



Otorimonogatari

Nadeko Medusa



001

Sengoku Nadeko, age 14.

Born June 3rd, Gemini, blood type B.

Height 153 cm (still growing), weight 38 kg.

Right-handed.

Visual acuity: 20/10 in both eyes.

Both parents healthy.

Allowance: ¥1,200 monthly.

Attends Public 701 Middle School, Class 2-2, roll call no. 28.

First term report card: Japanese 3, Math 2, Social Studies 4, Science 2, English 3, PE 2, Music 2, Art 4, Technology and Home Economics 5.

Strongest subject: none in particular. Weakest subject: Math.

School club: going home. First term of first year, attended softball club, but within one month retired membership of own accord. Gave reason as:

‘Tired.’

No bicycle owned.

No mobile phone owned. No PC owned.

Reads about 2 books per month.

Periodicals subscribed to: also 2 per month.

Friends on the few side.

No close friends. No boyfriend.

Rather than skirts, prefers trousers.

Rarely wears a skirt out of choice.

Resigned to it in the case of uniform.

Likes being barefoot, or sandaled.

Indoors, will go barefoot even in winter.

Put otherwise, does not like socks.

Wearing them feels disgusting.

Not particular about hairstyle, but fringe is long.

Has been growing it continuously since elementary school.

In the past hair was cut by parent, now by self.

Hobby: collecting hats.

Number of hats currently owned: 20. Has a variety of hats (from sun helmets to swimming caps), but hats with a peak would be those favored.

Such hats are worn pulled down low over her eyes.

So that the eyes can't seen.

To get by without seeing eyes.

Does not like to make eye contact with people.

Does not like places with many people.

Personality is withdrawn, sullen, shy.

Vocabulary is limited and does not like speaking.

Cannot speak while looking at the other person's face.

Uncomfortable with people's gaze and does not like being looked at.

Hates both looking at and being looked at.

When talking, always keeps head down, facing the ground, haltingly putting words together in a whisper.

For the most part remains silent.

Mouth sealed.

Speechless, wordless.

Favorite food: Hamburg steak, yakisoba.

Favorite manga: those of the '80s.

Favorite novels: young adult fiction.

Favorite films: fantasy.

Favorite sport: figure skating (spectating).

Favorite games: retro.

Favorite music: folk song.

Favorite color: purple.

Favorite onii-chan: Koyomi Onii-chan.

Favorite person: Araragi Koyomi.

Falling in love with someone is a simply marvelous thing, Nadeko believes.

With just that you feel like going on living, and with just that you cheer up, and you fill with a warm and fuzzy feeling, she believes.

The world is full of hardships, there are so many unpleasant things and so much that doesn't go your way, troubles are only ever piling higher, things which you thought everyday break down all too soon, supposedly reliable rules turn out to be unreliable, and both your body and spirit soon tire and wear out, until eventually you just want to drop down right there, but despite all that, through the emotion of being in love with someone, you can find the strength to persevere, and should that someone perhaps be there beside you, you can stay standing and go onward, she believes.

Even when you want to cry.

You can laugh, she believes.

.....

.....

.....

...But.

But why?

But why, Nadeko?

Why does Nadeko now find herself cowering?

Why is she cowering like this?

Head down, knees drawn in.

Crying like this?

She doesn't understand.

She doesn't understand, she doesn't understand, she doesn't understand.

Honestly, why?

Why did it turn out like this?

She doesn't understand.

And she doesn't even want to understand—

‘Why this, why that. As if ya didn't know why and how—aaan?’

Is what the white scrunchie wrapped around Nadeko's right-hand wrist says—or rather, it's not a scrunchie.

What might also look like a bracelet, is a white snake.

A white snake, with his scales standing on end.

The man (the snake?) himself had told her to say serpent rather than snake—apparently preferring the ring of it.

It suits him, he says.

But regardless, snake and serpent mean the same thing anyway, so it shouldn't be a problem describing this white scrunchie as a snake.

That's not where the problem is.

The problem is elsewhere.

The scrunchie—Serpent-san speaks.

His words brimming with malice.

No why or how—no two ways about it, he says.

'Yer to blame for everything, ain't ya—Nadeko-chan?'

'...No.'

Nadeko objects.

But that objection is in fact no more than just a reaction, and Nadeko knows better than anyone that there's not a scrap of conviction put into those words—Nadeko is merely reflexively denying what Serpent-san says.

A reaction and a reflex.

And not an objection at all.

'It's not Nadeko's fault.'

Try as she might to give it another go, it only rings hollow.

Hollowly empty.

It's quite the same as saying that it is Nadeko's fault.

That said, the reality is that Serpent-san must only be saying this to taunt Nadeko and he himself probably doesn't actually think she has done anything wrong—because, for Serpent-san, things like right and wrong, those sorts of notions invested in ethical values, don't really enter into matters.

For this snake, there's no right and wrong, but black and white.

White or black. Black or white.

That's all there is to it.

No such thing as gray.

And no such thing as judgment.

After all, in his view—

‘Sha! Sha! Sha! Too right, Nadeko-chan. I thought ya were just some gormless brat, but turns out ya do actually grasp my nature. Or have ya only just got it at last? ’Cause, ya know, ain’t it already too late—aaan?’

Says Serpent-san.

She feels she could be swallowed by that gaping mouth—she flinches from those bared fangs.

Her body tightens up.

...No, that’s a lie.

She’s not scared of those fangs anymore.

She thinks nothing of them now.

The first time she “saw” Serpent-san, then she had been startled and scared, but now she would like to go back to that old self who had feared his sharpness.

Nothing’s scary anymore for Nadeko.

There’s nothing to be afraid of left.

There’s nothing left.

Back when those fangs were scary.

Back when she was a normal middle school girl.

...Back when Nadeko was a victim.

Just how much time had past since then?—That makes it sound so long ago, but it is not in fact so long ago at all.

It was just the other day.

She can remember it clearly.

But at the same time, even just the other day is now a past she can’t go back to—her now distant past.

From the bottom of her heart, she thinks of how she longs to go back to that old self, but knows it’s impossible.

‘Nah, it ain’t like it’s impossible, actually—Nadeko-chan. Going back to the past ain’t as hard as you mammals think.’

Says Serpent-san.

Actually, apparently Serpent-san is not, in truth, speaking—he is communicating directly into Nadeko’s thoughts.

That is according to him.

His voice is just a representation, he had said.

Or rather, he had not said.

It is not that he is actually telling her these things.

It's an auditory hallucination.

An illusion.

That is what she is hearing.

That is to say, it is an oddity.

That which is oddly other.

If she had just understood that more deeply—perhaps it would not have come this.

Not to this—not to anything.

‘What I’m saying is, Nadeko-chan, if what ya want is to go back to the past, I wouldn’t mind granting that wish for ya—what with this Serpent-sama here, being what ya would call a god.’

‘God...’

She wonders.

It seems so empty.

It rings so horribly “vacant”.

A title that ought to inspire trust, to Nadeko now sounds so terribly glib. Like the math in her school textbook, it does not register.

God.

God...

People all carry god in their heart. Faith lies only there—who was it that said that?

‘...Would anything change in the past?’

‘Nah, it wouldn’t, it wouldn’t. It’d all just happen over again. A refrain or a repeat. Or no, what we’d have here we could call the Ouroboros. Round and round, forever and eternally, just doing the same thing—and every time it’d come back to Nadeko-chan curled up here, just like this, crying, saying she wants to go back to her old self. And each time I’d grant that wish, all godly like.’

‘...That would be “tragic”.’

It would be “tragic”.

To say death would better, would on this occasion, be no exaggeration.

Conceivably—even living would be better.

To eternally relive these same feelings, she wouldn’t hesitate to call that synonymous with “hell”—but with that on one side, Nadeko also finds herself thinking.

Serpent-san himself—this white snake coiled right now about Nadeko’s right wrist—must have spent an eternity reliving that “hell”.

A snake that has lived for over a thousand years.

A snake that has died for over a thousand years.

Dying and living over and over.

A snake that became a god.

Yes. Say what you will, Serpent-san is a god—a god that Nadeko doesn't believe in.

A god that Nadeko has “revived”.

‘In that case Nadeko doesn't want to go back... Nadeko just wants to stay here like this.’

‘Well then. Well then. However, Nadeko-chan, ya say that, but Nadeko-chan, staying here like this? Right now, Nadeko-chan, do ya even know where ya are and what yer doing?’

‘...Nadeko knows that much.’

That much she knows.

There's all sorts of things she no longer knows, but even Nadeko has not lost herself so far as to not at least know where she is.

She's keeping it together. No, that's a lie.

She's lost herself. She's gone.

But even so, she knows.

Where Nadeko is right now, at least.

That Nadeko is under the shrine, at least.

That she is curled up under the long ruined shrine—the North White Snake Shrine—at least.

‘...What would a stranger think if they saw Nadeko now? Hiding under a shrine. Would they think Nadeko was a thief?’

‘I dunno—but ya know, all humans are more or less basically thieves anyway. Every last one of them, always thinking of nothing but snatching what's rightfully others’.’

‘Are they...?’

‘They are. These past few days, it's Nadeko-chan who ought to have had that drilled into ya better than anyone else in the world. Aaan?’

‘...But surely there's loads of people who aren't like that.’

‘Nah, that “there's loads of times when they aren't like that” is what ya ought to say—it's a matter of what they're like at what times. Even good guys readily become villains, and villains too will do good. Everyone ya ever met will have been the same. Have ya forgotten, aaan?’

‘.....’

She had a feeling she had been led down the garden path there, but it was not particularly for that reason that Nadeko had fallen silent. Nadeko often kept quiet when uncertain, but this time was different.

She was silent for a different reason.

Something rustled.

It was because of that sound that she fell silent.

It was the sort of sound at which the imaginary voice of Serpent-san and her own low whisper were cleared away—erased.

It was the sound of footsteps.

If viewed just as noise—no, heard just as noise, they could be thought of as being only the slightest of footsteps.

But to Nadeko they were a large sound.

A gigantically huge sound.

To Nadeko, those footsteps were like the “oncoming” of a “monster”.

Footsteps that would inevitably destroy everything, turning it all upside down—

‘.....!’

In that instant, it was blown away.

What was? The shrine was.

The shrine building that Nadeko had been hiding herself under the floor of.

That was what had been blown away—Um, there’s that fable of The Three Little Pigs, isn’t there? She hasn’t read it since childhood, so Nadeko doesn’t remember the details, but she’s sure there had been a house which the wolf had blown down.

“That’s quite the incredible lung capacity—how large must that wolf’s lungs be?” she had thought, but she had now, however, witnessed an actual enactment.

Perhaps that tale is not entirely a made-up story after all.

However, this time it had been no house of sticks, but lumber.

Of course, it’s not likely to have been blown away by lung capacity—

‘Nice job taking yer time to ponder fairy tales in this emergency, Nadeko-chan—I had ya down as delicate, but ain’t this a surprise—ya got some brass. Got the knack of separating heart and mind, ya could say—Sha! Sha! So then I weren’t cockeyed crazy in choosing Nadeko-chan for my partner. First to last I’d had my doubts about that, but in the very end of the very end, I’m finally sure.’

No.

He’s crazy.

For starters, Serpent-san did no such thing as choose Nadeko as his partner—neither Serpent-san nor Nadeko had any such luxury of choice. Crazy.

Even while feeling the pieces of the shrine fly away from above her head, Nadeko stayed, not raising her face, still clutching her knees, not even so much as quivering.

‘Oi, oi, Nadeko-chan. Don’t turn away from reality—just how long are ya gonna spend looking down? Whether ya shut yer eyes, avert yer eyes or hide yer eyes, reality ain’t just gonna up and disappear. As if ya don’t know, as if ya didn’t know—aaan?’

She doesn’t need to be told.

After all—even if Nadeko wants to make reality disappear, she couldn’t do it.

She knows.

What she doesn’t know—is why it all turned out like this.

With the roof gone—although, what’s gone is more properly the floor, rather than a roof—no, in fact the whole of the shrine building had gone, so it was of course true to say the roof is gone too—she realized for the first time that at some point it had started to rain. Pelting down.

It’s a squall.

A cloudburst.

...Reflecting on the excellent naming of “cloudburst”, for a moment she had almost let her thoughts run away with themselves, but even without Serpent-san needing to chide her, she knew this wasn’t quite the time for it. But in that moment, Nadeko was already soaked through.

Well, it might be better this way.

Even if her clothes grow heavy with water, this bears little relevance to Nadeko now. And this rain, which started she knows not when, might well hide Nadeko’s tears for her.

‘Ya don’t know when? Oi, oi, yer memory’s muddy, Nadeko-chan—aaan? Weren’t it to get out of the rain that ya hid under the shrine’s floor? Ya ran off into the mountains, but on top of everything it started to rain—’

‘Oh... Did it?’

She had forgotten. It doesn’t come clear to her.

Her “muddy” memory.

Well, Serpent-san says so, so she does think it’s true—however, leaving the truth of that matter aside, there may be no word that suits Nadeko now, quite as well as “muddy”.

Filthy.

Soiled.

Nadeko is well and truly muddied.

Sloppy and dripping.

‘Feels like yer muddied, but not muddled though, Nadeko-chan—well, that’s if ya ask me. Sha! Sha! I mean ya still seem to be keeping yer cool, even now.’

Cool?

Nadeko?

Could she be?

‘Yeah, that’s right—or rather than cool, cold-blooded maybe. Even in this downpour, yer picking up on his footsteps, ain’t ya?’

‘.....’

She was.

She is.

Even with her eyes down—even obstructed by the pounding of the rain, Nadeko could.

Those footsteps.

His footsteps.

These approaching footsteps—she could hear them.

She would hear them.

Because this person—is a person special to her.

The person Nadeko loves.

‘Hey, Sengoku.’

With a thud.

At the call of her name—she felt her heart beat.

She felt it start to pound.

She’s surprised she even has such a thing as a heart left inside her, and embarrassed at herself that she would react this way.

So.

She still has emotions.

Truly embarrassing.

She just wants to disappear.

‘What’s up? Look at me, Sengoku.’

‘.....’

Told to do so.

At last Nadeko raises her face.

Like a rock or a fossil, she had wanted to spend the rest of her life frozen like this—but at his words, her body obeys.

No.

This must be what Nadeko had wanted from the beginning.

She had hid. She had run away.

But even so—it must have been that she had wanted to be found by him.

She must have wanted him to come after her.

She must have wanted him to help her.

And then.

And then, to be exterminated by him—

‘I’ve come to kill you—Sengoku.’

At those words.

At those words—those alluring words—she could just melt.

And of course her body reacts to the sight of him.

The sight of Araragi Koyomi.

The sight she catches—of Koyomi Onii-chan.

She can see barely an inch through the rain, but she could see Koyomi Onii-chan clearly.

Clearly.

So very clearly.

‘Sha! Sha! But it ain’t for some emotional reason that ya can see him. It’s simply that ya can sense Koyomi Onii-chan’s body heat with the characteristic pit organs of a snake—’

Mocks Serpent-san.

It can’t be helped.

It’s Serpent-san’s job to mock.

‘—Yer a snake now, Nadeko-chan, see—and a poison snake to boot.’

‘.....’

Of course, the voice of Serpent-san doesn’t reach Koyomi Onii-chan—and it’s only his usual jeering.

Nadeko really can see him clearly.

It doesn’t matter what she’s told.

She can see him clearly.

It’s not pit organs or any such thing—she can see him, Koyomi Onii-chan, clearly.

‘Didn’t I say? Don’t turn away from reality—ya can’t.’

Yes.

It's only natural.

After all, for close to six years—this is who she's been chasing after.

Even averting her eyes, this is the person she never turned away from.

Ragged school uniform. Long, disarranged hair.

Of his exposed skin, there was not a bit of it unhurt—blood trickled freely from the various wounds.

And Koyomi Onii-chan's left arm had been brutally torn away. No, more correctly it was connected by a scrap of flesh—but it hung perilously, looking ready to fall to the ground at a mere twist of his body.

Koyomi Onii-chan is a bloodsucking demon.

A vampire.

In the past he hadn't used to be, but more recently he had become one, apparently.

Nadeko had been told about this when they had been reunited and had in fact seen his abilities—but to look at him now, however, there was no sign of him manifesting his vampiric regeneration powers at all.

'Oi, oi, ain't that a cruel way to put it, Nadeko-chan? Weren't the one who put yer vampire onii-chan in this awful state, yerself?' Put in Serpent-san.

He doesn't miss a chance to make a retort.

'Poison works on vampires too, ya see. The fangs ya stabbed with him are still stuck piercing him now.'

'...Oh. Right.'

That'll be it.

That's what it'll be.

It was Nadeko. Nadeko—was at fault.

No room for excuses and no grounds for extenuating circumstances.

It was Nadeko's fault.

'Well then... Nadeko's got to fight.'

She says.

And slowly stands up.

Serpent-san on her right wrist. A giant fang in her left hand.

Poison in her heart—she stands up.

At the movement, her wet fringe sways—no, separate to her own will, Nadeko's body was already preparing for battle.

Of white or black, Koyomi Onii-chan, the vampire, would be black—overwhelming black.

With him before her, Nadeko's hair stood on end.

And each and every one of her hairs—was a snake.

A swarm of snakes.

Writhing, entwining snakes.

Yes.

It isn't just Serpent-san.

Nadeko now—has a hundred thousand snakes together with her.

Too many for there to be scope for Nadeko's will to grasp them all—it will be the snakes who will do the grasping.

No.

That's wrong.

She's trying to evade personal responsibility again—for a hundred thousand snakes.

The impetus is Nadeko and Nadeko is the source.

At fault must be the individual called Sengoku Nadeko.

It's "me".

Bound by a snake.

Possessed by a snake, it's "me".

'Hmph. She has fallen thoroughly, in body and spirit both, to the oddity, I deem—no, perhaps one ought, in such a case, rather say she has, to the oddity, ascended.'

Previously unnoticed, but having seemingly been beside Koyomi Onii-chan the whole time, was a little blonde girl who spoke now, her phrasing old-fashioned.

'I think I might at last perceive the why of Aloha Lad treating Forelock Girl so mindfully... No, no more now is she Forelock Girl, but Snake-locks Girl. Or—Snake Godly-locks, one might call her, perhaps.'

'.....'

'My liege.'

Says the little blonde girl to Koyomi Onii-chan.

She speaks to him with an easy familiarity.

Acting like they were partners.

'Waver not. No longer is this your sister's friend, nor your darling junior—'tis an oddity, malevolent and fiendish.'

Naught.

But one single snake.

Said the little blonde girl—Oshino Shinobu.

‘I know. I get that.’

With those words, Koyomi Onii-chan nods.

They were on exactly the same wavelength.

And then he says:

‘This is my enemy—and your prey.’

‘.....’

‘Tuck in, Shinobu.’

At the same time as saying that.

Koyomi Onii-chan and Shinobu-san—paying no heed to the still falling rain, and without exchanging any particular signals, without even eye contact between them—came on at Nadeko.

Oh, how envious she was.

Nadeko thought.

Of who? Of Shinobu-san.

It was Nadeko who really wanted to be in that position.

She wanted to be beside Koyomi Onii-chan.

She wanted to be his partner.

Even if they couldn’t become lovers, she wanted to be by his side.

So then why is it Nadeko—who finds herself, like this, standing against Koyomi Onii-chan?

She doesn’t understand. She doesn’t understand.

She doesn’t understand—why is it that Nadeko.

That “I”.

Am Koyomi Onii-chan’s opponent?

‘Nadeko hates you so much, Koyomi Onii-chan!’

With the giant fang gripped in her left hand, Nadeko took a swing—and struck Koyomi Onii-chan in the heart.

It’s effectiveness was guaranteed.

Guaranteed by god.

Vampires are said to perish if a wooden stake is driven through their heart—but what about being staked with a white snake fang?

Nadeko's beloved.

The heart of the person who was Nadeko's beloved—Ahh.

It burst asunder.

Its flesh and blood fell onto Nadeko.

Like rain.

Like a cloudburst.

‘Hyaharr! Oi, oi, at last ya really gone and done it, Nadeko-chan!’

Serpent-san screeches.

The hundred thousand snakes too, cry out triumphant.

No.

That may only have been Nadeko's own voice—why:

Because Sengoku Nadeko was laughing then.

For all that she wants to cry.

For all that she is crying—she's laughing.

‘Aha.’

She laughs.

And laughs, and laughs, and laughs, and laughs.

It was all so hopelessly funny—

‘Ahahahahaha... Ahaha, ahahahahaha!’

No, no, really.

Why did it turn out like this?—Why?

Why?

003

Now the story goes back a thousand years.

...That's going back too far?

It is a bit. Eh-heh-heh-heh.

Actually, Nadeko doesn't really know much about what happened a thousand years ago either—and what she does know is only what Serpent-san had to say about it, which doesn't have too much credence.

Credence, with the same root as “creed”, sounds somewhat god related, but that's another topic.

You shouldn't just swallow what Serpent-san has to say—or at least certainly not whole, like a snake.

And who really cares about a thousand years ago anyway?

Sooo...

The story will go back only as far as what Nadeko can speak of as having experienced for herself—meaning, only back to the day she met Serpent-san.

That will have some credence.

At least to Nadeko.

Sure, there might be some things that are misremembered—and, in fact, there are—but there are many things in this world which you can't forget even if you try, many things in this world you can't fudge even by lying—and for Nadeko meeting Serpent-san was one such thing.

Why that's.

Because it dragged up that snake from the past—dragged up the snake that once wrapped around Nadeko.

With a slither... Slithering back.

Like Nadeko, for so long dragging out those feelings from elementary school—slithering.

Well, the date that day was October 31st, a Tuesday—which is to say that it happened to be Halloween, but frankly though, it's not an Every morning was one of “dejection”.

More specifically, the “dejection” was for every journey to school—whether the 31st, the 30th or the 1st.

Whether it be October, September or November.

There was no trip to school without “dejection”.

Ever since that day.

Ever since June.

April, for instance, was different.

May, she supposed, had been too.

Kaiki Deishu, an infamous con artist, had come to this town apparently following rumors of the vampire Oshino Shinobu-san, so events may have been set in motion already by April or May—but regardless, the tangible effects of this, including Nadeko's case, were from June—

‘Uh-oh! Loo—!’

With this, Nadeko, burdened with her “dejection”, but nevertheless heading for school with plenty of time to avoid being late, found herself, upon turning a corner, about to be run into by a bike.

It’s a bike. Meaning, a bicycle.

Unlike the city bike which Koyomi Onii-chan rides (from the looks of which it appears Koyomi Onii-chan isn’t fussy at all about bikes) this was a pretty stylishly designed BMX.

Unable to move in that instant, Nadeko’s head span with flashes of her future—ah, Nadeko’s going to get run over, she’ll be hospitalized with a broken bone, she’ll not have to go to school, would Koyomi Onii-chan come to visit her, she better prepare some attractive pajamas—however, the cyclist declared:

‘Loo—!—ks like I’ve got this!’

And yanked the handles through a considerably reckless trajectory.

The front wheel formed a T with the frame.

To be fair, it probably was too late for the brakes to work, but doing this would be structurally the same as the bike’s frame colliding with a wall.

Frankly Nadeko thought that she was small enough to avoid simply by steering around her with a light turn of the handles, without needing to take such drastic action—but then she supposed the cyclist was in a panic too.

The front wheel stops, but still the back wheel alone drives on, and:

Hop.

As a result, the bike passed—no, skimmed—over the top of Nadeko’s head.

As a 4-koma title: “H-OP!”

After that, the bike and its rider went spinning flat across the ground, kicking up sparks like a firework—but anyway, Nadeko had suffered no injuries, let alone a broken bone.

But she was blanched.

...It was over in an instant, but it could not have been more traumatic—it was a traumatic experience. Monsters and the supernatural—those are certainly scary things, but that sort of psychological scariness can be surpassed in a moment by the very real, concrete scariness of something like a “traffic incident”.

For the time being, she quite forgot the “dejection” of going to school.

‘Are... are you OK!?’

Nadeko, coming to her senses with a start, rushes over to where the bicycle lay, having landed in the road—of course, it wasn’t injuries to the bicycle she was worried about, but to the girl who lies pinned underneath it.

It’s a girl.

By the rules of the road, fault probably lay with cyclist for coming out without checking left and right, but it was also the case that Nadeko had been walking along without paying attention—well, no, even leaving that aside, it was a concern.

If a person has collapsed, you would be concerned for them. She may only have fallen off a bike, but even an accident like that could be serious if there's been a blow to the head.

Perhaps it would be best to call an ambulance.

But Nadeko wasn't carrying a phone.

These days, public phones had become a scarcity in the town, so if she were to call for help, she would need to go to one of the houses around here—ah, but talking to a stranger would be quite impossible for Nadeko.

Then maybe if she returns home for now—

‘—I'm fine!’

‘Kyaa!’

Nadeko screamed.

Just as Nadeko reached the girl, she suddenly—like some wind-up toy—sat bolt upright. No, it had the suddenness of an automaton, but to Nadeko the impression was exactly that of a zombie—until then the girl had appeared entirely to be in a limp, motionless state.

Yes.

Just like times when Koyomi Onii-chan is dead.

...

Though that's quite the bizarre description.

‘You hurt, Sengoku-chan?’

The girl turned to Nadeko and asked.

Her face is a breezy smile. Really terrifically charming.

However, Nadeko only quailed at that smiling face.

‘Hmm? Something up, Sengoku-chan? I thought I'd pulled the dodge off, or did I graze a strand of your hair? If so, my bad, my bad, Sengoku-chan.’

‘H... how...’

She couldn't speak properly. Well, Nadeko was timid and shy like this no matter who she was talking to... But today, talking to this person, all the more than usual, she couldn't get her words out properly.

She was “uncommonly” afraid.

It would be fair to say.

‘H-How do you know...? Nadeko's name...?’

‘Hm?’

‘How do you know... Nadeko's... name...?’

‘Hmm?’

The girl’s eyes widen.

The very charming smile was still there—but it had unmistakably stiffened.

Like, a dawning realization were showing through.

‘Oh, that’s right!’

She said and rolled her eyes.

‘Damn, I haven’t met Sengoku-chan yet.’

‘Huh...?’

‘Oh, drat... I’ve got the order wrong... This is all because I’m having such trouble finding Hachikuji-chan... She’s all too irregular, that girl, I tell you. A right nuisance. Oh, what shall we do...’

While saying this, she gets to her feet and pulls the bicycle upright.

And then starting anew:

‘A pleasure to meet you, you lovely young lady!’

She said.

It is resoundingly belated.

Though it’s an “admirable” show of nerve.

‘I’m called Oshino Ougi!’

‘...Oshino?’

Oshino? Isn’t Oshino...

Oshino Meme—Oshino Shinobu.

No, this is someone else.

She was called Oshino Ougi.

This is the first Nadeko had heard that name—just someone with the same family name?

‘Er, what do I say to get me through this one then? All right, well, wasn’t it that with this girl I just have to use Araragi-senpai’s name? OK, er, Sengoku-chan, it was from Araragi-senpai that I heard about you. Look, you can tell by my uniform, right? I’m Araragi-senpai’s schoolmate. Kanbaru-san’s schoolmate too. That’s schoolmate, not cool mate! I’m a first year at Naoetsu High School.’

‘.....’

What a jumble.

Higgledy-piggledy even.

Faced with this person, you wouldn’t have to be Nadeko to be left speechless.

But Koyomi Onii-chan's schoolmate?

Not his cool mate.

And Kanbaru-san's—certainly, now that she mentions it, the uniform she's wearing was indeed that of their school, Naoetsu High School. She knows she's being foolish.

But Nadeko can't help but feel a little reassured at that. As patently suspicious as this grade-A suspicious character is, and really, she knows she's being foolish, but just by virtue of this girl being a student at the same school as Koyomi Onii-chan, she couldn't help but grant her a little bit of trust.

Not that Nadeko thinks this would have made a visible change to her manner.

She is, as ever, still nervously averting her eyes downward.

Not saying anything.

The usual “orthodox” pattern is that, while she holds her silence like this, the other person will always get fed up, and with something like a ‘Forget it!’ go somewhere else, leaving Nadeko to be.

That's the usual pattern.

‘Aw, no good, huh?’

But this girl—Ougi-san, just rolls her eyes again.

Instead of saying “Forget it!” or leaving Nadeko be.

She continued to mutter.

‘I've made a right mess of my start. Well, never mind. Sengoku-chan's case is basically a side-story anyway. This isn't going to end up like it did with Tsubasa-senpai of the Hanekawas—OK, so.’

Ougi-san holds her right hand out to Nadeko.

‘I'm Oshino Meme's niece.’

‘.....’

‘I've heard about you from my uncle too—that you're a girl who is a victim. Even if it's thanks to Kaiki-san's involvement, someone purely a victim is quite the rarity when it comes to oddities.’

Even so, said Ougi-san.

She said brightly.

‘It's not like a person will always be a victim, will they—Sengoku-chan? It's just, there are times when they're a victim and times when they're a victimizer. Or maybe even now you still think yourself a victim?’

‘.....’

‘No response, huh.’

Ougi-san shrugs, blithely.

‘Staring down like that, silent, never saying anything, maybe you really can go on being a victim—but I wonder whether that’ll go so well this time.’

‘.....’

‘This time is an exception—perhaps.’

‘.....’

‘Isn’t it nice and easy being a victim? You get all that sympathy and kindness. Well, victim blaming is also a thing, but essentially that’s a way of saying: “Victimizers are victims too.” I believe Uncle hated this kind of thinking, but, well, it might be apt to see everyone in the world as a victim. And having said that, turning it back around, maybe from the beginning it wasn’t like Sengoku-chan either was quite so purely a victim—and maybe in this story, that will be laid bare.’

‘...S-Story?’

‘Yeah.’

Says Ougi-san.

‘Don’t tell me you thought yourself to be living an ordinary life with no narrative at all, did you, Sengoku-chan?’

With a ‘See ya.’

Ougi-san mounted her bike—which was seemingly still roadworthy after its crash—and, with whirring pedals and nimble handling, departed off on her way.

Like always.

Nadeko thinks.

Nadeko hadn’t been able to speak properly and the other person got fed up and left—just like always.

She hadn’t said “Forget it!” as such, but the result is as always.

The “orthodox” pattern.

Nothing to be surprised about.

There ought not to be.

Only...

‘...Huh?’

There was nothing to be surprised about—and yet, there remained a slight sense of unease. No, but really only slight.

So slight she would doubtless forget it by tomorrow, never to remember again, but there is this unease.

For some mysterious reason, though she had had no mind to be held up talking so long, now that she notices it—now that she looks at the time, a quite substantial amount has gone and passed.

How to put it.

It was as though she had been robbed of time.

She couldn't think that she had enjoyed the conversation with Ougi-san so much as to forget the passage of time, but—only, why was it? Sometime again.

She felt she was going to have to talk with that person—why would that be?

No.

To tell you the conclusion upfront, in fact no such opportunity would arrive—after all, before Nadeko could ever meet her again. She would be killing Koyomi Onii-chan.

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Incidentally, Nadeko had ignored the hand that Ougi-san had held out to her—which is not to say that she hadn't seen it.

With her eyes downcast, not looking at Ougi-san's face, the hand was there in Nadeko's field of vision—in fact, what with staring down, it was practically the only thing that she could see. If Nadeko wasn't mistaken, Ougi-san must have wanted to shake Nadeko's hand.

Nadeko can't stand people's body heat—she can't stand to feel the warmth of other people's skin. She finds the mingling of her own and someone else's body heat deeply unpleasant.

When shaking hands with someone, for example, the sensation of that person's hand being warm—or alternatively cool—is agony for her.

It's enough to make her sweat.

That did mean though, to go into specifics, that she was surprisingly fine with being touched over her clothes.

'To be excessively averse to contact with other people, is an indication of the strength of self-consciousness. We could infer from this, that while you appear meek, you may instead carry a strong resolve against dependence on others.'

—Was what she had been told when she had spoken to Hanekawa-san about it, but Nadeko supposes this had been Hanekawa-san's fashion of kindness.

She had probably been choosing her words tactfully.

In actuality, Nadeko is just a coward.

She is simply afraid even of depending on others.

But then, if you ask Nadeko, the real mystery is everyone else though—how do they do it?

So easily trust their hearts to others?

Let themselves be touched?

Nadeko doesn't want to be touched and she won't trust anyone.

Well, leaving all that aside, Nadeko has reached her school. She has arrived at her destination.

Her traffic incident with Ougi-san (Ougi-san's self-inflicted crash, in the end), hadn't made Nadeko late—she may have been somehow held up longer than she thought, but Nadeko leaves home with ample time to cope with contingencies on her commute.

What had made her start guarding against such contingencies was, but of course, what had happened in June.

But rather than prudence, it was probably foremost anxiety.

...Come to mention it.

That hadn't been all that intolerable.

That experience, back then, of having a snake wrapped directly onto her skin—Ah, yes.

She had learned about this in Science class. A snake is a cold-blooded animal—so it wouldn't particularly have its own body heat.

Today's October 31st. While it had yet to snow, it was already cold enough to be rightly called winter—it's cold and chilly out. Which means it's the time of year when snakes, being reptiles, may already be dormant.

Entering the school building, she goes to change her shoes.

From outdoor shoes, to indoor ones.

Class 2-2's shoe rack, 2nd row from the top, is for Nadeko too high to reach without a bit of a stretch—every time she comes to school and every time she heads home, meaning every time that she uses this shoe rack, she thinks of how she wishes she were a bit taller.

She takes off her outdoor shoes first and, standing on the duckboard, extends her arm upward.

She reaches with her fingers into her compartment—

'Hya—Uwah!'

She's screamed again. The second time today.

For all that she's normally quiet, naturally even Nadeko's screams are loud.

Though she had frozen when almost run down by Ougi-san, this time she takes a dramatic pratfall.

She's in a slightly indecent pose.

Someone watching may have thought it looked like she had lost her balance stretching too far and slipped in her socks on the duckboard.

Like a klutz.

But she hadn't. That's not it.

Nadeko, unable yet to stand, looks at her right hand—the hand she had just put into the compartment.

'.....'

Seeing nothing out of the ordinary with that hand, she then looks toward the shoe rack—but all she could see there was shoe storage.

Nadeko's indoor shoes were protruding slightly.

But she couldn't see what she was looking for.

No white snake.

‘.....’

But she had felt something.

For Nadeko, a nostalgic feeling, she could probably call it—that feeling, like a snake wrapping itself onto her skin.

Supple and hard.

Sleek, but scaly.

And without feeling body heat.

That feeling of life—that binding.

‘.....’

Skin crawling.

Nadeko stands and then stretches, cautiously trying to peek into her compartment—only of course, she hasn't the height.

If only she had something to stand on, but she could see nothing so convenient nearby.

For now, she settles for gingerly using her fingernails to draw her shoes out the rest of the way from the compartment—she then checks inside the shoes.

Empty. There's nothing in them.

No socks, no human feet, and of course—no white snake.

It isn't there, and isn't to be seen.

‘.....’

Well, it's true Nadeko is a person with fewer friends than most, she's shy and rarely talks, and with how uncomfortable she is with contact with other people, even to the point of disgust, she can be a difficult kid to deal with, but normally, it's not like she gets bullied—so she's never had a snake put in with her shoes.

Come to that, that's going beyond the level of bullying. Any human who would do such a thing would be even scarier than the bullying itself.

Ummm, in other words, what Nadeko wants to say is, Nadeko is not a person of such significance that anyone would take the trouble to bully her by putting a live snake in with her shoes.

For being hated is also itself a talent and legitimate idiosyncrasy.

Even in June—that had been a matter of various things that had occurred outside of Nadeko's involvement.

Oshino-san, and Ougi-san this morning, had said Nadeko was a “victim”—but to Nadeko’s mind she wasn’t even a victim in that sense. The word collateral.

She had to feel this seemed most appropriate to her.

Given.

Given the current dire state of Class 2-2—she couldn’t help but think that.

Yes.

Regardless of things like Nadeko’s personality or disposition—the way Class 2-2 was now, no one was going to be up to any bullying.

‘...May’ve just imagined it.’

Just to be careful, she hopped up a few times to try to get a (poor) view of inside the compartment and there seemed to be nothing amiss.

Even so, it’s curious.

If she had simply imagined it, then it was only her imagination, and that would naturally be for the best—all’s well that ends well—but why was it?

If she had only imagined that sensation of a snake binding onto her—then why was it that, without having been able to see that snake, Nadeko would have felt that it were a “white” snake—

‘What happened, Sengoku-san? Is everything OK?’

A girl from the same year asked Nadeko, concerned about her (what could only have looked like) bizarre actions at the shoe rack.

In her small voice.

‘It’s fine.’

Nadeko replies, lowering her head.

‘It’s fine.’

Nadeko couldn’t tell whether the girl had heard or not, but she headed off for her classroom as though satisfied—the girl was in a different class from Nadeko, so naturally it was for a different classroom that she headed.

The shoe rack here being Class 2-2’s, students from her own class are not absent from around Nadeko—but they do not ask about her behavior.

It is without even looking at her, and without saying a word to each other, that each of them heads off for their classroom.

Yes.

They would, wouldn’t they?

That’s just the way Class 2-2 was these days.

For this is the “dejection” of her school life.

If you asked whose fault it was, well, it wasn't particularly anyone's fault... But should, perforce, an anonymous vote be used to pick a single person as the source who called forth the current state of affairs, then Nadeko thinks it would be, unanimously, that con artist, Kaiki Deishu-san.

He's a shoo-in.

No, this is making it sound like he's an acquaintance, but Nadeko has never met the man.

Only, he's more than an acquaintance.

In terms of the influence he's had, he's a truly major figure. A VIP, you could call him.

With the exception of her family, Koyomi Onii-chan and Tsukihi-chan, he is the person who has left the deepest impression in her life so far—why, because it's thanks to him that her life has become so destabilized.

Derailed. And broken.

.....

Ah, would this be the sort of way of putting things that reeks a bit of victimhood?

Oh dear, oh dear. Nadeko takes that back.

What's destabilized is Nadeko's surroundings.

What's derailed. And what's broken too.

They're the things around her, not Nadeko.

Nadeko, for her part, is still living even now, currently, exactly as she has—without any change, since long before Kaiki-san came to this town.

Only.

Now the classmates around Nadeko—have all simply become the same as her. That's really all it is.

That's why, to make a point of it, it's Nadeko's classmates who are the victims.

This may be taking the story through something of a detour, but Nadeko does think it's important, so let her talk a bit about past events. To put it simply.

The events of June.

Or rather, one page from the case file of Kaiki-san's scams—though Nadeko herself does not know all that much about it, she has, to some extent, heard tell of it from Tsukihi-chan of Tsuganoki 2nd Middle School's Fire Sisters.

Kaiki Deishu is a spiritualist, who styles himself a Ghost Buster.

It may make sense to say he is in the same line of work as Oshino-san, but it seems he is a little different in his disposition, as Kaiki-san apparently uses his spiritual abilities wholly for the pursuit of profit.

To call him a charlatan psychic would be putting it “forthrightly”.

However, perhaps it’s for the best to put it “forthrightly” here.

This year, the place the man had apparently chosen to set himself up in was this town where Nadeko lives—Kaiki-san had made the town’s middle schools his target.

In which no incidents occur.

A class in which nothing happens.

A class in which everyone feigns sleep.

A class in which no one wants to do anything.

Surely everyone here must be looking forward to being assigned different classes next year—it can’t get any worse than the terrible state now, Nadeko thinks, so she wouldn’t say she is any exception.

Though she thinks things might work out.

She also thinks things might never work out.

That it is too late for things to work out.

‘.....’

Good morning.

She thought of saying, but of course could not, so Nadeko, like always, entered the classroom wordlessly—there are some students who turned at her entrance, while others made no reaction, but that too is not something Nadeko pays much attention to anymore.

She’s used to it.

She’s used to this—this atmosphere like she had just boarded a train at a station.

Keeping a low posture to avoid attention, Nadeko goes to her own desk.

They’ll have a short test during homeroom this morning, so she’ll need to prepare—

‘.....’

...This time she didn’t scream.

It was the third time after all.

And she was in this classroom—if someone screamed in a train, they would be thought weird, wouldn’t they?

But while it was the third time she had been given cause to scream, it was, however, only the second time in terms of snakes.

From within Nadeko’s desk—this time clearly—a white snake had appeared.

With a slither, it crept out, baring its fangs.

But quickly it had gone again.

Nadeko, as though nothing had happened, sat in her chair and prepared for the test—well, perhaps even if this had been the first time, Nadeko may not have screamed.

After all, this class was already being tightly constricted by something like a snake.

Something coiling onto her, is nothing to scream about anymore—so long as she isn't bitten into.

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...Only, well, that attitude did not last for long.

It wasn't an issue of getting used to it.

From inside her bag, her pencil case, PE clothes, the cleaning cupboard, around the corners of corridors and even, at the worst, from between the pages of textbooks and exercise books—a “white snake” appearing, slithering toward her. With this sort of thing carrying on, it's only natural her spirit would break. She would lose her strength.

There's no longer any surprise. But it's draining.

She's exhausted. And fed up with it.

It feels like she's opening a whole row of jack-in-the-boxes.

Knowing already that something will happen if the boxes are opened, and yet having to go on and on opening them all the same, is itself a manner of “torment”.

Hallucinations.

Is what she thinks they are.

Despite believing herself to be fine, while spending her school life in this “dejection”, she may have been under a severe stress, with starting to hallucinate a white snake being an outcome of that. After all, to bring up a very famous example, wasn't the manga artist Eguchi Hisashi-san said to have suffered hallucinations of an albino alligator?

Only—if it weren't a hallucination.

If by any chance it were “one of those”.

...She could not help but consider.

According to Oshino-san, a specialist, “Meet with an oddity, and to oddities you will be drawn,” so apparently someone who has been affected by an oddity even just once, will be more easily affected by an oddity after that too.

No such thing had happened to Nadeko outside of that June—but perhaps now the first time was upon her.

The first time, or rather the second.

Though she did, of course, feel scared.

She had been braced for it.

One day, she had felt, such a day as this would come—enough, that what may have been scarier were all the days of nothing happening. Over “something may happen”, she feels “something has happened” is more bearable, you see.

A state of anticipation will only compound stress.

In her class, Nadeko learns that daily.

Only, with that said, against this phenomenon, Nadeko has no measures she can take.

If anything, when previously she had attempted to deal with this kind of situation through what knowledge she could gather by self-study (or what could barely be called that—she had stood reading in a bookstore) it had only made the situation worse.

Something that would have been well and good if left alone.

Without being left—had become something awful.

She had had a torrid time of it.

So she waited until the end of the day’s lessons, called Koyomi Onii-chan from the public phone inside the school, and explained to him what had happened.

She had been told by him before.

That if anything related to oddities were ever to occur, she must soon phone him.

So that’s what she did.

‘A snake...? A snake, huh.’

However, Koyomi Onii-chan’s reaction was frankly rather indistinct.

Nadeko thinks that, what with her having already got somewhat used to the shock, the way she explained it must lack a sense of urgency—instead she wished she had phoned him back when she first saw (felt) the white snake in the shoe rack.

That was the one time of which Nadeko could say unequivocally that she had been shocked.

‘Is it the snake from before?’

‘No... Not that. It’s not.’

She can’t speak properly.

Please don’t look down on Nadeko. Even if it’s Koyomi Onii-chan she’s talking to, she can’t speak fluently.

She tenses up no matter who it is. Even when speaking to her parents.

‘The snake before... how to put it... like, it was invisible, wasn’t it? But this time, it’s visible... Um, though not the first time, but after that...’

‘Oh? Hmm...’

Nadeko knows she’s not putting things coherently, but Koyomi Onii-chan listens to her patiently.

He's a man of fortitude.

'So the way things seem right now, there's been no real harm? It's not like it's fastened itself onto your body or—'

'N-Nope. It hasn't.'

Nadeko abruptly cuts in.

Now Nadeko's being the snake, ho-ho.

It had been with the thought of not wanting him to worry, but she wonders if she hasn't achieved the opposite instead. Koyomi Onii-chan, in spite of an uninviting look about him, is someone whose emotions show easily in his expression, so he's surprisingly easy to talk to face to face, but talking to him on the phone like this, unable to see him, it's hard to know what he might now be thinking.

Not knowing this, she's struggling with what she's saying.

She's struggling with her thoughts too.

How can Nadeko properly explain the situation she's been put in now?

...Put in?

Nadeko's put in it, is she?

'From, like, some kind of gap or inside a space that had been closed, those sorts of places... Suddenly appearing...'

'Hmm... So essentially, you're saying that from "places you couldn't previously see", a snake all of a sudden appears. Well, certainly snakes are known to "lurk". They're not keen on bright places, I guess—'

Koyomi Onii-chan goes over what Nadeko had told him, mulling it.

'—Might be a type of "shocker" oddity? The sort that just surprise humans for no reason...'

'? There's such a thing? Oddities that just surprise humans...?'

Like a nopperabo? No, Nadeko seems to remember reading, from when she had been researching such stories, about how the faceless nopperabo, being nopperabo, have rather sad origins.

'Well, yeah, see, superstitions fundamentally have a lot to do with attaching reasons in order to explain that which is unexplainable.

And, if you think about what surprises people, that's the unexplainable. Same as the things that go bump in the night. Oddities are inseparable from the shocking.'

Says Koyomi Onii-chan.

The way he talks about it, he's sounding like an expert.

So dashing. So splendid.

Of course, Nadeko knows that Koyomi Onii-chan must be repeating back what he had heard from Oshino-san or Hanekawa-san, or perhaps the little blonde vampire girl, but even taking that away, she thinks Koyomi Onii-chan is splendid.

...Although if you did take that away, quite what remains, is a question even for her.

‘But... Apart from at the shoe rack, Nadeko didn’t get surprised.’

‘I’ve thought this before, but... You know what, Sengoku? You’re actually pretty mentally strong.’

‘? Really?’

She’s not though.

‘Well, if I saw snakes appear out of gaps, I’m confident I’d be shocked every time. I reckon I’d make quite the winsome reaction faces, even if I do say so myself.’

‘You always know how to please!’

‘...Ah, no, I wouldn’t say that... Well, never mind...’

Koyomi Onii-chan was silent for a bit.

‘OK, so... Well, it’s not like all snakes are poisonous. Some are harmless. Yeah...’

I made a mistake that time with the jagirinawa though—says Koyomi Onii-chan.

? A mistake? Had he made some kind of mistake?

What Nadeko remembers of that time, was Koyomi Onii-chan saving her without a hitch...

‘Can you think of anything that might be the cause of it?’

‘Cause?’

‘Something that could be a trigger, or whatever, for why there’d be an illusion of a white snake appearing over and over in your surroundings... Like, say, anything you remember doing?’

‘Remember doing...’

She thinks.

But nothing comes to mind.

So, without having come up with anything:

‘...No. There’s nothing.’

She said.

‘Hmm... With an oddity, there’s supposed to be some fitting reason behind it, apparently, but, well, your case is a bit different then—it was last time too.’

‘.....’

‘Well, if it’s not urgent, then maybe let’s just wait until night.’

‘Night?’

‘Wait for Shinobu to wake up, is what I mean—lately, she’s been living a very strict routine. By lately, that’s about the last two months, though.’

‘Oh... Why?’

‘Ah, she really screwed things up pretty badly the other day, you see... Well, that was mostly my fault too though, but Shinobu’s taken it hard, and is still down about it. She took it hard enough that for a time she spoke to me politely.’

‘.....’

So whatever it was that happened, the main point is that, feeling very down has, apparently, made that girl take her lifestyle more seriously. That following proper sleeping patterns, her being a vampire, means sleeping through the day and waking at night, is perhaps a little ironic.

‘Shinobu didn’t assist that time with the jagirinawa—but now we’re going to have to get her to lend us some help.’

‘.....’

That Shinobu-san had not assisted that time would be down to her relationship with Koyomi Onii-chan not having been as good then as it is now, so she wouldn’t even have been asked in the first place.

Nadeko doesn’t know the girl all that well, but even so, that she had somehow apparently been reconciled with Koyomi Onii-chan had been pleasing news.

Just what you would expect of Koyomi Onii-chan.

‘Um... Shinobu... Shinobu-san eats oddities, doesn’t she?’

Nadeko had heard that was the sort of vampire she was.

The Oddity Killer or some such.

‘So, would she... eat... the white snake Nadeko saw?’

‘It might come to that—but it’s not like it’s OK to have her just eat anything and everything, so what we actually need is the knowledge in her head. Specialist knowledge passed on from Oshino. Anyways, if she complains of hunger, I’ll just have to feed her Mister Donut’s wares, pre-chewed.’

‘Yep. OK...’

Huh? Pre-chewed?

No, Nadeko must have misheard him say free food.

...Does Shinobu-san ever pay?

‘By the way, lately she’s been hooked on baked donuts. Even living scrupulously, she’s not one to miss out on Misdo’s new products. When it comes to knowledge, really it’s Hanekawa we’d want to ask—but now she’s not around.’

‘She’s not? Hanekawa-san... What happened?’

A late introduction—Hanekawa-san is Koyomi Onii-chan’s classmate and friend.

He also says she is his savior.

Nadeko has not met her many times, but even so, what little she’s seen of her was enough to make her think: “Ah, there’s something different about this person.”

Completely different.

So much so, that Nadeko had run away in fear when she first met her—Koyomi Onii-chan seems to have thought that Nadeko's escape act that time had been due to her being shy and afraid of strangers, but however shy and afraid of strangers Nadeko may be, even she doesn't run away upon meeting someone for the first time.

In fact, she would be scared of the consequences, so no matter how fearsome the person she is faced with is, Nadeko would probably just keep her head down and freeze.

Even fleeing is itself a decision, and is in a sense its own form of assertiveness.

It is quite beyond Nadeko.

Despite this, on that occasion—when she had run headlong, when had she run without turning back—yes.

That's because it had been Hanekawa-san.

There had been something she had felt with her skin.

Like a kind of—strong enough to change the temperature of everything around—body heat.

The warmth of flesh.

Felt without touching, through the air—a mass of heat.

It had been like looking at a fire.

...After that, Nadeko had learned that Hanekawa-san was a very nice person, so she's not so afraid as at that time anymore, but there's no mistaking that she is a "different" person—so just at hearing Koyomi Onii-chan speak her name, Nadeko's body had jumped slightly. Asking what happened.

That had included the sense—though discourteous—that perhaps Hanekawa-san had "done something".

'No, it's not particularly that anything happened. She's just off traveling.'

'Traveling?'

Nadeko tilted her head at the unexpected word. Travel?

'But isn't there school now?'

'Yeah. But she's taken PTO...'

'Paid time off!?'

This was a shock.

Did high schools have such a system?

Perhaps this means the rumors about Hanekawa-san being paid to attend school had been true...? She's a force to be reckoned with. 'Ah, no, it wasn't paid. She put a request in for permission for leave... And for a month, she's gone off on a trip. Well, she wasn't planning on going on to university or looking for a job either, so she doesn't need to bother about her attendance, only, there's that, but my Hanekawa's real strait-laced, you know, so she wanted to do things by the book...'

‘Hmm... But a trip? Where did she go?’

‘Around the world.’

‘Around the world!?’

Another shock.

Only, this shock is of a different nature to the shock before—for wasn’t Hanekawa-san’s plan for after graduating, rather than university or employment, “going to see the world”?

Rumor had it that it was apparently an affinity for Oshino-san’s way of life, though Nadeko didn’t know the real intention—but?

Around the world?

‘S-She brought her... plans forward?’

‘No, no. She said that while she’s still in the clear-cut position of being a high school student, in advance of going to see the world after graduation, she’s going for a preview.’

‘Preview...’

She is indeed no mere mortal.

To think she would scout locations in advance of her world travels... It would appear Nadeko’s assessment had not been altogether mistaken. ‘It’s kind of a rehearsal too, apparently... Well, she’s got a mobile phone with her, so it’s not like we couldn’t get in touch, but I wouldn’t want to give her something to worry about when she’s abroad, you know.’

‘.....’

Koyomi Onii-chan’s consideration toward Hanekawa-san, feels a little different from reticence—usually though, he’s keen to call Hanekawa-san even without a reason.

Perhaps it is even that when he does have a reason, that is when he does not want to call.

It’s a strange way of keeping a distance.

‘So... night?’

‘Yeah. Wait after you get home—I’ll call you. Let’s see... Since it’s around 10 p.m. that Shinobu wakes... Expect it to be around then.’

‘...Yep... Got it.’

Nadeko agrees to Koyomi Onii-chan’s arrangement.

Tonight, 10 o’clock. Naturally she had no prior plans.

There was something on TV she wanted to watch, but it’ll be recorded to HDD, so it’s fine.

‘If there’s anything before then, call me any time—I don’t think there’s much I can do, but I can at least be there with you.’

With her.

Would that mean beside her?

‘Yep... Thank you. It’s probably fine though.’

If Koyomi Onii-chan is going to help her, a snake is nothing to be afraid of.

And besides, she just needs to be careful of gaps and shadows, and worst comes to worst, she’ll only get a “shock”.

‘So, tonight at 10 o’clock. Nadeko’s looking forward to it.’

‘Ah?’

At that.

Koyomi Onii-chan’s voice lowered.

Ah, thinks Nadeko too.

But with quite a different meaning and tone.

Drat. A slip of the tongue.

‘Oi, Sengoku—you OK? Looking forward to it...? What’re you saying? Aren’t you in trouble?’

‘...Um.’

She goes quiet.

She’s not sure what to say.

She’s not sure—what she can say as an excuse.

‘Maybe I’d better come quickly after all? You seem confused, you know—what you just said, that’s not good. Looking forward to having to talk about oddities...’

‘N-No, that’s not it...’

Nadeko could tell over the phone that Koyomi Onii-chan was anxious about her—Nadeko felt simply awful about that.

‘...Sorry.’

But, still not sure what to say, she can only apologize.

Apologizing when she’s tongue-tied is a habit of Nadeko’s—she’ll either clam up, or she’ll apologize.

Nadeko doesn’t know what else to do when she’s at a loss.

She’s always had to live life like that.

‘When you’re in difficulty, just apologizing to end matters really doesn’t do at all; the meaning of the expression: “If sorry were enough, we wouldn’t need the police,” is much more profound than people think.’

These are words received from the exceptional Hanekawa-san.

They were stirring words.

But Nadeko hasn't been able to live up to them.

Just because you've been moved by some fine words, doesn't mean your life will change, she supposes.

'Sorry... Koyomi Onii-chan.'

'No, it's not something you need to apologize for...'

'It's fine. It's nothing... A-Anyway, at night. Um, er... 10 o'clock, yep?'

'Oi, Sengoku—'

'The ph-phone card's running out... Oh, there's a noise. It's really loud. Beep, beep it's going.'

Click.

Nadeko put the telephone receiver down.

Her telephone card (one she got from Animate as a bonus item. Koyomi Onii-chan has lamented: "You use them!?") emerged, more than half its credit still remaining.

What a kerfuffle.

She had escaped a tight spot... But, no, it was a mean excuse to use against Koyomi Onii-chan, who was only worrying about Nadeko because of her foolhardy slip of the tongue. And of all the ways of getting out of that tight spot, she could hardly conceive of one worse.

'.....'

Nevertheless, it was a slip of the tongue.

Enough of a slip to tie it.

That she would be looking forward to it—that may have been her real feelings coming tumbling out, but it was one thing she had certainly not to say.

Koyomi Onii-chan.

Somewhere in her heart, Nadeko was glad to be able to have an "adventure" about oddities once more, with Koyomi Onii-chan.

To be able to be saved by Koyomi Onii-chan.

Had excited Nadeko.

When she saw the white snake—that after the first time she had not been surprised, was perhaps because the emotion that she had felt foremost, more than fear or shock, had been delight.

At having something about which she could talk to Koyomi Onii-chan for advice.

She had been thinking about it for so long. She must have been waiting for just such an opportunity.

...How embarrassing. But these were her honest feelings.

Sengoku Nadeko wanted to be saved by Koyomi Onii-chan—just like that time.

‘.....’

Feeling truly ashamed at the way she was taking advantage of Koyomi Onii-chan’s kindness—feeling tight with worry about whether those emotions had been exposed to Koyomi Onii-chan.

Nadeko reaches for her telephone card.

And as she does, from behind the back of the card, once again the white snake appears—of course, this doesn’t shock her anymore, however, with some time having passed since the last one, and so caught off guard, she reflexively pulled back her hand.

In doing so, she knocks the telephone and the receiver falls off its hook—stretching and contracting, the cord bounces and wiggles about as if it too were a snake.

In the moment her attention had been taken by that, the white snake had already disappeared.

‘Ah... oh yes, Nadeko forgot to ask Koyomi Onii-chan about Ougi-san...’

While that thought springs to her mind unprompted, Nadeko takes hold of the phone receiver.

‘But... really, what could this phenomenon be?’

It’s mystifying.

With an oddity there should be some fitting reason behind it—but once again, there’s absolutely nothing that comes to mind for Nadeko— ‘Oi, oi, ya can’t be serious, Nadeko-chan—aaan?’

From the unhooked receiver—came that voice.

No, that can’t be right.

The telephone card has been taken out, and even if it hadn’t, the hook had already been depressed—and besides, the voice heard bore no resemblance to Koyomi Onii-chan’s.

How to put it.

It was a voice in which no trace of kindness or care was felt—only aggression and violence.

‘Ya reckon ya ain’t done nothing?—Ain’t that the richest. Clueless brats like you are the worst pain in the arse, I tell ya—ain’t got the first idea of what yer crushing under yer feet as ya lead yer merry lives.’

‘.....Wh-Who.....?’

Nadeko brings her face close to phone receiver and speaks into it.

Shaken terribly, Nadeko knows her voice will quaver, but she has no choice but to ask.

Against that voice—that scolding tone.

She couldn’t remain silent.

‘Wh-What are you—’

But there was no reply.

What there was instead of a reply—what appeared instead of a reply—were white snakes.

A great many of them.

From inside the phone receiver, from the many small holes of the mouthpiece and speaker, looking for all the world like tokoroten noodles being extruded, emerged a mass of white snakes—

‘Ky-kyaaaaaaa!’

She screamed, naturally.

Quite apart from what any snake might be doing, in visual terms it was a spectacularly grotesque image—a scene that would unmistakably be cut from any anime adaptation.

This too, was of course an illusion.

And by the time Nadeko had moved herself clear of the telephone—they had all disappeared.

‘Come over to North White Snake Shrine, Nadeko-chan.’

With the white snakes gone, from out of the speaker came that voice.

Even though, at this distance, she should not have been able to hear it—that voice came.

What could this be?

She’s not just seeing things, but hearing them too.

What could be happening to Nadeko?

Leaving Nadeko to her bewilderment, the imaginary voice continues.

‘I’ll tell ya there—what ya trample over on yer way through life.’

‘.....’

‘There ain’t no victims. In this world, there ain’t no one who ain’t a victimizer—every last one of ya, yer all a right bunch of self-absorbed bastards.’

007

This is something Nadeko had seen on the news the other day, but apparently there are people out there who will call the police, or call for an ambulance to take them to hospital, at the drop of a hat...

It seems that what those people desire is “being saved by people”—that is, according to the pundit, they feel they “want to be a person who will be saved by someone.”

They feel they “want to be someone who is given attention to, who is worried over, who is given help to.”

Since, in other words, being given help equals being loved and, additionally, being treated as being needed—it’s apparently a state of mind in which going out of one’s way to make a nuisance of oneself to others, and getting forgiveness for it after, is used as a method of getting affirmation of oneself being loved and being needed.

Apparently this is all done subconsciously.

In no way do they do it deliberately.

Only, whether deliberate or otherwise, to someone like Nadeko, it seems a very understandable thing—to someone who can't see the meaning in their own life, to someone who can't see their own self-worth, being shown concern from someone else is extremely important.

Being in this situation now in which she can seek help from Koyomi Onii-chan.

She would be lying if she said her heart didn't beat faster.

She would be lying if she said she wasn't excited, wasn't aflutter.

...Yes.

Like that time.

‘.....’

This being as she is, Nadeko may well indeed be self-absorbed—but she was legitimate, so didn't think she could count as a bastard. Perhaps a bit nitpicky as a comeback?

She couldn't just wait for night.

Nadeko thinks that the right course of action to take, would be to return home from school and stay put there, waiting for the phone call from Koyomi Onii-chan.

She knows that much.

Just because she has heard a voice now, doesn't mean the situation has changed—it's made no difference to there being “no real harm” so far.

What she sees is just seeing things.

What she hears is just hearing things.

But—what she had heard that voice say wasn't something she could just let pass.

“Victim”.

One to whom harm is done.

...Nadeko had no intention of thinking about herself in that way—it may be true that Nadeko did have something of a persecution complex, but she did not have, however, any intention of going about thinking of herself as a victim.

Since even if you have been harmed, that doesn't have to make you a victim—necessarily.

...So, upon hearing that voice—that utterly compassionless, rough and violent voice—Nadeko could not be unmoved.

She could not be unagitated.

She could not be unmoved.

After returning home from school, she changes out of her uniform.

Into overalls and a jacket.

The overalls were borrowed from her mother, and the jacket is her father's. Nadeko is small, so they hang very loose, but this is a disguise, so this may even be for the best.

She needed to go unnoticed, was how she considered it.

Last, rather than the peaked hat she always puts on when going out, Nadeko put on a red knit hat she had bought when she went skiing. One she could pull down deep, low over her eyes.

Nadeko straps on a waist pouch she uses for outings, fills it with various items, changes her shoes too for outdoor loafers different from what she normally wears, and leaves the house.

And she headed for the mountain.

Crowned by North White Snake Shrine, where she had been reunited with Koyomi Onii-chan—that mountain.

Since Nadeko doesn't have a bicycle, it is briskly by foot that she goes—the journey there takes around half an hour. From here to the summit should take her about another half an hour.

For Nadeko and her little stamina, it is quite the slog.

She couldn't make a passion of mountaineering.

Only, while she may be climbing a mountain, it is only a case of going straight up a single path, properly laid with steps (albeit old)—so even if she has to take rests, it will take time, but she will eventually arrive.

At the summit. At that place.

...Yes, just as a person, within one's life, just by living, will eventually arrive at the truth.

She will arrive.

That was the way she felt—when she somehow, in actuality, came to reach North White Snake Shrine at the summit, that was the way Nadeko's mood felt.

In June, when she had gone up the mountain many times, Nadeko's body had had a "snake" bound tightly around it—so in comparison to then, this could be said to be a relatively easy journey.

But when she arrived at the summit.

Nadeko—went limp.

Having made the climb for the first time in a while, she hadn't exactly felt out of practice, but she certainly hasn't the reserves to feel like she's missed it either.

‘.....’

No, maybe not “limp”.

Call it dumbstruck, perhaps.

At that sight—Nadeko was struck dumb.

When she passed through the rotted remains of the ruined torii gate, the view that presented itself to Nadeko—was a huge number of snakes, fastened about the grounds of the shrine.

Teeming, perhaps they should be said to be.

They are not white snakes—they are everyday, normal snakes of normal coloration. These snakes have had their bodies cut into lengths—and, with gouges, been skewered, onto the ground, onto trees, onto the shrine.

The snakes—are alive.

Despite being chopped up into pieces, they are alive and twitching—not only the heads, but the sections of body too—looking for all the world like ikizukuri.

Even in that audacious condition, they have not expired.

It's said a snake won't die unless its head is smashed—but these brim with a vitality beyond what could be explained with those words. Of course, crucified like this, they would surely not be able to live on for long—sooner or later, they must surely die. It is a horrendous scene.

Undoubtedly a no go for anime.

Nadeko doesn't know whether animal rights groups include reptiles as a target for protection, but no one would stay silent about a scene like this.

Except—Nadeko was silent.

Sengoku Nadeko remained silent.

Whenever she's faced with trouble—she goes silent.

'...But ya ain't surprised, are ya? Like ya expected it, like ya knew what were coming, ya didn't so much as shriek.'

Abruptly, without any forewarning, she hears the imaginary voice—this time, it felt as though it were whispering directly into her ear, without coming through anything like the modern instrument of the phone's speaker.

It was as though some thing.

Some sickening thing, were coiling itself about Nadeko—were binding itself onto her.

But no.

In these grounds, what's sickening more than anything else—is Nadeko.

After all—

'Right. After all... What wrought this nightmarish vision of hell, were none other than yerself, weren't it, Nadeko-chan?'

'.....'

She couldn't deny it.

But involuntarily, she shakes her head.

'N-Nadeko—'

And she says.

Against that voice—pitifully.

‘Nadeko... didn’t do th-this... much.’

‘Right. This is only an illusion—’

Just as she thinks she hears the voice say this, the scene before her eyes changes—the great mass of snakes, perhaps as many as a thousand, along with the gouges that skewered them, faded away like a “mirage”—no, it was not that all of them had disappeared.

Some alone remained.

Since they had been cut apart, she couldn’t tell how many there actually were—but by counting those heads that she could see, she judged there to be about twenty of them.

Twenty...

‘Let’s see, were it about this many? Nadeko-chan, the number that ya did in?’

That ya did in.

Carved up.

And crucified—was it this many snakes?

Said the illusory voice—as though to torment Nadeko.

‘This much—ya did do.’

‘.....’

She bit her lower lip.

Her hands go to her knit hat and she yanks it down further—no longer just low over her eyes, but enough to cover them completely. She doesn’t want to see anything anymore.

But it’s no good.

It’s burned firmly into her eyes.

The scene now—and the scene in June as well.

That scene, which Nadeko had created in June—

“Staring down like that, silent, never saying anything, maybe you really can go on being a victim... But I wonder whether that’ll go so well this time.”

Whose words had those been?

That’s right—they had been Ougi-san’s words...

Ougi-san—now she thinks of it, she feels that there was something more that girl had said...

That there was something.

Staring down like that, silent, never saying anything—

‘Sn... snakes.’

‘As it happens, ya got a choice, Nadeko-chan.’

Even with her eyes covered, she hears the voice.

Aggressive, violent—utterly without any shred of consideration for Nadeko, that voice in her head can still be heard.

It may seem a strange thing to say, but in that absence of tenderness, there seemed to her to be, here and now, her foremost and only relief.

After all—

‘First option, is ya can just head back home—ya can forget about everything. I can show Nadeko-chan illusions, and I can talk to ya like this—but that’s it. Like ya told that Koyomi Onii-chan, there ain’t been no real harm. Ain’t no real harm, so ain’t no harm been done. So ya can go back home and there ain’t no real problem.’

‘.....’

‘Nah, see, ya really can choose this first option, right? I ain’t got no mind to threaten Nadeko-chan into doing anything. Ain’t gonna force ya, and I can’t. That’s the position I’m in. Why, by rights I ought to be urging ya to pick this first option—’

‘.....’

‘Say something, why don’t ya?’

The voice says, irritated by Nadeko’s deep silence.

But even so, Nadeko can’t say anything.

She thinks she hears a click of a tongue.

Umm...

Was a snake’s tongue—anatomically, able to make a click?

‘The second option—is the path of atonement.’

‘.....’

‘If Nadeko-chan happens to want to choose the first option, then just go back through that gate, and right back down those steps—and then ya don’t have to, and ya mustn’t ever, come back to these grounds. Ya can turn yer back on my kin ya murdered, and just don’t ever look back again—but.’

That voice.

Somehow, she felt it was grinning.

‘If ya feel ya want to atone for these sins, I’ll give ya a chance—uncover yer eyes, and look here.’

Here...?

If she confesses.

It was not with any laudable thought of wanting to atone that she took off her knit hat—only, reflexively, no, mechanically, she simply reacted to those words.

Nadeko isn't a good kid.

She thinks of nothing but herself.

But—precisely because she thinks of nothing but herself, here, she could not but look.

Before her. Ahead of her.

At the voice's—form.

'Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa—aaaaaaaaaaaaa!'

This was the biggest scream so far.

The biggest scream of her life.

Great enough to send her backward.

Never mind falling onto her backside, it was enough that she might do a back flip.

Having never once managed to do one during PE, this scream might even have been big enough to propel her through a back flip. However, compared to the gigantic white snake, wound in coils enormous enough to engulf the grounds of the shrine—Nadeko's scream was but a mustard seed.

It possessed a substantiality too great to be thought an illusion.

Nor was there a sense of it being frightening.

It was, how to put it, simply too large.

Only—yes. Wow, she was all she could think.

She supposes, what this comes down to, is that Nadeko was a child who could only think childishly.

'Ya looked here, didn't ya? Ya looked at this serpent.'

That giant snake—Serpent-san speaks.

'Which means, yer also my kin now—means we're partners. And I'll have ya atone, Nadeko-chan.'

008

It seems Nadeko had taken the wrong meaning from Serpent-san's statement that there are no victims—no, perhaps she ought to say that she had interpreted it so as to suit herself.

That a victim will also bear some culpability for the causes of an incident, or that one may happen be the injured party on one occasion, but through a single mistake, anyone can make a victim of someone else—it was with those sorts of oft heard meanings, that she had chosen to interpret it.

Chosen to interpret it to suit herself.

But it was otherwise.

That wasn't what it had meant.

More plainly, directly, simply, easily.

Straightforwardly, it meant exactly what had been said.

Sengoku Nadeko—was guilty of “mass-murder”.

She was, in a typical sense, a victimizer.

There was no need to spin that meaning.

That June four months ago—back when so many middle school students had been bitten by the “charms” that Kaiki Deishu-san had spread about.

It was in the midst of that period.

A boy had confessed to Nadeko.

Not a confession in the sense of the kind of admission that Nadeko is about to make, but in the sense of telling someone “I want to go out with you” or “I love you.”

He was in the baseball club.

Nadeko doesn't remember his name. She's forgotten.

Or perhaps she may not even have heard it in the first place—Nadeko thinks he may not have told her what his name was.

Perhaps he assumed it was only natural that she would know him—it may be hard to believe, but among the popular students of the sporting clubs, such people are apparently not all that uncommon.

The sort who are convinced of their own fame.

But Nadeko had no interest whatsoever in sports, and besides that, she didn't want to go out or be lovers or any such thing—so she turned him down.

She wasn't going to date someone she didn't know.

And Nadeko—already had someone she loved.

However, this invited trouble—the fact that Nadeko had “dumped” that popular boy called forth resentment.

You're quite right! Nadeko had wanted to declare.

When they wondered at why he would have asked her, of all girls, to go out with him, Nadeko had well understood their feelings and concurred entirely—no, probably, that boy had had some kind of misunderstanding, she thought. He must have had the wrong person. But it seemed the only one who had realized this “truth” of the matter, had been Nadeko herself—the most painful part of it, was that Nadeko's best friend did not apprehend this.

The friendship ended. Sadly.

However, that Nadeko had been thinking throughout the time they had been friends, that a good kid like her would eventually end the friendship, and so it wasn't a surprise when it came, is also how Nadeko actually, really felt about it.

How she really felt?

It might also be said to be putting a brave face on it.

Well, let Nadeko wear that face, please.

According to what other classmates had been saying afterward (or rather, it might be more correct to refer to the emotions widely "exposed" as a result of Kaiki Deishu-san's "charms"), supposedly it was with the aim of going out with that boy from the baseball club that the girl had become friends with Nadeko—so, well, there seems to have been a bit more going on behind the scenes, but now it's all a mystery.

The truth is shrouded in darkness—no, shrouded in rumor.

What was the truth of the matter, no one can know for sure anymore.

It's in the past.

The game of love.

In this, everyone seems a little bit hapless—um, well, the more is said about that matter, all the more of a puzzle it will become, so moving on.

That friend, at the point of ending the friendship, had said: "I've put a curse on you."

Curse, in this instance, refers to one of Kaiki Deishu-san's "charms", and the one put on Nadeko by that girl had been a snake curse.

Apparently there had been quite a number of variations.

Not just snakes, but things like bees or frogs, and even, at the more peculiar end, lobsters—what would a lobster curse do? Perhaps break your back?

Anyway, Nadeko had swallowed those spite filled words—though they really had been no more than only spite.

That girl was not wicked, let alone a witch.

But Nadeko had started going to a bookstore, researching a method of dispelling that "charm" that had been put on her—in fact, what had apparently been the "right" thing to do, was to have found Kaiki-san, who had been somewhere in the town, and paid him to lift it—but unfortunately Nadeko was rather poorly informed in regards to rumors (it wasn't to be until the summer vacation that Nadeko learned of Kaiki-san's existence. At the time, she had had no idea that the charms were being "artificially" popularized) and even if she had known, asking help of a stranger would have been too difficult for Nadeko.

So, Nadeko did her best to lift the curse through self-study. This backfired and managed to put the curse into effect—a curse which had only been for show and ought really to never have become active (which is why, having learned her lesson from that, this time she sought Koyomi Onii-chan's help from the start), but leaving that aside for now.

The method Nadeko used then to remove the curse—was to cut wild snakes into five equal parts and, following a procedure, nail them up on a tree trunk.

Nadeko had got snakes.

And using gouges—chopped them up.

And then using those gouges as a substitute for six inch nails, she had taken those snake parts, and hammered them up onto trees. For about a week, she had continued that “massacre”.

It was a means of curse removal conforming to proper procedure.

However, the longer she had continued it, the more the curse grew ever stronger, and an unseen snake constricted Nadeko’s body with ever greater force—if Koyomi Onii-chan hadn’t found Nadeko, she would now surely...

‘Now surely, what?—Aaan? Nadeko-chan, wouldn’t ya have just gone on slaughtering more and more snakes?’

‘.....’

Against the words of the gigantic white snake—Serpent-san’s words, Nadeko could say nothing back.

Yes.

Nadeko, at that time, had been no victim.

After all, if Nadeko had done nothing—Nadeko would have been done no harm. And even if that were not so.

To all the snakes that Nadeko had killed.

That Nadeko had sacrificed, just to save herself—

To those tens of lives.

Sengoku Nadeko is nothing but a victimizer.

‘Nah, nah, what’s with all that then? If anything I’m even impressed by ya—when ya had been killing so many snakes as a sacrifice, pointlessly killing at that, and with a face like ya ain’t done nothing, crying Koyomi Onii-chan, Koyomi Onii-chan, ya made out that ya were the victim—that ain’t no ordinary nerve, ya see.’

‘.....’

‘If ya really have forgotten, I don’t mind jogging yer memory—remind Nadeko-chan how it was ya killed my kin. Show ya what it were like when ya sought out those snakes from the bushes, coolly and bravely grabbed their heads, then cut them to pieces with a gouge—’

‘St... stop.’

Nadeko said, at last managing to speak.

While remembering how the shaking of her hands had felt.

How distant it had been from “bravery”.

‘N-Nadeko remembers it...’

‘Hehh? Ya remember it, do ya?’

‘B-But that... couldn’t be helped...’

‘Couldn’t be helped? Right, that friend who put the curse on Nadeko-chan would probably say the same thing, I reckon—that putting that curse on Nadeko-chan just “couldn’t be helped.”’

Serpent-san says, sniggering scornfully.

What with him being a snake—and with being so enormous—no expression could be read, but from that voice, one ill will could be felt. Just plain.

Ill will.

Found anywhere and everywhere.

“Ohhh, but it couldn’t be helped”—simple as that, everyone tosses their morals away. Yer all infants, brats, and a bunch of inveterate simpletons.’

‘...But Nadeko...’

‘People, they don’t know what they’re trampling on as they live—everyone and anyone, reckons what they’re stepping on is the ground. But it ain’t, is it? That ain’t the ground they’re treading on, but it may be ants, or it may be caterpillars, and it might even be snakes, ya see.’

‘!!’

Upon this, Nadeko shifted her feet from the spot she stood.

For at some point—Nadeko had been treading on white snakes. No, that’s not true—it was an illusion, and she had not been treading on anything.

But it just happened to be an illusion this time.

Humans are always. Nadeko is always.

Trampling on something.

‘Nah, nah, nah, Nadeko-chan, I don’t want ya to get me wrong, but I ain’t out to have a go at ya for it—unlike meself, living beings have to sacrifice other life for the sake of living, ya see. Call it original sin, call it karma or call it inherent nature, right?’

‘.....’

‘Though, there’s a real big difference between Nadeko-chan hacking those snakes up, and eating yer dinner every day, ain’t there? ’Cause them snakes Nadeko-chan killed—in getting killed, having their lives offered up—those snakes didn’t amount to doing any good for Nadeko-chan, did they? Die like a dog—it’s an odd turn of phrase to use of snakes, but they didn’t even get that sort of wasteful death. ’Cause by them dying, the bind Nadeko-chan were in, were only made tighter—aaan?’

‘.....’

‘Nah, but so what? Thanks to all that, Nadeko-chan got to be reunited with Koyomi Onii-chan, so then I reckon that means they—my kin ya murdered—did ya some good after all, right?’

‘St-Stop, just stop.’

Nadeko says.

Covering her ears with both hands—but doing this couldn't block the voice inside her head.

Yes.

By now, even should she shut her eyes—she would surely see it still.

Those gigantic coils, there before her, encircling the shrine.

'Wh... what? What do you think y-you know about Koyomi Onii-chan? ...To Nadeko, h-he, he is—'

'Nahh—when it comes to Koyomi Onii-chan, I know a fair old lot—well, not that that matters. 'Cause at issue here, is what Nadeko-chan's done.'

What Nadeko had “done”.

The mistake that she had made. That she had clean forgotten.

That she hadn't so much as bothered to bring to mind—her original sin.

'Y-You... w-want an apology? Is an apology wh-what you want? You called N-Nadeko out here... Used il-illusions to drive Nadeko... A-Atonement? What...'

Desperately she puts words together.

If she stopped talking, it seemed like Serpent-san would never cease tormenting Nadeko—so, for now, she forces together a string of words. 'What does Nadeko... have to do?'

'What do ya have to do, huh?'

Oh-hoh, chuckles Serpent-san.

Baring his fangs.

'Usually, times like this are when ya'd beg forgiveness—that ya ain't said one word of “please forgive me” is something real special.'

'.....'

'Ya reckon ya made a mistake, but ya don't reckon ya did wrong? Is that how it is? 'Cause it “couldn't be helped”? Well, that ain't no surprise. From where good old humans stand, in the end, snakes ain't no more than reptiles—right?'

'...N-Nadeko d-doesn't...'

'Never mind.'

Serpent-san cut short Nadeko's attempt to plead.

'Might be I oughtn't have put it in a roundabout way like atonement—been a while since I spoke to a human, so I ain't got the knack of it. My bad, my bad—I'm sorry, aaan?'

Instead, she was apologized to by Serpent-san—though in that wording, nothing resembling sincerity could be felt.

Rather, it seemed to her that he was, from the depths of his heart, mocking puny Nadeko—if it is going too far to call it mocking, it felt at least that he was only, yes, “humoring” her.

‘It’s nothing—I’ve a favor to ask. Of Nadeko-chan. If it might just ease Nadeko-chan’s mind a bit, about that score of my kin ya killed—I’ve got just a little tiny favor I’d like to ask of ya.’

‘A favor...’

‘Right, or maybe Nadeko-chan wants me to put it like this?’

Serpent-san.

The great white snake—that head that ought to be expressionless, opened its mouth wide—and playfully, winked.

This did nothing at all to make him cute.

‘Help me, Nadeko-chan.’

‘.....’

It was an impossible request, she thought.

But turning it down was even more impossible.

‘O—OK.’

Nadeko says.

With her ears covered. With her eyes cast down.

Nadeko says.

‘If... If it’s only little.’

But thinking back, the conclusion of this story must already have been decided by this point—even if, at that time, she had known what Serpent-san was going to make Nadeko do, even if she had known what Serpent-san was going to do with Nadeko—even knowing the truth and the truth, Nadeko would surely have agreed just the same, and so, she believes, her fate would not have changed.

As such a story, is nothing but a story.

Her future spent killing Koyomi Onii-chan.

Tick by tock, draws ever closer.

009

‘Oh?—So you’ve stopped seeing them? Those white snakes.’

‘Y-Yep... It’s fine now. Th-Thinking about it now—like that white snake from the shoe rack, or that white snake from inside the desk—Nadeko probably just imagined it all.’

‘A mad jinn did it? Well, so it was an oddity then.’

‘N-No. Imagined it.’

‘I see... If that’s the case, that’s good...’

‘Y-Yep. So it’s good. It’s the greatest.’

Night.

Shortly after Nadeko had returned home, at 10 o’clock precisely, a phone call from Koyomi Onii-chan had come—exactly as promised. Not even a second off.

In contrast to his reputation for frequent tardiness, this is a surprisingly “punctual” Koyomi Onii-chan.

‘S-Sorry, for troubling you like that... It was an overreaction. Th-That’s no good, is it? Blaming every little thing on oddities...’

‘...Well, that’s true, I guess—hmm. Wait a sec. Shinobu’s right here...’

Saying this, Koyomi Onii-chan seemed to move his phone away from his ear. But his phone being apparently sensitive, the sound is still, just barely, picked up.

“Sengoku’s saying she imagined it—but, Shinobu, what do you think?”

“Imaginings are in and of themselves much the same manner of thing as oddities—hmm. However, ’tis that Forelock Girl, so—well, if that be the case, then it may be well. Leave it rest.”

“Really? I’d have thought what with what happened last time, we could never be too careful. Just in case, it might be best to meet up with her and ask in person, don’t you think?”

“I do not. Not at all, do I so think. Not the slightest. If the girl herself says ’tis well, delve into the matter no further. From the first, was it not said the danger was slight?”

“Yeah, that’s true... but...”

They seemed to be in the midst of a consultation.

In this case Nadeko had to reluctantly support, not Koyomi Onii-chan, but Shinobu-san.

Hooray, hooray, Shinobu-san.

‘All right, Sengoku.’

After a bit, Koyomi Onii-chan returned.

‘If that’s the case, well, let’s leave it at that. All’s well that ends well. But if it turns out that it was your imagination that you had imagined it, and it might be an oddity after all, you have to get in touch, OK?’

‘Y-Yep, OK... T-Th-Thank you, Koyomi Onii-chan.’

Saying this, Nadeko hung up.

Normally, having gotten a call from Koyomi Onii-chan, she would have liked to have enjoyed it longer, but she knew these weren’t the circumstances for that.

After putting the receiver down, just as she had a moment to breathe:

‘Sha! Sha! Sha!’

Went a voice from Nadeko’s right hand.

More accurately, from her right-hand wrist.

A white snake is bound, like a bracelet, around Nadeko's wrist—no, to give an analogy based on its thickness, it is like a scrunchie.

But in actuality it is neither a bracelet nor a scrunchie.

In actuality—the white snake, is a white snake.

It is Serpent-san.

He just looks plumped up, because his scales are standing on end.

‘Ya lied to yer beloved Koyomi Onii-chan, didn’t ya—fine with that, are ya? It’s like yer piling on misdeeds to hide yer misdeeds, ain’t it—ya carry on like that, one day yer life will come a cropper, aaan?’

‘...D-Don’t talk too loud.’

Nadeko, grasping her wrist and taking care not to be noticed by her mother and father in the living room, snuck upstairs.

Then she went into her own room and locked the door.

Now, she could relax a bit.

She sighs in relief.

‘Ain’t no real need to sneak around—the only one who can hear my voice is Nadeko-chan.’

‘.....’

She knows that.

But even knowing that, she would rather avoid being seen in conversation with Serpent-san—even if Serpent-san’s voice couldn’t be heard, Nadeko’s reactions to it would be loud and clear.

What’s more.

Serpent-san’s form—shrunk down to the size of a scrunchie on her wrist—would be visible to anyone.

‘...If you can make yourself that small, why did you appear to begin with, large enough to envelop the whole shrine...?’

When she put that simple question to him, Serpent-san, after laughing ‘Sha! Sha! Sha!’ said:

‘Staging. That’s staging—the staging of the introduction scene. Us oddities got to have humans shocked or we lose the meaning of our existence.’

An oddity that surprises.

That was what Koyomi Onii-chan had spoken about.

‘...How large are you really?’

‘I ain’t got no size. All I’ve got—all I am is a concept.’

‘Concept...’

What came to her mind upon hearing that, was math she had learned in the 1st year.

That a straight line is not an existence, but a concept.

That it has neither length nor width.

That in the case where length is specified, it’s not called a straight line, but a line segment—a straight line is, always, a line that passes straight through two points—its length is said to be infinite, and its width is said to be zero.

She didn’t really understand it.

What on Earth had that teacher been talking about?

Had he even known himself what he had been trying to say?

Quite what a half line was supposed to be, she’ll never know—only, she thought that what she had been told about straight lines, seemed to tally with what Serpent-san was talking about now.

The point was, that it was an existence only inside people’s heads, for the sake of explaining an explanation.

‘Now, anyone can see me bound like this on Nadeko-chan’s wrist, but that’s only thanks to Nadeko-chan being aware that this is what everyone sees as me, and it ain’t no more than that—well, to expand on that a bit, this is me in a state of possessing Nadeko-chan.’

‘Possessing...’

Possession?

Wouldn’t that be quite serious?

Kanbaru-san’s left arm—was that some other condition, different from possession, or wasn’t it?

‘Well, don’t mind that. Ain’t nothing—just a temporary thing anyway. Ya only got to put up with it until ya got this job done—Sha! Sha!’ He seems in high spirits.

It appeared, somewhat, that he might be happy at having acquired a physical body—but then again, is feeling happy something oddities do? Ah, but Shinobu-san is reputed to dance with joy when presented with donuts.

Who knows?

Nadeko sighs, and lets herself drop upon a cushion laid in the middle of her room. It’s a touch slovenly, but she’s tired.

Not tired at having lied to Koyomi Onii-chan—it is not as though Nadeko is especially an honest person, so she has been known to tell lies.

Like everyone does.

Nor would this have been the first time she time has lied to Koyomi Onii-chan... Neither is it that she’s tired from having gone up the mountain.

She feels no... not that much physical fatigue.

Her tiredness, is a tiredness regarding the future.

When she thinks of what's to come, it feels a little to her as though she might never be free of this "wearisomeness"...

'Mm.'

But she couldn't stay forever doing nothing like this—if she doesn't move things on, Nadeko would be left forever having to wear this distasteful scrunchie.

'Distasteful's a bit harsh, ain't it?—Aaan?'

'...You can read Nadeko's mind? That wasn't... said out loud, just then.'

'Nah, I just inferred from yer expression—being stared at with that kind of loathing, anyone'd think the same. Well, of course, there's also that me and Nadeko-chan are spiritually linked now, so those sorts of guesses are easier to get right.'

'.....'

When she had thought her mind may have been read, she had quite naturally felt "Oh, no"—but upon learning that he couldn't, she found herself a little letdown.

If Serpent-san were a mind-reader, it would be nice and easy not having to talk, was her reason for thinking such a thing, however... 'S-Sooo—Serpent-san?'

'Serpent-san, huh?—I'd rather have ya say Serpent-sama, really, but, well, expecting veneration from a lass who can't tell right from left, may be a pipe dream. What is it, Nadeko-chan?'

'...Wh-What should Nadeko do?'

Atonement.

Or, a favor.

The particulars of this—Nadeko had yet to hear.

At the shrine, no sooner had Nadeko consented than Serpent-san had, before her eyes, shrunken that gigantic body down—and bound himself onto Nadeko's wrist.

Then, declaring: "I'll tell ya the details at night. For now, I'm out of power," he had gone straight to sleep.

Apparently, in showing Nadeko visions and making her hear voices, Serpent-san had seemingly expended much of the energy he had held—so, at a loss as to what she could do otherwise, Nadeko had, in the end, gone back home.

Not long after she had got back in, Serpent-san had awoken, but it had been before she could hear any more of what he had to say, that the call from Koyomi Onii-chan had come.

'Wh-wh-wh-wh...'

She struggles to speak—but gathers her courage.

This was something she could not avoid.

'Wh-What sort of lewd thing does Nadeko... have to do?'

‘What the blazes!’

A tsukkomi from an oddity.

At the fangs bared tsukkomi, Nadeko fell back against her cushion.

As tsukkomi go, this was altogether too frightening.

‘How did ya come to that idea, Nadeko-chan?—I dread to think.’

‘Th-That’s not it? B-But snakes, in psychoanalysis, as a sexual motif—’

‘Don’t ya go lumping me in with that sort of populist notion, Nadeko-chan—for pity’s sake, taken too much of an influence from that Koyomi Onii-chan and that Kanbaru-san, ain’t ya, aaan?’

‘.....’

She has no words.

It’s as embarrassing as can be. How very awkward.

‘S-Sooo, Nadeko... doesn’t need to take any clothes off, then? No need to put on a school swimsuit or put on bloomers, then?’

‘Nah, it ain’t any of that sort of thing.’

‘Oh...’

What a relief.

She could almost hear the voice of Kanbaru-san’s disappointment though.

‘.....? B-But how does Serpent-san know about Kanbaru-san?’

‘’Cause I do. Like I told ya, I know about Kanbaru-san, and about Koyomi Onii-chan—aaan?’

‘Th-Then you are reading Nadeko’s mind...’

‘I’m telling ya, I can’t.’

‘Reading Nadeko’s aura?’

‘It ain’t like that.’

‘Nadeko’s corona?’

‘Ain’t that either.’

‘S-Sooo, reading Nadeko’s CoroCoro?’

‘Why is a second-year middle school student reading a manga magazine for little kids?’

What’s the problem with that?

It’s pretty good.

‘I told ya, I ain’t reading yer mind. It’s simply that I were watching—that day, when the three of ya performed that ritual at the shrine.’

‘...S-Sooo, do you live at that shrine?’

Is that what it would be?

So then, he would know about Koyomi Onii-chan and Kanbaru-san—and about the “mass-murder” Nadeko conducted at the shrine.

But in that case...

Huh? Would that mean...

‘A-Are you the... “thing” of that shrine?’

‘Don’t tell me yer only just cottoning on, Nadeko-chan—it ain’t like it ain’t something ya can’t figure out from the shrine’s name.’ ‘The shrine’s name...? Wasn’t it North White Snake Shrine...? Is there something about that?’

‘Is there something...? When ya look at me, a white snake, it don’t come to ya? A bit slow, ain’t ya, Nadeko-chan?’

‘.....’

Certainly, Nadeko was slow, so she couldn’t refute that.

Eh? But then, that means...

So, if that were the case, then wouldn’t that mean Serpent-san would be much more “important” than Nadeko had even imagined?

‘Serpent-san... Are you the person... the snake “worshiped”, at that shrine?’

‘Can’t quite say that’s the way it is—that shrine lost its faith a great long time ago. Now it’s only a haunt where bad things drift—nah, might be more right to call it a dump where they get swept.’

‘...Oh, yes, someone might have mentioned something like that...’

Someone else had said something about it being, as a location, still functioning, but that it was no longer a shrine to a god—since it was a complicated story, she had forgotten about it. Or it would be more honest to say that since it was a complicated story, she had ignored it in the first place.

‘S-Sooo—but, so, then you are important. Ah... Your Good Graciousness is important.’

‘Ain’t no point trying to get formal now—anyway, I ain’t important anymore, and I don’t mind if ya talk to me casually. Let’s me and Nadeko-chan be equal partners, right?’

‘Partners...’

He had said that earlier, hadn’t he—that word.

That word to express a relationship.

‘Well, we ain’t friends, right? Mutually.’

‘.....’

She wouldn't disagree.

But even if she's told she doesn't need to be formal, the reality is it's still rather daunting—after all, what living in a shrine would mean, is that Serpent-san would be (though he really doesn't look like it) a god.

He's a god. A god.

...Huh?

She had a feeling Oshino-san had said something, at some point, about how all of the concepts known as oddities are—something like gods. No, not only that, but even, taken to its furthest extent, that everything apart from humans, all existences and all concepts, were gods—“yaoyorozu no kami”—the myriad gods of Shinto.

That they were pervasive.

Was what he had told her.

But even then—even if they are pervasive, not paying respect to an outright god is a strange thing—only, well, regardless of whoever Nadeko talks to, formally or informally, she can't manage to speak in a manner that won't lead to offense anyway.

At least, if the man (the snake) himself says she can talk to him as an equal, then she supposes it must be fine.

So Nadeko, with an 'Err...' starts again.

'Well, then Serpent-san... If it's not something lewd, then what does Nadeko have to do? There isn't anything that Nadeko can do, beside that.'

'...At that difficult age when yer full of curiosity, ain't ya, Nadeko-chan... And self-shaming, to boot.'

Serpent-san, as though confounded, lifted his head from Nadeko's wrist (though Nadeko doesn't think Serpent-san, whether he be happy or sad, has any gesture he can make other than lifting his head) and let out his tongue.

Though it does also make him look like he's blowing a raspberry.

'But I will have ya do something beside that for me—frankly, I ain't got no one but Nadeko-chan to rely on. I'll lay it out clear for ya at the start—I'm taking advantage of Nadeko's weakness, capitalizing on vulnerability and exploiting vice, to get ya to do me a favor. That's how far I'm willing to go to get ya to do what I want of ya.'

'.....'

'Ain't any reaction, huh—hmm, expected that much from the outset, did ya? I see, I see—so ya ain't as slow-witted a girl as ya look, then.'

'...N-Nadeko is...'

She stammers.

'S-Slow... Sh-She's... dull.'

'I wonder about that. Well, forget it—I'll tell ya what I want then. Sha! Sha! Sha! A god asking something of a human—ain't these strange times indeed.'

‘.....’

‘What I want Nadeko-chan to do is—’

Find something—he said.

There alone Serpent-san spoke, neither aggressively nor violently, but with a somber directness.

Somber? No.

Solemn—perhaps it would be better to put it.

‘I want Nadeko-chan to find my corpse.’

010

The next morning, Nadeko headed for school the same as always.

Yes, indeed, whether one sees illusions, or is possessed by a god, to school one must go—that is a middle school student.

Wake in the morning, put on the uniform, make the school commute.

The exemplary middle school life.

The single element that is not the same as always, is the white scrunchie wrapped around her right wrist—that Nadeko will have to claim this is her sense of fashion, is a sore point.

‘S-Say, Serpent-san... clinging to Nadeko’s wrist is one thing... never mind that anymore, but can’t you become invisible to people except Nadeko?’

‘It ain’t that I can’t, but I don’t want to waste any more power—right now, by borrowing Nadeko-chan’s body, I’m taking it easy.’

‘Easy...?’

‘Don’t sweat it, ain’t like my voice can be heard—and while at school, I’ll make like I’m just an accessory for ya. I ain’t out to invade yer ordinary life.’

‘.....’

Nadeko wanted to tell him that he might be confiscated by a teacher, but... But she lost any confidence in being able to explain this properly, so left the conversation there.

Well, it would only mean Nadeko would get told off.

She considers too that she wouldn’t feel it mattered much, if he were confiscated.

That whatever happened, things would pan out somehow, is her feeling.

It was with these thoughts that she arrived at school. She changes her footwear at the shoe rack—of course, no white snakes would come crawling out from there anymore.

Those illusions had been a message Serpent-san had sent Nadeko—now that they could communicate directly, there was no reason for Serpent-san to use those messengers.

Serpent-san had apparently “mustered the last” of his power to send Nadeko those messages—

‘Hey. Hey, Nadeko-chan—why’d ya change yer shoes? Why do ya need to do that?’

‘...Who knows? Never thought about it before, but it’s to Keep The School Tidy... Um, don’t talk, will you?’

‘Right, I know—ain’t no need to insist, I tell ya. I’m real taciturn me, anyway. Same as Nadeko-chan.’

‘.....’

Scarcely believable. Will Serpent-san really pretend to just be an accessory...?

Upon entering her classroom, Nadeko’s classmates’ reactions to her were the same as always—and just like always, Nadeko goes to her seat. ‘School, huh—well, back at the shrine too, there used to be similar educational activities, ya know.’

‘.....’

Talk about predictable.

Even with other people around to see, Serpent-san was not about to stay quiet.

In theory, so far as not moving from being bound around her wrist was concerned, he seemed to be following through on his pretense of being “just an accessory”, but it would be hard to make the case that he was being entirely true to his word.

‘Unnaturally regimented—gives me the shivers. Or, nah, is this unique to this class? Somehow, it’s like yer all mutually keeping check, all tense—how can I put it—’

‘.....’

Nadeko stood from her seat.

Then exited the class. And then, crossing the hall and ascending the stairs, she moved all the way to before the door on the top floor—the door to the roof, which they weren’t allowed to use.

‘Ahem, Serpent-san.’

‘What?’

‘Be quiet.’

She pleaded earnestly. This is the first time in her life that she had asked a person to do something so bluntly.

Though he’s not a person, but a snake. And a god.

But even for Hatsumode, for any New Year’s shrine visit of any year of her life, she would not ever have asked for anything so seriously as she did now.

‘Sha! Sha!—Sorry about that. Looks like it were a lie when I said I were taciturn.’

‘You’re altogether quick in taking your words back...’

But it is not as though she had believed him.

But just because she didn't believe him, doesn't mean she can "condone" his flippancy... If anything his frankness even provokes "indignation".

'Look, Serpent-san?'

'What?'

'You've probably realized this, but Nadeko's a quiet kid.'

'Quiet kid?'

'A quiet, shy, calm kid.'

'Sounds like the sort of kid who might be anywhere without ya knowing.'

'Yes. The sort of kid who might be anywhere without you knowing—that's Nadeko.'

Nadeko, who is talking in a whisper to her wrist.

...To say what the problem is, the problem is this composition—that which is, right now on these stairs with no people around, currently acceptable.

This picture is a grave problem.

'If a kid like that, who might be anywhere without you knowing, were to be seen talking to her own wrist, what do you think all her classmates would think?'

'What'd they think?'

""Poor kid" they'd think.'

It would be a class upgrade from a quiet kid to a pitiable kid—no, perhaps better to swallow pride and call it a class downgrade. If that were to happen within the current state of her class, the sight would be unbearable.

'Really? I don't reckon it'd make much odds—what'd be different, if yer position were to change some?'

'.....'

What would be different? Nadeko's position...

'Ya don't talk to anyone in the first place, so it's all the same however yer thought—if ya ain't ever gonna chat to someone, whatever they think of ya, it's the same, right? I ain't wrong, am I?'

'.....'

Um? Huh, is that right?

Somehow it almost seems persuasive, but she also somewhat feels she's being mislead... She couldn't think that a god would cheat a person, but precisely by virtue of being a god, he might be able to do as he pleases with people's feelings. And supposedly he does tell lies.

And take advantage of weakness...

‘A-Anyway, Serpent-san.’

‘Hm? Oi, oi, Nadeko-chan. Ya ain’t gone through life using words like “anyway” or “enough about that” to just change the subject, have ya? Without any real discussion? Neither accepting what I’m saying nor arguing against, not even giving it some consideration—just shelving it? That ain’t Nadeko-chan’s way of dealing with life, is it?’

‘...Anyway.’

Nadeko’s way of dealing with life.

That is: with her eyes downcast, keep quiet.

And wait—for the other person to go.

‘The promise was that the daytime would be when Nadeko was free... That the daytime would be when Nadeko could do the same as always... That searching for Serpent-san’s body would only have to be at night...’

‘It ain’t like it were a promise, but, well, yeah—now that ya mention it.’

‘.....’

‘Nah, all right, it were a promise—yeah. I get it, I get it. That’s right. If Nadeko-chan says she’ll use her time at night for my sake, I ain’t got a mind to make impositions. Bound about Nadeko-chan’s wrist I may be, but I ain’t no handcuff—’

‘.....’

Yesterday night.

The “promise” made with Serpent-san had been roughly as follows:

No, perhaps that wasn’t what would be called a promise—nor a deal, as in the end, Nadeko was simply going to do as Serpent-san told her. Told: ‘I want Nadeko-chan to find my corpse,’ she had shivered.

She had frozen at the “macabre” word “corpse”.

Searching for a corpse?

‘...Wh-What’s that supposed to mean? S-Serpent-san’s... corpse?’

‘Oi, oi, don’t go talking about a corpse like it’s unclean, Nadeko-chan—yer making a face like ya were an elementary school kid told ya had to clean the toilets as a punishment.’

‘Wh-Why is your analogy so specifically ordinary...?’

That’s not very god-like...

‘Sha! Sha! Sha!’ Serpent-san laughs.

‘Ain’t nothing—since I’m merged with Nadeko-chan now, even if I can’t read yer thoughts or memories, I can to an extent, pull out some of yer knowledge.’

‘...Thoughts, memories and knowledge are different...?’

She doesn’t really understand.

Perhaps it's like Koyomi Onii-chan's relationship with Shinobu-san, or maybe like White Hanekawa-san and Black Hanekawa-san... No, but... she thought that between Serpent-san and Nadeko, compared to those two pairs, there was an overwhelmingly hierarchical relationship. 'Well, ain't like children's feelings about not wanting to clean toilets have changed since olden times either—however, Nadeko-chan, what I want to ask ya to do ain't cleaning, but collecting litter.'

'Collecting litter?'

'I don't reckon ya could call it a treasure hunt—even I ain't about to call my own corpse treasure. Even so, humans did once worship that corpse as a god.'

'.....?'

'What's called ashintai—a sacred relic. My corpse, which used to be prayed to at that shrine... But now it's lost, ya see.'

What's lost—is presumably not just the relic.

From that shrine, North White Snake Shrine, it's all gone: the relic, the belief—and its power. Everything and anything.

Now, over there.

Is merely a location.

No—perhaps it ought not even be said that it was merely a location—rather, that it was only a haunt, into which things drift.

'Right. That I can be here like this—it's a miracle. Nah, maybe I should say it's thanks to that vampire—Oshino Shinobu, former Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade.'

'.....'

The arrival in this town of Shinobu-san, the King of Oddities, had drawn in many different things, besides a con artist like Kaiki Deishu-san.

Many bad things—that is.

Where they had gathered particularly strongly was that ruin—that air pocket of a shrine.

Apparently it had been those “bad things” that had caused the otherwise inactive “charm” placed on Nadeko, and the “undoing” of it, to be invigorated.

Not only that.

Serpent-san—that supposedly fallen god.

Had been revived.

'Meaning Shinobu-san is the root cause...'

Nadeko's shoulders slumped.

She couldn't tell this to Koyomi Onii-chan.

At least from that perspective, Nadeko's decision to refuse his help could be seen as justified.

‘A strong power, in and of itself, can exert, for good or ill, an influence on its surroundings. Ain’t no responsibility in that—for what that’s worth, Nadeko-chan, yer making it sound like it’s someone else’s fault, but Nadeko-chan’s massacre is one of the factors behind the current situation.’

‘.....’

When it’s put to her like that, she has nothing to say for herself.

Though regardless of what’s put to her, her saying nothing isn’t new.

‘But my miraculous and heartwarming resurrection ain’t no more than a temporary thing—a short-lived miracle. A fleeting vision. Before long, I will vanish.’

Once again, said Serpent-san.

‘Right now I’m like a ghost.’

‘...A-A ghost of a g-god?’

No, the ghost of an oddity? It’s a bit knotty.

Like some illusory thing—perhaps?

‘What happened was—well, in short, someone came and used up nearly all the “bad things” gathered at that haunt—those “bad things” were the energy source that gave me form, but that spiritual energy got used for a right pointless exercise.’

Weren’t nothing I could do but watch from inside the shrine, said Serpent-san.

Serpent-san’s words displayed, what was for him, a rare feeling of (how to it put it?) “regret”.

She didn’t fully understand, but that someone would use up Serpent-san’s energy source, well, it goes to show there are some cruel people out there.

‘Wh-Who... would do such a thing?’

‘Nah, well, it were Shinobu-chan.’

It was Shinobu-chan. It was Shinobu-san.

The root cause and conclusion were both her.

The phrase “match-pump” comes to mind—extinguishing what oneself had lit.

‘It were due to that vampire’s own power that those “bad things” gathered there, so I ain’t gonna say she can’t do as she pleases—but that don’t change that it’s ’cause of that, that the concept which is me, has become a candle in the wind.’

‘...So to stop that candle going out... you need your corpse...?’

As a new energy source.

In order to go on living—no, saying “living” wouldn’t be quite right.

Only—to go on existing.

To pervade.

‘Well, ya ain’t wrong there. Meaning, it’s my manner of “food”—needing to feed on something for yer own sake, whether yer a god or yer a human, might not be so different after all.’

‘Food...’

‘Feeding for the sake of living. Well, in my case, I ain’t killing for the sake of living though.’

‘.....’

‘Hmm? Ya look like ya want to say something... Maybe that killing those snakes was “for the sake of living” so it “couldn’t be helped” and ya don’t reckon ya deserve blame?’

‘N-No... It’s not that... And Nadeko messed up after all... It’s just...’

‘Just what?’

‘...Nothing.’

‘Tsk.’

Serpent-san seemed irritated at Nadeko having withdrawn her words—faced with such indecisive reticence, it probably wouldn’t just be Serpent-san who would be annoyed.

‘If there’s something ya want to say, spit it out—we can’t build mutual trust otherwise.’

‘Mutual trust...’

‘Ain’t keen on building that, are ya? I’ll tell ya this though—unlike all the humans Nadeko-chan dealt with until now, I ain’t gonna go away. ’Cause I’m stuck like this, tied to Nadeko-chan’s right hand.’

‘...That’s... just because Serpent-san is using Nadeko as an energy source—like a backup battery...’

‘That’s a stopgap though. Nothing changes, then it ain’t gonna stop me disappearing—that’s why, even if Nadeko-chan needs to be pushed, I’m gonna have ya find my corpse.’

‘As you can’t... look for it yourself.’

If he could, he wouldn’t be looking to Nadeko for assistance.

‘Right—I basically can’t move from the shrine.’

‘Oh...’

Thinking about it later.

Serpent-san made a mistake in speaking those words—but Nadeko took in the fact that Serpent-san “can’t move from the shrine” without giving it any great consideration...

She ought to have thought about it.

About the reason why Serpent-san couldn’t move from the shrine.

‘So I’ll have to have Nadeko-chan help me out. With finding my corpse.’

‘C-Corpse, corpse... Can’t you stop saying that... Serpent-san? I-It’s scary, and kind of repulsive...’

‘I told ya, don’t go talking about a corpse like it’s scary, repulsive or filthy. Not even if it ain’t my corpse either.’

‘N-Nadeko didn’t say it was filthy...’

It was Serpent-san who compared it with cleaning toilets.

Besides, while it isn’t like she would do it out of choice, whichever role Nadeko’s assigned, she doesn’t skip on cleaning duties.

She wouldn’t want to be told off.

‘If you would call it a relic, then maybe... it’d be easier for Nadeko to talk about it.’

‘I’d be embarrassed to call my own corpse a relic—just calling it a fancy word, makes a big difference to the impression of it... Well, anyway, that’s the favor I want Nadeko-chan to do for me.’

‘.....’

Find his “corpse” so he could go on existing.

A body search, for the sake of going on pervading.

Compared to all the rigmarole gone through to summon Nadeko—it could even be said to be an exceedingly simple request.

But.

For Serpent-san this must be an imperative—there is a proverb: umisen yamasen.

It apparently refers to a snake which has lived in the seas for a thousand years and lived in the mountains for a thousand years, thereby becoming a dragon... Bits and pieces of what Serpent-san said imply he used to be a normal snake.

And that snake, upon dying, had been deified as a sacred relic at that shrine—with that time and then when the shrine lost its faith, Serpent-san would have experienced two deaths before now.

A third time.

He must not want to go through that.

‘Say, Serpent-san?’

‘What?’

‘Why did you choose Nadeko to help you?’

She had wanted to ask that.

Nadeko already knew she would have to help Serpent-san—so all the more, she had wanted to know the reason for that.

‘Nah, it ain’t like I chose ya.’

However, Serpent-san’s was no warm reply.

Not just blunt.

It was, like a snake, cold-blooded.

Though she doesn't in fact know for certain whether snakes really are cold-blooded or not.

'There weren't no one but Nadeko-chan who I could turn to.'

'.....'

From the words alone, it might have seemed as though there were some strong connection between Serpent-san and Nadeko, but somehow, rather than that—Serpent-san's manner was more brusque.

'It were only Nadeko-chan who I had a "channel" to, see—aaan?'

""Channel"...?'

'I were trying to put it in a modern way, for Nadeko-chan, but calling it a "bond" is clearer to me. Having lost its faith, that shrine weren't connected to anyone—with the exception of Nadeko-chan, who at that shrine, would ya believe, had merrily beavered away at snake killing.'

'...An exception without wanting to be... But then, Koyomi Onii-chan and Shinobu-chan too...'

'Koyomi Onii-chan and Shinobu-san have certainly also done a lot at the shrine—but on the point of a bond with me, it's a bit weak. There ain't no channel connecting them to me. Nadeko-chan directly killed my kin—my clan, which is stronger on that point. Well, even so, it took almost two months to connect the channel. It was like I were drawing in that thin bond, like it were soba.'

'.....'

It would come down to that, wouldn't it?

In the end—punishment for sins.

Rather than having been chosen.

It is all about atonement.

Whatever Serpent-san says—however it's spun, for Nadeko, it's the cleanup from that time.

The soba analogy seems an odd one though.

A thin and long one, for a snake?

'...Dinner.'

'Aan?'

'Humans eat dinner, don't they?'

'Sure—even I ate back when I were "living"—and like I said just a little earlier, even now I need energy in order to "go on existing" and that's what I want of Nadeko-chan.'

'S-Serpent-san said that what Nadeko did was different from eating dinner every day, but... but isn't it the same?'

'? What're ya saying? Making excuses?'

'N-No, that's not it...'

She couldn't explain it properly. She couldn't put her feelings into words.

But this.

She had tried to tell Serpent-san earlier—when she had stopped herself.

For the sake of their relationship from now on, she ought to have said it.

Even if she has to put it clumsily.

‘What Nadeko wants to say is... that there’s probably some “payback for eating”... If there is supposed to always be punishment for sins.’

‘.....’

‘Nadeko thought this would be the food chain... That “things that eat something, will be eaten by something.” But... once you stand at the top of the food chain, then you won’t get eaten by anything.’

Nadeko spoke while thinking.

‘Humans—aren’t eaten by anything. They just eat and just kill... There’s no punishment for the sin.’

‘.....’

‘When everyone says “itadakimasu”, how much of a feeling of “receiving the life of another” do they put into saying it?’

‘...The food chain ain’t that simple a thing though, is it? It’s drawn like a pyramid to make it easy to understand, but really it ought to be drawn circular. Like the Ouroboros—even humans, when ya become corpses, are prey for microbes.’

‘.....’

Nadeko was silenced by that “correct” response—but, no, it wasn’t what she had wanted to say.

She’s not getting herself across. Neither her words, nor her feelings.

‘What’s up, Nadeko-chan?’

‘Nothing... All right. Anyway.’

She’s gone and said it. “Anyway”.

‘Anyway, Nadeko just has to look for Serpent-san’s relic from now on—once that relic is found, you’ll let Nadeko go, won’t you?’

‘Let ya go? ...It ain’t like I’m out to pressure ya. I’m only exploiting yer sense of guilt.’

‘.....’

She has a feeling that counts as pressure, but certainly, Serpent-san isn’t using threats to make Nadeko conduct the search.

He is giving her room for choice.

Making her see those illusions of white snakes (via the “channel”, probably), wasn’t to disrupt Nadeko’s daily life, but to send a message. Simply a “summons”...

‘...A-Anyway...’

She repeated.

‘...All right. Nadeko will look for and find Serpent-san’s relic.’

‘Yer my savior. But I ain’t gonna thank ya.’

‘.....’

Why wouldn’t he?

Because he’s a god?

‘So, Serpent-san, where is your corpse?’

‘I dunno.’

‘Is it somewhere on that mountain?’

‘I dunno.’

‘Is it in this town?’

‘I dunno.’

‘When was it lost?’

‘I dunno.’

‘About how big is it?’

‘I dunno.’

‘Is it big like you were to begin with?’

‘I dunno.’

‘Or is it small like you are now?’

‘I dunno.’

‘About how heavy is it?’

‘I dunno.’

‘Is it like bones? Or is it like a mummy?’

‘I dunno.’

‘About how old is it?’

‘I dunno.’

‘Righto!’

All smiles, Nadeko slapped her thigh.

‘With all this information, it’s practically found already... What da hell!?’

Nadeko gave a tsukkomi.

A delayed reaction tsukkomi. Rarely does even Koyomi Onii-chan use one.

That it was in Kansai dialect, only makes it the more painful.

‘Th-There’s no way it can be found like this... Isn’t that basically saying nothing is known?’

‘Well, ya could put it that way.’

There isn’t any other way of putting it.

The breadth of Japanese expression is not that wide.

Even searching for a needle dropped in a desert might be easier—at least in that case you would know that somewhere in the desert would be the needle you were looking for.

...Though, it’s not easy to grasp what urgency there would be in circumstances which necessitated searching for a needle in a desert...

‘It’s impossible... Even taking a lifetime, it can’t be done. Even after being reborn as a princess, it’d still be impossible.’

‘Where did the assumption that ya’d get reborn as a princess come from? Nah, nah, don’t worry. This is why I’m merged with ya—’cause if we’re talking about “channels”, then my corpse—my relic, ought to have the strongest bond to me of all. So Nadeko-chan, what with being merged with me, will soon be able to find it.’

‘Soon...?’

‘Soon, if ya make an effort.’

‘Nadeko doesn’t want to make an effort...’

‘Nah, that were where ya say yer gonna do yer best...’

‘.....’

So maybe that means that this scrunchie bound around her wrist, would perform dowsing—certainly if that’s so, then it could be easier than finding a needle in the desert.

But even then.

‘...Is there any chance that the relic has been destroyed or burned or something, and no longer exists?’

‘There is... Well, if that’s the case, then I’d have to just give up.’

A remark displaying something like good grace from Serpent-san.

Though if he really did have good grace, he would not be demanding help from Nadeko in the first place...

In his position, Nadeko would have given up at the point of having only Nadeko to rely on.

‘...About how long is the time limit? When... should Nadeko find Serpent-san’s relic by?’

‘No idea—being a candle in the wind, it ain’t gonna be a surprise if I disappear any time. Now, by using Nadeko-chan’s energy I’m still existing—but that ain’t no more than an emergency battery. Unfortunately ya ain’t compatible.’

‘Compatible?’

‘It’s like forcefully using a foreign electrically supply—rest easy, I ain’t planning on taking over Nadeko-chan’s body, and it ain’t like I’m gonna be merged like this with Nadeko-chan until ya die. If Nadeko-chan doesn’t want to help me, if ya can put up with waiting it out long enough, eventually I’ll just disappear.’

‘.....’

‘Make an effort, or wait it out—choose one of the two.’

‘.....’

It seems that, to the last, Serpent-san will present Nadeko with options—only, from Nadeko’s position, there is no scope for choice. At least, that’s how she thought of it.

She doesn’t want to carry on having this distasteful scrunchie around her wrist, and besides, to Nadeko, putting up with something and making an effort were the same thing.

‘Nadeko will help, with searching... But, Serpent-san...’

Said Nadeko.

‘Going to school is fine, isn’t it?’

‘Aaan?’

‘Meaning... it’s fine to carry on with normal life...? ...N-Nadeko... doesn’t want to raise suspicions.’

‘Raise suspicions? From who?’

‘...Koyomi Onii-chan.’

Nadeko answered Serpent-san’s question candidly.

‘Nadeko told him it had been nothing... That Nadeko had “imagined it.”’

‘...? Then, Nadeko-chan, rather than not wanting to “raise suspicions”, don’t ya mean ya don’t want to “cause concern”? Ain’t that why ya lied to Koyomi Onii-chan?’

‘Th-That’s...’

She made a mistake. She misspoke.

‘When ya told him those lies, despite what ya said about wanting to be saved by him, I thought that were ’cause ya didn’t want to worry him—were I wrong?’

‘You’re not wrong... Yep, that’s right. It was to not worry him. Worry him...’

Serpent-san reacted to Nadeko trying to gloss over what she had said, as though unconvinced, but having seemingly decided “it doesn’t really matter,” said: ‘Ahh, forget it.’

‘Well, let’s leave it at that—sure, I ain’t gonna say ya have to use all yer time, day and night, for my sake. That’d be overstepping things. And to be fair, for finding my corpse—relic, night’s better suited anyway.’

‘.....’

‘Right, then that’s settled. Daytime’s Nadeko-chan’s time, night’s my time. To show my appreciation for Nadeko-chan’s dedication, I swear I ain’t gonna intrude on yer private time—’

.....

That was what had taken place last night.

That may have gotten confusingly long, but until now, that had been a flashback scene. Now Nadeko is on the landing of the stairs, outside the locked door to the school roof, arguing with Serpent-san. Ah, no—currently.

Currently, she was in a fight to the death with Koyomi Onii-chan.

This narration is a “revolving lantern”—her past flashing before her eyes.

Her regrets rushing by.

Sengoku Nadeko is in the midst of reflecting on where she could have escaped from the course of her fate—very well then.

Let’s return to the revolving lantern.

Round and round and round and round.

‘—Liar. Some god, you are.’

‘Nah, nah... Sure, it were a lie to say I’m quiet, and yeah, I swore I weren’t gonna intrude on yer private life, but I didn’t go as far as to say I weren’t gonna talk. For a god, the lower realm’s all novel—nah, I suppose it ain’t that novel. It don’t get any the better for change.’

‘.....’

‘It’s said that the voice of the people is the voice of God—but I’m a god who likes to talk for himself. But, well, I ain’t out to be a nuisance for Nadeko-chan. I ain’t out to make Nadeko-chan a “pitiable kid”... There ain’t no need and ain’t no point. I get it, I get it. I just have to be quiet.’

‘.....’

‘All right, I get it. I won’t just be quiet, I’ll go to sleep. Ain’t no problem then, right?’

Ain’t like I talk in my sleep, Serpent-san said.

‘—Now’s the season for winter sleep anyway.’

‘...Yep. But you mustn’t really hibernate. If you don’t wake up at night, Nadeko alone won’t be able to do anything.’

Just as Nadeko was giving Serpent-san that reminder.

‘Oi, Sengoku. What are you doing there?’

A voice came from behind her.

More accurately, from down the stairs—calling to Nadeko while looking up at her from below, was her homeroom teacher, Sasayabu-sensei. Sasayabu-sensei's nickname is Panda-sensei. Not because he particularly resembles a panda (if anything he's thin), but purely from his name meaning bamboo grove—but the atmosphere in Class 2-2 is not the right sort for calling the teacher by nickname.

‘A-A-!’

Nadeko turns around to respond to Sasayabu-sensei.

Taking some care of her skirt length, since the height difference on the stairs created a low angle.

‘Anything at all, sir!’

She stumbled on her words.

Mixing “Anything wrong, sir?” with “Nothing at all, sir”, she had managed to become a rather open girl.

‘?’

Sasayabu-sensei tilts his head.

Well, he would.

‘...Nothing at all, sir.’

She corrected herself.

Nadeko was not quick-witted enough to brazen through such a mistake by getting a laugh out of it... For her it was just embarrassing.

It could take about three days to get over something like that.

‘It was j-just with the thought of getting some fresh air on the roof... but the door was locked... So then...’

She thought of saying she had been “brought to a standstill”, but the insincerity of those stiff words made her hold them back.

‘.....’

And with that, Nadeko falls silent.

She doesn't like telling lies.

No, rather than disliking lying, she's just bad at it...

Right now, she had tried to lie reflexively, but unable to stick to it, she casts her eyes downward.

‘...Oi, oi, Sengoku, you ought to know you're not allowed on the roof. Sensei is always making that clear.’

‘.....’

Nadeko couldn't respond to Sasayabu-sensei's incontrovertible words.

When faced with trouble, she falls silent.

That's Nadeko. Pleased to meet you.

Certainly Nadeko knew that the roof was off-limits, which was precisely why she had chosen this place to have a "quiet word" with Serpent-san...

That Sasayabu-sensei had passed by here, was probably because he was on his way back from supervising club "morning practice"—Sasayabu-sensei is advisor to the wind instrument club, who use the music room.

'...Sorry, sir.'

But there would be trouble if she simply gave her homeroom teacher the silent treatment, so she speaks an apology.

Between the Silence and Apology commands, she selected Apology.

No need to bow her head.

She was already looking downward, so posture-wise she had already lowered her head—though, as already mentioned, Nadeko was positioned in a place above Sasayabu-sensei, so it may not in fact be seen in that manner.

'...The bell's going to ring soon.'

Said Sasayabu-sensei.

He seems to have shelved the matter of Nadeko's questionable behavior—the look he gives Nadeko is the look she often gets from adults, meaning not so far as of dealing with a "pitiable kid", but that given to a "troublesome kid".

To put it into words, that look would be: "There's likely to be some kind of problem, but it'd be tiresome to bother going into it."

She would like them to understand how much a child can be hurt by being looked at like that... But she doesn't have the courage to say that out loud.

And the tiresomeness is mutual.

Nadeko merely said: 'Understood, sir.'

'Won't be long. There's a short test, isn't there, sir?'

'Yes... Help me pass out the... Hm?'

Just as he was starting to say something, Sasayabu-sensei's words stopped. Nadeko, thinking this strange, read his expression—"What's that?" it seemed to be saying.

Ah, she thought—when she had apologized, both her hands had gone to the sides of her legs. Meaning, her wrist had been exposed to Sasayabu-sensei.

Meaning, Serpent-san on her right wrist.

Gulp, Nadeko swallowed.

Serpent-san stayed quiet—he said nothing and, remaining bound around Nadeko's wrist, he did not stir.

Like this, he really did seem to be no more than a distasteful scrunchie—it was only the lack of taste that could not, through any struggle, be denied.

Anyway, Serpent-san was remaining silent.

He seemed to be pretending to be an accessory just as promised.

She was happy about that, only, in this instance pretending to be an accessory would mean...

‘...Well, fine. If it’s only that.’

She heard Sasayabu-sensei say in a low voice.

He seemed to be saying it to himself, rather than to be heard.

Apparently, rather than thinking Serpent-san suspicious, he had found fault with Nadeko’s simple breach of the school rules.

The regulation that immoderate accessories were to be confiscated...

But it appears Sasayabu-sensei has let it slide.

It’s not cause for gratitude.

As this too amounts to no more than an expression of the feeling that “dealing with this kid is tiresome.”

It’s only what Nadeko has come to expect.

...But it’s also a fact that Nadeko herself regards that kind of treatment as being a “breeze” anyway... Having her homeroom teacher not bother to go into her affairs made student life much easier.

Just as Nadeko was breathing a sigh of relief and reflecting on how it might be best to wear a blouse with slightly longer sleeves from tomorrow, however:

‘By the way, Sengoku, about that thing Sensei has asked you to get done—how’s it coming along?’

Came Sasayabu-sensei’s words, causing Nadeko, with a start, to feel like gulping back the sigh she had just breathed.

Not that there’s any such figure of speech.

‘H-How...?’

‘Are you any closer to having it resolved?’

‘.....Um.’

At Sasayabu-sensei’s words, Nadeko went into a slight—no—large panic, feeling the tips of her own fingers trembling.

Not that she’s done a hard sprint, but she’s gone weak at the knees.

It was not that she was panicking because she didn’t understand what Sasayabu-sensei was talking about—if anything, it was knowing and wanting to avoid that subject, that put her in this severe state.

In the face of Nadeko’s reaction, which was hardly worthy of being called a reaction, Sasayabu-sensei said: ‘Oi, oi, come on,’ as if, how to put it, manifestly disappointed.

‘Even you must know that the problem needs to be resolved quickly.’

‘.....’

‘It all depends on you—Class Rep Sengoku.’

With that said, Sasayabu-sensei raised a hand and left.

Well, well. See, just like always.

While Nadeko’s tongue-tied, the other person goes away.

Even her homeroom teacher.

Call it her anti-personnel special move, perhaps.

If there had been anyone who had not been seen off that way, in the entirety of Nadeko’s life so far, that, yes, would just be the one— ‘Nadeko-chan were the class rep?’

Said Serpent-san, shortly after Sasayabu-sensei had gone.

It was not with a cynical edge, but a tone of plain surprise—Nadeko found some pride in having surprised an oddity who made a business of surprising people.

That’s a lie. She found no such thing.

Merely “that’s given it away,” was how she felt.

Fearing being made fun of, she had wanted to keep it from him...

‘Yep. The class rep. That’s Nadeko.’

‘Like hell. Class rep’s that thing, right? The class representative, right? Meaning, the student who takes care of class business, the most looked up to in the class, right? And yer saying that’s Nadeko-chan? Aaan?’

Serpent-san came across as extremely unconvinced—from an outside perspective, it may have sounded extraordinarily rude, but, well, it wasn’t as though Nadeko couldn’t understand his feelings.

‘Not really... A class rep’s not especially looked up to...’

Serpent-san’s knowledge was drawn from Nadeko’s knowledge in the first place, so the back and forth of Serpent-san putting questions to Nadeko, and Nadeko making denials, could be said to be “pointless”... But knowledge and perception, and the affirmation or negation of that knowledge were different matters.

And given that he had not known about it until now, apparently the fact that Nadeko was the class rep fell in the category of memory, rather than knowledge.

‘If it’d been a choice like Hanekawa-san, a class rep among class reps, being chosen, that’d be one thing... but it was different with Nadeko.’

‘Different? Different how?’

‘It was drawing the short straw.’

Said Nadeko. She's aware it's a bit of a "self-shaming" expression, but in this case, there isn't any getting round that.

'Serpent-san noticed the weird atmosphere in the class, didn't you? It became that way after the 1st term, in the summer holiday... So at the start of the 2nd term, when the class representative was decided, there weren't any volunteers or people put forward... So at the end of a dispute—'

No.

To be accurate, there had never been any dispute.

All there had been was an oppressive mood.

'—Nadeko was chosen.'

'Through what kind of twists and turns, do things come out like that?'

It seemed unlikely Serpent-san would be convinced even if it were explained to him—well, that's probably no surprise.

It would be rather hard to explain that heavy mood the class was under. "Mood"—in a novel it's between the lines, so she wasn't going to be able to describe it.

She isn't very good at Japanese as a subject.

She's even worse at explaining.

'But... Um, if it had to be put into words... There wasn't any girl in the class who hadn't used a "charm", except Nadeko, that's why... Probably.'

'Ahh. So, process of elimination, huh.'

That'd be about the size of it, said Serpent-san.

Serpent-san appeared quite satisfied with putting it down to a process of elimination—that he would be convinced by this was somehow a touch painful for Nadeko.

However, that Nadeko was hardly class rep material, was understood by none better than Nadeko herself, and she had felt this all too keenly for these two months, so she was not about to argue there.

If anything, it was a meeting of minds.

If they had glasses, she would have raised a toast to it.

'So essentially, weren't no one wanted to do it and weren't no one they wanted to let do it, so the work got pushed onto Nadeko-chan—they're a right bunch of no-goods, aaan?'

'Not really... It wasn't exactly pushed...'

It was not exactly that she had had it pushed onto her, however it was true that she hadn't been able to refuse it. Like she had been broken down.

'Well then, so at least they ain't quite so bad as to abuse a timid girl by forcing her into some awful duty. Sha! Sha! Sha!' '...Anyway, if you're talking about people pushing work onto Nadeko, Serpent-san's doing just that.'

'Oh? Ah, well, yeah, that's right—so I'm a no-good and all.'

Unabashedly, he howls with laughter.

As if to say: “Ya got me there.”

The incorrigible cheek.

‘I reckon it’s just how the world works—that unassertive kids like Nadeko-chan will draw the short straw. Were always the way.’

‘.....’

‘But, with that being that—what were that teacher on about? The thing he asked ya to do—what were that?’

‘...Th-’

Having expected this to come at some point, Nadeko had a line prepared for Serpent-san’s natural question, and delivers it as scripted. ‘That’s none of your business... Serpent-san.’

‘None of my business, huh? I thought me and Nadeko-chan were partners, one in body and soul.’

‘D... Don’t think that...’

Her tone becomes frail.

It’s hard to give a “firm rejection”.

And Serpent-san presses on against Nadeko.

‘Ain’t certain it ain’t my business either—right now, I’ve got something I need Nadeko-chan to do for me. I ain’t gonna stand for someone cutting in.’

‘...If it’s about who was first, it was the teacher...’

Nadeko reluctantly says.

If possible, she would have liked to have kept him in the dark, but talking vaguely and then having to fend off questions after that, would be hard for someone like Nadeko—so she was left with having to go ahead and lay it all out clearly.

“Do something about the atmosphere in the class,” was what he asked to have done. Quite a while back.’

‘...Harr?’

Incredulous, Serpent-san opened his mouth.

She half expected to hear his gaping jaw clang.

‘Oi, oi, what’s with that? That ain’t a job for the class representative—it’s one for the teacher, ain’t it?’

‘...Yep. Well, that’s true enough.’

Having sense pointed out by an oddity makes her wince.

Well, to be fair, while he may be an oddity, Serpent-san is a god, so he probably would speak some truths.

‘What’s called... passing the buck.’

‘Sha! Sha!—Worse than me, ain’t he? Don’t take more than a glance to know that ain’t an atmosphere that a single child on the inside can solve, aaan?’

‘...It doesn’t especially matter.’

Said Nadeko.

Quite whether Serpent-san, hearing of this matter, is sympathizing with Nadeko or whether he is simply amusing himself at her expense, is not something Nadeko could tell (since she couldn’t read his expression), but either way, she doesn’t want to keep talking about it.

After all, this matter.

In Nadeko’s mind—is already finished.

It’s over and done with.

It’s like arguing this and that over the contents of a manga past its last chapter.

It’s barren.

‘What? Don’t matter? ’Course it matters.’

‘What Sasayabu-sensei wants done isn’t going to “hinder” what Serpent-san wants done... So it doesn’t matter.’

‘Oi, oi, it ain’t like I think so long as I get what I want granted, that I ain’t bothered about what happens with Nadeko-chan’s life. Hey, if Nadeko-chan wants, I ain’t gonna mind if ya feel like talking things over with me.’

‘Talk things over...?’

Counsel with god. Somehow it has strange ring to it.

Perhaps it would be something like confessional... No, it’s not even as though Nadeko actually wants comforting, so Serpent-san’s concern is misdirected.

‘It’s not like that... There’s nothing especially wrong, so Nadeko’s fine...’

‘There’s nothing wrong? With having work pushed onto ya? From both yer classmates and yer homeroom teacher?’

‘Nothing’s wrong. After all...’

Said Nadeko.

‘Nadeko’s just not really doing anything.’

‘...Not anything?’

‘For the class rep work and the work from the teacher.’

Nadeko’s doing nothing, she said.

And with that, Nadeko began going down the stairs.

Just as Sasayabu-sensei had said, it's soon time for the bell—Sasayabu-sensei says all sorts of wrong things, but he's right about the time.

So she headed for the classroom.

Serpent-san, with a '.....' became quiet.

Presumably he had read the mood.

After that, until school ended, Serpent-san spoke not one word.

011

That night. Nadeko, as per her promise to Serpent-san, goes out in search of Serpent-san's corpse—she slips quietly out from her home. That her heart raced at feeling like a bit of a rebellious girl, she would rather keep secret.

'Sha! Sha!—This puts my mind to rest.'

As soon as she had gone outside, Serpent-san opens his mouth for the first time in a while. Perhaps he had, as he had said, been sleeping—maybe to economize on energy, or something.

'It's 'cause of the way ya were talking this morning... I were worried that with what I had asked ya to do too, maybe Nadeko-chan had just been saying ya had accepted to do it, when really ya were gonna do nothing.'

'...Nadeko won't do that.'

Anyway don't talk yet, Nadeko says.

She wanted him to stay quiet until they were a little further from her house.

She would risk becoming a "pitiable kid".

For once Serpent-san obediently did as Nadeko had asked—and then, after a while, once more he said: 'I were worried.'

From the fact that he had repeated it, presumably he wasn't saying it for effect, but had really been anxious.

And presumably he had really had his mind put at ease.

'After all, it ain't like I got to pick Nadeko-chan as my partner as the result of an interview, taking yer character into consideration—if Nadeko-chan were lazy and a casual liar, I'd be left with nothing I could do but burying my face in my hands. Well, I ain't got hands to bury my face in though...'

A not too funny snake joke.

Nadeko is told she's a "gigglebox", but she won't laugh at jokes that aren't funny.

'What Nadeko can't do, Nadeko won't do... What won't be done, can't be done, and what can't be done, won't be done—that's all there is to it.'

Says Nadeko. While walking.

‘Lazy... and a casual liar... could be what Nadeko is. Yes... At the very least, Nadeko can’t say that that isn’t the case. It might be. But... looking for Serpent-san’s relic... well, that seems doable...’

‘Does it now? Is it something that can be found with such zeal, I wonder.’

‘.....’

She was a touch fed up with Serpent-san talking, even now, as though to make an “issue” of things, rather dulling what enthusiasm she had, but certainly, looking at Nadeko as a class rep or how Nadeko was toward her homeroom teacher, no one could be blamed for thinking her an untrustworthy girl.

In fact, it’s not as though Nadeko is a trustworthy girl... Of course, she would hate to be called untrustworthy though...

‘Serpent-san, will you listen?’

‘Hmm? To what?’

‘How to put it... It’s a “gripe”, but will you listen to it?’

‘.....? Yeah, sure, I’ll listen to ya. Shoot.’

‘Kids who don’t make a fuss, are shy, not good at talking... and are quiet, like Nadeko... weak kids who aren’t good at making friends and cry easily... for some reason people think they’re “an-in-peach-able”.’

““An-in-peach-able”?”

Unimpeachable, huh, says Serpent-san.

Nadeko nods.

‘Actually, that’s probably why everyone made Nadeko be the class rep, and why Sasayabu-sensei made that ridiculous request too... But they’re wrong... Nadeko’s not “unimpeachable”, and not “spotless”... and not a “good kid” either... Having people form their own expectations and then be disappointed with you is, to be honest, kind of hard.’

She said that, while recalling Sasayabu-sensei’s disappointed expression.

It’s a “gripe”, plain and simple.

She ought not to be saying things like this.

But just as having your expectations betrayed is painful, it is also painful to betray expectations. Even if you never asked for anything to be expected of you.

‘So having said all that, Nadeko will say this for you upfront, Serpent-san... As atonement for having killed your “kin” and chopped them up into pieces, Nadeko’s going to do as much as is possible for you. But that said, it’s not like there can be any guarantee that Serpent-san’s relic will be found... So, if things don’t work out, then please:’

Don’t be disappointed.

Said Nadeko, and carried on walking.

She doesn’t look at Serpent-san on her right wrist.

It had taken a lot of courage to say this much. The cost effectiveness of courage is surprisingly poor. When she considers the labors ahead of her, she suspects she may have got her pacing rather wrong, but—

‘...Sha! Sha! I ain’t out to squeeze a cast-iron guarantee from Nadeko-chan. It’s just it ain’t no good to me if yer searching half-arsed, is all—at any rate, I ain’t got no one but Nadeko-chan to cling on, ya see.’

‘Cloning?’

‘Cling on.’

‘Cling on..... Erm.’

Well then, says Nadeko to start afresh.

Not starting over with an “anyway” or an “enough about that” because she doesn’t like the way the conversation’s going, but rather, in this case, it was with a sense of getting round to dealing with the real business.

‘Nadeko also needs to sleep, so it’s not like the search can go on all night... So, Serpent-san, just how should Nadeko go about searching for your relic?’

That it would be by dowsing had just been Nadeko’s guess and wasn’t solid.

Not knowing where it is or what it looks like, if she doesn’t get Serpent-san to tell her how to look for his relic, there would be no deciding a plan for what to do next...

‘Sha! Sha! For the time being, just wander around hereabouts—notwithstanding what I said before, well, basically, I don’t reckon it can be anywhere too far from the shrine.’

‘...Why?’

‘Why’s a bit of a tricky question to answer, but searching around where the thing used to be, is a decent way to go about it, ain’t it?—It ain’t like it were stolen or anything, ya see.’

‘.....’

So, it is not that it has been stolen?

But even if it hasn’t been stolen—Nadeko had been assuming that it had been “taken away by someone”.

After all, given the relic itself wouldn’t be moving of its own accord, unless someone had carried it off, then it shouldn’t disappear. Presumably it wouldn’t walk off on its own.

...But then again, it is an oddity.

What’s more, it is a “corpse” that was worthy of being worshiped as a god, so perhaps, contrary to expectations, it just might walk on its own. That corpses don’t move, is only matter of what is ordinarily so. Vampires are also, you could say, a sort of undead corpse, so perhaps “walking the night” is a possibility.

‘When you come down to it, what the relic is, is my body, so being my body, it’s my real form, so if ya pass near it, there’ll be a response—I’ll vibrate like a mobile phone. Then I’d want Nadeko-chan to narrow the location down by searching around that vicinity.’ ‘...Meaning, Nadeko should just keep on walking like this without stopping?’

If that's so, she feels a wee sense of an anticlimax.

The hat she was wearing today was a peaked baseball cap, not a knit hat, but, in a vaguely deflated mood, Nadeko tugged its peak down. Not for any real reason, though. It's just a habit.

‘To begin with, yeah.’

Said Serpent-san, in a manner of speaking that somehow didn't bode too well for the future, but Nadeko pretended not to notice this. It seemed unlikely that inquiring would produce an answer she would like too well.

What she doesn't want to know, she pretends not to know.

What she doesn't want to understand, she pretends not to understand.

‘...Would the relic maybe have gotten buried in the ground or embedded in a wall? Meaning, might it be hidden somewhere?’

‘Maybe—I dunno. Nor what sort of state it might be in. Nadeko-chan brought this up just earlier, but maybe it'll even turn out that it were chopped up into pieces and scattered about separately. Ya know, instead of being hidden, maybe it's been crucified up on trees here and there. Sha! Sha!’

‘.....’

She's been given a taste of his sarcasm.

It's an unpleasant feeling, but that's to be expected with sarcasm.

She doesn't suppose there's any sarcasm in the world that's nice.

‘So, Serpent-san... just to get this straight, from now, every night... until Serpent-san's relic is found, Nadeko should go about the town... having a nocturnal stroll?’

‘Yeah, that's about the size of it. If ya sum it up. I'd rather ya didn't make it sound quite so picturesque though, if ya can.’

‘So there won't be any fighting with weird enemies or having to compete with rivals over the item?’

‘Right... Wait, what's that about? Nadeko-chan weren't hoping for that sort of adventure, were ya?’

‘It wasn't like it was a hope...’

But that was certainly how she had imagined it would be—not in hope, but in fear though.

So.

An anticlimax—is what it feels like. Just what could this sense of unfulfillment be...?

‘By the way, what happens when the relic is found?’

‘I suppose what'll happen is, it'll be like I re-transfer over from Nadeko-chan to it... Well, it's originally my own body, ain't it, so rather than transferring, more a matter of “returning”.’

‘...So, then that'd be goodbye to Serpent-san.’

‘That's right, yeah. Hm? Ya seem like ya ain't all that glad about that, Nadeko-chan. Surely ya ain't gone and grown fond of me, have ya?’

‘It’s not that...’

A single day since they met, it wasn’t like they had spent enough time together yet for her to have grown an attachment, and to put it bluntly, she isn’t good with rough sorts like Serpent-san.

Not because he’s a snake, or because he’s an oddity, but as a matter of his personality.

‘...It’s just, Nadeko’s bad at goodbyes.’

‘Hmm?’

‘If someone... it doesn’t matter who... goes away... it’s tiresome, isn’t it?’

‘Tiresome? Ya got a weird way of putting it—why, it’s almost as though Nadeko-chan—’

Sounding dubious, Serpent-san had just begun to say something—indeed “doubtful” and “suspicious” was his manner—however, for Nadeko perhaps luckily, those words were to be left uncompleted.

For at that very moment:

“Brrrrrrrr♫”

Serpent-san’s white body, tied around Nadeko’s right wrist, vibrated—Serpent-san had earlier likened it to a mobile phone’s vibration function, but since Nadeko doesn’t have a mobile, she can’t be certain about whether that analogy is correct.

For an approximate example, she had taken it to mean something like the way the handheld massage device that her father used shook—but frankly the vibration was rather stronger than she had imagined.

Enough to hurt. No picturesque analogy this, but she had feared for her hand being torn off.

‘Wh... what?’

‘Sha! Sha!—Oi, oi, nice and quick, we’ve got a response. Nadeko-chan, head in the direction of 5 o’clock!’

‘The direction of 5 o’clock?’

Which way would that be?

If she’s suddenly having things described to her like she were in a movie, she’s not going to understand.

‘Picture a clock in yer head. The direction Nadeko-chan is facing now is noon, so 5 o’clock—look, it means just to the right of behind ya!’

‘J-Just to the right of behind...’

Even having it spelled out now, it doesn’t really come to her, but for the time being she does as she’s told and heads over in that direction.

Nadeko the Lackey, she might be.

Of course, since she isn’t walking through a desert or a jungle, but through a town with streets, she can’t proceed directly just to the right of behind.

After going around houses and while getting course correction updates from Serpent-san (being a bit annoying with his this o’clocks and that o’clocks. She would like him to accept that describing

diagonals was pointless), where Nadeko ultimately arrived at was a park. Nadeko is widely acknowledged to be an indoors person and so from childhood had not done much playing in parks, but this small park was one that she had known of, even so.

She could see playground equipment, such as a jungle gym, a see-saw and chin-up bars—these days, there is apparently a trend toward successively removing playground equipment, but this town’s “local authority” didn’t seem to be getting around to dealing with that. For better or for worse.

‘Right. It’ll be around here.’

‘Around here...? It’s a sandpit.’

Where Serpent-san’s dowsing, or navigation, had at last come to a stop, was, yes, none other than one of the park’s scant safe spots: the sandpit—no, perhaps even such a sandpit could be subject to “deadly hazards” such as “risk of buried glass”, “sanitation” or “harmful if swallowed”.

.....

Maybe not “harmful if swallowed”?

Just about the only thing that’s safe if swallowed is food.

‘Wh... what? Meaning, this sandpit is where Serpent-san’s corpse is buried?’

She’s gone and called it a corpse. Whoops.

Care is needed in how it’s referred to—but she’s also a bit averse to describing a thing buried in a sandpit like this, as a relic.

‘Right, ain’t no mistake—Sha! Sha! Or what, Nadeko-chan? Ya got yer doubts about the accuracy of my dowsing, have ya? Aaan?’

‘Not so much doubts...’

Yes.

Well, she supposes she did have her doubts, but she wasn’t about to offer them up for a debate.

But being buried in a sandpit—that’s like something a child would do... Or no, she thinks, it’s on the level of how a dog or cat might hide something.

‘...But, well, if Serpent-san says so... Might as well give it a search.’

‘What’s with that? Like ya ain’t got no get-up-and-go.’

‘Nadeko’s bursting with get-up-and-go.’

Saying that, Nadeko got out the gardening trowel she had brought with her in a knapsack.

On the basis that she was supposedly conducting a search, she had brought it as an item that might come in handy (she had various other things too. Rope and gouges, for example)... But she never expected to be using it so soon.

‘Go on, hurry up and dig. Ain’t no mistake about it—my relic is buried down there.’

‘.....’

‘Sha! Sha!—I feel like we’ve drawn a winning ticket on the first go. Aaan? Ain’t that lucky, Nadeko-chan? ’Cause with just a half hour stroll, yer already gonna be rid of me, ain’t ya?’

He is being rather animated, seemingly having quite forgotten what Nadeko had just earlier been talking about. Since her perception of Serpent-san until now had been basically that of a guarded cynic, this excited state is something of a surprise.

Well—it’s his own body that’s been found, so it’s probably only natural that he would be excited.

And found so quickly, at that.

Whether the comparison to drawing a winning lottery ticket was apt, exaggerated or perhaps even insufficient, she couldn’t tell... But that the odds had been very much against it was certain.

Something to be glad about then.

‘.....’

With a scrunch, she shoved her trowel into the sandpit.

At any rate, it seems that with this, she would, so soon already, be bidding farewell to Serpent-san—when she thinks of that, the “tiresome” feeling comes over Nadeko, just as she expected.

But Nadeko’s feelings were entirely irrelevant—when it comes to just digging in sand, motivation is not needed, and besides, all it amounts to is only a matter of whether it is sooner or latter—no—a matter of whether it is sooner or later, as at some point goodbye would come.

It just happens to be now, is all.

It was a short time together, but it was not as though she had wanted it to be long—no snake jokes, please.

Goodbye, to Serpent-san.

Once she finds the relic here.

012

She didn’t find it.

She dug and dug through nothing but sand, and in the course of digging, arrived at the bottom.

This was the first she knew of there being a bottom to sandpits.

Though it’s obvious.

But from her experience in childhood, her mental image of a sandpit was of sand going on forever—like a bottomless pit. Or it had been.

Only, well, here’s the bottom. It was concrete.

Apparently, concrete shaped like a swimming pool had simply been buried into the ground... How prosaic. She could have done without knowing.

The depth, she guessed to be about 50 cm.

So to a young child, a depth of 50 cm is enough to be infinite.

‘...Serpent-san.’

‘.....’

‘Hey, Serpent-san.’

‘.....’

It is Serpent-san’s turn to be speechless.

As though they’ve undergone a role change, nay, reversal.

‘Hey.’

Hey. Hey. Hey.

Nadeko badgered him.

Well, given that he’s bound to her wrist, responding to his silence by getting fed up and leaving is not going to work.

She knew she risked irritating him, and her mood was such that she would liked to have left if she could have... But then again, she was also so tired that she didn’t want to move.

‘It’s not here. The relic.’

‘.....’

‘It’s not here...’

She repeated her assertion, and at that, with an ‘Ah-hah,’ Serpent-san at last reacted.

He is undaunted. Defiant even.

‘Seems it were a false reading.’

‘A f-false reading...?’

How is he able to say such a thing undaunted... After he had been saying all that about there being no mistake?

And after making another person’s wrist shake so fiercely, practically like a typhoon—that was a false reading?

‘Very interesting, very interesting. The things ya learn, right, Nadekochan?’

‘If... if it was a false reading then... s-say that it’s a false reading sooner... You must have known at an earlier stage, didn’t you...?’

It’s rare that Nadeko would complain like this, but it’s only natural that she should want to.

The sandpit, dug up not just in one spot, but all over the place, was looking, well, ready for a game of human whack-a-mole.

And now she had the job of making it flat, by filling those holes, to look forward to.

A fruitless and futile exercise.

‘What? Ya can just leave it like that, can’t ya? Aaan?’

‘It can’t be left like this... That would be “anti-social”. What if a child was hurt by falling in a hole?’

‘Yer worrying too much...’

Perhaps, but she ought to do what she can to put it back to something close to how it had been.

That being so, it looks like tonight’s search shall have to proceed no further. It is a funny way of putting it, even if she says so herself, but the first day has been spent playing in a sandpit.

How childish.

‘So there can be false readings...’

‘Well, these things happen. Even gods ain’t all powerful.’

‘Isn’t it because they’re all powerful that they’re called gods?’

Omnipotent, omniscient god is what people say, isn’t it?’

‘Omnipotent and all powerful ain’t the same thing, ya know—check a dictionary for details.’

‘Hmm... Nadeko’s not got a dictionary. So, this shy-of-all-powerful dowsing—is it going to repeat its false reading? If that’s the case, with the wild-goose chases and wasted effort, it’s going to be pretty tough, both on time and strength...’

‘Naah, I got what the problem is already figured out. This ain’t gonna happen again.’

He seems very confident.

Which is not grounds to trust him.

“Talk is cheap,” as they say—and the one who would bear the cost of that cheap talk in wasted effort would be Nadeko, so really, she can’t be having with this.

To top it off, thanks to Serpent-san being bound on the wrist of her right hand, the strain from using her trowel with that hand is increased, so, while it might not be “tendinitis”, she’s probably going to have muscle ache tomorrow.

‘So why did it give a false reading, anyway? Is it like Doraemon’s “Missing Person Stick” having a success rate of 70%?’

‘Nah—it ain’t that.’

Due to their limited sharing of knowledge, her obscure reference was understood without comment, leaving her feeling a touch of dissatisfaction, but regardless, Serpent-san had rejected Nadeko’s supposition.

‘It’s that my spiritual energy is scattered—basically.’

‘Scattered?’

‘Or I ought to say it’s being scattered.’

His energy is being scattered—erm.

That sounds like something she thinks she has heard before—so, when and where did she hear it?

The drifting.

“Bad things” had—something or other.

Because of that, she was sure, Koyomi Onii-chan had—

‘—So you’re saying, rather than dowsing, it should be pictured more like metal detecting? And so it’s like, if there were a layer of ground with a lot of iron in it, it would be hard to find a buried land mine...?’

‘Ain’t that nice of ya—talking about my body like it were a land mine, Nadeko-chan—aaan?’

She seemed to have raised his hackles (scales?), but as he said nothing further, it sounded as though her understanding of it was not entirely off the mark.

Nadeko sighed.

If her understanding is right, then just how much waste and futile failure would Nadeko have to dig up, she wondered—and if time ran out while she was doing that...

If time ran out... Well, in that event, it wouldn’t be Nadeko’s problem, but Serpent-san’s though...

However, the same as Nadeko hated making an effort, she also hated wasted effort.

Well, it doesn’t matter what she says.

The work of specifying the location, through dowsing, could only be entrusted to Serpent-san—leaving Nadeko to be, as it were, a human spade, so her problem or not, she could do nothing other than trust and obey him.

Trust and obey. Just like being in service to a god.

‘So... by any means, that’s it until tomorrow.’

‘Oi, oi, Nadeko-chan. Yer awful quick to throw yer hand in—some such genius gambler, are ya? Let’s not give up yet and at least try one more place, right?’

‘No. Nadeko’s tired.’

She’s done for the day. Nadeko-san is clocking off.

After that, ignoring Serpent-san’s objection, Nadeko began the work of leveling the sandpit—no, since thinking of it as work would make it tiresome, she pictures it instead as making play out of plowing the sandpit.

That may have been a mistake.

Since she was doing it thinking of it as a game, the efficiency with which she conducted the operation dropped slightly and it took even longer than it would have if she had just done it normally—if she confesses in detail, what with being in a sandpit, since she was there, she may have got carried away with not just filling the holes, but playing for real at building small mounds, castles and such.

Bad luck, you might call it.

If she had known, it would have been better to have heeded Serpentsan's desire, and moved to some other place to search for Serpent-san's relic a little longer.

‘Ah. Found you. Sengoku.’

While she was in the middle of building Nagoya Castle (since there may be a copyright issue, perhaps best to call it Nagoya Castle-like), worrying about difficulties with the angle of the shachihoko end tiles, she heard that voice come from above her head.

She raises her face.

Carelessly, she had been lax with how she was wearing her hat.

Their eyes locked.

‘Ko... Koyomi Onii-chan.’

One step outside the sandpit, was Koyomi Onii-chan.

Koyomi Onii-chan.

Real name: Araragi Koyomi.

Wearing a serious face—in the dead of night.

Perhaps he's out for a stroll?