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Copyright

Yen Newsletter

Associate Professor Akira Takatsuki's Conjecture



A Tale of Curses and Blessings

Mikage Sawamura



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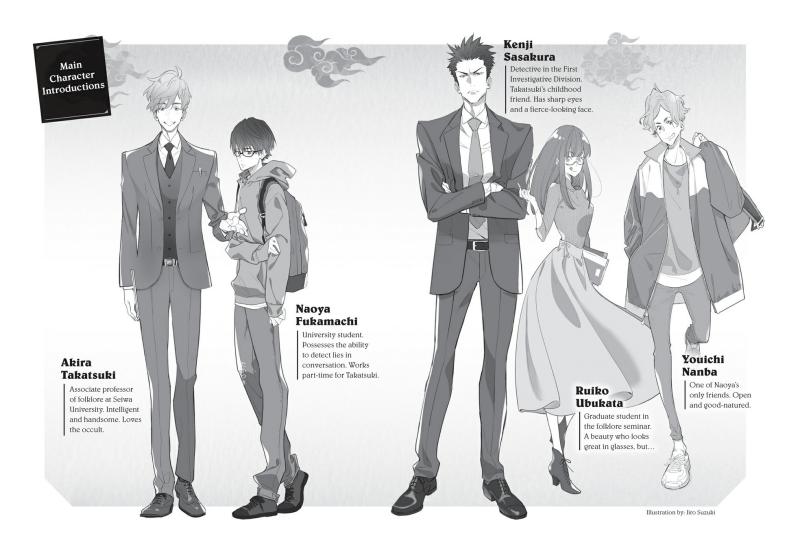
Chapter 2

The House that Enshrined a Demon

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A Story from Days Past

Yen Newsletter





## Chapter 1:

The Chain Letter and the Curse Cipher

During the last days of January until the beginning of February, the university campus was flooded with zombies.

They weren't the brain-munching monsters seen in movies and television dramas; they were harmless, really. But their staggering gaits, sallow complexions, and hollow eyes were as ominous as those of the living dead.

The sole cause of the zombie outbreak was...fall semester final exams.

As one might expect, the degree of zombification was most extreme in the first-year students. After all, they took the most classes. If they wanted to be able to take it easy at all in their remaining school years, students had to earn as many general education credits as possible in their first year. Notes from missed lectures were sold at steep prices. Past exam questions—inherited from club upperclassmen—were passed around frantically. People who had barely shown their faces on campus so far turned up for the first time in ages. As the cold midwinter winds raged, a different kind of mania than the school festival swept over the college grounds.

In retrospect, the spring semester final exams had caused comparatively less panic. Although those had been their first exams since entering the university, many first-years had yet to grow out of the grade school habit of taking their studies seriously, and aside from students who took half-semester courses, they hadn't come face-to-face with the possibility of failing a college class.

Fall semester final exams were another story. Many students withdrew

gradually from their studies as they got accustomed to college life. After spending their days absorbed in part-time jobs and club activities, staying out late with friends and partners, or frequenting group dates, students had to take on the last exam period of the academic year.

Out of practice with all-night study sessions, many students were practically done in by the effort of it. Those who had made a habit of skipping classes were in even more trouble. They stumbled into classrooms on unsteady feet, as if getting out of bed on time to take the exam had been difficult enough.

But finally, on the last day of exams, the zombified students would return to life once more.

The exam period for Seiwa University's current fall semester ended on February 1.

Circumstances varied based on which courses one was enrolled in, but in Naoya Fukamachi's case, the very last exam of his first year in college—the Western History I final—came to a joyous close in third period on the first of February.

The contents of the exam had been announced to the class in advance; they were asked to choose one of three essay prompts to respond to. That kind of long-form written-style exam—where students were given a two-or three-line prompt and expected to fill the rest of the two pages it was printed on with a response they devised themselves—was common in college, unlike the format encountered up through high school. Some exams were open-book, but that was absolutely not the case for Western History I, so Naoya had needed to memorize his response ahead of time.

"Phew! It's over...! I feel like I've wrung my brain completely dry and now it's totally useless...!"

"Ugh, I still have one more exam after this!"

As the bell signaling the end of the period rang and test papers were passed to the front, several students began to talk. Like Naoya, many of them seemed to have just completed their last exam, and they were being carried off in the swelling wave of freedom.

Naoya, also feeling the relief, stretched a little. Having an almost perfect attendance record meant he had pretty much avoided zombification during exams, but he had still found it difficult to completely memorize his essay response for this final in particular. All he could do now was hope he hadn't made any mistakes.

Looking around, Naoya realized one of the proctors at the front of the classroom was waving to him—a female graduate student with long hair and red glasses: his acquaintance Ruiko Ubukata.

Ruiko's wave turned into a beckoning motion, so Naoya put on his coat and scarf and made his way over to her.

Gathering up the stacks of exam papers, Ruiko grinned broadly at him.

"Congrats on finishing, Fukamachi! How'd the test go?"

"It went okay, I think... More importantly, why are you here, Miss Ruiko? This is a Western history class."

Curious, Naoya couldn't help but ask. Ruiko was studying folklore and antiquities, not Western history.

But she waved off his question lightly.

"Oh, I'm just working part-time."

"Huh?"

"Proctoring undergraduate exams is basically a side gig for grad students. The Academic Affairs Office assigns us to them willy-nilly, so sometimes we end up in charge of exams outside our departments. But I mean, all I have to do is pass out tests, collect them, and verify everyone's identity."

As Ruiko explained, Naoya recalled that he had also encountered another graduate student he knew—Yui Machimura—at a different exam.

"Identity verification" sounded like a bit of an exaggeration of proctor duties, but evidently in previous years, there had been a rash of incidents in which students in high-occupancy lectures got other people to take their exams for them. Consequently, present policy required examinees to put their student ID cards on their desks throughout the test. Proctors walked around to every seat,

comparing every single ID photo to its owner.

"...But isn't the photo on our student IDs the one we used for the university entrance exam? Aren't there a lot of people who don't really resemble their own IDs anymore?"

"Oh, tons. It's really common for people to switch from wearing glasses to contacts. Girls start putting on makeup and look like totally different people. The boys, too. It's pretty interesting seeing how many very serious-looking high school boys have rebranded themselves as blond playboy types... In your case, though, Fukamachi, what's interesting is how you look exactly the same as before."

"Well, excuse me for not changing, I guess."

Naoya had always been a reserved kid with glasses. Even the navy-blue coat he was currently wearing was something he'd had since high school.

"Anyway, did you need something from me?"

"Oh, right. Are you busy tonight, Fukamachi?"

"Huh?"

"If you're free, you *might* wanna consider dropping by Professor Akira's office. I just wanted to tell you that."

"...Drop by for what?"

"Hee-hee... That's a secret."

Ruiko smiled an elusive smile.

Wondering what was going on, Naoya left Ruiko with a simple "I'll swing by if I can." Retrieving his headphones from his bag and shoving them in his ears, he headed for the exit. All the other examinees were already gone, leaving no one but Naoya behind.

...Or so he thought, before he noticed a zombie draped listlessly over a chair in the very back of the classroom.

The zombie had familiar brown hair.

For a moment, Naoya considered simply continuing on his way, but the

zombie was a little too listless for his peace of mind, so he went closer to check it out. It didn't so much as twitch.

Taking out his headphones, Naoya tried calling out in a soft voice.

"...Nanba?"

With great effort, the zombie lifted its head.

As Naoya had thought, it was Youichi Nanba, a fellow first-year in the Literature Department. But Naoya was so caught off guard by the change in Nanba's appearance that he almost backed away instinctively. His face, usually adorned with a friendly smile, verged on gaunt, and dark circles stood out beneath his eyes. He really *did* look like a zombie.

On top of that, for some reason, Nanba's face was covered in injuries. Abrasions dotted his cheeks and the tip of his nose; small bumps protruded from his forehead. He was still wearing his black peacoat despite being indoors, and Naoya wasn't sure if that was because the back row of seats was subject to cold drafts from the exit or because Nanba simply hadn't had the energy to take it off.

"Oh," Nanba said. "If it isn't Fukamachi... You good...?"

"Uh, I'm fine, but...are you? What happened to you?"

"I'm a goner. Go on without me... I'm done for..."

Muttering in a hoarse voice, Nanba slumped back over the desk and stopped moving.

Naoya glanced toward the front of the classroom.

The exam proctors—including Ruiko—and the Western History I professor were looking their way questioningly. If they didn't vacate the room soon, they would probably get in trouble.

"Nanba. I don't know what you're sulking about, but get up. It'll be a pain if you die there."

"I can't. I don't have the strength to stand anymore..."

"Who cares? Just hurry up."

Naoya haphazardly tossed the writing implements still sitting out on the desk into Nanba's bag. When he picked up the student ID that was also displayed, his gaze dropped incidentally to the photo.

"Oh? In high school, you wore a school uniform and had black hair?"

"—Hey, wha—?! Fukamachi! Give that back!"

All at once, the zombie sprang back to life, snatching the ID card from Naoya's hand in a flash.

Naoya, meanwhile, merely grabbed Nanba's bag and walked briskly out of the classroom.

"Nanba, do you have any exams left?"

"...That was my last one."

"Then you can vent to me for a little bit. Let's go to the cafeteria," Naoya said, looking back over his shoulder at Nanba, who was following him but dragging his feet.

As if surprised by Naoya's offer, Nanba's eyes widened a little.

Then, the spitting image of a zombie once more, he tottered toward Naoya with both arms outstretched.

"Fu-Fukamachiii... You're a surprisingly kind guy, y'know..."

"What do you mean surprisingly? How is that surprising?"

After using the other boy's bag to ward off Nanba's attempt at a hug and his overcome expression, Naoya handed it to him.

"You let me borrow some of the past exam questions. I'm just paying you back for that."

Since he didn't belong to any clubs, Naoya had no reliable way to get his hands on old test materials.

And even though he had given Nanba the notes from the classes he skipped, Naoya really did find the past exam questions useful.

Student life involved a lot of give-and-take. A certain amount of fellowship with other students was a good thing, even if Naoya tried to stay away from

socializing. Just a little wouldn't hurt.

The cafeteria was crowded. Like Naoya and Nanba, many of the students had probably just finished with exams. The only open seats were on the patio, so after buying just a coffee each, the two of them made their way outside in their coats and gloves to sit.

Exposed to the elements, the patio was mercilessly freezing in the colder months. Naoya wondered if they would have been better off going to the library.

"So what happened to your face? Did you get into a fight with a yakuza?"

Nanba shook his head wordlessly.

Naoya thought things over for a minute. Then—

"...Nanba. If you got into some stupid fight with your girlfriend last night because she caught you fooling around even though it's finals season, you better start by going to apologize, because you're in the wrong here."

"No, it's nothing like that."

Nanba's injury-riddled face screwed up into a frown.

He ran a hand roughly through his brown hair, then propped himself up against the table with his elbows, looking utterly defeated.

"Listen... I'm about to say something really stupid, but don't laugh."

"Got it. I'll try my best."

"Yeah, please. It's just... I..."

Hesitating for a moment, Nanba ruffled his hair again before continuing.

"...I think, maybe...I might be cursed."

"What?!"

Though he didn't laugh, Naoya couldn't help but look at Nanba in surprise.

Nothing in Nanba's demeanor pointed to him joking around, and most importantly—Naoya could tell with certainty that he wasn't lying.

"Cursed? What on earth happened?"

"Um, well... You know about chain letters, right?"

"You mean like a letter that starts with 'You have been visited by an omen of misfortune' or something like that?"

"Exactly. Then goes on to say, 'Unless you forward this letter to five people within the next three days, you will have bad luck.' I...got one of those."

Two days prior, the letter had shown up in Nanba's bag without his noticing it.

It was written on plain notepaper—in penmanship so neat it seemed like a ruler was used—and stuffed into a white envelope. A standard chain letter through and through, there was no return name or address.

Naturally, Nanba hadn't taken it seriously.

He read it over once, snorting at its absurdity, and threw it in the trash.

"I mean, who believes in chain letters these days? Most people don't, right?"

"It's definitely more old-fashioned, as far as forms of harassment go."

"But...lots of weird stuff has happened since I got it..."

Things had started the day before.

As Nanba was walking down the street, a flowerpot fell from overhead.

The pot had plummeted from the second floor of the house he was passing, shattering on the ground mere inches in front of him. Apparently, the woman who lived in the house had dropped the flowerpot accidentally while changing out the ones in her window garden. Dreadfully embarrassed, the woman had apologized to Nanba, who could have been seriously injured if the pot had struck him. Unsurprisingly, the incident left Nanba a bit shaken up.

Next, there was the staircase at the train station.

A sudden altercation broke out between two office workers in the middle of their ascent on the stairs. Nanba, directly behind them, got hit with a stray blow and was nearly sent tumbling down the steps. Thankfully, he was able to grab onto the handrail right away, or he might actually have fallen.

"Those both happened in the same day. I thought it was weird that I almost got badly hurt twice in one day, but I just chalked it up to some occasional bad luck. I didn't think it was anything more than that at first."

But Nanba's misfortunes didn't end there.

After returning home and trying to unlock his apartment door, he realized his key was missing. He was able to borrow a spare after talking it over with the landlord, but then his heating system failed without warning in the middle of the night, and Nanba had to wear a coat to sleep in his own bed.

At that point, it seemed, Nanba started to find the situation strange.

No matter how one looked at it, the number of unlucky incidents he experienced in succession was unusual.

That was when the chain letter popped back into his mind.

There's no way, he thought. Even entertaining the idea was foolish.

But if Nanba was being honest, recalling the letter left him with a slight chill.

"I'm telling you—I've never had so many bad things happen to me in one day in my whole life... Anyone would get a little weirded out, right?"

Things continued to go wrong that very morning.

The alarm clock that should have been set to go off every single day inexplicably failed to chime. By the time Nanba woke up, his first-period exam was already starting. He got ready in a panic and rushed from his apartment—only to fall down the building stairs.

He came away with no more than scattered bumps and scrapes, quite fortunately, and headed straight for the station like that. But once he arrived, he found the train wasn't running due to an accident.

"That much stuff happening all at once can't be normal! Like, something has to be off, right?! I gave up on the train and ran to school because it's only one stop away, but I missed my first-period exam completely, and all my exams after that were a total wash. I can't help but feel like I really was cursed..."

Nanba groaned, slumping over the table with his head in his hands.

Naoya couldn't deny that it was unusual to go through that many unfortunate incidents in such a short period of time... Though he had a feeling Nanba's poor

study habits were to blame for his subpar exam performance.

"Hey, Fukamachi, do you think I should go have a purification ritual done? Where do you even go for something like that? A shrine? A temple? Some kind of psychic, maybe?"

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"Hmm... Well."
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When it came to matters such as this, there was only one person at Seiwa University to turn to...

Naoya picked up his coffee. It had long since gone past lukewarm and settled on cold, so Naoya threw the remainder back in one gulp and took out his phone. Waffling a little between calling and sending a message, he decided on the latter for the time being.

A reply—"Come right now"—came almost at once. Wondering if the man was bored or something, Naoya stood up.

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"Nanba. Come with me."
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"Huh?"

"It's freezing here. Let's go to Professor Takatsuki's office. He said he would hear you out."

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"Uh, wh-why him...?"
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"You should probably get an expert's opinion first, don't you think? Come on, let's go."

Akira Takatsuki was a well-known associate professor at Seiwa University.

He specialized in folklore and taught Folklore Studies II, a general education course that both Naoya and Nanba had taken for the past year.

Despite the "folklore" label, the object of Takatsuki's research was somewhat strange matters like urban legends and ghost stories. The topics they covered in Folklore Studies II—bathroom hauntings and human-faced dogs—were the kind of things one expected to see in a TV variety show, things that could perhaps be referred to as modern folklore. Chain letters fit right into that category, in Naoya's opinion. If Nanba wanted advice, there was no one better to go to than Takatsuki.

"Professor Takatsuki's class was interesting, but...he didn't even give us a final, just had us submit a report. He really said he would meet with me? More importantly, Fukamachi, why do you have Professor Takatsuki's contact info?"

"I work part-time for him."

"What do you mean, work?"

"Remember how he accepts submissions of strange experiences and secondhand stories on his website? Now and then, someone sends him a request for help with something like 'I think my apartment is haunted, and I don't know what to do.' I accompany him as an assistant when he goes to investigate cases like that."

"Wow, that sounds kinda fun."

"...It has its ups and downs."

Naoya's reply was vague. He could hardly talk about getting mixed up in a crime and almost burning to death.

"Is that all you do for work, Fukamachi?"

"No. It's not like requests come in every week. It would be tough to get by on that kind of inconsistent job alone. I also grade homework part-time for a distance-learning cram school. Remind me what your job is, Nanba?"

"I work at an izakaya. I also started as a private tutor recently."

"Huh, I can't really picture you as a tutor. That kind of thing takes a lot of prep, right? Isn't it hard?"

"Nah, I'm tutoring an elementary schooler. One of my relatives' kids, actually. They live nearby, and the kid isn't aiming for a private middle school or anything. I'm just teaching studying methods, really. They also feed me dinner while I'm there, so it's not a bad gig."

"Is the student a boy?"

"Girl. Fourth grade. She's super cute, too. Always calling me Yo-Yo."

"...Nanba. You know it's illegal to get involved with an elementary school kid."

"Wh-what are you—? As if I would! What kind of guy do you think I am?!"

As they talked, Naoya and Nanba made their way from the cafeteria to the faculty building. Evidently, Nanba had never been inside the building before, and he trailed anxiously after Naoya, goggling at their surroundings.

Takatsuki's office was on the third floor, marked by a plaque with the number 304 on it. Under that, in smaller characters, it read: Literature Department, Historical Literature Faculty, Folklore and Antiquities, Akira Takatsuki.

When Naoya knocked on the door, a voice from inside called out, "Come in."

"Excuse us," he replied, opening the office door and entering with Nanba on his heels.

"Welcome, Fukamachi! And may I assume you're the one who received the chain letter? Thank you both for coming."

Takatsuki, who had been typing away at his laptop at the large table in the center of the room, stood up with a beaming smile.

The professor was, simply put, a good-looking man. With his light-brown hair, kind and handsome face, and tall, well-proportioned body clothed in a three-piece suit, he was every bit the refined gentleman. His classes, consequently, were exceedingly popular with girls; female students completely filled the front row of seats in his lectures, which were usually left conspicuously empty in other classes.

Naoya shoved Nanba, who was still lingering near the doorway, toward Takatsuki.

"Sorry to bother you, Professor. This is Nanba."

"Th-thank you for seeing me..."

Nanba nodded at the professor.

Takatsuki smiled brightly at him in return.

"Ah, you took Folklore Studies II as well. I remember your face. Can I get you something to drink, since you came all the way here? I have cocoa, coffee, black tea, and green tea."

"Um, then, I'll have coffee..."

"I really recommend the cocoa, by the way!"

"...U-uh, okay. Cocoa, please..."

Nanba gave in meekly to Takatsuki, who was showing him the Van Houten cocoa bag excitedly. He's a nice guy, Naoya thought, watching the exchange.

Takatsuki's office was nice and toasty. Taking off his scarf, gloves, and coat, Naoya sat down in a folding chair. Nanba followed suit but remained unsettled, glancing here and there around the room. He turned his gaze to the bookshelves lining three of the office walls, taking in the antique volumes bound in the Japanese style and thick textbooks lined up alongside the occult publications and magazines, occasionally muttering things like, "Whoa, he's got issues of  $M\ddot{U}$ ..."

Standing at a small table set under a window at the back of the room, Takatsuki prepared their drinks. The table was home to a kettle and a coffee maker. Beside it, a bevy of mugs in all colors and patterns were housed in a small cupboard.

"Here you go."

Returning to the center table with a tray in hand, Takatsuki placed a cup of cocoa in front of Nanba.

"Thank you very— ... Wow, this mug sure is something."

Nanba's honest impression of the multicolored Great Buddha pattern on his cup slipped out whether he intended it to or not.

"Visitors to this office always use that mug," Naoya explained, taking his own mug from Takatsuki.

Before he had brought in his own personal-use cup, Naoya had also been made to drink his coffee from the Great Buddha mug.

"Now then, why don't you tell me your story, Nanba? I want to know the details of how you received the chain letter and the bad luck that came after."

Takatsuki took the seat next to Nanba, making it look like he and Naoya had trapped the other boy there.

Nanba raised his hand slightly.

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"...Um, Professor, do you mind if I ask you something first?"

"Not at all. What is it?"

"It's just... That seems like a lot for you to drink all by yourself."

"Hmm?"
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Puzzled, Takatsuki glanced down at his own blue mug.

It was filled to the brim with the same cocoa he had made for Nanba. But Takatsuki's cup also had two massive marshmallows floating in it. Even Naoya was able to catch a whiff of the sweet aroma that rose up out of the drink along with the steam.

"—Oh! I'm sorry! I only put marshmallows in my own! Of course you want some, too, Nanba! It tastes better that way! Wait just a moment; I'll grab them for you!"

"No, no, no, that's not it! I don't want any marshmallows! I just meant that you must have a massive sweet tooth, Professor! There aren't even that many girls who drink stuff like that!"

"Glucose nourishes the brain, so it's better to be proactive about your sugar intake, you know."

"Something that sweet probably wouldn't agree with my system, actually..."

"Oh? But it's so delicious!"

Takatsuki took a sip of his cocoa, smiling blissfully.

Bringing his own drink to his lips, Naoya watched Takatsuki and Nanba's backand-forth with a somewhat nostalgic feeling in his chest. His mug—decorated with a drawing of a golden retriever—was full of black coffee. Takatsuki was well aware of Naoya's dislike for sweets.

"—Anyway, let's hear your story about the chain letter now."

As the discussion about their beverages petered out, Takatsuki brought them back on topic.

Nanba's expression instantly turned meek.

Then he told the professor the exact same thing he had shared with Naoya

earlier.

Naoya listened silently, paying close attention to the sound of Nanba's voice.

When the story was done, Takatsuki glanced casually at Naoya, who gave the smallest headshake. Takatsuki responded with a tiny nod before returning his gaze to Nanba.

"Nanba, I'd like for you to verify a few things about your story, if that's all right?"

"...Okay."

"When you found the chain letter, it was inside your bag, yes? In other words, it wasn't mailed to you?"

"Right. There was no stamp or anything on it."

"I see. And you said you already threw the actual letter out. Does that mean it's no longer in your garbage can at home?"

"Yeah... I took out the recycling yesterday morning..."

"It no longer exists in this world, then. Your series of unfortunate events began after you had thrown out the letter, but—its contents said you had to forward the letter to five people within three days, isn't that right? It hasn't been three days since you found the letter. What are your thoughts on that?"

"Well... I don't know when the letter was put in my bag in the first place. The day I found it might have been the third day since it was put there. Even if the deadline hasn't passed yet, I've got a feeling the problem was me tearing it up and tossing it without even thinking."

"You're saying you think throwing away the letter was deemed sufficient proof of your lack of intention to follow its orders, and that caused the curse to take effect early."

"...I don't know how else to explain it."

Nanba's gaze dropped to his untouched cup of cocoa.

His expression had grown more and more somber as he spoke. Before, his tone had maintained its usual cheerfulness, but in the end, thinking about the things that kept happening to him must have been frightening.

In any case, there were no lies in Nanba's story. He hadn't even exaggerated anything.

All the incidents he described had actually taken place, and Nanba truly did believe his destroying the chain letter was to blame.

Then...

"—Nanba."

Takatsuki started to speak.

Hearing his voice, Naoya thought, Ah, I figured this was coming.

Takatsuki held his right hand out toward Nanba.

For a moment, Nanba stared back at the professor in confusion. Then, ever so timidly, he extended his own right hand.

Takatsuki grasped it tightly in both of his own.

He tugged Nanba forward in one smooth motion, leaning in close with his model good looks, peering into Nanba's face.

"Uh, wh-what? Wh-what's happening? You're too close!"

"Nanba, I'm so glad you came here today. I'm so happy I got to meet you."

Nanba stared at Takatsuki, alarmed, as the professor murmured to him in rapt tones.

Then, all at once—Takatsuki threw his arms around the boy.

"Congratulations, Nanba! What a truly incredible experience you're having! To receive a handwritten chain letter in the golden age of e-mail and text messaging! And what's more, you broke the chain! And now you keep having bad luck! You are an absolutely perfect example of a chain letter story!"

"Wh-what the—?! What're you—?! Wha—?! Wh-why is he this excited, Fukamachi?!"

On the receiving end of Takatsuki's passionate embrace, Nanba yelled in panic. His physique was fairly similar to Naoya's, so he fit pretty snugly in

Takatsuki's arms.

Naoya took a sip of his coffee before replying.

"This guy is obsessed with the supernatural. When a tale tickles his fancy, he gets fired up, and all common sense and social etiquette go flying out the window. Then he holds the other person's hands or tries to hug them."

"But why?!"

"Probably because he gets carried away by his excitement? I personally think it's a lot like when a big, friendly dog jumps on someone. Sorry, by the way. I usually stop him before he goes in for the hug, but since you're not a girl, I figured it was fine to let it happen this time."

"It's not! It's not fine! Hurry up and get him off me! Help!"

Takatsuki's unyielding arms seemed to be squeezing the shrieks out of Nanba.

You're the one who tried to hug me just a little while ago, Naoya thought, taking his time to stand. He went around the large table, stopping behind Takatsuki to tap him lightly on the shoulder.

"Professor. I think it's about time you let go of Nanba. Why not start by calming down?"

"Huh, why? I'm just trying to convey my genuine joy at meeting Nanba through a hug! There aren't many chances nowadays to get a firsthand account from a student who received a chain letter on paper! Don't you think it's amazing, too, Fukamachi?!"

Takatsuki looked back at Naoya with his big eyes twinkling, making no move to pull away from Nanba. It was like dealing with a large dog that—with its tail wagging furiously—wouldn't drop the toy in its mouth. Naoya tried again to reason with him.

"Don't ask me to validate your behavior. Just let him go. He's scared."

"Yes, indeed, he is, isn't he?! After all, he's totally cursed! It's natural to be afraid in that situation! Ah, I'm so envious!"

"No, it's not the curse scaring him right now—it's you!"

"Huh? What? So I am cursed?! And he's jealous of that?! That's so creepy! Let me go, let me go!"

Struggling in earnest, Nanba managed to escape Takatsuki's embrace on his own.

Takatsuki sat back with a start. He seemed to be regaining his senses.

He lowered his hands—which had been hovering in the air as if still holding on to someone—in a hurry and looked abashedly at Nanba, who squeaked and tried to shrink back, folding chair and all. Face riddled with guilt, Takatsuki bowed his head.

"I—I'm so sorry, Nanba! It was rude of me to say that being cursed is wonderful and that I wish it were me! And I'm really sorry for hugging you out of nowhere like that; I must have given you a fright!"

"I-is he always like this, Fukamachi?!"

"Oh yeah, all the time. Once his common sense comes back, he realizes he's just done something foolish and apologizes."

"...You've gotta be kidding me."

"That's why he hired me part-time."

"Wait, that's what he needs you for?"

Well, Naoya also played the important role of navigator, in addition to being Takatsuki's common sense.

He spoke to the professor, who was reaching for his cocoa with a despondent look.

"Since you've reflected on your actions, Professor, why don't we get back on topic? What should Nanba do now?"

"Ah yes, right. Um, when it comes to the chain letter he received..."

Takatsuki took a sip from his cup, put it back down, and looked at Nanba.

"...To cut to the chase, I do think you've been cursed."

"Huh?"

Nanba stiffened. Naked fear flashed across his face.

Takatsuki held out one hand slightly as if to calm Nanba.

"Come to think of it, we didn't cover chain letters in this year's class, did we? Now seems like a good time for me to talk about them a little," he said, standing.

Grabbing what appeared to be old lecture materials and the fountain pen stored in his suit's breast pocket, Takatsuki started scrawling something on the back of a piece of paper.

It was the contents of a typical chain letter.

You have been visited by an omen of misfortune. Within three days of reading this letter, you must send the same exact letter to five other people. If you don't, you will have bad luck. It is said that when one man, Mr. H. from [city name], failed to pass this letter along, he was later struck by a car and killed.

Takatsuki showed the paper to Nanba.

"Was the one you received more or less like this?"

"...Yeah."

"It's an example of what we call chain letters. A chain-like connection is created when the recipient passes the same letter along to the next person. The contents of such letters may vary somewhat, but there are always instructions regarding a deadline for sharing the letter, keeping its exact wording, how many people you need to send it to, and a warning of what will happen if you don't abide by the letter's rules. They tend to open with that line about an 'omen of misfortune'... Though, there's also the 'rod-letter' variation."

"Rod?"

"Yes. According to that type, if you break the chain, the rod will come for you."

"... What does a rod have to do with anything?"

"The explanation is actually quite simple."

As he spoke, Takatsuki wrote the characters for bad and luck in the margins

next to the letter he had jotted down before. He scrawled them messily and so close that they were practically overlapping.

"See, if you write bad luck like this, it looks a bit like the character for rod, doesn't it? The theory is that, at some point, someone with rather idiosyncratic handwriting probably wrote the letter like so, and the people who followed after that in the chain just kept copying the mistake. I'm sure there were people who noticed the error along the way, but passing along the letter unchanged is part of the rules. And above all, the idea of some unspecified 'rod' coming to get you must have made for an unsettling and interesting story. The potential for drawing interest is a major factor in whether folklore survives from generation to generation. Stories transform as they're handed down. The same is true of chain letters as they continue to be rewritten. In fact—this malicious chain letter was originally meant as a blessing."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yep. 'This is a blessing for your good fortune' used to be the opening sentence."

Takatsuki's voice was soft and gentle. He spoke in a slightly higher register for a man and with a strange clarity.

Nanba's expression, somewhat reticent toward the professor until then, was gradually shifting. Coming away from the back of the chair, which he had been firmly pressing himself into, Nanba leaned forward a bit as he followed along. It was just like one of Takatsuki's lectures. Students who usually dozed off or fiddled with their phones during class almost always paid rapt attention when Takatsuki was teaching.

The man was easy to listen to, and his lectures were fascinating. It wasn't just his looks that made his courses popular.

"The 'blessing' letter caused such a stir that it was even picked up by a newspaper in 1922. 'If you write this message on nine postcards and send them out, you will have good luck in nine days. But if you break the chain, you will suffer terrible misfortune.' 'You must complete this task within twenty-four hours of reading the postcard.' 'This message began with an American soldier and has circled the globe nine times.' Tons of households were receiving

postcards that said things like that. You'd probably be alarmed if you got such a letter, right? What's more, the postcard says you'll have good luck if you pass it on, but terrible misfortune if you don't. And so, to ward off misfortune and invite good luck, everyone followed the instructions of the message. But what do you think the result of that was? If nine people each send out nine postcards, that's eighty-one copies. If everyone who received one of those makes yet another nine, the total would grow to an outrageous number in no time. The sudden, dramatic explosion of the letter in society ultimately resulted in a police crackdown."

"No way! Did people get arrested just for sending a letter?"

"Yes. People could be detained for twenty-nine days for 'deceiving others via the dissemination of unlawful information, groundless rumors, or false reports.' The letters were such a huge trend that they became a societal issue. Now—you may be wondering where these letters came from in the first place. I think it would be correct to say that they probably originated overseas rather than in Japan. After all, it mentions starting with an American soldier, and one such postcard—written in English—was found to have been postmarked in London. Most likely, the letter was popular in English-speaking countries first, then someone translated it into Japanese and spread it here. Though there have also been reports of things like this in Italy, so I don't think it was limited to English-speaking countries in particular."

At that point in the story, something occurred to Naoya.

He raised his hand slightly to get Takatsuki's attention.

"Professor, the fact that it was translated into Japanese means the person behind it either knew a foreign language or exchanged letters with people from other countries, right? But people like that weren't very common at the time, were they?"

"Yes, well spotted, Fukamachi. Indeed, in those days, chain letters were popular among adults, rather than young people. There are even documented cases of ones sent by high-ranking officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and members of the House of Peers."

Takatsuki sounded like he was really enjoying the subject at hand.

"Grown men and women of high rank and education—hoping for their own good fortunes and fearing the contrary—copied the chain letters they received and mailed them out to other people. Curious, isn't it? But the people of this country have long believed that blessings and curses go hand in hand. If they hear that breaking an inexorable chain of good luck will result in bad luck, they're going to believe it. Chain letters preyed expertly on the sensibilities of the Japanese people."

That was why, despite being regarded as a societal problem and coming under police scrutiny, chain letters didn't disappear. Their survival from the Taisho period, through the war, and into the present era was fine proof of it.

But just as most stories transform as they are passed down, the "blessing letter" also changed over time.

Minor changes in its wording appeared, and variations in the deadline and number of recipients were created. Those were still just trivial differences, though. The letter's original nature was still preserved.

In the end, however, the letter would go through a definitive transformation.

"Eventually, the 'bad luck' version derived from the original gained popularity. The line about 'a blessing for your good fortune' was scrapped, resulting in a message that implored the reader to pass it along to others simply as a means of avoiding misfortune. These chain letters saw quite a surge in the 1970s, it seems, spreading to children as well. Just like that, what had started as a good luck message exchanged between adults ended up as a curse primarily transmitted by kids. At that point, the letter once more had a slight change in form. Sending it by mail was no longer a required part of the process. Within the closed ecosystem of a school, the mail service is unnecessary, after all. A student simply had to write the letter on a scrap of notebook paper and leave it in someone's shoe locker or desk. That alone allowed the chain to continue."

Takatsuki took another sip of his sugary cocoa.

A memory washed over Naoya as he sat there listening.

There had been a period during Naoya's elementary school days when chain letters were all the rage.

Once, he had even received one himself. At the time, someone even went as far as to leave such a letter on the homeroom teacher's desk. Furious, their teacher had lectured them about it for ages before banning chain letters altogether.

"Paper chain letters declined as e-mail gained traction. Though, as we can see in cases like yours, Nanba, they come back into vogue now and then. You see chain letters sometimes in e-mail and on social media, too. It's common on Twitter, for example, to see a post with a rather scary image attached that says something like, 'Once you see this tweet, if you don't retweet it within ten seconds, you will be visited by a demon in the night.' I think the Twitter example, in particular, is a departure from its predecessors in character, though. There's quite a large difference between sending a message to an unspecified mass of people with the click of a button and personally choosing recipients for things you wrote by hand. Sending a chain letter means having to decide who you want to spring a curse on. If you can ward off your own misfortune, it doesn't matter if someone else ends up in bad circumstances. That sort of thought process is always involved in such things, to some extent... That's why a chain letter is unmistakably a vehicle for cursing someone."

Takatsuki's words jostled loose another memory for Naoya—about the time he found a folded-up chain letter inside his elementary school desk.

The letter had appeared out of nowhere, and while Naoya had been creeped out by it, he was also desperate to know who on earth would have left it for him.

Naoya tried to recall how the incident had ended.

If his memory was correct, the letter had instructed him to pass it on to four people within forty-eight hours.

Yes, that was it—after a great deal of thought, he had left copies of the letter inside the desks of four other students.

The recipients, Naoya thought, had been kids he hadn't really liked or gotten along with. He had no idea what they had done after discovering his letters, but he wouldn't be surprised if they had all done the same as him and continued the chain.

And yet Naoya remembered that when he was sliding the letters into the desks, his hands shook.

He had been afraid of being seen by someone, certainly, but—more than that, Naoya had been petrified of what the letter might mean for the children he was giving it to.

With a thunk, Takatsuki put his mug back on the table.

"Chain letters are curse-bearing objects. But then—what exactly is a 'curse' to begin with? What do you think, Nanba?"

"Huh? Umm..."

Nanba hesitated, caught off guard by the question.

Cocking his head lightly to the side, Takatsuki looked at him.

"You thought you might have been cursed, right? Why was that?"

"Because...bad things—stuff that doesn't usually happen—kept happening again and again..."

"And because the only explanation you could think of for that was the chain letter?"

"...Yeah. Exactly."

Takatsuki nodded at Nanba's reply.

"A curse is made up of some sort of trouble and the source of that trouble. When something bad happens, people want to know why it happened. But there isn't a clear explanation for every incident that occurs. Some events can't be explained at first glance, and many things can be chalked up to simple coincidence. But the inexplicable makes us uncomfortable, doesn't it? Things we don't understand make us anxious. The 'curse' framework offers meaning in such cases."

The professor's words were similar to ones Naoya had heard from him many times before.

The mysterious comprises two elements: phenomenon and interpretation. It was practically Takatsuki's catchphrase.

People feared what they could not explain.

It was human nature to interpret the cause of a frightening event. They wanted to give it a reason, to attempt to understand it. Even if the result was a somewhat unrealistic conclusion, it was better than continuing to be in the dark. Thunder was caused by a drum-toting demon who soared through the sky; rustling sounds at supposedly empty riverbanks were made by demons washing their red beans. Many Japanese monsters and apparitions had been born from such interpretations.

Curses were a form of the mysterious, too.

"Unusually bad events happened one after the other. If you tell people about that—even if you don't mention the chain letter—there's bound to be some percentage of them who respond jokingly with 'Sounds like you've been cursed.' They wouldn't think for a second that their words would, in fact, invoke the curse to begin with."

Takatsuki chuckled.

"Curses only come into existence when someone recognizes them as the cause of some misfortune, you know. After all, they're the ideal explanation for an incomprehensible disaster. Misfortunes can be ascribed to the vague idea of a curse, but it's better to have something concrete to pin them on, like a straw doll, an amulet, or a chain letter. Conversely, a straw doll or chain letter without some corresponding misfortune won't lead to the establishment of a curse. Likewise, if no one thinks of the problems as a curse, no curse will materialize."

Takatsuki's hand shot out suddenly.

He gripped Nanba's still-untouched mug of cocoa from the top, lifting it up.

"Now then, Nanba. As for your situation..."

Setting the cup back down between himself and Nanba with a *clunk*, Takatsuki continued.

"You experienced a variety of unlucky incidents over the last few days. Narrowly avoiding having your head smashed in by a flowerpot, almost getting shoved down the train station steps, losing your keys, your heat malfunctioning, your alarm clock not going off, falling down your apartment complex stairs,

being late for your exam. Certainly, that many bad things happening in such a short period of time is rare. But any one of them could easily have happened over the course of a normal day. However—"

Next, he picked up his own mug, then plopped it down heavily right beside Nanba's.

"But you looked for a cause behind your bad luck, and you found it in the chain letter."

Waving his hand lightly over the pair of mugs, Takatsuki looked at Nanba.

"Thus, with a corresponding relationship established between misfortune and source, the curse was born."

"Oh..."

Nanba's mouth fell open.

His gaze flicked between Takatsuki and the mugs several times before he put one hand to his head.

"Huh? Wha—? Um, does that mean I put the curse...on myself? You're saying I wouldn't be cursed if I didn't blame my bad luck on the chain letter?"

"Yes, if we try to interpret what happened to you through a strictly pragmatic lens. I think it's likely that the first two events—the flowerpot and the station stairs—were frightening enough to give you quite a shock. Perhaps, as a result, your mind was elsewhere, and you dropped your keys. Maybe you simply forgot to set your alarm that night, so it didn't go off the next morning. And maybe, because your heat was broken and your apartment was freezing, you slept poorly, and that's why you fell down the steps. Once you get into a negative mindset, it's hard to break out of it, and you end up attributing all the bad things happening around you to the curse. As you get ever more depressed about the situation, it's only natural that you won't perform at your best, no matter what you do. That's probably why your exam didn't go well. By the way, about the broken heating—was there really no prior warning that it was going to fail?"

"Huh? No, really, just out of nowhere yesterday— Oh, actually, now that you mention it...I do feel like it was acting up a bit a few days ago..."

Nanba's muttered reply trailed off.

Naoya blinked in surprise.

Both times Nanba recounted the story—first to Naoya, and then to Takatsuki—he had said the heating system broke out of the blue. He hadn't been lying. At the very least, he must have believed that was the truth when he said it.

Takatsuki, likely taking note of Naoya's expression, chuckled again.

"The human memory is a fickle thing. Occurrences that must have taken place are forgotten entirely to make sense of inner narratives. It's not quite the same thing as lying. You could call it memory revision, and it happens frequently."

That's how it is, huh? Naoya thought.

Something could become the truth to someone, even if it differed from what the person in question actually experienced.

Still confused, Nanba stared at the metaphorically positioned mugs.

"Uh. Umm. So it's all just a big misunderstanding on my part...? Wait, if the curse and everything is just my misunderstanding, does that mean I'm in the clear?"

"Well, no? As I said earlier, the minute you had the thought that you had been cursed, the curse was, in fact, established."

"Huh...?"

"And there's no way for you to lift that curse by yourself."

Takatsuki was practically beaming. He slid the Great Buddha mug—which had served as the symbol for "misfortune" until then—toward Nanba, saying, "You can have this back now."

Nanba's mouth was hanging open again.

"Wh...? Whaaat? Then—what—am I gonna die, after all?! Can't you help me?!"

"Um, Professor, whatever the circumstances, leaving things like that is..."

Naoya had to interject. He never thought Takatsuki would admit defeat to the curse. That meant Nanba was without hope.

But Takatsuki picked up his own cocoa again, took a long sip, then spoke.

"Calm down. I'll do a purification ritual for you."

"P-purification? You can do that, Professor?! Really?! Please, please do it! Right now, please!"

It was Nanba's turn to cling to Takatsuki, who just barely managed not to spill the contents of his mug. He turned in distress to Naoya, who had no choice but to pry his classmate away from the older man.

Takatsuki met Nanba's pleading eyes with a bright smile.

"Yes, don't worry, we'll get started immediately. But before that, Nanba—drink your cocoa."

"Huh? But—"

"No arguing."

At Takatsuki's instruction, Nanba picked up the Great Buddha mug. He gulped down the drink in a hurry, his features plainly broadcasting his curiosity over whether it would have some sort of magical effect.

When he was finished, Nanba let out rather deep sigh.

"...Wow, that was sweet."

"But don't you feel a little better?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Sweet things will do that."

Patting Nanba lightly on the shoulder—which had sunk slightly as if he was exhausted—Takatsuki stood up.

Strangely, he returned to the table holding some children's origami paper, taken out of the cardboard box at the bottom of the bookshelf, where snacks and other miscellaneous things were usually stored.

Sitting back down, Takatsuki got to work folding something with his long, slender fingers.

"Do you have some sort of paper on you, Nanba? Doesn't matter what type.

Even looseleaf."

"Oh, yeah, I have some looseleaf."

"Good. Then I want you to try writing a copy of the chain letter you received. Whatever you remember is fine, but do try to make it as accurate as possible."

"Huh?"

With a dubious look on his face, Nanba took some paper and a pen case out of his bag.

Naoya turned to Takatsuki.

"What are you planning to do, Professor?"

"Nanba's letter said he had to send it to five people within three days, right? He found the letter the day before yesterday. The deadline hasn't passed yet. So in order to avoid the chain letter's bad luck, Nanba is going to pass the letter to five more people."

"Who are the five?"

"I'm making them right now."

As he spoke, Takatsuki's hands were hard at work on whatever he was folding.

He was making little paper men.

"These," Takatsuki said, "are *katashiro*—paper dolls used in purification rites. Since olden times in this country, it's been customary to have a paper doll take on the burden of impurity in order to free the afflicted. In a similar vein, we should be able to have the paper dolls take on the chain letter's curse. You're going to address your letters to them, Nanba. Even though they'll receive the letters, they won't be able to pass them on to anyone else. The chain will end here. Ah—it's hard to address a letter to someone without a name, isn't it? Let's go with, in order, Tarou, Jirou, Saburou, and Shirou."

Takatsuki wrote the name of each doll on its chest.

Watching him, Naoya interjected again.

"Professor?"

"What is it, Fukamachi?"

"You're missing one."

Naoya gestured to the paper dolls.

They were all made from different colored paper—blue, red, purple, green. But there were only four.

"The letter called for five recipients... You need one more."

"Yeah, well, I only had four sheets of origami paper. Therefore, I want you to address the last letter to me, okay, Nanba?"

"Huh?"

Nanba looked up from the looseleaf paper he was writing on to gawk at Takatsuki.

"I—I can't do that! You might end up having bad luck!"

"Yep. That's what I'm hoping for."

"What?! What are you saying?!"

"The thing is—I want to experience the supernatural firsthand so badly I can't stand it. I know what I said to you before, but there is a possibility that the chain letter will actually bring some misfortune. If I can verify that myself, it would be a highly valuable experience!"

"No, nope, no way! Nuh-uh, not even if you look at me with those puppy-dog eyes! F-Fukamachi, is he serious? Come on, can't you get him to reconsider? This is crazy."

"Well... I mean, this is just how he is..."

Both Naoya's response and his face were noncommittal.

Takatsuki really did want to experience something supernatural.

Determining whether real monsters existed in the world was the reason behind Takatsuki's research, and as he often said, if there were monsters out there, he wanted to encounter one no matter what.

Smiling, Takatsuki lined up the paper dolls in front of Nanba.

"It's okay. There's no need to feel bad. Unlike you, I won't associate any misfortune that happens with the chain letter. However, if some truly inexplicable disaster was to occur, it could become valuable data regarding the supernatural implications involved with things like chain letters! If anything, as a researcher, I would be thankful for the opportunity! So please, by all means, address one of the letters to me!"

"But! But—!"

Nanba looked terribly distressed.

In the end, after repeated urging, Nanba put Takatsuki's name on a letter. Glumly, he put his pen case and the remaining looseleaf back inside his bag.

"Isn't this great, Nanba?" Naoya said. "Your curse will be lifted now."

"Yeah... But, like, giving the curse to Professor Takatsuki is..."

"He said himself that he wants that to happen, so don't worry about it."

"But still... Besides—I mean..."

"Besides what?"

Naoya cocked his head to the side, and Nanba paused for a moment.

Then, with a sigh, he continued.

"Besides, the fact that someone sent me a chain letter in the first place is, like, pretty hard to deal with... Because, like Professor Takatsuki said, doesn't that mean the kid who sent it to me didn't care if I had bad luck?"

A chain letter was a vehicle for cursing another person.

The act of sending one inevitably involved being fine with the idea of someone else suffering for one's own sake.

Even as an elementary school student, Naoya had been quite shocked to receive a chain letter. He spent some time wondering who on earth had left it in his desk—and whether it was someone who hated him.

It was possible that, more than bad luck, chain letters brought feelings of ill will with them. That was why people who received them felt troubled and were more susceptible to the curse.

"Ah, that reminds me, I forgot to ask. Nanba?" Takatsuki, who had lined the four paper dolls up on one of the bookshelves, turned toward the center table. "Do you have any idea who might have sent you the chain letter?"

"Huh...?"

Nanba looked over at the professor.

Then he said—

"N-no, I don't. Not a clue."

Suddenly, Nanba's voice warped. The distortion made it jump wildly in pitch, as if some kind of device was applying a chaotic filter to every word.

Startled, Naoya reflexively covered his ears.

Nanba looked at him in alarm.

"Fukamachi? What's the matter? Are you okay?"

"Oh... Um, it's nothing..."

Naoya glanced at Takatsuki as he replied.

The other man was watching him closely. It must have come across loud and clear that Nanba had just told a lie.

"Nanba, you—"

But just as Takatsuki started to speak, the bell rang.

Nanba's head whipped around with a start toward the clock hanging on the office wall.

"Crap, the repairman is coming to fix my heat today! Um, Professor—I have to go now, but I really appreciate your help! I'm really sorry if anything happens to you! Your class was really fun, so I'll enroll next year, too! Fukamachi, thanks to you as well, seriously! Later!"

Donning his coat and grabbing his bag in a hurry, Nanba bowed his head to Takatsuki and Naoya several times, then rushed out of the room. The door closed behind him with a bang, and they listened as the sound of him dashing down the hall grew ever more distant.

"...He's so loud," Naoya muttered before downing the last bit of his coffee in one gulp.

Smiling, Takatsuki tucked the letters Nanba had written into a plastic sleeve.

"He's energetic, honest... Quite a nice boy, wouldn't you say?"

"I'd say he's just noisy."

"Well, most students are."

Takatsuki returned to the table. Rather than the chair he had been using before, he lowered himself into the seat right next to Naoya, looking exceptionally pleased.

"...What're you making that face for?"

"No reason. I was just thinking it's rare for you to bring a friend here."

"He's not a friend. We're just in the same language class."

"You would say that, Fukamachi. But I remember seeing the two of you together several times. That's right—you ate lunch together the other day, when one of the cafeteria options was fried mackerel."

Turning his face away, Takatsuki gazed into the air as if he was seeing the scene in question.

"Don't search your memories for something like that."

Naoya, exasperated, watched as Takatsuki appeared to mentally scan his brain for things he had seen around campus in the last year.

The professor had an unusually powerful memory and great eyesight, to boot. Consequently, everything he saw was stored in his mind as a clear image. As he was currently doing, Takatsuki could sift through his memories at will. It seemed he could also zoom in on the details of what he remembered.

"I saw you talking with a handful of people. I'm glad you're making friends as you should. That's a relief."

"Like I said, he's not my friend. I mean, it's not like he's a bad guy, but..."

Avoiding returning Takatsuki's amused grin, Naoya placed his empty mug on the table.

"...Nanba doesn't really lie, most of the time. So it's easy for me to be around him."

Naoya's ears heard the lies people told as distorted sound.

Spending time with liars, constantly being subjected to the warped words coming out of their mouths, was agony for Naoya. The sound alone made him feel sick.

Even if that wasn't the case, people lied on a regular basis.

Depending on the situation, even those who were usually truthful would lie on occasion.

Takatsuki rested his elbows lightly against the table.

"That makes sense. Plus, I think he seems very kind. Just before he left...he told a lie, didn't he?"

"...Yeah."

Naoya nodded.

"He thinks he knows who sent him the letter."

"And yet," Takatsuki replied, "he told us he didn't. Even though we don't know who it is, he instinctively covered for them."

Nanba certainly was the type to do that. He was unguarded and easygoing but also surprisingly mindful of others. It was all the more reason for him to be upset about being targeted by the chain letter.

"By the way, Professor. That was on purpose, wasn't it? Only making four paper dolls."

That thought came rushing back to Naoya, and he cast a slight glare in Takatsuki's direction.

"Even if you didn't have more origami paper, you could have used something else. If all you had to do was make a paper doll, even looseleaf or leftover class materials would have sufficed. But you made sure the last letter got addressed to you. Did you really want it that badly?"

"Well, that is a part of it. But look—it's because Nanba is such a nice kid."

Takatsuki's gaze slid over to the four dolls on the shelf.

"He felt quite badly about it, didn't he?"

"Yeah. It really bothered him."

"His concern, when it comes down to it, is a result of him thinking, *Oh no, I've given my curse to Professor Takatsuki*. That means the purification was a success. Nanba's curse is lifted."

Oh, Naoya thought. I see now.

Nanba's belief that he himself was cursed was the reason behind the curse.

Thus, his writing chain letters to the dolls wouldn't have any effect if there was even the smallest doubt in his mind about whether that would end the curse.

That was why Takatsuki deliberately gave Nanba something to feel guilty for.

It made sense, but—

"Still, Professor. I think it's seriously weighing on him."

"Yep, which means it's a good thing he doesn't have to worry about the curse anymore, right?"

"No, not that... I'm worried that the idea of bringing misfortune to someone he knows will genuinely make Nanba sick with anxiety. He's *that* nice."

"Huh?"

Just like Nanba's had before, Takatsuki's mouth popped open in surprise.

Then, covering his mouth with one hand, he whispered, "Oh dear."

He continued in a slightly louder voice.

"I'm sorry. That thought hadn't occurred to me. I see... So Nanba is that sensitive. I apologize; I'm not very cognizant of others' feelings, so I didn't think..."

"You don't need to look that apologetic over it... I'll check up on Nanba later."

"Yes, good, it makes more sense for you to do it than me. Oh—but the point is, even if I encounter some bad luck, it's okay! If it comes to that, I'll probably

be fine. My way of thinking about it is different from Nanba's, so I won't get caught up in the same curse."

Smiling, Takatsuki held up a finger as if to underline his point that everything was okay.

"For someone in your field of study, Professor, you don't seem to put much stock in curses."

"I am a researcher, after all. I can't just go around accepting unrealistic explanations for things that have logical interpretations."

"But you do hope for the unrealistic option to be true to some extent, don't you?"

"Well, yes. Like in this case, for example. I certainly can't make any definitive claims about Nanba almost being hit by a flowerpot and shoved down the stairs being nothing but pure coincidence! Couldn't there be something that drew those unlucky accidents to him? Not that such a thing would be easy to prove, though."

"So you're saying if something bad was to happen to you after this, it wouldn't necessarily be because of the chain letter?"

"No, but of course if I was to walk outside right now and suddenly get hit by a car, I might blame it on the letter."

Takatsuki glanced at the clock.

"Hey, Fukamachi. Do you have any plans for the rest of the day?"

"Um, no, not really."

"Great. In that case, do you want to come be my lookout so I don't get run over?"

"Excuse me?"

Grinning, Takatsuki stood up, towering over Naoya as he spoke.

"A request came in, actually. I wasn't planning on telling you about it since it's exam season, but if you're not busy, I'd love for you to accompany me."

Apparently, a middle school girl from Koto City was the source of the current

request submitted to Takatsuki's website, Neighborhood Stories.

"The girl's elder sister took my class this year, it seems, so that's how she knew about me and the site."

They didn't have much time before Takatsuki was scheduled to meet with the girl, so he explained the situation to Naoya on the move.

Wrapped up in a blue scarf and an expensive-looking gray overcoat, Takatsuki led the way from campus to the train station. Normally, the professor was bound to get lost when going somewhere for the first time. But having been to the scheduled meeting place before, he originally planned on speaking to the girl without Naoya.

At this time of year, the heating inside the trains was almost too effective at warding off the outside chill. As soon as they stepped into the train car, Naoya had to take off his fogged-up glasses and wipe the condensation from the lenses.

"Is this the type of request you would be able to handle without someone there for common sense? As in, does it relate to a topic you're not particularly interested in?"

"Not at all! I'm really excited about this one!"

Takatsuki answered in a cheerful tone, his eyes glittering with anticipation. When he was like this, he never failed to remind Naoya of Leo, the golden retriever he'd had as a child. Faced with his favorite toy or treats, Leo would radiate excitement the same way, though he was usually able to follow the "wait" command. Takatsuki ordinarily failed at that task, which was a problem.

"So what's the story this time?"

"According to the e-mail, the girl's friend may be cursed."

"Another curse? Don't tell me it's a second chain letter."

"Well, actually, it's one even I've never heard of. She called it the Curse of Marie-san in the Library."

"There are urban legends you don't know about?"

"Recently created stories that circulate in hyperlocal environments don't

make their way to me very often. Miss Ruiko is well-versed in internet folklore, so I asked her about it just in case, but she didn't seem familiar with it, either. That means this might be a good opportunity for us to collect information on a new urban legend!"

Takatsuki's voice was still brimming with happiness.

The meeting place was in front of a library in Koto City, where the girl's friend had supposedly been cursed.

They exited the train, and after a short walk, a park came into view. Nearest to them were rows of colorful playground equipment, and several large trees rose up out of the ground beyond that. Partially hidden behind the trees sat an old-fashioned, Western-style white building—the library, evidently.

Sitting on the wooden benches outside the library, huddled together as if to stave off the cold, were two girls in school uniforms. Catching sight of Takatsuki's face as he approached, the short-haired girl sitting on the right tapped the other girl—whose hair was in braids—on the shoulder. They started talking, their conversation loud enough for Naoya to hear.

"That's him! It has to be!"

"Huh ...? Really?"

"Yes, he's just like my sister said! Tall, young, and really handsome!"

Apparently, being handsome was considered a defining characteristic. In Naoya's case, people either described him as a plain-looking four-eyes or didn't find anything about him to be noteworthy.

When Takatsuki and Naoya made it to the bench, the girls shot to their feet. Both of their faces had flushed a charming shade of pink from the cold.

The short-haired girl looked up at Takatsuki as she removed her fluffy pink earmuffs.

"U-um, Professor...Akira Takatsuki?"

"Yes, that's me, from Seiwa University. This is my assistant, Fukamachi. And you must be Miss Akagi, the one who sent me the request?"

The girl responded to Takatsuki's gentle smile with an enthusiastic bow of her

head.

"Yes! I'm Yuzuka Akagi! This is my friend Miya Motohashi! It's nice to meet you!"

"N-nice to meet you..."

At Yuzuka's side, the girl with the braided hair also bowed her head. Naoya wondered if it was this girl—meek-looking, bespectacled Miya—who had been cursed.

The girls explained that they were in their first year of middle school and had been friends since elementary school. Appearing to be very different people at first glance, the girls were in the same class and still quite close.

The first order of business was to hear the girls' story, but disrupting the requisite silence of the library wasn't a good idea. Takatsuki bought some hot drinks for them from a nearby vending machine, deciding they could talk at the bench.

"Could you start by telling me what the Curse of Marie-san in the Library is about?"

Yuzuka was the one to answer Takatsuki's question.

"I heard about it from the upperclassmen in my club," she said, pressing the warm bottle Takatsuki had given her to her cheek.

"Some of the books in this library have something written in them that looks like a cipher."

It was said that the writing appeared in bloodred ink in the corners of the books' pages.

The cipher was made up of four combinations of digits. But if someone was unlucky enough to come across one, under no circumstances should they try to solve it. Rather, as soon as a person saw the cipher, they were supposed to close the book and chant the following sentence three times: "Please forget, Marie-san."

If they didn't, they would be cursed by Marie-san.

"If you do end up cursed, you might be able to save yourself by cracking the

cipher within three days, but that's not for certain. The other possibility is that when you figure out the code, Marie-san will appear right in front of you. The seniors in my club told me they don't know which one is the truth. Either way, if you see the cipher, you're in trouble, so they said it's best to avoid this library altogether."

"Ah, was there anything in the story about who exactly this Marie-san is?"

Takatsuki's query appeared to remind Yuzuka of something.

"Oh, right! I forgot to tell you the beginning of the story! Um, so I guess a high school girl named Marie-san used to come to this library a lot, but she died in an accident. Because she loved books so much when she was alive, she started to haunt this library after her death."

"I see, so the story is predicated on the conditions that, first, there's a ghost in the library, and second, there is a cipher written by the ghost."

Takatsuki nodded to himself as if in understanding.

Naoya tilted his head.

"But isn't it unusual for a ghost to do something like write secret codes? I've never really heard of that happening."

"True enough. That element alone is oddly off theme. Interesting—and so you found the cipher, I assume?"

Pivoting his gaze to Miya, Takatsuki addressed the latter part of his statement toward her.

Clutching her can of hot chocolate with both hands, Miya nodded.

"I like reading...so I borrow books from this library a lot. Then, two days ago, I was reading a library book at school, and I noticed some weird writing in the page margins. All kinds of people take out books from the library, so sometimes I do find scribbles in them, but...this one was strange, even for a random doodle, so I showed it to Yuzuka since she was nearby. I asked her what she thought it was, and..."

"At the time, I had just heard about Marie-san from my seniors. So I was like, uh-oh, this is bad. But when I asked Miya, it turned out she didn't know about

Marie-san and didn't do the chant, either."

Miya's head drooped.

"That story is popular in Yuzuka's badminton club, I guess, but no one in the choir club I'm in has heard of it..."

"I'm sorry. I should have told you about it sooner."

Yuzuka reached out to pat Miya's arm with concern.

Looking down at the girls, Takatsuki asked Miya another question.

"Do you have the book with you?"

"Ah yes, here it is."

Miya retrieved a hardcover book from the bag at her feet. She handled it with the kind of extreme caution normally reserved for things like explosives. The cover read, *Science Fiction of the World, the Complete Collection, Vol. 16*.

Gently, Takatsuki took the book out of Miya's hands.

"Is the page in question the one that's been bookmarked?"

"Yes, but... Um, you're going to look at it?"

"Oh yes, don't worry. I would be delighted to be cursed. Oh-ho—so this is Marie-san's cipher?"

Takatsuki had the book open to the marked page. From the side, Naoya peered in at it, too.

Something was written in red ink in the corner of the page, just as described by the story.

It probably contributed to the creepiness of the story to exaggerate by saying the ink was "bloodred," when in reality it was likely just written in normal red ink. In slightly rounded handwriting, it said *Next is 933-2-42-153*. Naoya frowned at the surprisingly long string of numbers. What were they meant to represent? Perhaps it was part of a series of codes, since the word *Next* was there as well.

Miya raised her head. Her fingers squeezed around the can of hot chocolate.

"...Um, I...don't really believe in the Marie-san story. I'm not a little kid. I know it's just supposed to scare people. But the idea of being cursed did get to me a bit, after all. I haven't been able to sleep..."

Naoya had indeed noticed that Miya's face was pale, and dark circles had bloomed under her eyes. It brought to mind the way Nanba had looked when Naoya first encountered him earlier in the day—it was the blatantly anxious, agitated face of someone who thought they might be cursed.

"—It's okay, Miss Miya."

Takatsuki bent down slightly with a kind smile so he could make eye contact with the girl, who stared back up at him.

"You don't need to be frightened. After all, your situation is actually rather incredi— Ack!"

"Professor, you cannot touch a middle school girl," Naoya hissed into Takatsuki's ear.

He had also yanked back on the professor's arm as it started to reach out toward Miya. It was a good thing Naoya had tagged along, he thought. If Takatsuki had grabbed on to Miya like he did to Nanba earlier, he would definitely be reported to the authorities.

Looking down at Naoya, Takatsuki pouted.

"I wouldn't! Even I know not to hug preteen girls!"

"Then what were you thinking of doing just now?"

"...Patting her head, maybe."

"You just met her, so you should probably hold off on that."

Takatsuki pulled back at Naoya's words, looking disappointed. Miya herself muttered something that sounded like "Aw, I wanted him to pat my head," but Naoya pretended not to hear.

"So what's the plan, Professor?"

As if mulling something over, Takatsuki stroked his chin with one hand.

"Yes, good question. I find it a bit curious that the badminton club knows

Marie-san's story, but the choir club doesn't."

"Huh?"

"It's odd, isn't it? They're in the same school."

Takatsuki looked at Yuzuka.

"Have you heard anyone outside of the badminton club talking about Marie-san?"

"I'm not sure... Oh! But when I mentioned it to some girls in our class, Miho and Kanna, they said they know the story! They're in the basketball club."

"I see. And do you come to this library often, Miss Yuzuka? What about the seniors who told you the story—or the girls in your class?"

"I don't, really... Pretty much only for some school assignments and book reports. I would guess it's probably the same for my seniors. In general, if you need to check out a book, the school has its own library, so I don't think there are a lot of students who go out of their way to come to this one... And Miho and Kanna don't seem like the type to read for fun."

"I've never seen either of them here," Miya offered.

Evidently, the story about Marie-san was popular with kids who weren't familiar with the library in question.

After taking another long moment to think, Takatsuki turned to Yuzuka again.

"Miss Yuzuka, you heard the story from the older students in your club, yes? Would you be able to find out where those students heard it from?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah! I'll message them on LINE!"

Nodding, Yuzuka took out her phone.

Just then, the library door opened, and two women who looked like college students walked out.

As the pair made to pass by their group, Takatsuki called out to stop them, presenting them with his business card.

"Pardon me. I'm Takatsuki, an associate professor at Seiwa University. I study ghost stories and urban legends. Could I have a few minutes of your time?"

At first, the women looked wary. But the moment Takatsuki smiled at them, they stopped walking. There were times when the professor's elegant features and gentlemanly demeanor came in quite handy. His title probably helped a bit, too.

The women looked over Takatsuki's business card.

"Oh, I have a friend who goes to Seiwa. What was it you wanted to talk to us about?"

"Also, you say you're studying ghost stories? Do they have classes like that at your school?"

Takatsuki nodded and grinned.

"Yes, indeed. I'm actually currently in the middle of collecting data about a ghost story. Do you two come to this library often?"

"It's nearby, so yeah, pretty often."

"And have you ever heard the ghost story concerning this library and a girl named Marie-san?"

"Um, what? No, I haven't."

"Neither have I."

The pair shook their heads.

Takatsuki thanked the women, and they walked off, giggling.

While Takatsuki had been talking, Yuzuka seemed to have received a reply from her seniors. She held out her phone.

"They said they heard the story from friends in their class!"

"Then, would it be possible to find out where those friends got it from? Once we know that, I'd like to keep tracing the chain back, if we could."

For a moment, Takatsuki's immediate response seemed to catch Yuzuka off guard. Then she started typing away on her phone again, likely asking her seniors for more information.

As Yuzuka tried to track down the origins of Marie-san's story through her smartphone, Takatsuki approached passersby and people going in and out of

the library with the same questions he had posed to the two college girls.

But not one of them had heard of Marie-san, and none of them were lying about it, either. They were all genuinely unfamiliar with the story.

Naoya was confused.

The situation felt very strange to him. Marie-san's story took place in this very library, but no one who actually frequented the library had any knowledge of it.

"What do you think this means, Professor?"

"Well, most likely—I think Marie-san's story has only just recently started circulating at the girls' school."

He continued.

"It's not surprising that the library chosen to be the setting for the story is a fairly unfamiliar place to the children spreading the tale. Don't you remember what we talked about during my lectures on bathroom and school ghost stories? These kinds of narratives often find homes in environments that are somewhat removed from the places we know and love, ones that feel extraordinary."

Naoya did remember that lecture.

People felt a sense of security in places they spent a lot of time in on a regular basis. Conversely, they felt uneasy in locations they spent comparatively less time in.

That was why school ghost stories were frequently set in bathrooms or special-purpose classrooms—like science labs and music rooms—that didn't get constant use.

To the students spreading Marie-san's story, the library was an unfamiliar entity. They knew it existed, of course, but they rarely spent time inside. A place like that—out of the ordinary, just outside the realm of their daily lives—was a worthy setting for a ghost story.

"Someone found a ghost story in this library and started telling other people about it. But since it hasn't been long since that began, there are kids at school who have heard the story—and kids who haven't. I get the feeling that Marie-

san's tale hasn't reached its final form yet."

"...Um, what do you mean by final form?"

Next to Yuzuka, who was still tapping away on her phone with gusto, Miya looked up at them, her expression curious.

Takatsuki gave her a kind smile and explained.

"Do you know the term *urban legend*, Miss Miya? It's a story that has an ending, a more-solidified narrative than simple rumors, and is often told as if it really happened to a friend of a friend. You've heard of Mary's Phone Call and Toilet-Bound Hanako-san, right? Like those, Marie-san's story is also a kind of urban legend, one that solidifies in form as it spreads from person to person. The underlying motif remains the same, but the details change. The story becomes more coherent, more believable, scarier, and more interesting."

"It...gets interesting?"

"It does. After all, one of the purposes of such stories is to share it with others so everyone can enjoy it. Have you ever told scary stories with friends on overnight field trips? It's like that. You tell the story, have fun seeing the reactions to it, and take part in the fear as a group. Many ghost stories are created this way. Also, if you're going to be sharing stories anyway, it's better to have one that will garner genuine fear and enjoyment, right? A boring tale isn't going to be well received, and stories that sound like they might be real are going to be scarier than ones that are obviously impossible. That's why, little by little, depending on how and when they're told, stories will evolve—some elements are cut, the ending changes, et cetera."

It was just like what Takatsuki had said before about chain letters.

After receiving a letter, you send it on to several other people without changing its contents. If you don't, you'll have bad luck. That was the central motif of chain letters—and was basically unchanged from their origination.

However, the statement that one would have good luck if they continued the chain, which had once been a part of such letters, was phased out.

It didn't matter if the standard rules of the letter—such as how many people you had to send it to and in what time frame—varied. There were likely also

several versions of the accompanying anecdote about someone breaking the chain and experiencing misfortune.

The story was viable even if the small details were modified. Even if "misfortune" became a "rod," if someone found that interesting enough in itself, the urban legend would continue to spread.

"Marie-san's story currently has two endings. One says the curse will be lifted if you solve the cipher; the other says solving the cipher will cause Marie-san to appear, so you shouldn't attempt it. But the latter ending doesn't quite mesh well with the part of the story that says once you find the cipher, you should close the book and chant the magic words right away. Most likely, the other ending—the one about being spared if you crack the code—was created later. It's a procedure that was designed as a life preserver for people who failed to avoid the curse in step one, I believe. It lends some consistency to the story, and the added element of suspense that comes from having to solve the cipher makes things more interesting. Eventually, I think the idea that you shouldn't try to solve the cipher will probably fade out of the story. Or the two endings will be combined into something like, 'If you solve the cipher, you'll be spared, but if you don't, Marie-san will appear.'"

"...Um, then, does that mean Marie-san's story is totally made-up?"

Miya gazed up at Takatsuki, her wide eyes blinking behind her glasses. Yuzuka looked up at him, too, her expression full of surprise.

Takatsuki's smile grew.

"Most of it, probably. But you know, typically, when stories are born, it's because there's enough background to base them off of. That background is what I'm really interested in."

As he spoke, Takatsuki turned to look at the library.

Naoya and the girls, as if compelled to do so, followed suit.

Without their noticing, it had grown quite dark outside. The outdoor lights on either side of the library's entrance had turned on at some point. The old-fashioned white building, surrounded by its large, sentinel-like trees, certainly possessed the type of atmosphere necessary for fostering ghost stories.

For some reason, Naoya's gaze flicked over to the professor standing at his side.

Takatsuki's eyes were tinged with blue as he stared at the library with a wide grin.

His eyes changed color like this, at times. They were normally the same dark brown as the eyes of a friendly dog, but they occasionally took on a startlingly deep indigo hue. Naoya always wondered what the world looked like through them—eyes that seemed to contain the whole night sky.

Takatsuki was never fooled by artificial monsters. And yet he always hoped they would be real.

Naoya thought that was probably because Takatsuki himself was only half tethered to reality.

All of a sudden, Yuzuka's phone chimed.

"Oh, I got a reply! They traced it to a friend of a friend of a friend of my club senior! Um, it says, 'Her younger sister heard the story from someone who works at the library!"

"The story ultimately originated outside of your school, then."

Takatsuki turned his gaze from the library to Yuzuka. His eyes had returned to their usual color.

"Well now, shall we step inside the setting for this tale at last? We may yet learn why Marie-san's story was created."

It was quiet inside the library. The interior was also elegantly old-fashioned in its construction, with graceful spiral staircases and stained glass windows. The first floor had a large children's corner in addition to rows of periodicals and magazines. The book Miya had checked out had apparently come from the general section on the second floor.

Takatsuki approached the first-floor information desk, where two women in library-issued pinafores sat. One of them, an older lady staffing the check-out station, looked up when she noticed him coming.

With a bright smile, Takatsuki handed her his business card.

"Pardon me. My name is Takatsuki; I work at Seiwa University. I was wondering if you could help me with something?"

"Yes, what is it? The local history section is on the second floor, if that's what you're looking for."

"Ah, no, I'm studying urban legends. Actually, I just recently learned of a ghost story about a girl named Marie-san based in this library. Have you heard of it?"

"Oh dear. No, I haven't... That's a bit frightening, isn't it? Are you sure it's this library?"

"Yes, it seems rumors of it have started circulating at the nearby middle school. I was told the students originally heard it from someone who works here, but... I see, so you're not familiar with it, then?"

"Not at all. Do you know about this?"

The woman speaking to Takatsuki turned her head, directing the question at her coworker.

The other woman, who appeared to be sorting through returned books, looked up.

"Marie-san? Nope, not a clue."

Her voice came out in a distorted roil. Startled, Naoya pressed a hand to his ear.

Thanking the older woman for her help, Takatsuki chased after the second woman—who was pushing her book-laden trolley away from the counter at an impressive speed.

He caught up to her in several long strides, reaching out beside her to grab the trolley's handle with ease. The woman—roughly in her midtwenties, with her long hair held back in a clip—stopped short in surprise. The staff badge hanging around her neck read Yukimura.

"I'm very sorry for interrupting your work, but I would like to speak with you briefly, if I may?"

"Oh, um, I can't, really..."

Her response was muttered and awkward.

In a sudden movement, Takatsuki bent his tall frame over so he was looking the woman in the face.

"But you know about Marie-san, don't you, Ms. Yukimura?"
"..."

For a moment, Yukimura went stiff.

Then she looked over her shoulder at the information desk, where her elder colleague was eyeing them curiously.

Her gaze flickered briefly as she appeared to settle something within herself. Finally, she pushed the trolley up against a wall, out of the way.

"Um, we're in the way here, so let's... Let's talk over there."

She pointed to a small room in the corner of the library that had Story-Time Room written on the door. It was probably used for reading aloud to children.

All the walls in the room were painted pink, and the floor was littered with little cushions that were made to resemble toy blocks. Everyone had to remove their shoes before stepping on the carpeted floor. "Wow, this takes me back," Yuzuka said as she walked in, making Naoya wonder if she had ever spent time in this room when she was younger.

"Um. What's this about Marie being made part of a ghost story?"

As soon as Yukimura had closed the room's door behind them, that question came rushing out of her.

Takatsuki recounted the tale, and at the end, Yukimura sank slowly into a crouch with her head between her hands.

"...What...? There's no way. How did it get like this...? Oh no, what should I do...?"

"So you were the person who first told Marie-san's story, I assume?"

Yukimura nodded listlessly in response to Takatsuki's question.

"But I didn't tell it like that... Like a ghost story..."

"Could you explain what you mean by that?"

Kneeling in front of her, Takatsuki gently implored Yukimura to elaborate.

"You're the only one who knows the truth behind this story and the meaning of the cipher—I'd like to know, too."

One after the other, Yuzuka and Miya knelt down beside Takatsuki, bowing their heads and saying, "Please."

Naoya knelt, too, looking at Yukimura.

She was the person responsible for the spooky tale that was currently circulating at the middle school. It started with her and had transformed into an urban legend as it spread from student to student.

What on earth were the real circumstances being obscured by the legend?

Yukimura began to speak.

"Marie... Marie Kitajima was a classmate of mine."

The story began eight years prior.

At the time, Yukimura and Marie Kitajima were second-years in high school.

Marie was always at this library. She was an avid reader and loved the library's atmosphere.

Then—just before summer vacation, a boy one year younger than Marie confessed his feelings for her.

It was love at first sight, according to the boy. On the way to school one day, he called out to Marie, stopping her in her tracks to deliver quite an impassioned declaration.

"Apparently, she told him she needed a little time to think about it. He was younger than her, and he didn't read a lot, so he didn't seem like her type."

But that didn't deter the boy.

Marie's reply had yet to materialize, so the boy approached her over and over, repeatedly telling her how he felt.

"I happened to be there for one of his confessions. It was pretty incredible. He

bowed really deeply and said, 'I love you today, I'll love you tomorrow, I'll love you forever!' He made a scene, and everyone around us was jeering and staring; Marie was a little embarrassed, too... Then, the day before summer vacation started, she told me—"

Marie decided to give the boy a reply.

But when Yukimura asked whether she was going to date him or let him down easy, Marie just laughed and shook her head.

"Where's the fun in a simple answer like that?" she had said. "Besides, if he likes me, he's going to have to like books and the library just as much."

Then, taking Yukimura to this very library and swearing her to secrecy, she explained.

Marie had decided to play a type of game with the boy.

She had hidden a coded message inside the library, and he had to figure it out.

He had until the last day of summer vacation.

If he solved the puzzle precisely, Marie would give him an honest reply. If he didn't, that was that.

"She didn't tell me what the secret message said, but she did tell me which book she wrote the beginning of the code in. That was the same information she gave him to start with, she said... But I don't know how the game turned out, in the end."

"Is that...because Miss Marie passed away?"

"Yes, on the last day of summer break. In a traffic accident."

Whether the boy solved the code, or what the code led to in the first place, Yukimura never knew. Time went on.

After graduating from college, Yukimura started working at the library.

Since her time in college, her memories of Marie had grown quite dim. The library became just "a place an old friend used to like."

Until just recently, when an elementary school girl approached the

information desk, opened the book she was holding to show Yukimura, and said, "I found a book someone wrote in."

That happened sometimes—patrons writing in the books. If the scribbles were so bad they made it difficult to read the book, it had to be removed from the lending list. Yukimura took the book from the girl to check the page it was written on.

In that moment, she felt time rewind.

She knew what she was looking at immediately. Numbers written in red ink on the corner of the page. It was a cipher just like Marie had shown her.

The numbers didn't interfere with reading the book's contents. It was fine to be returned to its shelf and made available for patrons to borrow.

In fact, Yukimura wanted the book to be a part of the library forever.

She wanted to keep the secret code her friend had hidden away safely inside the building she had loved until the end of time. Drawing attention to the book with the strange scribbles in it by making a fuss was the last thing she intended to do.

So she spoke to the girl who brought the book to her.

"'This is a code that was written by a girl named Marie. Let's leave it alone. And if possible, forget all about this...' That's what I said."

When the girl asked who Marie was, Yukimura had replied, "She was a girl who loved this library. She died in an accident when she was in high school." Perhaps the words *she died* had been too much for the child, because she ran away in a hurry with her eyes wide after that.

"Those were the only things I said to her... I never thought it would turn into a ghost story."

Yukimura looked down, seeming on the verge of tears.

When she went home that day, the little elementary school girl must have told her elder sister the story she heard from Yukimura. It was probably already like a game of telephone at that point; at the very least, it was doubtful the girl repeated the story word for word to her sister.

And perhaps, when that sister heard the story, she found it interesting or scary.

Thus, she shared it with her school friends.

It may well have been the sister who was the first person to embellish the story in its telling. "A girl who died in an accident left a cipher in the library" didn't make for a very good story on its own. Additional details like "whoever cracks the code will be cursed" and "there are words you can recite to ward off the curse" would grab her friends' attention more effectively. Especially since it was her little sister who had found the cipher. Tacking on that fact alone increased the story's credibility. After all, a great deal of urban legends came from retelling the experiences of real people.

That must have been how Marie-san's ghost story was born.

Yuzuka exchanged uneasy looks with Miya.

"Um... Um, Ms. Yukimura? We'll tell our friends at school that the story about Marie-san isn't true, so they shouldn't spread it."

Eyes downcast, Yuzuka spoke with her voice full of nerves.

Yukimura raised her head to look at her.

"I'll tell everyone," Yuzuka continued, leaning in toward the older woman. "That Marie-san isn't some kind of scary ghost, and she won't curse them or anything like that. And! I'll tell them this library isn't haunted! So, um, I'm sorry for accidentally making your friend out to be an evil ghost!"

With that, Yuzuka bowed her head to Yukimura vigorously. At her side, Miya did the same.

Yukimura looked between the two of them, surprised.

Then she reached out with both hands and set them on the girls' shoulders.

"You don't have to do that. It's not your fault. But...thank you."

She smiled at them, and Yuzuka, who had looked back up, let out a tiny, relieved giggle. She and Miya met eyes again, and the other girl laughed, too, fixing the glasses that had slid partially off her face when she bowed.

Watching that exchange, Takatsuki started talking with the merest tinge of disappointment in his voice.

"Ah well. A brand-new urban legend and everything. It'll probably die out now. Almost seems like a waste."

"Professor, you shouldn't say things like that. Think about other people's feelings, please."

"...Right. My apologies."

Takatsuki replied with remorse to Naoya's scolding. *Good*, Naoya thought with a nod.

Somehow, they had been witnesses to the birth, development, and death of an urban legend. It wasn't what they had come to do, but it seemed safe to say it was a very valuable experience nonetheless.

After that, as everyone filed out of the Story-Time Room, Yuzuka muttered something.

"I wonder if the boy who confessed to Marie-san ever solved the code... It's so sad, thinking he never got to hear her reply."

"Yeah. Plus, I'm kinda curious about the code, too."

Miya took *Science Fiction of the World, the Complete Collection, Vol. 16* out of her bag to look at it.

Takatsuki smirked.

"Well then, since we're already here, why don't we try cracking it?"

Yuzuka, Miya, and even Yukimura stared at him with wide eyes.

Naoya was a little caught off guard as well.

"You think you can, Professor?"

"I won't know until I give it a shot. Ms. Yukimura, Miss Marie told you the first book in the series, right? Which one is it?"

Though it was something she learned eight years before, Yukimura was able to remember the book after some thought.

Takatsuki, Naoya, and the girls parted ways with Yukimura at that point, as she still had work to do, and headed for the second floor.

For a moment, there was concern over whether the girls' parents would start to worry that their daughters hadn't come home yet, but it turned out both Yuzuka and Miya had told their families in advance that they were going to study at the library after school.

"Well, I mean, I thought if we didn't solve the cipher that Miya might get cursed and die! I was prepared to stay here all night if I had to!"

"...Thank you, Yuzuka."

With a slightly bashful expression, Miya thanked her friend. Perhaps Marie, who had loved books and spent all her time in the library, and her friend, Yukimura, had once been just like Miya and Yuzuka were now.

According to Yukimura, the first book was *The Great Kanji Dictionary, Volume* 1.

At the top of the stairs, they found the reference books section on the floor map before setting off through the labyrinthine bookshelves.

Takatsuki found the thick, heavy tome in question and carried it to a nearby chair, where he flipped open its cover.

"Oh, that's it!"

Yuzuka, looking in from the side, let out a little yell.

There, on the corner of the inside cover, something was written in small red characters. The handwriting was the same as what Miya had found. It said: *Next* is 4902-3-27-256.

Returning *The Great Kanji Dictionary* to the shelf, Takatsuki took off between the stacks on his own. Naoya and the girls rushed after him.

The professor led them to the medical books section.

He traced the spines of the rows of books as he walked, stopping multiple times to pick one out, flip through it, and put it back. Then, finally, Takatsuki opened a book off the shelf and turned to show it to them.

Naoya let out a reflexive "Oh" when he saw it.

There it was—another cipher written in the corner of the page, written by Marie.

"What? Professor Takatsuki, how did you know it was this book?" Miya asked, amazed.

"Because of this," Takatsuki replied.

He held the book out toward them, spine first. Under the title—*A History of Medicine*—was a sticker with 490.2 printed on it.

"This is a call number; it indicates where a book can be physically found in the library. Libraries in Japan use the Nippon Decimal Classification system to organize their sections and their books. In general, call numbers are the most common way numerals are used by anyone in a library. The first part of the cipher in *The Great Kanji Dictionary* was 4902, yes? So I was certain the next book would be in the medical section. The NDC's medical sciences division is 490. The 2 following that is a supplementary number referring to the format subdivision, specifically historical and regional texts."

"Then what about the rest of the numbers in the cipher?"

"Well, I have a theory, but it's just that: a theory. I believe the second part of the cipher corresponds to the book's shelf number, and the third part is the book's place in the shelf counting from the start. Which means the last number in the cipher corresponds to the page the next message will be on... It's been eight years since the cipher was written, so I assumed some of the shelf and book numbers would have changed. I'm glad I managed to find it."

Takatsuki smiled.

Naoya's brow furrowed a little.

"But this is a library. Some of the books could get checked out or accidentally put back in the wrong place. Miss Marie designed this game to give that guy who liked her a pretty big disadvantage, didn't she?"

"I think that's why she chose The Great Kanji Dictionary as the starting book."

"Huh?"

"It can't be borrowed from the library. It gets quite a lot of use by researchers, but I doubt many of this library's patrons even pick it up. Though finding the books after it in the puzzle would depend on luck. That's probably why she gave him until the end of summer vacation—so he had a good amount of time to do a thorough search. Now then, the cipher in this book says, *Next is* 908-2-14-205. 908 is the number for literature anthologies, sets, and collections. The book Miss Miya found was called *Science Fiction of the World, the Complete Collection*, wasn't it? Could I see the spine?"

At Takatsuki's request, Miya took the book from her bag.

The last names of the authors whose works were compiled in the volume—Sturgeon and Brown—were printed on the spine in big letters. And below that: a sticker with the call number 908 on it. This was undoubtedly the next book indicated by the cipher.

"That's amazing, Professor! You remember all the classification numbers?"

"Yep. I've seen the list before."

"But aren't there, like, a lot of numbers on the list?"

"I think people who have studied library science probably have it memorized, too. But in my case, it's just that I'm able to recall everything I see right away. My memory is a bit more powerful than the average person's. To prove it, I can recite what the cipher on page 205 of this book said. *Next is 933-2-42-153.*"

"Whoa! Do you mind if we check to see if you're right?!"

Miya and Yuzuka opened the sci-fi anthology to the page in question. The message written there matched what Takatsuki had just said exactly.

"So cool..."

"I wish my memory was that good..."

Eyes full of admiration, the girls stared up at Takatsuki, who gave a little *ahem* and puffed up with pride. He told them that number 933 referred to British and American fiction in novel and story formats, then started looking for the next book.

Counting from the end of the second shelf, Yuzuka pulled out the forty-

second book there, but found page 153 void of any handwriting.

"Huh? Maybe the placement changed, after all...?"

"Probably. I think the code is hiding in this one here."

Takatsuki took a small paperback tucked a little ahead of the one Yuzuka had grabbed off the shelf. It was *Satan in St. Mary's* by Paul Doherty.

Sure enough, a series of red numbers was waiting for them on the correct page.

"Hey, what?! How did you know it was that one, Professor?!"

"Miss Yuzuka, we're in a library. Please lower your voice a bit. The reason I knew this was the right book is...still a secret."

"What?! No fair!"

"Like I said, quieter, please."

Looking at the noisy middle schooler, Takatsuki pressed a finger to his lips to emphasize his point. Yuzuka's mouth snapped shut immediately, and she mimicked Takatsuki's gesture as if to show she understood.

The cipher in the Doherty book said *Next is 7787-4-56-121*. Takatsuki walked toward the theater and film section. It seemed more reorganizing was at play, because once more, the page in the book indicated by the cipher lacked any handwritten additions. Yuzuka and Miya began grabbing books at random in the section and checking them.

Naoya set about helping them, but he also turned to speak to the professor in a low voice.

"If our luck has run out, the right book could already be lost or taken out of circulation. Then the cipher would be unsolvable."

"That's true. But...it's probably this one, don't you think? Yep, see? There it is."

"Huh?"

Without hesitation, Takatsuki pulled *A Thorough Analysis of Disney Movie Music* off the shelf and turned to page 121, where there was indeed another

cipher.

"Next is 958-2-12-35. That's French literary anthologies. Let's go."

"...Professor, how on earth did you know it would be that book?"

"You haven't figured it out yet, either, Fukamachi?"

"What?"

The older man's face was scrunched up in amusement, but Naoya just looked back at him blankly.

"Not at all. At least give me a hint."

"I have a feeling the next book will also be the last one, so I'll let you know once we find it."

Putting the music book back on the shelf, Takatsuki headed for the shelves of French literature with a swish of his coat.

Once again, he selected a book—*The Complete Works of Stendhal, Vol. 1*—as if it were the obvious choice.

What was written on page 35 was in a slightly different format than the other ciphers.

All it said was 9-1-1700-2F. The third number was so high that Naoya couldn't imagine it was meant to indicate a book's place on a shelf.

But when Takatsuki saw it, he said, "Ah yes. Look. This is the last one, as I thought."

"What? How do you know?"

"I think this is a time and location for a meeting. It means September first, five PM, second floor. September first would be the day after summer break ends. If Miss Marie's suitor managed to crack the code in time, he was supposed to come find her here, on the second floor of this library, at that day and time."

That meeting could never be realized, though.

Marie was killed in an accident on the last day of summer vacation.

Hidden among the thousands of books, her last cipher had lost all meaning.

"...I wonder if finishing with a set date to meet meant that Marie was going to tell the boy that she wanted to go out with him?"

Takatsuki smiled in response to Yuzuka's musings.

"Oh, of course. I think that much is obvious."

"Right? Otherwise she wouldn't wanna meet with him!"

"Well, that's not why— Here, think of the titles of the cipher books in order."

"Huh?"

Yuzuka, Miya, and Naoya all exchanged glances automatically.

They couldn't just summon all the titles to mind as easily as that. They had been so caught up in the cipher until that point that the books' titles barely registered.

Shrugging slightly, Takatsuki rattled them off.

"First was Dai Kanwa Jiten (The Great Kanji Dictionary). Then Igaku no Rekishi (A History of Medicine). After that was Sekai SF Zenshuu 16 (Science Fiction of the World, the Complete Collection, Vol. 16), but the biggest words written on the spine were Sutaajon and Buraun (Sturgeon and Brown). Then we had Kyoukai no Akuma (Satan in St. Mary's), Deisunii Eiga Ongaku Tettei Bunseki (A Thorough Analysis of Disney Movie Music), and finally, Sutandaaru Zenshuu 1 (The Complete Works of Stendhal, Vol. 1). Now, what happens when you take just the first character from each spine in order?"

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"...DA... I... SU... KI... DE... SU...?"
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"I love you! Wow, so there was another coded message hidden inside the code!"

Yuzuka and Miya clasped hands and let out subdued squeals.

Thinking back, Naoya recalled that was the same phrase the boy had used in his passionate declarations toward Marie.

I love you today, I'll love you tomorrow, I'll love you forever!

Yukimura had said the confession had caused Marie some distress, but perhaps in her heart, she had long since been charmed by the boy's advances.

And so she had scattered a cipher infused with her own feelings around the library.

Maybe, during summer vacation, she had even watched the boy as he wandered about searching for her hidden messages, peering at him sneakily from the reading corner or somewhere else, smiling and concealing her blushing cheeks behind a book.

And if the boy had managed to crack the code and showed up at the appointed date, perhaps Marie would have said to him, "I already gave you my answer. Were you paying attention?"

The thing this library was keeping tucked away between the stacks wasn't a curse—it was the memories and flirtatious games of two star-crossed kids.

"But...I wonder if the boy ever solved the puzzle..."

Miya gazed at the book with the final cipher written in it, her voice low.

The game Marie had devised couldn't be solved unless one realized the first digits were call numbers. The boy had been given all of summer vacation—a decent amount of time to work with, but they still didn't know if he had figured it out.

"I wonder, too. Not that he would have been able to see her anymore after that even if he had... But I hope he was able to look fondly back on Miss Marie's game."

As he spoke, Takatsuki made to return the book he was holding to its place on the shelf.

Then, all at once, he froze.

"... Wait a minute. Something's off."

"Huh?"

Confused by Takatsuki's murmured statement, Naoya cocked his head to the side.

The professor finished shelving the book, then turned to look down at Naoya, his expression serious.

"What was it Ms. Yukimura said earlier? The first person to bring her a book with a code written in it was an elementary school girl."

"Um, yes? That's right."

"None of the books we just tracked down covered anything a child would typically read."

"...Oh."

Takatsuki was right.

That was odd. It made sense to assume that if an elementary schooler had found a cipher, it was written in a children's book.

And yet it appeared they had found all the pieces of Marie's puzzle.

Was there something they had missed?

Then—

From somewhere behind Takatsuki, there was a small fluttering sound.

"Huh...?"

When they looked, they saw that a book had fallen to the floor a short distance away.

Takatsuki retrieved the book and returned to Naoya and the girls. The cover design was full of adorable illustrations, very much making the book—called *The Diamond Mystery*—look like one meant for children.

Takatsuki opened the book.

"...Look at this."

Turning The Diamond Mystery around, he showed them the inside cover.

There, in red ink, it said Next is 3883-1-34-100. A cipher just like all the others.

But this one was written in a different hand.

Marie's writing had a roundness to it, but this cipher's characters were rather angular.

"...Let's go."

Book in hand, Takatsuki stepped back into the jungle of shelves.

Once again, the four of them moved from one book to the next. Takatsuki identified the correct section from the call number, and based on the rough position offered by the rest of the cipher, they searched for the subsequent code. All four of them knew what to look for now. It wasn't the genre or the contents of the book that mattered—it was the first character in its title. Following the page number indicated in the cipher, they opened the likely candidates, scanning the insides for red ink.

Daiyamondo no Nazo (The Diamond Mystery). Igirisu ni Tsutawaru Kowai Hanashi: Eikoku Yuurei Kaikitan (Scary Stories from the United Kingdom: British Tales of Ghosts and the Supernatural). Suzuki Masajo Zen Kushuu (Suzuki Masajo Poems: The Complete Collection). Kirin, Hizume wo Togu: Ieyasu, Hidetada, Iemitsu to Sono Jidai (The Giraffe Polishes Its Hooves: Ieyasu, Hidetada, Iemitsu, and Their Times). Den'en Saijiki (The Rural Almanac). And —Suriipingu Dooru (The Sleeping Doll), in which the code written on the specified page said...

"9-1-1700-2F... The same as Miss Marie's final cipher."

Miya's whispered words were just as gentle as the stroke of her fingers over the angular red message.

Beside her, Yuzuka gazed at the writing, too, speaking just as quietly.

"He... The boy did show up for that meeting, didn't he...?"

He had solved the puzzle.

The message hidden inside the code, too. He'd noticed it.

When the day dawned on September 1, after the end of summer break, had he already heard the news of Marie's death? Had he not? It was impossible to say.

Regardless, he must have come to the library that day.

September 1, at five in the afternoon, on the second floor.

Perhaps he sat and cried by himself in the same place he had spent his summer chasing a riddle.

And maybe, as he was leaving, he just happened to spot *The Diamond Mystery* on the first floor.

A book whose title started with the same character as the first book in Marie's game.

What kinds of feelings had welled up in him then?

Yesterday I loved you, and today I do, too. I'll always love you. Tomorrow, and every day after that.

But the person he wanted to say those things to wouldn't be there that day—or the next. She would never be there again.

There was only the library, with Marie's own feelings stored inside.

And so the boy hid his final confession to Marie in the library, too.

It was a confession that would never reach its recipient.

Nonetheless, other than this library, there had been nowhere else to put it.

Naoya and Takatsuki parted ways with Yuzuka and Miya outside the library before walking toward the station.

Evening had fallen completely at that point. When they checked the time, it was already seven o'clock. The midwinter wind was even more piercing than it had been in the afternoon, and Naoya instinctively curled in on himself against the chill. The sky above was blanketed in thick clouds. At this time of year, they were more likely to get snow than rain. Naoya hoped they got neither. Snowfall had delighted him to no end when he was a child, but for some reason, as an adult, he couldn't enjoy it at all.

As they headed for the train, Naoya brought up something he hadn't wanted to say in front of Yuzuka and Miya.

"...Professor. About the second cipher."

Takatsuki looked at him.

Naoya buried his chin in the folds of his scarf and continued in a muffled voice.

"That book—where do you think it came from?"

"Ah, The Diamond Mystery?"

The professor's reply came eagerly.

He must be thinking the same thing I am, Naoya mused.

"It's a children's book, after all! It belongs on the first floor. And there was no one else around those shelves except for us."

"...Do you think there's a chance that the book was put there kind of sloppily by mistake and just happened to fall right then?"

"Not at all. Everything was arranged neatly on the shelves; nothing was sticking out. More importantly—that book wasn't on any of those shelves."

Takatsuki would be able to recall every single book he saw lined up in that section. If he said *The Diamond Mystery* wasn't among them, that meant it had to have appeared then and there out of thin air.

"...Strange, isn't it?"

Ever so slightly, the tone of Takatsuki's voice had changed.

Naoya glanced up at him reflexively.

Takatsuki was looking back at Naoya sidelong, smiling.

As Naoya had expected, the professor's eyes were indigo. Though there was nothing but dense clouds visible over their heads, those deep-blue eyes seemed like they led straight up into the heavens—into the kind of sky one could only see out in the countryside. Not the polluted gray sky of a city, but an expanse of night so clear that it seemed you could make out stars tens of thousands of light-years away.

"The story of Marie-san's curse was made up. Just an urban legend shared for fun among a group of middle schoolers with incomplete knowledge of something that happened in that library. But the building blocks of the story—the memory of the people involved—may still reside there even now. And perhaps that memory was kind enough to show us, who just happened to get involved, the truth behind the legend."

"Then that means..."

Naoya swallowed the rest of his sentence.

It meant the one who had dropped the book back at the library was Miss Marie's ghost.

"Even I don't have eyes in the back of my head. So I can't say definitively that, for example, there wasn't some highly skilled ninja-like person who stealthily dropped the book and then disappeared without a trace. But I do think there's a more likely explanation than one that clumsy and forced. It doesn't do to cling too hard to purely 'rational' ways of thinking, after all... Ah, I'm so glad I accepted this case. What a valuable experience."

Takatsuki stopped walking. He looked back over his shoulder toward the library with his indigo eyes.

"There is no 'Marie-san's curse' in that building, but it's impossible to deny that Marie herself might still be there. I believe she is, at least."

"Then are you going to do another investigation, Professor? Of the...library ghost...?"

"Hmm, I don't think so."

Takatsuki blinked, and the night sky disappeared from his gaze. He stared up at the clouds, his irises dark brown once more, and rubbed his chin with one hand.

"It's just, you know... It feels like it wouldn't be right to disturb the purity of young love."

"Fair enough. But are you okay with walking away from what might be the first real ghost you've encountered?"

"Ugh, there's that aspect to consider as well."

Takatsuki clutched gently at his own chest with one hand, apparently battling some feelings of regret.

Finally, he looked toward the library again.

"If I remember correctly, the words you were supposed to say to avoid the curse were *Please forget, Marie-san*. But what Ms. Yukimura actually said to the little girl who found the cipher was 'Forget all about this.' I think she had the

right idea—what we found were very private messages. Things that outsiders like us should forget we ever saw."

"...You're right."

Looking over his shoulder just like Takatsuki was, Naoya nodded. He could still see, beyond the empty park and its partial cover of huge trees, the library Marie had loved.

Someday, someone was bound to happen upon the cipher again. The odd string of handwritten red numbers in the corner of the page would no doubt make that someone tilt their head to the side in curiosity.

But the cipher was impossible to solve unless one knew where to start.

That someone would probably close the book, perplexed, and eventually forget all about it.

Library collections changed over time.

As books were lost, damaged, discarded, and retired from circulation, the codes would gradually, quietly disappear.

The puzzles the two teenagers had left behind would someday become indecipherable mysteries.

That was as it should be.

They weren't for anyone else to understand anyway.

"...Gosh, it's cold! Let's hurry, Fukamachi."

A gust of wind that hit them head-on made Takatsuki shiver from head to toe.

Hunching his shoulders a bit as if to protect himself from another blast of air, he resumed their trek to the train station.

"Temperatures like these make me want to eat something warm! Some red bean porridge with candied chestnuts would really hit the spot right now!"

"You should probably stop eating sweets for dinner, Professor."

"Hmm, then what about some kind of hot pot? Tripe? Chicken or *shabu-shabu* would be nice, too, though."

"Yeah, hot pot sounds great... Won't talking about it like that make you want to eat some?"

"Living alone means not getting as many chances to have hot pot meals, doesn't it?"

"That's not true. They do sell clay pots meant for one person. But I usually just make a large amount in a regular size pot and eat it throughout the week."

"You don't get sick of it after a while?"

"I change the flavors and ingredients a little at a time. I start with chicken, add miso or something the next day, and eventually add curry paste. It has the strongest flavor, so no matter what you put in the pot before that, the curry tends to overwhelm it."

"Cooking proper meals even though you live by yourself, Fukamachi? That's admirable."

Takatsuki looked a little impressed.

He also lived alone, and from what Naoya remembered Sasakura telling him before, the professor hardly ever cooked.

"Do you tend to eat out, Professor? Is it that you can't cook? I know you made me some rice porridge that one time, though..."

"Oh, no, I can cook. I used to do it a lot, so I can make pretty much anything. But cooking just for yourself is boring, and it doesn't taste as good, you know?"

Takatsuki was still hunched up against the cold.

"...I didn't realize you hated being alone so much, Professor."

"I think it's true that food is more delicious when you eat it with someone else. Oh—Fukamachi! Why don't I treat you to dinner to celebrate finishing your exams? Even if you have hot pot at home, you probably haven't eaten it elsewhere in a long time, huh?"

"You'd do that?"

Talking about eating had made his stomach growl. Unlike a ghost, he lived in reality and needed food. Naoya wanted to eat something that would warm him

up and remind him that he was alive. Plus, it didn't hurt to save some money on groceries and let someone else pay for a meal.

"What do you want to eat, Fukamachi? I'm fine with anything."

"Um, in that case—"

At that moment, Naoya's phone started vibrating in his pocket.

He took it out to find that Nanba had sent him a message on LINE.

"Thanks for earlier today. I found out who sent me the chain letter, so I thought I would let you know."

When he got to that sentence, Naoya got Takatsuki's attention, his feet coming to a halt on their own.

"Professor."

"Hmm? What is it?"

Naoya showed Takatsuki his phone, and the older man stood shoulder to shoulder with him to peer down at the screen.

Nanba's information report continued from there in a series of separate messages.

"It was the kid I'm tutoring. The fourth-grade girl I told you about.

"She saw my face when I got to her house a little while ago and asked what the injuries were from. I told her about the letter, and she started crying and fessed up.

"She said chain letters are popular at her school right now.

"I asked why she gave it to me, and she started crying some more. IDK what to do.

"I guess when she asked me if I had a girlfriend a while back, I shouldn't have said 'obviously.' Looks like I got the chain letter because I broke a fourth grader's heart."

A small pfft burst out of Takatsuki as he read.

"Ah, how cute... Well, given that it was a paper letter with no stamp, instead

of an e-mail, I did consider the possibility that the culprit could be a child. Besides, when we were talking about the letter's sender earlier, Nanba referred to them as 'the kid who sent it to me.'"

"The letter looked like it was written with a ruler probably because the little girl tried to disguise her handwriting—in a pretty childlike way—so Nanba wouldn't recognize it."

Messages from Nanba were still rolling in.

"She thinks she's the reason I got injured, and she feels bad. She's literally crying all over her homework as we speak.

"Just to be safe, I talked to her about some of the stuff Professor Takatsuki said and told her not to do things like that anymore.

"I owe you one, Fukamachi. Professor Takatsuki, too. Seriously, thanks. Is he okay, BTW?"

An anxious-looking emoji arrived next, so Naoya sent Nanba a reply ("He's the picture of good health. Don't sweat it.") to soothe his worries. For the time being, at least, it didn't seem likely that Takatsuki was going to get run over by a car.

Text conversation over, Naoya put away his phone and found Takatsuki looking at him with a rather large smile.

"Nanba's a nice guy."

"...He sure is. Kinda dumb, though."

"You shouldn't talk about friends that way, Fukamachi."

"And I told you: We're not friends."

As the words came out of his mouth, Naoya felt embarrassed, somehow.

Takatsuki was always urging him to make some friends.

People like Naoya and the professor existed with one foot on either side of the line between their world and the next. They needed as many tethers to this realm as they could get just to stay in it. New friends, things they liked, fond memories... Takatsuki had said that to him before. For Naoya, who had avoided letting anyone get too close since gaining his listening ability, that was much more easily said than done.

And yet—if the Naoya of six months ago had come across a morose, apparently cursed Nanba, would he have taken him to see Takatsuki?

That question popped into his mind without warning.

He had a feeling the Naoya of six months ago would have just ignored the situation. He would have thought, *There's no need to fuss over someone to that extent. It's better not to get so involved in someone else's business*. And then he would have walked away, leaving Nanba draped over the desk all alone.

Naoya was aware that, little by little, he was changing.

Something had shifted since he began spending time with Takatsuki. Before, he had spent his time cowering behind the line he drew around himself. But now—Naoya felt like he was walking around just inside the line, thinking it was fine if he just stuck a hand out.

"Oh, darn. Fukamachi, do you mind if I make a quick stop at the office before dinner?"

As they arrived at the station, Takatsuki made a face like he had suddenly remembered something.

"Sure, that's fine. Did you leave something there?"

"No, it's just that I forgot Miss Ruiko said she wanted my advice on part of the paper she's currently working on. If it looks like it'll take a while, I might need to have you wait somewhere else."

"No problem. I mean, we could also go for hot pot another night."

"I'd rather invite Miss Ruiko along so all three of us can eat together!"

They took the train back to campus.

At nighttime, the university grounds were much quieter. Since exams had just ended, everyone had probably rushed off campus like freed zoo animals to go drinking and partying, not a single worry about test results or anything else in their heads.

There were, however, plenty of lights on in the faculty building, regardless of whatever the celebrating students were up to. Takatsuki's office windows were among the illuminated. Ruiko was probably already there, waiting for him.

Just then, Naoya remembered.

Ruiko had said something to him earlier, after his exam. Something about coming to Takatsuki's office that evening.

What had that been about? If she needed the professor's advice about a paper, why would she invite Naoya along, too?

He trailed along after Takatsuki toward the office, puzzling over it.

When they reached their destination, Takatsuki put a hand to the door, and—the moment he opened it, the hallway was filled with a sweet scent and the voices of several excited girls.

"Aaaah! He's here, he's here, finally!"

"Where are the party poppers?! Hurry, hurry!"

"Oh no, I forgot to put the candles on the cake!"

There were five female students inside the office—Ruiko, Yui, and three others Naoya didn't recognize who were probably more of Takatsuki's graduate advisees.

On the table, along with some fried foods, vegetables, and finger sandwiches, was an entire cake piled high with strawberries. The sweet smell that had poured from the room was coming from a pot of chocolate fondue set atop a little electric burner.

Indifferent to Takatsuki and Naoya standing frozen in the doorway, the girls rushed to get into place, each grabbing a party popper and setting them off, more or less in unison, with a bang.

"Surprise, Professor Akira! Happy birthday!"

Little multicolored streamers rained down around Takatsuki's hair and shoulders.

Picking off the stray bits of paper that had landed on him, Naoya looked at the

other man.

"Wh—? Professor! Is today your birthday?!"

"...No, it's tomorrow, actually. Wow, they really caught me off guard..."

Takatsuki spoke in a low voice, genuine shock on his face and strips of paper draped over his head.

Ruiko collected the spent party poppers and responded with no small amount of pride.

"Well, you're turning forty, after all! If you round up to the nearest decade anyway. We grad students had to do something to celebrate, right? So I took the liberty of planning a surprise party, imbued with all our dearest hopes that you stay young and handsome forever. I figured there was no way of hiding it from you on your actual birthday, so I moved it up a day."

Wow, Naoya thought, listening. This guy is going to be thirty-five? I guess he couldn't stay thirty-four forever. Still looks like he's in his twenties, though.

Smiling wryly, Takatsuki set about getting the streamers out of his hair.

"Framing it that way kind of makes me feel like I've suddenly aged twenty years, you know."

"It's fine!" Yui chimed in. "You're going to stay young forever like she said! Even when you're an old man, I can't imagine you looking much different!"

As usual, Yui's straightforward, charming face—currently adorned with a full smile—reminded Naoya somehow of a handcrafted doll. He agreed with her, too; Takatsuki seemed like the type of man to age well.

The graduate student next to Yui tugged a few times on her sleeve.

"Hey, don't tell me that's him?"

"Ah yes, you're right! This is Dog Boy, formerly known as Buddha Boy!"

"It's Fukamachi, actually!"

Naoya hurried to correct Yui's statement. The graduate students he hadn't met yet had apparently bestowed some strange nicknames on him without his knowledge.

Takatsuki looked down at Naoya.

"...I'm sorry, Fukamachi. Would it be okay if we had hot pot another time?"

"Of course. After all, this kind of party can't be held without the guest of honor."

"Why not stay and eat with us, since you're already here? There are savory foods."

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"It's okay; I'm..."
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Just as Naoya was about to say "going home," hands wrapped firmly around his arms from both sides.

It was Yui and the girl who had been standing next to her.

"Take a seat, Dog Boy!"

"That's right, sit, sit! Seniors' orders, Dog Boy!"

"Huh...? Whoa!"

The two girls forced Naoya into a folding chair using their iron grips, then immediately took the seats to his left and right as if blocking his escape routes. In another moment, someone put a paper plate loaded with fried chicken and vegetables in front of him, along with a disposable cup of oolong tea. He supposed that, because they were in a school building, it made sense that the girls hadn't bought alcohol for the party.

Surrounded by boisterous graduate students and pressed into taking part in the celebration, Naoya stared down at his paper cup, his nerves on edge.

Takatsuki had said once that his advisees were starving to dote on younger male students, since almost every person who joined his seminar was a girl. Consequently, every time Naoya encountered one of them in the office, he was smothered in attention.

But Naoya wasn't very good with crowded places. He didn't have the self-assurance to match the girls' enthusiasm, either. Feeling guilty about it, Naoya decided he would slip out at the first chance he got.

Perhaps his train of thought was showing on his face, because Ruiko looked

apologetic when she caught his eye.

"I'm sorry, Fukamachi. You hate sweets, don't you? The room smells like chocolate, so maybe it would be better if we got some air circulating in here."

Apparently, Ruiko thought Naoya seemed ready to perish on the spot because of the cloying scent engulfing the office. She walked over to the window.

As soon as she opened it, a surprisingly strong gust of wind rushed into the room with a *whoosh*.

"Fek!"

"Hey, Ruiko, close the window! It's too much!"

"Oh no! Something went flying!"

The powerful, storm-like winds tore through the office for a moment before Ruiko slammed the window shut. In the chaos, Naoya saw something get blown off the bookshelf.

Ah.

The paper dolls.

The ones Takatsuki had lined up along the shelf before leaving the office earlier. They fluttered through the air, colorful origami bodies dancing as they fell...

...and landing, of all places, right in the chocolate fondue pot.

"Oh no! The dolls got fondued!"

"Professor Akira, what were the dolls for? Did you use them in a lecture?"

Yui picked the little paper men—all a uniform brown now—out of the pot with disposable chopsticks. They would have to be thrown away. The melted chocolate was an unfortunate place to have landed.

...Unlucky.

Those were the paper dolls who had taken on Nanba's curse for him.

A strange chill ran down Naoya's spine as he sneaked a glance at Takatsuki.

Seated at the head of the table, Takatsuki didn't appear particularly affected

by what had just happened.

"No, they weren't for class. I was planning on leaving them out another three days, but since they've already served their purpose, we might as well toss them."

"Roger!"

Yui threw the bedraggled dolls into a garbage bag. They were just ordinary origami, after all. The purification rite Takatsuki had performed was more for psychological purposes than anything, so it wasn't like the dolls had any supernatural significance. At least, that's what Naoya tried to tell himself.

And yet...

He couldn't shake the cold, unpleasant feeling crawling over his back.

"Oh yeah, Professor! Are you busy next week?"

Having returned to her own seat, Ruiko looked at Takatsuki.

"Hmm? No, I'm not... Why?"

"Would you like to come stay at my parents' bed-and-breakfast?"

Ruiko grabbed a large knife and started slicing up the cake.

"It's out in Yamanashi. I guess they just had a pretty big cancellation, so there are a lot of vacancies. My mom contacted me yesterday and said if I invited some friends out to stay there, she'd give them the family discount. But no one can make it, so I thought I'd ask you. Our bed-and-breakfast has a hot spring, and the food is really good! My mom is the chef, but her cooking has been featured in some local papers multiple times! People who own vacation homes nearby and aren't even staying at our place come just to eat there!"

"That sounds great. Good food and hot springs... I bet KenKen would love it, too. He could drive us if he can get the time off, so I'll ask him."

Taking out his phone, Takatsuki fired off a message to Sasakura.

"Oh, he responded already; that was fast. I wonder if he's free right now. I'll just give him a quick call, then."

Takatsuki put the phone to his ear. It seemed all the other graduate students

were also very familiar with who Sasakura was, and they just smiled while the professor made his phone call.

"Hello, KenKen? Are you done with work for the day? Is now a good time...? What do you mean? What did you do...? —What?"

Suddenly, Takatsuki's face stiffened.

"...Which hospital?"

At those words, everyone else in the room turned to look at the professor in surprise.

Phone still pressed to his ear, Takatsuki stood up. He grabbed his coat off the back of his chair and threw it on. After exchanging a few more words, he ended the call.

"I'm sorry, everyone. I have to go."

Takatsuki looked around at all of them as he apologized, his features still a bit strained.

Yui was the one to ask.

"Did something happen?"

"Yes. I really am sorry; I know you went to all this trouble for me. But I need to get to the hospital."

"The hospital...?"

"...It seems that Kenji has been stabbed."

With that, Takatsuki picked up his bag and walked out.

There wasn't a single person in the office who could have stopped him from leaving.



## Chapter 2:

## The House that Enshrined a Demon

A week passed.

Naoya was sitting in the backseat of a car along with the bag he had packed with changes of clothes and so on.

The car's heating worked well, making it a bit stuffy inside. Naoya took off his scarf and gloves and sat back as the vehicle continued smoothly down the highway.

"Miss Ruiko told me her parents are both from Tokyo, but three years ago, they decided to quit their regular jobs, buy an old property in Yamanashi, and turn it into a bed-and-breakfast! I guess they won some money on a lottery ticket, and that kicked things off. Isn't that amazing? Miss Ruiko has been there helping out since last weekend, so we'll get to see her once we're there."

Looking back over his shoulder from the front seat, Takatsuki spoke with enthusiasm.

The car was headed for the bed-and-breakfast that Ruiko's parents owned.

Two days prior, Naoya had gotten a call from Takatsuki, asking if he wanted to come along.

"Miss Ruiko said there's a cave dedicated to a demon nearby. She's been there once and thought it had a great atmosphere. I definitely want to take the chance to check it out. Why don't you join me, Fukamachi? It'll be a three-day, two-night stay, and we'll have a lot of fun! I'm excited to try Miss Ruiko's

mother's cooking, too."

Takatsuki's invitations were always accompanied by assertions like "It'll be fun."

Perhaps he was just trying to lure Naoya into making some happy memories, like he was constantly talking about. But even if that was the case, it was hard not to be drawn in when the invitation was delivered in such a genuinely happy voice. Besides, Naoya didn't have any particular plans for his long spring break, so the thought of hot springs and good food was appealing, too.

The last time Naoya had seen Takatsuki, a week ago, the older man had been hurrying out of his office.

Naoya had been worried about the injured Sasakura—and about Takatsuki, whose face had been drawn and anxious as he left for the hospital that day—but the professor didn't touch on the topic at all over the phone. Too shy to bring it up himself, Naoya had merely agreed to go on the trip before ending the call.

And now they were Yamanashi-bound. Naoya had been picked up on the drive out of town, just like when they visited Okutama.

"It looks like Lake Yamanaka is nearby, so why don't we make a little stop there before the bed-and-breakfast? We could have *houtou* for lunch while we're at it."

"Houtou, huh? Now that you mention it, I've never had it. It's like flat udon, right?"

"Yep. It's flavored with miso, and they put lots of veggies in. It's delicious; plus, it'll warm us right up. Oh, but I'm wearing a white sweater today... I wonder if the broth will splatter. Maybe it'll be fine if I'm careful. Hey, Fukamachi, do you like houtou? Have you tried it before?"

"I haven't. But, um..."

Naoya leaned forward a little to speak to the two men sitting in the front seats, casually talking about *houtou*.

"Why is the person who got stabbed last week driving as if nothing

happened?"

Takatsuki turned to look at him. At the wheel, Sasakura merely glanced at Naoya in the rearview mirror. His gaze was, as ever, so intense that it made Naoya worry for a moment that he shouldn't have said anything. Sasakura's usual all-black attire, this time including a black down jacket and black sweater, only exacerbated his frightening aura.

"...I didn't get stabbed. I was cut."

Sasakura's voice was subdued.

At first glance, he looked like the type of guy to be involved with the mob or some other unsavory business. In truth, Sasakura was a detective with the First Investigative Division of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department.

He explained that, while working a case the week before, he had happened to stumble upon the culprit. Worrying that the perp would escape if he waited for backup, Sasakura had moved to apprehend the guy by himself, but the man had been carrying a carving knife and managed to leave a slice in Sasakura's left thigh. Takatsuki had called him just as the hospital staff had finished treating the wound.

"This guy's just too melodramatic. I was talking to him on the phone, no problem, so he had to know I was fine, but then he has the nerve to show up all beside himself."

"How could I not panic when you say something like 'I'm at the hospital right now because I got attacked with a carving knife'?! It's not exactly an everyday occurrence, is it?!"

Takatsuki snapped back in indignation at Sasakura's statement, and for once, Naoya was inclined to agree with him. Sasakura should have been more careful with his wording.

"You know, Fukamachi, even if that's how this guy feels, it was a pretty violent scene, according to his colleague. When he rushed in to assist, he found KenKen pinning the culprit to the floor in a rage, surrounded by a puddle of blood. The guy was almost in tears, face smushed into the ground, a bloody kitchen knife stabbed into the floor less than an inch away from his nose. The

other detective said from an outside perspective KenKen looked like a ruthless psychopath who had only half finished his attack."

"That sounds like a recipe for trauma. And 'a puddle of blood'? Doesn't that mean it was a pretty serious injury?! Are you really okay to drive?"

"It's on my left leg; it doesn't affect my driving. Plus, I got my stitches out yesterday, and the doctor even cleared me to take a bath."

"You recover fast, huh ...?"

"Guess I'm just built different... Anyway, my boss put me on desk duty, said I couldn't go back to the field until I was healed. But I have a bunch of vacation days saved up, and I'd have more fun if I went on a trip instead."

"You guys both just live to have fun, don't you?"

"That a problem? You should try it sometime."

"Sure. I'll do my best."

Takatsuki and Sasakura were totally different in both appearance and personality, but this one aspect, at least, they had in common. Apparently they had been friends since they were children because they lived in the same neighborhood, and maybe that was the reason they were still close as adults. In preparation for driving out to the snowy countryside, Sasakura had evidently even taken the trouble of putting snow tires on his car. He clearly intended to enjoy his vacation.

"Well, you should take it easy anyway, KenKen, since you're injured. I can drive if you get tired. I remembered to bring my license and everything!"

Takatsuki smiled brightly.

Naoya had a feeling, however, that Sasakura had little intention of letting his friend take the wheel.

The professor claimed to be a good driver, but if a bird ever flew by the windshield while he was driving, the chances of a major accident occurring were pretty high. After all, he was so terrified of birds that they made him faint. As someone who had watched Takatsuki pass out several times already, Naoya thought it was for the best if he didn't operate a vehicle anytime soon.

Traffic was light on the highway, and they made good time. They hadn't gotten any snow in Tokyo proper, but before Naoya knew it, the landscape he could see through the car windows was just a blanket of white. The sight made the fact that he was going on a trip more real, somehow. The weather was fine, and when Takatsuki looked out the window and smiled, he declared it was a "perfect day to be traveling."

They arrived at Lake Yamanaka in the early afternoon and had lunch there. Naoya and Sasakura watched attentively as Takatsuki—in his fluffy white sweater—tried to eat *houtou* without getting any on himself (which he succeeded in). Once they were full, they decided to take a short walk along the lakeside. There were piles of snow everywhere, but the areas where tourists walked around had been shoveled. Sasakura seemed to be walking with a slight limp; he moved slower than usual, but it didn't seem to hinder him otherwise.

On the other side of the lake, Mt. Fuji stood covered entirely in snow and was positively stunning. Parts of the lake were said to freeze in the winter, but as far as they could see that day, the surface remained unencumbered by ice, and the sun's rays sparkled brilliantly as they bounced off the distant shore. The bonerattling wind coming from across the water was cold enough to numb their fingers even through their gloves, but it was also so crisp that it seemed like something entirely unlike what they experienced in the city. With every breath, Naoya felt the staleness in his lungs being replaced with air that was clean and fresh.

After they more or less finished all the sightseeing they could do and were discussing whether it was time to head to the bed-and-breakfast, Takatsuki turned his attention to the gift shops lining the roadside.

"Ah, sorry, could I take a quick look at the souvenirs? I want to get some for the other faculty and members of the registrar's office, and I thought it might be easier to buy them now."

"Yeah, I should probably get some, too."

Adults had to be mindful of their workplace relationships, apparently.

Unsurprisingly for Yamanashi shops, *shingen* mochi—a treat made by a local manufacturer—was the predominant item available for purchase. Other

traditional Japanese snacks and packaged *houtou* took up much of the remaining shelf space. Naoya went with the two older men to browse the storefronts. He didn't have anyone in particular to give souvenirs to, but he thought he might find something for himself.

There, all at once, Naoya realized he was having a nice time.

Perhaps because the three of them had traveled together before, he found it easy to spend time with Takatsuki and Sasakura. They both knew about Naoya's circumstances, and neither of them told lies. Despite the considerable age gap between them, they didn't really make Naoya feel like a burdensome little kid or a third wheel, and he was grateful for that.

After Naoya's hearing changed, even vacations with his family became a bit uncomfortable. Outside of school field trips, he had never traveled somewhere for fun with friends his own age. More to the point, he didn't have any friends he knew well enough to take a trip with.

... Was it really okay for him to be having this much fun?

An abrupt, chilling unease gripped Naoya's chest, making him shudder.

You will be lonely. That's what was said to him the night he gained his ability.

The words were a judgment, and the ability was his punishment.

For the crime of participating in that forbidden festival, he was sentenced to live out the rest of his days all alone. That's how Naoya saw it.

And yet he wasn't alone right now. He was spending time with others, and he was enjoying it.

But...was he allowed to have fun like this?

Would he be forgiven, even though he was sentenced to loneliness?

"That's enough! I told you: I'm not buying it today! We're going home!"

The sudden sounds of an angry voice and a crying child snapped Naoya out of his thoughts.

He looked to the next shop over, where a young child seemed to be throwing a tantrum over a toy. The little one's mother looked furious and was trying to

drag her child away by the hand, only to be foiled by small, stubborn feet digging into the floor.

"No, nooo! I want it, I want it!"

"Fine, okay! I'll buy it for you next time!"

As the mother crouched in front of the child, attempting to negotiate, her voice cracked and warped.

"You can have it the next time we're here, okay?! So let's go!"

"No, you're lying! You're lying, I don't believe you!"

"Good grief! It's not a lie! I'm telling you: I'll buy it for you next time!"

"No, you're lying! Noooo, I want it now!"

The child was bawling in earnest. In his head, Naoya told the child, *You're right. She is lying.* 

Suddenly, Naoya started to notice the people around him. The gift shops were pretty busy, despite the cold. There was a man and a woman who seemed to be a couple— "When are we going to go to that restaurant we talked about?" "Oh, right, that place. I tried calling, but I guess they're all booked up. We probably won't be able to go anytime soon." A father and his kids— "Dad, Mom is looking for you!" "Give me a minute; tell her I'll be there after I take this work call." A man dressed in typical office attire talking on his phone— "Yes, they were actually quite understanding, but as for the ordering period—"

Once he was conscious of all the chatter, it was too late. Naoya became hyperaware of each and every voice, which he had apparently been able to filter out naturally up until that moment.

He fumbled in his pockets for his headphones but came up empty; his MP3 player was probably in the car. Desperate, Naoya covered his ears with his hands, but that wasn't enough to block out the noise. Someone walked by just behind him, speaking in a voice like the horrible racket of an unskilled theremin player. Naoya stared at the floor, anxious to keep the awful chills washing over him at bay.

This was surely, as Naoya had feared, the world trying to lock him out. It was

right there in his ears, screaming at him: You don't belong here. You aren't worthy of being here. You should have stayed cowering inside your little walls, all alone. When he was with Takatsuki and Sasakura, he tended to forget that this was how the world worked for him.

Somehow, Naoya managed to drag his gaze up to search for Takatsuki and Sasakura. They had wandered farther into the store without his noticing and seemed to be chatting about something as they perused the souvenir-stocked shelves. *I have to get over to them, now,* Naoya thought, but as if they had been tied down, his feet wouldn't move.

Then—

Out of nowhere, someone yanked on Naoya's scarf from behind.

The fabric encircling his neck tightened, and his breath stuttered in his throat. Naoya grabbed his scarf in a panic and held on, trying to keep it from digging any harder into his windpipe. A hand clamped down on his shoulder next, accompanied by a voice in his ear that reeked of tobacco.

"Yo, kiddo. Long time no see."

The whispered greeting only made Naoya more confused.

His arm was forced behind his back and held there firmly. Whoever was grabbing at him used that arm to steer Naoya into a shadowy section of the shop, sandwiched between a shelf and the wall.

"Hey! Wh—?! Let me go...!"

"Oh-ho? Don't tell me you forgot about me... That stings, y'know? I remember you *real* well, Seiwa University student Naoya Fukamachi."

"Huh...?"

Pressed up against the wall, Naoya managed to get a look at his captor.

He was a man, face partially obscured behind sunglasses, who appeared to be in his late thirties. He had curly, disheveled hair and an obvious five o'clock shadow. He looked down with his pointed chin jutting out, and Naoya felt like he had seen that face before.

With a sneer that made his already downturned eyes seem to droop even

more, the man raised his sunglasses.

"How d'you do? It's me, linuma, freelance journalist."

Realization hit Naoya when the man said his own name.

Iinuma was a gossip mag reporter Naoya had had run-ins with before. When Takatsuki had gone to investigate some ghostly activity at the request of a famous actress, Iinuma had taken pictures of the professor and the actress together without their permission.

"What are you doing here...? You're not still investigating the professor, are you?"

After his photo and corresponding article about Takatsuki and the actress was crushed, linuma had taken an interest in Takatsuki. He had looked into Takatsuki's past, including the *kamikakushi* incident, and even approached Naoya hoping to get more material.

But Iinuma shook his head nonchalantly at the question.

"Nah, it's not like I have *that* much free time. I'm here for another story. There's an actor and a fresh-faced little anchorwoman having an affair in a villa around here, so I just came to get some pictures. Thought I would make a visit to the hot springs before going home, since I'm done with work, but who did I just so happen to see? You and that professor. Felt like this must be fate—or my journalist's intuition at work."

Blabbering on and on about things Naoya hadn't even asked about, linuma lifted the large camera hanging around his neck.

"...So listen. What's the deal with that professor?"

He stuck the camera out in front of Naoya with the screen facing him.

One of linuma's photos was on the screen. It was one taken from behind: of Naoya, Takatsuki, and Sasakura walking around. He must have been snapping pictures in secret while the three of them had been strolling along Lake Yamanaka.

"I used a telephoto lens for this, y'know... So why was that guy looking right at me? He spotted me right away and kept glaring at me. It freaked me out." linuma tapped a button on the camera, cycling through pictures that had likely been taken in succession like a little frame-by-frame playback. With the press of a button, the Takatsuki in the first photograph went from having his back toward the camera to turning and staring straight at it, gaze sharp. Come to think of it, Naoya remembered that once or twice while they were sightseeing, Takatsuki seemed to be preoccupied with something behind them.

"See? Look at this—I told you, his eyes are blue. I'd really like to know what that guy's deal is."

In the picture linuma pointed out, Takatsuki's eyes were a deep indigo.

His interest piqued once he noticed that the professor's eyes occasionally changed color like that, linuma had been poking around in Takatsuki's business.

"Listen, kid, you wanna reconsider passing information along to me?"

linuma spoke in a raspy voice, peering at Naoya.

"I've been doing a lot of research on him since last time, and it seems like there's some fascinating stuff to be found. I think it would make a great story if it was handled by a professional. I'll pay you. Whaddaya say?"

"Not a chance. Please let go of me."

"You're as cold as ever, kiddo. But are you sure it's a good idea to turn me down? You know, *I have some dirt on you, too.*"

linuma's voice distorted.

Naoya grimaced.

"What's the point in threatening me when you don't actually have anything to back it up?"

"Oh? And what makes you so sure of that? There's nobody more honest than me. Well, I guess if you don't care, I'll just tell all your little friends what I know."

The roiling pitch of linuma's voice was sickening. It was like the man's filthy hands were riffling sloppily through his brain. Pressed against the wall, Naoya struggled to take even breaths. He lifted his aching, heavy head with all the strength he could muster and glared at linuma.

"...Shut up... You're so annoying... You liar..."

"No one ever taught you not to speak to your elders like that, huh?! Is this what college kids are like these—? Yeow!"

Iinuma let out a sudden yelp.

In the same moment, the hand holding Naoya in place disappeared.

"What exactly did you think you were doing with my assistant just now?"

The sound of that familiar, clear voice made Naoya gasp.

It was Takatsuki.

When had he shown up? He had linuma's arm twisted behind his back and didn't seem to be using much force to keep it there, but the other man was making a point to complain about it quite loudly.

"Ow! Ow, it hurts! What are you doing?! You're gonna break my arm! Someone, help! I'm being attacked!"

"Police. What's going on here?"

Sasakura appeared, looming over Takatsuki's shoulder.

linuma continued to yell, his arm still in the professor's grasp.

"Oh, officer! You're just in time! This man was assaulting that boy, so I tried to stop him! I think he even secretly filmed him. The proof is on that camera."

"Oh, a voyeur, huh? Let me take a look."

Sasakura reached for the camera hanging from linuma's neck.

"W-wait a sec! Are you really a detective?! Wait, I'm sorry! I said I'm sorry, so let me go already!"

The moment Takatsuki's grip loosened, linuma darted away, cradling his injured arm.

While the other tourists looked around to see what the fuss was all about, Takatsuki and Sasakura both turned to peer into Naoya's face, their interest in linuma's whereabouts already used up, it seemed.

"Are you okay, Fukamachi?"

"Hey, Fukamachi, was that him? The journalist you mentioned before?"
"I..."

Naoya looked up at the two of them. His knees trembled, and when it looked like he was about to sink to the floor, they moved to support him on either side.

Takatsuki's voice was full of regret.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize you got separated from us at first. And I never imagined you'd be getting harassed by some creep."

"Oh... No, it's my fault. I got distracted..."

The hands holding him up were big and reliable, and listening to undistorted voices made him feel like he could relax.

And even more than that was the overwhelming sense of relief—like a knot in his chest had come loose. Naoya gave a great, shuddering sigh. Just minutes ago, breathing had been so difficult. Now it was so easy it seemed unbelievable.

Urging his shaking legs to hold him upright, Naoya stood on his own and bowed his head slightly to Takatsuki and Sasakura.

"I apologize. I'm okay now. It seems like that guy saw us here by chance and was following us. I guess he tried talking to me because we had spoken before."

"You look pale. Did he do something to you?"

Naoya shook his head at Sasakura's question.

"I'm fine. But I think he's digging into the professor's background again."

"...Damn. Shouldn't have let him run off, after all."

Sasakura turned to look in the direction linuma had run, his already fierce-looking features twisting into an even more vicious expression.

Squinting a bit, Takatsuki stared off that way, too.

"It's all right. He's gone. Let's come up with a plan for the next time he comes around."

"Good idea. Anyway—for now, we should get to the inn. I want this kid to lie down. Come on, let's go."

As he spoke, Sasakura grabbed Naoya by the base of the neck. He started toward where the car was parked, dragging Naoya along with a firm grip... Naoya, as usual, wished Sasakura would stop escorting him like a criminal every time he led the way somewhere.

Ruiko's parents' bed-and-breakfast was an elegant, Western-style building situated in the woods.

The sun had already set by the time they arrived, but the warm glow of the building's lights helped it stand out from its surroundings. Flowerpots arranged here and there on the property housed violets, pansies, ornamental kale, and other vivid winter blooms.

Inside the front door was a considerable lobby, furnished with upholstered couches and a table. Directly across from the entrance was a large wooden reception counter. A well-built middle-aged man standing behind it looked up at them and smiled.

"Ah, are you Professor Takatsuki, by any chance?"

"Yes, I'm Takatsuki from Seiwa University. Thank you for your hospitality. Your inn is lovely."

"Thank you very much. And I'm the one who should be thanking you for always looking after our daughter."

Speaking in a calm, deep voice, Ruiko's father bowed his head.

At that moment, Ruiko—dressed in an apron with her long hair tied back—appeared from out of a corridor to the right of the counter.

"Ah! Professor Akira, Fukamachi, Mr. Sasakura, welcome! Let me show you to your room!"

Guided by Ruiko, they took the staircase to the left of reception to the second floor.

She led them to a spacious room usually meant for families. Like the one they stayed at in Okutama, it was a blend of Japanese and Western styles, with two beds and a section of tatami flooring large enough for a futon. There was also a small bathroom. Naoya put down his bag on the tatami mats right away,

figuring that once again he would be the one taking the futon. Whether it was rock-paper-scissors or anything else, he doubted he would beat Takatsuki and Sasakura.

"Dinner is in about thirty minutes. If you go down the hallway next to reception, the dining room is on the left. The hot springs are opposite that. Relax and enjoy yourselves, okay?"

"Thank you, Miss Ruiko. Does your family run this place by themselves?"

"Oh, no, that would be impossible. They have employees. Since I only come back to help out a little during long vacations, my parents are always calling me an ungrateful daughter and so on. By the way, I made tonight's predinner appetizer, so I hope you like it!"

With that, Ruiko bustled out of the room, as she apparently still had work to do.

Half an hour later, the three of them made their way to the dining room, where two other groups of customers were already seated. The tables were covered in white tablecloths and adorned with small candles. Takatsuki and Sasakura ordered a bottle of red wine from the list Ruiko brought to them. Sasakura shoved the nonalcoholic drinks menu at Naoya, apparently having no intention of letting him get away with underage drinking, but Naoya just asked for water.

Dinner was a multicourse Italian affair. Ruiko's appetizer turned out to be a serving platter of small, assorted dishes, from liver pâté to marinated vegetables. It was so splendidly arranged it reminded Naoya of a tray of patisserie sweets.

"Whoa, you really made this, Miss Ruiko?"

"Don't look so surprised, Fukamachi!" Ruiko replied, setting plates out for each of them.

"No, I just meant it looks like something you'd get from a professional chef... It kind of caught me off guard."

"That's because my mom taught me to cook. She used to be a chef. Even after she got married, she taught cooking classes. Thanks to her, I can at least have confidence in making food."

Ruiko puffed up with pride. Naoya remembered her mentioning that the cake at Takatsuki's birthday party wasn't store-bought, but rather another dish she was responsible for. His first impression of Ruiko—lying face down on the ground in Takatsuki's office with impressions from the floorboard seams clear across her cheeks—was so strong, Naoya never expected her to have a special skill like cooking.

Naoya took a bite of the appetizer—it tasted as good as it looked. He wasn't the type to obsess much over food, but nonetheless, he could appreciate being served a delicious meal. Honestly, Naoya was glad he came on the trip after all. Takatsuki and Sasakura had cleared their appetizers already, and they, too, looked content as they sipped their wine.

The next course was pasta: Dishes of penne topped with bright-red sauce were brought to their table. *This looks delicious, too,* Naoya thought, picking up his fork.

At that moment, Ruiko's father walked into the dining room, new customers in tow.

"Please sit here. Your food will be out shortly."

"We're so sorry we were late."

Bed-and-breakfasts like this one typically had fixed mealtimes, but Ruiko's father led the guests to their table with a gentle smile as if he wasn't bothered in the slightest. Despite the moderate distance between their tables, Naoya could hear what the new guests were saying.

"My husband tried to hurry me along, but I was late getting ready, you see. But these days, whenever we come to stay at the villa, I always make it a rule to eat here at least once. The food is so delicious."

"We're very grateful for your repeated patronage, Mrs. Kirishima."

Ruiko's father bowed politely to the table before heading in the direction of the kitchen. It seemed the new customers owned a vacation home nearby and had only come for the food. Naoya sneaked a look at them. There was a broadshouldered man and a plump woman, both getting on in years, who seemed to be a couple.

Takatsuki also glanced over, but the moment he got a look at them, his eyes widened and he turned his face away.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Sasakura asked.

Keeping his face hidden, Takatsuki answered in a low voice.

"...Sorry, KenKen, but would you swap seats with me?"

Sasakura frowned but immediately did as Takatsuki asked.

Newly seated with his back to the older couple, the professor let out a small sigh.

Sasakura spoke up again.

"You know those people?"

"Yeah, the woman... She used to visit my mother's place a lot."

Hearing that, Naoya's gaze inadvertently strayed toward the couple again. They were busy perusing the wine menu, apparently oblivious to anyone else's attentions.

Takatsuki had told Naoya once that after he came back from wherever he had disappeared to, his mother had dubbed him the *Tengu*'s Child and essentially deified him. His mother's father was the president of a massive corporation, and someday that title would be passed to her own husband. She was always surrounded by the wives of company executives and business partners, and evidently, she had wanted to spread belief in the *Tengu*'s Child to those women as well.

The older lady sitting across the dining room from them at that moment had known Takatsuki when he was the *Tengu*'s Child.

"Ugh, what terrible luck... I didn't expect to run into an old acquaintance in a place like this."

Takatsuki grimaced.

"You sure it's the same person? It's been, what? More than twenty years since you last met? Could be somebody else."

"You should know I never misidentify people, KenKen. I remember her name, too—Mrs. Ayako Kirishima. That woman, she's probably gained around forty pounds over the years, but her face hasn't changed much... The problem is, neither has mine."

"That's true."

Sasakura nodded. In other words, there was a chance the woman would recognize Takatsuki, too.

"Well, I suppose it doesn't really matter if she sees me. Still, I'd rather not run into old acquaintances."

For once, Takatsuki looked disheartened.

"Right now, just focus on eating your pasta before it gets cold. That couple isn't staying here. Once they leave, you probably won't see her again."

"That's right. And I'll give you my dessert when it comes out, so please cheer up."

"...Thank you both. But, Fukamachi, that kind of encouragement is a bit..."

"You will eat it, though, won't you, Professor?"

"Of course, if you're going to give it to me, I'll gladly eat it, but... I'm your teacher, and I'm older than you..."

Fork in hand, Takatsuki started stirring up his penne, grumbling under his breath. Naoya thought he had some nerve acting all mature when all it took was sweets to cheer him up. Besides, it wasn't like Naoya had another way to make Takatsuki smile.

Even with the slight damper on the mood, all the food was delicious. Naoya felt that both the pasta and the main course—roast pork—were better than he could have gotten at any nearby restaurant. When he passed the gelato he was given for dessert to Takatsuki, the professor accepted it with a radiant smile and his thanks. Making him happy really did require no more than a sugary treat.

Coffee was served after the food was cleared away.

A woman wearing a chef's uniform emerged from the kitchen along with

Ruiko. The two of them looked so alike that Naoya knew instantly that the woman was Ruiko's mother.

Coming over to Takatsuki's side, Ruiko's mother gave a polite bow of her head.

"Thank you for always looking after my daughter, Professor Takatsuki. And for coming all this way. Was today's meal to your liking?"

"Indeed, everything was absolutely splendid. I expected no less."

Ruiko's mother turned lightly pink in the face of Takatsuki's bright smile.

"I'm so glad you enjoyed it... Professor, my daughter doesn't cause you any trouble, does she? She's so disorganized, you know. I worry about her, as her parent."

"Not at all. Miss Ruiko is a very good, helpful, attentive student. She's quite enthusiastic about research, too. She does occasionally fall asleep on my office floor or leave books lying around everywhere, but I can tolerate that much."

"Professor Akira!"

Ruiko interjected, eager to stop the grinning professor from continuing to describe her behavior at school.

Her mother gazed earnestly into Takatsuki's eyes.

"At any rate, Professor, I had heard as much from Ruiko, but you really are quite young and handsome, aren't you...? Perhaps, if you wouldn't mind, would you consider marrying our daughter? Ever since she was young, she's only ever been interested in ghost stories and demons, and even now that she's grown, I've never once heard her talk about romance. When she was a child, you know, she always used to tell me, 'I'm going to marry *GeGeGe no Kitaro*!'"

"Mo-oom, stop talking nonsense!"

That time, Ruiko interrupted her mother, who chuckled and said, "Though, if she actually had brought Kitaro home to her family, I would have accepted it in the end."

Hold on, you'd accept it? Naoya thought. This was Ruiko's mother, after all. Well, what mattered most was that her family seemed to get along well.

... This could be bad, though, Naoya thought, casually glancing around.

Just as he feared, all the other patrons were looking their way. It made sense. The chef coming out of the kitchen with her daughter to greet a customer would get people's attention.

That Kirishima woman had also turned toward them in interest. She was murmuring something to her husband and taking the occasional sip of wine. From where she was seated, she wouldn't be able to see Takatsuki's face, but there were other potential risks. After all, his name had come up during the conversation. Peeking quickly at the professor, Naoya got the impression that, even though he was smiling as he responded to Ruiko's mother, he was also keenly aware of Mrs. Kirishima's attention.

Nevertheless, once the meal was over, Mrs. Kirishima and her husband would return to their villa. If they stayed a little while at their own table after the older couple vacated theirs, they could avoid a run-in.

That was the plan, at least. But...their hopes were too high.

"You there! Could I have a moment?"

The three of them watched the couple leave their table and waited a short while before doing the same. Despite that, the moment they set foot in the lobby on the way back to their room, a woman who had clearly been watching for them stood up from one of the couches.

It was Mrs. Kirishima. She hurried over to them with a smile, her plump form swaying slightly with the movement. Takatsuki's shoulders jolted minutely, and Sasakura stepped out in front of him like a shield. Unfazed, Mrs. Kirishima simply veered around him and stared up into Takatsuki's face.

"My, my, what have we here? I thought it was you—Tengu-sama!"

At that, Takatsuki's whole body stiffened so clearly that, even standing beside him, Naoya could tell.

Sasakura looked down at Mrs. Kirishima with disgust.

"Excuse me, but that's not his—"

"Ah yes, I'm sorry. What was it again...? Right. Akira, isn't it? I heard your

name during dinner just now, and it brought back such fond memories! My, look how you've grown... Oh, you probably don't remember me anymore, do you? We met several times, ages ago, at your mother's tea parties. How is your mother, by the way? I heard she was doing poorly some years back and haven't seen her at all since. I've been quite worried."

Mrs. Kirishima prattled on, unaware of Takatsuki's discomfort. What was worse, in Naoya's opinion, was that she was gazing at the professor like he was a dear old friend, without a scrap of malice in her expression. Even if they wanted to put an abrupt end to the situation, they could hardly push past her—she was just an old lady.

And then...

"Oh, I remember you, Mrs. Kirishima."

...Takatsuki started to speak.

"I remember you *very* well. You had a favorite blue floral dress that you wore often, yes? It suited you. I also remember agreeing to help you find something you'd lost—your wedding ring. You told me you wanted to find it before your husband found out. I offered you a theory as to its whereabouts. 'Is it not in your car?' I said."

A sweet smile spread across Takatsuki's finely shaped mouth.

Still seated on the lobby sofa, Mr. Kirishima looked at his wife with his eyes wide. Flustered, Mrs. Kirishima glanced back at her husband, waving a hand dismissively and saying, "Oh dear, that's not right."

But Takatsuki continued talking as if to deliberately drown out her words.

"I'm glad you found your ring back then. But it wasn't a result of me having clairvoyance or anything like that. I merely happened to see you shortly before that, down the street in your car with a young man. I was a little far away, but I have excellent vision, and I could see that there was no ring on your finger at the time."

Mrs. Kirishima gaped at him, then snapped her mouth shut.

Looking down at her with eyes that flickered with indigo, Takatsuki spoke in a

gentle voice.

"I'm very sorry, but I can't tell you how my mother has been lately. I've cut ties with my parents' house completely, so I haven't even seen her face in years. Now then, if you'll excuse me."

With another broad smile, Takatsuki gave a small, graceful bow to Mrs. Kirishima before heading toward the stairs. Naoya and Sasakura went after him without a word; Mrs. Kirishima did not follow.

Back in their room, Takatsuki made a beeline for the bed, sitting right down on top of the sheets with a *whump* and staring at the floor.

"Hey..."

"What am I supposed to do...when someone asks me about my mother out of the blue?"

Cutting off Sasakura, the professor started talking with his gaze still pointed downward.

"I can't even remember the last time I saw her. After all, I was handed some severance money and told never to darken my parents' doorstep again. It was inevitable, I guess, since it's my fault my mother ended up like that. But..."

Takatsuki, his tone all matter-of-fact until that point, suddenly went quiet.

With a big sigh, he ran a hand through his own hair and glanced up at Sasakura.

"...That was pretty childish of me just now, wasn't it?"

"Who cares? It wasn't that bad."

"Okay," Takatsuki murmured, flopping fully back onto the bed.

He stayed that way for several seconds, silently staring at the ceiling, then snapped back to a seated position to look at Naoya.

"I'm sorry, Fukamachi. That must have been unpleasant for you."

"It wasn't... Not really..."

Feeling awkward, Naoya shook his head.

He was roughly aware of the effect the professor's *kamikakushi* incident had on the Takatsuki family's state of affairs. He knew Takatsuki's refusal to be the *Tengu*'s Child led to his mother having a total breakdown, and that his father, unable to stand it, had sent Takatsuki overseas for a time to live with a relative.

But the part about the severance money or whatever it was—Naoya hadn't heard that before.

Takatsuki's smile was bitter.

"...I look like I'm quite rich, don't I? What with the place I live and all that—those are the arrangements my father made for me when I returned to Japan. He said, 'Starting today, your home is here. Nowhere else.' He gave me that and a bankbook with a considerable sum of money recorded in it."

The professor shrugged slightly, his tone casual like the topic was of no importance.

But his father's words—essentially, he had told his son he was no longer welcome in their house.

"You know, I think my family had been rather close, before. But ever since everything that happened—what hope did we have? We'll probably never go back to the way things were. Surprisingly, there may be people from that circle who don't know anything about the state of affairs. People who talk to me as if nothing has changed, just like Mrs. Kirishima... It's really...frustrating."

Once more, Takatsuki hung his head. Naoya realized he could hear every soft breath Takatsuki exhaled trembling a little, and his chest tightened painfully.

"Professor..."

He started to say something but faltered, realizing he had no idea what would be appropriate.

Takatsuki looked up with a somewhat pitiful smile.

"I'm sorry for bringing up something like that. Right—why don't the two of you go to the hot spring? Take advantage of it while you can."

"...Yeah. Maybe now's a good time for a bath."

Sasakura nodded and agreed with Takatsuki, so Naoya grabbed his yukata and

towel.

Takatsuki didn't accompany them to the first-floor bathhouse. Naoya understood why... But still, it made his heart break just a little.

Late that night, something happened.

Naoya woke with a start, feeling like some kind of noise was to blame.

Confused, he turned over in the futon, looking blearily up at the ceiling. He didn't hear anything odd. Checking the wristwatch he wore to bed, he saw it was past two o'clock. No one was awake. Naoya chalked it up to his imagination and tried to go back to sleep.

Then...

"...!"

A faint cry and the thud of a duvet being thrown aside shocked Naoya back to consciousness.

It had come from one of the beds, a short distance from the tatami flooring and futon he was sleeping in. Takatsuki had taken the bed closer to Naoya, and Sasakura's was a little farther away. Naoya turned quietly to look in that direction. The overhead lights were off, but there was just enough of a glow from the still-lit baseboard lights to get a dim view of the room.

He saw Takatsuki, on top of the nearer bed, curled in on himself.

The professor had his back turned to Naoya and both arms wrapped tight around his own torso. He was trembling, his breathing ragged, scoring his long fingers over and over down his *yukata*-clad back, nails digging in. It was like he was checking for something. He sounded utterly petrified.

Just as Naoya was considering waking him, he saw Sasakura rise from the other bed.

"...Hey. Akira."

Grabbing Takatsuki by the shoulder, Sasakura gave him a gentle shake.

Takatsuki's whole body jolted.

"...Ah... Ken...Ken?"

Eyes opening, Takatsuki straightened up. His voice was hoarse.

"Sorry... Did I wake you? I...must have been dreaming..."

"You okay now?" Sasakura asked.

## "...Yeah, I'm okay."

Takatsuki's reply was horribly distorted.

Naoya's breath caught in his throat; it felt like someone was sitting on his chest.

Like he was trying desperately to calm his own breathing, Takatsuki said the words again and again.

"I'm okay. I'm okay, I am. I'm totally fine. I'm all right... I'm not dreaming anymore, so I'm fine."

The more he repeated himself, the less warped Takatsuki's voice became. For some reason, listening to it made Naoya want to cry.

Liar, he thought.

The truth was, Takatsuki wasn't okay in the slightest. He kept saying those words to convince himself, forcing the lie to become reality, the lone competitor in a cruel game. And Naoya knew all about it. He felt ill. He couldn't bear it. He wanted to rip off his own ears and throw them away. That kind of understanding—Naoya didn't want it. Even Takatsuki would never want that.

"Think you can get back to sleep?"

Naoya heard Sasakura ask Takatsuki another question.

The professor answered, his voice free of distortion.

"Yeah. I'm okay. You go back to sleep, too, Kenji. Sorry for waking you... I didn't wake Fukamachi, too, did I?"

Takatsuki looked over his shoulder, and Naoya quickly pretended to be sleeping.

He felt both of their gazes on him for a little while, but before long, it sounded like they were putting Takatsuki's duvet back in place and lying down. Naoya heard the rustle of fabric and the creaking of bed frames.

Not at all tired, Naoya buried himself in the futon and stared into the murky darkness, trying to stifle his shaky breath.

He had heard about Takatsuki's nightmares before.

Dreams in which huge black wings burst through the torn-open skin on his back.

But that was just one of the nightmares the professor had. Whatever he had seen just now wasn't necessarily that.

Regardless, it was probably caused by his running into Mrs. Kirishima after dinner. The name she had called him—*Tengu*-sama—was likely the trigger.

Remembering how Takatsuki's voice had warped minutes ago, Naoya covered his ears and curled into a ball. He squeezed his eyes shut; the urge to cry was so strong.

Naoya had never seen the scars on Takatsuki's back. He knew Takatsuki didn't want anyone—not even Naoya—to see them.

Takatsuki was always smiling. He had his childish moments, but he was still a reliable adult and a strong human being.

And yet, even now, Takatsuki was a prisoner of his past. He was suffering.

There was a month of that past missing from his memory. Years later, Takatsuki still could not recall what had happened during that month. He was living with unknowns—but that meant he was also living with fear. All he could do was guess what he might have experienced in that time. He was looking for an "interpretation" to his own "phenomenon."

So far, though, it seemed that all Takatsuki's guessing had culminated in was nightmares. His mother had imposed on him the vision that he was carried off by tengu and nearly turned into one himself. She believed the skin on his back was ripped away when his wings were taken from him. The other, more realistic theory, as Takatsuki himself had worded it, was that he had been kidnapped by a common pervert, used as a plaything, and eventually had the skin peeled from his back. Either of those options had the chance of being correct, but there was also the possibility of the truth being even more sinister.

At any rate, Takatsuki's nightmare wouldn't end until he found answers.

Perhaps, eventually... Maybe even sometime soon, the day would come when Takatsuki would know the truth and be freed from his past.

Naoya hoped so. And he wished—from the bottom of his heart—that when that day arrived, it would come not with cruelty, but with peace.

"Let's go to that demon cave today!"

It was the next morning.

Takatsuki was beaming across the breakfast table.

"Apparently, it's not on any maps, but Miss Ruiko drew one for us, so we should be fine! I'll leave that to you, if you don't mind!"

As if it was the obvious thing to do, Takatsuki handed the piece of writing paper with the map on it to Naoya.

"...You had no intention of trying to read the map yourself, did you, Professor?"

"Well, there's no way I would be able to find the cave even if I did!"

"It's important to know your own weaknesses, I suppose..."

With Takatsuki smiling as though nothing had happened overnight, Naoya had no choice but to behave as usual. Sasakura's face didn't look any different, either... A furrowed brow and a scary expression were normal for him, after all.

Ruiko had wanted to accompany them to the cave, but she was buying and preparing groceries that day on her mother's orders. The three of them would be checking out the cave alone.

"What's that? You're going to see the cave? It's not all that impressive, you know. It's in the mountains, and there's probably all kinds of snow... Would you like to rent some boots?"

Ruiko's father provided them with snow boots he loaned out to guests who wanted to explore the area on foot. Since there was nowhere to get food near the cave, Ruiko's mother also gave them some homemade sandwiches along with disposable hand warmers. They were very attentive hosts.

It would apparently take thirty minutes to reach the cave by car.

On the way, with Sasakura at the wheel, Takatsuki told them about local folklore.

"There's a famous cave in Otsuki City in Yamanashi Prefecture called Oni no Iwaya. They have a legend about the folk hero Momotaro, too."

"Huh? I thought the Momotaro story was based in Okayama?"

"That's true; nowadays Momotaro is generally associated with Okayama Prefecture, but there are actually many similar tales from all over the country. The story of Momotaro itself is said to have taken its basic form in the oral tradition by the end of the Muromachi period. As publication developed during the Edo period, the story was transcribed and spread. According to the version told in Otsuki City, the peach didn't tumble into the river and float down on the current—it was found in a tree by an old man and an old woman, who brought it home. When they tried to cut into it, they discovered a baby boy inside. Once he was older, Momotaro enlisted a dog, a monkey, and a pheasant as his servants and went to slay the evil demon that lived in Mt. Iwadono. Oni no Iwaya is the specific location where that demon is said to have dwelled."

"So does the cave we're going to have a legend like that?"

"No, according to Miss Ruiko, the story of this cave is that the murderous demon who lived there was slain by villagers. There's a village called Sakai near the cave. Once, when Ruiko was helping out at the bed-and-breakfast, she made friends with a girl from Sakai, and that girl shared the story with her, it seems. Some research didn't turn up tales regarding demons in Sakai, so it's possible this legend is only passed down in that community... Ah, it's so wonderful how many legends and folktales there are yet to discover in this world!"

Looking back over his shoulder at Naoya from the passenger seat, Takatsuki smiled with what appeared to be genuine joy.

Somehow, seeing that made Naoya feel relieved.

The incident from the night before had still been weighing slightly on his mind.

If Takatsuki was fine now—if he had accepted that it was just a bad dream and wasn't letting it plague him through the morning—that was a good thing. The sight of his earnest excitement and twinkling eyes helped Naoya relax as well.

"Hey, look at that."

Sasakura slowed the car a little.

Up ahead on the edge of the road, they could see a group of people walking. There were five, maybe six men, all dressed in winter clothes and each carrying something long and thin. Looking closer, Naoya was startled to realize the objects in their hands were hunting rifles.

"Oh, I wonder if they live around here. Maybe they know about the cave; let's ask."

At Takatsuki's suggestion, Sasakura pulled the car up alongside the men and stopped.

The professor rolled down his window and called out to the group.

"Hello! Are you deer hunting?"

"Yeah. There's tons of 'em around here."

They seemed to be members of a local hunting club. Naoya, who had never seen anything like a rifle outside of TV, stared at them with wide eyes through the window.

Takatsuki continued.

"If we go straight down this road, we'll get to a place called Sakai, right?"

"Yeah, that's right... You all have business in our village or something?"

The men's gazes turned suspicious. Evidently, they were from Sakai.

"Yes. We heard there was a demon cave around there and thought we would go see it while we're in the area. Do you know it?"

"...Where did you hear about that?"

The men were scowling at Takatsuki with increasingly dubious expressions. It was quite a frightening sight, what with the rifles in their hands.

But Takatsuki just smiled as he always did, showing no signs of being perturbed.

"Oh, my apologies. I teach folklore studies at a university. I would love to learn more about the demon cave's story if I could. Is there anyone who's particularly knowledgeable about the legend? If possible, I'd like to interview them."

In response to Takatsuki's smooth, easy tone, the group looked a bit hesitant.

A few of the men took turns giving their input.

"You don't say...? A university professor, huh? To take the trouble to come all the way out here..."

"It's not all that big or deep, even though it's called the demon's cave. There's just a teeny little shrine inside it. Just somethin' kids sneak into on dares and such."

"They say there's a demon's head enshrined in there. Everyone in Sakai grows up hearing about it, but if you want details... Well, your best bet would probably be the Kitou family."

Takatsuki leaned slightly forward out the open window.

"The Kitou family, you say? How is that spelled?"

"With the *ki* character for *demon*, and the *tou* for *head*. Legend has it that a long time ago, when a demon came to the village, the family's ancestors killed it by breaking off its horn and decapitating it. Ever since then, the Kitou family has worshipped the demon shrine."

"They broke the horn when they killed it! How incredible!"

Takatsuki's eyes were alight with excitement. For a place that didn't even attract tourists, the cave seemed to have a surprisingly fleshed-out legend.

"And what sort of household is the Kitou family descended from? Village peacemakers or something similar, perhaps?"

"No, nothing like that. No lofty position. They were moneylenders."

"Ah. Moneylenders?"

"We're talking ages ago. They had the biggest, most expensive house in Sakai. Thanks to that, people from the village still have a chip on their shoulder about it... Old ladies around town used to say, 'Don't go near that house over there, it's full of man-eaters.'"

"Man-eaters?"

Suddenly, the conversation turned quite dark.

Takatsuki looked even more keen.

"I wonder what they meant. Certainly not literal cannibalism, one would think. After all, if that were the case, they wouldn't be a family who worships a demon—they would be demons themselves."

For a moment, Naoya's mind was filled with a scene inspired by Takatsuki's words: images in an old house of a knife-wielding demon who butchered and devoured humans. It was like the legend of the demon woman of Adachigahara.

But the group of hunters just laughed at the professor's musings.

"No, no, can you imagine? People probably just started calling them maneaters 'cause they hounded folks who didn't pay their loans back. They aren't even moneylenders anymore. It's all just old gossip... If you're going to Sakai, you should park your car somewhere on the road just before town. The roads inside are real narrow, so they can be hard to drive on if you're not used to it."

"I see. Thank you for your help."

"Sure thing. Bye now. Hope you don't run into any bears who just woke up from hibernation!"

That parting comment about the bears seemed to be a joke, and the men all roared with laughter as they started walking again. They were a rough-looking bunch, but kind nevertheless.

After driving on a bit farther, the view ahead suddenly opened up to reveal a number of houses clustered together in a valley, forming a little settlement. It had to be Sakai.

According to Ruiko's map, the only way to the demon cave was through the village. Heeding the hunters' advice, they left the car on the main road right

outside town. With every exhaled breath turning into a great plume of white smoke, the three of them gratefully opened the hand warmers they had been given and started walking.

"Do you see the roof on that building over there, Fukamachi? Doesn't it look like it has another roof sticking out of it?"

Takatsuki pointed out someone's house along their trek.

Many of the houses in the area had gabled roofs, probably because of the heavy snowfall. The home Takatsuki was talking about had a roof shaped like an open book but face down, with a smaller, slightly more elevated roof in its center. It wasn't quite tall enough to be a third story, instead giving the impression that it was built as a spacious attic area.

"That style of roof is a holdover from an old silk farm. Silkworms would be kept in the attic, with the roof raised for ventilation and lighting purposes. This used to be a thriving sericulture region."

When Naoya looked around the area, he noticed a good number of houses had such roofs. It was likely that few, if any, of those houses still raised silkworms, but by retaining their original design, the townscape itself seemed to create a link between the past and the present.

At the village edge, they came across a path that continued into the mountains. The demon cave was down that path.

Even with all the snow, a certain amount of people coming and going on foot had compacted the roads to some extent. Still, as expected, mountain paths were difficult terrain, and a moment's distraction could end in being buried past one's ankles in snow. The cold persisted, but the physical demand of walking in unfamiliar conditions helped gradually warm Naoya's whole body.

"Are you okay, KenKen? Don't push yourself if your leg hurts, okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine...," Sasakura muttered, staring at the ground. "Looks like someone came through here before us."

There were fresh footprints in the snow just in front of him.

Takatsuki nodded.

"It looks like they belong to a child. Two... No, three, I think. Maybe they come here to play. Brings back memories, doesn't it, KenKen? We used to play in a mountain like this, too."

A nostalgic smile broke over Takatsuki's face as he spoke.

Naoya cocked his head in confusion.

"Huh? You both grew up in Setagaya, didn't you? Are there mountains around there?"

"Oh, no, it was a mountain by my family's vacation home. We used to go when we were kids during summer breaks. The house was in Karuizawa, totally surrounded by forest. We'd catch bugs from morning till night, pretend we had secret bases, and one time we got lost in the woods and all the adults came looking for us."

"You, getting lost?"

"We were really young then. Oh, that's right! At the time, in the forest, KenKen—"

"Akira. Isn't that it?"

Sasakura interrupted before Takatsuki could finish what he was saying.

A short distance ahead, the path started sloping downward. A shallow stream weaved its way through the snowcapped trees. And beyond that, they could see the rocky gray mountain and an opening in its face that looked like the entrance to a cave.

Just then...

...the sounds of children screaming tore through the air.

Alarm clear on his face, Sasakura sped up the path, Takatsuki and Naoya following behind him.

Three children—two boys and one girl—came dashing out of the cave mouth, nearly falling over themselves in the process. They were somewhere around elementary or middle school age.

"Hey! What happened?!"

The kids had splashed their way across the stream and were rushing in their direction when they caught sight of Sasakura. Their faces and feet both froze. Naoya couldn't blame them. Some middle-aged man they didn't know—one who had a scary face, no less—had called out to them all of a sudden. Takatsuki appeared from behind Sasakura and addressed the children, too.

"What's wrong? We heard a scream; was there a monster?"

When Takatsuki asked them that, stooped forward a little to meet their gazes, the children looked at one another.

Trembling, the little girl opened her mouth.

"...No. It wasn't a monster. It was the demon."

"The demon?"

"Yeah. We found it."

The two boys nodded along to her answer.

The children had come to the cave as a test of courage.

The hunting club had mentioned doing something like that themselves. For the young people of Sakai, the demon cave was probably that type of place—somewhere to sneak off to without telling the adults, somewhere they went when their usual games had gotten boring and they wanted to do something just a little bit scary. It was a special place to play, even to kids who had seen it countless times.

"A few days ago, there was an earthquake. We were talking about how we hoped the cave didn't collapse, so we decided to come look. We thought it would be a good test of courage even though it's winter. So we went in there and saw that the shrine inside was broken, and—"

"And the demon's bones had fallen out! Well, its head anyway!"

"My grandma wasn't lying! She told me 'The skull of a slain demon is in that shrine!' I've never seen anything like that before! It was so cool!"

Brimming with excitement, the two boys chimed in as well.

"A demon skull?" Takatsuki asked. "You saw that?"

"Yeah! It was just like Grandpa said! There was even a mark on its forehead where its horn was broken off!"

At that, Takatsuki's brow furrowed a little.

To the children, he said, "Got it. Now, we three are going to go check it out, so you all should head home. Make sure you keep warm; you don't want to catch a cold."

Takatsuki started walking. Making good use of the snow boots, he stepped right into the stream like the children had. Sasakura and Naoya trailed after him.

On the other side of the water, there was something of a small clearing. With the mountain rising up to fill the entire space behind it, the clearing almost felt like a movie set. The children's snowy footprints, overlapping and in disarray, seemed to be urging them toward the dark, open mouth of the cave.

The entrance was about ten feet wide and six feet high. A thin rope—like the ones strung across Shinto shrines—had been hung at the top of the opening. Strangely, just inside the cave, someone had placed a large rock that was approximately Naoya's size. Though the gaps on either side of the rock were big enough for an adult to fit through, it was impossible to see past the rock into the inner part of the cave itself. It was like someone had obstructed the entrance on purpose.

No, Naoya thought. That's not it.

What the rock was blocking wasn't the way into the cave—it was the way out.

That idea came unbidden, and it was hard to shake.

It was said the skull of a defeated demon was enshrined inside the cave.

Didn't that mean the demon had been sealed inside? Beheading the monster wasn't enough to keep it from ever coming back to life, so they had to block the exit and hang a talisman.

That thought gave the murky darkness on either side of the large rock an oddly sinister aura, and Naoya's feet froze without his telling them to. As if he could sense something, too, Sasakura also came to a halt in front of the cave.

Takatsuki, on the other hand, performed nothing more than a cursory look around before slipping past the rock and into the cave's interior.

"H-hey!"

Sasakura watched him go with exasperation all over his face, but that turned into resignation as he went in after Takatsuki. For a moment, Naoya hesitated. Then, deciding he also didn't like the idea of waiting outside by himself, he followed Sasakura. Skirting around the rock at the entrance, he set foot inside the cave.

The second he was over the threshold, the air seemed to grow heavy, and Naoya almost stopped walking again. Perhaps because there was no way for it to circulate, the air felt somewhat stagnant—as though it had been sitting unchanged in the dim cave since the moment that demon had been sealed inside. Naoya's breath stuttered. He could hardly believe Takatsuki had merely strolled through it without any signs of worry. Reluctantly, he proceeded deeper into the darkness, thinking the professor was probably oblivious in more ways than one.

Visibility was limited but not totally absent inside the cave, which only reached about ten feet back. The walls and floor were rough, but the space felt more artificial than naturally formed.

At the rear, someone had placed another rock, this one around waist-high and shaped vaguely like a pedestal.

The shattered remnants of a shrine littered the ground in front of the pedestal. It had likely sat on top of the rock originally, before tumbling down and breaking. Among the collapsed shrine fragments, they could see smallish hunks of stone, which may have been responsible for knocking the structure to the ground.

And there, beside the debris, something else had fallen—something that wasn't a rock.

Straining to make out the object in the low light, Naoya almost gasped in shock when he recognized it.

It was a demon's head—a skull.

Lying on its side and stained the color of dirt, the skull was half wrapped in some faded red cloth. Its empty, hollow eye sockets stared up at them from where its fabric covering had come loose. The skull seemed to have been kept inside the shrine but was thrown from it when it collapsed.

Without hesitation, Takatsuki reached out and picked it up, fabric and all.

He pulled the murky red—the color of dried blood—cloth away from the skull gently.

The legend stated that the demon was killed by having the horn broken from its forehead and its head cut off.

There was indeed a hole in the demon's skull. Countless fissures splintered out from the site, which looked a bit sunken in. It gave the bone, which was devoid of flesh and skin, a resentful countenance. The jaw was slightly open, and the oddly misaligned teeth seemed almost to gnash at the air, as if at any moment right there in Takatsuki's grasp, the skull would wail with bitter hatred.

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"Hey," Sasakura said, his voice low. "Akira. That's..."
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"Yeah. Probably. I think so, too."

The professor nodded and looked at Sasakura.

"What is it?"

Still cradling the skull in both hands, Takatsuki answered Naoya's question.

"This isn't demon bone."

"Huh? Then—what? It's a fake?"

"No. It's human."

"Eh...?"

Takatsuki held the skull aloft, staring into its gaping sockets at eye level.

"This isn't some demon's skull. It's ordinary human bone."

Though Naoya had no idea how they had ended up in such a situation, they had no choice but to call the police once they found what they believed to be human remains.

Their cell phones were out of range in the cave, so they returned to the village, where Takatsuki explained the situation to a resident and asked to borrow their phone. He suggested eating their sandwiches while they waited for the police to arrive. They walked back to the car for an early lunch. Takatsuki really did seem to have nerves of steel, calmly eating his sandwich after handling human bones—even if he had been wearing gloves at the time. In the end, however, thinking it would be a waste not to finish the food he was given, Naoya ate his entire sandwich as well.

By the time the police showed up, the area was in quite an uproar. Locals wondering what the hell was going on and apparent rubberneckers from nearby gathered, following the police and Naoya's group back to the cave.

The two officers who responded to their call goggled in awe when they learned Sasakura was a detective with the Metropolitan Police Department.

"Huh?! Why is the MPD here?! Did you get an anonymous tip or something?"

"No, I'm just here on vacation."

"Finding human remains even though you're on vacation; now, that's something! Your detective's intuition kicked in, huh?"

"No. I would have liked this to stay a regular vacation, actually... Dammit, I'm definitely gonna get chewed out if my boss hears about this."

Sasakura started grumbling, and Naoya felt a little bad for him, seeing as this was supposed to be his chance to travel and recover from his injury.

Takatsuki and Naoya were made to wait outside the cave while Sasakura took the two officers inside to explain the situation. On the other side of the little stream, the crowd of onlookers had spread out along the bank. They were probably keeping some distance so as not to end up in the way of the investigation, but the mildly amusing result was that it made the stream look like some kind of force field.

Naoya leaned over to Takatsuki and spoke in a low voice.

"Um, does this mean...that this is a murder case?"

"I'm not sure. The skull looked quite old, but their actual age and whether

there was any criminal activity involved can't be determined without a proper investigation."

"Isn't the skull kind of like a sacred object, since it was enshrined? Is it okay to just take something like that out and run tests on it?"

"Mmm, well, that is a bit of a complex question of ethics. But since it's been found, they really don't have a choice. It's no different than if we'd found a corpse. They can't just put it back and call it a day. Besides, there's a chance they could find out who it belonged to."

"I guess that makes sense."

Just as Naoya said that—

A commotion broke out on the other side of the stream.

They heard an angry voice yelling and saw a rift open in the throng of onlookers. An old man had pushed his way through the crowd. His hair and beard were both pure white, and he carried a cane in one hand despite his tall, sturdy build. Beneath his stark facial hair, the man's face was as grim and forbidding as a gargoyle's.

He lumbered across the stream, ranting and raving at an impressive volume.

"What the hell are you all doing here?! Don't you know you risk Onigamisama's divine wrath if you enter his cave without permission?!"

"You wouldn't happen to be Mr. Kitou, would you?" Takatsuki asked.

The Kitou family was said to be the ones who enshrined the demon in the cave.

The old man nodded.

"That's right! My family has worshipped Onigami-sama in this cave for generations! Outsiders can't just barge in here and touch it as they please!"

"I'm very sorry about that. However, some children who came here on a test of courage found that the shrine was destroyed by the recent earthquake and that the bones had fallen out of it. By the looks of things, the remains might be human, so we had no choice but to report it. I hope you'll forgive the intrusion."

Takatsuki's tone was the epitome of politeness.

Hearing the words *test of courage*, Mr. Kitou's eyebrows shot up. He glared over his shoulder across the stream, where the three children from before were watching among the adults. They ducked down, cowering away from his gaze.

Just then, the crowd opened up again.

"Father!"

The second figure to emerge from the onlookers was a petite, slender woman in her late twenties or early thirties. She hesitated briefly at the water's edge before seeming to brace herself and stepping right into the stream.

The woman lost her footing slightly as she made to climb out on the opposite bank. The old man held out a hand to steady her.

"What are you doing here, Miwako?!"

"You ran out of the house looking all strange, Father... And then everyone was saying a corpse was found in the demon cave, and the police were on the way. I'm here because I was worried."

"It's not a corpse—just some bones! These men desecrated Onigami-sama's shrine! I don't care if they all end up cursed!"

"Please calm down, Father. Try not to shout so much..."

The woman he had called Miwako tried hurriedly to calm down Mr. Kitou.

Sasakura and the local police came walking out of the cave.

"Hey, what's going on out here?"

"Oh, KenKen. Everything taken care of inside?"

"Yeah. They're gonna take the remains back to test their age and origin."

Mr. Kitou's eyebrows went skyward again.

"Where do you think you're taking Onigami-sama?! Give that back; it's demon bone!"

Carrying a bag with the skull inside it, one of the officers responded to Mr. Kitou.

"Well, sir, we've heard the story about the demon head being enshrined in that cave for years from that detective there. But that aside, there's a high probability these remains are human. As far as the police are concerned, we can't just leave things as they are. We'll run some tests, and if we determine that it is demonic in nature, we'll make sure it gets returned to you."

"I'm telling you: It's a demon! The story has been passed down for generations!"

"As I've said, we'll know for sure once we investigate."

No matter how much Mr. Kitou fussed and howled, the police officer's response didn't change.

The two officers thanked Sasakura and headed back down the mountain path, bag of bones in hand. A stream of onlookers trailed after them, but several from the crowd remained, still watching from across the water.

One of the stragglers...was linuma.

He locked eyes with Naoya and gave a light wave as if to say hello.

"Mr. Sasakura."

"Yeah. I see him."

Naoya called out to Sasakura instinctively, and the other man glowered fiercely in linuma's direction.

"I don't think he's been following us this whole time," Takatsuki said. "I never saw him around the bed-and-breakfast... Well, it seems like he's *quite* interested in me, doesn't it?"

linuma had probably just been hanging around the area and followed the patrol car he saw out of curiosity. Perhaps from his view of things, happening upon Naoya and the others was just a stroke of good luck. From Naoya's perspective, though, it felt like being the victim of a bad prank.

Sasakura turned to Takatsuki.

"What do you wanna do? Rough him up a little while we have the chance?"

"A detective shouldn't be saying disturbing things like that. You can't detain

someone who's just standing there, so just leave him be for now... Besides, there's something I want to talk to that old man about."

With that, Takatsuki called out to Mr. Kitou, who was about to cross the stream and go home, presumably.

"Excuse me! If you don't mind, would you be willing to tell me the story of Onigami-sama?"

Mr. Kitou and Miwako turned around, the former with a dubious glare and the latter with a puzzled expression.

Unbothered, Takatsuki walked up to them, flashing his bright smile.

"I teach folklore studies at a place called Seiwa University. Whether the bones in the cave belong to a demon or a human, it doesn't change the fact that a legend about the demon has been passed down here. If you'd be so kind, I would love to hear all about it."

Unexpectedly, Mr. Kitou agreed to the professor's request.

"...Sakai's demon legend has been something for this village alone, but after all that fuss, I doubt it'll stay that way. That means it'll be necessary to make sure the tale is told properly even to outsiders."

The old man decided he would tell them the legend back at his house, so the group followed him down the path in succession. Along the way, Naoya looked over his shoulder to find that linuma seemed to be following, too, but he tried his best to ignore the man at Sasakura's urging.

They had been told the Kitou house was the largest in the village, and that turned out to be rather an understatement. It was significantly bigger than any of the other homes and seemed pretty old, too. Sitting by itself on a hill overlooking the village, the house looked like it was half swallowed up by the mountains when viewed from below. It also had the sort of roof Takatsuki had pointed out earlier, though Miwako informed them it had been many, many years since anyone raised silkworms inside.

"Now we make a modest living cultivating the land out back and get by on the money my husband sends us."

"Your husband doesn't live here?"

Miwako replied with a somewhat lonely smile to Takatsuki's question.

"No, he's a researcher at a company in Tokyo. He's busy, so he can only come home once in a while."

It turned out that Miwako was from Tokyo, and that was where she had met her husband, Masaomi. The two of them had lived in the city together for a while, but just last year, Masaomi's mother—Mr. Kitou's wife—passed away. They couldn't let Mr. Kitou stay by himself, so Miwako had moved to Sakai to live with her father-in-law.

"Masaomi wanted his father to come live with us in Tokyo, but...Father refused to be parted from Sakai. He's quite stubborn."

"Miwako! Don't talk about that nonsense!"

Mr. Kitou looked over his shoulder to shout at her, but Miwako just shrugged a little like she was used to it and said, "Yes, all right." The two of them seemed like a raging father-in-law and a shrinking violet of a daughter-in-law at first glance, but on closer inspection, they seemed to get along better than expected.

They were led through the foyer, deeper into the house. The wooden-floored hallways were dimly lit, and the atmosphere inside felt stuffy. The building was probably pretty well sealed, since the area got so much snow. But for some reason, the stuffiness reminded Naoya of the air in the demon cave. He stared hard at Mr. Kitou's back as the old man walked ahead of them.

This house had prayed to the demon in that cave for a long time. This man's ancestor killed the demon, decapitated it, and enshrined it in the cave.

But now it was possible that the demon's head was actually human. What the hell did it all mean?

Miwako served them tea and snacks in the back room of the house, where they sat on the tatami floor to hear Mr. Kitou's story. The hunting rifle lying beside the low table caused Naoya a great deal of concern at first, but Mr. Kitou explained that he had been cleaning the gun when a neighbor came to tell him the police were in town. He had rushed out of the house at the news, leaving

the half-cleaned rifle on the floor.

"The deer are always destroying the fields. After we're done talking, I have to go check on them... And if I'm lucky, I'll get us some dinner."

Realizing he meant the deer would become a meal, Naoya thought that made sense, considering they were living in the mountains. People in the city turned their noses up at food made from wild game, but in this village, shooting and eating deer was probably a common occurrence.

"Now then, would you share the demon legend with us?"

Munching away happily on one of the steamed yeast buns Miwako had set out, Takatsuki brought them back to the topic at hand.

The old man let out a long, contemplative groan, crossed his arms, and started to speak.

"It was a long, long time ago."

The story took place in a time when the village of Sakai was still called by its former name, Sakaimura.

One day, a demon came to town. It was a hideous beast with a single large horn growing from its forehead. The villagers closed up their homes to try to keep the demon out.

As a result, the demon went on a rampage in the village, attacking livestock and stealing what it could. The people who lived in this very house couldn't bear to watch the town be reduced to rubble, so they invited the demon into their home.

They plied the demon with food and alcohol, and satisfied, it fell asleep, whereupon the family bludgeoned it over the head with a millstone.

The demon's horn broke off, and the beast died, but the family feared the slain demon's wrath. And so they cut off its head at once, tossing it down the waterfall in the back of the house.

When they went to check the next day, they found the demon's head had floated down the river and washed ashore in front of a mountain cave.

The family then collected the head, built a shrine inside the cave to store it in,

and changed their own surname to Kitou.

"Ever since then, the Kitou family has always worshipped the demon enshrined in this land. By enshrining the demon, its calamitous power was transformed into a blessing that protected the Kitou household and Sakaimura. That's why no one should set foot in that cave. If the demon is resurrected, it could bring disaster with it."

With that, Mr. Kitou's story seemed to be concluded.

Takatsuki had questions.

"Do you know when exactly the demon-slaying part of the story took place?"

"I'm not sure. No specific era was ever mentioned in the telling. Just 'a long time ago."

"I see. In other words, it's passed down purely as legend. By the way—when I was talking to some other people about this earlier today, they told me this was once a family of moneylenders. Would that have been from before the time in the story?"

"No, probably later. The Kitou family prospered under Onigami-sama's divine protection. That's why they loaned out the wealth they gained to the villagers."

"I also heard there were those who referred to this as a house full of maneaters?"

Mr. Kitou snorted derisively at that.

"That's just drivel made up by people who couldn't pay back the money they owed. The land around here is limited, crops weren't growing well, and there were many who lived in poverty. Anyone who couldn't pay their loans back by the appointed date was apparently made to work hard manual labor for the Kitou household, and some resentful bastards spread those nasty rumors on account of it."

"I see, so there was no butchering and eating of humans after all! That is a bit disappointing, I have to say."

Sasakura's hand shot out from the side to smack Takatsuki in the head when those words left his mouth. Naoya got to relax more with Sasakura around,

since most of the "Voice of Reason" responsibilities fell to the older man.

While Takatsuki rubbed his head, Naoya took the chance to ask Mr. Kitou a question.

"We heard people from around here go to that cave often—children on dares, and things like that. Is the part about the demon's retribution not as well-known?"

"Everyone from Sakai knows everything I just told you. But the young ones are hopeless. They don't believe in the story itself, for one thing, or in the existence of curses... The fact that you folks know the story of the demon cave is proof enough of that."

"Huh?"

"For starters, this story wasn't supposed to be told outside this village. The demon's protection was for Sakai, and if outsiders learned about it, the village's blessing would be snatched away. And look, that's exactly what's happened. Outsiders have stolen Onigami-sama's head. If we all perish under his wrath, so be it."

The old man practically spat out his sentiment. It certainly was true that the police might never have gotten involved if Naoya, Takatsuki, and Sasakura hadn't gone into the cave.

"That was a fascinating story," Takatsuki said. "Thank you very much for sharing it. Since we're already here, would you allow me to investigate the cave just a little more? The demon's head may have been taken away, but there might be something else to discover there."

"Like what? What else could there be?"

"Well, who knows! Perhaps some item of the demon's, or something used to enshrine it, or something that would tell us how long ago the shrine was built."

"...There's nothing like that there. Even if the head is gone, it's not a place for outsiders to go waltzing in whenever they'd like."

Glaring at Takatsuki, the old man gave him a flat refusal.

"We're done talking. Don't ever set foot near that cave again, you

understand?"

With that, Mr. Kitou grabbed his rifle, muttered "I'm going to the fields" to Miwako, and left.

After Mr. Kitou was gone, Miwako apologized to Takatsuki with a slightly embarrassed expression.

"Um, I'm sorry for how rude my father-in-law has been."

"Not at all. I think I'm the one who has been impolite," Takatsuki replied.

Miwako held the small tray she had used to serve tea in her arms and sighed quietly.

"He's not a bad person. When I first started living here, some of the neighbors judged me for being from the city, but he stood up for me, saying, 'Don't treat my daughter-in-law like an outsider!' He's stubborn and he's blunt...but he's kind."

Somehow or other, that impression had come across. When Miwako had almost slipped trying to cross the stream in front of the demon cave, the arm Mr. Kitou held out to steady her had been a gesture of concern.

"...But isn't it hard? Living here alone with that old man, apart from your husband. The way of life is totally different than in Tokyo, too, right?"

At Sasakura's question, Miwako smiled and shook her head.

"I was totally lost at first, but I've gotten used to it. Life here isn't bad at all. Besides, I lost my parents at a young age, so it's nice to have a sense of family. I'm glad I get to live with my father-in-law. I do often wish Masaomi was here, too, but...he's busy with work, so it can't be helped. He wasn't even able to come home this past New Year's, in the end."

"Not even then?"

For someone to be *that* busy seemed improbable. No matter how hectic work was, the average company would be closed at year's end and over the holiday.

"Apparently, the timing overlapped with a sudden overseas business trip. It seems like he's always holed up in the lab, and I worry about his health."

"Does he contact you regularly? Over the phone or through e-mail?"

"Masaomi has never liked talking on the phone. He says it doesn't feel natural to converse with someone who isn't there in front of him. He does send e-mails, though, and he has mine and Father's favorite foods delivered to the house."

"Then why don't you go to Tokyo to visit him? Your father-in-law would be fine by himself for a day or two, I'm sure."

Miwako looked just a little excited at Takatsuki's suggestion for a moment before giving them another awkward smile.

"...No, I don't want to be a nuisance."

As she spoke, she turned her head to look at the chest of drawers in the corner of the room.

A framed picture placed on top of the dresser showed Miwako, Mr. Kitou, and two other people—an older woman and a young man with glasses. The man was probably Masaomi—and the woman, his departed mother. With his slender features, Masaomi resembled his mother more than his gargoyle-like father.

"It's okay. If I wait, Masaomi will come back someday. He'll come home to this house, to Father and me."

It sounded like Miwako was trying to convince herself more than her guests.

For some reason, Naoya started to doubt that Miwako and Masaomi shared equal affection for each other. The situation made it seem like Miwako was being taken advantage of as a caretaker for Mr. Kitou. Work demands aside, wasn't it a bit cruel not to come home for New Year's and not even call? If it turned out that Masaomi was actually living in Tokyo with another woman or something like that, it would be absolutely awful for Miwako.

But in the end, these were the affairs of someone else's family. It really wasn't a matter for outsiders to butt into. Neither Takatsuki nor Sasakura seemed to have any intention of getting further involved, either, so perhaps it was time to head home.

"Ah, that's right. The waterfall from the story earlier—does that actually

exist? The one the demon's head was thrown into."

They were in the foyer, being shown out by Miwako, when Takatsuki asked that question.

Miwako nodded.

"Yes, it's in the mountains behind the house. We call it a waterfall, but it's not especially high... Would you like to go see it?"

"Could I?!"

Takatsuki lit up. Seeing his childlike wonder, Miwako hurriedly looked to the side, holding back with what seemed like significant effort from bursting into unintentional laughter.

"P-Professor Takatsuki, you're really passionate about your research, aren't you...? Ah, please, follow me. I'll lead the way."

Miwako stepped outside, still suppressing a smile.

Behind the house, a field had been created by carving out a section of the mountain. They could see Mr. Kitou, hunting rifle in hand, walking through a grove of trees around the field. He froze when he saw them, so Miwako called out loudly, "I'm showing them the waterfall!" It looked like the old man gave a slight nod in response.

After a trek of about five minutes into the mountain, the waterfall came into view.

The flow of water came down from farther up the slope and cascaded over a cliff directly ahead. Naoya had been picturing a small stream of water trickling down a rock face at most, but in actuality, the falls comprised a considerable amount of water that splashed and roiled like rapids at the bottom. Their height, however, was not especially great—perhaps about fifteen feet—just as Miwako had said. If the legend was correct, the stream by the demon cave could be traced back to this waterfall.

"The water level is actually quite low right now, because of the season. In the summer, the falls are even more robust. When Masaomi first brought me to this town, he told me this was a hidden gem that only the people of Sakai knew

about."

Interest clear on his face, Takatsuki peered out over the cliff to the base of the waterfall.

"This is amazing! That cave, this waterfall—all these well-known local places that people from out of town have never heard of! Doesn't the pool at the bottom seem like it would be fun for kids to swim in during the summer?"

"Oh no, it's rather deep, and just beneath the falls, the current can draw you under the surface, so I think swimming in it would be pretty dangerous. Also, since it relates to the demon legend, it's not generally somewhere anyone wants to go. Not many people would want to swim in waters where a demon's head was discarded, right?"

"You think so? I would be thrilled, wondering if I might see the ghost of just a demon's head. Plus, it's fun to imagine how the head would have bobbled around the base before eventually floating down the stream! Ooh, I wonder how much blood there was. Is there maybe some element to the story about the demon's blood dyeing this pool deep red? That sort of thing is quite common in folklore, you know!"

"U-um, well... I'm not sure. I haven't heard of one."

Miwako stared at Takatsuki, whose glittering gaze was fixated on the water with an indescribable expression. Refraining from saying what he would have liked to say—"I'm sorry, this guy is just a bit of a weirdo"—Naoya settled for tugging back on the professor, who was leaning so far forward he looked like he could fall over the edge at any moment. He wished the man would act a bit less like an overexcited child, given that he was thirty-five.

Then, suddenly, Takatsuki frowned.

"Hmm. That man is still around."

"Huh?"

Following Takatsuki's line of sight, Naoya spotted linuma near the pool, apparently taking pictures of the waterfall. When he noticed them watching, he waved like he was greeting friends.

"Yo! I was just wandering around here and happened to find this place. Can you believe it? It's nice to do some landscape photography now and then!"

linuma yelled up at them over the noise of the falls. Naoya felt like they had acquired a stalker—exactly how long was this man planning on tailing them?

Takatsuki patted Naoya gently on the back.

"Don't let him get to you, Fukamachi. Guys like that, they hang around for a while, but before long he'll find something else to do... This isn't the first time I've experienced something like this. People who won't stop asking questions, people who want to write ridiculous stories—this world has no shortage of them. But when they don't understand any of the answers they find, or the stories they write are suppressed and never see the light of day, they all eventually get fed up."

Thinking back, Naoya remembered Sasakura saying something similar to him the first time he had a run-in with linuma. Something about that not being a new phenomenon in Takatsuki's life.

There must have been other people like linuma who had snooped around Takatsuki and written nonsense articles about the incident in his past. And without a doubt, Takatsuki's father had crushed those stories, too, before anyone ever saw them.

"But if he starts harassing you again like he did yesterday, tell KenKen or me right away, okay? I would hate for you to be bothered on my account."

"...Yes. I understand."

All Naoya could do in response to Takatsuki's earnest gaze was nod. The thought of linuma continuing to buzz around the professor like a fly for a while longer was awful, but there wasn't much to be done at present.

"Hey," Sasakura said. "Isn't it about time we get out of here? That weirdo is around, and I'm beat."

"You're right."

Naoya turned, ready to follow after Sasakura, who had already started turning back the way they came.

But realizing right away that Takatsuki wasn't with them, Naoya looked back.

"Professor? We're leaving."

"Oh, yeah, just a minute. There's something over there—"

Takatsuki was still peering down into the pool of water below.

Just as Naoya was about to tell him it was dangerous to lean that far out when there was no fence, a sudden, thunderous boom rent the air.

Everything happened quickly.

Naoya flinched instinctively—for a split second, he had no idea what the noise was, because he had never heard it before. The sound reverberated in his ears, and he realized almost immediately that it was a gunshot—Mr. Kitou's hunting rifle. But before any of them could blink, a second sound filled the air.

A horrible, dreadful noise, worse than any gunfire.

The cacophony of wings—many, many wings.

A flock of crows had been startled by the gunshot. The jet-black mass of feathers took off in unison from a surprisingly close cluster of trees, scattering through the air just overhead, almost low enough to touch.

"...Professor!"

Through it all, Takatsuki was still next to the cliff's edge.

One moment, he stood ramrod straight in fear—and the next, he was lurching sideways.

"Akira!"

Racing over the snow-covered ground, Sasakura reached out with one desperate hand.

All at once, an image popped into Naoya's mind. One that should have had nothing to do with the scene in front of him.

Takatsuki's office.

The paper dolls, fluttering almost gracefully toward the floor, swept up in a sudden gust of wind.

As he tumbled over the precipice, Takatsuki looked exactly like those dolls.

"Akira!"

Sasakura shouted, and Miwako shrieked. Down below, Iinuma was yelling something, too. Coming back to himself with a jolt, Naoya hurried to look over the cliff next to Sasakura.

For a heart-stopping second, he couldn't see Takatsuki at all. But then he spotted a flicker of something under the falls that looked like the professor's coat. Iinuma yelled again—"You gotta be kidding me!"—and Naoya saw him jumping into the pool and swimming toward Takatsuki. He had managed to pull Takatsuki out from under the cascading water and was attempting to swim back toward the shore. Then, suddenly, both linuma and Takatsuki disappeared below the surface as if something beneath the water was trying to hold them down. The current would pull you under, Miwako had said. Iinuma was struggling to keep his head above the water. At this rate, both of them would drown.

"...Shit!"

Sasakura tore off his down jacket and shoved it into Naoya's arms.

Just like that, he jumped off the cliff into the pool.

"Mr. Sasakura!"

Naoya could see him, along with the desperate linuma, tugging Takatsuki toward the bank. He was paddling through the current with one arm while the other held on to the professor.

"This way! We can get down to the bottom through here!"

Miwako grabbed Naoya's arm.

Clutching Sasakura's jacket, Naoya took off down the mountain path behind Miwako at a run. Mr. Kitou appeared from out of a grove of trees along the way, shouting, "What happened?!" Miwako explained, and the old man's face immediately blanched.

"Go this way! It's faster!"

He pointed to a narrow staircase that had been built into the cliff. The stairs

were covered in snow and made for treacherous footing, but Naoya flew down them to arrive near the base of the waterfall.

"Professor! Mr. Sasakura!"

Sasakura had only just made it to the shore. He was trying unsuccessfully to shove the unconscious Takatsuki up onto land first. Stripping the professor of his waterlogged coat, he tried again. Rushing over, Naoya and Miwako grabbed on to Takatsuki's arms and clothes and pulled. Together, they managed to haul him ashore and lay his completely soaked form out on its side.

Looking down, Naoya jolted in surprise.

Dragging Takatsuki out of the water had caused his sweater to ride up slightly, exposing a small section of his back.

Naoya could see them, just a little—the scars carved into Takatsuki's paleblueish skin.

He reached out to pull the sweater back into place without even thinking about it, feeling like he had done something wrong, somehow. When he did, his hand brushed against Takatsuki's skin, which was shockingly cold.

"P-Professor? Professor, are you okay?!"

Giving Takatsuki a small shake earned no response.

He can't be, Naoya thought, but a loud sloshing noise drew his attention. Sasakura, with Takatsuki's coat in his grasp, was crawling up out of the pool, linuma following behind him.

Sasakura had one hand pressed to his left leg. Something red was oozing out from between his fingers, and Naoya gasped.

"Mr. Sasakura, your leg...! It's bleeding!"

Instead of replying, Sasakura went to his knees next to Takatsuki, turned the man over onto his back, and started to check for breathing and a pulse. Eventually, he slapped Takatsuki lightly on the cheek several times before letting out a long, trembling breath.

"...Just unconscious. He's breathing, and I got a pulse."

Naoya felt his entire body sag in relief at those words, like a puppet with its strings cut.

Glancing to his side, he saw a shivering linuma wringing water out of his own coat. He had been the first person in the pool after the professor fell. If linuma hadn't gotten Takatsuki's head above water that quickly, he might have drowned.

"...I didn't expect that. You, saving someone."

"Scuse me?"

Teeth chattering, linuma stared at Naoya.

"You idiot. You know, if that guy died, all my hard work would be for nothing... Besides."

linuma suddenly cut himself off.

"Besides, what?" Naoya prompted, and the journalist scowled.

"Shuddup! I've just had more than enough of seeing people drown in front of me, okay?! *Dammit*, getting in the water in the middle of winter is no joke!"

With that, linuma picked up his camera and phone, which he had tossed to the side before jumping in after Takatsuki, checking that they weren't damaged.

Naoya blinked, feeling like his impression of linuma had just changed a little bit. He had thought the man was nothing but a lowlife, but perhaps even linuma possessed hidden depths of his own.

"Anyway, why did Teach suddenly fall off the cliff like that? Also, is there something on his back? I think I got a peek just before, but—"

Without warning, linuma reached out midsentence toward Takatsuki. Realizing he was aiming for the professor's clothes, Naoya hurriedly made to stop him.

Before he could, however, Sasakura slapped Iinuma's hand away hard.

"The hell? That hurt! What's with you?! I just wanted to look a little!"

"...No. Don't touch him."

Sasakura returned linuma's churlish glare with his own ferocious gaze.

Looking briefly intimidated, linuma quickly switched to a snide smile.

"Oh-ho, what's with the attitude? You know I saved that guy's life, right?"

"I'm grateful for that. But did you forget how I dragged both you *and* Akira out after that?"

"Is that what happened? I don't remember it at all."

Sasakura continued to scowl at the other man, who just sneered. Well, he was still linuma—and still a jerk—after all.

"U-um...?"

Unable to fully follow what was going on by herself, Miwako interjected in a confused tone.

Her voice startled Naoya into looking back down at Takatsuki. Even though his life didn't appear to be in danger, they had to get him somewhere else quickly.

At that point, Mr. Kitou finally made his way to the bottom of the cliffside stairs.

"Hey, is everyone okay?! Come on, let's bring him to the house!"

With only one good leg, the old man had probably struggled with the staircase. He was staggering in their direction when he called out.

Shooting one more glare at linuma, Sasakura lifted Takatsuki up in his arms without a word. With Naoya's help, they managed to carry Takatsuki back to the Kitou residence. Iinuma followed them, but not even Sasakura was going to stop him. He was drenched, too, and everything else aside, he had helped save Takatsuki's life.

Miwako set about drawing a hot bath and preparing a room for them immediately. She brought them a large stack of towels and two kerosene space heaters. Sasakura and linuma began drying themselves off around one heater, and Takatsuki was laid out by the other. Naoya decided to try using one of the towels to dry Takatsuki off a little for the time being, but he got the feeling nothing would really make a difference unless they got him out of his wet clothes.

"Um, are you sure you don't want me to call an ambulance?"

Miwako was looking down at Takatsuki with concern, but Sasakura shook his head.

"He's just unconscious, so he'll wake up soon if we just leave him be. Could I borrow your first aid kit later, though?"

"Y-yes, of course. I'll go get it."

She left the room, and Naoya looked at Sasakura.

"Is your leg okay? The wound opened up, didn't it?"

"It's fine. I just need to sterilize it."

Not surprisingly, Sasakura didn't look great. Naoya could hear his teeth chattering, which made sense for someone who had jumped into a snowy mountain stream in the winter. Iinuma had been sneezing repeatedly for a short while, as though he had already come down with a cold.

"...Hey. I laid a futon out in the next room. After you've changed him, put the professor to bed."

Mr. Kitou appeared and handed an old kimono to Naoya, who accepted it gratefully.

"Thank you. I'm sorry for troubling you like this..."

"Don't be. He fell because of the gunshot, didn't he? That makes me the one who's responsible for the trouble. With things as they are—you'll stay here tonight."

The old man withdrew after delivering that blunt sentiment.

As if they were taking turns coming and going, Miwako showed up immediately after that to let them know the bath was ready. Iinuma stood up, sniffling and sneezing.

Sasakura got to his feet as well, but before heading for the bath, he went over to Naoya and spoke in a quiet voice.

"Listen. Can I leave changing Akira's clothes to you?"

"Huh...?"

"Sorry, but I'm at my limit. I need to warm up some, or it'll be bad... Besides, I

don't want that guy around when Akira gets changed."

Glancing in the direction that linuma had just gone, Sasakura continued.

"Just wipe him down and change him. I'd actually rather bring him into the bath to get warm, too, but there's no way I could physically support an unconscious person right now... Sorry, thanks."

With that, Sasakura left for the bath.

Alone in the room with Takatsuki, for a moment, Naoya was at a loss. He spent it wishing the professor would just wake up already, but Takatsuki didn't show any signs of stirring.

When Takatsuki had collapsed in the past, Naoya had asked Sasakura how long it typically took for him to regain consciousness. The answer was: It varied. Sometimes he woke up after only an hour; other times he was out for more than half a day.

"...Ugh, fine."

He reached for Takatsuki's clothes, praying the man would at least stay unconscious while Naoya was changing his outfit. It was difficult, but eventually he got every sodden, clinging article of clothing off Takatsuki.

His body was still freezing to the touch and trembled minutely. It would probably be dangerous for his body temperature to drop any lower. After dragging the space heater a little closer, Naoya started to wipe the professor dry, rubbing hard with the towel to warm him. Even then, Takatsuki didn't so much as twitch, and Naoya felt like nothing he did could possibly wake him. According to Sasakura, when he was like this, Takatsuki was like an overloaded circuit breaker with a blown fuse. Still, Naoya thought, this level of vulnerability was a bit too much.

When he was done with Takatsuki's front, he hesitated for a second, then turned the unconscious man over onto his stomach.

Then, at last, Naoya had an unimpeded view of the scars on Takatsuki's back.

They were just as Ruiko had described them before.

Like marks left behind by wings being torn off.

His skin had been peeled off in two long, narrow triangles that started over both shoulder blades and extended down close to his hips. That was what Naoya had been told, but the reality was so much more terrible than he had imagined. He could hardly bear to look. There was a distinct divide between the unharmed part of Takatsuki's back and the scars, which were sunken in where sheets of his flesh had been torn away. They were the reddish-brown color typical of old wounds, but against the professor's otherwise pale, unmarred skin, they seemed like deep, filthy stains that could never be washed away. Jagged around the edges, like Takatsuki's skin had been removed with tremendous force, the scars—already more than two decades old—still looked raw and painful.

Naoya picked up a towel. He wiped the damp from Takatsuki's back, repeating the motion over and over. He knew the scars wouldn't disappear no matter how many times he rubbed at them, but he kept scrubbing anyway, fighting the urge to cry. If it weren't for these scars, Takatsuki's life might have been a little different. Perhaps his mother would never have become obsessed with the idea that her child had been stolen away by *tengu*, and maybe for Takatsuki himself, living would have been just a bit easier.

But once a scar was carved into the skin, it could never be erased. The past couldn't be changed.

And as for Takatsuki's past, there was no one who knew the truth of it.

For the first time, thinking about that past—and about what awaited Takatsuki at the end of the road he walked—made Naoya feel afraid.

Lifelong scars, indigo eyes, a frightening memory and intellect, and...an unusually intense fear of birds. Imagining who or what was responsible for all of those things was enough to make Naoya quake with fear.

"...Seriously...what on earth happened to you...?"

The professor's prone, unmoving form couldn't answer him.

But then, even if he had been conscious to hear Naoya's question—the one person who wanted an answer to it more than anything else was Takatsuki himself.

Sasakura and linuma returned from the bath just as Naoya had finished wrangling Takatsuki into the kimono Mr. Kitou had brought. The two of them were also wearing kimonos, though Sasakura's was quite short for his frame.

"—Sorry," Sasakura said, catching sight of Naoya's face. "I owe you one."

He patted Naoya on the shoulder just once, lightly, with one big hand.

Was his own expression *that* wretched? Naoya wondered, quickly looking down.

"Open that for me, would you?"

At Sasakura's request, he slid back the screen door to the next room and helped move Takatsuki to the futon Mr. Kitou laid out.

A short while later, Miwako brought them dinner.

"I'm sorry it's just basic dishes."

She looked terribly embarrassed, but both the warm soup and simple stewed sides tasted like comfort and seeped into every inch of their tired bodies.

After they had finished eating, Sasakura and Iinuma both spread out their own futons and went right to sleep, obviously spent. Takatsuki didn't seem like he would be waking up anytime soon, either.

"Why don't you take a bath, too, Fukamachi?"

Miwako had returned to clear their dishes, and Naoya decided to follow her much-appreciated suggestion.

Then, just as he was getting out of the bath, he realized far too late that there was something crucial he had forgotten to do.

He had never contacted Ruiko's family's bed-and-breakfast.

Naoya took out his cell phone in a panic, only to remember that he didn't get service in Sakai. Finding Miwako in the kitchen, he asked to use the phone, which she agreed to with a smile.

The house phone sat in a Western-style living room, and as he dialed the number for the bed-and-breakfast, Naoya was incredibly grateful that he had thought to record it in his cell, just in case.

After three rings, the call connected. Ruiko answered it.

"U-um... Miss Ruiko, it's Fukamachi."

"Ah! Fukamachi! Where *are* you? I haven't been able to get in touch with Professor Akira or Mr. Sasakura, and I didn't know what to do! You didn't even come back for dinner!"

Ruiko's voice blared through the receiver, and Naoya held the phone away from his ear for a moment. They had really worried her, it seemed.

"I'm sorry. It's just, um... There was an incident. It doesn't look like we're going to make it back to the bed-and-breakfast tonight."

"An incident? What happened...? Wait, why is it you calling and not Professor Akira?!"

This is bad, Naoya thought as Ruiko's voice rose in pitch.

"Fukamachi— Did something happen to Professor Akira? Where's Mr. Sasakura?"

"Um, well..."

If he answered honestly, she was bound to think they were in serious trouble.

Naoya forced his clumsy tongue to move.

"They're...fine."

As the words left his mouth, Naoya was aware that he was telling a lie.

They weren't fine. Takatsuki was still unconscious, and Sasakura had been practically gray when he went to sleep.

"It wasn't anything serious. It's just that the two of them are in the middle of something right now."

Naoya's ears couldn't discern when he himself was lying. His own voice didn't distort.

But in that moment, Naoya was decidedly a liar.

"...You promise it's not serious?"

"Yes. I promise."

His voice came out as clear as ever, but Naoya's face twisted with discomfort, and he covered it with his free hand.

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On the other end of the call, Ruiko had fallen temporarily silent.

Then he heard her voice through the receiver again.

"...Hey. Fukamachi?"

"Yes?"

"He is actually coming back, right? Professor Akira?"

"Eh...?"

Naoya made out the faint sound of Ruiko sighing into the phone.

"You know, I don't know why, but sometimes I have this fear... This fear that Professor Akira is going to disappear someday."

Ruiko continued.

"So every time I go to his office and see him sitting there smiling over a cup of cocoa, I feel so relieved. Like, thank goodness, he's still here; it's okay... He is okay, right? Professor Akira is going to come back, right?"

"Miss Ruiko..."

Feeling like there was an iron vise around his chest, Naoya laughed, grateful his face couldn't be seen through the phone.

"Gosh, where did that come from? Where on earth do you think he's going to disappear to?"

"Sorry, it's just..."

"Ah, that's right, in your mind you picture Professor Takatsuki as an angel who had his wings clipped and fell from the sky. You think he's going to return to the heavens someday?"

"H-hey! Fukamachi!"

Ruiko sounded a little flustered at having the thing she had said to him before brought up like that. Even she felt it was embarrassing, apparently.

"I really didn't picture you as a romantic, Miss Ruiko."

"W-well, excuse me for being a romantic! Even though I'm a bit too old for that now, you know!"

"We'll be back tomorrow," Naoya said.

Ruiko stopped talking, then asked once more as if to make sure.

"You mean it?"

"Yes. Please have some cocoa on hand for Professor Takatsuki. Mr. Sasakura and I will be fine with coffee."

"Got it. Tell him I'll have some marshmallows set aside especially for him."

"I will. See you tomorrow."

After hanging up, Naoya had the urge to curl up into a ball right where he sat. He sighed.

He ran his hands roughly through his still-wet hair, mussing it every which way, and when he finally hauled himself to his feet, he returned to the room where Takatsuki was sleeping. He peeked in at Sasakura and Iinuma as well, but they both seemed to be out cold.

Naoya didn't know what to do with himself, so he sat in a corner of Takatsuki's room and hugged his knees to his chest. He was tired, but he had no desire to take out his futon and go to sleep.

The conversation with Ruiko was probably to blame; suddenly, Naoya wished he was in Takatsuki's office.

The smell of a used bookstore, with the scents of cocoa and coffee mingling throughout. It was the smell of that room—the one that was familiar to Naoya now. And a smiling Takatsuki, sitting in a folding chair with both hands cupped around his blue mug. In Naoya's memories, Takatsuki was almost always smiling. The expressionless man sleeping in front of him that very moment looked like an entirely different person.

"...Please wake up soon, Professor."

Unable to bear the stillness of the room, Naoya broke it with a whisper.

"Miss Ruiko was really worried. So was Mr. Sasakura... And me. So hurry up and open your—"

Turning his gaze to Takatsuki as he spoke, Naoya jumped in surprise.

Takatsuki was sitting up on the futon.

Naoya hadn't heard a sound. He had no idea how long the professor had been awake. A little embarrassed, he wondered if everything he had whispered to himself had been overheard.

Half out of the covers, Takatsuki sat with his head drooping forward and eyes downcast. He had one hand pressed to his brow.

"Professor...? Does your head hurt?"

At the sound of Naoya's voice, Takatsuki's head swiveled abruptly in his direction.

The eyes looking at him sideways from under the hand still held to his head were dyed a deep indigo.

Those dark night-sky eyes stared, unblinking, directly at Naoya.

In that moment, without knowing why, Naoya shuddered.

That gaze—it felt like it could see straight through him.

Utterly unlike Takatsuki's usual eyes, they lacked even the merest hint of warmth.

Ever so slowly, Takatsuki blinked. The night sky didn't disappear while it was hidden behind his long eyelashes. If anything, an even deeper shade of indigo took its place, sending another shiver down Naoya's spine.

The hand on Takatsuki's forehead lowered, making its way to the tatami floor. Then Takatsuki started crawling toward Naoya, his pace unhurried. Naoya jerked away, instinctively trying to flee, but felt his back thud against the wall. Something was wrong. This Takatsuki was not one he knew. It wasn't just his face—even his presence felt like it belonged to someone else entirely.

Was he having some kind of sleepwalking episode? Or—

"P-Professor?"

The next moment, Takatsuki was right there in front of him, his upper body making a long, slow arc into being upright. With his head tilted slightly to the left, and eyes filled with terrifying darkness, Takatsuki peered at Naoya.

Reflexively, Naoya looked away. He had met Takatsuki's eyes with his own countless times before, but just then, for some reason, Naoya was overcome with fear. No matter what, he thought, he couldn't look into them now—but Takatsuki wouldn't allow that. His face loomed in closer, until Naoya could feel the professor's breath on his skin. The real, genuine night, harboring untold numbers of twinkling stars, stared straight into Naoya's eyes.

""

Naoya stopped breathing.

He had the same thought, every time he saw it: The darkness in that gaze was just like the sky above that midnight festival—the one he had stumbled into as a child. Takatsuki's eyes opened up into that night, into a place Naoya could only think of as another world. If he looked too deeply into them, he would get dragged to a realm on the other side. He was certain of it.

And now, through Takatsuki's eyes, some other being was watching Naoya, peering into his face.

The night was looking back.

"P-Professor..."

I need to bring him back, Naoya thought, only partially aware of what he was doing.

Opening his mouth as if in a gasp, he dragged the air into his unwilling lungs and forced it back out with purpose.

"Professor... Professor Takatsuki!"

Right away, Takatsuki's shoulders jerked.

He blinked several times in succession, truly looking as if he had only just woken up.

In the space of a second, the indigo had vanished from his gaze.

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"Wh ...? Huh?"
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The murmured voice that came out of that mouth sounded like the normal, everyday Takatsuki.

The eyes Naoya knew so well—big dark-brown puppy dog eyes—gaped at him.

"Fukamachi? Huh, why—?"

"You're too close, Professor!"

Naoya shoved Takatsuki away. The older man sputtered and yelled as a hand covered his face and pushed, hard enough to unbalance him, sending him toppling backward.

"Th-that's mean, Fukamachi! What're you doing, all of a sudden?!"

I should be the one saying that, Naoya thought. He wanted to ask Takatsuki what the hell had been up with him just now, but he got the feeling that wasn't a good idea.

So he reached out to Takatsuki, who was rubbing his nose from where he had fallen, and pulled him upright. And...

"...Professor. Do you remember what happened?"

...asked him that instead.

Takatsuki seemed confused for a moment, then he looked around his surroundings.

Understanding dawned on his features quickly.

"This...is Mr. Kitou's house, isn't it? Did I collapse again?"

"Yes, and not just that. You fell over the waterfall."

"The waterfall?!"

"You sank underwater, but Mr. Sasakura and linuma rescued you."

"KenKen and that guy...? Whoa..."

Takatsuki covered his face with both hands.

Then, with a start, he looked down at himself, apparently noticing at last that

he was wearing different clothes than before.

"...Right, I...fell into the water... Um, and my clothes...?"

"Ms. Miwako is washing them for you."

"No, I meant, er..."

"—I'm the one who changed you."

"I see..."

Clutching at the kimono near his chest, the professor hung his head.

He knew that Naoya had seen his scars.

"Professor...are you okay?"

Takatsuki looked up, opened his mouth, then promptly shut it again.

Then he smiled.

"Where's KenKen?"

At those words, a fire that Naoya couldn't quite name roared to life from the very depths of his chest.

Takatsuki hadn't answered his question just now.

He had changed the subject on purpose.

"Is KenKen okay? If he saved me, that means he had to swim. His wound could have opened, or he could have caught a cold—"

"Professor."

Naoya cut him off.

Takatsuki had stopped talking, but Naoya looked down, not knowing what to say next.

He knew why the professor had changed the subject.

Because when Naoya asked if he was okay, he had probably been about to say, "I'm fine."

Even though he definitely was not fine.

It was just like the night before—when Sasakura asked the same question,

Takatsuki insisted over and over that he was okay in that distorted voice.

That was the type of person Takatsuki was: someone who lied about being okay when he wasn't, just to spare other people's feelings.

But Takatsuki had also promised before that he would never lie in front of Naoya.

And so when lying wasn't an option, he deflected.

It wasn't that the professor was truthful 100 percent of the time. He just, for Naoya's sake, was always careful about it.

And it was making Naoya so, so mad.

He knew very well how ridiculous that was. Taking offense to someone being thoughtful on his account was stupid. Besides, hadn't he just done the exact same thing to Ruiko? He hadn't wanted to worry her, so he lied.

So then...why?

Why was he this angry?

"...Fukamachi, there's no need for you to make that face, you know?"

Takatsuki's brows were drawn with discomfort, but he was looking at Naoya with a smile.

Ah. So that's it, Naoya thought.

Because Takatsuki was always smiling.

Even when he was the furthest from okay that he could be, he hid it all behind a smile so no one would see the darkness or fear he held inside.

Even though Naoya already knew how much that cost him.

"...Why?"

The words started coming.

"You... Why?"

Lifting his head, Naoya glowered at Takatsuki, who looked taken aback.

Naoya leaned forward, ignoring the professor's shock, and simply let him have it.

"Why...are you always so unreasonable, you idiot?!"

"...Huh, wha—? M-me? Unreasonable? I'm not..."

For a moment, Takatsuki was flustered, as if he couldn't believe he was being scolded without warning.

Naoya kept on going, full steam ahead.

"You're old enough to know better than to act so recklessly! It causes trouble for everyone around you! Even me! Do you realize how hard it was to carry and change you when you're that needlessly tall?! And Mr. Sasakura had to swim in freezing cold water, and his wound reopened, and he's completely exhausted and sleeping in the next room right now! Even though you couldn't have known that a flock of birds was going to fly over us, it's obviously a bad idea to lean that far over a cliff without a railing! Could you at least *think* about things like that?!"

"Ah, um, I—I'm sorry; I'll reflect...on my actions... Wait, KenKen's wound reopened? Is he okay? That's..."

"I don't know! You can ask him yourself later! And...when you're not okay, could you just *say* so, please?! Don't think you can get away with avoiding the question or glossing over things by not answering! That's no different than lying! How do you not *know* that?! You're thirty-five!"

"Y-yeah, that's true, but I don't really think my age is relevant right now...
Anyway."

Takatsuki gave Naoya a small smile.

"I see. I'm sorry I made you worry so much."

Naoya didn't reply at first.

He remembered watching Takatsuki tumble over the waterfall, thinking his own heart might actually stop.

Looking down with a sigh, he could only whisper his next words.

"...You could have died."

"Yeah. I'm sorry."

"You can't just apologize and make it all better... This is why I told you not to say irresponsible things like 'I'm here for you' and 'I'm not going to let you go.' If you had died... I would be all alone again."

Just the image of Takatsuki falling was enough to make Naoya's hands shake.

He had been so scared.

The thought that this man had actually died—it had truly terrified him.

"Fukamachi..."

Takatsuki sat up straight.

He faced Naoya head-on and bowed.

"I'm sorry, Fukamachi. I'm so sorry for worrying you and causing you so much trouble."

"I told you: This isn't something that can be solved with a simple apology."

"Yeah, I know. But I really do feel awful about it, and I don't know what else to say, so for now, please accept my apology. Also... Umm... From now on, when I'm not okay, I'll do my best to tell you that, if possible."

"Wait a minute. You're just going to casually tack on 'if possible' like that? And what do you mean, you'll do your best? You're already trying to weasel out of it!"

"Aw, come on! I'm an adult! Letting my student see that kind of failing isn't cool! Let me put on a brave face at least a little."

"It's especially uncool to pretend to be brave, you know."

"What, really? I'm sorry..."

Takatsuki sulked, looking like a dog that had been yelled at.

I can't believe this guy, Naoya thought.

"Professor, you basically believe that, as long as you apologize, you'll be forgiven, don't you?"

"Yeah."

Takatsuki nodded, not even having the sense to look ashamed, and Naoya

was floored.

The professor got up, saying he was going to check in on Sasakura. He seemed completely back to normal.

But even if he was...what on earth had been going on with him before?

He had genuinely seemed like an entirely different person. The thought alone sent a chill down Naoya's spine.

Once before, Takatsuki had said that he and Naoya were walking paths that straddled the boundary between reality and the next world. Both of them had abnormal experiences in their pasts—and had become just a little bit unlike normal people.

But what if the path Takatsuki was on was far closer to that other world than Naoya's was?

Maybe Takatsuki was in such a precarious position that he was liable to teeter over that boundary to the other side at any moment.

Well, so what? Naoya thought, a petulant murmur in his chest.

If it seemed like the professor was about to fall into that other world, all Naoya had to do was bring him back. Call his name, like he had just a little while ago.

After all, Naoya was Takatsuki's traveling companion down that between-worlds path. Takatsuki had chosen him.

And so, as long as they made the effort to help each other down that road, as traveling companions should do, it would be okay.

It was safe to stick a hand or two outside the line he had drawn around himself—only after meeting Takatsuki had Naoya been able to consider that a possibility.

If his fellow traveler went too close to the other world, only moments away from disappearing into the darkness, a hand reaching out over that line would certainly be enough to grab his companion and pull him back.

At least, that's what Naoya wanted to believe.

The next morning, after Sasakura woke up and put on the clothes Miwako had dried for him, he left in the car to take linuma to a doctor.

The midwinter swimming excursion had been too much on him, it seemed. Iinuma ended up with a nasty cold, complete with a high fever that spiked overnight. Not helping him wasn't an option, so Sasakura drove him to the hospital, saying he was also going to take the opportunity to get someone to look at his leg.

"How come neither you nor Professor Takatsuki are sick, Mr. Sasakura? Are you just that tough?"

"The average person doesn't train the way I do. After the hospital, I'll stop at the police station and ask if they learned anything about that skull from yesterday. When I'm done with all that, I'll come back to pick you up, so until then, you two had better behave."

"Yep, got it. See you later, KenKen."

linuma already seemed too sick to walk on his own, so Sasakura half dragged him to the car with Takatsuki seeing them off. After they were gone, the professor turned to Naoya with a look of anticipation.

Naoya got a bad feeling in his chest.

"...Didn't Mr. Sasakura just tell you to behave?"

"I'm not planning on doing anything crazy, you know. But just sitting around here waiting is boring, don't you think? So, Fukamachi—let's go investigate this town's demons together."

"Huh?"

"I mean, while we're here, we might as well, right?"

Takatsuki gave him a bright smile and went to tell Miwako that they would be going out for a short while. Then he and Naoya stepped out into the village of Sakai.

As usual, Takatsuki started by gathering information. Most of the people who stopped to respond to the professor's friendly greetings were on the younger side—mothers of elementary school children, students, and the like. The

majority of the older folks he called out to simply ignored him and kept walking.

Takatsuki's popularity with local housewives was unchanged, at least. They didn't so much as hesitate to answer his questions.

"Ah, the demon cave. I heard about all the commotion yesterday... But to think there were human bones enshrined inside? How awful."

"I mean, when I was a child, we used to go in there all the time, playing and showing off! Now I'll have to make sure I tell my son he can't play there anymore."

"Doesn't it seem like the kids don't really go to the cave much these days, though? Mine told me last time they went over that way, old man Kitou gave them such a scolding. Told them they'd be cursed if they played there."

"A bit late, don't you think? Kids have always played at the cave."

"That man has been in such a foul temper lately. His son never even comes home anymore."

"You can say that again... I feel bad for Miwako, too, all alone with that obstinate old goat."

On the whole, the neighborhood ladies showed compassion for Miwako. They used to give her the cold shoulder, but recently, the town seemed to have accepted Miwako's presence.

When Masaomi was brought up in conversation, Takatsuki asked more about him.

"Are Mr. Kitou and his son not on good terms? Does Masaomi not come home because they've had a fight or something along those lines?"

"Their relationship is... Yes, well, it might not be so good these days. Masaomi went to college in Tokyo, and now he works there. It makes me wonder if he hasn't finally given up on this town."

"Surely not! How could he, when his wife is here?"

"But it seems the postman overheard those two fighting, you know! Masaomi wanted his father to move to Tokyo with him and Miwako, but the old man blew up on him! All 'You've been in Tokyo too long; have you forgotten your life

here? Don't talk like an outsider!"

"I swear, *outsider* is that man's favorite word. I wish he'd stop talking like we're some old-fashioned, insular little community!"

Just one of the happily gossiping ladies—slightly older than the rest—spoke up to discourage the others from talking about Mr. Kitou that way.

"Well, I don't really know what to say about that. My mother always says Mr. Kitou just wants to protect his family—and Sakai, too."

"Protect...his family and the town?"

Takatsuki looked a bit puzzled, and the woman nodded.

"By enshrining the Onigami-sama, the Kitou family has kept Sakai safe for a long time. I think, even if the bones in that shrine really are human, they must have belonged to a human who was evil enough to be a demon. If it's for the sake of protecting people, there isn't much of a difference between slaying a demon and slaying a terrible person, is there? For the Kitou family, protecting Sakai has probably become a matter of pride. That's why, even to this day, they can't help but take that sort of attitude toward people around here... If he could reconcile with his son soon, or if Masaomi and Miwako would have a child, Mr. Kitou could probably have some peace of mind."

As she spoke, the woman looked off toward the mountain where the shrine was.

"I think he's anxious, you know, because if things keep going like this, the Kitou family is going to die out. Lately, Mr. Kitou is always over there in front of the cave, putting his hands together like he's praying—quite a few people have seen him at it. There's a reason he hollers at anyone who goes near there now, even though he let kids play by the cave before. It's because he wants to defend the authority of Onigami-sama and his own family. Since Masaomi won't come back from Tokyo, like he's forsaking his family, his father is just becoming even more headstrong."

Once they had more or less finished interviewing people, Takatsuki set his sights on the demon cave as their next destination.

"Professor, we can't. Mr. Kitou told you not to go anywhere near it, didn't

he?"

"He did, but it's not like I told him I wouldn't," Takatsuki replied, nonchalant.

There it is, Naoya thought. His cunning side.

Arriving at the cave, the first thing Takatsuki did was look around inside it. It appeared that the police had only collected the skull, leaving the broken shrine as it had been.

The professor held up pieces of the shrine and examined them for a while. Then he picked up a bowl that was lying on the ground with the shrine fragments; it looked like a vessel used for offerings, and it was slightly chipped but mostly still intact.

"Look at this, Fukamachi. It's quite clean, isn't it?"

"Hmm...? Oh, that's true; it is."

The white ceramic bowl Takatsuki held out for Naoya to see was almost entirely free of dirt and grime. It didn't seem new by any means, which meant someone probably cleaned it on a regular basis.

And who could that someone be, other than Mr. Kitou?

"It seems the Kitou family patriarch has indeed been coming here to pray a lot recently."

"...Do you think it's because of what that woman said earlier?"

To defend his family's authority.

Not returning to Sakai meant Masaomi was abandoning his family and the village itself. Without him, the Kitou family would eventually be a thing of the past. Perhaps Mr. Kitou was praying at the shrine so often because he was afraid of that possibility.

Naoya tried to picture it—the old man, in front of the demon shrine, in endless supplication.

That figure, hands pressed together, praying that somehow, in some way, his son would come home to Sakai... It was like Mr. Kitou was casting a sort of curse. From Masaomi's point of view, at least, it must have felt like one.

"If Masaomi knows what his father is doing, that might just make him more reluctant to return. Even though Ms. Miwako is here."

Naoya thought Miwako should go back to Tokyo if her husband wasn't going to return to Sakai. It would be better for her that way, even if she disagreed out of concern for her father-in-law. No matter how many e-mails or packages of her favorite foods she got, the situation wasn't fair to Miwako at all.

"I see, so that's your interpretation, Fukamachi? Well...mine is a bit different." "Huh?"

Confused, Naoya looked at Takatsuki, who started to talk as he put the offering vessel back among the shrine fragments.

"That woman from earlier said something interesting, didn't she? 'Even if the bones in that shrine really are human, they must have belonged to a human who was evil enough to be a demon.' And she said that 'slaying a demon and slaying a terrible person' are the same. The human bones enshrined here—I wonder what kind of person they belonged to. Even though the police are looking into it, we probably won't find that out at this point."

Getting to his feet, Takatsuki stared at the mouth of the cave.

"There are various demon skulls and mummified remains out there. Ordinarily, they're fakes, things like monkey skulls with cow horns attached. But the one here was human. That rock that was put in the entrance, the one that looks like it's blocking it off—it might be just like the Chibiki no Iwa."

"What's that?"

"It's from the *Kojiki*, in the Yomotsu Hirasaka tale. When the creator deity Izanagi visited the realm of the dead, he ended up being chased out by his wife, Izanami, and her army of the dead. To keep the dead hordes from invading, Izanagi put a huge stone—the Chibiki no Iwa—on the Yomotsu Hirasaka, which is the hill that connects the underworld to this one. Similarly, this rock might have been placed here to prevent any vengeful souls from leaving this cave. In other words, this cave was used to seal up people who died with malice in their hearts."

Come to think of it, Naoya had thought the same thing the first time he saw

this place: The stone that seemed to be obstructing the entrance might have been there to keep the demon sealed inside from coming out.

"If that's the case...what is it that man is thinking when he's out there praying?"

Naoya hurried after Takatsuki as he walked out of the cave.

He thought maybe they would be leaving, but Takatsuki started inspecting things outside instead. The professor ran a hand lightly across the mountain's rocky face and examined the snowy ground.

Looking closer, Naoya realized there were a number of monument-like stone structures. Most of them were large, engraved rocks—the figures carved into their surfaces might have been Buddhas or demons—but among them was a mound of stones that had merely been arranged in a pile.

Crouching in the snow, Takatsuki gazed at the structures for a long time. Gently stroking his chin as he often did, he traced over the worn carvings in the larger stones and studied the simple, piled-up mound that sat beside the rest.

The professor made some kind of quiet noise, and Naoya stared at him in surprise. He was pretty sure the man had just laughed.

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"Professor?"

"Oh, how this world doth overflow with curses."

"Uh...?"
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Takatsuki looked up at Naoya. There on his face, as plain as day, was a smile. For some reason, Naoya shivered.

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Takatsuki stood up.

"Shall we, Fukamachi?"

"Huh? Where are we going?"

"Well, to slay a demon."
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Those words, exhaled on a breath that turned stark white in the cold, spread out through the winter mountain air and melted away.

Takatsuki led them back to the Kitou house.

When he asked Miwako, who greeted them, where her father-in-law was, she pointed them toward the tatami-matted room. Takatsuki announced himself outside the room's sliding door, and the old man's voice called from within for them to enter.

It was warm inside the room, but somehow it still felt stuffy to Naoya. On the far side of the low table, Mr. Kitou was sitting and holding a brazier. He jerked his chin at the two of them, prompting them to take a seat.

Takatsuki gave a bright smile and knelt down directly across the table from him, resting back on his heels.

"Braziers are nice, aren't they? So elegant. You don't see them very often in Tokyo."

Mr. Kitou snorted.

"Well, some outsiders used an awful lot of our kerosene last night. So I'm economizing."

"I'll be sure to make up for that. We owe this family a great deal."

"We don't need money. I'd rather you just get the hell out of here already."

"We will, as soon as our friend comes back to pick us up. But before that, why don't we talk for a little while?"

"Talk? About what?"

"The demon legend told here in Sakai."

The old man's thick eyebrows twitched.

"I told you all about that yesterday. There's nothing more to say."

"Yes, I've heard the folktale part of the story. But what I'm interested in are the actual events being concealed behind it."

"...What're you talking about?"

"Much folklore is based in real incidents that would be far too morbid to talk about in a straightforward manner. If someone is murdered in a village somewhere, and that's how people talk about it, well, that's just a regular old homicide. But if it's a demon that gets killed? A beast? A monster? That's a legend."

Takatsuki stared fixedly at Mr. Kitou as he spoke.

"Mr. Kitou. Since the bones enshrined in that cave were human, it means the background for the demon legend circulated in this town is, quite simply, someone's murder. Or rather—perhaps I should say it's the murder of the 'Other.'"

"The Other ...?"

"People who aren't considered members of a given community, or outsiders, in other words. Those are the Other. In this country, those who come from outside our communities are primarily met with one of two reactions: hospitality or murder. When outsiders receive a warm welcome, they're treated like divine blessings. You could think of the goddess Toshigami as an example—a being that comes from elsewhere and brings good fortune to the community. Thus, the positive reception. Now then, how about those who are killed? Well—that, in its own way, could result in good fortune. That's why the Other is killed."

With a fierce scowl, Mr. Kitou glared at Takatsuki.

Unfazed, Takatsuki kept talking in his usual gentle voice, no different than if he were giving a lecture.

"Are you familiar with the term *rokubu* killing? *Rokubu* refers to traveling Buddhist monks. They made pilgrimages all over Japan, leaving copies of the Lotus Sutra at different sacred sites. That kind of travel comes with expenses, meaning *rokubu* carried a lot of money. *Rokubu* killing is a folklore trope—it involves villagers killing *rokubu* to steal their money, which they would then use to amass a fortune. But those villagers' children would then be born with the same physical characteristics as the *rokubu*, or speak in the *rokubu*'s voice, condemning their parents' crime with things like, 'It was on a night such as this that you murdered me.' That's the general format for many such stories."

"They're just old folktales."

"That's correct. They were probably told as stories of karmic justice. Their main focus was the divine punishment received as a result of killing the *rokubu*.

However...don't you think that this kind of story wouldn't have been created in the first place if it weren't for actual instances of outsiders being killed?"

"...What are you trying to say?"

"I think it must have happened relatively often throughout the country. That is, people who came from elsewhere being murdered for their money. These days, the police could be onto you in no time, but back then it was a different story. If a monk traveling all about the land disappeared partway through his journey, looking for him would be hopeless. Even more so for a missing ruffian or thief. Killing an outside invader who threatens the community is no different than slaying a demon. I believe this is the case in Sakai—the truth behind the demon legend that has been told here."

Takatsuki continued unflinchingly.

"I've been told that the Kitou family members were moneylenders. They had the biggest house in Sakai because they were the richest. I've also heard the Kitou family was called a house full of man-eaters. This house is the only one in the village that stands alone from the others, isn't it? I suspect the Kitou family's role in Sakai—ah, in Sakaimura, rather—was to offer hospitality to visitors from elsewhere and kill them if they had an opportunity to do so. They would steal the travelers' money and possessions, redistributing the former throughout the village. The villagers were indebted to this family, but they also shunned them for their actions. *That* is why they were labeled man-eaters, most likely. The waterfall out back would have been where the corpses were beheaded, and afterward, the bodies may have been thrown into the pool below. Then the heads would be enshrined in the demon cave."

"...You're saying there was more than just one killing."

"Yes. There was only one head inside the shrine, but there were quite a few monuments built outside the cave. There are more heads under those monuments, aren't there?"

Mr. Kitou picked up the brazier tongs, leaving Takatsuki's question unanswered. When he poked lightly at the charcoal fire, red flames burst out from underneath the pile of snow-white ash.

"Even if they start investigating now," Mr. Kitou murmured, "they won't find

out anything about their identities."

Takatsuki's eyes narrowed.

"So there are more heads over there?"

"Those who come from elsewhere will bring either good fortune or calamity. And either way, it's fine to kill them. Because they're outsiders. That's what I was always told as a child—it's how I was raised."

Prodding at the charcoal some more, the old man spoke as if he were making small talk.

"The truth is, I saw the head of the family, two generations back, kill a traveler in the middle of the night. I was still young...but I remember it clearly. It was winter. There was disease tearing through the silkworms, and there was hardly any sellable silk that year. To make matters worse, almost all the crops in the area were destroyed by snow, so there was very little to eat in the village. But after that night, large quantities of rice bought from someplace else were distributed around to the villagers. They were all so grateful and kept thanking him over and over."

In this place, killing outsiders like that may have become a part of the established culture. It might have been necessary, in some sense, in order for the people living in an impoverished region to survive.

But talking about the facts as they were would have been too morbid, too cold-blooded.

And so the local people turned it into a legend about a demon.

Murdered travelers were enshrined as deities to seal away their resentment.

But that probably hadn't been enough on its own. The demon legend of Sakai was meant to remain forever within the bounds of the village. Speaking of it outside the village was forbidden. Both the cave and the waterfall were kept secret. Everyone agreed: It was a story that shouldn't be known anywhere else.

As time passed, however, the story became just another folktale. Those who knew the truth of the past died out—and most importantly, the culture of killing outsiders was lost in the modern era. The demon in the story became an

"actual" demon, because no one wanted to believe what had happened in the village was just murder.

"It's true; even if we inspected the legend through a pragmatic lens, the police aren't going to come investigate things now. That's why, at the outset, I came here intending only to learn about the demon legend before going home. However, circumstances have changed."

Mr. Kitou's brow twitched again at Takatsuki's words.

The professor smiled back at him.

"After all, I expect someone has died quite recently in this village. Your son, in fact—Masaomi."

Naoya gaped at Takatsuki, but the other man merely went on talking as he always did, with a smile.

"You know, don't you, Mr. Kitou? The real reason why Masaomi won't return to this house."

## "I don't."

The old man's voice warped. Naoya pressed a hand to one ear.

Takatsuki glanced quickly in his direction, then went back to watching Mr. Kitou intently.

"People in town told me that lately you don't want anyone, even residents of Sakai, going near that cave. And that they've noticed you're always outside the cave praying. I wondered—why would you be doing that in front of the cave rather than inside it?"

"How should I know? They probably just misspoke."

"No, I don't think so. There's a large stone at the cave's entrance. It wouldn't be possible from the outside to see someone praying inside, in front of the shrine. Which means, when you were spotted, you weren't in front of the shrine. You were in front of the cave."

Then, finally, Takatsuki hit the old man with his finishing blow.

"Almost all the monuments outside that cave were memorial markers

engraved with Buddhist figures. But there was one, a simple pile of stones—a grave that looked much newer. Masaomi is under there, isn't he? And you're the one who buried him, yes?"

## "I don't know what you're talking about!"

For the third time, Mr. Kitou's voice distorted wildly.

And then, from the other side of the sliding screen door—

Crash!

Startled, Mr. Kitou shot to his feet. He threw open the screen, finding Miwako outside it, slumped on the floor. She was surrounded by overturned teacups, a small kettle, and a tray.

"Miwako."

"Ah, ummm, I. Um. I thought. I would serve tea..."

Her voice trembled.

Mr. Kitou sank to his knees in front of her. He grabbed on to both of Miwako's quaking arms as if to steady her, making her jolt violently.

"Miwako. Miwako. You—did you hear all that just now?"

"F-Father, it's. It's not true, right? Masaomi. He's not dead, right...? And you, you didn't kill him, right?!"

Miwako's words escalated into a shriek, but Mr. Kitou didn't answer her. He simply lowered his gaze.

At that, Miwako shoved the old man away and hurried to her feet.

He looked up at her, dumbfounded, and sprawled across the tatami. Stepping over him, Miwako dashed across the room and went right out the back to the house's rear yard. Mr. Kitou shouted after her, but Miwako ran into the snow in her socks, not even glancing back at him.

"This is bad. We have to go after her."

Takatsuki stood and started running, Naoya rushing to follow.

Miwako had taken off in the direction of the waterfall. They saw her bolting

down the snow-covered path, stumbling and falling. But before the two of them could reach her, she scrambled back to her feet and kept running.

"Ms. Miwako! Ms. Miwako, please wait!"

Takatsuki called out to her, but she didn't stop.

By the time they caught up, Miwako had already made it to the edge of the cliff—to the precise spot Takatsuki had fallen from.

"Ms. Miwako."

Miwako turned toward them, startled by Takatsuki's voice.

She stood with her hands clasped together over her chest.

"Why ...? Why?"

Still trembling, she murmured that single word over and over as if in a daze. Miwako looked like she might throw herself over the cliff's edge at any moment, and Naoya felt frantic. Takatsuki had survived the fall without injury, but there was no guarantee Miwako would fare the same.

When he glanced at Takatsuki, however, the man seemed surprisingly composed.

He stopped about six feet away from Miwako and started speaking to her.

"Are you asking why Masaomi died? I don't know the answer to that question, either. But if you're asking why I think Masaomi is dead—it's because his glasses are tangled up in the waterfall."

"His glasses...?"

"You showed us a picture of him yesterday. I saw a pair of glasses identical to the ones he was wearing in that picture, caught on a branch about halfway down the waterfall. My vision is a bit better than average."

Naoya remembered that, just before Takatsuki had fallen off the cliff, he had been looking down as if he had spotted something. Could it have been Masaomi's glasses?

"You told us your husband didn't come back even for New Year's. He doesn't call. Even if he's never liked talking over the phone, that's a little odd. You said

you received e-mails and packages, but anybody could send those pretending to be someone else. When did you last see Masaomi?"

"When...? It was...in August... He came home to visit his mother's grave."

"And did he suddenly go back to Tokyo in the middle of the night or early in the morning?"

"...When I woke up...in the morning. Father told me, 'Masaomi had to leave for some urgent work matter.' And...I had an e-mail...from him..."

In that case, Masaomi must have died the night before.

Takatsuki pointed to the waterfall behind Miwako.

"I think you can still see his glasses from there, if you look hard. It's all right to lean out just a little bit. They're hanging on a branch that's sticking out about ten feet from the top."

"Oh..."

Turning on unsteady feet, Miwako made to peer into the waterfall just as Takatsuki instructed her.

In the same instant, Takatsuki shot forward, kicking hard off the ground.

He leaped at Miwako, grabbing her around the middle from behind and dragging her away from the precipice.

"-N-no! No, stop! Let go! Let go of me!"

Miwako screamed and struggled, but Takatsuki held on firmly.

"You don't have to die, Ms. Miwako. I didn't uncover the truth behind Sakai's demon legend for that reason."

"Then why?! Why didn't you just leave us alone?!"

Craning her neck wildly to look over her shoulder at Takatsuki, Miwako shrieked at him.

"You should never have said anything! No, you—I wish an outsider like you had never come to our home! I could have kept waiting with Father forever for Masaomi to return! I could have gone on waiting, wondering when I would see him again, forever and ever! But you!"

"Ms. Miwako, a lie like that can't go on forever."

Miwako continued to fight against him, and Takatsuki kept holding her tightly.

"The truth is, you had a faint idea, didn't you? That Masaomi was no longer in this world."

"Stop it! Shut up! Let me go! I'll die, too! If he's never coming back no matter how long I wait, I'd rather die!"

"You didn't want it to be true, so you didn't believe it. You believed Mr. Kitou's lies instead. His efforts, too, I think they were quite poignant. There's no cell phone reception out here. So I imagine Mr. Kitou must have purposely taken Masaomi's cell phone to somewhere it had service so he could send an email to you. And he sent you packages of foods you like. He probably also somehow went through things like resignation procedures with Masaomi's employer. He did all that, desperately trying to sustain the lie that Masaomi was still alive. For you, Ms. Miwako."

"Doesn't that mean he's just been lying to me this whole time?! That all along I've been tricked into taking care of the man who killed the person I love?!"

"Yes. But you played along with that fiction, with the hope that Masaomi wasn't dead. All you had to do to know the truth was take a trip to Tokyo to visit him, but you never did. But you know, there's always a limit to how much life you can live with the thin veneer of make-believe wrapped around you. Neither lies nor dreams last forever. Eventually, they rupture and collapse."

Perhaps that was why Takatsuki had gone ahead and destroyed that fiction before everything came shattering apart in the worst possible way.

Naoya wasn't so sure they hadn't arrived at the worst possible outcome anyway. Miwako's heart was in pieces, and the moment Takatsuki let go of her, she would probably throw herself over the edge of the cliff.

Then—

"—Enough. Let's end this."

From behind them, they heard Mr. Kitou's voice.

Turning around, Naoya saw the old man standing there with his hunting rifle

in hand.

For a second, he stiffened, thinking Mr. Kitou was going to open fire on them, but the old man just squatted down in the snow. He took off his boots, put the rifle between his legs, and pointed the barrel at his own throat.

"Mr. Kitou! Please don't!"

Naoya rushed to stop him. But Mr. Kitou put a toe on the gun's trigger, and Naoya instinctively froze. This man truly intended to die by suicide.

"... Ever since that day, I had a feeling that this is how I would go out."

Mr. Kitou started to speak, his voice low.

"That night, Masaomi and I spoke out here. He asked me to come here because Miwako would hear us if we talked in the house. He didn't want her to hear us arguing... Masaomi told me to come to Tokyo. He said to leave Sakai and come to Tokyo with Miwako. As if I could do that. The Kitou family is needed in Sakai. Who would pray to Onigami-sama if I was gone? Who would hold services for the heads buried there? Leave here...? How could I?"

And so, that night, Mr. Kitou told his son he wouldn't go.

Then he yelled at him—terrible things.

"I said, 'You don't understand the first thing about our family, you ungrateful wretch.' Masaomi told me I was the one he couldn't understand. He went away to Tokyo for college, got stained with the earth of another land, and became an outsider. The Kitou family—it kills outsiders. That's why. That's why I... I pushed Masaomi into the falls."

Naoya started in surprise.

Just then, when Mr. Kitou had confessed to his crime, his voice had distorted.

He didn't push Masaomi over the cliff.

"I killed Masaomi. So I... I should die, too. Because I killed him—"

"—That's not true."

Naoya had one hand pressed to his ear, partially blocking out that warped voice.

Mr. Kitou looked up at him from his seat in the snow.

"You didn't push Masaomi off the cliff. You didn't even kill him."

"Wh-what are you—?"

"It's true that Masaomi is dead. But you didn't kill him. Perhaps—he lost his footing, all on his own, and fell?"

At Naoya's words, Mr. Kitou shuddered.

## "Y-you're wrong. I killed him—"

"You're lying... I can tell," Naoya said, plainly and resolutely.

The old man stared at him with wide, frightened eyes.

Without Naoya's noticing, Takatsuki had moved to stand beside him. He was still holding on to Miwako, but she wasn't struggling anymore.

She looked at her father-in-law and asked, "Why...? Why did you hide Masaomi's death? Why didn't you tell me...?"

"Miwako..."

Mr. Kitou gazed back at Miwako, and his voice trembled. Tears flowed from the crease-ridden corners of both his eyes, disappearing into his stark white beard.

"Miwako, I'm sorry... It's, my fault. I... I was too weak..."

Suddenly, the old man gritted his teeth.

He readjusted the rifle in his hands, aiming it once more at the underside of his own jaw.

"Father!" Miwako screamed. "Please stop!"

"The Kitou family kills outsiders."

Chin pointed upward, Mr. Kitou continued.

"But *I kil*led one o*f my o*wn, so I'm no longer a member of the family. I'm the outsider now."

The toe Mr. Kitou put back on the trigger moved.

There was a thundering roar.

Naoya covered his ears and squeezed his eyes shut instinctively at the sound of gunfire so immediately close to him, but despite that, his ears still rang.

Terrified at what he would see, Naoya opened his eyes. There, on his knees in front of Mr. Kitou, was Takatsuki.

He was pushing hard on the rifle barrel, forcing its aim off to the side, where it had fired into open air.

"Wh-what are you...?! Why won't you let me die?!"

"Mr. Kitou, please stop choosing death to escape your lot in this life."

Takatsuki looked at him.

"Why do you think death will set you free in the first place? The living don't know anything about what happens after we die. Is there a heaven or a hell waiting for us? That idea may be nothing more than an illusion created to soothe our fears of the unknown."

"Sh-shut up! Let me die!"

"I can't do that. I didn't unravel this story because I wanted you to die."

With a sort of sadness in his tone, the professor explained.

"I just wanted to break the curse. The one put on you and on Ms. Miwako the curse of this family. Before you got trapped in the chains of a twisted story, before you yourselves were twisted by it. I wanted you to be free. That's all."

"Shut up; let me die! I want to die! I'm begging you!"

"You want to die that badly? To leave Ms. Miwako alone? Or were you going to take her with you? The reason you kept up the lie all this time—wasn't it for her sake?"

Another great shudder ran through the old man at those words.

Takatsuki took the rifle from Mr. Kitou's hands. Putting it down near himself, he peered into Mr. Kitou's face.

"If Masaomi's death was an accident instead of a murder, there was no need to hide his body. But rather than notifying the police, you buried him outside the demon cave. Because you didn't want Ms. Miwako to know he was dead, right? You didn't want her to be sad."

"No... No, you're wrong, you're wrong, I..."

Distortion faded in and out of the old man's voice.

"I had...something far more selfish on my mind..."

Mr. Kitou pounded against his knee with a fist. *Thump, thump*—with every hit, more sorrowful words were wrung from his throat.

"I just...didn't...want...to be alone... So I... I..."

His fists came to rest on his knees, clenched and trembling.

Looking up at Miwako with his eyes and voice both brimming with tears, Mr. Kitou confessed for real.

"...If you found out Masaomi was dead, Miwako, you would have left, too, right? Left this house... I didn't...want to be alone. I lied...because...I wanted to keep you here. I didn't want you to leave me... It was all...because of how pathetic I am... Please forgive me, Miwako..."

The old man curled in on himself and started to sob. Despite his fairly large stature, he looked very small—just like a child.

He was just a lonely old man.

Even within the village, the Kitou family was isolated. He had lost his wife, then his son. Truly, the only person he had left was Miwako.

"But then... Why did you say you had killed Masaomi?" Miwako asked.

Mr. Kitou didn't reply. He shook his head, still cowering.

Miwako knelt at his side and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Tell me, why...? Why would you lie about that? About killing him?"

Again, Mr. Kitou didn't answer. Miwako shoved at his shoulder, shaking him.

"That's so cruel, Father. Did you just want to hurt me even more?!"

"That's not it, Ms. Miwako."

Takatsuki interjected. Miwako turned her head to look at him, and he spoke

to her in a quiet voice.

"He lied about that—about killing Masaomi—to make you hate him."

Mr. Kitou jolted. He lifted his snow-covered face to look at Takatsuki.

"...Stop. Don't say that."

But the professor just turned back to Miwako, ignoring the old man's plea.

"When we lose someone dear to us, having someone to blame for it makes things just the slightest bit easier. There's no one to blame for an unforeseen accident. So Mr. Kitou probably decided that, when the time came, he would assume responsibility for all your resentment and hatred and end his own life. That was his way of closing the book on the Kitou family and setting you free."

Mr. Kitou had said, "... Ever since that day, I had a feeling that this is how I would go out."

He had carried that resolution for months.

In exchange for lying to Miwako, he intended to accept the hatred he assumed she would feel and die by suicide. He hoped that, by doing so, Miwako's heart could feel some relief, even if it was only a little.

"Of course, that was his ego speaking. But even so, I think that was the last show of concern Mr. Kitou thought he could give you, Ms. Miwako."

"...Stop it."

Miwako's voice came out quiet and bitter.

Naoya looked at her in surprise.

"You keep saying that— For my sake. What the hell were you thinking?!"

"Ms. Miwako," Takatsuki said, trying to calm her.

Miwako shook her head, cutting him off.

"Is this some kind of joke?! You thought you could save me even a little by doing that? Masaomi dead, you dying by suicide, and me, left alone...? You wanted me to live the rest of my life hating my father-in-law, who I would never even see again?! How is that any different than a curse?!"

Miwako glared fiercely at Mr. Kitou, whose face was crumpled in despair.

But then, the very next moment, her eyes welled up with tears.

They fell down her cheeks, and Miwako rubbed them away obstinately, trying to glare at the old man anew—and failing. Miwako's anger was eroded, eaten away bit by the tears that would not stop coming.

That anger became something else.

"You're really...so, so stupid. All you had to do was tell me."

"M-Miwako..."

"That's all. You could have just told me Masaomi had died. I would never have abandoned you... You're... You're so *stupid...*!"

She spat out the words, trembling, her voice dissolving into tears.

All at once, Miwako threw her arms around Mr. Kitou and started to cry loudly.

Caught off guard by being wrapped in her thin arms, Mr. Kitou flinched back at first. But soon after, his face collapsed into grief. Quiet sobs escaped him, and he slowly, timidly hugged Miwako back. Burying her face in Mr. Kitou's shoulder, Miwako shook and wept.

Then a breeze blew from across the waterfall.

It seemed to carry something away with it—something that had been confined in that land for a long, long time. The wind was marvelously clear and strong, as if it came to wash away in one fell swoop all the stagnation that had been accumulating endlessly in the demon cave, in the Kitou house, and inside the people who lived there.

The two people who had become prisoners of the house that enshrined demons sat with that wind blowing all about them, crying as openly as children.

There were no more lies between Mr. Kitou and Miwako—there was only the unbelievably sad truth.

For a moment, the wind wrapped around them. Then it blew away over the pure-white snow, continuing on and on, far and wide, until it disappeared.

That just may have been the moment when their curse was lifted.

Not long after, Sasakura returned to the house.

Before following them to the waterfall, Mr. Kitou had called the police, so Sasakura and a patrol car arrived at almost the same time. Sasakura had left linuma at the hospital, where he had apparently been admitted.

As soon as he heard what had happened, Sasakura seized Takatsuki by his shirt collar and yanked him forward with the sourest expression Naoya had ever seen.

"...I told you to behave, didn't I?"

"Yep. That's why I didn't do any more diving off of the waterfa— Ow!"

Takatsuki yelped as his friend's fist made aggressive contact with the top of his head.

Naoya looked on from the side, thinking how childish the two of them were being, when Sasakura whirled around and landed a hit on his head, too.

"...Ouch! What are you doing, you thug detective?!"

"Shut it. I told you both to behave. Doesn't he pay you to be his common sense? The other guy brought out a hunting rifle, for crying out loud! What the hell were you two doing?!"

"I'm not working right now! I just came along on the trip! The Voice of Reason is on vacation!"

"Don't give me that bullshit excuse, you little bastard—"

"KenKen! I'm sorry, I was in the wrong, so stop bullying Fukamachi! I'm sorry; it was all my fault!"

Takatsuki hurried to intervene as Sasakura hauled Naoya up by his shirt collar next. A police officer nearby gave them a questioning look.

Though Mr. Kitou hadn't killed Masaomi, he had indeed failed to alert the police to the presence of a dead body, which was its own crime. They were going to take him in for questioning.

As the old man was shepherded into the patrol car and driven away, Miwako

watched. Her eyes stayed fixed on the car for a long while.

"Ms. Miwako."

Takatsuki called out to her, and she responded without turning around.

"—You were right, Professor. I had wondered whether Masaomi was already dead. Father took the bankbook for the account Masaomi's salary was deposited in—it was then."

"...I see."

"He told me he was doing it because he was the head of the family, but... For some reason, when that happened, I thought, I wonder if there's any chance Masaomi isn't alive anymore. But I didn't try to find out... You were right about everything. I was afraid to know the truth. I wanted to believe it couldn't be true."

Miwako spoke in a detached, calm way. She sounded totally composed, but there was no telling what expression she was wearing on the face she refused to show them.

"Ms. Miwako, what are you going to do now?" Takatsuki asked.

Miwako answered, "I don't know. I'll probably stay in this house until everything is settled with Father. But after that... I still don't know."

It struck Naoya as he listened to her reply that, despite everything, Miwako still referred to Mr. Kitou as Father.

She continued to stare down the road the police had driven away on. Not even the patrol car's red taillights were visible anymore, but Miwako kept gazing in that direction.

Mr. Kitou had said he didn't want to be alone.

That was probably true for Miwako as well, Naoya thought.

Perhaps that was why she had bought into Mr. Kitou's lies. Maybe it wasn't just that she didn't want to believe Masaomi was dead.

A large hand patted Naoya once on the head.

It was Takatsuki.

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"Well, Fukamachi—shall we?"

"...Yes. Let's go."
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It was time to return to the bed-and-breakfast.

To go back to where Ruiko was waiting for them with a special cup of cocoa and two cups of coffee.

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"...Whoa, that's really something."

"Wow."

"It's so cute!"
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The marshmallows Ruiko had set aside specially for Takatsuki turned out to be shaped like adorable cats. Each one appeared to be a contentedly smiling cat face, eyes closed, with a paw held up on either side of its head. Floating around in the cocoa, they looked like they were enjoying a fun little swim.

Ruiko smiled as she served each of them their drinks in the inn's dining room.

"Hee-hee. I saw them online and thought I had to give them to you, Professor, so I went ahead and ordered them as a surprise. I really wanted to get dog-shaped ones, but I couldn't find any! Oh, but there were panda ones, and those were cute, too, so I'll give them to you later."

"Thank you, Miss Ruiko!"

Takatsuki waited until Ruiko disappeared back into the kitchen, empty serving tray in hand, before promptly taking a sip of the cocoa, smiling excitedly.

"Ooh, it's delicious, too. I'm so happy."

"But the marshmallows are going to start melting, aren't they? Won't they look a bit grisly after a while?"

"Don't say that! It's cocoa, so it's not like I can stop them from melting!"

"I mean, they're so cute I wouldn't even really expect a thirty-five-year-old man to be having them, but..."

"Why are you always bringing up people's ages, Fukamachi?! Who cares what I drink?!"

Sulking, Takatsuki took another sip of cocoa. Naoya really could not see him as someone in his midthirties when he was in the middle of licking melted marshmallow off his lips.

The dining room was empty except for their group; there was still time before dinner was served. The cocoa and coffee were prepared expressly for them by Ruiko, who was in the middle of preparing food with her mother.

Naoya tasted his coffee, too. It was delicious—superior in aroma and flavor and everything else to the kind he normally drank in Takatsuki's office.

And yet...

For some reason, in that moment, Naoya kind of wished he was drinking that coffee instead.

"Y'know, how do I put this...? This trip turned out to be pretty crappy, didn't it?"

Sasakura muttered that after taking a sip from his own mug. He sounded a bit tired.

They had certainly planned on having a relaxing vacation before everything that happened. It would have been nice to enjoy a peaceful little getaway—instead, they discovered human bones and experienced the dangers of amateur cliff diving.

"Professor, do you think—? Do you suppose the chain letter you got from Nanba is why things ended up this way?"

"Excuse me? What the hell are you talking about?"

Naoya's half-joking question put him on the receiving end of Sasakura's fierce glare.

Reluctantly, Naoya explained the whole incident, though he thought if anyone deserved to be glared at it was Takatsuki, not him. He told Sasakura about Nanba consulting with Takatsuki over the chain letter he had received—and about the professor's solution.

He still couldn't shake the image of those paper dolls fluttering in the wind—or the sight of Takatsuki tumbling over the waterfall the same way. Just thinking

about it made him shiver.

"Dammit, why would you do something so reckless...?"

That time, Sasakura *did* turn his glare on Takatsuki, who looked back at him with a puzzled expression.

"Well, I mean, one of my students came to me all depressed because he thought he was cursed. I had to come up with something; I'm his teacher."

"Okay, but why the hell would you decide to curse yourself?"

"I'm telling you: I don't think I am cursed. Although—Fukamachi seems to feel differently."

Takatsuki looked at Naoya with a wide smile.

Naoya's head drew back slightly at being so easily found out. Takatsuki read him like a book.

But then a horrible thought occurred to him.

Nanba's curse was drawn in by Nanba himself thinking *I am cursed* after receiving that letter.

Which meant, in this case, couldn't one posit that Naoya was responsible?

Even if Takatsuki didn't consider himself cursed, what if Naoya, beside him the whole time, had invited disaster by entertaining that thought over and over? What could he do to fix it?

Takatsuki leaned in a little toward Naoya.

"Say, Fukamachi, have you ever heard the superstition that a bunch of crows cawing on the roof of a house is an omen that someone in that family will die soon?"

"Huh? Ah— Um, now that you mention it, I think my mother said something similar a long time ago... There was a whole flock on the roof of a neighbor's house. I'm pretty sure she said it then..."

Momentarily thrown by the sudden change in topic, Naoya blinked and tried dredging up some old memories.

That was right—years before, his mother had seen a swarm of crows cawing

incessantly at each other on a nearby home, frowned, and said, "How eerie. It's like someone is about to die."

No one actually had died after that, but ever since then, when Naoya noticed a group of crows congregating on a particular roof, it creeped him out.

"Yes, things like that are fairly common folk beliefs—'Crow song is an evil portent of death' and 'Crows gathering on your roof is bad luck.' Coming across a flock of crows is something I would obviously hate, but I think these superstitions spread because many people—not just me—find that kind of sight scary or off-putting. Now then...as for you."

"What? Me?"

"I bet you feel guilty toward me right now. You're worrying that you yourself may have cursed me by wondering if the chain letter is to blame for my falling off the cliff. Am I right?"

Takatsuki was peering right into Naoya's eyes.

He was also entirely correct. In a mumbling, inarticulate tone, Naoya responded.

"...I mean, the way those paper dolls fell and the way you fell were just too similar."

"That's true. But chronologically, it doesn't quite make sense, does it?"

"Chronologically?"

"You clearly saw the paper dolls get blown around by the wind. And when I fell, that memory came to the fore. Because the two events were strikingly similar, your brain drew a correlation between them. But if your recalling the curse resulted in my being cursed, it would have to have happened before I fell over the waterfall. It doesn't make sense chronologically for the consequence to occur before or at the same time as the cause. The cause has to come first."

He was right.

The image of the paper dolls fluttering in the air came to Naoya just as he realized Takatsuki was going to fall. At that point, the professor had already gone stiff with terror at the sound of the birds flapping their wings. By the time

Naoya connected the curse to the situation, it was already a done deal.

"Japanese people have a long history of assigning omens to events retroactively. The superstition about crows on roofs is a good example of that. In reality, it's just people remembering seeing crows squawking on the roof of a house after someone in it dies and thinking, *You know, that* did *seem inauspicious to me at the time.* Since that connection was made after the fact, it cannot by nature be an omen. But as long as the circumstances fit to some degree, a causal relationship will be established. That's how the superstition about crows was born. Many other 'curses' in this country are the same—they're retrofitted to the circumstances when someone notices them. Rest assured, Fukamachi, you weren't the one who cursed me."

That had been true in Nanba's case as well. Once he made the connection to the chain letter he received after a few unlucky incidents, all of his recent bad luck was attributed to the letter's curse.

Naoya had the feeling it was the same for Mr. Kitou and the declaration he had made several times: The Kitou family kills outsiders.

He had probably lived his entire life very keenly aware that members of his family had murdered people from outside of town. So when his son died tragically in front of him, that thought must have been quick to surface. Mr. Kitou had derided Masaomi—whose way of thinking was so different from his own—as an outsider. That memory became associated with the family history of "killing the Other" in Mr. Kitou's mind, resulting in a curse that kept the old man imprisoned. He must have thought Masaomi's death was his fault, that he might as well have pushed his son over that cliff.

"At any rate, you were pretty cool this time around, Fukamachi."

Takatsuki smiled at him.

"It's a rare sight, isn't it? You, calling out someone's lies right to their face without even trying to hide your ability."

"That was..."

For some reason, Naoya faltered.

"I mean... When it seems like someone is going to die right in front of you,

how you might be perceived isn't actually important, is it?"

"Sure, but still—it made me a bit happy, seeing you act on your own initiative like that."

"Oh? I would've liked to see that."

Sasakura was smirking, his eyes narrowing at Takatsuki's words.

"This brat with the perma-frown and hands practically glued to his ears showing some growth, eh? Isn't that great, Fukamachi? Let's tell Ruiko so she can light a celebratory candle or something."

"P-please don't make fun of me!" Naoya said, taking another drink of his coffee to escape the conversation.

He wasn't a fan of having two adult men looking at him with amusement on their faces. They were watching him like proud parents rejoicing in their child's development. Naoya hated it.

"A-anyway! You're always being way too reckless, Professor! Doing something like that today even though I *just* yelled at you about it the night before! What would you have done if Ms. Miwako actually jumped or Mr. Kitou shot his rifle at us?! He was on the verge of killing himself as it was!"

"There was no reason for Mr. Kitou to shoot us, so I figured he wouldn't. I did think there was the possibility for suicide, but I thought it would be fine as long as I stopped him from doing that."

"'As long as I stopped him,' you say, as if it's that easy."

"Well, isn't it? There are people who can kill themselves without hesitating, but the majority will waver a bit before doing anything. I mean, look! I was actually able to stop him, wasn't I?"

Takatsuki smiled, waving the hands he had used to grab ahold of Mr. Kitou's hunting rifle. Naoya didn't understand how someone could have the nerve to calmly hold on to the barrel of a gun in a situation like that. The professor really was strange in all kinds of ways.

Sasakura was glaring at Takatsuki again.

"Look at you sitting there acting like it's all okay just because you managed to

pull that crazy shit. You really need to reflect on your actions this time. You're always saying you regret your behavior, but you never change a damn thing! Does that brilliant brain of yours forget about everything except the stuff you're interested in the minute it's not right in front of you?"

"That's right! It makes things a lot harder for us, you know! I really wish you would stop thinking everything will be forgiven as long as you smile and say you're sorry!"

"Don't expect me to do any more midwinter swimming, got it?"

"And I won't be changing your clothes for you again! It was *ridiculously* difficult, okay?!"

Sasakura and Naoya laid into Takatsuki from both sides.

But for some reason, Takatsuki just sipped his cocoa while looking slightly pleased. If he were a dog, his tail would have been wagging.

"What is with you, Professor? How come you're smiling even though you're in trouble?"

Takatsuki's smile only grew at Naoya's exasperated tone.

"How could I not be happy knowing there are two people who care about me this much? Plus, I think this trip was pretty fun. I mean, we got to eat *houtou*, and Miss Ruiko's mother's cooking is *so* delicious! And we went sightseeing and got to have so many valuable experiences!"

"There should be a limit to how stupidly optimistic you can be."

Though he was even more annoyed, Naoya thought, But that's just the type of person Takatsuki is.

Always trying to see the positives over the negatives. Always trying to offer an interpretation that was even the slightest bit kinder than the bitter, sad truth. As if doing so could turn a curse into a blessing.

Curses and blessings certainly were two sides of the same coin. What mattered was how someone looked at something—one circumstance could be seen in two entirely different lights.

Maybe Takatsuki had been trying to teach that to Naoya this entire time.

However, that didn't excuse him from feeling even a shred of remorse.

"...I see. Then I'll stop worrying about you altogether."

"What? Why?!"

"Because it's a waste of time worrying over someone who is so openly unrepentant."

Naoya turned his head away and sipped pointedly at his coffee.

"—You know," Takatsuki said. "For someone who hates lying so much, Fukamachi, you do it surprisingly often."

"Excuse me? What do you mean?"

"You lied to me back when you first started as my assistant, too, didn't you? You said you observed people as a hobby to hide your ability. That's a lie."

"Th-that was...!"

Flummoxed at being on the receiving end of the type of criticism Takatsuki didn't normally deliver, Naoya looked back at the professor without meaning to. What on earth could he say in response?

Eyes narrowing a little, Takatsuki continued.

"And just now, that was a lie. You're going to keep worrying about me a whole bunch even after today. You're not the kind of person who abandons others, no matter how coldhearted you like to talk. That's why you brought Nanba to me that time."

"You're wrong! I was just paying Nanba back for letting me borrow old exam questions! And I'm already done caring about you one way or another, Professor! I mean it!"

"Don't be silly, Fukamachi. I'm a teacher. I know, of course, that you'll pursue classes in the History Department next year! That means you intend to major in folklore studies and be my advisee!"

Takatsuki pointed at Naoya with a flourish like he was a genius detective from a manga.

But Naoya just shook his head.

"Ah, that's incorrect."

"Huh, how?!" Takatsuki wailed, aghast. "You picked the History Department because my class left a huge impression on you and made you think folklore studies was fun, right?!"

"I did enjoy your class, but the Japanese history course I took was just as interesting. I've chosen a department, but I haven't settled on a major yet."

"B-but..."

Looking utterly dejected, Takatsuki sank low in his seat. Amused, Sasakura started flicking one fluffy whorl on the professor's head.

Watching them, Naoya wondered—if his ability worked on himself, would his voice have sounded distorted just then?

Not even he could be sure.





Surprisingly few childhood friendships continued into adulthood.

kept remained relatively unchanged The throughout company one elementary and middle school. Students usually attended nearby institutions up to that point, so they pretty much had the same friends. But that wasn't the case in high school. Unless kids chose to enroll in a very local high school, there would be a significant change in the faces they frequently saw. They met new people and devoted themselves to study and club activities, and opportunities to spend time with their elementary school friends would almost entirely disappear. And that became even more true once they graduated. Some people went to college, others joined the workforce; social circles and daily rhythms transformed entirely based on the paths people walked. Then, before they even realized it, their childhood friendships were so far behind them that they couldn't even remember what those friends looked like. That was probably the norm. Most people parted ways with their childhoods just like that.

Sometimes, Kenji Sasakura wondered why—in spite of all that—one of his childhood friendships had lasted into his midthirties.

"There's somewhere I want to go on my next day off, and if it lines up with your schedule, I want you to come with me. Also, I bought that wine you like, so come over if you want to drink it."

On a rare day when Kenji had finished work early and was about to go home, he received that text message from an old friend.

That friend had a totally different job and workplace than Kenji, but he sent those kinds of texts often.

"I'll head over now."

He fired off that response and got one back—"Okay"—almost immediately.

Of the friends Kenji had when he was little, this was the only one he still regularly saw.

Kenji felt like their relationship could best be described as an obligation on his side, since quite frankly, given the particular experiences his friend had as a child, it simply hadn't been possible for Kenji to walk away from him. His friend was rather immature in many ways, and Kenji, who often ended up taking care of him, had been called his personal babysitter more than once.

Still, Kenji didn't think it was especially bad at his age to have an old friend who casually invited him over for drinks...even if that friend did cause him no shortage of trouble.

From the very beginning, the way they met had been strange.

It happened in their first year of elementary school, in the spring. On a Sunday, he thought.

At the time, Kenji's grandfather was a kendo instructor at a local dojo. Kenji had been attending classes at the dojo since he was in preschool and would also receive lessons in the garden on his days off, if his grandfather felt like giving them.

Kenji liked kendo. It made him feel like a sword-wielding character in a manga or an anime, which he thought was cool, even if cinematic swordfights were actually pretty different. The win-or-lose element was interesting, too.

Grandpa was out on some errand or other that day, and his parents were inside. With nothing to do, Kenji went out to the garden alone to practice.

Slightly worn out, he took a short break from swinging his bamboo sword around...

...and made direct eye contact with someone who was peering at him through a gap in the garden shrubbery.

"Whoa," Kenji exclaimed without meaning to.

There was a kid he didn't know there.

He thought they were probably around the same age, but he had no memory of seeing her at school. A kid with a face like that—soft, fluffy light-brown hair and big, bright eyes—would definitely have stood out to him.

Noticing Kenji's attention, she leaned forward, shoving her unreasonably cute face into the space where the greenery had thinned out.

"That's so cool! I wanna try, too!"

Oh, Kenji thought, hearing the other child speak, he's a boy?

He glanced down at the bamboo sword he was holding.

"This...? You want to try it?"

"Yeah! Hey, can I come in there?" the boy asked in his high voice.

Wordlessly, Kenji pointed toward the porch, which the path into the garden ran alongside.

Right away, the boy pulled back from the shrubbery and ran in through the entrance Kenji had indicated. He was dressed in a bright-white shirt and navyblue shorts and was a little shorter than Kenji.

He reached Kenji on agile feet, then put both hands on his little round kneecaps and bowed once quickly.

"Hello, sorry to bother you."

"...Okay."

Feeling nervous for some reason, Kenji nodded at him.

As Kenji grew, people would often tell him he had a "frightening face" or "looked like he worked in the mafia," but the truth was he had always looked that way, even as a kid. He had never had any youthful charm, and he wasn't particularly good at chatting. Even within groups of kids his own age, he was more likely to be met with fear and avoidance at the beginning.

He felt like this was the first time another child had ever come right up to him with a smile.

"Say, d'you think I could try that, too?"

The other boy's big, round eyes were gleaming.

He accepted the sword with delight when Kenji held it out and immediately started waving it around.

"...No. That's not how you hold a bamboo sword."

"Huh? Then how?"

"Put your right hand like this. The left one goes farther down."

"Like this?"

"Yeah. Straighten your arms more."

Imitating his grandfather, Kenji taught the boy how to grip and wield the bamboo sword. Picking up the techniques in no time, the boy swung the sword with much enthusiasm.

But before long, he looked over at Kenji with a somewhat anxious expression.

"Hey, do you have another one of these?"

"Huh?"

"This. I took it from you, so now you can't do it, too. I'm not supposed to hog things all to myself. It's rude. Or maybe we could take turns using it?"

Kenji was pretty sure they had a spare bamboo sword in the storeroom.

With two swords, they could do a pretend match, and that would definitely be more fun.

"...We have one. I'll go get it!"

Just as he was about to head for the storeroom, Kenji suddenly realized something.

He had forgotten to ask the other boy's name.

"Hey. What's your name?"

The boy stopped swinging the sword in his hands.

"Me? My name? It's Akira!"

He introduced himself just like that, with a smile like a friendly puppy.

"I'm Akira Takatsuki! What about you?"

"...Kenji. Kenji Sasakura."

"Oh? Then I'll call you KenKen! Hey, KenKen, how old are you?"

"Six."

"Me too! That means we're the same age!"

Then the boy held one small, pale hand out toward Kenji.

At the time, Kenji didn't know a thing about fancy customs like handshakes.

Seemingly unperturbed by his bewilderment, the boy grabbed Kenji's hand and gave it a vigorous shake. His smile was radiant.

"Nice to meet you, KenKen!"

And that was Kenji's first encounter with his childhood friend Akira Takatsuki.

Very soon after that, the adults arrived on the scene.

"Ah, Akira! Thank goodness I found you; what are you doing in a place like this?!"

A voice came from over the other side of the shrubbery, and a woman stuck her face through the gap just as Akira had done before.

Crying out a little in surprise, Akira darted to hide behind Kenji.

But at almost the exact same time, Kenji's mother poked her head out of the house.

"Oh, Kenji, you have a friend over? What's your name?"

"Ah, excuse me! Are you the lady of the house?! I'm so sorry, but could I come into your garden for a minute? My employer's son is in there!"

The woman with her face in the greenery called out frantically.

Startled, Kenji's mother looked between the two boys. Kenji, also totally at a loss to explain, kept standing in front of Akira to shield him.

Meanwhile, the other woman managed to find the entrance to the garden

and was staggering toward them, saying "Akira! I've been looking for you!" in a tearful voice. She was a kind-looking, slightly chubby woman wearing an apron.

Apparently realizing there was nowhere to run, Akira peeked timidly out from behind Kenji.

"...I'm sorry, Ms. Katayama..."

"Dear me, you have your mother worried sick, too! You know you can't just leave the house without saying anything! Let's go home right away, Akira!"

The woman—Ms. Katayama—threw her arms around Akira immediately.

Kenji's mother had hurried out into the garden to ask what was going on. Holding on to Akira's hand as if she never intended to let go of him again, Ms. Katayama began to explain the situation.

Akira, it seemed, lived in a big house just down the road. The house had only been built the year before, if memory served. Kenji's family knew the people who lived there had a child, but he went to a private elementary school and was driven around by car every day, so no one had gotten a good look at his face.

Ms. Katayama told them that she worked as a helper around the Takatsuki residence.

"Akira was supposed to go to a ballet lesson this afternoon, but I realized suddenly that I couldn't find him anywhere... Oh my, you've got everyone all in a tizzy. Thank goodness nothing happened to you!"

"My, my, that does sound stressful. I apologize; I just thought my son had a friend over, so I was rather oblivious."

"It's fine; it looks like they had a nice time playing together, so that's good at least!"

While the two women were talking, Kenji whispered to Akira, "...You ran away?"

"Yeah."

One hand still clutched in Ms. Katayama's, Akira nodded.

"How come?"

"...Because." Akira's brow furrowed as he pouted. "Because I have to wear white tights in ballet."

"Tights?"

"Yeah. White ones."

"You don't like white tights?"

"No, that's not it... It's just, at ballet class, another kid's mom saw me in my white tights and said, 'You look like a cute little girl.' People already think I'm a girl all the time! I don't like it. I'm a boy. That's why I'd rather do sword fighting."

"It's not sword fighting. It's kendo."

"Kendo?"

"Yeah. You write it like 'the way of the sword."

Akira looked at the bamboo sword he was still holding as Kenji spoke.

Then, realizing that he had yet to let go of it, he gave the sword back to Kenji and leaned in close.

"Hey. Is it okay if I come play again?"

"Huh?"

"I wanna do kendo! I'll tell my mom I like it more than ballet! So can I come over again?"

Even though he had just gotten in trouble for running away, Akira didn't seem to have learned his lesson at all, Kenji thought.

But somehow, looking into those excitedly sparkling eyes made Kenji feel happy, too.

And so he replied, "Yeah... It's okay. Come over anytime."

Despite saying that, Kenji wondered if he and Akira would actually see each other again.

Even though they were both first-years in elementary school, he more or less understood that they were from two totally different worlds.

Akira lived in a big house and had a maid. He wore pristine, unwrinkled shirts. He went to a different school, and after all, he was the kind of rich young lad who was used to wearing white tights and taking ballet classes. Everything about him set him apart from the average people in the neighborhood, who appeared almost dingy in comparison.

And yet.

"KenKen! I came to do kendo!"

The following Sunday, Akira visited the Sasakura home once more, this time accompanied by Ms. Katayama.

"So guess what? I told them! My mom and dad! I told them I wanna do kendo instead of ballet! My mom said, 'You can't, it's dangerous,' but my dad, and my grandfather, too—they said it was okay! They told me it's good for a boy to be healthy and strong! So that means I get to do kendo!"

Akira delivered that news with so much enthusiasm he seemed liable to soar into the sky.

Ms. Katayama explained to Kenji's wide-eyed parents, wearing a wry smile.

"I apologize. Akira wanted to come here to play again so badly we didn't even ask if it was okay... He said he wants to learn kendo and even went to talk directly to his grandfather about it. I think he probably doesn't have any friends in the area, so he's a bit lonely... Oh, but if it's a bother, I'll take him home."

"Oh no, not at all. No bother whatsoever," Kenji's mother replied, flustered by the expensive-looking packaging on the sweets Ms. Katayama had brought for them. Just then, Kenji's grandfather suddenly poked his head into the room.

"What's this? A friend of Kenji's?"

His grandfather, a seventh-level ranked kendo practitioner, looked like a warrior. He had keen eyes, spoke little, and still stood quite tall for someone his age. The children who came to the dojo were often afraid of him.

For a moment, with a man like that staring down at him, even Akira stiffened up and stopped talking.

Unsmiling, Grandpa asked, "You want to practice kendo?"

Akira blinked.

Then he stood up tall and replied, "Yes! I want to!"

"Then come to the garden. You too, Kenji."

With that, he withdrew deeper into the house, likely heading for the garden through the back.

Eyes huge with excitement, Akira looked back and forth between Kenji and his grandfather's retreating form.

Kenji stuffed his feet into his shoes, grabbed Akira's hand, and pulled him out the front door. Together, they entered the garden through the path by the porch. Grandpa was already there waiting with a bamboo sword in hand. Two smaller, child-size swords lay nearby.

Swinging his sword through the air once with a *swoosh*, Kenji's grandfather declared, "I'm not going to go easy on you, as your teacher. I'll train you hard, so keep that in mind."

"Yes!"

"Yes."

For some reason, Kenji also straightened his posture and responded. He and Akira looked at each other and smiled. At that point, neither of them was thinking about how different their lives were.

They were simply enjoying spending time with another child their own age.

After that, Akira visited the Sasakura family every Sunday.

Children's classes were held at the dojo on Mondays and Wednesdays, but apparently, Akira had other lessons on both days. Kenji's grandfather readily agreed to teach him on Sundays in the garden outside the house.

Although, he wasn't available to teach every week, plus there were days when it rained.

Akira came over anyway.

Even when Grandpa wasn't home, he and Kenji played in the garden if the weather was nice—or in Kenji's room when it wasn't. At first, Ms. Katayama

would stay the entire time to keep an eye on them, but before long, she merely dropped Akira off and returned later to collect him. It seemed the Takatsuki family had decided to place their trust in the Sasakura household.

Akira was a bit of a strange child.

Kenji noticed the way Akira gaped at the children's manga lying around his bedroom. When he asked about it, Akira told him he had never read manga before—or even really watched any anime. Kenji hadn't known such children existed, but Akira's parents had evidently forbidden him from reading or watching any of it.

"They told me I'm not allowed because that stuff isn't very good... But y'know, I kinda wanna try reading it... Hey, could it be our secret?"

"Sure. I won't tell."

At Kenji's nod, Akira gingerly picked up a manga, his cheeks reddening as if simultaneously enjoying the guilt and pleasure that came from committing his first disobedient act.

In no time, he was obsessed.

He flipped through the pages with his eyes alight, almost unreasonably happy, as Kenji watched from beside him. He had read this manga many times over, but he was surprised at how much more fun it was to read it with someone else.

"KenKen, this is amazing! It's so funny!"

"...I have the next one, too."

"There's another?!"

"Yeah."

Kenji took the next volume down off his shelf, and Akira pounced on it with glee.

After that, they pulled out manga after manga, reading each one with their shoulders pressed together. Of course, before Ms. Katayama arrived to pick up Akira, they put back every volume they had taken down, completely erasing any evidence of Akira's wrongdoing. Ms. Katayama regarded her charge's overly

satisfied face with mild suspicion, but Kenji kept his mouth shut. After all, he had promised it would be their secret.

Akira was also a very intelligent child.

Sometimes, he helped Kenji with his homework.

When he did, instead of just giving Kenji the correct answers, Akira taught him how to approach the problems to arrive at the answers himself.

"So when you do addition, it's good to start with easy stuff. When you have eight plus seven, the answer is going to be bigger than ten, right? So first, think about how many you have to add to eight to make ten."

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"Um... Two?"
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"Yep. Eight plus two is ten. So now, since you already used up two, you have to take that many away from seven. If you subtract two from seven, what do you get?"

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"...Five."
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"Yeah. You get five. So now you add that to the ten we made earlier. And you get?"

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"...Fifteen."
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"Yeah, that's right! See? You did it!" Akira said, clapping.

"...Hey. Are you really the same age as me?"

"Huh, why?"

"Because. You sound like a teacher."

"I do ...? Is that bad?"

"No. It's good. You make it easy to understand."

"Oh, okay."

Smiling wide, Akira stuffed a snack cake in his mouth. It wasn't until Kenji was a little older that he realized the only times his mother served them slightly fancier snacks were the days Akira came over.

Kenji was also invited to Akira's house on several occasions.

To Kenji, the residence was so grand—like the mansions he only ever saw in manga—that it looked like a castle. It had a spacious, grass-covered lawn, a chandelier made from countless crystal beads, and a large, circular window fitted with stained glass. It was also where Kenji learned for the first time that houses with fireplaces existed in Japan, too. He was certain that when Santa Claus went to Akira's house, he would go down the chimney and come out the fireplace just like in picture books.

As he had been leaving his own house, his mother had told him very seriously to be on his best behavior, so the first time Kenji set foot in Akira's home, he was utterly stiff with nerves.

Whether he noticed Kenji's demeanor or not, Akira took his hand and brought him to the living room, where his parents were.

"My, so you're KenKen! Thank you so much for always getting along so well with our son! I've been wanting to meet you for a while now, because you're all he ever talks about on Sundays. I hope you can keep being his friend from now on."

As soon as she saw his face, Akira's mother knelt down and pulled Kenji into her slender arms. A sweet scent wafted from her long light-brown hair, making Kenji's heart skip a beat.

Akira's parents made him take all kinds of lessons and had banned him from looking at manga and anime, so Kenji thought they would be frightfully strict and awful. But when he actually met them, that wasn't the case at all.

Akira's mother was very beautiful. She looked like a doll with her delicate face, long limbs, and kind features. His father, a slim and handsome man, looked at Kenji with a smile and said, "Thank you for teaching Akira kendo." They seemed like the appropriate owners of such an elegant house, and it was obvious that they both loved their son very much.

Pictures of Akira's mother in a white outfit adorned surfaces all over the house. She had done ballet for many years before getting married, even winning awards for it overseas.

"So pretty," Kenji said, looking at one of the photographs.

Akira smiled happily.

"My mom was a famous prima ballerina! I've seen her dance in videos, and she was so, so beautiful!"

"I guess that's why she wanted you to do ballet, too."

"...Yeah, but...I hate wearing tights."

"...Yeah."

If Kenji had been in that situation, he, too, would have infinitely preferred kendo over ballet. He didn't think he would be able to tolerate the white tights.

But if Akira hadn't run away to avoid ballet class that one day, Kenji wouldn't have met him. When he thought about it that way, Kenji was kind of grateful to Akira's parents for trying to make him learn ballet.

That was how much Akira's friendship meant to Kenji.

A few hours every Sunday—that was all the time they got together.

They both had good friends at their respective schools, and their everyday lives were probably nothing alike.

Nevertheless, the time they spent playing together was special.

Neither of them had the slightest clue what would happen in the future. They had no worries at all.

They just ran about in high spirits, like a pair of frolicking puppies.

Looking back on those days later on, Kenji had the same thought over and over... It may have been the happiest period of their lives.

Starting during their second year of elementary school, the Takatsuki family invited Kenji to join them at their vacation home for summer break.

They owned a villa in Karuizawa and were planning on spending a week there that year.

Somehow, Kenji managed to get his parents' approval, so one day in August he found himself being driven to the Takatsuki family villa by Ms. Katayama. Stowed in the trunk at Akira and Kenji's request, along with a bag filled with clothes and summer homework, there were two child-size bamboo swords. As

Grandpa always said—one should never forget to practice.

To Kenji, the days spent at the villa were packed with excitement.

After waking up, the boys trained with their swords for an hour, then made progress on their summer homework as promised until lunch. Then they were free. Shoving Ms. Katayama's delicious cooking into their mouths like it was a competition, the boys stood up in unison and announced, "We're going outside!"

The villa, notably, was surrounded by a large forest.

Forests meant adventure.

They even took the time to prepare necessary adventuring equipment: a butterfly net and insect cage for when they encountered bugs not yet known to humankind, squirt guns in case they ran into any adversaries, opera glasses that could be used for both reconnaissance and bird-watching. Even if they slipped and scraped their knees, they felt no pain. There were far more momentous tasks to attend to—like running and yelling among the trees.

For two small boys, the world was endlessly vast and full of charm.

The sunlight filtering through the greenery. Gorgeous butterfly species they had never seen before flying calmly by on graceful wings. Stag and rhinoceros beetles that weren't store-bought creeping over tree trunks. Every single thing caught their attention and fascinated them.

At night, they barbecued outside and played with sparklers. Exhausted by all the fun, the boys did lie down that night but decided they didn't feel like sleeping. They had a contest to see who could stay awake longer, which ultimately devolved into a pillow fight. Ms. Katayama scolded them when she popped her head into the room, telling them to hurry up and go to bed.

It was probably the first time in Kenji's life that he got to play as much as he wanted, all day, every day.

The same seemed true for Akira, as well.

In the middle of one of their midday adventures, the boys got thirsty and returned to the villa temporarily, where Akira's mother served them cold

lemonade.

"I'm so glad you came with us, KenKen," she said then, earnestly. "I've never seen Akira play like this, running around with such energy."

"Yes, indeed," Akira's father chimed in. "I've been thinking how much more subdued he was."

He was settled in a nearby chair reading a complicated-looking book, but he turned his attention to Kenji and continued speaking.

"Akira had no other children to play with last year, so he even seemed bored out here at the villa. As expected, boys should be full of spirit, even if they come home a little muddy."

"That's true, but as for overly rough play... Listen up, you two. Climbing trees is dangerous, so don't do it, okay? And don't go too deep into the woods. Stay where there are actual paths; don't wander off into the trees. You mustn't get lost, understand?"

Akira's mother patted their heads as she spoke. His father chuckled and called her a worrywart, which she answered with a pout and a protest that she was just concerned for their safety. Her sulking face was adorable, even from Akira's and Kenji's points of view.

On their last day of adventuring, the day before they were scheduled to go home, it happened.

As Akira was scouting through the forest with the opera glasses, he found a great purple emperor.

"I saw one! I actually saw one! Just like in the field guide! That was a great purple emperor just now!"

"What's a great purple emperor?"

"It's Japan's national butterfly! Um, it's special for our country! Like, if there was a national team for butterflies, it would be the captain! That was my first time seeing one in real life!" Akira explained, brimming with excitement.

Hearing him call it the captain of the butterfly national team made Kenji picture a truly awesome bug. He *had* to see it.

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"Where did you find it?"

"Over there! Flying between those two trees!"

"Let's go!"
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They scrambled off the path and pushed through the foliage, butterfly net held at the ready.

Stepping over thick, protruding roots to make their way ever farther into the woods, the boys felt more and more like explorers.

Unfamiliar birdsong rang out. A big spangle butterfly flew right under their noses as if trying to lure them away. Looking up, they saw the sun shimmering through a ceiling of overlapping green leaves. The forest—concealing the fabled great purple emperor somewhere within—was unendingly deep.

They lost track of how long they had been walking.

Akira, following closely behind Kenji, suddenly spoke up in an anxious voice.

"Hey, KenKen? We've gone awfully far. We should turn back soon."

"Aw, but..."

Kenji still hadn't seen the butterfly they were searching for.

They were going home tomorrow. This was his only chance. If they only went a little farther...

Without slowing his pace, he looked over his shoulder to tell Akira as much.

And all at once, the ground under Kenji's feet fell away.

"—Ah!"

He had no idea what had happened.

The entire world started tumbling round and round without warning, so that Kenji couldn't even tell the sky from the soil. When the spinning finally stopped, there was a dull ache all over his body. Thoroughly stunned, Kenji blinked a few times, not even able to cry. After several seconds, he realized he was lying face down in the dirt but still didn't understand how he had gotten there—or where he even was. Kenji looked around in a panic but could not find Akira anywhere. Abruptly thrown into somewhere totally unfamiliar all by himself, he felt

helpless. His heart squeezed tight in his chest.

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"-KenKen!"
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Suddenly, he heard Akira's voice.

His scratch-riddled arms and legs stung as he scrambled to his feet.

"KenKen, are you okay?!"

"...Akira."

Kenji was standing at the base of a tall, steep, grass-covered slope. A swath of the grass—leading in a straight line to the bottom—had been crushed by something. At last, Kenji's brain made sense of the fact that he had tumbled down the slope by accident.

He could see Akira's face peering at him from the very top. Kenji shuddered—he seemed hopelessly far away. It felt like he would never be able to get back up to the place he had fallen from.

"Hold on, KenKen! I'm coming down for you!"

"-No, don't!"

By the time Kenji's frantic reply left his mouth, it was too late.

Attempting to navigate his way down the slope, Akira lost his footing immediately and came rolling down the same way Kenji had.

"Akira! You idiot, why did you do that?!"

"KenKen, are you hurt?!"

Akira jumped up right away and threw himself at Kenji.

Momentarily cowed by his much-too-anxious expression, Kenji just shook his head in silence.

"...Good. I'm so glad."

Akira let go of him, relief clear on his face.

Embarrassed somehow, Kenji asked, "What about you? Are you hurt?"

"...Oh."

As if only just remembering he had fallen, too, Akira looked down at himself.

Just like Kenji, he had scrapes and dirt all over his body.

"Urgh."

Kenji watched as Akira's eyes filled with tears.

Panicked, he asked, "Does it hurt?!"

"...It, h-huuurts..."

"Where?!"

"Here and h-here, everywhere...!"

"Let me see!"

Kenji looked Akira over as the other boy started to wail. He had cuts and scratches and bumps and bruises, but nothing that was bleeding heavily or appeared to be broken.

"Akira, you're okay! Stuff like this will get better in no time!"

"B-but it hurts..."

"Once we get back and have someone take care of you, you'll be fine, okay? So come on, hurry—"

Let's go home, Kenji was about to say. Then he remembered.

He gazed up at the top of the slope.

The way home was up there.

It did not look like something they would be able to climb on their own.

That was when Kenji finally noticed—it was getting dark.

The sun had started to set.

He hadn't been paying any attention while they were walking earlier.

The voice of Akira's mother—telling them "don't go too deep into the woods"—echoed in his head.

Don't wander off into the trees, she had said.

She was worried about them getting lost.

...What do we do now? Kenji wondered.

Lost was exactly what they were.

At any rate, there was nothing to do but walk.

Scaling the slope was impossible, but even if they couldn't go up, there had to be another path somewhere. As long as that path led them to someplace people were, it didn't matter if that place wasn't the Takatsuki family villa. Whether it was somebody else's house, or even a highway, all they needed was to get out of the woods and find some sign of civilization.

Kenji grabbed Akira's hand—the other boy was still crying—and started walking.

Both the butterfly net and insect cage had been lost somewhere on the slope. The opera glasses, too, had cracked and were no longer functional. The only surviving pieces of equipment were the water pistols in their pockets.

His legs and arms hurt all over, and what Kenji really wanted was to stay crouched in that spot and start crying, too. But they had to get Akira back to the villa as soon as possible, so somehow, he forced himself to move. After all, Akira's parents and Ms. Katayama must be worried. Kenji needed to get his friend home right away to have his injuries tended to.

But they walked on and on for ages without encountering a single house or road.

If anything, the forest had only grown thicker and darker.

The woods at night were unimaginably terrifying.

It was so dark. There was no light anywhere. The star-strewn sky floating far above their heads seemed infinitely brighter than the surroundings they half crawled through. Kenji picked up a broken tree branch along the way, sweeping it out in front of them to stop them from walking into any trees or tall grasses and feeling for twisted, snakelike roots with his feet. Every time a piece of undergrowth brushed against his ankle, he shivered. A hoarse cry resounded somewhere, and he wondered if it came from a bird. Or perhaps it was the sound of something shrieking as it died? The grass ahead of them seemed to be rustling, as if some creature had just passed them by.

After all, they weren't the only ones in the forest.

There might be snakes. Or bears.

Or something even scarier.

...What was scarier than that?

"KenKen. KenKen, wait. Stop."

Akira tugged on Kenji's hand.

Kenji turned around, but even though Akira was right there, he could hardly see him.

"Where are we going?"

"...If we find somewhere with people, they can help us."

"I don't think it's a good idea to wander around randomly. We could get even more lost or fall again."

"But—"

"It's so dark... It's probably better not to walk too much, I think."

His voice still trembled a little, but Akira didn't sound like he was crying anymore.

He suggested they sit down, so Kenji did, setting the branch he had been clutching right beside his leg so he could reach it whenever he needed to.

Akira sat down next to him.

"I bet everyone is looking for us. As soon as it gets lighter out, I'm sure they'll find us right away... So until then, we have to be safe."

"...Yeah."

Kenji nodded.

Akira was smarter than him, and he seemed to have calmed down, so Kenji felt like it was safer to let him take the lead.

But sitting there in the dark only made the fear worse.

The sound of the grass shaking in the wind seemed unreasonably loud in

Kenji's ears. He felt like something that was big enough to swallow them both whole was going to emerge from the underbrush at any moment. He couldn't see a single thing, after all. How would they know if some awful beast was approaching?

If Kenji had to choose one good part of the dark, it would be that Akira could not see the way his face looked right then.

"...KenKen," Akira said. "Can I get a little closer?"

Without waiting for a response, he pushed himself up against Kenji's side even more.

He was shivering, Kenji realized.

"Are you cold?"

"No... I'm scared," Akira answered. "I hate the dark. It's scary."

"...I don't like it, either. The dark."

"Hey, what are we gonna do if a monster shows up?"

"Th-there's no monsters!"

"There are. Ms. Katayama told me last year. She said, 'Monsters appear in the woods at night, so you absolutely must not go there.'"

That was just something adults made up to stop kids from going into the forest alone after dark. There weren't actually any monsters. Adults just said there were.

For some reason, even though that was what Kenji wanted to say, the words got stuck in his throat.

Kenji groped for the branch he had set down and pulled it closer, gripping it as hard as he could.

It wasn't a bamboo sword, but Kenji felt just a little stronger with something long and wooden in his grasp. *That's right*, he thought. *If any monsters show up, I just have to fight them with this.* 

But as he stared into immediate darkness, his courage grew brittle and crumbled to pieces.

He hated the dark. He hated being afraid.

Despite his best efforts, he could feel himself losing hope.

What if they never made it out of the forest? The possibility made Kenji want to cry.

"...I'm sorry."

Suddenly, Akira piped up.

"Sorry for what?"

"Well, because it's my fault... I'm the one who said I saw a great purple emperor."

Kenji could hear in Akira's voice that he was on the verge of tears again.

"KenKen, I'm so sorry... If we can't go home, it's my fault."

"You're wrong!"

Slamming his shoulder into Akira's with a *thump*, Kenji talked over the other boy's sniffling.

"I'm the one who fell down first. If I hadn't, we wouldn't be here."

"Yeah, but—"

"Anyway, I wanted to see the great purple emperor, too," he said, rooting around in his pocket until he found what he was looking for.

Kenji pulled out the squirt gun and held it near Akira's face.

"Akira, here."

"Huh? What is it?"

"Water. Drink some. You'll feel a little better."

Akira opened his mouth, and Kenji poured a bit of liquid into it. The toy pistols were now their precious source of drinking water.

"...It's good. You have some, too," Akira said, letting Kenji drink from his own squirt gun.

Wiping at a trickle of water that had escaped from his mouth, Kenji felt Akira

searching his own pockets again.

"—Ah, found 'em! KenKen, I have some caramels!"

"Huh?"

"Ms. Katayama gave them to me! She said they were snacks for us to share!"

The crinkling sound of paper was followed by Akira dropping a single piece of caramel into Kenji's hand. Kenji unwrapped it and popped the candy into his mouth, feeling the sweetness melt over his tongue. The caramel stuck fast to his teeth the second he tried biting into it, but as he licked at it little by little, Kenji's emotions gradually settled.

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"...Akira."
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"What?"

"The great purple emperor. Was it pretty?"

"...Yeah. So pretty. Even better than the pictures."

"Oh. I wish I could have seen it, too."

"...Mm-hmm."

"Let's look for it together next year, too."

"Huh...?"

Kenji could feel Akira's eyes on him. Still sucking away at the caramel, he continued, "I mean, we're going home tomorrow. So let's look for it again next year."

"—Yeah!"

It was too dark to tell, but Kenji had a feeling Akira was smiling like he always did.

Then—

A short distance ahead, there was a flicker of something whitish.

Kenji squinted into the darkness, wondering what it was.

Then, without meaning to, he let out a small yelp in surprise.

It was a person.

A person was standing there.

It was a woman in a white shirt. She was looking at them and waving.

She wasn't someone Kenji knew, but she was undoubtedly beckoning in their direction.

Maybe the local residents had been informed of there being two lost kids in the area, and everyone was out aiding in the search.

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"...Akira. Help is here."

"Huh?"

"Look, can't you see?! Over there!"

"What, where? I really can't see anything."

"Come on, this way!"
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Grabbing Akira's hand, Kenji headed toward the woman.

Seeing them running after her, the woman started walking. She probably wanted to get them home quickly because everyone was so worried. Faster than Kenji and Akira could keep up, the woman moved at a brisk pace through the woods.

But every so often, she looked over her shoulder, confirmed that they were still following, and nodded a little as if to reassure them. It was impossible to get a good look at her face in the dark, and she didn't say a word, but Kenji felt that the woman had a kind atmosphere about her. Something told him that as long as they followed her sure-footed form through the dense forest, they would absolutely make it out.

That turned out to be correct.

Eventually, a white light came into view—the glow of a streetlamp.

At long last, they had managed to emerge from the forest, coming out next to a road.

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"Akira, it's okay now! We're safe—"
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Kenji turned to Akira, who he had been pulling along by the hand the entire way.

What? he thought.

The woman, in front of them until only a moment ago, was somehow standing just behind Akira.

Inexplicably, the atmosphere surrounding her—which Kenji had thought of as gentle while she was guiding them through the woods—had done a complete about-face. Now, the woman's presence was a little frightening.

With the woman now standing so close, Kenji could see her clearly. She was wearing a white shirt and black pants and looked to be around the same age as Kenji's mother. Her hair was a bit unkempt. Neither her pale face nor colorless mouth betrayed any hint of an expression.

She was staring directly down at Akira—her eyes were pitch-black.

"KenKen, we did it! We got out of the forest! We get to go home!" Akira exclaimed, delighted.

Just then, as if to respond to something Akira had said, the woman's lips moved.

Kenji did not remember hearing her voice.

But he understood what she said nevertheless.

My boy.

Those words. The woman gazed at Akira, and those were the words she spoke.

"...No!"

Instinctively, Kenji shouted.

He yanked on Akira's arm, pulling him away from her.

The woman lifted her face.

Her black eyes—two spheres of rabid, condensed obsession—shifted to fix on Kenji, and ever so slowly, she raised one thin white hand out toward him.

Again, her lips moved.

That's my boy.

I'm taking him with me.

"You're wrong!"

Still holding on to his broken tree branch, Kenji moved to brandish it like a kendo sword.

"He already has a mom! He's not yours!"

With a yell, he swung the branch.

The woman recoiled from him.

Taking advantage of the opening, Kenji grabbed Akira and ran for the road. When he felt the ground under his feet change from dirt into asphalt, he glanced back. The woman was still standing among the trees. She stared intently in their direction but didn't appear to be following them. It was too soon to let their guard down, though. She was an adult. If she chased them in earnest, she might catch them.

"KenKen?! KenKen, what's wrong?"

"Don't worry about it; just run!"

Kenji took off down the streetlamp-lined road at full speed, never letting go of Akira's hand.

Before long, they saw flashlight beams up ahead. There were two adults walking toward them.

"Akira?! Kenji!"

"Ohh, thank goodness, we found you! We've been looking everywhere!"

The two adults were Akira's father and Ms. Katayama. Spotting the boys, they rushed over frantically.

"Father! Ms. Katayama!"

Akira let go of Kenji's hand, jumped into his father's arms, and started crying all over again. His father picked him up and held him close, tearfully whispering

over and over, "Thank goodness."

Watching them, Kenji felt relieved.

He was so, so glad he had managed to bring Akira home to his parents.

"Oh dear, thank goodness you're safe, Kenji!" Ms. Katayama said then, wrapping him up in a hug.

The moment he found himself enclosed in the softness and warmth of those arms, something inside of Kenji that had been stretched taut for hours snapped.

Ms. Katayama stroked Kenji's head countless times as he suddenly began to sob. He heard her say repeatedly, "You did it. You're safe," and Kenji looked over his shoulder one last time.

The dark forest remained, but the woman was nowhere to be seen.

Back at the villa, the boys washed the dirt from their bodies in the bath and had their injuries treated by Ms. Katayama.

They were certain there would be a dreadful scolding in store. But as neither Akira nor Kenji could stop crying, and Akira's mother, waiting for them at the vacation home, was so overwhelmed with worry and relief that the tears kept pouring from her eyes, too, they got off without a lecture that night. According to Ms. Katayama, however, Kenji's parents had already been informed of their going missing and safe recovery over the phone.

"I believe they're planning on giving you a talking-to once you're home, so that's what you can expect!" she said. Kenji would probably suffer his mother's wrath the minute he stepped through the door.

"...My mom is scary when she's angry...," Kenji muttered unintentionally, and Akira smiled at him.

"But you get to go home. Isn't that great?"

You can say that again, Kenji thought.

If they hadn't made it out of that forest, he would never have seen his mother again.

Ushering them into the children's room, Ms. Katayama told them it was time

to sleep. The room contained one bed—for Akira—and one futon, for Kenji.

But that night, instead of climbing into the bed, Akira carried his pillow over to Kenji's futon and got under the covers.

"Let's sleep together, since it's the last night."

"...Okay."

They were leaving the next day.

There was a skylight in the children's room. For a little while, the two of them stared up at the night sky through the glass, not saying a word.

Eventually, Akira squirmed around until he was facing Kenji.

"...Hey, KenKen?"

"What?"

"Um, well... Earlier, who were you talking to?"

"Huh?"

Turning so they were looking at each other, Kenji blinked at Akira in confusion.

Staring back at him intently, Akira continued, "When we made it out of the forest. You said 'You're wrong!' to somebody. Who was it?"

"You...don't know?"

"I mean, besides us, there was no one there."

"...What?"

Kenji blinked again.

Akira had to be playing a joke on him.

That woman had been there.

The one who showed them the way through the woods.

But Akira gazed at him with his big, round eyes and said, "No one else was there. Nobody."

Then...that woman was...

A terrible chill ran down Kenji's spine.

"...!"

Kenji pulled the light summer sheets over his head and curled into a little ball. He didn't like the thought of his head or any of his limbs poking out from under the futon.

In retrospect, several aspects of the woman had been odd.

How she made no noise at all. How she suddenly appeared behind them when she should have been in front. And above all, how she had moved confidently through the dark forest without so much as a flashlight.

"KenKen. KenKen! Hey."

"...I'm going to sleep!" Kenji replied from under the covers. "You too, go to bed already!"

He heard Akira grumbling about something for a little while, but it wasn't long before the other boy snuggled up to Kenji and fell asleep.

Kenji couldn't sleep at all.

He wondered why the room had a skylight.

What if he stuck his head out of the futon in the middle of the night and looked up, and the woman was there staring down at him through the glass?

On the verge of tears, Kenji stayed curled in on himself under the blankets and waited for morning to arrive.

He envied Akira's peaceful, even breathing. The other boy didn't stir an inch even when Kenji gave his cheek an experimental pinch. Akira really was a lucky guy.

Even now, as an adult, Kenji didn't know who that woman in the woods had been.

He couldn't write off what he had seen that night as a dream or an illusion.

The reality was, that woman had helped them. Without her guidance, it was quite possible the two of them would have ended up in serious danger.

But why had her demeanor changed so dramatically at the last second?

Did the image of a child trying to walk away from her bring her own child to mind? Or had Akira just resembled the woman's son coincidentally?

Kenji had considered trying to find out if people had died in those woods—and if so, had any of them been mothers? Ultimately, however, he abandoned the idea. He had a feeling it wouldn't make much of a difference.

Kenji was invited back to the villa several times after that summer, but he was strictly forbidden from going into the forest, and he never saw that woman ever again.

He also hadn't encountered anything similar to her since, nor did he want to. If he had his way, he wouldn't have to see things like that for the rest of his life.

Yet for all that...

"Ah, KenKen, come in! You must have worked hard today! I was just watching a TV special about ghosts that I recorded a while back. Want to join me?"

"Are you trying to piss me off?!"

His childhood friend greeted him like that the moment he opened the door to his condo, and Kenji whacked him over the head without a second thought.

The friend Kenji had wandered the forest with that night had become an academic who studied spirits and urban legends—the stuff Kenji hated. He couldn't say for sure how that had happened. This friend, after all, had been through all kinds of things... Truly, his experiences were many.

Nevertheless, this childhood friend was still at Kenji's side, laughing as if nothing had changed since the old days.

Kenji had a feeling they would probably carry on spending their time together like this for one reason or another.

He was fine with that possibility—liked it, even.

Childhood friendships rarely lasted into adulthood.

But since theirs had already survived for so long, Kenji didn't mind if they kept it going—even if they stayed like this forever.

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Associate Professor Akira Takatsuki's Conjecture Mikage Sawamura

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