



Musubimonogatari

Tsuzura Human

001

Kouga Tsuzura was, uniquely, the only human to be a part of the Rumors Squad—even though the squad boasted a lineup of dubious members that could perhaps be called a night parade of a hundred demons, the person at the top that spearheaded it was neither mermaid nor golem, neither werewolf nor vampire, but a pure human. But she herself didn't put on any airs, often saying, "I'm an impure human. Because I'm just a human," as she shrugged her shoulders; but, well, in this case, questioning the humanness of a human was really just philosophical. I hadn't asked Gaen-san why she'd chosen this person to be the leader, but there was probably a good meaning to putting a human in charge of police officers mixed in with oddities, and in charge of an official squad that dealt with oddities before they became oddities.

A pure, or perhaps an impure, human.

In the end, Gaen-san's project of "going from just a fragment to an official group" or "going from just a unit to an entire organization" was still in progress.

Though I'd taken up my training at the Naoetsu Police Department due to my communication skills with an oddity, Kouga Tsuzura had most likely been elected as the key figure of the Rumors Squad due to her communication skills with other people. When it came down to it, if the Rumors Squad was unable to negotiate on an equivalent level with humans, in both a good way and a bad way, then the existence of the squad itself could end up becoming just another rumor.

So this was probably a countermeasure for something like that.

An equivalent (taitou) countermeasure (taisaku).

That's why Kouga Tsuzura wasn't even a specialist.

She had not even one skill she specialized in.

She had no technique where she could universally negotiate with oddities like Oshino Meme, and she couldn't do anything like swindle people through the use of oddities like Kaiki Deishuu. She wasn't an onmyouji that could beat up immortal oddities like Kagenui Yozuru, and she did not own a shikigami that was like Ononoki Yotsugi. She couldn't even cross between this world and the next using dolls like Teori Tadatsuru—and of course, she didn't know everything like Gaen Izuko did.

She could not see the form of any oddity, hear the voice of any oddity, be able to touch any oddity, or be affected by any oddity. She could not interact with oddities in any way.

That was the purity of a pure human—or perhaps the impurity of an impure human. But in other words, she remained wholly untouched by any oddity.

She probably didn't even have any guardian angels or guardian spirits.

She'd probably never even received fortune-telling that had been correct.

And she'd never gone wrong—she was always “not quite right, but not far from the mark”.

That's why she could be put in charge of a mermaid or golem or werewolf.

She was unable to be influenced, and she was especially unable to be negatively influenced—it was because she'd come this far without any ties to the supernatural that she'd taken command of the Rumors Squad.

A government official who could impartially come into contact with fantasy or the occult without investment or bias—for a world that was so strange and mysterious, it turned out that a person like that was unexpectedly valuable.

Because it was Gaen-san, I was sure that she'd been elated when she discovered such a person of talent (and undoubtedly a *person* of talent). Because she was “an onee-san that knew everything”, she was certainly aware that she'd met “an onee-san that didn't know anything”.

She would have been thoroughly aware of her.

Ignorance could certainly be considered a crime, but it was also true that knowledge could bring fear.

And because the Rumors Squad was a squad dedicated to eliminating fear, we definitely couldn't be the bringers of fear.

We couldn't let any rumors turn into a storm.

A breeze that softly caressed your cheek was best.

002

So, if we were in a police drama, then it could almost be considered an established pattern for some huge incident to occur, just as my four-month-long training period was about to come to a close. But it seemed that I would be finishing my work at the Naoetsu Police Department without anything in particular happening—of course, the duties of the Rumors Squad fundamentally meant that most of our concerns were “nothing happening”.

In exchange, a huge incident had occurred in my private life. You could even call it a serious accident. It helped that it had been a disaster I'd experienced twice before, but there did exist a rather unpleasant maxim in the world that went “third time's the charm”. Even though it included such a nice-sounding word like “charm”, how did this maxim have such an unpleasant ring to it?

I broke up with Senjouhara Hitagi. For the third time.

Why? Well, it was true that my feelings of ingratitude had come through during my stay at my hometown, because, in a way, I'd spent my days in a far more misanthropic way than I'd done as a student—I hadn't even ended up visiting the Kitashirahebi Shrine for my first shrine visit of the year. Because I was a coward—but even so, I'd at least made sure not to neglect communicating regularly with Hitagi.

I'd followed Suou-san's advice.

I'd sent text messages and even called her. International phone calls. I'd even signed up for a plan that made overseas calls cheaper, and we regularly updated each other on recent events. With the two of us being separated by just a smidgen of an ocean, these four months had yielded the most intimate communication from our relationship—almost like a honeymoon.

But perhaps that was actually a bad thing.

We'd inadvertently ended up broaching the subject of our future plans.

It was the height of foolishness.

But the end of my training period had been in sight, and I'd finished my final one-on-one meeting with Chief Kouga, so I'd needed to start preparing for what I'd do after I left the Naoetsu Police Department behind. And, in Hitagi's case, because she'd been an junior financial trader to a huge company, the time had come for her to decide whether or not to aim for an official manager position—as an overseas enterprise that went by the merit system, promotions came surprisingly fast, so for someone who grew up watching her father, this was something she needed to discuss.

Compared to Hanekawa, whose activities were on a global level, the scope of our problems was a little different. But if Hitagi planned on putting her base of operations overseas, then it would get extremely difficult for her to spend time with me, a government official.

Some sort of decision needed to be made.

A severe decision, without much room to negotiate.

To be frank, it was actually rather thrilling to watch Hitagi progress in her work... She'd never clearly boasted about it herself, but it seemed she was valued rather highly by her superiors, so I couldn't exactly bring up to her, "Why don't you come back?" in a lighthearted manner.

Though I'd be happy if she did come back to me, it was Hitagi's life. Not mine. It wasn't the life of Araragi Koyomi, who could not even get his way even in his own life.

It was something for Hitagi to decide.

But that indecisive attitude was what actually incurred her wrath, as we had a huge fight for the first time in a while—it had been so long that we'd forgotten how to even have a fight, so both of us had failed to control ourselves.

It was a mess. It was absolutely crazy.

Had it been the past, I probably would have meekly compromised on the matter, but the reason I didn't do that this time was, most likely, because I'd had pent-up feelings on my end as well.

Although I wouldn't go so far as to call it a grudge.

I'd even considered a path in which I'd give up on the path of becoming a police officer. Because I'd taken the civil service exam with such a light reason as "because my parents were police officers", I'd considered wildly flying the flag of rebellion against the country I'd sworn loyalty to and going off on a trip overseas where Hitagi lived—although, even Hitagi had gotten into the same trade (but a different company) as her father because of his influence.

Though she was on the complete opposite vector from me due to her working at a rival company to her father, our roots were still pretty similar.

But I couldn't lie to myself that I hadn't realized that the work of the Rumors Squad was something worth doing—that's right, being able to work with colleagues that had also decided to live their lives together with oddities within them was something that was completely fresh to me, an experience I'd never had before.

Having an open workplace had gotten comfortable for me.

And I even felt that my hopeless personality was suited to the duties that mainly involved dealing with rumors spread by kids before they ended up turning serious—I even felt like I was getting to redo the various things I'd failed at in middle school and high school.

It felt like I'd gotten a little bit of the compensation I thought I'd never get.

"Assistant Inspector Araragi. You're the one who decides your future, not me or Gaen-senpai. All Gaen-senpai can do is give you the experience of being in the Rumors Squad—the rest is left for you to decide."

You're the one who decides.

Chief Kouga had spoken to me in that manner in our last meeting.

She'd used a calm tone of voice, as if trying to calm my nerves.

"If you truly desire to tackle white-collar crime in the future, then I'm not unwilling to write you a letter of recommendation—to put it plainly, you're more than capable. No matter where you're assigned, I'm sure you'll be able to carry out your duties properly. Personally, I'd want you to one day take over my seat, and, no kidding, it would be ideal if you could even become the chief of the department. But I don't necessarily think life is about pursuing ideals. Though Gaen-senpai thinks differently from me, it doesn't matter to me whether you have the abilities or special characteristics."

Chief Kouga pointed at my shadow as she said that—it was rather fearless to point a finger at a shadow in which a legendary vampire resided, but she truly had no fear—that's why such a feat was possible.

And that's why she was able to give me those instructions.

“You don’t necessarily have to become anything like that. It’s fine to just live while taking it easy.”

...If she had instead tried to preach to me about the principles or the lofty goals of the Rumors Squad’s founders here, it might have ironically made me want to stay less, but the words she said actually made me feel like I wanted to continue in this line of work for a little bit longer—although I was well aware that that was my boss’s skill.

It’s fine to just live while taking it easy.

If I was ten years older, I wonder if I could’ve said that to Hanekawa.

Like that, I was not making plans for my future after the end of my training period, but asking myself whether or not I should escape from this country. Although the one that had been more urgently asking was Hitagi. Or maybe she had just wanted me to tell her, “Come back to me”.

But if I did say that, it would have turned into another fight.

And so we decided to break up. For the third time. Well, it was the third time that we actually broke up, but as for similar destructive fights, we had had too many to count in college—but if I said it like that, then, to those older than me, it would probably sound like some kind of push-pull relationship, and they’d probably say that everyone has had periods like that in their lives.

On the other hand, anyone younger would probably want to say to just go and end such a messy relationship already, but for future reference, I’d like you all to know that this will likely happen to you, too.

It’s already a miracle if, with your girlfriend that you started dating in high school, you can stay as lovers all the way to your college graduation (even if there were some breaks along the way).

So I felt that I didn’t want to lose that miracle. But those kinds of “it would be such a waste” feelings shouldn’t control Hitagi’s future—and they shouldn’t control mine, either.

I didn’t want to end things in regret. And I didn’t want to continue things in regret, either.

003

“Ah... Araragi. Why the hell are you here...”

That was what I wanted to say.

Well, no, for a line that sounded like it was spoken to someone who was supposed to be dead, it wasn’t something I could say—it was unmistakably something that Oikura Sodachi should say.

After all these years, I’d once again fallen into a chance encounter with my childhood friend that I’d broken ties with. Once again.

How many more times in my life would I break ties and then reunite with her?

The location was the town hall.

In preparation for leaving the Rumors Squad, I'd entered the stage of transferring the duties I'd been tasked with. Part of that was submitting various documents, so I'd gone to each section of Town Hall on my own—it was something akin to the work Hanekawa had done when she was erasing her personal history, but in any case, to my surprise, I found Oikura working at one of the positions.

She'd tied up her hair and put on glasses, working with an expression that made her look like a proper accountant—well, I did know that she'd been studying as much in college, so she certainly was a proper accountant, but even so, she looked more like she was performing the role of an accountant in a play.

To the point that it left me dumbfounded when I stood at the window to submit my documents... Eh? How do you have a job here like this? And not to mention in your hometown, in a government job among government jobs, said to be tougher than the police—

"I... I was worried about you. I was wondering if you'd be out on the streets somewhere by now, Oikura..."

"Don't cast me out on the streets to your own benefit. You wanna die?"

Even though she looked like an accountant, it seemed her personality hadn't changed much—well, just to me, at least. I see, so after she graduated from college, she came back here to her hometown—hmm.

Although, if she took the civil service exam after that... I guess she loved studying no matter how old she got.

"What, Araragi? You became a police officer...? An assistant inspector? A career man? Compared to me, in the local government, you're working for the national government? Why, why are you always one step ahead of me..."

"Um, it's not like I was trying to be one step ahead of you... And in terms of the qualifications needed to be an accountant, I was the one that failed."

To tell the truth about that, we'd crammed for the exam together. For a certain reason, I'd failed, although it was a long story. Well, to be frank, my mathematical skills had collapsed before I'd turned twenty—though the term mathematician may be too extreme, as Oikura had managed to get the qualifications to become an accountant, I honestly considered her the victor in the mathematics race.

"Heh. I wouldn't even mind calling you Euler, now, if you want."

"Don't mess with me. I cut ties with you two years ago on October 13th, didn't I? Don't try to build it back up little by little. I despise you."

"Whoa, whoa. It's not like I came here to invade your workplace. ...Do you want to get lunch together? There's something I want to get your advice on."

“Sure, I’ll hear you out. You can wait over there until lunchtime.”

Though she sounded like she was trying to start a fight, she accepted.

In a way, she was someone that it was useless to cut ties with... I see, haven’t I technically broken up with Oikura more than Senjouhara Hitagi, my girlfriend?

It was impossible to hide my surprise that such a coincidence had occurred. But if I thought about it, since we’d both grown up in this town, and since Oikura had likely been working at Town Hall since our college graduation, there had probably been a lot of chances for the two of us to meet during my training period, both of us being public servants.

I’d found myself at Town Hall dozens of times over the past four months for various reasons—perhaps we’d passed each other in the hallway without noticing. No matter how low the probability was, with this many chances, we would eventually have met—that was also something based on mathematics.

Considering that the probability of running into Oikura was overall higher than running into Kanbaru at the hospital, I’d could even say that reuniting with her just before I was about to leave town was later than it should have been.

Whether it was fate or not.

Fortunately, I had a mountain of other documents to submit at other sections until Oikura’s break—though I didn’t remember up to the exact date, it would be around two years since I’d last eaten lunch with her.

It was a long story, but it would be the first time “since that one case”.

Simply put, the first time since Hitagi and I first broke up—or, strictly speaking, was it since we broke up for the second time?

The third time I reunited with Oikura was in a college classroom. I’d wondered what sort of strange twist of fate this was, but it turned out that it was one of Hanekawa’s arrangements—it seemed Hanekawa had been concerned for Oikura in various ways, even after she’d transferred out of Naoetsu High. In one way or another, she’d encouraged Oikura to move onto college—and while Oikura’s academic abilities exceeded mine overall, the selection of colleges with mathematics departments was small. So, to put it bluntly, our third reunion was also inevitable, in a sense.

While I’d been commuting to college from my parents’ house, Oikura had been looking for a place to stay. She’d been having a lot of trouble, as she couldn’t pay rent and didn’t know any guarantors—and when I let my parents know, “Then call her over to our house,” were the instructions I was given.

I hadn’t broken out of my rebellious phase just yet, so I couldn’t just follow those instructions.

But I half-acknowledged that it was different from when we were in elementary school, and I couldn’t just leave a troubled Oikura alone, seeing as I still felt like I owed

something to her—I knew she’d fight back against me (that is, refuse) if I asked her directly, so I took the roundabout way of getting my sisters to invite her. And thus, for the first time in seven years, Oikura ended up living at the Araragi household.

That was when we’d studied accounting together.

It was our first study group in a while—but it was soon discovered by Hitagi-san.

I had thought it was barely safe to allow a childhood friend, one that I had no interest in as a member of the opposite sex, a place to stay at my house, but it seemed to Hitagi that this was totally out of the question.

No, I was definitely wrong in this case. There wasn’t anything more wrong than this. It was the worst blunder I’d committed at the end of my teenage years.

Of course it would lead to our first breakup.

It was thanks to Oikura that we were somehow able to repair that relationship—it was Oikura that went to great efforts to get Hitagi and I back together again. That is, her efforts actually meant threatening Hitagi and I by saying, “If you don’t make up, I’ll jump off from here and kill myself”, and there was also some cooperation with Hanekawa, who’d been a “ordinary celebrity” at the time (she was just a volunteering girl and not yet an activist), to mediate between us.

She’d immediately left the Araragi household, too.

Hitagi, who hadn’t been perturbed by the threat of suicide, still ended up feeling guilty at having taken away a working student’s place of residence, and though we didn’t immediately repair our relationship from that, it still gave us a chance to meet and talk things out.

In the end, Hitagi and I returned to normal, and we were able to carry on with our fun campus life for a bit, together with Oikura—it really was fun, at least until our second breakup occurred.

Our second breakup.

We’d broken up for an extremely stupid reason.

And, probably because she felt that the do-or-die efforts that she rarely showed to others had gone to waste, there was no one angrier at this breakup than Oikura.

Or, rather than being angry, she may have just been disappointed.

And though I’d managed to reconcile with Hitagi after that, we never once exchanged words with Oikura on campus until our graduation.

That was the fourth time we’d cut ties.

We’d moved on from college with a bad aftertaste left in our mouths, and had little reason to learn what had happened to Oikura after that—until this very day.

She's just working normally, isn't she!?

Well, I hadn't actually thought that she'd be out on the streets... But I was still relieved.

This was something I just had to tell Hitagi about—was what I'd started to think, before I remembered that I was in a huge fight with Hitagi at the moment.

We were in the middle of our third breakup.

I guess.... I should probably... tell Oikura, huh.

Shit, why did we have to meet at the exact time I broke up with Hitagi? All these bad things that occurred recently really felt very "Oikura Sodachi"-like—although, I shouldn't be blaming everything on Oikura.

"Thanks for waiting. Let's go, Araragi. I put aside exactly 30 minutes to deal with you."

"Well, thank you very much. Is there a place you usually go for lunch? I don't really know this area too well."

"What a disgrace. Even though it's your hometown."

"Well, all the sights are completely different from how they used to be. They've built shopping malls and stuff. C'mon, I'll treat you."

"I'd rather die than have you treat me to a meal."

So she still said stuff like that even at the age of 23... Maybe it was too early to feel relieved about her, but in any case, as we were both employed, I was fine with splitting the bill.

Oikura led the way into a cafe by the town hall. I'd thought that it was a place she frequented due to the reasonable prices, but it turned out that it was her first time coming here.

"I don't want to bring you to anywhere I go frequently," she said.

She really hates me, huh?

I prayed that this was a place that Oikura wanted to visit from a while back but found it hard to come alone—and, betting on that possibility, allowed her to choose what to order.

"So. What? What do you want? From me. From someone of my caliber."

"Er, well, I was thinking I'd apologize for what happened two years ago—but that's not really it."

"Of course it isn't."

"To be honest, I didn't think you'd cut ties with me over that much, back then... But I invited you out to lunch because I was surprised. To see that you were still alive... I mean, to see that you were working at the town hall."

"Don't get all surprised to see that I'm still alive. Why would I be dead?"

"Why would you be dead... From the bottom of my heart, it makes me extremely happy to hear you say that."

"Hmph. Well, it's not like I made a U-turn back here because I loved this place so much. It's not like I really consider this my 'hometown' in the first place... Since I moved around a lot. And I don't have any good memories at all," said Oikura. "But when I decided that I was going to become an adult from now on, that I was going to become a member of society, then I could only think of one person as my role model."

Role model.

In my case, it was my parents. But for Oikura, her parents were not those kinds of parents—in fact, she most likely had a strong desire to *not* become like those adults. However, if there were any other adults... She didn't even admire any teachers from school. If you took into account the circumstances of why she stopped attending, school was not a fun place for her at all.

After thinking as much, I suddenly understood.

"Ah, I see. When you were living in that apartment, you were looked after by that town hall employee, right? Even after you transferred out of Naoetsu High... That's why."

"Don't make me out to be so simple. I resent that."

She'll get mad no matter what I say.

She could hardly be considered an adult as she was now.

Was it too early for her to have gone out in society?

"For the record, and I'll just say it outright, I don't have the tiniest bit of any kind of admirable desire to care for kids so that they don't turn pitiful like me. This is just for my own self-help."

"Why would you intentionally go out of your way to say something so unlikable..."

What an easy-to-understand tsundere.

Well, a tsundere past the age of twenty was really just a nuisance... but I couldn't help but think about how much easier it would be if Hitagi was this easy to understand.

"Ha-ah. If only I was in love with you, instead."

"What's with those utterly repulsive words? Go die, and then apologize for ruining my mood. By the way, I'm constantly thinking about how I'm glad that I hate you."

It seems that she could be honest at times. When she's hating me, at least.

But anyway, it was good that she had a mostly steady reason for her steady job.

I wondered if she'd ever met back up with the town hall employee that had been in charge of the Oikura household—it would be wonderful if that would bring forth a teacher-student relationship, but it was probably a bit intrusive to ask something like that.

I'll save it for next time.

"Where do you live now?"

"And why do you want to know my address? What are you trying to do to me?"

"Don't be so obviously suspicious of me. I don't know about now, but after you left the Araragi household, didn't you constantly move from place to place? What, will you die if you don't keep moving?"

"You got a problem with that? I was desperately trying to keep you and Senjougahara and Hanekawa-san from tracking me down."

"If you ask me if I have a problem with that, and *that's* your reason, then yeah, I do have a problem. ...And you, of all people, add 'san' to only Hanekawa's name, huh?"

"You can't refer to 'TSUBASA HANEKAWA' without honorifics, after all. ...Last month, even Town Hall was in a huge uproar."

"Really? Well, that makes sense."

In fact, it was probably more hectic for Town Hall than it was for the police.

They'd be the ones to handle all the procedures.

"Did Hanekawa ever come to visit you?"

"No. When I broke off ties with you two, I did the same with Hanekawa-san, too."

"Well, it's another thing entirely to be involved with her now."

"She probably doesn't even remember me anymore. Why do you say that?"

"Never mind. I'm just jealous that you could cleanly cut her off like that."

Although it didn't seem like she forgot about you. She probably even knew about Oikura working at the town hall and was just playing dumb.

"So, Oikura. Where do you live now? What place are you renting out?"

"Don't be so stubborn about my address. Are you planning on burning my place down? I'm calling the police."

“Although I am a policeman. If you want, I’ll set up a police box near your place.”

“Don’t do anything unnecessary.”

“I can actually put in a request for an officer at a police box to do a focused patrol. My connections are worth that much.”

“What, to protect me? Or to keep an eye on me?”

“I’m sincerely worried about you.”

“Shut up. Make all your cardiopulmonary functions stop working.”

In spite of her abusive language, it seemed that it got through to her that my concern actually was sincere, as she told me that she wasn’t renting.

“I bought a place. With a government employee loan. They say purchasing a house is better in the long run.”

“.....”

Was that really okay?... No, wait, it’s way too premature to decide that...

In the debate between whether renting or buying was better, both sides had their reasons so I couldn’t really say either way, but when I heard that Oikura had bought a house (especially with a loan), it completely got rid of any impression of steadiness I got from her. But I’ll hear her out to the end.

It may end up that I’d have to cooperate with her not as just a childhood friend but as a police officer, but I’d do anything for Oikura... As long this idiot was happy...

“What... What kind of property did you buy?”

“It was like a haunted house that was mostly run-down, so it was fairly cheap... It’s all right, no need to stand up. It’s already been properly renovated.”

“I don’t know if you know about them, but nowadays there are these things called ‘renovation scams’...”

“Don’t treat me like I’m the biggest fool in the world. It’s a place you know about, too. It’s the house I lived in when I was in middle school.”

“.....”

That—I did know about. A place I visited dozens of times.

The place where Oikura and I had spent our quietest years—for Oikura, they were certainly some of her most turbulent years, but I see, she decided to purchase that house.

If it was in that state, then even someone in their early twenties could easily afford it. Or rather, to put it clearly, she was resolving the problem of a vacant house as a member of Town Hall—which was perhaps even good enough to be granted a bonus.

Although renovation didn't exactly sound easy...

"Regardless, you're the same as ever, hurting yourself like this... How is this self-help? You're just returning to where you started from. Do you really like going back to square one that much?"

"I'm the opposite of 'TSUBASA HANEKAWA'. I'm going to live by taking back my past."

Oikura Sodachi spoke as if making a vow.

"I'll paint over my memories in my own colors. I'll build a new family in that house. Although unfortunately, I don't have a partner yet—that reminds me, Araragi. How's it going with you and Senjouhara these days?"

"Well, if you want to keep your remodeling costs down, you can call me. We can do our best with DIY stuff to get it down cheaply. It might sound a bit shameless for me to say this, but I do have a lot of memories in that place. I'd like to leave a bit of my own color there, too."

"Don't try to so shamelessly avoid the question. Didn't you two come back here together?"

"You seem to be under a misunderstanding, but I haven't exactly returned definitively to my hometown yet. It's just for my training period..."

"Do you think I've forgotten how to use this fork?"

And she tightly gripped the cutlery in her hand—I had the feeling I was going to learn exactly how she was going to use that fork.

I guess there's no choice. The time had come for me to tell her.

Though I'd been able to sort of bring good vibes to the conversation through reminiscing in spite of our unexpected reunion, I wasn't sure if she'd cut ties with me after I told her, but I knew that it wouldn't be good if I didn't tell her properly... I told Oikura everything about my present situation, Hitagi's present situation, and our present situation.

The three of us, who had at one point been a trio, had all but fallen apart now—and as expected, when Oikura heard all of it, she held up her fork like a dart, pointed it at me, and... didn't throw it at me.

Instead, she laughed, "You're so dumb," as if she was amazed—almost as if she was enjoying it.

Well, if this ended just with her exposing the bad side of her personality and not with her cutting ties with me once again, then I was glad.

Perhaps it helped to highlight the fact that it was a completely different reason from when we broke up the first time because of Oikura. Because she hated when something was her responsibility.

I knew my childhood friend's personality very well.

"But really, it's like that, isn't it? Something so run-of-the-mill. Surprisingly, couples seem to break up more not when they go to college but when they get jobs. Upupu."

"Hey, a laugh that can hardly be considered human is leaking out."

"Didn't you two discuss this? When you were job hunting. If one side is aiming to work overseas, and the other is aiming to work as a government official, then it should have been obvious that you two would end up going in separate ways."

"Miraculously enough, we decided at the time to cheer for each other. And just like that, she was charging on ahead getting qualifications in the finance industry. I wanted her to get a job where she could use that to the fullest."

"What a progressive mindset. I would also cheer for any woman who chooses to work. No matter how much that woman spreading her wings overseas looks down on me for returning to my hometown."

"I don't think she looks down on you, though... She was also worried about you, you know? About what happened to you after graduation."

"She was probably just curious about if I'd been left on the streets."

"Well, I can't deny that."

"Deny it, will you!"

And after being laughed at for quite some time by Oikura (she sure is something), she finally asked, "...But, what are you planning on doing?", as if showing a bit of concern for me.

It's too late to react like that now.

And it was only a bit. And she was still half-smirking.

"In the end, isn't it a pretty lethal thing to fight over? With the way things are now, it just seems like either you or Senjouhara will have to quit their job and change where they are. So? What'll it be, what'll it be?"

"Don't say it like you're trying to corner me. If you're assisting with citizens' needs like that, you'd be a terrible government worker."

"Oh, please, 'citizens'? And don't worry. Even like this I can properly keep my public and private lives separate. Hello, thank you for waiting! How may I be of assistance?"

"Wow, the difference is amazing."

If she can do a proper customer service smile, then I'll approve.

"If only you would quit your job and move overseas and *then* break up catastrophically..."

"Hey, your secret desires are leaking out."

"I'm making sure my wish doesn't come true (kanawanai) by telling it to someone else."

"Telling your wish to the person in question just makes you unbearable (kanawanai)."

Well, there was no need to emphasize it again. It was a situation where we couldn't just reconcile halfheartedly—no matter what, a critical decision was necessary.

"If only you two just broke up forever."

"Just stop wishing for anything about me. Don't even wish me well."

"If I had to say it, Araragi, Senjouhara's path sounds pretty clearly decided, while yours seems pretty uncertain. As for what you want to do... Will you return to your hometown, or will you launch yourself to the big city? Since you're working for the national government, if you're thinking within all of Japan, your footing isn't really solid, yet, right? I'm just a local government employee, so it's easy for me to decide to just plant my roots here. And I bought a house and all."

After having bought assets and having become a property owner, she sure was acting like she was above me... Well, to be honest, it was surprising to see that Oikura was in a much more solid situation than I'd expected.

Although, unlike with Kanbaru, I didn't get the feeling that she'd gotten ahead of me.

"In that case, I can see why you think it'd be better for me to be the one to move overseas."

"No. I think it would be better if you died."

"It's a shame that I really enjoy talking with you. Should I come visit Town Hall every day after this?"

"If you do that, I'll abuse my authority and have your personal history be erased."

"Don't actually abuse your authority like that. Although rather than abusive (ranyou), you're deranged (ranshin). On a regular basis."

"Can I be serious with you for a moment? My wish is for you to move overseas, break up catastrophically, and then be left out in the streets in some foreign country."

"Rather than being serious, this has actually gotten rather severe. That is, your personality."

"If I'm going to grit my teeth and seriously consider your futures, then I can only say that you're going to have to take care not to get caught up in any transient emotions. Like when you took pity on me and made me live with you."

"...That's right."

If I wrote a letter of resignation, it wasn't unlikely that Hitagi would use that as a reason to break up with me.

Though she wasn't as thorny as she was as a teenager, she was still a close friend of Hanekawa's, and thus a girl with strong convictions.

"Although, for someone like her, if you talk to her in a reasonable manner, Araragi, then I don't think she'd be reluctant to return to Japan and get a job in her hometown. She's a girl that's starved for affection, after all."

"That's an awful way of putting it. But I don't want her to quit her job because of me. I feel like it would be terrible for the world at large if we allowed something like that to happen."

"That's a very government-official-like way of putting it. You want to set an example for the world? In that case, Araragi, if you decided to go out on the streets for Senjougahara's sake, wouldn't that also set a bad example?"

"Don't try to force me out on the streets at all costs. It's like you're doing everything you can to put me there! At least let me get a job overseas! I can even stay with my sister at first."

"That's a super lame thing to say... But anyway, regardless of whatever the world thinks, you should really think about Senjougahara for her sake. Because she's not 'TSUBASA HANEKAWA'—hm? Thinking about it, if she erased her past, then even that name shouldn't be valid anymore... What should we call that honors student from now on?"

"Well, she is a cat. We can just say, 'as yet she has no name'—or I suppose 'no longer does she have a name'. But if I think about Senjougahara for her sake, I can't exactly tell her that I want her to come back to Japan."

"Then you can just break up."

Her words felt like a slap to the face.

Oikura wasn't saying this with the intention of trying to hurt my feelings or punish me—she was just stating the obvious in an obvious manner.

Those words could even be spoken as an employee of Town Hall.

"Well, regardless of whatever either you or Senjougahara decides to do about your job or career, the fact of the matter is that neither of you are kids."

"Neither of us are kids, huh? Well, that's for sure."

A 23-year-old that didn't care about his partner would be better off just breaking up then and there. In my teenage years I would've thought it would be hypocritical to break up with someone for their sake, now that I've gotten to this point, I can't say that I agree completely.

"Considering she spent the best parts of her youth on you, it would be criminal to have her sacrifice her twenties, too. Just saying."

Oikura pulled out her cell phone—and, after tapping on the screen, she held it out to me.

On the screen was her address book.

It was apparently a request to go ahead and put in my personal information... So cutting ties for the fourth time was officially canceled.

"Don't make any decisions right now, okay? Because that would just make me feel responsible. Just make a follow-up report. I'd like to laugh like this again. One smile, please, my personal Mr. Clown."

"....."

"What? I can abuse my authority to collect all your personal information, anyway. Do you want me to become a criminal?"

"Of course I don't. But I can't help that I can very clearly envision a future where I'm putting you in handcuffs. I want to send in a letter of resignation to avoid that."

"For the record, it'll be better if you don't use my opinion as a reference. Like I said before, it's not like I have a partner."

And after that, Oikura suddenly spoke as if she thought of something.

Her words were like a surprise attack.

"Maybe... if both of us are still single when we hit our thirties..."

"Then?"

"Let's strangle each other to death."

What a lovely proposal. If that meant I'd get to quarrel with her all the way to my thirties.

004

And with that, I headed towards the Kitashirahebi Shrine.

And if you're asking "with what?", then not even I really had a clue, but I'd finally come up with the determination to go—I wanted to say that I'd managed to overcome something after talking to Oikura, but she'd probably hate me if I said that. So let's just say that I had had no choice but to go mountain climbing because I was pressed for time.

I completed the rest of my work in the afternoon and headed directly for the mountain that the Kitashirahebi Shrine was built on—how long had I last climbed this mountain, anyway? Back when I'd visited the place frequently, January meant lots of snow piling up, making it an extremely tough climb that made me feel awful just remembering it. But perhaps due to a change in the climate after so many years, the snow wasn't at a point where I'd slip and fall from it.

Let's see.

Would I, the way I was now, still be able to see Hachikuji Mayoi?

It wasn't like she was some kind of fairy that you were unable to see when you became an adult (at the very least, Gaen-san was able to see her; and in contrast, Chief Kouga probably wouldn't have been able to see her no matter how young she was), so thinking about it, I might have been agonizing over this for the wrong reasons—I could even say that, because I was troubled over various other things, I was simply jumping to conclusions.

It was like I was some young maiden that was afraid to approach the boy he liked out of fear of being rejected. It was hard to say that I was truly an adult man, if I did say so myself...

But it wasn't like I'd lost all hope.

Though she was a god enshrined in the Kitashirahebi Shrine as of now, if we went back to her roots, Hachikuji Mayoi was a lost snail—a ghost that could only be seen by humans that didn't want to return home.

A ghost that made people stray from the path that led back home.

There was probably no other person in this town that was better than me at losing their way, whether it was coming or going. After all, I'd more or less been unable to decide my path, my future, in every meaning possible.

I couldn't even see a glimpse of where I'd end up.

While I wasn't exactly lost out on the streets, I'd certainly lost my way.

In that sense, this could be the best timing, even better than the year's first shrine visit, to go and pay my respects to the Kitashirahebi Shrine—and then.

“...Of course.”

Even when I passed under the torii, entered the grounds, walked up the road, and reached the main shrine—the shrine at night was completely devoid of anyone. There was not a soul in sight, with neither a cat, nor a snake, and certainly not a snail to be seen.

Not even footprints had been left in the thin layer of snow that had piled up. Perhaps the snow was even absorbing sound, because it felt even more silent than I thought was realistically possible.

When I'd first visited this shrine, it had been abandoned, making it the perfect spot for a trial of guts. It was the same with Oikura's house, so now that I thought about it, perhaps I was a guy that liked playing in ruins.

But it became a spot for a real trial of guts—a real trial of the heart—after it was reformed. I couldn't even count the number of times my body had been used to mop the floors with when I came here.

And at the very end of it all, I'd fallen to hell.

It seemed the shrine was under reliable management by now, but the fact that five years had passed was almost palpable... Although maybe I was only thinking that because it was dark. Although I could still compare with when there had been a starry sky—was it here that I'd gone stargazing once before?

Well, even if I said that, this wasn't really a place to come at night... Whether it was for a trial of guts or for stargazing, anyone who came to such an unpopular place this late was not in their right mind.

Good grief.

Perhaps I'd just hit a dead end after losing my way.

As I thought that, I pulled out some spare change from my wallet and tossed it into the offertory box. A five-yen coin. Fundamentally, in these cases, was it two bows, two claps, and then a third bow?

"Have you become ready to die?"

Said a voice.

When I was thinking about what to pray for, a voice spoke from my snow-covered shadow—and it wasn't just a voice speaking, as a little blonde girl emerged with a wriggle from my shadow. Because even the light of the stars and the white of the snow managed to produce a shadow, it had connected the hotline from Shinobu to me.

It was almost like looking for service at the peak of a mountain with just how barely the connection was made... Shinobu had taken on a form with a fluffy knit hat, a bulky coat that made her resemble a snowman, and boots with fur.

This girl had also gotten influenced by worldliness.

Even though in the past, no matter how freezing the world was outside, she'd always sophisticatedly endured it lightly dressed—but anyway.

“Eh? What? What did you say?”

“I asked you if you’ve become ready to die. You’ve lived quite a long life, so have you become ready to die?”

Just like me.

Saying that, the little girl gave a terrifying smile—it felt like a long time since I’d seen that smile.

“Ah... Suicide from having gotten bored with living, right? That’s what makes up 90 percent of vampires’ deaths? Right, there was something like that, huh.”

“It’s not a matter of there was something like that. The reason I myself came to this country was to die, after all. That’s why I descended upon this town. So, my master, if you are thinking that you want to die now, I won’t think it strange at all.”
“Oh, stop it. I’m only 23 years old, you know?”

“But haven’t you taken to viewing the past quite fondly, as of late? Do you not think that it would have been better to die five years ago? For example, at this shrine. For example, on that athletic field. For example, inside that abandoned building. Do you not think you would have been happy if you’d died then? Ka ka.”

She seemed like she was having fun.

Though it wasn’t as bad as Oikura, her personality was still awful.

Although, it’s not like I didn’t understand what she was getting at—she was the legendary vampire that had chosen to die in the country where she’d met her first minion, Shishirui Seishirou, and she was the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire. And though I could hardly be considered of the same status as her, it was simply the common sense of immortal oddities that a long life did not necessarily mean a happy one.

Even the mermaid Suou-san or the golem Kizashima-senpai had been allowed to live due to oddities, while they would otherwise be dead. Even in the Rumors Squad, there were some truly special types like Kuwagata Hitata-san. Although I was the same... But in my case, it had been the opposite, because a vampire that had been about to die had been made to live by me, a human.

“My high school days were so fun and happy, and that was the peak of my life, so it would’ve been better if I died then. What, do you really think I think that? ...Stop it. There were plenty of times where I had fun, and there were tons of happy times, but overall my school life was just that of a moody teenager who’d almost dropped out.”

During that “kamaitachi” case way back when, Kizashima-senpai had said something along those lines—and in my own case, because I’d entered a private school with a standard score that didn’t fit my stature, it had been extremely tough.

I couldn’t just simply say that those times had been good. If I had to, I’d say so bitterly.

And my relationship with my family had been the worst.

Thinking about how it was back then, it's almost unbelievable how well I got along with my sisters now—while I didn't want to overly glorify my past, I also didn't want to overly disparage it, but looking at it comprehensively, I definitely didn't think that the me from back then was happier than me now.

“Ka ka. Is that so? Right now, you are extremely blessed, after all. Being pampered at your workplace, and being filled with high spirits. Even though the you from back then, despite being immortal, looked dead on the inside, I am certain that if he looked at you now, he'd be filled with pride.”

“I wonder about that. I can't help but think that he'd want to beat me up instead... Because right now, I'm just waving around a sense of elitism that the me from back then despised. I'm a career man with a good salary. And even though a lot happened, my college days were pretty fun, too. My area of activities got wider. Though I used to ride around on a bike, I learned to drive a car, and even boarded a plane and went on vacation. I read and understood books that I didn't understand in high school, and I even enjoyed movies that once made zero sense to me. If the me from back then, who had nearly dropped out and strayed from the right path, saw me now, he'd certainly find me utterly intolerable.”

“Can you become happy if you're betraying your past self? Are you going to feel guilty about your success?”

“That's not what I'm trying to say.”

Or was it?

Maybe I was just afraid of changing.

No, I couldn't say it was just that.

It was certainly true that I'd read and understood a book that I didn't understand in high school. And it was true that my tastes had changed as I grew older—but on the other hand, it was also true that I'd stopped being able to understand a book that I'd once loved so much.

Even though I had so much fun with it, it had stopped being fun.

Even though I'd been so deeply moved by it, even though the book had been almost life-changing, it just felt shallow when I reread it now—like it had gone past the limits of mediocrity—and that disappointment brought upon a sense of guilt that made me want to shrivel up and die.

Though it's an exaggeration, it was a sense of guilt equivalent to the guilt of killing a single person.

“Ka ka. So are you feeling depressed because you killed off your past self? But having said that, it isn't as if you can just living your life reading and rereading just a single book. It's quite possible that your feelings are the same as how, when you became a

vampire in that spring break, you immediately wanted to go back to being human—and the same as how, when I was asked to become a god, I thought that I wanted to stay as a vampire.”

“.....”

“Or possibly—how I let go of the chance to go back to being the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, and instead chose to live with you in your shadow.”

Shinobu then turned her entire body and faced the torii.

“But still, if my master wishes it, then I will be his most humble servant. It would not be hard to return you to your past state.”

“Eh? Return me...”

“It had not been this well-kept back then, but we’ve done something of the sort at this shrine before, have we not? We used that torii as a gate, and we rewound time.”

Ah—that’s right, we did.

Although at the time, Shinobu had just casually taken me along into a time slip... And that had brought on some unthinkable results, but still, in the exact same way she’d done then, Shinobu said, “Let’s do it!”

“Though I made a mistake before, don’t worry! I’ll get it right this time. It’ll be fine if we go to a past that doesn’t have you in it, right? With that, you’ll be able to safely go through high school for the second time. If you’re regretting the mistakes you made, why not just redo them? If you think that you right now are just one big mistake, you can just choose something different the second time around, whether it’s going to college or finding a job. Even so, you’ll keep on living—because you’re a vampire.”

Don’t get lost on the streets, but lose yourself to the dark.

That’s what Shinobu said—and it sounded like she was making a joke, but more than half of it was probably serious. She was the kind of girl to suddenly suggest such imprudent motions—and it was those that were the temptations of the dark.

And I’d fallen for them so many times in high school.

I’d fallen for them so readily, so casually.

Nonetheless, Shinobu and I were in the same boat—if I could sense that Shinobu hadn’t really changed that much in that respect, then that meant that I hadn’t really changed that much either. And if that was true, then perhaps that was actually something to celebrate.

The me from the past that was still inside me—he wasn’t dead yet.

"I don't have any desire to go back to the past, Shinobu. The me from right now and the me from the past are one and the same—they're both me. If there's someone that's going to be a high schooler for eternity, I'll leave that to Ougi-chan."

I see.

I'd certainly been flooded with nostalgia after returning to my hometown for the first time in four years. I'd met Kanbaru and Oikura, I'd talked with my sisters, and I'd experienced Hanekawa, so I must have become nervous and even sentimental—and I might have even fought with Hitagi because it was such a sensitive time for me. But this was just me acting like "the past was great" and playing at feeling good about it. I was pretty nasty for pretending something that ultimately hurt me.

I'd arbitrarily started to feel that I'd "left it behind", but it wasn't like everybody got to where they were now by making light of the past—Kanbaru got to where she was now through the match with her rival, and Oikura got to where she was now by taking in her past. It's because of the past that we have a present. It was even possible that Hanekawa, who'd erased her past, was the one thinking of the past the most.

Even as I felt apologetic towards my past self, I was confirming the position of my present self—but even the difference of 18 years old and 23 years old would probably seem like nothing when I looked back as a 30-year-old.

"I definitely can't say that growing up is going to be boring. Even Gaen-san and Oshino are all grown up, aren't they? Well, they might be exceptions, but fundamentally, growing up is something fun. And that seems true, looking at the people from the Rumors Squad, and looking at the entire Naoetsu Police Department. And even now, it's fun. There's still a lot of things I don't like now, just as there were in the past. But I can handle it. That's all I need to do."

I stopped looking at the gate... Er, the torii. And faced back towards the main shrine.

I couldn't see the god. But that was fine.

Not being able to see her was normal... It shouldn't be anything otherwise. Just like it was to Chief Kouga... Oddities were something that you normally couldn't see.

And, while you couldn't see them, they weren't something that didn't exist.

Even though you couldn't see them, you had to believe that they were there.

"Or maybe, it's like this. I hadn't lost my way in the slightest. I was just pretending to hesitate to feel better about myself, but I'd already decided what I was going to do—because standing at a crossroad doesn't mean I've lost my way. That's why I can't see Hachikuji. There's no way she wouldn't show her face if I was seriously troubled over something."

"Ka ka. If that's how you choose to think, then so be it. ...But for the record, I wasn't sure if I was going to tell you, but if it's that lost girl, not even I can see her."

"Eh? Really?"

You should've said that earlier.

Or rather.... Isn't that a little strange? Regardless of whether or not I could see her... Even if she was linked to me, Shinobu was an oddity that ate oddities, so being unable to see one was...

"Indeed. Perhaps she has just stepped out for a bit? Even back then, she had been a god that was frequently absent, that girl."

"....."

To be absent from the shrine, even when it wasn't Kannazuki, the month with no gods... Well, it wasn't impossible.

In that case, give back the offering I made earlier.

Give back my five yen.

"...Then, I guess I'll just have to visit again. So I will. Without waiting so long to do so, next time."

"Will you be coming when you're troubled over something?"

"Nah. I'll come during a better time. I've decided just now. I'll hold my wedding with Hitagi here. Before this god."

Though I couldn't tell if she really was here at the main shrine or not, I decided to do my two bows, two claps, and then a third bow anyway.

Thinking about it, the start of my relationship with Hitagi had been presided over by Hachikuji as well—in that case, didn't that make this place a shrine of matchmaking?

"There's no way she wouldn't show her face during my big moment."

And when she does, I'll embrace that stroll-loving god from the heart.

I'll show her that adults can have fun, too.

"...Though you're saying something rather dashing and it's all very thrilling, from what I could see from your shadow, aren't you and that girl currently in the middle of a breakup?"

"Didn't I tell you? I've already decided what paths I'm going to take—I've decided. So, my humble servant, in regards to that, I'd very much like it if you could help me by any means necessary."

"Huh? For work?"

"Nope. It's one hundred percent for fun."

"If it's work, I only plan on helping in moderation."

Shinobu smiled.

Not a terrifying smile—but a cute one.

“But if it’s for fun, then I’ll help you out with all that I have.”

005

On the final day of my training period, I made a special request to Chief Kouga to make some time for just the two of us to speak. When I gave her the bundle of documents I’d spent all night putting together, Chief Kouga skimmed through it before asking, “This doesn’t seem like a letter of resignation, so what is it? What’s going on?” with a puzzled expression.

“This is a housing map for this town. That is, for oddities—or rather, for the ‘bad things’ that come before oddities. I’ve written up a list detailing where they all are.”

To be honest, what I really wanted to submit was a report detailing the resolution of all of them, having them be dispersed in the wind, but because it was me, I could unfortunately only accomplish about half of my intended schedule—it still made for a good parting gift for the Rumors Squad, but I couldn’t say I was satisfied with it.

I was pretty lacking in originality.

What I did after descending from the Kitashirahebi Shrine was fieldwork that was basically the same as the actions of the specialist, Oshino Meme, who had gone around gathering oddity stores during his stay in this town.

If there was any difference, it would be that I did a fair amount of cheating by utilizing the appetite of the ruler of oddities, so to speak.

Even so, I hadn’t been able to finish in time.

And because I hadn’t finished, I couldn’t even determine which ones were harmful and which were harmless, only having Shinobu eat the ones that were definitively dangerous, so I had no choice but to rely on my fellow Rumors Squad senpai to handle the rest.

Nevertheless, this list should be useful in demonstrating my spirit—if anything, I’d be okay if just my feelings reached Chief Kouga.

“Your feelings are great and all, but I can’t take this without knowing what it’s for. You didn’t do it for work, right? Is this supposed to be a farewell gift, saying you’ll never be returning to the Rumors Squad?”

“Well, it is partly as thanks for taking care of me over these past four months, but it’s not a parting gift—if anything, it’s a bribe.”

“A bribe? Oi, oi, do you really think your chief is that underhanded?”

“I apologize for my choice of words. Let me change that to ‘gratuity’. The thing is, I’d like for you to write me a letter of recommendation.”

"I already said I would, didn't I? You didn't have to go out of your way to do your own research project. Your aspirations lie beyond the Naoetsu Police Department and the Rumors Squad, right? Okay, okay. It's fine, as long as you're not quitting being a member of the police, I can help you out. I'll make sure you're rated highly, whether you're going for the capital or any other region."

"However, I'm not going for either of those."

That was why I was showing every courtesy in making my request.

Though I was aware of how it sounded, I wanted a letter of recommendation that rated me as highly as possible.

"I'd like to continue my training like now—just, overseas."

"...Overseas police training for National Police Agency initiates?"

As expected, her mind was quick. Chief Kouga blinked in amazement.

That's right. Overseas training.

For some reason, I'd been convinced that, if I wanted to rush over to where Hitagi was, I'd have to quit my job to do so—I'd assumed that, as long as I was a government employee, I'd be unable to leave the country.

But I realized in the middle of my conversation with Oikura.

This wasn't about "TSUBASA HANEKAWA", and it wasn't like the National Police Agency was operating in countries with isolation policies, but in this era of globalism, there were systems in place if you looked closely—there were tons of police officers that cooperated with the International Criminal Police Organization and were dispatched overseas. But of course, this wasn't an easy matter. It involved taking on difficult work like guarding embassies and such. In a sense, it was operating overseas as a representative of your country, which meant you needed to be qualified to do so.

For example... Well, for a younger person, about the level of an Assistant Inspector.

Like this, it almost makes me feel stupid. I'd been grumbling about how easy it would be to chase after Hitagi if I'd had a different job, but the truth was that from college, or perhaps even from high school, I'd steadily proceeded down the shortest path to following in her footsteps, as if I'd known in advance.

Why did I become a police officer?

When Suou-san had asked this, I'd responded, "because my parents were police officers", but now I can respond like this—"because I wanted to stay together with my girlfriend that I was with since high school".

It was mixing work and leisure, but that was fine.

Because, before I was a public servant (kouboku), I was me (boku).

It was my humble servant that had told me that.

...I was probably repeating myself by now, but there were a lot of obstacles in my way. As a career, I couldn't go around completely unrestricted. Like being a single tree in a forest, there were probably a flood of applicants that were interested. Not to mention, the best of the best. The elite even among the elite. That's why Chief Kouga's support was essential, but even that probably wasn't enough—that's why I continued further.

"Someday, I'll return. And when that happens, I can be the chief of the Rumors Squad, or the chief of the Naoetsu Police Department, or whatever you want. And, of course, I'd like to make use of what I learned here even overseas."

"...In other words, you want me to bring this up to Gaen-senpai, too?"

"I doubt that she *doesn't* want to set up a base overseas, when she's trying to spread roots across all the public institutions in Japan, right? Though the FBI or the MI5 might be too much, she probably doesn't want to keep relying on unaffiliated cooperators like Dramaturgy or Episode."

"Well, that's true... Hmm."

Chief Kouga once again flipped through the maps I handed her. Though she'd skimmed them quickly before, she was carefully perusing them now—as a founding member of the Rumors Squad, it was possible she was measuring my capabilities.

In that case, I'd done most of it pretty roughly... I couldn't say I was proud of my paperwork skills.

"What about your foreign language skills? And not your grades on an exam—do you have the confidence to actually communicate with locals in the area? You have to be able to speak the language of the land you're in."

Her tone of voice changed from that of a superior to that of an interviewer.

At the very least, it meant that she was taking it into consideration—although it made me more desperate.

Though I'd boasted to Shinobu about how I had no intention of returning to being a high schooler, it seemed I would have to return to the times when I'd bluffed my way through everything, just for this moment.

"I can't say I excel at foreign languages, when I struggle with even Japanese. My communication abilities are poor. My social disposition is also poor. I have a bit of an ungrateful personality. But I will be accompanied by an interpreter, so I'll be able to exchange words with overseas oddities."

"An interpreter—I see. Shinobu-chan, huh?" said Chief Kouga without taking her eyes off the paper. "An interpreter for the language of oddities. That's what we valued most highly from you, after all—a delicate job that would be difficult for someone like Officer Saisaki."

"Then?"

“Hold on, hold on. Don’t rush me. This is still under consideration—Assistant Inspector Araragi, your proposal is convenient for me and Gaen-san. Or rather, it’s ideal. But that’s only if everything goes well, and there’s also the case of if everything doesn’t go well to consider. This isn’t a problem with your abilities, but a problem of organizational structure—from an adult’s point of view, there’s a high probability that you’ll be crushed by the strict work environment overseas, be discouraged, and quit being a police officer. I don’t have the slightest idea why you’re aiming on working overseas, but you might even end up breaking up with your girlfriend.”

It sounded like she had a pretty good idea, though?

Also, I felt like her statement was going a bit too far.

“It’s fine if you regret not doing something, over regretting doing something, you know?”

“I’m doing this so I won’t regret it. The reason I don’t feel fulfilled, the reason I feel so unsatisfied, even though I’m so blessed... The reason I feel guilty towards my past self is not because I’ve succeeded or that I’ve become a part of the winners. It’s because I’m not living my life out to the fullest. Even though I’m doing my best, I’m not actually doing my best. Even though I’ve grown, I’m not trying to grow further.”

“Did you forget what I said? It’s fine even if you don’t pursue your ideals. You aren’t obligated to make full use of your abilities—anybody would prefer living comfortably in a place that was prepared for them.”

“But, it’s fine even if I don’t live comfortably, isn’t it? It’s fine to live desperately. To go beyond my abilities and work myself to the limit.”

“Of course.”

As long as it’s within the range of the Labor Standards Act—said Chief Kouga, finishing her reread of the list.

“Okay, okay. Then, let’s go with that.”

“Eh? Go with what?”

“I’ll write you your letter of recommendation. I’ll put a gold star for your rating, and let Gaen-san know as well—but I don’t know what will happen after that. But whatever happens, I’ll have you return to the Rumors Squad in the end. And I won’t let you quit, even if you ask me to. That’s what we’re going with.”

There was suddenly quite a lot that we were “going with” that it was hard to process all at once. Sorry? “Okay, okay” actually meant “okay, okay”? A definite answer? Even though I had so many more logical arguments I prepared... Although they were more illogical arguments... But all my demands were met in full?

“This is some good work. I have some minor complaints, but I can really do something about them on my own. Seko-chan might even be moved to tears by this... The fact that you got Shinobu-chan to cooperate with you on this needs no further explanation. I can

feel your guts. It's easy to see that you've helped out with Oshino-kun's work in the past."

It did make me happy to be directly praised like this, but I couldn't help but feel restless from it... As someone who'd even faced off against a con man, I couldn't help but be suspicious of tricks or feints. Was she going to impose certain conditions for this—wasn't there going to be some difficult test or intense crash course?

"If you want to bargain like that, do it with Gaen-senpai. I'm just middle management that follows her instructions, in the end. I know nothing about specialist stuff and oddities. I can't do anything about tests or crash courses. I can only evaluate you based on the four months I've spent with you, as well as this presentation just now. I've told you plenty of times, haven't I? I can't see oddities,"

said Chief Kouga.

"But I do have an eye for people."

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And now for the epilogue; or rather, the punch line for this case.

After thinking long and hard about how I would proceed forward without betraying myself, I'd finally managed to take my first step on the long path that stretched out ahead of me, but I was less trembling with excitement and more utterly exhausted. I'd headed straight home in order to make up for the lack of sleep from the previous day, but what greeted me at the entrance hall was something that made me the most fed up in days—it seemed Tsukihi had returned from Tokyo, as a pair of sneakers that were neither mine nor Karen's had been left at the entrance.

I'd only noticed because I'd been faithfully checking the shoes at the entrance ever since Tsukihi's and Hanekawa's home visit before... But I would've preferred to not notice.

Although she did say that she'd drop by once more before going back overseas... But why did it have to be tonight? Karen was on a night shift today, so I'd been planning on getting some peace and quiet. It was as if both Oikura and Tsukihi had taken careful aim to have the worst timing possible... But oh well, at least this was a chance to pry into my sister's overseas lifestyle. I doubted that her utterly nonsensical private life would serve as a good reference for me, but I could at least use it as an example of what not to do. Thinking about how Senjougahara Hitagi was awake and moving around due to the time difference in that foreign country, I decided to interrogate my tiny sister—but then.

When I entered the living room, pumping myself up to stay awake for a little while longer, who would be sitting cross-legged on the sofa but the one that should be awake and moving around in a foreign country, Senjougahara Hitagi.

"Yo."

"This isn't a time to say 'yo!'"

I'd fallen to my knees, but I'd barely managed to keep myself from collapsing entirely, and crawled my way towards the sofa.

"How did you even get in?"

"You'd be better off changing where you hid the spare key."

"You do know you broke into a house of police officers?"

"I'm sorry I apologize I was foolish."

She looked right into my eyes and apologized.

Although, she was wearing colored sunglasses that made it obvious she'd just returned from some area with bright sunlight, and her voice had been completely monotone, but it seemed she was not actually apologizing for her audacious trespassing.

Don't tell me... Did she return to Japan to apologize...?

Seeing the sturdy suitcase that had been set aside, it seemed she hadn't even gone back to her parent's home, and come straight here instead—although she'd probably never say as much herself, considering how obstinate she was.

"Er... It's my bad, too. It was just a lot of stress that piled up. I'm sorry."

It was a strange feeling that I could only describe as having been beaten to the punch, or having been one-upped, but I felt a huge sense of relief, and I sat down on the sofa facing Hitagi.

Because even though I'd come up with various schemes using brains that I didn't have, I hadn't discussed any of them with Hitagi at all.

I'd wanted to act based on my own judgment until I reached my goal. I'd wanted to demonstrate my sincerity, but perhaps I was just being stubborn about it, too.

Well, I had thought about giving her a call starting tomorrow, but now that I met her face-to-face like this, I couldn't keep quiet for even a second longer. I wanted to share the career choices I'd thought of with Hitagi.

"Hitagi. There's something I want you to hear first, is that okay?"

"Whatever you want. As long as it won't turn into our fourth breakup. And, as long as you hear what I have to say first, Koyomi."

"Mm..."

She was really taking the wind out of my sails here, but oh well. If I got too passionate and started prattling on without thinking, she might just get mad at me for just moving the conversation along on my own. It's better to think about what I want to say in advance.

“As a condition for my promotion onto an official team, I sent in a proposal to establish a Japanese branch to the CEO, and it somehow turned into reality. It’s not decided for sure, but if I can get cleared on the budget, I’ll be able to return to this town this spring, together with my boss and my team. So I’ll be able to live together with you, Koyomi, from now on.”

“.....”

She’d moved the conversation along on her own.

Eh? Ehh? Ehhh?

You put a condition on your promotion? And not only that, you got your boss and your whole team involved? Just to come back to Japan? Just because you didn’t want to be apart from me any more?

“Establishing a branch in Japan had already been talked about before. I just pushed it along a bit... This means I’m really becoming straight-up rivals with my father, but daughters have to surpass their fathers someday, anyway.”

I thought the line had to do with sons, but I guess there was nothing saying that daughters couldn’t surpass their fathers, either... But anyway, what the heck? We’d had the exact same thought process. No, well, I had tried to move through my system, with conditions placed on my advancement, while Hitagi had changed her system entirely, and advanced by placing conditions, so I could only say that she’d one-upped me in that respect...

But, in that case... What were we going to do?

What was with this “Gift of the Magi” situation that spanned nations?

If I were to put it like Ougi-chan, these were truly gifts of fools.

“What’s wrong? If you’re not going to be happy for me, I’m going to burst into tears.”

“I’m happy. I’ve never been happier... I’m even trying to restrain myself from getting up and rejoicing. But, Hitagi-san. Can you prepare yourself and listen to what I have to say?”

If it was like this, I almost wanted the symbol of peace once known as Hanekawa Tsubasa to erase the borders of countries all over the world already, but we couldn’t just lazily wait for that day to come. In the first place, if that ever became reality, Hitagi would have to constantly watch over the state of international finance, and in the worst case, I might have to be the one to regulate it.

So, before that, let’s talk it out.

“What is it? Preparing myself... You’re making me all tense. Don’t tell me we’re actually going to break up for the fourth time? If so, I’m going to burst into tears.”

“That’s not it! Why do you want to cry so much? There’s no way that’s it. In the first place...”

In the first place, before we could break up for a fourth time, we’d need to reconcile our third breakup, didn’t we? Right, before anything, we’d need to talk about that—I didn’t want to hear any more about how common it was to get back together and then split apart again. And I didn’t want to put off getting back together for a minute more.

I extended my arm and gently pulled off her sunglasses. I had thought that the fact that she was still wearing them indoors meant that she’d pompously wanted me to take them off for her, but this was completely off the mark—Hitagi had just been hiding her eyes, because they were completely red, as if she’d been crying for days on end.

She’d already burst into tears, hadn’t she? She really was a bit of a crybaby.

Then, if I said this, she’d probably cry even more... But I was at a point where I’d have to start studying foreign languages from now on. Whatever happened next, I’d figure it out as I got to it, but for now, I’d love it if my girlfriend, who had spent quite some time in the country, could check my pronunciation for me.

“I love you.”

Her red eyes turned wide, and smiling while crying, bashfully responded with, “Koyomi, tore.”

The words of our union (musubi) were not words that had caught on, but words from our memories alone.