MAZEMONOGATARI

MIXED TALE

NISIOISIN

TRANSLATED BY
FANS

maxdefolsch & bluex present

MAZEMONOGATARI
Mixed Tale

NISIOISIN

Art by VOFAN, Take
and others

Translated by fans

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INTRODUCTION

What's this book about?

Nisio Isin, the author of *Monogatari*, likes to write short stories and extra content in addition to the light novels that form the main series. For the theatrical release of the *Kizumonogatari* movies in Japan, he wrote short crossover arcs in which Koyomi meets characters from other series of his and solves a mystery with them.

Four of these arcs were distributed in theaters for the first movie in January 2016 (one per week for the first four weeks), then four more for the second movie in August 2016, and another four for the third movie in January 2017, for a total of twelve. Finally, in February 2019, these stories were compiled into a full novel, *Mazemonogatari* (*Mixed Tale*), which included three newly written stories alongside the original twelve. Then, it was only natural for me to gather these translations into a separate *Mazemonogatari* volume, which on its own ends up being as thick as the main short stories compilation book, *Mijikanamonogatari*, that contains every short story and additional material written in almost fifteen years.

Note that Nisio also wrote another crossover arc in September 2016, *Tsubasa Lion*, but that one is related to *March Comes in Like a Lion* (which is not penned by himself, but by manga artist Umino Chika), and therefore unrelated to *Mazemonogatari*. Its translation is available, like everything else, in the main short stories book.

I have written more about the history of the project there, but I should also point out that this book is part of the *Second Edition*, and the version you are reading was released on the 21st of March, 2025.

Does this spoil the other Nisio series?

While knowing about the other featured series is not necessary to enjoy the stories (they are still written as Koyomi-narrated self-contained mysteries), the arcs will contain some references in passing that would be better enjoyed if you're actually familiar with them. And yes, some of these references could be viewed as minor spoilers, although nothing earth-shattering in my opinion. If you're adamant about avoiding those, then you'll have no choice but to read a large number of other Nisio novels before starting, such as all of *Zaregoto*, most of *Katanagatari*, and so on. As such, my advice would be the following: if you don't know whether you should read any particular arc, I'd recommend reading the associated series first only if you were already planning on doing so in the short term anyway (assuming it's actually possible for you, given the lack of English translations for some of them), otherwise just proceed and hopefully you'll have forgotten these details by the time you get to the actual series.

What's the reading order?

These stories were released rather late into the run of the main novels: during *Off Season*, around *Wazamonogatari*, *Nademonogatari*, and *Musubimonogatari* respectively for the three batches of four stories, and the first two books of *Monster Season*, *Shinobumonogatari* and *Yoimonogatari*, were published by the time *Mazemonogatari* was made into a novel. Therefore, you are expected to have read the first three *Seasons* already. After that, the most relevant of the aforementioned books is *Musubimonogatari*: taking place in a later timeframe, it will first be mentioned in *Shiogi Ranger* and *Rizumu Rock 'n'*, then the last few arcs (starting from *Mikoko Community*) will be set in timeframes that assume you've read it.

Other than that, the stories are all over the place chronologically. You should probably read them in order, but it doesn't matter that much considering their self-contained nature, and at most you will miss a callback to an earlier arc by a later one.

What's the chronological order?

Most of the stories, surprisingly, actually do have indications of their placement in the main timeline, in relation to known events or arcs, unlike most regular short stories.

Here is a summary of what we can gather:

Arc 9 (*Shiogi Ranger*) : Late April (before *Nekomonogatari Kuro*)
Arc 6 (*Risuka Blood*) : Between *Mayoi Maimai* and *Mayoi Jiangshi*
Arc 4 (*Mayumi Red Eye*) : Not long before July 7
Arc 2 (*Jun Build*) : Between *Tsubasa Cat* and *Tsubasa Tiger*
Arc 7 (*Hitei Clear*) : October (not long after *Koyomi Tea*)
Arc 8 (*Iori Fugue*) : Late October (not long after *Sodachi Riddle*)
Arc 10 (*Akari Triple*) : November
Arc 11 (*Rizumu Rock 'n'*) : Start of February
Arc 12 (*Mikoko Community*) : First year of university
Arc 13 (*Kuu Invisible*) : First year of university
Arc 14 (*Rai Roulette*) : Post-university (concurrent with *Musubimonogatari*)
Arc 15 (*Magokoro Finisher*) : Post-university (later than *Musubimonogatari*)

For these last three, we don't get much helpful information, and while we do know the first two take place during Koyomi's third year of high school and the last one doesn't, it is difficult to narrow it down more precisely than that:

Arc 1 (*Kyouko Balance*) : Before *Mayoi Hell*
Arc 5 (*Kuroneko Bed*) : After *Tsubasa Cat*
Arc 3 (*Nomi Rule*) : Later than *Zoku Owarimonogatari* (national holiday)

Is it canon?

As discussed in our main short stories book, the meaning of canon can get murky in a series where meta statements are such a constant feature. While it might be tempting to exclude *Mazemonogatari* from its premise alone, I'd argue that the magical world of *Monogatari* makes it difficult to rule it out, as it presents several options for it to work, such as aberrations and time travel (both of which indeed brought up), and even apparent discrepancies in the ages of non-*Monogatari* characters would not be sufficient to disprove canonicity to *Monogatari*. As shown in the previous answer, rather than just not giving timeline indications and keeping it vague (as in most regular short stories), Nisio went out of his way to make *Mazemonogatari* compatible and related to the main timeline we know, and never actually contradicts anything in the established *Monogatari* canon.

Now, your reaction might be "okay, but normal short stories were at least confirmed canon by being mentioned in the main novels, unlike *Mazemonogatari* arcs which are never referenced". Except that's not true! The end of *Mayumi Red Eye* states that Koyomi met the leader of the Pretty Boy Detective Club half a year later, which actually does line up with him mentioning in *Shinobumonogatari* that he recently befriended its members. And in the next novel *Yoimonogatari*, Koyomi talks about having been hit by a car once, which we've only ever seen happen in *Jun Build*. Finally, the latest part of Koyomi's career path was first established in *Magokoro Finisher*, and we subsequently witnessed it continue in *Ikusamonogatari*.

You might also bring up statements where such crossovers are described as "parallel worlds", which you could take it as meaning non-canon, but a counterpoint to that is that even a short story that is canon for sure (*Mayoi Room*) had Koyomi argue in the novel about how it was technically a parallel world because the story was written for an anime supplementary book. Nisio also remarked that in spite of his worlds being separate, certain of his characters can connect them.

In conclusion, so far I feel like the scales tip in favor of *Mazemonogatari* being canon, as I have not seen any truly convincing argument otherwise.

MAZEMONOGATARI

NISIOISIN

Kyouko Balance

Chapter Forget

Okitegami Kyouko

Boukyaku Tantei Series

Art: VOFAN

001

Okitegami Kyouko was a white-haired detective. And she wasn't just any detective, for she was known as "the fastest detective." Speaking of speed, our own Kanbaru was quite impressive in that regard, but just as Kanbaru's speed was connected with a rather serious condition, the reason for the "fastest detective" to be so fast stemmed from something that was best avoided.

Or perhaps it would be better to call it a "rationale" instead of a "reason."

It seemed that her memories reset at the end of each day. To be more specific, every time she went to sleep, her memories were lost.

Thus she was also called "the forgetful detective."

Well, one could hardly have asked for better qualifications for a detective who undoubtedly came in contact with secrets and confidential information on a daily basis. However, that qualification came paired with a certain fatalistic requirement: no matter how important or convoluted the case may be, she would only remember the details until she went to sleep at night, meaning that she would only have a single day in which to solve the case.

To look at it another way, it was proof of her incredible deductive abilities that she was both the fastest detective and the forgetful detective.

Setting aside her profession for the moment, from my own perspective as a teenager, I couldn't deny some measure of envy at the way she was able to live in complete freedom from her own past. I would be a horrible liar if I said that I had never once wished for my memories of that hellish spring break to be cleanly plucked from my mind.

Of course, it was impossible for me to forget those wounds, and, moreover, they were not memories that I should forget—but if it was possible for me to make it so they never happened, I would obviously do so.

But such feelings were inconsiderate at best and perhaps outright immoral. Even if I were to forget, it would not mean that the events surrounding that vampire would disappear like said vampire stepping into the sunlight to be erased from existence.

Just as the forgetful detective's cases continued to exist and have an effect on the world, even long after she had completely forgotten them.

Well, it might be a different matter for those mystery novels that Ougi-chan loves, but in the real world, the kinds of "mysteries" that a detective would be called on to solve almost always revolved around some tragedy. For anyone to continue doing work connected with such things would surely require some degree of forgetfulness to not be overwhelmed.

With that said, there was the obvious matter that she forgot the good memories along with the bad, and in that case you have to ask: what's the point? If happiness and unhappiness are two sides of the same coin, then you can't just forget the unhappy memories alone. Which meant that, for myself, I had no choice but to hold onto those memories of my hellish spring break and that ultimate bad end.

But, if one were to say such an enlightened thought to the forgetful detective herself, she would reply absentmindedly:

"No, no, I think it's completely fine to forget happy memories too. If happiness and unhappiness are two sides of the same coin, then if one is able to be bound by the unhappiness of their past, then they are just as

capable of being bound by the happiness as well. Logically speaking, the two would have the same potential."

She pondered.

"If we cannot pursue today's happiness because we are too focused on yesterday's happiness, then what is the point?"

I see; that's certainly an opinion.

An opinion that perhaps only a forgetful detective could have.

But, even if you said, "pursue today's happiness," it was not as simple as that. It's part of human nature to become preoccupied with memories of the past.

If it was so easy to become happy, then we wouldn't have to struggle.

"I don't know about that. It might be surprisingly simple to become happy. Here, suppose that you went shopping and the register came to a total of 777 yen for your purchase. Wouldn't that make you happy?"

Well, yes—but that's a rather "homely" sort of happiness.

But doesn't that sort of thing only bring about happiness because it rarely happens?

"That's not the case. Just do your shopping with the goal of buying 720 yen worth of goods. With a tax rate of 8%, your total will come to a perfect 777 yen."

So math was needed to find happiness.

But really, with the example that she gave, it wasn't so much math that was needed, but rather preparation. To prepare your heart to be happy.

Or perhaps determination.

The determination to be happy.

I'm sure it's exactly that sort of "this and that" that I was lacking during that spring break—and even later, I continued to forget it.

002

I was at the park. I was still unsure if the name was supposed to be read "Namishiro" or "Rouhaku,"[1] but whichever name was correct, I was at that park. It was centrally located between three train stations: East Nao, Central Nao, and South Nao. "A park with three different train stations located nearby? That sounds incredibly convenient!" you might say, but in truth, the park was located a considerable distance from each of the three stations, meaning that it was inconveniently far from all directions.

As a result, the park often remained quiet, like the residential neighborhoods that surrounded it. After all, there was nothing special about the park to encourage people to travel all the way from any of the three train stations.

As far as playground equipment went, the park only had swings and a slide. Aside from those meager offerings, the park was nothing more than a pointlessly spacious open area. And for a high school third-year, someone

[1] The name of the park is written 浪白, which could be read either way. Its true name was eventually revealed in *Mayoi Hell* to be "Shirohebi", connecting it to the main plot.

well beyond the target demographic for using the swings or slide, there really wasn't much to do in the park but sit on one of the benches.

But today, even something that simple was proving difficult.

The bench was already occupied—by a grown adult who was stretched out and seemingly peacefully sleeping.

I would have been annoyed at the inconvenience, but the figure's unique white hair distracted me from anything else. At first, I thought that the hair was a sign of advanced age, but when I looked at her face, I realized that she was actually rather young.

Maybe in her mid-twenties?

She was wearing a sweater that had grown baggy around the neck and a long denim skirt. At the side of the bench sat the khaki-colored boots that she had, presumably, removed before going to sleep. They stood straight and tall as if they had a will of their own.

The white-haired girl was using her arm as a pillow, and beside her sat a pair of stylish glasses—again, presumably removed before falling asleep.

In any case, this woman had a fashion sense that did not suit this part of town. That she was sleeping on a bench in the park was unsettling, but even without that aspect at play, she still seemed like she had arrived from another world. That she was a character from a story that was different from my own was obvious.

"…"

There had been no particular reason for me to visit the park that day, so there was more than sufficient reason for me to decide to simply ignore what I had seen and turn on my heel to head back home… But, well, of course I couldn't do that.

While this part of town was not particularly dangerous, I was still unable to walk away and leave a young woman sleeping defenselessly on a park bench.

While it may not be all that dangerous, the town did have quite a few oddballs running around.

At the least, Hanekawa would not turn a blind eye to this situation—she wouldn't pretend to have seen nothing. And so I walked over to the bench where the young woman slept and brushed her white hair back from her face.

"Hyaa?!"

She jumped up.

As if springs had activated to pop her upright.

She immediately put her glasses on.

"Who just touched my white hair out of nowhere!?"

She asked this while rolling up her sleeves and looking around, her white hair whipping about—and then her gaze came to rest on me.

I was only trying to wake her up, but I thought it would be a bad idea to touch her body, so I had touched her hair instead… and apparently thoroughly surprised her in doing so.

"It's okay; I'm nobody strange."

Well, if you counted aberrations as strange, then I probably was someone strange, but I was trying to calm down the woman who had just woken up. I held up my empty hands to show that I had no weapons and introduced myself.

"I'm Araragi Koyomi, a third-year student at Naoetsu High School. Which, by the way, Naoetsu High School is the top elevator school in this area, and it produces many graduates who go on to famous universities each year."

Normally I detested my school's reputation, but in this situation I was willing enough to use its reputation, even if I was someone who fell behind. And that white-haired girl just stared at me from behind her glasses.

W-Why was she staring at me so sharply?

She was like a detective staring down a criminal—setting aside if I was a criminal, she was, in fact, a detective.

"Pardon me. It seems that you were kindly trying to wake me."

She continued to stare at me for a while longer as if seeing through me, and then suddenly she smiled and bowed her head, her white hair swinging forward.

"It's nice to meet you. I am the head of the Okitegami Detective Agency, Okitegami Kyouko.[2] I am called the forgetful detective—by the way, where are we?"

[2] Her family name is written 掟上今, while the name of her agency is 置手紙 (lit. "letter left behind").

003

Okitegami Kyouko-san.

Twenty-five years old. Detective.

Head of the Okitegami Detective Agency.

Her memories reset at the end of each day, making her the fastest and most forgetful detective.

When she asked where we were, I was unsure how to answer her, as I still did not know the correct reading of the kanji for the park's name, but I answered as well as I could. In any event, the personal information that she conveyed to me after waking from her park bench nap was written on her left arm, and it was clear that she had been the one to write the words on her own skin.

Apparently when she had concluded that I was not anyone suspicious, she had bowed her head and then saw the words written on her bare arm—I had thought her arms looked thin when she first rolled up her sleeves, but at least now I understood why her self-introduction had sounded as if she were reading from a script.

It looked like she had recorded her personal information onto her own body so that she would be prepared no matter when she might forget.

Was she a primary school child?

Her right arm also bore writing: "I'm on a job."

It seemed that she was the type that could write with either hand.

Impressive.

"Hm. It would seem that I came to this town to investigate, as a detective—and during my investigation I went and fell asleep."

I didn't think that "went and fell asleep" quite explained it.

So, in other words, she forgot the details of the job that she was investigating.

"Yes. Completely. For that matter, I don't even know how I came to this town—Araragi-kun, do you have any idea?"

"Any idea…"

"Has anything strange or unusual happened in town lately?"

"…"

To be honest, I had far too many ideas. Strange and unusual happenings in town? Yeah, there were far too many of those—but I couldn't be honest with her about that.

"No, I have no idea. There are no criminals or lolicons in this town."

"I didn't ask you about the latter."

Kyouko-san then added that touching a woman's hair without permission was, without exception, a criminal act.

I got rebuked.

They say that there are a million customs for a million countries—but in this case, maybe it was less about the country and more about the girl.

"If there is nothing happening in this town, then I will have to expand the area."

"Well, the next town is a bit more of a city… I believe I read about a big traffic accident, a theft at the art museum, and there was a fire that was started due to negligent burning… But those were just newspaper articles that I happened to see."

"Hmm."

Upon hearing my vague information, Kyouko-san lifted up the hem of her long skirt—and I automatically locked eyes on it.

"Automatically locked eyes? Wouldn't one normally automatically look away?"

"Oh, my apologies. A difference in customs has come up."

I looked up at the sky.

The weather was good. The sky was clear and soft, much like her legs.

Apparently Kyouko-san was checking her body for any other potential memos—perhaps she wore such a long skirt so that it would hide any memos that she left on her legs?

But from what I had been able to see before I looked away, Kyouko-san's legs were flawless. And I meant that in both senses of the word.

Once she had concluded that she would find no notes, she said, "Araragi-kun, you can look this way again." When I looked at her once more, her skirt was back in place.

"Hmm, this is troubling. Just what was I here to investigate? I am not someone who would be so neglectful in preparing for an investigation."

She was quite confident in herself.

That was a level of confidence that I would probably never achieve in my lifetime.

"Could you have left a clue in your phone?"

My question made it painfully obvious that I was a layman, and my insipid question put my foolishness on full display. There was no way that the forgetful detective would leave behind confidential information inside of a device.

Even the notes on her body were a last resort used to get out of dire moments—Kyouko-san not only didn't have a phone on her, but she didn't even have a handbag.

She was in a bit of a predicament.

"Araragi-kun. It pains me to ask you this, when we've only just met, but could I make a request of you?"

"As long as there's no consumption of living blood involved, go ahead."

Kyouko-san looked confused at my self-deprecating joke, but she seemed to write it off as another difference in culture and ignored it.

"Could you look at my back?"

And with that she half turned on the bench so that her back was facing me. She then pulled her arms into the sleeves of her sweater and moved around underneath the fabric.

"There. My underwear is removed, so now if you would, please lift my shirt and sweater. The only place left that I haven't looked is my back, and I cannot see it myself."

"Eh-Eeh?! What are you saying! Stop that! There's no way that I can lift the shirt of a girl I don't know and look at her back!"

The high school third-year who had previously touched the hair of a sleeping woman and then stared at her legs made a strong ethical argument for why he would do no such thing—and then reached forward to lift her shirt up.

Having two younger sisters, I was used to pulling up shirts. I supposed that if someone was flexible enough, they would be able to write on their own back, but they wouldn't be flexible enough to read what they had written.

They'd have to ask for someone's help.

To look at it from another way, if she had written a note, then whatever this highly confidential information was must be recorded on the back of the forgetful detective—that is, if she had written a note.

Her spine was straight.

It was a wonderful spine. I could see the line of it down her back under her skin that I knew even without touching was so incredibly soft.

Seeing the bare back of someone in your family was one thing, but seeing the bare back of a complete stranger almost never happened. And as I looked at that spine, certain from its beauty that the girl to whom it belonged was in possession of one of the finest spines in the world, I almost forgot the important job that the detective had given me.

Nevertheless, I fulfilled my task.

It was there, near the third of her central thoracic vertebrae.

A note.

It was surely difficult for her to write the note, for the writing looked much worse compared to the notes she had left on her arms. Only one person who would have marked up such a beautiful back.

I had found the memorandum of the forgetful detective.

However, the information recorded there was so banal that it didn't seem like it could possibly be a confidential memo.

"*Milk Chocolate Coffee 140 Yen*
Fruits Cola 130 Yen
Butter Tea 150 Yen"

004

Instead of a note to help a forgetful child, this was clearly more along the lines of a shopping list. It didn't seem like it could possibly have any kind of deeper meaning, but when I relayed the information to Kyouko-san, she moved quickly.

The fastest detective.

It seemed that she didn't stop or waste time wondering over possible meanings or trying to dig out hidden clues contained within the mysterious note—well, actually, she did stop once after standing up from the bench.

She had nearly forgotten to put back on the underwear that she had removed so that I could inspect her back. It was hard for me to tell if she was reliable or defenseless.

"Araragi-kun. Are there any convenience stores in this area? One where I would be likely to find the three drinks that were on the list."

"No, there aren't any stores nearby…"

We were in a suburb.

If you wanted a convenience store, then you'd have to travel a fair distance.

"I see. Well then, what about a milk bar?"

"We're not *that* far outside of the city."

There was a store, but it was honestly not very well stocked—and more importantly, it seemed like a vending machine was the better prospect.

Fortunately, of the three drinks, the one oddball called "Fruits Cola" sounded familiar—I had bought it once before from a vending machine located on the path between school and home.

I had bought it mostly out of curiosity, and my reward had been suffering… Although if anyone deserved to be punished for playing with food, it was whoever had made the drink.

"I think it's unlikely that any other machines would be selling that drink."

I was certain the closest store wouldn't have it, and I had doubts about any convenience store carrying it.

And I didn't need to address the possibility of a milk bar having it.

"I see. Well then, I'll start by heading in that direction. Araragi-kun, would you be so kind as to tell me how to get there?"

"I don't think you'd have much luck with directions, so I'll take you there. It's in an area that can be a bit confusing to navigate."

"Oh my, that's very nice of you. I'll accept your offer."

Kyouko-san was speaking in an affable manner.

She had a very well-mannered but unexpectedly unreserved personality.

Well, after having her show me such a wonderful back as hers, it was the least that I could do to show her the way. And with that, Kyouko-san and I departed from Namishiro Park.

I'd come to the park on my bike, but I'd just come back for it later, since it seemed unlikely that an adult woman would agree to ride on the back of it.

"Is your job for today to go buy drinks, Kyouko-san?"

"While I do accept a wide variety of cases, I think it unlikely that I've begun to do grocery runs for clients."

"Then you just want something to drink?"

"If that was the case, then I don't think I would have gone to the trouble of writing the note on my back—and I wouldn't be able to drink three drinks on my own. Both in terms of volume and caloric content."

She had a point.

All three drinks, including the "Fruits Cola," were considerably high in sugar, and from what I could see of Kyouko-san's slender body, it didn't seem like the kind of thing she would consume.

Hmm.

So then the note that she left for herself was not something personal but was indeed related to her work—and since she listed the exceedingly rare "Fruits Cola" in her note, could it be that there was some special meaning to that specific vending machine? Looking at it from that perspective, the "Milk Chocolate Coffee" and "Butter Tea" were also unusual drinks, if not quite as rare as the Fruits Cola.

What if, perhaps, she hid some kind of important document behind the vending machine that has all three of those drinks…?

"Or maybe the vending machine has been rigged with a bomb."

"…"

Even if you point out that possibility with a smile… Just because you let me look at your back doesn't mean that I'm suddenly qualified or willing to become a part of your bomb disposal squad…

However—

"I really do owe you, Araragi-kun. Thanks to you, I look to be making a speedy return to my work."

When she cheerily said that, I realized that I wouldn't be able to back out on my offer to show her the way. The best that I could manage to say to hide my embarrassment was, "people help themselves on their own, Kyouko-san."

"Oh my, that's a very pessimistic thing for a high school boy to say."

"It's all the rage lately."

"From what I remember, that fad died out a long time ago."

"Fads are cyclical."

"I see…"

Kyouko-san tilted her head as if playing dumb.

"Personally, I think I'd prefer it if we all saved each other together—Oh, is that it?"

Kyouko-san noticed the vending machine as soon as it came into view.

Phew, I didn't get lost on the way.

I never said that I had a perfect grasp on this area's layout.

Looking over the machine's contents, I saw the "Fruits Cola" that I remembered—and now I noticed the presence of the "Milk Chocolate Coffee" and the "Butter Tea."

It had some other strange drinks as well.

It was hard to resist the temptation to buy such oddities.

But whoever was stocking the machine had to know that they'd do better business if they stuck with the major brands and flavors.

One might say that a lineup like this could only exist in such a remote location—and for Kyouko-san, a stranger to this area, it must have stood out enough that she made a memo of it before losing her memory.

"Hmm, that seems unlikely, Araragi-kun. Well, how about buying the drinks to start?"

"Huh?"

"I think it very unlikely, but let's try going with the interpretation that it was a shopping list. Perhaps buying the three listed drinks will provide some further hint."

Yeah, I could understand that part. It made logical sense.

What I did *not* understand was why I would be the one to buy them—shouldn't Kyouko-san be the one buying them, if anyone was going to?

Buy them yourself! Don't make a high school student buy things for you.

"Oh, well, it seems that I don't have my wallet on me. A wallet is a concentration of personal information, after all."

At that point she stopped sounding like a detective with an interest in protecting confidential information and started to sound like a spy from an enemy country—but to stay on topic, Kyouko-san not having money did not explain why I should need to pay in her stead.

"I see," Kyouko-san said dejectedly.

"Well then, I guess we'll just have to go and talk with your parents. We can talk about how their son looked on my naked back and what information we found there."

"Oh, so *that's* where I left my wallet! Wait, did I say *my* wallet? I meant to say it's *your* wallet now. Oh my, and look at this; there are coins inside it."

In the face of her threat, I promptly purchased all three drinks. It felt like she was, in part, making me buy the drinks just to vent her resentment at me.

Not for looking at her back, but for touching her white hair.

Since I didn't want the machine to get jammed, I had to take out each drink as it clanked into the bottom and hand it to Kyouko-san.

Two hot drink cans and one cold. And as for the "Fruits Cola," just looking at the label on the can had me reliving unpleasant memories.

"I see. Unpleasant memories. I guess remembering things isn't always positive—hmm."

Kyouko-san looked over every inch of the three cans with a scrutinizing eye. She certainly looked like a professional detective.

While they were different professions entirely, it made me think of the specialist that I knew.

However, after she finished poring over the nutritional information and ingredients of each can, Kyouko-san looked up with an expression of disappointment and handed the cans back to me. I could understand being disappointed to find nothing, but why give the cans back to me?

"Will you drink them?"

"…"

"In this situation—"

"It might provide the clue that we need, yeah, yeah."

Kyouko-san was too forceful, so I gave up on trying to protest and went willingly to face the water torture that awaited me.

In total I drank about a liter of fluids.

And of course, I got more than water from them—not only was the "Fruits Cola" just as bad as I remembered, but the "Milk Chocolate Coffee" and "Butter Tea" were both far too sweet for my liking.

But I drank them.

No wonder Kyouko-san made me do all of the drinking.

"What do you think? Have you noticed anything, Araragi-kun?"

"I've noticed that my eyes are twitching, but other than that…"

I wasn't cut out to play this kind of role.

In fact, not only was I not cut out to be a detective—I was perhaps as ill-suited to the job as a person could be—but it didn't seem like I was cut out to play the Watson role either.

"Well, we're at a bit of a stalemate now. What's going on here? As far as I can tell, there isn't a bomb placed on the machine."

Wait, had that really been a possibility?

While I had been undertaking the imposing challenge of downing the three saccharine beverages, Kyouko-san had gone over the vending machine with a fine-toothed comb—and, on that note, she had moved with a startling efficiency that once again proved that she deserved the title of fastest detective. That she found nothing of note on or around the machine meant that the possibility of hidden documents (or a bomb) had been ruled out.

Still, it was hard to believe that there could be another vending machine anywhere with the same lineup of oddball drinks. If any clues existed, then they would have to be found near this vending machine. At least, that's what I, the non-detective, thought.

How troubling.

At this point, did I just need to go to Hanekawa for help?

That honor student among honor students, that class president among class presidents, would surely be able to come up with some idea or some clue that would help—she was more than just knowledgeable; she was the kind of person who was born into this world to have great insights flash into her mind.

Fortunately, I, unlike a certain forgetful detective, was merely a normal high school student, which meant that I was carrying a cell phone. If we were going to need help, then it would be better to ask for it right away—hm?

As I reached into my pocket to grab my phone, I suddenly realized something.

"Kyouko-san. What's that?"

"What?"

"Your pocket. Your skirt pocket… what's that in it?"

005

There was no way around it. I had really messed up to have not noticed it sooner. While everything that had happened thus far had been largely unexpected and had put me off balance, I was still ashamed by my own blunder.

It was such a classic mistake for me to make.

I should have noticed it sooner. The forgetful detective didn't carry a wallet or a phone to keep her information protected and confidential, which meant that I should have noticed that her skirt pocket was bulging outward slightly and questioned what it could be.

"What? No, the only thing in my pocket was a single card… And this is a thick, heavy denim skirt. It would be one thing for me to notice it, but why on Earth would you notice it?"

Kyouko-san asked me with an exasperated expression on her face.

Even if she asked me why…

Guess this was another one of those "cultural misunderstandings."

I decided that it would be a bad idea to try explaining to her the depths of my scholarly interest in the many varieties of shapes present in the curvature of women's hips.

Nevertheless, Kyouko-san reached into her pocket to pull out what was, surprisingly, not much of anything. In fact, the addition of this new item didn't seem likely to produce any advancement in our situation.

It was a thin card.

To be more specific, it was an IC card used for transit.[3]

The cards people tap against ticket gates in train stations.

"Huh… Well, I guess even if you don't carry a wallet, you're still going to need something to get around. I guess it's only normal for you to have an IC card."

I dejectedly (and sarcastically) thought that surely she wasn't making high school boys pay for everything that she needed, right?

However, Kyouko-san was staring at the IC card fixedly.

As if she was looking at something mysterious.

"…?"

What was so mysterious about it? Could it be that Kyouko-san didn't know what an IC card was? Had she forgotten?

"No, these kinds of cards existed before my memories began to reset. So I know of them. But… I find it unlikely that I would use one."

"Unlikely? … Why is that?"

"You're right that I am not so reckless as to go out without any money on my person—when I was showing you my back earlier, I found the cash that I was carrying hidden in my underwear when I took it off."

Huh.

An amateur really was no match for a pro.

"I think you're pro enough if you could notice the card in my pocket, Araragi-kun. What kind of pro, I don't know, but… In any case, a transit IC card is not something that I would use as a forgetful detective. It's one of the worst possible things that I could use since it creates a log of where I have gone."

Aah, right. That made sense.

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[3] An IC card is a rechargeable card you can use to pay transportation fares and many other things.

The card would show everywhere that she traveled.

And that would mean leaving behind concrete data of her detective activities.

It was an item that any detective with a mind to keep their activities confidential would avoid using—they would instead use cash to pay for tickets whenever it was possible.

For the forgetful detective to have an IC card in her pocket was as unusual as it would be for Araragi Koyomi to have a handkerchief in his pocket.

Which meant…

That the IC card was actually a clue of some sort.

So Kyouko-san had a card in her pocket, but the card couldn't belong to her… or perhaps it did belong to her, which meant that some special circumstance forced her to make use of a card in order to complete her job…

"… Araragi-kun, are there any train stations near here?"

"Stations? Um, there are three stations that are close to here. The East, Central, and South Nao train stations are all nearby… But from this exact spot, which one is closest?"

I thought that the south station would be closest, but I had no sense of the area—and while I did have a smartphone, that did not mean that I understood how to use a map app.

"I see. Well, it doesn't really matter which station it is; if you could, please lead the way again. Let's start by checking the history of this card—you can do that at a ticket terminal, right?"

She was quick to make decisions and to take action.

If it were me, I would probably spend a while longer thinking over my new clues carefully, but Kyouko-san was different—she didn't hesitate to get moving. I would say she acted without thinking, but that wasn't quite right.

She moved while thinking. Or thought while moving.

As proof of that. "Oh, but first, Araragi-kun." She stopped me from setting off for the south station.

"I noticed this when I was investigating the vending machine earlier. This part right here… What function does it serve?"

What Kyouko-san pointed out to me was none other than a tap payment system that made use of transit IC cards.

006

Of course.

While they were called "transit" IC cards, their usefulness had spread beyond trains and buses to include vending machines, shopping center cash registers, and all manner of other situations. They were very handy little cards.

That was all the more reason for a forgetful detective who wanted to travel light to make use of an IC card—if it was not for the history that would track her every move.

"Huh. I see, so you can use this IC card with a vending machine too. Very futuristic."

Kyouko-san said it softly.

The IC cards that she remembered were newly made and were exclusively used for transit, and since that time they had spread to be useful for all kinds of shopping situations, but she had remained unaware due to her memories resetting each night.

And what she learned today she would forget again tomorrow.

It was not futuristic, since it existed in the present, but for her the present and future were much the same. Thinking about it in that way,

even a carefree high school boy couldn't help but take pause—but it seemed that Kyouko-san had been thinking about something else entirely.

"In other words, this IC card could have been used to buy drinks?"

She asked the question as if commenting to herself, but I responded anyway.

"Of course, although it depends on how much money is on the card. Umm, I'm pretty sure that you can check the card balance."

You couldn't check the card history like you could at a ticket machine, but even a vending machine should be able to read the remaining balance of a card by tapping it against the reader.

"Why don't we go ahead and check the balance while we're here, Kyouko-sa…"

Before I could even finish the sentence, Kyouko-san had already reached out with the dubious IC card in hand to tap it against the vending machine's reader.

Since she lacked experience with the technology (or maybe she had done it before, but no longer remembered), she pressed the card firmly against the reader with excessive force, but the machine had no trouble reading the card, and the small digital display lit up with the remaining balance of "2890."

2890 yen, huh… Well, unsurprisingly, just seeing the remaining balance didn't tell us much… And without knowing what the original charge put onto the card was, it was difficult to predict what she may have used the card for to reach this balance.

If her card balance had been 10000 or 20000 yen, or any other large sum of money, then we might have been able to hypothesize about the reason for the money to be on the card, but a remaining balance of nearly 3000 yen seemed like the typical amount that any random IC card may have left on it.

And so I turned back to Kyouko-san, ready to suggest that we go back to our original plan and head toward the train station to investigate the IC card's history, but when I faced her…

"No, this looks to be the key. Very well done, Araragi-kun."

And then she held out the IC card to me.

I accepted the card from her without knowing why.

"Could you purchase the same three drinks as before? But this time, use the card. I'm not sure how to do it."

"O… kay."

I had no reason to protest.

But why would I need to buy the drinks again? Whether the cans were bought with cash or with a card, the cans that came out of the machine would be the same.

I couldn't understand the thought process of the detective.

In any case, I did as told and used the IC card to purchase cans of "Chocolate Milk Coffee," "Fruits Cola," and "Butter Tea."

Just as before, I removed each can as it was dispensed, but this time I paused to briefly inspect each can, confirming that they were the same as the cans from before—which was obvious.

We were only pointlessly contributing to their sales.

What if the maker misunderstood and thought these drinks were actually popular?

"No, this hasn't been pointless, Araragi-kun—we've yielded results." Kyouko-san stated.

"We have a change of course. Please take me to the West Nao station instead of the South."

"Huh?"

What? Why suddenly change the destination for no reason?

It wasn't as if I had any strong reason to go to the south station aside from it probably being the closest station to our current location—but the west station? I hadn't even listed that as a possibility.

"Oh? You've mentioned an east and south Nao station, so I deduced that there must also be a west station. Was I wrong?"

"No, um… Well, there is one, but… The west station is pretty far from here."

"Yes, that's fine."

She replied decisively.

While I was impressed by her decision to head to a train station based purely on some kind of deduction, I was still confused by the decision, since it didn't matter which train station's ticket machine we used to check her card history.

"The history doesn't matter now. The present is more important than the past."

Was her reply.

Kyouko-san pointed at the vending machine once again—however, this time she was not pointing at the card reader, but instead the small digital screen.

The small screen was still turned on and active from my most recent purchase and displayed the remaining balance of the IC card.

2470.

That is, West Nao.[4]

[4] Japanese digits are frequently used as wordplay thanks to their multiple possible pronunciations. Here, "2470" can be pronounced as *ni shi na o*, which is the word for "West Nao" (西直, *nishi nao*).

007

"Well, Araragi-kun, since you bought the drinks, you'll need to drink them all. It's not acceptable to waste food. Drink them all, and then we'll set off."

We'll set aside for now my suspicions that Kyouko-san had orchestrated events so that I would be forced to purchase the trio of horrible drinks and undergo the same water torture a second time. When it was over, we headed to the West Nao station.

The west station was not among the three "closest stations" for visiting the park, and it was frankly not a distance that I would normally consider walking, but since I had the sugar calories of six overly sweet canned drinks flowing in my blood, I wanted to try and use up some of that energy. Our only other option for reaching the station was to take a taxi.

However, the forgetful detective made it a firm policy to avoid using taxis. I was only a high school student, so it wasn't as if I had ever been in a taxi before, but I was fairly sure that taxis were equipped with sound and video recording to cut down on crime, so for a forgetful detective who tried to move without a trace, it would be an incompatible form of transportation.

It was precisely because Kyouko-san behaved in this way that she was able to use the presence of an IC card in her pocket as a viable clue to lead her in the right direction. However, even if it was for her job, there was a part of me (as someone who had not yet experienced employment) that wondered if being thorough to this degree was really necessary.

On what conviction was Kyouko-san basing her identity as a detective?

"Conviction? If I had ever had such a thing, then I probably forgot it by now."

"Huh… Still, I think it's amazing. For myself, everything that I say and do is uncertain, insecure, and prone to change constantly."

"Oh? Is that so?"

"You could say that it's my special skill to quit things after starting, or to suddenly do things that I said I wouldn't do. It's my winning pattern."

I don't need friends. They'd lower my intensity as a human.

Whether that belief was correct or incorrect was beyond my knowing for the rest of eternity. However, if I had held to that belief, then it was likely that my spring break would not have been so hellish.

"They say that it's better to regret doing something than to regret not doing something—but giving up on something partway through is the most regretful option of them all, right? The runner-up is to suddenly do something that you'd decided not to do. Don't you think so? Because I do."

"I don't think it's a sign of insecurity to change your mind. Nor do I think it's insecure to change your convictions."

"…"

"It's okay to quit things partway through or to start them at the same point. It's also okay to regret. The way that you say it makes it sound like regret is a bad thing. The way that you're posing the question is wrong—it's like a trick question."

"A trick question?"

"Yes. You're being tricked. If Araragi-kun admires me for not changing my convictions, then I envy you for being able to experience and feel regret. Ultimately, it may simply be that we all seek the thing that we don't have."

We arrived at the West Nao station as we talked—but once we arrived, I didn't know what exactly we were doing. Should we check the card history anyway? Kyouko-san had made it sound like there would be no point…

"That's right. Since we've come to the station, why don't we use the IC card as it was intended—in other words, not at the ticket machine, but to pass through the ticket barrier? Araragi-kun, you have your own IC card?"

"Oh, yeah. I do."

I rarely used it, but it should be inside of my wallet. I had some concerns about the remaining balance, but it should be enough to get me through the barrier.

"Okay, then let's go."

Kyouko-san walked through the ticket gate.

I followed behind her.

With the 150 yen pulled from my card to board the train, I only had 30 yen left—I really did push it to the limit. I'd need to charge my card before leaving… Well, anyway, the remaining balance of my card didn't matter.

The real question was what happened with Kyouko-san's IC card.

If the remaining balance after buying the drinks had guided us to this train station, then the new balance after deducting the boarding fee would likely have some kind of meaning attached to it.

When the ticket gate displayed my remaining balance, Kyouko-san's IC card balance had erased from the screen, but since I knew the boarding fee and the previous balance, I could calculate the new balance easily.

"Nishi Nao" or "2470" from which the boarding fee of 150 yen was removed, would leave behind a balance of "2320" yen.

"2320"!

… Huh? I tried reading the numbers different ways, but the sounds didn't form words.

Ni sa ni re? *Ni sa ni o*? *Tsuu san fu maru*?

There were all kinds of possible readings one could apply to numbers, and you could mix and match different reading styles to make a lot of

combinations, but none of the combinations that I could think of made any sense.

I had been convinced that the next numbers to show up—the new balance of the card—would in some way indicate the station that we should travel to next. Was that wrong?

But if that part was wrong, then it called into question the first number of "2470" that had brought us all the way to the West Nao station. Maybe that had been simple coincidence, and the list of drinks had been intended to indicate something else entirely.

In which case, it had been a complete waste of effort to walk all the way to the station (about 12000 steps in total), and I had wasted my money (exactly 570 yen)—well, if my expenses were the worst part, that would be one thing.

But for the forgetful detective, who only had one day in which to operate, having wasted so much time coming to this station for no reason would be a grave error.

She needed to get back to her case as soon as possible.

As her cooperator, I felt partially responsible.

"Damn it, if only I had stared at Kyouko-san's naked back more brazenly, perhaps I would have found some other clue…!"

"Ahaha… You've chosen an interesting part to have regrets about, Araragi-kun." Kyouko-san replied, verbally parrying me. "It's okay. You didn't fail at that part. You looked over every inch of my back thoroughly enough to make me feel ashamed."

She said, giving me a big stamp of approval.

Or perhaps that was a brand she was pressing on me, not a stamp.

"Really? I assumed I must have missed something… But if we didn't miss anything, then what are we doing now? Is there some meaning to 2320?"

Had she found some other reading for the numbers?

I hadn't been able to think of anything.

"No, we don't need to do that anymore. The numbers are the meaning on their own. The numbers as a whole, that is."

And with that, Kyouko-san gestured not toward the landing where the train would arrive but instead toward the corner that held the rental lockers.

Rental lockers.

Each locker had its own number and could be rented out to store your luggage inside. You simply inserted coins into the slot at the side and then opened the lock.

No.

That was how it used to work, but in the current day that was not the only way to operate a rental locker.

Kyouko-san raised a finger and spoke.

"This transit IC card can be used to purchase goods from vending machines and use public transit, but I have deduced that it can be used for more than that—such as opening a rental locker. Am I correct?"

008

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

Thinking about it now, back when Kyouko-san first learned that the IC card could be used with the vending machine, she had said that the card was the key. So at that point, she must have already predicted what would happen.

To look at it with an even wider lens, it was possible that Kyouko-san had already conceived of this as a possible solution to the puzzle from the point that I read out the list of drinks and their prices from her back. If not, then things seem to have progressed far too smoothly.

We found the locker labeled "2320" and it was marked as "In Use." The IC card from Kyouko-san's pocket made the lock click open.

Everything was happening as if it had been planned.

And then, of course, inside of the locker was a single business card that read, "Head of the Okitegami Detective Agency, Okitegami Kyouko," along with the bronze statue that had been stolen from the art museum in the neighboring town just days before. Well, actually, I hadn't known that it was a bronze statue that was stolen.

"Hmm. It seems that my job this time was to return this stolen statue. Meaning that my job was already completed—and then I had felt relaxed and gone to that park to take a nap."

"Felt relaxed…? So you left behind a trail of crumbs for yourself to follow back after your memory reset?"

Hearing that, it was as if she had created a problem for herself to solve. I felt a strange and vague sense of hilarity about the whole thing. Reading over the note she had left for herself, it wouldn't have made any sense, which would confuse anyone who read it and would make them think about the contents of the note as if trying to solve a puzzle. The rental lockers and vending machine would have been entirely new ideas for the Kyouko-san of "yesterday," but she had found a way to put that new knowledge to immediate use in the creation of a coded message that would lead to the solution—and, furthermore, there was a truth to this situation that made it more complex than it seemed.

If her job was to recover a stolen work of art, then it was unlikely that she pulled off a counter-heist and stole the item back, but instead she likely deduced the culprit and confronted them. It wasn't difficult to imagine that she had a drawn-out negotiation with the culprit, and surely one condition for the return of the stolen item would be to "not reveal the identity of the thief," in which case she needed to forget what she knew as quickly as possible.

Thinking back on it, when Kyouko-san was lying on the bench in the park, her glasses had been placed at her side. In other words, before she had gone to sleep, she had removed them. It was the same as when she removed her underwear to show me her back—it was an action taken with conscious thought, meaning that she had not accidentally dozed off on the bench.

She had purposefully forgotten the details of her job.

It was something that only the forgetful detective could do.

And I was pretty sure that was what had happened.

However, even if that was the case, Kyouko-san had forgotten more than just the identity of the culprit. She would have forgotten ever making

the deal with the culprit to receive the work of art, meaning that I would never be able to confirm my suspicions.

In the end, any interpretation of events beyond, "I felt relaxed, so I took a nap," would not be possible. It was the kind of decisive action that only an adult could take and was not something a mere high school student like myself could mimic.

"Thank you very much, Araragi-kun. You've really been a great help. Well, I'll be heading back home on the train now."

The single business card that had been in the rental locker alongside the bronze statue listed the address for Kyouko-san's detective agency, and it seemed that she was going to use that address to find her way back home.

Placing the business card inside the locker with the statue served multiple purposes. The business card guided her back home and also indicated that she had been the one to place the statue inside of the locker, but also, in the unlikely event that she was unable to solve her own puzzle and get back to the locker, it would be found by a train station attendant and the statue would find its way back to her. For example, supposing that she had interpreted "2320" to indicate a time and she boarded a train arriving at that late hour. Of course, it was highly unlikely that Kyouko-san could have loitered around the train station until late at night without noticing the rental lockers—but still, if it did happen, she wouldn't have failed in her mission.

She never slacked in her preparation.

Her self-confidence was well earned by her efficiency at carrying out her job.

"I'm sorry for making you tag along through all of this."

"No, now that it's over, I feel like I've completed a fun puzzle game."

"I'm glad to hear that. I can't really thank you in any tangible way, but perhaps as a token to remember today…"

"You'll let me see your back again?"

"Ahaha, not that."

Kyouko-san laughed, and instead of placing the business card into her denim skirt pocket, she held it out to me.

"From what I have seen, you lead a chaotic life, Araragi-kun. Should you ever have need of me, please give the forgetful detective a call. I'll help you with anything at all, and then forget it."

"… Okay. I'll be counting on you when an emergency arises."

Since we had already stepped inside of the ticket barrier, I decided that I would also head home on the train. I'd ride the train to the South Nao station, walk back to the park to get my bike, and then ride it home. And that's just what I did.

Kyouko-san and I were taking different train lines, so we parted ways on the steps.

Since then, we have not met again.

Even if we did, she would have already forgotten our first meeting altogether.

We had parted in such a brisk and invigorating way that it felt only natural that we would meet again one day, but my shallow interpretation of events proved to be entirely wrong.

Of course, that's not to say that I never encountered a time when I could have used her help—a lot of things happened, and I lost a lot.

But I still never reached out to her for help. For one thing, I was already struggling to pay off the debt I owed to my little sister, so there was no way that I could afford to pay the rates for a professional private detective, but also, the business card that Kyouko-san gave me to commemorate the day we'd met somehow got lost.

For me to lose the business card was so rude that even I was offended by my callous lack of care, but, thinking about it later, I couldn't even remember where I had put the card. It was as if I had never received the card at all—it made me question if my memories of Kyouko-san were even real.

As if my meeting with Kyouko-san had been nothing but an aberration.

… Well, it's not as if my memory was the best.

The card was no doubt tucked away in the back of a desk drawer somewhere. Kyouko-san had told me that overvaluing the past would make me lose sight of the present, and it had sounded like a proverb when she

said it. Perhaps I should have left a note to remind me when I inevitably forgot, just as she did. But it was too late for that, and there was no point in bemoaning it.

And so, as a paltry defense against fading memories, on my way home from school I passed by that vending machine, and once again I found myself purchasing an eccentric drink.

As if I was remembering something.

MAZEMONOGATARI

Kyouko Balance — Chapter Forget

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MAZEMONOGATARI

NISIOISIN

Jun Build

Chapter Strong

Aikawa Jun

Saikyou Series

Art: Take

001

Aikawa Jun is a contractor. But not just any contractor. She is Humanity's Strongest Contractor. Among those who know her, being the strongest is the fate which gives Aikawa Jun's life meaning. If you would speak to those who know her, being the strongest and being Aikawa Jun would be the same.

She takes any job as long as an agreement is made.

Her recent activities include fighting an alien that fell from the sky, fighting an armed rock, fighting a blazing gaseous life-form, fighting a merman that dominates the oceans and fighting a plant with consciousness. That said, it would perhaps be more proper to label her as mankind's representative rather than the strongest human.

In any case, because of the fact that she became too strong to the point of currently carrying on her shoulders the role of mankind's guardian, she felt more like a threat instead of someone dependable, when I asked about her.

That's probably it.

Needless to say, I am definitely not on humanity's side. That's right. Araragi Koyomi is on the vampires' side.

After going through that hellish spring break, I found myself distant from humanity, and while I wouldn't say I'm like an alien, a rock, a gaseous life-form, a merman, or a plant, I'm also not a proper human being, even if my existence is one of being close and similar to men and women. I became a hostile force which should be generalized and dealt with, in other words, certainly something that should be exterminated.

Who would've thought that I, a mere high school student, would have carried the immense burden of becoming an enemy of the strongest contractor? Well, even if tremendously scared, I was a little proud of it. That said, her self-awareness about being mankind's representing athlete is completely nonexistent.

That person is just enjoying her life and isn't trying at all to question her own strength. She's solely rejoicing this world.

That is why those feelings are not of fear nor pride, but of plain interest.

Interest based on curiosity, in other words, an extreme and irresponsible interest. However, by no means do I feel this way because I am standing on the vampires' side.

Even for someone with whom I shared that hellish spring break… For example, Hanekawa Tsubasa, who knows everything and is definitely on humanity's side, or even for Oshino Meme, a specialist who serves as the mediator between humans and non-humans, they are constantly filled with curiosity.

Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade. The iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire.

Someone who I'm willing to bet is the strongest, not falling behind any non-human. If this aberration slayer and Humanity's Strongest Contractor, who claimed the top of humankind, were to face each other, I wonder how it would end.

The aberrations' strongest and Humanity's Strongest.

There is no way anyone wouldn't want to witness it. But in reality, if that matchmaking were to be established, I'm sure I wouldn't just be an irresponsible spectator. If that were to happen, I would go as far as to fight the strongest human.

002

In the Road Traffic Act, the bicycle is classified under the light vehicles without motor category, so when on a public road, instead of riding on the sidewalk, cyclists should ride on the roadway. Depending on the way of pedaling, a bike can go over 60 kilometers per hour and the sidewalks aren't organized in lanes. Because of that and taking into account that pedestrians can easily collide with bikes, it is obvious why this law was established.

But if people were to follow that law and pedal on the roadway, they would feel a bit afraid, as expected, as the masses of steel would go past them by ten centimeters beside at high speeds.

I don't know any historical details, but the bicycle was, without a doubt, invented afterwards. Maybe this is just my position as a cyclist, however, I can't help but to feel dissatisfied since the bicycle literally had to find a place on roads where cars already were exercising their authority and because there's this constant awkward sense of shame while cycling on the road.

Bicycles running slowly through the roadway, like the old days, are inevitably treated like a nuisance and make other drivers feel like they should just send them flying.

That said, I would have never thought that I would really be sent flying.

On my way home, when I was calmly turning the pedals of my usual granny bike, a red super-car approached from my back at a speed the eye cannot follow, and like it was precisely aiming at me, threw me as I turned round and round like a pedal in mid-air.

The driver is unforgivable unless they were giving DIO-sama a ride on the backseat.

There are certainly no marks of brakes on the road. Instead, the only vestige is the onomatopoeia "Zugagagagaah!" released when I was reduced to shreds while falling on the ground.

"Gu, gu. Guaa…"

I don't know what just happened. What an extreme state of confusion. I know that I have been hit by an automobile at high speed, but I can't process it as something that happened to my own body. The same unrealism I felt when I found the dying vampire. They say that winning the lottery has a lower probability than getting hit by a car, which I doubted. Now that I have actually been hit, I have no choice but to agree.

"Uh. Uuuh…"

I groaned. Even though I didn't want to, my voice let out on its own.

My throat was functioning like an accordion.

I doubted that I could speak, but if I was asked "Are you alright?" I feel like I would have responded "I'm fine" as a reflex. Even though I was obviously not okay, I wanted to assume I was.

However, the voice that called out to me, as I twisted trying to crawl on the ground, wasn't of someone being careful asking "Are you alright?".

"Oy, you there."

That's what the voice said instead. As I heard this dreadful voice tone while struggling desperately, I tried to lift my face and I saw a woman dressed in red. She was red to the point of looking like the materialization of red itself. She was a gorgeous woman whose whole body was wrapped in a wine red suit.

You could tell by the color. It seemed like she was the driver of the super-car in question, you could tell by the color. A pair of, obviously, red high heels that looked like lethal weapons stood right in front of my face.

With these shoes, I see why she wouldn't be able to step on the brakes. Although I doubt this person would set foot on the brakes even if she was wearing a pair of completely flat sneakers.

"What are you sleeping for? Stand up already or I'll run you over."

With your heels? So you are willing to step on my back, even though you won't step on the brakes? Looking closely, I realized how that person was wearing sunglasses (its lenses were obviously extremely red) but those weren't enough to conceal her sharp expression.

Crap. DIO-sama wasn't in the backseat. He was in the driver's seat.

It wasn't a threat nor a bluff. I realized how if I didn't immediately get up, she would really trample me, and using my remaining strength, I grabbed the wall with both hands and raised my body.

I have never seen a kabedon[5] like this. My legs were shivering. I just had a taste of how a newborn deer feels. However, I don't think my knees were about to give way just because of the received physical damage. As I stood straight, I noticed, in the distance, that bright red woman who was taller than me, faced her and certainly felt pressured by her intensity.

"Alright, you look great, onii-chan. Good, good. Ha ha ha."

She looked at me, in this state, and let out a friendly laughter. Why is this person laughing when a dying high schooler is in front of her. Moreover, she's genuinely having fun. This woman is laughing like she isn't responsible for anything.

And, as if she was sensibly responding to my hostility…

"Kiiick."

… she unexpectedly kicked my abdominal perpendicularly.

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[5] *Kabedon* (壁ドン, "wall bang") is the act of slamming one's arms against a wall (at times to prevent someone from escaping). This can be seen in different contexts, such as in shoujo manga, where this action shows sex-appeal; when the neighbors are being too noisy, showing discontent; etc.

So whether I'm standing or lying down, I get hit with the heels one way or the other! At this point, I didn't have to force myself to stand up in the first place if I was going to fall like this. Although, I have to prevent getting stepped on after being kicked, no matter what.

"Gu… Gugu…"

When I was about to fall on my knees, I somehow managed to keep standing.

"Ooh. That's amazing. You're hanging on, aren't you, onii-chan? I like people who try their best. I've taken a liking to you."

She said, naively impressed, clapping her hands and laughing even more.

You've taken a liking? I still don't have a clue who this is but my intuition tells me that being liked by this person is the world's most dramatic event. Though, I also don't want to turn this into a flashy scene of carnage.

Needless to say, this doesn't even compare to the hellish spring break and the nightmare of a Golden Week. I would have noticed that she's an extremely dangerous character even if she hadn't run me over at high speed from behind. It's just as if she were an invader from another universe.

"I am Aikawa Jun. Humanity's Strongest Contractor."

"Y-Yeah… Aikawa-san, is it?"

I was hit really hard. Her fist sank into my face and my body sank into the wall. I went through the rare experience of having half of my body become unified with a block of concrete.

"Don't call me by my surname, onii-chan. Only my enemies call me by my surname."

"…"

No… You… Not even a minute has passed since we met, and after running me over, kicking me, hitting me so hard my body caved into a wall, you think this is a friendly situation? This is clearly a hostile one. Though in my opinion someone who would cave others' body-half into a wall has no enemies…

"My, my name is Araragi Koyomi. A third-year high school student who pledged to defend the human rights based on the national constitution."

"Hmm, so your name is Araragi-kun. That's long and hard to say. From now on introduce yourself as Aki."

And like this, the advocacy of the young man still unified with the wall was heroically ignored. I admit that my name is hard to say, but no one has ever demanded that I changed it.

If I did that I'd lose what's good about me.

In two senses.[6]

"By the way, they say married couples shouldn't have different family names or else the family will lose its sense of unity, so I wonder how much sense of unity your family has, Suzuki-san. You know how wherever you go in Japan it's full of families."

That's a rather perceptive point of view, but unfortunately I can only confirm that with both my eyes since half of my body has transformed into a concrete block.

"Ahem… Jun-san. For now could you pull it out of here, please?"[7]

"Your spine?"

Of course not my spine! As I was about to rudely speak to a senior, without taking into consideration the age gap between us, Aikawa-san, or rather Jun-san, used the other side of the hand that punched me to firmly grab the block of concrete, pulled it from the ground, and I, flustered, remained silent. I'm not saying the wall was pulled out. Before that, how did she manage to even grab a plain block of concrete? The wall's not even structured in a way that would allow that.

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[6] The new name, *Aki* (阿木), was formed by removing 良々 from *Araragi* (阿良々木), and that's the kanji for "good" followed by the repetition character.

[7] In Japanese, pronouns and objects can be omitted and inferred through context, such as in Mayoi's *kamimashita* which roughly means "bit it". The same happens here: Koyomi asks if Jun could extract (*him)* from there (*the wall*), to which she asks back if he meant "to extract *his spine* from *his body*".

In any case, that was how the wall was destroyed and my body was freed. However, it's possible that the safety factor of the situation where I was restricted was greater.

"What is it? I can't hear you say 'thank you'."

"Unthankable."[8]

No, not that. I meant "thank you". That was me trying to force words of gratitude. And to that, Jun-san just lively laughed it out with a "Ha ha ha".

"Hey, no need to thank me. Instead, I have something I want you to tell me."

"Som-Something you want me to tell you?"

Perhaps, a moral way of life? I'm also not that well-versed in it, but I have a feeling there's a great amount of things I could teach her, you know? How you can't run over a high school student, kick them, punch them and cave them into a wall. And while we're at it, how you absolutely cannot pull a wall out of the ground with both your hands.

"Who cares about a moral way of life. The only one I go through is my way. So what I want you to tell me is just the way."

And after that she said,

"I was told that there is a building in this city inhabited by a vampire, but…"

That was what Jun-san asked me.

"Could you bring me there? To tell you the truth, I was contracted to exterminate a vampire."

[8] The expected word of gratitude would be ありがとうございます (*arigatou gozaimasu*, "I am thankful"), but Koyomi says あり得ないございます (*arienai gozaimasu*), mixing it with あり得ない (*arienai*, "unbelievable").

003

Aikawa Jun, Humanity's Strongest Contractor. After accepting a request, she gallantly came to our city and drove too far into the outskirts. Apparently the navigation system installed in the super-car wasn't acting normally. To begin with, a destination is a destination, and just as she was thinking how there was no other way but to ask a local for directions, she saw the silhouette of a high school student pedaling on his bike over the front glass of the car.

So she ran him over.

She accelerated and, aiming carefully, ran him over.

No, how could this be a valid motive!

If you wanted to ask for directions, bringing the car alongside the bike or at least honking would be other ways of doing it! It didn't even come to her mind to step on the brakes or even not to step on the accelerator!

Moreover, it really was done with careful aiming!

Look, a great friend of mine died a long time ago in a traffic accident!

You know there are things you should do and things you shouldn't do!

"It's because I do things I shouldn't be doing that it's fine. If you have any further opinions about me I'll fucking kill you."

"…"

This person nonchalantly said she'll fucking kill me.

To a child.

Our cultural worldviews are too different.

At this rate, I'll have her finish her business in this town, as fast as possible, and then leave in a good mood. I could say that, as a resident, that would be the best plan, but in this case, I have reasons for not executing it.

The building where a vampire lives.

That is currently the destination of Humanity's Strongest Contractor. Normally, I would coldly answer how I didn't know of such superstitious building and end the conversation there (however, a cold response may result in ending the life of the one who answers), but something was coming to my mind.

So many things were coming to my mind that it bothered me.

To be precise, the vampire no longer lives in that building. The fact that, in the building where the barrier has reached its purpose, lived the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, is already an old tale.

However, if I end up, nevertheless, guiding this contractor to the ruined cram school, it is not unlikely that I would end up exposing where and what the vampire is currently doing.

I messed up.

Here I thought it was DIO-sama, and in turn, it was someone from the side of the vampire exterminators.

I couldn't find any justification for why it looked like she didn't have the same research capabilities as the three vampire hunters, who visited this town during the spring break. I absolutely can't tell her about the location of the ruined building so I have to put everything into a lie!

I'm gonna have her leave this city by eloquently giving her wrong directions!

"Hahaa. I've heard rumors of that building. You were lucky to have asked me, Jun-san. However, if I remember correctly, that building is located in the Kyuushuu region. If you go straight from this road, facing

east, you will find a big station. Taking the train from there, please aim for the Nagasaki prefecture."

"I see. Facing west, if you go through the third alley you can find a shortcut, right? There will be a vending machine, so I can replenish water, and if I head about 600 meters south, on the right-hand side, there will be the ruins I'm looking for. I see."

It's not just that the lie was exposed, she even grasped the truth's details.

Are you kidding me?

"Ha ha ha. You're ten years behind if you wanted to deceive me, onii-chan. It might not look like it, but mind reading is one of my most developed techniques."

It really does "not look like it".

Having all of that destructive strength, why would she bother to learn such a modest skill… I wonder if it's because everyone around her is afraid and spouts lies all the time.

"That's about right. You said 'eloquent' and it just so happens I have a friend that is a professional in that sort of thing."

After reading my inner voice, she grabbed my shirt's collar. You know that's not a handle, right? Or rather, you know that my stature isn't so small that you can lift me up with both your hands.

However, pointing that out to someone who lifted a wall with both their hands is clearly futile.

"Well, now that I know the location, let's get going, onii-chan. I'll exceptionally let you ride on the assistant's seat."

"Eh? Why? Now that you know the place I should just…"

"You don't have to hold back. There aren't many people like you, you know? People that get to ride on the assistant's seat of my beloved car. Well, but to be precise, there weren't many people that survived after riding on the assistant's seat."

I absolutely don't need that precise piece of information!

I would have been happy if I didn't know that!

However, as I was getting surprised, I was crammed like luggage in the bright red car (apparently specially made. Even though it was in a flashy

accident there weren't any scratches) and while at it also crammed my bicycle in the back seat (the frame was simply twisted and Jun-san repaired it, with her hands. The method of repairing ended up being flashy as well), and thus Humanity's Strongest Contractor boarded on the driver's seat, and at the same time, stepped on the accelerator.

Agitated, I tried to fasten the seat belt, for safety purposes, although now it's as if I'm confining myself.

"I mentioned mind reading skills, but it's not like I can read everything. I only know that you are hiding something, onii-chan. That's why you're coming along."

"I think coming along is an excessive act of brutality, though…"

I tried to evade from the harsh truth by immediately using "coming along" and "excessive" together, but the mood wasn't soft enough to use that kind of wordplay.[9]

Abducting a young man is a complete crime.

No. Since this person showed up, she has done nearly nothing that wasn't a crime.

"What are you talking about? I even fixed the broken wall. In my younger days, I would've just left it destroyed there."

What even is that self-compliance.

Rather than fixing, didn't you just thrust the extracted wall in the original spot and crammed some of the shards in the part dented with my form?

Well, even if she was just mending it like building LEGOs, because she used a lot of force it looks like the broken part was fused without any glue.

"In any case, I'm not hiding anything, Jun-san. If you want, try to go around asking everyone around me. You will understand that Araragi Koyomi is a pure and upright man."

"Huh. That's also a lie."

"Kuh… How did you know I didn't have people around me!"

---

[9] The pronounciations of 同行する (*doukou suru*, "coming along") and 度を越す (*do o okosu*, "excessive") are similar.

"You don't need to have mind reading skills to know that."

Having said that so plainly straight made me lose face.

Unwillingly, I decided to change my approach.

Jun-san came to exterminate a vampire, but as I communicate with her, I feel like she's very different from the aberration specialists I know.

From Dramaturgy, from Episode, from Guillotine Cutter and also from Oshino Meme.

All of them paid respects, to some extent, to vampires.

That respect perhaps, consequently, led to loath and hatred and was identical to a hostile attitude. At the very least, they took the general idea they had of vampires seriously.

This person is different.

She's clearly having fun.

You could also say she's just screwing around.

Just how someone would enjoy an amusement park, she's heading to that ruined cram school building. Just like a group of preschoolers doing a test of courage during the night and stealthily entering the school grounds.

While she might have the deceiving appearance of a fully grown woman, this person is still a child on the inside. That's what put me off the most.

At this rate, I'll end up shamelessly guiding her to the ruined building, and should that lead to the confrontation between the contractor and the vampire, I don't have a clue what will happen after that, leaving me in a state of ceaseless anxiety. I wonder how much understanding she currently has of vampires.

"Hum, Jun-san. You have mentioned vampire extermination, but, actually… No. Not actually. Supposing that… And I mean supposing that, okay? Supposing that you were confronted with a fishy fabrication like a vampire, how are you planning to deal with it?"

"Punch them, win, and make friends with them."

It's a dangerous thought.

Yet again, she's a dangerous person.

"I will tell you, just in case, even if you run a vampire over that won't be enough to defeat it. No, it's not like I know anything in particular though."

"I know, I know. It's immortal, right? Isn't that great? As a subject of the 'undying' experiment, I simply have to meet it."

"…?"

"On the contrary, I have to ask you, onii-chan. Do you know what 'undying' means?"

After that unexpected question, I shrunk back.

What does undying really mean? Obviously, as someone who died over and over again, during spring break, it should be something I can proudly respond, with confidence. However, now that I think of it, that would mean I understand what it means to "die", but I have the feeling that I can't understand what "undying" means.

If I ever wanted to really understand what "undying" means, I would have no choice but to, just like the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, exist during a long enough period of years and months enough that I lose all motivation. No, if I really think about it, she must have been continuously dying up until this day and age, or something similar.

She was already at the verge of death when I met her.

In that case, what does one have to do in order to know, or rather, to understand what "undying" means? Whether it means reviving or continuously dying…

If coming back to life and dying over and over again isn't enough, then…

"I think that 'not dying' is determination."

Jun-san said without waiting for my reply.

Even though she can use mind reading skills, she doesn't try to listen, at all.

"'Not dying' is also different from 'can't die'. It is the expression of one's will to not die, no matter what the case might be. Therefore, 'not dying' is 'wanting to live'. I want to be the loudest at shouting that."

004

The strength of one's will. That which Humanity's Strongest Contractor mentioned, was something that I, as well as the vampire that had once visited this city, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, lacked. If we were talking about physical strength, that would be one thing, but during the spring break, we were definitely lacking in psychological strength. Definitely and lethally. Or even deadly.

I have a memory of that time, that I'm almost embarrassed of remembering. One of the nervous breakdowns of the vampire overflowing with an excessive life force and who was in such an awful state I couldn't bear to watch. Now that I think of it, she wasn't overflowing with it. She was missing it.[10]

And thus, we merely failed to die. There was no resolution. There was no determination. Either the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire and her second underling, after four hundred years, lacked strong will and firm conviction. It's not like we couldn't die because of our firm

[10] Koyomi contrasts two pronounciations of 溢れる: あふれる (*afureru,* "to overflow") and あぶれる (*abureru,* "to miss").

conviction. If we mention strength, then the class president amongst all class presidents, Hanekawa Tsubasa, has a way stronger will than us… You could say she was involved in the events of the spring break.

She was even more involved than the vampire.

And obviously, above all else, she said:

"Oy. I'll fucking kill you. Why are you getting lost in memories? I'll fucking kill you. We've already arrived at our destination, so hurry up and escort this lady inside that building. I'll fucking kill you."

"…"

Sure enough, one would doubt that a lady would say "I'll fucking kill you" three times in the same line, but in any case, the super-car the lady was driving arrived to the cram school's ruined building without having run over a single person.

This is the first time in a while I've been here. I spent the spring break here but… Or perhaps I should say, I made this my headquarters and it's also here where the violent fights, full of slashing and striking, unfolded. Due to the fact that no one would want to come to these ruins unless they had any business here, I was quite curious about it…

Because the barrier has already filled its purpose, Jun-san was able to easily reach this place. Shit. If I knew this would happen, I would have had Oshino leave the barrier as it was. Oh well, not that there is any barrier in this world that could possibly keep this lady out though.

"This is exciting. I wonder what kind of person this vampire is. They're a demon, to a certain extent. As I thought, they probably have horns and hold a metal club!"[11]

"Huum… The front gate is this way."

After she pulled me out of the assistant's seat, not with both her hands but a single finger, I led Jun-san, who couldn't help but to spout some off the mark expectations. However, I can't keep being the type of guy that gives in to violence. I see. I agree that I might have been a boy lacking in motivation during spring break, but now that time has passed, I've gained

[11] Some *Shinto* demons hold a metal club with marbles.

some experience. After exposing myself to danger a number of times, I might have gained some resistance. One can get used to anything.

That might just be different phrasing for accepting the current circumstances, as I had the feeling I was probably going to tag along with her for the rest of my life. The pain I was feeling when my whole body was covered in asphalt is going away, so now is my turn to counterattack!

"Hmm. I'm feeling a hostile presence somewhere. Looks like someone wants to get beaten to death."

"…"

Her intuition is too sharp. Even if she has mind reading abilities, my back is turned right now. I don't have enough life experiences piled up to be able to express myself through my back.

Not only that, but beaten to death… I don't want to die in such a depressing way in an extra story. By the way, putting aside her violent nature, Jun-san gives an elegant and dressy vibe, so I was hoping she would be reluctant to enter that ruin among ruins, but she didn't feel that way at all. She shows no signs of delicacy, to the very end.

She stepped on the degraded floor with her high heels and walked like it was a runway. Her way of walking looked like it was excavating the floor, or rather, turning the ruins into an even more ruined state.

"What a sharp point of view. When I was about your age I was known for collapsing every building I stepped into."

What's up with that urban legend? What kind of youth did she spend? Well, at this point, I have no choice but to carry out the plan I thought of inside the car. I'll need a lot of courage, not to mention I'll have to lie to someone with mind reading abilities. Although Jun-san's mind reading abilities aren't flawless. The fact that I am (tragically) right here is the proof. If I stay confident it will probably go well.

"So, shall we finally start looking for that va… What was it again? Ah, right. That vampire thing, Jun-san? I'll help you find it, to the best of my ability."

"What? What has gotten into you, onii-chan? Are you saying you will not only escort me but also help me on my task?"

"Of course I will. There's no way I wouldn't help. After all, working until the bones and flesh erode for the sake of a troubled girl is the worldview of Araragi Koyomi."

Jun-san doesn't have the age to be called a girl, but now that I think of it, in the world of athletes, no matter the age they will be separated into the boys' or girls' sections, so it shouldn't be a problem, judging from her tough physical stature.

"Hmm. What a peaceful view of the world. How idiotic. But, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. So I'll at least consider not silencing you, by completely erasing your existence, taking into account that point of view of yours."

"…"

Is there a chance I will get erased because you want to silence me? What kind of bloodthirsty worldview do you have? I will now put my familiarity with the land as a local to practice. I briefly thought about escaping to the ends of the Earth, but that would only please her. Instead of the ends of the Earth, I can see a future where I get chased to the very ends of the universe. Anyway, it's time to show my skills!

The skills with which I have vaguely dealt with all my encountered experiences!

No. It's no use. No matter how I try, I can't show off. The wish of showing off in front of such a stylish person was probably impossible right from the start, so I will quietly and steadily carry out the plan in order.

If I were to describe what I am about to do, I would say that when we search the various rooms, I'll stealthily set false clues while she isn't looking and try to deceive her.

Those false clues will demonstrate how the vampire has already left the town and went somewhere else. It is a plan to guide Humanity's Strongest Contractor out of this city.

That being said, the fact that a vampire is no longer living here is true, so this shouldn't be considered a total lie… Therefore, I should be able to avoid the mind reading abilities.

It's very lamentable that I end up becoming a nuisance instead of helping her, but I have my own circumstances. That said, I obviously do not own the tools or have enough deceiving skills to make a realistic setup. I have no tools or skills, but I have blood.

It's the blood that flows through my body, ever since I was transformed into a vampire back in spring break. Now I just need to leave a dying message written in blood somewhere within the building.

From all the conversations we had up until now, I can assume she has no specialist knowledge concerning aberrations but she still has her animal-like instinctive perception. She will most likely notice that the blood is out of the ordinary.

Because of that, the improvised blood writing will have quite a bit of persuasiveness. The problem is where exactly should those blood letters guide her out of the city? A while ago she saw through my lie when I pointed her to the Nagasaki Prefecture. I think I'll hint her to somewhere around the Tokushima Prefecture.

I feel deeply sorry for the people of Shikoku. I promise if someone from Shikoku ever decides to visit our town I will be kind, so I beg of you, please forgive me.

"So, from which classroom should we start searching, onii-chan?"

"I think it's better if we start from the upper floor, in order. They say vampires like tall places."

What I said was pretty random, but the fact that the classroom on the top floor was the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire's property is true. For the sake of making the false clues sound as realistic as possible (to raise the possibility of avoiding her mind reading abilities) I thought that placing the blood writing in that room would be the best choice.

Now then. This plan's greatest weakness is that I will at some point need to bleed in one way or another. Thankfully, this problem has already been cleared. I have the countless scratches left on my body after confronting the car accident.

If I peel off the crust, I will bleed as much as I want. Hehehehe, you dug your own grave, Aikawa Jun!

I couldn't stop feeling that it was my own grave she was digging but anyway. After climbing the stairs and reaching the ruins' fourth floor, we entered one of the three classrooms.

"Could you start searching from around the blackboard, Jun-san? I'll look around near the bulletin board. I'm sure there are some clues around here, for example, a message written in blood."

"That's some oddly specific hypothesis you're stating."

"People frequently state how 'blackboards are green, not black' but in the old days they were really black, you know?"

I followed my verbal gaffe with some miscellaneous knowledge Hanekawa taught me (did it work?) and started to walk toward the bulletin board as I had declared. I'll write on one of those tables stacked with clutter "Oh, that's right. Let's go to Tokushima." and pretend to find it in an exaggerated manner. Just like Newton when he found the universal law of gravitation. I'll show you an act that would make Newton turn into Oldton!

While I was writing that blueprint, I started peeling the convenient crusts with my index finger (well, I can't say that having crusts all over your body is convenient), chose a table and tried to write the line.

"そうだ　徳島、行こう"[12]

Wait a second. Wouldn't it be better if it was written in English? What would "そうだ　徳島、行こう" be translated to, in English? English is one of my weakest subjects.

Even though everything was going well (was it?), why did I have to be stuck and extremely worried about such a high school-like problem (I thought this was middle school level of English?).

And then that happened in a blink of an eye, while I was naturally and nonchalantly making an exaggerated sequence of motions.

"Look out!"

---

[12] "Oh, that's right. Let's go to Tokushima."

She said.

With that loud voice, my body was splendidly sent flying from the side. Accurately speaking, I received a lariat from right beside my neck. With her opposite hand, she firmly locked the back of my head preventing the force from escaping through my back and held my neck while I was getting thrown away.

And then I was, just like that, mercilessly slammed against the ground.

By the way, the person that shouted that warning was the same person that gave me that lariat. Needless to say, it was Aikawa Jun.

What!? Was the sinister intent of my plan revealed? Did she give that lariat because she found me stealthily setting the false clues?

… However, unexpectedly that wasn't it.

Now that I look at it, the desk I was trying to write the bloody message on was completely crushed. It almost looked like an "invisible force" was applied right above it. If Jun-san had not caught me from beside, the one receiving that invisible blow would've been me, not the table…

"…"

No. There's no doubt that receiving the "invisible blow" head-on would have inflicted less damage than Jun-san's lariat…

I would even go as far as saying that I was livelier when I was run over by the super-car. My head is dizzy… I'm impressed how my head stayed stuck to my body.

However, a strange occurrence was happening in, more or less, the direction of the crushed desk. The classroom's floor which had not been cleaned for a long time was covered in dust.

And as we thrashed about on it, the snow-like piled dust started dancing in the air like fog.

The dust was giving shape to a human body.

No.

Not a human body. Rather, it's an aberration's body.

But I could not believe what I was just seeing.

That… There's no way **that** was **here**.

There is no way that Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade was right there. That unparalleled monstrous aberration lost its existence for eternity during spring break. There's no way she's there. There is no way I'm seeing her. It's not possible that her silhouette is just before me.

"It was given form by the dust which was dancing in the air" was an incorrect assertion. I should say that the dust which was dancing in the air was barely depicting "her" appearance. Just as air inside water can turn into bubbles and appear on the surface.

And thus, as the dust fell on the floor and, thus, that silhouette stopped being visible.

"An invisible force".

Even so, the fact that it was a "force" did not change.

"She is invisible".

Even so, the fact that it was "her" did not change.

"This way!"

Jun-san shouts loudly.

I was expecting a flustered reaction of the contractor right as I was attacked by the "invisible force", but turns out her expression was sparkling, and more than that, she was smiling with joy.

"This way!", she said, while firmly grabbing my head and kicking the floor, not because she was attempting to dodge the "invisible force" but because she was suddenly trying to set-up a counterattack on "her".

Unbelievable. The counterattack failed, though. The "invisible force" could not be touched, so Jun-san's kick with her high heels passed right through "her" tall stature.

"Hmm… It's like a ghost, so does that mean I can't touch it?"

Jun-san murmurs some words, analyzing as both her legs land. For now, the fight turned "her" silhouette visible once again. Even so, it will all be meaningless if we don't manage to hit it.

That said, thanks to Jun-san's reckless kick (she couldn't see it so of course it was reckless, but even if that's the case, it wasn't *that* reckless), I could guess "her" true identity. No, that's probably saying too much. That did not change the fact that the "invisible force" was still unidentifiable.

Regarding the lack of specialist knowledge, there's not much of a difference between me and Jun-san.

I have some experience, though.

I have once seen a similar "snake"—a similar but different snake.

I had already gone through the experience of seeing something invisible.

That's why I now had the intuition that the existence which is "her", and the non-existence which is not there, is Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade while not being Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

That entity is "will". Jun-san had mentioned a will which "does not die"…

If I had to reiterate, "bad things" were in this classroom and "everything but that" has been taken away.

Or should I call it the "remaining thoughts". For those are the vampire's regrets left behind as well as its gruesome legacy, not will. If that's the case, I should rather call it a dying wish.[13]

That's it.

How could I not have realized something so simple?

The vampire is no longer living in this ruined building, so how come this contractor was requested to exterminate a vampire to begin with? I should have thought about it more seriously.

I initially thought the information given to her was outdated, but that wasn't it. Turns out a new aberration phenomenon which I wasn't aware of was occurring here.

It's not because it's outdated, it's because it's new.

An aberrational phenomenon preceded by a rumor—it's very possible.

After all, although for a short period of time, this was the building which the legendary iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire treated like her own daimyō[14] castle.

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[13] Koyomi compares 意志 (*ishi*, "will"), which is comprised of the kanji 意 (*i*, "feelings/thoughts") and 志 (*shi,* "to think"), to 遺志 (*ishi*, "dying wish") where the first kanji is 遺 (*i*, "leave behind").

[14] Powerful Japanese feudal lords.

It would be strange to leave out the possibility that the building itself suffered some sort of influence. The desk and the dust are under influence. Under domination. It is possible, just as Araragi Koyomi turned into an aberration by involving himself with them. Following this extreme logic, it's safe to assume the building itself turned into an aberration.

Up until now that didn't cross my mind, probably because this ruined building was used as a barrier arranged by the specialist in Hawaiian clothes.

I had felt a sense of relief because of it, but now that it has lost its function there is nothing suppressing the vampire's lost thoughts. They must have manifested upon my arrival.

I didn't intend on coming here, but I was abducted. Even so, the fact that I'm here remains. I am Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade's minion. Even now I can't escape from her influence, and of all things, my entire body is full of crusts, letting loose the smell of blood. On top of that, I even stupidly tried to leave a bloody message.

I doubt that this action didn't contribute to the revival of those vicious lost thoughts that infest this building, the sinister regret that sticks onto this very classroom. A brand new aberration.

And I am the one responsible for awakening it.

"… Jun-san, please step back."

I said while she was strangling my neck…

"An? What did you just say, punk?"

I impolitely and disrespectfully told that to the strongest human, and just as I thought, Jun-san responded with some sort of an intimidation.

However, I cannot afford to falter. I have already made my decision.

"From here on out, I will take over. I will assume responsibility. This is the only case where I cannot afford to let someone take responsibility for, this is my duty."

The thoughts left behind… The dying wish…

If it is true that her regrets remain here, I have to be the one to solve this problem with my own hands.

No. I'm not just saying this out of stubbornness and because of my sense of duty. It's not just a question of feelings. There was once a time when I faced an "invisible snake", so I'm capable of fighting against "her".

The aftereffects of the vampirification. It is something that I did, it is something that can only be dealt with by me.

Aikawa Jun cannot do it.

I see how she managed to protect me from the first attack (even though she was the one inflicting more damage on me). Because of her animal-like senses, Jun-san might just be able to dodge the opponent's attacks.

However, just now when she attempted to strike her high kick, she couldn't hit the opponent. The match won't be getting anywhere if she keeps fruitlessly kicking the air.

That's why…

"I'm telling you to stay back, Jun-san… Aikawa-san."

"…"

"'She' is aiming for my blood. So, please, stay away from me. Stay away from this building. Stay away from this city and… Oh, I know. Head to Tokushima."

And as I insist on following the already failing plan, I faced "her", who is invisible for the third time, with the intent of exorcising.

It's alright, rest assured.

I'll kill you as many times as needed.

I'll let you kill me as many times as needed.

As I renew that determination and killing intent, I faced "her" up front to exorcise.

"… I have to praise those guts of yours for trying to make an enemy out of me while I'm holding your neck, I'll give you that, Araragi-kun. So I shall give you a reward."

She said.

Without letting it go, she forcefully twisted my neck horizontally. For a second I thought she was going to twist it off. It was too extreme to be called a reward, though twisting my neck was not her true intention. Just as I was about to protest, my mouth was shut.

She put something on top of my lips.

"!? !? !?"

Without even having the time to be confused, my consciousness started to drift away. The kiss was so intense I couldn't protest, let alone breathe. Rather than an intense kiss, it sounded like she was taking a deep breath of the oxygen in my lungs. That's how ridiculously extreme that deep kiss was.

"Mu… mugu, gu gu."

"Puhaaa. 'Right. Thanks for the meal. Energy fully replenished."

And so, the contractor finally released both her arms that were coiling around my neck, but I couldn't stand on my feet, my legs lost all their strength because of the lack of oxygen.

And, just as a vampire sucks blood, she completely drained the oxygen out of me, thus I fell right then and there. At this point, not only I couldn't see "her", but also my whole vision went completely blank. I could just barely, in the corner of my field of vision, catch a grasp of Aikawa Jun's leg kicking the floor, once again.

This time she will try to land a punch.

I find it extremely mysterious how she looks like she's having so much fun no matter if her opponent is a vampire, remaining thoughts or the "bad things" that precede aberrations, anyway, an outrageous inhuman nonexistence. However, no matter if you try to kick or punch, what doesn't hit doesn't hit.

Even if you try to build momentum and wave your arm like that, for the invisible force, the attack won't…

"Bakkyuuuun!"

… It landed a hit.

Ignoring the onomatopoeia coming directly out of Jun-san's mouth, her fist, which was just like a bullet being blasted off a gun's barrel, scattered the materialized "remaining regrets". I could tell even if I couldn't see.

No trace was left, nor a shadow, nor a shape.

I could tell "she" was extinguished even though I couldn't see.

"Happy birthday to you.[15] If you manage to survive, let's play some other time, to our heart's content."

And so, Humanity's Strongest Contractor bid farewell to the vampire's dying wishes, with a lively expression on her face.

[15] In katakana in the text.

005

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

In the end, why did Jun-san's fist defeat the vampire's ghost? For a long while, this remained a mystery on par with an irrational theory from a shounen manga, or something along those lines. However, afterwards I had the chance to meet and to make an acquaintance of the immortal aberrations specialist, Kagenui Yozuru, who more or less explained what had happened.

"To be able to challenge the visible remaining thoughts activated by your blood, one would most likely need to ingest your saliva by kissing you. By ingesting the vampire-like DNA, one would meet the 'requirements' to be able to hit the aberration, for a short period of time."

She said.

So that reward kiss was not given with the intent of draining the oxygen out of me. No. Now that I think of it, if we follow the train of thought about how oxygen is transported by hemoglobin inside the blood, then that deep breath was also a "requirement". With that in mind, while it looked like she was just going wild doing whatever she pleased, that person was

unexpectedly worthy of being called a strategist, or rather, someone very calculating.

"No, not very calculating, I don't think. It doesn't look like she actually found your true identity. That said, I don't think she was just testing to see if the kiss would work or not. She simply wanted to kiss and that coincidentally worked out. She improvised too much to be considered a specialist."

If even the exceptional and extreme specialist, the one who is called the violent onmyouji, Kagenui-san says something like that, then it means Humanity's Strongest really is out of the ordinary.

"Indeed. Her strength really is out of the ordinary. With that in mind, if Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade's remaining thoughts manifested because of your blood, then it probably reacted upon the contractor's visit and thus gained a concrete appearance. Or, at the very least, it's one of the main causes, so your saliva was probably not even required in the first place."

If aberrations are entities that take shape according to human emotions, then it's up to a living human's strong will in the form of a kiss to crush them, and up to the truth… And so Kagenui-san continues her speech, uncharacteristically mixing up a lot of concepts in one go.

This comes from someone who has continuously killed her own will and emotions and who has kept by her side an immortal doll, so you could also say that it is an opinion rather characteristic of Kagenui-san.

Even if that's the case, I grief for the reward kiss. Boys' feelings get hurt as well, you know?

Not that I wanted to relieve myself of such resentment, but I ended up asking directly Kagenui-san who would win between the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade's real form, and Humanity's Strongest Contractor, Aikawa Jun.

"As one of many specialists I absolutely have to say that it would be a complete victory for Heartunderblade. I can say with confidence how that valuable species is the type of monster that would build a castle out of

human corpses and the type of monster that would eradicate half of the aberrations. Faith and things of that nature are meaningless before hatred."

And after stating such pragmatic opinion, Kagenui-san said…

"That's right, but as a human I would hope for the contractor's victory."

She stated that hopeful observation.

In any case, whether or not there were any remaining thoughts is not definite, but from there on, the ghost of the vampire did not show itself in the aforementioned cram school's ruined building again. However, shortly thereafter the ruined building was demolished, and that's a plus.

The building which Humanity's Strongest Contractor stepped on did in fact collapse, so that ghost story-like urban legend was most likely trustworthy.

M A Z E M O N O G A T A R I

Jun Build — Chapter Strong

Read the author's mind: Azart & Nyorem
Dressed the story with style: Bluex
Got run over by a car: Maxdefolsch

MAZEMONOGATARI

NISIOISIN

Nomi Rule

Chapter Rule

Chinou Nomi
Densetsu Series
0123456789
Art: Watanabe Akio

001

Chinou Nomi is a magical girl fighting against a great evil. In this context, you can think of "magical girl" as the kind in children's television series or anime, and you'd be mostly right. In reality, the magical girl I met was wearing a frivolous and voluminous costume and wielded a fancy magical stick.

However, she wasn't the kind of magical girl that appeared on television, and neither was she the kind of magical girl to appear in children-oriented anime. My honest impression was that she was an exceedingly dangerous girl whose existence in itself broke the rules.

Her age was about that of a middle schooler, so in that sense, she was in the same generation as my two little sisters. However, her upbringing differed quite a bit. Thinking about it now, even from my perspective of having lived through a lot of mayhem ever since that hellish spring break, it's clear that she lived in an abnormally harsh world.

Otherwise, she wouldn't have developed that bizarre personality, although that's my biased interpretation. Well, for her, who belongs to an organization fighting to save humanity, the life of a guy like me, doing his best just to survive on a daily basis, must be lukewarm in comparison.

Chinou Nomi—also known as the magical girl *Giant Impact*, came all the way from Shikoku to our town. The reason for that was certainly not tourism (in the first place, our city had no tourist attractions worth going out of one's way to visit from so far away), but a part of her training to fight that great evil.

Her training journey as a magical girl.

Speaking of anime, that was anime-like too.

Naturally, I was only able to describe her in such a simple way long after the fact. The me of that time had been constantly toyed with.

No, if you took it as a ritual and not training, it might not differ much from all my diverse confrontations with aberrations that happened at the ruins of the abandoned cram school or at the shrine atop the mountain. However, the magical girl *Giant Impact* was completely foreign to the gravity of facing such an initiation.

If I were to describe the *escape from a classroom* we experienced together as a ritual, that girl would deny it bluntly. She would surely deny my human rights altogether.

She'd say it was training.

She'd say I was wrong, swaying her head.

"This is a game, Koyomi-san."

Her words revived in my head.

Revived, like a vampire.

"It's obvious you'll never understand it, even if you spend your whole life trying, but in Shikoku, this is common—a common game. Nothing more than one of the numerous games occurring there."

I thought that saying I wouldn't understand it in my whole life went a bit too far, but if it was really that common, then she and I truly lived in completely different worlds.

Or rather.

I should say, the worlds we'll die in are different.

In reality, she was raised in a culture where dying was a premise. I described her as being of middle school age, but she most likely didn't go to middle school and wouldn't live to reach high school age.

If I was currently in lukewarm water, then she was inside a pool of sulfuric acid, not water. If I had one foot in the grave, then she was already inside the crematorium.

If vampires burn due to the hellfire of the Sun.

Then magical girls burn due to the hellfire of darkness.

Then, what I won't understand in my entire life might not be the game's mechanism or its structure, but Chinou Nomi, that single human.

Even if I spend my life.

Even if I die, I won't comprehend her.

002

"Multi-Stick *Living Dead*!"

Along with that roar, I was revived after being hit with a mysterious stick. Having died and come back to life again and again during that hellish spring break, I was pretty disconcerted, but this was my first ever resuscitation without the use of my vampire blood, or putting it another way, not based on my immortal body.

Naturally, it wasn't by CPR.

As if such a forceful cardiac massage existed. In a sense, it was even more dubious than a vampire's immortality, a groundless resurrection.

"Uh… uugh…"

It's not like I'd been hit by my sisters, but being revived with the feeling of being beaten out of bed was too novel and hard to accept—however, that still confused me,

"Oh! You were able to safely come back to life thanks to me, Koyomi-san! How marvelous, how wonderful, that you were able to be entrusted with my favor! Now, I shall allow you to send generous thanks and a thunder of applause in my direction for resuscitating you, someone I've just met for the first time, without any personal gain in mind!"

From the side, I heard a loud voice, seemingly taking the role of an alarm clock. That was the voice of the person who revived me, and thinking that, understandably, the benefactor of my life. I might have been supposed to thank her first thing when I opened my mouth, but whatever words of gratitude that might have existed had melted away like magic.

No.

What was really magic was this baseless and illogical resurrection. I unsteadily stood up and assessed the situation.

"…"

This was—a classroom.

A classroom of my school, Naoetsu Private High School.

Class 1-3.

The class I formerly belonged to.

However, you couldn't rightfully call it the classroom of 1-3—this classroom was a space that shouldn't have existed according to the floor plans.

Like the ghost of a classroom or of a class meeting.

It had been called that in the past, but that also wasn't accurate. No one knows what was correct—not being correct or concrete was the way of this Class 1-3.

I'd visited this nonexistent classroom twice in the past, so being trapped like this wasn't really a first for me.

Right. Exactly.

It slowly came back to my mind.

I was once again trapped in this classroom—without any doors or windows. However, during those times, I'd always been accompanied by my trusty junior and Oshino Meme's niece, Oshino Ougi. But not this time.

I was with someone completely alien to me.

Not a student of Naoetsu High School, not even a high schooler—her age was about that of a middle schooler. However, she wasn't wearing a uniform, but a fluffy and frilly costume. She was what you might call a magical girl.

Magical girl.

In other words, a *mahou shoujo*.[16]

"What's the matter, Koyomi-san? I wait and wait but I can't hear your heartfelt *grazie*. I really cannot tolerate that attitude toward the benefactor of your life. I shouldn't have revived you after all."

"…"

Isn't she going too far?

Betraying the gentleness and ballerina-like lightness emanated by her looks, a chignon of black hair and a long, delicate neck, resembling that of someone practicing ballet, what came out of her mouth was pretty blunt.

She almost seemed like an ill-natured Hachikuji.

Well, if it were Hachikuji, she wouldn't be wearing this flashy and colorful one-piece, whose complicated structure couldn't be grasped at first glance. The design was closer to that of a Middle Ages dress than of a one-piece, probably unfit for the current era. That costume looked like some sort of mille-feuille, so that girl wasn't to be made light of for rocking such an outfit.

No, she was already not to be made light of at the point when she was using magic—the magical girl *Giant Impact*.

It seems that was Chinou Nomi's alias as a magical girl.

Or rather, a code name.

"Just checking, but… Chinou-chan. The magic you can use by swinging… uhhh, what was it again, the Multi-Stick *Living Dead*, is called *Un-Dead*, and lets you return someone back to life no questions asked, right?"

"Who knows, I wonder. I'm leaving it up to your imagination."

"…"

Grr.

---

[16] In the original, Koyomi first says 魔法少女 (*mahou shoujo*, "magical girl") before switching to the katakana マジカル (*majikaru).*

"I won't answer any questions until you properly address your thanks. I use thanks from my surroundings as fuel for life. My teammates call me the magical girl *Thanks Impact*."

"You're hated in a really impressive way."

They probably don't think of you as a teammate.

Are they a team of magical girls, I wonder?

Well, since I've been revived like that, in fact, I have no choice but to believe in the power of her magic. It was rather stubborn of me, who accepted the existence of aberrations in general, starting with vampires, to not accept magical girls, quite the double standard. Also, the doll shikigami, Ononoki Yotsugi, is already basically a sort of magical girl.

So.

Setting aside whether I was thankful to have been revived with that magic, why did I die in the first place?

The answer to that was written on the blackboard.

No.

It's not the answer which was written—but the question.

```
[0][1][2][3][4]
[5][6][7][8][9]
```

10 numbers, and.

'□□□□'

4 empty blocks.

And those 4 blocks were encircled by a big drawing of a key. Someone sharp might figure out that the method to escape this room was inserting 4 digits inside those blocks.

A 4-digit number.

AKA, a password.

"I see. Then, for now, let's write something randomly…"

When I took chalk in my hand,

"Hoi."

I was walloped.

By that Multi-Stick *Living Dead* or something.

Hey, you just used that to revive me, but is it fine to hit living people with it?

"Are you an idiot?"

"Eh… What do you mean?"

"Are you an idiot? Are you an idiot? Are you an idiot? Are you an idiot?"

"I don't understand what you're talking about, but the fact that you're far from a decent person has been expertly conveyed."

"I am a cut above other humans. They've already disappeared by now, but don't tell me you've forgotten the numbers you randomly wrote in earlier?"

"Eh… I wrote them and… what happened after that again?"

"You died."

The magical girl *Thanks Impact*—I mean, the magical girl *Giant Impact* easily admitted.

"**If you get the password wrong, you die.** Such are the rules of this game."

003

On the subject of why I was trapped in a nonexistent classroom with a magical girl in the first place, it doesn't need much of an explanation.

One day, as I was strolling in the city, I witnessed a girl with an unusual fashion sense, so I followed her and we ended up trapped here together.

You might have misunderstood it as the slightly deranged behavior of following any girl who attracts my eyes, but I obviously don't have a hobby that consists of stalking middle-school-aged girls. And, even if anyone else was in my place, if they witnessed her, they'd definitely want to follow her.

I mean, after all, Chinou Nomi was traveling in the air.

The magical girl was flying.

In a straight line, and at a pretty high speed, too.

I was literally doubting my eyes. However, in the past, I'd seen a few people fly through the sky—but none of *them* could be properly called "people"; they were aberrations.

Flying with bat wings, flying with powerful jumps from cat legs, flying from the force of enlarging their body, such various means… So then, was that girl an aberration too?

However, I couldn't tell at all how that fluffy fashion girl was flying from afar. If she were an aberration, I couldn't ignore her, and even if she weren't, I still couldn't ignore her.

I couldn't not pursue her.

Furthermore, since for whatever reason, that flying girl was heading toward Naoetsu High School, that made it even less of an option—"It's a national holiday in Japan, don't tell me that girl intends to go to Naoetsu."

Tch.

To think the eyesight I got from transforming into a vampire during spring break would come in handy like that. Well, I can't do anything about what comes into my sight. Also, I'll say it while I'm at it, but when that girl was flying through the air with that short, tutu-like skirt, I'd ended up seeing things I shouldn't have, but the person in question didn't seem to care much.

If you're flying high in the sky, at least wear leggings.

So, as I was chasing the girl who had apparently illegally infiltrated the school from the rooftop, we eventually ended up trapped in this nonexistent classroom. Considering her identity was the magical girl *Giant Impact*, it wasn't an illegal but a magical[17] intrusion, to be accurate.

Good grief.

It's nothing out of the ordinary for me to get involved in something of the sort, but well, this case was a certified example of this. Can't I even look at the sky in peace?

"You know, I'm really sorry you ended up being involved in this graceful chosen one's mission, commoner. I had no intention of involving a commoner, but I am pretty cute for having been unable to take your rashness into account."

The girl, apparently not the slightest bit willing to apologize, named herself Chinou Nomi. Certainly, I followed her and got myself trapped on

[17] Koyomi makes a pun on 不法 (*fuhou*, "illegal") and 魔法 (*mahou*, "magical").

my own accord, so I didn't especially expect an apology. That said, it's not like I wanted her to irritate me.

To be honest, I couldn't quite get the gist of it even after it was explained, but she came to this town as a part of the research and development project for *The Absolute Peace League*, the organization she apparently belonged to as a magical girl.

Whether the plan was to analyze aberrations to try using them for magic or something totally unrelated, I wasn't privy to those kinds of details. But anyhow, the mission entrusted to the magical girl *Giant Impact* this time was to break free from the classroom she was trapped in. I don't really get how that was graceful, but I probably don't need to understand that. I'm sure I wasn't meant to understand.

What's important is that we were trapped in this classroom—that we were trapped in this classroom ruled by death.

A 4-digit password.

A 4-digit password where an error in input invites death.

"Not at all, Koyomi-san. In Shikoku, this sort of game is still on the reserved side. If you input the wrong one, the worst that happens is that your heart stops, right? We've played with rules where you explode to death if you use your cell phone, you know."

"…"

Is this how things are like in Shikoku?

I guess if I exploded, I wouldn't be able to come back like earlier with the Multi-Stick *Living Dead*. Conversely, was the magical girl *Giant Impact* sent out on this case precisely because, with her magic of *Un-Dead,* errors in input can still lead to a rechallenge?

What a great bother for this town.

I wished from the bottom of my heart for her to go back to Shikoku as soon as possible. Although I got trapped on a whim, I had no intention to hold back on cooperating. However, it didn't seem to go as smoothly as I wanted.

"Although it's unnecessary for my intelligent self, for Koyomi-san's sake, I shall take great pains and break a sweat to explain the rules of this

game again. If we can manage to write the 4 correct digits in those empty squares written on the blackboard, the door will open and we will be free. However, if we write the wrong number, our lives will end."

End our lives.

The pushy preface was so long that it didn't quite register properly, but it would probably *end our lives* regardless of whether we were humans or vampires. Then this magic might have been able to kill the legendary vampire, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

Well, even if she was entrapped in this classroom, I don't think that Aberration Slayer would follow the rules of this space and rack her brains thinking about the 4 digits…

"So, in short, inputting numbers randomly like I did earlier isn't the smartest option, huh…"

Yeah, the probability is one in ten thousand with 4 digits, after all.

It's not zero, but with that number, you wouldn't get it first try. You'd have a better chance of being hit by a car.

"Yes. That's the unsmart Koyomi-san's method."

"…"

Can't this girl speak without annoying people?

Although, it really was the unsmart Koyomi-san's method.

"By the way, what did I input earlier again?"

It seems that even if my life is returned with magic, the memories I had from before I died have been lost, causing me to forget what I'd input previously.

"You wrote in `[0][0][0][0]`."

"So I was going to try them all…"

Rather than unsmart, I was unsavable.

Although I did get saved.

"I'm sure there must be hints leading to a 4-digit code inside this classroom. If we can find those within the time limit, my mission will be a success."

"I see. Hints, huh…"

It certainly started to sound like a game.

Like one of those so-called escape rooms.

Rather than the mystery novels Ougi-chan loves so much, it felt more like an adventure novel—hmm? Hold on. What did she just say?

"What's that time limit? Is there such a thing?"

As far as I could see, the clock hung above the blackboard was frozen as usual. Right before the time to go home from school. At this point it was like an afterimage, or even just a mere image. Even if it wasn't in that state, I never had a time limit the other times I came here.

It was a space which could entrap us for eternity.

You can't go home until the answer is found.

This is this kind of classroom.

"By time limit, I don't mean it that way. I guess I should say it has nothing to do with your world, but with our world's circumstances."

Chinou-chan said, while letting out an embarrassed laughter, "Ehehe". You could even say she was laughing foolishly.

"The plan is that, if this mission is deemed impossible to achieve, at that moment, this school will be burned down along with me."

004

The not-so-amicable expression "burned down" was comprehensible, but to be more accurate, it seems another magical girl would come and carpet-bomb the whole area—it makes me want to ask if such a violent group of magical girls was a problem or not.

"Oh please, Koyomi-san. There's no way that those of us who fight to protect humanity are bad people, is there?"

I don't agree at all.

"By the way, that magical girl would probably be of a much higher rank than myself, an insanely powerful magical girl who could not only burn down the building but the entire town. No hard feelings, okay?"

There's no way I wouldn't have some.

What kind of crazy plan was our town involved in?

You know, I no longer care who involves me in what, but leave the school and the town out of it.

"Now, now. If the worst-case scenario comes to pass, I'll let you give me a peck on the cheek before we die, so let me off the hook with that. Ufun!"

"It's not something that can be forgiven just like that, you know."

"Oh my, are you wishing for more? Are you going to ask me to show you my panties? But, if we do that, Koyomi-san might purposely aim for a time-up. Kyaah, pervert!"

"I already saw them when you were flying earlier. Also, if the school burns down, I'll act as a representative of the town and punch you in the cheek."

Setting aside that unforgivably violent declaration toward a frail girl, at this rate, the situation might be more severe than the previous times I came here. My knees might give in if so many people's lives rest on my shoulders.

Randomly filling in 4 numbers must absolutely not be done.

"Chinou-chan. Let me ask you once more what I tried to check earlier, before you changed the subject. That magic of *burning down*, can't you use it? Like using it to melt the windows…"

"Are you telling me to cheat? How shameful. Truly shows your nature."

Please respect the rules, I was rebuked.

By someone like that.

"Well, if Koyomi-san wants to know that much, I shall impart my intelligence."[18]

"What did you just say?"

"I can do most things, but the only intrinsic magic I have is *Un-Dead*. Also flying. Come on, I gave you the answer you wanted, so where's your 'thank you'?"

"Do you request thanks for every little interaction of this level?"

That's too opportunistic.

She said she used thanks as life fuel, but how starved was she?

At this point, questioning Chinou-chan in itself became unpleasant, but after reluctantly probing further, it seems that the magic power resided in the special costume rather than in her body. There's a certain magic bound

[18] Here, Nomi uses the rare sentence ending しんぜよう (*shinzeyou*), which is used when you want to direct someone to do a task but you'll also assist them doing it, and want to give the impression this will be favorable to them instead of a direct order.

to each combination of costume and stick. It didn't seem to me that she was hiding other abilities she could have used.

"The intrinsic magic *Un-Dead*, huh… It's certainly convenient continuing after getting the wrong input, but it doesn't seem to be of any use to play the escape game itself."

"Exactly. Ehehn."

For some reason, Chinou-chan talked arrogantly.

"My best friend, the magical girl *Pumpkin*, once said: *We are magical girls and not magicians; we mustn't abuse our magic, and we mustn't be controlled by our magic.*"

"…"

She says some good things.

If I was going to get trapped either way, I'd have preferred being with that girl… Her being this girl's best friend is worrisome, but that's probably a lie so there's no problem.

"'This magic is convenient to use' or 'This magic is inconvenient to use', I call those luxurious worries. On the same level of luxury as having a hand so good in President that you refuse to exchange the two cards with the person in last."

"That comparison was so easy to understand that I feel like we lost the original point, though…"

But well, I guess she's right.

In reality, as someone who was revived by the Multi-Stick *Living Dead*, I'm not in any place to complain.

"That's why, Koyomi-san. We should start by investigating this classroom instead of being lazy. Now, get on it, godspeed! Really, you're always trying to take it easy."

"Try being more skillful at motivating people to work."

If I continued interacting with that girl any longer, I might've started aiming for the time-up just to be able to use violence against her, so I got on with the task right away.

Escape game.

Even if I was aware of them, I'd never done any and am bad at tasks necessitating the use of my head… However, since we were in a classroom, there shouldn't be many spots where hints could be hidden.

They are limited.

"Then, Koyomi-san, please start investigating the students' desks, in order, from the front. I'll start by searching the vicinity of the teacher's desk."

"Got it."

Thus, the investigation started.

It wasn't clear when exactly the time-up was, but to be honest, I considered the possibility that the magical girl would start bombing us as soon as possible, just to get rid of this bothersome girl, so I tried acting as fast as possible.

Perhaps this mission in itself was made up in order to eradicate the magical girl *Giant Impact*. I really get it, but please execute this kind of plan at home.

But, luckily, I immediately found something which might serve as a hint. Inside the first desk I investigated.

Removing the textbooks inside the desk, leaning in and peeking inside, on the backside of the board, there was a hiragana character written with a bold brush between two brackets.

[O].

"… [O]?"

"What? Did something happen to the lowly commoner that is you, Koyomi-san?"

"You could have just said 'Did something happen?' normally."

Her sense of superiority against commoners is impressive.

Is humanity really under the care of someone like that?

"There's something written inside this desk… with a brush maybe? I can't be sure, but it might be the same as the handwriting on the blackboard."

I wasn't especially skilled in handwriting analysis, but my vampire sight was able to catch a flying magical girl, so I could at least check the resemblance of the brackets.

"I see, a memo inside the desk, is it? Deeply interesting. Then, Koyomi-san, please search for any other similar memos inside the other desks. I will continue to investigate the vicinity of the teacher's desk."

"Got it. Mm… No, there's nothing inside this one. Maybe that was the only desk with a memo?"

But frankly, just `[O]` doesn't do much as a hint. If it was a kanji character, there might be something implied that came to mind, but that wasn't the case for a hiragana character.

"Ummm. Let's see. Following my inspiration, `[O]` would evoke `[OPPAI]`,[19] though."

"Don't follow your inspiration. Revolt against it with all your might."

"But Koyomi-san, it's hasty to arrive at a conclusion after only two desks. How about searching other desks? I'll continue like that and investigate the vicinity of the teacher's desk."

"Got it. Umm, as I thought, nothing either in this one… huh? There's something written in the fourth one. This is `[ME]`… no, `[NU]`?"[20]

"So there was something. It seems there are desks with and without a memo. Then we better check all of the boards."

"Yeah. It'll take some time, but looks like we need to."

"Koyomi-san, in that case, please check all the desks. I will continue and investigate the vicinity of the teacher's desk."

"How long are you going to search that desk's vicinity?"

How could she not have finished one desk when I checked through four of them?

Was the structure of the teacher's desk that complex?

---

[19] If you somehow don't know, this is the word for "boobs" (おっぱい, *oppai*).

[20] The hiragana characters め (*me*) and ぬ (*nu*) are very similar.

“It can’t be helped now that you’ve realized it. Earlier, when you died, I noticed some desks did and didn’t have notes, but going through all of them by myself seemed like a hassle, so I made you come back.”

“So you were considering letting me die!?”

To think I was brought back as a labor force… You said ‘without any personal gain in mind’, but Chinou-chan, you were completely set on gaining something through that, weren’t you?

I was told the same thing by a vampire during spring break.

Then, is this girl really human?

Seamlessly feigning investigating the teacher’s desk while letting me do all the others… If only the people around me awkwardly learning what living was could take from that debonair attitude—but, setting that aside.

“Participate.”

“… Ah, were you perhaps talking to me?”

“Don’t pretend you’re not used to receiving orders. We’re the only ones in this classroom, aren’t we?”

“Oh please, don’t emphasize the fact we’re alone. You’re talking to a young teenage girl, you know? You lolicon ♪.”

“I don’t know about Shikoku, but in this city, being in love with a young teenage girl doesn’t make you a lolicon.”

“What a scary city…”

Chinou-chan was creeped out.

This taught me the hardships of intercultural communication.

Anyhow, I gained Chinou-chan’s cooperation after that and we checked the remaining desks. The result: we found 15 hiragana inscribed.

And below is how they were concretely set out.

```
[O][NU][RA][YO][WA]
[MI][U][KU][SA][BA]
[NU][NA][O][DA][HI]
```

005

After that, we tried searching through the rest of the room, but nothing else stood out as a hint to our eyes—by the way, Chinou-chan claimed "This area is suspicious," and persistently investigated a trivial light switch.

Her sabotage went too far.

"So, it looks like we have to get a 4-digit number out of those 15 characters, but…"

Although I stared at the hiragana I wrote on the blackboard for a long time—written in the order of discovery for now—umm, no meaning came to my mind.

I can't make any sense of it.

I didn't get it with just one character, but the sense of mystery only increased now that there are 15 of them.

"But well, thinking normally, it could be an anagram… A word game where we move the order of the characters to create a sentence…"

"Yeah. But even if you want to switch them around, it's no easy feat. Let's think after a little break."

"You were basically on a break the whole time. Even for the desks, you only searched through 6 of them."

"I investigated thoroughly."

"You investigated slowly, rather."

"But you know, I discovered 5 hiragana."

"That pisses me off even more. What's up with your insane luck?"

"It would be a lie if I didn't answer that it was the luck of the chosen ones."

"Then use your luck of being a chosen one to rearrange those 15 characters."

"Please don't ask for the impossible. There are 1,307,674,368,000 different patterns for rearranging 15 characters, you know?"

"If you can calculate that on the fly, I'm sure you'll be able to figure this out on the fly too."

Don't show off your talent so nonchalantly.

However, one trillion…

It far surpasses the ten thousands of the password. Is it just me or was this escape game's difficulty increasing?

"No. Hold on, Chinou-chan."

"I won't."

"Stop that and hold on. Don't disobey meaninglessly. Look, even if there are 15 hiragana, some of them overlap, so we can reduce the number of patterns, no?"

"Right. `[O]` and `[NU]` are in there multiple times. Good job, Koyomi-san! With that, even you can do it. Come on, please arrange them. In the meantime, I'm going to take a breather."

"Don't take any breaks. For your entire life."

"My entire life, is it? How harsh."

However, although I said some harsh things, I could understand Chinou-chan's feeling of wanting to be spared from it. Even if the number drops one or two orders of magnitude below one trillion, that's like taking a cup of water out of the ocean.

As I thought, there was no way of resolving this anagram with no criteria. Not only will we end up with an infinite number of meaningless

sentences, but depending on spurs of the moment, we would end up with sentences with vague and complex meanings.

"… That reminds me, Chinou-chan. Earlier, you talked about having teammates, but setting aside the girl coming to reduce us to ashes, is there any possibility of the other magical girls coming to save you?"

"There is none."

She asserted.

With the tone of someone who properly understands their unpopularity.

"By the way, teams are made of five people. We're called magical girls, but it feels more like a squadron."

"Hmm."

She has four comrades and yet no one will come to save her… Then they're not comrades but almost enemies, no?

"Right, right, Koyomi-san. When I evoked fighting as a squadron, you could have joked that fighting with five against one cryptic opponent feels like a lynching, but I don't approve of leaving the numerous combatants that they take along for the fights out of the equation."

"Well, isn't that a sharp remark."

I wish she used that discernment to solve the code…

"Not including those small fries severely denounces not the low state of your consciousness toward human rights, but toward cryptics' rights, I guess."

"At this point, you're calling those combatants 'small fries'; your consciousness of cryptics' rights is pretty low too, in my opinion…"

"That, that. Exactly that. I can't get enough of people retorting on another retort, like Koyomi-san just did. I can't get enough of breaking through the lowered guard of people that think they can retort from a safe place."

"One day, instead of getting bluntly retorted at, you're gonna get bluntly stabbed."

Your position feels like a pretty dangerous one to me.

At any rate, even if I'm usually ridiculed for being in charge of retorts, I can't idly bear with Chinou-chan like that forever. Really, I can imagine the hardships of Chinou-chan's teammates… Mm.

Teammates?

I turned my back from the blackboard and looked at the desks once more—rather than the desks, at the seats.

The seats—right.

The seats lined up uniformly were no mere desks bereft of individuality. Each of them were meant to be occupied by a person.

The classmates—are fixed.

The classmates of when I was a first-year high schooler.

Not teammates, but classmates.

"… Chinou-chan. Once more. Let's investigate the desks once more."

"No way."

"Sorry, sorry, I phrased it in a way that made Chinou-chan think she had a choice. Let's search. No complaints allowed."

However, this time, we're going to note the owner of the desks that have a hiragana inscribed on them, too.

I said so.

006

The results were as such:

[O] — Kouma Okitada
[RA] — Kijikiri Hoka
[WA] — Shinaniwa Ayazute
[U] — Araragi Koyomi
[SA] — Ukitobi Kyuusu
[NU] — Shuzawa Juudo
[O] — Igami Michisada
[HI] — Kikigoe Enji
[NU] — Koudou Sousho
[YO] — Arikure Biwa
[MI] — Kube Aizu
[KU] — Oikura Sodachi
[BA] — Ashine Keiri
[NA] — Shuui Tsuuma
[DA] — Gekizaka Nageki

"Can you figure something out with that? After using me this roughly, you won't get out of it easily if all that work was for nothing."

"You only searched 3 of the 15 desks."

Even though it shouldn't take much time to simply search the textbooks for the names.

"Try thinking a little on your own, Chinou-chan."

"Even if you say that, I'm not asking you to do everything. Hahaah! But I got it. In short, we only need to make an anagram including those people's names."

"How many hundreds of billions of trillions of patterns are you intending to go through… But, focusing on each person's name is correct."

"Their names, is it? Mm. This guy with a weird name stands out. This 'Araragi' something guy."

"That's me. It's Koyomi-san. It stands out because it's a person you know standing right beside you."

"Aah, this time I got it. All of their names are *toward the front*."

Chinou-chan said.

As I thought, this girl seemed pretty sharp.

I bet she's the type to hide her talents.

… Maybe that makes it easier to survive in Shikoku. If so, I can't blatantly criticize her. Anyhow, the 15 names' initials were all in the *A* row, the *KA* row or the *SA* row.[21] It was clear. There was not one name from the *TA* row onward—to be more precise, from 'SU' onward.

Toward the front.

In other words, that means their attendance numbers were *toward the front*.

Naoetsu High School's attendance ordering is gender-mixed and, of course, Class 1-3 wasn't an exception to that rule. Verifying the obvious, the 15 names written on the blackboard were straight up the first 15 numbers, from 1 to 15, in the attendance order.

Naturally, I didn't have the attendance order of my first-year class memorized. I had to check not only those 15, but all students' names and list them up to recognize it—Chinou-chan only aided with 7 of them. At this point, I didn't even care anymore.

---

[21] The Japanese syllabary is a table in which rows are composed of characters beginning with the same consonant sound and the columns are the vowel sound. The first row is the あ (*A*) row, containing あいうえお (*A I U E O*). The second row is the か (*KA*) row, containing かきくけこ (*KA KI KU KE KO*). And so on, in this order of rows: *A*, *KA*, *SA*, *TA*, *NA*, *HA*, *MA*, *YA*, *WA* and *N*.

"So, you understand what we have to do now, right?"

"Yes. In addition to the 15 hiragana, we'll arrange the names of everyone up to the attendance number 15, I see."

"Stop clinging to your own theory."

Of course we're going to arrange them following the attendance order.

I'm going to rewrite the names, so give me a hand.

"Understood. I'll check the motion of the blackboard eraser and cleaner, so Koyomi-san, please take care of the rest."

"The rest is the main part, isn't it? Don't say it like I have less to do than you, don't say it like you're getting ready for something big."

Even if the eraser and cleaner didn't move, nothing much really changed.

Giving up on Chinou-chan, I wrote the result of sorting the students out.

`[BA]` — Ashine Keiri
`[YO]` — Arikure Biwa
`[SA]` — Ukitobi Kyuusu
`[HI]` — Kikigoe Enji
`[MI]` — Kube Aizu
`[NU]` — Koudou Sousho
`[WA]` — Shinaniwa Ayazute
`[NU]` — Shuzawa Juudo
`[U]` — Araragi Koyomi
`[O]` — Igami Michisada
`[KU]` — Oikura Sodachi
`[RA]` — Kijikiri Hoka
`[DA]` — Gekizaka Nageki
`[O]` — Kouma Okitada
`[NA]` — Shuui Tsuuma

"`[BA][U][YO][O][SA][KU][HI][RA][MI][DA][NU][O][WA][NA][NU]...`"

Bauyoosakuhiramidanuowananu.

Bauyoosakuhiramidanuowananu?

Huh? It's not a sentence.

Weird. I thought there was no doubt this anagram would be correct, though—did I miss the point?

Was the attendance thing just a coincidence? That would be bad. Just how much overbearing abuse and slander would the magical girl, whose fetish is to add retorts to retorts, throw at me? I can't even imagine.

I instantly prepared to defend myself, but the magical girl in question,

"I see! So that's what it was! Fully understood! The answer was in front of us the whole time!"

She was exclaiming eureka.

"Now that makes the password clear, Koyomi-san. It's our win!"

"…?"

I thought she might be pretending to understand when she didn't, but that didn't seem to be the case—then what did she mean?

In what way did she decipher this sentence, which made as little sense as before we switched up the order?

"No, there was nothing to decipher. This is straight up the password of a game."

"? No no, Chinou-chan, the code is a 4-digit number, right? Not 15 hiragana."

"Not that."

Chinou-chan took a magical-girl-like pose.

"This is the password of a video game from long ago."

007

Long ago, although saying it like that was a bit of an exaggeration, that was a mechanic from the dawn of video games, so long ago that even I didn't know it from experience. According to what the retro games lover Sengoku told me, in the days where there wasn't enough space to save all the data on the game's cartridge (this word is also pretty old), you continued the game by entering a password composed of hiragana.

In most cases, that password was a meaningless lineup of syllables created randomly. Apparently, the kids in that era were earnestly trying to remember that lineup. Since you can't continue anymore if you get even one letter wrong, they must have done it really seriously.

It must have been an unimaginable hardship compared to these days, when auto-save functions, automatic password storage or even fingerprint identification are the norm. I can imagine it must have been a fun kind of hardship in its own way.

In a way, having a mechanic that forces you to input a password became another facet of the game. Also, the inevitability of this structure meant that, as long as you knew the password, you could skip some points and start midway through. Due to all that, those passwords were closer to

hidden commands, which gave birth to rumors about *secret codes just before the endgame*.

Rumors.

Just like the tale of an aberration.

"'BAUYOOSAKUHIRAMIDANUOWANANU' is the password of an ancient RPG game, which had a magical girl as the main character. With it, you should be able to load a level 999 character right before the bonus stage. Among the maniacs, it's known as a legendary password transmitted from the underworld."

Chinou-chan explained haughtily, but since she said "RPG game", I bet she didn't have much experience with video games—she didn't feel like a maniac.

So maybe she only knew it because it was a game focused on magical girls. She said a great number of games were being held in Shikoku, so this might be one of them. From the impression I got, judging by the fact that the result of the anagram was *that legendary password*, it's possible that the organization she belongs to was involved in its creation.

"I see… A game's password huh. A hidden command…"

Still, that said, I couldn't satisfyingly claim to have found the solution.

Purposely making the answer deductible through the anagram a meaningless lineup of letters is already ill-natured, but well, I don't mind thinking they got us. The trick of making the answer to a code another code is a common means to up the difficulty. And even though it was unsolvable for me, since I didn't know of the game in question, being an outsider who just barged in, I couldn't help but admit that was the right answer.

But what does that do for us?

In the end, we still don't know the essential 4-digit password we need to escape the room, right?

Should we input 999, the level of that datasave? No, that would only be 3 digits—then, preserving the magical girl style, should we input the magic points?

"Impossible. The magic points hit the maximum of 999 too. What a dullard, Koyomi-san. Both your thought process and instinct."

"… (holding in my anger)."

"Huh? Why are you saying '(holding in my anger)' aloud?"

"So that you can hear it. Anyway, so it's not the magic points. Then what kind of points is it?"

"The point is the protagonist: the magical girl's name. This game had a system where the player could choose her name at will."

"Um. Well, that's the case in most games, even nowadays though—hmm?"

No.

If you start midway through inputting a password, that's not true anymore—in the same way that the level and magic points were, the main character's name was fixed to the password.

"The name of the magical girl from the *legendary password* is *Pai*."

"Pai."

As if having understood it thanks to my reciting, Chinou-chan grinned.

"That's why, I told you from the start, didn't I? According to my inspiration, the answer was `[OPPAI]`."

008

The text was cut in a weird place, so it might have seemed like that was the right answer, but of course, thinking of "oppai" when "pai" is evoked is the thought process of a young teen. Normally, when talking about "pai", it's natural to assume we're talking about "π", in other words, pi.

Pi.

3.14.

"Eh? But it still doesn't make a 4-digit code, you know? Then it's not enough for the code. Wouldn't inputting the size of my bust have better chances of success…"

"So the size of your bust goes into 4 digits?"

"I'm said to be a girl with a large heart, after all."

"In your case, what's large is your sins. They might reach into 4 digits."

"How cruel, saying something of the sort to me, loved as the moodmaker in my hometown. My big heart will forgive you, but I wonder what the others will say…"

"I think they're applauding."

Without a doubt.

They must be doing the wave in Shikoku.

"If my size alone isn't enough, then we just need to add Koyomi-san's. Lend me your chest."

"I don't have such a prominent chest either. Also 'Lend me your chest,' I'm not a yokozuna, you know… And not even yokozunas' chests reach 4 digits.[22] You know, pi doesn't really end at 3.14. So, like… 3.141592, it continues forever, it's a so-called irrational number."

"How detailed. Then isn't there an error in approximation?"

"Yeah, and being a mathematician means getting desperate over that error. So if you want a 4-digit number, you just have to input 3.141."

Having taken back the initiative, I grabbed the chalk.

I didn't know about that old game's password or whatever, but my knowledge helping us escape from here, to be honest, was a difficult fact to accept.

It's said that number won't be of any use when you get out in society, but to think it would become useful in this situation.

That reminds me, Euler was the one to first call pi "π".[23] While remembering what an ancient member of this 1-3 classroom told me, I wrote the 4 numbers inside the already-drawn 4 blocks contained inside the key.

"`[3][1][4][1]`…"

I'm really glad.

We had some turns and twists, but looking back on it, that was a disappointingly easy game. The school and the town were saved thanks to that, and I can bid farewell to Chinou-ch…

---

[22] The highest rank a sumo wrestler can attain.

[23] While Euler popularized it, the earliest known usage of the Greek letter π alone to represent the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter was by William Jones in 1706.

009

"Multi-Stick *Living Dead*!"

Along with that roar, I was revived after being hit with a mysterious stick. Having died and come back to life again and again during that hellish spring break, I was pretty disconcerted, but this was my first ever resuscitation without the use of my vampire blood, or putting it another way, not based on my immortal body.

No wait, it's the second time.

"Oh! You were able to safely come back to life thanks to me, Koyomi-san! How marvelous, how wonderful, that you were able to be entrusted with my favor! Now, I shall allow you to send generous thanks and a thunder of applause in my direction for resuscitating you, someone I've just met for the first time, without any personal gain in mind!"

… That line, which made me want to end it all, was likewise articulated for a second time.

Eh? Then did I die again?

Even though I properly inputted the password?

I instinctively looked at the blackboard, the 4 blocks I should have filled with pi's digits had turned back to being blank. In other words, `[3][1][4][1]` wasn't the right answer.

"You once again got ahead of yourself and got it wrong, Koyomi-san."

I was criticized with plenty of maliciousness.

That girl's impressive for throwing such heartless words at someone who just came back to life.

"That's how it ends up when you don't give me thanks. I'm sorry, but that makes me laugh. Hahahaha."

"… We don't necessarily need to hit the time limit for me to punch you, you know? Representing not just this town, but the whole of humanity."

"Sounds nice, aren't you more clever than I am? Big respects. So when you're going to gentlemanly retort 'How outrageous it would be to punch a girl,' I should hit back with a progressive remark like 'Then is it fine to punch men?' is that it?"

"No. I'll simply punch you."

It was a shame, but with the time limit drawing near, I didn't have the leeway to banter with her to lighten the mood… I had once again wandered into a dead end.

Looking back at "Bauyoosakuhiramidanuowananu" once more, it didn't even look like a game's password anymore.

Having something you're confident in turn out to be wrong deals a surprising amount of mental damage. Furthermore, two times in a row.

It makes you wonder if you got the fundamentals all wrong.

Compared to this, randomly writing down `[0][0][0][0]` and getting it wrong made it easier to get back up.

Though I properly died that time too… I don't know about magic or rules or whatever, but dying unconditionally is absurd.

With that, I guess I had to feel glad that I was with Chinou-chan who could unconditionally revive me. I even came to think that continually inputting the ten thousand options while using the Multi-Stick *Living Dead* for as long as was permitted was the most efficient way.

Ten thousand times, huh.

Even in that hellish spring break, I didn't die that many times—as I was thinking that,

"Hey, Chinou-chan…"

I turned back.

She was in the midst of removing her clothes—with the Multi-Stick *Living Dead* laid on the table, she was quickly removing the fluffy and easily noticeable magical girl *Giant Impact*'s costume entirely, even the boots.

What!? Why was she suddenly undressing!?

Hey, that costume was the reason why that magical girl was a magical girl, it's not something you should take off. No, even setting that aside, I couldn't make any sense of her act of undressing!?

Girls taking their clothes off without a word are mega scary!

Don't tell me this young teen was still so fixated on "π" standing for "oppai" that she was trying to expose her breasts!? Or maybe was she trying to keep her promise of showing me her panties, now that the time-up was close!?

If it's the former, she would be a real idiot, and if it's the latter, she was too quick to give up!

However.

Setting aside whether she was a real idiot or not, Chinou-chan didn't try to remove the extremely plain undergarments she was wearing below the costume, and she didn't show any intent of fulfilling that promise in her lifetime. In other words, she had a different goal for doing that.

That wasn't the idea of a sane person.

But definitely the idea of a magical girl.

In the end, whether she removes the costume or not, the magical girl *Giant Impact* was the magical girl *Giant Impact*.

Glancing back at the confused me, she promptly and silently picked up the chalk, *clack*, *clack*, *clack*, *clack*, she filled in the 4 blocks.

```
[3][1][0][1]
```

Setting aside where those numbers came from, them being inscribed so dramatically in this climax made me think that had to be the right answer for sure this time, but—

"I'm leaving the rest to you, Koyomi-san. With dexterity, okay?"

And.

Saying that in the same insolent and annoying tone as before, the Chinou-chan in her underwear, with the chalk still in her hand, collapsed on the classroom floor.

As if her life abruptly disappeared.

As if she *simply died*, according to the rules.

"Oioioioioioi! What was that!? Even up to this very moment, there hasn't been a single part of Chinou-chan's behavior I've been able to understand! What kind of rules are your actions based on?!"

Don't tell me she couldn't bear the urgent state of being enclosed here and chose death on her own. I strongly believed that couldn't be the case for Chinou-chan. I bewilderedly rushed over to Chinou-chan's side—at that moment.

At that moment, without any preamble—with a *clack*.

Like an automatic door, the door of the room opened.

010

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

The day stretched over quite a lot while we were trapped in there. But now that I could check the answer, it was a bit of a letdown, one without anything special. It's not like mistaking withered silver grass for the apparition of a ghost, but when you learn the answer, it's a damper akin to what comes out of ghost stories or urban legends.

Well, whatever I say, I'll sound like a sore loser since I wasn't able to figure it out, so let's get on with the solving without any unnecessary preface. That said, the number I wrote in, `[3][1][4][1]`, was good enough reasoning.

Gathering the 15 hiragana from the classroom, arranging them in attendance order and deducting it was the password of an old game—then, associating the main character's name "Pai" with "π" and connecting it to pi, up to there was correct.

However, I can't give 80 points to `[3][1][4][1]`. It doesn't deserve to fail, but 50 points is the most I could give it.

Because.

Pi was, ultimately, "3.141592" and not "3141592".

In my reasoning—I ignored the decimal point's existence.

In other words, the code I inputted wasn't "3.141" but "3141"—three thousand one hundred and forty-one.

About 1000 times bigger.

You can't possibly call that an error in approximation.

It'd be even more irrational than irrational numbers.

What was that about "being a mathematician"? I'm so embarrassed of my claim.

But what makes me even more embarrassed is that I let Chinou-chan patch up my input error.

By patching up, I'm not talking about the revival magic she used after it. Naturally, that was part of it, but I'm more talking about the development which came next.

The abrupt undressing.

And the `[3][1][0][1]` which came after.

It wasn't even pi, a lineup of numbers—at least for me, who's somewhat confident with numbers, the number 3101 doesn't ring any bell. But once you realize it, the intent behind it was evident.

Chinou-chan took into account the decimal point.

3.14's "."… Point… *Ten.*

It was "10 (ten)".[24]

In other words, she included the 10 (ten) between pi's basic form, 3.14's "3" and "14". With that, the "π" from the 15 hiragana finally made sense.

`[3][1][0][1][4]`.

In short, the code to escape the 1-3 classroom this time was 31014. However there were only 4 blocks to write numbers in.

Then do you only need to input `[3][1][0][1]`? Still, if 3141 isn't pi then 3.1 isn't quite it either. Even if it works mathematically, no one would think of pi when confronted with "3.1". Thinking of it that way, that deduction renders you hesitant to write it.

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[24] In Japanese, the decimal point is called 点 (*ten*), which Koyomi realizes is pronounced the same as the number 10 in English.

But Chinou-chan did it. Without any wavering.

And she died.

That wasn't akin to when the same thing happened to me, because of my error driven by inertia—it was calculated.

Dying was included in the calculation.

If the play-on-words interpretation of the decimal point as 10 (ten) was allowed, then there existed simpler puns in the world of numbers, ever since ancient times.

That is *death (4)*.[25]

That's the most famous wordplay, even.

`[3][1][0][1]`—and `[4]`.

By failing the input and dying, the code was completed. That mechanism goes over being ill-natured and lands in the vicious territory.

A 4-digit password.

The rule of 4.

The rule of death—huh.

If that's commonplace in Shikoku, then Chinou-chan and I will stay incompatible for the rest of our lives.

The sane people die first.

If that's the Shikoku, in which she lives—no.

Then, if you asked me whether she, who died, was sane, then I'd have to answer no—you can't call her sane, not just in Shikoku but in this town either.

She wasn't sane.

But I can't simply call her a mean girl.

If you look closely at the two times where I lost my life due to getting the answer wrong, from a bystander's viewpoint, it must have looked like reaching the right answer in itself was possible. For the girl whose specialty was to confront a retort with another retort, she must have been highly capable in that area.

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[25] The word 死 (*shi*, "death") is pronounced like 四 (*shi*, "4"), leading to the number 4 being considered unlucky in Japan, much like 13 in the West.

But.

Despite being skillful at sabotaging, being clever, and doing her best to not be cooperative for all the tasks, when it came to inputting the code—not the code where you *die if you get it wrong* but the code where you *die for sure*—that talkative girl moved without a single word.

Had she let me do it, even if I died, she could have revived me with her magic. Even though dying two or three times didn't make much of a difference.

… It wasn't the same.

She might have thought that way.

Thinking about it, both my first and second death came from my hastiness—from the hastiness of a lowly commoner. The girl who made me work so much, when it came to writing the code with a risk of death, she didn't try to make me do it even once.

Maybe she thought that it was natural for her to do it, since she realized the solution—maybe she just didn't want a lowly commoner to steal her spotlight. I can't imagine what passed through her head.

Although I shouldn't be trying to imagine her rules.

At this point, the theory of her organization dispatching her here to get rid of her wasn't completely outside the realm of possibility.

Escaping from a locked room where the solution for escaping was to die isn't a feat you can accomplish alone. It's like ordering her to go die. In the first place, even with the Multi-Stick *Living Dead*, if the person in question dies, that intrinsic magic is no longer of any use—but, perhaps that was the luck of the magical girl *Giant Impact*.

A former vampire who possessed a special sight witnessed her flying.

Moreover, through a strange coincidence, that witness was an ancient member of Class 1-3, where the mission took place.

Wasn't that one of those one-in-a-trillion draws? Furthermore, she threw that probability to the wind.

Originally, I should have inputted the `[3][1][0][1]` and 4'd[26] as a result. If the magical girl *Giant Impact* then revived me, we would have gone full circle—talk about pi.

But with no regards for that, she took the role of writing it down.

Ignoring the loss and gain, an action completely going against reason.

Forget about personal gain, it didn't make sense.

Irrational behavior outside the realm of comprehension.

That was, by all means, the behavior of a magical girl.

… However, I must also bring up that Chinou-chan's unexpected action at the very end wasn't the self-sacrifice of a devoted and noble mind.

Chinou-chan merely took up the role of inputting and dying for the mission; it's not like she didn't intend to come back to life after that. As per usual, I feel far from grateful, but rather, fiercely angry; it's not like she didn't prepare a means to work things out.

That's why, before Chinou-chan wrote down the code, she fluently took her costume off—and laid her tool to use the intrinsic magic, the Multi-Stick *Living Dead*, on the teacher's desk, where it was hard to miss.

The costume and the stick, coming together.

By putting it on, anyone can become a magical girl.

By swinging it, anyone can use magic.

If I remember correctly, that's what she said.

I'm leaving the rest to you—she said.

"…"

I didn't even have to decipher what to do.

That too was unconditional and certain.

It looks like the punch line was that I wouldn't have to punch Chinou-chan's cheek, but her heart. Although there wasn't the slightest chance I would feel relieved from that.

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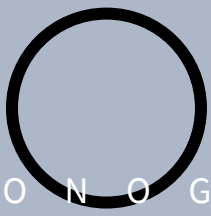
[26] Meaning "died". Here, the number 4 is written with furigana indicating 死 ("death") to make the pun.



MAZEMONOGATARI

Nomi Rule — Chapter Rule

Used the secret code from an old RPG: Sway Translations
Drew the hiragana under the desks: Bluex & Noyaxus
Entered the password and died: Maxdefolsch

MAZEMONOGATARI

Mayumi Red Eye

Chapter Eye

NISIOISIN

Doujima Mayumi

Bishounen Series

Art: Kinako

001

Doujima Mayumi was a member of the Pretty Boy Detective Club. Just from the name "Pretty Boy Detective Club", it sounded like a rather suspicious and puzzling organization, but I couldn't help but admit that learning that such an organization existed in this world was very much a new kind of surprise for me, as a male high school student. Well, each land had its own strange features, after all. If my town could even be visited by a vampire, then it perhaps wasn't any different to be visited by a pretty boy, as well.

Be that as it may, the Pretty Boy Detective Club was a group that was formed within a middle school, and if I were to look for a similar concept from my own surroundings, then, embarrassing as it was, I could only think of the unit of justice formed by my two sisters, Araragi Karen and Araragi Tsukihi, known as the Fire Sisters, and that made it easier for me to imagine such an unfamiliar situation. However, while the Fire Sisters in their own way were a pretty unfamiliar bunch to begin with (and the fact that I could call my own sisters unfamiliar was something I should probably take seriously, but I'll put that problem aside for now), there appeared to be one

major difference between them that made them fundamentally incompatible.

Because, if the aim of the Fire Sisters was righteousness.

Then the aim of each and every member of the Pretty Boy Detective Club was beauty.

Righteousness was not always beautiful, and beauty wasn't necessarily always righteous—and, for a minion of darkness like me, I couldn't even begin to imagine where to start distinguishing between the two.

However, if it was a matter of distinguishing them, then, even among the Pretty Boy Detective Club, the member named Doujima Mayumi seemed particularly suited to that task.

Because she was someone who happened to have exceptional eyesight in their possession.

Mayumi the Seer.

It seemed she was known by that nickname among the members of the club.

As someone who had the experience of being a vampire, if only for the brief period of time that is spring break, I still boasted an eyesight that was capable of, for example, seeing a lost girl, or witnessing a magical girl flying in the sky—but apparently, the eyesight of Mayumi the Seer was far beyond just that scope.

Because she had even been able to see a star that didn't exist, it was almost awe-inspiring—such a thing had to be a treasured episode that someone like Senjougahara, who loved astronomy, would envy.

Though I didn't dig any further, it seemed that she'd entered the Pretty Boy Detective Club after having gotten entangled with the discovery of that dark star—although, contrary to such a romantic-sounding anecdote, and contrary to the showy image of the words "pretty boys", Doujima Mayumi's personality was considerably warped.

Rather than pessimistic, she was almost spiteful.

Since I myself also had a rather gloomy character, I couldn't speak carelessly, but her gloominess was on the level of a dark star—for example,

when I brought up the subject of the Summer Triangle that Senjougahara had taught me about, she had this to say.

"Orihime and Hikoboshi and the constellation Cygnus are together called the Summer Triangle, but, on the day of Tanabata, the ones that form a bridge over the Milky Way are not swans, but herons… That's why I can't trust swans at all. But if you think about it, it's pretty ironic to say that I trust herons more…"[27]

It's amazing that you can think of something so negative while looking at such a majestic triangle, was what I'd thought, unable to hide my shock, even as someone who was more a fan of mathematics than astronomy. But, despite the exceedingly negative attitude this pretty boy had, when it came to trying to escape from the trouble she encountered in our town, I want to make it clear that she never gave up at any point.

"There's no way I would do that. Normally, I'm the kind of person that gives up immediately—but, if it happened to be our leader, that leader would definitely say something like this."

Leader.

That surely meant the leader of the Pretty Boy Detective Club.

"'Giving up on your dreams can sometimes be beautiful—but giving up on reality is never beautiful.'"

It was definitely something that, not only the Fire Sisters, but also I, their older brother, would never say in our entire lives, but it was an exceedingly beautiful saying. It was flowery prose that was enough to make even that negative girl think more positively—I could even say that, although I was a prisoner to derivatives and not flowery prose,[28] it still resounded plenty in my heart.

Anyway, in this case, Doujima Mayumi, who looked up to such a leader, had unfortunately encountered in our town neither swans nor

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[27] 鷺 (*sagi*, "heron") sounds the same as 詐欺 (*sagi*, "fraud").

[28] Koyomi compares 微分 (*bibun*, "derivative") and 美文 (*bibun*, "flowery prose").

magpies—although, because it was the Milky Way we were talking about, either of those would have been more reasonable.

What Mayumi the Seer witnessed was—a fish.

In particular, a fish that could be described as a symbol of brutality.

A piranha.

002

With Tanabata coming up, I was steadily doing some mountain climbing, aiming for the Kita-Shirahebi Shrine—however, my goal wasn't a simple shrine visit. That shrine had already been destroyed, and no god resided there anymore. It was totally empty in terms of a shrine and in terms of a plot of land, and the main shrine had half-collapsed, with only the *torii* remaining standing.

It had been so empty that there had been a risk of it becoming a source for trouble, so this Hawaiian-shirt-wearing old man named Oshino Meme who had visited this town had even gone out of his way to place a "seal" here. That was the kind of place it was, and even I had played a part in the placing of that seal, but in this particular case, I wasn't climbing the mountain for any aberration-related reason.

In short, it was for a preliminary inspection.

After the hellish spring break I experienced alongside the near-death vampire and after the nightmarish Golden Week I'd experienced alongside a classmate named Hanekawa Tsubasa, the girl that I had met by some strange twist of fate—the girl named Senjougahara Hitagi—had her birthday on July 7th, or, in other words, Tanabata. So it was to make the

preliminary arrangements to celebrate that birthday that I decided to go mountain climbing on this very day.

Since she was someone who loved the stars, and the day was none other than Tanabata, I'd figured, why don't we all go stargazing together?

Celebrating the birthday of a girl born on July 7th by going stargazing was such a special idea, unparalleled in its originality, that I trembled at my extremely unique creativity.

In the first place, trying to celebrate the birthday of a classmate was behavior that would be completely unheard-of for the me before spring break, who would say stuff like "I don't need friends, they'd lower my intensity as a human"… But anyway, this was about the present me.

Be that as it may, even if we wanted to go stargazing, July 7th fell on a weekday this year, so we didn't have the luxury to go as far as visiting an observatory—we needed to settle on a closer location.

At first, I'd thought it would be fine to do it on the roof of our school, but unfortunately, Naoetsu High's rooftop was not free to access.

And we wouldn't dare try to sneak up there.

And so, because it was the tallest point in our town, and because it was a place that people rarely went despite its wide range of vision, I decided to look into the Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, a good, little-known observation site.

After all, Oshino had called the Kita-Shirahebi Shrine an "air spot", so it didn't feel wrong at all to interpret that as a spot to view the skies.

However, as I laboriously climbed this mountain trail, I felt that this location hunting wouldn't bring about any favorable results—first of all, I had calmly begun to think that there was no girl in this world that would want to celebrate their birthday at a dilapidated shrine, but even before that, as if I were being cursed by my past self, the most important thing—the weather—was not looking too good.

The clouds had started to look menacing.

It hadn't been that way when I'd left my house, but once I'd arrived at the foot of the mountain and started climbing uphill, the sky had started to become cloudier and cloudier.

Far from the Summer Triangle, I couldn't even see the moon!

It was a dark night.

And it wasn't just cloudy—it actually seemed like it would start to rain. At this rate, if rain started to fall when I was on a mountain with no umbrella, it would just be a dreadful state of affairs.

If this really was a curse from my past self, then my past self must have really been carrying a profound darkness within him.

Well, considering I'd actually turned into a vampire and become a minion of darkness for those two weeks, perhaps that was actually the case, but I wanted him to at least be considerate on the day of Tanabata—but, fortunately enough, that was just needless anxiety.

Well, no, it wasn't needless in that there was suddenly a gap of sunny weather (even though it was night) that peeked through, but needless in that, even if this awful weather was indeed a curse, it wasn't a curse from my past self—at the summit, on the steps of the half-collapsed shrine.

There sat a pretty boy looking gloomy enough to be almost depressed, his head in his hands.

"…"

He looked like a boy in his second year of middle school.

However, there was so little of the liveliness or cheerfulness befitting such an age that I could even say I felt none at all—or rather, it felt like only the air around him had completely stagnated.

It was a gloom dreadful enough to make me think I'd met yet another aberration on the verge of death, just like during spring break. He seemed so much like a black hole that absorbed all light, that I was sure he even had a negative lux value.

I couldn't help but come to the conclusion that the reason for these dark clouds hanging above us was due to this kid—just what exactly was this pretty boy that contained so much grief?

I felt compelled to say that the way he hid his beauty seemed like some sort of *youkai* in itself, but, as a former vampire, and as someone who was not a specialist but an amateur who had come across various aberration

stories—as someone with that level of experience, I could say for certain that he was definitely human.

Well, there had even been a half-vampire that wore a white uniform, this wasn't something that I could make a sweeping statement about, but—which school was that uniform from?

The blazer didn't seem like anything I'd seen around here…

"Ah… Waah…"

The pretty boy, not having noticed me after I stopped underneath the *torii*, began to shake his head in his hands.

"Oh no oh no oh no oh no… What do I do what do I do what do I do… I don't know I don't know I don't know… Why do I have these eyes why do I have these eyes why do I have these eyes…"

"…"

I'd faced off against a number of people with their own troubles, the near-death vampire being the number one example, but this could be the first time I saw someone being so blatantly troubled like this… It was like he was making his surroundings even gloomier, with no sign of stopping.

By now, even the sky had been completely covered in clouds without a crack, with not a star in sight.

Far from making this an advance look, at this rate, I wouldn't even be able to see an inch ahead of me.

"Leader, you said it would absolutely be alright… You're really all talk, aren't you… Why did I fall for this…"

He was muttering stuff like that.

Leader?

Was he talking about heartbreak?[29]

It was true that, if I just left him like this, he could even be at risk of committing *seppuku*—at any rate, it was no longer the atmosphere of doing a test run for a classmate's birthday celebration.

I couldn't just ignore someone so blatantly troubled.

---

[29] Koyomi mistakes 団長 (*danchou*, "leader") for 断腸 (*danchou*, "heartbreak").

Also, it seems that recently, there have been rumors out in the world (although they were mainly rumors spread by my friend Hachikuji) that I was being called, not a "storyteller that helped girls in trouble", but a "storyteller that helped *only* girls in trouble".

It was an impressive way to circulate rumors.

It almost made me want to ask her if she was playing the stock market.

My attitude was that gender didn't matter when it came to people in trouble, and I'd learned that from my second mother, Hanekawa—it was simply a coincidence that, up until now, no worried boy had ever appeared before me. It was quite the coincidence for a series that spanned over twenty volumes, but it certainly was not the case that I was just ignoring boys.

As evidence, wasn't there a troubled middle school boy right in front of me at this very moment? It might be a bit imprudent of me to say it like this, but in order to prove that I wasn't a storyteller that only offered my help to girls, I wasn't going to leave this poor, perplexed boy on his own.

Well, even if not for that, if I just left this boy emanating darkness as he was, then it felt like it would end up never being possible to go stargazing at this shrine, so I had my own circumstances…

"Now then…"

The question was, how was I going to call out to him?

I didn't exactly have a bright disposition myself, so if I multiplied that darkness of his with my own darkness, then I had no idea how things would end up turning out.

In that case, I had no choice but to force myself into constructing a bright personality. It wouldn't do if I made a worried middle school boy overly cautious about me, either. I needed to act like a cool older brother that he could speak to candidly. After all, I even had two little sisters that were in middle school—compared to those two, even a middle school boy would seem cute.

"Yo! Why are you feeling so down, kid?"

"Kyaah!"

When I said that energetic line that I thought I would never say in my entire life and abruptly embraced him from behind, that "kid" let out a

very girlish scream—the tone of voice was so girlish that I figured that maybe his voice hadn't changed yet.

"Wh-Who!? What!?"

The panic of suddenly being hugged from behind was able to temporarily drown out the darkness that surrounded him—my strategy of sneaking up on him and surprising him was a success.

First impressions were important.

With this, I had surely influenced his impression of me into being a familiar, brotherly character that he could open up to even if it was our first meeting.

At the same time, I felt a certain delight in being able to say, "Hachikuji, I'm not just hugging you because you're a girl—I'll hug anyone indiscriminately, even middle school boys, because I'm just someone that loves hugging people."

Together with that feeling of delight, I took that boy that was still in a state of confusion and hugged him a second time, this time from the front.

"Hey. I'm Araragi Koyomi, a high school third-year," I said, whispering my self-introduction into his ear.

"The, the criminal revealed his own name… Does that mean he's not planning on letting me live…?"

"A criminal? What are you talking about? I'm your savior."

Was it a generation gap? Or maybe regional differences? Either way, the incomprehensible things that the boy said made me surprised.

And when he looked at me, it was as if he suddenly realized something.

"Ah, that's right, the way I, er, the way *I* look right now…"[30] he muttered.

It made even less sense.

I came to the conclusion that it meant that his worries actually ran that deep, so I continued.

"If there's something that's bothering you, then let me help!"

---

[30] In this sentence, Mayumi switches from the feminine first-person pronoun 私 (*watashi*) to the masculine 俺 (*ore*) in order not to blow her cover.

As I said that, I placed an encouraging hand around his shoulders. And—were middle schoolers really like this?—his shoulders were awfully slender, like the shoulders of a girl.

003

The middle school boy's name was Doujima Mayumi-kun.

My first name, Koyomi, was also one that could easily be mistaken for a girl's name, and he surely experienced the same thing many times, so there was no way I didn't feel a strong sense of sympathy for him.

He was a second-year in the middle school section of Yubiwa Academy.

Yubiwa Academy.

Unfortunately, it was a school I hadn't heard of.

As I expected, he'd come a long way from a different town to visit this town.

If so, then I assumed that he came because he was a fan of shrines or maybe a fan of abandoned buildings, but Mayumi-kun was actually neither—the reason he came to visit the Kita-Shirahebi Shrine was, like me, to look at the stars.

"It was a direct order from Leader, you see… Leader said that, when it comes to stargazing, then that's Doujima Mayumi-kun's specialty, so go and take a look. Whenever that leader starts talking, there's just no way to change that person's mind… Um, aren't you a little close?"

"Huh? Am I?"

It was true that, on the steps to the shrine, Doujima-kun and I were sitting about five centimeters apart, but since we were both guys, was there really a need to worry about how close we were?

Perhaps he was at a difficult age.

Well, he did seem like a rather delicate pretty boy.

However, from my experience, if you already had a fear of strangers in middle school, then it would be hard on you in the future—I didn't want to have this boy live a life that would make him sympathetic to my own sad high school life, so instead I got even closer, stuck right up onto him, put my arm around his shoulders again, and said, "Hey, now, there's no need to be shy."

"H-Hiii!"

"Don't worry, Mayumi-kun. People often say that I have an interest in young girls, but I have no interest in middle school boys."

"Th, they say you have an interest in young girls…!?"

So it's not just Sakiguchi-senpai, she murmured in shock.[31]

"Then, I absolutely can't reveal my identity here…"

"Your identity? What do you mean by that, Mayumi-kun?"

"N-No. It's nothing. Yes, feel free to leave your arm around my shoulders like that. You can do it as much as you like."

"Alright. I'm really glad, since it feels like I've gotten a little brother. If you were one of my little sisters, I'd probably just knock you out for no reason."

"…"

I wasn't sure why Mayumi-kun was trembling so much, but anyway, considering he'd come all this way to this empty town for some stargazing, I could see why he'd get so depressed at this bad weather.

Or so I'd thought, but that wasn't necessarily it—in the first place, he'd only come on orders from "Leader", which meant that Mayumi-kun himself didn't necessarily enjoy stargazing.

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[31] Sakiguchi Nagahiro, another member of the Pretty Boy Detective Club, is teasingly called a lolicon by his fellow club members because the fiancée chosen by his parents is still in first grade.

In that case, I assumed that "Leader" had to be the president of the Astronomy Club or something, but it turned out that even this was off the mark.

"I'm a member of the Pretty Boy Detective Club. And I came to this mountain as part of my detective work—I've managed to fulfill my stargazing duties, but I won't be able to return like this."

"?"

Won't be able to return? What did that mean?

No, even before that—he'd fulfilled his duties?

In this weather? How? Did he mean that he'd finished his observation before it turned cloudy? But no, if it was the time period before it turned cloudy, then it was only the moon that was just barely visible, and if that was all he needed to observe, then he could have done that without needing to climb this mountain.

Actually, the biggest point of uncertainty would be, what in the world was the "Pretty Boy Detective Club" that he mentioned so casually… So was something like that popular among middle schoolers these days?

Maybe I'd already lost that kind of childlike mindset.

A high school third-year, eighteen years old.

Even though I was still totally a kid, I also got the feeling that I'd matured a lot since my own middle school days—and meanwhile, Mayumi-kun's skin still looked pretty smooth.

"Rub rub."

"Kya, kyaah! What are you doing!?"

"Hm? Mayumi-kun, your cheeks just looked so soft that I wanted to try patting them… Did you have a problem with that?"

"No, no, of course not! After all, we're both guys!"

"Yeah, of course. C'mon, let's rub our cheeks together!"

"Ha, ha ha, ha ha."

In order to soothe the heart of the pretty boy that had emanated darkness on that scale, I'd manifested a Kanbaru-like sociability that was very out-of-character for me, so I was glad that Mayumi-kun showed me a smile as a result.

What, so my social disposition wasn't that bad, after all! So this was what it was like.

I've won, haven't I.

At life.

Well, putting aside the matter of the Pretty Boy Detective Club as being some sort of school club, I next asked about how Mayumi-kun was able to go stargazing with these clouds.

Did he have some sort of special tool he used, like a telescope that could observe stars even through clouds? It didn't seem like he would normally tell someone so easily, but perhaps thanks to my conversational skills, Mayumi-kun responded.

"I don't need any tools," he said. "If anything, I need a special tool in order to not observe them… Ah, shoot. I said it out loud."

"C'mon, don't be so standoffish! There are no secrets between us, alright? We're brothers who just happened to not be related, aren't we? If you don't keep talking, I'm gonna tickle you! Coochy-coochy-coo!"

"I'll talk I'll talk I'll talk! Ahahaha, stop it stop it stop it! I said I'll talk!"

Ah, it sure is fun for dudes to mess around with each other. This sort of relationship was hard to forge with someone of the opposite sex, I felt deeply in my heart, but then…

"Mayumi the Seer."

Those mysterious words that he uttered piqued my interest.

"That's what they call me—basically, my eyesight is extremely good."

"Extremely?"

"Yes. No matter how thick the clouds are, in the end they're just bundles of water, so I can see through them—so that's how I could observe the star that I needed to."

"Wow…"

It was pretty hard to believe just like that, but it wasn't something that was impossible—so that was his strong point as a member of his "Detective Club".

"So that's it. Then, can I lick your eyeballs a little?"

"Of course you can't!? Even if we're both guys, that's way too weird, right!?"

It seemed that I wouldn't be allowed.

However, if he possessed such outstanding eyesight, then it felt like it would be quite a hindrance in your everyday life. Was he really alright?

"Yes. That's why I normally wear glasses, to keep my eyesight in check."

In other words—a special tool.

Well, glasses were tools used to correct one's vision, so even if you used them to keep your vision in check, you could say that that was still a proper use for them.

"But I lost those glasses somewhere around this shrine… That's why I've been so troubled."

He lost them.

So basically, when he took them off in order to observe the stars, they went missing?

"Mm, I don't wear glasses so I can't say for sure, but in these cases, isn't it usually something like you unconsciously put them in your pocket or something?"

"Yes… I thought of that and checked myself, but they weren't in my jacket pocket or my slacks pockets…"

"You might not know just from looking by yourself. Here, stay still. I'll look for you!"

"Hyaah! Don't grope around in my pockets! I'm telling you, they're definitely not there! Definitely! Absolutely! I swear on my life!"

I looked with this eyesight of mine, so there's no doubt!

Said Mayumi-kun, stubbornly resisting.

He'd put up quite the struggle, as if his own chastity had been in danger.

He was quite bashful for a boy.

Although, thinking about it, everyone was like that during puberty—in that case, perhaps I didn't really need to worry about Mayumi-kun's future at this stage.

Then, instead of the future, the present was more worrying.

"Well, you can't help it if you lost them, so maybe you should give up and go back home? If you don't go back down the mountain soon, the trains will stop… And it looks like it's going to rain. I can stay behind and look for them for you. If you can just let me know your address, I'll mail them to you later."

"My, my address…" Though he should already have opened up to me by now, he said, "Yes, um, well. In the worst case, I have a spare set, so that won't be necessary," still openly wary about me for some reason. "However—I can't go back down. After meeting you, Araragi-san, it made me want to go back down even more, but even so, I just can't."

From the way he said it, it sounded like him meeting me turned into a form of encouragement for him, but what did he mean by he couldn't? Worried that my snuggling up to him wasn't enough, I decided to show off my powerful side to this young friend of mine and slipped my arm underneath Mayumi-kun's thighs with my other arm still on his shoulders, lifting him up and setting him down on my lap.

He was so light!

Were middle schoolers always this light?

"It's fine! Araragi-san, you're snuggling up to me plenty as it is!"

"Really? Well, alright… Then, why can't you go down?"

"For, for now, would you please let me get back down from your lap…"

"Now, now, no need to hold back, kid. Besides, you've already sat down! Feel free to stay just like that. Here! Now you have a seatbelt!"

"H-Hiiii!"

"Whoa, your waist sure is thin. It's not like I was expecting you to be muscular, but I can't feel any stomach muscles at all! It's like I'll be able to feel your ribs. Shouldn't you really be eating more?"

"Hiii, hiii!"

Mayumi-kun had been hesitant to speak, but perhaps due to my great capacity for tolerance or even my great capacity for embracing,[32] it was as if he decided that he needed to consult with me as soon as possible.

"It's because I can see it," he quickly said.

See it? See what?

"Swimming above the town—there's a giant piranha."

[32] Koyomi transforms 包容力 (*houyouryoku*, "tolerance") into 抱擁力 (*houyou ryoku*, "embracing ability").

004

A piranha.

A freshwater fish of the order Characiformes, of the family Serrasalmidae.

A carnivorous fish so famous that I probably didn't even need to describe it—but if he was able to see an animal like that, then of course, it made quite a lot of sense to not be able to descend the mountain.

No, it wasn't an animal.

Piranhas didn't soar through the sky, and even the largest ones were still smaller than fifty centimeters—the word giant shouldn't be a descriptor at all.

In that case, it was not an animal, but a monster.

No—perhaps, even an aberration.

"I can see a piranha about the size of a whale, floating in the air… Can't you see it, too, Araragi-san?"

When he asked, I could only respond that I couldn't—in the first place, I had climbed up this mountain from that very town itself. If there had been a piranha or something flying overhead, then all hell would have

broken loose in town right about now. It was a safe bet that this piranha wasn't just something that anyone and everyone could see.

That is, except for Mayumi-kun.

Except for the member of the Pretty Boy Detective Club, Mayumi the Seer.

"I see… You must have been pretty scared."

"Eh… So you believe me?"

"Naturally!"

It was so natural that there was no way I could say that it was just a trick of the light or that it was just his imagination—being able to see something that you shouldn't be able to see, or meeting something that shouldn't exist.

Stuff like that was just an everyday occurrence for me, and I was even aware of how sad one would feel if nobody believed you about it. So what I could do now was to take Mayumi-kun, trembling in my lap, and embrace him even more strongly—it kind of felt like his trembling actually increased dramatically, but of course, that had to just be my imagination.

However, a piranha…? Actual piranhas themselves were already pretty scary, but if they became aberrations, then honestly, I had no choice but to say that this was something far beyond my capacity.

A piranha monster?

In the worst case, they were even scarier than vampires.

Actually, a point of curiosity could be that, even though I had been a vampire in the past, my eyesight was still not enough to see that piranha—it was a piranha that only Mayumi-kun was able to see.

In that case, did that mean that there was a fierce carnivorous fish that resided in the innermost depths of his heart?

"Mayumi-kun. Do you think you can open your mouth for a bit? I want to check to see if your teeth have turned all jagged and sharp like a piranha's."

"Is, is there really a need to check something like that?"

"It's fine, just do it."

"Please don't try to just force things along. It's not fine, which is why I'm resisting! The shape of my teeth is something I can just check with my own tongue."

"I'm telling you, I think it'll be a good idea to check that tongue of yours, too, just to make sure. Just leave it to me!"

If the other person were a girl right now, then even if it were for the sake of humanitarian aid, I would feel extremely ashamed and hesitant when it came to peeking inside a girl's mouth, but considering Mayumi-kun was a boy, I had no problems with performing an oral check.

Hmph, Hachikuji had been thoughtlessly saying stuff like that, but wasn't I actually more suited to helping boys out instead? Perhaps I could actually unleash my full efforts like this. Though I was reluctant to say this, perhaps I hadn't been completely thorough when it came to the girls I'd faced up until now—and as I thought that, I turned Mayumi-kun around on top of my lap, placed my hand on his chin, and began to examine inside his mouth.

"Hmm. Let's see…"

I'd told him to leave it to me, but honestly, I hadn't exactly had many opportunities to check the teeth of another person, so it was hard to declare anything for certain. But, well, his teeth looked to be in perfect shape, and were very pretty. In that sense, you could say it was a set of teeth worthy of the Pretty Boy Detective Club.

But, for a middle school boy, his lips sure looked pretty soft… If anything, my eyes kept being attracted in that direction.

"Ah, no, my lips only look like that because they were done up… The other members put makeup on me… S-So, they won't taste good if you eat them, okay?"

"Hey, hey, I'm not going to eat your lips. I'm not a piranha. Hahaha, although it might be different if it were a girl's lips."

It was a questionable joke made between fellow guys that you would never tell to a member of the opposite sex, and I thought it would lighten the mood, but Mayumi-kun's response was a "Ha, ha ha ha," with a laughter that was as dry as a desert.

I felt so sorry for him.

He must have been really frightened by the piranha in the sky.

However, if I'd been the one to see something that unbelievable, even though I may not get depressed enough to emanate that much darkness, I might still be completely taken aback and choose to hide away in this dilapidated shrine for the rest of my life—but Mayumi-kun was different.

"It's alright now," he said.

As if attacking a weak point that opened up for just an instant, he jumped off of my lap—it seemed his eyesight really was good, as he didn't miss the chance when my embrace loosened just a bit to perform that oral check.

"I've been depressed for long enough. I've decided to go down the mountain now."

"Eh? Is it really alright?"

"Yes, especially because it feels like it's even more dangerous to stay here… I mean, after hearing what you had to say, Araragi-san, I feel more at ease about this."

Actually, a method existed from the beginning.

That was what Mayumi-kun said.

"Yes. It's pretty simple, actually. Basically, if I can't see the piranha, then I won't be afraid—so all I need to do is close my eyes when I go back down?"

"Close your eyes…"

No, no.

He was saying it as if it was a brilliant plan, but that was far from simple; it was a plan made out of sheer desperation. If that was something you could actually do, then you could've done that from the beginning, without getting all depressed—but I didn't even have the chance to stop him like that.

Because Mayumi-kun tripped on his first step.

It was way too obvious that that would happen.

It was the first time I'd seen something so obvious.

Perhaps he'd do better walking across a meadow, but walking down this rocky, desolate mountain path with his eyes closed was way too unreasonable—not to mention, after you tripped, you'd end up falling onto the rocky ground, too.

"Mayumi-kun, are you okay!?"

I rushed over to Mayumi-kun, who'd fallen forward, and picked him up. And then, I felt his body all over to check for broken bones or sprains.

"H-Hiii, um, wait, you're feeling me up a little too much…"

Being felt up, Mayumi-kun resisted violently.

That's good, it didn't seem like he was badly hurt.

What a relief.

Well, it seemed he himself had known that it would be dangerous, as he'd taken that first step very carefully. And he must have properly protected himself as he fell, as his smooth cheeks and soft lips were unharmed—although, he wasn't totally uninjured, there was a minor scrape on his knee.

Blood was spreading onto his slacks.

Hmm, it would probably be okay to just leave a scratch like this, but, well, the place we were in wasn't exactly a safety zone. It was an air spot for aberrations—it would be a problem if a middle school boy that came from afar got something akin to an aberration-like tetanus, so with a single motion, I rolled up the pant leg of Mayumi-kun's trousers.

"You're almost as skillful as a doctor, aren't you…"

"Well, I have some experience, after all."

"With medical treatment?"

"No, with flipping up skirts. Although it might be the first time I've rolled up someone's slacks…"

"Ha, ha ha, is that so. Um, you're rubbing my legs way too much… … I definitely can't let this guy meet Bare Legs-kun."

So apparently he had a friend named Bare Legs-kun.

Although, he must be a problematic friend if I wasn't supposed to meet him.[33]

As I thought that, I took a good look at the affected area, that is, Mayumi-kun's scraped knee—and when I got a good look, it turned out there was more blood than I thought.

Even Mayumi-kun was going "Uwaah…" in surprise.

Injuries like these were just a matter of course for middle-school-aged boys, but still, it was obvious that people would hate being wounded no matter what their gender was.

To encourage him, I said with an intentionally light tone of voice, "It's fine, it's fine. Something like this will get better if you just put some spit on it," and then I licked his bare knee.

I licked it directly. Slurp.

If the other person were a girl, then I would definitely have to be more tactful and go through the trouble of licking my finger and then using it to rub my saliva onto the affected area, but since it was a guy, it was a lot easier to not have to hold back like this.

He must have been extremely shocked from scraping his knee, as Mayumi-kun's face turned as white as a sheet. Feeling sorry for him, I pulled his slacks back down.

"I think it's going to be pretty hard to go down the mountain with your eyes closed," I said, reprimanding him.

It was quite literally, not watching where you're going. And, seeing as he wasn't a martial arts expert, there was no way he could pull off something like that.

"No… I'm sure I'll be able to do it this time. If I just be careful… It's just a single path down, anyway, and, I know! If I just use a walking stick…"

"…"

He wasn't going to give up.

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[33] Ashikaga Hyouta, a sports ace and yet another member of the Pretty Boy Detective Club, is nicknamed Bare Legs because of his tendency to always wear shorts and want to display his beautiful legs.

From the slenderness of his appearance to the depressed state he'd shown just a bit earlier, it seemed that I'd misunderstood him, but Mayumi-kun was a middle schooler with a lot more guts than I'd initially assumed.

I felt almost sorry that I'd lumped him in together with me.

It seemed his guiding principles would not waver.

In that case—I decided upon my own guiding principles at the same time.

"Then, let's go with that. I won't stop you anymore. But, I have one condition."

"Eh? Araragi-san, from what position are you coming from to put a condition on me, when we're meeting for the first time and are completely unrelated…"

"Don't say something so lonely like we're completely unrelated, Mayumi-kun."

When I said this, it was not an act, but bright words out of the kindness of my heart.

"I'll go down the mountain with you. Allow me to be your escort—and if you would rather have a walking stick, then feel free to use me as your walking stick."

005

Though the preliminary inspection for a birthday party had been hit with some unexpected developments, well, there was still some time before Senjougahara's birthday—the weather seemed like it was getting worse, and I could come back to this shrine whenever I wanted, so it felt like more of a priority to make sure Mayumi-kun reached the station safely.

The idea of closing his eyes to block his unnaturally good eyesight and erase the existence of the piranha was not too bad, so if I simply became Mayumi-kun's eyes and walking stick, then going down the mountain safely shouldn't be too difficult.

Although, if you asked me, as someone who'd fought against invisible aberrations before, then honestly, there were still some points of concern regarding this plan… However, right now, getting down the mountain before the weather became even worse was of the highest priority.

"Hey, it's actually more dangerous if you don't stick close to me. Just think of it like a three-legged race. I can see why you might be feeling reserved, but there's no need for that awkwardness."

"It's true that it feels awkward, but by no means am I just being reserved…"

"If you want, I don't mind giving you a piggyback ride, alright?"

"No, if you do that, then I'll be found out… Er, I mean, I couldn't allow you to spoil me like that. It's already bad enough that you're acting as a walking stick for me. I mean, it's already enough."

"Is that so? Well, that's fine, then…"

I didn't really mind spoiling him, though.

Perhaps, like Oshino, he held the same belief that "people could only save themselves"—or maybe he was simply just being shy.

In that case, we had no choice but to keep proceeding down the mountain unsteadily like this, with our arms and shoulders pressed up against one another. Even though I was acting like I was in fear of a major disaster, considering the way he fell so dramatically back there, doing this wasn't even really an exaggeration.

Incidentally, if he were simply closing his eyes, then there was a risk that he might open them reflexively if he stumbled a bit, so Mayumi-kun was also blindfolded.

He'd untied the necktie around his neck and used it as an eye mask, but when combined with his pretty boy nature, it made him look weirdly sensual… But, right now, it wasn't the time to be concerned about his looks.

I figured it would be better to avoid talking about the piranha until we got off the mountain, but seeing as his eyes were blocked off, it would be really depressing if we didn't talk at all, so along the way, I tried to deliberately engage Mayumi-kun in some conversation. But as a result, I realized that my first impression of the darkness he emanated had not been wrong at all.

For example, he would say things like,

"I don't like being misunderstood, but being understood in itself is also something that I don't really like,"

and like,

"I respect figure skaters. Because, even when they fall partway through, they absolutely get back up and finish skating to the end, right? If it were

me, I would 100% get sick of it and quit when I fell down. Like a *yokozuna*[34] that refuses to appear after a series of defeats,"

and like,

"They call him the 'faithful dog Hachiko', but considering that dog was given such an unaffectionate name like 'Hachiko', it's hard to think that he was faithful to humans at all,"[35]

and like,

"When you talk about intelligence, then ultimately, it just refers to the amount of endurance you have to study continuously for long periods of time. In the end, you just can't win against the physical types,"

and so on, and basically everything he said was negative, to the point that it seemed like he would swallow up his surroundings with his darkness.

But, well, even so, since it was a middle schooler saying those things, it still seemed pretty cute, so I earnestly tried to respond to each and every one of his sayings with things like, "You might just be misunderstanding that you're being misunderstood," and like, "Figure skaters still have upcoming competitions, after all. If they gave up halfway, then they'd lose their next chance, too. And it's not like *yokozuna* stop appearing in matches because they got sick of it," and like, "I don't know about the 'ko' part, but 'Hachi' part of the name actually has a surprising amount of affection to it," and so on.

However, regarding his point about intelligence being the endurance you needed to pull all-nighters studying, then considering the fact that I'd used my endurance as a former vampire to study for my entrance exams, it was hard to refute—even the members of Team Good Girls, Senjougahara and Hanekawa, had some pretty good endurance, too.

But for someone as negative as Mayumi-kun, who got all depressed and frightened, to keep up the attitude of trying to go down the mountain

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[34] The highest rank a sumo wrestler can attain.

[35] This refers to the story of a Japanese dog who waited for almost ten years for his owner's return after he died. Hachiko was remembered in Japanese culture as a symbol of loyalty.

without giving up—I felt that it was pretty hard to explain that away as him just having guts.

What made him go so far?

"I don't have any guts at all. If I were alone, I would've given up long ago."

"Is that so? So because I'm here for you, you can keep going? I wasn't doing this just because I wanted to hear that from you, but it isn't bad at all to hear something like that."

"Ah, no, I wasn't talking about you…" said Mayumi-kun.

In the complete opposite way of the aforementioned concept of "people can only save themselves"—though Mayumi-kun was pessimistic even regarding his eyesight that should've been a strong point for him, he sounded just a bit triumphant for this subject alone.

"No matter where I am, I'm still a member, after all. And I know very well that those guys would never give up, even in a situation like this."

006

We passed through the *torii* of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine and reached the foot of the mountain, but of course it wouldn't be a good idea to ride with both of us when one of us was still blindfolded, so I figured it wasn't a mistake to leave my bicycle there and head for the nearest station on foot. But as we grew closer to the town, the misgivings that I'd been secretly harboring became reality.

Of course, that didn't mean that there hadn't been any trouble up until that point—even if I was acting in the role of his walking stick, it was still pretty difficult to walk on uneven footing without your sense of vision, so Mayumi-kun, as well as I, who he clung to, were covered with leaves and twigs.

Though we didn't get hurt from falling or the like, our clothes did get torn here and there.

I was just in normal clothes, so it was fine for me, but Mayumi-kun was in a school uniform, so the damage could be pretty harsh.

"It's fine. If it gets to it, then I have a different uniform I can wear… Mumble mumble."

He'd said something like that, so it seemed it wouldn't be too much of a problem.

Although, it was interesting that, unlike with his glasses, he'd described it as a different uniform and not a spare.

Did he have two different types of uniforms?

"Well, it didn't take as long as I'd expected, so while we're at it, drop by my house and take a bath, Mayumi-kun. If you want, I'll even go in with you!"

"Uh, uh-huh. Well, I would go if I could."

It was clearly a firm rejection.

Really, this kid was so modest.

I thought it was rather heartwarming, but at that timing, I'd let my guard down a little—as suddenly, Mayumi-kun screamed.

"Hyaah!"

And with that loud scream, he fell onto his behind—and it wasn't because he'd tripped on something.

If he'd tripped, then, like before on the shrine grounds, he would've fallen forward instead.

But unlike before, he'd fallen backwards.[36]

"The-The fish. The piranha."

Sitting on the asphalt, Mayumi-kun pointed.

With a trembling finger, he pointed toward the sky above the town.

There, I could not see anything.

I.

Couldn't see anything.

But it seemed—there was something there for Mayumi-kun.

After coming down the mountain and approaching the town, it must look even bigger to him—that carnivorous fish.

"…"

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[36] The word used here is 後ろ向き (*ushiromuki*) which means "in a backwards direction", but more figuratively can also mean "pessimistic", which was used for Mayumi earlier.

Yes.

I thought—something like this might happen.

However, I should've taken it into much stronger consideration.

If Mayumi-kun's eyesight could pierce through dark clouds to observe the stars, then I should have guessed at the possibility that he would be able to see through even his own eyelids, or the necktie he was using as a blindfold.

That's why his glasses were an essential item.

Of course, if he could always see through those things, then it would be impossible to even go to sleep at night, so I could guess that he had some way of controlling it arbitrarily, but even so, after approaching the town, and thus the piranha, then if he grew aware of it…

He would be able to see it.

Even if it were invisible, he'd be able to see through to it.

And perhaps, it was *because* it was arbitrary—the feeling of "the more you didn't want to see something, the more you would end up seeing it" was not something that was limited to people with special eyesight.

I could only feel a sense of ashamed helplessness.

Though we'd somehow managed to get off the mountain, there was no point in the end if we couldn't make it into town.

"What a mistake I've made… For someone like me, who's called the 'Zero Tolerance Butter Knife', this is a huge disgrace."[37]

"Um, do you really have a nickname like that, that sounds like it came out of the newest line-up of light novels?"

Shit.

In the first place, why was it a piranha, anyway?

Aberrations had their own reasons for existing—that was what the specialist, Oshino Meme, had said in the past, but in this case, what was the reason that Mayumi-kun held in this case?

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[37] Koyomi's self-awarded title is 寛容飽和の柔軟刃物 (*kan'you houwa no juunan hamono*, "the flexible knife saturated with tolerance"), with a given pronunciation of ゼロトレランスのバターナイフ (*zero toreransu no bataa naifu*, "the butter knife of zero tolerance").

"Well, at any rate, you should probably take off that blindfold now, Mayumi-kun. It's backfiring now, and it'll actually be even more dangerous. Can you stand?"

"Y-Yes. Can you give me a hand?"

"Of course. You fell pretty badly, but is your butt okay? Let me brush the sand off of you."

"There's no need to trouble your hands for something like that!"

After standing up, Mayumi-kun removed the necktie from his head, and tied it back around his neck—as someone who'd never worn a necktie before, the process seemed pretty tough. It made me feel a bit immoral, like I was strangling the neck of a pretty boy.

"In general, neckties seem a little straining. Wouldn't it feel better to keep your chest more loose?"

"Not at all!"

"But anyway, what should we do about this… If it comes down to it, there's still the option of just forcing our way through."

"B-But, Araragi-san. What if it attacks us when we enter its territory?"

"Hmm…"

It was hard to explain it in a way that would convince him, but personally, I wasn't too worried about something like that happening. If an aberration that was that hazardous lived in the skies above this town, then Oshino would have put some measures in place to deal with it when he came to this town—that collector definitely would not have ignored such a perfect ghost story.

Even if not for that, no matter how gigantic this piranha was, perhaps the level of vampire I had become wouldn't be a match for it—but I highly doubted that it would be able to win against that Aberration Slayer known as the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire.

However, it wasn't something I could declare.

I couldn't get rid of the possibility that it was an aberration that would be harmful toward Mayumi-kun alone—just by taking a single step into town, he might end up getting dragged into **that** world.

And if that happened, I wouldn't be able to protect him.

In the end, since I was nothing but a former vampire, before the question of whether or not I could win against the piranha, I couldn't even see it at all.

"Just checking, Mayumi-kun. When you arrived at this town, you weren't able to see the piranha yet, right? It was when you were about to go down the mountain that you suddenly saw it—is that right?"

"Yes. To be even more precise, it was before I went down the mountain, on top of the shrine, when I got a sweeping view of the town. It suddenly went bam—like a dolphin jumping out of the water."

Although, rather than a dolphin, it was more like a whale.

It was like he'd experienced some crazy whale watching.

However, Mayumi-kun was pretty wild to climb on top of that collapsed shrine just to go stargazing. I didn't know if he just did whatever he wanted because nobody was looking, but maybe he'd received divine punishment from that?

Although, it should be a snake, not a piranha, that was enshrined there, not to mention the fact that that god wasn't even there anymore.

"Would it be impossible to just head in a direction that goes away from the town?"

"It's not impossible, but you'd end up having to go through some mountains, so rather than just making it for the last train, I don't think you'll even make it before daybreak tomorrow… Instead of taking that big of a detour, let's just try to take the long way around to the station, trying to avoid the piranha as much as possible. If we aim for Minaminao Station instead of Nakanao Station…"

If we did that, it might even be better to go back and get my bicycle, even if it took twice the amount of time—as I thought that, my eyes landed on a town map that had been installed to the side of the sidewalk.

Even though I was a local, I was by no means familiar with the lay of the land in these parts—in the first place, I had no reason to come in this direction, except for when I was going to the Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

I wouldn't say that I was completely unfamiliar with it, but I was afraid that the piranha might attack us if we didn't choose our route based on the most accurate information, so no amount of caution was too much.

It felt kind of like the game that grade schoolers played, where they pretended that the asphalt was the ocean, and you could only walk on top of the white lines… Although, since a carnivorous fish was flying in the sky, it was like the exact opposite of that game.

Fortunately, the town map was pretty detailed.

However, there was no indication of where we currently were.

Was this a convenient map or an inconvenient one? It was pretty tough to understand… Um, since my house is here…

"Hyaah!"

There, once again, Mayumi-kun screamed.

As if the idea of me brushing the sand off of him pained him that much, he barely managed to not fall on his behind this time, but, just like before, his face was in complete shock.

I'd gotten on guard, thinking that the piranha was finally coming to attack us, but that wasn't it—though Mayumi-kun had pointed at the sky earlier, right now, he was pointing at not even the ground, but the same map that I was looking at.

No.

More precisely—it was in front of it.

"In, in front of that map—there's a piranha. A smaller piranha."

"…?"

Hearing that, I turned back to face the map.

Of course, I couldn't see it.

The map was simply a map—however, Mayumi-kun was saying that he could see another piranha here, on top of the one in the sky. By a smaller piranha, that probably was referring to a piranha of a normal size—although it would still be enough of a threat.

Reflexively, I jumped away from the front of the map.

However, nothing changed after I jumped away—although Mayumi-kun probably wasn't just pretending to be scared as a practical joke to surprise me.

He could definitely see it—and only he could.

… At this rate, I felt like I was cornered.

It was one thing to be able to see a piranha in the sky far overhead, but if there was a piranha floating that close to us, floating perhaps even at eye level, then there was no way we could even walk through the town.

It was like trying to swim through a fish tank.

We would certainly drown.

"Goodness gracious… I never thought that the future when I'd need to perform artificial respiration onto Mayumi-kun would approach so rapidly."

"Um, I'd like to avoid a future like that at all costs…"

Even performing such witty banter at this stage wasn't helpful at all. Mayumi-kun must've started to feel cornered as well, as he was biting down on his soft lip with his beautiful teeth.

In his case, he was showing an expression that seemed less cornered and more like he was caught in a pincer attack, between the devil and the deep blue sea—but whether he was cornered or whether he was in a pincer attack, it didn't change the fact that we were completely at a loss for what to do.

Not to mention, the clincher—from overhead.

As if rubbing salt into a wound, or maybe even a piranha into a wound, drops of water began to fall from straight overhead right onto our faces.

Drops of water.

The bad weather had finally reached this stage—at last, it had begun to rain.

Furthermore, it wasn't at the level of just gently drizzling—it was raining with huge drops of water.

Just going off of experience, it was pretty clear that the rain would turn into a heavy downpour pretty soon.

It was pretty clear, even in the darkness of the night.

I'd been thinking that it would be pretty awful if it began to rain while we were still on the mountain, but at this rate, considering that we could still have taken shelter from the rain under the half-collapsed shrine, you could say that coming down the mountain had backfired on us.

To stand here out in the open, without even being able to enter the town, while getting more and more soaked—it was the definition of disastrous.

We were like drowned rats.

That made us sound like animals that would be easy for a piranha to eat—at this rate, it wasn't the time to grumble over trivial matters.

Thinking that there was no choice but to take drastic measures, I looked at my shadow.

The weather made it an environment extremely difficult for shadows to appear, but even so, there was still a faint light coming from the direction of the town, which managed to produce a faint shadow from me.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

An aberration for an aberration—no.

An Aberration Slayer for an aberration.

An Aberration Slayer that had been kept alive[38]—

"Ah."

Amidst the rain that had gotten to full force in the blink of an eye, Mayumi-kun spoke tersely.

"**It disappeared—the piranha.**"

"Eh…?"

"From the sky—and from the map."

It disappeared.

All of a sudden, he said that.

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[38] Koyomi qualifies 怪異殺し (*kaii goroshi*, "aberration slayer") with the similar-sounding 飼い殺し (*kaigoroshi*, "keeping a domestic animal beyond its useful life").

It was so sudden, so unexpected, that I almost didn't understand what he'd said, but it seemed Mayumi-kun himself was in a whirlwind of confusion, having been left utterly dumbfounded.

Well, of course.

For piranhas of various sizes floating in the air to disappear when it started raining—if they disappeared as soon as they were in water and not air, then wasn't that backwards?

Was it because rainwater wasn't seawater?

No, no, piranhas were freshwater fish.

In the first place, the type of water shouldn't matter if it was an aberration… Considering Mayumi-kun's eyesight which could go through even clouds and neckties, it didn't seem like curtains of rain would be enough to block his view of the piranhas, either.

No, but wait.

Water?

In the first place, eyesight is something that gets adjusted when the information is transmitted to your brain… In the end, eyesight could just be a function of the brain…

And, along those lines, light would also bend.

It would get warped.

And while we weren't talking about Mayumi-kun's warped personality, images weren't necessarily transmitted in a straight line. If they passed through water, then they would get strangely distorted—even the clouds that Mayumi-kun had described as "bundles of water" were similar, although he'd still managed to accomplish his stargazing through them.

They'd passed through and penetrated through.

They passed through too well—they were too transparent.[39]

And.

The floating piranha.

The sweeping view of the town—and the town map.

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[39] Koyomi makes a pun on 通り過ぎる (*toorisugiru*, "to pass by") and 透り過ぎる (*toori sugiru*, "too transparent").

"… Mayumi-kun!"

In order to confirm the idea that had hit me like a bolt of lightning, I turned to face Mayumi-kun amidst this heavy rain—however, from his appearance, I was hit with an impact like a burst of wind that was enough to blow away my idea entirely.

No.

It wasn't—*his* appearance.

Having gotten drenched in the blink of an eye from the falling rain, Mayumi-kun's uniform had begun to stick to the body, and the collared shirt under the body had turned see-through even without any power to see through things, displaying the curves of Mayumi-kun's body.

The bulge in the chest area and the narrowness of the waist were thoroughly exposed—and the makeup that had been described as "done up" had been washed away by the rain…

"Ma, Mayumi-kun… Don't tell me, you're actually a girl!?"

"Um, no, you *had* to have already figured it out at some point."

007

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

Though I'd been completely deceived by the name of the "Pretty Boy Detective Club", the earth-shattering gender-reversal-type narrative trick had finally been revealed, so let us resolve the remaining mystery—namely, the mystery regarding the piranhas that Mayumi-kun, who was actually Mayumi-chan, had witnessed. Of course, it wasn't like I had any specialized knowledge pertaining to "that", so allow me to tell you in advance that the following explanation has been woven together with information that was taught to me the following day by the brains of our group, Hanekawa Tsubasa.

Stereopsis.

To be more precise, it had to do with random dot stereograms—referring to pictures that were constructed as clusters of dots that looked like random noise at first glance, but when you focused on a specific point or intentionally changed up your sense of distance, some sort of design would appear.

Compared to 3D and even 4D effects appearing in the movie world, something like this seemed rather analog, but considering that you would

be able to see these three-dimensional objects without the use of special glasses, these stereograms were still pretty revolutionary.

Of course, because of how they were constructed, it was difficult to make complicated designs into three-dimensional shapes—only simple constructions like letters or cubes, cups or dice, balls or pencils… As well as simplified animals or plants.

And fish.

In a way, it was a kind of "visualization" similar to how you could connect the stars in the sky to imagine constellations—when Mayumi-chan had gotten a sweeping view of the town on top of the shrine, she'd seen that "visualization".

And she'd seen that same fish when she looked at the town map.

Thinking it through, it was perhaps just a simple matter of coincidence, and although it may not be something that anyone would be able to see, it was possible that someone would have been able to see those piranhas even if they didn't have the special eyesight that Mayumi-chan had—being just one of the functions of humans' eyes.

The function of grasping a sense of distance.

If the bird's-eye view of the town had ended up forming some kind of random dot stereogram.

The roads were generally set up to be straight, and most buildings, when seen from above, took on rectangular shapes—looking at it all from a distance, it could easily appear as a dot pattern of random noise.

In the first place, it was unlikely that a person would look down at a town from above, and even if they were looking at a town map, they probably wouldn't process the information on that map as a single picture. If anything, they'd probably see it from an oblique angle, looking at it part by part.

However, in Mayumi-chan's case, it wasn't just that her eyes were simply good, but also that she had a brain that was capable of processing that information—capable of, say, unconsciously calculating the refractive index of starlight through clouds and then automatically adjusting for it. Therefore, even if it was the sweeping view of a town seen from an oblique

angle, she could reconstruct the information transmitted from her optic nerves and reinterpret it in many different ways.

The ability of spatial awareness, or perhaps the eyesight of spatial awareness—as a result, she was able to get an image of the town as if she'd looked down at it from a bird's-eye view.

And had generated a fish above the town via stereopsis.

She'd instantiated it.

When you managed to see the image for just a moment, it ended up being hard to shake it off—it left a strong afterimage in your retinas, so it was like it would never go away.

Since the town map was just a close-up view and not a strict recreation of the town, it seemed hard to say that it formed the same random dot stereogram on its own, but it had simply been enough to remind Mayumi-chan of the bird's-eye view that was already in her brain.

Well, it wasn't really my place to say this, but she seemed like a kid who strongly stuck to her impressions, so after she saw something once, she probably had the tendency of continuing to see it—the reason she called the fish she'd seen neither a whale nor a dolphin nor a sunfish but specifically a piranha could have been because of her preconception of piranhas having jagged teeth.

After all, the construction of the town had most likely only become like a stereogram by chance, and it was unlikely that a person with the expertise needed for something like this did it during the city planning phase just for fun, so the actual design that would appear was probably very distorted—and due to that distortion, it was possible that people would see not the image of a piranha, and instead something like a deep-sea fish. Just like a Rorschach test, there were probably people that saw something completely different.

If it were me.

I would probably see an *oni*.

Knowing this much, it was pretty obvious why she stopped seeing it when rain began to fall—obvious, or perhaps a blank space.[40]

It was because there was a blank space in the sky that there was room for the piranha to float around.

But if the falling raindrops continuously filled up that blank space, then she'd end up focusing on that, and there would literally be no more room for the piranha to appear—the visibility of her imagination had been painted over by the visibility of reality.

The amount of information exceeded her limits.

You could perhaps say that, even if her eyesight had no limits, the amount of information her brain could process did have limits—in that case, it was really dependent on how Mayumi-chan's brain decided to interpret what she saw, but at any rate, as a result, it meant that the piranha that Mayumi the Seer saw above the town and in front of the map was not an aberration at all.

As long as this town didn't use to be a river or a lake or a swamp in the past, it had no connections to fish in the slightest, and there was no way that that held any connections to the Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, either. That would just be too good to be true.

It was not an aberration, but having said that, it wasn't just a trick of the light or one's imagination, either.

Not a trick of the light, but an optical illusion.

Not one's imagination, but one's functionality.[41]

However, if we say that, if we understand all that, then there was no longer any need to fear the piranha—there was no need to close our eyes to it. In fact, it could even serve as a fun attraction to enjoy.

Mayumi-chan and I, unable to see even an inch ahead of us in the rain, ended up walking back into town as if taking an underwater stroll, and I had succeeded in sending, not *him*, but *her* to the nearest station.

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[40] Koyomi changes 明白 (*meihaku*, "obvious") to 空白 (*kuuhaku*, "blank space").

[41] Koyomi makes a pun on 気のせい (*ki no sei*, "imagination") and 機能性 (*kinousei*, "functionality").

"Oh, there's no need for you to thank me like that. I only did what anyone would've done."

"Um, I didn't even thank you yet… Although I was hesitating over whether I was even going to. But, yes, you have my thanks. Even if I… Even if *I*[42] had been on my own, and the piranha disappeared when it began to rain, I think I would have been too scared to go down the mountain."

"Nah, I don't think so. Since you aren't alone at all. But really, I wonder where your glasses went. I'll go back and look for them just in case… But I wonder if there's actually a black hole at that shrine. Will you be fine on your own from here?"

"Yes. There's no trouble at all from here. Sorry for bothering you… Even though you did what anyone would've done, I'm still glad. That you snuggled up close to me, and that you believed what I saw as if it was natural. My leader would probably say something like this. 'It's outrageous to say that you only did what anyone would've done. What you did was absolutely beautiful.'"

"What a cool-sounding leader… Or rather, you could say it's beautiful. Your leader, huh? I'd like to meet that leader someday."

"Ahaha… Of course, I'm sure you'll have the chance to, someday. Because Leader might be as much of a weirdo as you are."

I'd assumed that those words said with that meaningful smile were just said for politeness's sake as she was about to depart, but apparently, it turned out to be Mayumi the Seer's prediction.

About half a year later, I would end up meeting the extraordinary **pretty girl** known as the leader of the Pretty Boy Detective Club with the nickname of "Manabu the Aesthete", Soutouin Manabu, and we would end up going on an adventure together.

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[42] Mayumi switches back to *watashi* as her first-person pronoun.

M A Z E M O N O G A T A R I

Mayumi Red Eye — Chapter Eye

Saw a translation in the sky: Polaris Translations

Drew a beautiful map of the town: Bluex, Noyaxus & @mewlinAI

Tripped on the way back from the shrine: Maxdefolsch

MAZEMONOGATARI

NISIOISIN

Kuroneko Bed

Chapter III

Byouinzaka Kuroneko
Sekai Series
Art: TAGRO

001

Byouinzaka Kuroneko is a young prodigy. While she is the same age as myself, that is to say, eighteen years old, she possesses an intelligence quotient I could never attain even in my wildest dreams. On top of that, her instincts are sharp and her footwork extremely light. A high schooler seemingly born exclusively for the sake of solving mysteries.

However, my interpretation is that she was a prodigy and not a genius. Her characteristic name and constitution lead me to unconsciously think of a good friend of mine; however, Byouinzaka Kuroneko and Hanekawa Tsubasa are as different as they could be. I don't hesitate when it comes to calling Hanekawa Tsubasa a genius, but I cannot bring myself to do the same when it comes to Byouinzaka Kuroneko, in the end she was that and only that, a prodigy.

A child.

You could even call her "an infant."

Although she looks mature—she is not.

It might be appropriate to think of it as her exceptional wit exempting her from the necessity of becoming an adult.

There is the cliché and poor loser adage that goes: "A genius after twenty years is just a person," but regarding Byouinzaka Kuroneko you could say the opposite. Although it is obvious at eighteen, there is no doubt in my mind that her childishness will stay present even after turning twenty or twenty-six years old.

An eternal prodigy.

In other words, in addition to being a prodigy, she is also a nonconformist and a rebel; a type of person not present in Naoetsu High School.

Thinking about such things, I felt that being intelligent isn't always something good, that overthinking can be detrimental—though of course a thoughtless fool like me has no right to say their part in that. And even if I did, she wouldn't brood over it at all.

"What about you, Koyomi-kun, how can you manage to stay so indifferent toward mysteries? I cannot fathom what lacking an uncontrollable urge to think feels like. As for myself, I would rather choose death than let something go unexplained."

Hearing her shamelessly asserting that, I could only think how she had strayed away from the path of normality toward the path of eccentricity. However, if I said that Hanekawa Tsubasa was the only one that came to my mind when I met the girl that continued to be an innocent prodigy no matter how much her body grows—that would be a splendid lie.

The discrepancy between her age and body.

It would be an unpleasant lie if I said that I wasn't reminded of the immortal vampire, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire—Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

That said, between the vampire whose body stayed infantile and the girl whose mind stayed infantile, the parts that are broken were completely different.

002

I suffered a bad fall during gym class so I headed toward the infirmary—though it's not like I was really injured. In reality, I had to go there alone in order to hide the fact that I didn't hurt myself despite the flashiness of the fall.

To be more precise, I got injured.

But that injury healed the instant it happened.

At this point it's no secret, but I stood out among my class. So having the sight of my kneecaps which should have torn being restored in an instant before their eyes would only contribute to making my future school life harder. That's why I had to take refuge to the infirmary.

Umm… It feels weird to trip in gym class when looking back at all the violent acrobatics I performed against Dramaturgy, Episode, and Guillotine Cutter, all that eccentric bunch during spring break. Well, the damage I received at the time wasn't on the level of scraping my knees though.

In any case, I needed to borrow some bandages or gauze and make it look like I actually received an injury… Luckily there was the "currently absent" indicator hanging up on the door.

The word "gymnasium" was written on the plate so the school nurse probably went to attend the girls' gymnasium.

Therefore, completely careless, I stepped inside the infirmary… and—

And, my eyes met with those of an unknown girl, wearing a gym uniform and lying nonchalantly in the infirmary's bed.

The unknown girl had a very distinctive quality to her. Elegant straight black hair, big round pupils, a small frame surprisingly bountiful, breasts pushing up on her clothes' chest part, but her uniform also had quite the unique quality.

She was wearing bloomers.

The legendary sportswear that disappeared in olden times. I know of it because by chance I was informed by quite the cultured person, Kanbaru Suruga. However, that girl wearing it not as a sportswear but as normal clothes had no chances of being normal.

She was, without a doubt, not a student from Naoetsu High School.

I often skip school so I couldn't possibly have a grasp on all of the first-year students, but I deduced that from the uniform which was against our school's regulations, and the fact that such a conspicuous girl would have had rumors about her.

Even I had an urge to go around spreading those rumors myself.

Urban legend. Ignorant mouthing. Idle rumors.

No, what am I doing preaching about bloomers… err, there's her name on the uniform, right?

Byouinzaka…?

At the very moment I was doubting my eyes, the girl in bloomers rolled on the bed and twisted her body like that of a cat, stretching her back and getting on her hands and knees, "Yah, yah," she raised a cheerful voice and directed a smile beaming of joy toward me,

"So you are Araragi Koyomi-kun! Of course you are Araragi Koyomi-kun, I knew it at first glance! Why, you may ask, fufu, that's obviously because your name is written on your gym clothes. Even you looked at the

writing on my chest just now, didn't you? Right, I am Byouinzaka Kuroneko. Oops, only my surname is written on my chest. Even if you stare at it like that, the first name Kuroneko will not suddenly materialize on it. But well, if Koyomi-kun were to wish for it, I do not mind if you call me 'KuroneKo-san.'[43] Close friends call me that way. So please stop staring at my chest now, even if I am fully aware that it is not your intention, having my breasts being stared at feels unpleasant. Having said that, Koyomi-kun, the next question you will bring up is 'my first name isn't written on my gym clothes either so how does this boob entity know my name?' right? That is a natural question. Thinking that there are a lot of people who wouldn't bother with this kind of natural question, you are certainly the man I set my eyes on. Aah, sorry for having called you 'Koyomi-kun' without permission, okay? I am really bad at judging my distance with people, that is why I am often mistaken as someone taking a liking to people like a cat would, when in reality I am shy like a cat. To put it simply, the name 'Araragi-kun' is difficult to pronounce so I have taken the liberty to call you 'Koyomi-kun' despite how over-familiar it may sound. I mean, 'Araragi-kun' looks like a name you would fumble over, doesn't it? Haven't any of your friends told you so? I am pretty bad at talking so I would be overjoyed if you could forgive me for trying to make my speech flow better and let me call you 'Koyomi-kun' in the future. Right right, we were talking about why I know Koyomi-kun's first name, right? But doesn't the wise Koyomi-kun already have an idea? Exactly, the reason I came to this Naoetsu Private High School is to meet you. By the way, I am a student from Outouin Private Academy. You might not believe me due to my small height, but I am the same grade as you, a third-year. I would like for you to trust me with these big milkers as proof. Hahaha, I guess showing my student ID would have been easier. Right, I am not a transfer student, even now I am still affiliated with Outouin Academy. To

[43] Byouinzaka's first name, Kuroneko, is normally written 黒猫 (lit. "black cat"), but her nickname is くろね子さん (*Kuroneko-san*), which is mostly made of hiragana, except for *ko* which is the kanji for "child".

put it simply, every bed of every infirmary around the world is a place where I can be—not where I can be but where I can sleep, maybe? Of course this is a joke, don't take it seriously. The truth is that infiltrating an unknown school made me awfully groggy so I instantly fell asleep. Good grief, I cannot put up a lie in front of Koyomi-kun. No, if I have to spill the beans, rather than being shy I have something like a human allergy. Therefore, even my commute to Outouin Academy is essentially a commute to the infirmary. Even just thinking about being trapped in a cramped classroom with thirty or forty people gives me goosebumps—if I had to put it in the *KuroneKo-san* way, it feels like every hair on my body is reversing, I guess? No no, don't misunderstand me, I definitely do not hate people, you know? Like how I, for example, love Koyomi-kun. It's a joke, a joke! I'm the kind of girl that likes to say jokes like this, you see. That is one of my bad points. But also one of my charming points. You know, there are quite a lot of people coming to the infirmary in search of that lovable aspect. Although that is only valid for Outouin Academy, Naoetsu High School's infirmary isn't in my range after all. That is why I am happy to no end that Koyomi-kun came to visit me like this. Though of course I understand that you didn't come to meet me, but this is a good occasion so I would like to request some advice from Koyomi-kun before the teacher comes back. I said it without any preamble, but yes, I came here to ask for advice from Koyomi-kun. Normally I would bow down and request for you to benevolently come to this pitiful self's help, but I understand that it would be exceedingly rude toward a man brimming with such chivalrous spirit as yourself. I got some stories, you know? Of how many people you have saved. If we count from your middle school days, that number would easily surpass ten thousands. And that is not an exaggeration, every time you save one person, at the same time their family and friends are saved as well. Although I learned of Koyomi-kun through the activities of the Fire Sisters, your little sisters, even then I have some confidence in my intelligence network. I have a friend that treats me as some kind of great detective, but I am basically an information dealer. Collecting information and analyzing it is my main occupation. So, Koyomi-kun, there is no way I wouldn't have

heard of your heroic tales, is there? My heart was moved around in all directions by your adventurous tales. Therefore bringing you a problem that I unwillingly ended up carrying is the most natural course of action. Meeting you here is nothing but a delightful coincidence for me, but if that didn't happen I intended to barge into your classroom. You might be thinking 'would you go that far?', but I am one who is willing to go through such lengths so please understand that. I would do anything. I would appear on any bed. Koyomi-kun, I would be glad if you could recognize my modesty for not appearing on a bed in your house. Or perhaps you would have preferred it that way? To be honest that idea wasn't really past me, but then I would have had to wait until after school which was unbearable for me. In the same way you are a high schooler uncontrollably wanting to help people, I am a high schooler uncontrollably wanting to solve mysteries, although that somewhat strays from my domain as an information dealer. That's how it is, so without further ado let's enter the main subject. Once upon a time in a certain place—well no, this is a current story, I have a friend I deeply love called Samatoki-kun. What have I to hide, the friend treating me as a great detective is also him. Pleasant, isn't it? Good gracious, if I were to express the depth of my affection for him, including the gratitude for the overestimations he holds toward me, it would fill an entire book of poem collections. Nevertheless, he has one troubling defect. In reality he has more, but let's keep it at one for today. Samatoki-kun has a pretty little sister. The overprotectiveness he shows toward her is his only problem. As I said it is not really his only one, however, I am so sure this is his biggest that I would even be willing to wager my lips on it. And once again, that overprotectiveness became the seed of trouble. Oops, although I understand Araragi-kun cannot listen in silence when hearing the words 'seed of trouble,' please calm down and listen. I appreciate the feeling, but no need to be that aggressive about it. Even I am not only an incompetent asking for help. Helping people is not my specialty, but I consider my personality built well enough to be able to help my friends. I am delighted that saying that in front of Koyomi-kun doesn't result in bragging talk, but I played a move to make that seed of

trouble end as just a seed. We don't have enough leeway to talk for long so I will explain briefly: there was one boy who fell in love with Samatoki-kun's little sister. In reality there are some more complex circumstances, but we can omit those parts. You can simply understand this as 'the pretty little sister was really popular.' And that girl received a passionate love letter. That in itself happens frequently and, in reality, I move around some pieces every time. So, that little sister was, if I had to compare it to someone from Koyomi-kun's surroundings, a kid similar to Sengoku Nadeko-chan, I guess? I am thankful that Koyomi-kun already accepted that I am an information dealer so I don't have to waste time answering the question 'why do you know Sengoku?' Just, that overprotective brother is really overprotective. How much Araragi-kun spoils the Fire Sisters, his two little sisters, is outside of the range of my investigation, but Samatoki-kun's overprotectiveness manifests in the form of 'any guy approaching my little sister won't finish unhurt.' Not something to be praised, but for him it is a way to express his affection. I also ask him to show some restraint but alas, it has little to no effect. So, in addition to my long-term strategy of enlightening Samatoki-kun, I have to prepare short-term tactics—in other words, makeshift treatments. So, on one hand I try to approach Samatoki-kun in a way that would restrain his rash behavior, and on the other hand I get closer to the male student and warn him 'if you value your life you should better stop'. Putting it like that makes it look simple, but it was a pretty hard task. That is because the letter sent by that student to the little sister was anonymous. Even if I wanted to advise him, I didn't know who the sender was. Therefore the mission which befell me this time was to identify the sender before Samatoki-kun and to make him give up on the little sister. I don't intend to sound like a hypocrite, but rather than having in mind the sender's well-being, that was a mission with Samatoki-kun's sake in mind. Perhaps my high motivation got materialized in the form of results, because I managed to immediately pin down a suspect. Right, so I am not here to ask Koyomi-kun's help on that subject. The concerns I want you to focus on are the developments that happened after. That said, the task was still difficult after identifying him. I have some reluctance on

calling someone a *suspect* just for having sent a love letter, but the letter in question reads pretty dubiously so it shouldn't be that far off. The sister was completely frightened, so I could no longer turn a blind eye to Samatoki-kun's reaction. What made it hard is that I endeavored to protect the suspect from Samatoki-kun, to protect the little sister, and to protect Samatoki-kun. However, the thing is, Samatoki-kun saw right through my objective—because we understand each other, him and me. Therefore Samatoki-kun waited for me to pin down that suspect. He let me identify the anonymous writer and moved based on that information—using my kindness in such a way, pretty atrocious, even from the perspective of a friend. Although I like that part of him. Even with that shortcoming, I had no intention of taking part in his plan. I investigated so that Samatoki-kun wouldn't be able to tell and I have no plan of ever telling him the name of the suspect. So, I had to contact that suspect in a way Samatoki-kun wouldn't notice—rather than Samatoki-kun, in a way no one else would. I needed to talk with the suspect behind-the-scenes. Behind-the-scenes, and peacefully, in order to calm things down. So first, I had to ask him 'are you the culprit?' in a way only he would understand. That comes before telling him 'the girl you confessed to has a crazy brother'—I have absolute confidence in my information network, however, anyone can make mistakes. Making them think I am down on them without any grounds would only create useless opposition. I am a high schooler cherishing peace and harmony more than anything. Naturally I had some grounds to do so, but I wanted to avoid something as devoid of delicacy as pursuing and chasing them down. So the method I chose was an encrypted signal. Emitting multiple signals at random and including the real encryption among those. So Samatoki-kun won't be able to easily find out which code among the massive amount I sent was aimed at the suspect. After all, he couldn't really take it out on every single person I sent one to—although the more I learn about how infatuated of a brother he is, the less I can relax. Anyhow, my plan up to then ended with great results. A few of my messages were caught by the meticulous Samatoki-kun, but he is not skilled at deciphering so no worries about that. For better or worse, he is an honest

man. Honesty is one of his charms, and a weak point. Naturally I count it as a charm. Plus, all of the messages he picked up were dummies—now is where my plan begins to see some dark clouds. Since the question I asked was 'are you the culprit?', I was waiting for a sincere reply from the suspect. No, it's not that no reply came. And having presented an arraignment through a code, there is no such thing as the suspect not understanding the meaning of the question. A reply properly came—however, the reply he sent back to me was encrypted too! Thinking about it that was natural, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, code for a code. Having sent him a code, I couldn't fairly get offended at receiving one myself. Rather, I took it as a challenge from the suspect to me. Or perhaps a provocation? 'If you can solve this encryption I shall admit I am the sender of this love letter,' I felt like it was hiding this meaning—precisely like a code would. I swear, I am acting for Samatoki-kun's future, but it's not like I was totally indifferent to the sender's safety though. However, he was the type to accept a fight he was offered. That motivation is splendid. Truly splendid. Come at me with that competitive and unyielding spirit! And isn't he stylish to easily deal with my encryption too? If this wasn't about Samatoki-kun I would be cheering for him, I would flutter in an ode to him. Now Koyomi-kun, Araragi Koyomi-kun. This is precisely my request for you. Won't you flutter along with me? If you allow me to bluntly state it, I want you to join forces with me and accompany me in the deciphering of the aforementioned cipher sent by the suspect!"

She said.

"… Err, is it finally my turn now?"

After having listened to Byouinzaka Kuroneko-san's, self-named KuroneKo-san's, roughly-13000-characters-long[44] speech unfold on and on, I complied with a long reply myself—

"Huh?"

[44] About 6000 characters in the original Japanese.

003

39／99／53／95／16／2／53／
16／15／68／26／6／73／7／
32／3／74／53／16／1／9／8／
45／68／19／53／16／16／33／
16／8／8／7／33／53／19／10／
74／1／68／85／6／57／16／
16／5／92／90／68／35／8／
90／68／53／16／16／92／15／
68／16／68／53／8／92／16／
16／8／53／31／23／63／15

004

The reason as to why I couldn't effortlessly digest the situation KuroneKo-san briefly explained to me isn't that I was enticed by her magnificent bloomers—I thought I had interacted with many bizarre people in Naoetsu High School, but I guess the world is vast. There are many people who surpass my imagination in this world.

I sometimes talk for long myself, but whenever that happens I properly take care and divide it into paragraphs. Just from what kind of broken world does this highschool girl come from?

What kind of start is this to *Mazemonogatari: Legend Part…* I wonder what the remaining three people will be like?

Well, I had absolutely no idea as for what the reason KuroneKo-san was relaxing in our infirmary could be, what happened in the Outouin Academy she attends, and what she had hoped to find in this Naoetsu High School that would resolve the situation, but anyhow—it seems like if I solve some sort of code she will go back to her own world.

Then let's omit all the reluctance and cooperate.

I will do anything in order to make her go back.

"Is that so? That is wonderful news! My utmost gratefulness to you! I was sure you would answer so, Koyomi-kun! I heard tales informing me that Araragi Koyomi-kun would never abandon someone in trouble, well, to be precise they say you would never abandon big breasts in trouble—"

"Then, should we begin investigating this code thing, KuroneKo-san?"

This action was originally unthinkable for our world built on dialogues, but I started to cut her off in order to accelerate the conversation.

To say nothing of cut off, I felt put off about having come to this infirmary.[45]

"So those lines of numbers are the code? Umm, it looks more like a list than a sequence though, I don't see any meaning in them at first glance…"

I scrutinized the loose-leaf that KuroneKo-san took out of her pocket on which were inscribed the (seemingly) random numbers.

"The paper itself isn't part of the trick, this is just the notes I have copied myself. Actually, I only finally obtained those numbers after a few steps of deciphering I went through following getting a reply."

"Hmm. So in other words you're midway through solving it…"

That being said, it didn't make sense.

No, let's step up our game and think about it.

All being said, I was a third-year and, although I would never have thought this during spring break, I was a student aiming to get into university.

If I don't exert my only specialty, math, in this situation, when in the world am I gonna do it—well, I should do it during exams I guess.

Anyhow, since KuroneKo-san would go home once I solved this, I had to put my all into it.

Odd and even numbers… common divisors… common multiples… prime numbers… the number one before… mixing the four operators…

---

[45] Koyomi says he's starting to use 食い気味 (*kuigimi*), which is an abbreviation of 食い込み気味 (*kuikomigimi,* "biting feeling") and refers to a way of talking where you start speaking before the person you're talking to is finished. He then replaces it with 悔い気味 (*kuigimi*, "regretful feeling").

fractions… inverse numbers… maybe it's degrees… complex numbers… adding the tens digit and the units digit…

"Oh, it looks like you are already testing out ideas, Koyomi-kun! How reliable, how admirable! That means I did good in coming all the way to this town from far away! The sight of your thinking face from the side is reminiscent of a certain famous philosopher! I bet you are quite popular with girls, I bet you are making rumors flow! That reminds me, there is a mysterious organization named the Araragi Harem, isn't there?! If they accept temporary members I would readily be willing to join for a day! Right, talking about harems—"

"… Um, KuroneKo-san, could you shut up for a bit?"

I wonder if she was going to die the moment she stopped talking; she wouldn't let me focus at all. Also, is the *Araragi Harem* known even to other schools?

"Oops, that was rude of me, I didn't mean to bother you. Now, now, calm down. How about taking a seat for a minute?"

Saying that, KuroneKo-san tapped the end of the bed. Certainly, being at a loss standing up isn't the best thing to do.

I sat down on the designated spot.

KuroneKo-san, who was right next to me, gracefully crawled even closer.

So close!

"Hey hey, Koyomi-kun, I am glad you are engaging with this so seriously, but if you focus so hard your face turns all red you inversely won't be able to come up with good ideas, don't you think so?"

"…"

Isn't she doing it on purpose?

It was fresh for me to have someone be on the offensive so much while seeming defenseless (the "we're the same age but she feels like an older sister" part was new). Though it didn't serve to up my thinking ability by any degree.

That said, even if KuroneKo-san didn't meddle with me from the side I don't think I would have obtained a eureka.

My face had turned red for an unrelated reason, but despite focusing pretty hard I couldn't even start seeing the shadow of a hint.

Every hypothesis I tested collapsed one after another.

To put it frankly, it was way too incoherent.

Even Oikura would give up with this one—yeah, this level of no-hints might even cause a hysteria crisis in her.

"If I had to say, '**16**' appears quite a lot… maybe? Aah, or maybe could that be attendance numbers?"

"Outouin Academy's attendance numbers don't go into the 50s or 90s. I think Naoetsu High School's don't either."

Right.

I only brought it up just in case.

Then marks on a test or placements?

That seemed more plausible than attendance numbers, however, even if that was revealed to be true, I don't know what would be the next step.

We quickly found ourselves at a dead end.

Mmm, the high amount of information despite the lack of clues made me lose motivation in thinking about it structurally… I couldn't keep my motivation high with the only motive being "I want to send KuroneKo-san home."

I was starting to get tired of this.

Why do I have to think about something like this in the infirmary?

"Oh please, Koyomi-kun you jokester, saying that to hide your embarrassment! Your motivation is *helping people*, right? If you think you are helping me, my friend, my friend's little sister, and the boy having feelings toward my friend's little sister, who is the creator of this encryption, don't you feel pure excitement arising in your heart?"

"…"

What kind of rumors exactly did this girl hear causing her to come to Naoetsu High School?

I told you I didn't really get the whole case that happened in your school because you talked for so damn long in one go.

So setting aside KuroneKo-san who was in front of me, I didn't know that friend or his little sister, and the thing that arose in my chest when thinking about the creator of that code and sender of the letter isn't excitement but anger.

"Phew! The demon at helping people, Araragi Koyomi!"

Ignoring, or simply not noticing, my inner feelings, she insensitively jeered at me at close range—jeering at people was insensitive in itself, but doing it at such a short distance added insult to injury.

I feel like she said it herself during her tirade, but the distance she takes with others that doesn't even leave them breathing room might seem to be the reflection of her strong amiability, but in reality it felt completely different to me.

I even feel like she's bad at being around people.

That might be why she treasures her friend so much.

… Well, I don't have many friends myself, so ideally I'd like to learn from her on that aspect.

Yeah, I guess I'll have to draw some motivation from that…

Also, I shouldn't gloss over one thing: from an objective standpoint this situation looked like I, an overexcited student, Araragi Koyomi-kun, had brought a student from another school to the one I am registered in, in a deserted infirmary, during classes, and was now flirting with her on a bed. This wouldn't look like I'm being one-sidedly teased by KuroneKo-san to an outside eye—not to mention that she was wearing bloomers.

Looking at them doesn't cease to surprise me.

Such a scene could mark an end for me if one of the few friends I have were to witness it—I'm personally somewhat interested in having an encounter between KuroneKo-san and Black Hanekawa, but not to the extent of ending my own life.

Therefore, I have to solve this code before either the end of the class or the nurse comes back—right, let's take a different approach.

It's a messy method but let's try rewinding from the answer.

"KuroneKo-san, the message you sent was a encrypted version of 'Are you the culprit?' right? So we can assume the reply to be one answering an

arraignment… so wouldn't it be fair to assume these numbers express a 'yes' or a 'no'?"

I personally think it could also be a "huh?" but given the amount of numbers that's quite unlikely.

Although both "yes" and "no" are too short to be a complete deciphering of this code too… But I think it's fine to continue with the assumption that this is the answer to a question.

"I feel like the most obvious solution would be having '1' as 'A,' '2' as 'I,' '3' as 'U,' and so on, but… this thing has stuff like '92.'"

We run into the same problem as the attendance numbers theory.

If only the numbers stopped at around '50'…[46]

"By the way, what kind of person is the suspect who constructed the code?"

"A first-year in the science course with great prospects for the future. He is in the same class as the sister. So too precious of a talent to have it be crushed in some ill-founded romantic quarrel."

"Hmm… The science course, eh. So it's probably better to expect a play on numbers and not words…"

But if it's some high-tier encryption then it might be better to leave it to a decoding software rather than challenging it myself in this infirmary. That would be way more—hmm?

Huh?

"Say, KuroneKo-san."

"What is it, Koyomi-kun? Making such a serious face now. Are you perhaps scheming a profession of love? If that is the case I would advise you against it. I'm a bothersome woman."

I'm well aware of that.

Not thirty minutes had passed since I met her, but I knew it full well.

"In the first place, why did you seek my cooperation to decode this?"

---

[46] Meaning each number could be matched with a corresponding hiragana, of which there are 46.

I was unsettled to find an unknown high school girl wearing bloomers appear out of the blue, however, that goes for her too, I was an unknown high schooler to her—no matter the rumors she might've heard, I find it hard to believe she thought I was the lord of deciphering.

She showed up without an appointment and blabbered with such fervor for so long that I got swallowed in her rhythm, but thinking about it with a clear head, this situation was messed up.

So messed up I don't know why I needed a clear head to realize it.

Why did KuroneKo-san rely on someone as lowly as me… Put another way, why did KuroneKo-san think *I* could manage to solve it?

Wouldn't that be the key?

I wonder. If Oikura were to somehow know that I'm thinking that, she might for real have a hysteria crisis, but in the end I can only think she got wind of my affinity for math… No, but even then, I mean, it's merely a subject I'm good at, it's not like I won a medal at the Math Olympiad or anything of that level…

If we're only talking about being good at math there must be students even just in Naoetsu High School better than me at it—someone like Hanekawa, yeah, that would be way more logical.

Or was there a specific reason that I completely missed out on? Like that the suspect in that science course was an old acquaintance of mine…

"Hahaha! No need to be suspicious of me about that, Koyomi-kun, geez! Didn't I already explain my reasoning on that? I came expecting great things from you because you're the only one I can rely on for this matter. Didn't I say so? That I have heard of your grand heroic tales!"

"Yeah… You did say that, but still, there's plenty of people more friendly and willing to help than me, no?"

Once again, someone like Hanekawa.

If I hadn't been helped by her during spring break I wouldn't be chit-chatting with a bloomer-wearing high schooler on this infirmary's bed at the moment.

But well, I feel like even if KuroneKo-san and Hanekawa met (not just talking about the Black version, that goes for her normal mode too) it wouldn't go over too well… Their compatibility seems pretty bad.

Anyhow, KuroneKo-san tried to put me on a even higher-up a pedestal by saying—

"Not in the slightest, you are my ***only one***. No need to exert modesty. You are without a doubt an irreplaceable person, the first and last of your kind to exist."

Before finishing with,

"I mean, you *are* a demon at helping people."

That too, she had said earlier.

Still, she probably doesn't mean it in a bad way, but being praised so much inversely feels like I'm being made a fool of. Isn't that the epitome of overkilled praise, a demon at helping people.

… Eh?

A demon—at helping people?

"There is no other hero equaling you, Koyomi-kun—I would expect no less from the man chosen by Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade to be her thrall. At the very least I don't know of any other **vampire** with an interest in helping others, you know?"

I was far off thinking it was overkilled praise.

An immortal aberration could not possibly die from simply getting praised—Kuroneko-san said bewitchingly along with a smirk.

005

I won't deny that one of the reasons behind my lack of motivation in deciphering the code lied in the fact I got in halfway through it—I cannot help but find requests like "can you help me out with this? I only have this part left to do" to be half-assed. I'm the type of person who, when involved in some matter, wants to deal with it from the ground up.

Of course I'm not just doing it for the fun of it, and I'm sure KuroneKo-san intended to make the burden lighter on my side for when she would seek my cooperation—despite the length of her starting speech I still think she was trying to keep it brief. That thought made chills run down my spine, but the reason as to why she visited Naoetsu High School in the first place was probably in the omitted part of her speech.

Apparently the reply from the boy suspected by KuroneKo-san was a code in the form of a painting.

"No, the word painting would be an exaggeration. It was only some scribbles written messily on straw paper—that was the main part of the cipher. And it led me to the numbers I presented to you earlier."

I was curious as to how she obtained such a list of numbers from a single painting, but, at any rate, the important part here was the painting in itself.

It depicted a demon.

It had an erratic shape, with horns, tusks, and gigantic muscles.

"That student was certainly smart, but it doesn't seem he had much of an inclination toward arts, you see. Therefore I unfortunately cannot bring myself to call that illustration good. However, it being good or not doesn't matter for the deciphering—neither does the represented subject."

That's why KuroneKo-san was able to smoothly progress on the solving—with a nice tempo, until halfway.

Until she reached this list of numbers.

But she hit a wall there—she couldn't obtain the yes/no reply she expected from these incomprehensible, seemingly random numbers.

"But you see, ciphers exist to be solved. So hitting a dead end must mean that I glossed over something important. So, there, I decided to go back to square one. *I had hastily deemed the contents drawn on the straw paper, in other words, the demon, to not hold any particular meaning, but could it possibly be the last piece of the puzzle I was missing?* I inferred that—this led me to sneak out of my infirmary and sneak into this infirmary, all in order to meet you, Koyomi-kun."

"…"

I was—convinced. In a way.

Deciding to go meet a *demon* because she deemed the key to be the *demon* is an overly simplistic way of thinking, but simplistic also means straightforward. Not taking the roundabout way but using the most direct method without hesitation is certainly what I would expect from KuroneKo-san.

Still, my puzzlement increased.

It reached its limit—not about the code, but something far more important.

"… How—"

How does KuroneKo-san know that, during that spring break, I got my blood sucked by Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade and as a result was turned into a vampire——!?

“Rather, let me ask you. How could I possibly not know about it? How can you all withstand not knowing? How can you not die, being this ignorant?”

Living without knowing anything.

That’s no different than being dead—KuroneKo-san claimed along with a smile on her face.

… I was mistaken.

I didn’t mean to underestimate the girl who introduced herself as an information dealer, but, even then, I tried to somehow make her fit into my common sense. I tried to reason it out by putting it in the same basket as the networks that the Fire Sisters, being the leaders of the middle schools in their area, or even the community that admires Kanbaru possess.

But—I was completely off the mark.

I cannot deny that it took me too long. I should’ve realized it from other factors, like the fact that she was wearing bloomers in this day and age like an heretic, her bizarre long tirade, or her unfathomable decisions leading her to sneak into another school in cold blood.

This girl—would do whatever it takes.

She even treats that hellish spring break mixed with blood and death where demons fought and clashed with each other I experienced as a mere piece of information and puts it to use.

I had lived for a time in a life-and-death situation.

But I could never have imagined that there could be people living in a life-and-knowledge situation—[47]

“…”

Well…

Strictly speaking, it seemed like the *demon* KuroneKo-san was talking about wasn’t a vampire…

Still, though surprising, I once heard that the more educated someone is, the more they lean toward admitting occult stuff, like ghosts and such—

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[47] Koyomi changes the idiom 生きるか死ぬか (*ikiru ka shinu ka*, “live or die”) to 生きるか知るか (*ikiru ka shiru ka*, “live or know”).

rather than a matter of faith, it's probably because they know how important it is to not deny everything flat-out and leave all possibilities a chance.

However, I couldn't admit it in any way.

Being part of that occultism myself, I had to deny that *accusation* of me being a vampire—my response to this arraignment had to be a complete no.

"Ha… haha. What are you talking about, KuroneKo-san? Vampires? There's no way those exist. Do I look like I'm wearing a manteau? Aah, I see, now that you mention it I once had a nickname close to that, didn't you get the wrong idea from that? That was back when my diet was mainly composed of ketchup…"

"No, I couldn't care less about the truth of the matter. Whether you admit to or deny being a vampire, or whether you were a living vampire mainly ingesting ketchup or not, none of that matters—I already know everything there is to know regarding it, be it for the lies or the truth."

She paid no heed to my justification.

Her eyes were shining a fiery blaze.

"Were the specialist Oshino Meme still in this town I would have headed his way, you see. But, for the time being, when it comes to *demons* you are first on the list. So please tell me your opinion on the matter, Koyomi-kun. How would you, the demon at helping people, decipher this code?"

"… E-Err—"

Despite seemingly having seen through me and all of my secrets, she showed no sign whatsoever of concern toward them—her attitude of wanting to know everything, yet having no interest in what she knows, was yet again out of the norm and abnormal.

If I, for instance, were to ask KuroneKo-san "you really know everything, don't you?" she would surely give an answer like that:

I don't know everything. That's why I want to know.

… I see now. Her friend's appraisal was indeed correct.

Byouinzaka Kuroneko isn't an information dealer.

She is a great detective—and one who understands everything from atop her bed at that, a *bed detective*.

"H-Hold on a second—I'll think about it now."

I once again faced the loose-leaf where the cipher was inscribed—leaving it aside for a moment didn't change how it looked, the list was exactly like when I had seen it a moment ago, however, the situation took a great turn.

This crazy girl knows about what happened in this town during the spring break—and not just that, she wants to use my situation for her puzzle-solving.

Therefore, if her plan fails she would judge that her estimation of me was a *miscalculation* and move on to another bed.

Even though meeting Oshino was effectively impossible—she might visit the bed of another person who got involved with aberrations in the past, or visit the bed of another *demon*.

So at this point claiming to not be a *demon* would work against me—I had completely lost track of who I should protect and how, but whatever; if I solved the code by myself right here, I would be immediately met with an impeccable happy end.

… Would I really?

Anyway, up to then I was thinking along the lines of "if I solve this, KuroneKo-san will go home," but I needed to change my stance to "if I don't solve this, KuroneKo-san won't go home." This deciphering had morphed into an insanely pressing matter for me.

"How are you doing, Koyomi-kun? Any inspiration coming soon? Or should I have waited for it to be night to visit a vampire?"

"… Um, is it possible to see the original drawing of the *demon*? If that's a hint too I want to try combining it with these numbers."

"Fumu. Unfortunately I couldn't avoid destroying it during the deciphering so I cannot show you the real thing. I will try replicating it from memory. Should I draw it on the reverse of this loose-leaf? Please lend me something to write with."

As ordered, I stood up from the bed, pulled a ballpoint pen from the pen holder on the infirmary's desk, and handed it to KuroneKo-san.

"Fufuuun. Whew phew. Here, done. I wouldn't call it a perfect copy but it is pretty accurate."

She had finished in no time and handed it to me, however, I regrettably didn't gain any inspiration from it—well, I didn't expect anything from it to begin with, it was mostly a way to gain some time to think.

She said she would replicate it, but looking at the drawing I couldn't tell who wasn't suited for art between her and the suspect.

I can certainly distinguish horn-looking things and tusk-looking things in it, but the quality of the drawing was such that even with that I wouldn't feel confident enough in calling the subject a demon.

If one was told beforehand it was a demon then that person might see that, but if they were instead told it was a troll they might say it was a troll—even so, at the very least, it didn't look like a vampire.

Well, it's at least the illustration of a monster… But how could this drawing, copied on the backside of the loose-leaf, lead to the list of numbers on the frontside—no, I guess that's besides the point for this case.

"Umm, maybe we could get it from sounding it out, or possibly through anagrams… or forcibly reading the numbers as Japanese…"

I simply said what was going through my head, but KuroneKo-san readily squinted her big eyes—she must've glared at me because of the mundanity of what I was saying.

Crap. She might be thinking I was a bad choice.

I was a little worried, but then KuroneKo-san said,

"Right, I forgot to tell you something."

And raised a finger.

Is there still something else she omitted?

"You mentioned 'reading it in Japanese' just now, Koyomi-kun, but the cipher I sent to the suspect was, when deciphered, in English. I asked him "Are you the culprit?" in English. So perhaps he tried to go along with me for his answer."

"I see…"

That was a more valuable piece of information than the monster's illustration, however, I can only feel like that increased the difficulty once again—English, really?

I know I snuck out on my own, but why do I have to think so hard about Japanese, math, and English during gym classes?

Ah, and art too.

Shit, go ahead and send whatever love letter you want, but because of the monster you drew in your poetic reply, I, someone completely unrelated, was forced to go along with this meaningless charade…

"… *But*, even if it's meaningless to me, it might not be to the creator of this code. I don't know if it can be of any use for solving this, but maybe he didn't only draw this monster simply because that's wh—"

"'Monster'!?"

Suddenly.

KuroneKo-san stood up from her crawling position—naturally, because the bed was pretty springy, she couldn't stop her inertia and ended up falling backwards.

Adding to that, her bountiful chest bounced quite heavily. At the same time, her gym uniform got pulled up by about five centimeters, which made clear that KuroneKo-san didn't only have a great bust size but also had incredibly slender hips. Going only with numbers Hanekawa's breasts would probably dominate, but if we take into account her unbelievably narrow waist it looked like she could put up a good fight, relatively speaking.

"A-Are you okay?"

"Yeah. It hyper-doesn't hurt."

She answered so, still sprawling on the bed.

Then,

"Hahahah

"I was mistaken!"

I didn't know what she was talking about.

That said, I readied my generous heart to accept and forgive any apology coming my way.

"There was no need to come see you at all, Koyomi-kun!"

She added. I agreed with her overall, but saying that after making me go along with her for so long rendered me speechless.

You are by no means a welcome étranger around these parts, how should I put it so she can understand—should I say it in English?

"Wh… what happened, KuroneKo-san? Did you perhaps suddenly come up with the answer to the code?"

"'Suddenly' is so misplaced, it feels to me like I took way too long! I should've realized something this simple much faster! Then, maybe coming all this way wasn't an error after all. Koyomi-kun, without your fantastic advice I might never have solved this cipher! Because if that were to happen, I would have thrown away my life on my own!"

Saying you would kill yourself just because you couldn't solve a code is such an exaggeration… I didn't think that. This high school girl might pull that off for real—still, I also feel like if she clamors this lunatically when she solves it, then there's not much of a difference between solving it or not.

However—my advice?

Did I give any advice?

"You're constantly doubting yourself, Koyomi-kun, aren't you? You rightfully informed this unenlightened fellow before you, didn't you? That this drawing wasn't that of a *demon* but that of a *monster*."

"…?"

"Hahahahaha!"

"S-Sorry, could you stop suddenly laughing every time you see an occasion? It's scary. I'm immortal but I feel like I might die from the surprise."

Still, I didn't concretely deny that the drawing was picturing a *demon*—but what changes by redefining this picture to the broader meaning of

monster? It's kind of like the difference between calling an unknown phenomenon 'an aberration' or 'a monster'—

"Japanese. Math. English. And to finish, art. Koyomi-kun, you tastefully expressed the curriculum of the case I presented you with as such, but I will have to include one last subject in that timetable as supplementary lessons."

"… One more subject? What could that—"

"Chemistry."

KuroneKo-san said.

"A branch of science: chemistry. The study of metamorphoses."[48]

[48] This whole scene/pun is a mess and has been slightly edited to try to somewhat work in English.

Kuroneko reacts to the word 化物 (*bakemono*, "monster"). She brings up the field of 化学 (*kagaku*, "chemistry", lit. "the study of change") which shares its first kanji with *bakemono*, and compares it to 科学 (*kagaku*, "science"). Since this is pronounced the same way, the last line was "to make it different from *science/kagaku*, let's call it *bakegaku* instead", reading the first kanji of 化学 with the alternative reading, like in *bakemono*.

Except… For some reason, the furigana Nisio used to indicate the pronunciation of 化学 and 科学 do not read *kagaku*, but rather the English loan words ケミストリー (*kemisutorii*) and サイエンス (*saiensu*), meaning the pun doesn't really work unless you ignore these given pronunciations.

I included all of this explanation to share the pain of the translator who had to deal with this. Please send your prayers to him.

006

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

Jumping at math as soon as I heard "science course" was too precipitated. Science courses have other subjects—such as chemistry or biology.

The science of metamorphoses and the science of life.

Put together, metamorphosing life, in other words, monsters—huh.[49]

Well, unlike math I'm not particularly good at these, but once you make the connection the cipher is as good as solved.

You can solve it with middle-school-level knowledge.

"Not to sound like a sore loser, but Koyomi-kun, I had a hunch when you proposed to 'sound it out'—every subject has mnemonics relying on sounds. And, in chemistry, there is one kind that comes to mind immediately."

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[49] Continuing from the previous note… The original line put together 化学 (*kagaku*, "chemistry") and 物理 (*butsuri*, "physics") to form 化物 (*bakemono*, "monster"). "Physics" was changed to "biology" in this translation to help making it work in English.

Right. Ones that stand out.

Naughty Margaret Always Sighs, "Please Stop Clowning Around."

Saying it out of the blue might get you to wonder "who's Margaret?" but I absolutely didn't want to provide KuroneKo-san with a new mystery by asking her that.[50]

Essentially it's about the periodic table of elements.

And, speaking of the periodic table, it shows atomic numbers.

And unlike attendance numbers or the Japanese syllabary, the numbers go to 118 here—therefore, changing the numbers to elements is a breeze.

"39／99／53／95／16／**2**／53／
16／15／68／26／**6**／73／**7**／
32／**3**／74／53／16／**1**／**9**／**8**／
45／68／19／53／16／16／33／
16／**8**／**8**／**7**／33／53／19／10／
74／**1**／68／85／**6**／57／16／
16／**5**／92／90／68／35／**8**／
90／68／53／16／16／92／15／
68／16／68／53／**8**／92／16／
16／**8**／53／31／23／63／15"

Becomes,

[50] The original is 水兵リーベ僕の船 (*suihei riibe boku no fune*, lit. "Sailor Ribe, my ship"), which is the go-to Japanese mnemonic for the beginning of the periodic table, followed by Koyomi saying "who's Ribe". English doesn't have such a go-to mnemonic, so this one was used.

"Yttrium / Einsteinium / Iodine / Americium / Sulfur / Helium / Iodine / Sulfur / Phosphorus / Erbium / Iron / Carbon / Tantalum / Nitrogen / Germanium / Lithium / Tungsten / Iodine / Sulfur / Hydrogen / Fluorine / Oxygen / Rhodium / Erbium / Potassium / Iodine / Sulfur / Sulfur / Arsenic / Sulfur / Oxygen / Oxygen / Nitrogen / Arsenic / Iodine / Potassium / Neon / Tungsten / Hydrogen / Erbium / Astatine / Carbon / Lanthanum / Sulfur / Sulfur / Boron / Uranium / Thorium / Erbium / Bromine / Oxygen / Thorium / Erbium / Iodine / Sulfur / Sulfur / Uranium / Phosphorus / Erbium / Sulfur / Erbium / Iodine / Oxygen / Uranium / Sulfur / Sulfur / Oxygen / Iodine / Gallium / Vanadium / Europium / Phosphorus"

Very smoothie-ly.

… I put on airs.

Saying "smoothie-ly" instead of "smoothly" was part of that. After all, there's no way I could remember the entire periodic table—I can at most recite the first ten I learned through mnemonics.

Yet, KuroneKo-san exhibited her perfect knowledge of it—so she was plain smart, that girl.

"Well, I wouldn't dare brag about being able to recite it spontaneously. I'm personally part of the school that thinks separating the lanthanides and the actinides from the rest on the table is cheating. I support that the table doesn't make much sense unless we lump them with the others."

There are schools of thoughts for stuff like that?

However, luckily, one doesn't need to partake in one of these factions nor to know what the atomic numbers of einsteinium or europium are to progress further.

What I want you to remember here is the question KuroneKo-san sent to the suspect boy, that is, "Are you the culprit?" which would be an English sentence obtained through decoding. That caused me to despair even further because of the possibility the reply might be in English, but… In this case, for atomic numbers, it is much more straightforward to write them using the Latin alphabet rather than kanji or katakana.

In other words, the elements' symbols.

Therefore,

"Yttrium / Einsteinium / Iodine / Americium / Sulfur / Helium / Iodine / Sulfur / Phosphorus / Erbium / Iron / Carbon / Tantalum / Nitrogen / Germanium / Lithium / Tungsten / Iodine / Sulfur / Hydrogen / Fluorine / Oxygen / Rhodium / Erbium / Potassium / Iodine / Sulfur / Sulfur / Arsenic / Sulfur / Oxygen / Oxygen / Nitrogen / Arsenic / Iodine / Potassium / Neon / Tungsten / Hydrogen / Erbium / Astatine / Carbon / Lanthanum / Sulfur / Sulfur / Boron / Uranium / Thorium / Erbium / Bromine / Oxygen / Thorium / Erbium / Iodine / Sulfur / Sulfur / Uranium / Phosphorus / Erbium / Sulfur / Erbium / Iodine / Oxygen / Uranium / Sulfur / Sulfur / Oxygen / Iodine / Gallium / Vanadium / Europium / Phosphorus"

Can be rewritten to be,

"Y/Es/I/Am/S/He/I/S/P/Er/Fe/C/Ta/N/Ge/Li/W/I/S/H/F/O/Rh/Er/K/I/S/S/As/S/O/O/N/As/I/K/Ne/W/H/Er/At/C/La/S/S/B/U/Th/Er/Br/O/Th/Er/I/S/S/U/P/Er/S/Er/I/O/U/S/S/O/I/Ga/V/Eu/P"

It's still quite a mess but we're nearly there.

If we add commas and periods appropriately to up the readability of this list, no longer one of numbers but of letters, as well as changing the upper- and lowercase letters, we obtain:

"*Yes, I am. She is Perfect angel. I wish for her kiss as soon as I knew her at class. But her brother is super serious. So, I gave up.*"

And for the last touch, if we are to translate it to Japanese to better express the will of the creator,

"Yes, I am. She is a perfect angel. I wished for her kiss as soon as I met her in class. But her brother is super serious, so I gave up."

I guess that should be about it.

Please be lenient with the awkwardness of my translation, part of it is due to my mediocre English skills, but the English version itself was limited due to inevitable restriction when writing with the chemical elements.

No wonder we saw a lot of **16**s—with these rules it's normal for one of the most common letters of the alphabet, S, in other words the atomic number for sulfur, to have a high appearance rate.

Still, that being said, he filled in quite a lengthy confession to KuroneKo-san's interrogation (probably something like "***Are you a suspect?***") when he could've simply said "***Yes, I am.***"

Perhaps he made such an essay that emphasized the awkwardness and embarrassment in order to hide his heartbreak from any third party. Or maybe it was to convey "this is none of your business" in-between the lines—and in reality, that's how it turned out.

The sender of the letter had apparently realized that his classmate, the "sister," had quite the dangerous "brother" and gave up before receiving KuroneKo-san's interrogation.

In that sense KuroneKo-san might've had a point when she said "There was no need to come see you at all"—even so, she didn't seem to regret all that wasted effort in the slightest.

She rather showed a feeling of accomplishment.

"Aah, I feel so much better! Hurray to being alive!"

She said while stretching, lying sideways on the bed.

From what I managed to pick up, she had originally undertaken this deciphering in order to protect her friend, but she had seemingly forgotten that intention—no, her true original intention might've been her *thirst for knowledge* from the very start.

If so, she must truly feel accomplished.

Although she was lying backwards on the bed, she didn't get her priorities backwards—well, in the end, her being both a bothersome and a meddlesome high school girl didn't seem to merely be a facade.

Not to forget she had what it takes to be a great detective.

Anyhow, I demanded the bed detective to not tell anyone what she knows about the spring break I lived through while she was in a good mood.

And for the deciphering, well it's not like I contributed much to it, but I still acted cooperatively so it's normal to expect something in return.

What Oshino would call a compensation.

"Hahaha, you need not worry! No fool would ever trust what I say!"

"Don't say something that gives me another kind of worry!"

As I was weirdly convinced once again that she wasn't suited to be an information dealer, KuroneKo-san asked "so please let me repay you in some other form. Is there anything I could do for you?"

"I wouldn't have solved this cipher without you, Koyomi-kun, so I want to do anything in my power."

"Mm? Umm, yeah but I don't really need anything… Ah, right. Could I get these bloomers? I have a junior collecting those, you see."

"I guess it's time to depart! Let's get away from this school as soon as possible! Outouin Academy's infirmary, my next pieces of knowledge, and Samatoki-kun are waiting for me to get home!"

Saying that, despite being so reluctant about going home, she returned to her school, to her school's bed—and in the end I didn't get any compensation. However, I feel like her "I wouldn't have solved this cipher without you, Koyomi-kun" wasn't mere politeness.

As I stated earlier, I didn't play any particularly important role, but even so, KuroneKo-san probably wouldn't have solved it on her own—naturally, not because of a lack of knowledge.

It's the opposite, a surplus of knowledge.

Had KuroneKo-san not known the tale of the high schooler who had his blood sucked by a vampire during spring break, she might not have strayed away from the path of correctness during that process—even if she hadn't noticed that the drawing of a *demon* wasn't a *monster* (in fact, only the creator knows whether that was an intentional hint) I can see her having the idea of the periodic table just from the numbers. That shouldn't be

impossible for her, with a perfect knowledge of that table—however, she knew.

Knowing of the urban legends, of the hearsays, of the rumors—led her to mistakenly question me, unknowingly inquiring to a fool instead of a sage.

I have to applaud her for still reaching the truth despite all of that. She was probably a sage among sages. Still, I can only say it's ironic how her, pursuing knowledge with her life on the line, was led astray in her deduction by that same knowledge.

And, that goes for me too.

Although in my case the irony was more meaty—on that day, if I hadn't known about the vampire, on that night, I might not have become a vampire.

At that moment, should I have known?

Or should I have died?[51]

The solution to that question, however, cannot be attained through any kind of deciphering.

[51] Playing again off the "live or die" / "live or know" pun from earlier.

M A Z E M O N O G A T A R I

Kuroneko Bed — Chapter Ill

Cracked the chemical code: Sway Translations
Drew a depiction of a demon: Bluex, Noyaxus & Kakuzō
Stared at Kuroneko's big milkers: Maxdefolsch

MAZEMONOGATARI

NISIOISIN

Risuka Blood

Chapter Blood

Mizukura Risuka

Risuka Series

Art: Kinu Nishimura

001

Mizukura Risuka is a magical girl. I remember writing a similar sentence just recently, specifically just three stories ago, however, this magical girl is different from the short-lived and plainly annoying one from before. She's an authentic and thoroughbred magical girl by birth. After all, her title is The Red Witch of Time. Indeed, a magical girl through and through—and on top of that, she has fulfilled all the nine necessary principles required to be a magical girl, so there's nothing to complain about.

By the way, the nine principles of magical girls are as follows:

1. A magical girl must be a girl. However, this does not apply to a boy who looks good in women's clothing.
2. A magical girl must be able to use magic. However, that magic should never be all-powerful.
3. A magical girl must exert no power other than magic. Armed force and intelligence, for example, are better left entrusted to her allies.
4. A magical girl must use a magical item. However, this does not apply if the magical girl herself is an item.
5. A magical girl must fight evil. However, that evil should be a vague concept, not a specific individual.

6. A magical girl must be able to transform. The transformation is not limited to one type.
7. A magical girl must be colorful. The costume as well as its character should be in line with the same color scheme.
8. A magical girl must continue to grow throughout her battles as long as the first rule is not violated.
9. A magical girl must be a magical girl. However, this does not apply if she continues to hold on to her courage even after losing her powers.

The above nine principles are just something I made up on the spot, so I don't want them to be taken too seriously. That being said, Mizukura Risuka was a subject that I could never even imagine having an encounter with—even for me, someone who'd met a vampire during the hellish spring break, meeting a magical girl who was supposedly a resident of the Kingdom of Magic—it was like a dream within a dream.

Like a dream within a dream, and one more dream further in.

So please think of this as a dream story.

It's a story about dreams coming true, both for me, as well as for the magical girl who couldn't escape from the warzone area of Kyushu.

Although that dream might have actually been a nightmare… even though I don't mind using that phrasing for Golden Week, it's too straightforward of a remark to use here (there's also the fact that the magical girl from Shikoku was a far worse nightmare for me compared to the one from Kyushu), so I'll refrain from giving it such a title.

The dream may just have been the result of wicked magic that Risuka's father, the most powerful magus of the gods, the untraceable *Nyarlathotep*, Mizukura Shingo, cast on our story.

002

I was trapped in the gym storage room.

No, it's not actually accurate to say that I was trapped—technically, I had been driven into the gym storage room.

Given that it was the gym storage room of Naoetsu High School, I can't help but be reminded of the time when I went against the vampire hunter Dramaturgy, a vampire-killing vampire. Back then as I was chopped into pieces by both of his flamberges, I was forced to scuttle into the gym storage room as well.

A chill ran down my spine just thinking back to that spring break, which was a quite literal do-or-die situation for me. But strangely enough, in the current situation, I didn't feel any negative emotions at all.

Because this case was different.

Because this evening, I was not alone.

"It's a strange thing, Risuka-chan. Even though I just met you today, I feel like we've been fighting together for a long time."

"Your imagination is probably what that feeling is."

It was a strange phrasing of words (dialect?). The one who turned around and answered me was a girl sitting on track and field mats piled up

in the left corner of the gym storage room—a girl of about ten years of age, sitting on a pile of mats, pointing the blade of a box cutter at me.

A box cutter?

"Pfft, this reminds me of my early days with Senjougahara."

"H-How can you remain so composed with a blade pointed at you?"

Red hair, red eyes.

Red thigh highs and red dress.

Red witch's hat and red gloves.

All, entirely red.

Both the box cutter and the holster for carrying it were red—the only thing that wasn't red was the silver handcuffs that adorned her right wrist like a bracelet, perhaps as some kind of fashion accessory.

In the town where I lived, you didn't see many people with outfits like that, even if they were an aberration. But, it looked good on her, so there was no sense of discomfort whatsoever.

From the very beginning, it felt like I was watching a paradise bird, covered in intricate patterns—looking again with the eyes of a high school student who knew a thing or two about fashion, I couldn't help but intently admire the coordination of those designs.

"B-But aren't you staring at my absolute territory?[52] Not intently, but pervertedly."

"Dear me! Looks like we're in agreement for the first time, Risuka-chan."

"What I don't want you doing is answer in a cool way to this kind of question."

"But I'll tell you one thing. There isn't a single non-absolute area on your entire skin."

"What do you know about my skin?"

Risuka-chan said in a disgusted manner and adjusted the aim of her box cutter toward me with even more precision—if she came any closer than

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[52] The absolute territory (絶対領域, *zettai ryōiki*) refers to the area of bare skin in the gap between overknee socks and a miniskirt.

she already was, it would go without saying that I would be cut down without mercy.

Schk schk schk schk…

Schk schk schk schk…

Schk schk schk schk…

She slid the blade in and out as if threatening me.

"Koyomi. I know someone like you. Someone I met in the past."

Mm… I guess I needed to do some deciphering here. Let's see, "I know someone like you"? "Someone I met a long time ago," is that what she meant?

"Really? It's hard to believe. I wouldn't have thought people similar to me could even exist."

"Do you have to show off for each thing you are saying?"

"By any chance, are they the 'Kizutaka' guy you spoke of before?"

"No. Kagetani Hebiyuki, a magician."

I see.

I didn't know what kind of guy he was, but just hearing his name, I couldn't help but feel a connection—he must be a fellow gentleman, kind to children just like me.

The fact that I had a fellow companion somewhere out there in this world, or maybe in another world, was really reassuring. I was happy to know that I wasn't alone, but unfortunately, that happiness was short-lived.

Clunk—the sound of the door being kicked reverberated throughout the gym storage room.

"!"

"He's here!"

Risuka-chan stood up on the mat—her wobbly behavior due to her sudden movement on the soft mat was cute. However, while that may have been the case, I couldn't afford to ignore the presence repeatedly kicking the iron door.

By the time my gaze reached the door, it had already morphed into a dented bumpy mess.

I lurked along with Risuka-chan on our honeymoon, wait no. I mean, in this locked room.[53] I was helpless in the face of the pressure that threatened to kick down the iron door… Hm?

Why did I assume that the attacker on the other side of the door was "kicking," or that the sound was caused by them "kicking the iron door"?

Because I could.

Regardless of whether I wanted to, I had to…

"What do we do, Risuka-chan?"

I asked, preparing myself for battle.

"It's only a matter of time before *he* comes storming in here."

"Time?"

Then, Risuka-chan jumped off the mats and landed beside me with a casual demeanor that seemed too used to battle for a ten-year-old girl.

Then, with a fearless smile, she said:

"The concept of time is problem that is immensely trivial where I am concerned."

Crrrrreeeeaaaaaaaaak!

And with that, the iron door was finally torn open.

What I saw on the other side of that torn-apart door was—as expected, a foot.

A right foot.

With a heel kick from that right foot, the iron door was torn open like a slit plastic bag—but the person standing there was not a taekwondo practitioner or a soccer player.

I repeat again. It was a right foot—yes.

With only the right leg attached.

A self-supporting right foot—an autonomous right foot.

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[53] Koyomi first says 蜜月 (*mitsugetsu*, "honeymoon") instead of 密室 (*misshitsu*, "locked room").

That foot, without shoes or socks, looked like a part of a dismembered corpse, as often found in *shinhonkaku* mystery stories.[54]

One of the *Six Wizards* led by Mizukura Kagi.

This was the right foot of the magician once targeted by Mizukura Risuka, the magician of multiplication known as *Carousel*—the right leg of Chikyuugi Mizore.

[54] The *Shinhonkaku* School (新本格派, lit. "Neo-Orthodox School") of detective fiction is a Japanese genre of mystery characterised by more metatextually dense and youthful stories than their more classically styled counterparts.

003

The name Chikyuugi Mizore was so bizarre, perhaps due to cultural differences, that it made even Araragi Koyomi and Senjougahara Hitagi feel common after hearing it. Allow me to explain how I got involved in this mess.

It was on my way back home from school.

On the way home, I spotted a girl walking ahead of me—well, maybe "spotted" was a misnomer, but she was about ten years old.

She was walking slowly, restlessly looking around.

"Oh! If it isn't Hachikuji?!"

In case you're reading this as a bonus for the film version and you're not familiar with the original novel, Hachikuji is my best friend, a fifth-grader who takes supreme pleasure in me hugging her from behind. She wouldn't hesitate to say that her sole reason for existing was to receive surprise hugs from me, and I, as an older third-year high school student, am merciful enough to play along with her games—oh, well, today was another lighthearted, rocket-starting day.

"Hachikujiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!"

"What!?"

"Hachikuji Hachikuji Hachikuji Hachikuji—!"

"What—!? What—!? What—!!?"

"It's Hachikuji, it's truly Hachikuji, it can be no one else other than Hachikuji! Unless it was Hachikuji, I would never be able to hug someone in this way, feeling her smooth skin with my cheeks. Hachikuji and I are such intimate friends that she doesn't mind no matter how much I fondle her, it's just some skinship contact! If I were to accidentally do this to a character from another novel or something like that, it would undoubtedly ring big trouble! No, really, your familiar red outfit still looks good on you, as easy to strip off as ever! Your trademark knee socks are just as comfortable to the touch as ever, Hachikuji! As usual, it's blissful to snuggle my face into your nice, stuffy red hair topped with a baggy triangular hat! Every single nook and cranny of your body is smooth and warm. Your eyes and lips are so soft!"

"WHAT!??"

Stab!

Stab! Stab! Stab!

"Woah!? My right thigh has been stabbed with a box cutter!? By Hachikuji!?"

Even though it's Hachikuji!?

Impossible, Hachikuji never uses any weapons, she would directly bite me with her teeth like a vampire…!

"You felon, so you are not Hachikuji!"

"Mi-Mimimi-Mizukura Risuka is me!"

The girl violently pulled out the box cutter from my right thigh and distanced herself from me—now that she was facing me head-on, the differences between her and Hachikuji finally became clearer.

"Tsk… You fooled me. I was completely deceived, how careless of me."

"Why are you the one looking like the victim?"

"Also, why is it that you're fine even after being stabbed in the thigh?" The girl—Risuka-chan questioned.

"Hey, hey. I can't answer that many questions at once. One at a time, okay?"

"It's irritating to do that."

She didn't like how I phrased my lines, it seems.

She had her own peculiar way of speaking, but fortunately, I knew a blond-haired, blond-eyed young girl who spoke in an ancient dialect, so it wouldn't be too hard to deal with a red-haired, red-eyed little girl, who spoke in a mysterious inverted way.

I was a specialist.

Not a specialist on aberrations, but on small girls.

"…"

Risuka-chan shook her head.

Even though she was silent, it came across as eloquent—she seemed to be frightened of something.

I couldn't leave her alone.

"What's the matter, Risuka-chan? You can ask me questions one at a time, okay? Although, there are some things I can answer and some things I can't."

"Everyone in this town talk in that way?"

"Yeah. I don't think I'm special, you know. I'm just a regular guy trying to do his best."

"Why are you the one looking like the victim?"

"Unfortunately, I was born with this face. But if it made Risuka-chan take interest in me, I must thank my parents for it."

"Also, why is it that you're fine even after being stabbed in the thigh?"

"My body is pretty well trained. I'm used to this level of scratch. Fortunately, the femoral artery seems to be intact, so it'll heal with just a little spit on it."

That's why you don't have to worry about my injuries, I said with the utmost kindness, just like I would for Hachikuji. However, Risuka-chan only distanced herself further from me.

"I-I should have aimed for the stomach then…"

"Oh, come on. I don't need someone digging into my gut outside of the hospital."

"Don't shrug your shoulders. That should be me doing that."

Ummm, I guess trying to put on airs was backfiring.

Actually, my thighs were causing me quite some pain right now.

That was also including the price of a pair of cut-up jeans.

"Oh well, now it's my turn to ask questions."

"How come you get a turn too?"

"You don't look like you're going home from elementary school, but are you alone? Are your parents around?"

"C-Confirming the absence of parents first thing… That's common practice among criminals, that is…"

I think there was a misunderstanding.

But I think we could understand each other.

"I don't go to elementary school… I'm skipping school. I'm always with Kizutaka, but I got separated from him… and my parents…"

Stammering.

While she seemed wary, somehow, Risuka-chan managed to divulge some personal information (Kizutaka?). It seemed to be difficult for her to talk about things related to her parents, regardless of her peculiar wording.

What was it, did they not get along?

"I see. So, you wanna come over to my place?"

"Of course I wouldn't."

I'm in the middle of a *witch hunt*—Risuka-chan said, declining my invitation.

Witch hunt?

"Aaah, that thing, yeah."

"There's no way you would know."

"Not exactly, but I know of a similar case. Yes, when I was researching medieval European literature."

"I wish you didn't brag about your knowledge."

"I don't know everything, I just know what I know."

"Could you cut that out?"

"I don't cut everything, I just cut what I cut."

Hanekawa might get angry with me if I use her lines in this way, so let's change course.

"I think I get the gist. Risuka-chan is a righteous magical girl who came from the Kingdom of Magic to take out evil magicians who do the world harm, right?"

"H-How did you actually figure that out? It's frightening how close your guess hits the mark."

"Don't underestimate me. After all, I am a specialist on small girls. I'm an authority on little girls, so naturally, I'm an authority on magical girls too."

"You must cause great pains to your family."

"Oops, sorry for the delay in introducing myself. My name is Araragi Koyomi. Even if I go to hell, I probably wouldn't change my ways."

"It's my first time getting that amount of useless information. Well… uh, Ara? Ragi?"

"Is it hard to pronounce? Well, just call me whatever you like."

"What should I do if I hate every option?"

"As long as you take your time and fall in love with it, that's fine."

"What is it that you're thinking about, Koyomi?"

"Heheh. I'm always thinking about you, Risuka-chan."

But still.

Despite us exchanging such witty and lighthearted banter (which I felt that she was boldly missing the point of), it was not as if I seriously believed that Risuka-chan was a magical girl at the time—as an insightful adult, I thought I might as well play along with her in this "game" of hers.

Just when I was thinking that I should pretend to be a monster and play with her until she could meet up with her friend Kizutaka, a monster appeared.

An actual monster.

"Koyomi! Dangerous!"

Dangerous? Me? Hey, hey, there's no one safer than me—but before I had time to say that (there was no margin left to say that), I was sent flying by a kick to my back, a kick from a right leg.

Was this the kind of pain my lovely friend Hachikuji feels when I hug her from behind? Wondering about this, I crashed straight into a telephone pole.

"Finally! He's dead at last! Wait, no! Are you alright, Koyomi!?"

For a moment, I thought I heard Risuka-chan's true intentions leaking out, but it was probably an auditory hallucination. After all, a ten-year-old girl who was the embodiment of an angel would never say such a thing…

"No problem."

I answered shortly and reversed my posture—wanting to do something about the identity of the thug who gave me a flying kick to the back.

But there was no one, nothing, nothing at all.

There was no one—except for a single leg standing there.

A bare right leg.

If I had to compare it to an aberration, it would be a *kasa-obake*[55] with its umbrella ripped off—but if that's the appearance it's aiming for, it should've been wearing *getas.*[56]

"Wh-What the heck is that…"

"The *right leg* of *Carousel*, Chikyuugi Mizore."

The question that I asked on reflex was unexpectedly met with an answer from Risuka-chan.

"It's the leg that was **failed to be hunted** in the series of *witch hunts* I conducted with Kizutaka and Tsunagi—I'm the one who came to hunt the remnants."

Saying that, the magical girl bared the red box cutter, showing her hostility.

Schk schk schk schk…

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[55] A *kasa-obake* (傘おばけ, "umbrella ghost") is a mythical ghost in Japanese folklore, that is usually depicted as an umbrella with one eye and a long tongue jumping around on one leg.

[56] Traditional Japanese footwear resembling flip-flops, with a wooden base and prongs elevating the foot above the ground.

004

Thinking about it, when I went against Dramaturgy, a right leg was also involved. The right leg of the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade. But now I was stuck fighting this aberration (muscular man?).[57]

It would have been nice if I had recalled that vampire hunter before being cornered into the gym storage room, but it couldn't be helped.

The situation was different after all, this time I was on the hunting side.

Furthermore, it was not a vampire hunt this time, but a witch hunt.

How much of a difference there was between aberration phenomena and magical phenomena was a matter of opinion, but I couldn't help but feel that rather than fate, this situation seemed more like satire.

In any case, since I'd gotten so involved, it looked as though I was not going to be leaving anytime soon.

"No, you can go home now, Koyomi."

"Oh, come on, don't be such a downer. Do you really think I'm the kind of person who can leave Risuka-chan all alone and go home?"

---

[57] "Aberration" (怪異, *kaii*) is pronounced the same way as "muscular" (魁偉, *kaii*).

"It's a shame that it doesn't seem so."

"I'll be fine. As long as you don't grow over 150 centimeters tall, I'll be fine."

"I what?"

However, according to Risuka, this hunt was supposed to be almost complete—the hunt of Chikyuugi Mizore.

The magic used by the man titled *Carousel* had the attribute pattern *Flesh* and was situated in the *Multiplication* category. In other words, he was able to remodel his body at will.

A body-modification type of magic.

I couldn't really grasp it. Even after receiving such an explanation, it was still difficult for me, someone from a different world, to understand.

"The point is that he can become multi-legged like a spider."

I was able to get a rough idea of what to expect from Risuka-chan's explanation. The man in question was able to increase the number of parts of his body, not only his legs, but also the number of hands, fingers, nails, hairs, eyes, noses, heads, and other parts of his body; completely unbelievable.

In terms of enlarging his body, it might be similar to Ononoki, the corpse aberration, but even she couldn't have gone as far as increasing the number of body parts.

Honestly, this was an opponent I had no idea how to deal with.

I would like to see how Risuka-chan (and Kizutaka? and Tsunagi?) hunted such a magician in the past.

"No. Our hunt wasn't complete, that's why he wasn't fully hunted and one leg managed to remain. I am still immature."

Said Risuka-chan.

Okay, now the mystery is solved as to why she came to this town and why she was scurrying around as if she was looking for something.

Did she come to take responsibility, so to speak?

What a splendid thing. I wanted to praise her.

"Don't worry about it. Being immature is what makes it so good."

"… 'I don't want to become an adult' is a strong belief of mine, but for the first time I've revised my thoughts against it."

I felt that my careless words had bent her beliefs on what could be said to be the most common theme of other worlds, however, it wasn't the time to worry about that ("Was the time to worry about my beliefs not now?").

After finishing my flashback, my consciousness finally returned to the inside of the gym storage room where the iron door had been broken down—Risuka-chan and I were confronting the right leg of Chikyuugi Mizore.

What a surreal picture.

But I can't laugh—as far as I'm concerned, this was just as life-threatening as my showdown with Dramaturgy.

"Risuka-chan, hide behind me."

"Are you saying your back is safe when you got kicked earlier?"

Nuh-ungh. She stabbed me where it hurt the most.

Actually, the thigh she stabbed earlier hurt way more.

Was my femoral artery really okay?

"I wouldn't be in this predicament in the first place if you hadn't held me back before."

"Hold you back? By any chance, are you referring to back when I ran away, with you on my back, from that roadside, holding both of your legs as you tried to fight wielding a utility knife?"

"What other meaning is there?"

At that point in time, when I couldn't yet believe in magic and magical girls, I thought that was the best course of action—and although I can see how it must've been a real drag, I think that the fact that I didn't run away by myself, leaving Risuka-chan behind, deserves recognition regardless.

"Come to think of it, you fondled my legs way too much back when we were running away."

"Well, I'm planning to continue to use expressions involving the word 'leg' and finish with the punch line 'I'm sorry.'"[58]

"Your behavior isn't really good enough to be tied up with such a punch line."

In any case, as a result of the phenomenon, as described by Risuka-chan, I held onto her while dodging the attacking right leg that was chasing us, and as a result of our quick escape, we were driven into the gym storage room.

Since it was Risuka-chan who intended to hunt the right foot of Chikyuugi Mizore in the first place, I guess the current scenario where she ended up being the recipient of a counterattack herself was something unprecedented.

"I had already made up my mind when I signed up for this. The hunting side is constantly being hunted as well. However, the only thing that I am unwilling to do is to involve you."

"Aw, don't say that Risuka-chan. I'm having a really fun time in this situation, you know?"

"The only reason why I've had such an embarrassing time is because you got involved."

Apparently, she didn't mean what I thought she meant. But either way, there's no going back—it didn't take long to figure out the circumstance we were in, and even if we didn't, this wasn't a gym storage room either of us could casually escape from anymore, even if we wanted to.

The situation suddenly felt critical, as if I had burnt my own bridges.

"Will I be able to fight with this leg while also protecting Risuka-chan…"

"I honestly want you to be out of the way there. Koyomi is in my way, I can't see the enemy."

"Haha, you sure have grown up. You seem to have developed a lot of nerve, little girl."

---

[58] Here, "I'm sorry" is written as 悪しからず (*ashikarazu*), where the beginning sounds like the word for "leg" (足, *ashi*).

"Don't talk to me as if you've known me for years. I have no doubt that you would have been torn to pieces along with the enemy if Kizutaka were here."

Scary.

What the hell is that guy?

I was having a harmonious conversation with Risuka-chan like this, intentionally inviting an inadvertent attack from the other side. But even though the iron door of the gym storage room was now broken, the right foot of Chikyuugi Mizore just stood there.

Like a runner's right foot waiting for the gun's signal.

Not even moving in the slightest, just standing there.

… Is it able to sense what I'm planning? A foot? With no eyes to see nor brain to think?

Is a magician with only a foot remaining still able to plot and scheme?

"No, Koyomi. That right leg is merely a remnant. It's already separated from the magician Chikyuugi Mizore. I'm going to have to say that the magic itself is separate from the main body, and it's automatic—no, impulsive it is."

Hmm.

Risuka-chan's explanation was rather incomprehensible, but from what I gathered the right leg is like a mirror, moving in response to our movements.

Risuka-chan tried to hunt it, so it hunted her back in return (the reason I was kicked in the back was probably due to standing in the course of the kick); I ran away with Risuka-chan in my arms, so it chased us; we hid in the gym storage room, so it found us.

It looked like a tyrannical move, but it wasn't.

It was an afterthought, a riposte, an appendix.

A reaction, a reflex, a response.

That's why, now that I had entered into a waiting position and Risuka-chan had positioned herself behind me where she couldn't be seen, Chikyuugi Mizore's right foot also stopped moving.

"I see. So my efforts so far haven't been futile. I still have my footing."

"Eeh? Just how did you even arrive at that conclusion? Also, I don't want to hear about 'footing' or anything else that's associated with the word 'leg'."

I tried to take credit for this state of equilibrium, but unfortunately, it wasn't even a leglock (another shame, I don't know what a leglock is).

But now, what to do?

This equilibrium state is not a bad thing, but considering that this is the former site of the Naoetsu High School gym storage room, I couldn't stay in this state forever.

If a third party witnesses me fighting with a bare right leg, I'm in trouble!

"What would be even worse is if a third party witnessed you taking a ten-year-old girl into the gym storage room."

"Don't fret. I do that all the time."

"Do you have a criminal record? Or are you a repeat offender?"

"Hmm. Yes."

The heartless term "repeat offender" got me thinking.

If that leg is a magical body that only responds to Risuka-chan's movements (physical and emotional), then if she were to go one step further and convert her standby posture to complete passiveness in battle, wouldn't the right leg lose its will to fight entirely?

"So if I were to cherish the legs of Risuka-chan, then our enemy would attain Nirvana, Risuka-chan!"

"I don't want to respond to that line. And what kind of situation involves you cherishing my legs? In the first place, in that case the leg would react to my bloodthirst of wanting to shred Koyomi to pieces."

She had already decided on shredding me apart.

It was too big a price to pay. I wish I only had to pay with my legs.[59]

"And how did this 'leg-cherishing' strategy come up to your mind because of hearing the word 'repeat offender'? What kind of history are you even having? What kind of crimes do you usually commit?"

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[59] The word for "pay" (払う, *harau*) can also mean "sweep" (one's legs).

"Wow. You're awfully interested in me, Risuka-chan."

"The only thing I am interested in is preventing your crimes."

"Then don't get involved with a guy like me in the first place. Forget about me and go find a better man."

"Yeah. One thing I've learned the hard way this time is that it was actually Kizutaka who was a good guy."

Unexpectedly, I had raised her opinion of Kizutaka, but also unexpectedly, I was able to think up a strategy within this unique exchange.

When I said earlier, "I wish I only had to pay with my legs" I was just trying to force myself to say something involving the word 'leg', as usual, for the sake of a punch line. But instead of 'sweeping', how about 'locking'?

Locking—one's legs.

"Risuka-chan. If anything happens to me, please tell the girl named Hachikuji—"

"There's nothing to tell, especially if it's from Koyomi to a child."

"Tell her that 'I died with you in my heart'."

"Disgusting."

I was called disgusting. By a girl.

I guess I should make some minor adjustments.

"I, who was nurtured by your chest, died with you in my chest, without being able to make yours grow."

"Didn't something already happen to Koyomi's brain?"

"If I come back alive, I'll ask for my usual reward ***kiss***."[60]

"What kind of life does Koyomi lead for that to be 'usual'? I don't want a kiss to be expressed alphabetically."

"I'd love to hear you abuse me again, but I don't like the sound of this punishment ***kiss***."

"The least you can do is to take that abuse you heard and reflect on your actions next."

"Welp. Now this is starting to feel like old-school literature."

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[60] Written in Latin letters in the original.

"It's more like a modern-day equivalent of a perverted text. Are they really going to give these out as a bonus for the movie? I don't want people to go there because of this creepiness."

"Let's go!"

With Risuka's encouragement, I broke into a sprint, aiming at the wizard's right leg, positioned behind the broken iron door. I rushed toward it in a low posture.

Single leg takedown.

A single leg takedown like no other.

It was a technique that was directly handed down to me by my sister, the martial artist Araragi Karen (more precisely, it was a technique that she often used on me instead), but of course, that wasn't the end of it—I ended up stumbling and rolling without letting go of the foot I had knocked down on the ground outside the gym storage room.

After that, as I learned from my sister (more like, as was beaten into me by my sister), I held Chikyuugi Mizore's right leg upside down, with my body covered in dirt all over, in an embrace (as if I were holding a little girl), and then locked the ankle with both my arms.

In other words, my plan relied on the so-called Achilles lock.

Unlike when I fought against Dramaturgy with a makeshift aikido technique, this time I got to use a professional wrestling technique.

Of course, this wasn't based on a conclusion as simple-minded as "The opponent is only a leg so the Achilles tendon must be its weak point."

I've decided that a joint lock must be effective against the counterattack type (or the karma type, to put it in supernatural-related terms) which reacts to the hostile or harmful intent of the attacker.

If I tried to hunt it, I would be hunted.

If I tried to exterminate it, I would be exterminated.

If you try to kill it, it will kill you… but with this kind of grappling hold, even if it ricochets back, it won't possibly take my life… huh?

I was trying desperately to hold down the right leg, which was rampaging in an attempt to escape from my Achilles lock, when I was kicked hard on the side of my face.

No way, was that Risuka-chan?! You want to take revenge at the drop of a hat!? Wait, no, this was not a girl's leg—looking at it, the leg kicking me was the same right leg I was supposed to be holding.

The bare right leg—the right leg of *Carousel*.

Two legs!? That actually seemed more normal—wait no, they're both right feet!

So the guy actually had two right feet!?

"**No—his right leg multiplied!**"

Risuka's voice resounded from the back of the gym storage room. That's right, *multiplication*! The magic of Chikyuugi Mizore—attribute pattern *Flesh* and category *Multiplication*!

But how could such a magical entity, separated from the main body and without a will of its own, be able to *multiply*? By the time Risuka-chan started looking for it, the only remnants left should have been just a single leg, right!?

… Oh, right.

It's me.

My appearance as the helper increased the number of Chikyuugi Mizore's right legs—in other words, reinforcements gave birth to proliferation.

"Damn… I thought I was helping Risuka-chan, I didn't expect things to take such a drastic turn because of me right at the end…"

"You didn't help me at all from the start either."

The kick to the face was probably a single leg takedown, within the range of what we would call a blow. However, since I hadn't lost consciousness, my strategy wasn't too off the mark—that thought didn't last long.

The impact of the toe kick by right leg B from my blind spot, coupled with the pain in the thighs, led to an overall poor lock, and right leg A, which had escaped from the Achilles lock, used that opportunity to entangle my neck in a tight fit.

The movement of right leg B followed the same path.

Oh no.

This formation is not good.

This wasn't a grapping hold against a grappling hold, it was a chokehold!

Triangle choke!

Crap, the grappling hold got interpreted wildly as ground fighting! Talk about school grounds!

This is bad, this is bad, this is bad, this is really really bad.

A grappling hold won't kill you, but a chokehold will.

"Hmph—run away, Risuka-chan! And please relay my final message to Hachikuji!"

"Are you sure it's okay to tell her?"

"Also, there's something I want you to convey to Hanekawa, Senjougahara, Kanbaru, Oikura, Karen, Tsukihi, Sengoku, and Ononoki-chan!"

"It's too much for me! Both the messages and your intentions!"

It may have been due to the last-minute decision that she couldn't take on such a troublesome task, but instead of escaping, Risuka-chan came to save me, I, who was on the verge of choking.

It's not that I wasn't in support of the idea, it's just that the sight of her jumping out of the gym storage room brandishing a cutter knife was a bit of a frightening image, but she managed to cut the strangling leg, I don't know if it was leg A or leg B, but she split it in two regardless.

Since an ordinary utility knife wouldn't be capable of such a thing, I figured that it must have been a magic utility knife—like some kind of magic stick?

But, the right leg that had been cut in half was not simply cut in half.

When it got cut, it rotated itself vertically and kicked up the cutter knife as if it was football juggling.

Of course, just juggling wouldn't make it go that far—it made me doubt my eyes, but the cutter flew over the grounds and landed on the other side of the school building.

What tremendous power… no, I guess Risuka-chan's power was tremendous to cause such a counterattack.

The flight distance was just a result of the reaction.

"Ah!! Ah, aaaah…"

Even though she had succeeded in hunting down one of the legs, whose number had gone up from one to two, Risuka-chan was upset by the loss of her cutter knife. She was trembling so much that it looked like she was about to crouch down where she stood—she was listless.

The color of her lips, which were so red, had also become heartlessly pale—her red eyes were moist and lush, and tears were about to spill out at any moment.

"…"

Anyway, being free from the triangle choke, I got up and started to run, trying to hold Risuka-chan a second time, and even though I knew that if I ran away, the right leg would just react to my actions and start chasing me, I couldn't control myself due to the state of Risuka-chan was in.

"What's the matter, Risuka-chan, are you okay? … No good, she's not even reacting to me fondling her legs!"

"…"

It's bad, no response at all!

Someone would get the impression that I was doing something bad!

In the meantime, the right leg seemed to be closing in on my back—no matter how fast it was, I could keep my distance. But in any case, this right leg would chase me every time I tried to escape, so it was only a matter of time before it caught up.

Matter of time, was it?

The concept of time is problem that is immensely trivial where I am concerned.

"Risuka-chan, what happened to your confidence! You phrased it as if it would have been a less difficult hunt if I hadn't interfered as much!"

"Ah… That was…"

A feeble voice finally responded.

"It was at that point that I had a trump card. But, that trump card is something that I cannot use anymore… because I don't have my cutter knife…"

It doesn't make sense. It might not have a meaning in the first place.

Trump card?

However, I felt a sense of déjà vu seeing Risuka-chan like that—as if this wasn't the first time I'd seen someone I knew in this situation.

Someone I knew…

What kind of person was it?

Was it my foolish self after losing my humanity—or the pathetic vampire who had lost her limbs?

In other words, for Risuka-chan that cutter knife was not merely a magic item, a magic stick, but a part of her body and soul; letting go of it was like losing a part of herself—which led to a loss of confidence?

I could be wrong. I might be making excuses.

It could be a similar situation to when a gambler has only a few chips left and purposefully places them on bets with a low chance to win—but still.

If that's the case—there's still a way.

I didn't have an ace up my sleeve, but I had something up my leg.

More correctly, though, I should say in my leg.

I plunged my finger into the wound on my thigh.

"Guh…"

It was like tearing the wound out of itself, and as expected, I groaned, but I didn't stop there—I carefully pinched **the desired object** that was stuck in the bone deep inside the wound with my thumb and index finger and plucked it out in an instant.

The item I dug up from the wound, covered in blood, was a blade.

The blade of a cutter knife.

The sharpest part of the blade.

"Risuka-chan! Use this! Although I don't know what you're gonna do with it!"

"…!"

There was no need to explain how it all came to be—it was obvious.

When Risuka-chan stabbed my thigh roughly, and then pulled it out violently, it got caught in the bone and broke off inside the wound. The remnants of a cutter knife.

No wonder I was in constant pain.

If I had to say, it was not the knife itself, but rather a remnant of the knife.[61]

Senjougahara, who is a specialist in stationery, would tell you that the blade of the cutter knife is modeled after a chocolate bar and is designed to be easy to break (in other words, it is easy to replace the blade when it is damaged)—such wisdom and intelligence of our predecessors has saved us.

And as expected, Risuka-chan smiled and received the blade from me—the smile proof of her recovered spirit, body, and soul.

Hence, I was caught off guard.

Risuka-chan closed her eyes and groaned, "Uuuuuuuuugh…!" then plunged the cutter knife deep into her right thigh, and using that momentum, Risuka-chan cut through her femoral artery.

[61] Normally, the word for "remnants" is 残党 (*zantou*), but here Koyomi switched the second kanji with the character for "blade", 刀, which can also be pronounced *tou*.

005

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

A cute girl commits a horrible suicide on my own shoulders, a traumatic experience that will stay with me until my next life. It would have been *only* traumatic if that was the end of it, but rather, considering what happened afterward, perhaps if I ended the story there I could have prevented the creation of trauma that will follow me even into my next life.

As a matter of course, bright red blood gushed out of the gaping wound on Risuka-chan's thigh.

It wasn't a surprise since Risuka-chan had severed her thigh artery, the next largest artery in the body after the carotid artery.

In fact, the human body is filled with about five liters of blood—and considering the fact that Risuka-chan is still a petite ten-year-old, she should have about two liters of blood in her body…

Huh?

That's not quite two liters.

The blood continued to gush out of the girl's right leg endlessly. It felt like an eternity. It continued to soak my entire body, and not only my body, but also the ground of Naoetsu High School.

It's soaking—it's invading.[62]

There's blood. There's blood. There's blood. There's blood. There's blood. There's blood. There's blood.

Risuka-chan's blood.

The magical girl's sticky blood.

The blood of the Witch Hunter…

The blood from the Red Witch of Time splattered all over the place.

Blood, blood, blood, blood, blood, blood, blood, blood, blood, blood.

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BLOOD BLOOD BLOOD BLOOD BLOOD was spreading.

The blood filled up the air.[63]

"**N O S T A L G I C !**"

Then, from the bottom of the massive pool of blood that swirled around the submerged ground, a disastrous voice echoed an equally disastrous incantation:

"**NØNKÎRÎ NØNKÎRÎ MÄGÜNÄÄDØ RØÎKÎSÜRØÎKÎSØRØÎ KÎSHÎGÄÄRÜKÎSHÎGÄÄZÜ NØNKÎRÎ NØNKÎRÎ MÄGÜNÄÄDØ RØÎKÎSÜRØÎKÎSØRØÎ KÎSHÎGÄÄRÜKÎSHÎGÄÄZÜ MÄRÜSÄKØRÜ MÄRÜSÄKØRÎ KÄÎGÎRÎNÄ RÜ RÎØCHÎ RÎØCHÎ RÎSØNÄ RØÎTØ RØÎTØ MÄÎTØ KÄNÄGÜÎRÜ KÄGÄKÄKÎ KÎKÄGÄKÄ NÝÄMÄMÄ NÝÄMØNÄGÎ DØÎKÄÎKÜ DØÎKÄÎKÜ MÄÎRÜZÜ MÄÎRÜSÜ NÝÄMØMÜ NÝAMØMÈ…**"

The pool of blood quickly became a pond, the pond of blood a sea, and the sea of blood a flood, all in less time than it took me to finish a single breath.

And then.

"**NÝÄRÜRÄ!**"

The overflowing blood concentrated at once.

Into the shape of a person.

What emerged was not a human, but a witch.

A witch who had transcended humanity.

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[63] The word for "fill" (満ち足りる, *michitariru*) contains the kanji 足 ("leg").

The twenty-seven-year-old Mizukura Risuka was there, wearing that overstuffed triangular hat that now fit her perfectly.

She stood with a mature appearance that left no trace of infancy.

Her height far exceeded 150 centimeters, her limbs had become much longer and slender, and her bright red leather outfit was wrapped around her glamorous body that was bursting open.

"**HA—HA… HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! HAHAHA, HAHAHA, HAHAHAHA! HA… HAHA… HAHAHA… HAHAHAHA… HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!**"

And.

The witch—like the vampire—laughed loudly.

She opened her mouth wide and laughed loudly, as if mocking the old world.

… If, when you reveal the trick, the answer remains magic, then it means there was no trick to begin with. But since finding an explanation even for the unexplainable was the specialist Oshino Meme's style, I'll try to be up for the task.

Let's follow along.

Mizukura Risuka—*The Red Witch of Time*.

If Chikyuugi Mizore's magic was focused on physical remodeling, with the attribute pattern *Flesh* and type in the *Multiplication* category, then Mizukura Risuka's magic would have the attribute pattern *Water* and belong to the *Time* category. Yes, it was destiny-interfering magic—in other words, magic that *manipulates time*.

Hearing that, you might be tempted to think it's the kind of magic that allows you to time travel or to stop time, but the time that Risuka-chan can control is basically limited to her own.

Her own personal time.

Risuka-chan herself calls this phenomenon *omission*—a shortcut through time.

For example, if she was injured and the injury would take one week to heal, she could theoretically *omit* that week and heal herself in an instant—

or if it would take three hours to get from her hometown to mine, no matter the means of transportation, she could *omit* the three hours and arrive in less than a second, just like teleportation.

Of course, it wasn't only conveniences, there were also various limitations attached (the fact that it can only move time "forward" is one of them), but it's still an extraordinary and astounding type of magic, even if you were to discount half of its characteristics—but the peak form of the Red Witch of Time comes up further along the line.

It appears when facing death.

That is to say, when she is in danger of losing her inherent time completely, her magic enters an emergency evacuation state—when the **amount of blood loss** reaches a certain level, the magic sigil engraved on each of her red blood cells is activated.

A total of seventeen years' worth of time is *omitted*.

She *grew up* from the age of ten to the age of twenty-seven.

An unconditional growth surpassing all reason.

She grew up from a magical girl to a witch.

So to speak, the magic's main function is to raise her to a condition suitable for an emergency situation, for example, when she's facing death—although it's a layman's idea, it wouldn't be wrong to think that Risuka-chan's blood was also a magical entity that reacts to phenomena, just like Chikyuugi Mizore's right leg.

And I don't need to talk about its effects. The simple improvement in her physical abilities is a given, as well as the scale-up of her intelligence and ingenuity. The amount and the scale of magic she could now use cannot be compared to when she was ten years old.

Indeed, there is a difference between adults and children.

Just as the teenage-girl form of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade and adult form of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade were different—the ten-year-old Mizukura Risuka and the twenty-seven-year-old Mizukura Risuka are different.

However, if you ask me, the most notable difference was.

"HA… HAHAHAHA! OH, IT'S BEEN SO LONG I FORGOT WHAT KIND OF CHARACTER I AM! IT'S PERFECT RISUKA-CHAN! WOO… HOO! I'M SO EXCITED I'M LOSING MY VOICE! COME ON, COME ON, COME ON, COME ON! NOT ONLY DID YOU FUCKING INTERRUPT ME IN MY HUNT EARLIER, YOU EVEN DID SOME THINGS TO MY TEN-YEAR-OLD SELF, SO I'M GOING TO CRUSH YOU BENEATH MY FEET, YOU LOSER! PROSTRATE YOURSELF TO MAKE IT EASIER TO CRUSH YOUR HEAD… ERR, KOYOMI, WAS IT? HAHAHA! HOW DARING OF YOU TO NAME YOURSELF A CALENDAR[64] IN FRONT OF THE RULER OF TIME. I WILL MAKE CERTAIN TO THRUST YOUR REWARD DEEP INSIDE—BUT BEFORE THAT! I MUST COMPLETE THE HUNT—I WILL THOROUGHLY ENJOY DISPOSING OF THE REMAINS OF TSUNAGI'S MEAL, I LOVE CUTTING OFF THE LEGS OF SMALL FRIES, AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"…"

… Her character.

What happened to the meek, charming, innocent, naïve, and timid Risuka-chan in the seventeen years that passed?

She really used the word "loser."

She's belligerent, coercive, contemptuous, and discriminating.

A textbook witch, if I could say so.

It could be said that I was witnessing the end of the gullible girl's metamorphosis, and by looking at the end result, her desire to not become an adult was a lot more understandable—but since the future is variable, it seems that every time she transforms, there is some margin of error in the image of Mizukura Risuka post-metamorphosis.

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[64] Koyomi's first name is 暦 (*koyomi*, "calendar").

For example, this time, the fact that she interacted with me before she transformed had a small effect on her, causing her to become this special twenty-seven-year-old version of herself.

However, it's within the margin of error.

It is almost certain that Risuka-chan's future is awful.

I tried to do my best, in my own way, the best I could, but it wasn't enough to change Risuka-chan in the future, was it?

It's a pity I couldn't be of help.

If this was Hanekawa, then maybe the situation would have been different, but in any case, things would have reached the same conclusion, that is certain. The twenty-seven-year-old Risuka-chan, immediately after awakening, took care of the remaining right leg of Chikyuugi Mizore.

She swung the blade of her cutter knife and sliced the leg into shreds. Of course, there was a reaction from the right leg, but that didn't bother her.

She took in all of its counterattacks, perhaps deliberately, but all of her injuries were instantly healed (or rather "omitted from time"), and she ended the *witch hunt*, showing off the overwhelming difference in skill.

At the same time, she dutifully fulfilled her promise of trampling me on the ground (with her stilettos!)

"Goodbye. Well, this has been mildly entertaining, you loser. If you've learned your lesson, don't even lay a hand on a magical girl again. No, lay a foot, I guess?"

With that, she was gone.

Like melting into space, like a dissolving bloodbath, she disappeared in a huff.

Or perhaps she *omitted* time and returned to her field—because this trip was, after all, a business trip that she should have never taken.

Good grief.

I stood up, lamenting and dusting my body that was full of holes—I was exhausted, but the ground that should have been ruined by the blood flood and the iron door that should have been destroyed were, mysteriously, all restored to their original states.

Is this the service of the *Red Witch of Time*?

Does the constraint that she can only control the relative time of her body, and the constraint that she can only advance "forward" in time disappear when she becomes twenty-seven years old? Or maybe she used another type of magic? If that's the case, it would have been nice of her to also heal the wound on my thigh (and the holes she opened with her stilettos), but her sadistic character renders that wish unobtainable.

But that's okay.

I'm not ordinary either, and an injury of this level is really just a scratch—even if "spit on it and it will heal" was an exaggeration, it will heal with my blood.

Blood.

Yes, I should add, that this was Risuka-chan's secret move—she hid such a fearsome ability, and it now seems natural that she'd leave some room to spare even when she was cornered by the right leg. But the impatience she felt when she lost her cutter knife was too overwhelming, making her trigger her ability.

The condition for activating her instantaneous growth ability was to **lose a certain amount of blood**—in other words, Risuka-chan needed to shed blood in order to use her final card.

In that sense, the right leg of Chikyuugi Mizore, whose only attacks were kicking and strangling, might have been close to a natural enemy for Risuka-chan.

Her trump card wouldn't activate even when she was close to death, because she'd be hit without bleeding—so even if it was a fragment of it, a knife was necessary.

A knife that cuts the skin, tears the flesh and rips the arteries.

… Her cutter knife wouldn't have had to be a magic stick, so it's hard to say that my deduction was correct, but in the end, it turned out alright.

At any rate, it was a relief not to have to clean up afterward—and it also seemed that we were able to get things over with without being seen, so, I guess I should go home and ask Karen to teach me the correct single leg takedown… hmm?

And then I remembered.

It is true that the landscape has been restored to its original state and there seemed to be no need to hide and cover up, but that was only for the ground.

What happened to the cutter knife that was kicked to the other side of the school building?

Now that I had noticed it, I couldn't avoid checking it out, so I went around the school building and continued to the courtyard.

Mizukura Risuka's red cutter knife was stuck in the middle of a flower bed.

"A lost article from a magical girl?"

As I muttered, I started to pull out the blade. And I did the same routine as her, the same grinding noises, *Schk schk schk schk… Schk schk schk schk… Schk schk schk schk…*

When I had completely pulled out the blade, I reached a conclusion—no, because it was me, I'd already reached the conclusion at the beginning anyway.

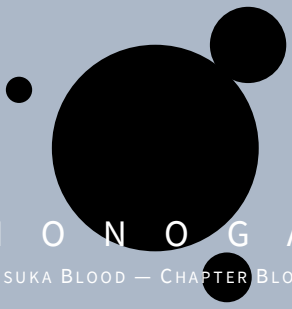
"Araragi Koyomi is really a man who never learns his lesson, isn't he?"

But, yeah.

I've been beaten up and stepped on, and although I'm reluctant to admit it, I'm still far away from feeling sorry.[65] I'll have to make a trip to Kyushu next time, to deliver what she had forgotten.

I feel bad for Risuka-chan, but I might mistake her for someone else once again!

[65] Just like earlier, "I'm sorry" is 悪しからず (*ashikarazu*) with the beginning sounding like 足 (*ashi*, "leg").



MAZEMONOGATARI

Risuka Blood — Chapter Blood

Spoke in a mysterious dialect: Link, Nyorem & Sway Translations
Stared at the absolute territory: Bluex, Kakuzō & Noyaxus
Crushed beneath Risuka's feet: Maxdefolsch

MAZEMONOGATARI

NISIOISIN

Hitei Clear

Chapter Sword

Princess Hitei

Katanagatari Series

Art: White Fox

001

Princess Hitei was a princess with something to hide. “But of course,” you may want to say, “why would you start with something so obvious? Say something more unusual instead!” But even if you used those strict words to scold me, that was how she gracefully and cleverly teased us—with how we couldn’t do anything even with such an obvious fact. That was the kind of person that the Inspector General serving under the Yanari Family of the Owari Shogunate, Princess Hitei, was. Because she was liable to deny any definition at any time for any reason, a passive person like me could even consider someone like her to be on the level of an aberration.

“I deny that!”

With that one phrase, she could turn over everything in a flash, so you couldn’t be careless. Compared to her, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, seemed almost like a straightforward person.

Thinking about it, if we went back to the origin of that legendary vampire, then she had also been a princess or a noble of some land, so it wasn’t like they didn’t have anything in common—if anything, the fact that they both had dazzling gold hair was a more obvious point in common.

However, unlike the idea that a vampire was clearly identifiable as a vampire, the identity of this princess would be totally unclear if you took out the fact that she was a princess. I have to cautiously add here that the title of Inspector General serving under the Yanari Family of the Owari Shogunate was rather fishy in itself, and that it was even doubtful whether she was really even a princess or if that was just her rhetoric.

Even though she was someone so unidentifiable, it made for a provocative performance to hear that her objective was not unknown at all—her objective was the gathering of swords.

The gathering of Japanese swords.

Made by the swordsmith known as Shikizaki Kiki, the thousand swords known as the Deviant Blades, and among those, the twelve Perfected Deviant Blades—in pursuit of those, she came up with an ingenious strategy, even in her position as a princess.

Zettou "Kanna". Zantou "Namakura". Sentou "Tsurugi". Hakutou "Hari".

Zokutou "Yoroi". Soutou "Kanazuchi". Akutou "Bita". Bitou "Kanzashi".

Outou "Nokogiri". Seitou "Hakari". Dokutou "Mekki". Entou "Juu".

The reason she wanted to gather those various eccentric swords was something that was wholly unknown to me, whose history differed from hers, and I wanted to avoid getting too deeply involved in that subject—however, because that was her only objective, it ended up not being strange at all for her to cross over generations to come and visit our town.

To cross over generations.

Ah, yes, indeed. That was another representative point in common between Princess Hitei and Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, one that we couldn't go without touching upon.

In the same way that that legendary vampire was a vampire that had flown in from centuries ago—Princess Hitei was a princess that had also flown in from centuries ago.

Although, it could be a falsehood that she would readily deny if I mentioned it carelessly.

002

Although it wasn't something I was especially proud of, I had a sister in her second year of middle school named Araragi Tsukihi. She was a stylish girl who changed her hairstyle at least once a month, and, as another part of that stylishness, she was also a member of the Tea Ceremony Club. And that wasn't in the sense that the elegance of tea ceremonies was particularly fashionable, but the more direct reason of, "It's because I like wearing kimonos"—I thought she'd be quite a bother to the club for joining for such a reason, but surprisingly enough, it seemed they got along rather well.

Personally, I honestly believed that there had to be something wrong with the club to be able to get along with my sister, and normally I wouldn't want to go anywhere near them, but unfortunately, modern society was such that it rejected my personal intentions, and today, I found myself visiting the middle school that my sister attended, Tsuganoki Second Middle School.

Because I was a relative of an attending student, it wouldn't be hard to simply visit normally, but because my reason was what it was, I ended up taking on the attitude of someone trying to sneak in.

To put it simply, in the Tea Ceremony Club's club room—or should I call it the tea room? In the tea room, a minor aberration phenomenon had supposedly occurred.

It was a story about how, even though there were supposed to be only seven members registered in the club, the presence of an "eighth person" could be felt.

Tsukihi had consulted me about that.

To be precise, it wasn't my sister that had felt the vague existence of that "eighth person", but the other six club members. Tsukihi herself had taken upon the task of denying the vague existence of that "eighth person".

Denying.

And, as a result of her evidence and her deductions, that denial should have succeeded—well, that was the kind of episode it was, and it should have already been recorded in a published work somewhere.

Because an incident that should have been resolved didn't end, all that remained was a bitter lesson of the emptiness of detective work, turning it into an experience with a bad aftertaste (although, I couldn't say that anything involving Tsukihi had left a good aftertaste). However, it wouldn't do to not make use of the lesson she'd finally managed to learn.

It was the brother's job to follow up on his sister's actions.

I wanted to confirm with my own eyes whether or not the case of the "eighth person" was actually resolved—I wanted to make sure, using the eyes of someone who'd experienced having their lifeblood sucked by a vampire, to free myself from further anxiety.

I did think that I was being a bit oversensitive, but recently, there was no way of knowing what would end up becoming foreshadowing later on.

After moving stealthily so as to not be discovered by any students and teachers, taking meandering detours left and right, I finally reached the tea room. And, using the key I'd borrowed from Tsukihi (of course, I meant that I'd borrowed it of my own accord), I opened the door.

Inside the tea room, a gold-haired, blue-eyed beauty, enrobed in a gorgeous kimono, was gracefully making tea.

That demeanor, that appearance.

Even if I'd been mistaken, there was no way she could be a club member—though the Tea Ceremony Club had now become a Japanese Clothing Club as a result of my sister's evil influences, there was no way she could be a member of this club.

Or rather, she probably wasn't even a middle schooler.

And it wasn't exactly something that should be cleverly pointed out by a high schooler that had unlawfully entered the premises, but no matter how I saw it, she was an adult—in that case, was she a teacher?

Perhaps she was the club's advisor.

Considering this middle school was a private school, it wouldn't be unusual for them to invite a staff member from overseas to teach English—but would someone like that become the advisor of the Tea Ceremony Club?

No, well, it seemed that aspects of Japanese culture like tea ceremony and kendo were valued pretty highly overseas, so this person, who had quite a foreign air about her—it was possible that her wearing Japanese clothes and making tea could be considered completely natural.

Unless—could it be?

Could this person possibly be the "eighth person"?

An aberration?

Wait, wait, it was way too early to judge that. It was just that I couldn't help but feel that she gave off the atmosphere of not being just a normal person—

"So, Koyomi-kun."

She spoke.

Sure enough, without any interruptions to her motions in making the tea, she spoke—her blue eyes hadn't yet turned to look at me, but she'd called my name, so she had to be speaking to me.

Even if it wasn't clear how exactly she knew my name.

"Do you believe in precognition?"

"Pre-Precognition?"

I tried to answer as such, closing the door behind me without thinking—I had thought that the first thing I needed to do was to keep this girl with her glittering gold hair out of sight, but that also meant that I'd shut myself in with her.

"The power to see the future in advance—no, perhaps I should call it the power to **experience** the future in advance. Although, some people may call that *déjà vu*—basically, precognition could be considered a skill similar to time travel."

"…"

"That is the reason that I, Princess Hitei, am here right now. From my perspective, it's already become a lost artisan skill, but fundamentally, artisan skills are something that are inherited from the roots—does that make sense?"

And, nimbly.

She finished her actions and presented me with a tea cup—this gold-haired, blue-eyed girl, Princess Hitei.

Eh? What?

Would it be better to accept her artistry?

Was it even the time to be swallowing tea?

Wasn't I the one getting swallowed up by this pace?

I had no idea what she'd even explained to me… Although, it was a little too sudden to be confronted with the concept of precognition, the term "time travel" was something I had just the tiniest bit of room to concede.

Just the other day, I'd undertaken an experiment along those lines—but it had been a complete failure, and it had turned into a breeding ground for future problems, so it was nothing but a bitter memory for me.

Rather than a bitter memory, it was a painful one.[66]

However, if what I'd done was a form of time travel from this world, then that just as well meant that this world could potentially receive travelers from some other world.

---

[66] 苦い (*nigai*, "bitter") and 苦しい (*kurushii*, "painful") use the same kanji.

If that was the case, then I couldn't just treat her frivolously—in the same way that that impossible world had done for me, I had to show hospitality for this person.

If anything, I might as well drink the tea that was offered to me.

For now, I'll play it by ear.

Resolving myself for the worst, I took off my shoes and stepped onto the tatami.

"Sorry, but I don't really know the proper etiquette. So I'm going to have to just do whatever I want."

I sat down cross-legged and tried speaking like a bad guy, but there was no change in the princess's prim expression—hmm.

It seemed she wasn't the type of person that went with the flow.

If that was the case, I surely couldn't expect her to play the straight man for me, so I respectfully changed to sit in a seiza[67] position and picked up the tea cup—was I supposed to turn it three times, or something?

"Thank you for the tea—gh!?"

The contents of the tea cup were mostly powder.

All the moisture in my mouth had been completely sucked away.

"Ahahahaha! You fell for it, you fell for it!"

Princess Hitei pointed at my choking self and laughed wildly—and you're actually pretty cheerful, aren't you!?

"Sorry, sorry, I wasn't actually making tea at all. I don't even know how to boil water—I had my close aide handle everything lifestyle-related, after all. At the very least, I could pretend that I had the knowledge for a performance… I'm sure that unpleasant woman could have done a better job, though."[68]

I'm bad at sitting in seiza, too.

Saying as such, Princess Hitei stood up.

Whoa, she's tall!

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[67] Seiza (正座, "proper sitting") is the traditional formal style of kneeling with the tops of your feet resting on the floor and sitting on top of your heels.

[68] In this sentence, "close aide" and "unpleasant woman" refer to Souda Emonzaemon and Togame respectively, from *Katanagatari*.

It could be because I was lying prone on the tatami as a result of gagging on the contents of that tea cup, but it was like I was looking up at a mountain—depending on the viewpoint, it could look like I was lying prostrate at her feet, but being looked down on from such a height with me positioned like this instilled within me a rather strange feeling.

"Did you think I was some foreigner with a deep understanding of Japanese culture? Then I deny that—because I'm a patriot that was born and raised in this very country."

Then, perhaps she was half- or even quarter-Japanese. Although, if I asked her about it, she would probably deny that as well.

I'd become rather familiar with gold hair ever since spring break, but blue eyes weren't something I'd come into contact with except in movies or dramas, so her gaze made me a bit flustered.

"Um… How did you know my name? And, how did you know that I'd be coming here today?"

Since I couldn't stay lying prone (lying prostrate) forever, I pulled myself up from the floor (my entire body had been painted with the green of the matcha[69]) and questioned Princess Hitei.

To be honest, I wasn't nearly as curious about those trivial matters as I was about her mixed-Japanese-Western impression, but I figured I could stall for time by asking those questions.

"Like I said, it's precognition, okay? It's precognition—your name, Koyomi-kun, and the fact that you'd visit the tea room in this school today were things that were predicted several centuries ago. Things that were experienced. Although, to put it another way, it was because I learned about those stupid things that I had no choice but to come all the way here. Since you were named in a prediction, I had no way of avoiding it because of my position—I'm bad at doing work by myself."

"… You're pretty much bad at everything, aren't you."

---

[69] Matcha (抹茶, *matcha*) is finely ground powder of specially grown and processed green tea leaves, and is used in traditional Japanese tea ceremonies.

"I deny that. There are a lot of things I'm bad at, but I have more things that I'm good at—for example, I'm especially good at twisting adorable little boys like you, Koyomi-kun, around my finger."

"…"

She—certainly seemed like she was.

To put it another way, this person was clearly the type of person that I was bad with.

Even when I stood up, my eye level only reached up to her shoulders—if I didn't keep my chin raised, I couldn't make eye contact with her.

"Like I said, Koyomi-kun. I can even guess the next question you're going to ask."

"… That's also that precognition you spoke of, right?"

"I deny that. Like I said, that's not a skill that I can use—if anything, all I've done is follow along with those predictions. The reason I can guess the questions you want to ask, Koyomi-kun, is because I'm especially good at twisting you around my finger."

"… Then, please try to guess, princess. What question am I thinking about in my mind right now?"

I knew that I probably should've ignored what she said, but because she kept repeatedly looking down on me, I couldn't help but give in to her provocation—at this point, I was most certainly already being twisted around her finger.

Tightly wrapped around.

It was like I was being made to dance on the palm of her hand.

"You're going to ask, 'What business do you have with me', right? What business do you have with me, to go as far as crossing generations and crossing worldviews to come visit—and to that question, I'll respond like this. 'I deny that. I don't have any business with you personally, Koyomi-kun—because what I have business with is the Japanese sword in your possession. That is, Youtou "Kokorowatari".'"[70]

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[70] Its full name is 妖刀『心渡』(*Youtou "Kokorowatari"*), which fits the naming pattern of the *Katanagatari* swords.

003

Youtou "Kokorowatari".[71]

Personally, I wasn't fully aware of how truly threatening it could be, so there were some parts that were difficult to explain, but to put it simply, it was a weapon made to cut down aberrations, wielded by the legendary vampire, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

An oodachi[72] that could cut aberrations and only aberrations.

As a result, it was known by the **alias** of "Aberration Slayer", and that name carried over to become another nickname for the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire.

In that sense, you could say that our gold-haired, gold-eyed vampire also gave off a mixed-Japanese-Western impression, but that didn't mean that she would hit it off with this Princess Hitei here.

If anything, it would be the opposite.

Her wariness would probably max out.

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[71] The "Youtou" part can be translated as "Demon Blade".

[72] An *oodachi* (大太刀, "great sword") is a type of traditionally made Japanese sword used by samurais in feudal Japan.

If she had really come to visit me because she wanted nothing else but that demon blade, then it really wasn't the time to be swallowing tea.

All I could do now was to do all that I could to feign ignorance.

"Demon Blade? Hahaha, what could you possibly be talking about? Haven't you been watching too much anime?"

"I deny that. After all, in my age, there were no such things as moving pictures."

But you knew that they were moving pictures?

Well, in the same way that her feigned ignorance was obvious to me, I'm sure she had easily seen through my attempts at deception—well, then, what should I do now?

If it was like this, then it could perhaps be considered brilliant that she chose the tea room of Tsuganoki Second Middle School as our location. At first, I couldn't understand why she had chosen to ambush me here of all places, but most likely, it was essentially the same as taking my sister as a hostage.

I would have almost rather preferred that she had lain in wait at Naoetsu High or even my own home. I'd at least have the home-field advantage then—although, since it seemed like she also snuck in here, it was actually a neutral zone, but being in a neutral zone was still awful in terms of the playing field.

But, even so, I couldn't carelessly respond to the princess's demands, either.

"Right. That's true—however, I deny that we're in a deadlock. To be honest, 'something like this' is really in the domain of that unpleasant woman, but perhaps I'll even deny that sort of limiting factor."

Koyomi-kun.

Would you like to **cross swords** with me?

The princess pulled out an iron-ribbed fan from within her clothes, opened it with a "clack!", pointed it at me, and ordered me as such—and then.

And then, thirty minutes later, Princess Hitei and I were lined up at the edge of Tsuganoki Second Middle School's swimming pool.

Going from the tea room to a swimming pool was quite a perplexing scene change, but what was more perplexing, what was all the more perplexing, was that, even though she still gave off an aura of gorgeousness, she was standing next to me wearing a school swimsuit.

"…!?"

I did a double-take.

Eh?

Hold on, were you actually the type of character that did funny things like this? Your agency didn't ban you from wearing school swimsuits?

Though I'd been bewildered at this unexpected encounter, I had at least tried thinking back to my circle of friends to compare with someone I was familiar with, and I'd come to the understanding that "well, I suppose she's closer to Gaen-san than Kagenui-san" and come up with a way to approach her as a result. But despite that, why would she herself put on something that those other two adult women absolutely would not wear, even in derivative works?

Up until now, the princess had bewitched me with her balance of Japanese and Western sensibilities… But due to some mistake, the imbalance from this blond beauty wearing a school swimsuit was…

"I deny that. Because I don't *not* do funny things, after all."

"…"

A double denial…!

Since she denied and denied things every time she opened her mouth, I had wondered how she'd gotten on in this world saying no all the time, but to think that she could deal with it like that.

"Since I've come all this way to the future, and I don't have any chaperones with me. It would be a waste to not play around a bit—in this world where I don't need to fear dying tomorrow."

"I see… A world where you don't need to fear dying tomorrow."

"If you're able to overreact to me looking like this, then I can truly feel in my heart that this is quite an easygoing era, to the point of making me giddy."

… I couldn't get a grasp of what era she'd actually come from just from listening to her talk, but if she was speaking like that, then it was hard for me to get a word in. Well, even if it had the word "school" attached to it, in shape alone it was just a normal swimsuit, anyway.

Although, instead of tomorrow, if it was Kagenui-san or Gaen-san, they'd probably die before being seen wearing something like that.

However, I couldn't exactly overlook the fact that a nametag reading "Araragi Karen" had been affixed to the chest of that school swimsuit.

In other words, this meant that it wasn't the school swimsuit of my sister, Araragi Tsukihi, whose stronghold was the tea room, but the school swimsuit of my other sister—Tsuganoki Second Middle School third-year, Araragi Karen.

In terms of the sizes of the swimsuits, it meant that she'd chosen to go for Karen's swimsuit and not Tsukihi's (Tsukihi was shorter than me, but Karen was taller than me. Even though she was younger)—but it was probably not as simple a reason as that.

It felt like she was implicitly pressuring me by saying, I have the older of the two sisters in my grasp, as well—it was for the first time in my life that I was feeling intimidated by a school swimsuit.

If we were talking about the size, then Princess Hitei would be about a head taller than Karen, so I'd expected the swimsuit to be too small for her, but it turned out that the extra height came entirely from her legs. And because the swimsuit had a design that only covered the torso, it was a perfect fit.

"Well, the fact that I'm looking like this now is also a fate that was predicted in advance."

"There's no way that's true, right?"

Incidentally, I hadn't changed.

I was still wearing my plain clothes that had been stained with matcha.

"So… Putting aside your costume… What exactly are we doing here, Princess Hitei-sama?"

"Like I said, we're here to cross swords—that's how that infuriating strategian went about gathering swords, you see. She went up to the owners

and proposed a battle, with the swords being wagered. But it doesn't feel like you want to even let me see Youtou 'Kokorowatari', Koyomi-kun, so for now, I can be flexible and propose a transaction."

Saying that—Princess Hitei jumped into the pool.

Because she jumped in without doing any warm-up exercises, I felt a mix of shock and awe at the nerve she had to have to do something like that, but I still couldn't see the logical reasoning behind her actions.

Perhaps confusing the enemy in that way and "denying" them any understanding or comprehension was her style of keeping the high ground…

However, watching her swim in the pool with some swimming style I'd never seen before (an old swimming style?), it was true that she just looked as if she was enjoying a vacation—she performed a splendid turn at the far end of the pool and stayed completely submerged as she returned.

As she returned… but she wasn't returning?

She wasn't coming back up after she dived down?

Eh? Don't tell me she was drowning?

No way, she couldn't possibly be drowning today, let alone tomorrow… Feeling the sense of responsibility that that was the one development that I had to prevent, I hurriedly took off my jacket to dive in after her—but, right when I'd taken off my shirt, the princess vigorously rose up with a splash at the side of the pool.

Her gold hair had become stuck to her body, giving off a strange allure—it likely would have been even more alluring if not for the school swimsuit.

As she moved her hair out of the way, she said, "Kuhum… gah. Ah, well, I guess I'm not cut out for physical work… Or rather, I'm not cut out for any kind of work. Koyomi-kun, stop stripping over there and come give me a hand."

"Give-Give you a hand?"

"Here, take this. I wouldn't be able to carry it myself without the help of buoyancy."

I had been thinking that she wanted me to take her hand and pull her out of the water, but it seemed that wasn't the case—I couldn't tell what it was unless I came closer, but it seemed she was holding onto "something" with both her arms in the water.

And the reason I couldn't tell what that "something" was unless I came closer was that it was something that was transparent—if you held onto something that was transparent in water that was transparent, then of course it couldn't be seen.

A crystal…?

Or perhaps, maybe even a diamond…?

The reason she'd been underwater for so long seemed to be in order to pick up that "something" that had been hidden (?) at the bottom of the pool… But did this princess intend on trying to trade Youtou "Kokorowatari" for something of monetary value?

Did she think Araragi Koyomi would be moved by money!?

… Although, I wouldn't *not* be moved.

The experience of taking on several millions' worth of debt to the specialist Oshino Meme during spring break was something that had left scars on my heart.

However, to that expectation of mine, she of course denied it—the object she delivered to me through the surface of the water was neither a crystal nor a diamond, but a counterfeit.

It was—a glass cuboid.

No.

More accurately, it was a glass "scabbard" that had a single Japanese sword sealed inside.

"Toutou 'Tetsu'[73]—it's not a Perfected Deviant Blade, but it's still one among the thousand Deviant Blades made by Shikizaki Kiki. It's something that can rival Youtou 'Kokorowatari', or it's at least something

[73] Still using the *Katanagatari* naming pattern, this one is called 透刀『鉄』 (*Toutou "Tetsu"*), which translates to "Clear Blade 'Iron'".

that's a good match for it. Each of us will wager each of our swords—Koyomi-kun. 'Now, let's have a fair fight!'"[74]

[74] The line usually said by Togame before battles.

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Because she'd said we'd be competing with swords, I'd been sure that I'd be put in the awkward situation of having a duel with slashing and striking (and the awkward situation of having a duel against a blond beauty in a school swimsuit at the side of a pool), but it seemed I'd been able to avoid such an unfair development—that is, as she wiped her body down with a bath towel (or rather, she had me wipe her. Whether she was in a kimono or a school swimsuit, she was still very princess-like), she had this to say about the glass case left at the side of the pool.

"Koyomi-kun. Please get the sword out from this 'scabbard'—but without damaging the vidro[75] in the slightest. If you can do that, I'll acknowledge it as your victory," she said.

As with all the statements she'd uttered up until now, I was unable to fully grasp the meaning of those words, but it seemed that was the special quality of this particular Japanese sword, Toutou "Tetsu".

In other words, it could **go through things**.

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[75] As someone who's from the past, Princess Hitei uses an older word for "glass", ビードロ (*biidoro*), borrowed from Portuguese. Modern Japanese uses the word ガラス (*garasu*).

It was a sword that could pass through the objects it cut—it was a sword that could slip through the people it cut.

And you may find yourself thinking that it loses all meaning of it being a sword, but the actuality wasn't that simple.

Because that special quality meant that it could pass and slip through armor and walls and cut into whatever was on the other side—for example, when cutting through humans, it could pass through the clothes and cut through only the body. Going further, without leaving a single wound on the skin, it could cut through only a person's internal organs.

It could vertically cleave through a person's body with a single slice while cutting only a single blood vessel in that person's brain, making it quite a deadly weapon that could be used to create unsolvable murder cases.

It sounded quite unrealistic—but it wasn't something I could laugh off as a joke. After all, Youtou "Kokorowatari" could perform a similar feat.

That is, it could cut through aberrations without cutting through humans.

That's why, in that sense, the princess describing it as "a good match", or even something that could "rival" it, was right—the bet each of us was making was fairly equal.

I understood that much.

What I still didn't understand was how that was related to the contents of the battle—in the first place, why was such a strange sword sealed in a glass case like that?

As for why she'd hidden it at the bottom of the swimming pool at a middle school, let's just go with the idea that Princess Hitei had planned it like that to set the pace of this encounter…

"Like I said, this vidro is the 'scabbard' for Toutou 'Tetsu'. Because it's a sword that can slip through any object—of course, even vidro. If you put it in a normal scabbard and carry it at your waist, it's highly likely that you'll just hurt yourself. That's why it was encased in a solid object in all directions, even the hilt—for safety reasons."

"I see… However, even if you were able to store it safely, doesn't that make it impossible to take back out?"

Although storing it was easy, because you could just manifest the sword's special quality when doing so—ah.

So **that** was what this battle was for?

"That's right. **Even in this state, a way to draw this sword exists**—and if you can figure out how, then it's your win, Koyomi-kun. And if you win, then I'll leave Toutou 'Tetsu' here in this generation with you. However, if you don't manage to draw the sword, or if you happen to damage the 'scabbard', then I'll have you present Youtou 'Kokorowatari' to me."

"…"

Huh?

Since when had I actually agreed to this battle?

I hadn't actually said I'd make this wager, right?

She had completely taken the initiative and decided not just the field but also the objects being wagered and the contents of the wager, without room for compromise… Was it really okay to just follow along with what this princess was telling me?

Even the school swimsuit was something she had just gone and worn on her own… By now, I really was completely twisted around her finger.

I couldn't say that I hated being manipulated by an older woman, through her bossiness or her allure, but if my life was at stake, then the circumstances were different.

And honestly, I didn't even need anything like Toutou "Tetsu"… What would you use something like this for, other than committing the perfect crime? Well, I'm sure it wasn't totally useless in the modern era, but considering my present state, I could even say that Youtou "Kokorowatari" was more useful—for the sake of staying alive in the future.

She'd really taken me for a ride here, but maybe there was some way to roll it back and make the battle itself invalid—no, but hold on.

Toutou "Tetsu"?

Because it kept being described as being able to slip through objects or pass through human bodies, I'd only considered using it for some sort of locked room trick, but wasn't the reverse also possible?

The reverse—in other words, it wasn't cutting the inside without cutting the outside, but cutting the outside without cutting the inside.

Earlier, Princess Hitei had described something unsettling like how it could pass through the clothes to cut through the body of the person wearing them—but, turning that around, what if you could cut through the clothes without leaving a single wound on the person, like some sort of superhuman feat performed by Ishikawa Goemon from the anime "Lupin III"?

More specifically, what if such a feat could be pulled off, in particular, against my friend known as Hanekawa Tsubasa?

"… Pfft. Good grief."

Oh, Hanekawa.

In the end, my motivation always ends up being you.

"Understood, princess. I'll accept your battle."

"For a character that appears in such a foolish generation, that's a good show of courage. It's worthy of praise—I won't *not* say that."

With a smirk on her face, at that critical moment, Princess Hitei brought out another double denial.

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Realistically speaking, the idea of swinging a sword at Hanekawa was nothing but a flight of fancy that I would never do unless I was in a situation like Golden Week, but in any case, considering that Princess Hitei had lain in wait for me with such meticulous preparations, I surely didn't have any other choice but to accept the battle—especially as I didn't have the time to take things leisurely.

Because we weren't in an indoor pool.

We were outdoors at a location where the sun shone brightly down on us—since the pool was placed slightly apart from the school building, we probably wouldn't be spotted by anybody anytime soon, but still, if we were to be discovered by an outsider in this situation, I didn't think it would end very well—although, as long as I was at the pool on the grounds of Tsuganoki Second Middle School, I suppose that would make me the outsider.

For an outsider to be playing with a Japanese sword next to a blond beauty in a school swimsuit, that would immediately become a matter for the police—not to mention, that school swimsuit was my sister's.

It went past the point of being a degenerate.

I had to deal with this quickly, if I also wanted to prevent being questioned in a family meeting tonight… And so, I crouched beside the glass case and peered inside.

Incidentally, I was using the terms "box" or "case" for convenience, but really, it was probably more accurate to call it a "lump" of glass…

Princess Hitei had said something along the lines of being unable to carry it without the help of buoyancy, but it was heavy enough that even I wouldn't be able to carry it for long.

For some reason, it gave off the impression of being a fossil.

Well, Princess Hitei surely hadn't brought this from *that* far in the past to be able to consider it a fossil, but I did remember seeing pictures of ancient bugs that were trapped in transparent amber.

But, since the glass was clear, the impression was more that of an unsheathed blade that had been frozen in ice.

Though I wasn't sure whether or not it was the right approach to take, I tried measuring the size of the cuboid… Although, I didn't have a tape measure on hand, so it was just a rough estimate using my hand as a ruler.

Going with about twenty centimeters for the length of my hand… It was about 1.5 meters vertically, thirty centimeters horizontally, with a height of thirty centimeters, I suppose?

And the unsheathed Japanese sword inside was approximately 1.3 meters in length… I didn't have any precise knowledge on the subject, but, well, I guess it was pretty long for a Japanese sword? Although, since I couldn't help but compare it to how absurdly long Youtou "Kokorowatari" was, I couldn't say for sure…

"'Meter' and 'centimeter'. Do you perhaps also use 'inch' and 'yard' as well?"[76] said Princess Hitei, interrupting me as I kept circling Toutou "Tetsu" while muttering to myself. "Though you said something about how I gave off a mixed-Japanese-Western impression, Koyomi-kun, aren't you guys really the ones that are more mixed?"

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[76] All units of measurement here were originally in English. Interestingly, Princess Hitei uses hiragana for foreign words, where a modern person would use katakana.

"… Princess, you said that your era was from the time of national isolation, correct?"

Recently, there had been theories that were made suggesting that the national isolation hadn't been as strict as it sounded… It would probably be just as stressful to ignore her remarks, so I had turned just my head to respond to her—when I looked, Princess Hitei had taken a seat at a shaded bench, as if to avoid UV rays, and was playing with a cell phone.

Of course, it was my cell phone.

It seemed she had gone and retrieved it from the jacket that I'd taken off—could she possibly be surfing the net right now?

Was she using it to research modern culture?

Though I wasn't as bad as Oshino, as someone who was decidedly not good with devices, the movement of her fingers seemed impressively fast…

"… You're very studious, aren't you," I said, sarcastically.

"I deny that. I'm not studying, I'm playing," said Princess Hitei, not taking her eyes off the screen. "I'm taking this time to play a reenactment of the Sengoku era."

"…"

In other words, she downloaded an app onto my phone all on her own and was enjoying a game about the Sengoku era? How could you be so shameless, and also, how could you even use that device so skillfully?

Did this person really come from the past?

"What era are you from?" I asked to Princess Hitei, not out of doubt for her (although I was doubting her).

"There's really no point in asking that. As far as I can see from playing this, it doesn't seem like our worldview and your worldview are properly connected."

"They're… not properly connected? Um, so is it something like parallel worlds?"

Though my understanding of the matter was shallow, I knew that it was an essential term related to time slips. So it could be said that, even if it wasn't time travel but precognition, even so, at the very point the future is predicted, it would already have changed that future.

"Perhaps not 'parallel', but 'double'. Well, it's not like I can say for certain, either. In the end, I'm just one of many cogs in the machine—but, when I think about the possibility that, somewhere along the way, there could be a connection to this peaceful and foolish era, then it feels like it's worth it for me to try. I'd love it if nothing was left for posterity, truly."

"…?"

As someone who was peaceful and foolish, I had no way of understanding what Princess Hitei was trying to say, or even, what Princess Hitei was trying to do—but at the very least, it didn't seem like she was trying to hinder or confuse me.

Well, it didn't matter if she ended up confusing me anyway.

I turned back around.

This time, I tried inspecting the surface of the glass by touching it directly—I felt it all over, even turning it over to touch the bottom, as if I was polishing it.

Obviously, it didn't seem like it was made with any mechanisms like a switch or something sliding open—it wasn't like a puzzle box.

There was no indication that it would open up if I guessed the right password, either—it was glass, after all, so if it had a gimmick like that, I'd be able to see it easily.

All that was in the glass was a single Japanese sword.

To pull out the Japanese sword in this state without damaging the glass—hmm, uh-oh, I just couldn't think of anything.

I had no idea where to even start, just like how this polished glass had no starting point—it didn't seem like the glass itself was anything special, since ultimately it was supposed to be just a "scabbard".

It was the sword that had the special quality of being able to slip through things… In other words, if I could figure out how to activate that special quality in this state, then would the sword fall out of the glass, just like that?

But if that was possible, then there would be no point in having this "scabbard"… Was I supposed to assume that the sword's special quality

wouldn't activate if I wasn't touching the sword somehow, like grabbing the hilt…?

If that was the case, then I probably wanted to do something to the glass itself. Even if the glass was supposed to be a "scabbard", that didn't mean it was against the rules for there to be some sort of trick to it—ah, shoot, my thoughts just went back to the start.

I was essentially going in circles.

"Princess Hitei…"

Once again, I turned to face the princess, this time with my entire body—but it wasn't because I had any ideas.

It was just that I thought I might be able to glean some hints from conversing with her.

Though it was a little underhanded, that wasn't something I could complain about.

However, the bench was empty. Only the cell phone had been left behind—eh, did she succeed in unifying the entire country in that Sengoku game already?

Then, where did she go?

It would've been preferable if she didn't walk around places in that get-up—was what I'd thought, but when I looked around, she was just swimming in the pool.

Before, she had gone in to pull the sword out from the bottom of the water, but now, it seemed she was just enjoying going swimming—speaking of which, even when she was getting the sword, she'd made lots of useless strokes while swimming… She was really in a vacation mood, wasn't she?

"Pwah… Did you say my name, Koyomi-kun?"

Princess Hitei popped out in the center of the pool and faced me—since she was tall, her glamorous upper body was still above the water even if she stood at the deepest point, making me unsure where to look.

"No… Um."

Normally, I was a pro at chatting idly, with a specialty in continuing conversations without any particular subject, but right now, I was completely at a loss for words.

Because she kept catching me off guard at every turn, it was a little hard to do.

So I just went straight to the heart of the matter with a direct question.

"Princess, what do you plan to do with Youtou 'Kokorowatari'? From what I understand, what you're gathering is, if anything, only the swords made by that Shikizaki Kiki person, right?"

"For that Shikizaki Kiki person to make swords, he needs the expertise regarding swords from the future. What I need to change is not just the future, but also the past."

"I see… An alteration, huh."

"However—let's see. If there *was* an aberration that I did want to kill, then I suppose it would be a ghost from the past."

A ghost—in the end, it seemed that the case of the Tea Ceremony Club's "eighth person" would be resolved as not actually existing, but good grief. Whenever I act for Tsukihi's sake, nothing really ever goes well, as always.

"Or perhaps I shouldn't call it a ghost, but a fate. It's not just me, but everyone from that era, that's bound to something like that, you see. Even that unpleasant woman, even Shichika-kun, even the Maniwa Ninja Corps—and even that idiot Emonzaemon."[77]

"… Well, I don't know about ghosts, but Youtou 'Kokorowatari' can't cut strings of fate."

If there did exist a sword that could sever ties like that, then even I almost wanted it.

No.

I guess I didn't need it.

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[77] Yasuri Shichika, along with Togame, is the protagonist of *Katanagatari*. The Maniwa Ninja Corps are a clan of ninja that are also looking for the Deviant Blades.

"Huhu. Ah, also." As if she hadn't been speaking seriously, Princess Hitei suddenly pulled back and said, "Hey, Koyomi-kun. Even if you try to indirectly get the way to draw the sword out of me, it's no use, okay?"

It was as if she'd completely seen through my intentions—like a clear blade.

"After all, I don't even know the right answer, either."

"Eh?"

"I'm sure the demon blade is the same, but the Deviant Blades choose their owners, you see—unfortunately, I'm not a swordswoman. Far from a sword, I can hardly carry anything heavier than chopsticks."

She was saying stuff like that so airily.

Even though nothing went past her. Even though nothing was overlooked by her.

What the hell, didn't that mean this approach was completely meaningless…! No, actually, was she really letting me know the "only the chosen one can draw the sword" condition this late?

If you said that, then I wasn't exactly a swordsman, either.

And I wasn't exactly suited to play the role of a hero that pulled out a sword from a stone, either—and if not even Princess Hitei was aware of the way to do so, then I couldn't help but doubt whether or not it was even actually possible to draw the sword.

That would mean that it wasn't even a fair battle, but thinking about it, Princess Hitei's objective probably wasn't even to have a fair battle—her objective was, after all, Youtou "Kokorowatari".

If that was the case, then this task that was already rather aimless would spike even further in difficulty—it was like being told to catch a tiger that was on a folding screen.[78]

She wasn't a princess, she was a shogun.

This didn't just *feel* like it was against the rules, it *was* actually against the rules, but, it was also my mistake for not checking beforehand—I

[78] A reference to a Japanese tale known as *Ikkyu-san and the Tiger*, in which a Lord decides to test the wit of a young monk named Ikkyu by asking him to catch a tiger drawn on a folding screen.

should've set an additional rule that, if I was unable to draw the sword, then Princess Hitei would have to demonstrate the correct way to draw it.

Since I'd gone into it with the intention of winning, I'd forgotten to consider those kinds of things… Shit, rather than being anyone like Kagenui-san or Gaen-san, wasn't she just a swindler like Kaiki?

"I'm not a swindler, I'm a strategian—or, at the very least, I'm just imitating what that unpleasant woman does. The real one is even worse, you know?"

I definitely don't want to become someone as dastardly as her, said Princess Hitei even as she imitated her, before going back to her swimming.

No, calm down.

It wasn't completely decided that it was impossible to draw the sword.

And, the fact that there was no perfectly correct answer was not something that worked against me—in fact, Princess Hitei was taking on quite a risk herself.

As long as the person who set the battle herself didn't know the correct answer, if I could simply clear the conditions no matter what I did, that would be considered correct—the scope of the problem was rather large.

A clever strategy always had to have a way to turn it around and use it against them.

That's why, even if I hadn't discussed it with this shogun beforehand, the answer wasn't clearly decided, which meant that I could still use my wits—for example, if the condition was that I "couldn't damage the glass", then what if I "melted the glass at a high temperature"?

It was something I came up with on the spot, and I didn't *not* come up with it on the spot (a double denial)—"melting" the glass could be loosely interpreted as "damaging" it, but at the very least, the surface of the glass would be completely smooth—rather than it being in a cuboid shape, it would be all smooth and liquidy.

Of course, if I actually touched that smoothness, I'd be inflicted with major burns, and there was also the question of how I'd even produce such a high temperature, but I'd be able to take out the sword that was encased in glass completely unaffected—or would I?

If I subjected the glass to temperatures high enough to melt it, high enough to give me major burns if I touched it, then would the Japanese sword inside really be unaffected?

Wouldn't it just melt along with the glass?

Um, if I remembered correctly… As far as I remembered from reading manga, glass melts at around 1400 degrees? While the melting point for iron was somewhere around 1500 or 1600 degrees… Wasn't that pretty close? No, the temperatures were so high that a difference of 100 or 200 degrees seemed almost negligible, but thinking about it coolly, it was actually a pretty big difference, wasn't it? Wasn't it a heat that I could think about coolly?

However, this wasn't a laboratory, so I highly doubted that I'd be able to control temperatures to within 100 degrees—and, for a more minor detail, a Japanese sword wasn't even iron, right?

Steel? Tamahagane?[79] It was some sort of alloy… Since it was forged in heat in the first place, couldn't that actually make it weaker to heat?

Although the swordsmith named Shikizaki Kiki may not necessarily have made swords in the proper way… Even if it didn't melt together with the glass, there was no guarantee that the Japanese sword would turn out with no damage.

And I couldn't assert that such a sink-or-swim method was possibly the "correct way"—I wasn't brave enough to do that.

Then… Something even wittier?

What if I used the sun?

I could hold up the "scabbard" over my head, expose it to the sun, and cast the shadow of the Japanese sword onto the side of the pool, saying, "See, I pulled it out of the 'scabbard'!"—but holding up this lump of glass that high and keeping it held up would be pretty hard for me.

Then, if I used buoyancy in the water—but did shadows show up nicely in the water? It would definitely waver a lot, right? And even if shadows

[79] Tamahagane (玉鋼) is a type of steel made from iron sand used to make Japanese swords, knives, and other kinds of tools.

did show up, it seemed like the glass would also cast a shadow—after all, the transparency of glass wasn't 100%, either.

Especially not for a lump like this.

Even if the shadow of the sword fell onto the ground, it would be meaningless if the shadow of the "scabbard" fell as well—if it fell.

If I dropped it?

"Have you figured out the answer by now? Or will you surrender? I'll just say it in advance, but if you get the way to draw the sword wrong, Toutou 'Tetsu' will automatically disappear, so be careful."

Before I noticed, Princess Hitei had gotten out from the pool and was standing behind me—really, she was someone you couldn't keep your eyes off of for even a second.

She was brazenly going "I'll say it in advance" while adding it as an afterthought, too… And it wasn't like objects could just disappear like that, so she was probably just putting psychological pressure on me, making it harder for me to use trial-and-error to solve the problem.

But, without even showing a hint that she was doing that, she said, "Here you go," and offered me her bath towel.

Did she want me to dry her off again…? Don't just say "Here you go". At least say please!

But, even though I didn't have a subservient personality toward princess-types, it was a pain to reject her demand, too—well, I'd been called "my servant" over spring break, so perhaps it wasn't a totally unfitting role for me.

I took the bath towel and began to wipe the moisture from Princess Hitei's hair—moisture.

Water?

"…"

"Hm? What is it, Koyomi-kun? Suddenly making a face as if you've just gotten free from a stressful situation."

"It wasn't that I got free from a stressful situation—I figured out how to get the sword free from the glass," I said.

And I spread the bath towel wide and put it over the glass "scabbard"—I then rolled it over to cover it from all sides.

On top of that, I tightly tied the ends of the towel together, making sure the knot wouldn't come undone. It was like I'd wrapped the "scabbard" in a furoshiki.[80]

"… What are you doing, Koyomi-kun? What I wanted was for you to wipe me down."

"There's no need to be so flustered. After all, I can wipe you off after I've made you break into a cold sweat."[81]

I smirked as if I'd said something rather clever, but it wasn't as if Princess Hitei had been particularly flustered or panicked—she was simply watching over my actions without any interference.

It felt like my joke had fallen flat, but I regrouped my thoughts and grabbed the bath towel bundle with both hands, lifting it with all my might.

As expected, it was considerably heavy, making my upper arm muscles tremble, but I somehow barely managed to hold it up over my head.

"My, my. Don't tell me you're planning to pass sunlight through it to cast a shadow and say, 'See, it's out!' If that's your answer, then I'll deny it."

No need to worry.

In any case, as long as it was wrapped by the towel, any shadow that fell would be completely dark—no silhouette of the Japanese sword would be seen.

What I planned on making fall was something else—no.

It was the **very thing itself**.

My arms had pretty much reached their limit, so I took the towel bundle, contents included, and threw it at the poolside concrete.

Crash!—it went.

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[80] Furoshiki (風呂敷) are a type of traditional Japanese wrapping cloth used to transport clothes, gifts, or other goods.

[81] Koyomi makes a pun with 焦る (*aseru,* "to be flustered") and 汗 (*ase,* "sweat").

A rather unpleasant sound rang out, sounding muffled from within the bath towel. The lump of glass had broken, not by the force of me throwing it, but from its own weight.

Of course, if my objective was just to break it then there would've been no need to wrap it in a towel, since it would actually lessen the impact, but it wouldn't be good if people were unable to walk around the poolside of my sister's school with bare feet.

I'd done it to prevent the broken glass shards from scattering everywhere—and I was relieved that all the glass had broken inside the towel, as planned.

Princess Hitei's eyes had widened in surprise—or not.

Instead, she looked at me with a completely composed smile and said, "What are you doing, Koyomi-kun? Of course, if you break it, you can take out the sword inside, but didn't I add the condition that 'you can't break the glass'?"

Rather than becoming agitated, her behavior was as if she was certain of her victory—no, don't panic, I shouldn't be the one to panic here.

The princess simply hadn't realized yet.

She just hadn't realized her own defeat yet.

That was natural, as I had hit upon her blind spot—that is, I had put into practice information that she had no way of knowing, being a traveler from the past.

"I haven't damaged it at all. Princess Hitei, when you jump into the surface of the pool, swim through the water, or splash water when you shake your wet hair, would you call that 'damaging the water'?"

"I would deny that. There's no way I would think of it like that. However, that's only because it's water—"

"**It's exactly the same for glass**. Because glass is **water**, after all."

Water—or, more precisely, a liquid.

This wasn't some random tidbit that I was being pretentious about, but something learned in high school classes—qualitatively, while it was solid, the molecular composition of glass was closer to a liquid state than a solid state.

It was a substance where the molecules didn't crystallize.

Without even needing to go out of your way to melt it with high temperatures, depending on your point of view, glass was already in a liquid state from the beginning—and that.

That was something everyone in the modern era knew.

"**That's why, even if it gets broken or scattered, it's not damaged**—I believe that satisfies the clear conditions you've set, Princess Hitei."

As she was a character from several centuries ago that even called glass "vidro", it had been a gamble as to how much she knew about molecular composition or the three states of matter, but the ever-so-wise Princess Hitei probably had no choice but to understand, whether she wanted to or not, as a result of that wisdom—of course, I didn't believe in the slightest that this violent way of doing things was the correct way to draw Toutou "Tetsu", but it was the princess that had denied any "correctness" in the first place.

No, if we're going that far, then even before that, choosing the poolside as the location for this battle was Princess Hitei's decisive mistake.

Whether she thought it was an appropriate place to hide the glass "scabbard", or she thought she could coerce me by wearing my sister's school swimsuit, or she simply wanted to enjoy a vacation—because she'd chosen our location to be at the water's edge, I'd been able to hit upon the fact that, at least by composition alone, glass wasn't very much different from water. I'd managed to get a hint from her in the end, even if it wasn't from our conversation.

Even though it didn't have to do with being at a poolside.

This was what they meant by, the crafty schemer *drowns* in his own schemes![82]

"I deny that. Like I said, it's not a schemer, and it's not a swindler. This is how a strategian does things—and that strategian would never drown in her own schemes, unpleasant as she is," she said.

---

[82] A Japanese adage: 策士策に溺れる (*sakushi-saku ni oboreru*), meaning "craft brings nothing home" but also containing the verb for "drowning".

Even at this stage, Princess Hitei hadn't fallen into dismay; if anything, her haughty smirk had grown even wider.

"Koyomi-kun. If you want to see me in tears, then why don't you try unwrapping that bundle? Perhaps the vidro was stronger than you expected, and didn't break completely?"

"…?"

Why hadn't her composure collapsed yet?

Why was this adult woman, in a school swimsuit, still putting on an air of self-importance—feeling uneasy that I'd lost sight of something important, I did as I was told and moved to unwrap the towel.

Ah, that's it, perhaps it wasn't just the glass that broke, but also the Japanese sword—was that what Princess Hitei was implying? Well, but the selling point of Japanese swords was that they didn't easily bend or break, right? Unlike the characteristic of glass that made it "easy to shatter" as a result of its molecular composition—however, if Toutou "Tetsu" really did break from the shock of hitting the ground, then I would certainly have no choice but to admit my defeat.

Well, whatever happens, happens… Praying for the best, I untied the knot—at first glance, just as I had planned, the glass had broken completely. Well, that was a matter of course.

As for the Japanese sword—it wasn't broken.

Well, it wasn't that it wasn't broken.

It… wasn't there.

"… Huh? Eh? What?"

Within the untied bath towel—it was packed with shards of broken glass, but the Japanese sword that should have been in those shards was nowhere to be found.

As if.

As if it had slipped down to the depths of hell.

"If you get the way to draw the sword wrong, Toutou 'Tetsu' will automatically disappear—I warned you in advance, didn't I? Since it vanished, that basically just means that you got it wrong."

"…!"

So that wasn't just a bluff…!

I'd been sure it was psychological warfare done as an afterthought… But, if it actually went and disappeared on me like this… It seemed like some kind of sleight of hand, but after it had been wrapped in the towel, the only one to have touched the "scabbard" was me… There was no chance to use a trick…!

"Ahaha. So it seems like you, Koyomi-kun, were the one to end up in tears? As well as—breaking out in a cold sweat."

Princess Hitei quietly closed her iron-ribbed fan, and spoke to me, unable to recover from my astonishment.

"I've never done anything so spirited even for Emonzaemon's sake—but shall I wipe that sweat off for you?"

It was quite a generous declaration of her.

006

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

In the end, Princess Hitei took Youtou "Kokorowatari" back with her to her own era—except she didn't. It felt like I'd been bewitched by a kitsune,[83] and I'd still harbored feelings of shame, but a loss was a loss, so at worst I'd resolved to hand over at least a replica of the sword—but, rather anticlimactically, it seemed she was satisfied with just being able to directly inspect the sword itself.

She'd also left behind Karen's swimsuit, so perhaps she had a rule that the only souvenir she could take back to the past was the information she gained. But really, if she had just said that from the start, then I probably wouldn't *not* have cooperated with her and shown her the sword at no cost.

"I deny that. Because I don't believe that there's anything to be gained for free—that's why I spent a lot of money buying stuff on that toy from earlier."

---

[83] Kitsune (狐, "fox") can refer to the actual animal, but they're a common subject of Japanese youkai folklore, in which they are highly intelligent spirits that can shapeshift into human form and trick people.

"What exactly have you done to my cell phone? No wonder you were able to unify the entire country so quickly!"

"First off, engaging in such decent negotiations was quite boring. It should be fun, after all!"

So her real motive was a vacation, in the end.

Well, it wasn't necessarily just that, though—wearing a swimsuit and swimming in the pool, those were all done to guide my thoughts, too.

Thinking about it afterwards, it was obvious.

Those various behaviors hadn't unintentionally given me a hint, but had ingeniously misdirected me—by having this battle by the water's edge, she'd skillfully reminded me of the liquid nature of glass.

It had been extremely skillful.

Rather than simply not establishing a correct answer, she'd gone and established a fake answer—it certainly was something that Princess Hitei would do.

Even offering me that bath towel at that timing seemed rather intentional, thinking about it now. In that case, did that mean she was already aware of the characteristics of the substance known as glass?

She probably was.

Yeah, she had to be.

She definitely had to be, to the point that it made me want to kill myself for acting like I was all that for being a modern person, even going out of my way to stress things in bold. Because she'd come to this town through a form of time travel called precognition, she could even be considered someone beyond a modern person—a person of the future, that had come from the past.

If she knew what moving pictures were, then she had to have known the characteristics of glass.

And the trick that had been set up in that "scabbard" was the proof—after all, if that gamble of crossing swords had simply been out of an irrationally playful spirit, then she wouldn't have tried to lead me on to make such a mistake and have an entire sword disappear.

It wasn't just a cultural difference.

It was a difference in our civilizations.

In solving the puzzle, Hanekawa Tsubasa (whom you all know as Araragi Koyomi's motivation) took part—at that time, she'd even caught on to what I wanted to do to her clothes using Toutou "Tetsu", but she didn't especially interrogate me about it (what an angel).

The answer ended up being some random tidbit that I couldn't say that everyone in the modern era knew, and it certainly wasn't something learned in high school classes. But apparently, "cutting the inside without cutting the outside", like the special characteristic of Toutou "Tetsu", was something that was actually possible scientifically.

With a laser beam, was what Hanekawa had said.

Laser technology that could **penetrate** through the surface of the glass and damage **only the interior**—just from hearing that, it almost sounded like some sort of technology out of science fiction, but it turned out to be real science that had actually been in use for quite some time.

Now that I thought about it, I remembered seeing glass craftsmanship like that before… A work of art manufactured within the glass, without damaging the surface or leaving any traces of welding.

I hadn't even thought once about how works of art like that had even been made, but it turned out that it was the result of a laser beam being focused in the center. To destroy the glass deep within without damaging the outer surface, you'd need a high-intensity, high-speed laser beam.

In the future, as technology advances, it was possible that we'd even develop laser scalpels to treat internal organs without having to cut open the skin or muscles—laser scalpels.

In a sense, we could call those blades, as well.

Even lightsabers, something that sounded like it came from a science fiction moving picture, were possible—so, if Toutou "Tetsu" was a sword with such an unheard-of nature, and if Princess Hitei was aware of what the future would bring, then she could take that glass cuboid.

And it would be easy to carve the **three-dimensional image of a Japanese sword** within it—without damaging the surface, it would be easy to **burn through** the shape of a Japanese sword inside.

It wouldn't be hard at all.

That "scabbard" had been empty from the beginning.

It was a folding screen that simply had a tiger painted on it.

Actually, I should have been able to realize that when I managed to lift the "scabbard" wrapped in the bath towel above my head even without the help of buoyancy—I shouldn't have felt mildly proud of myself for being stronger than I expected, because I should have been sharp enough (like a Japanese sword) to realize that something was off.

Because, if an unsheathed sword had truly been placed inside that cuboid, then it would have been far heavier than a lump of glass with the same volume.

In other words, Princess Hitei hadn't even placed the chip of a Deviant Blade onto the table in the first place—what she'd prepared wasn't just a fake answer, but also the paper tiger known as Toutou "Tetsu".

To add on a minor detail, she'd chosen to hold the battle beneath the intense UV rays of the sun, not just because it was by the water's edge, but because she wanted to take the three-dimensional image of the Japanese sword in the glass and pass light through it like a dispersive prism—that was probably it. At that point, it was no longer craftsmanship that was capable of being done in the modern era, so there would've been no way for a modern guy like me to see through it, but… Not putting Toutou "Tetsu" on the table and preparing a fake using that "sword that slipped through things" could just barely be considered fair play.

Although, as the one who was on the receiving end, rather than it being "just barely", the fair play was almost on the verge of harassment.

I was really led around by schemes upon schemes.

If that was supposed to be an imitation that she'd learned by watching someone else, then how far did the real strategian even go…? For someone like me who was born as a child in an era of peace, I sadly couldn't imagine it at all.

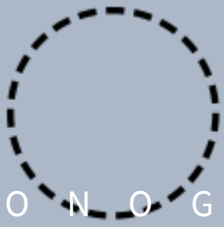
If anything, I should be glad that I was in such an era of peace that I couldn't imagine something like that.

Be that as it may, if I hadn't been fooled simply by appearances, and if I had managed to discover that it was just a lump of glass with nothing inside, then it would have been my victory then and there, so it wasn't a completely no-risk strategy, and I probably couldn't complain about the fact that things turned out like this. Even if I wanted to complain, the other party had already departed, not just from this town, but from this era.

What did she learn from determinedly gazing, with those blue eyes of hers, at that fearsome Youtou "Kokorowatari" that could cut down only aberrations? And what sort of strange and curious swords would be made from simply taking that information back to the past? It was something I would never be able to guess, but if, as a result of that unbroken string of fate, it somehow ended up being connected to the manufacturing of Toutou "Tetsu" itself, then it would be delightfully ironic. And, as if being twisted around by schemes, if that information twisted back to the creation of Youtou "Kokorowatari" itself, then that would mean my loss hadn't been for nothing.

Even before that, from the princess's point of view, because she considered it just playing around, she probably didn't even consider it an actual battle against me. But even so, I couldn't get rid of this sense of defeat.

If I could see into the future—even if I could see into the future—I surely wouldn't be able to see myself denying this crushing defeat.



MAZEMONOGATARI

Hitei Clear — Chapter Sword

Carved a translation inside: Polaris Translations
Wrapped it in a nice towel: Bluex
Didn't not take it back to our world: Maxdefolsch

MAZEMONOGATARI

NISIOISIN

Iori Fugue

Chapter Kill

Mutou Iori

Ningen Series

Art: Shiomiya Iruka

001

Mutou Iori is a demonic killer from the Zerozaki Clan. A demonic killer, as the name suggests, is a demon who kills people.[84] Looking at her from that perspective, I think it's safe to say that, among the many unique individuals that I've met so far, she's the most dangerous. I can't talk about it as easily as I could talk about an aberration, nor can I talk about it at length as I would for an urban legend. She is an overwhelmingly dangerous being.

Being.

Yes, the most important aspect is that, unlike a youkai manifestation, a demonic killer exists—but don't worry, as of now it seems that Mutou Iori has been forbidden from killing humans—and I can therefore tell you a few things about her with great trepidation and care.

About her.

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[84] While 殺人鬼 (*satsujinki*) is a common word to refer to serial killers, it's been used specifically in *Zaregoto* and *Ningen* to refer to members of the Zerozaki Clan as a way of contrasting them with other families of murderers. Other translators have conveyed this term using "psycho killer" or "cutthroat murderer".

About the demonic killer in a knit beanie who I met.

It's not so much a story, it's more of a report… By the way, the Zerozaki Clan is something like a guild for demonic killers. According to her, they're a lot like a family.

"As a member of the family they take very good care of me" is what she told me with a hint of embarrassment.

Just hearing that description, you wouldn't be sure what kind of organization it is, but that thing, "family", is something Hanekawa Tsubasa had wanted very badly, so when I learned that even demonic killers desired that same thing, I couldn't help but feel a sense of closeness. However, when I learned that the strong bonds that connect the Zerozaki Clan consist of things like "Do not allow any to live who harm the clan" and "Kill anyone who opposes you", that feeling of closeness faded away and I decided to pretend that I had never felt it.

Of course this "Killing Name" only came in third place in the ranking—for the "most disliked" ranking they were uncontested at number one, which the demonic killers as a whole were apparently quite proud of.[85]

Mutou Iori is a part of this group—not related by blood, but rather bound together by the shedding of blood—and she is a new member.

She's a seventeen-year-old demonic killer.

In gaining that title she also had to lose much—for instance, her school record. Until recently she was a second-year high school girl, but now she's lost that place in the world. For example, her friends. For example, her daily life. For example, her ability to rest.

And for another example, her hands.

When she became a demonic killer she ruthlessly had her hands cut off, left and right, at the wrist. It was reminiscent of having one's arms taken off by the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

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[85] In *Zaregoto* and *Ningen*, the seven "Killing Names" (殺し名, *koroshina*) and their counterparts the six "Cursing Names" (呪い名, *majinaina*) are families of murderers, each one having a different way and reason for killing people.

Now of course this gave me that feeling of closeness once more, but when becoming friends with a girl who's not a vampire but a demonic killer, a certain level of prudence and caution was necessary—at least in my case.

And that's because, as I said before, she's currently a demonic killer who cannot kill humans, which means that, strictly speaking, she is still a danger to me.

An extreme danger.

During that hellish spring break, as a result of having my blood sucked by a vampire, I became something that I'm not sure should be viewed as human or non-human. As someone who had, at least temporarily, ceased to be human, Araragi Koyomi possibly presented a convenient loophole to the "no killing humans" rule.

There was no guarantee that the impulsive serial killer Mutou Iori wouldn't use the giant scissors called "Mind Render" that she inherited from her older brother to cut me in half.

002

When I awoke, I found myself in an unfamiliar place, which is something I had become familiar with after awakening (in both senses) in the ruins of a former cram school, but this time I felt a light panic that perhaps I had slipped through time or perhaps this was all a dream.

I say all of this because the place where I woke up was a location I frequented during the summer break of my first year of middle school. And this place had something in common with the ruins of the former cram school, for it too was a ruin—an abandoned house.

It was in a residential area, in a building that had been left to rot back behind the other buildings of the block. The only way to access the house was to take a small path between the other buildings, and from the looks of the place, it's possible that nobody even remembered that it existed. I was in a room on the second floor of that dilapidated and forgotten building.

Um… What was it again?

I'm not in my first year of middle school right now, I'm in my third year of high school, right? So why… Aah, that's it.

Just recently, this nostalgic, and in a sense unpleasant, building had been used to solve some mysteries with a younger girl from school. So once that event was settled, in order to process my own feelings, I went back to that room on my own.

Saying that I wanted to process my feelings is just an excuse. What I really wanted to do was go back to this ruin and confirm if all of my memories of this place were things that I wanted to forget.

If I wanted to forget my summer with that fairy.

Perhaps I just wanted to go back and verify that those memories were something that I would never forget.

Even someone who lives their life as half-assed as I do can feel sentimental—and that's fine—but the real question is, why was I sleeping here?

Sleeping directly on top of a deteriorating, ruined floor couldn't possibly be comfortable… Had I worn myself out with my entrance exam studies? Was I even sleeping? Had something rendered me unconscious and I only then came back to my senses?

"Oh. Awake, are you?"

Ah.

I hadn't realized it, but a girl had been sitting across the room from me. She spoke to me when I sat up—while holding a large pair of scissors in her mouth.

Holding scissors in her mouth?

Huh? How was she talking?

Wait no—beside the point, sorry—who?

Who was that?

The dim lighting in the room made it difficult to see the girl. If my eyesight was still at the peak it had reached during spring break this would've been nothing, but the timing didn't work out. In any case, it seemed safe to say that she wasn't someone I knew.

And I was pretty sure that I came here alone…

She was wearing a knit beanie on her head and a knee-length pleated skirt—the skirt looked like it belonged to a school uniform, but the top

didn't seem to match. She was wearing a parka whose sleeves were way too long.

She looked a bit like Ougi-chan… Wait, no, that design for Ougi-chan was made by the anime production company, wasn't it? The appearance of the world is becoming rather unclear lately…

Well, setting aside the question of whether she had a school uniform on, she was clearly a girl around my age—and you might expect one to think of Senjougahara given the presence of stationery, but the scissors that this girl had were too large to be called that.

Senjougahara would probably say that they were an affront to aesthetics.

Rather than scissors, they looked more like two large knives that had been joined to each other. For someone holding something that dangerous, she was remarkably calm.

"Oh, does this bother you, Koyomi-onii-chan?"

Koyomi-onii-chan? Why did she call me that?

What happened before I lost consciousness?

"I'll just put them away for now. Hup…"

And with that, the girl used her jaw to throw the scissors straight above her in the air—and at the same time stood up and raised one leg in the air to do a standing side split.

I panicked for a second, since she was wearing a skirt and was lifting her leg in a way that gave a clear view under it, but then I realized that she was wearing spats under her skirt.

So I guess instead of Ougi-chan or Senjougahara, now she was more like Kanbaru.

But in this girl's case, she had more than just spats on under her skirt.

She had a strap around her leg that looked like a gun holster like you'd see in a western action movie—but apparently what fit into *this* holster was not a gun. The scissors turned a beautiful arc through the air and then dropped snugly down into the strap.

"There, now we can all relax. Relaxing scissors."

"… I don't find those scissors relaxing at all."

Those were some dangerous acrobatics.

I was intensely anxious just watching it.

"If you wanted to show off, the spats alone would have been enough."

"Oh, so you're into spats, Koyomi-onii-chan? There are many sides to your perversion, aren't there."

It was unsettling to hear a girl I had only just met make conclusions about me so quickly (both in regards to her deciding that I'm a pervert and her deciding that I am into spats), but I could tell as soon as she stood up that she had not been trying to show off her acrobatics skills with a performance.

That was her standard method for putting away the scissors.

The way that the sleeves of her parka hung loose from her arms made it clear—it wasn't a problem of the sleeves being too long.

"Oh. This is what they call an 'honorable wound'. I had my hands cut off by some hitman brothers. Don't worry about it."

"… I see."

Hitman? Hitman brothers?

To be entirely honest, everything that's been said and done in this ruined building so far has been a reason to worry…

"I have prosthetics that I can wear, but it's such a pain that I forget a lot of the time. Of course, if I had them now, I wouldn't have to lay low in a place like this. I'll be reflecting on this mistake for sure."

"Lay low…?"

Hearing a place where I had made memories called "a place like this" stung a little, but then again the place looked like it would fall down if there was a strong breeze, and I've probably referred to this place in the same way myself, so she's entitled to her feelings. More importantly.

Aah, that's right.

That's when I remembered.

What happened before I lost my consciousness.

I came to this building with my mind full of complex and strange thoughts, then I went upstairs and entered this room on the second floor. And there.

There, I entered the room, and someone who had been hiding inside delivered a high kick to my medulla oblongata.

"Ah. You've gone pale, Koyomi-onii-chan. You must have remembered. Yes, I did something rude to you earlier. I thought you were one of the people following me."

The girl with the knit beanie—otherwise known as the "**someone who had been hiding inside**"—laughed sheepishly and bowed slightly.

I don't think that being embarrassed helps anything.

"P… People following you?"

Realizing that the situation I found myself in was more dangerous than I could imagine, I scooted back away from the girl and asked, "Who are you? What are you?"

"Me? I'm Zerozaki—Mutou Iori. Just between you and me, I'm a demonic killer."

She started to give a name, then corrected herself, then dropped a little profile that was impossible to ignore, and on top of that she added…

"I'm currently a fugitive criminal."

Which I really didn't want to know anything about.

003

I see, I understood my role here, I was there to be the hostage for a fugitive. If I'd been told that beforehand I could have prepared for the role, but to just have it suddenly shoved onto me like this, I had no idea how to react.

I didn't have any plans to appear in a tragicomedy like this—but maybe I had been so preoccupied with aberrations lately that I stopped being on guard against fugitives? Maybe I should seriously reflect on this.

Anyway, back to Mutou Iori.

As often happens, she was on the run from false accusations for crimes that she didn't commit—and it wasn't the police that she was running from.

Humanity's Strongest Contractor.

Aikawa Jun.

… I know that person.

I just met her recently.

Rather than meeting her, I was almost killed by her.

I couldn't believe it… Was it really possible to have a connection like that?

"To keep things brief; I'm a demonic killer who has been banned from killing humans. I promised to not kill any more humans and so Aikawa-onee-san overlooked me."

"Oh, I see. Makes sense."

It didn't make any sense.

What a stark and bloody worldview.

Even in a shortened form, I still didn't want to hear that.

And if she said "not kill any more humans", did that imply that she killed humans previously?

This fugitive… If Mutou had a worldview like **that**, then even if calling herself a demonic killer was just a cheeky little joke, my life was still in great peril of being snuffed out at any moment.

"Ever since then, Iori-chan has done her best to avoid killing people. Aren't I a good girl?"

"Yeah, a good girl. I wish you could be my junior."

Neither my junior nor I are exactly normal, but still, we're not demonic killers.

"And in spite of that, currently, I'm being suspected of something that I didn't do. I'm suspected of being the killer in a murder case—and if things stay on like this I'm going to be deemed in violation of my agreement and Humanity's Strongest will come to put me down. And so I've fled to here."

"…"

"Suspecting me just because I'm a demonic killer… It's not fair! Right?"

"…"

It seems reasonable to me to suspect someone who is called a demonic killer, but that hardly seems like a constructive opinion to voice in this context. I've almost been killed purely for my vampiric nature, so it's not as if I can't understand her view… Still, that's probably not something I should be focusing on right now. No, what I should be thinking about right now is how I can get through this situation unharmed—and on top of that, how to release this demonic killer back to her own worldview.

Damn, this is just like when I met Humanity's Strongest. Lately it seems like more than half of the people that I meet leave me wondering "How

can I make it home alive?"… Normally, when someone imagines their dream collaboration, they think of a quiet, idyllic scene, and yet…

For some reason all of my collabs seem to be turning into VS scenes.

It's not a dream collaboration, it's a nightmare.

"So, I'm sorry to have to say this, but since you've seen my face, Koyomi-onii-chan, you'll have to stay here and hide with me. Even an old ruin like this can become a home. Want some candy? I have juice too."

Seemingly unbothered by my obvious problems with the situation, Mutou came over to sit beside me. I could see a stack of convenience store bags in the corner of the room, so I guess she really did have candy and juice. Still, to ruthlessly litter the room where I had made memories… And she says this can be a home.

Oh, and the reason that she knows my name is because apparently, while I was unconscious from her kick, she went through my belongings. She's quite the young criminal. Although that doesn't explain why she decided to call me "Koyomi-onii-chan".

"… I make it a policy not to eat snacks."

"I see. But I think it's a good idea to eat when you have the chance. I mean… You can't go back home now."

Scary.

How could she take away my freedom to return home as if it was nothing? … Then again, Mutou did knock me unconscious with a single kick even though I've gone through more than my fair share of fights.

Yeah, I think it was a good idea to do what she said.

"Well I *will* have some candy. Aahn~"

"…"

Even if you open wide…

But then again, while I can't be sure whether what she told me was the truth, I figured the least I could do was offer some support to a girl without hands. Now was probably the time to show that I was willing to cooperate. So I grabbed a convenience store bag and took a snack out of it at random, then tossed it into her mouth. As I tossed it, I asked…

"So, Mutou, could you tell me a bit more about your situation?"

And to follow it up:

"I may not look like it, but I'm actually a bit famous at my school for running a Boy Detective Agency. I've cleared the names of nearly 100 falsely accused classmates."

"Wow. So Koyomi-onii-chan goes to a school with nearly 100 students who have been accused of crimes… And he's in a 'Boy Detective Agency' even though he's in high school."

Huh, I didn't think she was the type to play the straight man. She seemed kind of out of it, so I assumed she'd be the fool of our comedy duo, but I guess she was born to play another role.

"So how about it? Let this witty boy detective lend you a hand!"

"A witty boy detective, huh. That's not a very good image. Hmm. I appreciate the offer, but I think I'm going to pass. Juice."

"… Okay."

So she'll turn down my help, but she'll still demand juice… I was thinking about how impossible this demonic killer was to read as I opened the bottle for her to drink.

Well if I can't read her, then I can't read her… It was probably more important to not let myself become a victim of Stockholm syndrome.

"It's pointless anyway. I was thinking if I'm going to be suspected of murder, then maybe I should just go on a killing spree instead of holding back."

"Don't think like that. Don't give up."

I tried to persuade her, arguing like a human rights lawyer.

And since I was the one closest to hand should she decide to start killing, I was fairly desperate in my attempt.

"I'm sure that your family will believe you, Mutou."

"My family would believe that I was the killer. In fact, if they found out that I wasn't, they'd probably scold me for it."

"… Just tell me about it. I'll figure something out."

Everything I learned about the culture she came from made it sound all the more repulsive, and my attempts to convince her were becoming increasingly weak, but maybe having something to drink changed her mind

somehow, because Mutou suddenly said, “Very well, then I will tell you what happened in a literary fashion”.

Whether they’re a demonic killer or not, the ways that women think continue to be impossible to understand.

“I am overflowing with writing talent, after all. Ufufu. I’m going to get a Nobel Prize for literature.”

“Please don’t do the literature angle. If possible I’d prefer a pop style.”

“Pop, huh… Okay. In that case I will aim for the light novel literary award.”

A light novel literary award?

That probably exists.

“Hey! It’s me, Mutou Iori! I’m a rambunctious, high-energy seventeen-year-old! Something totally crazy happened to me recently! Wanna hear about it?”

“Okay. Numbered list. Please tell me what happened in the format of a numbered list.”

Wow, Mutou’s concept of a light novel was outdated.

That’s certainly quite the writing talent.

“Really I’m just a seventeen-year-old girl who’s always in the way and always ready to kill, but hey!”

“Saying ‘but hey!’ like that makes it sound like a joke. Anyway, what is the ‘totally crazy’ thing that happened?”

“Okay, okay. Koyomi-onii-chan is so demanding. How troublesome.”

Mutou looked like she was having fun though.

Maybe she was just happy to have someone to talk to, since she’s on the run.

“Okay, so you wanted a numbered list? Well there are five key points to this situation.”

“Okay, five points.”

“① The victim is Kino Daichi. He’s a fifteen-year-old boy. ② He was killed with my large scissors. ③ More than ten people claim to have seen me kill him. ④ The Kino Division and Zerozaki Clan are currently at odds

with each other. ⑤ I'm a demonic killer, so even if we were not at odds with the Kino Division I'd still want to kill him."[86]

"Mhm, mhm. I see."

① The victim is a fifteen-year-old boy. ② He was killed by Mutou's large scissors. ③ There were many witnesses. ④ There was also motive. ⑤ Mutou would kill even without motive…

"Mutou."

"Yes? Have you already solved it, boy detective?"

"I'll go with you, so turn yourself in."

That was the only possible response.

How could she possibly avoid being found guilty for this? There's an overabundance of evidence.

"Unfortunately, in our world there is no such thing as turning yourself in."

"What world is that?"

Are you from the Middle Ages or something? Actually no, I bet you could turn yourself in during the Middle Ages.

"What we do have is vigilantism. But I can understand why this isn't something you'd want to hear, Koyomi-onii-chan. Until recently I was a person like you as well. If you don't wish to hear any more about my world, then let's end it here."

"… It's okay. I'm fine, keep going."

I put up a front of being fine—but it was a bluff.

"So what? What was it? The victim is Kino Daichi? Of the Kino Division? Hahaha, they sound pretty weak."

"They are poisoners who use any and every poison or disease. They're a group of pros who could destroy a town of this size in about three days."

Endure it. Get through this.

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[86] While the Kino Division and some of its members have been introduced in *Zaregoto* and *Ningen*, this particular character seems to have been specifically created for this story.

I'd already learned something new from talking to her. I figured that if I made a mistake in how I dealt with her, then I might not be the only victim. Not a great thing to learn, but…

"So? The Zerozaki Clan… Your family and this Kino Division are against each other… And to put it in the most blunt terms, does that mean they're killing each other?"

"Yes. But, and this is an important distinction, I am not a part of that mutual killing. Because I have been banned from killing by Aikawa-onee-san. Therefore in a battle I am useless."

Yes, that makes logical sense. Even if that isn't enough to remove suspicion from her…

"There were witnesses, right? Are all of them lying?"

"No, in this case the witnesses aren't all that important—after all, the first of the "Cursing Name" families, the Tokinomiya Hospital, was involved in this battle."

"Hospital? So are they doctors who save victims who have been poisoned by the Kino Division?"

"They are people who can control the hearts and minds of others."

"…"

And we're not talking about aberrations, right? I've heard that vampires have a "fascinate" ability…

"So the witness statements aren't reliable at all. They can create as many witnesses as they want. In the past something similar happened—so the goal of the Tokinomiya Hospital is probably to make it seem like I've violated my ban so that Humanity's Strongest Contractor will come to put me down."

"But if you're not involved in the fighting, then having Jun-san come to kill you… Wouldn't that have no effect on the conflict itself?"

I didn't have the best grasp of the power balance between these factions, but… From what I gathered so far, it didn't seem like there was any reason to go to so much trouble just to have Mutou removed from the conflict.

"But that's not the case. The Zerozaki Clan has the habit of destroying anyone and anything related to any event which has caused harm to a

member of the clan. They act without regard to potential losses that they may incur."

"Is your family made of giant hornets?"

Feeling great relief that I had not tried to force my way out of this house and escape, I accepted her explanation. If you think about it from that perspective, then having Mutou "dealt with" by Jun-san would mean that the entirety of her clan would be taking on Humanity's Strongest.

For the opposing groups, being able to use Jun-san, the ultimate joker, in such a way, would be the next best thing to making an ally of her. Furthermore, since Mutou is a new member of the clan and is no longer taking part in the killing, she becomes an easy target. She isn't with her comrades to create an alibi for her whereabouts.

"Yes. For the Tokinomiya Hospital I would have been a perfect target. Even if I was outside of the sphere of conflict, I wasn't entirely removed from it. I'm sure they learned of my existence during one of the battles."

"I see… Well this at least establishes why someone would want to frame you."

Of course that didn't prove that Mutou was innocent… And given my own situation with her, I wasn't so sure that the word innocent could really be applied to her in any sense. In truth, she could have broken her promise to Jun-san and murdered someone, and then feigned innocence or had her own mind manipulated to plead innocence to me, but ultimately, I was her hostage so the only thing that I could do was believe her.

"So with all of that said, ultimately it comes down to point number 2 in your list. Your scissors which were used to commit the murder. That isn't something the Tokinomiya Hospital could recreate, right?"

It's not as if I know enough about the Tokinomiya Hospital to really comment on what they could or couldn't do, but based on what I'd heard so far it didn't seem like they could create physical evidence.

"Yes. To be more specific, the member of the Kino Division had his heart stabbed with a blade and the opening to the wound matches the shape of my scissors—the blade of 'Mind Render'."

I couldn't help but wonder if they had coroners among their number (of pro players?), but I guess what's more important is that the wounds made by her scissor blade must be very unique. I could see the scissors, and they did seem to be unusual in their shape.

"Mutou, could I see it again?"

"My spats? If that's what you want, I don't see why not."

"No. The scissors."

"That's more or less the same thing. Go right ahead, flip my skirt up."

She stood up and placed her thigh in front of me. Flip up my skirt—what kind of situation did I get myself into.

"If you're too embarrassed to do it yourself, then I could use my teeth to hold my skirt up."

"That's not any better."

I hesitated, but decided to lift her skirt myself. The spats are bad enough, but being this close to a girl's thigh is enough to make my heart race even if she isn't a demonic killer.

"Thanks to the spats you can really see the shape and form of the thigh."

"You're voicing your thoughts, Koyomi-onii-chan."

"High praise for Araragi Koyomi! 'The First Mystery of the Year Solved in a Flash!'"

"You're voicing a review, Koyomi-onii-chan. And that's not a very good review. My thighs have no mysteries."

"'The culprit was… the reader?!'"

"That's been done too many times."

"'The culprit was… the reviewer?!'"

"Well that's quite novel."

"Going to sell a million copies."

"It won't."

We've left behind the mystery genre and created a derailment of literature.

If she was wearing stockings instead of spats I could have established a *tear-jerker* literature genre, but let's not get ahead of ourselves—back to the topic at hand.

"The way that the holster wraps around her thigh is also really sexy…"

"You didn't make it back to the topic, Koyomi-onii-chan. Also that holster was originally worn by a strange old guy under his suit."

Anyway… I focused on the large scissors, I think she called them "Mind Render". Those large blades were quite out of place on a girl's thigh…

"Hmm. They really are rather unique blades. But even if the murder weapon is determined to match these scissors, that doesn't mean that you're the one who did it. Someone could have just used the same type of scissor."

"I'm afraid that explanation doesn't work. 'Mind Render' is a one-off. A swordsmith by the name of Furuyari Zukin used all of his skill to create these—there is not another pair of scissors like it in the world."

A murder weapon of which only one exists. Which must be the reason that they had the scissors be the murder weapon, because it provides strong proof that Mutou did do it—right? If so, that leads me to my next hypothesis.

"In which case maybe these scissors really were used to commit the murder. However, they were not wielded by you, but by another player… Have you lent these out or left them unattended?"

Earlier she said that she would often forget to wear her prosthetics because they're a pain to deal with, so if I extrapolate from that and assume that she can be a bit careless with her things, then it's possible that someone used her scissors while she wasn't paying attention.

But the demonic killer's response ruined that theory.

"My scissors never leave my side. Literally."

"… I see."

That creates some fairly insurmountable evidence.

If this was a mystery novel, "There's no way that the killer would use a weapon that would leave a mark that proves that they, and only they, could be the killer!" would be the obvious defense, but in the world where this girl lives that explanation wouldn't work.

For factions that are at war with each other, murder is the name of the game. In a certain sense, leaving a calling card that names the killer is

probably a very common act for a demonic killer—the only exception would be Mutou, as she is bound by her own unique rule.

But then, where does that leave us?

How can we possibly prove Mutou's innocence when all of the evidence against her has been more or less confirmed? I'm starting to feel less like a human rights lawyer and more like a hotshot lawyer who can get people off regardless of their crime as long as he's paid enough money.

"Um, Koyomi-onii-chan."

"Wait, just let me think for a while longer. I'm sure that I can find a way to free you."

It perhaps wasn't something that I should have been saying to a demonic killer, but Mutou responded in a fairly blasé tone, "Oh, well, that's kind of you". A few moments later, she continued.

"But could you put my skirt back down for now?"

004

With all of the information assembled so far, it was hard to refute the conclusion that this case was beyond the scope of the boy detective Araragi Koyomi—the odds were seriously against Mutou being found innocent even if you put the best spin on the situation. And if Mutou was at a disadvantage, then I, her captive hostage, was too.

I was at a disadvantage in regard to gaining my freedom.[87]

To be quite honest, at this point I was thinking quite a lot about passing this case from a fake detective, myself, to a real detective, Hanekawa Tsubasa. I could realistically do just that if I called on her, but in this scenario that was simply not going to happen.

I couldn't bring Hanekawa or anyone else into a situation with a demonic killer. And even if Mutou wasn't a demonic killer, she was still from a worldview where violence and bloodshed are commonplace.

It was just as Oshino Meme had said, though the context was different, I had to save myself by my own power. So… What to do? How could I get this knit-capped girl to be declared innocent? From witness accounts to

[87] Pun between 不利 (*furi*, "disadvantage") and フリー (*furii*, "free").

physical evidence, everything was so perfectly lined up to declare her guilty that I was starting to see her knit beanie as a balaclava instead.

"Ummm… So if that Tokinomiya Hospital group is involved, then it doesn't really matter if we find an alibi for you, right? They can just change their memories?"

"That's right. You really do understand, don't you. So are you a 'Cursing Name'? Your name seems fitting. Are you the 'Cursing Name' Seventh Rank Araragi?"

Oh shut up.

So if suspicion fell on her because of the murder weapon, then the only way to clear that suspicion was by focusing on that aspect of the case… Mhm. But in this case, even if we couldn't prove that she was innocent, if we could provide proof that someone else might be guilty, then wouldn't that be enough?

The murder weapon being "Mind Render" was the piece of evidence that indicated Mutou as the only possible killer.

"Furuyari Zukin, was it? What if someone asked this grandpa to create the same thing again…?"

"Grandpa? Oh? Why do you know that he's an old man? I only told you that he's a swordsmith."

"Stop trying to use that trope that comes up in every single mystery drama. I'm on your side."

I just assumed based on his name and his title that he was an old guy.

Wait, does that mean he isn't an old guy?

"Oh no, he's an old man. Well to be more specific he WAS an old man, but now he's deceased. So if you're asking if he could create the same blade again, the answer is no."

"Hm… But someone else could create a model of it, right? A model… like a fake metal sword…"

Fake metal scissors.

They wouldn't be made by the same person, so no matter how much they try to duplicate it, they wouldn't create a perfect copy… But they could certainly create something that's close enough.

"Yes. And of course I thought of that as well, but that really must be impossible. I told you, didn't I? I carry 'Mind Render' with me at all times."

For a moment I didn't understand her point, but then it clicked.

In order to create a duplicate, they would of course need to see the original.

Aside from the original creator of the scissors, and Mutou who carries them with her every moment of every day, any other person, if tasked with creating a duplicate of the scissors, would need to have the original sitting on their desk in front of them to study. But if they had access to the original, then they wouldn't need to create a duplicate—they could just use the real blade to commit the crime.

"Um… Is it possible that someone could take the scissors without you noticing, and then return them again before you realized they were gone?"

"As you can see, they are held in a holster. It's highly unlikely that I could have someone graze their hand against my spats once without noticing, let alone twice."

Then it's impossible.

But what if her ability to "notice" and "perceive" was taken from her by the mind manipulation skill of the other group? But then… If they were close enough to manipulate her mind, then they could just implant the command to go kill Kino What's-His-Face and skip all of the other steps.

Now I suppose it's possible that they then removed her memories of having committed the crime, but that doesn't really make sense. If their goal is to have Humanity's Strongest and the Zerozaki Clan fight each other, then leaving the memories behind would probably help the process along.

So it should be safe to assume that Mutou's statement that the scissors never leave her possession is true… Wait, hold on?

"Mutou. Have you heard this before? 'You have the right to remain silent.'"

"…? Well, yes, of course. They say it all the time in mystery TV shows."

Thank goodness. She came from a worldview where turning yourself in wasn't a thing, so it was possible that the right to remain silent might not have existed either.

"In other words, whether you're a suspect or even if you've been charged with a crime, you don't have to say anything that could incriminate yourself. If you just retract the statement that 'Mind Render' never leaves your possession, then the reason to suspect you falls apart, right?"

To go a step further, she could even give false statements like, "I lost it three days ago", "I put it in one place, but I found it in another", or "I left it in another room when I went to take a bath". Now normally I wouldn't suggest such a thing, but since lives are on the line I think lying is okay.

Even if that wasn't enough to completely remove all suspicion, it would've at least gotten us out of this dire situation. Of course, Jun-san could read minds, so how we'd get beyond that is another problem…

But Mutou proved that I didn't need to think so far ahead.

"No, I can't lie about that."

What? I couldn't help but lean forward.

She couldn't lie? That mustn't have been because she was just an overly honest person. Unable to turn herself in, but also unable to lie? What kind of logic was that?

"Y-You know your life is on the line, right?"

"Koyomi-onii-chan. For me, keeping 'Mind Render' on my body at all times is something that I must stake my life on. That's how I show my respect—no, love—for its former owner, Soushiki-san."

Mutou explained in an unwavering tone.

Love.

Is that the familial love that they talk about? The love of the Zerozaki Clan?

If so, that would certainly overcome any issues of profit, loss, or self-interest.

"So it's fine, Koyomi-onii-chan. You don't have to think about it so hard. You don't have to worry. I'll do something to take care of myself."

Mutou smiled as if to comfort and encourage me, and while I did feel a form of admiration for the way that her family worked, and I would've been willing to respect that in another circumstance, I really wished she remembered that my life was also on the line.

"Oh, that's right. Want to join the Zerozaki Clan then?"

"I'm pretty sure it's not so easy to join your family."

"Anyone who is a demonic killer can join."

"Then since I'm not a demonic killer, I cannot join."

Maybe if they accepted vampires.

I rubbed at my neck as I thought that—I'd slept on my neck wrong during my brief nap on the floor of the room, but the gesture had nothing to do with that.

I was touching the scars on my neck.

During spring break I had been bitten by a vampire, and now I had these scars—and at that time I was taken from my normal daily life and thrown into the depths of hell. I wonder if it was the same for Mutou?

She should have been a normal high school girl like any other, but then one day she was slapped with the label of demonic killer, and she had to throw away her entire normal daily life as well as her hands—if the only thing that saved her in that time was the family that she gained, then even a dishonest girl would become honest in regard to that one thing.

It's not something that I can understand, but I can accept it.

While I was able to get through my own ordeal without having to quit school, my life since that spring break has changed. It's probably safe to say that I no longer operate on the normal sense of ethics.

Mutou had said that it was something that she had to stake her life on—and I gave away mine.

So…

"…"

Hm? Scar?

That's what was left after the night when Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade bit me—it's the scar of having her vampire fangs buried deep into my neck.

If you wanted to view it from a romantic angle you could call it a kiss mark, but if you weren't trying to put a spin on it you'd just say bite mark.

"Bite mark…"

If we're talking about knowledge from mystery novels, then taking a bite mark and finding the "culprit" to be the legendary aberration slayer would be possible, right? But that wasn't what I needed to think about… For instance, if this scar indicates her fangs, then…

"Mutou."

"Yes? What is it, Koyomi-onii-chan?"

"Could I lift your skirt up again?"

"That's one hell of a sentence to take out of context."

Mutou stood up and presented herself to me once more, saying "Go right ahead"—she did it with an air of impatience that all but said, "It doesn't matter how much you look, you're not going to find anything."

And that's exactly right.

It's pointless. Checking her leg once again.

No matter how much I **look**.

But I had learned through my own bitter experiences that there is more to the truth than what you see or hear.

I lifted Mutou's skirt.

And then I leaned forward and sniffed the scent of the demonic killer's spats-clad thigh—and received a knee to the face.

005

Taking a knee to the face so soon after being kicked in the head almost made me go unconscious again, but that's not really important. I'm not a very good writer, so when I said that I sniffed her thigh I was making a mistake in my choice of words.

Now, let me be clear that I did not have any interest whatsoever in the scent of Mutou's thighs. How hot and steamy her thighs would be after being trapped inside of spats for an extended period is not something that I want to know anything about.

Rather than trying to investigate the scent of the moist bits under her skirt, this exceptionally clever boy detective was aiming for the truth hidden in the shadows—in other words, I was trying to smell the giant scissors that she keeps strapped to her leg, the blades of "Mind Render".

I wanted to **smell the blade**—to detect the **scent of blood** soaked into the metal.

"What are you doing? I don't understand at all."

There was an unspoken second part to her question which seemed to be saying that if she continued to not understand, then she would kill me.

The way that she was holding "Mind Render" in her mouth seemed to support my interpretation of that unspoken part.

There's no need to be so desperate about it.

Mutou, I've as good as proven your innocence with this.

"Your thighs hold no mysteries, but they did have answers. The wound in the victim's chest where he was stabbed through the heart matches the shape of your "Mind Render", which is what marks you as the killer, right? Which means that if the wound shape can be reproduced, it would create doubt that you were actually the one who did it."

"Well yes, that is true. But there's no way to create a copy and we've already gone over that fact at length, haven't we?"

"Yes. We had anticipated that it would be impossible to create a duplicate of your weapon—as long as it stayed on your body at all times, there could be no copies. However, that might not be the case."

"?"

"When we say 'on your body at all times', it doesn't mean that it's always strapped to your thigh—as evidenced by you holding it in your mouth right now."

In this case, she had the scissors out while she decided whether or not to kill me… But anyway, during combat she would have the scissors out. Mutou had made a promise to Humanity's Strongest to not kill anyone, but she had also said that it didn't remove her completely from the conflict. Which means that there would be times at which she would not keep the blade stored on her thigh, but would instead take it out and use it.

"Oh. Well yes, maybe I could have explained it in more detail, but that doesn't change that 'Mind Render' never left my possession. You were muttering something about bite marks earlier, but 'Mind Render' is too tough for me to leave bite marks on it?"

"That's not important."

The whole thing about the vampiric bite mark on my neck wasn't directly related to the current issue, it was simply the idea that got me thinking on the right track.

What's important here is "shape".

"Because we keep talking about making copies of blades, it sounds really difficult and we automatically want to reject the idea of someone doing it, but if we think about it instead as making a duplicate of a key—doesn't the nuance change?"

"The nuance changed, but even for making a duplicate key, don't you still need the original?"

"You do, but depending on the material you might not need it for very long. It's possible that you can use clay to take the shape of the thing and create a duplicate from that."

Taking an impression and making a mold.

It's a vital process used to create things like plastic models and figures, and you wouldn't have to be a swordsmith to make a duplicate that way.

Of course, it's not the most accurate way to create a copy, and recent keys are made in a way that prevents this sort of copying method from working—but if you only need to make a blade that is close enough to the real thing to leave a specific wound pattern, then… It works well enough.

"If they used clay to create a mold of 'Mind Render' then they would only need access to it for an instant, right?"

"Yes, but… They didn't even have an instant? I can't say that I've never dropped it once since I began using it, but I can say with certainty that I have never once dropped it during a battle with the Kino Division. So I don't see how they could have pierced through my defenses and made a mold."

"They didn't have to pierce your defenses, because you are the one who did the piercing."

"M-Me? What did I pierce?"

"To create a mold you don't have to use clay. Gum works, rubber works—and so does meat."

Even a human body.

I rubbed a hand across my neck again and felt the bite mark left by the vampire's fangs.

006

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

I'm not sure how close I came to the truth with the theory that I had painstakingly constructed by ironing out the details regarding the murder weapon, but it had been enough to safely free me from the armed fugitive.

And I'll admit that there is something ironic about saying "ironing out" in this situation, and even the word "ironic" is ironic, but the point is that the enemy tried to frame Mutou for this crime with iron in a flesh mold.[88]

During battle.

Mutou may not be allowed to kill, but she must have had many chances to use "Mind Render" during various battles—and so, as to not break her promise, she didn't aim for vital areas, but she had surely stabbed the blade of her scissors into enemy players' bodies more than once or twice.

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[88] In the original, the word for "ironing out" is 肉薄 (*nikuhaku*, "coming close to"). Koyomi then comments on the irony of using this word, which contains the kanji for "meat" (肉, *niku*), in a situation where a mold made of meat was used. He then adds that it's ironic to use the word "ironic" (皮肉, *hiniku*) as well, since it too contains this kanji. We tried to convey the puns by switching the focus from the "meat" to the "iron".

I don't even really have to guess about that. By smelling the blade, I was able to confirm that it had the fresh scent of blood on it. She had recently used that blade against another human being.

Having my blood sucked by a vampire wasn't just for looks—oh, but I'm not planning to start calling myself the vampire detective, just to be clear.

And if the player who she stabbed knew that she would **not aim for one of his vital organs**, then they might just go out of their way to get stabbed by her—since the wound left behind would have value.

It would then serve as a mold to copy the shape of her weapon.

… Using the human body in place of clay to take a mold is not something that anyone from our world would consider normal, and pouring molten iron into a wound is basically torture. Even if you did it to your own body, that's not something that should be allowed. There's also the fact that it's an underhanded tactic to try and pin blame on an innocent person—even if they are a demonic killer—but then again, when you go to such extreme measures to create your false evidence, it's hard to really criticize it.

Ultimately, what I came away with was the feeling that we were from entirely different worlds—and in that sense, all of my attempts to hypothesize and craft theories could've been entirely baseless, and even the final idea that I came up with might have paled in comparison to the real events that occurred.

But what matters most of all is that it was enough to convince the fugitive.

"Well, I guess I'll go surrender to Aikawa-onee-san and explain things."

That's what Mutou said after mentally preparing herself. Apparently, even if turning yourself in to the police isn't a thing, surrendering is?

"I can't just keep running away forever—not that I ever intended to do so. Thank you for your help, Koyomi-onii-chan. I won't forget this debt to you."

"I'm fine if you forget it… Oh, but can I ask you something?"

There was one mystery remaining.

It wasn't something important, but it would be nice to hear her answer.

"Why do you call me 'Koyomi-onii-chan'?"

"Because I'm a little sister character, in spite of my appearance."

Huh. That's unexpected. Perhaps my thoughts showed on my face, because she giggled and continued.

"Don't worry. I've been casually testing you this whole time, but you've 'passed', Koyomi-onii-chan."

"'Passed'? What?"

"The human exam.[89] Thanks to that it was quite fun! It felt like I was a normal girl—a normal human—again. Well, see you!"

And so—let the Zerozaki begin.[90]

Well, Mutou Iori will.

The rambunctious, high-energy seventeen-year-old went back home to the battlefield where her family waits.

"…"

It's been a long time since someone recognized me as a human being.

It had been enough to save me, but, and I'm not the most honest person, I now belatedly began to feel that perhaps I had wasted a chance to have a more meaningful conversation with Mutou. She had both of her hands cut off and she casually referred to that as an "honorable wound", so I'm sure we could have talked about much more—she must have had a hundred stories to tell me about those two hands, and I would have liked to hear them.

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[89] She's emulating her brother's habit of testing people he meets with an unsaid "human exam", which is also the namesake of the first volume of *Ningen*, 零崎双識の人間試験 (*Zerozaki Soushiki no Ningen Shiken*, "Zerozaki Soushiki's Human Exam"), and whose outcome usually decides whether he kills or spares someone.

[90] A catchphrase from *Ningen*.

Conversely, it pained me that I had no tales of heroism to share with the demonic killer. The only stories that I have would be just as miserable for her to hear as they would be for me to tell.

The scars carved into the side of my neck, and the scars that remain deep in my heart, are terribly dishonorable wounds; terribly dishonorable kiss marks.

MAZEMONOGATARI

Iori Fugue — Chapter Kill

Mind: Tigoris Translates
Render: Bluex
Failed the human exam: Maxdefolsch

MAZEMONOGATARI

NISIOISIN

Shiogi Ranger

Chapter Army

Hagihara Shiogi
Saijou Tamamo
Yukariki Ichihime

Zaregoto Series

Art: Take

001

Hagihara Shiogi was an experienced tactician, Yukariki Ichihime was an adaptable string master, and Saijou Tamamo was a reckless berserker. That's why, even though those three were completely equal high school students just like me, they were beings that were completely different from me—although, recalling the fact that I myself had transformed into a mighty vampire over that spring break, then even if we were completely different living beings, you could perhaps say that we were completely equal monsters in that respect, so it was hard to judge.

Anyway, allow me to introduce them, one by one.

Hagihara Shiogi. Sumiyuri Academy third-year.

The academy was one that strived to gather various kids with various circumstances and train them into graceful *Yamato nadeshiko*,[91] or perhaps into elegant combatants, and she happened to be that academy's representative—for my own convenience, I took it to mean that she's something like the student council president, but the title of tactician was not quite so easy to understand. Despite being in the middle of training

[91] A Japanese term meaning "the epitome of pure, feminine beauty".

herself, she had placed the academy under a substantial amount of control, like a shogi player manipulating the pieces on a board, so it was awfully awe-inspiring—if I wanted to look for someone similar to her at Naoetsu High, then there probably wasn't anyone other than Hanekawa. But, a high schooler that could actually compare to Hanekawa? Just the thought of it sent chills down my spine—not to mention, unlike Hanekawa who was primarily of the intellectual type, this tactician was well-versed in martial arts, which made her all the more difficult to manage.

Yukariki Ichihime. Sumiyuri Academy second-year.

A combatant that the tactician placed her trust in—however, her main role was to be in charge of searching for the enemy. As a string master—to put it simply, it was more or less a user of strings—she wove a complex system of "invisible threads" in all directions like a spider building a nest, using it to grasp the situation. It was apparently a technique she acquired from a "master" that went by the name of Shisei Yuma, but in a way, she'd already surpassed her master—the skill with which she used the gloves she inherited was far more accurate than even high-tech radars, and far more gruesome as well. However, just because she was entrusted with a support-like role did not mean that she was lacking in combat prowess at all—in fact, she was in that role *because* her combat prowess was exceedingly high. For the tactician who would use any means to achieve her duties, she thought "it would be unsportsmanlike to put this junior on the front lines" and decided to put that transcendental skill—in other words, Yukariki Ichihime—in reserve. The spider's thread that she wove around could just as easily turn into sharp sawblades with exceptional cutting ability. Even the legendary vampire had had her limbs cut off once before, and even I had more or less been chopped up into pieces before, but even so, I'd probably say that that was preferable to the fate of the victims that had gotten in her way.

Saijou Tamamo. Sumiyuri Academy first-year.

A combatant that the tactician didn't place her trust in—a berserker. If there existed high school girls that were born for the sake of combat, then she would certainly be one of them, and if there existed high school girls

that were born for the sake of killing, then once again, she would certainly be one of them. The large knives, far larger than the usual fifteen-centimeter kind, that she gripped in both hands reminded me of the vampire hunter, Dramaturgy—however, she was not a solidly built giant but a cute and lovely girl. However, the number of people that Saijou Tamamo had killed up until now surely far surpassed the number of brethren that Dramaturgy had exterminated. As for what those vacant eyes of hers were focused on, there was no one who knew. Not even she herself knew.

Tactician. String master. Berserker.

This ridiculous three-man cell of rangers was said to equal an entire country's troops with just the three of them—and it was none other than Humanity's Strongest Contractor that had said so, so I probably couldn't take it as a simple joke. However, with that in mind, the facts were just too hard to accept—that I, someone who was "completely ordinary with no good points", would end up taking on all three of them at the same time.

It was like it had been fabricated.

Yes, as if it wasn't a story, but nonsense.[92]

In the latest work of the series, *Musubimonogatari*, I, Araragi Koyomi, had splendidly grown up into a fine twenty-three-year-old, but this was an event that occurred after I'd only just turned eighteen—that is, near the end of April. If you'll allow me to use some know-it-all specialist terminology, then this incident occurred some time between *Kizumonogatari* and *Nekomonogatari (Kuro)*. However, as things were, without even making it to *Musubimonogatari*, I would have lost my life before even running into the various aberrations that appeared after *Nekomonogatari (Kuro)*—becoming a twenty-three-year-old would have been but a dream within a dream.

By the way, I'd be happy if you could still remember that three-way intersection.

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[92] As if it wasn't *Monogatari* (物語, "story"), but *Zaregoto* (戯言, "nonsense").

After all the blood was sucked out of me by the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, and after I'd been reduced into a dreadful vampire, I'd fallen into a pincer attack from three sides by Dramaturgy, who killed those of his own kind; Episode, the half-vampire; and Guillotine Cutter, who fancied himself a god—it was that very same intersection. At those very same coordinates, I ended up going through the exact same experience.

No, I could even say that the situation was even worse than that time.

After all, unlike during spring break, I couldn't rely on Oshino to help me—of course, that middle-aged guy in a Hawaiian shirt would claim that he didn't remember helping me at all, and that he was just keeping the balance between humans and aberrations. But if I were to accept that twisted view, then that made me even more certain that he would not gallantly appear to save me in this case.

After all, those three that had me in a pincer attack this time were not aberration specialists at all.

They were **human** specialists.

Those girls were not trying to exterminate me as a vampire—they were trying to exterminate me as a human. Good grief.

However, I'd managed to just barely survive that hellish spring break in some way or another after this and that—I hadn't yielded to Dramaturgy's dual swords or Episode's gigantic cross or even Guillotine Cutter's despicable hostage-taking strategy. So if I were to be murdered by these three girls in the same breath, or rather in the same spurt of blood, then I'd just feel sorry for those three men.

I'd show them that I could survive once again—even without Oshino.

I'd show them that I'd be able to survive, even if I wasn't a vampire.

Because one day, I wanted to appear in a mystery novel like, "My classmate that was supposed to have died during high school invited me to a class reunion…?", or something along those lines.

And I didn't want to appear as the "classmate that was supposed to have died".

But there was no time to cower. Now, at this three-way intersection where all roads lead to hell, what road should I take?

To take the right path and fight the berserker → proceed to 002.
To take the left path and fight the string master → proceed to 003.
To take the back path and fight the tactician → proceed to 004.

"Swaaaaaay… sway."
"Your purpose will be cut off here."
"Even if the opponent is a vampire, my name is Hagihara Shiogi. By any means, fair or foul, I'll shoot you from head-on."

These roads leading to hell were full to the brim with high school girls in arms.

002

Without much room to make a decision, I broke into a run down the right path. Since the foolish option of cowering in place was out of the question, then I was convinced that this was the wisest path out of the three-way intersection.

However, this judgment seemed to go against common sense. Instinctively, it did not seem like a particularly preferable way to go. The reason being that, the one approaching me from the right path, Tamamo-chan, was the unique member of the three-man cell of rangers that was very obviously and very visibly brandishing weapons.

In both hands, she was wielding knives unbefitting of her physique, that you could mistake for hatchets or even axes.

Normally, I'd say you'd be crazy to deliberately choose such a terrifying path that involved encountering such a terrifying girl, but right now, you could hardly call this a normal situation—with that in mind, I placed a great amount of importance on the fact that Tamamo-chan did not seem used to those two knives of hers.

Indeed, those knives looked truly brutal.

However, when I focused, not on her hands, but on her legs.

Tamamo-chan's movements seemed extremely erratic—whether you described it as a staggering gait, or as if she were a fawn that had just been born, she was walking as if she were drunk, swaying back and forth as she moved forward, like Yajirobe.

She was surely being swung around by the weight of her knives, which was why she couldn't walk straight. It was as the saying went: too much was as bad as too little. It would be like a beginner that thought, "The most expensive one is obviously the best one", and ended up buying a computer that was uselessly high-spec.

By not being fooled by her intimidating appearance, seeing through her true nature, and deliberately rushing down the path that looked the most dangerous—I surely resembled a hero that had managed to overcome a great number of battles.

Speaking of her appearance, Tamamo-chan, like a normal high schooler, was wearing a track suit. However, very much unlike a normal high schooler, her track suit was in tatters—I assumed that she was so unused to her knives that she ended up cutting her own clothes (and her cropped hairstyle was probably for the same reason), but what attracted my attention was not the fact that her track suit was in tatters, but that the design of her track suit was the bloomers kind—no, it's not that I was focusing on her bloomers.

Even if she was a high school girl, just what era was this high school girl from?—I happened to be someone who was incredibly strong-willed against those younger than me, but with that in mind, I couldn't feel the intensity of a veteran emanating from Tamamo-chan at all, let alone the sense that she'd had many battles' worth of experience… Really, bloomers?

If you looked down at me from a bird's-eye point of view, it might have looked as if I'd simply made a beeline for a high school girl in bloomers, which gave off a pretty problematic impression, but it wasn't like I was planning to tackle her slim body just like that—not in the slightest. Even if she wasn't used to them, knives were still knives. If we ended up grappling, then I wouldn't necessarily be safe from getting slashed even at

random—I couldn't take that risk. Unlike when I was attacked at this intersection over spring break, I was no longer immortal now.

I had no intention of sparing any effort in escaping from this predicament I'd fallen into, but neither did I plan to engage in battle with a high school girl that had undergone special training—the reason I went with this forward-bent dash was not in order to fight, but in order to avoid fighting.

It was a stylish act of escapism.

As Tamamo-chan's footsteps unsteadily tottered left and right, I was planning on quickly slipping past around her. Doing so shouldn't necessarily be impossible to achieve… If I made sure to stay wary of the edges of the knives, it should actually be rather easy.

If a giant like Dramaturgy had been standing in my way, then there wouldn't have been an opening on this straight road to slip past, but as for Tamamo-chan, she was much more petite than I was, and she was walking while colliding with the walls beside her, like some sort of automatic vacuum cleaner. With each collision, she'd change her trajectory, all the while drawing closer to me—if so, then when she tottered to the right, then it was simply a matter of heading for the left.

Though it was a road, there was still width to it. That was all it was.

"Swaaaaay… sway… sway."

See, even Tamamo-chan herself was murmuring her own onomatopoeia for how she tottered back and forth—that was proof that those massive weapons were too much for her. Together, those two knives surely weighed even more than Tamamo-chan herself, so it was a simple matter of universal gravitation—however, those thoughts were a complete misunderstanding.

And it wasn't that those boorish knives weren't all that heavy.

It was that her weapons weren't too much for her at all—if there *was* something that was too much for her, it would be her madness.[93]

"Sw! Ay!"

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[93] Koyomi switches 凶器 (*kyouki*, "weapon") with 狂気 (*kyouki*, "madness").

Though it should have been onomatopoeia to express her precarious tottering, she'd suddenly shrieked it at full force—and all of a sudden, Tamamo-chan moved deftly, leaping in front of me where I'd been trying to slip past her.

She'd moved like she was in a sidestepping exercise test. No, it was like teleportation.

She was actually using the weight of the knives and her own lightness to her advantage.

She came after me as if she were falling over against the wall on my side—if I had turned my eyes away for an instant in fear of the knives' sharpness, I would absolutely have gotten stabbed right then.

I twisted backwards to dodge the blades. If Tamamo-chan's movements were from a sidestepping exercise test, then my movements would be the exercise in which you "turned your torso to elongate your spine"—it wasn't the kind of stretch you wanted to suddenly do after dashing at full force, and doing so would absolutely hurt your lower back, but I couldn't just let my heart get stabbed in order to preserve my lower back.

Your back couldn't replace your internal organs.

As a result, the knife in her right hand stabbed into a telephone pole in my place. The knife went in deep, up to the hilt, into the pole—eh? No way, were telephone poles constructed out of something that could be stabbed into like that?

Although I'd never once thought about what the inside of a telephone pole was made up of…

"I got you now—"

With an absent-minded, practically monotonous tone of voice, Tamamo-chan spoke as if the telephone pole had been her target from the beginning—in fact, she hadn't once turned to look at me, who'd stopped in place. She was still facing away from me.

"My—name is, Saijou Tamamo-chan. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yesyesyesyesyesyesyesyesyes. Saisaisaisaisaisaisaijou Tamamo, Saijou Tamamo. Yesyesyesyes. I am Tamamo. Tamamo I am."

"…"

Yikes. What was with this girl?

Had I, perhaps, taken the worst possible path I could've taken?

Putting aside her two knives… Had Saijou Tamamo actually been someone to properly fear?

"Wait… Hold on. Tamamo-chan. Let's talk."

"Right, let's talk killing. Kill talking. Killer king. King is me. No. King Hagihara is senpai—I am."

Wow.

Hohey.

And, while I could only think of such a dull thing to say (if anything, I was probably saying "pawn"[94] instead), Tamamo-chan pulled her knife out of the telephone pole with a twisting motion—and that "pulling motion" became one and the same as a "motion to stab me".

Like something straight out of the art of *iai*,[95] she made to slash at me in a single movement.

If she had been using a Japanese sword, then perhaps it could have been considered the *kesagiri* motion, but with that boorish knife of hers, it felt more like she was chopping wood.

To be honest, rather than the blades themselves, I was more afraid of her ability to slash at me without hesitation—without any emotion whatsoever, she was moving to cut me in half as if it were as natural as breathing.

It wasn't even bending backwards—I ended up doing some form of backflip in order to dodge that knife. You might think that a dodge like that was trying too hard to be cool, and that it was exaggerated and irrational, but in order to face Tamamo-chan, who moved in eccentric ways, I had no choice to use eccentric movements as well.

Though I'd succeeded in dodging her attack, I messed up my landing. So if I wanted to score myself, I'd give it 50 points out of 100, but at this

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[94] Koyomi associates the sound he made to 歩兵 (*hohei*, "pawn").

[95] Iaido, or iai, is a Japanese martial art that emphasizes being aware and capable of quickly drawing the sword and responding to a sudden attack.

point it wasn't all that different from 0 points—if the saying went 50 of one and half of 100 of the other, this was more like 50 of one and 0 of the other. I may as well come up with a new saying that went, if you only go halfway, that's basically the same as standing still—but was I really busying myself with coming up with a new saying here?

"Swaaaaay, sway, sway. Swayswayswayswaysway—"

Of course, I'd collapsed onto the asphalt by then (since I'd messed up a backflip, I was more than fortunate that I didn't break my neck), so I'd expected either of her two knives to come swinging down at me next, but Tamamo-chan's next attack was, for some reason, directed at the telephone pole again.

Did she have some sort of grudge against the pole? Jeez, this girl.

Taking the hilt of her knife, she loudly and violently bashed it into the telephone pole again and again.

… I didn't understand the meaning behind her actions, but I began to think that I might be able to slip around her like this, and slowly started to crawl away—and just then, Tamamo-chan turned her eyes toward me.

No, her eyes weren't facing me at all. If anything, they were just wide open.[96]

Though her head had turned toward me, her line of sight was following a completely different vector, and the movements of her legs and her arms were all over the place. Her form lacked any sense or reason, but somehow, the tip of her knife was extremely accurate in heading for me.

It seemed that, like a sensor, she acted on reflex to anything that moved—that must have been why, instead of going for me on the ground, she'd gone for the telephone pole that was wavering unsteadily, its balance having been disrupted.

My goodness.

To think that lying on the ground and not getting back up was actually the right thing to do.

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[96] Koyomi compares 向いて (*muite*, "facing") with 剝いて (*muite*, "wide open").

In my crawling position, I had no other way to dodge but to roll over on the ground—my choices were getting more and more limited, and my survival skills were becoming more and more pathetic.

This time, the knife that swung down toward me stabbed into the asphalt.

Was this world made out of tofu?

However, the tofu this time was on my side. In other words, the weight of the knife had actually turned against Tamamo-chan—she was unable to pull the knife that had gotten stuck vertically into the ground.

"One knife is enough."

However, Tamamo-chan was not just quick in her movements but also in giving up. Without exerting any more effort in trying to pull it out, she let go of the knife's hilt, and switched over to the task of killing me using her remaining knife—it was true that, in order to kill me, a single knife would be sufficient (although the joke of one *knife* being *enough* was unfortunately very funny.[97] I felt like I wanted to use it myself in the future, if I managed to survive).

However, that opening had given me enough time to stand back up. It may sound like a bit of a surprise to hear this, but I was, at the very least, capable of getting back up.

Of course, even that movement of standing up made Tamamo-chan react.

As if she were being magnetically drawn in, she instantaneously leapt toward my chest. I wouldn't deny the fact that every man more or less had the desire for a girl in an exposed track suit to leap toward his chest, but when that girl was carrying knives, the story changed quite a bit—Tamamo-chan was rather like a Venus flytrap, as she wouldn't react if I didn't move, but not moving when a knife was pointed at you was effectively impossible.

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[97] The words ナイフ (*naifu*, "knife") and イナッフ (*inaffu*, "enough") have somewhat similar pronunciations.

However, since I'd managed to understand that property of hers, it didn't seem right to turn my back on Tamamo-chan and run away from her at full speed—the faster I moved, she was sure to move even faster.

The result ended up being that I stood in the same place and evaded Tamamo-chan's knife with the smallest possible movement—of course, performing such a boxer-like achievement was pretty much impossible for a mere high schooler like me, so my uniform slowly began to tear into pieces. My outfit was turning into a matching set with Tamamo-chan's. It almost looked like we were good friends. What could we do as a pair?

Rather than dodging by the skin of my teeth, I was dodging by the skin of my neck.

If there was some small salvation in all of this, it would be that her attacks were only coming from her knife—she wasn't hitting me with her bare hand or kicking me with her gym shoes. Without any headbutting or elbowing, either, she fully stuck to her fencing style.

In a way, her apparent pathological obsession with knives seemed to be my best chance to win—a chance to win against that madness of hers.[98]

As long as I kept my eyes on her knife, I could just barely dodge it.

After that hellish spring break, I'd forfeited that immortal vampirism that I'd possessed, but its vestiges still obstinately remained in me—in the human known as Araragi Koyomi, a demon had settled in.

Though my **immortal** powers were unreliable, I had confidence in my **eyesight**.

And my kinetic vision was no exception.

Tamamo-chan's illogical, irregular, and erratic movements gave her a form that was incredibly difficult to read, but fortunately, I was an extreme amateur when it came to martial arts, which meant that I wasn't led along by the preconceptions of those sorts of formalities.

When she was waving both knives around, it felt like I absolutely couldn't take my eyes off for even a second, but with one knife, I had some

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[98] 勝機 (*shouki*, "chance to win") is pronounced the same way as 正気 (*shouki*, "sanity"), which runs counter to "madness".

leeway—and I could use that "leeway" in order to search for my next escape route.

"Shred shred—shred shred—shredded wheat."

However, despite none of her repeated attacks landing a single hit, it seemed Tamamo-chan didn't feel any stress at all. Since she was a soldier, so to speak, I would have preferred if she did get irritated, and perhaps even get bored with trying to kill an amateur like me… If she would just get irritated, then perhaps that could even serve as a weak point for me…

Why wouldn't she get irritated?

"Shredded wheat, put it in a bag. Take the bag and cut it up. Cut it up and the insides spill out. Spill out, like your insides—"

… It sounded like she was singing some insane cursed nursery rhyme, but she wasn't irritated at all—however, even if she wasn't irritated, it seemed Tamamo-chan actually found it surprising.

Surprising why I hadn't gotten "shredded" yet.

Well, of course, there was no way she could know that I was using my vampire sight to dodge her knife—and even if I did tell her, I doubted she'd be able to understand. In the first place, it was hard to believe that a person would so relentlessly try to cut up a regular human being as if doing papercraft, let alone a vampire…

"If your belly hurts, then I'll rub it—rub rub stab stab—swaaaaay, swaysway."

I was the one who'd suggested we talk, but I should probably stop being led astray by Tamamo-chan's words (singing) now… In any case, I was going to just do my best to keep my eyes on the knife.

And as I thought so, I realized.

I'd assumed in the beginning that my eyes had gotten used to it, but that wasn't it at all—Tamamo-chan's movements that had been keen in all senses of the word had started to slow down in pace, little by little.

Through my eyesight, I noticed her fatigue.

Of course, a swinging motion was a great way to utilize the weight of the knife for the greatest effect, but it wasn't like she had arms the size of

logs like Dramaturgy had—they were thin arms that were like withered trees.

Being eccentric, erratic, and unexpected had a nice ring to it (or did it?), but there was no way that keeping up those illogical and inefficient movements wouldn't tire her out physically. Alright! By managing to hold out, I earned another opportunity—as soon as her movements got just a bit slower, I would find the right timing and dash away at full speed…

And then.

As soon as I'd spotted a faint glimmer of hope together with Tamamo-chan's fatigue, I'd lost sight of something else in turn—the knife, that I should have been following with my eyes without a single blink, suddenly disappeared from my field of vision.

"I might swish around and I might slash around—if you cut it close, then it'll be too close to call—and then, I my kill around—"

With her gaze fixed on who knows where, she thrust her now-empty right hand in a V sign into the air, twisted her torso, raised her right foot behind her, stood on her left foot on tiptoes, and, with her left hand—

Tamamo-chan's left hand was spun behind her back.

Her body's incoherent movements seemed way too erratic to just be a simple misdirection, but Tamamo-chan should have been holding her knife in that hand… Aha, so was she trying to confuse me for a moment by hiding her knife in my blind spot? But there was no use. As soon as she took the knife out of my blind spot, I'd be able to keep following it.

Or perhaps, was she switching the knife over from her tired left arm to her unused right arm behind her back—but that wasn't it. That wasn't it at all.

I should have been paying more attention to her nursery rhymes.

I my kill around—

It wasn't close to proper English grammar in the slightest, but she had done exactly as she'd said—before she could tear me to shreds, she went around and **stabbed herself in the back.**

And, after piercing through her flimsy torso that was barely there, the tip of the knife protruded out of Tamamo-chan's stomach—and pierced straight into my stomach.

It plunged right in. And then it tore me to shreds.

With the edge of the knife, she carved a Z into my stomach. Well, no, if the letter carved into my stomach was a Z, then she would be carving an S into her own stomach—in any case, she was cutting up her own bowels along with mine.

It seemed that for her, the saying, "Your back couldn't replace your internal organs", had no meaning.

Through her own back, she'd pierced my guts.

If my belly hurts, she'll stab it.

It wasn't that she was going to bring the knife out from the blind spot behind her, but that she was going to bring the knife out through her stomach—and not even a vampire's eyesight would be able to see that.

No. I'd seen the outcome of this battle from the beginning. I'd seen my own death, too.

The moment I chose the path on the right—

"… But, wait a minute, aren't you gonna die, too? What's going on with your spine?"

"It's fiiine. When people die, it's not because their spine breaks, it's because their heart breaks."

Feeling just the slightest bit happy that I was able to hold a proper conversation with this girl in bloomers at the very end, then with a snip, with a snap, I had no other choice but to die here.

← Back to the intersection

003

Taking the path on the left as the natural decision to make, I ran down it at full force—without much room to hesitate, what was important was the courage to make a decision. After all, the right path had a girl with cropped hair, wearing bloomers, and wielding two knives tottering unsteadily in my direction. Anyone who picked such a path would have to be a complete and utter idiot. An idiot that wouldn't get better even if he died. An idiot that was better off dead, regardless.

Even so, I was reluctant to retreat behind me and face off against Shiogi-chan. After all, she was the leader of the three-man cell of rangers. To go head-to-head against someone who possessed an ingenuity that could compare to Hanekawa's was not something that appealed to me.

And so, by process of elimination, I decided to take on Hime-chan.

She was a girl with giant yellow ribbons on her head—she looked so young that it was hard to see her as the same age as Kanbaru, but of course, she was still a good enough soldier to attend Sumiyuri Academy, so I couldn't let my guard down against the cuteness of those ribbons.

Fortunately, I could see what was in her hands.

I could see what was in her gloves.

She was a user of strings.

She was stringing up a system of "invisible threads" in the surrounding area in order to get a grasp of the situation and begin searching for the enemy—as such, it would be an impossible task to dodge her and slip past her on this straight road. It would be as hard as trying to steal a jewel guarded by a security system of infrared laser beams.

Normally.

However, I was endowed with the eyesight of a vampire—while a normal human's sight might not be able to perceive those superfine strings, they were not "invisible threads" to me at all. If I was in perfect form, I would even be able to see infrared beams.

I wouldn't say that evading the strings that had been set up three-dimensionally on this straight road was like taking candy from a baby, but they weren't so hindering that I needed to run any slower than I was.

If anything, the strings were surely a hindrance to Hime-chan instead.

It was as if the zigzagging spider's nest that she constructed had actually become a spider's thread that was coming to save me—they say that spiders only walk on the vertical threads of a web, right? Then I could simply run while hiding in the horizontal threads.

In the first place, moving while setting up a web was not something that could be performed at a fast pace—Hime-chan would have to proceed slowly. I hadn't exactly thought that far when choosing to take the left path, but it seemed now that I could move as I pleased while slipping through the gaps in the web.

However, at my incredible feat of running at full speed without touching or cutting even a single one of those "invisible threads", the girl with the yellow ribbons, Yukariki Ichihime, simply watched over me without even blinking an eye.

She simply displayed a cute smile upon her cute face.

"Huhuhu. It sure is brave of you to perform a suicide attack, Araragi-san. But from Hime-chan's point of view, that barbaric act is just like a moss to a flame," she said.

What, was her signature move to get proverbs wrong?

Sorry, but in our world, that was a fundamental skill that anybody was capable of using.

You're a hundred years too early to think you can charm me with such a traditional character trait, string master—however, her actual signature move, naturally, was not playing with words, but playing cat's cradle.

Today was a nice day in spring, but if there were any moths flying into flames, I would certainly be one of them—I'd leapt straight into the spider's nest because I'd had the confidence that I'd be able to get through, but I hadn't predicted how the nest would move.

No, of course I'd known it was possible.

This web wasn't just something that could lie in wait—it could even attack.

These threads were not threads to tie up the enemy, but threads to slice up the enemy.

So I'd more or less prepared myself to respond to however the "invisible threads" decided to come at me—but what landed outside of my expectations were the dynamic movements of those threads.

All of the threads returned, back to Hime-chan's hands. With a **swoosh, swoosh, swoosh**—they'd retracted and wound back up into her gloves.

Compared to walking along while stringing up the spider's nest, it seemed that she didn't need to be as high-strung about retrieving the threads—well, it was a simple matter of following the reverse procedure of stringing them up, and thinking about it, it was obvious that I'd managed to get this far because the "invisible threads" were visible to me, so there was no reason to bother winding them up surreptitiously.

And, on that note.

There was no reason for Hime-chan to perform her **next action** surreptitiously, either.

If I was able to see them, then she may as well show them to me.

She took the threads she'd just gathered up and immediately reused them—her role was normally for logistical support, but when it was necessary, and also when it wasn't necessary to keep the strings out of sight, she was capable of reconstructing her nest in an instant.

And this time, it wasn't the nest of a spider.

Or rather, it wasn't even a nest—it was a wall.

In an instant, a "wall" appeared before my eyes.

They were no longer "threads" that had been strung up—an entire "surface" had been knit together.

Without needing to fuss over the details of where to hang it or what to hook it on, she had knit the "net" across the two telephone poles to the left and right—and it was an extremely fine net, as if a hundred million volleyball nets had been put together. This wall was something I could not dodge, even if I could see it.

Just physically, there was no gap through which a person could pass through.

"…!"

Of course if you bundled threads together, you could make a rope, and if you bundled ropes together, you could make a net—I'd hit the brakes as fast as I could, but I was too late. I collided head-on with the wall.

I'd sworn to keep moving even if my legs were cut off, but I had ended up being stopped by this.

However, threads were still threads in the end.

If this were a single piano wire, and I'd been running at a speed of 80 km/h, then I surely would have reenacted a Hollywood-like scene where my head was cleanly cut off, but if the "invisible threads" were bundled up into a clearly visible wall, then even if I collided with it at a speed that humans were capable of (about 15 km/h?), then I would only end up getting tangled up in the threads. In that sense, you could say this net was a safety net.

It was like, if you lay down on a single needle, it would pierce into you, but if you lay down on ten thousand needles and distributed your weight, then they wouldn't even be able to pierce your skin—not to mention, this wall, like the spider's nest before it, surely worked to protect me as well.

After all, if you erected a wall in the middle of a straight road, then in terms of aberrations it would be the same as a "*nurikabe*",[99] seeing as it stood in Hime-chan's way just as it did mine—but it wasn't the same at all.

Strictly speaking, it was less like I'd collided with the wall and more like I'd gotten stuck in the wall—after all, it wasn't a wall made of concrete or plaster, but a wall made of threads. As mentioned above, I'd gotten tangled up in those threads—and it was less like I'd stopped running and more like I was floating in the air.

One of my legs and one of my arms, as well as my head, had burst through to the other side of the wall.

I could perfectly lock eyes with Hime-chan.

She had an extremely happy grin on her face.

There wasn't even an ounce of malice in that grin—but there wasn't even an ounce of innocence, either.

"Uhuhuhu. You've fallen into my trap, Araragi-san—literally."

"…"

Ah, so that was it.

This wasn't a nest, and it wasn't a wall, either—it was a trap.

If I remembered correctly, something like a fowling net… The kind you used to catch wild thrushes and the like… With my entire body being caught in it like this, I could move neither forwards nor backwards… Yes, my weight had been distributed…

But fowling nets should have been banned as a hunting method in modern times due to their viciousness…

"… Won't you help me out?"

I gave it a shot, since I had nothing to lose.

"No way. The early Hime-chan catches the bird, you know."

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[99] The *nurikabe* (塗り壁, lit. "plaster wall") is a youkai from Japanese folklore that's said to manifest as an invisible wall that impedes or misdirects travelers walking at night.

It sounded like she'd gotten a proverb wrong yet again, but in this case, it was quite "literally" so—she put her hands behind her head and quickly untied her yellow ribbons.

She loosened the hair she'd tied up—seeing it like this, her hair was longer than I'd thought.

But why was she letting her hair down at this time?

"Well, Hime-chan used up all her strings in order to make that fowling net. So I was thinking I'd prepare something in place of those strings."

"Th, then, are you going to use those ribbons? It's true that they're just cloth, which is a bundle of threads…"

"No, no, these are precious ribbons that I received from my master, so I couldn't possibly use them in such a hurtful way."[100]

So, I'll use my hair, instead.

Saying this, Hime-chan bounded toward me, who'd been rendered unable to move an inch—and wrapped a lock of hair around my neck.

The action was like she was wrapping a scarf around me, but if you thought it was anything like such a scene shared between fellow high schoolers, there was not one aspect of that in the current situation. In the first place, I was completely stuck in her trap.

The early Hime-chan catches the bird—or strangles it.

"Then, farewell, Araragi Koyomi-san. Your purpose will be cut off here."[101]

During spring break, I'd died in roughly a thousand different ways, but being strangled to death by hair was certainly not one of them—for a good-for-nothing like me to die like this, it was perhaps not so bad after all.

However, even in my fading consciousness, this came to mind.

If only I hadn't chosen the left path—

← Back to the intersection

[100] She's referring to Shisei Yuma, the person who taught her to use strings, as explained in the third volume of *Zaregoto*.

[101] She replaces the word 糸 (*ito*, "thread") with 意図 (*ito*, "purpose").

004

This was by no means a retreat—I was turning on my heel with a lighthearted backstep, exhibiting a foolish courage by choosing the route that would have me face off against the tactician: Hagihara Shiogi. Of course, I wasn't trying to be unexpected at all—going after the team's boss was the usual play to make in situations like these. Not to mention, if I just used my common sense, then taking the path behind me was the only choice that made sense—obviously, it would be no joke to go up against Tamamo-chan, who had large knives in both hands, and trying to evade Hime-chan and her radar of threads that perpetually probed the surroundings for enemies would surely end up being the most foolish decision made in history. If those choices were no different from me just biting my tongue off and dying right then and there, then it would surely be better for my survival if I went for the sly tactician instead.

Even if she was a high school girl that could compare to Hanekawa, she was by no means Hanekawa herself. It was true that, if she was a "Hanekawa capable of fighting", it was basically making the strong even stronger, but the moment she used violence, she would become a completely different person from Hanekawa. It was her pacifism that

completely rejected acts of war that was one of Hanekawa's unique strong points—and that was why I had a chance to win.

I didn't know how many battles she'd lived through, but I'd long since passed the border of death over spring break, to the point that my entire body was obliterated—if we were to face off in just a single match, then perhaps I'd be able to outwit this tactician.

With an air of composure, Hagihara briskly walked down the center of the road and approached me—as if this simple path in this ordinary town was some royal road.

At a glance, she seemed like a standard high school girl in a uniform with the aura of a proper young lady, but she carried with her an intensity that made it hard to believe that she was my age. By this point, I'd already begun to deeply regret choosing this road… Wouldn't it actually have been better to face those two knives, or leap into the spider's nest that had been strung up…? Why did I choose something that was so much like a last resort in the very beginning?

"So you've decided to come to me on your own, Former Vampire-san. This is all going so according to plan that I'm actually a bit taken aback—it appears that there won't be any need for garlic."

With a faint smile, Hagihara reached inside her uniform—garlic?

Whoa, whoa, a lovely high school girl shouldn't carry around something like that in her bosom. Isn't that a bit too crude to use as a weapon in vampire hunting? I flinched back for a moment, but then began to run even faster, as if I'd been encouraged by the enemy.

Of course, that just meant I'd allowed her to provoke me.

Even so, at the very least, I was going to remain alert. And if she pulled out from her bosom not garlic but a knife like the ones Tamamo-chan held, then I prepared myself to react accordingly and run past her while staying safely out of range. When I said that Hagihara could even compare to Hanekawa, it wasn't just her intellect alone. Even the size of her chest could rival Hanekawa's—and within that cleavage, she could surely even store a large knife. Well, I probably didn't need to worry about her bringing out any "invisible threads", since that was the specialty of a string master that

was rare in modern times. That was something that only Hime-chan and her master should be able to use. So I would probably be able to circle around her even while keeping a distance of two meters.

It wasn't easy to dodge her when she was standing right in the middle of the road, but maybe if I feinted—or if I made a feint by pretending to feint—or a feint of a feint of a feint—however, when I was only five meters away from her, what Hagihara pulled out from her bosom was not garlic.

"Very well. Stop right there. That's perfectly within range of my gun."

What she pulled out from her bosom was a pistol.

Of course I'd stop at that. Even if she didn't tell me to.

"Eh? Are pistols even allowed? In your world."

"Against professional players, a gun like this is nothing but a toy that wouldn't be effective in the slightest, but against a demon, I'm sure it'll be fine—the object itself is low-quality, but the bullets are made of expensive silver."

So she'd brought silver bullets with her.

Indeed, if she was carrying those around, then there wouldn't be a need for garlic…

"Yes. In our world, 'mobile devices' would fundamentally refer to weapons, not cell phones, after all. Would you mind raising your arms above your head? Araragi-kun."

So those ostentatious knives and that fantastic thread usage, in the end, were both just misdirection, and the clincher was an extremely simple and straightforward gun… It felt like both the gun's muzzle and reality itself had just been thrust upon me.

"Okay, it's my loss. I surrender. Please have mercy."

I raised both my arms as I was told. If I'd still been a vampire, then at this point I could have used the breakthrough solution of turning my arms into vegetation, but now, it was a bit ironic—it was more or less because I'd lost almost all my vampirism then that I'd come to be defeated again at this three-way intersection.

"However, I wonder if you could answer a question of mine. Why are we even like this? Hagihara. Why are you—why are you, Hime-chan, and

Tamamo-chan going after me? Why are you trying to stab me, to tie me up, and to shoot me?"

"…?"

This tactician was essentially a bundle of tactics that moved with a solid grasp of the state of the game, but at this question, she displayed a dumbfounded expression for the first time—it was as if she didn't even understand what I'd just asked.

This girl… She wasn't even playing dumb—this was actually beyond her comprehension.

It was almost like she was a normal high schooler, racking her brains at the last question on her final exam—it seemed that my "wanting to know why I was being aimed at" was much too mysterious for Hagihara.

"Why am I going after you? Why am I fighting? Hm. What a leisurely perspective to take—but I've never once thought about it. I've only ever acted as I've been ordered to… Even a tactician is just a soldier in the end."

"You-You guys fight for no reason?"

"A war doesn't need a reason, correct? In the same way love needs no reason."

It sounded like a pretty smart thing to say.

I see—she wasn't someone who could compare to Hanekawa at all.

If anything, she was the exact opposite of Hanekawa.

"… You really don't know anything, don't you."

"I don't even want to know. It's because I don't know that I'm able to fight."

Every aberration has their own reason for existing—those were the words of the aberration specialist, Oshino Meme. And then, the specialist of humans, Hagihara Shiogi, would surely continue like this—humans don't have any reasons for existing at all.

Because she was ordered to, for some reason or another, because it came to mind, on the spur of the moment.

She will fight.

"… Then, why did you stop me? If you didn't plan on talking it out, you could have just shot me without wasting your breath."

Was it not to tell me the reason for this battle that had suddenly broken out? I'd held onto a sliver of hope that there would be room for negotiations, depending on what the reason was, but…

"… Aha."

Hagihara laughed. She laughed like a normal high school girl.

This wasn't her doubting me or anything—it seemed she'd just found it funny.

"Expecting to hear the reason for being shot before being shot? Araragi-kun, you've watched too many westerns."

"I haven't watched that many westerns, though. Huh? Then, what was the point of this 'Freeze!' and 'Put your hands up!' thing? Weren't you giving me a chance to beg for my life?"

"The reason I stopped you was that, it's hard to aim at a moving target with this low-quality gun. The reason I had you put your arms up was so that you wouldn't be able to protect your heart."

"… I'm glad you at least told me that much."

"Well then, BANG. My name is Hagihara Shiogi. By any means, fair or foul, I'll 'shoot' you from head-on."

Hagihara pulled the trigger of that low-quality gun.

A silver bullet would have an immediate effect even on a human, not to mention a vampire, but even as that bullet pierced through my heart, I still felt like I wanted to know.

Not the reason for being shot, and not the reason for fighting.

If I hadn't doubled back, and instead gone straight ahead into one of the left or right paths, then how would it have turned out? That was all I wanted to know—

← Back to the intersection

005

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

In the end, no matter what route I chose, no matter what parallel world I went down, the ends of every branch seemed to probabilistically converge toward much the same conclusion. It may seem like a very mathematical moral to this story, but this wasn't actually the case.

Even if all roads were blocked on this three-way intersection, there was still a route in which I could survive.

My first mistake was assuming that I was only limited to three options.

Even if cowering where I stood was out of the question—despite being at a three-way intersection, available paths spread out in all directions. I wasn't a shogi piece, so it wasn't like I was restricted to the spaces on the board. In that case, I'd be better off choosing **a route that involved confronting neither** Saijou Tamamo, nor Yukariki Ichihime, nor Hagihara Shiogi—and it wasn't that hard to do.

The steps were what I could call, "back-and-forth".

Well, to be exact, it would be the *foot*steps I would take… I'd only analyzed the three combatants based on how threatening they were, but that was an extremely grave error on my part. Well, of course, I'd needed

to take into consideration their respective threat levels, but "only" doing so didn't expand the range of decisions I could make—if anything, it reduced it. In the first place, the threat levels for all three of them had far surpassed the threshold, so it was all the same to me whether their combat prowess was 100 points, 1,000 points, or even 10,000 points—since my own combat prowess was less than 1 point.

In that case, I needed to focus on something else. Something that I could compete in.

For example… Yes, what if I "only" looked at their movement speed?

Now matter how they were trained, a human body could only reach a human's running ability in the end—they wouldn't be able to run faster than a car, and when compared to a train, we humans would all be more or less on the same level.

Furthermore, even if we were all **on the same level**, we weren't exactly **the same**.

Each person had their own individual speed.

A-kun went out to go shopping at a rate of 5 km/h. In order to give him more tasks to do, B-kun chased after him thirty minutes later at a rate of 6 km/h—and to deliver the wallet he'd forgotten, C-kun went out thirty minutes after that at a rate of 8 km/h. How long would it take for B-kun to catch up to A-kun, who departed thirty minutes earlier? How long would it take for C-kun to catch up to the other two?

Of course, as people like to say, applying a problem like this to reality brought about various logistical inconsistencies. Like, "How far do they even plan to walk?", or "Aren't there any traffic lights?", and so on—and the most extreme of those would be, "There's someone chasing after you, so turn around and go back!"

And I would utilize that inconsistency.

Among the three high school girls, the one with the fastest pace was, to my surprise, the one walking briskly down the middle of the royal road, taking elegant and composed steps, Hagihara Shiogi. As it were, she was just walking normally, but if we were to assign her pace a score of 100 points, then relatively, then the one with the slowest pace, once again to

my surprise, was Yukariki Ichihime. Because she was walking while stringing up her spider's nest in all directions, her pace had slowed down considerably—so compared to Hagihara's 100 points, Hime-chan's pace would get a score of around 80 points. And, as for Saijou Tamamo, who proceeded forward while swaying and shaking with a lightning-bolt-like trajectory, I'd say she was somewhere in the middle with 90 points.

Of course, this was just their basic speeds, and I could only gaze in wonder at Tamamo-chan's keen and eccentric movements when reacting to "moving targets". And even Hime-chan could move at an above-average speed if she abandoned all pretense of secrecy. As for the speed of Hagihara's silver bullets, they were difficult to track even with a vampire's eyesight. However, I could still use it as a basis—a basis for choosing my path.

First off, I'd take Route Left. In other words, I would head for the spider's nest.

However, I wouldn't run at full speed. I'd run at a speed of about 100 points, fast enough that I wouldn't be chased from behind, and proceed straight down the left path—at least, only partially. Before running into Hime-chan, before getting caught in her radar, I would turn around.

I would turn around and **return the way I came**—using that inconsistency of my choices in a consistent manner. Of course, it would be ideal if I could return backwards without being seen by Hime-chan, but it didn't matter if she did see me. In the end, her role was just to "stand in my way", and that spider's nest was made just for that, so she wouldn't abandon it to chase me too far—since the other routes were blocked by the berserker and the tactician, after all.

Or they "should have been" blocked.

However, before I could "return to the start", the tactician that walked at a 100-point rate would arrive at the center of the three-way intersection. There, she would have to make a decision.

She'd be confronted with the same choice as I had—should she go down the left path, or the right? As long as her objective was a pincer attack,

she absolutely needed to choose one of them, **but which path should she take to continue the pincer attack?**

In other words, I was transferring my options to the other party—however, if she thought about it for just a little bit, she'd realize that she had no other option but to take the right path. After all, if I'd gone down the path where that radar lay in wait, then she wouldn't be worried about letting me escape… But if I'd gone down the path with the out-of-control berserker in charge, then there was a million-to-one chance of an unexpected defeat. That's why she would have to proceed down the path on the right.

And so, the tactician would take the right path, and the unguarded back path would then be open for me to escape at a 120-point pace—an unguarded escape route would be created.

Well then, let's go with that plan in 006.

Having my stomach be turned into a Z sign while listening to nursery rhymes, being caught in a forbidden fowling net and getting strangled by a girl's hair, or getting shot by a silver bullet even after I'd become a human… If I was going to meet such wretched fates, then I would rather just die sooner—was not what I thought in the slightest. Even this route may fail against the tactician's iron fence, but if so, then I just needed to look for another route.

It didn't sound too bad to be stuck in an endless loop where I got to play with high school girls from another world forever, but I would much rather prefer to enjoy myself with **everyone** I was going to meet from now on—so until I find the route I could use to escape, I'll revive myself over and over again. If there's no route, then I'll just make one. And, someday, I'll turn into that boring, twenty-three-year-old adult.

Even if I'm torn to shreds, my heart won't break.

My purpose won't be cut off here.

My name is Araragi Koyomi.

After just barely escaping from that hellish spring break with my life, unlike when I'd been a vampire, my life was something I wanted to cherish.

M A Z E M O N O G A T A R I

Shiogi Ranger — Chapter Army

Shot by the tactician: Polaris Translations
Stabbed by the berserker: Bluex & Noyaxus
Strangled by the string master: Maxdefolsch

MAZEMONOGATARI

NISIOISIN

Akari Triple

Chapter Invite

Chiga Hikari
Chiga Teruko
Chiga Akari

Zaregoto Series

Art: SHAFT

001

Chiga Teruko, Chiga Hikari and Chiga Akari are triplet maids. Even if I strongly assert that they are "triplet maids", I feel like I don't understand the concept at all. However, since the three sisters are listed that way in the cast of characters of the mystery novel they appear in, I have no choice but to present them that way even if my worldview is different.

Chiga Akari—triplet maid, eldest daughter.
Chiga Hikari—triplet maid, middle daughter.
Chiga Teruko—triplet maid, youngest daughter.

What's that?

I get the triplet part. It means they are identical siblings sharing the same DNA. I get the maid part, even if it feels like part of a particular Japanese subculture, the origin of the maid traces back to England and is a fundamentally historical idea—they are loyal servants, I would summarize. But what's a triplet maid? Are they both triplets and maids? Is that what they are? No matter how hard I rack my brain, I cannot find any deeper meaning…

Well, for the people absolutely wanting to know the details, not a movie but OVAs are in production, so you will be able to witness the events of that gruesome decapitation case. However, generally, twins are an unavoidable part of mysteries. Triplets may be somewhat unconventional, yet there are sufficient prior examples… For mysteries fated to determine only one culprit, twins who constantly boast the benefits of being able to do one person with two roles or changing places are a taboo for forensic investigations, but they are surely appealing for mystery writers.

That being said, realistically, twins, triplets, or even quadruplets cannot change places that easily. In the first place, even if their DNA is the same, their fingerprints are not. Even if their appearance is identical, their personalities are not—miraculous sympathy between twins is in fact nothing but a fantasy. If one of them falls and gets hurt, it is not like the remaining sibling's knee will be scratched or ache. If I were to talk about it in accordance to my own worldview, "twins are a bad omen" is an absurd argument based on preposterous biases of a bygone era. So trying to get amusement out of such delusions must be a great bother for such men and women.

However, that was merely an introduction. Returning to the main subject of this case, the three Chiga sisters, they are triplets created in a way to make changing and alternating roles possible—triplet maids.

Deliberately raised similarly and closely.

Brought about by a product of delusive delusion.

This was prompted by the motto of the master they are currently serving… Exiled from the enormous Akagami Foundation, nowadays confined on Wet Crow's Feather Island, an isolated and solitary island. Apparently that mistress was such a person.

Akagami Iria.

She should be a young woman not much older than me, but even hearing only half of what was told to me, she was completely crazy and far out of the norm. Not just for the case of the triplet maids. Despite being exiled to an island, far from a prison, she was living in a luxurious mansion

and engrossed in dialogues with various eccentrics and oddballs from all over the world.

Eccentric and oddballs—of the type that were also denoted as geniuses.

Saying that much, I don't even need to explain why those identical triplets came to visit our town… Right, the triplet maids were dispatched all the way here to invite a new genius to that island.

Now, speaking of geniuses living in our town…?

002

"Hanekawa Tsubasa-san, right?"

I was surprised to have been mistaken for that person, I was surprised to see triplets when I turned back, and I was surprised to see their old-fashioned and traditional maid clothes.

The shock was such that I didn't know what I should be surprised about first.

In a way, the three surprises offset each other and inversely weren't much of a surprise. By the way, I was at the former site of the cram school where I hid during my hellish spring break alongside a particular young girl.

As you can guess from the phrase "former site," there was no longer a building there.

It would be a long story to tell, but in short, it burned down due to a fire.

Burning extensively and turning into ashes.

Well, a lot happened in the time between summer break and this November… After concluding the episode involving the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire with a violent bad end, I thought there

was nothing left in life for me. However, events denying that assumption occurred at a pace of about one or two a month, so my life was truly inside a storm of drama.

Regardless of whether you can call the path I walked on ever since spring break "life", this was the first time I had experienced something like "upon turning back there were maids."

Not just maids, triplets.

This was clearly a miraculous experience I would never be able to relive.

Maybe triplet maids are even more seldom met than vampires? I can't calculate it since I don't have the data, but I feel like the probability of the three triplets all being maids is lower than that of having your blood sucked by a vampire…

"I am the eldest daughter, Chiga Akari. Glad to meet you. Pleased to make your acquaintance from now on."

"I am the middle daughter, Chiga Hikari. Glad to meet you. Pleased to make your acquaintance from now on."

As the eldest daughter, Chiga Hikari introduced the last one with "And this is the youngest daughter, Chiga Teruko," the three of them tidily greeted in unison. Lifting the end of their skirts and bowing their heads, that etiquette was far above what you could draw in any picture, it was something you could only see in CG.

It was so maid-like it actually felt like fiction.

The headbands and aprons looked too much like they came from a theatrical play.

At the very least, it was unfitting clothing for this burnt field… By the way, the triplets were so indistinguishable that I started wondering if someone forgot to adjust the focus; however, I was somehow able to differentiate the youngest daughter, Chiga Teruko, the silent one during the introduction.

That was because she was the only one wearing glasses.

However, were you to remove those glasses, she would surely fade in with the others in no time. Their age was about mid-twenties I guess? Although they looked more composed than that.

"We three are servants of Akagami Iria-sama. You are Hanekawa Tsubasa-san, right?"

Hearing the old-sounding word "servant", in this particular location, I couldn't help but be reminded of that legendary vampire. But setting that aside, I'm not Hanekawa Tsubasa.

I might have carelessly forgotten to say it until now, but I'm Araragi Koyomi.

To mistake Araragi Koyomi for Hanekawa Tsubasa, what kind of error was that?

Didn't you get the wrong gender altogether? No, well, the name Tsubasa could well enough be that of a man I guess… And it's not like I put a nametag on my uniform and passed by this burnt field on my way back from school.

I don't know where their information went amiss, but I did seriously consider saying "No, you got the wrong person. My apologies for being unable to be of any use to you."

If I were being honest that's what I should've done, however in that case, how much of a necessity was there for me to be honest?

A clearly strange group of three having come to this town in search of Hanekawa… I had too big of a debt toward that class president to overlook this situation.

And one more thing.

As of this November, Hanekawa Tsubasa had dropped out of Naoetsu High School.

Explaining how that came to be would also take a long time (one whole book), so allow me to abridge it and stick to the current events. Anyhow, she wasn't at school nor anywhere in Japan—sorry that they came all this way, but no matter how much they search through this town, the triplet maids and Hanekawa won't be able to meet each other.

That means I had to take the spokesman role and stand in for Hanekawa Tsubasa (I had to?). Let me use the words "not up to the task" with the wrong meaning.[102]

"Yes. I'm Hanekawa Tsubasa. I have huge breasts."

"What?"

Akari-san (or Hikari-san?) made a completely puzzled face.

I screwed up, Hanekawa wasn't such a character, was she?

There was no need to play the same character in the first place. I didn't especially have to play the role of Hanekawa's twin little sister. I should have only devoted myself to pretending to be Hanekawa and listening to the request of those maids.

"Might you have an inquiry hane?"

"Hane?"[103]

Hikari-san (or Akari-san?) knitted her eyebrows even further.

I couldn't devote myself.

I didn't learn my lesson and tried to end my sentence like Hanekawa, but upon further reflection Hanekawa didn't end her sentences like that—I tried saying "An inquiry?" as "An inquiry hane?" but it didn't quite transmit well.

I mean, my speech techniques didn't work at all (is it my imagination or was Teruko-san somewhat glaring at me?).

I thought triplet maids might be of short-lived interest, but these girls were unexpectedly residents of a proper mystery… We also did do mystery-like things, but well, they're basically always linked to aberrations.

We're not genuine.

"No, nothing. I asked what your business was. I'm also really busy. I have to simultaneously solve simultaneous equations."

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[102] Koyomi uses the expression 役不足 (*yakubusoku*), which can be interpreted as "not being good enough for the task" or "being dissatisfied with being given the task".

[103] Koyomi changed the end of his interrogative sentence from ですわね (*desu wane*) to the nonexistent ですはね (*desu hane*) to match Tsubasa's name.

I tried to somehow make it seem like I was smart but it wasn't going well… Aren't simultaneous equations meant to be solved together from the start? Also, don't claim being busy when you come alone to this burnt place. It's the kind of spot you only come to when you're the least busy person on this earth.

This should be a short one to explain.

The me of November had a slight problem in his life (or rather life-or-death), so I naturally wandered here while wondering what to do—it couldn't be helped for me to reminisce about Oshino Meme, an authority in aberrations.

That man too was no longer in this town—even if he were, he was the type of man to claim "People just go and get saved on their own," so he wouldn't swiftly resolve my current problems.

"In fact, congratulations."

Akari-san (or Hikari-san?) said as if changing the atmosphere.

It was so smooth, they must be used to handling weirdos. However, "in fact, congratulations"? What's up with that ominous lineup of words?

"Hanekawa Tsubasa-san. On this occasion, you gained the rights to visit Wet Crow's Feather Island and have an audience with our master, the graciously smart Akagami Iria-sama—as one of the chosen geniuses."

003

A chosen genius.

How honorable it sounded.

No one has ever, and probably will never say this to me in the future, a denomination so magnificent I even thought it was an auditory hallucination. However, that denomination also made me glad from the bottom of my heart that Hanekawa herself wasn't here.

That was probably the appellation this class president would hate the most. There was no doubt she would much prefer being called "fancy glasses president" than this.

But well, if there was a foundation not yet taken down in Japan, and if there was a young mistress exiled from that foundation to an island, and if that mistress was creating a salon gathering geniuses on that island (at this point how likely would that be?), Hanekawa Tsubasa would, without a doubt, be an outstanding enough talent to be invited.

For instance, a painter without a style.

For instance, a scholar whose studies are complete.

For instance, a chef who has already tasted success.

For instance, a fortune-teller who has transcended too far.[104]

And for instance—a holy class president.

That's how I came to know the reason these triplet maids, these heretic existences, came to this town. That said, I couldn't really part with the triplets by saying, "I see, so that's what it was. I totally got it. Well then let me tell you, I'm not in fact Hanekawa Tsubasa. I'll give you a memo with the real Hanekawa Tsubasa's location so please head there. I'm glad I got to talk with you, enjoy!"

My connection to this class president wasn't so light as to let it be and proclaim that this was only a matter between those triplets and Hanekawa, that it was a decision Hanekawa should make on her own. Don't mess with me, like I'd let you take Hanekawa to this unknown island with that unknown mistress.

I'm not even fine with her quitting high school and going abroad, you know?

I need to somehow turn them down.

If I don't ask these triplet maids to leave… the situation might again take a turn for the worse. I was constantly wishing for those with different worldviews to go back to where they came from, I… I now deeply realize the difficulty in intercultural exchanges. To think I would even wish for those relatively harmless maids to go back.

However, not caring about my thoughts, Hikari-san (or Akari-san?) said with a bright smile that didn't even consider the possibility of being turned down, not hiding how much she thought of it as an honor and something wonderful.

"Congratulations!"

She repeated herself.

I thought that even if I passed my college entrance exams, I wouldn't ever hear a "Congratulations!" so bright that it made my mood waver,

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[104] These four lines are taken word for word from the introduction of the first volume of *Zaregoto*, and refer to the different geniuses invited to Wet Crow's Feather Island by Akagami Iria: Ibuki Kanami, Sonoyama Akane, Sashirono Yayoi, and Himena Maki respectively.

but… That said, it's not like I really was invited to that something-something-Island.

Someone like me would just get turned down at the gate.

"But."

There, Akari-san (or Hikari-san?) raised her finger.

"You mustn't become flustered. Entry isn't without cost, you see."

"Eh? I have to pay my own way?"

Although she was exiled, that rich mistress says some miserly things.

I felt like I could use that as a reason to hook a refusal in, however, naturally, that wasn't the meaning. Hikari-san (or Akari-san?) continued Akari-san (or Hikari-san?)'s words,

"For admission there is a test. Please answer the following question."

She finished her statement like so… A test?

An admission test?

Why is there a need to pass a test for an invitation I didn't even ask for…? Aren't tests something a high schooler like myself hates the most?

However, that was surprisingly not off the mark.

In the first place, the Hanekawa Tsubasa that that mistress wanted to invite had an uncontrollable love of tests, to the point where you could basically call that class president a pervert—a test pervert.

She was the kind of girl to ask for a test herself before being allowed to enter the island. In the spirit of my assumed understanding of Hanekawa's own spirit, should I ascertain these girls' style here?

"Okay fine. But, you'll surely regret it: you'll regret having tried to test me."

What's with that line?

I couldn't become like Hanekawa in the slightest.

However, I wasn't taking the triplet maids' test solely in order to pass as Hanekawa…

Rather, I judged it to be the better choice.

Essentially, if there is a test and you can't get to meet the mistress without passing it, conversely, by failing, Hanekawa wouldn't have to go

to that eerie and mysterious island where it seems like a murder case could happen at any second.

Kukuku. I'm a pro at failing tests.

If you need a man born to fail all sorts of tests, that's me.

"Is that so. We appreciate this motivation. As expected of the talent which mistress has fixed… has set her eyes on."

Hikari-san (or Akari-san?) nearly made a slip of the tongue.

That group exhibited a tidy atmosphere unfit for these burnt ruins, but in the first place, having mistaken this lowly me in this lowly place, aren't they in reality pretty clumsy maids?

"Then for this test… Shall we go with that one?"

There, Akari-san (or Hikari-san?) shot a glance toward the triplet that was apparently the youngest of the bunch despite being born on the same year, month and day; they were looking at Teruko-san, who had up to now always been one step behind. In response, Teruko-san removed her glasses.

Now I couldn't differentiate them.

The now-identical set of three started steadily changing places, in a quiet motion. In the same kind of motion a magician would move face-down cups in, and I quickly couldn't keep track of them individually. With or without the vision of a former vampire, that motion was too complicated for calculations to follow. When one hid two passing each other behind her back, I couldn't even see what they were doing.

That confusing shuffle only continued for ten seconds.

After that, those three snapped into place and courteously stopped moving.

They were encircling me from three sides like hunters not letting their prey escape—then, they once again lifted the end of their skirts and bowed once.

One of the three then spoke.

Someone, I had no idea who, put forward this question:

"Now, who is the eldest? You have two chances."

004

It was nothing special.

It was a typical Monty Hall problem—yet again.

What Ougi-chan explained to me the other day, when I infiltrated Nanahyakuichi Middle School.

To think that would be applicable to triplet maids… In any case, the "you have two chances" doesn't simply mean "you can miss once," that's the nature of the problem.

If I designate one of them as the eldest, regardless of whether that is correct or incorrect, I can remove one of the remaining two from the options—and after having moved from a three-way choice to a two-way choice, I have the right to change my selection.

I can change, or I can not change.

In other words, this was a question based on intuition.

Changing or not changing might appear to have the same probability, but in reality changing is the correct choice. With that, the chance to guess the correct one goes up from one third to two thirds.

The detailed explanation is already published somewhere (also, people would point out I make my special volumes too thick) so I'll keep it short

here. Anyhow, using the right to change my answer is correct—**in normal times**.

These aren't normal times.

The triplet maids were killing their emotions and waiting for my answer whilst acting as motionless mannequins, but I couldn't possibly follow the textbook method here. After all, I want to fail this test.

I desperately wanted to fail it.

I absolutely must not use my second right to choose, and more importantly, I can't use my first one without thinking of anything. I must raise, even if by a little, my chance of misfiring my guess at who the eldest was.

I mean, one of the reasons the Monty Hall problem is hard to understand is that even if you choose randomly, don't make the correct choice, and follow your gut, **you will win one out of three times**. If my odds of winning are as high as in rock-paper-scissors, I have to think about it.

I can't make a gamble with a one-third probability of losing Hanekawa.

I want some additional ingredients to help my decision-making process at least.

I started turning in place and observing the three surrounding me in turns… I wouldn't ever have imagined I would someday be able to observe maids at such a close distance in my life.

Even if this was an exterior teahouse, I wouldn't have been allowed to stare so much.

But, no matter how much I worked up my eyes, I couldn't distinguish any differences between those three. Are triplets always this similar? I thought that Teruko might have had some traces from the glasses she was wearing until just earlier, however nothing came up from inspecting all three of their noses.

"Is it okay if I touch?"

"It isn't."

Akari-san or Hikari-san or Teruko-san refused on the spot. Yeah, I guess it's normal.

"Please make your decision by relying on observations."

"Can I ask questions?"

"We don't mind, but you're not assured we will answer truthfully. Especially Teruko, because she's a liar."

Then that approach isn't valuable.

Trying out something else, I asked "Then, please show me your fingerprints."

No matter how much they look the same, be it twins or triplets, their fingerprints should differ. If their DNA is the same, how about their luster? Well, it's not like I collected their fingerprints beforehand so it's not like checking that will change anything… But in any case, my ideas would stay entangled if I didn't find any difference.

I needed a linchpin for my thoughts.

That said, the fingerprints and palm prints they showed me all looked the same to me. At the very least, those three would get the absolute same results from a palm-reading divination.

Umm. There's too few clues to start anything.

This relentlessly abnormal situation of being surrounded on three sides by maids didn't allow me to think logically. How much worth does logic hold in front of the miraculous existences that are triplet maids?

First, I heard that in cases of twins their order of birth gets reversed… The convention is that the twin born after becomes the eldest… But what's up with that flimsy convention?

Just, if that were the case, what about triplets? Would the order of birth become youngest, middle, eldest? However, even then, since they first introduced themselves as "Triplet maid, eldest daughter Akari-san," "Triplet maid, middle daughter Hikari-san," and "Triplet maid, youngest daughter Teruko-san," the one I should guess (to miss) was "Triplet maid, eldest daughter Akari-san."

If possible I would have preferred to decide based on their personality, but they started shuffling before I could grasp their individual character… Apart from the glasses-wearing, taciturn, inexpressive Teruko-san, Hikari-san and Akari-san were still mixed up in my head when the test started.

If I had to say, Akari-san was the proper one and Hikari-san the more familiar and kind…? But, being maids, they erased their presence perfectly so I couldn't read much into that.

Well, I guess it's useless to think any more.

If I stay at a deadlock for too long they'll eventually figure out I'm a fake Hanekawa, so let's make the situation progress anyway.

There are two guesses so I only need to reach the touchstone of the first guess.

I need to observe the triplet maids' reaction to that.

"Then, I designate you first."

It was completely random but I pointed at one of the maids. I didn't have any grounds, but she was the one to answer my "Can I ask questions?" earlier. Setting aside the "You're not assured we will answer truthfully," I leaned heavily on the words that came after that: "Especially Teruko, because she's a liar." She only said that because she wasn't Teruko-san, you can reason that out.

So I decided, **if she were feigning that**.

You were trying to lure out the fact you weren't Teruko-san, but in fact you, who spoke, aren't you the taciturn Teruko-san? That's the sharp deduction of the Boy Detective Araragi Koyomi.

Well, whatever the circumstances might have been, it was more instinct than a proper and logical deduction, but… However, well, that should be quite the feat for my first answer.

The choice fundamentally had no definitive answer, so in the end the real Monty Hall problem started now—sure enough, the one I designated, Akari-san or Hikari-san or Teruko-san, smiled lightly and by saying "I see, well then," she prompted the other two, Akari-san or Hikari-san or Teruko-san.

Among the prompted Akari-san or Hikari-san or Teruko-san, one Akari-san or Hikari-san or Teruko-san mirrored the movement of the other Akari-san or Hikari-san or Teruko-san whom I pointed at, and smiled in the same way. Yet, the remaining Akari-san or Hikari-san or Teruko-san

shrugged her shoulders, still expressionless, took out a pair of glasses from the pocket of her apron, and put them on.

She then took one step back.

So she was Teruko-san? Is that what it meant?

So the Teruko-san I aimed at (trying to miss) wasn't in fact Teruko-san but Akari-san or Hikari-san?

Regardless, after my first answer the three-way choice changed into a two-way choice—among the remaining two, one of them was the eldest daughter Akari-san and the middle daughter Hikari-san… No, not necessarily.

It is not certain that, just because she put glasses on, the remaining maid is actually Teruko-san—during the shuffle motion they might have passed the glasses to each other somewhere I wasn't looking, they looked like they had enough leeway to pull off such a trick.

The refined step technique of maids isn't to be taken lightly.

The lack of sound when walking is comparable to ninjas.

Well, whether the two remaining choices were Akari-san and Hikari-san or Akari-san and Teruko-san, it shouldn't make a big difference for the person answering… no, hold on?

There's no way it wouldn't.

Teruko-san (or Hikari-san) appealed that she was the wrong choice by putting on glasses, but… wasn't there something unnatural in this exchange? I only thought from the perspective of the person taking the test, but what about the maids' perspective?

… I can't visualize it at all, but if I were one of those triplet maids, a living example of the Monty Hall problem—then, after the person taking the test answers, there should be a meeting to decide what to do, right?

I mean, they didn't know until that very moment who would get designated—I chose one of the maids randomly, welding myself on a single statement, but I could have taken that statement another way and chosen another maid.

If I had no criteria, then they didn't either.

So there was no way for them to be sure of who would be chosen the first time, therefore… they shouldn't have been able to decide who will be removed from the options after.

So in this case they would need a signal—**in the case both of them were wrong.**

However, the maid prompted by the Akari-san or Hikari-san or Teruko-san I chose, Akari-san or Hikari-san or Teruko-san smiled without even an eye contact, and the other one put glasses on.

I'm not allowing for telepathy among triplets.

I shouldn't be saying that, being a resident from a world messing with aberrations, but I'll ban any abilities that surpass human understanding. Being totally identical triplets was enough of a cheat.

I didn't consider this development, but if they removed a maid without a single time lag, that means one of the two not-designated maids was Akari-san.

Originally, in the Monty Hall problem, the choices A, B and C are under the control of the game master. The choices don't move of their own will… Even then, it contains the same problem. Thinking purely with probabilities, changing the choice on the second try gives you a two-thirds chance of winning. However, since humans are managing the game, the judges should require thinking time.

In the case the one-in-third correct option was selected—which one of the other two to remove? The conditions are totally identical so throwing in a bias wouldn't let the game carry on.

The game master should choose randomly.

They must harden their heart and eliminate their own will.

You might think I'm insistent, but in short, you can establish that rule—if the correct option was among the non-selected ones, you have no choice. No need for a thinking time, the option chosen by the game master is set in stone. If the correct option wasn't among the non-selected ones, you have a choice and a thinking time is necessary.

Therefore, the person taking the test can make such an hypothesis.

If the game master stopped to think, you shouldn't change.

If the game master didn't stop to think, you should change.

… Then it becomes more of a psychological battle than a logical one, but of course, the game master isn't defenseless against that. Even when the correct option wasn't selected and they don't have any room to choose, **they can pretend to have room.**

Whether they are hesitating or not, they can systematically fix the thinking time to ten seconds. Doing that, the person answering has no way to distinguish the two cases.

If you remove the reactions, there is no longer any material for judgment.

So if the triplet maids did that, I would be completely clueless. But, what they did was the contrary. The thinking time taken was nil.

As far as I could think, they should have been able to fake hesitation.

But they shouldn't have been able to fake not hesitating.

There are lies you can't tell.

For any liar.

In the case the two were both wrong, if they remove themselves from the choices at the same time (they would simultaneously say "Ah," "Ah," and they would awkwardly have to yield to the other), it would be like saying the other one is the correct choice. Then, since one of the prompted maids put on glasses instantly and the other one smiled, it's settled that the remaining maid is the eldest daughter, Akari-san.

Bingo!

But, I'm not stupid enough to scream "Then I won't change my decision!" Letting yourself be swayed over by the joy of deducing the correct choice and losing to the temptation of choosing the right answer would be the act of a real fool.

Here, I should pretend to not have noticed anything and follow the Monty Hall theory to the letter, going against your gut and changing your choice is correct—**for me.**

Perhaps the triplet maids didn't make a mistake but gave me a hint. Maybe they're saying that someone unable to notice this lack of thinking time doesn't have the qualifications to have an audience with the mistress…

I don't know how widely it is understood, but nowadays, being a time when the Monty Hall problem is completely solved, what is tested in order to enter the island might instead be skills like perception and concentration.

I can't think Hanekawa wouldn't notice the thinking time factors I noticed, so I'm deeply sorry for the maids having come from far away, but I'm going to logically commit an error.

As I was thinking that, and when I was about to proudly give out the Monty Hall answer ("Even if there were 100 options…"), the maid I chose in my first go… The one most likely to be Akari-san.

"I'm sure it will be fun, Hanekawa-san."

That maid cheerfully said so.

Since Teruko-san was (seemingly) out of the equation, there was no need to keep the expressionless face, her smile was really kind, as if considering me.

"To compete with other geniuses of your level, it will be fun for Hanekawa-san."

"…"

Those words—rendered me speechless.

Aaah… I see.

I was thinking about it in the wrong way.

I was thinking along the lines of "Don't even joke about sending Hanekawa to an isolated island screaming 'murder mystery'," and "Why did that exiled mistress have to call Hanekawa over?" and "Hanekawa isn't a spectacle, I'm the only one who should be able to look at Hanekawa." But this invitation had a different meaning.

An isolated island gathering geniuses.

In other words, geniuses can exchange there.

And without any bias, there might be scholar geniuses, artist geniuses, maybe even sports or cooking geniuses, board games geniuses or martial arts geniuses. Anyway, this was an occasion to come in contact with people of outstanding talent.

On that island, you'd be guaranteed a rare experience you never could have had in a proper university… I can endure missing such an outrageous environment, but what about Hanekawa?

There was no doubt she would dislike being called a chosen genius.

Being called like that was what she hated the most.

However, if you asked whether Hanekawa hated those called chosen geniuses, that wasn't really the case—rather, she would faithfully assess those exceptional talents without any jealousy or envy.

In the same way she properly paid respect to the wandering psychedelic middle-aged man—or when she, as a normal human, analyzed the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire who had lived 500 years.

Wouldn't Hanekawa wish for interactions with geniuses?

She was currently wandering abroad, but wasn't she spreading her outlook in order to meet people like that in the future, after she graduates? Wasn't she spreading her wings[105] for that?

Then I wonder if it's really fine for me, in this burnt field, to make not the amateur decision but the commoner's decision of tearing this invitation of hers to this other world in pieces… Crap.

I thought of something unnecessary.

I got cornered into making a totally different choice.

"… Are those geniuses… monster-like?"

"Pardon?"

"No, the people on that island… The people invited on that island. What kind of people are they? You said geniuses of the same level—"

As Hanekawa Tsubasa.

As that invincible and perfect class president.

"—Are there even comparable geniuses?"

"I cannot affirm. Because I'm not a genius. I'm only a maid—we're only three maids. Triplet maids."

The person that was suspected of being Akari-san said so.

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[105] Tsubasa's first name, 翼 (*tsubasa*), literally means "wings".

That answer felt like a letdown, "However," the maid on my right, Hikari-san (or perhaps Teruko-san not wearing glasses) continued.

"As a maid I've seen various geniuses—a colorful assortment of geniuses. Geniuses stimulate each other, influence each other, enhance each other, and kill each other."

"K-Kill…?"

"Ah, no. Of course in the sense of killing one's self."

No, even if you try to fix it by making that smug face…

Killing one's self, what kind of situation is that? What kind of "of course" is that?

"For me geniuses are people I can't understand, but isn't that why geniuses profit from each other? Isn't that why they attract each other? For someone not understood by everyone, isn't having someone that understands you far more important than being liked or being hated?"

Although I can't understand how Hanekawa feels about that—Hikari-san (or Teruko-san) smoothly added so, but that didn't need to be added.

Of course that was the case for Hanekawa.

Ever since spring break I've continued affirming I couldn't understand her, so there was no doubt.

If a genius appeared who was able to say the words "I understand you" to Hanekawa, not merely kindly or severely, but with plenty of persuasiveness… Just how much would her talent be fulfilled?

I don't know everything, I just know what I know.

I know how much she, who continuously said that line, wanted to know herself.

I know.

"…"

If that's the case.

Maybe I should not change my decision and continue designating Akari-san… **but even if that's the case.**

I was just pretending to hesitate.

I was just creating thinking time.

I was just pretending to think for Hanekawa's sake… In reality that choice was an instant decision.

There was no room for doubt.

It's not for me to decide what Hanekawa should do… What I should decide are only my choices.

My decisions.

She doesn't need my protection.

So I should only follow my ego.

"Then, would you please soon proceed to your second choice. Now, who is the eldest daughter? Please point at the maid you think is her."

Being told that by the suspected Akari-san, I—

I changed my choice.

But not toward the smiling maid, I pointed at the maid wearing glasses—right, the one removed from the options and who looked to be Teruko-san at first glance.

"Splendid!"

And.

The maid who looked to be Teruko-san removed her glasses and smiled.

"I am Chiga Akari. The eldest daughter of the triplet maids."

005

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

I pretended to follow the Monty Hall solution and purposely chose the wrong answer, but realized the truth at the very last moment. Did those girls **really** have no thinking time? Certainly, there was near to no time lag after I chose for the first time. One of the two who were not chosen had put on glasses and the other one smiled at nearly the same time as I chose. But, **what if the thinking time was already finished by then?**

There was no way to know who I would choose among the choices A, B, and C before I did. But, when I chose with a one-out-of-three probability, what if they had already chosen who of the remaining two to remove?

Since Akari-san (the maid looking like her) said "then for this test… Shall we go with that one?" as if she thought of it on the spot, I accepted it without further questioning, however, what if the test had already begun then?

Then it's a simple story.

Let's say choice A was correct and B and C were wrong, if they chose from the start to remove choice B, there would be no need for thinking time. Even if I chose B, at that time they would have to remove C.

Of course that kind of method isn't originally used in the game, it can't even be applied to a repeated thought experiment. If the game master had a habit, which became a will and a bias, it would cease to simply work according to probabilities. The random nature would be lost.

However, for a one-time fight in this burnt field.

For example, if **the maid the glasses were handed to during the shuffle** were to be removed, if you create an elaborate mystery beforehand, if you agree on that—there would be no need for thinking time among the sisters.

The one possessing the glasses would put them on and the other one would smile.

When I noticed this, all my thought process went down the drain.

I didn't know which one was Akari-san, I had no idea who to choose to be wrong.

I didn't know anything.

So, as a desperate measure, I pointed at the **sure-miss** option.

In other words, the Teruko-san who was removed after the first choice. Though it was now unclear whether she was Teruko-san or Hikari-san, anyhow, the glasses-wearing maid, who retreated one step.

I wasn't told to not choose the maid removed from the equation.

Taking the statement of Teruko-san being a liar the other way… "In reality you were the right choice, the eldest got removed from the options, right?" I meant to play the role of the genius who got drowned into overthinking, read too deep into it and was trying to show off.

But, of all things that could happen, that was the real correct answer.

No, technically not.

If the real correct choice was the one removed, you could argue they wouldn't be insisting so much over the invitation and simultaneously setting up such a coward trick question. So that wasn't it.

The one I chose wasn't the removed choice. The one I chose, the one I ended up choosing **was the maid who hadn't been removed**—her, who was removed from the options was purely a misfire.

Not Akari-san, but instead Hikari-san or Teruko-san, one of the two.

The thing about the glasses probably went as I deduced at the last moment.

They decided the person holding the glasses would be removed from the options from the start. **And, they had also decided that the glasses in question would be silently handed to the other remaining choice behind my back.**

I wonder if you can call that a substitution trick too?

Who would have thought that **differentiating** by glasses would have led to a substitution of identical triplets? The purpose of the circular formation wasn't just to prevent escape by Hanekawa Tsubasa, as I had thought, but to get behind my back. To hand over the glasses right behind my back.

Before entering the second stage, the maid I designated first (which is now clearly Hikari-san or Teruko-san) would suddenly say to me "I'm sure it will be fun, Hanekawa-san" to attract my attention and cover up the glasses being handed over. And to make me ponder.

I played right into their hands.

However, then, the ones who got drowned in their plan were the triplet maids.

Since the maid with glasses I chose, trying to be wrong, was splendidly the eldest daughter, Akari-san. Looking at it without the maids, the glasses, or all those complicated factors, it was effectively a Monty Hall problem by the books.

I properly got the right answer by changing my choice.

Because of that, I was currently relaxing on the luxurious cruiser heading toward Wet Crow's Feather Island. Unable to bring up that I wasn't Hanekawa Tsubasa until the end, I was led into a limousine, a helicopter, and finally this cruiser.

Advancing on the shortest route in this dim ocean.

An ordinary student was on the verge of entering an island which was gathering chosen geniuses… A student failing his exams was on the verge of having the honor of meeting the exiled mistress from a big foundation…

How did it come to this?

Also, what is going to happen now?

Did I instantly get punished by karma for crushing Hanekawa's invitation because of my ego? No, but, I wonder? Did I really choose the maid with glasses with the intention of missing?

When I pointed at her, who was obviously the correct choice with logic, what did my intuition tell me…? Didn't I know in reality that she was Akari-san? Did I know, but pretend not to? Wasn't I trying to make my will to protect Hanekawa and my ego coexist together?

I'm beaten. I have no idea if I really knew.

It looks like this time I'll be able to cover for her by taking her place, however, in the future, when Hanekawa tries to leave the nest, will I be able or unable to accept it and send her off? Which answer is the right choice among those two? It shouldn't be a question that far off in the future, but at this rate it looks like it'll stay a difficult and undecided question I won't be able to answer alone.

Well, fine. It's thinking time.

Luckily I won't be lacking in interaction with geniuses in the mansion I'm going to live in now. This kind of opportunity is rare so I won't hold back and borrow the wisdom of those VIPs.

The first morning of my life on Wet Crow's Feather Island was just greeting me.

MAZEMONOGATARI

Akari Triple — Chapter Invite

Picked the eldest daughter: Sway Translations
Picked the middle daughter: Bluex
Picked the youngest daughter: Maxdefolsch

MAZEMONOGATARI

NISIOISIN

Rizumu Rock 'n'

Chapter Eat

Niounomiya Izumu
Niounomiya Rizumu

Zaregoto Series

Art: Take

001

Niounomiya Rizumu is, surprisingly, a great detective—see? We've already gone off the rails. But supposing that we continue to move forward in spite of having derailed, we would realize that she is not a person who carries the title of detective who is possessed of such acute logic as to be called a great detective, but instead she is a person who carries the title of great detective while only possessing passable deductive ability. She calls herself that, and she wears a mantle in the old style, so no matter what anyone else might say to refute her claim, she won't be affected by it. Just as a rose by another name would still smell as sweet, Niounomiya Rizumu by another name will still smell like a great detective.

What is a great detective?

If you stop and think about it, it's a profound question—and one that cannot be answered.

If we compare her to a forgetful detective from another time, it might help us understand a bit more. The most remarkable difference between the two is that Okitegami Kyouko receives a request and then solves a case, which is what we will define as being a detective, meanwhile, Niounomiya

Rizumu goes out and solves a case without even having been asked to look into it, which must be what a great detective is, right?

She solves a case?

No.

In fact, it's the opposite. When Niounomiya Rizumu begins to investigate something, without fail, a case **will begin**. While it is true that the great detective does not have anyone requesting that she look into cases, it is not because she is driven by her own inquisitive nature that she goes out and puts everything that she has into her Field Work.

She does it for her "Older Brother".

It is for her **twin older brother**, the hitman Niounomiya Izumu, that she operates as a detective. A great detective and a hitman appear to be diametrically opposed (though what really goes well with a great detective is a "criminal" or "mysterious person", or you could go with an "assistant"… a "hitman"?), and it's possible that some may have even heard of the Niounomiya twins as a pair as one, one as a pair. But even if you have heard of them, it would be best if you feigned ignorance to the best of your ability. Of course, with a great detective as part of the pair, your act will be seen through in an instant.

Steps number 7 and 8 of the "Thirteen Stairs".

"Carnival" Rizumu and "Man Eater" Izumu.

The twin siblings are like two sides of the same coin, and together they are the ace of the Niounomiya Troupe, the top-ranked of the "Killing Names". And with the pair consisting of a hitman "older brother" and a great detective "little sister", I can assure you that you would never want to be caught lying or attempting to deceive with these two around.

I don't want to be outed by a great detective or killed by a hitman.

002

"I'm Niounomiya Rizumu! Sixteen years old! And a great detective!"

"Okay! So how can I get you to go back home to your world?"

"Don't try to get it over with as quickly as possible! This is special!"

When I tried to treat her appearance like a bureaucratic affair, Rizumu-chan immediately filed a complaint and shut me down. We were located at the top of a mountain at the Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

In the past, this shrine had been godless and abandoned, but then "bad things" that precede aberrations had taken up residence within the shrine. During that time, the shrine was too dangerous to be a test of courage, and it was more akin to a test of immortality. But after that, skipping over some details, the shrine was demolished and then rebuilt, *torii* gates were added, and a small water fountain was installed. Now at the start of February, the shrine as a whole was brand new and completely changed. (For reference, the start of February was right between the events of *Koimonogatari* and *Tsukimonogatari*.)

Calling a shrine brand new doesn't fit with *wabi-sabi*,[106] and it's unclear if one could say that the shrine has an ancient and honorable history, but having visited the shrine, I could say with certainty that visiting the current Kita-Shirahebi Shrine did not come with the danger of being strangled to death by a snake.

The shrine was still without a god, though.

The reason that I had gone to visit the shrine in the first place was specifically to confirm that the shrine did not have a god in residence (I'm not so trusting as to believe a swindler), and to my surprise, when I arrived, there was neither a god in residence nor a snake, but instead I found a great detective wandering the yard.

And according to her, she was sixteen years old.

A great detective in glasses.

I compared her to another glasses girl I knew, though Hanekawa was not in Japan at the time, and she was quite different in appearance. She was hiding both of her hands under her mantle, which was not because she lacked manners or because we stood on a cold, snowy mountaintop, but because underneath the mantle she was wearing a straitjacket.

A straitjacket.

No, no, it would take more than that to surprise me now.

If that was all that defined her, then she might as well be Doujima Mayumi.

This was my eleventh time interacting with another world, and having encountered eccentrics and oddballs left and right, I was surely accustomed to it by now. If you told me that Niounomiya Rizumu-chan has two personalities and that the other personality is that of her "twin older brother", who is "Niounomiya Izumu, the hitman", and that she wears the straitjacket at all times to contain and seal her brother, well, I wouldn't be surprised in the least.

It would be dealt with appropriately.

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[106] In traditional Japanese aesthetics, wabi-sabi (侘寂) is a worldview centered on the acceptance of transience and imperfection.

Before that "older brother personality" Izumu-kun could appear, I would have everything wrapped up and finished.

I would kindly say, "Please take your leave".

They should have known that there is a reason for hiding behind red tape. Did they not realize what it did to a person to deal with more than ten weirdos from other worlds?

According to Oikura Sodachi, who would go on to work in a literal bureaucratic office in the future, it was the duty of those in a bureaucratic office to welcome in individuals who are overflowing with their individuality and handle them safely and comfortably—which made it truly ironic that she worked in such a field.

"So, what is it, Rizumu-chan? Am I here to help you solve a case of some sort? I'm the king of assistants, so leave it to me."

"I'm having a hard time understanding what your character is supposed to be, onii-san… The 'king of assistants'? What is that?"

I wished she wouldn't ask me that.

More than half of the things that I said had no particular meaning.

"Haha! I've got it! You were the culprit, onii-san!"

"Don't declare me the culprit without establishing a reason for it."

"If I were looking for the one who killed the specialness of my appearance, then you would be the culprit!"

"Well, that's fine, isn't it? I doubt that anyone's read this far. We're like the bonus features section on a DVD."

"They are! They are too! They're reading it! And the next one is the final one getting a theatrical distribution, so everyone is excited!"

"I checked the table of contents, and in the next one it looks like three college girls who are good friends will be coming…"

"Three college girls for the finale is amazing, isn't it! It's so unexpected and surprising! Hey, wait—don't skip over me and start talking about the next story! And don't read the table of contents! Ahaha!"

Even though I had ruined her first scene, she laughed innocently—what a cheerful girl.

To be that bright… she definitely didn't belong here.

There weren't any characters with a *shine* like that in this worldview.

But I couldn't have simply failed to welcome her—of course, that didn't mean I wanted to throw a welcome party for her. Even setting aside the aspect of intercultural exchange, it had become an Araragi Koyomi tradition to help out strangers in need.

There was no need to recall the visit of the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, and cold-blooded vampire.

… On that note, while the mantle that Rizumu-chan wore did make her look like a detective, her design also looked a bit like a vampire—whoa, and her canines were sharp.

"Actually, that's just for this story."

Rizumu-chan abruptly stated while flashing her pearly whites.

After that, she shifted from being a meta-mystery great detective to being a traditional mystery great detective. I asked her what brought her to this area, and she told me—though I would have preferred to be left out of it, it didn't seem this great detective had a confidentiality agreement stopping her from sharing.

"I'm currently working on a child abduction case!"

"…"

I had prepared myself, but the answer was still heavier than expected.

I wondered if I could help with solving such a heinous crime.

To be honest, it seemed like something that was far beyond the scope of the king of assistants, but seeing as Rizumu-chan's arms were bound in a straitjacket to contain her "older brother" personality, it looked like I would have to lend a hand to protect the peace of this town.

"The girl who was abducted is Yamiguchi Houko-chan. She's thirteen years old!"

"Thirteen years old…"

The abduction of a thirteen-year-old girl.

It was a truly vile and despicable crime—however, at the same time, I couldn't help but wonder if the government recognized the usage of the kanji for "yami" in family names. It was just my nature to be worried about things that didn't matter.

Speaking of thirteen-year-old girls, though, there was a legendary vampire who had her limbs taken from her, and afterward, she had taken on the form of a girl of around that age—

"Oh, and she's an assassin."

"Hmm. I see."

The words washed over me.

Anything that could not be understood was ignored.

"So the point is that this girl needs to be saved, right? Okey-dokey. When you said that it was a child abduction, I had a moment of panic, but, fortunately, I am a specialist when it comes to saving thirteen-year-old girls."

"I-Is that really 'fortunate'?"

She looked at me then, not as if I were a criminal, but as if I were a pervert… I had to admit that I didn't appreciate being treated like a weirdo by a girl who was herself a weirdo.

I wanted to be properly respected as someone who specialized in little girls.

"I'm sixteen years old, okay! And my older brother is eighteen years old! That makes him the same age as you, Araragi-onii-san!"

"…"

I wondered just how much of this whole "split personality background info" I was supposed to accept without questioning. No matter how I looked at it, it didn't make sense for Rizumu-chan to be only sixteen years old. And the whole thing about sharing a body with her "older brother" felt a lot like an initial character premise rather than something concrete…

Setting aside the issue of emotional or mental age, I think her real physical age may even be over twenty. It would have probably been pointless if I'd asked Rizumu-chan about it since she was unaware of her split personality. (Please do not ask why I, a person who had only just met her, knew about a particular quirk of her body that even she wasn't aware of. These kinds of inconsistencies are necessary to make cross-world interactions possible.)

Speaking of split personalities, Hanekawa Tsubasa and Black Hanekawa; Kanbaru Suruga and the Rainy Devil were all forms of split personalities, but Niounomiya Izumu and Niounomiya Rizumu seemed to be a very different situation that wasn't quite like the aberration-based split personalities that I knew.

Their split personalities were artificially and deliberately created, and while they were unnatural, but not supernatural, they had achieved a fine balance so that each personality supported the other… And that was probably thanks to the skill of their creator, Dr. Kitsuregawa.

"Don't worry. I can't save anyone but thirteen-year-olds."

"Then what kind of 'king of assistants' are you…?"

"Sixteen-year-olds have no value. They can save themselves."

"You don't sound like an assistant at all, onii-san!"

Rizumu-chan sounded like she was regretting her choice of who to consult, but she followed it up with, "But it's okay!!" and quickly pushed through her doubts with sheer positivity. I had to be impressed by the tenacity of this girl from another world.

"The girl who was abducted, Houko-chan, has already been released!"

"Huh? Really?"

Well, that was a bit of a disappointment.

"If there's not a thirteen-year-old girl anymore, then what am I supposed to do? Damn it, I'm a highly skilled specialist in exactly one field, and now it's been taken from me."

"I wouldn't call you a highly skilled specialist, I'd call you a… No, no, never mind!"

Rizumu-chan had been about to say something else, but she swallowed her words. So she wasn't just cheerful, but considerate too.

"Well, in any case, if the thirteen-year-old girl is safe, then that's a great thing, isn't it? I don't see any problem."

I had heard from my parents that abductions and hijackings had a very low success rate, and I supposed that this case fell in line with that.

"Setting aside hijacking, determining if an abduction was a success or not is so easy! Even if the person who was abducted is released, if the culprit

receives a ransom payment, then it would be a success for them! If the culprit doesn't receive their ransom money, but they do kill the abductee, then it's considered a failure from both the culprit's side and the investigator's side!"

The standard for success or failure changed depending on the objective.

The best outcome was for the victim to be released unharmed and without the payment of a ransom, as well as the capture of the criminal… As someone not directly involved in the matter, I had to be happy that Houko-chan had been safely freed.

Even if she was an assassin.

"Wait, but hold on, even in that case, it's not like there aren't issues left to resolve! Even if there isn't a problem, there are still questions!"

"Not a problem, but a question?"

For a great detective, problems and questions were both things that had to be solved.[107]

[107] Rizumu says that there is still a 問題 (*mondai*), which can mean both a problem and a question (like on a test), and that even if it's not a "problem" (プロブレム, *puroburemu*), it's a "question" (クエスチョン, *kuesuchon*). The final line says "To a great detective they're both *mondai*."

003

It was apparently called the Antique Apartment.

The place where Houko-chan lived, that is. It was a three-story building with six 4-tatami single-room apartments. It looked to have been built around the same time as the Tamikura Apartments where Senjougahara lived, but the most shocking thing of all was the fact that the thirteen-year-old girl lived there with her fifteen-year-old older brother.

Rizumu-chan is also a little sister character, so I did begin to think that we had too many little sisters running around, but that didn't mean that it was okay to kidnap one of them. Anyway, one day Houko-chan went out and then never returned home to the Antique Apartment.

Given that the two siblings had clearly run away from home, just having his little sister be late coming home would be reason enough to worry, but again, because they are runaways, he would not have been able to go to the police for help looking for her.

Well, I supposed that I didn't have any way of knowing how effective the police were in Rizumu-chan's worldview… But in any case, all of the residents of the apartments went out to search the neighborhood for her,

and after waiting until the following morning, something finally happened. An attaché case arrived in the mail.

An empty attaché case.

It wasn't completely empty, but the only thing inside was a single envelope with a letter demanding a ransom payment.

"I don't remember the details, but the letter demanded a payment of 50 million yen!"

Rizumu-chan's testimony was far from reliable, but the point was that he received a ransom letter.

A price of 50 million yen in exchange for a human life—was that a fair price to set? Was it too high or too low? I was sure you could argue the value of life either way, but regardless of the greater issue of value, in practical terms, the sum demanded was not a small amount. I once had a middle-aged guy in a Hawaiian shirt come up and give me a bill for 5 million yen, but that wasn't important for this situation. The point was that it wasn't the kind of money that a runaway boy could possibly pay.

"That's right! You've latched onto a good point, onii-san. I think that money was never the objective of this abduction!"

"Money wasn't the objective…? But the ransom letter demanded payment, didn't it?"

"Yes, but it wasn't the money that they wanted, **it was to make him have to pay the money**… They wanted to make him give in to an unreasonable demand by paying the money. That was their true goal!"

Hmm.

Her cheerful tone made it harder to accept what she was saying, but I could see what she was trying to say. But… Just who is this older brother character to be targeted for such an absurd plot?

As a fellow older brother, I was curious.

"He's a hell-fanatic reaper."

"Huh…"

And that was all it took to kill my curiosity. I didn't want to be involved anymore.

"But technically speaking, the target of the note wasn't the reapers. His father is a reaper and an assassin, and he was the target of some inhuman threats—the Emperor of Crystal. Crystal Kaiser, undefeated for life, Rikka Gajumaru. Do you know of him, onii-san?"

I didn't know him.

I didn't want to know him.

I would have asked her to take back the information she'd already given me, but of course that was impossible.

In order to make Rizumu-chan leave this town, which was the ultimate goal, there would have to be a sacrifice. Learning more about this ridiculous family was the first compromise on the path to getting her to leave.

A family with an emperor father, a reaper son, and an assassin daughter sounded completely nonsensical.

Was the mother a ninja?

"So the point of the abduction was to make the undefeated father give in to the threat? These people come up with some horrible ideas."

"Well, if you want to talk about horrible, the father is probably the more horrible person here. Apparently it's a hobby of his to go around to these families and impregnate their daughters."

That's beyond horrible.

And if that was the case, then it was entirely possible that the siblings weren't full-blood relatives—I didn't want to get involved in the affairs of some other family, but it seemed like this family was just too spectacular to avoid getting involved.

Could it even really be called a family?

"So this is also revenge! More specifically, it's revenge from a branch of the Tokinomiya Hospital for him laying his hands on their daughter!"

"Oh, I know the Tokinomiya Hospital."

I'd just learned about them recently.

Yep, I've heard all about them.

I heard all about them, but I only understood a fragment of it. Essentially, they were a family of hypnotists or something. Which made

sense. It would be a piece of cake to kidnap a thirteen-year-old girl if you had hypnotism powers, even if she was an assassin.

Which meant that Rizumu-chan's hypothesis that the kidnapping wasn't about money, even though the ransom demanded a payment, seemed to have been confirmed. The Tokinomiya Hospital didn't seem like a group that needed to kidnap children to earn money.

To have a "Cursing Name" group, who were more abhorred by their own allies than by their enemies, out for revenge against him really highlighted just how unique a person this Emperor of Crystal must be. If the Tokinomiya Hospital was after him, then there was no way he stood a chance—rest in peace.

"That's not the case. The father wouldn't pay the ransom. He just ignored the ransom."

"Oh…"

So he was not only horrible, he was also trash.

For this father, apparently two of his children being in trouble was nothing to cry over.

"Mhm, because he was undefeated for life. He wouldn't give in to a cowardly ransom."

"That sounds cool, but in reality…"

Being undefeated for life was cool, but if you were also horrible trash, then it didn't have much meaning.

"Also, it's worth mentioning that the reaper brother and assassin sister ran away from home to run away from their father, so in a situation like that, it's not likely that the father would be relied on anyway. The sins of the father shall be visited upon the children. I guess you could say it's their loss for being kidnapped!"

What a cruel worldview.

It made me think that my own world must've been comfortably lukewarm by comparison.

"Okay, so the little sister was abducted, the older brother had no means to pay the ransom, and he wouldn't go to his father for help. That sounds like there's no solution to this problem. But from what you've told me,

Houko-chan was safely freed from her captors—if you hadn't told me that already, I wouldn't have been able to tolerate listening to the rest of the story—so how did her older brother manage to scrape together 50 million yen?"

"Oh, that part's no big deal. Among the residents of the Antique Apartment are a wealthy young woman and a kind young man.[108] They can prepare 50 million or 500 billion yen without any trouble!"

That sounded pretty comfortable too.

50 million yen was nothing to them?

"Mhm. For the blue-haired onee-san, a 10000-yen note is the lowest-value currency that she handles."

"Is there anybody normal in that worldview of yours?"

I was starting to look forward to hanging out with a group of three female college students.

In any case, I had to admit that in my own worldview, all of the residents of an apartment building wouldn't go out looking for a lost thirteen-year-old girl, pay out a massive sum of money to pay her ransom, or have any degree of cooperative relationship among themselves.

I wasn't jealous of it, but I certainly wouldn't mock it.

"So, instead of relying on his undefeated-for-life father, the older brother was able to get the money from someone else, he paid the ransom to the Tokinomiya Hospital, then the assassin Houko-chan was safely returned to the Antique Apartment, and everyone lived happily ever after?"

"As far as summaries go, you're completely right, but it doesn't make any sense. The 50 million yen was placed into the attaché case as the ransom letter said, and then the brother and the apartment residents dropped it off."

"Mhm, mhm."

"And the place that was designated for the drop-off is here, the Kita-Shirahebi Shrine."

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[108] This is referring to Kunagisa Tomo and Ii, the main protagonists of *Zaregoto*. Tomo is the heiress of the Kunagisa family, an extremely rich and powerful political organization.

"What kind of deal are you guys doing in someone else's town, huh?!"

With that detail added, it now made sense why Rizumu-chan was here at the shrine. She was searching the scene of the crime for evidence. Was there anything more defining of a great detective than searching every inch of a crime scene for the critical piece of evidence?

I hadn't looked at it that way before, but now that she mentioned it, it kinda made sense for illegal transactions to take place at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine nowadays.

No matter how they tried to rebuild or revitalize the shrine, people rarely visited, and the air pocket hadn't changed.

"The abductors told them to leave the attaché case on top of the offering box. If they did so, Houko-chan would be released."

"That's quite the offering."

"And the reaper older brother did exactly as he was told."

"He must have a real soft spot for his sister. If it were me, I would have taken a more severe approach to the trade. Even if it meant harm to the sister, I would have wanted to have some justice for what they had done, and I think the sister would want that too."

I babbled responses without much thought while I glanced over at the offering box.

Just the other day, my two younger sisters (and my junior) were stuffed into that box like sardines into a can, so I had to admit that the whole scenario felt rather real to me…

"Of course a reaper wouldn't just take this lying down. In fact, he handled it all quite easily—due to being a reaper. He put the case where they directed, and then he and the others who came to help him hid around the shrine to wait for the abductors to show up."

"Don't bring a swarm of your buddies to our town!"

And she wanted to complain about me ruining the "specialness" of her coming here?

The barriers between worlds aren't meant to be crossed en masse, I mentally retorted.

Anyway, the degree of teamwork demonstrated by the apartment residents was admirable, but more importantly, when it comes to an abduction case, the most difficult aspect for the perpetrator is that they must, at some point, come into contact with the victim's side in order to collect their payment… Which meant that designating Kita-Shirahebi Shrine as the drop location was bad enough, but to instruct them to leave the money on top of the offering box was incomprehensible.

They chose a location that was almost entirely deserted, but then chose the most frequented and conspicuous location in the shrine to be the drop point. Maybe it was silly to expect common sense and consistency from one of the "Cursing Name" groups, but the situation simply didn't make sense.

It was like begging for someone to stick around and catch them when they came to collect.

"I don't know about wanting to be caught, but I do think they wanted them to stick around and watch. To see the performance."

"Performance?"

"The magic trick."

Magic tricks? Illusions?

Rizumu-chan continued.

"To skip to the end, the perpetrators never showed up for the appointed time. They didn't show up and release Houko-chan, and of course they also didn't take the money."

"Hm… That doesn't really fit with what you told me, does it?"

"You'll see. After getting impatient, a cool resident of the apartments with a rich friend ran over to the case and opened it up."

Despite being described as cool, he definitely sounded more hot-blooded than anything.

However, I didn't think that a person would go move the attaché case just because they got impatient, so maybe they intuitively sensed that something wasn't right—that maybe someone had somehow gotten past all of their watching eyes and taken the money from the case without being detected.

It turned out that the intuitive sense was correct—well, half correct.

The other half was completely unexpected and worthy of being called a magic trick.

Upon opening the attaché case, the 50 million yen that should have filled it was gone—and in its place was a thirteen-year-old girl in a peaceful sleep.

Stuffed in like a sardine.

004

If I remembered correctly, they called them switch tricks.

Whoever had done it had clearly gone for a literal interpretation of the phrase, "exchange the hostage for the money", and while they hadn't quite had an entire crowd of people as an audience, they did have multiple people actively watching the area at all times, so to perform the swap in the manner that they did was a truly spectacular magic trick.

"But couldn't they have done that thing? Y'know, being the Tokinomiya Hospital and all. Couldn't they have just used their hypnosis skill or whatever on everyone watching the case, then done whatever they wanted?"

"Onii-san, you sure know a lot about the Tokinomiya Hospital, huh."

"I'm a pro, after all."

That was a lie. I wasn't anything close to a pro.

I'd only heard about them from Mutou, so I didn't really understand—in fact, it's probably better to not understand them.

"Well, I'm afraid that the pro is wrong. Not even the Tokinomiya Hospital can hypnotize all of the people that were keeping watch—mind

manipulation abilities are not something that can be used on a random number of people at once."

Hmm.

So the skill wasn't as powerful as an outsider like myself would assume. In that case, perhaps it was best to assume they used a completely different trick to make the swap?

In any case, once the 50 million yen was stolen from the case, even if Houko-chan was returned safely, it would be marked as a victory for the abductor. Wait, no, if the objective for the Tokinomiya Hospital was to make the "undefeated-for-life taste defeat", then the whole abduction plot had no winner at all.

In which case, since Houko-chan was safely returned, the residents of the Antique Apartment might be the ones closest to being called winners.

"Yep, after all, 50 million yen is chump change!"

"I can't agree with that statement, but if the money was a paltry sum to the person from whom it was stolen, then I don't suppose they would care if it was taken."

Those who laughed at 50 million yen would cry at 50 million yen.[109]

… And I couldn't think of anyone who wouldn't laugh about 50 million yen, and I was certain that anyone would cry over it.

"For the Tokinomiya Hospital side, they must have also known that they needed to return Houko-chan or else they might face a terrifying comeuppance. They're a group that can do those kinds of potential loss calculations."

"Unlike the Zerozaki Clan."

"Yes, unlike the Zerozaki Clan. … But just because Houko-chan had been returned safely didn't mean it was time to celebrate. They couldn't just leave the case and return home to the apartment and resume their lives.

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[109] Based on the saying 一円を笑うものは一円に泣く (*ichi-en wo warau mono ha ichi-en ni naku*, "those who laugh at one yen cry at one yen"), meaning that someone who mocks a penny for being a worthless sum of money will cry at losing their last penny.

Even if the residents of the Antique Apartment lacked the skills to hunt down the abductors, it was still unsettling to not know what had happened—if they could at least know what occurred, they could be satisfied."

Which is how Rizumu-chan came to be on the case.

"Yep!" Rizumu-chan firmly agreed.

So what remained was more of a mystery than a question, and when it came to a mystery, you couldn't ask for better than a great detective. I didn't know what connected the residents of the Antique Apartment to the Niounomiya Troupe (it seemed like it was an unclear thing even in their worldview), but that explained how it was that Rizumu-chan came to be here at the Kita-Shirahebi Shrine after everything had already happened.

It also told me what I needed to do.

I had to solve the switch trick.

"Alright, well, I'll take this home with me and think it over, then I'll consult with the higher-ups, and once we've reached a conclusion, we'll have the solution delivered to you by mail. It's been a pleasure working with you."

"Stop trying to streamline it! Don't go home! Solve it here!"

I tried to polish my bureaucratic tone, but she still complained about it.

So she wanted me to solve it here… Even though I'm neither a fast detective, nor a great detective.

"If you think about it in normal terms, then someone slipped in without being spotted by the watchers and quietly swapped out the cases."

If they had opened the case, removed the money, and then placed the sleeping girl inside, it would have taken too much time. It didn't seem possible for them to have used such a drawn-out method, which meant they would have most likely swapped the cases in one quick motion.

The difficulty would decrease if they switched cases. But even then…

"It just doesn't seem likely that someone could have escaped the notice of every person who was there."

"Yeah. I guess, for reference, how many people were there to keep watch?"

"Including the residents of the apartment building, about twenty people!"

"That's a popular thirteen-year-old."

If you mobilized a group of all of my acquaintances, you wouldn't manage to assemble that many people. If I were kidnapped, I probably couldn't count on very many people coming to help me—but even if there had only been a few people keeping watch, the Tokinomiya Hospital wouldn't have a means of knowing exactly how many, and so avoiding the notice of "everyone" would be difficult.

After all, the watchers were hidden.

Even if they could evade notice, there wasn't a reason for them to do so.

They didn't have to use a switch trick. If they retrieved the contents of the case, then they could have returned Houko-chan at another time; there was no need to take the money and return the girl at the same time.

Or was there?

But looking at the fact that they gave them an attaché case in which to place the money… There was an implication that the perpetrator would find it convenient for the ransom money to be placed inside of the case, and that gave weight to the "secretly swapped the cases" hypothesis. It was hard to get away from that idea.

In which case… No, something was strange.

It was odd.

If they wanted to swap the cases more easily, then why would they specify that the case be left on top of the offertory box? They could have chosen a place like under the floorboards of the shrine building or at the base of a nearby tree. If the perpetrator was able to specify the drop point, then why did they need to go out of their way to pick a location that would make the task more difficult?

Need…

If this really was a magic trick, then there was a purpose in choosing a location that made the watchers think, "It will be impossible for them to swap the cases without us noticing". It was like Rizumu-chan said, "a performance". But the only place where it was actually "impossible for them to swap" was on top of the offering box.

It would be a mistake to assume that it had been impossible at all times.

"That's it. What if they had swapped the cases at some earlier point? If the cases were swapped at some point during the travel from the Antique Apartment to the Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, then the case placed on the box would have contained a thirteen-year-old girl from the start…"

But even as I said it, I realized the flaw in that explanation. 50 million yen and a thirteen-year-old girl have entirely different weights. As soon as the swap happened, anyone picking up the case would have noticed that something had changed. Unfortunately, I am a peasant, so I could not say that I had experience with the weight of 50 million yen, but I had read in a manga that 100 million yen weighs about 10 kilograms or something. Thirteen-year-old girls were my specialty, so I felt fairly confident in saying they tend to weigh more than 10 kilograms.

However, it was possible that I had been premature in retracting my theory.

"I had thought about that too. But the attaché case is so tough it's like a portable safe, so with the weight of the case, it's possible that the weight of 50 million yen versus the weight of a young girl might not be all that noticeable after all!"

"The case was that heavy?"

"If it was normal duralumin, it would be easily broken in a worldview like ours!"

Huh. That explanation may have held water.

So it sounded like I would be better off not thinking of this attaché case as an attaché case at all. I needed to update my hypothesis. So they were essentially carrying around a safe, and carrying a safe all the way up a mountain to the shrine sounded like a truly agonizing task.

"Mhm. They needed several people just to carry it!"

"If it's that big and heavy, then swapping the case sounds even more impossible… No, wait. Even if there wasn't an opening on the surface, there could have been some kind of contraption, right? After all, the perpetrators are the ones who prepared the case."

"What kind of contraption?"

"Like…"

I wasn't so confident in my ability as to think that I could come up with a hypothesis on the spot, but something did pop into my mind. What about a false bottom? In other words, Houko-chan was there inside of the case from the start… If they did that, then at the very least they would save themselves the task of having to bring her to the shrine and place her in the case.

If the safe was that heavy, then even if it contained the 50 million yen and the thirteen-year-old at the same time, it was unlikely that anyone aside from myself or Oshino would be able to feel the difference in weight.

… The issue that remained was: what was the point of such a contraption?

If we were talking about it as a magic trick, then a contraption of that kind was a classic, but since this was a child abduction… What was the purpose of it? Unless they just wanted to have fun?

Was it something to do with the Antique Apartment's residents? Or was the ultimate goal of the trick to surprise that "undefeated-for-life" guy? If that's what they wanted there was no need to worry about the risk… But honestly, that substitution felt weak as a show.

Instead of calling that trick and false bottom a surprise, they'd just be reasonable.

Keeping the effort minimal, making it look effortless—the 50 million yen was properly plundered after all, it's not like the Tokinomiya Hospital was getting into show business or anything.

Even if a false bottom was the method employed to get Houko-chan into the case, that still didn't explain how they had managed to remove the 50 million yen from the case without being seen. So they weren't seen, but

they somehow removed five heavy bricks of bound paper bills? Even if it wasn't that much weight, in terms of size, it was… Size?

Size… Yes. That's it.

A thirteen-year-old girl and 50 million yen had different weights, yes, but they also had different sizes. A thirteen-year-old girl wasn't going to weigh less than 50 million yen, and she was also not going to occupy less space.

It was a rough approximation, but supposing that the 50 million yen took up a third of the space of the girl, then if you placed 50 million yen into a case with a false bottom containing said girl, then… Wouldn't that obviously be too small a sum of money?

I wasn't talking about if it was too much or too little money to exchange for a human life—no, that's not even remotely what I meant. I was referring to the size of the case provided in relation to the amount of money demanded. The case was simply too big.

A large case could hold the same amount that fit in a small case, so if you had to choose, it was better to go too large instead of too small, but… In a case so ridiculously oversized as that one must have been, the money would have been bounced and bumped around the entire time it was in transit. Would they purposefully choose to use a case that would result in crumpled and damaged currency?

But then… If they had held to the format of normal kidnapper demands, they would have insisted on used, non-sequential bills, so a bit of extra crumpling wouldn't make that much of a difference.

"Ah."

No.

No no no no no.

It didn't matter what condition the money arrived in, but the same could not be said of Houko-chan, who was hidden at the bottom of the case. If the trick were to swap the money with a mannequin, then sure, the false bottom would work, but we're talking about a living human being.

A thirteen-year-old girl.

Stuffed into a metal case and then hauled up a mountain by a group of men… There was no way that she'd come out of that case "unharmed". She would have been bounced and tossed about inside the case the whole way up.

Blunt trauma, scrapes, and bruises—there's no way that she'd have been able to avoid being physically harmed, and if nothing else, when she was discovered inside of the case, it was impossible that she could be in a "peaceful sleep" after being transported in that fashion. It was guaranteed that she'd have woken up.

Which meant that it was unrealistic for them to have used a false bottom as the trick.

It might be best to assume that the switch must have happened here at the shrine—so I looked over at the offering box again. This time I didn't simply glance at it, I looked at it intently.

Did it come down to the Tokinomiya Hospital using their patented mind manipulation powers after all? I had been told that they couldn't manipulate the minds of multiple people at one time, but that didn't mean that it was impossible.

Even if they couldn't manipulate them all in an instant, if they simply took their time and went one by one… One…?

"…"

Or not. That's it, they only needed one.

In this scenario, they only needed one person—and with that, they could solve every problem.

The problem, the question, and the mystery were all resolved.

The case was solved.

There was a way to safely transport her inside an oversized case without her being harmed.

And the solution was the ultimate in simplicity while also serving a second purpose.

It was more fueled by necessity than a desire to surprise anyone.

"Rizumu-chan!"

I turned back to Rizumu-chan to have her confirm or deny my hypothesis, but someone else was standing in her place.

The mantle that she had worn was gone.

Standing with his arms bound by a straitjacket was her "older brother".

His face was similar to that of his sister but also distinctly different in a way that couldn't be explained away by simply his lack of glasses. Where Rizumu-chan had been naive and innocent, the person who had taken her place had a wicked, vicious smile on his face—he was the hitman "Niounomiya Izumu-kun".

"Gyahaha!" Izumu-kun laughed. "If I've come out, then that means that you've solved the mystery, onii-san? Which means it's time to stop playing detective—from now on, it's time for the slaughter, yes?"

"…"

"Slaughter time lasts for one hour of every day. So, tell me, onii-san, who is it that I should be killing?"

005

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

In a way, my plan to get Rizumu-chan to leave by solving the mystery was a great success, but what I had not counted on was the appearance of her hitman brother personality as soon as I solved the case. I couldn't simply ask him to leave so that I could confirm if my hypothesis was correct, but looking at it another way, Izumu-kun wouldn't have come out unless I was correct, which meant that I had indeed solved the mystery.

Now for the explanation.

I was a third-year high school student, which meant that I didn't possess a credit card. Without a credit card, it was more difficult to order things online, so for someone who did order a lot of packages, they may have reached the correct conclusion much more quickly than myself or Rizumu-chan. I had proposed the hypothesis of a false bottom in the attaché case, but then I discounted my own idea because it wasn't realistic to transport a human safely inside a metal case in that fashion. Well, it turned out that I had been wrong to reject that idea.

If the contents of the case were too tightly packed in, then any shock or bump would be transmitted directly into the contents. Alternatively, if the

case was too empty, the contents would bounce and jolt around inside, hitting the walls. The sweet spot was a happy medium between the two, with enough room for shifting inside but not too much.

It's often said that "the box's purpose is to protect the product, so damage to the cardboard box does not qualify you for an exchange", and much in the same way, the durability of the attaché case wasn't to protect itself but to protect what was inside of it.

Now there should have been some wiggle room, but in the transport of a living human being, they couldn't allow for any possible damage… So what did they do?

Now was the time for common sense.

All they had to do was fill the gaps with packing material.

That would reduce the shock and potential for damage.

That's what companies did when they shipped out packages, or if you purchased a single slice of cake from a store, they would place it in a box and fill the gaps with paper to reduce how much it could move within the box. That was the solution to the false bottom problem.

It also solved the problem of the vanished money.

If Houko-chan was inside the case from the start, then that solved half of the mystery, but what about the money? How was the money taken out of the case while twenty or so people watched? It was simple. The money wasn't taken.

From start to finish, the money was always there—it had simply changed form.

And I meant that literally. Every single 10000-yen bill that made up the 50 million yen had been **crumpled up into a ball** to become packing material; it had **remained** inside of the case.

The money hadn't been bounced around inside the case and damaged; rather, it had been **turned into packing material** to prevent damage.

It hadn't been a *question*, but a *cushion*.

When nobody showed up for the exchange and the one "cool guy" in the group got fed up and ran over to check the case, he found Houko-chan inside, but if he had really been a cool guy, he would have noticed that she

was tucked into the case like a body into a coffin surrounded by flowers, only in her case she was surrounded by crumpled-up paper currency. But he had overlooked the fact that the bed she was sleeping on was made of 5000 crumpled-up 10000-yen notes.

He was definitely too hot-headed. Unlike me.

But there was a blind spot.

It wasn't the same as Schrödinger's cat, but when anyone opened the box, they wouldn't pay any mind to the material used to fill the space around her—when you went to eat cake, you didn't look at the paper placed in the box.

The same applied to abducted thirteen-year-old girls.

Any doubts about the old bits of paper used to pad the case would be forgotten—they could have even been soiled with ink or something, but that probably wasn't necessary. Just by crumpling them up, most people wouldn't recognize the paper as currency.

According to Rizumu-chan, the residents of the apartment took Houko-chan and soon after left the mountain, leaving the case behind. So, of course, the paper packing material inside the case was also left.

Which meant that the abductors could simply wait for them all to depart and then leisurely go collect their money—they could even flatten and organize the bills with the time that they had.

Even if they couldn't achieve their goal of making the Emperor of Crystal taste defeat, they were still able to collect the ransom, so even if they failed as pro players, they had still succeeded as child abductors. But then… This abduction could only have succeeded if it was performed by pro players like the Tokinomiya Hospital, so maybe that still counts as a failure?

After all, the one who had crumpled up the money and created the packing material inside of the case was none other than Houko-chan, the victim, and the only one who was inside of the "closed room" of the case.

That's what I had realized about them only needing one person to be hypnotized.

They had used hypnotism not only to capture her but also to return her.

From what I had learned, hypnotism could not be used to go against the sense of morality that was embedded deep inside a person's unconscious mind, which meant that hypnotism could not be used to make a person commit a crime or do something entirely out of character, but if the command was "create padding to protect yourself", then the command aligned with the wishes of the person and it would easily take effect. Adding on a command to go to sleep once done would just be a small bonus.

The trick ended up being something like if Schrödinger's cat had committed suicide inside the box. But what they had done proved to be disgustingly sufficient for fulfilling the necessity of the appearance of a magic trick, a switch trick, and the necessity of getting the girl back alive and unharmed.

If the abduction victim, Houko-chan, had not been returned "alive" and "unharmed", then the perpetrators would not have been able to collect their 50 million yen. That was the one bit of good fortune on the side of the Antique Apartment residents.

The safe return of the thirteen-year-old girl was ultimately the most important thing—even if it meant losing 50 million yen.

"No, it's not lost. This cute boy has been tasked with getting it back. The ace of the Niounomiya Troupe, member number 18, byproduct of the 13th round of experimentation, Niounomiya Izumu. Gyahahaha!"

And with that laugh, Izumu-kun leapt away from the Kita-Shirahebi Shrine. Even with both of his arms sealed within the straitjacket, he was able to jump as if he were using Ononoki Yotsugi-chan's "Unlimited Rulebook", to fly away with incredible power.

When Rizumu-chan suddenly disappeared and was replaced with Izumu-kun, coupled with the location, it felt as if a viper had suddenly slithered out of the grass at my feet, but fortunately for me, the "brother" also departed as soon as he heard the report from his "sister".

What had been fortunate for me would no doubt be the greatest misfortune for the abductors.

Feeling deeply grateful that I had not been caught up in a battle between the first of the "Killing Names", the Niounomiya Troupe, and the first of

the “Cursing Names”, the Tokinomiya Hospital, I remained alone at the shrine and stood before the offering box.

I acted out of routine and took out my wallet to retrieve not a 5000-yen bill, but instead a 5-yen coin, and I went to throw it into the offering box—but then I paused. Standing in a shrine that had no god, I was about to bow, clap twice, bow again, and then pray for something that was in direct contrast to the meaning of the 5-yen coin.

In other words, I was asking to not have any ties to it.

Although the party was in full swing, the time to end the cycle of fun and enjoyable inter-world interaction was drawing near.

MAZEMONOGATARI

Rizumu Rock 'n' — Chapter Eat

Emperor of Crystal: Tigoris Translates
Carnival & Man Eater: Bluex & Noyaxus
Stuffed into a briefcase: Maxdefolsch

MAZEMONOGATARI

NISIOISIN

Mikoko Community

Chapter Uni

Emoto Tomoe
Atemiya Muimi
Aoii Mikoko

Zaregoto Series

Art: Take

001

Aoii Mikoko is a tomboyish college student, Emoto Tomoe is an ephemeral college student, and Atemiya Muimi is a former delinquent; now a college student—with that said and done, if I were to proceed with the same formula diligently maintained for over a decade, I would now start detailing how these girls possess queer and bizarre personalities and put in perspective how abnormal they actually are—however, exceptionally, I haven't been provided with any more particulars about them this time around, sadly.

They are neither forgetful detectives nor Humanity's Strongest Contractors, neither magical girls from Shikoku nor newbies from the Pretty Boy Detective Club, neither infirmary shut-ins nor magical girls from Kyuushu, neither princesses of the double negative nor demonic killers on the run, neither military-trained high school girls nor triplet maids, neither great detectives with a double personality nor hitmen with a double personality.

They are normal college students.

Commonplace college students.

Mundane college students.

Nothing more than that—no.

Nothing is slightly off. That word is a good fit to describe their friend whom they call "Ikkun," but I must choose a different term that would apply to these three close friends—to begin with, it's an extreme rarity to be *nothing*; that goes for living people, dead people, and even immortal vampires.

Being normal, commonplace, and mundane is of extreme rarity.

My meeting with these girls happened in an ordinary and exceedingly common fashion: In line with them being modern college students—or perhaps followers of ancient traditions—it happened at a mixer.

No aberration was involved whatsoever.

And they probably won't be revealed to be aberrations themselves.

Let me tell you from the beginning.

Right, that was a short while after my test studies had paid off due to me galvanizing myself—or turning myself into a test demon (to an extent I wouldn't have thought possible back in spring break)—midway through the year, winning me a spot into Manase National University's Science Department Math Section, where I became a brand new university freshman.

Well, I *passed*, but through a wait list. That's a thing, apparently.

Those of you who've studied diligently might not know about that system (and I didn't know either despite not studying diligently), but in short, someone vacated their spot and I took it. It's like saying "Your efforts didn't pay off, but they did," which leaves a bad aftertaste and makes for half-assed closure, but passing is passing.

Let me sincerely—even if just in appearance—be glad about it.

Let me say "It's not like I wanted to be accepted or anything, okay?!"

Well, I wanted to.

By the way, I wasn't the only student from Naoetsu High, my former alma mater, to be accepted into my new one, Manase University's Science Department's Math Section—Senjougahara Hitagi was, too. However, she wasn't on a wait list—far from that—she was accepted on recommendation. So don't lump her with me. And since she also worked

as my tutor for over half a year to stop me from failing classes, you could say she got accepted twice by herself.

She's really amazing.

Soon I won't be able to stop bowing to her.

And in addition to her—though she wasn't technically a student of Naoetsu High when she took the test, and there is no way for those of you who have only seen the movie to know about that character—the girl with a tendency to snap who was previously enrolled in the same high school as us, Oikura Sodachi, was accepted into the same section of the same university.

"Reunions" with Oikura are, to me, surprise events that occur on a regular basis, so although I wasn't that surprised, well, saying it didn't make me happy would make me a liar—or a scam artist.

And whatever the situation, I don't want to be a scam artist.

So, with all that, Senjougahara, Oikura, and I peacefully and merrily engaged in our glittering university life on the campus that became our new world—hold on.

Hold on—said Senjougahara to me.

"This won't do at all. I can't see any changes compared to our high school days right now. I can't see any growth. This isn't a fresh start. We were meant to reform, but we ended up reverting to our old selves. What is the point in only hanging out with old acquaintances? Why are we shutting ourselves in our comfortable, narrow world? Didn't we get rid of our old selves altogether? Didn't we change in character down to the bone?"

She had a point.

Although I had become a university student, I actually had fewer friends.

Way, way fewer.

I hadn't met anyone new—to begin with, setting aside the studies aspect (and the aspect of immortality), neither of us had ever been much good at communicating, but now that we were free from the compulsory educational system, that became even more apparent.

So that's how it was.

The three of us hung together more so by convenience than because it was fun.

However, obviously, that wasn't a good thing. University is where one is meant to prepare for partaking in society, but we were clearly headed in a bad direction.

We had to get off those rails.

Therefore, I went to my other tutor and second mother, whom I've recently been calling "mom," Hanekawa Tsubasa, and begged her while bawling my eyes out. After graduating from high school, she set off on a journey overseas (I won't give any more details. In short, rather than going out into society, she wanted to go out into the world as soon as possible), but at least she was somewhere with some signal at the time.

"You leave me no choice. I'll arrange a stage where you can mingle."

"Mingle?"

"A way to not be single,[110] basically. Let me see… it might as well be with people from another university, don't you think so?"

That is how I came to meet Mikoko Aoii, Emoto Tomoe, and Atemiya Muimi—in a normal way.

[110] Tsubasa used the word 交流 (*kooryuu*, "mingle"), but it can also mean "alternative current", so after Koyomi asks back, she replies by saying it's the inverse of 直流 (*chokuryuu*, "direct current").

002

"What even is 'normal'? Average? Is 'unusually normal' 'normal'? Or isn't it rather 'unusual'? If you go read outstanding people's biographies, you'll find out they're actually quite the laymen, but isn't that more 'abnormal' than 'normal'? If there's a majority of weird people, will they become 'normal'? Are we talking numbers?"

The girl nitpicking at me was Atemiya.

When I saw her come to the mixer in a flashy, pink jersey, I wondered whether she was actually a *former* delinquent… My high school didn't have any delinquents (at best you had Hanekawa calling me one when I was an academic failure), so her lethargic attitude was most fresh to me.

It made my heart pound—in many ways.

"I don't think numbers are really the deciding factor here. Earth is a very 'special' planet, with its water and living creatures, but to us, its inhabitants, that's natural—the 'norm', right?"

The one who calmly pacified Atemiya was Emoto.

She had her hair tied up on both sides and was wearing a dress with a strawberry pattern. The contrast with Atemiya made her look like a polite

middle schooler—however, as you can notice from how clearly she could express her opinion, she wasn't simply a docile girl.

"Ahaha! Right, yeah, 'normal' can only exist because of 'special' things, that's so true! Also, if being 'special' was 'normal,' I might hate being that kind of 'normal'! It's like, 'An immortal vampire, except with suicidal tendencies'!"

And the one who stirred up the debate with a strange simile that might or might not fit was Aoii.

Among all the girls I've met in my life, she was by far the most coquettish. The type of people I had never crossed paths with, two lines fated to never meet. She wore hot pants that revealed almost up to the crotch with pockets sticking out from behind it, and a thin camisole; it was as though she had taken on a challenge to show as much skin as possible. Even her bright bob haircut she had curled came off as rare in my eyes (there were not only no delinquents in Naoetsu High, but nobody even dyed their hair brown).

An immortal vampire, except with suicidal tendencies, huh.

I guess that's a pretty good fit.

"I see. That distinct sense of irony; I'm noticing someone here is majoring in Cocteau."

"Eh? I'm not, though…?"

I tempted fate with that remark, but unexpectedly bewildered the bright college girl—anyway, that was during the after-party.

We had moved to a karaoke room (a very normal thing to do).

There were no rooms large enough to fit everyone available, so we split into two groups. We were on the verge of forming the team Araragi Koyomi + Senjougahara Hitagi + Oikura Sodachi, but managed to barely avoid that situation thanks to Aoii's cheerful interjection.

"No, we should mix! We have to split the members! We have to be dismembered! I received strict orders from Hanekawa-san! It's like, 'A standing ovation, except I simply stood up because I couldn't see after the person in front stood up'!"

"Oh hoh. Not in a million years would I have expected to come across one of Dostoevsky's pupils today."

"I'm not…"

Like so, we split into groups decided randomly.

Mathematically speaking, no matter how random we might try to be, the results will always end up non-random (I learned it at school the other day), so our teams were ultimately unbalanced.

As previously noted, Aoii Mikoko, Atemiya Muimi, Emoto Tomoe, and Araragi Koyomi were gathered in room 301. While Senjougahara Hitagi, Oikura Sodachi, Usami Akiharu were in the neighboring room 302. … Wait, that room had one more, some guy from their university who barely talked, even during the main party. He was so gloomy that even I had concerns about him; what was his name again? I think the others called him "Ikkun"… Anyway, room 302 had a nice balance, which naturally made room 301 unbalanced and an away game.

My whole life has always been an away game.

I'm Awaygi-san (sorry, I flubbed it).

Regardless of how it came to be, Senjougahara Hitagi and Oikura Sodachi, who had past experiences with being the center of communities, seemed to be making the most out of the situation. I, on the other hand, still wasn't comfortable.

I only wanna hang out with people I know…

Don't leave me behind!

So that's why I was trying to survive through this after-party by putting on a mysterious act. For the moment, however, I couldn't really call it a success.

I couldn't advertise how cultured I was.

Shoot. So you're telling me a weirdo on my level wasn't mysterious or rare at all for these college girls who'd established a normal community for themselves…? Rather, it backfired by triggering this incantation-like interrogation of "What's normal?".

Hanekawa really outdid herself by introducing this outrageous group to us.

My studying regime was over, but maybe that wasn't the case for my life make-over regime—all in all, that mother of mine was a harsh instructor.

"Immortality also doesn't really make sense to me," Atemiya picked up on Aoii's remark.

These three had been jumping from one topic to another the whole time—I felt like I was watching a smooth-running telephone game taking place.

"Isn't 'not dying' synonymous with 'not changing'? Wouldn't that be super boring? Still-alive coelacanths aren't even living fossils at this point, they're basically monsters."

"Right. They also say you truly realize you're alive when you're near death," Emoto added, coming off as awfully genuine.

It felt as if she, herself, had been on the verge of death before, but instead of accepting it as *hell* like I'd done, she had accepted it as being *normal*.

"Still, I wouldn't want to die. Dying to feel like you're alive, huh… that's kinda conflicting. If only we could feel alive by simply being alive. Do we *need* that relativity to exist? It's like, 'Cat lover or dog lover? Except it's cat lover lover or dog lover lover?'!"

"Ah hah. Bringing out Saitou Ryokuu now, I see."

"Who?"

How does she not know?

Despite failing at creating a mysterious atmosphere and instead desperately grasping onto any punch lines in my sight, these three still let me partake in the conversation. At least it confirmed they were all good-natured.

"Living means changing, doesn't it, Araragi-kun?"

Atemiya asked me, seemingly trying to revive the debate—talking into the mic.

Her lecture echoed in the whole room.

While in the meantime I could hear Oikura singing from the neighboring room with a level of wondrous mirth she would never exhibit

before me… Shit, I would tease her afterwards. I would shower her with praise about her siren-like voice.

"You can't exactly stay the same forever, can you? What you think is 'normal' won't continue to be 'normal' forever. Some time ago, not possessing a mobile phone seemed like a respectable stance that was even a bit cool, but now you'd be seen as a hard-headed, annoying person. It's the same principle."

So even the same actions can hold different meanings.

When someone says "He sure has changed," it's actually possible that only that person's surroundings changed. There are cases where not changing and having changed relatively to others produce the same effect.

I have seen cases of it.

Identical behaviors on different targets produce differing results.

Plus, even if one doesn't do anything, they become older.

Even an immortal and perpetually young vampire isn't an exception to that rule.

Rather, they are perfect examples of it.

For that Aberration Slayer, continuously being that iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire in itself must have demanded an intolerable amount of passing changes.

Enough for these passing changes—to spiral into passing away.

"Right. Then, Mikoko-chan. How about you tell Araragi-kun about that *episode*?"

Suddenly.

Emoto prompted Aoii, making her tilt her head. "That episode? You mean when you ended up naked the other day, Tomo-chan?"

"Why would I want that? You really think I would ask you to tell him about the time I ended up naked?"

"I'm joking, I'm joking. You meant that time I ended up naked the other day, right?!"

"Why would I want that? You really think I would ask you to tell him about the time a friend of mine ended up naked?"

"Then about the time Muimi-chan…"

"I wasn't naked. I haven't even disclosed the whole story."

These girls were classy even when reminiscing about a time they were naked.

It reminded me of Kanbaru—the monster of communication—my naked junior.

… Well no, she wasn't really my naked junior.

What could she be doing right now, I wondered.

I tried mentally escaping from the karaoke room by recalling the past, but the group of college girls didn't let me.

"Don't worry, don't worry. Your Mikoko-tan properly knows what you're talking about. It's *that*, right? The story with the sculpture."

"A sculpture?"

It's like—

"A sculpture, except it's a changing sculpture."

Aoii said, suggestively—or rather, mysteriously.

003

"At first, it was a rat's sculpture.

"That little creature that goes squeak. Squeak squeak. Do you know of it? You know of it, right?

"And as for why it was a rat, well, it was that year's zodiac animal.

"It took place at a temple, you see.

"You probably know about this already, but in Kyoto, where we live, there are lots of shrines and temples. Like, if you throw a stone, it will for sure end up hitting a shrine.

"Though you shouldn't throw stones at temples… Ahaha!

"They say you can touch the Buddha's face up to three times, so maybe he'll forgive me?

"Mm? You're knowledgeable about shrines, Araragi-kun? Kita-Shirahebi Shrine? Hmm. I didn't know shrines with no gods existed. Tell me more about it later, okay?! It's a promise!

"I know, Tomo-chan, I know.

"I'm not going on tangents, I swear. This is a serious story, after all.

"Araragi-kun's knowledge about *shrines* translates to one about *temples* in my case.

"Plus, snakes aren't exactly unrelated to my story.

"Ah, but like, even though I'm calling it 'my story,' I heard about this from Ikkun originally—Ikkun knows a lot of cool stories.

"If you may allow me to play the big sister, Araragi-kun, I too had a period when I was tormented with worries, just like you are now. Back when I had just become a freshman. I feared I wasn't doing enough. That I wasn't good enough.

"Then, although he didn't tell me I was, Ikkun instead told me about this temple's history—about the rat's sculpture.

"Once upon a time, long, long ago.

"A certain famous monk had completed a magnificent sculpture of that year's zodiac, the Rat, and quickly received praises from the whole nation—that rat was apparently so vivid, people thought it could start moving any moment.

"So vivid it could start moving any moment, huh.

"Hearing it now it sounds like a ghost story—mhm?

"What is it, Araragi-kun? You reacted to the word ghost story? Ahaha, you must be a scaredy-cat! So funny!

"But don't worry! I bet some people thought the same as us even at the time—and so, these people trapped the rat in a cage so it wouldn't escape!

"You could say that emphasizes how splendid that sculpture was, but you could also argue that trapping it in a cage ruins the art.

"You know the… Louvre Museum? I think it's called that?

"Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* is hung there. I saw it the other day on TV, it was inside a thick glass case. Apparently it got stolen a few times, so it's kinda the natural result, but I doubt Da Vinci-san wanted people to look at his painting from beyond a glass pane—I thought at the time.

"Or didn't, maybe.

"I don't know what the famous monk who'd carved the sculpture thought about it, but when he saw his work displayed inside a cage, he apparently said this:

"'It is futile.'

"'You may imprison it, but you will never be able to restrain the soul I imbued it with.'

"'This sculpture has already left my hands.'

"'This rat is already free of my priest-on.'[111]

"… Yeah, sorry. I came up with 'priest-on' myself. Ikkun didn't say it, nor did the monk.

"By the way, having heard this much, you probably predicted my story's punch line to be that the next day they found the cage empty and that the rat had escaped somewhere, it had disappeared—or something along these lines.

"Well, that's a damn good prediction!

"That's indeed what happened ultimately, but the course it took to 'disappear' was quite unexpected.

"Rather than unexpected, way too surprising.

"A change—yes.

"Bizarrely enough, it's like you were saying earlier, Araragi-kun; even when they don't do anything, people age. Just like how high schoolers will one day become college students.

"After a year, the zodiac changes.

"The next day—well no, the next year.

"**The rat's sculpture inside the cage—had turned into an ox's.**"

[111] The sentence here is この鼠はもう、節操がない (lit. "this rat no longer has any integrity"), with the word 節操 (*sessou*, "integrity") being pronounced the same way as 拙僧 (*sessou*), which is the humble way in which the monk is referring to himself, meaning the sentence can be interpreted both as "this rat is free to change" and "this rat no longer has me".

004

Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, and Boar.

These are the zodiac animals.

Indeed, a new year brings a new zodiac animal—inevitably.

"I'm kinda feeling snakey, so shall we go with the Snake again next year?" It doesn't work like that—after the Snake, no matter what happens, it will be the turn of the Horse.

"Yeah. It became a snake and a horse too. With every year that passed, the sculpture inside the cage changed and took an infinity of shapes!"

"Come on, an infinity is way too many," Atemiya retorted.

This must be a recurring story they were forced to hear about all the time. She was already lethargic to begin with, but now she didn't hide how bored she was.

"Right. It only happened twelve times, after all."

On the other hand, Emoto seemed to be having fun just by seeing Mikoko having fun; she was smiling—how can I put it… this trio was well-balanced.

The complete opposite of the Araragi Koyomi-Senjougahara Hitagi-Oikura Sodachi trio, which was built on unbalanced foundations.

"True! But technically it wasn't twelve times either—it would be eleven times. Because it never looped around. On the twelfth New Year, the Boar didn't transform—it disappeared into thin air and was gone!"

"Disappeared—"

Right. She'd said it.

That the rat ultimately escaped from the cage.

An unrestrainable soul—even imprisoned, staying still in one place, or not even trying to move, even so, it couldn't keep itself from changing. Its *disappearance* might also reflect how death is inevitable.

Of course, as a tale enshrined in the cultural canon (albeit from a temple and not a shrine, as I'm used to)[112] it's more likely to be a myth than something that actually happened (it's even debatable whether that "certain famous monk" existed. It's kept too vague to tell), but it seemed full of life lessons.

Urban legends. Ghost rumors. Second-hand teachings.

Aberration tales—huh.

"Being able to change even while trapped inside a cage—I see it as a pretty positive message, personally. Rather, I can't believe that story comes from Ikkun," Atemiya shrugged.

"I like this story, it's nice and scary. Changing every year means that it doesn't have a fixed self, doesn't it? I feel like that can fuel hope as much as it can fuel despair."

"I totally get it! It's like how we come up with a different resolution every new year! It's like, 'My dream is to become a bride, except, within the year'!"

I couldn't see how what Mikoko had said matched in any way with Emoto's interpretation, but that's just how interpretations are, they differ

[112] The word for "myth" (神話, *shinwa*) shares its first kanji with the word for "(Shinto) shrine" (神社, *jinja*) while "(Buddhist) temple" is just 寺 (*tera*).

for everyone—well, and if I had to choose a camp, I would have been on Emoto's side.

It being restricted to the zodiac animals gives it a sense of unity, of a single chain of changes occuring over twelve years, however, abruptly transforming from a rat to an ox after the first year frames it as an aloof character.

How come it went giant from the get-go?

Talk about an abrupt process.

But continuing on that train of thought, the third year was the Tiger's.

From an ox to a tiger—from a herbivore to a carnivore.

Victims turn into assaillants; a ruthless arrangement—now that it had made the people looking from outside the cage feel society's transiency, it became a cute bunny in the fourth year.

What the heck?

Fur clothes are exploding in trendiness this year. Did people awake to their cuteness?

And the next year was the Dragon's.

It finally entered the realm of fiction in the fifth year.

When one of my little sisters—the bigger one—was in her first year of middle school, she started claiming to be the reincarnation of the demon lord (we, as a family, dedicated ourselves to rehabilitating her. Afterwards she started calling herself an "ally of justice." Now, whether that was an improvement or not…); this transformation reminds me of that excessive ego inflation.

For the metamorphosis into the Snake in the sixth year, you could interpret it as a wake-up call to abandon delusions and return to reality, however, then I wouldn't be able to explain the Horse in the seventh year—a horse?

Do people ever wish to become horses? What could push one to think that way? Would a rat wish that? No, I couldn't even be sure its first form was really a rat after this many transformations—at this point I pictured it more like a Nue.

Then it would really… be devoid of any integrity.

From a horse to a goat (awakened to fur yet again? Did the trend loop around before the zodiac could?). From a goat to a monkey (I shudder at the lack of common points). Then from a monkey to a dog, stopping by a rooster for some reason (dogs and monkeys are said to be on bad terms, so did the rooster come in to cushion their conflicts? And did it feel like returning to the mountain?). And from a dog to a boar (why did it go back to the mountain?).

After all this, interpreting the eventual escape from the cage as it having "escaped from itself" seemed like the most apt to me—changing haphazardly doesn't get you anywhere.

It's important to find what truly defines you.

… Still, this is yet again an excuse.

I—**we** thought from start to finish that there was something defining *what was unique to us* in our high school days and inspected that under every possible angle, but I don't think anyone managed to come up with a conclusion that wasn't "I am myself."

Hanekawa Tsubasa—a cat.

Senjougahara Hitagi—a crab.

Hachikuji Mayoi—a snail.

Kanbaru Suruga—a monkey.

Sengoku Nadeko—a snake.

And—a demon.

We were all kind of running away from ourselves, and the answer to the question "What are you fighting against?" has only ever been "Myself"—not your enemies, much less aberrations.

We didn't even have enemies.

And aberrations simply existed where they ought to exist.

Normally—most normally, exceedingly normally.

"Thinking about it, how was the order for the zodiac animals even decided? It's so random. Do you think they held a mixer?"

Aoii was still drifting away with her weird ideas.

As far as I could tell, she hadn't made much effort to gain anything from this story herself—and frankly, I felt like such a shallow perspective might be the best way to go about it.

There is no need to force yourself to change, and there is no need to force yourself not to change.

"Some people start 'searching for themselves' after entering university, but while some end up finding nothing, others might come across a miserable self. Like, 'What, am I that horrible of a person!?' You might get disappointed at your real self—isn't Ikkun a perfect example of that?"

"Not at all, Muimi-chan. Ikkun isn't like that in the slightest, gee. He's the one who told me this story to cheer me up, remember?"

And I don't think it cheers you up at all… It's definitely not clear what that gloomy guy wanted to convey, but at least I could see Aoii didn't get the message.

"'Feelings of wanting to change are suicidal.'"

Then.

Emoto said that.

No—these weren't Emoto's words.

"I remember him saying that. Ikkun that is."

"…"

This too—felt cryptic.

I had barely spoken with said "Ikkun" during the main party, but the more I heard about him, the gloomier my idea of him became.

"Isn't that maybe a roundabout way of saying that, even if one consciously tries to change themselves, they will not have changed at all?"

"But aren't there parts of yourself you can't change unless you consciously try to? Stuff hidden by habits."

"But still, when habits continue for too long their meaning can change! Like how a fun smartphone game can become a time-waster before you know it! And you don't want to leave it even so because staying there feels comfortable!"

"Doesn't it just mean that when something comfortable becomes uncomfortable you have a hard time parting with it?"

"Right. Even if you live in a nice house, you might end up surrounded by tall buildings and blocked from the sun, after all—a perfect community can go extinct in a single blow, so to handle any trouble, in the end, diversity is necessary."

"If you ought to change even when you're not dissatisfied, then should you want to change even more when you're dissatisfied? It's like, 'Freestyle 400 meters, except if it was truly free they would run on the poolside'!"

"If change is inevitable, it's natural to aim in a good direction. A good change might be nice, but a bad one is terrible. Going from a rat to an ox is good, but from a dragon to a snake feels… you know?"

Goodbye telephone game, now they were excluding me from the conversation.

They never passed me the ball.

Mhm… I knew it would end up like this.

I prayed the same situation wasn't unfolding in the neighboring room too… I was a bit worried about Oikura's chanting seeping through the wall never stopping. To begin with, those two sucked at communicating even more than me.

They were just experts at pretending to be on good terms.

And even that is merely ancient history—from when Senjougahara Hitagi was part of the Valhalla Duo and when Oikura Sodachi was Class 1-3's president—and although I'm not in a position to say this, these statuses were probably tough to maintain for both of them.

It must have been way easier on them *after* their friends left.

And I know from first-hand experience that this "ease" is the same as the one that comes from laziness. Being alone wasn't fun, but it wasn't painful either.

I don't need friends. They'd lower my intensity as a human.

Thinking back on it now that I was in university, that claim was indeed not correct—however, it wasn't completely wrong either.

Making friends raises **the intensity of your life**.

Life turns into hard mode—and it goes without saying that playing on hard mode is more fun.

Though that too is up to preference.

It was as though Senjougahara Hitagi and Oikura Sodachi, whose social skills had once relaxed—or even lapsed[113]—were on the verge of collapsing a second time, yet were still trying to stand back up on their feet—they were both amazing.

These two who had turned from dragons into snakes were trying to make their way back to being dragons.

Thinking back on it, as someone who knows about Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, I couldn't quite call dragons the higher form of snakes, but well, that also shows how changing isn't an end in itself.

Ultimately, nobody says "You've changed" with a positive connotation.

It's painful when someone throws a "Man, you've changed!" to your face, while on the other hand, "You haven't changed one bit" is generally meant in a good way…

"But even the value judgment to decide what is 'good' or 'bad' doesn't stay the same, does it? In elementary school people called me a 'lethargic kid,' but in middle school that changed to being 'well-mannered'—even though I hadn't changed at all."

"If only we could assert whether something is good or bad regardless of what anyone could say… Long ago I thought Mikoko-tan was a strange name, but recently I feel like it's actually pretty good, you know?"

People don't even need to stick to their beliefs to produce split opinions.

Well, that might ultimately be unrelated to changes—someone can be a best-selling author all they want, they'll always be hated by some… Even if one aims to be liked by all, that earned likeability alone can become a reason for others to criticize you.

All opinions are mixed, and both sides will talk out loud.

It's what Oshino Meme would call keeping a good balance.

If one isn't as thorough as him, they will fail at staying in the middle ground and will sooner or later side with one party—the problem is when that judgment switches sides all the time.

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[113] A pun between 楽さ (*rakusa*, "ease") and 落差 (*rakusa*, "drop").

All is constantly in movement—actually, here it should be: All goes through an endless cycle.

Twelve animals changing shape frequently might be hinting at the cycle of reincarnation, and not a lack of integrity—still, someone must have decided on them. Same for constellations.

Even if they are fabricated tales… I guess that's the point.

Changes cannot be avoided, so one ought to make efforts to change themselves—in that sense, this mingling was beneficial to me. I might have gotten the slightly shorter end of the stick, but the initial suggestion wasn't mistaken.

Even if humans' instinct is to preserve the status quo—a homeostasis reminiscent of an immortal vampire—they also tend to escape from reality and deny themselves. Otherwise we wouldn't have progressed that much, we would have gone extinct ages ago.

The problem is:

Not when one changed, but when they were made to change.

When someone didn't change intentionally but was forced to do so by others—sometimes into a rat, sometimes into an ox, sometimes into a tiger, sometimes into a rabbit.

Or a dragon, a snake, a horse, a goat, a monkey, a rooster, a dog, or a boar.

If one was made to change so much.

Whether that was in a good or a bad direction, whether that change was inevitable or unavoidable—wouldn't that run counter to one's "sense of self"?

It's not that their changes lacked integrity—they had no self.

Those changes weren't good for them—they were deemed good by others.

"Mm? Is something wrong, Araragi-kun?"

Noticing my long silence, Aoii asked me, a bit worried—and yet, I couldn't muster the courage to answer her.

I was the worried one.

Earlier I'd thought, "It's definitely not clear what that gloomy guy wanted to convey," but if he had told Aoii the story of the morphing sculpture when she was troubled about her lack of changes **with that intent**—then, that "Ikkun", then in the same room as my dear HitaSoda Duo, wasn't merely gloomy.

He was darkness.

In our worldview, I guess he would be close to Oshino Ougi?

Should I warn these three college girls—I wondered for an instant, but no more than an instant before choosing silence.

That would be, as mentioned above, change forced by outsiders.

I bet they accepted his existence with full knowledge of the "changes" he would bring to them—it was not within my duty to change that, nor was it within my power.

The only thing I could do was go home, unchanged. Muster my courage, cut this mingling short, and take my small community out of the neighboring room.

After all, by nature, this daydream-like mingling might not have even taken place, and I might not have met these girls.

005

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

If I were to follow the routine I've now maintained for over ten years, I would start detailing the aftermath of the case that took place, but again, this is an exception—I parted with the three girls normally, and never saw them again, like normal. To begin with, there wasn't even an incident to talk about. I was kind of aware already, but apparently I didn't give them a good impression—well, I was silent for most of the latter half of the party, what can I say?

The other pair seems to have done a better job than me at having fun, however, neither of them seems to have maintained contact with the other community after that.

Apparently they couldn't contact them or something.

I'm almost certain the cause lies in our insular community, but maybe something happened to them—or maybe not.

Still, not having a punch line or even an epilogue would feel too awkward—so I'll replace that void with my arbitrary analysis of the myth "Ikkun" told to his troubled friend.

Even if some things cannot be changed, they can be replaced. That's the point.

The first thing that comes to mind when hearing the sculpture changes into a new animal every new year is that someone was sneakily replacing the one present inside the cage. However, the cage's primary function was to prevent that from happening—in a way, this situation created a sort of locked room.

Moreover, replacing the sculpture introduces a problem of quality—if the new one isn't as excellent on the artistic front as the former, nobody would call that a "transformation."

Therefore, we can hypothesize that the new ones were from the same sculptor as the original. But it's natural to assume that "famous monk" wasn't behind the creation of the cage, so he obviously shouldn't have the key to open it.

So replacing it was impossible. The sculpture was literally blocked on all sides—but not quite.

Things aren't that simple in reality—they are even more simple.

It wasn't blocked in any way, that locked room was full of holes.

It was a *cage* after all.

They wanted to seal an animal's sculpture, so a cage seemed to be the perfect candidate for that, but cages for sculptures are meaningless—rather, it makes more sense to think of that cage as a theft-prevention security measure the temple set up because the sculpture was so remarkable.

For the same reason as the *Mona Lisa*'s glass case—however, the difference between a cage and a glass case is that the former has **gaps**.

The sculpture wouldn't fit through them—but a human's hand might.

What can you do if your hand can fit?

Replacing it is impossible. You cannot get the sculpture out.

But—isn't there **another process** you can carry out through the cage?

… Speaking as someone fooled by the trick, hearing at the very start that the "rat" had transformed into an "ox" gave me a weird preconception. I unconsciously started thinking "Huh, the sculpture got bigger."

I assumed the sculpture had "gone giant"—but we are merely talking about sculptures.

They don't have to be faithful to reality in size.

One could carve a rat's sculpture as big as a building without qualms, and following that logic, one could carve a minuscule ox with no problems—well, these are extreme examples, but in reality there is no problem whatsoever with having the ox's sculpture be smaller than the rat's.

"I am not carving statues, I only bring out the statue present inside the rock for everyone to see"—that sounds like what an ancient wise man might say, and to borrow these words, the monk carved out the "ox" present inside the "rat".

Then the "tiger" present inside the "ox".

Then the "bunny" present inside the "tiger".

Then he carved out the "dragon" present inside the "bunny;" the "snake" present inside the "dragon;" the "horse" present inside the "snake;" the "goat" present inside the "horse;" the "monkey" present inside the "goat;" the "rooster" present inside the "monkey;" the "dog" present inside the "rooster;" and the "boar" inside the "dog."

Every passing year.

On every New Year.

As he got older—then, we can come up with a logical explanation as to why the zodiac didn't loop around. It's elementary: It has become too small to be carved down any further—it couldn't be carved, and didn't need to be.

It could now fit through the gaps in the cage.

It was small enough to pass through the cage—to be liberated from it.

In a way, this is the sculpture version of matryoshka dolls, however, this was nothing more than theory—it makes sense as a theory, but not at all in practice.

Seeing the sculpture lose in size for two or three years and not notice is one thing, but some *must* have realized around the fifth year—in no way could the secret have been kept until the monkey's turn on the twelfth year.

Therefore, this tale is undoubtedly a work of fiction.

Not an old tale, but a fabricated tale—no, it's not even a composition.

It's not even a story.

I would call this—nonsense.

… What could "Ikkun" have wanted to convey?

What was his message for his friend wanting to change but being unable to? A cycle of zodiacs that, at first glance, seems unrestrained, lacking any integrity, but was actually forced to change by someone's influence, by someone's intent—is that what he wanted to say?

That one doesn't change, they are only ever forced to.

It hadn't lost its integrity.

Nor had it left the monk's hand.

Rather, it was dancing in his palm.

Even if you feel free, even if you think you escaped from the cage, that it was orchestrated by someone else; freedom is permitted but not free will—was that his message?

Or maybe this is what he wanted to convey:

Changing means carving yourself away.

The more one changes, the more barren they get; the more one changes, the more they lose themselves—ultimately they will become a frantic boar of a derisively smaller size compared to the original giant rat, something easily crushable inside one's palm.

Feelings of wanting to change are suicidal.

Did he want to say that to Mikoko just as he had done with Emoto?

No—probably not.

He probably had nothing to convey or say to her—this was nonsense only one who had his body, mind, and ego eroded until they had completely worn out could mouth; so his existence didn't matter now.

Eroding his body despite not being immortal. Gnawing it away.

The boy who didn't change, but instead disappeared.

That Nonsense User must have been born this way—that Nonsense User must have died this way.

… That reminds me, I hardly ever spoke with "Ikkun," but thinking back about it, I remember one thing he'd said that stuck to me. My memories of the context leading to it are really vague and faint, but I think he addressed that not just to me, but to our group of three.

Upon learning we partook in this mingling to try and change our current situation, "Ikkun" didn't tell us "Feelings of wanting to change are suicidal." Seeming as if he was simply mouthing what he was thinking—or mouthing what he was not thinking—he *hmm*-ed at us before whispering his impression, as though a serpent coiling around our necks.

"You want to change? That's a change for me."

Though it's just nonsense.

M A Z E M O N O G A T A R I

Mikoko Community — Chapter Uni

Added puns while retelling a tale: Sway Translations
Sculpted a rat with integrity: Bluex & Noyaxus
Still stuck in the karaoke room: Maxdefolsch

MAZEMONOGATARI

NISIOISIN

Kuu Invisible

Chapter Hero

Sorakara Kuu

Densetsu Series

Art: Mitsutani Osamu

001

Sorakara Kuu was a commanding officer in the airborne troops of the Earth Eradication Army. Considering that he had earned such a title at the young age of fourteen, it was impossible for an altogether ordinary nineteen-year-old first-year university student not to have a bit of an inferiority complex. And of course he wasn't simply an officer; oh no, he was also the hero who saved all of humanity, so that inferiority complex was really kicking into overdrive. After all, the most that I'd ever managed to achieve was saving a single vampire girl who'd had her limbs cut off, and even that had proven nearly too difficult for me.

However, if we discarded our achievements and our histories to focus instead on who we were as people, then I believed there were commonalities between myself and this hero.

A boy with no emotions.

A boy who wasn't deeply moved by anything.

A boy who was always cool, who never got hot under the collar, and who didn't feel or react in any way no matter what adversity or challenge he may face. A boy who operated with the cold efficiency of a machine.

Wow, jeez… It was like looking into a mirror, right? With a character background like that, he may as well be named Araragi Koyomi, am I right? But wait, so that description wasn't me? Who was it? Oh, it's Sorakara Kuu? Jeez, I couldn't hide how surprised I was to see my character overlap so much with someone else.

When I was younger, people often said that I was too cold. His description reminded me of the time when I would often say "I don't need friends, they'd lower my intensity as a human" as an explanation for my actions.

When I looked a bit deeper into his story, I learned that he was accompanied by an innocent little girl named Shisui Kanzume and that the unit that he led is filled with girls who have one or two quirks each. There were other things as well that I couldn't help but see as commonalities between us.

All of that is to say that a part of me thought that maybe, just maybe, if we were to meet, we could overcome the age gap and actually get along fairly well. Maybe that was naive of me.

The fact that I had that expectation was proof enough that we were not all that similar, and of course that expectation was quickly crushed into dust. Why? Because, as I said before, he is a hero and I am not. Even if we have similar backgrounds, no amount of forced familiarity in the face of an overwhelming inferiority complex was going to be able to fill that gap.

If anything was going to fill that gap, it would be my dead body cut up into a million tiny pieces.

002

I still had some lingering effects from when I turned into a vampire, and of those effects, the most notable was a boost to my visual perception. I'd never bothered to have my eyes checked, but I would guess I had something like a 3.0 or maybe even a 5.0?[114]

My vision wasn't as good as Doujima Mayumi's, but I had good night vision and dynamic visual acuity. It was strictly an aftereffect of what I had been through—a side effect that I couldn't be rid of and a constant reminder of what I had to regret—so I had never been proud of my improved visual acuity, but I had surely come to rely on it to some degree or another. More than a year had passed since that spring break, and at some point in that time it had become "natural" to me, so if I were to walk into a situation in which **it did not assist me at all**, I would surely find myself on unsteady footing.

For instance, when facing an invisible enemy—an invisible hero.

That definitely made me unsteady.

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[114] Japan uses a "decimal" visual acuity scale, where 1.0 is normal vision, and exceptional vision can approach a value of 2.0 (meaning someone able to see details from twice as far away as someone with normal vision).

"I'm honestly surprised, Araragi Koyomi-san. How are you avoiding me? Or rather, how are you avoiding my invisible blade, *Gyakutai Tarou*?"

I could hear him speaking to me, but I could not see him. I was in—or rather, I had been chased into—one of the large lecture halls of Manase University. It was a lecture hall meant to hold around 300 students at a time, but given the late hour, it currently held only myself and one other, **who could not be seen**.

So this "*Gyakutai Tarou*" was an invisible blade, but… I couldn't even see the form of the assassin who was wielding it.

I think it was called "*Grotesque*" or something.

I was racing about in confusion, but I confirmed it once more: he, Sorakara Kuu, was wearing a suit that made him invisible.

He was wearing a suit that made him impossible to see, even with my improved vampire vision. He wielded a sword that was similarly invisible, so naturally I was backed into a corner.

"No, I really am impressed. If it wasn't my mission to do so, I would choose not to kill you."

That was just a roundabout way of saying it was his mission to kill me. Damn it, why'd this have to happen to me? At least this looked like it would end without any other students getting caught up in it. And why'd he keep saying "impressed" while relentlessly pressing me into a corner? Someone this heartless isn't capable of feeling impressed by anything. His words were empty.

"—Kuh!!"

In the same breath as he stated how impressed he was, the hero swung his sword. *Gyakutai Tarou* swept through the air in what I assumed was a lateral movement aiming to separate my head from my shoulders.

I dodged by a literal hair's breadth—but it wasn't a complete dodge, as I purposefully let his blade nick me so that I would expel an appropriate volume of blood. Praying that his blade wasn't poisoned, I sprayed blood across the hero and then rolled away to get some distance. It wasn't even remotely a smooth roll, I flung myself raggedly across the ground.

I got up and looked around… No good.

I had hoped that by spraying him with blood I would be able to spot the transparent hero by using the blood like fluorescent paint, but… the invisible hero remained invisible. Even if I had somehow managed to miss Sorakara-kun with my spray of blood—a fourteen-year-old might be shorter than I imagined—his blade had certainly been coated with it.

"Sorry, but that plan won't work."

Maybe he told me that out of some kind of kindness, but he needn't have bothered. It was already obvious.

"Even I don't fully understand what is done to make myself invisible… I do at least know that it's not a matter of changing my appearance to match my surroundings like a chameleon. This suit is made with the most overly advanced science not to alter my body, but to instead alter your eyes, sight, eyeballs, optic nerve, and even your consciousness… It's not that you cannot see me, but rather that you do not try to see me, Araragi Koyomi-san."

Sorakara-kun continued.

"… 'Earth Army'-san. The Earth Eradication Army's prized Dr. Hidari Usagi, who is more of a mad scientist than a genius, didn't create anything more than a reproduction of the same theory used in the Earth Army's camouflage technique."

003

I was, unfortunately, already aware of the organization that fights against the Earth, which had turned bad: the Earth Eradication Army. I'd learned about it from a magical girl I met before named *Giant Impact*.

She was a crazy magical girl who liked to play with people's lives. Anyway, this and that happened with her, and some people were brought back to life or brought others back to life, and in all of that mess I learned about the "Earth Eradication Army" as well as the "Earth Army".

All of this information was apparently strictly confidential, so when she kept on blabbering on to me about the details of it, I was getting a bit indignant, but…

"So the 'Earth Army' is like this group of monsters that pretend to be humans and infiltrate society to destroy human culture from the inside—to explain it in terms that your simple mind can understand."

The undead magical girl explained it like that so that even my simple mind could understand—and well, at the time, I figured this was all backstory for a world that had nothing to do with me, so I largely let it pass in one ear and out the other. If I were to be more specific, I didn't catch

about 90% of what she had to say. If I hadn't done so, I would have died from sheer irritation.

I should have listened.

But then, how could I have known that I would be labeled as a member of this "Earth Army" and have the leader of the airborne troops come to kill me himself?

"I heard about you from Chinou-san. She said that she met someone who didn't seem quite human, and that that person might just be part of the 'Earth Army'." Sorakara-kun explained to me.

I had no way of knowing what had happened to result in this, but it seemed that the magical girl from Shikoku, *Giant Impact* (real name Chinou Nomi), was currently serving as a member of the airborne troops under Sorakara.

Hey, wait a second. She ratted me out!

It was only a temporary thing, but for a while there, we had been like partners overcoming a trial together, and she went and sold me out to her new boss?? Was she some kind of far-less-erotic Fujiko-chan or something?[115]

Who are they calling a member of the "Earth Army"?

I wanted to argue back in my defense, but… It wasn't because most of the members of the "Earth Army" were covert operatives that were unaware of what they really were. Actually, the problem had more to do with an overabundance of awareness. I, Araragi Koyomi, certainly did fit the bill for "someone who wasn't quite human", since, well… I was a former vampire. I wasn't a monster, but I was an aberration.

"The Earth Eradication Army operates under the rule of smiting anyone we doubt. My apologies if we're wrong, but that's how we do things."

He said some terrifying things in a completely uninterested voice… And again, I couldn't really say that he was wrong…

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[115] A reference to *Lupin the Third's* Mine Fujiko, a professional criminal who regularly partners with the protagonist before betraying him as soon as her goal is in sight.

While it had happened in a parallel world, I had actually destroyed humanity once… I couldn't hold my head high and proclaim that I was a humanitarian. Instead, I had to look down awkwardly…

But that didn't mean that I was going to quietly let myself be exterminated either.

One reason for that was, of course, that I was quite fond of my own body, but I didn't want that to be my primary reason. After all, there were many others in this town who fit the bill for "not quite human". It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that more than half of the people I associated with fit that description, and I just couldn't let this hero boy have so much extra work piled on.

Which is why I needed to run away as hard and as fast as possible.

If I could escape from this situation, there was a glimmer of hope waiting for me. Fight fire with fire and secret organizations with secret organizations.

If I could make contact with the boss of the specialists, the "lady who knows everything", Gaen Izuko-san, then I would be able to absolve myself of the suspicions that had been unfairly made against me… In order to save myself and those who mattered to me, I would have to get out of here alive.

In any case, the "get cut on purpose and splash my blood to make him visible" plan was a failure. In spite of the great risk, there had been no reward… I tried to think of a way to salvage a solution from the failed plan, and I came up with the idea of trying to smell the blood that had been spilled to scent-track the enemy, but that was no more than an abstract and impractical hypothesis.

The basis of the idea was that if I couldn't rely on sight, then I could rely on smell. Unfortunately, while the iron-smell of blood might be coming from the blade that had cut me, it was also a scent that was emanating rather potently from my own neck. It would be impossible to smell the blood on his sword through the smell coming from my own body. I had considered an extension of the first plan, which was "get cut enough to leave puddles of blood, then track him through his footprints", but I rejected that idea without trying it.

Unlike with the idea of splashing blood onto the hero, in this case I would be perceiving the puddle on the ground, so it should remain unaffected by his suit. However… This idea might have worked back when I was a vampire, but I was only a former vampire, so if I tried to go through with the plan, he wouldn't need to exterminate me because I would die from blood loss first.

There was also the small issue of him being able to walk across desktops to approach me and avoid the puddle of blood altogether. Put all of it together, and it meant that I would have to continue as I had thus far, barely cutting through (not getting cut through?) by relying on **sound**.

Sorakara-kun understood that already.

"I really do think it's amazing. I admire you, Araragi-san. You're a man among men."

By continuing to babble on in that manner, he was able to disguise his footsteps—but given that he could be saying anything, did he really have to stick to this one line of dialogue? There was no emotion or inflection in his voice.

There should be a limit to just how insincere a person can be.

My friend the corpse doll had more emotion than this guy.

So while he was able to use his voice to disguise the sounds of his movements, in exchange for that, I was able to hear his general location based on his voice instead. Up until now, that was how I had managed to stay alive. When it all began, I was shocked to discover that I was under attack, but it didn't seem like he'd been fully prepared to kill me.

Maybe they sprung the mission on him at the last second, or killing me was a quick add-on to some other mission, or maybe it was some political machination at work—it seemed like the kind of thing that would happen in the Earth Eradication Army.

It's truly frightening what people can demand without specifying their reasoning for it.

So thinking about how this boy (soldier) was caught up in all of this, I could allow myself to feel some consideration for Sorakara-kun (and

Chinou-chan as well), but no matter how considerate I might be, I wasn't going to let myself be killed. So… I wondered what I could do instead.

The thing that I feared most in this situation was for him to start swinging *Gyakutai Tarou* around wildly and just pressing forward in a relentless attack. There would be too much noise for me to hear any specific swing out of the flurry, which would make it impossible for me to dodge.

But I knew that Sorakara-kun wouldn't do that… That was the only thing that I was fairly confident that I'd worked out about *Grotesque* and *Gyakutai Tarou*. The only weakness I'd found so far for the invisible hero.

Which was to say…

He couldn't see himself either.

Neither his own gallant figure nor the large sword he was swinging around. If he were to start waving the blade around wildly, there was a good chance that he could end up cutting himself instead.

Because he could not see, his *Gyakutai Tarou* became a double-edged sword—and it might literally have been a double-edged sword for all I knew, so that was like a quadruple-edged sword. His entire body was presumably covered in this *Grotesque*, but it seemed unlikely that the suit was all that protective. Considering the function that it was said to perform, it was probably quite delicate and sensitive to any sort of physical attack.

Even if that were not the case, Sorakara-kun would still want to avoid any kind of close-quarters combat. Whether he was invisible or not wouldn't matter much once someone got hold of him. Thus he maintained his distance and made measured attacks… Of course, he wouldn't want to let the situation drag out for too long.

The Absolute Peace League that Chinou-chan used to belong to had the mission of protecting humanity, and in order to achieve that goal, they wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice an entire city. If she used to belong to a dangerous organization like that, then what I had seen of this Earth Extermination Army had done nothing to convince me that it was any less dangerous.

I needed to break the equilibrium and absolve the doubts.

Looking back at that spring break when I became a vampire and was nearly exterminated, I couldn't help but laugh at my current situation, because now I would have to try and save my life by declaring my vampiric nature to absolve myself of the accusation of belonging to the "Earth Army".

What a strange situation.

"It's never easy, is it, Araragi-san."

Sorakara-kun continued to talk idly in that same emotionless voice; the topics didn't matter because the goal was simply to make noise. Neither of us stayed in one place; we both continued to move about the lecture hall.

"Not easy? What is?"

"It's because you rely so much on your superior vision that losing sight of me has caused you so much confusion. But then, in my own case, if I did not use the bleeding edge of technology, I would be able to attack you much more directly. It's interesting that an advancement in battle technology has resulted in suppressing my combat ability."

Was he going for a "great national powers develop weapons so great that they can no longer wage war" theme? That was a bit of a heavy topic for making small talk. Bringing up the achievement of peace through the development of weapons as a topic—that guy was really messed up.

However, if we were to get into a battle of words, then I thought I would have the edge on him. If I could make this cold, emotionless hero laugh, then I would count that as my victory.

I needed to change from heavy topics to something funny.

"I understand how you feel. I think you'd call it justifiable ignorance. Sometimes I find myself thinking… If I had never known love, then maybe I would never have known this pain either."

"…"

Huh. No reaction.

He didn't seem to be affected at all.

"I understand how you feel. I used to be like you. 'I don't need friends, they'd lower my intensity as a human' is what I used to say. You remind me of that period in my life."

"No, I do need friends. I'd be in a lot of trouble without them."

He wasn't giving me anything to work with! Agree with me, even if it's a lie!

Sorakara-kun's words had no effect on me, and my words had no effect on him… However, the fact that he said "need" and not "want" did indicate that he was the real deal—it made me painfully aware of how false I had been.

I set aside those feelings and spoke again to the boy, "Oh, I understand. I know exactly where you're coming from. I was going to say the same thing." I made sure to express my understanding. I would close the gap…

"It's pretty strange. I think if we'd met under different circumsta—HYA!"

I just said "Hya!"

I was indignant that the hero would try to cut me down while I was in the middle of talking, but thinking about it more, that had been his plan from the start. Use noise to distract me from the sounds of his footsteps, and then strike.

And I went right along with it.

How absolutely brutal.

I think if we'd met under different circumstances, he'd just have killed me in a different way.

I managed to dodge the attack, but the desk that had been behind me was cut clean in two—that's one sharp blade. I tried kicking around the area, but I didn't manage to hit anything. He had already finished moving.

He might not have a heart, but he knew how to stay alert.[116]

"When wielding a sword, you lose every option but to use the sword—that said, you cannot simply toss it aside either. It's not limited to science; even with magic, one must really be pushed to toss something aside. Even if their doom is obvious, humans don't want to let go of their standard of living once they've achieved it."

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[116] Visual pun between 心 (*kokoro*, "heart") and 残心 (*zanshin*, a state of relaxed alertness in Japanese martial arts).

For being the hero of humanity, he really said some harsh things about the ones he was supposed to be protecting. I couldn't be sure if he'd stayed there, but I turned to face the direction of his voice.

"Life might get a lot easier than you'd expect if you'd let go."

That was me.

It wasn't a bluff or a lie to try and buy time—and it also wasn't my own story. I simply happened to know someone who had experienced just that.

"I know someone. They're the same age as you, a middle school student, and just like you they don't go to school… That person gave up their position as god. They weren't forced, cornered, or coerced; they gave it up of their own free will."

Power could be cast aside.

If it was for your hopes and dreams.

I said it to express the idea that he should toss aside his weapons and go home, though I didn't say that part explicitly. I was sure that he understood.

I was certain of it, but that was naive of me.

Since the boy had no heart, it was possible that he didn't even listen to what I said… If that were the case, then he was probably drawing near to make another attempt at cutting me down.

Instead, he had moved far away from me over to the podium, where a lecturer would usually stand. It seemed that moving there had been his goal. Or rather, he had moved to the sound equipment that was built into the podium.

Why would he want to do that?

"BWOOOWWWWWW!!!"

A deafening sound erupted from the speakers throughout the lecture hall. No matter how loud I or Sorakara-kun spoke, our voices never echoed in the hall, but this sound did. The noise—it was a song—continued to blast out of the speakers as if an indie band had just started a concert.

Aah, I thought.

This had been his goal from the start. It was for this purpose that Sorakara-kun had chased me into this classroom. I had aimed for a large

lecture hall to avoid getting trapped in a dead end, but for the hero boy, a classroom with a sound system was perfect.

Now he no longer had to talk about topics that he didn't care about or try to distract me. He was invisible as well as impossible to hear through the noise, and unlike before, when he spoke to cover his steps, now I had no hint of where he was.

So he hadn't gone quiet for a while because he was listening to what I had to say, but rather because it had taken time for him to take out some kind of transmitter device from inside of his suit and connect it to the sound system… The music was some kind of rock-adjacent genre, which was surprising for such a cold and emotionless boy, but I guess even with bleeding-edge technology they still try to build in a music player.

"Oh, shi—"

There was no time for that.

Now, normally, the flow of this story would be for me to break the ice with this guy and find a peaceful resolution, but unfortunately the hero didn't know how to read the room.

A guy named Sorakara Kuu couldn't read the atmosphere? What's up with that?[117] So was it impossible to see eye-to-eye with this guy? And here I thought we could get along as fellow builders of non-existent harems!

If I were to be fair to him, I would have to admit that, until now, not a single character has appreciated my narrative structure, so I couldn't really blame Sorakara-kun's heartlessness for failing to go along with it. I would have liked to apologize for my prior misleading statements, but I didn't have time for it.

The balance was broken. He'd broken it.

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[117] *Sorakara Kuu* is written as 空々空, which is entirely made of the same kanji 空 with different pronunciations (the middle character 々 means a repetition of the previous kanji, like in 阿良々木 for *Araragi*). Pronounced as *sora*, it means "sky", while as *kara,* it means "empty", playing on his absence of emotions. As *kuu*, it usually means "empty air" or "sky" again, and it's the start of the word 空気 (*kuuki*, "atmosphere").

Now it was time to act—it was no longer possible to hear his location, but I could know one thing at least. In order to turn on the music, he had to have been standing in one place.

Near the podium.

Before he could close the distance between us, I had to escape. I needed to run out of this music-filled lecture hall.

With rock-like background music playing, it felt almost like a scene from an action movie as I began to sprint toward the door to the classroom. Sorakara-kun seemed like the athletic type, but it seemed to me that his suit was probably really tight and restrictive, so it should slow him down.

It wasn't that far away, so I should've had a chance.

I hadn't taken part in any battles recently, or even anything resembling a battle, so I had let myself get out of shape. Nevertheless, I flogged my legs for speed as I ran up the slope of the classroom, weaving between desks as I dashed for the door. I smashed through the door and propelled myself through headfirst—

"And that's a bingo. Just as Sorakara planned."

—and directly into the path of another blade I couldn't see. I heard an elegant voice, like a rose covered in thorns, as the unseen blade sliced through the air toward my neck.

004

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

Essentially, Sorakara-kun was not alone. The hero, clad in his "invisible military uniform" and waving around his "invisible weapon", wasn't alone—there was one other with him.

They had been waiting at the doors to the classroom without making a sound, much like Cerberus waiting at the gates of Hell. Another hero, or to differentiate them, maybe a dark hero.

Thinking about it more, there was no reason not to mass-produce the weapons that he was using. Well, there were ethical and moral reasons, but an organization like the Earth Eradication Army wouldn't care about those.

Just as a human wouldn't give up a certain quality of life once it had been attained, a level of battle would not be relinquished—that was karma, that was destiny.

Still, Sorakara-kun's battle plan that used two invisible people against one, with the second invisible attacker remaining hidden until the very end, was certainly not normal.

I do need friends.

I'd be in a lot of trouble without them.

So, I knew at least that it was not Chinou-san… The second attacker was most likely a member of the Sorakara-kun Harem (which is not on the same level as the Araragi Harem), which meant she was probably a member of the airborne troops. I had to give credit where credit was due, because whoever she was, she had waited there by the door with her sword ready, just waiting for the moment to strike. She never once entered into the back-and-forth that had taken place throughout the room.

And so my head was cut off.

There was no doubt about that. If I had actually been a member of this "Earth Army", that is. Normally I would have said something about how "ironic" it was that my being a former vampire had saved my life, but in this case it truly was what allowed me to make my narrow escape from death.

To explain what happened…

After being chased into an enclosed space, Sorakara-kun had talked aimlessly to cover the sounds of his footsteps (and it turns out he was covering the sounds of his partner's footsteps as well), but it was an incomplete method of concealing the sound he was making. He then blasted the room with sound to completely disguise his movements, which would trigger his lone, cornered target to flee in confusion. There in the path of the door to escape the room waited the second attacker, who would then drop their blade onto the target and put an end to their life—the plan had never been to corner the target but instead to funnel the target into the doorway to escape. That was the reality of the plan that Sorakara-kun had made. The only flaw in this cold, calculated strategy was the simple fact that, unfortunately for them, I had already perceived the second attacker.

Not that I had everything figured out from the start.

I never saw anything—from start to finish, I never once saw *Grotesque* or *Gyakutai Tarou.*

But when the sound system in the room began to blast noise, literally in that moment, I realized the presence of the second assassin.

And based on the shape of their hips, I also knew that they were a girl. Now you might be thinking, "Well, then clearly you saw her!".

Not to be annoying by saying it again, but I did not see her.

I also had not splattered her with blood, so there was no way to smell that she was there. I also did not suddenly awaken a new power due to the stress and danger of the situation.

I didn't need to awaken a new power because it was one that I'd had all along. A vampire power—not of sight or of scent, but of hearing.

It wasn't much different from how I had listened to his footsteps and his speech to determine where he was standing. When Sorakara-kun blasted the room with noise, it certainly covered the sounds of his footsteps, but it also provided me with an image of not just where he was located, but where his friend stood.

This was a skill **derived from bats**, with whom vampires had a long history. They can fire off high-frequency sound waves and perceive the space around them—and in this enclosed space with sound blasting from every direction, I too gained the ability to perceive the room around me from the way the sounds bounced and echoed back.

Words had not been loud enough to echo in this room, but the sound system was.

I was able to perceive the room in that moment, but at the same time I really did feel that I was in greater danger than before—because I had suddenly realized the presence of the second enemy.

I was justifiably ignorant.

If it hadn't been for that, I would have been perfectly calm in that moment, but when I realized that I was a cornered rat, I faltered. I had prepared a million strategies for what to do next, but with this new information, there was only one path left to me.

I had to abandon any idea of retaliation and escape before Sorakara-kun—no, before Sorakara-kun and his friend **could notice that I had noticed.**

That girl would no doubt aim for the moment when I reached the door to attack, and since I had determined that **while two enemies were attacking me, they did not have anyone else to support them**, I could

pretend to not have seen their trap, and their own hubris would give me the chance to escape.

And in truth, I had not seen the trap.

I'd heard it.

So after that, it became quite simple. I dodged the blade, then ran away until I had escaped from the two invisible attackers, and then I called my beloved support center, Ononoki Yotsugi-chan, and had her mediate between myself and Gaen-san. Due to certain circumstances, Gaen-san and I weren't talking to each other.

That I had sought help was proof that I'd grown up into an adult. Or rather, I was a university student—that was one difference between myself and my twin Sorakara-kun, well, aside from the whole hero thing.

The sound strategy that Sorakara-kun employed to trap and kill me had instead saved my life. Once the misunderstanding was cleared up, I talked to him about it, and he said that this sort of occurrence was a regular thing for him. A hero's heroic actions had a tendency to awaken sleeping evil.

Where there is light, there is shadow. The glimmer of a hero is not so different from the glint of a villain. It was a common trope among the stories of heroes. As I said before, the reason that I was not killed was because I was not actually a member of the "Earth Army", but instead a former vampire. Looking at it from another angle, the reason I had been saved was because Sorakara Kuu was a hero.

That's how the ambiguous bat narrowly escaped death.

Incidentally, after a mediator cleared the air between us, Sorakara-kun apologized to me.

"I was wrong; I'm sorry."

It was kind of amazing to be able to apologize after everything he did… He bowed his head and said the words, but they were so devoid of any sincerity that I found myself taken aback. Was I supposed to rejoice and say, "Yeah, that's right!" when it wouldn't surprise me in the least if he straightened from his bow and immediately tried to strike me down once more? If he has no sincerity, then why would he bother to have ulterior motives? His apology was nothing more than a string of words. There was

a limit to how insincere a person could be—but if I kept an open mind, then I couldn't say with certainty that within that emptiness there was no invisible heart or inaudible scream.[118]

So I will look forward to the day when that boy chooses to step down from the throne of being a hero so that we can have a conversation without reservation.

[118] A reference to *Densetsu's* premise, where one day a scream killed one third of Earth's population.

M A Z E M O N O G A T A R I

Kuu Invisible — Chapter Hero

Wielded the story: Tigoris Translates
Made it visible: Bluex & Kakuzō
Sliced by the second blade: Maxdefolsch

MAZEMONOGATARI

NISIOISIN

Rai Roulette

Chapter Trick

Fudatsuki Rai

Bishounen Series

Art: SHAFT

001

It all began when I, a twenty-three-year-old in the middle of my probationary period to be an assistant inspector of the Naoetsu Police Department's Rumors Squad, received a report that one Fudatsuki Rai was, outrageously, running a casino out of the gymnasium of the Tsuganoki Second Middle School.

Though when I said report, I didn't mean anything official. My younger sister, Officer Araragi Karen of the Naoetsu Police Department's Community Safety Division, formerly known as the enforcer of the Tsuganoki Second Middle School Fire Sisters, popped by to ask me about it after hearing rumors.

She didn't hide her anger.

"I don't know who this kid is, but nobody's allowed to mess around in my old school. I'd like to just go in there and teach this kid a lesson, but it's a 'delicate situation', so I haven't even reported the information I gathered to the upstairs yet."

I, of course, tried to get her to report it, but I could understand why she didn't. If word got out that a middle school had been playing host to gambling activities every night, it would be a massive scandal. It wouldn't

end with the arrest of the ringleader of the gambling either, as all of the other students who went there would be treated as accomplices. To say that the private school's reputation would be dragged through the mud would be an understatement.

It was truly a big mess.

I was forced to think of a conman from another time as I considered how skillfully this person had managed to get so many middle school students from the area involved. Not only that, but the kid didn't even attend the school that he was using for his gambling, AND this Fudatsuki Rai was only a fifteen-year-old middle school student himself.

Nevertheless, it was the duty of the police department to act in cases like this.

"Alright. Listen. I didn't become a cop to protect the law; I became a cop to protect the futures of children."

I felt impressed for the first time in a while hearing my mischievous little sister say that. It was impressive that she'd managed to get through three years of high school without becoming twisted like me. She still had the same mentality she'd had in middle school.

I deeply respected that.

Ignoring how my middle-school-mentality little sister talked rudely to her older brother… Especially considering the sorry state of my current affairs. Anyway, it wouldn't do to just leave this matter unaddressed. But even if the investigation was limited to the Araragi siblings, how could we approach resolving this?

"That's it, nii-chan."

What's it?

"That casino is currently limiting itself to Tsuganoki Second Middle School students. If you look at it the other way around, it doesn't matter who you are—as long as you're a student of the school, you're let in and welcomed. Which means infiltrating that soon-to-be-closed school as an alumni should be a viable means of investigating."

Saying that the school was soon-to-be-closed seemed a bit much to me, but okay—get out the school uniform and student ID from the closet,

where they'd been stored for the last four years. Preparing a costume and a fake ID from scratch would take a long time and a lot of effort, but if we already had access to them, we could simply make a few modifications and it would be done in no time. However, there was a problem.

And it was a big problem.

Officer Araragi had been pretty tall when she was in junior high school, but she'd grown even more since then. She was over 180 centimeters tall and was probably pushing 190 centimeters. If a girl that tall was attending the school, everyone would have noticed her already. Even if she had not grown an inch from the time when she unironically called herself an ally of justice, her body had developed in a way that marked her as an adult.

"I see. So…"

Officer Araragi seemed disappointed when I said as much.

She then told Assistant Inspector Araragi, "I'll let you borrow my uniform, so my beloved nii-chan, who hasn't grown an inch since middle school, will have to be the one to infiltrate."

002

"Roulette is normally a game played with red and black spaces. Red is blood, and black is darkness, which I don't find particularly pleasant. I would like to make this game more wholesome, which is why I've opted to use red and white spaces. Those colors have a more pleasant association, don't they?"

Fudatsuki Rai-kun was the one talking. With his hair swept back neatly and a white suit on, he looked exceptionally adult for his age as he stood behind the roulette table facing me and explained the color change while keeping a smooth smile on his face the whole time.

Oh, right, sorry, I've skipped ahead a bit. So to quickly recap, the infiltration was an immediate bust. To put the most positive spin possible on it, the plan was going wonderfully right up until I tried to enter the gymnasium.

I, a male adult public employee, was wearing my little sister's old school uniform to try and infiltrate a middle school, which sounds like the setup for an entirely different crime from what I was trying to investigate. Oh, and just so you know, I ended up not wearing Karen's uniform. I instead

had to borrow from the strategist of the Fire Sisters (who was not in Japan at the time).

Karen's uniform had proven to be too baggy on me, even though she had worn it back in middle school. So anyway, with a fitting uniform on, we took a photo to edit the school ID, and with that in hand, I was able to enter the casino.

I was let inside and welcomed.

It was so showy and brilliant that I doubted what I was seeing.

"Showy and brilliant" didn't seem to capture it properly. Maybe it's better to say "gaudy and gorgeous"?

It left me speechless—that was the most accurate way to express my feelings about it.

Was this really a gymnasium? Did people really play basketball and volleyball in this same place during the day? It didn't seem possible.

There was a glittering stage with lights shining down on it and background music playing that made you feel energized whether you wanted to or not. Slot machines, poker, blackjack, baccarat, craps, and roulette… Well, there were also some other games that a non-gambler like myself couldn't recognize. There were tuxedo-clad dealers and colorful bunny girls. Were they really middle school students?

Bunny girls.

This was a form of culture not found in our worldview. From what Karen had told me, this whole thing was put on by middle schoolers, so I had imagined a much more "homemade" casino, but this place was on par with Macao or Las Vegas. The only difference that I could spot was the lack of alcohol. They even had cameras set up along the ceiling to watch for cheating!

Wait, no, I can't let myself be impressed.

This must have cost a fortune to set up?

What was the house doing spending this kind of money? With this kind of investment, there's no way that fleecing some middle school students of their allowance was going to make up for it… Was the objective not to make money?

Was there another goal?

Was the point just to keep money moving between hands? Yes, just like roulette…

Damn, this didn't seem like something that I could handle on my own… I thought that I should retreat and come up with a new plan. I thought I might even need to consult with my senior, Inspector Kizashima, since she had more experience and might better understand what to do…

And as I tried to back out…

"Oh? Going home so soon after arriving? Won't you stay for a while and see more of my Tsuganoki branch of 'Reasonable Doubt', Assistant Inspector Araragi?"

Yep.

The gambler had caught me.

003

"Roulette is typically split into two styles: American and European. In our casino, we have one green space, which is European style. Which means that the odds of winning with red or white are not 50% because you can bet on neither as well."

In other words:

① Red = 18 of 37

② White = 18 of 37

③ Green = 1 of 37

But looking at these odds, I had to conclude that anyone who would bet on green in a game of chance like this wasn't a gambler; they were a gambling addict.

In my case, however, I was more of a math addict, so what I found most interesting about the whole thing was how they managed to divide a circle into 37 equal spaces. They must be very finely crafted to all be the same size, right?

In any case, it didn't matter which color I bet on because it would inevitably put me at a disadvantage. Getting it right wasn't really winning so much as getting it wrong would mean losing. If I bet on red, then I had

18:19 odds against the dealer, Rai-kun. The advantage went to him. If I bet on white, then it was still 18:19 odds with the advantage going to Rai-kun.

It wasn't so unbalanced as to be impossible, but a disadvantage was a disadvantage. It was that slight advantage on the house side that made casinos. I would have to happily accept the disadvantage. After all, I'd been caught infiltrating the casino, so they could've been taking me out back and beating me to a pulp right now instead.

An assistant inspector being beaten by a group of middle school kids… That was the making of a scandal all on its own. Instead, the mature middle school boy had challenged me to a game of all things.

"Let's have a bet, Assistant Inspector Araragi. If you win, my group of thugs and pretty girls will withdraw from this city after tonight and never return. If I win, then you will turn a blind eye for another two months."

Looking back on my own awkward middle school years, Rai-kun was behaving with such a level of maturity that it didn't seem possible that he was so young. But that two-month time period… That was scary. Scary because it was the same length of time as my remaining probationary period.

Creepy, right?

I had assumed that they'd simply noticed that a grown man was dressed as a middle school girl and come to detain me, but that wasn't the case—he knew my name when he stopped me, and now he made it clear that he knew quite a bit more about me than that.

At that moment, what I felt most was not a desire to get out of the situation safely or a desire to protect the dignity of my little sister's former school, but instead I felt that I couldn't leave this smiling boy to do as he pleased.

I was acutely aware of that feeling.

I needed to do something immediately…

This boy needed a lot more than simple guidance from an adult.

And that's how I came to be sitting at a roulette table alone with Rai-kun, who would be playing the role of dealer. Why roulette? Simply

because it was the only game whose rules I understood. Even if I had a vague understanding of them as games, as means of gambling, I was ignorant… To be entirely honest, I didn't even fully understand roulette. The colors had been changed from red and black to red and white, but aside from that, it didn't seem to have any house rules.

So the rules were simple: pick red, white, or green.

I'd heard through my circles—which is to say, through urban legends—that roulette dealers can land the ball on any color or number that they want, so I couldn't let my guard down just yet. I could've place my bet right then, but it would've been best to wait for the ball to be tossed and then announce my chosen color. At the moment I found myself drawn toward red, but maybe I was actually being guided there?

Red is the color of blood. Blood.

There was no telling how much Rai-kun knew about me, but if he was aware that I was a former vampire, then he might have tried to push the blood association so that I would choose red.

Leading…

If the other color was not white but instead the usual black, then I might have placed my bet there; if you said "darkness", then I would've thought "Ougi". If I were to place my bet without thinking, I'd have probably gone with that.

Rai-kun, being the creator of this whole casino, was apparently well known among the visitors, as the area around the table had quickly turned into a viewing gallery… At the moment, nobody had noticed anything odd about me, but if I remained in the center of attention for too long, someone was bound to realize. Just the thought of being caught in this situation had me in a cold sweat.

On that note, having middle school bunny girls wandering around nearby made it difficult to pay attention on its own. If Karen were here, she might have forgotten about her position as an officer and resorted to violence by now, which would've resulted in a great disgrace for her former school.

"Have you decided, dear guest?"

He hadn't forgotten my title. He was aware of the many people watching and listening, so instead of calling me "Assistant Inspector Araragi" again, he instead only referred to me as a guest. It was that ability to adapt and take everything into consideration that made him terrifying.

He was so abnormal as to seem like an aberration.

And if I stopped to think about it, the fact that he had such a massive operation going on in this school with so many students coming and going, with only a mere rumor leaking out? That showed amazing control. If my sister hadn't been a former student of this school and hadn't been a legend in her own time, she wouldn't have had the network of connections required to get word of this rumor to me. And even then, it was *only* a rumor.

An urban legend.

"Yes, I've decided. Spin it."

I hadn't actually decided anything, but that's what I said—I didn't want to let this immeasurable middle school boy get ahead of me. Though… I didn't suppose he was able to read minds.

"Very well."

As soon as I nodded my head affirmatively, Rai-kun spun the wheel and let the ball in his right hand go flying. I had considered that with my vampiric vision I might have been able to see the spin and the path of the ball and project where it would land, but it didn't work.

Those vampiric aftereffects weren't coming in handy as of late. I could just barely keep track of the two separate moving parts, but when it came to predicting which number the ball would land on, it was pure chaos theory. I would have better luck guessing than trying to cheat. With the cameras overhead and the watching crowd all around, I had no chance of trying to cheat by any other means. A police officer on an illegal investigation who also cheated—that was quite a pile of irredeemable qualities. 18 out of 37.

I was at a disadvantage, but compared to the bloodbaths I'd been caught in before, these odds weren't so bad.

By the way, the ball that was spinning at high speed around the track wasn't white, but instead black. Since they had changed the colors of the roulette from black and red to white and red (which I believed had less to do with any association with darkness and more to do with making the roulette more gaudy), the black color had been repurposed for the ball.

"The human psyche is a strange thing, isn't it, Araragi-san? 'I want to save money' and 'I want to spend money' can be felt at the same time. 'I want to lose weight' and 'I want to eat delicious food' are a similar pair of opposites. We can dream of opposites at the same time."

I had been thinking of going red after all and had moved my hand to place the chip on that side when Rai-kun spoke at the perfect moment to interrupt me.

"It's less of a contradiction and more of a dilemma. An unresolved dichotomy. Which is why people will say, no matter what dream may come true, 'It wasn't supposed to be like this'. They say that it's better to do something and regret it later than to regret not doing something, but whenever we enact one decision, we are giving up on the opposite, and that regret is the same."

"…"

He was saying something complicated. If his goal was to confuse me and make me lose focus, then unfortunately for him, the attempt was a failure. The middle school bunny girls dancing on the stage were already doing a much better job at that than he was.

"No, no, I'm simply saying that whether it be a game or in life, you cannot sum it all up in terms of two sides. Dualism is nothing but an easily understood fiction. You can't label things black and white—or, in this case, white and red. Winning and losing, good and evil, truth and lies—these are not things that are in conflict, but rather things that coexist."

"It's impressive that you're aware of that at your age. It took me almost all of my three years of high school to come to that conclusion."

I kept my voice low so that only Rai-kun could hear me and shrugged my shoulders—though with all of the noise, it may have been unnecessary.

How odd.

It wasn't because he was the boss of the casino or because he was a criminal, but there was something about the very basis of who Rai-kun was that made me feel completely incompatible with him. If we had met as fellow students in school, then rather than being opposed to each other, I would say that we'd have nothing to do with each other at all. If we spent three years in the same class all through high school, we'd graduate having never once talked to each other. Was it his politely condescending tone that irritated me so much? I was surrounded by people who were overly familiar, or if not that, were direct and outspoken.

Compatibility, huh…

"White."

I declared the color and placed the chip down on the white space. Strangely, the chip that I had been handed was the same color as the ball that was spinning around the roulette wheel—black.

White and black: Black Hanekawa.

I supposed that that too was an example of coexistence. Still…

"Hey, Rai-kun. Having it both ways is nice and all, but it's no good if it just means both sides fall together. That's what I think."

"Oh? Is that the conclusion you've drawn from your additional four years of college, Araragi-san?"

Rai-kun was also lowering his voice to speak with me now. Three years of high school and four years of college.

"It's not a conclusion. It continues to change. It changes in leaps and bounds. What I say and what I do alike."

I looked forward to it.

What would I be doing a year from now? There was an infinite variety, just like the outcome of spinning a roulette.

"No more bets."

Rai-kun returned to his normal volume, or actually, he spoke even more loudly now. He all but sang the words out as he put on the performance of a dealer.

I know all about it.

"That's the cutoff. Please do not place your hands on the table. This game will not allow any additional changes beyond this point. So, if you don't mind, would you care to explain your reasoning for betting on white?"

"I didn't have a reason."

Until just before I placed the bet, I had been leaning toward betting on red—or, while I was at it, if I bet on green and won with odds of 1 out of 37, I'd look extremely stylish, and the bunny girls would no doubt be all over me to praise me. I couldn't deny that some part of my mind had toyed with that thought, which is exactly why gambling is terrifying.

A person couldn't help but want to risk it all on a nigh-impossible bet to try and pull victory from the jaws of defeat. And be praised by bunny girls. But no, I couldn't let the charisma of some middle school girls put me into an overly competitive mindset.

I swear that my decision was not based on any association with Black Hanekawa; it was also not based on the color of her panties when we first met.

If red was blood and black was darkness.

White was bone.

The things that I said and did changed constantly. I changed sides, I renovated, I alternated, and sometimes I even retreated—but I wanted to show that no matter what, the bones remained. It didn't have to do with the original white ball for roulette being made from literal ivory.

I wanted to show this mature-acting youngster what a big-boned adult looks like.

… Or, then again, maybe he'd simply influenced my thinking by guiding the conversation, but that would be fine too. If victory and defeat coexist, then whether I won or lost, I would be doing something about what was happening inside of this gymnasium.

Declaring my bet was a declaration of war.

"White for bones, huh… Very interesting. That's a foreign viewpoint for a youngster like me. White bones, huh."

“You think that’s the idea of an older person? Not just white bones, but fossils?”

“It’s more of a monster than a fossil.[119] I was not wrong to choose this place as a playground—or perhaps it’s better to say that I chose this place as a mine?[120] In any case, this game of roulette that you chose by chance is truly well suited to you.”

?

As I pondered what that could mean, the roulette wheel began to slow down, and the ball did so as well, until they finally impacted each other and the ball began to bounce within the numbered spaces.

It fell in the space of a certain number of a certain color, and at the same time Rai-kun said

“You really are a happy-go-lucky person.”

He said it in such a scathingly polite voice that I did a double take.

[119] Visual pun between 化石 (*kaseki*, “fossil”) and 化物 (*bakemono*, “monster”).

[120] Pun between 遊び場 (*asobiba*, “playground”) and 採掘場 (*saikutsuba*, “mine”).

004

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

To start with the conclusion: the Tsuganoki branch of Rai-kun's "Reasonable Doubt" chain was closed—in other words, the ball finally came to rest in a white space.

I believe it was 23 white.

But whether or not that was a victory for me was still something that I questioned. Yes, I had placed my bet on white, and the result had been white, so if you went based entirely on those facts, then it was without a doubt my win… But it didn't **feel** like a win.

Was this just how it felt to win?

It was something I had to wonder about… After all, in my life I hadn't exactly experienced many moments that I would call victorious. Maybe that was why it felt so strange, since I had no frame of reference for what winning should feel like.

I thought that, in one aspect, it was a good thing. I didn't get a high from my beginner's luck and become a gambling addict. When it was unclear if I had really won or if I had somehow lost, it was hard to get addicted.

So yes, that was good.

What would not be so good is if the closing of the casino only meant that the middle school students of the school moved on to doing some other kind of nighttime recreation. Of course, the "patrol officer of justice" Karen would never allow that, so she continued to keep an eye on the school, and from what she reported back, the students of Tsuganoki Second Middle School all speak of the casino in the same way. "Yeah, that was really fun! But… What even happened?" It was as if they'd been bewitched by a *kitsune*.[121]

Bewitched by a *kitsune*, huh…

That sounded like an aberration.

You wandered into what looked like the Dragon Palace[122] and spent the night there, only to wake up in the morning on a bed of leaves. And when Karen tried to trace anything from the casino, she was unable to find any trace of Fudatsuki Rai, the pretty girls, or the punks that worked for him.

Was it a dream, or was it reality? "Reasonable Doubt".

At that point, it was time for someone to get to work and let the rumors drift away on the wind; the Rumors Squad. They're a segment of the public offices that had been created by Gaen-san.

"Fudatsuki-kun probably never intended to win against you at all, Assistant Inspector Araragi. Just as you intuited, his purpose for being there was most likely not to make money, and from the moment you entered in disguise, he had probably already decided to withdraw. The reason that he challenged you to a game anyway was most likely to help you save face as an inspector going undercover and to create a more smooth closing of the casino."

It was too late to tell me that.

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[121] In Japanese folklore, *kitsune* (狐) are fox *youkais* that can shapeshift into human form to trick people, as well as create illusions, among other powers.

[122] The Dragon Palace (竜宮城, *ryuuguu-jou*), or Palace of the Dragon King, is the supernatural undersea palace of *Ryuujin*, a dragon god from Japanese tradition. It is well-known for being featured in the fairytale *Urashima Tarou*.

After I had made my report to my reliable senior at the Rumors Squad, Inspector Kizashima, that was how she interpreted the events. And just for reference, Kizashima-senpai is a golem.

That means she's a clay doll that contains a human soul.

The golem had been created by her grandfather after she passed away during her middle school years, and after that, it had been impossible to change the design of the doll, which meant that Kizashima-senpai had the outward appearance of a girl in her early teenage years. If I had asked her for help at the start, the investigation would have been much easier, no doubt.

Well, not that I could have come to her and said, "Please put on this middle school uniform and infiltrate that middle school for me".

"So he lost on purpose? But… Why?"

It wasn't as if I had never considered that possibility. In fact, that had been one of my first thoughts… After all, this was the boy who had boasted so proudly about winning and losing coexisting. Just as I had decided, "Whether I win or lose, this won't end here", he must have also decided, "Whether he wins or loses, let's end this here". It made sense that he had seen my arrival as a turning point—a signal that it was time to put an end to the games.

It wasn't because I was an enemy who had infiltrated.

I was nothing more than the bell signaling the end of the school day.

… But if that were the case, then in a single round of roulette, the odds of losing were 18 out of 37, and the odds of winning were 19 out of 37. That was basically a 50/50 chance. It seemed to me that winning would have been just as good as losing in that situation.

"No. From what you've told me, Assistant Inspector Araragi, that boy was absolutely certain of the outcome and purposefully chose to lose. After all, the result was 23 white, wasn't it?"

"Y-Yes, if my memory is correct."

"Your memory is always perfect, Assistant Inspector Araragi", she said sarcastically, then continued, "There is no white 23. On an official roulette, the number 23 is red."

Huh? 23 is… red?

Um… But I was certain that it was white? … Was my memory wrong? Had I seen it incorrectly? There is no white 23… on an official roulette… Ah, but wait, that roulette was a special design. It used a red-and-white color balance. Of course, there was no black 23 either; if 23 is a red color, then black would be 22, 24, 26, 28, 30…

"29 is also black. And 30 is not black. In both the American and European styles, on a roulette, red and black do not perfectly alternate—that's the source of the confusion. 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12, 14, 16, 18, 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 30, 32, 34, and 36 are red, and the other numbers, in other words, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 15, 17, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 29, 31, 33, and 35 are black."

A perfect memory.

Well, I suppose it's common sense for people who know, but I had assumed they alternated back and forth, so it caught me off guard. But then again, if red had all been even numbers and black all odd numbers—or the opposite—then surely I would have noticed it. After all, in roulette, one could bet on odd or even numbers, so if the numbers were cleanly divided into red and black, it would be no different from betting on the color.

"Umm, then, if in this 'Reasonable Doubt' version of roulette the black numbers were instead white—"

But that couldn't be, because 23 had been white. Which meant they swapped red and white?

"But if that were the case, it wouldn't allow him to create a defeat to have his victory. **They were not reversed from the start; they were reversed later on.**"

"So you mean the color was changed from red to white after the ball landed on it? No, no no…"

That was impossible.

The entire roulette table couldn't simply change color like a chameleon. Even if there had been some kind of trick built into the table, I would have had to notice a change like that.

"Is it really such a drastic change? Colors can be changed as simply as turning a light off or on."

"Turning a light off or on? I was sitting at the table; I'm not so blind as to not notice lights right in front of me."

After all, I had a vampire's excellent vision.

I hadn't been able to trace the path of the roulette with my eyes, but that was because I'd been slacking off and gotten rusty; the ability to notice a light was nowhere near as difficult.

"What if it wasn't direct light, but instead reflected light?"

"Huh?"

"The table surface doesn't have to emit a light; **the light could have been hidden in the ceiling above to shine down on the table.**"

That was why.

That was why the table had to be red and white—that is what Inspector Kizashima was saying.

"Black is, regardless of the light that you shine on it, still black. Red and white **can be created**. Or at least you can make them appear close enough to what you want. The three primary colors of light."

"… **The cameras on the ceiling.**"

I had assumed that they were cameras placed to prevent cheating, but they were directly above each of the tables, and could be the source of the light. The ball and the chips for betting hadn't been black to match the original color scheme, but because if they changed color as well, it would destroy the effect—black was darkness.

And it could coexist with light.

And of course, not being allowed to place your hands on the table after he said "No more bets" was for the same reason… If I had looked down and seen my hands washed with color, I would have realized that something was going on.

"Since there is no way to view any of it myself, I can only hypothesize based on what I would have done, but the ceiling light disguised as a camera wouldn't have to cast light over the entire table but could instead shine specifically on the place where the chip had been set or where the ball

landed on the roulette. It was likely designed to shine light in very specific, small areas. It might be that the roulette, which acted as a projection screen, remained in its base form until a change was needed, and then in those specific circumstances, the light would shine down and change the color. Of course, that only really applies in this case, where the bet was based on color, so in reality there may have been a more complicated system in place—but in any case, it was some kind of projection machine."

"That's beyond illegal…"

You can't do something like that and then say it was just a game—but then again, you could only pull off something so lawless with a game of this sort. And it wasn't only illegal; it was brazenly so. He had no conscience about doing it at all… Even if I was a beginner with roulette, I was still an active police officer sitting at the table where he changed the red and white.

"So you say, but I think he did his best to distract you from it. When the light changed—as the ball landed on 23, he said, 'You really are a happy-go-lucky person', to draw your vampire eyes away from the table and the roulette, which I think shows considerable skill."

"Should you really be praising skill at cheating?"

"Is it really cheating to lose on purpose?"

Guh.

That was the only way that I could respond to that question. The noise and the gaudy lighting of the place started to seem like they had been designed to throw me off and make me susceptible to the illusion.

"I can't believe it… Having the bunny girls wander around the table perimeter was no doubt part of his plan to distract me as well."

"No, that's simply a lack of focus on your part, Assistant Inspector Araragi. And I realize that it's late to say this now, but as an officer of the law, it was your duty to contact and notify myself or section chief Kouga as soon as you saw middle school girls dressed as bunny girls, Assistant Inspector Araragi."

That was a well-deserved scolding.

If I tried to say that I wanted to do exactly that, well… I was just making excuses.

… Setting aside the bunny girls, it seemed likely that the roulette table that I chose at random was not the only game that was rigged in the casino. They were probably all set up with similar tricks. Rather than being a trick to make the house always win, it was a trick to coordinate wins and losses so that the "guests" went home feeling fuzzy and unsure, just as I had.

Beyond casinos, any sort of game or form of gambling, including lotteries and drawn lots, would be most addictive if it had a one-in-five chance of winning big. At that ratio, the players were most likely to continue indulging.

To put it another way, if there was a ratio that was most addictive, then surely there was a ratio that was least addictive. And perhaps that was what the Tsuganoki branch of "Reasonable Doubt" had been trying to manifest. A form of gambling addiction countermeasure. Perhaps the true objective had been to test and prove the efficacy of their system.

Test and prove—as in human experimentation.

But that made it even more unbelievable. To not only use their "guests" as experiment subjects, but even an undercover police officer… It was the exact opposite of the big-boned path that I had chosen and instead demonstrated the flexibility of a mollusk, which cannot be fossilized.

I could only admire that, even if we were enemies.

So maybe we weren't enemies.

A gambler who didn't want to be in conflict but instead wanted to coexist.

Considering my position, I couldn't exactly praise a criminal, but I could say that I found that inconsistently consistent stance to be beautiful.

I didn't mean it in an ironic or challenging sense.

I meant only to convey that it was beautiful and maybe even innocently good-natured.

"What kind of adult will Rai-kun grow up to be?"

Even with the mystery solved, I continued to feel that strange floating feeling. In response to my final question, the indestructible golem that would never age beyond looking like a child began, "It would be a miracle for that boy to survive to next year". She spoke in a cold and indifferent

voice. “Child and adult, life and death, perhaps for Fudatsuki-kun they coexist in the way that light and darkness do.”

The winds that blew this time carried rumors that changed colors at a dizzying rate, much like a roulette wheel, and much like a ball thrown into destiny, it settled where it was meant to be.

MAZEMONOGATARI

Rai Roulette — Chapter Trick

Red like blood: Tigoris Translates
Black like darkness: Bluex & Kakuzō
White like bones: Maxdefolsch

MAZEMONOGATARI

NISIOISIN

Magokoro Finisher

Chapter End

Omokage Magokoro

Zaregoto Series

Art: Take

001

Omokage Magokoro was Humanity's Last. Once "that" arrived, no matter what story it was, it meant that it was over. Whether it was a mystery, a fantasy, or even a biography, the story would end as the curtain dropped with crisp and determined finality.

Fourteen times I had come in contact with various world trees, various world lines and various worldviews, but I still lacked the qualifications to speak of the men and women who I had met through those brief brushes. Even if I were not myself, but instead a licensed storyteller who was in a position to pass down superior technologies and ideas to the masses, I would still not be in a place from which I could or should be speaking about the cultures of societies and worlds that were not my own. In fact, it might even transcend being a difference of culture to be a difference in ecology. It would be unacceptable for my unthinking actions to cause the destruction of an ecosystem.

I'd probably already gone too far in that regard.

A secret organization that was the enemy of all planet Earth and great detectives with impeccable reasoning skills were, in a literary sense, ingredients that came with a warning label that read "Danger: Do Not

Mix!" There was no discussion of one being superior to the other or one being the better—they were simply different.

At its core, I was not fond of the concept of designating invasive species as needing to be killed or of calling any animal species whose population grew too large a pest. That was, again, not from any sense of good or bad, but instead because I was a person at risk of being designated as needing to be killed or called a pest—or rather, I was a vampire. In truth, it was possible that from their perspective, I was the one who should be considered strange.

Okitegami Kyouko. Aikawa Jun. Chinou Nomi. Doujima Mayumi.

Byouinzaka Kuroneko. Mizukura Risuka. Princess Hitei. Mutou Iori.

Hagihara Shiogi. Saijou Tamamo. Yukariki Ichihime.

Chiga Hikari. Chiga Akari. Chiga Teruko.

Niounomiya Izumu, Niounomiya Rizumu.

Aoii Mikoko. Atemiya Muimi. Emoto Tomoe.

Sorakara Kuu. Fudatsuki Rai.

I wonder how I had looked through their eyes. Had I looked like a monster that needed to be destroyed, or had I been a stranger worthy of becoming friends with?

In any case, after having so many intermittent encounters with these other worlds, there was one thing that I could state with confidence.

The fact that the cold worldview from which the Blue Savant and the Nonsense User originated had come to an end in the **single digits** was, frankly, a miracle.[123] It may not have been obvious at the time of completion, but when compared to the dreadful state that we found ourselves in, ending and ending but somehow always continuing like some kind of literary phoenix, I think the dreadful truth became obvious.

Endings were difficult.

They said that dying was easy, and in a way I suppose that it was, but really… Wasn't dying the most difficult part of all? They said that "all's

[123] The protagonists of the *Zaregoto Series*, which ended after nine volumes long before this story was written. However, in 2023, a tenth volume was released.

well that ends well," right? So obviously that implied that the ending was the most critical part of all.

It didn't need to be said.

The source of that miracle had been none other than the Orange Seed, Omokage Magokoro—successor of Humanity's Strongest Contractor and thirteenth of the Thirteen Stairs, an organization built for the sole purpose of bringing about the end of the world.

And there was no doubt that she would bring an end to this twisted and chaotic mess as well.

002

It was through a series of wrong turns, missed encounters, and innumerable misunderstandings that I found myself assigned the investigation of a series of serial killer serial killings. If we were to try and count up the number of mistakes that had brought me to this point, then we would first begin at my graduation from Manase University, then the completion of my police academy training, followed by my time spent working in the Rumors Squad of my local Naoetsu Police Department, and then my journey to America to study abroad at the FBI academy for some reason. At that point in time I had accrued hundreds of wrong turns, thousands of missed encounters, and for misunderstandings, the number no doubt tallied at not tens of thousands but hundreds of millions. I was in my mid-twenties and still in the academy.

Was I cursed to remain in school for the rest of my life? Or maybe it was a curse to be stuck at the bottom rung of an elite group that was well beyond my level so that I could forever agonize over my own incompetence. If it was the latter, then the curse could likely be traced back to a certain childhood friend from primary and middle school.

At this rate, how could I possibly start a happy family with my girlfriend Senjougahara Hitagi? It was a dream within a dream. You might get mad at me for having such lofty goals, but when I thought about how every single thing was unfolding exactly how Gaen-san wanted, I couldn't help but feel embarrassed. And then there was my littlest sister who came to America before me saying, "Onii-chan, you chased after me like a duckling chasing after its mother! That's so precious!" and making a fool of me… It seemed like my life had changed drastically after encountering that iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire during the spring break between my second and third years of high school, but in actuality, the one who had changed my life more drastically might just have been that smiling, friendly lady who knows everything.

Well, in any event, maybe one day I'd have a chance to discuss that again—so there I was going through another day of training at the academy in the state of Virginia (for a former vampire it seemed a bit inevitable to end up in a place named such) when I received a summons to the FBI headquarters in Washington D.C., which I obeyed.

And, just to be clear, I did not emphasize the "D.C." in the name out of some desire to seem cool. No, instead I emphasized it because I had once gone to Washington state by accident. It was about as confusing as discussing "Kyoto" and "Tokyo-to".[124] If you didn't pay attention, you might just hear the wrong name.

And so it goes.

"I'm so happy; it's been a while since I got to speak Japanese. In spite of my hairstyle, I *am* Japanese."

She said with a guffawing laugh.

I was in a room in the headquarters alone with her—Magokoro-chan.

In response to her boisterous laughter, I did as any Japanese person would do and smiled politely in response—or I tried to, anyway. I found my smile faltering in the face of her aura.

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[124] Tokyo is the name of the capital, adding 都 (*to*) at the end designates the metropolitan area around the city.

Her orange aura.

Her hair seemed to glitter, or rather, it really did glitter, reflecting light from its orange surface. Her hair was tied into thick, heavy braids that reminded me of the heavy ropes used by shrines to ward against evil. Also, in spite of it being nowhere near the Halloween season, she was wearing a maid uniform.

The clothing looked to be practical and useful, but a maid uniform was still a maid uniform. The uniform looked familiar to me as if I had seen it before, but that wasn't important—in any case, we were in the land of freedom, the United States of America. It would not only be rude to talk about the fashion sense of someone during a first meeting, it would be downright boorish.

However—

"ER3 system… was it? MS-2?[125] Unlike the FBI and CIA, I've never heard of it before, but that's the organization that you belong to, Magokoro-chan?"

"There aren't many who would use '-chan' to refer to me, inspector. Inspector Aa-chan."

And then, once again, she laughed heartily. Not even the vampire who has been living for over six hundred years and lurked in my shadow laughed in such a manner.

Aa-chan?

There weren't many who would refer to me in such a manner—they might call me a pervert, but being called Aa-chan was a first.

"Well, it's not an organization that you should ever encounter if you live a proper life. So don't worry about it, Aa-chan. Now hurry up and lay out the information on this serial killer serial killing case. I'll bring a quick end to this floundering investigation."

"…"

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[125] In *Zaregoto*, the ER3 System is a research organization located in Houston that gathers the biggest geniuses of the world. MS-2 is a subdivision of ER3.

She had been sent by some mystery scientific agency or organization, and while Magokoro-chan looked like she was still a teenager, she had come to the FBI and now was confidently stating that she could solve the case—no, actually, it wasn't confidence in her voice; it was the certainty of stating a fact.

Ending was a daily occurrence for this girl, and the longer that we sat facing each other in the room, the more that I could feel the gap that separated us.

I had been called in because I was fluent in Japanese, a skill that any Japanese person similarly possessed, and not because of any special skill or ability of my own. I wasn't even really an investigator yet, but now I was playing the host to this girl. In this case, it seemed best to obediently go with the flow of events instead of trying to show off and make a good impression with the higher-ups so that they'd send me back to Japan sooner.

Otherwise it might not be the investigation that was ended, but myself. I began to fulfill my part by explaining to her, "the serial killer serial killings are something that was created by the media."

"Huh. I know that. The media loves to make a spectacle and sensationalize events."

"The thing is, in this case, the truth is funnier than the fiction. To be more accurate, it's not a serial killer serial killing…"

It was a serial killer high-speed killing.

They were not killed in series—but with speed.[126]

[126] Pun between 連続 (*renzoku*, "serial") and 高速 (*kousoku*, "high speed").

003

To say that people dying was "funny" would be considered inappropriate in Japan and invite a good scolding, but even in the land of freedom it wasn't something that could be said lightly—but in this case, this incident, the reality was so bizarre that it made you want to describe it as such.

As a trainee (or whatever I was, since my position wasn't exactly clear), I obviously had no official connection to the investigation, but, nevertheless, I had still learned the broad strokes of what had happened because the incident was just so unbelievable.

Just hearing that the fourteen victims were all serial killers was already the setup for some kind of morbid joke, but even if they had all been normal, sinless citizens, the sensationalism of the event would not have needed any further embellishment or exaggeration to make people stop and pay attention.

It was embarrassing to admit, but until Gaen-san's introduction (scheme) brought me over to America, I had known next to nothing about the agency known as the FBI that often showed up in foreign TV shows (to the point I had thought it might be fictional). The agency was something like a police force that was used to help with investigations that

spread across large areas of the United States of America's massive landmass. And, in that sense, this serial killer serial killing had seemingly been made specifically for the FBI to investigate, and that was neither an exaggeration nor inappropriate to say.

After all, the crime had taken place across the **entirety of the country**.

Coming from an island nation, hearing that didn't have quite the same impression on me, but when you consider the massive land area in the North American continent and that the crimes extended even to the island state of Hawaii, this case was far from simple.

The wicked serial killer became one of the most wanted criminals in the country for having committed murder in states all across the country.

The first serial killer was in Chicago, Illinois.

The second serial killer was in Manhattan, New York.

The third serial killer was in San Francisco, California.

The fourth serial killer was in Denver, Colorado.

The rest goes as follows: the fifth one in Orlando, Florida; the sixth one in Hot Springs, Arkansas; the seventh one in Nashville, Tennessee; the eighth one in Big Island, Hawaii; the ninth one in Dallas, Texas; the tenth one in New Orleans, Louisiana; the eleventh one in Boise, Idaho; the twelfth one in Montgomery, Alabama; the thirteenth one in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; the fourteenth one in Fairbanks, Alaska, and so on.

And so on.

Because the case had not been solved, that meant that it was continuing—thus calling it a "serial killing" was not incorrect; however, the distinctions of "first," "second," "third," and such needed some additional explanation.

And by that I meant that the numbering indicated the order of discovery, which was not necessarily the order of killing. Including the murders that occurred in Alaska and Hawaii, the events spanned six different time zones, which on its own presented the issue of how to track the time of events. Fortunately, tracking events according to the coordinated universal time solved that problem, and with that standard in place, it became obvious that the times of discovery for the various killings

were all over the place. However, it also became obvious that the times of death were **nearly** the same.

In this case, the "nearly" stemmed from the medical examiners not wanting to be overly exact in their estimates for time of death. But just as the "weapon" and "cause of death" for each victim were the same, it seemed that the "time of death" for all fourteen victims was also the same.

Saying they were the same didn't quite cut it.

One could even go so far as to call them uniform.

So, that was the problem—from Hawaii in the south to Alaska in the north and from New York in the east to San Francisco in the west.

How could fourteen serial killers hiding out in fourteen different and distant locations in the country be killed at the same time?

004

"By running."

Magokoro-chan said it without smiling. Her expression was completely serious. Magao-chan.[127]

"If you ran really fast, then you could do it. There's nothing that you can't do if you try your hardest. That's what my former partner and loving wife used to tell me."

I had no idea who she was talking about, but I had a strong feeling that her friend had said it with a heaping load of sarcasm at the time.

I had no evidence on which to base my belief, but I felt certain.

"If it were me, I could do it."

"At a glance I would say that it's at least four thousand kilos between San Francisco and New York."

"Four thousand kilos? What's the big deal with four tons? For me that weight is nothing."

"…"

[127] "Serious" is written as 真顔 (*magao*) where the first kanji is the same as in 真心 (*Magokoro*).

Was she an idiot from another century?

I said that we were in a room in the FBI headquarters, and to be more specific, it was a class of reception room often called a "VIP room." Make no mistake, it was by no means an interrogation room, and also make no mistake that of the two people in the VIP room, I was not the one who had warranted the special treatment…

To be fair, I did bear some of the blame for only saying "kilos" instead of "kilometers" while in a country that used miles to indicate distance, but even then, this girl was boasting that she could carry four tons and run over two thousand five hundred miles, and that seemed the bigger issue than any misunderstanding about units.

How many pounds were in four tons…?

"I'll allow that you could run across Canada to reach Alaska, but Hawaii is out in the middle of the ocean, so you wouldn't be able to run to it."

"OH! That's right! Aa-chan, you're really smart!"

Don't make Aa-chan my official title.

Also, how is that the part that convinced you?

This meeting wasn't being made public, but the FBI had called her in to assist, and that implied that she couldn't simply be an idiot… So why had they called this girl in to help…?

Araragi Koyomi was in this room because of "fluency in Japanese," but what was the reason for this girl to be here…?

Thinking about it more, if she lived here in America, then unless she was newly arrived like myself, she would be able to understand English to some degree, surely. So… Had I been called in because she had made an unreasonable request like, "in exchange for helping with your investigation, I want to speak Japanese with someone."

The reason for her special treatment…

"Oh, that's 'cause if you're looking for a serial killer of serial killers, then I'm the one you'd wanna talk to. Of course, the ones I did in weren't serial killers but demonic killers."

"… Hm?"

What was that? Did I hear her wrong?

Right now, here in the FBI headquarters, without any kind of restraints or detainment… did this girl just turn herself in?

"Well, at the time I was under Migishita Rurero's control, and I wasn't of sound mind. It was perfectly justified self-defense."

She'd been talking like an airhead up until that point, but suddenly she began to throw around legal terms as if establishing a defense—but it wasn't so much that she was explaining away a slip of the tongue, but rather that she was trying to match with my vampiric (not demonic)[128] sense of values. Sense of values, or perhaps, worldview.[129]

It seemed that she wasn't completely incapable of being considerate. And what did she say? Migishita Rurero?

She'd slipped it into the conversation casually, but that was quite the name.

"The serial killers could have been gathered in one location, killed at the same time as a group, and then their corpses could have been carried to each of the discovery locations—but even then, the area is simply too extensive for that to be feasible."

Extensive—a wide area investigation.

It was such a wide area that it was strange that it had not crossed any international borders—for instance, in a territory like Guam or in an allied nation like Japan, it wouldn't be strange for more bodies to have been found elsewhere. If the ones who were killed were all serial killers on the most wanted list, then did it make sense to profile the killer as a patriot "hero of justice" whose goal was to uphold the public peace?

At the very least, we had to admit that the killer had outperformed the intelligence agencies by locating all of the killers.

However, killing serial killers because they deserved the death sentence and enacting personal justice in such a manner was an affront to law, history, and humanity.

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[128] Pun between 吸血鬼 (*kyuuketsuki*, "vampire") and 殺人鬼 (*satsujinki*, "demonic killer").

[129] Pun between 価値観 (*kachikan*, "sense of values") and 世界観 (*sekaikan*, "worldview").

It was unforgivable.

It was not justice but a crime.

Furthermore, not all states had the death penalty, and some of the fourteen serial killers had been active in those states, so perhaps it was a good idea to keep in mind that someone connected to the prior killings was delivering death to the perpetrator—however, it seemed unlikely that someone filled with righteous fury and enmity could have carried out the killings. There was something mechanical about the crime.

It felt too detached.

As if it had been an experiment…

"The time gap between the discovery of the first serial killer and the discovery of the fourteenth serial killer was too small. So it seems unlikely that they simply moved the bodies."

"Well, if they'd done something like that, then there would be postmortem lividity and the like that would show they'd been moved around. Plus, the corpses would rot."

"Mm—Aah, did I not tell you that part yet?"

The setting for the murders was so strange that I had forgotten to tell her about the "murder weapon" and "cause of death"—even though they were just as bizarre as the locations of the murders.

"The 'murder weapon' is a freezer."

"Freezer?"

Magokoro-chan smiled as if I had told a joke.

Cute.

"Does that mean someone swung around a freezer and hit people in the head with the corner? Well, that's amazing. I once dealt with a demonic killer musician who went around killing girls with maracas, but this guy has him beat."[130]

"I don't think anyone can top that."

I wanted to hear more; well, actually, no, I didn't.

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[130] This is a reference to Zerozaki Magashiki from the *Ningen Series* (which is itself a spin-off of *Zaregoto*). He's a sound user who plays music (including a pair of black maracas) to control minds and kill people.

However, I had said nothing about swinging the freezer around and hitting people with the corner—if that really was what had happened, then while it still wouldn't make the killer a "hero of justice," it would certainly earn them my respect in some manner.

But, instead, all that I could do was shiver.

And not just because it was a freezer.

"The killer used a powerful industrial freezer to flash freeze the serial killers—and then he shattered them into a million pieces."

That was not the kind of thing a hero, or a human, would do.

The corpse that was found in Alaska was the fourteenth of the bodies discovered, and that was the reason… The ice and snow of the region easily disguised the frozen bits of body, and, at first, it had been considered a potential accidental death, which had delayed the report to the FBI.

Conversely, in Hawaii or southern continental states like Florida or Texas, the home of the ER3 System headquarters, the frozen body parts had quickly thawed and become a terrible spectacle to behold.

To call it a "grotesque murder" was an understatement.

It was at the point that it seemed feasible for the killings to be the work of an aberration… Could it be that I had been called in for that reason instead of because of my ability to speak Japanese? Let's not touch on the possible existence of a project to create a monster department within the FBI…

I had brought along Shinobu with me as an **interpreter**, but did I dare bring her out? It was illegal to have a blonde loli slave in this country… unlike Japan.

"It's possible that there are more bodies that haven't been found yet. The bodies are closer to powder than chunks, so it's possible that the pieces are more disguised than they were in Fairbanks, depending on where they got dumped."

It was possible that the killer had dumped in all fifty states—or maybe that had been the killer's goal, but finding the hideouts of fourteen serial killers had been the limit.

I wasn't sure if I should be thinking that there had been fourteen serial killers to find, or should I be thinking that fourteen had been the limit… No, what I should be thinking about is only one killer. The one behind this case.

A serial killer. A high-speed killer.

Running, huh…

Well, if there was a hero who could move at the speed of light—wait, no, even if they could move at the speed of light, freezing them at the speed of light would be difficult…

"I see, I see. The truth of this case is orange to me. Or, rather, it's clear to me.[131] Sometimes the farther away you are, the faster you arrive. Hahaha!"

Magokoro-chan opened her mouth wide and,

"Ha ha ha

Hm?

She picked the conversation back up casually, but… what had she said before?

The truth of this case is orange to me. Or, rather, it's clear to me.

It's clear to me?

Was this ridiculous, confusing case clear?

The farther away you are, the faster you arrive—what kind of paradoxical mystery novel line was that?

"I see. So you haven't defined any yet. But I'm sure you're looking for a highly aware suspect instead of a highly skilled suspect. You said you're not at that stage of the investigation, but I think we've just skipped a few steps."

"Ma-Magokoro-chan, when you said that it's clear, do you mean that you've figured out the trick?"

"Let me ask you instead: why haven't you figured it out?"

… So now she's playing the role of an annoying great detective.

I reflexively leaned forward in response, but Magokoro-chan spoke again as if to stop me.

"No, what I actually meant to ask is… do you really have the intention to end this?"

"…? Of course I do. I'm so ready for the end that it's like New Year's Eve for me. My heart is ready, and the countdown has started.[132] I want this cruel, hopeless case wrapped up as soon as possible—at as high a speed as the rest of the case."

"Then you want high elevation instead of high speed—but no, no. I didn't mean the case."

Do you have the intention to end the world, Aa-chan?

That's what Humanity's Last Orange asked me.

As if issuing an ultimatum.

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[132] The original line is a pun between the words つもり (*tsumori*, "intention") and おおつごもり (*ootsugomori,* "New Year's Eve").

"Do you know what triggers the end of the world, Aa-chan? Seeing your limits, and seeing your future."

Like I said—my name isn't Aa-chan.

005

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

Or maybe it should be the punch line of the whole thing.

Even after becoming a member of society, I had continued to keep my student's view of life due to my endless training and education, but, nevertheless, I had continued to grow older and experience more of what life had to offer, and as such, I believed that I had come to better understand the complexity of the world—I well understood that the world was indeed complicated and mysterious.

No matter the case, no matter the event, and no matter how many words you tried to use, I knew that the full story could never truly be told… Furthermore, it was not possible to explain a mystery with just a few words.

One time Ougi-chan had told me that mystery novels where the explanation of the solution was longer than the setup for the mystery were the mystery novels that were best suited to be called great works, and I hadn't really understood. Even her explanation sounded like a mysterious obsession to me, and in that sense, the entire world was rife with just the kinds of mysteries that she seemed to prefer.

However, in this one murder case, I have to accept the exception among exceptions—Magokoro-chan made the impossible possible.

The one to bring the truth into the light for this murder case spanning the entirety of the United States of America involving the deaths of fourteen wanted criminals was not a police inspector nor a great detective, but instead the Orange Seed. And she said…

"They were scattered from space."

And that was it.

It wasn't that she conveyed all that there was to tell, but rather once that aspect of the story was heard, the rest became meaningless in the face of the revelation—a crime taking place across the entirety of such a large country was impressive, and a bit much, but the solution to the mystery transcended the global scale.

Uh huh.

Well yeah, that was the end.

Once the case was considered in such a way, the petty crimes taking place in these various places across a flat map of the Earth stopped mattering—I almost said something pretentious like "this isn't a planar killer, but a three-dimensional one," but delving into it more, it went beyond three dimensions to even control time.

A high-speed murder case.

In light of this new perspective, Magokoro-chan's mysterious words, "sometimes the farther away you are, the faster you arrive," suddenly made sense.

Similarly, her comment about a highly aware instead of highly skilled killer.

It wasn't high speed, but high elevation.

Very high elevation.

Four thousand kilos was nothing.

From a height ten or twenty times that distance, if the serial killer were to have had his victims "fall" toward the landmass of the United States of

America, then even if the victims were all thrown from the same point in the same direction, they would be scattered across the landscape from even the tiniest deviations in angle. And if the goal had been to scatter them, then all the more so.

Thinking about a military satellite that is able to launch missiles helped with imagining the possibilities—with only minor adjustments such a satellite could aim at half of the world without moving.

Without moving.

No, in truth it would be moving incredibly fast—such a geostationary satellite has to move fast enough to not fall back due to Earth's gravity as well as to match the rotation of the planet below.

It was because of the great distance.

Speaking of great distance, long ago, the class president who knows everything told me in preparation for a test that while increased falling time seems like it would mean greater falling speed, in reality, because of air resistance, the speed would not increase beyond a certain point—which was why the question text included a bit about "ignoring air resistance."

Which is why even if they were pushed out to fall from the stratosphere, they wouldn't impact the Earth at the speed of light—however, one might then wonder how the serial killer bodies would not share the same fate as most meteors that enter the atmosphere and burn up due to the air resistance.

But that way of thinking was wrong.

Because they were frozen.

Furthermore, the proposed weapon of an industrial freezer was no longer a valid consideration—the murder weapon was "space."

The scale was so large that it couldn't even be seen.

But if you were basing your beliefs on commonly told lies, then you might believe that when a person is tossed out into the true vacuum of space, they will explode, as is often seen in manga or anime, but that wasn't really the case—instead they **froze.**

Before they even had time to suffocate from the lack of air, they would instantly freeze to death.

Flash frozen.

Thus they would not burn up due to friction with the atmosphere because ice cannot burn. It was a stalemate between hot and cold.

And then they would impact the Earth like a chunk of ice.

Of course they'd shatter into pieces, no matter how soft the ground was.

Naturally, in reality, there was no way of being certain if that was what would happen. In truth, there were no public records from anywhere in the world of a human body being launched toward the planet from space. You could dig through every academic institute in the world, and you'd not find any hard proof.

Or at least, there had been no such proof until now.

Whenever a new means of committing murder was discovered, it quickly spread through the world to become commonplace, but if a trick like this established itself as an all-too-familiar story for the world, then, truly, the world was over.

Or at least, much like what happened with the advent of the heliocentric theory or the theory of evolution, the world would be split into the world of old and the new world.

I was being shown the limits and the future.

A locked-room mystery trick using a needle, thread, and fingerprint identification or an alibi trick done by manipulating the timetable of a train through the use of an ancient energy like electricity seemed like such cute and nostalgic mysteries to solve. I couldn't help but be shaken as I witnessed a paradigm shift in the world of crime, even if I wasn't alone, but Magokoro-chan's true motive was not there.[133]

She had already solved the case with a few words.

But she wasn't content letting the world end with only a few words—if the world was her prey, then she had placed a shot firmly into its torso, but now she approached, aiming for the head, and spoke another short sentence.

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[133] Here, "true motive" is written as 真意ちゃん (*shin'i-chan*), the first kanji being once again the same as in Magokoro and with the suffix *-chan* added.

"In other words, the culprit is an alien."

Forget about being speechless; I almost went lifeless at those words.

Araragi Koyomi had almost gone down in mystery history as the first person ever to hear the solution to a mystery and die from shock—but, certainly, or perhaps, uncertainly.

A case involving the deaths of fourteen serial killers that no investigator could catch, secretly capturing all of them, taking all of them into space without being noticed or caught, and then launching them from space, with careful aim, so that they each landed in, for some reason, different states of the United States of America, and again, without being witnessed by anyone—to be able to pull off such an incredible undertaking would take such an incredibly powerful organization with similarly incredible luck that, in a way, it actually became a comfort to instead think of the crime as having been committed by aliens in some new form of experiment similar to cattle mutilation.

If they're aliens, then we didn't need to understand.

Not understanding them was the magic of aliens.

It was just an experiment—literal human experimentation.

It wasn't **"You are the culprit!"**

It was **"We are aliens."**[134]

They should have been coming to invade Earth, but for some reason instead they chose to focus on this one nation, this one region, and there was no chance of understanding their way of thinking. That was just their culture. A very different culture.

You had no choice but to accept it as a lump sum.

Looking from their perspective, we too had a different culture, or perhaps, a different world—it gave me a taste of what it would be like to be a normal person transported to another world with my smartphone in hand.

---

[134] 我々は宇宙人だ (*wareware wa uchuujin da*, "we are aliens"), also commonly written in katakana as ワレワレハウチュウジンダ, is the standard line aliens utter when first meeting humans in Japanese works of fiction, similarly to "we come in peace" in English-speaking works.

They were looking down on our laws, history, and all of humanity—in retrospect, those words read like the opening of a declaration of a space war, in which case I would like to redact that sentiment.

It had been drilled into my head since my teenage years that I had been taking the easy path by simply ascribing the root of problems to aberrations and that I had been tossing aside rational thought—however, I ask you now, if you don't give up rational thinking in the face of this situation, then when will you?

I endured and struggled through a lot, but when faced with such a horrifying truth, as the unlicensed and unqualified storyteller that I was, I had no choice but to quietly shut my mouth… The amusing and inappropriate cultural exchange needed to end.

That's it.

Learning from the forgetful detective's quick judgment, leaving the fighting of aliens to the contractor, taking the magical girl who toyed with life as a lesson in what not to do, though I may not be a boy like those from the Pretty Boy Detective Club, sealing away any curiosity akin to that of the shut-in in bloomers, becoming an adult just like the magical girl who governs blood, using the double negative learned from the Inspector General, like about half of the demonic killer clan doing it for their family, fair and square like the tactician, without being misled by the triplet maids, changing drastically to suit the tastes of the twin assassins, avoiding danger the way the close-knit college students would, in order to outlive the hero who boasted of his unusual kill-death ratio, in the manner of the skillful gambler's defeat, I gracefully accepted this ending—but even so.

As the last line, let me just say one thing—as the final line, just one thing.

We[135] are tenacious.

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[135] The line mirrors the standard alien greeting from earlier. Here, the kanji used are 物語 (*monogatari*, "story") while the furigana that are used to indicate the pronunciation are われわれ (*wareware*, "we"). It can interpreted as "we", "stories" or even as the "*Monogatari Series*" itself.

MAZEMONOGATARI

Magokoro Finisher — Chapter End

Translated alien language: Tigoris Translates
Adapted it to our worldview: Bluex
Brought everything to its end: Maxdefolsch

Afterword

This is something that I identified a long time ago. One of the most complicated things to do in mystery novels is writing true human beings. And readers may not fully understand why. That's a thing one comes to understand when writing novels, not just reading them. Something that you can only experience when you start writing. If you try to think about it, you may understand this particular feeling when thinking things like "this great detective can't exist" or "this mysterious person can't be real". That also happens when a character is introduced for the sole purpose of being killed. Or when an author creates a scene just to draw a reaction from the audience. Or when you increase the number of suspects for the sole purpose of selecting one. This is the difference between writing human beings and writing characters. Recently, people are starting to point out this issue. Rather than writing traditional mystery novels, they transform human beings into characters. This is making the novels more lively, isn't it?

This book gathers short stories that were written for the animated movie "*Kizumonogatari*". The first part of the short stories was distributed for "*Kizumonogatari* Part 1: Tekketsu-hen" and is composed of "Chapter Forget – Kyouko Balance", "Chapter Strong – Jun Build", "Chapter Rule – Nomi Rule" and "Chapter Eye – Mayumi Red Eye". The second part was distributed for "*Kizumonogatari* Part 2: Nekketsu-hen" and is

composed of "Chapter Ill – Kuroneko Bed", "Chapter Blood – Risuka Blood", "Chapter Sword – Hitei Clear" and "Chapter Kill – Iori Fugue". The third part was distributed for "*Kizumonogatari* Part 3: Reiketsu-hen" and is composed of "Chapter Army – Shiogi Ranger", "Chapter Invite – Akari Triple", "Chapter Eat – Rizumu Rock 'n'" and "Chapter Uni – Mikoko Community". This book is special because of how the stories were distributed. And since it's special, I thought that I was obligated to write new ones. They are about Sorakara-kun and Fudatsuki-kun, and like *Mayumi Red Eye*, they are about the relationship between a male middle-schooler (?) and Araragi-kun (why those two!?). As the last performer of this book, I chose Omokage Magokoro. I wanted to tell a story about how one culture communicates with another one. This is a story that may even put an end to the *Monogatari Series*. Magokoro is really scary. It's with these feelings that I wrote this book, *Mazemonogatari,* 100% as a hobby.

I want to thank Watanabe Akio for drawing the cover with the women gang. I'm grateful to you, the readers, for allowing me to continue writing these stories. I also want to thank Take-san, TAGRO-san, Nishimura Kinu-san, Kinako-san, VOFAN-san and Watanabe-san for their character designs of Chinou Nomi and all the other ones. I'm really happy for being able to witness the miracle of seeing all those characters assembled together. Thank you very much. Thank you for continuing to read my novels. And even if there is only one copy of this book, I'll still be happy.

NISIOISIN

SPECIAL THANKS

For their contributions in translating and proofreading the stories

Azart, Link, nyorem, Polaris Translations, Stationary Proofreations, sumiraj, Sway Translations, Tigoris Translates

For their help with everything else, great and small

appointedfern, ccherias, Kakuzō, mewlinAI, Noyaxus, Valan

For making with me what Vertical never will

bluex, »sawa«

For being part of my life all these years

The people of #monogatari-anime

For reading this book until the very end

You

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