

Kizumonogatari

傷物語

By Nishio Ishin



Translation taken from Baka-Tsuki. Original translator unknown.

http://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Monogatari_Series

I claim no credit for anything other than dumping it into Word and saving it as a PDF.

caractacuspotts, June 2013



BOOKBOX DESIGN
VEIA
FONT DIRECTION
SHINICHI KONNO
(TOPPAN PRINTING CO., LTD.)
ILLUSTRATION
VOFAN

本文使用書体：FOT-筑紫明朝 Pro L

第零話 こよみヴァンプ





001

I think it's about time I talked about Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade. I believe it is my responsibility. I met her in the spring break between my second and third years of high school. That meeting was impactful, and also quite devastating. In any case, I think I had really bad luck — of course, that's the same as saying that I couldn't avoid bad luck whereas someone else could, but I don't think there ever was someone in my shoes. It's quite irresponsible for me to say that it was really bad luck that got me into this, maybe I should just accept that it was all my fault. In the end, I believe that it was me being me that started that chain of events.

A chain of events.

Without putting too much thought on it, I carelessly used that expression — but though I presented it as "a chain of events" just for argument's sake, I honestly don't know exactly how large this chain actually is. What event was it that started it all, what road did it follow, and how did it end? I can't tell exactly. It's possible that even now it hasn't ended, or maybe it hasn't even started -- this is not a pretense or a play on words, I honestly believe that.

In the end, I could only observe events from my point of view, so I will never know what this chain of events really meant, or didn't mean, to people other than me. If I could listen to 'their' story, perhaps I would be able to grasp the whole deal to some extent -- but even then, I wouldn't expect to learn the real story.

It wouldn't be the truth, but what they recognized.

And that might be enough.

However, to begin with (and that is the only thing I am sure of), the girl who was at the center of it all, Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade, was such an existence.

She has a meaning only for the observer.

She has a different meaning based on the observer.

The meaning would not be the same between fellow observers.

That would be — a vampire.

It would probably be of no use explaining what exactly is a vampire. They're in comic books, movies, games; a concept that's been totally overused. Although not a culture born in this country -- most of the Japanese are very well acquainted with it. Coming from the other side of the globe, by now that concept is a bit old.

However, during Spring Break.

I was assailed by a vampire, the old concept from the other side of the globe.

You could say I am an idiot.

I really do think I was an idiot.

And because of that stupidity that belongs to no other than myself — I experienced hell for two weeks.

And that Spring Break, from beginning to end — was a full-blown hell.

A hell that seemed like a joke, and a joke that seemed like hell.

What event was it that started it all, what road did it follow, and how did it end — as I said before, to me this will forever remain an enigma, a paradox that will never be solved, but if I do know just one thing for certain, is when that hell started and when that hell ended.

March 26 until April 7.

That is — Spring Break.

Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade — afterwards, I understood that an entity like her is to be called a "Kaii".

A Kaii.

A monster.

An inhuman being.

If that's the case, being her observer at that time, at that place, in that way — is the main reason why I got put into this hell, I think.

I was greatly unqualified as an observer.

And I was stupid after all.

If I want to talk about her, it is inevitable that my own stupidity will be thoroughly exposed — and although that seems like a masochistic act, I guess I really do have to tell the story of that vampire.

The story of the wound I received from her.

The story of how I wounded her.

I guess I do have to tell it.

I believe it's something I have to do.

That's my responsibility.

.....The introduction was quite a long one, but please bear with me — though I said something impressive like this being my responsibility, after all it's the responsibility of a stupid buffoon to begin with. I don't know if I'll get discouraged -- I may sound pessimistic but, to be frank, I'm not confident I can finish telling this story. That's why I'm setting up such long-winded and solemn introduction.

In addition, as the most I can do, though if I start telling the story now, like a rock rolling downhill, later it will be difficult to stop midway, but just for good measure, for the worst case, in case my resolve fell short, I want to announce in advance how this story ends.

This story about vampires has a bad end.

Everyone receives an ending where they became unhappy.

Still, precisely because it was a hellish ending, the chain of events probably hasn't ended yet, and in any case, my responsibility towards her will last all of my life.

002

If you make friends, your strength as a human will decrease.

I think I said something like that.

I remember it happened Saturday, March 25th, just before Spring Break, in the afternoon of the closing ceremony day — at the time, I was taking an aimless stroll nearby the school I attend, Naoetsu Private High School.

I don't participate in any kind of clubs.

I was just taking a purposeless, aimless, relaxed stroll.

I was certainly not in high spirits because Spring Break began tomorrow.

It's not just Spring Break. Whether it was Summer Break, Winter Break, or Golden Week, long holidays were things that a student, fundamentally, should be happy about; and even I was fundamentally happy that the third semester ended and Spring Break came, but at the same time, it was also a fact that long holidays gave me more free time than I needed.

Especially since there was no homework for Spring Break.

For some reason, I don't feel like staying at home.

This being the case — the closing ceremony ended, we took our report cards in class, the class dissolved with a "see you in the new school term", yet at that point I don't feel like going straight home, though on the other hand I don't have any other place to go, so I am loitering around the school like a suspicious person.

I have nothing to do.

It's more killing time than killing boredom.

Fact is, though I commute to school by bicycle, the bicycle itself was still in the bicycle shed inside the school — that too was a sign that I'm not planning to return home yet.

My stroll is just a stroll.

Obviously I'm not a fitness nut.

I could be killing time at school as well, but there was a reason why staying inside the school was as hard as staying at home — although it was the afternoon of the closing ceremony day, a lot of people were there participating in club activities.

I don't like people working so hard.

Not that our school is that passionate about club activities. The exception is the female basketball club which was joined by a monster of a super-rookie that enrolled here the last year because of some mistake, but that aside it feels mostly like "The importance is to participate" even for the other sports clubs.

That being the situation, though not exactly a real reason, somehow I was just walking around the school premises, although I was starting to think that it was about time to go pick the bicycle up from the shed and head home — I was hungry, after all — and then I happened to see an unexpected person.

Being Spring Break, it was a bit complicated to decide whether it was the second or the third year, anyway, a popular student in the same school year of mine -- Hanekawa Tsubasa, was walking in front of me.

I was wondering what she was doing with her hands around the back of her head, it seems she was doing up her braid. She collects her long hair behind in one braid. Braids by themselves are rare in recent days, but she also left her forelocks straight.

She was in her school uniform.

The model hasn't changed at all. A skirt ten centimeters long below the knee.

A black scarf.

And she was wearing the designated school sweater over her blouse.

And also designated were her white socks and school shoes.

The look of an honors student, indeed.

And she was one to begin with.

An honors student among honors students, a class rep among class reps.

I was in a different class during both first and second years, which is why she probably doesn't know about me, but I've heard about how she's like as a class rep.

I'm not very interested in gossip, so I may have heard only half of the story, but even then it seems she is quite the class rep.

I'm sure she'll be a class rep even in the third year.

And she'll have excellent grades.

It seems odd to express it like that, but it seems she's abnormally bright. Getting 600 points full marks on 5 subjects 6 courses for her is a piece of cake. That is, if all students take a test, that someone ranks first is as completely natural as someone ranking last, but in Hanekawa Tsubasa's case, she's always been at the top for these two years.

Although I was doing fine until I enrolled at a private school Naoetsu High School, in the blink of an eye I was becoming a dunce and in the blink of the other eye I became a dunce, between me and her there is a difference like heaven and earth, or maybe I should say we are antithetic.

Hmm.

Instantly, she caught my attention.

Since we were in different classes, although I knew her, in the end I had never really seen her much — I was a bit surprised to spot her by chance after the closing ceremonies.

Well.

By chance, accidentally.

It seems she was coming out of the school gates, and thinking about it carefully, I was loitering by the school all the time, so it's not that strange I spotted her.

Naturally Hanekawa was not aware of me.

She seemed to be focused on fixing her braids, like I didn't enter her field of vision — well, even if I did enter in it, I and Hanekawa are not even that close to nod at each other.

Hahaha.

Rather, an honors student like Hanekawa would certainly hate a person living thoughtlessly such as myself.

She is serious and I am frivolous.

It's better she doesn't know about me.

Let's just pass by one another like this.

Though I say so, I don't need to run away.

I continued walking at a steady pace, as if pretending that I hadn't noticed her — and if the two of us took five more steps, we would be safely passing by each other, it happened then.

I.

Probably would never forget this moment for the rest of my life.

Without any warning — a wind blew from the front.

"Ah"

Without wanting to, I let out a gasp.

The front part of Hanekawa's slightly long, ten-centimeter below the knee pleated skirt was completely flipped up.

Normally, she would immediately push it down by reflex — but the timing was kind of bad, and both her hands were behind her back, and they were still working on the complex task of fixing her braid. Watching from my position, it looked as if she was putting on a slightly cool pose, with her hands wrapped behind her head. That's what it looked like.

That was the situation when her skirt was flipped up.

Everything under it became completely visible.

It was by no means something flashy -- however it was such elegant underwear that the eye captivated by it wasn't allowed to turn away.

It was a clean pure white.

It wasn't suggestive at all, the coverage area was actually quite large. It was the full coverage kind with thick fabric — absolutely nothing lascivious, and in that regard one could say it lacked sexiness.

However, I could feel the dazzling radiance of that extreme whiteness.

And it was not plain at all.

A complex design made with white thread over a white background was embroidered in the center part of it — for all I know there were flowers on it. That pattern, symmetric on the left and right sides, exquisitely made up the balance of the whole underwear. And the central top part of the embroidery was decorated with a small ribbon.

That ribbon further intensifies the impression of it all.

Furthermore, right above that small ribbon, her abdomen and quite a lovely belly button was visible. The skirt was so boldly flipped up that even such parts became unbecomingly exposed. You could even see the blouse's hem clearly showing tucked inside the skirt. I never thought the hem of a blouse could be so lascivious until now.

Well, the skirt's lining for me was a new thing. Despite me happening to see them, often, they were an inviolable unknown entity. For the first time I think I've understood the structure of the clothing you call a skirt.

And best of all, it was just beautiful that only the front part of a skirt was flipped up.

The pure white of the underwear, and, as if boasting a competition with that whiteness, her plump thighs, were emphasized by the contrast with the deep blue of the skirt in background, and stood out. The skirt, quite long compared to that of an ordinary girl's, in this situation was like a curtain that highlighted an elegant work of art. The pleats in the pleated skirt also seemed as if they were velvet.

Considering her pose with her hands wrapped behind her head, it seemed as if she were boasting her underwear to me -- that was the end result for her.

She.

Hanekawa Tsubasa, in the end, didn't move an inch.

She was dumbfounded.

Her facial expression froze, while she remained in that pose, as the skirt flipped up.

I think it all happened in the space of a second.

But, I felt as if it were an hour — I felt like I was seeing a hallucination, where it was as if my life could be coming to an end. It is by no means an exaggeration, I experienced a whole life in a moment.

To the point where the surface of my eyeballs would dry.

The lower part of her body had stolen a glance from me.

Well, of course I understand — of course I understand that in this situation it would be proper courtesy to quietly look away.

Normally even I would have done so.

If I were going up the stairs and a girl were in front of me, I'd at least have the mental focus to look at my own feet.

However, I wasn't as perfect as a man to do so on the spot against this blessing which suddenly swoop down on me without any mental preparation.

It seemed as if Hanekawa's figure was burned into my retinas.

If I happened to die right now, and someone happened to implant themselves with my eyes, they'd hallucinate about Hanekawa's underwear for the rest of their lives.

That was how much of an impact it was.

An honors student's underwear.

"....."

In fact.

How long will I go on describing an honors student's panties?

When I came to my senses, Hanekawa's skirt had already come back down.

It really lasted just a moment.

And then, Hanekawa.

Still dumbfounded — was looking at me.

She stared at me.

".....Err"

Woah.

This is a bad time to interact with her.

What should I do at a time like this?

"I..... I didn't see anything, okay?"

I tried an obvious lie.

Hanekawa ignored my obvious lie though, and just continued staring at me. She finished braiding up her hair, brought down her hands, and though it was a bit late, she patted down her skirt.

Though it really was much too late.

And then for a moment, she looked away as if looking to the sky, and then looked at me again, saying,

"Ehhehe"

She was bashful.

.....Oh.

You'd laugh at this?

She's quite a forbearing woman — as expected from a class rep among class reps.

"Well, what should I say?"

Tap, tap, tap.

Hanekawa hopped up to me with her feet together, as if jumping with a knee pad.

Coming from 10 steps away to a distance of about 3 steps.

A quite close distance.

"No matter how you think of them, skirts have pretty low security when it comes to hiding things you don't want others to see. I guess I would need a firewall like spats?"

"I, I dunno....."

It bothers me when you use such metaphors.

Am I the virus, then?

Luckily for her -- though I don't know if it really was, anyway there was nobody around, not even Naoetsu High School students.

Just me and Hanekawa.

Which means I was the only one who saw her underwear.

That gave me a bit of an ego noticing this reality, but let's leave that aside.

"I think this was Murphy's Law at work just now. Maybe it should be added there, like, if you wrap your hands around your back your skirt flies up in front of you — Normally one is cautious about the back, but surprisingly the front is a blind spot"

"Yeah..... I guess"

I don't know.

Or rather, this is awkward.

Whether or not Hanekawa meant it, I felt like I was scolded in a roundabout way — that said, just staring doesn't have much persuasive power, but certainly I was feeling guilty for witnessing, though not on purpose, "what she didn't want others to see".

And yet she is smiling.....

Don't try to drag this discussion on.

"W-Well, don't worry about it. I lied about not seeing it, but it was like a silhouette, I couldn't see anything well"

This was also a lie.

I could see it so well it was terrific.

"U, hm, mm?"

Hanekawa tilted her head.

"If you could see everything say so, that would make girls feel more at ease"

"W-Well, I have plenty of will to say so, but the fact is that I can't deceive you"

"I see, so you can't deceive me"

"Yeah, I'm sorry I couldn't make you feel at ease. I think I should have lied"

The words of a man who had been telling nothing but lies since a short while ago.

"Am I imagining things, or does it feel like the careful description of my skirt was spanning about four pages?"

"It is, it is, it's all just your imagination. Up until now I have been describing a quite emotional, beautiful scenery"

This was not a lie, though subtly.

"Well, I'll be leaving now"

And then lightly raising my hand, showing Hanekawa that I didn't want to continue this conversation any further, I went up ahead.

At a rapid pace.

Ahh, what is this?

Hanekawa was probably going to head home, and on the way back home maybe she would tell her friends, with a mail or the like, how I ended up seeing her panties. I don't think an honors student would do that, but I also think she would do it exactly because she is an honors student. Well, Hanekawa doesn't know my name but..... I suppose she knows at least that I am a student in the same year of her.

Realizing that this could be seen as being a bit too self-conscious, I slowed down my pace, and then,

"Wait a second!"

A voice came from behind.

It was Hanekawa.

What, she came after me!

"I've finally caught up with you. You walk pretty quickly"

".....You're not going home?"

"Hmm? Well, ultimately I will go back home, but why are you heading back to school, Araragi-kun?"

"....."

She had my name.

Ehhhh?

I don't have a name plate or anything, you know!

".....Well, you see, I was going to get my bicycle"

"Oh! You go by bike, then?"

"Well, yeah..... my house is far from here, you see——"

Hey, that's not the point.

Though it seems that she doesn't know I commute by bicycle.

".....Why do you know my name?"

"Eh? Well, of course I would. We're in the same school, right?"

Hanekawa said so as if it were obvious.

Same school, you say.....

You make it sound as if we are in the same class.

"Well, you may not know me, Araragi-kun, but you are quite famous"

"What?"

I asked back without thinking.

It's you the one who should be famous.

And besides, I'm nothing more than a pebble on the roadside at Naoetsu Private High School —— I don't even know if my classmates can say my full name.

"Hmm? Something wrong, Araragi-kun?"

"....."

"Araragi-kun (阿良々木くん) is written with the 'a' ('阿') that's the 'ka' ('可') from 'kanou' (可能 / possibility), two 'ra's ('良') from 'ii ko' (良い子 / good kid), and the 'gi' ('木') from 'jumoku' (樹木 / trees and shrubs), you get . And your first name would be 'koyomi' ('暦') from 'toshitsuki no koyomi' (年月の暦 / the yearly calendar), right? So it's Araragi Koyomi-kun (阿良々木暦くん)"

"....."

She even has my full name and the kanji used to write it.

You have to be kidding.....

Considering she has my name and face, if she happened to have a Death Note¹, I'd be a dead man.....

Actually, the same goes for me though.

"You are —— Hanekawa"

I wasn't getting even with her, or refusing to give in, but I said that back to her without giving her a confirmation.

"Hanekawa Tsubasa"

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_Note

"Woah!"

Hanekawa gave a very surprised look.

"Amazing. You know the name of someone like me!"

"At the final test of the first semester of the second year, in all subjects, physical education and visual arts included, you got wrong only one question in the forms, Hanekawa Tsubasa"

"Eh? Hey..... come on, now! Why do you know that much?"

An even more surprised Hanekawa.

It doesn't seem like she's acting.

"Eh.....? Could it be you're stalking me, Araragi-kun? Oh my, am I maybe too paranoid?"

".....Not really"

Somehow — she doesn't seem to be aware she's famous.

She probably thinks that she's 'normal'.

A normal girl, just a bit serious.

In addition, she feels awkward at dealing with a celebrity like me -- well, maybe I too have become quite famous, as a dunce.

However, that said, there is no meaning in bringing that up.....

I gave a non-serious answer.

"I heard it from my alien friends"

"Eh? You have friends, Araragi-kun?"

"Ask if aliens exist first!"

I gave a comeback to a person I just met.

However, that was pretty rude, even though she didn't mean any ill will.

"Well, umm,"

And noticing this herself, as expected, she seemed a bit embarrassed saying that.

"Well, I had the impression you were someone who is always alone, living in solitude"

"Are there cool guys like that?"

It seems she knows me.

But not that well.

"Well, like you said, I don't really have any friends. And you are so famous that even people without friends know you"

"Hey, quit it!"

Hanekawa was a little annoyed at that.

We are talking about the girl who after having the inside of her skirt boldly exposed just made an embarrassed smile.

"I don't really like this kind of jokes. Don't tease me like that, please"

".....I see"

I nodded to that, since objecting would result in an argument.

Oh boy.

The pedestrian crossing in front of the school gates showed the red light, so I stopped there — Hanekawa was standing next to me.

.....

Why is she following me?

Did she forget something at school?

"Hey, Araragi-kun"

While I was thinking.

Hanekawa started talking.

"Do you believe in vampires, Araragi-kun?"

"....."

What is she talking about, I thought.

And then I realized it the next moment.

Yeah, she was pretending to be calm, but she was actually embarrassed that I saw her underwear.

It's quite obvious.

I wasn't anyone famous but certainly Hanekawa knows about me — and somehow she had even figured out my connections (the fact I had no friends).

She's probably not hearing very good rumors.

In that case, it would not be strange if she perceived my intent examination..... my accidental glimpse at her underwear as a stain on her reputation.

And so she followed me in order to take care of that.

She doesn't part immediately after her panties are seen, by following me and talking constantly, she is undoubtedly planning to overwrite my memories.

Hmph.

You're naive, honors student.

Even if you bring up a strange topic like vampires, my memories of that won't disappear.

"What's the matter with vampires?"

Well, anyway, if this will satisfy her, then I'll discuss the topic she brought up. If I think of it as a compensation for having seen her panties, humoring her with this idle talk is no big deal.

"Well, recently I've been hearing rumors. Like, there's a vampire in the city, so you shouldn't go out alone at night"

"That's a bit vague..... it's a baseless rumor"

I gave her my honest impression.

"Why would a vampire be in this country town?"

"I don't know"

"A vampire is a foreign demon², isn't it?"

"I think it's not exactly a demon"

"If you're going against a vampire, I don't think there would be difference between going alone and being accompanied by ten people"

"Well, of course!"

Ahaha, Hanekawa laughed.

A cheerful way of laughing.

.....The image I had of her was different.

It has been bothering me from quite some time now.

Since she was an honors student and a class rep among class reps, I was expecting she would put on more airs.

Instead, she's oddly friendly.

"But, there are many eyewitnesses"

"Eyewitness testimony? Interesting. Then why don't you bring me this Kin-san you mentioned?³"

"I didn't mention Kin-san though"

It's amongst the girls, said Hanekawa.

"Not just the girls at our school — the girls that attend nearby schools talk about it a lot. Though I should note it's a rumor spread only by the girls"

"A rumor spread only amongst the girls..... seems like something I've heard somewhere before"

Though, a vampire?

That rumor really runs deep, doesn't it?

"They say it's a blonde-haired, beautiful woman — a vampire whose cold eyes could chill your spine"

"That's some pretty concrete details. But you can't tell if she's a vampire just off that, can you? What if she's an ordinary person who stands out just because she has blonde hair?"

At any rate, this is a suburban rural town.

A city on the outskirts of the region.

You can't even find people with brown hair here.

"But"

Hanekawa continued.

² To be exact, the word used is "youkai".

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T%C5%8Dyama_no_Kin-san. I found a transcript of the scene Nisio should be referring to here: <http://www.sakusha.net/moromoro/omake/neta/kinsan.html>. Basically a woman is accusing a man to have tried to kill her and she stated that Kin-san saved her, so he should be able to testify in her favor. That man then asks her to bring him this so-called Kin-san. It seems there is a TV host that likes to spoof the scene: "What should we do if Kin-san really came?"

"I heard that her blond hair illuminated by street lights is almost dazzling -- yet she has no shadow"

"I see....."

A vampire.

I hear it so often that by now it feels like an ancient word, but I don't know that much about it. However, now that she mentions it, I did hear that -- vampires can't have a shadow.

Because they are weak against the sun.

However, if it happens at night.

Even if there is a street light over it, one could still see things wrong — besides, doesn't it seem too much like a hoax, with a setting like a street light?

Even if not a hoax, it's a bit unelaborated.

"Indeed"

Even if I said something blunt, Hanekawa wasn't upset about, instead she showed agreement.

She is a good talker, and a good listener.

"Yes, even I think it is a silly rumor. But thanks to that rumor girls don't go out alone at night, so I suppose it's good for public order"

"Well, you are right"

"But you see,"

Hanekawa slightly lowered the tone of her voice.

"If there are vampires, I'd like to meet them"

".....Why?"

Somehow.

Maybe my supposition was wrong.

I thought she was using idle talk in order to erase my memory of her panties -- however she puts too much enthusiasm in her words.

Normally, thinking about it, telling a guy like me dressed in a school uniform about "a rumor just for girls" seems quite strange.

"You'll die if they suck your blood, you know?"

"Well, I don't want to die though. Let's see, maybe meet them is not the right word. It just would be nice if such -- superhuman beings existed"

"Superhuman, like a god?"

"It doesn't have to be a god, though"

Hanekawa remained silent for a bit, as if picking her words, but finally,

"Otherwise, nothing would really come out of it, right?"

She said.

And then, suddenly.

The traffic lights turned green.

But, Hanekawa, nor I would move.

Frankly.

I don't get it at all, not only what Hanekawa is saying, but also what she wants to say -- it's like the conversation doesn't connect.

"Oh my, I'm sorry!"

Maybe what I was thinking was showing in my facial expression, Hanekawa spoke as if in panic.

"Araragi-kun, unexpectedly you're easy to talk with. I got carried away, I feel like I told you something that makes no sense"

"Ah — no, it's fine. It's okay"

"It is odd that you are easy to talk with, yet you don't have friends. Why don't you make any?"

She asked me directly.

Probably not meaning any harm.

I understand that at least.

It's not that I don't make any friend, I just can't make any, but I hesitated to give a direct answer.

That's why — that time, I answered like this.

"If you make friends, your strength as a human will decrease"

".....Eh?"

Hanekawa — gave me a blank face.

"I'm sorry, I don't quite get what you mean"

"Well..... you see, it's kinda like this"

Oh crap.

I tried to say something cool, but I don't know how to continue.

"You see, if I had friends, I'd have to worry about them, right? If my friends get hurt, even I would, and if they were sad, then I too would be sad. Putting it that way, these weak points build up. As a human I would grow weaker"

"..... but, if they have fun, then you'd have fun, and if they're happy, then you're also happy, where is it written that you would become weak? The weak points build up, but don't the good points build up as well?"

"Err"

I shook my head.

"I envy when friends are having fun, and I'm jealous when friends are happy"

".....Small-minded"

Hanekawa said, bluntly.

Leave me alone.

"Even if it were as you put it, then it all would come up to zero, so everything would be the same. Having friends or not having them it's the same thing. Actually, there are a lot of bad things in this world — so in the end, wouldn't it be a negative?"

"Don't say something so distorted"

I withdraw my statement about you being easy to talk to.

Hanekawa said.

I was a very limited time offer — well, whatever.

It's better to clear this kind of misunderstandings early.

"You see, I want to be a plant"

"A plant?"

"I wouldn't have to talk, nor walk"

"Hmm"

For the time being, Hanekawa nodded to that.

"But that's wanting to be a living being, right?"

"Hm?"

"Normally, you're supposed to say you want to be something inorganic, like stone or iron"

I have the impression she brought up an unexpected point.

I said I wanted to be a plant because that's what I'm really thought from a long time ago, but I never thought it would receive an objection.

Hmmm.

I see — inorganic, huh?

Certainly, plants are also living beings.

"I'm going to head for the library now"

"Hmm?"

"While talking with you, I started feeling the urge to go to the library"

"....."

What train of thoughts did she follow?

Well, she did say ultimately she will go back home or something — so she probably has no real plans. She has free time just like me, so would she kill it by just wandering around the school, or going to the library?

That could be the wall that divides dunces and honors students.

"Tomorrow, the library will be closed since it's a Sunday, so I have to go today"

"Hmmm"

"Do you also want to come, Araragi-kun?"

"Why?"

I smiled bitterly.

A library.

I didn't even know this city had such thing.

"What are you gonna do there?"

"Obviously, I'm going to study, am I?"

"Obviously, you say....."

This time I'm the one faltering.

"Sorry, but I'm not praiseworthy enough to study on my own even without homework to do for Spring Break"

"But next year you will have exams, right?"

"Exams or whatever..... I doubt I will even graduate. I won't make it in time no matter what. At the very least, I'm trying not to be late next year"

".....Hmmm"

Hanekawa — — murmured, like she was bored.

I don't think she really wanted to go together.

But Hanekawa said nothing more.

I wonder.

It's because she isn't putting on airs, I can't understand her well.

The traffic lights kept changing between green and red.

Now it's red.

When it turns green we will part, I thought -- at least, that should be a good timing.

Hanekawa too should be thinking that.

It's not like she's someone who can't read between the lines.

"Araragi-kun, do you have a cellphone?"

"Well, a cellphone, yeah"

"Could I borrow it?"

Saying that, she put out her hand.

I'm not sure what it is she's planning to do, but for now I did as she told me to, I took my cellphone from my pocket and handed it to Hanekawa.

"Oh? It's brand new"

"I changed it recently. I bought one new after two years, there are so much complex functions now, it's wasted on me"

"Don't say such miserable things when you're still young. If you keep that up, when you grow up you'll be left behind by our civilization. If you aren't good with these digital things, you can't even lead a satisfying daily life"

"Fine, if it comes to that I'll seclude myself in a mountain. Then when civilization falls apart, I'll return to this city"

"Exactly how long do you plan on living?"

Are you immortal, asked Hanekawa, astonished.

As soon as she said that, Hanekawa began tinkering with the cellphone.

A class rep among class reps, and the very picture of an honors student, but here she was a female student, and her fingers were ridiculously quick with the buttons.

I didn't put in personal information that would be embarrassing if seen, but..... do not touch other people's phones without asking!

Or maybe she is suspecting that when her skirt flipped up I secretly took a picture with the cellphone's camera?

Then you can check as much as you want.

I'd like to wipe away such slanderous suspicion.

Or rather, girls have it hard, they have a lot of things to care about. If it was about a boy, and the zipper fly of his trousers was open, he could just insist he was Sexy Commando⁴ and that would work.

.....Would that work?

"Here you go. Thanks"

Hanekawa immediately returned the cellphone to me.

"There was no such picture, right?"

I said, and Hanekawa,

"Eh?"

Tilted her head.

"Picture?"

".....Err"

Huh?

Did I misread her?

Then what in the world did she do?

It seems my wariness was noted by Hanekawa, she pointed at the cellphone in my hand, which I hadn't put back in my pocket, and said.

"I put my number and e-mail in there"

"What?"

"Too bad. You made a friend!"

And then.

Before I could say anything, Hanekawa zoomed past the pedestrian crossing — before I knew it, the traffic lights had turned green.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexy_Commando_Gaiden:_Sugoiyo!!_Masaru-san. Sexy Commando is a battle manga where distracting the opponent is the key to win.

I had planned on parting ways like that, but it seems she took the initiative — huh? Wasn't she going to the library? Ah no, she decided to go to the library while talking to me — it wouldn't be strange if initially she was headed in the opposite direction.

Once she crossed Hanekawa turned at me and waved a hand, "Later!".

I responded on reflex.

Once she checked I was waving my hand (probably like an idiot), Hanekawa turned on her heel, made a right turn before the school gate, and walked looking like she was in a good mood — the moment she turned the corner, I couldn't see her back anymore.

After I confirmed that, I checked my cellphone.

It's really true.

"Hanekawa Tsubasa" was registered in the address book.

Her phone number and e-mail.

I had never used the address book. I remember all the numbers I need to know — though I'm not boasting about my memory. At the most I memorized the numbers of my home and of my parent's cellphone, so it's nothing to talk about. For other numbers, I just check them in the call history.

It's just that I had no friends.

That's why.

This "Hanekawa Tsubasa" would be the first entry ever registered in my address book.

"What's with her.....?"

The way she acts — is beyond my understanding.

Friend?

Friend, did she say?

Did she really mean it?

The point is, how can a pubescent girl give away her contact information so easily to a boy of the same age whose name she knows but whom she has just talked with for the first time -- actually, maybe I'm just out of date on this?

I don't know.

However — even if I don't know, there is one thing I've understood.

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

An honors student among honors students -- a class rep among class reps.

Far from putting on airs —

".....Amazing, she is a nice person"

A class rep among class reps.

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

A little while later -- during the Spring Break, I would meet the girl that passed by in the afternoon of the closing ceremony day again, but at that point in time I had no way to know.

I didn't have even the slightest hunch.

003

And then--

And then, with that memory still lingering, the night of that day.

Night.

The town was completely dark and I was moving around by foot. There wasn't a real reason why I loitered around the school this afternoon without using a bike, but there was a reason why I wasn't using it now.

By the way, I have 2 bikes.

One is a female-style bike I use for going to school -- the other is a mountain bike, my favorite.

I like to ride the latter even without a purpose, but right now I can't use it. If the bike that was firmly locked inside the entranceway were to go missing, the fact that I went out would be discovered by my family.

Unlike in the past, I'm currently completely free to do as I want.

You could even say that I am neglected.

It follows that, unlike my two little sisters, I have no curfew and I am not prohibited to go outside at night (although it seems my sisters don't really abide by such rules anyway), there are still times when I don't want my family to know I'm going out.

For example, when I'm out buying ero-books.

"....."

Well, that is.

It may look kind of bad, but let me explain.

I couldn't forget Hanekawa's panties I saw today!

.....Am I digging my own grave?

That's the truth, though.

Although I said that I wouldn't forget it for the rest of my life, I never thought that the image would be so clearly burned into my memory.

Even after Hanekawa left, her panties never left my mind. I thought so even then, but more than 10 hours later I can confirm that, indeed, if someone were to implant my retinas, that person would surely be hallucinating about Hanekawa's panties.

Damn.

Even though we talked a lot after that, the thing that left the biggest impression were the panties, just what does it mean? It may be a lingering memory or something else, but after waiting some time, I could remember almost nothing else except the panties!

Even though she is such a nice person.

Even though Hanekawa is such a nice person!

This further fosters the feelings of guilt that I don't need to be burdened with.

It is tormenting my heart.

Hanekawa is such a nice person, yet towards her I'm harboring feelings close to animal passion.....

What's actually the matter, though.

The question must be how long it has been since I have seen panties in person. Though this is a preparatory school, half of Naoetsu High's students are high school girls. There are also students wearing short skirts for fashion, so I have caught occasional glimpses before, but seeing the panties of a girl so blatantly and so perfectly..... really, it didn't happen even in middle school.

Going back to elementary school..... I don't think that should count.

I see, so it was a first in my life.....

How should I say it, it has the feeling of a love-comedy manga from the 80's.

I thought Hanekawa had no relation to me, I never thought that a flag could be raised in that way.

Damn.

That thing is foul play.

I doubt girls would have these kinds of emotions if they saw boys' underwear.

It's unfair!

Hmph, although a flag was raised, when I think about it carefully, we just crossed paths with each other.

I'm not even meeting her.

Surely by now, Hanekawa wouldn't even remember that she talked to me in the afternoon.

Therefore these are really feelings of guilt that I don't need to be burdened with..... I think I really am small-minded.

Leaving that aside though....., after eating dinner I thought that I must do something about it. The thought that after this, for some time, no, probably for the rest of my life that I will have to live with these feelings of guilt gives me the creeps.

She is a nice person.

In any case she is a 'friend'.

That's why I can't stand it -- my strength as a human is clearly going down.

I have to worry over something like that, of all things.

And so, after the view outside the window became completely dark, I hung the plate 'I am studying' on my room and quietly sneaked out of the house.

In order to go to the only big book store in this town to buy ero-books.

This mission is already accomplished. I've bought two photo books and I'm currently on the way home.

Of course I wouldn't put on an unmanly (?) show for the clerk by buying normal books together with the ero books. If it comes to just that, I will buy the two books I wanted. I am that kind of man. If Hanekawa is a class rep among class reps, I am a man among men.

Well, I do make sure that there is nobody I know inside the store beforehand though.

In short.

The plan is to overwrite my memories by reading ero-books. The same technique I expected Hanekawa to use on me after she chased me. That time I thought that you couldn't make memories disappear that way (although by now I think Hanekawa didn't have that intention), but to overwrite ero with ero should be a valid plan.

If I can't delete them, then I should be able to overwrite them.

If it's the only one it's difficult.

If it's one of many memories, it should fade.

Between seeing it in person and looking at it from photos there is a big difference, but I can overcome that with numbers.

Taking into consideration the circumstances, the two ero-books I bought are both from High School Girls: Focus on Underwear. As a consequence of having already bought some ero-books in the beginning of March, my wallet is frankly bleeding due to this expense. However, this is a price I have to pay.

It would be better if my head was the one bleeding.

But there's no choice.

I can't have these impure thoughts of Hanekawa anymore.

Guilt kills the man.

They say boredom kills the man, but people can die even from feelings of guilt.

Oh boy.....

She should have just slapped me.....

".....Friends, huh"

Carrying the bag with ero-books in one hand and my cellphone in the other, I checked the address book and I murmur.

"It's..... it's not like I need them though"

However, it makes me think.

If I'm told that, it makes me think.

When did I become like this?

In middle school, I was still a normal person that would talk to other people -- the same goes without saying for elementary school. Which means that it happened in high school, after becoming a dunce?

It's an easy explanation.

I was reckless, I picked a high-class high school and I passed the exam for some reason, then I was not able to catch up.....
I didn't hit it off with the people around me.

I failed.

Is that it?

I should still have had a chance to start over.

Even if my grades were the worst, I'm not being discriminated or despised -- I should have had plenty of chances to make friends.

The one person who prevented that was me.

"Hmm"

Sometimes I don't understand myself.

I don't want friends, but isn't that just a self-justification for not having any?

Isn't that self-protection?

Friends.

If you don't have them you still survive.

People who don't have friends could just hang out with people who don't have friends. In fact, there are other people like me -- to cite an extreme example, among the people I have been in class with during the first and second year there were students whom I have almost never seen chatting with anybody.

Then it's no big deal.

You can live like that too.

But.

"I don't want to have friends, and I am not even thinking of having a girlfriend, yet why do I still have perverted thoughts?"

What a mystery.

One pair of panties has excited me so much that in the end I contributed to the circulation of money.

And yet, isn't it just cloth?

In the past I once wondered 'why would a woman want to put such indecent things on her body. Is she a pervert?', but I got it backwards.

Now that I think about it, they can be purchased.

.....No, wait!

If I bought them it would be a crime.

Even if it wouldn't be a crime it would come pretty close!

Good grief -- I want to become a plant.

If I could do that I would become indifferent to this lust.

I don't want to become a rock or a piece of iron, nor can I conceive of the idea, though.

That too is probably part of the smallness of my mind.

".....Whoa, it's this late already."

Although I had rushed to the bookstore aiming to get out at its closing hour, it became a late hour while I walked around leisurely-- that is to say, the date changed.

It's already March 26th.

Right now, from this moment, Spring Break begins.

I put my cellphone back in my pocket, and hurried back home -- normally this big bookstore is too far from home to walk to by foot. In fact, this bookstore is located near my school. I am walking a distance almost identical to the one I commute by bike.

It is obvious it takes time.

However, it took too much time.

I don't have a reason that dictates me to return home quickly, but even so it is bad to be too late..... it is possible my sisters would enter my room without permission.

My sisters might guess from my absence and the presence of the bike what I'm currently doing..... they have good intuition.

Ah, now that I think about it, I have seen my sisters' panties. When they come out of the bathroom they are in their underwear. I don't think that counts though.

That aside.

Leaving whether or not I will be discovered aside, it is already very late, it is darker than when I got out of home. It would be stupid to get hit by a car.

I believe all boys share this worry, not only me, but there is no trip one must be as careful as when returning home after the purchase of ero-books.

If there is an incident, the content of your bag gets inspected.

High School Girls: Focus on Underwear.

If Hanekawa were ever to find out..... she'd definitely misunderstand.

It's not what you think.....!

This is actually a way to protect your chastity from me..... I wasn't thinking of doing that!

.....This meaningless emotional swing was actually pretty funny though.

If it's this dark it really is dangerous, but anyway this is a rural city so there aren't many cars, and you immediately notice them from the headlights. Fundamentally it is a baseless fear -- however.

With that being said, isn't it a bit too dark?

Thinking about this I looked at the sky, and I understood the reason.

The light from the streetlights is missing.

Almost all of the streetlights, placed at intervals of 5 meters, are not lit -- actually, almost is not the word, only one of them is lit.

Are they broken?

It's impossible for so many streetlights to break at once though..... Is it a blackout? But then it is weird for a single one to be lit.

While thinking about that.

While thinking about that, although it didn't particularly bother me and I just accepted something like that could happen too, I continued to walk ahead.

I said I don't have a reason that dictates me to return home quickly, but giving better thought to it, I have the mission to return home even a minute earlier to peruse the books I bought.

This mission has the priority over all else--

"Thou!"

And that's why.

"Hey..... thou over there. Thou"

And that's why, even if someone call out to me like that, I'll ignore her, and -- thou?

What's with this ancient way to call out someone?

I reacted by reflex.

I looked at the direction the voice came from -- and then suddenly I was at loss for words.

Under the lone lit streetlight nearby.

Illuminated by the streetlight -- 'She' was there.

"I will..... let thee save me"

Blonde hair which didn't fit this rural town.

Chiselled facial features -- cold eyes.

She is wearing a chic dress -- even that dress is unfitting for this rural town.

Though the nuance of unfitting is different in the case of the dress.

That dress -- surely was once elegant, high class clothing, but right now it's a mere shadow of itself.

Torn.

Worn out.

Like pieces and pieces of ragged cloth.

It was like even a dust cloth looked better than that -- conversely, it was a dress that even in that condition could ooze out its original high quality.

"Can thou hear me..... I am saying I will let thee help me"

'She' -- is staring at me.

That sharply cold stare makes my body freeze -- however, properly speaking, at the moment I am not that frightened.

At any rate 'She' looked beat.

Her back against the streetlight.

Sitting on asphalt ground.

No -- sitting is not exactly right.

More like slumping on it.

Staring at me was the only thing 'She' could do.

.....No.

Even if 'She' wasn't beat, even if 'She' wasn't slumping -- 'She' couldn't lay a hand on me, just stare.

To begin with, 'She' had no hands to lay on.

The right arm was -- *plucked out* at the elbow.

The left arm was -- *plucked out* at the root of the shoulder.

".....!!"

And that's not all.

Even the bottom half was in the same situation.

Right leg -- *amputated* at the knee.

Left leg -- *amputated* at the root of the thigh.

No, the right leg has a particular sharp cut section -- the section is very clear. It doesn't seem nastily plucked out like the other wounds on the right arm, left arm and left leg.

However.

The state of the sections is in this case irrelevant.

In other words, 'She' has no limbs left.

That's the reason why -- she is slumped under the streetlight.

Rather than being beat.

This can only be described as dying.

"H-Hey -- are you okay?"

My heart is beating like an alarm bell.

I had always thought that was just a metaphor -- but now I really have that impression.

My heart is beating so much it hurts.

My heart -- is running wild.

Like it was telling me of an imminent danger.

Like an alarm bell.

"I'll immediately call an ambulance"

For having four limbs amputated, the blood loss was really minimal.

Without paying attention not even to that at that point, I take out the cellphone I just put back in the pocket, but -- my fingers are shivering, I can't push the buttons well.

By the way, what is the number for the ambulance?

117?

115?

Damn, this is a number I should have registered in my address book.

"Amboolens..... I do not need it"

Still not losing consciousness even with that quadruple amputation, with a powerful tone of voice and antiquated expressions, 'She' spoke to me.

"*Thus....., give thy blood to me*"

"....."

My fingers, which were dialing a number -- stopped.

And then.

I suddenly remember my conversation with Hanekawa this afternoon.

A rumor spread only between the girls.

What was it?

What did she say?

At night.

Don't go out at night alone--

".....Blonde hair"

Blonde hair.

Blonde hair--

Illuminated by the streetlight, the blonde hair was dazzling.

--And.

She has no shadow.

'She' was standing under the lone lit streetlight in the surround, like shone by the bright spotlight over a stage -- and her blonde hair illuminated by the streetlight was really blinding -- however.

Really.

"She" had no shadow.

Without any shadow of doubt.

'She' really doesn't have one.

"My name"

And then -- 'She' speaks.

"My name is Kisshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade..... the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire."

'She' said.

With those ragged clothes.

And missing four limbs.

Yet still domineering.

Inside her opened lips -- I can see two sharp fangs.

Sharp -- fangs.

"I will swallow thy blood to make it my flesh -- so give thy blood to me"

".....A vampire"

I said, while catching my breath.

"Shouldn't you be -- immortal?"

"I lost too much blood. I cannot regenerate any more, nor shape-shift. At this rate -- I will die"

"....."

"A worthless human -- should consider a honor to become my flesh"

My feet don't stop shaking.

Just what's going on?

Just what did I get dragged into?

Why does a vampire suddenly appear in front of me -- and on the verge of death?

Vampires that shouldn't exist do exist.

An immortal vampire is dying.

Is this for real?

"H-Hey"

I was so shaken I was unable to speak, and 'She' seemed to grimace at me.

Actually, it may have been a grimace of pain.

At any rate 'She' had lost all arms and legs.

"What..... what is the matter? Thou canst save me, thou know'st? Dost thou think thou wilt ever receive such honor elsewhere? Thou doth not need to do anything -- Just offer me thy neck and I will handle the rest"

".....Blood, you say..... couldn't you do a transfusion?"

I have to admit I wasn't calm during that question.

I don't know what's going on.

What kind of joke is this?

'She'..... Kisshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade was probably thinking the same thing too, so there was no response.

No.

She might not have the strength to respond anymore.

"Ho-How much do you need?"

This question was more specific, so she answered to it.

".....For the time being, with thy share I can endure this emergency"

"I see, my share..... hey!"

I'll die from it then!

But I swallowed my comeback.

Her eyes, looking at me.

Her cold eyes.

Those are -- eyes looking at *food*.

I am not kidding -- I am saying that seriously.

A worthless -- human.

She is about to die.

And she is trying to live -- by eating me.

She is not seeking my help.

She is preying on me.

She is just trying to live by her own means.

"....."

That's right.

What am I saying? -- What am I doing? What -- am I going to think following the premise of *saving* this girl?

Am I going crazy?

She is a vampire!

In other words, she is a monster.

I don't know why her arms and legs are missing, and why she is about to die -- anyway, the reason is not important.

Why should I get dragged in.

A wise man keeps away from danger, right?

What point there is in entering the tiger's den when there's no tiger cub?⁵

This person is not a human -- she is a non-human.

A superhuman being.

Hanekawa described it like that.

"What is the matter..... Blood. Give me blood. Quickly..... Quickly, I say. Why are thou dozing off, thou dolt"

"....."

She has no qualms about it.

The vampire is talking as if it would be natural for me to do so.

I made one step back.

No problem.

I should be able to escape..... I should be able to get away.

Even if the opponent is a vampire, a monster.

If her arms and legs are cut off, I should be able to get away -- to begin with, she shouldn't even be able to chase me.

I just need to run.

That's what I have been doing all this time.

With just that, I can deny this reality.

And then.

With one foot already stepping backwards--

"No..... No way"

That moment.

Her eyes -- looked very frail.

⁵ From the Japanese proverb "You can't get the tiger's cub without entering the tiger's den", meaning "nothing ventured, nothing gained"

As if the coldness of before was just a lie.

"Will thou..... not help me?"

"....."

A ragged dress.

Arms and legs cruelly plucked out.

She doesn't have a shadow even if illuminated by a streetlight, a monster.

However--

I thought that that blonde girl was beautiful.

I thought she was pretty.

I was charmed -- from the bottom of my heart.

I couldn't look away from her.

Moreover, I couldn't move my feet.

Not because I froze, or because they won't stop shaking.

It's just that I can't move them.

"No..... Noo"

That haughty attitude of before crumbled -- from her eyes, which had a golden color like the hair -- tears begin to fall in large drops.

Like a child.

She started to sob.

"No, no, no....., I do not want to die, I do not want to die, I do not want to die! Save me, save me, save me! Please, I beg thee, if thou save me, if thou save me I wilt do everything thou sayeth!"

She was shouting in pain.

Unashamedly.

As if I was already out of her sight.

Degrading herself -- she screams.

She bawls.

"I cannot die, I cannot die, I do not want to vanish, I do not want to disappear! Noo! Someone, someone, someone, someonee--"

There is no guy who would save a vampire.

No matter how much she screams -- your heart must not be moved.

Because you'll die, you know?

All your share of blood.

Although I have never been scared while donating blood.

I didn't like it.

I don't even like to burden myself with a fellow human, a monster is even worse, I can't carry a burden so heavy.
Try to burden yourself with a vampire.
Just how much would your human strength decrease.
"Whaaaaah"
The tears flowing out -- started turning red like blood.
I don't understand why.
I don't understand why, but that -- might be a sign death is coming.
Death for a vampire.
Tears of blood.
"I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry....."
Finally, her words of plea have turned into apologies.
What is she apologizing to?
Who is she apologizing to?
But -- I couldn't stand watching her.
Watching her apologizing like that, to an unknown being.
Perhaps.
She is a being that shouldn't do so.
She is not a being that should die in such an unsightly way.
"Wh.....Whaaaaaaaaaaah!"
At this point.
Screaming that, I started running.
I forced my feet which couldn't move to move -- and turning my back on her, I ran away with all my might.
I could still hear her voice apologizing behind my back.
Am I the only one who can hear her voice?
Won't someone else be called out by that voice and go there?
Kisshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade.
Should I help her?
.....Impossible.
I'll die.
Besides, she's a monster.
A vampire.
There is no need to save her -- right?
".....I know that already!"

I.

Throw the paper bag I was carrying in a garbage stop a little further.

The bag that was holding inside the two ero-books.

It is courtesy to dump your trash in the morning, but the garbage doesn't get collected on Sunday anyway. Still, choosing a garbage stop was a minimum of decency.

Perhaps some lucky middle schooler will pick it up.

It's a waste, but I don't need it anymore.

That is to say, it would be a problem if I carried it with me.

I'm going to die in a moment, as if I could carry with me ero-books -- ah!

There is no trip one must be as careful as when returning home after the purchase of ero-books -- I should have realized it.

My strength as a human now hit the ground.

"....."

While returning to that streetlight -- even from my eyes, spontaneously, large tears started to drop.

My parents.

My two little sisters.

I avoided human contacts, and in a moment like this the people who I can think of are just these -- and, despite that there are only four people, it is enough to make me cry.

Family members that I don't have very good bonds with.

Especially after I entered high school and became a dunce, a very strange yet unavoidable gap formed between me and my parents.

I neither dislike them nor hate them.

I think it is the same for them.

It's just that a gap formed.

It often happens during puberty.

I can accept this view, but -- if I knew this was going to happen, I would have spoken to them more.

Quietly sneaking out of the house, and then become a missing person.

Ah..... even if I threw them away, my sisters will probably guess that I was out buying ero-books and something happened to me on the way back.

It's okay.

Under no circumstance will they bring shame on the family.

I loved you, my sisters.

"....."

I wipe my tears.

Actually, thinking about it, ending up with few people to remember worked for the better -- if I ineptly had things like friends, time might run out.

Conversely speaking, it was because I could build only this extent of human relations that right now I am able to make this choice, I thought.

Back to that streetlight.

The blonde vampire was still there.

She wasn't crying anymore.

She wasn't even making a sound.

She was still sobbing though.

It seems she already gave up.

"Don't give up, stupid!"

While calling her out, I rushed over to her -- I leaned in front of her, and then.

I personally offered my neck.

"It's you who have to handle the rest"

".....Huh?"

She -- opened her eyes.

Surprise dominated her face.

"Can -- can I?"

"Did you think you couldn't, you idiot--"

Shit, shit, shit.....

Why?

Why did it turn out like this?

"It -- it is obvious why, it's because I never did anything, because I just lived thoughtlessly!"

I scream.

I scream what I really think.

"I have never had a reason to keep living no matter what, I have never had a reason to give priority to my life, even if I died, it won't have any impact on the world!"

My life is not beautiful.

It is not pretty.

In that case, I should die in order to keep this beautiful thing alive.

That's the conclusion.

I'm a worthless human.

While a vampire is a higher being -- right?

"--In my next life, I will be successful. I will get the essentials down, I will skillfully weave human relations, I won't feel guilt for every little thing, I will be able to do things unintentionally without worrying, I won't have qualms about having things my way, I will be able to blame all bad things to other people, I will reincarnate as that kind of person -- and that's why!"

I said.

At least.

Saying so yourself was the pride of a lower-class being.

"I will save you -- suck my blood"

"....."

"It's all yours, don't leave a drop -- suck all of it"

".....Th"

She.

Kisshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade -- it's only my personal assumption, but probably for the first time in her life she thanked another being that wasn't herself.

"Thank you....."

A sharp pain went through my neck -- I realized I was being bitten by her.

My consciousness vanishes at once.

Then, with my last ounce of consciousness, I remembered.

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

If I ineptly had things like friends, time might run out.

It was close.

If I remembered her a bit earlier, I might not have been in time -- whew.

Well, whatever.

Though it lasted less than ten minutes, though it was very brief, dying while remembering my encounter with Hanekawa -- might not be so bad. No, in this case, I'm not thinking at her underwear.

Would you ever cut me some slack about it?

Let me be cool at least in the end.

Thus the short life of Araragi Koyomi, 17 years and something, abruptly, without any prelude or previous notice, came to an end -- or so it should have happened.

004

I suddenly regained consciousness.

It really feels like being reborn.

No, a better way of saying it would be it feels like being alive again.

“Ahh! It was a dream!”

I wanted to say something like that.

Of course, it wasn't a dream— if it was a dream, then the place where I regained consciousness would be my room.

But this place isn't my room.

It's a place I have never seen before.

My sisters who would wake me up every morning weren't here either.

“...”

But.

I felt like going back to sleep, until I've woken up from this dream.

So? Is this...a ruin?

I realize that it's the inside of some sort of man-made building...the windows were sealed up by thick boards using nails, the fluorescent lights on the ceiling were all broken....

Then I realized myself.

I was sleeping on the floor.

This floor was made of linoleum.

There were cracks all over it.

I moved my head, taking a look around my surroundings— what is that thing hanging on the wall?

A blackboard?

And...desks?

Chairs?

...A school classroom?

I say it's a school— but it isn't Naoetsu High, this I can still tell.

Although— there is this feeling that this isn't a school.

I am an active high school student no matter what.

Even if it's not my own school, I can understand when it's the same, that's why this place, I can tell whether or not this is a school.

With that being said...what is it?

It's not a school, but a place where there is a blackboard, and a large number of desks and chairs...?

Ahah, I know.

This is the atmosphere of a cram school.

The building of a cram school.

...But with that being said, no matter how you look at it, it's a closed down cram school.

Windows, fluorescent lights...it feels like a collapsed cram school?

Probably because it was too dark I could only see that much—— too dark?

Huh?

Why could I—— inside a room that has its windows sealed, and where there isn't a single beam of light...see so clearly?

I know it was very dark.

I could tell there definitely wasn't any light.

Initially I shouldn't even be able to see my own fingers—— in this very dark situation, but, I could see.

I could see very clearly.

No...but is this really how it is?

It's probably because my eyes just opened, so my senses are still not right?

While I was in this unnatural train of thought, I was getting up——

“...hurts”

At that moment, I bit the insides of my mouth.

Hmm?

Why are my canine teeth so long?

I'll stick my finger in my mouth to check—— so.

When I move my finger, my hand also moves, at the moment I realized—— sleeping on the arm I was going to move, was a little girl.

“.....”

Eh?

Little girl?

“....Ahhhhhhhhhhh!?”

It really is a little girl.

Her age is about 10 years old?

Wearing a fitting dress, a blonde girl—— skin that's the kind of white where it's like it's transparent.

Shushu, lightly breathing——

She was asleep.

Sleeping sweetly.

“....”

I completely don't understand the situation.

Why am I here, also where is this place, and who is this blonde girl, I don't know any of this...but I can be sure that this current situation right now is not okay!

If it's just a girl then it's okay.

But with a girl that I've never seen before, this situation already has an illegal taste to it!

"H, hey...hey, wake up."

With the blonde girl's body, I started holding her in a place that wouldn't be a problem (like the arms), and started shaking.

"Hm~m...."

Then, the blonde girl, really unwillingly said.

"5 more minutes...."

A blonde girl that says such a built-in phrase.

She went back to sleep.

"Like...like I said, wake up!"

I didn't care about her, so I continued to shake the blonde girl's body.

"....Until I'm good."

"How long do you want to sleep?!"

"....About 46 hundred million years?"

"Another earth will arise!"

I screamed the rebuke, then covered my mouth in a panic.

That's right.

Thinking closely, isn't it bad if I woke her up right now?

While the girl is sleeping, I'll use this chance to find a way to solve this problem myself. No matter how I look at it, this is the best method. I used the word solve but I don't even know where the problem is....

First of all, I looked at the watch on my left wrist.

So.

Right now it's——4:30.

No, if it's a watch, I can't figure out if it's in the morning or the afternoon.

Cellphone, cellphone...found it.

The time the screen showed, was 16:36.

Date is...March 28th!?

Well...I remembered the last time I checked my cellphone, at that time——the date just switched, it was March 26th.

That means——two days have already passed?

"...No."

Even if this isn't a dream....just how much of this is real?

So.

That memory -- up till when is it correct?

This time in order not to wake the blonde girl, I lightly pulled myself out from under her head.

First I need to confirm what this place is....

I walked towards the room's (classroom) door without making any sounds—— the door was unlocked. Actually it's more like one of the doors was loose, in terms of a door it's really unreliable. The possibility of being imprisoned in a mysterious facility was gone with that. (It sounds silly, but it's really scary)

Ah, before we talk about the cute blonde girl, kidnapping a guy like me won't earn anyone anything....

After I exit the door, I saw a stairwell.

Written on the floor here was [2F].

Second floor?

There were stairs going up and going down.

I thought about which direction I should go——usually you'll go for the first floor.

First, if you can't exit this building you can't do anything else.

There seemed to be an elevator across from the stairs, but there's no need to confirm, that elevator won't work.

I went down the stairs.

"...Well, the phone-book inside my cellphone still has Hanekawa's number and email there, that shows the meeting with Hanekawa after the closing ceremony in the afternoon was real...then the even further past memory, should be real too.

That pair of panties definitely wasn't a dream.

Although it felt the same as a dream.

"The money inside my wallet lowered, and the receipt is here...that means, the thing about buying female magazines for young people was real too."

But, I pretended to not notice that and continued speaking.

"But, what happened after that...doesn't look real at all!"

Even if it wasn't a dream.

It is still possible I messed up something?

Like say——a woman was hit by a car..., and then I saw it..., and fainted right on the spot?

Hm.

Although it's a bit forced, however it has a bit of reason. Especially since it was my first time.

Then...with an unconscious me, someone moved me to here...no, it's not like that. I mean this kind of development is impossible. For something like this, you'll be fine if you call an ambulance normally.

But, the time shown by my cellphone was correct.

Oh no, away from home for 2 days, feeling should be 3 days.

Although this isn't the first time I have slept outside for no reason, three days is almost across the danger line. Thinking back to my sisters' weird behaviors, it could possibly be very cute..., but I need to report back.

At this moment I.

Once again——thought about leisurely things.

But this thought, at the instant I walked out of the building, turned to thin air. Dodging the rubble scattered near my feet, metal pieces, glass pieces, boards and cans that I can't read, and cardboard boxes (But, why can I see in such a dark place?), outside of the building, the instant I appeared in the dense grass where there is no one——at that moment.

Body.

My whole body----combusted.

I should have realized.

The evening sun which I can already call it that——why is it so blinding?

But it was already too late——my body combusted.

“Giahahahahahahahahah!”

I used a scream that isn't like a cry.

I can't say it hurts.

Hair, skin, flesh, bone, everything——combusted.

It was burning.

In an incredible speed——burning.

“Ahahahahahahahahah!”

Vampire.

Weak against the sun?

A dark being that is a vampire, can't beat the sun?

That's why I said——no shadow.

But what does that have to do with me——

“Idiot!”

Towards me who is trying to extinguish the flames on my body, and using a lot of knowledge and rolling on the ground (I think I read somewhere that you can extinguish the flames on yourself like that), inside the building, a sound like that rang.

I looked up.

As I was burning, moisture already gone, using these eyes, I looked at the place where the sound was coming from——right there was the blonde girl who was just sleeping.

The girl looked at me with noble eyes, towards me——

“Come back here quickly!”

Screamed that.

With that being said, because it hurt too much, my body couldn't move according to my will——seeing me like that, the girl suddenly decided, she dashed towards the outside of the building.

At that moment.

Just like me——the blonde girl's body combusted too.

But, she didn't care about herself, running towards me, then held me who had collapsed, and just dragged.

The flames got bigger as it burned.

She was dragging me just like that.

I felt her strength.

Strength that was bigger, compared to normal kids.

Such small arms, should be praised for having such strong brawn——but it didn't have enough power to carry me.

Just dragging.

Burning, while dragging.

Burning but still able to use strength, indeed a big character, ——but, even with that, the girl dragged me to the inside of the building, that means away from the sunlight, and it was after a certain amount of time.

The real surprise was what happened after.

My body.

And the blonde girl's body's surrounding flames, in the instant it entered the shade——disappeared like magic. Not just that——not even burn marks were left.

Surrounded by such incredible flames.

Not even the clothes were burned.

The hooded parka and camouflage pants.

Like there was nothing.

The blonde girl's soft dress, was in the same situation too.

"Eh, eh, eheh...?"

"Really."

Towards a dazed me——the blonde girl spoke.

"What kind of idiot would suddenly walk right under the sun—I take my eyes off you for a second, and you do something like that. Dost thou have a death wish? A normal vampire would evaporate in an instant."

"...Eh?"

"Don't let there be another time where you go out when the sun is there. Having immortal powers, you'll burn, regenerate, burn, regenerate in an eternal loop. Whether the regeneration power runs out or the sun disappears first——, you'll still get a taste of what hell is like. So, that is what it means to be an immortal vampire——"

"Eh———eh"

Vamp——ire.

Then, indeed——this, wasn't a dream nor a mistake.

"Then, then, you...you are?"

Blonde hair, dress.

Then cold eyes.

No, the age is too different—the dying her that I saw, even if I can't accurately determine her age, but—with just looks, it's at least 27 years old.

It's totally different from the ten year old her.

Moreover, the limbs.

Right arm, left arm, right leg, left leg, the blonde girl has them.

The ten year old girl, has these limbs like sticks covered in flesh.

Compared to the her with missing limbs—it's clearly different.

But—

But there are similarities.

For example, the insides of her mouth when she talks, there are white teeth—and the like.

"Achem."

She nodded her head.

Suddenly using a confident attitude, she raised her chest and said.

"It is I, Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade, you can call me Heartunderblade."

Then she continued with the shocking speech.

"I've only created two subordinates in four hundred years—hm, looking at your regeneration powers, you turned out pretty good. There doesn't seem to be any signs of going berserk either. It's just that it was a bit worrisome when you wouldn't open your eyes."

"Sub—subordinate?"

"Yes, so thou—hm. Now that I think about it, I don't know thy name. Uhm, well. The name you had up till now, doesn't hold much meaning to the you now. Anyways, servant."

She laughed.

Miserably laughed.

"Welcome, to the World of Night."

"...."

Araragi Koyomi's a little over of 17 year life, should have just ended.

But, it wasn't like that.

It's just that, in a way it ended.

I felt that the meaning changed a little.

I—just like how it was written in words, was reborn.

Vampire.

Manga, movie, games, like veins that scatter endlessly—to more than half of the people it's an ancient being.

But, to me, to a highschooler in this generation, vampires are rarely heard about.

You can almost say absolutely unknown.

Just like what the name suggests, a blood-sucking demon.

At best, it doesn't like the sun, has no shadow——that much I know, moreover it's something I realized when I talked to Hanekawa.

And then——what was it? Right, doesn't like garlic?

I'm not sure.

That why I said——I don't know anything.

When a vampire sucks blood——the thing about the one being sucked will turn into a vampire.

If blood was sucked, you'll become a comrade.

If blood was sucked, you'll become a subordinate.

To force humans to give up humanity——I totally didn't know.

Comrade.

Subordinate.

I thought I'd die for sure.

If one person's amount of blood was offered of course you'll die——it was because I had the determination to die, that I stuck out my neck to her.

But——who would have thought.

The determination to become a vampire, I had none.

But, there is no point in saying this——just like regret standing in front of you.

I, after having her suck my blood, absolutely absurdly, turned into a vampire.

No need for proof.

This body that combusts under the sun.

This body that burns and then instantly regenerates.

These eyes that can see clearly in the dark.

Then the canine teeth inside my mouth——fangs.

With only these things, it's clear enough evidence.

Things like having a shadow or not——there's no need.

"Where...where is this?"

But.

To this idiot Araragi Koyomi, that's me, let's not face this reality at the start, first start asking her from this point.

Second floor.

The place where I regained consciousness, the place the two of us returned to.

At least this place is a ruin for sure, in this 4-floored building, windows sealed by boards——in other words, it seems to be a room where sunlight can't enter.

Uhm.

Although I can regenerate, it's better if I avoid combusting.

Didn't she use the term [evaporate]?

"Hm..."

While turning her blonde hair, the vampire started to speak.

"Indeed, although I call this place a [Cram School]—but a few years ago it closed down. Right now it's just a ruin. Like that, it became convenient for hiding."

"Puun..."

So it was a cram school.

Then a ruin.

But, hiding? What a weird phrase.

It's like we had to hide.

In order to look after an unconscious me, she chose an empty place?

"Then, Kissshot, next question—"

"Wait."

She,

Kissshot stopped me.

"Didn't I let you call me, Heartunderblade."

"Too long. Heartunderblade? I bit my tongue twice just saying that line. How can a name cause you to bite yourself? So, Kissshot is shorter...Or, can I not call you that?"

"...No"

Kissshot seems to have said something, but she shook her head.

The blonde hair lightly shook.

"Well, fine, you can call me whatever you want—I have no reason to refuse."

What an intriguing line.

Ah, a foreigner's last name, is it Kissshot or Acerolaorion? With that being said, is it okay to just call her that suddenly?

...But would a human's way of thinking work with a vampire?

"Then, what is the next question?"

"Well...I became...a vampire?"

The second question, is the question I needed to ask the most.

For facing reality, it's a very important question. If it's not like this, I can't seriously accept it.

The one I wanted to ask the most, is another.

"Of course."

Kissshot answered clearly.

“There is no point in explaining now—thou art my subordinate, my servant. Be honoured.

“Servant....”

Although it was just said.

Hmm...servant.

Inconceivably I don't feel like hating it.

“Then—why did you turn into a child's body? Last night...no, two nights ago? When I met you—you looked like an adult—”

“I'm sorry I look like a child.”

“No, I don't mean that.”

Just like an adult.

Although—the limbs were cut off.

That's what I want to say.

“Thy blood, I sucked it all.”

She showed me her teeth—then she laughed.

It's not like it's something to laugh about, laugh.

“But this degree wasn't enough—that's why, we became connected. Even with that I only kept my life. With that being said, I kept the minimal degree of immortality, the majority of vampire powers became limited—so inconvenient.”

Even with that.

Life was kept—she said.

Don't wanna die.

The image of her crying and calling—suddenly crossed in my head.

Right now inside Kissshot's speech, I can't see that image at all.

Right now I realized.

Right now I just realized.

I really—helped this woman.

Helped, a vampire.

Sacrificed my own life—

“My limbs are like this, only the shape regrew. Well, the insides are empty—with that being said, it should be no problem...however, the master servant relationship needs to be clear, servant. Even though I'm like this, I'm a vampire that has lived for 500 years. The master servant relationship should be clear, you being turned into a vampire just recently, should never speak with a peer-like speech.

“Ha, haa.”

“Huh, an ambiguous answer—do you really understand?”

“Um, umm—I understand.”

“Then as a sign of obedience to me, rub my head!”

She said majestically.

....

Rub head.

Uwa, her hair is really soft.

Although there is a lot of hair, it's really smooth.

“That's enough.”

“....That's the sign of obedience?”

“You don't know that?”

She looked at me with contempt.

Vampires use a different set of rules.

“So ignorant. But regardless of ignorance, thou art smart for being obedient towards me—I really created a good servant. But, servant.”

Kissshot continued speaking.

Staring at me with cold eyes.

“Thou saved my life. The poor and exposed me, was saved by thee. So, I'll specially allow you usage to your ill-manner tone, and allow you to call me Kissshot.”

“Call, calling you like that—”

So calling her Acerolaorion was better?

It isn't a bad line...but, looking at it, there is no need for another title.

But.

I took note of what Kissshot said.

---Limbs are like this.

---Just the shape regrew.

Indeed, although the body of the ten year old girl is rather small, but the Kissshot now still has limbs.

Just the shape?

Inside is—empty?

“Moreover...in the future, I might still need to borrow thy power.”

“Ha?”

What was that.

Spoke at the part I took note?

“Hey...basically.”

“No, you shouldn't be so excited, servant. With you being a servant it is evident for you to serve your master. If thou rubbed my head, isn't that obedience to me?”

She said it with her chest raised.

Well, although I say chest raised, it's only a ten year old body. Absolute no boobs.

Although I say chest raised, it has the feeling of a stretched back.

....Also, [chest raised] this phrase means [raising your chest and speaking out], I don't see that meaning at all.

But...there is no use no matter how much I rebuked.

I didn't get a normal answer.

This matter I'll leave for later——it's about time for the question I want to ask the most. The padding for this question has already been set up.

"Why——turn me into a vampire?"

"Hmm?"

"I had the determination to be killed——when you sucked my blood."

The traffic lights changed too.

Faces from all sorts of people crossed——although there were only four people.

Ah, isn't it five people?

I can't remember.

"...It's nothing, no reason. After your blood gets sucked by a vampire, no matter who you are you'll turn into a vampire. That's it."

"So——it's like that."

It's like that.

I——struck my neck out to her?

Had the determination to be sucked dry.

Also the determination to be killed.

But——

The determination to not be human, do I have it?

"Ahh, to me this is just right, do you know why?"

Kissshot of course didn't change——she even spoke with an arrogant tone.

"To thee, it is something you have to do."

"...Like you said, borrow my power?"

——The matter where you have to borrow my power.

"Right. Although thy blood by itself allowed my body to recover——the me right now, is far from full power. So from now on, thee must take action."

From——from now on?

"Of course. Finishing prior work, then move. That's me, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade."

“....”

Title, too long.

With the name added, how many letters are there?

I think just cold-blooded fits.

“I should——”

Unknowingly, I wanted to ask——but if it’s like this, the topic will go the wrong way. If Kissshot wanted to do that, I think it’s right too——but, I have more important matters to ask her.

As the answers to the padding questions, there is still some use.

So I asked the question I most want to——ask.

The thing I most want to hear.

“I.”

The decision is final, this is what I said.

Tightly stared at her.

Towards the answer——I already have the determination.

“I——can’t turn back into a human?”

“Hm.”

So.

Kissshot——didn’t answer with the same reaction I had imagined.

I thought she’ll be mad, or think it’s weird, things like being confused——those were the reactions I had predicted, but, to let me understand, she nodded her head.

“That’s——what I thought.”

Said it like that.

The prediction on this side was wrong——but the other side’s prediction was right.

Even the point about what I’ll ask.

I was seen through from the beginning.

“I can understand why thou wouldst have these feelings.”

“Can understand?”

A higher being.

It’s just as what Hanekawa said, at least, looking at it from the beginning, her being a vampire indeed saw humans as a lower being compared to them.

According to her——humans are a lower being.

Then——

Why be unhappy about becoming a vampire, stuff like that.

Towards wanting to turn back into a human, stuff like that.

I thought she would say something like that, but——

“I understand.”

Kissshot, said that.

“I was also invited to become god, but I refused.”

“G, god?”

“It’s something from the past.”

Anyway, she said that.

Although we’re back to the original topic, but this thing seems like something I shouldn’t touch.

“Wanting to turn back into a human——in other words, ‘turn back into what you were originally.’ That’s what I think.

Although I said “Welcome to the Night World”, but I didn’t think thou wouldst accept it.”

“So it’s like that——”

I once again, noted I didn’t listen to the answer to the question.

“Then, what can I do. I——”

“...can turn back.”

Kissshot, lightly said.

The eyes looking at me were still cold.

You can say its sight is piercing.

“Turn back.”

But——staring at me with a sight like that, she said “can turn back”, so she declared, clearly.

“I swear on my name.”

“.....”

“Of course...servant. For that, you need to listen to me, as my servant you don’t need to be shy, but, this isn’t a command but a threat, if you want to turn back into a human, then be obedient to me.”

Then of course——she, laughed miserably.

005

Dramaturgie.

Episode.

Guillotinecutter.

Those are the names of the people who took Kissshot's body parts away, Or so I was told.

Kissshot described them to me, though It was difficult to picture them from just her words.

Like using a different country's language to explain an abstract concept, I was left befuddled about the three men. Still, they were simple compared to the more important matters we'd discussed.

The man called Dramaturgie stole her right leg.

The man called Episode stole her left leg.

The man called Guillotinecutter stole her arms.

The three people each stole an essential part.

They are the reason she was left in such a poor state. If she hadn't sucked my blood, she would have certainly died.

An immortal body that could have died.

This paradox is one Kissshot knows best.

She had, at the time, known determinately that she would die.

With what little life she had left, using that beaten body. Escaping those three men would have been difficult.

"Why?" I asked inadvertently during her explanation. "Why steal your limbs?"

"I'm a vampire. Ye are humans---hmm, thou art not one anymore, thou art what they call a Monster now." Kissshot said definitely.

"And of course, they exorcise monsters."

"Those three people specialize in exorcising vampires---they make a living by killing those like me. Beings that specialize in exorcising vampires, thou shouldst have heard of them before?"

Should have. Must have.

If there were vampires, there were those who went against them.

Thinking back, I don't think I'd ever heard of them, but there was a chance I'd recalled it from somewhere.

"Then, we need to defeat them?"

"What kind of idiot talk is that? Do you have a death wish? Although the point about having my limbs taken away is heartbreaking. I don't have much regeneration power left---in this situation, how can I fight?"

"So that's it."

"Like I said...." Kissshot naturally continued from before. "I just need thee to face those three people--- and retrieve my limbs."

"Huh....?"

I was speechless.

"Al, alright....It can't possibly be that easy?"

"Hmm, looks like I didn't explain it clearly to thee, if thou wants to turn back into a human, I need to have my full power restored. Basically, back to my complete form. For that, my limbs are needed."

"Bu, but- I'm no good with things like fighting."

I didn't do anything bad, but my tone seems like I'm making an excuse.

"I'm not unathletic, but I'm not athletic either. My body is as you see here. I have never even been in a fight before...., also, most importantly, won't I get exorcised?"

I was presently a vampire as well. The chance of that happening was huge. My opponents were skilled exorcists. Even if they spared me, an ex-human, it'd be impossible to get them to give me their spoils -- Kissshot's limbs.

"Idiot, thy weakness only applied when thou wast still Human" Kissshot said tiredly.

"Thou right now art my subordinate--- Though thou art weak, in my current state thou couldst easily overpower me."

"....? Even though you're a Vampire, you're weak?"

"No!" She said, irritated at my words.

Indeed, she was a very easily angered person.

"Based on my appearance now, thou makest rash judgements. Let me maketh myself completely clear. Among vampires I'm of the highest level. I'm called the Kaii Killer."

"Kaii Killer...."

Her current form made it difficult to imagine her as powerful.

Also, what was "Kaii"?

Some sort of monster?

Regardless.

"Hmm, even if the presently weakened you isn't as strong as me.... You're stronger than me at full power. Yet those three men were able to take away limbs from the you in complete form?"

"I was ambushed by those three people. I underestimated them; totally underestimated them. Guys at that level, even with three people combined together wouldn't have been my opponent."

"Huh....."

"Basically..." Kissshot sighed angrily. "As long as you fight them one on one, as singular opponents, you should be able to take them on. Honestly, it'll be easy. This kind of task is fair to turn you back into a human."

I definitely wasn't convinced by her speech.

I decided to take a nighttime stroll.

This was a bit after the sun had set. Finally I was able to leave the abandoned cram school. Finally I was able to confirm my location.

This cram school was on the border of the rural town that I lived in. That being said, this area wasn't underdeveloped. I didn't know why the cram school had been abandoned. I figured it got swallowed up by the bigger cram school in front of the station, and finally had to be foreclosed. Kissshot found it fitting for a last-ditch hiding spot.

I decided to phone home.

Luckily, my little sister picked up. The older of the two.

"Tell everyone I'm spending break on a trip to find myself." I said bluntly. She agreed.

I didn't think beforehand, and it took me a moment to realize I had just convinced my sister I was the type of person to take a trip to find myself. I must seem really pathetic.

Just as I hung up, my younger little sister sent a text to me. My sisters were in middle school, so they didn't have cellphones. She used the living room computer to text me.

"To onii-chan. Sometimes people get lost, but, when you calm down you should think carefully about your actions. Where did Tytyl and Mytyl find the Blue bird?"

.....

My youngest sister was lecturing me.....

Receiving reprimanding texts like these really set me off. To add insult to injury, it wasted my phone's batteries.

I wondered where could I recharge my cellphone....the charger was at home but I couldn't go back. All I could do was buy a charger at a convenience store.

It's improbable that the cram school had electricity. All I could hope to do was buy a spare battery.

If I could finish my mission before the batteries ran out, it shouldn't be a problem.

"They aren't a match for me...originally they aren't a match for me. They also aren't a match for you."

Well, it should be easy, right?

Although in the beginning I had trouble believing, my vampire powers truly existed. A demonstration of my abilities would result in a trip to the slammer and a night of police interrogation for sure. That is to say, the area was filled with abandoned buildings. Who cared if I vandalized them a little?

That kind of thing.

"But, we're missing an important detail." I could feel Kisshot's words wrap around me, the tension rising rapidly.

"Where are those three people?" I prompted.

"Don't know."

"Don't know, she says." I mocked her.

"Superfluous worries are useless and unneeded. Just walk around outside, they will find you---they're vampire exorcising specialists. Finding a vampire for them is the same as raising a hand."

"Is that so?"

"Just stick around. Night is when Vampire's powers are most active -- They are like moths to a flame. They'll definitely come toward thee."

"....."

"Right now, probably in order to find me, they are roaming around this town. Do it well and you'll meet them tonight."

Kukuku. Kisshot's intolerable laugh sounded strange.

Well, not having to find them really helped....although the term is "to find a person". I'm not a person, therefore I hoped it'd be impossible.

But, I'm sort of beginning to not pay attention to the rhythm of things. Shouldn't I be asking more questions? The thing about me becoming a vampire being an indisputable truth, for example.

Unconsciously, I think about another topic. Can I really turn back into a human?

Can no one be sure that Kissshot isn't lying?

Using me in order to retrieve her limbs, not satisfied with seeing me simply as food. She was the brain, and I was the Limbs.

The issue with that is Kissshot wasn't giving me orders. She was threatening me.

I could have not lent my power to her.

....But in order to prevent me from thinking that it was a waste of time, she was using my desire to turn back into a human to use me.

She was using me as bait. She must have been lying..

Using the matter of turning me back into a human. It's possible that Kissshot was thinking like that.

"....."

No. She turned me into a servant so she didn't need to go through the trouble. Wouldn't it just be an order, then?

.....Hmm. Couldn't be. Currently that girl is in a state where she basically can't use the powers of a vampire---that's why, if she doesn't lie she can't get me to obey?

Well, it isn't impossible...

She may look ten, but she certainly can't be treated like it. Thinking back to when she was in her original form, her expression looked very intellectual. At least she seemed as though she lived 500 years, like she said. Her thinking wasn't slow at all. Also, I hadn't asked any important questions. I only thought stuff relating to turning back into a human, avoiding the important things---I forgot to ask Kissshot why she came to this small rural town in Japan?

Monsters really are strange.

But aren't vampires western monsters?

Aren't those three brought here by Kissshot too?

"...Hmm."

No matter how I say it, it's all speculation.

Whatever Kissshot is conspiring, I, right now, still can't trust her--- so for now I'll just do as she says.

The initiative is totally within her control.

First get her limbs back----I'll deal with the rest later.

No matter how much of it is wrong, I don't see how those three vampire exorcising specialists could be lies.

Following what Kissshot said, I turned myself into bait. I went somewhere where there weren't any roads. At that moment, at a fork in the road.

I thought the Vampire Kissshot-Accerolaorion-HeartunderBlade hadn't thought it through. Although she had lived 500 years, her thinking was still slow.

If I took them on one-by-one, I should be able to take them. She had said that, but I wondered where the evidence was to back up that claim.

She had been defeated by them. So doesn't that refute it?

I felt like my brain was breaking.

But it was already too late. Or maybe, just in time. It was only a second beforehand that I realized what was happening. Kissshot said I could finish tonight if I worked hard.

But, thinking about it carefully--- I could die tonight.

My second death.

"What should I do?"

First, I noticed the one on my right.

A giant standing over 2 meters, both hands carrying a giant wavy-shaped blade, walking towards me. His figure was enormous. I could use his jeans as a sleeping bag. His shirt was probably made of five times the amount of fabric as mine. He wore a headband across his bangs to hold back his messy hair.

A man made entirely out of muscle, a stone-cold face. Holding onto his wavy blades, he stared at me.

He matched Kissshot's description.

This man is the one named Dramaturgie.

The man who stole Kissshot's right leg.

He grunted.

I then noticed the man to my left.

He was completely opposite of Dramaturgie. A slim man was walking towards me. Despite a naive face, his stare was sharp.

If I used the metaphor, 'Even a stare can kill people.', I probably would have been killed immediately. It was that sharp.

Sanpaku eyes, and a white student uniform. He seemed young. Perched on his shoulder was a giant cross which defied his stature.

It didn't look constructed, but rather like a silver cross necklace that had been magnified fifty times.

It was three times the size of a man, and was probably over three times the weight. You've gotta be kidding me.

The cross wasn't just some ceremonial object. It was a weapon.

The man with the giant cross on his shoulder smiled. He walked towards me with a piercing glare.

He was consistent with Kissshot's description.

This man was the one named Episode.

The man who stole Kissshot's left leg.

"What---what should I do."

Finally, I noticed the one behind me.

I don't know when he arrived, but the man wearing the priest-like robes was honest looking in comparison with the other two. His hair resembled that of a hedgehog, and he permeated danger.

I couldn't tell what he was feeling, nor could I make out if his eyes were open or closed. At least he wasn't carrying a weapon like the other two. Still, he had stolen more things from Kissshot than the others.

The priest-like man, vacantly faced with nothing in his hands walked towards me naturally.

He matched Kissshot's description.

This man is the one named Guillotinecutter.

The man who stole both of her arms.

“---I might as well do nothing....!”

Vampire exorcising specialists.

Dramaturgie, Episode, Guillotinecutter.

Each of these three people converged, with me in the center.

Just like the fork in the road.

No way to escape---like a mouse in a pocket.

“Ah? Well. So popular.”

The first one to open his mouth was the man carrying a giant cross on his shoulder, Episode.

His voice matched his appearance. Messy.

"It's not Heartunderblade. Who is this guy?"

[illegible]

Ignoring me, the man made entirely of muscle answered. Dramaturgie.

But I couldn't understand a thing he said.

I hoped there was a possibility they had forgotten my presence.

“No, Dramaturgie.”

Guillotinecutter, the priest-like man behind me, spoke.

He talked in a smooth tone.

"If you're doing business here then you should use the language native to here. That's the most basic logic."

“ .. ”

Of course I wanted to look behind me, but I couldn't. That would have meant turning my back on Episode and Dramaturgie.

Guillotinecutter was the same as the other two, and, ignoring me, he continued talking.

“Well, but, it’s exactly as you said, Dramaturgie. Probably...no, definitely, this teen is Heartunderblade’s subordinate.”

"Really!" Episode remarked unhappily.

"I thought that vampire didn't believe in making subordinates?"

"She's not incapable of it. She's made one before."

“■■■....., We forced her hand. She most likely made one to act as her limbs while she recovered.”

Dramaturgie spoke in Japanese this time to my relief.

I figured he was the muscle of the group, but he was able to guess my exact situation.

"Then what does that mean?" Episode smiled as he said it, rocking the giant cross off his shoulder.

"All we can do is ask this runt here about Heartunderblade's whereabouts?"

"That seems to be it." Dramaturgie nodded, agreeing with Episode. Guillotinecutter nodded as well.

"I'll get rid of this kid and find the real treasure -- Heartunderblade." He said that easily.

Suppose that means they'll let little-old-me go? Hopeful observation was all I could do at this point.

They ignored me, acting as if I wasn't their equal. They completely denied me as a living thing. I was completely unequal.

"Ehm." Guillotinecutter cleared his throat.

"That being said, what should we do? Like Episode said, if this child knows Heartunderblade's location he'll surely give us trouble."

"Leave it to me." Episode laughed.

"I'll completely destroy him."

"No, I'll do it," Dramaturgie cut in. "I'm the most fitting for this job. I have the most experience."

"I don't mind doing it either," Guillotinecutter smoothly expressed his opinion. "You two must be tired."

"Don't!" Episode stuttered, "Don't be so damn self-righteous!"

I collected myself, and without facing anyone or making any eye-contact, roared defiantly.

"What, what are you people saying?? What do you mean you want to exorcise me? I'm just a human? Are you going to kill me?!"

"....."

"....."

"....."

At least, it created an instant of silence.

Did my words reach them? Even so, that's all they'd do. My words would reach, but the meaning wouldn't.

No one gave a response.

"Then it's the same as usual." Dramaturgie said suddenly.

"Fastest one wins, then." Episode said.

"Good, equal competition based on skill." Guillotinecutter said.

Then these vampire-exorcising specialists, these three people, almost at the same time, charged towards me.

I could see each one of them with my newly acquired vampire's eyes. I could see in the dark with these elite eyes. But, though I say I could see, I had no idea what should I do.

What was I supposed to do in this sort of situation?

"Hm....ahahahahahah!"

I probably did the stupidest thing I could have done given the situation. Instantly, covering my head with my hands and rolling into a ball, I squatted down on the spot. I gave up on attacking, but didn't defend either.

No.

Of course that will happen.

What did I misinterpret?

I had the worst characteristics possible for the main character of an anime, manga, or light novel.

A normal high schooler, expected to battle a bunch of vampire exorcising specialists?

What is this? School Psychic Battle?

How could I win!?

So what if I can break concrete walls?

So what if my jumping improved and I could move faster?

What could I do with these powers?

I'd never been in a fight because I never had any opponents! I had no experience in a situation like this!

Damn it! I'd already discarded my life once. I gave it up to Kissshot. So why should I cherish this not-life?

"-----"

.....!

.....,

I noticed I had been waiting a long time. No matter how long I squatted, it was clear their attacks would never hit me.

Could it be that they got scared? Could it be that because of my pitiful performance they got bored and left? That was impossible, who was I kidding? They weren't scared of me.

I slowly lifted my head out from my knees.

".....Ha, ha." I heard this easy laugh.

"Flinging swords and knocking stuff around with a cross? You guys must be energetic to cause such unrest in a residential area!" said the person who caught the blades with his bare hand. Using only his right hand's index finger, middle finger, ring finger and pinky, he had stopped Dramaturgie's blades. He then halted Episode's cross with nothing but his right foot. Lastly, he raised his left hand, and Guillotinecutter ceased his movement.

Just who was this guy? Just a random middle-aged passerby?

Standing on one leg, holding everyone still, he spoke.

"Did something good happen?"

006

Oshino Meme

The old man that happened to pass-by revealed his name.

I thought his name was ridiculous, but since he saved my life I couldn't tell him that.

Even if he looked strange.

Even if he was wearing a weird Hawaiian shirt.

As long as he had rescued me---I couldn't point any fingers at him.

.....

But he really was a sluggish old man.....

"Ah....Oshino."

Should I add -san to it? Should I use honorifics? I felt kind of lost--- Even though he was my savior, I didn't know his motives. I couldn't call him an enemy or a friend.

I still hadn't determined if I had really been saved, though I couldn't make any move at this point. It would have been strange.

Firstly, I thought I should thank him.

"Thank you for saving me."

"No need to thank me. I saw you were alone so I helped you. That's all, Araragi-kun." Oshino said in an innocent tone. He was uncomplicated.

That aside, the three men escaped promptly after Oshino appeared, as if on command. They were gone without a trace in mere moments. They didn't even leave a word of escape. I hadn't retrieved Kissshot's limbs, but at least I was alive.

Oshino Meme—

This Hawaiian shirt wearing man who doesn't look like my enemy....nor Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade's enemy.

"Anyway, Araragi Koyomi--- Your name sounds bottomless, by the way. This guy though, Honestly. No common sense otherwise he wouldn't have opened a barrier at a place like this. Prolly' a fellow with lots of experience."

"....."

"No need to be so alert around me, Araragi-kun. No need to stare at me. You are really energetic, did something good happen?" Oshino took out a cigarette as he said it, biting down onto it with his teeth. I thought he would light it, but he just held on to the cigarette in his mouth.

"Well, in any case, let's go home first, Araragi-kun."

"Go home?"

"That cram school ruin."

Saying it like it was obvious, as Oshino prepared to walk.

"Wait a minute!" I yelled towards his back. "You, how do you know about that!?"

"Hm? Of course I know. It was me who introduced that place to that child." Oshino was the sort of man to say incredible words casually.

Eh?

I hadn't thought of how Kissshot had come to find a place like that.....

This guy told her?

"Well, as they say: If you have Honor, you have Bravery. That child, Heartunderblade, was dragging your body. She seemed troubled, so I told her about that place."

"You... know Kissshot?"

".....?"

Oshino didn't answer my question. He stared at me strangely, and I wondered if he had questions about my words.

".....What?"

"Nothing. You just called her Kissshot."

"Hm? Ah."

"Those three were like that too, calling her Heartunderblade normally..... I was just wondering why you didn't do that too."

"Because....isn't that very long?"

What's so strange about that?

"It shouldn't be a problem, what I call her. It's not a definite rule."

"Well, I guess that's true. Still, you're her subordinate. That's extraordinary. Firstly, we're not talking about normal vampires. Heartunderblade is the legendary Kai killer. The iron blooded, hot blooded, cold blooded vampire.

"Vampire....you know the stuff about vampires?"

Well, it's improbable that he didn't. Appearing from nowhere and warding off those three men. Just looking at those two points, it was evidently clear.

"You---what kind of person are you?"

"Me? Sometimes a mysterious child of the wind, sometimes a mysterious traveler, sometimes a mysterious drifter, sometimes a mysterious bard, sometimes a mysterious high-class vagrant."

All mysteries.

"Sometimes a female voice's lowest range."

".....Sometimes an alto?"

"Sometime I am, sometimes I'm not."

"Only amended this point....."

He suddenly shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm just an old man who passed by; that's all." Oshino let out a breath as he said it.

I thought he was very weird.

"Today is as so. Just so happens Heartunderblade's given me trouble before. Relax, I'm not a vampire exorcizing specialist."

"....."

Can I believe him? No, it's not like that. The truth is 'I can only believe him.'

"Although it's not like I know nothing about vampires. Though, my specialty is much broader. I know a lot about many things. Anyway, let's wait till later to do the self-introductions. First of all you should go back to the school, Araragi-kun."

In the end, I could only follow Oshino's words.

I followed Oshino back to the cram school ruin, even though it was entirely possible that Oshino was a vampire exorcizing specialist targeting Kissshot.

Still, Oshino knew that Kissshot was in this cram school ruin. How else would he have known to go into the empty building on the edge of town? If he's a different type of vampire exorcizing specialist than those three people. He could easily eliminate her. He could easily eliminate the weakened Kissshot Acerolar-orion Heart-under Blade.

Still, There was the possibility that he truly wasn't an enemy, though I still couldn't call him a comrade.

"Hey! I'm back!"

I said some unneeded stuff to Oshino (Like an old anime, my words were probably unnecessary. I understood there was no point in determining if Oshino was an enemy or friend at this point). After walking for about an hour, I returned back to the second floor ruin. Kissshot looked really happy, as if she had been tired of waiting.

Uwaha.

She hadn't realized, though, that her plan was flawed.

"Hmm...? The guy behind..... I think I have seen that face from somewhere before?" She said as we walked in.

"That's mean. You don't remember me?" Oshino could only smile.

"Wasn't it me who told you about this secret base. Heartunder Blade, Kai Killer-chan."

"Ahhh...right, that time." Kissshot nodded.

Ehm.

Anyway, it looks like he didn't lie. Oshino really had met Kissshot that night. It was certain she had learned of this place from him.

"Well?" Kissshot said towards me, her interest in Oshino waning.

Like I said, don't look at me with such eyes full of expectations.

"Well....listen to me calmly, okay?"

I don't know ventriloquism, or tautology. The me who avoided cell-phone calls after entering high school had an unusually low amount of speaking expertise. I got lost in my retelling of the situation with Episode, Dramaturgie, and Guillotinecutter. I failed to retrieve the limbs, and moreover I had to be rescued by Oshino. I explained all of this in a shallow manner. While I talked to Kissshot, Oshino gathered up some desks. It took me a moment to realize he was making himself a bed. Why? Was he tired? He exercised an immense, unrestrained freedom.

"Huh." Kissshot said after listening to my story completely. She didn't seem disappointed, though ten year olds could be misleading. Then again, she was much older than me. She wouldn't cause trouble out of nothing. It's possible she was still processing the information.

"It's troublesome that they're still working together. I thought they'd disband after attacking me.."

"At least consider it for a bit."

"They want to completely crush me, those three men. I have countermeasures here too, but they've done too much damage to me already"

"Something something about the reward money."

"Hm. Ahhh. So that's how it is. I see. This world is so cruel." Kissshot laughed suddenly.

Did she think of something?

"I'm so stupid. It's because of the jetlag."

"What? How is this related to being a tourist?!"

Hm. I figured this was the perfect time to ask. I kept thinking about my own stuff, so I had forgotten to ask before.

"Kissshot, by the way, why did you come to Japan? Moreover this rural little town."

"Hm? Sightseeing."

"....."

"Mount Fuji, Kinkaku-ji, I hadn't seen any of them." She said as if it were simple. It was obviously a lie. There was no way she'd have been attacked by three weapon-wielding men if the reason was that simple. Moreover this rural little town doesn't have Mount Fuji, or Kinkaku-ji.

But, lying so straight, it'll be hard to counter it.

"You're not trying to conquer Japan, right?"

I closely asked her.

"Hm, no."

She said that.

"Anyway---you couldn't defeat those three people even at full strength? Then, your subordinate me, how can I win against those three people?"

".....Like I said, fight them one by one."

"They are cooperating, so that's impossible. You said it was okay to just dillydally here, but even here, sooner or later they'll find us. "

"There's no need to worry about that." Oshino opened his mouth suddenly. He was lying on his side, on the makeshift bed he had made.

Too free.

"While you guys were sleeping I had set up a barrier here."

".....Barrier?" He had mentioned something like that before too, but, what exactly was it?

"....Something like a force-field?"

"Hm, you can call it that." I could tell the answer was far more complicated, but Oshino settled for that simple explanation.

"People who know the area very well aside, it is impossible for people like strangers to discover this place."

".....you," I asked alertly. "What exactly do you want?"

"What do you mean "what do you want?" Oshino let out a laugh. He was a strange man. How old was he exactly? Definitely over thirty, though no normal person that age would talk like he did. Thirty is the age where you're supposed to clean up and become a decent adult, right?

"Why would you help Kissshot and me? I know you're not one of them, but are you one of us?"

"You're being really mean." Oshino pulled the cigarette from his mouth, and returned it to his pocket.

"It's as I said, I had no intention of helping you or Kissshot. As for why I saved you, Man, I just wanted to. . "

"... .. I don't understand what you said."

"I want to achieve a balance." Finally, Oshino was making some sense. "That is to say, it is my job."

"... .."

"A job about communication between here and there." Oshino continued.

"See, vampires are troublesome. They're far too powerful. Not to mention, There's the Kaii Killer here. Listening to you makes it seem like they're in the wrong for attacking some weak child; that is completely not the case. This child, Heartunderblade, is an entirely worthy opponent"

"Such words of praise are really embarrassing." Kissshot said as she raised her chest. Not that it made much difference for a child to puff out their chest. I had a feeling praise wasn't Oshino's intention, but I let it be. The question now, is what side Oshino is on.

"You made a self-introduction, didn't you say you would follow-up your introduction?"

"Oshino Meme . A free man of no residence." It was so.

"Well, just think that I'm an authority in terms of monsters. Haha, though I'm not the same as those three people, I'm not great with monster exorcizing."

"What do you mean "Not great?""

"To put it simply I don't like it."

"But you're not a specialist?"

"I am a specialist, that's why I help with maintaining the balance. Essentially, I negotiate. I'm a middle-man."

Negotiation? Here and there - connecting? What is here - what is there? Clearly "Here" refers to the land of man and "There" Refers to the land of monsters. But... What side am I on?

"Monster... Great. I prefer to be called Kaii."

"Kaii---"

"This child here, she's the Kaii Killer. A rare type of vampire that can absorb energy from Kaii. That's why she's legendary" This upset Kissshot. Being ten years old she was irritable, but Oshino matched her personality. Her appearance is still different from her inside, and thus she probably hadn't gotten used to it yet. Because of this, I can't help but think it'd be best for her to return to full power as soon as possible.

"Don't act like you know everything - brat." Kissshot was referring to Oshino. If she really is 500 years old, then calling him that should be acceptable. Oshino kept referring to her as "That Child", but that was extremely disrespectful. Oshino didn't react to being called brat. To him, it was almost as simple as a passing breeze.

"It's just like you said, Heartunder Blade." He said plainly.

"You can't judge using rumors --- not caring about if the opponent is human or not. However, hmm, listening to the conversion you guys just had, it seems like this matter is particularly serious. I couldn't have imagined that something so troublesome would happen."

"Not troublesome at all. It is very simple."

"To a vampire that can live for a long time, it may be simple, but for us humans it is very difficult. Right, Araragi-kun?"

"Eh."

Wow. I was astonished that he had grasped the situation so quickly. It made sense. He saw me as human. On "this side".
"... .."

"En? What, your reaction was very strange – Araragi-kun, didn't you want to change back into a human? Don't you want to be normal again?"

"No, I do ... but ..."

"If you want to become a human being, of course you're a human." I suppose it is that simple.

Oshino returned his gaze to Kissshot plainly.

"Moreover, I'm interested in you, Heartunderblade. It's interesting that you're willing to turn Araragi-kun, your servant, back into a human. I'm interested in this point."

"Ah ~ ~ ~" This was clearly a compliment, but Kissshot reacted negatively.

"I don't care for negotiators. Don't say anything unnecessary, Brat. I've always hated people who speak out of turn."

"Speak out of turn? That's not what I'm doing. Even though I'm breaking it down, I don't intend to just rattle off randomly." Oshino Meme said, lying on the bed.

"From this perspective, I can stay on the middle-ground." Oshino said plainly.

"Middle-ground?"

Between here and there?

"You mean between us and the others?"

"There's no other." Oshino nodded.

"Actually, looking at plainly, I've already helped you quite a bit. I showed you this cram school and created the barrier... You could say it was some sort of fated meeting."

"Can – can you help us?"

"I'm not helping you. I'm only lending you my strength." Oshino simply said. "Right now, the balance is off. Those guys will just continue to bully you. I don't like it, their kind of tactics."

"Then, you – are a comrade?"

"No. Not a comrade, nor an enemy."

Oshino is neutral.

"As I said, I'm strictly along the barrier. I stand in the middle. Everything oncoming is up to you, not me. You are all swirling together, and it's up to you to retrieve the walnut in the fire. The reasons, and consequently, the results, have nothing to do with me. I can merely make adjustments to this fate."

"... .." I looked to Kissshot, and even she seemed suspicious of Oshino.

What does this guy want?

"Ahhh, of course, this is a job so it can't be free of charge. Travelers really need money when on the road. Right, payment. How about two million yen?"

"Two, two million!!!" Oshino glanced at me calmly despite my shock.

"I won't press about when to pay. But I don't lend my strength for free. Without this, there won't be balance."

"... .. But, but." My only choice was to trust him. But could I really trust him? This strange old passerby? He showed Kissshot this place, and he saved me from the three men. Even the matter of the barrier aside... was he really that suspicious?

"... So, can I hear your plan?" Kissshot immediately agreed. I suppose this is the difference between an undying vampire and a 17-year-old boy.

"You say you're a negotiator but it isn't that easy. Those three people will not be convinced, and even so, you're neutral. You won't retrieve my limbs from them even if I wanted you to."

"I wouldn't even think about it. Besides, I don't know the plan yet." Oshino's words frustrated me. Though, he was finally acting for a reason more reliable than 'Just because I felt like it'. It was relieving.

"It's possible that I can do it. I'll bow my head and ask nicely. If they refuse this, it is only then I'll resort to more dangerous methods. Fortunately for us, this game can be solved with words and words alone."

"You think this is a game?"

"First of all, we'll need to split them up. It shouldn't be a problem if we do it one-on-one. Though, even you can't read their moves, Heartunderblade. So I'll need to find a way to do that." Oshino said.

"You guys have to risk a certain level of corresponding danger to do so. Don't think too much of it."

"No, that I already know. I have the determination, of course my servant also has the same."

Don't be determined just because you felt like it. It was my determination in the first place!

"But, brat, how are you going to negotiate with those three people?"

"Like I said, ask while bowing my head - They're an easygoing bunch." Oshino spoke like if he was telling a joke. There must be a limit to Oshino's proposed Q&A. Those men are people who don't listen to the words of others. What kind of person do you have to be to think like this?

"The rest is a trade secret. Araragi-kun will then handle retrieving your limbs. If he can safely return your arms and legs, you can return to your completed form. Then, Araragi-kun will be free to return to humanity."

"I've got to get them back..." Of course the most difficult task was left to me. Even if I take them on one by one, they're still three grown men.

Dramaturgie, Episode, Guillotinecutter.

One dual wields wave-like blades. The other, a giant cross. The final is still a mystery.

Honestly, I have absolutely no confidence in winning. Though since it was for my own sake, I couldn't refuse. Still, I didn't want things to end up the way they did that night. It made no sense to fight them without tactics or reason. Might as well say today I was thinking too much. Although I wanted to be calm, I couldn't help but be anxious.

I'm like this. Kissshot too.

Like I said, if I'm fighting them again, I'd need a new strategy.

"Hey, servant." Kissshot said to me.

"What, Kissshot?"

"I didn't bring any human currency. I'm not even certain what kind of amount two million yen is. I'll leave that debt to you."

"... .."

"Don't worry. This brat's skills are real - this I assure you. I watched him rescue you using my hyperopia. Despite my weak form I'm still able to do something simple like that.

"But he's not an enemy or a comrade. He's neutral."

"I didn't bet on him being a comrade from the start. If this guy was an enemy who was absolutely clear of my current position, I would have already been killed. There's no choice even if we wanted one," she paused. "He said he was neutral, which is better than the alternative."

"... .. Ah." I hadn't thought of that.

Understanding means being very careful.

Furthermore, it's not a death sentence if Oshino's negotiations fail. His eyes weren't that cold. Which left me with only one question left.

He was just an old man who happened to pass by. 'Just passing by'... Was Oshino's presence really just a coincidence?

Meeting Kissshot just when she was in trouble, appearing just when I was being attacked. Indeed, it was far too coincidental.

I wondered if there was any meaning to it. What could Oshino benefit from this? It was too much of a coincidence. Still, I couldn't write it out.

Simply meeting by coincidence and observing from behind. It's similar to this afternoon after the closing ceremony, when I ran into Hanekawa at the school gate. Purely accidental. Thinking about it, if I hadn't met Hanekawa I wouldn't have gone to the bookstore. I wouldn't have met Kissshot, and I wouldn't have been put in this situation.

Right then, meeting this strange man... I felt lucky. I didn't want to tell him. I was a person good at only facing what he wanted. But, I felt determined, so I spoke up.

"I don't have much money saved... but if you won't press me on it, and I don't need a Guarantor... I'll bear the debt..."

I had no choice but to borrow money. Having no money at my age... I was pathetic.

"Well, it's decided. Haha, thank you for your patronage ~ ~ ~" Oshino said, pleased by my words.

"Oh, not to mention but I'll be living here from now on. I expect you to take care of me. To be honest I'd been eyeing this place ever since I arrived in town, but I gave it to you guys after thinking about whether or not I really needed it. This town doesn't have any better ruins. Anyway, what should we do first? Should we huddle? Discuss our plans for the future?" Oshino said this, of course, while lying in his casual position. Naturally, Kissshot and I brushed him aside and refused to follow his suggestion.

I didn't notice that it had already passed midnight.

The date changed to March 29th.

I'd say we should talk about tomorrow, but tomorrow was today.

007

Dramaturgie.

A giant who is over 2 metres in height.

A duel-wielder who carries giant wavy blades in his two hands.

I think that kind of giant sword is a type called Flamberge.

Muscular – a man that is like a piece of muscle.

Also I have a deep image of his headband holding his bangs.

He took Kissshot's right leg, and is a vampire hunting specialist.

It was a really tortuous process - well, in the end only Oshino knows what kind of tortuous process it was, actually, I don't know why it became like this, either way, he is my first opponent.

"Ah....."

While sighing, I was walking at night in the small town.

The date is March 31.

The last day of March.

Over the change of time, after 12 o'clock it'll be April Fool's Day... .. I should be careful.

No, I'm already a high school third year student, I'm not saying I have any particular thoughts about April Fool's Day, but, it's just a problem with my mood.

I don't have any thoughts about April Fool's Day itself, it's just that I'm not good with days that have events.

"Dramaturgie is a vampire."

Just now.

Before going out, in the classroom on the second floor, Kissshot once again introduced me to Dramaturgie.

If anything, this is the first time I have heard of this information.

"Vamp vampire?"

So of course I was surprised.

"That guy - a vampire?"

"... .. You can tell just by looking at him. Or are you saying that there exist humans with a body like his? I have lived for five hundred years, that kind of human, I have never even heard of one. "

"... .."

No, well.

Indeed, this can't be solely described as him being tall, and he trained his body well, it's completely not even in that level anymore.

But, you still don't have to use the kind of eyes where you look at an idiot on me.

"But, why did a vampire become a vampire exorcising specialist? There's no reason."

"A vampire that would kill his brethren isn't that special. An eye for eye, a tooth for a tooth, to deal with a vampire of course you use a vampire."

"But – he is not a traitor?"

"We don't have that kind of concept."

In fact although Dramaturgie took her right leg, Kissshot is still using a tone that doesn't carry any hatred to talk.

"Or are you saying that you humans do not kill each other?"

"... .."

"Let me say this first, as I know, there doesn't exist a single animal that doesn't kill his own kind. No, even plants, trees of the same kind would take nutrients from each other."

Well, speaking strictly you can't count vampires as living beings, in the end Kissshot added such a sentence.

It was a really detailed note.

"Even plants --- ah. Well, I understand the reason - but, you really didn't mention this thing before!"

"Mmmm, well, probably it's like this because presently I'm in a weakened state, in order to maintain this, my thinking and memory are fading --- "

"Well, then what should I do?"

"Well, there isn't any other way. All you can do is take advantage of the characteristics of vampires. Haven't I already told you this before?"

These definitely can't be called tips. It is only fit as random talk.

"Well, in Dramaturgie's position, it's unlikely that he'll use this battle method, but at least pay attention about not letting that guy suck your blood. If a vampire has its blood sucked by another vampire, its existence will disappear. "

Only this point.

... .. It sounds like since the moment I woke up, Kissshot has had a very high rating for me.

You're definitely going to win anyway – a feeling like that.

Quickly collect those arms and legs back for me – a feeling like that.

Is the reason why you don't even prepare me for failure because your rating for me is too high? However, although your rating for me is very high, I feel that it's a bit too high.

Well, to her I'm a subordinate and a servant--- as if she's bragging about her own strongest legend, she's also rating me as such.

"... .."

I'm walking slowly---- currently reading a book.

Entitled "Learn Aikido Starting from Nothing!"

It's a guide book for fighting.

"Mmmm... .."

Coming out from the cram school ruin, I first went to this town's only large-scale bookstore.

That bookstore where I bought stuff, before encountering Kissshot under that streetlamp.

This is the second time, and this time I can say it is official, although I was looking forward to getting some constructive suggestions from Kissshot.

But after knowing that there is no hope in that, I can only do something about it myself.

That is why I have this book.

One more thing, because buying a fighting book was too embarrassing, I also bought a baseball teaching guide and a list of classical music recommendations book.

No, but.

Why can I buy a single ero book, but not overcome the embarrassment of buying this one book?

While thinking about that and reading the book – anyway, I need to finish this book.

Achmm.

In the evening, it's actually very convenient to be able to see in the dark, but – really I don't think much of it.

Nothing at all.

Speaking of it, I suddenly thought about how my older little sister used a fighting technique on me.

Just bare-handed.

Yeah, although I have no experience in fighting, but there were several times where I practiced with my little sister....

That girl really doesn't know about severity.

Thinking about this I can only smile bitterly--- later on, with a scary vampire, moreover fighting with a vampire-killing vampire, for this, I only have my half-baked knowledge and the experience of quarreling with my little sisters, up to this point I'm still thinking about this; it really feels strange.

Really.

Can't you become a little more serious, me!

Basically there's a problem with this living style.

What should I do in order to live a serious life?

"Is that you, Araragi-kun?"

Just like that a sound came from behind.

Turning over to that direction - there was Hanekawa Tsubasa.

Even though it's Spring Break it's still her uniform look.

Glasses, three pigtails, it was the same as when she was at school.

"Ah - ha, Hanekawa."

This girl - why is she here?

A place where there wouldn't be anything happening.

It's just that starting from the big bookstore, it's the shortest route Oshino set up to the 【battlefield】 .

It's the same as the three-divergent crossroad where I was attacked by those three people, just a residential area.

Eh eh?

Hanekawa's home, is near here?

Or is it that, in order to recapture the phrase "very serious" in my heart- this guy, is that crazy a person?

No, it's impossible that it's that.

Naturally, it turned into a situation where Hanekawa and I were looking at each other.

And then Hanakawa -

"Hmm?"

Head inclined over.

Then, suddenly she used both hands and pressed the front of her skirt.

"No. Today I won't let you see them."

"... .."

This woman

She said such an incredible line so naturally.

So moe, you!

"Wh-wh-what a-are y-you sa-saying I-I d-don't un-understand."

I originally intended to say it fluently, I did not expect the stuttering.

"Unfortunately I have no idea what you are saying."

Voice and will were completely opposite.

This is completely the reaction of someone who doesn't know anything.

"Hmm? What, did you forget?"

Hanekawa bit her lip, and spoke with a tone of doubt.

What forget -

I thought Hanekawa would have immediately forgotten about that meeting that day.

"You obviously saw my underwear."

"... .."

"Moreover you were staring all along."

Remembered.

Moreover it was remembered in a very annoying way.

"Underwear? Ah, you mean the anti-cold clothing for your bottom that this country uses?"

"Do not pretend to be a person from another cultural circle."

"... .. No, no! Misunderstanding, misunderstanding! I just noticed the texture of the skirt! I was only paying attention to the texture of the skirt!"

"Saying that is still pretty perverted."

Being laughed at.

Being laughed at just like that.

No

Let's not talk about this first.

"Hanekawa what are you doing at a place like this?"

"Hmm? A stroll? Right?"

"... .. At this time?"

It is now nine at night.

Although there's no rule, let's not mention people like me, it definitely isn't a time for going out for a serious student like Hanekawa.

I'm thinking that.

"Everyone is the same. Araragi-kun too, why are you walking like G-man 75 at a time like this?"

"One person walking like G-man 75 is impossible."

"Hmm? What are you reading, Araragi-kun? Baseball book?"

"That"

First of all I should close the book.

Of course if I displayed the fact that I became a vampire it would be really stupid—I don't know why you can't see vampires through a mirror (anyway it's that), right now what my appearance became like, I truthfully don't even know.

First of all, canine teeth.

If I don't open my mouth wide when talking there shouldn't be any problems.

Also there is – the wound on my neck?

The wound from Kissshot's bite -

If that gets found out it would be really hard to cover up.

Speaking of any other changes with my outer appearance, right now I'm a vampire so I don't have a shadow—as long as I don't go near a streetlamp, I shouldn't be discovered.

Another thing would be my clothes' smell.

Of course I turned into vampire, but I don't have to mind my body odor, however inside that cram school I haven't changed clothes nor taken a bath.

It's about time I should go buy some clothes....

I also want to take a bath too.

However, the precious money inside my wallet, is basically my military funding right now- because I just bought a book, I don't have any surplus anymore. When can I sneak back home?

"What, a book you can't let others see? Ah, could it be an ero-book?"

"What kind of nonsense are you saying. I have never touched such dirty books. Your soul will be defiled."

I should script my lie.

But Hanekawa didn't rebuke back - such a good person.

"Well, ah, because of this."

What "ah" "because of this", I don't even know what I'm saying, in general, I want to quickly end this conversation, and then say good-bye to Hanekawa—I didn't think that reading a book would waste this much time, that's why I need to quickly get there.

Also there is an even more obvious worry.

I don't want to get her involved.

Because of vampires.

Later on the opponent I'm facing is also a vampire.

That place isn't somewhere an ordinary person like Hanekawa should go.

No matter how much of an honors student, how much of a class rep.

Hanekawa is only a normal person.

"Hmm? Wait a minute. Araragi-kun you're going really fast. We met so coincidentally, Araragi-kun, let's stay and talk more."

I valiantly walked forward with my back towards her, but Hanekawa still followed me.

Just like that day.

"Talk ... talk about what?"

"Hmm? Ah - Well, Araragi-kun, how was studying today?"

"... .."

I have never heard of such a chat.

Who knows.

Didn't I say that I wouldn't do independent study during Spring Break.

Even if not, starting from when I turned into a vampire, day and night has completely been flipped around, today for me, has just started.

"Today, I specialized in mathematics."

"Math, mathematics huh."

After entering high school, ever since turning into the worst student, I've experience a fail in practically every subject, but only math was an exception.

Thanks to my math grades, I've still at least protected the lifeline of my high school life of getting into a private advancement school. The misconception of being good at math means your brain is smart, there's a bit of that in the staffroom.

However, thinking that just because of that I can talk to Hanekawa about math, I totally didn't mean that.

Because, if the rumors are true, Hanekawa completely doesn't need to think about calculations between 99 to 500.
500.

That means, calculations like 465 plus 321 she doesn't need to think, she'll directly have the answer.

Of course we say that people who can use an abacus are even more incredible - but in the end, no matter how difficult the calculation is, math is just addition and subtraction.

If you don't need any time for addition and subtraction calculations, then answering questions will only use overwhelmingly less time.

For me, I'm good at it because you don't need to memorize in math, Hanekawa can even memorize math.

Even more of a monster than a vampire.

"Un, unfortunately for me today what I studied was a little bit of Spanish."

"Spanish? ... Ah!!"

Hanekawa showed a very surprised look.

If she's surprised then that means she believes.

I didn't think that she'll believe it.

"Unfortunately, I completely don't know Spanish."

"That, that's too bad."

"Yes. I just know about everyday conversation"

"... .."

You know everyday conversation... ..

"Spasibo!"

I said a sentence without thinking.

"... .. Spasibo is Russian!"

Hanekawa began to rebuke.

"Also, doesn't spasibo have the meaning of amazing?"

"... .."

An unexpected rebuke came back at me.

Also, Hanekawa, you really do know the Russian for amazing

"No, you need to think about what it means before you speak."

"Well you really do know everything."

"I don't know everything, I just know what I know."

"Well"

She said something implicit so naturally.

She really is the class rep of class reps.

... .. Thinking about it calmly, during spring break, it's neither second nor third year, so Hanekawa isn't a class rep well, whatever.

The same feeling as a class rep.

"All in all, learning is a good thing, humans are learning their whole life."

"Huh? You said something good, Araragi-kun"

"That's why we need to think more constructively, that's right, something like a way to better society."

"Yes."

Hanekawa really did believe what I say.

"I was thinking in what way will no one be bullied?"

"... .."

How should I know.

Towards a simple conversation this topic is too heavy.

"You can't run away because the mission is too heavy. Isn't it said that difficult roads start from one step?"

"No, that is a thousand miles begins with one step."

Ah.

Thousand miles, is very difficult.

... .. What's being said is too great, this girl.

Would most people say it like that?

"... .. First of all, place surveillance cameras in the school, on the surface will it not remove bullying?"

Although I don't know the reason, the results can be prevented.

"Hm. This point is good, but this leaves the privacy problem. What about locker rooms?"

"Mmmm."

Reached an important point.

Bullying can happen in a place like that too.

No, actually a confined space like that is more dangerous.

"... .. Alright, I know. The responsibility of inspecting the girls locker room videos would be given to me, the proposer."

"What 'alright'!"

Hanekawa-sensei was serious shaking her head.

There has to be limit to embarrassment.

"Also, I'm not limiting it to girls' locker rooms."

"Oh no!"

The panicked me.

Calmed Hanekawa.

"Araragi-kun wants to see that kind of place."

"No, wait, the boys locker room videos would be for you to inspect, just pretend I didn't say what I just said."

"I don't want to see."

... ..

It's not this matter.

If I don't say farewell to Hanekawa – I would be late for Dramaturgie.

Also, I don't want to get her involved.

"Hanekawa.....isn't it time to go back? It's also about time for me to head back."

"Huh? Well, even if you're not me it's about time for you to head back."

"Hanekawa's home is around here?"

"Absolutely incorrect. When strolling, I feel like I should come here."

"... .. At night, don't go outside."

I said that.

"You might meet a vampire?"

Abusive to oneself, saying this towards myself.

However, I didn't think that these words would hurt myself.

I did not expect my own words would hurt myself.

"No, in fact, I'm kind of hoping for it."

Hanekawa in front of me, said that.

"Well, I think that it's just a rumor - but I might encounter a vampire."

"... .. Why?"

I carelessly asked.

"Why do you want to encounter a vampire?"

"No, I have not really thought about it - because I'm in the age where you hope for this kind of non-daily thing. Encountering a vampire, something like having a brief conversation with it."

"What are you joking!"

Then unconsciously.

I started roaring like that.

Ah.

Oh no.

"Ah, huh?"

Hanekawa started doubting, smiling ambiguously - began panicking.

"Sor, sorry."

Said it like that.

"Did I say something I shouldn't have said?"

"... .."

Nothing like that – saying that is very simple.

I think that it is very simple.

Actually, the one who's shocked – it's me rather than Hanekawa.

Originally I'm ready to accept the current situation.

Handling everything in a cool way.

The thing about becoming a vampire.

The thing about helping to collect Kissshot's arms and legs later.

This way I can turn back into a human.

Already understood and accepted.

It should be like that.

The thing about saving a dying Kissshot, I don't regret it at all – turning into this situation, I still have a bit of confidence.

However.

Hanekawa's sentence - I was shaken.

When did I start roaring towards people other than my blood-relatives?

Ahhh

Sure enough, my strength as a human has already hit the ground.

But - no, that's why I said.

That why I must -

"... .. No."

I shook my head.

I swallowed my apologetic words down my stomach.

Then.

"You provoked me."

Then.

"Eh?"

"It really pissed a person off, your nose."

Let's first leave the fact that I do not understand the reasoning behind those words, towards Hanekawa who's exposing an embarrassing smile, I used up all of the mean words I can say.

It feels just like torturing a kitten.

Basically the worst feeling.

However, I cannot not say.

"I like standing around by myself, so don't follow me."

"Ah, Araragi-kun, what are you suddenly saying? Up to just now weren't you happily talking to me?"

"Not happy at all."

I said without emotions.

"I was just pretending to be happy."

"How could -"

"I had my goal towards your money."

"I, my family, isn't a rich family."

Oh no.

I said something funny.

Then I changed it a bit.

"... ... Who knows if you are adding points for yourself, for a poor student like me, can excellent-sama not care about me. You might think that you have a sense of superiority, but being sympathized on this side is troublesome."

"... ..."

The expression on Hanekawa's face suddenly disappeared.

I can't be timid just because of that.

I can't not continue.

From my pocket I took out my cellphone- and then I stretched it out towards Hanekawa's side.

"Don't touch other people's phone by yourself!"

While letting her look, in my phone book I deleted Hanekawa's name, phone number, email.

"... ... So, go away now."

Then.

After listening to my words - Hanekawa closed her eyes.

She may start crying.

Something like making a girl cry is a first since elementary school.

That's what I thought.

But she didn't cry - she opened her eyes, although very weak, but, she still smiled.

Up to this point you still

"Okay."

Said it like that.

"I'm sorry, for making you say such things."

Hanekawa with her back towards me, left from here.

Sorry... ...?

This girl, in the end she apologizes?

Huh, I even said it to that degree.

To tell the truth, even for me who said such things my mood turned black - how can you still smile like that?

... ... Isn't that obvious..

That girl, is different from me.

Really is a very good person.

Next, it's not only because I need to hurry to the agreed place that I had to quickly say farewell to Hanekawa - there is also that I can't involve a ordinary human like Hanekawa.

However.

There is the more important point - I may have made Hanwkawa very sad. Using a variety of names - perhaps it is just random anger.

Wanting to meet with a vampire.

Towards an innocent her who spoke such things – random anger.

Of course I know Hanekawa didn't have any ill-intent.

Do I really not have any regrets?

Things such as saving Kissshot.

In actuality I really hated it?

Things such as taking back Kissshot's arms and legs.

For this, I can only face the danger.

There is also one thing I'm even more scared of.

I.

Can I really change back into a human?

Appearing under the sun would cause me to taste hell.

There are also other kinds of constraints.

But – for now I'll have one eye open and one eye closed. Vampires, this kind of existence above that of humans, is there really no point in looking forward to it?

Results.

I'm getting more nervous.

That's why, great.

Not only did I say farewell to Hanekawa here.

But I also cut off our fate.

No, probably she'll definitely not see me again - this time also is just, the extent of an occasional passing.

So fortunately I said good-bye before I made a bond with her.

Really fortunate.

"... ... This would do."

I gently said.

I put my phone that I took out and put it back into my pocket.

"This way I can raise my strength as a human a little bit."

I've gotten stronger -- so.

So I can be certain about the thing with battling with Dramaturgie, the assignment of taking back Kissshot's right leg, completing it with no problems.

For now this thing is the most important.

Heartbreak absolutely is no problem.

Heartbreak absolutely is not a problem.

I took a step forward.

It took more time than expected, but I didn't have to worry about being late – because the destination wasn't that far from that bookstore in the first place.

The place Oshino designated, the setting for the battle with Dramaturgie - this is a place I'm very familiar with.

In other words, the sports field of Naoetsu Private High School.

008

In vampire exorcizing, you don't choose a time and a place.

Disregarding time, place or situation, finding a vampire and then exorcizing it, this is their way to do things -- however if they carried out such boundlessly troublesome, extremely dangerous in practice doctrine in this countryside town of modern Japan it would be atrocious.

The mediation between us and them --

Expecting the worst to happen, it's no wonder Oshino selected a battlefield that was deserted, therefore nobody would notice even if there was a fight.

The school's sport field, thinking about it, maybe was not such a bad choice.

A school at night is in a sense a blind spot.

A place so noisy during the day, but when the night comes it transfigures -- by then nobody watches over it. Undoubtedly it is best suited as a field for vampire exorcizing.

Obviously, you can't enter the school building.

Since it's a building that possesses rooms which could be damaged by theft, such as the staff room or the principal office, naturally it's protected by a security firm.

However -- if you just climb over the closed school gate, you can enter the sports field.

Therefore.

If it's brief -- there will hardly be any eye-witnesses.

It's a good battlefield.

".....But why does it have to be Naoetsu High School?"

"Because it's the high school you attend."

Towards my question, Oshino answered like that.

"No, what I'm asking is why did you choose the sports field of my high school -- well, since that school is in a place separated from other houses, in itself it may be suited as a place for a battle, however, how can I say it, for me it will be more difficult."

"Difficult? It won't, it will be easier."

Oshino wagged his finger, and said that.

"For you it will be easier to do it, Araragi-kun. Your opponent is a specialist in vampire exorcizing, while you recently became a vampire yourself, and you are fighting him -- isn't it better to have at least the advantage of terrain?"

"Fake blood? I don't know how to use such a gimmick. Does paint work too?" {Fake blood = chinori}

"Advantage of terrain, I said." {advantage of terrain = chi no ri}

Because if it wasn't that, you wouldn't be impartial.

It's a free service -- Oshino declared.

Well, I understand his reasoning -- however, as I thought, performing such an anomaly at my own school is not very appealing.....

Well, whatever.

Starting over -- let's go with Gakuen Inou Batoru. {Campus superpower battle, a light novel genre}

".....Have I kept you waiting?"

For some reason an idiotic greeting came up.

It's just that, since the other person came here first, even if I wasn't late, I couldn't help but say it.

In the center of the sports field -- a strong-muscled man was sitting cross-legged.

Mouth shut and eyes closed, like he was meditating.

Responding to my voice, he -- Dramaturgie,

"???"

Said.

Well, I don't understand what he said.

But after,

".....Ah, in local language -- indeed."

He says, and then he stands up.

He is really huge..... It's like he will hit his head with the moon if he is not careful.

Huh.....?

He is not carrying the flamberges, his wavy blades?

Let alone both, not even one of them?

What?

"Don't misunderstand -- brother."

Though I was now free to doubt the opponent was actually empty-handed, Dramaturgie, in extremely fluent Japanese, opened up.

"I didn't come here to exorcize you."

"....."

What is he saying?

Automatically, I put myself on guard.

I reviewed in my mind the index of 'Learn Aikido Starting from Nothing' that I left in a bag outside the gate. A technique I could use in actual fighting..... errr.

While I was thinking, Dramaturgie reiterated a statement with the same meaning.

"That man -- complying with the words of that smooth-tongued man I came, but not because I wanted to exorcize you."

"If you didn't come to exorcize me -- then what?"

Smooth-tongued man.

He is undoubtedly talking about Oshino -- as I thought even the other party finds him glib.....

"I want you to come over to my side."

Dramaturgie said straightforwardly.

Without following procedures, he suddenly brings out the main issue.

"I ask you. Wouldn't you like to enthrall yourself in vampire hunting -- like I do?"

".....I ain't getting what you mean."

I respond to the unexpected development by bluffing.

"The other time you were slashing at me without me having a word in it -- what are you saying now?"

"That time there was Episode and Guillotinecutter. In front of those two, it was impossible to entice you like this.

However, a rarity like the subordinate of Heartunderblade, the Iron-Blooded Hot-Blooded Cold-Blooded vampire -- it'll be too sad if it was killed."

"If I become your comrade,"

I ask.

"You'll give me back Kissshot's right leg, this kind of deal?"

".....You have some nerve for calling that woman Kissshot, but you guessed wrong. Killing Heartunderblade would be your first job."

".....Then I refuse."

Out of the question.

The point is that I want to go back to be a human -- there is no way I can become a fratricidal vampire.

You must choose words tailored for your listener.

"I see. Too bad. Really regrettable. Right now, I have 53 brethren -- I thought the control of your master over you seems weak, so I thought you were fit to become a comrade"

The control is weak?

Is it really like this?

Kissshot didn't -- didn't turn me into a servant?

"53 is still a big number. Are there really so many fratricidal vampires? -- I finally agree with Kissshot's words. Well then, if I did as you said, I would have become your 54th comrade."

"Oh no. You would have instantly become the number one"

Dramaturgie said without changing his facial expression.

"By the way, I am the current number one"

".....Hmm"

I thought from the beginning that he wasn't an ordinary person.

I am not really surprised.

Because he is the sort of vampire so enthusiastic about exorcizing -- Kissshot is a truly incredible being.

The Iron-Blooded Hot-Blooded Cold-Blooded Vampire.

Kaii Killer.

Indeed.

"Paradoxically, I commend you for trying to make me your comrade but -- the next time entice more skillfully. You won't seduce a woman like that."

Following Oshino's image, I don't know why but a glib remark came out.

I thought it was a scene where I had to show off.

"I see."

Dramaturgie's answer was just an agreement.

It was a failure.

To say it better, it was embarrassing.

.....However, this is a chance.

Perhaps, in order to persuade me, Dramaturgie has left those undulating long swords somewhere else.

No matter how much I realize this body is immortal, to me edged tools are instinctively scary -- this development, just to be clear, is a big help.

Perhaps the things that cut off Kissshot's right leg was--

Dramaturgie's long swords.

Among the cut limbs, it was the only smooth -- clean wound, that right leg.

With those swords endowed with an undulating blade, slicing in such a way looks on the contrary difficult -- however, if Dramaturgie isn't carrying those swords, I must view it as a good opportunity.

The wind is blowing my way -- maybe.

"Well then, let's begin -- Pitiful boy. Heartunderblade's subordinate. It shouldn't take much time, should it?"

"Wait, before that let's confirm the terms."

I said to Dramaturgie who started spinning his arm.

"I am worried there might be discrepancies between our reciprocal terms."

"Fine. Let's confirm the terms."

"If I happen to win -- you'll give me Kissshot's right leg, is that fine with you?"

"If I win, you'll tell me Kissshot's whereabouts?"

"I'm fine with that."

"Me too."

Then we begin.

His arm was spinning -- I was saying.

Dramaturgie shot it towards me.

It was a speed you couldn't expect from that gigantic body -- striking with his whole body behind it, it was a punch like a pro boxer.

I can see it.

With vampire eyes, I can see it.

However -- even if can see it, I can't deal with it.

"Au.....ugh."

The following instant -- my left arm flew.

It was neither broken nor torn off.

Due to the impact of Dramaturgie's fist, it was pulverized.

"Hi.....iiiiiiiiih!?"

The problem isn't the pain.

At once fear had my body in its grip.

The body -- one fifth of it, disappeared!?

I -- by reflex.

By reflex, and then by instinct --

Ran away from Dramaturgie.

However, it seems that after just two steps my feet twisted and I collapsed on that spot -- it was good it happened, because the place where my head was until some time ago was crossed by a frighteningly fast huge fist.

With my left hand on the ground, somehow I avoided tumbling

However my thoughts are racing -- left hand?

What?

The left arm which should have been pulverised -- is still there?

".....!?"

Vampire -- regenerative power!

Is it really instantaneous?

The regeneration didn't extend to the cloth that was blown together with the left arm -- but it becoming bare conversely clearly demonstrated the recovery power of the vampire flesh.

I've taken care of confirming things like the physical strength, obviously I didn't confirm the healing power -- my surprise in this moment was complete. However, reflecting about it, if I think about that time in the beginning, the living hell of when I exposed my figure under the sun -- this recovery power isn't strange.

"What's happening? You are only running away! Heartunderblade's subordinate!"

".....Don't call me in such a weird way!"

Seeing the regeneration of my left arm, my head cooled down.

Even the terror vanished somewhere -- that's right.

That's totally right.

My adversary is a monster -- but now I'm a monster too.

What should I fear?

"OOOOH!"

I roar -- while performing a backflip.

As I thought, my mobility increased.

And I even thought that things like a backflip, without using at least a trampoline, or possibly some CG, was impossible for me -- and then.

I stiffened, and for the first time I faced Dramaturgie.

"Ooh. You seem resolute."

"It's thanks to you -- because of that I will pardon you for my clothes."

While I'm speaking, I think.

Dramaturgie.

A vampire that kills vampires.

Kissshot said that it would be good to grasp in advance vampires' special characteristics -- vampires' special characteristics, if I remember correctly --

They are weak to the sun. Dislike crosses. Dislike silver bullets. Dislike holy water. Dislike garlic. Dislike poison. Die when a stake is driven through their heart. Are these their weak points? Besides, talking about special characteristics..... well, basics of the basics, they suck blood, moreover draining energy while doing so. They don't project a shadow, and they don't have a reflection in the mirror.

Surely Dramaturgie -- which is now illuminated by the moon, doesn't have a shadow.

I am the same.

Canine teeth -- or perhaps I should say fangs.

Since my opponent Dramaturgie had his mouth close in a straight line often, I couldn't observe this.

After that -- immortality?

Nearly infinite recovery power?

Eyes that can see well even in the darkness?

After that the power to turn the body into things like fog or darkness, there is even healing power in the blood of a vampire, I believe -- however, I've come to think that there could be no meaning in pondering about it though.

I don't mean to look down on Kissshot's advice, but -- because we are both fellow vampires, in strengths and weaknesses, all in all, I guess we are fairly matched.

I am immortal, he is immortal too.

If it comes to that -- experience and potential will decide everything.

About experience, I can't but acknowledge he is one step ahead -- or perhaps I should say it's not a matter of just one step. {To be exact, in Japanese it's about days ahead}

While I have read the manual of aikido just a little while back --

"The hell with it!"

Maybe it's the influence of Kissshot, but while I shouted old style words that I wouldn't use in my entire life-- I flung myself at Dramaturgie.

"I thought you were going to use some strategy -- but personally I appreciate such straightforwardness."

While talking -- Dramaturgie unleashed on me exactly that kind of straightforward attack.

Straightforwardness.

You could even say it was dull.

No matter how big the fist, no matter how frightening the speed -- if I see it three times, I grow accustomed with it. Well, if I was still a human it would be different, but now with vampire eyes -- three times is plenty.

Facing forward.

I avoided that fist facing forward -- and then with a delay, I grabbed the arm that looked like a log -- even beyond that, it looked like an earthen pipe.

I use the force of the punch of my opponent.

Like that -- I flow into a locking technique.

Learn Aikido Starting from Nothing!

"(1) Grab opponent's arm -- (2) Pull it forward -- (3) Strike with all your strength!"

Now, as far as explanations meant to teach a technique to a novice go, the wording seems a tad too rough, but it did the trick.

A giant exceeding two meters, without even a falling technique, fell hard, face forward, on the not so well maintained sports field.

No -- I threw him.

And while I'm at it, I pin down Dramaturgie's back with a knee -- and I completely pulled his shoulder joint backward.

"Ho-How's that?"

".....Crafty."

Dramaturgie said, with his face buried in the ground.

"The straightforwardness was greatly preferable -- it appears that you didn't lose the common sense from when you were a human. Well, it's reasonable -- I can understand since I once was a human too."

".....What? Don't talk nonsense, just give up already! If you don't, I will break this arm --!"

Wait, what was that?

Although they sounded frighteningly like the words of a guy who is coming from behind.

Although it sounded like an introduction.

.....Common sense from when I was a human?

Common sense -- way of thinking?

"Ah....."

That's right -- it was that.

I've done a locking technique..... now what?

What comes after this?

I break him -- wasn't it?

But even if I broke him -- since my opponent is a vampire, he would recover immediately.

"Da-Dam--"

And yet.

What Dramaturgie was talking about was not only limited to that -- even if I noticed I don't think I could have done something, but I realized the real meaning behind his words after my hands, which surrounded his earthen pipe-like arm, were amputated with a cutting sound.

They were cut?

No, it's not that -- it seems I cut them myself.

Because I grasped his hand which morphed into an undulating blade.

"Gh.....guargh!"

This time it was clearly painful -- a real pain.

A sharp pain.

From now on it seems I can use this metaphor knowing what I am talking about.

I instinctively leapt back, creating some distance from Dramaturgie's body -- my clipped hands which had fallen on the ground vanished.

Looking at it, they were already back on my wrists.

They were reprimed.

This regenerative power..... growing new hands didn't feel like a lizard's tail -- it was simply a "they're back".

And the vanishing after the cut.....

It wasn't a vanishing, it was more like an 'evaporation'.

That's what you can call a handy system.

It's not like I can leave my hands behind on the school's sports field!

Dramaturgie, taking his time, or rather with a movement that could even be called slow -- rose.

He couldn't help taking time.

Anyway -- it was because his hands were now morphed into wavy blades.

"....."

Shape-shifting power!

Vampire's -- shape-shifting power!

This guy -- turned a part of his body into weapons!

Even that day it was like this!

Even if it was at night, no, exactly because it was at night vampire eyes should have seen it -- I still had the common sense from when I was human, and because of that I deemed it impossible!

Thinking he put away his swords to persuade me was an idyllic delusion.

The two swords from the beginning -- were one with Dramaturgie.

".....What happened? Are you already done?"

Dramaturgie says.

Despite having the high ground, his stern facial expression doesn't crumble -- it's like he has honed his keenness even more.

Our experience -- is too unequal.

From the start there was too much difference.

Even if we are both vampires -- I can't do what he is able to.

Swords of that size and length..... if I try to face him in these conditions, I think I won't even be able to get close to him. Even under normal circumstances that large build seems to have twice or thrice my reach --

"I asked you if you are already done. Won't you answer? What you did now -- was this country's 'judo'?"

It was aikido.

But for as much as I can tell, it's not like I am an expert.

The point is, that technique was a fluke -- not only it's impossible for me to do it a second time, but also I fear retaliation even with variation.....!

Damn, why did I have to come bare handed?

I didn't think they were a part of his body, alright, but that aside I did notice my opponent was using swords, I should have thought it was better to bring weapons!

If I had at least a cannon..... heck, at least anything, I just don't have such connections!

".....Hm?"

No..... wait?

Don't I have -- a trick?

If it's like that --

"....."

"I see. You give up -- fine for me, then here I come. Until your immortality runs out -- or until you scream you want to die, I'll chop up your body."

Dramaturgie moved -- I moved too.

However, I moved backward.

Withdrawing -- the intention was to run in the direction opposite of Dramaturgie.

"! Are you running away?"

Dramaturgie cried.

However my action is not to escape and not even flight.

It's a stubborn -- withdrawing.

Withdrawing in order to come from behind.

It's not like I haven't come up with a clear idea -- it's 'the hell with it'. I don't have time to hesitate -- it's a little awkward, but I just have this trick left.

As expected, in sheer walking ability I am better than Dramaturgie. It's a rough estimate, but Dramaturgie should weigh more than 200 kg -- now that he morphed his arms into swords, it might be close to 300 kg.

No matter how fast the fists are.

It doesn't mean he can move his whole body that quickly.

It would be the weirdest movement of mass ever.

Of course he may be running faster than a human, but with a base weight of 55 kg, I shouldn't lose against Dramaturgie -- I'll make the best of this advantage!

That said, this isn't fleeing.

I'm not randomly escaping.

There was a specific destination -- 'advantage of terrain'.

Although I didn't attend it very diligently, I spent two years in this school -- I know at least the PE storehouse's location.

Taking a good distance from the pursuing Dramaturgie, I managed to reach the storehouse -- and kicked open the iron door. It should have been locked, and even if it wasn't I didn't have time to unlock the small bolts one by one.

And then -- my expectation lands bingo.

That's right.

In my school, during PE there are baseball lessons --!

I grabbed a ball from the lot in the cage.

And then I remember.

The contents of the baseball textbook, bought together with the manual of aikido --!

I'm glad that after I finished reading the aikido manual, because there was still time left, I read it in advance -- it would be a disaster if by chance I read classical music!

"(1) Hold aloft -- (2) Place lower body's strength in the upper body -- (3) Swing down the arm!"

Nonetheless, as I thought, for a novice the contents are too rough.

It seems I'm no good at choosing reference books.

However -- the ball still flew in a straight line towards Dramaturgie.

For a guy like me who doesn't have a past in being a baseball teenager, of course it was the first time throwing the ball this way (unfortunately, baseball in PE was an elective choice. I personally chose soccer), counting even the aikido technique of before I must be a guy with beginner's luck -- that hard ball hit Dramaturgie on a lung.

"Guh....."

The movement of Dramaturgie who was charging like a heavy motor car stopped -- he crouched down on the spot.

The ball was rolling around -- as I thought, it seems even a vampire has internal organs that work like internal organs, his respiration was difficult. Thinking about it, if you stab the heart with a stake a vampire dies -- then it is natural its lungs too are working.

If it's like that, even an attack against sense organs should be effective.

He is immortal, but you can work around it.

Alright, just like that -- I grabbed another ball.

The cage was still stinking full of balls.

However, my control was stinking too.

My beginner's luck seemingly spent, after that I threw five consecutive balls, but I didn't even graze the squatting Dramaturgie.

Absolutely, I was just digging the ground near him.

It looks like I dug so deep that afterwards I must level the ground over there with the roller used by the baseball club or something, however if I can't hit with such powerful balls there's no meaning.

And he is such a huge target too.....!

I can't climb the Major mound like this!

Climbing the Everest seems simpler.

".....You really are a man that has both craftiness and straightforwardness."

While talking, Dramaturgie rose up.

And then once again -- he dashes towards me.

"But even that -- it's a single use only technique!"

".....!"

Currently the distance between me and Dramaturgie is about 25 meters -- is it? With his legs..... he can close it in three seconds!

If this happens, entering the PE storehouse was a bad move..... even if I want to run there's no place to run!

I'm in despair.

Already half giving up, I threw the ball that could be my last --

"Hun! Such soft ball, even if I took it, it should have been clear from the beginning -- you won't stop me with one or two balls!"

While he was saying that charging forward -- the ball exploded in his face.

And then that ball stopped Dramaturgie.

It's not like his previous remark was wrong.

It isn't necessary to take it back.

The last ball.

The ball I threw -- wasn't a soft ball.

It was a hard ball.

Or perhaps it's better to say it was a shot.

It's the iron sphere used for shot puts.

"....."

Who is the guy who put a shot in the cage of baseball balls?

As expected, it looks like this one did damage him -- Dramaturgie covered his mouth with the two wavy blades, and groaned.

.....The regeneration was slow?

About vampire wounds, my left hands or both wrists did heal instantly, didn't they?

Is it because it was a shot?

No, to begin with, why did the shot hit -- if I recall, surely that throw seemed even too stable for me -- or better, could I normally throw a shot that way?

What is the reason -- wait, I get it, it's the weight!

I could have noticed when I kicked open the iron door.

Becoming a vampire -- my physical strength increased.

To me now, a hard ball used for baseball is too soft -- and too light. Therefore, excluding the beginner's luck of the first throw, my control was upset.

Something like a shot is just right -- no.

Even a shot was still too light.

Then --

"Now you'll see!"

Before Dramaturgie raises his face.

I manage to drag out from inside the storehouse -- used to level the ground, a concrete roller.

It's the roller used by the baseball club.

Holding it in one hand I lifted it up..... and I majestically held it aloft.

"If I can't hit not even a big target..... I must use a bigger ball!"

And then, I placed lower body's strength in the upper body and --

I swung down the arm!

".....!"

I was on the verge of waving it down.

Dramaturgie, although he still hasn't been hit, was crouched on the spot flopped down -- seeing his blade arms pointed towards the sky, I stopped the swing at the very last moment, and I threw that roller I was holding to the ground.

It made a frightful dent in the ground.

I was almost going to smash my toes.....

"What kind of pose is that? Dramaturgie."

"It's as it looks. I give up."

Without the stern facial expression crumbling -- with the tone of voice used until now, so said Dramaturgie.

"Being hit by that thing with your strength, it's not something I can bear -- it would take me two days to recover."

"Eh.....?"

"You seem to have misunderstood -- vampires don't get to recover damage in an instant. Well, among other things my lineage is those weak at regenerating -- however, even so, your lineage is the exception. It's must be because you are Heartunderblade's subordinate."

Is..... is that so?

Nevertheless I, without swallowing Dramaturgie's words, didn't lower my guard. At once I quietly extend the hand towards the roller slammed on the ground.

"Didn't I tell you? You are number one."

"....."

"Even if I lose because of potential, I thought I could have room for victory thanks to experience -- but it appears that it's impossible. I can't hunt you."

"No -- way."

Even though I am inferior as far as experience goes -- I have the upper hand with potential.

I wasn't conscious of that -- even now I don't have that sensation.

"Perhaps you'd prefer I spoke this way? I'll never fight you again, just spare my life."

Dramaturgie said that without even making a smile. The damage from the shot looked healed -- but he didn't seem yet ready to fight.

Quitting here -- he is quite the pro.

A professional.

While we were both still fine --

".....Kisshot's right leg. You'll give it back to me."

"Ok."

Dramaturgie nodded, and then.

He transformed his blade arms, turning them back.

"Now it's kept hidden in a certain place -- but I'll hand it over to that smooth-tongued man immediately. Is that fine?"

".....Yes."

"Then it's settled."

So he said and -- suddenly, his shape began to blur.

I thought it was an optical illusion, but it wasn't.

Even if vampire eyes can be mistaken, it wasn't an optical illusion.

His body was melting into darkness.

Shape-shifting power.

He changes his body into fog -- and like that.

Dramaturgie disappeared -- however, after his shape disappeared completely -- just his voice alone, resounded in the field.

"Heartunderblade's subordinate."

".....What is it?"

I reply to the darkness.

"I'll ask you once again. Shall you become our comrade?"

"Impossible."

I said clearly.

No matter how many times he asks, the answer won't change.

"I don't find any appeal in such a thing."

"....."

"One time of Gakuen Inou Batoru is enough."

I didn't get a reply.

It seems he finished turning into darkness.

Will that guy keep his promise?

I became a bit anxious, but then I changed my mind and thought it will be fine. Because Oshino will work to make that promise true.

However, even without that, I have a hunch that Dramaturgie the vampire will surely keep his promise.

Straightforward and simple.

A vampire that was once a human too, huh?

If possible, I wanted to ask him a more detailed account -- I did think that too, but it was absurd.

We just don't mix.

His side tried to exorcize me and Kissshot -- our side wants to get back the limbs from those three.

That's why.

".....By the way, right leg GET"

With this, it's one fourth.

If I look at the time, just a few minutes passed, however I felt like I lived five times -- no matter my immortal body, that was hard.

Although hard -- still 3/4 to go.

Well then, I'll go back tidying up.....

In addition to the regenerative power, I didn't really feel any body exhaustion, but mentally I was extraordinarily worn out. I put in order the balls and leveled the ground..... but what about PE storehouse's iron door?

I kicked it open.

.....Well, there's nothing I can do.

I placed it back in its place.

"Let's see..... well, I did pick up the scattered balls, right?"

It happened when I raised my face.

There's no need to repeat it now, its vampire eyesight -- I noticed that long away from the storehouse, there was someone hiding behind the school building on the other side of the sports field.

Someone -- who?

It's not Dramaturgie..... don't tell me, is it one of the other two?

Episode, or Guillotincutter?

It can't be..... they should become my opponents only later. Then..... maybe it's Oshino?

While professing neutrality, the truth is he is secretly watching over me -- just like the mentor of the main character of a shounen manga!

I don't remember you making me your disciple!

However it makes me a little happy -- wait.

I've made such misunderstanding, however that someone isn't even Oshino. In order to see better the shadow of the school building, I changed my angle and took ten steps closer, my eyes in the end grasped that figure.

I silently stared at the pair of pupils over there.

That was Hanekawa Tsubasa.

".....Eh?"

Eeh?

Why -- is she here?

Don't tell me, did she follow me?

Did I leave traces?

Although I drove her away so rudely.....

I was confused, unable to do anything, I was just standing up like an okimono, so -- guessing I noticed her even at this distance, Hanekawa walked towards me.

Briskly.

I even thought I could hear the sound of her footsteps.

Urgh.....

She is three times scarier than Dramaturgie.

Why is a girl this scary..... is it because it's Hanekawa?

An honor student -- class rep of class reps, Hanekawa Tsubasa.

"What was that?"

She suddenly uttered.

It looks like that expression won't allow me to use the ploy I came up with before Hanekawa got close, 'play dumb'.

I was seen.....

She has seen..... everything.

That is to say, even if she saw just the last minute it was still definitively an out..... I lifted a roller with one hand.

"After that, I searched for you. For a moment I lost sight of you, however this bag was dropped in front of the school gate"

While talking, she pointed out the bag she was carrying with her right hand, which I undoubtedly left at the school gate, and which contained the aikido manual, the baseball textbook and the classical music recommendations book.

"I was unsure you were inside the school, because you should have climbed over the gate"

"....."

Despite being an honor student, she is too aggressive.

However -- it was a blunder leaving the books outside the gate. I can't believe how just because of that this happened, although I had no way to foresee it.....

"Say, Araragi-kun -- because it's was from a distance I couldn't see it well, but..... somehow, didn't you do something that looks like it was taken out from a romance?"

".....It's not your business."

I said it with all my might.

Damn.

I got back Kisshot's leg, with that I thought I could write one thing off, I felt like I got a momentary relief -- and still.

And still I have to hurt Hanekawa's feelings.

"Rather than that, why are you tailing me? I don't get it at all. I told you not to follow me around -- don't be a bother by acting like a friend."

".....Araragi-kun, you are not a person who says such things."

Hanekawa's eyes -- were really scary.

They are not cold like those of Kisshot -- if I am forced to say, they are probing eyes.

They are piercing, penetrating -- such kind of eyes.

They make you aware of your shallowness, even unpleasantly -- such kind of eyes.

"I feel sorry for having made you say that -- but right now the truth is that you are in a situation that forces you to say such a thing against your will, right?"

Hanekawa -- presented me the bag she was carrying with the right hand.

I took it.

If she simply came to deliver lost property -- this exchange should be over.

"I was late to notice, sorry."

She continues though.

"If that's the case, I want to be of assistance."

".....Don't be pushy."

I said with a strained voice.

"Don't read too much into it. I was just bored being with you. I like to be alone."

"That's a lie. You are not a misanthropist or angry against the world, that much I can tell. Araragi-kun, you seemed to enjoy talking with me at least."

"That's because I was after your fortune!"

"But my family is not that rich!"

"Then I was after your Dakara!" {A bottled water brand}

"If you are thirsty say so!"

I bit my tongue. {He meant to say "karada" (body)}

"I meant to say I was after your body!" {"[...]dakara karada[...]"}"

"The Dakara or the body, which is it!?"

"The body!"

I yelled.

I don't understand what I'm saying anymore.

"And that's why if you show me your panties another time I will make peace with you!"

"Got it."

Toward that -- Hanekawa was extremely calm.

Not perturbed, not moving an eyebrow.

With a spontaneous action she turned up the skirt of the uniform.

And then she exposes to me the underwear inside.

They were dark grey underwear with felt texture.

It was a dull design without patterns or ornaments, but consequently it drew out the inherent flavor of raw materials.

"Satisfied enough? Can you see them well?"

"....."

"If you like, I can take off my blouse too"

Hanekawa --

With the skirt pulled up, said this quietly.

Ah!

That time -- for the first time.

At last I felt like I met Hanekawa.

Without missing each other -- we met face to face.

Yes.

She is a good person, but -- it's not only that.

She is strong.

People like me -- aren't a match for her.

".....Please forgive me for saying cruel things."

I -- bent forward as much as I could, bowing my head.

Hanekawa was still turning up her skirt, but obviously I didn't bow because I wanted to have a good look at the inside.

It was in order to apologize.

And also in order to make a request.

"Please be my friend."

009

Before explaining the situation to Hanekawa, though, there was something I had to do -- in addition, of course, to it being too late in the night. Hanekawa did me the favor of temporarily going back home.

I promised to tell her everything tomorrow night.

And then I returned to the usual cram school ruins -- Oshino was missing, but I reported to Kissshot, who was waiting in a class room on the second floor, that I succeeded in getting back the right leg.

"Well done."

Kissshot said.

"Well, being my subordinate, it is of course -- thou hast received my power, the likes of Dramaturgie are no match for thee."

"Though he made for an adequate opponent..... that guy knew when to give up."

"Hmph. Well, it is because among the three Dramaturgie was the most discerning -- I don't really mean to scare thee, but with the other two things won't go this way."

"So it seems....."

Episode.

A guy who carried a gigantic cross on the shoulder, he looked dangerous -- also, that priest-like looking man..... Guillotinecutter.

That guy is hiding something nasty.

He gave me this impression.

"However, right now for the time being thou canst rejoice, because with this thou art certainly one step closer to a human."

"Really.....?"

Thanks.

I have the impression I got further away from being a human instead, though.....

"Although Dramaturgie had superhuman physical strength, it looked like I was better at recovery -- just in case, there's something I wanted to ask for reference. How many times can I die?"

"Who knows."

Kissshot replies.

"Without putting it to test, I do not know that much."

"As if I would test it!"

And that was that.

While we were making a conversation that looked like a meeting for celebrating victory and reviewing, early dawn arrived, and I was inevitably drowsy when Oshino came back.

He was wearing his usual aloha shirt.

As expected though for how many clothes he seemed to have, the design of all of them, like he was also making a political statement, was psychedelic.

When I met him in the three-forked road he was empty-handed but, I don't know when or from where, Oshino was supplied with a minimum of daily necessities -- somehow, it gives the impression he was doing camping practice.

".....Now that I think about, your dress doesn't seem dirty at all, how come?"

"Hm? Well, it is because a vampire's clothes are like a part of his body"

The question was asked by someone whose left sleeve was took away from Dramaturgie, and couldn't help looking vaguely like some kind of rock singer. So, Kisshot answered me with her usual dress.

"Dramaturgie too turned his clothes into fog, didn't he?"

"Like the wavy blades, the clothes too are a part of the body?"

"If I had to say it, I think the clothes come from the matter creation power. I too, when I fight, may use a sword, but in my case it is different from Dramaturgie, even in those occasions I do not use shape-shifting, I rather use matter creation power."

"Amazing....."

Where did the law of energy conservation and the law of mass conservation go?

Well, whatever.

They went elsewhere.

And that was that.

"Welcome home, Oshino."

"I'm home~."

Oshino, waving his hand leisurely, was carrying a traveling bag -- inside that bag there should be Kisshot's right leg.

"Araragi-kun, you did splendidly."

"I don't deserve such praise."

"What are you saying? You hung on. I was secretly watching over you, so I know."

".....Is it true?"

"Yeah."

Oshino nods.

"I also know that Araragi-kun made a girl turn up her skirt."

"....."

I remembered that for an instant I mistook Hanekawa, who was hiding in the shadow of the school building, for Oshino, I was slightly happy, however now it only embarrassed me.

That is, he really did see it.....

At least don't talk about such things in front of Kisshot!

Would you tilt your head to the side! {to express doubt}

"Err..... about that, Oshino."

"Aah, don't worry. I was watching from a place in front of you, so from my angle the panties of that girl weren't visible."

"I was not worried about that!"

"You have a nice friend. A classmate?"

"The class is different. But yes..... she is a friend. She is called Hanekawa Tsubasa. Class rep of class reps."

I said.

I was so embarrassed, though.

Humph, Oshino muttered, for no particular reason.

"Anyhow, you better have given a proper explanation to the eye-witness -- that girl looked especially smart."

"I have the intention of doing so. I don't know how to talk about it, though."

"You could always ditch her."

"That one failed."

"Yeah. Well, when girls are your opponent, no matter how careful you are, it will never be enough."

"I think this matter doesn't have anything to do with being boys or girls, though."

"Oh my, you are surprisingly lacking self awareness. Unlike girls, boys can't create even one dance, can they?"

".....Well, with this manner of speaking it seems like only the girls possess creative talent, but the simple truth is that in PE class girls have creative dance."

I can't stand having creativity measured according to that.

"However Araragi-kun, if our daily life was adapted into an anime, the one moving frantically without being able to dance would be you, right?"

"For what reason should our daily life be turned into an anime!"

"But Araragi-kun, the nice face you show when you make a retort is impossible to convey through a Drama CD, you know."

"Our daily life is a Drama CD!?"

"However, it's good you are having fun. It feels like Mashin Hero Wataru's ending."

"It's a different generation!"

"So you say. The maker of your cellphone being Kyocera, in other words are you being conscious of that?"

"Don't make such indirect appeals!"

That aside.

However, indeed, for boys it's an enigma what the heck girls are doing at creative dance lessons.....

Honestly, I can't even imagine it.

"Well, since I am a man too, I don't concretely know, it must be an unladylike dance that you won't show to boys."

"Suddenly my interest gushed forth!"

"If it wasn't that, it wouldn't be done only by girls."

"Uhhmm."

A wrong hunch.

However, when girls are in the gymnasium doing creative dance, it is granted that boys are always receiving lessons on the sports field.

Maybe we are being separated.....

"Ah, hey Oshino, talking about a thing just for girls, there is yet another thing that bothers me about PE lessons. It's a story that happened during middle school, during health and physical education. Just a few times, boys and girls had different lessons. Since it was a classroom lecture, could it have been related to things like physical strength? That time, what the heck were girls studying?"

"Araragi-kun, that--"

He started saying.

Like Oshino changed his mind, he cleared his throat once.

--That I don't know. It's something not even I know."

"Yeah, I guess."

"That's right, when you explain the situation to that girl called Hanekawa Tsubasa, you can take the opportunity and ask about it to her, right? She will surely tell you."

"Ah, I see, of course. It's a good idea."

Absolutely.

It maybe my imagination, but I feel a little wave of malice though.....

"Hey."

Here, at last, Kissshot cut in.

"Is the idle talk finished?"

"Hm? Ah -- Hahhaa, Heartunderblade, it's good you are so energetic, did something good happen? Well, it did happen for sure--"

Oshino, while laughing, opened the zipper of the traveling bag.

And then he inserted the hand inside --

Like that, he took out Kissshot's right leg.

"....."

It was inserted whole as it was.

Without being stored in a case or wrapped in vinyl, in that condition, it was inserted bare.

Like a bizarre murder case.....

It's the leg of an adult female.

With a slender shape -- it was a splendid leg.

As expected from a vampire leg, it was neither bleeding nor rotting --

"As promised -- he really gave it back."

Dramaturgie.

A vampire that is a vampire killer.

"It's for these things that negotiators exist. It would be troublesome if there wasn't any trust-- a relationship of mutual trust is the most important thing, right? Because without trust the negotiation won't come true. The other party might consist of specialists of vampire exorcism, but this one especially should have been quite the pro, therefore he can't default on a debt -- Here, Heartunderblade."

Oshino casually hands the right leg over to Kissshot.

Kissshot takes it.

A splendid image.

".....Although, what do you use it for? Your current legs are of a different size..... You can't replace them, right?"

"I'll do this."

She says.

Kissshot holds her own right leg with both hands, "A~n" she opens wide her mouth, and then she bites it.

And then she starts eating it.

Munch munch, chomp chomp, crunch crunch.

Flesh and bones together.

"....."

You can't adapt this into an anime.

A ten year old girl is eating the right leg of an adult female.....

Moreover, finding it relatively tasty.

"Um?"

Kissshot suddenly turned this way.

"Ye shouldn't be watching, you fools -- Leave me alone during a meal. A bit of manners."

"Ah, right --"

Even without being told to, it's not something I'd like to see.

Without waiting to be expelled, me and Oshino went out the room into the corridor, and closed the door with hands behind my back.

Maybe it was funny, as Oshino let out a simmering laugh.

I only give a sigh.

".....By the way, Oshino. While Kissshot is eating, there is something I want to ask you."

"Hm? What would it be?"

"If you have watched you should know, my left arm was struck by Dramaturgie -- however, it immediately recovered. A recovery whose speed is at a level you can't explain. And yet, how come that Kissshot's legs and arms didn't regenerate?"

"Because Heartunderblade, at that point in time when you met her, had already almost lost the immortality of a vampire - don't you think it's this?"

"No, I've already thought that. However when my hands were cut and the wrists recovered, the clipped hands vanished. For this reason, I thought that Kissshot's limbs too should have vanished -- but this didn't happen either. Why is it so? Neither the regeneration nor the vanishing happened--"

"That girl has a precious lineage, Araragi-kun."

Oshino said, without putting on much airs.

"The limbs of that girl were calmly -- stolen by those guys, like they wanted to own them."

"....."

"Those guys divided the whole body and the limbs. In other words, those guys stole, more than her hands or feet, her vampire existence. For this reason the four limbs won't regenerate nor vanish. As a matter of fact they have been paralyzed. By suppressing the vanishing, you forbid the regeneration -- thinking about it, for sealing the Kaii Killer it's a very effective tactic.You better take care of yourself too."

Oshino used a malicious tone of voice.

"Dramaturgie seemed to rather prefer you become his comrade, but Araragi-kun, you are the subordinate of that Kissshot. Your limbs might be stolen too, so you won't necessarily avoid being turned into a specimen."

"For -- for real?"

"Hahhaa. Did you take it seriously? Well, since it's a special technique, it can't be used too many times. You can relax, that method should hardly be used -- besides, probably they need three people for it to work. Only two remain, so this risk isn't there anymore."

".....Who will be my next opponent?"

I asked.

"Will it be Episode, or Guillotinecutter?"

"They are the ones who decide the order, so I can't tell yet, but I think that maybe it will be Episode. By any possible means I want to quickly arrange it. So that you can turn back into a human even a day earlier."

"Oshino."

A little perplexed, I asked even that thing -- before talking with Hanekawa, I wanted to make that thing clear.

"Can I -- really turn back into a human?"

"If you take back all of Heartunderblade's limbs, you can turn back. Didn't she tell you so?"

"Well -- Isn't there the possibility that Kissshot lied? In order to regain her own limbs, she told a lie --"

"Hey."

He poked my head lightly.

"You shouldn't doubt her in this manner. Isn't that kind of sad?"

".....But--"

"Talking like that about your life savior, you are an awful ingrate."

Oshino.

Has said those words -- ingrate?

Life savior?

I'm Kissshot's -- no, Kissshot is my life savior, is that what Oshino said just now?

"Whoa, what face are you doing, Araragi-kun -- did something good happen?"

".....Don't talk like you saw through me."

"You are being transparent -- Certainly, you sacrificed your life for Kissshot's sake. You offered your neck to her fangs. I think it's splendid -- I think it's a handsome gesture. However, Araragi-kun, properly speaking -- at that point you must have died."

I had my blood sucked.

I was sucked without a drop of bodily fluid left behind.

At that point I must have been dying.

No -- at that point I've certainly died once.

"However, you revived. As a vampire -- but until now you have been allowed to preserve yourself."

".....That's because there is a rule that if a vampire sucks your blood, you become a vampire without exception, right? It ended up with me not dying, sure, but the expression life savior is not applicable--"

"Without exception? Who said such thing?"

Oshino has a broad grin.

He still has an attitude like he saw through me.

An attitude like he saw through the anxiety and mistrust accumulated like dregs in my heart.

"Kissshot said it."

"Only the person herself has said it? Didn't you think about the possibility that it was a lie?"

"No way."

It was a lie?

This one was the lie?

However -- where is the necessity to tell such lie?

"I'm not really taking Heartunderblade's side, so I will explain it here -- when a vampire sucks the blood of a human, there are two patterns. One is a meal that replenishes nourishment-- the other one creates a subordinate as a personal servant."

Those two are really different things.

Oshino said so slightly smiling.

"Well, in order to create a subordinate you need to absorb a certain amount of nutrition, though -- frankly, the fact is that if she sucked all your blood for a meal, even if a complete recovery is out of the question, she wouldn't have lost her skill to that extreme."

"Well -- but."

It may be though.

However, on this subject, Kissshot said this -- under that streetlight.

Drinking my portion of blood -- was an emergency measure.

Her current looks.

The looks of a ten year old girl.

Is it possible to say -- she took an emergency measure?

Is it possible to say -- she was able to get a supply of nourishment?

Just like -- a child missing a meal.

"Practically, the current her looks like she only has the ability to regenerate. She used up her skills to form that body, it appears she has completely lost even her essential faculty of blood sucking"

"Eh? Really?"

"Really. The current looks of her, are like something for an emergency evacuation -- in exchange for almost sealing her skills, she has been preserving her life force. Talking about things she could do in her condition of a quadruple amputee, she went at length. Frankly, if she had sucked your blood for a 'meal', she would be in a lot better state than now."

"Then..."

I reflect.

With a dim-witted mind, squeezing out an intelligence that wasn't there, I frantically reflect.

I try to make it coherent.

".....In order to recover her limbs from those three, even going as far as temporarily losing most of her skill including the blood sucking faculty, was there a need to make me a subordinate?"

"No, there wasn't."

Oshino waved his hand sideways.

"Of course even that would be possible, and if you try asking her she will undoubtedly tell you so. However, that is most likely a reason affixed afterwards, I think. Heartunderblade just couldn't bring herself to kill you -- I think."

"....."

"Vampires, especially Heartunderblade, don't really fancy creating subordinates -- even if they are about to die, they aren't inclined to save themselves by making a subordinate. Heartunderblade -- is heart under blade. In the stories I've heard, she seems to be a very different vampire -- she was dying and in order not to kill Araragi-kun, she had no choice but to make you a subordinate."

Life savior.

If it's like that then surely -- Kisshot was my life savior.

That's right.

To begin with, when Kisshot called out to me, she shouldn't have had the intention of making me a subordinate.

Just a nourishment supply, a meal was the intention.

Just an emergency measure was the intention.

However.

She -- said thanks.

To someone who was basically a worthless human.

To me who offered his neck.

"Araragi-kun, when you woke up here, Heartunderblade was sleeping nearby, right? She was using your arm like a pillow. Wasn't she caring for you all the time with constant supervision?"

"Constant supervision --"

"Because the risk of going berserk is entailed to those converted into subordinates. She looked out so that didn't happen. Maybe I should say she watched over you. And then..... after that, in order to save you, who carelessly exposed your own body under the sun, without hesitation she too rushed out under the sun -- while facing the risk of evaporating"

Well, Oshino added.

"That maybe closer to the affection humans have toward pets, though -- but at least, Heartunderblade is trustworthy towards you."

"Trustworthy -- huh."

"Therefore, if you don't believe her it's pretty sad. Didn't I tell you before? The most important thing is a relationship of mutual trust, Araragi-kun. Don't worry, you can turn back into a human -- the problem may be after that, instead."

".....After that?"

"Thinking of yourself as a victim or something. Acting like a victim -- it's hard to look at."

Those were harsh words.

I am perplexed by having such remark brought up.

"Well, I don't think I need to please you..... however, I don't really have the intention of acting like a victim."

"That is enough. Don't forget what you just said Araragi-kun. In any case looking from my point of view, though -- you are too twenty." {甘い}

"Twenty?" {にじゅうい}

"Ah, sorry, too naive." {甘い}

Oshino corrected himself.

No, such slips of the tongue should be impossible.

"There is an appropriate reason for Kaii -- I'm saying. Araragi-kun, the reason you encountered a vampire, it is necessary you think about it more."

"Well, that....., was chance -- wasn't it?"

"It may be chance. However, what you must think about is the reason why that chance occurred.Well -- but now, maybe it's better if you think about taking back Heartunderblade's limbs as first things first. I don't have any obligation to worry about you, however Araragi-kun, that manner of fighting of yours makes me just a little uneasy."

"Well..... I can't say: Leave it all to me."

That aside.

If the specialist Oshino says it -- I wonder if I'll be all right.

That's right.

Though she has a big attitude, certainly Kissshot is trustworthy towards me -- she calls me a servant, but she thinks I owe her my life.

If that's the case.

I too must live up to her.

Answering trust with trust -- a relationship of mutual trust.

"Well then, she should have finished eating by now."

"Ah..... right. I must ask the details about the next opponent, Episode."

We opened the door and returned inside the room.

Indeed, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade -- changed her looks, from that of a ten year old girl, to that of a twelve year old girl.

She grew.

While we weren't watching, she's gotten so big.

010

".....In other words, you are saying that every time she eats one of the stolen limbs, the body of that child grows?"

Hanekawa -- showed her understanding like that.

It is April 1st, immediately after the sunset -- Kissshot is still sleeping. The vampire has days and nights reversed -- even for me it was the same, it was awkward to drag the honor student Hanekawa out at very late night hours, so I endured and rose early.

A barrier is placed in the ruins of this cram school.

So said Oshino.

I was told it doesn't just conceal the existence of Kissshot and me, it even makes it difficult for ordinary persons without a guide to reach here. For this reason I made an arrangement with Hanekawa so that she comes nearby, and after the sun sinks I directly go to meet her.

Hanekawa has come at the time promised and at the place designated.

With her usual uniform.

"Yo."

Hanekawa greeted me with a raised hand.

It was an outgoing behavior that doesn't make me feel the awkwardness.

This moderately informal interpersonal distance puts me at ease.

"Did you bring me the thing I requested?"

"Sure. As you see."

"Good. Thank you. Well then, this way."

And then -- I guided Hanekawa to the ruin of the cram school.

Private property, no trespassing.

We pass through the fence where this sign is affixed (even the fence that surrounds the ruins of the cram school, appropriately for a ruin, is full of holes here and there), and we enter inside the building.

Oshino was out negotiating, and Kissshot was sleeping. I have talked to Kissshot about bringing Hanekawa, but she didn't seem particularly interested. Because it might be a complicated conversation, we should have spoken in another classroom, but Hanekawa wanted to see what Kissshot looked like.

Therefore, for talking to Hanekawa, I chose the same room on the second floor where I am usually passing time. On a corner Kissshot was indulging in indolence, this was the setting. It goes without saying that because planks are nailed on the windows of this room, even starlight doesn't enter. Having vampire eyes I don't have any problems, but Hanekawa has a normal eyesight, so I prepared a flashlight -- well, everything was prepared by Hanekawa though.

And then I, after some gossip (after all since Spring Break I haven't come in contact with newspapers or television), talked with Hanekawa until the morning of today -- Hanekawa was listening attentively, looking very interested.

Honor student.

Her curiosity towards the unknown may be beyond average.

I told her everything I could tell her.

I didn't want to hide anything from her.

Despite today being April 1st, I didn't want to lie to her.

And then, when I finished talking about the 'growth' of Kissshot's body -- Hanekawa

".....In other words, you are saying that every time she eats one of the stolen limbs, the body of that child grows?"
said this.

"Although it is weird calling a vampire that lived 500 years 'that child' -- this is what happened, right?"

Humph.

A moderate comprehension.

Exactly, I nodded.

"The right leg..... from the knee, she grew about two years ahead....., right, once the remaining limbs gets collected, maybe she can perfectly go back to her original looks..... of a 27 years old, I think"

"Hmmm --"

"Well, talking like Freeza-sama, with the left leg and both arms, she is saving two transformations for later."

"Ah, that's easy to understand."

While talking, Hanekawa was watching Kissshot, who was sleeping wheezing over the prefabricated bed Oshino built.

Though a vampire, with a quick glance she didn't look like anything other than a lovely 12 year old girl. The image of me and her being together inside an abandoned building could be really perceived with a tinge of criminality.

I only pray Hanekawa doesn't view it this way.

"Well then, it's my fault -- maybe."

"Eh? What?"

"That Araragi-kun met a vampire."

"....."

Why do you think so?

Although I said I told everything I could tell, without wanting to hide anything, even I am not that much of an idiot. I thought I completely omitted the few passages about Hanekawa's panties and ero-books?

However this agitation was completely missing the mark.

"Don't they say speak of the devil and he shall appear? That proverb is relatively valid for ghost stories. Speak of it and -- the Kaii will approach from the other side."

"Hmmm. However, I didn't--"

Ah.

That.

That day I -- heard it from Hanekawa.

We spoke about a vampire.

At night, I went out alone and--

"--No, it would be ridiculous. If that was the case Hanekawa, a vampire should have appeared even for you, who mentioned it to me."

"It's not like it had to. The likelihood did nothing but increase.Besides, even in front of me... for appearing, he has appeared, right?"

"Hm?"

"Araragi-kun."

Ah.

That's right.

I am a vampire.

I see -- midway on the route to face Dramaturgie, the reason why in that place and time I unexpectedly met with Hanekawa, possibly, may have been because the chances of that had been raised.

There is an appropriate reason for meeting Kaiis.

The reason I met a vampire--

"One can also think about it this way. Thinking that rumors precede Kaii's very existence -- Thinking that because the rumor is made, the Kaii arises. It's along the lines of the so-called folklore."

"Because they exist the rumor comes out, because the rumor comes out they exist -- huh. It looks like the question about whether you like the egg or the chicken meat."

"Hmm? I personally like eggs."

The joke wasn't understood.

Unexploded ordinance.

".....You know everything."

"I don't know everything, I just know what I know."

"I see."

Nodding.

I return the conversation to the main thread.

"Leaving aside rumors and so on, Hanekawa -- yesterday you were looking for a vampire of your own will."

And because of that -- I was mad.

Today, of course, she is not doing such things though.

"For what purpose were you doing that? A higher being -- was it? Did you want to make small talk or something--"

"Well, it's not like I was seriously searching for it. I would be asking for the moon. In some way, I don't know how to say it - have you ever felt a desire for a change in your life?"

"A change....."

In my case, more than a change in my life, it was my ecology which changed.

As I thought, it's unbearable.

Though -- she is an honor student.

Even Hanekawa, class reps of class reps, on occasions won't know how to say something, I was a little surprised.

No -- since she is human, that is natural.

Because even for me who became a vampire the troubles didn't end.

In fact, the troubles have rather multiplied.

"It is an escape from reality, in the end."

"I want to go back to reality."

"You can go back, I am sure."

So Hanekawa told me.

They were words that didn't have any guarantee behind, but -- they were words that made me happy.

"However, although I said I want to be of assistance -- if it comes to such a monstrous story, it doesn't look like there is much I can do."

"It's not true."

I say.

I point with a finger -- the luggage Hanekawa brought -- which has been placed in a big backpack.

"They may be change of clothes and what else, but I thank you for bringing me daily necessities."

"Please, it's fine. At least this."

Hanekawa blushed.

"That aside, how about quickly changing clothes? Your clothes are worn out."

"Uhm."

"When I was picked up by you in such a state I was obviously surprised. Er, can't you borrow some clothes from the man called Oshino?"

"He has only aloha shirts....."

"An aloha is ok."

"If it's LOHAS sure it's ok."⁶

I tried to line up words that were just similar.

Incidentally I don't know the meaning of LOHAS.

However, that aside, there is obviously a limit to how much I can move with these clothes. It would be nice if I could use the matter creation power like Kissshot, but there is no way I can do such thing.

"I see -- errr."

Though.

Obviously, I have a certain unwillingness to change clothes in front of a girl..... if I change clothes I must undress even the lower body.

"But we are not in such a hurry..... I'd say."

⁶ Lifestyles Of Health And Sustainability. Market segment made of ecologically conscious consumers.

Ah.

Now I realized.

Without reflecting about it, yesterday night I asked to Hanekawa "Bring me a change of clothes" a change of clothes in this case is not only shirts and trousers, aren't underpants included too?

"....."

Err.....

Errrrr.....?

"W-Well -- anyway, I think I can change at least the upper body."

While I pretend to be calm, I stretch a hand inside the backpack Hanekawa brought me. Hm, it's packed splendidly.....

Well, she didn't put in only clothes..... so I open the zipper, and they have been packed above the change of clothes.

That is, the underpants were topmost.

"An M size fits you?"

"Y-Yeah....."

"I don't know whether you use as underpants briefs or trunks, so I prepared both"

"....."

It was an unnecessary concern.

No..... I'm sorry. It's my fault. My head doesn't really function too well. It's Hanekawa who had to buy briefs and trunks for my sake, surely she must have felt embarrassed.....

"Hm? What's wrong? Won't you change clothes?"

"I will....."

I say, and I take out a plain shirt folded below the pants. No matter how I look at it, it's brand new. Notwithstanding that, without putting it in a bag, I see that she also cut the tag, and it seems that Hanekawa, after the purchase, washed it once, and after putting it in the dryer brought it to me.

You didn't need to go that far.....

Are you taking pity on me, I wonder.

For the time being I decided to take off the clothes of the upper body which were worn out, and I went through the arms in the sleeves of the plain shirts.

I do it and,

"Please wait."

Hanekawa said.

With that voice she halted my movements, but, oh no, now I am half naked.....

"I was right -- I thought it yesterday too. Araragi-kun, your physique is changing a little."

"Hm?"

Now that you mention it.

Just a little -- more muscular?

No, it's not just a little -- I've got a small six-pack.

"I was right."

Hanekawa repeated.

"Yesterday when I noticed you from behind I was unsure you were really Araragi-kun -- the attachment of your muscles was different. I have the impression they are becoming slender, or to better say tensor."

"....."

What kind of person are you to be able to recognize from behind a young male student you almost didn't get in touch with.

That's what bothers me.

"Mumble mumble."

Suddenly, it appears Kissshot has opened her eyes.

Incidentally, when she 'grew' even the attire and the hairdo were remodeled -- with the 10 years old looks she had a fluffy dress with a bobbed hair, but now that she is 12, the dress had a little more adult-like design, and the hair became long.

"Becoming a vampire changeth thy figure, because the regeneration power tryeth to keep the flesh in the most healthy of conditions."

"Eh?"

"Zzz."

Asleep.

Saying just that, she fell asleep once again.

Is she awake, is she sleeping.....

However, didn't she inadvertently tell a wonderful thing?

Well -- it may be. Undoubtedly, after becoming a vampire, even the nails don't grow -- I can neglect entering in a bath.

I can't find that out in just one week, but certainly even the hair shouldn't have grown.

And there was also that.

I am meaning -- the moderate muscles of my body build.

And this means that if I go further I should be able to become, like Dramaturgie, strong-muscled, and I should also be able to shape-shift a part of my body into weapons--

".....She fell asleep."

"Well, when she woke up she didn't look very well."

"That's -- her 500 years."

"It's a self-allegation, though."

".....However, I feel like I don't believe my eyes."

After saying so Hanekawa added "Please excuse me", and started touching my upper body. She slowly stroked the abs, and after that near the chest.

Stroke.

Stroke.

.....Crap, I am a little aroused.

It's like I am subjected to a tasteless prank.

".....Judging from touch, you are identical to a human. However, somehow, you seem more elastic"

"....."

It was simply intellectual curiosity.

Well, it may have been that.

".....Identical to a human, you say. Hanekawa, have you touched the body of other men?"

"Eh? Oh no, I didn't, of all things."

Flustered, she took away her hand from my body -- although late, she was a bit embarrassed.

"That's right. I blurted out conjecture. Not good.Would you quickly put on your shirt?"

"O-Okay."

I dressed.

It may have been M size, but it felt a little large -- but well, there is no problem in it being large.

Also I like its plainness.

"Hm. It looks good"

"Ah. Thanks -- or rather, I'm sorry. When all this ends, I'll immediately pay you back."

"It's fine. I have my New Year's money I've saved up since I was a child."

"Don't use such things!"

I can pay back the money, but I can't pay back memories!

She is a bottomless girl.....

If I carelessly ask a favor something unlooked-for will happen.

"There are two parkas, they are packed below. Ah, for trousers are jeans ok?"

"Yeah. The preference goes to ease of movement"

"I judged waist size and cuff tucks with eye measurement, so if they seem tight or short tell me. I'll go buy new ones"

"....."

Even if they are a little tight, even if they are a little short, I will endure.

I thought.

Even if I can't try them on here, I thought that for now I'll check the rest, and I rummage the bottom of the backpack.

And.

There I found a bag.

That was -- the large size paper bag of a bookstore.

It appears there are ten books inside.

".....?"

I tried taking it out, and

"Ah, that's a present."

Hanekawa said.

"Yesterday you bought a book of Aikido, right -- you left it in front of the school gate. Based on our conversation from earlier, it was to fight that big man, right?"

"Well -- kind of."

She referred to that Dramaturgie as 'big man'.

Unexpectedly she has some nerve.

"In the end, I felt the baseball textbook I bought together was more useful."

"Ah. The book you were reading when I met you."

"Does it matter?"

Yes, nodded Hanekawa.

"Well, having the caution of making preparations towards a fierce battle is a correct approach I think -- I just thought that you were having a misunderstanding."

"Well, I know -- you say it's just haphazard?"

It's because yesterday she was watching.

My clumsy battle style.

The resigned to luck, I'll -entrust-everything-to-you battle style.

"Certainly, if by reading a manual one immediately mastered something, nobody would have problems."

"Ah, no, no, I wasn't meaning that."

Said Hanekawa.

"Aikido and baseball are things that humans do, right?"

".....? Well, certainly to Dramaturgie a locking technique was meaningless -- No, since his recovery power was not that great, if that time I broke the arm, there might have been some effect."

"Hm. Talk about brutality. However, it's not even that. I was not talking about being on the receiving end, but about what one can achieve. I am talking about what you could do."

"Eh?"

"Aikido is a technique of humans -- baseball too is a sport of humans. At the present time certainly you are gifted with a strength superior to that of humans, and even if you use aikido or baseball, I think that on the contrary it would restrain your strength in vain."

"A--Aaah."

Right.

At present -- a baseball ball was too light for me.

A shot was so-so -- a roller finally felt adequate.

Because all parameters were simultaneously increased, it was inevitably hard to become well aware of it, but for the present me, the techniques of humans -- may on the contrary become a hindrance.

"Therefore what you should read now, my thought, are these."

Saying that, Hanekawa opened the paper bag I took out from the backpack, and exposed the contents to me.

They were manga.

Moreover, all Gakuen Inoue Batoru.

Boys in school uniform on the front covers.

".....!"

"I tried searching, but I couldn't find vampire high schoolers as main characters, so I tried choosing stories where the main characters are boys who use ESP."

"Y-you tried choosing....."

"Perhaps, in this way"

She opened a page.

A main character-looking boy was running on the wall.

"The present you should be capable of a movement that disregards the laws of physics."

"Haa....."

I was involuntarily taken aback -- no.

Isn't this idea unexpectedly not so bad?

On the contrary -- it is fairly good.

You didn't lose the common sense from when you were a human -- said Dramaturgie. His words suggested he, like me, was a former human. And in the actual fight, as foretold, because I was thinking inside the box of that common sense, I got into an unnecessary pinch.

Since I could even backflip -- I should be able to run on walls.

"Ah..... well thought."

"I tried going on reading, it was fairly interesting."

"Hummm....."

It was a manga I didn't know, but certainly it seemed interesting.

"The books I personally recommend are romances, but thinking about the purpose, the ones more immediate should be manga. Because by memorizing with a picture is easier to leave something in memory."

"I agree."

"Well, please let me give them as a reference. Also, I think you better still go choose them to your liking."

".....Thank you."

However..... when we talked last night, I didn't tell to Hanekawa that I had yet to face Episode and Guillotincutter later, and yet these quality preparations.....

As I thought, she is no ordinary person.

"Here. This is a book card for those occasions."

"The preparations are too good."

"Hmm? Was cash better?"

"Cash sucks!"

What the heck am I saying!

Anyway....., I am grateful for receiving so much concern from Hanekawa. Book card included.

Well, I really don't have any money.

I spent too much on books.

"You are a big help, Hanekawa. I will absolutely repay you."

"No. What I can do is just this."

"Just this -- is more than enough."

To tell the truth -- it's reassuring.

If she turned the other way, I would have really been helpless.

I can't call Oshino a friend -- and Kisshot was the source of the circumstances, moreover a vampire.

I've never thought that just being able to chat with another person would soothe me this much.

No -- she is not another person, she is a friend.

"Truly -- thank you."

"No way, in times of trouble we have equal standing. If there is something else you want me to do, Araragi-kun, feel free to say anything. This was the best I could do now though"

"Yeah. I'll rely on you."

"That's right. Now let's clean this room."

It is in total disorder, Hanekawa said.

Well, this is an abandoned building, you know.

The instant I said it, Hanekawa has already started moving -- hey, wait a minute, I won't force you to do this much.

"Don't bother, it was like this from the start."

"That's even more the reason why you mustn't leave it untidy. Any place that you can tidy up, you must always tidy it up --
Hmm? What is this?"

Hanekawa picked up something from a corner of the room.

For a moment I didn't understand what the heck it was that. However it became immediately clear. That was similarly a large bookshop bag -- however it's not the one Hanekawa brought, and neither the one I bought yesterday, in which there were the aikido, baseball, classical music books.

However it was a bag I recognize.

And then I realize.

Yes.

That was the bag with the two ero-books, which I should have thrown away the first day of the Spring Break.

"Mumble mumble"

In background Kisshot was talking in her sleep.

"I forgot to say to thee. The bag thou wert carrying which looked important fell on the roadside, so when we came here, I took care picking it up for thee"

"Y-You there!"

"Zzz."

Fallen asleep.

Ooh..... Hanekawa was staring at the contents of the bag.

A female high-schooler was staring at an ero-book of female high-schoolers.....

"Let's see, you met a vampire returning from a bookstore -- wasn't it? At March the 25th? The night of the day you crossed path with me?"

".....!"

Amazing!

What phenomenal intuition!

H-Hey wait, aren't you by any chance making my most unwished-for misunderstanding!?

"Ehhehehe."

Hanekawa raised her face, and looked at me with a grin that covered her face.

The flashlight was illuminating her from below, and that made her looked like a Kaii.

And then she takes out a book from the bag, and opens it to a certain page. In that page, dreadfully, an exceedingly ridiculous scheme, namely 'Special feature: class reps with glasses' unfolded.

Hanekawa with a very soft -- purring voice said.

"Hey. What is this?"

011

Episode.

A guy with sanpaku eyes⁷, wearing a white uniform, and carrying on his shoulder in one hand a gigantic cross, three times his height, the cube of his weight.

He is -- a vampire hunter, I hear.

He hunts vampires aiming for monetary reward, you could say he is a hit man.

And then -- furthermore, in addition, at the same time.

He is -- a half vampire.

Hunter and half.

According to the angle he could look like nothing but a youngster, but on the contrary he is a specialist in vampire exorcism who stole Kissshot's left leg -- this is Episode.

".....You are late."

Three days since then -- April 4th.⁸

The line-up of ill-omened numbers subtly made me uneasy, but even if I fuss over such a thing that I have no control over, I still can't do anything about it.

I tried to check the time on my wristwatch, and I noticed I forgot to put on my wristwatch -- then I thought I'd check it on my cellphone, and I even forgot my cellphone.

Disconcerting.

As I thought, I am not calm.

Well, whatever -- because when it comes to it, the person I want to get in touch with, Oshino Meme, a vagrant-like person, doesn't own a cellphone or a PHS⁹. But then, as said by the person himself, it seems he is an idiot with electronics.

Well, the cellphone is a tool that seems rather barely related to spirits and Kaiis.

That aside, the night of April 4th.

Once again I went to the school field of Naoetsu private high school at night.

Naturally -- the second battle.

To fight with the second specialist at vampire exorcism, Episode.

In these three days, I considered many things -- however, I ultimately settled on going unarmed, similar to the fight with Dramaturgie.

"It is better not to carry weapons."

I followed the opinion of Hanekawa.

"Well, a normal weapon might not withstand your present superhuman strength as a vampire, and even assuming you prepared a weapon that could withstand it, if you were walking around carrying it and a policeman questioned you, what would you do?"

⁷ Eyes with visible white between the iris and the lower eyelid.

⁸ 4th month 4th day. 4 is an unlucky number for Japanese because it is homophone with "death".

⁹ Personal Handyphone System.

"....."

Now, she really had a point.

"Well, if you say so, I think those vampire exorcists should receive questioning from authorities for sure."

"Those people are professionals, aren't they? Won't they know ways to avert that at least?"

"Uhm."

Thinking about it, Dramaturgie was able to turn his body into fog.

I guess he is thinking outside those people's boxes.

It follows that I'm unarmed -- I feel like I'm not capitalizing on the lessons acquired from my blunder of having challenged Dramaturgie's two wavy blades empty-handed the previous time, but Hanekawa, I owe her one, taught me a few things she could observe from that fight, even if she was just watching from behind the building.

Essentially, she found my faults.

Making the best of that experience -- I will fight.

As usual, Kissshot's advice was hardly of use -- below I'll recall the scene of when I received Kissshot's advice.

"Vampire hunter and half vampire -- well, I too know at least that of vampire terminology, however Kissshot, can't I receive information that is a little more detailed?"

The 12 year old looking Kissshot, however, to my question, replied this.

"I forgot."

She said.

She forgot.....

As always throwing out her chest with a proud attitude -- because passing from a 10 year old to a 12 year old she was experiencing the so-called age of secondary sexual characteristics, the puffing of the chest in itself indeed happened, however certainly it was not because of proud words.

"Hm -- My memory is dropping. Ah, did I tell thee before?"

"Those are amusing words....."

"Uhm. Wait a minute."

Saying that, Kissshot put her right hand beside the face in a handchop, and without taking aim she thrust those four fingernails in her own temple.

The tiny right hand sank in the head of the blonde girl up to the wrist.

The blood gushed out like crazy, evaporated and vanished.

"H-H-Hey.....!"

"Wait a minute. I will remember at once."

Like that, Kissshot crudely stirred up her own cranium, that is the squashy cerebral insides. From the wound not only blood, but also a liquid which was probably spinal fluid spilled out whistling.

".....!"

Nononononononono.

This is totally unsuitable for an anime.

The fingers got entangled even in the ocular muscles or something, because the right eye was exhibiting a novel movement that could only make you think it has been possessed by the devil.

S-She is literally searching her mind.

What a mnemonic technique.

"Uhm."

At last Kissshot extracted the deep red stained hand.

She was smiling, refreshed.

"I remembered."

".....What?"

I interrupted, while seeing that even the blood that stained the hair was still evaporating.

"What did you remember?"

"As also clear from the fact that Dramaturgie tried to make thee a comrade, he was not hunting vampire because he hated them, but Episode is different. He hath an antipathy towards vampires."

"Antipathy? How come -- Isn't he 50% vampire? Well, since he is a hunter, I'm sure he at least is not an ally but --"

"Well, about the half vampires -- since the samples are scarce to begin with, I cannot draw a conclusion -- but in most cases, they hate vampires."

"Why?"

"Well, simply put, because a half vampire is an entity not accepted by the vampire world. On the other hand, it is not like the human world could accept him either. Hence -- he hateth his vampire blood."

"Shouldn't he hate humans as well, then?"

"He may not like them, however what's the point for thee to hate people who are weaker than thyself?"

Kissshot said a blunt thing.

"Though a half, his strength cannot be compared to that of an average human. Above all Episode seemeth to bear a strong hatred towards vampires. I do not know in which way he was raised -- well, he must have been raised in a way that is better to be left unknown. Therefore do not think he will simply give up. Unlike Dramaturgie, he is acting out of personal feelings rather than work."

"Sigh--"

So he is not as committed to professionalism as Dramaturgie, huh.

"Half vampires, in exchange for an immortality even weaker than that of a vampire's -- are characterized by almost not bearing the weak points of a vampire. They can even walk under the sun -- and they can even cast a shadow."

"Eeh..... they can cast a shadow?"

"In other words -- talking about the converse, in exchange for having the advantages halved, they are stripped of almost all the weak points."

"Aah....."

I see.

It depends but -- not having weak points makes one a little formidable.

"What can I do to win?"

"Uhm? Well, how about doing as usual?"

"....."

Thanks for your overconfidence in me.

That said -- the night of the appointed day has come.

During these three days, I was absorbed with reading manga. Looking from an external point of view, well, I was idling, or if not that I was feeling like doing nothing, but I couldn't help it -- you could say I covered almost all the manga of the Gakuen Inou Batoru genre published in major magazines.

It's a mystery, but if you read driven by necessity, no matter how interesting the manga is, the hand that turns the pages over becomes slow..... including today, since then Hanekawa has come to the cramming school immediately after sunset to deliver me manga daily, so I couldn't say it was already enough.

I have even received a book card, but in the end it was better for me not to go out that much.

So said Oshino.

The night of April 1st, exactly, immediately after Hanekawa went home, Oshino came back -- it happened then. I even thought I could almost introduce Hanekawa, but since it appeared Oshino chose expressly the time Hanekawa went home to return, I presumed I wasn't suppose to interfere.

"I talk from a neutral standpoint, but that's a nice idea. That class rep-chan is sharp."

After Oshino said that,

"However, I believe I have to speak against you going out save for the day of the showdowns."

He continued.

"Because there is the possibility that they are aiming for that time."

"Well, but -- this should be covered by your negotiations."

"The key of a negotiation is not giving the opponent any chance, you know. I don't think they will meddle with you, but you may not find it fun to be followed."

"Even if I am followed, this place won't be discovered, right?"

It's a barrier that only the residents, me, Kissshot, and also the man who affixed it himself, Oshino can enter -- I believe he told me this was the effectiveness of the barrier.

"Well, I am confident about the barrier. However, I'd like to thwart the minimum possibilities."

"The possibilities --"

"Class rep-chan will come tomorrow too, right? If you wish to increase the variety of the manga you read, try asking her in that occasion. Ah, I think that since there is a barrier, even if she comes here twice or thrice, she will get lost though -- I have no choice but to include her."

"B-But--"

"Obviously, since I can't help you, if you say class rep-chan is out, you will have to rely on your other friends."

There isn't any other friend.

I have no choice but to rely on Hanekawa.

"Ah, if you've finished reading it lend it to me too."

And with that single irritating word, Oshino left.

He came back and then immediately went out.....

But when does he sleep?

I have often seen him lying down, but come to think of it I've never seen him sleeping -- is he working so hard on the negotiations?

If so, then maybe I could at least lend him manga.

And Hanekawa is a really nice person, the next day -- that is to say April 2nd, when she came back to the ruins of the cramming school, I made the request, and immediately she took upon herself the role of "person in charge of purchases" in reply, and from then until today, that is to say April 4th, for three consecutive days she went buying her recommended manga and my requested manga.

She is too nice.

Today I went out after three days and

"Good Luck."

She cheered me with words of encouragement.

They were simple words, but they filled my heart.

"Really..... if I return to human form, I wonder what I can do to thank her."

However.

At that time -- I was off the mark.

About the strength of the girl called Hanekawa Tsubasa.

And I had yet to grasp -- the amount of danger involved by now.

"I think that guy actually went back home --"

While I murmured something terribly idyllic if looking back from future developments -- at last, Episode appeared.

He appeared on the Naoetsu private high school's sport field.

In the guise of fog -- he appeared.

"....."

Vampire hunter.

Half vampire.

He doesn't have the weak points of a vampire.

However -- even if weakened by half, the abilities of a vampire remained.

A guy with a thin lines image -- and sanpaku eyes.

White uniform.

He looked very young -- but the gigantic cross carried on a shoulder with one hand refuted this impression.

With a faint smile like on that day -- he gave me a sharp glare.

Episode.

The guy who had stolen Kissshot's left leg.

"That's hilarious."

He suddenly said.

Not even a word of apology for coming late.

"Really, it makes me laugh -- chief Dramaturgie was reverse-exorcised by a brat like you, of all things. Talk about slacking off -- I really hate vampires' guts, including those of fellow vampire exorcists, and yet I still respected chief Dramaturgie, him alone --"

"....."

He was full of hostility and spite.

On top of that, he was looking down on me.

Well, if he hates vampires and humans, a former human like me who has just become a vampire must be his most hated type.

"Well? What should I do with you, brat?"

".....What you should do, you say."

"This is a fight -- in what should I fight you? I'm cool even with something not violent -- I feel like I will never lose to the likes of you."

"I'm sorry."

I say.

"Apart from being Kissshot's subordinate, I'm just a normal person -- among other things I was even a dunce. I can only go with vampire hunters and vampires. Besides, I don't think I can beat you in anything but rock paper scissors."

"Aw, man. That's -- hilarious."

I'm seriously laughing my head off, said Episode.

"You are unexpectedly a chicken. I've hunted some former human vampires, but -- they all got carried away more. Like they felt they had become all-powerful. Just because they obtained an ability akin to a mosquito, they put on the airs of world leaders. That's hilarious."

"....."

I don't know how much he strives for 'local lingo', but for this guy with a dangerous cross on the shoulder repeating 'that's hilarious' over and over can't help but feel so out of place.....¹⁰

I don't know what the person himself thinks about it, though.

"Well, I teach reality to those guys though. But it seems you don't need it -- It spares me the work. Therefore, today is a special service."

¹⁰ Episode speaks like an alpha male, but the expression translated with "that's hilarious" is only used by young girls.

Episode said, closing one eye.

That may have been a wink.

"I'll kill you in such a way your side effect won't play out."

".....I've already heard those words before."

"It's my catchphrase. That's hilarious, right? When you'll imitate me, set it up properly."

Saying this -- Episode offered the hand from the side that didn't carry the cross.

A handshake?

A handshake before a fight?

The guy is surprisingly polite..... while thinking that, I tried to grasp that hand, however in that instant Episode quickly moved it --

-- and formed scissors with it.

"Yeah, I win."

"....."

"You can't defeat me in rock paper scissors either -- therefore I'll beat you even in vampire hunters and vampires."

"Oshino is the type that I'm not good with."

I said.

"But you -- you are the type that I hate."

"Oh man, if you say this to people like me, you can't fight Guillotinecutter -- not even I can come close to his nastiness. Well, since tonight you will lose against me, luckily you won't ever have to fight him though."

"You are very self-confident."

"You could say that."

However, he said.

"I agree that man, Oshino Meme, is a twisted bastard. Man, that's hilarious. Because he put up this farce -- be it with a former human vampire or a genuine vampire, I've never done such a fair and square battle."

"Let me hear the terms."

"Yeah. If I win you'll tell me Heartunderblade's whereabouts -- in the fat chance you defeat me I'll return the left leg of that girl. This kind of thing?"

"Yeah -- exactly."

"By the way, do you understand the meaning of these terms?"

Episode continued with a grinning face while I nodded.

"*It's forbidden to fight to kill* -- in this battle. In order to get Heartunderblade's whereabouts from you, I can't kill you, if you want to get back from me the left leg of that girl, you can't kill me either. The action seems rough, yet it draws a line from being a deathmatch. It's a peaceful thing --"

"....."

A game.

Oshino defined it in that manner.

It is not a deathmatch, but a game.

"And -- it's like you say. Dramaturgie, Guillotinecutter, me too, we are all professional -- you don't have any odds of victory unless you do things this way. He chose the method that gave you some chance."

For -- real?

This is to balance things?

That glib man -- did he think this far, and set up this kind of fight?

His neutral -- negotiation service.

2 million yen -- he asked.

"Well, obviously, if I just knew Kisshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade's whereabouts, you and that woman, together -- guess what, I'd kill you in such a way your side effect won't play out, you know?"

Episode laughs.

"Just so you know, don't think I'll go easy on you. I hate bullying the weak -- but I love bullying villains."

"Am I a villain?"

"You must be. You are a monster after all."

".....Even you."

Even you are the same.

I couldn't say that.

He is -- just half.

"Eh? Even you -- what? If there's something you want to say, spit it out."

"No, it's nothing..... there is nothing I want to say. Let's begin."

"Yeah, let's finish this."

The introduction was over.

Contrary to the time I fought Dramaturgie, it was me who attacked first -- in fact, I was thinking only about making the first move.

In fact, I don't have any fighting experience.

If I turn defensive, I'll start shaking in no time, and I won't understand what's going on before my eyes anymore -- I should at least launch myself into offense.

With a movement I saw in a manga, I rushed in and unleashed a punch I placed all my body weight on -- however, that punch cut the air.

Or to better say -- it cut the fog.

In an instant, Episode changed his body into fog -- it is impossible to hit the fog. I was drawn in by the arm in which I placed my body weight on in a weird pose, and staggered forward.

This is bad, the counterattack will come -- and I put myself on guard, however, having turned into fog, even the other person was likewise unable to attack.

Episode, turned to fog together with the huge cross,

"Sorry, but in raw strength I'm no match for you, the Kaii Killer's subordinate -- I don't plan to fight you in close combat."

He said, while in form of fog -- he restored his body in a place quite distant from me.

Even the cross was reconstituted.

The cross became fog too -- is it a part of his body, like with Dramaturgie?

No, I am mistaken..... if I had to say it, he handles it in the same way as the clothes.

The same as Dramaturgie and Kissshot's clothes.

It must be that.

".....What are you planning to do from that far away?"

"I'll do this!"

Said Episode --

And he threw that gigantic cross towards me.

Offhandedly --

Unlike what I did when I faced Dramaturgie before, he didn't have a pitching stance or anything, he threw it just using raw power.

"W.....whoa."

It was completely unexpected.

Don't tell me he throws that gigantic cross, three times his height -- well, if we go there I was going to throw a roller too, but -- a vampire hunter that throws crosses!?

This guy is not pious at all!

I had thought of it was a weapon, but -- I was adamant he was just going to use it like a broadaxe --!

".....Kuh!"

At the last moment -- I dodged it.

I dodged, and mentally cursed.

Am I stupid, will I ever learn -- I don't have any need to dodge the opponent's attack! After all, with the regenerative power that comes from being Kissshot's subordinate, I'll be healed in the blink of an eye -- I thought I had to make the best of that advantage! That may be the common sense from when I was a human, but I unintentionally dodged by reflex. It was because I could see it with vampire eyes -- however.

However, this time it was a blessing.

The cross I thought I dodged, as a matter of fact just barely grazed my right shoulder -- and that right shoulder, the following instant, burst into flames.

It flared up.

It -- evaporated.

Exactly like the time I basked under the sunlight --

"T-The cross--!"

I mean -- isn't it a weak point of all vampires?

Even I knew at least that!

Episode was carrying it like it was overly, overly ordinary, furthermore its extreme conspicuity was on the contrary a blind spot -- that is, he was so completely unperturbed by me noticing it that I left it out of my consideration.

I see.

As a half vampire Episode doesn't have the weak points of the vampire -- in other words, he is unfazed by crosses.

The cross.

A gigantic cross.

And that weapon, it looked like there was nothing to it but if I touched it directly, it seems that the effect comes out.

That terrific effect.

The evaporated skin -- in addition, doesn't regenerate.

Well, it's not like it doesn't regenerate -- although the regeneration is abnormally slow. Even if it's the recovery power of the subordinate of Kissshot -- it doesn't catch up.

Then this is bad -- more than with the sun.

One just touched it directly and it had an instant effect.

And just by a scratch -- I am in this state.

What would have happened if I took the blow directly!?

"Eh.....?"

While I was worrying over my wound, once again Episode turned into fog -- and in the form of fog he switched places.

I was convinced he would have come here to attack me, however, as previously stated, Episode didn't get close. Speaking of where he went, it was the spot he threw the gigantic cross at a moment ago.

Having grazed my shoulder tip, it pierced the sport field with a 10 meter long tip up to half its length. Episode restored his flesh nearby -- and then he uprooted the buried cross.

"Come to think of it, when you fought with chief Dramaturgie, you threw things from far away -- nice idea. I too, when I fight with Dramaturgie look-alikes, use the same trick -- like this!"

So saying -- he threw the cross a second time.

Aimed at me.

This time I avoid it perfectly -- however, while it might be true I dodged it, I couldn't relax. It took me a while to understand what kind of battle plan Episode decided for me, but now I got all the details.

In the previous battle with Dramaturgie.

Hanekawa observed basically two faults.

The first one --

"If your opponent did the same what would you do?"

Was this.

"With the physical strength of that big man, if he threw back your shot or roller, what would you have done?"

And then -- the second one.

"The scary thing with attacks from long range, more than anything else, is running out of ammunitions. Because you throw your weapon -- even if the cage was full of balls, I think it was a poor move throwing them without thinking"

What Episode was doing now against a vampire like me was admirably free from those two faults.

First, the throwing of that cross.

No matter how much I try, I can't throw back that cross -- in what way can I throw a cross I can't even touch?

The moment I touch it, the part that touched it evaporates.

Furthermore, there is no worry of running out of ammunitions.

He turns into fog -- and he can go taking back the tossed cross by himself.

".....Half vampire --"

He is unfazed with touching crosses.

He can turn his body into fog.

He is making the best use of his own advantages -- heck, he is using even the weak points!

"That's hilarious."

As supporting my conjecture -- once again he restored his body nearby the cross stuck into the ground.

And then with all his strength he pulled it out.

"I'll slowly shave you to death like this -- I beg you, at least take care of not getting your heart hit. It's not like I can kill yy-- ouu !"

While speaking -- a surprise throw.

I can dodge it -- this maybe is because, as he said, I top him in terms of power. Even the arm strength of a half vampire can bring forth plenty of speed, and yet it is not something that can surpass the eyesight and explosive power of me as a full vampire.

Although -- as it is, certainly, he will shave me to death.

I don't have any card to play -- in the Gakuen Inou Batoru books I've read in these three days, there wasn't this kind of development!

I turn around.

As I thought, the cross was stuck into the ground.

That was -- exactly like a grave marker.

The cross stuck into the sport field --!

And then nearby there, his shape arose.

"You can give up -- although in any case tomorrow I'll kill you. You can think I have a one track mind, you can think I'm stuck in a rut, I don't care, I'll kill you with the same technique I'm using now -- because vampires are helpless against crosses."

"....."

He is -- a professional.

Although he acts from personal motives, he is a pro too.

I look at the shoulder wound received in the beginning. It still hasn't completely regenerated -- I keep feeling a violent pain.

I have no plan.

At any rate, unless it was a short conclusive battle, there were no ways for the experience-less me to win against an experienced opponent -- although, against his careful set up -- I can do nothing.

Thus I'm in a desperate situation.

Even if I run to the physical storehouse, with the opponent being fog there is no meaning to throw shots or rollers -- what kind of counterattack should I do against an opponent who won't be hit by physical blows?

Due to the panic the body completely stiffened, if I'm like this I won't avoid Episode's next attack, I somehow came up with this strangely calm conclusion. It happened then.

"A -- Araragi-kun!"

That yell -- reached my ears.

An auditory hallucination this loud is impossible -- looking at the direction the voice came from, who was the person there..... oh well, if that much was said it's already clear from the voice, it was Hanekawa Tsubasa.

She came out from behind the building.

Like on that day, she was -- hiding there?

How absurd -- Hanekawa was supposed to be back at home, and yet --

"You can't give up yet! Your opponent is fog, therefore --"

Like ignoring my confusion, Hanekawa shaped both hands as a megaphone by the mouth, and she kept yelling toward me.

"A fog, therefore -- in other words --"

".....That's hilarious."

He said.

Episode, without any hesitation, threw that gigantic cross prepared against me -- *toward Hanekawa*.

Eh?

What?

Why did he do that --

"Ha..... Hanekawaaaaa!"

The reflexes of Hanekawa are by no means poor, I hear.

She is an honor student.

Even her PE grades in themselves are outstanding -- although after all this is within the common sense of humans.

She cannot be compared to vampires, of course.

And neither to half vampires.

With her eyesight and explosive power, dodging that cross is unattainable -- she could slip out at most half a step from that place, that was all.

An arm of the cross -- *dug through her flank.*

Naturally, not being a vampire, even if she was touched by the cross she wouldn't ignite nor evaporate, but even so there is no mistaking that gigantic cross was a thick mass of silver.

Her tender flank.

Offered no resistance at all.

".....!"

I mustered all my running speed, and rushed over to Hanekawa's spot. For my senses it took only a moment -- as a matter of fact, before Hanekawa fell backward on the ground, I managed to catch her.

However.

In the end it was already -- too late.

The uniform of Hanekawa got torn, her skin got torn, her muscles got torn, her ribs got torn, her internal organs got torn. A bright red blood poured out without end -- it didn't stop.

The wound is too big, stopping the blood is out of the question.

Of course -- the pieces of meat scattered around, or the blood gushed forth, didn't evaporate.

They soaked the sport field as they were.

Without hurry.

The red -- the red was sinking.

"Ha..... Hanekawa, Hanekawa, Hanekawa, Hanekawa!"

".....Ehhehhe."

Hanekawa.

She laughed like she felt shy.

In these circumstances.

Like she felt embarrassed her internal organs have been seen.

She acted shy.

"Araragi-kun, you are loud."

".....!"

"Y-Your cellphone."

The complexion of Hanekawa was steadily worsening.

And even then she didn't let down her smiling face.

She didn't let down her smiling face and continued.

"You forgot your cellphone. I've come -- to bring it to you."

"I-I don't care about the cellphone!"

I cried.

Although even Hanekawa understands that -- cellphones and so on, for Hanekawa are nothing more than a pretext.

I'm sure Hanekawa was simply worried.

Without going back home -- she came here.

And then, not being able to stand watching -- she came out.

There's no way she didn't understand how great the danger was!

"Get a grip on yourself..... your opponent is fog."

Though the ground was steadily being dyed red -- nevertheless the tone of Hanekawa was firm.

"The fog is, in other words, just water."

".....?Ha-Hanekawa?"

"Araragi-kun."

With a firm tone of voice -- she slowly closes her eyes.

"What was your record at the running long jump?"

I felt her weight.

Like taking those words as a cue, suddenly the body of Hanekawa got heavy. Though the blood is pouring out so much -- just by losing consciousness, humans become so heavy.

Then.

What happens if they lose their life.

"Ha -- Hilarious. How long are you gonna make me wait?"

I looked.

Episode had already picked up the cross which went through Hanekawa -- he was facing in this direction, and he was ready.

"If you keep standing there, the body of that girl will get injured more."

"Y-You..."

"For your information, you're the one who broke the pact first -- Kaii Killer's subordinate. It should have been a one-on-one. Well, since I also meddled with an outsider, I'll say we're even."

"Hanekawa -- is an ordinary human."

She can't be counted in.

What in the world could Hanekawa have done?

"Against an ordinary human, you--!"

And yet.

Even humans -- are your enemies?

Not only the ones you hate -- are enemies?

Not only vampires, even humans --!

Even if that's the case, you still shouldn't drag Hanekawa into this -- when she lost consciousness, with a firm tone of voice to the last moment, she gave me an advice, whose meaning I unfortunately didn't understand at a--

".....!"

Fog?

Water?

Running long jump?

Ah -- no.

No, I've understood.

I see..... it's 'advantage of terrain'.

I withdraw the previous statement, Hanekawa could be truly counted in.

With this, I can win!

"Oooooooooooooo!"

Yelling with all my strength -- I started running.

I lay down the body of Hanekawa gently on the sport field, and I put into practice, without further elaboration, a tactic I conceived from her hint.

The current position of Episode and 'that place' was in a straight line -- above that line, I stop my feet. And then, at exactly the same time, Episode throws the gigantic cross at me. That was perfect -- no, not yet.

If I don't dodge that cross I won't satisfy the requirements!

I don't jump, I crouch on the spot -- when the gigantic cross passes over my head, it takes away a tuft of hair.

And then the cross gets stuck into 'that place'.

"What what -- you should be angry yet in the end you just escape! Ha! You are lame through and through -- That's hilarious!"

Episode immediately turn his body into fog, and chases after the cross.

However I too wasn't going to stay in that place aimlessly -- from that crouched over stance, knees in a spring, I jump up at once!

With that shock, the sport field -- was not just dented, it was cracked.

I will have to make it level again afterwards.

However, now I couldn't care less about such thing -- It was the first time keeping a posture in mid-air, but it was quite difficult.

Vampire jumping power.

Vertically I jumped perhaps 20 meters.

And then, forward -- 20 meters.

Precisely as I aimed for.

I land in 'that place'.

'That place' -- like the PE storehouse, having attended this school for two years, and having received PE lessons, there's no way I don't know 'that place'.

That is -- installed at one end of the sport field, the sand pit.

I landed there.

Running long jump.

Though without the approach run.

I don't need it.

And yet this was surely a running long jump.

The landing happened right beside the cross that was stuck deep into the sand pit -- the arrival at the sand pit of Episode turned into fog, was once again simultaneous.

"Ha -- That's hilarious! A great power, however there is no way such imprecise kick can hit me as fog!"

Still turned into fog Episode laughs.

It wasn't the case to laugh, though.

"Fog is nothing but water"

I say.

"If I were to spread around the sand here, what would happen?"

Running long jump -- when you land, you merrily scatter sand around.

Though that would have happened even with a normal running long jump -- this is a vampire running long jump. The sand stored in the sand pit got all dispersed -- it is an intense landing.

In addition, because of the cross Episode threw just before, the sand of the sand pit was stirred and dispersed -- my landing there was the final blow.

As expected.

Episode -- displayed his figure.

In the same way for example Hanekawa's blood has permeated the soil of the sport field -- Episode didn't have the intention, it was simply a physical phenomenon.

He showed his figure.

"Wh.....Wh.....!"

".....Ooo!"

With the chance of Episode being disoriented, I throw myself upon his slender body -- while the sand which flew up fell from the sky, I pushed down Episode on the spot with all my body weight.

Being mounted over, Episode still struggles and resists -- but I held him down against his will with brute force.

I hold him down with brute force, I wring his neck.

Episode can't turn his body into fog for a while.

If so -- with my strength, I win.

I.

I. I. I. I.

".....!"

I'll kill him!

There is a me that from somewhere, from a place that is not here, is observing a me in whom the inside of the head is becoming completely empty.

Completely empty.

The fact I was transformed into a vampire, my opponent being a half vampire, Kisshot's left leg, everything -- has disappeared from inside my head.

There are only.

There are only the internal organs of Hanekawa.

Inside a completely empty head, I cling to them -- therefore.

Therefore I, he,

Just him -- I have to kill--

"Enough."

Tap.

In that moment -- a light hand was laid on my shoulder.

"If you go further -- you will lose your humanity."

".....!"

Without taking my hands off Episode's neck, I looked over my shoulder -- the person there was a man in an aloha shirt, Oshino Meme.

While sand was raining down.

He was standing there like it was natural.

"A--Ah..."

Even that time with Dramaturgie -- he was watching from somewhere, he said. Therefore he was certainly doing it this time too. I had completely forgotten this -- however, if that's the case!

"Y-You! Couldn't you have stopped Hanekawa!"

"Don't yell it. You are so energetic, did something good happen?"

Even in a situation like that -- Oshino broke in a frivolous laugh.

He was displaying a rather annoying smiling face.

"However even if you are energetic, I'm sorry but you are in the middle of a match. Look, he fainted."

"Eh --"

After being told I notice it.

Episode was showing the white of his eyes. I took off my hands, confused, I distinctly left the mark of my fingers on the base of his neck.

"E..... Eh?"

What was I trying to do now?

Was I -- trying to kill him?

Him, a half vampire..... half human?

However -- however, Hanekawa.

Hanekawa.

"Hanekawa!"

"Ah, I saw her."

"How could you watch -- why didn't you stop her!"

"Not covered by the fee. I am contracted only for negotiations with the three specialists in vampire exorcism -- more than that costs extra. I have no concern with an ordinary person."

Two million --

The compensation fee.

The balance.

"Then say it from the beginning! If you'd told me so--"

"You could have paid her part of the fee, another two million yen, you say?"

"Two million? I would even have paid you three million yen!"

"Woah, that's grand."

"This is not the time to joke, Oshino!"

"It's not a joke, it's bargaining, Araragi-kun. And with three million yen, negotiations are completed."

Said Oshino unfazed.

"I'll give you a hint, then. Use your head a little, Araragi-kun -- what do you use your immortal body for?"

"Er --"

"Well, it's like you say, just because a single human took part in the strife between a vampire and a half vampire, there's no reason to kill. That's overdoing -- therefore for that additional charge I will tell you one good thing. This is a case where you don't wring any neck -- try remembering"

"Remember, you say....."

What?

There wasn't even time to think about this question.

Like Kissshot showed me before -- I formed a handchop, and I plunged it into my temple.

I don't care that you can't turn this into an anime!

With all my strength -- I fiddle with my brain. I savor the revolting touch of blood, spinal fluid and brain until I'm sick and tired of it -- and then.

".....!"

I immediately remembered.

A special characteristic of vampires -- I immediately knew what to do. On the spot, with the hand still plunged inside the brain -- I left behind Oshino and Episode, and with all my strength I ran up to the body of Hanekawa lying down.

Five minutes.

If the oxygen doesn't go to the brain for five minutes, the brain ceases activity -- speaking on the converse if I make it in time, even if the heart has stopped, she should be safe.

Safe.

Not even three minutes has passed yet.

I extract the handchop from my temple -- and I drop the blood stuck on that hand into the hollowed flank of Hanekawa, into that excessively big wound.

I heard it from Kissshot.

In the blood of vampires there is a healing effect -- and then in this case, this blood is the blood of me, the subordinate of Kissshot, the Iron-Blooded, Hot-Blooded, Cold-Blooded Vampire.

Obviously, since my vampire blood evaporates from the point that bleeds, I created wounds on my body, one after another, it was necessary to keep the blood pouring -- I did it.

And before my eyes -- it was visible.

The wound of Hanekawa was healing.

The internal organs were regenerated, the bones were regenerated, the muscles were regenerated, the skin was regenerated -- and in the end, without leaving not even one scar -- she was restored.

More than regeneration -- it seemed like regression.

I try touching her gently.

I try stroking Hanekawa's flank.

Pale and gently sloping, that part seemed thin even for her years -- very tender, it looked so glassy that if you pushed it, it would have collapsed, but it was still certainly real.

".....A-aaa."

In one breath.

Emotions stifled to death escape out.

In the blink of an eye, the chest is filled.

"Ha--Hanekawa!"

I hugged her belly passionately.

Though if I squeezed her with the strength of a vampire and broke her thin body, I would be back to square one.

".....Araragi-kun."

Hanekawa who seemed to have recovered consciousness said suddenly.

No -- it seems her consciousness returned a little while back.

"Why are you rubbing your cheek on my stomach like it is so precious for you?"

"Er..."

"In addition, is my ripped uniform by any chance your deed?"

It may happen that people are unable to recollect what happened just before losing consciousness.

It seems that somehow this is also the case for Hanekawa.

Let aside your uniform, even your organs were ripped, you know.

"Please, Hanekawa."

I said to her, without changing posture, with my face buried in her flank.

I want to make sure she is alive.

"Let me stay like this just a little longer."

012

I guess it was because of the difference in volume between the left leg from the joint and the right leg from the knee down. The transformation of Kissshot who ate her own left leg was dramatic. I was surprised by her growth from the 10 year old look to the 12 year old look -- but this time, even if I knew from the beginning her body would have changed, I was still even more surprised.

After she got back her left leg, Kissshot in an instant grew up to match my appearance age-wise.

17 years old.

She may have even become taller than me.

Obviously, in the interval between 10 years and 17 years, even humans undergo a bigger change in appearance, from 'the period of the secondary sexual characteristics' on to 'the growth period' -- to add a concrete example, the size of her bust became astounding.

If she were to swagger throwing out her chest like she did until now, it would become something terrific.

Even her looks became more adult-like, and at the same time even the design of her dress changed into something more chic. The hair grew further, and was collected in a ponytail.

An impressive result.

Though no matter how she looks, Kissshot is 500 years old from the beginning.

"Hmph."

Kissshot was satisfied.

It seemed so even when I got back her right leg, somehow Kissshot had this feeling of satisfaction each time, and because she doesn't try to hide her happiness, even I, who practically acted like her 'arms and legs', am happy to see that.

Because it is worth doing it.

"I feel the conditions of my body have greatly improved -- thou could say I almost recovered my immortality."

"I see.Then could you be the one in charge of the next battle?"

"Nay, unfortunately it seemeth I still cannot use my vampire skills. It just means that it is harder for me to die than before. Maybe I could fight Dramaturgie, but with my current status I would not even defeat Episode."

Kissshot, however, said with a prudent tone of voice.

"Not to mention if the opponent was Guillotinecutter."

"....."

You say the same -- I thought.

Since then.

First of all, I sent Hanekawa, whose wound recovered, back home -- I deemed it best for her to go home while Oshino watched Episode.

As a matter of fact, somehow it was like Oshino didn't want to meet Hanekawa (since the first day, Oshino and Hanekawa, thanks to miraculous timing, never achieved a meeting -- since it would have been impossible for Hanekawa to elude him, it must have been Oshino who avoided her) or so I thought -- Hanekawa though seemed to have perceived it, and consented to go back home.

See you again tomorrow, she said.

And she went home.

After that Episode regained consciousness, and he, Oshino and I took care of the sports field which was visibly a mess. We filled up the holes in the sport field gouged by the gigantic cross with manual labor, and we restored the sand pit to its previous conditions, in addition Hanekawa's pieces of meat scattered around (naturally, no matter how much one waits, they won't evaporate) were disposed of (we had a somewhat lively discussion, but we gathered them up and buried them in a flower bed, 'the tomb of Pii-chan' read the sign we put. The one who had that idea was the specialist Oshino Meme. I felt putting a gravemarker using a cross made with tree branches was overdoing it even if it was a black joke), well, I can't say things were as before, but the cleaning up good enough to fool people was done.

Oshino and Episode -- left me behind after that, they went together, leaving for somewhere.

"I lost."

Episode said, while leaving.

"Damn, that's hilarious -- I've become senile. I was beaten by an amateur the likes of you--"

"....."

"Don't glare at me like that -- I apologize for that missy. I, too, got more heated up than necessary. Besides -- speaking frankly, for me, fighting the subordinate of the Kaii Killer was a devil of a job. I couldn't afford to overlook even an ordinary person taking part -- well in the end I still lost, so this won't make me look any better. However, don't think you can face Guillotinecutter with that one shot technique. I might be very crazy -- but his craziness is on a whole different level."

Episode in the end, as agreed -- actually, the match lost its meaning since Hanekawa barged in, Episode attacked the barging Hanekawa, and I tried to kill Episode, so you can't say it was genuinely as agreed, however -- he returned Kissshot's left leg.

On April 5th, at early dawn, like a few days ago, Oshino came back bringing in a travelling bag which contained Kissshot's left leg.

Kissshot ate it at once.

She was already craving to eat it.

She transformed into a 17 year old.

"Guillotinecutter--"

A man with a hedgehog looking hairdo resembling a catholic priest.

He was the only one -- without a weapon.

--What kind of person is he? Both you and Episode seem to be terribly wary of him."

"Thus I will explain on him."

"Your explanations are somehow vague. There are too many things I understand only afterwards. Give me a more decent briefing. My ears are all open."

The sun of April 5th was already rising.

As long as we stay in this room on the second floor of the cramming school ruins, we don't have to worry about sunlight, but I still want to ask the story from Kissshot before she goes to sleep.

In fact, I'm sleepy too.

By the way, Oshino left the travelling bag and went out again. He went out for the last negotiation -- despite being such a glib bastard, he was a comparatively hard worker.

Well, I pay him money.

He must do his part of work.

However, I really wonder when he sleeps.....

"Thou asked me this, yet even if I explained it from minus to plus, it would not have much practical meaning."

"It's not like it's really meaningless.Also, in that phrase, it's not 'minus' but '1', and it's not 'plus' but '10'."

It's from 1 to 10.¹¹

I say.

"Guillotinecutter..... can we agree he is a 'human'?"

"Yea. He is not a vampire like Dramaturgie, and not a half vampire like Episode either. He is a completely genuine, ordinary human."

"He doesn't seem an ordinary human, though."

He doesn't seem genuine either.

He doesn't seem a man to whom those words would match.

"Hm. Well, indeed."

Kissshot says.

"He is..... a cleric."

"Hah. Don't tell me he belongs to the special forces of Christianity."

"Close but far from it."

Kissshot shakes her head to my jest.

.....When I faced her as a 10 year old or a 12 year old, naturally I didn't feel anything, however if it really comes to be of the same age, somehow she made me nervous.

Kissshot was as pretty as a doll.

.....Somehow she looks like a foreign model.

Or possibly -- a medieval aristocrat seen in a movie.

Maybe it's just the dress that gives me this impression.

"I wonder how I can express it with the words of this country..... well, a literal translation will be enough."

"Literal translation?"

"Guillotinecutter is an archbishop of a certain historyless new religion."

"A--Archbishop?"

He is a big-shot.

An archbishop that young -- since he is human, he must have an age in accordance with the appearance, right?

¹¹ Japanese for "from A to Z". In kanji "1" looks like "-" and "10" looks like "+".

"That religion hath not a name -- It is an organization not even I know well. However, there is something I must make clear -- according to the doctrine of that religion, the existence of Kaii is not acknowledged."

"Oh....."

A historyless new religion, huh.

However Kissshot has been living since 500 years ago, so frankly speaking one shouldn't trust her sense of time. She might call a new religion even one already existing from before the war.

I wonder what is Guillotinecutter's ordinal number as an archbishop.

No way is he a first generation.

"Guillotinecutter is personally enforcing the duties of that religion of eliminating the Kaiis who should not exist. Well, in other words Guillotinecutter, while being an archbishop, is also simultaneously serving as the commander of what thou call special forces."

"I see."

"He is the shadow commander of the black team serving under the umbra fourth group of the dark special duty forces."

"Too literal a translation."

Translate it more smoothly.

This is so clichéd.

"However..... in the end he is just a human, right? No matter what tricks he uses, he is no match for a vampire, right?"

"He is a 'human' who is neither a vampire nor a half vampire, and who is contracted for his specialty, vampire exorcism. This is something thou must be careful about -- both of my arms were actually stolen by that guy, is that not so?"

"Sure."

Dramaturgie, the right leg.

Episode, the left leg.

Guillotinecutter, the left and right arms --

Simply put, twice the parts.

"Although that time I was careless. Also my physical conditions were somewhat bad."

Kissshot made a subtle excuse.

Well, I won't retort.

"If we take Dramaturgie as hunting vampires for work, and Episode for personal feelings, then Guillotinecutter is hunting vampire for beliefs. I speak for myself, but faith is troublesome."

Work. Personal feelings. Beliefs.

Well -- beliefs certainly may be more troublesome than personal feelings.

"Hey, what should I do?"

"Be victorious. I will leave it to you."

"....."

She may be the legendary vampire or something, but bulldozing your way through no matter what is going too far, I thought.

However Kissshot, having said just that much, lay on the bunk and fell asleep as she was.

Uhhmm.

Because she looks like a girl of the same age, and she is also fairly pretty, if I'm incautiously exposed to her sleeping figure, it becomes hard for me to do anything.

I even feel like she is tempting me.

I even feel like not doing anything would be rude.

I even feel too self-conscious about that.

It was an endless delusional spiral.

".....Whatever."

It is time (early morning), I'll try to sleep too.

Anyway, there isn't much meaning in deciding a tactic, I understood it well with the recent Episode case -- a flimsy battle plan will just confuse me when it fails.

I have to be flexible in my fights.

Although this too is asking me for too much.

Even today, after sunset, Hanekawa will come here -- I have something to say to her. Until then I'll rest and I'll make myself ready. Well, the vampire body is 'always preserving conditions healthy', so even without any sleeping I am always ready, but if I had to say it this is taking care of my spirit.

Today is already April 5th.

Spring Break, if you notice, is already ending.

I really wonder if I would safely be able to return a human before the new school term -- if the new term started, obviously a playful reason like self-searching won't be accepted -- while thinking that I fell asleep.

Though it seems vampires usually sleep in coffins -- like Kissshot and Oshino, I sleep on a bed made with desks.

And then, when I awoke, it was already evening.

I didn't dream.

Somehow it seems vampires don't dream.

Thinking about it well, I calculated that after I became a vampire I have been sleeping 12 hours a day, but since it's hard to be active while the sun is out, I can't help it.

Sleep brings a child up well.

Kissshot is still sleeping -- it's not like she is really brought up by sleeping, however this state of affairs where the moment I wake up there's a blonde beauty sleeping next to me, in a sense it was more bewildering than when Kissshot looked like a young girl.

It seemed Hanekawa -- had yet to come.

Even Oshino is not back yet.

Since he understood Hanekawa was coming, if he was really avoiding a meeting with Hanekawa on purpose, for the time being he won't come back.

This is not a rehearsal, but I waited for Hanekawa while rereading the Gakuen Inou Batoru manga Oshino returned briefly after he finished reading them.

I had finished five volumes when Hanekawa turned up.

I got lost, she said.

As usual -- as Oshino once said, that was the barrier's effect. It's a really troublesome barrier -- well on the other hand, you can say that as a hideout while Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade was regaining her power it was really the best.

Covered by the fee.

Actually, the barrier was something that Oshino did by himself.

The balance -- he said.

"Good morning, Araragi-kun."

Putting aside the flashlight, Hanekawa sat on a chair.

She is wearing the school uniform.

Since her blouse and school sweater were torn by the Episode's attack last night, I secretly hoped today I was able to see Hanekawa in her plain clothes, but somehow it seems my hope was betrayed.

"Betrayer."

"Hmm? What? What is it? Am I betraying Araragi-kun?"

"No, I was talking to myself."

Or rather, it was a selfish talk.

So she has spare uniforms, huh.

I hear girl uniforms can be damaged easily after all.

"Hanekawa, how is the stomach wound?"

"Even if you say wound -- there is no wound left."

"Really. I wonder, let me have a look at it."

"What 'I wonder'?"

She got angry.

I said it quite seriously though.

However, I confirmed it thoroughly yesterday night, also Hanekawa herself said she was fine, so perhaps it's all right.

She was treated with vampire blood.

I worried afterwards that if I did that, there could be the risk that Hanekawa turned into a vampire, but when the specialist Oshino was asked, it seemed there was nothing to fear.

Turning into a vampire and immortality appeared to be somehow different systems -- or rather, there isn't much connection between them. Neither ability has the other as a byproduct, they are completely separate.

"If it can heal the injuries of others, then the vampire is not so evil, I think -- well, to begin with, if I didn't turn into a vampire, you wouldn't have received that big wound though."

"You're right."

Ahaha, laughs Hanekawa.

After that, she glanced towards Kissshot who kept lying around over the lined-up desks,

"Ah, it's really true, she grew up -- Heartunderblade-san."

She said.

"Wow, she has become quite the beauty. Her features remained..... but with this she almost looks like a different person."

"Even a girl thinks so?"

"Everybody would think so..... though the hairdo became a ponytail, even when she sleeps she doesn't untie it."

Hmmm, hums Hanekawa.

It seems she thought of something.

Well, if you think about it a female may be more sensitive to female features.

Hanekawa after this spent some time thinking, however in the end she didn't say anything, she returned the glance from Kissshot to me, and from inside the bag she was carrying,

"Here, Araragi-kun. Coca-Cola. I bought it for you."

She took out the beverage she had bought from an automatic vending machine in that area, and she offered it to my stretched hand.

I take it.

"Ah -- thank you."

"Incidentally, my share is a Diet Coke."

"Huh."

"Since your muscles grow spontaneously, no matter how many calories you consume now, you shouldn't become fat, I guess? Then as a girl I am envious."

"I don't know. Well, if I had to say it then I feel like I don't have any appetite. Like I am unconcerned with eating."

Even Kissshot doesn't eat much.

I guess it feels like instead of eating because you are hungry, eating because they are delicious luxury groceries.

"The food of vampires is blood, isn't it?"

"Ah, yes it is."

"By the way, do you have something like an impulse to suck blood?"

"Hm? No -- on that subject, I don't."

Although I'm a vampire.

It seems Kissshot now doesn't have the ability to suck blood, said Oshino -- I wonder if I'm like that too?

I never thought about it.

".....Do you know the difference between the taste of Coca-Cola and that of Diet Coke, Hanekawa?"

"I know it."

"I don't know it well."

"Uhhh.I have reflected on this thing."

"Hm?"

"A new product development. One beverage company successfully produced a Diet Cola whose taste was perfectly identical to Coca-Cola."

"Oh."

"It's just that the color was blue hawaii."

"That's not Coca-Cola!"

I ended up laughing.

It was a little funny.

And then -- I laugh for a while, and I took a breath.

Class rep of class reps.

Honor student.

Excellent grades.

Only such expressions came out before when speaking about Hanekawa Tsubasa, I thought she was a narrow-minded, inflexible person -- I thought she was a self-important class rep, and yet if you try talking with her, she is not like that at all.

The conversation is enjoyable, and she is always thinking about her companions.

And yet yesterday she had to go through that.

She hasn't even blamed me yet.

After April started, she has been meeting with me everyday -- perhaps, if Hanekawa didn't do so, I wonder if my heart would have given in.

The anxiety about whether I can turn back into a human. The anxiety of having to fight vampire exorcism specialists -- if I lower my guard a little, my insecurities will assail me.

For Kisshot, a vampire who basically brags about being the strongest, it may be a feeling difficult to understand, and Oshino to begin with doesn't care about that -- however Hanekawa dissolved my anxiety.

It's not something regarding last night only.

How much I am helped by Hanekawa.

Saved by her.

I believed I knew it, until that stupid accident happened last night -- it was like I couldn't sense how much she has done for me.

Therefore.

I must talk with Hanekawa.

I have something to tell her.

"Hanekawa."

"Hm?"

"It's better if you don't come here anymore."

".....Hmm."

Hanekawa, with a smiling face -- got up from the chair, and came near me.

"Well, I thought you would have told me so."

"Please, don't get hurt -- it's different from the other times. Even the other times of course I didn't want to drag you in..... honestly, I went too far when I didn't restrain my feelings. I regret those outbursts of anger. But now it's different."

".....In which way it's different?"

"Yesterday, when the cross of Episode hollowed your flank....., I lost control of myself. I thought the blood in the head stopped..... like dead."

"Me?"

"Me."

Though I have an immortal body -- I thought I died.

It hurt like it was my own wound.

"Have I talked about the strength of a human?"

"....."

"Your wound hurt me like it was my own. No -- it hurt more than if it was done to me. Hanekawa, I..."

I said.

Since last night I have been thinking many ways to say it, however in the end I could only speak straightforwardly.

"I don't think I want to turn back into a human even at the cost of belittling you."

".....Belittling me."

Hanekawa says with some perplexity.

"I won't let you do that to me, though."

"However, are you thinking about what you are doing? This is the precious period of Spring Break, and you are wasting it for the sake of someone like me -- on top of that you were on the verge of death. Are you thinking about what you are doing?"

"At.....at all?"

As if being told this was rather unexpected, Hanekawa shook her head fluttering.

"I lost my memory and I don't remember it well, but the fact I was on the verge of death was my fault, right? If I had to say it, you didn't have to save me."

"You are not reflecting upon it in that manner."

I understand Hanekawa is saying this seriously.

I understand she doesn't want me to be concerned.

It's not hypocrisy.

She is really a good person.

However – it is because she is that strong.

For this reason, she is in danger.

"I don't know."

"....."

"If I were in the same situation, I'm not sure I could save you. For example, if we switched places, I wouldn't have the confidence to pull off something like that. In front of that dangerous guy, I wouldn't have the confidence to expose a body that is not even immortal -- but you do it normally."

I tried to choose my words, but -- it was in vain.

I can't choose them.

There was only one word to describe Hanekawa.

"You are scary."

".....Scary, you say."

"Frankly, you draw me away."

I say, looking downward.

"Don't get hurt. It's not my intention, but I can't really understand why you do so much for me. I'm just a classmate you got acquainted with recently, I don't understand how you could become so devoted to me -- you are like a saint."

A saint.

Or the mother of one.

"But your self-sacrifice would be too tough for me. I don't even have the capacity to bear it all. It's not a matter of getting healed or not getting healed -- if I think about you getting yourself injured for my sake..... my body won't move. That is what I'm scared of, I can't fight Guillotinecutter like this."

"This isn't self-sacrifice."

Hereupon, Hanekawa --

Said in a tone of voice that was a little angry.

"This is not self-sacrifice."

"Then what is it?"

"It's self-satisfaction."

Hanekawa said in a quiet tone.

"Araragi-kun. You are misunderstanding me -- I'm not such a good person, and I'm not strong either. I am just doing what I want to do..... I think that perhaps there isn't a person that thinks only about herself as much as me."

"....."

"If you knew the real me, Araragi-kun, you would surely be disappointed."

It troubles me that you have such a false impression of me.

Hanekawa laughs.

"I am deceitful, and unyielding. Enough to repel you, at least."

".....You are bluffing."

"It's not a bluff, it's all true. Even with you, I am just doing things because I want to do them. Therefore there is nothing you should worry about."

"Hanekawa....."

"However."

Hanekawa clapped her hands in front of her chest. And like that, with hands still joined,

"If my presence makes it difficult for you to move, then it would be a prime case of getting my priorities wrong."

She said.

"You already have enough Gakuen Inou Batoru manga, it's time for me to retire from my purchasing duties. Even if you read some more, it will just go over your head. Indeed, it doesn't seem there is anything I can do anymore."

"No, there is something you could do."

I said, gazing firmly at Hanekawa's face.

I said, gazing steadily at her.

"Wait."

"....."

"In the new term, in that school. Wait for me."

That's tough, I think.

I don't understand how much agony and anxiety is involved in awaiting a person who could never come back.

After this, I will fight the most dangerous vampire extermination specialist among the three, the one who everyone is wary of, and even assuming I will clear the stage, I don't really know if I will be able to turn back into a human -- despite this, I want you to wait for me.

"I will look forward from the bottom of my heart to still be able to talk with you."

".....Oh."

I don't know why, but Hanekawa here moved back one step.

Her eyes seemed somehow happy.

"Pipipi, pipipi, pipipi."

"Hm? What's that sound?"

"The sound of heartbeats."

"Eh? A girl's heartbeats have that sound effect?"

It's also a sound that resembles an alarm clock!

"That was close, I was about to fall in love."

"You could have dug -- things like a hot spring or oil?"¹²

That's grand.

She must be rich.

"You always use that trick to hit on a girl."

"Hm? Oh no. I'm not following you, and to begin with I have almost never talked to girls."

"You talk like a womanizer. And yet you bought that ecchi book."

"Ugh.....!"

No, that's because I am a boy.

I couldn't help it.

"My goodness."

Saying so.

Hanekawa tried to stretch herself to the limits, after that her facial expression became resolute, and in that state she inserted her hands inside the hem of the pleated skirt of her uniform.

I thought she would once again flip up her skirt for me, but, no matter what, Hanekawa didn't do such a thing devoid of logical connection.

Instead she took off her panties.

She lowered her pink panties with lace surrounding the edge, and while taking care that the rubber band part didn't come in contact with the bottom of the shoes, she pulled it out from both legs.

There is no need to say I was frozen.

It was a supreme absence of logical connection.

"Er..... Here."

While her face was obviously turning red from the embarrassment, Hanekawa presented that underwear squished into a tiny ball to me.

"To speak like in the scene just before the climax in Gakuen Inou Batoru."

Hanekawa says it bashfully in her state.

"I will lend them to you. You'll return them to me when we meet in the new term."

".....Wait a minute. In the first manga you bought me there was certainly that scene, but if I remember well in that occasion the item used was a necklace the heroine wore."

"I don't wear a necklace."

Hanekawa says, fidgeting and pinning down her skirt.

"Araragi-kun, you like panties, don't you?"

".....!"

I won't deny it!

¹² Slightly homophone verbs.

I won't deny it!?

Since denying that affects the identity of Araragi Koyomi, I absolutely can't deny it!?

Araragi Koyomi won't say no!

Hey, wait a second!

"E-Errr."

"Ah, if you don't want them..."

"No, I'm not saying I don't want them. This is not a matter of wanting them or not wanting them. Uh-huh. Let me see, you were saying I can return them when we meet in the new term?"

While I felt slightly surprised that female underwear becomes so small when you take it off, at my wit's end, I took that cloth.

A gentle warmth fills my palm.

".....Sorry. I won't give them back."

"E-Eh?"

"In fact, I will never give them back. They will be inherited by my descendants as an heirloom of the Araragi family."

"Please quit it!"

"These panties parted with your body for good."

"I don't believe this!"

"I won't give the panties back, but in exchange."

I say.

I strike a mighty pose.

"I will absolutely repay my debt. When you need it, even if I won't be able to do anything, I will absolutely be there -- repaying my debt with you from today will be my purpose in life."

"Listen up, return the panties."

No matter how cool my words were, they had no effect.

Hmmm.

Words are powerless.

Hanekawa says.

"After this I must go back home commando, moreover with this low security skirt..... Araragi-kun, compared to this, defeating the man called Guillotinecutter is not so difficult, is it?"

"You are right."

No matter how hard the battle is --

If I think about that I am outstripped.

Surely it's no different from an easy victory.

"Well then, good luck."

"Good luck."

Let's meet in the new term.

Smiling, we knocked our fists.

The new term after the end of the Spring Break.

I will look forward to meeting Hanekawa.

I will look forward to be in the same class.

I.

I have renewed my resolution to return to a human.

While the memory of that farewell of Hanekawa was still lingering, about three hours after she went home, with Kissshot at last going to open her eyes, Oshino came back to the ruins of the cram school -- unusually for him, he had a grave facial expression.

"I'm sorry, I messed up."

And then with a voice suited to that facial expression, Oshino said.

"Class rep-chan has been kidnapped."

013

Guillotinecutter.

A man with a hedgehog looking hairdo resembling a catholic priest.

He has slit eyes that made him appear calm.

A human.

A human -- that repudiates the existence of Kaii.

A human -- that erases the existence of Kaii.

He doesn't carry weapons.

A specialist of vampire exorcism based on faith.

Kissshot called him the archbishop of a 'new religion', and the shadow commander of the black team serving under the umbra fourth group of the dark special duty forces.

Half-vampire Episode described him as nasty, even Kissshot said to be on guard against him, a cleric.

That -- was Guillotinecutter, who had stolen both arms from Kissshot.

"Oh, did you run here -- much appreciated. However, not being able to turn your body into fog is a sign you are still new at this."

Guillotinecutter said.

With an overly polite tone -- narrowing his eyes.

".....!"

I was at a loss for words.

I didn't have a word to reply with.

We were at -- the sports field of Naoetsu private high school.

At the same place where, at the end of the last month, I had fought Dramaturgie, and where I battled Episode last night-- Guillotinecutter was waiting for me.

He was embracing in one arm the body of Hanekawa Tsubasa.

That hand that didn't carry a weapon --

Was tightly grasping Hanekawa's neck.

"A-Araragi-kun--"

Hanekawa -- at present was safe.

She wasn't injured, and she wasn't made unconscious.

Of course.

Because she -- is a hostage against me.

If she wasn't safe it would be meaningless.

At present.

"I-I am sorry, Araragi-kun -- I..."

"Please don't chatter as you like."

Suddenly, he put strength into the fingers wrapped around her neck.

Guillotinecutter forced Hanekawa to be silent.

Cough, from the inside of her throat a breath leaked out.

"H-Hey -- don't!"

I considered it bad to carelessly provoke him, but naturally I couldn't stand quietly -- I shouted.

"Yes?"

With an extremely calm tone--

Guillotinecutter says affably.

"Is something wrong, Monster-san?"

"She..... she is a girl."

"I dislike discriminating on sex."

"But -- she is an ordinary person."

"Precisely. If she wasn't she wouldn't be a hostage."

"Don..."

I.

I don't know how in the world I should talk anymore.

"Don't do something cruel."

"Cruel? Do you mean like this?"

With the fingers still entrenched in her nape, Guillotinecutter tried to raise Hanekawa's body. That looked the very same as hanging her by the neck.

"U.....Uugh!"

Hanekawa -- groaned in pain.

As a reaction, Guillotinecutter,

"You are annoying."

He lowered the arm, and let her feet touch the ground.

Still, Hanekawa wasn't allowed even to cough -- I can't even imagine what action Guillotinecutter will take in response even for just a physiological reaction.

I just -- went limp.

"Y.....You."

I had no intention of taking them lightly.

I certainly have no intention of taking the words of Episode and Kissshot lightly -- however, as usual, I had understood nothing.

Guillotinecutter.

Possibly when I heard 'human' I might have felt partly relieved. I may have relaxed. At least, he doesn't have superhuman strength or immortality like vampires or half vampires -- I thought that meant the degree of difficulty was lowered.

However it was far from it.

This guy took a hostage without hesitation --

and in addition, he has challenged me to a duel.

"Well, this is entirely my fault."

Oshino.

Going back to the ruin of the cram school, when Kissshot was on the verge of waking up -- and after he informed me that Hanekawa had been kidnapped, he said that looking really apologetic.

This was not the place for frivolous talk.

"It was fine up until yesterday; yesterday night I even included class rep-chan in the contract. And yet, I was outguessed. The issue of Episode throwing a cross at class rep-chan could still be said to be part of an act of battle. And even then, normally a human that lives in this world, including a person in my situation, wouldn't want to involve an ordinary person--"

"Therefore -- you avoided Hanekawa?"

"I didn't mean to avoid her, but certainly I never wanted to face her. I thought that she shouldn't exchange words with me -- well, I too don't want to deliberately involve an ordinary person, not limited to class rep-chan. I won't try to hinder it, but I won't try to prompt it either -- that's my standpoint. However, Guillotinecutter..."

Like he had no hesitation, said Oshino.

"He didn't flinch at all -- the result of my actions was a complete failure. I completely misread the talents and the caliber of the other party."

".....But why Hanekawa -- he shouldn't know this place, right?"

"He has been watching. Probably -- the fight with Episode. Or maybe even the fight with Dramaturgie -- in order to avoid that, I conducted negotiations with the three separately -- however, I was outsmarted."

Like Hanekawa watching from behind the building.

Like Oshino watching from somewhere.

Guillotinecutter too -- had been watching.

"Even if you are followed the barrier is still effective, but it's not like class rep-chan was living here -- if you searched for her you will find her."

"....."

She had left the barrier behind.

She must have been found on the way back.

Or could he have been waiting for her in front of her home?

".....What should I do?"

I asked Oshino.

"What the hell should I do?"

Strangely -- I didn't have the words to blame Oshino.

What I should do now was more important.

There was nothing but that in my head.

"The terms are the same -- Araragi-kun and Guillotinecutter will fight one-on-one. If Araragi-kun wins, Guillotinecutter will return the arms of Heartunderblade. If Guillotinecutter wins, Araragi-kun will tell him Heartunderblade's whereabouts."

".....And what about Hanekawa?"

"He is not counting her in. Perhaps, he is thinking of her as a tool -- no, as a weapon."

"A weapon--"

Like the long swords of Dramaturgie.

Like the cross of Episode.

Guillotinecutter, as a weapon, will use-- Hanekawa.

Guillotinecutter was armed with Hanekawa.

"Th-The place and time?"

"Designated by him. The place is the usual, the sport field of Naoetsu private high school -- the fact he designated that is proof he has been watching the fights so far -- and then the time is the night of April 5th."

"Eh?"

"In other words: tonight."

It was a designation that sounded very hasty -- but thinking from the point of view of Guillotinecutter, from his nauseating point of view, I cannot but understand.

Hanekawa is an ordinary person.

In addition she is not a dunce like me, she is an honor student -- even I would be worried about going out at night. If she doesn't return home one night, surely her parents will contact the police.

Guillotinecutter wants to settle things before that happens.

It was a rotten way of doing things, but still, he is certainly a professional.

He will put an end on things before causing an uproar -- however, it's not like this guarantees the safety of Hanekawa afterwards though.

On the contrary, I don't even think he has the intention to let it end quietly for Hanekawa who knew the situation.

Nevertheless -- that issue of hating 'early uproar', for me, should have been certainly something to take advantage of.

"Exactly."

Oshino said.

"That's the spirit, Araragi-kun."

"Oshino--"

".....No matter how much I gloss it over, this was my fault. I will give you another little hint for this time. A plan for rescuing class rep-chan. If you can manage *that* -- surely, you can beat Guillotinecutter."

".....Hostage notwithstanding?"

"Yeah."

He nods.

"First of all -- forget everything about *the main character of the Gakuen Inou Batoru manga*."

Oshino continued.

"And then, give up being a human."

There wasn't much time left.

There wasn't even spare time for worrying.

Therefore, after Oshino made that preamble, I had no choice but to follow the strategy he taught me -- the risk of polishing up in advance a tactic for the time of the fight. In other words, becoming agitated and confused if it fails -- despite that, this time I have to accept that risk.

Even if it's already the third fight.

I capitalized nothing out of experience.

"Since Dramaturgie-san and Episode-kun unfortunately went back to their home town -- it is really bothersome for me to be your opponent alone. If I don't use even one hostage, I won't counterbalance you, will I?"

Guillotinecutter said this without flinching.

With his thin slit eyes, he smiled, amused.

"Both honest to a fault, Dramaturgie-san has already returned the right leg of Heartunderblade-san, and Episode-kun has already returned her left leg -- is this what they call chivalrous spirit? How quaint."

"....."

"In other words, Heartunderblade-san has recovered accordingly. Former human boy, Heartunderblade's subordinate-kun. If I face you directly, it is impossible for me to harm you."

In any case I am not immortal -- he said.

He complacently says with nonchalance.

"W-What are you going to do to Hanekawa?"

"I won't do anything at all. If you won't do anything at all."

Guillotinecutter immediately replied.

"If you want me to do something to this girl, I will do it though -- it is so nice that for a new former human a hostage is normally applicable. With a genuine vampire opponent that won't do -- or maybe if the hostage were to be a subordinate the story would be different, I guess? Would you be the hostage to use for Heartunderblade?"

".....You're kidding me."

"I am deadly serious."

Nimbly.

Like he was using Hanekawa's body as a shield, Guillotinecutter thrust it at me.

Like -- it was a tool.

Like -- an actual tool.

"I don't possess superhuman strength like you fellows, but I am still well built. If it is just one girl -- I can kill her easily."

"Guh....."

It is clear he is built.

It is very clear from the fact he's been handling Hanekawa with a single arm for a while -- however, what this man forged is not body but his force of will.

He is too strong mentally.

In this situation -- he won't show a gap.

"Incidentally, I won't kill her in a way that will give her time of resuscitate, like it happened with Episode-kun -- I will crush her brain with a single blow. If I destroy a complex organ like the brain of a human, even with the blood of the subordinate of Heartunderblade-san, a perfect recovery is impossible, don't you think?"

".....Do you still call yourself a human?"

"Oh no. I am God."

Guillotinecutter.

With one hand in front of his chest, so declared.

"It follows that you fellows who oppose me should not exist. I swear by God, that is to say by me -- I won't allow you to exist."

"....."

"Though if you became my ally, like Dramaturgie-san and Episode-kun -- maybe it would be worth it to let you live?"

".....I refuse."

I answered by reflex.

Just receiving that invitation in itself gave me goosebumps.

God, my foot.

You are -- quite the monster.

Oshino Meme, is probably looking from somewhere at our current state of affairs like he did until now -- however, no matter what, he can't interfere. It's a one-on-one fight -- that's the result of his negotiations.

He can't but shut his eyes on the hostage.

There could have been the possibility of Kissshot coming out for me, but it is out of the question having Kissshot getting killed by Guillotinecutter at this point -- Kissshot still has some ways to go before recovering completely.

Also, even assuming Kissshot would win, in that case she won't be able get back her arms -- damned if you do, damned if you don't.

Then.

I -- had to give maximum priority to Hanekawa's life.

"I see."

Without looking particularly disappointed, Guillotinecutter nodded.

"Frankly, I thought there was no way a new one like you could defeat Dramaturgie-san and Episode-kun, you know -- those two are unexpectedly pathetic."

"Look who's talking..... you didn't come out in the beginning because you were using those two to test me, right? So that when your turn came, you had chosen a valid tactic--"

Oshino carried out the negotiations with the three separately, but the one who decided the turns of Dramaturgie, Episode and Guillotinecutter was the opposite team.

Dramaturgie was the leadoff man, Episode said his batting position didn't matter to him.

And then Guillotinecutter -- aspired to be the last hitter.

"It is not like I thought so deeply. It is just that Episode-kun left the turn order to me, who was his superior, and to Dramaturgie-san....., Dramaturgie-san was the first player in order to get the reward. Ah, no..... now that I mention it, Dramaturgie tried to make you a comrade, right? Then he must have thought you could have been defeated by me or Episode-kun beforehand. Well, of course, it is not like I didn't think like you say, but even if either one would have exorcised Heartunderblade-san, in the end, my church would have gotten the credit."

".....You wanted to have it easy."

The one giving the reward was you, I bet.

Then what's your purpose?

If the purpose of Dramaturgie was a reward or an invitation, for Episode surely the reward was secondary to personal feelings -- therefore he didn't fuss over the turn order -- hereupon, the purpose of Guillotinecutter?

There was no need to ask.

It was his beliefs.

"Well, for me it's fine. I am not a person who shuns hard work -- in order to improve this world, I won't spare myself any toil."

The idle talk lasted too long, Guillotinecutter said.

Indeed he was talkative.

He may be a talkative man by nature -- a loose tongue is good, I could say it's a sign he is being negligent.

There are two ways to defeat an opponent who has the upper hand.

Either win by letting him be negligent, or win by making him tense.

No matter how much I think, this time it could only be the former.

I defeated both Dramaturgie and Episode doing this.

And then--

Guillotinecutter, now, is being negligent.

Even if he doesn't have a gap, he is being negligent.

There is a chance of winning.

However in order to do that--

In order to do that, I must throw away my humanity.

"Hanekawa."

I ignored the words of Guillotinecutter, and I called out to Hanekawa, who was held by that arm.

"It's all right."

Hanekawa can't reply.

Because she is being strangled.

She can just -- watch me.

I continue.

"I will definitely save you."

".....What a bother."

Guillotinecutter said in a calm tone.

"I won't be as forbearing as humoring you with this high school friend play. God, that is to say me, says this -- it's time to begin."

"Begin..... huh."

I say, facing Guillotinecutter.

"What can I do? As long as you keep Hanekawa as a hostage, I can do nothing. Besides, I don't have the intention of doing anything. I will completely submit to your orders -- in these circumstances, a fight is not feasible."

"God, that is to say me, says this -- the instant the fight begins, you should raise both hands and say 'I give up'. In other words, the fight will be settled the instant it begins."

"I understand."

I nod without hesitation.

I shouldn't even have a reason to hesitate.

"Therefore, let Hanekawa go now."

"That would be so convenient for you -- there is no way I will do it. The release of the hostage will be after the fight ends. Do I look like a fool who gives away his weapon in the middle of a fight?"

That too -- is the word of God?

Don't kid me.

Hanekawa is a weapon?

She -- is different.

She is different from you -- or me.

You are not a person who can touch her!

"Araragi-kun!"

At that moment, Hanekawa -- cried while being strangled.

While her neck seemed to break at any time.

While she was threatened to have her brain destroyed.

Nevertheless she cried.

"Don't care about me!"

"It's not like I can do that--"

I shouted back.

And then that -- became the signal of the beginning of the fight.

Of course, Guillotinecutter doesn't move -- he doesn't do anything. He just opens faintly the thin slit eyes -- and just laughs a lot towards me.

He just makes a loud laugh.

Without wanting to hear that laughter -- I kept shouting.

"I told you I didn't want to turn back into a human even at the cost of belittling you--"

And then I--

"But if I can't meet you anymore, there wouldn't be any meaning in turning back into a human!"

I didn't even have to raise my hands.

The instant it began, the fight was settled.

It is as Guillotinecutter says.

".....Eh?"

It's just -- that I win.

I thrust away Guillotinecutter's body with all my strength -- at the same time, I also managed to plunder Hanekawa's body from him.

It was simple.

It was extremely simple..... and convenient.

"Y-You -- what the heck."

Guillotinecutter groaned.

"Don't tell me -- this is the power of vampires."

"Wrong. It's the power of friendship."

However -- the distance between me and that guy was a little more than 10 meters.

Guillotinecutter didn't allow me to get closer than that -- nevertheless, even if I threw a shot or a roller, I didn't have the confidence I wouldn't hit the hostage Hanekawa, used as a shield.

Therefore -- without moving.

While I wasn't moving, I shortened that distance.

I shape-shifted my body.

".....There is no Gakuen Inoue Batoru main character like this."

There's no way he exists.

He would be the villain instead.

Like Dramaturgie shape-shifted his arms into wavy blades -- I shape-shifted my arms into plants, and I extended them forward as much as possible. I considered many things, but in the end I couldn't conceive the image of 'extending the body' in a short time, so I switched to the image of replacing the body with plants.

Plants are my specialty.

Because I was thinking every day I want to become a plant.

Obviously I never thought I want to become a monster -- undoubtedly it turned out like in the image.

I thought that even if we are both vampires, it would be impossible for me to do what Dramaturgie does -- however Oshino refuted that.

"You can run on walls, you can jump 20 meters."

Then, he said.

"You should at least be able to shape-shift your body -- it's the same theory. Crabs dig a hole imitating a carapace, you have no need to fixate on the shape of the human body. It should be a trick completely unexpected by Guillotinecutter who thinks you are new -- therefore picture a form that isn't that of a human, and change the shape of your body."

That's impossible for me, I replied.

But Oshino said this.

"Then are you able to abandon class rep-chan?"

.....

You are an annoying guy.

My arms which *grew* not like long swords but rather like large trees, just like millenary trees of a solitary island. They split off while they grew, moreover, each of those branches followed my intentions and I was able to make them bend as I wanted.

To thrust away the chest of Guillotinecutter.

To arrest the arm of Guillotinecutter.

I was even able to get Hanekawa back.

Somewhat I could also call it an over the top image.

Certainly this -- is not like a human anymore.

I threw away my humanity.

In the end, I thought I couldn't imitate Dramaturgie because I still didn't throw away my humanity -- rather than because I didn't lose the common sense I had as a human.

For *the me who wishes to turn back into a human*, it is something I must not be able to do, I thought.

I couldn't imagine myself except as a human.

However that prejudice -- after all was only a prejudice.

Because I am already a monster.

Like that, I slapped Guillotinecutter onto the sports field, I constricted him -- I shut him up. I don't know if it was the word of God, but I didn't want to hear anything the guy could spew, so I bound his mouth with ivy -- and made him faint.

Obviously I won't kill, I'm going easy.

I must get back Kisshot's arms -- besides, if I could do such monstrous thing, it was thanks to you.

Thanks to you.

I thought I might be ok with not turning back into a human.

".....Huff."

I restore the arms.

They instantly turned back.

Whether I picture them or something, they are the arms I looked at for 17 years..... all I had to do was remember them. Because I was inadvertently struck with the rash idea that if that didn't work, the worst case, I would have had to cut off my arms, hereupon I felt relieved from the bottom of my heart.

While I was at it, I had pulled Hanekawa toward me.

"Hanekawa -- are you ok?"

Embracing Hanekawa, I looked at her neck -- the mark of his fingers remained pitifully visible, but there was no internal bleeding. If that's the case, the mark should vanish immediately. It also appears that nothing else has been done to her.

I'm glad.....

I'm really glad.

That currently makes me happy more than anything.

"Ah -- ah, err, Araragi-kun."

Hanekawa, with a jerk, pushed my chest away with her hands. I don't know what she was trying to do, but somehow it seems she wanted to get away from me.

"Le-let me go."

"Ah..... ok."

I unwrap my arms, and Hanekawa moved farther away from me.

When there was a bit of distance.

"Err... Ha-Hanekawa."

"T-Thank you, Araragi-kun."

Hanekawa said in a small voice, looking away from me.

"B-But, um -- don't get closer. D-Don't come here. Don't touch me, I mean."

".....Eh?"

Don't tell me -- she was afraid of me?

Because she was dragged into this?

Because she was nearly killed?

Or because the shape-shifting of my arms -- startled her?

The me who threw away humanity -- is scary?

Such -- but, I, although.

"Oh no, it's not that."

Hanekawa fidgeted.

While fixing the cuff of her messed skirt, she said.

"Right now I am not wearing any panties."

014

The following day, April 6th.

Daytime.

In other words for vampires it is night, Kissshot and I were sleeping as usual in the room with shut windows at the second floor of the cram school ruin.

I was awakened.

By Oshino Meme in the end didn't come back last night, and did not even make an appearance -- where did his commendable manner of yesterday go? He was laughing frivolously with his flippant impression as always.

"Good morning, Araragi-kun,"

".....I am tremendously sleepy,"

"Just come here already,"

While my eyes remained half asleep, I was dragged out by Oshino into the corridor -- during this commotion, Kissshot continued to sleep soundly, without turning over once in her sleep.

She is a tranquil girl.

Maybe she has no such thing as worries.

"What is it -- Oshino?"

"Hm? No, we are in the corridor..... Well, Heartunderblade might not wake up, but as a precaution let's go to a floor above. Let's go to the fourth floor."

"The fourth floor....."

No matter how asleep I was, I could tell at least that.

"But the windows there are open. Think what would happen if the sunlight hit me."

"It's all right. It's raining today."

"Rain?"

Really?

Come to think of it, in these days it didn't fall.

If I assumed it didn't fall in the period when I lost consciousness before becoming a vampire, then this is the first rain since the beginning of Spring Break.

Well, it might also have rained while I was sleeping 12 hours during daytime..... but since I am not watching the weather forecast I don't know.

"So you can relax. Well, with your healing power, even if by some chance the sun shone, it's not like you would die immediately, right?"

"Try saying it after experiencing your body evaporating."

"Let's go."

Oshino climbed the staircase buoyantly. While watching my steps, I followed his back. It seems any classroom on the fourth floor was fine, as Oshino chose the nearest door.

Once that door whose knob appeared to malfunction opened, even by sight that room was messy beyond salvation.

He is not a lucky guy.

"Heave-ho."

However, like he really didn't mind it, he aptly pulled out a chair on the spot, and sat down on that chair facing the opposite direction.

I did the same thing.

I just sort of tried to imitate him.

".....That."

I pointed at the traveling bag Oshino was holding in his hand.

At last I had become wide-awake.

That bag, until now, has carried Kissshot's right and left legs.

Which means...

"Yeah."

Oshino nods.

"You guessed right. Inside there are the arms of Heartunderblade."

".....I see."

I -- took a big breath and felt relieved.

I took the fact that Oshino didn't come back by morning to mean that Guillotinecutter could have had the intention of not returning the arms of Kissshot to us, and that made me worry.

Kissshot, like she didn't care about it,

"It is morning. Shall we sleep?"

and fell asleep.

She is a tranquil girl -- maybe she has no such thing as worries.

Or maybe it is I who am too much of a wimp.

However, we are talking about Guillotinecutter who defined "honest to a fault" Dramaturgie and Episode, who respectively returned the right leg and the left leg, the possibility that he decided to go back on his word sounded very plausible.

No matter how much I fretted, I had no choice but to entrust that domain to Oshino, but--

"Uhm? Ah, I know what you want to say."

said Oshino.

"You want to say that Guillotinecutter kept his word well, right?"

"Well, frankly speaking, I was thinking it."

"That's my chance to show my skill. This is a negotiation service, you know -- although I could reveal that Guillotinecutter in fact looked like he didn't really have the intention of returning them."

"As I thought."

"He was holding a considerable grudge -- I believe. Because in the case of Guillotinecutter, unlike the other two, he was acting out of belief."

"Belief."

I remember.

The many times he expressed it in words.

"However that would have been the mentality of a friend of justice, I suppose."

"Each person's definition of justice is different, you know. You shouldn't deny other persons simply -- it's just that for you he was a villain. Besides, while saying one thing or another, the end result was this."

He throws the traveling bag in front of me.

A rough treatment.

"He gave them back."

"Because that was giving them back properly."

"Therefore I must have persuaded him."

"In what way did you persuade him? He is a sort of fanatic -- being secular, from my point of view he is exactly like a fanatic, you know. Isn't returning the limbs of a vampire for him like relinquishing his faith?"

"Therefore he must be a guy who understands if you talk with him -- because even that guy is a pro."

"A pro."

"Exactly, a professional."

My cross-examination maybe had become too heavy, Oshino said that and put an end to the discussion.

"Concretely, I informed him that if you finish collecting Heartunderblade's limbs, you want to turn back into a human -- and also that even Heartunderblade is accepting that."

".....In other words, Guillotinecutter withdrew for my sake?"

"Something like that, perhaps."

Oshino made a subtle choice of words.

It feels like he is insinuating something, however, if you think about it, this man is always insinuating like crazy in everything he says. Even if I swallow that, it might not have much meaning behind it.

The pose of seeing through people, literally a pose.

There are times when it might be just that.

Well, whatever his purpose, it was a good thing that Kissshot's parts came back. Properly speaking, with that much, there is nothing else I should say.

I don't even want to remember people like Guillotinecutter.

I opened the zipper of the traveling bag.

The right arm, from the elbow to the tip, and the left arm, clipped from the round tip of the shoulder -- were confirmed to both be inside the traveling bag.

"Well, at least he chose to keep the honor of the other party -- nevertheless, even then, he got a stern warning for kidnapping class rep-chan. If this were soccer he would have gotten a yellow card."

"A red card, I'd say."

"A red card would be having killed her, I guess. Therefore if class rep-chan would have died that time, Episode would have gotten a red card -- although, since you also wanted to kill Episode, I guess you cancel each other."

"I didn't have the intention to--"

I didn't have the intention to kill him, I tried to say, but I stopped at the last instant.

That's just a lie.

That time I got mad, and it couldn't be helped -- no, I even thought I didn't care what happened.

If Oshino didn't stop me.

Perhaps I -- would have killed Episode.

The intention to kill -- was there.

--Well, that..."

"What is it, you raise and lower your voice, you are really energetic, Araragi-kun. Did something good happen?"

Oshino, who said this like he was making himself inconspicuous, pointed at the arms peeking through the inside of the traveling bag with his unlit cigarette.

"Anyway -- with this you have gathered all the four limbs. Congratulations, Araragi-kun. Mission complete. I am happy like it's someone else's problem."

"Someone else's problem?"

"Because it is."

"....."

Well.

It is someone else's problem.

"A word of praise. Practically -- even without any battle experience, a mere high schooler took as opponents three veteran specialists of vampire exorcism and got three wins in a row -- I take off my hat at you."

"You are not wearing a hat."

"It's a metaphor."

Oshino puts the cigarette in his mouth.

In any case it is still unlit.

".....It may be a trivial thing, but Oshino -- why don't you light the cigarette?"

"Hm? Well, if I lit a cigarette now wouldn't the anime adaptation become difficult?"

"....."

Why are you so obsessed with the anime adaptation.

It's a deep mystery.

"Come on, Araragi-kun -- although I've said congratulations, you are making such a gloomy face. If you achieve an objective you should be happy no matter what, right? Somehow it's like you are radiating an aura resembling a funeral vigil."

"I have a doubt, Oshino."

I said.

In addition to that -- there was still another thing that made me uneasy.

Until the last moment I was tormented over whether asking it or not, but when I see this buoyant behaviour of Oshino, somehow it seemed silly thinking it over.

I must ask what I want to ask.

Because, after all, what is not answered is not answered.

"It's something about Guillotinecutter."

"Yeah?"

"Well, I do understand it intellectually -- in the battle of last night, it was because he was negligent, in that way, that as a result I managed to win without getting badly hurt. I understand it intellectually. However -- Oshino, it's as you say. With the single attack of a mere high schooler -- I could beat that dangerous guy, isn't it somewhat strange? He is the guy who stole both arms from the legendary vampire, isn't he?"

"Hrm."

"Well, it's not just Guillotinecutter, even with Dramaturgie and Episode it went like that. Those guys too stole the right leg and left leg from Kissshot respectively -- considering that, I, who you defined as not having any battle experience, or you could say that at most I had sometimes scuffled with my sisters, from the point of view of the outcome I defeated them easily -- what in the world is the reason for this?"

I could have been lucky, maybe.

It could have been unexpected.

However -- isn't there a more constructive answer?

"Are those guys weak? Or it is I -- who is too strong?"

Although I asked it -- I'm not guessing an answer.

It's really just a mystery for me.

However -- I don't know why, I got the impression Oshino knew that answer.

The reason is that he is more neutral than anyone else.

Because he is the person that tries to preserve the balance.

"Both of them."

As expected, Oshino said it.

"Looking from their point of view, you are obviously too strong -- looking from your point of view, those guys are obviously too weak. Because you -- aren't a nobody, you are the subordinate of Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade."

"Well, it's just due to that."

"It's just due to that."

He affirmed.

Oshino affirmed it.

"If I must pick a reason why an amateur like you could defeat those guys, it would be that -- well, there was still plenty of possibility you could lose though. That is to say, their chances have been thoroughly higher. Araragi-kun sure is something-
_"

"Plenty or not plenty..... you have brought the circumstances down to an even match for me."

The balance.

Giving me the advantage of terrain, prohibiting deathmatches -- when Hanekawa was later taken in hostage, deciding a plan in proportion to that advantage.

You have always made the circumstances an even match.

However.

"However, if that's the case then I will say it's strange. When I think that as a premise -- the story became strange."

"In what way would it be strange?"

"Even with just a subordinate like me it went this way. With Kissshot in her full power mode -- even those three together should be really no match, right?"

I am convinced of that.

Kissshot's power as a vampire in her original form, even if estimated as a minimum, shouldn't be below the level of the current me -- and on top of that, she has 500 years of experience.

500 years of experience

Battle experience.

Even if facing Dramaturgie's wavy blades, Episode's gigantic cross, and Guillotinecutter's dreadful resourcefulness -- was it really possible to steal four limbs from Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade?

I have only one conclusion.

It doesn't seem possible at all.

There's no way it is possible.

"Nice intuition, Araragi-kun -- if you trained you might become a pretty good specialist, you know."

Oshino said with a broad grin -- I thought he didn't intend to answer seriously, but that was not the case.

He continued, and -- he answered my question.

"It's as you say, Araragi-kun. Since each one of them could hardly defeat Heartunderblade, they tried to challenge her as a trio, however even three persons together could hardly defeat Heartunderblade. It is just..."

"It is just?"

"That if at that time Heartunderblade wasn't at full power -- wouldn't the story be different?"

She wasn't at full power.

I had a memory that matched those words.

I can remember it without having to tamper with my brain -- Kissshot said it.

Her physical conditions were bad -- or something.

I thought it was an excuse.

If I assume that wasn't an excuse.

"Therefore -- the battle between Heartunderblade and those three guys became an even match."

"....."

"Well, whether you asked that or not I intended to hand it over to you -- but since you asked, handing it over helps the flow of the discussion, Araragi-kun. Occasionally even you show some sharpness."

Saying that.

Oshino, casually took out 'something' from a pocket of the aloha shirt, and he tossed it at me. That should have been a pocket that contained cigarettes -- therefore I thought he threw at me a pack of cigarettes, but that was not the case. However, even so, that pocket in the aloha shirt worn by Oshino should not have been a pocket that could contain something that big.

That.

Made up with deep red flesh -- was a heart.

"Eek.....!"

I involuntarily cowered, and the thing I caught with both hands fell on the ground -- somehow it petrified me to this extent.

I was petrified, it means I have become unable to move.

However in contrast with the me who was unable to move--

that heart kept beating with a *lub-dub lub-dub*.

"That's the heart of Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade."

Oshino said.

"Without that heart, she battled the specialists of vampire exorcism one-on-three -- it's very clear why her limbs were cut off."

".....!"

It's natural.

Even I can understand that the power of vampires is specifically the blood -- without the heart that is the pivot that sends out that blood, it's a wonder she ended up just with losing her limbs.

".....And she didn't even notice."

"Indeed. She was thinking they just stole her hands and feet -- even while being nearly killed, she must have thought the reason was that her conditions were really bad. She has too much trust in herself -- she never thought that before she knew the rug could be pulled from under her feet."

"I see..... so it was that."

Hmm, I thought.

"I considered him crafty, but to think that Guillotinecutter had even stealthily stolen the heart of Kissshot -- afterwards the three attacked her together, huh. Although, stealing the heart from Kissshot without her noticing in itself must have been a really hard job, so I should give him more credit, I guess?"

"Oh no, Araragi-kun."

Oshino refuted my words.

Moreover comparatively easily.

"The one who stole the heart was not Guillotinecutter."

"Eh? What do you mean? That Dramaturgie or Episode stole the heart and Guillotinecutter was taking care of it?"

"Oh no no no, it was neither Dramaturgie nor Episode."

"Then who?"

Don't tell me that there could be a fourth specialist of vampire exorcism coming here, such thought made a chill run down my spine -- however, Oshino's reply was the following word.

"Me."

"....."

Words won't come out at the moment.

There were a few remarks that came into my mind, however I felt all of them were inappropriate in this situation, and I gulped them down. Thereupon Oshino, without being begged for, starts to explain -- they were theatrical elocutions typical of the villain of a historical play.

"To begin with, I just happened to pass by -- I was tottering the streets at night, and there was a vampire possessing a power so formidable it's not even fun. I easily imagined that was the Kaii Killer -- so *in order to bring a balance*, I extracted that heart in advance."

Because I simultaneously expected even that several vampire exorcists would have come in this town -- he says.

"Without her noticing it -- I stealthily extracted her heart."

"Are you..... able to do such a thing?"

After having said it, I notice this is a stupid question -- that's right, I saw it with these eyes.

Oshino stopped the attack of Dramaturgie, Episode and Guillotincutter all together with a playful pose similar to a single-footed scarecrow.

That's the skill he possesses.

Even the negotiations with those three -- materialized.

"I am."

Oshino replied.

"Although I don't mean that it's simple -- the farthest from it, it was a freakishly hard job. In particular it was difficult to extract her heart without her noticing it. Armed with a cross, garlic and holy water I somewhat stealthily hid my figure. However, it could have still gone either way. Even if it was not less than 50-50 it was not more than 50-50 either -- and then unexpectedly, the dice favored the three."

".....And then Kissshot having her limbs plucked out, barely escaped with her life -- and so she met me."

"And then, with your blood, she escaped death."

Oshino said.

"And you became a vampire."

".....I see. Then -- it would be no wonder I could defeat those three--"

I guess.

Far from being a wonder, it satisfies me.

The difference in potential -- was decisive.

"The fact that you told Kissshot of this cram school ruin as a refuge, were you thinking of it as atonement or something? You even went as far as affixing a barrier while we are inside--"

"Atonement? I didn't commit any crime where I need to make amends for, you know. Therefore, even this is balance. Your involvement has tipped the scales."

"Scales?"

"It was unexpected that the Kaii Killer turned a human into a subordinate. That was way too unexpected. As far as I'm concerned, the story should have ended when I managed to extract the heart, but with this it had been reset."

"A reset....."

Come to think of it -- even those three said a similar thing. Kissshot creating a subordinate was way too unexpected, like she was--

Something like a believer.

Kissshot is a believer of not making subordinates--

"That said, even if I reset things, this time Heartunderblade has been too weakened -- with one-on-three, if we add you, the subordinate, two-on-three, indeed things weren't evened out."

".....Then, even the fact you happened to pass by in front of Kissshot who dragged me along, even the fact you happened to pass by the point I was attacked by those three, it was all on purpose? I couldn't help but think your appearance on the scene didn't have any sense -- so that was the reason."

Even the fact he told Kissshot of this cram school ruin.

Even the fact he saved me from those three.

He did everything in order to bring a balance -- so that was the reason.

"Actually, it happened by chance."

Oshino said in a tone like he was making fun of me.

"You have just been lucky."

"....."

I even think there's no way we have been, however, unexpectedly, it might have been that.

Because you can only observe a phenomenon after it has ended.

"It means -- just by getting back the limbs, Kissshot can't return to her full power, complete body--"

Even if I get back the right leg, the left leg and the arms.

Still, if the heart is missing -- it is fatal.

"Of course."

Oshino nodded to my words.

"Therefore you, after this, should have had to take the heart back from me -- because even if the Kaii Killer got back her arms, it would still be you with more vampire power. As the fourth round, the battle between me and you -- I should have brought a balance with that."

".....F-Fighting -- with you?"

"Should have been."

"Should, you say..."

"Although I was spreading foreshadowing of being the last boss by being called by you utterly sloppy, it ended up being all in vain" {Last boss = rasubosu. Sloppy = zubora}

"Actually, that's not very effective."

It doesn't stick out much.

And although the words do look similar.

To begin with, I don't remember having commented you were sloppy.

You must be self-conscious about it and don't need others to tell you.....

"That's not my intention anymore."

Oshino, this time lazily holding the cigarette in his mouth, just with the movement of the lips, with that cigarette pointed at the heart I was holding in my hands.

"Look, I've already given it back to you, right?"

"Hu.....Huh?"

"If you want to call it atonement, then this is atonement. I am really sorry for what happened to class rep-chan. It's really unusual that an ordinary person was swallowed up in things to this point. Because normally -- people run away from Kaii. That girl is a bit abnormal. I can't explain it adequately just with goodness--"

"....."

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

Not self-sacrifice -- self-satisfaction.

Even when she was nearly killed by Guillotinecutter--

She was worrying about me.

After it ended, without even trying to say a word to blame me, she instead said such absurd things as 'I'm sorry, I got caught easily. I should have been more careful--'.

"If you let me speak frankly..."

Oshino muttered like he was talking to himself.

"A kindness of that level makes me uneasy."

".....That's not the way to talk."

"It's something even you should have felt. Am I wrong?"

He says it like he sees through me.

As always -- however, certainly it was as he said.

I said a similar thing to Hanekawa.

Even after being told that -- Hanekawa didn't change though.

".....That girl is like forcing goodness on herself, isn't she? Of course, nevertheless I can't make it her fault. As it turned out, although I managed to rescue her with my tactic, it was you who executed it -- I don't think I could make it up just with last night's thing."

Oshino, only when he said those words -- in the same way of yesterday, had a meek expression.

"Good grief, what a disgrace it was. You can say that was already a burden to all the Oshino who live in Japan."

"Don't drag your failure into all the Oshino-sans who live in Japan."

"Hahhaa. Therefore, think of that heart as a substitute for a consolation prize, Araragi-kun. It's from me with all my good faith."

"A consolation prize....."

"As things stand I am a guy of mutual trust relationships. With this the balance -- it's a somewhat complicated issue, but roughly it's level."

Oshino.

Saying so, got up from his chair.

"The right leg. The left leg. The right arm. The left arm. And the heart. With this Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade has gotten back the parts she lost. In other words, with this you will turn back into a human. Let me say congratulations another time -- shouldn't you rejoice?"

".....Honestly, it's a complex feeling."

I said.

"It's like everything was schemed."

"That's thinking too much of it. If we assume someone schemed this state of affairs, I too am on the side which was under a scheme."

"It doesn't seem so, though."

"That it seems or it doesn't seem, that's a fact. Araragi-kun, you are overestimating me a little. Even I have things I can do and things I can't do. I am ingenious, but I am not a genius, you know."

"....."

What a bothersome guy he was.

"I may separate, but I don't scheme. Ah, that's right, Araragi-kun, I ask you this just out of interest, lately, haven't you been hungry?"

"Hm? Well -- I think I said it before, but since I became a vampire, maybe it's the immortality, I don't have much appetite."

"Ah, I see."

"Is something wrong with that?"

"Is it? Well, just everything."

"Everything..."

"Well, I just thought it must have been time for you to get hungry. At any rate, two weeks passed already -- hahaha. Must have been hard.See you, Araragi-kun. When you safely return a human, take care not to act rashly again. The person who happened to meet a Kaii once, after that becomes easy to attract, so be careful."

While talking -- without even returning the chair to its original place, Oshino went out of the room, leaving me still seated.

"Hey, what is it -- don't talk like you were leaving this place."

"I am leaving. The job is finished -- looking more like a failure, but still, what's finished is finished, what has ended has ended. Ah, that's right, Araragi-kun. About your share of two million yen and class rep-chan's share of three million yen, a total of five million yen, let's say we're even." {chara = forgiving a debt}

"Fl...flippant? {flippant = charai}

"Hey wait, that would be me. Even I said, even. Offsetting each other. My failure, and Heartunderblade's heart -- well, that much might be enough, but it's a free service."

"....."

"Even if you don't stare at me like that, there's no catch -- I may not look like it, but I am prodigal. As long as it can bring a balance, I don't intend to be fussy. Well then, give my regards to class rep-chan."

"Do you want to go without meeting her?"

"Yeah. After all it ended without a meeting -- well, I'd say there's no need to push it and meet her."

"Well, you may be right. Although since the affair with those three ended, even if you meet, it's not like you would drag her into something again, right?"

"Don't make me think about it, now it would be awkward. Besides..."

Besides, Oshino said once more.

After that.

"After all, that girl really makes me uneasy."

he said.

Clearly -- and bitterly.

"Well, even though I say so, for the time being I plan to linger in this town, so if you catch sight of me, at least call out to me."

As if switching over, Oshino laughed cheerfully.

"At any rate, if you feel indebted toward me for pardoning the fee -- oh yeah, just search and inform me of the Kaii myths that circulate in this town. My specialty is primarily that one, after all. I hope you will forgive me for strife like this one -- that's not to my liking, really--"

What.

Even while saying this he was walking without changing pace, Oshino opened the door with the broken knob and went out in the corridor, and like that he closed the door.

There was no word of goodbye.

On that subject -- I have never seen the scene of him saying a word of goodbye to someone.

No matter how trivial the parting scene.

He was always just laughing frivolously.

"Give me a break....."

Indebtedness? Give me a break.

There's no way I feel such thing -- leaving aside if it was plotted or not, part of the source of this problem after all stemmed from you.

Of course -- it was thanks to you that I was saved though.

No.

If I say that, how would he reply?

You just saved yourself on your own -- he would say.

".....With this, right arm, left arm, and heart GET."

From Guillotinecutter the arms.

From Oshino Meme the heart.

The missing pieces were all together.

At last, the time for the complete revival of the Iron-Blooded, Hot-Blooded, Cold-Blooded vampire, the Kaii Killer, Kisshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade -- had come.

015

"Yyy--yahhoo!"

That--

Was the first thing Kissshot said with her complete form.

That night, when she woke up I handed over the three parts Oshino gave me to her-- regarding the heart, she was perplexed, but I told her the truth of the matter as it stood. Kissshot, liquidating the question with an easygoing "I see", bit into that deep red heart as if it were an apple.

The rule is that you must not be present when a lady is eating.

That means I went out into the corridors.

And then after a little while -- I heard that gleeful scream.

It was -- a voice of joy from the bottom of the heart.

I opened the door and went back inside the classroom.

The complete form of Kissshot stood there.

It was the woman I met that day under the streetlight.

The golden hair.

It grew further, and it was a little done up in the nape.

The chic dress -- it was even much taller than me.

Honestly, I thought she was beautiful.

It's different from being lovely, or cool -- I think that maybe, in my life until now, I've not even once felt such beauty before.

No.

Even that day I -- thought so.

Undoubtedly -- it was the complete form.

It was the looks of the complete her.

"Yahooo! I am back, I am back!"

"....."

Well, if in her complete looks she didn't do things like skip, jumping inside the crammed classroom, I could have gotten much better memories, possibly even feel deeply moved.

She was in high spirits for sure.

No solemnity or anything whatsoever.

"Kissshot....., incidentally, it looks like Oshino has gone somewhere during the day."

"Yea? Is there something wrong?"

"Well, it's about the heart. I wondered if you weren't angry about it."

"It is all right, I bestow him my pardon -- or to better say, I could not care less!"

Kyahahahaha, she makes a laugh with a lovely voice not appropriate to her looks, and she continues to skip around.

Hmmm.

Still, I didn't notice it that much under that street light, but..... the bust of Kissshot is superbly big.

Each time she hops it shakes, shakes, shakes, shakes.

I have the impression even the front of the dress is opening up.

I see, so from that (10 years) she undergoes that kind of progress (17 years), and she finally becomes this (27 years), huh.....

It's a mystery.

"....."

If I begged her now that she is jubilating in such high spirits, maybe she would let me touch her breast, it's not like such a wicked impulse wasn't floating in my head, but I didn't have the courage to put it into practice.

That is to say, there's a limit on how much you can be a spoilsport.

"Hm."

Suddenly.

Kissshot abruptly became motionless.

What, did she read my mind?

I became uneasy at once, and,

"Wh-What's wrong, Kissshot?"

I asked.

I even have the impression my voice turned inside out.

"....."

Kissshot stood still for a while, and that intensified my uneasiness, however after another while,

"Hm? What is it?"

She said.

"Just now, were thou talking to mine afterimage?"

"A-Afterimage?"

"As a matter of fact, just now I traveled around the Earth seven and a half times"

"Are you light!?"

Even if I do say so myself.

That was a retort that I won't believe I actually made for the rest of my life.

"Just kidding, that was a fib! With seven laps and a half in this moment I would be in Brazil!"

Kissshot cackled.

Wow, she sure is in high spirits.

"Ha ha. It feels so good. Being complete with oneself -- servant."

Afterwards Kissshot continued to frolic for another two hours, but at that point naturally she seemed to have calmed down at last, and said that.

"Once again, let me thank thee. Of course, I thought thou would skillfully gather my limbs, but to gather even the heart of which not even I was aware of, that was really an unexpected task. I bestow thee my praise."

"I don't know."

Even if she thanked me and praised me, I couldn't help but feel uneasy.

I still couldn't shake the feeling of being the victim of some scheme.

Like I was manipulated -- that's what I thought.

"I just have the impression I did nothing but run around in circles -- rather than gathering them I felt like they gathered themselves."

If you asked me whom I have to thank, I'd say it's thanks to Oshino.

But since Oshino would hate to hear that, then I'd say it's thanks to Hanekawa.

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

Incidentally, tonight she is not coming.

We have decided the next meeting will be at the new school term.

We decided it together.

Well, obviously now that I defeated all the three specialists of vampire exorcism, I don't think she will be in danger anymore, but -- I still judged it best for her not to come close to this cram school ruin.

At the point in time when I decided that it was also uncertain whether Guillotinecutter would have actually returned Kissshot's arms or not.

Even if I say the new school term -- that's already the day after tomorrow though.

It's already close.

And when we meet again I -- will be a human.

That's my expectation.

.....In the end Oshino openly avoided Hanekawa and left, but I think I got the impression Hanekawa wanted to meet him. Come to think of it -- I failed to ask her.

Well -- at this point it's too late.

More importantly.

"Kissshot. I'm sorry to say this when you are so worked up, but -- if possible, I would like to be turned back into a human quickly."

"Ah, of course. Relax, for I will turn thee back into a human. But servant-- before that, shall we talk a little?"

"Talk?"

"Some catching up -- ha, nothing of the sort. It is just that I want to tell thee something about turning thee back into a human."

The tone of Kissshot was calm.

Even her eyes were once again cold.

It seems she's in her serious mode.

"Well, fine."

"Yea. Then shall we change places?"

"Not here?"

"Wherever is fine, but let us create an atmosphere."

Let us go up, said Kissshot.

As I am told to do, I go out this room, and climb the stairs -- it seems by now the rain had ceased, but it's already night, wherever we go there isn't the risk of evaporating.

Kissshot passed me on the way to the stairs, and then in the end we climbed up to the fourth floor.

She chose the room Oshino and I went in during daytime.

I thought we certainly would have talked here, but Kissshot seemed dissatisfied, and

"Shall we go higher than this?"

she asked.

"The building doesn't have a rooftop, does it? I didn't notice anything that resembled an emergency staircase either."

I said, and

"Hmm."

said Kissshot, as she glared at the ceiling.

Crack.

And a portion of the ceiling blew off.

The concrete rained down, but she, without minding that,

"Follow me, servant."

Said that, and (like it was natural) from a point on her dress which on the large back was open like the bust part, she grew a pair of bat-like wings (!), she flapped, and she went out from the hole in the ceiling opened by her glare.

"....."

No, there are too many things I could retort at.

Your ecology is full of holes.

I mean, Kissshot's glare has a physical destructive power..... even the viciousness of Episode's eyes totally pales in comparison.

It surpasses Dramaturgie's shape-shifting power.

She has grown wings.

I tried to do the same thing too, but aside from plants that filled my daydreams crazily, until now, I had never imagined growing wings, so of course I couldn't do it.

I used an ordinary jump, and pass through that hole.

Well, even this is plenty amazing, isn't it?

Ruins, the rooftop of the cram school -- actually, rooftop might not be accurate, after all we are just above the roof.

On that roof.

Kissshot was waiting for me sitting squatted.

Under the starlight at night -- the much more melancholic image of the sitting girl possessed a bizarre charm. Though it was uncalled for, I became strangely tense.

I don't know why.

I cowered, and shrunk.

Complete form -- her complete looks.

A complete existence.

And -- a superior existence.

I -- felt she was making me realize that after all I was nothing but her subordinate.

"Hm?"

Suddenly, Kissshot looks this way.

"What art thou doing? Come closer."

".....Yes."

As I was told -- I sat down next to Kissshot.

I do it and abruptly received a headbutt.

She butted me.

"Wha-what are you doing!?"

"What art thou afraid of -- thou are my precious servant. I will not eat thee."

"Y-You're right....."

Her words have seen through my heart.

Certainly though, if I see Kissshot laughing in that way, I start feeling stupid for shrinking.

Thinking that, I relaxed at once.

"Well now, what were we talking about?"

"Didn't you say there was something you wanted to talk about?"

About turning me back into a human.

You said that before.

"That manner of speaking was not accurate. It is not that there was something I wanted to talk about, I just wanted to talk and anything will do."

"? Don't say something strange."

Let's chat a little.

I don't know when, but I remember being told that by Hanekawa.

Well, although she is a vampire, she is still a woman, I guess?

Maybe she likes to chat.

So it's like a party to commemorate her complete recovery.

"Is it something I will need for when you turn me back into a human?"

"It is needed. By me."

"Hmmm. But you have lived 500 years. You shouldn't lack stories to talk about."

"It did not happen much."

Kissshot replies to my words.

"Because I just fought to the death the whole time with people like those three -- before I noticed it, I had become a legend. Well, a man like that brat is rare--"

"Brat..... Oshino?"

"Picking my heart without me noticing is quite a feat. Though I will not be stupefied -- I do not even know when we crossed paths."

"I wonder who that guy is."

"Who knows. However, if I consider that that brat could have devoted himself entirely to vampire exorcism, even I tremble. I was lucky he is an opportunist who continues to stay neutral."

"Opportunist....."

I even thought it was a cruel manner to talk about him, but unexpectedly it seemed an appropriate title for Oshino. If I told it to him, he is quite capable of calling himself that with glee.

"So what happened this time in itself was stimulating -- however, basically they were 500 boring years.Oh yea, speaking of things I should talk of, in the end, I guess there is only that man."

"That man?"

"I already told thee thou art the second subordinate I created, did I not? Therefore this is the story of the first subordinate."

"The first--"

Let me see.

It was a story -- of 400 years before, right?

"Ah yes. Now that you mention it, I think you told me. I was the second after 400 years -- I remember I heard something that resembled a Koshien invitation."

"Koshien?"

"Err, don't mind it. It was just a metaphor. More importantly, what kind of guy was the first subordinate? I'd like to hear it."

"Yea. I will tell thee."

"Was he a guy like me?"

"? Why do thou think so?"

"Er, that is--"

I didn't tell her.

Well, Oshino is not here anymore, so it's fine.

--The truth is I heard this from Oshino. There are two meanings in a vampire sucking blood, even if your blood is sucked, you don't necessarily become a vampire."

"Hm."

Kissshot frowned.

".....Do not misunderstand. It is not like I tried to save thy life -- I just turned thee into a subordinate to use thee for gathering my limbs. By now I can reveal it to thee, but if I said it to thee from the beginning, thou might not have obeyed, so I lied."

"Oshino said you would have told me so."

"....."

Kissshot stayed silent.

And then she didn't say anything.

Whether it was because I hit the bull's eye, or because I missed the mark..... I couldn't tell though.

"W-Well, so I was wondering if he could have resembled me -- at any rate, the persons you have chosen to turn into subordinates have been two."

"He had in common with thee just the race."

I went back at what I was saying while thinking that after all I should have stayed silent, but Kissshot flatly denied my conjecture.

"That guy was a warrior -- worthy of entrusting my back to, a remarkable warrior."

"Uhhmm..... well, I can't guard your back."

At best, I think I can guard your house.

Actually, I might not be able to guard even that.

"Well, it was 400 years before. Unlike now, all men must have been sorts of warriors."

"Thy historical viewpoint seems to be full of bias and is distorted."

"Err."

I'm not good at world history.

"No, look, somehow I have this character, you know, so I'm not good with a hysteric way of thinking."

"I never knew there was the second meaning of hysteric in 'historical'."

It was exposed I'm also not good at English.

"However, it has been a while since I came into this country. Certainly it seems to have become peaceful -- this country alone seems detached from the world."

"I'm sorry, I am peace-addicted."

I think this is not really something to be sorry about, though.

However, I was not a warrior for sure.

No matter how much airs of Gakuen Inou Batoru I put on, I am an ordinary person through and through -- no matter how much skill I am given as a vampire, I'm like a middle-schooler possessing a butterfly knife.

Kissshot surely must have been dissatisfied.

All the more if the first was that awesome.

"Well, the fact that you turned me into a subordinate, whether it was because you were thinking about my life, or whether it was in order to gather your limbs, in the end it was an action taken as emergency evacuation..... so there is no reason I and the first should have something in common. However, you said we belong to the same race."

"Yea"

"Then he was mongoloid? A Japanese -- no way. From the continent?"

"Nay, he was Japanese."

Kissshot said an unexpected thing.

"A man I met in this country while I wasted my youth and gallivanted the world over. I learned Japanese at that time as well -- well, it seems the words have changed considerably."

"The Japan of 400 years ago....."

The Edo period? Was it?

I was also not good at Japan history.

Or rather, I am not good at anything except math.

"Then he was not a warrior, he was a samurai....."

"Hm? Ah, I think thou are right."

Kissshot nods.

"At any rate, he was a strong man."

"Hmmm -- however, if that's the case, it would have been better if you summoned him this time too. Since he is a subordinate, he too is like a servant, right? If that's the case, then you didn't have to walk a tightrope by using me--"

"Impossible. Because he is already dead."

Kissshot said so as to interrupt my speech.

In fact, I'd say she practically interrupted it.

"That too is a fairly old story. Dost thou remember? I must have told thee that when I fight I sometimes use a katana."

"Hm?"

Did she tell me?

Well -- ah yes, when was it, it's something that came out when we talked about Dramaturgie's long swords. She should have mentioned producing a sword with the matter creation power.

I had completely forgotten.

But I am glad I remembered it without having to tamper with my brain.

"That katana I mentioned, was his memento."

She said.

Kissshot thrusts her own right hand shaped in a handchop in her belly. It goes through her dress, her fingertips bores through her internal organs easily.

And it had just ended without me tampering with my brain.....

Not minding me becoming dumbfounded, Kissshot pulls out her right hand from the belly -- and that hand was grasping something that looked like the hilt of a sword.

Moreover, the hilt of that sword -- a Japanese sword?

My guess was right on the mark.

The sword Kissshot drew from her belly, with an overall length of 2 meters, was an oodachi.

"Youtou¹³ 'Kokorowatari'¹⁴ a first class blade by an unsigned swordsmith, but it seems he was quite renowned. Well, I do not understand it well -- but as long as it cuts it is enough."

"Eeh....."

Meanwhile Kissshot's belly wound is already healing -- then I looked at that katana. It's long..... although long, not as long as Dramaturgie's long blades. Nonetheless..... even though Dramaturgie's flamberges had a shape imbued with an artistic quality, Japanese swords in themselves have a unique charm.

If I had to say it, for Kissshot, with blond hair and a dress, a katana was a mismatch -- no, to begin with, no matter how sharp the sword is, is there really a weapon that could withstand a vampire's superhuman strength?

"Do not move."

She said.

Suddenly, Kissshot waved that sword, 'Kokorowatari'.

It looked like a movement that shook off even the dust attached to the sword -- however, it wasn't that.

"Hey--"

"Do not move. Now I have cut thee."

"E-Eeh?"

"Dost thou feel pain?"

"Er, no--"

"Hmmm. That means my skill did not dull -- Thou can move at this point. Thou art already healing"

"Wh-What is it..... a second lie following the 'earth seven laps and a half' one? You say healing, but in my case the clothes don't heal..... where did you cut?"

"The torso, horizontally. I also cut something I could not stand"

"Could not stand!"

¹³ A "youtou" is a sword that has a supernatural air about it. Sometimes the term is rendered with "demon sword" or "enchanted blade", but "youtou" in itself doesn't imply neither evilness or magic.

¹⁴ Kokorowatari = Heart Crosser.

"Do not worry about the clothes. The sharpness of 'Kokorowatari' is authentic -- to the extent that if the cut ends are left alone for a while, they stick together. Of course, the merit goes to my skill though."

"....."

It seems true.

Is it for real.....

"However, how come that sword could withstand your ability -- your physical strength? Wasn't that originally a common sword?"

"It is because even if thou say that, this is not the original. Using the original as raw material, the first subordinate created it with his own flesh and blood. Furthermore I am the one inheriting it. Well, because of the problem of the sword being too sharp, no matter how much I cut, it remains as before. Therefore, this could be said to be a katana suited to cut only Kaiis."

"Kaii -- cutter, huh."

"Exactly. 'Kokorowatari' being complicated to pronounce, the enemies passed it as 'Kaii Killer'. Originally Kaii Killer was not my nickname, it was the appellative of this sword."

While talking -- Kissshot puts the sword back in her belly.

It looked like she was doing seppuku.

Once again, she is immortal.

However, that katana -- was the memento of that first subordinate who should have had the same immortality, said Kissshot.

The first subordinate -- was already dead.

"An immortal vampire dying, in other words -- it means he was exorcised, right?"

Dramaturgie, Episode, Guillotinecutter -- people like those three should have existed even 400 years before.

However,

"Wrong."

Kissshot said.

"He was a man who would never be killed by anyone."

"Then what?"

Despite being immortal.

In which way did he die.

"Suicide."

Kissshot said indifferently.

With cold eyes -- staring at the town spreading below.

"It is the actual cause of death for vampires 90% of the time: a common reason."

"....."

"Incidentally the remaining 10% is due to incurring vampire exorcisms -- the other causes of death are something like a calculation error."

"Suicide, why?"

"Boredom kills the man, I guess they say."

Boredom -- kills the man.

Though people die even for feelings of guilt.

But boredom certainly kills.

"Well, it depends on situation and epoch, but, whether one is a genuine vampire or a former human, in most cases, it seems that vampires, after living 200 years, end up wishing death."

"But -- in what way could they commit suicide? Aren't they immortal?"

"Like thou did in the first day, throwing oneself under the sun is the quickest way -- well, it is something like jumping off a cliff."

"Don't put it so nicely....."

However -- maybe it was something like that.

He certainly had a death wish, Kissshot said to me that time.

"If we assume there was something that changed in that man, it was the fact that he chose his own death, just some years after he became a vampire -- though in that short time, nothing changed much."

Because he did it in front of my eyes.

He threw himself under the sun.

Ostentatiously, while showing off.

Kissshot murmurs.

"Henceforth -- I never made another subordinate. Until I met thee."

".....Weren't you bored?"

I asked.

That might have been something I shouldn't have asked, though.

"You lived not just 200 years, you lived -- even 500 years."

"There is no way I was not bored."

Kissshot replied, without swearing.

"I have been idle all the time."

"....."

"Idle, idle -- there was nothing to do. If I did something, in reaction to my activity, vampire exorcists started followed me around -- like those three followed me during this time's sightseeing."

"Sightseeing."

I thought that was probably a lie.

Though I changed my mind and came to think it could be really true.

If before in this country.

She created the first subordinate--

".....However, thou did not bore me, servant. Thou -- everything thou did wert insane."

Perhaps thou was the first person in history who offered his neck to a vampire -- laughed Kissshot amused.

For her aged appearance, that was an awfully childish way to laugh.

"Even calling me Kissshot all of a sudden."

"Ah..... about that, I didn't have time to ask you, but somehow everyone was surprised about it. Even Oshino. Is it something I shouldn't do?"

"There is not a fool who calls a vampire by her true name."

"True name? Is it something like first name?"

".....It is stupid to even explain. Well, the world..... no, the epoch might be different -- Not just me. Even those three. I must be old fashioned with a fashion lag. If I want to fit in appropriately with the current epoch, after all, maybe I should look like that brat"

"Wanting to have looks based on the style of Oshino..... no way. As if being flashy like that should be an ideal."

"More than an ideal, a fact."

Well, whatever, said Kissshot.

"This is the extent of what I can talk about. Aside that, I wanted to listen to thy story. Thou hath lived 17 years, have thou not? There is no way thou lived idly. Try telling me something interesting."

"Whoa."

What a solemn style.

With that style telling an interesting story is a tall hurdle.

"E-Errr..... well, then one typical stupid short story. There is a man, well he was a good young man, but he had a troublesome fondness for alcohol. If it just comes to that, it was an individual idiosyncrasy, and he did as he pleased, but regrettably one day he was driving drunk, and he ran over a small girl crossing with a raised hand with the green light. Being drunk, at that time he didn't notice he ran over somebody, but the following day at the parking lot of his apartment he saw blood stuck to the bumper of his car, and he became aware of the incident. On the newspaper the man learns the name of the girl he ran over was 'Rika-chan'. Naturally, he should have given himself over, but the man was tormented. There shouldn't have been any eyewitnesses, therefore if he stayed silent..... Meanwhile it became night. At that moment, the landline phone of the apartment received a call. 'I am Rika-chan. Now I am in front of the apartment'. Saying just that, she hung up. 'Rika-chan!? That's impossible!'. The man was shaken. However, that was certainly the voice of a little child. It was a lisping voice. Don't tell me the girl I ran over, that should have been dead.....? Thereupon he received immediately a second call. 'I am Rika-chan. Now I am on the first floor'. The room where the man lived was on the fifth floor! 'Rika-chan' must have aimed there. Presuming so, the man goes beyond being shaken and becomes frightened. Moreover there was a third call. 'I am Rika-chan. Now I boarded the elevator', hey don't be sly!"

"....."

It wasn't received well.

In proportion to how long I spoke.

A reciting style that made aware of a comic storyteller, but I might have been more annoying than expected.

"Well, not like that, just normal funny stuff is enough."

"Guh....."

My pride was wounded!

Though I am fundamentally a straight man.....

I can't stay silent being looked down like this!

"Well then, second part!"

"Ooh."

"Professor Clark said it -- 'Boys be anchovy'!"¹⁵

"....."

She isn't even smiling.

Even a one shot gag is no good.

"Then third part! I remembered it because a while ago the topic of world history came out, I will tell you my failure story!"

"I am looking forward to it!"

"In the 'ABCD' of the 'ABCD blockade' that surrounded Japan before WWII, the question of writing each country name was proposed in a test -- to that question I answered this! 'A is America, B is United Kingdom, C is China, and..... D is Germany'!"

"....."

Kissshot inclines her head to the side.

She won't laugh even for a failure story.

"Errr....., if I had to say what's funny, is that I guessed B was United Kingdom, but for some reason I read D in romaji..... moreover Germany was siding with the Axis Powers, right?"¹⁶

I explained my own gag.

In response to that Kissshot said.

".....What is the ABCD blockade?"

"You don't possess the common knowledge of a human!"

It was a sad way to miss the mark.

After that, in the end.

The hand of the clock passed midnight, and the date changed into April the 7th -- that is, until it became the last day of Spring Break of Naoetsu private high school, Kissshot and I kept chatting above the roof of the ruin.

¹⁵ Should be "Boys be ambitious".

¹⁶ ABCD stands for American British Chinese Dutch. The names of these countries in Japanese are respectively "Amerika", "Igirisu", "Chuugoku", "Oranda". Araragi for D answered "Doitsu". In case someone wanted to know, Igirisu and Oranda come from Portuguese "Inglês" and "Holanda", while Doitsu comes from the Dutch "Duits".

I had felt that Kissshot's cold eyes were full of the will to shoot down the short stories I presented, but midway through we both ended up with 'so much high spirits that everything is funny', and whatever we said we burst out laughing.

I think it was mostly meaningless conversation.

I think it was a superficial conversation.

However -- perhaps.

When I reflect upon this Spring Break, the best memory left, that I surely won't ever be able to forget, will be in this day, this moment, this place: when I talked with Kissshot.

I believed it's because I laughed.

"Now then."

Even if she laughed so much she cried, while rubbing her eyes whose coldness nevertheless didn't disappear -- Kissshot stood up.

"It is time -- I will make thee a human."

"Ah, yeah."

That's right.

Damn, I carelessly forgot.

Is it normal to forget such an important thing..... I was a little shocked at myself.

I passed too much time having fun.

However -- the party was at its peak.

"Come to think of it -- the first subordinate never said he wanted to turn back into a human?"

".....Hm, it is complicated."

"Complicated, you say."

You use difficult Japanese.

"In any case, those days it was impossible for me to turn someone back into a human -- this time, if possible, I intend to capitalize on that lesson. Say, art thou ready?"

"Err..... maybe it's because I laughed too much, but I am a little hungry. Could I put something in my stomach before? Since the food if I remember well was exhausted, would I be in time if I went buying some before?"

"Hm? Well, certainly even I who suddenly returned to my complete form am feeling hunger -- however, can thou not even bear it?"

"Well, kind of."

"Do thou want to bring the portable food?"

"Portable food, you say."

What's that.

Must be outmoded sensibility.

"Well, it's my last night as a vampire, it's a point where I have a little reluctance to part. Is there something you'd like to eat?"

"I do not have likes or dislikes."

"Uhhmm..."

Well, anyway, at this hour only the convenience store should be open, so from the beginning I don't have a choice.

"Well, fine. Do whatever thou want, my servant. I will receive thy spirit of wanting to be my servant even if for just a little bit longer -- I will get ready on the second floor."

"OK."

And that said--

We put a closure to the conversation above the roof.

Although only the convenience store should be open, even with that convenience store I must go very far to buy something -- the round trip from the cram school ruin takes one hour.

If one doesn't use vampire running power, that is.

However -- I didn't feel like running.

Instead I purposely walked slowly.

Humph.

What a hassle.

I will turn thee back into a human -- she said.

Indeed, I can't deny that it made me a little nervous being told that so lightheartedly.

I am a chicken and a coward.

However -- the 'little reluctance to part' words said to Kissshot were a makeshift lie. Of course, I don't mean that I want to be Kissshot's servant for a little longer. Out of the question.

Just.

I loathed to part.

".....Uhhmm..."

Perhaps..... it's the same, even for Kissshot, I think.

Something she wanted to say about turning me back into a human.

In the end, there was no such thing.

She just -- genuinely wanted to chat with me.

To party.

"I don't know."

Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade.

The Iron-Blooded, Hot-Blooded, Cold-Blooded vampire.

The legendary vampire.

Kaii Killer.

"Obviously -- she will go somewhere."

I got back all her body parts.

She shouldn't have a reason to stay in this town -- no, in this country any longer.

Sightseeing -- she said.

If I think about the first subordinate, surely this must have been something like a tour in a land of memories -- however, as far as her memories go, it only happened that her worst memories got a recoating.

She had her heart stolen, she had her limbs stolen.

The second subordinate created in desperation was an ordinary person.

And that subordinate says he want to turn back into a human.

Though she said I didn't bore her.

"She was invited to become a god, and refused -- very different from Guillotinecutter."

Once she leaves this country.

She will wander around the world again, probably.

No, since she talked like she gallivanted in her youth, in these days maybe she doesn't travel like that anymore.

To begin with, I wonder if she could get on planes -- well, maybe she can just grow wings and fly in the air. That's a convenient body.

However, there is obviously no sorrow of parting.

Simply, what could be said to be Kissshot's bonds were roughly just me being a vampire, so I feared parting with that.

I felt that undoubtedly I understood the reason Oshino, that frivolous man, doesn't say a word of farewell.

"Well, it can't be helped."

If you meet, you will also part.

That's life.

Even though for Kissshot these two weeks were nothing but bad memories, looking back now, for me maybe it was not that bad of a Spring Break.

Maybe it was not that bad of a Spring Break.

What, I really come to think of it that way.

"Alright!"

I continued the party above the roof, and I opened the farewell party. Wanting to make it as showy as I could, at the convenience store I used up the money on hand and spent it on cakes and other sweets, and then at a quick pace I returned to the cram school ruin.

On the way back.

While thinking I would still actually say words of farewell to Kissshot, I prepared myself -- and I arrived at the room at the second floor.

The date was April 7th.

The time was past 2:00 AM.

"I'm back"

With that feeling, I open the door as cheerfully as possible.

Kissshot was having a meal.

Munch munch, chomp chomp, crunch crunch.

Munch munch, chomp chomp, crunch crunch.

Munch munch, chomp chomp, crunch crunch.

Munch munch, chomp chomp, crunch crunch.

She was eating -- a human.

".....Eh?"

I drop the sack from the convenience store I was holding in my hand.

At that sound, Kissshot turns her head to me.

While her hands.

were holding a human head half eaten.

"Ah, servant -- thou were unexpectedly quick. However I did tell thee. It is manners not to be present when a lady is eating.

I recognized that head.

One of the three specialist of vampire exorcism.

The only human among them.

It was Guillotinecutter.

His body, his flesh was cut to pieces -- he was mangled to a size easy to eat.

A fish -- served whole.

"He showed up while I was waiting for thee -- it seems even the barrier was not able to hide me at full power. However, since I was getting hungry, he came at the perfect time. He was a good tonic."

She said.

Kissshot gestured like she was seeking someone over my shoulder.

And then she inclined her head looking perplexed.

"What? That *portable food* with glasses and braids -- did thou not bring it with thee?"

016

At a time like this, I didn't know of a place to stay -- going back home is, of course, impossible. On the other hand, even assuming there was another abandoned building like that cram school ruin, I didn't have any spirit left to search for it.

I was being chased by time.

The moment of sunrise was getting closer hour by hour -- I was quickly driven into a corner.

In the end.

I thrust not one hand, but both inside my brain, tampering with it for tampering's sake, thinking for thinking's sake -- and I chose as a temporary shelter the PE storehouse of Naoetsu High School.

Temporary shelter -- it was really a temporary shelter.

However, this windowless PE storehouse blocked by an iron door in itself seemed fit for hiding me, a vampire, during the day. I chose it in desperation, but it was not such a bad place. The day I fought with Dramaturgie, I didn't give up and I repaired the iron door by brute force, I am glad from the bottom of my heart I put it back, I thought -- no, I didn't think it.

There was not a thing to be glad for.

I got it all wrong.

"W.....wwwwwwwwwWwWwwwWw."

My teeth keep chattering.

My body doesn't stop shivering.

Why.

Why.

Why didn't I notice that?

Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade -- is a vampire.

A vampire.

Weak against the sun.

Dislikes crosses.

Dislikes silver bullets. Dislikes holy water. Dislikes garlic.

Dislikes poison.

Dies when a stake is driven through the heart.

Doesn't project a shadow, doesn't have a reflection in a mirror.

Fangs.

Immortal body. Semi-perpetual recovery power.

Eyes that see well even in the dark.

Shape-shifting power.

Healing power in the blood.

And -- *she eats humans.*

"wwWWWW.....waaaaaaaah!"

I moaned and moaned and moaned--

But I was feeling only a burst of regret.

I thrust a hand inside my head, and I continued to tamper with my brain -- where did I get it wrong, in what way did I get it wrong, so that it became like this -- I continued to think about it.

However.

I definitely got it all wrong.

"Wwww.....wwwwwwwwwwww."

For vampires, humans are food.

For higher beings like them, lower beings like humans, in the pyramid of the food chain, are a step below.

That is.

Something I should have understood in the beginning, isn't it?

The truth is -- she tried to kill me, right?

She tried to eat me, right?

She tried to drink my blood, right?

Like a worthless human being.

Originally, even I--

Was food for her.

Even if she wanted to talk.

Even if I was one-sidedly feeling a bond.

In the end -- I am food.

"....."

For Kissshot -- any human.

Every human is the same.

Of course, she has a high opinion of Oshino's skills.

But his skills are only on this level.

Or maybe I am talking about something I don't actually know -- I even thought, but still, a human is a human.

Food is food.

Even Oshino understood that.

As proof of that -- before Kissshot became complete and got back her vampire skills -- he left the ruin.

And.

If I try to remember carefully -- Kissshot almost didn't speak with Hanekawa. She didn't even notice her -- far from it.

That's right.

For Kissshot, Hanekawa was food.

She was not treating her as a friend of mine--

She was treating her as my portable food.

The portable food for me, a vampire.

Or maybe, if she had met Hanekawa after she got back her blood sucking power, Hanekawa might have become a victim of that ability -- I think.

Like Guillotinecutter.

She might have been chopped to pieces and eaten.

"Clerics are said to be unappetizing -- but he was quite tasty. I did not think of having likes or dislikes, but 'hunger is the best sauce' is a well said maxim."

"No....."

To the woman who was seductively using her tongue to wipe her mouth from the blood and meat stuck to it -- trying to summon them, I said.

My courage.

And my terror.

Trying to summon them, I said.

".....Y-You -- mustn't eat humans."

"Hm?"

It really seemed like she did not understand.

Kissshot greatly tilted her head to the side.

"But servant, if I do not eat them I die."

That's right.

She was right.

That was a reason extraordinarily easy to understand.

There was a limit even to simplicity.

And for that reason, Kissshot doesn't have any problem with it -- she won't even try to rebut it point by point to me, a former human who wants to turn back into a human after this.

She thinks it's general knowledge.

It is general knowledge.

For a long time -- she has been eating them.

She has been eating humans.

She continued to eat them.

Vampire.

A first subordinate -- and a second one.

Living 500 years, she shouldn't have sucked the blood of just us two -- and with the exception of us, the rest of the people have all been chopped to pieces, and eaten without leaving flesh or bones, like that.

That's her nutrition replenishment for the case when she doesn't create a subordinate.

In rumors.

When a vampire sucks blood, people become vampires without exception -- it seems it's not completely false. After sucking blood, if one doesn't deal with it properly, indeed everyone turns into a vampire.

If she sucks even a drop of blood.

One will always -- become a vampire.

And the proper countermeasure -- is to eat the body of that human without leaving even a piece of meat. Thanks to that, the vampire gets much greater nutrition -- and the corpse of the human whose blood was extracted avoids turning into a vampire.

It seems it goes like that.

Just by having my blood sucked -- I became a vampire.

And Guillotinecutter.

As a meal -- was eaten flesh and all.

However it was not limited to Guillotinecutter, in these 500 years Kissshot continued to do this.

It is natural.

Since it was not even worthy to think about it -- without noticing it, without even wanting to notice it, I just kept averting my eyes.

That's right.

I never understood anything.

Even when I met her in the beginning, even when she was on the verge of death, why did I not try to help the dying Kissshot -- I didn't understand it at all from the beginning.

Why she couldn't receive help.

It seems I didn't understand it.

The edible human -- why doesn't he help the vampire.

The predator and the prey.

Despite us only having a relationship of that kind.

"W-www.....wah."

Guillotinecutter.

He was a despicable man.

He was a man who was sneaky and foul, a disgrace to humans.

And yet--

He was not a person who should be killed.

Though he gave Hanekawa a terrible experience -- even that was my fault.

Because I was a vampire.

Guillotinecutter.

Whatever the reason, whatever the way, he was just trying to exorcise a monster.

"N..... noo. I can't take this anymore.....nooo. I don't want to think -- I don't want to think about it!"

I extract my hand from my brain -- and I hold my head.

"Noo!"

However, my brain didn't stop thinking.

It was not just Guillotinecutter.

Dramaturgie. Episode.

Even them, who already returned to their home towns, intended to exorcise a vampire -- and the one who prevented them from doing so was none other than me.

After all.

I took back from them -- the limbs they stole with great trouble from Kissshot. And then, of all things, I let that legendary vampire recover her complete form.

Needless to mention Guillotinecutter.

If from now on Kissshot eats a human -- if she takes a meal, it will all be my responsibility.

If Hanekawa is eaten.

If my sisters are eaten.

If my parents are eaten.

That will be all -- my fault.

Because I saved her.

It's not just the limbs and the heart.

To begin with, in that very first day, at that time.

Under that streetlight, if I didn't save Kissshot -- if I had abandoned her, with that the story would have been over.

At that time I didn't abandon Kissshot -- and I understand why it happened, it was the weakness of my heart.

It is different from the strength of Hanekawa.

Such weakness does not bear the slightest resemblance to Hanekawa's kindness that made Oshino feel uneasy, and made me think she was scary.

That was self-satisfaction, not self-sacrifice.

Just because one lives thoughtlessly -- it doesn't mean that one can die thoughtlessly.

I was eaten by a vampire and died in that manner.

Did I think about what my sisters would have felt?

Did I even think they wouldn't have cried?

--Bleargh!"

Somehow I resist the nausea.

I resist even the tears.

I resist, because if the dam fell apart for one moment I didn't really know what would happen -- I was afraid to lose control of myself.

For now.

I wanted to preserve at least a little autonomy.

With Kissshot it became an argument, a verbal fight in which I didn't understand what I said anymore -- in the end I rushed out the cram school ruin without a place to go to.

And I finally arrived at this PE storehouse.

The only dark place I had in my memories.

Outside the sun must have already risen -- though Spring Break, the people who do club activities may have come to school, but luckily today is the last day of Spring Break. Club activities should have been forbidden.

I don't have to worry about pupils of sports clubs opening the door of this PE storehouse.

Obviously, just to be sure I am building a barricade from the inside.

"It's my fault."

My thoughts.

They come out from the corner of my mouth, without me noticing.

"It's my fault that even after all this, people -- will continue to be eaten"

By that vampire -- who can't be stopped by anybody.

By that Iron-Blooded, Hot-Blooded, Cold-Blooded vampire.

By Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade!

"It's my fault -- my fault, my fault!"

If I think about it.

Obviously Oshino could read this development.

To begin with, he said it was about the balance, but when he stole the heart from Kissshot in the beginning, he shouldn't have received a request from anybody -- because he met with those three only later.

That means his was an autonomous decision.

It was an action that deviated from work.

A mediation between us and them.

That is to say -- at least, he must have stolen the heart from Kissshot as a decision from the human side.

He didn't go as far as exorcising her.

Because his doctrine is to bring a balance.

An opportunist -- I remember Kissshot defined Oshino like that.

And the balance he brought -- I destroyed it.

If it was unexpected that Kissshot would have created a subordinate, it was also unexpected that a human would have saved a dying Kissshot.

My foolish idea, my foolish move--

Nobody expected it.

I thwarted the efforts of those three.

I got back even the heart Oshino had stolen.

I'm the one who made the story troublesome, aren't I?

It seemed like somebody schemed it, didn't it?

What silly things am I saying -- the one who schemed it, after all, was myself. This state of affairs, in all its aspects, is completely and thoroughly -- my fault.

My rash action.

The payback for my heart's weakness of not abandoning a dying vampire -- resulted in this.

Guillotinecutter died.

He died, eaten.

His head was chewed, his brain was eaten along with the skull -- now there is no way he will revive. Even if I use vampire blood -- he won't revive.

He is dead.

Death.

There is nothing I can do to undo it anymore.

"Why did all this--"

And Guillotinecutter was not the end, but the beginning. For the vampire Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade, this is nothing but a new starting point.

From now on she -- will 'routinely' keep having meals.

Routine is devastating.

I think I have heard someone say those words.

I can't stop her anymore -- the crucial vertex of the triangle, Guillotinecutter, was eaten, not to mention that even the three together were no match for her.

Dramaturgie too.

Episode too.

No matter if it was for work or for personal feelings, they won't fight Kissshot now that she has become complete -- thinking that, I was made to realize how impressive the depth of the beliefs of Guillotinecutter was who challenged her alone.

He was never an admirable man.

Still, that was the power of humans.

Even if rebuffed -- it doesn't pale.

The one who pales -- was me.

Oshino Meme -- Oshino, who managed to steal the heart from Kissshot without being noticed, might be able to stop Kissshot, but he probably won't.

The balance has already been brought about.

The game ended too.

The scales too, are already tipped.

The humans lost.

They were defeated -- by Kissshot.

And also, at this point, with what face could I, of all people, say it -- please stop Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade.

There's no way I can say it.

Even if my mouth split, there's no way I can say it.

"--I can't stand it anymore."

This Spring Break.

I never had the thought that everything that happened in this Spring Break was wrong. I had many vicissitudes, but in retrospect it didn't seem like such a bad Spring Break -- it shouldn't have been such a bad Spring Break, and yet--

It was actually the worst Spring Break.

It was just a hell.

It was only a hellish joke.

I was just a fool who didn't understand anything.

"I loathe it."

Still.

Inside me -- there was still one thing smoldering.

Through regret and self-examination, somehow I am averting my eyes -- I have noticed a terrible truth.

Although, at this point I couldn't avert my eyes anymore.

That's right.

That, too, was obvious.

"I loathe it, and yet I, too."

It's so obvious it's glaring.

"Even I -- am a vampire."

No matter how much I fear, loathe and detest vampires -- I am one of them myself.

Precisely.

Oshino's words weigh heavily upon me.

They weigh in my heart.

They weigh -- in my stomach.

--Ah, that's right.

--Araragi-kun, I ask you this just out of interest--

--Lately, haven't you been hungry--

".....!"

I am becoming -- hungry.

Now I feel hunger.

--Ah, I see

--Well, I just thought--

--It must have been time for you to get hungry.

--At any rate, two weeks have passed already.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit.....!"

At the moment -- I can still bear it.

It's just a little hunger.

However -- if that allusion of Oshino's was implying the current state of affairs -- *sooner or later, I will want to suck other's blood.*

I will develop the impulse to suck blood.

And I will want to eat humans.

Because -- I am a monster myself.

Because I am a superior being.

"Shit!"

The first subordinate.

I have no way to know what kind of man he was -- but I think the reason he committed suicide after just some years was more or less because of this. Though we might be different -- in the end, we are the same. He couldn't stand being degraded to a monster anymore-- no, being *promoted* to a monster. Obviously, it seems Kissshot didn't understand that emotion, but -- it shouldn't be comprehensible to her.

That was a human emotion.

And then, 400 years after that.

Even I, the second subordinate -- had to go through the same experience.

"Ha.....hahahahaha."

At last -- a laugh came out.

I could only laugh.

If you think about it, this is quite a humorous story.

As funny stories go, this was well played.

After all this running around in circles, in the end, I was finally made to realize I got it all wrong -- if we imagine this story had an audience, I must have been quite the talented buffoon.

There is a limit even to stupidity.

I looked so goofy -- it was funny.

"What should I do about this -- I have no choice but to die."

That.

Naturally, was the most natural idea.

It was completely pointless.

At this point.

At this point I don't think I want to turn back into a human.

I can't think something so selfish like being guilty of so much, and then think of having just my own wish granted -- wrong.

That sounded handsome.

Surely I don't have such admirable thoughts.

I am just -- afraid.

I am afraid that the moment I turn back into a human, Kissshot will eat me.

It is a given.

I just fear falling down the food chain.

However, I also can't stand being a vampire.

I hate sucking blood and eating people.

Even my immortal body at this point is repugnant.

Therefore.

"I have no choice but to die."

Not to die thoughtlessly -- to die properly.

It is the cause of death for vampires 90% of the time.

It is different from dying of boredom though.

However, the feeling of guilt can kill a man -- therefore.

Similar to the first subordinate, I can only choose death -- that's the only path left for me at this point.

Well, actually -- why did I hide in this manner inside the PE storehouse? Why did I try to survive during daytime by doing this?

Yeah, for example.

For example, if now I removed the barricade, opened the iron door and thrust my body into the sports field -- with that I would be able to die.

A death wish -- I think she said.

Obviously there was the recovery power of a subordinate of Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade, even if I threw my body under the sun, I wouldn't die that easily -- there would just be a cycle of evaporation and recovery, and yet...

I should be able to die before the sun set.

If I take off my clothes, stand naked, and bask into the sunlight, certainly -- in all my life, my first and last attempt at streaking.

It's not king of Kaii <no-life king>, it's naked king <streaking>.

It's an unfunny joke, I think.

It is for this reason that I am basically a straight man.

".....Oh boy."

What a failure.

Really, what a failure.

I thought it could go much better -- I thought it was going well.

However, this is how things are.

What a whammy.

I have no choice left but to die.

".....Ah, yeah."

I just decided it.

As if I was dispossessed of an evil spirit, I could calm down.

I think I have to phone home.

It completely escaped from my head, but I told them I was going out on a journey of self-discovery -- actually, there was no such thing, I have only lost myself.

In fact -- isn't it better to not contact them?

In what way can I tell them that later on I will die -- I also absolutely can't say the reason. If that's the case then I even think that it's better to leave it like this; the older brother went missing while out on a journey of self-discovery.

I don't know how it would be received, but leaving my parents aside, for my sisters it might become a running joke -- the runaway boy.

It is not a small runaway, it is a real runaway.

Well, I think that's fine too.

"But I wanted to talk -- with Hanekawa."

And there is something I must tell her.

Hanekawa was so heavily affected and dragged into this, there is no way I could let her be uninformed of anything like this -- unfortunately, because of the sunlight, at the moment I have no way to contact her from this PE storehouse I had jumped into to run away from Kissshot.

I even personally erased her mobile phone number and e-mail.

In front of her eyes.

I erased them in order to wound her.

Since then, even after I met her again -- I didn't ask for her contact address because it was awkward. Although that may be an awkwardness felt only by me -- at this point I regret even that.

How much a chicken and a coward I am.

Though I am good at math, it doesn't mean I am strong with numbers; I can't remember a row of 11 digits, and needless to say I don't stand a chance with an alphabetic e-mail. If I contacted her once it should be left in the history, but -- I didn't contact her even once, and she didn't contact me either. If you think about it, in that manner I didn't transmit my number and e-mail to her.

She still doesn't know my contact address.

If only I told her that time.

.....If only I told her that time, what?

Would Hanekawa phone me right now?

How foolish.

Not even she is capable of an ESP-like feat like that -- no way such expedient developments exist.

If God was so expedient, I wouldn't have had to go through this -- I wouldn't have to be guilty of such failure.

While I think it is futile struggling, for the time being, even to look at the time, I took out my cellphone.

It was 5:00 PM.

It seems I have secluded myself here for more than 12 hours -- it doesn't feel real. However, even if this irrelevant time enters my field of vision, even if it enters my head, it just stops at that.

That aside, I opened the address register in a futile struggle, but -- it wasn't futile, it gave my heart a shock like being hit by a blunt weapon.

There...

Was Hanekawa Tsubasa's name.

".....Therefore."

I let out a voice.

Regardless of whether it was my own callowness or the circumstances I was in, I was deeply moved -- I never thought I could be deeply moved by watching the cold screen of a cellphone.

Although I thought there was not a thing to be glad for.

Although I thought it was just a bad Spring Break.

"Do not touch other people's phones without asking.....!"

She always had the chance.

It could have happened at the time of my fight with Episode, when she came to deliver me the phone on the sport field, it could have happened anytime. I am basically very easy-going with the management of my cellphone; I didn't set a password.

That's because I hardly put in any personal information -- however.

In the address register that was empty.

Now there was recorded, once again, the name of Hanekawa Tsubasa.

Her number -- and her e-mail.

"....."

I was thinking I was fine with that.

I thought I wanted to talk to Hanekawa, and I had things to tell her, but a part of me was thinking that even if I couldn't talk to her, maybe I was fine with that.

Although there is no way I could leave her uninformed of anything.

I was also thinking that I didn't want to tell her anything.

Therefore -- talking about expedience, for me it might have been more convenient that way.

But that is impossible.

If it turns out like this, what I have to do is decided.

Actually -- I decided it on my own.

I sent a mail to Hanekawa.

Because with a call I might cry.

What in the world is Hanekawa doing on Spring Break's last day -- studying at the library? I don't know where the library is, but if that was the case, then there is the possibility she has turned off her phone.

Well, whatever.

Let's wait patiently for an answer...

I was thinking, but she replied immediately.

I check it, and the time I received that mail was perfectly identical to the time I sent my mail. Not even a minute difference.

Unbelievable.....

That was a reply within a maximum of 60 seconds.

I thought it must have been a very concise reply, but I checked the text and, beginning from "Dear" and ending with "Very sincerely yours", there was a full-blown letter.

Amazing.

Girls certainly seem to type mails quickly, but.....

Come to think of it, in that day of the closing ceremony, even when she first registered her personal information in my phone, Hanekawa's keystrokes were quite fast..... once again, amazing.

That is to say, I didn't know because I mostly send mail only to my family, but was mail something that must be written with such humble expressions..... I thought they were a more frank tool.

Anyway, summing up the letter I got from Hanekawa, the content was 'I'll come immediately, so wait for me'. In the end I couldn't wrap it up well, and I could send her only an outline of the matter; as expected of Hanekawa, she guessed it all with just that.

Really.

Though I would have liked it better if it was Hanekawa, not me, who had met Kissshot. Speak of the devil and he shall appear, was it? Although Hanekawa and I are the same concerning vampires -- the one whom Hanekawa encountered was me, and it was me who encountered Kissshot.

A sudden thought.

Kissshot became a rumor between girls -- then, excluding Hanekawa, could there have been other girls, counting even the pupils that attend other schools, a person besides me who had encountered Kissshot?

And if there was, what happened?

Did she just pass by her?

Or did she have her blood sucked -- and was eaten?

If such a thing happens it should become a serious affair, I think; but on the other hand if the body was eaten whole, without leaving any evidence, even if it became the talk of the family, or at most of the class, it might be a story hard to spread in the neighbourhood.

Self-discovery or small runaway--

It might just be thought of as something like that instead.

Though if it comes to a large number of people that might not be the case -- that may be a problem of the vampire rank, but it doesn't seem Kissshot needs such a large quantity of 'food'..... this is a possibility.

"Two weeks, Oshino said. Therefore for Kissshot one person per month might not be enough..... then, even counting Guillotinecutter, the victims would have been two or three.....?"

Though it is not a problem of numbers.

If that's the case -- she won't be discovered.

".....What is it. I still feel like I am failing to notice something--"

Failing to notice.

Or leaving it undone.

Now that I have contacted Hanekawa, there shouldn't be anything I left undone, I thought -- and.

In that instant Hanekawa arrived.

The sound of someone knocking on the iron door of the PE storehouse.

Knock knock.

"Girl delivery."

"....."

No, I can't laugh.

That's not the right way to show concern.

In any case, I remove the barricade (with vampire physical strength, it is simple both building them and pulling them down), and after I told Hanekawa to come in with her body turned sideways, leaving the door as closed as possible, I stuck to the wall in order to not get hit by the sunlight that got in at the same time of her entrance. It was already sunset, but the evening sun still remained.

Later I am going to bask in the sunlight.

Later I am going to have a full-body sunbath.

However that will be after I talked to Hanekawa.

Hanekawa, even today, is wearing her school uniform.

This girl doesn't feel like showing me her plain clothes..... or maybe she doesn't like me seeing her plain clothes..... but I don't have an obsession over this point, though.

Hanekawa was smiling cheerfully.

It was her usual smiling face.

That too was concern, I suppose.

"What is this?"

In addition, while I was working to block the iron door with a barricade once again, she says this to my back with a tone of voice awfully full of high spirits.

"It looks like I was cleverly locked up in the PE storeroom. What should I do if Araragi-kun played a lewd prank on me?"

".....A prank, you say."

This girl....

Isn't she thinking I could be quite the lecher? Well, I certainly might have showed that side a lot, but I am undoubtedly not a person who likes this kind of lewd talk.

I am more of a gentleman.

"Flashlight, on."

She turned it on, and placed it above the vaulting horse. Since it's a flashlight with a square shape, it doesn't roll. After that, Hanekawa sat on the mat. I sat in front of her.

"Ah--. You are sitting in front, you are trying to peek at my panties."

"You are misunderstanding the kind of man I am."

I said to Hanekawa who was gesturing to pull the cuff of her skirt tight, unable to bear it anymore.

"If, for example, there was in front of my eyes a naked girl, and that girl said to me don't look, I am a man who would be able to not look!"

"That would be normal."

"Guh.....!"

Really?!

When did the world's common sense change?

"Err, Hanekawa, you just don't know how much of a gentlemen I am."

"Gentlemen is the plural form."

Hanekawa says.

"Well, if that's true, then I am looking forward to it."

"You are looking forward to what?"

"When the new school term arrives, I will be able to see Araragi-kun's gentle side as much as I want, right?"

"....."

That's -- to say.

Your intuition is too good.

Although in the mail I revealed nothing of that -- and although I had the intention to cover it to the end.

Because Hanekawa will stop me at all costs.

"Therefore you mustn't die."

".....Hanekawa."

"You mustn't die."

She says.

Through the darkness, she is clearly looking at me.

"Thinking in that way is proof that you're running away from your heart."

".....You are amazing."

I reflect upon Hanekawa's words, and after that I said what I thought, as it was.

"You are amazing. When you are in front of me -- it seems like I am a terribly insignificant person. Perhaps if I didn't meet you, I would have died much earlier, I think. There were plenty of situations where it seemed likely."

"That's why I am telling you that you mustn't die -- listen to what I say."

"It is all my fault."

I said.

That already felt like a confession.

"My rash action produced this result -- that time, when Kissshot got my blood, it was like I wasn't thinking it would become like this -- it is something that one would understand if one only thought a little. Giving blood to a vampire, what kind of a thing it is -- and yet I..."

That she -- eats people.

That there would be victims.

I didn't think that at all -- after I thought so, it escaped. Even afterwards, no matter that I became a vampire and I had my hands full with my problems -- there should have been plenty of time to reflect on it.

No.

To begin with, I said it in the beginning.

In the closing ceremony day, to Hanekawa.

I was the one who said it.

Your blood will be sucked -- you will be killed.

Exactly like that.

Guillotinecutter got his blood sucked.

He was killed.

He died.

I didn't understand what I should have understood.

"Because of me, a person died."

"It is not your fault. Besides..... surely, for a vampire..... for Heartunderblade-san that should be a very natural thing. It's the same thing as us eating cows and pigs."

"....."

If I do not eat, I will die.

So she said.

"But -- she thinks of you as my portable food. She didn't feel you were part of the group."

"But your case was an exception."

Life savior.

We are mutually life saviors.

I saved Kissshot--

Kissshot saved me.

If that's the case, there might have been a relationship of mutual trust.

However, that...

"It would be like loving a bright cow..... look, even if they are not cows, there frequently are -- genius dogs, or genius monkeys."

"Are you talking about pets?"

Hanekawa interrupts me.

That's right.

Certainly, even Oshino -- said a similar thing.

Affection towards a pet--

"But for her it is natural -- including the part about me."

"Yeah. Therefore Kissshot is not evil. I am the one who is evil. I am evil -- nobody else is evil."

"I don't think you are evil though. Because good and bad change 180° with the place you stand in."

"You are right."

Oshino said even that.

Each person has a different definition of justice -- he said.

Therefore Oshino.

Obstinately chose to have a neutral standpoint.

"I never thought about it -- Dramaturgie, Episode, Guillotinecutter. Those three -- were *the justice of humans*."

"At that time you were a vampire -- so it couldn't be avoided.then again, don't put it so simply."

"It's even harder not to put it like that. I ended up becoming an enemy of humanity."

"Then do you give up turning back into a human?"

Hanekawa says.

It's not an accusing tone of voice -- but for the present me that was a strict question.

"Have you given up your humanity? Didn't you say you wanted to turn back into a human -- you wanted to go back to reality, didn't you?"

"There was a victim. Now it would be too selfish for only my wish to be granted."

"Since you say selfish, then isn't the present you selfish?"

"Eh?"

"Because..."

As if to confirm the position of her glasses, after taking a short breath -- Hanekawa said.

"You are trying to run away, abandoning the mess you've caused."

".....No."

It's not that, I tried to say, but I fumbled with my words.

Hanekawa added.

"Both the heart and the body are running away."

"....."

"After this, you will try to run away. Because of your mistakes, you will try to reset everything. And since there is no reset button in human life -- you will try to disconnect the plug. Am I wrong?"

".....You are wrong."

You are wrong.

I think so.

"It's not that I want to run away, I want to take responsibility for it. The least I can do for atonement is to personally put an end to this immortal life."

"You will just add a sin to your sins."

Hanekawa says.

"Suicide is a sin."

"What what..... Hanekawa, are you an opponent of suicide?"

"I don't mean to take precisely that standpoint, but in this regard, I believe you surely are the same."

"The same?"

"You feel bad when people die."

Explaining the implication, Hanekawa continues.

"Although you are fine with dying -- you feel bad when people die."

"....."

"Whatever kind of person it may be."

".....Are you talking about Guillotinecutter?"

I recollect him.

Although, I interacted with him only a few times.

"There are people that should die -- but there can't be people whose death doesn't matter. That's the way I think. That's the definition of me. And using those terms, I am already a person that should die."

"You are currently not a human." {in Japanese, "ningen" means both "person" and "human"}

"That's just hairsplitting."

"I split hairs. If it's for a friend's sake."

"Hanekawa."

I said.

It goes without saying that, if I mention this matter to Hanekawa, I will receive some sort of objection and I will be talked down, I think--

But I still said it.

"Certainly at present I am not a human. I am a vampire. Therefore -- like Kissshot, even I will eat people."

"....."

"I tried to imagine it a little..... just by thinking about it I felt sick. I don't want to live if it's at the cost of eating people."

Therefore I have no choice but to die, I said.

If I can't turn back into a human -- then I have no choice but to die.

"Unlike you, I am a weakling, so if I don't die now, I will surely procrastinate it -- sooner or later I will be unable to overcome my hunger."

Portable food.

Kissshot's words.

"Hanekawa -- sooner or later I will see even you as only food."

That's scary.

Although the corpse of Guillotinecutter was scary too -- Kissshot calling Hanekawa that was scarier.

That cognizance.

That common sense, sooner or later it will become my common sense.

If the common sense of when I was a human disappears -- and I acquire vampire common sense.

Undoubtedly I will come to see Hanekawa as only food.

I will want to eat her.

"If that's the case, don't eat."

Hanekawa.

However, without any of the objections I imagined -- without talking me down, she said so with a calm tone of voice.

"Araragi-kun, you can eat me."

".....What are you saying?"

I really didn't understand.

Not what she was saying, her feelings.

"If I can't die for the other's sake, I can't call that person a friend."

".....Err..."

As expected, that definition was too reckless.

Who can stick that definition to himself?

"Exactly. Didn't I say it? If you knew the real me you would be disenchanted."

Hanekawa said with a smiling face.

".....What in the world are you?"

"Hmm? I am your friend. That's what I believe, at least."

"With just that much would you normally get involved this far? How could you do so much for someone like me -- or are you the reincarnation of a cat I saved when I was an elementary schooler, a childhood friend who moved, a comrade in arms in a previous life, that kind of person?"

"Not at all."

"I hope so."

By the way, I have never saved a cat.

I haven't had any childhood friend who moved.

I don't know anything about my previous lives.

"I did tell you this even before, but -- how can you do so much for me who you just met? If you did that for everybody, you would never have enough bodies."

"I don't do it for everybody, though."

Hanekawa says.

"I am doing it because it is you, you know?"

"Even if you do so much for me, I am a minor, so I can't become your co-signer, you know?"

"Actually, I wasn't planning that."

"Even if I were an adult, I am unemployed anyway, so I still can't become your co-signer."

"It is a different problem, but I hope you get a job."

"Saying that doesn't make it easier!"

"Well, certainly you don't have it easy, but....."

Basically, Hanekawa continued.

"If I only have to help you, then one body is plenty enough."

".....Are you saying you are ok with dying?"

"I don't want to die, but you saved my life twice -- so even if I got eaten by you, perhaps I wouldn't utter a complaint."

I think I will say that it hurts, though.

Hanekawa said such a carefree thing.

Though I was not talked down--

I was at a loss for words.

She is really -- amazing.

Honestly, words won't do her justice.

"Therefore you mustn't die."

Hanekawa said once again.

"Don't die."

".....And what about responsibility?"

I -- unintentionally asked.

"I was the one who revived a dying Kissshot -- I carefully gathered her limbs, I got back even the heart without being asked to. What about this responsibility? If we say that to die is running away, then if I don't die will I be able to take responsibility for it?"

"Then will you be able to take responsibility for it if you die?"

"I don't know."

Everything was already over.

At this point there is nothing I can do -- I can't try to tip the scales.

There is nobody who can stop Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade completely revived. It is my responsibility she revived -- and she will unabashedly continue to eat people.

The same way she did until now.

From now on it will be my responsibility.

"Guillotinecutter didn't have any chance -- in the time I went to buy something at the convenience store, like a snack between meals, he was chopped up and eaten. Even Dramaturgie and Episode, who went back to their hometown, will never be a match for her. If I had to raise the probabilities, it would be Oshino -- but he absolutely wouldn't do anything for me more than bringing a balance. He draws a firm line -- for him the matter of Kissshot is already over. Besides, even Kissshot from now on won't let her heart be stolen that easily. Nobody can stop that vampire anymore."

"Not even you?"

Hanekawa said, cutting in.

"Can't you -- stop her? Or rather -- aren't you the only one who can stop her?"

Those.

Were unexpected words.

And -- they were something I failed to notice.

"Kissshoot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade..... the Iron-Blooded, Hot-blooded, Cold-Blooded vampire, was it? And you are her only subordinate -- Conversely speaking, aren't you the only one who can stop her?"

".....Ah."

What I was failing to notice.

And what I was leaving undone.

Was that.

Why didn't I notice such a simple thing -- if neither Dramaturgie, Episode, Guillotinecutter or Oshino can do it.

Then I, Araragi Koyomi, who gathered from those four the right leg, the left leg, both arms and the heart have no choice but to do it.

That's what I should do.

That -- would be responsibility.

Putting aside what I can and cannot do.

Indeed, I made a big mess.

And yet I'm still -- not doing anything!

I -- will *exorcise* Kissshoot.

I said it with words.

They were deeply accompanied by my actual feelings.

That's right.

That is something -- only I can do.

I will stop -- that Kaii Killer!

If that's what I should do -- I have no choice but to do it!

Inside my head something clicked -- I felt that gears engaged.

"Your facial expression changed."

And.

"While we're at it, let's tell you a good thing, Araragi-kun."

Hanekawa Tsubasa said, as she was further pressing on.

"It might be a bad thing, though."

"Hm? Good or bad, which is it? Don't speak cryptically."

"For the present you it might be inconvenient, but for the you of a while before it was convenient."

"It became even more unclear, but....."

"Yesterday I went to the library -- I did some research. The night of the day before yesterday you beat Guillotinecutter-san, and you assembled the parts..... well, you actually didn't assemble the heart, but with that you could turn back into a human. However -- I became a little anxious."

"Anxious, you say."

"I was anxious about whether Heartunderblade-san would really turn you back into a human."

Though I wasn't doubting it, said Hanekawa.

"Therefore, I considered the case in which she didn't turn you back into a human -- and I researched if there were other methods of turning you back into a human."

In other words.

She researched -- a method to revert a 'former human' vampire who was bitten by a vampire and turned into a subordinate back into a human, huh.

".....Does such a method exist?"

"It exists. Just one."

Hanekawa nods.

"When a servant, who must normally obey the master, injures his master, that master and servant relationship will collapse, and the servant's condition of servitude will end."

".....? I don't understand the meaning but....."

"In other words, if you beat Heartunderblade -- no matter what Heartunderblade-san wants, you can turn back into a human."

"Is..."

I.

At first I was just -- surprised about that simple rule.

"Is -- is that so?"

The collapse of the master-servant relationship.

Even now, I can say that it's already collapsing -- by giving the final push.

I can turn back into a human.

So that's how it is.

"I found the same description in several books, so I think it is credible -- for the you who doesn't want to turn back into a human, and wants to die, *this might be inconvenient*, but it can't be avoided. Because you are the only one who can defeat Heartunderblade-san."

"--That's inconvenient."

Yeah.

After all, if you are well prepared you don't have to worry, huh.

It's something that I hesitate to express as something trite like killing two birds with one stone, it's really--

"It's really -- inconvenient. Everything goes as you think."

"This is what I call scheming. Even if I do say so myself -- I think it's playing dirty."

"You -- know everything."

"I don't know everything. I just know what I know."

Araragi-kun, says Hanekawa.

"With this you have no choice but to turn back into a human, don't you? Because there is no way that, at this point, you can leave Heartunderblade-san be."

"There is no way I--"

"Or will you run away?"

Hanekawa said as a clincher.

"If you still say you will run away, I -- will stop you with all my power."

I wish you would give me a little break.

Of course the responsibility remains -- my responsibility of having caused this state of affairs remains, that is something that won't ever disappear.

But.

This mess is -- cleanable.

I can clean up this mess.

If I can do it, I have no choice but to do it.

Better than a simple death.

Better than an easy death, this was really atonement.

Once again I look at Hanekawa.

And once again I thought she was amazing.

Until a little while back, I was thinking only about dying -- whatever I was saying, I was thinking only of punishing myself, and yet I just talked with Hanekawa a little, and before I noticed I had set aside that question.

I thought I could not die until I talked with Hanekawa -- but conversely, because I talked with Hanekawa, I cannot die anymore.

Hanekawa surely won't allow me to die even after I exorcise Kisshot and turn back into a human. She will use all kinds of wiles, and she won't let me do that, I think.

I made a troublesome friend.

And -- I made a good friend.

"If that's the case, then the problem is -- whether I can or cannot defeat Kisshot."

The vampire closest to Kisshot.

That would be me -- however, that said, the difference between our positions of master and servant could be fatal. Pulling off a revolution should be no ordinary feat, after all.

"I agree. Although I devised plans -- it's not like there aren't holes. The case of you losing would be the worst result, at least for me. You dying as you wished to -- and the Kaii Heartunderblade-san remaining alive.....I might be eaten by Heartunderblade-san. She viewed me as portable food, so she might remember my face."

"Do you have countermeasures for that?"

"Hm? No, I didn't think that far ahead."

Hanekawa shook her head looking troubled.

"She has a precious lineage, doesn't she? Somehow Heartunderblade-san doesn't fit the mold of existing vampires. It is as you and Oshino said, her immortality is so high that the weak points don't look like weak points anymore."

"If we assume I am the same as her fundamentally -- then the problem becomes a difference of career....."

"There is also the mental side."

"Mental side?"

"Whether or not you can defeat Heartunderblade-san with whom you've lived together all this Spring Break."

"....."

She nursed me.

She looked after me with constant supervision.

To save me from being burned by the sun, she too threw her body under the sunlight.

And -- she was my life savior.

The life I tried to throw away--

She didn't go as far as sucking it away.

That may be closer to the affection humans have toward pets--

But still.

For example that time when we were above the roof--

We laughed, that time.

--I can take care of the mental side."

Putting it all together, I said it.

"I will definitively exorcise her."

"Yes."

Hanekawa nodded.

It looked like there was still something she wanted to say, but she decided to leave it unsaid.

In exchange -- she says "Well, then".

"Of course I will assist you. I have my responsibility as a plan deviser. If there is something I can do, don't hold back and say it."

"Don't hold back -- huh."

"Ahaha, well, even if I said that, I didn't have in mind any further ecchi service though."

Even if she added a paragraph, was Hanekawa really trying to change the atmosphere, laughing cheerfully in that way -- no way.

Therefore this was a misunderstanding..... good grief, wasn't that manner of speaking a lead-in to skillfully direct the conversation, huh.

Why was she trying to assist me with this subject?

Assist me with things like setting up battle tactics!

Really, what silly things are you saying to this gentlemanly Araragi Koyomi, don't hold back, of all things--

"Hanekawa."

"Yes?"

As Hanekawa tilted her head to the side, I said in my most gentlemanly manner, "Could I touch your breasts?"

"....."

Hanekawa's facial expression froze while her head was still tilted.

Nevertheless, she still kept her smiling face.

A heavy air got a hold of the PE storehouse.

What should I do when there is this heavy atmosphere.....

"Your breasts."

"I heard you."

Uhhmm, Hanekawa looked up, then down.

After that she looks back at me again.

"Why would you need it?"

"I need it at all costs."

I say.

I make my most serious facial expression.

"You didn't see it. What Kisshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade in her complete form looked like."

"Hm? Well..... I have seen her 12 and 17 year old forms, so it's not like I can't imagine what she looks like as a 27 year old."

"It is probably beyond your imagination."

I say, raising my index finger.

"She possesses breasts that are beyond your imagination."

".....Breasts."

"I fear of losing while I am distracted by those breasts. Those breasts will probably shake a lot in the middle of battle. That's why I want to gain some training on female breasts as a countermeasure."

"Oooh."

Hanekawa groaned.

"That's a surprisingly stupid reason....."

"D-Doesn't it make sense to you?"

".....Hmm."

Hanekawa quietly closes her eyes and brings her eyebrows together as if she has a headache.

".....Fine then."

"Huh!? Really!?"

Why?

Did she concede some parts of it made sense!?

"Wait a moment."

She says.

First Hanekawa unfastens the scarf and takes off the school sweater -- then she extracts the cuff of the blouse inserted in the skirt. While I was puzzled over what she was doing, she also winds both arms around her back, and inserts her hands under her blouse.

Some seconds passed.

From inside her blouse, Hanekawa pulled out her unhooked bra. With an adept hand she quickly folds it, and she hides it under the mat she was sitting on.

After that, she looks at me.

"Well then, touch them."

She said.

".....!"

I didn't wish for this much!

What is this situation!?

I can't get my heart ready.

S-She didn't need to take it off!

She didn't need to take off anything!

"E-Eeeeh?"

Besides, what is this?

Somehow, the moment she took off her school sweater and unfastened her underwear, it seemed like her breasts inflated..... is it an optical illusion?

No, vampire eyes are immune to illusions.

Hanekawa now, at least from what I can observe from over the blouse, wouldn't lose to Kisshot, no, possibly she possesses a bust that cannot even be compared to.

Moreover the shape was also splendid.

Although she took off her underwear and they should have lost their support, it was like they were defying the laws of physics -- it's as if Hanekawa can disregard gravity while being an earthling.

This is beyond my imagination.

Of course, it was because I thought Hanekawa was qualified for it that I made that request, but even so, it was very rude to say it was for training.

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

She can have a fair match with Kisshot on her own.

It was unthinkable that Hanekawa had such breasts!

B-But.....?

Getting up, Hanekawa walked towards me (at each step her chest showed a movement that exceeded imagination, so I shut my eyes, and I couldn't move, like I was paralyzed), and then she immediately sits in front of me -- lining up her arms on both sides, she pulled tight her dorsal muscles, and with a jerk she threw out her chest.

In that posture, her breasts seem even bigger.

Undoubtedly this could be said to be asserting one's chest.

Moreover, since it was quite a thin blouse, the whole image of Hanekawa's breasts could be said to be within a hair's breadth of being explicit.

"Araragi-kun."

"Eh? Ah, what?"

"Since you are going to massage them, massage them right."

"R-Right?"

"I think you should massage them for no less than sixty seconds."

"Si-sixty seconds....."

No way.

The hurdle is too high.

What is she meaning with massage them right?

Before I knew it it changed from touching to massaging.

Crap, now I can't say it was a joke.....

What am I doing to my precious friend?

"Don't go easy on me!"

"Y-Yessir!"

As told, I prepare both hands by reflex.

I prepare them, but aside from that I don't move.

At any rate, because of vampire grip, I can't really avoid going easy, but I don't know how much force I should use. To begin with, should I touch them from above or from below..... and I haven't the slightest idea of what to do after the first move.

Certainly they won't fit inside my hands.....

Therefore I hesitated going from the front.

Maybe approaching from the side -- no no.

Uh, there is a more pressing matter though.

"H-Hey, Hanekawa."

"Hm? What is it?"

"Could you turn your back?"

I say with a vanishing voice.

"It's hard to do it while seeing your face."

With just the light of the flashlight, maybe Hanekawa wasn't able to see me well, but being a vampire I could see her facial expression perfectly.

Her face was already flushing.

She was biting her lips.

It's hard.

"....."

Remaining silent, Hanekawa suddenly nodded meekly, and faced the opposite direction.

I could see the roots of her braids.

I never looked at it carefully, but what beautiful hair..... there really are no signs of damage. I guess it habitually receives a careful grooming.

"Ugh....."

Ah, but even now it's hard.

Since Hanekawa turned her back, I have to move my hands around her body, but in this case her arms neatly aligned on her sides are slightly in the way.....

"Ra-Raise your hands over your head."

"Is this radio gymnastic?"

Despite saying that, Hanekawa raised her arms.

With this the way was opened.

And then I slip my arms under those armpits -- obviously, going this far, our bodies are on the brink of contact. Actually, because Hanekawa is facing the other way, if I try to touch her breasts, naturally it will feel like I am hugging her from behind though.....

Even perceiving the distance is hard -- should I cross my arms? No, is it easier to grasp if I keep going normally?

I open my fingers.

Hanekawa had not moved at all from before -- but even from behind I understand she is nervous. However, I am certain I was nervous.

My heart is racing.

"Y-You won't get mad afterwards?"

"Don't worry. I won't get mad."

"Really?"

"Really."

".....Okay then, just in case there is a trial later, please say 'Araragi-kun, please fondle my bra-less boobs'."

Snap!

I have the impression I heard that sound.

It must have been the sound of Hanekawa's veins popping out. Or maybe it was her facial muscles that popped out.

"A..... A-Araragi-kun, p-please, fondle m-my bra-less boobs."

"No, it won't do saying it in such a low voice. That makes it seem as if you hate it and I'm forcing you to say it against your will. You must state in a much louder voice what you want me to do to what, by your own will."

"Araragi-kun! P-please fondle my bra-less boobs!"

".....'It is really an honor to have my boobs massaged by Araragi-kun'"

"It is re-really an honor..... to have my boobs massaged by Araragi-kun....."

"Err.....'I developed these lascivious boobs for the sole reason of having Araragi-kun massage them'."

"I developed these l-lascivious boobs for the sole r-reason of having Araragi-kun m-massage them."

"Really. It didn't look like it, but you are pretty perverted, Hanekawa."

".....Yes, I am incredibly perverted, I am sorry."

"You don't need to apologize. No matter how perverted you are, it's not like someone would be bothered by it."

"Th-That's right, ehehe."

"Well then, concretely, in what ways are the boobs of the perverted and serious class rep lascivious?"

"I can boast that th-their size, and their softness..... are peerless in their lasciviousness!"

Aah.

I see, now I get it.

During puberty even I experienced the common perplexity of why I was born in this world..... but now, at the age of seventeen, I finally found the answer to that question.

I was enlightened.

I lived for the sake of this day.

I existed for the sake of this moment.

The person called Araragi Koyomi was born in this world in order to experience the day of today..... no, that's not it. It is not on a personal level anymore.

Surely this world has existed this long just to make me experience the day of today.

From this point on the rest of history will simply be a throwaway match!

"That is to say, normally it's impossible to massage the tits of a friend!"

I ran away.

I was the one who threw my hands up, I made three steps back and I started crying.

It was a posture exceedingly close to prostration.

"It doesn't happen! It doesn't ever happen!"

".....Chicken."

Hanekawa said in a terribly quiet voice.

Without even turning this way.

Without even looking at my posture exceedingly close to prostration.

"Chicken. Chicken. Chicken chicken chicken chicken."

"I am a chicken. I am a coward. I am sorry. No matter what you say, I don't have words to reply with. Please forgive me. It is my fault. I got caught up in the moment. I took advantage of Hanekawa-san's kindness, but thanks to her involvement, I came to my senses."

"Do you think it ends with this? Do you know how much resolve it took for me to sit here like this?"

"N-No, someone like me cannot have even the slightest idea, but while we are at it, I would like to hear how much resolve it was."

"Honestly, I thought it wouldn't have ended just with having my breasts massaged..... Ah, so that's how, my first time will be on a mat in the PE storehouse."

"Isn't it too early for that resolve!?"

"Well, it happens."

"As if!"

Girls these days are confident, but..... under no circumstances!

"And yet, after you terribly teased me and humiliated me, you didn't even touch me with a finger.....!"

"That's why I am apologizing, you know."

"If you apologize that will be it. Huh. I am in a position that, if you apologize to me, I am obliged to forgive you. Huh."

"I think it's really inexcusable, but please forgive me, stylish spectacles class rep!"

".....This is the first time someone made such a fool of me."

"Eek."

Was it about the breasts?

Or was it about the glasses?

Maybe it was the class rep?

"Araragi-kun..... am I so unattractive?"

".....!"

Stop it stop it stop it!

Don't bully me by saying such lovely words!

"I-It's because if I massage your breasts in this situation, perhaps I will regret it for the rest of my life!"

I may regret not massaging your breasts.

But I chose to regret not massaging your breasts rather than regret massaging your breasts!

"I-In exchange, could I massage your shoulders?"

"Shoulders?"

"Yes. Shoulders. I want to massage your shoulders."

".....Well, it's a deal."

We came to an agreement.

I massaged Hanekawa's shoulders.

Rub rub rub rub.

Whoa, they aren't stiff at all.

I heard that with bad eyesight shoulders get stiff easily..... she is a healthy girl. In this way, even if I, who am no masseur, massage her, it won't feel good at all.....

Obviously she has no meat at all in these places.

I can clearly feel the shape of the bones -- is this the clavicle?

Uh..... That's all.

Wait wait, not yet.

Rub rub rub rub.

60 seconds like this.

"I-It is over. Thank you."

On top of massaging her shoulders, I ended up thanking her.

What a servile character I have.

"Was it enough?"

"Y-Yes. The continuation is on the internet."

"As if you could massage on the internet."

"Th-Then, the continuation is in the new school term."

"Yeah. That's more like it."

Hanekawa nods.

Her braids shake at the same time.

"You made it this far with a girl."

As I took off my hands from her shoulders, Hanekawa got up and walked, going back to where she was before on the mat, but she didn't sit, she turned this way while standing.

"So don't tell me you are going to lose."

"I will win." {polite form}

By now I must go back to my speech pattern, it seems I continued to use polite expressions with Hanekawa all this time.

However, it was not only this.

I could say it clearly.

"I will win." {informal form}

I was able to say it.

"Even at the cost of your breasts!"

"Actually, it was better to leave that part unsaid."

There was a slight difference in spirits.

Hanekawa said "that aside" and cleared her throat once.

And after that she said.

"This one is the final battle."

"Yeah -- it's the closing curtain of Gakuen Inou Batoru."

The moment I said that.

Outside the PE storehouse -- a thundering noise resounded.

017

Kissshot-AcerolaorionHeartunderblade.

The iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire.

The legendary vampire.

The Kaii Killer, the King of Kaiis.

She is a vampire.

She has dazzling golden hair and a chic dress, a beautiful vampire, so beautiful your blood freezes -- no further exposition is needed.

It suffices to say -- she, of whom I am a subordinate, is my final opponent.

"Kissshot....."

I brushed aside the barricade with all my might, and I opened the iron door of the PE storehouse -- outside the sun had already sunk, and she was there in the center of the sports field.

The ground at her feet was cracked.

It must have been the impact of the landing.

In fact, she sank ankle deep in the sports field.

On Kissshot's back, those bat-like wings were missing -- being her subordinate I grasp it by instinct, she undoubtedly arrived here from above the roof of the cram school ruin with a single running long jump with no approach run.

She waited for the sunset.

And she -- jumped to my location.

However, that was still incredible. Even if it was the same running long jump with no approach run, I patted myself on the back just because I jumped a maximum of 20 meters -- and yet Kissshot very easily jumped a few kilometres.

Of course, at that time I was not aiming at a record, I firmly intended on landing in the sand pit, so it must not be used for a comparison -- but if I were asked if I could jump from here to the cram school ruin, there is no need to say I would not be so sure about it.

I closed the PE storehouse's iron door with a hand behind my back.

Leaving Hanekawa inside.

In front of Kissshot that door was no obstacle whatsoever -- but nevertheless, it could give me some peace of mind.

Don't say a thing, I whispered towards the door.

After that, I took one step forward.

Toward Kissshot.

".....Yo."

While greeting her in that way -- I get closer to her.

"I didn't think you would do me the favor of coming here."

I thought that was the best barrier.

The setup of time and place.

Unlike the times when I fought with Dramaturgie, Episode and Guillotinecutter -- there is no Oshino and his mediation.

I had no choice but to do the negotiations myself.

However, we were fellow vampires.

Master and servant -- her subordinate.

The fact she showed up almost simultaneously with the sunset could mean that since Kissshot obtained her complete form my movements might be completely visible to her.

Where I am.

What I am thinking.

I can't hide anything from her.

Kissshot is looking at me with eyes colder than usual -- and the first thing she did, was to pull out her legs from the sports field, right leg first, then the left leg.

After that.

"Just one time."

She said.

"Servant. While the sun was out, I understood thy feelings -- I understood the reason why thou wert so angry. I resisted sleep and I reflected upon it. I think I have been insensitive -- I think I lacked way too much consideration toward thou who were a former human. Thus just this one time I will bow my head to thee."

"....."

"Return beneath me."

Kissshot says.

Her's was a beautiful voice.

With a captivating voice -- she allured me.

"Live together with me. Thou saveth my life -- Thou art a weird guy, but it is for this reason I think I can live together with you. Do not turn back into a human -- dost thou not wish to live eternally with me?"

".....I'll pass."

I said.

I looked back at Kissshot's cold eyes.

I strengthened my resolve -- and I said it.

"You ate a human. That was enough for me."

"If thou knew that -- wouldst thou have not saved me? Wouldst thou have let me die?"

"Kissshot -- I knew nothing. No....."

I shook my head.

"That's not it, I realized it from the beginning -- I just averted my eyes. I wanted to die for your sake, I thought -- in other words, I gave you permission to eat someone. However, I never imagined that as a result people would have died. My action was beautiful, but not right."

I am fine with dying --

But I feel bad when people die.

If I think about it, it's a selfish opinion.

It is impossible to subscribe to that sort of opinion.

".....I thought thou would say so."

Kissshot said while all smiles.

"I wanted to hear thee say that."

"Kissshot....."

"With this my hesitation disappeared -- Servant. Even I somehow realized it from the beginning. I thought thou wert such a kind of guy."

"What kind of guy?"

"Thy gentleness to me -- would have lasted only for as long as I was in trouble, I knew it."

I thought that thou wouldst not have interest in me once I became complete.

Those words of Kissshot were bitter.

"Thou didst not save me because it was me -- thou wouldst have saved anyone who was in trouble."

"....."

I don't do it for everybody, though.

I am doing it because it is you, you know?

Hanekawa said.

However, I.

Even if it wasn't Kissshot -- at that moment I.

"Hence -- I sensed this would happen. By the way -- I saved thee because it was thee, thou knoweth? Thou threw away thy life for me, I would have regretted killing someone as gallant as thee."

".....Regretted."

"For the hard work thou did for me, once again, I thank thee. Hey, come closer, servant. From thine expression I guess thou already know, right? Exactly. If thou kill me -- thou can turn back into a human as you loved to."

"....."

I gulp down my saliva.

I recognize once again that my plan has been seen through -- and I recognize how much difference of ability there is between me and her.

Trying to face her like this -- it is different.

It is different from the patterns of when I fought those three -- I seemed to be oppressed by a formidable sense of intimidation, and by a feeling of tension.

That's right.

The biggest difference -- is that the battle that will unfold now will clearly be a 'deathmatch'.

A deathmatch is not forbidden.

In addition -- the opponent was the Kaii killer.

"Do not let this dishearten thee too much, servant."

Kissshot says.

She looked even slightly happy.

"I am currently in my best condition in all these 500 years -- when I fought those three at the same time, not only my conditions were bad but I was also careless. I did not think my heart had been stolen, but..... at my level, there are not that many..."

".....Many what?"

"Chances to get serious."

Saying so -- Kissshot beckons to me.

"Speaking frankly, even I do not know how it will turn out -- but since thou art undoubtedly the strongest among those who have fought me thus far, there is no need to pull punches. It is a great pleasure for me."

"I may not live up to your expectations."

I summon my courage and step by step I walked up to her.

My normal self would have run away -- however, now it is different. Behind my back, inside the PE storehouse, there is an important friend. My back has someone to protect -- I can't run away.

I have to face her.

Hanekawa, look at me.

Because I can't look pathetic in front of you.

"After all, I am a former human -- 'a former food'."

".....Relax. I am going to kill thee with ill will and hostile spirit, but even so I will give thee a handicap -- What did that brat say..... oh yes, a fifty-fifty match. I will abide by that rule."

It is a game.

So saying, Kissshot jumped lightly.

The next instant after she jumped, she appeared right in front of me -- in a position with our legs crossed alternated.

In her complete form she was taller than me.

With that point of view, she was looking down on me.

"I will not fly in the air. I will not hide in shadows. I will not turn into fog. I will not turn into darkness. I will not disappear. I will not shape-shift. I will not use my eye power. I will not even materialize matter. Needless to say, I will not even use the demon sword 'Kokorowatari'..... the Kaii Killer blade. In other words, I will not use the active abilities of a vampire -- I promise. Of course, thou can use them -- though what thou art able to do is, at best, to shape-shift the tip of the arms."

"....."

And even that was something I was able to do because Hanekawa was taken hostage -- now that I am feeling closer to the human side than that time, certainly it will be hard for me just to even shape-shift my fingertips.

It would be different if I had Dramaturgie's spiritual power, or maybe if I had experience -- but I am new at this and I don't have either.

"Properly speaking, as thy master, I can to a certain degree control thine actions, but -- I will not do that. I promise I will not resort to such an ungraceful act. This will be a fight purely based on immortality -- so combat experience will not be needed. A death match while standing at this distance -- with this, it should be an even match between thee and me, right?"

".....What a bore you are."

I say.

Close to her, I glare at Kissshot's face.

"So you do this when you want to get serious. Or maybe it means you are careless, aren't you?"

"Carelessness? Unfortunately for thee not even I am so foolish to be careless when facing my subordinate -- But if I do not give thee a chance of winning there is no game right? I want to get serious. It would be dull to have the battle abandoned midway."

And then she formed handchops.

With both hands in the shape of a sword -- at this super close distance, she gets ready to fight.

I imitate her.

In this case a handchop is better than forming a fist.

With the arm power of a vampire, both fists' and handchops' power could be said to be within the margin of error. In that case then it is easier to use a handchop that is more flexible--

"....."

I examined the surroundings.

Although I said the sun already sank, it is still not such a late hour. There may be no people at school, but no matter how far away this school is from the other houses, there could still be eye-witnesses around.

If we don't settle this early.

However, when I thought that,

"Thou art very brave to look away when I am in front of thee, servant."

Kissshot said.

"Relax. Those three are not here anymore -- an ordinary person will not even be able to get near me when I am at full power. Even if someone saw me, at most I would become a rumor--"

--A rumor."

Street gossips. Urban legends. Second hand information.

Calling a rumor a rumor -- and speak of the devil and he shall appear.

"Although -- thy portable food in the hut behind is different, right?"

".....Kissshot. I have one last thing I want to ask you."

"Ooh. Fine, a souvenir for the other world -- I will answer to everything. Just ask me."

"What are humans to you?"

"Food."

"I see"

It was a flash answer.

I was able to drive the last wedge.

"I wanted to hear you saying so -- I wanted to hear it from your mouth!"

And then I move -- Kissshot moved too.

"I will take your life, my master!"

"Time to die, my servant!"

Even that may have been in order to create an even match -- making it seem like we moved at the same time, Kissshot let me have the initiative.

My handchop struck Kissshot's face in a horizontal swing -- the upper half of her head was severed, and it was blown behind together with her golden hair.

Like she was waiting for it, Kissshot's handchop blew up my head. Although it was the same handchop, the power was different -- compared to Dramaturgie's fist the impact point was smaller, but the power was more focused.

Both our heads flew away.

In normal circumstances this should have been the end.

However -- I and Kissshot are not humans.

We are monsters.

Even if our heads blew off, even if the brains was destroyed, unconcerned with the five minutes time limit, for just an instant our consciousness and field of vision were disrupted -- and immediately they returned as before.

Neither of us had taken any damage.

"Hyaha!"

Kissshot -- laughs.

"Ha! "Haha! "Ahaha! "Hahaha! "Ahahahaha!"

In a vibrato like she was harmonizing by herself -- she laughs with joy.

"So good -- this is the greatest deathmatch between fellow vampires ever! Encore, encore, encore -- servant!"

"Shut up!"

The handchops interweave.

Not restricted to the head, they hit even the body and the limbs.

My handchops gouge Kissshot--

Kissshot's handchops gouge me.

We continue to brutally gouge each other.

".....!"

Of course, it's not like my sense of pain was numbed.

The pain was still there.

If the brain is destroyed the thought stops, if the lungs are destroyed the breath stops, if the heart is destroyed the blood flow stops.

Even if I became a vampire--

It's not like my body physically changed.

Recovery power, healing power, immortality.

This is just what stands out.

However -- it sufficed.

"Woooooooooooooooooh!"

"Haha! Scream more! -- I love manly roars!"

With her breast, as I expected, shaking violently -- although the attacks she was unleashing were even more violent -- Kissshot bursts out in a loud laughter.

Even Kissshot surely feels the pain.

There is no way her sense of pain wore out.

However nothing of that transpires from her, she doesn't even grit her teeth or scream like I am doing.

No matter where she is destroyed--

No matter if her brain, lungs or heart are destroyed, she keeps laughing out loud like she doesn't care.

With cold eyes, but an amused expression.

A ghostly laugh.

"G..... Goddamn!"

"Hey hey, it is too early for that word, servant -- like thou wert feeling bitter for something while under these equal conditions!"

So she grew accustomed to pain -- huh.

The pain of having her body torn for her can only be a sensation she got used to a long time ago.

If that's the case.

In these 500 years.

What kind of bloodshed did she survive?

What kind of line between life and death did she cross?

A difference of experience -- a difference of battle experience!

"OOOOOOOOH!"

However!

I am covering that difference in experience with willpower -- in this scene!

"Come on come on, keep screaming -- let me hear a war cry!"

"Don't get cocky on me, Kissshot!"

"If I think thou wilt be the last to call me so, I am reluctant to part!"

It was a pointless battle.

No matter how much blood was splattered or how much meat was scattered, it evaporates before reaching the ground, and when it evaporates it regenerates.

In the end there was no damage.

I could die from the shock caused by the pain -- maybe I already died from that shock and the vampire immortality resurrected me.

However..... it was strange.

We are equally immortal.

But Kissshot has greater offensive power.

This in itself is not strange.

However, I wonder about it -- honestly, I didn't think my blows held such destructive power they would be able to hurt Kissshot's body so much. In that regard, I just thought I would be overwhelmingly inferior to Kissshot -- but in fact, my blows destroy her body without much impact shock.

It felt like I was destroying tofu.

"Hahahahaha! "Haha! "Ahahahaha!"

With the cheeks destroyed, with a smiling face like kuchisake-onna -- Kissshot answered to my question.¹⁷

Master and servant.

She can see what I am thinking--

"As a matter of fact, servant -- vampire defensive power is not that high! Of course, it should not even be compared to the humans vampires eat, but -- as if inversely proportional to the outstanding attack power, the defensive power is low! If the attack power is 100, the defensive power's maximum value would go from 10 to 20, approximately! Servant, do you understand why it is like that!?"

".....!"

Kissshot restores even the dress -- because that dress is created by her will. However I can't do the same -- my clothes are just clothes.

Above the waist I was already next to naked.

"Because the immortality is equal to a defensive power!"

"Precisely!"

Kissshot says.

"Thus in this battle thou doth not need to defend from mine attacks -- just concentrate all thy mind on thine attacks, and destroy my body!"

¹⁷ Kuchisake-onna is a legendary woman with a slit mouth.

"Are you a masochist!?"

"I will not deny it!"

Sometimes the handchops even collided with each other.

When that happened, it was my hand that was destroyed.

In this battle there was no chance to play cheap tricks -- but on the other hand, there was no chance even for elaborate tricks.

Until the immortality runs out.

Or until the mind of one of us collapses.

Such was the battle -- no.

No, the truth is different.

This pointless battle has always been nothing but a preliminary skirmish -- for Kissshot it was something like a game, for me it was not a game, but still something like a preliminary step.

I know it.

I found it out.

And -- I sensed it.

The way to kill Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade.

The technique to exorcise her.

Now that I am actually face to face with her.

I grasp it by instinct.

I don't know whether it is the instinct of a human or of a vampire, however I felt it.

If I think about it, I heard it from Kissshot herself -- then that should certainly be a valid idea.

What I had to do was clear.

However -- I had no chance to do it.

Because the technique to exorcise Kissshot was at the same time the technique with which Kissshot would exorcise me.

For this reason it is a pastime for her.

A game.

Surely -- Kisshot can kill me any time. Of course that's not being careless -- she wanted to enjoy her own full power a little while longer.

Therefore -- if Kissshot shows an opening.

Waiting for that opening -- I must continue this standing exchange of strikes.

I must continue this pointless match of death and rebirth.

"Haha, I like it, servant -- thou have quite the willpower! Although thou have the power of a subordinate of mine, normally a new vampire would not risk his life so much!"

"It's because of this setup! It's great that you like it!"

"Just for that it is a shame! Thou could have become a legend like I did!"

"A legend? Like hell I'd want to become that -- just the thought of a stranger knowing my name makes me shiver!"

"I totally feel the same way!"

The conversation during the deathmatch.

The conversation while we gouge each other.

Yesterday -- the conversation we had above the roof of the cram school ruin was completely different -- this was a rude, random, purely spur-of-the-moment conversation.

I didn't have the self-control to laugh.

Kissshot was laughing, but it was completely different from the smiling face of last night; I couldn't feel any friendliness.

Even while we are blown off behind --

Both legs still remained.

This is the Hell of regeneration.

Even if the body is crushed into little pieces, with a gust of wind it is mended and it returns as before, gets further crushed, mended again, and again and again the body is crushed into little pieces, and it continues to be crushed for eternity -- that kind of hell.

One of the Eight Greater Hells.¹⁸

Then undoubtedly this, right here and now -- was hell.

"By the way, I will tell thee one thing -- servant! Although there is no point in thee knowing it since we part here--"

"Yeah!?"

"Dramaturgie, Episode, Guillotinecutter for sure, all the vampire exorcism specialists that until now have tried to kill me -- even that brat with the flashy shirt did not know it, but I am actually a former human!"

Kissshot -- said while laughing.

She said it while her neck was regenerating a cut.

"A former human -- in other words I am the same as Dramaturgie and thee!"

"A--Ah? Weren't you an original!?"

I was convinced of that.

But come to think of it -- Kissshot herself never said such a thing even once.

"I almost forgot about the time I was a human -- I think I was born from a good family! Were we aristocrats? This dress seems a vestige of that time -- ha! Well, for vampires over 300 years old, there are no originals or subordinates anymore!"

"Hey -- What's your point?"

"No, I just forgot it for a long time -- I remembered it last night talking with thee! Even I at first felt hesitation about eating people!"

"Then!"

¹⁸ Also called Eight Hot Hells, from the Buddhist scriptures.

"Thou too!"

Kissshot for a moment stopped her attacks.

And said.

"If thou ate even one person -- thou would not feel it a sin anymore!"

"....."

I stopped my attacks, matching her.

Our injuries regenerate in the blink of an eye.

"Even Dramaturgie, despite being a former human....., moreover a vampire exorcist -- was eating people, thou know? Although it seems he is eating only capital offenders supplied by Guillotinecutter's church--"

"It is not right to eat them just because they are criminals..... all the more if they were judged criminals by Guillotinecutter's church."

"Aye. However the criterion of what is right or not to eat is not limited to humans. One must not eat cows, one must not eat pigs, one must not eat whales, one must not eat dogs -- this is not about Guillotinecutter alone, even between fellow humans there are difference in culture. Not to mention I am the Kaii Killer vampire. In a month it suffices me to eat 1 human -- in a year they are at most 12 people. Even accounting for 500 years, they would be a mere 6000 people. Looking at history, how big a number is it? How many humans did humans kill until now?"

".....This is a sophism."

"I am certainly not a threat for the world. My influence over the world is insignificant. And yet thou still tell me to die because I eat humans?"

Kissshot says.

"It is the human appetite that is the biggest greed."

If I do not eat I die.

It's not just vampires, even humans are like that.

It's not just humans, even animals are like that.

Even the plants in which I wished to turn into -- are like that.

As long as they are not inorganic substances.

As long as they are not stone or iron.

They must sacrifice other lives.

"That's not the problem, Kissshot."

I said.

"And it's like you say. What I say to you is -- die because you eat humans."

"....."

Kissshot received it with an ooh.

And -- she slowly thinned her cold eyes.

"Kissshot. I am a human."

"I see. I am a vampire."

And the battle restarted -- should have.

A pointless match of death and rebirth should have pointlessly unfolded -- at that moment.

On my back.

From behind,

"Please wait!"

A voice echoed.

It echoed on Naoetsu high school's sports field.

That was clearly the voice of Hanekawa -- now that I mention it, just before there may have been the sound of the iron door of the PE storehouse being opened.

"A-Araragi-kun, there is something strange!"

Hearing that from Hanekawa behind me, I thought you are the one who is strange.

Why did you come out of the PE storehouse in this situation -- have you no fear? Even I who have an immortal body understand the reason, just by standing in front of Kissshot like this it wouldn't be strange if your heart broke -- didn't I tell you that Kissshot with her eye power has even the ability to destroy a concrete block just by gazing at it?

Then why -- did you show yourself?

"Hanekawa! Go hide yourself!"

Knowing the risk, I looked behind.

"No -- Run! Just run! Don't stay here! Put as much distance as you can from here!"

"I-It is not like you think, Araragi-kun--"

Hanekawa -- was upset.

Even when I deeply hurt her, even when Episode made a mess of her flank, even when Guillotinecutter took her hostage, the Hanekawa who remained calm all the time -- was plainly shaken.

"There was something really weird from before--, Araragi-kun, p-perhaps we were still failing to notice something very important--"

Failing to notice?

There was still -- something we were failing to notice?

No, there should be no such thing.

There is nothing left undone--

"Thou art noisy!"

Kissshot -- yelled.

Even Kissshot was upset.

That was quite an unexpected reaction.

Although I had seen only once the scene of Kissshot being upset -- when I was still a human, and for a moment I was abandoning her.

When I made the right decision

.

She -- was upset.

She was crying, begging, apologizing--

"Do not say any superfluous words -- portable food!"

She glared.

Just by doing that--

The PE storehouse's iron door behind Hanekawa was blown off.

Eye power.

Unlike the time when I kicked it open, now it's impossible to fix it -- the PE storehouse's iron door shrank like when you crash aluminum foil, and was blasted inside the PE storehouse.

Even the ground around Hanekawa was cracked.

What was around and behind Hanekawa -- was erased.

Just by being looked at.

She just looked at it.

The iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire -- the Kaii Killer!

".....Ah."

Obviously even Hanekawa for a moment gulped down her own words.

But I saw it.

I -- already saw it.

I know it.

I know her dangerousness.

Hanekawa Tsubasa.

I know that she won't stop for just that much.

She firmly, strongly; glared back at Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade.

"Heartunderblade-san -- could it be that you--"

"Human flavor -- Do not meddle!"

Once more Kissshot looks at Hanekawa.

Looks.

Eye power -- vampire's eye power, however!

--An opening!

Being just a pointless deathmatch, at first it didn't produce Kissshot's opening -- at this point it produced it!

Of course, unlike me, even while facing me Kissshot should have had margin to literally look aside -- but now it is different.

Now it is different.

She is upset -- and looking at Hanekawa.

She is full of openings.

".....Kisshot!"

While I shouted her name--

I thrust myself between Hanekawa and her.

I received head-on her eye power.

While all the body was blown back--

I

bite

the base of her neck.

I bite -- with extended double teeth -- with fangs.

".....!"

The technique to exorcise Kisshot.

The technique to exorcise a vampire.

The technique with which a vampire exorcises a vampire--

If you think about it that's extremely simple and clear.

Instinct taught it to me.

It is not clear whether it was my instinct as a human or as a vampire -- however.

She said it from the start.

Before fighting Dramaturgie I received from Kisshot a tip that couldn't even be called a tip--

--At least--

--Pay attention about not letting that guy suck your blood--

--

If a vampire has its blood sucked by another vampire

, its existence will disappear--

At that time I didn't have a bloodsucking impulse -- but now it is different.

Now I am -- hungry.

Squelch.

I suck her blood.

I drive my fangs into her soft white skin.

The way to suck blood -- I grasped it without anybody teaching me.

Undoubtedly it is the same as people taking a meal.

"Guh--"

Kissshot groans.

Even if the blood spilled out regenerates -- the blood sucked out won't come back.

Because this is energy drain.

Only for kiai against kiai.

Because they are not even a meal.

Though they are nothing more than a meal, they are not even a meal.

This is just -- kiai killing.

I made a shield with my body against eye power -- it shouldn't reach Hanekawa. If I keep sucking Kissshot like this -- if I fully wring her blood out, like Kissshot did to me that day--

"Ha."

Kissshot.

While collapsing backwards -- she leans on me from above -- however.

She was still laughing.

"Haha "Hahaha "Hahahaha "Ahahaha "Hahahahahahaha "Haha "Hahahaha "Ha "Hahahahaha "Haha "Ahahaha
"Ahahahahahahahahaha--!"

She dies laughing, huh.

Even that may be fine.

Her blood.

Kissshot-Acerolaorion-Heartunderblade's blood -- was delicious beyond compare.

No matter the quantity -- I could keep drinking it forever.

I wanted to keep drinking it forever.

That's how delicious it was.

Kissshot.

In this way, without obtaining a sense of fulfillment, or sense of achievement whatsoever, I will just exorcise you right away on the spot--

I will kill you.

The life I saved -- I will kill it.

This is my responsibility -- even if I turned back into a human because of your death, I wouldn't ever obtain any sense of fulfillment or achievement -- it would be nothing more than a consequence!

".....Eh?"

Suddenly.

Suddenly, abruptly, I reflected.

Something I was failing to notice?

What is it that I was failing to notice?

I was failing to notice something so important that Hanekawa had to rush out of the PE storehouse -- what in the world could it be?

And why was Kissshot so upset -- why was she so furious for what was at most the nonsense of a 'portable food'?

She had so much self-control before.

Besides, I heard that before.

'Do not say any superfluous words'.

That line of Kissshot -- I think I heard somewhere the same words from the mouth of Kissshot even before:

--I do not know anything about stuff like negotiators--

--Do not say any superfluous words--

--Brat.

That's right.

Kissshot said that to Oshino -- what was the topic?

I remember it.

Before that, the words Oshino said--

--I'm interested in you, Heartunderblade--

--you are willing--

--to help Araragi-kun--

--turn back into a human--

".....!"

I.

Pushed down Kissshot, and ended up on top of her -- without thinking, by reflex I got up. Naturally, I extracted my fangs from her neck -- and then.

I looked at her facial expression.

I saw it.

Kissshot's cold eyes, while still cold became hollow, her pupils seemed even slightly muddled -- even so her lips curl.

"What is it -- servant?"

Kissshot says.

"I have still -- half of my blood left."

"....."

"Now that I have so much blood drawn out of me I cannot move, but if thou do not hurry, soon I will revive, thou know?"

It is as she says.

Now she can't move, but she will soon revive, it is as she says.

However -- more importantly.

I had something I had to ask her.

Although the last question I wanted to ask her was what I should have already asked -- there was something I had to ask her.

That.

Might have been something I shouldn't ask though.

"H-Hey -- Kisshot."

"What is it?"

In what way

did you plan to turn me back into a human?"

Kisshot bluntly tutted at my question.

"Dost thou care about such things now?"

"I care. It's important."

"That portable food. She should have stayed silent."

Kisshot cursed Hanekawa.

And she shut her mouth.

And then the accursed Hanekawa -- with a slow pace, walked up to me and Kisshot. Although she put back on her school sweater and tied back her scarf, judging from the shaking of her breast which seemed to have the boingboing onomatopoeia drawn in the background, it seemed she didn't have time to put her bra back on.

Unconcerned, Hanekawa came closer.

And then spoke.

"Heartunderblade-san."

She said with a respectful tone of voice.

"Did you plan from the beginning to be killed by Araragi-kun?"

"....."

"In order to turn him back into a human."

I failed to notice it.

If this didn't happen -- for example, if I didn't witness the scene of Kisshot eating Guillotinecutter.

In which way was she actually planning to turn me back into a human -- beside the method Hanekawa researched, what other kinds of method existed?

I didn't even think about that.

I completely -- failed to notice that.

And.

"Do not talk rubbish, portable food -- as if there was any ground for it."

"Then please tell me in which way you planned to turn Araragi-kun back into a human. I researched it, and as for methods to turn a vampire back into a human I found nothing else."

Nothing else.

Nothing else but to kill the master.

Nothing else but to break the master-servant relationship.

"Ha. It was a known fact -- it is just that in the first place I never wanted to turn this servant back into a human. I just lied to him to make him gather my limbs. I will tell all kind of lies in order to regain my complete form -- even the reason I turned this guy into a subordinate, to tell the truth, was simply due to my circumstances."

"That's not it. You made him gather the missing parts because if he killed you in an incomplete state he would not turn back into a human, isn't it? If you are not killed after you regain your complete form, it will mean nothing--"

That time.

Kissshot was in such high spirits not because she regained her complete form -- but because she satisfied the requirement to turn me back into a human -- then?

"Rubbish. Way off the mark."

"Then -- why did you come here?"

Hanekawa talks with Kissshot with extreme composure.

The predator and the prey.

Despite the fact they are a superior existence and an inferior existence.

They speak normally.

"Araragi-kun had a reason to fight you, but you don't have it. You covered it up with reasons like a chance to show your full power or something like that -- but in fact you came here to get killed by Araragi-kun, right? Just for that, right? Making the conditions an even match -- you deliberately stirred up Araragi-kun."

"Ha-Hanekawa."

"Araragi-kun, be quiet."

Hanekawa strictly commands me.

And she continues.

"Of course, there wasn't any ground for this -- I just couldn't help but feel something was weird, but a while ago, because you did not kill me who interrupted the fight

-- I understood. You..."

Although she blew up Hanekawa's surroundings with vampire eye power.

Hanekawa herself was not harmed.

Even though Episode threw his cross mercilessly towards Hanekawa who similarly intruded in the battle -- Kissshot, who called Hanekawa my portable food, didn't attack her.

She just threatened her.

"You plan to die."

".....Thou shouldst have stayed silent."

Kissshot.

Repeated the same words as before.

"After saying it what do thou plan to do? After saying it -- do thou think my servant will be able to kill me?"

"Eh?"

"As a master I understand well my servant -- he is a fool who saves a dying vampire. If he knew about what the brat called my 'will', would he be able to suck my blood?"

"W-Well -- but..."

Hanekawa is at a loss for words.

Kissshot coldly looked at her.

With hollow pupils -- she coldly looked at her.

"I thought that was the most difficult thing -- how can I make him kill me, that was what troubled me. Therefore I stayed silent on the method until the last moment. I was already thinking I had no choice but to play by ear..... however, although it was unexpected for me, thanks to Guillotinecutter the conditions were ready by chance. If he got so angry just because I ate one person, there was no need to bother worrying about it--"

I, she said.

Kissshot, with those eyes looked at me.

"--I could get killed by thee while being the villain, the bad guy. Thou didst not need to know mine intentions."

"Why."

I murmured.

I was dumbfounded -- well, but.

It was a fact that with that explanation everything matched.

"Why did you -- such a thing."

"Servant."

Kissshot says.

"I was searching for a place to die."

"A place to die--"

The cause of death for vampires 90% of the time.

Suicide.

Boredom -- kills the vampire.

Quite the -- boredom.

"That was the reason I came to this country -- since the first subordinate died, I never came here again. It was not sightseeing--"

"B-But you."

I do not want to die.

She said -- while crying.

The heart stolen -- the limbs cut--

She barely escaped alive.

"I thought it was time to die. That was my plan."

However, Kissshot says.

"In the end, I became afraid to die."

"....."

"I became afraid to disappear after having lived 500 years. I feared, I feared to disappear, I did not know what to do. Thou happened to pass by there. I begged you to help me."

"I -- helped you."

The outrageous thing was that I thought nothing.

I thought nothing about the consequences or the future.

It's just that.

I didn't want to see -- her tear-stained face.

I couldn't stand to see it.

"For the first time in my life, I was helped by another person."

"....."

"Whether they were human or vampire, nobody has ever helped me. While I was sucking thy blood -- I asked myself what I was doing. Therefore -- even if I consumed your blood, I did not eat thee any more -- I made thee my subordinate. The second subordinate in a lifetime."

Because thou wert not opening thine eyes, I thought thou wert going berserk -- Kissshot says.

With constant supervision all the time.

She nursed me.

"However, somehow, thou opened thine eyes. Well, I thought that if thou wanted to be a vampire all would be fine -- but thou, as I thought, said thou wanted to turn back into a human. While thou wert not conscious, I grimly thought it over. I decided it at that time."

Kissshot said, helpless, but with a powerful voice.

"I will die for thy sake."

".....For my sake."

"Thou wilt kill me, thou wilt turn back into a human, this time I will die. I felt I finally found the place to die -- the place to die I was searching from 400 years before."

"400 years before--"

That is -- the first subordinate.

Kissshot said.

About turning him back into a human.

--In those days it was impossible for me to turn him back into a human--

--This time, I intend to capitalize on that lesson.

"I could not die for his sake. I was unable to offer him my death. I could not turn him back into a human -- therefore."

"For my sake."

In order to turn me back into a human.

In order to help me.

She wanted to throw away her life.

"So do not be conceited, servant. It was originally my responsibility -- If I did not act so disgracefully such a thing would not have happened, and if thou did not save me, that time I would have died."

".....!"

Eh?

That..... wait a moment.

What is this situation -- impossible.

At this point -- my mental side.

I can take care of the mental side--

Even though I said that a little while before!

".....What is it? Art thou crying?"

"Ah....."

Now that I notice -- my cheeks are wet.

Why?

Because even if that was the case -- it doesn't change what I have to do, right?

Even if she wants to die for my sake.

Didn't she eat a person?

"Thou are a crybaby -- my servant. How pathetic."

"T-That's not it. These aren't tears. This."

This, I say.

"This -- is blood."

"Ooh."

"Blood is flowing--"

How did it turn out like this.

Kissshot is a vampire.

She ate Guillotinecutter.

She has eaten 6000 people so far.

However.

"--Even your blood is flowing--!"

We are alive.

Therefore it's the same.

What I did.

What she is trying to do.

What she did.

What I am trying to do.

Aren't they perfectly the same--!?

"Really, thine intervention was unnecessary, portable food."

Kissshot said.

"And I had planned to be killed showing an opening at a suitable point -- but well, fine. Servant, after all thou hath no alternative left but to kill me."

"T-That's..."

The mental side.

My mental side.

"If thou do not kill me, from tomorrow on I will eat 1000 people per day.If I say this, thou hath no choice but to kill me right? As a proof this is not a bluff, if I start by seizing that portable food, wilt thou make up your mind?"

"....."

"It is better to pluck thyself the life thou saved. This is -- responsibility, right?"

"Kissshot--"

"Thou art the second person to call me by that name. And thou will become the last."

I looked at Hanekawa for help.

Hanekawa -- was just biting her lower lip however, moreover she didn't say anything. It was as if to make known the desperation of this current situation.

Even Hanekawa does not know what to do.

Yeah.

It is as Kissshot said.

If things are like this, Hanekawa didn't need to rush out of the PE storehouse and disclose what Kissshot had in mind -- in the end, what I have to do doesn't change at all, in this way the situation only grew worse.

However.

If I didn't know it -- and I kept misunderstanding Kissshot -- without being able to feel regret or remorse.

"After all, you are watching from somewhere -- don't put on airs and come here quickly! You bastard, I've got work for you!"

Hanekawa was looking at me surprised.

Kissshot was looking at me surprised.

However without paying attention to their glances -- I keep yelling.

"Oshino! I know you are here -- with your neutral standpoint, there is no way that you aren't watching this place right now! I have understood all your words -- I don't seek an explanation anymore! So come here -- I have understood what I have done, I deeply understood even the fact that I am not a victim but an offender! So come here -- Oshino Meme!"

"--I can hear you even if you don't yell like that."

Always with a buoyant attitude -- Oshino was sitting above the roof of the PE storehouse.

He was sitting cross-legged -- resting his chin in his hands.

Looking really bothered.

How long -- or maybe he was there all of a sudden.

"Araragi-kun. It's a first for us to meet in this place."

".....Oshino."

"Hahhaa, you are really energetic -- did something good happen?"

"I've got work for you."

I repeated.

I stared at Oshino -- and I repeated it.

"Do something."

"That is?"

With a wry smile, Oshino jumped down from the roof of the PE storehouse -- he has a physique that doesn't make you think he has very good reflexes, however he landed neatly, without even bending his knees.

And then he cheerfully gets near us.

"You are too vague."

"I will pay money."

"It's not a problem of money."

"Then what is the problem?"

"It's your own problem."

Don't be pushy.

Oshino says like he is refusing.

In fact, he actually refused.

"Yo, class rep-chan."

And then Oshino raised a hand at Hanekawa.

"Nice to meet you, I'd say."

".....Yes."

Hanekawa responded with a nod.

"Nice to meet you -- I am Hanekawa."

"I am glad that I stopped in this city just in case, even if the business with Heartunderblade ended. Because by doing so I was able to get to know you."

".....I always thought you certainly disliked me, though."

"No way. I never happen to dislike a girl. I warn you that if you hear something strange from Araragi-kun, that's a false rumor."

Impudently.

Oshino said a barefaced lie.

"In fact you are amazing -- although you had nothing to do with the Kaiis, you were affected so deeply, female high schoolers are really so energetic, did something good happen?"

"It's not like I had nothing to do with it."

Hanekawa said with resolution.

"Araragi's problem is my problem."

"Whoa, that's friendship."

Oshino lets out a simmering laugh.

It was a profoundly irritating demeanor that made fun of other people.

"Or is it youth?"

"Brat."

Kissshot says to Oshino--

"Do not interfere. We have a pact."

"I don't recall having made any pact with you, Heartunderblade -- I just wanted everything to turn out for the best. It was just better for me if you chose to die in order to turn Araragi-kun back into a human. For me -- in other words for humans."

Oshino said.

That's right.

Surely that was true even for Guillotinecutter.

I thought it was strange that he meekly returned Kissshot's arms, however, if I remember correctly, Oshino said he told Guillotinecutter the gist of it -- he informed him that I wanted to turn back into a human, and that Kissshot accepted it.

Therefore he returned them.

Oshino obtained a compromise by doing so.

By doing so he persuaded him -- with that reason, Guillotinecutter gave in.

If that was the case, even if he returned the arms he wouldn't contradict his doctrine.

He should have been able to preserve his face as an archbishop.

And yet, because I had been deep in talk with Kissshot, I had gone to the convenience store, and I had been regretting to part with Kissshot -- I dragged it out, no matter how much time passed I wasn't trying to kill Kissshot.

Guillotinecutter thought he had been tricked by Oshino, and he entered the cram school ruin alone.

Not even the barrier can hide Kissshot with her complete form.

"So well, although things approximately went as I thought..... Class rep-chan really did something superfluous. It would have been better if Araragi-kun didn't know it."

"I."

Hanekawa says not flinching at all.

"I think you are mistaken."

"Oh, boy. What a breast. I commend you just for your breasts."

"W-What?"

Hanekawa pins down her breasts in hot haste.

Shake shake.

Oshino looks at Hanekawa,

"Ah, I got it wrong. What a nerve. I commend you just for your nerves, I wanted to say" ¹⁹

And laughs.

As if it is possible.

That was just sexual harassment.

"Anyway, an honor student speech is quite something, well then class rep-chan, what do you plan to do about this situation?"

".....That is something for Araragi-kun to decide."

So replied Hanekawa to Oshino's rebuttal.

"If nothing else, ending it all without knowing anything would be too cruel."

"You heard her, Araragi-kun. I am given the stern treatment -- Class rep-chan's excessive kindness is a cruelty. She is really abnormal. How in the world has she so much faith in you?"

"....."

"Say, what are you going to do?"

Oshino faced toward me--

And as usual, he held in his mouth an unlit cigarette.

"I just wanted to see with my eyes the after festival -- you have come so far, you have come so close, just in case I'll try to listen. The work you got for me as a specialist. About the fee, oh yeah, it will take over the 5 million yen I condoned you."

Oshino said, with a broad grin.

¹⁹ The second kanji of "nerve" is that of "breast".

"Then, your wish?"

".....I want you to teach me a way to make everyone happy."

I put into words.

The wish from the bottom of my heart.

"A way to end things without anyone being unhappy."

"As if it existed."

Are you stupid, Oshino shrugged his shoulders.

"There's a limit even to convenience. That's a theme written by grade schoolers in moral classes. It's not realistic."

"Oshino -- I..."

"However."

He takes out from his mouth the cigarette and put it back into his pocket.

Oshino Meme looks at Hanekawa, at Kissshot, and at me in turn -- and says.

"There would be a way to make everyone unhappy."

He swiftly explains it to us who are dumbfounded at his words.

"In other words, I'm talking about distributing onto everybody the burden of unhappiness generated by this situation -- nobody will have his wish fulfilled, but if that's fine with you, the way exists."

"....."

Everyone will become unhappy -- everyone will be burdened with unhappiness.

Distributing.

Subdividing -- the burden.

This is certainly not something to push onto a single person.

"Concretely..... yeah. Araragi-kun, come very close to kill Heartunderblade. Almost strip her of her special characteristics and abilities as a vampire -- just make sure she doesn't die. Make Heartunderblade more moribund than before. So much that she won't even be a shadow of her former self, not even her name will remain. Make her an inferior existence, a human-like pseudo-vampire -- an entity that won't be able to eat humans no matter how hungry she is."

And then, continued Oshino.

"Araragi-kun, you won't be able to turn back into a human -- but you will be able to come very close to it. You will become a vampire-like pseudo-human. Some of the special characteristics and abilities of a vampire will remain -- it won't be possible to strictly call you a human, but you will be extremely far from a vampire and extremely close to a human, naturally you will be completely different from a half vampire, become this kind of halfway entity. It will suit you."

"I-It will suit me, you say."

"Naturally you too won't be able to eat a human no matter how hungry you got. However..... by settling things this way, setting Araragi-kun aside, Heartunderblade will starve to death without sufficient nourishment. You must continue to constantly give Heartunderblade your blood. The sole nutrient able to keep Heartunderblade alive, once degraded to that inferior existence, will be just your flesh and blood. You must devote the rest of your life to Heartunderblade, and Heartunderblade for all the rest of her life must stay close to you."

"Then--"

Hanekawa cut into.

"In other words, we, the humans--"

"Yes. Give up on exorcising a dangerous vampire. Give up on the complete elimination of the Kaii Killer, The iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, as well as her subordinate. If she loses that much power, guys like Dramaturgie and Episode won't even be able to find Heartunderblade out. That is to say, the risk remains. The danger that Heartunderblade and Araragi-kun might turn back into vampires and eat people will remain to an extent that cannot be disregarded--"

If I do that--

Everybody will become unhappy.

Nobody's wish will be fulfilled.

Kissshot won't die.

I won't turn back into a human.

Both vampires will survive.

".....Do not joke around, brat!"

Kissshot yelled below me.

She raises her voice.

I already sucked half her blood -- unable to move, the only thing she was able to do was to yell in that manner.

"What on earth does a brat who did not live a tenth of what I did understand!? Do not say convenient things -- I do not want to survive in those conditions! There is a limit even to disgrace -- I do not want to live in shame! My place to die is here! At last I found it -- at last I can die! I -- will die for my servant's sake! Let me die for his sake! Kill me, kill me -- hurry up and kill me! I do not want to live!"

"That's why you will become unhappy. Your wish will not be fulfilled. Although the one who decides will be Araragi-kun. Yes, it's as class rep-chan says."

"Servant!"

As if she thought Oshino wasn't worth the talk, Kissshot turned her eyes my way.

"As I said now -- do not be taken in by that brat's fast talk. I do not want to live."

".....And yet, I..."

Without hesitation, I decided it.

It was definitively my responsibility.

I thought hard at the consequences -- and I said it.

"I want you to live."

"....."

I --

Caressed her hair softly.

Her golden hair.

Her soft and smooth hair.

That -- yes.

It was certainly a sign of obedience.

"I will not say it once -- I will bow my head like a servant any number of times. So don't try to have a cool death -- live an awkward life for me. Don't search for a place to die, search for a place to live."

Kissshot -- had a desperate facial expression.

However she can't move.

She can't even struggle.

She is in tears--

With tears similar to blood, she was just supplicating.

"I-I beg thee..... please, servant. Somehow..... somehow kill me. Kill me, somehow turn back into a human. Help me--"

"I'm sorry, Kissshot."

I call out her name.

The name that perhaps I will not call her by again.

"I will not help you."

Thus -- my Spring Break ended.

The Spring Break that was like hell.

And my last Spring Break as a high schooler -- with a tragic bad ending in which nobody became happy and there was no salvation, the curtain closed.

018

Afterword.

Or to better say, the story from now on.

The next day, after a long time I was roused out of bed by my two sisters, Karen and Tsukihi, and I headed to school. The older brother returned home after a journey of self-discovery that lasted for two weeks and the parents didn't say anything special, while the sisters only burst into loud laughter. Since in fact I believe I did something for which there were no words, and that could only be laughed at, I think I can only agree with them.

Anyway, today the new school term starts.

I headed to school riding my bike. It has been two weeks since the last time I rode my bike. I don't think you can forget how to ride a bike just because you experienced a little hell.

The arrival.

At the gymnasium the class grouping was posted.

"Ooh"

A miracle happened. My name and that of Hanekawa are within the same board. Well, miracle may be too strong a word for that, but I was a bit elated. It was an emotion I didn't feel at the class change in the second year. I don't know what the true nature of that emotion was, anyway it was wonderful that we got to be in the same class.

From among the crowd of students who raced to confirm their own class, I found Hanekawa and called her out -- because the very picture of an honor student like her is rare even at Naoetsu High School, I spotted her immediately.

She had changed her hairdo.

That is to say, she had only split her single braid in two to the sides, but just by that her image changed considerably.

"Oh my, it's Araragi-kun.....yoo-hoo."

Hanekawa had a tired look on her face.

Her shoulders were dropped, and she was dejected and slouching.

There has never been someone so down because of the new school term.

"Is something wrong, Hanekawa-san?"

What could it be?

Does she dislike us being in the same class?

I was assailed by a persecution complex, however somehow it seems that it wasn't that.

"Ah."

Hanekawa pulled the sleeve of my school uniform, and took me out the gymnasium. And as I thought we reached a point where the two of us could talk,

"I forgot my bra in the PE storehouse!"

She groaned.

"Yeah."

"By now, it would have surely been discovered....."

We wanted to finish cleaning the sports field up all we could, within the limits of the feasible, but there was nothing we could do anymore about the PE storehouse's iron door which was curled up and crumpled like an aluminum foil by vampire eye power, so we left it like that and went back home. Nobody was going in the direction of the sports field yet, but the door completely disappeared, no matter how I look at it there will be a big fuss about it. Naturally, the surroundings of the PE storehouse will be scrupulously examined.

It seems that was distressing Hanekawa.

"Although the circumstances didn't allow me to be attentive, for me it will be the blunder of a lifetime..... and the embarrassment of a lifetime."

"Don't worry, Hanekawa."

"? Why?"

"I retrieved it."

"What did you say!?"

"I will not let you feel embarrassed."

"In those circumstances when did you have time to do that!?"

"Hey, don't say something so sad. During this Spring Break, I never thought, not even once, to give priority to anything other than your underwear, you know."

"Don't make me listen to your sad story!"

"And that's why in my room now I have a full set of top and bottom."

"Give them back!"

We chatted.

Since it seemed there was still time until the bell rang, Hanekawa and I talked a little bit in that place. Of course the topic was vampire related. Hanekawa taught me something out of her vast stock of knowledge about vampires.

"Well, it's only a theory."

She premised.

"Vampires suck human blood -- however, the implication changes completely whether they suck blood for a meal or whether they suck it in order to create a subordinate."

"Yeah, I don't know if it was from the person herself or from Oshino, but I think I've heard it."

"A meal, well it's a meal, but creating a subordinate somehow seems to be something akin to a sexual act."

"Se-Sexual act?"

"Seriously."

Said Hanekawa.

"They say appetite and sexual desire resemble each other. Besides, following that line of thinking, isn't it clear why a vampire doesn't want that much to create a subordinate? In 500 years -- she had two subordinates. I don't know much about vampire's idea of chastity, but she has been a virtuous woman."²⁰

"Virtuous?"

²⁰ It is worthy to note that "kizumono", from the title, means not only "damaged goods", but also "a woman who has been deflowered".

"I think her first subordinate was her lover."

A rule of not creating a subordinate--

That's how they described it to me.

A virtuous -- vampire.

Even if they are about to die, they aren't inclined to save themselves by making a subordinate -- was it?

Then.

In which occasion do they create subordinates?

That was the question.

".....But weren't they human and vampire?"

"That's why she turned him into a subordinate, didn't she? The existence of vampire halves could be said to attest to those sort of couplings..... although the circumstances were a bit different, I suppose. At any rate, this was just a conjecture. However, it's for this reason that she tried to redo what she did at that time, I think -- as atonement."

Atonement--"

She couldn't turn the first subordinate back into a human.

Therefore she added a second, me, to the first.

Might have been.

"She didn't want to be killed by the three vampire exorcists though -- what she really meant by having found her place to die, maybe was the fact she met with you. When she met -- the second subordinate."

"A place to die -- huh."

"Thinking about it, at the time when she almost lost her vampire abilities by turning you into a subordinate -- at that time when she lost her bloodsucking ability, perhaps she was already prepared to starve to death. If a vampire can't suck blood, she dies."

"Well....., that's true."

"But in order to turn you back into a human, she couldn't let herself starve to death."

".....Last night, at the beginning she invited me to live together for eternity..... I don't know what she planned to do if I accepted her invite."

"Well, that's precisely what would have happened, isn't it?"

"Precisely."

"Even if a person cannot live alone, two people can."

"....."

"Two people is better than one, just two of you is better than three -- something like that. That sort of thing."

What it could be, says Hanekawa.

I wonder, I replied.

"A wound."

"Hm?"

"A wound has remained."

Hanekawa said looking at my neck.

At the back of the neck, the marks of two fangs.

"What? The collar doesn't hide it well?"

"Hmm. Perhaps I noticed it because I know about it."

Folding her arms, Hanekawa checked it from various angles.

"Besides, there are also the PE hours..... Araragi-kun, it would be better if you grow your hair a little more."

"I see..... maintenance will be a pain."

"In the end, how much of a vampire remained in your body?"

"I have to test it later, but.....well, it seems my capacity to heal is higher. I have the impression that when I brush my teeth it's more difficult for my gums to bleed."

"So down-to-earth....."

"Something like that. If I look at it positively, I was indeed able to turn back into a human, although side-effects remained - that's what I'd say."

"Hmmm..... side-effects, huh."

"Well, whether or not I am currently a human -- just by being able to get out under the sun like this, I feel like the world changed considerably."

"You're forward-looking."

Hanekawa was bashful.

Even the smiling face of Hanekawa -- as I thought, seen under the sun looked dazzling all the time.

"Well, if there is something that worries you, just say it. I will let you massage my shoulders as much as you wish."

"That's right. If I want to massage them I will say so. In order to make Hanekawa feel good I will research many things beforehand and I will get my heart ready, and from the next time I will be truly able to massage them."

".....Y-You're talking about my shoulders, right?"

"Hm? Eh, ah, well yeah"

"That's an ambiguous answer....."

Hanekawa made a bitter smile.

In any case.

She offered her right hand to me and said.

"At last I got to be in the same class as you -- I have to grab the chance to properly rehabilitate you."

"Rehabilitate..... what's that?" ²¹

"Rehabilitate, it's written like resurrect."

Isn't it fitting for the immortal Araragi-kun? ²²

²¹ The original Japanese word, "kousei", has many homophones.

Said Hanekawa.

"Please take care of me for the next year, Araragi-kun."

"Yeah. Without saying a year, please take care of me forever."

Although surely it will be shorter than eternity.

Still, please take care of me forever.

I shook Hanekawa's right hand.

That was certainly a handshake between friends.

And then we go in the classroom, and we receive from the homeroom teacher a short course on the new school year, and the new school term -- well, it was the usual every year. Tomorrow we will elect the class representatives, so I was told to consider who would be a good candidate. Of course I will vote for Hanekawa -- for the male one, I don't care.

And then after school.

I went to the cram school ruin alone.

I departed after informing Hanekawa. I even thought to go together with her, but this was my responsibility, and mine alone.

Twenty minutes by my bicycle -- and I finally arrive at that place.

I already know this place as if it was not the house of other people but my own home, I pass through a hole in the fence and I enter the premises. Still, if I think about it, I could say this was the very first time I looked carefully at this building from the outside during daytime.

If I looked at it under the sun light -- it was more shabby than expected.

It was rotting and decayed.

It was as if the building was dying.

Looking at it with human eyes, that was what was visible.

I cast down my eyes and I enter that abandoned building -- and then I climb the stairs.

Second floor -- I pass beyond it.

I'm headed for the fourth floor.

'She' isn't weak against the sunlight anymore.

Because 'she' is no longer a vampire.

I checked the room that had a hole in the ceiling, but there was nobody there. I open the door of the next classroom -- it seems even that door was broken -- and Oshino was there.

"Yo. You're late Araragi-kun -- I've been waiting for you."

Oshino greeted me with a cheerful tone of voice.

As always he is wearing an aloha shirt.

He is lying down on a bunk bed made with desks, no matter how I look at it he wasn't waiting for me, but even if I retorted at every little thing it would be of no use.

²² In Japanese "immortal" means also "undead".

"Hahhaa. The school uniform suits you, Araragi-kun. You look very different."

"Despite my appearance, I am a student you know."

"Ah, you're right. I inadvertently forgot. That's right, you were the Gakuen Inou Batoru main character."

"I don't really know if that really happened anymore, it's something from a distant past."

Anyway, it's not in my character to be a main character.

I am not fitted to be a villain, or a monster.

Right now I am a mere high schooler.

As I appear -- As I look, I am a student.

Though for a little while I became superhuman.

"I see. Class rep-chan is not with you, is it?"

"Yeah, I'm alone. Would it have been better if we were together?"

"In fact, in this case it doesn't matter."

Although, Oshino continued.

"If you let me speak out of concern, you must be very careful about class rep-chan. Araragi-kun -- you shouldn't take your eyes off her. That girl is a bit -- too dangerous. This time everybody..... including you and me, we have all been manipulated by that girl. If that girl were to become the center of a problem, honestly, not even I can imagine what in the world would happen."

"Yeah..... you don't need to tell me, I was going to."

I replied.

"Because she's a friend."

"I see. Well, this is not an after-sales service, but I was worried about what would happen to you, so I plan to stay in this building for a while -- I searched a lot, but in the end this cram school ruin was the one where it was easiest to pass time. If something happens consult me."

"Consulting you is too expensive."

"It's not expensive. It's an equitable compensation."

He said.

Oshino pointed to a corner of the classroom with his unlit cigarette.

"Well then, let's proceed at once with the first time."

In a corner of the classroom.

There was a blonde girl.

She was sitting hugging her knees.

She looked 8 years old -- a small girl.

Not a 27 year old.

Not a 17 year old, not a 12 year old, not a 10 year old -- an 8 years old blonde girl.

With an insecure expression -- she was staring at me.

".....Really."

What in the world should I call her?

She is not even a shadow of her former self, she doesn't even have a name.

The ruin of what she once was.

The pomace of a beautiful demon.

And--

For me, an existence I can't forget.

"Really..... I'm sorry."

I moved close to her.

And then I lowered my waist to match the sitting girl, and hugged her.

"If you want to kill me, you can kill me anytime."

She doesn't say anything.

She won't talk to me anymore.

As if she was also peevish, she showed some resistance -- but immediately she became docile, and while still not saying a word she bit my neck.

A little pain.

And then a sense of euphoria spread through my body.

"I still don't think that was the correct thing to do."

Oshino says from behind with a casual tone of voice.

"I guess I should call it human self-centeredness. The disgust you felt for vampire eating humans could be said to be the same as the disillusionment from seeing the scene of a lovely cat eating a mouse. And you chose to keep a vampire as if it were a pet. To remove her fangs, to declaw her nails, to smash her vocal cords, to neuter her -- huh. You, who have been treated as a pet, now treat your master as a pet. This is exactly what's happening now. If you think about it -- it's not an impressive tale."

"....."

"The human who wanted to throw away his life for a vampire, and the vampire who wanted to throw away her life for a human, huh. It's like you wash blood with blood -- however, blood will tell. Since this is work, I don't mean to stick my nose into it, but -- well, since I had a part in it, if you get tired of it just tell me, Araragi-kun."

"I will never loathe it."

I reply, while the girl sucks my blood.

"Because I am doing something I like."

"If you liked, then?"

The detached rejoinder from Oshino.

While giving him my back, I -- hug lightly the small and helpless body of the girl who even with all her might would still get crushed by the physical strength of a human.

We, who wounded each other, lick each other's wounds.

We, who have become damaged goods, need each other.

"If tomorrow you die my life will last until tomorrow -- if today you live, I too will live today."

So I vowed aloud.

And then the story of the damaged goods begins.

Red when wet and black once dried, a story of blood.

The story of our precious wound which will never heal.

I would not tell it to anybody.