



Musubimonogatari

Mitome Wolf

001

Saisaki Mitome was the descendent of a werewolf. In general, there's a sense of familiarity that comes with using the term "wolfman" instead of "werewolf", but since she was female, I suppose it should be "wolfwoman" instead. But anyway, she was a wolf while she was human, and she was human even when she was a wolf—unlike how I became a vampire, or how Suou Zenka became a mermaid, or how Kizashima Nozomi became a golem, instead of becoming a monster partway through her life, she had been instilled with a wolfish nature from birth, or perhaps from even before she was born.

Though I didn't really have an understanding of the girl herself, other than her rough personality, it seemed she'd come from such a family... Her parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins all, more or less, had the same constitution—a constitution where, on the night of a full moon, they'd transform from humans to wolves.

It seemed that the wolf genes in Saisaki Mitome were particularly strong even among her family members, so even if she didn't bathe in the light of the moon, she was still capable of transforming if she looked at any similar-looking round object—and to the opposite effect, even on a night with a supermoon, she was capable of restraining her wolf transformation.

Her constitution was completely under her control.

"If y'ask me, though, the feeling of 'not transforming' is what makes no sense. Since I've been living like this for thirty years."

In the first place, if you ignored the unexpected point that she could "turn into a wolf", Saisaki Mitome was mostly just a normal person—a normal person with slightly more power than a human, slightly faster legs than a human, a slightly better nose than a human, and slightly more fondness for fresh meat than a human.

For a girl like her, choosing the path of a police officer was extremely natural.

She simply believed that that was the best way to use her abilities to maximize her contribution to society—although, at the moment she had made that resolve, the idea of the Rumors Squad hadn't even sprouted in the mind of Gaen-san yet.

So the path that she tried to walk was the path of what was technically still a proper police officer.

"I wanted to become a police dog. Since they're cool. And the days where a wolf can live as a wolf are over now."

I'm the Last Wolf now, she said, not out of self-deprecation but almost out of pride—actually, her time as a police officer was something to boast of, with many commendations given for her services.

With her physical capabilities easily exceeding those of a brawny guy even in spite of her supple body, she was brought into special forces as soon as she was sworn in—

and when she had been my age, she had already been put in charge of an entire unit, carrying out large-scale criminal investigations and nationwide disaster relief efforts.

Gaen-san was also crazy for headhunting a hero like that... But from Gaen-san's perspective, a member like Saisaki Mitome was indispensable for the Rumors Squad.

When I heard that, I had interpreted it as, "Aha, so basically that means we needed combat-ready personnel"—because even if they were on the level of rumors, the oddities we'd go up against weren't guaranteed to be defenseless.

At the very least, we'd need to be able to protect ourselves.

However, this was just me jumping to conclusions.

What Gaen-san actually wanted was not the werewolf's physical state, but the werewolf's mental state.

Though you wouldn't expect it from someone with a rough personality like hers, she had the steely resolve that made her unconditionally execute the orders that were given to her. And Gaen-san wanted to use that as an example.

She wanted the way of life of the "Last Wolf" to influence the team that had been entrusted with her secret—to take the strong wills of the declining werewolves and have them flourish out in the world.

And the wolf that had obtained this sponsor...

Was currently encircling a cat.

002

That day, every public institution throughout Japan had become restless. Because *that* Hanekawa Tsubasa was returning for the first time in three years—so any and every organization was going through any and every policy in place to try and stop the flight she was on. But resistance was futile, for all those plans were smashed to pieces. The government had persisted to the very end, but, upon learning that her goal was to erase all traces of herself from the country, they reluctantly gave up. Even if that meant risking a change in the peace level of the country, they had opted for the chance to wipe away the shame of her country of origin being this pacifist country. Naturally, the Naoetsu Police Department that I was training at was moving at a whirlwind pace as well. Or rather, it was a full-on storm—because the jurisdiction of this department was where Hanekawa Tsubasa had spent most of her teenage years.

Nevertheless, because the Rumors Squad was in charge of not storms but rumors in the wind, we'd been left out of the loop from that uproar—with the exception of one police dog, or the self-styled "canine policewoman".

"Koyomi-kun, Koyomi-kun. Tell me everything you know 'bout Hanekawa Tsubasa. Since they put me in charge of escortin' her."

She had just stopped me from going out to nip another rumor in the bud with Suou-san—incidentally, her way of closing the distance to people was rather unique, so she

called me “Koyomi-kun” from our very first meeting. And she coerced me into calling her “Mitome-san” with her intense senpai pressure.

Suou-san tactfully read the mood and said, “Kay, Araragi-kun, I’ll meet you there,” quickly going on ahead—although if she were really being tactful, I would’ve wanted her to say something like “Sorry, but he’s my partner,” and forcibly take me along with her. But, considering a mermaid to a wolf was like paper to scissors, it was probably unreasonable to have such expectations for her. The reality was that, for a bundle of deliciousness like Suou-san, the only coworker she could safely associate with was Kizashima-senpai, the golem who did not need to eat to live. Though it did give her the drawback of seeming “wishy-washy”, it was better than being preyed upon.

Along those lines, even I had no chance of disobeying Mitome-san.

There was the simple instinctual fear I had of wolves, but I did also feel that I wanted to go beyond the limits of my squad to help out with Mitome-san’s escort duties using my past experience—not to mention, the fact that Mitome-san’s escort was someone I owed a great debt to from my high school days.

“However, all I know about is really the old Hanekawa... Basically, her past profile that she’s coming here to erase. I don’t want it to become pointless information that could distract you.”

“There’s no such thing as pointless information. I’m here because I wanna learn everything I can, even stuff that might be distractin’ or incorrect, so that I can deal with every possibility. So it’ll be better if you cooperate, all right?”

It almost sounded like a threat, but her airtight attitude was actually reassuring.

“What I need to protect isn’t Hanekawa Tsubasa. And I’m not exaggeratin’ here, but I’m protectin’ this country, or maybe even the whole world. So I wanna do it perfectly. And why are we just standin’ around, Koyomi-kun? Let’s go to a cafe. I’ll buy you something to drink.”

It was a suspicious senpai act.

By the time I entered the third month of my training period, I’d managed to figure out my senpai’s methods of pampering (in a worldly sense, it would be called “extortion”)... But oh well.

“Mitome-san, don’t tell me you’ve been put in command of the escort group?”

“Course not, course not. I’m just an underling of an underling of an underling. I’m like the end of a cigarette butt that was thrown off in the corner. Since they already decided on the frontline ages ago... But it’s because of that that I can hear from you younger folks. Even this old wolf has a role to play.”

Even though you’re that that far off in years, old wolf.

Unless she’s counting in dog years.

“But y’see, my family has somehow gotten involved in the escort preparations, too, and I have orders from them. There’s one from the riot police, of course, but they managed to bring in someone from outside the National Police Agency through extra-legal measures... It’s crazy, isn’t it? Maybe they’ll even bring the JSDF in!”

“...Those are some extravagant preparations for a single girl coming back to her home country.”

“Well, it’d be great if we were just making a big fuss over just one rat.”

Although it wasn’t one rat but one cat.

But that cat, in the sense that she was quite capable of shaking up the values of today’s society, could probably be considered to be on the same level as Schrodinger’s cat among influential cats—it wasn’t the time to be worried about the territoriality of such organizations.

Territoriality.

It was to get rid of territoriality that was Hanekawa’s great cause now, and the way this nation was coming together right now ironically could be considered dancing upon the palm of her hand—or, because she was a cat, her paw.

“But it’s the first time hearing of it, Mitome-san. That your family members are in all sorts of places.”

“Didja think the werewolves would just be hiding up in some cave somewhere? Well, among the younger folks, there’s no one that’s the real deal like me, who can transform perfectly... The best they can do is be good at howling.”

Perhaps it was like my vampire constitution.

The world had been under the influence of oddities beyond the Rumors Squad’s establishment—in the same way Kizashima-senpai was among the graduates of Naoetsu High. Surprisingly, the abnormal was right up there alongside the normal.

For better or worse.

In the first place, if we considered the graduates of Naoetsu High, then Hanekawa was certainly the single most extraordinary one. When we were still in school, Senjouhara Hitagi had designated her as a “real monster”, but if I had to say it, that had actually been a prediction.

Because right now...

The 23-year-old Hanekawa Tsubasa was certainly a real monster.

003

After graduating from high school, when she left for her round-the-world trip on that very same day, Hanekawa had still been a teenage girl with an interest in broadening her horizons out of a thirst for knowledge. Putting aside the location scouting that she did as

planning in the second term of her third year, her teenage years could be considered barely falling within the range of common knowledge—or so I'd thought, carefreely believing that she'd become something like a backpacker and return to Japan in a year's time. Not knowing my own place, I resolved to not be someone that my benefactor would be ashamed of.

However, Hanekawa's round-the-world trip did not involve an itinerary of visiting popular tourist spots, and it wasn't even like backpacking, but "round-the-world" in a literal sense—it seemed she'd planned on going around visiting every country that existed on the Earth. Every single one. "Is she trying to do a stamp rally with her passport?" was what I'd said as a tsukkomi, but I had nothing to say when I'd heard that she'd even managed to sneak her way into countries with isolation policies, that you couldn't get into with just a passport.

It had gone past the scope of what I could play the tsukkomi for.

I'd gotten picture postcards that informed me about her current circumstances, but the tidings bore pictures of scenery so different from Japan that even abstract paintings were easier to understand, to the point that I even wondered, was there a worse way to communicate than this? And in the near future, I would come to learn about the current circumstances of my schoolmate from television.

She'd been splendidly picked up by the media as a young Japanese girl who was going around helping people by participating in volunteer efforts and NGOs, removing mines, digging wells, maintaining infrastructure, and building schools and the like—and all at once, she became famous as a Japanese Joan of Arc.

Regardless of the actual contents of the news, it didn't seem very Hanekawa-like, because she hated standing out in ways like showing up on television, but apparently she'd even put herself on a billboard to quickly amass funds for her activities (according to Senjougahara Hitagi, who was close enough to her to call her by her given name).

Because of her unimaginable popularity, philanthropic movements increased explosively even within Japan. But that trend didn't last for long.

It wasn't that the fickle Japanese soon found a new idol to take their interest... Thinking about it now, I could even say that it was some incredible foresight for the media to dub her "Joan of Arc".

Just before Hanekawa turned twenty, her activities turned from relief efforts for victims of war and recovery support for war damages to becoming a mediator for wars themselves, and her personality changed as well.

Whether you called it a mediator or a peacemaker—though it was supposed to be a trip across the world that was heavily influenced by the rootless wanderer and advocate for neutrality, Oshino Meme, she had arrived at an unthinkable destination.

A war mediator.

It had become far too heavy of a portable shrine to carry around and idolize for fun. What was all the more annoying was that such activities suited her perfectly—in places

around the world, she indiscriminately settled things with peace treaties and armistices, triple alliances and bitter enemies in the same boat.

She was using an eraser on the borders of the world without leaving a single line.

That had become her objective—so at a glance it seemed she'd arrived at being a peace advocate, but some people thought of her actions as dangerous, along the lines of being on the path towards world domination. She'd crossed the point of idol treatment, straight past the point of VIP treatment, and reached the point of becoming a wanted person on an international level.

Though she'd once spoken on radio broadcasts on the warfront about how she wanted to make the five rings of the Olympics into one beautiful flower, she now had a charisma that could no longer be found on billboards but could be called one beautiful revolutionary.

Nowadays, even speaking her name in public was forbidden—there was even a country where sending the name “TSUBASA HANEKAWA” in an email was considered a crime (it should be said that that country later merged with a neighboring country without even its name being left). While Japan hadn't reached that point, the public institutions were all keeping their eyes on her “people-helping”.

“■■■■■ (a greeting in some language), Araragi-kun. Are you well? Today, I've erased my sixteenth national border.”

For some time, I'd been receiving picture postcards containing such messages, but before long, they'd stopped arriving—though I'd been worried that something had happened to her, it seemed that Hanekawa had begun to sever ties with me, whether she thought it'd start to be a bother for me or it'd be a hindrance to her activities.

Because it was her, I felt that she was trying to systematically alienate us, softly and gently, without trying to hurt us—and it was possible that this return to her country was the culmination of all of that.

A culmination (shuutaisei), or perhaps a final accomplishment (shuu taisei).

As if she was entering a witness protection program, she was planning on completely erasing her existence and becoming a tool made for peace—as for what spectacles she would have seen to get her to make that decision, I had no clue.

As someone who unconcernedly described the world as peaceful, I truly couldn't comprehend the meaning of her actions—would it have been so bad to spend a fun campus life with me and Hitagi?

It probably was bad for her.

Though I'd been able to become friends with that monster, I couldn't become a kindred spirit—looking at the results, our friendship was just one of those boring associations that ended upon our graduation from Naoetsu High, but the fact that Hanekawa Tsubasa was returning to the jurisdiction of the Naoetsu Police Department at the same time I'd come back to town after four years seemed like a curious twist of fate.

Although we probably wouldn't meet.

Wouldn't, or should I say, couldn't.

It wasn't particularly uncommon to be called out for escort duty like Mitome-san was, but on the contrary, I'd been given specific orders to not come close to the hotel that Hanekawa was staying at—not just me, but all her former acquaintances (even her foster parents) were given such notice.

The only ones who could enter the hotel were the ones in charge of escorting her. Even its employees would be put on forced leave that day—although the truth was that if this ultimate pacifist were to stay for longer than a day, it could possibly turn into an emergency situation that wouldn't end with an assault or an assassination.

It was even possible that the entire area that Hanekawa was in would be hit by an air raid just to target Hanekawa specifically—if they could prevent a mass panic, the government would probably even order an evacuation of the town.

Wherever Hanekawa was was considered both the ultimate peace zone as well as the most dangerous spot for all major world powers—just by her moving somewhere else, she could drastically affect international affairs.

I'd even had to be afraid of being forced to leave the country at one point. In the end, we arrived at the pragmatic approach of "doing work as usual" (although I figured that was in part due to Gaen-san's arrangements—after all, Hanekawa was no stranger to Gaen-san, either), but compared to my friend from school who'd expanded her sphere of influence to a global level, the work that I was in charge of alongside Suou-san involved striking at the origin of certain "charms" that were being used by middle schoolers.

When you looked at it like that, my actions haven't exactly changed much since I was in high school.

It was beyond just becoming someone my benefactor wouldn't be ashamed of.

Even if Mitome-san wasn't escorting her, I still wouldn't be able to show my face to Hanekawa.

004

"Hmm. A cat, huh? You even gave her a name like Black Hanekawa. But that cat's no longer inside Hanekawa Tsubasa anymore, right?"

"Well, it's not that it's no longer inside her. It's more like it's settled down... Like a stray cat that got adopted by a family—also, there was a tiger, too. That one wasn't an oddity from long ago like the sawarineko, but a new oddity that Hanekawa herself created."

"A new oddity? That's crazy. To think she'd invented something all on her own..."

That said, it was surprising, almost shocking, to hear that Mitome-san was a descendant of werewolves tracing back to the beginning of oddity history.

As for Mitome-san's appearance, she was wearing a leather jacket and sunglasses, giving off a stylish but rough atmosphere, but what she ordered at the cafe I was taken to was hot milk.

Though she was a wolf, her selection was like that of a puppy.

Also, her leather jacket was fake leather. Though she wasn't a vegetarian, Mitome-san still supported animal rights.

"Although that Kako only lives inside Hanekawa's head now, too."

"Kako?"

"Ah, that's what Hanekawa named that white tiger—for Hanekawa, Kako is one of her cute younger sisters, as is Black Hanekawa. Like entering the tiger's lair to catch a cub, I guess... At that time, it seemed she'd intended to sacrifice a lot to get both oddities in her care, but looking at the results, it seemed more like she gained more than she lost..."

At that time, Hanekawa had obtained weakness. She'd made negative feelings and bitter memories her own—and that wasn't a bad thing. If it weren't for that, the "absolutely flawless class representative" that Hanekawa was would surely have fallen to ruin in the near future. Instead of becoming charismatic enough to change the world, she'd probably offer up her life to save some inconsequential guy (yes, for example, someone like me) and die a tragic death.

How many times had she nearly died in that spring break alone?

"Becoming stronger by learning what it means to be fragile, huh... Rather than something philosophical, it sounds like some martial arts principle. Although it seems weird that, after finally acquiring some 'humanness', she'd come back to try and erase it after all this time."

Mitome-san seemed suspicious about that, but unfortunately, that wasn't a question that I had an answer to. Returning to erase your personal history—after going through all that, after finally learning what it meant to be weak as a human, why would she try to make it as if it never happened?

Perhaps the name "Hanekawa Tsubasa" itself had become a hindrance to her activities for peace... Although, putting aside "Tsubasa", her family name, "Hanekawa", wasn't even something that was absolute.

Because it had changed a number of times before.

But that was not what I knew about Hanekawa as a classmate, but something that Hanekawa had told me in confidence under special circumstances. Should I let Mitome-san know about that much as well...? But it wasn't the time to be mindful of her privacy.

Though it didn't exactly make me happy to spread rumors about my friend's secrets, Mitome-san was collecting information not just out of curiosity but for professional use—I probably wasn't the only one she was asking about this.

Although I was probably the only one who was aware of anything related to oddities like Black Hanekawa and Kako, she'd probably procured all the information about her complex family situation long ago.

...although Hanekawa was now trying to make sure that information couldn't be procured.

"Ah, that's right. Speaking of things related to oddities... There were several times that I had to heal her."

"Huh? Like, you treated her injuries?"

"You could call it that, but it was healing that utilized my vampire immortality. Thinking about it now, it's not exactly something to be proud of. Although I don't regret it."

"You don't, huh?" Mitome-san gave me a wry smile. "Well, let's put that in the past. So speak. Basically, you gave the blood of the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire to Hanekawa Tsubasa, right?"

"Yes. And quite a large amount, for that matter... And I used my spit to heal her at one point, but that's minor in comparison."

"Using your spit...? I don't think that's something I can put in the past."

This werewolf's standards were rather strict, but I moved on with the conversation.

"I feel like healing her with blood had to have affected her negatively after that—she even worked together with a vampire hunter named Dramaturgy at one point. Did you know about that?"

"Nah. But I've heard the name Dramaturgy before. He's first-class at his job—and possibly even above that. Oh, so that's it. So on top of Oshino Meme, Hanekawa Tsubasa had a second master in that vampire-killing vampire..."

Calling him a second master didn't seem to fit exactly, but, well, it was true that Dramaturgy's work etiquette could be seen in the current Hanekawa's style as well.

The work of a pro.

You never know where something you learn will be useful in life.

But the real question was not about those teachings.

"It seems that Hanekawa got this thorn-like item from Dramaturgy that could dramatically activate immortal powers within her, and she entered into a pseudo-vampire state several times after that. Um... She said it was like hay fever. The vampirism that lay dormant within her from the healing reacted to the vampire-exterminating item and produced an immune response..."

Since I didn't really understand how it worked, the explanation ended up being awkward. And apparently, she'd already used up that allergy-like factor...

“So it’s pretty likely that, in her third year of high school, she had the experience of becoming a gold-haired, gold-eyed vampire not once, but continuously.”

“So y’t think that feeling of almighty power she experienced then is what turned her into the hero ‘Hanekawa Tsubasa’ now?”

“Well, regardless of Dramaturgy’s way of life... I don’t think her vampire experience is really related. If I had to say it, I feel like it seemed more like a tough experience for her.”

She didn’t thoughtlessly use her vampirism like I did.

And that feeling of almighty power as a vampire was linked to a feeling of helplessness when turning back to a human.

“I can’t say that there was no backlash from it, though. It’s possible that the experience of using violence to resolve a problem when something didn’t go her way was what led to her extreme pacifism... Well, the biggest thing is that I know very little about her wandering lifestyle after graduation, and that’s what really matters.”

“That’s true. If anything, what made Hanekawa Tsubasa what she is today is what she experienced after graduatin’ from Naoetsu High—all right. But I can use this as a reference, Koyomi-kun. Very much.”

Mitome-san said that and downed her cup of hot milk in one gulp. Well, the conversation had gotten longer than I expected it to, so it had probably cooled off by then.

“I’m glad to be of help. Please be sure to protect Hanekawa.”

“You can count on me! Since it’s my job. ... Though I can’t really say if protectin’ her life and body or her ideology is more important to preserve the world’s current state of affairs.”

I couldn’t say, either.

At the very least, the justice that I was currently pursuing ran counter to her beliefs... Even though it was still at the stage of a pipe dream, if her activities continued to bear fruit, even the country known as Japan would end up ceasing to exist.

It was possible that the reason she came to erase her personal history that was left behind in her country of origin was not to throw away her “humanness”, but in preparation for the above.

“I’m in support of pacifism, but there’s a limit to good deeds, y’know.”

“Yes. Even for me—that’s I’ve sworn to keep in mind. Although Hanekawa should’ve also learned as much in her high school days.”

There must have been something else she learned after that.

Something that I wasn't aware of.

And, though this shouldn't be taken the wrong way, it didn't mean that what she learned was necessarily wrong.

It would actually be weirder for the "truth" she attained as a teenager to stay true to her after all this time.

Because both your common sense and your environment will change over time—even the way I was evaluating Hanekawa without being around her was weird.

"Oh yeah. It's reassuring to hear that you're in charge of her escort, Mitome-san, but wouldn't Hanekawa herself be bringing along escorts from overseas? Like some sort of secret police, or bodyguards."

"Hanekawa Tsubasa has no affiliation to any organization or group, after all. For everything she does, she gathers people from here and there, and then breaks them up after she achieves her goal. It sounds like her basis for doing so is because she thinks 'keeping groups permanent leads them to ruin', was what a team of psychologists concluded after analyzin' her—though she's not anti-authority, she is anti-establishment."

Well, she was like that even as a high schooler.

While she was an honors student, due to such and such reasons, she barely came to school for the latter half of her third year—and people had blamed her absence on me, the vice-representative.

"Well, she's not an idiot, so I'm sure she won't do anything stupid like completely entrust her safety to the local escorts. She'll probably have some safety measures in place... I'm just takin' extra precautions by sniffin' stuff up right now. There isn't really anything I need to do as a werewolf. If there was, that would mean the entire town was at risk of annihilation."

"Please don't say something so scary."

"Well, if Kissshoot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade decided to come out of that shadow and assist with the escort, there'd be nothing to worry about."

"Unfortunately, that's an impossible request. She's lost a lot of her power, obviously, but in the first place, vampires and cats aren't very compatible... I don't think she'll even help me with my work until this whole racket is over."

"You're talkin' like she's allergic to cats or something. Well, don't worry, in the case of an emergency, this werewolf alone can save the town. But I have something to ask you, not as a police officer, but as a police dog. Is there anything valuable that you got from Hanekawa, like a present or something?"

"Um..."

Despite the intrusiveness of the question, I couldn't figure out her intentions for asking.

A gift from Hanekawa?

"I know I'm kinda invadin' your privacy, but I am the 'canine policewoman'. If there's anything with her scent on it, that'd be great."

"For her escort?"

"Just to be sure, y'know. But my position's really more as support, so I don't think I'll get a chance to get close to her, so if I can get her scent, I should be able to track her down if it ever gets to that... Any ideas?"

"Uh, let's see... I feel like we had to have exchanged presents at one point, but since it's been five years... And since I've moved around a bit, I don't have any good feelings about it..."

Though I mumbled as such, there was in fact a "present" that came to mind.

However, that went drastically beyond the realm of privacy... Though I didn't go as far as taking it with me to my lodgings, I was sure they were still in my room at my parents' house. That is, Hanekawa Tsubasa's underwear made up of her brassiere and shorts, as well as the braids that she had me cut off before the cultural festival.

I didn't want to seem like a pervert to the senpai I had managed to speak honestly with.

It was a group of items that I wasn't exactly sure what to do with anymore, unable to throw them away or move them somewhere else—and since so much time had passed, while it probably could be used for DNA analysis, her scent should certainly have faded. Even though I hadn't exactly been in my right mind in high school, I certainly hadn't gone as far as putting them in a Ziploc bag and hiding them in a freezer to preserve them... They had not been very well preserved.

"Is that so?" said Mitome-san.

It didn't sound like she expected much from the beginning, but her follow-up question sounded more like the question she really wanted to ask.

"Then, Koyomi-kun. Can you tell me one last thing? How much of a chance do you think there is for Hanekawa Tsubasa to try to come visit you during her stay here?"

"I'm prohibited from meeting her directly."

"Yeah, but that just means that you're prohibited from goin' to see her, right? I'm askin' bout the possibility of her coming to see you."

Though there had been questions I could answer immediately, this question didn't seem like one of them, so I decided to take the time to think about it.

And in that time, Mitome-san said, to make sure, "I mean, even though you were pretty vague about it, it wasn't like you were just friends or just classmates if you don't count the stuff about oddities, right? Isn't it possible that she has any particular feelings about you or anything?"

“.....”

Including that in my thoughts, I formulated my response.

The possibility of Hanekawa coming to meet me was...

“Zero. There’s no need to worry about that.”

“Is that so? All right. Sorry about asking too much of you.”

That apology itself was too much, really.

005

There were two pieces of bad news.

Although normally, in cases like these, you were supposed to have one each of good news and bad news, I only had bad news to share. And two pieces of it, at that.

The first had to do with the investigation into “charms” that I was performing with Suou-san. We’d made little progress, and the incident did vividly resemble a series of events that had occurred in this town in the past, but it seemed our search would not end with a bang but with a whimper. There was nothing incident-like, there were no damages, and there wasn’t even a clear point of origin—in other words, it was the gossip you’d get from stereotypical kids, without any villains scheming anything in the background.

There were no con men in the picture. Not even any copycats.

“It seems like we can just leave this rumor alone. There’s the possibility that trying to influence it from outside could actually make it worse, too. Let’s just continue with follow-up observations and see where the wind takes it,” concluded Suou-san.

Right, if we tried to manage everything and anything, the Rumors Squad could unthinkably become some sort of thought police.

And though we didn’t have the sense of achievement that came from a straightforward investigation, it wasn’t unfortunate or bad news to have a case end up being pointless—the bad news was that I wasn’t able to arrest any con men.

Though he hadn’t kept it perfectly, that Kaiki bastard must really be keeping his promise of not entering this town—he had a surprising amount of integrity, even for someone I’d arrest on the spot if I ever saw him back in this town.

Putting that aside, the second piece of bad news was that, hiding in the shadow of the news of Hanekawa Tsubasa’s return that had the public institutions in an uproar, my younger sister, Araragi Tsukihi, had stealthily returned to our parents’ home.

She was having ice cream in the living room as soon as she came home.

No, no, of course, being able to see the sister I loved when I least expected it was a joyous occasion, no matter the circumstances. But what prevented this from being categorized as “good news” was the reason Tsukihi had returned. She hadn’t come

back after learning of my own return, aiming for my training period, and she hadn't come back because it was close to New Year's—she'd come back because she'd dropped out of the overseas college she'd enrolled in.

Dropping out for the second time.

This wasn't just bad news, it was the worst.

"It's fine, it's fine. I'm planning on entering a new school, anyway. Although it's not going to be a college, but a dance school."

"What are you even trying to become? What kind of person even is my sister?"

"Relax. At least, I'm really proud of you, onii-chan. You career bastard."

"You wanna die?"

"Since the Araragi family is full of straight-laced people, it's no fun if you don't have at least one person like me. When a crisis befalls this family, the playful youngest child can lead them to salvation!"

"You're more likely to bring us to ruin. Isn't it your fault that Karen-chan and I can't get any promotions?"

"Oh, please, rolling around in your lust for promotions. Meanwhile, all I've thought about was simply dancing in casinos."

That made me uneasy.

Karen had simply been elated at her close sister's sudden return and was now showing off her skills in the kitchen—she somehow seemed to be in even higher spirits than when her brother had come back home.

It made me ashamed.

To think that the first thing I would see when I came home tired from work was my younger sister in Japanese clothing... Had she come here like that from the airport?

How had she managed to get through the Hanekawa countermeasures?... In her own way, this girl wasn't exactly normal.

She had, for some reason, tied her hair up in two braids that fell onto her shoulders.

The hairstyle resembled that of Hanekawa in her honor student days.

Because Hanekawa Tsubasa was famous even overseas, it was unlikely that Tsukihi was unaware of her return...

"Oh yeah. I heard about that from Senjougahara-san when I met up with her the other day."

“What, you met with Hitagi? Although I knew you were keeping in touch...”

No matter how good you were with languages, it was valuable to have someone you could speak with in your native language, so even Senjouhara Hitagi and Araragi Tsukihi had become friends over text, despite not having had any close relationships before.

Although, the places they lived were farther apart than the distance between Hokkaido and Okinawa...

“Yeah. When I texted her that I dropped out, she got worried and came to see me.”

“Don’t just tell people important information over text!”

“That’s why I came here to tell you directly, onii-chan.”

She sure did grow up to be carefree.

Even though she forbid Hitagi from telling me because she knew I’d object, and only told me about it after the fact.

...Well, whatever.

It was fine if there was just one person like her in this family.

“So. How long do you plan on staying? Are you going to be here for New Year’s? I’m sure our beloved parents will be coming back for that, too.”

“Hmm. Our behooved parents, huh.”

“Not behooved. Beloved.”

“Well, I’m happy that you want to spend that much time together with me, onii-chan, but I’m taking off tomorrow.”

Although I already told Karen that, said Tsukihi, licking on the cap of the ice cream container.

This girl hadn’t even learned an ounce of decorum, even when she was about to turn twenty... But tomorrow?

“What do you mean by that? Suddenly departing after suddenly arriving? That’s barely a fraction of a second. What, are you some kind of jet-setter? And where are you even getting the money? Our doting parents should really start cutting off your allowance.”

“He-ey. Even though you still got yours until you were 22?”

“Answer me! If you’ve fallen to a life of crime, even if you’re my sister, I’ll have to arrest you even if I’ll be crying while I do it. And then I’ll come interrogate you every day.”

“That sounds like a wonderful proposal, but don’t worry! I haven’t fallen to a life of crime. Yet.”

“Don’t say ‘yet!’”

“I’m tearfully working some small, pitiful jobs, and paying for my dance school tuition myself.”

When she said that, it made it sound like Tsukihiko’s living environment was like Kanbaru squeezing out money to pay for her medical school tuition, but why did the impression I got feel so vastly different?... Maybe because she was related to me, I only saw her flaws?

I supposed I would always be worried about my sister... Although anyone would find themselves worrying about someone like her.

“Also, it’s not like I’m leaving the country tomorrow. I’m planning on sightseeing around the Tokyo area for a bit. I might come visit again before I go. I’ll be counting on you then!”

Around the area... That was definitely some careful thought-out planning.

I doubted she even made reservations at hotels to stay at while sightseeing.

Well, considering that she got a visa and spent time overseas, not pitifully but powerfully, the capital of Japan could be considered a peaceful paradise, but the current peace level of the country was in the middle of being drastically rewritten.

Although, saying that, staying in this town could be even more dangerous, so I figured I’d let her go sightseeing as she pleased. But I doubted she’d find lodgings in advance with the way she plunged into things... I guess I’d have to be the adult here and make reservations for her.

“I’ll pay for the hotel fees, too. I’ll be your sponsor for whatever funds you need while you’re in Japan.”

“Onii-chan, you’re too soft on your sisters, aren’t you? Even though you groped your sister’s boobs in the past.”

“Don’t bring that up as comparison. Weren’t we both just tiny kids back then?”

“Uh, no, your height back then was about the same as you are right now.”

“Well, your boobs were tiny.”

“Your attitude is pretty much the same as it is now, isn’t it! Unlike my boobs.”

But I’ll pass on the funds, said my sister that was tiny (in height).

“Hey, now, why pass on money when you’re drowning in poverty?”

“I’m not drowning in poverty. Being a tutor in Japanese actually pays quite a bit.”

“Cheekily getting a part-time job... But your career bastard onii-chan has a salary, y’know. Let me at least pay for your hotel fees.”

“I won’t even have any hotel fees. Onii-chan, I bet you just think I’m just going on a sightseeing course without thinking, but I already made arrangements to stay with a friend. Did you already forget about her? Sengoku Nadeko-chan.”

Was she looking down on her brother’s memory?

Although she did have a point... But, aha.

The concept of staying with a friend was foreign to me, as someone who didn’t have friends... Or rather, she was still friends with Sengoku, huh? Even though it would’ve been troublesome since they didn’t go to the same school... Although I didn’t know the details, since she was a mangaka, she’ll be working pretty hard, right?

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. I’ll help her out with her work, too. As an assistant to the great Sengoku Nadeshiko-sensei. As her chief assistant.”

“Don’t suddenly try to command Sengoku’s team. Doesn’t that make you the one with a lust for promotions?”

“I can at least help with pencil shading.”

“What great artistic skills you have there.”

Don’t say it as if you can help with doing the beta inking.

My sister was such that the more she tried to lend a hand with something, the less she actually helped that person out.

“All right, all right. Do as you like, and live as you like. Live freely for my sake, too. But take it slow just for tonight, okay?”

“That’s right. While we’re here, do you wanna take a bath together for the first time in a while? Since I’m still barely a teenager.”

“That would be bad for any teenager!”

And with that, Karen called from the kitchen, “Onii-chan, Tsukihi-chan, dinner’s ready, so help me take it over there!”

Right, even if we couldn’t help her with cooking, we should at least help her set the table... But the only one to get up was me, while Tsukihi took the remote control and began to watch television.

What a freewheeling person.

“Hm? Karen-chan, isn’t this way too many plates? I know how much you want to welcome this idiot, but no matter how you look at it, this is way too much for just three people.”

“What are you talking about, nii-chan. There are four of us!”

“Eh?”

Now that she said that, it wasn’t just the amount of cooking. There was even an extra set of cutlery with chopsticks and forks laid out on the table... Could it possibly be that one of my parents, with their investigative abilities, heard of Tsukihi’s return and took the bullet train back home?

“That’s not it, nii-chan... Didn’t you hear from Tsukihi-chan? I was sure that you’d already given the okay for it...”

Karen-chan’s expression dropped in an instant from showing a good mood to an “oh no, this isn’t good” face.

“We might get fired for violating orders, then, huh. Both me and you.”

“Eh...?”

Oh, no, don’t tell me.

There was a third piece of bad news?

As I turned pale with a foreboding premonition, the door to the living room opened.

“Good morning, Tsukihi-chan, Karen-chan. Sorry for borrowing your bed. Has Araragi-kun come back yet?”

And, rubbing her eyes with her left hand while smoothing down her bed hair with her right hand, a very sleepy, pajama-clad Hanekawa Tsubasa appeared.

006

The symbol of peace. The Japanese Joan of Arc. The young champion of the modern era. The anti-war revolutionary. The single flower that bloomed across the nations—as I heard those many catchphrases that described her, I too had earnestly built up the image of “TSUBASA HANEKAWA” in my mind. But suddenly meeting my classmate like this made me see her not as any of those descriptions, but as just a 23-year-old girl.

A dignified atmosphere, or a well-prepared dependability, or a finely honed appearance. If we were talking about those, then the women I worked with fit the description far

better—well, it was true that I was first seeing her half-asleep and in sleepwear, but she gave off an even more absentminded impression than she did in high school.

Even after going “Oh, how embarrassing” with a shy chuckle and taking a seat, her eyes were seemed drowsy—it could just be that she hadn’t put her contact lenses in, but anyway, if we were speaking of the symbol of peace, then this in itself was very much like a symbol of peace, so to speak.

But her seated posture made me really want to ask, what part of this makes you an international person of importance?

Though she hadn’t grown much compared to high school, almost to the point of making me wonder if she actually got younger, there was naturally still a change in her appearance—the hair she had cut short had grown back long.

It was probably longer than when she had kept her hair in braids.

Although the black and white stripes were the same as when she had a bob cut... Or no, didn’t it somehow feel like there was more black hair? After a certain point, the media had stopped broadcasting any images of “TSUBASA HANEKAWA”, after all—I wouldn’t be able to compare even if I went to the past—so I couldn’t say for sure.

Although it was currently at a state that couldn’t just be dealt with by smoothing it down with her hands.

“What is it, Araragi-kun? Staring at me like that. Ahaha, do I look that charming to you when I wear pajamas? I borrowed these from Karen-chan, though, so they’re a little baggy.”

“No, that’s not it...”

It’s not like it’s the first time I’m seeing it, was what I began to say, before I stopped myself, remembering that my sisters were at the table, too.

Speaking of which, the trend of Araragi Koyomi seeing those of the opposite sex half-naked after just getting to know them started with Hanekawa, didn’t it... But what was different now was that Hanekawa back then wasn’t the type that could’ve stayed calm after being seen in sleepwear by a guy (and there were those of the type that could stay calm—examples: Senjougahara Hitagi, Kanbaru Suruga).

Back then, she’d cover up with a coat or something.

Thinking that, today’s Hanekawa had descended from the second floor (she hadn’t just borrowed Karen’s pajamas, but her bed as well) and had been surprised to see that I’d finished work and come home early, but even as she said that she was embarrassed, she didn’t bother going back to the second floor to change.

Well, no matter what life she led in the past few years, she probably wouldn’t have been able to survive with such a naive and delicate sensitivity—even a shy maiden can turn bold.

But no matter how indispensable boldness was, both overseas and at warfronts, coming here today and wearing Karen's pajamas, sleeping in Karen's bed, and eating Karen's homemade food was just a little too brazen—well, in terms of food, clothing, and shelter, that was just a matter of Hanekawa and Karen's relationship, so I wouldn't interfere. The real problem was that this was happening "today".

My senpai was probably pulling an all-nighter for the sake of protecting this girl—how did that escort target end up partaking in dinner at the Araragi household as if it was the most normal thing in the world?

I glared at Tsukihi.

And, as if understanding me just from the mere eye contact we'd made, she said, "What? Didn't I tell you? I came back with Hanekawa-san," tilting her head with a blank face.

She didn't tell me.

We'd only talked about how those braids reminded me of the old Hanekawa—and I hope she didn't think that that in itself was good enough of a report that she'd returned to this town with Hanekawa.

That kind of nonverbal communication doesn't exist!

No matter how related we were, that was just impossible.

"Huh? Didn't I say that I heard from Senjougahara-san that Hanekawa-san was coming back?"

"You did..."

"What about how Senjougahara-san had been entrusted with a message from Hanekawa-san?"

"You didn't say anything about that."

I didn't really get the whole story, but it sounded like she'd actually laid the groundwork in advance—I doubted that I'd make any progress dealing with such a carefree Tsukihi, so I turned my eyes to my still-employed sister that had become a full-fledged member of society.

"Um, no, I was totally sure that this had already gone through you, nii-chan. Since if you knew, you would have got in contact with Boss. I mean, I was also forbidden from meeting up with Tsubasa-san, too," said Karen, as if she was making excuses.

It seemed she called the section chief of the Public Safety Squad "Boss", but I couldn't care less about that custom—and the chain of command was different, so it would've been weird for me to suddenly put myself in there.

Although, I was in the same boat for not alerting my superiors about Hanekawa Tsubasa's current location, as well as eating dinner together with her.

I wondered if I should make the report now, at least, but I wasn't sure... As a policeman, that was something I should've done reflexively, but I'd been caught off-guard by her sleepwear-clad form, and I was thinking on an empty stomach, so I'd ended up taking my seat at the table, which was bad.

It meant that I had the time to hesitate.

If it was a problem for such a world-famous celebrity to be in a private home with no escorts and no security measures and nobody aware of it, then it was also a problem that she had managed to slip away from those perfect escort preparations to be here.

It was a huge problem—and a huge failure.

If word got out that Hanekawa Tsubasa had been exposed to danger, then international trust in Japan would plummet—at the very least, the entire Naoetsu Police Department would be destroyed. It wouldn't stop at just the Rumors Squad. It wouldn't stop at just the dismissal of me and Karen. The unemployment rate of the prefecture would rise in an instant.

How much of an uproar were they in right now?

“Ah, um. It's all right, Araragi-kun. You're such a worrywart as always. But don't worry, I managed to slip away from them without being noticed. And I plan on leaving without being noticed, too.”

“Really... Then...”

Was that really fine?

To incite an entire country to stand guard over an empty hotel in itself was pretty shameless... What would Mitome-san think if she heard about this?

Seeing as I'd so confidently declared that there was zero possibility that Hanekawa would come to see me, I was nothing but extremely apologetic.

If I had offered Mitome-san the “Hanekawa keepsake items” that were the underwear and braids, she probably would have begun tracking her down... At this point, was it good or bad that I hadn't?

“I can't feel at ease in a hotel suite, you see... It's way more comfortable at a campground. Ah, but of course, Karen-chan's bed is perfectly comfortable, too. I've completely gotten over my jet lag.”

Even though her drowsy atmosphere made me wonder if she had really gotten over it, in any case, it seemed Hanekawa had absolutely no sense of danger—even though this could turn into an international crisis.

Although it was possible the term “international” didn't even exist for her as she was now.

"I didn't really want to take my meals in such a stiff setting, either. Rather than room service, I wanted to eat some home cooking like this. Araragi-kun, if you're not going to eat that, can I have some?"

"Ah... Go ahead."

"Onii-chan, if you're not going to eat that, can I have some, too?" asked Tsukihi.

"You can go and starve."

"Well, nothin' we can do since she's already here, nii-chan. Thinking about it, we let Hanekawa-san stay here before—although at that time, you were away for a bit, weren't you?"

It seemed Karen had gotten over it with that.

A mental strength expected of someone who still went to her dojo three times a week.

It made my hesitating look shameful.

"Just think about it like this. If I'd gotten rounded up as part of the escort team, then I wouldn't've been able to have dinner like this with Hanekawa-san. So I think I'm pretty lucky!"

If this was supposed to be lucky, then it was some artificial good luck... But I guess that was fine?

Nevertheless, it seemed my sisters—Tsukihi, obviously, but even Karen, though she'd prepared for the worst—did not care that they were in the presence of such an important person.

Or maybe I was the one that had gotten too caught up in my own thoughts? Perhaps, after being in the company of my past acquaintance like I'd done in the past, I didn't have any confidence in my past self... If that was true, it was just me having an inferiority complex on my own.

"Well, putting aside being forbidden from seeing her... Was there anyone dispatched to help out from your squad, too? One person from my squad went out to help."

"Saisaki Mitome-san, right?"

"Huh. You know her?"

Then you should've told me. It's already my third month of training, y'know?

"I mean, I don't know her personally, but she's pretty famous, and I've seen her face a lot at tournaments. Police martial arts tournaments."

"Oh, really."

“There are rumors that she got sent down to the Naoetsu Police Department because she caused some scandal, but if she got put in charge of Hanekawa-san’s escort, then it doesn’t sound like she did anything wrong.”

So rumors like that had flown around... The gossip was pretty outrageous.

Though she herself probably didn’t mind, it seemed disgraceful to her as a wolf.

Even though I was only her kouhai temporarily, I wanted to try and restore her reputation somehow, but then again, there was no worse scandal than allowing such an important person out of her sight.

“It sounds like Gaen-san’s plans are pretty successful, then,” remarked Hanekawa, unprompted.

Since we were in front of Karen and Tsukihi, she didn’t say anything more, but it seemed she had kept herself up-to-date on the details of the Rumors Squad’s foundation. Despite her drowsy expression, she was as quick-witted as ever.

She was really sharp-eyed—and just sharp.

I doubted she was still in contact with Gaen-san even now... Well, regardless, this seemed like the right timing to use that line.

“Hanekawa. You really know everything, don’t you?”

“I don’t know everything. I just know what I know,” responded Hanekawa with a chuckle.

Like she’d done in the past—except today, Hanekawa added one thing more.

“Whenever I come to know something, the number of things I don’t know increases.”

Even someone who knows will someday turn into someone who doesn’t know.

007

After dinner, it was time for a shared bath.

Of course, not shared between me and Hanekawa, and not between me and Karen, but between the close sisters Karen and Tsukihi—it seemed my sisters were being considerate of me, who had a lot to catch up on with my old classmate.

Well, those two, being the former “Tsuganoki 2nd Middle School Fire Sisters”, also probably had a lot to catch up on.

“Well, I can’t just eat up without doing anything in return,” said Hanekawa, declaring that she’d wash the dishes. “Will I wash the dishes, or will I get a person to eat?”

That was really something an azukiarai would say. But anyway, I couldn’t just let a visitor do all the work on their own, so I went up to the sink next to Hanekawa to use the sponge and dish soap.

“Ahaha. It almost seems like we could be a married couple.”

That was a dangerous joke.

Even more dangerous when you took into account Hanekawa’s relaxed pajama look.

But, even as she acted jokingly, her skill with the dishes was something that I couldn’t even begin to compare to—though I’d been living independently for a while now, I wouldn’t be able to handle those dishes so swiftly.

It ended up being that for all the dishes I’d washed, Hanekawa would wash them again—so there was basically no reason for me to be there.

What kind of double-checking attitude was this?

“I just remembered after saying ‘married couple’, but are things going well with Hitagi-chan?”

“It’s a little embarrassing to be reminded of us with ‘married couple’, but Hanekawa, don’t you already know about that, too?”

“Yeah. I already heard from Hitagi-chan herself.”

“Of course.”

“Why don’t you go overseas, too, Araragi-kun? I think it would be nice if you spent more time with Hitagi-chan.”

“Well, I am a government official, after all. I pledged allegiance to my country.”

“Oh.”

I was trying to evade the question, but Hanekawa’s response was shorter than I expected... Well, it was true that she was fighting the very concept of countries, so to her, a government official was an enemy among enemies.

It was a little awkward. And because I was essentially doing the same work that I’d been doing, it was a little more awkward.

I’d unconsciously ended up looking for how Hanekawa had changed and hadn’t changed from how she was in the past, with the viewpoint of comparing Hanekawa Tsubasa and “TSUBASA HANEKAWA”—but from Hanekawa’s point of view, it was probably me who’d changed a lot.

Although that was true as well.

When I was in my third year of high school, the only one I pledged allegiance to was Hanekawa herself.

Aside from a vampire.

"...How long do you have until you have to go back to your hotel?"

Since I thought it would be awkward if the silence continued, I changed the subject.

Though I asked how long, I thought it would be good if she could leave even a second earlier, but I couldn't exactly say to a visitor that I wanted her to leave.

No matter what I'd said, I did feel happy that, when she came back, Hanekawa had slipped through the defenses to come to see me.

The fact that I felt more confusion than happiness was something I could chalk up to me being older, because if Araragi Koyomi had been a high schooler, he'd be jumping up and down with glee.

I guess that could also be what it meant to be a professional.

"It's not really a matter of 'how long'. I'm not Cinderella. I'm actually Sleeping Beauty."

"So you're a princess? I'd heard you were a revolutionary."

Ignoring my attempt to poke fun at her, Hanekawa said, "Actually, it'll be harder to go back than it was to slip away. Because what I used wasn't a locked room trick, but an escape room trick," as she polished the plates until they were squeaking. "Maybe it's something that I should have Ougi-chan settle for me. Is Ougi-chan doing well?"

"Mm... I guess she's doing fine. She's definitely lively."

"Have you met up with Kanbaru-san? And what happened to Oikura-san after that? And Sengoku-chan? And have you gone to see Mayoi-chan already?"

"Oi, oi. What happened? You're spouting off all these nostalgic names one by one."

Since I'd changed the subject first, I couldn't exactly complain when the subject was changed again, but her rapid-fire questions were a bit weird. She wasn't waiting for my answers—or maybe she just wanted me to put them all together before answering.

"I've met up with Kanbaru. At the hospital by chance... I haven't kept in touch with Oikura at all... Not since that one case. Sengoku's not even in town anymore. Although I didn't see her before she left. For Hachikuji... I was thinking of going for my first shrine visit."

It kind of felt like I was making my ingratitude distinct by putting it into words.

I was really bad at socializing.

Was I really related to those sisters of mine?

I'm sure that Sengoku would've stayed in town if I hadn't messed up in my interactions with her... Or maybe that was me being overly self-conscious.

But in terms of being overly self-conscious, that was probably the case for me with Hanekawa, too.

If I hadn't gotten to know Hanekawa during that spring break, let alone seeing her half-naked, would she even have gone as far as being called the Japanese Joan of Arc overseas?

Well, if she'd stayed the "absolutely flawless class representative", she would've fallen to ruin before turning twenty, but it was possible she would've been able to get a handle on her talents eventually without having to rely on Black Hanekawa or Kako.

Like Mitome-san and her wolfishness.

That would've brought her closer to the "ordinary girl" that she wanted to become—and, though I could be speaking out of ingratitude, the Hanekawa now could hardly be considered that.

Doing something like erasing her past for the sake of the future.

...Well, if it's living in the future over living in the past, then that was true for me, and true for everyone. Because no matter how much you thought about the answer to "Why did you become like this," it would end up being either blaming someone else or blaming yourself.

You shouldn't blame God or oddities.

"Don't be too concerned over old friends. Or did you suddenly get some lingering attachments when you decided that you were going to erase your past? Even for you..."

"Hmm, I wonder about that. To say it bluntly, I didn't ask because I was all that curious. Although I am curious about what will happen to everyone 'afterwards', my head is full of something else right now."

Well, perhaps.

Not even I thought that my hometown should be prioritized over all of humanity... World peace, banzai!

"Well, for Karen and me, our jobs are on the line, after all. So it would be great if you could figure out a good way to leave. Find something in that mind of yours."

It probably seemed like I was just changing the subject again, but I was seriously asking—regardless of me or Karen, I definitely didn't want to be a bother to my senpai, Mitome-san.

That was my socializing now.

"Even if it's you, it can't be that easy to erase your history. Or are you trying to become a different person altogether?"

“Um. Mmm. Araragi-kun, it seems like you’re under a pretty big misunderstanding, but this visit isn’t just incidental to my return to Japan, you know?”

“Eh?”

“Erasing my history was just my official stance—I don’t actually care about doing any of that. My origin can become a weakpoint for my activities, but it’s good to have weaknesses like that. If anything, that’s really what’s incidental,” said Hanekawa. As she continued to wash the dishes.

“The reason I came back was to see you, Araragi-kun.”

008

“When I said my head was full of other things, that obviously meant that my head was full of thoughts of you, Araragi-kun. Though I feel bad for everyone else. Do you want me to tell you something good? When I was in high school, I was in love with you, Araragi-kun. You didn’t notice, did you?”

She said it rather indifferently, as if she was humming without realizing it, but it was true that I hadn’t noticed—at least until she’d confessed to me directly.

“Ahaha. I just wanted to try saying something like that. Going back to the guy I fell in love with in high school and telling them about it as an adult.”

“...It’s the first good news I heard today.”

“My, my.”

“But... It’s all in the past, right?”

“That’s right. It’s something from the past. However, Araragi-kun, if you really want it no matter what, I wouldn’t mind going out with you, all right?”

“Was that also something you wanted to try saying?”

“Nope. That was something I regretted as soon as I said it. What a mistake,” said Hanekawa, closing her eyes.

It wasn’t clear what she was imagining on the back of her eyelids, what memory she was looking for in her mind.

I no longer had any way of understanding what Hanekawa was thinking.

If she had incidentally dropped by to see me while doing something else, that would’ve made me happy—I might have even ended up grinning ear-to-ear even after Hanekawa left.

But if she came to Japan solely to come see me...

Or possibly, Hanekawa didn't even have the sensation of having "returned" at all. Since she had long since become an "earthling", and had most likely spread her wings and left the nest known as Japan.

Hanekawa Tsubasa. A girl with unusual wings.

No—she was no longer a girl.

"...Why?"

That inelegant question could have even carried a hint of anger. But even if it wasn't elegant, I certainly didn't think it was unreasonable—right?

How many people across the country had been mobilized for the sake of her wanting to see me? Even though it could've changed international affairs, risked public order, and even caused war or internal strife, the reason for coming home to reunite with an old friend? Even putting aside Mitome-san's circumstances, even putting aside my and Karen's jobs being at risk, it was still incredibly thoughtless, and an incredibly childish act.

Who would've thought someone like Hanekawa would do such a self-centered act that not even someone like Tsukihi would do.

"Why would you do something like that?"

"Um. Mmm. Well, I can think of two possible reasons why I snuck over here to see you."

"You can think of two possible reasons..."

"It's like Schrodinger's cat. Is the cat in the box alive or dead—and as for the right answer, well, let's see. If you can manage to correctly guess the trick to how I managed to escape from the box, the hotel that was being closely guarded, then I'll tell you which of them is right."

Explaining the trick, huh. It reminded me of the old days. Although that was really Ougi-chan's role.

...But that wasn't it, because Ougi-chan had left my side already. She'd stopped coiling around me like the darkness of the night and splendidly discovered her own role to play—and, in the first place, I was a policeman.

What would I do if I couldn't deduce the trick to a locked room on my own?

"Right. But it's not a locked room trick, it's an escape room trick."

In the broadest sense, I felt that the two were the same, but I suppose a locked room does require a body to remain in the room—the body of a cat.

Schrodinger's cat.

“So, what are the two possible reasons? To the point of putting into chaos the world that you were trying to make peaceful.”

“Number one. About trying to make the world peaceful... I got tired of it.”

“.....”

“Like, the opposite of Cinderella? I got exhausted of being treated like a saint, and I wanted to run away from everything. I want to go back to how it was in the past. To when Araragi-kun would tease me about my huge breasts... Because of my strict eating habits, even my chest has shrunk a little. Did you notice?”

“How would I notice? Those pajamas are huge on you.”

“Yeah. I wanted to go back to when we could have conversations like this.”

Being treated like a saint, huh... Although I'd treated her more like the Virgin Mary.

“It wasn't supposed to be like this. I would've been fine with just being able to help the people that I could reach. Really, how did this all happen—”

Well, her reach did end up extending all the way to the other side of the Earth, but that probably wasn't the explanation she wanted—plus, that “number one” wasn't necessarily true.

I mean, it was possible, but was *that* Hanekawa Tsubasa really the type that went, “I'd been propped up as a symbol of peace before I knew it”? If her talents had simply been dressed up, she wouldn't have become this much of a sensation.

Not to mention losing heart after that and coming to see someone like me.

“Are you still saying 'someone like me'? You convinced yourself that way in the past, too, Araragi-kun. Getting fixed on thinking, 'There's no way *that* Hanekawa Tsubasa would fall in love with someone like me.' Even though you have no idea how much hope I placed in you.”

“No, that's—”

“And number two. I came to scout you, Araragi-kun.”

Without letting me make any excuses, Hanekawa presented the second option.

“Were you aware that I was doing all my work alone? Or maybe you weren't that interested in the work I was doing, Araragi-kun? In any case, since I'm not affiliated with any organization, I don't have any friends that share my beliefs—just cooperating, and nothing but cooperating, with those who came to cooperate at the time. I did that this whole time because I thought it would be contradict what I was doing if I didn't do it like that, but I feel like I'm at my limit. My beliefs are falling apart. I did some serious self-reflection on my high school days... And my mental care is important, too. So even if their motives are different from mine, I want a partner I can trust.”

“...A partner?”

Mitome-san had indeed spoken of Hanekawa's independent action. That itself gave a slight amount of authenticity to “number two”, but still, a partner?

“Yes, a partner. Someone who can support me when I need it most—or someone who can set me right when I need it most. And I couldn't think of anyone else but Araragi-kun. Although I've seen every country in the world, there was no one like Araragi-kun—no one who'd risk their life to try and stop me when I was being stupid. No one who'd try and stop my genius.”

“.....”

“So, which of these two reasons is the real one? Not even I know.”

Until you open the box.

Though she'd been looking at my hands washing dishes this whole time, Hanekawa finally turned to face me.

“Do you have the courage to open the box? Will you be able to understand the feelings that I don't even know?”

“...I wonder. Regardless of what I choose, it all sounds like it's wrapped up in smoke and mirrors.”

I glanced away, unable to meet her eyes—but I couldn't completely turn away from her. In the first place, without even properly looking at my hands, I'd been doing the dishes while watching Hanekawa next to me the whole time—no wonder the dishes weren't getting clean.

I was looking at her black and white hair.

I was even looking at the gray that had been mixed in.

“So I'll put aside the escape room trick deduction and answer both patterns for now. If the reason you came here was 'number one', then my response would be 'Then quit'. I'd say that your peace of mind is more important than the peace of the world—although if I said that, you'd surely fly into a rage, remember your beliefs, and return to your hotel.”

“I see, I see. And in the case of 'number two'?”

“I'd respectfully decline.”

“Because you're a government official?”

“Because I'm a member of the Rumors Squad. Although it's only for training. Right now, the peace of this town is more important than your peace of mind. The peace of this town that you spent your teenage years in.”

“...But that answer is what sounds like smoke and mirrors to me. Even though I’m right here, Araragi-kun, what you’ve been looking at all this time was the old me.”

It was a harsh indication, but for some strange reason, it made me a little happy.

The old Hanekawa Tsubasa.

But for the ‘old Hanekawa Tsubasa’, which time period were we talking about?

The absolutely flawless class representative? Black Hanekawa? After she cut her hair? When her hair became striped after she took in that white tiger and acquired weakness?—and there was even the Hanekawa Tsubasa that had once carried with her that gold-haired, gold-eyed vampirism.

And there were even times when Hanekawa Tsubasa had not been Hanekawa Tsubasa.

“Although it would’ve been fine if you didn’t try to be so shrewd, and instead said, ‘I know how you feel!’ and gave me a hug. Regardless of whether my feelings were ‘number one’ or ‘number two’, that would’ve solved everything.”

“I wouldn’t use such a master-key-like lie on anyone, much less you. Am I supposed to be able to understand something that you don’t? Even when I was a high school third-year, and even now as a 23-year-old, I’m just full of things I don’t understand. Things I don’t understand, and things I don’t know.”

I don’t know everything. I don’t know anything.

Just once, Hanekawa had said that—and with what feelings she had when she said that, I still didn’t understand.

“Right. Then, what about the escape room trick? Did you figure it out?”

Ultimately, I figured that Hanekawa would probably have been able to handle anything... Since she was a revolutionary that could cross any border, I doubted it was impossible for her to weave through a gap in any perfect escort.

If there was a single clue she’d left, it was the statement she herself had made, that “it’ll be harder to go back than it was to slip away”... If anything, this was a hint.

Most likely, it wasn’t any method that involved showing of but some sort of simple shortcut that hit a blind spot... Since she wasn’t the kind to come up with any weird schemes.

At least, if it was the Hanekawa I knew... If someone like that existed.

But even if we said that ‘the Hanekawa from when I knew her’ existed, the Hanekawa that had gone around the world would have certainly expanded her knowledge, and it was possible she had used an idea that I could never think of.

No matter how much she flattered me by saying that “there was no one like Araragi-kun”, I couldn’t swallow that at all. There were probably plenty of people like me, without even needing to use the Rumors Squad as reference, and she had to have met, gotten disappointed with, gotten hopeful for, and gotten used to someone like me—for Hanekawa, the period of time when Araragi Koyomi was special to her should have long since been over.

That’s right. I could think of a third pattern where neither “number one” nor “number two” were correct—or rather, that was the one that seemed the most probable. What if Hanekawa had come to the Araragi household for a completely different purpose?

If that was the case—I got it.

For the first time tonight, there was something I finally understood.

But I didn’t point it out.

I’d even lost interest in discussing the escape room trick that I’d gotten a clue to.

So instead, I said this.

“...Hey, Hanekawa. In exchange for telling me something good, do you want to hear something bad?”

“What? I do, I do.”

“For me—when I was in high school, I was in love with you, Hanekawa. You didn’t notice, did you?”

“—Ahaha.”

An empty laugh from Hanekawa. Her eyes had gone past drowsy into becoming hollow.

A vacantness that she’d obstinately protected.

“Araragi-kun, was that also something you wanted to try saying?”

“No.”

I shook my head. I turned away from Hanekawa.

Although I felt like I’d been turned away this whole time.

“That was something I regretted as soon as I said it.”

And it wasn’t just in the past.

Even now, in the present tense, I’m regretting it.

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

Because my sisters came out of the bath at the same time we finished the dishes, we had to leave our not-so-meaningless conversation unfinished, and after returning to a child's mindset and holding a pajama party for an hour (even I'd been forced to change), Hanekawa left the Araragi household behind—no.

She wasn't Hanekawa Tsubasa.

She wasn't the Hanekawa Tsubasa I knew, and she wasn't the Hanekawa Tsubasa that I didn't know.

After that, I met up with Mitome-san who had finished up her escort duties and confirmed with her—whether or not Hanekawa had tried at all to slip away from the hotel that she had been confined to.

Whether or not the hotel suite had turned into a skin she had shed.

The symbol of peace and the worldwide person of importance known as “TSUBASA HANEKAWA” had continuously been in her room working to erase her personal history—signing her name, stamping her seal, and disposing of various documents. She'd been absorbed in putting her entire self through the shredder. She hadn't taken a step outside her room, and Japan's perfect escort was something to be proud of—they'd fully protected the person of importance, and they'd fully protected others from the person of importance.

But then, what did that mean?

If Mitome-san had not been a part of the escort, then I would have allowed for the possibility that “there was a gap that at least a single cat could crawl through”, but in this case, even a wolf was involved. A wolf had encircled her. For Hanekawa who only knew “what she knew”, it was hard to believe that she'd inferred the existence of werewolves in advance and set up countermeasures... If Hanekawa had truly slipped away from her hotel, met up with Tsukihi, and visited the Araragi household, then there was no way that Mitome-san would not have caught on.

Even if she didn't know her scent, she would've pursued her.

If you told me that “Hanekawa” had “slipped away to come here”, then I would end up thinking she did “slip away to come here” in some way or another, but if Mitome-san said that she was “there”, then the symbol of peace must have been “there” at the hotel this whole time—she would not have made even a hint of attempting to escape.

And, finishing up the length of her stay while under strict protection, she left Japan behind, exceedingly safely and exceedingly peacefully.

The destination of her plane had been kept secret.

She'd erased all her traces—she'd erased her past, as well as her present.

And disappeared from the world.

“I don’t get it at all. How’d she do it? I’m glad you’re trustin’ me, but it doesn’t change the fact that Hanekawa Tsubasa appeared at your house, right?”

“Yes. Like Schrodinger’s cat. Like it was dead and alive at the same time—she was both here and there at the same time, in some quantum sort of way. But something like a physics-based superposition explanation would be a really stupid conclusion in a mystery novel.”

There was a body double playing her role.

That was how I explained it to Mitome-san—as an apology for my careless declaration that there was “zero possibility”, it was the only truth that I could think of.

“She’d sent in a perfect lookalike over to my house, while she herself stayed at the hotel busy doing paperwork.”

“A perfect lookalike... There’s no way. Those things only happen in mystery novels, right? If anything, I’d rather figure out how the escape room trick works.”

“It’s the simplest escape room trick. While she herself stays within the box, a different person pretends to escape—that’s the most logical solution. If she had actually escaped and had been noticed, it would’ve caused an uproar too terrible to look at, after all—for the sake of maintaining the public order, Hanekawa staying at the hotel and pretending to escape was the best choice.”

And it wasn’t as easy as just slipping out.

She’d need to do something about the escape after a few hours, too—but in this case, while it was obvious that going back to the hotel was harder, she herself was already at the hotel without needing to go back.

“A lookalike—or I suppose we could call this a copycat. She even successfully (manma to) deceived me. With cat food (neko manma to).”

“You really didn’t need to go for that pun.”

After starting with the minor flaw, she pointed out the real flaw, saying, “That’s a little weird, isn’t it?”

“Whether she did it successfully or with cat food, you yourself gettin’ deceived is weird, Koyomi-kun. Even though you said all that before, because she’s a celebrity of sorts, Hanekawa Tsubasa’s treated as a taboo in being covered by the media, and there are no photos of her out there, so I’d get it if we were the ones getting deceived—but Koyomi-kun, you’re someone who knows the reality of her teenage years that she’s erased, so there’s no way you’d be deceived by a body double.”

“Yes. I don’t think that it’s possible for me to mistake someone else for Hanekawa, either—no matter what form she completely changed to, no matter how different her

hairstyle was, no matter how slightly her chest shrunk, no matter if she'd lost five kilograms, I'm confident that I'll absolutely be able to identify her."

"Yeah. I don't need all that about her chest. But keep going."

"But the preconditions have gone global. At best, my 'absolutely' is limited to within Japan—but Hanekawa Tsubasa has gone all over the world. There's no country she hasn't been in. The parameters are different. Even if she didn't have any friends—she knows seven billion people."

"....."

"They say that there are three other people in the world that look exactly like you."

That was also a kind of rumor, and thus our specialty.

And so it wasn't just folklore we could laugh about—realistically, there probably weren't any more than three people who'd have such a wide area of activities that they'd run into one of their lookalikes.

But Hanekawa Tsubasa was one of those three people.

And if there were plenty of people that were like Araragi Koyomi—then there were probably at least three people that were like Hanekawa Tsubasa.

"...If the one that visited your house was a copycat, Koyomi-kun, then what was their objective? Whether it was 'number one', or 'number two', regardless of the reason, didn't she just want to see you? But if the one you 'reunited' with was a body double, then that just flips over the whole premise.

"She didn't flip over at all. Because she's a cat. Because Hanekawa's objective was not to see me, but to gain entry into the Araragi household—it was just another thing on her agenda towards erasing all traces of her past."

"Erasing her past... And what does that mean?"

"Before I say any more, please let me apologize. I'm extremely sorry. I couldn't say anything because I was too embarrassed, but Mitome-san, I did have a present that I had gotten from Hanekawa that I took great care of all this time."

The truth was that it wasn't because I was "embarrassed" but because "I didn't want to be seen as a pervert", but the particulars didn't matter.

"And that was a present where, while I don't know her about the scent, DNA analysis was possible..."

"Wait. What kind of a present is that? The heck? Tell me about that!"

"Hanekawa's objective was to dispose of all of those. And she succeeded."

On that day, when I came back from work, “Hanekawa Tsubasa” had been on the second floor—she’d been searching my room. She’d mercilessly disposed of the “presents” that I hadn’t been sure what to do with.

Although, she probably recovered them to dispose of later.

She probably would’ve preferred to burn them on the spot, but since the objects were underwear and hair, I’m sure it would’ve been simple to just take them with her on her body—she could just put on the brassiere and shorts, and use the braids as extensions.

That was probably why she had had more black hair than usual in her striped hair—and if she could even fool my eyes, then it wouldn’t be that difficult to slip through Karen’s and Tsukihiko’s eyes as well.

Regardless, those precious keepsakes had disappeared from my room.

My memories had been lost.

“That was the ‘number three’ objective that she came to see me for. In the end, even though she’d declared that she was erasing her personal history as her official stance, that itself was the truth as well. That was her true intention, and chatting with me was just out of courtesy. She just said something appropriate for a reunion with her former classmate, making up something believable, while steadily accomplishing her ‘number three’ mission. Well, she could’ve accomplished it without coming to see me, but—”

“...Even if you’re right, Araragi-kun. That doesn’t necessarily mean the one who came to see you was the body double, does it?”

“Eh?”

“It’s equally possible that the Hanekawa Tsubasa we were escorting was the body double, and the Hanekawa Tsubasa who came to see you was the real thing—and to go further, maybe her ‘number three’ objective was the pretense, and the ‘number one’ and ‘number two’ that you decided were fake were actually her true thoughts? No, no, I don’t actually have any reasons for sayin’ that. I just think that Hanekawa Tsubasa, for no real reason at all, just wanted to see her first love again.”

“...That’s surprisingly romantic of you, Mitome-san.”

“I’m the Last Wolf, after all. That’s obviously romantic.”

“But the possibility of that is zero,” I declared without any lingering aftertaste.

For such a gray-area question with no black or white, I gave an immediate response.

It probably could be better to leave this riddle unsolved, leaving the main points vague, but let’s make the answer not wilting flowers but flapping wings.

“Or rather, it’s even possible that both of them were body doubles. If there are three people that look like you, then that leaves another lookalike on this Earth. It’s possible that Hanekawa Tsubasa didn’t even return to Japan.”

When I opened the box, it was empty.

For the problem of whether the cat in the box was alive or dead, that would mean the cat hadn't been in the box in the first place—but I preferred that the most.

“Whaddya mean you prefer that? Doesn't it make you angry? If the person you were talkin' to was a body double, that just means Hanekawa Tsubasa was makin' a fool out of you! Isn't that why you tried testin' her?”

“That was something I wanted to let Hanekawa know. No matter how much I'd regret it afterwards.”

“Being happy even if you met a copycat... That's kinda pitiful of you. Koyomi-kun, aren't you the romantic one here?”

“I won't deny it, but I'm not happy that I met a copycat. What I'm happy about is that Hanekawa even sent me a copycat... That she sent me an empty box.”

Really, truly, and honestly, I was happy from the bottom of my heart—whether it was peace or saving people or her beliefs or the world, whatever she valued the most, whatever she strove to protect.

Because the person I was now had become just an inconsequential guy to the person that Hanekawa was now. And that made me the happiest of all.