

# Associate Professor Akira Takatsukis Conjecture



Thus, the Gates to the Spirit Realm Open

Mikage Sawamura



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It was April. Naoya Fukamachi had become a second-year student in Seiwa University's History Department.

In their first year, students were all lumped together under the umbrella of "liberal arts," but from their second year onward, they were divided into three departments: literature, history, and psychology. Although they wouldn't choose their majors until they were in third year, Naoya had heard that second year was when courses started getting more specialized and students were assigned more reports than in first year. In the *Campus Life Guide*, which was prepared by the student council and distributed upon matriculation, students were advised to "try earning as many general education credits as possible in the first year, because specialized courses can be rough."

This same time last year, everything had been new to Naoya, and he had found it difficult to relax. But now, embarking on his second year at the university, he was already familiar with college life. He had a thorough knowledge of not only the layout of campus buildings but also the product shelves at the student co-op. He no longer bore the same confused expression as the fresh, innocent first-years who wandered around with maps in hand, wondering things like "Which one is Building 1?" and "Where is the registrar's office?"

At least—that's what he had thought.

"Are you a first-year?! I'm part of the tennis club, BLUE STARS! Nice to meet

"Brain Thieves, the drama club, will be performing its new sci-fi historical drama, *Until Next Time, Hell's Paradise*, today in club hall 2A at six PM! We have priority seating for first-years, so please take advantage of it!"

"I'm from the divination club! We're having a mixer today! Using Four Pillar astrology, Western astrology, tarot readings, numerology, and divining rods, our upper-class students can predict anything and everything about you! Please join us!"

Club recruiters swarmed Naoya like a school of hungry piranhas, trying to lead him to their clubrooms at the slightest opportunity. He managed to evade them somehow, scrambling inside one of the school buildings, only to find fellow second-year Youichi Nanba there, pointing and laughing at him.

"Ha-ha-ha! You got mistaken for a first-year?! That's so lame, Fukamachi! Seriously!"

"...Shut up," Naoya replied, straightening his dislodged glasses.

As he was fixing the shoulders of his shirt, which had been tugged out of place, he noticed something flutter to the ground at his feet. It was a flyer that one of the recruiters had shoved into his bag of their own volition. Sighing, Naoya picked it up and threw it away in a nearby garbage can.

April was when all the student clubs worked frantically to gain new members. Just like the year before, the school's main thoroughfare was lined with club recruitment booths, making it look just like a festival. Upperclassmen carrying stacks of flyers called out fervently to any new students who walked by. But unlike in high school, they couldn't use the color of people's indoor shoes or their badges to discern what year those people were in. They appeared to be guessing based on facial expressions and general vibes, but sometimes, like in Naoya's case, they were mistaken. Naoya had absolutely no idea which aspects of him were causing these mix-ups, though.

"Listen, Fukamachi. How do I put this? It's like, your style isn't very sophisticated. It's kind of giving the same vibe as a high schooler's."

"That's because I wear pretty much the same clothes I wore in high school."

"Go buy some new ones. At least some black skinny jeans or something. Also, now that I think of it, why not lose the glasses and switch to contacts? Ah, but then again, being a 'four-eyes' is a pretty major part of your image, so if you stopped wearing them at this point... Oh, why not try dyeing your hair instead?"

"Yikes, no. What a hassle... Speaking of, you had black hair in high school, too, didn't you, Nanba? And a uniform."

"I told you to forget about that!" Nanba wailed, covering his hair—which was even lighter in color than it had been the year before—with both hands.

In the student ID photo Naoya had just happened to get a glimpse of previously, Nanba had sported black hair and a rather serious look.

"Fukamachi, do you have Professor Takatsuki's class next?"

"Yeah. You too?"

"Yep. Last year's class was really interesting. Plus, the exam was just a report."

Since Nanba had also chosen the History Department from his second year onward, the number of classes they had in common had increased. Perhaps because of the issue he had helped Nanba resolve at the end of last year, Naoya felt like they were maybe a little closer than before. Nanba also came to sit next to him more often when they were in the same class.

They were headed to the first session of Modern Folklore I.

The course was a specialized one in the History Department that met on Thursdays during fourth period, in room 302 of Building 2. It was taught by Associate Professor of Folklore and Antiquities, Akira Takatsuki.

His general education course, Folklore Studies II, had been rather popular, and it seemed like this one had a high registration rate as well. It wasn't being held in a tiered lecture hall, but it did require a rather large classroom, in which more than half the seats were already occupied. Classes without assigned seats tended to fill in from the back row, but one unique feature of Takatsuki's courses was the tendency of their front rows to fill up first. That day, the front row was taken up entirely by female students.

Finding open spots near the center of the room, Naoya and Nanba sat side by side.

Almost immediately, Naoya was distracted by the voice of the male student sitting right behind them.

"...Yes, I'm sorry, but about today's shift... I'm feeling really ill all of a sudden. I'm going to the doctor in a minute, so could I have the day off...? Yes, I think it's a cold."

The student's voice, interrupted by affected coughs, started distorting wildly partway through his words.

Reflexively, Naoya covered his ears and glanced over his shoulder.

A boy who looked to be the very picture of health was repeating the words "I'm so sorry, really" into his cell phone. Even his apologies sounded viciously warped. Naoya wondered if the female student stifling a laugh in the seat next to him was his friend or girlfriend. As the boy continued, saying how badly his head hurt and that he couldn't stop coughing or feeling nauseated, the metallic screech of his voice hit Naoya's eardrums like a knife, making him wince involuntarily.

"-Fukamachi?"

Nanba's puzzled tone pulled Naoya's attention back.

Naoya whipped his hands away from his ears in a hurry.

"Oh... Sorry, I didn't catch that. What did you say?"

Focusing his attention on Nanba's voice instead of the other student's, Naoya was somehow able to regain his composure.

Still looking a little perplexed, Nanba replied, "I said, what are you going to major in? Have you decided already? Is it folklore?"

"No," Naoya said, shaking his head. "I'm still thinking about it. We have another year to decide, so."

The History Department comprised four major subjects of study: Japanese history, Western history, Asian history, and folklore and antiquities... The last option really did feel like it was tugging Naoya toward it with all its might, but at

the moment, he planned on taking the year to carefully consider his choice.

"What about you, Nanba? Are you going with folklore, since you're taking Professor Takatsuki's class?"

"Hmmm, I haven't really decided yet, either. Western history seems good, too. But Professor Takatsuki's seminar also seems fun... And, I mean, his graduate students are really pretty, y'know? That pretty girl with glasses you talk to sometimes, she's one of Takatsuki's students, right? It would be nice to have pretty older girls around me."

"If you mean Miss Ubukata, she's a second-year doctoral student right now, so by the time we're in a seminar she won't be at the university much... Anyway, Nanba, don't you have a girlfriend?"

"Doesn't mean I can't appreciate seeing a pretty face. Or talking to one. It's no different from the girls who always fight for front-row seats in Professor Takatsuki's lectures because they just like to look at him. It's called 'eye candy."

Nanba's girlfriend was in the tennis club with him, but since she had chosen a different department, they had no classes in common.

While Naoya was talking to Nanba, the student behind them seemed to have finished up his phone call. He was chatting with the girl next to him—his voice clear and undistorted—about a date that evening. But there were still plenty of warped voices audible in the din of the classroom. Pretending to rest his chin on his hands, Naoya covered his ears again.

Just then, the bell rang.

At almost the exact same time, Takatsuki walked into the classroom.

"—Yes, hello. Let's start the lecture."

Takatsuki stood at the lectern with a microphone in hand, addressing the class, and all the commotion subsided like a receding tide. Letting out a small, relieved breath, Naoya put his hands back down.

With a wide smile, Takatsuki looked around the room.

"Today is the first meeting of this class. I'm Takatsuki, the one who will be teaching Modern Folklore I. Pleased to meet you all... Though since everyone here took Folklore Studies II last year, I suppose there's no need to introduce myself now."

Laughter rippled across the room. Everyone there knew Takatsuki really did remember his students' faces. His unusually powerful memory and eyesight had both become common knowledge in last year's course.

This man—wearing a well-tailored three-piece suit on his tall, slender frame and a friendly smile on his movie-star-handsome face—was Seiwa University's much adored associate professor. His good looks alone drew plenty of attention, but even more than that, the content of his lectures was quite unusual.

"Now then, in Folklore Studies II, we covered a wide range of ghost stories and urban legends that are told in modern times. We'll cover basically the same topics in this class. Scary stories, strange tales, urban legends that pretty much everyone has heard somewhere. We'll take a closer look at these stories, which have been divided up into several themes, while considering the state of Japanese consciousness as it links past and present. Our first theme is...the spirit realm."

Takatsuki picked up a piece of chalk and wrote "Spirit Realm" on the blackboard in his tidy hand.

Then, still holding the chalk, he looked back at the students for a moment.

"Today I'll be giving you a rough outline of the theme... I spent a lot of time yesterday thinking about what story to use as an introduction, and in the end felt this one would work well."

As he spoke, Takatsuki wrote something on the board alongside the words "Spirit Realm."

Immediately, some of the class burst into snorts and giggles. For a moment Naoya thought he might even join them.

After all, the words Takatsuki had written were "Kisaragi Station."

"Do you all know this story?" the professor said, pointing to the title on the blackboard and turning to face the students. "If you know it, raise your hand."

A majority of the room did so. Many of them were still snickering.

That was to be expected. "Kisaragi Station" was a famous urban legend.

Looking around and smiling some more, Takatsuki continued, "Ah yes, it seems many of you are familiar with the story after all. But since some of you aren't, I'll give a brief explanation. It first appeared in 2004 on the occult board of the internet forum 2channel in the form of someone asking for advice regarding a situation she was actively experiencing, taking place over multiple posts for a number of hours. The person, who identifies herself as 'Hasumi,' starts off by writing, 'I've been taking a certain private railway for a while now, but things seem strange. This is the train I always commute on, but it hasn't stopped at a station for about twenty minutes.' The train would normally stop every five—or perhaps seven or eight—minutes, but this one hasn't reached the next station. It's late at night, and there are other passengers on board, but everyone except for the post's author is asleep. Essentially, Hasumi is asking if anyone knows what's going on. Since she's doing so via a forum, other users post in response to her with suggestions like 'Perhaps you got on the wrong train' and 'Go talk to the conductor.' Soon, Hasumi informs the forum that the train has stopped at an unmanned station called 'Kisaragi Station.' Hasumi gets off at the stop, and the train goes on without her. Forum users realize there is no stop by that name on the line Hasumi was taking. So where in the world is Hasumi? Users go on to share various theories."

Resonating through the sound system, Takatsuki's voice was slightly high in register for a man's, miraculously clear, and soft. And yet, the story that soothing voice was telling was an internet ghost story that could have been covered on some bizarre TV special. Naoya always thought the school must have a rather open-minded definition of "scholarship," since this was one of its official for-credit courses.

"The area around Kisaragi Station is all grasslands and mountains, and it doesn't seem as though she can call a taxi, so Hasumi sets off into the dark, walking along the train tracks, where she has several frightening experiences. She hears the sounds of drums and bells in the distance and encounters an old man with one leg. Forum users begin to wonder at this point if Hasumi might already be dead. Hasumi then reports that she has passed through a tunnel

called 'Isanuki' and met a person at the end of it who is giving her a ride in his car back to the station. She seems to be under the impression that she's safe, but the other users urge her to be careful. They fear things are going to get strange again. And as expected, in Hasumi's next post, she shares the disturbing information that the car is heading not toward the station, but into the mountains, and that the driver has started muttering incomprehensibly to himself. Her posts stop there, perhaps because her phone battery has died, and the story ends without giving us a clear idea of what Hasumi's ultimate fate is."

Naoya had read about the "Kisaragi Station" story in some online article before. The article had contained screenshots of the actual posts exchanged on the message board at the time. A number of people had replied to the user known as "Hasumi," offering her advice half in jest, their posts riddled with internet slang, while everyone on the message board had followed the story with rapt attention.

"Rather than being a story narrated by one person, the 'Kisaragi Station' story is made up of exchanges between one inquirer and multiple advisers. Such interactions are common on the internet forum in question. Another fairly famous one in the occult genre is the so-called 'Cover Thread.' There's also the 'Train Man' story, as a non-occult example, which was made into a movie and a TV drama. There's a sense of gamelike fun that comes from responding to the inquiries of others in real-time situations. Whether or not the incidents are actually happening is moot at that point. What's important is the shared sense among participants that the stories are indeed real. Indeed, like many other internet posts, the 'Kisaragi Station' story is largely considered to be a work of fiction. It's the sort of story sometimes known as *neta*—internet slang for what is essentially the base idea, root concept, or *seed* of something later expanded upon."

Takatsuki grinned, and many of the students nodded along with him in apparent agreement.

Naoya had had the same thought when he'd read the posts from the forum. Many of the forum users, too, while they seemed to be going along for the ride quite willingly, had posted things like "this is *neta*" and "ur trolling."

"Nonetheless, if you follow the posts from that time, there is an undeniable

tinge of eeriness throughout them, particularly because this happened in an online forum. Just as there's no way to prove that what someone has posted there is true, it's also impossible to determine that it was all a fabrication. On the one hand, you may believe such a story is impossible. On the other, you may want to believe, deep in your heart, in the existence of this Hasumi character who disappeared without a trace from a mysterious train station. That sort of feeling is behind the formation of this story and its being told even now. The 'Kisaragi Station' story remains extremely popular despite how much time has passed since its appearance. Seven years after the original post, a person calling themself 'Hasumi' posted again on a different site, and many similar ghost stories have since been created. On Twitter, people regularly post tweets that say, 'I fell asleep on the train, and when I woke up I was at Kisaragi Station.' There are also a lot of investigative articles and such about it online. I recommend reading some of them if you have the time. They're very interesting!"

Takatsuki delivered that suggestion with an innocent, childlike smile on his face. Between the gleam in his big, round eyes and the liveliness in his voice, he seemed to be really enjoying himself. There probably weren't many associate professors who lectured with such naked enthusiasm.

"So why does the 'Kisaragi Station' story leave such a strong impression on people? In short, it's the story of someone who got lost in the realm of spirits. Narratives about exploring the spirit realm have proliferated since long ago. For example, we have Izanagi's visit to the spirit realm as seen in the *Kojiki*; Urashima Taro's journey to the Dragon Palace; and the story I introduced to you in last year's class from 'Heiji Daito' and 'Senkyo Ibun,' of the boy named Torakichi who went to the realm of the tengu."

Takatsuki's eyes narrowed slightly as he said those words.

Knuckles bent, he rapped twice on the words "Spirit Realm" he had written on the blackboard.

"Yes, people have harbored a strong interest in the spirit realm for a very long time. We believe there is another world, separate from the one we are currently living in. Why is that? Well, to begin with, we have a tendency to perceive the world as being divided into two opposing sides. Within and

without. This world and that world. Ordinary and extraordinary. Us and them. We split the world into separate pieces in our minds. To do that—we draw countless lines around ourselves."

For a moment, Naoya felt like Takatsuki's gaze had flickered to him, and his shoulders nearly twitched in surprise.

Once more, Takatsuki gave them a wide smile.

"The world inside the lines we draw is a calm, safe one. It's the one we're familiar with, the everyday routine that we know and love. Nothing terrible happens in this world. Strange things only occur in the spirit realm, or on the borders between our world and the next. This is because the spirit realm is extraordinary. It may be governed by rules we don't know. A place without the sort of order we're used to could be very dangerous. I think people who have traveled abroad can understand this feeling pretty easily. On your first time in a new country, it's common to feel anxious because you don't understand the language, and the customs are different. The scenery is unfamiliar, and there are even differences in public law and order."

Naoya had yet to travel abroad, but he still more or less understood what Takatsuki was describing. Even just visiting a new city could be nerve-racking, let alone another country.

He had felt that way right after entering college, too. Everywhere he looked were unfamiliar faces, and neither the methods of study nor the way he spent his time within the college were the same as they had been in high school.

Back then, Seiwa's campus had been a world that Naoya was unacquainted with. Even the classmate sitting at his side, Nanba, and Takatsuki, speaking from the lectern, had been total strangers.

Now, after a year, the college had become a thoroughly ordinary place for him.

"In ancient times," Takatsuki went on, "anywhere outside the village you lived in was considered another world. The boundaries of the village were no different from the boundaries of the world. The mountains, forests, rivers, oceans, and so on that stretched far and wide outside the village were beyond human will, and as a result humans saw gods and apparitions in those places. Tengu, kappa, demons, Orochi, trickster creatures like foxes and tanuki. These beings were representations of the wilderness that we could neither comprehend nor control. However—before long, our concern with nature began to subside. With the development of commerce and culture, our surroundings overflowed with all sorts of new things, and our attention shifted from the far-off mountains and plains to what existed in our vicinity. What do you think resulted from this?"

Takatsuki glanced around at the class briefly, but perhaps because no one seemed likely to respond, he merely went on to answer his own question instead of posing it to a student.

"Doors to the spirit realm open where people direct their attention. Which is to say—the other world that used to exist outside human settlements has now found its way inside the towns and villages."

Disquieting sentiments fell casually from Takatsuki's lips without his smile so much as budging.

"In the latter period of the Japanese Middle Ages, demons called tsukumogami were depicted quite often in picture scrolls and the like. Tsukumogami are very old tools and implements which have acquired a spirit. You've probably heard of the 'Tsukumogami Emaki' and the 'Hyakki Yakou Emaki,' which are said to have been created in the Muromachi period. Teacups and lutes that have sprouted arms and legs may be fairly adorable, but their existence meant the appearance of monsters in the immediate surroundings of human lives. The border of the spirit realm no longer began at the boundaries of the town. This trend became even more pronounced in the Edo period. As settlement populations increased, interest in the mysteries of the mountains and the plains waned further, and interest in the creatures we call 'humans' grew stronger. Consequently, stories about strange things happening within towns and villages—ghost stories, in particular—exploded in popularity. Humans and ghosts, which are just the shadows of former humans, became more frightening to us than demons and monsters. The borders of the spirit realm had encroached so far into our daily lives that the mysterious became something that could occur anywhere. Even the family members people shared a home with could be possessed by ghosts and turn into unfamiliar beings. That made it quite difficult for people to feel safe. However—around that time, ghost stories started being associated with entertainment. This is when we began to see Buddhist tales, which were supposed to contain some sort of moral, being divorced from religion and treated as mere scary stories. The Edo period saw the publication of a large number of ghost story compilations, the appearance of ghosts and demons in plays and paintings, and the flourishing of rituals where participants gather to share ghost stories. The concept of ghost stories as recreation continues into the present day."

A story could be scary but entertaining. Or it could be the scariness itself that one enjoyed.

Even in modern times, people enjoyed scary stories. Horror movies, books, manga. Crowds flocked to haunted houses and other spooky events.

Those things allowed modern humans to play in the spirit realm and toy with monsters. Children summoned Kokkuri-san in classrooms after school hours and hid letters bearing misfortune among others' belongings.

It was only when they found themselves embroiled in strange circumstances and losing sight of the boundary between normal life and the spirit realm that people realized just how dangerous such things were.

"To us—people living in the present day—it's no longer unusual that gates to the spirit realm can appear anywhere. Nevertheless, we still notice the same old traditional boundary lines. Even now, we share the sense that strange things happen more frequently at night, rather than during the day, or at twilight, which is the midway point between the two. There's also the idea that the possibility of encountering something terrifying is overwhelmingly higher in areas with fewer people as opposed to crowded places. A school at nighttime, for example. A late-night train that's mostly empty. The slit-mouthed woman and Hikiko-san always wait for us on deserted streets. The ghost stories we tell today are still steeped in the fear of the spirit realm that has been rooted in human consciousness since ancient times. And—there's one more thing. A factor that cannot be disregarded when we discuss modern ghost stories. What do you think it is? Yes, you there."

Takatsuki pointed to one of the female students sitting in the front row.

The girl looked panicked at having been suddenly singled out, but Takatsuki addressed her again.

"You never missed a lecture last year. So, any ideas?"

"Uh... U-um, uhhhh...?"

Takatsuki threw the faltering girl a lifeline.

"It's something you're extremely familiar with. You probably use it every day."

"Huh? Wha—? Oh—cell phones?!"

The girl grabbed her own phone, which had been resting on top of her desk, and held it up as she answered.

Smiling, Takatsuki nodded.

"Yes, that's it. Smartphones and computers, and the online world they connect to. The 'Kisaragi Station' story I mentioned earlier is an urban legend that was born in an online forum. The internet, which a huge number of people use in modern society, has become a place to tell all sorts of stories. This fact can't be ignored. Furthermore, the internet makes it easy to find information which shares a common thread, which means you can gather different information and verify it. It also means that you can add more fake stories to the mix. You could take a picture of some otherworldly character from a minor foreign television program, add a completely untrue caption to it, and give rise to a whole new ghost story. In this way, stories grow, spreading so far they can even cross oceans. Then, before long, people lose interest and the stories disappear, before eventually making a comeback. Regarding the spirit realm in the present era, you could say that the doors which lead to them can be found online. We all carry around tools that connect us to the spirit realm every single day."

While the students listened attentively to Takatsuki's flowing tone, for some reason or another they found their gazes drifting toward their own phones on their desks or in their bags. Their thoughts turned to the intangible but unmistakably real place those phones led to—"online."

And just then—

As if on cue, someone's cell phone started ringing.

Many of the people in the room jumped involuntarily at the sound, their heads whipping around to face the source.

The ringing phone—was Nanba's.

"Wh—! Ah! I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

Pouncing on his phone, Nanba hurried to stop the noise.

Takatsuki looked at him with a wry smile.

"Ah, it's you, Nanba. Your phone has great timing, but please make sure to silence it during class, okay? It's not like you're getting a call from some otherworldly being, right?"

"No, I'm sorry! It was my girlfriend!"

"That's all? How boring. I would have had you call them back right away if it had been from something like in *One Missed Call* or 'Mary-san's Phone Call."

"No thank you! There's no way I would return a freaky call like that!"

Nanba shook his head vigorously at the titles of the Japanese horror movie and the urban legend that Takatsuki had mentioned. Other students burst into laughter; one small chuckle even escaped Naoya. If the phone call had really come from a ghost or monster, there would have been no use arguing with the professor over calling it back. If he needed to, Takatsuki would probably just have snatched Nanba's phone away and dialed the number himself.

It seemed that Modern Folklore I was bound to be another popular course that year.

After the lecture ended, Nanba looked down at his phone with a frazzled expression.

"Damn, that scared the crap outta me... I even told Narumi I had classes until fourth period, ugh..."

"You should put it on vibrate during class," Naoya said, putting away his writing materials. "Was it something urgent?"

Nanba shook his head.

"No, our club is doing recruitment and a mixer after this, so it was something to do with that. She could have just messaged me on LINE! Geez, did she really wanna hear my voice that bad?"

His girlfriend had apparently contacted him through LINE after calling, because Nanba started tapping out a reply. Despite his grumbling, a slight grin found its way onto his face, so apparently his relationship was going well.

"You're handing out flyers, too, Nanba? Make sure you don't accidentally give them to anyone in second year or above."

"We don't just welcome first-years with open arms, y'know. Speaking of, aren't you going to join a club, Fukamachi?"

"Nope, I wasn't planning to."

"If you give one a try, you may find yourself enjoying it! Though...I guess I can't really imagine you spending an afternoon playing an invigorating round of tennis or anything like that. Anyway—I should get going. You heading home?"

"Yeah, I'm done with classes for the day..."

Just as Naoya started to answer, he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket.

He took it out and saw a message from Takatsuki.

"An interesting request came in, so please stop by my office if you have time."

Immediately replying with an "I'll head that way now," Naoya picked up his bag.

"It's work. I've gotta head out, too."

"No worries. Professor Takatsuki again?"

"Yep. See you later."

With a wave good-bye, Naoya left the classroom.

When he set foot in the hallway, he grimaced. The campus was crawling with people this time of year. Clusters of students were everywhere, even in the halls and the stairways. Their laughter and voices echoed off the ceilings and the walls, sounding like they were doomed to ricochet around inside the buildings forever. If any of the voices among them were distorted, their echoes

seemed to make the very air quiver without end, until Naoya felt like he was suffocating. He took his MP3 player out of his bag and hastily jammed the earbuds into his ears.

He left via the back door to avoid becoming prey for the club recruiters out front and headed toward the faculty offices, sticking to the path that hugged the rear of the school building for as long as possible.

As he had expected, there were no students canvassing outside the faculty offices. Naoya took the stairs to the third floor, stopped in front of door 304, and removed his headphones.

He knocked lightly, and heard a soft voice reply from within: "Come in, come in."

When Naoya opened the door, Takatsuki stood up from the large central table where he was working on his laptop with a bright smile.

"Welcome, Fukamachi. I look forward to working with you again this year!"

They had met up several times over spring break, but this was their first interaction since the start of the new school year. Naoya gave a small nod and replied, "Thanks... I'm guessing that means you want me to be your assistant this year as well, huh?"

"Is that even a question? Of course I do!"

"...I mean, even if you give me the puppy-dog eyes..."

When Naoya had first accepted Takatsuki's casual offer of a part-time job, he had thought it was a one-time deal. However, from the start, the professor had apparently considered it an arrangement without an end date.

"Would you like some coffee? The request e-mail is open on that laptop. Feel free to have a look."

As he spoke, Takatsuki walked over to the small table at the back of the office where the coffee maker and kettle were set up.

Naoya sat in a folding chair at the table.

Every time he was in this room, he felt a sense of relief. It had been this way ever since his first visit. Takatsuki's office was quiet, unlike the rest of the

school. The smell of old books permeated the air, mingling pleasantly with the scents of coffee and hot cocoa, blanketing Naoya with a deep feeling of calm.

He pulled the laptop on the table toward himself and peered at the screen, where the e-mail was open, just as Takatsuki had said. It had come through the professor's website, Neighborhood Stories.

#### The message read:

I found your website extremely interesting, Professor Takatsuki.

I'm writing to you because there is something I hope to discuss with you.

It's about the Mystery of 4:44 story which you have many examples of on your site. My colleagues and I were joking around at work the other day, playing a game that was popular when I was a kid—the Curse of 4:44. Several strange incidents have occurred since that day.

I may be misguided in bringing this issue to you, Professor, but I don't know who else to turn to.

I would be very grateful to receive a reply if you are able.

The requests that came to Takatsuki were similar in content to horror manga and TV specials, just like the topics he covered in his lectures. Some people probably thought believing in such "childish stories" was stupid.

But the majority of Takatsuki's clients were adults. They all came to him, faces writ with anxiety, asking earnest questions about things like curses and ghosts. The sender of this e-mail had mentioned "colleagues," so they were probably a working adult with a corporate job.

Naoya didn't think the people who contacted Takatsuki spent their daily lives believing in the occult. But when they found themselves in situations they could only think of as supernatural, they had no choice but to believe in it. How old they were didn't matter. As soon as the thought of ghosts or curses popped into their heads in relation to events happening before their eyes, that was that. The fears and anxieties that welled up from the depths of their hearts couldn't be quelled through self-assurance.

That was why they turned to an expert.

But it was difficult to jump straight to seeking advice from a psychic or a spiritualist. Most people hesitated to do so, worrying they might fall victim to a scammer or be asked to pay exorbitant fees for such services.

By comparison, Takatsuki's "associate college professor" title made people feel much more at ease. That was probably the reason his site received a neverending stream of such requests, even though it didn't explicitly say anywhere that he was available for consultation. Any request involving the supernatural was one he received with great enthusiasm, though, which made the consultations mutually beneficial for both Takatsuki and his clients.

"Professor, what's the Mystery of 4:44?" Naoya asked as Takatsuki returned to the table with a tray in hand.

He had an inkling he might have read about it while browsing Takatsuki's website before, but he didn't quite remember.

Placing Naoya's mug of coffee down in front of him, Takatsuki tilted his head to the side.

"Ah, maybe it wasn't popular when you were a child? Have you heard of the 'four o'clock hag'?"

"Ohhh, that does kind of ring a bell... Wasn't it something like, if you do some specific thing at 4:44, a ghost will appear?"

"Yes, that's the one."

Takatsuki nodded and sat down in the seat next to Naoya.

As usual, his mug was filled to the brim with cocoa—this time with big, pink, heart-shaped marshmallows floating on top. Apparently, every time one of Takatsuki's graduate students happened across marshmallows with unique, adorable shapes, they bought them for him. It might have seemed like something too cutesy for a thirty-five-year-old man to enjoy, but with Takatsuki's youthful features, the drink suited him perfectly.

Bringing the cup to his face to savor the sweet aroma wafting up from it, Takatsuki said, "The 'four o'clock hag' is one of the ghost stories that commonly

makes the rounds in schools. The standard version goes: On the fourth day of the fourth month, at forty-four minutes and forty-four seconds past four, if you knock on the bathroom door four times, the four o'clock hag will appear and steal you away to some desolate place. There are many variations, including some which don't go so far as to specify minutes and seconds in the time, and some where the hag doesn't take you to the spirit realm—she just appears. In some versions, the hag kills you, and in others, there's no bathroom involved."

"I think the one I heard said she appears in the bathroom of the school gym. I didn't know there were versions without a bathroom."

"Oh? The story is set in quite a few places, actually. Libraries and classrooms and such. My favorite variation says if you draw a circle on a school chalkboard and press your hand into it at 4:44 PM, the four o'clock hag will appear and drag you into the board. It's pretty scary!"

Takatsuki laughed with genuine delight. Naoya wondered to himself what kind of person smiled that brightly while telling a horror story. If Sasakura were there, he would have scowled in disgust for sure.

"Why does the four o'clock hag show up all over the place like that?"

"Probably because the location in which one encounters her is not a part of the four o'clock hag's identity."

Takatsuki lifted his mug to his mouth and gulped down a half-melted marshmallow, his eyes closing halfway in satisfaction.

"Take 'Toilet-Bound Hanako-san' as an example. The bathroom setting is a central part of the character's identity, so it would be odd for her to appear anywhere other than a bathroom. But the four o'clock hag's identity is only based around the number four and being an old woman. Therefore, the limits placed on where she can appear and what she can do are rather lax. I think that's made it easier to blend it with other ghost stories. The fact that she might appear in the toilet in the first place is probably a result of her tale being combined with another bathroom ghost story. Knocking is also the method of summoning Toilet-Bound Hanako-san, for one thing, and some versions even involve the hag asking a question like 'Red or blue?' Similar to 'Red Hanten.'"

"Seems like pretty much anything goes with this story."

"Yep. In fact, some variations even omit the 'hag' part of the equation."

"Huh? It's really okay to leave that part out?"

Naoya froze unintentionally with his mug halfway to his mouth.

It was said that stories changed in the telling. A tale's core elements would remain, but anything else could be pruned away or exchanged for something entirely different.

But the four o'clock hag's story was, in short, one in which the scary ghost of an old woman appeared. How could it still be viable without the old woman?

After another sip of cocoa, Takatsuki answered.

"It doesn't really make a difference, because the most essential component of the story is the number four. I believe it actually originated from the idea that 'if you perform a specific action at 4:44 and 44 seconds, something bad will happen.' That bad thing being the summoning of a terrifying crone was likely a later addition."

"What happens in the versions where the hag doesn't appear?"

"Many of them fall into the 'getting spirited away' category. Being transported to a totally different room, falling through a time warp, or getting sucked into another dimension. That sort of thing. Even in the version with the hag, she's often stealing people away."

"Even though it's a ghost story, it doesn't seem like death or curses are involved."

"Those variations do exist, but they're rare. There are also ones with writing appearing on the ceiling in blood, and ones that involve other specters. It has sort of a 'grab bag of scary story elements' feel to it."

"...Then I wonder which version it is in this client's case?"

Naoya turned his attention back to the laptop.

The e-mail only mentioned a "Curse of 4:44." There were no details regarding how the curse was invoked, and as for consequences, these had been summed up as "strange incidents." He didn't expect that some ghostly hag had appeared or anything, but what *had* happened?

Then, getting the feeling that someone was staring at him, Naoya looked at Takatsuki again.

The professor was gazing at Naoya with his chin resting in his hand. He looked strangely pleased. At moments like this, Takatsuki really did remind Naoya of a big dog. He could almost imagine a large golden retriever sitting there, happily wagging its tail with a *whap-whap* sound. Takatsuki's light-brown hair only strengthened the image.

"Wh-what is it?"

"I was just thinking that, regardless of what you say, you're fairly interested in this job, Fukamachi. I'm glad. That's very gratifying to me as your employer."

Takatsuki gave him a wide smile.

The man always stated clearly that he was happy whenever he felt that way. The open, straightforward expression of his emotions still threw Naoya for a loop. It was so starkly different from Naoya's own nature that he never knew how to respond.

Dropping his gaze to the dog pictured on his mug, Naoya muttered, "Well, I mean...it's like a continuation of the lecture. Hearing about the stories is interesting... Besides, doesn't it make you wonder what is happening to this person? Once you've heard this much."

"Yep, you're right, it does make me wonder! So let's go hear them out, okay? Oh—and by the way, when you choose to major in folklore and antiquities next year and join my seminar, you can write about something like this for your graduate thesis! I'm sure the research would be fun!"

"I told you before that I haven't decided on a major yet! I really wish people would stop trying to recruit me. I'm getting tired of it."

The conversation taking a turn into Takatsuki trying to persuade Naoya to join his seminar made Naoya turn away with a huff.

Takatsuki's voice was alarmed when he replied.

"Huh? What do you mean, you wish people would stop trying to recruit you? Does another professor have their eye on you, Fukamachi?"

"No, that's not it. There are no other professors who go around pushily inviting people to their seminar like you do. I was talking about club recruit—"

Naoya snapped his mouth shut before finishing his sentence...

...but it was far too late.

Takatsuki had turned to the side with a hand slapped over his mouth. Despite his efforts, though, he ended up bent over the table in laughter, unable to hold it back.

"O-oh, I see. You got...mistaken for a first-year...and scouted for clubs...? That must have been irritating..."

"Well, excuse me for looking like a kid, I guess!"

Takatsuki's shoulders shook. He had yet to sit back up. *It's not* that *funny*, Naoya thought. Between Nanba earlier and Takatsuki now, being laughed at was starting to sting a little.

That settled it. Indignant, Naoya decided he would go shopping for new clothes after he got paid for this case. He'd buy some "sophisticated" outfits, or whatever it was Nanba had said.

But then a pang of worry flashed through his mind—what if nothing changed even after he started dressing differently? What if that kind of clothing just didn't look good on him? And what kind of stuff was he supposed to buy to begin with...?

"Whew, sorry, Fukamachi! I apologize for laughing! That was wrong of me, so don't look so upset, okay?!"

"No, you're fine. Don't worry about it..."

His suddenly dejected demeanor made Takatsuki call out to him in concern. Naoya brought his mug to his mouth, his gaze distant. Perhaps he could wash down the gloom with the bitter taste of black coffee.

Starting the next day, at least for the time being, he thought, he would try to stick to the less frequented routes around campus.

They scheduled a meeting with the client for the following evening.

The client asked them to come to a café in Ota City called Un Pommier.

But when Takatsuki and Naoya arrived at the café, the sign on the door said CLOSED.

"Huh? This is the right place, isn't it?"

Naoya compared the store to the map on his phone, cocking his head in confusion.

The café, situated on the first floor of a multipurpose building, had a cozy feel to it. The front door consisted of a wooden frame with a sizable pane of glass fitted inside, the latter of which had a large image of an apple tree engraved into its surface. It was difficult to see past the engraving into the store, but the lights were on, and he thought he heard the sound of people inside.

When Naoya tried giving the door a push, it opened without issue. He exchanged glances with Takatsuki.

The professor raised one hand a little as if to say, I'll take it from here, before poking his head in through the half-opened door.

"Excuse me! I believe I'm supposed to be meeting someone here?"

"Ah yes! Please, come right on in!"

Right after a male voice had answered them from inside, the door swung the rest of the way open. A man in an apron was standing next to the entrance.

"Welcome. The other party is waiting for you."

"Thank you very much."

Smiling, Takatsuki nodded at the man in appreciation. Naoya followed suit with a small bob of his head.

The man, who was likely the café's owner, looked like a pleasant, agreeable person in his forties. The store was filled with wooden furnishings, and the atmosphere inside was warm and homey.

The client—a woman—was seated at the rearmost table in the café. When she noticed Takatsuki, she jumped to her feet and bowed emphatically.

She appeared to be in her twenties and had chestnut-colored hair that was

short and tidy. On the taller side for a woman, she was dressed in a tailored jacket and trousers.

"Hello, I'm Yukari Sawaki. I recently contacted you via e-mail. Thank you so much for meeting with me!"

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Akira Takatsuki, associate professor at Seiwa University. This is my assistant, Fukamachi."

Takatsuki held out his business card as he spoke, and Yukari hastily grabbed her bag to retrieve her own card, which had the words "Tooyama Architectural Firm" printed on it.

"Um, I work at an architectural design company near here. Strange things keep happening at the office... Professor, I was...hoping...I could talk to you about it...?"

Still standing, Yukari spoke as if each word took monumental effort to squeak out.

Just then, the store owner approached. He handed Takatsuki a menu, then looked at Yukari.

"Now, now, there's no need to be so tense. Why not sit first and then explain?"

"Oh yes... Good idea."

Yukari plopped down into her chair without pretense. Takatsuki and Naoya sat opposite her.

While the owner set out glasses of water for the table, Takatsuki looked up at him and asked, "Are we still okay to order? There was a 'closed' sign on the front door."

"Ahh, yes, please do," he replied. "The lady here has reserved the café for tonight, so the sign is there to prevent other customers from coming in."

The owner shrugged lightly.

"She said she needed to reserve a place to have a somewhat complicated conversation. She's a loyal customer and seemed to be in a tight spot, so I agreed. There's no one else here but me, but please pay me no mind while you

talk. Café proprietors are best considered just another part of the decor."

"He's always saying things like that," Yukari interjected with a wry smile. "Don't think too much of it."

The two of them seemed rather comfortable around each other, so the owner's statement about Yukari being a loyal customer must have been true.

There was no cocoa on the menu, but there was hot chocolate, which Takatsuki ordered. Naoya asked for coffee. Though he looked a little taken aback by the professor's choice, the owner smiled and nodded at them before disappearing behind the counter.

"Um..."

Yukari looked at Takatsuki, straightening her posture and opening her mouth as if to speak.

But in the next instant, she snapped it shut again and averted her gaze, her expression drawn.

"...Ah. Is it difficult to talk about, perhaps?" Takatsuki asked, head tilted slightly to the side.

The eyes that shot up to meet his own showed anxiety, confusion—and one more emotion.

Takatsuki offered her a gentle smile.

"Miss Sawaki, I'm not sure what you've been through, but the fact that you contacted me after looking at my website means you've experienced something frightening, right? I'm sure some people are reluctant to discuss these sorts of things in earnest with others. I've even had clients preface their stories with 'you might think I'm crazy when you hear this.'"

Yukari's face had gone light pink. Takatsuki must have hit the mark.

There were clients like her, sometimes—clients who had encountered some inexplicable phenomenon and believed it might be supernatural somehow, but when it came time to tell someone else the story, they started to doubt themselves. Or maybe sometimes they were struck by the sudden sense that it wasn't something to be shared with others. No one wanted to be called crazy,

and it would be humiliating to be ridiculed over such a thing.

Leaning forward over the table just a little, Takatsuki peered straight into Yukari's face.

"Please don't be afraid to tell me what happened. Many people have come to me with requests like yours before. I assure you, I won't laugh at you. Although —my standard facial expression is a smile, so please overlook that."

Takatsuki pointed to his own grinning mouth as he spoke.

Yukari chuckled. The tension melted visibly from her shoulders.

"Thank you, Professor... I'm usually the type of person who can watch horror movies without being bothered at all. But those kinds of things happening around me have scared me so much it's silly... I don't know what to do."

She pushed her hair out of her face, and the somewhat large wristwatch she was wearing peeked out from beneath the cuff of her jacket. It looked like one designed for men, but it suited her style.

The café owner returned then with their orders. He placed a mug of hot chocolate down in front of Takatsuki, then set another smaller vessel next to it, saying, "To add to your drink, if you'd like." The contents looked and smelled like rum. A pleasing aroma wafted from the coffee he served to Naoya, too.

Without hesitation, Takatsuki poured all the rum into his mug, took a sip, and smiled.

"Ahh, it's delicious. The flavor is superb."

"Thank you very much. I'll leave you to it now, please take all the time you need."

With a bow, the café owner retreated once more to the counter, where he picked up a hardcover book and appeared to start reading. It seemed he really was just loaning out the café for that night.

"Now then, please. Tell me your story."

At Takatsuki's gentle nudge, Yukari took a drink of water to calm her nerves, and finally started to speak.

"It started—on April fourth."

They had just gotten out of a rather long meeting at the architectural firm where she worked. Feeling a bit fried after having seen their client off, Yukari and some other staff members returned to their desks, having decided to have some tea and take a break. In addition to Yukari, there were three other employees present at the time: Hayashi, her senior male colleague; Murata, a woman who had joined the company at the same time as Yukari; and the office administrator, a woman named Oono.

Tea and snacks in hand, the four of them got to chatting.

Then, somehow or other, the conversation turned to repeating numbers.

"As I recall, someone said, 'Don't you love it when you glance at the clock and the time just happens to have repeating digits?' Like 7:07 or 15:15. Then someone else said, 'Speaking of which, today is April fourth. That's double fours.' Murata looked at the time, saw it was four thirty, laughed, and said, 'Four o'clock on April fourth, that's another four. Isn't that wild?' Then...Oono added, 'Not to mention, this building's address is 4-4.' And Hayashi chimed in with something like, 'Plus, there are exactly four of us in this room right now.' It was just...silly small talk. But—"

At that moment, Yukari had remembered something.

Something about a scary story she had heard as a child.

"I said to everyone, 'Do you guys know about the Curse of 4:44?"

Murata and Oono had both nodded, but Hayashi hadn't heard of it and shook his head.

So Yukari had explained exactly what kind of story it was.

Sitting across from Takatsuki and Naoya, she dropped her gaze to the tabletop.

"If four people gather on April fourth at 4:44, draw a circle on the classroom blackboard and all put their left hands inside it, the circle will transform into a door to another dimension and drag you inside. Even if you escape, you'll carry the other dimension's curse, so the only way to be safe is to never do it... It was

one of the scary stories that was popular when I was in elementary school. It may have been one of our Seven School Mysteries."

"Ooh, that's similar to my favorite version of the 4:44 story!" Takatsuki interjected with a grin.

Yukari returned his smile a little before continuing her story.

"Murata and Oono knew slightly different variations, so we spent a while just swapping stories and laughing about them. Until eventually..."

Eventually, Hayashi had looked at the clock and said, "Why don't we try it?"

By that point, it was already four forty. Hayashi drew a large circle on the office whiteboard and beckoned everyone else over.

"He said, 'It's like fate that this topic came up today, since the date only happens once a year.' Neither Murata nor Oono would do it at first, but then it was like they got into the spirit of the moment, or...maybe it was just because Hayashi kept trying to convince us. We all ended up standing in front of the whiteboard, staring at the clock... And then—"

Following Hayashi's countdown, they all put their left hands in the circle just when the clock hit 4:44.

The feeling in the room at that moment was, somehow, peculiar.

Even though they knew nothing was going to come from the little game, their hearts pounded away in their chests. Almost as if they were waiting for something to happen.

But of course, nothing did.

How could it have? It was just a scary story for children.

"We all looked at each other and laughed, like, 'What on earth are we doing?' We took our hands off the board—all of us except Hayashi. He was still standing there with his left hand up for some reason."

Giggling, Oono had slapped Hayashi lightly on the back, asking him how long he planned on staying that way.

But Hayashi had looked tense.

Curious, Yukari had asked him what was wrong, and Hayashi, his face stiff, had replied, "I can't move my hand."

"Oono looked shocked and tugged at his arm, but it didn't budge. Murata and I tried, too. We were panicking a little. And then—"

And then, abruptly, Hayashi's hand had come away from the whiteboard.

Yukari and the other women had stared, mouths agape, as Hayashi looked around at them with a smug expression. He had lifted his left hand as if to show his fingers fluttering, and asked with a smirk, "Did I getcha?"

He had fooled them, in other words.

A little miffed, Oono had dealt him another light slap and an admonishment —"What are you, a first grader?"—but Yukari and Murata were just relieved. They couldn't help but find it funny at the time.

Just then, the company president, Tooyama, returned from another meeting with the rest of the staff. He had overheard their conversation. A bit exasperated, he had asked them what they thought they were doing during work hours, but ultimately had just laughed and let it slide.

Then everyone went back to work, assuming the incident was over.

Except it wasn't.

"Shortly after that, a strange message appeared on my phone from a number I didn't recognize. The subject line was blank, and the only thing in the body was the number 4444. Murata was at her desk next to mine, and I heard her say, 'I just got a weird message.' She was looking at her phone and her expression was off. I asked her about it, and she had received the exact same message as me. Not just her, either. Hayashi and Oono had received it, too."

The four of them had looked at one another, commenting that the situation was a little creepy. Her tone accusatory, Oono had turned to Hayashi and asked, "You did this, didn't you?" But Hayashi had shaken his head and replied, "No, I didn't."

Their boss, Tooyama, was looking with suspicion in their direction, so they all busied themselves with work once more. Then, the next evening— Another

message came.

"The sender was different from the first one, but the contents were the same. Just '4444.' Except...Murata's was different. One of the digits was dropped, just from hers, so it said '444.' And when Hayashi mentioned it, I realized the messages had been sent...at 4:44."

The second message brought more unease.

But it was only an e-mail. Everyone agreed it didn't warrant such concern. They noticed Tooyama scowling at them, probably because he thought they were slacking off, and returned to their various tasks in a hurry.

However, four days later—

Murata didn't come to work.

She said she had been injured.

"She did end up coming in later, in the afternoon, but apparently she had twisted her ankle. It's just that, the way it happened, it was odd."

According to Murata, she had woken up at dawn unexpectedly and decided to make a quick trip to the convenience store by herself. On her way home, she'd fallen down some stairs close to her house.

"She said someone yanked on her leg...from below."

Out of nowhere, Murata had said, she felt someone wrap a hand around her ankle and pull down hard.

The problem was, someone would have to have been lying belly down on the staircase to grab and tug on her leg from that angle—but there was no one else there. She was sure of that.

Checking her phone after having tumbled down the steps, Murata noted the time. It was exactly 4:44 in the morning.

"When we heard that, we couldn't help but think about the game we had played on April fourth. And the messages... But while we were talking about it, our boss came in suddenly, threw a file down on the desk, and said, 'Stop wasting time with this nonsense and get back to work.' He was really annoyed, so we let it go. Until three days after that, when another e-mail arrived, again at

4:44. Myself, Hayashi, and Oono got it; Murata didn't. That time, mine and Oono's said '444,' but Hayashi's was just '44.'"

Tooyama would have seen them if they'd discussed it in the office, so the four coworkers went to a nearby sit-down restaurant after work to talk.

During that conversation, Hayashi had said something like: "These weird emails started coming after we fooled around on April fourth. I don't know if there really is a curse or not, but let's just assume right now, for argument's sake, that this is all happening because of that game. If we accept that the inexplicable circumstances of Murata's injury are the fault of the Curse of 4:44, the time at which she was injured is significant. The message that's missing a digit indicates the next target of the curse, and whatever unlucky thing they experience is obviously going to happen at 4:44. Right? Doesn't it seem like those are the rules of the curse?"

"I laughed and told him that kind of stuff only happens in horror movies, but... everyone except me looked really serious."

Hayashi had taken out his cell phone and showed them the '44' message.

Face grim, he had said, "You might think it's stupid, but it's better to be safe than sorry. Anyway, it looks like I'm next in line."

The curse would strike at 4:44. As long as they were careful at that time, they should be okay. Having come to that conclusion, the four of them parted ways for the day.

The next three days passed without incident.

In the afternoon on the fourth day, Murata had glanced around the office and said, "Huh? Where's Hayashi?" At some point without their having noticed, he had left the room.

A bad feeling rising in her throat, Yukari had looked at her watch.

It was 4:44.

"A second later we heard a really loud noise from the stack room... We all rushed to see what it was and found one of the shelves our files are stored on had fallen over... And Hayashi was on the floor, leaning back on his hands like

he had fallen onto his rear."

All the shelves were secured to the walls, but they had noted recently that the anchor on the shelf that had fallen was starting to come loose. Not loose enough to have caused the shelf to topple so quickly, though.

Hayashi wasn't injured. By chance, he had glanced at the clock in the stack room, realized what time it was, and made to return to the other room with everyone else. The shelf had tipped over not a second later onto the exact spot Hayashi would have been standing had he not moved, undoubtedly with enough force to crush a person underneath it.

Hayashi had evaded the Curse of 4:44.

But then—

Ordering the rest of the staff to tidy up the mess, Tooyama had taken Hayashi into another room.

When he returned a while later, Hayashi was stewing.

He said he had been removed from the project he had been managing alongside Yukari and Murata because, on top of that, his employment contract was being terminated.

"Hayashi was a contract employee, and his contract was set to expire at the end of June. But usually, he should have been able to renew it, or had the possibility of being promoted to a full-time position if his performance was satisfactory. And yet...he was told, flat out, his contract would not be renewed in July."

"Did Mr. Tooyama give any reason for that decision? Had Mr. Hayashi made some sort of major mistake in his work?"

Yukari shook her head at Takatsuki's question.

"I know that Hayashi has been having some trouble with his designs lately, but I don't think he did anything worth being dismissed over. But all our boss said was, 'Your contract will not be renewed in July. You're no longer needed in this office.'"

"That's quite a harsh way of putting it."

"Things like that *have* happened before, though. Our boss is usually nice, but every once in a while he gets so strict he's like an entirely different person... He's fired employees and ended negotiations with clients totally without warning before."

"I see," Takatsuki said, stroking his chin lightly with one hand. "But it seems like even though Mr. Hayashi avoided the misfortune of being trapped under a bookshelf, he was beset by some other unlucky incident entirely."

Yukari's already cloudy expression grew bleaker.

"Actually—that wasn't the only bad thing that happened to him."

"What do you mean?"

"That same night, he was hurt... Someone attacked him."

"What?"

Having been informed he would be losing his job—even though his last day was still a ways off—Hayashi had stayed out late drinking that evening. On his way home by himself, suddenly, he'd been struck from behind with something that felt like a metal pipe.

Thankfully, he'd sustained no serious injuries. But given the lack of surveillance cameras in the vicinity and that the attacker had worn a full-face helmet, the police didn't expect to identify a suspect anytime soon. Evidently, Hayashi could think of no reason why the assault had happened, and the chances were high that it was just a random incident.

When she'd heard about this, Yukari had grown frightened. She thought perhaps the curse was behind things after all.

And then, again, the following day—

At 4:44, she received another e-mail. It said "44." Considering the pattern the curse had followed until that point, its next target would probably receive a message with just a single "4" in it, so it wasn't Yukari. But that meant the next target would be— "I just happened to be in the bathroom at the time. I was hurrying back to the office, and I could hear Oono shouting something from inside. I opened the office door, and Oono came out and just...walked right past

me. She practically ran down the stairs, as if something was chasing her... And then, all of a sudden, there was this screeching noise from outside..."

Alarmed by the sound of a vehicle slamming on its brakes, Yukari rushed outside.

Oono was lying in the street, a pool of red seeping out from under her body.

Right next to Oono was a car, its front windshield shattered, that had screeched to a halt. The man who staggered from the driver's seat said, "She just came out of nowhere..."

Oono's cell phone had fallen to the ground near her. It was broken.

The cracked screen was completely blacked out, but Yukari was sure that Oono must have received the e-mail with the lone "4."

This was the curse's punishment for Oono.

The accident had taken place two days ago. After it happened, Yukari had searched frantically for something, anything that could be helpful, then found Takatsuki's information on a website dedicated to urban legends, and contacted him.

"...I should never have brought it up that day," Yukari said, hanging her head. "I should never have mentioned the Curse of 4:44. None of this would have happened. It's my fault... Because of me, this..."

Tears fell to the table like little drops of rain. Yukari wiped at them with her hand, but that didn't stop the tears from coming. She kept rubbing them away anyhow, as though she didn't know what else to do.

"—Ms. Sawaki. Please take this."

Takatsuki held his handkerchief out across the table to Yukari, who accepted it with a quiet word of thanks. She dabbed at her tears for a little while, sniffling, then set the handkerchief down.

"Ms. Sawaki."

Takatsuki held his hand out toward her again.

Yukari looked up at him, probably thinking he meant to take the handkerchief

back.

"U-um, I'll return this to you after I wash it. It's got makeup on it now..."

"Please don't worry about that. You can keep it, if you'd like. Your hand, please."

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"My hand ...?"
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Eyes still full of tears, she regarded Takatsuki's outstretched right hand with confusion. Then, hesitantly, she reached out with her own. *Ah*, Naoya thought as he looked on, steeling himself. *I guess it is about time*.

Takatsuki gripped Yukari's hand tightly in his own over the table, as if they had just struck a deal. Then, rather than letting go, he clasped his left over both of their right hands, tugging Yukari a little closer in his direction.

"Please don't cry anymore, Ms. Sawaki. Tears don't suit a wonderful woman like you."

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"Huh...?"
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Bemused, Yukari blinked several times at the professor's soft, sweet delivery.

Takatsuki leaned across the table to bring his face closer to hers. His big, dark-brown eyes, framed by his long lashes, peered into Yukari's tearful gaze.

"I'm so, so glad I met you. Truly, from the bottom of my heart."

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"Um-"
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His face was so close to hers that all Yukari could do was stare at it. Naoya saw her face turn bright red in real time. This was around the point where most female clients noticed how handsome Takatsuki was. Prior to this, they were probably too preoccupied with whatever was troubling them to pay much attention to their consultant's face.

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"Excuse me, sir?"
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The café owner, who had seemed absorbed in his book, called over to them in an alarmed tone. Naoya put a hand on Takatsuki's shoulder, figuring he had better put an end to the situation.

"Professor. That's enough. Let go of her hand."

But Takatsuki only tugged Yukari closer with more passion than before, like not a single word Naoya had said had registered.

"What you've experienced is incredible! It's evolved from the standard Mystery of 4:44 and is on the verge of becoming a whole new ghost story! The part about ominous messages being delivered via cell phone is excellent. After all, ghost stories smoothly incorporate elements of our daily lives to suit the times! And trying to avoid disaster by figuring out the rules of the curse? It's just like *Final Destination*! Oh, do you know that movie? It's a really fun one about the inevitable machinations of Death itself!"

His well-bred manners abandoned, Takatsuki rattled on and on in excitement. It seemed that a new school year had not been enough to stop him from losing all common sense when he heard a mysterious story that struck his fancy. *I really should get him a leash*, Naoya thought, even though he knew there was no way he could use something like that on Mr. Associate Professor here.

At that point, Takatsuki pulled a wide-eyed Yukari into a hug from across the table. Yukari looked like she had no clue how she had ended up in this situation, which just made sense. Confusion was a normal reaction to having a hot guy stare at you from mere inches away while he gushed about the "machinations of Death" or whatever.

"Professor Takatsuki! Knock it off, you can't just do that! Let her go!"

"Sir, please! What do you think you're doing?! Stop that!"

The café owner had rushed over and, along with Naoya, pulled Takatsuki away from Yukari.

Once she was freed, Yukari slumped into the backrest of her chair. She still looked dazed, but meekly accepted the glass of water that the owner handed her. The drink seemed to snap her out of her fog, because she looked up at the owner and mumbled something like, "He just, without asking..." On the inside, Naoya was apologizing to her on his hands and knees for how his professor had just behaved.

In standard Takatsuki fashion, the moment he was dragged away from Yukari, he appeared to regain his sanity, shrinking back into his own chair out of shame.

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"Professor."
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"...Yes."
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Takatsuki looked at Naoya like a chastised elementary school student.

Good grief.

Naoya heaved a sigh.

"How many times have I told you that it's still not customary in Japan to hug someone you've just met?"

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize to me. Say that to Ms. Sawaki."

"I am so, so sorry, Ms. Sawaki. I lose all sense of reason when I hear a good ghost story."

Takatsuki's apology was honest and straightforward. Yukari and the café owner both looked at him with utterly guarded expressions.

Then the owner cleared his throat.

"Ahem. Well. That kind of behavior is troublesome in the café, so please refrain from repeating it."

"Yes, it won't happen again."

"So, ah, you're still talking, right? I'll just be over there."

"—Oh, manager? Please wait a moment."

Takatsuki called out to the owner as he made to return to his post behind the counter.

Reaching down with one of his long arms, the professor picked something up off the floor and held it out to the other man.

"I believe you dropped this just now."

"Huh? Oh-"

The owner took the item from him a little hurriedly. Naoya didn't have a good view of it, but it looked like a wristwatch.

"I apologize. It must have fallen when you were stopping me a short while ago. It's not broken, is it?"

"No, it seems fine. I do a lot of washing and scrubbing dishes here, so I usually put it in my pocket for safekeeping. Thank you for pointing it out to me."

The owner met Takatsuki's regretful concern with polite thanks before leaving the table again.

Takatsuki turned to Yukari, who still seemed wary of him, with a look that suggested he was ready to get back to business. But before that, he apologized again.

"I deeply apologize for my behavior just now; it was inexcusable. I simply found your story so fascinating that my inner researcher took control and went on a joyride before I realized what was happening. I'll be more attentive to that from now on, so please forgive me."

"R-riiight..."

"And now, regarding the matter at hand," Takatsuki said, his gentlemanly demeanor falling right back into place. "The kind of misfortunes that keep occurring around you, Ms. Sawaki, are much clearer to me now. As is the fact that this all appears to have started because the Curse of 4:44 was invoked. Incidentally, if you don't mind my asking, when you first heard this story as a child, did you ever actually try it then?"

"Gosh, no. I mean, it was the kind of story that always ended with 'you must never do this, or else.' I—I was scared."

"I see. And what about your friends?"

"I don't think any of them ever did it, either."

"Naturally. That makes sense. School ghost stories are always based around some condition like that—'if you do this, something scary will happen, so you'd better not.' Most children believe it and won't go out of their way to break the taboo. That's how those ghost stories persevere."

"What do you mean?"

Yukari cocked her head to the side, and Takatsuki smiled.

"Well, if they did try it and nothing happened, that would make the story totally fake, right? Once a ghost story has its veil of mystery torn away, it dies out in no time."

Naoya thought about out-of-the-way bathrooms in the corners of school buildings that often ended up rumored to be haunted. Kids were not likely to use a toilet they had been told had a ghost inside it. And the more they believed the story, the more that bathroom would be avoided.

The ghost haunting that bathroom would exist as long as that was the case. All it took was someone who truly believed in the ghost for its story to essentially become reality.

"The Curse of 4:44 has lived on inside you this whole time, Ms. Sawaki. That's why it just came out that day, on April fourth, when the opportunity unexpectedly arose. It wasn't your fault. Ghost stories lurk in one's subconscious, until one day they simply burst to the fore. Besides, wasn't it Mr. Hayashi who suggested actually testing out the story? You're not to blame here."

Takatsuki's smile was gentle. Yukari looked back at him with slightly widened eyes, but the gloominess returned to her face the next moment.

"But...the Curse of 4:44 isn't just a ghost story, is it? I mean, so many things have actually happened."

Takatsuki nodded.

"Indeed. The incidents that have occurred around you are very real."

In an effort to disguise how they trembled, Yukari clasped her hands together on the table.

"... What scares me is that each misfortune is more serious than the last."

Listening to her story, Naoya had had the same thought.

The first target, Murata, had gotten no more than a sprained ankle. Next, Hayashi might have avoided serious injury when he'd managed to not be crushed under the shelf, but he'd ended up losing his job and then getting hurt anyway. Then there was Oono, who had been hit by a car. That was a far cry

from what Murata had suffered.

"Um, I can't help but ask," Naoya said. "What happened to Ms. Oono after the accident?"

"She was taken to the hospital. Her injuries are serious but not life-threatening, it seems."

That answer put Naoya ever so slightly at ease. At least it wasn't a story with a body count.

Yukari, however, clasped her hands together more tightly.

"...But I'm next, in terms of order. If something worse than what happened to Oono happens to me, that means..."

She bit her lip. Without a doubt, the thought that the next incident could be the first fatality was running through her head.

And Yukari herself was on the chopping block.

She turned her panicked gaze on Takatsuki.

"Professor, what do I do? What can I do in this situation? Do I get an exorcism done? Do you know anyone who can do that sort of thing?"

"Erm, well—before we get to that, let's talk a bit more, Ms. Sawaki."

Takatsuki held his hand up just a little, as if to calm her.

"For starters, what do you think is the reason the Curse of 4:44 relies so heavily on the number four?"

"Huh? Isn't it...because four is bad luck? Since it's pronounced the same as the kanji for 'death'?"

"Yes, that's exactly right," Takatsuki said with a refined nod before continuing. "Numbers we try to avoid because they're considered ominous are called 'unlucky numbers.' Here in Japan, we also avoid the number nine because it's pronounced the same as the kanji for 'suffering.' Nowadays they aren't as widely feared, but both hospitals and hotels tend to avoid using four and nine when numbering rooms. How do you think other countries feel about them?"

"Other countries? You mean...ones that also use kanji? Like China?"

"Yes. Naturally, China also uses the same character for the number four. In Chinese, however, 'four' and 'death' don't sound as similar, so they don't find it as unlucky as we do here. But in South Korea and Taiwan, they are pronounced the same, so those countries also avoid it. So how long has this mindset been around in Japan? Going back through the literature, we can see that the custom of avoiding the number four already existed by the Heian period. For example, in the Shoyuki—the diary of a statesman named Fujiwara no Sanesuke—there's an account of groups of five people being formed deliberately to avoid gathering in groups of four. In Kujo Kanezane's diary, Gyokuyo, he wrote that since offering prayers at four locations was unacceptable, an effort was made to differentiate the first three locations from the fourth. In the Shasekishu, which was written in the Middle Ages, it is plainly stated that the number four was avoided because it sounded the same as the word for 'death.' As for other unlucky numbers, there's thirteen, but the fear of thirteen originated in Western cultures before spreading to Japan, so we don't quite think of it in the same way as four and nine. Whereas it's their pronunciation that makes four and nine feel ominous, the number thirteen itself possesses a significance that people dislike."

Takatsuki spoke in a fluid tone, exactly like when he was lecturing.

Blinking a few times as if she wasn't entirely following, Yukari asked, "Umm... So if it's been avoided for that long, does that mean four really is an unlucky number?"

"Rather than that, I think this is an example of the belief in the power of spoken language. The characters for 'four' and 'death' look nothing alike, but people associate the former with the latter based solely on how they sound. Japanese people have believed for ages that words which are said aloud contain power. That's why it became necessary to choose our spoken words carefully. They hesitated to even say 'death,' as it was so inauspicious. And so, since it sounds the same, they began treating 'four' with caution, too. Japanese people love wordplay to this day because of our long culture of linking different words by sound. It's said that few people will use a phone number that contains the sequence '4989' because it sounds like the phrase 'extreme distress.' The kanji for '37564' can be pronounced just like 'massacre,' so as you'd expect, that

particular string of numbers isn't used much. Conversely, you get auspicious combinations like the word for 'fate' sounding the same as 'five yen,' which is why we like to use 5-yen coins when making monetary offerings."

Takatsuki was positively beaming. As she listened to him speak, Yukari seemed to regain some of her composure. Her shoulders relaxed, and a slight smile appeared on her face.

"...I give twenty-five yen a lot of the time, since it almost sounds like making a prayer for twice as much luck. But you're not supposed to give ten yen when you make an offering, right? Because it's associated with 'distant relationships'?"

"Yes, that's another common one," Takatsuki replied, nodding. "Monetary offerings are supposed to be supplications to the divine, so by all rights that kind of wordplay shouldn't matter one bit. And yet, most people use 5-yen coins for them. We go about our lives constantly sorting the things around us into the categories of 'lucky' and 'unlucky."

"Why is there so much emphasis placed on luck?"

"Above all, it's because we are powerless."

Takatsuki's eyes narrowed a little as he said those words.

"Natural disasters, disease, man-made catastrophes, and so on. Our lives are full of misfortunes, and humans are relatively powerless to stop them. I believe we use this mindset as a charm to protect us from bad luck. We eliminate things that remind us of death and suffering from our rituals and our daily lives as a preventative measure, and in opposition to the negative, we introduce positive elements. We're trying to preserve our sense of security. But eventually, if we start to feel like we have bad luck or we're cursed, those feelings gain enough of a foothold to make us retroactively assign them the blame for unfortunate incidents that have already happened. People say things like 'Patients often die in that hospital room. Doesn't the room number have a four in it?' When something upsetting happens and we can't explain why, we tend to crave answers."

People fear what they don't understand.

Takatsuki said it all the time. Situations that had no rhyme or reason were frightening. Consequently, in wishing for some sort of answer, people would come up with their own.

If something bad happened and there was no readily available explanation for it, and someone involved just happened to notice the number four at the time, they would associate the number's unlucky reputation with the real-life misfortune they had experienced. In turn, the number four itself would become the scapegoat for the unfortunate incident. No matter how nonsensical the superstition, if it could be used to explain even one thing, people believed it easily. Even if that belief led to a new matter of concern, it might be outweighed by the relief offered by its accompanying coping mechanism: As long as you avoided unlucky numbers, you'd be fine.

"However, the more we blame the number four for our misfortunes, the more mystical and malevolent it becomes. Its popularity in the world of ghost stories is equivalent to how much we fear it in our daily lives. That's how we get ghost stories about '4:44.' The version you did with your colleagues, Ms. Sawaki, is just one derivative of that. Its foundation is rooted in the beliefs of people from many, many years ago, who considered four an unlucky number."

Pausing to finish his hot chocolate, Takatsuki drained the last of the mug's contents before returning it to its saucer. He smiled at Yukari.

"The Curse of 4:44 story you told earlier, Ms. Sawaki, involved other dimensions, didn't it? Either 'being dragged into another dimension' or 'carrying the other dimension's curse.' But don't you think that's strange? If the misfortune originally associated with 'four' is 'death,' how do other dimensions come into it?"

"Huh ...?"

The look Yukari gave the professor said she hadn't actually considered that question before.

Naoya looked at him, too, with a similar feeling. Come to think of it, when they had discussed stories related to "4:44" in Takatsuki's office, most of them had involved someone being taken somewhere. The version Yukari knew was one of those.

But other dimensions weren't an intrinsic part of the connection between "four" and "death," so how did ghost stories about "4:44" end up incorporating them as elements so often?

"The concept of other dimensions didn't even exist that long ago, did it?" Naoya said, and Takatsuki nodded happily.

"Yep, that's correct. Interest in other dimensions grew as works of science fiction became popular. There's a theory that the spread of the term 'fourth dimension' in particular influenced the 4:44 story. 'Four o'clock' and 'fourth dimension' are also associated with one another based on the way they sound. It's to the point that there's even a subspecies of the ghost that gets summoned in the bathroom at 4:44, also known as the 'four o'clock hag.' It's called the 'fourth dimension hag.' On top of that, 4:44 ghost stories are popular in schools, which means they're frequently told by children. And I mean, it's only natural that children are familiar with the term 'fourth dimension,' isn't it? Given the massively popular series they would know it from?"

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"Huh?"
"'4D Pocket'!"
"Oh... Doraemon."
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Naoya nodded in understanding. Yukari burst into a small fit of giggles at Takatsuki's earnest impression of the character—he had even imitated the voice.

Then the professor continued with his explanation, his soft voice alive with amusement.

"Even if they have no understanding of physics or other sciences, works of entertainment like that gently instill in children the existence of this mysterious world known as the 'fourth dimension.' As we discussed in our lecture the other day, people are naturally fascinated by the thought of 'the spirit realm'—a place altogether different from the world we live in. The traditional concept of 'the spirit realm' became associated with the science fiction term 'fourth dimension,' and a new ghost story element was born. When you look at it from that angle, I think the 4:44 story is really interesting. Scary stories with older components like 'unlucky number four' and 'the existence of the spirit realm'

get combined with stories that use newer elements like 'other dimensions' and 'the fourth dimension.' Then add in a dash of stories where scary old women appear, and it's like you've got a breeding ground for new urban legends."

"Um...does that mean the Curse of 4:44 is just complete fiction? So there's no reason to worry?" Yukari asked. She was still smiling a little.

But Takatsuki, his own grin also very much present, shook his head.

"No. As I said earlier, the incidents occurring around you are real, Ms. Sawaki. Besides, I would never say that ghost stories are entirely meaningless fabrications."

"Huh?"

"If anyone knows that we cannot conclusively state 'real monsters don't exist,' it's us... After all, there are people who have gazed upon the otherworldly with their own eyes."

The otherworldly.

Those words brought Naoya flashing back to a time and place he had once been.

Rows of blue paper lanterns glowing like will-o'-the-wisps under the endless indigo night sky. A crowd of masked revenants performing a swaying, shambling dance. Naoya felt the *boom, boom, buh-boom* of the drums as if it were actually there ringing in his ears. A chill ran down his spine. He had only seen it once, when he was very young—that midnight festival of the dead.

What better example of the "spirit realm" could there be?

A place outside the realm of the living, from which Naoya had only somehow managed to escape by paying a price.

Suddenly, a hand clapped him on the shoulder, and Naoya started.

His consciousness resurfaced from the depths of his memory. He wasn't at a festival, he recalled. He was sitting in a café. Takatsuki was looking at him apologetically, as if to say he was sorry for making Naoya remember. Naoya shook his head minutely and brushed the professor's hand off. Takatsuki's smile felt forced.

Turning to face Yukari again, Takatsuki folded his hands together on top of the table.

"What I mean to say is, I'm still extremely interested in your story, Ms. Sawaki. Would you allow me to conduct a full investigation? If possible, I'd like to speak with the other persons involved. And if you could show me the room where you actually invoked the Curse of 4:44, I would be much obliged."

On Saturday morning, the very next day, they heard from Yukari again.

She had somehow managed to get permission from her boss, Tooyama, to show them the location of the curse ritual—the office where she worked, in other words. The only other person from the original group of four that would be joining them, however, was Murata. Oono was still in the hospital, so there was nothing to be done about her absence, but apparently Yukari hadn't been able to get ahold of Hayashi, either.

Yukari wanted to show them the office sooner rather than later, and Takatsuki agreed. He made plans to visit the building that same afternoon at four PM.

When they arrived there at the appointed time, they found Yukari standing at the entrance with another young woman and a tall man.

Yukari made introductions.

"This is the company president, Mr. Tooyama, and this is my coworker, Murata... I tried calling Hayashi a few more times after we spoke last, but he never picked up."

"I see. We'll have to make do without him, then. Hello—I'm Takatsuki, an associate professor at Seiwa University. Thank you very much for today."

Takatsuki turned to Tooyama to greet him, and the two men exchanged business cards.

"Hello. I'm Tooyama. Since you'll be taking a look around the office, I would like to be present."

Tooyama spoke in a deep, calm voice and bowed to Takatsuki.

His neatly designed business card read "Hirotaka Tooyama." Dressed a bit on

the business-casual side in a thin sweater and blazer, he looked like he was in his midforties or so. The eyes behind his silver-rimmed glasses were wide from corner to corner and half-lidded. But his overall atmosphere was gentle rather than severe. He didn't seem like the type to just suddenly fire an employee, at least.

Murata held out her business card to Takatsuki next.

"I'm Murata... Nice to meet you."

She looked slightly unwell as she nodded in Takatsuki's direction. Murata, whose business card indicated that her given name was Mai, had long hair and was dressed in a light-colored cardigan and long skirt. She was favoring her left ankle, which was bandaged, just a little. Naoya recalled that it was Murata who had gotten hurt first by falling down some stairs.

Tooyama's company was on the second floor of the building. No one else was there since it was a weekend, but the office had a bright, modern sort of feel. In addition to work desks, there were colorful sofas placed at the entrance and near the windows that were probably used for taking breaks or holding meetings. Here and there, the room was decorated with photographs of buildings the company had designed and paper architectural models. According to Tooyama, there were seven employees, including the office administrator.

"This one is my desk. Next to me is Murata, Hayashi sits across from me, and Oono is next to him."

Each of the desks Yukari pointed out gave a clear impression of the person who sat at it. Yukari's was relatively tidy, whereas Murata's was covered with cute little trinkets. There was a humidifier and a thick lap blanket at Oono's desk, while Hayashi's was buried beneath stacks of files.

At the window alongside the desks, there was a whiteboard.

Takatsuki walked over to it and pointed at its currently blank surface.

"Is this the one you used for the curse?"

"Yes," Yukari said, nodding.

The whiteboard was utterly ordinary. Takatsuki stared at it for a short time

before seeming to lose interest.

"Well, then," he said, smiling wide. "Let's talk, shall we?"

As they settled in at some of the sofas, Takatsuki began by asking Murata about the story.

Murata was quite visibly tense. She sat stiffly on the sofa, barely making eye contact with Takatsuki.

"Ms. Murata, I'd like to ask about the circumstances of your injury. I heard you woke up at dawn unexpectedly and went to the convenience store. Is that something that happens often?"

"Um... Uh, no, I just happened to wake up then on that day."

Startled by the sudden distortion in Murata's voice, Naoya pressed a hand to his ear.

Takatsuki glanced at him briefly before looking back at Murata.

"That happens to me, too, sometimes—waking up at odd hours. You worry you'll oversleep if you try going back to bed, so you might as well just get up, right?"

"Y-yes... So then I decided to go to the convenience store and left my house."

Again, her voice warped.

Covering his ear again, Naoya frowned. What was going on? The story they had heard was that Murata had woken up early, gone to the convenience store, then fallen down some stairs. But if this part was a lie, then she hadn't actually gone to the store at all.

There was a bad feeling rising in Naoya's chest. *But*, he thought, *that would mean...* 

Naoya kept his hand pressed to his ear as, at his side, Takatsuki continued to ask Murata questions.

"You fell down some stairs on your way home from the store, yes? Someone grabbed your leg?"

"Yes. I felt someone grab my ankle out of nowhere...and pull down hard on it."

"That's what caused your fall?"

"Yes."

Murata answered Takatsuki without looking up at him, her gaze on the floor.

Naoya glared at her.

You dirty liar.

After having heard about the incidents from Yukari, he had never expected this would be the outcome. He was appalled; every single thing about Murata's story was made up. Her ankle probably wasn't even sprained—the bandages were just for show. It was no wonder she had been acting strange this whole time.

The claim of having been injured by the Curse of 4:44 was—in Murata's case, at least—a lie of her own making.

Takatsuki went on.

"As for the message you received on your phone, do you have any idea who sent it?"

"...no."

More distortion. Naoya was fed up. Murata knew who the e-mail had come from.

The whole thing was a lie. There was no question.

The reason behind it was still a mystery, though. Naoya could tell when someone was lying, but he didn't have the power to discern why.

He did know, however, that Yukari had probably been set up.

By Murata—no, by the three other people involved, most likely. Naoya remembered Yukari telling them that when Hayashi had talked about the rules of the curse at a restaurant, everyone except for her had looked very serious. It was probably a safe bet to assume they were in on it together. Under the pretext of the Curse of 4:44, the three of them had concocted some nonsense

so they could enjoy seeing Yukari tremble in fear.

Naoya was itching to get up and tell Takatsuki everything that instant, but in front of other people he couldn't give away the fact that he could hear lies. All he could do was be patient for a little while longer.

What a joke, Naoya thought. As he was letting out a short sigh, he was struck by the feeling that someone was looking at him.

It was Tooyama, for some reason. He was staring at Naoya over his glasses with a slight frown. He probably thought it was strange that Naoya had been covering one ear for most of the conversation.

Naoya wasn't sure what to do. His covering his ear was a signal used to tell Takatsuki that someone was lying, so he couldn't just stop. If Tooyama asked him about it, he would simply have to make some excuse about his ears ringing or something.

"Now," Takatsuki said, launching into another question, "I'd like to ask you about Mr. Hayashi. He was almost crushed under a bookcase in your stack room, and later on someone attacked him in the street. Do you have any idea who his assailant might be?"

"Not at all."

Murata's voice came out clear as a bell.

Taken aback, Naoya dropped his hand from his ear. What did that mean? Had Hayashi not made up that incident himself?

One hand on his chin, Takatsuki looked down a little in thought.

"As for Ms. Oono...she was in a traffic accident, I believe? I was told she ran out into the road on her own. It's assumed that she received an e-mail just prior to that which contained only the number four. Ms. Sawaki said she just happened to be in the bathroom at the time. What about you, Ms. Murata?"

"I was...in the office."

"You sit across from Ms. Oono. Could you tell me how she was acting at the time she received the message?"

Frowning, Murata fell silent. Her face was clouded over with emotion—and not just guilt. There was confusion. And fear. Her arms, which she had wrapped around herself, were shaking a little.

Something frightened her.

But if Murata was one of the instigators behind the whole debacle, what in the world did she have to be so scared of?

With Murata no longer speaking, Tooyama stepped in.

"—I was also in the office at that time. Oono made a phone call immediately after receiving the message."

"Do you know who she called?"

"Hayashi, probably. He wasn't at work since he had gotten injured, and I heard her yell his first name into the phone."

"His given name?"

"Yes. The two of them have been dating for a while."

Tooyama presented that fact casually. Yukari looked shocked, but Murata merely looked down, as though she already knew.

"During that phone call, I heard Oono say, 'What the hell is this?' And, 'I thought I wasn't going to have to do anything.'"

"Huh...? What did she mean by that?" Yukari asked, her tone bewildered. Maybe it was finally starting to occur to her that her three colleagues had pulled the wool over her eyes.

Tooyama continued his matter-of-fact account of the incident without answering Yukari.

"Next, she said, 'What do you mean you don't know? It wasn't you?' Then... after listening to the person on the other end of the line for a while, she suddenly became very distraught and ran out of the office still clutching her phone. Soon after, we heard the sound of an accident. Everyone went outside to see what had happened, and there was Oono, lying on the ground."

Tooyama's voice didn't distort at all while he spoke.

Naoya frowned. None of it made sense to him anymore.

Murata's injury was an act. That was certain. But had the attack on Hayashi and Oono's accident both been unplanned events?

While on the phone with Hayashi, Oono had asked, "What the hell is this?" Most likely, by "this" she was referring to the "4" e-mail. Her statement about not having to do anything probably meant she hadn't been tasked with faking an injury of her own.

Despite that, Oono had received a message targeting her, and had probably complained about it to Hayashi. She might have dialed him up the moment Yukari had stepped away from her desk.

And yet, it sounded like Hayashi had told Oono he didn't know who had sent the message. That it hadn't come from him.

So who had sent it?

"Ms. Murata," Takatsuki said, settling his gaze on her, "you said you don't know who's responsible for the e-mail you received. What about the one Ms. Oono got? Any ideas there?"

"No."

Murata's voice didn't distort. She knew who had sent the first message, but not the last one.

The whole situation was becoming murkier by the minute. Murata, Hayashi, and Oono seemed to have been working together at the start of things, but somewhere along the way, the course of events had taken an unintended turn.

It was as though, partway through, the curse had become real—a dangerous wild animal with its fangs bared at the people who were supposed to have tamed it.

"I'll be straightforward, Ms. Murata. Do you believe that the Curse of 4:44 is real?"

At Takatsuki's question, Murata's shoulders gave an almighty jolt. She looked up.

Yukari was watching her. Murata stared back at her, at a loss, then spoke in a

quiet, hoarse voice.

"...I'm starting to think it might be."

Yukari's face stiffened. Trembling, Murata hugged herself tighter.

"Um...I really don't know how things ended up like this. I mean...the Curse of 4:44—how could something like that exist? But then, why did those things happen to Hayashi and Oono...? You're a college professor, aren't you?! Scary stories are your specialty, right?! Then please, do something! I-I'm so scared I can't stand it! If this continues, I'm worried something awful really will happen to Yukari... If it does, I..."

Murata sounded like she was on the verge of tears, but nothing she said bore the slightest hint of distortion.

She was genuinely very afraid for Yukari in that moment.

"What are your thoughts regarding this chain of events, Mr. Tooyama?"

Takatsuki turned his questioning upon the other man.

"...I'm annoyed, to be frank. Childish games like this will only cause delays in our work."

Yukari and Murata looked at him in surprise, but Tooyama merely shrugged.

"I'm right, aren't I? Why would I care about 4:44 or curses? I'm not an elementary schooler... Ah, my apologies. I shouldn't talk like that in front of someone who studies them."

"Oh, no, I don't mind. So that means you don't believe the curse is real?"

"Why would I? Murata's injury is minor, Hayashi was probably just the victim of a random attack, and Oono ran into the street of her own volition. Isn't it more trouble to go out of your way to blame it all on a curse?"

"That's a very pragmatic answer. So I'm going to respond with a pragmatic question... Could you tell me why Mr. Hayashi's contract was terminated?"

Takatsuki smiled brightly at Tooyama.

"I heard his contract lasts until the end of June. And yet you informed him quite early that it wouldn't be renewed. Why is that?"

"...The sooner he knew, the better," Tooyama replied, lightly adjusting his glasses. "The project he was on is going to continue into and beyond July. I concluded the project would carry on fine without him, and decided to terminate his contract... The reason he was let go is, I'm embarrassed to say, an administrative one. I needed to make personnel cuts."

Tooyama's voice distorted intensely.

Naoya covered one ear. Administrative issues had nothing to do with Hayashi being let go.

"Nevertheless," Tooyama continued, "it's only natural that having fewer people makes for more work. That's why I'd really like for all this nonsense to be over with quickly so my staff can focus on their jobs. Sawaki, in particular, is supposed to participate in a bid for a building design next month, but she hasn't been able to concentrate on it because of this incident."

"I'm sorry...," Yukari said, hanging her head.

"It's not your fault," Tooyama told her. He turned back to Takatsuki and went on. "I allowed Sawaki to invite you to the office for the same reason. I thought it might help settle things down. So how about it, Professor Takatsuki? Have you begun to unravel this mystery?"

"Indeed, more or less."

Naoya looked at Takatsuki's smiling face in surprise. Had he already figured out what the hell was happening here?

Just then...

The sound of a single low-pitched vibration reverberated through the office.

Yukari froze in her seat. Then, every movement stilted, she reached into her jacket pocket to pull out her phone.

One glance at the screen made all the color drain from her face. She turned to Takatsuki, while Murata, who had leaned over to see from beside Yukari, let out a small cry.

"May I?"

Takatsuki reached out, taking the phone from Yukari. He and Naoya both

peered down at the device.

An open e-mail took up the screen. The sender's address was a meaningless string of letters and numbers. The subject was blank.

The body of the e-mail was empty, too—there was nothing in it, not even a single "4."

But even Naoya could tell this message was part of the series of curse e-mails.

Each time the next target had received their warning message, a digit had been dropped from the "4444" in the initial e-mail. Murata had gotten "444." Hayashi, "44." And Oono, just "4."

This e-mail was blank because all the fours had been used up. It meant Yukari was the last one standing—but not for long.

At the top of the phone screen, the time displayed was 4:44.

"I knew it... Something is going to happen to me, too, isn't it...?" Yukari murmured, her voice shaking with fear.

Murata rubbed Yukari's back with one hand, as if to calm her, but she herself was as white as a ghost.

Tooyama looked between the two of them with a troubled frown. It seemed like he wanted to say something but was at a complete loss as to what would be appropriate.

Suddenly, Takatsuki spoke.

"—When you think about it, isn't e-mail kind of scary?"

Yukari, Murata, and Tooyama all looked at him.

Handing the phone back to its owner, Takatsuki continued talking, his voice jarringly carefree considering the situation.

"Unlike a paper letter, e-mail has no physical form, and the characters lack the individuality of handwriting. Many people probably only have a vague idea of how e-mail is delivered. We regularly use terms like 'online' and 'over the internet' with such familiarity, and yet these spaces do not physically exist. They're practically the same as the world inside Doraemon's 4D Pocket. When you receive an unmarked message from a world like that—one you don't really understand—it's only natural to be frightened. Though, if it were me, I might enjoy it."

"Professor Takatsuki... Um, wh-what do I do...?"

"There's no doubt you just received a warning of some impending disaster."

At those words, Yukari sucked in a breath. Takatsuki, on the other hand, sounded as calm as ever.

"If we apply the rules of the curse Mr. Hayashi mentioned, you only need to worry about the time 4:44. Moreover, considering the incidents before this, bad things only happened when the target was alone. So, as long as you're careful twice a day—when the clock strikes 4:44—you should be fine. On weekdays at that time in the afternoon, you'll be at the office, correct? Please make sure you're not by yourself then. As for the morning...do you live alone, Ms. Sawaki? No? Ah, you must live with your family, right? In that case, I don't think there will be a problem."

Takatsuki grinned at Yukari.

Starting to get worried, Naoya interjected, "But Professor, one person did experience something bad at a time that wasn't 4:44. It was nowhere near that time when Mr. Hayashi was attacked, I'm pretty sure."

"Yes," Takatsuki replied. "But that was unrelated, so it's of no concern."

Naoya didn't quite know what he meant.

Yukari was probably even less convinced. She was shaking like a leaf.

"B-but, am I...going to have to w-worry about 4:44 every day from n-now on...? There's no way... At some point, ssurely..."

"Goodness, no. I don't mean that you'll need to stay vigilant forever. I'll come up with a countermeasure and contact you again soon."

"A countermeasure? Like an exorcism?"

"Something like that, though probably not quite what you're imagining. I'll consult with an expert and pass their advice on to you. However—since I'm sure you're feeling highly anxious about the circumstances, Ms. Sawaki, I'll give you a

protective charm."

"A protective charm...?"

"Yes, one that's very effective in times like this. Pardon me, but could I have a piece of paper?"

At his request, Yukari retrieved a sheet of copy paper.

After thanking her, Takatsuki took the paper, folded it into quarters, and then ever so carefully tore out one of the four sections along the fold lines by hand. He took the fountain pen from his breast pocket and scrawled a few kanji characters on the torn-out piece. If what he had written was a word, it wasn't one Naoya had seen before.

Takatsuki handed the note to Yukari.

"See this? It's pronounced 'i-na-ji-n-shi.' Whenever you're scared, chant this in your head four times. It's a mantra to keep you safe. Oh, and please fold the paper it's written on in four and carry it with you at all times. Keeping protective charms close to your person is key. You may want to stow it inside your phone case, since that's the number one thing most people take with them everywhere these days."

Yukari accepted the charm from Takatsuki like she was being handed a lifeline. As instructed, she folded the paper and placed it in the pocket of her wallet-style phone case with excessive care.

Once he was sure his advice had been followed, Takatsuki stood up.

"Now then, I think that's about as much as I can do for you today. I'll be in touch again soon, so please take very good care of yourself until then. It's going to be okay, Ms. Sawaki. That charm will absolutely protect you."

Leaving Yukari, who was still dazed from shock, in Murata's hands, Tooyama saw Takatsuki and Naoya out of the building.

"You're sure she'll be all right with just that?"

"Yes, for now. I think the charm will work well."

Tooyama sounded worried when he glanced back toward the office, but Takatsuki was smiling as he replied.

There was some doubt in the expression that Tooyama answered Takatsuki's words with, and Naoya understood that to a degree. He wondered how much of an effect the protective charm could actually have.

Then Tooyama's gaze shifted in Naoya's direction.

"You...um, Fukamachi, was it? Is your ear okay?"

"Huh?"

The unexpected question made Naoya tense up reflexively.

Gesturing to Naoya's ears, Tooyama smiled, the outer corners of his eyes pulling back slightly with the motion.

"You kept covering your ear back in the office... People have said several times before that the air pressure in there is a little high, maybe because it's a bit too airtight. I was a little worried that might have been bothering you."

"Oh... No, I'm okay. It's just, um, my ears have been ringing a little. Since this morning."

"I see. If that keeps up for much longer, you should go see a doctor. Ear problems can be bad news."

"Yes, I will. Thank you for your concern."

Hoping to bring the conversation to a quick end, Naoya bowed his head.

But Tooyama did not seem to be done talking.

"By the way, you're a college student, aren't you? What department and year are you in? And where are you from?"

"Eh...? Um...I'm a second-year student, in the History Department... I'm from Yokohama..."

"Do you live there now?"

"No, I'm in the city proper... I have my own place close to the college."

"Oh? Say—by any chance, would you like to work part-time for me?"

"Huh?!"

Where the hell is this coming from? Naoya thought, taken aback by the

sudden offer.

His smile widening, Tooyama waved his hand lightly.

"Ah, sorry for asking out of nowhere like that. It's just that with Oono, our office administrator, in the hospital, we're in a bit of a bind. The job is simple, just desk work. You wouldn't need to have any interest in architecture or design, though it certainly wouldn't hurt if you did."

"Um, I mean," Naoya mumbled, perplexed, "I would need time to think about it..."

Then, without warning, Takatsuki reached out and tugged Naoya back.

Moving to stand between Naoya and Tooyama, he said, "I have to object, Mr. Tooyama. Fukamachi works part-time for me. Please don't try to snatch him away."

"My apologies. I couldn't help but think how nice it would be to have an earnest, serious college student around the office."

"Fukamachi isn't available. I'm sorry, but you'll have to find someone else."

Takatsuki's smile was as bright as ever, but his tone clearly brooked no argument.

What is with these guys? thought Naoya. Way too many people have been trying to recruit me lately.

Three days passed.

Yukari was walking alone along the road outside the train station. She had taken the train to deliver documents to a client a few stops away and was in the process of returning to her office. Bag slung over her shoulder, phone clutched in one hand, she moved at a brisk pace. Occasionally she glanced at her wristwatch, her already stiff expression hardening more and more each time. It was almost 4:44. Her lips moved minutely, perhaps because she was reciting the word on the protective charm to herself over and over.

Even though it wasn't yet 4:44, Yukari was constantly on high alert. She made sure not to stand close to the edge of the train platform. Before going down any set of stairs, she was careful to check her surroundings and watch her every

step. That vigilance was probably why she looked so exhausted. Kept under that amount of stress, anyone would have been mentally fatigued.

Before long, she came to a crosswalk. The walk signal was flashing, about to turn red. Normally, Yukari would have dashed across the street to beat the light. Instead, she stopped, cautious, and decided to wait for the next signal. Taking care to stand so as not to be too close to the road, she stared blankly ahead.

The street outside the train station was crowded at this time of day. Businessmen, stay-at-home spouses with their daily shopping, students. All sorts of people started filling in the space behind and to either side of Yukari. Most of them were fiddling with their phones, their attention only marginally on their surroundings.

Suddenly, someone shoved Yukari hard toward the road.

Before she could so much as scream, the force of the push sent her staggering forward, off-balance, several steps into the street—and into the path of an oncoming vehicle. On the other side of the small box truck's windshield, the driver's mouth fell open in shock.

But just as Yukari was about to topple onto the street, a pair of long arms caught her from the side.

"Fukamachi! Follow him!"

The force with which he'd pulled Yukari to safety made Takatsuki fall to the sidewalk. He landed on the ground, Yukari still in his arms, then called out to Naoya.

At once, Naoya took off after the man, who had shoved through the crowd of people waiting to cross the street. The man was heading for the train station, knocking pedestrians out of his way as he ran. He was fast. But Naoya couldn't let him get away.

Then someone stepped right into the man's path, blocking it.

The man made to bolt, but the figure obstructing his escape grabbed him by the arms. Struggling hard, the man tried to break free. Naoya caught up as the two grappled with each other, and jumped in to further restrain the man. "—Good, you got him. I'm very grateful for your help, Mr. Tooyama."

Having arrived shortly after with Yukari in tow, Takatsuki thanked Tooyama, who had a firm grip on the man.

Takatsuki stepped in to take Naoya's place, grabbing hold of the still-struggling suspect by the arm. Twisting the limb behind the man's back, Takatsuki aimed a light kick to the back of the man's knees. The man went down with a yelp. Stopping him in the first place had taken the combined efforts of Tooyama and Naoya, but Takatsuki had subdued the man with ease by himself. Naoya and Tooyama both stared at him, wide-eyed, with something almost like fear. Was this another move Sasakura had included in the professor's self-defense lessons? What on earth was that out-of-control officer teaching ordinary people?

"Hayashi... Why...?" Yukari whispered.

She was looking down at the captured man's—at Hayashi's—face.

Clicking his tongue, Hayashi looked away from her.

But the next moment, Takatsuki twisted his arm even harder, and he let out another low cry.

"Mr. Hayashi. I teach folklore studies at a university. Generally speaking, I'm not really interested in cases that aren't paranormal."

Takatsuki's smile was wide.

"However, what you've done is a crime disguised as a paranormal phenomenon. No matter how little interest I have, I can't just ignore someone committing a crime. Thank you very much indeed for playing your part so readily."

"What ...?"

Frantically trying to whip his head around to see Takatsuki behind him, Hayashi's face twisted.

Meanwhile, Takatsuki never once slackened his grip on Hayashi's arm, though he seemed to be maintaining the hold at the point *just* before it could cause actual injury. It was true that Takatsuki wasn't interested in anything outside the occult. Once he figured out something wasn't supernatural, he tended to get bored with it.

But at the same time, he absolutely never forgave anyone for trying to pass off a crime as something otherworldly.

He unraveled counterfeit mysteries and ruthlessly exposed the sins hidden within.

Perhaps this was because he himself was the victim of a criminal act that had been dressed up to appear supernatural.

"Considering events thus far, I figured something would happen within a few days of the message arriving. I'm glad—you have some sense, at least. I couldn't be sure that you wouldn't do something that might drag other people into this, like setting Ms. Sawaki's residence on fire at the crack of dawn or releasing toxic gas into the office at night. So, just in case, I asked a detective I know to coordinate with the local police station to patrol the area. But then again, from what I'd heard about your actions up to this point, I got the feeling you wouldn't resort to something so drastic. Plus, you were the one who first brought up the 'rules' of the curse, so I was fairly confident you wouldn't stray from the 4:44 timing. That made it very easy to predict your behavior."

Takatsuki had laid a trap for Hayashi.

After being injured in a random attack, Hayashi had been taking time away from work. He hadn't been expected at the office this week, either. Ostensibly, he was using the break to search for a new job, but Takatsuki thought it more likely that he was just waiting for Yukari to go somewhere alone in the afternoon so he could make his move.

And so, Takatsuki had contacted Tooyama and Yukari to ask that Yukari be purposely sent out by herself—naturally, with Takatsuki and Naoya as her undercover guards. Since Hayashi would recognize Tooyama, he had been asked to watch over Yukari from a distance without getting too close.

Falling for this hook, line, and sinker, Hayashi had pushed Yukari into the road.

And having done so in front of so many witnesses, he would be hard-pressed

to talk his way out of it.

Peering down at Hayashi, Tooyama asked, "Why? Why did you do this?"

Hayashi tried to turn away from the question again, but all he got for his trouble was another twist of the arm.

In a strained voice, he answered, "I-it was just a little prank at first! Because Sawaki told us about the Curse of 4:44 or whatever... It made me think I could scare her if I made it look like the curse was real. So..."

Her brow knit in anguish, Yukari clenched both of her hands tightly.

"So everyone was in on it except for me after all. Oono too... Even Murata. But why? Why would you all do this? Did I do something to you?"

"Ask the boss," Hayashi spat.

Tooyama frowned.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You're always paying Sawaki more attention, aren't you?! I've been here two years longer than she has! So why did you pick her to lead the project?! And why did you decide to feature her design in the next bid...? I bet everyone else feels the same way! Why is it all about Sawaki?!"

Hayashi yelled and raved, and Yukari's eyes grew wide with surprise.

Shaking his head, Tooyama sighed.

"That's your reason? Isn't it obvious...? It's because she's brilliant. Do you not even understand that much? Then I was right after all—our office doesn't need you."

Hayashi glared at Tooyama, scowling fiercely.

It had been jealousy the entire time. Hayashi hated that his junior coworker received more recognition than he did, but his pride wouldn't allow him to show it in a normal fashion.

Outwardly, he had probably pretended to get along well with Yukari. At the very least, she didn't seem to have had any idea that Hayashi had felt that way.

"Mr. Hayashi," Takatsuki said, "before we go to the police station, why don't

we talk a bit more? About what you did, and what you were thinking."

Likely realizing he had long since lost his chance to escape, Hayashi started to speak in a faltering manner.

"I really...only meant to play a little prank, at first..."

That day—after they had invoked the Curse of 4:44—Hayashi had sent the "4444" e-mail on a whim. It was just supposed to be a joke. But when everyone had seemed more creeped out by the message than he'd expected, he had decided to use it as an excuse to mess with Yukari.

First, he'd decided on the rules of the curse, because he figured it would be scarier that way.

Next, he'd come up with the order in which they would be "cursed." First was his other junior coworker, Murata. Next, himself. His girlfriend, Oono, had told him disdainfully that she thought such things were stupid, so Hayashi had decided to put Yukari third and end the charade after some light terrorizing.

Of course, Murata had been reluctant. She and Yukari were friends, but she couldn't oppose a senior colleague. And in the end, Murata had done just as she'd been told, and pretended to fall victim to the curse using the scenario Hayashi had come up with.

Then it was Hayashi's turn. It was already a known fact that one of the shelves in the stack room was a bit wobbly, so he had pushed it over, acting as though he had experienced a very close call. He'd made it seem like he had been able to avoid getting hurt because of his understanding of the curse's rules.

But then—things had started to go awry.

That night, Hayashi was randomly attacked in the street.

It wasn't like he thought that had happened because of anything other than plain bad luck, but nothing remotely similar had ever happened to Hayashi in his whole life. Plus, the fact that it had taken place the very same day as his staged curse-evasion incident had made him feel a bit uneasy.

So Hayashi had decided then and there to call the whole thing off.

At that point, it was supposed to be Yukari's turn to get an e-mail, but Hayashi

hadn't sent one. He'd figured everyone would just forget about the curse sooner or later if nothing else happened.

And yet—the next day, when he was absent from work because of his injuries, Oono had called him. "Hey, what the hell is this?" she had said.

When Hayashi asked what she meant, Oono had shot back accusatorily, "I thought I wasn't going to have to do anything. So why did I get this '4' message?!"

Oono had received an e-mail, despite the fact that Hayashi had not sent one.

He told her he didn't know, and that it wasn't him. Hayashi informed Oono honestly that he had decided to give up on the curse after being randomly assaulted.

But when he'd said that, on the other end of the line, Oono had started to freak out.

She had cried into the phone, "So you're telling me someone else sent it? Are you saying the curse is actually real?!"

Hayashi tried to calm her down, but the call disconnected. Later, Murata called him to let him know Oono had been in an accident.

Afraid that there truly was a curse, Oono had run into the road in a fit of panic.

"I didn't send that message. Murata said she didn't, either... So it could only have been Sawaki. She must have realized what we were doing at some point and wanted to get back at us."

"No, you're wrong. I didn't send it..."

Yukari shook her head, but Hayashi only glared at her and continued talking.

"I thought I had to just end this whole thing quickly before anything else happened. It all started with the Curse of 4:44, so it would be over if something happened to the last person involved: Sawaki. So I sent her an e-mail... I pushed her because I wanted her to get hurt. Because if I didn't, the curse wouldn't end! If I didn't make it stop soon, something else would have happened! Wouldn't that have been worse?! In order to end this curse, I had no choice but

to do it!"

Spittle flew from Hayashi's mouth as he shouted, and Yukari stared down at him in horror.

Naoya, who was also observing the state Hayashi was in, felt the whole tale was a bit...uncanny.

There was something off about his story, like it had suffered a collapse in logic.

Somewhere along the way, it seemed like Hayashi himself had started to believe the curse was real. He said he suspected Yukari of turning things around on them, and that he had acted to prevent that, but it sounded like, rather than getting payback against her, his goal was to end the curse. What was more, Hayashi did not appear to realize how nonsensical that was.

"...The thing about curses, you know, is that once you believe in them, it's too late for you."

Takatsuki spoke in a low murmur.

"No matter how many other possibilities you try to find, in the end, you will always return to one thought: The curse did this."

From Hayashi's point of view, everything should have gone according to the script he had written.

But then events that weren't a part of his plan had happened. Losing his job. Being attacked. Oono receiving an e-mail he hadn't sent.

To Hayashi, those incidents were inexplicable.

Or perhaps, to some extent, his confusion stemmed from the guilt he felt over his own misdeeds. Not in a "what goes around comes around" sort of way, but maybe Hayashi was in a state of hyperawareness regarding curses, since he had blithely used one as a cover to bully someone else.

As a result, the Curse of 4:44 had taken up residence in his mind.

"The Curse of 4:44 is supposed to open up a door to the spirit realm... In a sense, it seems that's true."

"Huh?"

Naoya frowned at Takatsuki's statement, looking between him and Hayashi.

Still restraining Hayashi, Takatsuki answered in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Do you remember the definition of 'the spirit realm' I spoke about in class? The spirit realm is a place outside of the ordinary, where the systems we know don't apply. Doors to the spirit realm can appear anywhere. If such a door opens inside someone's heart, that person might do something they would never even have dreamed of doing ordinarily. Hayashi played with the occult as if it were a toy, and this resulted in his mind being sucked into another world. I guess he really shouldn't have invoked the Curse of 4:44... Or something like that."

Takatsuki let out a small snicker, then brought his mouth close to Hayashi's ear from behind.

"Congratulations," he whispered. "By some measures, you could be considered an example of someone who was genuinely met with misfortune because of the Curse of 4:44. This has been a *very* interesting case for me after all."

Hayashi's bloodshot eyes were wide open. His pale face twitched and contorted out of shape.

He looked as though he had been well and truly cursed.

In the afternoon three days later, Takatsuki and Naoya paid another visit to the café where they had first heard everything from Yukari: Un Pommier.

This time, the person waiting for them inside the shop was Tooyama.

"Professor Takatsuki, thank you so much for the other day."

"Not at all, I should be thanking you. My apologies for asking you to meet during work hours today."

Tooyama and Takatsuki exchanged slight bows and sat down at the same table Yukari had occupied before. Naoya took a seat next to Takatsuki.

There were no other customers. After delivering the drinks Naoya and Takatsuki had ordered, the owner went back behind the counter to become

"just another part of the decor." Jazz could be heard playing softly throughout the quiet café.

They were meeting with Tooyama to hear about how things had gone following the incident. Takatsuki was of the opinion that it would be better to speak with Tooyama than Yukari, and Naoya had agreed. Yukari had been dealt quite the shock. Asking her to rehash the awful affair would have been cruel.

Takatsuki smiled contentedly into his mug of hot chocolate—the same thing he had ordered last time—and said, "Mr. Tooyama, how has Ms. Sawaki been holding up?"

"Well, I get the impression she's still feeling a bit shaken up but is trying to distract herself through work. She seems motivated and is really putting in the hours. At this rate, I think she'll be fine at next month's bid as well. I intend to support her as much as possible, too."

Tooyama's voice was calm. He paused to take a sip of his coffee.

After everything had happened the other day, Tooyama had escorted Hayashi to the police station. Hayashi's pushing Yukari into the road was indisputable, so they would have to press charges for that offense at least.

Relations between Yukari and Murata had, as one would expect, been a bit strained since then. Even though she had only been following Hayashi's orders, Murata had lied and even faked an injury. Still, even Yukari seemed to understand that Murata had been seriously worried for her safety the day that they'd spoken to Takatsuki in the office. There wasn't much anyone could do except hope time healed the rift between them. It was expected that Oono would be released from the hospital soon, but whether she would be returning to her job at the architectural firm was unclear.

"In any case, things seem to have calmed down for now. It's all thanks to you, Professor. I'm very grateful. Though it does seem like we have an immediate opening for an office administrator at work. Are you sure you aren't interested, Fukamachi?"

"I mean, I don't even have any experience with office work..."

"We'd train you properly, of course. Getting some experience now will be an

advantage when you enter the job market."

"Um..."

"Mr. Tooyama. I believe I said as much before: Please don't try to poach my assistant."

A smiling Takatsuki intercepted Tooyama, who had apparently not given up on recruiting Naoya. Tooyama replied with a grin that he was "only joking," but the slight distortion in his voice made Naoya sneak a look at the expression behind his silver-rimmed glasses. He seemed like he was at least half-serious.

"By the way, Professor Takatsuki, though the incident has largely been resolved, there is still something I don't understand. May I ask you about it?"

"Of course, what is it?"

"Who sent that e-mail to Oono if it wasn't Hayashi?"

That was the very issue weighing on Naoya's mind as well.

The first three messages, as well as the very last one which Yukari had received, were Hayashi's doing.

But the identity of the sender of the fourth e-mail—the one Oono and Yukari had both gotten a version of—was as yet unidentified. It wasn't Hayashi, and it certainly hadn't been Yukari, either.

Takatsuki took another long sip of his hot chocolate.

"Actually," he said, "I invited you to this café today because I wanted to discuss that. You weren't directly involved, Mr. Tooyama, but it's not as though you were totally removed from the situation, either... And I didn't want Ms. Sawaki here for this..."

"What do you mean?"

"The person who sent that e-mail," Takatsuki replied, the words flowing casually from his mouth, "is the owner of this shop. And I believe he's also Ms. Sawaki's boyfriend."

There was a *thud* from somewhere behind them. The café owner, who had presumably been aiming to blend in unobtrusively with his surroundings, had

dropped the book he was reading.

Turning to look at the counter, Takatsuki called out to the man.

"Manager? You were listening, yes? Please join us, there's no need to be all the way over there. We have to discuss what you did now."

The owner stood up.

He walked unhurriedly to their table and lowered himself into the seat next to Tooyama. The expression on his face was not unlike resignation.

"Manager, may I ask your name?"

"It's Ishida."

"Then I'll call you Mr. Ishida, shall I? Mr. Ishida—was anything I said just now incorrect?"

"...No."

Ishida shook his head.

Tooyama's eyes widened in surprise. He must have been taken aback to hear that Ishida had sent the e-mail, but some of his shock might also have been because there was a considerable age difference between Yukari and this man.

With a small sigh, Ishida asked, "...How long have you known?"

"Regarding your relationship, I had an inkling from the beginning. There was an atmosphere of intimacy around you. But there were two factors that led me to believe I was right. The first was that Ms. Sawaki chose this shop as the location for our consultation."

Takatsuki held his index finger up in the air.

"At the start of that meeting, she seemed embarrassed to be consulting me on such a topic. As if she thought it wasn't something she should talk about in public. And yet she decided to talk to me here, despite the fact that you—someone she sees regularly—might overhear. In other words, as far as Ms. Sawaki was concerned, you were not an outsider to this matter. She probably told you the whole story even before she met with me, didn't she, Mr. Ishida?"

"...Yes," Ishida said with a nod. "Actually, I'm the one who suggested she

consult you. She had been searching online for someone, and I thought a university professor was probably a safe choice."

Grinning brightly, Takatsuki gave him a slight bow.

"Thank you for the recommendation. Now—the second reason was simple. You both wear the same wristwatch."

"Ah... You picked my watch up for me that day when I dropped it."

Ishida's smile was wry.

"She asked for them as a birthday gift. She doesn't really wear jewelry, so she said it would be nice to have matching wristwatches. I asked what we would do if her coworkers found out, since people from her office come into the café, but...since I never have mine on while I work, we concluded that it wouldn't be an issue."

Once it had been mentioned, Naoya clearly recalled that, when he had stopped Takatsuki from hugging Yukari, Ishida had dropped his wristwatch. And afterward, Takatsuki had noticed and handed it back to him. Thinking back on it, Ishida's eagerness to pull the professor off Yukari had probably come from his not wanting to sit back and watch somebody else put their hands all over his girlfriend.

"If my theory that you and Ms. Sawaki were dating held water, the rest followed quite easily. It was highly likely that Ms. Sawaki would discuss the situation she was presently wrapped up in with a romantic partner. You would also have access to Ms. Oono's e-mail address via Ms. Sawaki's phone. There was no one other than you, Mr. Ishida, who could have sent that '4' message."

"...It's just as you say."

Ishida nodded again.

"But why?" Tooyama asked. "How did it benefit you or Sawaki to send that e-mail to Oono?"

Though he seemed about to reply, Ishida faltered.

Takatsuki stepped in to answer in his place.

"Naturally, he did it to protect Ms. Sawaki... This is more a guess than a

theory, but was it not also you who attacked Mr. Hayashi, Mr. Ishida?"

"...Yes," Ishida admitted, his voice low. "That's right."

Naoya looked at him in slight astonishment. It was hard to see Ishida, who appeared to be so gentle, as someone who would attack another person with a metal pipe.

Ishida sighed again. His head drooped forward as the air left him. Or perhaps he was simply hanging it in regret.

Then he began to speak—about how events had unfolded and culminated in his assaulting Hayashi and sending the message to Oono.

"That night...Hayashi and Oono came to the café."

It was the day Tooyama had told Hayashi his contract wasn't going to be renewed.

They'd come in late, near closing time, when there were no other customers. They had probably decided to stop in after having a meal somewhere nearby. Hayashi had seemed a little drunk, and a lot unruly.

"As I said before, to most customers, the owner of a café might as well be another piece of furniture. So they'll all sit in here preparing for business meetings and discussing their divorces and complaining about their jobs without batting an eye. Of course, it's not as though I give any indication I can hear what they're saying... That day, Hayashi said, 'Why the hell did I get fired? Boss must be shackin' up with Sawaki after all, just like I thought. He's just playin' favorites.' He probably never would have dreamed that the person secretly listening in on his conversation was dating Yukari. He was talking so loudly. Saying things like, 'I'm so pissed off. I'm seriously gonna push that goddamn Sawaki down the stairs or something.' And Oono—it was like she was enjoying herself, fanning the flames. She said, 'You could blame it on the curse now, so why not?' Then the two of them started talking about how they could make Yukari falling down the stairs look like an accident, like they were trying to polish a soap opera script. The way they were talking about it was so *detailed*... I thought, 'These two might actually try to do it.'"

Ishida had kept his "part of the decor" mask on through a truly Herculean

effort, but on the inside, he had no intention of letting them get away with it. He wouldn't stand by and allow Yukari to suffer harm because of their petty jealousy.

"I had no presence of mind at the time. I flew into such a rage that when I think back on it, I have to wonder why... Truly, I don't know. Maybe I should have just come out and let them know, 'I'm Yukari's boyfriend, and I just heard every single thing you guys said.' Maybe if I had, their plan could have been snuffed out in a second... But I couldn't say it. Even though Yukari had said there was no need for us to hide our relationship from her coworkers... It was me. I felt inferior. She's young and beautiful and has a promising career...and I'm the uninspiring middle-aged owner of a small café that doesn't get many customers."

Before leaving the café, Hayashi had mentioned not being drunk enough yet. After the pair walked out, Ishida had locked the door without cleaning up and followed them. Hayashi had said good night to Oono and gone into a bar that was open late. Once he was sure of the situation, Ishida had returned briefly to the café to retrieve the motorcycle helmet he used on a regular basis.

Then he'd waited for Hayashi to exit the bar and start walking off before coming in swinging with a steel pipe he had borrowed from a nearby construction site. Hayashi had been incredibly drunk, and Ishida's face had been hidden by the helmet, so Hayashi didn't seem to recognize his attacker.

Nevertheless, once he had fled the scene, Ishida had felt like his days were numbered. At first, thinking the police would be coming for him at any second, he had been terrified.

But there was still one more thing he had to do. He needed to send a "4" e-mail to Oono before Hayashi could send one to Yukari.

"I figured if they were planning to do something awful to her using the curse as pretense, all I had to do was mark Oono as the next target first. Then they wouldn't be able to do anything to Yukari. And I certainly never intended to cause Oono any harm. When I heard that she ran out into the road in a panic, I wished I had never sent the message. I am truly so, so sorry..."

Ishida stopped talking, his head hanging even lower.

Both Takatsuki and Tooyama stared fixedly at him in silence.

Speechless, all Naoya could do was stare at him, too. He certainly should never have attacked Hayashi, but from the story Ishida had told, it wasn't hard to feel sympathy for him... And more than anything, when he thought about Yukari, Naoya's chest ached.

It might have been appropriate to say Ishida was yet another person who had been swallowed up by the Curse of 4:44. The forbidden game that Yukari had mentioned and Hayashi had insisted they play had ended up claiming more victims than expected. Ishida hadn't been a part of the game, but even *his* mind had become host to thoughts and feelings he had never had before.

Ishida himself said he would go to the police regarding his attack on Hayashi.

But first, he wanted Yukari to hear everything from him... Takatsuki and Tooyama both agreed, thinking that was for the best.

As they walked away from the café, Tooyama heaved a deep sigh.

"I can't believe it... I really do feel awful for Sawaki. She's already in shock, and now she's going to find out her boyfriend is turning himself in to the police?"

"I'm sorry. I also didn't want Ms. Sawaki to come to any more harm, but I couldn't pretend not to know about this, either. Please, look out for her, even just as her boss. From this point on we're out of the realm of my usefulness."

Tooyama grumbled something like "Well, I suppose that's true" at Takatsuki's statement.

It seemed as though his company was about to be in a very tough position for some time. His brilliant staff, who had just worked so hard to regain their motivation, might once more become too overwhelmed by sorrow to focus on their jobs. Even if that didn't happen, Tooyama had probably lost two employees anyway. It wasn't likely that Hayashi would be clocking in anytime soon, and it was unclear if Oono would resume her post either.

Just as Naoya was thinking, Maybe I should work there part-time until things calm down, Takatsuki spoke again.

"Mr. Tooyama, there is one thing I'd like to confirm, by the way."

"Yes, what is it?"

Tooyama looked at Takatsuki—and suddenly, Takatsuki leaned in close to the other man. He paid no mind to Tooyama jerking back in alarm and only crowded even closer, staring through Tooyama's glasses into his eyes.

"I've wanted to ask for a while now... You knew from the beginning, didn't you? That Mr. Hayashi, Ms. Murata, and Ms. Oono were lying to trick Ms. Sawaki?"

Tooyama was tall, but Takatsuki was taller. Naoya could see Tooyama tense up, as though the gaze peering down at him had pinned him to the spot.

In the space of a second, the professor's eyes took on a bluish tinge. Tooyama, only inches away from them, sucked in a weak breath when he noticed their color—the indigo of the bottomless darkness of night.

"Professor Takatsuki... What the hell are you...?"

"Who cares about me? I want to know about you, Mr. Tooyama."

His indigo gaze unblinking, Takatsuki said, "You knew from the beginning. That's why you decided to fire Mr. Hayashi—because you knew he was lying."

Naoya's eyes opened wide at Takatsuki's words.

"What...? Professor? What did you...just say...?"

But Takatsuki didn't answer Naoya's question. He merely continued staring down at Tooyama.

"When Ms. Sawaki recounted the series of events for me, I thought a few of your actions were strange. When you heard they had done the Curse of 4:44 in the office, you laughed and let it slide. That's a rather generous attitude to take. But when Ms. Murata was talking about spraining her ankle, you threw a file down on a desk to interrupt the conversation. That was quite a harsh reaction. And it was the same when Mr. Hayashi was nearly crushed by the shelf. Ordinarily, one would have expected you to show some concern first, but you called Mr. Hayashi into another room—not just without concern but in a foul mood, no less—and told him you were breaking off his contract. At that point, I

think it would be fair to say your demeanor was a bit cruel rather than just harsh. Ah yes, Sawaki also said you're usually a kind person, but that you had abruptly severed ties with people before. That makes you sound like an inconsistent and outrageously moody person. However—if we look at things from a different perspective, there is a clear thread of consistency."

Takatsuki's eyes shone an even deeper shade of indigo. The night sky in them was real. A dark abyss so tranquil that staring into it too long seemed liable to slow one's breathing to a stop, and so deep that it felt like it would swallow up a person's soul entirely.

"You hate them, right? Liars. That's why you get upset when someone lies."

"Th-that's..."

Stilted, Tooyama tried to speak. He seemed desperately to be trying to look away from Takatsuki, but behind his glasses, his eyes didn't budge. Naoya knew just how Tooyama felt. Takatsuki's night-sky gaze possessed a power that made it difficult to resist. Every time Naoya looked into those eyes, he felt compelled to say things he would rather have kept hidden.

A faint smile appeared on Takatsuki's lips.

"Please, Mr. Tooyama. Tell me, won't you? The reason you took an interest in Fukamachi is that you realized he's just like you—that his ears can hear lies as well."

Tooyama's eyes had opened so wide he looked shell-shocked.

Then—Takatsuki blinked. The night sky vanished from his gaze in that instant.

As if awaking suddenly from a daze, Tooyama scrambled away from Takatsuki. He took a few steps back, inhaling large gulps of air and letting them out hard like he was trying to regulate his breathing.

"...Seriously... What the hell are you, really...?"

"Well, I don't much know the answer to that myself," Takatsuki said, smiling.

Taking another deep breath, Tooyama looked at Naoya.

"Fukamachi. You said you were from Yokohama, but do you have any relatives in Nagano?"

"Oh... My's mother's family is in Nagano... I used to go there often when I was little."

"I see. It's the same for me. I'm not from Nagano, but I have kin there. I visited several times when I was young... And just one time, I had a very strange experience there."

"You mean...?"

"A festival. In the middle of the night. People dancing under blue lanterns with all sorts of masks on their faces."

The memory hit Naoya with a wave of vertigo.

The sight of that festival roared back to life inside his head. The crowd dancing to the drums. His grandfather, who was supposed to be dead, taking him to a food stall. A man wearing a black demon mask, and three sweets sitting on the counter.

A candied apple, a candied plum, and an amber-colored lollipop.

Choose just one— "Fukamachi, are you okay?"

Takatsuki was propping Naoya up by the shoulders. Voice hoarse, Naoya told the professor he was fine.

"I see," Tooyama said, touching one of his own ears. "...So you are like me after all."

The reason Tooyama had shown concern for his ears and peppered him with questions was because he had realized from observing Naoya's behavior that the two of them were alike.

Naoya stared at Tooyama like he was seeing him for the first time. Until that moment, he had never imagined there might be other people like himself.

"Um...have you ever met anyone else like this...?"

"No. You're the first. Do you also hear people's voices distort when they lie?"

"...Yes."

"I see. It's...difficult, isn't it? I know that very well."

There was no trace of a lie in those words. Tooyama spoke them with the

bitterness of experience.

"What do you usually do about it? I'm guessing it's tough for you to be in crowds."

"...I put on headphones and listen to music."

"Ah, I used to do that, too. It's easier when you fill your ears with sound beforehand, right?"

Behind his glasses, Tooyama's eyes narrowed with concern.

"It's better to practice ignoring sounds you don't want to hear. Try to make it so unpleasant sounds don't even register. It may be hard at first, but you'll get better at it over time... Though, even so, you are going to hear them sometimes."

"Th...Thank you! I'll try that!"

In that moment, a peculiar feeling welled up in Naoya's chest. He didn't know if he wanted to laugh or cry. This man knew the same pain he had suffered for so long, of people's horrible, warped voices. Naoya had never been able to commiserate with another person about it before. No matter how much he tried to describe it, no one would ever really understand unless they had heard that sound, too.

He never expected to feel such joy at finding out it wasn't just him. All these years, Naoya had believed he was the only one with ears like his.

"I'm so...relieved, somehow. Even with a power like this, to think I could get by normally in society like you do, Mr. Tooyama... To be honest, I wasn't sure if it was possible for me to have much of a future."

"This ability, it's really not that bad, you know?" Tooyama gave a wry smile. "After all, you can tell when someone is lying. You notice when someone is trying to rip you off right away; you can remove untrustworthy people from around you. I know immediately when another company submits false reports or estimates to me, and I can easily identify which members of my staff I don't want to keep around."

Tooyama was putting his ability to practical use. It was his weapon.

Naoya was genuinely in awe. So it was possible to live that way?

He wanted to be like Tooyama. So badly. To interact with people properly, instead of drawing a line between himself and the world and hiding behind it. Even if it was too late to get rid of his power now, he could use it as a tool to function in society. And if he did that, then maybe someday, just like a normal person, he could even get married and have a family— Just then, Naoya felt something in his chest run cold.

He'd just happened to catch sight of Tooyama's left hand.

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"...Mr. Tooyama?"
"Yes?"
"Um..."
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He hesitated once, with the question on the tip of his tongue.

But Naoya couldn't bear the thought of not asking.

"Mr. Tooyama—your family?"

Tooyama's face shifted ever so slightly into a grimace.

Oh, Naoya thought.

"I'm not married," Tooyama said. "My parents and younger sister are...well, I believe they're still alive, somewhere. I haven't heard anything about them dying."

The cold feeling flowing through Naoya hardened into a solid block of ice. His heart plummeted in his chest like a stone.

Takatsuki, seeing Naoya sink into silence, opened his mouth to speak instead.

"Mr. Tooyama, someday, I would like to investigate the festival that caused Fukamachi's ears to become like this. Have you ever been back to the village where you saw that festival as a child, since becoming an adult? Do you happen to know what it's like now?"

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"—You shouldn't go there."
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Tooyama cut across Takatsuki's words in an unexpectedly harsh tone of voice.

The professor stopped talking. Once again, Naoya looked at Tooyama in surprise.

Staring hard at Takatsuki, Tooyama continued, "It's practically a ghost town there now. Even if you did go, an investigation would be a waste of time. You're better off just giving up on the idea."

"...l...see."

Takatsuki's gaze narrowed.

Tooyama looked away from him and back to Naoya.

He took out one of his business cards, wrote something on the back, and handed it to Naoya.

"You can contact me at any time, for whatever reason. I've been getting by with this ability a lot longer than you have. I believe I might be able to give you some advice when you need it."

"...Thank you."

Naoya accepted the business card. It was the same one Tooyama had given to Takatsuki, except he had written what appeared to be his personal phone number and e-mail address on the reverse.

They watched Tooyama, who said he needed to return to work, walk away. Naoya looked down at the business card in his hands.

Director of an architectural firm—that was Tooyama's title. It wasn't a solitary position. His office also seemed to be decorated with awards he had received for his design work. He employed people and did business with other traders and clients. He led a properly successful life.

Nonetheless, whether Tooyama was actually happy at present, Naoya wasn't sure.

He knew that it wasn't for him to judge. But the expression Tooyama had worn when asked about his family looked a lot like the one Naoya saw every day in the mirror.

If you choose that one, you will be lonely.

It seemed that curse was one he would bear his whole life.

Takatsuki's hand came down on top of Naoya's head, patting him lightly.

"...Listen, Fukamachi."

Naoya couldn't summon the will to shake the professor's hand off or even look up at him. He just kept staring at Tooyama's business card.

"Everyone has their own way of living... Just because you have the same power does not mean you're bound to walk the same path."

Those words were probably meant to be comforting.

Still unable to lift his gaze, Naoya replied, "...That's true. I don't even know if I'll be able to get by in society like Mr. Tooyama anyway."

"I don't think that'll be a problem. You're doing surprisingly well already."

"Am 1?"

"Yep. Whenever I see you around campus, it looks like you're playing the part of a moderately social person rather deftly... Though if you ask me, it would be nice if you had a few more close friends."

"I don't really care to."

"Oh? But you do get along well with Nanba, don't you?"

"...He's always the one initiating."

"You truly are a bullheaded little guy, aren't you, Fukamachi?"

"—H-hey! What are you doing?!"

Naoya ducked away, flustered, as Takatsuki started mussing his hair vigorously.

Smiling like a mischievous child, the professor made grabby hands in Naoya's direction.

"Your head is at the perfect height, Fukamachi. KenKen is taller than me, so it's hard to do things like this to him."

"What could be so fun about messing up Mr. Sasakura's hair?"

"You won't know unless you try it... He'll definitely get mad, though."

"I figured. Anyway, why are we talking about this?"

"To cheer you up," Takatsuki replied, tilting his head slightly to the side with a bright smile.

"Wha...? I-it's not like I'm depressed or anything!"

"Really? You looked disheartened. Well, then—I suppose we should leave. Are you hungry, Fukamachi? Let's get dinner and head home."

"...Fine, if you're paying."

"Of course."

Takatsuki turned and promptly started walking toward the train station. Once he had taken a particular route, he could follow that same route without getting lost, even if he was alone.

Naoya shoved Tooyama's business card into his pocket and chased after Takatsuki.

"By the way, Professor, there's something I wanted to ask you."

"Oh, what is it?"

"That protective charm you gave to Ms. Sawaki. What does 'i-na-ji-n-shi' mean? Is it some kind of regional incantation or something? From the kanji I would guess maybe somewhere that cultivates rice crops?"

"Ohh, that?"

Takatsuki grinned over his shoulder at Naoya.

"Try reading that word in reverse, Fukamachi."

"Huh? Backward?"

"Just humor me."

Naoya tried to picture the syllables in reverse, as he was told.

"Umm, okay, so if it's 'i-na-ji-n-shi,' then you would get...shi-n-ji-na-i...?"

As soon as he sounded it out, the realization hit him.

Shinjinai—"Don't believe it."

"Wait, are you kidding me?! It was just a nonsense word?! You said it would keep her safe!"

"A protective charm is a protective charm. Even if it's one that I invented."

"'Invented'?! That's just lying, isn't it?! I can't believe you had the nerve to give that to Ms. Sawaki!"

"I'm telling you, it was a legitimate charm. Has no one ever told you about 'soubunze' or 'soushinahanoko' or 'Yodasou'?"

"Wh-what in the world are those?"

"The first two incantations are used to break out of a nightmare or avoid it altogether. If you reverse them, you get 'zenbu uso' and 'kono hanashi uso'—'none of this is true' and 'this story isn't real.' 'Yodasou' is a monster that attacks children and yells something like, 'I am Yodasou! Turned around!' If they can't solve that riddle, the monster kills them. Again, if you read it backwards, you get 'uso da yo.' 'It's a lie.' There are tons of ghost stories with this kind of wordplay. Like I said, Japanese people love puns and palindromes. But until someone catches on, both 'soubunze' and 'soushinahanoko' act as comforting mantras to keep them safe from ghosts and such. I'm sure many children memorized these words frantically when such stories were popular. That was all they had to do to avoid having bad dreams. And even if they did have one, they could escape from it. As long as they believed that, the incantation would work. The same goes for the one I came up with, 'inajinshi.' Ms. Sawaki was reciting it for all she was worth, wasn't she?"

"...Are you saying it's a 'those who believe shall be saved' sort of thing?"

"More like 'any port in a storm,' I think," Takatsuki replied with a laugh.

I can't believe this guy, Naoya thought. Somehow it felt like he had been monumentally duped.

"...It's scary how you can say things like that without your voice warping even a little."

"It's because I'm not actually lying. I really do think that."

Liar.

It was true that, at that moment, Takatsuki was only saying things he really believed. But when he had given Yukari the charm, he had probably chosen every word very deliberately. He had likely spoken so that nothing he said *could* be untrue in order to keep Naoya, who had been sitting right next to him, from realizing what was happening. As intelligent as Takatsuki was, it would have been easy enough for him to accomplish.

"You really are a bit sly, Professor."

"I prefer 'clever.'"

Naoya scowled at him reflexively, but Takatsuki stooped over a little to peer at him.

"I told you, Fukamachi. Once you believe in a curse, it's too late. The best way to avoid it? 'Don't believe it.'"

"You might have a point, but..."

"That's why I'm saying," Takatsuki went on, "don't believe that you're going to be lonely, either."

Naoya's mouth snapped shut automatically.

The eyes staring down at him weren't indigo. They were their usual dark brown... Takatsuki's own eyes.

They shone with a gentle light and narrowed slightly as Takatsuki smiled.

"You mustn't believe it. A curse like that, it might be nothing more than a lie."

Oh, Naoya thought. He's still trying to cheer me up.

Wondering if he really looked that sad, Naoya turned his gaze away. Takatsuki's dark-brown eyes didn't have the power to trap him in their hold forever.

"...But, Professor, if it's too late once you believe in a curse, I think it's probably already over for me."

"Th-then I'll just knock you over the head to make you forget it all! Or something!"

"Did you seriously just casually offer to give me amnesia?! For a smart person,

you sure do say the wildest things sometimes."

"...Fukamachi, I'm feeling really dejected right now. Would you cheer me up?"
"No way."

Casting this reply coldly over his shoulder, Naoya walked on ahead of Takatsuki.

That night at the festival, his grandfather had told him: "You will be lonely."

And just as he had said, Naoya had been living a solitary life ever since.

...Or so he had thought.

Naoya looked back at Takatsuki. As he followed in Naoya's wake, the professor was sulking like a child. When he noticed Naoya's gaze, however, his expression turned quizzical.

"What is it, Fukamachi?"

"...It's nothing."

Naoya faced forward again.

As he did, on the inside, he addressed a message to his grandfather.

Grandpa, it said, I wonder if I actually am lonely now.





Rumors spread that a mermaid had appeared at Enoshima in early June.

The sighting was reported on by a sports newspaper originally.

A local fisherman had gone out to sea on his boat early in the morning and spotted something black floating in the waves, spread over the surface of the water. At first, he'd thought it might be garbage or seaweed, but then something round had popped up from beneath the water, right in the center of it.

That was when the fisherman had realized the floating black mass was long hair, and that what had emerged at its center was a human head.

The fisherman was startled—was it someone who had drowned? A body someone had disposed of? He leaned over the side of his boat.

Suddenly, the head swiveled in his direction.

It was a woman. Her soaked black hair clung to her pale skin. Her eyes were huge and black. Her lips, red.

That face—beautiful even from a distance—looked at the fisherman, her mouth curled up at the corners, and then...

Her head disappeared back under the water. Half a second later, something leaped out of the sea, cleaving through the waves.

Thin shoulders, heavy breasts, a trim waist that transitioned down into the

scale-covered form of a fish tail.

Teasingly, the mermaid—as that was unmistakably what she was—rotated once in midair, sending droplets of water flying, before diving back into the water. That was the fisherman's account of the event, at least. The article that published his story was nothing major; a mere blurb on the page, it had probably only been meant to fill space.

When it was picked up by internet news sources, however, things started to change.

The link to the article circulated rapidly around Twitter, and people even started traveling to the Enoshima area just to see the mermaid.

Then other people began to come forward claiming to have seen mermaids themselves—"I was surfing in Inamuragasaki and saw a woman's face floating in the water right next to me. A second later a huge fish tail splashed out of the sea." "A mermaid waved at me from far out to sea when I was walking along the shore in Shichirigahama."

Various such stories emerged, and little by little, the mainstream media took notice.

And there was one man, an associate professor at Seiwa University, who was simply guaranteed to sink his teeth into the tale.

"—Which is to say, I'm revising the lesson plan for today. We're going to talk about mermaids!"

Takatsuki stood at the lectern with a glowing smile across his whole face as he made this announcement. Laughter spread through the room.

Even Nanba, sitting at Naoya's side, muttered something that sounded like, "Thought so." It appeared that most of the class had figured Takatsuki would bring the topic up during their lecture. Many of the students snickered as the day's handouts made it to their seats.

"We get the sense that there aren't many modern urban legends involving mermaids, perhaps because our impression of mermaids nowadays is heavily influenced by the Western image of them. The mermaids who appear in Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid' fairy tale—as well as those in the Disney movie adaptation—are more 'charming and likable creature' rather than 'monster.' However, that's not to say mermaids never get the scary treatment these days. Several years ago, there was a horror event held at the Sunshine Aquarium in Ikebukuro. Has anyone heard of it? Did anyone go? Ah yes, a few of you, eh? It was essentially a haunted house that took the form of an immersive narrative experience at the aquarium at night. The illuminated tanks worked well with the eerie mermaid puppets, and the event drew large crowds. Naturally, those mermaids were depicted as horrifying and grotesque because they were part of a haunted house. After all, it's not as if you often get the chance to be attacked by a mermaid! You could also see the fish and jellyfish and such, so it was a very enjoyable experience."

Takatsuki grinned as he spoke. Judging from the way he talked about it, Naoya had the feeling the professor was one of those who'd attended the event. Perhaps with Ruiko and the other grad students? Sasakura seemed likely to decline if he was invited.

"Now let's take a look at how Japan originally viewed mermaids. Our oldest written description of them comes from the Nihon shoki. Please turn your attention to Handout 1: Chapter 22, the era of Empress Suiko. It reads, 'In the summer of the twenty-seventh year, on the fourth day of the fourth month. A report from the province of Afumi: In the river Gamafu there was a creature in the shape of a man. Autumn, seventh month. A fisherman of the province of Settsu cast his net into the canal. Something alike in form to a child, which was neither a fish nor a man, entered his net. He knew not what it should be called.' The 'river Gamafu' is what we now know as the lower reaches of the Hino River in Shiga Prefecture. Something that resembled a person was spotted in its waters. Next we have the account of a fisherman in the former Settsu Province who caught something in his net which seemed to be a child. This creature was neither a human nor a fish, so the fisherman didn't know how to refer to it. This 'neither human nor fish' likely means it resembled both human and fish, you see. We tend to think of the sea when we think of mermaids, but the ones in this period seem to have been river-dwelling."

The idea that reports along the lines of "something sort of weird happened here" were included in the *Nihon shoki* was comical, in some ways. The same

content that made for a sports newspaper article had been written about in a historical record created by the state itself.

"On to Handout 2, which is from volume 20 of the medieval fable collection, Kokon Chomonju, is called 'In which residents of the seaside settlement of Beppo in Ise Province captured mermaids and presented them to former Assistant Vice-Minister of Justice Tadamori.' It's an account of three peculiar fish which were caught and brought before Taira no Tadamori, and as you can see, the term 'mermaid' is distinctly used. There's also quite a detailed description of their appearance. Their heads were humanlike, but they had small, fishlike teeth and mouths that protruded like a monkey's. Their bodies were exactly like those of regular fish. Furthermore, when people approached these mermaids, they shrieked in voices that sounded human, and even shed tears. Two of the three were presented to Tadamori, who was disgusted and returned them immediately, but the third was carved up by the fishermen and eaten without compunction. They experienced no unusual side effects, only stating that it was delicious. According to the legend of Yao Bikuni, consuming mermaid flesh will grant you eternal youth and longevity, but no such account appears here. It really makes you wonder what mermaid tastes like, doesn't it?!"

Lecturing animatedly, Takatsuki began drawing on the blackboard. It was probably supposed to be a picture of the kind of mermaid described in the *Kokon Chomonju*, but it was quite bizarre. Some of the problem certainly lay in Takatsuki's drawing ability, but the original subject matter itself definitely contributed to the issue. After all, there was a human head stuck directly where the fish's face would have gone. It was significantly more fish-forward than the one in "The Little Mermaid." If she had looked like this, she probably would have had a hard time getting a prince to fall in love with her. The prince would probably have just run away, actually.

"Handout 3 is the entry on mermaids from the Wakan Sansai Zue, which was compiled in the mid-Edo period. There's an illustration included as well. This one is the 'upper body of a human woman, lower body of a fish' type. The explanatory section references the Wamyosho as well as the aforementioned Nihon shoki. Between this and the fact that we still occasionally see articles

about such creatures being caught in nets, you get the sense that fishermen must encounter mermaids now and then. Although in reality, what they're catching are probably less like the mermaid in this illustration and more like the human-faced fish—that is, a fish whose face is simply humanlike—we covered in class last year."

As he followed along with the professor's words, Naoya remembered the Napoleon fish he had seen on TV before. When people thought of fish, they tended to imagine flat, pointy heads like the ones on sauries and sardines. But the humphead wrasse, with its round, protruding forehead and massive, thick lips, somehow evoked the image of a human face. If someone accustomed to seeing ordinary fish suddenly came across one of those, they might reflexively mistake it for a human-faced fish.

"When it comes to the Edo period, mermaids were considered a relatively mainstream creature. In Santo Kyoden's illustrated storybook *Hakoiri Musume Men'ya Ningyo*, mentioned in Handout 4, a mermaid caught by a fisherman out at sea comes ashore, marries the fisherman, and starts working at a brothel to make a living. She is woman from the head to the neck but fish from the shoulders down, and consequently has no arms. However, in *Ryugu Namagusa Hachinoki*, also by Santo Kyoden, we see the upper half woman, lower half fish type again. Both of these examples were modeled on the tale of Urashima Taro. It's further established that that mermaid in *Hakoiri Musume Men'ya Ningyo* is the child conceived of Urashima Taro's affair with a sea creature other than Otohime during his time at the Dragon Palace."

The handout Takatsuki indicated as he spoke included a rather striking picture of a woman who looked exactly like the ladies often shown in woodblock prints —at least, as far as her head was concerned. Her body, just below that, was entirely the same as a normal fish's. She was also human in proportion and depicted standing deftly upon the tatami mats using her tail. Her face would probably have been considered beautiful, but could she really have attracted customers as a sex worker? Staring at the handout, Nanba muttered, "People from the Edo period were somethin' else. I could never." Naoya was inclined to agree.

"In Handout 5, we have a report from the second year of the Bunka era that

was included in the Gaidan Bunbun Shuyo of a monstrous fish that was caught in Toyama City in Etchu Province. If you look at the illustration, you can see what appears to be a fish with the horned head of a woman. According to the text, 'Its face resembled that of a hannya mask. The fin was adorned with a vignette-like pattern, and it had three eyes on each flank.' Fishermen in nearby Sado would sometimes find this kind of creature in their nets, but as it was said that ensnaring a mermaid would lead to a bad catch, we also get an account of a captured mermaid being given food and alcohol before being returned to the sea. Handout 6 is a drawing printed on a flyer in May of the same year titled 'Ningyo no zu.' It's generally the same as the mermaid described in the Gaidan Bunbun Shuyo, but at the end it says, 'Those who see this fish once will enjoy great longevity, avoid misfortune and disaster, and gain a lifetime of good luck and virtue.' It's interesting that, despite its ominous appearance, it seems to have been regarded as a blessing. Later on, pictures of hime-uo, which look very similar to these examples, became popular as protection from disease. In other words—those who peddled said images in the street under that pretext frequently sold out of their wares. Which means there were also many people very happy to purchase them."

The *Ningyo no zu* drawing showed the head of a woman with disheveled hair attached directly to the body of a fish. With the two horns protruding from her head, and her mouth open and showing a row of teeth, her face really did resemble a *hannya* mask. It might have been difficult for modern people to believe that seeing this creature would result in long life, but people from back then probably hung her picture on their walls with great joy.

Looking down at the handout, Takatsuki gave a slightly wry smile.

"In any case, until the Edo period, mermaids in Japan were not very beautiful. There are objects said to be mummified mermaids here and there, but they aren't pretty to look at, either. Most of them are considered fakes created with taxidermy techniques in which the upper half of a monkey or something similar is attached to the body of a salmon or trout. The mermaid on the cover of the Kyoden story is somewhat beautiful, but she is nevertheless a departure from how we imagine mermaids today. You can see exactly how much our perception of them transformed with the influx of Western culture."

At that point, a girl seated at the front of the class raised her hand.

"Professor, what does that mean about the mermaid sightings reported out of Enoshima? All the eyewitness accounts say the mermaids are human to the waist and really pretty, too. In other words, they're the spitting image of Western mermaids, the kind we think of today as mermaids."

"Yes," Takatsuki replied, smiling wide. "Judging from the information that has come out thus far, that's exactly right."

The girl who had asked the question leaned forward a little.

"So then," she said, "does that mean those reports are fake after all? I mean, originally, Japanese mermaids were the type where only the head was human, right? It feels like the ones from the current sightings are a bit too far from that image. Did someone who is only familiar with Western-style mermaids make the report up? Or is it just a simple case of misidentification?"

"Hmm, well, in order to make that argument, I suppose you would first need to assume that the human-head type of mermaid actually has inhabited Japan since a long time ago."

Takatsuki gestured to the drawing he had made on the blackboard earlier.

The female student suddenly covered her mouth with one hand, as if only just realizing her point rested on the assumption that mermaids were real. Other students began to laugh, and the girl curled in on herself in embarrassment.

Takatsuki, however, looked around at the derisively giggling students as if they were the odd ones.

"Huh? What's so funny? She asked a really great question."

The laughter subsided, and the girl raised her head just a little.

Offering her a kind smile, Takatsuki said, "This country has many supernatural creatures. Demons, kappa, tengu, just to name a few. All of us, when we hear those words, can drum up images of what those creatures look like. However, there probably isn't anyone in this classroom who has actually seen a demon or a kappa, right? We all think we know what they look like because we've seen them in manga and novels and such. If I told you all right now to draw a picture

of Nurikabe, I'm guessing everyone would draw the rectangular character from *GeGeGe no Kitaro*. You know the one."

Turning to the chalkboard, Takatsuki drew something that resembled a large, pounded fish cake with short limbs. He added two eyes in the middle of the shape, then swiveled back around, facing the class.

"It's Nurikabe," he declared proudly.

The students responded with a smattering of applause. The subject matter was easy to grasp, so somehow, the drawing could reasonably be seen as Nurikabe.

"Through the stories we've been told, or else the pictures that accompany them, we are able to clearly visualize figures we've never seen. What's more, our understanding of those visualizations is a shared one. There was a time in this country when the word 'mermaid' usually invoked an image of this humanhead type, because that's how the people of the time understood mermaids to look. But with the rapid influx of Western culture to Japan during the Meiji period, we also saw a huge number of fables and tales from other countries being introduced here. Japanese people are exceptionally good at adopting the cultures of other countries. We soaked up Western fairy tales and novels—along with the monsters that appear in them—with ease. As a result, our image of the creatures known as mermaids evolved as the shared understanding of them as 'beautiful women from the waist up, fish from the waist down' spread. The truth is, in this case—it doesn't actually matter what real mermaids look like, because we only know them in the form we've been told about."

Takatsuki gave a slight shrug.

That was true, Naoya thought. It wasn't likely anyone in the room had met a real mermaid.

But everyone present still had an idea of what mermaids should look like. And now, with the contents of Takatsuki's lecture fresh in their heads, they could add to that idea the image of "what mermaids in Japan originally looked like."

Whether said images resembled actual mermaids in any respect, no one could know.

"Fundamentally, people are only able to view the world as they wish to see it. Even the life-changing experience of seeing something that looks like a mermaid at sea will be impacted by our common understanding of mermaids. The moment someone thinks, 'I just saw a mermaid,' the image we all have of mermaids in our minds will very tidily work to supplement the likely indistinct full-body view they actually had. And that will only be truer for someone who's only heard about the sighting. Of course, the nature of the medium that recounts the story will also have an impact. A sports paper would probably want to present the information in an amusing way. After all, a reader's interest is more likely to be drawn in by a depiction like 'a beautiful, bare-chested mermaid leaped out of the sea' than 'some creepy sort of fish-human hybrid appeared.'"

Still smiling, Takatsuki turned his attention back to the girl who had first raised her hand.

She was no longer withdrawn, hunching down in her seat. Instead, sitting up tall with a normal posture, she was listening to Takatsuki speak with interest. His smile grew.

"We don't know yet whether the present rumors circulating about mermaids are made up or genuine. But tales about them have been passed down in Japan for generations, so perhaps there really are creatures we would call mermaids here. At least, I'd like to maintain that level of romanticism! I mean, I really want to see a mermaid! At least then I would know whether the human-head or half-human version is correct!"

Takatsuki's gleaming eyes made the students burst into another round of laughter.

It was extremely typical of him to open with such a huge amount of exposition, only to conclude with a statement like "I want to see a mermaid." He was probably going to make a trip to Enoshima to search for them before long.

As Naoya considered that if that did end up happening, Sasakura would probably be driving Takatsuki there in his car, the professor's gaze turned toward Naoya. He was smiling gleefully.

Oh, Naoya thought. He definitely wants to go.

No message came from Takatsuki immediately after class, however.

Walking out of the school building by himself, Naoya considered going to the library. He shoved both headphones into his ears and started to walk.

Then, halfway there, he suddenly changed his mind and turned toward the building that housed the dining hall.

Having bought only a paper cup full of cheap coffee, Naoya sat at one of the tables near the center of the space.

He wasn't really there to drink coffee, though.

Music played through his headphones, loud enough to drown out other sounds. The song was from an older album by a foreign artist that he had taken a liking to after hearing it somewhere by chance.

Taking a sip of his coffee, Naoya looked casually around the dining hall.

All the surrounding tables were occupied by students in twos and threes.

Some smiled, some frowned—but they were all talking. Naoya just couldn't hear what they were talking about. The English lyrics blasting through his headphones almost seemed to erect a barrier around him that blocked out their conversations.

Setting down his cup, Naoya lightly adjusted the bridge of his glasses. He took in a small breath, then exhaled.

Then he reached up and took just one earbud out.

The voices filling the hall immediately flooded into his now-empty ear.

"Like I said, you're worrying too much! It's not like those two are dating or anything!"

"I've read that book before, too! It made me cry so much! It was so touching!"

"Okay, so, this is a true story. At my old part-time job, my senior coworker turned to me and showed me her—"

He could hear the lies—all of which were likely trifling little fibs—being

sprinkled in among the interweaving exchanges. They were the kind of lies meant to gloss things over in the moment, or to make a story more interesting. Naoya didn't think any of the people who were speaking had any particularly malicious intent.

And yet, to Naoya's ears, just the fact that they were lying was enough to harshly distort their voices, automatically turning the sound of them into an unbearable racket. Naoya looked down, trying to endure the awful chills coursing down his spine.

In April, when they had met, Tooyama had told Naoya it was a good idea to practice ignoring sounds he didn't want to hear.

Since then, the two of them—who possessed the same ability—had been in contact several times. When Naoya had asked how to go about practicing that skill, this was the method Tooyama had suggested.

While listening to music in a crowded place, remove just one earbud. Then attempt to only half listen to the conversations around you.

Focus on the music playing in your other ear, and even when distorted voices break your concentration, try not to pay them any attention. Once you grant them even a second of awareness, the lying voices will be the only thing you can hear, so think of them as nothing more than static. Ignore them.

Naoya more or less understood what Tooyama was trying to tell him. Sometimes, when people were in the middle of talking to one another, they became less conscious of what was being said in their vicinity because they were focused on their conversation partner's words. He felt like Tooyama was saying he should develop the ability to use that same skill when he was by himself. The other man had told him that once he was used to doing this with one earbud in, he should advance to taking both out and trying to pick out only the sounds he wanted to hear from the general ruckus.

There was another thing Tooyama had said to do—one that he admitted was the most essential, but nevertheless the most difficult.

"Don't feel guilty for being able to tell when someone is lying."

Both Tooyama and Naoya knew the instant someone hid a lie among their

words. It didn't matter how much that person controlled their facial expression or adjusted their tone. Whenever they uttered anything they knew was untrue, their voice would warp.

The thing was, nobody wanted to be caught in a lie.

"It may be true that the ability we possess is no different than being able to spy on other people's innermost thoughts and feelings, but it's not as if we're doing it consciously... Try not to let it weigh on you. Though I realize that's easier said than done."

When he'd said that, Tooyama had smiled bitterly. Naoya had felt himself doing the same.

This power had caused even his own family to shun him. It wasn't as simple as just not caring about it, especially now.

"Yeah, I totally understand that feeling. It's not really Mami who's at fault here, right?"

## "No, seriously! I'm not lying! The whole thing is true!"

The voices around him vacillated rapidly between shrill, high-pitched ringing and deep, tremolo bass. Feeling like his very brain tissue was being stirred up, Naoya grimaced and slapped his hands over his ears.

Deciding he had practiced enough for the day, he put his earbud back in. Though he thought he'd held on for quite a while, the coffee in his cup hadn't cooled down much. Naoya forced the bitter liquid down his throat and stood up.

Tooyama had said that even if it was hard at first, he would get used to it a little at a time. He had apparently used to collapse when he was in crowded places, but that didn't seem to be the case now. At least for the time being, there was nothing Naoya could do except continue to practice as he'd been told.

That said, the experience had left him feeling a little wrung out. He had meant to stop by the library that day, but he headed for the school gate instead, thinking he might as well go home. The courtyard was as busy as ever. There were plenty of people walking through it or sitting on the benches chatting, but the space was also used for all sorts of club activities. The dance club was performing a routine to music, the drama club was doing vocal exercises, and next to them for some reason was a group of people selling bananas for cheap. No matter where one looked, it was chaos.

On top of all that, Naoya was starting to worry about the sudden and recent increase in pigeons in the area.

Apparently, students who sat on the courtyard benches had been scattering bread and snacks for the birds, causing a huge number of the local pigeons to descend on what they thought was a feeding ground. At that very moment there was a gray pigeon tip-tapping around by Naoya's feet, completely unafraid of him. There was bird poop everywhere, and some of the pigeons would even fly low, directly in front of people whom they seemed not to recognize as people. It had become a bit of a problem for the university. Despite the registrar's office putting up Do Not Feed the Birds signs in various places, the horde of pigeons wasn't going to disappear overnight.

Concerned, Naoya had asked Takatsuki if he was okay with all the birds around. The professor had answered that he avoided passing through the courtyard as much as possible, so the issue was sort of being handled. Naoya was still uneasy, however, worrying that sooner or later Takatsuki was going to collapse.

Just then, Naoya noticed a man walk through the school gate in his general direction.

The man wasn't a student. He looked much older than one. He was clad in a fitted three-piece suit, sported a mustache, and had to be at least in his fifties. Perhaps he had a bad knee or something, because he was carrying a cane, too. He could have been a member of the faculty, but Naoya did not recall ever having seen him at school.

More to the point, Naoya was certain he would have noticed someone like this around campus before.

The more he thought about it, the more the man seemed to possess an

unreal sort of aura. With his long gray hair tied back in a single ponytail and his neatly groomed mustache, he looked just like a character from a movie. The term "English gentleman" naturally came to mind even though Naoya was pretty sure the man was Japanese. Tall and well-built to boot, the moderate number of creases in his handsome face gave him a touch of refinement.

Naoya might have accidentally been staring at him while lost in these thoughts, because suddenly, the English gentleman turned to look at him.

As soon as their eyes met, the man broke into a bright smile.

At the same time, Naoya was caught off guard by the feeling that he had seen this man somewhere before. Maybe he actually was a film star?

Seeing that the gentleman's lips were moving as he approached, Naoya hurried to take out his headphones.

"Um, sorry, I couldn't hear you... Is something the matter?"

The man looked mildly surprised by Naoya's question before smiling once more.

"I'm sorry to bother you. I'm here to see a man who works at this school. His name is Akira Takatsuki. Do you happen to know where I might find him?"

Naoya was caught a little off guard by this English gentleman saying Takatsuki's name in his clear, pleasant baritone.

"Oh... Um, if you're looking for Professor Takatsuki, he's probably in the faculty building around this time."

"Ah, you're not one of his students, by chance? If you wouldn't mind, I would much appreciate you showing me the way."

"I don't mind. This way."

Naoya had nothing left to do for the day but go home, so acting as this man's guide was no problem.

Perhaps the man was a professor at another university, since he was here to see Takatsuki. He didn't seem like a client who had come after finding the Neighborhood Stories site. There was no "I'm being menaced by the occult" vibe about him.

Looking around the courtyard, the gentleman's eyes crinkled in amusement.

"Quite lively, isn't it? Is there some kind of event today?"

"No, it's pretty much always like this. Those are all clubs over there."

"Reminds me of Covent Garden. I wish there were a cup I could toss coins into."

The man twirled his cane gently in his hand as he spoke. There was something —a wolf's head?—carved into the grip. It wasn't obvious unless one paid close attention, but the man seemed to have a very slight limp in his right leg.

They arrived at the faculty building, and Naoya showed the man to room 304.

When he knocked on the door, however, there was no answer.

"Huh...? Is he not here?"

Naoya tried the doorknob, thinking Takatsuki was usually in his office at this time of day. The door didn't seem to be locked. Was it all right to just leave the gentleman waiting inside for the time being?

Considering his options, Naoya opened the door and peeked inside—and nearly jumped back in surprise.

There were books and sheets of paper scattered all across the office. Stacks of books were piled up on the table and the floor. Countless photocopied reference pages in clear sheet protectors littered the room with a number of pens mixed in among them. The office looked like the scene of a very recent fight sequence, but there was no one to be seen.

Despite how he seemed, Takatsuki rather liked keeping things tidy. He was in the habit of immediately putting things back where they belonged when he was done with them, so his office was always neat... Naoya could think of only one person who would make the place look like this.

He peered under the table.

"...Ugh, I knew it! Miss Ruiko!"

A long-haired woman was lying on the floor as if she had only just collapsed there. A laptop was left open at her side, its screen long since gone dark. Ruiko Ubukata was one of Takatsuki's graduate students. She frequently fell asleep on his office floor when she had a research presentation or thesis deadline looming.

"Come on, Miss Ruiko! You can't sleep there. Wake up, please."

Naoya got closer and tried calling her name, but Ruiko only mumbled some incomprehensible sounds and rolled over. Usually, Ruiko was the kind of beauty Nanba fawned over, but it seemed she was in an unfortunate state today—hair unkempt, face bare but for the dark circles under her off-kilter glasses.

"Miss Ruiko. Come on, you have to get up. You have work today, don't you?"

"Hnngg... Fukamachi, you go in my place, 'kay...? I'll pay you a lot..."

"What are you saying? I can't do that," Naoya replied, right as someone opposite him started speaking to Ruiko.

"Pardon me, m'dear. Are you quite all right?"

It was the English gentleman.

He had apparently gone the long way around the table to reach the other side. Leaning his cane against the table, he knelt next to Ruiko and gently helped her sit up.

"A lady shouldn't sleep on a cold floor like this. Dear me, you poor thing, you look so tired. Come now, at least sit in that chair there. It may be a mere folding chair with absolutely nothing about its molding to compliment, but I'm sure it will accommodate a lovely girl like yourself better than the floor. Here, can you stand?"

In his deep, clear voice, the man unabashedly spouted lines that would have fit right in on a stage. The fellow had to be an actor, Naoya thought, because he doubted an ordinary person would have been able to say any of that without difficulty.

But unfortunately, Ruiko was still half asleep. It was only once she was seated in a chair, propped up by the gentleman, that she opened her bleary eyes.

"Hn...? Professor Akira, when did you grow a mustache...? Oh no, it suits you..."

"Miss Ruiko, that isn't Professor Takatsuki."

When he pointed this out to Ruiko, who was blinking sleepily as though she hadn't yet woken all the way up, Naoya realized something.

That was it—that was the reason he felt like he had seen this man before.

It was because they looked alike.

This man—and Akira Takatsuki.

"Huh? What's going on? You left the door open."

Right then, Naoya heard Takatsuki's voice on the other side of the door.

Several envelopes in hand, the professor walked into the room. He had probably been at the registrar's office.

"Whoa, Miss Ruiko, you've made a mess again... Oh? Fukamachi? And—huh? Huh?! What?! Uncle Wataru?!"

Takatsuki's eyes widened and then went completely round as he glanced from Naoya to the English gentleman.

The man went back around the table and walked up to Takatsuki.

"Akira, my boy! It's been too long! How are you?"

"Uncle! What's going on? I didn't hear you were coming!"

"Ah-ha-ha, surprise! The nerve of you, becoming such a fine man! I missed you, you damn rascal!"

"I missed you, too, Uncle!"

The gentleman spread his arms wide and wrapped Takatsuki in a hug that Takatsuki happily returned. When they were standing right next to each other like this, it was easy to see the resemblance—their faces, their statures, even the somewhat unreal atmosphere around them.

"Huh...? Professor Akira... There are two of you...? What's happ'ning...?"

Ruiko was mumbling and swaying a little in her chair.

Naoya thrust his phone, with the time and date displayed on the screen, right in front of her face.

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"Miss Ruiko, it's Thursday."

"Thurs...day...?"

"You have work today."

"—Oh."
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In a heartbeat, Ruiko came to her senses.

Shooting to her feet so fast that the folding chair clattered to the floor, she pulled a huge tote bag from under the table and stuffed her laptop, papers, and pens into it at record speed. With no more than a "Sorry, please excuse me!" Ruiko slipped right past the two still-hugging men. It was almost impressive how quickly she moved post-reboot. Though if she had to go home, get ready, and then make it to the cram school where she worked part-time, there probably wasn't even a second to spare.

"Be careful not to fall, Miss Ruiko!" Takatsuki called through the open door after the sound of her receding footsteps.

Naoya felt like her answering "I will!" came from a considerable distance away.

Finally pulling away from Takatsuki, the man said, "Akira, a gentleman would never let a woman sleep on the floor. I'm disappointed."

"Well, you see, Miss Ruiko is an eager student and a good kid, but she's the sort who forgets to sleep and eat when she's busy, so sometimes she'll just pass out on the floor like that..."

"My word. Just like you used to be, eh? Well, if you knew this kind of thing would occur, you could have laid a blanket out for her in advance, at least. That's how we did it at home, after all."

"Yes, but Uncle, this is my office, not my house. I can't just leave a blanket here..."

Smiling and shaking his head, Takatsuki closed his office door at last.

Then, with a start, he turned to look at Naoya, whose presence he seemed to have forgotten about until that moment.

"Ah, Fukamachi, I'm sorry! Are you the one who showed my uncle here?"

"Yes. I just happened to meet him at the school gate."

"I see. Thank you for that. So—this is Wataru Takatsuki, my maternal uncle. I mentioned him before, remember? The relative who took care of me while I lived overseas for a while? That was Uncle Wataru," Takatsuki explained. "He lives in the UK, usually."

So he was a real English gentleman after all.

The gentleman—rather, Wataru Takatsuki—bowed his head elegantly toward Naoya.

"How do you do? Ah, your name is Fukamachi, is it? And your given name?"

"It's...Naoya. Naoya Fukamachi."

"I see. Well then, Naoya, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance once more."

Wataru held out his right hand. The handshake was still not a very common custom in Japan, but the older man did not seem like the "when in Rome" type. As soon as Naoya offered his own hand, Wataru grasped it firmly in his larger one and shook it up and down as he pleased. He and Takatsuki really were similar. Even the way they neglected the personal space of someone they'd just met was the same.

From what Naoya remembered, the professor's father had taken his wife's name when they'd married, which likely explained why they also shared the Takatsuki surname.

"Uncle, please sit. I'll get you something to drink. Is black tea okay? I only have tea bags, though. You sit, too, Fukamachi. Have some coffee, since you're already here."

At Takatsuki's urging, Wataru sat in one of the folding chairs. Naoya had been thinking it was about time he went home, but with those words, the chance had passed him by. Not seeing another choice, Naoya also took a seat.

Turning his head this way and that to survey the office, Wataru said, "So you're an associate professor already? You were still only a lecturer the last

time I saw you, I believe. Has it really been five years since then?"

"Yep, that was five years ago. What did you come to Japan for this time, Uncle? Work?"

"Indeed. It seems we'll be getting some new client companies, so I came to discuss business with them. Also, well, I just wanted to lay eyes on my dear nephew for the first time in a while."

"I'm in good health, as you can see. You seem to be doing well, too, Uncle. I'm glad."

Takatsuki carried a drink-laden tray to the table and set a mug of tea down in front of Wataru.

Seeing the cup Takatsuki had used for the tea, Naoya's brow furrowed. Visitors to the office invariably had drinks served to them in a mug with a multicolored Great Buddha on it, whether they liked it or not. At least, that was how it was supposed to be. But the one Takatsuki had just given his uncle was a red one—Ruiko's usual cup.

As he put Naoya's coffee—in his dog-patterned mug—down on the table, Takatsuki smiled wryly.

"Don't scowl at me like that, Fukamachi. My uncle is an antique dealer in England. He's quite fussy about aesthetics, so he'd probably tell me off if I got that mug out."

"Even you care about stuff like that, Professor?"

"Of course I do. I owe a lot to him, you know."

It was quite unusual to see Takatsuki moving at any pace other than his own.

And yet, now that Naoya thought about it, he thought he remembered Takatsuki saying once before, "I don't know how I would have ended up if I hadn't gone to live with a relative for a while."

Wataru Takatsuki was probably the person who had stood at the professor's side during the most challenging period of his life.

That thought only made Naoya more uncomfortable. He felt like he was getting in the way. The two were family, hadn't seen each other in ages, and on

top of that, were probably especially dear to one another.

I need to drink this quickly and go home, Naoya thought, lifting the mug to his lips.

But as he did, he realized that, for some reason, Wataru was staring at him.

"Um, yes?"

"—Oh, nothing," Wataru answered. Deep wrinkles formed at the corners of his eyes as he smiled. "I was just thinking that Akira seems to have taken a liking to you. I bet he's rather attached to you, eh?"

"I feel like 'attached to' isn't a phrase typically used to describe how someone older relates to someone younger."

"But he *is* attached to you, isn't he? Now, now, have a chocolate. Take good care of him for me, will you?"

As he spoke, Wataru took a chocolate candy from his suit pocket and forced it upon Naoya, who could only sit there at a loss.

Takatsuki stepped in.

"Uncle, Fukamachi doesn't eat sweets. Also, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't say anything weird to him, okay?"

"I haven't said anything weird. You were always the kind of child who refused to let go of someone once you grew attached to them, weren't you?"

"That's the kind of thing I'd rather you not say...," Takatsuki muttered, frowning.

Naoya hadn't really seen that expression on Takatsuki before. It was like he was embarrassed to have various things about his childhood revealed without his permission. Wataru was like a parent to him, essentially. Who knew the professor could make a face like that?

Sitting on his uncle's other side, Takatsuki had his usual blue mug in hand. It seemed to be full of cocoa, but there were no marshmallows in it—another departure from the norm. Naoya found it a bit interesting.

Sipping from his marshmallow-less cocoa, Takatsuki asked, "How long are you

in Japan, Uncle?"

"I thought I'd stay for a while, since I have the chance. My business negotiations are over already, but I haven't been in the country for such a long time, so..."

"What about the company? Will it be okay without you?"

"Yes, because I have a brilliant assistant! Her name is Irene, and she does everything perfectly. The company doesn't even need me to keep running as long as she's there. So even if I'm off enjoying myself for a time—"

He was interrupted by a vibrating sound—likely his phone—coming suddenly from his pocket.

Taking out his phone to look at the screen, Wataru muttered a quiet "ack!" The display said "Irene." Excusing himself, he got up and went to take the call in the hallway, though he looked more like a child on his way to a sermon than a grown man about to talk to his assistant.

He came back in a short while later, his expression a bit dejected.

"...I've been told I have one week before I had better go back..."

"It seems awfully nice of her to say you can stay the week, though?"

"You know it's eight thirty in the morning over there? I wish she loved work a little less and loved me a little more... Blast it, I was thinking of taking my time, visiting Kyoto and going to the hot springs for at least half the month... I wanted to spend more time with you, too, Akira..."

"I'll spend as much time with you as I'm able, Uncle, so don't be so discouraged, okay?"

Wataru had slumped, crestfallen, over the table, and Takatsuki patted him gently on the back. *Seriously*, Naoya thought. *These two are so similar. They even pout in the same way.* 

"Uncle, what about tonight? Let's have dinner together if you're free."

"Tonight is no good. I have plans to meet with someone after this. What about this weekend, instead? If you haven't got anything on, why not take your old uncle out somewhere fun?"

"Ah. Saturday is, well..."

Wataru raised an eyebrow at Takatsuki's somewhat noncommittal answer.

"What's this, then? If you have a date with someone, you had better introduce them to me. It's only proper, since I'm your uncle."

"It's not a date. Um—well, I did want to ask about his weekend plans, so. Hey, Fukamachi, are you free this Saturday?"

"Huh...? Wh-where's this coming from?"

Not expecting to suddenly become the focus of the conversation, Naoya almost choked on his coffee.

Looking at him from around Wataru, Takatsuki said, "You see, I was wondering if you wanted to come with me to the Enoshima area to look for mermaids. I just heard from KenKen that he's not working Saturday, so he could give us a ride. I'm sure it'll be fun, you know?"

"Right... Sure, I'll go. I figured you would want to see it. The mermaid, I mean."

Naoya had been able to tell that Takatsuki was eager to go from the expression he'd worn during class, but apparently he had just been waiting on confirmation from Sasakura.

The professor's eyes shone with excitement.

"I mean, they might actually be real! This could be my chance to confirm with my own eyes what Japanese mermaids really look like!"

Wataru cocked his head to the side.

"Mermaids, you say? Are there mermaids swimming in the waters of Japan these days?"

"Yep. It's a big news topic right now. There have been a number of eyewitness reports. I really want to go to Enoshima this Saturday, since KenKen can actually make it. You could join us if you'd like, Uncle? We could do some sightseeing in Kamakura while we're at it."

"Of course I'll go! Japanese mermaids, eh? How thrilling!"

Wataru smiled with his whole face, his eyes sparkling just like his nephew's. They really were alike. Even though he was a bit older, that childlike look of joy was the spitting image of Takatsuki.

It seemed that Wataru had only come to say hello to Takatsuki that day. As soon as he finished his tea, he stood to leave. Naoya decided it was a good time for him to head home as well.

Takatsuki said he would see his uncle to the train station, so the three of them ended up leaving the building together.

In the courtyard, the club activities still appeared to be in full swing. The banana stand was gone, but in its place the street performance society was putting on a Chinese spinning-top demonstration. A game of double Dutch had started up as well. It had already amassed quite a crowd, as participants welcomed anyone passing by to join the rhythmic rope-skipping.

Weaving their way through the hustle and bustle, Naoya and the two older men walked in the direction of the school gate. Wataru seemed to enjoy all this sort of revelry. He turned his head to watch the various groups with amusement, occasionally applauding their exploits.

"Now that I think of it, the place you used to live when you were abroad, that was England, right? Were you in London?"

Recalling Wataru's earlier likening of the courtyard to Covent Garden, Naoya turned to Takatsuki to ask him about the subject. He was pretty sure that was the name of a popular tourist destination in London.

Grinning, Takatsuki looked at him.

"I lived in a neighborhood on the outskirts of London. Uncle Wataru owns a housing complex there. The residents who lived there were like one big family."

"It kind of sounds like an overseas sitcom."

"Yeah. It actually was a lot like that, a bunch of people from different countries living in one building... There was an English baker, someone from India who worked in IT, a French counselor, two big dogs, my uncle the landlord, and me—the little freeloader."

"Wow, what a cast of characters..."

"Right? We all ate meals together and took turns being in charge of the cooking. It was my job to walk the dogs. Every day was a delight. I really miss everyone..."

Takatsuki's nostalgic smile made Naoya think he must have really fond memories of those days. For some reason, the idea that there was a time the professor had lived like that gave him a sense of relief.

But just then—

A brief shriek rang out from somewhere ahead of them.

What now? Naoya thought, turning to look in that direction.

When he saw them—without even thinking, Naoya's hand shot out to grab hard onto Takatsuki's arm.

"Professor—!"

Pigeons.

Several birds, flying noisily and entirely undaunted through the crowd, were headed straight in their direction.

It was too late to dodge them; Takatsuki was already frozen in place.

The pigeons swept in right around eye level, skimming shoulders and heads with their flapping wings as they passed. Naoya and the others ducked to let the birds continue on their way.

"..."

Takatsuki's faint gasp was just barely audible.

The second Naoya realized what was happening, the professor had already collapsed against him.

"Professor!"

"Akira!" Wataru yelled.

Though he tried his best to support Takatsuki's weight by himself, ultimately, Naoya ended up sinking to the ground right where he stood, the other man in his arms.

"Akira! Hey, Akira!"

Dropping his cane and kneeling beside them, Wataru shook Takatsuki by the shoulders to no effect. His cheeks drained of color, the professor was as white as a sheet.

"Naoya," Wataru said, his tone severe, "Akira still gets like this when he sees a bird, even now?"

Naoya nodded minutely.

"...Yes."

Suddenly, Naoya realized people had started to gather around them. There were some concerned faces in the crowd, but there were many more pairs of curious eyes. *This is bad*, he thought. He needed to get Takatsuki somewhere else fast, but he wasn't confident he could carry the man alone, and he couldn't ask a man who walked with a cane to help. As for the faintly smiling students staring down at them—he was reluctant to go that route, too. Noticing some people's cell phones out and pointed in their direction, Naoya was horrified. What did they intend to do with the pictures they were taking?

"—Huh? Fukamachi?"

At that moment, Naoya heard a familiar voice and whipped his head around to look.

It was Nanba. He was peering down over the wall of people surrounding them.

"It is you, Fukamachi. What're you doing...? Wait, is that...Professor Takatsuki?!"

"N-Nanba!"

Naoya couldn't help but gaze up at him with imploring eyes, which seemed to catch Nanba momentarily off guard before he quickly pushed his way through the bystanders.

"What happened? Did he have a seizure or something? Is he anemic?"

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"...Something like that."

"Seriously? You wanna get him to the health center?"

"Yeah... But, um, I can't carry him myself."

"Say no more. I got you."

"Huh...?"
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Nanba had answered like it was the most natural thing in the world. As he took hold of one of Takatsuki's arms, Naoya could only stare at him, mouth slightly agape.

Nanba slung the professor's arm over his own shoulders and made to stand, but he wasn't that different in physique from Naoya, who hastened to assist. Naoya put Takatsuki's other arm around himself and the two of them managed to get up, supporting the unconscious man as a team.

"—Hey, what the hell are you all lookin' at?!" Nanba shouted. "Show's over! Go on, get outta here!"

The rubbernecking crowd scattered.

Wataru, who had taken out his phone to make a call of some kind, hung up and turned toward them.

"I'd rather we take Akira home than to the infirmary. I just called for a cab to meet us in front of the gate. Apologies, but would you mind carrying him there for me?"

"...Sorry, Nanba. Could you help me?"

"Yeah, sure. No problem. Narumi—go ahead without me! I'll be there soon! I gotta help out here!"

Nanba called out to a ponytailed girl standing on the other side of the thinning human wall. Looking worried, the girl nodded in understanding. She had to be Nanba's girlfriend.

The taxi Wataru had called arrived in no time. Together, Naoya and Nanba managed to lift Takatsuki into the back seat. Considering Takatsuki would have to be carried all the way up to his apartment, Nanba had to come with them. It

was a little cramped, but they got Takatsuki into a seated position in the middle of the seat and squeezed in on either side of him.

Settling into the passenger seat, Wataru gave the driver Takatsuki's address, which he apparently knew, and the taxi departed immediately. Before long, they were outside the apartment complex in Yoyogi. Wataru searched Takatsuki's pockets for his keys, and Naoya and Nanba heaved the professor onto their shoulders once more, somehow or other succeeding in getting him to and then past his own front door.

They removed Takatsuki's jacket, laid him on his bed, and finally got a chance to catch their breath. People were *really* heavy when they were unconscious. The fact that Sasakura could do this without breaking a sweat was beginning to make Naoya seriously respect him.

"I am so sorry to have troubled you like this," Wataru said. "I'm sure he wasn't easy to carry. I'm going to make a quick call. Could you keep an eye on Akira?"

He left the bedroom with his phone in hand.

It wasn't as if they were doing it just because they'd been told to, but Naoya and Nanba stood over the bed, looking down at Takatsuki. Worrying that he would get uncomfortable, Naoya took off the professor's tie and unbuttoned his shirt collar. The professor showed no signs of waking.

"Hey," Nanba said, "who's the silver fox?"

"Professor Takatsuki's uncle. He just happened to drop in to see him today."

"Whoa, for real? Is everybody in his family that good-looking? Those are some powerful genes, huh...? Anyway, is it really okay not to take him to a doctor?"

"This happens a lot, so. If we just leave him be for a while, he'll wake up on his own...probably."

"Yeesh. Does he have some kind of chronic illness or something?"

"Well, I mean, it's...you know. More importantly, Nanba...I'm sorry."

Nanba looked at him in confusion.

"You had somewhere to be, right? Sorry for dragging you into things."

"Yeah, but it was just a club meeting. It's **totally fine if I'm late**, so don't worry about it."

Waving Naoya's concern off with a little chuckle, Nanba replied in a voice that was slightly distorted. Naoya snapped his mouth shut automatically, feeling a faint tightness in his chest. *This idiot*, he thought. It wasn't "totally fine." His being late was probably going to cause some kind of problem... But even though he was lying, he'd told Naoya not to worry.

It was true—there really were lies like this in the world. Kind ones, told deliberately for someone else's sake.

"Fukamachi? What's up?"

"Oh..."

Nanba was squinting at Naoya as though he had been making a really weird face or something.

"...Thanks, Nanba."

When he opened his mouth to exhale, those words came naturally with it.

Naoya was so glad for Nanba's readily given kindness. He could not express how relieved he'd been to see that friendly face among all the openly amused stares earlier.

"Aw, come on. This is what people are supposed to do for each other. Besides, it's always been my dream to come to the aid of someone collapsed along the wayside, and at the end, when they ask for my name, say 'It ain't nothin' worth mentioning' and leave."

"Okay, weirdo," Naoya said. As he laughed at Nanba's dramatics, his gaze somehow ended up back on Takatsuki.

For some reason, he could practically hear the professor in his ear, saying something he had once told Naoya.

"It's okay to ask for help when you need it. Don't forget that—understood?"

At the time, it had annoyed him. It'd felt like Takatsuki was admonishing him like a child.

But—maybe this kind of situation was what Takatsuki had been referring to back then.

"Well, I should get going. When Professor Takatsuki wakes up, tell him he can thank me later, okay? I accept credits as payment."

"You can't earn college credit for carrying someone when they faint... And what happened to 'it ain't nothin' worth mentioning'?"

"That's one story, this is another, and credits are credits."

Naoya saw Nanba to the door as he finally left for his club meeting.

Then he peered into the living room to see Wataru had just finished his phone call.

"Oh, has the other lad gone? Is Akira still unconscious?"

"Yes. Um...Mr. Takatsuki, didn't you say you had plans tonight?"

Having settled on "Mr. Takatsuki" after briefly waffling over how to address the man, Naoya received a "Wataru, please" in response.

"I just canceled my plans. I don't want to leave Akira alone in his condition."

"Huh? But if we just let him rest, he'll wake— Oh."

In the middle of saying something, Naoya remembered.

They had gone on a trip over spring break, and Takatsuki had lost consciousness then, too.

When he had come to, he hadn't been his usual self.

Wataru's gaze narrowed slightly, as though he was reading Naoya's face.

"Naoya, you— Don't tell me you've met the other Akira?"

Startled, Naoya looked up.

One hand idly stroking his chin—yet another habit he shared with Takatsuki—Wataru stared fixedly at him.

"How much do you know? About Akira."

"How much...?"

Unable to meet the other man's eyes, Naoya glanced instinctively toward the bedroom. His thoughts drifted to the person sleeping on the other side of that door.

When it came to how much he knew about Takatsuki—the answer was probably "a lot."

He knew all sorts of things about Takatsuki that he was pretty sure other students didn't.

"I know he was spirited away when he was a kid... I know about the scars on his back...about his eyes...and that he had problems with his family, so he lived abroad for a while..."

But even as he answered Wataru's question, Naoya found himself wondering if he actually did know anything about Takatsuki.

He was never really sure, after all.

What kind of person was the real Takatsuki? How did those intermittently blue eyes look at the world? Naoya had gotten intimately mixed up in Takatsuki's affairs several times already, and he realized that had made him feel as though he knew the other man.

Then Wataru asked him something strange.

"Tell me—have you ever seen Akira's face do anything other than smile?"

"Huh?"

Momentarily bewildered, Naoya looked back up at him.

Takatsuki was pretty much always smiling. He smiled like a child when he was having fun, and produced a wry smile when he was minorly inconvenienced. Even when he was apologizing for something, he was more apt to smile than not.

But...Naoya had seen him wear other expressions, a few times.

Like during the "Miracle Girl of Okutama" case. That was the first time he had seen Takatsuki angry enough to shout. It was also the first time he'd seen Takatsuki shed tears.

"...I see. Akira seems to be keeping you quite close."

Perhaps reading Naoya's expression again, Wataru sighed.

Then, abruptly, he looked toward the bedroom.

"Do you want to know more?" he asked. "About him, I mean."

Naoya froze.

Wataru knew Takatsuki back before he had grown up. And in all likelihood, he was the person who had made Takatsuki into the man he was now.

The professor had once told Naoya that, due to his mother treating him as the "Tengu's Child," he had stopped knowing whether he was a human, a god, or a monster. Both he and his mother had sustained so much mental distress that in the end, his father had sent him to live with Wataru.

It was the years he'd spent with his uncle that had allowed him to regain his humanity, Takatsuki had said.

If Naoya was being honest, he did want to know more about the Takatsuki from that time.

However-

"I...don't know if he would want me to know."

In a few key ways, Takatsuki and Naoya were exactly the same.

Takatsuki seemed like an open book, but he actually drew a very clear line between himself and those around him. He skillfully concealed anything he didn't want to say, and rarely talked about himself to begin with, to the point that Naoya had learned more about Takatsuki from Sasakura than from the man himself.

Wataru smiled, the wrinkles on his face crinkling, and put his hand on Naoya's head.

"You're a good lad."

"Huh...?"

A few additional gentle pats followed the first, and Naoya only became more bewildered.

Then, suddenly, Wataru clapped his hands together.

"—Now, then! Naoya, are you any good at cooking?"

"What?"

"No matter, I'll make us something. Do you have anywhere to be tonight? You don't, right? Then allow me to treat you to a home-cooked meal!"

"H-home-cooked ...? Why?"

It felt like the conversation had just veered off in an odd direction, but Wataru started toward the kitchen with some sort of spring in his step.

"Well, I had to cancel my evening plans, after all. What can I do other than make myself something to eat here? You might as well join me at this point. Now, let's see what we have in the refrigerator... Oh, bloody hell!"

Wataru shouted something in English into the refrigerator. Naoya went to find out why and saw that the fridge—which was rather large for a single man who lived alone—was almost entirely empty.

"Oh. I think I remember him saying he doesn't usually cook..."

"I don't remember raising him that way! Ah... Oh! There's miso, at the very least. Some cheese... That's just a snack, though. Three eggs... Condiments and oil, more or less... There's rice. Not much, but...rice cooker, check. Pots, pans, basic cooking utensils, check. Right, got it."

After rummaging around the kitchen as he pleased, Wataru swiveled back around to face Naoya.

Taking out his wallet and promptly withdrawing a ten-thousand-yen bill, he said, "Naoya, I need you to go shopping."

"Pardon?"

"Fish and vegetables, to start. At this time of year...probably horse mackerel for the fish. If they don't have it, meat will suffice. Beef, chicken, pork—any of those would be fine. Just basic vegetables will do. Carrots, onions, potatoes, cabbage, whatever you'd like. Here's my mobile number; call me if you're unsure."

"Uh, um, i-is it okay to just use his kitchen without permission...?"

"It's Akira's fault for being asleep. Or rather, it's his fault for having such a fine kitchen and neglecting to use it! I'm appalled. Off you go, now. I'll put the rice on."

Shedding his jacket, Wataru wasted no time in trading it for the apron hanging next to the refrigerator. Apparently aprons were just another thing English gentlemen looked good in.

Naoya didn't see a point in arguing, so he left the building with the tenthousand-yen bill clutched in his hand. Having located a nearby supermarket on his phone, he bought what Wataru had asked for and returned to Takatsuki's apartment.

As promised, Wataru was a good cook. He prepared the ingredients expertly and had everything laid out on the dining table in no time without Naoya even needing to help. Salt-grilled mackerel, stewed vegetables, miso soup, freshly cooked rice—for all that he lived in England, the meal Wataru served had a quintessentially Japanese feel.

Over dinner, Naoya mainly listened to Wataru talk about the UK and his work. The older man was a good conversationalist and could make any topic entertaining, but—Takatsuki didn't come up even once in any of Wataru's stories.

After eating and clearing the table, the two of them went to peek into the bedroom.

Takatsuki certainly looked asleep, but Wataru nodded after surveying him briefly and said, "He should be fine like this. He's just sleeping normally, now."

"How can you tell?" Naoya asked.

Putting a finger to his lips as if to say "shh, listen," Wataru winked.

Naoya did. And, though it was faint, he could hear the definite sound of a sleeping person's deep, even breathing.

"Akira doesn't breathe like that right after he passes out—he barely breathes at all. Hardly a peep out of him until a little while ago, right? He's changed

position, too. We can leave him be."

Wataru saying that made Naoya realize it was true. Maybe the reason he had felt uneasy every time he had seen Takatsuki's unconscious form was that the professor was always eerily quiet in that state. He never stirred, never made a sound. He just lay there, like a puppet with its strings cut.

At that moment, Takatsuki was curled up in bed on his side. His face was mostly obscured by the duvet, but judging from each peaceful inhale and exhale, he was sleeping comfortably.

"The *other* Akira won't be making an appearance now that he's in this state," Wataru added, closing the bedroom door. "No need to worry."

Naoya looked at him.

"...Um. What...is it? The 'other' Professor Takatsuki... Does it usually come out when he loses consciousness?"

"I wouldn't say that, no. I've only met him a handful of times, and I don't know what he is, either. However...I am certain he isn't Akira."

"Is it like a split personality or something?"

"Who knows? I spoke to a specialist about it once, but I was told what I'd described didn't fit the bill. In any case...I refuse to believe it's something that came from within him."

Wataru looked down at Naoya with a conspiratorial grin.

Then, stooping down a little, he peered into Naoya's face from much too close.

"So, Naoya, I think it's about time we started exchanging information, eh?"

"E-exchanging information...?"

"I'll tell you about Akira's past. You tell me about his present. Ah—we'll need alcohol. Let's see... Hmph, his refrigerator is empty, but he's stocked up on wine, hasn't he? White or red, Naoya? I prefer red, myself."

"W-wait a minute! I'm not...!"

Naoya tried to object as Wataru began pawing through the professor's wine

shelf. He didn't know if that was the kind of discussion they should be having when Takatsuki wasn't around. But Wataru merely prodded him in the direction of the sofa and grabbed a bottle off the shelf.

"Come, now. You're going to be close to him for a while yet, after all."

His tone was casual, the words tossed out offhandedly.

He wasn't asking for any sort of confirmation; Wataru made the statement like it was already a done deal. Pausing, Naoya stared at him. He couldn't have known about Naoya's ears, so why had he said a thing like that?

Wataru looked directly at him and continued with a serious expression.

"Allow me to be frank, Naoya—my nephew is very dear to me."

"O-kay...?"

"Truthfully, I didn't want Akira to return to Japan. I thought he should just live happily in Britain with me and my compatriots forever. He would definitely have been happier that way. But Akira made the decision himself to come back to Japan... Rather than letting me protect him, he chose to tough it out alone."

Wataru removed the apron he had worn to cook and tossed it over the back of a dining room chair.

"And so I want to make sure Akira is surrounded by people—allies—who know him well. From what I've seen, he has taken quite a liking to you. Keeps you close. That being the case, I want you to let me use you for Akira's sake."

"By 'use,' you mean...?"

"I want to keep Akira safe from now on, and I intend to make that a matter for your concern. Past, present, and future are all connected. That's why I want you to know as much as possible about him. It's not as though he'll tell you himself, is it? I do think it's a shame. You have so much life ahead of you... But it's always been my policy to utilize anything that can be useful."

Naoya had heard those words somewhere before.

Oh, I see, he thought. To some extent, Wataru had likely connected the dots regarding Naoya's relationship with Takatsuki. He must have sensed that Takatsuki kept Naoya close because Naoya, too, was burdened by unique

circumstances.

And yet the reason he was about to deliberately tell Naoya all about Takatsuki's past was—to prevent Naoya from distancing himself too much from Takatsuki?

That was...

"—It's a bit late for that," he muttered.

Wataru blinked.

"What was that?"

Naoya didn't answer; he just sat down hard on the sofa.

It was too late, truly.

Takatsuki seemed to have no intention of letting go of Naoya anytime soon, and Naoya himself...

"As I thought. You're prepared, then."

Wataru took two wine glasses from the cupboard, settled himself on the sofa as well, and put one glass in front of Naoya.

"Um, I..."

Rather pointedly, the older man tilted the bottle so that wine poured noisily into Naoya's glass.

Naoya frowned. It was a generous pour—a merciless one.

Wataru spoke calmly.

"You're not going to tell me you can't drink, surely?"

"It's not that I can't. But..."

"Go on, then. You can blame it all on the alcohol, right? My saying what I'm about to say, and your listening to it. It's the wine's fault."

He gave Naoya another meaningful smile. It was not the sort of expression a good role model would wear.

Naoya lifted his drink, prompted by Wataru's "Come now, cheers!" The moment their glasses clinked together, he felt like he had become complicit in

some kind of wrongdoing.

Watching the bloodred liquid swirl round and round inside the glass, Naoya was struck by a strange feeling. The idea of getting drunk with a middle-aged Englishman he had only just met that day, at his college professor's apartment, while that very same college professor lay unattended in another room was... But then, something almost just like this had happened before, when he had first heard about Takatsuki's situation from Sasakura. He hadn't been allowed to drink the wine that time, though.

Still...he felt some guilt about it.

Even on that occasion, however, Naoya had been the one to ask for answers.

He brought the wine to his mouth. Unaccustomed to the bitterness, he struggled just a little to get it down. But, he thought, maybe that was a good thing, considering what he was about to hear.

"...How old was he?" he asked. "When you took him in."

"Fifteen. He was with me for three years."

All throughout his high school years, in other words.

Topping off their already half-emptied glasses, Wataru continued in a low voice, "I had been living abroad since my midtwenties, so I had actually barely spent any time around Akira when he was little. I rarely came home to Japan, so at most, we'd have a few meals together whenever my sister would go on holiday to Europe with her family— Do you understand? Even though that was the case, Akira was left with me. With an uncle he had met so seldom he could have counted the number of times it happened on his hands. One who had cut practically all ties with the family, no less."

He paused, his upper lip curling beneath his mustache.

"At the time, Akira seemed normal from an outside perspective. He was always smiling. Maybe even more than he does now... Back then, he had forgotten how to do anything but smile."

At those words, Naoya drank another mouthful of wine, barely tasting it.

Wataru talked for a long, long time.

The story he told... It ended up being the kind that absolutely called for at least one drink.

Naoya awoke the next morning to someone shaking his shoulder.

It was Takatsuki.

"Fukamachi, why are you at my place?"

"Oh... Good morning, Professor."

Sitting up from the sofa he had been sleeping on, Naoya rubbed his eyes. He fumbled for his glasses on the table, where he assumed he would have put them the night before, but came up empty. Maybe because he had just woken up, or because of the wine, his head felt hazy. While Naoya groped around fruitlessly, a completely gobsmacked Takatsuki picked Naoya's glasses up from where they had fallen beneath the table and held them out.

"What do you mean, 'good morning'? I woke up to your being here, which scared me half to death... Did I collapse again?"

"Yes. Do you remember trying to cross the courtyard to see your uncle to the station? The pigeons..."

"Ah. I see... I'm sorry I caused you trouble. Well done carrying me all the way here, though."

"Oh, Nanba helped me with that."

"Nanba? Wow... Could you thank him for me later?"

Takatsuki seemed to have only just woken up, too; his voice sounded pitiful. Hair slightly mussed, he was still wearing the shirt they had put him to bed in.

Naoya glanced at the wall clock and saw it was half past six. After listening to Wataru's story the night before, Naoya had talked a little, too, but he got the feeling he must have gotten tired in the middle of that and just gone to sleep right there on the couch. He hadn't particularly planned on spending the night or anything.

"Oh, you're both awake?"

Wataru swept into the room then, the only one of them who looked put-

together. His hair and mustache were both tidy, and even without his jacket he looked the very picture of a proper English gentleman.

"I used your bathroom and borrowed a shirt, Akira. You should shower, too. And have breakfast right after. You must be hungry since you missed dinner."

"Just a moment, Uncle! You gave Fukamachi alcohol, didn't you?! You can't do that—he's still underage!"

The moment he laid eyes on Wataru, Takatsuki started scolding him. The wine bottle and glasses had been left out on the table, so their drinking-party-for-two must have been quite apparent.

Wataru shrugged.

"As if college students haven't been drinking heavily at parties since the first day of term. You don't need to get so angry about it."

"That's not the point! The drinking age may be eighteen in England, but in Japan it's twenty!"

"—Um, it's okay. I already had my birthday this year, so I'm twenty now."

It was far too early to be arguing, Naoya thought, so he interjected.

The words were barely out of his mouth before Takatsuki was whipping his head around frighteningly quickly to stare at Naoya.

"...Eh? Fukamachi? What did you just say?"

"Um, just, I'm already of age."

"Not that. Your birthday. When was it?"

"Last month...?"

"When last month?"

"The...fifteenth...?"

Takatsuki did not have to look so crestfallen, hanging his head like that, Naoya thought. It was just a birthday.

"Why didn't you say anything?!" Takatsuki wailed, abruptly looking back up. "I made a promise with KenKen, we were going to throw a drinking party for you

when you turned twenty! Because we hadn't let you drink before! But you...! You just...! I can't believe you just celebrated your birthday in secret without telling us!"

"But I mean, you never asked me about it!"

"I was waiting for the right time to ask! I didn't want to tip you off to the surprise! *Ugh*—seriously! This is *so* like you, Fukamachi!"

The pout is annoying, too, Naoya thought. Who went around announcing their birthday to other people at his age?

Takatsuki disappeared into the bathroom in a huff, and Wataru slapped Naoya on the shoulder with a wry grin.

"Akira seems to have become a lot more expressive. How wonderful. Now—I'm going to prepare breakfast. Naoya, could you clean up the bottle and glasses?"

Redonning the apron, Wataru began assessing the leftover ingredients from the night before and the items that they'd originally found in the refrigerator for breakfast possibilities. Upon discovering a bag of bread rolls in the freezer, he seemed to decide on doing Western cuisine instead of Japanese. He made omelets and side salads and popped the rolls in the toaster oven. Takatsuki returned from the bathroom just as Wataru was adding hot water to the prewarmed pot of black tea leaves.

Still toweling off his wet hair, Takatsuki looked at his uncle.

"Gosh, it's been ages since I had your cooking, Uncle. Did you go buy groceries for it?"

"Oh, that reminds me! Akira! Sit down! There, now!"

It was Wataru's turn to give Takatsuki a tongue-lashing. Startled, Takatsuki sat down at the dining table.

"Akira," Wataru said, standing over him with his arms crossed, "how do you explain this kitchen?! You never cook? I'm disappointed! After all the time I put into teaching you how!"

"I mean, I used to cook more. It's just that when I cook for only myself, it

doesn't taste good."

"Then what do you usually do for meals? Don't tell me it's takeaway every time; that can't be good for you!"

"There's an affordable prix fixe place nearby that's run by a very kind older couple. Their food is delicious and homestyle, and actually rather nutritious... Anyway, Uncle, I'm thirty-five years old. Would you mind not lecturing me like this?"

"And I'm fifty-eight. Anything else you'd like to say?"

"...No. I'm sorry, that was wrong of me."

Resigned, Takatsuki apologized meekly.

Naoya watched the two of them, an indescribable feeling in his chest.

If not for what he had heard last night, he might have found it a bit funny, or been able to think, Even Takatsuki can make a face like that, huh?

But now—after learning how the relationship between the two of them had been established, for some reason, all he felt was pain.

"Well, now! The food I went to the trouble of making is getting cold! Naoya, you should take a shower, too, after you've eaten. Breakfast first. You need to eat properly to function, and breakfast is the most important meal of the day!"

Wataru clapped his hands together as he made that announcement, then started pouring the tea.

They were all seated at the table, about to start eating—when the intercom rang.

"Blimey, who is it? It's only seven o'clock."

Wataru frowned. Naoya noticed that Takatsuki's face had suddenly gone blank.

The professor walked over to the wall-mounted monitor. The face of a man Naoya didn't recognize was displayed on the video screen.

"Mr. Kuroki. What is it? You know what time it is, don't you?"

Pressing the button at the bottom of the monitor, Takatsuki spoke in a cold

tone.

An incredibly impersonal, businesslike voice came through the speaker in response.

"Good morning. I have a meeting in the area today, so I decided to pay a visit while I was nearby."

"I'm in the middle of breakfast. And I have guests."

"At this hour? Did you have a late-night visitor?"

"That's a private matter, Mr. Kuroki."

"I won't take up much of your time, so if we could speak face-to-face? There's something I need to discuss with you."

Naoya was surprised to hear what he thought was the sound of Takatsuki clicking his tongue. It was rare for him to take such an attitude.

"Akira, who the hell is that?" Wataru asked.

"—Mr. Kuroki," Takatsuki answered, the words coming out with a sigh. "One of Father's private secretaries."

He walked over to the front door.

Takatsuki's father was the president of the Takasaki Corporation, a large company which he had inherited from his father-in-law—Takatsuki's grandfather, in other words. But what business could one of his employees have with the professor at this time of day?

Naoya heard the door open, followed by another "Good morning." Wataru got up, going to stand where he could observe the situation, so Naoya followed him, peeking into the hallway from behind the older man.

A man in a dark suit was talking to Takatsuki. With his jet-black hair slicked neatly back and his posture upright, the man looked to be slightly older than Takatsuki. His face was plain and nondescript, except for his slightly piercing gaze.

"I'm glad to see you look well, sir. Have there been any issues with your health?"

"As you can see, I'm fine."

"I see. I heard you collapsed yesterday, so I was concerned."

"...How do you know that?"

Everything Takatsuki said was polite, but unlike usual, it was also very curt.

The man named Kuroki, on the other hand, sounded utterly indifferent as he spoke. The vague distortion in his voice when he had said "I was concerned" set Naoya's teeth on edge. The man wasn't the slightest bit worried about Takatsuki.

Just then, Kuroki's gaze shifted in their direction.

"And these people are...?"

"They're guests. My uncle and one of my college students."

"Uncle? Ah—you must be Wataru Takatsuki?"

Eyes widening a bit, Kuroki walked straight into the apartment. Takatsuki's face twisted into a scowl, but Kuroki paid him no attention, making a beeline for the living room.

Wataru glared at him.

"Quite the impudent secretary, aren't you? Barging into someone's home this early in the morning."

"I do apologize. However, this is also a business matter. How do you do, sir? My name is Kuroki. When you suddenly canceled your dinner plans with President Takatsuki last night, I didn't expect your being here to be the reason. I'm a bit surprised."

Looking pointedly over Wataru's aproned appearance, Kuroki held his business card out with a superficial smile. Wataru tossed the card—which read "Kazuma Kuroki"—onto the table without glancing at it.

More shocking than that to Naoya was that the person Wataru was meant to have met with last night was Takatsuki's father. Takatsuki, too, turned to look at his uncle with a slight furrow in his brow.

"I wanted to visit my dear nephew before meeting with my brother-in-law,"

Wataru said. "A spot of trouble arose while I was there, however, so—unfortunate though it may have been—I had to cancel dinner."

"Ahh, I suppose you were there when he collapsed?"

"I wonder how it is you know about that."

"Well, you see, this was posted on Instagram," Kuroki said, taking out his phone to show them the screen. The moment Naoya saw what was on it, he felt like he had been punched in the chest.

It was a short video—a shaky shot while whoever recorded the video approached a crowd of people. The view over someone's shoulder. The long legs of someone who had collapsed and the back of the person cradling him. There was audio, too. The din of people all talking at once. A conversation—"Did someone faint?" "Isn't that Professor Takatsuki?" "Oh, you're right. It's Takatsuki, the folklore guy."

The camera shifted to the side to capture the face of the person on the ground.

It was Takatsuki, his eyes closed. A portion of Naoya's face was visible, too.

It was from the day before, on campus. Probably the work of one of the students who had been there. Some of them had gotten their phones out at the time, Naoya remembered. The post even had tags: #SeiwaU #theincident #AssociateProfTakatsuki.

"I believe this type of post disappears after twenty-four hours, but I submitted a takedown request just in case. Your father was terribly distressed, sir. Don't you think you should receive proper treatment?"

The way Kuroki said that, as if Takatsuki was the one at fault in this situation, made Naoya flush with anger. How could he blame Takatsuki? The ones in the wrong were those who lacked the common sense to know they shouldn't upload videos of people collapsing. And anyway, what the hell did he mean by "treatment"?

Perhaps feeling Naoya's eyes on him, Kuroki glanced in his direction, but appeared to lose interest almost immediately. He turned his gaze back to Takatsuki.

The professor's voice was ice-cold when he replied.

"Is that all you wanted to say? If so, please leave. As you can see, we're in the middle of eating."

"Yes, that's all the business I have here today. My deepest apologies for coming at such an absurd hour and interrupting your breakfast. Now then, please excuse me."

Kuroki bowed, the picture of decorum, and left without another word.

As soon as the door latched, Wataru launched into an indignant outburst.

"What the hell was that?! What an inexcusably rude prick! When did he replace the previous secretary?"

"He's been around for about five years now. The one you knew, Uncle, was three secretaries ago."

Takatsuki's response was dispassionate.

"Three...?"

The interjection slipped out of Naoya before he could stop it. Takatsuki looked at him.

He smiled bitterly, like he was somewhat worn down.

"I'm not sure what to call him. My babysitter, maybe? A watchdog? Every once in a while, he shows up unannounced like that to keep me from behaving strangely or doing anything that would draw attention to myself."

"And the Instagram post? Does he check stuff like that, too?"

"I don't know where he finds the time, truly—as busy as I expect he is. I should really thank him for his dedication. I got an awful earful that time I was on TV."

Naoya recalled the time a magazine had been about to publish a photo of Takatsuki with an actress. It had been pulled from the issue before publication due to outside pressure.

Takatsuki's father had almost entirely cut ties with his son, but whenever something odd regarding Takatsuki started circulating, he made sure it was

quashed without exception. Maybe it was Kuroki who carried out those orders.

With a slight shrug, Takatsuki said, "It seems my father's wish is for me to live as quiet and unassuming a life as possible. I mean, I'm still living in the apartment that he prepared for me years ago, so I can't complain much. As long as I maintain an ordinary lifestyle, I don't get in trouble."

"But that's..."

Isn't that just cruel?

What was Takatsuki's father trying to protect by keeping a constant watch over his son and his surroundings? Was it his company? Or his son?

Judging from Kuroki's attitude minutes ago, it seemed unlikely that Takatsuki's well-being was the top priority.

Takatsuki looked at Wataru.

"By the way, Uncle, you were supposed to meet with Father last night? You said you canceled... Is that okay?"

"Oh yes, don't fret over it. It wasn't about work. I was told we should have a meal together at least once since I would be in Japan, so I just made an appointment with him. If he has some sort of business with me, I'm sure he'll get in touch while I'm here."

"Right... I'm sorry, I caused trouble for you, too, yesterday," Takatsuki said, his head drooping a tad.

Wataru clapped his hands again.

"Enough of the doom and gloom! Breakfast has gone cold. Why don't I reheat the bread, at least?"

Takatsuki looked up, smiled, and nodded.

"Yeah, good idea. I know it's a waste, but let me make a new pot of tea. Oh—that's right. Fukamachi, do you have classes today? Do you need to go in for first period?"

"No, not until second period. I've got time. I'll go home after I eat."

It was Friday, which meant both he and Takatsuki had to be at the university

later. But even if he had breakfast at Takatsuki's place, Naoya still had more than enough time to go home and shower before he had to leave for school.

"Ah, and don't forget we're going to Enoshima tomorrow for the mermaids! I'll text you the time and place to meet later."

"Got it."

Getting up to boil some water, Takatsuki was already back to looking as he always did. Naoya stood, too, deciding to help reheat the food.

But the smile Takatsuki wore—Naoya couldn't see it the way he usually did. Not anymore.

Takatsuki... Even now, he smiled. It didn't matter if he was in pain or if he was sad. He donned that smile like armor, hid everything underneath it and pretended to be fine. Despite the way Naoya had told him off for doing that over spring break.

Last night, Wataru had told him the reason Takatsuki was like this. Thinking of a young Takatsuki who had been faced with no choice but to become this way, Naoya looked down, an inescapable ache blooming in his chest.

Saturday came.

They met up on the earlier side, at eight thirty in the morning. The plan was a short day trip to Enoshima. As always, Sasakura pulled up in his car to get Naoya, and they were off.

Unlike usual, there was another person sitting in the back seat—Wataru. Cane in hand, resting gentlemanlike in his seat, Wataru was gazing out the window happily. With Takatsuki also wearing a suit, it felt like there were two high-class Englishmen in the car. As ever, Sasakura was in casual clothes, wearing black from head to toe.

"Searching for mermaids in Enoshima, huh? I hope they're beautiful. Mermaids are usually beautiful women, aren't they?"

"Japanese mermaids typically look like this, actually."

On his phone, Naoya pulled up the illustration from the *Ningyo no zu* flyer that Takatsuki had discussed in class to show an eager Wataru. The older man

goggled at it and muttered, "Oh, bloody great..." Evidently, it was not to his liking.

"You haven't changed, eh, Uncle Wataru?" Sasakura said from the driver's seat.

Sasakura had apparently gone to visit Takatsuki several times when Takatsuki lived in England, so he and Wataru were like old friends.

"Nor you. How wonderful to see that you're looking as terrifying as usual. Speaking of, I heard from Akira that you were injured while apprehending a violent criminal recently? You're so dashing, KenKen."

"Yes, and after that I went on a trip where I was meant to recuperate, but I ended up having to dive into a stream in the middle of winter."

"You always take such good care of Akira, don't you? I'm glad. I hope you'll continue to do so for many, many years."

"Right... Of course."

Sasakura glanced at Wataru in the rearview mirror. A furrowed brow was his default expression, though, so what may have looked like a glare was probably just a polite nod.

The drive from within Tokyo proper to Enoshima would take just over an hour. According to Takatsuki, the plan was to start at Katase Fishing Port because that meant they might get to speak to the fisherman who first saw the mermaid. Next, they would do some sightseeing on nearby Enoshima before heading to Inamuragasaki.

"The first sighting occurred in the waters off Katase Fishing Port, but they've since been happening around Shichirigahama and Inamuragasaki," Takatsuki told them, fiddling with his phone in the passenger seat. "Recently, there have been an especially large number of sightings in the vicinity of a park in Inamuragasaki."

Sasakura's gaze flicked briefly skyward.

"It looks like the weather...might just barely hold out."

"I'm not sure. But it is the rainy season, after all. Still, there will be fewer

people around if it rains, right? Kamakura and Enoshima are quite touristy places. I've rarely been there myself, though."

"At this time of year," Naoya said, "rain doesn't put a dent in the crowds in Kamakura."

Takatsuki turned around to look at him.

"Why not?"

"Because tons of people are there to see the hydrangeas. The wait at Meigetsu-in is two hours if you're unlucky."

Meigetsu-in was a well-known hydrangea-viewing destination. The temple appeared in all sorts of guidebooks, and both foreign and domestic tourists flocked to Kamakura in droves during the appropriate season.

"Then it sounds like it would be best to avoid that area. Oh, right—you're from Yokohama, aren't you, Fukamachi? Not far from Kamakura and Enoshima. Are you well-acquainted with the area?"

"I wouldn't say that, but I have been there a handful of times. My middle school class trip was in Kamakura, too... But, um, there is something that's been on my mind."

"Huh? What is it?"

"Will you be okay in Enoshima, Professor?"

Naoya's question seemed to puzzle Takatsuki quite a bit.

"Be okay with what?"

"Well, because—there's always a huge number of black kites flying around over there?"

"Eh-?"

Takatsuki's face stiffened.

A heavy silence fell inside the car. Apparently, that hadn't occurred to anyone else.

The issue had been weighing on Naoya from the minute he'd heard they were going to Enoshima. Maybe he should have brought it up sooner.

Sasakura was the one to break the silence.

"...Now that you mention it, I've heard about that before. You know, kites flying up on someone from behind to steal their lunch and stuff? I feel like it was on the news."

"Yes. They're not like the pigeons at school. These fly at you on purpose."

"Blech, enough! I can practically see it happening..."

The blood was already draining from Takatsuki's face.

His tone stern, Wataru said, "Akira, I think we'd better not go to Enoshima. Don't you agree?"

"Mmnn, but we already came this far..."

Takatsuki was wavering. What he'd just heard was apparently more than he was confident he could withstand.

"Chill out. Let's just go sightseeing in Kamakura instead. If we don't go all the way to the coast, there shouldn't be as many kites, right?"

"Yeah, but the mermaid...! *Augh*, I've never hated the way birds affect me more than I do now...!"

Still, when he tried to look things up for himself online, all Takatsuki seemed to be able to find was information about watching out for black kites. When he got to a picture in which there were so many kites flying about that they nearly blotted out the sky, Takatsuki quietly put his phone down.

"...Okay. We'll see Kamakura and then go home. We can just...go to the Great Buddha and Tsurugaoka Hachimangu Shrine...I guess..."

"Don't cry, Akira. I'm sure it'll still be fun."

"That's right, Akira! Let Uncle buy you some of those pigeon biscuits they're famous for, eh?"

Sasakura and Wataru took it in turns trying to cheer up the despondent Takatsuki. He wasn't actually crying, but it was hard not to feel bad for him.

"Enoshima may be out of the question, but Inamuragasaki should still be okay, right?"

Takatsuki turned back around to Naoya again. The expression he wore made him look just like the only child who wasn't allowed to go to the festival.

The incident with Kuroki had happened just the day before. They had to go on this trip to get him out of the house, but even so, Naoya at least wanted him to enjoy himself.

"The kites probably go to Enoshima because there's a fishing harbor, not to mention lots of people from all the tourism. But at least from what I found online, the park in Inamuragasaki doesn't get very crowded, so there might be fewer kites, too... Though I guess if there aren't a lot of people to talk to, you won't be able to gather information like you usually do..."

Naoya showed Takatsuki the article he had found on his phone. There weren't any kites in most of the photos it used, at least.

Frowning, Takatsuki thought for a few moments, then turned to Sasakura.

"...KenKen, is it okay if we just try going? It doesn't seem like we can do much of an investigation anymore, but I want to see where the mermaid has been appearing, at least."

"Fine."

Sasakura nodded.

"I mean, worst-case scenario, if you collapse, I'll let you sleep it off by yourself in the car while Uncle Wataru, Fukamachi, and I go do a little sightseeing around there. It'll be fine."

"Thanks so much for the words of reassurance," Takatsuki said, smiling wryly. "Right, in that case, just don't trouble yourself, okay?"

The park was just off of National Route 134. They parked the car in a nearby lot and ever so cautiously peeked up at the sky. There were some kites flying around, but not many. They were at a fairly high altitude, too, and didn't show any signs of dive-bombing the group.

"Oh, I think I'll be okay if it's just like this..."

Once Takatsuki had made that judgment, they decided to try checking out the park.

Naoya had never been to this place before, either. He wondered if it might have been more accurate to call it a nature preserve than a park. It was located on a portion of land that jutted out slightly into the sea. There was a long, sandy beach, from which the rocky seaside coast rose up into something like a small hill. The top, which seemed to have been leveled off, was blanketed in grass. Beneath the cloudy sky, the endless expanse of water lost some of its luster, but even so, the waves rushing in from the distance to surge over the shore one after another—accompanied by the constant sound of water cresting and rolling and retreating—were magnificent. *Ah*, Naoya thought, even though it was the most obvious thing in the world, *I'm at the sea*. After all, it had been quite a long time since he had been to the ocean.

They could see people surfing off the coast. Looking off to the side, along the land, they could even see Enoshima. The view was excellent, and there really didn't seem to be many tourists. If anything, it felt like the sort of place where locals would go for a nice, leisurely stroll.

There was, however, one unanticipated group of people on the beach—the media, TV cameras in hand.

They were also after the mermaid, apparently. Stopping surfers and passersby, the reporters asked questions with their microphones held out. Maybe they planned to run the footage on some kind of infotainment segment.

"Akira, what do you want to do?" Sasakura asked.

Takatsuki's gaze shifted toward the hill.

"Let's skip the beach. There don't appear to be many people over on that hill, so let's check it out."

Turning their backs to the water, they started walking toward higher ground.

The two of them seemed concerned about Takatsuki being caught on camera accidentally. Even if he wasn't interviewed, just appearing in the background would probably be enough to earn the professor some snide comments from Kuroki.

Thinking about that made Naoya furious. It wasn't as though he wanted Takatsuki's face carelessly splashed across the television, but it felt like

restrictions were being put on Takatsuki's behavior, and that was just unreasonable.

Suddenly, Naoya felt a hand come down with a whap right on top of his head.

He looked up, startled, to see Sasakura.

"What was that for?"

"—I heard you met Kuroki. Akira told me."

Sasakura spoke quietly enough that the waves almost drowned him out.

Takatsuki was walking with Wataru a short ways ahead. Probably, only Naoya had heard what Sasakura had just said.

"...He seemed like a really nasty person. What does he even think about Professor Takatsuki?"

"I can't stand that guy, either," Sasakura spat.

"Does Kuroki really check to see if he's appeared in any articles or whatever every single day? Why go that far...? I heard he was awful that time the professor was on TV, too..."

"...I mean, when I learned after the fact that he'd been on TV, I got pissed, too."

"Huh?"

Naoya looked at Sasakura in mild surprise.

The other man stared out toward the sea for a little while, like he was searching for the right words.

"—Listen, you've heard about Akira's mom getting lost in her own fantasy world over whatever was behind the *kamikakushi* incident a bunch of times already. But Akira's father and his grandfather...they did the opposite."

"The opposite?"

"They concluded he was kidnapped by a person...some kind of pervert."

It was a very realistic train of thought. So realistic that Takatsuki's mother had simply not been able to consider it.

She would not entertain the idea that, at the age of twelve, Takatsuki had been kidnapped and imprisoned by some common deviant—one who'd injected him with some strange drug that had altered his brain and his eye color and, right at the end, carved the skin from his back before dumping him like trash.

Of course, there wasn't any evidence to back up that theory. As thoroughly as the police had investigated at the time of the incident, they'd been unable to discover the cause of Takatsuki's disappearance. But considering he'd been missing for a month, as well as the circumstances in which he'd been found, it was no wonder his father and grandfather felt the way they did.

"And when it comes to Akira himself, he considers both possibilities. Even though he's real taken with the unrealistic angle, the other side of his brain thinks there might be someone in this world who kidnapped him."

Sasakura kicked roughly at the sand. Traversing beachy terrain for the first time in a while was harder than Naoya had expected it to be. In no time, his sneakers were covered with sand. He wondered if the gentleman duo walking ahead in their leather shoes were managing all right.

"When he told me the reason he'd agreed to be on TV, I was horrified...

Akira's face hasn't changed much since he was a kid. There's a good chance anyone who knew him from back then would recognize him."

Fighting just to hear Sasakura's voice over the sound of the waves, Naoya didn't fully understand at first what those words meant. It didn't take long to hit him, though.

And the moment that realization hit, he felt sick to his stomach.

"Don't tell me—he didn't... He didn't try to use himself as bait, did he?"

If Takatsuki thought his former captor would try to strike a second time after seeing him as he looked now...

Sasakura's already grim face bent into something even more fiendish as he nodded.

"He had the nerve to say to me back then, all calm and composed, 'Someone who kidnapped a child to perform heinous acts on them might not be

interested in an adult, but just on the off chance that they might be'—that was why he did it."

"'The off chance'?! He put himself in that dangerous of a situation for that?!"

"Like I said, I was pissed. I mean, nothing came of it in the end, and I think Akira has given up on that tactic, too, but..."

Even so, the risk had been too great.

There was one thing that had fallen into place for Naoya, though.

When Takatsuki unmasked someone who hid their wrongdoings behind a supernatural veneer, he sometimes acted with a shocking amount of aggression.

Naoya was certain that was because Takatsuki was imagining the day when he would capture the person who had kidnapped him with his own hands. That was why he had become as strong as he was.

It was just another part of himself that he concealed behind a smile.

"Akira's father uses Kuroki to prevent damage from being done to the company by Akira's past being dug up or having the 'Tengu's Child' thing he was forced into come to light. I do think that's true—but in the end, it still kinda feels like he's protecting Akira, too. His being victimized again would be a huge problem, even if there is only the 'off chance' of it happening. He's learned some self-defense and arrest techniques so he can handle that possibility, but... no matter how much stronger he gets, he has one hell of an Achilles' heel."

Sasakura turned his gaze upward.

Although there weren't many of them, black kites were soaring through the sky here, too.

If one of them were to fly at Takatsuki out of nowhere, he'd lose consciousness then and there. If the person who'd kidnapped him knew about that weakness, there was no way they wouldn't use it against him. In that scenario, with Takatsuki unable to even put up a fight, if things took a turn for the worse, he could die.

"...Mr. Sasakura," Naoya said, kicking through the sand like Sasakura had done

before, "you really are the professor's guardian, aren't you?"

"Shut up."

Sasakura glared at a kite flying far overhead.

Though it had seemed just about to circle around in their direction, the kite suddenly changed course and flew away.

"Uh?! Mr. Sasakura?! Do you have laser beams shooting out of your eyes or something?!"

"Animals are sensitive to body language. And birds have good eyesight."

Had he really just scared that kite off? It hadn't been coincidence...? Well, maybe any animal would have turned tail and run if they were on the receiving end of a stare with that much bloodlust in it.

By Wataru's standards, Sasakura was definitely one of Takatsuki's "allies." But since the two of them had been friends since they were young, it wasn't like Sasakura had been put up to that role or anything.

Wataru also wanted Naoya to become one of those allies, and Naoya himself had every intention of being one.

But even though he was on Takatsuki's side, Naoya wasn't strong like Sasakura. He couldn't protect Takatsuki in an emergency. Naoya was well aware that, if anything, he was usually the one who needed protecting.

As for potential weapons, Naoya had only his ears.

Lightly, he put his hand to one side of his head.

It wasn't until he'd met Takatsuki that Naoya had even been able to think of his ability in that way. If he could just put his ears to slightly better use...

"Oh, that reminds me. You're gonna come drink with us at Akira's place tonight," Sasakura said all of a sudden.

"Huh? No one told me about that."

"I just did. You turned twenty, right? Your drinks are on us."

"...Um, well, my tolerance isn't very high, so I'm good, actually. Besides, the thought of partying with guys like you and Professor Takatsuki, who drink

alcohol like water, is terrifying."

"That's why I didn't say we're going out somewhere. Relax, I'll take care of you when you pass out."

"Could you not be so eager to get me to that point?!"

This thought had occurred to Naoya while drinking with Wataru, too—why did it seem like he was surrounded by adults who were *too* tolerant of alcohol? He couldn't remember ever seeing any of them actually drunk. Meanwhile, two glasses of wine were enough to make Naoya sleep like a baby.

They reached the bottom of the hill as they talked. It looked like, if they climbed the gently rising staircase, there would be a great view at the top.

"Are you okay to keep going, Uncle?"

"Oh yes. We've come this far, let's go all the way up."

The gentleman duo started up the stairs after their short exchange, Naoya and Sasakura following behind.

At the top was a landscaped park furnished with benches and covered rest areas, with a number of pine trees planted throughout. There were even some hydrangea bushes in bloom. The side of the hill facing the water ended abruptly in a cliff, marked off by a low fence. Beyond it, the sea and sky stretched out endlessly. People were scattered about, but as expected, the park seemed like a place intended for locals.

"—Multiple people claim to have seen the mermaid from here," Takatsuki said, approaching the fence. Naoya and the others joined him so that the four of them stood side by side, gazing out at the ocean.

The view of the water from up high was good despite it being overcast. Beneath the thick, puffy clouds, the blue-gray surface of the sea undulated and rose, cresting and breaking as whitecaps. Naoya could have stood and watched it for ages without losing interest. But while they could spot the occasional surfer frolicking in the waves, nothing mermaid-like was visible anywhere on the horizon.

Looking around the park, Takatsuki saw a middle-aged woman who seemed

like a local walking her dog. Taking advantage of the opportunity presented to him, he walked over to her.

"Hello, may I speak to you for a moment?"

The woman stopped walking when Takatsuki greeted her with his bright smile. Her dog, a Shiba Inu, sat politely at her feet and looked up at the professor with its tail wagging gently.

When Takatsuki asked her about the mermaid, the woman snorted in amusement.

"Really? You're a college professor but you took the trouble to come out here to investigate those rumors...? Hmmm, I mean, I've never seen one. A mermaid, I mean. But I guess some people in town are friends with the fisherman who first said he saw it, so I heard about it secondhand. I was told the news article hugely exaggerated the story. They said the part about the mermaid jumping out of the sea and spinning in the air was made up."

"I see. Then what was it that the fisherman actually saw?"

"I guess all he said was that he saw a woman swimming quite far from the shore. He also just happened to see what looked like a huge fish fin at the same time, apparently. That's why he thought maybe he'd seen a mermaid. But I mean, it's the ocean. Fish are everywhere in it."

The woman giggled as she recounted the story.

"I suppose that's true. It could be that a large fish was, coincidentally, swimming right beside a woman who was casually swimming in the ocean. Which makes me wonder, why would that woman be swimming out there? Is it a well-known locale for long-distance swimmers?"

"No, you wouldn't want to swim in that area. Or rather, you wouldn't normally expect to see anyone swimming there. That's why the fisherman thought she might be someone who died by suicide at first. I guess he realized that wasn't the case when she looked at him and smiled. Though when he looked back out at the water a little while later, he couldn't see her anymore."

Dragging her dog—who seemed reluctant to part with Takatsuki—along in her wake, the woman continued her walk.

Sasakura piped up.

"So, what, it's a hoax after all? That woman basically just said the story boils down to 'someone saw a woman swimming,' right?"

"Mmm, it seems so."

Takatsuki stroked his chin lightly with his fingers, his smile wry.

"The truth appears to be that someone saw, firsthand, a woman swimming and a large fish tail, and those two things were combined into 'I saw a mermaid.' The resulting story was published in a sports newspaper and spread online, allowing for fresh gossip to flourish. I believe most of the sightings reported after the sports paper article were posted to Twitter."

Just like internet forums, Twitter could be highly anonymous—a good place to invent and disseminate fabricated information. When people found a post interesting enough, they would like or retweet it. The more a topic was trending, the more copycat tweets would appear.

"As reports of mermaid sightings increase, people who read those reports will begin to form a solid connection in their minds between the words 'Enoshima' and 'mermaids.' Once that happens, there will be people who believe the stories are real—that mermaids really do exist in these waters."

The result was that people had begun traveling all the way to Enoshima to see mermaids.

Then, as a matter of course, there were more misidentification incidents and more people posting online as though they had actually seen mermaids. Eventually, it became a hot enough topic for the media to cover it.

And at that point, it didn't matter if there really were mermaids around here. People would behave as if it were true.

"It reminds me, you know, of Loch Ness and Nessie," Wataru said, tapping the end of his cane gently on the ground.

Takatsuki nodded.

"Yep, it's exactly like that. That lake was also swarmed by people who had gone to see a sea monster whose existence was unconfirmed. Even after the

most famous photo of Nessie—the 'surgeon's photograph'—was exposed as a fake, it didn't do much to stop people from going there. They even did some scientific investigations. There are still people who believe Nessie exists, and probably even more who hope that she does. The current situation here is likely very similar, resulting from quite a lot of people wanting mermaids to be real."

Looking off toward the beach, they could still see what appeared to be a television crew. That crowd in particular probably didn't actually believe there were mermaids here, but they were almost certainly filming programs with the goal of insinuating that it could be true.

For some reason or another, Naoya recalled the "Kisaragi Station" story.

That story had been created through various contributions to an online forum by people who—despite not knowing for sure whether the original post they were replying to was made up or not—had proceeded as though it was real.

This whole media storm around mermaid sightings was very similar. People who found the initial story of a man seeing something that looked like a mermaid interesting rapidly piled on. The bevy of eyewitness reports that flooded the internet thus gave rise to a new urban legend: that there were mermaids in Enoshima.

It may even have been the case that a surprisingly large number of the world's ghost stories and urban legends were born that way. Somewhere, some small utterance grew with every subsequent mouth that told it, until finally becoming a version of itself that was accepted as common knowledge.

That was how people had arrived at understandings such as Nessie's existence in Loch Ness, and the presence of mermaids in Enoshima. It didn't really matter whether those things deviated from the truth.

Because after all, the majority of people telling the story had never actually seen a mermaid themselves.

Takatsuki turned back toward the sea.

"But you know, I am a little curious about who that woman might have been. A woman swimming somewhere unfit for swimming is, in itself, a bit of a mysterious and impactful occurrence. Enough that I can't fault the fisherman

for thinking of mermaids in the moment."

"You mean it's like he interpreted the bizarre experience of seeing a woman where he didn't expect to see one as 'that wasn't a human, that was a mermaid'?"

Takatsuki nodded at Naoya's words.

"Yep, that might be it."

As he stared fixedly out into the water, like he thought he might see a mysterious woman splashing among the waves, Takatsuki's eyes shone with just a flash of indigo.

"Regardless of the interpretation, however, the notion that there was a woman there cannot be discounted. What in the world was she?"

"Probably a case of suicide after all, don't you think?" Sasakura said.

"Or a ghost!" Wataru added excitedly, causing Sasakura to scowl in disgust.

Takatsuki smiled at the two of them in turn.

"One could also theorize that both of you are correct."

"What do you mean?" Naoya asked, his head cocked to the side.

"Well, I did a little research the other day. There was, in fact, someone who died by suicide here in the water a year ago. The body was never found, but more and more women have been sighted swimming out to sea. Maybe what that fisherman saw was a more recent body, or maybe it was the ghost of the woman from a year—"

"—She's not dead!"

Suddenly, a high-pitched voice cut across Takatsuki's.

They all turned to look in the direction it had come from, startled.

A young boy—no older than a first-or second-grader, probably—with an adorable head of soft, curly hair, stood staring straight up at Takatsuki. How long had he been there?

"Mama isn't dead!" the boy yelled, his voice the sort of sharp, piercing one typical of children. "She's not! She turned into a mermaid in the sea!"

This is the son of the woman who died by suicide a year ago? Naoya thought, incredulous.

Takatsuki crouched down in front of the boy.

"So, your mama became a mermaid?"

"Yeah! Sae even said so!"

"Sae? Who is that?"

"She's, um, a lady who comes to the store! She's Mama's friend and she sells fish!" the boy answered.

Takatsuki glanced at Naoya, who shook his head. The boy's voice wasn't distorted.

Children his age tended to lie intentionally because it was fun to say things that weren't true, and telling such untruths to as many people as possible was like a game to them. But just now, the boy hadn't been lying. He really believed his mother had become a mermaid.

Naoya's ability didn't work specifically to determine the absolute truth of things. If someone believed what they were saying, their voice wouldn't come out warped, even if their words didn't align with reality.

Just then, an older man sitting on a nearby bench looked their way and stood up.

"Oh, Riku. What are you doing here?"

"I was bored so I came here to play!" The boy—Riku—gave a very spirited reply.

Standing up straight, Takatsuki asked the man, "Do you know this child?"

"Oh yes, yes. His family runs a restaurant right around here."

"My name is Riku Harada! I'm six years old!" Riku announced, standing up as tall as he could.

He seemed frustrated that Takatsuki was so much higher up now that the man wasn't crouching. But when the professor reached down and scooped Riku up in his arms, the boy giggled happily.

"Riku, you came all the way here by yourself?"

"I'm not supposed to! But I was really bored, so I did it anyway!"

"I see—you came here anyway, huh? Even though you're not supposed to."

Takatsuki smiled wryly.

It seemed the old man had overheard the entire exchange with the woman walking her dog before, because he said to Takatsuki, "Did you say you were a college professor earlier? That you're here to investigate the mermaids?"

"That's right. I'm Takatsuki; I teach at Seiwa University."

"Nowadays there seems to be an awful lot of people making a fuss about mermaids. But I'd rather you didn't talk about that in front of him. He seems to really believe his mother became a mermaid."

"So then, his mother actually...?"

"Yes. A year ago."

The man's words were deliberately vague. Apparently, there was no doubt that the person who'd died by suicide a year ago was Riku's mother.

"Where is his family's restaurant? I think I should take Riku home. His family must be worried."

The old man told them they could find the restaurant right across the road.

Takatsuki set Riku down and crouched again to talk to him at eye level.

"Riku, let's go home, okay?"

"Awwwww!"

"I'll walk you there. All right?"

"...Then, could you hold my hand?"

Riku reached one small hand toward Takatsuki.

"You know, um, I'm not good at walking. I just fall down. I'm really good at swimming, though! When I'm in the water, I can go so fast. Not on the ground, though. So hold my hand, please?"

"Yep, I understand. We'll hold hands."

Standing up with a big smile, Takatsuki took Riku's hand. Naoya noticed when he glanced down that Riku's knees, peeking out from under his shorts, were covered in adhesive bandages. Just as he had said, he probably fell down often.

"Um, so! The reason I'm not good at walking, it's because my mama is a mermaid! That's why, um, I'm better at swimming than walking!"

"Did Sae say that too?"

"Yeah! Sae always comes over to play with me!"

The idea that someone had explained to Riku that his clumsiness was due to his being the child of a mermaid was pretty interesting. Although Naoya had a feeling the truth was that all children his age were prone to falling down because their heads were still disproportionately large.

They went back down the hill, walked along the sandy beach and back to the road with Riku. The restaurant was exactly where the man in the park had indicated it would be, just on the other side of the street. There was a small box truck parked on the spacious front lawn, which seemed to double as a lot. Behind that stood a log cabin—style building with a wooden sign that said Restaurant HARADA. Under that, the sign informed them that the restaurant opened at eleven. Naoya checked the time—it was only ten forty. Since they were escorting the family's child home, though, it was probably okay to go in a little before opening time.

Standing on his tippy-toes, Riku opened the shop door and practically leaped through it.

"I'm ho-o-ome!"

They heard a female voice shout from inside.

"Oi, Riku! Where have you been?!"

"Ah, excu-use me?" Takatsuki called, holding the door open. "We happened to meet Riku at that park across the way. A neighbor told us he lived here, so we brought him home."

"Oh geez, um, Mr. Harada! Looks like Riku's caused some trouble for some people! Ah—sorry, please come inside for now!"

Doing as the woman's very energetic voice bade them to, they went into the restaurant.

The shop was tiny, with four tables and five seats at the counter. The interior brought the log cabin—style warmth indoors to match the exterior nicely. Large windows supplied a clear view of the sea, and seashells had been used to make various decorations in the space. There were also some rather old-seeming framed black-and-white photos hung on the wall and displayed on the counter, which caught Naoya's interest slightly, since they looked fairly out of place against the rest of the cheery decor.

There was a young woman holding a mop inside, dressed casually in a T-shirt and worn-out jeans. Waist-length, jet-black hair tied back behind her neck, she looked like she was in her twenties and would have been very aptly described as a "classic Japanese beauty." Her fair, oval-shaped face somehow brought to mind the dolls used in Girls' Day celebrations. There was a mole just under her right eye that gave her a particular kind of charm.

"I'm sorry you had to go to all that trouble. Tell you what, how about having lunch while you're here? The fish is really good! They buy it from the place I work."

Riku twined himself around the woman's legs, and she laughed while tousling his hair. She was probably the "Sae" person Riku had spoken about.

Wataru turned to Takatsuki, his expression serious.

"Akira. Let's eat lunch here. We can't refuse the invitation of such a beautiful woman."

"Sure, that's fine, I was planning on doing that anyway."

Takatsuki gave an exasperated smile. The English gentleman was apparently very fond of women.

Then, a flustered-looking man—Riku's father, Harada, it seemed—poked his head out of the kitchen at the back of the shop. He was a short but well-built person with tanned, boyish features. He looked like he might surf or something in his downtime.

"Um, has my son been a nuisance somehow?"

"No, not at all. He told us he went to the park alone because he was bored, even though he knew he wasn't supposed to. I figured he would be missed, so we escorted him back here."

"For goodness' sake...I am so sorry about that."

"No, please, we should apologize to you for barging in before the restaurant opens. Though we would like to have lunch here, if possible. Would that be all right?"

"Oh, of course! Please have a seat!"

Harada's face overflowed with gratitude.

Judging from the blackboard menu hung inside the restaurant, they served Italian food. The house recommendation was a seafood pasta, which all four of them ended up ordering.

Harada disappeared into the back after taking their orders, and the woman from before came up to their table instead.

"You all don't look like you're here for a day at the beach. What did you come to do at the seaside dressed in suits?"

Her tone was friendly and open, and Takatsuki smiled brightly in return.

"We came to investigate mermaids. I teach folklore studies at Seiwa University. My name is Akira Takatsuki."

"Wow, a college professor! That's cool! I'm Sae Umino. I work at a local fishmonger's."

"Do fishmongers also offer kitchen cleaning services to their clients?"

Takatsuki gestured to the mop Sae was holding.

Sae laughed.

"Oh, no. This is a freebie. I deliver the fish to customers, and this place is my last stop. And ever since the incident last year, Mr. Harada has been having a hard time running things by himself. So I help with simple things at the end of my delivery route. Cleaning, hanging out with Riku, seeing to customers, that sort of stuff."

Sae mentioned "the incident" in a really light tone, probably because Riku was right nearby. He had climbed onto a counter chair and was watching them, legs swinging in the air.

Looking around the restaurant, Takatsuki's gaze settled on the black-and-white photos on the wall. The pictures showed people working on a sandy beach and tinkering with boats in a harbor.

"Those photographs look quite old. Are they shots of this area in the past?"

"Oh, yeah, I think that's what he said. Hey, Mr. Harada? What's with these photos again?" Sae called loudly over her shoulder toward the kitchen.

Harada yelled back in return, his voice mingling with the sounds of cooking.

"I found those at my grandpa's place! I want people to be able to see what things were like back then! Not a bad idea, right? It's preserving our culture!"

"But they're kinda tacky. Wouldn't it look nicer if you had some color landscape photos or pictures of the sea? Look, this one has a bunch of old people in dirty clothes drying fish on the beach! That's boring! Won't customers be bummed out just looking at it?"

As she spoke, Sae very decisively laid the countertop photo face down. The pictures didn't bum Naoya out, but he supposed it was true they weren't exactly bright and colorful.

Walking back over to their table, Sae said, "Mr. Harada was still in the middle of prep work, so it'll probably be a little while longer before he can start cooking. Ooh, I know—I'll read your palms for you! I'm really good at it. Come on, hands out!"

Unsurprisingly, the first person to put his hand out was Wataru.

"Just having a lady take my hand is enough to make me happy! Japanese women really are beautiful. Skin like porcelain even though you work by the seaside. You're like an antique doll, it makes me want to put you in a glass cabinet and take you back home with me!"

"Uh-oh, this creepy old guy is talking like a psychopath! His palm looks pretty normal, though."

Deftly sidestepping his rhetorical flourishes, Sae looked carefully over Wataru's palm.

"Hmm... Is there a woman close to you that you've been angering? One you're also currently in love with? If you work hard at your job, your love might come to fruition, so don't abandon hope! Give it your all!"

Sae flashed a bright smile at Wataru, who drew his hand back, pressing it to his chest as if he had been stabbed.

"I say... You mean Irene? Fruition? It'll come to fruition, will it? With that workaholic woman?"

Wataru was muttering to himself, so it seemed that Sae had, unexpectedly, hit a bull's-eye.

"Next. You, tough guy!" Sae said, calling on Sasakura.

Sasakura held one large hand out to her with a surly look on his face. Sae examined his palm intently.

The next time she spoke, the first thing she said was, "You're a worrier, aren't you?"

*"…"* 

Sasakura's scowl deepened at her straightforward assessment.

"Listen, tough guy, don't push yourself so hard, okay? There are limits to what a person can do! You can't be responsible for every little thing! But hang in there, okay? You seem like a good person!"

With that, she gave Sasakura's back a hearty slap. It was already impressive that, despite having just met him, his scary face didn't intimidate her, but from the look Sasakura was wearing now, Sae had once again been spot-on. Grinning, she slapped his back one more time.

"Next! Your turn, glasses boy!"

She singled out Naoya this time.

"Um. No thank you."

Naoya declined immediately. He was worried she was on a winning streak.

But Sae just reached out and grabbed ahold of his wrist.

"Come on, don't be a wet blanket. Show the nice lady your hand...! Eh?"

Looking down at Naoya's palm, Sae's eyes suddenly opened wide.

Instinctively, Naoya tried to tug his hand away. There was no way such a thing would happen, of course, but what was he supposed to do if she told him he was going to die the next day or something? Sae held on tight, though, not only refusing to let go but even bringing her face in close to study his palm even more thoroughly.

"You... Your palm is awfully interesting."

"I-interesting? What does that mean?"

"Yeah—interesting."

Sae looked up.

Still clutching his hand, she stared straight into his eyes. It was probably just the low lighting, but Sae's eyes were pitch-black. Naoya jerked his head back in surprise.

He didn't know why, but just for a moment, Sae's eyes had reminded him of Takatsuki's. The color was different, but the way they made him feel like he was about to be dragged into their depths was dreadfully reminiscent of those indigo night-sky eyes.

"You—you have some sort of secret."

"...What?"

Naoya felt another jolt of shock hit his shoulders. At his side, Takatsuki looked at Sae, his expression shifting subtly.

"There are trials ahead...," Sae murmured, as though delivering a prophecy. "Make sure you don't get swallowed up, okay?"

Then she let go of him.

Naoya pulled his hand back and looked back up at Sae. She seemed to have lost interest in him already, though, because she had turned to Takatsuki with her grin back in place.

"Okay, here we go! Time for your reading, Mr. Professor. Your hand, please!"

Holding his hand out toward Sae, Takatsuki joked, "This is a bit scary, isn't it?"

As Sae spread his hand open, the expression abruptly vanished from her face.

Her line of sight shifted from his palm to his face. Her eyes had gone wide again.

"...Is something wrong, Miss Sae?" Takatsuki asked, voice calm.

Reaching forward, Sae grabbed Takatsuki's face in both of her hands, drawing it toward her own and gazing into his eyes. The professor made no effort to resist, simply returning her gaze.

Staring at Takatsuki, whose brow was slightly furrowed, from so close that the two of them could almost have kissed, Sae's eyes looked pitch-black once more. When she saw the flickers of indigo in the depths of his stare, her eyes opened even wider.

"...Who is it? Who's in there?" she whispered.

Takatsuki's frown deepened. Sasakura and Wataru both looked at Sae, their faces somewhat stiff.

"Miss Sae?"

At the sound of her name, Sae gave a little start and blinked.

Then she looked at Takatsuki again. This time, it was like she was trying to meet his gaze rather than peer into the recesses of it.

"You have a secret, too," she told him.

Takatsuki's eyes narrowed.

"You must be more careful. You shouldn't go looking for trouble to throw yourself into. Those around you will be dragged into it, and it will end in disaster. You mustn't try to understand everything... There are some things in this world that you're better off not knowing."

Those words sounded just like a warning.

Takatsuki smiled.

"What could that possibly mean, I wonder?"

Sae let go of his face, stood up straight, and grinned back.

"Who knows? Just kinda got that feeling, I guess."

"It didn't quite feel like a palm reading to me, though."

Takatsuki held up his hand, fluttering his fingers for her to see.

Grabbing the mop she had leaned against the table, Sae said, "Why would I look at a hot guy's hands when his face is right there? Thanks for the nice view, Professor! Well—your food is probably just about done! I'll go see!"

She disappeared into the kitchen.

Shortly thereafter, Harada and Sae emerged each holding two large plates of pasta, so apparently their food *was* ready. Piled high with squid and shrimp and shellfish, the pasta looked absolutely delicious. It was no wonder it was the house recommendation.

Takatsuki smiled at Harada.

"Thank you very much. And—pardon me, but would it be all right if we had a minute of your time while we eat?"

"Oh, sure. There aren't any other customers here at the moment, so that's fine. What did you need?"

"I came here to investigate the mermaid issue that's been causing such an uproar lately. Earlier, Riku was telling us that the mermaid is his mother."

"Ah, right... He said that, huh...?"

Frowning uncomfortably, Harada looked at his son. Riku, seated in the counter chair with his legs still dangling, smiled at them. He seemed pleased to have been brought up in the conversation.

"That's right! Mama turned into a mermaid! Right, Sae?!"

"Yep, that's right! Riku's mama is a mermaid! Right?"

As one, Sae and Riku turned to each other, smiling, and said, "That's right!"

Harada looked more uncomfortable.

"Hey, um, Sae? Sorry, but could you play with Riku for a bit? I don't really want him to hear this."

"Yeah, sure, no problem. Hey, Ri-i-ku! Come with me, let's play over here!"

After leading him to a table in the far corner of the restaurant, Sae started a game of patty-cake with Riku. Though she was still fairly young, Sae seemed comfortable dealing with children. Plus, it looked like Riku adored her.

Harada grabbed a chair from another table and sat down alongside theirs. He opened and closed his mouth several times as though not sure where to start. Running a hand roughly through his short hair, he cast his gaze toward the corner of the counter, where a picture frame, smaller than all the rest, sat on display.

The photo inside showed Harada, Riku, and a kind-looking woman with long hair, who must have been Riku's mother.

He drew the frame closer, sighed once, and started to speak.

"My wife and I met in the sea."

Her name was Yuuko.

They had met eight years ago, when Harada was still a student.

At the time, Harada had spent nearly every waking hour surfing in the surrounding waters. Other people would join him sometimes, but more often he would just wander down to the beach alone to ride the waves.

Except one day, he noticed there was a woman swimming right next to him in the water.

"I remember thinking it wasn't safe. If my surfboard hit her, she could be seriously hurt. The second I started panicking about it, I lost my balance and fell off the board. When I surfaced, there was Yuuko, laughing. She looked so happy."

Yuuko, young and unmarried, had a live-in job at a local soba restaurant run by an elderly couple. She was about the same age as Harada but hadn't chosen to go to college.

After that, they saw each other at the beach a lot. Yuuko preferred swimming

to surfing, but once Harada taught her how to ride a board, she mastered it in no time. The effortless way she maneuvered over bigger waves, her delighted laughter ringing out all the while, had made Harada fall head over heels for her before he knew it.

"This restaurant was originally run by my father. He told me he would be retiring when I graduated from college, so we decided I would take over for him. And at the same time, I proposed to Yuuko."

She had accepted his proposal happily.

Keeping a small restaurant afloat as newlyweds wasn't easy, but they enjoyed it. Soon, they were blessed with a child. Riku was born, and they became a family of three.

Yuuko had been friends with Sae since before she met Harada. When Sae would come around to the restaurant to sell them fish, she would make time to hang out with Yuuko and Riku. She was practically another member of the family.

Several years after Riku was born, however, Yuuko had collapsed in the shop.

"From day one after she gave birth, she had a hard time with the recovery. She just got weaker and weaker... I was told, by the time she collapsed, her insides were already in such bad shape..."

Eventually unable to even get out of bed, Yuuko had looked at Harada with big tears rolling down her face, apologizing over and over. "I'm so sorry," she would say. "I'm sorry this is happening. I thought we would be together forever."

Harada decided to temporarily close the restaurant to tend to Yuuko, but she didn't want him to. Her hospital bills had cost quite a lot, for one thing, and they would still need money to provide for Riku.

But Harada said he wanted to spend as much time by Yuuko's side as possible.

"Thinking back on it now...I shouldn't have done that, telling her I would close the shop for her sake. I think she felt backed into a corner."

One day, having gone out shopping with Riku, Harada happened to glance

toward the water as they drove down the seaside road.

Way offshore, facing the open sea, a head of black hair was bobbing along the rising waves.

Oh, somebody's swimming, Harada had thought at first.

But then he realized that couldn't be right.

It was winter at the time, and there was no way anyone would be out swimming. It wasn't out of the question to see people in wet suits surfing, but that wasn't what he had seen.

Harada had a bad feeling. He rushed home and checked Yuuko's room.

It was empty. She shouldn't even have been able to sit up on her own.

Leaving Riku at home, he had sped to the beach, but he could no longer see anyone out in the water.

Instead—there were witnesses.

There was a couple who had come to the seaside for a date just by chance. They were in a panic, discussing whether to call the police, and when Harada asked what was going on, they told him.

A woman had showed up at the beach and just walked right into the water. She'd swum farther and farther away from the shore until eventually, they'd lost sight of her.

Harada showed them a picture of Yuuko. Without a doubt, they said, that was the woman.

The police determined that she had died by suicide as a result of her illness. Her body was never found.

"I didn't know how to explain it to Riku," Harada said, hanging his head.

When he spoke again, it was in a low voice. He didn't want his son—still in the corner playing with Sae—to overhear.

"I couldn't tell him his mother ended her own life. I was at a total loss, and when I asked Sae for help, she told Riku the mermaid story..."

"You mean the 'your mother became a mermaid' one, right?" Takatsuki

asked, head cocked to the side.

Harada nodded, looking troubled.

"We were trying to avoid hurting him, but I mean, he's at that age, you know? He ended up totally convinced it was true and started talking about it with people away from home. That was a bit awkward. But it wasn't like I could tell him it was a lie at that point."

It was true—when it came to six-year-olds, they were still likely to believe in things like Santa Claus. They might very well believe their mother had become a mermaid and returned to the sea if that was what someone had told them to explain why she was gone.

"I figured he would forget about it with time, but then this mermaid incident happened, and he just got more excited. He seems to be under the impression that Yuuko has come back."

One hand over his face, Harada shook his head.

Then-

"—It's not a lie."

A high-pitched voice spoke up.

With a start, Harada picked his head up and looked around.

Without their noticing, Riku had come to stand right behind his father. He was staring up at him with his big eyes.

"It's not a lie. Mama came back."

Sae stood and approached their table. She crouched next to Riku and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, Riku, you shouldn't interrupt when adults are talking, okay? Come on, let's go back over there to play."

But Riku just shook Sae's hand off and stared even harder at Harada.

"Mama was outside my window the other night," he said.

Harada looked like he was on the verge of tears.

"Riku..."

"She was outside my window, and she sang me a song. I heard it."

"Riku, that... It was just a dream."

"It wasn't a dream. I was awake. Mama promised me one time. She pinkie swore! I asked her not to go anywhere and she told me it was okay. She said even if something happened and she had to go away, she would come back to see me again, no matter what!"

Voice rising to a shout, Riku looked somehow desperate.

Oh, Naoya thought, as he gazed at the boy's face.

To Riku, the idea that his mother had become a mermaid was a dream he could not afford to wake up from.

Because if it wasn't true, it meant his mother was dead. That he would never see her again. He couldn't bear that. Even if his father told him it was a lie, he would cling to the story the way children clung to fairy tales. He wanted it to be true.

Just like Takatsuki's mother. Both of them, turning their backs on the harsh reality and escaping into the fiction of a dream to protect their own hearts.

Naoya's eyes drifted unconsciously to Takatsuki. What would he say to Riku? Takatsuki didn't allow fake mysteries to persist. Digging up the real events behind the farce and exposing the truth was just how he went about things. Every time.

But to do that to a six-year-old boy? That seemed wrong.

Sae put her hand on Riku's shoulder again.

"Riku, it's okay—we get it. Your mama was a mermaid all along, right? But living on land was bad for her body, so she had to go back to the sea, right?"

She spoke to him in a gentle voice, and Riku just nodded and silently sucked his thumb, as if he had regressed to being an infant. Big tears dripped down his cheeks. Watching him, Harada's own eyes welled up.

Carefully taking Riku's thumb from his mouth, Sae patted his hand and gave it

a squeeze.

"Riku, do you wanna come play outside with me for a bit? You don't mind, right, Mr. Harada?"

"Right, yeah... Sorry, Sae."

Harada nodded, and Sae and Riku left the shop still holding hands.

Harada watched them go, wiping at his eyes. When he turned back to their group, it was with red eyes and another troubled expression.

"I apologize. Talking about stuff like that... Your food has gone cold, hasn't it? I'll remake it."

"There's no need."

Takatsuki smiled and dipped his fork back into his meal, which wasn't even half finished. Naoya, Sasakura, and Wataru slowly followed suit. The tomato and seafood pasta was just as delicious cold, but Naoya struggled to get it down.

Sniffling, Harada excused himself and stood. He put his chair back where it belonged, and as he was returning to the kitchen, his back to their table, Takatsuki called out to him.

"-Mr. Harada."

Harada paused but didn't turn around. He sniffled again.

"If it heals his wounded heart even a little," Takatsuki said, "I don't think it's wrong to play along with your child's fantasy for a short while."

Wataru looked down. Sasakura's eyebrows rose slightly. A little surprised, Naoya looked at Takatsuki, who continued talking.

"But the time will come for him to face reality... When it does, if you're there for him, it'll be okay."

As he continued facing the kitchen, Harada's shoulders shook.

They heard a small, tearful voice reply: "Thank you."

As they walked away from the restaurant and back toward the car parked in the lot, Sasakura turned to Takatsuki.

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"...You all right?"
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"Yeah, I'm okay."

Takatsuki gave him a tiny smile.

Sasakura stared down at Takatsuki, glowering. But then, that was just how Sasakura looked all the time.

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"Good, then."
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"Yep."

Takatsuki nodded.

Naoya glanced at Wataru, who was walking unhurriedly next to him, his cane tapping along the ground as he went. He seemed to be focusing intently on the pair ahead of them.

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"...Mr. Wataru?"
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The older man shifted his attention to Naoya.

"Akira has grown stronger—even more than I realized."

Wataru chuckled softly, his gaze turning forward again.

Naoya looked at Takatsuki, too.

He and Sasakura appeared to be discussing where to go next. Sightseeing in Kamakura sounded like the logical choice, but there was no shortage of things to see there. Neither of them was very familiar with the city, so every place they mentioned was somewhere famous.

Eventually, Sasakura looked back at Naoya.

"Oi, Fukamachi. You're from around here—don't you know anywhere good that isn't as well-known?"

"I'm not from here, I'm from Yokohama!"

"Why do people from Yokohama always make a big deal about that? It's the same prefecture, ain't it?"

"Please don't lump the whole prefecture together! Do you have any idea how big Kanagawa is?"

Right as Naoya replied, there was a sudden *pat-a-pat-a* sound, and he felt something cold land on the tip of his nose. Within seconds, the asphalt beneath their feet was covered in wet splotches.

"Eep, the rain is here! Let's hurry!" Takatsuki yelped, holding his arms over his head.

No one started running out of concern for Wataru, but they picked up their pace and made straight for the car.

Once they had all climbed back into the vehicle, Naoya got stuck following Sasakura's unreasonable order to "find somewhere we can go sightseeing that's out of the rain." He sat in the back seat, frantically tapping away at his phone, fed up with being surrounded on all sides by buffoons. If all they cared about was "having fun" all the time, why couldn't they look things up themselves?

Takatsuki called Naoya to his office the following Monday.

That morning, he said, he'd received a call from Harada.

"Actually, it was Riku on the other end of the line. He told me his mother visited him again last night."

Beside himself with excitement, the boy had repeated his news over and over into the receiver: "Mama was here. She sang to me through the window. Come here, I'll show you the proof."

Shortly after, Harada had taken the phone from his son and apologized several times to Takatsuki, sounding like he was at his wit's end. Apparently, Riku had insisted on calling the professor and wouldn't take no for an answer.

Takatsuki wanted to go—he had told Harada as much.

"KenKen has work today, and Uncle Wataru is out on business, too. What about you, Fukamachi? I'm going to go see evidence of mermaids... Do you want to join me?"

Naoya nodded. "I'll go."

He had classes until fourth period on Mondays, but he was pretty sure he'd do fine in the last one even if he didn't attend every lecture. Plus, Nanba was in that course, too, so he'd be able to borrow the notes he missed. Takatsuki

frowned when Naoya told him he would skip a class, but if they waited until after fourth period to leave, they would probably get to Harada's restaurant around the dinner hour, when they were likely to be busiest. When Naoya pointed out they would be causing trouble for the family that way, Takatsuki reluctantly gave in.

When his third-period class was over, Naoya and Takatsuki took the train to Inamuragasaki.

They made it to the shop, and Riku came bounding their way; he had been keeping his eyes peeled for their arrival.

"This way! Um! Come with me!"

Pulling Takatsuki along by the hand, he led them to the backyard. The rear of the restaurant functioned as living quarters, and Riku's bedroom faced the back.

Outside his window, Riku pointed animatedly at the ground. The soil was slightly muddy from the rain that had fallen over the weekend. Riku jabbed his finger at it eagerly.

"Look! See?! Here, here it is!"

Naoya wasn't sure what "it" was, though. There were small footprints—probably Riku's—but nothing else of note. Only tracks left behind by the flow of water.

Then it was like a glint of light reflected off something in the mud.

Brow furrowing, Takatsuki crouched down. Very carefully, he plucked something out of the muck with his fingertips.

Naoya studied the object from beside the professor. It was half covered in dirt, but he could see that it was semitransparent, curved, and thin, like a scrap of cellophane or a delicate glass shard.

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"What is it?"
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"This is—"

Taking out his handkerchief, Takatsuki gently wiped the soil away and held it up in front of his face.

Apparently unable to wait for Takatsuki to state his judgment, Riku hollered, "Can't you tell? It's a scale! A mermaid scale!"

"A scale...?"

Naoya squinted hard at the thing between Takatsuki's fingertips.

Now that it had been pointed out to him, he could tell that it was indeed a scale, approximately the size of a fingernail and pastel red in color. Looking more closely at the ground, he noticed there were a handful of similar scales scattered around in the dirt, as if some scaled creature had crept along the ground, following the streams of runoff like roads.

"Last night, um, Mama came here in the middle of the night! I was asleep at first, but I woke up and knew it was her right away! The shutters were closed so I couldn't see her, but I heard her singing! The song she used to sing to me when I was really little! Um, I always used to fall asleep when I heard it, and last night I did, too! But then I woke up in the morning and came out here, and look! Mama must have left these behind!"

Riku jumped up and down as he told them his story, unable to contain his excitement.

A beleaguered-looking Harada held him by the shoulders.

"It's been like this all morning. He's been telling the neighbors and even people who come to the restaurant... You know there's media swarming the beach around here. If they catch wind of it and pile into the shop..."

Even though it was coming from a child, it was probably not a great time to be shouting about mermaids visiting. Some reporter might descend on them, hungry for a story, or it could show up online, posted by some ordinary person who happened to hear about it.

"I'm in the service industry... I can't have the restaurant earning some strange reputation. I just... I don't know what to do..."

"Papa, why aren't you happy?! Mama was here! She's healthy! Come on, be happy with me!"

Shaking off Harada's hand, Riku went back to bouncing on the spot and

yelling. Harada told him to stop, but Riku gave no sign of hearing.

"Hey, Papa! Why?! You don't want Mama to be alive?! She's not allowed?! Why, Papa?! Tell me!"

Finally, Harada broke. He shouted, "Riku, that's enough!"

Startled, Riku stopped jumping. Tears welled up in his eyes immediately, and overflowed.

"...But why...? Why, aren't you h-happy, Papa...?"

"Riku... Riku, your mother—"

"Mama isn't dead! She came to see me...!"

Riku started to wail in earnest, sob after sob tearing its way loudly from his throat. Harada stood helplessly, watching his son cry.

His mother dying by suicide was too cruel a reality for a six-year-old to face. He wanted her to be alive, even if she lived as a mermaid. He wanted her to come visit, even if it was only a dream.

Takatsuki crouched down in front of Riku, holding out the scale he had picked up off the ground before.

"Riku, here. Take this. It's precious to you, right?"

Continuing to cry, Riku looked at Takatsuki. He took the scale and cupped his tiny hands around it tightly.

"Listen, Riku," Takatsuki said, his voice kind. "This has to be our secret."

"...S-se...cret...?"

Takatsuki nodded.

He put one hand on Riku's head, stroking it lightly, and gestured to the ground with the other.

"If your mama really came here, she probably didn't want anyone except you and Papa to know that. That's why she came in the middle of the night, when no one else would see her."

"B-but, b-but why...? Why w-would...she...n-not want th-them...to know...?"

Riku asked, heaving with sobs.

Takatsuki smiled at him.

"Because people would be frightened, right? Of a mermaid coming out of the sea. You remember the people from the TV stations at the beach? Those people came here looking for mermaids. If they captured your mama, that wouldn't be good, right?"

"N-n...no! I w-would...h-hate it!"

"Of course you would! So—that's why you have to keep it a secret that your mama was here. Don't talk to anyone about it except the people who are here right now, okay? That scale, too—you have to keep it hidden somewhere safe. Can you do that?"

Riku nodded, holding the scale out, clenched in one little fist.

"C-can, can I, k-keep this, as a t-treasure?"

"You can. Treasures have to be kept inside treasure chests. Do you have a treasure chest, Riku?"

"Yeah! I'm gonna go put it in there!"

Picking his way carefully across the ground to avoid trampling on any traces of mermaid presence, Riku scrambled into the house through his bedroom window.

Harada exhaled a single large sigh.

"Professor Takatsuki, I'm so sorry... Thank you so much."

He bowed deeply to Takatsuki, who looked at him and said, "Mr. Harada—this is as much as I can do."

His detached tone made Harada raise his head.

They could hear Riku banging around inside his room. Takatsuki's gaze shifted to the house, and he continued in a low voice.

"You're his father. When he's ready to come to terms with reality, you have to be there to support him...so he doesn't end up like some other unfortunate soul."

After they left the restaurant, Naoya and Takatsuki walked along the seaside road for a while without speaking.

Naoya was the one to break the silence.

"... Are you sure it's okay to leave things like that?"

This time, Takatsuki had not settled things in his usual way.

He had reinforced the fantasy Riku harbored that his mother had become a mermaid. But if that caused the boy to sink deeper and deeper into the illusion, wouldn't it be a problem?

What if Riku ended up like Takatsuki's mother?

Takatsuki's mother had closed her eyes so tightly to reality that she'd ultimately even denied the existence of her own son as he stood right in front of her. If Riku rejected reality that way— "It's okay," Takatsuki said, his voice slightly raspy. "Riku is still a child. At his age, the line between dreams and reality is inherently blurred, but it'll become clearer as he grows. He's going to find out the truth someday, but when he does, I'm certain his father will be there for him... They're not like my family."

Takatsuki looked down, a somewhat lonely smile on his face. Naoya's chest ached.

He wanted to believe Takatsuki was right.

Which was why there was something the two of them still needed to do.

"It's this way, Professor."

Checking the map on his phone, Naoya took the lead with Takatsuki following meekly behind.

Their destination was the fish seller's shop that Sae worked at.

Takatsuki had a recollection of the shop's name. During their first visit to the restaurant, there had been a small box truck parked out front—the one Sae used to make deliveries. Naoya didn't remember the name of the business emblazoned on the side of the truck, but it was seared into Takatsuki's brain like everything else he saw.

When they got to the shop, the balding manager told them they could find Sae out back.

Going around the building, they spotted an apron-clad Sae cleaning the storehouse floor. She used a hose to rinse stray fish blood and scales from the concrete, then scrubbed at it with a deck brush.

"—Oh! Professor Takatsuki and glasses boy? What's going on? Another mermaid investigation?"

Upon noticing their approach, Sae flashed them her usual grin.

Returning the smile, Takatsuki stepped up to Sae.

"Miss Sae, you spread scales around in the backyard of Mr. Harada's house last night, didn't you?"

"...Well, darn. I've been found out, huh?"

Sticking her tongue out, she rapped a fist gently against her own head.

Takatsuki looked down at the floor drain that was covered in stubborn fish scales.

"You work at a fishmonger's, after all. You could get your hands on as many scales as you'd like, I imagine... Did you sing, too? Last night, for Riku."

"Of course I did. I mean, it would be difficult for a mermaid to pull herself up onto the land from the water and actually crawl along the ground. Maybe it was presumptuous of me, but I sang on her behalf. I heard Yuuko's lullaby so many times, you see."

Sae spoke not with shame, but with pride.

She probably thought she had done a good deed, that she was doing the most she could for a young child who had lost his mother.

"I made marks on the ground with a mop, too, did you notice? I figured I would manage somehow or other since it was after the rain we got, but it was surprisingly hard to make it look good! I got as many pretty scales as I could and picked out all the same color ones to scatter around. I wanted him to think of her as a beautiful mermaid, so—"

Takatsuki cut across Sae's crowing, his words plain and resolute.

"—I came to tell you that your consideration is no longer necessary."

Sae's eyes widened a little.

"...Huh? Uh-oh. Professor Takatsuki, are you mad?"

"I understand that you did it for Riku's sake. You want him to believe his mother is alive as a mermaid, right? But if this is a kind fantasy, then no more proof is needed. Dreams and reality are different, after all."

At those words, Sae's wide-eyed gaze narrowed.

"...What's the problem? Isn't it fine to live inside a dream? Things are more fun that way."

"I know someone who is no longer able to return from the dream she lives inside... It's a miserable existence. It doesn't make anyone happy, not even the person in question."

"Maybe Riku is different."

"Even if he is, it's the role of those around him to help him reconcile his dream with reality. We mustn't do anything more to point his attention toward the fantasy world. It wouldn't be right to do that to him."

"...What if it isn't just a fantasy world?" Sae replied facetiously, tossing down the deck brush she was holding.

It hit the floor with a clatter, but she ignored it and took off her apron.

She looked at Takatsuki through upturned eyes, pouting slightly, like she was tired of being reprimanded.

"You study the mysterious, but you deny the fantastical. And yet I think you know very well that things that run contrary to human logic are surprisingly common in this world. Isn't that right?"

"Well, I'm not so sure. I wish desperately to encounter real monsters every day, but it doesn't appear to be working very well."

"Oh? I see. Then I guess those eyes are just for show. That's surprising."

Takatsuki's brow furrowed.

"...What does that mean?"

Still looking up at him, Sae's lips curled suddenly up into a smile.

"What, indeed? Figure it out yourself, Professor."

Her eyes, narrowed to crescent moons, were pitch-black. As though it had been lured out, a faint indigo light flashed in Takatsuki's gaze. If Takatsuki's were the night sky filled with countless stars, Sae's were the absolute darkness of a moonless, starless night. The kind of blackness that swallowed up everything.

"-Just kidding."

Sticking her tongue out at them again, Sae blinked, her eyes brightening just a tad. Her usual smile returned to her face.

"I see... Okay, well, that's fine. If it makes you that upset, I'll stop."

"Miss Sae-"

"I was just trying to show some kindness in my own way, but maybe it wasn't nice after all, since you say so... I'm sorry, 'kay? I'm not so good at understanding stuff like that. Humans sure are complicated, aren't they?"

Sae shrugged, rolling her apron up in her hands. Turning, she started to walk toward the shop.

"Well, Professor, I have something I should attend to, so I better go."

"Miss Sae, please wait—"

"No can do. I told you, I'm busy. Bye-bye, Professor. See ya later."

Blowing them a kiss with one hand, Sae disappeared into the building.

All she left behind was the deck brush she had thrown down on the wet concrete floor.

As he and Takatsuki walked back along the coastal road, Naoya felt some sort of unease in his chest.

A few steps ahead of him, Takatsuki was quiet. He wouldn't get lost on a route he'd taken at least once, so Naoya didn't need to mind him, but his total silence since they'd left the fishmonger's was a little worrying. Even from

behind, Naoya got the feeling as Takatsuki kept up his brisk pace that something was being intently turned over and over inside that head of his.

But then, something had been niggling at Naoya's brain, too.

Something was...wrong.

Ever since their first trip to Inamuragasaki, he hadn't been able to shake that odd feeling. He also hadn't been able to identify what it was, exactly, though it continued to tug at the edges of his consciousness.

Naoya looked out toward the water. This area seemed devoid of surfers today. He watched a large wave roar up to its peak before crashing down. Then, among the frothing whitecaps, something dark and round caught his eye. Someone was swimming—quite a ways from shore. With waves that big, were they okay?

Naoya stopped walking absentmindedly as he watched. Takatsuki called back to him.

"Fukamachi? Is something wrong?"

"Oh...just now-"

But as he turned his gaze back to the open sea, he realized there was no sign of the head from a moment ago—there were only the rolling waves. Maybe he had just been mistaken. The seemingly endless number of people claiming to have seen mermaids here had probably experienced something very similar.

At that moment, Naoya felt as though something inside himself had finally clicked into place.

"Fukamachi?"

Takatsuki had walked back toward him, concerned that he was still standing in place.

Naoya looked up at him.

"Professor. Um, there's something that's been bothering me for a while."

"What is it?"

"Miss Sae—she thinks mermaids are real, doesn't she?"

There it was. The source of his discomfort.

The first time they had visited Harada's restaurant—how many times had Sae turned to Riku and said, "your mother is a mermaid"? That was supposed to be a fantasy made up for Riku's sake. A gentle dream.

In other words—a lie.

"I mean, it's odd. Her voice never distorted, not once. That means, when she said Riku's mother is a mermaid, she really believed it."

"That's..."

Suddenly, Takatsuki's eyes snapped toward the sea.

One long finger extended, he pointed to a particular spot in the water.

"Fukamachi—look."

Following the line of his finger, Naoya saw it again—that dark, round thing. Someone's head.

Before, it had been facing the open water, but now it seemed to be looking in their direction.

He couldn't really make out any facial features; the distance was too great. Nevertheless, somehow, he got the feeling that, whoever that head belonged to, it was smiling at them. A pale arm rose up above the water and waved as if in greeting.

And then—

Just as the head and arm sank back into the ocean, something else broke through the surface—a massive fish tail.

"—Pr-Professor! Professor, no, no! Professor, stop, you can't do that! Stop, please stop!"

Before Naoya could blink, Takatsuki was attempting to clamber over the guardrail and jump down to the beach below. Naoya only barely managed to hold him back. It didn't matter that the ground he would have landed on was largely composed of sand—jumping from this height was a bad idea. Not to mention the thing he was trying to get to was way out in the water. What

would Takatsuki have done once he was on the beach, unless he seriously intended to start swimming in his three-piece suit?

Takatsuki looked back at him, and Naoya sucked in a breath.

His wide-open eyes had turned a deep blue.

"Fukamachi—did you see that? Just now."

"I did, but..."

"The face, too?"

"From here, no..."

"I saw it," Takatsuki stated. "These eyes, they could see it. That—that was Yuuko."

"Huh...?"

"The family photo at Mr. Harada's shop. She was in that. And just now, over there, that was the same face."

Takatsuki pointed to the sea again. There was nothing there anymore.

The professor started walking again without warning, his pace even quicker than before.

"P-Professor? Where are you going?!"

"Fukamachi—there's something that's been bothering me for a while as well."

"What is it?"

"The pictures at the restaurant... Why was it just that one photo that Miss Sae turned over? I couldn't see that one from where I was seated at the time. Could you?"

"I might have... But I don't remember it, really."

Naoya thought he recalled it showing people making dried fish on the beach. Black and white and a bit grainy, it was the kind of photo one expected to see in a Japanese history book.

"We're going to go check," Takatsuki said, speeding up yet again.

His legs were so much longer that Naoya was already jogging to keep up. But oddly, for once, Takatsuki paid no attention whatsoever to how Naoya was faring and simply chugged along without slowing.

Restaurant HARADA was already seating customers for dinner. Thinking more patrons had arrived, Harada looked over to greet them, then blinked in surprise when he realized Takatsuki had walked in. Ignoring the man's instinctive welcome call, Takatsuki slipped between the occupied tables, reached around the customers seated at the counter, and grabbed the face-down picture frame.

"...Fukamachi."

He pointed to one part of the photo.

It was, as Naoya had thought, a shot of people drying seafood on the beach. The two most prominent figures in the photo were a man who could have passed for the fairy-tale fisherman Urashima Taro, and a woman who looked like she belonged in an old Japanese movie.

Takatsuki was pointing at something behind them—a woman walking on the sand, facing the camera. Judging from the big round basket she carried under one arm, she, too, was engaged in some sort of work.

"—That's Miss Sae," Takatsuki said.

"What?!"

Naoya squinted hard at the image, trying desperately to make it out. It was so old, and it had probably been enlarged to some extent. The graininess was too intense for him to even confirm whether the woman had a mole under one eye. Still, there was no mistaking it—the oddly familiar smile on that face, which had suffered much less loss of clarity than the two larger subjects, was undoubtedly Sae's.

Standing side by side, Naoya and Takatsuki stared at the picture. Naoya could feel the gazes of the customers and Mr. Harada on them. Mr. Harada tried to get their attention—"What's the matter? Is there something wrong with that photo?"—but Naoya couldn't even summon the will to answer. No, it wasn't just that—Naoya had no idea how he ought to reply at all.

There, in an old photograph, probably from the late 1920s or early 1930s, was

a woman they had been speaking to just minutes ago.

It could have been coincidence. Just someone who happened to look similar, or perhaps a blood relative. Either of those theories could hold water. But Naoya had never yet met anyone with a relative who looked this much like them.

So what in the world did it mean?

Outside the shop windows, under the darkening sky, the deep ocean waters rolled gently. A long time ago, people had believed the Dragon Palace existed in that ocean. They'd envisioned a world far, far below the surface, where humans could not reach, one different from their own. Another world—harbored beneath the shifting tides of the sea.

On Wednesday, when Takatsuki went to see Wataru off as he was returning to the United Kingdom, Naoya ended up tagging along.

"Thank you for the company," Wataru said, tapping his cane against the floor. Having checked the rest of his luggage already, his cane was his only carry-on.

Takatsuki hugged him.

"See you, Uncle. Come again anytime, okay?"

"Yes. You too, come visit me sometime. I've got vacancies in the apartment block."

"...Yeah, thank you."

Nodding, Takatsuki closed his eyes for a moment, then let his uncle go.

Wataru turned to Naoya.

"Naoya, thank you for spending time with this old chap as well."

"I'm not going to hug you, just so you know."

"Why not? That's what you do when you say good-bye to someone—you hug them!"

"Sorry, but I'm Japanese born and raised. I'm too reserved for that."

Wataru poked sulkily at the ground with the tip of his cane. He really is Takatsuki's uncle, Naoya thought. Not that he wanted to believe "pouting like a

child" was something inscribed at the genetic level.

But just when Naoya was letting his guard down, Wataru threw his arms open wide and wrapped Naoya in an emphatic hug.

"Hey! I said—! Japanese people—! Don't hug!"

"I hug, and I'm Japanese. Naoya—please, take good care of Akira, won't you?"

Holding Naoya tight as he made to struggle out of the embrace, Wataru whispered into his ear, and Naoya reflexively went still.

"...If you're that worried about him, you could just live here, you know?"

"The air in Japan doesn't agree with me. Living overseas is in my nature."

Wataru ruffled Naoya's hair and stepped back. Glaring at him, Naoya pressed his hands over his mussed head. Why couldn't members of this family leave his hair alone?

He felt like he could still hear the clink of glasses ringing in his ears from that night.

That toast had been like a ritual naming him as an accomplice to some unholy act.

The story that had followed—an account of Takatsuki's past that Naoya had washed down with bitter red wine.

"Well then, Akira. Naoya. Until next time."

Waving, Wataru walked away from them and out of sight through the international departures gate.

Takatsuki watched him leave with a small sigh.

"Well, he's gone."

"Yeah. There he goes."

"I wish he could have stayed a bit longer. I really missed Uncle's cooking... Although the more he's around, the more people's embarrassing pasts get disclosed without their permission, which I suppose is a problem."

Takatsuki looked sidelong at Naoya, who took a startled step back. Had they

been found out?

"Pfft."

A small snort of laughter burst out of Takatsuki.

"...Oh, Fukamachi, you really are so easy to read. So he did tell you after all? About my past, I mean."

"Huh? Wha...? Wait, did you just trick me?!"

"I mean, I had a feeling he would probably tell you about that, being who he is. It's so unfair, really. I've become such an exemplary adult, the least he could do is keep my embarrassing teenage years under wraps!"

"...An exemplary adult... Ri-i-ight, on the surface, at least."

"Hey! I'm more than just my looks, Fukamachi!"

"Are you, though? If nothing else, 'exemplary adult' isn't what I would call someone who tries to leap from a high place the moment they see a mermaid."

"That was... I mean, at the time... I just, I was a little shaken up."

Takatsuki cleared his throat with a little ahem, then looked back at Naoya.

"Right. We should actually talk about that, shouldn't we? That day threw me for a loop, too, and we just went home without really discussing it."

That day—

Takatsuki had barely spoken a word on the entire train ride back from Inamuragasaki. He just sat silently, deep in thought. Naoya hadn't felt like he would welcome someone initiating conversation, either, so they'd just gone their separate ways when they'd reached Tokyo.

"Fukamachi, let's sit down for a little while," Takatsuki said, gesturing to an empty bench.

They sat next to each other, watching people pass by.

"The questions are," Takatsuki began, "what was it that we saw in the ocean, and—what on earth is Miss Sae?"

"The thing in the ocean...looked like a mermaid."

"Right. And that face, it belonged to Yuuko."

"Which means..."

It meant, when all was said and done, that Riku's mother was indeed a mermaid. One that transformed into a human and came ashore, just like in the Andersen fairy tale. Could it really be true that living on land and giving birth to a human child had been too much for her body, so she'd had no choice but to return to the sea?

And if that was the case, then what did that make Sae, who knew all about the truth? Was she a mermaid, too? Or— "Professor, you told us in class, right? Eating mermaid flesh grants you eternal youth."

"That's from the legend of Yao Bikuni. There are versions of the story all over the country...of a woman who stopped aging and lived for many, many years after eating mermaid flesh."

They hadn't been able to find Sae again after that.

Immediately after having confirmed her presence in the photo at the restaurant, they had rushed back to the fishmonger's only to hear from the manager that Sae had just up and quit moments before.

She was such a mystery. One minute she was bright and friendly, and the next, everything about her down to her atmosphere felt like it belonged to someone else entirely. Not unlike Takatsuki, Naoya thought.

Takatsuki looked up at the ceiling and murmured, "Ahh... It really is unsettling not knowing."

There was a hint of amusement in his tone, though.

"One could come up with all sorts of realistic interpretations. Like—Yuuko isn't dead, she's just in hiding for some reason, but sometimes she goes to the sea to swim. Or that both the face we saw in the ocean and the woman in that picture just happen to be doppelgängers. To begin with, if Yuuko is a mermaid, there would be so many odd details... When she gave birth and when she collapsed, she went to the hospital, for one. They must have run blood tests on her, determined her blood type and so on. But what in the world would a mermaid's blood type be? Besides, Yuuko and Mr. Harada got married. That

means she had a family register. Is there a mermaid registry? Was the Dragon Palace listed as her legal address? I mean...that's obviously impossible."

Takatsuki snickered.

Then, lowering his gaze from the ceiling all the way down to the floor, he continued, "And yet—I cannot doubt what I saw with these eyes of mine."

His long fingers traced quickly over his eyelids.

"Fukamachi...do you suppose I can say one of my dreams came true?"

Day in and day out, Takatsuki talked on and on about his dream of actually encountering something supernatural.

Perhaps, this time, they had met with the real thing instead of just some sham.

"...Hey, Fukamachi."

Leaning sideways, Takatsuki rested his weight against Naoya's shoulder.

"Miss Sae laid out a fantasy for Riku to live in. My mother took up residence in a fantasy, too, to protect her own heart. If the one Miss Sae created for Riku was actually reality...then what about my mother?"

"Professor..."

"My mother never came back from the fantasy world. So the question is, am I a resident of that world myself? Is it possible in reality to be stolen away by tengu? And am I courting disaster just by wanting to know that answer?"

Takatsuki spread his hands, holding them up in front of his face.

If mermaids could exist in this world—maybe that meant tengu could, too.

"...If Miss Sae's palm reading was accurate, someday I could end up dragging you into something terrible."

Against Naoya's shoulder, the professor's weight grew a little heavier. Naoya looked over at his downcast head.

The expression on his face wasn't like him. Takatsuki looked lost, as if worrying that what he had been doing all this time was wrong.

What Sae had said then had been weighing on Naoya's mind, too. Peering into Takatsuki's eyes, she had asked, "Who's in there?"

What had she seen in those eyes?

"Well," Naoya said, spreading his palms out as well, "if Miss Sae's palm reading was accurate—"

He held his hands out where Takatsuki could see them.

"—I've got trials waiting for me in the future. I'm certain that's to do with you, Professor."

"...I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?"

Naoya gave Takatsuki a solid nudge with his shoulder, pushing him back up.

"You're always getting people dragged into things. Like Mr. Sasakura, he always ends up involved somehow... It's too late now."

"Fukamachi..."

"I'm telling you, it's too late—you can't get rid of me now."

Takatsuki had told Naoya before: "I'm not going to let you go."

Naoya himself was already past the point of no return.

Besides...more than anything, Naoya wanted to know, too.

About the truth Takatsuki was seeking.

"To start with, if you're a resident of a fantasy world, what happens to me? Mr. Tooyama experienced the same festival I did, which means that wasn't just a dream I had. It's real. Professor...you promised me, right? You said we would discover the truth behind that festival together. Are you thinking of going back on that promise now? You better be ready to face the consequences, then."

"We didn't pinkie swear or anything, you know? There was no 'cross your heart and hope to die."

"Broken promises of any kind are simply unacceptable!"

Naoya glared at Takatsuki, who looked back at him—and then laughed.

"You're right... Yeah, I'll keep my promise. When summer break is here, let's go to the place where you saw that festival. We'll go figure out what it is together."

Takatsuki held his right hand out to Naoya.

How many times do I have to tell him shaking hands isn't a thing here? Naoya thought, staring down at that hand.

But he had shaken hands with Takatsuki once before. This was probably supposed to be a renewal of that—of the moment Naoya had decided for himself to be near this man.

He stuck his own hand out, and Takatsuki took it with a bright smile.

"I look forward to working with you, Fukamachi," Takatsuki said.

"...Thank you very much," Naoya replied, squeezing Takatsuki's hand in return.





Wataru Takatsuki was going home to England after his first visit to Japan in five years. His nephew and his nephew's student came to the airport to see him off.

"See you, Uncle. Come again anytime, okay?"

"Yes. You too, come visit me sometime. I've got vacancies in the apartment block."

Wataru and Akira hugged one another.

It had already been many years since his nephew had grown to be as tall as he was, but every time they hugged like this, Wataru thought, *He's gotten so big.* Akira had probably been about seven or eight inches shorter and a lot daintier when Wataru had taken custody of him. And now, he was such a fine adult. How mighty was the passage of time.

Next, Wataru turned his attention to the somewhat aloof-looking student standing behind Akira.

"Naoya, thank you for spending time with this old chap as well."

"I'm not going to hug you, just so you know," Naoya said bluntly, retreating a step.

It was common for Japanese people to prefer a large amount of personal space and to avoid making a lot of eye contact. Having not been raised in a

physically touchy culture, they tended to distance themselves physically and mentally from others.

But...in this kid's case, that probably wasn't the only factor at play.

Most likely, Naoya was "damaged goods."

Wataru hadn't inquired about Naoya's circumstances, and Akira hadn't offered anything about them.

Even so, aside from his one mean-eyed childhood friend, this was the kind of kid Akira had always fussed over. Perhaps the reason Wataru had called out to Naoya when he'd first laid eyes on him at the university was because Naoya reminded him of another boy—one who was closed off to everyone around him.

After actually speaking to him, that impression wasn't as strong, but still—in some ways, Naoya resembled him—a child Akira had once spent time with...and Akira's old self.

"Well then, Akira. Naoya. Until next time."

As he waved good-bye and walked through the international departures gate, Wataru remembered that time.

The day he'd welcomed Akira into his home, and the days that had followed.

He thought of the story he had told Naoya about Akira's youth.

Twenty years had already passed.

Wataru had been thirty-eight when he'd taken custody of a fifteen-year-old Akira. The man hadn't grown a mustache yet, and the antiques business he'd started with a friend was finally taking off. He had acquired a block of flats several years prior at a bargain due to unforeseen circumstances, and at that point, there were three tenants and two dogs living in it.

Truth be told, Wataru hadn't known about what had happened to his nephew until the boy's father, Tomoaki, had asked him to look after his son.

That was how meager the relationship between Wataru and his family was.

Having realized quite early on that Wataru's temperament made him

unsuitable as a successor, his father had kicked him out of the house promptly upon his graduation from college. He had been unceremoniously handed a bankbook and a debit card linked to an account that contained a fairly considerable amount of money and told, "Do as you please. The Takasaki Corporation is no longer a matter of your concern." When Wataru had asked if he should consider this his inheritance, his father had readily confirmed as much. Deciding he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth, Wataru had accepted the money gratefully and moved out.

Shortly after that, he'd started living overseas. He rarely returned to Japan, and even when he did, he never visited his parents. He didn't keep in regular contact with his older sister Sayaka or other family members. If they traveled to Europe for vacation, Wataru might have meals with them here and there. They didn't even exchange yearly Christmas cards. His relationships with his friends and coworkers were infinitely more solid.

And yet Tomoaki had turned to Wataru for help.

The moment his sister's family had been compelled to come to him, of all people, was the moment Wataru realized exactly how broken their home had become.

"I understand this is an unreasonable request. But I could not find a better alternative."

On the other end of the phone, his brother-in-law's voice sounded more miserable than Wataru had ever heard it, brimming with hopeless fatigue and heartache.

He had listened to Tomoaki's request and replied rather casually that he was fine with it.

There was space in the apartment block, so it wasn't a big deal.

"Thank you... Truly, you're a lifesaver."

Wondering what in the hell had been going through Tomoaki's mind when he'd picked up the phone to make this call, Wataru told him not to worry about it.

His brother-in-law had said there were no better alternatives, but Wataru

wondered if any other options existed in the first place. If he hadn't agreed, what had Tomoaki intended to do?

Well, whatever, Wataru thought.

In any case, he had room in the apartment block.

That wasn't to say Wataru had no worries about the situation.

After all, he had only met the nephew in question a handful of times. He couldn't even remember how many years it had been since they'd seen one another. Who knew if they would even recognize each other?

"Right... I mean, fifteen years old... That's a difficult age... He's going to be at the height of his rebellious phase and puberty and all that..."

Wataru found himself on the verge of wailing in consternation as he waited at Heathrow to pick up his nephew. He couldn't just turn around and leave, right? No, of course not. As an adult and as a human in general, that would have been absolutely deplorable.

The problem was, Wataru wasn't fond of bothersome things. He had basically no interest in anything other than what he liked and tended to ignore all else, which had made his grades in school quite skewed. This was one of the reasons his father had given up on him.

Not to mention, his nephew had even more worrisome circumstances, in addition to being at a difficult age.

"...I really was too hasty... I shouldn't have agreed without thinking it over..."

Standing in front of the busy arrival gate, Wataru held his head in the hand that wasn't wrapped around his cane.

Glancing at his surroundings, he saw there were hugs being given all around. Passengers exiting their flights were greeted warmly—"It's been too long!" "I missed you!"—by those who had come to pick them up.

The least he could do, Wataru thought, was be welcoming.

After all, his nephew had been kicked out of his home at the age of fifteen.

The poor lad had nowhere else to go, so Wataru would give him somewhere.

It was only right as his uncle. Even if his nephew ended up shutting himself up in his room all the time, that was still better than his being turned out onto the streets.

Resolving to give his nephew a hug, too, Wataru faced the gate and held up the sketchbook-cum-welcome sign he had been keeping tucked under one arm. Written on it in Japanese was the message: Welcome to England, Akira Takatsuki!

Then—

"...Uncle Wataru?"

Someone addressed Wataru in Japanese from just beside him, and he turned to look, flustered, in that direction.

A slender boy stood there with a large bag slung over his shoulder.

He had big, bright eyes, a fair complexion, and light brown hair. With his well-ordered features, the boy was the spitting image of the teenage older sister in Wataru's memories.

"Akira?" he asked, and the boy—Akira—broke into a wide smile.

"Yeah! Uncle Wataru, it's nice to see you again! I'll be in your care from now on!"

He bowed his head politely, his tone clear and bright.

Wataru looked down at him with a sense of relief. Well, now, he thought, if it isn't a proper smile. He had been expecting the worst, but if this was how things were, it would be no different from hosting a study-abroad student. At the very least, it didn't seem like Akira would stay holed up in his flat all the time or hurt everyone around him with teenage melodrama.

Sketchbook in hand, Wataru opened his arms and wrapped Akira up in a hug.

"I'm glad you're here, Akira. Welcome to England! It's been a long time since we last met, but you recognized me just fine. Hard to forget a face this handsome, eh?"

"Yep, I could never forget my cool 'Uncle Cane,'" Akira replied, giggling.

That had been his nickname for Wataru when he was little.

This could work, Wataru mused as he loaded Akira into his car and drove him to the apartment block in a small neighborhood on the outskirts of London. The boy chatted a lot during the drive despite almost certainly being jet-lagged. He talked about his memories of meeting Wataru as a child and the movies he had watched on the plane in a tone that sounded genuinely cheerful.

Things just kept getting better, in Wataru's opinion. He could already feel a kinship welling up between himself and this smiling boy. He even thought to himself how Akira might take after him more than Sayaka.

"Here we are. This is the apartment block."

"Wow, it's wonderful. It looks like something out of a movie!" Akira said, getting out of the car and looking up at the building with his eyes alight.

The complex was an old five-story redbrick building. It wasn't especially big, but the large arched windows and green ivy crawling along the walls gave the place a nice atmosphere. Each floor was its own rental unit, with the first floor serving as Wataru's residence.

Turning to Wataru with his gaze still sparkling, Akira asked, "Hey, Uncle? Do you ever see ghosts here?"

"Ghosts?"

"I heard haunted properties are more popular here in England. I thought that was interesting, since places with ghosts in Japan are rented for cheap."

"Ah, British people do love their ghosts. They think a haunting gives a place more prestige, you see. Unfortunately, however, there are no ghosts in this building...probably."

"'Probably'?"

"I haven't seen any yet, but that doesn't mean one isn't hiding somewhere, right? So if you see one, make sure you tell me. Because then..."

"Then...?"

"I can raise the rent," Wataru joked with a smirk.

Akira snorted with laughter.

"Come now, in we go. Your flat is on the third floor. Your luggage already arrived via courier. I'll help you unpack later, so just come with me to mine for now—it's the first floor. I'll introduce you to the other tenants."

With that, Wataru opened the front door.

At once, they were bombarded with quick, successive popping sounds, as if a firefight was taking place inside. Their field of vision was entirely obscured by multicolored streamers and confetti as the smell of gunpowder filled their noses.

"Yokoso, Akira!"

"Irashaimase!"

"Ah, konnichiwa, ohayo, arigato gozaimasu! Geisha, Mt. Fuji, sushi!"

It seemed the residents had been lying in wait on the other side of the door with party poppers in hand. Standing in a line, they called out in clumsy Japanese and set off another round of party poppers at fairly close range.

"Oi, you dolts! You're going to scare my nephew!"

Wataru immediately hollered at them in English. He had heard they were planning a surprise welcome party, but he should have known they would take it too far. Startled, Akira stood rooted to the spot. The streamers hanging all over his head made him look a bit like a rainbow-colored mummy.

"...Um. Nice to meet you, I'm Akira Takatsuki. Thank you for the kind welcome," Akira replied in English, pulling streamers from his hair.

He was actually quite fluent in English. It didn't seem like he would have issues with everyday conversation, at least.

While he had them all lined up in front of the door, Wataru decided to introduce his tenants.

"Akira, these people are my family now. Let's go down the line, I suppose—that's Emma. She works at a local bakery and is aiming to become a baker herself."

"How d'you do, Akira? Looking forward to getting to know you!" Emma said, giving Akira a light hug.

Their resident Brit, Emma, had fiery red hair, green eyes, and was twenty-four years old. Quite dazzlingly pretty, Emma was covered in freckles and always smelled of freshly baked bread.

"Next to her is Richart. He works as a counselor in London."

"Hello, Akira! It would have been nice if you were a girl, but oh well!"

Richart hugged Akira, too. Thirty-two-year-old Richart was a slender French man with blue eyes and slightly longer blond hair. When Wataru had announced he would be taking in the child of a relative, Richart had very persistently asked whether the child was a girl and if she was cute, but had immediately calmed down upon learning Akira was a boy. Richart was that sort of guy.

"Last is Arnav. He works in London at an IT company. If you have any sort of computer problem, go to him. He can help with most anything."

"Nice to meet you, Akira. I'm sure we'll be great friends," Arnav said, shaking Akira's hand.

At thirty-four, with brown skin and dark eyes, Indian-born Arnav was probably the most well-behaved person in the complex. He had a serious personality and a somewhat stiff manner of speaking, but he was also incredibly kind.

"Okay, now that we've exchanged hellos, it's surprise party time!" Richart declared, urging Akira toward the living room with a light shove to his back.

The living room had been decorated as though they were throwing a birthday party for a toddler. Star-and heart-shaped balloons had been tied here and there, and a triangular banner with the word WELCOME emblazoned across it hung from the ceiling. Akira laughed happily and let out a "wow!" when he saw it.

Just then, they heard—arf!

The sound—two different dogs, taking turns to bark—was coming from behind a door at the back of the living room.

Akira's eyes lit up again.

"Are there dogs here?!"

"Oh, merde, they were getting in the way of decorating, so I shut them in Wataru's room. We'd better let them out."

Richart went over to open the bedroom door. Two big dogs—one black, one white, both floppy-eared—came bounding through it. A vet had said they were probably retriever mixes, but it was hard to be sure because the dogs were both rescues.

"They're so cute! Uncle, what are their names?"

"The black one is Lobo. The white one is Blanca."

"Like from Seton's Animal Chronicles!"

"That's right. I'm fond of *Lobo, the King of Currumpaw*. Unfortunately, however, Blanca is the brighter one in this household."

The two dogs sniffed all around Akira to get an idea of his scent, seemed to deem him not a threat, and began circling him while barking excitedly. Smiling, Akira reached out to pet them. Apparently he liked dogs, which was yet another aspect of living together that Wataru could now rest easy about. He had been worrying to himself what he would do if his nephew didn't like dogs.

"By the way, Wataru," Emma said, "what's for supper? I baked an apple pie since you asked me to handle dessert, but I'm rather sure it's your turn to cook. Are you going to start now? Or are you thinking of going out to eat tonight?"

"Ah, about that. Akira—listen up for a moment."

Akira was still preoccupied with the dogs, but Wataru got his attention.

"Yes, Uncle?"

"As long as you live in this building, there is one rule you absolutely must abide by."

Akira's eyes went wide at his uncle's grave tone, which made Richart laugh and pat him on the back.

"It's nothing to worry about—just that we all eat supper together unless someone has a date or something! Each unit has a kitchen, but Wataru's is the biggest and nicest, so we make and eat supper down here on the first floor. It's more fun that way, don't you think?"

"We take turns cooking. Oh, but someone else will take over if you've got some other engagement on your night."

"Advance notice is appreciated, however. Unless it's an emergency, you should let everyone know by the day before."

Emma and Arnav added those clarifications, and Akira scratched his head with a somewhat awkward smile on his face.

"I haven't really done much cooking before, though. I don't know if I can."

"In that case," Wataru replied, "you can learn by helping others cook. Remember, food is the foundation of everything. Humans can't live without it, and a delicious meal is sure to bring people joy. So—it's my turn to cook tonight. Akira, did you remember to bring the goods I asked for?"

Akira looked puzzled for a moment before he said, "Oh, you mean the instant ramen? I heard you asked if some could be sent with me."

"Yes, that's the stuff. It's quite a hassle to find here."

"...Does making instant ramen count as cooking?"

"Oh-ho. Was that a dig at me just now? Don't turn your nose up at Japan's instant ramen! It's extremely delicious! I make it with vegetables and corn and butter and meat. You should try it. I'm certain you'll be hooked."

"I am interested in trying it, but...um, Uncle?"

"What is it, lad?"

"The ramen was in one of the boxes sent by the courier... I'm not sure I know which box, though."

"Pardon?"

Unconsciously, they all cast their gazes toward the ceiling.

Quite a few boxes had been delivered, and if memory served, they were all rather large.

"... A treasure hunt," said Arnav, quietly.

Everyone—save for Akira—nodded and started for the stairs.

Flustered, Akira chased after them.

"W-wait, we're going to open the boxes now? Together? But my underwear and stuff are in there?!"

"Sorry, Akira! I'd like to respect your privacy, but I also quite enjoy Wataru's special ramen!"

"Ooh, don't tell me you brought some Japanese porn with you? Let me take a look later! I'll show you my stash, too."

"If there's something you don't want us to see, just say so in advance. I'll close my eyes."

"No, um! Hold on! There's no porn, but! But still!"

The adults surged noisily into Akira's flat with the anxious boy on their heels. Apparently adolescent boys didn't want people to see their underclothes and whatnot, but since they would be living together from now on, worrying about such things was pointless. Akira bustled around saying things like "That's my winter wardrobe" and "Those are study aids" and "Not those briefs! Stop it!" while the rest of them started opening boxes at random of their own accord and rummaging through the contents. Lobo and Blanca followed in the boy's wake, barking up a storm.

The room that had been so neatly prepared for Akira's arrival devolved into utter chaos in minutes, and Emma got a thorough look at all of Akira's underwear, but in the end the ramen was safely unearthed. They ate it together, and it was delicious. Everyone also offered to help Akira put his room back in order, incidentally, but he turned them down with a smile. In that respect, after all, he was a teenager.

Late that evening, Wataru called Akira's father.

"Akira made it here safely. He seems to be adjusting well to the flat."

"...I see. Thank you. He's in your hands now."

The almost stoic way Tomoaki said those words touched a bit of a nerve in Wataru. He wanted to give the man a dressing-down for having so heartlessly cast such a good kid out of the house and shipping him overseas to live with a

relative.

"Hey, Tomoaki?"

"Hmm?"

"Akira doesn't seem particularly troubled to me."

On the other end of the line, his brother-in-law went silent. Unconcerned, Wataru barreled on.

"In any case, I suppose Father gave the order, did he? To send Akira here."

By Wataru's estimation, this whole thing had to be his father's—Akira's grandfather's—suggestion.

He had heard that his older sister had become quite mentally unwell after Akira's kidnapping incident. Unlike Wataru, meek and outstanding Sayaka had always been doted on by their father. She had likely already been dating Tomoaki when her leg injury had resulted in her retirement from ballet. He'd been a prospective marriage partner selected by her parents, but Sayaka had fallen for Tomoaki readily.

Wataru was sure his father must have been satisfied with Akira, too. The boy had a good disposition and excellent grades. He had probably been the old man's target for future successor. Sayaka had even said once that their father was quite partial to her son.

But the kidnapping had changed everything. There was no going back.

"That's how much the old geezer cares about Sayaka, eh? Even more than for his grandson."

Sayaka's illness, Wataru had been told, had been caused by the circumstances of Akira's return. His sister had always been rather opinionated, but apparently she was utterly convinced that Akira had been kidnapped by *tengu* and had tried to turn him into some sort of deity because of it.

But Sayaka was the one with the problem, wasn't she?

It wasn't as though Akira was to blame.

"Listen, Tomoaki. Don't you think Father made a mistake ...? Choosing to

protect his mentally unwell daughter and sending his grandson, who could have become an exceptional successor, out of the country? I think so, at least."

For a while, out of sight through the phone, Tomoaki said nothing.

Then Wataru heard a faint sigh, followed by:

"-You're wrong."

"Huh?"

"The decision to send Akira away...was mine."

Wataru's eyes widened.

"...Why?"

"Keeping him here any longer wouldn't have been good for him. And..."

Tomoaki paused briefly. There was more silence.

Summoning all his patience, Wataru waited for his brother-in-law to continue.

"...And...to be honest, that boy...he scares me, too."

"What did you say?"

Wataru could not believe his ears.

"What about him could you possibly be afraid of? He's such a good kid."

Tomoaki's response was vague.

"—You'll understand sooner or later."

Akira arrived in England at the end of March. He'd graduated from a junior high school in Japan, and arrangements had already been made for him to attend a school in London.

But school in the UK didn't start until September. There was nothing for Akira to do but try to use those six months to become acclimated to the country.

Sometimes, Wataru would have to leave home for days at a time to buy antiques, but everyone else in the apartment block looked after Akira while he was gone. All of them, including the dogs, seemed to have taken a quick liking to him and made a group effort to dote on him.

The building's only rule was that they had dinner as a group.

Gathered in Wataru's large dining room, they all put their hands together in the Japanese style and said "itadakimasu" before eating. The menu frequently consisted of whatever dishes the chef on duty that evening liked best or was good at—in other words, it was usually someone's national cuisine. In Emma's case, it was cottage pie and herb-roasted bone-in lamb chops; pot-au-feu and cassoulet for Richart; various curries for Arnav; and nikujaga and different types of noodles for Wataru. Akira helped with meal prep every day. Unable to make so much as a soup at first, in no time Akira could bake bread and cook pot-au-feu and curry all by himself.

For the life of him, Wataru could not figure out why Tomoaki was afraid of the boy.

Surrounded by the other residents, Akira was always smiling. Never selfish or rebellious, he was mild-mannered, good-natured, and caused no trouble at all.

"... I guess sending Akira to England was the right choice."

One night, after his nephew had gone to bed, Wataru said those words to Emma over a glass of wine.

"He spends every day without worry and truly enjoys his life here. I'm glad I took him in. Well—living under the same roof as and being fussed over by a woman this charming and beautiful, any boy would be happy."

Wataru scooped up a lock of Emma's bright-red hair and winked at her.

But for some reason, Emma's face darkened a little.

"...About that, actually. There's something that's been bothering me for a while."

"Something bothering you?"

"That boy, he's a bit odd, isn't he?" Emma said, swirling wine around in her glass.

Wataru stared at her, bewildered.

"What do you mean, 'odd'? Emma, you aren't seriously going to tell me you're afraid of Akira or some such nonsense?"

"It's not that I'm afraid of him. But you don't think it's weird, Wataru? A boy his age always smiling, never getting homesick?"

"Emma, that's... I told you, Akira was having problems at home."

"Yes, I remember that. But, Wataru, have you ever seen Akira cry or get angry even once?"

"-What?"

He only realized it the moment the words fell from Emma's mouth.

It was true—Wataru could not remember seeing anything other than a smile on the boy's face since his arrival. There were variations in the smile, naturally. One for when he thought something was funny, one for when he was happy, one for when he felt a little awkward, and so on.

"Well, but—always smiling is a hell of a lot more preferable to crying all the time, don't you think? Maybe he's just having that much fun every day."

"Mmm, I suppose that could be it," she replied, shrugging a little.

Not even Emma seemed to think it was something to be seriously concerned about.

Nevertheless—Akira wasn't entirely without problems, truth be told.

Akira cried out a lot in his sleep.

It was only by chance that Wataru noticed.

They didn't sleep on the same floor, after all. Normally, he was none the wiser.

Coming home late one night, Wataru saw there was a light still on in Akira's room and went to check on him. He tried calling out to see if the boy was still awake but found his nephew asleep in bed, apparently having just forgotten to turn the lamp near his window off.

Wataru switched off the lamp and crept quietly toward the door to leave—and that was when Akira started moaning.

He threw his duvet off and curled in as though trying to hold himself, murmuring incoherently. When the babbling began to sound like *stop*, *no*, and

please help me, Wataru rushed to shake him awake.

Sitting up with a start, Akira looked at his uncle, his face pale.

"...I'm sorry. Was I talking in my sleep? It must have been loud."

Akira smiled apologetically, and Wataru found himself unable to ask what he had been dreaming about. *Even now*, he thought, *he's smiling*. An awful sadness filled Wataru's chest.

"Do you think you can get back to sleep? If not, you could sit up talking with me until morning."

"...Could I use your study instead? I'd like to read a book."

Such times often led to Akira shutting himself in Wataru's study with Lobo and Blanca.

More than half the books in the study were in English, so Wataru had offered to loan him a dictionary, too, but Akira had said he didn't need one. Before coming to England, he explained, he had memorized an English-Japanese dictionary, a Japanese-English dictionary, and an English-English dictionary. When Wataru asked how he could memorize things like that, Akira had laughed and said, "I have a slightly better memory than other people."

Many times, when he peeked into the study in the morning, Wataru had found Akira asleep on the floor with the dogs. The sight was undoubtedly cute—it was like there were three dogs cuddled up—but he didn't want his nephew to catch a cold or wake up in pain. There was nothing for it but to spread a blanket out on the floor of the study in advance. Once Wataru did that, Akira began wrapping himself up in the blanket of his own volition when he got sleepy. It was important to prepare for potentialities when possible.

But if Akira was crying out in his sleep like that, wasn't that proof that he was shouldering some kind of mental burden?

Luckily, Richart was a counselor. Mental and emotional issues were his area of expertise. Wataru got Akira to try counseling sessions with him...but it was unclear whether this was actually effective or not.

One day, Wataru asked Akira what he and Richart had talked about when the

boy came home from a session.

"Hmmm... Well, he pretty much only asked about my love life," Akira answered, head cocked to the side.

Later on, Wataru made sure to knock Richart over the head for his trouble.

Eventually, September came, and Akira started attending school in London.

With his English ability, he wouldn't have any problems studying or holding a conversation, but the building residents grew worried when they heard Akira was the only Japanese student at the school.

Shortly after term began, Richart asked Akira over dinner, "No one's bullying you, right? If they are, make sure you tell me, yes? I'll treat them to some therapy known as a thorough talking-to."

"There's no one bullying me right now," Akira said, smiling wryly. "It's okay."

Arnav was in charge of supper that day and had cooked them a fish curry. As Akira was bringing a bite of fish to his mouth, he made a face as though something had just occurred to him.

"—Oh, hey, what's a 'changeling'? The dictionary said it's 'a grotesque child left behind by fairies as a replacement for a child they've kidnapped,' but I don't really understand what that means."

Emma looked bewildered by his sudden inquiry.

"Where did you hear that word, Akira?"

"At school. There's a kid who gets called that."

"Huh?"

"He lives in this neighborhood. We ride the same bus home a lot. His name is John Harker."

The adults at the table exchanged looks, but none of them seemed to recognize the name. The area wasn't very large, but they still couldn't be expected to know everyone who lived there.

"Akira," Emma said, "changelings come from old Irish folktales. Fairies would lure human children away to their world and leave other fairies behind as

substitutes. Those substitutes were called 'changelings.' Oftentimes they were said to have rather ugly faces that looked nothing like the child they were meant to replace."

"...So then, fairies kidnap children in this country, too?"

Akira paused with his spoon halfway to his mouth.

Emma nodded.

"That's right. When people went missing here, their disappearances would get blamed on fairies a lot of the time. People would say they got stolen away by the fae or lured into the fae world, that sort of thing. Those are just silly old stories, though."

"Hmm... I see," Akira said, eyes cast slightly downward.

Beneath his long eyelashes, Wataru noticed the boy's eyes were suddenly tinged with blue.

"Akira?" he asked, startled.

With a little jerk, Akira looked up at his uncle. Already, a placating smile was blooming over his face. His eyes were their usual dark brown.

"I think John gets bullied by the other kids. Maybe that's why they call him a weird nickname like that... I was thinking of becoming John's friend."

"Ah, that's a nice idea, Akira," Arnav commended him, as serious as always. Akira chuckled, bashful.

None of the other residents seemed to have noticed his eyes. Wataru paid careful attention to them for a little while after that, but nothing strange happened. Perhaps it had just been a trick of the light.

Akira really did seem to become close with John after that day. His name came up frequently when anyone asked Akira how things were going at school.

It was nice to see Akira make a friend, but Richart soon had new worries.

"That boy John gets bullied, non? Is Akira going to be okay? What if they start bullying him, too, because of it? He must already stick out at school since he's Japanese."

Ending up with a target painted on one's back for standing up for another kid was definitely not unheard of.

But Wataru couldn't encourage Akira to stop associating with the friend he had taken such pains to make. Richart advised everyone to keep an eye on the situation for a little while, so they started casually checking Akira's clothing and belongings for stains every day when he came home.

Akira, however, went to and from school with a smile on his face, day in and day out, giving no indication at all that anything troublesome was going on.

The sense that everything seemed okay gave them all some relief, but—it was also naive.

One day, Wataru got a call from the school while he was at work.

Telling him an incident involving Akira had occurred, the school asked Wataru to come by. Leaving his work to someone else, Wataru rushed there as quickly as he could.

Classes had been dismissed for the day when he arrived. He found Akira sitting in an empty classroom, an apologetic smile on his face, accompanied only by a scowling male teacher standing at his side.

"...I'm sorry for causing you trouble, Uncle."

"Akira, what the devil happened? Are you hurt anywhere, or—"

"—It was other students who were injured," the teacher cut in.

Akira looked down, a tinge of shame in his expression.

Learning that his nephew had injured other kids caught Wataru by surprise.

"What happened?"

"Well—"

Frowning, the teacher explained.

A certain group of students had apparently had their eyes on Akira for a while. They were overly interested in him, for some reason, and thought it suspicious that Akira always changed into and out of his gym clothes in a separate room. So, apparently, they had attempted to force Akira out of his

clothes.

Wataru was completely distraught. The school had been informed of the scars on Akira's back and been asked to make accommodations for him in advance, but it seemed that had backfired.

"So he fought back against the kids trying to undress him, and they were injured?"

"Correct. He picked up a broken broom handle from nearby and beat them all down in seconds. They sustained minor injuries to their foreheads and shoulders and such."

I see, Wataru thought.

This sort of thing was common—when students fought, whichever side caused injury to the other got the blame, regardless of why the fight had happened. The ones who'd caused this incident had lost the scuffle. Wataru having been called to the school probably meant he was being held responsible, as Akira's guardian.

"I see," Wataru said. "I understand now. Akira—stand up."

Obediently, Akira got to his feet. Putting a hand on the boy's shoulder, Wataru looked at his teacher.

"From what I've heard, the other students are at fault here, no matter how you look at it. If you're going to lecture anyone, it should be them. I'm taking Akira home."

Akira looked up at Wataru in surprise. Maybe he had expected to be reprimanded. Pushing the boy gently toward the door, Wataru made to leave the classroom.

But then—

"I already gave the other students quite the stern talking-to."

"...Pardon?"

Without thinking, Wataru froze and looked over his shoulder.

The teacher continued, his expression as sour as ever.

"I invited you here today because I wanted to apologize for having overlooked their inappropriate behavior until now. Mr. Takatsuki might have been a little excessive in his actions, but I deemed it to be an unavoidable use of self-defense in a one-against-many situation. I am committed to preventing such incidents in the future."

Wataru stared at the frowning teacher, a little bemused.

Evidently, the displeased look on the man's face was just his default expression.

As he stepped outside the school with Akira, Wataru couldn't help the sigh that escaped him.

"Phew, that was stressful... So this is how parents feel after being called to school."

"I'm sorry, Uncle. I didn't mean to scare you," Akira said, his voice apologetic again.

Wataru ruffled the boy's hair.

"Oh no, don't worry about it. My parents got some summons on account of me, too. I was quite the troublemaker in elementary school and junior high."

"Did you settle down during high school?"

"—I take it you don't know why I've got a bad leg?"

"No, no one's ever told me."

"On my sixteenth birthday, I skipped school to go get my motorcycle license. The very same day, I bought a bike, caused an accident, and ended up with a comminuted fracture. My father was livid... That was probably the thing that made him finally give up on me."

Akira burst into a small laugh at Wataru's smirk.

"You really were a bad kid, Uncle."

"Indeed! And you'd better not follow in my footsteps, you hear?"

"Well, I'd rather not have a comminuted fracture," Akira said, glancing at his uncle's leg. "It seems painful."

Wataru glanced back at the school, recalling the face of Akira's teacher. The man looked mean, but he was a first-class educator. It seemed his nephew had managed to enroll in quite a good school.

Now that he had calmed down, he scratched his head a little, finding it almost humorous how he had abandoned work to practically fly here. He hadn't ever thought of himself as the type to do something like that. He was supposed to be the type to toss aside anything troublesome or annoying. A tad uncomfortable, Wataru wondered if this was what it felt like to have a son. He wasn't even married.

"By the way, Akira... You were being bullied, after all. Why didn't you say anything?"

"It wasn't really bullying," the boy replied, giving a slightly embarrassed smile. "I guess they thought the reason I don't change in front of people is that I have a tattoo of falling cherry blossoms somewhere. Do they broadcast Japanese historical dramas here, too?"

"So it would seem... Akira, if you don't want to go to school, you can quit."

"I'm fine, Uncle. You're just overprotective."

Akira giggled.

Looking at him, Wataru realized Akira probably wouldn't say anything even if the bullying continued.

Perhaps this was what Emma had been concerned about. All Akira did was smile. He seemed determined to hide behind a smile, even in the worst scenario. He probably thought of it as trying not to cause anyone trouble or make them worry, but the result was that, by extension, he wouldn't turn to anyone for help. It made Wataru feel a little desolate. The adults in his life would have to keep being vigilant for a while after all.

Wataru went to pat Akira's hair again, when just overhead, he heard the sound of wings flapping.

Looking up, he saw a flock of doves taking off from behind a nearby building and heading for the roof of church a bit farther away. Wataru often thought European townscapes were suited to flocks of doves. Birds flitting through the spires and triangular roofs always made for quite the nice picture.

Wataru's musings were cut short by something colliding with him.

It was Akira.

"...Akira? Hey, what's wrong?!"

His face pale, Akira had collapsed against Wataru as if he had tripped over his own feet or something. Letting go of his cane to support his nephew's delicate frame with both arms, Wataru called his name over and over. There was no response. Passersby stopped to ask if everything was all right, alarm in their eyes, but it was clear to Wataru that Akira was *not* all right.

He asked someone to call an ambulance. Akira still hadn't regained consciousness by the time they got to the hospital.

He was examined as thoroughly as possible, but all the doctors could do was shake their heads. There was nothing obviously wrong with him, so their best guess was that it was "psychogenic pseudosyncope." Wataru was told Akira could rest there until he woke up, at which point it would be okay to take him home.

Standing beside the hospital bed and looking down at Akira, Wataru heaved a sigh.

What the hell is psychogenic pseudosyncope? he thought.

If he tried hard enough, he thought he recalled Tomoaki saying something like "don't show him any birds" before Akira had come to England, but it was hard to believe the boy could end up in this state just from seeing a bird. In the bed, Akira was too quiet, too still. So much so that Wataru started to worry he might die. The doctors had said he was fine, but the sight of his pale face made Wataru think the tests had to have been wrong somehow.

What would he do if Akira died like this?

Was he supposed to contact Akira's parents?

When hospital staff asked what Wataru's relationship was to the patient and he'd answered "I'm his uncle," they'd responded with, "Where are his parents?" It was a natural thing to ask. When something happened to a child,

the first order of business was contacting their parents. The ones who should have been standing at Akira's side now were his mother and father, not his uncle. Wataru knew that.

He knew that, and yet...a not-insignificant part of him felt like he'd just been punched in the gut.

"...Damn it."

How foolish that only a short while ago he'd been entertaining the idea that he had become like Akira's father.

What they were doing was nothing more than playing pretend at being a family, he knew.

But what choice did they have?

After all, Akira's real parents had thrown him away.

Wataru turned his gaze back to his nephew.

"...Akira?"

At some point while he wasn't paying attention, Akira had opened his eyes. He'd regained consciousness.

Thank goodness, Wataru thought, opening his mouth to say something—and freezing with a jolt.

Akira's eyes had changed color.

Usually the dark brown typical of many Japanese people, right then, those eyes were deep blue—no, they looked like they had been dyed in indigo. They weren't the blue eyes of a Westerner. Wataru had never seen anyone with eyes like this before—eyes so profoundly deep and dark that they looked like they had been cut right out of the night sky.

Ever so slowly, Akira's gaze shifted toward him.

... Who the hell is this? Wataru thought.

There was neither the ghost of a smile on those lips, nor even the slightest hint of warmth in that gaze. Akira was always as affable as a puppy around company, but in that moment, his face was completely devoid of emotion. It made it much easier to see just how startlingly symmetrical his features were.

Akira sat up. Wataru let out a short, unintentional gasp merely from the relief of no longer having those eyes on him. Being pinned under that gaze had made his blood run cold, like he'd caught a chill.

But—it wasn't a chill he was feeling.

It was fear—the kind of fear a person feels when they cross paths with a being entirely alien to them.

Looking toward the window, Akira spoke.

"Is this—totsukuni?"

"What ...?"

Wataru's brow furrowed. Akira always spoke Japanese when he and Wataru were alone but switched to English in front of others. What he had just said was in Japanese, but it didn't sound like the kind of Japanese Wataru was used to hearing. "Totsukuni"? It took a few seconds for his brain—which had been fairly distanced from Japanese for a long time—to convert those sounds into their kanji. Totsukuni—a foreign land. Undeniably, the word had been said in Akira's voice, and yet, with all the feeling and inflection absent from his tone, he'd sounded like someone else entirely.

Getting up from the bed without making so much as a rustling sound, Akira walked over to the window and spoke again.

"Akira—has been cast off?"

"Cast off?" Wataru echoed instinctively.

Expressionless, Akira looked back at him for a moment before turning abruptly back to the window.

"Unwanted things are cast off. Abandoned. Thrown away. It has been so since the days of Hiruko and Awashima."

Wataru had heard those names before, he thought. Hiruko, Awashima, cast off... The connection between those three terms surfaced in his head with a passage from the *Kojiki* that he had read years ago. It was from the story of Japan's creation by the gods Izanagi and Izanami. The first two children of their

union, the failed divine beings, Hiruko and Awashima. If memory served, Izanagi and Izanami had put the two children in a boat—and set them adrift at sea.

Akira flung the window open wide.

It was a large window, and its opening was followed by a rush of wind and sounds from outside. The hospital faced a major road. The hustle and bustle of city streets flowed in—people talking, music playing somewhere, engines running, car horns—all seeming to come from below. Wataru couldn't remember what floor of the hospital they were on.

"If you do not want him, we will have him," Akira said calmly, facing the open window. "We will take Akira—he can return to us once more."

Akira leaped onto the windowsill effortlessly, like he weighed nothing at all.

Wataru shot forward at once, arms extended. His right leg buckled, unable to handle the sudden movement, but he barely noticed.

Grabbing ahold of the back of Akira's shirt, Wataru hauled him backward with all his might just as it seemed like the boy would throw himself from the window.

Falling back into Wataru's arms, Akira looked up at him with his indigo gaze.

Wataru stared right into those eyes and said, "He's not unwanted."

Unable to shake the feeling that he was addressing some other being, Wataru threw that word back at it. Something that looked like the twinkling of an actual star deep within those night-sky eyes sent another chill down his spine.

Wataru forced himself not to look away.

"I won't give him to you... Akira is my precious nephew."

Akira continued to stare fixedly, and then at last, just once—he blinked.

The blue bled out of his eyes in moments, leaving his usual dark brown behind.

"...Huh? Uncle? What happened?"

The puzzled face looking up at Wataru then belonged to the Akira he knew.

Behind him, the door to the hospital room opened with a clatter. Emma,

Richart, and Arnav dashed inside, calling out in alarm, but Wataru could not answer them. He couldn't even turn his head.

Without a word, he pulled Akira's slight form into his arms. He felt Akira squirm a little in surprise but refused to loosen his grip.

Afraid that if he let go, that indigo-eyed Akira would come back and steal this one away from him at any time, Wataru could only hold on.

Later, when asked, Akira told his uncle that his memory cut off right after he'd seen the flock of doves. He had no recollection whatsoever of the conversation he'd had with Wataru immediately after waking up. He did, however, seem to sense from Wataru's demeanor that he had behaved strangely.

"Um...I'm sorry, Uncle. I was probably still half asleep or something," Akira said, flashing an evasive grin, but it was obvious that even he didn't buy his own explanation.

Wataru decided to consult Richart's expertise and asked if Richart thought Akira's conduct pointed to a split personality. But as Richart reminded him, dissociative identity disorder, as it was properly known, could not make someone's eye color shift.

He thought of calling Tomoaki, but quickly rejected the idea. He got the feeling his brother-in-law also had no clue what that *other* Akira was.

After the incident, Akira continued to attend school regularly without displaying any especially unusual mannerisms.

The bullying episode still weighing on his mind, Wataru rang Akira's teacher to ask about the state of things.

To his surprise, the teacher replied, "Mister Takatsuki is rather popular at school now."

Apparently, the way Akira had defeated a group of bullies in a matter of seconds with only a wooden stick had reminded the other students of a samurai or a ninja, and they had started calling him "Samurai Boy" as a sign of respect... Children, Wataru supposed, were just uncomplicated that way.

Despite his increase in popularity, Akira continued to spend time with the boy

named John.

Since they lived in the same neighborhood, they started commuting to and from school together. Thinking of what could happen if Akira were to encounter a bird while out by himself—if he lost consciousness somewhere unfamiliar and no one were to see—Wataru was just relieved there was someone with him.

Akira brought John to the apartment block a few times.

John had messy red hair and blue eyes. The way he looked furtively up at others and didn't say much made it fairly easy to recognize him as a child who was frequently bullied.

For all that, however, he wasn't a bad child by any means. He even once apologized to Wataru, claiming it was his fault Akira had been bullied.

It happened one evening after John had joined them for supper. Wataru was driving John home; Akira had stayed behind.

"...Why does Akira care about me?" John murmured from the back seat, staring out the window. "He got bullied for hanging out with someone like me... I'm sorry. He went through that because of me. It was my fault."

"That is not something for you to worry over. You aren't to blame," Wataru said.

In the rearview mirror, he noticed John's gaze flicker in his direction. The boy's big blue eyes were filled with tears.

"...Speaking of," Wataru continued, "are you still being harassed?"

"No... It seems like nobody wants to do anything to me because I've got 'Samurai Boy' by my side."

"I see. Akira is a dashing lad, isn't he?"

"But he should be friends with other kids—not me, the 'changeling.' With the popular kids, you know? I think that lot actually do try to invite him to join them all the time. He's smart and popular with girls... I dunno why he wastes his time on me."

John stared out the window again. His words were pretty obsequious, but his confusion sounded genuine.

The reason John had been labeled a changeling became obvious the moment they arrived at his house.

He looked nothing like his parents.

His mother was a blond woman with green eyes. His father, possibly of Middle Eastern descent, had black hair and tan skin.

"Thank you for taking the trouble to bring him home," his mother said, her tone somewhat cold and stiff. Her demeanor was rather unfriendly, too; immediately after thanking Wataru, she disappeared back into the house.

Ah, I see, Wataru thought. This boy doesn't get shown much love.

"Well, John, see you soon, eh?" he said, patting the boy lightly on the head.

John, however, said nothing. He was staring across the street.

For a second, Wataru thought he might have been rattled by his mother's attitude—but that wasn't it.

Following John's gaze, he saw a man standing on the other side of the road. Wataru frowned.

The man had red hair and was wearing sunglasses despite the fact that it was already getting dark. He seemed to be attempting to hide his face behind the upturned collar of his gray coat. Standing with his legs slightly apart, the man just stared at them.

"Do you know him?" Wataru asked, looking at John.

John shook his head minutely from side to side, not taking his eyes off the man.

Then John's mother poked her head out of the house again.

"John, what are you doing? Come inside already... John?"

She turned her questioning gaze in the direction John was looking.

The next second, she let out a faint gasp.

"—John, inside. Now."

Voice severe, she started ushering her son inside. John seemed reluctant to

obey, his attention still across the street, but his mother was relentless. Ultimately, he gave up and went in.

John's mother gave Wataru, who was still standing near her front door, a brief nod before practically running back into the house.

Wataru watched them go before looking toward the man in the gray coat again—but there was no one there.

Even though Wataru was certain he couldn't have been looking elsewhere for more than a few seconds, the man had vanished like he was never there to begin with.

Back at his flat, Wataru found Akira in his study with Lobo and Blanca. He was settled on the blanket his uncle had laid out for him, one dog on each side, reading an old book.

The book, titled Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry, was one Wataru had just recently purchased from a secondhand bookseller. It was a collection of stories and poems about fairies and such, compiled in Ireland by renowned poet W. B. Yeats. Having already made his way through nearly every book in the study, Akira always noticed right away when Wataru added something to his collection.

"Welcome back, Uncle. Thank you for bringing John home."

Akira looked up from the page he was reading to smile at his uncle. The dogs barked their greetings to him as well.

Wataru gestured to the book. "Is that interesting?"

"Yeah... It's a little scary, though."

Wataru had bought the book because he thought it might end up being useful to his work. The antiques he dealt with sometimes had mythological or fairy-tale motifs, so being knowledgeable about such topics wasn't a bad idea.

The fact that there was a section of the book called "Changelings" had played a part in the decision to buy it, too.

Sitting himself down next to Akira, Wataru looked at the page the book was open to—which just happened to be the preface to the "Changelings" section.

The page described a method for identifying a changeling that involved placing the child in question in a lit fireplace and chanting a spell. If it was a changeling, the book said, it would "rush up the chimney with a cry."

"...So what would happen if someone did this and it wasn't a changeling, just their actual child?"

"The child would suffer some serious burns, I'm sure."

"That's cruel... To go that far because they want to know whether it's their own child so badly..."

Akira closed the book with a whisper.

To some extent, Wataru had a feeling he knew why his nephew spent time with John.

Akira probably saw himself in the boy everyone called "changeling."

In Irish legend, fairies stole human children and left impostors in their place.

Someone had once kidnapped Akira in Japan, and after he'd returned, his own mother insisted he was not her child.

Wataru didn't think John had ever been abducted, but the relationship between him and his mother was one Akira could easily sympathize with.

Announcing he was going to bed, Akira stood up. He patted the dogs good night and started to leave the study.

Then, stopping in the doorway, he turned his head just a little to speak over his shoulder.

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"Uncle—about John."
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"Hmm?"

"He told me yesterday that he really is a fairy changeling."

"...Come again?"

"He said they were coming tomorrow to take him back to the world of the fae. That we'd have to say our good-byes."

Eyes downcast, Akira spoke in a rather level tone.

"Akira..."

"The fairies are coming to pick him up. I'm a little jealous."

"Akira."

Looking up at the sound of his name, Akira smiled brightly at Wataru.

"Sorry, I'm talking nonsense... Anyway, I'm off to bed. Good night."

The very next evening, Akira disappeared.

He hadn't shown up on the first floor when it was time to prepare dinner, so Arnav had trekked upstairs to check on him. When he came back down, ashenfaced, it was to tell them Akira was gone.

Akira had never failed to inform someone before leaving the apartment block. It sent the rest of the residents into a panic. No closer to locating him after phoning everyone who came to mind, Richart insisted they have Lobo and Blanca sniff Akira's clothing to track him.

"But they haven't been trained to do that... I don't think it's possible."

"How will we know unless we try?! Let them smell his socks or something!"

With no better options in mind, Wataru fished one of his nephew's undershirts out of the laundry and held it up to the dogs' noses, who gave it an eager and thorough sniffing.

"Lobo, Blanca! Where's Akira? Think you can find him?"

The dogs barked simultaneously in response to Richart before running straight for the front door. Everyone hurried to chase after them, but Wataru's bad leg would not allow him to maintain speed for long at all.

"Just go!" he yelled. "Call me if you find him!"

Just barely keeping pace with Lobo and Blanca, Richart and Arnav shouted back in understanding. Staggering to the side of the road, Wataru leaned heavily on his cane, cursing and striking his right leg with his fist. How hateful that, though it had been his own foolishness that had earned him this injury, he could not escape it by his own will.

Out of nowhere, a motorcycle came up from behind Wataru, stopping

diagonally in front of him.

The person sitting astride the bike was a beautiful, red-haired woman.

"I went to borrow this from the bakery manager! Hop on!"

It was Emma.

"Emma?! I didn't know you could ride a motorcycle!"

"I never said," she answered, grinning. "You know, when I lived out in the country, they used to call me 'Red Rocket'!"

Wataru straddled the bike's rear seat and wrapped his arms around Emma's waist. The scent of freshly baked bread tickled his nose.

The bike roared to life, and they took off in search of the others. Turning a corner, they spotted the running forms of two dogs and two men in the distance. Richart was starting to fall behind. Pulling the motorcycle even with him, Emma hollered, "You got this, mate!" A gasping, puffing Richart breathlessly called back with, "Not...fair!" Arnav, meanwhile, sprinted down the sidewalk after Lobo and Blanca at a steady speed, his breathing even.

Their group made for an incredible procession: Two dogs, one black and one white, seemingly racing one another. An Indian man with the form of an athlete, hot on their heels. A winded Frenchman tottering behind them at an ever-growing distance. And, tearing through the street alongside them, a redheaded Englishwoman on a motorbike, and a Japanese man with a cane tucked under one arm clinging to her. Passersby stared, craning their necks in obvious curiosity.

The dogs led them to a warehouse-lined street on the edge of town.

The area was desolate, practically deserted, except for a solitary car parked beneath the single illuminated streetlight. Next to the open rear door of the vehicle, there were three people engaged in a struggle. One adult, and two boys —John and Akira.

Akira was attempting to reach John, who was being shoved into the back seat by an adult man.

"Akira! John!" Wataru shouted from the motorbike as the dogs broke into

high-pitched yelps.

The man looked back at them in alarm. Evidently deciding the odds were not in his favor, he rushed around the car to the driver's side door as Akira dragged John out of the back seat. Not a moment later, the car started to take off. The wide-open rear door slammed into Akira, who still had his arms around John, and Wataru watched the two boys crumple to the pavement.

"Akira!"

Emma brought the motorcycle to a quick stop and Wataru practically flew off it in his haste to dismount. He ran for the collapsed boys, Arnav and the dogs close behind.

"Akira, are you hurt?!"

"...No, I'm okay. But why are you here?"

"You can thank Lobo and Blanca for their noses," Arnav replied.

The dogs busied themselves licking all over Akira's face as he remained plopped down in the street. Panting hard, Richart joined them at last, immediately sinking down at Akira's side.

"We should phone the police, right?" Emma asked. After all, they had just witnessed an indisputable attempt at kidnapping.

But Akira objected.

"Don't, Emma... You'd rather not, right? John?"

John sat on Akira's other side, dazed. He turned in surprise at his name, then lowered his gaze to the ground.

"Akira," Wataru spoke up, "what's the meaning of this?"

"Well, I'll explain everything later, okay? Let's just take John home for now."

When they arrived at the Harker home, they found it in a bit of an uproar.

Apparently, John had disappeared from the house after leaving behind a note that said "good-bye." His mother had called the police in a panic, afraid her son had run away or that he intended to harm himself. When Wataru and the others turned up with John safely in tow, they informed the police they had

found him on the outskirts of town. Clearly annoyed by what they saw as a waste of their time, the police left.

"John! Oh, John, I'm so glad you're all right...!"

Her face wet with tears, John's mother pulled him into a hug.

From within the circle of her arms, John looked wildly confused.

"...Er? You...were worried? About me?"

"Of course I was! What the bloody hell were you thinking?!"

Mrs. Harker scolded John and wept at the same time, and John could only stammer in response. He had probably never seen her make that face while yelling at him before.

Recalling her demeanor from the evening before, when he had escorted John home after dinner, even Wataru was a bit surprised. She hadn't seemed like the kind of mother to worry this much over her child.

Then, suddenly and without explanation, Akira looked at Richart and Arnav and said, "Hey, could you do me a favor? Could you take John's father to the pub across the way for a drink?"

"Pardon?"

"Understood."

Richart sounded perplexed, but Arnav merely nodded. He walked over to Mr. Harker, offered to buy him a pint, and steered him out the door toward the nearby pub. John's father also looked bewildered, but with Arnav and Richart each taking him by an arm, he had no choice but to allow himself to be marched out of the house.

Once he had left, Akira approached John and his mother.

"I'd like to explain, Mrs. Harker... Just now, John's biological father came to pick him up."

Mrs. Harker stared at him in shock.

Holding his left arm, Akira continued.

"Two days ago, I saw an unfamiliar man waving to John on our way home

from school. He was trying to obscure his face with his lapels and a hat, but he stood out to me since he wasn't from around here, nor was he someone I had ever seen on our regular commute. I asked John about him later, and he said something about the man 'coming from the land of the fae to pick him up.' That made me realize the man was, as I had suspected, John's biological father."

John's eyes widened in surprise.

"Wait, how could you know that?! He was hiding his face!"

"Because his ears are the exact same shape as yours," Akira answered, tugging on one of his own earlobes with a small smile. "I read once that heredity can be determined by ear shape."

"His ears... But how could you see them from that distance?"

"Ahh, well, my vision is a bit better than the average person's."

Akira's tone was casual. He tilted his head once to the side, then looked back at John's mother.

"Mrs. Harker, I guessed correctly, didn't I? That man—" He glanced in the direction Mr. Harker had gone with Arnav and Richart. "—isn't John's biological father."

Mrs. Harker's eyes followed his. Crestfallen, she nodded.

She turned back to her son. Her voice was hoarse.

"John... You knew?"

"...I didn't know, but...as soon as I saw him, I could tell... He looks like me."

"I see..."

Mrs. Harker buried her face in her hands, then stared once again at the front door.

When she shifted her attention to Akira, there was a wobbly smile on her tearstained face.

"You had him taken out of the house because you knew this conversation was coming."

"I wanted to make it easier on you, even if only a little."

Akira smiled.

Drawing a shaky breath, Mrs. Harker looked at John and started to speak.

"John's father and I dated when we were students."

Though they had certainly been lovers while at school, they'd sort of just stopped seeing one another after graduation.

Then they'd met again by chance after Mrs. Harker was already married.

They'd had a one-night stand, and naturally, John's mother had never told her husband.

She'd realized before long, however, that she was pregnant. Her heart had sunk at first, but there was still a chance the baby was her husband's. She'd gone into labor praying for it to be so—but the baby boy she delivered had looked exactly like her ex and nothing like her husband.

Mr. Harker had been suspicious, but she'd explained things away with a lie about her late grandfather having red hair. At the time, the situation seemed settled, but she could feel a lingering distrust in her husband. With the fear of Mr. Harker discovering her infidelity hanging over her head, Mrs. Harker had felt a coldness growing within her toward her son.

"It wasn't John's fault, I knew that... But every time I looked at him I saw *his* face in my mind... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry...!"

Then, the previous day, when Wataru had brought John home, Mrs. Harker had seen her ex standing across the street.

She knew, instinctively, that he had come for John.

Mrs. Harker had never told him about how she'd given birth to his son, but he must have heard it from someone. They still had friends in common, after all.

When John disappeared with no explanation but for a good-bye note, she'd realized immediately what was going on, but couldn't bring herself to tell her husband or the police. She knew it was the right thing to do, but no matter how hard she tried, Mrs. Harker could not utter the truth she had been hiding since John was born. Instead, she had screamed and wailed about her son running away or trying to harm himself—it didn't matter as long as they found John,

she'd thought.

"But...how were you there just when he tried to take John away?"

"Oh, that's simple," Akira replied, his smile wide. "John told me the fairies were coming for him today, so I hid outside your house and waited."

Knowing the man would wait until after dark to come get John, when they were less likely to be spotted by other people, Akira had staked out the Harker home starting at dusk. When, as expected, John came out of the house, Akira had tailed him.

And then, out in the warehouse district, he'd seen the man sitting in his parked car.

"—I had no intention of interfering if John made it clear he wanted to leave with that man of his own volition."

Still smiling, Akira continued, "The man opened the back door and told John to get in, but just then, John looked unwilling. So I figured he didn't really want to go and stepped in."

Mrs. Harker looked at her son with teary eyes.

"Why did you change your mind?"

John mumbled his answer to the floor. "...Because I felt like...if I got in that car, I'd never be able to come back here again. I got scared... I saw your face in my head."

Kneeling, Mrs. Harker took his downturned face in her hands and gazed up at him.

"But...I...I've never been a good mother to you..."

"..."

John hesitated.

Somewhere in his heart, John had probably started to believe he really was a changeling because he didn't think his mother loved him. Nevertheless— "Well, but..."

Desperately trying to find the words, John opened and closed his mouth

countless times. When he finally spoke again, his answer was exceedingly simple.

He placed a hand gently over one of his mother's.

"...But you're still my mum."

Wailing, Mrs. Harker hugged him close. Wrapped up tight in her arms, John started to cry, too. He raised his arms, returning the embrace with slightly awkward movements. It may very well have been the first time John and his mother had ever held one another like that. Mrs. Harker was still apologizing —"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry for everything, I'm so sorry"—in her tearful voice, but John just shook his head.

"—Uncle."

Watching the two of them, Akira suddenly spoke.

"Let's go home," he said, looking up at Wataru with a smile.

Emma retrieved Richart and Arnav from the pub, and they all went home together. Since it was a bit late to start making dinner, they bought some fish and chips from a shop on the way back to the apartment block.

The trek home was mostly quiet. Only Lobo and Blanca, excited about the oily smell of fried fish, kept up a steady stream of inter-canine communication.

Everyone was thinking about what would become of the Harker family. Mrs. Harker intended to tell her husband the truth; what would he do when he found out? But how things would progress was entirely up to the Harkers, and all anyone else could do was hope the resolution would be even a little bit amicable.

Back at the block of flats, everyone seemed to deflate a little. Starting with the search for Akira, way too many things had just happened. The residents were eager to gather around the dining table, eat a meal together, and get back to normal life.

But as the rest of them headed for Wataru's dining room, Akira alone stayed where he was.

"Akira? What's wrong? Come eat."

"—Ah, um, sorry. I'm just not very hungry for some reason."

As he started walking toward the staircase, he seemed to be holding his left arm gingerly.

"Akira?"

"I guess I'm just tired. I'm just going to go to bed. Good night."

Akira smiled, and he did indeed look exhausted. His complexion was rather pale.

Emma scowled.

"Akira. Akira, wait. Are you—"

Taking several great strides across the room as she called after him, Emma reached out and grabbed Akira's left arm.

His face crumpled at once.

"Ow...!"

"I knew it! Damn it all, you are hurt, aren't you?!"

Emma pushed his left sleeve up. The area just below Akira's elbow was horribly swollen and discolored—the red of inflammation mingling with the darker murkiness caused by blood pooling under his skin.

Wataru remembered seeing the open car door slam into his nephew earlier. That must have been the cause.

This entire time, Akira had been so calm and composed that no one had noticed he was injured.

"Ah, ah! Show me! Are you joking?! Look at this! Why didn't you say anything?! There's no way it doesn't hurt!"

"F-first aid kit! I'll go get the first aid kit! Wait, no, should I call an ambulance?!"

"Calm down, Arnav. Just sit down for now, Akira."

They steered Akira toward the living room sofa, where Richart carefully palpated his arm. Richart said he didn't think any bones were broken, but he

wasn't a medical doctor. A hairline or impacted fracture wasn't out of the question, so for safety's sake, it was best if Akira was taken to the doctor in the morning.

Until then, Wataru did the best he could to stabilize the arm. When he was done, he stared hard at his nephew.

"...Why didn't you tell me you were hurt?"

"I'm sorry, but it's really not as bad as it looks. I'm fine."

Akira gave him a big smile.

Even at a time like this, Wataru thought, at his wit's end. The boy was in so much pain he didn't want to eat, and yet...

"More importantly, aren't you glad? For John, I mean," Akira went on, smoothly changing the subject. "I'm so glad he's with his mother. Thank you all for helping. I might not have been able to do it by myself."

He grinned at them.

All at once, Emma shot to her feet. She looked furious.

"Akira! That's enough!"

"Huh?"

Akira stared up at her in confusion. Looking at him, Emma seemed about to say something else, but suddenly, her face scrunched up like she was on the verge of tears. Akira's mouth fell open in shock.

"Emma? Wh-what is it? Did I do something wrong?"

"...Augh, that's it! I've had it with you, young man...! Akira, come with me!"

Grabbing his uninjured arm, Emma hauled Akira into the dining room and made him sit at the table. She stormed into the kitchen, flinging open the cabinet and refrigerator doors with a series of bangs, and began heating a saucepot of milk over the stove.

A short while later, Emma set a mug of cocoa down in front of Akira.

Akira blinked.

"...Emma? Why cocoa all of a sudden...?"

"Don't drink it yet. It's not finished."

With that, she fished two marshmallows from a bag and plopped them into the mug, where they floated atop the cocoa.

"All right. Drink up."

"Um, but why, though ...?"

"This is a bit of magic my gran taught me a long time ago. Anytime something bad happens, if you drink a cup of cocoa with marshmallows, it's guaranteed to make you feel better. That is to say, sweet things calm the mind. Even when you're suffering, having something sweet can help soothe the hurt somewhat. So drink, Akira. I expect you need it right now."

Akira looked up at her and chuckled a little.

"...But come on, what would I be suffering about?"

"Enough with the lies," Emma interjected, cutting him off. "When's the last time you cried, Akira? Or told someone when you were hurting? Now you've ended up like this, not even able to say you're in pain when you're injured. I won't stand for it. If you carry on like this, someday, it'll ruin you."

Gazing into his eyes from up close, Emma spoke like she was desperate to reason with him. But the small, bemused smile on Akira's face remained, as though he truly had no idea what she was getting at. Seeing that, Emma's expression turned sad. She cupped his face gently in both hands.

"What happened to you, Akira? What the hell made you this way? It's okay not to smile at a time like this. It's okay to cry. Why don't you understand...? Even if you wail and scream, we will all be right here with you."

Akira opened his mouth, then shut it again. He reached out toward the mug of cocoa.

"I'm not a little kid anymore, you know. I don't care about sweets..."

"Just drink it... You're still a child."

Emma patted his head.

Wrapping his hands around the mug, Akira picked it up and stared at it for a while, watching the marshmallows melt.

Then he brought the mug to his mouth and took a sip. Wiping the marshmallow from his lips, he looked up at Emma again.

"This is...really sweet."

"Sure is. Like I said, sweet things are a balm for the soul."

"But I told you, I..."

Mid-rebuttal, Akira tried to flash her his usual smile—and failed.

At first, he looked like he was laughing and crying at the same time, but it only took moments for the smile to completely disappear. Akira looked down, his shoulders trembling. Several tears rolled down his face and dripped onto the dining table. A small sob he could not stifle leaked out from the depths of his throat. Covering his mouth with one hand, Akira's head drooped even lower.

Curled in on himself in the chair, he looked *so* small, like he was no more than a helpless child. In that moment, Wataru finally realized that Akira's smile was his armor.

How much had this boy endured all by himself until now, Wataru wondered, just by hiding all his hurt and sadness behind a happy face?

"Akira... We're a family," Wataru said. "You know, I realized a long time ago that I didn't exactly hit the jackpot when it came to family. The day they kicked me out of the house, it could not have been more obvious. That's why, when I bought this building, I decided I wanted to make my own family with everyone who lived here."

That was why he had made it a rule that they all eat supper together.

Every day, even when they didn't have to, everyone gathered on the first floor and spent the evening talking and laughing. When one of them was in trouble, the rest dropped everything to help. If one of them went missing, everyone else tracked them down, even if it meant teaching the dogs to follow a scent.

Any way one looked at it, Wataru thought, that was a family, even if they

weren't connected by blood.

"You aren't unwanted, Akira."

Wataru put a hand on his nephew's head and ruffled his soft brown hair.

"You aren't unwanted. You can stay here forever, with us."

"...I d-don't, creep you out?"

Under Wataru's hand, it was like Akira was trying to shrink himself to nothing. When he spoke, he sounded so painfully young.

"You're not s-scared? Of me? My being here...isn't a bother?"

"You're no bother, and we're not scared of you. Because we know exactly what you are."

"What I am...?"

"That's right. You are my precious nephew, and a part of this family. You're ours—all of ours. Our boy."

Akira looked up at him. Wataru took the boy's face in hand and pinched his tearstained cheeks.

"Now go ahead and cry it all out. You're definitely going to be hungry when you're done, so we'll do dinner again then. Fish and chips might be a bit disappointing after all, eh? If there's anything you want to eat, just tell me, I'll make it for you."

Tears still streaming messily from his eyes as his uncle tugged his cheeks this way and that, Akira smiled just a little. "Tha' hur's," he said, so his uncle pinched his face even more, eliciting another smile.

These ones, Wataru thought, probably weren't armor. These smiles were real.

Things were a bit rocky for John's family after that. Nonetheless, his parents stayed together, and John's biological father never came looking for him again. His relationship with his mother was still a little awkward, and things with his dad were a bit strained, but it didn't seem like anything that couldn't be resolved with time.

In the end, Akira was still almost always smiling or laughing. There wasn't

much that could be done to change that, since a smile had become his default expression anyhow. But as he continued to live in the apartment block with the other residents, little by little, he started showing other expressions, too.

The residents doted on Akira more than ever. During his vacations from school, they planned family trips, both domestic and international. They traveled to Wales, the Lake District, Edinburgh, France—even as far as Germany and Italy.

One day, Akira came to them with a very serious look on his face.

"There's something I want to talk to you about... Um, would it be okay if I invited a friend from Japan to come visit?"

Apparently, he and the friend had been exchanging e-mails the whole time he was in England. The possibility of visiting Akira in the UK during summer break had just come up recently.

"Akira, don't tell me you've got a girlfriend? Do you have a picture of her?"

"Oh, if your friend is a girl, you have to introduce me! Japanese girls are so cute!"

"Richart, you can't try to steal Akira's girlfriend."

The mention of a friend of his from Japan had everyone in a tizzy, but Akira looked at them with a wry smile.

"Sorry to disappoint, but he's a boy. His name is KenKen; we've been friends since we were little. I learned kendo at his house. He's the real Samurai Boy, not me."

"Did you go to school together?"

"No, we went to different schools, but still. We're friends... We always will be."

Looking down slightly, Akira smiled.

It was not a smile they had seen from him before.

"Kenji, he—he was the only one who never changed. Even after what happened."

The smile was somewhat lonesome, somewhat nostalgic, and very, very fond.

After the incident, everyone around Akira must have looked at him differently. Some probably treated him like an abscess about to burst, while others had just quietly drifted away.

It was just that one childhood friend who had always stuck by his side.

"—So, um, I have a favor to ask."

"A favor? What is it?"

"Before KenKen comes here, I want to completely memorize the streets of London."

"Huh?"

"This will be his first time traveling abroad! His English isn't very good, so I'll have to be his tour guide... But I get lost right away when I try to use maps..."

In other words, he wanted to get the lay of the land so he could show his friend around without issue. Now that Wataru thought of it, though they had vacationed both in and out of the country, they hadn't spent much time with Akira sightseeing around London. And if possible, he and his friend probably wanted to be able to frolic about the city without an adult following them everywhere. Getting lost along the way would just be pitiful.

In response, Emma broke into gales of laughter.

"Akira! You're trying to show off for your friend, aren't you?! You want to act all cool, like, 'I live in England, so naturally I know where everything is,' don't you?!"

"Emma, come on! Don't say it like that! I just don't like getting lost!"

"Yes, yes, I understand. I'll show you everything, from the major tourist spots to the delicious back-alley restaurants. I know where you can bring people who say English cuisine is bad, all the best bakeries, all that stuff. Don't you worry. Next time we both have a day off we'll make a date of exploring London, all right?"

"If it's good food you want, I can tell you where to go! I also know which cafés all the most beautiful women frequent. Perhaps your friend would enjoy

admiring a lovely girl while he drinks his tea, non?"

"Hold on, I'll show you the best Indian restaurants. The best food I've had in England has been Indian food."

The entire complex joined forces to take Akira to all of London's hidden gems, and right around the time he had finished committing all of London's streets to memory, his childhood friend came to the UK. The moment they met, Richart greeted the boy by bellowing, "Yo! Samurai! Yakuza! Harakiri!" The boy's face, already quite intense at the best of times, twisted further in utter confusion. Afterward, Akira brought him to the Tower of London, the London Dungeon, and some famously haunted pubs. When they came home later that evening, Wataru couldn't quite tell if the twitching in the boy's face was caused by fatigue or something else entirely.

About two years after Akira had come to live in England, he told them he intended to attend university in Japan.

Naturally, everyone froze at his announcement. They had all expected him to stay in England for the rest of his life.

But Akira shook his head.

"I can't stay here forever... I've always planned on returning to Japan."

That resolve hadn't changed with time, apparently, and Akira had even researched schools he was interested in.

When they asked what he wanted to study at a Japanese university, his answer was "folklore."

"Japan has a ton of stories like the Irish fairy tales. I want to study things like that in Japan."

"Can't you just study them here instead?"

"Learning about it in Japan would be more meaningful... Besides, I want to do fieldwork and stuff, too."

Akira gave them a bright smile.

To be safe, Wataru even contacted Tomoaki about the matter. But as he was told "He can do as he likes," he had no choice but to reluctantly allow Akira to

return to Japan. The boy's academic ability was superb, and since the school even had a quota to meet for admission of students who had lived abroad, Akira got into his top choice without issue.

The day before Akira left England, the apartment block's residents partied late into the night. It wasn't as though he would never see any of them again, so Akira had looked a bit exasperated throughout. But Emma, Richart, and Arnav all hugged him, tears streaming down their faces, then followed that up with a great deal of alcohol and even more crying. In the end, every last one of them drank themselves unconscious, leaving only Lobo and Blanca still standing.

Wataru accompanied Akira for the journey to Japan.

Tomoaki had said he would send someone to collect Akira at the airport, but Wataru couldn't help but be anxious over the thought of his nephew going back to that house all alone. If necessary, he was prepared to fight both his brother-in-law and his own father if it meant securing Akira a safe place to live... And if that didn't work, he even entertained the idea of just turning right around and bringing the boy back to England.

At the airport, there was a man waiting to pick up Akira. Dressed in a stiff suit that looked expensive but lacked the slightest hint of style, the man introduced himself as Tomoaki's private secretary.

They piled into the man's car, and he took them—not to Akira's parents' home, but to an apartment complex in Yoyogi. He showed them to an already furnished two-bedroom apartment that was far too nice for a college student living on his own.

"From now on, you live here, per your father's wishes. I will be checking in on you periodically, so you should expect as much. This is yours."

The secretary spoke curtly as he held something out to Akira.

It was a bankbook and a debit card.

Ah, Wataru thought, his heart sinking like a stone.

This was exactly like what had happened to him.

Tomoaki wasn't even related to the man, but he was doing just what

Wataru's father had done—handing his son money and severing all other ties with him—to a boy who was just eighteen.

As though his business with them was complete, Tomoaki's secretary exited the apartment without another word. Left standing with the bankbook and card in hand, Akira looked around the room.

Wataru couldn't see his nephew's face from his vantage point. Anxious, he called out to him without thinking.

"Akira...? Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Akira answered, not turning around. "I never expected to be allowed to live at my parents' place again, so I'm okay."

He looked around his surroundings again. A luxurious sofa set, a huge TV, empty bookshelves. It could have passed for a showroom.

"Sort of reminds me of a birdcage, you know? This place. Everything's so neat, I almost feel like I'm suffocating."

"Akira..."

"Do you think he'd be mad if I just sold this place and rented a smaller apartment? I don't need this much money. Should I just toss it? I'll work to pay for my own stuff."

His tone was joking, but Wataru could hear a part of him meant it, too.

"Akira."

Slowly, he walked around until he was standing right in front of his nephew.

He needed to know what kind of expression Akira was wearing that he stubbornly refused to show his uncle. What would he do, Wataru wondered, if he found the same smile from three years ago plastered across the boy's mouth? The smiling shield that he and Emma and the others had spent three years tearing apart—if Akira put it back on now...

But the expression Wataru found himself peering into was one of apprehension that was perfectly appropriate for a boy Akira's age.

Despite his relief, at the same time, Wataru's heart ached for Akira.

From this point on, he would live all by himself, half a world away from his uncle and the people he had spent three years with, in this birdcage of a room. He would be supplied with money, but not love.

Akira—far more than those around him realized—was such a sensitive child.

He had grown proficient at hiding his hurts and pretending he was fine, but he still got hurt. It wasn't like he didn't feel the pain.

All Wataru wanted to do in that moment was whisk Akira right back to England.

But that wasn't what Akira himself wanted.

"Akira."

He pulled the boy into a gentle hug.

Akira had grown considerably over the last three years; they were practically the same height now. Wataru got the feeling Akira would have reached this height a lot sooner if his life had gone differently. His development had been stunted in Japan, but thanks to living with Wataru, Akira had finally been able to recoup his losses.

But his days at his uncle's side were over.

"Akira. Be strong."

"Uncle..."

"Live with as much determination as you can, and be happy. If they're going to give you money or a place to live, just take it. Don't throw it away. Use it, you hear me? No matter what you do, you'll need money... If there's something you want to do, use this money to get there."

Wataru spoke those words into Akira's ear as if conveying crucial instructions, then stepped back and let the boy go.

"Listen. Remember this: When things get tough, ask someone for help. It doesn't matter if it's me or anyone else. Don't go it alone... And if all else fails, come back home."

For a brief moment, it looked like Akira was going to cry.

But before it got to that point, his face shifted into a pained smile.

"...That's a last resort, Uncle. I'm finally back in Japan."

"As long as you don't forget you always have a home to return to."

"Yeah, I know," Akira replied, nodding.

"I know," he said again, ultimately still smiling as he shed a single tear. "Thank you."

Twenty years later, after studying folklore at university, that nephew had become an associate professor of folklore and antiquities.

On the flight back to England after having visited Akira for the first time in too long, Wataru stared out the window at the sea of clouds and heaved a small sigh.

He was glad he had seen how his nephew lived now. In addition to being as dangerous as ever, the world surrounding Akira was by no means kind to him, but—nevertheless, he was blessed with those who stood reliably by his side, protecting and supporting him. The trip had been worth it just to learn that.

Wataru prayed that Akira's future would, at the very least, be a happy one.

As his uncle—as his family—happiness was what he always wanted for Akira.

Once Akira made the decision to leave the UK, Wataru's ability to intervene in his nephew's life had almost entirely disappeared. That was how Akira had wanted it. Rather than remaining tucked safely under Wataru's wing, he had chosen to fight.

Most likely, it was a fight he pursued to confront his own past.

Wataru didn't know if Akira would win. He didn't even know if it was possible for him to find any sort of closure. But if this was what brought him fulfillment, Wataru thought he should keep going.

The only thing he could do, as the uncle who lived thousands of miles away, was make sure that if Akira ever got tired of the war he was waging—or if, perish the thought, he should be defeated someday—he would always have a place to come home to.

The flat Akira had lived in for those three years had been kept vacant for that very purpose ever since.

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