

DIGITAL

VOL 1

殻物語

KARAMONO

GATARI

CHAPTER FIRST

Design / PAPERCLIP

PAPERCLIP

KFUJI EDITIONS

KARAMONOGATARI

殻物語

Shell Tale

PAPERCLIP

FIRST EDITION

CHAPTER FIRST
HITAGI STAPLER



001

I love Hitagi Senjogahara.

Why? It's simple, really—I love her because she's Hitagi Senjogahara. I know it sounds tautological, but Senjogahara isn't someone you can sum up in a single sentence so this is the best I can do.

I love Hitagi Senjogahara, because she's Hitagi Senjogahara.

I wonder if that's enough for a passing grade?

A for effort?

B would be fine too... It's a difficult assignment.

Of course, reducing someone to a few words like that would be demanding regardless of who the subject was, but when it comes to Senjogahara, in particular.....

It's categorically impossible.

Forget shooting for a sentence—a whole paragraph would barely scratch the surface. It'd take an entire book just to achieve a brief overview, and even then—I'm not sure where to start.

Maybe... Maybe, at the very least, I can begin with the one thing I'm certain of.

The most fundamental truth I've learned.

A fact, you could say.

Something I know.

Hitagi Senjogahara..... lives an ideal life.

Yes, that's right.

It might be counterintuitive to open with this impossible assertion, and I don't doubt I've raised some eyebrows by asserting it so confidently. And, maybe it's a little presumptuous—and somewhat off-putting, to discuss someone else's life at all. To be clear, if there's anything I firmly believe in, it's that other people's lives... When it comes to the lives of others, no matter how much they intersect with yours or how much responsibility you might feel towards them—someone's life should only belong to themselves.

That's a boundary you just can't cross—for anyone. I believe this with my whole heart.

However, I'm making an exception.

Because Hitagi Senjogahara isn't just anyone—if anything, I'd say that displaying a little bit of outrageousness would be part of her signature.

So... consider it an homage, if you will.

Allow me to put it into perspective: apparently, throughout their life, it's estimated that the average person will get to know around 1,500 people. If we're talking about just basic interactions, the number shoots up closer to 80,000. Eighty thousand. It's a lot, more than our small human minds can realistically imagine, and still—you could go multiple lifetimes without meeting someone as outrageously confident as Senjogahara when it comes to this.

She's truly one of one.

Not many could ever boldly declare that their life is ideal, and although it isn't exactly an observation that Senjogahara has ever made herself—not outright—she leaves no doubt about it.

So, I hear you ask, why? When, and how?

They're all great questions.

It isn't uncommon for people unfamiliar with Senjogahara to assume that she owes her straightforward attitude to an equally straightforward personal history. Naturally, you might argue, no one path through life is ever completely straightforward. As privileged as you could be, everyone had

some bumps in the road, and maybe it was simply that the road Senjogahara had found herself on was unusually level. If some tribulation was par for the course, some would think—Senjogahara must've hit a hole-in-one.

It'd make some sense.

That is—if it were true.

I already feel a little dirty for putting words in her mouth, and it'd be uncouth to tell the story in her stead, but I think most of my readers will be acquainted. It's been told before—more competently than I ever could, too. The terrifying situation she found herself in as a middle-schooler, the miserable state she was left in as her family broke apart, and the intense emotional turmoil that the fallout brought along. Situations that unfolded, predicaments that children should never have to endure, eventualities that went far beyond ordinary growing pains.

By the time Senjogahara entered high school, after having to brush away successive attempts from unscrupulous conmen to swindle her vulnerable self—she resorted to wishing upon a crab. For just a small alleviation of her ails, she had to rely on superstition.

She became entangled with an *aberration*.

And while receiving a god's blessing did allow her some peace of mind, it came wrapped around a curse, too. Isolation, malady, apathy—suffice to say, scoring even a *birdie* seemed foregone. While her peers got to hit from the fairway, Senjogahara had been planted straight into the rough.

It didn't stop her.

She struggled plenty, through inordinate pain at times, but whatever trials she faced, they were—to her—never anything so dramatic that they would be a fundamental obstacle to her survival. In fact, even me calling them “trials” is something she'd find awfully self-important (sorry, Hitagi).

She's incredibly strong.

In my eyes, that is.

In the eyes of Senjogahara, it wasn't anything special.

Although many in her place would've stopped to catch their breath, moving forward was second nature to her. It wasn't a particular show of

strength, nor a testament to her wit. No. Simply put—the way she saw it, Senjogahara Hitagi never had any other choice. As she was keeping herself busy with life, certain things happened—and in continuing to live, so did other things happen too. On the whole, although she could be proud of herself for aspects of her life in which she'd made unquestionable progress, she didn't bother holding herself responsible for the things that were out of her control—the events that befell her one after another, were they good or bad.

And...

Just like that, by the time college was on the horizon, her circumstances had changed for the better. Whether it was something brought on by her quiet perseverance or simply a happy accident of fate, the nuance had little importance to her.

She was grateful.

Spring break rolled around, and she could afford to live a peaceful and carefree life. A semblance of warmth had returned to her home in the Tamikura Apartments, she'd been able to reconnect with a companion from days past, she'd grown a little closer to her classmates (well, just two of them, really), and she'd even found herself the heroine of a romantic adventure of her own. A real one, this time.

A true love story.

All of that was more than enough.

Objectively speaking, it wasn't much—but it was ample happiness for her, and she was more than thankful. It was the one thing that, regardless of how impassibly she faced the world, she made sure to never forget. Even if some things were yet unresolved, or still imperfect—Senjogahara had moved forward with conviction.

“What's happened has happened, and what'll happen will happen.”

Hah—I sounds a little ridiculous, don't I?

As if she'd say something that embarrassing...

Isn't imitation the sincerest form of flattery? Senjogahara has taught me so much... I thought I'd try my hand at it. While it may not be a lesson I learned from her, it's a lesson she taught me anyway.

That's why she has my endless admiration. My endless love.

They're one and the same, frankly.

At least they became one and the same, somewhere along the way.

It's difficult to pinpoint when feelings of admiration might take root to transform into that blossoming tree we like to call "love" (a cherry blossom tree, that's the most romantic), but if I had to pick a moment... If any scene was to symbolize the instant I fell in love with Senjogahara—it'd have to be that evening. That evening, in the dimly lit abandoned cram school where she came face to face with an ill-mannered (spirited, he'd say) Hawaiian-shirted occultist, her weight-stealing crab, and a boy who was only meant to watch her save herself.

To Senjogahara, *he* was her savior.

She insisted.

And me, a total outsider—as pathetic as it is to admit, I fell for her almost immediately.

I don't think falling in love should be anything to feel embarrassed about, but I'll allow myself to feel flustered for being such a pushover nonetheless. I could even say that—with no small amount of pride—in more ways than one, I am her biggest fan.

If I wasn't so conscious of my perfectly prim record as an upstanding member of society, you'd no doubt find me coming home every day to a room filled to the brim with Senjogahara-themed merchandise. *Otaku* get a bad rap, but I think it takes some real bravery to put your social standing on the line like that for the one you love. People love to whine that "It's just a character!" as if it's so ridiculous to cherish something you can't embrace.

Be honest—would you love your girlfriend if she was a worm?

I'd hope so.

That's it, I'm wearing my "I ♥ GAHARA" t-shirt now, I don't care if she disapproves.

...Still.

Still, despite being her biggest fan, there's a certain question that I often return to—or rather... maybe it's exactly because I've fallen so helplessly in love with Hitagi Senjogahara that I'm made to linger on this.

A cheap bit of doubt, one that makes my heart waver at times:

If this modest happiness is enough for her to consider her life ideal, if her decision to move forward has left no room for remorse, I wonder—

Does Senjogahara ever glance over her shoulder?

For all the words attributed to her character, and the rare reminiscence she's shares with a detached tone, steeped in half-truths and playful lies...

Is *nostalgia* something she ever experiences?

I often think—

It's a little ugly to cast aspersions on the one thing I've just claimed defined her best, but—as inhuman as her courage seems, as immovable as her determination is, there has to be something she still regrets, right?

Just a small something, at least.

Human beings—no, even *aberrations* too—even if they proudly live the happiest, most fulfilling life they can imagine, there should be a question that unites us all:

“What if it had been different?”

Could it have been different?

It's an unescapable hypothetical, one which you might as well call the foundation of our imagination. The first act of *storytelling*—how would she answer it?

Maybe she'd argue that there's no reason for her to be so greedy, and that there's no use in worrying about hypotheticals—especially ones that concern the past.

Maybe she'd have a point.

Rationally speaking—if you wanted to be efficient. A question like “What if it had been different?” can be answered in a million different ways, and if a question has a million indistinguishable answers, how confidently could you say that there was a purpose in asking it?

“It could’ve been better, but it could’ve been worse,” she’d declare, adding that “Whatever happens in the future could be good, or it could be bad. It’ll happen either way, right? There aren’t any good reasons to dwell on the past—and when it comes to anguishing about the future, even less.”

Ahaha...

Sorry, I’m getting carried away again.

She probably wouldn’t say that—not those exact words. I’d like to think she’d say something preposterous nonetheless. A brazenly blunt assertion while she looked you straight in the eyes, leaving no way of telling whether her words were genuine truth, shameless cover-ups for her intimate thoughts, or just her inescapable brand of dry humor.

Was it all of the above? Who could know?

No one but herself would know the truth.

No one, not now or ever, because those kinds of truths exist only inside a single person’s mind—whoever’s it is.

However, still—

Her life is already ideal. She doesn’t particularly long for change...

It’s unbelievably strong of her, yes. It’s admirable, desirable, inspiring, and it’s the reason I love her, yet—I feel a hint of sadness at the thought. Sometimes, there’s this melancholic air to her. Sometimes, it’s as if she refuses to look at the world beyond the present—to let her eyes wander.

Anywhere.

When you refuse so completely to anguish about the future, how can you possibly look towards it? Logically speaking, you couldn’t have one without the other. By all manner of reason, either you entertained the possibilities or you averted your eyes.

In her instinct to *move forward*... maybe her future is something Senjogahara has actually *left behind*.

She’d committed to it, but once it was all dealt with, now that she’s *moved forward* successfully—what comes next? Will she move blindly, unaware of whether it might be forwards or backwards? Or rather, has she arrived at a standstill?

Is this really the end point of Hitagi Senjogahara?

When push comes to shove, I'm only an outsider in her life, and I have no right to pass judgement... but does it have to be so bittersweet? If she really is too happy, too content with life to wish for it herself—would it be wrong to do it in her stead?

It's only a small wish, although a deeply selfish one.

There are grandiose wishes that people have, things that would fundamentally change the world for the better, or at least fundamentally change their lives—that isn't my wish. Its fulfilment wouldn't matter. The world would remain the same.

But I can't help thinking, maybe—

If things were a little different...

Not another world, barely another life.

Just maybe—

In a *more ideal* life, would Hitagi start moving forward again?

“I hate quiet days.”

As I roused myself from bed, I was reminded of something I’d told Tsubasa Hanekawa back when we’d only recently met. If I recalled correctly, it was the first proper conversation we had, or something adjacent to it—not too long after I’d been sworn in as her vice-president. Although, technically speaking—I was sworn in as *our homeroom’s* vice-president, but that part felt less important.

In any case—it was something I’d uttered a few months ago, and it seemed that it still held true.

On this day, March sixteenth, the morning after my formal graduation—I was reminded of that fact.

5:00 AM.

I didn’t even have to turn my head towards the small wall-mounted clock to know that was what it read. The ceremony from the day before had proven uniquely exhausting, but it hadn’t stopped me from waking up at the same time, in the same way I always did:

With a small, delicate yawn.

Hauu~

Just like that, with my arms stretched behind my head.

It was part of my *morning ritual* you could say, although it isn't a description I'm particularly fond of. There was nothing religious or solemn about it, and I wasn't looking to curry any spiritual favor—I'd done enough of that in the past to grow sincerely bored of it.

Right now, I was just waking up. Nothing ritualistic about it.

I wasn't unaware, however—as I silently slipped out of my pajamas and into the nude, of how eccentric (erotic, even) this habit of mine might come off to the average person.

To the common mortal, and others below me.

Unless you were a shift worker who relied on the first train of the day to reach your workplace, an unemployed shut-in with no regard for the concept of time, or a vampire who slept through daylight hours (which wouldn't count as a *common mortal* now that I'm thinking about it and doesn't sound so different from a regular shut-in anyway), getting out of bed at an hour still shown on the right-hand side of the clock should be something of a rare occurrence.

For the average person.

In fact—for that average person, doing so intentionally might pose a challenge. Even if they went so far as allowing themselves an ample and indelicate yawn in lieu of my purposeful show of restraint... They might still not be able to do it.

Dear me, I thought. It was deplorable.

I remembered at once a rumor I'd overheard in the halls of Naoetsu High, a small tale about a student who was infamous for his truancy. Allegedly, he'd grown so complacently incapable of getting himself out of bed that he needed his little sisters to firmly shake him awake every single morning. Sometimes he'd be missing for the first few classes or wouldn't even show for an entire day, only for the school to later find out that his sisters were off on a field trip, bedridden, or otherwise indisposed.

A third year, apparently.

It sounded like a joke, but if that was the kind of *morning ritual* some people were used to... beyond the terrifying things that a *ritual* of the sort

would summon—it wouldn't be surprising if a biological clock as rigid as mine seemed a little unnatural to people.

Maybe I'm overstating my case.

Even when you accounted for the generalized laziness of human society, that particular anecdote made for quite an egregious display of sloth (*Sloth*? Is that what he was summoning?). If the societal norm somehow became to rely on exploitable younger siblings for something as basic as getting up in the morning, even a sliver of autonomy would start to sound outlandish.

He was infamous for a reason. And a little gross, honestly.

To think that the admirable, angelic Hanekawa saw it as enviable... "I'm sure he has his reasons," she'd argued with me once, "And besides, doesn't it sound nice to be woken up by a caring little sister? He's luckier than most, I'd say. I understand wanting to take advantage of that." At the time, Hanekawa's conciliatory attitude towards such an obvious lowlife baffled me, but it was in my best interest to maintain an amicable relationship with the class-president.

I refrained from pointing out that if it were up to me, he'd be lucky to get up from his hospital bed, with or without his little sisters' help.

No, I won't be giving my condolences.

I could never get along with that sort of man—a scoundrel. Fundamentally speaking, there's too little overlap.

I may be detestable in my own right, but for a woman of my caliber, waking up was simply something that happened (at five a.m., the morning of) after I'd gone to sleep (at ten p.m., the evening prior)—with very few exceptions. You only had to consider this much to recognize that we lived in two completely distinct, irreconcilable worlds.

And if he has his reasons, as Hanekawa says—so do I. However odd they may be, my oddities aren't unjustified.

I'm quite sensible, I'd attest.

Understandable, even.

Relatable.

Hm. That sounds good—I'll put it on my resumé.

The relatable reason is such:

Waking up before sunrise was a habit I began to develop when I was still in middle-school so that I could go on runs in the early morning, before the typical respectable salaryman had even had the chance to hit *snooze* on his bedside alarm—which is to say, before my father was up. It was the sort of discipline that was necessary for a girl like me, who turns everything she eats into straight flesh—to keep her body in its ideal shape. As an active member of my school's track team, it also made for valuable out-of-school practice.

So, I went out on these runs.

I woke up before everyone else, exercised for about an hour, came home to my father, showered, and got ready to start my day. Before long, the regimen had made its way into my routine, and had helped keep my figure in its exquisite condition thereafter.

That's all there was to it. A boring, relatable story.

It's reason enough, don't you think?

What's that? No, you say?

Not at all?

It's not relatable enough, either?

Well, fine—Since you're really forcing my hand.

I'll let you have this.

The even more boring truth... is that leaving the house at an unreasonable hour was a discreetly convenient way for me to get some time to myself.

Unsurprisingly, it doesn't take much for a humble residence like the Tamikura Apartments to start feeling cramped, especially when the entire space has to be shared between my father and me. It wasn't that I was vexed by his presence (we only have healthy disagreements), but even in a healthy relationship, a teenaged girl needs some space away from her lover every now and then.

Sorry, her father.

I lose sight of the nuance sometimes.

Regardless, for that reason, the early mornings were precious to me. They were the perfect moment to escape my claustrophobic predicament without being met by the usual hustle and bustle of the town. Doing it this way... there was no one around that might overhear my heaving breath, rugged panting, stifled moans, and effortful whimpers.

Free rein and peace of mind.

What a liberating sensation—I was already sighing in anticipation as I adjusted my brassiere's strap.

Maybe this stated distaste for voyeurism would come as a surprise, it crossed my mind, to those who'd had the misfortune of running into me before my "rehabilitation" at the hands of Tsubasa Hanekawa. Certainly, while there was no shortage of twisted and depraved girls that would enjoy being caught in a shameful act of indulgence, as I once might have...

I wasn't part of them—not anymore.

It was part of my vice-presidential oath. A noble vow to renounce all forms of unsightly sadomasochistic behavior.

In earnest, at least—even the class president understood that there was no refusing a well-placed joke every now and then, even if the sexual-comic relief role was better suited to my delightful junior Suruga Kanbaru these days.

Without a doubt, she was the rightful heir of the Gahara Style™.

I only needed to take a glance at her astounding rate of innuendos per page to concede that she'd already surpassed even my wildest fancies of perversion. Honestly, the unstoppable force of nature that Kanbaru had become in my absence filled me with an unassailable sense of pride—the likes of which I could only describe as the sort a mother-bird feels when she watches her fledgling fly the nest.

Not that monkeys could fly, and I was more of a mother-crab than a mother-bird, but Kanbaru was never one to abide by rules that didn't involve a ball and a hoop.

I spared a thought for her as I pulled up my spats—under which I wore an appropriately comfortable pair of panties, I should specify. My respect for her didn't extend to her questionable wardrobe choices.

All this to say—now that I'd passed the baton of impropriety to a promising junior, my continued habit of going on runs in the early mornings had nothing to do with the pleasure of feeling the cold air nip at tender skin as the heat of physical exertion rises inside to struggle against it, every inch of the body seizing up with both pain and relief at once.

Only a pervert would assume so. Definitely.

It was thanks to the class-president. With her intervention, the impure Senjogahara girl who violently assaulted anyone who came close to her and only opened her mouth to spew inappropriate insults was gone.

I'd well and truly turned over a new leaf.

More than that—I'd turned over a new page.

A new chapter, even.

A new volume, ostensibly.

The impure girl was gone and replaced.

"Nice to meet you. I'm New Gahara Plus. NG+ for short."

And compared to Old Gahara Minus (OG-? Even the abbreviation looks worse), I was essentially a different person. Whoever that lonely loser that used to bear the name of Hitagi Senjogahara was, she wasn't me.

We were so essentially different that this very entry could stand as an essentially separate serialization of its own.

It would be nice to have a brand-new franchise all for myself.

I should think of a title.

How about—

The Hitagi Tales.

Amazing, I'm already sold.

Simple, to the point, and puts the main attraction front and center—with a firm "*The*" for emphasis. *The Hitagi Tales*, the unmistakable, definitive, definitional tale of Hitagi Senjogahara.

Yes, it's pretty good.

But on second thought—the whole “*Tales*” thing, would have me steering a little too close to its predecessor. If I was going to sail into uncharted waters, I’d need a shift in genre to boot.

Let’s say—

The Three Hitagi Problem.

Now we’re talking.

Not that having three of me would be a problem—it’s only metaphorical—but here’s the pitch: it sounds like the title of a romantic drama, and it starts slow, but it’s actually an intricate hard science-fiction novel. It has exactly the kind of trope subversion modern audiences are looking for—trendy, cool, innovative, intriguing...

The perfect story.

And on top of that, I’d get to go on some spacefaring missions.

Frankly, if anyone did write it—*perfect* might become obsolete as an adjective. It’d surpass perfection, no doubt. Throw out your dictionaries. It’d be a piece of literature so all-encompassing, so exquisite, that it’d have you wondering whether there was any use in ever writing—truly, reading other novels any longer.

And once the movie came out, that’d mark the end of cinema, too.

Hitagi Senjogahara would become the capstone of human artistry.

Maybe it was just the fabric of my shirt sliding on top of my skin, but I was starting to get aroused. It was arousingly ambitious. Too ambitious, maybe.

Too ambitious for this world...

Ah, unfortunately, for the good of society... An idea as arousingly brilliant as that can never be allowed to see the day. Such is the burden of genius, some would say—my burden, it would appear.

—ack!

I felt an inexplicable weight press on top of my body—I thought, but the explanation was clear. My burden was leaving me with no escape: the future of literature was resting on my shoulders. That, or the sportswear

hoodie my father had gotten me as a graduation gift was a little heavier than my old one.

Either way—it was a shame. *The Three Hitagi Problem* would have to be shelved, however—

Something about it remained true.

As much as I altered the setting, as much as I fiddled with the supporting cast, it would have to be “Hitagi Senjogahara’s story.”

Whose else would it be?

And today, it was also the story of Hitagi Senjogahara—the New Gahara, not the Old one—who was presently busying herself with zipping up her hoodie as silently as possible in her father’s apartment.

Not in space, sadly, but we’ll see about future installments.

I was a changed woman, no doubt about it, but even crossing the stylistic boundaries of art wouldn’t warrant a complete re-contextualization of my character. It wasn’t like we’d gone through a series reboot, and the name remained the same at least.

It’s good to have a sense continuity, even if you’re writing an unsanctioned spinoff—which isn’t something I’d recommend doing in the first place, of course, but you never know.

It’s a legal grey area, apparently.

And with this sense of continuity—today’s story was the continuation of another. A corollary to the much lamer, much more sordid story of the “Hitagi Senjogahara” who stalked the school’s corridors like an unpleasantly bitter ghost. If nothing else, my past would serve as juxtaposition. A reminder both of the girl Hitagi Senjogahara once was and the woman she’d since become.

The woman I’d since become: not a detestable, vitriolic teen with violent antisocial outbursts, nor the docile, good-natured schoolgirl some would rather have me be.

I’d become me.

Better yet—the ideal me.

Hitagi Senjogahara, in the best shape she'd ever been. The best shape there was, by all accounts—have you seen my physique? Ever since I'd regained my ability to put on some weight, I'd acquired quite the appealing build. For all the extra curvature, I kept my toned figure.

Slim, yet curvy...

The kind of body that's all the rage, to put it lightly.

And just as I'd made leaps and bounds of progress in physical form and carried my most essential traits into the present, the same went for the rest.

I'd fundamentally changed, for the better, but...

I'd retained some qualities—for the better, too.

My recent adventures had been a truly centrifugal experience.

The scum had all collected at the bottom of the vial and promptly been discarded, leaving only the purest distillation of myself. Refined to perfection (a running theme, well suited to a running woman).

Pure Senjogaharanium.

In other words—as radically new of a direction as it had taken, this was still the life I'd been dealt. My only one—barring reincarnation, maybe, but I'd rather not buy into more wishful nonsense. Unless I was being *Reincarnated as the Villainess in an Otome Game but the Boys Love Me Anyway*, you could count me out. Actually, throw in the girls too. For good measure. Any self-respecting *otome* game should have at least one female dating option in my opinion.

Scratch that, one is too few.

An all-female cast would be ideal. I'm speaking from the perspective of a *yuri* practitioner after all—a disgraceful lesbian, in IRL terms.

That was the common interpretation.

"I hear Senjogahara's never had a boyfriend," I sometimes heard murmured in the hallway. "How could a girl as beautiful as her still be single?" my prying schoolmates would bicker amongst themselves. "Is she, you know..."

A lesbian?

Was I? I'll neither confirm nor deny, but I will say—on the two former counts, they were entirely correct. Despite the many advances I suffered from innumerable varied yet uniformly forgettable male peers, I'd remained woefully *single* throughout my time at Naoetsu High, and had every intention to keep my business clear of the opposite sex.

It was among the things that were part of me, and wouldn't change.

Much in the same way that I still hated quiet days, and still woke up at 5:00AM every morning for my habitual jog.

Even today.

Especially today.

The first day of my final days as a highschooler.

Usually, I assume—after a laborious exam period, freshly graduated high-school students are meant only to relish in the fruit of their efforts and take the opportunity to finally relax. Of course, that was a touch generous. Owing to its status as a fairly prestigious private school, the majority of Naoetsu High's graduates (which now included me) often received recommendations for their college of choice before their finals even took place, which made the final exam period distinctly *unlaborious* for many. A bonus round, a post-credits scene—nevertheless, it was something that kept even the more volatile students on task until their spring break.

After which, they were free.

For a decent while.

No course material to study, no ceremonies to prepare for or attend. Adding to that, the more reputable students wouldn't be holding their breath for a decision regarding their future.

All worries were extinguished. In other words—a quiet, restful time.

Given the circumstances, most people would find it a little preposterous to be up so early without a suitable reason, and yet—here I was, preparing to brave the cold morning air, fully dressed in little more than spats and a humble hoodie.

Because I had no respect for quiet days, or *relaxation*.

relaxation /rɪləkseɪʃən/

noun

1. Inactivity, especially after a period of work.
2. The preferred way for a slacker (common high-school student) to pass time, especially while shirking work.

Despite its many revisions, the word had yet to be inducted into the Senjogahara English Dictionary (*SED* for short).

To be clear, I was far from being a workaholic—I self-identified as a slacker myself when it came to schoolwork, but I still had my priorities. Just about *anything* I could spend my time on easily bested an afternoon of meaningless loitering—or a morning, for that matter.

Even worse, just imagining myself enduring a quiet day filled to the brim with *nothing at all* was enough to make me wince in pain.

I was too impossibly restless to endure it.

That was the peculiarity—no, the cornerstone of my personality that informed my grievance with *relaxing*. One of the various things about me that hadn't and wouldn't change.

It made me a particularly difficult woman to be around, and had contributed to the sense of distance I felt with my peers throughout my time at Naoetsu, yet—I had no desire to compromise on it.

Difficult, intransigent.

A real #####, I know—although I personally prefer the publisher-friendly *tsundere*.

For Old Gahara, it had gotten to the point where I'd almost completely resigned myself to the belief that I was simply too fundamentally different from my classmates for the rift between our perspectives to ever be bridged.

Almost completely.

That “almost” was Tsubasa Hanekawa.

The class president of all class presidents, who by now I've mentioned more than enough times to warrant an introduction, but I was somewhat taken up by my multi-tasking.

I had to remain time conscious.

In order to ensure I was ready and out the door as soon as possible, I usually saved the inessential things for my return, after running. Showers, hairstyling, and bathroom visits (when I could avoid them) were all on the cutting room floor.

Some things I couldn't skimp out on, though—

For this morning, I'd set aside a modest breakfast consisting of a single granola bar, and eagerly welcomed it within my insides as I picked my phone up from its usual resting place on top of the shelf.

I gave the display a quick glance:

No messages—unsurprising, and irrelevant.

Ten minutes past the hour—somewhat more relevant.

I decided I could afford to spare the class president a little more thought and stuffed the device into my sweatshirt's pocket.

Nowadays, I only needed to scroll through the three contacts I'd saved to its memory to get in touch with her—"Father" (self-explanatory), "junior" (Kanbaru insisted strongly enough for me to eventually cede), and "Hanekawa (^.^)" (isn't the little cat so cute?). It made it all too easy to forget that there was a time when I would've obnoxiously scoffed at the idea that I might ever get along with someone like her.

At school, Hanekawa had an indelible reputation for her hard-working nature. The general consensus, as she appeared, was that the class president had no real hobbies and was always spending her free time on one of three things: schoolwork (studying), after-school work (tending to student council business), and extracurricular schoolwork (self-studying for subjects that weren't covered in class).

In other words: work, work, work—nothing else.

What was most baffling wasn't even that the only thing on her menu was work—it was that it was all the same flavor of work.

She was frankly ridiculous.

It's the early morning, so this analogy seems only right to use: You've walked into a *café* expecting to grab a warm beverage and breakfast, only to

realize that it exclusively serves drinks. You might be a little disappointed to miss out on a fresh croissant, but you'd get over it pretty soon. It was understandable enough, and you'd at least get to enjoy a tasty drink of your choosing. Honestly, it was your fault for going to a *café* for the food anyway—you might even convince yourself of that.

Now, having accepted your fate of a relatively unexciting, unsatiating liquid breakfast with a side of nothing, you browse through the menu—only to be met with an entire page of nothing but unsweetened *espresso*.

Sure, a *café* doesn't have to serve food—and if you wanted to be really traditional about it, maybe it didn't have to serve non-caffeinated drinks either. It wasn't all that unreasonable or surprising for the revered class-president to be a thorough workaholic.

But.

There had to be at least *some* variety, *some* excitement, however small. Otherwise, your establishment was doomed to fall into ruin. Come on, seriously—you couldn't even spare a drop of milk?

I'd be rooting for them to fail. By any measure of reason, I would've taken my business elsewhere.

And yet—

Although—conversely—the class president could not have been further removed from my lifestyle of coasting by on general academic proficiency, having no stake in after-school activities, and only haphazardly skimming through required textbooks. Although, realistically speaking, that was where it should've ended, and I would've taken my business elsewhere.

It turned out differently—inversely.

By some twist of fate, not very long into our third year of high-school, the current vice-president was suddenly indisposed, and I was volunteered by Hanekawa herself to take his place in helping her plan for our school's upcoming cultural festival. I was exposed firsthand to her pathological tendency to overwork herself, and—hold on.

I'm very sorry.

I was intending on keeping it short.

To get to the point: this newfound connection made me wonder whether Hanekawa and I, however different, might share a similar perspective on “relaxing,” and I eventually seized the opportunity to ask her directly.

Actually, thinking about it now...

The events were only a few months old, but I couldn't recall the details of our conversation that day, which was unusual.

Not anything worrying—just unusual.

By and large, my retrospective ability was commendable. It was thanks to its quality, among other things, that I'd been able to so comfortably coast by in my academic ventures without effort. It was unusual for me to lack in recollection.

Was the fatigue setting in now that I'd finally crossed the finish line of my high-school years? I questioned the sudden memory hole as I stretched myself to completion on the *tatami* flooring.

Krr—It creaked.

The *tatami* did, not me.

Unfortunately, after all the years spent stretching every morning and evening, ravishing my youthful musculature barely elicited a thing unless I was fully folded over in half. Other than a slight tinge of ennui and disappointment, everything was in order.

I didn't feel tired at all.

As I'd heard from the class president, however—when it came to stress and exhaustion, just how you felt didn't cut it. You could only be sure of the diagnosis by dutifully assessing its signs. Maybe this slight bit of fog was a small symptom.

I moved on to stretch my calves, and—searching the confines of my mind out of stubborn obstinance, I did remember something.

The detail that had concluded our drawn-out conversation.

Hanekawa's response was totally sneaky.

Evasive, even—she barely answered my question at all. It was something like, *Why shouldn't you enjoy every day equally?* No, more like, *In my opinion, you'd be better off enjoying each day equally.*

Yes, that's right. That sounded about right for her.

According to her reasoning, rebuking idleness when you'd been given an opportunity to relax was no different from rejoicing at the news that "something bad" had happened just because it was more interesting than hearing about "nothing of note" taking place.

You were asking for it, essentially.

"That's just called being a troublemaker," she'd said.

"It's unforgiveable," she'd added.

Okay, she didn't go that far—probably.

"Be careful what you wish for."

If we'd known about the monkey's paw lurking on our school grounds, I'm sure Hanekawa would've brought it up.

Not that she had to—immediate danger or not, she simply saw it as the reasonable stance for any class president worth her salt to take when dealing with a classmate's insistent pessimism.

She was reprimanding antisocial behavior, just as she'd grown accustomed to.

The peacekeeper of Naoetsu High.

Admittedly, it was a far cry from the response I'd been hoping to get from her, but there were few things more Hanekawa-like than leveraging rightful criticism to avoiding giving a straight answer, so I had little to complain about.

Her idiosyncrasies were just as precious to me as her genuine beliefs, and I did feel as though I'd managed to come closer to understanding the kind of person she was.

The rift wasn't so unbridgeable—at least, with her.

Not that I was convinced by her little stunt, naturally—when it came to the result of the debate, I totally *owned* her. No amount of endearing

evasiveness was going to tide me over to the peace-loving, quietude-tolerant relaxation side of the enthusiasts.

I don't "mellow" easy, perish the thought.

I'm untamable.

My wakefulness—at this hour, on this day—was an act of resistance, and I would continue to resist through the entirety of these dreadful holidays. Not only did I count myself among the students skilled enough to have already secured a recommendation, but my father and I's financial situation couldn't afford us anything in the way of vacationing.

It was still too early to prepare for my college entrance, too.

There was nothing to anticipate, and nothing to do.

One thing, actually.

I could wait.

.....

...and wait.

.....

...for a while.

.....

...sitting still.

.....

.....

...patiently.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Utterly sighful.

Utterly yawnsome.

Couldn't something interesting happen already?

Had I seriously been handed a filler arc for my very first main character role? Was I supposed to sit tight and wait for the TV adaptation to catch up to the source material?

That wouldn't sit right with me.

As competently written as a filler episode could be, it was something you only watched because there was nothing better to do. Any twists and turns it might have were just feeble attempts at distracting the audience from noticing the purpose of its existence: buying time.

Which is to say—to wait.

Waiting has no stakes. And with no stakes, there's no point.

Ha~

I sighed, a little less delicately than before.

I didn't have a choice—I'd endure it.

I drank my fill from the kitchen sink—Water bottles only served to bother me when I was running, so I rarely carried one. I preferred to rely on simply hydrating myself before and after my outing. I was rarely gone for long.

This morning was no exception.

I had this, at least, I concluded.

My imperishable habit.

So, I laced my running shoes.

Unfortunately, I couldn't skip straight to the good part, but I'd endure this intermission best I could.

I checked my trusty sports watch—the one I'd relied on since my early days of jogging. The band was getting a little tight, but even with the small amount of weight I'd put on recently, my wrists were preciously thin.

Twenty-past.

If I lingered any more, it might get crowded on the way back.

My hand wrapped around the cold doorknob that led directly outside, and—

Well, this is where you'd usually turn around and announce your departure before being on your way, but since there wasn't anyone awake inside the apartment to hear it, I kept the words to myself.

Just a small "I'm headed out" recited in my heart.

It's the thought that matters, isn't it?

I was hoping for some excitement, so I figured a show of good intentions would help tip the scales in my favor. My religious beliefs were best described as "resolutely atheistic," ordinarily, but I had no misgivings about using whatever I could to my advantage.

Oh—that sounds ill-intentioned.

What I meant to say...

"I'm not one for prayer, but I'll make an exception for today."

In Hanekawa's name—Amen.

I stepped out of my dear father's apartment and took to the streets. As expected, the morning air was crisp, and the roads still perfectly empty, save for a few birds chirping here and there.

How nice.

Maybe the firm stance I just took against "quietude" and "relaxation" would cast the shadow of doubt upon the truthfulness of that sentiment, but—I see no need to defend myself.

Believe it or not.

I really did enjoy these brief moments of undisturbed silence.

I couldn't decide whether it was due to their habitual nature or because I knew they'd end shortly after they began, but I had no trouble enjoying their degree of quietude. There was no dull anticipation, no boredom to dread. They had enough of a purpose—enough to disqualify them from my unyielding scrutiny.

In fact, I was already starting to forget about the uneventful days that were awaiting me.

Running alone really empties your mind.

When I had nothing but ambient noise to accompany my stride, I could focus just on the present, the here and now. Once I had enough momentum, even running became nothing more than pure instinct.

I was living in the moment, fully.

Which might be why, owing to this very particular morning, I'd put a little more emphasis on "emptying my mind" and "living in the moment" than usual.

A little more.

A little too much, maybe.

Likely. It was possible.

I was thoroughly invested in letting my senses guide me. I emptied myself in body and soul, you could even say. How awesome, you might think. It sounds just like when the protagonist of a *battle shounen* is about to unlock a new super power, you'd say—

But instead of throwing a *Black Flash*, I just ended up getting lost.

Ah.

I completely omitted to follow my route.

Oops.

I'd assumed that jogging along the same streets so often would have seared their path into my muscle memory, but it seemed all it took to get lost was a hint of overzealousness. Apparently.

All of a sudden, I was lost.

And honestly, I was peeved.

The day had only just started, and it was *already* turning sour? I had no intention of giving reason to Hanekawa's careless reprimands, but they suddenly sounded awfully appropriate. You'd think it was fate itself punishing my ungratefulness—the class president herself, if you wanted to get meta about it.

The irony was so on the nose that I couldn't help but wince.

Something bad happened—already.

Lol, I laughed—if I burst into tears now, at least people would think I was crying of laughter. It was the best I could do to save face.

But, I thought, hold on—*something bad?*

I checked my watch.

You'll excuse me for not divulging the specific hour here, but I feel like I should maintain a minimal sense of privacy. I've already been far too generous in the previous section—any further information about my daily routine could prove compromising to my well-being. If you're that interested in the minutiae, I'll allow you to approximate based on context clues.

Either way, I'd only been jogging for a short while.

I inspected my surroundings—I was still in close enough proximity to my neighborhood, and a quick glance proved sufficient to more or less recognize my whereabouts.

This really wasn't an inconvenience.

I took a wrong turn while taking a jog outside, nothing more. It wasn't *bad* by any stretch of the imagination—there was no need to be dramatic. Whether delivered by fate or my class president, such an inconsequential bother wouldn't deter me.

It was anticlimactic, if anything.

So much for karma catching up to my troublesome nature—it couldn't even manage to make me properly lose my way. And if I'd ended up in a part of town that was further away from my darling father's apartment, or wandering a neighborhood I didn't recognize—it would've been equally unreasonable to declare me *lost*.

All things considered, Naoetsu was a normal, agreeable town, complete with a normal, agreeable layout. Nothing in particular stood out about it, but nothing got in the way, either. It was clear that it wouldn't take much effort to find your way around it—even for someone completely new to the place, I'd argue.

It was well indicated.

Just from where I was standing, I could see up to three signposts.

Naoetsu was uniquely navigable. Some years ago, the district had gone as far as having maps put up in every corner of town—the kind that come with a survey of the landmarks in the surrounding area and a cute little red pin that reads **YOU ARE HERE**. Things you usually only see in the bigger cities, to drive up tourism.

Not that there really were any noteworthy landmarks, again. Unless you were interested in a sightseeing tour of Japan's most properly average public toilets and park benches (I hear some German guy made a movie about that, go figure), there wasn't much in the way of tourist attractions that a city plan could highlight—no matter how competently drawn it was.

If there was one thing that did stand out about Naoetsu, it was how agreeable it was. For a city that has so little to offer, it was almost nonsensically accommodating.

You might even call it *too* accommodating, if that was possible. Any more accommodating and it'd be totally overrun by suspicious ill-mannered Hawaiian-shirted cranks and other various scoundrels that squat the local cram-schools consequence-free.

Eurk.

Despite being all warm from the physical exercise, I felt a shiver run down my spine.

That abandoned cram school wasn't too far from here.

It was unoccupied at the moment, luckily, and considering the state it'd been left in by the events of last year... I couldn't imagine a new vagrant moving in anytime soon.

Our peaceful town was better off that way.

Right, it was definitely possible to be too accommodating.

Having an easy-going attitude is one thing, but you have to draw the line somewhere. Just think about it for a moment—if everything was permissible and within reach, how many people would still care to conduct themselves appropriately?

Would I? Honestly, I couldn't tell you.

Besides the class president, my father, and an outspokenly serious girl I once shared a homeroom with, possibly—there were only a handful of people that truly cared about the rules of society I'd chance.

It's why they group up all the dirty magazines in a corner at the bookstore. The well-adjusted members of society get to avoid the mind-rotten perverts that are shameless and insane enough to go out of their way

to browse the aisle in public—and for the more prudish ones, it keeps them in check.

Not that I really knew all the ins and outs.

Of Naoetsu's urban planning—I mean. I liked to consider myself well informed, but knowledge of that nature belonged more to Hanekawa's domain of expertise than mine—she was the know-it-all who gave me the rundown in the first place. She really did know a lot (not everything, but still a lot), but she seemed in particular to know a lot of useless trivia about this town's short history. A lot more than would be reasonable for a girl her age.

Local politics is old people stuff.

She's lucky she has such an enticingly youthful body. It makes for a good balance. A gap *moé*.

As for her thoughts on that particular aspect of our town, they weren't too different from mine. According to her, it wasn't a town that was worth thinking much about—although she did so anyway. The single conclusion she could offer, rationally, was that it made for an easy, frictionless life.

Frictionless.

Whether it was meant as a compliment or submitted as a complaint, we at least agreed on the assessment.

Point being: only a truly helpless dimwit could manage to get lost in a town like ours, where even a grade-schooler would find their way home without a hitch.

Brrr.

I was definitely still warm from all the running, but I felt another shiver tickle my spine.

That park wasn't too far from here.

Well, actually—it was a good hike away, now that I was thinking about it, but I was reminded of it all the same. Unpleasantly enough.

It was an unimportant anecdote, so the details were vague to me, but I remembered a kind of story taking place there. In that kind of park, on a kindly late spring (or some other season), on the kindling of an uneventful

day last year (or further back than that), featuring a certain grade schooler (or another kid, I wouldn't know). An *aberration* tale about a kind of ghost with a kind of affinity for leading people astray.

That kind of story.

Let's not get carried away though.

That was then (whenever it was), and this was now.

As far as I could tell, I hadn't become the victim of a curse.

Now that I was reminiscing about it, I realized, I remembered letting slip that the neighborhood around the park was my turf.

Just my distinctive modesty.

Truthfully, when I was in my prime, the entire town fell under my jurisdiction. There wasn't a chance I would get lost in any part of it, now or then.

"Sigh," I sighed.

Mourning the gentler times of my iron-fisted rule over The Naoetsu Kingdom, I concluded with a dreamy, softly nostalgic sigh.

In the end, nothing of note had happened yet.

"Yawn," I yawned.

A bored, dull yawn.

Not much I could do about it.

Other than that, the day was still young. I had some kilometers to run.

Section change. According to the time-honored conventions, when the number that heads each of these parts ticks up by one, it means that we've entered a new scene. I've heard of cases in which the increments went beyond normal linear progression, but I'm told that a "section change" almost always implies a change in location—or, at least, in the characters featured.

Almost always, it seems, because I hadn't moved an inch, and given that the sun had yet to show itself on the horizon, I wouldn't be expecting company any time soon.

And yet, it wasn't unwarranted.

Section change, new scene: Hitagi Senjogahara, a nondescript neighborhood, and—an obstacle. The setting hadn't changed, not because I'd given up on my morning jog, but because my path was being blocked.

I was being held back, nefariously.

In front of me was my enemy: a utility pole, planted into the sidewalk, as I'd come to expect of utility poles. In that regard, as far as utility poles went, it was about as normal as it gets. It wasn't especially large, or placed in a way that would be particularly obstructing of the sidewalk's intended pedestrian use. A neutral enemy. Morally grey.

In other words—I could've sidestepped it easily.

I wouldn't have needed to sidestep it at all, in fact, but something about it caught my attention.

Oh? I exclaimed, silently.

Something of note, I thought. Finally.

It wasn't much. Under normal conditions, it was a barely noticeable detail. The kind of technicality the average reader only picks out on their fourth re-read of the novel, unless they're using an annotated copy—the sort of thing you shouldn't be doing on your first read anyway. If your name isn't Tsubasa Hanekawa, it was best to give up on grasping absolutely everything about a book on first pass.

Nonetheless, I noticed it.

Don't worry, we haven't switched narrators—this is still Gahara speaking, and Hanekawa still has me squarely beat in attention to detail. What I'm saying—is that I noticed it regardless.

I was compelled to notice it.

It bothered me, even.

This something *of note*, which, as it appeared—

It was...

A note (lol).

Okay. That one wasn't very good.

I was just looking for amusement.

In front of me was my compelling detail—a note (lol). Was such a trivial thing worth its own scene? I was a little eager to move on to the next section, honestly, and I was unnerved to have to further postpone my run, too, but... I felt compelled.

I wanted—I mean, I couldn't simply ignore it.

If I was to believe in myself as the narrator of this story, I couldn't let any detail get by me, however small. There was no way they'd handed me a filler arc after all—this had to mean something.

I approached the object of intrigue decisively:

A note, fluttering in the cool early morning air, pinned onto the wooden surface of the non-obstructing wooden obstacle that had barred my path.

Or, not exactly.

As I realized fairly quickly, it was the rest of one. From the looks of it, its remains were being held together by a narrow piece of metal. Most of the paper had been torn off, and only a small scrap was left.

A perplexing sight, I thought, but watching it hang on for dear life had a morosely romantic hue.

It was just a loose piece of paper, but I almost felt bad for it. What a sordid fate—the result of a well-intentioned resident’s attempt to keep neighborhood flyposting in check, probably, but the botched job had left the stub with barely enough of itself to offer a dying word.

It was pitiable, truly.

I wondered whether I should put it out of its misery.

I clasped the paper between my fingers.

I’d committed to displaying my well-intentioned nature for the day, hadn’t I? It’d be mercy, and I’d only be finishing what was started. Keeping the streets clean was classic community service, too.

However...

With that in mind, I didn’t have a clue who’d put the thing up in the first place, and it seemed sturdily attached. It was likely that whoever was behind this had intended their work to stay put for a while.

Other than me, it shouldn’t be bothering anyone.

As satisfying as it would be to pull it clean off, I might even start being accused of engaging in reckless destruction of private property, rather than helping anyone out. It wasn’t worth it.

Whatever. I could at least satisfy my curiosity, I figured.

I leaned over the note to read its contents.

.....

“Ah?”

This time, the confusion escaped my lips.

There was certainly enough reasonable space left for me to expect a glimpse of its now-obsolete purpose—a word or two and maybe a flair of punctuation—but it was blank.

Completely blank.

Not a word. Not an inked trace. Not even a trace of ink.

Nothing at all.

This situation was getting weird, I thought—*ominous*, if I wanted to dramatize a little.

What was an empty scrap of paper doing on a random telephone pole in the middle of nowh—sorry, the middle of a lovely residential area? It was the sort of clue the protagonist of an esoteric murder mystery story would find strewn about an outlandish crime scene, I mused.

Although, realistically...

With this piece of forensic evidence mostly incomplete, the implications were potentially far more mundane than the intrigue of its context clues let on.

It could just be someone’s to-do list, for example.

Something lame like that.

“People have all kinds of weird hobbies nowadays,” I spoke, though not to anyone in particular.

Talking to myself was an unpleasant habit of mine.

I made sure to restrain myself when there were others around, so as to not bring harm to the carefully crafted image of the “*cool, detached girl*” that I’d cultivated over the years, but it had a tendency to come out when I was alone.

Like now—thankfully.

I'd even glanced over my shoulder to make sure of it.

It's good to double-check your work.

I should've done so before nearly ripping up someone else's hard work, I realized, but I was at least certain that no one had seen me attempt it.

No harm, no foul?

I looked around again for no particular reason, but the neighborhood was as quiet as it got.

It's good to triple-check your work.

The class president would commend me for it. You might argue there wasn't much need for me to be sneaking around like this in the first place, but I couldn't be too safe. What if whatever oddball planted their shopping list there was irrationally committed to the privacy of the non-information on display?

I wouldn't want to be taken in for stalking.

Don't get me wrong—I wasn't one to care about a menial breach of a stranger's privacy as long it was entertaining enough. The way people talk about "stalking" makes it sound like a terrifyingly dirty word, but as long as no one finds out, what's the big deal? You just need to be good enough at it to not get caught.

No harm, no foul—right?

If I have to be honest, it's those novice stalkers that are spoiling the fun for the rest of us. I had to give Kanbaru some pointers about it once—she was going completely overboard with it. Showing up at the targets house, smashing their bike, beating them senseless... The only reason it ended up working was due to her freakish athleticism—a rare trait for a pervert.

To rely on it was an affront to the art.

The crucial part, I taught her, was to avoid contact and leave as little of a trace as you could manage. As long as you were in the clear, you could peep as much as you want to—and do whatever else might come to mind.

Nothing crass, I assure you.

In this case, though—with most of the memo destroyed there wasn't much left to peep at.

A powerful security measure.

If you insisted on protecting your privacy (to keep away from dirty, amateurish stalkers, for one), destroying as much information as possible was the best way to go about it. Like how *James Bond* burns the secret transmissions once he's done reading them.

Ah, *hm*.

A thought rose to mind.

I'd written it off as a personal list, but if the author had gone to the length of posting it in a public area, there was a considerable chance that it had an intended recipient.

It didn't mean that Naoetsu had its own 007, of course. Even if there was some kind of spy network in this peaceful of a town, *Bond* himself stopped receiving handwritten instructions a while ago already—whenever Daniel Craig took over.

That said.

Was I witnessing some sort of primitive written communication?

Considering how unavoidable they were nowadays, going without SMS and e-mail was pretty hardcore, but if you were going back to paper communication, you could always use a fax-machine. Forsaking the entire postal system to send a letter was even more intense.

It was impressively stupid—almost charmingly.

You rarely met such a dedicated luddite.

Unfortunately, adopting such an out-there communication method came with its downsides, clearly. Given this setup, it was all too easy for a Good Samaritan to get the wrong idea and try to take down your message before it could reach its destination.

It'd only be an awkward misunderstanding, and it would definitely be no one's fault at all, but despite my own complaints about technology, at least e-mails couldn't get ripped in half.

The stub did serve as proof that an attempt was made—only, an announcement that doesn't tell you what it's announcing is as good as useless.

No, it's worse than that.

Like a nagging feeling you can't pin down. A message that leaves you emptier than you were before receiving it. That leaves you more *lost*.

It's *perverted*.

Sorry, perverse—I still had Kanbaru's antics on my mind.

Either way, the more I looked at this incomplete letter, the more I was being assailed by those feelings of perversion. Because my robust memory had unusually failed me earlier in the morning, maybe—I couldn't shake the feeling that I was missing something.

I had to get to the bottom of things, I thought.

And, *ah*—

Before I could catch myself in the act, my phone was already flipped open and ringing into my ear.

“...uhgh.”

It was a slip up. An unbecoming one.

I'd made it a rule not to call on her unnecessarily, but my mind had gone to the first person who might be able to help me pierce through the veil of an inconsequential mystery. Inconsequential, futile...

It was fine.

She owed me. A more scrupulous woman than I might've been pained to call upon a favor for something as menial as this, but I was more than fine with squaring her debt through small services.

I was making a magnanimous exception.

Besides, I only just realized, it was too early for her to pick up.

“Hello? Senjogahara?!”

“...”

Never mind.

She actually answered.

I'd nearly forgotten about how unnaturally early it was, but she answered anyway. She even caught it before the second ring.

Of course she would. What a bother.

“Yes, this is herself,” I responded curtly.

Miss Hanekawa.

Apparently, my class president wasn’t yet of the fact that it was perfectly acceptable for her not to respond to calls she received at unreasonable hours. Actually, it was perfectly acceptable not to respond to calls in general—but that was still a somewhat ambitious concept to expect her to grasp.

I wished she’d start with the basics at least.

“... ”

Just hang up, I implored silently.

Save me the embarrassment.

I won’t do it again.

“..... ”

Actually—do *what* again?

I’ve already forgotten all about this, so let’s put it behind us, okay?

.....

.....

.....

“Uhm...”

She was still there.

The usual strategy of giving the cold shoulder and not saying a word wasn’t working at all. Admittedly, it was a strategy I commonly employed at school, so there was there was no guarantee that it would work over the phone.

Still—

“Tch.”

Useless phone, I cursed the wretched perversions of technology under my breath.

What was even the point of engaging in live conversation if I couldn’t make my assailant (interlocutor) tremble under the unbearable weight of being blatantly ignored?

I was starting to empathize with the anonymous primitivist from earlier. Even pinning handwritten notes to telephone poles was more dignified than this humiliation ritual.

“Excuse me, are you just going to ignore me until I hang up?” Hanekawa commented. “Don’t you think that’s a bit rude? If I didn’t know any better, I’d be feeling pretty hurt,” she added.

Ah, I give up!

It was useless, she’d seen right through my intentions. The dematerialized alienation of social bonds caused by technological progress had nothing to do with it—the class-president was just too strong.

I was outmatched. I’d been blaming the system, but it was an individual difference all along...

That’s just wrong, isn’t it?

I’m happy to have learned. It was a worthwhile lesson from my dear Tsubasa Hanekawa.

Thank you for teaching me this.

You can hang up now.

“A lesson?! It’s far from the first time you’ve tried to brush me off like that, it obviously isn’t gonna work anymore...” she sighed. “Frankly, being so forgetful at your age... It’s a little worrying, Senjogahara.”

How irritatingly relevant.

Not that she had any way of knowing, but the subject was a little sore at the moment.

“I’m sorry, did you need something? Are you just here to humiliate me?” I asked.

“Huh? You’re the one that—”

“If it’s the latter, I should warn you that I won’t be going down without a fight.”

“A fight?”

“That’s right. Since you seem so intent on degrading me, let’s have a duel. No holds barred. A free-for-all. I bleed and bruise easily, but I can take a beating—don’t go easy on me.”

“Bleed?! I’m not cut out for that stuff at all,” she scampered. “If I ever got physical with someone, I’d probably just let them win by forfeit. Now, can we get back to—”

“Forfeit? That won’t do at all. It’s no fun if you don’t fight back.”

“I just told you that I won’t be doing that... And wait—what was that about ‘degrading’ you? I thought—”

“So you’re not interested in *getting physical* with me, then. Ah, I’m a bit hurt..... Is my body that unappealing to you?”

“That’s obviously not what I—”

“If you’re going to keep humiliating me like this, I’d at least like a fighting chance. It feels better when it’s earned, you know? I don’t mind showing you the ropes.”

Whether you’re dishing it out or savoring it yourself, the taste of bitter defeat is an acquired one. If she wanted to learn, the class president was in good hands.

Take it from Kanbaru’s teacher.

“Ah, stop, stoppppppp!!” Hanekawa blurted out. “I have no interest in humiliating you or being humiliated! None! Zero! Nil! Zilch! Not a taste I want to acquire!”

Bizarrely enough, she sounded a little out of breath—as if someone had rudely interrupted her three times in a row.

Please look out for yourself, Miss Hanekawa.

“And besides,” she continued after regaining her cool, “As I was trying to say... You’re the one who called me in the first place. Before six in the morning, no less.”

I hope this isn’t just your idea for a prank, she added.

“Oh, is that what happened?”

“Yes?”

“Are you certain?”

“Unless I’m somehow still sound asleep and dreaming—also yes.”

“That sounds uncertain to me,” I remarked. “Have you tried pinching yourself to make sure?”

“I’m not doing that.”

Especially not at my request, she complemented.

Maybe I’d gone a little overboard with the teasing.

“You think so poorly of me, Miss Class President. It’s just a normal thing to suggest to someone who might be stuck in a dream, isn’t it? Unless you’d rather use a spinning top.”

“...I don’t need to do any of that. Your incessant quipping is enough to tell me that I’m *unfortunately* speaking to the real Senjogahara.”

“How presumptuous,” I quipped. “Even for a class president who knows everything, that’s a bold assumption.”

“I don’t know everything, just what I know... And I know that only the real Hitagi Senjogahara would argue back so forcefully when she knows she’s in the wrong.”

She had a point.

Still, I’d argue, you could hardly ever be so conclusive—about anything. Even the brightest physicists and philosophers of our time have petty unresolved arguments about simulation theory. Descartes had a good start, but beyond “I think therefore I am,” he was basically freewheeling it.

To this day, it’s still up for debate.

While a *simulation* is a little different from a *dream*, that’s only on the surface of it. Ultimately, the idea is the same—if a simulation is an invention capable of emulating the world, wouldn’t a dream count too?

It’s an invention of the mind, isn’t it?

For all Hanekawa knows (a lot), and for all I know (a little bit less), there’s no such thing as a “real Hitagi Senjogahara,” and since all we can be sure of is that *we think*, therefore *we are*—then there’s a chance that it’s all my own invention.

“Lewis Carroll?” Hanekawa reacted with genuine surprise, “A chapter title from the lesser *Alice in Wonderland* sequel at that... that’s quite niche of you.”

“Not at all—it’s really surging in popularity these days.”

“19th century children’s literature is?!”

"Of course not," I answered. "It's from a visual novel—books are way too old-school."

"A visual novel...?" Hanekawa interrogated. "Aren't those full of obscene stuff? I've read about them somewhere..."

"That's just a bookworm's antiquated stereotype—visual novels are works of art I'll have you know. It's real literature. Very moving stuff. Not obscene at all."

"I feel like I shouldn't trust you about this."

"*Wonderful Everyday*, how could it not be wholesome?"

"Hm, I guess it does sound wholesome enough..."

"Correct. A touching story that everyone is sure to love."

Maybe not everyone, I'll profess. I'd skipped over some of the more contentious details, but at least I wasn't lying about it being heartwarming.

"That's all well and good Senjogahara, but you didn't call me just to tell me about your favorite computer game, I assume."

"What are you talking about? I never said it was my favorite."

"..."

I sensed the atmosphere grow tense.

"Fine, Miss Class President. I'll tell you why I called you."

"Please do," she requested.

"It's just..."

"Yes?"

"You see..."

"Go on."

"I was out running like usual, and..."

"I'm listening."

"I don't want you to misunderstand, but....."

"You don't have to worry about that."

"I was just having a moment of doubt, so....."

".....So?" she asked.

"So I tripped on my laces and my phone fell out of my pocket, flipped itself open and dialed your number—all by itself. Real bummer."

"You had me sold on the drama for once, but that twist is way too outlandish," she critiqued.

"That's just how it goes," I conceded. "I did try to cancel the call before it went through, but for some reason it was picked up before it could even ring twice. Before six in the morning, no less."

"I—"

"I'll apologize in whatever manner best suits you of course. What would you like? Will you have me prostrate myself in the nude like before?"

"—have nothing to say in my defense, but when did I ever ask you to do that for me?! Please don't go to such ridiculous lengths to apologize to me."

Easy enough—that was settled.

I apologized for my imprudent behavior, and Hanekawa recognized her part of the blame in the incident.

I didn't have to trouble her any further.

It would be excusable for me to leave the conversation off here.

...

It would be.

"That said, if it was just an accident, I guess I'll—"

"Alright, Prez," I spoke. "Since you're being especially amenable today, I'm willing to call it even—so long as you humor me for a moment. You have a duty to listen to your classmates' troubles, don't you?"

Ah, was she about to say something?

That was too bad.

I didn't mean to cut her off, really.

She'll forgive me I'm sure—I mean, it probably wasn't anything important anyway. And my request was fairly menial too. I only felt a little guilty for wasting Hanekawa's time over a silly accident, so I figured I might as well burden her with that favor she owed me.

Not exactly a favor—a small question.

“I don’t recall signing on for such an overbearing school duty. Putting aside that I’m not the president of any class anymore—we’d get no volunteers if the role had that sort of intense responsibility,” she responded, dryly.

This wasn’t the sultry Hanekawa I was used to dealing with. My comment seemed to have caused a stir.

She couldn’t be upset at me, could she?

“Is that a no, then?” I politely asked for confirmation.

“It’s a no from Miss Class president,” she explained, “But as Tsubasa Hanekawa... I don’t mind hearing you out. You don’t need to use my sense of duty to trick me into having a conversation with you.”

Besides, Hanekawa continued.

“It must be pretty important if you went out of your way to call me. Class president or not, if something’s troubling you, it concerns me too. At least I’d like to think so, as... well, as your *gZZZZT*—” Hanekawa’s voice was broken off by a sudden crackle from the phone line. “It’s not like I’d be able to go back to sleep after such a lively wakeup anyway,” she lamented, without reprising her earlier statement.

As my what?

Unfortunately, she was completely drowned out by the reception issues. She must’ve gone through a tunnel.

My “good friend”—could it be?

Was I sufficiently blessed to count myself amongst the people Hanekawa would consider herself a “good friend” to? Maybe “guardian angel” was more fitting...

Your guess¹ is as good as mine.

I was happy to receive privileged attention from Naoetsu High’s top celebrity regardless.

¹ If you have an idea of the word that Miss Tsubasa Hanekawa was about to say, please leave it in the comment section below. In the events that a correct guess is submitted, the publication will be selecting up to ten willing participants to receive the alluring prize of a now-exclusive photoset of the ex-class president in her old high-school uniform. Offer subject to terms and conditions, the winners will be announced via e-mail after / / . For further details, please consult www.hanekawasnumberonefan.com or contact us via email at kfuji@aol.com.

I took advantage of Hanekawa's benevolence to give her a short run-down of the situation, carefully circumnavigating the detail of me accidentally running off track—for the sake of brevity.

"Hmm... It could be a lot of things, but if whatever's left is just a regular blank piece of paper, then it's probably a more personal thing. If it was some kind of advertisement campaign, even that small scrap would have some color to it. You probably would've seen other posters around, too."

That's about all I can say.

The possibility of a full-blown advertisement campaign hadn't even crossed my mind. It should've been my first hypothesis, if I'm to be honest, and I might not have even given the flyposting a second thought—had I considered it for a moment.

Dutifully rejected, however, by the class president who'd emitted it.

Well, we did arrive at the same conclusion in the end, so let's just say that I'd already discerned it through my intuition.

"Right. I was thinking the same, actually," I concurred.

Let's see, Hanekawa ruminated.

"Is there anything particular about the way it's displayed?"

"With how little is left of it, it's hard to say."

"Then, anything noteworthy about the material?"

Another detail I'd failed to consider.

My telephonic accident was paying dividends.

I reached towards the torn note again to feel the grain.

It felt... like paper.

I had a certain fondness for stationery, but it was limited to all the various utensils and implements, not so much the supports they were designed to imprint on. I usually opted for the cheapest notebook I could find. Beyond the skill of the artist themselves, the tool is the primary distinguisher of quality—the material is secondary.

Thus, with my lack of expertise, the only thing I could deduce was that it wasn't any variety of textured or coated paper. Nothing too unique. Hazarding a guess at the grammage was beyond the scope of my abilities.

"Just some regular old printer paper," I summarized.

"Aha!" Miss Holmes gave her best impression of the eccentric detective, "That pretty much confirms it then. We're dealing with a lone suspect using whatever they had on hand, and they likely didn't have time to prepare much, either. Even if they wanted to advertise something small-scale like a tutoring service, they would've known in advance to pick out a more appropriate weather-resistant style of paper—we can basically eliminate that hypothesis."

Heheh, this is pretty fun, she mumbled to herself.

"Hold on," I said, "I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, Miss Holmes, but you're getting ahead of yourself. A well-established company would probably make sure to use high-quality material, but we can't assume everyone else would comply with the industry norm, even if they had time to mull it over."

They might've run into budgeting issues, or maybe they just didn't care to look into printing options. Not everyone is that thorough. Even businesses prefer to cut corners where they could when it came to applying business standards.

When it came to personal endeavors, regulations are just a set of loose guidelines. Unless your name is Tsubasa Hanekawa, of course.

"Micro-enterprises are businesses too, though..."

"I'm sorry, are you including high-school math tutors in your definition of *enterprise* here?"

"Legally speaking, it's an important classification," she defended herself. "You can't skirt around the law just because it doesn't sound like a big deal."

"Fine. What about those tutorship adverts where you can rip the phone number from the bottom of the page then? Doesn't look like they use weather-resistant paper to me."

“Ah, well—they should, probably...”

“If everyone did as they should, the sun might as well explode.”

“Why would that happen?!?”

“Just a figure of speech.”

“Do your idioms have to be so extreme? What’s wrong with saying it might just snow?!”

“Maybe it’s because we’re only just coming out of winter, but I feel like I’ve seen enough snow for a lifetime. I’d welcome a bit of change.”

“If that change didn’t involve the extinction of our solar system, I’d be on board with you! And wait—wouldn’t the sun disappearing make it even colder here on Earth?”

It’d just be an everlasting winter... Hanekawa shuddered.

“I wouldn’t worry about that if I were you. Humanity would already be wiped out by the blast.”

“How grim.....”

“Any other thoughts, Miss Holmes?” I called her back to attention.

“Ah,” Hanekawa reacted, realizing that she’d diverted from the original topic, “Well, you do have a point, it could always be someone advertising *themselves*, technically speaking. In this case, though... I still feel like it isn’t what we’re dealing with.”

“And why might that be?”

“A hunch.”

A hunch, she said.

It was rare for Hanekawa to make such ungrounded assumptions, although... It happened to align with my *intuition*, so I was inclined to agree.

It probably wasn’t an advertisement, even if we counted self-printed tutorship or dog sitting publicity.

“It’s not necessarily a bad hunch,” I interjected, “It does seem like it was put up a little haphazardly. It’s torn off now, so it’s only attached in one place... But there’s nothing that would indicate that there was anything stuck to the rest of the wood’s surface before, either.”

It might've only ever been attached in one point—which would've only made it more prone to being torn out in all but one spot, too.

“So it *was* posted in a hurry...”

“I wouldn't be surprised.”

There were no hints of leftover glue nor any visible holes in the smooth wooden surface. If the culprit had taken their time with their flyposting, they would've at least fastened it in all four corners.

Most likely.

While validating a hunch with circumstantial evidence was hardly scientific, that was all we were after—the most likely scenario.

We could allow ourselves to be a bit unthorough.

It was just a bit of fun.

“Regardless,” Hanekawa moved on. “Since it was posted in a publicly accessible area, it has to be some kind of attempt at communication.”

I assented.

She was unknowingly making her way to my note-passing theory.

How astute of her.

“*Oh, err*—not like a letter, though,” she abruptly clarified. “*Public communication*, I should've said. If you wanted to pass a message to a specific person without having to go through the postal service, you'd just insert it into their letterbox yourself, obviously...”

“Obviously.”

Right. How astute of her.

“We can only speculate from here on,” Hanekawa asserted. “What did this mystery person need to announce so publicly?”

“Something important enough to want the attention of a residential area, but too pressing to go much further than hastily hanging up a flimsy sheet of paper,” I summarized.

“Some kind of emergency?”

A missing person?

I ventured a guess.

It'd certainly qualify as an emergency.

In addition—it was customary to spread as many flyers as possible when someone went missing, especially in any of the residential areas they might've disappeared to.

“No, nothing so grave, I think...” she explained. “You would've seen it announced in other parts of town—and I haven't heard of any recent missing person cases, either.”

“A pet, then.”

“A pet might still be a bit much,” Hanekawa deliberated. “It could just be an important object. Something that got lost, in any case—it would explain the need for the neighborhood's help.”

It was a rather vague conclusion, but it was about as far as we could go with our hypotheses.

Case closed: a *Missing* poster.

“Speaking of, Hanekawa—did I forget something at your place?”

The question slipped out on its own. With the ambiguous truth of the matter resolved thanks to Miss Holmes (which made me the Doctor Watson of the duo), I didn’t feel any more at peace for it. I was palpably more unsettled, as it turned out.

It was purely incidental.

In all likelihood, at worst—it was simply that our conclusion (the notion that our mysteriously noteworthy scrap of paper was an attempt at locating a lost or misplaced *thing*) had reminded me of my perverted—sorry, perverse feelings from earlier. Our *phoned-in* investigation had done little to elucidate the thought and nothing to dispel it.

While I did feel as though we were still missing something regarding the case, there wasn’t much more I could do about it, as it were.

“Huh? This is a little out of the blue,” Hanekawa reacted.

Hanekawa and I visited each other frequently.

Back when Hanekawa’s house was burned down by a tiger who happened to be none other than an *aberration* spawned by the repressed dark side of her personality, I’d invited her to stay over at the Tamikura Apartments while the people who called themselves her parents looked for new

lodgings. Unfortunately, it could only last as long as my father was away (which wasn't very long), and I had to give her up to the Araragi family soon after, though it wasn't before urging my father to move the date of his next business trip up a few days. He happily obliged (a bit too happily, frankly, it was embarrassing), and we were able to make some room for Hanekawa to stay over as she waited to move into her new apartment.

I still feel indebted towards him.

I suppose that's among the more normal things for a daughter to say about her parent, but for me it was a new experience.

Thanks, old man.

Altogether, the short-lived adventure broke some meaningful ice between us, and we found ourselves meeting up much more frequently afterwards.

Hanekawa's new place wasn't anything special, but it didn't need to be anything special to have the Tamikura Apartments squarely outdone, so while we did "visit each other frequently," it would be more accurate to say that *I* visited *her* frequently.

In brief—The reason I was directing this question to Hanekawa:

If I really had misplaced or forgotten anything (which I was confident I hadn't), it would've been at one of three places: school (now closed), my father and I's apartment (too cramped for anything to stay lost in it for very long), or Hanekawa's relatively spacious house.

...Or somewhere outside, in which case it was already a lost cause, and wasn't worth thinking about.

I stated my case to the class president.

"I guess it makes sense that you'd think to ask me first... Although, I know I called you forgetful earlier, but it's still not something I would've expected you to ever ask for help with. You're usually pretty put together..."

"It was just a passing thought," I explained. "I wanted to make sure."

"But, wait—you're asking me if you left *something* behind at my place?"

"That's right, something. It could be anything, honestly."

“*Anything*? How am I supposed to look for something that you’ve ‘forgotten at my place’ if you don’t even know what it is? You’re going to need a better pick-up line than that if you want an excuse to sneak into my room!”

She was just joking of course. I’d already been in Hanekawa’s room plenty of times while visiting her.

To do all sorts of things.

“Playing hard to get, are you? Where’s the gentle and easygoing girl I’ve been hearing about?”

“You should know that easygoing doesn’t mean easy!”

“Really? I heard you were pretty forthcoming in the prequel story, though. It even boosted your audience score by quite a bit.”

“I... don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Besides, I was reading your character page the other day, and I’m almost sure it definitely said ‘Hanekawa is a gentle, easygoing and easy girl.’ That’s where I got it from.”

“...Are you *almost sure* or did it *definitely* say that? Which is it?”

“I’m probably certain of it.”

“That makes even less sense, Senjogahara.”

“It’s a tossup. 50/50 odds?”

“Am I a gacha character?!”

“As a release day unit, you should be wary of power-creep Miss Hanekawa. I hear it’s really causing a stir as of late.”

“Where are you sourcing that kind of information...”

“The fan-wiki, of course.”

It’s a great resource.

The only downside, really, is the insufferable amount of unnecessarily heated arguments—most of the time over less than nothing too. Honestly, the internet truly elucidates the breadth of human stupidity.

Although, in this case—I can’t blame anyone for getting passionate about a 7★ character like Tsubasa Hanekawa.

“That many?! Doesn’t it typically only go up to five?”

"I thought so too, but it turns out they had to come up with a new rarity just for you. You're that precious," I said with a strikingly suave look that was all but wasted over the phone.

I should've video-called.

"I'll admit, that was pretty smooth... But are you seriously spending your free time arguing with people online? I feel like I should consider re-evaluating my mental image of you."

Again, she insisted.

There was a tinge of disappointment in her voice, but the idea that I had become reputable enough that such a minute flaw seemed out of character for the Gahara within her heart was sincerely flattering.

"Don't worry, it's completely anonymous," I clarified. "I can insult them as much as I want, they can't even do anything about it."

"That doesn't make it any better!" Hanekawa exclaimed. "Actually, it makes it worse! Way worse!"

"Kidding. I'd rather not spend my precious time on shut-ins that waste their days away debating who the 'best girl' of the anime is. What's there to argue about anyway? It's obviously me."

"I wonder if that'll still be true when this gets adapted..."

"Well, if you're going there—of course it won't be. Despite my striking bod, my main appeal was my unpredictable nature and mysterious intentions. Now that I'm narrating, it's as good as gone—without it, I have no chance of besting your impossibly bountiful chest..." I bemoaned. "Ah, I guess I'll settle for number two... Silver doesn't look half-bad on me, at least..."

"Surely you're exaggerating, Senjogahara," Hanekawa protested. "The way you put it, you make it sound like all that matters is a girl's cup size..."

"You shouldn't underestimate the power of breasts, Hanekawa. Especially yours. As difficult as it is for me to admit, you're in a league of your own. Even I find myself completely entranced by them. Your breasts are an undeniable fact of life. A monument, if you will—a true testament to womankind."

That was why I had to resort to petty tricks to secure the top spot, I explained. Despite my striking bod.

“Will you stop mentioning how ‘striking’ your ‘bod’ is? I’m starting to think you really do chat in those forums after all.”

“Wow. That’s pretty hurtful. Do you find me that untrustworthy? I wouldn’t lie to you about this.”

“Well, I’d certainly hope not...”

Recognizing my commendable moral character, Hanekawa breathed a sigh—of relief.

It was relief, definitely.

In my defense, I wasn’t lying about avoiding those headache-inducing discussion boards—but, to come completely clean... I didn’t have a computer at home in the first place, so picking fights with idiots on anonymous discussion boards wasn’t something that was up to me to avoid out of principle.

I lied just a little bit.

I simply couldn’t resist spinning a few yarns here and there to see how the class president would react. Don’t get me wrong, variety is good too, but dishonesty is the real spice of life.

If that made me a bad person, I would at least be a bad person with good taste.

“In any case, Hanekawa,” I atoned by getting the conversation back on track, “I really do think I lost *something*. Or at least that I’m forgetting about *something*. I’m not sure what it would be, but it’s like...”

It was unreasonable from the jump, but trying to get Hanekawa involved in this barely comprehensible sentiment of mine was only seeming more ridiculous. I’d gotten carried away by our little detective stint, likely.

After all, we’d solved the mystery. It was an open-and-shut case, a smalltown curiosity with no further implications, no matter what my feelings regarding it were.

The lingering sensation I had was just meaningless *déjà-vu*.

Or, conversely—*jamaïs-vu*?

It's not uncommon to be irrationally anxious about the possibility of having lost or forgotten something. It rarely needs a good reason—like worrying that you've left the oven on after leaving the house.

My father's apartment only had a stovetop, but I could more or less imagine what it would be like.

"Beats me," I concluded.

"Uh?" Her face dropped into a *blasé* disbelief—or at least, I imagined it did. We were just on the phone, and this time I was the one being deprived of my call partner's charming expressiveness. Technology really was an instrument of evil after all, I thought.

"I'd love to explain it to you, Hanekawa, but I feel like I'm running out of pointlessly vague French loanwords to use."

"How about... *malaise*?"

Not bad.

Not many could riff on such a specific linguistic joke.

"I can see why you're a top student beloved and revered by all, Miss President."

"It's just a word, nothing much... And again, I'm neither your class president nor a student anymore. Do you even remember our graduation ceremony? You *were* there, right?"

How cruel, I thought.

Did I really deserve to be admonished for wanting to hold onto the precious memories of my schoolyears? Our final high-school ceremony (which I dutifully attended, regardless of Hanekawa's duplicitous attempt to imply otherwise) had only happened yesterday.

We'd just barely stepped out of the front gates.

A little clemency could be observed while the uniform was still warm.

Nonetheless—she was right about the first part.

"It's nothing much," I agreed. "I'm just being dramatic—crying over nothing, my usual hysterics. Anyone in their right mind would simply ignore me."

"You really know how to twist people's words against them..."

"I'm only being straightforward. Next to all the things I've had to put up with, a little well-meaning emotional abuse is nothing I can't endure. I'm over it, trust me."

"Is that so..." She paused for a while. "Okay, then. It seemed to be bothering you, but if you're over it..."

I'm glad, she declared.

"You did humor my request in a perfectly agreeable manner, even if you ended up being pretty worthless in the way of comforting my anxieties. All in all, I guess you met the minimum requirements."

"There you go again... I'll start feeling bad about it, you know?"

"I've given you a two-and-a-half star rating on the app, in case you were curious."

"What happened to the seven I had earlier?!?"

"That was a different scale, naturally. I've also added a two percent tip."

"*Two* percent?! And please don't act like you've been paying me for this, people are going to start thinking that I'm part of some shady class-president-for-hire business."

"I wanted to write in zero, but it didn't let me."

"So stingy!!"

"As for the review..." I spoke, "I don't have high standards, so even though it was bare minimum—it was more than enough to satisfy me. I have no complaints."

"Could've fooled me."

"And, besides, I like talking to you."

"I like talking to you, too," Hanekawa said, softly.

"You're a good distraction from the throes of life."

"I'm...not sure how to take that."

"I mean that you're the one for me."

"Don't say that so carelessly!" she exclaimed with an uncharacteristically strained voice, "But... As long as it makes you happy, Senjogahara, I'll gladly keep 'humoring' you."

"Yes," I contemplated. "It does."

It did.

Even if I still wished my precious morning run hadn't been so vexatiously disturbed by it—I was finding myself appreciative of the torn-off poster that made me stumble, drop my phone, have it flip open and dial Hanekawa's number all on its own.

There was such a thing as happy accidents.

Wasn't that romantic?

Well, maybe it was—but if it was Hanekawa, I didn't mind.

“Listen, Hanekawa, I'll thank you properly later, but I need to get back to—”

“GOOD MORNING MISS SENJOGAHARA!!!!

!!

!!”

Before I could finish my sentence, I was interrupted by the buzzing of an abnormally large bee. Actually, the bee seemed to be shouting something, rather than buzzing—which made me wonder if it was even a bee at all.

I'd never seen a bee do a double back handspring before, either.

Into a triple-twisting double tuck.

...That was quite something.

What a talented little bee.

A triple-twisting double tuck? As far as I know, a skill of that difficulty was unheard of, even in Olympian gymnastics—and I'd just watched someone pull it off on a random sidewalk.

"Unheard of? You're really out of touch with athletics, aren't you Miss Senjogahara? What was it..." She counted on her fingers, upside down. Upside down, yes. She was holding herself upright with a one-arm handstand. A little too *show-offy* for my tastes, but it was astoundingly impressive. "Three little twists and two flips? That's nothing these days... Err, wait I think they call them *saltos* actually—I don't really pay attention to that, though. Anyway, you should see all the crazy stuff they're doing in America! This barely qualifies as a warmup routine to them."

What was her name... Bill? Bail? Ball? She's good... she wondered aloud.

That, a warmup routine?

A bee that doesn't buzz, cartwheels around, and speaks an intelligible language... It looked somewhat like a human girl, too—albeit a rather tall one, and with a bizarre insistence on having her hair styled in a side ponytail despite how inadequately its length lent itself to it.

If I wasn't so steadfast of a natural skeptic (one of my strongest qualities, in my opinion), I might've actually believed that this hyperactive bee was nothing more than a typical hyperactive middle-schooler, but my suspicions were roused. No, I deliberated—there was no way the creature strutting about on the tip of her fingers in front of me was anything close to a “normal” 15-year-old girl.

Sincerely, I had doubts that I was dealing with a human at all.

It reminded me of a certain monkey-girl.

Whatever bizarre specimen she was, though, she was clearly unbothered by the fact that her handstand had her completely exposed.

“Be mindful of covering up,” I advised. “Even a quiet neighborhood like this one is never completely safe from whatever suspicious people might be lurking about.”

“Don't worry, Miss Senjogahara—it's always safe as long as the Fire Sisters are around!”

What a boisterously cringe announcement.

Fire Sisters this, Fire Sisters that.

Now that the cat's out of the bag, I'll admit—I was hoping to pass her off as a random fan of mine, but unfortunately for me I was acquainted with this girl. I guess it was obvious from the fact that she knew my name. As she declared herself, she was one half of the Fire Sisters duo formed by the Araragi siblings.

They were a pair of make-believe vigilantes, essentially.

Regardless, safe or not, I could understand a degree of exhibitionism—what I was more personally bothered by was the fact that her tracksuit covered so little of her body that you'd think the air was filled with a warm summer breeze, rather than the lingering winter chill it really was.

“The winter chill?” she blinked—upside down, still. “As a fellow athlete—*err*, ex-athlete, I guess—you should know that as long as we keep moving, the cold isn’t something we have to worry about!”

“A real pest, this Fire Sister. Just because you’re an athlete, you think you shouldn’t have to worry about the cold? Talented athlete or not, you’re going to get frostbite before long,” I imagined myself retorting.

Completely out of character, but it felt appropriate for the moment.

Somehow. For some reason, it seemed like the kind of response such an obviously brash declaration was expected to be met with.

For some reason, I thought, because I couldn’t imagine anyone that might be self-righteous enough to deliver such an embarrassingly straightforward scolding right to her face.

Of the modest social circle I was a part of, Hanekawa certainly counted as *righteous*, but mostly in the “reasonable and upstanding” sense of the word. For someone to be so convinced of their righteousness as to go toe-to-toe with the Fire Sisters, themselves the embodiment of self-righteousness...

They’d have to be a thoroughly incorrigible idiot. Fighting fire with fire, in every possible sense.

Essentially: an annoying hypocrite.

The type of person I hated the most. Just imagining this hypothetical villain made me want to disagree with him out of spite, frankly—but I had an Araragi to put in her place.

“You should know that only a miscreant would call a young maiden in her prime ‘retired,’ Araragi. Although, when it comes to the rest...” I lingered. “It’s somewhat violating to admit, but you have a point.”

“Heh! ‘Course I do. When the fire of justice burns inside you, how could you ever feel the cold?”

Stirred by the fire of justice burning inside her, she jumped—no, flipped up onto her feet and struck...

I guess you might call it a “heroic” pose—generously.

It was only basic wordplay, but she was clearly proud of herself.

A bit too proud.

Maybe humoring her was a bad idea after all, I thought.

“Besides, just because you can’t feel the cold doesn’t mean you’re suddenly immune to its consequences. It makes it even more dangerous, actually. You won’t even notice the symptoms setting in,” I imagined myself replying, again.

This unpleasant character that had installed himself in my head was really getting on my nerves. Did I even know anyone remotely as annoying as him?

Ludicrous.

“Say though Miss Senjogahara...” she continued, “After everything we’ve been through, why’re you still being polite and using my surname? I thought we’d be buddies by now, y’know? Well, I guess you don’t know that much about me, all things considered... But I feel like I know you pretty well anyway! Oh, now that I think about it, maybe it’s because Suruga’s been telling me all those stories about you from back when—”

“Polite?” I interjected.

This girl seriously didn’t know when to stop.

We were about to broach some dangerous topics, and she was just stretching her legs without a care in the world. Thank goodness I’d interrupted her.

“You misunderstand,” I explained, “I just can’t remember which Araragi you are for the life of me.”

And to further clear things up: while I was vaguely familiar with the Araragi family, there was absolutely nothing that I might’ve “been through” with this girl that would’ve justified her chummy attitude.

We’d spoken a few times at best, and even those occasions barely qualified as conversations. The sheer difference in wit was too pronounced for us to engage in anything more than small talk.

I don’t get on first name basis with just anyone.

“Ehhhhh—?! Really?!?” she yelped. “My sister and I are so super-duper different, I always thought there was no way anyone could ever get us mixed up... Maybe you just have exceptionally bad eyesight?”

Like, really really bad. Not that it's a bad thing of course, she went on.

She could really benefit from learning when to keep quiet.

“Yes, that's right. I forgot my glasses at home, you see. My apologies, I'm sorry. I was just trying to avoid blurting out the wrong name...”

“Oh, that's fine I guess...”

“Which one are you? Kyou or Ryou?”

“Eh?!” she recoiled. “Wait, wait! That was just one of your 'Gahara jokes, right? Of course, haha...”

She reassured herself with a light chuckle.

“Yup, I figured from you mentioning your glasses. I mean, Tsubasa is the four-eyes character, right? *Was*, I guess—but that's a pretty good one,” she continued. “You wouldn't just forget my name like that.”

Haha! she forced a laugh.

Haha.

Setting aside that Hanekawa had turned in her glasses a while ago in favor of contact lenses... This girl's naivety was staggering.

You could tell her the moon was a giant rice ball and she'd just respond by asking you what the filling was. I had a hard time believing someone this gullible really existed, honestly—she must have been my natural foil.

It's tuna-mayo, by the way.

But now that I'm thinking about it, she went on.

“I'd be more like Kyou, right? Hmm, but Tsukihi's really scary when she's angry, so maybe she'd be a better fit. But there's no way I could be all cutesy like Ryou! Tsukihi's definitely better at that... But then again, if you look at the way we treat our love life, isn't it obvious who's who in this scenario? Wait, I shouldn't bring Rousokuzawa up right now, Tsukihi and him are actually going through a bit of a rough period. You know, as her older sister, I really think she should pay attention when I'm trying to give her some useful life advice—but she won't hear a thing! She likes to get on

my case about Mizudori, but isn't it exactly because I've had (small) relationship issues that it makes sense for me to help her through it? As far as I'm aware, Mizudori and I are doing just fine right now, so, as the older and more experienced one of us, isn't it normal to try to drop a little bit of wisdom here and there? Instead, she just calls me inconsiderate! Seriously, always dishing out advice, never one to take it. Because of that, people always act surprised when they find out she's the younger one of our justice-delivering evil-punishing Fire Sisters duo... Ah, but don't let me bore you with family drama, Miss Senjogahara. You don't have any siblings, so this stuff probably doesn't make a lot of sense to you, I get it..."

Right, she was the eldest one. I remembered now.

I wondered for a moment whether I should leave her to her unending monologue just to see how far her impressive ability to ramble about nothing would take her, but her high-pitched voice was starting to grate on me.

"Don't worry, this isn't boring at all," I interrupted.

"Err, I think you got your dialogue tags all messed up, Miss Senjogahara..."

"Oh, I was just quoting someone."

"Who?!?"

"Miss Senshougahara. She's a very kind-hearted person."

"So you really were bored..."

"I do understand what you're saying, Araragi (eldest). I might not have much in the way of a family myself, but from what I can tell, your behavior is nothing short of exemplary. Sure, you're horribly self-centered, and maybe you do talk over people all the time, but I don't see how that makes you any less considerate as a person. After all, you just want the best for your sister, right? Maybe she's the one who should be a little more considerate—of you."

"Wow, you really do get it, Miss Senjogahara!" she exclaimed. She really was easy to convince. "And you don't even have a little sister! Tsubasa was right, you are perceptive..."

You can just use my first name by the way, she added.

“Hold on,” I stopped her. “Tsubasa?”

“Eh? She’s your class president at Naoetsu... Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten her name too?”

“Class president?”

“W-What? I mean, if you really have forgotten...”

“Kidding. Another Gahara Joke for you,” I offered. “I can’t help it, you’re just so easy to tease. Besides your freakishly athletic body, it might be your greatest attribute.”

“Thanks...?”

“So, you really were referring to Hanekawa.”

“Yep, that’s the one!”

Hm.

I assumed she was talking about a different “Tsubasa” than mine the first time around, but it seemed she was indeed calling a girl three years her senior by her given name. Hanekawa had told me that she’d been keeping in touch with the Araragi sisters ever since her short stay at their place, but I had no idea they’d grown this close...

Wait, no—knowing this Fire Sister freak, there was a chance that she started calling her “Tsubasa” from the jump. Unprompted. Non-consensually, even. She was a name-violator. Even Kanbaru was getting the “Suruga” treatment, and they’d only met recently.

Well, “Suruga” probably enjoyed it.

She’s like that with violating things.

“By the way...” she kept going, folding into a bridge stretch now. “Tsukihi told me you two were dating, but if that was true you’d definitely be calling each other by your first names by now, wouldn’t you? With how close you are—you’d be past that point, definitely! I told Tsukihi she was just imagining things. I mean, why would she even think that? I know it’s for Nadeko’s sake, but all the romance manga she’s been reading lately has been making her say some real weird stuff.”

Ah, by Nadeko, I mean Nadeko Sengoku, Karen clarified unnecessarily, *I guess you’ve never met her.*

I'd never met her, and didn't care to. Whoever she was, she was irrelevant to the conversation at hand.

"Hold on Araragi (eldest, surprisingly). Are you implying that what name you call someone by actually matters to the relationship you have? You know, I'm sure you've been really looking forward to that little boyfriend of yours (whatever his name is) finally calling you by your given name (whatever it is), but the truth is that grown-ups don't care about that kiddy stuff. You *are* the older Araragi sister, but I suppose being older than a child doesn't necessarily make you an adult."

"S-so you were surprised too?!?"

That was her takeaway?!

"And wait," the eldest(?) Araragi sister added. "My name's Karen! You know, *Ka* as in *fire*—the Fire Sisters? We made it super easy to remember on purpose, so you definitely know that!"

She really wasn't going to let go of it, was she?

I was loathe to admit it (again), but she wasn't entirely wrong. For all its faults, the duo's painfully juvenile branding made for a convenient mnemonic.

Try as I may, they wouldn't slip my mind so easily.

Her boyfriend's name, on the other hand—for all her agitation, she didn't seem to mind that I hadn't bothered memorizing it. I was starting to understand why her attempts at doling out relationship advice kept falling on deaf ears.

"Splitting hairs over a name again?" I sighed. I wasn't about to bring up her boyfriend unprompted, naturally. "Well, there's nothing wrong with being a child I suppose. We've all been there, and now Hanekawa and I are getting older... We aren't in middle school anymore—that's the difference. Actually, when I put it like that... I can't hold it against you for disagreeing with me."

You are a child, I insisted.

"H-hold on—I'm not in middle school anymore either!"

“Huh? You’re not? Really?” I made sure my surprise got through to Karen, which she eagerly picked up on.

“Y-yeah! That’s why...” she hesitated. “I might’ve disagreed with you some time ago, but I’m headed to high school now—I totally get what you mean! Getting all precious about names just isn’t my jam anymore. Tsukihi does like to make a fuss about it though (you know, being a year younger than me and all) so that’s why I brought it up.”

The opportunity to save face was all it took to throw her sister under the bus. Was this the younger generation’s hero of justice?

Don’t make me laugh.

So... Karen spoke up.

“Then... You and Tsubasa *are* dating, right?”

“Ah, is that what I said?”

“I guess not...”

Karen Araragi deflated. Like a balloon.

Another Gahara victory.

Having exacted my revenge against Karen for her interruption of my already much-too-interrupted morning run (as well as my equally precious phone call with Miss Hanekawa), I indulged in a few more victory laps around her rapidly deflating ego until she gave up altogether and sprang back to life with her usual cheery disposition. She was indefatigable, truly, but I'd had my fill—I was free to return to my business.

“Your business?” Karen asked, pointing to the telephone pole that bore the subject of my and Miss Holmes’ recent investigations, which I’d almost managed to forget about. “Say, Miss Senjogahara—It wouldn’t happen to be related to that, would it?”

The business I was referring to, of course, had nothing to do with the loose scrap of paper. Besides a few vague doubts about having missed something somewhere—which wouldn’t be dispelled by simply loitering around, if they even were the sort of thing you could dispel at all—there wasn’t anything left to ponder about.

The business on my agenda was to complete my jogging exercise and head back to my father’s apartment.

But Karen insisted.

As she explained, it was her first time seeing anything of the sort be posted on the telephone poles around here. The same went for me, naturally,

but it wasn't like I was intimately familiar with the area. I'd just taken the wrong turn into some scarcely ventured neighborhood. While I didn't know how Karen had found herself running into me, I had no reason to think that she had any particularly pertinent experience with the goings-on of the place, either.

A thoroughly pointless observation, most things considered, until I considered—Hold on, wait.

What *was* Karen doing here?

"Ahaha!" she laughed heartily. "That's a good one, Miss Senjogahara."

I obviously live here, she stated.

"..."

She lived here.

"Haven't you been to our place before? I figured you were just dropping by to say hi or something."

"..."

How had I missed it?

From the outside, the Araragi household was fairly inconspicuous, but I'd been here enough times (once, at least) that I would've expected to recognize it. And I was standing right in front of it, no less.

Unknowingly. Right in front.

Should I cry?

No, maybe I'd do better with simply killing myself right away.

I prided myself on my ability to get around this city, and yet. I'd not only managed to deviate from my intended course, but I'd even walked—well, ran right into enemy territory. Without noticing.

Honestly, it was downright shameful.

I was ashamed, downright.

Only ritualistic suicide could alleviate my shame.

That out of place *Missing* poster had completely transfixed me, somehow—I was staring at it so "weirdly" (as she put it), that Karen was apparently under the impression that it belonged to me.

Ah.

It sounded, a bit...

It sounded a bit like a misunderstanding—on my part, if you looked at it a certain way. If you wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt, maybe Karen hadn't even realized that she was interrupting anything at all.

If you wanted to be lenient, it could be that my verbal assault was...

Hold on—*lenient*? Who am I kidding?

Whatever little teasing I partook in could hardly ever compensate for how often Karen's brash attitude went wholly unpunished. There was no reason to be lenient with a girl like her—and even if there was, a slight slip up was hardly a big deal.

Seriously.

Like Karen said, I was just joking. In fact—

"I'm glad you're developing a taste for my finely crafted comedy, Araragi," I praised her.

The Gahara Joke®. Refined and avant-garde.

"A vanguard? I thought that was Suruga's thing..."

"Miss Kanbaru plays center, not point guard," I corrected her misunderstanding.

"Ah, really?" she questioned. "Well, same difference—team sports aren't really my thing anyway. I'm all about the one-on-one action."

"It'd be nice if you could manage a little neuron-on-neuron action instead. At this rate, I'm wondering whether understanding even the concept of a punchline would be too exacting for you."

Karen Araragi might never come to understand why the chicken crossed the road.

It was pitiable, frankly.

"I'm not sure if I fully get it yet, but I think I'm getting better at recognizing them. It's about saying something really stupid, right?"

"Right. Something like: 'Karen Araragi has a brilliant mind.'"

"Uhh... I'm not sure I get that one, actually."

Whatever.

I give up.

“What’s up with that bit of paper though?” she launched back into the previous topic. “Lemme take a look! Hiyaa—! What’s it say?”

Before I could be bothered to explain the situation in full, she was already exclaiming eagerly.

“Don’t get too excited, it’s blank,” I tempered her.

“Oh—that’s lame,” Karen concluded with visible disappointment.

Zero to one hundred followed by one hundred to zero—in one second flat. It had to be a world-record.

“From what I can tell, someone put it up here because they were trying to locate something they’d lost. That’s about all there is to it.”

“Something you lost? Hold on—don’t tell me it’s your weight again? I heard about that from Tsubasa. Sounds like a pain.”

“...No, that’s not it. Although it certainly was a pain.”

I wouldn’t let myself make the same mistake twice. The weighty emotions I’d spirited away with the help of a crab and accepted within me once again—they were here to stay.

I was no longer the girl who’d lost a part of herself.

I harbored no residual regrets, nor did I have any memories buried away that needed remembering.

I’d paid my dues to my past. I’d been thorough enough.

The poster simply wasn’t mine, whatever vague feeling of—well, whatever it was—it had elicited. What business would I have in plastering things in front of someone else’s house anyway?

“Eh? Well, people have all kinds of weird hobbies nowadays...”

Touché.

“It’s weird though,” she remarked. “This thing’s all torn up for some reason. Did someone get upset and rip it off? That’s destruction of private property, isn’t it?”

Touché again.

Thankfully, a crime I hadn’t made myself guilty of.

“I doubt it’s anything so intense,” I answered, “It could just be that the original owner found what they were looking for. They’d have no need to keep the notice up for much longer.”

“Hmm...” Karen worked her thoughts, surprisingly. “That’s all well and good, but it definitely wasn’t here yesterday. Did they really find it that fast?”

If Karen was telling the truth, it really was a bit weird.

The day had only just started too—was this mysterious poster somehow both put up and taken down over the course of the same night?

“Oh, I know,” her eyes lit up as she answered her own interrogation. “They probably just remembered where they left their belongings right after putting up the first poster! That kinda situation happens to me all the time. Tsukihi’s always stealing my things, so whenever I feel like something got misplaced, I get into a big fight with her... But most of the time, it just turns out that it was sitting in some dusty old unopened drawer I’d forgotten about ages ago!”

Funny how that happens, she concluded with a contented smirk.

Incredible.

Was I witnessing neuron-on-neuron action at last?

Maybe I’d misjudged Karen Araragi. With one fell swoop, she’d introduced important testimonial evidence and addressed it with a coherent rationale.

“That’s not a bad conjecture, Fire Sister #1.”

“You’re making me sound like an NPC...” she whined.

“It’s your fault for picking such a lousy title.”

“It’s not lousy!”

“It’s very lousy. One of the lousiest I’ve ever heard.”

“You just don’t get it... But I forgive you. Because that’s what a Fire Sister does.”

She struck another “heroic” pose to accompany her mantra.

Incredibly lousy.

The pose, catchphrase, and the title—she might as well bin it all. She should rejoice that she'd at least earned the position of #1 Lousy Sister—even if it was just due to seniority.

Either way, I got us back on track.

“Your theory holds water, I'll admit. As a person who hardly ever forgets or misplaces things I can't personally relate to it, naturally—but I can see how it would happen.”

Case closed, I declared, again.

It was more of an open-and-shut-and-open-and-shut case by now, but we'd seen it through to a more proper conclusion.

“Just like that?” she asked.

Just like that, yes.

After all, it was just a small scrap of paper. We'd already made enough of a scene out of it—*scenes*, even. Any more undue importance and we'd be encroaching on idolatry. The kind of behavior that invites eerie and bothersome superstitions.

Like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Not that I believed in those, of course—we've gone over it.

I could excuse Hanekawa's insistence that bad thoughts brought about bad things (it was endearing enough) but at the end of the day, superstitions are lame stories people tell themselves with a pat on the back.

I'd rather not live my life by empty proverbs.

Simply, in this case: there were better things to waste my spring break on. Beggars can absolutely be choosers—you just need the courage to be fussy enough.

“Woah... Things really do sound cooler when you add ‘courage’ in front of them,” Karen remarked, following up on my courage to change the subject. “I gotta say, though... that's really never happened to you? Thinking you've lost or forgotten something when it was right there all along, I mean—I thought it was a pretty common experience.”

And... she had the courage to change it back.

She didn't let up.

"To be honest with you," I answered to placate her relentlessness, "I can confidently say that I've never forgotten a single thing. Not even once. I remember things well enough to know that I'd remember it happening—if it had."

"There's no way it's that good..."

"There is. It's so good, in fact, that I sometimes remember things that haven't even happened yet."

"How does that even work?"

"And if I bite down on my thumb really hard, I turn into a giant."

"You inherited the *Attack Titan*?!?"

"Don't worry, I'm a reasonable person. I have no plans to flatten the world with the Rumbling just yet."

"You're scary, Miss Senjogahara..."

I get that often for some reason.

"It kinda reminds me of my master—the one from my dojo I mean." She clarified unnecessarily, which only made me more suspicious of the kind of *master* Karen Araragi usually referred to, but I was glad that I was being left out of it, at least. "That old man is just so strait-laced all the time that for the longest time I thought he was some kind of terrifying *oni* that didn't know what a smile was, but one day I caught him with a huge grin on his face organizing some gachapon figures on his desk! That's when I thought, 'Woah! A big guy like him smiling like a kid because of a little plastic toy? He really is just human like the rest of us!'"

I wonder if you two would get along... she trailed off.

It was difficult to imagine someone so outlandish that even Karen had trouble thinking they were human, but the implication that either her "master" or her would be "just like the rest of us" was so absurd that it made me want to burst into laughter.

Or burst into tears, I couldn't tell.

"That's very cute," I said, "but I don't see how that little story of yours has anything to do with me."

“Uhm... Well... You know...” she hesitated. “When you were on the phone with Tsubasa, just now...”

Before I came up to say hello.

What a bothersome girl.

She *did* know that she was interrupting. And how could she tell that I was in conversation with the former class president?

Was she eavesdropping too?

“Uh, that part’s pretty obvious Miss Senjogahara. I can’t think of anyone else you’d look so happy getting a call from that early in the morning...” she explained. Annoyingly. Was I really smiling that much? I couldn’t recall a smile gracing my face. It hadn’t, right? Karen was mistaken, or she was just imagining things. “You’re super intimidating to approach, but you always go softer on Tsubasa. It’s like you turn into a whole different person!”

It’s like my master and his figurines, so gap moé! she beamed.

...Gap moé?

That settled it—she had the completely wrong idea. My character’s *moé* charm is all about my impassible hot-and-cold attitude. Just ask my fans.

There’s nothing “gap moé” about me. That’s all Hanekawa.

You’re saying, I summarized.

“That (you think) you (maybe) saw me smiling on the phone? Huh. Well, who knows, maybe you’re right. I wouldn’t be so confident if I were you, however—looks can be deceiving, as they say...”

“See! He denied it just like that too! Oh, I know—maybe I should start calling you ‘master’ too?”

“Please don’t. I wouldn’t want people getting the wrong idea. If you insist, though, I’ll allow you to call me Madam.”

“The wrong idea about what? I call Suruga ‘master’ all the time, and she doesn’t seem to mind.”

“Ah, so you don’t know...”

That was where she'd got it from—I should've expected as much, given their recent closeness. This was Suruga Kanbaru she was talking about—it was less that she didn't mind, and more that she actively enjoyed it.

If I had to guess, hearing unsavory rumors spread around it was only the cherry on top.

What a devil. I couldn't be prouder of her.

"Huh? Know what?" Karen curiously asked.

"It's fine. Don't worry about it. I'm sure the Fire Sisters have plenty enough on their plate already."

"Yeah, I guess so..." she lamented with a melancholic look I hadn't yet seen from her.

"What, you're not hungry? Did that blazing fire of justice of yours finally burn itself out?"

"Are you kidding? I'm still raring to go! It's just..." she exclaimed in a burst of liveliness and grew quiet. She chased her thumbs for a moment before breaking the silence. "Well, everyone just calls us the 'Fire Sisters' 'cause it's shorter, but if you wanna get technical about it, we're supposed to be the 'Fire Sisters of Tsuganoki Second Middle School.'"

That's the full name, she explained.

It made sense.

Karen and Tsukihi Araragi, the Fire Sisters.

As a complete outsider, that was how the Araragi sisters were introduced to me. It was fairly innocuous, I thought, but when people talked about them (which happened bizarrely often at Naoetsu Private High School considering they were really just a pair of naively earnest middle-schoolers), it wasn't infrequent to hear them referred to as "the Fire Sisters, Karen and Tsukihi Araragi" instead.

In a very literal sense, their reputation preceded them. And because of that—because there was no "Karen and Tsukihi Araragi" without "the Fire Sisters"—you could hardly imagine ever separating the two, whether from their little make-believe vigilante duo or from each other.

It made sense, to me. It was a lot like a situation I'd found myself dealing with during my own middle-school days—a memory that I'd kept comfortably locked away until not too long ago, one that I could now recall with pride.

About Suruga Kanbaru, speak of the devil.

She was, once upon a time, just a girl from the basketball team whom I'd become unwittingly associated with.

For context, back then—I wasn't quite as unapproachable as I turned out to be in my later high-school years, but I still generally preferred to keep to myself, and while I got around in the *jock* circles (if you could call them that) of Kiyokaze Public Middle School, I had even less of an interest in basketball than I did in people. That's why, the thing that caught my attention about Suruga Kanbaru wasn't her personality (although she was an admirable sportswoman), or her skill with the ball (although her dribbling and shooting were both exceptional). And, although... although it would be convenient for me to say that it was purely incidental, or that no one could've anticipated the improbable and ambiguously intimate bond that took shape between us—that wasn't it, either.

There was a reason I got closer to Suruga Kanbaru, a clear-cut, obvious reason—her legs.

She had remarkable legs.

My interest in Kanbaru's legs had nothing sexual about it of course (for a while at least), but it was something that I—as the ace of the track team and an avid runner—naturally looked out for.

Despite being a year younger than me, Kanbaru's shining exploits on the basketball team had already made her a rising star with a renown that rivaled my own, so it didn't take much convincing for me to sit in on one of her exhibition matches—my disinterest in her sport notwithstanding. More than anything else that was said about her (there was a lot), she had a reputation for being terribly fast, the first to pounce on every rebound, capable of outrunning anyone else on the court.

Well, as I learned, it was all true.

I went to greet her after the game, to which she responded with an enthusiastic “Yo!” immediately followed by a “Wait, aren’t you Senjogahara? The track team star, Senjogahara?” and even though she surprised me by turning down my request to face her in a hundred-meter dash, we appreciated each other’s presence enough to grow closer over the coming days.

Soon enough, we were no longer just Hitagi Senjogahara of the track team and Suruga Kanbaru of the basketball team. Against my best wishes, we were, to a growing number of people.....

The Va—

Va... Vaaahhhhh..... Haaahhnnnghhh.....

Eurgh, forget it.

I’ve wasted enough breath over the years complaining about the terribly inelegant name Kanbaru came up with, there’s no use re-opening that can of worms. I consider myself fairly open minded, but you have to draw the line somewhere.

You need to abide by some standards, at least.

...

“Valhalla Combo,” seriously?

Valhalla?!? Combo?!?!?!?

Excuse me.

Cringeworthy nickname notwithstanding—throughout our time in Kiyokaze Middle, Kanbaru and I became something of an item.

Think of that what you will.

A duo, assuredly.

You could say we were inseparable—from our passion for sports, and also from each other. During that time, it was all too easy to forget that the comfortable relationship we entertained was nothing more than the bond between “Suruga Kanbaru of the Kiyokaze Middle basketball team” and “Hitagi Senjogahara of the Kiyokaze Middle track team.” Every smile we exchanged, every conversation we had—they were just an extension of that first meeting in the school gymnasium.

There was no way it wouldn’t fall apart.

We were running on overtime, long enough to forget that the ref's whistle would eventually be blown. That I might eventually stop being "Hitagi Senjogahara of the track team," and would certainly one day stop being "Hitagi Senjogahara of Kiyokaze Middle."

So what? I called Karen to attention.

"You're moving on from your old school, like everyone else who happens to be unlucky enough to call themselves your peer. The Fire Sisters of Tsuganoki Second Middle School are through, it seems."

"Yeah, we are," she moped.

"Who cares? It's not like you and your sister are suddenly going to stop getting along. You live in the same house, too, so you won't even be seeing each other that much less."

"Maybe..."

I'm sure Tsukihi will get over it—take it from me.

Even though I rejected her so callously, and even though we did stop getting along, and even though we never saw each other on a regular basis anymore after that—that dear junior of mine managed to get over it.

Next to what I put her through, Tsukihi's situation was a blessing.

"But this is Suruga we're talking about..." Karen moaned.

"You're right. Maybe next time I run into Kanbaru I'll tell her that Karen Araragi was so discouraged at the thought of being compared to her master that she lost all will to go on. I hope she won't be too disappointed, but that's life, I guess."

"H-Hey!" she pouted.

"And I'll remind you—I hope you're not under the selfish impression that your situation is at all unique. It's quite the opposite, honestly," I pointed out. "Downright mundane. Middle-school graduation? What a joke (laughing). You can start worrying about 'graduation' when you have to move out for college."

"Ahaha..." Karen laughed, embarrassed, "You're probably right, Miss Senjogahara. I shouldn't sweat it. Your graduation ceremony was yesterday, right?"

She'd heard from Suruga, she said, and I sighed wistfully.

Hah~

"Don't remind me..." I pleaded. "My days of wearing a school uniform for non-investigable reasons have already come to an end. It happened so fast, it's as if the clothes are still warm....."

"Woah, that sounds really suspicious—and kinda lewd."

"Well, Hanekawa and I were going at it for a good while."

"Okay, that definitely sounds lewd."

"Far into the evening... She was so shaken that she could barely keep her voice down—it was really something."

"...Should I be covering my ears?"

"Don't be rude," I reproached. "Are you so insensitive to your seniors' feelings? You shouldn't look down on Miss Hanekawa for this, it's normal to get a little emotional at your graduation ceremony. Not everyone is an insensitive monster like you."

"Me? I—Well, I didn't cry, true..." she admitted. "But I know what you mean. It wasn't even her graduation, but I was on the phone with Su—"

Karen's voice tapered off.

"Su?"

"Uh, yeah, Su!" she fumbled. "My—ahem... My really good friend, Su. She, um—she was sad about it, and all."

"Oh. I see."

Someone really should do something about her atrociously loose tongue, I thought, but it occurred to me that there had to be a reason she'd been able to get this far in life without learning what was supposed be a vital skill.

When you're a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

Am I using that right? It doesn't matter.

This lively, recently graduated hammer simply had no grounds to treat her problems like anything other than a nail. You could chalk it up to her strength, or maybe to coming from having faced no real adversity in life, but it remained Karen Araragi's way of life regardless.

Why interfere? If anything, I was happy for her.

And it did warm my heart to hear that my junior was moved about my departure from Naoetsu—enough to let it show in front of a girl who looked up to her as a role model, even.

I didn't mind those small slips of the tongue.

"So you'll be moving out then?" she followed up. "For college, I mean."

"What? Of course not."

"Oh, great! The three of us can keep hanging out, then! Suruga was worried you'd be disappearing on us."

"How joyous," I declared. With glee.

I wasn't sure where Kanbaru would've gotten the idea that I'd be skipping town, but in retrospect... Despite our recent conversations, the topic of my university of choice hadn't come up once.

Some topics were still a little sensitive after all.

"It seems like it'd be a bother, honestly," she mused, "We only get so much time off between school years, I wouldn't want to spend it on a chore."

"It beats having nothing to do, I'd say. The next few weeks are shaping up to be rather boring on my end."

"Boring? Madam Senjogahara, you might be the first person I've met that doesn't like being on break," she remarked with a sense of surprise, "Other than Tsubasa, maybe..."

"Surprisingly, she and I disagree on this."

"I kinda get it, I guess. I'm glad the dojo stays open through the holidays—when I've got nothing important going on, I can always count on my Master to come up with some crazy exercise for me to throw myself at!"

What a maniac.

"I'm surprised they're still letting you into tournaments."

"Well, I am sorta running low on sparring partners lately..."

Running *low*?

The phrasing was suspicious to say the least. You'd think she was talking about her protein intake. Was this "master" of hers responsible for supplying her with fresh meat, too?

"I don't really mind though," she boasted, "Even if there's no one left on Earth for me to spar with—that just means I've gotta start looking elsewhere!"

"Are you going to tell me you came here from *Planet Vegeta*?"

"I have been thinking of going blonde..."

"Base form Karen is more than enough. A *Super Saiyan* powerup, that might really make the sun explode."

"I've at least got to get over *9000*!"

"This isn't a manga though—even if we did get visited by a group of hostile space aliens, you'd run out of worthy adversaries well before the number got that high. What would even be the point?"

"Idunno, I don't really care about competing anyway, so... I guess I'll be fighting for justice?"

"..."

There wasn't any point at all.

Even if the universe itself was falling apart around her, she'd still be practicing her roundhouse kicks on the nearest training dummy.

What a maniac, really.

Say, Madam Senjogahara, she called out.

"Wasn't this supposed to be blank?"

The plot thickened.

I traded a few more pleasantries with Karen and, estimating that I'd spent more than enough time honing my quips on her, I watched the recently graduated Fire Sister (who assured me that her little sister and her would "figure it out, probably!") cartwheel, handspring, and *salto* away from whence she came—with a hurried "Syalate!!!" blurted out. It sounded about as ridiculous out loud as it looked in written form.

Syalate.

See + you + later = Syalate (???)

I had little to no insider knowledge surrounding the vocabulary employed by the younger generation, but there was no chance such a ludicrous farewell was part of it.

I wasn't sure how—or if at all—the Araragi family's neighbors tolerated having their garden walls be used as balance beams on a daily basis, either. For such a tranquil neighborhood, the idea of private property being defiled so senselessly should be inconceivable... but I settled on chalking it up to Karen's insurmountably headstrong nature.

Like the rest of it.

Even if someone did, at some point, try to complain—I'm sure they quickly recognized how futile of an endeavor it was. As I said, there weren't

many people who I could imagine being able to give Karen Araragi an honest scolding. Outside of her own parents, maybe—I didn't recall ever meeting them, but considering they were police officers, they probably knew their way around a case like hers.

As for me, although I knew a thing or two when it came to dealing with foolhardy and credulous types like her, it wasn't something I'd call an "honest scolding." It was a cheap ruse—a little conversational trick, just enough to have my way. Slightly unscrupulous, maybe. Gently amoral, let's say.

Don't get me wrong, I felt no remorse about it. I may be the narrator, but I'm not fond of moralizing tales—I made no illusions about there being a valuable lesson for anyone to take home.

To take to my beloved junior's home, in her case.

Apparently, Karen was off to the Kanbaru Residence. They really were getting along suspiciously well, I'd pointed out to her, only to be met with an invitation to join them on their playdate. Although Karen wasn't a middle-schooler anymore (technically speaking), it wasn't my place to intrude on a moment of intimate bonding between juniors, I explained in return.

I gently turned her down—despite her further attempt to sell me on the "rope training" that would supposedly be taking place.

Did she misread intimate *bonding* as intimate *bondage*?

That's a good one.

It nearly made me laugh, honestly.

Maybe Karen had it in her to be a proper disciple of the Gahara Style™ after all? If anything, it sounded a lot like the kind of innuendos that my dear "so perverted that she mistakes family rate for family rape" Suruga Kanbaru went around reciting with a self-satisfied grin. That was likely where she'd got it from.

Or, alternatively, she was being completely serious—in which case I should try be on my guard about the kinds of "hang-out" I was being roped into. In my defense, I couldn't know. I didn't ask for the specifics.

Out of sight, out of mind.

I didn't want to be tangled up in their mess.

I did wonder for a moment, with suspicion, how these worryingly compatible young women had come into contact in the first place, but I figured—considering how incidental my own association with the Araragis was, any audit of their relationship would be hypocritical.

Who knows? Maybe their meeting was owed to a law of the universe: meatheads attract likeminded meatheads. There's a whole manga about it isn't there?

Actually, more than one—and multiple parts.

It even made for a more fitting comparison than *Dragon Ball Z*.

The *Rainy Devil* would basically be a shoo-in as Kanbaru's stand, and if we went through the whole cast: Hanekawa would have her cat (and tiger), the lost child would have her snail (even though it was technically a cow), I could be attributed that ponderous crab (it was a bit of a stretch since I'd already split with it a while ago, but it'd been an important enough factor in my life), and Karen...

What about Karen?

Karen was supposed to be where the analogy began, but it seemed like she instead marked where it ended. When I put it into perspective—she didn't really fit the pattern at all.

At best, there was...a bee?

I was loosely aware of a certain commotion involving an afflicting bee, but as Hanekawa had explained it to me then, it was only a passing ill. The matter of a few days. Assigning me a crab was a stretch—acting like Karen's bee was sufficiently relevant to feature was a complete distension. Something you shouldn't wish on any athlete, monstrously insensitive or not.

And yet—beyond that incident, the Araragis' prodigal martial artist had no real history with *aberrations*.

Worse, even—part of the crisis plan had been to keep Karen convinced that the curse placed on her was a simple fever, to ease her recovery. From her perspective, she'd never crossed into the realm of the *supernatural* at all.

Despite her ostensibly supernatural prowess that surpassed anyone else's—it was Karen's unquestionably *natural* life that made her the odd one out among these small-town tales.

Frustratingly.

Somehow, besides my own father, she was the most 'normal' of the people I was acquainted with. It was a small circle, but still—

To the uninitiated, those who didn't believe in ghosts or monsters, Karen was far too aberrant to be understood. In the world of *aberrations*, she was too mundane to make sense of. The fact she was so *normal* made her even more *abnormal*.

She didn't make any sense, much like this thickening plot.

If I wanted to be cynical about it, I'd argue it was why Karen was the one to remark on it—on the other thing that hardly made any sense. "Wasn't this supposed to be blank?" she'd asked me, pointing at the remains of the feeble paper scrap that was *supposed* to be blank. After such a striking cliffhanger, I wouldn't blame you for thinking I was just postponing its follow-up for cheap effect.

You'd be correct.

There's no such thing as shame when it comes to telling a compelling story, and, on top of that, I was now afforded all the peaceful tranquility necessary to ponder my new discovery—undisturbed.

At least, I should've been.

With Karen Araragi gone, the early morning streets were as quiet as they should be, and yet—I heard a noise. Faintly.

It was faint, but there was a noise.

I was certain that I'd heard a muffled *Haauuu~* emerging from the communication device still delicately entrapped within the fingers of my left hand.

"Hanekawa?" I spoke into my phone.

To no avail.

Such a uniquely adorable yawn that could only belong to the ex-class president, I thought—but I was only met with silence.

“Ah, well... It’s about time for me to get going anyway,” I expressed.
Out loud. With decent volume.

—And waited a few seconds.

.....*shuffle*.

I heard some more noise come through my phone’s speaker.

Shuffle, shuffle...

It sounded suspiciously like a girl shuffling around in her bedcovers.

...*shuffle*.....

It stopped.

.....

.....

“Eek—!” I heard a scream, followed by a loud *thump*.

—?!

Did she fall out of her bed?!

“A-ah, Senjogahara!” a timid voice finally responded, very obviously
dizzied from a sudden tumble.

What a surprise, it really was Hanekawa.

On the phone, just as I’d left her. What a good girl.

Admittedly, I could’ve easily confirmed that our phone call was still
running if I’d only checked the display, but it seemed Karen’s unannounced
appearance had perturbed more than just my jogging routine. I was un-
usually air-headed today.

I needed to get ahold of myself.

How was the call still running? Ah, right—because Hanekawa was a
good girl, and she was there waiting right as I’d left her.

Wait—as *I’d* left her?

I might’ve forgotten to hang up on my end of the line, but I had a
solid excuse, and it wasn’t like I was the only one holding up the phone. It
might take two to tango, but you only need one to let go.

There was no reason for the call to have stayed connected through my
entire conversation with Karen.

Unless.

Unless a certain someone had also “forgotten” to put an end to it.

“Uhm... You’re not upset, are you?” Hanekawa asked.

“Upset? How could I be?” I asked, sincerely. How could I be? “To be honest with you, I was just thinking about how much of a shame it’d be to get this story back on track without an interlude featuring the fan-favorite big-breasted Miss Hanekawa.”

“This one’s definitely my fault... I know I was supposed to hang up, but I just wanted to hear your voice for a little longer...”

...

That was the reason?

Moé, moé, moé, moé, moé, moé, moé—super *moé*.

What an adorable little thing, I wanted to touch her all over.

...I had to exhibit some restraint.

“I’ll say, Hanekawa...” I calmed myself. “I’m impressed that you would admit to something this deeply embarrassing so readily.”

“I-is it that embarrassing? I was just being sincere...”

It was cute. Extremely cute, but I had to hold myself back.

“Extremely.” Extremely embarrassing? No, extremely cute. Super cute. I want to touch you all over. “But that’s exactly what makes it so endearing.”

“Ah...”

“I wouldn’t want it any other way,” I explained.

“...”

Hm?

Weird, there wasn’t a single sound coming out of the receiver.

Did the call get disconnected?

“Hanekawa, could you at least pretend like you’re going through a tunnel or something? You should know I don’t take well to being ignored,” I requested, stoically.

“You can’t say something like that and expect me to respond like it’s nothing!” she complained.

“Really? I was just being sincere.”

“Senjogahara...” Hanekawa whined.

Very cutely, might I add.

Even those small reactions of hers were so incredibly *moé*.....

I've already mentioned that Hanekawa was always very popular at school, but the real deal far exceeded the paltry stereotype of the angelic class president. Holding the undivided attention of someone like her really was a privilege beyond compare.

And I should say, I continued.

"I like you, of course, but don't misunderstand. I'm not giving you a free pass just because you're cute. If I wasn't such a thorough loner, I'd have every right to be irritated by the thought of so many call minutes going to waste on dead air."

Outside of the occasional call with my father, Hanekawa was the only person I exchanged with over the phone on a regular basis, so if anything, she was the one doing herself a disservice by running my credit dry.

"You still have a metered plan, Senjogahara?! I didn't even know they offered those anymore."

"You didn't know? That's quite rare for you," I teased. "You see, my father and I are a rather old-fashioned family. We still top up our phone plans at the convenience store down the road."

A generous lie.

Old-fashioned? We were just plain broke.

"...When did convenience stores start counting as 'old-fashioned?'"

"Excuse me? We're talking about the primordial essence of our country here, Hanekawa. The corner-store is the corner-stone of Japanese culture."

The way I see it, there's nothing more traditional in this country than a good old 7-Eleven.

"The way I see it, there's no way you passed Japanese History."

"Huh? We had a class for that?"

"One that you slept all the way through, clearly."

"Then it must have been pretty yawnsome," I so declared.

"Yawnsome? What's that, a new Gahara catchphrase...?"

“It’s the word of the moment, Miss X-Class. Just you wait.”

“...I’m going assume that’s just short for ‘ex-class president.’”

“If it was a proper classification, you’d have to be S-Class, naturally,” I explained. “And speaking of classes—you should take it up with the teaching body. Maybe they can revise this so-called ‘Japanese History’ curriculum.”

“To what, a lesson about convenience stores?!”

I was fooling around, mostly, although it wasn’t such a bad idea—there’s a lot to learn about the history of convenience stores.

For example: Here, in Japan, even though 7-Eleven is a staple, it’s common knowledge that it was originally an import from an American chain, but there’s a catch. What most people (especially Americans themselves) would probably be surprised to learn is that, not too long after the Japanese venture was formed, its branches overtook their US counterparts so rapidly that our local subsidiary ended up completely buying out the parent company. Nowadays, even the stores in the US are Japanese-owned, and they’re only dreaming of replicating the success they’ve had here.

The cultural import is being exported back—interesting isn’t it?

If I had to put it in other terms... it’s not unlike borrowing from English by calling our erotic games *adult*, only for players to refer to them by the Japanese word *hentai* once they reach overseas markets. Well—erotic content is a contentious issue, especially when it comes to its cultural exchange.

No need to include it in the syllabus, it was good enough as a personal anecdote—although I’m sure there’s people more qualified than me to talk about it.

A certain junior comes to mind.

“In any case,” Hanekawa interrupted my thoughts in an act of saving grace that gracefully preserved the moral fabric of my character. “Being bored is no excuse to be falling asleep in class, Senjogahara. It’s disrespectful to the efforts of our teachers. Please knock the habit before you enter college.”

"A bad excuse? You really think so? I'd like to hear what you'd consider a 'good excuse' for falling asleep in the middle of something, then."

"Oh... Uhm....." Hanekawa fumbled.

"You said you kept the call running so you could hear my voice for a while longer, is that right? Evidently it wasn't important enough for you not to sleep through it," I pointed out.

Please knock the habit, it's disrespectful.

"Oh, come on," she protested. "Can you blame me for getting a little more sleep on a day off? Your call woke me up you know?"

"Forcefully enough for you to catch it on the first ring?"

"...That's because I'm a light sleeper."

"Really? You always seemed to sleep soundly when we shared the futon in my father's apartment. Just like a baby..." I recalled fondly. "I must say, it was an earnest pleasure to watch Tsubasa Hanekawa's peaceful sleeping face, unbothered by her vice-president's cold, toned body, pressing up against her soft skin..."

"T-that's because... I mean—that's got nothing to do with it! And we definitely did *not* sleep in the same futon!"

I'd remember it happening if it had, she explained.

I've heard that somewhere before.

What an awfully weak defense.

"Not too fast now Hanekawa, that doesn't sound right—I vividly remember enjoying the enticing smoothness of your skin before digging into the appetizing plumpness of your thighs..." I pondered.

Or was it your breasts? I advanced.

They were eminently plump too.

"That..." Hanekawa trailed off.

That was in the shower, she explained with a hint of embarrassment.

Ah, right, it was in the shower.

We'd had no choice—after accounting for my father's needs, there was only enough hot water left for a single shower, so Hanekawa and I were forced to take it together. On top of that, with the Tamikura Apartments

baths being quite a bit smaller than the apparently lavish washroom of the Araragi household, there was no way to avoid excessive skin-to-skin contact.

I'd pre-emptively offered to my class president that we wash each other, but, needless to say... our bodies ended up coming into contact in more ways than that which a standard washing procedure entailed.

"So that's where I @#\$%ed your £©#%, then," I surmised.

"Please don't censor things needlessly, you'll invite some very troublesome misunderstandings."

"As I recall, you were so enthusiastic about it that you asked to swap positions halfway through."

"H-how else would we wash *each other*?!"

"Oh, but I dropped the brush, didn't I? You didn't seem to mind me continuing with my hands, thankfully."

"I..."

"I see your point. It would make sense to sleep so soundly after such an intense experience. I was pretty spent myself."

On that note.

While we didn't have as much of a reason to keep bathing together after my father left for his business trip, we saw no reason to stop doing it either, which meant that I was able to enjoy Hanekawa's perfect slumbers all throughout.

Senjogahara... the perfectly awake Hanekawa sighed.

"We showered in the mornings, remember? The actual reason I slept so comfortably at your place was just..." she hesitated. "Well, because it was *your* place. I guess I've got no reason to feel embarrassed about it."

She'd gotten a generous helping of my sleeping face as well, she explained. That made us even. If that was the reward for saving her from a tiger, I'd do it all over again.

By the way, I wondered.

"That tiger of yours, from back then—did you give it a name?"

“Hmm...” Hanekawa was deep in thought. “I’m not sure if this fully answers your question, but I remember what Miss Gaen said, at least—*Kako*, the Tyrannical Tiger.”

“That’s a fine name for a specialist to give, I guess. That said, Hanekawa—it’s a part of *you*, right?”

“Yeah,” she answered solemnly. “She’s a part of me.”

“You’ve never wanted to give her a more personable moniker?”

“I can’t say it ever crossed my mind...” she said with a hint of disappointment. Considering she called *Kako* by personal pronouns, it wasn’t surprising that she’d be upset that she hadn’t thought up a name for *her*, too. “I guess... I figured ‘Tyrannical Tiger’ was descriptive enough.”

“Well, Miss Hanekawa,” I retorted, “It’s not about being explicit—that’s what nomenclature is for, scientific or occultic. I’m talking about a nickname—a cool title. Something fun.”

“I... I think I’d be a little out of my depth, really.”

“With all the knowledge you’ve got stored in that encyclopedic mind of yours, a bit of fun has you stumped?”

“I don’t know everything,” she insisted. “Just what I know.”

“Which excludes fun?”

“No comment.”

“You don’t even need to come up with it all on your own—cheating’s just fine, as long as you pick something fitting enough.”

“How would you cheat at naming things?”

“Well, for one, you could just steal the title of a song you like. How about... *Between Love & Hate*?”

“By *The Strokes*?”

“That’s right, from *Broom on Fire*.”

“I’m sorry, since when do the *Strokes* refer to floor-sweeping?”

“Whatever they were stroking, they made the album of the summer.”

“Twenty summers ago, maybe...”

“You never know when something’s gonna make a comeback,” I pointed out—although, admittedly, I never bothered listening to the radio, so the album of the summer was always whatever I personally had on repeat.

“I don’t dislike it...” Hanekawa shared, “It’s pretty fitting. Is it really something authors do that often, though? It seems a little cheap.”

“Maybe not in the books you’re used to reading, Miss Hanekawa. The author of one of the most popular manga series in the world does it all the time. There’s no dishonor in being referential.”

The author of one of the most popular light novel series in the world, too. A cheat might not sound far off from something cheap, but we shouldn’t start drawing false equivalences.

Shortcuts are good.

Of course, there was a host of legal issues that could arise from adaptations and exportation, but you might as well try. Worst case scenario, you could just change it after the fact.

“Can I ask what prompted this?” the woman of the summer inquired.

“Oh, it was nothing, really,” I defended myself, “Well, maybe it had to do with an important plot development that took place right as you were comfortably dozing off, but since that train of thought was suddenly interrupted, I really couldn’t tell you...”

Urgh, Hanekawa grimaced, probably.

“Fine, then. Since you won’t tell me—How about I return the question?” she asked firmly, as though she’d resolved to deduce my intents all by herself. Usually, I would’ve simply gone and explained myself instead of beating around the bush like this—but it was in the spirit of our little detective game, so I didn’t protest. “That crab you ran into a while back, *Omoikani*—the Weight Crab, was it? Are you giving it a nickname too?”

Her words accompanied by a faint scratching noise.

The static made it hard to tell, but it sounded like a mechanical pencil tip brushing against a notepad—0.5 millimeters, if I had to guess, standard fare for an office pencil. She’d re-located to her desk.

I was dealing with serious-mode Hanekawa.

More than a police investigation, actually, it felt like I'd suddenly become the subject of an impromptu psychiatric evaluation. A routine workplace personnel check, or something of the sort.

Was I being laid off?

Surely not—I was fairly sure that I hadn't let her on to anything too incriminating or distressing...

Please don't lay me off, Miss Hanekawa.

It was in my best interest to answer truthfully. No, I explained, I wasn't planning on giving my past affliction an endearing nickname. My meeting with the Weight Crab was undeniably pivotal to my life, and had no doubt led me to becoming the person I was today, but entrusting its name to me would be—

"A *stretch*, right?" she finished my thoughts.

I couldn't tell if it was that Hanekawa's intuition really was that sharp or if she'd chanced into the perfect question, but she was already right on track. With such sharpness, I'd have to reconsider my appraisal.

0.4 millimeters?

That's professional grade—the serious-mode is no joke.

"I see..." she continued, "You wouldn't, because unlike *Kako* and 'Black Hanekawa' who were aspects of my personality that I'd turned away from... That crab deity was never really *part of you*, was it?"

She was just paraphrasing my own thoughts, but hearing it from someone else made me wonder how legitimate that phrasing really was.

I remained a plain-old human all the way through, and the *Omoikani* was a god, but you could say (as I had, earlier) that it had still, in its own way, been part of me. If it was linked to the person I'd become... You could make a case for it—especially if you wanted to act contrarian, which Hanekawa's discerning comments certainly incited.

"Well, even though it was never physically tied to you—I don't mean to be presumptuous, but it's probably still part of who you are. Figuratively, at least..." she continued, immediately quashing my contrarian instinct before I had the chance to speak up.

She was getting sharper.

0.3 millimeters.

“In fact, that goes for quite a few of the people we know. We’ve gotten ourselves involved with a pretty wild assortment of *aberrations*,” she explained, astutely. “The crab, the cow, the monkey, the snake—”

“Hold on, you’ve lost me. What snake?”

“Ah, right, I guess you weren’t really directly involved in that one... We actually owe it the ‘curse’ that we got acquainted with later—well, that the Fire Sisters got acquainted with, but that’s what I was getting at.”

The Cinderswarm Bee.

In other words, Karen Araragi.

Hanekawa’s pencil grew quiet. She must have been using it to draw up a list of the aberrations we’d come in contact with along with their relation to the person they afflicted, I figured, and come to a conclusion.

Considering the precision of the reasoning it spelled out, I definitely had to upgrade it from 0.3 to 0.2 millimeter.

It doesn’t get finer than that.

Top of the line, even for a former class president. For her to deduce my intent to touch on the peculiarity of Karen’s Bee with only the vaguest starting hint—she certainly hadn’t lost her luster. She could no longer be called the class president of all class presidents, but it seemed she’d actually upgraded to ex-class president of all class presidents, whether former, current, and future.

And thanks to her, we’d finally come full circle.

“Just like an Ouroboros, huh?”

“Ah, if you’re asking about the snake aberration, it was actually a Jagirinawa...”

“A Jagirinawhat?”

“It’s—”

“Don’t bother, I have a feeling that it’s a particularly boring story.”

“Every story’s worth telling if you ask me, but fine—either way, you shouldn’t be too impressed with my deductive reasoning here. It wasn’t very

hard to figure out that you wanted to talk about Karen... I just had to work my way back from the endpoint."

"It's still impressive, Miss Holmes. You do good work."

"You flatter me, Doctor Watson," she sighed.

"I wonder, would you be able to work out the unexpected development that our investigation underwent in your absence?"

"That would be pure speculation... I'm pretty good at problem-solving, but I'm no oracle."

"It's related to our dear black-and-yellow Fire Sister's physical acuity."

"Despite how undeniably 'human' Karen is, she is pretty freakish, in that regard..." Hanekawa pondered. "What happened this time?"

I went over the full extent of my prior observations to Hanekawa. About Karen's *normalcy*, and her *strength*... And that I was still mulling over the events that had transpired briefly before we parted ways.

Then, as succinctly as I could, while her 0.2 millimeter professional-grade pencil was moving again, I caught her up to the details of my interaction with Fire Sister #1 (now in both seniority and skill)—up to and including the discovery she'd made about the 'blank' sheet of paper.

Well, to be precise, that sentence was a contradiction now.

Precisely, as Karen found out—

It was *almost* blank.

Etched onto the struggling corner of the page, there were two small letters, printed in ink so discolored that it was just barely perceptible to the naked eye. At first, I thought Karen was getting her untimely revenge by messing with me right as I was getting ready to leave, but after re-examining the evidence a number of times, I was able to confirm it.

K.A.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

Not the fact that something was written on the note after all—that much was credible enough—but that Karen had noticed it almost immediately after taking a look in its direction, even as it was fluttering in the wind.

As if she was an *aberration* herself.

“Freakish” was an understatement.

Beyond that initial discovery, however, she proved rather useless.

She had little to offer in the way of identifying who or what this *K.A.* might be referring to, instead asking me, “Those are initials, no?” before adding, “Is it a missing person, then?”

“Hm. That doesn’t seem right, Doctor Watson,” Hanekawa remarked. It was pretty cute how earnestly she gave herself to the task. “If it was the name of someone who went missing, why would they use their initials rather than the full name?”

If anything, she added, this might be our first real clue about the author.

The author?

True, it was stuffed in a corner of the page, away from where you’d keep the most relevant information—the body of the text.

Initials made for a pretty uninteresting signature, but that could be it.

“How many K.A.’s do you know, Hanekawa?”

“Ahem...”

“Well? We should try to find that author, shouldn’t we? It seems like our best shot.”

“Err... There’s definitely one that comes to mind right now.”

“Is that so?”

Singling out a suspect right off the bat?

The open-and-shut-and-open-and-shut-and-open-again case was progressing rapidly.

“I just don’t think it’ll be a very helpful clue,” she bemoaned.

“Hm? What makes you think that?”

“Actually, I should say it might be more unhelpful than anything.”

“Ha? What makes you say that?”

“Ahem—It’s that... There’s only one K.A. I personally know.”

“Okay.”

“...”

Out with it already, Miss Holmes.

“They’re Karen’s initials, aren’t they?”

And now, I found myself wandering the halls of the Naoetsu Public Library. Despite the sudden impression it might give, this precipitated jump in setting unfortunately had nothing to do with me having unlocked fast-travel capabilities (I was still working on it), and everything to do with the uneventfulness of my trip from the Araragi household to the library. If I've astonished you, I apologize, but it's simply too irrelevant to our cherished plot to be worth recounting in full. If you really must know the method employed—for characterization purposes, at least—I traveled by foot.

Befuddling, right?

Well, for this kind of distance—maybe it was.

The two locations were considerably far apart (relative to each other at least, they were practically on opposite sides of the city), so to a mere civilian, perhaps taking it on without a better means of transport would seem unfeasible—to me, it didn't pose any problems.

A bicycle would've been more appropriate, certainly, and if I'd dropped by my apartment complex, I could've opted to take the shining new motor vehicle that had recently come under my possession out for a spin... Even so—I'm sure I've made it discernible enough by now, and I hate to reiterate my exploits in a way that makes them sound like a

shameless brag, but my running prowess was hardly limited to small morning jogs and hundred-meter dashes.

If I'm to be humble—I may be “retired,” but I'm still nothing to scoff at. In the same manner that Hanekawa wasn't any less prestigious or sharp after stepping down from her presidential role, I still retained my athletic essence.

Vehicle or not, it wasn't an issue. I barely broke a sweat, truthfully.

In addition, it allowed me to keep the four-wheeled surprise undisclosed to Hanekawa for now, whom I'd informed of my mode of transportation over the phone before departing.

Speaking of—

The time I'd inadvertently spent speaking to that woman “over the phone” had done more than simply drain my call minutes. Yes, I'm aware that it's rude to refer to a fair young maiden (or generally anyone, but that's irrelevant) as “that woman,” but it was more than deserved in this case. However cute Miss Sleeping Beauty's little intemperance was, my phone's battery life had now dipped to an upsettingly un-cute, yet equally little number, making the GPS function a no-go for the trip.

Terrible, really. I'd have to scheme for my revenge.

Hitagi the Schemer would have to make a return indeed.

For now, though, she was in luck. I had a good sense of the direction I was meant to be headed in, so an occasional glance at the large signboard-maps scattered throughout the city was enough to keep me on track. Just like running low on call credit and my lack of vehicle, it was hardly an issue—my journey went smoothly.

As I said, uneventful.

And though uneventful, it did allow me to satiate my body's urge for exertion. After standing around in one place for nearly a hundred pages, frankly—it was quite the relief.

The gentle soreness of my muscles...

With any luck, an intense workout like this one would leave me aching tomorrow, too, which would make my customary stretching a little

more enjoyable. Delayed Onset Muscle Soreness—DOMS for short, quite the appropriate name in my opinion.

Of course, the pursuit of pleasure wasn't the sole reason behind my decision to make my way to this place—the public library, “probably the most eminent font of knowledge in our small city,” as Hanekawa so poetically (and humbly) put it.

Although I called it “my decision,” it was more of a joint affair.

Now that I was roaming the quiet, studious library, I was in the perfect mood to mull things over, so allow me to summarize—

Ha? *Allow me?*

When did I become so deferential?

The amenable politeness of my immediate environment must have been seeping into me—worrisome. If I kept it up, I'd swiftly sprout cat ears and start reminding everyone of the limits of knowledge.

Three of me would be a boon, but having more than one Tsubasa Hanekawa around... As pleasant of a prospect as it was, it feels like it would violate some fundamental law of the universe. If two Hanekawas (or would it be Hanekawaii?) came into contact, would they mutually annihilate or merge into something beyond human comprehension? Would the result be zero, one, or Hanekawa²? And just how powerful would a Hanekawa² be anyway?? Would she actually reach over 9000???

Scary.

It was best not to run the risk, especially with a martial arts fiend like Karen Araragi around. They might get into a world-ending scuffle.

Thankfully, although I may not be able to reach Hanekawa's heights, diversity does breed innovation, and we would definitely have to be innovative if we wanted a shot at figuring out the matter at hand.

I'll try to stay in character.

Listen to this summary—no.

Here's a summary:

Like the synopsis written on the back of a book, or the short overview of prior installments you'd find on the inside cover of a longer series, to get

the readers up to speed—you'd have to imagine a mystery series for this one, naturally, but considering how loose the serialization of something like Holmes and Watson's adventures was maybe it was a marginally flawed comparison. Strangely, despite being the author of such a long-running story it doesn't seem like Arthur Conan Doyle was one for overarching narratives. Most of Holmes' adventures are strictly episodic, and they were written completely out of chronological order. At some point, Doyle even went so far as to kill off Sherlock Holmes, in a short story he titled *The Final Problem*—which, nowadays, is more like the mid-point of the oeuvre than any kind of “final” conclusion, since the famed detective ended up cheating death a few years later due to popular demand. And this is setting aside the adventures not written by Doyle himself, of course.

A real mess, honestly—but maybe it's part of what makes Sherlock Holmes such a ubiquitous character. You could say that he transcends storytelling itself, in a way.

Thankfully, my role was only that of the reliable and relatable Doctor Watson, so it should be fine for me to give a brief recap while I consulted the directory map of our municipality's library. It felt appropriate, whether because of the literary wealth that surrounded me or simply because I'd been jogging my thoughts for a while.

So, rewinding to where Miss Holmes and I left off—

What began as a simple letter had revealed itself as a lost item notice, and Fire Sister #1's contribution had now revealed a crucial piece of evidence—a pivotal one, even. It was remarkable enough to impress me, and even made Hanekawa wonder whether she'd learned forensic techniques from her peacekeeper parents. Thanks to her, we were closing in on the author's identity.

We were expecting to close in on the author's identity.

Unfortunately for our little detective roleplay, however—rather than ushering in a third and final conclusion that would have finally put the small-town mystery to rest, the ensuing deliberations ended up incriminating none other than the junior policewoman herself, (K)aren (A)raragi. On

top of that, her prompt flight from the scene (which I'll take the blame for) had already closed off the possibility for further interrogation.

It put us in a bit of a bind.

Then, in a remarkable brainstorming effort, Hanekawa drafted up a list of names from our latter-day alma mater's student records, aided by her outstanding photographic memory. Unsurprisingly, there were quite a few matches for K.A. initials, but we had too little information to work with, so it produced no worthwhile results to speak of, either.

We had more questions than answers.

Despite the ostensible futility of our search, we kept at it for a while. By the time Hanekawa and I had reached an apparent dead-end, the sun had already come out in full. We'd hardly narrowed anything down though, and now—it seemed uncertain whether we could say that it was a “lost item” notice in the first place.

“When you think about it...” Hanekawa measured. “If you're going to leave a signature on a poster like that, you'd make sure it had your full name, not just your initials. The point of it is to get people to contact you, isn't it? Why would you want to obfuscate your identity?”

It was a little stifling.

Of course, our flimsy pretend-investigation had been, thus far, largely based on guesswork and loose extrapolation, so I wasn't expecting any sort of grand reveal—still. It was a bummer.

We had to make a decision, Miss Holmes advised.

A “decision” at this stage, you would imagine, should've concerned whether or not to abandon the investigation altogether and leave the “cold case” behind—for any duo of amateur detectives, it might've been. A duo that wasn't us. Although Hanekawa and I weren't professionals by any stretch of the imagination, we'd nevertheless agreed on seeing it through to the end.

“Well, I'll give you my input of course,” she added, “But it'll be up to you to make the decisive call.”

“Miss Holmes,” I responded, “We’ve been working through this case together, but if someone was to make that call, shouldn’t it be the chief investigator?”

“Ah, I wouldn’t mind, but...” she searched for her words. “Since you’re gonna be the one doing all the running, I’d rather give you the final say.”

A branching path.

I could choose to pursue the fleeing suspect all the way to the Kanbaru residence, or—

“The list of names we came up with was discouragingly unhelpful, but that’s only the limits of what I know. If we want to gather more clues, the library is going to be our best bet,” Hanekawa elaborated. “And, this is just based on what you told me, but—given how Karen reacted, I really doubt she’s actually involved in this...”

Karen could be trusted, Hanekawa assured, and reaffirmed her guidance, *We should go for the library.*

Objectively, Araragi was suspicious. Her testimony (the only one we’d gathered) was the sole piece of information we had that wasn’t based solely on observation, she’d blatantly intruded on our investigation, she somehow noticed a barely visible piece of evidence, left almost immediately, and—worst of all, the note was posted right in front of *her house*.

She’d acted like a complete outsider, but a profile like hers would be complicated to entirely dismiss...

Had it been anyone but her.

Not that I was so sure about giving the Fire Sister my vote of confidence. I’m not as benevolent as Miss Hanekawa. Rather, I had a hard time imagining that someone as earnestly idiotic as Araragi would manage to pull off such a convincing act—or even conspire to do so in the first place.

I wasn’t decidedly striking her off the suspect list, but if I had to make a choice, Hanekawa’s suggestion sounded like the most pertinent. It would have been convenient to have us split and investigate both, but alas...

“Sorry, but you’ll have to do without me for a while...” Such was the former class president’s response. “We’re having breakfast soon.”

We.

She wasn't being coy about her dissociative identities of the past.

Tsubasa Hanekawa was, sincerely and intentionally, including herself in the Hanekawa household's daily observance of breakfast—the household that belonged to the people who called themselves her parents.

In the wake of the tiger incident, she'd told me about her request for a room of her own, and she'd kept me up to date with her evolving relationship with her family. By her account, it had begun to soften, somewhat. They were beginning to make themselves worthy of the title they went by, it seemed—but I didn't expect it to have progressed to this degree.

As far as I knew, this was a first.

I was happy for her.

Yes, I was happy for her—enough to forget about her attempt to shirk her investigative duties. It reminded me that my own father was likely waking up and getting ready to start his day as well, back home, and that I'd intended to make my way home before he left the apartment so that I could give him a morning's greeting... but he rarely could spare the time for a proper breakfast, and even if I exhausted myself at my top speed now, I wouldn't be making it back in time.

Perhaps I'd overstated Hanekawa's wordless commitment to this adventure, but mine was all-in. It was nagging at me, honestly—I couldn't shake it. Call it sunk cost, but I couldn't throw in the towel just yet.

So, following a few more words with Hanekawa, wrapped up by a near-endless back and forth of *I'll let you go ahead and hang up*, and *No, it's alright, you can hang up*, that only ended when "Roomba" (which wasn't a creatively insulting title for the family pet, I learned, but a rather shining example of Hanekawa's woefully unimaginative nicknaming as it straightforwardly referred to apartment's actual Roomba model 557) had to be let into the room for cleaning:

I arrived at the library, just in time for its opening.

I emitted a curt "Good morning," towards the front-desk worker, and, using the floor plan to point myself towards the "contemporary non-fiction"

corner of the building, I made my way up the pleasantly sunlit stairs and onto the third floor.

It looked completely unfamiliar to me.

As a resident of Naoetsu Town, I'd, naturally, visited its lauded public library more than once, and yet... This building wasn't one I'd ever set foot in—I was almost sure of it.

"When did they renovate this place?" I let slip under my breath.

Did this library always have a third floor? If it was a recent addition, it would certainly explain how foreign it was to me, but could you even undertake renovations of that scale in just...

Ah, hm.

Right, how many years had it been?

Thinking about it now, I hadn't come here in a while. In milder times, before my graduation from middle-school, the events that preceded it, and the rumors that succeeded it... That was the last time I'd been, most likely. Back then, my father and the woman that used to wear his wedding band made a regular habit of taking me to borrow a book or two from the library. On rarer occasions, we'd even pick out a DVD from the still-budding audiovisual section and play it on the flat-screen TV back home.

It wasn't often that I had the chance to visit a place from my younger years (I hadn't been to Kiyokaze since I graduated, and both the house I used to call my home and its flat-screen TV had already disappeared a while ago), so this situation itself was unfamiliar to me. Apparently, I've been told, it isn't unusual to feel an eerie sense that things are just out of place, but it usually just meant that everything looked small, miniaturized.

On the contrary, this library was massive.

The emptiness of the opening hours was most likely responsible for making this hallowed site of quietude seem even more expansive than normal, of course, but there was a comfortable vastness to its high ceilings and wide bookshelves that I'd never associated with it prior to today. This new Naoetsu Public Library had little to do with the one 14-year-old mini-Gahara habitually visited.

It felt like I was free to do exactly as I pleased.

Except shop for porno mags, probably—No matter the amount of renovation work it would go through in its enduring presence, an all-ages library would always remain an all-ages library, as was the rule with matters of public interest. All other manners of adult activities were off the table, too.

And they were such nice tables—what a shame.

Not that I minded things being off the table, but for now it mattered little—I wasn't looking to indulge in any matters of public interest. What "free to do exactly as I pleased" really implied, in the immediate, was my freedom to conduct an investigation in peace.

As Hanekawa and I had concluded, beyond the pair of initials we'd discovered and a general knowledge of the area, we were sorely lacking in information. No matter what hypothesis we wanted to prioritize when it came to the true nature of the torn page or its motive, drafting up a list of names alone wouldn't help.

So, as my first order of business, I was searching for any material that might help me get a grasp of some profiles or stories that might fit the bill—hence, I was browsing through the aforementioned "contemporary nonfiction" shelves.

Not exactly—I wasn't browsing through them so much as traversing the broad, well-organized, wooden shelves full of textbooks and self-help drivel to reach what I was really after: a narrow, significantly less elegant, metallic.....err...a *rack*, ostensibly—labeled "Naoetsu Today."

The local newspaper, although most of the clippings more accurately described "Naoetsu Yesterday" than any "Naoetsu Today." An archive, essentially—with a few copies of the day's paper neatly stacked up nearby for good measure. Hanekawa had told me in advance about the library's collection of old local news articles, but I was still surprised to actually find one.

"A bunch of old newspapers"—for the most part, "news" stories that had ceased to be "new" a while ago already...

Who were these even for?

Was there really so plentiful a demand for erstwhile factoids that it would have its own shelf—as rickety as it was? For those that dated back only a few weeks, it was understandable, but did anyone read the rest?

Other than nosy self-proclaimed detectives, I supposed.

It was a great help.

As thoroughly as I could bring myself to, I scanned the dreadfully trite pages and loose snippets that were (thankfully, at least) sorted approximately headed by the geographical area of relevance. Unsurprisingly, “K.A.” was far from an exceptional combination to find.

Kasumi Aoki, Karen Araragi, Kizuki Arai, Kanna Amano, Karen Araragi, Kazama Arada, Kaede Asumi, Karen Araragi, Kotomi Ashida, Kyoko Atsumi, Karen Araragi, Kumiko Asadaa, Kiyoshi Aoyama, Keisuke Amamori, Karen Araragi...

Karen’s prodigal talent had earned her quite the volume of journalistic features over the year, but besides hers, none of the names seemed to bear any relevance to the matter at hand, and there was no mention of anything related to a missing person or lost item in the vicinity of the Araragi household in today’s paper—or any of the past week.

...

I mulled over Hanekawa’s earlier observation.

After consideration, a neighborhood notice being marked with initials rather than a full name *was* improbable. For the signature to be so inconspicuous—discarding the faintness of the ink (for all we knew, it could’ve been a simple misprint, so it was best not to dwell on it unduly), there was only one possible justification: the signatory must have already been known to their audience—that just the pair of letters was enough to make them recognizable to whomever the intended recipient might be.

Of course, it immediately brought back to my mind the first hypothesis I’d essayed—that it might be a personal letter, even an open one. A pamphlet, a manifesto, a piece of amateur poetry... something of the ilk. While the two letters at the bottom of the page did seem like they

implicated a particular person, it was possible that the work was more artistic than utilitarian in nature.

An *author*, so to speak, and Hanekawa had indeed spoken.

Unfortunately, even with my wider consideration, the snippets of articles yielded nothing.

Ah~

I couldn't help but let out a small sigh.

If there was something to be figured out, I'd have to cast a wider net—or I had to cast it elsewhere.

Think outside the box.

There had to be something else we'd glossed over, another assumption we'd failed to scrutinize—

Right...

There was.

Until now, we'd been assuming that the signature left on the scrap was as much a mark left by the author as it was an indication of the culprit's identity—that the author and the culprit were *one and the same*. Naturally, if that *were* the case, the author-culprit's reluctance to sign with their full name would have to mean that it was an internal affair, and one with which the neighborhood was familiar—however.

There was no reason to assume the two were even conspiring, let alone that both roles were filled by a single person.

If the *author* (of whatever contents were now completely missing, save for a scrap) was separate from the *culprit* who had nailed it to its telephonic cross—there'd be no need for them to be a local. Maybe their renown wasn't constrained to the part of town the Araragi household impeded on, or even Naoetsu itself.

For an author in the truest *artistic* sense of the word, signing off with only initials would be unambiguously customary. It wouldn't provide any direct information on the culprit, but it might at the very least shed some light on their intentions.

For now, it was about the best I could do.

Unless—

“Awawa~ It must be my lucky day!”

Unless I made a chance encounter, that is—but I want to make something clear. Of all the words contained in the Senjogahara English Dictionary—or any English Dictionary for that matter, “*lucky*” wasn’t one I’d use to describe myself. Further yet, in the event of a rigorous, impartial evaluation of my life thus far... If I had to make a list of the most ill-suited adjectives for the job, “*lucky*” would be near the top, definitely—on the podium, at least. The bottom three of Hitagi Senjogahara’s character sheet would look something like this:

Mellow—not in my wildest dreams.

Tame—anything but.

Lucky—I’d be deluded to think so.

And you could add *chaste*, for an honorable mention.

(Lol).

Just kidding—how could a cloistered princess like me be anything other than a kissless virgin? And to think I was surrounded in life by only a full cast of even more hopeless virgins... Just my luck, isn’t it?

Woe is me.

It’s only fair, you might say. After all, my SPD, CHA, and INT were already pretty much maxed out, so it’s natural for my other stats to lag

behind a little. It's the only way, you could argue, for an exceptional unit like me to not throw the world out of balance.

This low LCK was my penance.

Don't start pitying me too soon, though—it's not that abysmally low. All in all, I was a pretty well-rounded individual. I'd had my high-rolls and *critical* hits here and there (not to brag, but I did knock out a rowdy classmate of mine in a single clean punch one time)—simply, compared to the rest of my outstanding self—my luck was... Within expectations.

Below average, but within expectations.

To put it in terms that an older generation or an out-of-touch ex-class president might understand—I'd missed out on the "Blessing" *omikuji*, but I hadn't exactly drawn a "Misfortune". What fate had in store for me was closer to the equivalent of a "Future small blessing"—the one that has 'blessing' in the name, yet is not only "small," but doesn't guarantee to show its effects any time soon, either. Of course, there are some sticking points to this comparison. It's long past me, and I'm not proud of it, but as someone who used to regularly try my hand at *omikuji*... I might've once considered a "Future small blessing" to be the result of 'unexpected luck' in its own right. Out of all the options, it's usually the rarest one.

However—

As anyone with a brain should know, the make-believe world of fortune telling operates on its own, fantastical terms where the whims of fate always conveniently skew in favor of whatever's most interesting. That's why, in that world, a humble fate of "nothing special" is a lot more "outstanding" than it really should be. Even Tokyo's oldest temple fudges the numbers—when you're drawing slips at *Sensoji* Temple, you've got a 30% chance of "Misfortune," 17% for a "Great blessing," and a whole 35% for a "Blessing." After accounting for the rest, it leaves the "Future small blessings" with a laughable rate of.....3%.

With numbers that ridiculous, it's a wonder that it was ever taken seriously at all, let alone that it continues to be.

Truthfully, the real world is mundane. The most banal outcomes are the rifest, and only a negligible amount of people can reasonably say that they've been served exceptional luck, whether in fortune or misfortune. In that regard, my circumstances were fairly normal. At best, I'd seen half-blessings, future blessings, and a few small blessings—small misfortunes, maybe, but as a rule of thumb, I was neither *lucky* nor particularly *unlucky*.

I didn't consider luck to be an important factor in life.

And yet, I'm only human—and as any detective down on their luck would, even the most cynical ones, I was still tacitly hoping to welcome a convenient turn of fate that would push me along towards the truth.

But I want to make something else clear: whenever my fate did on occasion take a fortunate turn—you shouldn't think that I would ever go around cheerfully celebrating my “lucky day.”

That wasn't my line.

Not at all.

If it were, it would be a grave misattribution. Worse even, it would be serious mischaracterization.

As you should know, I wouldn't say such pitifully embarrassing things—not even if my own life were at stake. Not even my father's.

There was no chance, absolutely, unconditionally that I...

Well, “unconditionally” was a daunting word. If push came to shove, maybe, I'd let slip an embarrassing thing or two for Hanekawa's sake—but she'd be the one and only exception, and she was currently busy having a heartfelt breakfast.

Besides—*Awawa?!*

I was still working on my habit of talking to myself, but I did know to keep my interjections in check. As things were, I stayed away as best I could from overtly enthusiastic expressions like “Woah!” and “Yay!” so something as spirited as “Awawa~” certainly wasn't in my repertoire.

I wouldn't debase myself with such a cutesy onomatopoeia.

“Eeeehh—what's wrong with cutesy onomatopoeia?!”

There isn't anything innately wrong with letting out a *moéful* cry of glee, but it's something only a handful of people can candidly pull off. If a character like mine was given that kind of line, it'd be for a one-off joke.

At worst, extra-canonical content—like those in-character audio commentaries improvised by my wonderful voice actress. Things get pretty hectic on there, I'm told. Or a comedy spinoff mini-series, perhaps?

That wasn't such a bad idea. Someone should write it down.

Outside of that, though—no onomatopoeia.

It's a Gahara Rule.

"Seriously, not even a little one?"

...Fine.

Out of all the acts of self-degradation I might be impelled to partake in, I would be willing to emit, on request, a small "*wan-wan*" for Miss Hanekawa—but that was it. Just the one.

Every rule had its exception, that much would be fine.

"It's starting to sound like your rules have a lot of exceptions, honestly."

What if they did? Flexibility and compromise are inevitable in ruling. If it couldn't allow for an exception, it would just be a Gahara Dogma.

Flexibility is also a Gahara Rule.

It's a wonderful skill in bed as well—just ask Hanekawa.

"And all your rules seem related to Miss Hanekawa for some reason... Is that its own rule too?"

No, that part is just a coincidence.

"She's very lucky."

That again?

"Excuse me—could you stop commenting on my internal monologue? It's rather distracting," I intervened.

"Oh, were you busy?" asked the pestering voice, incredulously.

Hunched over and fondling a rackful of newspaper clippings at opening hours, I wasn't sure what I would seem like if not "busy." Even assuming that my uninvited interlocutor had a different definition of the word, it was

bad manners to intrude on a woman when she was busy groping a heavily stuffed rack.

“Wow, Miss Hanekawa really is on your mind a lot.”

“I’m not sure whose internal monologue you’re even meant to be commenting on anymore. I worry about the company you keep if such an ordinary phrase has you thinking these inappropriate thoughts about the former class president.”

“I never said they were inappropriate, though.”

“There are more ways to say things than screaming them at the top of your lungs, Araragi.”

Tsukihi, Araragi.

As the assumed strategist of the Fire Sisters operation (which wasn’t saying much given Karen’s acumen), she was fairly perspicacious. She had nothing on Hanekawa’s sharpness, it goes without saying—but she had her wits about her.

Talk about a “chance” encounter.

What were the odds?

I’d given up on questioning Fire Sister #1 so that I could rush here to the library, and the moment I hit a snag, out comes Fire Sister #2. With a LCK stat as worthless as mine, pulling back-to-back Araragi sisters from the random encounter tables of unrelated areas had to be pretty unlikely. I’ve already compared my circumstances to a “Future small blessing” fortune, but I wasn’t expecting to be dealing with *Sensoji* Temple’s implausible three percents.

To call it a blessing, though...

If I was going to have a chance encounter, I’d have preferred something more directly beneficial—like a briefcase full of intel, or the culprit’s written confession, or Hanekawa in a bunny suit—better yet, Hanekawa presenting the culprit’s written confession in a bunny suit.

“I should call you out for being a filthy pervert, but I am pretty curious about that last one,” Tsukihi conceded, weighing the former class

president's breasts against her own with cupped hands. "How does she even deal with those?"

"I'm not quite sure how she manages, myself," I answered. "The burden of hanging our deepest aspirations abreast her chest is doubtlessly cosmic in scale. It'd be futile to attempt to reason in our own terms."

Tsubasa Hanekawa was simply too far ahead of us. Especially much too far ahead of Tsukihi—and again, she was presently occupied, unfortunately.

In her stead... I would've appreciated a *shiny* encounter, at least, but I was faced with a rather commonplace Tsukihi Araragi.

That said, for Tsukihi, "commonplace" apparently meant wearing colorful *yukatas* year-round right through to the middle of March, even when they fell shorter than her own hair did—which wasn't as much due to the cloth itself being particularly undersized, mind you (although it was), as it was her carefully kept hair extending so far down past her shoulders that it nearly dragged across the wooden flooring with her steps.

Sorry—it did drag across the wooden flooring.

Never mind, forget the *shiny*. She looked odd and out of place enough just with her usual colorway. Like a provocatively human-shaped bird-of-paradise.

"Hold on. Why am I a plant?!"

"A plant? Not at all, I'd never," I rebuked. "I was talking about the actual bird. The resemblance is striking, honestly—they're quite alluring, those pestering birdbrains, but they have a distinctively grating call. The plants they share a name with, on the other hand... They have the decency to keep their beaks shut."

"Huhhh?!?" she pouted angrily. "What do you mean a 'distinctively grating call?!?!?!'"

"Oh, now that you mention it, maybe it's more reminiscent of being rudely pecked at than a birdsong..."

“*Urk*—well, you...” She frowned, pointing an accusatory finger in my direction. “You were rudely ignoring me!!! I was just setting things right—basically.”

“So, it was an eye for an eye? Right, right, that’s reasonable enough. It definitely makes sense, that’s true,” I acknowledged. “Ah, but...”

“But what!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” she fumed.

“Oh? What’s with all the exclamation points, Araragi?”

They made it difficult to tell what she was trying to say.

“But. what,” she carefully repeated, with a calmer tone.

Her eyes were still fully ablaze, though—and her punctuation was just as confusing. Passion is great, but careful punctuation is important, too.

“Wait, were you asking a question?” I hypothesized.

“Um! Yes~?” she thoughtlessly punctuated again.

“I was just thinking...” I began, “An eye for an eye—that sounds like a pretty antagonistic ideology, doesn’t it?”

For a self-proclaimed hero of justice, I mean.

“...Ah.”

“Not that your dubious moral compass is any of my business. I’m not one to pass judgement.”

“No, I don’t really mind,” she voiced a belated response.

I was counting on Tsukihi getting even more riled up, but she was surprisingly unperturbed.

That bipolarity of hers was hard to predict.

“I wouldn’t really know,” she ceded. “The whole ‘hero of justice’ thing has always been more of Karen’s hobby, honestly. I just let myself get dragged along with it.”

A hobby, huh?

It was a strangely self-deprecatory choice of words, to say the least—one that I presumed her sister would strongly disavow if given the chance. As I understood it, “justice” was meant to be the guiding principle of the Fire Sisters pair, the two of them—their maxim, basically.

Their Araragi Rule?

Either way, this bluntly dispassionate response was out of step. I wondered how often their ideological clashes escalated into heated disputes.

Performing tea ceremonies, playing the *koto*, arranging flower bouquets—as opposed to her sister (and in spite of her astonishingly short fuse), Tsukihi Araragi had a penchant for the more “pacifist” traditions and pastimes. Perhaps for that reason, it was misguided of me to expect her to adhere all the way to Karen’s airheaded principles, Fire Sisters or not. While her big sister was busy smashing through all manner of social conventions in the name of her burning passion, Tsukihi was clearly concerned with the “proper way” of doing things—to the degree that a “hobby” might require, that is.

At least, that was her character archetype, on the surface.

I’d never personally seen her take part in any of those activities, and given how distinctly out of season her *yukata* was, there was a tangible chance that Tsukihi’s choice “hobbies” were less about *respecting* tradition than they were about *re-speccing* it to her whims.

Her and Karen would be birds of a feather in that regard.

Bees of a chitin?

“Cheating? You’re openly trying to tarnish my reputation now...”

“You’re only in middle school—everyone will forget all about that silly reputation of yours soon enough,” I redressed her without bothering to correct her flagrant mispronunciation. “If anything, you should be cheating as much as you can while you’re still able to get away with it.”

I’ll concede that it was a pretty bad joke.

As discerning as Tsukihi was, it was a probably little too intellectually demanding for her age group too. It was the kind of lame pun that would have Hanekawa folding over in laughter, though...

Like a *neopteran*’s wings, over their abdomen...

.....(lol).

She might’ve been rubbing off on me.

If you don’t get it, go open up a textbook—or look it up online, I couldn’t care less.

—What was I saying?

Something about birds and bees.

Birds and bees...

And Hanekawa rubbing off on me.....

“Uhm, Miss Senjogahara—are you feeling a little disheveled maybe?”

“I’m plenty sheveled, thank you very much. Don’t give the readers the wrong impression of my ethereal beauty.”

Make no mistake about it—even in my sports clothes, drenched in sweat, and out of breath, I’m a sight for sore eyes.

Especially, some would say.

“Ah... Hm... I was just wondering, if you might be thirsty...” she suggested with an affected nonchalance that I ignored.

Now that Tsukihi had mentioned it, I realized that I was practically dying of thirst. After such a long journey on foot, my habit of never carrying a water bottle had turned against me.

“Yes, I’m sincerely parch—”

“Then I’ve got just the thing!”

Was she waiting for me to say it or what?

She clasped her hands, reached into her clothes, and without waiting for my reply, produced a bottle of barley tea, presenting to me as if it were a cup of freshly brewed *matcha*.

Very mannerly.

The total opposite to her brusque interruption.

Maybe she was more passionate about her tea ceremonies than I’d previously assumed, I thought, but the choice of beverage remained questionable. Beyond the plastic container severely clashing with the decorum of the ritual, being offered a ubiquitously summertime drink in the middle of March was perplexing.

Paired with the short-hemmed yukata, you’d think our exchange was taking place in the middle of summer, not the cusp of spring.

Did she forget to check her calendar this morning?

“Hehe, it might technically still be winter, but—” she rified, “*barley!*”

“ ... ”

“Just barley~” she repeated her joke, sticking her tongue out as if trying to salvage the punchline with an appeal to her charms.

“ ”

Sorry, it looks like we have to scrap the mini-series.

I’m afraid this cast just isn’t cut out for it.

“Ah, is it a little too high brow? I thought it might be.”

Too high brow?

Karen Araragi evidently wasn’t the only otherworldly specimen being housed by the Araragi family. Frankly, my respect for their parents was starting to morph into concern.

What conditions could have possibly produced such disconcerting offspring? There was no way normal, respectable people like Hanekawa and I shared a universe with these people.

They lived in their own Araragiverse.

“Oh, right,” I went along with her whims, “The joke must’ve gone over my head. Could you explain it for me?”

“Well, you see... Normally it’s pretty weird to be carrying around barley tea when it isn’t summer, so that’s the setup—but that’s when I say ‘It might be winter, but just barley!’ Because it sounds like ‘barely!’ And that’s the punchline,” she explained with frantic agitation of her improperly estival bottle.

“Ah, it’s as I thought.”

“As you thought?”

“It’s a horribly unfunny joke, as I thought.”

“Ehh?” Tsukihi exclaimed with genuine surprise. “Why would you think that?!?”

“Because it’s horrible and unfunny, mostly—although you’re right to call into question whether it really qualifies as a ‘joke.’ I was undecided myself.”

“I’m not calling it into question?!?”

“I was pretty desperate to quench my thirst, but now...”

“Now what??!”

“I just can’t risk it.”

“Risk what???”

“...Your horribleness-and-unfunniness, is it contagious?”

“You’re the one who’s horrible and unfunny,” she pouted.

“Hardly. I’m a comedy whiz.”

I’d willingly cede to the other allegation.

“I even made sure to wear my *yukata* this time for the extra dramatic irony. When Nadeko sees this, I’m sure she’s going to straight up *explode* with laughter. She knows how to joke around, yep.”

That Nadeko Sengoku again?

If Tsukihi was telling the truth about the hysterical responses her bottom of the barrel wordplay was receiving, her bond of friendship with Miss Sengoku was truly invaluable. She must be a charitable one.

Or a complete idiot—who knows.

“Regardless, that would be situational irony, not ‘dramatic’.”

“What? No way, I was counting on it being dramatic...”

“Now you’re just thinking of a dramatic reveal.”

“Oh, if we’re talking about reveals, that’s where I’m expecting something like... ‘*Omigosh*, Tsukihi was an amazing comedian all along!’”

“I take it back—the dramatic irony is definitely there.”

We just went over how out-of-character that kind of speech pattern would be for me, and yet.

“You think so? Nadeko’s gonna get so much inspiration for her *yonkoma*, this is great...”

“*Yonkoma* are good, but shouldn’t you be worried about the actual manga?” I remarked. Based on what I’d gathered from Karen’s oversharing tendencies, it sounded like Miss Sengoku’s work kept itself closer to the codes of the “romantic drama” genre, where this kind of... humor—if you could call it that, would be considerably out of tune. “The comedy strip-comics usually come with the *tankobon* release. Your friend is just self-publishing online, isn’t she? For now, anyway.”

Despite it being my first time hearing about this amateur *mangaka* friend of the Fire Sisters, it was a reasonable assumption to make. At best, she would've been scouted for a tentative serialization.

Middle-schoolers don't tend to go straight to having volumes printed out.

"Oh, that's a good point," she retracted her comedy prop and fell into deep thought. "Then, how about..."

Tsukihi concentrated for a while with eyes shut, and—

"In spring equinox
the crab, although she protests
drinks the barley tea..."

She launched into verse with stiff solemnity.

"There's nothing more romantic than poetry, right? I'll convince Nadeko to add some... she could just use them as inspiration, too."

"A *haiku*? How traditional of you," I commented.

"What do you think of it?" she asked with a touch of hesitation.

I'd been nothing short of heinous and unrelenting with my criticism, and yet Tsukihi was eagerly awaiting my next critique.

I wasn't too surprised.

This dynamic might seem counterintuitive to the subset of people who endeavor to be as placating as possible to their entourage, but, as I'd learned—it wasn't an uncommon reaction to harsh honesty.

You could go as far as to call it a sort of pathology, actually. Across the full spectrum of circumstance—from those with the most comfortable lives to those who survive best they can, humans share an ineluctable belief that painful things have their place.

Whether it's a pathology, or a ritualistic worship of suffering—
There isn't much difference.

As the sayings go, some things are "too good to be true," and "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." To anyone of mild intellect, it makes intuitive sense—it has all the allure of nuance and reasonability. Pills are hard to swallow, antiseptics have a sting, and working out makes your

muscles burn—all of these are verifiably true, certainly, but they only go one way.

Not everything that stings is antiseptic, a rock is just as hard to swallow as a painkiller, and a sprain hurts a lot more than a workout session. Sometimes, life is painful for no reason, and you won't be any stronger from having endured it. Conversely, there's no such thing as a necessary downside. Even if every light casts a shadow, there are no hidden sides to a flat surface.

In my case, I wasn't harsh because I found it more truthful or righteous. It was just part of my personality—I had no ulterior motives, whatever others would like to believe.

People will always interpret the world however best suits their needs.

Not that I minded. Tsukihi was free to take my cruelty as a teachable moment if she wished, and I was pretty accustomed to the role of the “cruel mistress” by now.

“It isn't completely worthless,” I judged her work. “I'd say it passes.”

“You really do talk weird, Miss Senjogahara, but I guess I'll accept the praise. Haikus aren't really made for English anyway—the original Japanese version reads way better, trust me.”

It's basically completely different, she affirmed.

“‘Original Japanese’?” I remarked. “This is an English-language novel.”

“Huh?” she sulked. “I wrote it in Japanese though...”

“Then you'll have to keep dreaming that it gets a Japanese release.”

As much as it breaks my heart to say, the best we can do for now is stash it in the extra pages somewhere. The afterword, maybe? It seemed to aggrieve Tsukihi too.

She brushed it off with a terse *whatever*.

“By the way,” she went on. “You can drink from my bottle. I need it for later, but it's not like what's inside matters—it's not real tea anyway.”

She wasn't fond of the taste, she explained, so swapped it out for some water and a bit of food coloring

I did relieve her from her bizarrely high effort prop, but—

A Japanese girl who didn't like barley tea?

You had to wonder if she even liked tea at all. A Japanese girl with a pastime of hosting tea ceremonies who disliked tea? Every other detail about Tsukihi Araragi was cause enough to completely re-shuffle any appraisal of her.

It went beyond bipolarity—she was fundamentally impossible to pin down. It would be admirable, if it didn't make me wonder whether I'd have another practical joke sprung on me as I took a tentative sip of the barley-colored liquid.

...

Never mind. It really was just water.

Unpredictably predictable.

One of the best examples of her elusive characterization was also one of the first things I learned about the little-sister Araragi—I've already forgotten where I picked it up, so let's say it was the word on the street. I've since experienced it for myself, but I was previously acquainted with her volatile anger, by way of a catchphrase she used to tout around. Something about being *dagnabbit mad*.

Dagnabbit mad...

It was both so on the nose that it was overbearing ("dagnabbit" + "a bit," seriously?) and underwhelmingly nonillustrative. A bit mad? Enough to exclaim "Dagnabbit"? Which was it?

Not to mention how old-timey rural it sounded.

"Oh, that one was pretty much a mistranslation, *actually*," Tsukihi noted, pushing a ridiculous pair of fake glasses up her nose, which I could only assume she'd stashed inside *yukata* for another lame gag.

A visual one this time—was she trying to revive the stillborn mini-series? If so, she was insistent, but she was barking up the wrong tree. Rather than a distinct Araragiverse, it was as if she lived in another medium altogether...

Maybe her jokes would get some laughs in the *anime*?

"Of course they would!" she touted confidently. "I even have a signature dance over on TV. It's super catchy! And, by the way—the opening

song's title doesn't make sense without the original catchphrase either...
Cue ED!"

"A sound-cue joke isn't going to work in novel form either, but I appreciate the effort."

"The adaptation will do me *Marshmallow Justice!*"

"Please do justice to your sister's belongings," I requested.

"Bleh—" Tsukihi protested, "We basically share everything, it's fine." I'd heard quite the opposite.

It must've been what Karen was complaining about earlier.

"Well, *apparently* you also heard that my catchphrase was 'dagnabbit mad,' so maybe someone's just been feeding you lies."

"I'm experienced enough with misinformation," I retorted. "Since you seem so particular about your 'original Japanese versions' though, what would Miss Tsukihi Araragi have it be translated to?"

"Uhm, I'm not in charge of the localization, so I probably shouldn't be asked about it..." Tsukihi defended herself, followed by a short pause. "But if you want to know what I think, I'd say it's definitely untranslatable. They should've left it as is! It's just too unique of a catchphrase, you know? A distillation of the beauty of the Japanese language! And of my brilliant mind, of course."

Same as the haiku, she noted.

For someone who "shouldn't be asked about it," she sure had strong opinions. I hoped she didn't have a Twitter account.

She should leave it to the pros, I told her.

"I hear our books have quite the talented translators already."

"Urgh, sure—*one* of them has some talent. He did your debut, so you're pretty lucky... I got stuck with a second-rate!"

"Does everything have to come down to luck? The real reason is obvious enough."

"It is?!"

“Why was I was given the better translator? It’s simple—I had the better novel. I’m a pivotal character, a first-rate heroine. A second-rate story gets a second-rate translation, Araragi.”

And regardless—sure, “dagnabbit” sounded a little odd, but Tsukihi’s original wordplay was rather deplorable in the first place. Nothing deserving of a gold medal, and even less of a platinum one.

What “distillation of beauty” was she so obstinate on preserving?

“Bleh, whatever. It was a little advanced, it’s fine if you don’t get it,” she pouted. “It’s far behind me now anyway. I’m already soaring on towards greater heights...”

She sighed wistfully, as though she were reciting straight from a romantic drama.

“...”

Maybe that really was what she was doing. I wouldn’t put it past her.

“Although I do regret it greatly...”

“Don’t contradict yourself so soon, it’s unsightly.”

“I regreatly.”

“Please don’t underline your puns either, I’ll throw up.”

“But you *italicize* yours all the time!”

“You can’t compare the two. They have a totally different feel.”

“It’s not *that* different...”

“It is that different.”

“Maybe you’re right...”

“*I always am.*”

“Woah, that was pretty suave.”

“I always am.”

“Eurk, that one gave me the creeps.”

“Oh? What’s the matter?”

“Okay, okay! I give up, you’ve proved your point...”

Tsukihi threw her arms up in the air to signal her defeat and let herself sprawl over the library bench.

Made herself sprawl over—I should say. The way her *yukata*'s hem just barely covered all the most critical areas couldn't be anything but deliberate.

Her splayed posture made the previous bird-of-paradise comparison even more striking. Tsukihi herself was petite enough, but her extravagantly long and silky black hair covered the entire seating area by itself.

It was a good thing no one else was around at this hour.

"I've gotta say, Miss Senjogahara, bantering with you is strangely fun. How come it's so rare to run into you outside?"

"Outside? Where else would we run into each other?"

"Uh..."

"You meant to say 'at this time of day,' surely—and the reason for that would be your repulsive tendency to sleep in past a tolerable hour."

I had reason to be offended.

Not only were we obviously indoors, but that odd phrasing of hers made me sound like a severe shut-in. I may have been cloistered in the past, but I'd never stooped so low as to waste my life away locked in my apartment—clearly.

If I did, I wouldn't be here in the first place.

"How did you know I like to sleep in?!" Tsukihi cried. "But... Yeah, now that I'm thinking about it... I guess you don't really visit our house anymore, so we always just end up meeting outside."

She talked with a remarkably nonchalant air. How self-absorbed.

It was like she was trying her best to seem less interested in the topic of conversation than in twirling her spectacularly long locks of hair around her index.

Even though she was the one to initiate.

As I recall, I replied.

"The Araragi household hasn't been graced with my presence more than a single time. It's understandable you'd ache for more, but it's hardly anything to mourn."

While I'd technically marked my second visit to the Araragis just earlier, I wasn't sure whether Karen would have told her sister about our run-

in yet. Not that it would change anything. It wasn't anything more than a coincidence—the point remained the same.

I couldn't let Tsukihi give people the wrong idea.

"Still, though... doesn't it feel like we used to see each other around more often?"

"You must be thinking of Hanekawa," I tried. "She did stay with your family for a short while."

"I'm pretty sure I'm not... Miss Senjogahara and Miss Hanekawa are so different, I wouldn't get the two of you mixed up like that." Tsukihi pondered for a short while. "Well, whatever!"

Before moving on with an airy smile.

"I've got my reasons... but what are you doing all the way out here, Miss Senjogahara? To think you ran here, too..."

"You could say I'm pushing my luck," I suggested.

That seemed to be the theme, and it wasn't wholly inaccurate to my efforts.

"Hmm..." She squinted. "That's a suspicious answer."

"It's the human condition. If you're not willing to push your luck a little, how can you aspire to get anything done?"

"Huh? I don't disagree I guess... But playing it safe does seem to work out for some people, doesn't it? Even if it's a little boring at times."

"How safe can they afford to play it? Whether rich or poor, talented or worthless, the moment they step into the world, anything goes. There's no way to guarantee their safety."

"Ehh? But—" Tsukihi protested.

"Between us? If you're asking me, the only ones who are really playing it safe are the losers that shut themselves out from the outside world completely. If nothing else, I'll give them that."

"As in... Nothing ventured, nothing gained?"

Or the other way around, maybe, she suggested.

Nothing gained, nothing ventured. As long as you renounced profits from the outset, you wouldn't have to put yourself at risk.

She was on the right track, but that was only part of it.

Too irresolute.

Even if you chose to *gain nothing*—

“Being unambitious won’t cut it. If you go with the flow and stick to whatever’s right in front of you, you’ll still be exposing yourself to plenty of things that are out of your control. Whether you choose to run towards it or not, danger lurks just about everywhere.”

“*Huaa...*” Tsukihi shuddered with a grimace. “I’m going to be looking over my shoulder when I go out, now.”

“Well—don’t take it that seriously. It might be the job of the Fire Sisters to keep the peace in this town, but with a crime rate this low you’re probably just as likely to be eaten by a vampire as you are to be kidnapped by some miscellaneous scoundrel.”

Zero percent odds, in other words—nearly.

“No matter how peaceful the town, though,” I continued, “You’re always at risk of tripping, or getting caught in a sudden rainstorm, or showing up at the convenience store after they’ve sold out of tuna-mayo rice balls.”

Just by existing, we’re already pushing luck. That’s why, if you truly want to “play it safe.”

You have to stop existing altogether.

That’s the only solution.

The only way to avoid pain.

“.....So shut-ins *don’t exist*? That’s pretty intense. I’m all for differences of opinion, but denying someone’s human rights like that could be a bit problematic.”

“They’re the ones doing it to themselves, really.”

“...They are?”

“Once someone’s shut themselves off enough—if they’ve stopped interacting with the world around them, can you confidently say they *exist*?”

“Ah—*Schrödinger’s hikikomori!!!*”

“.....”

That was a bit too far.

Too morbid, even for my tastes.

“To be honest, I didn’t expect you to be the kind of character who spends much time philosophizing, either,” Tsukihi commented. “Today really is full of surprises.”

“A *lucky* day?”

“Yep!”

Tsukihi had announced herself with that outrageous claim. As exceptionally charming as I was, was my unanticipated presence all it took for such a boisterous declaration?

How nice it must be to have such easily met standards for one’s life, I thought.

“Don’t sell yourself short, Miss Senjogahara,” she attempted to reassure me, unnecessarily. “I was talking about this book, though.”

Tsukihi pointed at a conspicuously colorful book that was caught near the top of a nearby shelf labelled *Illustration & Photography*.

“I’m already pretty lucky to find it so easily, but you being here makes me double lucky! I’m not tall enough to reach the top of the shelf, so you’ll get it for me, won’t you?”

Was she rejoicing at the thought of using me as her gopher?

Who did she think I was?

“Well, you’re Hitagi Senjogahara, and aside from my big sister, you’re the tallest girl I know!”

Err, maybe Mom is taller, actually... she added.

Were my longer-and-more-slender than average legs enough to mark me as the target for forced labor? The only person I’d ever allow to enslave me was Tsubasa Hanekawa.

Who did this girl think she was?

“That one’s easy. I’m Tsukihi Araragi.”

“Oh, is that your name? I thought you just went by Fire Sister #2.”

“I’m not as gullible as Karen, you know?!”

“Karen? Are you talking about Fire Sister #1?”

“And why does she get to be first?!?”

So that's what she was going to take issue with. She had a competitive streak, unlike her sister. It was curious. Tea ceremonies, martial arts...

Weren't their hobbies misattributed?

It was likely a desirable arrangement that Tsukihi had no interest in martial arts and that Karen had a relatively amenable disposition—relative to her little sister, of course. With how much they mirrored each other, it really was a wonder that they weren't actually twins.

Sisterhood was a complicated and strenuous bond, evidently.

I was happy to be an only child.

Having said that, though—I set Tsukihi's now-half-empty comedy prop aside and reached for the uppermost row of the *Illustration & Photography* aisle, carefully dislodging the vibrant book that Tsukihi had been eyeing.

In case you forgot, I was showing good will today.

All About Clamp.

An art book, which Tsukihi received with eagerly extended hands and an enthusiastic “Thank you Miss Senjogahara!” and began flipping through it at once. She was planning on borrowing it on Miss Sengoku's behalf, I postulated.

“I already mentioned it earlier,” Tsukihi spoke without taking her eyes off of the pages' colorful illustrations, “But you're surprisingly easy to get along with Miss Senjogahara. I remember Miss Hanekawa saying that you could have a pretty complicated personality at times, but you're easy to hold a conversation with.”

“Why wouldn't I be?” I asked.

“Well, you're definitely pretty intimidating... Personally though, I can't say I have any complaints.

“That's very charitable of you. On my side of things, I've got plenty, in case you're desirous of constructive criticism.”

“Oh, no, it's alright. We shouldn't let ourselves get bogged down by the small details, it would spoil the fun.”

“Tch—” I contained myself.

I was showing good will, today.

While Karen's personality was ultimately fairly amenable to socialization, her little sister—who had all the exterior of a respectful and by-the-books girl, was somehow infinitely more presumptuous.

We'd been getting along, but the out-of-character self-righteous urge to lecture them was welling up inside me once again.

It must've just been a natural reaction to prolonged exposure, I figured.

I made a mental note to discuss it with Hanekawa.

Even so, I told myself, it was fine.

That Tsukihi was able to say with a straight face that I wasn't a particularly difficult person to befriend—it spoke to the irrational whims of her character, no doubt, and a twisted belief about the nature of my harshness, most likely.

Even so—

It wasn't something the Hitagi Senjogahara from before her senior year of high-school—who'd left Kiyokaze Middle behind without so much as a perfunctory farewell and made every effort to keep strictly to herself at Na-oetsu High, could've possibly imagined hearing from anyone.

From a girl four years her junior no less.

If that Hitagi of days past were to give some “constructive criticism” on my current display of amnesty, perhaps I'd endure some jabs about how I'd “grown weak” and “lowered my guard,” or maybe a complaint that I wasn't properly “keeping tabs on my enemies.”

I'd done well to abandon the gimmick.

Seriously, what was she supposed to be—a *tsundere* or a *chunibyō*?

The foregone chun-Hitagi was naïve to think that avoiding social contact as much as I could was any way to live. It wasn't getting me anywhere. I just ended up creating more problems for myself.

My present affability was for the best.

Just the right amount—I didn't want to lose sight of myself.

So, all in all—these days, the distinction of “not-so-hard to get along with” wasn't one I found quite as unpleasant to earn as I might've back then.

That was what had changed.

And, watching Tsukihi hold the art book above her insouciant face (she was still lying completely flat on the bench), I figured it was fine. Just this once at least, I'd let her off with a simple click of the tongue.

It wasn't worth the bother, and I wasn't self-righteous enough to care. She was a lost cause anyway.

You know, it kinda reminds me, Tsukihi spoke up.

"In Nadeko's manga, there's these two side characters who are both close to the protagonist, but they never get to meet in the story. I kept telling Nadeko 'You should let them have a scene together! I bet they'd get along super well!' but she said it wouldn't make sense for them to have a drawn-out conversation, because of the plot... I was pretty bummed."

"She could always save it for a side-story."

Or a spinoff, I chanced.

"Woah, that's a super good idea!"

Not at all. It was the most basic suggestion I could think of.

"Say, since I'm on my way to Nadeko's place after this, and you don't seem to have anything better to do... Do you wanna come along? I wonder if you'd get along with her."

"I'm sorry, 'nothing better to do?'"

"Don't worry—I'm sure Nadeko wouldn't mind. You'll see, she's a bit of a ditz sometimes, but she's a really sweet girl," she continued, ignoring my rebuttal.

Super cute, too, she added, *even after that thing she did to her hair.*

Letting go of the book with one hand, Tsukihi haphazardly mimed a pair of scissors cutting a dangerously short line through her bangs with the other. I didn't have to ask what "that thing" was meant to imply.

An unsanctioned hairstyle change.

Unsanctioned by Tsukihi, that is—who conveyed no small pride in her self-proclaimed title of "fashion advisor of Tsuganoki Middle." Not that this short-and-messy-banged friend Nadeko was a Tsuganoki student

herself, she explained—simply, as her “best friend,” Tsukihi considered that it fell within the scope of her responsibilities nonetheless.

“Honestly, I’m a little jealous... No matter what she does, she always ends up being infuriatingly cute. She doesn’t even have to try—it’s completely unfair!” she whined.

Infuriatingly cute...

She didn’t even have to try?

It sounded worse than that. If Tsukihi was to be believed about the bangs...insofar as this Nadeko Sengoku did occasionally *try* to change up her looks, her attempts went in the direction opposite of “cuteness”.

And yet.

“It’s *acute* self-sabotage!”

It wasn’t surprising that someone like Tsukihi, who was particularly conscious of her carefully crafted social presentation, would find it unjust that someone who scorned ‘cuteness’ so thoroughly could maintain such effortless appeal.

“A-*cute*, get it?”

For her charms, Missy Sengoku did come off as a spoiled brat.

A spoiled, cute brat.

It put an inexplicably bitter taste in my mouth.

“Okay, I have my first complaint to make,” Tsukihi announced, still keeping her eyes fixed on the illustrations.

“Do say. I promise your feedback will be processed with due consideration and within the shortest delays.”

“Miss Senjogahara, you didn’t even react to my joke! You’re a boring audience member.”

“I would be, naturally. I’m much more suited to the protagonist role.”

“Whaaat? No, no way—who cares about a main character that doesn’t even laugh? No one’s gonna watch that show.”

Super boring, she reiterated, *and unrelatable*.

"You shouldn't measure a character by how much you relate to them," I refuted. "The straight man is the most crucial character of a good comedy—it only makes sense for them to be the protagonist."

If she wanted to help her friend with her manga's comic relief, she'd do best to commit some of these basic principles to memory, like her big sister—the wordplay could come later.

At least she didn't underline it this time.

"*Straight man*? I'm not sure I even hang out with anyone who fits that description... other than Dad...and *that guy* I guess."

"The straight man is just the one who has the upper hand. In this instance, for example—that would be me."

"Huhh—you??" Tsukihi exclaimed. "Wait...does that mean you're the guy?"

The guy?

"Well, you know—with Miss Hanekawa and all? I thought it might be a bit inappropriate to ask, but since you mentioned it..."

"If you think something is inappropriate to ask, it's typically advised not to do so," I reminded the frustratingly carefree bird. "And you're wrong on that count too. You can't just make an equivalence, there's no 'guy' to speak of."

Relationships between women are different.

That's all.

"Urgh," she groaned, "That sounds so much nicer than dating boys. Here I am, stuck with *that guy*..."

"I'm not going to ask about your boyfriend troubles. You can stop being so obvious about it."

"*Sigh*..." she sighed insistently. "You're weird, Miss Senjogahara. Aren't girls supposed to like gossiping about romance?"

Sure, to most people, it was the natural order of things.

Any talk about the "natural order of things" rang hollow coming from the mouth of a Fire Sister, though.

"You're free to gossip about whatever you'd like, but neither the natural order of things nor your boyfriend troubles are any of my business."

"So, this is how an IRL lesbian sees the world..."

"You need to knock the habit of reading internal monologues. How many pages back did you even go for that one? A hundred and twenty?"

"I didn't have to, it's pretty obvious..."

That must be what she told her big sister. How aggravating.

Seen as she was so interested in "how an IRL lesbian sees the world," I told her.

"Why don't you go ahead and ask that mangaka friend of yours out? I'm sure it'll be more instructive than asking a high-school graduate you're barely acquainted with about her intimate life."

"Y-you mean... N-Nadeko?!" she stuttered.

With a flustered squeal, surprisingly—which made her drop the precious art book she had her clutches on.

Not to worry. I caught it before it could be damaged by her face.

"Sure, whatever," I brushed it off. "The two of you seem close enough."

Mostly, I just wanted her to leave me alone. I'd had enough incessant questioning for the day.

I wouldn't be discussing the details of my privacy with children.

"No way that would happen..." Tsukihi said. I thought I noticed a subtle glower on her face. "I'd never ask about it directly, of course, but such a drastic haircut has gotta be the result of some pretty serious heartbreak."

"It sounds like you do know some girls who'd rather not waste their time gossiping about romance. What a go-getter this 'Nadeko.'"

"T-that's not it!" she sulked. "There are rules, that's all. Girl code, you know?"

"Whatever you say."

"Wait, Miss Senjogahara... Have you not heard of girl code?"

"I know perfectly well what 'girl code' is, thank you."

"Really?" she pestered. "What is it then?"

"I'm uninterested in discussing matters of romance."

We've been over this.

Come on... Tsukihi whined.

“Are you and Miss Hanekawa even official?”

011

Moving on from the numbing topic of romantic hearsay, I realized that I'd all but forgotten about the mystery I was meant to be solving. The all-important plot of this story had gotten quite severely derailed.

Thus, I dutifully re-railed our conversation—I courageously changed the subject, so to speak.

“Ehhh? Hold on, Miss Senjogahara—my sister? You mean Karen?”

So exclaimed Karen Araragi's little sister, youngest of the Araragi family, longer-haired half of the Fire Sisters duo and its self-appointed dispassionate strategist as I caught her up to speed.

I was doing a lot of that this morning.

“Karen? No, no—I was talking about the other one,” I joked.

“The other one?! Don't tell me...” Tsukihi's eyes narrowed. She took it seriously. “Is someone finally here to tell me about a mysterious stranger that's been going around claiming to be my long-lost sibling? Wait—Am I finally going to get a little sister of my own?! Are my wishes coming true?!?”

“I wouldn't dream of it. Just two of you is more than enough.”

It was a bizarre thing to fantasize about in the first place. Three Hitagi, Hanekawa², and now another Araragi sibling lining up to take the stage? The character duplication gag was getting out of control.

“Oh, you’re right. If she ended up being another Karen, our family probably wouldn’t survive for very long...”

Right, probably. It was probably for the best to not discuss the consequences we’d face if the new sibling happened to be another Tsukihi, either. She was enough of a handful on her own, as leisurely as her mood appeared to be this morning.

On a more serious note, though—

Tsukihi provided her own testimony of the situation—which for the most part neither contradicted nor appended Karen’s own, and affirmed her sister’s innocence in the affair.

In Tsukihi’s account, one thing stood out.

Something that went missing in the area, she noted, that “even Miss Hanekawa” wouldn’t have known about. It fit the time-frame too, although according to her it hadn’t yet been found.

She didn’t know why the poster would’ve been taken down.

“She was already missing last night, and I didn’t see her when I left this morning...”

“She? A missing person, then.”

“Of course not!” Tsukihi corrected. “I’m talking about the life-sized magical girl doll I keep in my room, duh.”

Duh? Have I been transported into a world where it was obvious for people to keep life-sized magical girl plushies in their room?

Madoka Kaname? Homura Akemi? Which one?

I didn’t know they sold life-sized plushies. I’ll have to look into this.

“Err.....*Whomura?*” Tsukihi tilted her head quizzically. “I don’t know if she’s supposed to be a character from a TV show or whatever. I just got her as a gift.”

“...”

A complete poser. Ew.

Disgusting. Repulsive. Unsightly. Vile. Gross. Revolting.

How could she own a “magical girl doll” without knowing who the main characters of *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* were? It’s a seminal work of

TV animation, don't you know? You're aware that we share the same animation studio, right? There's been plenty of crossover collaborations too...

In which I was cast as Homura, by the way. The coolest one. We happen to have a lot in common—especially our coolness.

“Since you're not even capable of identifying her,” I warned Tsukihi, “You should just hand her off to me. I'll take proper care of her.”

“What?! No way!” she protested. “She's mine!”

“Ah wait—I suppose I'll have to find her first. How troublesome... If it were me, I wouldn't let such a precious doll vanish on me so easily.”

“I didn't *let* her!?”

“Honestly, did you even try? Maybe she ran off because you didn't love her enough. I'll shed a tear.”

“That's not it! K-Karen probably just hid her somewhere to mess with me!” the poser whimpered.

“Maybe so, but who else knows about this prized possession of yours?” I returned to the topic at hand. “Whether or not they would've broken into your house to rob you of it, which sounds improbable—if our dear paper-scrap is at all related to its disappearance, someone other than you or your sister must have known.”

“I don't take her to school, and I only got her recently...” she wondered aloud. “I don't think anyone outside of my family knows her.”

“Would your parents have put up the notice?”

It wouldn't be out of character for a police officer, much less a pair of them. They could've overreacted.

Not unlikely.

“Without telling us? No, that doesn't sound like them.”

Forget it. Back to square one.

I went on to prod about other people the Fire Sisters were familiar with that might've at least fit the culprit's profile by name, but despite a brief spell of hesitation, Tsukihi drew a blank—not dissimilarly to her sister before her. A dissatisfied admission that it “didn't ring any bells” marked the extent of the Araragi sisters' depositions.

Karen was the only “K” of the Araragi family, it appeared.

Back to square zero.

“But if it really was someone from around here,” the dejected Tsukihi asked, “Does it make much sense to sign a Japanese name with initials? It’s not like it takes up a lot more space than writing it out, usually.”

“Rather ironic for you to say, Araragi. Isn’t your last name spelled with four characters?”

“Well, I guess so...”

She still signed it with the *kanji*, she informed me. It was one of the first things she’d looked forward to practicing when she started taking calligraphy classes.

The self-absorbed implication of her anecdote didn’t seem to bother her, although I couldn’t exactly fault her for taking pride in her unique surname—I quite liked my own, which matched hers both in character length and unusual construction.

On the other hand, I had to wonder what kind of project their parents were dreaming up when they landed on their children’s given names.

I mean—Moon Fire (lol)?

It didn’t get much more cringeworthy than that. Had Tsukihi and I been middle-school classmates, I would’ve gotten my insecurity over having a “basic” *hiragana* name a lot sooner.

Hi-ta-gi—simple, elegant. It perfectly describes me.

In fact, that was the real reason I couldn’t carry water bottles on my runs: it would blemish my simplistic elegance—and in that sense, I might also want to rejoice about coming up empty-handed from my trip to the library.

Zero baggage, no travel weight...

That sounds familiar.

...I maintain that minimalism is classy.

Authentically stylish—like showing up to an airport with only a lightweight purse and a boarding pass. Except the boarding gate was Naoetsu

Public Library's front doors, and the only means of transport waiting for us outside were a handful of compact cars and the Araragi vehicle of choice.

It was a granny bike, by the way.

How quaint.

Tsukihi must have been aware of how unmistakably the garish crimson colorway made it stand out, because she came to the two-wheeler's defense as soon as we stepped onto the parking lot. As *moé* as her sudden outburst and panicked gesticulations were, I was promptly subjected to a lengthy elaboration on why "a lowered frame is a must-have!" if you want to ride your bicycle while wearing a *yukata* and how "all of the nicer-looking bikes have super inconvenient designs" and how she "didn't get to pick the model anyway—it was a hand-me-down!"

"What a cute little thing," I gave my honest thoughts. About the bicycle, obviously. "It's got a nostalgic vibe, don't you think?"

"Nostalgic?" Tsukihi doubted. "It looks..... old, I guess..."

I thought it was apt.

A granny bike isn't called a granny bike for nothing—it definitely looked old, but there was a rather warm and inviting quality to the Araragi family's cheap racing-red ride.

"Actually, Miss Senjogahara—another thing," Tsukihi made a courageous effort to re-rail us—our conversation—once again. I only hoped it was a more productive one than the precedent. "I don't have much else to contribute to Miss Hanekawa's hypotheses, but there's a detail I don't remember you mentioning."

"I don't mind filling you in. I've got nothing better to do."

"You said that piece of paper was attached...to our *telephone pole*?"

"The one that stands in front of your house. If you want to legally designate it as 'your telephone pole,' I assume you'll have to file a claim with the municipality," I lamented.

"How?"

"I'm positive you can find their e-mail address online."

“Urgh, no, I don’t care about that... The paper note, how did you say it was attached?”

Ah, how did I say it was attached?

Wait, did I mention how it was attached?

Something metallic—that was about all I could say. It didn’t narrow it down very much, if at all. A nail? A screw? Either would prove unorthodox methods for a meager sheet of paper.

What could it mean?

I could be misremembering the material. I’d hardly given a second thought to the specific method of fastening—not even a first thought, truthfully.

“...I did feel like I’d forgotten something,” I confessed.

As I recalled, it was the first impression I’d had of the note—the reason I’d called on Miss Holmes to begin with. And now I really had forgotten something. A detail.

A small detail, but it felt important—eerily so.

“Don’t worry yourself too much Miss Senjogahara. If you managed to forget about it, it can’t be that important.”

“As far as I’m aware, people forget important things all the time. Don’t bother trying to comfort me with demonstrably false claims, it won’t work.”

I came off slightly nastier than I intended.

She wasn’t making sense, but it did have some relevance. Whatever I’d forgotten—right now, the crux of the matter was that the evidence was too thin.

There was hardly any evidence.

Even accounting for how stylishly minimalistic my empty-handed demeanor was, I was a little envious of Tsukihi’s bespoke Naoetsu Library tote-bag—I contemplated as I watched her approach her ride’s basket and carefully laid the bag flat inside, so as to not damage the precious art-book within.

Cue ED, a granny bike had its uses.

Compared to me, she wasn't particularly glamorous. Her mismatched getup looked silly, frankly—but she'd found what she came for.

As I'd assumed, she would be borrowing the book on her friend's behalf, who apparently frequently gushed about how highly she revered the particular group of illustrators it featured.

It was why she'd showed up so early in the morning, too. She could've delayed her meet-up time with Nadeko, but wanted to keep it a surprise—since it was just a loan from the library, it wasn't a “gift” per se, but she hoped the budding mangaka would find it thoughtful all the same.

It was cute.

“I don't know...” Tsukihi meandered. “Is that really true?”

“Fishing for compliments won't work either.”

“Do people really forget important things?” she clarified.

“It'd be a lot more worrisome if everyone was capable of remembering everything that ever mattered,” I told Tsukihi. “Just ask your sister.”

The Attack Titan is a fearsome one.

“Karen? Whatever that means...” Tsukihi brushed it off. “I still think I'm right about this though.”

“Perhaps I've underestimated the two of you then,” I responded. “Are the Fire Sisters so celebrated that not one of your friends has ever forgotten to mark the occasion of your birthdays?”

“No way, we're not that famous yet. It's definitely happened—it's happened a lot, actually. Way too much...” she sighed. “But I think that's because it wasn't important to them in the first place.”

“That's awfully self-centered of you.”

“Don't get me wrong—I don't hold it against them,” she explained. “I forget stuff about my friends as well. Usually, I'd say—most of the time... It's just because it didn't matter all that much to me. It doesn't change how I feel about them, though, so I don't really mind if they forget things about me either.”

That's just how it is, she concluded.

Awfully wise for a middle-schooler.

“Well, I do mind it when it comes to one person...” she continued unprompted.

“Suit yourself,” I yielded, “I can tell where this is going. You’ve been helpful enough—I can pretend to care to your piffling romantic troubles for a minute or two.”

“Really?” her eyes brightened.

“Ask again and I’ll change my mind.”

“Miss Senjogahara! Rousokuzawa totally forgot! That—that *guy*!” Tsukihi burst into flames, “He super-duper-hyper-totally forgot!! On White Day, of all days!!! He didn’t buy me a gift, and worst of all, he didn’t even show up!!!!”

“How terribly sad. I feel for you, I really do.”

“I’m so peeved... It was my first White Day in a relationship, it was supposed to be special, but I had to be stuck with that guy—seriously! I’m peeved.”

“My condolences. I can’t imagine your pain. You must be peeved.”

“Urgh... You’re too nice, Miss Senjogahara, but it’s fine. I’ll get over it,” she resolved. “Still... Forgetting a lover’s promise is just too cruel, isn’t it?”

“Without question. It’s the cruelest crime one could commit, I’d add. Worse than murder, even.”

“Meanwhile, I bet you had a nice night out at a restaurant for White Day, all adult-like...”

“Yes, it was lovely.”

“Don’t rub it in my face!”

“We even exchanged pillows that night.”

“Y-you and Miss Hanekawa did?!”

“Hanekawa? I did think of inviting her, but I wouldn’t want her lecherous charms to steal my father away from me.”

“Ack—you’re even worse than Karen,” she complained.

Her shoulders slumped slightly, and she let out a sigh.

To be compared to the girl who ditched her boyfriend for a hundred-man *kumite*—I felt prejudiced, but I considered Tsukihi's low spirits and chose not to protest.

I was certain she didn't mean it

"I don't know what to do with her sometimes... That big sister of mine, she's a lost cause."

Karen Araragi, now a recent middle-school graduate yet still every bit a problem child as the year she'd entered it, would be in high-school before long. I attempted to assure Tsukihi that she could count on the educational system to beat her big sister into a more societally-appropriate shape, but I didn't put any stock into my words.

A demonstrably false claim, as revenge for earlier.

It *was* Karen Araragi we were talking about.

"I doubt she'll change all that much," Tsukihi refuted. "Maybe... She'll change a bit, but she'll stay the same. Probably, yeah. That might be for the best."

Change isn't scary at all.

"Are you feeling left behind?" I conjectured.

"Huh? How did you—"

"It came up with your sister earlier,' I should say, but your tiresome sulking is sufficiently transparent by itself."

"Karen told you about the Fire Sisters disbanding?"

"She expressed some remorse at the thought."

In her own uniquely roundabout fashion.

"That sounds like her," Tsukihi sighed. "She's never been very good at expressing her feelings. I remember when Mizu—"

"I see no reason to fret. You're headed to the same high-school, aren't you? A year from now, Karen will be more or less in the same shape as you left her. You're hardly left behind."

That girl was sturdy as a rock, to a fault.

Her stubbornness was axiomatic—whether it was a good or bad thing depended on your perspective, and who you were.

"I know," Tsukihi said. "Karen will be Karen, with or without the Fire Sisters. I'm happy for her that she gets to move on with her life so confidently."

I'm happy, but what about me?

A library will be a library. Karen will be Karen.

Whoever you are, identity doesn't change easily.

"That's how it should be, but what about me?"

What about me? Tsukihi asked.

"I'm not afraid of change in the slightest. I have no reason to be—I just go along with whatever sounds convenient, and I do whatever seems the most fun at the time. I'm super carefree—privileged, aren't I?"

Privileged was putting it lightly.

Spoiled, more like.

"For a while, I thought she was like me, but even Naddie—even Nadeko has something she's afraid of losing, it turns out. I bet she's afraid of things changing too much..." Tsukihi arched herself backwards over her bicycle's seat in another dramatically uncomfortable splay. "Even if the whole world went against her, she wouldn't give up on her manga."

But what about me?

"If things got too hard, I'd probably just abandon everything at the drop of a hat and become a different person," she assessed with serene indifference. "I feel like I might just do that."

"..."

"Would I still be Tsukihi Araragi? Could you say that? Could you say that Tsukihi will be Tsukihi? Who knows? I don't know."

I don't know... Tsukihi Araragi concluded.

"Is that it?" I inquired.

"Yep!" she exclaimed and sprang back on her feet.

She was as fickle as she was spry.

"That's awfully self-centered of you."

"You already said that earlier..."

"Karen will be Karen? It's not unlikely given her personality, but how can you be so sure?"

“Didn’t you agree with me?”

“Certainly. It’s true, Karen will be Karen—but from my point of view, it’s just as true as the idea that a library will be a library, that Hanekawa will be Hanekawa, and that you, Tsukihi, will continue being Tsukihi.”

“What are you trying to say...?”

“That there’s nothing special about you. As the one experiencing your own life, it’s normal that you’d think it impossible to pin down—but to everyone else, you’ll always be ‘Tsukihi Araragi,’ nothing more, nothing less.”

“.....”

Tsukihi Araragi was silent.

Okay, she started.

“Just one more thing then.”

“Don’t get used to me humoring you like this,” I advised.

“What do you think about ‘Moon Fire?’”

“I try my best not to think about it. Too much frowning would accelerate me into old age sooner than I’d like.”

“I’m thinking of keeping things going in Tsuganoki,” she explained. “As a solo act.”

“As *Moon Fire*?”

“That’s right.”

I would’ve burst out laughing if Tsukihi didn’t seem so serious about her rebranded persona.

Moon Fire.

Were these the greater heights, that Tsukihi had alluded to “soaring towards?” This was the summit that the youngest of the Araragi family was scaling? I’d have liked to say that it was at least better than *dagnabb*—sorry, *platinum mad*, but it was hard to tell.

If she was going to snoop around in my internal monologue, couldn’t she have taken a hint?

“To be honest with you Araragi,” I acknowledged. “It’s awful.”

“Yeah, I figured you’d say that. I just think it has a nice ring to it...” She’d seen the hint—she just hadn’t cared enough to take it. “Yep, I like it!”

I guess I might as well cut my hair now, she added.

"Hold on," I interjected. "Did you seriously let it grow to this abominable length for such a childish reason?"

"Oh, no. I didn't have a real reason. I know you're supposed to make a wish or something, but it's not like I had anything particular in mind. I could've wished for Karen's graduation, I guess... But then again, I wasn't that worried about her."

It just sounded fun at the time, Tsukihi elaborated.

"It's really become a drag though..."

She pouted.

What an incomprehensible girl.

If I've forgotten about it, it can't be that important. I only had myself to blame, but as much as I wanted to take Tsukihi "Moon Fire" Araragi's reassuring words in earnest, unfortunately—again, I couldn't shake it. This passing interest of mine was bordering on compulsion, which I wanted to credit to a desire to see Miss Holmes' efforts duly rewarded. She'd picked up the phone before six in the morning just for me, after all...

Either way, I was sure of it now: I was missing a piece of the puzzle, but what? Tsukihi's question—the one I wasn't able to give a proper response to—provided a lead.

I may as well follow it, I figured.

Whether it held the key to this disjointed small-town mystery or otherwise—it would at least put my lingering discomforts to rest.

...Right. I may as well.

A last-ditch effort, if nothing else. Whatever the outcome, I'd have no reason to protest about it. After this final attempt, I'd have no excuse not to call it quits—thus I convinced myself, and delivered my excuses to Tsukihi Araragi who had made a final offer for me to accompany her to her suspiciously-close-friend Miss Amateur Mangaka's house.

I humbly declined.

Bizarrely enough, it was the second time in a single morning that I was turning down a girl-on-girl playdate. It might seem a little out of character for me, but beyond my duties towards myself and Miss Hanekawa, I have no interest in being a third-party to these sorts of suspiciously intimate girl-friend gatherings, and more specifically—no interest in middle-schoolers.

Tsukihi might've seen no issue in inviting me (as suspicious in nature as she tended to be, she waved my questioning off with an indifferent shrug), but I'm no pedophile.

I have a preference for well-endowed women, as you know.

Big-breasted.

And anyway, Tsukihi would've had me riding on the back seat, of her granny bike—if you could call even that metallic lattice a “seat.” It was an appropriately “princessly” position, she argued.

Unbelievable.

Me, Hitagi Senjogahara, riding an old-timey granny bike behind a fourteen-year-old girl with barely a seat for comfort? Any princess worth her salt would rightly deem it a humiliation ritual. I called her bicycle “inviting,” not “fit for nobility.”

Nostalgic—that was the word I used.

Appropriate for a warm sunset scene, reminiscent of peaceful summer days. I felt some tinge of it—nostalgia, as I watched Tsukihi pedal off without me. A sense that things were coming to a close, and that it was a time to look back on past memories fondly... with a relaxed gait, and a popsicle in mouth.

It was more than a little misplaced, it goes without saying.

My sentiments were likely influenced by Tsukihi's peculiar demeanor—the warm sunset would have to wait. As I closed in on my destination, the sun was only just reaching its zenith in the sky, and we were still—I had to remind myself, in March. That girl walking out of the Araragi neighborhood's 7-Eleven with a *Garigari-kun* in her hand probably just had a few screws loose.

Even her outfit screamed “lunatic,” both with its gaudy orange-colored outfit and her azure-dyed twin-tails that nearly perfectly matched the hue of the soda-flavored popsicle she—Huh?

What soda-flavored popsicle?

It was gone.

Under a minute—no, under a second. She didn’t even lick it once. You couldn’t even say that she “ate” it.

She’d straight-up *inhaled* it.

She disappeared into the convenience store again—and came out with an entire bag of cheap popsicles. “Just a few screws loose” was too charitable. There wasn’t a single screw in her that was properly tightened. She was structurally compromised—demented.

“Ah, Big Sister,” she noticed my glare and called out to me in perfect monotone inflection. “Did you want me to get you one? It’s up to you.”

“I hope you’re not implying that the dozen you have stashed in your bag are all intended for your personal consumption,” I questioned.

“These?” she asked, holding up her grocery bag with both hands. “I bought them with my money, so they’re mine. But I don’t mind getting another one for Big Sister.”

It was up to me, she said.

“Don’t go around calling strangers ‘Big Sister.’ Last I checked, I have no filial relation to any circus freaks of your ilk,” I reminded the girl of her place. “Are your parents aware that their daughter is blowing her graciously given allowance on convenience store snacks?”

“No way,” she protested flatly, without a hint of emotion. “This is my hard-earned cash. I worked super-duper hard for it.”

“Did they roll back child labor laws when I wasn’t looking? What ‘work’ could a runt like you possibly be doing?”

“That part is secret Big Sister. I can’t tell you.”

She was messing with me.

It was a childish joke.

“Roleplay whatever fantasy you like,” I told her, “But leave me out of it. I’m not sure if this is some kind of ploy to get in with my father, but I’m not your big sister—I’m his only child, got it?”

“That’s alright Big Sister,” she calmly repeated. “You can have a nice dessert even if you’re an only child. It’s up to you.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Why?”

“I’ll let you imagine whatever excuse displeases you the most.”

“I won’t ask you to pay me back.”

“For 76 yen, I’d hope not.”

“They have different flavors inside.”

“The classic soda flavor is already the best one.”

“You have great taste Big Sister,” she gave deadpan congratulations.

“That goes without saying.”

Whether you’re talking about popsicles, drinks, or any other food item: the original taste is what makes a product take off at the outset, so it’s only rational that it would be the best one. The rest of the variations are just for when you get bored of the real deal—or for people who want to appear different.

Anyone who’s truly honest with themselves will readily admit that the classic flavor is the best.

“Are you sure you don’t want one? It’s up to you, Big Sister.”

“It’s my final say. Why would I want a soda popsicle in winter?”

“Winter...” she muttered.

The phrase seemed to bounce around in her structurally compromised head for a while. A possible after-effect of her sudden frozen dessert ingestion, I thought.

It would induce some nasty brain-freeze.

“That’s right. It’s winter,” she confirmed.

“Anything else?”

“But just barley,” she said with no particular intonation.

And made a peace sign with her hand.

The punchline didn't even make sense this time, and with how emotionlessly it was delivered, you'd think she just misspoke. What was she talking about?

Barley-flavored popsicles? That sounded like the sort of novelty product that would hit the shelves and be promptly discontinued within the span of a month.

"Just barley," she repeated.

Now it was devolving into a lousy ripoff of Tsukihi's gag.

It's not unusual for jokes to lose their humor once they've been repeated enough times, but this particular bit was dead on arrival. I had a hard time believing Tsukihi Araragi's popularity was vast enough for it to have spread so far amongst the local middle-schooler population...

Hold on.

Didn't she mention coming up with it for Nadeko's sake? To practice her "dramatic irony." Why would a random tween have heard about it?

Come to think of it—

"Oops," the not-so-random tween declared. "I blew my cover."

She let her bagful of non-barley-flavored popsicles fall to the ground and took position in a set of imaginary starting-blocks.

Good form, but—

"Ow. That hurts, Big Sister."

I grabbed her by the twin-tails before she could run off on me.

What'd I say? It wouldn't have happened if it were me.

"What a nice and practical hairstyle you've got, Miss Magical Girl," I praised her. "I'll try my best not to question why the Araragi family's life-sized doll suddenly decided to go on an adventure towards the corner store to buy herself some popsicles, but you should know that your owner has been quite distraught by your absence."

I was exaggerating a bit—Tsukihi wasn't that worried, but something was bothering me about this kid—this *doll*. Despite the lack of expressiveness, her hair felt so "real" that it was difficult to think of her as an inanimate object.

That said, she was rather “animate” at the moment—enough to plead for mercy.

“Big Sister, I’ll give you the whole bag so please let me go.”

“Ah? I’m afraid that won’t do—you’ve already relinquished possession of your precious treasure. You’ll need another bargaining chip.”

“I won’t tell anyone that you assaulted me, so please let me go.”

“Not a bad argument, but why shouldn’t I take care of that part myself? I could—hmm, let’s see...”

Shall I slice your tongue off?

“Ah. Ah. Somebody help me. I’m being assaulted by a scary woman who preys on children,” she spoke without bothering to raise her voice.

“If you’re going to resort to screaming for help, could you at least put a little more effort into your cries? You’re making this rather unfun.”

“Big Sister, do you have fun torturing children? That’s twisted.”

“No, the only things ‘twisted’ right now are your cute little twin-tails,” I retorted. “And it is pretty fun.”

Their pastel color was remarkable.

It was like playing with candy.

“That isn’t true,” she protested. “My hair color is super-unremarkable and boring. Can you let me go?”

Please, she added. What a good kid.

“This fluorescent blue? Unremarkable? You must be joking. Should I laugh? Haha, what a funny joke.”

“Maybe you’re out of touch Big Sister, but blue hair is a lot more unremarkable than purple these days.”

“Purple?” I asked. “ROFL, I know you’re not being serious. no1 dies their hair purple. XD.”

“Don’t worry Big Sister Purple, I won’t laugh at you. I think it’s admirable to try and connect with the youth. Even with outdated slang.”

“Who are you calling Big Sister Purple? My hair is brown.”

My slang wasn’t outdated at all either. “XD,” outdated? It’s timeless.

And, again—I’m no sibling of hers.

“Well, that’s how it is in the anime...”

Purple?

My sleek, beautiful brown hair, dyed to such an outrageous color? Who is this parody of my character she speaks of? The producers should’ve known that I’m more charming enough with my natural looks.

There’s no need to rely on cheap visual flare.

“That may be, Big Sister Purple,” the doll conceded. “Everyone loves it though. The fans even call you The Purple Beauty.”

They do?

Not the nickname part, there’s no way that’s true and I’d be more offended by such a lousy title than anything—but the former was nice to know.

Hm...

“Well, fine—I’m not interested in splitting (or twisting) hairs over this any longer,” I declared, and let go of her hair. “I’m in a pretty good mood today.”

The doll straightened herself out and patted out her outfit down as if she were dusting it. *As if* she were dusting it—there was no actual dust on her.

I hadn’t played so rough.

“Thank you for not slicing my tongue off, Big Sister. I’ll really give you the whole bag, so please don’t tell on me to Miss Moon Fire.”

She’s even scarier than you sometimes, she justified herself.

She extended her dozens of popsicles towards me.

“I’m feeling generous, so I’ll let you keep your tongue and your deserts both—as long as you can answer a question of mine.”

“You can count on me Big Sister. You can ask anything you want. It’s up to you. I’ll even give you a rundown of the FAQ. Maybe that would answer your question?”

“If that’s what you prefer, I don’t care.”

“Okay, Big Sister. Here goes: My name is Yotsugi Ononoki. I’m a living puppet *tsukumogami*. My job is super-duper secret. My physical age is

twelve-years-old. My height is 144cm. I don't make loud noises when I'm being tossed around. The color of my underwear is—"

"I'm sorry, you said these were Frequently Asked Questions?"

First Tsukihi's uncharacteristic lack of misgivings in inviting me to her friend's place, and now this—I was starting to get suspicious.

What kind of evil was lurking around the Araragi household?

"Frequently Asked Questions?" she contemplated. "I guess that comes out to 'FAQ' as well. I'll have to register this new meaning. I only knew about the Female Attractiveness Questionnaire."

"The *what* questionnaire?"

"That's what he called it. You haven't taken it, Big Sister?"

I guess it's up to you, she added.

It was up to me? It had better be.

Why did she keep repeating that phrase?

"I'll ignore that you said anything about a 'questionnaire.' Just clear this one thing up for me," I inquired.

"Activating service mode," she engaged.

Service mode? I wasn't going to think about that too hard either.

"Tell me, aren't you supposed to be a 'magical girl doll'?" I asked.

"Oh, you think so too?"

Ononoki twirled around to show off her dress.

Between the flashy colors, the unusual hairstyle, and the plethora of ribbons—other than the bright yellow rainboots that violently clashed with the design's overall cohesion, she certainly looked the part.

She certainly looked magical-girl-ish enough, only...

"You're not any magical girl I've ever heard of. Pardon my language, but who the hell are you supposed to be?"

"Of course you wouldn't have heard of me, Big Sister—I'm custom made."

Custom made? An *OC*?

What kind of disturbed pervert would get a life-sized tweenaged doll custom-made? One who promptly gives information about the panties she's wearing, at that.

And what the hell was a Service Mode?

Things were getting far too suspicious.

"Sorry Big Sister, details about my creation are super-duper secret."

"Whatever," I settled, "It won't be my first time turning a blind eye to nefarious designs."

Out of sight, out of mind.

By the way, Big Sister, Ononoki launched into a suggestion.

"If you're here to meet Miss Moon Fire, she won't be home today."

She was over at Miss Snake's, she explained—which was clearly in mention of Nadeko Sengoku, although the meaning of the serpentine nickname was lost on me.

Was she the snake Hanekawa was referring to on the phone?

"I've seen enough of your owner for the day," I responded, "I just live in the area. Is it so wrong to go for a morning stroll?"

I hadn't discerned the exact nature of Yotsugi Ononoki's relationship to the Araragi family, but if she was anything like a guard dog, I was better off not disclosing my intent to drop by their home unannounced.

"I disagree," Ononoki declared, preposterously. "The Tamikura Apartments are thirty minutes away by foot. Twenty if you're jogging."

"?!"

How did she know where I lived? Was I being stalked?

"Miss Moon Fire talks about you."

"Enough to give away my home address, apparently." I was baffled.

Even if that was it, how did she recognize me?

Did Tsukihi show her pictures as well? Did the family doll receive a full PowerPoint presentation on Hitagi Senjogahara of Tamikura Apartments?

Come to think of it, she did comment on my "anime appearance."

"No, Big Sister Purple, I didn't need any visual aid. I simply used my highly sharp sense of deduction. Miss Moon Fire always talks about the angry looking woman who has a weird relationship with the big-breasted class-president that stayed over for a couple days last year."

"Don't comment so liberally on my former class-president's chest size. It's off-putting."

"Not fair," Ononoki complained. "Why is it okay when you do it?"

"I'm not an insufferable brat for one, and secondly—if you insist too much on how big her breasts are, she might get insecure about it."

"Ah, I see. Even though they're really massive, you shouldn't tell her."

"Right, so keep yourself in check."

"Or else Big Sister President will get a breast reduction."

...Don't say the quiet part out loud.

This service-doll knew too much and talked too much.

I had a "weird relationship" with Hanekawa? If that was how Tsukihi saw it, I was compelled to disagree.

Karen had a point. Her little sister was letting herself be influenced by sappy manga. Considering how incessantly she'd pestered me about whether Hanekawa and I were "official," it wasn't especially shocking to learn that she commonly described our relationship "weird," but it was a decidedly childish way to see things nonetheless.

One that Hanekawa and I didn't share.

Were Hanekawa and I dating? Were we friends?

Did it matter so much?

Hanekawa and I were happy as we were. I liked her—we liked each other a lot, no doubt. Enough that I'd seriously considered at some point whether I should "ask her out" in *official* terms, as Tsukihi put it.

However, simply—that wasn't the nature of our relationship.

You could call it "ill-defined," but it was what suited us. While I was mostly off the radar of unsightly gossip, Hanekawa had a reputation to uphold—she was busy enough mopping up the mess left by others to not need a rumor mill to her name. I was happy just this way, and Hanekawa—I'd

have to assume, was too. If things were destined to progress between us, I was certain they would.

Things could take their course. For both Hanekawa's sake and mine, there was no need for us to rush headfirst into romance.

"Wow. Moon Fire was right. It's up to you, but it is 'weird.'"

"I won't be heeding a tween doll's comments on relationships."

"Twin doll? I'm an only child, Big Sister. Like you."

"A child is what you are, no doubt about it."

"Technically speaking," she rebutted, "I am over one-hundred."

But it's up to you, she insisted.

Worrisome.

I didn't need to hear about legally-absolving technical details.

"Big Sister, your romantic troubles are very interesting, but I think my popsicles are going to melt. I should head to the Ara—home. I should head home."

"We're headed in the same direction."

"Ah," Ononoki said. "Huh?"

"It's a short story," I explained.

Just like that.

I ended up giving another summary of my morning so far, this time up to and including my meeting with the identity-crisised Tsukihi Araragi at Naoetsu Public Library.

Yotsugi Ononoki was surprisingly receptive, jumping in at various points to facilitate my recounting of the events. She'd passed by the pole and its ripped note herself this morning, she mentioned—and gave her own report.

It almost seemed second nature to her.

"So that's why you're visiting my owner's house, even though she's out playing with the snake," she concluded. "And even though it's a dead-end."

That last part was unheeded—and wrong.

"It's my last-ditch effort, you could say, but I'm not throwing in the towel just yet. I wouldn't call it a dead-end."

"Think about it Big Sister," she said with a twirl. "Does it really matter how it was attached there?"

"Shouldn't you be able to tell me?"

"Hmm, I guess I forgot too. Probably because it didn't matter."

"You can't make that call if you can't remember the detail."

"Well, it sounds like a dead-end to me." Ononoki reach into her popsicle knapsack. "But it's up to you."

"It certainly is up to me," I concurred. She really was obstinate about needlessly clarifying that. "It's nagging at me."

I have to see it through.

"What if it doesn't lead anywhere?"

"I'll cross that bridge when I get to it, but if it does," I posited. "I'll have no choice but to accept it."

"Then it'll be a dead-end."

"It won't be."

"What if it is?"

"I'd have to be fine with that."

"So you'd be fine with it?"

"I'd have to be."

"It doesn't sound like you'd be fine with it."

"Of course not, it's been nagging at me."

"That you don't know why someone attached a ripped page on the telephone pole in front of the Araragi family's house?"

"That's what I've been investigating."

"Hm." She paused. "I don't think so, but it's up to you."

Ononoki split the plastic packaging down the middle with expert precision and withdrew the blue popsicle from it.

It's up to you.

How persistent.

It's up to me? Every time thus far, her catchphrase had at least been technically correct, but her use of it here didn't make the slightest bit of sense.

Something about what I'd seen this morning was bothering me, and I couldn't decipher what. That was all.

It was out of my control, not "up to me." Even if it wasn't related to Tsukihi's question, there was a crucial detail I was missing, and I had no choice but to pursue it—whatever it was.

"Maybe it is crucial, just not in the way you think it is—Big Sister Crab."

She held the popsicle out to me.

"What else would it be crucial to? It's not like I have a sizable personal stake in this anecdotal mystery. If anything, the Araragis would."

And Ononoki herself, I added.

I accepted her gift without thinking, and she began unwrapping another popsicle for herself.

"Maybe what's bothering you has nothing to do with the telephone pole, Miss Moon Fire's house, the paper, or anything else that's relevant to 'this anecdotal mystery,'" she suggested.

"That'd be incoherent."

As I thought, the classic soda flavor was the best.

Even in mid-March.

"Want to know what I think, Big Sister?" Ononoki asked.

Without redundantly clarifying that it was up to me, this time.

Naturally though, it was, and so—

"Why don't you enlighten me?" I asked the magical doll.

"I don't think you actually forgot anything. I think you're just bothered that you didn't care to notice it," she divined. "Even though it was right in front of you."

The whole time, it was in right in front of me.

Thus spoke the doll.

"Ah, by the way. I just remembered," Yotsugi Ononoki added as she scrutinized her frozen dessert—as if what she remembered was completely unrelated to her previous words.

A stapler did it, she said.

After a full morning of running around town, my phone was finally flat out of battery, meaning that I was only able to call Hanekawa after I'd made my way back home—at which point I was growing somewhat impatient, but she picked up the phone before it even rang a second time, as usual, and responded with feigned surprise, also as usual. “Hello? Doctor Watson?!” she asked as if she hadn't been expecting me. How very cute of her, I thought, and in my functions as her reliable assistant in detective endeavors, I gave yet another summary of my findings—one last time.

My final mission report.

To cut to the chase: after thanking Yotsugi Ononoki for her 76-yen donation to the Senjogahara cause, I'd changed plans and skipped over the Araragi household to head straight to my own cherished Tamikura Apartments. Spurred by the spirit of Karen Araragi's air-headedness, I fumbled around for a dusty old unopened drawer that I'd forgotten about ages ago, in an abandoned corner of my room—somehow, as cramped as it was, it did harbor one of those.

And then...

Well, what else? I opened it.

“Hold on,” my chief investigator interjected. “You said it was *stapled* there?”

“Unmistakably,” I confirmed. “A single staple, I’m sure of it.”

Ononoki’s statement had been enough to remind me.

In truth, she was right. I hadn’t forgotten, and I hadn’t been misremembering the details—the lone flimsy-looking staple that held our mystery together—a “narrow piece of metal,” as I’d called it. Looking back, that description alone made it obvious.

It couldn’t have been anything but a staple.

“Still, a staple?” Hanekawa sounded her confusion. “That’s odd.”

It was odd, definitely.

Then again, a lot of details about this case were odd.

“Can you even staple through that kind of wooden surface?” she continued. “How did the culprit... Whoever put it there, how did they force it through the pole?”

A regular stapler going through wood? It wasn’t possible, as far as my experience and expertise went. Even a specialized upholstery stapler would struggle with anything harder than plywood.

Staplers are a delicate thing.

“It’s a bit gruesome, honestly...”

Quite. It was brutish.

A disgraceful and unnatural act.

“If anything, Senjogahara, I’m surprised you didn’t mention it sooner. Staplers did use to be your thing...”

Back then, she added with an affectionately reminiscent air.

By all manners of reason, I should’ve noticed it. Hanekawa was right to point it out, as was the magical doll before her.

Staplers used to be my thing, after all.

I had a phase, you could say.

And now, there it was—right in front of me once again. Stashed away among the pile of sharpened pencils, whetted rulers, scissor-blades, and other miscellaneous lethal stationery.

My trusty red stapler.

With a splash of dried blood on its crimp, it appeared—I had no idea how it had gotten stained.

I'd have to properly wash it later.

"You'd gone and stashed it all away?" Hanekawa asked. "Awe..."

That's pretty adorable, she teased.

Yes, I'd stashed it all away.

That was one thing I'd forgotten—a memory I'd let go of without realizing I had, and now came back to me in full.

They were my arsenal.

Tools, utensils—although I roamed unarmed these days, I used to collect everything that could conveniently double as a weapon. There were countless more than I would've ever had an academic (or artistic, admittedly) use for, but back then my weight was still being held as collateral by a ponderous crab. It was easier to carry a plethora of ponderous implements under my skirt when I had no extra baggage.

It happened to be why my interest in paper never developed beyond a mild affinity, too. Paper can be sharp in its own right, but deploying a sheet of A4 as self-defense is hardly feasible—even if, weighing the perfect amount of kilograms I did now, it made for a more reasonable option.

I'd consigned these armaments to obscurity.

Despite my weight finding its way back to me, I could've kept one or two around as a guarantee, but I chose not to. It was a resolution I'd made.

Not long after meeting Hanekawa, I recalled.

Soon after one of our first exchanges—the one when the delinquent vice-president Hitagi Senjogahara deigned to pester her class president about her thoughts on "quiet days."

It wasn't our very first exchange, nor our first conversation to go beyond platitudes, but it was significant. It was another thing I'd forgotten, and that I was now remembering fondly.

Nostalgically, even.

"Quiet days?" the class president had wondered aloud, lightly tapping the criterium pencil against her lips. At the time, she still wore her large

distinctive rounded glasses and her two neatly separate braids, and nearly every gesture of hers had a transparently studious air about it. Nearly. “Hmm... I don’t mind them, really.”

What a remarkably divested response it was.

She had a talent for keeping the flow of conversation smooth even when she was flat out ignoring her accoster, but already by then there were a few subtle hints that I’d started to pick up on.

Hanekawa’s eyes had escaped to the window as she answered, as if allowing her untrustworthy vice-president to peer into them might’ve revealed the uncertainty of her words.

“Why do you ask?” she added with a quizzical tilt of the head.

Nearly every gesture of hers was studious—but this was one of the rare non-scholarly Hanekawa mannerisms I’d sometimes be allowed to peek at, and it made me wonder whether our class’s mascot might be more cat than president.

More cat than human, rather.

It was easy to forget that the apotheosis of class presidents was a mortal creature that lived, breathed, and walked among us. Whether the creature was human or feline—that was still up for debate.

A hybrid of both, maybe?

Plagued by the image of a Hanekawa with two adorably cute ears sprouting out of her hair (a cherished sight I’d only be graced with much later), I remember having to fight every urge to not reach out to the top of her head and give it a pat. It gave rise to other questions, too.

Does the class president purr when her fur is stroked? I wondered, but it would unfortunately have to wait.

“Well, since someone like you has absolutely nothing going on in their life other than schoolwork—I was wondering how a ‘day-off’ Hanekawa might sustain herself,” I explained. “If at all.”

“S-Sustain myself? That’s a little...”

“Hibernation was a hypothesis. It’s what mammals tend to fall back on when they’ve got nothing better to do,” I continued relentlessly.

"I'll have you know, I'm plenty capable of keeping myself busy out of school. I've got hobbies of my own, just like any other schoolgirl."

"Hobbies?" I wondered aloud. "Being?"

It was only a natural follow-up question, but Hanekawa seemed shocked. Even she could be caught off guard, I learned, despite what rumors would've had me believe.

"Reading for one," she pouted angrily at my passive-aggression.

"The ravenous beast hunts for prey on library grounds..." I observed. "Well. What have you been reading lately, Miss Hanekawa? Any recommendations? Your latest finds?"

"The last thing I read? That was probably..." the class president paused for a moment, "*Sexual Reproduction of Tree Crops*, I think."

"How lascivious," I joked.

She'd answered with a textbook.

Even though she tried to cushion it with some doubt, the fact that she remembered such a precise title in full was telling enough.

"I'm sorry, did your brain just turn off after hearing the word *sexual*?" she reprimanded me without missing a beat. "It's obviously just..."

Well, I guess it is a textbook, she admitted.

"I take it back, I thought you were a model student in a league of your own," I messed, "but you might just be a different species altogether~"

The model student-species retorted with an insistence on the virtue of studying, adding that my employed style of punctuation was unbefittingly cute—to which I pointed out that I considered myself a perfectly upstanding schoolgirl.

And a cute one, I added.

"You keep saying that, but you've been making quite a reputation for yourself," she warned. "At this point, the entire student body is terrified of you... even our own class is cautious to approach you."

Being cute isn't just about looks, she assailed.

With a defiant pout. How could she assert that cuteness wasn't about looks if she was going to make such an adorable face?

“You have a long way to go until you can grasp true *moé*, Miss Senjogahara.”

I was taken aback by the studious class president’s sudden reference to the unquestionably un-studious *otaku* concept of *moé*—but it only served to convince me of her charms.

“If I can’t *grasp* it, dear Miss Hanekawa...” I pleaded, “Will you at least allow me to *grope* it?”

“Grope?!?” she exclaimed as she protected her chest from my hands.

In retrospect, I was lucky that she hadn’t terminated our relationship right then and there.

“I just prefer to keep to myself, is that a crime?”

In response, Hanekawa brought up the laundry list of conveniently excused aggressions that did in fact qualify as “crimes.” In my defense, my victims were simply “asking for it,” I told her (as I had the teaching body prior), but Hanekawa wasn’t having it.

Hah... she sighed in dismay.

“You’re lucky that Mr. Adashima lets your behavior go on account of your good grades.”

“That’s right. All’s well that ends well,” I argued. “And now, I’m helping out with frivolous school life business. I’m atoning—wonderful. How acquiescent of me.”

“Please don’t call it frivolous,” she moaned, “But I suppose I can’t deny the rest...”

At least you’re making progress, Hanekawa conceded with a pensive expression before returning to the school festival schedule that she’d been poring over since classes ended.

In Gahara terms, I should’ve considered it a victory.

It wasn’t every day that you got to get one over the class president of all class presidents. Under normal circumstances, it would’ve been enough to brighten up my day.

However, that day—I couldn’t accept such a hollow victory.

“No fun? Isn’t that a little harsh? I’m just doing my job, aren’t I?” she questioned.

Just doing her job—that was exactly the issue.

Hanekawa had tacitly accepted my excuse of “helping out,” but the truth was that she was the one doing all the work.

Thus far, my presence in the dimly lit classroom had amounted to little more than an occasional nod of approval or a tacit suggestion when the class president found herself hesitating about which early-afternoon time slot to decide on, which shade of blue the ribbons would be, or which wall to lean the signboard against. “All that for a maid café...” I had let slip earlier in conversation, to which Hanekawa had admirably insisted that it was in both the school and the students’ best interests that it was organized as sensibly and professionally as possible.

“It’s like I’m making conversation with my dentist,” I confronted her. “Even when I get to score against you, it still feels like pulling teeth. Don’t you ever get tired of flaunting how much better you are than everyone?”

I was harsh, unnecessarily so, but the amount of people that would be able to distinguish between the hues that she’d been picking between could probably be counted on one hand—even if you included the entire country.

The entire world, even.

“If you think being a responsible student is enough to make me better than everyone, it says more about you than it does about me, Senjogahara. It doesn’t hurt to have a little bit of faith in others, you know?”

She was a responsible student, in no uncertain terms—I thought as much. Professional, too, no doubt.

But sensible?

I’d been enjoying the peaceful atmosphere of our extracurricular meeting enough to let my rebuttal go unspoken earlier, but she was pushing it now. I explained to the president that a maid café wasn’t a particularly distinguished event. At the point we’d reached, by anyone’s standards—she was overdoing it.

She should forget the irrelevant details, I reflected.

When it came to a maid café, the image of Tsubasa Hanekawa, perfectly pure and purely perfect class president stuck in a classic French maid outfit—that would be more than enough to sell every Naoetsu High student on the event, and then some. You could host it in an abandoned shrine, an empty park, or a dilapidated cram school, and the turnout would still be in the hundreds.

It was certainly enough to sell me on it, I remarked.

However, Hanekawa rebutted.

“I don’t think I’m overdoing anything...” she said, “After all, we’re third years now. Studying for college exams is more important, so I have no intention to go overboard with this. Still, today’s meeting is the last chance to finalize things, so I might as well make sure everything’s in order. No regrets!”

She pumped her fists gently in front of her, another uncharacteristically unprofessional affect, which I figured she’d eked out in an effort to lighten the mood.

“You always make things so unromantic,” I told the class president. “This isn’t what a girl our age is supposed to be feeling regret over. Is your love life really that dry?”

“I’m surprised that you of all people would go out of your way to use a girl’s romantic history against her, Miss Senjogahara.”

She could be incisive when she was backed into a corner.

Despite my objections, though—I wasn’t slacking off purely due to my general disinterest in the fundamentally boring task of organizing a fundamentally boring event. Rather, it unsettled me that Hanekawa, being the assiduous laborer that she was, seemed to justify a habit of taking on most of the work for herself, whether someone was available to assist her or not.

That “someone” just happened to be me.

Regardless of my efforts, she wasn’t giving me many opportunities to help out—her defense was almost as flawless as her work ethic. Even when she was the one being lent a hand, she still managed to make the other person benefit more from the exchange than she did.

Somehow—a true model student.

Hanekawa brushed it off. She thanked me for subbing in for the vice president, conceding that I'd probably rather spend my free time differently, but that I'd been a "big help" thus far regardless.

"In your own way," she complemented.

How painfully virtuous of her, I thought as she silently ran through her event checklist. Although I couldn't hold it against her, her subtly melancholic resignation was difficult to apprehend.

"Don't take me so seriously," I consoled her, reluctantly. "I was just poking fun at you—I may be a cold, heartless, incorrigible delinquent, but I'm not so antisocial that I wouldn't want these afternoons to be at least a little more enjoyable."

For the both of us, I clarified.

"If that's true, you have a very unique way of endearing yourself to others, Miss Senjogahara."

"So that's how you interpret it. I see."

"Didn't you just say so?!"

I did imply as much, and she was correct to pick up on it.

Yes, I was endearing myself to the class president, but I was loathe to admit it. It was pitiable, somewhat.

"Assuming the best of people is bound to get you in trouble, Miss Class President," I deflected. "Be careful out there, you never know what kind of lunatics might be lurking in the shadows."

"Aha," she poked at me. "Are you referring to yourself?"

"Who better to speak of Hell than the Devil herself?"

I figured I had enough experience in the area to know what I was talking about. At the time, as far as the limited experience I'd developed told me, carelessly extending the benefit of the doubt to people seemed to only invite a procession of despicable opportunists.

I assumed it was better to be guarded about these things.

"That's worrying. You should really rethink your approach to making friends, Senjogahara—such pessimism."

"I've had zero complaints so far."

"Of course you wouldn't. Have you even tried making friends?"

"I've been closer to my peers than most," I spoke frankly.

"That's... an interesting answer..." she lingered.

I thought I made out a faint blush on her pale cheeks.

"Is that how you encourage honest students trying to get back on the straight and narrow?" I changed the subject, courageously. "Ah, well... Clearly my noble efforts are wasted on a twisted personality like yours."

"What was it you said about assuming the best of people?" she joked.

A rarity, those few months ago.

The brooding look on Hanekawa's face had dissipated and the atmosphere in the classroom had relaxed somewhat. I might have even had on a small smile.

"You're less of a pushover than you let on, Hanekawa. I wouldn't mind letting you have your way with me."

"I'll be doing nothing of the sort."

And she flat out rejected me.

For just a small moment, I felt the slightest bit of empathy for the countless boys that had suffered a similar fate at my hands.

"But you haven't answered the question yourself yet, Senjogahara," I was reminded. "Since you asked me, it's only fair for me to ask in return."

What do you think of quiet days?

I already knew what my answer would be.

"I hate them."

I laid my truth bare in front of Hanekawa, who seemed discomposed by my sudden show of conviction, mumbling out a muted "I-Is that so..." with startled eyes.

It was quite *moé*.

Seeing my response get such an extreme reaction out of her, I wondered what I'd done to deserve such a precious sight.

Of course, I wasn't unused to seeing people's faces grow red and their act turn flustered after they'd received a blunt reply to a question they only

expected to be answered with platitudes. Experience, however limited, told me that a curt “Bad.” to a hesitant “How are you doing?” was enough to make even my most cool-headed suitors seize up in confusion—it was meager compensation for having my boundaries so shamelessly violated, I was aware, but the small amusement I derived from seeing flimsy ideas of courtesy being trampled was all I had.

However, more recent experience also told me that Hanekawa was hardly someone who followed laws of what was “usual.” On the contrary, when it came to her, it was more reasonable to assume that all of her questions were asked in earnest, and that most of their answers in turn fell within her calculations. In my mind, she was the kind of person who would reply with a warm smile and a genuine look of concern, “Bad? I hope your day gets better then, Senjogahara. By the way, have you signed up to the roster for our class’s café event yet? I don’t remember seeing your name on the register.”

Even in the confines of my imagination, she’d made herself unshakable.

In short, someone as virtuously persistent as Hanekawa couldn’t be toppled by a single crude retort—I concluded. There had to be more to it than that.

“You’re not going to ask why?” I pressed.

“Ah, sorry! I got lost in my own thoughts a little there, ahaha...”

I could’ve said the same.

Then, the class president readjusted her glasses—which were already firmly pinched on top of her nose. As lively as it had gotten, I didn’t remember seeing them slip at any point during our conversation.

The ritual seemed to return her to her usual self regardless.

“Suit yourself. It’s not like I was finally making an effort to get closer to you or anything, I don’t care either way,” I attempted the *tsundere* method.

“Ehh—? But just earlier, you said—”

“You must’ve misheard. As you should know, I’m a cold-hearted delinquent. A cloistered princess with no interest in ever letting others within the high walls of my castle.”

An ice queen.

Out of all the monikers I’d been graciously bestowed by my dear classmates, I found it egregiously distasteful, and it was among those that soured my mood the most. I understood that it was just some turn of phrase—an archetype I was being assigned, but to me, there was some serious lack of critical thought in the affair.

I hardly spoke to anyone of my own initiative in the first place, much less did I harbor a desire to have any “subjects” to speak of. Just the idea of having a swarm of sycophants hanging on my every word was enough to make my stomach churn.

My only consolation was that the “ice” part was true enough.

Hanekawa, on the other hand, was curious: What could be so bad about having a day to yourself with nothing in particular to do? Don’t most students wish they had more time off?

Between regular classes, the cultural festival, entrance exams, and club activities, she was swamped.

“I’m lucky if I even get half a day at the end of the week...”

For someone as sharp as Hanekawa, I found her reproaches surprisingly roundabout.

I pressed her.

“Most students get a full two days a week, you’re obviously the one who’s in the minority here. Besides, I wasn’t aware you were part of any clubs. If you want more time off, why don’t you just quit?”

Of course, even with the entire weekend off, I doubted our class-mates would complain about an excess of free days—and telling someone to quit just because they wish they had more time to relax was nonsensical on its face.

Whether it was athletics, music, art, or anything else, people had more than enough reason to spend their precious time on whatever activity they

wished. Anyone could recognize that. It was a pathetically weak argument overall.

Truthfully—I just wanted the president to react.

Instead, she gave another roundabout response.

“I’m not exactly part of a club. But as a member of the student council there are lots of things I help coordinate. Club activities can be pretty time consuming, sure... but it’s part of what you sign up for, right?”

The same went for the student council, she concluded.

Setting aside that it was almost a complete non-sequitur from my comment, I esteemed everything about it made sense, only—it was a major thing for me to set aside.

She’d made it sound like she was being reasonable, but she’d completely snuck around having to give me a straight answer.

After I’d given her such a layup, too.

I quickly determined that my only way to squeeze a satisfying answer out of her would be to block off all of her escape routes.

“So much for all that talk about wishing you had more free time then. Clearly, you’d rather be occupied,” I attacked.

“Well...”

“If people were so attached to their free time, why would they bother joining clubs? Sounds counterintuitive to me. Are they idiots?”

“I don’t think—”

“You know, maybe I just don’t get it because I’m not part of any club myself,” I cut the president off. “I’m sure you know, but because of my condition, I’ve had to give up on track and field—or being part of any kind of sports club for that matter. Well, to be completely honest, I had to give up on everything.”

I had no other choice, I told her.

I had to endure it.

“Quiet day after quiet day. Going home straight after class, opening the door to my empty apartment. Every evening, every weekend, filled with

an unbearable amount of nothing. You seem to know everything, so I figured you'd know this too."

Hanekawa was silent.

I continued my assault.

As far as I'm concerned, I avowed.

"Anything is better than being left with nothing to do. Barely half a day at the end of the week? Don't get me wrong, I'm not interested in making myself jealous of your tedious position on the student council, but that sounds good to me."

Before I knew it, the flimsy classroom chair I was sitting in had been pushed aside and both of my hands had firmly planted themselves on top of Hanekawa's desk.

If someone had walked into the room at that moment, they would've likely assumed that I was an incorrigible deviant attempting to intimidate the revered class president into submission.

They wouldn't have been far off.

I hadn't raised my voice, and I had no intention of harassing her, but I wasn't backing down—I'd turned our peaceful conversation into an interrogation. I let her think I was letting my guard down, and I flipped the script on her. It should've dawned on me, Hanekawa was right.

My idea of getting close to others was completely messed up.

I didn't care whether I was doing things the "right way" or not.

For what I judged, Hanekawa could hate me all she wanted—she could find me cold, cruel, or repulsive, but if I was going to accept having her at my side, or the inverse, I couldn't let her get away with such a cowardly answer.

"Say, Miss Hanekawa," I made an effort to speak plainly. "Cramming all the work that you can into your agenda, taking on as many responsibilities as you'll be allowed to, even spending what little time off you have in the library reading textbooks. Am I really supposed to believe that's something 'most students' do?"

Of the president and her vice, I was the one any level-headed person would have called “anti-social” without a second thought—but it seemed, to me, that it equally befitted my festival-planning partner.

You’re just pretending to get along, I accused her ruthlessly.

“I can’t blame you, a shoddy excuse like that is probably enough to convince the rest of the school—in fact, I don’t doubt that it’s enough to convince the teachers, as long as they get to push even more work onto their beloved pet student. I’m not going to let you off easy.”

I didn’t want to let her off easy.

If I was destined to be branded as a troublemaker for my rotten high-school years, I would at least have this triumph, I declared.

“I have no problem being hideous, and I’m not known for being reasonable. Relaxing, doing nothing in particular... It’s plain obvious that you couldn’t care less—no, I bet you can barely stomach the thought of it.”

They were barely educated guess, no better than wild assumptions.

I had no justifiable reason to believe that anything I was saying was true, I was simply giving it my all.

All it would have taken was a simple “You’re wrong.” With the slightest push, my house of cards would have crumbled. If Hanekawa had snapped back with the smallest amount of conviction, I would have no choice but to fall on my sword.

But Hanekawa was silent.

Completely silent—not a sound.

I’d “totally owned her.”

That was what I’d remembered this morning as I woke up, my memory still foggy from my slumber. I’d affronted the class president in debate, and come out on top.

But—I now recalled, that wasn’t how our conversation had ended.

A few seconds passed, and Hanekawa spoke.

“Pfft,” she stifled a giggle. “Miss Senjogahara...”

She smiled.

I was at a loss.

Was she going to let me have it?

Was I going to face the class president's sternest admonishments?

Was she going to call me unreasonable, tell me I was assuming too much, that I should put more stock in my fellow classmates?

Tsubasa Hanekawa smiled, warmly.

She looked towards the window, but what she might've been trying to hide was beyond me at the time.

"Be gentle with school property, please," she asked.

Hanekawa directed her eyes towards my fingers, which had been inadvertently digging into the desk so passionately that they'd been completely drained of blood.

I was a bit embarrassed.

"It's nothing," I reassured her. "My fingers just look like that."

I invented that it was a side effect of my mysterious medical condition, but I doubt the president bought it. I reconvened with my chair and stored my hands beneath the desk.

Not that I had anything to hide.

"You're terrible. Is there anything you won't cover up with an obvious lie?"

"You're the one who lies. I only ever tell the truth."

"Isn't that a famous mind-game?" Hanekawa tilted her head again. It was charming. "Then, which door is the way out?"

"Neither."

"I'm trapped?!" she yelped.

"Correct. You may strip naked and beg for your release," the prisoner was informed.

I wasn't so merciless as to force a defenseless girl to reveal her secrets. Even back then, I had a magnanimous streak.

"Ideally of course," I added, "You'll be the one doing the streaking, Miss Class President. Hueh. Huehehe. Huehehehe."

"Spare me the creepy old pervert laughter," she whined. "Your imitation is so spot on that it's giving me chills."

"It's my natural laughter..."

A creepy old pervert? I was wounded.

It was no way to speak to a youthful princess.

"I guess I never have heard you laugh before, Senjogahara."

Hanekawa was still smiling gently.

"There isn't much to laugh about in this miserable world of ours," I rified. "Especially not with such a dour class president."

A joke.

A lie.

"People ought to get to know this side of you better."

"I'd rather not. I have a reputation to uphold."

"The reputation of a girl that gets overly passionate about rest days?"

Tch, I crossed my arms at her.

Not like I care!

I was just doing it to get under your skin!

B-Because I hate you! I-Idiot!

I used to make for a compelling *tsun*.

"Just me, then. I don't mind selfishly treasuring this side of you. And, honestly—as severe as you were, you weren't completely off the mark."

"Naturally."

"You could act a little surprised at least..." she weakly complained. "You're not wrong. Weekends, holidays, they've always been difficult for me, to say the least. Coming to school, studying, taking care of class president responsibilities—it's certainly not always the most fun you can have..."

But it takes my mind off things, she asserted.

"Even so, I'll stand by what I said. Even if they're painful, and I just end up running away—I can't bring myself to hate something that should bring me peace."

It could be a lot worse, couldn't it?

"If we start complaining about peaceful days where not much has to happen, or those days when things happen for no purpose—filler episodes, I guess you could say... what kind of trouble are we asking for?"

"I'm not one to be deterred by superstition."

That was probably a good thing, she admitted, but at the same time.

"At the same time, we should try to enjoy ourselves, shouldn't we? That's why, as despicable as they are, quiet days... I don't want to say that I've ever hated them."

It was for the best, she concluded.

And yet, just as I'd remembered before—I didn't budge.

I still wanted to say I hated quiet days with full conviction.

"You really do talk like you know everything, Miss Hanekawa," I contended.

Pffhehe, Miss Hanekawa laughed.

"I don't know everything, Miss Senjogahara."

Just what I know.

"I doubt we'll ever see eye to eye," I added.

On this matter, at least—I was positive.

"Would you take a bet?"

"On what?"

"That you'll change your mind."

"What is this, a delinquent rehabilitation program?"

"Your very own personalized course, aren't you glad? You'll have to stop bringing dangerous weapons to school, too."

"This invasion of privacy feels like it goes beyond the terms set out by my vice-presidency. Is there an appeal form?"

"The bad-tempered Hitagi Senjogahara conceding to the righteous class president... It'd be one for the books, no doubt."

"Quit dreaming, it won't happen."

"More the fantasy books than history books," she recognized.

"It'd be out of a fairy-tale," I added.

"The kind of tale filled with terrifying monsters or the sort that comes with a wish-granting genie?"

"The latter, I'd hope. The world is filled with enough terrifying monsters as it is," I chose.

If that fairy-tale ever comes to pass... Hanekawa contemplated.

“I’d like this genie to grant a wish for me.”

A wish. Hanekawa’s wish.

“Speak your desire, class president of mine.”

“If I can get the fearsome Hitagi Senjogahara to concede to me, let’s see...”

Something that seems far-fetched...

The class president deliberated for a moment.

“You said scoring against me was like pulling teeth, Senjogahara.”

“In retrospect, it was a generous comparison.”

“That’s mean,” she reproached. “I have to get you back for it.”

It’d be nice to—no, no.

She mumbled to herself.

Just once at least...

“To be honest,” she vacillated, “I called you out for having no romantic life, but it’s true mine has been just as dreary. If not more.”

“Should I act surprised?”

“You probably have more experience than me, all things considered.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it.”

“It’s decided then.”

“Spare me.”

“If I win this bet, Senjogahara...”

The class president winked.

“You’ll have to take me out on a date!”

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

It's only normal that it'd have one, but what kind?

Hanekawa and I spent some time reminiscing together over the phone, but as is often the case, I've come to learn—we were left with more questions than answers. What was the crucial detail that had eluded me? How was the mystery resolved?

As Yotsugi Ononoki the magical doll had said—it was up to me.

You might call it a tale of disappointment.

This drawerful of schooltime weaponry that I'd unveiled in my apartment played no part in solving any enigma, real or invented, that the oddly placed scrap of paper had posed. Finding myself in possession of the incriminated weapon did make me sound terribly suspicious—but only insofar as a cheap twist might have revealed me and the culprit to be one and the same. Beyond a convoluted amnesia-induced solution, my small-town mystery adventure had unraveled, soured, and ultimately fizzled out.

In that regard, nothing had happened. The plot went nowhere.

And yet, I wasn't wholly unsatisfied.

Some mystery was dispelled, and some questions found their answers.

As Ononoki had predicted, it turned out, the crucial detail I'd been missing was one that I hadn't forgotten. It was a detail, a memory that I

couldn't forget, because as Tsukihi maintained—important things couldn't be forgotten. And in much the same way, it was something that had been right in front of me—for a long time.

The whole time, you could say.

It was a tale of humility, then. Possibly.

One about acceptance, maybe.

I thought I'd done my due diligence, that I'd changed more than enough to call myself the “ideal Hitagi Senjogahara.” If nothing else, I would've assumed this attitude could've lasted me a few years—at least until those glaring personality flaws of mine caught up to me, maybe.

But it was this unbecoming eagerness to change that happened to be promptly challenged. I had a forceful insistence on making a clean, unequivocal break with my past, and with a personal history as unsavory as mine, who wouldn't?

I'd thrown unpleasant things away in whichever manner I could manage, with little regard for what was still attached to it.

A promise, in this case.

When it came to my trusty red stapler and its accompanying arsenal of stationery—as easily as I'd forgotten the specifics of it, I knew that Hanekawa had won some time ago. I'd ceded as much, and left myself hanging onto the one belief I still staunchly espoused, as the scrapped note to her staple.

“I hate quiet days.”

My last line of defense against complete rehabilitation—to a certain extent at least, that was how I perceived it.

Although, fortunately—or unfortunately.

Whether it was over the course of one uneventful morning or a third year of high-school spent at the side of a big-breasted class president, I had lost my right to declare it with any conviction.

In the end, I really did debut with a filler arc.

And worst of all? I enjoyed myself.

Whatever tale it was, it was pretty fun.

As it happened, the self-proclaimed “ideal Hitagi Senjogahara” still had a little more room for change. The “New Gahara” I was today was a continuation of the “chun-Hitagi” I’d been yesterday—I’d been willing to recognize as much, but what I’d failed to account for was the “Hitagi Senjogahara” I would eventually become, tomorrow. Future Gahara—she was part of this illustrious lineage too, of which each step was equally perfect.

Most likely, I was already in the process of becoming Future Gahara.

Who knew what would happen? In under a month, I’d already be in college, changing by the hour, moving forward.

Not towards the *ideal*, but towards something *different* all the same.

Something better, no doubt.

Taking it all in, I returned to my call with Miss Holmes, the former class president, Tsubasa Hanekawa—the girl I liked, whatever name you wanted to call her by.

As long as you didn’t comment too much on her cup size.

“Honestly, Senjogahara I’m surprised you remembered such a silly bet we made, but if you’re bringing it up now...” she questioned me. “Does that mean I won?”

She’d won. Pretty handily, I’d say.

So, I reckoned it was the fearsome Senjogahara’s turn to concede.

I wasn’t quite so perturbed by the thought of a quiet post-graduate respite any longer. I was more than willing to have a few more filler episodes before I was eventually forced to catch up to the main plot. Maybe “relaxation” would be inducted into the *SED*, and with enough episodes—we could even have our own slice-of-life miniseries.

Or a comedy one, but my faith in that was still wavering.

And as for the closing statement of our investigation:

I’d loathe to end this story with the same mistake that it’d started with, but I wanted to believe that there was at minimum one thing that would never change.

I spoke it into the receiver:

“I don’t dislike you, Tsubasa Hanekawa.”

Let's go on a date.

Afterword

What's it like to write a novel? I'd like to say that this story was born from a noble pursuit, but the truth is nothing special. Curiosity, an itch, the need to prove something, maybe. The *MONOGATARI* series (I checked the novels for this one, that's how the typography is done) and its characters, Hitagi Senjogahara in particular, are something I have endless admiration for. Endless love, you could say, but even for the things we love, or particularly for the things we love, there always has to be a doubt, a question, some emptiness, some longing. That's what love is, isn't it? Longing. And so, in these novels that I love, I looked for the empty spaces, the doubts, and the questions, and I felt an urge. An inalienable itch to write, to tell a story, to convey and explore my love of *MONOGATARI*. What's it like to write a novel? I'm not sure when I began to ask myself this question, and I'd endeavor a timeline of sorts, for posterity's sake, but I wouldn't want to bore you in this already boring Afterword. I wouldn't want to leave a bad impression. After all, if there's any blank page that belongs to me and only me, that speaks of PAPERCLIP, and not her inventions it would be this one. The Afterword. So, if you'll excuse me, I won't recount the brief history of *KARAMONOGATARI* in full, but if it'll at all satiate your curiosity, I'll let you in on a mildly interesting anecdote. *KARAMONOGATARI* is not "Chapter First: Hitagi Stapler," that much should be obvious enough (It's called "Chapter First" after all, isn't it?), but more importantly to the developments of the past 4 (Four? That's a lot!) months of my life: "Chapter First:

Hitagi Stapler” is not *KARAMONOGATARI*. It wasn’t supposed to be, at least. Truthfully, my first intentions, my purest desires laid not in this story, but in what I’d thought to call “Hitagi Daydream,” now our “Chapter Intermission.” Suffice to say, the story of *KARAMONOGATARI* has yet to be told. Although I’d settled on this novel that was not “Hitagi Stapler” in the months leading up to the end of 2025, it was soon after I’d resolved to throw my life at the act of writing, in the first month of 2026, that “Hitagi Stapler” became a necessity. I invented it piecemeal, bit by bit. I “studied,” I “researched” in every way I could, poring over the various novels written by the author that will forever elude me, NISIOISIN, and translated (for the most part) by the translator that I will forever respect, Ko Ransom. To them, dedicated “special thanks” are unneeded. They hold my gratitude forever. To my readers, the ones who’ve made it this far, and obstinately read this meandering Afterword from a nobody whose four months of life were thrown aside for this unpublishable work, I am grateful as well. And I hope, somehow, that I’ve conveyed a fraction of my love, and a fraction of what I dream I might’ve learned. I shouldn’t linger.

This has been part one of *KARAMONOGATARI*. The first true and honest story I’ve written, whether as PAPERCLIP or someone else. I sincerely hope you’ve enjoyed it, and that you’ll look forward to its continuation. It was an arduous journey for me, possibly the most arduous journey I’d never imagined embarking on, but I’m glad to have embarked on it. As always, I’d like to say, although it’s only my first appearance in any sort of Afterword: Please count on me to write. This first one may have taken me four months, and I have no doubts you’ll find in it a plethora of faults, but I’m certain my next work will be more timely, more precise, more earnest, and more tender. Please count on it. The next chapter, “Chapter Intermission: Hitagi Daydream.”

Our adorable class president and somewhat-less-adorable harmless delinquent will have themselves a date! Surely, if anything, that’s something to be excited about. And the unsolved mystery... Hold on, there’s an unsolved mystery?

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All of my friends who have supported me and continue to support me,

And all of my readers.

しゅんぶん
春分やカニの「否」の^{いな}に^{むぎ}麦^{ちゃ}茶^の飲む

ー阿良々木月火