



Musubimonogatari

Nozomi Golem

001

When I was told that Kizashima Nozomi was a golem, it wasn't something that I could immediately accept. At that point in time, I was being informed of what sorts of talented people had been assembled for the Rumors Squad, but when I was told that the true identity of the short girl in front of me was a golem, I could only think that it was some sort of inside joke. But it was not.

Her rank was Inspector, her age was 29, and her true identity was a golem.

I hadn't been sure whether I was supposed to laugh or not, so it was good that I didn't laugh.

If I had to describe her, I would say she had a kind of dreamy atmosphere almost like a fairy, but it seemed that that was just a result of her creators' preferences, and it wasn't something I should bring up—her creators, in this case, meant her grandparents.

In actuality, she apparently came down with a serious illness when she was in elementary school, and soon after lost her life. She hadn't been "close to dying", and she hadn't been "on the verge of death"—she had actually died. Her organs ceased functioning, her pupils dilated, her muscles stiffened, her blood stopped flowing, and her brain cells withered away.

She died.

No matter how optimistically a medical examiner looked at her, she had completely lost her life.

However, before her soul could be destroyed, her grandparents grabbed ahold of it by its tail—and mixed it in with the mud that they had prepared in advance. They thoroughly mixed and scrambled it until it became firmly attached, until it was impossible to separate her consciousness from the mud, and then they finally shaped it into human form.

Into the form of their granddaughter.

They even made each and every strand of hair out of mud.

And the final result was, believe it or not, the golem, Kizashima Nozomi.

"Yes. Therefore, even though I look like a person on the outside, I'm really more like a figurine—the inside of me is completely and thoroughly packed with mud. I'm just a lump of dirt that isn't what she looks like. Although they occasionally remade me here and there to match my age, my grandparents eventually passed away when I was in middle school—they hadn't prepared mud dolls for themselves, you see. Or perhaps they had completely been exhausted from making me. As such, my appearance has stayed the same since then, which is what you see now."

Although I'd often be seen as mature for my age—said Kizashima Nozomi innocently.

“Well, it does make me immortal, in a sense. It’s not guaranteed that my soul will stay affixed to this mud doll forever, but I’m sure it will last through your training period, Assistant Inspector Araragi, so I’ll be in your care for now. Please don’t look down on me because of my baby face, okay? Because even if my appearance hasn’t followed along, I’ve properly grown up mentally.”

She drove that nail into me on our first meeting.

Since I myself knew a young girl that had lived for about six hundred years, there was really no need to worry about that front, but the association I had made at the time was not to the young vampire girl but to a little doll girl—yes, the girl named Ononoki Yotsugi that had once stayed as a freeloader at the Araragi household.

Although, in her case, she was a doll that *didn’t* contain a soul. Far from being a mud doll, she was actually a corpse doll.

Therefore, it was hard for me to really understand what it meant for a doll to contain a soul—and I would probably finish my training period without becoming able to understand.

A four month period was much too short for us to reach a mutual understanding.

No, it would probably be hard even if we had our entire lives.

Even if we happened to both be immortal, and even if we both happened to be burdened by similar pasts, it wouldn’t exactly be easy to share those pasts with one another.

The same as it was with any two people.

002

I would have assumed that the case of a randomly attacking phantom slasher would have had Crime Squad 1 in charge of it, but apparently the investigation actually had to do with an oddity known as the ‘phantom slasher’.

It happened on the road that led to Naoetsu High.

Yes, *that* Naoetsu High.

Apparently, high schoolers on their way back from school were slashed at from behind by a sharp implement, and this occurred multiple times—if this was true, then it would blow up into a huge incident that would hit the national papers, but the only reason it hadn’t already was because none of the victims witnessed any villains waving a huge knife, and the only things that were slashed were their uniforms, with not a scratch to be seen on their bodies.

The damage only went as far as the uniforms.

Of course, if there really did exist such a villain, then we couldn’t just leave this alone in case the crimes escalated, but it was a little hard to believe that any villain (or even any good person) would be able to pull off a trick like slashing open just the uniform without any of the victims noticing.

Perhaps it could have miraculously been done once or twice, but the number of victims had hit the double digits—if this was really the work of a human, then that human could only be on the level of Ishikawa Goemon.

It wouldn't be a miracle but a superhuman feat.

However, while it would be a huge incident if it was the work of a human, it would be just as huge an incident if it wasn't the work of a human, either.

It was only on the level of a rumor at the moment, but if there really did exist this 'phantom slasher' oddity, then that meant the school was involved.

And as a graduate, I couldn't ignore that.

I had to do something about it.

Well, it's not like I was a student with that much school pride... Rather, for most of the time I spent at that school, I was pretty much full of hate for it.

In class I would fervently pray that, if meteors were to fall on to the Earth, they would hit this school—remembering those turbulent feelings that I had at the time made me once again realize how hard-hearted I was in high school.

No matter how much I hated it, I shouldn't try to drop meteors on it.

It's amazing that they even let me graduate.

Though I'd spent my high school days looking down on (or really looking up at) the distasteful "elite" with a certain sort of pity for being victims of a test-results-focused education, I had ironically returned home five years later as one of those distasteful career men that had passed the state exam... If the me from back then saw me as I was now, I'm sure he'd give me a good beating.

But y'kno-ow, I can't help but think that I re-eally had a lo-ot of fun back then.

My memories are re-eally glistening like gold.

Ha-ah.

"What are you making such an ostentatious sigh for, Assistant Inspector Araragi?" asked Kizashima-senpai.

We were making our way on-site in a conspicuous police car when Kizashima-senpai asked me this from the passenger seat—with me at the steering wheel. Though I was happy at first to be given the chance to drive (it's a police car! a police car!), it turned out not to be so fun due to Kizashima-senpai constantly making remarks from beside me ("Aren't you turning on your turn signal too late?" or "It's faster if we go this way, you know?").

Unlike Suou-san who liked to change it up every now and then, Kizashima-senpai would consistently address me as "Assistant Inspector Araragi"—since she herself was an

inspector, it felt like she was trying to establish the pecking order every time she did that.

I wondered if I really did look like such a cheeky kid to her.

"I'm not as soft as Suou-chan is, after all. I'll be sure to thoroughly toughen you up! Into the next section chief. Or even the chief of police!"

"I don't think I'll be able to make it that far. For someone as halfhearted as me, the path of the elites is far too steep. Plus, there'll be all sorts of traps and pitfalls. I could drop out just like that."

"Did you expect the path of the elites to be some extravagant feast? But don't worry, because if you just drop out, then the Rumors Squad can take you on as an underling."

"I don't exactly have any strong desire to stay in my hometown, though..."

Or rather, I had zero desire.

If there had been any attachment, I wouldn't have gone without visiting for an entire four years.

However, it seemed Kizashima-senpai thought it was the opposite, for she said, "Again with you trying to act all tough. I guess that's how it is for you kids," failing to understand my complexities—also, it seemed Kizashima-senpai had a habit of overly acting like a senpai, even when it wasn't necessary.

Overly acting like a senpai, or perhaps overly acting like an adult.

Perhaps she was trying to cover for the fact that her outer appearance had stopped aging in middle school.

If that was the case, it wouldn't exactly be mature to try and get in the way of those feelings.

Incidentally, the one officially in charge of me during my training period at the Naoetsu Police Department (in other words, the one who'd gotten stuck with me) was the mermaid Suou Zenka-san, but I had been specifically paired with Kizashima-senpai for the sake of this "phantom slasher" incident.

We had formed a combination.

I'd gone through a tough struggle together with Suou-san on a different case, but Kizashima-senpai was also a graduate of Naoetsu High like me—though we hadn't attended at the same time, Kizashima-senpai wasn't just my senpai as a member of the Naoetsu Police Department, Rumors Squad, but also as a student of Naoetsu High.

I'd gladly let her act like a senpai to me.

And as such, I'd refer to her as Kizashima-senpai with nothing but respect.

To be honest, there had never been anyone in my life I could call senpai until now, so this actually made me pretty happy.

“But it’s a little interesting. I thought for sure that I was the only immortal student to attend Naoetsu High since it was founded.”

“And that was an incredibly conceited thought to have. Even if they weren’t immortal, there were a good number of part-youkai that attended before you, just from what I’m aware of.”

“Really...”

There were a good number of them, just from what she was aware of.

With that frequency, it likely meant that oddities weren’t as rare as I’d thought—which meant the foundation of the Rumors Squad had been all the more necessary.

“Well, though I’ve never seen an example as extreme as yours, Assistant Inspector Araragi, doesn’t everyone go to school with their own circumstances? I’m sure there’s no high school student in this world that spent their youth blissfully, without a single care.”

Now that I heard that, that was probably true.

It was so true that I had nothing to say in response.

For example, even Senjouhara Hitagi had been able to complete two of her three years in a state of “having no body weight”.

There could have been plenty more of those students that I’d simply never noticed... Even in that Class 1-3 in my first year that had put me in despair.

Maybe even that person, too.

But, on the other hand.

While my vampire constitution did lend itself to some inconveniences in my daily life, it surely couldn’t be comparable to the difficulties one had to face when one’s body was a doll made of mud.

What kind of life did Kizashima-senpai lead in high school?

“It wasn’t that hard, actually. People are surprisingly not that interested in other people’s circumstances—and since Gaen-san was able to figure me out just like that, it meant my disguise hadn’t even been perfect, either.”

“...And have you met Gaen-san personally?”

“I haven’t. She’s an acquaintance of an acquaintance of an acquaintance of my grandpa and grandma... or so I remember.”

Hmm.

Suou-san had also said that she'd never met Gaen-san personally... I would never have thought so because of her affable personality, but it was possible that that controller wasn't someone you could easily come face-to-face with.

Although, to be honest, I hadn't exactly met her that many times, either—and most of those times was set up through Ononoki-chan, too.

“Ah. Could it be possible that, somewhere within the range of your grandparents' acquaintances' acquaintances' acquaintances' acquaintances, there was a person named Teori Tadatsuru? He was a puppeteer specialist.”

“Hm? Unfortunately, I'm not familiar with that name. Who is that?”

“A direct kouhai of Gaen-san... He was the main creator of a corpse doll that I know.”

I had asked on the off chance that she did know, but it seemed no such unusual coincidence had occurred. Although it wasn't particularly unfortunate. Well, Gaen-san's network was pretty large, and Teori Tadatsuru was really an outlier on the level of Oshino Meme or Kaiki Deishuu, so naturally, things wouldn't fall into place so neatly.

“Well, either way, it's thanks to her that I was able to find employment, so I feel a great deal of gratitude towards Gaen-san. These days, it's hard to find work even if you aren't a golem, after all. I won't go into it all, but I put in a lot of effort, okay? Until the Rumors Squad was founded.”

“...Were you and the section chief members of the squad since its foundation?”

“Yes. Right now, the ones left are us two—the other founding members were... killed in the line of duty.”

“Eh!?”

Was this that unforgiving of a squad!?

But when I turned my head in confusion, Kizashima-senpai scolded me by saying, “Keep your eyes on the road!”

With an amused tone.

“I'm just kidding. After starting up the Rumors Squad, they all moved to other regions. They needed to spread the roots that had sprouted, after all. Because the chief wanted a leadership position, and because I loved my hometown, we stayed behind at the Naoetsu Police Department.”

Moved to other regions... Roots that had sprouted... In other words, they went to start up the next “Rumors Squads”.

They'd been steadily doing all this behind-the-scenes work while I had been stressing over my course units in college—or rather, had the behind-the-scenes work already started before I'd even entered Naoetsu High?

If that was the case, it was probably closer to the truth to say that the first Rumors Squad was founded at the Naoetsu Police Department not because it was my hometown, but because it was Kizashima-senpai's.

Although it's not like there was only one reason... Good grief.

The world had an underbelly that made me want to start believing in conspiracy theories.

An underbelly, but also a side flank.

In the first place, compared to Hanekawa Tsubasa's current activities overseas, Gaen-san's plans were much calmer, though perhaps not as wholesome.

There was no need to worry.

In that respect, you've gone past the level of me being able to worry about you, Hanekawa-san.

"What's wrong, Assistant Inspector Araragi? We've almost reached the site. It's fine to take in the nostalgia, but please be sure to live in the present. For the sake of the future."

It was like a proverb.

If you ignored the fact that neither I nor Kizashima-senpai had anything like a future.

003

Because I had commuted to school on bike, I had hardly ever used the path that was the shortest between the station and the school where the "phantom slasher" was said to appear. Strictly speaking, both bicycles that I had owned had gotten destroyed beyond repair in my third year, but after that, I obstinately went to school on foot using the same path that I'd taken on my bicycle, as if I were trying to mourn the losses of both of them.

The paths one takes aren't changed easily.

As such, I didn't really recognize the lane that we arrived at.

To the point that it made me wonder, had it really been like this then?

It didn't exactly have a good view, and it was surrounded by thickets of trees on both sides, so it didn't seem like a path I would want to take... Was this even a path that Naoetsu High students even took? I couldn't even see a dog on this path, let alone a single person.

“It can get crowded enough that it becomes hard to breathe when it’s before or after school. Well, I’m just exaggerating, but it did get crowded like that when I was attending.”

It seemed Kizashima-senpai was the kind that took the trains, so she was able to testify as such—though I had no idea why, it seemed she was in a good mood.

“If you have to ask me that, Assistant Inspector Araragi, then the truth is that it seems they’ve become a lot more concerned with safety and public order than they used to be. They’ve put up more streetlights, and they even have convex mirrors set up at road junctions. Ahaha, how many times did I get hit at that corner by bicyclers?”

This wasn’t something I could just pretend to not know anything about.

As a bicycler myself, this was painful news to hear—I’d never hit anyone myself even though I’d been hit before, I couldn’t say that I hadn’t engaged in dangerous bicycle riding like having two people on my bike.

Or rather, I’d done that quite frequently.

It wasn’t really that the world got stricter since then, it was more that I was just a good-for-nothing at the time.

“Fortunately, since I was a mud doll, even if I was hit by a bike, it didn’t hurt or itch or anything. Even if I were to get hit by a plane, it wouldn’t hurt or itch or anything. It was actually harder to pretend that I was injured—I didn’t want to overexaggerate the pain, but if I said I was completely unharmed, I would just stand out in a bad way.”

As she spoke, she pulled out a small flask, then gulped down its contents—though the flask was the kind you’d usually use for alcohol, hers only contained water.

As she was a golem, she normally wouldn’t need food or drink. But, in the exact opposite way as Suou-san, moisture was something that was indispensable to Kizashima-senpai. Especially on sunny days like today.

There was a risk that her skin—that is, her mud—could dry out.

While she was immortal, she wasn’t necessarily indestructible.

“Haah... Nevertheless, when I still attended, there wasn’t anything like the ‘phantom slasher’. Not even bicycles were considered dangerous—I wonder if, because public order improved, all the smaller issues that went ignored are paradoxically starting to come to light?”

“That could be the case... Like, cautiousness in general went down, or something... And the problems themselves had already been there in the past...”

But if we were talking about the “phantom slasher”, then that probably wasn’t it.

It was hard to believe that high schoolers were having their backs slashed at in the past.

At the very least, I'd never experienced something like that—well, I couldn't exactly say "never".

For one, I'd gotten the inside of my mouth stapled at one point... Even that would be a huge incident if it happened now.

"Hmm. Assistant Inspector Araragi, what you said does show one point of view, but the way I see it is a little different. It's not completely true that something like this never happened in the past."

"Is that so?"

I had thought that Kizashima-senpai's view was that the "phantom slasher" had never appeared in the past, but was she taking it back? I tilted my head, but she simply continued, "In the past, a phenomenon like this was probably dealt with as 'kamaitachi'."

"'Kamaitachi'? Right, I've heard about that before."

"I'd be surprised if a member of the Rumors Squad hadn't heard of 'kamaitachi' before."

"Ah, yes, well, I am still a newcomer."

"'Kamaitachi' are youkai that come in a trio. As the name implies, they're weasels (itachi). And both hands of each one are sickles, like this... The first one knocks you down, the second one cuts you up, and the third one applies medicine to those cuts to heal them—you've heard that, right?"

"Mm—"

If I told the truth, I probably had not heard about that before, but I didn't want my senpai to think I was ignorant, so I gave a vague response without telling the truth—and another reason for that vague response was to incorporate my skeptical feelings of, "What kind of weird youkai is that?", as well.

"To make cuts and then heal them... What exactly are they trying to accomplish? And is the first weasel, the one that 'knocks you down', even really necessary? They'd probably be more successful if they started off with suddenly slashing at you..."

"Those sorts of matter-of-fact criticisms are what spoil these nicer ghost stories—and give birth to more dangerous ones, like the 'phantom slasher'."

It'll be bad if we don't deal with it while it was still a rumor, said Kizashima-senpai.

Her scolding made me feel almost like a criminal... even though I was a policeman.

"But trying to eliminate everything that brings about uneasiness is more a modern thing."

"That's right. So an incident like this one may have just been ignored in the past. Since it's only uniforms that were cut, with not a single injury on any student's skin."

“They wouldn’t even notice until it was too late.”

“Indeed. You’ve said something smart, Assistant Inspector Araragi. Not everyone is immune to pain the way you and I are.”

Though I wasn’t immune to pain, either...

Maybe it would be good to have a discussion on the minor differences between our types of immortality, bringing in Suou-san as well... It was possible that a wrong assumption could lead to a terrible mistake otherwise.

Anyway, it was time for the inspection.

Kizashima-senpai and I tried walking back and forth, up and down the path, to start with.

But there were no new developments from doing that.

There were no weasels that suddenly burst out of the thickets of trees, and there were no perverts that burst out, either.

“When you say ‘thicket of trees’ (zoukibayashi) too many times, doesn’t it end up sounding like ‘forest of organs’ (zouki bayashi)?”

“Please don’t say something so horrifying with such a polite way of speaking.”

“I don’t have any organs, after all. If I could grow a heart or a liver, I’d probably harvest them.”

“That’s taking horrifying to the extreme.”

Surprisingly, our conversation aligned pretty well.

And though it wasn’t brought on because of the thicket of trees, I asked, “Could it be possible that it’s a natural phenomenon?” as we continued walking. “Don’t we also call that ‘kamaitachi’? A whirlwind-like phenomenon where a vacuum forms near your body and cuts you up...”

“True. Or rather, it was more that everyone was satisfied with calling it the work of the youkai, ‘kamaitachi’, until they tried to scientifically explain it as the vacuum phenomenon through science. Like the theory of geocentrism.”

“Geocentrism... That’s a little too large-scale to be on the level of a rumor.”

“But ‘kamaitachi’ themselves are rumors in the wind. Because they are wind, after all. Nevertheless, I think it’s hard to see this case as a natural phenomenon—if it were, it would be even more unnatural for only the uniforms to get cut.”

That was true.

Actually, since clothes could flutter about, it seemed more likely that only the skin would get cut—plus, the fact that only the backsides of the students were cut bothered me.

I doubted that a natural phenomenon would behave so much like a surprise attack.

“It’s possible that the way this lane was constructed made it easy for ‘kamaitachi’ rumors to begin—and if that’s the case, it would actually be unnatural if no such phenomenon occurred in the past.”

“It’d be unnatural, huh.”

Then, rather than a natural phenomenon, was it an unnatural phenomenon?

The thing was that it was still hard to judge whether an oddity phenomenon was natural or unnatural.

If anything, it was supernatural.

In the end, with no results to show after three trips up and down the path, we returned to the starting point—though legwork was fundamental to police work, if all we did was walk around without thinking, we’d just get tired.

Although golems never got tired, and vampires could recover from their fatigue in an instant. This was a mental thing.

“Hmm. Is there some sort of misunderstanding that we’re making? I’m only saying that because I’m the kind of guy that often makes a lot of misunderstandings...”

“But we’ve gotten clear evidence of uniforms that had been cut up, you know? And not even just one or two.”

“That’s right... But Kizashima-senpai, there’s something that bothers me. For example, let’s say there was some kind of youkai, whether it’s a ‘kamaitachi’ or a ‘phantom slasher’, and they were slashing at high schoolers from behind.”

“Swish! Like that.”

“Yes, like that. In this example, the youkai wasn’t actually seen—but if the clothes they were wearing were cut, is it really possible for them to not notice that? All the victims testified that ‘they’d been cut before I knew it’, but...”

For example, even if they didn’t feel any sharp implements (?) on their bare skin, they’d still feel some sort of wind pressure... The skin of humans usually had fairly sensitive sensory receptors, after all.

“Considering I basically have a natural mud pack with my mud skin, I can’t really relate to that. Since I can only really sense temperature and humidity. It’s really terrible in midsummer. There was even a time when my arm came off!”

“Did something that brutal really happen?”

“I can’t say it was all that brutal. I can just stick it back on again if I moisten the edges. It’s a little unclean, but as the saying goes, nothing a little spit can’t fix.”

So she could at least produce saliva?

I really wanted to ask her about the finer details of her immortality.

“Anyway, going back on topic. Well, in the opposite of my example, if it was midwinter and your back was exposed, then you’d definitely feel a chill, but right now the weather is pretty nice. Maybe people are just making the assumption of safety that ‘there’s no way my uniform will suddenly get cut’, and that’s actually having a huge effect.”

“That’s true...”

What I had was only a theory. I wasn’t totally convinced of it myself.

Not to mention, the rumor that I was challenging in this case was exceedingly unrealistic—and the less realistic it was, the less convinced I was. If someone did get slashed at from behind and realize it, they’d probably start panicking out of fear.

It would be impossible to think properly in that state.

“Could you confirm this for me? It wasn’t just the victims that didn’t see the ‘phantom slasher’, but all the students around them also didn’t see it, right? Did it seem like the uniforms suddenly tore open to the students around them?”

“I don’t believe there were any witnesses to that effect. It seems that all the victims were targeted because they were returning home alone.”

“Hmm.”

Hearing that students returning home alone were targeted, or that care was taken to not be witnessed by anyone, made me think that it was less likely for it to be an oddity phenomenon and more likely for it to be a human crime—was it possible?

If they stealthily approached so as to not be noticed by the victims, and daringly slashed at the uniform while being careful enough to not cut the skin, and quickly disappeared before the victim turned around—

It wouldn’t be hard to hide in the thickets of trees, but the real challenge was still trying to cut the uniform without cutting the skin.

Were such acrobatics possible with any sharp implement?

At the very least, it would be impossible with a sickle.

“...Ah. If it was a demon sword, then maybe...”

“A demon sword? What is that?”

“Well, there was something like that, a while back—it probably still exists now, but since it hasn’t been used for several years, it could be all rusted over. It’s a huge longsword that the vampire in my shadow once wielded that can cut only oddities.”

But that was the opposite.

It would be able to ignore the clothing and cut the body inside, but it wouldn't be able to cut just the clothing itself—unless the clothing itself was an oddity... But an oddity of school uniforms just makes no sense.

"I see. Well, it's not like oddities related to clothing don't exist at all. Incidentally, won't you be calling out that vampire? I've heard that, when you were working with Suou-chan, you enlisted her help—you enlisted the help of the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire for an on-site inspection. That is, you left it all to her."

"I didn't leave it all to her, but, well, yes. However, I don't want to have to rely on a young girl all the time. I'm already an adult now, too..."

I gave an arbitrary excuse to dodge the question.

The truth was that Shinobu wasn't particularly happy with how Kizashima-senpai was treating "her master" as an errand boy, so it would actually be difficult to call her out in front of Kizashima-senpai.

And even if I wasn't working with Suou-san, I would be okay with asking for her opinion if I was left alone—but I couldn't exactly say, "My partner hates you, so please go somewhere else."

Though I had to say this was somewhat of an inconvenient arrangement, it was natural that nothing went exactly the way I wanted it to when I housed an oddity within me—or rather, within my shadow.

"Regardless of if it is an oddity phenomenon, if it isn't an oddity phenomenon, and if it's a natural, unnatural, or supernatural phenomenon, if we can't come up with a theory, they'll bring in Crime Squad 1 or the Public Safety Squad to take over for a full-blown investigation. Since there are victims involved."

"True."

The real problem with the case was if there was even a perpetrator involved.

A nonexistent perpetrator.

That in itself sounded like a rather modern rumor.

004

And so we spent the entire morning inspecting that school road. (Just as an experiment, Kizashima-senpai and I tried slashing at each other with some sticks to see how it felt. From someone else's point of view, it probably looked like some adults pretending to swordfight for some reason—with the fact that Kizashima-senpai basically looked like a middle schooler, it wouldn't have been surprising for me to be reported. Even though I was a policeman.) After getting lunch (Kizashima-senpai was very senpai-like when she paid for lunch—although the workers were giving me a look as if saying, why are you making a kid like this pay for you?), the two of us decided to visit our dearly missed alma mater.

We'd made an appointment to do so.

That was the power of a public institution—a freelancer like Oshino or a con man like Kaiki wouldn't have been able to enter a school in the middle of the day.

We'd made plans to hear what the affected students had to say (calling it police questioning would be an exaggeration) during lunch break.

Of course, this wasn't as simple as it sounded—it was thanks to the section chief's resources that we managed to make this work so smoothly. And it was for the process to go even smoother that the school's graduates, Kizashima-senpai and me, were dispatched.

So the feeling that it wasn't going smoothly was probably just me.

It felt vaguely difficult to do this.

To be honest, I hadn't expected to be come back to my alma mater like this—or rather, I hadn't expected to come back at all.

Though I'd made plans to visit the Kitashirahebi Shrine at least once over my four-month training period, I hadn't especially felt the desire to visit Naoetsu High even once.

I didn't personally have anything to do, and there wasn't anyone that I knew—no, that wasn't true.

Strictly speaking, there was someone I knew at this school, but as for whether or not I wanted to meet her...

"It's fine to be more confident about this, Assistant Inspector Araragi. There are teachers that you learned from that are here, aren't there? Go and brag about how you're a career man now!"

"Why are you phrasing it like a command? I don't want to. I don't want to be seen as conceited for becoming a police officer after having been unable to keep up in school. I don't want them to think that I came to tell them off, or misunderstand that I came to get back at them..."

"If you actually do have those feelings, then aren't you just feeling guilty? Don't worry, nobody really cares about you that much."

Really?

Well, I did act like I was a problem child, but like how there were plenty of immortal students, I suppose from the school's perspective, I was just one of many problem children that they had.

I may not even be remembered.

In the end, I'd managed to avoid them, as the teacher that guided us around was someone I didn't know, and the conversations with the affected students ended without any problems—that was all thanks to Kizashima-senpai's skill.

Though nowadays I felt a huge barrier in trying to converse with today's high schoolers, Kizashima-senpai appeared to have no problem with it.

It seemed her childish appearance was surprisingly effective in removing that barrier... Though it wouldn't have been surprising to develop a complex over it, she was much heartier than that.

I probably wouldn't be able to make use of my own short height like that.

While Suou-san was an adult that liked kids, Kizashima-senpai's strong point was her ability to communicate with kids, whether she liked them or not—and because oddities were more likely to get involved with those who were younger, this was most likely an indispensable disposition to have in the Rumors Squad.

At the very least, it was a lot more useful than just being immortal.

As such, although Kizashima-senpai really got into chatting with the victims, she still managed to hear what everyone had to say by the end of the lunch break, not having forgotten her main reason for coming.

She had naturally even managed to obtain everyone's phone numbers, be they boy or girl.

"This cell phone is my work phone, by the way. I make a very big distinction between work and leisure, so don't worry, I wasn't trying to get close to any cute guys here—and I don't think you're the sort to mess around with high school girls. Considering your age."

"Thank you for your concern. But I feel like I've gotten even older in the past 30 minutes. It doesn't feel like I have the energy to speak with high schoolers anymore. Even though in my mind, I'm still a young boy."

"Well, in terms of my body, I'm still a young girl, after all. So growing older would be nice for a change. But anyway, we didn't hear anything new, but at least that means we didn't hear anything that could overturn what we've confirmed so far. That's still a good harvest of information."

I personally couldn't see that as a good harvest... Working really was just an accumulation of wasted effort, wasn't it?

"Well then, shall we head back to the site, Assistant Inspector Araragi?"

"Ah... Kizashima-senpai, do you mind going on ahead? There's somewhere I want to visit in that building over there."

I'd been hesitant the whole time I'd been within the school, but once our duties were finished, I finally decided to say that—we hadn't driven the police car here but simply taken the school road, so it wasn't like she needed me to drive her.

But detectives really had good intuition.

"Didn't you want to leave as soon as possible before? You said you had no good memories of this place, didn't you?"

"I didn't go that far... I do have some good memories. Well, you're right that I do want to leave, but seeing as I'm already here, there's someone that I should probably see before I go. It'll be scary if I don't."

"Hmm? ...Is it something personal?"

"Yes, it's personal. But there's a possibility that we could get some information to help the investigation—because she's a mystery maniac."

Or rather, she herself was wrapped in mystery.

As mysterious as the darkness.

005

I then parted ways with Kizashima-senpai, who had said that if that was the case then she had somewhere she wanted to visit, too, so I could do as I liked—to no one's surprise, she herself had some "secret location" within Naoetsu High as well.

No matter how open this workplace was, I probably wouldn't get the chance to hear how an immortal golem like her spent her youth in this school—but as for me, my "secret location" was the classroom for Class 1-3.

However, there was no such Class 1-3, so it was a nonexistent Class 1-3.

"Hey—Araragi-senpai. I thought you'd forgotten about me."

Sitting at the teacher's desk in this empty classroom was none other than Oshino Ougi—though she was supposed to have been a first year that transferred to Naoetsu High when I was in my third year, she still wore a Naoetsu High uniform and still wore a dubious smile on her face.

Ever since then, Ougi-chan had been a high school student this whole time...

After she had gotten separated from me, I heard she'd gotten close with Kanbaru, but after Kanbaru graduated as well, it seemed she'd ended up becoming fixed in the school itself.

Did she even exist, or did she not exist?

As Oshino Meme's niece, it seemed she'd taken up the occupation of getting students who'd lost their way in Naoetsu High and making them even further lost—quite literally becoming a school ghost story, as one of the seven wonders.

Because her starting point had been me, not even Kizashima-senpai was aware of Ougi-chan, but even if the Rumors Squad tried to get ahold of this classroom's existence (or nonexistence), it would probably be impossible for them.

Though she couldn't be considered harmless, Ougi-chan had become a symbol of the school, and there was probably no specialist that could do anything about that—since even Gaen-san had said so, that was the extent of how untouchable she was.

In the end, even I had simply left her alone once I had graduated from high school, but she experienced some utterly nonsensical growth since then—her appearance was still that of a 15-year-old, but in spite of that, she had taken on a dramatic evolution. It had gone to the point that it was almost irreparable.

If I were to confess my crime (even though I was a policeman), then this was one of the reasons why I didn't visit my hometown, but seeing that I was her manufacturer of sorts, I probably couldn't go without visiting her anymore.

“...What are you reading, Ougi-chan? A mystery? A locked-room one?”

“No, no. It's not even prose, you see. Recently, I've started reading a lot of manga,” said Ougi-chan, showing me the cover.

Oof. I felt like I'd just been hit.

As if she had been lying in wait for me to come see her, the author was none other than—“Sengoku Nadeko”.

“But apparently you don't read the kanji as 'Nadeko' but 'Nadeshiko'. It's her pen name. I'd always thought her name was rather strange, but it looks like she herself was worrying about it, too.”

“...Is it her third work since her debut? That's pretty amazing,” I started, with a harmless, inoffensive comment.

“Though it doesn't seem like it's selling very well,” shot back Ougi with a harmful, offensive comment.

That was the type of girl she was.

“However, it has a bit of a cult following. Since it's cute but dark. Ah, though I say dark, I haven't been meddling in her affairs at all—that darkness is the darkness of Sengoku-chan herself.”

Though I do like this work, said Ougi-chan, setting the book aside.

Seeing how she handled it gently, it seemed she wasn't lying.

“Don't worry. After Sengoku-chan graduated from middle school, she moved away from this town. So you don't need to be concerned about her suddenly running into you on the street and reviving her lovey-dovey romantic feelings for you, Araragi-senpai.”

“I hadn’t really been concerned about that in the first place...”

Or had I? I didn’t even know.

I hadn’t even known back then, either.

“Isn’t she tied to Gaen-san, now? I thought I heard something like that... No, not Gaen-san. Was it Ononoki-chan...”

“That’s right. Just like you, Araragi-senpai, or rather, Assistant Inspector Araragi—Gaen-san is making good use of her as a mangaka. Gaen-san’s project aims to steadily set things up even on the entertainment side of things, too.”

“As always, Ougi-chan, you really know everything, don’t you?”

“I don’t know anything. You’re the one who knows—Assistant Inspector Araragi,” said Ougi-chan, looking at me with those pitch-black eyes of hers.

...That was it, wasn’t it?

“But stop calling me ‘Assistant Inspector’, Ougi-chan. You’ve always called me ‘senpai’, after all.”

“That’s Kanbaru-senpai’s duty, but if that’s what you wish, then I shall do as you please. But aren’t you making a triumphant return to this high school after having become a detective in the Rumors Squad, Araragi-senpai? If you just wanted to hear about the present state of Sengoku Nadeshiko-sensei, you could just look in the table of contents of the magazine she’s serialized in. But if you’re here for advice, then I’m all ears.”

“Well, it’s not exactly advice, but...”

I’d come to this illusory Class 1-3 because I couldn’t just leave after coming this far without meeting Ougi-chan, and since I’d said as much to Kizashima-senpai, I had to open up about the secrets of my investigation.

To open up to a mystery maniac about the secrets of my investigation was itself a rather mysterious development.

Although it was hard to keep secrets from Ougi-chan in the first place.

“Ah, yes. I myself have been truly grieving over the ‘phantom slasher’ incidents taking place on the school road to Naoetsu High. It seems that even the students I’m currently meddling with have taken some damage from slashing, as well.”

...It seemed that among the kids that we’d spoken to earlier, some of them had fallen prey to Ougi-chan.

They were taking damage beyond what they’d received from the “phantom slasher” or the “kamaitachi”, but there was nothing I could do about that... In the end, after getting involved with Ougi-chan, they could only do something about it themselves.

Just as I, Kanbaru, and Sengoku had done.

“So it’s not your doing, then. Right, Ougi-chan?”

“Oh my, are you doubting my words? Ha ha. You have no faith in me at all.”

It wasn’t really something to laugh about, since I’d certainly had my concerns—as long as Naoetsu High’s students were victims. Although, suddenly slashing at innocent high schoolers from behind wasn’t exactly something that Ougi-chan would do.

“Innocent high schoolers, huh? But do they really exist?”

“Huh? What? What do you mean by that?”

“No, no, there’s a very deep meaning to that.”

“Is there?”

“It’s regrettable that I would fall under false suspicion by my beloved Araragi-senpai, but I shall offer up a modest hint. Being useful to you, Araragi-senpai, is my purpose in life, after all—or rather, it *was* my purpose in life.”

When she switched to past tense, it made me keenly aware.

Of the fact that Ougi-chan was no longer bound to me—despite going by the name Oshino Ougi, she didn’t even hold the position of Oshino Meme’s niece anymore.

The darkness grows up, and the darkness leaves the nest.

In that sense, you could say she’d gone far past Oshino Shinobu, who still inhabited my shadow.

She wasn’t stagnating—unlike me, although I’d been the one to bring her into this world.

“A hint? You can’t just give me the answer?”

“Do you really see me as a kouhai that’s that kind?”

“You’re so unkind it’s almost astonishing.”

“Then that astonishment is your answer. However, I am a mirror to you, Araragi-senpai. You’re not exactly a capable kouhai yourself, are you?”

“Well, yes.”

“Anyway, the hint.”

Why did the “phantom slasher” only target the backs of students as they were coming back from school, started Ougi-chan.
And I was the one who continued.

“—*When they could just as easily do so as they were going to school?*”

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"Hmm. Well, that does seem right. Since a school road is used both to go to and to come back from school—it's a little strange that the attacks are only focused on those coming back."

That's a pretty clever school friend you have there, said Kizashima-senpai once we met back up on-site.

She wasn't even a school friend of mine, and the hint wasn't really something I could use, even if I heard it—so the way it made the mystery even more mysterious was very Ougi-chan-like.

Without prying further into the affairs of my "school friend", Kizashima-senpai said, "As for me, I visited the staff room."

So Kizashima-senpai's "secret location" was the staff room?

It wasn't exactly a place I could accompany her to.

I was ashamed of my bad behavior in those olden days.

"Yes. Although I went in there without making an appointment. It was just a decision I made on the spot. I had fun chatting with some of my old teachers. They were saying, 'You haven't changed a bit, have you?' But that's a matter of course for me."

"...I'm just asking out of curiosity, but Kizashima-senpai, what do you plan on doing in the future? You wouldn't possibly keep walking around with a baby face at 80 years old, right?"

"That's a rather indelicate question."

She turned it around by saying that I would encounter the same problem, but strictly speaking, my immortality didn't necessarily mean eternal youth and longevity, so I couldn't avoid changing over the years, in both a good way and a bad way.

But it was different for mud dolls.

Even clay figures managed to stay exactly the same for thousands of years, right?

"Well, in that case, I'll have to deceive them with makeup. It'll be the opposite of makeup usually being used to make people look younger... I'll have to put wrinkles on my skin and such."

"Would it not be possible to get Gaen-san's help with making a new doll to move your soul into?"

"With that Teori-san or some such person? It would be great if that was possible. But what my grandpa and grandma used to keep my soul in this world was mostly a forbidden spell, you see."

"Forbidden spell (kinju)?"

“I’m not talking about a golden (kin) tree (ju). A spell that’s forbidden—a very powerful one, though not very practical to use. Well, someone may be able to reverse-engineer it after a few decades, so I can wait until then. Fortunately, I am immortal, after all.”

It almost sounded like she was a patient with some incurable disease just hoping for a new treatment to be discovered, but, well, in the first place Kizashima-senpai had actually died at a young age from a serious illness, and the mindset itself was rather alike.

My questions went a little too far. Let’s get back on track.

“So, Kizashima-senpai, did you find out anything new from the staff room?”

“I didn’t make any progress. Instead of trying to figure out the truth behind the ‘phantom slasher’ incident, I noticed that they seemed more concerned about trying to cover up such disturbances—since it is a private school, I can only guess at their true motives, but they’re stepping back from solving the problem.”

“That approach that Naoetsu High takes is still the same as it was back then.”

Although I couldn’t exactly criticize them for it, since it worked out well for me a number of times... How many times had I gone around in the school at night?

I’d forgotten about the time I snuck onto the roof, too.

But it was true that such an insular environment was what led to students becoming truant. It wasn’t a problem that could easily be resolved, but I hoped that they’d do something about it someday.

“Indeed. But anyway, for the time being, what we must do is resolve the problem that’s at our hands now—at this point, all we can do is try to catch the criminal red-handed and arrest them.”

We can’t arrest oddities, but if there are any “kamaitachi”, we’ll grab them by their tails—said Kizashima-senpai.

“And just in time, it’s almost time for students to start coming back from school. We’ll stand guard here and try to witness the moment that any students’ backs get cut—if there were no witnesses, we’ll be the witnesses ourselves.”

It was a rather proactive attitude.

Although, I was a little reluctant to just stand by and watch while kids were slashed at—it felt almost like a decoy operation. It may be a bit naive to say this, but I wanted to stop crimes before they occurred, if I could.

“I feel the same way, but in reality, none of the victims have even a scratch on them. Of course, they’ll need to pay for their uniforms, but none of the high schoolers are at risk here.”

Mm, was all I said in response.

That was true, but the one-in-a-million chance still made me hesitant. A stakeout operation was a very police-like thing to do, but to just stand by and watch high schoolers get attacked...

"Please get a grip. Because even 'just standing by and watching' is harder than it sounds."

Kizashima-senpai clapped her hands together loudly as if to encourage me.

"Unlike the case of the river that Suou-san was in charge of, this case has a high probability of the observer effect taking place. No matter how cleverly we try to hide in those thickets of trees, the 'phantom slasher' may not appear simply because it senses our gazes."

The observer effect.

It was something like, the act of observing a phenomenon itself will end up influencing that phenomenon... It was logic that was applied to things like verifying the existence of ESP.

Like, if you take an antagonistic approach and try to see through its tricks, then fortune-telling will end up not working... Though it wasn't exactly the same as saying, "true believers will be saved", it was a rather convenient excuse for occult-types, having some amount of truth to it.

Instead of a new treatment, this was an old medicine that had seen many days.

That is, the placebo effect.

"Yes. Although in our case, we don't exactly doubt the existence of oddities—but on the other hand, if 'not being witnessed' is the condition for the 'phantom slasher' appearing, it does manage to account for why the victims only had their backs slashed at."

"It does, doesn't it?"

It wasn't just an oddity phenomenon with no witnesses, but an oddity phenomenon that occurred precisely because there were no witnesses... In that case, a stakeout operation could be counterproductive, in a manner of speaking.

Although, if us being on the lookout put a stop to the 'phantom slasher' incident, I guess that could be called productive?

"Don't be stupid. It's not like we can stand guard around this school road forever. The duty of the Rumors Squad is to nitpick these rumors. What would be the point of keeping a single nit alive?"

I thought the expression of "keeping a nit" should be patented, but it was as she said.

It was a bad habit of mine to only be able to see what was in front of me.

What I should be focusing on was, in this case, the backs of people and the background scenery.

"Then, what should we do? If we want to stand guard without getting noticed, the trees seem like the only option to hide in..."

But if that was the only blind spot, then I would think that anyone would be more conscious about checking there.

In the first place, if they were going to enter our line of sight, we'd appear in their line of sight as well.

If you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.

Was it something like that?

"If there are no blind spots, we can just make one. Aren't we experts on death, Assistant Inspector Araragi?"

It seemed that Kizashima-senpai was fond of thinking along the lines of, "If there's no such-and-such, then we'll become such-and-such" or "If there's no such-and-such, then we'll make such-and-such". It was an element you wouldn't find in my personality no matter how hard to looked. A positive creative energy.

Or would that just be, "If there's no creative energy, we can just get creative energy" as well?

"If we don't use our immortal powers now, when would we use them, Assistant Inspector Araragi?"

"If I had a choice, I wouldn't ever want to use my immortal powers, though... But what exactly do you mean, Kizashima-senpai?"

I had no idea how being experts on death led to not becoming witnesses to the "phantom slasher".

What the heck was this golem trying to get at?

"You're rather slow on the uptake. Like I said—well, let's see. Assistant Inspector Araragi, please go and use that convex mirror over there."

"Sorry?"

"I'm saying, go to a different place and use that mirror to keep an eye on the school road. You at least have the exceptional eyesight of a vampire, don't you?"

Ah—that's what she meant.

It wasn't exactly simple to be on the lookout through a mirror, but thanks to the aftereffects of vampirism lingering in my body, it was possible for me with my long-range vision.

Moreover, using a mirror to see oddities that couldn't, or shouldn't, be seen was rather like a tradition from mythology.

For a famous example, the legend of Medusa.

Or was that using a mirror to exterminate her?

In any case, it was possible that Ougi-chan was ostentatiously reading the manga of Sengoku Nadeshiko-sensei as foreshadowing for this moment—or no, that was just to drop some snide remarks.

Ougi-chan loved to offend people, after all.

“Right. And vampires aren't reflected in mirrors, after all. Even if you can see them from here, they won't be able to see you from where they are.”

Though Kizashima-senpai laid out the plan with a triumphant face, that was something I had no choice to point out the flaw in.

“I'm very sorry, but unfortunately, I'm the type of vampire that does get reflected in mirrors...”

“What did you say!? Well, please give it your all and figure something out.”

Was it something I could do something about just by giving it my all?

It had been a huge problem in the past when I'd stopped showing up in mirrors... To think that, five years later, I'd be trying to make an effort to stop showing up in mirrors.

But if I could manage that, then it could get me a lot of sway, not just during this case, but for the rest of the training period as well—using my vampire powers wantonly was not something to be praised (considering I'd gone through a lot of hardships because of it), but as far as the Rumors Squad was concerned, that shouldn't be a restriction.

Of course, that was if they had any restrictions at all.

“Since it's an order from my superior, I'll do the best that I can... But what will you be doing, Kizashima-senpai? I'm sure there was some special trait that golems had that gave them an advantage in standing guard...”

Because of my poor study skills, I wasn't too familiar with the subject.

I'd heard something along the lines of golems having certain characters inscribed on them, and that inscription was their only weak point, or something... But I couldn't think of any special traits otherwise.

And to that, Kizashima-senpai glanced back at me and said, “The special trait that golems have, Assistant Inspector Araragi, is that, at the end of the day, their entire body is made of 'dirt'. And nothing more.”

And, once again, she took out her small flask.

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If I had to start from the conclusion, we attained no results from standing guard.

Even though, from halfway up a mountain that was a few hundred meters away, I'd opened my eyes wide and observed the convex mirror (though I'd put in some fighting spirit, I couldn't tell if I did or didn't show up in the mirror, but I felt that this wasn't something you could do with just your all), while Kizashima-senpai had covered herself in dirt and kept watch all the way until evening.

Or, rather than covering herself in dirt.

She'd transformed her entire body to dirt—and kept watch like that.

It was that doton-no-jutsu that ninjas used—or not, because Kizashima-senpai had poured her flask of water over her head and muddied up her mud body.

It was the exact opposite approach to water that the mermaid Suou-san had, but in a sense, you could say it was exactly the same.

Her body, that could dry up and crack without moisture—while that body of “dirt” did, in fact, require a supply of water (and you could even repair broken parts with it—making her immortal), an excess supply would actually make it harder to maintain her shape.

She'd become muddy.

“But it won't end up releasing my soul. It wouldn't do that even if my body turned into something like a swamp—so I won't be hiding in the trees. I'll be right below them, covered in dirt.”

I'll just be down in the dumps—said Kizashima-senpai with an innocent look.

An innocent look of course came naturally for a golem, but I couldn't keep from getting nauseous at the thought of going that far for my work—it wasn't even turning her body into dust, but into mud.

Far from the trees themselves, she would scatter pieces of “herself” all across the school road.

In short, she would be stepped on by all the high schoolers returning home from school.

She'd be trampled underfoot by the kids she was aiming to protect.

I had felt that I was being naive in being reluctant to do a stakeout because it felt too much like a decoy operation, but, far from none of the students being at risk, the one who was at the most risk was Kizashima-senpai herself.

What a mess.

It may be just a matter of course for her, but it being a matter of course was a mess in itself—whether or not she'd be able to return to her original form would be a matter of

luck every time she tried it, and even if she didn't feel pain, I highly doubted that losing a human form didn't cause pain to one's soul.

To be stepped on by the very ones you're trying to protect.

It had to be painful.

"I don't understand, Kizashima-senpai, why you have to go that far—I'll keep a proper lookout, so let's just leave it at that."

"There are no absolutes when it comes to rumors. Therefore, if we don't do the best that we can, we cannot say with confidence that we thoroughly 'nitpicked' at everything—I don't want you to have the wrong idea, Assistant Inspector Araragi, because it's not that I don't have faith in your eyes."

"But—excuse me, but I don't want you to have the wrong idea, either. It's not that I don't have faith in you. In fact, I feel like I should learn from you that consciousness you have for your work. I feel it from the bottom of my heart. But there are limits we just shouldn't cross!"

Of course, considering this 'kouhai's rebellion', what came to mind was my classmate from high school, Hanekawa Tsubasa—I realized now, as the years passed since that spring break, how much harder it was to recover from what she did for me back then.

After that, after the nightmare had passed, her way of living had changed.

Hanekawa was no longer the Hanekawa she was back then.

After our paths diverged, I no longer had any way to stop Hanekawa.

And because of that, when I saw anyone that reminded me even a little bit of Hanekawa, I wanted to try and stop them, whoever it was—and Kizashima-senpai didn't just remind me of her "a little bit".

In a sense, she was throwing herself at the problem even more than Hanekawa was.

Thinking about it now, even Suou-san had that same inclination...

"It's important to us that the world remains connected, and I'm sure you feel the same way, Assistant Inspector Araragi. Gaen-san, and even the section chief, are making good use of that—doesn't it make you feel the greatest when you see that you take that profile you've had to cover up and use it for the sake of justice and helping people?"

And please don't ask me what justice actually means, said Kizashima-senpai, forcibly ending the argument and moving straight into preparations for the stakeout... More specifically, taking off her jacket. And then taking off the rest, even her shoes.

Ah, that was right.

It seemed that I had once again been hit with the fate of seeing a girl half-naked after just barely getting to know them. It almost felt like I needed to settle some dispute or

karma would come back to bite me someday—but anyway, it seemed Kizashima-senpai couldn't stand the thought of getting her brand-name jacket or silk stockings or custom-made loafers dirty, even if she was going to cover herself in dirt.

It seemed she'd firmly drawn the line between work and leisure there.

Well, even if I was used to suddenly being stripped at, if she'd drawn the line there, I had no choice but to restrain myself from trying to stop her.

All I could do was watch over the convex mirror from a far away place with the same seriousness that she had.

And, at the same time, make sure she stayed safe after turning into a thin layer of dirt and spreading all over the school road like a carpet (although in that form, safety meant nothing), whether I liked it or not.

Every time a high schooler walked by, even as I wondered whether or not they'd get slashed at, I couldn't help but watch their feet instead, and I spent the whole time in that feeling of unease when I heard, "I've changed my mind about her, just a little," from my shadow.

It seemed Shinobu was pleased with the golem's method of investigation—although it wasn't to the point that she would give us any suggestions, unfortunately.

She must not have liked the fact that I was obediently doing as I was told.

What an incredibly loyal manservant I was.

And with that, we disappointingly ended up with no results—we couldn't catch the "phantom slasher" red-handed, and no phenomena that even resembled it occurred. After the returning-home period, it had turned completely dark, and the school road had become completely deserted.

I hurried back to the site and asked the ground, "Are you okay, Kizashima-senpai?"

"I'm fine. There are no problems here. Sorry to have to ask you this, but would you mind filling up the flask I gave you and putting my parts back together, Assistant Inspector Araragi? It's fine if you just do it roughly. I'm sure you'd never expected to be playing with mud at this age, but this is work, too."

Was this really work, though?

Even though I thought that, when I did as I was told without any objections, the mud soon began to sloppily come back together on its own into its original form, as if it were some sort of shape-memory alloy.

"I'm confident that my stakeout wasn't noticed... I can assert that with absolute confidence. But I didn't catch a glimpse of anything youkai-like. If that's the case, then that means it may not be an oddity phenomenon after all."

How was she even speaking? Was the dirt just vibrating to produce sound like speakers did? But even in that condition where she was still just a pile of dirt, Kizashima-senpai made her analysis.

“I had the same impression. However, if that’s the case, the culprit... How did a real ‘phantom slasher’ even slash at the backs of high schoolers without being noticed by anyone?”

Was it really an expert?

In that case, the situation really called for neither me nor Kizashima-senpai but Mitome-san to appear... Hm? No, wait. That wasn’t it. What we should be doubting wasn’t that.

The question wasn’t, how did they do it without being noticed.

That would be a culprit’s point of view. Or the point of view of those standing guard.

If it was really an oddity phenomenon, in the end, anything was possible—putting aside the idea of a demon sword, even Shinobu in her prime could cut off the heads of anyone without being noticed, not just uniforms.

So the question wasn’t how.

It was—why did they notice?

The affected high schoolers didn’t notice when they were being slashed at, but why did they notice afterwards? Since, far from it being midwinter, the weather was quite nice—what caused them to notice?

It’s on your back, after all? Would you even be able to notice?

Would you notice at any point in time except when you were slashed at?

Not even I could look at my own back, even with a vampire’s vision.

Did someone around them tell them about it? No, all the victims were going home alone. Then...

“All right. I’ve more or less taken shape now. Assistant Inspector Araragi, if you would return my clothes.”

“Ah, right. Here you go.”

Even if the form had come together, her outer surface was still mud, so it was almost like a prototype figurine.

It didn’t have the grossness of a vampire’s regeneration, but it did still give off a rather unrefined impression—but of course, because figurines had no bones. After taking the clothes in her awkwardly moving arms, she trudged over to the convex mirror.

Luckily, golems did get reflected in mirrors—and since two convex mirrors were set up to face each other, it was easy to see the back of your head, too...

Mirrors (kagami) set up to face each other?

—Then that astonishment is your answer.

—I am a mirror to you, Araragi-senpai.

“...And you really are a model (kagami) kouhai, Ougi-chan,” I whispered.

Because, Ougi-chan had nimbly given me all the answers.

Turning that around, it meant that to her, I was no longer someone she needed to seriously ridicule, making that further evidence of our separation—but that was the way she ought to be.

Mirrors facing each other—opposite mirrors.

If they let you see the back of your head—of course they’d let you see your back, too.

Right.

For that fact, “I was the one who knew”.

“Kizashima-senpai, do you have a moment?”

I called out to Kizashima-senpai who was still in the middle of setting herself. Following Ougi-chan’s example.

“It sounds truly foolish when I put it like this, but—”

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

It was truly foolish. It had certainly been a blind spot; nevertheless, even if I ended up solving a puzzle for the first time in my life, I couldn’t celebrate just yet.

In the end, the school road was not the site of the incident, only the site where the incident was discovered—it wasn’t where the victims received damage, but where they noticed it.

By looking in the mirror.

By looking in those mirrors that faced one another.

By looking at their own backs. —All they did was notice.

Knowing that, the rest of the puzzle fell right into place.

If this wasn't actually the site of the incident, then where exactly did the victims' uniforms get cut? If students on their way to school had become victims as well, then it would've been hard to pin down, but if the victims were only limited to students coming back from school, then the answer was obvious—the site of the incident was the school.

It was Naoetsu High.

Yes, a “phantom slasher” had appeared in that insular environment—which made it even easier to narrow down the possible suspects. If the scene of the crime was a place that couldn't easily be entered, not even by the police unless they followed the proper procedures, then the culprit had to be among those that were inside.

They weren't even trying to make it seem like the work of an oddity.

It would be easy to slash at someone's uniform without them noticing or even getting hurt, if that person wasn't necessarily walking home from school—because in school, students had gym class.

And, though I'd never taken part in any, there were also club activities.

If the uniform wasn't being worn, then even without a demon sword, anyone could easily cut it with a box cutter, scissors, or, with some difficulty, even nail clippers.

“In other words, is it just a prank among students? One that just ended up getting blown up into this big issue? When I was in high school, there'd been pranks like sticking a piece of paper with 'KICK ME' written on it on someone's back, but is it like that?”

“...Kizashima-senpai, did you go to an American high school or something?”

“I went to Naoetsu High.”

“Ah, that's right.”

Well, “KICK ME” signs could be the same, but cutting up uniforms wasn't something that ended as just a prank—even if it didn't involve any “phantom slasher”, it was already a big issue. And, if you included the fact that all the victims were the type that would walk home alone, it ended up coming together into something very unpleasant.

Not just a prank, but harassment. And it wasn't just harassment, it was almost bullying.

From the impressions I got of the victims when Kizashima-senpai had talked to them, it didn't seem that they particularly thought that something that terrible had been done to them, so it barely fell one step short of bullying, maybe...

Ougi-chan had said she was “currently meddling with” some of them.

Which meant that they were those kinds of kids.

Kids that seemed like they would be swallowed up by the darkness—it was possible that Ougi-chan was “meddling” with not just “some” of them, but all of them.

Perhaps she, like some sort of guardian deity for the school—or perhaps like some sort of guardian angel for students that had lost their way—had stopped the crimes before they could succeed.

And yes, it only turned into this “phantom slasher” rumor because of the cases that came to light, but realistically, there were probably victims that didn’t notice the damage until they got home and just meekly accepted it.

It wasn’t a matter of escalating the problem. The problem had already been escalated.

The situation was already critical—there was really no more room to aggravate it further.

Knitting her eyebrows together and twisting her childish face into a frown, Kizashima-senpai said, “In that case, we’ll have to pick that nit out without letting any of the victims know the truth... If we give an official notice to the teachers, we should be able to prevent any more damage from occurring.”

Yes, I agreed.

A cover-up like this was right up my alley. We’d wrap this up by rounding up the perpetrator without letting the victims know—though I didn’t think that was the best way to do things, we’d have to be fine with doing so if we wanted to settle things before the situation went from “one step short of bullying” to *actual* bullying. Depending on how you saw it, it was a little unfair to protect the victims by pretending that there was no perpetrator, but that was the job of the Rumors Squad. A nonexistent perpetrator.

To pretend that there was no ghost story, and that there was no incident.

Not shaking off the problem—but letting the wind blow it away.

But, even so...

“For a school with such a strained atmosphere, it’s a rather serious rumor. It seems I was the one that got caught up in the nostalgia, Assistant Inspector Araragi. My apologies.”

After finally drying up and shaping her hair back in place, Kizashima-senpai bowed deeply towards me. Rather than an apology, it seemed more like a confession.

“Because of my school pride, I ended up remembering only the good parts. But that’s right, school is a very stressful place. Even if I passed off ‘KICK ME’ signs as a joke, my high school life hadn’t always been good—my memories of school aren’t all good.”

“...But I’m sure you definitely did have good memories, and a fun youth, as well.”

I was sure she did.

It surely shined brightly, no matter how muddied it got.