

The ruins of the cram school that the foremost authority on Kaii—Oshino Meme—had used as his headquarters, was a place filled with memories. Not because I once traded blows with Araragi-sempai in one of its classrooms, nor because I would often sleep there due to problems with Kaii, nor because I witnessed its entire engulfment in flames—

No. Obviously these were valid reasons, and you could even say they were the exact reasons for my nostalgia. But in addition, I had an even more fundamental reason.

Even though I've never told Araragi-sempai about it.

Or rather, I couldn't tell him.

Not even now did I tell him.

Back then—before the cram school fell into disrepair, when it still functioned as a cram school—I used to take classes in it.

To be specific, it was sometime between the second and third year of middle school, when I found out that Senjougahara-sempai was going to go to Naoetsu High School. I thought my grades weren't good enough for Naoetsu, so I asked my grandparents to let me attend extra classes. That happened to be this cram school.

However, the school ran into financial trouble during my time there, and finally closed down. Nobody would have guessed financial trouble though, with all the elementary- and middle-schoolers attending. Later on, though, there were rumors that the school apparently hired a lot of big-name tutors in an effort to compete with the big-shot cram school in front of the bus stop, but ended up unable to pay the tutors' wages. So the tutors who helped me bring my marks up to get into Naoetsu High School were also guilty of pushing the cram school to bankruptcy...I've always had trouble reconciling this reality in my heart.

In any case, the table that served as the bed for Oshino-san, Araragi-sempai, and even Shinobu-chan, could very well have been my desk.

Not that it matters much, of course.

Even though it was a memory, it wasn't anything to linger over—the reason I didn't bring it up with Araragi-sempai and the others was purely because I never happened to find the right time or place for it.

Those ruins that were somehow left behind, despite being burnt to rubble—even if they completely disappeared from this world, I wouldn't be sad.

How should I say it—hmm, this might sound cold of me, but I think the moment I started high school, that memory was “cut off”.

And even during my time there, my hands were already full with scheduling basketball practice, that I'd begun to dislike that cram school—although it wouldn't have been fair to my grandparents to think that way, since they were paying my tuition, I was the one who had asked them to send me there in the first place.

So...

That's how it was.

When that cram school closed from financial trouble, this nagging thought: “what if it’s all because I always hoped for it to close?” kept bothering me.

...Maybe that’s why I could never bring it up.

Although now that I think about it, I probably still feel the same way—all things considered, I seem to be, in a sense, linked to this place by fate.

More so than Oshino-san, who used it as his headquarters. More so than Araragi-senpai, who used it as his bed—because even after it’s burned down to rubble, even after it’s become a useless spot for everyone else, I was still walking toward it.

“Of course you’re free to fantasize that the road you’re walking on right now leads to dreams of the future—but most of reality isn’t that way at all. That’s just a road straight to the past, and people are only travelling it backwards. And if you’re not careful on that road, your spirit might even be taken from you. It’s an unbelievably strict one-way road.”

That’s what my mother used to say, but it’s not realistic to walk straight forward without ever looking back, right?

And so, after talking with Karen, I pressed the B-button and ran (haha what is this) toward the burnt-down ruins of the cram school, and there...

There—

I met the “Lord Devil”.

Already half a year had passed since the fire, and the town couldn’t just do nothing about the ruins, so they flattened it with steamrollers. So technically, it was a barren plot of land, and in the middle of the barrens—

Stood a girl holding a pine-wood cane.

A girl my age.

A high-school aged girl—that was what Ougi-kun told me. It seemed to be the case. A simple fact, yet I somehow felt unpleasant about it.

She wore a tracksuit—when you speak of tracksuits, you think of Karen, who wears one year-round (especially right after talking with her. But if Karen’s tracksuit outfit is a sign of healthy lifestyle, this girl’s tracksuit appearance gave more of an “I don’t care about my looks” impression.

It was an oversized, baggy tracksuit.

As baggy as bedclothes—no sense of fashion at all.

And her poofed-up, sand-brown hair, as if she never combed it—only reinforced my impression of her—speaking of which, that was my first time seeing sand-brown hair in real life.

Although sand-brown hair isn’t that uncommon in today’s world, this being a small town, the most you see is the bleached hair of a girl who spent too much time in chlorinated pool water (and of course, Shinobu-chan’s golden hair). Naturally, then, I was a bit wary of that hair color.

In a sense, I was more terrified of sand-brown hair than of the Devil.

But that was why—exactly why—I calmed myself down.

No.

That's not it.

There was another reason.

“...Even though I give three options, people usually solve their problems with the first”

At that moment—

As I was debating what to say to the girl, she took the initiative.

At some point or another, her attention focused on me.

The sand-brown-haired devil was gazing at me.

“Out of every ten people, seven would choose to write to ‘Lord Devil’ about their problems. Out of the remaining three, maybe two would make a phone call.”

“And the last person would come meet you face-to-face, like me?”

“Nope. The last person would choose “give up”. Given these three options, those who choose to meet the ‘Lord Devil’ face-to-face—they would probably be the eleventh out of ten.”

Her speech sounded more boyish than mine.

A deep, fairly steady tone—and unbelievably slow. Not a cute, methodical slow, but a pure, unadulterated slow—this might sound insulting, and I didn't really want to use it, but “slow-witted” describes it perfectly.

Just waiting for her to get to the next word was enough to dry out your patience.

That slow.

Like you were playing a familiar tape at half-speed.

“But most of those kinds of people have fairly serious problems, so I immediately refer them to places like the police station, law agencies, or child care centers. Up to now, there have been only two ‘eleventh’ people who have chosen to meet me face-to-face, and I’ve done the same for both—however—“

The girl said.

Her eyes slowly turned in my direction.

“—it looks like you’re not in that sort of situation, Kanbaru Suruga-san.”

...My heart immediately jumped at being called by name.

Not because I was stunned to be called by name by a complete stranger, and obviously not because she was an actual “Lord Devil”, with unimaginable powers to know my name that I hadn't spoken yet.

“You’re exactly right, Numachi Rouka-san.”

I said.

I, too, spoke the girl’s name.

And so, the girl—Numachi—smiled for the first time.

“You still remember my name? I’m happy to see that.”

She said thus.

Yes.

Since she dyed her hair, I couldn’t tell at first glance, but this “Lord Devil” was a girl I knew from before.

Despite this, I didn’t clearly remember her face—I only remembered from the pine-wood cane she held under her left armpit.

Numachi Rouka.

In middle school, she played for the basketball team of another school in the area. We had faced each other countless times. We weren’t “rivals”—calling us “mortal enemies” would have been more appropriate.

I couldn’t clearly remember losing to her, but at the same time, I couldn’t recall whether I had beaten her before.

If I could be called an offensive player, she would be the slow, relaxed defensive player. There had even been rumors of her stopping an entire team from scoring...

Judging from her playstyle, her “slow-witted” speech pattern was probably also part of her personality.

At the end, she played for another school, so we never talked like now despite having known each other in middle school.

“Haha, Kanbaru—your left arm.”

At that moment.

With her free right hand, Numachi pointed to the bandages on my left arm.

“So the rumors about your left hand were true after all. Just like me then. Turns out famous athletes can’t help but get injured, huh. Ah, but isn’t it too conceited to call yourself a famous athlete? No, you can’t be thinking that, right? Kanbaru—”

I said nothing, gazing at Numachi’s left leg.

Since her tracksuit was baggy, it was hard to notice at first glance. But looking closer, you could see that one of her legs was wider than the other. Of course, I could only tell the difference because I knew what to look for—her left leg.

Her left leg—was wrapped in plaster.

Firmly.

Tightly.

Protecting her foot from impact.

From the world.

Thus, she wore no shoe on her left foot.

Left leg—injury.

No doubt about it.

That's the reason she used a cane.

In the playoffs between middle schools—before her school faced mine—Numachi had busted her left leg from a fall, and was forced to quit the basketball team. Looking at it now, it still hadn't healed—if it still hadn't healed after three years, it was probably going to stay with her for life.

But now was neither the time nor the place to ask for details.

“Your left hand: did you hurt it playing basketball too?”

...She asked the uncomfortable question before I could.

Perhaps she was sympathizing with my own injury. But if that were the case, I could only bow my head and apologize.

My left arm's injury was nothing glorious like hers—it was only there because I once messed up. To compare the two is to blemish her story.

“Hmm, you could say that.”

Unable to say the truth out loud, I vaguely nodded my head.

“From your uniform, it looks like you go to Naoetsu High. A top school, from what I heard. And you must have gotten into Nationals with that school too...impressive. You're pretty smart after all.”

“Actually, it's not quite...”

I said as I scanned Numachi's tracksuit outfit.

It was an elegant red tracksuit.

I was too far to make out the brand logo on the chest, but I would've recognized a well-known logo. So the brand was probably not very popular.

At least, it couldn't have been a school-issued tracksuit.

“Huh? Me? I'm not in high school. I couldn't even take the entrance tests due to rehab. Now I'm one of those self-employed people that folks get so passionate about.”

But with my foot this way, it's obviously hard to find a company wanting to hire me, and I don't work part-time either. So when I say self-employed, I really mean jobless—Numachi said as she stuck her right hand into her tracksuit pocket.

So she wasn't in high school.

Then in that sense Ougi-san was wrong to call her "high school student". Turns out I'm not as frank as other people think I am, to be inwardly sighing in relief at this point.

"And so I became the 'Lord Devil'."

"..."

"Because I had nothing else to do."

As she spoke, she took out her cell phone from her pocket, fiddled with it, and put it back.

As if checking her messages.

Perhaps someone called the "Lord Devil" from somewhere? No, she would have answered the phone. Maybe she was fiddling with her phone on purpose for show.

She was the same on the court in middle school—good at messing with the opponent's mind.

"...because you broke your leg, you had a hard time finding a job—and you chose to become the 'Lord Devil' instead of working part-time?"

"Eh?"

Numachi looked surprised.

The surprise looked genuine—although there was a chance she was faking it.

So I asked again. I wasn't close enough with her to be able to read her expressions.

"No. No no—it's a misunderstanding, Kanbaru. I don't know who you heard about it from, but you must have misunderstood."

"Misunderstood what?"

If I heard something from someone, then it must be the stuff about the "Lord Devil" from Ougi-kun.

"It's true that I'm working as the 'Lord Devil', but I'm not making money from it."

It's a free counseling service—said Numachi.

I was surprised to hear this, but then again, neither Ougi-kun, nor Higasa-san, nor Karen-chan had mentioned the "Lord Devil" asking for payment for his services.

In fact, their tones suggested that the client risked nothing at all—

"..."

If that were true, I might have been influenced by Oshino-san asking five hundred million yen from Araragi-senpai, or by Kaiki Deishu scamming lunch money from middle school girls—to be under the impression that the “Lord Devil” was also in the business for the money.

A free consultation, a free counselor.

That might as well be—

“...that might as well be Araragi-senpai then!”

“Hmm? What was that, Kanbaru?”

“No, it’s nothing, Numachi—“

I shook my head—

“I got it wrong. Sorry.”

I apologized.

“I see now. For the sake of the world, to help those in need, you’re providing counseling services for free. A ‘kind soul’, right?”

“Haha, I’m kind of embarrassed when you put it that way—“

“Then why do you call yourself the ‘Lord Devil’?”

I clearly had no intention of complimenting her, but she got embarrassed anyway—a disgusting feeling. So I cut her off without letting her finish.

“If you chose this name, then there’s bound to be people put off by this name, right?”

“Well, we’re in an age where impact is everything. Impact factor, and topicality. You can’t draw customers’ attention without first giving them a shock. Surprise factor is important, whether in entertainment, arts, or politics. And even if I were a fearless atheist, I wouldn’t be shameless to the point of calling myself ‘Saint’ or ‘the Great Archangel’.”

“...”

“More importantly, troubled people are almost always bound by a sense of inferiority. With that mindset, it’s easier to get them to rely on you when you call yourself the Devil, the lowest of the low, rather than ‘God’ or ‘Angel’.”

“...uh-huh. I seem to get it, but also not really.”

“Eh? I’m surprised—even a person like you, who walks under the sun, can understand this feeling? No way. Did your personality get twisted slightly when you broke your arm?”

“That’s not the point...”

You could say that the injury represented my twisted personality, but the injury was the effect, not the cause. However, her ability to see through things in an instant hadn’t changed from her playing days.

No, that insight must have improved after she retired. Did she choose to open this free consultation service based on that ability?

...That's not it.

I basically never spoke with Numachi during middle school, and only saw her on the court—but based on my experiences playing against her, I think I could understand her “character” to a degree.

The athlete Numachi Rouka—

Was not one to enjoy solving others' problems.

She was not one to use her insight to help others.

Did something perhaps change within these three years?

<Translation Draft in Progress by [inksquid43](#), May 29, 2015>