



Musubimonogatari

Zenka Mermaid

001

Suou Zenka became a mermaid in her first year of high school, or so I've heard. According to her, she "wasn't a mermaid, but a half-fish person"—but for now, let's just say she was a mermaid. For someone like her who gave off such a dignified atmosphere, it certainly felt more appropriate to call her as such over something that sounded like it could come from the Cthulhu Mythos.

Apparently, a truck had made a sharp turn onto a pedestrian-only street in order to avoid a child who hadn't waited for the signal to cross, and she was met with the misfortune of being hit by that truck and falling into an irrigation canal on the verge of death. She only managed to escape death by eating the miraculous "mermaid flesh".

Between her, who had become immortal by eating, and me, who had become immortal by being eaten, we made for a pretty good contrast. But in terms of the inconvenient lives we would lead afterwards, we were exactly the same.

We would never gain back any compensation for that.

There were times where what you gain is what you lose, and there were times where you lose what you gain, but there would never be a time where you can gain back what you lose.

And that was even more true when it came to life and immortality.

Despite having been a promising swimming athlete, she was no longer able to swim after that happened—and it wasn't because of any injuries lingering after the accident. After all, the "mermaid flesh" allowed her to completely recover from any injuries without leaving a single scar.

And it wasn't due to any psychological trauma from falling into the irrigation canal.

What was more traumatic was—after the accident.

Whether you called it a punishment for consuming the miraculous "mermaid flesh" or just an extreme case of food poisoning—after recovery, whenever she entered the water, her body would transform into that of a mermaid. And you may think that a "mermaid transformation" sounds rather romantic, but I urge you to listen until the end.

In short, it was like the *retrogression* of evolution.

Just spilling some juice on her skin would turn it into scales, just washing her hands would turn them into cod, and taking a bath would mean the loss of her legs—and she couldn't even go out on rainy days, for fear of being unable to breathe and suffocating on the side of the road.

Dying was better than this.

Apparently, she'd thought as such a countless number of times—just as I had.

But after coming to terms with it (which I'd heard had taken quite some time), and then ten years after that, it seems that her approach to her constitution had turned to, "This was better than dying."

"'It would've been better if the truck had run over the child instead', and such thoughts, I've finally managed to leave behind—and eventually, I'd like to become someone who's able to think, 'I'm happy I'm alive.'"

...In the first place, you may think that it took quite some time to get a 26-year-old woman like her to open up about a topic so private and sensitive, but in actuality, she had told me all of the above on our very first meeting.

Of course, while it wasn't simply as a return gift, I told her about the spring break between my second and third years of high school, about how I'd had my blood sucked by as well as sucked the blood of a vampire, about how I had become—or had been reduced into being—a vampire.

The place that I, 23-year-old Araragi Koyomi, had come to work at was that open of a workplace. And its name was the Naoetsu Police Department, Rumors Squad.

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"Araragi-kun, why'd you decide to become a police officer?"

As a high schooler, due to having ridden around everywhere on my bicycle, I had believed that my area of activities had been rather expansive, and I had been under the impression that there were no unknown places or secret roads that I wasn't aware of in the compact little town I lived in. But coming home after four years made me realize that this was just an arrogant misunderstanding of mine.

For example, I hadn't known that the high school that I had attended back then, Naoetsu High, had had such a large river flowing right in front of it.

A large river, or perhaps a daring river.

The river had the kind of intensity that you could go rafting in—even if you weren't someone with a transformative condition like Suou-san, I doubt you would want to casually dip your feet in a current like this.

"Oops. Please excuse me. Assistant Inspector Araragi, for what reason did you decide to become a police officer?" said Suou-san, correcting herself in a playful manner.

Assistant Inspector Araragi.

I felt like I was unable to respond to that title—which I was sure I would never get used to—and like I was unable to respond to that uncomfortable question.

Thinking about how many times I would be asked that question again and again—goodness gracious, I was already feeling tired even though it was only the first time.

Although it was a little weird. Despite having gone into minute detail about the vampire that lived in my shadow, I hadn't said anything about why I chose to work at this job.

"Because my parents were police officers—I suppose. Both of them were."

"I see, I see. Does that mean that you felt like you wouldn't be able to become more than your parents if you didn't become a police officer? Or does it mean that you got to this position using the connections of your parents?"

She was using a teasing tone of voice, and in fact she probably was just straight up teasing me. But as I was the subject of the topic, I couldn't help but think about what she was asking.

I didn't think I had any of the admirable feelings of the former, but I didn't think I had any of the selfish feelings of the latter, either.

It wasn't like I did this out of some strong ambition, but it wasn't like this was calculated, either... That was just the kind of person I was.

"A long time ago, I met this con man that really pissed me off. I was pretty badly deceived by him, actually. So my dream is to arrest him. It's my heart's desire. So that's why I'm a police officer."

After some hesitation, I finally responded with that.

This, at least, wasn't a lie.

Although you could say it was only just "not a lie".

"Hmm. A con man, huh? So you want to go after white-collar crime—you sound like such a career man. Then, since you were assigned to something like the Rumors Squad, does it feel like it's not really meeting your expectations, Araragi-kun? Well, it's just four more months of enduring this, so let's do our best!"

"I've never thought poorly of this squad. Although I do admit that it was unexpected. That a public institution had a squad like this."

"Right, well, this is just a test run, after all. It's just one of Gaen-san's many plans—whether or not it's up to Assistant Inspector Araragi's expectations."

"Like I said, I don't think that."

"I'm counting on you for a lot, though. Seriously, even if you're just a career man here for training, we've finally gotten a male coworker in this squad."

It was hard to tell how serious she actually was. But Suou-san, who didn't mix well with water, was at least twice the distance from the river as I was, showing that she didn't want to be hit by a single drop of the water spray. Despite her usual cool demeanor, it was clear she was taking considerable precaution when it came to riverbanks.

At the very least, for this matter in particular, it wasn't a mistake to rely on a newcomer like me for help... The Rumors Squad chief sure had a nasty personality for dispatching someone who wasn't good with water to the waterfront.

Though they were a trusted friend of Gaen-san.

"I guess it's more likely for girls to be into romantic stuff like the occult and the spiritual, since the squad ended up being a bunch of girls. Being biased isn't a good thing, you know. So don't hold back, Araragi-kun, and enjoy this harem situation to your heart's content."

"Please. I've left all that behind in my high school days."

"Um. What kind of life did you lead in high school?"

She snickered, and then continued.

"I don't know Gaen-san personally, but I do owe her a lot. So I'd like to produce results that can meet up to that—and your life may have been smooth sailing up until now, Assistant Inspector Araragi, and you may not want to do so, but while you're with us, try to cooperate, okay? Think of it as a form of community service."

Community service, huh. Though I wasn't the type to have any sort of affection for my community.

Besides, I couldn't call my life smooth sailing.

Not in the slightest.

For an uncomfortable-sounding title like Assistant Inspector, any idiot could pass the civil service exam and start as one. For that much, you didn't even need connections from your parents.

And it wasn't like I'd been living apart from oddity phenomena for the past four years—even if I was apart from my hometown, my shadow stayed perfectly attached to me, and that shadow was one that pulled an oddity along with it.

Something that I had always done had simply become a job. And it wasn't even a hobby that had turned into a job, but my lifestyle.

The Naoetsu Police Department, Rumors Squad?

That was just Gaen-san setting up something like this in the town I lived in.

Since that woman knew everything, I couldn't help but suspect that she decided to use the Naoetsu Police Department as a model, already having foreseen that I would become a police officer in the future.

Okay.

So it was like having your oddities locally sourced.

As a 23-year-old adult, I'll do my best and work myself to the bone.

If anything, working myself to the bone was one of my strong points. In the literal sense.

"Anyway, Suou-san. What kind of rumor was it again? What sort of circumstances does this river have? I ended up being paired with you without getting all the details... and the chief just told me to ask you."

"You can be more casual with me, you know? I'm not that much older than you, plus your rank is higher. You're an assistant inspector, and I'm an officer."

"I'm not very good with being casual. I had a good upbringing."

"Don't make me laugh."

She shrugged.

"Well, this river was a place you could swim in—and in the summer, families would have barbecues, and kids would use it as some kind of playground, and so on," Suou-san continued. "But I guess since this is your hometown, there's no need to explain that much, right?"

"No, I'd like you to explain that much as well."

In the first place, I hadn't even known that this river existed until recently.

Unfortunately, as I had had a good upbringing, I spent my childhood without a family to take me to barbecues or friends to play with.

I had wondered where everyone in my class would go off to after leaving me behind, but I see now! They would go to places like this.

Although it's not something I could do anything about, knowing that as an adult.

"There weren't any major problems that occurred until now, but this summer, there were a series of accidents—five children that drowned here."

"....."

"At least, five that we know of. There could be more. Nobody has died yet, from what we know."

But—being biased wasn't a good thing.

Hearing those words, I turned to look at the river again—the boisterously flowing river wasn't necessarily on the level of rapids, but I probably couldn't guarantee absolute safety in it.

While Suou-san had called it "some kind of playground", looking at it now, it looked absolutely too dangerous for kids to play in.

I wonder.

Could this just be the “viewpoint of an adult”?

Had I just become a boring adult, being overbearing and restricting kids from their fun?

“Whether that’s being overbearing or not, we’ve been starting to hear things along those lines—like, people asking if we should bar entry from the riverbank or have schools warn children not to come close.”

“Like how playground equipment has been gradually disappearing from parks?”

“I’m not completely against that happening, though. It’s a risk to keep equipment that’s slowly deteriorating, and wanting to keep it is just for the nostalgia of older people.”

It was an opinion that was more mature than I’d expect from a 26-year-old.

It could be due to the mermaid flesh she ate—10 years in her life could very well be the same as 800 years normally.

“Although it’s more that older people rarely change their opinions. It’s like how cars made when traffic laws were more lenient didn’t have any seatbelts. And you could still go on highways.”

I didn’t really get that comparison.

She was probably enjoying the generation gap with how her metaphors didn’t make sense to her kouhai.

“Well, regardless of general opinion. In the case of this river, if someone had died, there would absolutely have been restrictions imposed on it—so it’s a good thing that the season ended before that could happen.”

“Did they just set aside the problem for now?”

“I suppose it would be more like deferring it. Even though no deaths have occurred, five is still a considerable number. It weighs pretty heavily on me. And one is still in critical condition, not having regained consciousness yet—and even among the other four, we’ve had broken bones and the like, so the situation is tense.”

Although they could recover if they ate my flesh—she said, without missing a beat.

If that was the case, then even the unconscious child would make a complete recovery if I had them drink my blood—but that couldn’t happen.

I couldn’t allow it to happen.

Both Suou-san and I knew very well what kind of tragedy would be born from such a rash action.

Neither of us wanted to make anyone else go through these terrible conditions that were worse than dying.

“Anyway, it’s the town hall’s job to decide whether or not to put a fence around the riverbank, not ours—our job is to manage the rumors, after all.”

To manage the rumors.

The phrase didn’t exactly roll off the tongue, but that was indeed the role of the Rumors Squad.

And it was indeed my job.

Urban legends. Idle rumors. Street gossip.

And—rumors.

“Out of the five children that drowned, we have testimony from three of them. According to them, they didn’t just drown—their ankles were grabbed by some ‘invisible hand’ and pulled to the bottom of the water.”

“.....”

Three out of five.

Excluding the child that was still unconscious, it was really three out of four.

Just going by the numbers made the credibility of this testimony extremely high.

In other words, an extremely credible rumor.

“...I wonder if there’s a kappa in this river.”

“Who knows? Maybe it’s a mermaid,” said Suou-san in response to my attempt at poking fun at the situation.

Her expression was stony, making me wonder if it was even a joke.

The atmosphere felt rather hard-boiled.

“At the very least, it doesn’t seem like any of the children had their shirikodama removed. But there’s no mistake that the number of drowning accidents has suddenly increased—making this the perfect breeding grounds for a ghost story.”

So we need to smash it up before that happens—said Suou-san disinterestedly, with a dry voice that belied her violent statement.

The words of a mermaid who had to stay dry to survive.

“...Suou-san. Why did you decide to become a police officer?” I asked. Not simply to make conversation or as revenge for earlier, but because I had suddenly become curious.

Like me, she suffered from the aftereffects of an oddity story, with many physical restrictions applied to her, but that didn’t mean she had to become a police officer—and she could very well have gone on avoiding waterfronts if she hadn’t become one.

“Araragi-kun, do you like pro baseball? I really like it, you see.”

“Eh?”

“I like it so much I even watch minor league games.”

“You like it that much...”

As I responded as such, and as I marveled at this unexpected hobby of hers, I thought she was just cleverly trying to change the topic, but I was wrong.

Suou-san continued.

“But it really hurts to watch player drafts. Even though there are these players that are so good, almost monsters, at baseball, they don’t even get to choose the team they play for—so I always think about what it means to be able to choose your occupation.”

Hmm.

Strictly speaking, some players did have the right to veto, but I knew that what she was getting at probably wasn’t as simple as that—even I, when I became a police officer, had tried to explore other avenues at one point, before having to face reality in the end.

Reality. The grim reality.

It created a wall tougher than having to face oddities.

“People will only become what they’re able to become. Whether that’s police officers, or mermaids.”

Or vampires, said Suou-san, looking at my shadow.

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Strictly speaking, I was someone who wasn’t even able to become a vampire.

In normal mode, I wasn’t immortal in the way Suou-san was. I was neither human nor oddity, just something half-baked.

But if I told her that, I’m sure she’d respond with something self-deprecating like, “Well, I’m just a half-baked half-fish person,” so I kept my mouth shut.

It wasn't like anything would come from the two of us sitting around half-baked and staring at the river forever.

Because it was the off-season, it was only me and Suou-san at the riverbank, but it was better to finish our investigation before anybody noticed. And as Suou-san couldn't enter the water, it was up to me to carry out the survey of the site.

Using the shadow of a tree as cover, I changed into a swimsuit.

To think that my first job as a police officer would be to go swimming—not to mention that flowing water was supposed to be bad for vampires, although it was something I could endure.

The whole job was about endurance.

"Wow. You really work out, don't you, Araragi-kun. No wonder you're so eager to strip."

"I don't work out. It's just my constitution."

And I wasn't eager to do anything.

"Mhm. Can I take a picture?"

"Of course not," I said as I took a step into the river. If a pro of it being the off-season was that there was nobody around, then a con would be how freezing cold the water was, which I came to be keenly aware of.

It was basically an ablution.

It would be a huge letdown to hear that a vampire who was brought in as an assistant inspector for training died of a heart attack—and even though it would be a great pleasure to besmirch Gaen-san's name, I didn't exactly want to die to accomplish that.

As I had learned in my swimming lessons in the past, I splashed handfuls of water onto my body as I stepped deeper into the water.

Uh-oh, it was really deep.

For someone like myself who wasn't exactly a giant (I hadn't grown any taller in college), this was quite a cruel task.

As such, I decided to give up early on and put on my goggles, allowing myself to sink beneath the water without putting up much resistance. Somehow, it felt like I was making up for all that time I didn't spend playing when I was a kid.

By myself.

"Are you all right, Araragi-kun? If you absolutely need it, should I come help?"

...Although, it seemed that, from Suou-san's point of view, I looked like some guy who was nearly drowning.

I gave her a thumbs-up (though it probably seemed more like my arms were flailing up) in order to make it seem like I was having absolutely no problem. Disregarding the fact that my swimming had the elegance of a rock, I managed to make it to the center line of the river and daringly dive to the bottom without any problems.

Because I had gotten used to how cold the water was, and because I could see fairly well due to the relative clearness of the water, I could even say I felt some entertainment value in having this spot as somewhere to hide, even if the flow of the water wasn't necessarily calm.

It was the random thrills that you could only get from natural phenomena.

Maybe it was like one of those endless pools. Or was that backwards? Was it endless pools that were based on rivers?

Naturally, because I could be thrown off by the strength of the water if I let my guard down, and because I could slip on the mossy rocks at any minute, there was a world of difference between this and an endless pool...

But even as an amateur, I felt that having as much as five drowning accidents occur in this river felt like it was a little too much. If you told me that there was some other factor, it would be hard to deny—but, unlike my high school days, I couldn't simply go with an amateur opinion.

Since I was no longer an amateur.

Unlike Oshino or Ononoki-chan, I was now a professional police officer and had to lay down a proper judgment—as a member of the Rumors Squad, even if it was only for a four-month training period.

...Ononoki-chan, huh?

Thinking about that girl made me nostalgic.

And from there, I figured out one thing I wanted to confirm.

"Suou-san. You said they were children, but around what age were they specifically? If they were elementary school kids, I feel like it would have been hard for their feet to touch the ground, even in the shallow parts..."

"The oldest was 15 years old, and the youngest was 7. Without being biased, I can say it does feel like the range is pretty wide. Incidentally, I believe the oldest one was taller than you, Araragi-kun. He said his feet touched the ground at the very deepest part."

"Is that so?"

Then I couldn't say anything about that.

It wasn't something I could use.

I went to a point where my feet could touch the ground and said, “If we turn that around, it means that no one over sixteen was a victim,” putting the obvious into words.

It was hard to judge if I should interpret it as adults being less likely to drown when playing in the water, or if I should interpret it as the trend of younger people being more likely to encounter oddities.

It turned out that meeting a vampire when I was almost a high school third-year was on the rare side of things—even Suou-san was only 15 or so when she ate the “mermaid flesh”.

The results of the inspection turned out to be “we couldn’t say either way”, but really, the only one who would be satisfied with such neutralism would be Oshino Meme.

In this case, a neutral conclusion was no different from substantiating the rumor.

Our job was to “smash it up” before the rumor became an oddity story, so going “we couldn’t say either way” basically meant we weren’t doing our job.

That would just be stealing my salary. Even though I was a police officer.

“I suppose we don’t have a choice. I’m going to call Shinobu,” I said as I pulled myself out of the water.

“Eh? Already? Aren’t you being a little hasty?” asked Suou-san, astonished. “I thought you’d try a little harder on your own,” she said as she passed me a towel (extending her arm as far as possible so she herself wouldn’t get wet).

Did I disappoint her? Although I had no intention of trying to show off.

“Trying to do everything on my own by any means possible and making a mess out of things was what I did in my teens, after all. I’ve learned a little since then.”

“I see. But hold off on calling that vampire for a bit. Don’t bring her out when I’m here. I don’t want to be eaten.”

Ah, that’s right.

I’d been very firmly warned about that by the chief.

Because Suou-san was a mermaid, that in other words meant that her body was “mermaid flesh” in itself—and even before all that miraculousness about how it could completely cure an unconscious patient, that flesh was a delicacy.

Like me, Shinobu could no longer be called a vampire, but even if she didn’t drink blood, her nature as a consumer of oddities still remained—and while that nature made her an excellent way of getting an “expert’s opinion” on whether or not there were any oddities in this river, having such delicious meat right next to her would surely throw off that judgment.

For the chief and Suou-san, who hadn't spent over five years together with her, it was natural to be wary that Shinobu would indiscriminately make a beeline for the "mermaid flesh" that was my senpai.

That wasn't something you could compromise on.

Compared to the fundamentally harmless image of the mermaid, both Shinobu and I were such beings that it was almost bizarre that we were still allowed to live.

"Well, I'm gonna dash off back to the office ahead of you, then. If you figure something out, just text me, okay?"

"Is texting okay? What about keeping things confidential?"

"It's our role to get rid of things that should be kept confidential, isn't it? If you want, feel free to just livestream the whole thing. You've managed to become so muscular, Araragi-kun, so it would be a waste if you didn't show it off."

I couldn't care less about my muscles, but in any case, Suou-san soon departed from the riverbank—just to make sure, I gave her about five minutes to get some distance before crouching and knocking on my shadow.

As one would expect, a vampire who led a certain lifestyle for almost six centuries wouldn't be able to so easily change it in just a few years. But even though Shinobu remained nocturnal to this day, she would still respond when called on, as long as she wasn't in a bad mood.

It seemed that on this day, she was actually in an extremely good mood, as it only took one knock before that blonde young girl came out of my shadow with a "nyuu~" sound. And as I, the master, was clad in beachwear (or since I wore it to swim in a river, should I call it riverwear?), Shinobu was also wearing a swimsuit.

It was a one-piece bathing suit that almost made it seem like she just came to play in the river.

"Ka ka!" laughed Shinobu, baring her fangs. "'Mermaid flesh', is it? Certainly, not even I have had the pleasure of eating such a thing. I wonder what flavor it could possibly have?"

"Give me a break. Please don't eat my colleague."

"I shan't, I shan't. I have no intention of laying waste to my master's place of work—not when it directly concerns my own lifestyle. In turn, please work as hard as you can to support me."

"I didn't think I was working to support you, though..."

That wasn't the case, was it?

Or rather, perhaps that was exactly the case.

Me being alive meant that Shinobu stayed alive as well, and it was because Shinobu was alive that I was able to keep on living—"If you want to die tomorrow, I'm ready for my life to end tomorrow."

That immature line that I had spouted off as a high schooler still remained valid even now.

That was Araragi Koyomi's top-priority stipulation.

"Nevertheless, I'm going to need you to work a little, too. What do you think, Shinobu? I'd be fine with kappa or mermaids, or even that dear old omoshi-kani, if you'd like."

"Dear old, you say? Well, I suppose it has been a while since we have been in this town in itself—it seems that that Mayoi girl has been doing a good job of keeping things suppressed. I have to say, it feels exceedingly stable from a spiritual standpoint, to the point of irritating me. Or at least making me hungry."

"Is that so? Hmm... Then, does that mean the five drowning accidents that occurred here were really just accidents?"

"Nay. That is not the case," said Shinobu, shaking her head.

It was a motion that was extremely theatrical for no reason.

Or was there a reason?

"From my diagnosis, out of the five cases, four of them were not accidents, but incidents. And if we leave it alone, it is sure to create even more victims."

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As it was only for four months, I had decided to live at my parents' house during the training period.

For the first time in a while, I was back in this house.

However, the Araragi household that I had spent my teenage years in presently housed only a single individual: the eldest daughter, Araragi Karen.

It was unlikely that they had been waiting for the exact moment when all three of their kids had graduated. But when the second daughter, Tsukihi, entered college, my parents, who were at the head of the prefectural police, were called in to work for the national government.

Since the two of them were still together, it wasn't necessarily the same as one of them being away from their family for work. But anyway, after that, I had left the house in the spring of my second year in college, leaving my two sisters there. But suddenly, a month later, Tsukihi quickly dropped out of college in order to re-apply to a college overseas.

Seriously?

Well, she was always the kind of sister that felt like she couldn't be confined to the boundaries of Japan, so in a sense it was the perfect route for her. But as a result, it left Karen in the sorry state of being in the house all by herself, which really made me feel rather sorry for her.

Although, that made it sound like I should be visiting my home more often.

As such, I decided to treat Karen more nicely, at least for the next four months.

However, those warm feelings were brought to a halt as soon as I went through the entrance to my dear old home—for a house that was way too large for only one person to live in, Karen sure had made a huge mess.

It took three days to clean it up.

"It's not my fa-ault, y'kno-ow. Unlike you, nii-chan, I've been working since last year!"

As her brother, I decided to hear out the excuse that she fired off.

In the first place, as I had left the house first, I had no right to complain, and Karen was technically my senpai in terms of employment—she had started working as soon as she graduated high school.

At the Naoetsu Police Department as well.

I never thought that she'd take that intense martial arts training and use it to make arrests... But Araragi Karen, former member of the Tsuganoki 2nd Middle School Fire Sisters in charge of combat, was now employed as a police officer in charge of public safety.

It really was the right person for the right job, but I never that I'd be beaten to the punch by my own sister.

Whether or not we were "chips off the old block", the eldest son and daughter following in the footsteps of their parents to become police officers made Tsukihi's freewheeling stand out even more. On the other hand, perhaps she had finally acquired a sense of independence at the age of twenty after having been so easily influenced by her brother and sister for so long.

"Eat up!"

"Thanks for the meal."

Though her ability to keep things neat and tidy was utterly hopeless, at the very least, Karen had succeeded in acquiring some cooking skills when she was on her own.

That made it even harder to keep my head up.

It was pretty natural after being away for four years, but it really did feel like I was just a guest at my own home.

“So, how was it, nii-chan? Assistant Inspector Nii-chan.”

“Don’t call me that. And make fun of me. I’m a career man, now.”

“But weirdly enough, you don’t really have a good image. Is it because of TV dramas?”

To be honest, I had been thinking the same.

After studying so desperately, and twice as hard during college entrance exams, and then finally passing the public service exam, only to end up with a bad image...

I’d been told by my college classmates that I just seemed like a bundle of lust for power and career advancement.

As long as I wasn’t with someone I could feel at ease with, I probably shouldn’t describe myself as a career man.

I was already feeling anxious about being teased by the on-site officers after my induction... Why did I have to feel like this even after I’d become a working adult? I was glad that nothing like that happened at the Rumors Squad, although I did still get the elite treatment, in some manner of speaking.

The people of the Rumors Squad had all come into contact with oddities in some form or another and were housing oddities in their bodies, but it seemed that I was the only one who had actually spoken to an oddity and come to a mutual understanding.

Elite treatment, huh?

For someone who was basically at the bottom of the barrel in high school, I couldn’t exactly say I felt happy to say those words.

“Hahaha! That’s hilarious! So it’s like that? When guys who are all about anti-authority are suddenly thrown into positions of authority?” said my sister, coming up with a cheeky example even as she took in twice the calories that I did. Considering she was basically twice my size (though that was exaggerating, she was only about twenty centimeters taller than me), her high metabolism, and her activities as a popular public safety officer, I was sure the calories she needed was an order of magnitude higher than what I needed (and that was surely not an exaggeration).

On-site officers, huh?

Hmm.

The kind of work I had wanted to do was something along those lines... But after seeing my sister’s sociability firsthand, I felt like I was personally experiencing Suou-san’s words of “people will only become what they’re able to become”.

I couldn’t become my sister, and my sister couldn’t become me.

“Well, people like you who work impulsively and emotionally aren’t really suited to working on-site, y’know? What’d suit you better would be like, leaning back and crossing your legs and being self-important in front of a mahogany desk.”

“I don’t think anything could make me more mad than hearing that from my own sister. If I’m so impulsive and emotional, I guess you’re just asking for me to beat you up!”

“Ooh! Do you want to fight it out, then? I even have a toothbrush ready to go if we need one!”

“Stop it! That was a rash decision made out of my youthful passions!”

And I made the small claim that I had actually been on-site today.

It was an elite claim to make.

“At least, it seems like the Rumors Squad is going to actually make use of me, instead of just having me sit around and do nothing. I actually was brought on-site, instead of just being treated like a bad rash.”

“Oho? Well, that entire squad is basically like a bad rash, y’know. In that no one wants to touch it. Since it’s sponsored by the higher-ups, there’s just a whole buncha rumors flying around the whole precinct.”

And so it was the Rumors Squad.

That’s exactly what Gaen-san wanted.

“If you came to the Public Safety Squad, then I would’ve spent all my time doting on you as your senpai, though.”

“If I had to go through something so painful, I’d probably just look for another job,” I said with a shrug of my shoulders.

I didn’t want her to take revenge against my youthful passions in such a way... Although, on one hand, I honestly did think that it might have been better if it went the way she’d described. But I’d keep that a secret. I had had the selfish idea of working, not through the connections of my powerful parents but through those of my skillful sister, and getting through my training period easily and safely, even if I did have to deal with Karen.

But it was good that that didn’t happen, since it was truly a very selfish desire.

“By the way, Karen-chan. You said there were a whole buncha rumors, but what exactly do you know about the Rumors Squad?” I asked, keenly aware that I was still adding “chan” to her name despite her being over 180 centimeters and over 20 years old.

Even though I tried to stop, I never could in the end.

“Mm. Going to investigate any disturbing rumors that are appearing in the area, and stuff like that is what I’ve heard. Or taking care of things before an incident occurs...”

Since there have been cases where a disaster happened and people regret ignoring the warning signs. So in order to protect against that, the Rumors Squad was established... So instead of resolving incidents, it's about preempting them. But there are a lot of coworkers who think it's the opposite. That the Rumors Squad is there to prove that rumors are just rumors, and that incidents aren't going to happen."

"I see."

I expected that rumors of oddities or youkai wouldn't be circulating around the squad, but it was interesting to hear that it wasn't some kind of secret agency, and that the rumors were pretty close to the truth.

They were almost asymptotic.

Maybe the experiment also involved gradually being more transparent about things?

Gaen-san had said something along those lines back when I was approaching my training period—and while at the time I had wondered how honest she was being, I can see now that, for this particular case, she really was being honest.

"It's about time for the specialists who have hidden themselves from the public eye to switch over to forming an official organization, Koyomin—just like how the onmyouji were in the past. So I suppose in a sense, we'd just be going back to the starting point."

Like Suou-san had mentioned, this wasn't something that had just started now, but something she had planned far in advance—long before she even met me.

And it was very much like her to come up with this approach to forming the organization into something like the National Police Agency—instead of trying to persuade higher-ups, she would become "friends" with those involved with oddities and send them into the organization lower in the hierarchy.

When the people that were sent in gained a good reputation, the plan would begin in full force—so the fact that I had been employed at this time was certainly not a coincidence.

Pinning down the regional jurisdictions instead of the central headquarters was a lot like the clever strategy in Othello of taking the corners first.

It's like I was dancing in the palm of her hand, no matter how far I went.

Well, if the implication was that Gaen-san had treated me well during my third year in high school as an investment towards this very moment, then I suppose I, like Suou-san, owed that much to her.

At the very least, I was going to serve out these next four months splendidly.

I'd do the best that I could.

Of course, I also felt that I wanted to show off my cool side to make up for all the pitiful sides I showed when I was in high school.

“And? Nii-chan, what did you mean by on-site? In the first place, what kind of work does the Rumors Squad actually do?”

“That’s classified for the sake of the investigation—or I guess it’s not.”

If there was an element of danger, then I would definitely protect what was classified, even if the person I was speaking to was a police officer or my sister. But right now, the matter I was in charge of was proving that there was no danger.

And as a member of a squad trying to be transparent, I figured there wouldn’t be a problem to talk about it.

But you could also say that this was also an important form of police questioning—it wasn’t a good thing to bring your workplace into your home, but I figured Karen, who, unlike me, loved to go outdoors as a teen, would have played at that river before.

So I was going to ask her what it was like then.

“Karen-chan. Did you know that there was a huge river near Naoetsu High?”

“I don’t know everything. I just know what I know.”

“That’s really nostalgic!”

It was a line I’d heard a lot back in the day.

Speaking of which, Karen-chan had been pretty close with Hanekawa, hadn’t she?

“Although I haven’t heard from her recently. But that’s understandable. Are you still in contact with her, nii-chan?”

“Mm, ah, well, sometimes. Recently... Well, I guess it’s understandable...”

If we started talking about Hanekawa now, I was sure we’d never stop, so despite already being immersed in the nostalgia, I forcefully turned the conversation back by asking, “So, did you know, or did you not know?”

“I knew about it, yeah. Or rather, the other day I went overnight fishing with everyone from the squad there.”

“.....”

Forget loving the outdoors as a teen. She loved the outdoors even now.

She sure is active.

Even though she didn’t walk around outside with it on anymore, she still wore a tracksuit inside the house.

And she was still as sociable as she was as a student—it almost made me envy her.

And you could fish at that river? Huh.

Well, it's true that when I dove underwater earlier today, I saw some pretty big fish in there.

"It seems that there's been some kind of serial drowning accidents there. Children have been drowning there one after another, and a weird rumor is going around. So my main job is looking into that."

"Hmm. Drowning accidents? That's something I didn't know about. And I camped out there without knowing about it. Should I not have done that?"

"No, I don't think there's anything wrong with that."

If you thought it was imprudent to go fishing at a place where kids had drowned, then pretty soon you'd start questioning your every move. It was true that there was some cause for concern as long as someone was still in critical condition, but since they were still alive, there was no need to take things that gravely.

"Anyway, Karen-chan. Did you notice anything strange when you were there?"

"Anything strange?"

"Well... Any points where it would've been easier to drown, or places where it would've been easier to slip... Or if someone suddenly got weaker while you were camping."

Since the matter itself was rather vague, the questions concerning it also became ambiguous—for someone with a straightforward personality like Karen, it seemed it didn't sit well with her, and she frowned and crossed her arms.

"I don't think there was anything like that. We had lots of fun."

"Is that so? ...One more thing, just for reference. Were all the people that went camping your coworkers? Did anyone bring their family along? That is—anyone with kids?"

"Huh? Nah. Everyone was an adult."

All right.

Well, as far as I understood, the victims were indeed limited to just kids.

I thought of what Shinobu had said.

"Out of the five cases, four of them were not accidents, but incidents"—despite being so terribly specific at first, she would not say anything more after that. Trying to tempt her with her favorite donuts didn't help, either.

It seemed Shinobu had her own standards.

Standards for assisting me, not helping other people.

Even though the Rumors Squad had taken me on due to my mutual understanding with an oddity, at this rate, it felt like I wouldn't be able to live up to that.

Speaking of which, was it three out of five people that had testified that they'd been pulled into the water by an "invisible hand"? Excluding the one that was still unconscious, it was three out of four—turning that around, it meant that one out of those four hadn't given any such testimony.

If I took Shinobu's words at face value that four out of those five cases were not accidents but incidents, then that implied one out of those five was not an incident but an accident—was that case the one kid who didn't see the "invisible hand"?

If that was true, then I was more curious about what that kid's testimony was.

If they had said that they had or hadn't seen an "invisible hand" at the time, they might have just been written off as saying something weird, but, well, that was just how oddity stories went.

I decided to look into it properly, without dismissing it as "something that kids just said".

I'd already sent a report in, but I decided to let Suou-san know what I planned on doing next after I finished eating.

It may not be putting old wine in new bottles, but I decided to follow in the footsteps of an old specialist and put in some legwork—because there was something you just couldn't get from gossip and hearsay. Of course, it was also in my personality to follow through and look into even the smallest things, like who a "friend of a friend" was...

"What, nii-chan, don't go to work now! I know your dream is to be on-site all the time, but when you're in training, you're totally free to just sit around and relax."

"Well, it's been a long time since I've been back here, so I figured I'd brush up on the lay of the land."

"Even though you had no idea about that river? Why don't you go meet up with some old friends instead? Hanekawa-san and Tsukihi-chan are both overseas, but there have to be some other people you wanna meet, right?"

I felt like Hanekawa being overseas and Tsukihi being overseas should have been treated with completely different nuances, but... For that matter, there were a lot of people that were around me that ended up going overseas, huh? I guess my high school days were full of people with talent that went undervalued in Japan.

Regardless, if I were to take this as a chance to reconnect with old friends... Well, it wasn't like I didn't have any friends, but... Even though it's true now, I didn't really have a good social network back then, did I?

Because having friends lowers my intensity as a human.

Was what I had thought.

Maybe I was just being ungrateful, but there were people I didn't want to meet, and people that were just unpleasant to meet. There were plenty of them.

As I thought that, it felt like my teenage years had not been very good.

Though I had already been aware of that, this just served to confirm it again.

And I had a persecution complex that if I met up with people, they'd just despise me as some career-oriented rascal—I couldn't get into the mindset of returning home loaded with honors.

Why did I have to feel like I was some criminal in hiding?

"I guess you're right. Maybe I'll go see how Kanbaru is, at least. What's she up to these days? I know she got into a college for athletics... If everything went well, she should be a fourth-year by now? She didn't quit like Tsukihi did, right?"

"As for her, she's aiming to be a doctor," was the response I got back from Karen.

Speaking of which, she was closer to Kanbaru than she was to Hanekawa, wasn't she?

Since they were both sports-minded... That's right, in the first place, it was me who introduced them.

That happened, too, huh?

It makes me feel all nostalgic.

"Hoh, a doctor? In that case, if she's aiming to go to graduate school for a doctorate, then she'd probably be studying for entrance exams again right now. Well, from what I can remember, she had a pretty good head on her shoulders..."

"Ah. That ain't it, nii-chan," said Karen in an accent for some reason, correcting my thoughts. "Not that kind of doctor, but an actual doctor."

"What kind of doctor?"

"Like, a physician."

"A physician?"

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Even if I wanted to make amends for neglecting my friends, I'd been thinking that I'd have all of four months to do so, so there was no need to worry (although that kind of thinking was what promoted my feelings of ingratitude). However, as fate would have it, on the very next day, I ended up in an unexpected reunion with my kouhai from high school named Kanbaru Suruga.

On the morning of the next day, I went around with Suou-san to visit all of the children that had drowned to hear what they had to say—but unfortunately, we didn't get any results.

It ended up just being a reconfirmation of what we already knew. The ones that supposedly saw the “invisible hand” claimed to have seen it, and the one that supposedly didn't see it claimed that he absolutely did not see it.

Well, we technically got results in that we were able to hear their accounts firsthand (it wasn't easy to get kids to talk to you, but Suou-san was great in that respect). Either way, since we had visited four out of the five kids that had drowned, we decided we might as well visit the remaining one.

The one that was still unconscious and unable to speak.

“When you see the face of the person involved, your motivation changes, right?” said Suou-san when she made the suggestion, and there were no complaints on my end.

And so, we had come to the hospital with flowers in arms to visit the final child (although technically, in terms of when they drowned they were the “first child”) when we were met with an unexpected greeting.

“Oh! By the sound of those footsteps, it must be Araragi-senpai, isn't it?” a cheerful voice called out from the reception desk.

Since we were in a hospital, she naturally didn't come at me at Mach speed the same way she did in high school, but when I turned around, I was unmistakably face-to-face with my kouhai Kanbaru.

She had grown out her hair again, with it falling long and straight down to her lower back.

And she had opted to go for a nurse look.

Huh? According to my sources, wasn't Kanbaru-kun aiming to become a physician?

Was this cosplay?

“I'm just working part-time! It's a part-time job. And I'm just helping out in the office, too—I'm not even a nurse. It's just policy to dress like this, since if I don't, I might get confused as not being part of the staff.”

It was true that she wasn't even wearing a nurse cap, and when I looked closer, I realized she just had on a blouse and cardigan... I thought that in itself could cause some confusion, but then again, that could be the point of the rule.

Like how I was told to keep wearing a suit and tie during my training period.

“But still... a part-time job?”

“Yeah. I gotta earn money for tuition. After I turned twenty, my grandparents decided to stop supporting me financially.”

I’m even paying rent now, said Kanbaru, sticking her chest out in pride.

That boastful way in which she didn’t even treat her senpai like they were her senpai was the same as ever, but to be honest, that was indeed something to be proud about—compared to me, who had been dependent on his parents all the way through his college graduation.

Anyway, while her lively demeanor and peppy attitude (as well as her boastful attitude) was the same as when she was in high school, the 22-year-old Kanbaru Suruga had naturally grown up since then—although it was possible that the impression she gave off was stronger due to us having run into her at her workplace.

Even though I had thought she was still a student...

It really felt like she’d gotten ahead of me.

“Is this someone you know, Araragi-kun? In that case, I’ll go on ahead, so you can take your time here and come later.”

“Ah, no, Suou-san... I mean, we are in the middle of work, after all.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine! Social interaction is a part of our work, too. They’re always like, ‘cherish your local connections!’ and all that.”

Without allowing me to refuse, Suou-san forced me to stay where I was before heading towards the room of the child we intended to visit—though I was thankful, she sure was one pushy senpai.

“Sorry, Kanbaru. Even though you’re probably working right now.”

“Nah, I don’t mind! The morning rush just ended, so I thought it was a good time for a breather, anyway.”

Though I didn’t know if that was really the case or if she was just saying that out of consideration for me, hearing it did make me feel more at ease.

It would definitely be the former if it were the Kanbaru I knew in high school, but after her learning of the toils of hard work, it could very well be the latter as well.

Anyway, seeing as I’d been left behind, I decided to take up Suou-san on her offer—Kanbaru and I moved to the break area. Because I wanted to seem like I was still some kind of senpai to her, I treated her to some juice from the vending machine.

“Araragi-senpai, I’d heard rumors that you’d become a police detective or something, but was that pretty lady earlier your senpai? I didn’t know you were back in town, though. You should’ve given me a call!”

“I just barely got back, you see. I thought I’d do that once things settled down.”

It sounded a lot like an excuse, and in reality it really was an excuse, but even as I said it we clinked our cans together as a toast to our reunion. We were indeed both of drinking age, but considering it was the middle of the day and we were both in the middle of work, getting alcohol could be going a bit too far.

“How’d you hear that I became a detective?”

I thought it would be from Karen, but the answer I got was completely different.

“From Ougi-kun,” she responded—hmm.

That basically meant that information about me was being leaked to her.

“When I heard the news, I was thinking, ‘That guy has grown up to be a fine young man now, hasn’t he?’ I was so proud.”

“What’s that supposed to mean!?”

“Do you work here, now? I was sure that you wouldn’t come back to this town again. I was sure you’d passed on.”

“Well, this is at the very least just for the training period, so I don’t know what’ll happen afterward... and ‘passed on’!?”

I had nothing to say in response.

In some form or another I was a government official, so even if I wasn’t a professional baseball player, my destination was something I couldn’t decide by myself.

And that was especially the case when Gaen-san’s plans could sink their teeth into me at any moment.

“How about you, Kanbaru? Why a physician? I was sure you’d aim for becoming a professional basketball player or something... Or is there even a league for women’s basketball yet? Maybe a corporate team...”

“Ah, basketball? I felt like that’s something I saw through to completion. Although I still play for fun, on days off with friends.”

“Friends. I see.”

It was a word I hadn’t used even once when I was in college.

I’m envious of your satisfying college life.

“But still, to become a physician. In this vast ocean we call life, isn’t that a pretty drastic change of course? You’re going from an athlete to a doctor.”

“Nah, I’d already been thinking about it in my last year of high school. I went to a college for athletics because I wanted to stay active, but I chose the medical department because of what I wanted to do in life. ...That is, become a sports doctor.”

“A sports doctor?”

In other words, a doctor that specialized in preventing sports-related accidents or injuries, and helping with physical therapy, huh?

As I heard that, everything made perfect sense.

That’s right. When I was still attending college in this town, Kanbaru had reunited with an old friend of hers—someone who had once been a rival, before she had been forced to retire after an injury that occurred during a game.

And while it wasn’t due to an injury, Kanbaru herself had had to withdraw from the court after her left arm was rendered unusable. It was probably because of those bitter experiences that she chose this path.

Such splendid reasons.

My kouhai was so dazzling that I felt like I was being purified...

“To think that this Kanbaru Suruga, who would speak of nothing but boobs and panties, would become like this... It’s a story I wouldn’t be able to tell without crying.”

“I feel like I spoke of more than just that, though.”

“Then, you’ve stopped reading BL novels by now, right?”

“Oh, no, those I still have an interest in.”

Was that so.

In any case, it was a far cry from how I responded to the question of why I became a police officer with, “because my parents were”—this kouhai was too much.

She’d become too good to be true.

I was glad I ran into her like this.

Seeing how I felt like this now, I could tell that I had had some hesitation about meeting Kanbaru again, afraid of what kind of person she had turned into.

Considering Kanbaru’s mother was in fact Gaen-san’s older sister, there had been the possibility of not me but Kanbaru being used as one of Gaen-san’s pawns, but it seemed that avenue no longer existed.

That string of fate had been cut.

A completely clean cut.

Although I didn’t want to acknowledge it, it seemed that that con man, Kaiki Deishuu, had anticipated Gaen-san’s movements and chopped down that string of fate in advance—looks like everyone and their mother was trying to get ahead of one another.

Would I be able to become like those adults?

"It's not as simple as it sounds, though. I already felt like I wanted to quit a couple times. I've even started to think more pragmatically about if it would be okay to just take any position that deals with medical care. Like with basketball, even though I said that I 'saw it through to completion', despite how I was said to be at a super high school level, I just ended up being discouraged at a college level."

"....."

"The world is vast. I thought there was no one scarier than Senjouhara-senpai, but after going to college, I met dozens of people that were even scarier than her... Although I never met anyone that I liked more than her, so I did feel that my outlook was narrow."

"...That's right. There are tons of crazy people in this world," I agreed, from the bottom of my heart.

Those feelings remained, even as I entered the working society.

Even in spite of the Rumors Squad being one of Gaen-san's schemes, I had never imagined that there was a girl that had turned into a mermaid after eating the "mermaid flesh".

I'd never thought that I'd been particularly special for having my blood sucked by the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, but the Rumors Squad boasted a lineup of members with histories that could easily brush any conceited thoughts away.

Kind of like how "one in a million" actually meant quite a lot of people when thinking on a global scale.

"Crazy people, but incredible people, too. If there's a monster that's the only one of her kind, it'd be Hanekawa."

"Ah."

Kanbaru gave me a subtle look of understanding.

Though they hadn't interacted much with each other, Hanekawa probably still left a big impression on her.

"Is she still alive and well?"

"She's still alive—from what I can tell. Apparently I'd get some sort of message if she ended up dying."

"What kind of life is she even living?"

Hearing that, she's probably not the type of person to give up before accomplishing something, said Kanbaru.

It wouldn't be a surprise to lose all your motivation when comparing yourself to Hanekawa, but, as I expected, it was different for a star who had been prominent for a generation.

Her conviction was different.

It didn't seem like she was just going to stop with high school being her glory years.

"By the way, Araragi-senpai, what business do you have at the hospital?"

"You can stop adding senpai, now. We're not high schoolers anymore."

"To me, you will forever be my senpai, Araragi-senpai!"

"Really, this kouhai is too much."

As I said that, I wondered to myself if this could be considered fate—I doubted that Kanbaru was aware of every patient that entered this big hospital, but I didn't think there could be that many unconscious children that had been hospitalized.

"As you guessed, I'm here for work. —do you know about that kid?"

"Oh, the one that drowned in the river... Even though that river wasn't supposed to be that dangerous. I guess maybe it's changed since I'd been there?"

Of course, she knew about it already.

Do you love going camping, too?

Although I already knew that she did.

"For the police to get involved, does that mean they judged that this was some sort of incident? Like they were held down in the water, or were pushed in, or something."

"Well, my job is really to make that judgment. It would be better if it wasn't an incident—although I suppose there's no 'better' when a person has drowned. ...What do you know about that kid's condition?"

"I'm not directly involved in treatment, so I can't say for sure, but I don't think it's looking good for them. There are no signs of them regaining consciousness... It's almost like their soul was taken from their body."

"Their soul—"

What kappa took from people was their shirikodama, right?

Although I didn't know what shirikodama was exactly.

"I want you to keep this a secret, but there have been a lot of similar accidents occurring at that river. At this rate, they'll probably have to close down the whole area."

“No way... If that happens, where will we be able to go camping from now on?”

Then it doesn't matter if they close down the whole area, was the kind of resentful thought I had when I heard that.

Unlike you, I've never had to think about where my friends and I will go camping, and I never will.

“In that case, Araragi-senpai, please do something so that that doesn't happen! ...or maybe I shouldn't be asking that from you.”

“It's fine to just ask that from me, but I can't promise anything. Since it's really town hall who decides that, while I'm just here to investigate.”

“That's right. Well, then I guess it'll be fine if I go and ask town hall.”

It felt like she actually would go and do that.

Her proactive personality may have even doubled from her high school days.

Since, unlike me, she had plenty of friends from high school, she probably even had some friends that were employed at the town hall—was what I had thought. But I would never have guessed that, among the few people I had become acquainted with in high school, one of them would in fact be employed at the town hall.

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After visiting the hospital, Suou-san and I grabbed lunch before once again returning on-site to the river—because the duties of the Rumors Squad were different from those of regular police officers, I was a bit bewildered at not being able to make use of what I'd learned at the police academy, but visiting the site a hundred times was finally something that felt police-like.

Although it was only the second time.

And it seemed that Suou-san intended on bringing this to a conclusion on this second visit.

“Since I have plenty of other matters to attend to, too. Even if my seat is off by the window in the office, I'm still pretty busy, you know.”

That was because, for reports that were on the level of rumors, they needed to perform a sweep of the entire area with the few people that they had in order to check things in detail.

It seemed that my training was invaluable to the squad, whether it was because I was male, because I was young, because of my vampire attributes, or maybe just because I was an extra helping hand.

Although I hadn't lived up to those expectations just yet... so I'd better work hard.

“Kanbaru... That is, the kouhai I met earlier liked to come camping around here in the past, but she said she didn’t feel anything out of place. I won’t go into too much detail, but she’s not exactly someone that’s unrelated to oddities, so if there was really something lurking in the water, it wouldn’t have been unusual if she felt anything...”

“I see... But Araragi-kun, the little vampire in your shadow very clearly said that ‘there was something there’, didn’t she?”

“Yes. But that was all she said, and she wouldn’t tell me anything more than that, so...”

“That’s fine. That’s still good progress for us. And by the way, sorry about earlier, that I had to interrupt your conversation with your kouhai.”

“Ah, no, it’s all right. We made plans to meet up again later.”

Although I wasn’t sure if those plans would really play out or not.

Even though we had managed to talk quite a bit despite having run into each other by chance without an appointment, in reality Kanbaru was probably incredibly busy, balancing her studies with her work—probably even busier than I was. And even if she had a day off, she’d probably want to spend that precious day off with her friends playing basketball or going camping.

After her outlook was widened, I didn’t want her to narrow it again just for me.

She’d met dozens of scary people, but not one she liked more than Senjougahara—even though she’d said something like that, I did think that that could have been a form of consideration for me.

Consideration.

Perhaps I should be happier that my brash kouhai had learned consideration for others, but that consideration or tactfulness made me feel melancholy instead.

It would be a selfish desire of mine to want her to stay as the brash kouhai that I knew, and if I told her that, I’m sure she wouldn’t be able to continue seeing me as the senpai that she respected.

For forever.

Plus, for someone her age, it wouldn’t be weird if she was seeing someone that she was serious about—she wasn’t going to stay a 17-year-old girl forever.

As for Senjougahara Hitagi...

I wonder what she’s doing now?

“Hm? What’s wrong, Assistant Inspector Araragi? Making such a pensive face. Were you thinking of the girl you used to be with or something?”

She sure is sharp. As expected of a detective.

Although it felt more like a woman's intuition than a detective's intuition.

"Well, it's not used to be with, since I'm currently still with her. We were together since high school... We went to the same college, and we broke up twice, and got back together twice."

"Huh. Then isn't it weird to be yearning for her? Didn't you two shack up together after graduating college?"

"We did shack up together once in college... But she found work at a company overseas, you see."

And that was to follow her father.

I had been aware of the fact that Hitagi's father worked for an overseas company, but what was surprising was that Hitagi went to work for a rival company—by picking the same trade but a different company, she wasn't even trying to hide the complex she had towards her father, but, as if in revenge towards her impoverished life she led at the Tamikura Apartments, she was now making waves as an up-and-coming financial trader, if I were exaggerate a bit.

It's pretty amazing what she was getting up to while I was in the police academy.

Really, everyone just loves going overseas, huh?

You're all lacking in patriotism.

"Araragi-kun, it's not like you came back to your hometown because you wanted to, either. You shouldn't act like you're being patriotic, either. If we go by Gaen-san's motto, then Japanese people playing an active role overseas is something to be proud of. Wouldn't it be amazing if we had a network like the overseas Chinese?"

Gaen-san's final objective was probably something along those lines—with agents you can dispatch, like the FBI or the MI5—said Suou-san, though I couldn't tell if she was joking or being serious.

"Well, I suggest you contact her frequently, so that the relationship doesn't just die out naturally. Police detectives in particular have it tough in marriage—even I've had to break up with five or six people after getting this job."

Although that could be just because of her personality, but I kept my mouth shut about that.

But whoops, I spoke too much about my private life.

Even if we were in an open workplace, I didn't want it to be a place where I talked about everything and anything.

But I'll take her advice to heart anyway. Not because she was a detective, but because she was my senpai in life.

Since I was ungrateful and bad at keeping in touch, and I'd cut several ties that way before—thinking about it now, I was lucky to have gotten back with her even twice. I needed to make sure it wouldn't occur a third time.

“So, Suou-san. How did it look for that kid?”

In the end, while I spent my time talking in the break area, Suou-san had returned from the hospital room far earlier than I had expected, and I hadn't been able to get a look at the final child's face.

“I didn't get a look, either. There were no visitors allowed. ...Apparently that wasn't the case yesterday, so they may have gotten worse. The situation may be more urgent than we thought.”

“.....”

“Luckily, thanks to the nurse in charge, I got ahold of all their personal information. The parents both work, so they often have the child watch the house—or rather, they often leave their child alone. But you wouldn't think that that happened with how cheerful the kid is, and they're the type that likes to take the lead when with other kids, which is what led to the drowning.”

It was a topic that was difficult to broach inside the hospital.

It wasn't because she had other matters to attend to that Suou-san wanted to hurry and finish up this case, although that was probably one of the reasons—though she always gave off the impression of finishing up her work quickly, it seemed her motivation had gone up after having been unable to see the child's face.

“It would be awful if these cheerful kids were to lose their playground.”

I ended up coming up with a rather banal comment.

They were embarrassing thoughts that exposed my shallowness as a person, but the resentful thoughts I had of wanting them to close down the river to prevent camping had all but disappeared by now.

“This is just conjecture, but it does give off the impression that only children are being targeted. Since there are no victims that are adults... Even my sister recently went fishing here, but nothing went wrong then.”

“Karen-chan, right?”

“So you knew about her? The foolish but prideful sister of the Araragi family.”

“Well, she does stand out, after all. Mood makers like her give off a good impression.”

It would've been good if she joined the Rumors Squad, said Suou-san, but that would certainly be impossible—given her character, she herself could be considered a kind of urban legend or ghost story.

Frankly, without even me needing to deceive her, she stubbornly refused to believe that the damage she took upon her body from the con man was the work of an oddity—if I had had her strength, I probably wouldn't have been reduced into being a vampire, either.

Or perhaps, as someone who'd been reduced into being a mermaid, it was because Suou-san felt that way that she sought out a mood maker for the Rumors Squad.

"Our squad is missing a mood maker, you see. So we'd had some expectations from that girl's brother."

"Well, sorry about that. For being a mood breaker."

"Oh, don't worry. Although, even though I'm not really in the mood, perhaps we should follow in Karen-chan's footsteps and all go fishing together?"

And like that, Suou-san threw off her coat—and after giving it to me, she continued on by taking off her shirt, skirt, stockings, and garterbelt, one by one.

She was taking off her clothes as naturally as if she were in her own home.

Though I'd heard about it beforehand, this grandiose display made me a bit self-conscious—it was a grandioseness that made yesterday's changing in the shadow of a tree seem almost shameful.

Of course, Suou-san naturally was wearing a swimsuit underneath it all.

It was a one-piece bathing suit like what Shinobu was wearing yesterday, but naturally, the impression given off by a young girl wearing one and by a mature woman wearing one was completely different.

Finally, she took off her high heels and began doing warm-up exercises.

"This time, I'll be the bait."

Though the line was probably a reference to the picture book in which Swimmy said, "I'll be the eye," it did eloquently sum up the strategy she had in mind this time—indeed, as she had become a mermaid after eating the "mermaid flesh", her entire body was a bundle of deliciousness.

To the point that she wouldn't even allow a vampire to be called in front of her.

Though it was me who had entered the river yesterday, the plan today was for Suou-san to dive in to lure the oddity out (if there was one)—since the "mermaid flesh" didn't taste good to just vampires.

Mermaids could be considered food to any oddity.

If it weren't for the eternal youth and longevity, they would probably have gone extinct long ago due to overfishing.

In that sense, Suou-san the mermaid was even more valuable than a vampire who had lived for six centuries—and of course, for her, it was a plan that she was reluctant to carry out.

The plan of becoming a mermaid and drawing out oddities by using herself as bait necessitated that she turned into the “half-fish person” that she detested—and, as you could tell from how careful she was around the water yesterday, it was hard to say that that was a trauma that Suou-san had overcome.

“That’s for sure. I can’t count how many times I tried to kill myself. And I would just come back to life anyway, so even doing that became a pain...”

“...I’ve heard that the cause of death for immortal vampires is 90 percent suicide.”

“Oh. I’m jealous that they’re even able to die—or at least, that’s what I would’ve thought in the past.”

Suou-san shrugged her shoulders.

Her swimsuit was off-the-shoulder, so the action of shrugging her shoulders stood out even more than usual.

“Half of my body becoming fish is, in other words, a retrogression, after all—having stuff like genuine sharkskin made me want to cry back when I was more sensitive. But if I cried, those tears would just make more scales appear, so I had to endure it until I stopped being so sensitive. At first, I would rip off the scales one by one. But that would just make me bleed, and then there would be even more scales. Half of my body became fish, but 70 percent of the body is water, so it was hard for me to do anything.”

“.....”

“Ah, sorry. Did you get turned off by the self-torture? Don’t worry about it. I can take those tough memories and make the best out of them for work, now. It’s good to have a job that can make use of your strong points, but it’s just as good to have a job that can make use of your weak points—as well as a job that you can live a long life in.”

As she said that, Suou-san finished up her warm-up exercises and briskly approached the bank of the river—there was no hesitation in her steps. She had surely strengthened her resolve.

I did feel that I would take her place if I could, but unfortunately, as proved by the results of yesterday, vampires apparently didn’t make for good bait. As the Oddity Slayer, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire’s existence was likely to make itself known to other oddities, but if we turned that around, it meant that she was an existence that oddities could easily avoid. While she could use oddities as bait, she couldn’t become bait for oddities.

The only thing I could do was watch over her.

“All right, Araragi-kun. Grab on to this end over here, and if anything happens, pull me out, okay?”

Suou-san handed me a rope that she had tied around her body in a complicated manner. This was almost like fishing, or perhaps even cormorant fishing.

She hadn't simply tied it around her torso—the rope had been complexly interwoven around her body and all four of her limbs. That was surely done because, when she turned into a mermaid, she didn't just slip out of the rope.

It wasn't something I should be imagining, but perhaps because I had just recently run into Kanbaru, it somehow reminded me of “Japanese bondage torture (surugadoi)”... Being handed the end of the rope made me feel nervous in more ways than one.

I could only pray that nobody witnessed this scene that looked like I was trying to torture Suou-san, because if we were reported—well, I guess it would be fine, because we were police officers.

None of this felt real to me, still.

“I'm counting on you, Assistant Inspector!”

As if she had read my mind (although it would've be really embarrassing if she could), Suou-san called out to me again using my rank.

“You might want to look away when my appearance changes, but keep your eyes open and fixed on me. If nothing happens even after I—after the mermaid becomes the bait, we should be able to conclude that these were just accidents. That won't make that kid suddenly regain consciousness, and it won't suddenly heal the injuries of the other kids, but at least we can rule out the irrational. Because we can at least confidently guarantee that there won't be any more victims. For the two of us that have lost our futures, let's protect the yet unseen futures of those to come.”

“...Understood.”

“All right. And incidentally, if anything does happen to me, don't take any drastic measures in trying to save me. Just report back to the station. Since no matter how bad it gets, I definitely won't die. As long as we're at this river, who's in more danger? The mermaid in her natural habitat, or the vampire who's weak to flowing water? Feel free to leave me behind.”

This didn't feel like something that should've been said incidentally, but without waiting for my response, Suou-san yelled “Here we go!” and leapt into the water. As if to substantiate her claim of having been a promising swimming athlete, she swam with a beautiful, streamlined form.

007

To turn into fish after getting wet.

Putting aside how it actually happened, the wording itself was easy to understand in terms of cause and effect, but to watch that phenomenon, that oddity phenomenon, occur before my very eyes... Well, the impression was certainly different.

It was hugely different, widely different, an order of magnitude different from what I had imagined.

Compared to that stereotypical image of the lower half being the fish and the upper half being a beautiful woman—it was practically the complete opposite. Although, even if that image actually existed, I'm sure it would actually be rather grotesque itself.

At one point, Kanbaru Suruga had had her left arm possessed by a monkey oddity, and her arm had been transformed into a monkey's up to her elbow—but even then, it was still an amalgamation of two primates.

To become half-fish and half-human was something that could not easily be expressed in words, and it held a beauty that could not be expressed through paintings.

This is something I heard later on, but apparently this transformation took on a different appearance every time it occurred—parameters such as the amount of water, the quality of the water, the temperature of the water, and the amount of bacteria in the water all came together to decide what sort of fish would become half of her. The condition of Suou-san herself also factored into the equation.

This time, it was a piranha.

Probably.

Densely-packed scales sprung up all over her body, and densely-packed fangs sprung up inside her mouth.

A half-fish person—was how she had described herself, but looking at her like this, I couldn't even call it "half"—she was basically all fish, with the last remnants of her humanity showing up in the one-piece swimsuit caught in her pectoral and dorsal fins.

It seemed that the rope that she had been tightly bound by would slip off, but it seemed to have somehow gotten tangled up with that swimsuit and managed to retain its shape... While I kept my eyes fixed on her as I was told to, it was a grand display that I could almost describe as pitiful.

I couldn't help but keep my eyes fixed on her.

"Piranhas are actually one of the more preferred kinds," was what Suou-san said, also later on. "There were times when I turned into stuff like deep-sea fish and mollusks, after all—gross doesn't even begin to describe it. There's a certain charm to fish, but a person becoming half of one is just the worst. I'd be fine with dugongs, at least... but among aquatic animals, it seems like mammals are out."

Speaking of which, there was that theory that what people thought were mermaids were actually dugongs or manatees... I remembered hearing from Hanekawa at some point that the meat of a dugong was extremely tasty.

Maybe even that ended up tying into the legend of the mermaid?

It was so that the five drowning accidents didn't end up tying into a new oddity story that Suou-san had cast herself to the bottom of the river—but, with there being no value to turning into a piranha, nothing ended up happening.

No oddities—no kappa, no crabs—appeared.

There was nothing that seemed like it wanted to prey upon the mermaid.

Though she had taken on a hideous appearance, she surely hadn't lost her ability to think, but Suou-san began to swim forward at the bottom of the river—if I got careless, I could have been pulled into the river from the rope I was holding.

She was probably breathing through gills now, since it seemed she didn't need to come up for air.

Well, fishing wasn't something that produced immediate results, anyway... I should be patiently vigilant about this.

For the Rumors Squad, being unable to fish anything up was really the more desirable result—or maybe fishing with bait wasn't even the right way to describe this?

Even if “mermaid flesh” was a delicacy, oddities did have their own tastes, after all... If that was the case, Suou-san's stripping and transforming would end up being a waste... Well, someone like Suou-san probably wouldn't consider that a waste, though.

She's the kind of person who's aware that useless actions make up the essence of labor.

As her kouhai, I'll make sure to properly learn this attitude from her.

As I thought that, I sat down on the riverbank. Since it seemed like it would be a drawn-out battle, I figured I'd conserve some mental strength in order to respond more quickly in an emergency... I never had an interest in fishing, but surely not even anglers were constantly on the alert.

They'd wait for a tug.

Even so, to make sure I didn't end up accidentally letting go of the rope, I wrapped the end of it around my wrist—that way, even if Suou-san started to get eaten... Then I suppose I'd just get eaten along with her?

If that happened, I figured Shinobu would come to my aid...

“Don't just assume things for your own convenience.”

With that timing, a voice spoke from my shadow.

“Certainly, if your life is exposed to danger, I will be sure to move with great haste—but that will not necessarily be the case if that mermaid is in crisis.”

“Huh?”

Though I ended up saying that out of reflex, there was no further response from my shadow.

What? What did she mean by that? It was surprising in itself that Shinobu was awake in the middle of the day, but it was also surprising that she would come out with something that sounded like a warning—or maybe she was just rebuking me for my selfish thoughts?

It was true that, in high school, I relied a little too much on Shinobu's powers and ended up in some outrageous circumstances. There were some unwanted side effects that came from abusing vampire skills, from utilizing Shinobu's powers as if they were my own—if it weren't for Gaen-san, I probably wouldn't have lived to graduate from high school.

That's why, even if the members of the Rumors Squad were to rely on it, I definitely shouldn't think that "Shinobu will do something about it if it gets dangerous", not even a little bit.

But, right now, was she really only doing nothing more than rebuking me?

Don't just assume things for my own convenience, was exactly right. That was exactly why Shinobu wouldn't take any excess actions in helping me out—even though she told me that this case seemed to be oddity-like, she didn't disclose anything specific.

In other words, it was an attitude even more prudent than Oshino.

Prudent, but reliable.

So the problem was what she said afterwards—that wasn't necessarily the case if that mermaid is in crisis.

That was what Shinobu said.

That was what she was implying.

If we turned that around, didn't that mean that, right now, in real time, the mermaid—Suou-san was in a crisis?

"Suou-san!"

Without really understanding anything, I followed my instincts—my "impulsive and emotional nature", as Karen put it—and stood up and pulled the rope back with all my might.

And though I pulled, it didn't budge a bit.

Considering that the aftereffects of my vampire constitution allowed me to be muscular without even needing to work out, I shouldn't have been completely powerless, but, as if I had landed a huge fish, I was totally unable to pull the rope back.

Or rather.

The rope was pulling me towards the middle of the river.

Was Suou-san trying to move through the water?

No, that was wrong.

Though I couldn't see well through the reflections on the surface of the water, Suou-san was doing somersaults in the water, in pain. It looked almost like she was drowning—even though she was a mermaid?

As if she was suffocating from respiratory failure—even though she had gills?

“.....!”

In any case, Suou-san was no longer in a condition where she could pull me in... That mermaid was definitely in a “crisis”. Then, where was that force that was pulling in the rope coming from?

The “invisible hand”?

Even when I looked, not just around Suou-san, but in every nook and cranny in my surroundings and even up to the sky, there was nothing that seemed like it could be an oddity. Even if I looked out for those “bad things” that preceded the coming of an oddity, I couldn't feel anything at all.

But I was no longer the boy I was in high school.

Even though I couldn't say I had insight on every oddity in the world, since there was definitely something odd happening right now, there was no way that I couldn't feel a single thing wrong.

Even the “invisible hand” that the drowned children said they saw was something that I should be able to see—or maybe this wasn't an oddity phenomenon at all? Was Suou-san simply drowning just as the five children had before her? Was this just the sixth drowning accident to occur—

It wasn't the time to be thinking about that right now.

If the rope wouldn't budge no matter how hard I pulled, then I'd give up on that approach—shit, I wish I'd worn my swimsuit today, too. Thinking that, I jumped into the river.

Unfortunately, with a form less like the beautiful form of a fish and more like what would be used as an example of bad form, I promptly bounced off the surface of the water.

It was like how, if you didn't reduce your surface area when entering the water, the resistance of the water felt like concrete—but what was different was what happened just before I would've entered.

I rolled over the surface of the water and slid to the point just above where Suou-san was struggling, and—and I didn't sink into the water. It was like the entire river had frozen over—except that it wasn't frozen, it was still flowing, and it was still liquid.

Nevertheless, my body wasn't sinking.

As if I were on a huge conveyor belt, I was continually being pushed downstream, but it wasn't at a speed that I couldn't go against. Though I did so clumsily, I was able to move my arms and legs to stay above Suou-san.

However, I couldn't get near her.

I couldn't sink.

It wasn't ice, but it was like the mermaid had been trapped in the middle of a water bed—it was less of an "invisible hand" and more of an "invisible sack" that was impossible to pierce through.

No matter how hard I punched it, the surface would pleasantly bounce back.

There was no doubt about it.

This was absolutely an oddity phenomenon, with no room for error—this had crossed the limit of simply being a rumor.

But really, what kind of oddity was it? To be able to create all this strangeness without even showing even the slightest bit of it—

"...No, that's not it."

It wasn't invisible because it was an oddity—it was invisible because it was transparent.

For example, it could be invisible because it was "water" itself, which was high in transparency.

Neither kappa nor mermaids nor crabs.

"—The river itself is the oddity!?"

Then even mermaids would drown.

It would be like, on land, if the air itself could bite you. No matter how hard you tried, humans were unable to resist against changes in air pressure. Plus, even if you had gills, that didn't change the fact that you were breathing in oxygen.

That's why even fish would suffocate in water with low oxygen levels.

Like how just throwing goldfish into a tank was the same as actually taking care of it—if you didn't properly set up an oxygen pump, the goldfish would suffer a living hell, gasping for air above the surface of the water.

Water might be the mermaid's natural habitat, but if the water itself was the enemy, any mermaid would die from drowning.

No.

It would be better if they could die.

But Suou-san couldn't. She couldn't die like vampires could. Really, considering vampires had an obvious weakness in sunlight, mermaids had a much simpler kind of immortality that far surpassed them—if what I experienced over spring break was hell, then what Suou-san was experiencing now was a living hell.

“Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!”

I didn't expect anything from repeatedly hitting the surface of the water—it took a lot of effort just staying where I was. Despite being in the miraculous position of being able to crawl on top of the water, I couldn't do the normal thing of just sinking into the water.

It felt like the flow of the river got faster, too.

Since I was attached to Suou-san via rope, I was able to not be pulled downstream, but it felt like our positions were reversed... Normally, I should be the one that needed to pull Suou-san out, but now I couldn't do anything but watch as Suou-san drowned—as Suou-san continued to drown without even being able to die.

I couldn't do anything but watch.

But that was all I needed to do.

Even as she struggled with her entire body, even as she continued to drown, even as she stayed unable to breathe or speak, Suou-san looked up at me through the surface of the water—but she had never once been looking at me for help.

With those strong piranha eyes.

With those eyes filled with a strong determination, she was trying to bring something to my attention.

She kept flapping her mouth open to try and tell me something—and it was definitely not in the way a “drowning goldfish” would. However, no matter what Suou-san was shouting at me—no matter what sort of plan she had to try and escape from this crisis, it wouldn't reach me from within the water.

Despite being anticipated for my ability to communicate with oddities, something this irritating was a first—there was no way I could even begin to understand the movements of a piranha's mouth, no matter how hard I stared at Suou-san's mouth to try and read her lips.

But, just as I was starting to despair, I suddenly plunged into the water. Though I had braced myself against the water, increasing my points of contact unlike how I was

supposed to, in order to not be washed away by the current, I suddenly—as if it was a matter of course—sunk into the river with a splash.

As if I'd stepped on a pitfall, I sank in a straight line towards Suou-san.

I would have never been able to guess what had actually happened.

What Suou-san was doing was not shouting, but singing.

The “mermaid’s song”.

If it was within the range of common knowledge that the “mermaid’s flesh” gave rise to eternal youth and longevity, then it was within the range of common knowledge that the “mermaid’s song” had the power to sink ships—for a song that could sink even the most unsinkable of ships, it wasn’t hard to sink a single person.

And so I was able to reach Suou-san.

But of course, I would have never been able to guess that that wasn’t even Suou-san’s intention.

It wasn’t that unreasonable to assume that, despite telling me to leave her behind in an emergency with a calm face, she looked to me for help when it came down to it—but if that wasn’t the case, it was clear that she wanted to get me to do something.

The “invisible hand”.

Regardless of whether being brought into the inside of the water bed changed the reflectivity or whether my scrambling about changed the transparency, I was able to distinctly see the hand that should have been invisible.

I was able to see the hand that was grabbing Suou-san’s body, as if it was grabbing not a piranha but a squirming eel—but the role I’d given was not to pull that hand off of her.

What I was supposed to do was—take the hand that was grabbing Suou-san.

The hand of the child that was reaching out for help.

008

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

Even though, back in my high school days, Oshino Meme had thoroughly instructed me on how stupid it was to try and resolve oddity phenomena through violence, I had come dangerously close to making the same mistake again. What was the point of saying “I

was no longer the boy I was in high school”? If I did the same thing whether I was able to see oddities or not, then there was no meaning to it at all.

The fact that I’d made so many misunderstandings was also just like it was in high school.

When Shinobu had said that of the five drowning accidents, four of them were not accidents but incidents, I had easily jumped to the conclusion that the child who had not claimed to see the “invisible hand” was the one who had simply gotten into an accident, but that wasn’t the case—whether it was “visible” or “invisible” was simply based on each person’s disposition and circumstances.

It wouldn’t have been strange if there were only two, or even one, that testified to see it.

Then, what was the case that Shinobu ruled out as an “accident”? That was, in fact, the case of the “first” to drown.

The case of the unconscious child, whom we were unable to visit as a result of no visitors being allowed—it was only that case that was an accident, and the four that followed were incidents.

They were oddity phenomena.

Though I said as much, a sharper person would probably have been able to figure out the truth much faster... I was, regrettably, too slow on the uptake.

In short, for the four cases that followed—the “invisible hand” that pulled the four children down into the water was the hand of the “first” one. Well, at this point, the wording of “pulling down” was not exactly correct anymore.

Because all that hand was doing was reaching out for help.

“It’s something like a living ghost, I suppose. One that possessed the water. It makes sense that the child never regained consciousness, even after all this time. That’s because their consciousness had become the very water that they drowned in, and were continuing to drown all this time—”

Suou-san, who had gotten back out of the water, was speaking in a dejected tone.

The parts of her body that she wiped with a bath towel were turning back into human skin.

“—It must have been so painful for them. Even drowning for just a few minutes made me think, for the first time in a while, that ‘dying was better than this’.”

“...It was like their soul was taken from their body, was what my kouhai said.”

There was no way I would’ve been able to guess with such a vague hint, but perhaps those who could guess would’ve been able to—their soul hadn’t been taken but had been continuing to drown.

That's why—they were reaching out for help. In a daze.

In a daze—in the water.

Having become the water itself.

“The reason for why they only sought help from other kids is also a painful one. It's because they didn't have any trust in adults.”

“.....”

Since both parents worked, they left their child to be independent, which, put in a bad way, meant that they neglected their child. So for them, an adult wasn't someone they could reach out to for help.

Learning the reason why there was no response to me diving down to the bottom of the river yesterday—why there wasn't even a trace of that child, as if they were trying to hide themselves... It made me reflect on myself as well.

So that was it.

Though in the past, I was mentally childish enough to play around with grade schoolers even as a high school student, right now, even if I was still immature, I'd become a proper adult.

People will only become what they're able to become.

It was possible that that wasn't just limited to occupations, but applied to becoming adults, as well.

Though I had thought about finding the time to visit the Kitashirahebi Shrine at some point, I felt like I now understood the reason why my legs wouldn't turn in that direction—the thought of no longer being able to see Hachikuji Mayoi as I was now made me freeze in fear.

But, on top of that, it was possible that there were a lot of things that I was no longer able to see—opposite to how Kanbaru's outlook had widened, my field of vision had grown astonishingly dim.

As if the transparency had turned to zero.

However, in the midst of that resolution, there was a single thread of salvation.

Because in terms of adults, Suou-san, who was even older than me, still got a response from the “invisible hand”—because they reached out to her for help, just as they had for the other four children that had gotten pulled in.

This could be explained by the “first” child ending up pursuing the “mermaid's flesh” out of a desire to survive, but my explanation differed from that.

It was because Suou-san had visited their hospital room, even if she hadn't been unable to meet them.

She had brought flowers, and tried to see their face, even if they couldn't speak to her.

They weren't just another profile, and they weren't just another point in the investigation. Suou-san had treated this child in critical condition as another human being—and tried to save them.

It was because these earnest thoughts reached them that the “invisible hand” clung to her, even when she was an adult—though the river stubbornly rejected me when I tried to jump in after her, it still refused to let go of Suou-san.

...I'm really reflecting on my actions, okay?

To think that running into my kouhai by chance and leaving the hospital visit to my senpai would bring about such a dilemma—while a mistake like this would've been forgiven in high school, as a public servant, the mistake was unforgivable enough that I could be made to resign just from that.

Well, actually, the high school Araragi Koyomi that tried to save anyone and everyone was just barely tolerated at that... I couldn't say that I wouldn't have had a millimeter of the feeling that “even if I visited the unconscious child, it was only for my own satisfaction”.

It made me laugh.

Wasn't it that my reason for living used to be for my own satisfaction?

“Try not to criticize yourself too much. The one who really wants to do that is me, after all—being so helpless in front of Mr. Newbie over here makes me want to die from embarrassment. Although I can't die.”

Suou-san, who had mostly returned to a human form, was lying spread-eagled on the river bank—it seemed that the towel had done all it could, and her next step was to bask in the sun to dry herself out.

She really was an expert on her own constitution.

Although, for a mermaid, it seemed less like sunbathing and more like becoming sun-dried.

“I only figured out the truth after I started to drown, too. Since the last time I drowned was the very first time I entered a pool, it actually felt rather fresh to me, and the shock of it all made me understand—like a dying message.”

Was it like how people's ability to think spikes up when they're about to die?... At least, it seemed it was an effective way of thinking for mermaids, if they were in such a deathly situation that they wanted to die.

Was that the reason why I'd come across some awesome (awful) ideas when on the verge of death?... It was like a five-year-old mystery had just been solved.

"Well, it's not a way of thinking that I'm proud of. And in the end, Araragi-kun, you were the one to take the kid's hand. That was something I wouldn't have been able to do."

Suou-san tried to comfort me, as even though I had gotten out of the water, my feelings had sunk. But even if that was the truth, it didn't comfort me in the slightest.

The only reason Suou-san couldn't grasp the hand of the child that was grasping her for help was simply that, because she had become a mermaid, her hands had turned into fins.

That was why Suou-san brought me into the water.

I was just an adult that had been rejected by the river, and besides, I'd been attacking the water bed with all my might, so it was really the "mermaid's song" that brought me into the world of the water—into the soul that was reaching out for help.

So I was just acting in her place.

In Suou-san's place, I took the hand of the child that had reached out to Suou-san for help—and that was good enough.

That was enough to return the flow of the river back to normal.

It was actually Suou-san that pulled me out of the river when I started to drown. Because she had taken a form with lots of sharp piranha teeth, the brand new suit I had worn for training hadn't just become wet, it had become torn.

Well, I'd rather lose my suit than my life.

And not just my life, but the life of the drowned child, too.

"Thanks to you, Araragi-kun, I'm sure that child's soul has gone back to their body... That means the worst is over, and they'll probably soon wake up. It's all up to the doctor, now."

"...That kid probably isn't aware of the fact that they pulled in four others, right?"

"I hope so. Although they probably just grabbed the others in a daze, so... What? Are you saying that, because even broken bones were involved, that that kid should take responsibility for it, even if they were just asking for help?"

"No, of course that wasn't what I was trying to say."

"Jeez, your stubbornness is just what I'd expect from a career man."

"Like I said, that's not it!"

Although, if I had experienced this in my high school days, I would've left feeling dissatisfied just ending this by saying, "I feel sorry for the kids that drowned". But I felt that it was in order to face these feelings of dissatisfaction that I became a policeman as well.

"Well, forgive them for my sake, all right? Disregarding what happened to me, they did end up letting go of the four others in the end... And if their soul returned to their body, then there won't be any more repeated drowning accidents occurring at this river. The riverbank won't need to be blocked off, and it'll serve as a great place to go camping or fishing with your friends for years to come. What a happy ending."

Quickly wrapping up the case as if it were some fairy tale, Suou-san changed the subject by asking, "I'm mostly dry now, so can you get me my clothes?" I guess she's just the kind of person that was soft on children.

Well, that's fine.

It wasn't like I hated children, either—at least, that was what I thought in high school.

"Huh? Suou-san, you came with your swimsuit underneath your clothes, didn't you? Are you going to put your clothes back on over it, after swimming?"

"Ah. Damn it, I forgot to bring a change of underwear. Again."

"What are you, a kid? 'Again?' It's almost as if this happens all the time."

"We-ell, it doesn't feel comfortable anymore, and I pretty much exposed myself when I turned into a piranha, so I may as well just take off the swimsuit... Sorry, Araragi-kun. Even though we just barely got to know each other, I'm showing you another unbecoming side of me."

"Please don't worry about it. I've become used to seeing girls half-naked after just barely getting to know them."

"What kind of life are you leading?"

In the end, after taking off her swimsuit to dry, Suou-san put it back on to wear her clothes over it. Since her appearance at least looked dignified, she seemed a lot more like police than me in my half-dry, tattered suit.

"Well, let's report back to the station. If we do that, I'm sure the chief will reward us with another job!"

Though her attempt to take up a businesslike attitude right after trying to save a kid while nearly drowning herself wasn't particularly persuasive, I had no objections to that persuasion.

Besides, in order to make up for all the points I lost in this shameful debut case, I wanted to show off my good side to my senpai in the next case.

"Uh, huh? Wait a second, Suou-san."

“What is it? Is there something else in this river? Or did you want to go camping? Why not put in a request to the chief? We can all go as a welcoming party for you.”

“No, no, that’s not it... There probably won’t be any repeated drowning accidents anymore, but the first case of drowning was different from the other four, wasn’t it? If the other four were pulled in by the ‘invisible hand’, then how exactly did the ‘first’ child end up drowning?”

According to what Karen and Kanbaru said, there hadn’t been even a single accident at this river up until now, so I wondered if it was all right to leave this as “just a drowning accident”.

And to that, Suou-san said, “Well, Assistant Inspector Araragi. Our job is just to deal with the mysterious while they’re still rumors, after all.” And, rubbing the back of her head as if caught off guard, she said,

“If we don’t leave at least one mystery unsolved, we’ll have nothing to do.”

That was truly something only an adult could say.