here and there"

"....."

A cat monster in the shape of a human.

I guessed such fitting, accurate and even qualified expression really existed.

Overly vague.

Overly exact.

"Assaulting -- people, you say. What do you mean by that?"

"As I said, we still don't know much about it -- if that bakeneko *touches* you, you become exhausted, and you suddenly lose your strength -- anyway you'll faint"

Becoming exhausted, losing your strength, it was an explanation that felt a little vague -- but *knowing*

*the correct answer in advance* like I did, that much was clear.

Energy drain.

"Since when?"

"Eh?"

"I mean -- when did the first person got assaulted by that bakeneko?"

"Who knows. We don't know the details well -- it's still under investigation, but the rumor reached our place this day. That's why I became worried about you, and I called your phone like a devil"

"....."

My sister had good intuition.

Though at the same time she was also late and missed the target -- at that point, I had been already assaulted by the bakeneko, and fell in battle.

However -- I see.

It was that, huh.

Last night, after handing over Hanekawa's parents, the Hinderer Cat assaulted the neighborhours, huh.

There had been other damage beside me and Hanekawa's parents.

Now I could understand.

I thought Oshino had been weirdly proactive -- if the victim was only Hanekawa, as a neutral balancer he would have never embarked on a job so actively.

*It was because other victims had appeared.*

No.

*It was because Hanekawa herself had been possessed by the cat and became the offender* -- that the specialist set out.

But there was something I didn't understand.

Why did the Hinderer Cat -- *assault people?*

You could say there was something strange when a nocturnal kawaii moved during daytime -- didn't Oshino said that the Hinderer Cat does not actively harm people that way?

.....No.

Maybe the Hinderer Cat himself was not aware it was assaulting people -- in most cases kiai don't care at all about humans.

The vampire that views humans as a source of nutrients, as tanks filled with blood was still better; most kiai saw no value in the existence of humans itself.

For humans, kiai were the same.

The same thing whether they were there or not -- practically this case.

That was why, unlike what it did to me, tearing off an arm or bite, if it was just an unconscious energy drain -- it was possible that 'assault' was just the self-righteous viewpoint of the human side.

It could even be that imprudent and rowdy passerbies, seeing a girl in underwear and cat's ears, made unwanted advances.

The victims maybe just suffered a counterattack.

I at least would not leave such catchy character alone -- no, better leave that aside.

I meant to say.

It had really become a serious matter.

"I'm relieved you weren't a victim, but in this situation, as the avatar of justice, as the Fire Sisters we can't stay silent! Karen-chan is now getting ready to hunt the bakeneko!"

".....No"

What could I say.

Was even monster exorcism included among the jobs of these allies of justice, the Fire Sisters?

Underworld detectives<sup>[101]</sup>, even.

Anyway, normally I would just rebuke the Fire sisters for their activities a little and leave them alone -- however this time that would have been a little dangerous.

It was different from female middle schoolers' tests of courage.

If they became victims of the energy drain all the better, were they to show open hostility toward the Hinderer Cat -- they might end up with a torn arm like me.

Tsukihi and Karen were not immortal like me, they would die instantly.

Karen was fairly confident about her abilities, but if we could defeat the cat with karate we wouldn't have these problems -- we had a Nyanko-sensei<sup>[102]</sup> here.

Nyanko-sensei used judo, was it?

On the other hand, these were not sisters I could stop -- the more I stopped them, the more eager they would become and the harder they would try, they are that type of person.

They burned to excess.

Fire Sisters.

"Hm? What's wrong, brother? 'No' what?"

".....I meant no, that would be a problem for me"

Tsukihi looked at my face doubtfully, and while sighing deep inside my heart, reluctantly, against my will, I started talking.

A full blown monotone.

"I was so scared from going back home through the streets at night by bike, and now you made me hear that frightening story about the bakeneko, I'm completely trembling, I'm a chicken, I can't sleep alone now. So I thought that, starting from today, I could have slept together with you and Karen-chan for a while, but if you have to mobilize for justice's sake, I guess I have to give up. I could count only on you two"

"What? Do you count on us alone?"

She ate the bait.

My foolish sister ate the bait.

"It can't be helped, then! My trembling brother is too pitiful, I will persuade Karen! We'll leave the bakeneko to the police!"

".....Thank you"

She was a last born who had really no resistance when her brother counted on her.

Well.

As you see.

If there ever was something I could do for Hanekawa's sake, maybe it was not getting in Oshino's way, and sleeping together with my sisters.

On the other hand, I couldn't deny I had some remaining fears. The Hindering Cat's energy drain somehow didn't seem to be a lethal skill, but it was not hard to imagine that as a supernatural power, if pushed too far, it would have endangered the life of somebody -- in addition, the Hindering Cat had even the sheer power to tear a man's arm off simply by biting it.

Even its speed and jump power tremendously surpassed human imagination.

In other words -- if the situation was not solved quickly, it was possible that there would have been casualties.

That there would have been victims and deaths.

That someone would have died.

It was possible that Hanekawa would have killed.

Through my brave sacrifice I had somehow stopped my sisters' rampage, but I could not stop even 'policemen' or 'town volunteers' from making a move -- as if a high schooler could have such authority. Even though there was still no talk of bakeneko exorcising or bakeneko hunting, the more the people set out for bakeneko watching, the more that risks increased.

Losing your strength or fainting might not be good.

But death -- was bad.

Because, if we took away the supernatural phenomenon of kiai--

It would have meant Hanekawa Tsubasa had become a murderer.

A normal -- murderer.

.....Please give me a break.

How could that happen.

What joke was that.

Though as a staff officer her disposition was more sensible to rumors than average, the existence of the Hindering Cat was transmitted to Tsukihi with just the actions of a day -- it didn't seem to be covert about its activities.

In fact, perhaps it was not thinking anything.

It was clear from the fact it walked out in underwear -- it didn't seem to have even a little consideration for the life of Hanekawa afterwards.

Afterwards.

Afterwards?

But afterwards what?

What did you have to do to make it afterwards?

The energy drain it had at hands was one thing, but I couldn't understand the Hinderer Cat's objective.

Maybe if I asked Oshino the details about the Hinderer Cat I could make that clear -- no, I guessed I didn't need to know that sort of thing.

I had to avoid troubling Oshino with that.

I had to not get in his way.

It was all right. He was a frivolous, flippant, superficial old man -- but a professional was still a professional.

He would solve this immediately.

Before Hanekawa killed people by mistake -- immediately.

If I wanted to know more details, I could ask him after everything had ended.

To Oshino -- or maybe to Hanekawa.

I could ask to them.

Still, I was not sure.

Did I have the right to know that?

Ah no, before that, did I want to know?

I received such shock from trespassing into Hanekawa's house and learning its true state of affairs.

If I stepped on the other side of Hanekawa's facade, inside her heart -- if I intruded rudely in her privacy -- would I still to be able to remain Hanekawa's friend?

I was not sure.

I guessed in this world there were things it was better not to know.

I didn't know if it applied to this case, but I thought that if you absolutely adored an admired hero, a respected historical figure, and you tried to know more about him, perusing several biographies, and then you ran into his scandals and vices, at that time everybody would feel betrayed -- but wasn't feeling down from that quite a selfish thing?

Selfish liking to selfish hate.

Selfish expectations to selfish disappointment.

Selfish admiration to selfish disillusionment.

If things were like this -- then it would have been better not to know from the start.

That time.

I shouldn't have become involved with Hanekawa.

I shouldn't have cared about the gauze -- but still.

That would have been taking the Cinderella part.

Just wanting to like, to have expectations, to admire.

I had never understood how much I had been helped in Spring Break.

I had been just anguishing.

In the end, thoughts always go around in circle, and if there ever was something clear, it was that starting from Spring Break I had spent a month in the same class as Hanekawa Tsubasa, and yet I didn't know anything of her.

Was this love or what, how foolish.

Laugh.

Laugh at me.

The conversation I had exchanged with Tsukihi at this point had become terribly embarrassing.

More than out of focus, it was outside the argument.

However, even now -- if I thought of Hanekawa, my heart seemed to burst.

This was what I thought, while sleeping together with my sisters, like a child, like a doll. I guessed I was really tired, despite having slept for all the day: the evening of that day I immediately fell asleep.

And like that, the 30th of April ended, and the 1st of May came along -- though it was Golden Week, during May Day private high schools didn't close.



May 1st and 2nd were ordinary days.

Monday and Tuesday.

I had to attend school.

Having slept together with them, it didn't take Karen and Tsukihi more time and labor than usual to quickly rouse me out of bed -- riding on my ladies' bicycle for commuting use, I headed to school.

Even arriving in class just before the start of the lesson, Hanekawa, obviously, was not there to be found.

She was absent.

It meant the prized record of Hanekawa Tsubasa as a honor student, never late, never absent, never leaving early, ended abruptly that day.

Even if it wasn't true, it seemed that a pupil with a high popularity like Hanekawa being absent without any parent's call (her parents were still unconscious at the hospital, it was impossible for them to call) was something different from a dunce like me skipping school casually, as the homeroom teacher, looking worried, addressed the homeroom to see if there was somebody who knew her situation.

Of course though, once addressed the classroom suddenly became noisy, and no information could be gained.

Naturally, I could not say anything either -- among the classmates, at this point, it wasn't like there were no curious, or to better say sharp of eyes and ears people who had heard rumors about the bakeneko, but nobody would directly connect that to Hanekawa.

I was the only one who could see the Hinderer Cat and conclude she was Hanekawa.

No, maybe it was already impossible even for me.

Since I was praying it had been only an illusion, or at least some kind of mistake.

Now that I mentioned it, it was somewhat impressive that a girl named Senjouhara, in a corner of the room where everybody was getting noisy, listen to the homeroom teacher's address looking strangely bored.

Rather than bored, I wonder how I should express it -- she had an expressionless face that seemingly wanted to say 'As I thought. She is that kind of girl', as if she saw through her own kin -- anyway, something like that.

May 1st, and May 2nd, Hanekawa didn't come to school.

By the time the after school of the second day drew near, the rumors of the bakeneko had spread

through the school -- there were even a great number of first-hand witnesses -- you could see the dynamism of the Hinderling Cat.

Just three days.

Unfortunately it seemed that in this peaceful and eventless country town rumors of the bakeneko flurry, unlike the vampire commotion in Spring Break, didn't spread only among girls -- if it kept up like that, and I was not exaggerating it, people would have started hunting the bakeneko.

Even the Fire Sisters would not stay within my reach forever -- since when those two moved it was like all the middle schoolers of the city moved, I wanted to keep them in check as much as possible, however there was a limit to how much authority I had over them. Well, thought I said authority, the problem was that my spirit couldn't bear the humiliating situation of fawning on them.

That aside.

Before the consecutive holidays started again from May the 3rd, tomorrow, I once again decided to visit the abandoned building where Oshino lived -- no, it was not because I was stubbornly trying to help him or I wanted to ask him something.

I didn't even want to know what point he was at.

It was just something unrelated -- I went there to provide some food to the vampire little girl, as usual.

Since the previous time had been the 29th, it would have been fine for another little while, but starting from tomorrow there would have been three consecutive holidays, so I had to keep a tight eye on my sisters on these days off, therefore I thought to supply her nourishment earlier. Besides, my amateurish opinion was that, since she had 'charged' me a few days ago, she should have been hungry.

I chose as a time period midway during evening, so that I could avoid getting in Oshino's way -- I aimed at a time period when Oshino would be out looking for the Hinderling Cat.

It was not midnight therefore.

It was twilight.

This Golden Week I had a thoroughly bad intuition though.

My intuition was bad.

My luck was bad.

On the fourth floor I tried searching the vampire little girl inside the same classroom she had been in the other time -- and she was not there.

Oshino Meme was there.

In addition, he was not simply standing there.

He was there ragged, tattered and worn out like a dust cloth.

"O-Oshino!"

"Hm? Ah, Araragi-kun -- I've been waiting for you"

I rushed over in a hurry, however Oshino welcomed me composed as always. As if lying face up had simply been like stretching the body through calisthenics for him, he slowly raised his body, looking tired, while scratching his own head.

If you looked more carefully, in actuality his being ragged and tattered started with his Aloha shirt and ended with just his clothes, his body was fine. I could notice just some scatches.

However, it was not like I had jumped to the wrong conclusion.

Oshino Meme.

Was visibly limp and emaciated.

It was the first time I saw him that weakened since I met him in Spring Break, at least.

"Thought it was time for you to come -- I wanted to recover until then. Because I used my miraculous wonder bandage on you some days ago"

"Oshino..... what in the world has happened?"

For the time being I rushed over to him and I asked that, still confused.

"What happened, you say? Nothing much -- I simply lost, that's all"

Oshino answered my question with an easygoing attitude unchanged from usual.

His attitude was not a bluff or talking tough.

He was just stating the truth.

"Lo-Lost, you say. Against whom?"

"Can't you guess? Against the Hinderer Cat, obviously--"

Counting from the night of April 30th, it has been three days.

Within that time I have battled twenty times -- and lost twenty times.

Said Oshino, grinning.

No.

It was really not something to grin about.

That was not even talking tough.

He looked like a weak instead.

"Isn't that -- a complete defeat?"

"It is a complete defeat. A miserable sight. Ha ha"

Oshino got up swaying.

His feet were really unsteady.

He looked like he would have fallen anytime.

"Really, female high schoolers in underwear are too much a temptation for the eyes of an old man. I get distracted by that and I can't fight anymore"

" ....."

I could see those words were unmistakably simply self-effacement, Oshino's characteristic frivolous talk -- still, I couldn't believe how I felt.

I rather preferred to believe he couldn't fight because he had being charmed by a female highschooler's underwear.

I meant -- how could it be that Oshino lost?

The Oshino who in Spring Break led by the nose even the Iron-Blooded Hot-Blooded Cold-blooded vampire, moreover twenty consecutive defeats -- this was a bad joke.

A bad dream.

Maybe he had gone easy on her because she was Hanekawa, an acquaintance -- or was it that since he knew her he had been negligent?

.....

Either way this was completely unlike him.

He was not a man that naive.

In fact he seemed more the type that won't go easy if he personally knows his opponent. Speaking from my personal experience.

"Goodness. This twentieth time I had been considerably *drained*. The fact scratches may become fatal wounds is a troublesome characteristic -- don't squeeze vitality from this worn out withered middle aged old man, I'd say"

"I-Is this kiai that strong, this Hindering Cat"

While going past shivering and becoming frightened -- cautiously, I confirmed that with Oshino.

"It overwhelmed even a specialist like you--"

"Nothing of the sort"

Replied Oshino though, waving his head.

As if to say my words had missed the mark.

"I touched on it the other day. It would be no match for the vampire who assailed you -- in fact, it's such a low level kiai that even the act of comparing it in itself would be an insolence"

"Eh.....?"

Low level?

Low level.....did he say?

For a moment, I thought Oshino told me that to sweep away my uneasiness -- but he was not the kind of man who said things to ease one's mind.

But still.

Low level kiai?

Did he say that?

"Hey, hey -- you told me that compared to the vampire there is a qualitative difference, but the other day you didn't tell me the Hindering Cat was a low level kiai, you know?"

"I preferred not to say it. If I told you that, you might have started saying you wanted to help too, so I didn't explain that part, that's all -- if you let me say my opinion as a specialist, exorcising that kiai is a piece of cake. Actually, there's no need for a specialist, even an amateur racking his brain could deal with him, it's really that kind of kiai"

"Eh -- but?"

The story was different,

It was completely different from what he told the other day.

Then, I started to say, but Oshino blocked me with a "Of course".

"This doesn't mean I cut corners. I challenged it for real -- although afterwards we will become even, I felt in debt with class rep-chan due to the incident in Spring Break. I didn't have any weird concern there"

But I lost, said Oshino.

He didn't look frustrated.

He didn't radiate an air of failure.

However.

He was certainly frustrated -- he was thinking he had failed.

We knew each other only for a short time, and we were not that close -- still, this much was transmitted.

Oshino Meme.

Took pride in his own work.

"The Hindering Cat is a small fish"

Once again.

Oshino said, as confirming it.

"To begin with, the Hindering Cat *kaii* was conceived as the antipodes of the Beckoning Cat<sup>[103]</sup> -- it's a joke-like folklore born out of a play on words. The beckoning cat invites good fortune, the Hindering Cat invites hindrances -- it pretends to die on the road, and possesses the persons who approached it out of compassion. It's a supplanting type of monster. The type of *kaii* that takes over a body. And like a god of poverty, it knocks down the owner of the body, its material form, into the depth of misfortune. It is -- well, we could say it's an often seen template monster"

"....."

A *kaii* that took advantage of a person's conscience and its compassion.

Such kind of thing was certainly an often see *kaii* tale, a cliched story -- besides.

*It was a phenomenon I had personal experience of.*

Therefore it was not something fresh.

However.

"Right -- however, it's class rep-chan"

I believed I had understood that alright, said Oshino.

"The fact the person possessed was class rep-chan made this case an extremely irregular one. She *brought* what was originally nothing more than a small fish, the Hinderling Cat, to something almost close to the strongest -- in the worst case it could rival even the vampire"

"....."

"More than sharing the body, it's sharing the knowledge that's bad. The ancient traditional kiai countermeasures I use, my techniques, my methods, everything spectacularly rebounds. That girl possesses the specialized knowledge of a specialist. That girl -- knows everything"

"....."

"I've never heard of a kiai that assaults people using strategy and tactics"

Said Oshino, looking more desperate than ever.

"I've understood it from the beginning, but that class rep-chan sure was not an ordinary person. Being efficient at assaulting people -- is not something a kiai does"

"Wait a minute. Efficient at assaulting people? Oshino, you make it sound as if Hanekawa was proactively assaulting people"

"Well -- in a way it's true. The Hinderling Cat shouldn't have been that kind of kiai, though -- Anyway, Araragi-kun, maybe it's actually not a bad thing that I'm having such a hard time fighting it"

"Eh?"

"To put it the other way around, this development is proof that there is class rep-chan inside the Hinderling Cat. That's what I think. At least this sort of thing wouldn't happen if there was not class rep-chan inside the Hinderling Cat, if it completely took over both her body and consciousness. Perhaps inside the Hinderling Cat, *a considerably great portion of class rep-chan's consciousness remains* -- this is the reason why it is so efficient. And as it stands this is the worst news, and at the same time also a news of relief"

"How come? Where is the relief you talk about?"

I never thought I'd make an enemy of Hanekawa.

Therefore this threat was beyond all imagination -- where was the relief he talked about?

"I mean, if she had been taken over completely, it would be the end. There would be no choice but to kill her"

Matter-of-factly.

Oshino said.

There would be no choice but to kill her -- he had said.

"If we don't salvage class rep-chan's consciousness while it's still there -- if we don't exorcise the Hindering Cat, Hanekawa Tsubasa, your precious friend, will part forever from this world"



The Hinderer Cat, according to Oshino, was an extremely common example of kaido tale -- it would be better to reference the myth here.

A white cat lies dead on the road.

He may have died of hunger, or he may have been kicked by a passerby, anyway, it lies on the side and doesn't move.

Judging from its clipped tail, it doesn't seem have the fortunate background of being raised as a treasured pet cat.

Thinking that cat was pitiful -- a man passing by the road picks it up.

He touches it.

He may not bury it in another place and hold a memorial service, but his hand connects.

From that night, the eccentricities of that good man starts.

Stormy as if he was a different person.

He becomes violent.

There is a commotion when he drinks sake and hit people -- the persons close to him, whether friends or family, become dead tired just by being there.

People around tremble: it's that cat's curse.

You could see he even behaved like a cat, they say.

At this point these people acknowledge the situation is out of control, and they call an exorcist, trying to purify the haunting cat--

Here comes the punchline.

The best part of the Hinderer Cat.

The extremely common truth of kaido tales.

*The good man had never been possessed by the cat from the start--*

"Call it an absurd ending, call it a surprising ending, this is a kaido tale with a small lesson of sort. A

tailored sermon like there often are in fairy tales. People exclusively good don't exist. Kindness in the end is nothing more than the tip of the iceberg. There is always another side -- if there is light there is darkness, if there is white there is black. The cat was nothing but a catalyst. This is not just the story of an ingrate cat -- this is an episode of seeing through the other side of people"

The other side of people.

So explained Oshino.

But why a cat, I asked. As if he was explaining an obvious thing,

"That's because a cat is something you *wear*<sup>[104]</sup>"

He said.

"Even class rep-chan is *wearing* the cat -- there are no people exclusively good and fair. It's because she is trying to be like that -- that the stress piles up"

Deep black.

Oshino said.

Blackness.

Class rep -- Hanekawa Tsubasa's dark side.

"Still, normally the cat should have been more like a mask. I don't really know what's going on, class rep-chan has almost joined with the cat. Considering the cat as the main body, this absolute junction is more like an absorption. As a threat it's really untreatable. In fact, more than untreatable it's unbeatable"

The way Oshino spoke, with those alliterations, could have been seen as funny, but he was just describing the seriousness of the situation.

This guy said all the serious things in a frivolous way.

Superficial -- and glib.

"We must settle this quickly, or it will be really dangerous. It's possible that ultimately the punchline will really be something like that class rep-chan had not been possessed by the cat from the start. We must do something before she and the cat merge completely--"

.....I had understood the situation was serious.

And even that in the worst case even Oshino wouldn't have been able to handle it.

Still -- there was nothing I could do.

The only thing I could do.

Was nothing.

I couldn't do anything for Hanekawa's sake.

Despite knowing the dark side she had inside -- despite peeking at that profound abyss.

There was nothing I could do.

In the end, after that Oshino went out immediately -- he said he had been waiting me, but that was his frivolous talk. It seemed the truth was that he had dropped by the abandoned building between the battles with the cat only for some rest, only for replenishing his equipment -- I provided blood to the vampire little girl, who for some reason today was sitting on the second floor, and I went home.

The eyes of the vampire little girl.

As I thought, were looking at me in disdain.

A light disdain for me.

That was my sensation -- surely because I was disdaining myself.

The next day -- May 3rd, Constitution Memorial Day.

It was the day where Japan's constitution had been enacted, or promulgated, I didn't know well, anyway it was a holiday.

In any case, whatever the origins or the words, I hated event days.

If you can't make merry like a child, then sleep like an adult.

However, that day, May 3rd, I couldn't stand still at home, and I secretly went out, without my sisters noticing.

I concluded it was possible to shelve the fear of the Fire Sisters setting out to exorcise the bakeneko.

The reason was that, according to what I'd heard from Oshino yesterday -- and to the rumors I heard from Tsukihi, making free use of the Fire Sisters' information network, certainly the Hinderer Cat had created a large quantity of victims through the energy drain, but as damage went it was really insignificant.

Although it made people ataxic to the point of losing consciousness -- still, it was not a symptom which required hospitalization.

To say it with the words of Vegeta in the last part of Dragon Ball, 'It'll feel like you just ran a lot'.

The only one who suffered special damage had been Hanekawa's parents, and me who had received a physical attack and got my arm torn off -- in other words.

It just *exhausted* people.

The vampire was different in that regard -- but maybe the damage was controlled intentionally. Taking that into consideration, perhaps the energy drain was used in a way as to not cause serious damage.

Despite it had the peculiarity of being always on -- or maybe exactly for this reason, the cat was going easy.

If Oshino's conjecture about it assaulting people intentionally was correct -- it likewise pulled its punches intentionally as to not kill people.

*Hanekawa's consciousness remained--*

I wondered what that meant exactly.

.....If we assumed that was true, then it bothered me the reason why the damage had been serious for three people.

I could somehow understand the reason for Hanekawa's parents.

As for me.....

Since it seemed I would come up with some depressing truths if I probed deeper, I bravely preferred to stop thinking.

And like that -- I decided that if it was during the day at least, and not at night, then it wasn't a big problem how the Fire Sisters moved. I didn't have to worry they would have died. Those two were so full of energy I actually wished the Hindering Cat drained their energy -- this one was a joke.

Anyway.

I headed to school.

The Naoetsu private high school.

The school I attended -- I had nothing to do in particular.

In fact there was no purpose behind.

It was a school that I tended to skip even when there were the ordinary, common lessons. I admit I didn't really understand myself for going there expressly choosing a national holiday as a day, but I couldn't help but to go.

At any rate, in terms of time I would have been very boldly late, though.

The school gate had been left open for students working hard at club activities, and even the school building had not been closed up.

If we compared it to Hanekawa's house, the trespassing had been easy -- though saying it like that would give the impression I was a man who liked to trespass, inviting misunderstandings.

I had no other places to go.

Therefore I climbed the stairs, and I headed toward the classroom.

As expected the classroom was locked -- I thought, but the back door was open.

Tsk tsk, they had been careless.

I thought, but on second thought, closing the door was the duty of the vice class rep, me.

Since I usually entrusted it to Hanekawa, I had carelessly forgotten -- oh man.

I wasn't even able to close a door when Hanekawa was not around, huh.

Sure I felt down.

.....No, I wasn't the kind of person who felt down for something like that to begin with.

I was a guy that even at home tended to leave the doors unlocked -- thought of course it was because I had understood this city was safe.

Anyway, I was lax regarding that, to not say irresponsible.

In spite of that -- I was currently retrospecting over the fact I had left the door open.

What a strange feeling.

In the end the way as I was now entirely *began with Hanekawa* -- if I tried to think once again how I had behaved before Spring Break, until I had met with Hanekawa, I couldn't really remember.

I felt like she had rebuilt me.

She didn't just changed me, she changed me anew -- on a second thought, that sort of thing sure was scary though -- why would I perceive it as something to be glad of.

It was a wonder.

"....."

Though natural, the class was empty.

I entered, passed behind the teacher's desk and sat -- not on my seat, on Hanekawa's.

The seat where Hanekawa usually sat.

The seat I somehow searched during lessons.

Though even looking at the blackboard from Hanekawa's point of view I couldn't understand her feelings.

I couldn't understand anything.

While sighing, I slumped letting my arms hang, face down on the desk.

I wasn't able to raise my spirits.

I didn't come to school for some kind of change of pace, but doing so only made me feel more down.

Counting from the beginning of the Golden Week, this seat had been empty for more than four days -- no possibility of Hanekawa's warmth remaining.

I was just exaggerating my being apathic in absurdly low spirits, but this way it looked exactly like I had crept in the empty classroom to rub my cheeks on the desk Hanekawa ordinarily used.

To tell the truth, if you think that the busty Hanekawa-san's breasts had always been pressed on this desk, this image was close to that of an elementary school student licking his favorite girl's recorder.

Despite thinking that if I were to be seen by someone my life would end in many ways, just for fun, I stretched my tongue and lightly licked Hanekawa's desk, which obviously had no scribbles or carvings over it, and was in sparkling new conditions--

".....!"

--and I was seen.

I was given the stink eye.

From a short distance away, sitting on the seat I usually used -- there were a pair of pupils staring at me.

Pupils.

They were cat eyes.

".....You sure are a pervert with no maxing out nya"

Who was there looking at me, who was somehow slightly trembling -- not knowing when in the world it arrived and since when it had been there, there was -- a white haired cat in black underwear.

No.

It was the Hinderer Cat.

"You are frightening nya..... more frightening than a kawaii nya. Just now you aroused yourself by licking the desk of a girl nya....."

"T-That's not it!"

It was it.

It was dead-on.

The kawaii managed to make me feel nervous.

"More importantly, how did you get in this classroom--"

"More importantly, you say. Human, is there something in this world I need to mind more than the fact you licked all over Mistress' desk nya?"

"I don't understand at all what you are saying! No matter what you try to say, I won't ever confess anything in court! Therefore more importantly! More importantly, how did you get in this classroom?"

I was blazing out as if my life depended on it.

Since it had to do with my life from now on, it really depended on it.

"Nyahahaha. Are you an idiot? Stealthy footsteps are a cat's specialty nya -- I took a good look at your pervert behaviour nya"

"....."

Well.

When dealing with the kawaii, trying to ascertain things like the why and the how wouldn't get you anywhere, it was just futile.....

I didn't even have enough motivation to get up from the chair.

A sudden encounter.

A sudden encounter with the Hinderer Cat.

However -- since the way it entered the scene had really overwhelmed me, somehow I couldn't switch my feelings.

I was not in the mood for a battle.

And to begin with, I understood perfectly I had no chances against it. It was futile to fight back, let alone offer resistance. The only thing I could do was keeping my cool. Oshino would have been better -- no, even Oshino wouldn't have any hand to play.

If nothing else the fact the Hindering Cat was here meant that, after we parted last night until this point in time, Oshino had not brought good results.

I wondered how many times Oshino lost within the space of a night--

"Hm? What is it? Your mug shows no hostility nya -- human"

"It's because I can't do anything to you -- cat. Besides, it's not like you will take my life -- right?"

"Who knows nya"

The Hindering Cat laughed.

With Hanekawa's face.

It laughed in a way unlike Hanekawa's.

However this was still Hanekawa herself.

The dark side of Hanekawa.

"My energy drain is not a skill, it's part of the setting of my character nya -- a setting according to which the person who touches me get hindered. It's not something I control myself. I may go easy, but it may not be enough. Even if I don't have the intention to kill, it is possible I could kill by mistake nya"

".....Still, I liked that you didn't bite me or scratch me the moment we met. Because it doesn't last long on me"

I said, while showing the gesture of protecting my left shoulder.

This was just a bluff.

You could call it bravado.

Talking tough to not let the weakness show.

"Hmph. A vampire, huh"

The cat said.

"Well, if we have to talk about you, you are a superior first class kaii someone like me couldn't originally clash swords with nya -- however thanks to Mistress, thanks to her strategies and tactics I



could acquire a power of existence strong enough to overwhelm even a professional specialist. I feel grateful for that"

"....."

"Although I am not the type of kiai who returns a favor, more like the one who returns evil for good -- I feel so grateful that just this one time I would like to return the favor"

The type of kiai who returns evil for good -- huh.

A delightful expression, indeed.

"I've heard cats are animals with a surprisingly strong sense of duty. Like the Nabeshima Cat<sup>[105]</sup> -- it went as far as becoming a monster to strike her mistress' foe. Dogs remember faces, cats places, they say, but that's doubtful"

"Doubtful {怪しい}, huh. Just because it was a monster {妖怪}"

Nyahahahaha, laughed the Hinderer Cat.

Hmmm.

My Hanekawa would never laugh at such lame wordplay.

If I said a lame joke she might have preached me a sermon.

The other side of Hanekawa.

The other side -- the dark side.

"Though we are both possessors of the peculiar energy drain -- the Hinderer Cat one and the vampire one are completely different"

I said. I was just repeating the words of Oshino, though.

"The vampire energy drain is a meal -- the Hinderer Cat's energy drain is a curse"

"Hmm. Well, that's true nya"

"What I don't understand though is why you are indiscriminately assaulting people. If we talk about types, the Hinderer Cat was not the type who assaulted people, right?"

"....."

The cat -- stood silent.

It seemed it wasn't willing to obediently answer my questions.

In fact, from the start it would not answer what it didn't want to answer, it would not say what it didn't want to say, it was doubtful we could manage to talk -- I didn't feel like we could manage a mutual understanding.

The words reached, but it seemed the meaning didn't.

Well, I could agree that wouldn't change even when fellow humans talked, but -- personally, I wanted it to answer me at all costs -- since I had finally managed to meet by chance the cat in this classroom.

.....Wait.

Was this by chance?

I felt like there was a different implication between when I encountered the cat near Hanekawa's house and when I encountered it in this class--

"Hey, cat. Aren't you--"

"Doing something uncharacteristic of you nya?"

Thereupon said the Hinderer Cat, looking bothered.

Looking extremely annoyed, it crossed its legs.

It was not the time to think such thing, but Hanekawa sure has amazingly long legs.

Since she wasn't wearing a skirt and her legs were bared up to the crotch, I could grasp their length clearly.

Despite being shorter than me, her legs are longer than mine, huh?

I want to lick them.

Ah no, that's wrong.

It's, I want to watch them as if licking them.

.....I wasn't able to follow through.

"I have to admit I am disregarding the Hinderer Cat's character setting nya -- character dissolution nya. Well, I'm still following the setting per se, but I am unmistakably an irregular"

Although technically it's not me the irregular.

It's Mistress who is.

Said the Hinderer Cat.

Oshino had certainly said a similar thing.

"Uncharacteristic of me -- huh"

"....."

"So what. It's just a diversion nya"

"Ah?"

"The reason I assault people. Didn't you want to know the reason why I assault people indiscriminately, at random? So I told ya -- just a diversion. Something like a ding dong dash! Something like writing graffiti on a wall! The same kind of thing!"

In other words.

I was in a temper.

I was releasing stress nya--.

The Hinderer Cat disclosed -- while laughing with its cheeks twitching.

*What?*

*What did it say?*

"Releasing..... stress, you said? That's..... eh? Wait..... What do you mean?"

"What does it mean what do you mean, I meant what I meant nya -- you saw inside that house, right?"

"That house, you say--"

"Mistress' house nya. I can tell, you know? It was obvious to me -- Cats have a very good nose nya. When I went back for a change of clothes, inside the house it was full of your smell"

Nyaa, you are a degenerate stalker -- the cat said, with a knowing face.

It went back for a change of clothes?

Ah, indeed, even though it was the same black, the underwear the Hinderer Cat was wearing now had a different shape from the one she was wearing April 29th, and to be correct even April 30th.

I must have been very confused.

I was ashamed to not have noticed it.

I guessed it was impossible to wear the same underwear for two or three days -- ah no, a cat shouldn't think of changing clothes, that must have been Hanekawa's consciousness as a female high schooler

which vastly remained.

A Hanekawa likeness.

Knowing that it appeared to exist inside the cat -- I felt relief.

Fussing about your personal appearance -- was a very common trait of girls.

I had been late -- but still not too late.

I could still get Hanekawa back.

Her consciousness vastly remained.

Hanekawa's unconscious.

.....In fact, if I thought at the worst possibility, it was also possible that last night, when it battled with Oshino, Oshino might have suffered a definitive defeat -- in that case all would be lost -- but judging from the atmosphere around the cat now, it wasn't the case.

I didn't know why.

Or rather, I got the impression it was so.

Yes.

What was different from the 29th was not just the shape of the underwear.

I felt like the atmosphere around the Hinderer Cat, which was like that of a devil, violent like a tiger more than a cat, had lost its thorns and became mellower.

.....

Releasing -- stress?

"Mistress had lived in the house, with that family, for fifteen years nya -- can you imagine the pressure that bombarded her and besieged her? Don't tell me you can't understand how much pressure it was. I release that by playing pranks on good townspeople around nya. I get to feel refreshed by causing troubles on other unrelated people nya. Just that nya -- it's an action that has no bearing on being a hindrance or a curse nya"

"No bearing, you say--"

That was so uncharacteristic of it.

Did kiai do such sort of things?

The kiai are absolutely faithful to their settings -- like it had been for the vampire, it was necessary to

do the impossible in order to disregard the setting.

Impossible. The impossible -- in order to make reason withdraw.

"I'll teach you one thing -- those two"

The cat said.

"I am a possession type of kiai, so I took over the body of Mistress -- in other words I took over the brain. Therefore we share the knowledge"

The cat said.

Oshino had said that it was troublesome because they were sharing the knowledge.

And that was bad.

"I know how Mistress had been living in that house for 15 years"

"....."

It knew.

It knew -- it just happened to know this.

"Although what I know is just the knowledge of it nya. I don't really know how Mistress have felt for each of those things 'she knew' nya. It seemed Mistress didn't have the habit of keeping a diary -- sometimes she has kept a diary the Summer Break as a homework, but she always concluded with a 'Today was fun', like pressing a seal nya"

"Fun, she said"

In that house.

What fun could she have had.

"No way it was true"

"Yeah. I too think so -- my intelligence is fundamentally that of an average cat. That's the setting of my character nya -- but in my own way, I could sense so nya. That's why -- I'm helping Mistress releasing her stress nya"

"But..... if that's the reason, then there's no need to assault unrelated people--"

"Unfortunately, I know only this way--"

Because evil it's fun nya.

It's fun when people that you don't know are troubled nya.

"It's neither logic nor sophistry -- in nothing else, as a character degenerated in reversal I am somewhat mellower, don't you think? Compared to when I torn off your arm"

".....I thought so"

"Didn't you? In other words, what I'm doing is effective"

That's why you can relax, said the cat.

"If I assault another *five hundreds people* -- Misress' stress will be all released. Then my role as a kiai will end, I will finish returning the favor and I will vanish -- well, since my *modus operandi* doesn't change from that of a cat with the same intelligence, five hundreds people won't be easy. Still, in a month it will end"

".....A month"

"Exactly. Therefore tell that Aloha old man to not get in my way. I don't understand well, but I guess that Aloha bastard wants to save mistress. If so, then leave it at me"

Oshino -- perhaps, was not working for that reason.

No way he thought something like I want to save her.

Even if we took away his peculiar awareness of being a pro -- he was not thinking that someone could save someone else.

People.

People are the only one who wil save themselves -- that was his philosophy as a human.

.....However, even if I were to explain it, I doubt that cat would possess the intelligence for understanding that.

They didn't understand each other.

People and kiai -- didn't understand each others.

"I could say that as a kiai I am the embodiment of Mistress' stress that became a character nya. In other words I am a new variety nya. I am a completely different thing from the so called Hinderer Cat of the myth -- *a specialist's methods won't have any effect on me*. You can't exorcise me, purify me or cleanse me. Because of him my efficiency dropped. Tell him to desist from doing the useless and making me waste my time"

".....Leave Hanekawa to me, you said"

I asked, remaining silent about Oshino's personality.

"Why are you doing so much for her? In the end you are nothing more than an evil spirit that is possessing Hanekawa. There should be no reason for you to be so active for Hanekawa's sake"

"I have been telling you before, didn't I? In order to uncharacteristically return a favor--"

While grinning.

The Hinderer Cat -- left the seat.

Or to better say, it moved from the set to over the desk -- as if it didn't care at all for my gaze, it went on all fours and stretched its back.

"--which is a lie, though nya"

And then.

After finishing stretching -- it added that.

"I can't really disregard my setting as an ingrate cat. Because kawaii are like that nya -- it's the same as vampires, they can't help sucking blood nya. Therefore the reason is not returning a favor -- in the first place, as a matter of fact, aside from receiving her knowledge, I have no reason to feel obligated to Mistress nya"

".....Eh?"

What are you saying?

Haven't you been buried by Hanekawa when you were dead on the road, run over by a car? Shouldn't you have taken advantage of that sympathy and kindness?--

"You are wrong nya. That is -- certainly, as a phenomenon, an identical thing happened. Mistress picked me up while I was lying down on the road, moved me to a suitable place, and buried me. There are no mistakes in that perception itself nya. It is as you saw standing nearby nya -- ah, by the way, at that time you just stood near Mistress and helped digging the hole, you didn't touch my corpse with a finger, that's way the hindrance didn't occurred nya"

Well, touching a corpse requires courage nyaa, it looks like you're going to get cursed, and you will actually get cursed though -- said the cat.

"Ah..... well, I'll admit I got the jitters. And that's why Hanekawa is impressive for doing so with nonchalance -- but since she got cursed as a result, I'll say she wasn't rewarded. Hanekawa's kindness backfired"

"That's not it, far from it nya"

Though I had not been able to, if only I had been able to stop Hanekawa -- or at least if I didn't get the jitters and I would have been the one to carry the corpse, this wouldn't have happened.

After finishing listening to my words filled with regret, the Hindering Cat said this.

*"That time, Mistress didn't feel compassion at all"*

"----"

*"Mistress never felt any pity for me* -- she didn't have a fragment of kindness. As a kiai who by setting takes advantage of that, I can assert that"

Nya.

The Hindering Cat added his sentence ender -- that might have been still another part of its setting.

A moe component or something.

Certainly it was moe though.

Still, that component revealed that Hanekawa's inside -- Hanekawa's dark side.

It was so black.

It was so darkish.

It was so bluish black.

It was so -- grotesque.

"Mistress held a memorial service for the me on the road as if it was a fixed routine work nya -- completely emotionless nya. She didn't sympathize with me. In other words, I actually didn't have any gap to take advantage of--"

"Ah, but -- Hanekawa--"

"Her sole wish was *to be a normal girl* nya"

The cat said.

"It was already a supplication, I should say -- in this case, for Mistress being normal means being logical nya. The idea of Mistress is to be correct nya. If you find a dead cat on the roadside you should bury it -- well, certainly this is the correct thing to do nya. You could call it a rule. You could call it a formula. Therefore Mistress abode by rules and formulas -- that's all nya"

"....."

I really was not able to object to the cat's words, to their intensity, to their weight.



No.

Even if that wasn't the case, I would have no way to object.

Because even I had felt for a long time the alienness of Hanekawa Tsubasa who prized order and rules to the point of being strict -- her sense of values.

Her sense of ethics, to say it clearly, was abnormal.

The cat had used words like routine work, rules, formulas -- but from my point of view those were *commandments*.

An obedience to commandments born out of the little stubbornness of not wanting people to think she had gone astray because she had been grown in a special family environment -- however.

".....*Normally*, one shouldn't be able to obey to commandments. Even if they understood it's a beautiful and correct action, most people would not think to bury a cat died on the roadside. In fact, maybe they would think it -- but they wouldn't put that into practice. Though embarrassed, they wouldn't even be able to leave the seat to elders on a train"

Even assuming they would be able to, that would be something like an allies of justice pretend play like the Fire Sisters -- the best they could do would be a game.

And even my sisters would move on from that game when they would become high schoolers.

One day even them.

Would become normal girls.

They would absolutely not become a Hanekawa -- they would become normal girls.

"She shouldn't have been able to do it, emotionally-wise and ability-wise. And yet Hanekawa managed to"

"Indeed. She managed to -- emotionless nya. While not thinking anything, she was able to carry out her ethics, like a machine. ....Many memorial service have been held for me, but that kind of thing was unusual nya. *That's why -- I want to help her*"

In other words it's just a whim.

Very cat-like, right?

The Hinderer Cat joked, while raising its left hand like a beckoning cat.

"Well then, get this into his skull -- tell that Aloha bastard to let a cat's pranks slip, or I'll sue him for animal cruelty -- because I am letting him slip"

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

"Isn't it obvious? If I -- that is Mistress, really wanted to cause harm, she would have killed him in the first battle. *I'm being lenient since he is an acquaintance* -- and you..... well, it doesn't seem like you plan to do anything"

Saying so, the cat jumped down from the desk -- though just a 50 cm height, it managed to rotate midway.

"You are right. The right thing to do for Mistress is not doing anything -- you don't want to die after all, right?"

Without the sound of footsteps, turning its back on me, the Hindering Cat walked toward the door -- cats' footsteps have no sound because cats have paws, but the soles of Hanekawa's feet had not mutate into that.

Even that.

Was part of the setting, huh.

A character's setting transcended theory, reason, laws of physics and ethics.

It existed even an absurd puss in boots.

"Farewell. Hold on and live in happiness, human"

Saying so.

The Hindering Cat went out of the room, into the corridor--

"Wait!"

Until I stopped it by reflex.

With a "huh", the cat turned just its head -- literally a head-turning beauty.

No, its expression would be a little too puzzled in order to say so.

"You say your objective is releasing Hanekawa's stress -- but that's impossible"

"Huh? Why?"

"Because that stress mostly comes from her parents, you know? Even if you release all the stress, once she returns home it will accumulate again"

At the moment they were being hospitalized -- but they would not be hospitalized forever.

If time passed.

They would have returned to the home of their daughter, who didn't have a place to stay.

"No matter if you assault five hundreds people and keep releasing stress for a month, sooner or later all will be back as before"

"Hmmm. Ah, that's right. In that case"

The cat, who didn't seem to have thought that far, the cat that scantily thought, recognized my point -- in Spring Break.

Like that vampire often did with me, exactly in the same way -- she put on a ghastly smile.

"I'll rough them up with *this* until they will lose the will to come back again nya"

And then -- she showed me the nails on her right hand.

They looked like they could kill a person.

They looked like they could stab to death a person, those sharp five nails.

"This time the energy drain won't be enough. I'll just respond to domestic violence with domestic violence nya -- if Mistress wishes so"

"As if!"

As if Hanekawa would wish that!

I got up as if kicking the seat -- and drew near the Hinderling Cat.

No, I tried to draw near.

However -- I narrowly gave up on grabbing its shoulder with my hand.

".....Yeah, that's right. The moment you touch me, you get hindered -- that's why I'm the Hinderling Cat. Don't get close, don't touch. You can't touch me with a finger nya. Not getting involved it's the right choice nya -- for me, and perhaps even for Mistress, nya"

"Hey, cat"

"Farewell. Live in happiness"

It repeated the same words.

And this time the Hinderling Cat left for real -- it wouldn't turn around anymore.

"....."

I was left behind in the classroom.

Acting brazenly unaffected, I returned to Hanekawa's seat, I raise the seat that got knocked down when I got up, and then once again I sat on it.

As I was doing before the cat appeared -- I put my upper body weight on the desk.

The Hinderer Cat didn't touch me.

And yet I was completely exhausted.

"Aah....."

I murmured.

Feebly.

I checked that inside the classroom there was nobody -- in fact, even if there was somebody, I would have murmured the same things regardless.

I had to murmur.

These overflowing feelings.

"It's hopeless. As I thought -- I like Hanekawa"

I had to put in into words.

I had to give them shape.

"I like her so much, and yet I cannot absolutely touch her"

I can't touch her even with a finger.

The most I can do is rubbing my cheeks on this desk.

Not because of what happened in Spring Break.

Not because I was saved, and neither because I feel a debt of gratitude.

Not because she is cute, and neither because I find her pitiful.

Not these things that reek of reason.

I like that girl.

I think I like her.

I feel I like her.

I understand I like her.

".....However, it's just as Tsukihi says"

And.

I calmly kept murmuring.

While thinking emotionless.

"I can't help but like her -- but this feeling is not love"

While continuing murmuring -- I renewed my determination.

Perhaps that was something decided from the start.

At this point I had noticed something obvious.

My feelings for Hanekawa had grown so strong--

They had exceeded love a long time ago.

What I wanted was more than stay with her forever.

"I want to die for her sake"

And then, if you asked me the way I spent my Golden Week from that day, yes, I have been constantly kowtowing.

Since May 3rd when I met the Hindering Cat in the school's classroom until Sunday, May 7th, the last day of the long holidays, in other words today, I had spent my time groveling on the floor.

I had devoted all my energy in kowtowing.

I went at it for nearly five days.

I didn't know the correct number when expressing it in hours, but I guessed it was around a total of one hundred hours.

That much hours.

Without drinking, without eating, skipping even school Saturday, without even the slightest tremor and without dozing off, without lifting my face not even once, as if I was a stone statue carved in that shape, I continued kowtowing.

Now, now, this was a commonplace episode.

It was not something one should talk about as if it was some sort of event, everybody should experience it once or twice in their life, anyway, I spent my consecutive holidays like that.

.....I prayed ardently that at the end of the Golden Week I wouldn't have to submit an essay on how I had spent my holidays for homework.

Well, mine was not an elementary school, so no way I would have to do something like that -- and even if I had to, I would say I had spent the Golden Week in a posture identical to this.

I was extremely sorry to have made people expect that a heroic resolve in an empty classroom would have lead to an epic battle between the Hindering Cat and me, but unfortunately I knew my place.

I was aware of it.

I was familiar with it.

Even if the nastiness of the initial Hindering Cat more or less faded as a result of releasing stress through assaulting people -- still, as a 'human', it was a self-evident truth that I couldn't have faced it, let alone crossed swords with it.

No way I could win against an opponent whom even Oshino couldn't win against.

I would get killed, die, and that would be the end.

I wanted to die for Hanekawa's sake -- but that was to say that I didn't want to die if it was not for Hanekawa's sake.

I wouldn't die in vain.

I wouldn't die a dog's death.

If I had to say it -- I would die like a cat.

And like that, while Oshino and the Hinderer Cat waged an onmyouji<sup>[106]</sup>-like superpower battle, while assaulting people and rescuing people, from place to place in this city, on-and-off without pause, I was kowtowing at full power with my heart and soul, at full speed ahead.

By the way, concerning the object of the kowtowing.

Even this was not something one should talk about as if it was some sort of event, for a young man whose growth period ended, even in another situation, it was an object worthy to bow your head as a so called rite of passage, in other words an eight year old little girl.

An eight year old little girl.

The Iron-Blooded, Hot-Blooded, Cold-Blooded vampire.

Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, in her mere shadow of herself, her pomace.

A former vampire blond little girl.

Therefore this scene was me, in a room on the fourth floor of the abandoned building, the ruin of a cram school, performing a kowtow in front of a vampire little girl with a sour look that was sitting while grasping her own knees.

.....

Here I say it, but there is a 100% probability that this scene won't be turned into an anime.

I don't know why.

I feel like this plot had graciously given up on further media mix -- though now that I think about it, I suspect that it was all already over when me and my sisters flaunted each other's underpants at the beginning.

A black paragraph<sup>[107]</sup> for the whole book, something like that.

"What are you doing, Araragi-kun?"

In fact, even Oshino told me so.

"I'll remind you that risking your life and thinking you're fine with dying are two different things -- I thought you had learned that lesson in Spring Break."

Then again those words didn't have his typical ironic or sarcastic tone, nor seemed to imply anything, and neither felt flippant, they sounded very normal.

On the other hand, in this five days those had been the only words Oshino spoke to me -- it seemed that each time a battle with the Hindering Cat ended, Oshino returned to this building to heal his body (taking into account that after that once he finished resting and got his stuff ready he immediately went out, he had continued to lose without almost sleeping or resting), however, guessing my intention, he immediately stopped talking to me. Even when passing behind me, he was silent.

The vampire little girl was silent all along.

Even I was silent.

Toward Oshino, toward the little girl.

No way I could break the silence and say something.

To begin with, this was not kowtowing with the intention of supplicating -- I couldn't really say that was not my secret intention, but as for my intention, I was in fact placing my head on the floor as an apology.

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry I'm counting on you now.

In all sincerity, I apologize.

Really.

It wasn't strange that Oshino got flabbergasted at the impudence in my shameless behaviour. If you liked, I would rub my face on the ground and scrape off my face.

I knew.

I perfectly knew what I was doing.

How much selfish.

How much egoistical.

How much complacent it was -- I knew.



However, though he was flabbergasted and didn't speak to me anymore, on the other hand Oshino didn't try to stop me.

Maybe that was a consequence of his sense of values as a balancer, maybe he understood just a little of my feelings.

Maybe he sympathized with me.

.....No, I guess not.

He simply had no reason, no duty to stop me, who was trying to save myself, just that.

But Oshino.

Understand this at least.

I certainly don't wish for you sympathy, let alone your approval -- I'd like you just didn't misunderstand one thing.

What I'm doing right now is not risking my life -- let alone me thinking it's fine to die.

I cannot martyr myself over ambitious feelings such as being able to die for a friend, like Hanekawa does -- like in the commandments Hanekawa based herself on.

What I am harboring in my chest is just the self-centered desire of being willing to die for Hanekawa's sake, nothing more.

I am frustrated.

I don't think it's something I should do, or something I must do anymore -- I just want to do it.

And then.

Immediately after May 7th's sun had completely sunk, there was movement in this still situation in which we were stuck -- all of a sudden the vampire little girl, who similarly to me for nearly five days had been kowtowed without moving, not even quivering, as if she was a fossil, suddenly, without prior notice, stood up -- and trampled the back of my head with a naked foot while I was kowtowing.

Now, now, this too was commonplace.

In a long lifetime, regardless of gender, everybody experiences getting the head trampled by a little girl. Those of you who have not done it, go do it immediately.

Trampled by the sister, trampled by the cat, trampled by the demon.

In my life things led to things.

As I thought the vampire little girl had gotten her foot off the back of my head, she followed up by kicking my face, this time with a toe kick, as if scooping up.

I couldn't take it and I was turned up while still in the kowtow posture -- I got to feel like a turtle that had been turned over.

I hit the back hard.

This posture of mine which didn't crumble in five days--

This equilibrium at last crumbled.

I got kicked by the little girl.

Just barely, but even this was something that happened. If we compared it to the Big Bang that created the universe, there wouldn't be any objections if I said it happened often.

However.

What followed -- was not commonplace.

So uncommon it might be the first and last time.

It was something creepy.

"....."

What I saw, once I immediately got up to dauntlessly venture once again in another kowtow, was the vampire little girl upright with her mouth wide open, as if pulling out her tongue toward me -- like a magician of old, she was pulling out a Japanese sword from inside her throat.

A long -- Japanese sword.

Clearly longer than the current vampire little girl's height.

It would be classified as an oodachi.

I had seen that katana just one time, in Spring Break.

Heartunderblade.

The heart under the blade.

The origin of the name Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, the sole and only 'weapon' she, as the strongest existence, had ever swung--

Demon sword 'Kokorowatari'<sup>[108]</sup>.

Also known as 'Kaii Killer' -- it didn't have a scabbard.

It didn't need a scabbard.

Why should a katana destined to keep cutting the kaii without breaks ever need such a container--

"!"

For the girl that katana was an ID close to a license, or possibly an irreplaceable memory, and yet she threw such a demon blade at my chest like it was a stick.

I was not able to grab it.

As if doing a clumsy game of juggling, I only held it in my arms in dangerous looking ways. Somehow it didn't fall on the floor.

Feeling relieved I raised my face -- and the vampire little girl was already back to her previous posture.

Sitting while grasping her knees, with a sour look.

.....

On that subject, I failed to see her expression when she trampled me or when she kicked me -- it was not surprising though, since I had been staring at the ground the whole time.

When she spat out the demon blade she couldn't show any emotion -- oh well.

I could imagine.

Disdain or scorn, something like that I guessed.

Anyway.

If nothing else -- it was not a ghastly smile like she had in Spring Break.

Even if someone may find it so comical to be worthy to view it.

She wouldn't show it to me -- especially not in this situation.

Still.

I kowtowed once more toward her, very deeply, as an apology.

"It has bothered me since you first did it."

At that moment, with a timing that seemed calculated -- with a timing that seemed as if he saw through me.

I was called out from behind.

Though it had not passed that long time, it was a voice I missed.

I turned and as expected there was Oshino Meme.

"Araragi-kun, you got the kowtow wrong."

"Eh?"

"That's the tea ceremony bowing while sitting. What a polite way of making a request--"

Ha ha, laughed cheerfully Oshino.

However, once again his Aloha shirt was full of scratches -- the worst until now. One wouldn't get into such miserable conditions not even while fighting a hundred cats at the same time.

It didn't seem a state in which one could laugh.

"Ah. I took the posture of a middle schooler in the tea club as a reference..... I may have learned it by mistake"

"Do you make tea club's middle schoolers kowtow? You have an awful fixation."

"I didn't do it for fun!"

Besides, I said.

"Rather than receiving the kowtow, I prefer to do it -- these have been very productive five days."

"Hmm. And you managed to get 'Kokorowatari'. That's quite something -- not even I expected vampire-chan's change of heart."

Anyway, let me congratulate you, said Oshino.

Though there was actually no sign of him being congratulant.

Really none at all.

Still, those were not inconsiderate words -- from what I could see, even he was certainly at his wits' end.

As a pro, Oshino would not call what I was doing -- what I was trying to do -- getting in his way anymore.

In the least.

"Class rep-chan's parents, you know—"

Oshino started saying, as if it was a trivial subject.

"They are already leaving the hospital."

"! Is that so?"

I was surprised.

I thought they were so debilitated that it would take a while for them to recover their consciousness -- however, this was not good news at all.

In other words -- those two would already return to that house that didn't have Hanekawa's room.

That fact meant -- that in the case the Hinderling Cat went home to change clothes, it could run into them, and--

"I've heard them out just a little."

"Eh?"

"I went to visit them before they left the hospital. A break in the battles with the Hinderling Cat -- I thought I could get some hints. There wasn't any, though."

"....."

So that was what Oshino did while I was kowtowing in front of the vampire little girl, huh -- in fact, now that he mentioned it, visiting the first 'victims' of the Hinderling Cat, that was those two, and hear them out was for Oshino the proper procedure, the proper *modus operandi*.

I would have never thought of that.

Hearing Hanekawa's parents out -- talking with them.

Inconceivable.

I didn't want to speak with them -- I didn't even want to see their faces.

"*They didn't know anything*. Those parents didn't know anything about their daughter -- well, these days it's like that, I guess? She's at a difficult age too."

".....That's the peculiar family environment."

"Indeed. *I noticed that* -- I couldn't obtain any important information to use in the battle against the Hinderling Cat, but I could hear an interesting episode instead."

"An interesting episode?"

"Yeah, well, their consciousness had just returned, they blabbered while still in trance -- it seems

they mistook me for a doctor."

No way they looked at this dirty old man with an Aloha shirt and mistook him for a doctor, no matter the trance.

What actually happened should have been Oshino intentionally playing that part and making them misunderstand.

"What episode did you hear about?"

"That time when daddy hit the face of class rep-chan."

With a nonchalant facial expression, Oshino started narrating it as if it was really a funny story.

"An adult male hit with all his strength, without holding back, resolute: bam -- he struck her with so much power the frame of the glasses was able to cut her. Class rep-chan was blown to the wall. Well, class rep-chan is a lightweight."

"....."

It was not a story I wanted to hear in detail.

Especially not from the point of view of the one who hit.

I didn't even want to imagine it.

"Class rep-chan's body collided strongly with the wall, and for a while she crouched with the pain. After that what do you think she did, Araragi-kun?"

"What she did -- well....."

"Not screaming even when her father hit her for no reason, class rep-chan just crouched. What do you think her next action was?"

I couldn't answer.

Not because I didn't know -- looking at Oshino's facial expression, and thinking of the girl called Hanekawa Tsubasa, I was painfully aware of how the story would continue and end.

At this point, there really was only bleakness.

"*'Don't, father.'*"

Oshino said.

Though not similar -- he imitated Hanekawa's tone of voice.

"*'You shouldn't hit the face of a girl--'*. Class rep-chan said, smiling cheerfully."

".....!"

Those were words I couldn't bear to hear.

Were.

Were those the words of a daughter hit by her father?!

That sort of thing?!

"It's disgusting, you know -- an innate goodness of dreadful proportions. Daddy got further frenzied, and naturally he continued to hit her. She was such a saint that if she was born in Yamataikoku <sup>[109]</sup> she could have become the successor of Himiko. To be frank, even I would hit such child."

Scary.

Scarier than the kiai.

Disgusting.

Erasing his smile -- Oshino said that as if he was spitting out.

"In the end, I think the fact she poked her nose into the work he brought back home and so on was nothing but an excuse. Even without that, daddy -- and mummy too, have wanted to hit her for a long time, I guess."

"Wanting to hit her --what?"

A father. A mother.

Hitting the daughter.

"They thought of her as A monster, not a daughter. It was as if being told for no reason to raise a demon -- there are many types of supernatural stories about a child replaced by a monster, though in this case the child wasn't even related to the parents--"

".....What's this about, Oshino?"

I cut into his long speech.

"Are you -- on their side?"

"I'm not on the side of anyone, I'm neutral. If I had to say it, it's a matter of points of view <sup>[110]</sup> -- class rep-chan has her own point of view, and her parents have their own. For an outsider there's no way to know who is right. In fact -- there's no such thing as right or wrong to begin with."

There is not right or wrong, only circumstances, said Oshino.

Those were words without room for objection.

"If I had to express it with a cheesy pun, the moment she threw her parents at you, class rep-chan threw away her consciousness. It's a lame joke though -- ha ha, since you are her friend you are on her side, but the friends of the parents are likewise on the side of the parents. There's no such thing as right or wrong to begin with."

There's no such thing as right or wrong to begin with.

Oshino repeated, obstinately persistent.

No question about it.

He was right.

He was right in saying there was no right or wrong.

However--

"Still, Hanekawa -- she is right."

"That's why I'm scared and feel disgusted."

Oshino refuted easily the objection I milked out.

"To keep the ecosystem in balance, this time I'm taking the approach of standing by class rep-chan's side -- but if we really think about the ecosystem's balance, the best would be that she got taken in by the Hinderer Cat and vanished, I think."

".....No."

I started to say, but I couldn't object.

I couldn't affirm it was as he said in all aspects -- but I had no basis to deny that.

Nothing at all.

Nothing at all, so I couldn't stick up for her.

However -- Oshino.

In Spring Break I was saved by Hanekawa because she was abnormal.

She saved me.

"Of course, her parents are not people who deserve praise -- I understood it by talking with them. They had abdicated their parenthood, it was evident. However, Araragi-kun, I couldn't avoid to understand their feelings. *Living under the same roof with a person who was completely right, your*



own daughter to boot, it makes me shiver. For ten and more years a person who was always right stood beside you. It's pathetic, but the reason those two became such kind of person undoubtedly comes from the fact they had been living under the same roof with class rep-chan."

I remembered.

The nameplates affixed on Hanekawa's house.

The name of the parents -- and slightly distanced, the name 'Tsubasa' in hiragana.

However.

If nothing else, at the beginning -- at the start point, they had at least created a nameplate.

Even if very meager, there was at least that.

A family's..... how could I say, a sort of prototype of it.

A cozy home drama, something before it became the mere shadow of itself.

There was supposed to be something before it turned into ruin.

The same way as the current me began with Hanekawa -- even them, certainly, had begun with Hanekawa.

It was because they have lived with Hanekawa.

That they became like that.

If so.

"They kept having an absolute rightness constantly displayed in front of them from very up close. To put it in other words -- it was a hell in which they were endlessly displayed their own ugliness, their own inexperience. It was a nightmare. I could even praise them for managing to not hit her for ten and more years."

".....But that's not Hanekawa's fault no matter how looked at it."

"It is her fault. She is the only one who should be criticized. A person that holds power must be aware of the effect that power bestows to the surroundings -- this is not the metaphor of the black han and the white egg, but parents who get their personality disintegrated by great children are commonplace. In that regard, class rep-chan was too unaware of it. She was convinced that she was normal. She persisted in being convinced she was normal. She made a needless endeavor. The result is this situation."

She brought hindrances.

She brought hindrances to the thing she touched.

She brought hindrances to the person she touched.

As if she was in full bloom.

"She distorted all the way even the course of the Hindering Cat kaii -- in this case anything and everything was irregular. Anything and everything was irregular, so just class rep-chan was irregular. The reason why vampire-chan now felt like helping you a bit is because the enemy is class rep-chan. Each and every little thing's all class rep-chan's fault."

"I'm sorry, Oshino. I think it's probably as you say, but I think you shouldn't have said it -- don't talk bad of Hanekawa anymore."

I said.

At last, I became unable to bear it anymore.

"Or else I'll kill you."

"Is yours pity for her, huh?"

The feeling of a common person toward a dead cat on the road, huh -- Oshino didn't stay silent.

He was not the kind of man who stayed silent even if I threatened him.

He was a man that talked a lot.

"Are you feeling pity for her, born in misfortune, grew up in misfortune, possessing an intelligence greater than her misfortune, huh?"

"You're wrong. Completely wrong. It's so unlike you to miss the mark BY that much, Oshino."

I rested the back of the demon sword the vampire little girl had lent me on my shoulder -- trying my best to look cool.

"As if I could pity someone. Unlucky girls are simply moe. I just want to work off my frustration."

While chocking back my tears.

Putting on airs -- I struck a pose.

"Female high schoolers in underwear and cat's ears are what I find hot!"

The demon sword 'Kokorowatari', the Kaii Killer -- as the name implied, was a blade for killing the kaii.

Just the kaii.

A deadly weapon for killing only the kaii.

To put it the other way around, it was a deadly weapon that couldn't kill humans -- in fact, it was not just limited to humans. The Kaii Killer couldn't slice any lifeforms or objects that weren't kaii.

An unparalleled sword in front of a kaii, but if you weren't in front of one it was equivalent to a blunt blade. Someone could say it was even worse than a blunt sword -- it didn't even physically collide with what was not a kaii. Just like an incorporeal ghost, it slipped through, it passed by.

Although strictly speaking this 'Kokorowatari' the vampire little girl owned was a replica<sup>[111]</sup>, a fake, we should say that this fake possessed such characteristics as a result of being created with vampire fantastic superpowers in a wild idea, it seemed the 'genuine' Kaii Killer was something like Ishikawa Goemon's Zantetsuken<sup>[112]</sup>, which could cut everything in this world but the konjac.

That aside.

An explanation of the meaning it had for the current case a demon sword that killed only the kaii, that cut only the kaii -- should be unneeded.

By using the Kaii Killer, I would be able to separate the *Hindering Cat part* from Hanekawa Tsubasa -- from the body and mind of Hanekawa Tsubasa.

To cut only the cat -- cut and release.

I would be able to cut like a Gordian knot her dual personalities which were two sides of the same coin.

*I would be able to exorcise only the Hindering Cat without Hanekawa herself sustaining any injury* -- take it as boasting if you like, but this was an Ultra C<sup>[113]</sup> level underhanded trick impossible even to the specialist Oshino Meme.

Turned out the aforementioned Oshino, by the end of the Golden Week, had continued losing a total of one hundred battles against the Hindering Cat -- and I was the only one who could fight back.

I could.

Well, since it was a borrowed object, and the way I borrowed it was kowtowing to a little girl, it was nothing to boast about -- furthermore.

There wasn't anything I would feel proud for.

Still.

I could make this story end.

Without any setup.

Totally disregarding foreshadowing or logical connection, I could put an incontrovertible end to the book.

And--

That alone was enough.

"That demon sword has been customized for vampire use, so I can't use it -- only you can do it. It's better this way. It's a nice idea."

The authorization of the specialist.

Certified with a seal of approval -- not the case it seemed, guessing from the spoofing tone.

Even if it was an actual fact that the Kaii Killer had been customized for vampire use, it still seemed something a specialist like Oshino could handle, though even assuming he could--

Oshino wouldn't.

Such convenient item -- the use of a tool which could gain results without paying even compensations, for him could only be unlawful.

A foul, a cheat, a violation of rules -- balance be damned.

"Yep, that's exactly it. Seems you have realized it. It's somewhat better than being unaware."

Oshino said grinning.

"As a specialist I have nothing else to say to you, but as a friend I do. As your best friend, I want to warn you."

"Warn me? About what?"

For the time being I asked, while feeling repulsion toward his disgustingly informal, over-familiar manner of speaking.

Thereupon Oshino lifted three fingers.

"More than warnings, I want to raise some objections in my own way. First thing. If you use that sword you can certainly separate class rep-chan from the Hinderling Cat -- at first glance, it looks like the best idea to say the Hinderling Cat's requiem. However, exactly because it looks like the best idea, it's the idea the class rep-chan would be guarding against the most. My one hundred defeats were due to her strategies and tactics -- and her knowledge. It's precisely because she saw through all of my attempts that I feel bound hand, foot and tail. Wouldn't an idea the likes of you conceived be the first thing the Hinderling Cat would take into consideration, and already prepare a countermeasure for?"

He folded one finger.

".....Might be."

I answered to Oshino. I hesitated over making a comeback about the fact he nonchalantly said 'the likes of you', but for the time being I shelved it for later.

"If we talk about possibilities, it exists. However, I am confident about that -- perhaps it will go well. I can't guarantee it with an absolute certainty, but in my own way I have a plan."

"A plan?"

"Well -- maybe not a plan. Expectations."

We could say it was wishful thinking -- if that happens then things will go fine, I believed.

It was not like I had something in mind.

But believing was enough for me.

".....Hmmm. All right, let's trust you on that, if you are fine with it."

"Don't talk like you were implying something -- what are the other two warnings?"

"Ah, no -- I'll cancel the second. It would be the same even if I said it. Just let me say the third."

Oshino said, and he folded the remaining two fingers at once.

What's with this last minute indecisiveness -- no, I didn't think that.

Because I could imagine what Oshino's second warning was -- I understood it.

Yes.

I understand, Oshino.

If you don't say it -- it will help me a lot.

Though you've never had the intention of helping me.

Now and always.

You won't ever help me.

"The third, the last one. This is the most important, moreover the most practical, I think. Araragi-kun. You are prepared for war, alright, I won't stop you -- but the real problem is, how would you find class rep-chan, who is hiding somewhere in this city? During this Golden Week, though I have always lost, I was able to battle the Hinderer Cat one hundred times because I am a specialist, and I know techniques to track and detect kiai -- I can grasp its territoriality and its turf. And yet, I'm shaken off one out of three times. It's difficult because the opponent is class rep-chan, all the more for an amateur like you. What do you intend to do about that? How would you manage to play war in the first place? It's like at this stage of the game you have the intention to rely on me for tracking and detection, right?"

"You are saying it as if you would do it if I asked, Oshino."

I said, shrugging my shoulders.

"Don't worry. I have an actual plan about that, not just expectations or wishful thinking. I won't trouble you. From here on we'll take different paths. You search the Hinderer Cat with your ways as a specialist -- and I'll do it in my own way."

"Huh. Your own way, huh."

"Yeah. This is something you can't do, the Ultra C."

"Hmm."

Then show me what you've got.

Do as you like -- whether this will be an action scene or a tearjerker, I absolutely won't get in your way.

So said Oshino, and he didn't try to ask what concretely my plan was. What a best friend I had -- and then.

And then, thirty minutes after that conversation.

Exactly thirty minutes.

I didn't go outside to look for the Hinderer Cat, like Oshino did -- I stood right in the center of a room in the second floor of the abandoned building, perhaps the smallest classroom among the rooms in the building, doing nothing.

I had already finished doing the things I had to do.

I only had to wait.

It seemed though that if I got too far from the vampire little girl the demon sword would lose its existence even before its efficacy, and would collapse at the molecular level, so I just had to remain inside the abandoned building, the choice of the place in itself didn't have much importance. A school's classroom would have been fine -- but well, it wasn't good to attract too much attention.

Besides, this room was surprisingly a good choice.

Because from the window of this room, which had its glass broken, probably by children who threw stones, and of which only the frame remained -- the beautiful moon was visible , which slashed the night sky, it slashed the black night sky as if a picture which had been completed by a renowned artist--

"----!"

Right beside that masterpiece.

Splitting the concrete right beside me with a body blow, piercing through like a bullet -- the Hinderling Cat appeared.

Ignoring the scattered fragments.

Breaking the steel frame -- together with a roaring sound.

The Cat easily landed four footed in front of me.

Cracking even the floor where it landed, a shock that made me think the whole abandoned building would collapse passed through the air and was transmitted to me.

An appearance where you knock down the wall. Imitating Ranma ½'s Shampoo in this 21th century.

Now that I think about, Shampoo turned into a cat when poured with water, right?

Then she was close to Hanekawa who turned into a cat wearing a cat<sup>[114]</sup>.

White hair.

Beast ears grown on the head.

Black underwear -- barefoot.

Cat eyes -- Hinderling Cat.

I made me shiver just by existing.

While I remained nevertheless standing upright without moving, the Hinderling Cat suddenly raised its face, and

"Araragi-kun! Are you all right!?"

she said.

She called out, without trying to hide her agitation, so desperate she was even close to crying, biting her own lip.

Even now, she had a threatening look, she might have lept at me with the same force with which she smashed the wall -- however, once confirmed with her cat eyesight that I was normally standing upright, roughly in perfect health,

".....What's this?"

she said.

She looked downward with her raised face -- while slowly standing up.

"I have been tricked<sup>[115]</sup>."

".....Yeah."

Looks like it, I said.

What I did was simple.

It seems that the game of tag in the continent is called "eluding the cat"<sup>[116]</sup> -- sorry, but I didn't feel like playing a game of tag or hide and seek.

If anything, it was kick the can.

And the can was myself.

I had just sent one e-mail -- I had just sent Hanekawa's cell phone mail address a mail whose contents were *'I'm being killed by the vampire, come save me'*.

It was a concise help mail where nothing concrete was written, and consequently could have been taken any way -- and for Hanekawa that was enough.

Luckily, as a man I was a source of countless worries.

I was an all you can worry.

Mobilizing the knowledge and imagination power she possessed, Hanekawa imagined several things all by herself.

And then -- she rushed here for me.



Like she always did.

Even in Spring Break.

And like that -- were I dying, were I being killed -- were I trying to kill myself, she had rushed to me.

This situation was, so to speak, the replay of that -- if we exclude the fact that the contents of the mail were a lie.

I was extremely sorry to the vampire little girl for falsely accusing her<sup>[117]</sup>, but at the moment, being realistic, she was the only one I could cast in that role.

This was not a plan the Oshino who exceedingly hated the saver/saved relationship -- or at least the Oshino hopeless with machines could have used.

*If Hanekawa wasn't seeking my help -- then I would seek hers.*

If there ever was a weakness that a third party could have pointed out, it would be whether Hanekawa who turned into the Hinderer Cat would read the mail or not, whether she was carrying a cell phone or not -- but I had no worry about that.

You know.

*For female high schoolers, cell phones -- are like possessing evil spirits-*

If she knew the concept of going back home to change clothes -- then she could use even the battery charger plugged in the electrical outlet.

.....

People with composure to spare could jokingly imagine she was holding it between her breasts.

"Huh -- anyway, you arrived quickly, Hinderer Cat. I am amazed that you made an appearance within just thirty minutes. You are really something."

".....You're the worst, Araragi-kun."

The Hinderer Cat looked this way.

She glared.

"You lied and made people worry -- that's so wrong."

"Ka ka--"

I -- laughed at those words.

Like a villain.

Like Ashuraman.

Involuntarily my face split in a smile.

"What's that?"

Threatened the girl subjected to that.

"Someone is getting mad here -- what's so funny?"

"Ah, it's, you see—"

I said. Pointing at the cat. the Hinderer Cat.

"You got confused on your speech pattern -- Hanekawa."

Pointing at Hanekawa Tsubasa.

"....."

"What's the matter, honor student? Wasn't the Hinderer Cat setting sticking nya nya at the end of its sentences.....!?"

The cat -- Hanekawa.

Remained silent for a short while after I brought that up -- at last she gave up, and

"Well now."

She said.

With the very same time she used in the beginning.

"Or maybe I should say 'well nya' -- well, whatever. Eh? Huh? When did you find out?"

Her attitude was weirdly beaming, no feelings of guilt, unapologetic.

Right. The usual Hanekawa.

A Hanekawa-like -- Hanekawa.

Nothing unlike her about her.

No.

Not even once had Hanekawa ever been something other than Hanekawa.

Not even when she was unlike Hanekawa.

Not even when she didn't resemble Hanekawa at all.

Never.

A great part of her consciousness remained -- no such thing.

A dual personality -- no such dual personality.

There was no exterior or interior, no black or white.

If you turned the other side inside out, you would get the front.

The dark side was at the same time a full-size Hanekawa.

Whether you tried to invert it or revert it, no matter how you spinned it, she was herself.

Hanekawa -- was Hanekawa.

Always and everywhere.

All evil deeds and misdeeds.

All the pranks.

*Everything -- was something she did herself.*

As in the kiai tale of the Hindering Cat.

She had not been replaced.

Hanekawa had never been possessed by the cat from the start--

If you looked carefully, the ghost was withered silver grass.

"Somehow I understood it from the beginning. I am your friend, you know. So there was no way I could mistake you for someone else. Therefore -- I couldn't help but understand."

I said matter-of-factly, without putting any emotion into it.

Almost a monotone.

If I didn't use that kind of tone, I wouldn't have had a way to hold this absurd discussion.

It was a thoroughly absurd dialogue.

"Whether a kiai possessed you or you absorbed a kiai -- you still remained yourself, Hanekawa. As if

your nature would change if you changed your character. That's you. You yourself. If a friend mailed you seeking help, no matter the situation, on the spur of the moment you would rush over -- like a cat rolling a hairball, you instinctively can't help but rush over! That's who you are!"

".....This--"

This is me.

Really?

Hanekawa looked downward on her whole body.

The body that changed into a kiai.

The appearance of a monster.

"That's right. After all, though you are angry at me for lying, you actually breathed a sigh of relief, right? You feel relieved, right? You are relieved that I'm not dying, that I'm not being killed, right? You are glad the mail was a lie, right?"

"....."

"Amazingly kind, amazingly strong. Too kind, too strong. So kind even living is tiresome, so strong you sold your soul to a kiai. You are so right it puts pressure on other people. I understand that you would like to deny that -- I don't get it, but I understand. But you know, Hanekawa..... you know, Hanekawa..... still, Hanekawa, that's who you are!"

Carry the burden on your shoulders!

Take it upon yourself!

Don't let go of it!

I took back my previous remark -- damn.

I couldn't speak in monotone, I yelled sharply, in a scream.

I was not able to not put emotions into it.

I was not able to not succumb to my violent emotion.

I was not able to not confess to Hanekawa.

"Live your whole life with that nature! Don't ever change! Don't ever become someone else, don't ever become something different! You were born with that character, you were brought up with that character, there is nothing you can do about it! You have been already completed, you have been already finished -- let bygones that connect to the present be bygones -- we could say it's just the

setting of your character! Even if you denied it, you can't make it as if it never happened! Don't complain, you can only hold on and get on with it!"

".....What are you saying, Araragi-kun?"

Hanekawa -- received my scream.

She was confused.

She was bewildered.

Bending her head, she created a forceful smiling face.

A stiff smiling face

She pitifully created.

"Don't speak nonsense -- I too have it tough. I too have things I can do and things I can't do. I too am human."

"You are not human."

I said, interrupting Hanekawa.

"You entrusted that body to a kiai. Don't call yourself a human now."

--That was cruel, Araragi-kun."

Hanekawa said -- still with a smiling face.

As if she was reproaching me.

"You should know why I turned into this, though. Still asking me to hold on -- that's cruel. Too cruel. Araragi-kun, would you pity me?"

"I won't."

I gave Hanekawa the same answer I gave to Oshino.

"You don't know who your real father is, the mother who birthed you committed suicide, you got passed around families and ended up with blood unrelated parents with whom you have not been able to create bonds, you were brought up in a cold family, but still forced yourself to be normal, and of all things you managed to achieve that -- you lived without trouble as if you were under a martial law, you really are unlucky! You got such bad luck, I mean, you are so unhappy! But still -- it's all right, that sort of things!"

It's all right!

This is all right!

Stop being so serious!

"It's okay, okay, don't mind it! Don't worry about it! It's not like you have to have sad thoughts because you are unhappy, it's not like you have to sulk because you are not blessed! Cheer up even when bad things happen! A person like you! A person like you, after this, should make a face like nothing ever happened and go back home, and then you should live with your father and mother, who left the hospital, the same life you have lived until now with no change whatsoever! I guarantee in your whole life you will never reconcile with your father or mother! Even if by any chance in the future you'll become happy it will be in vain, no matter how happy you'll become, the fact the past had been bad will not disappear! You can't make it as if it never happened, it will influence you! No matter what you do, no matter what happens, unhappiness will pile up as unhappiness inside your heart forever. You'll remember it when you'll forget it, dream all your life! *We* will keep dreaming nightmares for all of our life! We 'll keep dreaming them -- that's already a given, so don't look away from reality! You can play pranks on passerbys, or pretend to streak in underwear, but by releasing just a wee bit of stress like that, reality won't change!"

".....it won't change."

It won't change.

It won't mutate.

It won't transform.

Even if you wear a mask, even if you wear a cat.

Even if you turn into a kiai -- you won't change, mutate, transform.

You are still yourself.

"I absolutely don't feel pity for you."

I repeated.

I said, as if pressing for an answer, as bashing.

I blamed Hanekawa Tsubasa.

"Weren't you the one who rehabilitated me!? -- If you strayed from the right path, what should I do!?"

Don't use a cat as a reason.

Don't use a kiai as a pretext.

Don't use a monster as a chance.

Don't use unhappiness as a drive to grow up.

Even if you did -- in the end, that would be like scratching at yourself.

The kaii -- is actually *not there*, you know?

That is a lie.

"If you say you want to release your stress then I will undertake all of it. I will touch your breasts whenever you want, I'll look at you in underwear wherever you want. That's why -- you have to bear it."

I will always have time for you.

Because we are friends.

She listened silently to my proposal -- Hanekawa.

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

".....Araragi-kun, you are really the worst."

My head hurts.

She said.

"Araragi-kun, even if you can become a star, you can't become a hero."

"I can't become a star."

I shook my head.

"I can only become a vampire."

And I even failed at that.

"I see."

So you're not going to be -- my hero.

You're not.

"I thought of it before, but Araragi-kun, you must really dislike me."

"Yeah."

I nodded.

"I really hate you, Hanekawa."

"I see. And I hate you too, Araragi-kun."

Saying this, Hanekawa,

## "Just die"

looked away from me, in disdain -- and she muttered with a barely audible tiny voice.

[illegible]



[illegible]

Meow.

Said Hanekawa like a cat -- and once again she got on all fours.

Twenty nails whose shape transfigured dug into the concrete floor. Some times ago she did something similar even in the classroom. Cat nails can be pulled in and out, was it?

A skilled hawk hides its talons<sup>[118]</sup> -- cats are like that too, huh.

The nails themselves are one of their skills, huh.

"Nya ha. You will undertake all of my stress, that's wonderful."

Said Hanekawa, still in that posture.

While looking up from below.

"Can I kill you, then?"

"You can. That's my ambition."

I answered that to Hanekawa's question, spreading both arms.

"I want to die killed by you."

"Okay!"

Then please die.

Directly after I narrowly managed to recognize that voice -- or maybe it might have been just before.

Without a sound, I was blown off.

To be exact, my upper body had been blown off.

I was not sure of what she did to me.

Perhaps I had been scratched by her nails, perhaps I had been pierced by her fangs, or possibly I had received a body blow.

After all, the attacks a cat could do are basically those kinds of things -- and any of them was originally not something which could slice a man's upper and lower body in one blow.

However, that was the kaii-like way of doing it.

With a cardinal blow accompanied by a shock so strong it would stop my heart, my torso was chopped near the bones of the waist, and with a speed ostentatiously equal to that of the Shinkansen, my back struck the wall behind.

This was that sort of thing.

Like when Usui-san got hit by the Gatotsu Zeroshiki<sup>[119]</sup>, or like in the last moment of Freezer-sama when he faced a super saiyan, something like that.

What a Shampoo I had.

While still catching in my field of view my lower body, which remained standing upright on the same place -- I slid from the classroom's wall I was slammed into, and I fell on the floor.

Ah.

This point of view is so low.

"Ow!"

Slightly delayed -- my sense of pain started working.

While viewing my maimed side with my internal organs flowing out, pulpy and glistening -- a pain like in a bad joke ran over all my body, not just over the wound.

"O-Owaa!"

"AARGH!"

However -- a scream disturbing the expression of my impression of pain resounded in the small classroom.

It was similar to the cry of a cat in rut.

Her howl erased everything.

"Nya..... NYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA.

As if the lack of sound at the moment of the blow had been a lie.

That scream which could reach the whole town, that scream which could roar through the world, of course -- needless to say it, was Hanekawa's.

No.

In this case -- it was the Hindering Cat's, I guess.

The death agony of a kiai.

"A-Araragi-kun! What! What did you do -- to me!?"

I saw Hanekawa, grovelling on the floor the same way as me, asking me that, mixed with screams. At that point in time such question was a great intellectual curiosity -- but it was very clear

I pointed with a finger.

At my lower body which had remained standing upright.

".....! Wh—"

Hanekawa was speechless.

That was being speechless, I guessed -- because from that lower body, *as if the sole spine had been left there*, a Japanese sword was sticking out.

Well, in this case the expression closer to the truth would be that the lower body was tacked on the floor with a Japanese sword.

A Japanese sword.

Needless to say -- the demon sword 'Kokorowatari'.

The Kaii killer.

"Y-you had prepared a katana!"

"Yes. *I swallowed it beforehand* -- just like an old style magician."

Like the vampire little girl did.

Though the vampire little girl actually did it in a different way -- using the matter creation power she made herself a scabbard, but in my case I had simply plunged the katana from the mouth like an axle of the body, I made it pass through the stomach along the spinal cord and through the left foot, and I pierced the floor with it.

In a word, a skewer.

This act would not be possible if it weren't for the immortal nature of a vampire -- and even then the endless regeneration while being killed by the Kaii Killer was a living hell.

I had been waiting for Hanekawa standing and not sitting for thirty minutes for that reason. It passed through the axis of my body running along the spine like an axle, so I was not able to sit -- of course, if I had to say the reason why I did something that could have killed me so painfully that when my lower body split from me I finally felt relief, it was to hide the Kaii Killer.

In order to hide it inside my body.

And in order to make Hanekawa lower her guard and carelessly attack me.

Figuratively speaking, it was something like stuffing a large quantity of glass fragments inside a sand bag -- Hanekawa couldn't resist because she had hit such a thing.

Because it was a strategy without meaning, just like the other time when my arm got targeted, -- it had been tough provoking her.

I was really sorry for saying perverted things I didn't really mean, like touching her breasts or seeing her in her underwear.

"UH, GUH, UUUUUUUUUUUUGH! B-but! But -- but Araragi-kun, this pain--"

"Yes. *You are not hurt yourself.*"

I said.

"The sword I buried in my body is called the Kaii Killer -- I borrowed it from a vampire, it's a demon sword that cuts only the kaii. It has cut not you -- but the Hinderer Cat buried in your body."

Hanekawa crouched and grasped the back of her right hand -- from what I judged, it seemed my upper body had been blown off by a cat punch with the right hand.

But there was not even a wound on that right hand.

That was natural.

It didn't wound humans -- the Kaii Killer cut only the kaii.

The Kaii killer killed only the kaii.

It was nothing like the Hinderer Cat's characteristic that gave Oshino a hard time, the energy drain with which a scratch could become a fatal wound.

Debilitation.

Swoon.

No such half-baked effects would arise.

It was beyond salvation.

*It kills a kaii with a scratch* -- demon sword 'Kokorowatari'.

"W-What!?"

Hearing my explanation.

Hanekawa made an expression of surprise from the bottom of the heart.

"How can such preposterous sword exist?"

"Yeah. You never heard about it, didn't you?"

Because I didn't tell you.

I heard about the Kaii Killer directly from the vampire little girl. There was no legend or anything -- just a confidential talk.

It was a story I heard in Spring Break.

On the rooftop over this building -- alone with the vampire little girl in her complete form.

A time we spent together.

The memory of that conversation with Kisshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, among the hellish experiences I had, was one of the few treasures.

Therefore I had never talked about the nature of the Kaii Killer to anybody.

Not even to you.

"Even a specialist like Oshino didn't know she was carrying such an unforeseeable sword until a while ago. It is literally -- a katana that transcends human knowledge."

"O-Oshino-san too!"

Didn't know about it.

Hanekawa -- moaned.

Hanekawa was unable to hide her confusion. I continued.

Proudly.

"If you knew about the existence of such killer item, you wouldn't have fallen for such a trick -- everybody could imagine setting up a trap by hiding the katana inside your body, and everybody would do so. It's such shallow thinking you can't even call it a strategy."

And Hanekawa had fallen for that.

Easily, mindlessly.

She had fallen at the first try.

Because she didn't know about it.

Because -- she didn't know about it.

"Well, on the other hand, this was just wishful thinking -- because you could still have possibly known about the katana's existence, even if not from me. Feel relieved, Hanekawa -- not even you know everything."

"....."

"Not even you know everything."

I said, with a feeble breath.

"Therefore don't make a face like you knew everything and lost all your hope -- just die, you said. Someone like me should just die, you said. Don't say something like that, get real. You too still have plenty of things you don't know! That's why! I don't know everything, I just happen to know this -- you say! Tell me that again like you always do!"

Cough.

My last words were mixed with a large volume of blood.

A great service of blood from both the torso and the mouth, in terms of street performing I had switched to water tricks.

No, this was not the time for a dull metaphor.

Needless to say, I was dying.

I was going to die miserably.

I had annihilated the Hinderer Cat with one scratch from the demon sword, but the prerequisite was that I had to receive a blow that pierced my body (although I didn't think the upper and lower body would separate).

And as it had been the case with the left arm, the Hinderer Cat's attack was accompanied by the energy drain, so vampire's healing skill wouldn't work.

In fact, there was really no sign of regeneration below my torso -- just blood and viscera spilling out endlessly.

I could have forcibly connected the lower body stabbed by the sword, but it was not possible in this situation.

First of all, when I swallowed that blade and when my upper body had been blown off, the kiai killer had injured me considerably, and I didn't notice how much damage had been done. Anyway, over there the regeneration of the undying and unkillable vampire had already begun -- in any case.

I was dying.

I was dying killed by Hanekawa.

I was dying for Hanekawa's sake.

Really -- I'm so happy.

"....."

Of course, I understand.

I understand that my actions are those of an extraordinary buffoon -- it is clear.

It is futile.

*This thing, this thing I did*, is terribly pointless.

By using the Kaii Killer, I can certainly exorcise the Hinderer Cat -- but nothing more than that.

The story would conclude, but the problem would not be solved.

The stress Hanekawa is under won't be overcome -- and it's not like the friction in the family will disappear either.

The Hinderer Cat's existence will be eliminated, that's all.

In other words the situation will return back to how it was before the Golden Week.

There won't be a great difference with the cat's experiment of assaulting five hundred people to eliminate stress -- in fact, that way there might have been some relief, at least.

If this solution was fine -- perhaps Oshino wouldn't have lost one hundred times. He would have settled it the first time. The fruit of compromise -- I am sure that the second warning he wanted to tell me before as my best friend was exactly that.

Pushing all responsibility on the kiai, and resetting the entire situation.

In other words, though wrong as a method to clear the stage, cutting off the power of the game for a moment, and then trying to redo it from the save point.

In Animal Crossing Mr. Resetti<sup>[120]</sup> would get angry at you.

It's cowardice, it's a stopgap measure.

It's makeshift in the real meaning of the word<sup>[121]</sup>.

But that's fine.

I don't intend to save you, Hanekawa.

Things like preventing you from becoming a murderer, or preventing you from killing your parents, as of now these are just justifications.

I want to die for your sake -- without any meaning or purpose.

Just that.

Ah, right. There is also that thing, how can I say it.

Ah..... well no, in fact I have said all I wanted to say.

Right.

Yes, it is as I said before.

Hold on.

Hold on.

There are plenty of things to do, and plenty of things to hate, even after this they will continue to be plenty -- hold on.

Hold on, become happy.

In this way I die, but -- I am a kiai, a monster, a vampire, therefore mine doesn't count as a murder,



quickly forget me.

Now you are on your own -- be successful.

"Ugh..... NYAA!"

The moment I closed my eyes, putting on airs of nihilism, self-complacent and narcissistical -- a phenomenon that startled me happened.

Hanekawa's shape was further transfiguring.

Further like a cat -- both arms, both legs were covered in white fur.

Nails and fangs once again stuck out abnormally one after another.

More than a cat, that was already a being more like a white tiger.

"NYAA!"

"....."

Before the candle goes out, for a moment, the flame burns stronger -- in the same way, the existence of the Hinderer Cat was manifesting.

So much that it could take over Hanekawa.

Were it a small fish, were it low rank.

Even when dying, even when vanishing.

It was still a full fledged kaii.

The dying cat was now tearing Hanekawa's mind in pieces, it was violating her.

Raging for the pain of the sword cut, it was scratching Hanekawa.

Due to the fact that the demon sword had separated Hanekawa and the Hinderer Cat -- their union had started malfunctioning.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

"NYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

The scream of Hanekawa mingled with that of the cat.

They overlapped -- the synchronized.

I couldn't die calmly with their screams.

".....What are you doing, cat?"

That's wrong.

What would you do if you wounded Hanekawa?

*Did you forget the reason why you possessed Hanekawa -- the reason why you let yourself be taken in by Hanekawa?*

Or maybe you can't remember it with you cat memory.

It absolutely wasn't a cat-like whim.

It was neither a matter of *being like or unlike yourself*.

The reason why you bothered so much for Hanekawa -- the reason why you lent her your cat hand<sup>[122]</sup> was because *she didn't pity you* when you were dead on the road, wasn't it?

She abode to rules, she abode to ethics.

Completely without emotions.

That's what you said, and it's true in itself -- but that's not all.

Even in my case -- when I was assailed by a vampire and ceased being human, Hanekawa never pitied me at all.

She didn't pity me, she didn't have mercy on me.

And she didn't commiserate me -- or *look down on me*.

She viewed me as an equal.

Right, Hindering Cat.

Whether we die on the street, or get assailed by a vampire--

"We are not *pitiful* at all!"

I know.

It was not a whim.

It was not simply returning a favor either.

You too got to like Hanekawa -- and that's why.

That's why you should stop assailing Hanekawa like that.

Let's stop.

Stop right there.

Please stop.

Listen to my prayer.

If this keeps up, then I won't have died for Hanekawa's sake--

"Foolish servant. If thou cut the power so roughly, it is natural that the machine breaks"

Suddenly, I -- got an auditory hallucination.

Too much pain.

On the verge of death, -- I had an auditory hallucination.

Not the Mr. Resetti one.

An auditory hallucination in which *she* rebuked me.

".....!?"

In fact.

Auditory hallucination was the right term -- because the moment I noticed she had abruptly appeared striding over my head, so suddenly that the question was not how long she has been there, but if she was there even now, with the indefinite existence of a kiai itself -- but she didn't speak.

This bedeviling -- no.

This is-devil-ing girl.

This shadow of the former Kissshott Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, this golden hair golden eyed little girl.

Couldn't possibly speak.

"If thou were a swordsman as good as Miyamoto Musashi, thou could use an oar as if it were a sword -- but thou art the complete opposite of that. What an absurd use for my prized sword. Thou made kiai sashimi. It makes me laugh."

I thought she would have continued that talkative auditory hallucination, but with a snap, in a really insane gesture, she plucked off her own left arm. As if it was the part of a plastic model.

Of course, her arm was not the part of a plastic model -- therefore from that wound a deep red lifeblood flew out in large amounts.

When that scene, which made me remember of myself eight days before, caught my eyes, the vampire little girl swung the left arm with the right arm, and sprinkled my torso with the spilled fresh blood like a shower.

".....!"

As I already mentioned, in vampire blood there is a healing factor -- moreover this was the blood of a vampire little girl who in the past had been a chaste purebreed vampire.

The effect was dramatic -- from the wound in my torso, just like a lizard's tail, a lower body grew before my eyes.

At the same time, at the center of the room, my lower body which had been skewered by the demon blade vanished as if evaporating -- only clothes and shoes, and the exceedingly long blade 'Kokorowatari' remained there.

At any rate.

How come I recovered so much, when she is supposed to be only a pomace right now -- ah, right.

I immediately solved the question I was raising.

Basically, during this Golden Week, somehow I provided her *too much blood* -- I overdid it in making her drink blood under a pretext. Even after I had received the katana before, in the end I had made her suck plenty of my blood; not as thanks, but as a farewell gift -- and that was why.

That was why now.

Precisely for that reason now.

She had regained a little too much *vampire factor*.

Though not as much as in Spring Break -- something that sure could be compared to that.

Something that exceeded the effect of the Hinderer Cat's energy drain.

I had miscalculated.

The volume of blood I provided her was based too much on the rule of thumb -- it surpassed the estimates, it was more than what was suitable.

"Really, the same as always, thou can only see what is in front of thine eyes, servant. Thou forced me to live -- do not think I will let you die."

You fool, she said.

She said it without trying to hide her discomfort.

She said it without absolutely showing her ghastly smile.

"I will show you how it is done, lo and behold. See, *this is how you use the Kaii Killer.*"

That was the last auditory hallucination.

To begin with, I couldn't hear a thing.

I just imagined she had told me so.

A selfish overoptimistical wishful thinking.

However -- auditory hallucinations were fine.

Auditory hallucination were the best.

Unless it was even a visual hallucination -- this girl.

She was here.

She came here for me.

Just that was enough -- tears came out.

"U--nya!?"

The vampire little girl, silently -- as silent as she had been until now, slowly drew closer to the Hindering Cat with the bearing of a king, despite being a little girl. Midway, she casually extracted the demonsword piercing the floor, and as if to say there was no need to use that exaggerated thing she quickly stowed it away in her body in one gulp, and she drew closer to the Hindering Cat.

Without a word of thanks for the food.

Badly mannered, she bit that neck.

It was a meal.

The Hindering Cat had its hand full with putting up with the pain from the sword cut, it didn't have the composure to shake her off. The energy drain started working the moment the fangs touched -- but that too didn't have any effect.

As if the energy drain could work with a vampire.

No matter the energy that got sucked, it was immediately sucked back.

Seemingly devouring each other, the level of their abilities was too different.

The beautiful white fur, which had started covering her whole body already, gradually withdrew --

the Hinderer Cat kiai, just the kiai alone, got sucked up.

It was absorbed inside the vampire little girl.

*Hanekawa's stress* -- was absorbed.

".....It's all right."

I murmured.

While not feeling like getting up even if my body had completely recovered, I murmured as in a monologue.

But it was not a monologue.

Those words were addressed to Hanekawa.

"It's all right, Hanekawa. We are not altogether up to scratch, but..... we are supremely unhappy, absurdly unappreciated, broken beyond any repair, but..... we'll be like this our whole life, but it's all right!"

Having nothing to do with her, the vampire little girl had already disappeared, leaving no shadow of her presence. Inside the classroom me and Hanekawa were alone.

The cat's ears had disappeared, the hair had turned black again.

Released by the vampire little girl, Hanekawa had completely turned back as before, and while lying down as if sleeping, still in her underwear--

"No way that's all right!"

She said, as if she was having a nightmare.

Ah.

You are right.

What you say is always right.

Anyhow, like this, while happy as in a dream and blood-stained as in a nightmare, frantically mad as in a prophetic dream.

We managed to postpone the problem.

Afterword, or to better say the punch line.

At last it ended, it ended on the end line -- this time's denouement.

The next day, like always, my two sisters Karen and Tsukihi roused me out of bed, and I woke up -- well, at the time my condition was such that more than sleeping I was being dead, so it might be more correct to say I had been resuscitated rather than woken up.

By the way, as expected, from May 3rd to May 7th Karen and Tsukihi's Fire Sisters had run all over the town in order to settle the bakeneko flurry -- but in the end, during the Golden Week, they had been unable to tail it.

That was natural, since it was a tailless cat.

I really wanted to say "what are you doing while one is kowtowing?", and yet it seemed they didn't get discouraged, and even today they continued to look for it. Do as you wish. Just this time I won't stop you. It was a law of the world that a finished story kept being recited and handed down.

I ate breakfast in a hurry, I rode my bike and left home -- since I was going to school, the machine was not the mountain bike but the granny bike.

There were a few places I had to drop by before going to school, though.

So I departed early.

The first place I had to visit was where I buried the white cat together with Hanekawa, its tomb so to speak -- that tomb that Oshino said to be completely empty.

Since I wasn't familiar with the area it took me some time, but I was still able to find the place without much trouble -- but.

How could I say, when I dug it up with the small shovel I had brought with me -- when I defiled the grave -- there was buried.

The corpse of a cat.

The remains of a dull silver cat -- had been buried in the ground.

It was not completely empty.

A putrefaction smell wafted up, it was a real corpse.

"Hmm."

Though I had said a 'but', it was something I could understand -- even this was something obvious.

No surprise here.

The problem was whether Oshino knew that or not -- no.

Perhaps, I just didn't manage to explained him the place well. Oshino got it wrong, dug up in the wrong spot, and got deluded thinking the corpse had disappeared -- even he was not all powerful, sometimes he got things wrong.

I got convinced of that, and for the second time I covered the cat corpse with earth and buried it.

I joined my hands and prayed.

I wished him happiness in the next world.

"Well now."

The next place I headed to, needless to say at this point, was the abandoned building, formerly a cram school -- since finding the tomb took some time, I had to hurry.

On the other hand, this was not an urgency or an emergency either -- simply, last night I wasn't actually caring about the conditions of my wounds, so my mind wasn't really there, but I wanted to thank the vampire little girl as soon as possible.

I wanted to even stroke her head.

The sign of obedience -- though I wouldn't call it that.

Still, I thought she could let me do at least that -- I thought she would certainly let me thank her.

"....."

My expectation was largely unfulfilled.

The sense of omnipotence of the look from above in epilogues didn't apply here.

As I arrived and met her in the classroom on the first floor, of all things the vampire little girl was wearing an enigmatic helmet with googles, the type you wear when riding a moped.

I couldn't stroke her head like this.

"Ah, that? Vampire-chan badgered me about it. After all she is the one who solved the whole cat thing, so I gave it to her as a prize."

Oshino explained.



What.

"Not even an expectation largely unfulfilled..... it was a fleeting hope."

I can't even say thanks now.

I mean, rather than improving, a moat has been built in our relationship.

It can't be helped, though.

Looking at things now, I am convinced that the voice I thought I heard that time was really an auditory hallucination.

And really -- she was not hiding her embarrassment or being tsundere. She didn't save me.

It could have been that she had a strong grudge against Hanekawa because of what happened in Spring Break, it could have been that she was protecting me as her source of nutrients, it could have even been returning the favor for letting her eat ten pieces from Mister Donut -- just that.

She was more whimsical than a cat, calling it a whim was most correct.

I'm fine with that.

Whims are part of one's strength.

I'll set my objective on one day hearing that auditory hallucination for real, stroking your head, and stirring up that beautiful golden hair of yours.

One day we will mutually understand each other.

Without walls between people and kaii.

"It was surprising enough that she lent you that demon sword, let alone that she went out saving you -- despite you being the only one who can save yourself. Ha ha. I've already given up on you and class rep-chan."

"....."

This guy was glib when saying something cold.

I wondered how serious he was -- I guessed in this case he was completely serious.

Well.

This coldness was his charm.

"It was a miracle that such a plan went well -- I didn't say it because I thought I shouldn't be a wet blanket, but since class rep-chan herself turned into a kaii, there was a high possibility that the demon

sword could kill her."

"Eh!? Say what now?"

I thought I had the authorization from a specialist, you know!

You're too cold!

"If class rep-chan had *really* been in trance -- it would have been dangerous."

"....."

No way Oshino would not have noticed that, I guessed.

Especially when having such a hard time fighting her.

"By the way, Oshino. I'll leave the rest to you, so I don't want to annoy you, but..... Hanekawa -- she is fine, right?"

"Hm?"

Oshino tilted his head, playing dumb.

This was the last thing I had to do before going to school -- I wanted to confirm at least this.

"Ah, she's fine. I can guarantee it -- class rep-chan doesn't remember a thing of what happened in this Golden Week. She has lost all her memories as Black Hanekawa."

Saying so, Oshino affectedly, histrionically put in his mouth an unlit cigarette.

"Black Hanekawa? What's that?"

"I mean class rep-chan in *that state*. It's a little wrong to call that a Hindering Cat -- for a new species a new name is necessary. A monster for the modern era, Black Hanekawa."

"You really don't have any naming sense."

While reviling him, I thought that was really an appropriate name.

It was not a matter of living up to one's name or not.

The name splendidly expressed the essence.

Dark Black.

Not because she was wearing that underwear -- well, that too of course, but before that.

That blackish blackish blackish black--

Even her darkness-like existence.

Was unmistakably Hanekawa Tsubasa.

"A new species, huh..... well, *the person herself* had said so. In other words, it becomes an actual dual personality unrelated to the kiai."

"Hm. No, not really. That was really a kiai. That's how you explain it."

Oshino said, very categorical.

"Afterwards, I escorted class rep-chan home while her consciousness was hazy -- on the way I heard many things."

".....More than hazy, she must have been totally unconscious."

"Totally. If she wasn't, I couldn't have gotten it out of her -- it was something like hypnotherapy."

In other words.

Oshino's main job.

"The collecting kiai tales thing."

"Yeah. A new species of kiai is rare in these days when technological civilization is in full bloom -- so I wanted to hear it all from the person herself. Besides, I billed her the fee for my work, one hundred thousand yen."

She doesn't remember anything though, so I'm not sure I can bill her -- Oshino said, jokingly.

Maybe one hundred thousand yen was too cheap if compared to my case..... but in the end, as Oshino said before, the resolution of this case was largely owed to the vampire little girl's involvement, so proportionally that much was appropriate, maybe.

Perhaps, it was just the necessary expenses.

"And what have you heard with that hypnotherapy of yours?"

"Well, these are just conjectures on what I've heard, but -- it seems that at first the cat had really been a real Hinderer Cat. However, that Hinderer Cat phenomenon itself ended immediately."

"It ended?"

"The moment it first drained the energy of the parents -- *the moment it got its hand on the closest people around*, it seems that class rep-chan's consciousness temporarily got back. I guess it's because at that point her wish had been granted."

"Her wish--"

Her desire. Hanekawa Tsubasa's desire, huh.

An openly violent rebellion towards her parents--

*"However it immediately returned.* No -- I guess it would be more correct to say class rep-chan herself strongly wished for it, she brought back the cat that had started to leave her and she harbored it once more. She harbored a possessing spirit. A kiai who should have actually been able to let her go, to refuse. It didn't end, it continued. I am the one who said that the Hinderer Cat fit class rep-chan to a T, but using my words, it fit her too much to a T -- it was too suited for her, and therefore it couldn't let her go. In short, she was charmed by the bewitching allure of the cat -- *the feelings reached*, and that was the instant the new kiai, Black Hanekawa, was born."

"And afterwards, it was evil deeds galore without a break -- huh."

Energy drain in order to work off her stress.

Night after night, like a random maniac--

Like a degenerate, it assaulted people.

There were of course valid extenuating circumstances behind the motive for the energy drain against her parents -- but for what happened after that, there was nothing.

Nothing of the sort.

If I had asked the reason.

Hanekawa would surely have answered me this.

"I was just in a foul mood, there was no reason--"

"--It's because I was upset."

A laughable story.

When she got possessed by the kiai she had been respectable, when she had harbored the kiai she had been wicked -- still, that was being human.

Hanekawa Tsubasa was a human.

"Somehow -- it's like in that proverb of the cat that licks the plate gets the punishment<sup>[123]</sup>. Many things are Hanekawa's responsibility -- say, Oshino. If it had continued to assault people, would the Hinderer Cat -- I mean Hanekawa -- neither, Black Hanekawa, have been able to work off all the stress and then disappear?"

My question was at the same time a question about my actions.

How do I say it, I couldn't erase the impression I had done something unnecessary, intrusive and obtrusive.

I had meddled in something that was best left alone, and it had been selfish and uncalled for.

I couldn't but regret that I had to get in Hanekawa's way.

"Not at all -- Didn't I tell you? If she had continued harboring the cat she would have vanished. There was no choice but to kill the cat. If we could work off stress by being violent there would be no troubles. From my point of view there was too much stress piled up -- stress is something you should take *in moderation*. Class rep-chan turning into Black Hanekawa, her rampage, could be said to be something born out of the fact that *the stress caused by her parents had vanished*."

"Eh.....? But--"

"We could call it tensile strain. Like, if you don't support it, the pole falls -- to be more free than anyone else can only mean to be more uncomfortable than anyone else<sup>[124]</sup> -- well, even if we take that out, relying on a kiai to work off stress is hoping for too much. What you did was right."

"Right....."

Being right even when you shouldn't be.

Something is right for someone -- it is really something arbitrary.

Certainly I may have been right.

However, it is not like Hanekawa was wrong either.

She was just black and evil.

Though black--

It was not like she wasn't serious.

It was not like she wasn't pure.

"And so Black Hanekawa has shouldered all the memories inconvenient for Hanekawa, huh -- really a useful kiai."

"More than shouldered, it stepped into her shoes. It's similar to a co-signer. It's the kiai class rep-chan herself created, after all -- it is natural that it's convenient for her. It's a self-created character, the ideal of convenience."

I don't think that forgetting is necessarily a good thing, though -- said Oshino.

"It seems that the parents, as an effect of an intense energy drain, had forgotten that they had been assaulted by their daughter -- that's like just putting a lid over something smelly. The source of the bad smell -- still remains untouched."

"Remains untouched -- huh."

Friction and strain.

Domestic violence and abdication of parenthood.

Anything and everything.

Remains untouched -- without ending, it continues to persist.

Still, I think that things are fine as they are now -- it is better that she forgot.

If you forget your self -- it is better to forget your heart.

Just think that in this Golden Week you have been bitten by a dog -- think you have been bitten by a cat -- think you have had a bad dream.

Pretend you saw nothing.

And forget.

Whether you remember or forget.

It won't ever be undone -- and in any case, nothing changed.

"The ideal of convenience, huh. Feels like the kiai I thought of."

"Oh yes. Right on. Even you when you were a child conceived your original superman, right?"

The generation was different.

Still, I had conceived my personal stand<sup>[125]</sup>.

"Unable to wish for anything else than a hero who conveniently saved her -- class rep-chan raised one inside her."

"If you put it that way, you make it seem like a dual personality."

"It isn't, but in fact I said it to make it seem that way. Because it's better to think of it that way -- kiai are these kinds of things in the first place."

"These kinds of things?"

"This is not really true, but since being too blunt offers no relief, we choose to think it has been the

action of a spirit -- kinda like blame shifting. Class rep-chan turned eccentric because she has been crushed by family stress -- but instead of coming up with this conclusion, we'll say it has been a kiai, the Hinderer Cat, Black Hanekawa, a dual personality, *we'll choose to think that*, because it is the most relieving"

"We'll choose -- to think that"

It was a remark unlike the balancer Oshino, that only went against his principles, however he might have found a common ground for this case. He probably was thinking that as a pro he had not been able to do a through job.

In other words, more than a common ground -- it fell into place.

Here is the punch line<sup>[126]</sup>.

Illogical and surprising--

"It feels like a grey conclusion, neither black nor white."

What a play on the word punch line.

"It can't be avoided. Everything in this conclusion has been chosen by class rep-chan. Me and you have no say in the matter. Therefore I will endeavor to keep in contact with you as always even after this."

".....You better."

Choosing to think that -- huh.

Wishing for nothing but a hero, Hanekawa had turned to herself -- I couldn't become her hero for her sake, all I was able to do was just this, huh.

Yeah.

I was not even able to die for Hanekawa's sake.

"Oshino. You say it's a new species of kiai -- but it's like Hanekawa for a long time had been possessed by a spirit called family, don't you think?"

I said.

Accidentally.

For no reason, somewhat a sudden idea.

I tried saying it.

"Not a cat or a demon--"

"Family, huh. But for class rep-chan her parents were not family, right?"

"Exactly -- it's because of that."

A family that would be natural for everybody, like Karen and Tsukihi were natural for me, for her it was like an apparition -- it meant it had not been 9 days of Golden Week, and neither 15 years, it had been since she was born -- that she had been charmed by family.

"For Hanekawa a family had been something like a kiai, I guess."

"I wonder."

Oshino tilted his head rejectively though.

"A family in reality is something quite depressing, you know? There's the rebellious age, and even a real father may be a good-for-nothing -- say, Araragi-kun, can you draw Japan's map?"

"Huh?"

I was dumbfounded.

What was this adult saying all of a sudden.

Was he not listening to my conversation?

"Well, I can. What are we talking about, though?"

"Well, most of the Japanese should be able to draw Japan's map -- but I think it's because of the weather forecast. By watching the weather forecast, a Japanese can learn Japan's shape."

"Ah--"

Hmmm.

Now that he mentioned it.

When I draw Japan's map, what comes to my mind is the weather map I see in TV.

"I agree, that might be true. One looks at the weather forecast more than at atlases. Still, what do you mean by it?"

"What I want to say is -- you are greatly mistaken if you feel like you know Japan because you saw the weather forecast."

Oshino said.



Don't talk like you were an expert when you don't know much about it -- it seemed he wanted to say.

I see.

"By the way, a kawaii that embodies the concept of 'family' already exists -- what you came up with was something men of the past already came up with, Araragi-kun."

"I see. Sorry, I'm a sciolist."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Still, no matter what she did once she became a cat -- if I think of her as Hanekawa, many things come to my mind."

"Why don't you marry her?"

Smoothly.

Oshino said.

He dared to say.

"Huh?"

"I'm saying, why don't you marry class rep-chan? That way, she would be able to get the family she has never obtained."

"Well....."

You talk lightly of marriage, you know.

"That's a bad joke, Oshino."

"Really? I think it's a good idea. As a way to return the favor of having been helped in Spring Break by class rep-chan, I think it's a valid deal."

"Even Hanekawa has feelings, you know."

"Of course she has."

Said Oshino indifferent.

With his usual bantering tone.

"It's because she has feelings that she gets charmed."

"....."

"That she becomes a victim and an offender."

And a kiai.

Oshino said.

"But what about your feelings?"

"My -- feelings?"

"I was sure that you loved class rep-chan."

"Don't say something absurd."

I laughed.

I broadly grinned.

Yes--

This was the cool scene where you grinned.

"I don't love Hanekawa."

"Really?"

"Really"

Let's choose to think it that way.

This was the greatest happiness.

Ha ha, Oshino laughed. A frivolous laugh.

"If it's fine with you, then all right. Though I tried to ask, class rep-chan's feelings are more important than yours -- no matter what the Hinderer Cat or you did, you are the only one who can save yourself."

"Besides, Hanekawa didn't ask for my help."

Unable to ask for anything else.

Unable to ask for anything.

".....She could have just asked me."

I said, like a poor loser.

I had to say just that.

"If she asked, I would have done anything."

"Probably she thought you were unreliable."

Oshino said, extremely frank, extremely harsh.

"It just seems she'd rather rely on her own wild idea. Or maybe, unexpectedly, she might have asked for your help."

"Huh?"

"Not asking for help doesn't mean that you don't want to be saved, right? Similarly, not saying you like someone doesn't mean that you don't like her."

Oshino Meme said.

As if he saw through, as usual.

"Everybody has words they can't say rashly, Araragi-kun."

"....."

"Ha ha. No matter if you ask for help or not, in the end you are the only one who can save yourself. Although it's sad that that new species of kiai got pitifully absorbed by vampire-chan and disappeared. After all it was a recent new species, a mutation. No match for the old kind. An original self-created kiai is weak until it takes root. Machines and tatami are better when they are new, kiai are better when they are old."

"The king of kiai -- the vampire."

While saying so, I looked toward her.

However she wasn't looking at me, she was just calmly squatting.

"Hmm. Always calling her vampire-chan or vampire little girl doesn't sound right in the least. Luckily, from here on I should be able to communicate with her by feeding her at Mister Donut, let's see, I shall give her a name, I guess--"

I realized I had been deep in talk, the start of the lessons was drawing near, so while not paying much attention to what Oshino was saying, I left the abandoned building and headed to school.

At this rate I would be late.

If I got late Hanekawa would get mad at me.

Therefore I frantically spun the pedals -- not worried about whether I would be able to talk with her who had forgotten everything once I met her at school, single-mindedly.

Arriving at school at the last instant, I left my bike at the bicycle shed. Hectically headed to my classroom, I ran up the stairs -- and even then I had no worry.

There was no anxiety.

Hanekawa would have smiled as usual.

And I was confident I would have smiled back as usual.

That was because I didn't love Hanekawa or anything.

In all of my life I would never say I love her.

".....Hanekawa."

I murmured in a low voice, so that nobody would hear.

Hanekawa.

Hanekawa, san.

One day I will love someone that is not you.

For the first time in my life, I will love someone that is not you.

Now that you taught me the feeling of sympathy toward the other people, the day when I will fall in love with someone that is not you will certainly come.

However I think I will certainly never forget these golden glittering nine days that you forgot -- I will remember them forever with lingering affection.

No matter what future lies in wait, what will happens in the days to come, these feelings I have for you will certainly never change, and won't ever disappear.

And like that, in this way.

In the Golden Week of his third year of high school, the May of his eighteen years, Araragi Koyomi got a broken heart over something that was not his first love.

I climbed the stairs.

# Translator's Notes

1. ↑ The kanji of the name Hanekawa Tsubasa are "feather - river - wing". By the way, the kanji of feather and that of wing put together as a word mean "assistance".
2. ↑ A more precise translation would be the medical term "sequelae": pathological conditions resulting from a disease, injury, or other trauma.
3. ↑ Araragi is referring to a scene that happened in Kizumonogatari
4. ↑ The Olympics in Japanese is "gorin" (five rings)
5. ↑ In Japanese having both shoulders exposed also may literally mean stripped to the waist. Makes sense given how their clothes work
6. ↑ A reference to Boogiepop Overdrive: The Piper
7. ↑ A national holiday that has been moved to a Monday (e.g. Coming-of-Age Day)
8. ↑ It sounds like that in English, but that name actually means "good hope"
9. ↑ In Japanese various is written as "color + color"
10. ↑ Nendoroid Puchi
11. ↑ A 5 means you took all A in a certain subject
12. ↑ Possible pun on the sound of words. Striped pattern = shimamoyou, wicked = yokoshima
13. ↑ A Japanese expression to mean devoting energy to something useless, referred to book learning
14. ↑ In Japanese it was a word that meant "experience of a hundred battles". In Nise it was mentioned Karen faced a karate training in which one has to fight 100 sparring partners, and she even won most of the matches
15. ↑ Momotaro was born from a peach tree
16. ↑ The joke is about two kanji which have the same pronounce, 気 (spirit) and 木 (tree)
17. ↑ For auspicious occasions, like weddings
18. ↑ Manzai comedy
19. ↑ A datesim about younger sisters, there were 12 of them and each of them used a different form of "brother" to address the main character
20. ↑ H in Japanese is read as ecchi, and it is the first letter of hentai (pervert), often used to directly mean hentai itself
21. ↑ A reference to Inuyasha. That would make Araragi Miroku, the perverted priest
22. ↑ Kafrizzle is a fire spell from the Dragon Quest videogame series
23. ↑ Kanetsugu had a helmet with the kanji for love affixed on it
24. ↑ A fish. Reputedly delicious
25. ↑ Japan has even a desert. Referenced even in Katanagatari
26. ↑ In Japanese listen and ask are the same word with a different kanji
27. ↑ Perhaps it has to do with the fact Araragi used the word in English
28. ↑ this can also mean "I have no desire"
29. ↑ The Japanese equivalent sits down on the stage though. By the way, the reference to the punch line comes from this
30. ↑ I suspect the expression Araragi used in the Japanese text is the one used while moving on the mats during tea ceremony

31. ↑ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanasaka\\_Jiisan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanasaka_Jiisan)
32. ↑ "Omae" is one of the pronouns the Japanese use for the second person. It is very informal, so it can be rude. By the way, Araragi uses it, although in his case he is male so a bit of rudeness can be forgiven. Females generally like to speak with more polite forms
33. ↑ Donna nii na no yo donna nii na no yo donna nii na no yo. Yodonda nii na no yo?
34. ↑ She said something similar in Nisemonogatari
35. ↑ In Japanese hysteria as word came from German hysteric, so it is easier to see it sounds similar to mystery novel
36. ↑ Needless to say, her VA in the anime
37. ↑ Famous for Ultraman, even some anime may reference it
38. ↑ Rally as in tennis. A rally starts with serve and return of the serve, and a sequence of shots until the point is won by one of the players.
39. ↑ Unhittable return
40. ↑ A variation of tag, you have to touch the designated color or you can be tagged. Interestingly, the word for "it" in Japanese is "devil", which is used sometimes to refer to Araragi (vampire = blood-sucking devil)
41. ↑ A title used to refer to a Buddhist demon god, later applied even to other people. Oda Nobunaga called himself that once
42. ↑ A character of Kinnikuman
43. ↑ I think this term is used in wireless games, something like "here comes a new challenger"
44. ↑ This is a word that means "lack of filial piety for going first", meaning that the son is displeased to die before his parents. It is part of a formula used in suicide notes
45. ↑ A Nintendo game from 1985
46. ↑ Fujoshi (yaoi fans) is written using the kanji of "to rot"
47. ↑ "Burdensome" in Japanese is written as "hand gets burned"
48. ↑ Cultural note: for the Japanese it's "cicada belly"
49. ↑ Abbreviation of "Mote onna mote otoko ni narechau bikyaku sutorecchi", a variety program with calisthenics. Not exactly serious stuff, I guess.
50. ↑ A monster from the Dragon Quest series. Estark is almost always asleep when encountered and must be awakened in order to fight. In some cases Estark has been asleep for so long that he can only remember his name and nothing else, not even if he is a good or evil being
51. ↑ It's not a play on words, this is when a puzzled character makes a cat face.
52. ↑ Originally the pig is supposed to climb a tree. This pun mirrors that of Tsukihi as Karen too mixes up the two omophone kanji of spirit and tree
53. ↑ Nure-Onna, a monster with the head of a woman and the body of a snake
54. ↑ Possibly a reference to Star of the Giants
55. ↑ The original word meant "to see someone of superior status" and also "to make a supplication"
56. ↑ A mythical being that can read minds
57. ↑ The author of Fist of the North Star
58. ↑ "Complete stranger" in Japanese is written as "red stranger"
59. ↑ An anime about an orphan honeybee
60. ↑ In Japan the age of majority is 20
61. ↑ In Japanese this adjective is literally "with shoes on". For the Japanese the outside is dirty, so you must take off your shoes when you enter a house. It's a severe breach of etiquette not

doing so

62. ↑ There is a pun here. Bow is 下げる, braided hair is お下げ
63. ↑ A pun. Frown was written as white + eyeball + vision, glower is white + eye
64. ↑ BL jargon. In this case the uke has the initiative over the seme
65. ↑ Reference to Neon Genesis Evangelion
66. ↑ Best known for his work Keroro Gunso, he was also the designer for the Angel-XX figurine series of Evangelion. He designed anthropomorphized moe angels
67. ↑ A breed of chicken famous for its tasty meat
68. ↑ In Suruga Monkey, Araragi jokingly referred to the story as a date sim, with Hachikuji as the fourth heroine being captured
69. ↑ Hand care cream brand
70. ↑ Written as "two persons", and "person" also means "human" in Japanese
71. ↑ "Moe" means to sprout
72. ↑ A long-running cooking manga
73. ↑ Vampire in Japanese is bloodsucking devil/demon/ogre
74. ↑ A Japanese card game played with 100 cards on which there are written poems
75. ↑ You have to get the cards with the poems whose first syllables match the syllables of the winning word
76. ↑ There is only one card for each of these syllables, so this is the hardest combination
77. ↑ D-Pop is a set of six mini doughnuts
78. ↑ From the manga Genshiken, Susanna Hopkins is an American otaku girl. Her dialogue is written mostly with katakana, and her lines consist in anime and manga quotes. She has even quoted Bakemonogatari
79. ↑ Madara = pacific cod
80. ↑ Oshino and "creep up" share a kanji
81. ↑ Kaiki, in Nisemonogatari
82. ↑ The original Japanese word is untranslatable. Macchiponpu means "stirring up trouble to get credit from the solution" (wasei: match pump, i.e. lighting a match and then putting it out with a water pump)"
83. ↑ In Japanese "punishment" is omophone with "drumstick"
84. ↑ This comes from the Chinese zodiac, which has 12 signs based on animals. These 12 signs have been used to represent the 24 hours of a day, two hours per sign. The first sign, the Rat, is assigned to the top of the clock, meaning the time period 11pm - 1am, and the other signs follow in order. The Ox is the second sign, therefore the time period it symbolizes is 1am - 3am. For some reason the hour of the Ox is considered the period when ghosts and monsters are more likely to appear. "The hour of the Ox, when even grass is asleep"
85. ↑ A reference to Rurouni Kenshin (rurouni = wanderer)
86. ↑ Japanese expression for something very white
87. ↑ The color jet black
88. ↑ For reference, she is speaking substituting every "na" syllable with "nya" {=meow}
89. ↑ "Coaxing voice" in Japanese is written as cat caress voice
90. ↑ The original word can also mean very white, transparent
91. ↑ These three adjectives have in common the kanji for white. Clear = bright + white; pure = pure + white; innocent = clean + white
92. ↑ In Japanese jump and fly are the same word written with two different kanji according to

the meaning

93. ↑ Wings on a tiger is an expression meaning "invincible"
94. ↑ A character from the manga Yu Yu Hakusho
95. ↑ Reference to Evangelion
96. ↑ To hinder and to touch are omophones in Japanese
97. ↑ From a Japanese proverb which was about gods instead of cats. The meaning is "let sleeping dogs lie"
98. ↑ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oath\\_of\\_the\\_Peach\\_Garden](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oath_of_the_Peach_Garden)
99. ↑ The Japanese learn hiragana and katakana first, and kanji later. Only a very young child has yet to learn some kanji
100. ↑ A cat with supernatural powers that include shape-shifting into humans. Some bakeneko has two tails, this is referenced by Hanekawa's twin braids
101. ↑ Reference to Yu Yu Hakusho
102. ↑ From Natsume Yuujinchou
103. ↑ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beckoning\\_cat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beckoning_cat)
104. ↑ "Wearing (on the head) a cat" in Japanese means "feigning innocence"
105. ↑ [http://www.sarudama.com/japanese\\_folklore/vampirecat.shtml](http://www.sarudama.com/japanese_folklore/vampirecat.shtml)
106. ↑ Literally Yin-Yang expert, a sort of Japanese magician. Nisemonogatari's Kagenui is an onmyouji
107. ↑ Araragi is referring to the black screens seen in the TV edition of Bakemonogatari
108. ↑ Kokorowatari = the heart crosser
109. ↑ Yamataikoku, (Japanese history) a country that existed within Japan. Ruled by Queen Himiko in the third century AD
110. ↑ "Point of view" and "ally" have the same pronounce in Japanese
111. ↑ As explained in Kizumonogatari, the real Kokorowatari was the sword of the first subordinate.
112. ↑ Reference to Lupin III.
113. ↑ A popular term used for women's gymnastics during the 1964 Summer Olympics, where a Russian gymnast created an extremely difficult maneuver called the "Ultra C".
114. ↑ It's the same verb that means placing things on your head from above, like a crown for example.
115. ↑ The Hindering Cat has a peculiar speech pattern. Here Hanekawa is talking normally, using her own pronoun.
116. ↑ He is referring to the Chinese name. In Japanese the name is "demon pretend play".
117. ↑ Literally "making someone wear wet clothes". The "wet" is probably a lexical reference to the "wet woman" mentioned earlier.
118. ↑ "A wise man keeps some of his talents in reserve."
119. ↑ Reference to Rurouni Kenshin.
120. ↑ Mr. Resetti is a mole whose role in the Animal Crossing series is to advise the player to remember to save before quitting the game, and to give a lecture if they don't
121. ↑ In Japanese makeshift is {mother-in-law + son}, a reference to Hanekawa who was unrelated to her parents.
122. ↑ This comes from a Japanese expression about a situation where you would welcome even a cat's hand to help you.
123. ↑ In this proverb you have to imagine there is a fish on a plate. A cat eats the fish and gets



away. A second cat comes to lick the plate and gets caught.

124. ↑ "Free" (自由), "uncomfortable" (不自由).

125. ↑ Reference to JoJo.

126. ↑ "Punch line" in Japanese is related to the verb "to fall". Here and there in the text there were variants of this verb.