

The Tatami Galaxy

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Chapter I –The 4.5 Tatami Nemesis of Love

In the two years before the spring of my junior year of college, I accomplished not a single thing of practical use. Wholly avoiding wholesome association with the opposite sex, diligence towards my studies, the discipline of my physical body, and other activities directed towards becoming a capable member of society I instead isolated myself from women, abandoned my studies, and let my flesh fall into ruination. Even so, why is that I ceaselessly labored away, still anticipating that excellent arrangement?

I must inquire of the responsible party. Where is the person responsible?

It is not the case that I have ceaselessly been in this condition. Immediately following my birth, I was the very paragon of unmarred purity, as charming as the infant Prince Genji; without a single wicked thought in that head it is said that my radiant face spread the light of love throughout the hills and valleys of my hometown. It is doubtful whether that is still the case. Each time that I look in a mirror I fly into a rage, asking 'Why is that you have become thus so? Is this the sum of your current existence?'

There are those who say that I am still young, and that people are yet things that may change.

How ridiculous.

It is said that the soul of a man is the same at one hundred as it is at three. Yet with this year, another one will be added to my twenty, and the end of my splendid quarter-century-long youth of my life will soon approach. What is to become of the coarse efforts I have poured into changing my own personality? At this stage if I attempt to twist my character which already towers above a sea of nothingness, the most I can do is break it.

At this moment, I must drag my obstinate self into leading a respectable life. I must force my own eyes to realize that reality. It is firmly my intention to not close my eyes.

And yet, somehow, it is unbearable to look.

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Since it is said that people who interfere with the romance of others are fated to an equestrian death, I stayed far away from the lonely stables at the north end of campus. If I were ever to approach the horse-riding grounds I would certainly be attacked by a band of rampaging horses, which would jump the fences and trample me underfoot to the point that the leftover scraps of flesh would no longer be of use even for sukiyaki. For the same reason, I was deathly afraid of the Kyoto mounted police corps.

Speaking of why I was so afraid of horses, I was once notorious, known far and wide as a nemesis of love. As a Black Cupid dressed in the robes of a reaper, instead of the arrows of romance I swung

an axe, using what was like an infrared sense to sweep up those red threads of fate that bind lovers and cut them to shreds. Because of my deeds, countless young lovebirds shed bitter tears enough to fill six washbasins.

Those were certainly the heights of inhumanity; of that much, at least, I am aware.

It's possible that before I had entered university, the me back then had trembled slightly with excitement at the possibility of entering into a rose-colored life flirting with members of the opposite sex. During the first few months of my college career, I did not even need to force myself to believe such things, resolving firmly in my heart that I would not become a beast, but would instead go forth, gently and politely accompanying beautiful maidens. At any rate, I was prepared to overlook men and women throwing away reason and wildly hooking up.

Before I knew it though, I had lost all composure and transformed into a scoundrel, feeling nothing but joy at the sound of those red threads snapping. Back alleys of broken love overflowed with the scraps of those strings, and tears of resentment. Those defiles of desperation that I frequented were where I would meet a despicable man who would become both my greatest friend and my sworn enemy.

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Ozu is a student the same year as I. Though he is a member of the electrical engineering department, he hates electricity, electronics and engineering. His first-year grades were so dreadful, as low-achieving as is possible, that it is questionable whether there was any worth in him enrolling in college in the first place. However, the man himself was not concerned in the slightest.

Because he despises vegetables and adheres strictly to a diet of fast food, he has the extremely eerie look and complexion of someone from the far side of the moon. If you were to meet him the street late at night eight out of ten people would mistake him for a youkai. The remaining two people are certainly youkais themselves.

Cruelly beating the weak, groveling to the strong, selfish, self-assured, lazy, a complete demon, neglecting studies, lacking a shred of pride, feeding off the unhappiness of others he was able to eat three square meals a day. There is not a single part of him that is praiseworthy. If I had never met him my soul surely would have been cleaner for it.

Keeping that in mind, setting foot into the Misogi Movie Circle in the spring of my freshman year was mostly assuredly a mistake.

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At the time, I was still a sparkling freshman, green and fresh as the fallen cherry blossom leaves.

Upon entering the university grounds, each first-year was immediately pressed with club fliers, I with so many that they could not be processed by a single person. Among those fliers, only four caught my attention: Misogi Movie Circle, a mysterious call for disciples, Honwaka Softball Circle, and the Lucky Cat Restaurant secret society. Each of these had its own air of suspicion, yet was its own doorway to a yet unknown campus life, and I was torn with inquisitiveness, thinking that no matter which I chose a fascinating future lay ahead. There is no other way to describe this manner of thinking, other than to say that I was a hopeless fool.

After lectures, I directed my steps towards the university clock tower. It seemed that many circles were holding new member information sessions in that vicinity.

Around the base of the clock tower milled throngs of freshmen, their faces still blushing with springs of hope, as well as crafty circle members, eager to prey on those same hopes. Thinking that among these countless circles lay an entrance to the phantasmic illusion of the entrance to a rose-colored campus life, I wandered around in a lightheaded daze.

The first thing to catch my gaze was a group of students holding a billboard displaying “Misogi Movie Circle”. They were screening a movie as a way of welcoming potential new recruits. Now that I think upon it, I should not have followed along beyond that. Honey-laced slogans like “Let’s Have Fun Making Movies Together!” or “Make One Hundred Friends!” should not have worked on me, yet I was bewildered by them beyond myself. My decision that day to join the circle must be attributed to the fact that my expectations for that rose-colored future completely made me forget myself. From that day, I would embark upon the path of a beast, and instead of making friends only acquired enemies.

Upon entering Misogi, I was completely unable to integrate into that irritatingly congenial atmosphere. Though I told myself “This is a trial you must overcome; by entering this oddly cheerful group, that rose-colored life, beautiful raven-haired maidens, and eventually the entire world will lay before you”, I was inevitably crushed.

Driven into a darkened corner, suddenly an ill-omened face appeared beside me; I thought it might be a messenger of hell that only someone of my delicate nature could see.

That was the first meeting between Ozu and me.

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After that fateful encounter, the next two years flew by in a breath. It was the end of my third May in university. I sat in my well-loved 4.5 tatami room, glaring at the despicable Ozu. I lived in the Shimogamo Yuusuisou boarding house in Shimogamo Izumigawa, which is said to have burnt down in the turbulence at the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate and rebuilt in the exact same fashion, and if it weren’t for the light leaking out the windows, it would be just like an abandoned ruin. When I first

visited this place during the co-op association introductions after my matriculation it was only natural that I thought I had wandered into Kowloon Walled City. Anyone who sees this crumbling, wooden three-story building would probably think to place it on the list of important historical structures yet if it were to burn down it is likely that no one would even blink. Even the landlady who lives to the east would most certainly be relieved.

That particular night, Ozu came to call at my residence. The two of us gloomily gulped down sake. Being told "Feed me something", I broke out my electric range and grilled fishburgers, but Ozu downed it all in one swallow and proceeded to make extravagant requests: "I want properly grilled meat, something like salted beeftongue with leeks." I was a little angry, but after I thrust those scorching hot things into his mouth, he silently shed such tears that I was obliged to forgive him.

At the start of the month, due to our single-minded efforts, things in Misogi had gotten into such a miserable state that we voluntarily exiled ourselves from the group. Though it is considered good manners to clean up after yourself, we mustered all our effort to leave a bad impression behind, as though it were the muddiness of the Yellow River. Ozu was as usual my constant associate, but even after we left the circle he seemed to keep himself busy in all sorts of schemes; he seemed to have a hand in the sports circles and even in the activities of the secret society. His visit that night was no doubt to also visit a certain resident of the Shimogamo Yuusuisou on the second floor. Ozu called that resident "Master", and had been coming and going from that residence since our first year. The reason that this miserable relationship between Ozu and I hadn't already been cut was not only because we were always pushed into the same dark corners in the circles, but also because he always was making calls to my boarding house. Even when I inquired as to the nature of this "Master", Ozu simply put on a loathsome, obscene grin and refused to answer. It was probably a rather indecent sort of master, was the conclusion that I came to.

Misogi and I had already completely broken off relations, but Ozu who was always quick of hearing constantly replenished my stream of information, and thus lifted my generally-dour spirits. In order to reform the movie circle, we threw off what little scraps of honor we had, but even though we had nothing left, our protests which we had done at the risk of our own lives had brought nothing to fruition, and the inner workings of the circle remained largely unchanged, at least according to Ozu.

As drunk as I was, I became unavoidably belligerent. I had been banished from the circle, and I, whose life consisted solely of going from the boarding house to campus, felt an uncharacteristic gloom settle over myself. But Ozu was unconscionably good at stirring me out of that gloom.

"Hey, let's do it."

he said, as his body bent back and forth in a disturbingly biological fashion.

"Hmph."

"Then it's decided. Prepare everything and come at dusk tomorrow."

Looking exceptionally pleased, he left to return to whatever hole he came from.

I felt like I had been picked up from my previous depths quite handily.

I tried to fall asleep, but the Chinese exchange students on the second floor seemed to be having a raucous get-together, which made sleep quite difficult. I was a little hungry as well, so I decided to take a trip to Neko Ramen. Without making my bed, I left my room to wander the world outside.

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Purely by chance, that night I met the Master who lived on the second floor of Shimogamo Yuusuisou.

Neko Ramen is a fabled ramen stand which is rumored to make its broth out of cats. Whether that is true or not, the taste is unparalleled. Disclosing the location where it makes its frequent appearances seems like an affront, so I shall not put the details into writing here. However I will say that it can be found in the area around Shimogamo shrine.

Late that night, while trembling in an unbreakable trance slurping up the incomparable ramen there, another customer entered and seated himself beside me. At a glance, he had a very odd appearance, wearing a dark blue yukata and geta that a goblin might wear, all with an air of composure. He almost resembled an immortal mountain hermit. Giving him a view askance from my bowl, I remembered that I had seen this fellow many times in Shimogamo Yuusuisou. A retreating figure as he creaked his way up the unstable steps; a sunbathed back out on the clothes-drying deck as he had his hair cut by some female exchange student, a perplexed silhouette at the communal sinks washing some mysterious fruit. His hair was as tousled as if he had just passed through several typhoons, and the eyes on his eggplant shaped head. His age was undetermined, and though I might have been tempted to call him a middle-aged man he also gave off the air of being a university student. Of course, I didn't even imagine that he could be a god.

He and the shopkeeper appeared to be friends, and exchanged pleasantries. Once he did turn to his noodles, though, he slurped the entire bowl up with the force of Niagara Falls flowing in reverse. Before I had even finished, he had drained his entire bowl of broth; it was practically an act worthy of divine recognition.

Once he had finished, he turned to scrutinize me slowly. After a while he spoke, with a peculiarly old-fashioned pronunciation.

“You are a resident of Shimogamo Yuusuisou, are you not?”

As I nodded in reply, he smiled looking quite satisfied.

“I am also a resident there. A pleasure.”

“Likewise,” I replied, and on that note I was quite prepared to cut off the exchange there. However he looked boldly and piercingly at me and nodded a few times himself, asserting “I see, so it is you.” Though I was still feeling the effects of my previous alcoholic indiscretions, I still felt wary of

this overtly familiar fellow. He might have been my long-lost brother separated from me ten years ago but that was impossible seeing as I had no brother to separate from in the first place.

As I finished my ramen, the man approached me and as if he were used to this naturally fell into step beside me. Producing a cigar, he lit up and proceed to breathe out fumes. As I attempted to quicken my pace, he intentionally and effortlessly calmly kept up, though there was no wind to buoy him. One might have thought him to be a wizard. What a nuisance, I thought, when suddenly he spoke again.

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“They say time flies like an arrow, but it is a most vexing thing how the seasons pass in such succession. I haven’t the slightest idea how many time has flowed by since the creation of the heavens and earth, but from the looks of it it doesn’t seem to have been much. For so many humans to have been born in such a trifling amount of time is quite amazing. And they have been spending their days studiously devising their schemes; they are quite industrious, aren’t they? It’s quite splendid, and to say that I think they aren’t quite adorable would be a falsehood. But no matter how endearing they are, there are so many of them that there simply isn’t enough room for compassion towards them.

“Once fall comes, we must again go to Izumo, and don’t make light of the train fare. In the past we pored over every matter quite carefully, and even had great arguments and disputes over them, and took entire nights to decide things, but these days we don’t have that kind of leisurely time to spend. Now we simply toss everything into the ‘Resolved’ box without even bothering to look; it’s quite tiresome. No matter how we wrack our brains to put them together, clueless men let opportunities slip out from under their noses, so that the women that they had in their grasp simply become joined to other men. So you see, it’s worthless to even pray for some backbone; it’s just like trying to empty the water from Lake Biwa with a ladle.

“Except for the tenth month of Kannazuki, we labor drawing up all these schemes. There are those that do it with wine in one hand while picking at their noses with the other, using lots to decide everything, but I am far too earnest to decide the fates of these poor creatures like that. Against my own judgment I get drawn into their fates; I look at each one carefully, worrying about them as if they were myself. Struggling to draw up an appropriate encounter I tear at my own head. It’s almost like marriage counseling in a way. Is this what a god should be doing? That is why I smoke too much, my hair has become thin, I gorge myself on castellas, I have to eat herbal medicine for my digestion, waking at dawn I have become quite sleep deprived, stress has completely worn out my jaw. The doctor says that I should get rid of my stress, but is carrying the fates of so many people such a frivolous manner?

“The other gods certainly aren’t so serious, taking 20,000 league cruises on Elizabethan-esque

luxurious boats, all the while accompanied by bunny girls and carelessly gulping down champagne. They make me a laughingstock, saying things like “That guy is hopeless. No matter how much we reason with him he won’t let himself loose.” and such. I can see through the act, you fools! Even though they be gods they are completely useless. Why is it that year after year only my hand rigorously undertakes the business of connecting those red threads? Though thinking that is useless.

“Don’t you think so?”

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What is this odd person babbling on about?

“Who...are you?”

I inquired as I came to a stop on the road at the bend where the Shimogamo boulevard turned east into the road of the dead. Across from us, the darkened Tadasu forest rustled around the long, deserted road to Shimogamo shrine stretching to the north. In the distant shrine grounds the orange glow of the paper lanterns burned faintly.

“A god, my dear fellow. I am a god.”, he waved his finger at me with an amused expression. “My name is Kamotaketsunuminokami.”

“C-come again?”

“Kamotaketsunomimokamo...Kamotaketsunuminokami, is it. Don’t make me say it again, I’ll bite my tongue.” He pointed towards the murky shrine road.

“Didn’t you know? I live right near the Shimogamo shrine.”

I had made a visit to the shrine before, but this was the first I had heard of this god’s existence. Kyoto abounds with heaps of venerated ancient shrines, but Shimogamo is one of the foremost, even being designated as a World Heritage site. No matter how I thought about it, to call himself the god of such a prominent shrine with such a storied history was a stretch for this man who stood in front of me: at best, an immortal hermit, at worst a god of poverty. There was no way he could be equal to the task of a god of Shimogamo shrine.

“You don’t believe me, do you,” he sighed.

I nodded.

“Wretched, wretched indeed,” he said, yet he didn’t seem aggrieved in the slightest. The scented fumes from his cigar wafted this way and that in the night air. Across the way, the eerie murmurs of the forest were making me uneasy. Behind the smoking man, I made to walk away quickly. There could come nothing good of associating with this mysterious fellow.

“Just wait a moment now,” he called out to me. “I know everything about you. Your parents’ names, the sour smells you were always making as a baby, your nickname in elementary school, the cultural festival during middle school, your fleeting first love in high school...of course that ended in failure

too. The excitement, rather, shock you experienced from watching your first adult video, your wanderings as a ronin, your infamously slothful days after entering university..."

"You can't be serious..."

"I know everything."

He nodded quite self-assuredly.

"For instance, how your guerilla attempts to screen a movie exposing the contemptuous behavior of this man Jougasaki ended with you 'voluntarily' exiling yourself from the circle. And the reason you have spent the last two years in such a timid state..."

"Th-that's because Ozu – " I unintentionally burst out, but the man raised his hands to stop me.

"I accept that you have been somewhat dirtied under the influence of Ozu. However, that's not all, is it?"

The incomprehensible happenings of the past two years suddenly burst through my head, swaying like paper lanterns. Of all places, in the sacred forest of Shimogamo shrine, all these thorny memories suddenly seized my dainty heart to the point that I wanted to scream out, but like a gentleman I restrained myself. While I was caught in this inner agony, this self-styled Kamotaketsunuminokami looked with mirth upon my writhing form.

"...None of your business. It has nothing to do with you."

Upon hearing my words, he shook his head.

"Take a look at this."

From within the folds of the yutaka, he produced a dirty sheaf of papers and shuffled towards the neon lights of a nearby billboard, beckoning me to approach. As if I were a moth attracted towards the light I walked towards him.

Each time he flipped through the ledger he had produced, a hundred years' worth of dust flew into the air, and here and there the pages were worm-eaten through and through. The man was licking his fingers for traction as he turned the pages, so without a doubt he was eating a fair amount of dust as well.

"Here it is."

The place he was pointing to was near the end of the book. On the grey, begrimed page, a woman's name, and my name, and Ozu's name were jotted down. The lettering was so terribly ostentatious it was as if whoever wrote it imagined himself some sort of powerful god.

"When autumn comes, we gather at Izumo to match couples together. Surely you know of this as well. I carry hundreds of such issues, and among those this particular case exists. You understand what I mean, don't you?"

"I haven't the slightest."

"Really now, you're even more stupid than I thought you were. To summarize then, I am planning to match this woman you know, Akashi-san, with someone."

The god spoke.

“In other words, it is between you, and Ozu.”

The Tadasu forest rumbled and swayed with black gusts of wind.

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The next day I rose from my half-rotted bed just past noon. I immediately recalled my idiotic actions of the previous night, my face turning a humble shade of red.

Last night at the Neko ramen cart a god of the Shimogamo shrine had turned up, who also happened lived on the second floor of my boarding house, and promised to mediate the relationship between Akashi-san and me. It was quite possible that this was simply a case of me being lost in an all-too-convenient fantasy. Being driven by your feelings for others, loosening the bands on your heart too much, and becoming self-indulgent in one's wild imaginings is shameless and certainly unbecoming of a gentleman.

Nevertheless, the previous night's meeting with that god was quite commonplace. He didn't show me anything out of the ordinary, nor were there any sudden crashes of lightning. There were no fox or bird familiars there to show him deference. It was nothing more than an ordinary case of a god showing up to a ramen stand and sitting down beside you. Even if you were to say that impression was persuasive, surely you would be lying.

Making certain of the truth would surely be simple; all I would need to do is ascend to the second floor and meet with this so-called god face to face. But if the door opened and the god from last night actually appeared and asked me who I was, perhaps it would be better to lie about my identity. Or if he said “Yah, I got you good!”, I wouldn't be able to lift my eyes. No doubt while disparaging me I would certainly be sent into a miserable spiral for the rest of my life.

“When you've decided, come visit me. Second floor, innermost room. But I want a reply within three days; I'm a busy fellow after all,” he had said.

In the end, having been depressed by my simple life existing solely within the bounds of my boarding house and campus, and being thus thrown into confusion by this affair was an affront to my honor. Chanting Buddhist mantras ceaselessly, I took hold of this rabid idea like a swelling balloon rising into the May skies.

Speaking of which, that self-styled god had said that he was going to Izumo to tie the red knot between couples. If that was true could I really just stand here?

From my bookshelf I fished out a dictionary.

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Kannazuki, also known as the tenth lunar month, is well known as the time where the eight million myriad gods all gather at Izumo leaving the various regions empty. Even I know of this. Without going into too much detail about the exact count, eight million is about one-fifteenth of the population of Japan. In that number, there are certainly going to be a few odd gods in the group, just as even at a prestigious university there will still be idiots.

The thing I had been wondering about was what exactly all those gods gathered at Izumo to discuss. I imagined that it was things like strategies to counteract global warming, or the global economy. For all the gods from every corner of the country to spend an entire month in discussion, this must without doubt be an illustrious conclave, with heated debates about matters of great import. It is unthinkable that it would involve something like indecent talk while enjoying a hotpot with friends. Wouldn't that just be the same as a bunch of moronic college students?

That day in the boarding house peering at my encyclopedia, a truly dreadful reality presented itself before my eyes.

In that book was written starkly that the thing that was so hotly debated at Izumo was how to romantically link men and women together. For the sole purpose of joining those red threads of fate do all the gods assemble. It looks like that shady god at the ramen cart was speaking the truth.

I quivered with rage at the gods.

Do they really have nothing better to spend their time on?

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To get my mind off these things I threw myself into my studies. However, while glaring at my textbook, I came to the conclusion that I needed to do something to recover the barren past two years of my life. That pathetic me was in complete contradiction to my true aesthetics. Consequently, I gallantly decided to give up on my studies. This was perhaps the most gentlemanly route.

Now that I had left the scholarly route, I had no recourse but to turn to Ozu to provide me with the report that I needed to turn in. The secret society had a print shop, where you could order and acquire counterfeit assignments. Without relying on this print shop, if I hadn't had Ozu as an intermediary to get my assignments I would long since have been completely worn out. Both my mind and my body would have been worm-eaten, in tatters. My inseparable relationship with Ozu might also have in part been due to this.

Though it was still May, it was so humid that it already felt like summer. Though the window was thrown open so wide that it invited displays of obscenity, the air was still stagnant inside. In that still air, elements of mysterious composition intermingled and fermented, and as though it was amber-colored whiskey at Yamazaki Distillery would surely intoxicate anyone who entered this 4.5

tatami space. On the other hand, upon opening the door that led out into the corridor, the cute kittens that wandered the boarding house would boldly enter the room. They were so cute that I almost wanted to eat them, but I would not stoop so low as to do such a savage thing as that. Even if I only had one pair of underpants remaining, I must always act befitting a gentleman. After rubbing the sleep out of their eyes, I promptly chased them out.

Closing the door, I flopped down like a log. I tried to get lost in untidy daydreams, but that didn't go well. Then I tried to make plans to seize the rose-colored future of my dreams, but that didn't go well either. Getting irritated at this and that, the only thing that got jumbled up was my insides. Having nothing else to take out my frustrations on, the unlucky cockroaches that attempted to scramble through the crevices of the 4.5 tatami room were smashed to smithereens.

Since I had gotten up so late, the day was swiftly turning to dusk. The light from the setting sun in the west shone through the window, only furthering my irritation. The matchless hooligan who sat sulking in that patch of orange sunlight now felt like riding a white horse along the beach like a nobleman, but unfortunately I, as the Nemesis of Love, was afraid of horses.

While being tormented by these unnecessary and ambivalent thoughts, my thoughts turned to the approaching time of my rendezvous with Ozu. Further tormenting myself seemed like a waste of time. Do you really think if you keep this masochistic internal battle up, someday the Buddha would pull up the dangling spider's thread and stroke you on the head? In the end, the spider's thread would snap and you would be plunged into a 4.5 tatami hell, ending up nothing more than entertainment for the Buddha.

At 5 in the afternoon, at the conclusion of these dazzling masochistic delusions, Ozu came calling only to find me still standing there sulking.

"Ill-tempered as ever, I see," were his first words to me.

"I could say the same about you," I scathed in return.

Ozu's face was as ugly as the boarding house's communal restroom, though the faint smell of ammonia he was giving off was probably just my imagination. Under the sweltering setting sun were a man and a just past twenty who was staring fixedly. Ill humor and ill humor breed more ill humor, and that breeds even more, like a miserable, neverending cycle. I was already fed up with it.

"Are the preparations complete?" I inquired. In reply, Ozu simply swung the plastic bag he was carrying lightly. Venomously colored tubes of blue and red and green shifted. "Well, there's nothing for it. Let's go", I said.

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Ozu and I left Shimogamo Yuusuisou a.k.a. Kowloon Walled City and went out into the deserted town. We crossed the Shimogamo shrine road and came to Shimogamo boulevard. Going across the

boulevard from Kyoto family court, the Aoi Bridge across Kamogawa River came into view. The evening view of the clear river flowing from the bridge was quite wasted on the two sinister looking youths standing there. Folding our arms, we gazed downstream. The sunbathed leaves budding on both sides of the river were quite beautiful. From the bridge, distant Kamo-oohashi could be seen in the darkening panorama, with buses and cars going on their way. From this perch, we could also weakly feel the signs of college students frolicking on the riverside. Soon, that playground would become a hell of agonized screams.

“Are we really going to do this?” I wondered.

“Didn’t you say yesterday that you were prepared to unleash heaven’s judgement?” said Ozu.

“Of course, from *our* perspective it’s heaven’s judgement. To everyone else, this seems like a stupid prank.”

Ozu laughed scornfully.

“So you’re going to believe what they think and turn your back on your own convictions? I for one don’t trust my body or my soul to those people.”

“Shut up.”

The only reason he verbalized such sickening assertions was to agitate me. To this person who ate three meals of day of other people’s unhappiness, stirring up emotions and throwing other people into confusions were his *raison d’être*.

“All right, time to do this. Let’s go.”

While outwardly scorning his idiocy, to stay faithful to my own convictions I followed after him. We stepped off the bridge and descended down to the west bank of Kamogawa River, heading downstream. Where Takanogawa River from the northeast and Kamogawa River from the northwest flow together becomes the Kamo River. Students call the inverted triangle at that confluence between Takanogawa and Kamogawa the “Kamo delta”. From spring to the beginning of summer, the location is widely used to hold parties to welcome freshmen.

Before long we approached the Kamo delta. We felt all those noisy, laughing people seated on spread-out blue sheets coming into our grasp. Being even more cautious, we hid ourselves under the darkness of Demachi Bridge. If we were spotted by the cavorting members of the enemy camp, like one of Ichinoya’s battles, our audacious surprise attack would come to nothing.

I took out the fireworks from the plastic bag and laid them out on the ground. Ozu took out the Carl Zeiss monocle he had borrowed from me and surveyed the delta on the opposite shore.

I lit up a cigarette; the brisk evening breeze quickly dispersed the fumes. A father accompanying his children passed us by on the bridge; he took a suspicious glance at our actions under the bridge, but went on his way. Luckily, this wasn’t something that most townspeople would look twice at. This was something that we did to affirm our convictions, and could not be stopped.

“How does it look?” I asked.

“Most people from our grade are there. Hehehe. But I didn’t see Aijima-senpai, or Jougasaki-senpai.”

“How the hell can he be late to a party, being such a heavy drinker? Doesn’t he have any common sense?” I huffed. “Without those two, there’s no point in a surprise attack.”

“Ah, there’s Akashi-san.”

Akashi-san was a female student a year below us two. I suddenly remembered the what had been written in that shady god’s ledger last night.

“Akashi-san came too?”

“Look, she’s sitting on that embankment up there drinking a beer. As usual, she’s holding herself aloof from everyone else, I see.”

“Brilliant. But she would have been better off not coming to such a stupid party.”

“I feel sorry for whoever had the job of getting her to come.”

Briefly, images of Akashi-san’s intellectual appearance and refined movements ran through my head.

“Ah, ah – ” Ozu sounded exceptionally pleased. “Aijima-senpai’s here.”

Snatching the monocle from him, I traced Aijima-senpai’s movements past the pine trees and down the embankment; the new students waiting on the beach greeted him with cheers.

Aijima-senpai was Jougasaki-senpai’s right-hand man in the Misogi movie circle, and constantly nagged the two of us. He could be forgiven for nitpicking at the slightest flaws in our movies, but he even went to the acrobatic lengths of manipulating the screening schedule against us. We had even prostrated ourselves in humiliation just to borrow the editing equipment. He was unforgivable. Though he was so embraced by the revelers, must we be content with this transgression on the opposite bank? Today, the hammer of justice will fall, and we will avenge ourselves of the many years of injustice. While you run about attempting to escape the fireworks falling from above, repent your errors from the bottom of your bellies, and weep while playing with the crabs on the beach.

My breath became ragged and heavy like a beast’s with anticipation, and picked up a firecracker, but Ozu grasped my hand.

“Not yet, Jougasaki-senpai still hasn’t come.”

“I don’t care anymore. The death of Aijima-senpai will be sufficient.”

“I understand how you feel, but our real target is Jougasaki-senpai.”

Our argument continued for a while. The motives behind our actions were thoroughly impure, but Ozu had a point. Expending all our efforts on attacking Aijima-senpai, a mere figurehead, would be a complete waste of our efforts. For the interim, I decided to sheathe my sword.

However, to our frustration no how matter how long we waited, Jougasaki-senpai did not appear. In the whistling wind, we were wounded to the bottoms of our souls. From the beer-swilling enemy camp, joyous laughter resounded. On the other hand, us two simply stared motionlessly, while people

walking dogs and jogging turned odd glances towards us.

On Kamogawa River, this sharply contrasted situation simply poured oil onto the flames. If it had been a raven-haired maiden by my side, though huddled as I was, I would be able to wait it out. However, the one who was beside me was Ozu. Even though on the opposite shore was rolled a harmonious scene, why did I have to huddle here with a man who looked like a Taisho-era usurer? Did I go wrong somewhere? Was the mistake within me? At the very least, give me a kindred soul, or even a raven-haired maiden, was what I thought.

“Well this is quite a contrast,” Ozu observed.

“Shut up.”

“Ahh, it looks so fun on the other side.”

“Whose side are you on?”

“This is pointless, let’s just go to the other side. I want to drink with all those naïve-looking freshmen.”

“Are you planning to betray me?”

“I never promised you anything, did I!”

“You just said a while ago that you would offer your mind and body as support, did you not?”

“I already forgot about that.”

“You asshole – ”

“Don’t look at me with those eyes!”

“Oi, stop clinging to me.”

“But I’m lonely, and this wind is making me cold.”

“You lonely bastard – ”

“Kya!”

This mockery of a lovers’ quarrel under the bridge soon felt completely empty, or rather that emptiness finally drained the last of our patience. Though Jougasaki’s figure was still absent, now that it had come to this it couldn’t be helped. We could send a cake lacquered in bug corpses later, but for now we would be content with splashing cold water in the face of their honor.

Holding the fireworks, in the darkening evening we went out to the shore of the river. Ozu went down into the river and filled up a bucket with water.

○

Skyrockets are things to be launched towards the sky. They are absolutely not to be held in the hands, launched towards people, or used to bombard people on the other side of a river having a peaceful welcoming party for freshmen. That can be extremely dangerous. I would like you all to avoid following in my footsteps.

Though it is called a surprise attack, making a strike without warning is completely against my style. I first raised my voice towards the enemy camp on the other bank: "Heed us well, *blah blah blah*, we will now begin our revenge! Please be careful of your eyes." Having said this, I glanced over there. They were all standing there slackjawed with their mouths open like idiots, with dumbfounded gazes towards us. If they didn't understand, then we would make them understand, I angrily resolved.

Suddenly, the figure of Akashi-san with her beer bottle caught my eye. Mouthing the word "Idiot", with that completely on-point critique of us she hastily retreated behind a pine tree. The rest of the partygoers were completely unable to swallow the situation, their eyes darting here and there. Now that Akashi-san had taken refuge, there was no need for me to hold back. I immediately signaled Ozu to begin the bombardment.

We had originally planned to beat a gallant retreat to the sounds of screaming from the opposite bank, but the enraged upperclassmen appeared to be want to save some face to the underclassmen, and were crossing the river without regard to getting wet. We were thrown into disarray by this unexpected circumstance.

"Uh, I think we should go," I said.

"Wait, wait, we still need to put out the flame."

"Hurry, hurry."

"We still have some rockets left to shoot off too."

"Just leave them!"

We made a break to Demachi bridge, but from the top of the embankment a figure came into view, hastening towards our position with a alarmingly threatening expression.

"You troublemakers!" it yelled with a somewhat familiar voice.

"Whoa, Jougasaki's finally arrived," Ozu cried.

"What terrible timing."

Screaming, Ozu slipped past me and fled in the opposite direction. Racing towards Kamo-oohashi, he nimbly disappeared into the night, yelling "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" abandoning all pretense of self-respect.

I was nearly nabbed by Jougasaki-senpai, but with the grace of a leopard I slipped his grasp and ran for my life after Ozu.

"How long do you miscreants plan on doing this type of thing?" Jougasaki-senpai stood on the riverbank hurling his sermon-esque words behind us. If he really wanted to take this didactic attitude towards me, he should have first taken a good hard look at himself. I was so properly outraged that I nearly turned to face him, but it was clear that the justice of my cause would be defeated by the violent masses arrayed against me. I had no intention of subjecting myself to such dishonor, therefore it was not a retreat at all; it was simply a tactical retreat.

Ozu had already made it to Kamo-oohashi, and had nearly disappeared out of my sight. How

dreadfully fleet of foot. I was about to follow after him, but suddenly a rather hot mass whooshed into my back, causing me to gasp in pain.

From behind me, a roar of joy rose into the air; it appeared that the enemy forces had launched a vengeful rocket at me, and struck my retreating form square in the back. The events of the past two years began to stream through my mind like a revolving paper lantern.

○

In the two years after I entered university, I had picked a rather unproductive battle to fight. Though I was unashamed of my praiseworthy tribulations as the Nemesis of Love, I could not suppress my tears. It was a thankless, thorny road I traveled.

The rose-colored hue of my brains as I entered university soon turned a bluish-purple, due to many events which I will not relate here. Certainly nothing I could say would elicit any sort of sympathetic reaction from my readers. In the summer of my freshman year, the unsurpassedly sharp blade called reality cut my foolish dreams short on the university campus.

After that, I began to view the world with cold eyes, and resolved to swing down a hammer on the heads of those who frivolously lost themselves in careless dreams. Frankly put, I decided to ruin the pathway of love for everyone else.

If a maiden in the east falls in love, I tell her "Give up on that freak"; if a guy has star-struck delusions in the west I tell him "It's useless, you might as well give up now"; if the fireworks of love bloom in the south I quickly pour water on them, and it's said that love is impossible in the first place in the north. Because of that, I was stuck with the reputation of "Tactless". But that was a misunderstanding. In fact, I understood situations far better than others, and used that information to intentionally quash these sorts of relationships.

There was someone who enjoyed my struggles, who stirred me up and laughed as I stirred up the embers of conflict within the circles. That someone was Ozu. Using his peculiar information network, there was not a rumor he was not aware of. Whenever I started to throw oil on the fire he immediately began to spread malicious gossip to fan the flames so that the corners of every circle rang with discord and infighting, much to his delight. It would be very appropriate to call him the incarnation of wickedness, a disgrace to Homo sapiens. No one should wish to become like him.

Misogi movie circle had only been established fairly recently, but already had about thirty members. Even so, that was thirty enemies that I had to deal with. Due to Ozu and my actions, we had also caused certain people to leave the group, who had later ambushed and nearly drowned me in the canals of Lake Biwa. For a while I was unable to return to my own home and had to hide out in Kitashirakawa boarding house with an acquaintance, holding my breath. I had even been too direct and caused someone's girlfriend to cry in the middle of Konoe Avenue on some occasions.

But I would not, I could not lose.

It goes without saying that if I had lost back then, both I, and everyone else, would have been much happier. I don't give a damn whether Ozu is happy or not.

○

Firstly, I was upset with the system behind Misogi movie circle.

In Misogi, under Comrade Jougasaki's benevolent leadership, circle members peacefully created movies at his whim, a truly despicable setup. At first simply laboring against my will under his command, I soon grew to become dissatisfied with the organization. However, it galled me knowing that leaving the circle amounted to an admission of defeat. Knowing that I would have to fire the beacon of rebellion right in front of the eyes of Jougasaki-senpai and his cronies, I began to shoot a movie of peculiar characteristics. Of course, with none of the other members willing to help me I reluctantly enlisted the help of Ozu.

My first work was a tale of two men who after the Pacific War continued a storied battle of pranks, exhausting the limits of wisdom and strength; a movie overflowing with violence. With Ozu, whose expression never changed exactly like a Noh mask, I with a constantly energetic performance, and a constant stream of merciless pranks, it truly became a sickening movie without compare. The final scene, which saw Ozu who had painted himself completely pink and I with my head half-shaved, battling it out on Kamo-oohashi, surely deserved at least a glance. However to no one's surprise the movie was completely ignored; only Akashi-san laughed during the screening.

My second movie was patterned after Shakespeare's 'King Lear', with one man wavering between the affections of three women. However we could not gloss over the basic problem of having not a single woman in our cast, and we went into such detail over the man's internal strife that a storm of vilification was cast at us from the women's camp, earning our work a "Best of" place in the pantheon of perverted films. Only Akashi-san laughed at the screening.

My third work was a survival movie dealing with a man who in order to escape an infinite prison of 4.5 tatami rooms embarks on a endless journey, but comments like "Haven't I seen this setting somewhere before?" and "It's not even a survival movie in the first place," put an end to my hopes. The only one who commented favorably was Akashi-san.

The more I made movies with Ozu, the more the other circle members started to press in around us like a campfire; Jougasaki-senpai's view towards us became colder, and before long he began to completely ignore us like we were pebbles on the side of the road.

The strangest thing is, the more effort we put into dethroning him, the more Jougasaki-senpai's charisma seemed to increase. Now that I think about it, it's like we were one end of a lever used to raise his charisma, though saying that at this point is too late.

In reality, all my schemes weren't enough to salvage my way of life. How terribly obstinate I was.

○

Having successfully extracted ourself from Kamo River, we headed into town to celebrate our victory.

It felt quite hollow, the cool evening breeze rushing by as we rode our bicycles. Dismounting, we morosely walked the streets of Kawaramachi. The garish lights in town sparkled and lit up the dark blue skies. Ozu turned into Sanjou-oohashi and entered an old-fashioned brush shop while I waited outside. Before long he came out with a face full of chagrin.

“Well? Did you buy the brush?”

“No, though we need it for the tribute to Master Higuchi. He did say he wanted the fantastic tortoise-shaped scrubbing brush that is reputed to be able to scrub away any impurity.”

“Does such a thing even exist?”

“That’s the rumor, but...even the shopkeeper laughed at me. We simply can’t offer anything but that to the Master.”

“It could probably scrub away even the idiocy in your soul.”

“It’s hard since the Master is always asking for things. Japanese pepper crepes and Demachi Bud bean rice cakes we can acquire, but he even wants things like antique globes and banners from book fairs, and seahorses and giant squids. And if we bring him something that displeases him we’ll be excommunicated on the spot. There’s no rest for the weary.”

Despite saying this, Ozu seemed oddly cheerful as he strolled along with me along Kiyamachi.

Though this was indeed a tactical retreat, I kept doubting myself, as if it had actually been a defeat. Ozu constantly had this look that said “As long as it’s interesting it’s fine”, but I couldn’t be so irresponsible. The reason we had pulled off our surprise attack at the Kamo delta tonight was to teach a lesson to all those upperclassmen and our peers that we held a grudge towards, but thinking back upon it it seemed as if they had actually been enjoying themselves. Our battle is not merely a sideshow to a drinking party. Even it was endlessly so, that is worthy of more praise than Eizan.

“Keeheehee.”

Ozu suddenly chuckled.

“Even though Jougasaki-senpai looked so self-important to his fans, he’s probably really worn out by now.”

“Is that so,” I asked, but Ozu put on a very proud look.

“Even as a doctoral student, he devotes all his time to shooting movies and doesn’t study at all, so he can’t even conduct a single experiment or test. Even though his parents diminished his allowance he fought with his boss and quit his job. He just broke up with the girl he stole from Aijima-senpai

last month. He's hardly in the position to be lecturing anyone."

"How exactly do you know all this, anyways?"

Ozu put on a evasive expression.

"You shouldn't underestimate my information gathering network. I know more about you than even your lover does."

"I don't have a lover."

"Well, I'm just covering my bases. Our real problem is Aijima-senpai," he said with a troubled face.

"Is he really now?"

Ozu smirked. "You don't understand how much he's hiding, do you."

"Enlighten me."

"I can't, I can't. It's too terrible to put into words."

Takase River was shallow at this time of year, about as shallow as the movies that Jougasaki-senpai was obsessed with mass-producing. I was still a bit angry, staring out at the lights of the town sparkling on the water's surface. The narrow, private garden-like world of the Misogi movie association still revered that charisma of Jougasaki-senpai, especially the freshman girls, to the point that they refused to see the reality in front of them and just rolled around in ecstacy like cats presented with catnip. Though he pretended to have deep discussions about movies and acted in all ways as a gentleman, the reality was that the only thing that man was interested in was boobs; in fact, that was the only part of girls he could see. It would probably be better if he let himself become captivated by those irresistible tits and let the rest of his life fall into ruin.

"Hey, your eyes are glazing over."

I slackened the furrow between my brows. At that moment, a woman we were passing in the town looked at me and smiled; her eyebrows were quite uncreased and smooth. I composed myself and returned a smile worthy of a gentleman of Meiji year 100. Upon receiving this, the woman made as if to approach me and strike up a conversation, but contrary to my expectations the one she spoke to was Ozu.

"Oh, good evening."

With a sensual voice she inquired what he was doing there.

"Just a few errands."

I increased my distance from Ozu. As I had no intention of eavesdropping, plus somehow the atmosphere had become a bit more amorous. With all the traffic on the street I couldn't hear their voices, but looking back from a distance, it appeared that the woman had her fingers in Ozu's mouth and was probing around. They appeared to be quite intimate, but I wasn't jealous at all.

It wasn't at all like me to stand there in the street staring at the two of them, so I turned my gaze towards the shops secreted in the eaves of Kiyamachi street.

○

In between the bars and brothels, a dark, squeezed sort of house stood in the shadows. Under the overhang, an old woman sat at a wooden stall covered by a white cloth; she looked like a fortuneteller. On the hanging sign, a number of kanji of cryptic meaning were inscribed. From the orange light of a lantern the hag's face floated up through the gloom. The appearance of the whole thing was eerily threatening, like a ghost trying to take the souls of passersby on the street. I had once had my fate read for me, but after that my fortune took a turn for the worse, with the shadow of an old woman seeming following me everywhere I went. Nothing I did went right; people I was expecting never showed up, I could never find anything that I lost, I failed my courses, my thesis that I was about to present suddenly went up in flames, I fell into the canals of Lake Biwa, I was caught by a snake-oil salesman on Shijou street, among other unpleasant happenings. While I was thinking of all this, the old woman noticed me looking at her. She glared at me from the inky darkness with gleaming eyes, and I was caught by her ghostly emanations. Her ghostly aura had a persuasive power to it, and logically thinking I came to the conclusion that someone with such a freely flowing aura could not possibly be wrong in her divinations.

In my coming on twenty-five years of life, there were but few occasions where I took someone's advice humbly. Though I took few risks in life, wasn't there a possibility that I could choose the thorn-lined path. If only I had chosen to stop relying on my own judgment earlier, my campus life certainly would have taken a different shape. I would not have entered the warped circle of the Misogi movie association, nor met the labyrinthine character of Ozu, nor been branded with the dark name "Nemesis of Love". Rather, I would have been blessed with wonderful mentors and friends, become accomplished and recognized as a great talent in the arts, of course have a beautiful raven-haired maiden at my side, face a shining golden future ahead of me, and acquire that all-important "rose-colored campus life" in the palm of my hand. For someone like me, having that kind of life didn't seem far off at all.

That's right.

It wasn't too late. I could hear someone's objective advice and break out of this dreary life.

I moved my legs toward the old woman as if attracted by that odd aura.

"Student, what is it that you wish to know?"

The old woman mumbled her words as if her mouth were full of cotton, giving off the impression that her words had all the more worth to them.

"That's a good question. What should I say, indeed?"

Seeing me at a loss for words, she laughed.

"I can see from your face that you are very frustrated, unsatisfied. You are not able to use your full talents; the current situation you are in is not suited for you."

“Yes, that’s exactly it.”

“Show me your hands.”

The old hag took my palms and peered into them, grunting approvingly.

“You have much earnest talent in you.”

I tipped my hat to her keen insight. Just as a true master hides his skills, to be able to so unassumingly realize my hidden sense and talent within five minutes of meeting me, this was no ordinary person.

“You must not let your opportunity slip away. An opportunity is nothing more than an excellent chance, you understand? It’s difficult to take hold of such opportunities. Something they hide in places you don’t expect, and sometimes something that you thought was an opportunity was really nothing at all. But in order to seize an opportunity you must act. You look like you will have a long life, so sooner or later you will be able to take such an opportunity.”

As befitting her aura, her words were truly profound and deep.

“I don’t want to wait too long for something like that; I want to take that opportunity now. Can you be a little more specific?”

At my probing, the old woman’s wrinkles deepened. I thought her right cheek must be itchy or something, but after a while she smiled.

“It’s hard to be specific about the future. Even if I were to tell you exactly, it would soon twist and warp with the machinations of time. Fate is something that changes from moment to moment.”

“But, you still haven’t really told me anything other than obscure sayings.”

As I tilted my head in confusion, she breathed out through her nose.

“Very well. I will refrain from speaking of things far ahead, but I can speak of things that will soon come.

I widened my ears like Dumbo.

“Colosseum,” she suddenly whispered.

“Colosseum? What’s that?”

“It is the sign of an opportunity. When an opportunity arrives, it will be accompanied by Colosseum,” she intoned.

“So are you telling me I need to go to Rome?”

But the old woman merely grinned.

“When your opportunity comes, you mustn’t let it slip away, you can’t just fumble around randomly as usual. Seize it, daringly, unlike your actions up until now. If you do, you will no longer be unsatisfied, and be able to embark on a new path. Though that may lead you to a different kind of dissatisfaction. I expect you understand though.”

I didn’t understand in the slightest, but I nodded anyways.

“Even if you don’t catch this one, you don’t need to worry. You are a splendid young man, so

someday without a doubt you will make it. I can see it. There's no need to rush."

With that, the old woman brought her divinations to an end.

"Thank you very much."

I nodded and paid the fee. When I turned around, it was to see Ozu standing behind me.

"A little lost lamb, are we?" he said.

○

Going out into town that night was Ozu's idea. I disliked the hubbub around town, so I rarely stepped in there. But Ozu sauntered around nightly looking for obscene happenings and accumulating evil ideas. Because he was constantly moaning about wanting to eat salted beef tongue with leeks, we frequented a barbecue place on Kiyamachi street to supplement our poor nutrition. To complement the meat I ordered shiitake mushrooms. As I gulped them down Ozu eyed me with an expression as if he were witnessing someone shoveling horse dung into his mouth.

"Those are some pretty nasty things you're eating there. Those are mushrooms, you know. Brown, soggy mushrooms. I can't believe you're eating those. What are those nasty little white gills on the bottom for? Why are they even there?"

I was rather annoyed with his meat-only diet, and I distinctly remembered having to pry open his mouth and force him to eat the green onions. But he was absolutely committed to his unbalanced diet, and I had never seen him eat a full meal before.

"Who was the girl from before?"

He looked blank.

"You know, the one you were talking with in front of the fortune teller."

"That was Hanuki-san," he managed, before returning to his beef tongue. "She's an acquaintance of Master Higuchi, and I know her pretty well too. She was coming back from her English conversation school, and invited me somewhere to drink."

"You shameless bastard. You're a little more popular than I'd expect."

"Of course, the ladies never give me room to breathe. But I had to courteously decline."

"Why?"

"When she gets drunk, she has an unfortunate habit of licking people's faces."

"Even your dirty mug?"

"Yes, even this adorable thing. It's how she shows her love."

"If someone were to lick your face they'd probably contract an incurable disease. What an extraordinarily reckless woman."

We turned our meat over the fire while engaging in this idiotic conversation.

"What did that fortune teller tell you?" Ozu leered. Even though it had been a rather portentous

dialogue about the way my life would go, Ozu vulgarly dismissed it, saying “It was probably just about your love life; completely useless.” He continued to disparage me, repeating things like “Ew, that’s disgusting” and “What a pervert” like a broken alarm clock, constantly breaking my deep train of thought. I angrily shoved a half-cooked mushroom into my mouth, and we both lapsed into silence.

The old woman had said something about “Colosseum”, but I had never had anything to do with Rome, or with the Colosseum. No matter how hard I searched through my memory, I couldn’t come up with a single connection. Still, whatever it was that Colosseum referred to would surely appear in the future. But what exactly would it be? If I tried to work out another plan now, I would surely let that opportunity slip through my grasp once again. I was uneasy.

The restaurant was bustling with young faces that seemed like they had been high school students only a few days ago. It seemed that welcoming banquets for new students were being held all over the place. It pained me to remember, but I was also once a freshman, full to the brim with self-consciously embarrassed, yet rosy hopes for the future.

“You’re thinking about how you should have had a better university life, aren’t you?” Ozu suddenly cut to the heart of the matter. I snorted but maintained my silence.

“It’s useless,” he sighed, as he bit into his beef tongue.

“What is?”

“No matter how you played it, you have eventually gotten to the same place anyhow.”

“Hell with that. I certainly would not have.”

“It’s useless. You always have that same face.”

“What face?”

“Like, you were born under an ill-omened star, or something like that.”

“You have some nerve saying that, you with your impish face.”

Ozu leered, his face twisting even more like a youkai’s.

“I accept head-on the reality of my star-crossed birth. I enjoy my worthless life as a student greatly. I have no reason to be criticized like this,” I sighed. “And besides it’s because you’re like that that I became like this.”

“But it’s fun like this, isn’t it? Are you still unsatisfied with something?”

“With everything. This disagreeable state I find myself in was completely your fault.”

“That’s quite a shameless thing to state.”

“If I hadn’t met you, my life would have been so meaningful. I would have been studious, gone out with raven-haired maidens, and enjoyed a wonderful life without a single cloud hanging over me. That much is for certain.”

“Those aren’t magic shrooms, are they?”

“It’s only today that I have truly realized the amount to which my student life has gone to waste.”

“Not to comfort you or anything, but I think that no matter how you led your life you would have

been contaminated by me, intuitively. At any rate I am putting forth all my effort into making you worthless. There's nothing you can do to fight against fate." He pointed his finger at me dramatically. "You and I are bound by a black thread of fate."

I shuddered as an image of him and I sinking to the pitch-black bottom of the sea, tied by a dark thread, floated through my mind.

Ozu smiled contentedly at my discomfort and continued to devour his beef tongue. This damned rotten youkai.

○

With the tactical retreat from Kamo delta, the fortuneteller's puzzling words, and Ozu weighing heavily on my mind, I soon drank my cup dry.

"Akashi-san is still a member of Misogi, isn't she," I groaned, but Ozu shook his head.

"Actually, I heard that she quit just last week. Something about her refusing even Jougasaki-senpai."

"Really. That's right after we left."

"She's probably only there tonight as an 'alumnus' of the circle. What a faithful woman."

"You sure do know a lot about all this."

"Well, I did have a drink with her the other day, as part of the same engineering club."

"You bastard, pulling a fast one like that – "

The image of Akashi-san, hiding behind the pine tree on the embankment while sipping down her beer came to my mind.

"How about Akashi-san?" he suddenly asked.

"What do you mean, how about?"

"Since the only person who has been able to understand you so far, with your unheard of idiocy and your unparalleled grotesqueness, has been me – "

"Quiet, you."

"She could probably understand you. This is an opportunity. If you don't take this one now, you're probably too far gone to help." He smiled as he looked at me. I waved my hand to grab his attention.

"Now listen here. I don't want a girl who can understand someone such as myself. I want someone who puts your head in the clouds, someone whose daintiness and refinement are positively dream-like, a raven-haired maiden whose head is filled only with beauty."

"You're going on about that selfish nonsense?"

"Shut up and leave me alone."

"You're not still thinking about that time freshman year when Kohinata-san dumped you, are you?"

"Speak not that name in my presence."

"Ah, so you are still thinking about that. What a obstinate person."

“If you continue to speak I will bake your face on this grill right now.” I announced. “I don’t feel like having this sort of conversation about love with you.”

Ozu suddenly sat up in his chair and laughed scornfully.

“Then, I guess this opportunity is mine. I’ll become happy instead of you.”

“It’s impossible for someone as evil as you. Akashi-san has a good eye for people. Plus, you already have a girlfriend, I can tell from the way you’ve been sneaking around.”

“Fu-fu.”

“What’s with that smirk on your face?”

“Not telling.”

○

While we were having this irritating conversation, I suddenly remembered my real-and-yet-unreal chance meeting with Kamotaketsunominokami at Neko Ramen. During that vaguely mysterious yet endlessly suspicious meeting, that arrogant self-styled god had hinted that he held the scales balancing Ozu and me. That’s right; it had been so shady that I had completely dismissed it from my mind. With my alcohol-impaired mind, hadn’t he completely predicted this whole turn of affairs? No, that couldn’t be possible. It was shameful for me of all people to be so lonely that I got caught up in such a convenient fantasy; it was preposterous to think that I would become romantically involved with a raven-haired maiden like Akashi-san. But it was still mystifying. That god had laid out the travails of my life, and even hinted at my thorny, shameful past, and to add to all that he guessed precisely exactly the situation I was currently going through. There was no explanation for this. Perhaps that god was the real deal? Perhaps he really did go to Izumo by train each autumn and weave the red threads of fate.

While I was thinking all this, my vision had gently started weaving side-to-side, and I realized that I had become quite intoxicated, when I noticed that Ozu was missing. He had stood up saying something about going to the bathroom, but hadn’t come back.

At first, I didn’t think much of it, calmly sinking into my thoughts as they swelled up like a balloon. However, after fifteen minutes had passed and Ozu still hadn’t returned, I imagined him sneaking off furtively behind my back and became quite infuriated. This was the eighteenth time he had departed like a spring breeze and left me with the bill.

“Damn it, not again?”

While I sulked and muttered under my breath, I felt Ozu come back and sit down.

“It’s about time – ” I sighed and looked at the person seated across from me, but it wasn’t Ozu.

“Come on, senpai, eat up. If you want to eat more you’ll have to hurry,” Akashi-san said unconcernedly, as she began to grill the remaining meat.

○

Akashi-san was a student a year younger than me in the engineering department. As she did not mince words, she was respected but largely avoided by her peers. As she was someone who wasn't even afraid to lash back at Jougasaki-senpai when it was called for, I viewed her very favorably. With the eloquent blade of her tongue, she could not be outmaneuvered by Jougasaki-senpai. He was always afraid of having his charismatic image injured, and though her indifferent but intelligent face, not to mention her breasts, were certainly to be desired, she would not take any words from him.

It was the summer of her freshman year. As usual, Jougasaki-senpai was leading an expedition on Mount Yoshida, shooting his unintelligible movies. The freshmen were shooting the breeze while we were all taking a lunch break. One of the other freshmen frivolously asked her, "Akashi-san, what do you do on the weekends?"

She answered without even looking up, "Why must you ask me that kind of question?"

After that, no one asked her about her weekend plans.

I heard about that exchange some time later from Ozu, and remember proudly thinking, "Akashi-san, you just keep doing your own thing."

I had no clue why someone so levelheaded would be in such an eccentric club as Misogi. However, she was prepared for any situation, and could instantly understand any piece of machinery you put in front of her; so though everyone kept their distance from her, she was highly respected. Despite that she, Ozu, and I were generally left alone, there was a world of difference between her, and our universally-despised duo.

But she, whose countenance seemed like a medieval European fortress, had a weakness.

Last autumn, due to a shortage of available hands, I was grudgingly forced to help out a movie production. As usual, the locale was Mt. Yoshida.

While installing audio equipment up on a tree, Akashi-san, with a cool expression as though she were an inspector during the war, suddenly shrieked as though she were a character from a manga and fell off the tree. I swiftly ran up and caught her, or rather, was squashed by her falling form while trying to escape. She clung to me, her hair disheveled, while half-crazedly waving her right hand about.

It seemed that, while climbing the tree, she had grabbed for a piece of bark which unexpectedly was quite squishy. In her right hand she clutched a gigantic moth. She apparently was deathly afraid of moths.

"It squished, it squished..." she whispered over and over, trembling, her face pale as if she had just met a ghost. But her incredibly strong grasp showed the fragility of the person she was clinging to. The fascination I felt while she did so is indescribable. At that moment, I, the Nemesis of Love, very

nearly fell in love. The worldly passions which I had long since left behind suddenly burst into flame again, but I firmly held back my feelings and comforted Akashi-san, who was still muttering incoherently, like a gentleman.

I had no illusions that she was sympathetic towards the pointless battle that Ozu and I were waging. At the very least, she was just a passive bystander as far as the circle's inner politics went, but she never went to the point of making that an issue.

Akashi-san's opinion on the movies that Ozu and I made are as follows:

"You've made another idiotic movie again, haven't you?"

She repeated that a total of three times.

Well, counting our final masterpiece, four times. Our last movie, made just this spring, was the only one that she actually disliked. In addition, she noted, "This one was questionable" to her list of criticisms.

○

"Akashi-san, why are you here? Weren't you just at the Kamo delta? Or did you come all this way just to see me?" I said in a very airy voice, but she simply scowled and pointed at me.

"You really are clueless, senpai. Have you already forgotten that the circle likes to hold events at this restaurant?"

"I know, I come to this place all the time too."

"After the party, Jougasaki-san invited everyone for a barbecue and took all the freshmen here. They're sitting over there now." She pointed towards the entrance. I strained to look above the partitioning screen, but thought better of it, deciding not to risk getting caught.

"Why would they think to gorge themselves on meat after a party, those carnivorous brutes. Don't they have any pride as an agricultural people?" I groused, but she ignored me.

"It would be very bad if you were to get caught."

"If it's a fight they want I'll give it to them. If they ask for one. Though I am quite sure I would lose."

"If you really want to fight it's fine. But you'll be completely disgraced. You'll look like a fool in front of all those cherry freshmen. Come on, finish eating the rest." She pushed the roasted meat at my face, all the while scarfing down the scraps herself. As I looked at her with a slightly revolted look, she blushed and said, "Pardon me, it's been a while since I had meat." For all her embarrassment though, she was eating quite a lot. I was already full, so I told her to eat the rest.

"I'm going to go home now. What about Ozu? Have you seen him?"

"Ozu-senpai already escaped out the back door. He certainly deserves his nickname, 'Elusive Ozu'."

He was as swift as the wind, just like the Kai-no-takeda army.

“I’ve already calculated the bill. If you go out the front, you’ll be seen by Jougasaki-san and the others, so please go out through the back. I’ve already talked to the shopkeepers and secured your passage. I know them quite well, you see.”

What frighteningly detailed planning. I was so amazed that I meekly went along with her plan and handed her the money for the bill.

“I’ll pay you back eventually.”

“Never mind that, just make sure that you keep your promise.”

She furrowed her brow and frowned at me.

“What promise?” I tilted my head, but she just waved her hand at me.

“Never mind, for now just run. I need to get back to them soon.”

I gulped down the rest of my oolong tea and casually saluted her. Picking my unsteady footsteps carefully, I stood up behind the partition so as not to be seen, and walked out into the dark corridor.

An older woman wearing a white apron stood by the staff exit and opened the door for me. She responded to my thanks by sympathetically murmuring, “You’ve got it pretty hard though you’re still young, haven’t you?” Akashi-san must have explained the gist of it to her.

Once I reached the outside, I found myself in a dark and cramped alleyway. Extracting myself into Kiyamachi, I looked for Ozu’s shape, but he was nowhere to be found.

○

Let me elaborate about the last movie that I made.

When spring rolled around again, my level of irritation rose again. Jougasaki-senpai was once again waving his baton around, without giving so much as an atom of any sign letting up. As if he were an infant chewing on a pacifier, he threw his authority around the club, his eyes taken by the lure of new students to boss around. In their turn, the freshmen were captivated by Jougasaki-senpai’s laughably small charisma, and appeared to be intending to waste their perfectly good time as students. They were in desperate demand of someone to splash cold water on their faces, and I decided that I would take on that most unpleasant and thankless duty.

To prepare for the movie screening that would take place from April to May to gain new members, I prepared two movies. One was an incredibly dreary affair, which involved Ozu sitting in front of the camera reciting the scene with Tasuno Yoichi from *The Tale of Genji*. The upperclassmen, of course led by Jougasaki-senpai, unanimously opposed this one.

“You can shoot whatever idiotic film you want,” Jougasaki-senpai casually declared in the midst of my despair. “Just don’t get in the way of the recruiting efforts.”

But I, with pomp rivaling that of Winston Churchill, fought back bravely with my dissenting opinion, and forced them to allow my movie screening. I used every last ounce of effort to make them

understand.

In actuality, I had secretly prepared a second movie.

It was a puppet show based on Momotaro, except the old couple that found the boy for some reason gave him the name Masaki instead. From there, Masaki's intolerable journeys begin. Masaki starts the Onigashima movie circle, and uses poisoned dumplings to trick the underclassmen into accepting his authority. With a truly moronic accent he outlines his world view and theories on love, while accompanied by his trusted dog/monkey/pheasant he spies on naked girls, and in general while maintaining an outwardly respectable appearance hides an outrageously perverted persona, feasts on debauchery, and in the end comes to reign over the Masaki Kingdom. But before long, two allies of justice come along, dye Masaki's body completely pink, roll him into a bamboo mat and throw him into the Kamo river, restoring peace to the galaxy.

On the outside, it looks like a black comedy based on Momotaro, so I tried my hardest to provide amusement to the viewers. However, Masaki resembles Jougasaki's name, and I gave all the other characters their real-life names. This movie, borrowing from Momotaro, was nothing less than an exposé documentary on Jougasaki-senpai.

To get the inside scoop on Jougasaki-senpai, I relied completely on Ozu's information network. As a Homo sapiens, I cannot in good faith reveal how deeply Ozu was intimately familiar with Jougasaki's actions. "I have a spy in his secret service," was all he would say, but it was still a mystery. In any case I was touched by his wickedness, and resolved to roll up my sleeves to get it done.

The day of the screening, as planned I had Ozu switch the Tale of Genji film with 'Momotaro: Jougasaki-senpai Version' and start the movie. Then, slipping into the darkness, I exited the building.

○

After escaping the yakiniku place in Kiyamachi, I rode my bike north on the road following the river.

On the other side of the swelled Kamo river, the lights of the town sparkled as if it were a scene from a dream. The area between Sanjou-oohashi and Oike bridge was well known for being a gathering place for couples. I keep that kind of thing out of my mind, in fact I don't even have time to think about it. I kept riding my bike, and soon both the lights of the commercial district and the Kamo River Couples Exclusion Zone faded into the night.

Even at this hour, the Kamo delta still buzzed with activity, swarming with empty-head students up to no good. On the north bank of the river I could see the dense groves of Aoi Park. With the cool night air whispering against my faces I pedaled on towards Shimogamo shrine leaving the Kamo delta behind.

The shrine road was dark and vacant.

I parked my bike at the entrance to the road and walked into the gloom of the Tadasu forest. A little ways in was a small bridge, which I remembered leaning against and popping open a ramune. That was one year ago, at the Shimogamo shrine used book fair.

Not far from the shrine road, stretching south and north are the horse riding grounds; back then they were crammed with tents, filled with people looking for books. Since it was just a short stroll from Shimogamo Yuusuisou, I visited almost every day. As if the bustle of that day had been a dream, the deserted grounds at night were now eerily empty.

The book fair had been where I met Akashi-san.

I walked the sprawling grounds, drinking my ramune under the sunlight-bathed trees, savoring the refreshing summer atmosphere, and browsing the tents stretched out around me. No matter where I looked, boxes filled with musty old tomes were lined up, so many it made my head spin. Luckily, numerous felt-lined chairs were arrayed in the field, just for people who had been intoxicated by all the books to get a rest. I sat down in one of them and let my mind wander. It was August, and sweltering, so I had to wipe away the sweat from my brow with a handkerchief.

In front of me was a shop labeled Gabi Bookstore, and sitting on a pipe chair in front of it was Akashi-san. Isn't that one of the underclassmen from the circle?, I wondered. It appeared that she was minding the shop. At the time, she had just entered the circle, but she didn't try to hide her talent, and both her ability and unapproachable nature were already known to everyone. I stood up and began browsing through the bookshelves. When I glanced over and made eye contact with her, she just shifted her gaze a downward a little. I decided to buy Jules Vernes' "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea". As I made to walk away, she ran after me.

"Use this, please," she said, and offered me a fan inscribed with the words "Evening Breeze Secondhand Book Fair". As I fanned my sweat-beaded face, I dangled the book from my hand and walked off into the Tadasu forest.

○

The next day I woke up in the evening and went to a café near Demachi to have dinner. I remembered seeing the setting sun the previous day illuminating the Oomoji pyres on the mountain. I guess this meant that Okuribi would be coming up soon. I fell into a daydream imagining what it would be like watching the Oomoji fires with Akashi-san, but no matter how good those delusions were they wouldn't fill my belly, so I left it off there.

Giving up I returned to my 4.5 tatami room and started reading "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea". It was easy to imagine myself taking flight in that fantastical world, but those were also just delusions. The fortuneteller's prediction, and the sudden appearance of Taketsunuminokami must somehow be related, or so I imagined. I turned the word "Colosseum" over in my mouth. I still didn't

understand what she meant by “grabbing that opportunity”.

As night fell, Ozu came calling.

“Good evening.”

“You’re quick to run away as usual.”

“And you’re as sullen as usual,” he replied. “You don’t have a girlfriend, you were ‘voluntarily’ exiled from the circle, you don’t study at all, what on earth do you intend to do with your life?”

“You’d better watch your mouth or you’re dead!”

“Kill me? Would you really do that? That’s cruel of you.”

He grinned. “I brought you something to cheer you up.”

“What’s this?”

“A castella. I got a lot from Master Higuchi, so this is your share.”

“Well this is unheard of, for you to be giving someone something.”

“It’s because cutting up and eating a big castella like this all by your lonesome is the very depths of isolation. I want you to fully feel how lonely you are.”

“So that’s what it is. I’ve already tasted it plenty, and gotten sick of it.”

For once, Ozu decided to talk about the Master.

“The other day, the master decided he wanted a seahorse, so I got a tank from the garbage dump and brought it back. But when we tried to fill it with water, it all came leaking out and made a complete mess. The Master’s room got completely flooded.”

“Wait, where is your master’s room?”

“It’s the one right above this one.”

My head suddenly came to a boil. Some time ago while I was away my room sprang a leak in the ceiling. When I came back, the dripping water had completely ruined all my books. Not only that, but my computer was also destroyed, and all my data was completely lost. This incident further hastened my retreat from the scholarly pursuits. I was prepared to lodge a furious protest, but decided that getting involved with the unidentified resident of the room above me was too troublesome, and ended up leaving everything unsettled.

“So that was your work?”

“I’m sure the destruction of your porn library was no big deal,” he brazenly declared.

“Go away now. I’m busy.”

“I’ll leave, I’ve got a yaminabe hot pot at the master’s place tonight anyways.”

I kicked the smirking bastard out into the hallway and restored peace to my room.

○

The night began to wear on. While listening to the burbling sound of the coffeemaker, I eyed the

castella Ozu had brought. Though he had said he wanted me to suffer from loneliness by eating it, I had no intention of losing to him. After the coffee boiled, I emptied out my mind and calmly ate the castella. The faint scent brought back vague memories of childhood. While stuffing my face, I realized that it really was quite tiresome to be eating this alone. It would be much preferable to be sipping black tea elegantly, with someone like Akashi-san, but definitely not Ozu, or maybe Akashi-san. It was surprising that I was even having these thoughts. The unexpected events of the past few days had made me a real coward: the retreat from Kamo delta, the irksome meddling by that god, the fortuneteller's mysterious prophecy, meeting Akashi-san at the yakuniku place, and so on. My powers of reason were dissolving like a sugar cube.

Though I wasn't one to burn with the passions of love, in that instant of weakness I suddenly longed for the company of anyone at all, which was completely against my creed. Wasn't it by scorning those shameless students who longed for each other's company that I gained my infamous reputation as the Nemesis of Love? Wasn't it by suffering through this barren life and treading perilously close to utter defeat that I had gained my victory?

"Then, I guess this opportunity is mine. I'll become happy instead of you."

That was what Ozu had said in the restaurant. I didn't believe at all in the suspicious god's words, and I was sure that someone as sharp as Akashi-san would never be fooled by a perverted youkai with an unbalanced diet like Ozu. On the other hand, she did seem open-minded enough to be amused by such a relationship. Come to think of it, both she and Ozu were in the engineering department. They had also like-mindedly quit the circle. If I stood here with my arms folded and did nothing, the unthinkable might happen and Ozu and Akashi-san might really become romantically involved. This wasn't just my personal longing for others: Akashi-san's future was at stake.

Above me, a moth had somehow entered my room and was fluttering around the new fluorescent light. Through the walls I could hear a man and a woman talking. Straining my ears, I could tell that the voices were coming from the adjoining room; I could almost hear their endearments and a stifled giggle. I walked out into the hallway to investigate, and though there the window above the door was darkened, with my ear pressed to the wall I could hear them whispering sweet nothings to each other.

The person who lived in the room next to mine was a Chinese exchange student. Having left the mainland and crossing the sea to come to an unfamiliar land, the two of them must have had trouble adjusting. For the two of them to find comfort in each other was a natural human instinct, and something that I was not in a position to criticize. At least that much, I understood. I understood, but I couldn't just leave it alone. I found no amusement in eavesdropping on the lovers' talk coming from the darkened room, though I didn't even understand what they were saying. I bitterly cursed myself for not having studied Chinese as a second language, and in frustration returned to devouring the castella.

Will I lose?

Will I really lose to my loneliness?

To distract myself from the isolation, I gnawed at every corner of the angular confection before me, but after some time I gained control of myself. Fighting back the tears of my emptiness, I put down the half-eaten castella and stared at it. Viciously chewed up, it no longer looked like a castella, and more like an ancient Roman...

Colosseum, I murmured.

What an absurdly roundabout prophecy.

○

I recall meeting Akashi-san just before I left the circle.

The spring film screenings were being held in one of the lecture halls. After starting up my Momotaro film, I quickly left the hall under cover of darkness and walked to the circle's meeting space. No matter how stupid Jougasaki-senpai was, he would realize the true purpose of the film after a few minutes. It was clear that under his direction I would tried, sentenced, and executed in a kangaroo court, so I left quickly to collect my belongings from the clubroom.

The golden gleam of the setting sun lit up the shrubbery on the campus, making the leaves on each tree gleam mysteriously like hard candy. I had no clue why I had stayed in this ridiculous circle for two years, but in the end, leaving it was still an emotional affair.

In the clubroom, Ozu had pre-empted me and was already stuffing his things into a rucksack, like a youkai scrounging for human bones. I had to admire him for his uncanny ability of always being the first one out of the gate.

“You got here quickly.”

“That’s because I’d rather avoid trouble later, so I thought I’d disappear as quickly as possible. Though it seems we’ve already cut ourselves a fair portion of it.”

“That’s true.”

I tossed most of my things into a bag I had prepared for the occasion, but decided to leave my manga and novels. They would be my last parting gift.

“You don’t have to leave the circle with me, you know.”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve saying that, considering you made me help you. It would be pointless staying here by myself, wouldn’t it?” he huffed. “And unlike you, I have diversified my campus life, so I still have lots of circles I can go to.”

“I’ve always wondered; what kinds of other things do you do?”

“I’m a member of a certain secret society, I’m the disciple for that Master, I’m also part of a religious circle...and my love life is extremely busy.”

“Wait. You can’t possibly have a girlfriend, can you?”

“Fu-fu.”

“What’s with that indecent smile?”

“Not telling.”

While we were still fishing around in the room, Ozu suddenly whispered, “Someone’s coming!”, and before I could tell him to wait, had sprinted out of the room. What incredible speed. Just as I grabbed my bag to follow him out, Akashi-san entered the room.

“Oh, Akashi-san.”

She took a large swig from the cola bottle she was holding and frowned at me.

“You’ve made another idiotic movie again, haven’t you?” she noted. “I watched part of it.”

“Did they stop the screening?”

“Well, the viewers found it interesting, so there’s no way they could. But Aijima-senpai and a few others are you looking for you now, senpai. They’ll probably be here soon. If you don’t want to be smashed to pieces, I suggest you run.”

“I see. As long as the viewers laughed, it was worth.”

She shook her head.

“I like the ones you made earlier. This one was of questionable nature.”

“Well, this one was just a hit-and-run.”

Her eyes went to the bag I was holding.

“Senpai, are you quitting the club?”

“Of course.”

“I guess it can’t be helped considering what you did this time. You’ve blown away the last shreds of what prestige you had here.”

I gave a hollow smile. “It’s quite a relief.”

“Senpai, you’re a moron.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“That movie was supposed to be Ozu’s Genji movie, wasn’t it? I wanted to see that.”

“If you want to, I can show it to you.”

“Really? Then it’s a promise.”

“Yeah, next time. But it’s really not very good at all.”

“It’s a promise,” she insisted.

“I’m leaving my manga here, so make sure to read them for me.”

And just like that, I left the past two years of agonizing struggle behind, the space that had polished me into worthlessness. As long as my last masterpiece had dealt a blow to Jougasaki-senpai’s charisma I was content. Though somewhere in my head, I felt that was probably impossible.

At the door, I turned to look back. Akashi-san was sitting there reading my manga.

“Well, Akashi-san, I bid you farewell. Do not be taken in by Jougasaki’s lies.”

She turned and glared at me.

“Do I look that stupid to you?”

At that moment, I saw Aijima-senpai and a few other brawny fellows charging towards the box.

Without replying to her, I turned and fled for my life

○

.With my loneliness and my reason battling it out like two evenly matched champions in my head ,I spent a restless night, and eventually headed towards campus. That day I was worried by so many things that I don’t remember anything about it.

I spent so much time analyzing everything that was happening that I wore myself out, slowly coming up with the perfect course of action. Though it was too late for a perfect plan, I still analyzed everything without hesitating; Akashi’s life, Ozu’s life, and my life, going through many patterns, our many different fates, comparing and contrasting everything, and in this manner I eventually grew tired. Who should be happy, who shouldn’t be happy, and surprisingly I came up with an answer. I, who shuffled along on this mortal coil interfering with others’ love and being kicked by horses, also considered whether I could still change my path at this point in life. It was a very difficult question.

○

The sky was shrouded an indigo blue as twilight approached, and I made my way home from campus. I shut myself in my room and pondered my final conclusion.

Having made up my mind, I left my room and went to go see the god.

Though I had lived in the Yuusuisou for two years, this was the first time I had gone to the second floor. The corridor was littered with random belongings, and was even more filthy than the first floor. It was as cluttered as downtown, and the further you went in the dimmer it became, as if you were picking your way through a back alley in Kiyamachi. I arrived at the innermost section, room 210. In front of the door were scattered an ottoman armchair, a dust-covered fishtank, a discolored cartoon frog, and a banner from the book fair among various other objects. There were so many that there was hardly a place to stand. For a god to be living here, there was certainly a lack of formality. I wanted to flee from the disorder and return to the ordered first floor, living my days out in peace, but at the same time hated myself for having such foolish hopes. There was no name on the doorplate.

At any rate, even if this was a prank I was fine with it. Being prepared to laugh it off, I gathered up my manly resolve and knocked on the door.

“Eeeeeentrude”

With that strange proclamation the god popped his head out.

“Ah, it’s you. Well, what have you decided?” he said, with an air that suggested someone with too much time on his hands.

“Ozu is unacceptable. Pick me for Akashi-san instead.”

He smiled.

“Very well. Wait in that chair for a bit.”

He withdrew back into the room; I could hear him rustling around inside. I had no intention of sitting in that dust-covered chair, so I just stood in the hallway. After a while he came out of the room, saying “Well, let’s go. Follow me.”

○

Where were we going? Surely it wasn’t to offer a sacrifice at Shimogamo shrine, or was such a thing actually necessary? I shivered with misgivings behind him, but he didn’t direct his footsteps towards the shrine. Instead, he proceeded rapidly past the lighted Shimogamo teahouse and headed south. My head tilted in bewilderment, we arrived in front of Demachiyanagi station. From there he headed down the river to Imadegawa street and stopped on the east end of Kamo-oohashi. He looked at his wristwatch.

“What are we doing?” I hesitantly asked, but he simply put a finger to his lips.

Dusk had already fallen, and the Kamo delta had been again occupied by boisterous students. Due to the recent rains that had only stopped yesterday, the swollen river roared by, with the reflections from the streetlamps that were flickering on making the surface look like gilded silver. Now that the day was fading Kamo-oohashi was packed with the dazzling lights of cars going by. The orange lights of the lamps that dotted the bridge burned mysteriously in the night. For some reason, tonight the bridge looked awfully wide.

While I stood there trembling, the god gave me a wallop on the back.

“Now, it’s time for you to cross the bridge.”

“Why?”

“Listen well. Akashi-san is going to come from the other side. Talk to her and ask her out to a café or something. I chose this romantic location expressly for that purpose.”

“That’s impossible, I can’t!”

“Stop whining. Now go.”

“This is weird though. Didn’t you say that you make these matches when you go to Izumo in the fall? Isn’t it pointless to do anything before you do that?”

“What an insufferably logical person you are. Even though we do make those matches, it’s still

important to put all the pieces in place. Now go.”

With a gentle push from him, I started stumbling over the bridge. It was really quite irritating, to be treated like a fool. From behind, he called “Oh, and if you meet a strange person there before Akashi-san, don’t mind him too much.”

As I was walking, I passed a number of strangers, but before long I came across a familiar, sinister face floating in the light of one of the lamps by the guardrail, a demonic visage that I couldn’t forget even no matter how hard I tried. Why was he here? As I glared at him, Ozu simply returned a smile at me, then hopped down and punched me in the stomach. “Oof” I gasped, but he simply walked off towards the east.

I stood right at the center of the bridge, doubled over and clutching my stomach, with the Kamo river flowing beneath me. Over in the south, at the misty ends of the river, the far-off lights of Shijou avenue blinked and sparkled like gems.

At that moment, Akashi-san came walking by.

I attempted to strike up a casual conversation, but suddenly froze up.

As her senpai, I normally had no issues with exchanging words with her. But now, as the feared Nemesis of Love trying to build a relationship instead of breaking it down, my body suddenly became as stiff as concrete and my mouth was as dry as the surface of Mars. With my unfocused eyes unable to take in anything and gasping as if I had forgotten how to breathe, I had never acted so suspiciously before, and I would probably not regret it if I had to throw myself into the coursing water of the Kamo river and be washed out of the Kyoto to escape Akashi-san’s chary gaze.

“Good evening,” she said, with a puzzled look. “Were you able to make it out safely?”

“...yes, thanks to you...”

“Are you taking a walk right now?”

“...yes, yes...”

And on that note, my creased gray matter suddenly stopped working. The silence was golden.

“Well then.”

She continued to walk by me.

It was inevitable. As someone who had always interfered with others’ romance, I hadn’t a clue as to how to actually walk that path myself. For someone as proud as I to suddenly be thrown into that thicket, there was no way I could reasonably be expected to brazenly put on those affectations. At the very least, I needed some preparation. This would be all for today. I told myself I had tried my hardest, and done my best.

Suddenly as we walked our separate ways, we each were startled by the sudden appearance of a goblin striking a dramatic pose on the handrail. It was Ozu. It was impossible to guess what he was thinking, bathed in that bright orange light, but it was an uncanny sight. We gathered there looking up at him.

“What the hell are you doing up there?”

He cackled and grimaced towards us.

“You didn’t think today would be like this, did you? Though I can’t say I’m surprised at you, to completely defy a god and run the course of love like this.”

I suddenly remembered and looked towards the east end of the bridge. As usual Kamotaketsunuminokami was standing there with his arms folded, peering at our exchange with great interest.

“You mean to say this was all your trickery, Ozu?” My stomach suddenly wrenched. “I’ve finally got you now.”

“What is this, what’s going on?” Akashi-san whispered to me.

“Didn’t you make an oath to the god of Shimogamo shrine?” he accused. “You must grab hold of that opportunity now. Can’t you see it? Akashi-san is right next to you.”

“This is none of your business.”

“If you don’t act now, I’m going to jump!”

With those absurd words, he turned his back on us and clenched his hands as if he were going to leap out into the void over the river.

“Wait a minute. What does my love life have to do with you jumping?”

“I actually don’t know either,” he admitted.

Akashi-san tried to persuade him as well. “Ozu-san, the river is swollen right now. If you jump you’re going to drown!”

While this bizarre exchange was going on, screams suddenly came from the Kamo delta to the north. The student festivities were in an uproar, and everyone was running around trying to escape.

“What is that?” said Ozu as he crouched down. As I grabbed the handrail and leaned over to look, I could make out something that resembled a dark cloud stretching from the Aoi Park forest to the delta. It buzzed loudly as it grew larger and concealed the entire delta from view. The people inside the cloud on the delta ran agitatedly this way and that, flapping their arms and batting at their heads as if they were half-crazed. The dark cloud began to spread over the surface of the water towards us.

The noise from the delta began to become even more tumultuous. From the pine forest the cloud kept sliding closer to us. This wasn’t an ordinary occurrence. Flutterflutterflutterflutter went the squirming cloud as it rolled towards us like a carpet, rising above the water, coming over the handrail and burying the Kamo-oohashi like an avalanche.

“GYEEEEEEEEEE” Akashi-san screamed as though she were a character from a manga.

It was a swarm of moths.

The next day the moth plague made the Kyoto news, though nobody understood where the moths had come from. By tracing their route, it appeared that the moths had come from the Tadasu forest, that is to say, Shimogamo shrine, though things were still unclear. Even if all the moths in the forest had simultaneously decided to migrate, there was no clear reason why. There was an alternative rumor going around that the moths had actually come from the neighboring Izumigawa town, but that explanation was just as inexplicable. That night, it appeared that a swarm of moths had also gathered in a corner of my own boarding house.

When I returned, the corridor was littered with moth corpses. I had forgotten to lock my door, so my room was blooming with them as well, but I reverentially gathered the corpses and buried them.

○

With fluttering moth scales battering my face and sometimes moths entering my mouth, I stood fast covering Akashi-san and gallantly protected her from the worst of it. I was originally from the city and had never had to coexist with bugs, but these past two years in the boarding house had completely accustomed me to all sorts of arthropods.

Even so, the sheer number of moths that night utterly overwhelmed the bounds of common sense. The thrumming sound of beating wings completely cut us off from the outside world, as if it were not moths but a swarm of winged imps passing over the bridge. It was nearly impossible to see anything. What hazy glimpses I got out of my gritted eyes was limited to the moths dancing in the orange light of the streetlamps and Akashi-san's shining black hair.

After a while the swarm moved on, leaving only a few stragglers flitting here and there. Akashi-san stood there with an ashen face, frantically brushing herself off, repeating over and over, "Are there any on me? Are there any on me?" before sprinting away with frightening swiftness towards the east end of the bridge away from the writhing moths still dotting the ground. She finally stopped and collapsed to the floor in the soft light of a café on the other side.

The moths were still receding towards Shijou like a thick carpet, when I suddenly noticed the yutaka-robed god standing next to me, stretching his body to look over the guardrail. His face was crumpled in disarray, so that it was hard to tell whether he was crying or laughing.

"That fool Ozu. He really fell off, didn't he," he sighed.

○

We jogged down the embankment on the west side of the bridge. In front of us, the Kamo river surged thunderously by. It was so swollen that the surrounding shrubbery was being pickled in the water, and it was much wider than usual as well.

We entered the water and approached the underside of the bridge; something seemed to be wriggling in the shadows of the supports. Ozu clung desperately like a discarded piece of trash, trying not to be swept away. The water wasn't too deep, but it was swift, so the god nearly was nearly swept off his feet, despite his supposedly divine powers. With some difficulty, we made our way to Ozu's body.

"You moron!" I yelled while being drenched by the spray.

He simply laughed through his tears, "Heehee, I caught something," and held out his arms triumphantly. He was holding a spongy teddy bear.

"It came flowing right to me," he whimpered with a hint of pain. "How unworthy I am; I've fallen, and I can't get up!"

"Be still now" the god commanded.

"Of course, master. My right leg hurts a lot," he meekly submitted.

"You're Ozu's master?" I asked."

"Indeed." He smiled.

With help from the god/Ozu's master I raised Ozu to his feet. "Ow, ow, be more careful!" he demanded, but eventually we dragged him to the shore. Akashi-san was also on the riverbank; though she had suffered a considerable shock from the moths, she was alert as always and had already called for an ambulance. Now she just sat on a bench holding her blue cheeks. We rolled Ozu like a log up the beach. Attempting to dry our clothes, we shivered with cold.

"It hurts, hurts. Help me," he moaned.

"You're so noisy. And you shouldn't have climbed on the railing to begin with," I observed. "The ambulance will be here soon, so just deal with it a little longer."

"Ozu, you show a lot of promise," Ozu's master said.

"Master, thank you very much!"

"But when I told you to break a leg, I didn't literally mean it, you know. What an incorrigible fool!"

Ozu sat there sobbing.

After about five minutes the ambulance arrived at Kamo-oohashi. Ozu's master went up the embankment to fetch the EMTs, who promptly wrapped up Ozu in a blanket and set him on a stretcher. I would have been overjoyed if they at that point threw him into the river, but they of course being professionals did not distinguish between their patients. Without sparing a glance for Ozu's evil doings, they reverently carried the stretcher back to the ambulance.

"I shall accompany Ozu." Thus saying the master boarded the ambulance and left.

○

At last, only Akashi-san with her face still buried in her hands and I in my drenched clothes were

left. I still held the teddy bear that Ozu had found while clinging to the bridge in my hand. It put on a doleful expression as I squeezed it, wringing the water out from it. It was really quite a handsome bear.

“Are you okay?” I inquired of Akashi-san.

“I really can’t stand moths,” she sighed.

“Well, would you like some coffee to calm your nerves?”

I was most certainly not taking advantage of this girl’s weak point to achieve some indecent goal. I was simply concerned for her, as she was still quite pale.

I bought canned coffee from a nearby vending machine and drank it together with her, and gradually her visage returned to normal. She squeezed the bear I had given her many times; I looked at her with my head tilted in confusion.

“This is a Mochiguman, isn’t it?” she said.

“What’s a Mochiguman?”

She said that she had a collection of similar bears which he held dear to her heart. With that same tenderness, she collected five of them, naming them Mochiguma, as a unit called “Fluffy Squadron Mochiguman”. She spent many days being comforted by poking at their fuzzy behinds. However, last year at the Shimogamo shrine book festival, one of them had fallen out of her bag, and had been lost ever since.

“Then, this is the one you lost?”

“It’s quite miraculous, for it to be here of all places.”

“It was probably washed down here by the river,” I conjectured. “Since Ozu found it, I thought it would be put to better use if I gave it to you.”

She gave me a dubious glance, but looked happy to have found her bear, and regained her composure, looking completely recovered from the moth attack.

“Ozu invited me to the café today, and then he told me to cross the bridge. I wonder what that was all about.”

“No idea.”

“But he is interesting, isn’t he? I once saw him run back and forth across an intersection waving a huge Ferrari flag.”

“Don’t mind him. He’s just a big idiot.”

Akashi-san hmm-hmmed, nodding her head.

“You’re a little late, senpai. As far as I can tell you’ve already been infected by him.”

I looked a little discouraged but then said, “I remembered.”

“Remembered what?”

“I need to show you that movie.”

I was speaking of the movie I had made just before leaving the circle, the cryptic one with Ozu

reciting the Tale of Genji.

“That’s right!” she said, looking pleased.

The next week I we spoke and I delivered the movie to her. The word “confusing” was brought up numerous times in our discussion of it, and afterwards we decided to have dinner together.

You can debate the success of the movie, and while I am firmly in the naysayers’ camp, at least Akashi-san was satisfied with it.

○

To describe how the relationship between Akashi-san and I developed after that would deviate from the purpose of this manuscript; therefore, I will refrain from recounting each wonderful facet. I am sure my readers would rather not waste their time reading such contemptible stuff.

There is nothing more boring than telling a story of successful love.

○

Speaking after experiencing the many new developments that peppered my campus life after that, it was quite vexing to have to admit the naiveté of my previous life. I am not one to recognize my faults so easily. It’s true that I bore great affection for myself, but what woman would want to embrace such a filthy twenty year old man like myself? I was so provoked by this that I angrily and vehemently refused to help my previous self.

I couldn’t shake off the feeling that choosing Misogi movie circle in front of that fateful clock tower that day had been a mistake. What if I had chosen a different circle? If I had responded to that call for disciples, or chosen the softball circle, or even entered the secret society, my past two years certainly would have been quite different. At least, it is plain my life would not have been as twisted as it is now. Perhaps that ever elusive rose-colored campus life would have been in my grasp. I could not bring myself to deny that the past two years had not been full of mistakes and missed chances.

Above all, my unfortunate mistake of meeting Ozu would surely haunt me for the rest of my life.

○

Ozu was for a time admitted to a hospital near the campus.

It was quite delightful to see him strapped down to the white hospital bed. Because of his already pale complexion, it appeared as if he had contracted some incurable disease, though in reality it was merely a bone fracture. It was probably appropriate to say that he was lucky getting off with just a fracture. I came to gloat over his inability to partake in any of his usual wicked habits, but instead of

saying anything I mostly just sat there eating a castella.

For him to have dragged his Master into his idiotic plan, and fallen off the bridge, solely to introduce Akashi-san and me, was something I could never understand. It was impossible for any of us to understand his lifestyle. Of course, we didn't need to.

“I hope you’ve learned your lesson about sticking your nose into people’s business?” I said while stuffing my cheeks with castella, but he shook his head.

“I refuse. There’s nothing else I should be doing, after all.”

What an incurable character.

I demanded to know what was so interesting about playing with an innocent person like me.

○

His customary youkai-like grin floated to his face.

“It’s how I show my love!”

“I don’t need that nasty stuff,” I replied.

Chapter 2 –The 4.5 Tatami Masochistic Proxy-Proxy War

In the two years before the spring of my junior year of college, I accomplished not a single thing of practical use. Wholly avoiding wholesome association with the opposite sex, diligence towards my studies, the discipline of my physical body, and other activities directed towards becoming a capable member of society I instead isolated myself from women, abandoned my studies, and let my flesh fall into ruination. Even so, why is that I ceaselessly labored away, still anticipating that excellent arrangement?

I must inquire of the responsible party. Where is the person responsible?

It is not the case that I have ceaselessly been in this condition. Immediately following my birth, I was the very paragon of unmarred purity, as charming as the infant Prince Genji; without a single wicked thought in that head it is said that my radiant face spread the light of love throughout the hills and valleys of my hometown. It is doubtful whether that is still the case. Each time that I look in a mirror I fly into a rage, asking 'Why is that you have become thus so? Is this the sum of your current existence?'

There are those who say that I am still young, and that people are yet things that may change.

How ridiculous.

It is said that the soul of a man is the same at one hundred as it is at three. Yet with this year, another one will be added to my twenty, and the end of my splendid quarter-century-long youth of my life will soon approach. What is to become of the coarse efforts I have poured into changing my own personality? At this stage if I attempt to twist my character which already towers above a sea of nothingness, the most I can do is break it.

At this moment, I must drag my obstinate self into leading a respectable life. I must force my own eyes to realize that reality. It is firmly my intention to not close my eyes.

And yet, somehow, it is unbearable to look.

○

The principal character of this memorandum is no other than I. The other lead player is one Master Higuchi. Between these two noble men is inserted a minor character of diminutive stature, Ozu.

On the subject of myself, there is little else to say than that I am a proud third-year university student. However, to suit my readers I shall consent to describe my appearance.

Let us take a journey through Kyoto. From Kawaramachi Sanjou you stroll along the arcade, going west. Since it's a spring weekend, the crowds are quite lively. While glancing through the gift shops and tea houses, you suddenly see a raven-haired maiden, the kind that makes your heart skip a beat,

coming your way. She's so radiant that it looks like everything else pales in comparison. Her coolly brilliant eyes turn to a man walking beside her. He looks a little past twenty, his eyes clear, his brow firm, a refreshing smile always on his lips. No matter what acrobatic angles you look at him from, it is impossible to find flaw, and he has an extremely intellectual look to him. He is about 180cm tall, and well built, but always keeps his emotions in check. He has an easy gait, and yet there is confidence in each step. He is excellent in all fields, and always has a pleasant aura about him. If there is a gold standard to judge a man by, he is it.

Please, I would like you to imagine that person whenever you think of me.

Because I am doing this solely for the convenience of my readers, I am certainly not portraying myself as more beautiful than I am in real life, or trying to make high school girls go gaga over me, or pretending to be a university valedictorian, or make myself out to be any such absurdly marvelous thing. So, dear readers, please engrave that image that I just laid out before you into your heads, whenever you think of me.

It's true that there is no raven-haired maiden beside me at present. There may also be a few points of difference between me and the man I described.

However, those are minor quibbles. It's what's on the inside that's important.

○

Let us continue to the matter of Master Higuchi.

I live in room 110 of a boarding house that resembles Kowloon Walled City called Shimogamo Yuusuisou in Shimogamo Izumigawa, while he lives a floor above me in room 210. For two years, until our fateful parting in the spring of my third year here, I was his apprentice. As a result of neglecting my studies to practice ascetism, in the end I only learned useless things and improved the worthless parts of my character, while simultaneously neglecting the better parts of my character.

The rumor that Master Higuchi was an eighth-year student was entirely a myth. Like a suspiciously long-lived animal, he seemed to constantly linger around the campus.

He always had an easy smile on his eggplant-shaped face, for some reason giving off the vague impression of a nobleman. However, he always had a lazy bush of stubble sprouting from his chin. Without fail he would always be wearing his blue yutaka, with an old jumper put on over it during the winter; with that garb on he could often be found at a stylish café drinking a cappuccino. He hadn't even an electric fan, but during the dog days of summer he knew a thousand different places to cool off. The hair on his head was indescribably unruly and bizarre, as if a typhoon had blown over his head and left everything else untouched. He enjoyed smoking cigars. Occasionally he would go to school as if he had just remembered that he was a student, but by now there was probably no way he could get enough credits. Though he didn't speak a word of Chinese, he was well-acquainted with the

Chinese exchange students in the same boarding house; I once came across him having his hair cut by one of the Chinese girls. I had lent him a copy of Jules Verne's "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea", but it had been almost a year and he still hadn't returned it, leisurely flicking through its pages. His room was decorated with a globe that he had taken from my room, cutely dotted with pins. I didn't learn until later that those pins marked the locations of the Nautilus.

Master Higuchi didn't actually do anything, being too absorbed in his grand lifestyle. Depending on how you looked at it and your level of self-denial, it was either a gentlemanly attitude of self-improvement, or the pinnacle of foolishness.

○

Lastly we come to Ozu.

Ozu is a student the same year as I. Though he is a member of the electrical engineering department, he hates electricity, electronics and engineering. His first-year grades were so dreadful, as low-achieving as is possible, that it is questionable whether there was any worth in him enrolling in college in the first place. However, the man himself was not concerned in the slightest.

Because he despises vegetables and adheres strictly to a diet of fast food, he has the extremely eerie look and complexion of someone from the far side of the moon. If you were to meet him the street late at night eight out of ten people would mistake him for a youkai. The remaining two people are certainly youkais themselves.

Cruelly beating the weak, groveling to the strong, selfish, self-assured, lazy, a complete demon, neglecting studies, lacking a shred of pride, feeding off the unhappiness of others he was able to eat three square meals a day. There is not a single part of him that is praiseworthy. If I had never met him my soul surely would have been cleaner for it.

Keeping that in mind, becoming a disciple of Master Higuchi in the spring of my freshman year was mostly assuredly a mistake.

○

At the time, I was still a sparkling freshman, green and fresh as the fallen cherry blossom leaves. Upon entering the university grounds, each first-year was immediately pressed with club fliers, I with so many that they could not be processed by a single person. Among those fliers, only four caught my attention: Misogi Movie Circle, a mysterious call for disciples, Honwaka Softball Circle, and the Lucky Cat Restaurant secret society. Each of these had its own air of suspicion, yet was its own doorway to a yet unknown campus life, and I was filled with inquisitiveness, thinking that no matter which I chose a fascinating future lay ahead. The only reason I thought this was because I was a hopeless fool.

After lectures, I directed my steps towards the university clock tower. It seemed that many circles were holding new member information sessions in that vicinity.

Around the base of the clock tower milled throngs of freshmen, their faces still blushing with springs of hope, as well as crafty circle members, eager to prey on those same hopes. Thinking that among these countless circles lay an entrance to the phantasmic illusion of the entrance to a rose-colored campus life, I wandered around in a lightheaded daze.

The first thing I saw was a group of students holding a billboard displaying "Misogi Movie Circle". It looked like they were screening a movie as a way of welcoming potential new recruits. However as I didn't have the nerve to introduce myself I kept circling the clock tower, reading the fliers closely. On one of them was written in bold letters, "Disciples wanted".

"Clairvoyance to find the fated maiden within the crowds of Gion, and ears from which even the sound of cherry blossoms falling into the canals cannot hide. Appearing everywhere within the capital, going forth freely between heaven and earth. Known to all the gods, afraid of none, beholden to none. His name is Higuchi Shintaro. Come, ye young ones who hold promise. Assemble on the thirtieth of April before the clock tower. No phone number."

Of all the dubious fliers in the world, surely there was none that could match this. And yet, so shamelessly challenging the world and tempering the heart was surely the way leading to that glorious future that was sure to come, or so I thought. Being ambitious was surely not a bad thing, yet being misled would surely lead to ruin.

As I scrutinized this flier, a voice suddenly came from behind me. "You." As I turned my head, I was met with the appearance of a very odd person standing behind me. Though this was a college campus he wore a threadbare yukata, puffing on a cigar, with a scruffy eggplant-shaped face. It was hard to tell whether he was a college student. Though he gave off a suspicious impression, for some reason he also seemed to carry himself with a nobleman's bearing, with a roguish yet endearing smile.

This was Master Higuchi.

"Did you read that flier? I am currently seeking disciples."

"What kind of disciples?"

"Well now, it's not something that can be so easily discussed. This is the senior apprentice."

Beside him stood an eerie fellow with an ill-omened face. For someone as delicate as I, he looked like a messenger from hell.

"I am called Ozu. Pleased to meet you," he said.

"Though he is the senior apprentice, it's only by fifteen minutes," Master Higuchi dryly chuckled.

Though we would go on to visit bars hundreds of times, the only time I was ever treated by Master Higuchi would be that one time. As I was not accustomed to drinking I got into a rather sticky situation, and immediately hit it off with Master Higuchi, who lived in the same boarding house, Shimogamo Yuusuisou, as I. We went to his 4.5 tatami room, and together with Ozu started heatedly

discussing some impenetrable topic.

At first Ozu was quiet, as though he were some death god standing ominously at your bedside, but he soon started quite frequently about tits. We argued profoundly about whether the breasts we saw in front of us were real or not, but eventually as if we were discussing quantum mechanics Master Higuchi said, “It doesn’t matter whether they’re real or not. What matters is whether you believe they are.” Soon after this deep statement, I lost consciousness.

Thus, I became Master Higuchi’s disciple, and met Ozu.

What kind of disciple had I become? That was a question that, even after two years, I still did not understand.

○

Being associated with Master Higuchi, whose everyday actions were obscene, meant that whatever naïve expectations I had of perseverance, humility, and propriety went right out the window. Even if I were to carry such things, facing off against him with them would inevitably end up with no gain whatsoever for either of us wretched beings. The first thing I had to learn in dealing with him was the concept of tribute. This meant food, or other such indulgences.

The only ones who went in and out of the Master’s room were me and Ozu, Akashi-san, and a dental hygienist named Hanuki-san. Yet at times, the Master would depend solely on us for 90% of his food. I suppose he consumed the mist for the other 10%.

I wonder what he would do if all of us were to suddenly leave him. “He would surely procure food by his own devices,” is what a novice would say. In fact, even if his food supply were to suddenly shrivel up the Master had already tempered himself with an invincible mindset. Given the recent recession and his complete lack of academic credits, he had already been faced with such a famine for quite some time; such were the extremes that the Master refused to move a finger. This was the power of the Master, to make us all believe that he would rather starve to death than expend energy.

But somehow, even if we didn’t give him food, he never gave off the impression of being hungry. It seemed that he had the mystical power of being able to stave off pangs of hunger simply by puffing on his cigar. There are few students who have managed to attain such a state of mind.

It was hard to imagine such a person being afraid of anything, yet there was a single incident where he admitted to being afraid.

Not only did he refuse to return that book he had borrowed from me, he also kept a number of outstanding library books. When I told him, “It’s already been half a year,” he simply replied “That’s right. That’s why I’m afraid of the library police.”

“Is there such a thing as library police?” I asked Ozu.

“It does,” he replied with a fearsome smile. “It’s an organization that uses the most inhuman

methods to forcibly retrieve overdue library books."

"Liar."

"I am indeed."

○

We had a clandestine gathering on the Yoshida shrine road in the Sakyo ward.

Though many high school and college students come here to pray for success in their exams each year, it's said that Yoshida shrine has the mystical power to automatically make anyone who does so fail their exams, and that the tears shed by all those souls each year are enough to fill half of Lake Biwa. I respectfully stayed away from the shrine, but even with all that caution all my academic credits slipped through my fingers like sand. The mystical power of Yoshida shrine is certainly something to be feared.

Given how many credits I was missing, I did not want to set so much as one step onto the shrine grounds, but due to a series of unfortunate events I was compelled to hold this meeting in the dead of night on the shrine road.

It was May, two years after I had entered university. Though it was sweltering in the day, when night fell the air turned cool. With only the light of the clock tower falling on me I was able to see that Konoe street was quite deserted. Only the occasional nocturnal student passed by, with the shadowy appearance of some deep-sea creature. If this were a nighttime tryst with an artless raven-haired maiden, I would not be at all hesitant about waiting all alone on the shrine road. In this waiting surely there would be some sort of bashful happiness involved. However, tonight I was here to see Ozu, a filthy Y-chromosome bearing youkai. I wanted to just leave now and break my rendezvous, but if I did, my standing with Master Higuchi would be eroded. Reluctantly I waited. Ozu had said that he'd come in a car he borrowed from an upperclassman called Aijima in his circle. I whiled away the minutes by imagining Ozu getting into an accident without harming anyone but himself and being ripped into shreds.

Before too long, a little round car came into view on East Ichijou street and stopped near the main campus gate. From within a dark figure hopped out and started walking my way; to my great sorrow, it was Ozu.

"Good evening. Did you wait long?" he said in a pleased voice.

That face, which looked as if it had turned the corner straight from the depths of hell, was filled with malicious joy; it was certainly because of the plan for tonight. This was a person who sated himself on three meals of other people's misfortune every day. Keep in mind that the infamous, heretical plan for tonight was solely this man's idea and was not in any way suggested by me. I am the polar opposite of him, a veritable saint, a man of virtue. I was only doing this for the sake of my

Master, being completely opposed to it.

We got in the car and started traveling towards the winding, complex residential districts to the south, he in a very good mood.

“It was almost ruined, having Akashi-san say no. That girl displays mercy in unexpected places, wouldn’t you say?”

“Most upstanding humans would be opposed to this, especially me.”

“This again? You know you actually enjoy it on the inside.”

“Do I look happy? I’m only here on the Master’s orders. Don’t forget that,” I repeated. “You do realize this is a crime, don’t you?”,

“Really now?” he tilted his head, but it was less cute than eerie.

“A most heinous crime. Trespassing, theft, abduction...” I reeled them off.

“Abduction only applies to humans, doesn’t it? We’re only stealing a love doll.”

“Don’t say it so plainly! Use code words, or something.”

“You say that, but you’re really quite interested in seeing it yourself. I can tell, seeing as we go way back. You probably want to touch it, too. What an unbridled sex drive you have.”

He put on an indefensibly obscene expression.

“Fine. I’m leaving.”

I made to undo my seatbelt and open the door, but he said, “Okay, okay,” in a coaxing voice. “That was uncalled for by me. Cheer up. It’s all for the Master’s sake, after all.”

○

The origins of the conflict have long since been lost in the darkness of history, but Master Higuchi called it the “Masochistic Proxy-Proxy War”. From that nickname I could vaguely deduce that it was no more than a disgraceful quarrel.

About five years ago, a man named Jougasaki and Master Higuchi had a falling out, and one leading to another soon sparked the flames of war. Even now, the war was continuing in this quiet neighborhood.

Sometimes Master Higuchi would out of the blue remember to harass Jougasaki, who would return fire; this cycle repeated itself over and over. As his disciples, we were caught up in this conflict, having our human dignity trampled on by this unproductive affair. I was no exception. The only one who took voraciously to this duty was Ozu, who appeared to be in his element.

Jougasaki was the head of a certain movie circle, and wielded considerable power while also continuing his doctoral studies, but alas, Ozu was also a member of that circle. Last autumn, Ozu outdid himself and actually expelled Jougasaki from the circle. Being that his soul was completely corrupted, Ozu kept his dirty hands in various places and seduced an upperclassman named Aijima to

pull off a coup d'état. Jougasaki was still resentful towards Aijima as the ringleader of the scheme, but had no clue that it was actually Ozu pulling the strings behind the scenes.

Not knowing what to do with himself after being kicked out, Jougasaki renewed the age-old war with Master Higuchi. Things escalated from a small quarrel, and eventually in April of this year Master Higuchi's beloved blue yukata was dyed pink. Master Higuchi ordered Ozu to draft a plan for a counterattack. Ozu, displaying his ability as the lieutenant of darkness, came up with a plan most vile.

It was called "Kidnap Kaori-san".

○

Jougasaki lived at the foot of Mount Yoshida, in a recently rebuilt charming little two-story apartment next to a bamboo grove in Yoshida Shimo-oojichou. That night, Ozu and I hid ourselves in the shadows of a concrete wall next to the apartment. I felt like a messenger of hell, but to Jougasaki there was probably no difference. As we were stealing his most beloved treasure, we couldn't complain if he were to call us foul demons of the abyss.

Ozu peeped over the top of the concrete wall. Jougasaki lived on the second floor, on the south side of the building; in his window a light still burned.

"I wonder what Jougasaki's doing? It looks like he's still in his room." Ozu sounded frustrated. "It would be bad if Akashi-san didn't keep her promise."

"She's got a miserable role as well. We shouldn't have forced her to do it."

"What? She's one of Master Higuchi's disciples as well, and we needed her for this. When it comes to idiots, there's no difference between males and females."

We stood in the alley trying not to move, squirming in the darkness where the streetlights couldn't reach. If we were to be seen by someone we were sure to be reported.

The longer we stood there, the more I felt myself being polluted by Ozu's foul influence. If it had been a raven-haired maiden by my side, I would have been more than willing to wait. Unfortunately, it was Ozu. Why must I hide myself with this sinister fellow? Did I go wrong somewhere? Is the fault within myself? At least give me someone more like-minded to myself, if not a raven-haired maiden.

"This has turned into a nuisance. It looks like our plans have gone awry."

"There's no way Akashi-san would cooperate in a crime like this. Let's just give up."

"We can't. For us to have gone as far as borrowing Aijima-san's car, there's no way we can give up now."

Ozu frowned and clung to the wall like a gecko.

"And what exactly happened between Master Higuchi and Jougasaki-san anyhow? Why are they continuing this pointless battle? And why the hell do we have to do this?" I complained.

"The Masochistic Proxy-Proxy War."

“And what’s that?”

“Beats me.” Ozu tilted his head. “I don’t understand it either.”

“So basically we’re participating in a war that nobody understands and wasting our precious youth. Isn’t there something else we could be doing?”

“This is part of our training to expand ourselves as human beings. Though it’s obvious that standing around here with you is a waste of time.”

“That’s what I’m saying!”

“Don’t look at me with those eyes!”

“Oi, stop clinging to me.”

“But I’m lonely, and this wind is making me cold.”

“You lonely bastard –”

“Kyaa!”

Killing time in the darkness with this pointless mockery of a lovers’ quarrel soon felt empty. And for some reason, it felt like I had done this before, which began to frustrate me.

“Hey, haven’t we had a conversation like this before?”

“No way, not something this dumb. It’s probably just *déjà vu*.”

Suddenly Ozu bent over. I followed suit.

“The light in his window just went out.”

We held our breath, as a man came tramping down the stairs. He went to the bike garage and took out a scooter. This wasn’t the first time I had seen him, but no matter how I looked at him he was a splendid fellow with a lot going for him, not like one to participate in such a fruitless conflict.

Compared to his overflowing vitality, the only thing that was overflowing from us was rotten juices.

“What a manly man,” I sighed.

“You can’t judge on appearances, you know. Even though he puts on that handsome face, the only thing that he ever thinks of is tits.”

“You’re a fine one to talk.”

“How rude. I’ll have you know that I restrain myself properly when I think about breasts.”

While we stood there next to the wall arguing about breasts, Jougasaki put on his helmet, straddled his bike and rode off towards the east.

We oozed out of the darkness and went around to the stairs.

“He won’t be back for a while,” Ozu giggled.

“Where is he going?”

“A café on Shirakawa street. He’ll be waiting there drinking coffee for about two hours, but what he doesn’t know is that Akashi-san is never going to show up. What a moron!”

“That’s pretty cruel.”

“Now, let’s get to work!”

He ascended the stairs. We were completely dependent on that ruse to pull off this bit of trespassing, but we had no way to pick the lock on his front door. For that, Ozu had gained access to Jougasaki’s ex-girlfriend and surreptitiously obtained a copy of the master key. It wasn’t just the matter of the lock; Ozu knew absolutely everything about Jougasaki’s private life. Once, when Jougasaki was exchanging letters with a certain female correspondent, Ozu even got his hands on the letters himself; such was his meticulousness.

“He who controls information controls the world.” He was fond of such acrobatic sayings, and in his notebook, almost like an encyclopedia in its thoroughness, were carefully written down the deepest secrets of various people. Whenever I thought about this I was filled with unease, as if spending another moment with this twisted individual was unbearable.

Upon opening the door we were greeted with a kitchen and a 4.5 tatami-sized wooden-floored room; across from us was a glass door partitioning the rest of the apartment off. Ozu slid in first, his experienced hands deftly finding the lights. It was almost as if he was used to coming in and out. When I noted this, he nodded.

“He is our upperclassman, after all. He sometimes has me come over here so he can complain to me, and those tend to take a while to list. It’s quite a pain,” he coolly replied.

“You scoundrel.”

“I’d rather you call me a tactician.”

I didn’t want to get too involved in this crime, so like a gentleman I stepped past the front door but went no further.

“Come on, this way,” Ozu urged, but I stood my ground.

“You go look for it. I’m not going past here. It’s only manners, after all.”

“We’re already here, aren’t we? I guess it can’t be helped if you’re still trying to play the gentleman at this point.”

Giving up the dispute, Ozu went on his own further into the apartment. From the blackness of the back room, I could hear him rustling around, followed by the sound of him stumbling over something. After a while he started to chortle to himself, in an ear-splittingly loud voice.

“Come on, Kaori-san, don’t be shy. Dump Jougasaki and come along with me.”

In a while Ozu emerged into the kitchen carrying a woman beneath his arm. I was dumbfounded.

“This is Kaori-san,” he introduced us. “Damn, I didn’t reckon on her being so heavy.”

○

Many people are aware of the existence of things called “Dutch Wives”, including me. I imagine that they are things only bought by men driven to their very limits, who later shed many bitter tears

of regret.

In May, Ozu learned of Jougasaki's own concealed Dutch Wife, which was no ordinary love doll, but was made of out super-high quality silicon and cost over one hundred thousand yen. He insisted that it was only proper to call it a love doll.

If you were to say that Jougasaki had been driven to the depths of despair by suddenly being kicked out of his own circle, as well as dumped by his girlfriend, and had succumbed to his loneliness, it might be forgivable for him to impulsively buy such a thing. But that was not the case. It seemed that Jougasaki had owned that love doll for at least two years. In that time he had also reached out his hand for real girls, so you could say that he was a love doll fanatic, from a certain point of view. It was hard for me to imagine it.

"Living with and cherishing a love doll has a certain meaning to it. The matter of his having a real girlfriend is a different matter. It's a very refined sort of love, something a crude person like you who only sees a love doll as a tool could never understand."

Since it was Ozu saying this, I obviously didn't believe those words.

And yet, the love doll called Kaori-san that Ozu dragged out was so beautiful, so pitiful, I could hardly believe it was just a doll. Her black hair was combed, and she wore elegant clothing, properly buttoned up. Her eyes gently gazed in my direction, as if she was seeing a dream.

I unconsciously blurted out, "So that's it..." in wonder.

Ozu raised a finger to his lips, hissing "Shhh! You're too loud!" He then proudly exclaimed, "This is her. If you're not careful, you might fall for her!"

With some difficulty, as if she was quite heavy, he laid her down on the kitchen floor. Beside this sleeping beauty crouched a repulsive youkai; it was like an illustration from an early Showa-era horror novel.

"Come on, we need to get her to the car."

Unexpectedly business-like in contrast to his appearance, Ozu loaded her body onto my arms. She just lay there smiling sweetly. Her skin looked just like regular skin, and was soft to the touch. Her hair was carefully groomed, her clothes were arranged with nary a thread out of place. You might have thought that she was a lady born into nobility, except that she was completely still, as if she had been frozen in place staring into the distance.

I was unexpectedly turned on, er, rather I was turned on by rage.

I wasn't well-acquainted with Jougasaki, but I had to admit that this was a very closed, refined sort of love. Kaori-san had such an elegant expression on her face, one that wouldn't tolerate a corrupt lifestyle. Her smoothed hair, her carefully arranged clothing, everything indicated the depth of Jougasaki's love for her. For a brigand like Ozu, who would only treat her as a tool for sexual gratification, to ruin the delicate, graceful world that Jougasaki and Kaori-san had constructed, was something that I would not forgive, even if it were under the Master's orders. It would be the heights

of heresy. It was outrageous to imagine us snatching her away from here.

I, who had thus far walked this barren path without questioning Master Higuchi, could not swallow this cruel act in front of me. Master, I just can't do it.

I seized Ozu, who was still gleefully pawing her all over, by the lapels.

"Stop that."

"Why?"

"I won't forgive you if you lay a finger on her."

Jougasaki, lift your head up and keep walking on your own path. There is no path in front of you, yet you can make one behind you. I let out an encouraging yell in my heart. Of course, it was directed towards Kaori-san as well.

○

That night, I returned to Shimogamo Yuusuisou dragging Ozu behind me, who was still making all sorts of dissenting cries like a small animal.

I spent most of my time in a boarding house called Shimogamo Yuusuisou, which was located in Shimogamo Izumigawa. I had heard that the place was burned down in the chaos at the end of the shogunate, and had been rebuilt in exactly the same fashion. If it hadn't been for the light leaking out of the windows, you could be forgiven for mistaking it for an abandoned ruin. When I first visited this place during the co-op association introductions after my matriculation I thought I had wandered into Kowloon Walled City. Anyone who sees this crumbling, wooden three-story building would probably think to place it on the list of important historical structures yet if it were to burn down it's not hard to imagine that no one would even blink. Even the landlady who lives to the east would mostly certainly be relieved.

It was already midnight when I ascended the stairs with Ozu. I lived in room 110 on the first floor, but Master Higuchi lived above me in the deepest recesses of the second floor, room 210. Through the window at the top of the door, we could see that the lights were still on; it appeared as if he was waiting for word of our success. To be honest, I felt bad for betraying his expectations and tossing the proxy war aside. I had to bring him something to put him in a good mood.

When I opened the door, Master Higuchi and Akashi-san were seated facing each other. It appeared as if he was giving her a lecture, but in fact it was she who was giving him a stern dressing-down. When she was us enter empty-handed, she gave a sigh of relief.

"You didn't go through with the plan, did you?"

I silently nodded, while Ozu just sulked.

"Well now, disciple. Welcome back," Master Higuchi said, while looking uncomfortable and squirming in his chair.

I pushed Ozu aside and gave a full account of what had happened. Master Higuchi nodded lightly and lit up a cigar, letting out a long puff, as did Akashi-san. It looked as if they had a long debate, ending up with an overwhelming victory for Akashi-san.

“Well, for tonight we shall end things here.”

Ozu opened his mouth as if he was about to protest, but the Master thundered, “SILENCE.

“All things have a limit. Certainly, the incident with my yutaka being dyed pink was highly regrettable. However, it is also true that tearing apart Jougasaki and Kaori-san, who have enjoyed each other’s company for so long, would also be an exceedingly cruel thing to do. Even if she is a doll.”

“That’s right, Master. Even though what you were saying in our conversation just a few minutes ago was completely different.”

Ozu tried to speak up, but Akashi-san cut him off: “Ozu-san, please be quiet.”

“Anyways,” the Master continued, “this deviated from the rules that Jougasaki and I set down. Not only that, but for us, beings who do not tread foot on the ground and freely pass between heaven and earth, this was an imprudent action. I got too rash thinking about the tragic loss of my yutaka.”

He let out a sorrowful puff of smoke.

“Are you satisfied?” he put to Akashi-san.

“I am,” she assented.

Thus, Operation “Kidnap Kaori-san” came to an end. Ozu, who was bathed in the combined light of our three icy gazes, made hasty preparations to leave. “I, uh, have a banquet tomorrow night at the Kamo delta with my circle. So, so many things to do...” he said, with all the conviction of a fishburger.

“I’m sorry, Ozu-san. I can’t make it tomorrow,” Akashi-san said. She was also a member of the same circle as Ozu.

“Why not?”

“I need to get to work on my report. I need to gather data for it as well.”

“What’s more important, your studies or the circle?” Ozu drew himself up. “You need to come to the banquet.”

“I refuse,” Akashi curtly responded.

It looked as if Ozu had lost the wind in his sails. Master Higuchi smiled.

“You are quite intriguing,” he said, praising Akashi-san.

○

The day after the Kaori-san kidnapping attempt, I walked along Sanjou Oohashi, my mind galloping over my memories of the last two years. The summer-like weather had finally let up, with a cool evening breeze blowing by. As I reminisced, there were countless incidents where I regretted acting

the way I had, but the most striking one was my meeting Master Higuchi in front of the clock tower. If I hadn't met him there, I'm not sure how, but things would have been different. I'd thought about going into the Misogi movie circle, or the Honwaka softball circle, or even the Lucky Cat Chinese restaurant secret society. No matter which I had picked, I certainly would have become a much more worthwhile, wholesome person.

The lights of the town slowly flickered on one by one in the falling dusk, spurring me further along this train of thought, but I couldn't let myself get too distracted and forget why I was here. I was looking for a Kamenoko brush in an old-fashioned shop on the west side of Sanjou Oohashi on my Master's behalf.

According to Master Higuchi's second-hand information, the Kamenoko brush had been produced for over a hundred years by Nishio corporation; it was made from palm seeds and Chinese windmill palm fibers. In the turbulence at the end of the Pacific War, the secret technique was stolen by a group of medical students, who used the fibers of a certain palm which grows only in Taiwan to produce the Kamenoko brush. The brush apparently uses the Van der Waals force to bind dirt to the innumerable firm bristle tips at the molecular level and effortlessly lift off any sort of dirt or grime: the ultimate cleaning weapon. Due to pressure from firms which feared that such a power would decrease soap and detergent sales, the brush was never sold widely, but it's said that even now, in secret that mysterious brush is still being produced.

The sty that Master Higuchi lived in was intolerable to the eye. If a privileged young lady were to gaze into the filth of the sink it's guaranteed that she would faint on the spot. In the corner with the sink, life forms which have never before been seen on the earth before secretly continue to evolve, and when I pointed this out, I was told by the Master that the Kamenoko brush was a necessity, and that I needed to get it or face excommunication.

I wanted to tell him to excommunicate me on the spot.

Thus, I began my pilgrimage to various shops which were said to carry the brush, but as I began a hesitant explanation of the magical brush, the shopkeepers invariably started to laugh. Of course they would. Even I was laughing.

"Well now, that kind of brush don't exist, does it?" they said.

To escape their mocking faces, I lost myself in the bustle of Sanjou street.

There was also my failure to kidnap Kaori-san. At this rate I wanted to just excommunicate myself.

From there I staggered towards Kawaramachi street, passing in front of the famous pachinko parlor, where the plotting ronin were said to have been attacked by the Shinsengumi in antiquity. It was hard to say why they would choose a pachinko parlor to assemble at.

At this rate there was no way for me to return to Shimogamo Yuusuisou. Even if I couldn't find the mystical brush, I couldn't return to the Master emptyhanded. Perhaps a Cuban cigar would do the trick. Or perhaps I would buy some fresh fish at Nishiki market.

In the depths of distress I tottered south down Kawaramachi. As night fell, the unavoidable growing crowds furthered tormented me. I dropped into an antique place called Gabi Bookstore to browse for a bit, but as soon as I entered the shop the proprietor, whose face resembled a boiled octopus, glowered at me and shouted, "We're about to close. Out, out, out!" driving me out as if I was a poisonous insect. They say faces are friendly things, but not being giving an inch to spare was an irritating thing all the same.

Having lost my destination I walked back out into the chasm of buildings, and into Kiyamachi.

Ozu had said that he had a banquet with his circle tonight. That bastard was probably surrounded by cute freshmen and having the time of his life at this very minute, while I had failed in my search for Master Higuchi's fabricated mystical brush, been chased out of the refuse of the bookstore, and was doomed to wander the crowds alone. Surely this was an injustice of the highest degree.

As I loitered near one of the bridges on the Takase canal, I spotted Hanuki-san's face in the crowds of Kiyamachi, I immediately becoming flustered and pretended to be trying to light a cigarette, in hopes that I wouldn't be noticed.

Hanuki-san was a mysterious dental hygienist who also frequented Master Higuchi's place. There was a 90% chance that she was sauntering around Kiyamachi looking for ethyl alcohol. I had only run into her downtown once, but I had spent that night being dragged around as if she was an outlaw who had tied me to the back of a horse, and when I came to I collapsed on the ground alone near Ebisugawa power plant. It was a good thing that it had been summer, or I would have frozen to death under the bare trees. Tonight I would rather not be dragged around on an endless night of hell and be poisoned half to death with coffee shochu. I ducked my head out of sight, and Hanuki-san passed on by.

I sighed a breath of relief, but it wasn't like I had anything else to do.

At that moment, just as I resolved to excommunicate myself from Master Higuchi, I met the old lady.

○

In between the bars and brothels, a dark, squeezed sort of house stood in the shadows. Under the overhang, an old woman sat at a wooden stall covered by a white cloth; she looked like a fortuneteller. On the hanging sign, a number of kanji of cryptic meaning were inscribed. From the orange light of a lantern the hag's face floated up through the gloom. The appearance of the whole thing was eerily threatening, like a ghost greedily hungering for the souls of passersby. I had once had my fate read for me, but after that my fortune took a turn for the worse, with the shadow of an old woman seeming following me everywhere I went. Nothing I did went right; people I was expecting never showed up, I could never find anything that I lost, I failed my courses, my thesis that I was about

to present suddenly and spontaneously combusted, I fell into the canals of Lake Biwa, I was caught by a snake-oil salesman on Shijou street, among other unpleasant happenings. While these wild thoughts were going through my head, the old woman noticed me looking at her. She glared at me from the inky darkness with gleaming eyes, and I was caught by her ghostly emanations. Her suspicious aura had a persuasive power to it, and logically thinking I came to the conclusion that someone with such a freely flowing aura could not possibly be wrong in her divinations.

In my coming on twenty-five years of life, there were but few occasions where I took someone's advice humbly. Though I took few risks in life, wasn't there a possibility that I could choose the thorn-lined path. If only I had chosen to stop relying on my own judgment earlier, my campus life certainly would have taken a different shape. I would not have become the disciple of enigmatic Master Higuchi, nor met the labyrinthine character of Ozu, nor let the past two years of my life go to complete waste. Rather, I would have been blessed with wonderful mentors and friends, become accomplished and recognized as a great talent in the arts, of course have a beautiful raven-haired maiden at my side, face a shining golden future ahead of me, and acquire that all-important "rose-colored campus life" in the palm of my hand. For someone like me, having that kind of life didn't seem far off at all.

That's right.

It wasn't too late. I could hear someone's objective advice and break out of this dreary life.

I moved my legs toward the old woman as if attracted by that odd aura.

"Student, what is it that you wish to know?"

The old woman mumbled her words like her mouth was full of cotton, giving off the impression that her words had all the more worth to them.

"I'm not sure where to start..."

Seeing me at a loss for words, she laughed.

"I can see from your face that you are very frustrated, unsatisfied. You are not able to use your full talents; the situation you are in now is not suited for you."

"Yes, that's exactly it."

"Show me your hands."

The old hag took my palms and peered into them, grunting approvingly.

"You have much earnest talent in you."

I tipped my hat to her keen insight. Just as a true master hides his skills, to be able to so unassumingly realize my hidden sense and talent within five minutes of meeting me, this was no ordinary person.

"You must not let your opportunity slip away. An opportunity is nothing more than an excellent chance, you understand? It's difficult to take hold of such opportunities. Something they hide in places you don't expect, and sometimes something that you thought was an opportunity was really nothing

at all. But in order to seize an opportunity you must act. You look like you will have a long life, so sooner or later you will be able to take such an opportunity."

As befitting her aura, her words were truly profound and deep.

"I don't want to wait too long for something like that; I want to take that opportunity now. Can you be a little more specific?"

At my probing, the old woman's wrinkles deepened. I thought her right cheek must be itchy or something, but after a while she smiled.

"It's hard to be specific about the future. Even if I were to tell you exactly, it would soon twist and warp with the machinations of time. Fate is something that changes from moment to moment."

"But, you still haven't really told me anything other than obscure sayings."

As I tilted my head in confusion, she breathed out through her nose.

"Very well. I will refrain from speaking of things far ahead, but I can speak of things that will soon come.

I widened my ears like Dumbo.

"Colosseum," she suddenly whispered.

"Colosseum? What's that?"

"It is the sign of an opportunity. When an opportunity arrives, it will be accompanied by Colosseum," she intoned.

"So are you telling me I need to go to Rome?"

But the old woman merely grinned.

"Student, when your opportunity comes, you mustn't let it slip away, you can't just fumble around randomly as usual. Seize it, daringly, unlike your actions up until now. If you do, you will no longer be unsatisfied, and be able to embark on a new path. Though that may lead you to a different kind of dissatisfaction. I expect you understand though."

I didn't understand in the slightest, but I nodded anyways.

"Even if you don't catch this one, you don't need to worry. You are a splendid young man, so someday without a doubt you will make it. I can see it. There's no need to rush."

With that, the old woman brought her divinations to an end.

"Thank you very much."

I nodded and paid the fee. I turned around only to find Akashi-san standing behind me; at some point, she had snuck up behind me without me noticing.

"A little lost lamb, are we?" she said.

○

Akashi-san started visiting Master Higuchi's room last fall. After Ozu and me, she was his third

disciple. She was also a member of one of Ozu's circles, and could be considered to be his right-hand woman. As her fate seemed to be linked with his, it was inevitable for her to become one of Master Higuchi's disciples.

Akashi-san was a student a year younger than me in the engineering department. As she did not mince words, she was respected but largely avoided by most people. Her straight black hair cut short, whenever she met an illogical argument she was always prepared to debate the point with her brow furrowed. There was something a little distant in her eyes, and she showed few signs of weakness. It was befuddling why she would choose to become friends with Ozu, and why she would become a vassal of Master Higuchi's 4.5 tatami domain.

It was the summer of her freshman year. Some other freshman frivolously asked her, "Akashi-san, what do you do on the weekends?"

She answered without even looking up, "Why must you ask me that kind of question?"

After that, no one asked her about her weekend plans.

I heard about that exchange some time later from Ozu, and of course remember proudly thinking, "Akashi-san, you just keep doing your own thing."

But she, whose countenance seemed like a medieval European fortress, had a single weakness.

Last autumn, when she had just become Master Higuchi's disciple, I met her at the entryway of Shimogamo Yuusuisou, and we ascended the stairs together to go visit the Master. Akashi-san, with a cool expression as though she were an inspector during the war, suddenly shrieked as though she were a character from a manga and fell back down the stairs in front of me. I swiftly ran up and caught her, or rather, was squashed by her falling form while trying to escape. She clung to me, her hair disheveled, but I couldn't support that stance, and we both tumbled down the stairs to the corridor.

A frail moth fluttered above our heads. While we were climbing the stairs, it seemed that that moth had decided to alight upon Akashi-san's face. She apparently was deathly afraid of moths.

"It squished, it squished..." she whispered over and over, trembling, her face pale as if she had just met a ghost. But her incredibly strong grasp showed the fragility of the person she was clinging to. The fascination I felt while she did so is indescribable. At that moment, I, who should know better than anyone the proper class distinction between upper and lowerclassmen, very nearly fell in love. Akashi-san continued to mutter incoherently, but I just sat there like a gentleman, comforting her.

○

As we walked along, I explained the story behind the Kamenoko brush to Akashi-san, while she frowned and sighed sympathetically.

"Master Higuchi's really asked for something impossible this time."

“I’m sure it has something to do with my failure to kidnap Kaori-san last night,” I surmised, but she shook her head.

“I don’t think that’s it, it wouldn’t be like him. I think I made him reconsider last night.”

“I wonder.”

“It was you who decided not to go through with the plan, wasn’t it? If you hadn’t turned back, I think I would have grown to despise you utterly.”

“But didn’t you ensnare Jougasaki-san as well?”

“No, no. In the end the Master had to call him.”

“So that’s how it is.”

“Besides, doing all those loathsome things are against the Master’s teachings anyways.”

“Things like that sound more persuasive when you say it.”

She wryly smiled and gave a little satisfied toss of her short black hair. She seemed rather jaunty.

“I failed to kidnap Kaori-san, and now I can’t find the brush. I guess I might as well resign myself to being excommunicated.”

“No, it’s a little bit early to give up,” she firmly stated and started to walk a little faster. With that determined gait she looked a bit like Sherlock Holmes. On the other hand, I walked behind her like a timid, clinging client visiting his office on Baker Street.

“I’ve been wondering for a while, but what exactly happened between Master Higuchi and Jougasaki-san?” she inquired quizzically as she proceeded towards Kawaramachi.

“You mean to say that even though Jougasaki-san is in your circle you haven’t heard anything at all?”

“Not even a bit.”

“The only thing I know is that it’s called the Proxy-Proxy War.”

“There must have been some really extraordinary event to begin with.”

She suddenly stopped in front of the shop I had visited just a while ago, Gabi Bookstore.

The sour-faced shop owner was shutting up the store, but when he saw Akashi-san’s face he cracked a broad smile. The octopus-faced man looked like as if he was the old bamboo cutter seeing Princess Kaguya for the first time, falling over himself to please her. Apparently Akashi-san worked at the bookstore part-time, and would also drop in whenever she passed by to chat with him. Even so, it was no mean feat to make this hard fellow melt like a marshmallow. The difference between him now, and when he had chased me out earlier, was like the gap between heaven and earth.

While I looked at the complete collections of Ueda Akinari displayed in the shop window, Akashi-san talked to the shop owner, who nodded and listened attentively. At last, he shook his head with an apologetic face and pointed towards the west.

“It’s not here, it looks like we’ll have to look somewhere else,” Akashi-san said to me, and our search for the Kamenoko brush wound its way west.

We crossed Kawaramachi street and walked along Takoyakushi street, entering crowded Shinkyougoku. From there she headed into an alley stretching towards Teramachi and without hesitation entered an old secondhand goods shop with old bags and electric lights lined up along the front. I played around with a tin submarine in the corner, while Akashi-san inquired about the brush and was directed to a general store in Nishiki market.

I trundled along obediently behind her as she went to extreme west end of Nishiki market and talked to a married couple tending a dark and crowded store; this time, she received information about a man on Bukkouji street who might know about the brush.

As the day faded we crossed Shijou street, passed south by Bukkouji temple, and walked back towards the east. Unlike where we had just come from, there were few people out and about here, and it was mostly quiet.

Akashi-san stuck her head into a shop with its shutters half-closed and called out, "Excuse me!" She dropped the name of the shop in Nishiki and was received favorably, calling me in as well.

Assorted odds and ends were placed all over the dirt floor. The thin, crane-like shop owner flicked a switch, flooding the store in orange light.

"Where did you hear about that?" Upon hearing this, I told him about Master Higuchi and his desperate request.

Illuminated by the orange light, the shop owner's thin, chiseled face looked even deeper and overflowed with dignity. I was overwhelmed and my voice trailed off into silence. After a while he turned and went into the dark recesses of the shop, returning after a while with a paulownia box. Without saying anything he opened the lid, revealing an ordinary-looking Kamenoko brush.

"This is it," he stated, handing the box to me.

"How much will it be?" I choked out, and he peered at me closely.

"Let's see... I'll make it twenty thousand yen."

No matter what special properties the palm tree seeds and fibers that made up this brush had, twenty thousand yen was an outrageous price. If it was going to be that much, I would much rather choose to be gloriously expelled.

I excused myself by saying that I didn't have that much money on hand, and left the shop, thinking about the fate that awaited me.

"Senpai, what are you going to do? Are you going to buy it?" Akashi-san asked as we walked down Shijou street.

"The hell I will. Twenty thousand for a brush? Something like that is meant to be used in Shimogamo teahouse, not to be covered in filth and grime in a 4.5 tatami room sink."

"But didn't the Master command you to retrieve it?"

"Might as well be expelled."

"Knowing him, he won't let you go that easily."

"No, he has you. Ozu's there too. He probably planned to fire a person like me eventually anyways."

"Stop being so pessimistic, please. I'll intercede for you."

"Thanks."

○

Since I had become a disciple, I had endured a great many of Master Higuchi's unreasonable demands. Now that I think about it, I have no idea why I wasted so much time doing his cryptic bidding.

There are many universities in Kyoto, and of course many students as well. As students of Kyoto, we were honor-bound to serve the city, or so he insisted. No matter whether it was rainy or windy, Ozu and I spent hours seated on the cold, stone bench of Philosophy, absorbed in Nishida Kitaro's "An Inquiry into the Good", having impenetrable discussions saying things like "In other words, perception of a kind of impulsive will" and so forth. We were like a kind of tourist attraction. Our lives were thus spent completely unproductively, and on top that I had problems with digestion. I tried with all my strength and mind to continue, but by volume one, chapter three, entitled "Will", I had completely burnt out. At first, I tried to keep an intellectual mindset, but that gradually came loose.

We read up to "Our bodies were originally built to carry out various activities, in order to preserve life and reproduce"; here, Ozu repeated "...in order to preserve life and reproduce". An indecent smile rose to his face, and he seemed to get overly excited. Without a doubt he was absorbed by some shameless fantasy brought about by his Y chromosome. Being tasked with reading impermeably dense works of philosophy day in and day out had brought his darkest urges to fruition, and "An Inquiry into the Good" had been transformed in his mind to "A Compendium of Technical Sex Jokes". Of course, any intentions to improve him had been brought to a standstill. If we were to continue to the fourth chapter on religion, we would surely fall into a sacrilegious conversation unfit to broadcast to the world at large. It was probably a good thing that our emotional strength, fortitude, and mental capacity did not sully the sacred name of Nishida Kitaro any further.

The Master was a fan of Ferraris, so whenever a Ferrari won an F1 race, I was tasked with the unpleasant burden of bearing a huge red flag with the vaulting horse insignia, and running back and forth across the intersection, while simultaneously trying to avoid death on the bumper of the passing cars. I had originally planned to make Ozu do it, but since he was the one who had scrounged it up and presented it to the Master, the burden fell to me. Furthermore, whenever the Master was fanned up, Ozu was nowhere to be found. In the end, I was the one who spread the light of Ferrari over the world. Passing cars hurled insults at me, while pedestrians simply stared at me with scornful

eyes, driving me further into thoughts of violence.

○

The Master always hungered for new things. As a person of great importance his appetite howled for new things, but in the end it was always Ozu and I who had to supply him with these things.

It wasn't just food, alcohol, and tobacco we provided him. Saws and folding fans, and even a Carl Zeiss monocular we won at a drawing in the shopping district. Even the copy of "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea" that he had been absorbed in reading for the past year was originally mine; I had bought it at the Shimogamo shrine used book fair, intending to warm myself up with the classic tale of adventure during the long, chilly autumn nights, but at some point it had somehow fallen into the Master's hands. We were already busy enough with Demachi futaba bean mocha and Shogoin yatsuhachi and sea urchin crackers and Nishimura eisei crackers, but when he decided he wanted a banner from the used book fair and a frog statue, we were utterly bewildered. A life-sized Kamen Rider figure, a tatami-sized fishcake, a seahorse, a giant squid; I was brought to my knees by these requests. Where was I supposed to find a giant squid?

We had once been told, "Go to Nagoya now and bring me a miso pork cutlet without the cutlet" but Ozu actually went all the way there; I had to tip my hat to him. By the way I had once gone all the way to Nara just to get the crackers they use to feed the deer.

When Master Higuchi said that he wanted a seahorse, Ozu dug up a fish tank from God knows where, and even found gravel and water plants to put in it, but suddenly an ominous crack came from the tank, and suddenly like Niagara Falls all the water came pouring out. The Master just laughed watching Ozu and I scrambling around the flooded 4.5 tatami room. Finally, he jovially commented, "Won't the water be leaking to the floor below?"

"Probably, considering how tattered this building is." Ozu facepalmed. "It'll be troublesome when the person below us complains. What should we do?"

"Wait. The room below us is mine!" I yelled.

Ozu looked relieved. "Oh, then it's fine. I hope it leaks even more."

From Master Higuchi's room, the water leaked through the floor into room 110 on the first floor, completely soaking my room. The dripping water had completely ruined all my books. Not only that, but my computer was also destroyed, and all my data was completely lost at sea. Obviously, this incident further hastened my retreat from the scholarly pursuits.

Even before he had obtained a seahorse, Master Higuchi made another request for a giant squid, and the fish tank that Ozu had obtained was tossed out into the corridor to gather dust. To distract himself from further thoughts about getting a sea creature, Master Higuchi "borrowed" my copy of "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea" and had refused to give it back for almost a year now.

As it was, I was always the one getting the short end of the stick.

○

Among the many follies of Master Higuchi, the fierce “Masochistic Proxy-Proxy War” with Jougasaki stands out as one of the most severe.

According to the Master’s orders, we drew over Jougasaki’s nameplate, blocked his front door with a large refrigerator, and sent him a number of sorrowful letters. To repay these efforts, Jougasaki glued the Master’s sandals to the floor, sent balloons filled with black pepper into the room, and had twenty servings of sushi delivered to us under Master Higuchi’s name. By the way, Master Higuchi wasn’t perturbed in the slightest when he received the sushi, and instead invited a number of foreign exchange students, in addition to Ozu and me, for a sushi party. Of course, he was quite calm and collected about the whole thing, but he made Ozu and me foot the sushi bill.

At the end of these two years of training, if one were to ask me whether I had improved myself as a young man I would regrettably have to respond that I had not. In that case, if I was further asked why I would spend so much time doing these things, the answer would be solely to see Master Higuchi look pleased. Whenever we made fools of ourselves doing some meaningless activity, he looked absolutely delighted. If we brought him something in accordance with his wishes, he would tell us, “You have come to understand as well”, and his face would crack into a huge grin.

The Master never devolved into meanness, and always kept a proud air about him. Yet when he laughed, he looked just like a child. Hanuki-san termed that special power that he had to make Ozu and I move with just a smile, “Higuchi Magic”.

○

The day after the search for the Kamenoko brush, though it was only seven in the morning, I was still asleep as most college students would consider this hour nighttime. A hasty rapping at the door jolted me from my sleep, and I sprung to open the door. Standing outside in the hallway, his hair still disheveled but his eyes gleaming, was Master Higuchi.

“What do you want, this early in the morning?”

At these words, the Master hugged a rectangular object to his breast, and just stood out in the cold hallway. Suddenly large teardrops began pouring out of his eyes. His eggplant-shaped face crumpled up, and his mouth quivered at the corners, as he wept and scrubbed his eyes like a bullied child. He managed to choke out, “I’ve finished, I’ve finished it!”

I nervously prodded “Finished what?”

“This.”

He reverently held out the thing he was clutching. It was Jules Vernes' "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea".

"This morning, the journey I have been on for the past year has ended. I was so moved, I wanted to let you know. Of course, I must return the book as well."

For a moment it looked like he was going to collapse, but he stood there so bravely, with tears streaming down his face, that I was touched, as if I had also been on that twenty-thousand league journey.

He handed the book back to me.

"Apologies for taking so long, truly. But it was a wonderful journey," he sighed. "By the way, I've been so captivated by the book that I haven't had time to eat. Won't you join me for a bowl of gyudon?"

And so we went out into the cool morning air and headed towards our favorite gyudon place.

○

After taking breakfast at the gyudon stand, Master Higuchi left while I was still paying the bill for both of us. I caught up with him nearer to the Kamo river, only to find him standing there stroking his unshaven chin and staring contentedly at the sky. "Nice weather, isn't it," he remarked. Above us, the slightly hazy May sky stretched towards the horizon.

We arrived at the Kamo delta. Master Higuchi passed through the pine trees and descended the embankment, turning to face the empty sky as though he was inhaling it. In front of us, cars and pedestrians hurriedly passed over the river on the wide Kamo-oohashi as the dazzling morning light beamed down upon them.

As if he were standing on the prow of a sailing ship, Master Higuchi walked to the point of the delta, and lit a cigar. From the left, the waters of the Kamogawa river flowed by, and from the right, the waters of the Takano river. They joined in front of Master Higuchi and with breathtaking fury roared their way south. Since it had rained heavily only a few days earlier, the rivers seemed to be quite swelled. The green shrubbery that grew along the riverbank was partially submerged, thanks to the unusual width of the waterway.

While taking a puff, the Master said, "I want to undertake a long journey."

"That's rare of you."

As far as I knew, he had never been away from his 4.5 tatami room for more than half a day.

"I've been considering it for quite some time, but it was reading Twenty Thousand Leagues that firmed my resolve. It seems that soon it will be time for me to ride the swells of the world at large."

"Do you have enough money?"

"Of course I don't," he laughed, while taking another puff. He suddenly seemed to remember

something.

“That’s right; the other day while I was on campus, I met a fellow I used to drink with until I was a junior. I greeted him, but he didn’t seem happy to see me at all. When he asked me what I was doing, I simply told him that I was re-taking my German class, but he hurriedly took his leave after that.”

“If he was your classmate, then he’s probably working on his doctorate by now. So by now, it would probably be awkward to meet someone who’s technically an underclassman now.”

“Why on earth would he be awkward? It’s not him that had to retake a year...I don’t understand.”

“And that’s why you’re the Master.”

He put on a triumphant expression.

Back when I was a freshman, the Master had warned me, “Under no circumstances must you repeat a year, play video games, or play mahjong. Otherwise your student life will go to waste.” I had followed that teaching faithfully and never once dipped my hand into any of them, though my student life had gone to waste anyhow. I had to inquire about that, no matter what.

We sat down on a bench on the embankment. Since it was Sunday morning, there were plenty of people jogging or taking a stroll by the river.

“While I was looking for the Kamenoko brush in Sanjou, I went to see a fortune teller.” I took a deep breath.

“You mean to say that you’ve hardly started life, yet you’ve already gone astray?” he smiled. “Why, you’ve hardly even left your mother’s womb yet.”

“With the two years here I have remaining, I don’t want to waste my time any further doing things like looking for brushes, fighting this Masochistic Proxy-Proxy War, looking for brushes, listening to Ozu’s filth, looking for brushes, and letting my student life go to ruin.”

“If you’re still worried about the brush, you needn’t be; I won’t expel you,” he reassured me. “You’ve done splendidly these past two years. Never mind what happened previously, I’m sure that you’ll be able to waste the next two years just as well. In fact, I guarantee it.”

“I don’t need that guarantee,” I sighed. “If I hadn’t met you and Ozu, I would surely have led a much more meaningful life. I would have studied hard, gone out with raven-haired maidens, and had a spotless student life. That’s right, there’s no doubt about it.”

“What’s wrong? Are you still half-asleep?”

“I’ve come to realize how worthless my life has become. I should have thought more about what I could have achieved. My choice during freshman year was a mistake. I have to grab my next opportunity, and escape this dreadful life.”

“What opportunity?”

“Colosseum, or something like it. That’s what the fortune teller told me.”

“Colosseum?”

“I don’t really know what it means either.”

The Master loudly scratched his sprouting chin, all the while scrutinizing me carefully. This face, the one he had on now, was the one that made him seem so lordly. It certainly seemed to suit the crumbling 4.5 tatami room he lived in, but it also seemed like that of a prince of noble lineage who had been shipwrecked while on a voyage in the Seto inland sea and had been borne by the flowing current to the 4.5 tatami island of solitude. And yet, he refused to throw away his decaying yukata, and remained in the 4.5 attami room.

“You can’t use a word like ‘opportunity’ while simultaneously putting limits on it. What regulates our existence isn’t what we can do, but rather what we can’t do,” he proclaimed. “Do you have the power to become a bunny girl? Or a pilot? Can you become a carpenter, or a pirate sailing the seven seas? How about a master thief, stealing away the treasures of the Louvre for your very own? What about the developer of a supercomputer?”

“No.”

He nodded thoughtfully, and then unexpectedly unoffered me a cigar. I gratefully accepted and fumbled around trying to light it.

“The majority of our sufferings in life result from the dreams of others. Trying to rely on something as unreliable as your inner potential is the root of many kinds of evil. You must recognize the person you are now, the person that no one else can become. What you call the “rose-colored student life” is unachievable, I guarantee it.”

“That’s cruel of you.”

“Think of it as fortitude. You should learn from Ozu.”

“Absolutely not!”

“Don’t be like that. Just look at what he is. He’s certainly an incorrigible fool, yet there’s a method to what he does. A genius who rushes through life will most certainly be unhappier than a fool who takes his time.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“Hmm...well, there are exceptions to everything, I suppose.”

We sat in silence for a time, watching the sun shining between the pine trees. For someone like me who boasted an average of ten hours of sleep a night, I was desperately short on my sleep quota, and being bathed in the warm sunlight started to make me feel sleepy. The Master hadn’t gotten any sleep either, and was looking tired himself. We sat there, two strange little men, in a half-trance, ruining the beautiful Sunday morning for everyone else.

“Shall we return?”

“Yes, let’s.”

On the way back to Shimogamo Yuusuisou, we passed by the road to Shimogamo shrine.

“You must settle down. Otherwise, you’ll never receive your inheritance,” the Master suddenly said, as if he was talking to himself.

“What inheritance? I asked in astonishment, but he just smiled and continued to suck on his cigar.

○

No one knows what the future holds. Within the midst of this bottomless darkness, each person must seize hold of the things that are of advantage to him. To impart the value of this philosophy on us, Master Higuchi proposed we hold a hotpot in the dark. To have the insight to pick out our desired food even in the dark is an essential skill to survive in today’s cutthroat society, or so he said, but I had my doubts.

That night, Ozu, Hanuki-san, and I showed up at Master Higuchi’s 4.5 tatami room for the hotpot. Due to an approaching report deadline, Akashi-san was unable to come. I also insisted that I had a report due concerning an exceedingly complex experiment, but my cries fell on deaf ears. This was an outrageous occurrence of sexism.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make the proper arrangements with the print shop,” Ozu said, but relying on Ozu to get me forged reports from the print shop was what was driving my scholarly pursuits into a downward spiral.

While each of us brought our own ingredients, we were forbidden from discussing what they were until it was time to put them into the pot. Ozu, who was still fuming about the Kaori-san kidnapping incident, announced with a repulsive grin, “Since it’s a hotpot, it’s fine to put whatever we want in there, you know,” and brought a number of suspicious ingredients. Knowing that this was Ozu we were dealing with, I began to fear for my life.

I was aware that Ozu hated mushrooms, and above all refused to recognize mushrooms as an edible food, so I brought an assortment of lovely mushrooms. Hanuki-san also seemed quite amused.

It was so dark in the Master’s room that we could hardly make out each other’s faces. The first wave of ingredients were emptied into the pot, and Master Higuchi encouraged us, “Eat up, eat up!”

“It’s not even cooked yet, though,” I objected.

“Don’t worry about that; just eat whatever your chopsticks touch,” he ordered in reply.

It seemed that Hanuki-san was drinking beer, yet “It doesn’t taste like beer at all in the dark,” she complained. “I can’t get drunk when I can’t see anything!”

○

I first met Hanuki-san in the summer of my freshman year, by way of Master Higuchi. After that, I often met her in the Master’s room.

She was beautiful, yet her expression was reminiscent of that of the wife of a military commander from the Sengoku era. No, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she was more like the

commander himself. There was much ambition in her face. If times hadn't changed, it seemed to me that she would have become a feudal lord, and if she had wanted to she could cut me and Ozu in two. Her favorite foods were ethyl alcohol and castellas.

Hanuki-san worked as a dental hygienist at Kubotsuki dental clinic near Mikagebashi. She had invited me to go there many times, but I couldn't stomach the idea of lying there defenseless with various rods and pipes being stuck in my open mouth; furthermore, I couldn't get the image of Hanuki-san wielding a bloodied halberd to scrape the plaque off my teeth out of my mind.

I had debated this many times before with Ozu, but for some reason it seemed like Hanuki-san was Master Higuchi's girlfriend, yet it wasn't really clear. Neither was she his disciple, and of course there was no way she was his wife. It was quite a mystery.

Hanuki-san was the same age as Master Higuchi, and also seemed to be an old acquaintance of Jougasaki as well. Jougasaki often had checkups done at the clinic where she worked as well, so they had crossed paths many times over the years.

It wasn't really clear what had gone down between the three, but it was certain that Hanuki-san knew what had happened to cause the Proxy-Proxy War between Jougasaki and Master Higuchi. Ozu and I had once schemed to get her drunk so we could ask the particulars, but she had turned the tables on us. After that we didn't try to ask her anything again.

○

Eating things that you can't see is an unexpectedly uncanny thing. Adding to my unease, among our number was Ozu, whose person is malice distilled into its purest form.

We started eating after the hotpot was cooked through, but each successive bite of food, or rather of things that resembled food, overwhelmed us. "What's this mushy thing?" Hanuki-san cried as she heaved whatever it was towards my forehead, causing me to grunt in surprise. I threw it back towards Ozu's direction, receiving a yelp for my troubles. Afterwards, we realized that it was actually just a long limp noodle, though in the dark it seemed more like a long, thin worm.

"What's this? An alien umbilical cord?" Ozu pondered.

"You put it in, didn't you? You eat it."

"I refuse."

"Young ones, you mustn't waste food," Master Higuchi commanded as if he were the head of a household, so we meekly quieted down.

After a little while, Ozu suddenly squeaked, "What's this!? It feels like a mushroom!" Apparently he had stumbled upon one of my Shiitake traps. I snickered and pulled up something that looked like a thumb-sized demon. My heart almost stopped, but upon further inspection I realized that it was just a firefly squid.

As we progressed to the third course, I noticed that for some reason the food had gotten suspiciously sweet, plus I detected the faint odor of beer.

“Ozu, you bastard. You put in red bean paste, didn’t you?” I cried.

“Heeheehee,” he sniggered. “But the beer is from Hanuki-san, isn’t it?”

“You figured it out? But it deepens the flavor, don’t you think?”

“It’s already so deep I can’t tell what’s what anymore,” I complained.

“It’s as deep as an abyss, this hotpot is.”

“I just want to let everyone know that it wasn’t me who put the marshmallows in,” Ozu quietly proclaimed. It appeared that he had pulled up a marshmallow.

I chewed on a red bean-flavored shrimp, and then bit into a marshmallow-coated piece of cabbage. When I took a glance at Master Higuchi, who was sitting beside me, he seemed perfectly happy to munch on whatever came his way. He seemed to be in his element.

I started talking about how Akashi-san had derailed the Kaori-san kidnapping. Hanuki-san cackled.

“Akashi-san was right; kidnapping Kaori-san would be way too mean.”

Ozu spoke up against her, sounding hurt.

“Think about all the perfect planning I put into that. Plus, Jougasaki dyed the Master’s yukata pink. That was pretty low on its own.”

“But you have to admit, it was pretty funny. Jougasaki is such a joker.”

Ozu sank into astonished silence, becoming one with the darkness. Considering that even at his best he always lurked in the shadows, it was impossible to pick out his silhouette now.

“It’s been fairly hard on Jougasaki too though,” Hanuki-san mused. “He was kicked out of the circle, but that was your doing wasn’t it, Ozu?”

She pointedly looked towards his direction, but he just sat invisibly in the shadows and didn’t respond.

“Jougasaki couldn’t stay in the circle indefinitely,” the Master declared. “It was simply his time.”

“That doesn’t sound at all convincing, coming from you.”

Since we were rather bloated from eating all manner of distasteful things, we soon turned from eating to discussing various matters. Hanuki-san seemed to be chugging down beer, while Ozu was still in a foul mood and refused to speak.

“Ozu, why aren’t you saying anything?”

The Master sounded puzzled. “Are you really still here?”

Since Ozu didn’t reply, Hanuki-san gaily said, “If he’s not here, then let’s talk about his girlfriend!”

“Ozu has a girlfriend?” I quivered in rage.

“They’ve been going out for two years. She’s in one of his circles, and I think she’s a lovely girl from a rich family. I’ve never seen her though. Once, when she dumped Ozu, he came to me for advice, and he cried to me over the phone the entire night...”

“That’s a lie, that’s a filthy lie!” From the darkness Ozu suddenly started screeching in protest.

“Ah, so you *are* there,” the Master said delightedly. “Well, how are things with her now?”

“I invoke my right to remain silent,” he replied from the shadows.

“What was her name again?” Hanuki-san sat there in thought. “Something like, Hiko...”

But there Ozu started protesting again, repeating “I invoke my right to remain silent” and “I want a lawyer” so loudly that Hanuki-san just laughed and stopped teasing him.

“You traitor, sneaking around by yourself without telling me,” I indignantly berated him, but he just innocently replied “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

While I glared in his direction, from beside me the Master said, “This is pretty big” with a muffled voice. “And it’s soft, too.” He gingerly tried to take a bite.

“This isn’t food,” his voice came softly. “I think this is against the rules.”

“Can someone turn on the light?”

I stood up and flipped on the lights. Ozu and Hanuki-san sat there, their mouths agape in astonishment. A cute sponge teddy bear sat on the table, its plush bottom seated firmly on the Master’s plate, sopping wet with broth.

“What an adorable teddy bear!” Hanuki-san said.

“Who put this in?” the Master inquired. “It’s obviously completely inedible.”

However, neither Ozu nor I nor Hanuki-san had any knowledge of it. The reason no one expected Ozu is because it was clear that he would never think to use something that pure and chaste for his evil schemes.

“I’ll take it,” Hanuki-san declared, and she went to wash it carefully in the sink.

○

Hanuki-san is a lovely person, but she was a pain when she drank too much. As her face got paler and paler, her eyes would glaze over and she would slowly start to lick your face. There was a certain exhilaration in running away with Ozu from an intoxicated Hanuki-san, who was trying to pin us to the wall and lick our faces. Of course, it wouldn’t be proper as a gentleman for me to get too excited over such a thing, though Master Higuchi seemed to have an amused expression on his face. Hanuki-san wanted me to sleep beside her after eating an entire castella she had received from her boss, but I vehemently refused.

Eventually Ozu’s twisted visage dozed off into filthy dreams, and Hanuki-san calmed down long enough to start nodding off.

“I am going on a journey,” the Master said in a sing-song voice. He hadn’t drunk very myself, but Hanuki-san had the mysterious ability to somehow get him drunk by drinking a lot herself.

“Where are you going to go?” Hanuki-san raised a bleary face.

“For now, I intend to circumnavigate the world, though it may take several years. Will you go with me, Hanuki-san? I could use someone who can speak English.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, that’s absurd.”

“How’s your English, Master?” I inquired.

“I refuse to learn such a simple language.”

“But what will you do about it then, Higuchi-kun?” said Hanuki-san.

“Ah, the hour has struck; it’s already past twelve. I must go eat at Neko Ramen.”

“Should we wake Ozu-kun?”

But the Master shook his head.

“Leave him be, the three of us will suffice.”

He winked. “We’re going to meet Jougasaki.”

○

Master Higuchi strolled leisurely through the shadows of Mikage-doori in front of Shimogamo shrine, with the Tadasu forest swaying in the night. It was completely deserted at this hour, with only the occasional car passing along Shimogamo-hondoori. I silently followed along behind the Master I silently followed along. Hanuki-san wavered along in the rear, though it seemed that she had finally sobered up.

“Listen, my apprentice.” Master Higuchi had a wrinkled grin on his eggplant-shaped face.

“I am going to make you my proxy.”

“What proxy?” I asked, confused.

“Fufu. In any case, ready yourself.”

“Why aren’t you picking Ozu?”

“Ozu-kun has duties of his own.”

It is rumored that Neko Ramen makes its broth out of cats, but whether that is true or not the taste is unmatched. I was still full from the hotpot, but at the thought of the flavor of Neko ramen I was ready to eat another course.

All alone in the wintry darkness burned the lone light of the Neko Ramen cart, with warm steam rising into the cool air. The Master looked cheerful and sniffed the air eagerly, rubbing his chin. At the cart there was only one other customer, who was talking to the shopkeeper.

As we approached, the shopkeeper raised his head and greeted us with a casual “Yo”. The customer stood up and looked at us, his finely chiseled features illuminated by the orange light.

“You’re late,” complained Jougasaki.

“My bad.”

“Jougasaki-kun, it’s been a while! How have you been?” Hanuki-san nodded towards him.

“Thanks to you, fit as a flea.” He flashed a gleaming white smile.

The three of them sat down at the counter, but I was at a loss for a seat, and just hid myself in the corner. What exactly was this gathering all about? I’d never seen Master Higuchi and Jougasaki together in one place, so this had to be for something important.

Thus, the curtains rose on the Higuchi-Jougasaki Reconciliation Negotiations.

“Well, let’s end this,” said Master Higuchi.

“Might as well,” agreed Jougasaki.

Thus, the Higuchi-Jougasaki Reconciliation Negotiations came to a conclusion.

○

“It lasted for a while this time, didn’t it?” the shopkeeper commented. “Five years, or more, I think?”

“I don’t remember,” Jougasaki snapped off carelessly.

“Probably five years exactly. It was around this time of year that our predecessors had their negotiations,” Master Higuchi conjectured.

“I see, I see. Five years exactly then,” the shopkeeper nodded. “What happened to them?”

“My predecessor got a job at a courthouse in Nagasaki, since he came from there originally.”

“And yours, Jougasaki?”

“Hmm, not really sure. He was pretty irresponsible, so I’m not really sure,” Jougasaki mused. “I haven’t talked to him since he left school.”

“Then he’s just like Higuchi-kun, always disconnected from reality. I wonder why he ended up being your Master?”

“Haven’t the slightest. I guess it just happened that way,” said Jougasaki with a wry chuckle.

Meanwhile, the shopkeeper handed out the ramen. While they continued to mysteriously converse among themselves, I stood outside the mosquito net, astounded by the fact that they were all so familiar with the shopkeeper, though I kept slurping my ramen.

“That guy?” Jougasaki suddenly said, looking in my direction.

“Mm. He’s my proxy,” the Master said, proudly clapping my shoulder. “Is yours not coming tonight?”

“That idiot, he said that he couldn’t come because he had to be somewhere else.”

“I see...”

A smile rose to Jougasaki’s cheeks. “He’s a hopeless villain, you know. But I have no doubt he’ll pull through as my proxy; yours had better be ready.”

“I look forward to it.”

“Make sure you bring him to the duel.”

“The shopkeeper laughed. “So you’re actually going to do that?”

“Naturally. The Kamo-oohashi Duel is one of the ceremonies, after all,” said the Master.

○

As it seemed that the conference had ended harmoniously, Jougasaki gallantly rode off on his bicycle. Master Higuchi yawned loudly and said, “I suppose we’ll need to kick Ozu awake from his beauty sleep sooner or later.”

“Master, I don’t really understand,” I said. “What’s a proxy?”

I’ll explain it to you tomorrow, I’m too tired tonight.”

And he set off back towards Shimogamo Yuusuisou.

I was tasked with taking Hanuki-san back to her apartment near Kawabata-doori. She was still softly cuddling the teddy bear from the hotpot as she walked along the dark road. She looked less like a military commander than a lonely, troubled girl.

While these thoughts went through my mind, we walked in silence along Mikage-doori.

“Jougasaki-san’s pretty cool, isn’t he?”

Upon hearing me say that she snickered.

“He’s not that different from Higuchi-kun, you know.”

“Really? They don’t seem too alike, other than their prank wars...”

“He’s actually enjoys it, though it’s hard to tell from his face.”

“That sounds kind of hard to believe.”

“It’s because he hasn’t had a friend other than Higuchi-kun for a long time.”

She fell silent and squashed the teddy bear to her body; it mournfully stared at me.

At last we approached the Takano river. Mikage-bashi is a snug, round sort of bridge from which you can see Daimonji mountain to the east. Whenever the Bon festival came around, the bridge would be packed with people who had come to see the Daimonji fires. By the way, I still haven’t seen an okuribi bonfire.

Hanuki-san still hadn’t said another word, and I couldn’t shake off an ominous premonition, as if some foul creature had built a nest inside her and was just about to crawl out. Her face looked blue, as if she were thinking extremely hard, and her lips were pressed together, though trembling rather subtly. It was like she was about to come to some sort of life-changing decision.

“Are you not feeling well, Hanuki-san?” I inquired somewhat timidly, but she grinned widely.

“You noticed?”

She suddenly rushed to the guardrail on the bridge and almost beautifully, smoothly threw up. She

stared thoughtfully at the food that she had just eaten at Neko ramen, now coming out of her mouth and falling down into the Takano river.

In that moment of weakness she let go of the teddy bear, and it sadly rolled off the guardrail towards the river like a riceball. “Ah—” she stuttered and started to climb onto the guardrail; it was all I could do just to restrain her. We both nearly fell off the bridge, following after the ramen and teddy bear. The little form of the teddy bear sadly revolved around and around as it fell, finally hitting the surface of the river with a faint plop.

“Ahhh, it fell.”

She exhaled regretfully, letting her chin rest on the guardrail. “I wonder where he’ll be swept off to,” she said in a sing-songy sort of voice.

“From here it’ll go towards the Kamo delta, and then into Kamo river, and then into the Yodo river, and then finally into Osaka bay,” I explained kindly.

She sighed through her nose and stood up, saying “Fine, go where you please,” in an overly theatrical voice, inadvertently spraying spit everywhere.

I felt sorry for the teddy bear.

○

After seeing her off to her own apartment I returned to Shimogamo Yuuisuisou. As I came in sight of my own room I thought I saw a filthy, unnerving sort of beast sitting in front of my door, but it turned out to be Ozu.

“Go back to your own place,” I chastised him, but he replied “Don’t be so cruel now,” and barged into my room, collapsing onto the floor like a cadaver.

“Where’d you all go off to without telling me.”

“Neko ramen.”

“Bunch of meanies. I was lonely, so lonely I thought I’d disappear.”

“Your wish is my command.”

For a while he kept blubbering in that piteous voice, but eventually he grew tired of it and went to sleep. I tried to shunt him off to the dust-filled corner, but he mumbled something and refused to budge.

For my part, I crawled into my futon and fell deep into thought. I’d become the Master’s successor, but what exactly was this “Masochistic Proxy-Proxy War” business about? What happened between Master Higuchi and Jougasaki? What was tomorrow’s duel on the Kamo-oohashi going to be like? Was the shopkeeper from Neko ramen involved or not? Was I going to be forced to continue this battle of pranks with Jougasaki’s successor? Could I still run away? What kind of person was this successor? What was I going to do if he was the type of person that beat the weak, groveled to the

strong, was selfish and lazy and a complete demon, neglected his studies, lacked any shred of pride and gorged himself three times a day on other people's unhappiness?

I got up and just listened to Ozu's breathing for a while.

I had a terrible premonition feeling so strong it was as if I was staring straight at it; it spread like oil through my chest, and any attempt to deny it would have been worthless. I was so dissatisfied with my present situation that I went to the trouble of consulting the fortune teller in Kiyamachi, yet what exactly was it? I was supposed to grab hold of an opportunity and escape into a better life, but wasn't I being pressured more and more into a ravine where turning back was impossible?

Ozu turned towards me as I lay there in torment, his face twisted into a cherubic semblance of sleep.

○

The next day, I kicked a still half-asleep Ozu into the hallway, and left for campus.

I still couldn't keep the Kamo-oohashi Duel out of my mind, and spent the day in an agitated state. I hastily brought the school experiment I was conducting to an end, and hurried back to Shimogamo Yuusuisou. I went to call on Master Higuchi, but the board that swung from his door said "Taking a bath". He was no doubt cleansing himself in preparation for the duel which was soon to occur.

I returned to my own room and listened to the burbling sounds of the coffeemaker, while staring at the castella that Hanuki-san had given me the previous night. It was really quite cruel of here, to make one person eat such a quantity of castella. I thought that it would be far more appropriate to take it while sipping tea with some other lovely person, and surprised myself when Akashi-san came to mind. To face this unlucky selection as a successor of the Masochistic Proxy-Proxy War, and being forcibly placed upon the doorstep of unhappiness, it is all I can do to indulge myself in these insolent daydreams and escape from reality if only for a little while. I am not unaware of my shame.

Above my head, a hapless moth that had gotten in fluttered around the fluorescent light. I remembered that Akashi-san hated moths, and started thinking about that incident on the stairs like an idiot. I cut up the castella with a fruit knife, and stuffed my cheeks with slice after slice, groaning to myself. As I was about to reach for my library of porn to assuage my feelings of worthlessness, a knock came at my door.

When I opened the door, Akashi-san was standing on the other side, but she screamed and stepped back. At first I thought it was my countenance that had frightened her, my cheeks flush with passion like a beast, but I realized that it was actually the moth behind me. I slowly coaxed the moth out and showed Akashi-san inside like a gentleman.

"Master Higuchi called me to inform you he'll come at dusk. It doesn't look like he's in his room," she told me.

I quickly recounted to her the conference last night between Master Higuchi and Jougasaki.

“Things really got moving while I was busy with the report, didn’t they? I suppose I’ve failed as a disciple.”

“Don’t worry about it, it was over very quickly.”

I poured a coffee and gave it to Akashi-san. She took a sip and said, “I brought something for you.” From her bag she produced a paulownia box that seemed somehow familiar; she opened it to reveal the Kamenoko brush that she and I had been searching for, quietly nestled inside. “Now you won’t be expelled by the Master, correct?” I was moved to tears by her consideration for her elder disciple.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry...” I groaned.

“It’s fine,” she replied.

“By the way, would you like some castella?” I offered. She took a slice and munched on it.

“I’ve inconvenienced you quite a bit, being busy with that report and all.”

“I suppose; it’s a ways from being completed.”

“What kind of report is it? You’re in engineering, aren’t you?”

“I’m enrolled in the structural engineering department. It’s about things like shrines, and coloseums...”

Colosseum.

A hard knock came at the door, and Master Higuchi’s voice floated through.

“Hello, disciples. It is time for the duel.”

○

The Master’s face was still slick from his bath, though unshaven as always. “I was just in the bathhouse with Ozu,” he said.

“And where’s he?”

“He went to Jougasaki’s place. It seems that he is actually Jougasaki’s disciple. What an interesting character.”

He idly cackled. “He was also the one who dyed my yukata pink.”

Of course, I’m sure that most of my readers figured this out already.

Last fall, after Jougasaki was kicked out of the circle, Ozu started hanging out with him, listening to his complaints while also sympathetically cursing the wretch who was responsible for his misfortune. Of course, I’ve already mentioned that the sneak who kicked Jougasaki out was Ozu himself. Thus Ozu wormed his way into Jougasaki’s heart and secured his place as a trusted confidant. Each day they grew closer like two snakes coiled together, and as soon as Jougasaki learned that Ozu was Master Higuchi’s disciple, he asked him to become a spy, to which Ozu acquiesced with a smile like a twisted merchant’s, “You’re so sly, Jougasaki-senpai!”

With Ozu's clandestine manipulations, the stage was set for a meaningless struggle to begin.

Under Master Higuchi's orders, Ozu stuffed ten different kinds of bugs into Jougasaki's mailbox; conversely, under Jougasaki's orders, he dyed the Master's yukata pink, and thus going back and forth through complicated maneuvers he became a double agent. Even without thinking hard about it, only Ozu would work so tirelessly. It's hard to say what he meant to gain by bending all his energy to pull off these feats. It is a tantalizing enigma, yet one that I won't put too much thought into solving.

"I realized that he was Jougasaki's spy, but it was amusing, so I left him alone," the Master chortled.

"So basically, everything was his doing," I theorized. "And you both were dancing in the palm of his hand."

"I have to admit, I'm impressed with Ozu-san," said Akashi.

"Yes, quite," the Master said without looking upset. "He's such an incorrigible fool. In the history of the Masochistic Proxy-Proxy War, there has never been such a feat. His name will surely go down in history. Ah, a castella."

He noticed the castella, and without even being offered any started to wolf it down. Looking triumphant, he announced, "Well then, tonight is the Kamo-oohashi Duel!"

"Master, hold on a second."

He nodded at my confusion.

"You must want to know the details, I suppose. It is time to explain the origins of the Masochistic Proxy-Proxy War."

○

What is the Masochistic Proxy-Proxy War?

This miserable, yet noble conflict can be traced back to before the Pacific War.

The origins of the matter are said to stem from a high school love rivalry, or from a drinking competition, but whichever it is, the details have been lost to history.

The first battle dragged on over a long period, as both participants were still in school and fought incessantly. It went on so long that even when they graduated, no conclusion was in sight. The unnamed belligerents had already given up on solving the problem in school. The obvious solution would be to make peace, but the two of them were obstinate and refused to do this. Yet they were both so tired of it that they didn't want to go on fighting either. They were proud too, so they refused to let it go unresolved. The surprise solution they eventually came up with was to force two underclassmen to fight in their place as proxies.

And that was how the long, unbroken history of the war began.

Though nobody knows how the war was fought back then, it's clear that even then the unwritten rules of engagement consisted of pulling off petty pranks. There doesn't need to be any enmity

between the two participants; the only requirement is that they must fight. The new proxies simply continued to fight without ending the war as their predecessors had; they didn't know whether or not they should end the war. Eventually they handed over the reins to a new set of proxies, postponing the end even further.

Through the war, defeat, and post-war period, without any concern for the goings-on in the world at large, the proxy war raged on continuously. The reason for the battle was completely forgotten, with only the rules being passed on, which eventually became tradition in themselves and completely regulated the actions of the participants.

In the latter half of the '80s, Neko ramen became the designated location for the negotiations and inheritance ceremony. After the fighters concluded their duel on the Kamo-oohashi, they would hand over the reins to their proxies. The new proxies would then begin their own battle, and then eventually elect new proxies of their own to succeed them.

That day, Ozu became Jougasaki's proxy, and I, Master Higuchi's.

Master Higuchi and Jougasaki were the twenty-ninth proxies. There wasn't actually any feud between them. Either every proxy had disliked the idea of a ceasefire, or they simply just didn't know how to end the war.

In other words, this war was utterly meaningless.

○

“Is this a joke?”

"If you don't become my proxy, then Jougasaki and I will never be reconciled. Ozu is such a meddler I'm sure it'll be worth your while."

You've got to be kidding me!"

Master Higuchi suddenly knelt to the ground before me.

I hardly thought it was a tradition worth going all this way to protect, but I couldn't say no to his actions. I started crying a little inside, knowing that my rose-colored campus life was once again slipping out of my reach. "Fine," I muttered. The Master raised his head and nodded, looking satisfied.

"Akashi-san, will you be the witness? I need you to ensure that both of them fulfill their duties wholeheartedly, and keep the peace if things get out of hand."

“I understand,” she curtly nodded.

There was no turning back.

The Master let out a sigh of relief and let his body relax a little. "Now I have no regrets," he murmured to himself. He produced another cigar and lit it up. Having been forced to take up the mantle of this meaningless war and throwing away any chance of grabbing whatever opportunity would come my way, I miserably thought about what lay before me in this worthless, decades-old conflict, when I noticed Akashi-san poking me insistently. She pointed at the box containing the Kamenoko brush.

"Master, I have the Kamenoko brush. Akashi-san managed to obtain it for me."

As I presented him with the brush, the Master's eyes widened in astonishment, and he gave a little gasp, but soon his face crumpled apologetically.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'll be leaving after the duel is over."

"Eh?" Akashi-san gaped in surprise.

"So you really are going to go on that trip around the world? It still seems a bit reckless to me."

But he just shook his head.

"It was for that sole purpose that I chose you to be my proxy. I won't be going back to that 4.5 tatami room for a while. Can I ask you to clean it up for me?"

"Self-centered to the last, I see."

"I suppose so." He smiled wanly.

"Look at the time; we need to get to the Kamo-oohashi. It's my last battle with Jougasaki, after all."

As we were about to leave the room, Hanuki-san came rushing in, completely out of breath. "Oh good, I made it..." she wheezed. "I ran here as soon as I got off work."

"I was beginning to think you weren't coming to watch."

"I want to see it with my own eyes, though it's a pretty pointless sort of battle."

And so we set off for the Kamo-oohashi.

○

We stood on the east end of Kamo-oohashi. Master Higuchi rolled up the sleeve of his yukata and consulted an old-fashioned wristwatch.

The afternoon had already given way to indigo twilight, and the noisy students had already begun their occupation of the Kamo delta. It was probably a welcoming banquet for new students. Come to think of it, I had spent the past two years completely avoiding such things.

The roaring Kamo river was swelled from the rain that had fallen the other day, its surface gilded with silver from the streetlights that were beginning to flicker on one by one. Imadegawa-doori was already bustling, and passing cars washed light through Kamo-oohashi. The orange lights that dotted the thick guardrail on the bridge shone dimly, mysteriously through the night. For some reason,

tonight the bridge looked awfully wide.

“Ah, here they are,” the Master said, sounding pleased, and started walking towards the center of the bridge.

From the other side of the bridge, I could see Jougasaki walking towards us. Beside him, of course, was Ozu.

The two parties glared at each other all the way, and met at the exact center of the bridge. Below us, the sheets of spray shot up from the raging river. Far to our south, at the ends of the black expanse of water, the lights of Shijou town glittered like precious gems.

“Well, if it isn’t Akashi-san?” Jougasaki said, looking puzzled.

“Good evening,” she nodded back.

“You know Higuchi?”

“I became his disciple last fall.”

“She’s just an observer today. This is the apprentice I introduced you to yesterday,” the Master stated, pointing at me. “By the way, isn’t your proxy over there my own disciple, Ozu?”

A smile floated to Jougasaki’s face.

“You thought he was your man, didn’t you? But the entire time, he was actually my spy. Did I fool you?”

“You got me,” the Master smiled ruefully.

“Well then.”

“Let’s do it.”

The air suddenly became incredibly tense.

While we looked on, Jougasaki and Master Higuchi squared off against each other. Jougasaki’s chiseled features were washed in pale light, looking almost as if he were an assassin from the end of the shogunate. Ozu, standing beside him, only added to his appeal, floating that gloomy grin. Meeting them was Master Higuchi, his eggplant-shaped face as strained as it could possibly get. As he stood there haughtily, his arms nobly folded across the front of his deep blue yukata, I could feel an ineffable vigor radiating from him. The two opponents looked like mighty rivals, arrayed against each other in an epic showdown.

What sort of battle was it going to be? We waited there with bated breath, awaiting the next development.

At last, Hanuki-san walked between them, her hand poised as if were about to cut a string that linked the two.

“Get it over with quickly.”

For a duel that was going to end five years of conflict, that sure was a disappointing introduction.

Jougasaki went into a low martial-arts stance, while Ozu hastily retreated to the rear, as did Akashi-san and I. Master Higuchi stood completely motionless. Jougasaki pushed his left palm in front

of him towards the sky, while his right hand was in a fist at the side of his waist, as if he were about to leap towards Master Higuchi. In response, the Master unfolded his arms and made strange, esoteric signs with his hands as if he were chanting mantras.

“Let’s go, Higuchi,” Jougasaki snarled.

“Prepare yourself,” replied the Master.

After a breathless moment, the two of them suddenly sprang into action.

“Rock, paper –”

“Scissors!”

Jougasaki dramatically crashed to the ground.

“All right, we have a winner!” Hanuki-san started applauding by herself; Akashi-san joined in a beat or two after. I was too dumbfounded to move.

“I won, so you’ll be the one to make the first strike,” the Master instructed me.

The Kamo-oohashi Duel was nothing more than a game of rock-paper-scissors to decide which proxy would make the first strike.

○

“Well, well, that’s a burden off my shoulders.”

The Master sighed and looked up to the indigo skies, crossing his arms and returning to his usual unflappable manner. Jougasaki stood up as if nothing had happened, a nonchalant expression on his face. Master Higuchi took out a cigar and offered it to him.

Jougasaki took a puff and asked, “Well, Higuchi, what are you going to do now? It’s all at an end now, thanks to you.”

“I will fly off into the world.”

“Hey, Hanuki, Higuchi’s spouting psychobabble again.”

“Don’t mind him, he’s just an idiot,” Hanuki-san replied. “Want to go drinking?”

During this exchange, the Master abruptly smiled and leaned over to whisper in my ear.

“Now, I probably won’t be able to meet you again.”

“Huh?”

“So I’m going to give you my globe.”

“Okay, but it was my globe in the first place.”

“Was it really?”

So he really intended to disappear off somewhere.

As I tried to find the words to answer him, screams rose up from the Kamo delta to the north. The merrymaking students appeared to be in an uproar, running this way and that. As I grabbed the handrail and leaned over to look, I could make out something that resembled a dark cloud stretching

from the Aoi Park forest to the delta. It buzzed loudly as it grew larger and concealed the entire delta from view. The people inside the cloud on the delta ran agitatedly this way and that, flapping their arms and batting at their heads as if they were half-crazed. The dark cloud began to spread over the surface of the water towards us. We gazed at it, fascinated.

The noise from the delta began to become even more tumultuous. From the pine forest the cloud kept sliding closer to us. This wasn't an ordinary occurrence. Flutterflutterflutterflutterflutter went the squirming cloud as it rolled towards us like a carpet, rising above the water, coming over the handrail and burying the Kamo-oohashi like an avalanche.

"GYEEEEEEEEEE" Akashi-san screamed as though she were a character from a manga.

It was a swarm of moths.

○

The next day the moth plague made the Kyoto news, though nobody understood where the moths had come from. By tracing their route, it appeared that the moths had come from the Tadasu forest, that is to say, Shimogamo shrine, though things were still unclear. Even if all the moths in the forest had simultaneously decided to migrate, there was no clear reason why. There was an alternative rumor going around that the moths had actually come from the neighboring Izumigawa town, but that explanation was just as inexplicable. That night, it appeared that a swarm of moths had also gathered in a corner of my own boarding house.

When I returned, the corridor was littered with moth corpses. I had forgotten to lock my door, so my room was blooming with them as well, but I reverently gathered the corpses and buried them.

○

With fluttering moth scales battering my face and sometimes moths entering my mouth, I stood fast covering Akashi-san and gallantly protected her from the worst of it. I was originally from the city and had never had to coexist with bugs, but these past two years in the boarding house had completely accustomed me to all sorts of arthropods.

Even so, the sheer number of moths that night completely overwhelmed the bounds of common sense. The thrumming sound of beating wings cut us off from the outside world, as if it were not moths but a swarm of winged imps passing over the bridge. It was nearly impossible to see anything. What hazy glimpses I got out of my gritted eyes was limited to the moths dancing in the orange light of the streetlamps and Akashi-san's shining black hair. I didn't have the composure to see how everyone else was faring.

After a while the swarm moved on, leaving only a few stragglers flitting here and there. Akashi-san

stood there with an ashen face, frantically brushing herself off all over, repeating over and over, “Are there any on me? Are there any on me?” She then sprinted away with frightening swiftness towards the east end of the bridge away from the writhing moths still dotting the ground, collapsed to the ground in the soft light of a café on the other side.

The moths were still receding towards Shijou like a thick carpet.

I noticed the others standing there and looking dimly around the area. I mimicked them, glancing around the spots of orange light dotting the bridge.

As if he had made a magnificent escape in the cloud of moths, Master Higuchi was nowhere to be seen. He truly lived up to the name of Master, making such a brilliant escape. Mysteriously, Ozu was also missing; I guessed that he’d also planned the disappearance from the start.

“Higuchi and Ozu are gone!” Jougasaki said in amazement, still surveying the bridge.

Hanuki-san suggested, “Let’s get out of here,” still holding on to the guardrail as the evening breeze wafted by.

○

“I’m going to go drinking tonight,” Hanuki-san declared, with her hands on her hips. “Come on, Jougasaki.”

“Fine by me,” he said with a slightly distant, almost lonely expression. “But that card Jougasaki didn’t even say goodbye. It would have been nice to have that memory, at least.”

“It’s been a while since we drank together.”

Hanuki-san stepped closer to me. “Take care of Akashi-san, huh?” The two of them turned and started moving off in the direction of Kiyamachi.

I walked towards Akashi-san, who was still cowering in the light of the café. “Are you all right?” I asked. “The Master has gone away.”

She turned a queasy face and looked at me.

“Will having a cup of tea make you feel better?” I was certainly not trying to take advantage of her cowardice towards moths; I was simply concerned by her pale face. She nodded, and we went into the café in front of us.

“I wonder what happened to Master Higuchi? Ozu too,” I pondered while sipping a cup of coffee.

She looked at me with my head tilted, and suddenly burst out laughing.

“It’s like he’s one of those hermit wizards or something, like he just disappeared into the sky!” She took a sip. “It’s just like him.”

“I wonder where he went.” I tilted my head. “But I’m pretty sure Ozu had something to do with it.”

While we were slowly drinking our coffee, I suddenly remembered and started talking about

Colosseum. I wondered aloud whether her saying the word back then had been the chance I was waiting for. If I hadn't been swept up by the Master again, I surely would have been able to set foot upon a new life. I lamented letting my rose-colored future get away again with a loud sigh.

"I let it slip through my fingers..." I groaned. "And now I'll just be going through the same motions over again."

"No, you're wrong." Akashi-san shook her head. "I'm sure you've grabbed hold of that chance already, you just haven't noticed it yet."

As we sat there, the sound of an ambulance siren gradually came closer and closer. We thought it would pass us, but it came to a stop on the west end of Kamo-oohashi; loud clamor of activity pierced through the café.

"Thank you so much for finding that Kamenoko brush, by the way."

I inclined my head, and she gave a still-shaky smile.

"Though it's a shame that the Master left. I'm just happy that it made you happy."

I suddenly felt a rush of emotion that was improperly directed towards someone who was my apprentice. Though it's against my principles to explain what exactly those feelings were, I felt that I needed to do something, anything, in accordance to those feelings. I spluttered out a single line.

"Akashi-san, won't you go to Neko ramen with me?"

○

To describe how the relationship between Akashi-san and I developed after that would deviate from the purpose of this manuscript; consequently, I will refrain from recounting it here. I am sure my readers would rather not waste their time reading such contemptible stuff.

There is nothing more boring than telling a story of successful love.

○

Following that incident, all knowledge of the whereabouts of Master Higuchi were lost to darkness. No one thought that he would pull off such a dramatic escape, without even saying goodbye. I still don't know if he ever set off on his trip around the globe.

After his disappearance, it took Akashi-san, Hanuki-san, and myself half a month to unenthusiastically clean up room 210. The Kamenoko brush proved to be an immense help, but it was still an immense struggle. Hanuki-san independently gave herself an early discharge from cleaning duty; Akashi-san had a panic attack while looking at the built-up filth and attempted to flee; and Ozu, who had come to observe our efforts and was leaning on crutches, threw up all over the sink.

The tempest of my rage at being forced into discipleship by Master Higuchi raged the fiercest just

before he had disappeared, but even now that he was gone I was still dissatisfied. When I saw the pins on the globe in the Master's room, marking all the locations of the Nautilus, I was unexpectedly overcome with emotion and almost embraced the globe, wanting to rub my face all over it, but I restrained myself. I removed the pins and wondered where Master Higuchi was right now.

By the way, the fantastic Kamenoko brush is currently in Akashi-san's room. She has learned to use it with great efficiency.

○

I later heard from Hanuki-san that Jougasaki had left the lab, seeking to find work somewhere. Now that I think about it, I wonder where that beautiful, silent maiden, Kaori-san, that Ozu had tried to steal was. I pray that she and Jougasaki are continuing to live a blissful life together.

Hanuki-san is even now carrying on as a dental hygienist at Kubozuka dental clinic. About two months after the Master had disappeared I went in to have my teeth examined. My wisdom teeth had become a little decayed, prompting Hanuki-san to reproach me, "Now aren't you glad you came?" Furthermore, I was bestowed with the honor of having her scrape the plaque off my teeth. To her credit, despite having such a haughty face like an ambitious military commander, her hand was very gentle: the mark of a true professional.

It is not for a ruffian like myself to imagine what she went through after the Master left, but I imagine she was very lonely. Thence, when she invited me to go drinking, I, along with Ozu and Akashi-san, always bravely took up her offer.

It was always a rough time.

○

Master Higuchi's sole concern, the Masochistic Proxy-Proxy War, was handed over to Ozu and me. As I faced the unpleasant task of continuing this war until I found a proxy, I was filled with thoughts of gloom.

At the Kamo-oohashi Duel, it had been decided that I would make the first strike. I took advantage of Ozu's admittance into the hospital to repaint the bicycle he called "Dark Scorpion" bright pink. It was a masterpiece, and afterwards you could hardly recognize it as the same bicycle.

When Ozu came out hobbling on his crutches and saw this, he puffed up like a fishburger, and huffily rode off towards Shimogamo Yuusuisou.

"This is outrageous, you can't just paint it pink!"

"You painted Master Higuchi's yukata pink, though."

"That's completely different!"

“The hell it is!”

“I’m going to Akashi-san to file a complaint, I know she’ll understand!”

And so it went.

○

After experiencing the many new developments that peppered my campus life after Master Higuchi absconded, it was quite vexing to have to admit the naiveté of my previous life. I am not one to recognize my faults so easily. It’s true that I bore great affection for myself, but what woman would want to embrace such a filthy twenty year old man like myself? I was so provoked by this that I angrily and vehemently refused to help my previous self.

I couldn’t shake off the feeling that choosing to become a disciple in front of that fateful clock tower that day had been a mistake. What if I had chosen a different path? If I had gone into Misogi movie circle, or chosen the softball circle, or even entered the secret society, my past two years certainly would have been quite different. At least, it is plain my life would not have been as twisted as it is now. Perhaps that ever elusive rose-colored campus life would have been in my grasp. I could not bring myself to deny that the past two years had not been full of mistakes and missed chances.

Above all, my unfortunate mistake of meeting Ozu would surely haunt me for the rest of my life.

○

Immediately after the disappearance of Master Higuchi, Ozu was admitted into a hospital by the university.

It was quite delightful to see him strapped down to the white hospital bed. Because of his already pale complexion, it appeared as if he had contracted some incurable disease, though in reality it was merely a bone fracture. It was probably appropriate to say that he was lucky getting off with just a fracture. I came to gloat over his inability to partake in any of his usual wicked habits, but instead of saying anything I mostly just sat there eating a castella.

Why did Ozu have a broken bone?

Let us return to that evening, when that swarm of moths overtook the bridge.

○

With fluttering moth scales battering my face and sometimes moths entering my mouth, I stood fast covering Akashi-san and gallantly protected her from the worst of it.

On the other hand, though Ozu was being completely swarmed by moths, that odd smile never

left his face, and he simply stood there waiting for things to subside. The only thing he seemed to be worried about was his hair getting mussed.

He saw Master Higuchi climb up on the guardrail of the bridge. Through the storm of insect scales, Master Higuchi stood up there, his arms outspread, as if he were about to take flight above the ancient city. Ozu instinctively shouted out, "Master!" A few moths immediately flew into his mouth and smothered his cries, he walked up to the guardrail anyways and took hold of the Master's yukata, as if he were in a dream. Suddenly the Master seemed to lift off into the sky, and Ozu found himself being pulled up along with him. The Master looked down at him, and though the air was flooded with the sound of beating wings, Ozu insisted that the Master said to him, "Ozu, you show a lot of promise."

Since it was Ozu telling us this, I obviously didn't believe him.

After telling him that, or so Ozu said, the Master slipped through Ozu's fingers and disappeared.

Ozu immediately lost his balance and fell into the Kamo river, breaking his arm and being forced to cling to one of the bridge supports like a discarded piece of trash, until he was discovered by one of the revelers from the Kamo delta.

The ambulance that Akashi-san and I had heard elegantly sipping coffee at the café was apparently called for Ozu's sake.

○

I wasn't persuaded in the slightest by Ozu's account of the Master's disappearance, and suspected that there was another side to this story.

"So you're saying that the Master was borne off on his journey by that swarm of moths?"

"That's right, there's no other explanation."

"I can't trust anything you say."

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"It's hard enough believing that you would try to throw yourself at the Master to stop him."

"It's because he's a very dear person to me," he indignantly huffed.

"If you really cared for him that much, then why did you keep switching loyalties between Jougasaki and the Master like an opportunist? What did you mean by that?" I said.

○

His customary youkai-like grin floated to his face.

"It's how I show my love!"

"I don't need that nasty stuff," I replied.

Chapter 3 –The 4.5 Tatami Sugarcoated Life

In the two years before the spring of my junior year of college, I accomplished not a single thing of practical use. Wholly avoiding wholesome association with the opposite sex, diligence towards my studies, the discipline of my physical body, and other activities directed towards becoming a capable member of society I instead isolated myself from women, abandoned my studies, and let my flesh fall into ruination. Even so, why is that I ceaselessly labored away, still anticipating that excellent arrangement?

I must inquire of the responsible party. Where is the person responsible?

It is not the case that I have ceaselessly been in this condition. Immediately following my birth, I was the very paragon of unmarred purity, as charming as the infant Prince Genji; without a single wicked thought in that head it is said that my radiant face spread the light of love throughout the hills and valleys of my hometown. It is doubtful whether that is still the case. Each time that I look in a mirror I fly into a rage, asking 'Why is that you have become thus so? Is this the sum of your current existence?'

There are those who say that I am still young, and that people are yet things that may change.

How ridiculous.

It is said that the soul of a man is the same at one hundred as it is at three. Yet with this year, another one will be added to my twenty, and the end of my splendid quarter-century-long youth of my life will soon approach. What is to become of the coarse efforts I have poured into changing my own personality? At this stage if I attempt to twist my character which already towers above a sea of nothingness, the most I can do is break it.

At this moment, I must drag my obstinate self into leading a respectable life. I must force my own eyes to realize that reality. It is firmly my intention to not close my eyes.

And yet, somehow, it is unbearable to look.

○

After two years of complete unproductivity, I became a third-year college student.

The incident happened around the end of May. From here on, I will explain the King Lear-esque dramatic incident involving myself the three women who revolved around me; however, keep in mind that this is neither a tragedy nor a comedy. There will be undoubtedly be people who find no need for sensitivity and will shed tears upon reading this as if curry powder has entered their contact lens. Contrariwise, there may be people who upon reading this will give out great belly laughs; these people I despise utterly, and I will chase them to the ends of the earth, exacting the blood of the fathers by dunking their heads in hot water for three minutes.

As long as the will exists, even the slightest, most trivial thing can impart wisdom, or so some wise person said, but I'm sure that you can apply that saying to this series of events.

I learned many things as well, so many that I couldn't enumerate them. If I had to pick two, they would be one: don't leave decision making up to your Johnny, and two: don't stand on the guardrail of the Kamo-oohashi.

As for the rest, you can read between the lines.

○

It was the middle of the night, on an evening in late May.

I lived in the Shimogamo Yuusuisou boarding house in Shimogamo Izumigawa, which is said to have burnt down in the turbulence at the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate and rebuilt in the exact same fashion, and if it weren't for the light leaking out the windows, it would be just like an abandoned ruin. When I first visited this place during the co-op association introductions after my matriculation I thought that I had wandered into Kowloon Walled City. Anyone who sees this crumbling, wooden three-story building would probably think to place it on the list of important historical structures yet if it were to burn down it is likely that no one would even blink. Even the landlady who lives to the east would mostly certainly be relieved.

I sat on the tatami mats of my domicile, room 110, glaring at the fluorescent light overhead, which was intermittently flickering in and out. I knew that I needed to change it soon, but since doing that was tiring I kept putting it off.

As I was about to reach into my library of pornography, a sudden pounding came at the door: my despicable friend Ozu had come to visit, and my peaceful respite was thrown into shambles. I pretended to be out and tried to absorb myself in a book, but he persisted and barked for me to open the door like a dog. Disregard for others was a specialty of his.

Once I opened the door, Ozu's devilish grin floated up at me. "Apologies for the intrusion." He turned back towards the corridor and said, "Come on, Kaori-san. I'm sorry, it's a squalid dump."

It was disgraceful for him to be taking a woman out into the neighborhood around Shimogamo shrine, no doubt hoping to score. But even I had the sense to hide my porn in the presence of a lady.

I stuffed all that I could back into the library, sneaking a furtive glance over my shoulder, and noticed Ozu carrying a petite girl into my room. Her beautiful hair swayed back and forth, but it was inexcusable for such a lovely woman to surrender herself to a demon like Ozu like this.

"What's wrong, is she drunk?" I asked apprehensively.

"What are you talking about? She isn't even a person," was his baffling reply.

Ozu sat her down, with her back against my bookshelf. Sweat prickled on his brow from the effort of carrying her weight around. He rearranged her hair neatly, and her face came into view.

She was very cute, and her skin looked just like real skin and was soft to the touch. Her hair was carefully groomed, and not an article of clothing was out of place. She looked just like a well-to-do young lady, other than being completely motionless, always looking at some far-off place as if she had been frozen in time.

“This is Kaori-san,” Ozu introduced her.

“What is she?”

“A love doll. I can’t leave her in my room, so I need you to take care of her for the time being.”

“That’s pretty bold of you to ask, considering how late you just barged in here.”

“Now, now, it’ll only be for a week. Don’t go off doing nasty things to her, now.”

He smirked again.

“And look, it’s just like flowers suddenly bloomed in your room. At least your room will look a little brighter with her here, won’t it?”

○

Ozu is a student the same year as I. Though he is a member of the electrical engineering department, he hates electricity, electronics and engineering. His first-year grades were so dreadful, as low-achieving as is possible, that it is questionable whether there was any worth in him enrolling in college in the first place. However, the man himself was not concerned in the slightest.

Because he despises vegetables and adheres strictly to a diet of fast food, he has the extremely eerie look and complexion of someone from the far side of the moon. If you were to meet him the street late at night eight out of ten people would mistake him for a youkai. The remaining two people are certainly youkais themselves.

Cruelly beating the weak, groveling to the strong, selfish, self-assured, lazy, a complete demon, neglecting studies, lacking a shred of pride, feeding off the unhappiness of others he was able to eat three square meals a day. There is not a single part of him that is praiseworthy. If I had never met him my soul surely would have been cleaner for it.

Keeping that in mind, setting foot into the Honwaka softball circle in the spring of my freshman year was mostly assuredly a mistake.

○

At the time, I was still a sparkling freshman, green and fresh as the fallen cherry blossom leaves. Upon entering the university grounds, each first-year was immediately pressed with club fliers, I with so many that they could not be processed by a single person. Among those fliers, only four caught my attention: Misogi Movie Circle, a myserious call for disciples, Honwaka Softball Circle, and the Lucky

Cat Restaurant secret society. Each of these had its own air of suspicion, yet was its own doorway to a yet unknown campus life, and I was torn with inquisitiveness, thinking that no matter which I chose, a fascinating future lay ahead. The only reason I thought this was because I was a hopeless fool.

After lectures, I directed my steps towards the university clock tower. It seemed that many circles were holding new member information sessions in that vicinity.

Around the base of the clock tower milled throngs of freshmen, their faces still blushing with springs of hope, as well as crafty circle members, eager to prey on those same hopes. Thinking that among these countless circles lay an entrance to the phantasmic illusion of the entrance to a rose-colored campus life, I wandered around in a lightheaded daze.

The first thing to catch my gaze was a group of students holding a billboard displaying “Misogi Movie Circle”. However as I didn’t have the nerve to introduce myself I kept circling the clock tower. Suddenly, another group of students holding a sign saying “Honwaka” came into view.

Honwaka is a circle that borrows a spot on the sports grounds to play softball every weekend. Practice is not mandatory, and anyone who wants to join in on a casual game afterwards is welcome to do so.

With such a warm, snuggly name, and a flexible schedule, they captured my interest immediately; plus, there seemed to be a number of girls in the circle as well.

I did not play sports in high school, but neither did I participate in any cultural activities. I simply puttered along with a group of like-minded fellows, refraining from doing anything that required effort.

“Sports might not be so bad,” I thought. Being in a serious athletic club might be too arduous for me, but Honwaka was a mere circle. Anyways, all I’d have to worry about was socializing while chasing a little white ball around, without stressing out about whether we’d reach the national championships. Farewell, gloomy high school days; from here on out I would be sweating refreshingly while making a hundred friends. My days of ascetic practices would consist of throwing a softball around, and without a doubt I would soon master the art of socializing with beautiful girls, an art that is essential for going out into the world. It wasn’t that I was particularly focused on conversing with girls, but if they wanted to come to me, I of course had no intention of refusing. It’s all right, my dear, come into my arms!

I continued to think about the possibilities, and quivered with anticipation.

I repeat: I was a hopeless fool.

Thus, I entered Honwaka, and while attempting to converse with others, was made to realize how bitterly difficult a thing was this refreshing socialization I had imagined. It was even more tepid than I had thought, and I failed to become intimate with a single person. It was intolerably embarrassing. Though I attempted to master the skills of socialization, I wasn’t a part of the conversation to begin with. By the time I realized that I had to be socially adept to add to the conversation, I was already

left behind, and soon I lost my place within the circle.

How swiftly my dream was shattered.

However, I still had one kindred spirit within the circle.

His name was Ozu.

○

It's pretty hard work, as I was telling Ozu. I suddenly had an irresistible craving for Neko ramen, so Ozu and I exited Shimogamo Yuusuisou and walked through the evening shadows towards that cart. Neko Ramen is a fabled ramen stand which is rumored to make its broth out of cats. Whether that is true or not, the taste is unparalleled.

While Ozu slurped his steaming ramen, he told me about the doll, "Kaori-san", whom he had apparently stolen from her owner on his Master's orders.

"You – isn't that a crime?"

"Is it?" He tilted his head.

"Obviously! I want no part of it."

"But the Master and Kaori-san's owner have been friends for at least five years. I'm sure he'll be understanding. Plus," he added, with an indecent grin, "I know you want to try living with her, I can tell."

"You asshole – "

"Don't look at me with those eyes!"

"Oi, stop clinging to me."

"But I'm lonely, and the night air is chilly."

"You lonely bastard – "

"Kya!"

This mockery of a lovers' quarrel at the Neko ramen cart soon felt completely empty, or rather that emptiness finally drained the last of our patience. And for some reason, it felt like I had done this before, which began to frustrate me.

"Hey, haven't we had a conversation like this before?"

"No way, not something this dumb. It's probably just *déjà vu*."

As we passed the time, wavering between enjoying the incomparable flavor of Neko ramen and having this idiotic conversation, a new customer arrived and stood beside us. He seemed to have a very odd appearance.

He wore a deep blue yukata with a sense of composure, while on his feet were a pair of geta, like a goblin might wear. For some reason he seemed like a mountain hermit. Giving him a view askance from my bowl, I remembered that I had seen this fellow many times in Shimogamo Yuusuisou. A

retreating figure as he creaked his way up the unstable steps; a sunbathed back out on the clothes-drying deck as he had his hair cut by some female exchange student; a perplexed silhouette at the communal sinks washing some mysterious fruit. His hair was as tousled as if he had just passed through a typhoon, and the eyes on his eggplant shaped head. His age was undetermined, and though I might have been tempted to call him a middle-aged man he also gave off the air of being a university student.

“Ah, you came too, Master?” Ozu bowed his head as he slurped his ramen.

“Yes, I got a little hungry.”

The strange man sat down and ordered a bowl. It seemed to make sense that such an eccentric person would be Ozu’s Master. Ozu paid for the Master’s ramen, which was a rare thing indeed for him, considering how miserly he usually was.

“Jougasaki-san has been dealt a serious blow with this move. It wouldn’t occur to him in his wildest dreams that he would come home to find Kaori-san having run away.”

Ozu spoke with great conviction, but the Master raised his eyebrows and lit a cigar.

“Akashi-san came by earlier, telling me that we were going to far.”

“That stuff again?”

“Trampling on someone else’s love like this is inexcusable, or so she insisted. Even if it is a doll. I think she’s even prepared to expel herself.” The Master scratched his scraggly beard.

“Kaori-san is unexpectedly considerate, for someone who’s usually so cold-hearted. But you need to draw the line; you can’t be soft on her just because she’s a girl.”

“Being so confrontational isn’t really my style though.”

“But I already brought her back from Jougasaki-san’s place. I refuse to take her back!”

“Then what will we do with her?”

“His room.” Ozu pointed at me. I said nothing but bowed my head. The Master looked at me with a surprised expression.

“Aren’t you a resident of Shimogamo Yuusuisou?”

“That’s right.”

“I see. I appreciate your service.”

○

We returned to Shimogamo Yuusuisou; Ozu left in the car that he had used to transport Kaori-san, while his Master wordlessly bowed to me and ascended to the second floor.

When I returned to my room, the doll was still leaning against my bookshelf, gazing listlessly with those dreamy eyes.

On the way back, Ozu and the Master had still been grumbling to each other, eventually coming to

the conclusion that “It couldn’t be helped that we brought her back, so let’s just watch how it develops for a while”. But to me, who was on the other side of the mosquito net while they were having their discussion, and in whose room lay the doll, this seemed entirely unreasonable. Ozu looked triumphant, as he had eventually won the argument, while the Master looked satisfied that I was the right man for the job. It was like I had been bewitched by a tanuki and fox tag team.

After we left the Honwaka softball circle, Ozu and I had continued to associate with each other. Though he had left the circle, it seemed that he still dabbled in a number of other organizations. Whether it was as a member of a mysterious secret society, or as a respected figure within the movie circle, each day of his was filled with activity.

It was also an important custom of his to come visit a man who lived on the second floor of Shimogamo Yuusuisou. Ozu called him “Master”, and had been coming in and out of this boarding house since he was a freshman. The reason it had been so hard to wash my hands of Ozu was not only because we ran away from the same circle in the same fashion, but also because he so frequently visited my boarding house. Whenever I tried to inquire about what kind of Master he had, Ozu simply grinned obscenely and refused to answer. Perhaps they simply discussed lewd topics, or so I concluded.

I sat on my 4.5 tatami floor and stared at Kaori-san, who had abruptly become my new roommate. It was all quite irritating, though I had to admit that she was a very charming doll.

“Kaori-san, I admit that it’s a dirty place, but do make yourself at home,” I said out loud as a sort of test. Even for me it was an idiotic gesture, so I laid out my futon and went to sleep.

○

After Kaori-san’s intrusion into my room, the cogs that ran my life were thrown into disarray. My previously tranquil existence was, in the space of only a few days, jostled by a number of fantastic events as though it were a toy boat bobbing around on a raging sea, and inexplicably my life was set on a different path. It was all Ozu’s fault.

The next day, I opened my bleary eyes, and from the futon was taken aback by the sight of a prim-looking woman leaning against my bookshelf.

A woman in my room – this was a shocking, unprecedented event.

It’s as if I had taken some young lady into my room to fool around with last night, and she had ended up staying here; having woken up earlier than I, she was distraught with her memories of the past night’s indiscretions and leaned on the bookshelf, too shocked to move. Obligation, discussion, marriage, leaving school, poverty, divorce, destitution, and a lonely death; this chain of events raced through my head like a revolving lantern. I lay there on my futon, trembling like a newborn fawn, thinking that I was completely screwed, until I recalled the events of last night, and realized that

Kaori-san was just a doll.

The shock of all this eventually stirred my languid brain from its stupor.

Kaori-san had not moved an inch since last night. I greeted her with a “Good morning”, brewed coffee, and grilled a leftover fishburger patty as my breakfast. As I ate, I unthinkingly began to converse with her.

“You know, Kaori-san, this is a misfortune for you as well. It must be hard for you to live in such a guy’s room. Ozu’s a jerk, isn’t he? He’s never once in his life spared a thought for someone else, and probably fuels himself off other people’s misery. I guess his parents didn’t give him enough love when he was small... Though I guess you can’t really reply to me. It’s a shame, such a lovely morning as this, and you’re just sitting there sulking. Come on, try talking to me.”

Of course, she didn’t say a word.

I finished the fishburger and gulped down my coffee. Since today was a holiday I had no time to spare for shooting the breeze with a doll. I had my own life, after all. After a few days of rain the sky had finally cleared up, and I had woken up early for once, so I figured I would go out to do my laundry.

The laundromat was a few minutes’ walk away from Shimogamo Yuusuisou, in downtown. I dumped my clothes into a machine and then walked out to buy a can of coffee. When I returned, the laundromat was still empty, and only the machine that I always used was running. Bathed by the glorious morning sunbeams, I drank the coffee and smoked a cigarette.

When my laundry was done, I lifted the lid of the machine. My jaw dropped in surprise.

My beloved, well-worn boxers were nowhere to be seen. Instead, a small teddy bear made of sponge lay there. The bear and I glared at each other for a few moments.

How bizarre.

If it was something like women’s lingerie being stolen from the laundromat, I would understand. But what was so interesting about stealing the grey briefs I had spent two steadfast years with? The only thing that could possibly be gained from such a thing was grief and futility. Furthermore, the thief had left behind this cute teddy bear, further deepening the mystery. What kind of message was the thief trying to send? It was probably a hidden confession of love. But I don’t need the kind of love from someone who steals my underwear. I want love from someone who puts your head in the clouds, someone whose daintiness and refinement are positively dream-like, a raven-haired maiden whose head is filled only with beautiful things.

I checked the other washing machines, and even the dryers, but my underwear was nowhere to be found. I stamped my feet in frustration. It was stupid to think of reporting this to the police. I honestly didn’t want to uncover the kind of person who would commit this sort of act.

I clutched the teddy bear and started making my way back home, partially because it would irk me to have to go back empty-handed. Periodically I flared up in anger, but there was nothing I could do; I

let out my rage by squashing the bear between my hands.

○

After the theft at the laundromat, I was completely put out and returned to my room, my face puffing out like a fishburger.

Though the sun often shone straight into my room, making it unbearably humid, it was still cool in the morning. Next to the bookshelf, Kaori-san sat patiently awaiting my return. Though I was filled with rage, seeing her calm face instantly wiped away my anger. Ozu had said that he had stolen her from someone, but whoever that unlucky someone was, he must be chasing after her, his eyes in a bloodshot frenzy. Just guessing from her tidy appearance, he must have cherished her like she was a princess.

It didn't feel right, just sitting her down there. I placed a copy of "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea", which I had bought from the Shimogamo shrine used book fair, in her lap. Now she looked as if she had borrowed a corner of my room and was being lost in a fantasy of adventures at sea; a veritable intellectual, raven-haired maiden. Her exquisite charm was almost palpable.

It was a room where no one was, or rather, a room that no one wanted to enter.

The only ones here were myself and this beautiful girl. There was no reason for anyone to intrude and criticize us. I displayed a great deal of restraint by refraining from overly praising myself, and treated her very courteously. First of all, I had been entrusted her by Ozu. I could never forgive myself if I did something strange to her and was taken to task for it by him.

I sat at my desk and cleared my mind of the underwear thief, then turned to a letter I had received the other day. The author of this letter was a female.

Readers, do not be surprised that I was participating in an exchange of correspondence.

She lived alone in Joudo-ji; her name was Higuchi Keiko. She was a young woman, and worked at an English conversational school in Shijou-Kawaramachi. Her hobbies were reading and gardening; she wrote enthusiastically about the flowers she kept on her veranda. Her handwriting was beautiful, as was her sentence structure; impeccable, even.

However, I had never even met her.

○

Though it was very old-fashioned, I loved writing letters, and had yearned since I was a youth to have a pen pal. All the better if my partner was a young lady, or rather, was having such an intellectual life, and such a correspondence, even possible without a young lady? I resolved firmly that having this sort of correspondence was the only way forward for me.

An essential point is that the letters must be handwritten, and under no circumstances, even if the jaws of hell open wide or the end of the world comes, must you meet the other correspondent. Of utmost importance is this second point. If you learn that your partner is a young lady, it is of course natural as a male for the urge to meet her to overflow. But this is exactly where you must not give in. If you fail, all the effort you put forth into this elegant relationship will come to naught in an instant.

One day, I was overcome with the urge to unthinkingly take a chance and begin an elegant correspondence. However, finding an unseen lady to begin writing letters to proved to be a difficult task. Sending a letter to a random address and praying that a suitable girl happens to live there is unrefined, even degenerate. But consulting something like the Kyoto branch of the Japan Correspondence Society is even more in opposition to my ideals.

When I confessed my inner thoughts to Ozu, I was immediately branded as a pervert. Without giving me time to defend myself he stared at me with upturned eyes and declared, "Then you'd just be getting off by sending this unseen girl nasty letters, wouldn't you? You really need to get a hold on your sex drive, you sick bastard!"

"I wouldn't do anything that nasty!"

"Come on, I know you too well. Half of you is made of porn."

"Shut up!"

Despite this, it was because of Ozu that I got a chance to start this correspondence.

In the autumn of my second year, Ozu, whose literary tastes extended no further than a pornography magazine, started reading an ordinary novel, and gave it to me after he was done. He said he'd seen it on the hundred-yen shelf in a used book store in Imadegawa, and picked it up on a whim. He didn't need the filthy thing after he was done with it, he continued.

The novel painted a dreary, out-of-date portrait of a student's sufferings, and was completely uninteresting with hardly a mention of a girl in it, but my eyes were drawn to the last page. On it, with lovely handwriting, was written an address and a name. Normally, this kind of thing would be erased before being the book was sent off to a used book store, or the store itself would erase it to prevent future trouble. It looked as if they had overlooked this one.

I suddenly thought, "This is your chance." Wasn't this a sign from heaven? Wasn't this a once-in-a-lifetime chance to begin a correspondence with this unseen maiden?

In retrospect, I didn't have any evidence to suggest how old this woman was, to say nothing of my image of her as a girl who loved books, was a little reserved, and further hadn't realized how beautiful she was. I suppose it would be fair to call me a pervert. But for the sake of that critical moment, I would be willing to wear that label of infamy.

I rushed out to the Demachi shopping district to buy beautiful stationery overflowing with sincerity, the kind that would compensate for the shamelessness of my acts.

I had the good sense to realize that, since this letter was completely out of the blue, I should limit

its contents to harmless conversation. If I were to send a detailed letter of uncertain meaning, I shouldn't be surprised if it was reported to the police. I first apologized for sending such an unexpected letter, humbly adding that I was a very diligent student, and that I had always dreamed about engaging in a correspondence of letters. Then I wrote about the novel I had just finished, neither praising nor criticizing it, without once writing anything about expecting a reply. It would smell fishy if I were to make it too lengthy, so after a number of drafts I was able to condense it into a sheet and a half. After completing it I reread it over and over; it smelled of sincerity without even a hint of impure thoughts, and despite myself I was proud of this great success. In the end, letters are things that come from the heart.

In this corrupt world, replying to an unknown letter requires a fair amount of consideration, and even more if you are a well-brought up young lady. I willed myself not to be disappointed if a reply never came, but to my great delight it did.

Thus, from this unbelievably fortunate event, a correspondence that would span half a year and end in May, concluding in the worst possible way, began.

○

Dear Sir,

It has quite suddenly become humid, after the hollyhock festival ended. It feels like we have entered the dog days of summer, before the rainy season even comes.

Since I am not fond of heat, I feel it would be nice for the rain to come quickly. There are many people who say that it becomes too dreary and damp, but the patter of rain outside helps me relax. My grandparents have a number of hydrangeas at their home, and since I was a child I have always enjoyed idly watching them bloom from the veranda.

Since you recommended "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea" a few days ago, I have been reading it slowly; I have reached the third section. At first I thought it was a children's book, but the more read, the more profound it becomes. I enjoy Captain Nemo's mysterious character, but if I had to say, my favorite character is the harpooner, Ned Land. I feel sorry for him, being locked up in the submarine without the freedom to move around. The Professor and Conseil are locked up as well, but they seem to be happy; only Ned Land seems to be frustrated with the situation, and before long I found myself rooting for him. Or perhaps, it is because I am as much a glutton as he.

If I were to recommend a book, may I suggest Stevenson's "Treasure Island"? You may have already read it, but it was one of my favorites as a child.

My work has been quite ordinary, with nothing in particular to speak of.

Recently, a professor who lived here in Japan for three years returned to his home country, and we

held a farewell party for him at an Irish pub in Oike-doori. I am currently unable to drink alcohol, but the Irish food they had was quite delicious. The fried fish, in particular, was good.

The professor originally came from San Francisco, and he told us that if we ever went to that city we were welcome to visit him. He is in his mid-thirties, but is apparently still attending college. I think being an exchange student would be fun, but I am busy enough as it is, so it does not seem that that will come to pass.

I apologize if I overstep myself in saying this, but I feel that being able to study whatever one wants in college is a marvelous thing. I am surely someone like you, being blessed with so many opportunities, would use them to better himself. Since you will be going on to your third year of college this spring, please believe in yourself and do your best.

However, as health is of utmost importance, please do not overexert yourself.

You said that your favorite food is fishburgers, but you mustn't eat too many of them; try eating a variety of foods, and do take care of yourself properly.

On that note I shall end this letter here. I humbly await your reply.

Yours Sincerely,

Higuchi Keiko

○

As the afternoon wore on, my room became progressively muggier. The hotter it became, the angrier I got, and my fury at the underwear thief at the laundromat boiled up again. I huddled in a corner of the tatamis staring at Kaori-san, who looked enthralled in her book, and squashing the teddy bear which had been switched for my underpants.

To get my mind off things I threw myself into my studies. However, while glaring at my textbook, I came to the conclusion that I needed to do something to recover the barren past two years of my life. That pathetic me was in complete contradiction to my true aesthetics. Consequently, I gallantly decided to give up on my studies. This was perhaps the most gentlemanly route.

Now that I had left the scholarly route, I had no recourse but to turn to Ozu to provide me with the report that I needed to turn in. The secret society had a print shop, where you could order and acquire counterfeit assignments. Without relying on this print shop, if I hadn't had Ozu as an intermediary to get my assignments I would long since have been completely worn out. Both my mind and my body would have been worm-eaten, in tatters. My inseparable relationship with Ozu might also have in part been due to this.

Though it was still May, it was so humid that it already felt like summer. Though the window was thrown open so wide that it invited displays of obscenity, the air was still stagnant inside. In that still

air, elements of mysterious composition intermingled and fermented, and as though it was amber-colored whiskey at Yamazaki Distillery would surely intoxicate anyone who entered this 4.5 tatami space. On the other hand, upon opening the door that led out into the corridor, the cute kittens that wandered the boarding house would boldly enter the room. They were so cute that I almost wanted to eat them, but I would not stoop so low as to do such a savage thing as that. Even if I only had one pair of underpants remaining, I must always act befitting a gentleman. After rubbing the sleep out of their eyes, I promptly chased them out.

I threw myself down, and before I knew it fell fast asleep. I had gotten up much earlier than usual, so I hadn't had enough sleep the previous night. By the time I woke up with a start, the sun had almost set, and my holiday had almost completely gone to waste. The one thing I had planned to do today was go to English conversation class, and that was drawing near. I made ready to leave my room.

Considering my terrible experiences in the Honwaka softball circle, I wasn't ready to trust another circle just yet. Of course, I had plenty of time on my hands. Since Miss Higuchi had mentioned that she worked in an English conversation school in Sanjou, I had used this as the impetus last fall to start learning English at a school in Sanjou in Kawaramachi. By the way, there was no one by the name of Higuchi working at the school I attended.

"Well then, Kaori-san. Take care of the room while I'm away."

But she seemed engrossed in her book and didn't even look up. The visage of a maiden lost in the dreamworld of books is truly a lovely thing to behold.

○

I rode away from Shimogamo Yuusuisou on my bicycle.

Dusk was settling on the neighborhood, and the soft clouds that hid the sky were tinged with pink. A cool evening breeze blew across my face.

After I left Shimogamo shrine behind, I crossed Mikage-doori, and then left the shrine road altogether. After that I crossed into the area between Kawai-bashi and Demachi-bashi. From the west flowed the Kamogawa river, and from the east, the Takano river. They merged at this spot, commonly known as the Kamo delta. At this time of year, the area bustled with welcoming parties for new college students. I too, came here when I was a freshman after I entered the peculiar softball circle called Honwaka, but for some reason I was never included in the conversations, and the only memories I made were miserable ones of skipping stones across the river by myself.

While riding on the cool embankments along the west bank between Demachi-bashi and Kamo-oohashi, I fell into self-flagellating thoughts, and glared at the congenial merrymakers on the other side of the river. Among the revelers, I spotted Ozu; there was no way to mistake his ominous

silhouette. I stopped my bicycle, against my better judgment.

Ozu appeared to be comfortably ensconced in a group of freshmen. He gave no thought to the wasted day that I had just spent, and instead chose to party with his new friends. In sharp contrast, across the river I sat there fuming. For that filthy youkai of a man to be surrounded by all these fresh, glowing freshman was an insufferable outrage. There was no stopping the spread of his corruption.

I sat there glaring for a while, but the only thing that accomplished was that my stomach started growling. I pulled myself together and began pedaling once again.

○

After class ended, I walked around town, already submerged in night.

To fill up my stomach I slurped up a bowl of Nagahama ramen, then descended into Kiyamachi. As I walked, I thought of Ozu, amid discomfort from my distended gut. For the last two years, he had been at the center of my limited friendsphere, constantly disturbing the peace of my 4.5 tatami existence. Just last night, I had witnessed his selfishness as he barged into my room in the middle of the night and forced a love doll on me. The real problem though, was that he was even now corrupting my once-pure soul. The only thing I had to show for collaborating with him was a blackened heart. Wasn't coming into contact with his warped mind twisting my own as well?

My mind consumed with irritation towards Ozu, I continued to stumble along the Takase river.

At last my feet came to a halt.

In between the bars and brothels, a dark, squeezed sort of house stood in the shadows. Under the overhang, an old woman sat at a wooden stall covered by a white cloth; she looked like a fortuneteller. On the hanging sign, a number of kanji of cryptic meaning were inscribed. From the orange light of a lantern the hag's face floated up through the gloom. The appearance of the whole thing was eerily threatening, like a ghost greedily hungering for the souls of passersby. I had once had my fate read for me, but after that my fortune took a turn for the worse, with the shadow of an old woman seeming following me everywhere I went. Nothing I did went right; people I was expecting never showed up, I could never find anything that I lost, I failed my courses, my thesis that I was about to present suddenly and spontaneously combusted, I fell into the canals of Lake Biwa, I was caught by a snake-oil salesman on Shijou street, among other unpleasant happenings. While these wild thoughts were going through my head, the old woman noticed me looking at her. She glared at me from the inky darkness with gleaming eyes, and I was caught by her ghostly emanations. Her suspicious aura had a persuasive power to it, and logically thinking I came to the conclusion that someone with such a freely flowing aura could not possibly be wrong in her divinations.

In my coming on twenty-five years of life, there were but few occasions where I took someone's advice humbly. Though I took few risks in life, wasn't there a possibility that I could choose the

thorn-lined path. If only I had chosen to stop relying on my own judgment earlier, my campus life certainly would have taken a different shape. I would not have entered the enigmatic Honwaka softball circle, nor met the labyrinthine character of Ozu. Rather, I would have been blessed with wonderful mentors and friends, become accomplished and recognized as a great talent in the arts, of course have a beautiful raven-haired maiden at my side, face a shining golden future ahead of me, and acquire that all-important “rose-colored campus life” in the palm of my hand. For someone like me, having that kind of life didn’t seem far off at all.

That’s right.

It wasn’t too late. I could hear someone’s objective advice and break out of this dreary life.

I moved my legs toward the old woman as if attracted by that odd aura.

“Student, what is it that you wish to know?”

The old woman mumblingly spoke her words as if her mouth were full of cotton, giving off the impression that her words had all the more worth to them.

“That’s a good question. What should I say, indeed?”

Seeing me at a loss for words, she laughed.

“I can see from your face that you are very frustrated, unsatisfied. You are not able to use your full talents; the situation you are in now is not suited for you.”

“Yes, that’s exactly it.”

“Show me your hands.”

The old hag took my palms and peered into them, grunting approvingly.

“You have much earnest talent in you.”

I tipped my hat to her keen insight. Just as a true master hides his skills, to be able to so unassumingly realize my hidden sense and talent within five minutes of meeting me, this was no ordinary person.

“You must not let your opportunity slip away. An opportunity is nothing more than an excellent chance, you understand? It’s difficult to take hold of such opportunities. Something they hide in places you don’t expect, and sometimes something that you thought was an opportunity was really nothing at all. But in order to seize an opportunity you must act. You look like you will have a long life, so sooner or later you will be able to take such an opportunity.”

As befitting her aura, her words were truly profound and deep.

“I don’t want to wait too long for something like that; I want to take that opportunity now. Can you be a little more specific?”

At my probing, the old woman’s wrinkles deepened. I thought her right cheek must be itchy or something, but after a while she smiled.

“It’s hard to be specific about the future. Even if I were to tell you exactly, it would soon twist and warp with the machinations of time. Fate is something that changes from moment to moment.”

“But, you still haven’t really told me anything other than obscure sayings.”

As I tilted my head in confusion, she breathed out through her nose.

“Very well. I will refrain from speaking of things far ahead, but I can speak of things that will soon come.

I widened my ears like Dumbo.

“Colosseum,” she suddenly whispered.

“Colosseum? What’s that?”

“It is the sign of an opportunity. When an opportunity arrives, it will be accompanied by Colosseum,” she intoned.

“So are you telling me I need to go to Rome?”

But the old woman merely grinned.

“Student, when your opportunity comes, you mustn’t let it slip away, you can’t just fumble around randomly as usual. Seize it, daringly, unlike your actions up until now. If you do, you will no longer be unsatisfied, and be able to embark on a new path. Though that may lead you to a different kind of dissatisfaction. I expect you understand though.”

I didn’t understand in the slightest, but I nodded anyways.

“Even if you don’t catch this one, you don’t need to worry. You are a splendid young man, so someday without a doubt you will make it. I can see it. There’s no need to rush.”

With that, the old woman brought her divinations to an end.

“Thank you very much.”

I nodded and paid the fee. I turned around only to find a woman standing behind me.

“A little lost lamb, are we?” Hanuki-san said.

○

Hanuki-san is in the same English class as I am. Ever since I had entered the school half a year ago, we had been friends, but our relationship was strictly that of classmates. I had challenged her many times in an attempt to steal her transcendental skills, but each time had been bowed in defeat.

Hanuki-san speaks an exceedingly flowing, though almost disjointed, sort of English. The rapid-fire words she spits out dance freely in the air, and despite her atrocious grammar, transcend normal rules to connect to each other and organize themselves into meaning in the other person’s head. It’s a profound mystery. On the other hand, while I’m carefully polishing my words inside my head, the conversation moves on without me, so that by the time I’m ready to speak it’s already too late. This pattern repeated itself endlessly. If I must speak without perfect grammar, I will proudly choose to be a silent onlooker, silently hammering at a bridge to test its safety until it collapses.

From what I had gathered from personal introductions, Hanuki-san worked at a dental clinic.

During class, we were free to talk about whatever topics we wished, but Hanuki-san usually pontificated on teeth. In the past six months alone, Hanuki-san had greatly increased my knowledge of dental vocabulary. We had all become very knowledgeable about teeth; how fortunate for us.

I invariably chose to speak about Ozu's misdeeds, since his miserable existence was at the core of my relationships with other people. It was actually kind of embarrassing to speak of his foul crimes in front of other people, but I unexpectedly received acclaim for it; and so, "OZU NEWS" became a staple of the class each week. They probably liked it because it involved lurid gossip about other people's private lives.

After a few weeks of this, Hanuki-san called out to me one day after class. Astonishingly, it turned out that Ozu was one of her acquaintances. He was a patient at the dental clinic where she worked, and also was an old friend of the "Master" whom Ozu frequently called on.

"It's a small world," she commented.

We complained about Ozu's shifty personality, and soon hit it off with each other.

○

After we bumped into each other in front of the fortuneteller, we headed into one of the many bars in Kiyamachi.

It seemed that she had made plans to come here after class ended, but suddenly was overcome with disgust with the person she was supposed to meet, and was caught between wanting to drink, and not wanting to meet the person, until she spotted my lost figure there in the street. "I owe you one," she chirped repeatedly as she rapidly promenaded down the avenue.

The bars were all lively with activity, since it was the weekend. Of course, there were always plenty of students, but this weekend was especially busy, since there were parties being thrown to welcome new students. Here and there I caught sight of faces that only a few days ago had been high school students.

We drank a toast to a future of bleakness for Ozu. The topic was especially convenient, because there was no end of things to complain about when it came to Ozu. The world was full of slanderous things to say.

"He's caused so much trouble for me."

"I know, right? It feels like that's his favorite pastime."

"Meddling in other people's lives is his reason for being."

"And yet, he keeps his own life so private."

"Yeah, yeah. I don't even know where he lives. He wouldn't tell me, no matter how many times I asked, even though he always intrudes into my place."

"Actually, I've been there once."

“Really?”

“Yeah. Jodou-ji, a little ways down Shirakawa-doori in a studio building that looks made out of candy. Ozu-kun gets a pretty generous allowance, you know. I feel sorry for his parents.”

“God, he pisses me off...”

“But isn’t he your best friend?” she asked, giggling. “He always talks about you.”

“What does he say?”

A vision of Ozu standing in the dark, a mysterious smile on his face, leapt to my mind. There was a chance that he had fed Hanuki-san atrocious lies about me, and I had to firmly clear those up.

“A lot of things. Something about you two leaving the same weird circle together.”

“Ah.”

That part, at least, was true.

○

The circle I had blundered into, Honwaka, was like the name sounded, as snug as a cloud floating in a hazy spring sky. Upper and lowerclassmen called each other alike by name, and there was no distinction of rank or title. There were no senpais or kohais, no hatred or sadness. The members built a spirit of love while tossing a little white ball back and forth, everyone helping and cooperating with each other. It was the type of place that, in no more than a week, would have you wanting to flip over tables to break the monotonous pleasantness.

On the weekends the circle would borrow the sports grounds to play ball, enjoy a meal, and have fun, month after month after month. How could I possibly learn the nuances of sociability in such an insipid place? It was impossible. My patience was fraying thin.

No matter how much time passed, I was unable to get to know anyone. Everyone was always smiling, making polite conversation, refraining from disagreements, never once letting a coarse word pass their lips. Each person’s demeanor was so alike to the next that it was impossible to distinguish one from another, or to match names to faces. Whenever I tried to say something, everyone would paste a polite smile to their faces, and sink into silence.

The single person who I could feel kinship with was Ozu. He had managed to obtain a place in the circle with his acquired art of conversation, but despite his best efforts he couldn’t pull off a smile; each time he tried to do so, he only succeeded in looking more like a youkai, and it felt like he was trying to hard to hide some inner wickedness. The only person’s name I knew in the circle was his. Or rather, the only one I couldn’t forget.

That summer, we were on the border of Kyoto and Osaka prefectures, having a three day overnight trip. Softball practice was merely a diversion; in reality, it was another friendly get-together. Everyone was smiling and chatting pleasantly, while I sat there glowering, thinking it was too late now

to make friends.

But on the second night, after the meeting in the field service center we were using as our lodgings was over, a strange middle-aged man whom I had never seen before was suddenly introduced by one of the upperclassmen. He was chubby, as if his cheeks were packed with marshmallows, and his glasses were so small that his face almost buried them.

After a while, the man began to speak. Love, and the ills of the modern age, are your battle to fight, he said, rather forcefully. His vague, overbearingly majestic words kept flowing, but it was impossible to tell what he meant. "Who the hell is this?" I kept thinking, and took a look around me, but everyone else sat there with rapt adoration on their faces, listening to his words intently. Only Ozu sat there in front of me, yawning and stretching.

Eventually, circle members whom the man pointed at stood up, and began talking about themselves. They spoke not only of personal troubles, but also sang the praises of the circle itself. I'm so glad I was invited here, they said. One of the girls even started weeping; the fat man consoled her in a very indulgent tone. "You're not wrong at all. I believe in you, and everyone else here does too."

Ozu was singled out, and he stood up to speak.

"For some reason, after I entered college I was filled with doubt, but thanks to entering this circle, I feel like I've been able to adapt much better. I feel at ease when I'm with everyone here. It's an amazing thing," he said, humbly, as if the yawning he had been doing earlier was a sham.

○

"And then what happened?" Hanuki-san pressed me. She was a little drunk now, so her behavior was beginning to get childish.

"When they asked me, I tried to sound enthusiastic, but the fat man told me to come by his room later, so I thought I'd stepped in it. But before I went back to the room I waited in the bathroom until the lobby was empty, and then I stepped outside for a bit."

"Ah, and then you met Ozu, didn't you?"

"That's right."

As I snuck out the front entrance of the field service center, Ozu's form emerged out of the darkness; I thought he was some lurking youkai slinking out of the ancient forest. I soon realized that it was Ozu, but didn't let my guard down, convinced that he was an agent dispatched by Honwaka, intent on trussing me up and delivering me to the fat man. They would confine me in some underground torture room smelling of brine and interrogate me until I confessed to all of my high school love affairs. Did they really think I would acquiesce to their demands?

"Quickly!" he whispered as I glared at him. "You're running away, right? So am I."

And so, we reluctantly joined forces and slipped into the murky forest.

The road from the field service center down to the village at the bottom of the mountain was pitch black, but luckily Ozu had brought along a flashlight. I had to admit that he'd come prepared. We had left our belongings back in our rooms, but since I hadn't packed anything too important I wasn't concerned. Occasionally a car would rumble down the road, but each time we hid ourselves amid the trees.

"Well, that was quite the adventure!" Hanuki-san exclaimed, in an exaggeratedly admiring voice.

"I'm not so sure about that. We probably could have just stayed the night without anything bad happening."

"But wasn't it a cult?"

"I guess. But after that they didn't even call me back or anything. I guess they weren't too interested in me."

"Maybe. What happened after you got off the mountain?"

"Well, we reached the farms at the bottom, and crossed through one of the fields. We thought we might be able to hitch a ride from someone on the highway, but since it was the middle of the night there weren't a lot of cars and they wouldn't stop anyways. If it was me, I wouldn't have stopped either for two mysterious guys on the side of the road."

"That sucks."

"Anyways, we kept walking, and reached the nearest rail station by following the signs. It was super far, since we were in the countryside. It was around four in the morning by the time we got there, but we were so paranoid that they would send someone there to search for us, that we followed the tracks to the next station to throw them off. After that, we got some canned coffee, and boarded the first train back here."

"That's pretty incredible."

"On the train we slept like logs. I could barely move my feet another inch."

"And that's how you and Ozu became friends?"

"No, I wouldn't call it a friendship, per se."

She snorted.

"But Ozu does have some good within him."

"I can't really see any."

"There you go again. You don't even know the story about his girlfriend?"

I couldn't believe my ears. I leaned forward inadvertently.

"His...his girlfriend?"

"Yeah. He met a girl in the movie circle back when he was a freshman. The Master hasn't seen her, and I haven't either. It seems like he doesn't want anyone else to know. Selfish, yet somehow I think it's adorable. He comes to me for relationship advice too."

"Real..."

Hanuki-san seemed quite amused at the sight of my cross expression.

“What was her name again? Hmm...”

○

Hanuki-san took me to one of her favorite haunts, a bar called “Moonwalk” in Bonto-chou. As we continued to slander Ozu, our talk became more intimate. Speaking poorly of a third party who isn’t present has the odd effect making two people closer to each other.

The conversation eventually turned to the theft at the laundromat.

“They must really have wanted your underpants,” she laughed, tilting her head.

“It’ll get pretty bad if lose all of my underpants like that.”

The night was wearing on, yet Hanuki-san showed no signs of tiring. I was starting to get fatigued, being enveloped in the constant noise of the town. I was getting to my limits on alcohol as well. As the intoxicated Hanuki-san’s eyes began to seductively glitter, I started to miss my 4.5 tatami room. I wanted to go home, turn my brain off, look at some porn, and then crawl under my futon to sleep.

But things just weren’t going my way.

Since we lived close to each other, we shared a taxi. Hanuki-san’s glowed ever brighter, and I began to fear that I had lost control of the situation. As she stared at the town speeding by, she chuckled and looked in my direction, with a disturbingly hungry expression.

Her apartment was near Mikage-doori, facing Kawabata-doori. As I escorted her swaying steps towards her room, she invited me in for some tea; by that time, I had lost control of myself. I didn’t know who I was, where I had come from or where I was going, trapped within the flow of eternity. I stood there trembling, like an abandoned cat in the rain.

○

Ever since I knocked upon the cursed door of puberty, my Johnny had been stuck in a wretched state. Other guys’ Johnnies were probably free to move as they willed, without shame or restraint. However, possessed as he was with a master like myself, my Johnny was unable to act according to his nature, and was forced to cover up his true potential. A true professional doesn’t show his hand, yet a Johnny as vigorous as he couldn’t be satisfied with such hollow circumstances forever. Now, he tried to reassert his reason for existence, shaking off his shackles, and raising his head haughtily.

“Hey, hey, isn’t this where I come in?” he repeated boldly, over and over.

Each time he did, I cautioned, “This isn’t the time”, and ordered him to stay put. We are civilized people living in a modern age. I am a gentleman, and have many matters to attend to. I convinced him that I didn’t have time to let him fool around with women.

“So when exactly is this ‘opportunity’ going to come?” he grumbled. “Don’t condescend to me,

bro.”

“Don’t be like that. I kind of have to look down on you, you know.”

“You’re more concerned about your intellect than you are about me. Hell, having a brain must be nice.”

“Stop sulking, it’s embarrassing.”

“Hmph. Good things come to those who wait, huh?” he sighed, and retreated back into his shell.

Though I didn’t pity him in the slightest, I had to feel a little sorry for him, having to wait all this time. No matter how rambunctious he was, he was doomed to be chained to me, a lone wolf, unable to interact with the world at large. My misery for his situation increased. As I thought about how he was only able to show his prowess during wild daydreams, I couldn’t stop myself from shedding tears.

“Don’t cry,” he consoled me. “I’m sorry. I was being selfish.”

“Sorry,” I muttered.

And so, I made peace with my Johnny.

At least, that’s how I think of it.

○

Hanuki-san’s room was very tidy, and the furnishings were surprisingly sparse. It felt like she could easily pack up and move anywhere she wanted to go, something that made me a little envious. There was a considerable difference between this and my chaotic room.

“Sorry. I drank too much,” Hanuki-san laughed, while brewing some herbal tea. That mysterious glint was still in her eye. While I wasn’t looking, she had taken off her coat and was wearing a simple long-sleeved shirt. When did that happen? I wondered.

She opened the glass door to the veranda; from our position overlooking Kawabata-doori, we could see the trees lining the Takano river.

“It’s so nice here, by the river. The cars are kind of noisy though,” she commented. “If you climb up to the roof, you can see the Oomogi fires to the east.”

However, at that moment, Oomogi was the furthest thing from my mind.

Wasn’t being alone with a woman in her room and sipping tea one of the most stereotypical ways for a gentleman’s honor to be broken? My brain went into overdrive, poring through my knowledge of history, physics, psychology, biochemistry, literature, and even pseudoscience, to find an appropriate response. I thought if Ozu were here, there would be no need for me to be this tense, and everything could proceed normally.

Even so, Hanuki-san was being way too careless.

It was dangerous for her to bring me to her room this late at night. Certainly, I had been her classmate in English school for half a year now. I was also the “best friend” of Ozu, who she also

knew. But if she was a proper lady, I wouldn't have to worry about being trussed up like a turtle, hung upside down from the balcony and slowly roasted alive. I feared for her personal safety, while she happily started chatting to me about the person she was supposed to meet tonight.

I was surprised to learn that her drinking partner was originally going to be Dr. Kubozuka, from the dental clinic, and even more surprised to learn that the good doctor already had a wife and kids. In my eyes it was unforgivable for such a person to abuse his authority and arrange for a tryst with another woman, but since Hanuki-san had been working for him for so long, I decided that a scoundrel like me didn't understand the nuances of their relationship. Though I had decided not to interrupt her, she kept talking about him, and eventually asked for my advice.

"I guess it was really rotten of me to abandon him in Kiyamachi," she muttered.

When I started to lapse into silence, Hanuki-san sidled up to me. "What's with the tense expression?"

"I've always been like this."

"Liar. Those creases weren't on your brow just a minute ago," she crooned, and her face came very close to my brow.

Then, she started to lick my face.

I jerked back, completely astonished. There was no mistaking it: her eyes were burning strangely, and she began to advance on me.

○

At that moment, I noticed four things about the situation.

Number one: the soft swellings on her bosom were pushing up against me. I attempted to deal with this situation calmly, but as expected it was a struggle. I despised the ability of those feminine curves to completely dominate men, and had pondered this question for many years, but had yet to provide a satisfactory answer to why those curves, whose only redeeming feature was their softness, wielded such power over us. Not only was there the matter of Hanuki-san's breasts, I had to admit that I was aroused by the situation, but I had no intention of letting these mere swells of flesh ruin the pure heart I had spent so many years protecting. To do so would be unforgivable.

Number two: when I backed away from Hanuki-san's probing tongue, I noticed a bulletin board on the wall. It was covered with photographs, some of which seemed to have been taken abroad. There was Italy, and in the background was the Colosseum. In the midst of this absurd situation, the fortune teller's words flashed through my mind. Was the opportunity I was looking for right in front of me?

Number three: having decided that he had waited long enough, Johnny was now attempting to assert his dominance. "Dammit, is it my turn yet?" he reared his head up. I tried to rebuke him, but he insisted, "Isn't this the chance you were looking for?" quite persuasively. "I'm tired of waiting. It's time

for you to let me get to work!"

Number four: along the left wall, through the kitchen, was a bathroom. If I went in there to weather the storm, I could wait there until things calmed down.

Hanuki-san kept wrapping herself around me, trying to lick my face.

While my mind was whipping itself this way and that, Johnny kept wriggling around insistently, trying to get my attention. He was trying to utilize my carnal appetites to take control of my body. While my brain had not yet given consent, Johnny was pounding on the door to its headquarters.

"What are you doing?" "This is your chance!" "You're doing it wrong!" were his war cries.

Behind the doors of my headquarters, I stoically blocked out his yelling and stared at the campaign map in front of me. "Can you really call someone who lets himself be washed away by these temporary lusts a civilized person? Where is my pride if I take advantage of an intoxicated woman like this?"

In response to my solemn remonstrations, Johnny raised his fist to the skies and began to pound on the iron gates of my headquarters, throwing a half-crazed fit. "Just let me do it then!" "Don't you realize how important this is!?" he screamed, "Let me take over for you!"

"What meaning is there in this act? Preserving my honor is far more important," I replied, to which Johnny changed his tone, pleading with me instead.

"Well, what's the point in this honor of yours? Who's going to praise you for keeping it intact? You might be able to open up a whole new world by doing this, you know. Don't you want to see what's on the other side?"

"I do. But now isn't the time."

"How can you still say? Can't you see this is your chance? You even saw the Colosseum! It's just like that old woman said, isn't it?"

"Whether or not I should take that chance is up to me. You have no right to make that decision."

"Ughhhh. I'm think I'm going to start crying now."

I steeled my resolve. I inched away from Hanuki-san, who was still trying to slink up to me, going along the wall as escape route. Even so, she still clung to me. We kept moving along, like some absurd jungle animal, slowly crossing the room and going into the kitchen.

"Ah! It's a cockroach –" I cried, startling Hanuki-san and causing her to turn her head. I took advantage of her distraction to stand up and race into the bathroom, locking the door, secure in my fort. Though it was meant to protect my honor, it sure didn't feel that way.

In the meantime, Johnny let out a roar of frustration.

○

"What's wrong? Are you feeling sick?"

Hanuki-san carelessly asked from the other side of the door. I answered, "I'm fine, just a little..." while straining my ears. After a while, I heard her return to the living room.

I sat behind my barricade and thought about the three women who were swirling around me. One was the yet-unseen recipient of my correspondents, another was the silent love doll, and the third was this completely wasted woman who was trying to lick my face.

But in the previous two years of tranquility, such a dynamic situation had never happened. Oh, this sugarcoated life. Perhaps, ever since Ozu had brought Kaori-san to my room, the winds had begun to change. From now on, my notebook would be full of lovers' trysts, and I would have to share endless whispered intimacies until my throat started bleeding. Even just thinking about it was tiring. I started to lose my nerve, and the task began to seem like a trek up Mount Hiei.

If I didn't plan on becoming a master of the sexual arts, I would need to narrow it down to one person.

Among the three women, one of them was a silent maiden, so no matter how I thought about it, she was not a contender. Another, according to my philosophy of correspondence, I would never be able to meet. This left, of course, only Hanuki-san.

Just like the fortune teller had predicted, I had seen a picture of the Colosseum right here. Surrendering control of the lower half of my body, as Johnny was insisting, was devoid of meaning. Instead, I would wait here, according to my gentlemanly precepts, until Hanuki-san returned to her senses, and from there would commence negotiations for our collective union.

Even if she was drunk, she wouldn't try to lick the face of someone who she knew was totally uninterested. I was an eccentric person, after all, so it wasn't odd that she showed so much interest in me. Here and now, I could get a fresh start, grab hold of that opportunity and set off on a shining golden road towards the future. I had faith in my own untapped potential; it was merely lying there beneath the surface.

I calmed myself, and after Johnny calmed down as well, exited the bathroom. Hanuki-san was face down in the center of the room, snoring like a bellows. I decided to wait until she woke, and sat down beside her.

○

Because of the alcohol, despite my best efforts I started to doze off. I thought I was leaning against the wall, but before I realized it I was lying on the floor.

This was an alarming indication.

When I finally woke up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, in front of me primly sat a demon.

Resisting the urge to jump up and shriek, I looked it more closely and realized that it was Ozu. How strange. I was sure that I had been in Hanuki-san's room, yet here he sat before me. Perhaps it

had been Ozu hiding inside the shell of Hanuki the Dental Hygienist the entire time. Then, that would mean that I had been getting licked by Ozu-Hanuki, and was about to begin negotiations for this unholy union?

“Why the hell are you here?” I finally said.

He brushed imaginary lint off his head.

“I was called away to have fun with my precious underclassmen, and had to take a taxi here. It looks like I was needed.”

I had no clue what he was talking about.

“That is to say, as Hanuki-san is a dear friend of my Master, but she has a single weakness. When she gets drunk, she tends to lose her sense of reason.”

“What?”

“It appears that you were licked?”

“Well..yes.”

“Usually she behaves herself, but tonight it looks she overdid herself drinking with you. She’d like you to consider what happened tonight water under the bridge.”

“Huh?”

I was astounded.

“She would like me to convey her apologies to you, though it’s a little late for that.”

From the direction of the bathroom came the loud sounds of retching, as if the toilet itself was protesting. It seemed that Hanuki-san had barricaded herself in there and was paying her dues for the alcohol she had consumed.

“But why did you come?”

“As her representative, I am here to explain the situation to you. I can’t just ignore one of the Master’s oldest friends when she’s in a bind.”

I had thought to see Hanuki-san licking my face as a turning point in my life, though in retrospect, that was pretty idiotic. It was a good thing that I retained control over my own sense of reason, though it was irksome to think that Ozu was the one to douse my face with the cold water of reality.

“You didn’t try anything funny, did you?” he asked.

“Nothing. Just...getting my face licked.”

“Well, I wouldn’t expect much out of you. You probably dashed to the bathroom and locked yourself inside as soon as she approached you, didn’t you?”

“Of course I didn’t. I made sure she was okay, like a gentleman.”

“Sure.”

“God, this is annoying.”

“Don’t judge her too harshly, now. She’s getting her comeuppance with the toilet bowl.”

“I mean you! You’re pissing me off!”

“Don’t mix me up into this please.”

“Every time I get myself into trouble, you’re always there. Angel of death, that’s what you are.”

“Always full of harsh words, aren’t you? Why do you think I extricated myself from a lovely party to come all the way over here? It’s because I wanted to comfort you, as a close friend.”

“I don’t need your pity. You’re the reason I’m even in this mess!”

“For such shameless remarks, you say them with such pride.”

“If I hadn’t met you, my life would have been so meaningful. I would have been studious, gone out with raven-haired maidens, and enjoyed a wonderful life without a single cloud hanging over me. That much is for certain.”

“You’re still drunk, aren’t you?”

“It’s only today that I have truly realized the amount to which my student life has gone to waste.”

“Not to comfort you or anything, but I think that no matter how you led your life you would have been contaminated by me, intuitively. At any rate I am putting forth all my effort into making you worthless. There’s nothing you can do to fight against fate.” He pointed his finger at me dramatically. “You and I are bound by a black thread of fate.”

I shuddered as an image of him and I sinking to the pitch-black bottom of the sea, tied by a dark thread.

“Anyways, you’ve been going out with someone for two years, haven’t you? On the mark, aren’t I?”

He just smiled slyly. “Ufufu.”

“Why are you laughing?”

“It’s a secret.”

“I’ll never forgive you, for having so much fun without me.”

“Calm down, my happiness is irrelevant right now. Just pretend everything tonight ever happened, and accept this.”

He pointed to a box of sweets.

“What’s that?”

“An apology from Hanuki-san; namely, a castella. Please take it as a humble offering,” he simpered, like a sales clerk plotting to take over the store.

○

The sky was slowly turning lighter as I walked back into town.

The streets were vacant, as the parties had already ended, and the cold morning chill bit into my bones. I stood in the middle of Mikage-bashi, hugging myself to stay warm, and looked at the submerged greenery on the banks of the Takano river. It felt refreshing to view such pleasant morning scenery for once, and only with a heavy heart did I return to Shimogamo Yuusuisou.

Everything felt just a little bit drearier – the broken fluorescent light in the entrance hall, the wooden shoe rack, the dust-filled corridors.

I tromped through the chilly hallways and collapsed in my bed, my blankets still tousled. In the warmth under the covers of my futon, I thought back on the many events that had transpired yesterday. It was most upsetting that Ozu had turned up the way he did, completely dissipating the fleeting plans I had for a future with Hanuki-san, but I supposed this merely signified a return to the starting position in the Game of Love. This was a common occurrence. I must think of receiving a castella for the lacerations in my heart an advantageous occurrence. I must be patient.

But I couldn't understand it.

I couldn't fill the hole in my heart.

From the futon, I snuck a glance at my silent roommate. As usual, Kaori-san was resting against the bookshelves, serenely reading her book. I got up and caressed her hair. Suddenly, an urge to cuddle with this captivated raven-haired maiden manifested itself.

"You idiot..."

I shook my head at myself, and retreated back into the futon.

It was shameful, that I was having such wild delusions about the state of my life. Or perhaps, if I had gone along with the fortune teller's prediction and let Johnny make the decisions, culminating in a shameful tryst with the intoxicated Hanuki-san, that new life might really have opened itself up to me. No, I recognized that was silly. Relations between men and women should be conducted in a much more solemn manner, not tied together on a whim like a shoelace.

I had thought that everything had started to change once Ozu brought Kaori-san here, but of the three women revolving around me, Hanuki-san had suddenly dropped out of the running; that dream had lasted no more than half a day. The ones who were left were my pen pal, whom I could never meet, and the woman who lived with me and yet was not alive.

In other words, there was no one left.

I must face this cold reality unflinchingly. As long as I am alive, everything is possible.

While I lay there in my futon, gazing at Kaori-san, Johnny gave a sudden squirm, but I managed to fall asleep there and avoid more trouble.

○

I woke up at dusk and walked to a café next to Demachi to have my dinner.

As I passed the Kamo delta, the setting sun clearly illuminated the Oomoji pyres; soon the bonfires would be visible. I stood there, imagining what it would be like to see the fires with Miss Higuchi Keiko, but recognizing that I would just get hungrier as the evening breeze rustled by me, I broke the daydreams off.

After I went back to Shimogamo Yuusuisou, I sat at my desk and concentrated on writing a reply to Higuchi-san, seeking a refuge from the thoughts buzzing around my head.

Dear Miss Higuchi,

As if summer has come already, so too do these sultry days seem to continue without end. The air is close in my boarding house, making it insufferably humid. Sometimes I feel like stringing up a hammock in the corridor, but I can't quite bring myself to go that far. It is quite difficult, not being able to study in the dormitory. I expect that soon enough I will find myself spending a lot of time in the library. The atmosphere is soothing there, and I expect that I will be able to very productive there.

I'm happy that you are enjoying "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea". When I was reading it, I had a world map by my side, simultaneously charting the progress of the Nautilus in the book. Doing that made me feel almost as if I was also embarking on a nautical voyage around the world; I recommend that you try it for yourself. I have not yet read Stevenson's "Treasure Island" – I shall look for it in a bookstore. The old adventure novels have the power to simultaneously put you on the edge of your seat while making you feel lackadaisical as well; it's quite exquisite. Though they are adventures, they're not brutal, something that I can appreciate.

I'm not sure exactly what Irish pubs are like, though I hope to visit one someday. Since I spend so much time either at school or at home, I haven't had much of a chance to go out into town.

Since this spring semester began, I have been very busy with experiments and lectures. Though looking from the outside, my schedule might look demanding, each day is actually quite fulfilling. The world of science is a wonderful place. We've come such a long way since Jules Verne imagined it in the 19th century, and it's regrettable that men of those times merely stood at the foot of the mountain and couldn't see what progress lay ahead. However, it is because of their efforts that we have our modern lives, so we can't say that it was a luxury.

As you mentioned, I am making the most of the opportunities that I have been blessed with, and seek to improve myself any way I can. Of course, health is very important, and I try to get exercise whenever I can. I put care into planning my diet as well.

However, I do not subsist on fishburgers every day. I hope you have not misunderstood my meaning; I am the sort of man who not balk even at eating bowls of aloe yogurt.

I expect you are quite busy yourself, but please accept my best wishes for your health.

Sincerely Yours

I nodded with satisfaction and put down my pen.

There were a few embellishments here and there, but all in all, it was a tasteful piece of work. Even when the words I was writing were less than sincere, I came to think of myself in that manner while I was writing them. Letter-writing is the mark of an exemplary student, but after I finished writing, it began to seem almost dream-like. It was painful, discovering how far I had fallen from my ideal self; how impudent I was, to write words like, "I seek to improve myself". Though I had the will, the path was shrouded in darkness. How exactly was one to improve oneself? I couldn't shake the feeling that I was only heaping up mud, rubbing stains into my already muddy character.

I placed the finished letter into an envelope, and reread Miss Higuchi's letter.

She mentioned that she enjoyed the rainy season, that she like looking at hydrangeas through the mist. She felt sorry for the harpooner in "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea", being locked up inside the submarine. And she admonished me to take care of my body, me!

I wondered what kind of person she was.

Though I had written the letter to distract myself, how ironic it was that now my heart hurt all the more. I pressed her letter to my chest and heaved a sigh. Even for me, it was a despicable action, and the realization of that helped me return to reality.

In a daze, I absentmindedly rubbed the teddy bear I had picked up at the laundromat yesterday, its soft fur helping me calm down. The more I looked at it, the cuter it became, so I decided to give it a name. After about five minutes of thought, I decided to associate it with its unparalleled softness, and named it Mochiguma.

○

That night, while I was examining myself to determine whether I had the courage to fool around with Kaori-san, and whispering unprintable things to myself, Ozu came to visit.

"So when are you going to get this thing out of my room?"

"Soon, soon." He grinned. "You're secretly enjoying living with her though, aren't you? Having her read "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea" like that."

"Shut up, shut up right now. I don't you to ever open your mouth again."

"I refuse. If I can't chatter, then I'd die."

"That would be very nice."

"On the contrary, as long as I can waste my breath, I won't die, even if you killed me."

He went on to talk for a very long time about a magic brush, whose fibers were unimaginably stiff and fine, which used the Van der Waals force to bind dirt particles, so that you could lift off any sort of grime without putting in an iota of effort; this superhuman brush was apparently called the Kamenoko brush. It seemed that his Master had charged him with finding this thing.

“There’s no way something that ridiculous exists!”

“No, I assure you that it does. It’s hardly strange that you don’t know it exists. Apparently it was never sold widely, due to pressure from detergent makers who feared its extraordinary cleaning powers. Anyways, if I don’t find it...”

“Your mind has been worn down by this crap too, hasn’t it.”

“It’s hard, since the Master asks for all sorts of things. Japanese pepper crepes and Demachi bean mocha I can acquire, but he even wants things like antique globes and banners from book fairs, and seahorses and giant squids. And if I bring him something that displeases him I’ll be excommunicated on the spot. There’s no rest for the weary.”

Ozu seemed strangely cheerful.

“Oh yeah, and when the Master wanted a seahorse, I scrounged up a huge fish tank from the garbage dump and brought it to him. When we tried filling it with water, it all came pouring out and made a huge mess. The Master’s room was submerged.”

“Wait, what room does your Master live in?”

“It’s right above this one.”

My head suddenly came to a boil. Some time ago while I was away my room sprang a leak in the ceiling. When I came back, the dripping water had completely ruined all my books. Not only that, but my computer was also destroyed, and all my data was completely lost. This incident further hastened my retreat from the scholarly pursuits. I was prepared to lodge a furious protest, but decided that getting involved with the unidentified resident of the room above me was too troublesome, and ended up leaving everything unsettled.

“So that was your work?”

“I’m sure the destruction of your porn library was no big deal,” he brazenly declared.

“Go away now. I’m busy.”

“I’ll leave, I’ve got a yaminabe hot pot at the master’s place tonight anyways.”

He held up a plastic bag filled with ingredients.

As he turned to leave, his eyes fell upon the teddy bear sitting next to my TV. He picked it up and stroked it, ascertaining its softness.

“Why do you have such an adorable thing in your room?”

“I just found it somewhere.”

“Can I have it?”

“Why?”

“I want to try putting it in the hotpot.”

“Are you stupid? You can’t eat that.”

“Maybe someone will mistake it for a rice cake and try.”

“I seriously doubt that...”

“If you don’t give it to me, I might spill some water again upstairs. Your porn library will be ruined.”

“Fine, fine, take it!” I shouted. It was heartwrenching, having one of the few comforts in my life taken away, but I just wanted to get Ozu out of my room.

“Heheheh. Thank you very much. Don’t go messing around with Kaori-san now.”

“Shut up, and get out!”

As he left, I suddenly felt very tired. I prayed to the god of Shimogamo shrine that Ozu might choke and die on that teddy bear.

○

I spent the next day buried in lectures and labs, and at last had my dinner of pollock roe spaghetti at Café Collection. Afterwards I went out to Imadegawa-doori and watched Mt. Yoshida, the budding trees on its slopes illuminated by the setting sun.

Ahh.

I tottered off down the road towards Ginkakuji.

I wasn’t sure what had come over me.

Being constantly accompanied by Kaori-san in my room, and Hanuki-san’s advances, had helped me break through my shell a little. In other words, I had become susceptible to this disease called love.

I weighed Miss Higuchi and Kaori-san on a scale, ignoring the fact that this wasn’t something to be so trivially considered. Though they both seemed quite alive, there was a vast difference between “human” and “doll”. Plus, I had already been acquainted with Miss Higuchi for half a year, even if only through letters. And furthermore, Kaori-san was tainted with Ozu’s foul crimes. The scales tipped heavily towards Miss Higuchi. Perhaps it was more accurate to say that it was because of those scales that my heart, normally as placid as the Pacific Ocean, was starting to tremble.

In conclusion, I had turned my steps towards the residence of Miss Higuchi, who I had forbidden myself to meet in the first place. I don’t know what came over me. But if I hadn’t decided to go to her home then, and pierce the veil of mystery, I would never live it down; it was hard to decide which choice was the better one.

As if driven by my longing for human company, I reached Shirakawa-doori. The wide intersection of Shirakawa and Imadegawa-doori was filled with cars passing by. The chilly breeze blew harder, making me feel even more lonesome. It seemed as if the path of philosophy continued onwards on the other side of the crosswalk; the line of cherry trees along the street was in full bloom, evening sunlight shining through the leaves.

“I’m just going to see what kind of place she lives in. I’m not even going to meet her,” I mumbled unconvincingly to myself.

And thus, I made my way towards that unseen, forbidden home of Miss Higuchi, “White Garden

Joudoji".

○

Further down Shirakawa-doori, I located the Joudoji bus stop, and from there started walking into downtown.

I had gotten her address from her letters, but hadn't ascertained its exact position on a map, and had to rely mostly on intuition to find it. Without a goal in mind, I aimlessly wandered the gradually darkening streets. In the back of my mind I wondered whether it might be better to not find it after all, and purposely avoided asking anyone for directions. As I continued to walk the silent neighborhood, I consoled myself thinking about Miss Higuchi's peaceful daily existence.

After half an hour of pointless wandering, I began to reflect on my ungentlemanly behavior. Perhaps it was better not to find her after all. The sun had almost set, so it would be wise to head home soon. But at that moment, I suddenly caught sight of a sign saying, "White Garden Joudoji".

The building itself was neatly tucked away, a large, white apartment building that looked almost as if it were made of candy. The difference between it, and my Shimogamo Yuusuisou, was like day and night.

But now that I had found out where she lived, I was at a loss for what to do. I casually glanced at the mailbox, but there was no name on it. The front door was locked, so there was no getting inside, but I could see the first floor corridor where she lived from across the fence. Her room number was 102, so I expected it would be the second door from the left. As I stared at her closed door, I suddenly felt like I was committing some incredibly shameful act, and considered leaving before she saw me. And yet, since I still had yet to see her face, my mind was completely torn.

As I stood there wavering between loneliness and self-loathing, the door to room 102 suddenly opened. I was about to hide myself, but I couldn't resist this opportunity that had suddenly presented itself before me.

I laid eyes upon Miss Higuchi.

The Miss Higuchi I saw then had a rather uncanny-looking face. Gaunt as if she wasn't getting enough nutrition, it resembled the face of a person who came from the dark side of the moon. A smile that seemed to wish for the unhappiness of other people hung there, almost demonlike. It, and Ozu's face, seemed like two peas in a pod. In fact, it was just like Ozu's face, as if she was actually Ozu.

In this case, the expression "God in Heaven" would be appropriate.

There was no mistaking it.

It was Ozu.

Hardly sparing a glance in my direction, he walked through the front door. Heading to the bike rack and mounting the bicycle he called "Dark Scorpion" he rode off towards Shirakawa-doori with

a sneer on his lips.

I stood there, still hidden behind the wall, quivering like a block of jelly.

The apartment complex was definitely Miss Higuchi's "White Garden Joudoji". Neither had I mistaken her room number. It was nearly unthinkable, but perhaps she and Ozu were acquaintances? But were they so close that he would visit her room? No, I wasn't so foolish as to believe in such a coincidence. For my pen pal to just coincidentally be close friends with Ozu was a ridiculous binding of fate that even a god wouldn't dare devise.

Then, what other reasons could there be?

I suddenly remembered that Ozu had never told me where he lived. Here I was in Joudoji. And two nights ago, Hanuki-san had been telling me something in that bar in Kiyamachi.

"...Jodou-ji, a little ways down Shirakawa-doori in a studio building that looks made out of candy..."

If Hanuki-san was correct, then it was safe to conclude that White Garden Jodouji, room 102 was Ozu's residence, and I realized that this meant that Miss Higuchi lived in the same building. It took me a lot of self-discipline to swallow the inevitable conclusion. I longed for a cube of sugar to help me withstand this unbearable pain.

Miss Higuchi Keiko did not exist.

For over half a year, I had been corresponding with Ozu.

○

And so, my correspondence with Miss Higuchi came to an end.

There could be no crueler conclusion.

Through the darkened streets I reeled, going back to campus, before turning my steps towards home. The Yuusuisou towered through the night, as if uncannily reflecting my own petulant heart.

I slid open the door and walked inside. In the blackness of the corridors something was making a hissing sound. On further inspection, it turned out to be a rice cooker; it looked like someone was using one of the outlets in the hall to make their dinner. At the moment, I didn't have the patience to allow this small theft of electricity, and I violently ripped the plug out, no doubt ruining someone's dinner, before slamming my door and retreating into my room.

As usual, Kaori-san was seated in the corner of my desolate room, engrossed in her book. My dream of being with Hanuki-san had ended, Miss Higuchi had never existed in the first place, and now the only future for me lay in silent Kaori-san.

I picked up the castella Hanuki-san had given me as an apology. In the midst of the 4.5 tatami square I faced off against the angular pastry. Forgetting the softness of Hanuki-san's breasts, the letters I had exchanged with Miss Higuchi, everything, I decided to make this cake my dinner and

without even cutting it started to devour it.

"This is what you get for ignoring me," Johnny sneered.

"Shut up, I don't want to hear it!"

"It would have been fine if you had let me take care of things in Hanuki-san's room. At the very least, you wouldn't be shut up here in your little room again."

"I don't believe you."

"Well, now all you have left is Kaori-san."

"You, what are you thinking?"

"Come on now, you're not still trying to keep up this 'gentleman' crap are you? Get over yourself, let's just have fun for once! I'm not even asking for a lot, though I think I overestimated you."

Johnny seemed to be planning on doing something vulgar to Kaori-san, and I was equally desperate to stop him. If I gave in now, all the pride I had saved by barricading myself in Hanuki-san's bathroom would come to nothing. If I greedily took her unresisting figure as a good thing, like some barbaric feudal lord, I could no longer hold me head high.

As Johnny and I continued our heated discussion, Kaori-san continued to quietly read.

"I'm disgusted by you!" Johnny spat out carelessly.

"It's not my fault, it's Ozu!" I groaned, continuing to eat the castella.

The more I ate, the more isolated I felt in my own personal hell, chewing on the sweet castella with a deranged expression. Fury swelled up inside me. Damn Ozu. Considering what had happened with Hanuki-san, and Miss Higuchi, wasn't I just dancing in the palm of his hand? That miserable demon. What was so enjoyable about making me do this?, I asked myself foolishly. I couldn't hope to understand his behavior using my own standards. He was just that type of person, someone who would eat three meals a day of other people's happiness. Now that I thought about it, he had been feasting happily off me for the last two years.

Everything had become just a little bit clearer.

Ozu deserved to die.

I would grind him into coffee grounds.

As I made up my mind, the ceiling of my room swayed slightly.

Some sort of commotion was coming from upstairs, in Ozu's Master's room. I could faintly make out the sounds of a quarrel; someone was stamping their feet. The broken fluorescent light flickered as it swayed, making the moths fly around in panic, throwing my room into alternating shades of light and dark. It was almost as if I was in the midst of a hurricane. As I paced around my room in a frenzy, I yelled out maledictions against Ozu. You son of a bitch, and other assorted phrases. You probably think I was crying, but of course that's absurd; I would never do such a thing. There were very many reasons to shed tears, but I would refrain from doing so until I had ground Ozu up. Johnny, I think I'm going crazy.

“Well, there’s nothing more you can do. This is what you get for calling me an idiot, and putting on those stupid airs. I have nothing more to say. You’re doomed to wander around this 4.5 tatami prison with me for all of eternity,” Johnny said, the one person who would never leave my side. “In this room, you’re doomed to be miserable, no matter how clever you are.”

“I agree, this is wretched.”

“Well then, even if she is a fake, we might as well get some pleasure from Kaori-san.”

Johnny tried to persuade me at the most desperate times.

I gazed at Kaori-san, leaning against the bookshelf, reading “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea”. Her silky black hair hung there elegantly, as her clear eyes stared straight at the pages. Love comes in many forms, but when it wanders into such a claustrophobic maze as this, sometimes the way back can be hard to find, especially for one such as me. Bewildered by Johnny’s whispering and Kaori-san’s elegant profile, I questioned whether throwing away what little pride I had left was my only course.

Caught in the throes of this internal debate, I reached out my hand and touched Kaori-san’s hair.

At that moment, the thunderous sounds of someone rushing down the stairs pounded my room. I expected the sounds to dissipate towards the front entrance, but instead they came down the corridor towards my room. As I wondered what was going on, the door to my room was violently kicked open.

“You...”

With murderous intent, a man stepped into my room.

I only learned this later, but this was Kaori-san’s owner, a man who was engaging Ozu’s Master in a mysterious conflict called the “Masochistic Proxy-Proxy War”: Jougasaki.

○

The first meeting between we two, who should have had a common ground against Ozu, was not a harmonious handshake, but a full-on fistfight, with sparks flying everywhere. Since I was too proud to resort to brute force, though, it was mostly a one-sided affair, with me being beaten into the ground.

I was driven into the wall, completely bewildered as to what was going on, while my favorite lucky cat figurine was knocked off my TV. Johnny, who only a moment ago had been wriggling lustfully for Kaori-san, screamed like a little girl and cowered in a corner. Always quick to run away, despite being the fruit of my loins.

Behind the towering figure that stood in front of me, Ozu’s yukata-wearing Master quietly entered the room. A girl, breathing hard as if she had run all the way here, also shouldered her way into the room and pushed him out of the way. I seemed to remember having seen her somewhere before.

“Jougasaki-san!” she shouted. “This is ridiculous, suddenly assaulting someone like this!”

She helped me up.

“Are you okay? I’m sorry about all this, it’s all a misunderstanding.”

I wasn’t used to having my door broken down and being savagely battered like this. I grandly rose to my feet, and placed a wet handkerchief that she handed to me to my bruised jaw. The girl picked up my lucky cat figurine and introduced herself: “I’m sorry for intruding on you like this. My name is Akashi.”

“Jougasaki, you’ve got it completely wrong,” Ozu’s Master said.

“He’s not part of it?” Jougasaki doubtfully asked.

“Not at all. He was merely entrapped by Ozu,” said Akashi-san.

“My bad,” Jougasaki apologized, but he turned quickly to Kaori-san. He seemed to be relieved to find her unharmed, lovingly stretching out his arm to stroke her hair as if she was his own child. If she had been molested in any way... I shuddered to think of what would have happened. Jougasaki probably would have rolled me up in a bamboo mat and tossed me into the Kamo river.

While Jougasaki and Kaori-san were having their own alone time, Ozu’s Master sat down on my chair as if it was his room he was in, and lit up a cigar; he didn’t seem inclined at all to explain what was going on. I was left completely in the dark.

○

“Can’t you rein in Ozu a bit?” said the Master. “We never intended on things to go this far.”

“Well, since I did get Kaori back safely, I suppose no harm, no foul. But I’m going to have a stern talk with Ozu. I can’t believe he trespassed into my room like that,” Jougasaki said, rather forcefully. He seemed to be as angry as I was.

“If you want to talk to Ozu, he’ll be here soon enough. You can boil him, or stew him, or do whatever you want, though no matter how you cook him he’s still inedible,” said the Master, rather irresponsibly.

“That’s right; since Ozu started this, he should take the responsibility,” Akashi-san commented.

I drank in the situation and became even angrier at Ozu. Being made to face the wrath of Jougasaki took on a deeper meaning now that I knew who was behind it.

“Ah, is that a castella?” the Master asked, looking at the remnants of the castella I had eaten alone. His eyes were greedy, so I cut off a bit of uneaten cake and gave to him, which he proceeded to devour with great gusto.

Jougasaki glared at the castella-eating Master.

“Anyways, what we’ve been talking about is silly. Ozu’s already switched his loyalties to me.”

“How naïve. You really think Ozu is that straightforward?” Higuchi smiled and stood up. “Well, I supposed I’ll return to my room for now.”

“We still have to figure out how to transport Kaori back,” Jougasaki objected.

“I think Ozu-san borrowed a car from someone,” said Akashi-san.

“Unbelievable. Sorry, but can I ask you to hold on to her for a little while longer until I get aa car? I should have it prepared by tonight,” Jougasaki said to me, a little apologetically.

“Sure,” I nodded.

Ozu’s Master stepped out of my room. He stared at the entrance to the boarding house, smoking his cigar. After a while he called out.

“Ozu, over here, over here. Come here for a moment,” he beckoned.

Jougasaki and I stood at almost the same time, and clenched our fists, prepared to pulverize Ozu, who had just stepped into the room.

“Master, what are you doing in this filthy place?” He peered inside, but the moment he saw us two standing there swelled with rage, he neatly dodged out of the room. His sense for danger was actually incredibly adroit. In his haste to escape, he kicked the rice cooker I had unplugged earlier; it tumbled down the hall, clanking noisily.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” he wailed as he sprinted down the hall. If he was going to apologize, then he shouldn’t have done anything in the first place.

“Motherfuckerrrrrrr” Jougasaki and I bellowed as we pursued him. Akashi-san and the Master followed behind us.

○

When it came to running away, Ozu was world-class, and he burned through the neighborhood of Shimogamo like a minor demon. As fast as I ran, Jougasaki gradually outpaced me. I finally petered out past the Shimogamo teahouse close to Demachiyanagi station.

Akashi-san came riding up on a bicycle behind me.

“Let’s pincer Ozu at Kamo-oohashi. Please go to the west side of the bridge,” she said coolly, and rode off to encircle Ozu, her bike screeching loudly. I looked after her figure admiringly as she disappeared into the night.

Trying not to praise myself for not collapsing despite how exhausted I was, I struggled on to Aoi park. It appeared that Ozu and Jougasaki had already turned towards the riverbank. With the Kamo delta right in front of me, I crossed Demachi-bashi to the west bank and started off south on the embankment, finally reaching the west end of Kamo-oohashi.

The afternoon had already given way to indigo twilight, and the noisy students had already begun their occupation of the Kamo delta. It was probably a welcoming banquet for new students. Come to think of it, I had spent the past two years completely avoiding such things.

The roaring Kamo river was swelled from the rain that had fallen the other day, its surface gilded

with silver from the streetlights that were beginning to flicker on one by one. Imadegawa-doori was already bustling, and passing cars washed light through Kamo-oohashi. The orange lights that dotted the thick guardrail on the bridge shone dimly, mysteriously through the night. For some reason, tonight the bridge looked awfully wide.

As I walked across the bridge, still out of breath, Ozu came sprinting towards me from the other side; Akashi-san had successfully lured him in. I felt supremely satisfied, having Ozu fall into the trap.

“Ozu!” I yelled, and clenched my fists. He came to a stop, with a bitter grin on his face.

Jougasaki came running up from the east end, but he was gasping for breath as well. Akashi-san was riding up behind him. We had pinned Ozu right in the middle of the bridge, with the Kamo river flowing by right beneath us. Far to the south, at the ends of the black expanse of water, the lights of Shijou town glittered like precious gems.

“Help me, we’re friends, right?” he pleaded to me, his arms outstretched.

“Thank you for having such a long correspondence with me, Miss Higuchi. It was fun,” I sneered.

For a moment he tried to feign innocence, but he soon realized it was no use. “I didn’t mean anything by it,” he wheedled. “I don’t have a bad bone in my body.”

“And yet you played me like a puppet. It’s no use. I’m going to kill you now.”

“You’re going to hit me, no, kill me? You wouldn’t!”

Jougasaki and Akashi-san finally reached us.

“Ozu, we’re going to have a talk,” Jougasaki said with a solemn face.

Despite the fact that he was cornered, Ozu somehow managed to pull off a smile.

Suddenly he turned and leapt nimbly up to the guardrail. The orange lights that lined the rail lit up his face from below, making it seem even eerier than usual. It seemed for a moment that he would fly off into the sky and make his escape.

“If you’re going to hurt me, then I’ll jump off the bridge!” he declared, rather unreasonably. “If you won’t guarantee my safety, then I won’t come down!”

“You’re hardly in a position to bargain for your safety, you halfwit,” I said.

“Think of the things you’ve done,” added Jougasaki.

“Akashi-san, say something! I’m your elder, you know!” Ozu cried in a wheedling tone, but Akashi-san just shrugged and said, “I can’t defend you.”

“You know, I’ve always like that blunt side of you.”

“Flattering me is useless.”

Ozu slid his feet and spread his arms as if he was about to fly off. “I don’t care anymore, I’m going to jump now!” he screamed.

“Fine, go ahead. Jump,” I said.

Just disappear into the river already. Then I’ll finally be able to have some peace and quiet.

“There’s no way you’re going to jump,” Jougasaki mocked him. “You love yourself too much.”

“What? I’ll show you!” Ozu vowed.

Yet for all his words, he just stood there.

As we stood there shouting back and forth, screams rose up from the Kamo delta to the north.

The merrymaking students appeared to be in an uproar, running this way and that.

“What is that?” muttered Ozu, craning his neck.

As I grabbed the handrail and leaned over to look, I could make out something that resembled a dark cloud stretching from the Aoi Park forest to the delta. It buzzed loudly as it grew larger and concealed the entire delta from view. The people inside the cloud on the delta ran agitatedly this way and that, flapping their arms and batting at their heads as if they were half-crazed. The dark cloud began to spread over the surface of the water towards us. We gazed at it, fascinated.

The noise from the delta began to become even more tumultuous. From the pine forest the cloud kept sliding closer to us. This wasn’t an ordinary occurrence. Flutterflutterflutterflutterflutter went the squirming cloud as it rolled towards us like a carpet, rising above the water, coming over the handrail and burying the Kamo-oohashi like an avalanche.

“GYEEEEEEEEEE” Akashi-san screamed as though she were a character from a manga.

It was a swarm of moths.

○

The next day the moth plague made the Kyoto news, though nobody understood where the moths had come from. By tracing their route, it appeared that the moths had come from the Tadasu forest, that is to say, Shimogamo shrine, though things were still unclear. Even if all the moths in the forest had simultaneously decided to migrate, there was no clear reason why. There was an alternative rumor going around that the moths had actually come from the neighboring Izumigawa town, but that explanation was just as inexplicable. That night, it appeared that a swarm of moths had also gathered in a corner of my own boarding house.

When I returned, the corridor was littered with moth corpses. I had forgotten to lock my door, so my room was blooming with them as well, but I reverently gathered the corpses and buried them.

○

With fluttering moth scales battering my face and sometimes moths entering my mouth, I stood fast covering Akashi-san and gallantly protected her from the worst of it. I was originally from the city and had never had to coexist with bugs, but these past two years in the boarding house had completely accustomed me to all sorts of arthropods.

Even so, the sheer number of moths that night completely overwhelmed the bounds of common

sense. The earth-shattering sound of beating wings cut us off from the outside world, as if it were not moths but a swarm of winged imps passing over the bridge. It was nearly impossible to see anything. What hazy glimpses I got out of my gritted eyes was limited to the moths dancing in the orange light of the streetlamps, and Akashi-san's shining black hair.

After a while the swarm moved on, leaving only a few stragglers flitting here and there. Akashi-san stood there with an ashen face, frantically brushing herself off all over, repeating over and over, "Are there any on me? Are there any on me?" She then sprinted away with frightening swiftness towards the east end of the bridge away from the writhing moths still dotting the ground, collapsed to the ground in the soft light of a café on the other side.

The moths were still receding towards Shijou like a thick carpet.

I suddenly noticed Jougasaki standing stock still beside me, as if he hadn't noticed the writhing moths stuck in his hair.

I looked around in the soft orange light of the lanterns illuminating the bridge.

As if he had made a grand escape borne on the wings of those moths, Ozu was nowhere to be seen.

"That moron really fell off," Jougasaki muttered, rushing to the guardrail.

○

Jougasaki and I descended down the embankments from the west side of the bridge. Before us, the Kamo river rushed thunderously on. The river was swelled, covering the plants that normally dotted the bank.

We entered the water and approached the underside of the bridge; something seemed to be wriggling in the shadows of the supports. Ozu clung desperately like a discarded piece of trash, trying not to be swept away. The water wasn't too deep, but it was swift, and Jougasaki was actually swept off his feet. With some difficulty, we made our way to Ozu's body.

"You moron!" I yelled while being drenched by the spray, but he simply smiled through his tears. "Please forgive me, considering the state I'm in."

"Whatever, just shut up," Jougasaki said.

"Okay. My right leg really hurts a lot," he said meekly.

With help from Jougasaki I raised Ozu to his feet. "Ow, ow, be more careful!" he yelped, but we ignored him and dragged him to the shore. In the meantime, Akashi-san had arrived at the riverbank; though she had suffered a considerable shock from the moths, she hadn't missed a beat and had already called for an ambulance. Now she just sat on a bench holding her blue cheeks. We rolled Ozu like a log up the beach. Attempting to dry our clothes, we shivered with cold.

"It hurts, hurts. Help me," he moaned.

"Oh, be quiet. And you shouldn't have climbed on the guardrail in the first place," I observed. "The ambulance will be here soon, so just deal with it a little longer."

I glanced at Jougasaki, who was kneeling beside Ozu, and had to swallow my anger. Of course, at this point even I wasn't really thinking about dragging Ozu to Shimogamo Yuusuisou and grinding him up into coffee.

Before long, Ozu's Master came lightly down the slope towards us. He obviously hadn't exerted himself to get here quickly.

"I was wondering where you had all gone."

"Ozu got himself hurt, Higuchi. It looks like a broken bone," said Jougasaki.

"What a miserable fellow."

"But Master, I did all this for you," Ozu cried piteously.

"Ozu, you show a lot of promise," the Master said.

"Master, thank you very much!"

"But when I told you to break a leg, I didn't literally mean it, you know. What an incorrigible fool!"

Ozu lay there sobbing.

After about five minutes the ambulance arrived at Kamo-oohashi.

Jougasaki went up the embankment to fetch the EMTs, who promptly wrapped up Ozu in a blanket and set him on a stretcher. I would have been overjoyed if they at that point threw him into the river, but they of course being professionals did not distinguish between their patients.

"I shall accompany Ozu." Thus saying the Master boarded the ambulance and left.

As if he had already forgotten about Ozu, Jougasaki mentioned something about getting a car to pick up Kaori-san and departed the riverbank.

At last, only Akashi-san with her face still buried in her hands, and I in my drenched clothes were left.

"Are you all right?" I asked her.

"I really can't stand moths," she sighed.

"Well, would you like a drink to calm your nerves?"

I was most certainly not taking advantage of this girl's weak point to achieve some indecent goal. I was simply concerned for her, as she was still quite pale.

I bought canned coffee from a nearby vending machine and drank it together with her, and gradually her visage returned to normal. I started talking about my troubles with Ozu, eventually coming to the events of the past few days. But when I spoke of how angry I was with Ozu for inventing Miss Higuchi, and toying with my heart as he had done, she unexpectedly said, "I'm sorry."

"I apologize, but I had a hand in that as well. Ozu asked me to be a ghostwriter for him, you see."

"What?"

"I read 'Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea', like you suggested."

A refreshing smile came to her face.

"Your letters were very good. There were a lot of untruths, but they were skillfully written nonetheless."

"You noticed?"

"Yes, but I was lying as well, so I suppose it's even," she said.

Suddenly, with a smile on her still-pale cheeks, she blurted out, "We met at the Shimogamo shrine used book fair, didn't we? Do you remember?"

○

That was one year ago, at the Shimogamo shrine used book fair.

Not far from the shrine road, stretching south and north are the horse riding grounds; back then they were crammed with tents, filled with people looking for books. Since it was just a short stroll from Shimogamo Yuusuisou, I visited almost every day.

I walked the sprawling grounds, drinking my ramune under the sunlight-bathed trees, savoring the refreshing summer atmosphere, and browsing the tents stretched out around me. No matter where I looked, boxes filled with musty old tomes were lined up, so many it made my head spin. Luckily, numerous felt-lined chairs were arrayed in the field, just for people who had been intoxicated by all the books to get a rest. I sat down in one of them and let my mind wander. It was August, and sweltering, so I had to wipe away the sweat from my brow with a handkerchief.

In front of me was a shop called Gabi Bookstore; on a pipe chair in front of it, was sitting a girl with her eyebrows knit as if deep in thought.

I stood up and began browsing through the bookshelves. When I glanced over and made eye contact with her, she just shifted her gaze a downward a little. I decided to buy Jules Verne's "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea". As I made to walk away, she ran after me.

"Use this, please," she said, and offered me a fan inscribed with the words "Evening Breeze Secondhand Book Fair".

As I fanned my sweat-beaded face, I dangled the book from my hand and walked off into the Tadasu forest.

○

That night, Jougasaki took back Kaori-san, and the two of them resumed their tranquil, loving existence.

According to Ozu, Jougasaki was popular with real girls as well, and had a series of relationships while he was in his circle. It wasn't hard to imagine, with his finely chiseled features. What I couldn't

understand was why someone with so many women to choose from would choose to devote himself to Kaori-san. It seemed that he had already been living with Kaori-san for two years, so he was pretty committed.

“Living with and cherishing a love doll has a certain meaning to it. The matter of his having a real girlfriend is a different matter. It’s a very refined sort of love, something a crude person like you who only sees a love doll as a tool to satisfy your urges could never understand,” he lectured me.

As someone who had lived with Kaori-san for four days, I could see where Jougasaki was coming from, but that path was not one I was meant to tread. I guess in the end I would rather choose a raven-haired maiden, a living one. Perhaps someone like Akashi-san.

Ozu’s Master continued to live on the second floor of Shimogamo Yuusuisou, and I would occasionally bump into him. Always wearing his dark blue yukata, he serenely did what he wanted like a pensioner. Akashi-san often came to visit him.

“That’s why the Master is so grand; he always does as he pleases,” was how she appraised him. The man himself extended me an offer to become his disciple, and I considered it for a time.

What I was hesitant about was what exactly I was going to be a disciple of; that point was never clearly explained to me. Secondly, was that if I did become a disciple, I would become Ozu’s underling.

A few days earlier I had partaken of a hotpot in Higuchi’s room; I met Hanuki-san there.

“What a small world!” she exclaimed.

I still didn’t know very much about the conflict between Jougasaki and Higuchi, even after being dragged into the Kaori-san kidnapping plot, though it seemed that kidnapping was a forbidden move. While Ozu was in the hospital, Akashi-san took up his mantle splendidly, converting Jougasaki’s bike into a five-wheeler.

○

After the whole incident with Ozu was over, I began to get closer to Akashi-san.

I guess you could say that there was a silver lining to Ozu’s wickedness after all, though I still wasn’t going to forgive him. Even considering the fodder he had given me for my weekly sessions at the English conversation school, it was still not worth it, though his exploits were greeted with wild acclaim by my classmates.

○

To describe how the relationship between Akashi-san and I developed after that would deviate from the purpose of this manuscript; consequently, I will refrain from recounting it here. I am sure my

readers would rather not waste their time reading such contemptible stuff.

There is nothing more boring than telling a story of successful love.

○

After experiencing the many new developments that peppered my campus life after that, it was quite vexing to have to admit the naiveté of my previous life. I am not one to recognize my faults so easily. It's true that I bore great affection for myself, but what woman would want to embrace such a filthy twenty year old man like myself? I was so provoked by this that I angrily and vehemently refused to help my previous self.

I couldn't shake off the feeling that choosing the Honwaka softball circle in front of that fateful clock tower that day had been a mistake. What if I had chosen a different circle? If I had chosen the Misogi movie circle, or responded to that call for disciples, or even entered the secret society, my past two years certainly would have been quite different. At least, it is plain my life would not have been as twisted as it is now. Perhaps that ever elusive rose-colored campus life would have been in my grasp. I could not bring myself to deny that the past two years had not been full of mistakes and missed chances.

Above all, my unfortunate mistake of meeting Ozu would surely haunt me for the rest of my life.

○

Ozu was for a time admitted to a hospital near the campus.

It was quite delightful to see him strapped down to the white hospital bed. Because of his already pale complexion, it appeared as if he had contracted some incurable disease, though in reality it was merely a bone fracture. It was probably appropriate to say that he was lucky getting off with just a fracture. I came to gloat over his inability to partake in any of his usual wicked habits, but instead of saying anything I mostly just sat there eating a castella.

"I hope you've learned your lesson about sticking your nose into people's business?" I said while stuffing my cheeks with castella, but he shook his head.

"I refuse. There's nothing else I should be doing, after all."

What an incurable character.

I demanded to know what was so interesting about playing with an innocent person like me.

○

His customary youkai-like grin floated to his face.

“It’s how I show my love!”

“I don’t need that nasty stuff,” I replied.

Final Chapter – Around the Tatami Galaxy in Eighty Days

In the two years before the spring of my junior year of college, I accomplished not a single thing of practical use. Wholly avoiding wholesome association with the opposite sex, diligence towards my studies, the discipline of my physical body, and other activities directed towards becoming a capable member of society I instead isolated myself from women, abandoned my studies, and let my flesh fall into ruination. Even so, why is that I ceaselessly labored away, still anticipating that excellent arrangement?

I must inquire of the responsible party. Where is the person responsible?

It is not the case that I have ceaselessly been in this condition. Immediately following my birth, I was the very paragon of unmarred purity, as charming as the infant Prince Genji; without a single wicked thought in that head it is said that my radiant face spread the light of love throughout the hills and valleys of my hometown. It is doubtful whether that is still the case. Each time that I look in a mirror I fly into a rage, asking 'Why is that you have become thus so? Is this the sum of your current existence?'

There are those who say that I am still young, and that people are yet things that may change.

How ridiculous.

It is said that the soul of a man is the same at one hundred as it is at three. Yet with this year, another one will be added to my twenty, and the end of my splendid quarter-century-long youth of my life will soon approach. What is to become of the coarse efforts I have poured into changing my own personality? At this stage if I attempt to twist my character which already towers above a sea of nothingness, the most I can do is break it.

At this moment, I must drag my obstinate self into leading a respectable life. I must force my own eyes to realize that reality. It is firmly my intention to not close my eyes.

And yet, somehow, it is unbearable to look.

○

In the spring of my junior year, I shut myself up in my 4.5 tatami room.

It wasn't homesickness, or that I was afraid of participating in society. It was that I wished to isolate myself from the outside world and continue to forge myself. Not only had the past two years tarnished my hopes for the future, my grades were also in shambles. Now, facing a murky third year, there was nothing that I wished to gain from university. I believed that I must undertake my ascetic devotions here, in this 4.5 tatami room.

Terayama Shuji once said "Throw away your books and go out into the streets".

But back then, I thought – Go out into the streets and do what?

○

This account, concerning my 4.5 tatami existence, was written to raise uncomfortable truths among the general populace. Only a few days ago, I was trapped and forced to wander in an endless maze of 4.5 tatami rooms, and I had to ponder the nature of this existence, to the point that I wanted to jump off the Kegon waterfall.

I, who loved the 4.5 tatamis so much, embraced the title of “4.5 Tatami Ideologue”. No matter where I went, there was not a single person who did not afford respect to me, and I attracted admiring glances from everyone. “That’s the famous 4.5 Tatami Ideologue!” “Wow, he seems so cool...” whisper the raven-haired maidens.

But even for me, the day came when I had to leave my domain.

What would make someone who was so steadfast in my devotion go to such an extent?

Those particulars are what I intend to speak of.

○

The protagonists in this manuscript consist solely of myself.

It's quite depressing, but it's mostly just me.

○

It was the end of my third May in university.

I lived in the Shimogamo Yuusuisou boarding house in Shimogamo Izumigawa, which is said to have burnt down in the turbulence at the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate and rebuilt in the exact same fashion, and if it weren't for the light leaking out the windows, it would be just like an abandoned ruin. When I first visited this place during the co-op association introductions after my matriculation it was only natural that I thought I had wandered into Kowloon Walled City. Anyone who sees this crumbling, wooden three-story building would probably think to place it on the list of important historical structures yet if it were to burn down it is likely that no one would even blink. Even the landlady who lives to the east would most certainly be relieved.

Even now it's unforgettable, what happened the night before I embarked upon my adventure. I was sitting alone in my room with a sullen face, when unexpectedly Ozu came calling.

Ever since I had met him in freshman year, I had been inextricably entangled with him. I had quit the Lucky Cat Chinese Restaurant Secret Society, but was too proud to associate with lesser beings, and the only person with whom I had previously associated was this odious imp. Though I detested

him for having dirtied my soul, I couldn't quite wash my hands of him.

Ozu called one Higuchi Shintaro who lived on the second floor of Shimogamo Yuusuisou "Master", but each time he visited him, always made sure to poke his face in my room.

"Sullen as usual, I see," he commented. "You don't have a girlfriend, you don't go to class, you don't have any friends, what on earth do you intend to do with your life?"

"You'd better watch your mouth or you're dead!"

"Kill me? Would you really do that? That's cruel of you," he leered.

"By the way, I came here two nights ago, but you were out. Shame, since I came here expressly to see you."

"I was at a manga café that night, carefully devoting myself to my studies."

"I brought a girl named Kaori-san to meet you, but since you weren't here I had to take her somewhere else. What a shame."

"I don't need an introduction from someone like you."

"Come on, don't sulk like that. Here, this is for you."

"What's this?"

"A castella. I got a lot from Master Higuchi, so I'm just spreading the wealth."

"Well this is unheard of, for you to be giving away something."

"It's because cutting up and eating a big castella like this all by your lonesome is the very depths of isolation. I want you to fully feel how lonely you are."

"So that's what it is. I've already tasted it plenty, and gotten sick of it."

"I heard from Hanuki-san. You were at the dentist the other day, weren't you?"

"Hrm. What of it?"

"So your teeth really are rotted then."

"No, that's not it. It was a much more weighty condition."

"Liar. Hanuki-san told me, only an idiot would let his teeth degenerate like that. Your wisdom teeth are halfway gone already."

The secret society I had left behind was still firmly controlled by Ozu. Besides that, it seemed that he had his hand in a number of other activities as well. Anyone would think to use that power for the good of society, but each time Ozu thought of that sort of things his limbs locked up.

"What kind of upbringing did you have, that you would become like that?"

"This is a pearl from the Master's teachings."

"What kind of Master is he?"

"It's impossible to describe him in a few words. His is a very profound existence."

He yawned and stretched.

"The other day, the master decided he wanted a seahorse, so I got a tank from the garbage dump and brought it back. But when we tried to fill it with water, it all came leaking out and made a

complete mess. The Master's room got completely flooded."

"Wait, where is your master's room again?"

"It's the one right above this one."

My head suddenly came to a boil. Some time ago while I was away my room sprang a leak in the ceiling. When I came back, the dripping water had completely ruined all my books. Not only that, but my computer was also destroyed, and all my data was completely lost. This incident further hastened my retreat from the scholarly pursuits. I was prepared to lodge a furious protest, but decided that getting involved with the unidentified resident of the room above me was too troublesome, and ended up leaving everything unsettled.

"So that was your work?"

"I'm sure the destruction of your porn library was no big deal," he brazenly declared.

"Go away now. I'm busy."

"I'll leave, I've got a yaminabe hot pot at the master's place tonight anyways."

I kicked the smirking bastard out into the hallway and restored peace to my room.

Then, my thoughts began to drift back to the spring of my freshman year.

○

At the time, I was still a sparkling freshman, green and fresh as the fallen cherry blossom leaves. Upon entering the university grounds, each first-year was immediately pressed with club fliers, I with so many that they could not be processed by a single person. Among those fliers, only four caught my attention: Misogi Movie Circle, a mysterious call for disciples, Honwaka Softball Circle, and the Lucky Cat Restaurant secret society. Each of these had its own air of suspicion, yet was its own doorway to a yet unknown campus life, and I was torn with inquisitiveness, thinking that no matter which I chose, a fascinating future lay ahead. The only reason I thought this was because I was a hopeless fool.

After lectures, I directed my steps towards the university clock tower. It seemed that many circles were holding new member information sessions in that vicinity.

Around the base of the clock tower milled throngs of freshmen, their faces still blushing with springs of hope, as well as crafty circle members, eager to prey on those same hopes. Thinking that among these countless circles lay an entrance to the phantasmic illusion of the entrance to a rose-colored campus life, I wandered around in a lightheaded daze.

The next group I met was the Lucky Cat Chinese Restaurant secret society. It was unthinkable for a secret society to advertise itself so blatantly on a flier, but it really was, as I learned afterwards, a real secret society.

One of the directors of the Library Police division, Aijima-senpai, called out to me. He was supremely clever, and behind his glasses laid two very keen eyes. Outwardly he was very docile, but

for some reason he gave off the impression that he wasn't quite being sincere.

"It'll be fun, and you'll be able to meet a lot of new people!" he wheedled, inviting me to come to the law school courtyard.

I considered his offer. It was true that my social life was exceedingly narrow. During the college years it was important to disseminate information among the students that wriggled through the halls of this institution, and in these repeated interactions lay the path to my shining future. Of course, in addition to such serious considerations, it was undeniable that there was something fascinating about belonging to a secret society. I repeat: I was a hopeless fool.

What is the Lucky Cat Chinese Restaurant?

Its purpose is shrouded in mystery, but I will dare say this: there probably is no purpose.

The secret society was simply an umbrella organization for a number of lesser branches, and if I were to list the names and purposes of these branches you probably wouldn't believe me.

The important ones, then: the print shop, which forces a stable of star students under house arrests to pump out report after report; the Library Police, which enforces the collection of overdue library materials; the Cheery Bicycle Corps, which tends to the matter of organizing bicycles on campus. Of lesser importance were the school festival planning secretariat, the Eizan Electric Railway Research Society, the Pillow Talk Youth Commission, the Sophistry Discussion Group, and a number of other clubs, research groups, and even cults.

It was generally held that from a historical standpoint, the origins of the secret society lay in the print shop; thus, the chief of the print shop commanded the entire society. Though it was unclear whether such a person actually existed, there were many theories. Some people held that it was a young raven-haired maiden, others that it was actually an elderly law school professor, and others still that it was a masked pervert who had been roosting under the clock tower for twenty years. At any rate, I was merely a minion in the Library Police, and had no opportunity to come into contact with this person.

Aijima-senpai's invitation had led to me joining the Library Police. "For the time being, just follow him," he told me, pointing at another person. An eerie fellow of ill portent stood underneath the cherry blossoms. To someone as dainty as myself, he looked like a messenger from hell.

That was my first meeting with Ozu.

○

There's a famous novel about an ordinary man who wakes up one day to find that he has turned into a poisonous bug. In my case, it wasn't that dramatic. I spent every day marinating in my room, with each day exactly the same as the last. You might even say that I had always been a bug to begin with.

The clock pointed to six, but it impossible to tell whether it was morning or night. I pondered the matter while lying in my futon, but I had no clue how long I had slept.

I squirmed around for a bit like a bug before sluggishly rising from the bed.

All was quiet.

I brewed some coffee and ate a bit of castella. After finishing my primitive breakfast, I felt an urgent pressure on my bladder and decided to head to the communal restrooms near the entrance of the boarding house.

Opening the door of my room, I stepped onto a tatami mat.

How strange.

I looked over my shoulder. My chaotic 4.5 tatami room was right there. But right past my door in front of me, the exact same chaotic room was splayed out. It was as if I was looking into a mirror.

I passed through the door and into the space beyond. Without a doubt, it was my room: the feel of the tatamis when I lay down, the assorted books on the bookshelves, the broken television, the writing desk I had been using since I was in elementary, the dust-covered washstand – it all looked so well-used and familiar.

I slipped back through the doorway, but was met once again by the same sight. The long years of zealous training, the constant kneading of my heart, the unflappable persona I had spent so much time building had not prepared me for this. It was astonishing, for my room to have suddenly cloned itself.

Now that it was impossible to exit through the door, the only option was the window.

After pulling the permanently closed curtain, I was greeted by the light of a fluorescent lamp through the cloudy glass. I threw open the window and gazed upon the sight of my own room. gingerly stepping through the window frame, I checked out the furnishings of that room, only to come to the same conclusion.

I returned to my original room and smoked a cigarette to try to calm down.

My eighty day expedition through that 4.5 tatami universe was about to begin.

○

The adventure I embarked took place in a number of basically identical 4.5 tatami room. I would therefore like my readers to have a clear image of what this room is like before I proceed.

First, to the north is a door, about as flimsy as a cracker fit for a baby. It's still covered with an assortment of lively stickers and labels from the former resident of this room.

Just past the door is an absolutely filthy sink, with cans of shampoo and appliances and all manner of trash piling up together. It's guaranteed to put off even the most determined chef. I vehemently reject any possibility of cooking in this sad kitchen, and cling to the philosophy that men should not

enter the kitchen.

Most of the north wall is a closet strewn with drab clothes, books I haven't read, papers that I can't bring myself to throw away, an electric heater, and other assorted objects. My library of pornography is also hidden inside there.

The east wall is dominated by bookshelves, besides which are a vacuum cleaner and a rice cooker, neither of which I feel inclined to much use.

To the south, there is a window, with the well-loved desk I have been using since elementary school occupying the space beneath. I rarely open the drawers, and have completely forgotten what lies within them.

The space between the bookshelves and my desk is a no-man's-land, where junk that has nowhere else to go is tossed: I refer to it as an exile to Siberia. Someday I will need to figure out exactly what is in there, but for now it's too frightening to venture there. I get the feeling that once I go in, the chances of me ever getting out again are exceedingly slim.

On the west side, there is a broken TV and a small refrigerator.

And thus we return to the north wall.

It only takes a few seconds to go around the entire room, but now it feels one and the same as my brain.

○

Why did I choose a 4.5 tatami room in the first place?

I know of one person who lived in a three tatami room, but he was even more aloof than me, and became absorbed in reading Heidegger's "Being and Time", becoming more and more obstinately withdrawn and set against the world, so that last year his parents had to come and pick him up.

Two tatami rooms certainly exist within Kyoto. Unbelievable as it may sound, near Joudo-ji, there are rooms that consist of two tatamis joined end-to-end. If you were to sleep in one of these rooms, there's no doubt that your body would begin to stretch out.

There's a frightening rumor on the street that in a certain ward of Kitashirakawa Baptist General Hospital there are rooms that consist of a single tatami, but the students that saw these rooms mysteriously disappeared within a few days, and their friends all suffered tragic fates.

And then there is the 4.5 tatami room.

Compared to 1, 2, or 3 tatami rooms, 4.5 tatami rooms are beautifully organized. You can lay out three tatamis side-by-side, and then lay a fourth on top of those three. The remaining space is filled by the remaining half tatami, creating an invigorating square. Isn't it beautiful? Two tatamis can also make up a square, but the resulting space would be exceedingly cramped. On the other hand, if you were to make a larger square, it would become as spacious as Takeda Shingen's lavatory, and you

might become shipwrecked.

After entering university, I came to support the 4.5 tatami room.

Seven or eight or even ten tatami rooms exist, but can the people who reside therein truly say that they are fit to control such a space? Can they sweep the corners of such expanses into the palm of their hand? With great power comes great responsibility. We humans are only capable of controlling spaces no larger than 4.5 tatamis, and those greedy beings who hunger for more would be met by some fearsome insurrection from some corner of their room – that was what I asserted.

○

My exploration of the 4.5 tatami galaxy, but I would not be so base as to impatiently set off just yet. I analyzed the materials I had at hand over and over and over, slowly coming up with the perfect strategy. Perhaps it would be accurate to say that I would overanalyze things until the opportunity had already passed.

I returned to the original room and pondered what I should now do.

A truly admirable person would not lose his cool, no matter what situation he was in. After some thoughtful deliberation, I made up my mind to make use of the empty beer bottle that Ozu had left here a fortnight earlier. Having relieved my bladder in it, I recovered my composure.

Panicking would not get me anywhere. As I was a third-year student only in name, I had spent most of my time here in this room. For me to suddenly wish to get out of this room despite my earlier compunctions about spending time outside was incredibly shallow. As long as there was nothing to threaten me here, I had no reason to leave. I would settle down and carefully craft my life here; this was surely a turn for the better.

It was decided. I leisurely perused my copy of Jules Verne's "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea" and let my mind be transported to that distant undersea world. After I tired of that, I looked into my porn collection, took up the proper instruments, and transported myself to another world altogether. I eventually tired of this as well.

It occurred to me to turn on the television, but it had never been in good shape. The screen revolved like a pinwheel in a hurricane, so unless you had superhuman kinetic vision it was impossible to tell what was being displayed. I stared at it for a while until I got sick. If I had known that this situation was going to happen, I would have gotten the TV fixed earlier.

Eventually the hands of the clock made a full revolution. As I heated up the fragments of a fishburger, it occurred to me that all I had left was the castella. There was also a bit of daikon radish, but I decided to leave that alone for now. Before I went to sleep I checked just in case, but on the other sides of the window and door were still the same 4.5 tatami rooms. I flopped onto my futon and stared at the ceiling. Why had I become trapped in this world?

There was one hypothesis I could come up with – the curse of the Kiyamachi fortune teller.

○

A few days ago, I decided to kill some time by going to Kiyamachi. After browsing through an antique bookshop, I started to roam aimlessly. That was where I met the fortuneteller.

In between the bars and brothels, a dark, squeezed sort of house stood in the shadows. Under the overhang, an old woman sat at a wooden stall covered by a white cloth; she looked like a fortuneteller. On the hanging sign, a number of kanji of cryptic meaning were inscribed. From the orange light of a lantern the hag's face floated up through the gloom. The appearance of the whole thing was eerily threatening, like a ghost greedily hungering for the souls of passersby. I had once had my fate read for me, but after that my fortune took a turn for the worse, with the shadow of an old woman seeming following me everywhere I went. Nothing I did went right; people I was expecting never showed up, I could never find anything that I lost, I failed my courses, my thesis that I was about to present suddenly and spontaneously combusted, I fell into the canals of Lake Biwa, I was caught by a snake-oil salesman on Shijou street, among other unpleasant happenings. While these wild thoughts were going through my head, the old woman noticed me looking at her. She glared at me from the inky darkness with gleaming eyes, and I was caught by her ghostly emanations. Her suspicious aura had a persuasive power to it, and logically thinking I came to the conclusion that someone with such a freely flowing aura could not possibly be wrong in her divinations.

In my coming on twenty-five years of life, there were but few occasions where I took someone's advice humbly. Though I took few risks in life, wasn't there a possibility that I could choose the thorn-lined path. If only I had chosen to stop relying on my own judgment earlier, I wouldn't have been bullied around in the Lucky Cat Chinese Restaurant secret society and been driven to barricade myself in my room, nor met the labyrinthine character of Ozu. Rather, I would have been blessed with wonderful mentors and friends, become accomplished and recognized as a great talent in the arts, of course have a beautiful raven-haired maiden at my side, face a shining golden future ahead of me, and acquire that all-important "rose-colored campus life" in the palm of my hand. For someone like me, having that kind of life didn't seem far off at all.

That's right.

It wasn't too late. I could hear someone's objective advice and break out of this dreary life.

I moved my legs toward the old woman as if attracted by that odd aura.

"Student, what is it that you wish to know?"

The old woman mumblingly spoke her words as if her mouth were full of cotton, giving off the impression that her words had all the more worth to them.

"That's a good question. What should I say, indeed?"

Seeing me at a loss for words, she laughed.

“I can see from your face that you are very frustrated, unsatisfied. You are not able to use your full talents; the situation you are in now is not suited for you.”

“Yes, that’s exactly it.”

“Show me your hands.”

The old hag took my palms and peered into them, grunting approvingly.

“You have much earnest talent in you.”

I tipped my hat to her keen insight. Just as a true master hides his skills, to be able to so unassumingly realize my hidden sense and talent within five minutes of meeting me, this was no ordinary person.

“You must not let your opportunity slip away. An opportunity is nothing more than an excellent chance, you understand? It’s difficult to take hold of such opportunities. Something they hide in places you don’t expect, and sometimes something that you thought was an opportunity was really nothing at all. But in order to seize an opportunity you must act. You look like you will have a long life, so sooner or later you will be able to take such an opportunity.”

As befitting her aura, her words were truly profound and deep.

“I don’t want to wait too long for something like that; I want to take that opportunity now. Can you be a little more specific?”

At my probing, the old woman’s wrinkles deepened. I thought her right cheek must be itchy or something, but after a while she smiled.

“It’s hard to be specific about the future. Even if I were to tell you exactly, it would soon twist and warp with the machinations of time. Fate is something that changes from moment to moment.”

“But, you still haven’t really told me anything other than obscure sayings.”

As I tilted my head in confusion, she breathed out through her nose.

“Very well. I will refrain from speaking of things far ahead, but I can speak of things that will soon come.

I widened my ears like Dumbo.

“Colosseum,” she suddenly whispered.

“Colosseum? What’s that?”

“It is the sign of an opportunity. When an opportunity arrives, it will be accompanied by Colosseum,” she intoned.

“So are you telling me I need to go to Rome?”

But the old woman merely grinned.

“Student, when your opportunity comes, you mustn’t let it slip away, you can’t just fumble around randomly as usual. Seize it, daringly, unlike your actions up until now. If you do, you will no longer be unsatisfied, and be able to embark on a new path. Though that may lead you to a different kind of

dissatisfaction. I expect you understand though."

I didn't understand in the slightest, but I nodded anyways.

"Even if you don't catch this one, you don't need to worry. You are a splendid young man, so someday without a doubt you will make it. I can see it. There's no need to rush."

With that, the old woman brought her divinations to an end.

"Thank you very much."

I nodded and paid the fee.

Then, like a lost lamb, I turned and wandered back into the crowds of Kiyamachi.

I would like you to take to heart exactly what the fortune teller predicted.

○

Perhaps this situation was brought about by that woman's curse. If that was the case, then perhaps the key to breaking this dreadful spell lay in this 'Colosseum'. As I resolved not to sleep until I had unraveled this mystery, I drifted off into peaceful slumber.

By the time I woke, the clock pointed to twelve.

I rose and pulled aside the curtains.

No blinding light of day greeted me, nor did the inky darkness of night. It was only the pale light of the fluorescent lamp in the other room. I had hoped that something would change if I went to sleep, but the situation was exactly the same. Opening the door met with the same results as before.

For the convenience of my readers, I will label my original room as Room 0. The room on the other side of the door is Room 1, and the room that lies through the window I shall designate Room -1.

I sat cross-legged in the middle of the room and listened to the soft burbling of the coffeemaker. Of course, I had gotten hungry once again. The castella was already gone, and I had already eaten the last of the fishburger. I checked inside my refrigerator, hoping that something had magically appeared inside, but all that was left was pieces of radish, soy sauce, pepper, salt, and a blend of spices. It was bereft even of that college staple, instant ramen. This was my reward for relying on a convenience store diet.

I boiled the radish and ate it, liberally sprinkled with salt and spices. After drinking the coffee, I was completely sated.

After only two days, I was out of food; all I had left was coffee and cigarettes. No matter how liberally I used these to stave off my pangs of hunger, my ribs would eventually start poking through my skin. I would starve to death in this godforsaken place, my body crumbling to dust.

I was greatly perplexed as how I was to survive in this 4.5 tatami world, and attempted to ignore my physical condition, though no amount of willpower could hide the growling of my stomach. With

no other recourse, I came up with a plan to solve my food problem.

○

College students are filthy animals. When you think about filthy, you think about mushrooms. I figured that I could eat the mushrooms that were growing in the back of my closet. But after I pulled out the porn, cardboard, and rotting clothes, I discovered it to be an arid place, not suitable for growing mushrooms. Should I spread out my clothes on the floor, sprinkle them with water, and cultivate mushrooms that way? I decided that if it came down to subsisting off mushrooms which themselves fed off my own dirty clothes, I would rather choose the glory of starvation.

I also thought of boiling the tatamis and eating them; there was probably enough of my bodily fluids soaked into them that they had nutritional value. But they had too much fiber. It was clear that if I ate them, my bowel movements would become exceedingly flowing, like the canals of Lake Biwa, and I would be hastened to an untimely end.

A moth had been sitting on my ceiling for the last few days, unmoving. Perhaps I could derive some protein by consuming it. Even if it was a bug, it was still an animal. If I were ever to be stranded on a mountain, I would simply hunt for worms and beetles to toast and eat. However, I would rather lick up the dust in the corner of the room, than consume this foul thing covered with scales.

It would be a grand sort of survival if I had to chop off my excessive body parts and eat them, but since my body was very fuel-efficient and I lived very frugally, about the only excess meat I had on me was my earlobes. I was about as edible as a sparrow – all bones – and I would rather not be talked about as “the man who ate his earlobes to survive”.

From somewhere between the TV and my desk I fished out a bottle of whiskey. About half a year ago, Ozu and I had bought it for a bout of drunken revelry, but it was a little too harsh for me, and had lain there ever since, only half drunken. In these hard times where food was scarce, even the little nutrients the whiskey contained were valuable. I also found some expired vitamins in a medicine box in the closet.

Since I was too proud to eat cultivated mushrooms, the tatamis, the moth, or my earlobes, all I had left to live on was whiskey, vitamins, coffee, and cigarettes. I was like Robinson Crusoe, washed up on this uninhabited 4.5 tatami shore. At least he had a gun to hunt with, but all I had was this moth. Nevertheless, I at least had running water, and furniture, and didn’t have to worry about being attacked by wild animals. It was a little hard to decide whether this actually counted as “survival”.

I spent that day rereading “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea”, defiantly challenging whatever merciless god was watching me from afar. Since I couldn’t see the sun, it was impossible to tell whether it was day or night, and any attempts I made to demarcate one day from the next was going to be fruitless.

When I closed the door and drew the curtains, it felt just like any other day, and I half-expected Ozu to come bursting through the door to bring me another piece of misfortune.

The consolation was that I had gotten my wisdom teeth pulled two weeks earlier. If I hadn't, I would probably be rolling on the floor crying out for a dentist, and perhaps even collapsed and died.

The teeth I had gotten pulled at Kubozuka dental clinic were even now adorning the top of my desk.

○

Near the end of April my jaw had started hurting, and I couldn't even sleep at night.

I diagnosed the pain as a jaw condition, concluding that it was induced as a symptom of stress. Considering the dandelion-like fragility of my body, and my constant dedication to pondering higher thoughts at the expense of my body, it was stranger that I hadn't acquired this affliction earlier. With that understanding, I was filled with satisfaction, knowing that this was a trial that only the few chosen ones had to undergo, and writhed on the floor of my room in a religious trance.

"You don't even have any stress! I refuse to believe that," Ozu said, looking at my distastefully. "You don't even do anything anymore, now that you've quit the society."

Certainly, to an outsider it would seem that I did nothing, but I insisted that I was filled with stress from spending so much time pondering these thankless questions: the pain in my jaw was proof enough of that.

"That's definitely just a cavity," Ozu bluntly told me.

"Of course not, that's ridiculous! It's not my tooth that hurts, it's my jaw."

Staring down at my pained form, Ozu recommended the Kubozuka dental clinic, and mentioned that a beautiful hygienist called Hanuki-san worked there. But I refused. I had experienced through a number of adversities and my heart had been burnished and refined. Still, a dentist was a frightening thing.

"I'll never go to a dentist."

"Even if you'll get to have a beautiful woman stick her fingers in your mouth? You should be thanking me. You've never had the chance to lick a woman's fingers before in your life, that's what I think. You should take advantage of your cavity while you can; this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance.."

"Don't lump me in with the likes of yourself. I wouldn't want to lick someone's fingers anyways."

"You fluting liar!"

"That makes me sound like an orchestra, idiot. Say it right: fucking."

"Whatever, just make sure to go!"

He seemed to be rather passionate about this.

One night, the pain suddenly spread, and my teeth started pulsing, almost resonating with each

other. It was as if a troupe of fairies had gathered in my mouth and were putting on some sort of Cossack dance performance. I finally had to give in to Ozu's urging.

It turned out that the pain wasn't due to my body's fragility, or to my constant pondering: it was because of a cavity in my wisdom tooth. Reluctantly I had to admit that Ozu's deduction was correct. After I had left the secret society, I hardly had any human contact at all, and as a result, my dental habits also suffered.

I wasn't enticed by the possibility of tasting a woman's fingers at all, I assure you, but it was true that Hanuki-san was a captivating woman. I would guess she was in her late twenties. Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun, so she looked like the wife of a military commander, rigid and dignified. While arching her strong eyebrows, she skillfully handled a number of buzzing, terrifying instruments, splendidly removing the tartar from my teeth. I was in awe of the cool manner in which she conducted herself.

After the procedure was done, I told her that Ozu had recommended me here. She seemed to know him quite well, chucking "He's an amusing character, isn't he?" Then, as if carrying a newborn, she carefully handed me my tooth, swaddled in cotton.

I folded the tooth up in a tissue and enshrined it on my desk, staring at it every day. For some reason, it was hard to throw it away.

○

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I was making light of the situation, pretending that this was all just a dream.

But after three days, there was still a 4.5 tatami room sitting beyond the door, and another one through the window. By then, I couldn't just sit there reading "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea" any longer. I was scraping the bottom of the barrel as far as food was concerned, and I was running out of cigarettes as well. I had been hoping to preserve my pride and move as little as possible, but if I died, there wouldn't exactly be any honor for me to hold on to.

The last dregs of my coffee drained into my empty belly, and I slowly lapped at a dish of soy sauce, hoping to distract myself from my hunger.

At this point, there was little for me to embarrassed about, but no matter how little food I had, the call of nature still applied to me. I had devised an ingenious system where liquid waste went into the beer bottle, and when it got full I would simply dump it down the sink. The brown stuff, however, was another matter.

With my bowels straining, I pushed open the door to Room 1. There was a window in this room as well, and to my great relief, opening it revealed that it continued on to Room 2. When I went back to my room, I crossed over the window to Room -1 and opened the door in that room, finding that it continued to Room -2 as well.

Exactly how far did this go on?

But my priority at the time was clear. I laid out some newspapers on the tatami mats, took care of business, then gingerly placed the lot in a plastic bag and tied it up.

Once the danger had passed, I began to think once again about my shortage of food and tobacco. Now that it had come to this, I had to find a solution. Whatever sort of world this was, I could only rely on myself.

○

The way I solved both of those problems was as follows.

I entered Room 1.

The room through the door was unquestionably my own; it followed that I wouldn't hesitate to use it as such.

Setting foot into the room, I spotted a box of cigarettes. Then, I spotted a fishburger and castella, though I had thought I would never see either of those again. I also found the daikon radish. Immediately I set to grilling the fishburger, liberally sprinkled it with pepper, and proceeded to savor this wonderful protein for the first time in three days. I wasn't done there. Having finished the fishburger, I carved a slice of castella off for dessert. As energy flowed through my body, it felt as if I had been brought back to life.

Opening the window in that room, I looked into Room 2. It struck me that the rooms probably continued on into infinity. What an awfully miserly infinite world this was. I now lived in a boarding house larger than the entire world.

Initially I fell into despair, but the more I thought about it, the more fortunate it seemed. Even if I ate all the food in a room, I could simply move to the next one and acquire another fishburger and castella. Unbalanced a diet though it was, for the time being I wouldn't have to worry about starving.

I couldn't ignore the fact that I was sustaining myself off the castella I had received from Ozu. I had been unwillingly attached to him for two years, despite my vain attempts to cut off our relationship, but this was the first time that he had actually been of some use.

○

A year and a half after I entered university, my activities with the Library Police came to an end.

I've already mentioned it, but the purpose of the organization known as the Library Police is to track down those insolent urchins who refuse to return their borrowed library materials, and forcibly retrieve said materials. If necessary, we would resort to brutality to achieve our ends, though it may be more accurate to say that we were capable only of using brutality. Why did the Library

Police shoulder such a burden, or how they were related to the school administration – these are questions that you should not pursue, because if you do, it is entirely possible that you some harm will befall you.

Besides the retrieval of library property, the Library Police also has one another duty: to gather personal information on individuals marked as targets, and to use that information to various ends. For one, that information can be used to retrieve books. To determine where a library patron lives, we must observe his behavioral patterns, and to coerce unwilling targets to give up their materials, knowledge of his weak points is also essential. But seduced by the power of all this information, the society itself became hungry for even more knowledge. The Library Police had started to deviate from the original purpose of its information gathering decades before I joined. Besides the campus itself, everything in Kyoto from Oohara-sanzenin to the north, to Uji Byoudouin-hououdou in the south was covered by the Library Police intelligence network.

On a whim, the chief decided to break apart the relationship between Mr. A (twenty-one years old) and Ms. B (twenty years old). At a snap of his fingers, he could obtain whatever intel he wanted about them, like – “Mr. A is going out with Ms. B, but he’s actually having a fling with Ms. C from the tennis circle, whose grades are jeopardizing her chances of graduation”. Using that, he was easily able to get the information he needed to remotely control Ms. C and strike a lethal blow to the relationship between Mr. A and Ms. B.

The only organization that could stand up to the colossal power of the print shop, which was derived by selling masses of forged reports, was the Library Police. The print shop chief’s true identity was shrouded in mystery, but the Library Police chief was recognized as the de facto leader of the entire Lucky Cat Chinese Restaurant secret society.

At the time, I was merely an underling with no acquaintance whatsoever the the chief.

As an underling, my task was simply to retrieve library materials. Unfortunately, I wasn’t very good at this job; I would often share a smoke with the person I was supposed to be collecting from, and end up drinking with them. This was only the tip of the icebergs as far as my indiscretions went. Luckily, I was able to achieve results with the help of Ozu.

Ozu made use of his considerable skills in his collection work: willpower, tears, cowardly subterfuge, extortion, surprise attacks, and even theft. Of course, his track record was outstanding, and like a chain reaction, since I was his partner mine rose as well. I began to have my doubts about the Library Police.

Because he seemed to enjoy all this information collection anyways, Ozu used his mysterious connections to become the right-hand man of Aijima-senpai.

As we entered our second year, Aijima-senpai assumed the mantle of Library Police chief, and promoted Ozu and me to executive positions. Surprisingly, Ozu turned the offer down, and instead moved to the print shop. Reluctantly, I took his place, though I had absolutely zero motivation.

Caught in this rotten position, I soon became a manger only in name.

Aijima-senpai was filled with scorn for me, and soon began to ignore me like I was a pebble on the side of the road.

○

During my tenure in the Library Police, I met a rather odd fellow.

It was the winter of my first year. There was a person whose copy of a certain artist's biography was half a year overdue; his codename was Kannazuki. I was ordered to retrieve the book, and attempted to make contact with him. His name was Higuchi Shintaro, and he lived on the second floor of my very own Shimogamo Yuusuisou. He had a very odd appearance, not like a student at all, and yet he didn't seem like a fully-fledged adult either. It was never easy to tell if he was in his room or not, and if he was, he never showed his face. When I barged in one day, all I found was a duck aimlessly wandering about the room, with no trace of the man himself. He always wore an antiquated blue yukata, and had an eggplant-shaped face with an unkempt beard. That bizarre appearance always made it easy to find out where he had been, but trying to contact him directly was like trying to catch smoke. Many times I just lost sight of him in Shimogamo shrine or Demachi shopping district.

One night, I finally caught him at Neko ramen.

"You've been stalking me for a while, haven't you?" he smiled complacently. "I've been thinking about returning it, but I'm just slow at reading."

"Well, the due date was a long time ago..."

"Yes, I know. It's time for me to give it up."

We slurped our ramen in silence.

I didn't let him out of my sight, all the way back to Shimogamo Yuusuisou. "I need to use the bathroom," he said upon arriving there, and stepped into the communal lavatory. I waited for some time, but he didn't come out. My patience waning, I finally stepped inside, but the room was deserted. I ran up to the second floor, and just like magic, there was light shining through the window above his door.

I pounded on his door, shouting his name, but there was no response. He was making a complete fool out of me. While I raged outside in the hallway, Ozu arrived; at the time, he was still my partner.

"I beg your pardon, this is my Master's room," he said apologetically. "Please let it slide this time."

"Like hell I will!"

"It's no use. Once he's borrowed something, it's lost forever."

I was just as determined not to give in. I had no clue what kind of Master this was, but if a person like Ozu was his disciple, there was no way he was any sort of decent one.

"Master, good evening. I have an offering for you."

Ozu entered the room, with a backward glance at me. "I'm sorry," he said, closing the door with a grin.

○

I had been puttering around between Room -3 and Room 3 for about two days, and still there had been no improvement in the situation.

For the time being, I tried to keep myself busy. To keep fit, I strained through pushups and squats. I downed basins of coffee, and stuffed myself with castellas, while devising new concoctions with fishburgers and radishes. I read the description of the magnificent food in "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea" so many times that I began to drool.

I had always enjoyed secluding myself in this 4.5 tatami room, but always with the security of knowing that I could leave whenever I wanted. Once I opened the door, I would be greeted with the filthy hallway, and past that was the filthy bathroom, the filthy shoe rack, and past that was the exit from this filthy boarding house. It was precisely because I could leave whenever I wanted to that I never did.

Eventually the realization that I was confined to this 4.5 tatami space started to weigh heavily on me, and combined with the lack of calcium from my diet, began to vex me. No matter how long I patiently waited, my situation wouldn't improve. Now that it had come to this, the only thing left for me to do was set off on a journey to the ends of this 4.5 tatami world, solve this mystery, and if possible, escape it completely.

About a week after I had been imprisoned in this desolate land, at six o'clock, still now knowing whether it was morning or night, I set off on my expedition.

From Room 0, I had to choose whether to go through the door or through the window.

I decided to go through the door. In other words, I would be moving through Room 1, Room 2, and so on. For now, I would just go as far in this direction as I could.

Despite the heroic connotation of the expression "to the ends of the earth", I didn't actually need to muster up much courage, since I would just be traversing my room over and over. I wouldn't have to worry about wild animals, or blizzards, or running out of food; hence, I didn't have to prepare anything. No matter where I was on my journey, I would be in my own room. If I got tired, I could just crawl under the covers of my own bed.

Though I didn't meet any wild beasts, I did have a number of frightening chance meetings.

On the first day, I crossed through twenty rooms, and yet the rooms still continued on. It truly was a fool's errand, and I decided to stop there for the night.

○

On the third day, I discovered how to create infinite wealth.

When I was describing my room, I mentioned the space between my desk and the bookshelves. That day, I decided to dig in there for anything that might be of use, and upon my survey of that Siberian wasteland discovered a ragged wallet that had been banished there. Inside it was a single thousand-yen bill. I sat in the middle of the room, smoothed out the worn bill, and laughed hollowly. What use was this bill to me? Having descended from a capitalist society into this utterly isolated 4.5 tatami world, it might as well be another scrap of paper.

But when I moved into the next room, I found another wallet and another thousand-yen bill. I was thunderstruck. If it was the same in all the other rooms, then I would make a profit of a thousand yen in every room. Ten rooms would mean ten thousand yen. One hundred rooms was one hundred thousand yen. A thousand rooms was... What an incredibly lucrative trade. Whenever I escaped this world, I would be able to pay off the rest of my tuition, and probably my living expenses as well. Cavorting around in Gion was no longer just a dream.

After that, I started to carry a rucksack on my journey, and threw another thousand-yen bill into it with each room that I passed.

○

At first, I found moving through room after room to be extremely dull, and spent what time I had left reading and indulging myself in daydreams, trying to keep my spirits up. I even took the opportunity to admirably do some studying, and sat at my desk, being soundly defeated by Schrodinger's equations.

I kept recalling the old fortune teller's words.

What was this "Colosseum"?

I was firmly convinced that she had placed a curse on me, and it was clear that the key to breaking the curse lay in "Colosseum". But there wasn't a Colosseum anywhere in my room. While I traversed through this massive dimension, I looked for things that might be related to the Colosseum, but found absolutely nothing.

○

As I continued this brutal journey, I thought back upon the Mochiguma that had been my solace for a year. Though this whole experience had slowly made me more cynical, the thought of that soft teddy bear was still nostalgic.

Last summer, I found the Mochiguma at the Shimogamo shrine used book fair, and it soon became

very close to my heart. It was a grey, spongy bear, almost as soft as a baby and as tall as a can of juice. Squeezing it affectionately was sure to bring a smile to my face, and I always had it at my side. After I left the secret society and retreated to my room, with my only human contact being the half-demon Ozu, having a companion during my solitary training was essential.

However, a few days before this journey began, the Mochiguma mysteriously disappeared at the coin laundromat. I was washing the poor dirtied bear, but when I lifted the lid at the end of the cycle, someone had absconded with my Mochiguma, leaving a pile of unlovable boxers in its place. Upon further inspection, it turned out that those sorrowfully stained boxers were in fact my very own underpants.

“Perhaps you merely imagined that you were washing a bear, and actually came here to do your regular laundry. You just got sick of doing ordinary laundry, and fancied yourself washing a teddy bear instead of your boring clothes,” I thought. “You’re starting to lose it.”

But when I returned to my room, my underpants were still in their usual spot. I was confused, now in possession of two identical sets of boxers. Even now, that mystery had never been explained, and I just had to live without my Mochiguma.

I prowled around the room, hoping my Mochiguma was doing well, wherever he was.

○

Initially I counted every room that I occupied, but somewhere along the way I gave it up.

Open the door, go in, cross through Room n, open the window, climb in, cross through Room n+1, open the door, go in, cross through Room n+2, open the window...this slog continued on endlessly. Though I continued to profit a thousand yen at a time, I still couldn't see any means of escape, and depending on how hopeful or despairing I was feeling, the value of each bill I picked up fluctuated wildly. If I couldn't get out of this world, then all the bills I had been painstakingly collecting were just scraps of paper. Though the value of those bills plummeted, I wasn't sure why I continued to collect them; it was either sheer persistence, or mere destitution.

I ate heaps of castellas, grilled fishburger after fishburger, and soldiered on this lonely march.

Sometimes I wondered whether I had actually fallen into a hell of 4.5 tatami rooms, and was condemned to suffer like this eternally. Thoughts of my previous iniquities floated through my head, and once or twice I even collapsed, overwhelmed by my embarrassment. “Of course I would fall into hell!” I shouted.

At last, having reached the limits of my patience, I collapsed onto the tatami mat like a log and refused to march further.

I began to read “The Curious Casebook of Inspector Hanshichi”, getting drunk off the cheap whiskey and chain-smoking. “Why must I suffer like this?” I wailed at the ceiling. I became frightened

at this claustrophobic world and sang what few songs I knew at the top of my lungs; in any case, no one was going to complain about the noise. I would much rather have stripped naked and done a full body painting, but though I now yelled unthinkable obscenities at the top of my lungs, and though I was completely alone, my powers of reason hadn't completely gone out the window yet. But it wouldn't have been surprising if I lost control of those reins soon. Of course, I continued to grit my teeth.

However, I did manage to make a discovery.

Though each room looked practically identical, I noticed that there were a few differences here and there. It was the tenth day of my journey. The differences were almost unnoticeable, but the contents on the bookshelves were slightly dissimilar. I thought to pick up "The Curious Casebook of Inspector Hanshichi", but in that particular room the book did not exist.

What did this mean? I didn't know the answer.

○

Let me expound upon the nature of my hygiene on this journey through the 4.5 tatami world.

I was thankful for the fact that I didn't need to do laundry. There was a set of clothes in every room, so if my own got dirty I could simply change whenever I wanted. I fastidiously changed my underwear every day, so oddly enough, it was actually cleaner in this world without laundromats.

I tried to keep shaving, but before long it got tiresome and I gave up completely. For one, I couldn't even go outside even to a convenience store, so there was absolutely no point. My hair got quite long as well; my face was like that of a Robinson Crusoe, washed up on a 4.5 tatami shore.

My beard and hair were hardly of concern to me, but my body was another matter. There were coin-operated showers in the corridor in Shimogamo Yuusuisou, but in this world where corridors did not exist, it was impossible for me to just walk down the hall and get to those showers. The only things I could do was boil water, pour it into a washbasin, and wet a towel to wipe myself off. Humming under my breath, I tried my best to pretend that it was just as good as a shower, but it was a miserable effort.

○

As I had nothing else to think about, I spent a lot of time reflecting upon the wasted past two years of my life. Even now, I regretted how much time I had spent on foolish pursuits.

After I broke up my partnership with Ozu, I soon became known far and wide as a unprecedently useless manager, the laziest in the history of the Library Police. Though all I did was slack off, I was never hunted down or threatened. Ozu, who on the other hand was the shining light

of the Library Police and had become part of the print shop, often visited me, and it was probably because of that that the powers that be decided to let my transgressions slide.

I told Ozu that I was thinking about quitting, but he merely laughed and brushed it off.

“Come now, I’m sure that staying as you are could be fun as well.”

How irresponsible.

My second year was a frustrating, indecisive time. I couldn’t take it anymore. On paper I was part of the top brass, so I still attended the secret meetings and surrounded myself with conspiracies to keep up appearances, but it all felt completely meaningless. All the other society members thought I was an idiot, and the reigning Library Police chief Aijima-senpai wouldn’t give me the time of day. I felt nothing but loathing for Ajima-senpai.

Every night, I thought about abandoning the society. It would be too dull to just leave outright; my escape would need to be an open show of defiance that would go down in the history of the Library Police.

In the fall of that year, I was having a drink with Ozu, and let my plans slip. “I can’t endorse your plan,” he said. “No matter how much it feels like a game, the Library Police’s information network is the real deal. It’d be pretty bad if you were to make an enemy out of them.”

“You think I’m frightened?”

Ozu toyed with the Mochiguma lying on the floor. It gave a whoosh as he pushed down on its tummy, all the air escaping out of it.

“You’re going to become like this bear. My heart already hurts for you.”

“Like you give a damn.”

“It’s because you say things like that. Right now, your reputation is in the gutter, but I’m protecting you to the best of my ability. A little appreciation would be nice.”

“I don’t have anything to thank you for.”

“I think it’s called courtesy.”

In the fall, when loneliness threatened to pierce my bones, the warm burbling of the hotpot was a comforting sound. Spending such a night with only Ozu as company was a serious problem. As a human being, this was completely wrong. I shouldn’t be sulking at my misfortune of falling into this weird society. Beyond the secret society, a respectable campus life was waiting.

“You’re thinking that you should have led a better student life right now, aren’t you?” Ozu conjectured, quickly getting to the heart of the matter. “You’ve been restless for a while now. Have you been dabbling around with love on the side? I know that sort of thing would make you pretty self-aware.”

“I’m not interested in that stuff.”

“Didn’t you work part-time at the Shimogamo shrine used book fair? I saw your little rendezvous there.”

I ignored his barbed accusation.

“...I should have chosen a different path.”

“Not to piss on your parade, but no matter what you did, you would have run into me. Call it intuition. At any rate, I’m putting all I have into making you worthless. There’s nothing you can do about destiny.” He pointed his finger at me dramatically. “You and I are bound by a black thread of fate.”

I shuddered as an image of him and I sinking to the pitch-black bottom of the sea, tied by a dark thread, floated through my mind.

Ozu smiled contentedly at my discomfort and ate some pork. “Aijima-senpai’s having difficulty as well. Even though I’ve moved to the print shop, he still comes to me for advice.”

“Why does he like a bastard like you?”

“My flawless character, my clever tongue, my clear intellect, my lovely face, and of course my immeasurable love for my fellow man. These are what you need to win friends and influence people. Why don’t you learn a little from my example?”

“Shut up,” I growled, but Ozu just grinned broadly.

○

I left those memories behind me, and continued on my journey.

The history of the Earth is split into various spans of time, roughly divided into the Precambrian, the Paleozoic era, the Mesozoic era, and finally the Cenozoic era. At the beginning of the Paleozoic era was the Cambrian period, and during this time the so-called “Cambrian explosion” occurred where many new species came into being. During the Jurassic and Cretaceous periods of the Mesozoic era, dinosaurs flourished on the earth, the type that I loved to look at pictures of when I was young.

At the end of the Paleozoic era was the Permian* period.

If you look at the kanji that make up Permian, you might imagine that the surface of the earth, inhabited by all manner of squirming creatures, to be covered with tatami mats. In that period, the world was composed of an infinite number of two-tatami rooms. In the Mesozoic era the number of tatamis increased by one and the world entered the Triassic period. But as the advent of the dinosaurs arrived, the beautifully laid out tatami mats were stomped into nothingness and the Jurassic period reigned.

I can’t help but think that the world has turned into a large 4.5 tatami room. The Quaternary period of the Cenozoic era had ended, and I had moved into the 4.5 tatami period. All the animals that crawled the surface of the Earth had undergone a mass extinction, and only I and the moth that clung to the ceiling were left. Biodiversity is finished.

As the last remaining human, I shall wander this 4.5 tatami world endlessly. Even if I were to seek to become the new Adam of this new age, Eve has gone missing.

But as I seethed with this misfortune, I met a most unexpected Eve.

○

It was about twenty days into my journey.

I had lost track of what room I was in, so I shall call it Room k. Having spent half the day marching on, I was becoming tired; I took a rest and had some castella, which I had come to loathe entirely.

The fluorescent light in the next room appeared to be broken, flickering on and off intermittently. I had already seen a number of these dark rooms, terming them “cloudy rooms”, always passing through them quickly, since they had an eerie aura about them.

After finishing my break, I opened the window and peered into the next room.

In one of the corners, someone was sitting and reading a book.

Clichéd as it may sound, my heart nearly jumped out of my throat.

Over the past twenty days, I hadn't talked to another soul, but now, on this journey through this solitary world, I saw the shape of a person. In this case, fear overtook my delight.

The person reading the book was a girl. She was looking downwards, staring intently at the copy of “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea” on her lap. Beautiful black hair flowed down her back, shining brightly. She hadn't even looked up when I opened the window, which was brave enough in itself; I considered whether she might actually be a witch who controlled this corner of the 4.5 tatami world. If I made one false move, I might be turned into a steamed meat bun and devoured.

“Ah, I beg your pardon,” I hoarsely stammered.

She didn't react.

I timorously stepped into the room and moved closer to her.

She sat there smiling sweetly. Her skin looked just like regular skin, and was soft to the touch. Her hair was carefully groomed, her clothes were arranged with nary a thread out of place. You might have thought that she was a lady born into nobility, except that she was completely still, as if she had been frozen in place staring into the distance.

“Is this Kaori-san?” I murmured, almost too shocked to speak.

○

It was near the end of fall last year.

Aijima-senpai, who had inexplicably become the head of the Library Police, was interrogating everyone about their duties. He had mobilized the Library Police solely for the petty goal of

overthrowing the head of the Misogi movie circle. The target was the overlord of that circle, a person called Jougasaki.

There was some beef between Aijima-senpai and this Jougasaki, but there were those who also whispered that his real objective was to take control of this circle for himself and impress a girl who was one of the circle members. Whatever the reason, Aijima-senpai had set Jougasaki in his crosshairs.

The first step, of course, was intelligence gathering.

Through the intelligence network that encircled the campus, we amassed every piece of information that pertained Jougasaki. Among the data we gathered was a photo of a woman. During the war council to take down Jougasaki, this photo was circulated among the staff, and an emotionless voice spoke up.

“This is the target: Kaori-san.”

That was Aijima-senpai’s filthy, despicable plan. He saw Kaori-san as nothing more than a pawn; if we kidnapped her, then Jougasaki would have no choice but to bow to our demands.

The operation took place on the night before the school cultural festival, and the campus was still raucous with merrymaking. Jougasaki was away at a gathering of the circle, leaving his apartment vacant. With regretful glances back at the carousing, as if asking why they were forced to participate in this act, several members of the Library Police staff slipped through the night and gathered at Yoshida shrine, with myself among their number. We linked up with the lockmen and headed towards Jougasaki’s apartment.

The plan was for the lockmen to get access to that apartment, allowing the staff members to enter and steal away Kaori-san. However, we encountered a setback before we even got to the building. Among us was one member who, upon realizing that this entire enterprise was a criminal offense, completely lost his nerve and dedication to the plot. That member was me.

I threw a tantrum and clung desperately to the concrete wall. The other members had also been harboring doubts about the plan, and faced with my outburst vacillated among themselves. My noble, upright objections were about to ruin Aijima-senpai’s plan.

At that point, Aijima-senpai unexpectedly made an appearance.

“You nimrods, what are you dithering about?” he bellowed, but we were divided into two factions: one that wanted to proceed immediately with the plan, and another that was ready to run away as fast as it could. Of course, I was part of the faction that wanted to run away, or as I like to call it, make a tactical retreat.

As I fled into the night, I left an elegant parting remark, “Screw your stupid plan!” Aijima-senpai’s eyes flashed like a serpent’s. I thought he was going to kill me.

I careered into town and hid myself in the crowds, cursing myself for saying those words.

In the end my protests were fruitless, and Aijima-senpai kidnapped Kaori-san anyways.

Late that night, in some underground corner of campus, Jougasaki was forced to bow to Aijima-senpai's demands, and a few days later, ceded control of the circle he had founded and ruled with an iron fist. Aijima-senpai was praised far and wide for his success, embraced by all.

I was filled with outrage.

I would never forgive the Library Police chief.

Not to sing my own praises, but I had some tricks up my sleeve as well. I immediately fled to a hiding place that Ozu had prepared for me, and safe from the eyes of Director Aijima, heaved a sigh of relief and frustration, quivering with rage.

○

I decided to stay the night in Room k.

When I woke up, I still didn't feel like moving on yet. While scratching my sideburns, which by now grown so much that they had already merged with my beard, I pondered the situation. As I sipped my coffee, my gaze fell upon the dirty wall behind the TV.

Then I had a revelation.

For over twenty days, I had been monotonously repeating the cycle of going through the door and exiting through the window. Wasn't this too straightforward though? If I really wanted to escape, why hadn't I broken through the wall? Maybe that would solve this entire problem. There was an exchange student living next to me, but even if I were to suddenly come crashing through the partition, I'm sure he would just laugh it off with his continental open-mindedness.

Confidence began to well up inside me again.

I examined the wall. The reason I hadn't installed an air conditioner and endured the heat wasn't just because I was so manly. The walls of this boarding house were like the props in the cultural festival: so thin and full of holes that I could hear my neighbor and his girlfriend whispering sweet nothings to each other as if I was right next to them. As soon as I installed a cooler, all the cool air would flow right into room 109, then 108, 107, 106, in an endless chain. I would basically be footing the AC bill for the benefit of all the other residents on the first floor.

Now, all my sweat was about to pay off.

I did some pushups and squats to warm up, and then took a wrench to the wall. The partition easily dented, and a small crack opened up. I felt as if I was Hercules, and merrily pounded away as I was covered by a cloud of dust, but eventually pounding away got tiring. With all my strength I gave a kick to the crack, and a small hole about fifteen centimeters in diameter opened up. From the other side came the light of a fluorescent lamp.

"All right!" I crowed, and widened the hole some more before passing through.

And then, I found myself in yet another identical 4.5 tatami room.

○

After that, I continued to break walls, tried and failed to break through the ceiling, inflated and deflated, opened doors, licked soy sauce, opened windows, slept for two full days, got wasted and threw up, and continued to destroy walls. Through this endless 4.5 tatami world I continued my wanderings.

The following are extracts from my journal of the next twenty days. Parenthetically, the dates are based solely on my sleep schedule in that world. They are by no means an accurate representation of the actual time that passed, as the only way I demarcated days and nights were when I went to sleep and woke up.

Day 24

I woke up at two. For breakfast I had coffee with salt and vitamins. I broke through a number of walls, I don't remember how many. The walls that separate the rooms are fragile, but it doesn't matter how many I break. Still, breaking walls has become a kind of recreation for me. It feels like the light of hope comes peeking through whenever I smash through a wall, maybe it's a dream? But maybe this endless 4.5 tatami world is a dream. Am I dreaming? A dream. A dream. My dream. A shining, rose-colored, worthwhile campus life.

I started to feel depressed thinking about those things, so I had some whiskey and fishburgers and went to sleep. Even in my dreams I was eating a fishburger. Get it together. Whether awake or asleep it's always fishburgers. The only things my body is made of are fishburgers and castellas.

Day 25

I woke up at four. I didn't feel like doing anything today, so I only traveled for a little bit. I had some whiskey. It's kind of sad, but though that whiskey is so harsh I've already gotten used to it.

Day 27

I feel stronger. Though I haven't been able to set foot outside of these rooms I have managed to temper my body. It must be because of breaking through all these walls, and the squats I did to shake off my gloom. I wonder how you do real Hindu squats though. Maybe the ones I invented are actually more effective than the real thing. When I leave tomorrow, perhaps I shall begin to spread these new Hindu squats throughout the world.

Day 30

Today I found something interesting in one of the rooms I passed. It was only a small paulownia box, but when I opened it there was a Kamenoko scrubbing brush inside. I tested it on the sink, and

even without using any detergent all the filth came right off. This thing is super effective. I'm merely a traveler passing through these rooms, but just on a whim I polished the sink to a shine. What an idiot I am.

I wonder why each room has these small differences. What causes them? Kaori-san was also one of them. Even though they all look like my room at first glance, how do these assorted variations arise? I have neither the interest nor the money to buy a love doll, and I don't remember anything about this brush.

It's a mystery.

Day 31.

I woke at three.

I don't know if it's afternoon or morning. Someone please tell me. If you do, I will present you with 3,000 yen. Today I recklessly dashed through many rooms. However, it's probably not a good idea to do that without establishing a direction to move. From now on, I think I will stop breaking walls and return to moving through doors and windows. Though I will probably start wondering about the other side and start breaking walls again in a while.

I took a nap and had another dream.

One of the rooms was divided in half by the Great Wall of China. I was able to scale it easily, probably because it was a dream. Of course, considering that it can be seen from space, I shouldn't have been able to scale it in a single leap, but then again it was a dream. On the other side, Ozu was sitting there eating some delicious-looking barbecued meat. The salted beef tongue with leeks was almost done, but he started to harass me and snatched the meat right off the grill. He ate it all, even half-cooked, so I wasn't able to get any. I suddenly woke up, feeling incredibly frustrated. That bastard Ozu. He's such an asshole, even in dreams. But even though he frustrated my plans in my dream I still sort of missed him.

God of the 4.5 Tatamis, please bless me with some meat. I'm not asking for anything extravagant, just a bit of roasted eggplant, or half-cooked leeks, or even just the drippings off the meat.

Day 34

I stopped my journey a little early today, and did some cooking. I smashed the castella into crumbs and grilled it along with the fishburger. It tasted a little strange, but at least it was a change from the usual. Coffee is something that I'll never get tired of, but I wonder how much nutrition there is in it. This is a very important question. I considered that question, then started worrying about my lack of vegetables and chugged down some vitamins. I want to eat something nutritious. I want some seaweed.

I washed my hair in the sink, and went to sleep. Why is it that washing my hair in cold water

brought me such anguish? I broke down and cried. It was probably to relieve some stress.

Day 39

You're supposed to stay still and wait for rescue when you are stranded, but how many people would be willing to do that in a situation like mine? If I didn't move, then I would run out of food rather quickly. I am a nomad who wanders this 4.5 tatami world looking for fishburgers and castellas. I have neither luxury, nor freedom.

Anyways, who would look for me in this situation? How should I express this situation in words? Is it the world that disappeared, or is it only me?

If it was me, then about a month has already gone by in the real world. June has already ended. I'm like the 4.5 tatami version of Urashima Taro. He didn't have it too rough, since he just spent all his time in the palace of the Dragon King.

My family is probably searching for me. I feel sorry for my parents.

But Ozu would never think about searching for me. He's probably just laughing it off with the underclassmen, saying something like "I wonder where he went?", I'm certain of it. My grudge against Dream Ozu for denying me the salted beef tongue is still fresh.

Day 39

What will I do if I really can't escape this place?

I'll just have to bravely survive here as a colonist, all on my own. I will use the castellas and fishburgers, and invent other culinary creations, begin cultivating mushrooms, break down all the walls and construct a bowling alley, movie theater, arcade, and all sorts of entertainment centers for myself, and realize my own paradise.

I'm getting excited just thinking about it.

I'm so excited, but why am I crying?

○

Throughout this miserable journey, I had been plagued by the problem of food.

I desperately wanted to eat some rice. Even a convenience store onigiri would do, no matter cold and hardened it was. I would trade a hundred fishburgers just for the chance of eating one. If a freshly cooked bowl of rice were to be placed before me, I would undoubtedly shed floods of tears.

Thin miso soup from the co-op store. Hard-boiled eggs. Rolled eggs. Boiled spinach. Grilled mackerel. Chopped burdock root. Fermented soybeans. Unadon. Oyakodon. Gyudon. Tanindon. Seasoned rice. Hijiki seaweed. Amberjack teriyaki. Grilled salmon. Tenshishan. Roast pork ramen. Tamagotoji ramen. Nanban duck soba. Chinese gyoza soup. Fried chicken kara-age. Yakiniku, of course.

Curry. Rice and red beans. Vegetable ramen. Cucumber marinated in soy sauce. Chilled tomatoes. Melon. Peaches. Watermelon. Pears. Apples. Grapes. Satsuma oranges.

Maybe I would never taste any of them ever again. But even that thought just made me long for them all the more. Every day, I left this 4.5 tatami world behind, unconsciously chasing after illusions of glorious food.

The thing I yearned for most was Neko ramen.

Neko Ramen is a fabled ramen stand which is rumored to make its broth out of cats. Whether that is true or not, the taste is unparalleled. Thick noodles broiled in mysterious, complex broth. Though I was still imprisoned here, in my sleep I could go to Neko ramen whenever I wanted.

A world where I could go to Neko ramen in the middle of the night.

To me, that was Paradise.

○

The other thing I longed for was a bath.

I harbored a deep desire to plunge into one of the wide tubs in the public bathhouse and pickle myself thoroughly. I recalled the ancient bathhouse that was in downtown, just west down Shimogamo avenue. Whenever I felt like it, all I had to do was pick up a towel and head outside. Going there early in the evening, while it was still empty, and jumping into a bath with a splash and a shit-eating grin on my face was one of my greatest pleasures.

How I longed to do that again.

I once tried to construct a bathtub after a day's march.

From the closet, I dragged out a few cardboard boxes, dumped out their contents, and disassembled them. From that material, I took two hours to fashion a sort of bathtub. I knew how much water I could boil in my coffeepot; as far as I could I made the tub level, and attempted to waterproof it with plastic garbage bags.

Then I boiled water in my pot, and dumped it into the tub; I don't know how many times I had to repeat this.

As much as I was looking forward to soaking myself, the water quickly became tepid, and there wasn't enough to submerge my entire body, so my poor little body just shriveled up in that little cardboard bath. It was truly a heartwrenching experience, and I couldn't help but wonder just what I was doing. The bathtub eventually collapsed, and all the water came pouring right out into the room.

The most painful thing was that no one was there to make fun of my pathetic efforts. If Ozu were here, he would undoubtedly flay me down to my very bones.

"What are you doing? Are there worms in your brain or something?" is what he would tell me.

○

One morning, I woke up to the sensation that someone was stroking my face with a feather duster.

I rose from my disheveled bed to discover that my room was dancing with moths. I was incredibly startled; usually there was just the one moth sitting alone in the corner of the ceiling, but today a number of comrades had joined him. They kept trickling in one-by-one through the hole I had knocked in the wall yesterday. When I looked through that hole, the room on the other side was swarming with moths, black scales fluttering down everywhere.

I hastily grabbed my rucksack, moved to the next 4.5 tatami room, and shut the window tightly behind me.

Every single room had a single moth, so when they all gathered together they made a huge flock. Perhaps they were lonely as well. The residents of each room had begun to mingle with each other, finding brethren to support each other, and after gathering had begun a room-by-room migration of their own. I was a little jealous of them.

I heaved a large sigh.

Those moths could talk coarsely among themselves, fall in love, and even sneer at those of their number that did. On the other hand, I could talk to myself, indulge in daydreams, and laugh at myself for doing so. It was a completely self-contained existence.

The moths who had become my roommates seemed to be enjoying themselves here, making me even more conscious of my solitude.

○

Let me return to something that happened last fall.

After I fled from the abduction of Kaori-san, I retreated to a hideout and trembled alone there.

Since I had openly declared rebellion, Aijima-senpai would likely move the Library Police to crush me. Jougasaki's fate would be my own. My humiliating secrets would be posted on the bulletin boards, I would become a laughingstock everywhere I went, and before long some ruffians would show me the color of my insides and slap me around from Nanzen-ji to Suirokaku.

According to Ozu, Aijima-senpai was searching high and low for me.

"This is a problem for Aijima-senpai as well; he's getting reckless," Ozu informed me. "It's getting to the point that I might need to mobilize the print shop."

I didn't step a single foot outside of my hiding spot.

My refuge was actually the room of one Mr. Higuchi Shintaro, whom I had previously attempted to coerce to return a book. When Ozu first suggested that I hide on the second floor of Shimogamo

Yuusuisou, I couldn't believe my ears. My plan was to skip out on Kyoto entirely and achieve enlightenment by hiding at Cape Muroto.

"Rather than running around recklessly, it's safer to hide right here. They'd never thing to look right under their own noses, see?"

Ozu's persuasion finally convinced me, and I began to freeload in Higuchi's room.

I spent every day playing a homemade naval battle board game with Higuchi. For a while, Ozu didn't show up. Now that my campus life was effectively about to end, was it really okay for me to be so obsessed with this board game? As I gloomily sunk a submarine, Higuchi produced a cigar and tried to console me.

"Cheer up now, Ozu's sure to help you out."

"Won't he just betray me instead?"

"Hmm, that's a possibility as well, isn't it?" he smiled. "It's never easy to tell which way the wind blows with him."

"This isn't funny!"

"But, you yourself said that risking your life by hiding here was a gallant endeavor."

○

I had been wandering this maze for nearly fifty days.

It was hard to believe that in the real world, it was already the middle of summer.

For 1,200 hours, the only food that had entered my mouth was castellas, fishburgers, vitamins, coffee, and daikon radishes. No sunlight, no fresh air permeated these walls, there was no one for me to talk with. My custom of gathering wealth had become repugnant, and I didn't want to keep picking up these thousand yen bills anymore. I was prepared to just toss away that rucksack I had been using to gather all that money, and continue on without it.

What a world this was. What a world.

The ground was covered by rows of unbroken tatamis, there was neither morning nor noon here, the wind didn't blow, the rain didn't fall. The only light here was from the dingy fluorescent lamp. With solitude as my only companion, I frantically rushed from one room to the next, looking for the end of the world. I broke down countless walls, climbed through countless windows, opened countless doors.

Occasionally I would inhabit the same room for several days, reading books, singing songs, smoking cigarettes. I might as well rest from all this pointless running around, I sulkily told myself. But sitting there in that awful silence, as if the rest of humanity had died out, and spending the entire day staring listlessly at the crumbling ceiling plunged me into a terrifying well of loneliness. Making bizarre food creations with the limited ingredients that I had, folding endless hordes of origami cranes and

yakko-sans, pacifying my Johnny, writing essays, doing pushups, placating Johnny a little more, playing with a rubber band gun – no matter what I did, I couldn't forget the reality of my situation.

Everything comes to him who waits.

I had been barricaded in my 4.5 tatami fortress ever since my escape from the secret society half a year ago. I had figured myself someone who could exist in solitude quite comfortably. How foolish of me. That was because I wasn't really alone. Compared to my present existence, the me back then was positively surrounded by people. I was no more than a precocious infant, dipping my toes into the tide on the shore of the sea of loneliness, yelling, "I'm so alone!" exultantly.

I couldn't stand to be alone.

No matter what, I need to escape this place.

I unsteadily rose to my feet, and began journeying through this 4.5 tatami world once more.

○

There was no one here.

Not a single word was spoken in these halls.

I wondered when the last time I had spoken to Ozu was.

Keeping my hope alive while wandering through this place was becoming harder every day, as was clambering through these countless windows. I couldn't bear to utter my soliloquys anymore, or sing songs, or even wipe myself off. I certainly didn't want to eat another fishburger.

Always the same 4.5 tatami rooms.

Always the same.

Always the same.

No matter how far I went, the scenery didn't change.

I wearily whispered the same things over and over in my head.

○

Last autumn, while I was still laying low in Higuchi's room playing my board games, something extraordinary happened.

Like a youkai, Ozu had made his move.

Taking advantage of the assistant director being in Hokkaido for a scientific conference, Ozu exercised his deputy powers and ordered a halt to the operations of the print shop. This was an unprecedented event, and Aijima-senpai completely forgot about me, rushing immediately to the print shop.

Ozu appeared before Aijima-senpai, slyly smiling like a dishonest merchant.

"The directors of the Lucky Cat Chinese Restaurant are concerned; it seems that someone is planning a mutiny against them. We are having a meeting to address those concerns."

Not even in his wildest dreams did Ajima-senpai imagine that Ozu was planning to take all the power for himself. While they were holding their negotiations, Ozu was laying the groundwork for his scheme with the other organizations. Using the connections of an old associate of his in the Honwaka softball circle cult, he was able to negotiate with the other organizations quite easily. In addition, the head of the cultural festival committee was his friend; even the more obscure research societies knew his name. To make his point more persuasive, Ozu promised to shave off a large amount of the cuts from the print shop that were supposed to go to the Library Police, and distribute them amongst the other groups. With his connections from his Library Police days, he made sure only to recruit people he knew would rally to his cause. Those he couldn't convince to join him were placed under house arrest on the day of the meeting by the Library Police.

There was something to be said for his versatility.

Aijima-senpai was caught in the midst of this intricate web.

The meeting was an open-and-shut affair. Once the truth came out that Aijima-senpai had used the Library Police to settle his personal grudge against Jougasaki, he was unanimously expelled from the secret society. He was unceremoniously kicked out of the meeting, still thunderstruck by what had just happened, while the other members quietly continued.

"I think Ozu-kun would be able to do a fine job," the Honwaka softball circle representative recommended.

"I already have a lot of responsibilities to uphold," Ozu demurely declined.

In the end, it was decided that Ozu would become the head of both the print shop and the Library Police.

○

The night that Ozu was inaugurated as the new Library Police chief, I hesitantly ventured onto campus for the first time in a week. While I had been barricaded inside, it had grown fairly chilly, and the autumn leaves had begun to cover the ground. I passed through the law school and descended into the underground lecture room where the meeting was held, witnessing the success of Ozu's coup d'état and the dismissal of Aijima-senpai.

After the meeting was adjourned and the other members left, Ozu sat alone on the lecture platform. I observed his face from my seat in the corner of the room. The room, devoid of all but us two, grew steadily colder, and our exhaled breaths sparkled in white clouds in front of us. As always, Ozu, Vice-Director-of-the-Print-Shop-cum-Library-Police-Chief, didn't give off the sort of aura that such a grand title warranted, and was grinning in his usual fashion like an imp.

“You’re a scary person, you know that?” I said earnestly, but he just yawned and stretched.

“This is just child’s play,” he sighed. “In any case, you’re off the hook now.”

We left the underground auditorium behind and headed off to Neko ramen.

Of course, it was my treat.

And so I washed my hands of the Lucky Cat Chinese Restaurant and set sail for brighter lands. Or so I thought, but I couldn’t rid myself of the barren influence of the last two years. I secluded myself in my room again.

I had hoped to quickly rid myself of the dreadful personage of Ozu as well, but that didn’t go very well either.

That was because he was the only person who ever visited me in my room.

○

Ozu is a student the same year as I. Though he is a member of the electrical engineering department, he hates electricity, electronics and engineering. His first-year grades were so dreadful, as low-achieving as is possible, that it is questionable whether there was any worth in him enrolling in college in the first place. However, the man himself was not concerned in the slightest.

Because he despises vegetables and adheres strictly to a diet of fast food, he has the extremely eerie look and complexion of someone from the far side of the moon. If you were to meet him the street late at night eight out of ten people would mistake him for a youkai. The remaining two people are certainly youkais themselves.

Cruelly beating the weak, groveling to the strong, selfish, self-assured, lazy, a complete demon, neglecting studies, lacking a shred of pride, feeding off the unhappiness of others he was able to eat three square meals a day. There is not a single part of him that is praiseworthy.

And yet, he is my only real friend.

○

My pitiful march went on.

The bookshelves of the room that I stayed in were littered with materials pertaining to movies. Unfamiliar videotapes were scattered in the space between my desk and the bookshelves. While sipping coffee and smoking, I fished around for those tapes, and happened on one upon which was rudely scribbled the title “The Kamo-oohashi Duel”. It was labeled as Misogi property. My interest piqued, I inserted it into the video player.

It was an exceedingly strange movie.

The only actors were Ozu and myself. We played two men who took up the duty of waging a

storied war of pranks that dated back before the Pacific War. The movie was mentally and physically exhausting, with Ozu, whose Noh mask-like expression never changed, myself energetically spouting nonsense, and a constant stream of merciless pranks. The final scene, where Ozu, who had his entire body painted pink, and I, who had shaved only half of my head, clashed on the Kamo-oohashi, was unexpectedly gripping. As the credits rolled, I was still on the edge of my seat, almost ashamed of my own reaction to it.

Unexpectedly, I was moved, seeing Ozu's face for the first time in seventy-plus days.

I guess it was just too nostalgic.

After the movie proper ended, there was a making-of feature, though the scenes were obviously staged. Ozu and I sat in front of the camera having script meetings and creating tasteless set backgrounds. There was even a tawdry section about audience reactions, but the only person who deigned to leave feedback was a woman who said, "You've made another idiotic movie, haven't you?"

I seemed to recognize that woman from somewhere.

"It's Akashi-san," I murmured.

○

The used book fair. Akashi-san. Mochiguma. Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea.

In the summer of my second year, I arbitrarily decided to pick up a nice, quiet part-time job. A place in Kawaramachi called Gabi Bookstore sometimes used part-timers to work at the used book fair, so I thought I'd try there. "I don't pay hourly," growled the owner, a man with a face like a boiled octopus.

The other part-timer who worked there was Akashi-san. The bookstore owner was always rude to me, but whenever he talked to Akashi-san, his face melted into an expression something like I imagine the woodcutter had on his face when he laid eyes on Princess Kaguya. He resembled that old man from the story far too much for my taste.

Not far from the shrine road, stretching south and north are the horse riding grounds; back then they were crammed with tents, filled with people looking for books. No matter where I looked, boxes filled with musty old tomes were lined up, so many it made my head spin. Numerous felt-lined chairs were arrayed in the field, just for people who had been intoxicated by all the books to get a rest. Though it was sweltering, there was something charming about the cicadas when they cried. On one of my breaks, I wandered over to a nearby bridge, popped a ramune, and leaned back on the handrail, pondering how silly it was for me to be wriggling around in the Library Police like a worm.

I met Akashi-san every day at the fair. Her hair was cut refreshingly short, with very intellectual-looking eyebrows; her unflinching gaze pierced you right through, and she gave off the impression that she didn't pull any punches. She was mostly assigned to watch for shoplifters, though

under that hawkish gaze no potential thief would even dare try.

Despite her intimidating demeanor, a number of adorable charms dangled from her bag: identical plush teddy bears. In the evenings after we finished tidying up, I always saw her stroking those bears, with a very serious, almost philosophical expression on her face.

“What are those?” I inquired.

Her eyebrows relaxed, and she smiled. “These are Mochiguma,” she replied.

She gave the five bears, different colors but otherwise identical, the nickname “Fluffy Squadron Mochiguman”, and treasured them dearly. The name Mochiguma was adorable and unforgettable in itself, but the smile on her face as she told me their names was even more unforgettable.

In other words, frankly put, just as I feared, I fell head over heels for her.

The day before the end of the book fair, I was crossing that small bridge at dusk, when I happened on a Mochiguma; Akashi-san had dropped it on her way home. I figured that I’d return it to her the next day, but on that final day she didn’t show up. She had some urgent business to attend to, I was uncivilly told by the owner. I purchased “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea” as a memento of the fair, and left Shimogamo shrine behind me.

In the half year since then, I’d promised myself that I’d return the Mochiguma to Akashi-san one day, and cherished it myself. Losing it at the coin laundromat was a serious blow to my heart.

“Oh, how nostalgic...” I whispered, staring at the image of Akashi-san frozen on the screen.

○

Seeing Akashi-san’s face breathed new life into me.

The next day, I began to smash through walls again, but as I silently pounded away with a wrench, my thoughts were constantly on that videotape. I had never made a movie with Ozu before, and yet that tape was clearly made by the two of us. Doing a little soul-searching uncovered a secret urge buried within me to make that kind of movie. On the videotape label was written the word Misogi. I dredged up memories of standing in front of that fateful clock tower, all the way back when I was a freshman. The name of the movie circle which I had decided not to enter that day was Misogi, wasn’t it?

These slightly varied rooms.

A tape that I hadn’t made.

Bookshelves filled with books that I had missed the chance to buy.

A Kamenoko brush that I hadn’t bought.

Kaori-san, whom I shouldn’t have been living with.

One day, I halted my trek, frozen in the middle of the room, staring up at the ceiling.

I finally understood the structure of this 4.5 tatami world.

It was embarrassing, how I had failed to grasp that simple logic this entire time. These rooms which were endlessly splayed out were all my rooms, without a doubt. These past days, I had been traveling through fragments of parallel existences, rooms that only existed in parallel universes.

All my strength left me.

How these rooms were organized was unknowable. Why this world had come into existence was also unclear, or why I had stumbled into it.

But now I understood one thing.

Even the smallest choices I made had an impact on my future. Through the countless decisions I made each and every day, an infinite number of different fates were born. An infinite number of myself were born. An infinite number of 4.5 tatami rooms were born.

Therefore, the truth of this world was that it had no end.

○

I lay down on my wrinkled bed, and listened.

The uninhabited expanse of the 4.5 tatami world was devoid of sound.

There was no one to talk to, no one who would convey anything. For me, who had no one to convey this information, there was neither past nor future. There was no one to look upon me. There was no one who would mock me, or respect me, or slight me, or come to like me. There was no chance that such a person would ever appear in this world.

I was just like the dusty, stagnant air in this 4.5 tatami room.

Whether it was the world that had disappeared, or whether it was I who had disappeared from the world, to me the only thing that existed in this world was myself. In all these hundreds of rooms that I had struggled through, I had not met a single soul.

I was the last man on Earth.

Was there really anything for me to go on living for?

○

If I were to ever get out of this place, I wanted to do so many things.

I would eat a delicious meal and slurp up Neko ramen. I would walk throughout Shijo in Kawaramachi. I would go see a movie. I would haggle with the octopus-faced owner of Gabi Bookstore. It might even be fun to attend a lecture for once, or participate in a ritual dance at Shimogamo shrine. I would go console Aijima-senpai, so unceremoniously kicked out of the secret society. I wondered how everyone was doing. I hoped they were having fun in that bustling world. Were they doing well? Was Jougasaki being happy with Kaori-san? Was Ozu busy feeding off other

people's unhappiness as usual? Was Akashi-san still puzzled at the loss of a member of Fluffy Squadron Mochiguman? Or had she found it in some unfathomable place? I wanted to find out.

But that wish would probably never be granted.

○

I felt something hard poking into my back. Fumbling around behind me to see what it was, I found the wisdom tooth I had gotten extracted at Kubozuka dental clinic. A maniacal smile rose to my lips, and I rolled around cackling, clenching that tooth.

Why was this thing here?

This was Room 0. I was back where I had started.

I wasn't sure where I had strayed in my wandering, but over the past weeks, I had returned back to the original room. It was probable that in some corner of this 4.5 tatami world I had unknowingly strayed while caught in the throes of desperation, and circled back around.

None of the rooms in this world were exactly the same, but the space between every door and every window was like a reversed image in a mirror. Thus, it was possible that I had thought that I was moving forward, when in reality I was traversing through the same room I had just come from. Though I had tried to maintain my bearing, it seemed that I had failed.

I had just completed a pointless loop.

Even so, I was already in a pit of despair, so I just quietly accepted this new revelation, laying in my bed and absentmindedly running my hands through my long mane. There was nothing for it but to accept a solitary life in this world, forgetting the memories of my past life in the world outside. I would cease this barbaric behavior of breaking walls and live the quiet life of a gentleman, reading literature, weaved in with a little bit of porn, and concentrate on refining my character. At any rate, it didn't seem like I would be able to escape this endless tatami prison, so I would proudly await my death in this land.

As I pondered my future here, I fell asleep.

That was on the seventy-ninth day.

○

I opened my eyes.

The clock pointed to six, but it impossible to tell whether it was morning or night. I pondered the matter while lying in my futon, but I had no clue how long I had slept.

I squirmed around for a bit like a bug before sluggishly rising from the bed.

All was quiet.

After my usual morning ritual of cigarettes and coffee, I didn't feel like doing anything just yet and rolled back into my futon. I picked up the worm-eaten wisdom tooth that lay near my pillow. As I held that ill-omened, rotten tooth up to the light, my thoughts returned back to the old fortune teller in Kiyamachi.

I was still convinced that this whole baffling situation traced back to that old woman. She cajoled me with words like, "You have much earnest talent in you", and laid this curse upon me, who was already struggling with hopes of escaping to a better life.

"Colosseum."

What nonsense.

I no longer required that meaningful rose-colored campus life, that ultimate asset I had so coveted.

This was a frightening tooth, and I was amazed at how long I had resisted urges to get it checked out. The top of the tooth was hollowed out, and I could see its internal cross-section, as if it was a scientific mannequin. The more I looked at it, the less it looked like a wisdom tooth; it more closely resembled an ancient Roman construction...

"Colosseum," I breathed.

Suddenly, the sound of rustling came from the window.

Before I knew what happened, a squirming black cloud came pouring through the half-open window and into the room.

The swarm of moths that migrated throughout this world apparently passed through Room 0 on its route. They kept pouring in, filling the room all the way up to the ceiling, and yet the stream still didn't slacken.

I started to panic and attempted to escape to Room 1.

As I opened the door, the cool air of the corridor flowed by my cheeks.

The dusty wooden planks of the floor stretched before me into the darkness. On the ceiling, scattered electric lights dimly shone, and in the distant entrance hall, the white fluorescent lights gleamed in the darkness.

○

I walked towards the entrance hall, not even paying attention to the moths that streamed out from my open door.

From a corner of the hall, a whistling sound pierced the air; it was probably somebody cooking rice using the outlets in the hall. The allure of a fresh bowl of rice drew me in, but I firmly resolved not to stop and kept on walking. In the entrance hall, my shoes were still neatly placed in their usual spot.

I exited Shimogamo Yuusuisou and walked out into Shimogamo Izumigawa.

The town was saturated with shades of evening, and the evening breeze that blew through the alleys softly caressed my face. I was overcome by the most delicious scent I had ever smelled. It wasn't the smell of any one thing in particular; it was just the smell of the outside, the scent of the world. It wasn't just the smell, it was the noise as well: the rustling of the Tadasu forest, the murmuring of the streams, the sound of a bike passing through the night.

My unsteady feet carried me through Izumigawa. Before me, hard asphalt stretched out endlessly. I could see street lamps, gate lamps, light leaking out from upstairs windows. I passed the Shimogamo teahouse, its lamps throwing out light onto the street. I walked through past the silent houses lining the Shimogamo shrine road. At last I could hear the sound of cars, and the scene of students carousing on the Kamo delta underneath the black pine trees unrolled before me.

I crossed the road and entered the Kamo delta, walking past the trees on the embankment. Filled with a sudden flood of emotions, I broke into a half-run, tapping the rough tree trunks as I moved past them, pushing roughly past the other students. They looked at me resentfully as I ran past, but my shaggy locks and beard dissuaded them from saying anything.

As I came out from under the boughs of the forest, a beautiful, cloudless indigo sky spread out above me.

Running, almost falling down the embankment, I ran to the tip of the delta, and was greeted by the loud sound of water rushing by. I stood proudly there, as if standing on the prow of a ship. From the east came flowing the Takano river, and from the west, the Kamogawa river; they merged in front of me into the Kamo river and flowed ceaselessly on towards the south.

The surface of the river was gilded with silver from the streetlights that were beginning to flicker on one by one. In front of me, the mighty Kamo-oohashi lay across the river. On its guardrails, neatly arranged lamps threw orange light across the bridge, and a line of cars streamed endlessly across its surface. People walked across the bridge, people writhed on the Kamo delta; no matter where I looked, I saw people everywhere. The brightly burning lamps, the brilliantly lit Haiken line Demachiyanagi rail station, the streetlamps, the lights of distant Shijou, the lights of the cars passing along the bridge, everything glimmered like precious jewels, blurring before my eyes.

What was this feeling?

The night was alive.

It was like the Gion festival had come.

I breathed the fragrant atmosphere deep into my lungs, and stared up at the sky, which was slowly fading from peach to indigo, finally crumpling up my face, before unleashing a raw, primitive yell.

○

I bathed in the disgusted, fearful glances from the other people on the Kamo delta, completely

entranced in the fact that I was here, alive.

I'm not sure how long I stood there. Before long, an uproar rose on the Kamo-oohashi. When I looked up from my position on the delta cape, a throng of people on the bridge was making a raucous din. What were they all yelling about?

As I pondered that question, a man suddenly climbed up to the guardrail of the bridge. He seemed to be arguing with the crowd that stood before him. His face was illuminated by the lamps dotting the guardrail, and I suddenly realized that it was Ozu. He gestured as if he was about to jump off the bridge, grinning broadly, writhing his hips unsteadily. Though I hadn't seen him in eighty days, he still had that impudent, impish face. While I had disappeared for a while, he had continued to forge ahead on his own accursed path.

Overcome with emotion, I yelled his name, but he didn't appear to hear me.

What kind of idiocy was he up to in that precarious position? Perhaps it was something related to a party. As I contemplated what was going on, a shrill scream rose up behind me.

I turned around, only to see a dark cloud shrouding the top of the embankment. The students who were in that cloud were thrashing around erratically, half-crazedly waving their hands and tearing at their hair.

The fluttering black cloud continued to spread, heading relentlessly down from the pine forest directly towards me. This wasn't an ordinary occurrence. Flutterflutterflutterflutter went the squirming cloud as it came down the embankment and rolled over me.

It was a swarm of moths.

○

The next day the moth plague made the Kyoto news, though nobody understood where the moths had come from. By tracing their route, it appeared that the moths had come from the Tadasu forest, that is to say, Shimogamo shrine, though things were still unclear. Even if all the moths in the forest had simultaneously decided to migrate, there was no clear reason why. There was an alternative rumor going around that the moths had actually come from the neighboring Izumigawa town, but that explanation was just as inexplicable. That night, it appeared that a swarm of moths had also gathered in a corner of my own boarding house.

When I returned, the corridor was littered with moth corpses. I had forgotten to lock my door, so my room was blooming with them as well, but I reverently gathered the corpses and buried them.

But I suspect what happened is clear to my readers.

This is what I think.

During my eighty-day sojourn to the 4.5 tatami world, the moths inside each of those rooms gathered together into a large flock. That large flock came into my room, and from there streamed

out into the world.

○

I gallantly stood my ground on the tip of the delta, with fluttering moth scales battering my face and sometimes moths entering my mouth.

Even so, the sheer number of moths that night was absolutely ridiculous. The earth-shattering sound of beating wings cut me off from the outside world, as if it were not moths but a swarm of winged imps passing over the bridge. The only things I could see through my squinted eyes were the shimmering waters of the Kamo river, the handrail of the Kamo-oohashi, and the shape of someone falling off that guardrail into the river.

After a while the swarm moved on, leaving behind the crowd of shocked revelers who murmured in loud, nervous tones about what had just happened, but I mutely scanned the bridge. There was a dark object entangled in the supports of the Kamo-oohashi like a piece of seaweed. Was it Ozu?

The students that tightly packed the bridge above were all shouting simultaneously. "He really fell off!" "Oh bad, oh bad, oh bad bad bad" "Someone help him!" "Nah, just let him die." "He won't die, even if you kill him!"

I entered the swollen Kamo river and splashed my way towards the center. A number of times I was swept off my feet, but I kept hastening towards Ozu's position. Though I was completely drenched, considering how filthy I was already it was more like taking a bath.

With some effort I finally made it to the pontoons, yelling, "Are you all right?"

Ozu stared at me for a while, eventually asking, "Huh? Who are you?"

"It's me, it's me!"

He narrowed his eyes at me for a while, before it finally clicked.

"But what's with that Robinson Crusoe look?"

"Yeah, it's been pretty bad on my end too."

"Can you move?"

"...owowowowowowowow. It's no use. Something's definitely broken."

"Well, let's at least get you to the riverbank."

"Ouch, ouch, I can't move!"

Some of the people who had gathered on the shore came down to help out. "Get him up" "Get that side" "I'll get this side" they yelled, coordinating our efforts. "Ow, ow, be more careful!" he yelled as we carried him to the shore.

A large crowd had gathered on the west bank of the river, making a huge racket. I thought I saw Aijima-senpai in that crowd and drew back, but at this point there was no reason to fear him anymore. Everyone started to crowd around Ozu, who was lying on the beach like a log.

Higuchi arrived, looking unperturbed, and asked no one in particular, "Where's the ambulance?" Jougasaki told him, "Akashi-san already called for it. It'll be here soon." Beside Higuchi, Hanuki-san was staring down at Ozu. "You reap what you sow, isn't that right?" she told him.

Lying on that dark beach, Ozu groaned.

It hurts, it hurts. It hurts so much. Do something!"

Higuchi knelt down next to him.

"I failed," Ozu said in a small voice.

"Ozu, you show a lot of promise," the Master said.

"Master, thank you very much!"

"But you didn't have to go all the way and break a bone. What an incorrigible fool!"

Ozu lay there sobbing.

Amidst the crowd that surrounded him, a number of important-looking people gathered and started to have a discussion.

"Calm yourselves, Ozu won't run away," Higuchi thundered in an intimidating tone. "I will bear the responsibility for him."

After about five minutes the ambulance arrived at Kamo-oohashi.

Jougasaki went galloping up the embankment to fetch the EMTs, who promptly wrapped up Ozu in a blanket and set him on a stretcher. I would have been overjoyed if they at that point threw him into the river, but they of course being professionals did not distinguish between their patients. Without sparing a glance for Ozu's evil doings, they reverently carried the stretcher back to the ambulance.

"I shall accompany Ozu." Thus saying the Master boarded the ambulance along with Hanuki-san and left.

○

So much had happened while I was away.

The story of why Ozu was chased down and cornered at the bridge is so complicated that a full account would be another book in itself; therefore, I shall tell it only in brief.

Higuchi and Jougasaki had been waging a mysterious battle called the "Masochistic Proxy-Proxy War" for a long time. In mid-May, Higuchi ordered his underling Ozu to take revenge for his yukata being dyed pink. Ozu decided to take that revenge in the form of stealing Kaori-san, in imitation of what Aijima-senpai had done last fall. He originally thought to put her up at my place, but since I was missing, gave her to Library Police supervisor A. Unfortunately, Mr. A fell madly into a forbidden love with Kaori-san, and surreptitiously absconded from Kyoto with her in tow. Ozu used the Library Police of his own accord, obtained a rental car and hunted down Mr. A, recovering Kaori-san. However, once it was clear that Ozu had used the organization for his own gain, certain branch

circles and societies that were dissatisfied under the rule of the new Vice-Director-of-the-Print-Shop-cum-Library-Police-Chief took advantage of this opportunity to occupy the offices of Cheery Bicycle Corps, the Library Police, and even the print shop. They further discovered that Ozu had been siphoning off part of the revenue from the print shop to buy food and drink for Higuchi, and began to scheme to recover the lost money from Ozu. Aijima-senpai, who had been waiting for just such an opportunity to avenge himself, made schemes of his own to regain his standing as well as return to the Lucky Cat Chinese Restaurant. He bullied some underlings in the Misogi movie circle to give him Ozu's location and pursued him. But that night, on his way home Ozu sensed something was up and didn't return to his apartment, instead hiding in someone's garden in Joudo-ji, and called Hanuki-san, using her as an intermediary to contact Higuchi for help. Hence, Akashi-san received orders from Higuchi to extract Ozu, and infiltrated Joudo-ji. There was a tight net of surveillance encircling Ozu's apartment stretching from Joudo-ji to Ginkaku-ji, but Akashi-san devised a plan to pass through the canals of Lake Biwa, and they slipped through that net undetected. Evading the infrared sensor-like eyes that were watching the area to the east of Kamo river and north of Marutamachi-doori, Ozu was forced into women's clothes and slipped past the watchers and crossed Tadekura-bashi, finally reaching the safety of Shimogamo Yuusuisou. In Higuchi's room, Ozu was finally able to breathe a sigh of relief, but Jougasaki barged in, filled with rage about Kaori-san being kidnapped, and Ozu was discovered by the roving eyes of the society. He was barely able to escape from his swarm of pursuers, but at least he was cornered on Kamo-oohashi, and with nowhere left to run climbed onto the guardrail.

He stood there undaunted, with an impish look on his face.

"If you say that you'll do anything to me, then I'm going to jump!" he cried. "I'm not going to come down until you guarantee my safety!"

In the end, he fell off the bridge into the Kamo river and broke his leg.

○

As soon as Ozu was carried away, the people on the riverbank began to disperse, as if the tide was going out. After my eighty-day confinement, being in such a large crowd was bewildering, and I stood there for a while, mindlessly stroking my beard.

As I stood there absentmindedly looking around the riverbank, I caught sight of a woman sitting on a bench. Her eyebrows were knit, and she had her blue face buried in her hands. I walked up to her.

"Hey, are you all right?", I asked to which she replied with a wan smile.

"I really can't stand moths."

I see, that explains it.

"There were a lot of people on the bridge; what was that all about?"

“Ozu-san...well, it’s too complicated for me to explain right now.”

“You’re an acquaintance of Ozu?”

“Yes. You’re one as well?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve known him for a long time.”

I introduced myself: I lived on the first floor of Shimogamo Yuusuisou, and had known Ozu since freshman year.

“Are you by any chance in the Library Police?” she asked. “You’re the one from the seahorse incident, aren’t you?”

“Seahorse incident?”

“Master Higuchi ordered us to get him a seahorse, so Ozu-san provided him with a fishtank. But as soon as we tried to fill it with water, it shattered.”

“Ah, I know what you’re talking about. That was a pretty bad experience.”

“But in the end, Master Higuchi never got his seahorse.”

“Why’s that?”

“Master Higuchi decided that he’d rather have a giant squid instead.”

“I don’t think you could raise one of those in a normal fishtank.”

“Even Ozu couldn’t supply one of those. Instead, I heard that he placated the Master with a giant Ferrari flag that he bought somewhere.”

She started to run her pallid cheeks vigorously.

“Would you like a drink to help you calm down?” I inquired.

I was most certainly not taking advantage of this girl’s weak point to achieve some indecent goal. I was simply concerned for her, as she was still quite pale.

I bought canned coffee from a nearby vending machine and we drank it together.

“By the way, how are the Mochiguma doing?” I asked.

“Well. But one of them is missing...” she trailed off, and closed her mouth. Then she looked very closely into my eyes, and suddenly realized who I was. “You worked at Gabi Bookstore, at the used book fair, didn’t you? I beg your pardon, I didn’t notice it was you.”

“You remember?”

“Yes, I remember you, but that’s an impressive beard you have now,” she said, staring at me.

It’s impossible to describe how I was feeling at that moment. Struggling to express those feelings with actions, I blurted out the only thing I could think of.

“Akashi-san, would you like to go have some ramen?”

○

As I ate that ramen, I overwhelmed the shopkeeper with a flood of tears. It was my first Neko

ramen in eighty days.

“Is it really that good?” Akashi-san asked.

“Mm, mmph!” I groaned.

“That’s very nice,” she quietly nodded, slurping up her own noodles.

○

Those are the facts of my trip around the 4.5 tatamis in eighty days.

I couldn’t bear to stay another night in a 4.5 tatami room, so for a few days I slept out in the hall. I found a new boarding house in Mototanaka and moved there with all due haste. This time, I picked a 6-tatami room, and made sure that it had a bathroom attached. Even so, I caught myself sometimes wanting to use a beer bottle to urinate in, and remembered those horrible eighty days.

The strangest thing was that even though I had spent so much time in there, out here in the real world hardly any time had passed at all. It was less like Urashima Taro and more like the dream of Kantan. But it hadn’t been a dream. The swarm of moths, and my wild hair, and my rucksack filled with thousand yen bills was proof enough of that. I paid for the cost of moving entirely with the money that I had collected in that sack.

○

To describe how the relationship between Akashi-san and I developed after that would deviate from the purpose of this manuscript; consequently, I will refrain from recounting it here. I am sure my readers would rather not waste their time reading such contemptible stuff. There is nothing more boring than telling a story of successful love.

○

After experiencing the many new developments that peppered my campus life after that, it was quite vexing to have to admit the naiveté of my previous life. I am not one to recognize my faults so easily. It’s true that I bore great affection for myself, but what woman would want to embrace such a filthy twenty year old man like myself? I was so provoked by this that I angrily and vehemently refused to help my previous self.

I couldn’t shake off the feeling that choosing the Lucky Cat Chinese Restaurant secret society in front of that fateful clock tower that day had been a mistake. If I had chosen a different path, I most certainly would have led a very different student life.

But from walking those infinite 4.5 tatami rooms over those eighty days, I surmised that no matter

what I had chosen, my life would not have changed very much. The most frightening thing was that in each of my lives, no matter what path I walked I always ran into Ozu. It was just as he said: he and I were connected by the black thread of fate.

Therefore, I would neither embrace my past self, nor affirm my past mistakes, but for the time being I would let both slide.

○

Ozu was for a time admitted to a hospital near the campus.

It was quite delightful to see him strapped down to the white hospital bed. Because of his already pale complexion, it appeared as if he had contracted some incurable disease, though in reality it was merely a bone fracture. It was probably appropriate to say that he was lucky getting off with just a fracture. I came to gloat over his inability to partake in any of his usual wicked habits, but instead of saying anything I mostly just sat there eating a castella.

Higuchi, Jougasaki, Hanuki-san, and Akashi-san, members of the movie circle, friends from the softball circle, the secretary of the campus festival planning committee, the bartender from the restaurant, the shopkeeper of Neko ramen, and even a number of people from Lucky Cat Chinese Restaurant came to call on him constantly. I was shocked to see even Aijima-senpai there. The front of the hospital was guarded by a cordon of secret society members day and night, ensuring that Ozu wouldn't try to make an escape.

One day, Akashi-san and I were by his bedside talking, when a beautiful girl came in carrying a handmade bento lunch. Ozu suddenly became flustered and told us to get out. Outside his room, Akashi-san started to titter like a small demon.

“Who was that girl?” I asked.

“That’s Kohinata-san. She used to be in the movie circle that Ozu-san and I are in, but it seems that she has been going out with him since freshman year.”

“I can’t let this one pass. He had a girlfriend?”

“Even though he spends so much time with his evil schemes, he still finds time to go out with her,” Akashi-san said, sounding amused. “Ozu-san hates it when other people meet her. I suppose he must pretend to be a good boy whenever she’s around.”

I glanced down the hospital corridor. At the corner of the hall, a strange man was meaninglessly pretending to feed ten-yen coins into a pay phone. His face seemed strangely familiar, and I remembered without a doubt that he had been part of the group that set out to kidnap Kaori-san back in my Library Police days. As soon as he noticed me glaring at him, he hurriedly slammed the phone down on the receiver and dashed behind cover.

I heaved a sigh.

“Hey, Akashi-san. Ozu has so many enemies, wouldn’t it be better for him to go into hiding for a while?”

“Maybe you’re right.” She grinned. “Leave it to me, I’ll get it all sorted out.”

○

When Ozu, who had been my only friend for the past two years, found himself in a bind, I would spare no expense to come to his aid.

“It’ll be tough for you even after you leave the hospital, won’t it?”

“That’s pretty obvious.”

“Then why don’t you run off somewhere until things have cooled down a bit? I’ll pay for the expenses.”

Ozu eyed me suspiciously.

“What are you scheming? You can’t fool me!”

“You should put a little more trust in your fellow man. There are open-hearted people like me in the world. Do you even have any money, anyways?”

“That’s rich, coming from you!”

“Don’t worry about it, just let me take care of it.”

“Why do you want to pay for me so much, anyways?”

○

A broad grin floated to my face.

“It’s how I show my love!”

“I don’t need that nasty stuff,” he replied.