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NOVEL

WRITTEN BY
NANAKO
TSUJIMURA

ILLUSTRATED BY
UTAKO
YUKIHIRO

THE CASE FILES
OF
JEWELER
RICHARD

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Seven Seas Entertainment

HOSEKISHO RICHARD-SHI NO NAZOKANTEI

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Illustration by Utako Yukihiro

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CAST

Seigi Nakata

A Tokyo native who started apprenticing as a jeweler after graduating college, thanks to connections he developed at his part-time job. Just as his name—Seigi, meaning “justice”—implies, he’s an earnest young man always looking to help others, even if he may be a bit lacking in tact at times.



Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian

An English jeweler with a better command of Japanese than your average Japanese person. His incredible beauty would strike anyone, regardless of gender, utterly speechless. He has a weakness for all things sweet.



HER NAME WAS DEBORAH.

Of course, upper-class etiquette forbade me giving her a pet name. My university friends from similarly distinguished backgrounds, despite being largely unaware of their position in society, did not use nicknames, either. That did not stop Deborah from giving me a nickname of my own: Ricky. It reminded me of my cousin Jeffrey. Whenever she used that nickname for me, I felt the depth of her warmth and affection in it. When I asked if I might call her Debbie in return, she said I didn't need her permission. I was enchanted by the gracious beauty of her acceptance.

I fear I need more time to heal this wound before I can remember that moment with fondness.

I cannot rid my mind of the image of a Ferris wheel reflected in the surface of the Thames. *The Jeff you know is gone. He's never coming back.*

I suppose that when a person loves someone with all of their heart, they may well lose the ability to distinguish between themselves and the object of their affections. I lost two loves in a single moment, and it felt like half of the cells in my body committed apoptosis with them. I couldn't understand why I was still alive, when they were gone.

My world shattered around me, so I left it all behind and fled to a city of jewels nestled in the mountains. There, my thoughts repeatedly turned to my grandmother and the question I had once posed to her as a child. *Why are beautiful things sad?*

I was convinced I could now answer my child self's question. In the end, all things must return to their rightful place.

And my loved ones' rightful places were not with me.

Nothing is so beautiful as that which you cannot have. It's like watching a person walking away from you and knowing, no matter how much you will them with your eyes, that they will never turn and look back at you.

I wished I could tell my grandmother this, but she was no longer with us. I wanted to tell her that I had come to the town she would never visit again. I wanted to hear her voice. I wanted her to call me a fool in the same tone she once used to demean my accomplishments when I informed her I'd earned top marks in all my subjects.

The phantom image of the retreating figure remains eternally beautiful, and yet as hollow as a dream. But it was that dream that held sway over me, and I was the most hollow of all.

Even after my brilliant mentor took me under his wing and thrust me headfirst into the world of gemstones, I felt no different inside. I waited for something—I knew not what, only that it wasn't here—to come along and save me. I was a cuckoo depositing her egg in another's nest under the light of a full moon, coral scattered across the ocean floor like the remnants of a snowstorm, a powerful desire that lacked the willpower to make itself real. If my grandmother were alive, she would have laughed at me for being so infantile.

Perhaps that was why I hurt a certain man so deeply in that city which, much like Sri Lanka, was once a part of England.

■ Prologue ■

AUGUST 22ND

Hi, it's Iggy from Sri Lanka again. First off, I'm okay. I don't think I'll be able to post for a while, but there's no need to worry.

AUGUST 30TH

Iggy here. Sorry for freaking everyone out with such a short post. I didn't expect to get so many replies down in the comments section. I guess a lot of people read this blog, huh?

Most of you probably keep up with world news, but for those of you who don't know, they declared martial law here in Sri Lanka. Right now, there's a curfew in Kandy and a couple other cities. That's because a store was set on fire in Kandy. Three people died, and the news says a lot more were wounded. But there haven't been any other big riots since the military moved in.

It's such a shock. My head is a mess of whirling thoughts: This doesn't feel real. There must be some mistake. I don't live in a place where this sort of thing happens, you know? Maybe no one I've met in Sri Lanka has all that much money, but everyone's been so warm and friendly that our daily lives feel rich in other ways. On the flipside, I've been here less than half a year. What do I know, right?

I'm trying to explain how I feel, but it's like the words don't come out right.

I don't know when I'll be able to post another update. Sorry.

For a number of reasons, I'm not going to be in Sri Lanka for a while.

Messages for certain commenters:

H: I'm okay, I really mean it. Stop worrying. Things are going to be hectic for a while, but I'll give you a call later.

Mr. N: Sorry for worrying you. I didn't realize you read my blog. I'll get in touch, okay?

J: Thanks for worrying about me, but I'm doing okay. I'll get that souvenir for you another time.

T: Wow, I'm surprised to see you here. Thanks for messaging me! It's really nice to hear from you, and I'll be in touch later.

You know what's funny? I thought no one knew about this blog, but it turns out everyone I know is passing it around to keep tabs on me. You guys are the worst.

But hey, I'm relieved to have you all looking out for me. Thanks for everything.

R: Let me give you a call. Sorry if it comes when you're asleep.

Also, would it have killed you to let me know you read my blog? I'm mortified now!

 The First
Country: Japan 

WAS JAPAN ALWAYS THIS HOT?

I'd been living in the Sri Lankan tropics—a land of jungles, elephants, and seas teeming with colorful fish—till August. Sri Lanka was the kind of place you associated with pretty intense heat, but I was positive it had never been *this* bad there, thanks to the difference in humidity. I could feel the air clinging to my shirt the moment I stepped off the airplane, and I knew it wasn't just my imagination. This was Japan in September. Tokyo in September, to be exact.

When I, backpack and rolling suitcase in tow, stepped out onto the platform of the Airport Terminal Station, my breath caught in my throat.

“Oh, wow.”

It just slipped out.

The train sliding up to the platform was spotless. Not a speck of dust on its exterior, interior, anywhere. I figured they had someone keep it under watch at all times, even at night, so no one could come in and scrawl graffiti on it. All the seated passengers stared down at their phones in silence. *Right. Okay.* I had to remind myself that this was how people acted on trains in Japan.

I lugged my bags on board, checked my ticket to find my reserved seat, and sat down. This was the Keisei *Skyliner*. I knew the route so well I didn't have to wait for the announcer to name every station we passed on our way into Tokyo.

I stared out the window, seeing my face, reflected in the glass, superimposed over the station. I looked befuddled.

I felt like I was going to drown in this wave of nostalgia. I'd never really understood what nostalgia meant until now, but maybe it was my complete and total familiarity with the trains, people, and advertisements casually coming and going before my eyes. I didn't need to keep my eyes peeled to soak up my surroundings. If a tourist asked me, “What is that?” I felt confident that I could describe whatever it was in a mere sentence or two.

That was what it felt like. Like I knew the flavor of every soda in all the

vending machines just by glancing at their labels.

This was *Japan*. The land where I was born and raised. This must be how migrant workers felt when they returned to their homelands after years spent away.

The train quietly chugged out of the station as I breathed countless silent oohs and aahs. The countryside slid by outside my window, interspersed with electricity pylons. There went a billboard with giant Japanese characters on it. A row of greenhouses. A schoolkid racing by on a bike. Everything felt familiar to me, even the trains passing in the other direction. I didn't need to be on them to know exactly what they looked like on the inside.

I had never felt like this before.

Once my excitement wore off, exhaustion kicked in and bowed my shoulders, like the strings holding me up had just been cut. It had been a fourteen-hour flight. It was 5 p.m. now, but my mind still thought it was morning. Too much continuous travel.

But I'd made it. I was home.

My plans hadn't been particularly well defined, but I had intended to stay in Sri Lanka until I came back to Japan to retake the civil service exam. I hadn't expected to come home so soon, but a mob had burned down a store in Kandy, and people had died. It was apparently due to a religious conflict, but the news reports were so complex that it all went over my head. I still didn't have a clear picture of what was going on.

As far as I was concerned, Christmas cake, Buddhist green tea, and halal curry all tasted great. I had no problems with any religion, so I didn't understand what all the fuss was about. I knew it was a sensitive topic, but also that I'd never learn anything if I didn't try, so I asked the neighbors about it...but all I got for my efforts was a host of unreadable facial expressions.

On the day of the arson, my phone would not stop blowing up with notifications. I received messages from Hiromi, Mr. Nakata, Saul, and Jeffrey.

Even my old friends from college, who knew nothing of my recent exploits, sent me texts and emails. And of course, Richard messaged me. Everyone was intensely worried about me. The house that Saul was letting me live in wasn't harmed, but I could still hear gunshots and smell thick black smoke from inside. I couldn't open any of the windows. I was scared to go out, even to pick up groceries. During that time period, I lived off a stash of cup noodles.

Mr. Nakata had lived in Southeast Asia for a long time, and he reassured me that this sort of thing wasn't that uncommon. Every country had its own complex political situations. Still, that didn't mean I could let my guard down. He cautioned me to keep my distance from anyone who looked dangerous and told me to come home. Saul told me the same thing when he called. Really, I didn't have much of a choice.

I gave my pet dog Jiro to the neighbors to look after. They had two kids, and they'd been nice enough to share *biryani* with me before. When I told them I was going back to Japan, they readily agreed to take care of Jiro. It helped that I left them some money for their troubles. Jiro had been a stray to begin with, and people in Sri Lanka didn't tend to take care of animals unless they were raising them for food. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if I found Jiro back on the streets by the time I came back. But who knew when that would be?

Hiromi and Mr. Nakata video-called me several times to discuss my next steps. As always, they advised me to follow my heart and do what I wanted with my life. They were so forgiving that I felt like I needed to bow and scrape in apology. Hiromi looked like she was mellowing out and eating better than the last time I'd seen her. She'd stopped working night shifts, she said, and having Mr. Nakata home was doing wonders for her mood, too.

Follow my heart. Do whatever it is I wanted in life.

The *Skyliner* arrived in Nippori within forty minutes of boarding the train. My bags and I grabbed a different train on the Keihin-Tohoku line heading toward Shimbashi Station. The silver train with its blue stripes felt like an old friend.

I would meet Hiromi and Mr. Nakata at their house later this evening, but a college friend had sent me a message suggesting we meet up the moment I made it back in from overseas. It was basically an excuse to throw a party. These friends of mine were a mixed bunch of those who'd made it as civil servants, those who hadn't, and those who were taking a gap year to study and retake the exam. I thought this would be a great chance to listen to their stories and glean powerful insights.

I was still on the fence about what I wanted to do, personally. The more time I spent in Sri Lanka, the better I understood what a cushy position a government job in Japan could be. Whether I was cut out to work one of those jobs was another story. If the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wanted a specialist in foreign languages, I might have a shot, even without the right mentality to be a civil servant. I doubted things would be so easy. But who knows? Maybe it would all work out if I tried hard enough. If nothing else, I had the motivation to work hard.

But if that fell through, what was I supposed to do? Become a jeweler and work for Saul? Did I even have that in me? Well, it wasn't like I knew nothing about gemstones. The issue was, could I look at gemstones for years on end without getting tired of them?

I liked stones, sure. Learning more about them every day also brought me a sense of personal fulfillment, and I wanted to get certified if I could manage it. But I still couldn't picture myself working as a jeweler ten, twenty years down the line. Would I end up being someone like Richard? Did "someone like Richard" even exist, or was he one of a kind? When I first moved to Sri Lanka, I'd been worried I would never be able to fill his shoes. Now that I knew more about the industry, that worry had shrunk, and a new one had taken its place: You never know what might happen next when your job took you all around the world. You could even get caught up in something like arson! If I became a jeweler, I was sure to make my family worry.

I wondered how Richard had come to terms with that. Presumably, it had

been the last thing on his mind when he first ran away from home and England. But now? Now, I wasn't so sure. Maybe he worried about this, too.

Ever since the cruise, family troubles had kept him busy. I wanted to call him, but I didn't know if he was getting enough sleep, and I felt bad bugging him constantly. I figured I'd watch how things played out and call when he had a free moment.

My train pulled into Shimbashi Station amidst a flurry of apologies over the loudspeakers for arriving a few minutes behind schedule. The platform was filled with office workers, packed in like sardines. There were more people who clearly stood out as foreign tourists than there had been when I was last in Japan, but none of the commuters looked twice at them. A few white tourists in shorts chatted to each other in Russian, and I saw a group of girls in headscarves who looked Indonesian. Seeing people from other parts of the world mingle with my everyday life against the backdrop of the enormous train wheels gave me a dizzying amount of whiplash.

This was Japan—the country of my birth and childhood. But Japan wasn't a photo or a movie. It didn't stay the same forever. I kept seeing on Japanese news sites, even while I was overseas, that the immigrant population was on the rise and tourism was booming. It had never felt real until this moment.

I had some time before I was due to meet my friends. If all I had to do was stand around looking at my phone, I would much rather be looking at the piece of jewelry wrapped in its parcel, I thought.

As I stared off into space, I caught the eye of one of the foreign tourists milling around. She was here with another girl. The first girl looked like she was from India or somewhere close by, while the other was tall, slender, and maybe French. They had matching pink suitcases plastered with stickers of national flags from all over the world: New Zealand, China, Japan. I wondered if they represented all the places the girls had been to.

The Indian-looking girl came over to me with a troubled look on her face. She

and the French girl were probably around twenty, I judged. When she said, “Excuse me” to me in English, I felt slightly relieved. Which was odd. I mean, this wasn’t Kandy. I could actually speak the majority language here.

The girl told me she wanted to catch a particular driverless train, because she heard it offered stellar views of the city at night.

At night, huh? Hmm.

I asked her to give me a moment and pulled out my phone.

I still had my SIM card from Sri Lanka in, so my search engine was in English. I switched my keyboard to Japanese input and searched up nearby night cityscapes and driverless trains. I got a couple of hits. There was a train line called the Yurikamome that ran close by. I’d never taken it, but then again, I’d never taken any number of trains in Japan. This line ran through an industrial zone right on the water’s edge which was, according to this website I found, famous for the multiple movies shot there. The website showed me images of a futuristic beachfront cityscape. I felt like I was looking at a country I had never been to.

Just then, I heard someone’s voice calling my name.

“Hey, Nakata? Is that you? It is! Who woulda guessed? Here you are helping a stranger again!”

“You never change. Wow, you sure are tanned!”

“Long time no see, guys. Sorry, could you give me just a minute to finish this up?”

It was Noguchi and Toyama. We had classes together back in school, and Noguchi was the one in charge of planning this party. He was also the one who had messaged me. Knowing them, I figured they wouldn’t mind waiting another minute or two to wrap up.

When I flashed them a “It’ll be quick, I promise!” gesture, the two of them exchanged glances and grinned. What was that all about? Well, never mind

them.

I told the girls they were at Shimbashi Station, and they could catch the Yurikamome from those stairs across the way. However, it wasn't dark yet, so I suggested they hang around here a little longer. The Indian girl seemed to understand. She turned to the French girl and started talking in French. *Ah-ha*, I thought. When I switched gears and repeated myself in French, both girls lit up. Their joy was infectious, and I brightened, too.

"We're from Mauritania. Have you heard of it? It's in Africa."

"Yeah, I know where it is. Next to Senegal, right? Did you know that the most common octopus we eat in Japan comes from Mauritania? Maybe you'll run into a familiar face—well, tentacle—if you stop in at a sushi joint."

The girls looked amused and slapped each other on the back.

"We have to wait for the sun to go down anyway. Let's grab some sushi near the station."

"Hold on. When I was searching for the Yurikamome, I spotted a cool place near Toyosu Station. It's apparently one of the best seafood markets near a major railway line in the whole country."

The girls were suddenly all ears.

Just then, Noguchi spoke up.

"Hey, Idzuka! Did you just get off work? Hey, Nakata, Idzuka's here. He's back in Japan after graduating from Princeton."

"Uh-oh, are those foreigners? Here, Nakata. I'll sub in."

"O-okay, sure."

Idzuka from Princeton, Idzuka from Princeton... I couldn't place who that was again. I knew Princeton was in New Jersey in America, but that was about it. Before I could tell him that the girls spoke French, Idzuka shook both their hands and started talking to them in fluid American English.

“What’s up? You girls need help?”

I already knew the basic problem, so he could have just asked me and been done with it. But Idzuka turned his back on the rest of us, acting like he was trying to bail me out. Maybe he thought I was no good at foreign languages and was struggling along bravely. For a few seconds, all I could do was panic and wonder what to do next. It was too much. There was just too much information to process.

For a moment, the girls looked like they were going to talk to Idzuka. But then they both turned to me.

“Who’s this guy?” they asked me. In French.

Idzuka looked blank. I was about to tell him. It wasn’t my fault he decided he knew better.

“He’s an old classmate, and he just got back from America. He’s really smart, honest.”

“You’re plenty smart yourself. And your French pronunciation is stellar. You must have been studying it for a long time.”

“Oh, no, not really. I just started this summer.”

“Get out! You liar. You’re a natural.”

“No, I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Come on, what’re you putting yourself down for? Anyway, you should come join us for dinner. Tell us more about sushi.”

“I’m sorry, but I just got back to Japan myself. I’m supposed to catch up with my friends.”

“Oh, you were overseas? Where were you living?”

“In Sri Lanka.”

“No way! Small world. My great-aunt’s Sri Lankan. She was born in Jaffna.”

“Really? That’s cool. Uh...”

“Hey, what’re your socials? You have socials, right?”

“Um...”

It was right about then that I realized I was being flirted with—and also just how long this was taking. When I snuck a glance behind me, I saw multiple people waiting, garbed in everything from suits to casual clothes. All of them looked well on the way to fed-up. I guess I was holding up the show.

I wrapped up the conversation as quickly as was polite, recommended them a sushi restaurant with good reviews on the Yurikamome line, and went back to my own group. There were eight of us in total. I recognized four, including Toyama and Noguchi. The other four, Idzuka among them, had probably graduated before I did. Maybe we’d never met before, or maybe I’d just forgotten them. I wished I’d read the invite to this drinking party more carefully. Jet lag was taking its toll on my memory.

The group was a mix of would-be civil servants and those who had already landed themselves jobs in that sector. Even though it was the weekend, things still felt kind of formal. Not that I minded. If I had been overseas, I couldn’t have participated in this sort of gathering at all.

“Sorry for keeping you all waiting. My name is Seigi Nakata. Thanks for having me today, and, uh...I’m not sure what else I should say about myself.”

“Don’t worry, we all know you. You come up on the grapevine all the time.”

“Huh? I do?”

A chill ran down my spine. *The grapevine*. What were people saying about me? There goes that weirdo that went to our school? Richard and Mr. Nakata hadn’t mentioned anything of the sort to me, but...what if rumors had begun flying around after that man showed up at my school?

Calm down, Seigi. Even if they had, that was all in the past. Two years ago, even. That man couldn’t possibly still be hanging around.

I smiled and protested in confusion. It sure had been a long time since I’d

acted like this.

“So, uh, what kind of things are people saying about me? Nothing bad, I hope.”

“Oh, you know. Like you’re a whiz at languages and stuff.”

“Yeah, you’re jetting all over the world, aren’t you? You’re something else, man.”

“Huh?”

I had no idea people were saying those things about me. How did they find out this information in the first place?

Idzuka suggested we get moving, and we all set off. While we walked, Noguchi and the others filled me in.

“Yamanaka and I are part of the gap-year crew. We meet up occasionally to hang out and go drinking. You come up in conversation sometimes when we wonder what you’re up to these days. Same with Shimomura.”

“Oh! He’s in Spain right now, and he’s doing really well. I actually met up with him in August in Paris.”

“Yeah, he mentioned that to us. You guys are hitting up all the trendy spots.”

“Trendy? What do you mean by that?”

“Paris, Spain, you know. What, did you guys go on your graduation trips and just never stop? I wish I could travel around the world while I study for this exam.”

“Not me. I’d never be able to buckle down and focus. I wish I had half your brains, Nakata.”

“Who, me? You’re full of it. I’m nowhere near the brainiac you’re making me out to be.”

“Nah, you’ve been hiding major talent from us this whole time. Back in college, I always thought you were kind of a C student.”

“Turns out you’re a come-from-behind surprise winner. You scare me, man.”

“Whaaat? No way.”

This was weird. It felt like one of those moments when I walked into a room and wasn’t sure where to stand. What was all this about the way I used to be before I left Japan?

It didn’t make any sense to me. The hot, sticky summer air felt stifling.

Back in Ratnapura, I started from zero and had to claw my way into a position within the community. None of the things the guys were talking about ever crossed my mind when I lived in Sri Lanka.

Once we got to the pub, we sat down at our big reserved table, toasted with a round of beers, and then started catching everyone else up on our lives. The gap year guys had no reservations about sharing their mock exam scores with one another. Meanwhile, our upperclassman bemoaned the horrors of work for our listening pleasure.

People said maintaining friendships took work. I’d heard of coworkers banding together with those from their alma mater in so-called university cliques, but I had never realized people really were treated differently in the workforce if they came from private schools instead of the more prestigious national universities. And yet, my old classmates weren’t bemoaning their bad luck. Far from it, actually—they all seemed to be really enjoying themselves. Still, I sensed an undertone to the conversation that things were harder than they made it seem.

Throughout all that, Idzuka said little.

Finally, when everyone else was done, it was my turn. I felt like they’d saved me for last—for the finale—and I didn’t know what to say. I was scared that someone here, not knowing all the details of my situation, might leak information that put a certain horrible guy back on my tail. That’s why I only told the bare minimum to anyone but my closest of friends.

Therefore, I explained that I had an overseas internship through the shop I worked at part-time during college. This came with the flexibility to study for the civil service exam while I worked, so the plan was that I'd come back to Japan in a year or two. Now, the question begged: Would I tell them what line of work it was?

"And in terms of the job... Uh, I'm not sure if I should say..."

"Yeah, yeah, we get it. You're the star of the class, Nakata. No need to rub it in."

"Oh, give me a break. Anyway, um... I'm still trying to figure out what I'm doing with my life, I guess."

"You put on a good show earlier. What was that, English?"

"No, French. Those girls were from Mauritania..."

"Where the hell's that?"

"West Africa. Gotta study that ODA stuff for the exam."

"To hell with the exam. So you're telling me you speak English *and* French, Nakata? And what, other languages on top of that?"

"Um, not really. Just Sinhala and a little bit of Spanish. It's no big deal."

"This man's a regular polyglot. You oughta join the Ministry of Foreign Affairs."

"No way, I'd be terrible at it."

"How'd you get this sweet gig anyway? Come on, you can tell me. Use small words so a dumbo like me can understand."

I felt like they were asking me to spill the beans on a secret once the alcohol loosened my lips. I didn't want to open up about everything, but I figured there was no harm in telling them I worked in the gemstone industry, if nothing else. As briefly as I could, I talked about the environment Richard had set up for me, my many spur-of-the-moment "business trips," and my ongoing studies for the

civil service exam.

I must have sounded like I was bragging. “Oh yes, I have this rich colleague of mine who gave me this accommodating job, and I can jet all around the world as I pursue my studies. What a delightful opportunity he’s given me!” That was probably how it came across. But it was all true, as I knew myself.

So I explained the work was difficult, and I couldn’t do my job if I couldn’t even speak the language. This required a ton of studying on my part. Also, there was that arson incident recently in Sri Lanka. I figured the others already knew about that, but when I mentioned it, my classmates’ brows furrowed into worried wrinkles.

“Wait, someone set a shop on fire? Huh? Where was that?”

“In Kandy. That’s a city in provincial Sri Lanka. It’s famous for its Buddhist temples.”

“Oh yeah, Noguchi said something about you living there. So is that why you’re back in Japan?”

“Didn’t that come up on the news yesterday?”

“Yeah, I think I saw it online. Wasn’t on the news on TV, though.”

“Not surprising, if no Japanese people were injured. Stuff like this doesn’t often make the primetime news.”

That was certainly true. Still, there had to be lots of migrant workers from Sri Lanka in Japan, right? It wasn’t like I had expected my classmates to be perfect experts on the subject, but these reactions were more subdued than I had imagined. I was kind of surprised.

I looked down at the table. The others must have thought I was done speaking, because they all picked up the conversation around me.

“You’re something else, Nakata. A real go-getter. With that resume, you could go for being a jewelry dealer or a civil servant. The choice is yours, huh? You even passed the first round of the exam already.”

“Anyway, what’s the deal with your...boss? The guy’s got some unusual taste, huh? Are you his only ‘intern’ or what?”

“...As far as I know, yes.”

“Whoa. So if you quit, that’ll be a huge blow to the company, huh? Is this one of those jobs where you basically can’t leave?”

“No, it’s not really like that. I’m not sure how to describe it. Uh...”

How could I explain so they’d understand? That is, how could I define my relationship with Richard? He called us friends in Provence, which thrilled me, but I knew my drinking companions would never believe me if I said that. Not when he was doing me favors left and right without me repaying him. So what else could I say?

“Well, it’s kind of like he really cares about me. I’m someone special to him.”

That was about the best I could do. I gave the table another stiff smile to try and breeze past the awkwardness, but it didn’t work. The table went so quiet it was almost uncanny. My classmates’ eyes bored into me in a way that made me feel uncomfortable.

“He ‘cares’ about you? With, like, money and gifts and stuff?”

“I don’t know if I’d go that far.”

“So, he’s letting you be the big man? Only takes off the mask and lets his guard down around you, huh? That kind of deal?”

“...I don’t know. Maybe. That’d be nice, I guess.”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Maaan, even back when we were in school, I always thought you were kinda pushing it with this guy.”

“What’s your relationship with this dude? Wait, am I allowed to ask that? This doesn’t make it a sensitive topic, right?”

“No, no, no! You have the wrong idea.”

This conversation was rapidly taking a turn for the weird. And this wasn't the first time, either. The way I explained my feelings for Richard to Tanimoto had led her to cast unfair judgment on our relationship. This latest mess-up was undoubtedly my fault, too. But how else was I supposed to put it? How could I explain that a real British aristocrat cared for me without anyone getting the wrong idea? No matter what I said, I feared it wouldn't go how I wanted it to.

I could feel the sweat trickling down my face as I searched for an answer. Just then, a person down at the other end of the table spoke up. "Hey."

Idzuka.

He hadn't spoken throughout this entire conversation, but I was glad he'd stepped in now. Maybe he was throwing me a bone as a fellow person who studied abroad.

"The whole time you were talking, I kept wondering something. Can't you just cut to the chase and say Nakata's his boss's kept man?"

Huh? What? I froze. What the heck was he saying?

Idzuka had long since finished his beer and was now nursing a glass of sake. He swirled it around in his glass and then looked at me with something like pity in his eyes.

"Um... No, I'm not. His kept man. At least, I, uh, certainly don't think so..."

My Japanese felt so stiff and awkward, I could have been in baby's first language class. A is for apple, B is for bear.

Everyone else in our group went quiet. I wished one of them would come to my rescue and ask Idzuka if he was off his rocker. But no one did. Why were they silent? The sweat was really pouring down now.

Idzuka took another gulp of cold sake. The guy sitting next to him tried to get him to stop, but he took no notice of his pal.

"At the most basic level, an employer and employee have a give-and-take relationship, right? You put in the labor, and in return, your employer gives you

a paycheck. You get paid a thousand yen an hour, and you do a thousand yen's worth of work. But you're telling me your boss pays you to work on improving yourself? That only happens when your employer has some kind of interest in your talent. Actually no, it's not even that—he's interested in *you*, right? That sounds super creepy to me. What'll happen to you if your boss gets bored of you someday? Won't you just get put out on the street like a dog?"

The room seemed to freeze over. I wished anyone, *anyone*, would speak up and say something.

If this conversation were in English, what would I say? English-speaking Seigi Nakata reacted to things differently than Japanese-speaking Seigi Nakata. I was more forceful and aggressive in English than I was in Japanese, and I tended to speak my mind more. English-speaking Seigi would probably say, "What the hell are you talking about? Me, Richard's kept man? That's kind of rude. You shouldn't say that to someone you barely know. I mean, you wouldn't want me saying that about you, right? What's the big idea? Did I do something to offend you?" All of this would be said in a casual register, of course—English didn't stand on ceremony as much as Japanese did.

But what about Japanese-speaking Seigi? What was the right thing to say in Japanese?

Once again, I was stumped. The eyes trained on me stung. The ball was in my court, but even after racking my brain, I couldn't come up with a better answer than another awkward smile.

"Um... I don't know. I've never considered that before. I mean, I'm working pretty hard and all. With all these mandatory business trips and learning Sinhala and everything."

"Where I work, I have people lording it over me every day that I didn't graduate from frickin' University of Tokyo. And you call studying on fancy cruise liners 'working pretty hard.' That really chaps my hide. Look, I'm sorry I can't set a better example for you, okay? I'm just jealous. Yeah, I'm jealous! I'm nasty

and mean, that's all."

"H-hey, no, there's no call for that. It's just, um..."

"Idzuka, cheer up. You're doing fine, man. Seriously, you have it super rough with all your older colleagues harassing you all the time."

"Yeah. I'm grateful you were able to make it out here today, even."

"Uh-huh. Hey, tell us what you've been up to lately."

Everyone tried to soothe Idzuka's ruffled feathers. I accepted an apology, letting the insults become water under the bridge. Strictly speaking, I didn't think an apology absolved him of his nastiness, but maybe you couldn't say that if you were Japanese. Even if I tried to bring it up, I knew I'd have to do so in a roundabout manner. Problem was, the right way to do so had slipped my mind.

Someone asked me what I wanted to drink for round two. Honestly, I didn't want any more beer. I missed the sugary-sweet nonalcoholic ginger beer left behind in my house in Kandy. I would even take a coconut, the kind you could buy anywhere and then slice open with a knife. Thinking back on that made me wonder how Jiro was doing.

"Hey, Nakata, you okay? Oh, yeah, yeah. I get it. This place's too cheap for you, huh? I mean, it's a chain bar."

"Shut up, that's not true at all. It's nice to have Japanese flavors again."

"Man, what I wouldn't give to be in your shoes. Missing the taste of home!"

"Right? But there's no hope for us. We're not Nakata."

Yamanaka laughed, but Noguchi grimaced behind him. Even so, he wouldn't meet my eyes.

Oh. Okay. I got it. No one wanted to stick up for me because that just wasn't how things worked at this party. Everyone here had the shared understanding that I was the bad guy. My role was the worldly traveler returning home to look down his nose at everyone else. I was supposed to be a jerk. Deep down, they probably sympathized with Idzuka more than me.

Once I understood that, everything else was easy. I had to leave this party, and soon. Feigning an incoming work call, I stepped outside and pantomimed a conversation in Sinhala before ducking back in to apologize and beg off with a forced grin.

At that point, they no longer cared about me. If only I could have said the same.

I said my goodbyes, smiled, and left. How much was the bill again? I only had one beer. I wasn't exactly sure how much that cost, so I gave the person at the counter a thousand yen. It was a small-enough sum of money that I didn't care if it actually cost less and they were just pocketing the change. Still, I was mostly sure they weren't. This was Japan, after all.

Yeah. This sure was Japan.

It was seven-thirty by the time I stepped outside. The sun had gone down, unsurprisingly. Shimbashi was a hop, skip, and a jump away from Ginza, and before my thoughts could catch up, my feet were already on their way there. *Yeah, you know what? Let's just walk. Let's just go to Ginza. Let's go somewhere I like. A place where the past coexists with the dazzling present.*

It wouldn't take that much time. It was only maybe a fifteen-minute walk past billboards for *gyudon* restaurants, coffee chains, and loan services. And there it was. A world I knew so well. Or one I thought I knew well, but—

"What is this?"

Ginza Six? Well, it was in Ginza Rokuchome, *Roku*—six. Got it.

The new, futuristic building loomed across the street from the Uniqlo. I never knew it existed until now. Back when I was running constant shopping errands in Ginza for desserts, this plot of land had been home to a Matsuzakaya department store. But, come to think of it, I recalled them closing a while ago for remodeling. This must have been the finished product.

A completely unfamiliar high-rise in a place I knew like the back of my hand.

Thought I knew like the back of my hand.

I needed a minute to get my head on straight.

After enough time had passed that I felt sort of prepared to face the unknown, I walked into the building that had once been a Matsuzakaya. It was bright inside. The mall was filled with stores selling luxury brands, and all the non-Japanese people milling around reminded me of a duty-free shop in an airport. Still, it wasn't like everyone was a foreigner. I saw Japanese people, too. The air smelled fragrant and sweet.

I took an escalator up to find a modern art installation hanging from the ceiling. I wasn't here for a particular reason, just to kill some time, so I figured I'd go all the way up to the top floor for lack of anything better to do. The map said the place had a rooftop garden.

The escalator didn't go all the way to the roof, so I asked how to get there.

Oddly, I got a response in English.

"You can take the elevator on the south side."

"Thanks," I said back. In English.

"You're welcome." In English.

As I rode the elevator up, I thought, *That was nice of you and all, but you really didn't need to use English for my sake.*

The garden started just beyond the elevator doors. As the sky above greeted me, I felt like I'd stepped into a full-blown park. A checkerboard of tile flooring. A pool with running water. Plants and shrubs. And beyond the garden, the night lights of Tokyo. The smell of the flowers reminded me of the Kandy Spice Garden, which made me feel like I was starting to lose my mind. Maybe the jet lag was to blame for that, too.

Against the background sound of the running water, I sat down on a bench and placed a call. I wasn't feeling sorry for myself so much as wondering what was wrong with me. What was I supposed to do at a time like this? Call Richard.

He'd told me that so many times my ears were sore from hearing it.

With my thumb, I pulled up my call history and scrolled through it until I found him. Then I hit "Redial."

He picked up on the fifth ring. "What is it, Seigi?"

Richard. Richard. Oh, Richard, Richard, Richard. I said his name to myself a good thirty times. Where was he? Not in Japan, I knew that much. *Étranger* was closed today. Had Saul not informed me of this beforehand, that would have been the first place I looked.

For a few moments, I couldn't get any words out. I knew he wouldn't mind if we just sat there in silence, but I didn't want to be silent. I simply couldn't make the words come out. That is, in Japanese.

As full of shame as I was, my mouth started flapping. But not in Japanese. In English.

"Hey, Richard. Something really strange is going on. I'm Japanese, right? And I've lived my whole life in Japan, but for some reason, I'm having trouble speaking Japanese. When the words come, they don't match what I'm thinking anymore. It's like Japanese can't keep up with what's going on in my head."

In English.

It was strange. All I did was switch languages, but now the words came gushing out like water from a faucet. I must have looked odd to anyone watching. My English didn't sound like that of a native speaker, and my facial features clearly marked me as Japanese. Yet here I was on the roof of a Ginza department store, bemoaning my inability to speak Japanese. It was enough to make people think something was wrong with me.

But tonight in the rooftop garden, there was no one around except for me and a non-Japanese tourist.

I kept babbling on in broken English.

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. It just startled me, and I really wanted to talk to

someone.”

Richard’s response was so simple.

“As it turns out, I am quite familiar with this sensation.”

His elegant English was easy to comprehend. But the phrase he used: *Quite familiar*. What could he possibly mean by that?

Before I could ask, the man who my drinking buddies suspected of “keeping” me continued speaking. Me, Richard’s kept man. The thought was hysterical.

“As I’m sure you are aware, English possesses more non-native speakers than any other language in the world. If you encounter an English speaker, it would be a poor assumption to think they come from Britain, America, or Australia. Using this global language imbues us with a shared identity, so to speak. English gives us a way to connect with those who speak languages that we do not. When we communicate in English, we automatically wrap our ideas in a shell of empathy for our fellow human beings.”

That made sense. Now that I thought about it, no one had ever criticized my English before, which I doubted had anything to do with my command of the language. Rather, the world was so full of people trying their very hardest to learn English that labeling someone’s English as good or bad was kind of pointless. It really all boiled down to one thing: Can you communicate? Alternatively, can you get the right answer on an English exam?

English was saturated with ideas like that. One might even say English was kind enough to meet you where you were. Maybe that was what Richard meant by a shell of empathy.

And maybe this was why I wanted to default to English when dealing with difficult emotional issues.

When I told Richard that, he responded, “Bravo.”

The answer he always gave me. I felt like Jiro getting a pat on the head.

Richard wasn’t done yet.

“I’m always well acquainted with how it feels when your mother tongue refuses to come out. As your teacher, I am enormously pleased with your progress in English, but I cannot claim you have reached the level of a native speaker. You must know this as well as I do. You cannot read the British newspaper *The Guardian* cover-to-cover yet, can you? But speaking in another language makes it easier to shed unnecessary elements. We find ourselves capable of expressing that which does not exist, that which is inexpressible. Your command of Japanese is too vast. You have too many words at your employ when you speak in your native tongue. This is why you may, at times, find yourself at a loss for words in Japanese. Such is the fate of the language learner.”

Such is the fate of the language learner. Which meant that this was happening to me purely because I was studying foreign languages.

As I persisted in butchering English by breaking it into Japanese-sounding syllables, Richard laughed at me. Over time, the gap between Japanese-speaking Seigi Nakata and English-speaking Seigi Nakata was slowly closing, as if spanned by a bridge. To me, Richard was a bridge. Not in the sense that he let me walk all over, but rather that he stood across the river and advised me how to join him on the far side.

“Perhaps I should not have said ‘Such is the fate of the language learner.’ At any rate, I know this feeling well. I even decided to give it a name.”

“A name?”

“Yes. Would you like to hear it?”

“Sure.”

“Étranger.”

He didn’t speak it with a final elongated vowel. It was a French word, but he pronounced it like it was Japanese: *etoranje*. Maybe *etoranje* was best classified as a Richard word, actually.

I didn't have to ask to know what it meant. *Stranger*.

"It is the sensation that you are lost within yourself. You feel as if you are about to suffocate and drown in a sea of words. If you, too, feel like an *étranger*, then welcome. This sea is one I know very well. It is an old, dear friend of mine. At times, it is a storm-racked prison, and at other times, it is my emergency shelter. Might I ask how you find it so far?"

"Really, really difficult," I answered honestly.

I could hear Richard stifling a chuckle as he continued, his words tumbling off his lips. Had he been drinking? Probably not, but there was a deeply gentle quality to his voice tonight.

"Now, it's nothing to be so frightened of. You already know how to swim, don't you? Your predicament will improve in due time, but if you are especially concerned, I advise you to leave the television or radio on. Let your ears soak up the language. It's a slapdash solution, but it will work. If you do not need to rush, take it slowly and savor this sensation. You will find many things sinking to the bottom of the ocean that will become your flesh and blood."

Then came his reminder.

"You are always welcome to call again if you ever find yourself in another difficult patch. I'll be waiting for you."

The voice he used was so kind that I wanted to try and squeeze out a few words of Japanese. To me, "Thank you," wasn't the exact same thing as "*Arigato*." The nuance was different. So, which one fit best here? Which indeed?

"Hey, Richard? *Arigato*."

"Oh, is this Japanese I hear? You don't need to force yourself, Seigi. But you are very welcome."

"I wish I could switch between languages half as fast as you."

"Being multilingual from childhood will do that to you. You, on the other

hand, have spent much of your life with nothing but Japanese at your disposal. However, you have made brilliant progress these past few years. You should take pride in your accomplishments.”

“I know, I know. I’m happy with my growth, too. But we don’t say ‘I’m proud of myself’ in Japanese. It would be weird to say out loud. People would ask me if I’m dubbing a foreign TV show.”

“They might, but that doesn’t change the pride you feel deep inside. Does it?”

He was saying I could keep it hidden so long as I knew, deep down, that I had something within me that sparkled like a gem.

Richard switched back into his native language and repeated his question. I felt warm inside. Touched.

So I, too, wanted to respond in my mother tongue. *“Arigato.”*

“You’re quite welcome. Well now, tell me. How is it to be back in Japan again?”

“It’s incredible. Did you know they built a high-rise called Ginza Six? It has a garden on the roof and everything.”

“I did. Is this your first time going? They have a splendid assortment of treats for sale in the basement.”

“Of course the Emperor of Sweets would know. Let me guess. Do you already have a favorite store here?”

“Several. Why don’t you try something new yourself?”

“I’ll think about it if they have ice cream. It’s so hot in Japan. Honestly, I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Forgive my impertinence, but this is common knowledge for any foreigner who visits Japan. Well, we never know the worth of water until the well is dry, as they say. No doubt you’ll find a dizzying assortment of ice cream options to choose from. Enjoy. And my apologies, but I will be arriving at my destination momentarily.”

“Huh? Wait, where are you? Did I catch you in the middle of something?”

“I was driving. Don’t worry; I had you on Bluetooth. Now, I’m afraid I must be going.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate it. Be careful out there now.”

He hung up.

I wondered where he was, since Richard never mentioned it. Maybe he was whizzing through the huge Texas desert or speeding through Germany for a mineral show. I knew why he hadn’t told me. If he judged that my mental health was seriously in a bad state, he could announce that he was on his way and I’d have no excuse to turn him down for politeness’ sake. That had happened three times during the period he was living in a hotel in Tokyo, and I felt bad he went to such lengths on my behalf. But at the same time, I felt just as thrilled that he came running for me.

“ ... ”

What would it be like to be a kept man? I could only imagine. After all, it wasn’t a job. You couldn’t add “kept man” to your resume. Taken to its extremes, I supposed being a kept man could be defined as relying on your partner’s financial support without you doing anything in return. Even so, I doubted the kept man of a multimillionaire received half the things I did.

It all came down to the complexity of human relationships. Maybe it was dumb and insensitive to try to figure out how to label the relationship I had with Richard.

I stretched, told myself I could worry about all that later, and took a lap around the garden. I discovered a shrine to Inari tucked away in a corner, which made me feel happy. It had to have been here from the Matsuzakaya days.

Then, I took the elevator back down and discovered that the Emperor of Sweets was right. This place really was a dessert-filled paradise that took my breath away. It was heaven, and I was spoiled for choice. Everything looked so

delicious I could barely believe my eyes. In that sense, it kind of reminded me of Ginza as a whole.

I waited in line with all the young women stopping in on their way home from work, some of them probably younger than me. I mean, I was no longer right out of university. After a long, agonizing ordeal, I finally gave up on the matcha soft serve in favor of a popsicle studded with fruit chunks. Just like my boss, desserts could make any weary soul feel better.

Later, I took the subway to my transfer station and called Mr. Nakata, who kindly agreed to pick me up at Machida Station. This coincided perfectly with the schedule that we had previously agreed on. I decided not to tell him I'd left the drinking party early. However, when Mr. Nakata saw me, he was so overcome with emotion that he burst into tears. I joined in, and in the end, I wound up telling him everything.

I was a mess today. Maybe I could pin that on the jet lag, too.

At any rate, Mr. Nakata and I had a do-over of the drinking party, sitting down across from each other with beers in our hands. These, however, were nonalcoholic. And they tasted great.

"I know it's been tough for you, but, Seigi, know that I'm always on your side. I'll support you no matter what you want to do."

"I think you're being a little too nice to me."

"No, you deserve it. You're a good, hardworking kid. Too hardworking. You got that from your mom. You deserve an old man spoiling you once in a while."

"You don't need to treat me like I'm a baby, 'old man.'"

"You keep rubbing it in, you'll make me mad."

"Oh, shut up."

This didn't feel like a homecoming. While Mr. Nakata was back from his long stay overseas and I was in Sri Lanka, Hiromi had moved to a different rental in the same city. She used to live alone in her old place, and barely went home at

all, since she was so busy as a nurse. But now she lived with her husband, and she cared a lot more about security. A change in lifestyles was only natural.

Her third-floor rental was all but brand new. It wasn't a very big place, but it had autolocking doors and a dishwasher in the dining area, like Hiromi had always wanted. It was impressive. Most impressive of all was that Hiromi actually bought herself something she'd been talking about wanting for years. For as long as I'd known her, Hiromi had always stubbornly refused to do anything to make herself happy. Well, at least up until she married Mr. Nakata.

It was my first time in the new place, but I already liked being there.

Mr. Nakata sat on a low upholstered couch as he looked me up and down. I sat cross-legged on the floor in front of him, with some dried mango snacks—a souvenir I'd bought—lying between us.

I waited for Hiromi to get up and leave her own seat before I whispered, "You did a really good job. Hiromi's hard to please."

"Don't I know it. But that didn't stop me from marrying her. Now, how are things with you?"

"...I think I'm still in shock."

It was hard to wrap my head around the fact that the place I'd lived was under martial law. Had any other Japanese person been woken by smoke and gunshots, they would probably have reacted the same way I did.

A sympathetic smile crossed Mr. Nakata's tanned face. He was as powerfully built as the day I had met him, but I had never found any part of him intimidating. I loved that about him.

"I lived near Jakarta for a long time, and terrorists bombed the area twice. Blowing up shopping malls and worse... Policemen died, and the companies I worked for sent me home. But I worked with the local guys stationed there, and every time, it felt like I was the only one running away. And that hurt on the inside."

“I suppose those sorts of incidents don’t usually make the Japanese news.” That sounded oddly formal. I tried again. “I mean, we don’t see that sort of thing on TV all that often.”

“You can be formal if you want. You’re still my cute son either way! But I disagree. Plenty of people get news in English on social media, and they’re plugged into that sort of thing. Besides, countries like Japan and England pick up international news all the time, don’t they? And it isn’t like the Sri Lankan government is cracking down on the information, either.”

Mr. Nakata’s take was a new one for me. I wasn’t sure if that was how it worked, and I told him so. He shrugged.

It was funny. When I was with him, I felt like I could talk about anything. Even the things I felt too insecure about to show Richard.

“After the arson, Sri Lanka was cut off from the internet for a while. I still don’t think they have access to international social media. I think that’s because of the government... Well, I guess it’s because they’re intimidated by their citizens. But that intimidates *me*.”

“Yeah, governments can be frightened of their people... Scary stuff, all right.”

“...Honestly, I’m pretty upset at the way I handled this. For a place I was supposed to live in for a year, I really didn’t know the first thing about it.”

“I don’t think I had a good grasp of Indonesia’s problems, either.”

When people weren’t interested in something, he added, it didn’t make a difference if it showed up on the news. They would always remain indifferent to it.

Mr. Nakata smacked his lips, took a hearty swig from his bottle of beer, and then smiled.

“But you would hate to be indifferent, wouldn’t you? I think that’s very cool of you.”

“...I mean, I’d like to be cool someday. Since you’re my dad.”

“Oh, shut up. You’ll make me cry. Shut up, really. I’m sorry. Look, I’m crying already.”

“I’m sorry! Uh, here’s a tissue.”

“Thanks. Hey, don’t you start crying now, too.”

“I can’t help it. It’s just my heart sweating...”

“What are you two doing, blubbering like a couple of idiots? Go to bed! Seigi, do you want to take the futon or the couch? This couch is one of those that can fold out onto a bed. I haven’t tried sleeping on it yet, though, so I couldn’t tell you how comfortable it is.”

“Whichever’s easiest.”

“Stop worrying about what’s easiest, Seigi. This is your house.”

“And you, what are you so emotional for? Don’t tell me you got drunk on nonalcoholic beer, because that makes no sense.”

To myself, I thought, *Wow, I’ve only ever seen things like this on family dramas*. The house was still new to me, and having this scene unfold in my own family felt even newer. I almost couldn’t believe it. But regardless of my belief or lack thereof, it was very real. So I had a quiet cry in the bathroom, pulled the couch out into a bed, and lay down. It felt odd not having any mosquito nets around me. They were essential in Sri Lanka.

My pajamas were blue. Ever since I was a child, Hiromi had always picked out blue clothing whenever she shopped for me. I preferred orange or pink, but I found that difficult to tell her. It wasn’t so easy for me to say I preferred the colors of the padparadscha.

Just then, a blue light lit up the darkened dining area. My phone. I had put it on the charger on the floor when I went to bathe and almost forgot about it. Maybe someone had called me, worried that I left the party so early.

I squatted down and peered at the screen. It wasn’t a phone call after all, but a message. I had set up my phone to give off the same attention-grabbing

notification as calls whenever this particular person messaged me.

It was only one sentence long: *Stick to the plan.*

Short and to the point, but I'd missed this. The last time I'd received a message from this address was back in Kandy. I remembered hearing faraway gunshots as I held Jiro's warm body close to me.

The message's sender bore the same name: Vincent.

"Got it," I texted back. *And send.* When the read receipt came up, I found myself gritting my teeth. Was I nervous? No, not really. If anything, I think I was trembling with anticipation.

Stick to the plan. Well, the plan was for me to spend only a short time in Japan. By the next afternoon, I was on a plane en route to Hong Kong.

 The Second Country:
Hong Kong + 

LET'S TALK, said the message.

It came when I was living in the house in Kandy, and I was in no state to make a proper decision. There was arson happening outside, the news was blaring angrily, and even Jiro was pacing around in worried circles. The message was only the cherry on top.

With that subject line, there was no mistaking who had sent me this message—even though I needed to talk to Richard, Saul, and Mr. Nakata just as badly.

I was so stressed I sent back a rude reply.

What the heck are you thinking? I'm dealing with an awful situation over here. Haven't you seen the news?

I had wanted to talk to Vince for ages now. When I learned on the cruise ship that he had once worked for Richard, I had the naive hope he might give me advice for my future. Then I learned he was helping a rich girl named Octavia exact her “revenge” against Richard and his family, and I wanted to talk to him to demand answers. What was he trying to do?

But Vince only showed up to save me from trouble—always clad in a smart suit or phoenix jacket, with his fashionably brown-dyed undercut—before vanishing as quickly as he appeared. He was like a *deus ex machina*, but one I wanted to tell, “Thanks, but could you cut the BS?” and slap with a fan, like in a comedy show. I’d asked him to talk to me many times, and he’d ignored every single request.

And *now* he was being communicative? What was his damage? This was an emergency. The country I lived in seemed to be coming down around my ears. I usually prided myself on not being too self-centered, but this was the one time when I wanted to be self-centered so badly it hurt. *Time and place, Vince! Please!*

The stress of the past six months and all my anxiety over the currently unfolding situation came to a head and exploded in my response to his

message. Still, that kicked me into action. Forget Vince. I needed to contact my loved ones.

I still didn't have a clear picture of what was going on, but maybe my friends and family could fill me in on the news I couldn't catch in Sri Lanka. And they did. By placing dozens of calls, desperately searching the web, and occasionally snatching a break by skimming the comments flooding my blog, I managed to get through that first day.

The military was called out to quell the riot, but the government placed us all under curfew come nightfall. The first night, it applied to all of Sri Lanka. In subsequent days, only Kandy was under curfew. I wondered what would happen if I broke it. I was curious, but not inclined to try it for myself.

Once I finished contacting everyone, I gave my phone a break. It had already eaten up two full charges in one day. I ate some of my stockpile of preserved food and petted Jiro.

Then, just after midnight, I remembered Vince's message. Now that I was calmer, I realized this was exactly what I'd been hoping for all along. I knew I shouldn't have responded to him so rudely, but what was done was done. Vince was always quick to know everything, so he must have known about my stressful situation.

I opened my phone and checked my messages one more time. Much to my annoyance, he still hadn't responded to my questions. Wasn't he the one who wanted to talk? This was getting kind of frustrating.

Hey, I can see the read receipt, so don't act like you never got my message. Let's talk! In case you lost it, here's my number. Yup, same one as always.

Still no answer. Maybe time zones were to blame. I didn't know where in the world he could be. Vince had shown up in France and the Caribbean, so he could be in Alaska, Argentina, or pretty much anywhere for all I knew.

I was tired, so I called it a day and went to bed. Then, at 2 a.m., I finally got a phone call. There was no caller ID, just a number, but I already knew exactly

who it could be: a certain someone whose name started with V. I cursed myself for sending him my phone number without a second thought.

The moment I answered the call, I shouted, “Can’t you cut me a break? I’m exhausted!”

Whoops. Even if I was grouchy about him waking me up, that didn’t justify me yelling at him. The last thing I wanted to do was owe him an apology.

But then...

“Sir, is this your first time in Hong Kong? Why don’t you take a taxi around Victoria Peak tomorrow? I’d be happy to drive you.”

Oops. My taxi driver’s words pulled me back to the present. Right. This was Hong Kong, not Sri Lanka under martial law. I was on a highway going from the airport to my hotel. The driver spoke English quickly and a little idiosyncratically.

Try as I might, I always zoned out whenever I thought about the arson. My nerves must have been completely fried. When I remembered everything in such painful detail, it was difficult to distinguish reality from the flashbacks.

I smiled back vaguely and answered in English.

“No thanks. I’m half here for work.”

“Half? So you’re only half here for fun? What a shame.”

“It’s okay, actually. That’s just how I roll these days. I don’t really want to be all work or all play anymore.”

“Ah, my bad. I didn’t understand what you meant at first on account of my English. My daughter goes to college in Canada, but I’m pretty rusty myself. Anyway, you’re sightseeing tomorrow, I hope?”

“My travel plans are packed, so I’m afraid I can’t. Sorry.”

“That’s too bad.”

Everything moved fast at Hong Kong International Airport. It probably helped

that I arrived in the evening, when it wasn't as busy, but even so, it took less than thirty minutes for me to step off the plane and make it to a taxi. And that was even with currency exchange.

When I found my taxi in the airport's waiting zone, a person dressed like a security guard asked me if I knew where I was going. I said the name of my hotel, and the security guard printed out two receipt-like things from a handheld machine that showed directions to the hotel and a rough estimate of the cab fee. The driver got one, and I got the other. *Amazing*, I thought. This must be to prevent clueless tourists from getting ripped off by illegitimate taxis.

The paper claimed it would be a fifteen-minute drive to the hotel. During that fifteen-minute ride, the only things to see were endless processions of high-rise apartments towering against the night sky. They reminded me of a type of stony-iron meteorite called pallasites, which had olivine—peridot—in them. Pallasites were rare, pretty stones, and popular with collectors. I'd once been shown a picture of them in a café in Shinjuku Station.

The lighted windows of the apartment dwellers glowed orange in the huge, cliff-like buildings. The orange parts were like the peridot, and the walls were the iron, just like in a cross-section sample of pallasite. I was also surprised by the sheer height of the apartments, and the staggering number of windows. There were tons upon tons of them, all arranged in a never-ending sequence of rows and columns. The ceiling height of each story seemed lower than most Japanese apartments, which made it feel like the developers wanted to pack in as many people as possible.

We turned off the highway into a commercial area filled with trucks and people loading and unloading massive quantities of cardboard boxes. My hotel was in a neighborhood called Mong Kok. It was a business hotel that didn't strike me as either particularly old or noteworthily new. For a place I had booked at the last minute, it wasn't too shabby.

I woke up the next morning at 6 a.m. and set out for the place I had been told to go to. Being in a new country and not experiencing jet lag was a fun, new

sensation.

I picked up the subway at Mong Kok Station. The news bulletins on the stations' billboards were written entirely in Chinese, but, oddly enough, I could understand the gist of them from the characters. It also surprised me to learn that the station stop named 太子 (which I read as *taishi*) was known as "Prince Edward" in English. Hong Kong had been a British territory up until the end of the twentieth century, I remembered.

The escalators that led down to the subways were so much faster than Japanese escalators that they spooked me. They reminded me a lot of the escalators on the London Underground.

I then rode a subway line marked in green called the Kwun Tong Line all the way to its last stop: 調景嶺. I wanted to read those characters as *choukeirei*, but the Roman alphabet over the text spelled out "Tiu Keng Leng." I read the name falteringly. It had to sound much better when spoken by a Hong Kong - native. I would have to find someone and ask them to correct my pronunciation.

Following the announcement that came over the loudspeaker, I rose from my chromium-colored seat and exited the subway car. I took an escalator up to street level, where my field of view suddenly opened up. It looked like I had come out into a huge shopping mall near a stall selling egg tarts. I took the escalator up one more floor and followed the directions on a map until I made it outside into a park area. It wasn't a second-story garden in the station. Instead, the station connected directly to the rooftop park of a shorter apartment complex next to it.

This place was the model of convenience, not to mention enormous and bright. Truly, a modern train station.

The park had lots of amenities, with everything from monkey bars to strength building equipment. There was so much stuff that I had to assume it was all free for anyone to use. As I walked along a path that wound around a tennis court, a

woman in running clothes jogged past me. Just like the area around the airport, I saw enormous skyscrapers everywhere I looked. I felt moved by the hints of life I saw at every window. These weren't commercial buildings but places people lived. The whole area had the feeling of a new development.

To kill time, I wandered around the park and checked out its various sights: a basketball court, a cricket pitch, a paved walking path, a gate with a security guard. I assumed the area past the gate was restricted. So, where to next?

While I meandered, I spotted a section of the park that was ringed by plants. The paths there were much narrower, so I assumed they weren't for running on.

There was a man there. I thought at first that he was rehearsing a dance—but I was wrong. The man, clad in a running shirt and loose pants, was going through a shadow-boxing martial arts routine. Shadowboxing—that was a training regimen where you fought an imaginary opponent. Was he doing *tai chi chuan*?

No. He was too close to his imaginary opponent, and his footwork was as nimble as a cat's. He was practicing an art called *Jeet Kune Do* that I'd seen numerous videos of on YouTube. Bruce Lee, an action star so famous even I knew his name, had pioneered the art. Lee was born in this very place: Hong Kong.

I stood in the shade of a tropical tree and watched the man drip sweat as he fought his invisible opponent. He never let up on his onslaught. Really, it seemed like this was never going to be over. Who was he imagining fighting? Eventually, I grew tired of waiting, and I called out.

"Hey there. It's Seigi."

The man turned his head at the sound of my voice and saw me. It was Vince. Vincent Lai.

His face was hilarious. With his eyes opened so wide in alarm, I could see the whites below his large irises.

Then I realized he was attacking me, and I reflexively brought my arms up to head height. Wait. He wasn't punching me. He was kicking me. Oh no. This man was as much of a martial arts master as he looked. His leg moved like lightning, but he stopped moments before impact, barely touching my arm with the back of his leg. As much as I was annoyed that he'd attacked me, I was also impressed.

"Watch it, that's dangerous. I came all the way from Japan to see you, so it wouldn't hurt you to be a little nicer."

"...Why are you here?"

"Oh, well, you know. It's a small world."

"I'm asking you, what are you doing here?"

"I got a tip-off."

Vince's brow furrowed into deep wrinkles as sweat continued to trickle down his face.

"From whom?"

"Promise me you won't be mad if I say?"

"I'm not going to ask again. Who told you I was here?"

I was getting nowhere. Oh well. I guess I had no choice but to spill the beans.

"Marian. I met up with her."

His wife. But I didn't have to say that part out loud. Vince's face turned ashen immediately. I hadn't known he could look like that.

"...She's worried about you, you know."

I let my guard down for only a moment, but Vince used that opportunity to grab me by the collar. It was so fast my eyes couldn't keep up. I shivered. This wasn't a martial arts move. He was simply grabbing me like he was about to hit me. I felt scared.

He jabbed at my collarbone with a finger.

“What did you do to her? How do you even know about her?”

“Calm down, please!”

“If you say the wrong thing, you’ll be sorry.”

“Look, I’ll talk, I’ll talk!”

“Spit it out before I snap. Now!”

“She reached out and messaged me!”

He responded with an explosive breath that sounded like he didn’t believe me. He was confused, a feeling I knew all too well. I still felt confused myself.

Vince took a few steps back, and I fixed my messed-up collar. I started to formulate a plan to protect myself if he tried to pull that same trick again, but Vince had evidently lost all taste for a fight. As the sweat continued to drip off him, he looked down at a spot near my feet and mumbled, “But what for?”

“Let me show you the message.”

I pulled my phone out of my pocket, unlocked it, opened my messaging app, and passed the phone to Vince. Once he saw it with his own eyes, it would all make sense.

I screamed into the phone, “Can’t you cut me a break? I’m exhausted!”

The person on the other end of the line gasped. Was that a girl? It wasn’t a grown man like Vince, that was for sure. She sounded like a tiny, frightened animal. Who was this? Who had contacted me using Vince’s address? Could it be...

“...Octavia, is that you?”

If she was a girl connected to Vince, that only left one possibility.

And yet—

“Hello. I’m... You can call me Marian. I’m Vincent Lai’s wife. I’m in New York.

You're Japanese, correct? Do you know my husband?"

It was a bit stilted, but her Japanese was grammatically sound. I felt myself transported back to the cruise in the Caribbean when Richard had shown me that photo of Vince on his wedding day. He was dressed in his finest against the backdrop of a Hong Kong night with his equally plump wife at his side. That photo, which had been taken before Vince lost a bunch of weight, showed his wife as a young woman dressed in red. Her facial features made me think she was Asian, but other than that, I didn't remember much about her.

So, the girl on the phone was his wife? Wait a minute. Hold on. I thought Vince used his personal address to keep in touch with me. He even said he hadn't given it to Richard. Why would he let his wife use something this hidden? It made no sense. No one managed their information like that in this day and age.

Although I might have been an English-speaking Japanese person, my language skills didn't extend to Cantonese. So I asked Marian if she preferred to talk in English or Japanese, and she answered, "English" in the same tongue. Her accent was a bit different than Vince's. If anything, it sounded similar to Mr. Nakata's. There was a no-nonsense, brisk tone to her voice.

After her one-word response, she added, "I'd like to talk. So please, talk to me."

I tried to converse with her to the best of our mutual abilities over the phone. But I found her difficult to understand, and she kept breaking down in tears and hanging up. With preparations for returning to Japan keeping me busy, I found it difficult to make time for her. Even if we kept calling, I wasn't sure we'd ever get through to one another.

After giving it some thought, I decided to make a detour to New York on my way back to Japan. Sri Lanka to Japan with a stop in New York, huh? That trip had me circumnavigating the globe. *I get to personally confirm that the earth is round*, I mused to myself on the flight as I listened to the adorable little blonde

girl in the seat next to me sing a song.

Saul was the only one I told about stopping by the United States on my way back to Japan. I told Mr. Nakata I would be a bit late coming home, but not to worry, and he passed that message on to Hiromi. And as for Richard... Well, I stewed over it quite a bit, before finally electing not to tell him anything. I still remembered the look on his face when I learned about his falling-out with Vince. When Richard said, “You really haven’t changed,” his smile had been so bright, it looked unnatural.

Richard was always beautiful. Sometimes too beautiful. Of course, this was no more than a hunch, but when I saw the look on his face, I knew something had happened between them.

You really haven’t changed. Or was that only what Richard wanted to believe?

I wondered what Vince thought. Presumably, he was already in contact with Octavia at that time. I also wondered how Richard felt when he saw the video where Octavia promised to bring him to justice, but I could hazard a guess at that. It had probably hurt real bad. If I opened my stupid mouth and said, “Oh hey, Vince’s wife got in contact with me, so I’m going to America,” I might as well be pouring concrete all over the tranquil forest pool that was Richard’s heart. He might even tell me to stop and go himself, and that wouldn’t help me at all.

Besides, I knew he’d find out eventually, one way or another.

This was my first time in New York, and I found it to be more welcoming than I expected. I’d probably just hyped it up in my head, thinking it would be just another city filled with big, impersonal skyscrapers like Roppongi or Shinjuku.

Anyway. New York! One of the biggest, most bustling cities in the world. But it was also a city with quite a lot of history. I wanted to explore the city that had been at the forefront of civilization for over two hundred years, but I didn’t have time for that on this little side trip. In fact, I had less than a day to spend in New York.

Marian was waiting for me at the American Museum of Natural History. It was one of the largest museums in the whole United States and an undoubtedly famous tourist attraction. I passed through an exhibit showing moon rocks in the Earth and Planetary Sciences Halls to find Marian standing at the entrance to the Hall of Gems and Minerals. Having just come back from the jewelry exhibits in the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, this very different treasure trove of rockhounding delights made me grin. What to prioritize: beauty or science? Which aspect they chose to highlight in their displays probably said something about each nation's character.

In any other situation, I would have liked to stop and stare at the rocks on display. But this wasn't the time for that.

Marian wore a black T-shirt and black jeans. She was slightly tanned, with wavy dark brown hair and almond-shaped eyes. She had lost some weight compared to when the photo was taken, but not as much as Vince. Still on the bigger side, but not chubby.

And she trembled when she saw me. I had sent her a photo of me ahead of time, and when she recognized my face, she ran up to me. She looked like she was about to burst into tears. Marian skipped the introductions and jumped right into the conversation.

"What's going on with Vince? Is he alive?"

What an icebreaker.

I had last seen Vince in France in August, a month ago, but I certainly thought he was still alive. He'd seemed in good shape when I last saw him. I told Marian I didn't know him very well, but he was watching out for my boss and me, in his own Vince-ish way. Most likely, he was trying to help us out.

From what I knew, Vince had gotten married at the drop of a hat and left Hong Kong after naming Richard his enemy. The course of his life was so dramatic that I'd wondered if he and his wife were only pretending to be a couple. But when I saw the look on Marian's face, I realized how ridiculous that

was. She clearly hadn't been sleeping well, judging by the dark circles under her eyes and her trembling hands. She was afraid of what I had to say about her husband. If this was an act, it was an Oscar-worthy one.

She dabbed at her streaming eyes and apologized for losing her composure. Then she looked around to make sure we were alone and began yanking her shirt up. I panicked, as anyone would in my situation. Was she going out of her mind with grief? I immediately looked away.

In a trembling voice, she said, "He left me with something very special before he disappeared. Look. You know what I'm saying, don't you?"

"Huh?"

Right in front of the exhibit about California gold, Marian rolled up her shirt for all to see and pointed to her exposed lower belly. I could see it in the reflection of the glass case. A red, vertical line ran down the right side of her abdomen. What was that? A scar from an old wound? No, it was probably a surgery scar. What had happened? And why was she showing that to me?

Wait. *Something very special*. Maybe it was...oh, how did you say this in English? I couldn't think of the right word. I gestured for her to give me a moment and pulled out my phone before I responded.

"Did you have an organ transplant?"

Marian's expression remained grief-stricken as she nodded silently. I was shocked, but all the same...would she please cover up again?

At my flustered request, she put her shirt down and gave me a tiny smile for the first time.

"...What're you smiling about?"

"You're a pretty lighthearted person, Mr. Nakata. Do you get that a lot?"

"Well, sometimes. Sorry, did I make a weird face at you?"

"No, not at all. Your reaction was just very funny. Sorry, I was a little nervous about meeting you. I was worried you would turn out to be scary."

“Yeah, people often say I’m kind of weird. Oh, I don’t mean that in a bad way. I mean, well, maybe they mean it in a bad way. But I’m not a creeper or anything like that.”

Marian giggled.

A group of schoolchildren on a field trip chose that moment to come in. As their teacher started talking to them about the Gold Rush, we let ourselves be pushed out and began walking through the exhibits. This museum was full of expensive-looking mineral samples that would have been the centerpiece at any mineral show. The gemstones were, according to a sign, further inside the hall.

“My husband’s a lot like you,” Marian mentioned offhandedly as we walked, “Sorry?”

“Lots of people call him weird when they first meet him. He’s pretty blunt and doesn’t express his emotions well. But he’s incredibly kind and empathetic whenever anyone’s going through a tough time.”

Marian looked down at her feet while she talked, strewing words like pebbles in our wake.

“I grew up in the Philippines before I married Vince. I left my family and came to work in Hong Kong as a maid when I was fifteen. I worked for his family, the Lais. I was a nurse for Vince’s father before Mr. Lai passed away from heart disease. Then Vince and I got married and came to the US for my surgery. He paid for all of it.”

Marian’s English was slow and faltering, but I chalked that up to a matter of emotion instead of a lack of English skills. Which was no surprise. The story she was telling came as a shock even to someone like me, who was no stranger to being bombarded with information. I’d experienced the same thing plenty of times, like when I learned Richard knew Hiromi and Mr. Nakata, when he and Mr. Nakata met, and when a certain distasteful figure came begging on my

doorstep. I knew perfectly what it was like to feel so shocked and helpless your voice died in the back of your throat—but I felt far worse now than I had in any of those past situations.

Was Vince really the same husband Marian was talking about? To me, Vince was a hip, clever, popstar-like figure who casually showed up to save the day. Vince the popstar, an organ donor? Vince the popstar, paying for all of Marian's medical bills? It was unbelievable. How did all of this happen?

Marian looked at an array of minerals fanned out in a display case, occasionally shooting me glances as she continued her story in her simple English. She was fifteen and Vince eighteen when they met. She hadn't been hired as a nurse to begin with but rather to make meals, clean the house, and perform other similar tasks. This sort of thing didn't happen in Japan, but Hong Kong's British influence left it with a culture where families often had maids. Even these days, with more and more households becoming dual income, there was still plenty of demand for domestic help. Many girls came from the Philippines to work in Hong Kong and send money back to their families, Marian said. Just like her.

She didn't talk about Vince's mother. Vince's father, her employer, owned a jewelry store in the heart of Hong Kong. It mainly sold jade and coral pieces, and Vince was supposed to inherit it someday. However, land prices rose steadily following the handover of Hong Kong and the huge influx of mainland Chinese tourism. This resulted in land sharks threatening to snap up the property, which was when Saul and Richard stepped in to save the day. This much, I knew. So what happened after that?

Marian paused in front of a gem known as the Star of India, the largest star sapphire in the world. She looked at me. Bright bands of gold ran through the blue star sapphire, much like the tears trickling from Marian's brown eyes.

"Before I tell you the rest, I want to make sure of one thing."

"Go ahead, please."

“Mr. Nakata, are you on Vince’s side? You are, aren’t you?”

For a moment, I was stumped for an answer. To Marian, Vince had enemies. Those were, as far as I knew, anyone who opposed Octavia—aka me, Richard, and the rest of the Claremont family. And yet, Vince had come to my aid multiple times. Also, I knew he was only telling me a fraction of the whole story about his falling-out with Richard.

Therefore, it was really only a brief moment before I had my answer.

“Yes. I am.”

“Do you really mean it?”

“I sure think I do. Well, but it’s the other way around. I think Vince is on my side.”

“Your side?”

I nodded.

“I don’t know why, but he’s always helping me.”

She gave me a doubtful, smart-alecky look, but this was the same woman who agreed to meet a total stranger like me even if it was dangerous.

“Oh,” she said. Her voice trailed away into a whisper. “Same as he ever was.”

Inside my head, I could hear another man’s voice saying, “You really haven’t changed.” It took me a moment to come back from that unsettling night on the cruise ship to this museum in New York.

Marian then related to me what happened after Saul and Richard met Vince and took him under their wing. Vince was barely in his early twenties at the time, not much older than I was when I met Richard. He attended college while he worked for them. In Hong Kong’s secondary school—the equivalent of high school in Japan—80 percent of students who graduate are done with school right then and there. Only 20 percent went on to college. Compared to all the fuss in Japan about declining enrollment in universities, the Hong Kong academic system seemed completely different.

“Vince loved academics. He was so smart he could outmatch his university professors. That’s why he enjoyed working for Saul and Richard so much—he called it a stroke of good luck. His eyes would light up, like he was a little kid. He kept telling me about how incredible they were and about all the gemstones and languages he was learning about. It all went over my head, really. But I enjoyed seeing him look so happy.”

It sounded like he was in clover, as the saying went. But I knew that hadn’t lasted long.

Marian started walking again, following the path through the exhibits. Her footsteps were so measured I felt like we were walking back through time—into her story.

Together, we reached the gemstones section and found a placard talking about jadeite. A row of decorative items carved from jade were up on display: a statue of a dancing Buddha, a second statue of one meditating, a carving of a cow with folded legs, and a round object that looked like a sword guard. The stones were of remarkable quality, and the workmanship was excellent. These were all from Asia originally, I assumed. When I imagined the long route they must have followed to make it all the way here to a museum in America, I couldn’t help but whistle, impressed.

I commented on how gorgeous they were, hoping to restart the conversation. Marian didn’t respond to that statement. Her next words came from her own inner world.

“...Vince used money he really shouldn’t have.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Do you know someone named Jeffrey Claremont?”

I bit back my immediate response. I more than knew him. He was like an easygoing older brother to me—but back when I’d first met him, he’d been anything but that. For Richard and I both.

I nodded silently, and Marian turned to face the exhibit to hide the emotion on her face.

“I’ve never met him personally, but he’s the reason that everything went wrong for Vince. He was looking for his...step-brother? Cousin? Something of the sort. Then when he learned that Vince knew this person, Jeffrey Claremont started ordering Vince to pass on information to him in secret. I don’t think Vince could refuse. If Vince said no, Jeffrey Claremont promised to lie to Vince’s employers and say Vince was spying on them. He would have lost his job either way.”

This had all happened back when Richard was working in Hong Kong while on the run from that curse of a will. Jeffrey, seeking to free his family from the seventh earl of Claremont’s will, had chased after Richard, who held the key to that freedom. Meanwhile, Richard had cut all ties with his family and fled from them. Jeffrey hadn’t been choosy about his methods, just as he hadn’t when he first met me.

“Jeffrey Claremont paid Vince a lot of money, from my understanding. Mr. Lai was so sick and required such expensive medication that Vince really needed the money.”

But Vince’s father had passed away all the same. Even with medication, there was sometimes no beating death. That happened a lot, as far as I knew, and no one was to blame.

When I said as much, Marian shook her head emphatically.

“No, you misunderstand. Vince didn’t buy the medication. He never told anyone that he was receiving that money. He put it all away for himself and never told a soul, not even his father. We lived in such a tiny place that there was barely anywhere to hide it, so Vince built a space under the floorboards in my room to stash his checks.”

“ ... ”

“He would wait for me to go out shopping and then hide the money. I

accidentally caught him in the act of moving my bed one day, and then Vince...”

Vince told her that he’d raise her salary if she kept quiet about it. At any rate, these checks could only be cashed by the person listed on the check. So even if Vince was hiding something from his family, Marian didn’t see the harm in keeping it a secret. From then on, Marian hinted, Vince trusted her like she was another part of the family.

“Working for Richard and Saul gradually changed Vince. He was as excited as a little kid about working there at first, but he grew depressed as time went on. I think he couldn’t stand betraying the people he looked up to. He would yell at me sometimes, and he started getting more hostile to everyone. Even his own father! He kept saying that he wasn’t good enough, in every way. I think the only things that weren’t tarnished were his desire to learn and to go out into the big, wide world to test himself. He always said he wanted to leave and go somewhere far away.”

Not good enough in every way. Leaving and going far away. I think I understood how he felt, to some degree. Being around Richard and his overwhelming beauty always left me feeling both happy and incapable of putting too much thought into anything complex. Richard had everything. He was almost perfect. What would it be like to work with him and want to *surpass* him?

Depressing, I imagined. I was luckier than I’d realized, having the skills to run myself ragged finding a mountain of goodies to feed the Emperor of Sweets and tease him about his sweet tooth. But if that hadn’t been the case—if I’d been fixated on all the ways I couldn’t measure up to Richard, instead—I would have gotten myself stuck in a rut.

That being said, I didn’t blame Richard. That was just wrong. Still, you couldn’t have a relationship with someone else if only one person was trying. The moment one person in the equation gave up on the relationship, the dynamic changed. Vince must have been tired of the way things were between them. And when you’re stuck in an unwinnable situation, a huge sum of money can be

a way out. The devil himself couldn't have timed Jeffrey's offer better.

"Vince was always talking about wanting to go to America to study. People in Hong Kong go overseas to study or work all the time, just like in the Philippines. But it's not as common in Japan, is it? I think that's incredible. There's enough work to be had that you don't need to leave your home country to send money back to your family."

"I hear that's changing these days. It's becoming a bit of a fad to take working holidays abroad and whatnot."

"Really? Then I guess it's the same everywhere."

People all around the globe wanted to be somewhere they're not. Somewhere amazing. Somewhere their hard work would pay off. Marian had come to Hong Kong in search of a place like that. She had eight brothers and sisters back in the Philippines, and if she didn't get a job, her only other option was to get married—but being married didn't guarantee a good life. Therefore, she chose to learn Cantonese, go to Hong Kong, and seek work there.

Vince, on the other hand, chose to save his money and go to America. He told Marian he was waiting for his father to die, Marian explained to me in a low voice.

"Because at that point, nothing would tie him to Hong Kong anymore and he could study in America. Of course, he never breathed a word of that to his father."

Eventually, his father did indeed pass away. It was an awful way to put it, Marian muttered, but it was basically negligent homicide. An awful way to put it indeed. Vince was the champion of never talking about his own life. Until I could ask him about it myself, I didn't have the right to pass judgment. I needed information first.

"Vince is studying at a college in America right now, isn't he? He's majoring in business administration—that's what he told me when we first met, anyway."

“He lied to you.”

There was no pause before she told me. Marian looked me right in the eye as she said it. Her own eyes were free of tears now, though still dense with emotion.

“The money’s all gone now. Really, there’s none left. He dropped out of his university in Hong Kong, too—all because I needed to have my surgery in the United States.”

“...That’s the surgery that gave you the scar you showed me, right?”

“Yes, exactly. I had a kidney transplant.”

A kidney transplant. Kidneys, like livers, were called “silent organs” because it was difficult to detect the early stages of anything wrong with them. You might feel slightly fatigued, or a bit anemic, but even when those “slightly”s and “bit”s dragged on for a while, it could be hard to tell you were dealing with a full-blown illness.

Marian said her case was the very same way. She had little time to pay attention to her health, between taking care of the daily housework and Vince’s ailing father. The only two people who saw her every day were Mr. Lai and his son, and neither paid much attention to her. She spent lunch breaks with her friends who worked as maids in the neighboring homes, but those were usually loud, raucous occasions, though they sometimes spread a sheet to one side of the sidewalk and took a nap together. Either way, there was never the right time to have a conversation about her health.

“I only realized I was sick after things had taken a definite turn for the worse with Vince and the shop. He never talked about work anymore, at that stage. And I was busy job-hunting after working for years at the Lais’, because Vince was adamant about going to school in the United States. Yet he looked like death half the time and barely ate. Eventually, I suggested he should see a doctor, and he told me in that blunt way of his: ‘*You* go see a doctor. You look terrible, and you’re always tired these days.’ It’s not uncommon for Filipina

domestic servants to live in poor working conditions. I even had a friend who was crushed and killed under a falling piece of furniture while she lived out of a tiny room in her employer's house. So I thought nothing of being under the weather. More than anything, I simply had no time to think about myself because I was taking care of Mr. Lai around the clock. But when Vince told me that, I felt like I had the old him back. I was so happy that I actually took his advice and went to the doctor. Hong Kong has very high standards of medical care, just like in Japan. And just like in Japan, young people in Hong Kong are usually too busy to see a doctor."

Since Marian was thinking of switching employers and had noticed herself tiring more easily, she went to a public hospital for a checkup. When the results came back, they decided they needed to run more tests. That struck her as odd, but she went back for another examination that she didn't fully understand before she got her diagnosis. Kidney disease. If she couldn't get a new kidney, she would need to have dialysis for the rest of her life.

In simple terms, the kidneys are the organs responsible for producing urine. If they struggle to do so, the body can no longer flush its waste products, and the person with the faulty kidney will need to undergo a treatment called dialysis to artificially clean their blood. Without that, they'll die. People can't live without a way for their body to eliminate waste. To be honest, I only knew this because I looked it up on my phone. I kept having to look up words I didn't know to follow along with the conversation, because I simply didn't have the English vocabulary. Thank goodness for modern conveniences. Throughout the whole conversation, I kept wishing Hiromi were here. She was a nurse, so I could have just asked her.

From there, Marian said, her future looked bleak.

"Surgery would have cost me a lot of money, even if I had it done at the public hospital. And I didn't have a donor. My family lived back in the Philippines, but going home for the procedure wasn't practical, either. The Filipino health care system is nothing like Hong Kong's or Japan's, and the

surgery costs would be different. I didn't have enough saved up to make it work, and I was told it would be difficult to keep working as a maid while undergoing dialysis. I asked the doctors what other options I had, but they didn't say a word."

"...So, what did Vince do?"

"He didn't know anything yet. I wasn't sure whether I should tell him then or wait until I was on my deathbed. But while I was making up my mind, he eventually found out—because I collapsed at home just as all the paperwork for his trip to the US was finalized."

I could imagine it. Marian said the place she shared with Vince and Mr. Lai was tiny. The latter was dead, and a death in the family always sent huge ripples throughout the household. When Grandma died, both Hiromi and I felt like a part of the world died with her. Vince must have been carrying a heavy emotional burden in the aftermath of his father's passing. Even if his father was an unpleasant person to live with, I could only imagine withholding potentially lifesaving money would mean preparing himself to bear that guilt for the rest of his life. I didn't think I could do it if I was in his shoes.

But Vince *had* done it. And, as Marian said, he was ready to go to the United States. That was the depth of his resolve.

To have Marian's health take a turn for the worse in the middle of all that... I imagined Vince had felt like part of his world was ending, too.

"Vince said he'd give me severance pay, but I understood how important this money was to him. I didn't want to be the one holding him back, so I told him to save his money. Then Vince saw the reports from my medical examinations and changed his plans."

Marian simply woke up one day to find Vince laying out a marriage proposal in plain, dispassionate terms. Then, he said, he'd give her a kidney.

"He had the right blood type to give me a kidney, and he was in good health. There was nothing stopping him from being my donor. Therefore, he said, we

should get married and use the money to jump the line in the US healthcare system to have my transplant. I didn't even know where to begin. None of this made sense to me, but I still agreed, because I liked Vince a lot. I'd liked him for a very long time, in fact. I didn't want to leave him if there was a way to avoid that."

"...Did Vince know...?"

"Did he know I liked him, you mean? I think so. We were on pretty friendly terms, after all. But we lived in two very different worlds. Besides, he was so surly. I didn't ever think I stood a chance of marrying him."

That made my jaw drop. Just who was this guy? Seriously, who was he? Did he love her? Did he actually love Marian, and was that why he tried to do all he could to save her before it was too late? Or was he trying to make up for letting his father die? Maybe he felt that losing his last two family members in such a short span of time was his just deserts. Maybe, even if he was able to look the other way and let his father die, he didn't have it in him to do it a second time. Or all of the above. Or none of the above.

I didn't know any of his reasoning, but what was certain was that Marian was just as lost for answers as I was.

She started sniffing again.

"...We got married in Hong Kong. We dressed up in our best clothes and got a photographer and everything. Then, afterward, we underwent surgery in New York. I was slowly losing the color in the tips of my fingers and toes, but that stopped once his kidney started working inside of me. He called it his wedding present for me, and he set me up with a place to live and money for my expenses. But that was it. We never got to live like husband and wife. I've been in love with him for years, but I never had the chance to tell him. I know that may not mean anything to Vince, but... He still sends me money regularly, but he doesn't pick up the phone. Is he doing well? Is he okay?"

I had never had anyone press me for answers about someone's well-being

with such urgency before. Honestly, I had realized that she didn't know what Vince was up to these days the moment she began telling me her story. She was oblivious to everything. After marrying her, taking her to New York, and donating her his kidney, Vince had vanished before her very eyes.

If I had been in her shoes, I would have chased after him. I would have put the word out anywhere Vince had connections and hunted high and low until I found him, be it in Hong Kong or the United States. But recovering from surgery and not having a stable income had to make that harder. Anxiety really could become overwhelming when you felt helpless.

I told her that Vince was okay and doing well. Last I'd seen him, he'd come to rescue me with a flashlight when I fell down a hole.

Marian's expression immediately changed, and she asked what I meant about the hole.

I told her it was a long story, but I basically got pulled into a treasure hunt in France. She didn't really seem to get it, so I decided to skip the rest of the story and only tell her the important parts.

"Vince is helping my boss, Richard, and me. Well...yeah, I think *helping* is the right word."

Which meaning of *help*, I still didn't know. At the very least, he wasn't entirely an enemy. I knew that for certain.

I didn't think Marian was completely satisfied with my answer, but she looked a little bit calmer, no doubt because I kept repeating that he was all right. Even so, I couldn't say she looked particularly happy.

"Mr. Nakata, I think Vince still feels like he owes Richard something. If he thinks it will help Richard, he'll do anything for him. Considering all the kindness he's shown me... Well, of course he'd go to such lengths for Richard."

Once again, I asked her if she hadn't heard from Vince at all. She said he'd told her to contact him for certain things. Her health. Her living conditions. Any

issues that cropped up. Her most recent news. In essence, she could tell him at once if anything bad happened, but he wouldn't tell her what he was up to in return. As information went, it was a one-way street. Marian once got so fed up, she tried lying to him, saying there'd been a fire and begging him to come home, but all he did was send her a large chunk of money to fix it. That put an end to her lying.

"It's truly awful. I'm married to the man I love, and I don't have to worry about dialysis. I'm living in America, for crying out loud! But even with all that, it feels like the whole world has gone grey for me."

"I know. I want to see Vince, too. I really want to meet up and talk with him. The trouble is, where is he?"

"I can make a rough guess, if that helps. When I catch him up on what I'm doing, he sometimes sends me photos back. A flower in France, a shot of the ocean in the Caribbean. Things like that. Maybe it's a fun pastime for him, since he can't be out there posting these photos on social media. It sort of feels like a greeting card, but it also gives me hints about where he is. Whenever he goes anywhere, he usually stays for about a week at most. I imagine he uses the same address to contact you as he does to send photos to me."

"...Speaking of addresses."

That first message: *Let's talk*. That had come from Marian, but it was sent on Vince's private account. Based on what she had said, I couldn't imagine that Vince shared it with her. So how had she used it to get in touch with me? And why me? But first, how?

When I asked her those questions, Marian gave me a sad smile.

"Vince and I are both geeks, you might say. We're mad about machinery. People like to make fun of me by saying Filipinas don't know anything about complex machines, but that's complete baloney. My older brother's a repairman and has been fixing old computers since he was ten. With his help, I can do just about anything with computers...though knowing how to hack into

my friends' accounts might be going a bit too far. Sorry. I was so desperate to find Vince that I was willing to do anything. But I guess that really only works in fiction. You were the top person in his list of recent contacts, so I ended up sending it to you. Still, that worked out for me in the end. I'm really grateful you gave me your phone number."

Didn't that make her a hacker? I told her she was impressive, although I didn't really know what I was complimenting her for. Marian looked down at the floor, apologetic.

"I really shouldn't have done it. Vince knows I'm great with computers, since he was always a total nerd, too. I think he knows I did it but doubts I can actually hunt him down, since my situation doesn't leave much room for flexibility. My prognosis is about as good as it can be, but between complications, medical checkups, and constantly having to run back and forth from the hospital, I'm not completely out of the woods yet."

She looked at me, her eyes filled with determination.

"But that doesn't mean anything. I can't bear to sit here and do nothing."

She really was impressive. Her big, bright eyes and gentle voice belied the way every word she spoke was filled with passion.

"Mr. Nakata, can I ask you a favor?"

I already knew what she was going to ask without her saying it.

"Tell him to come home. Convince him for me."

I nodded, and she broke out into a relieved grin. Then her face took on a slightly worried tint before she left me with one final message for him.

"...I'm not asking Vince to fall in love with me. It's okay, really. I love him enough for the both of us. I know all his favorite foods, his favorite music. I'm a great cook, a fantastic singer, and a hard worker. I'm understanding, I mind my own business, and I'm very neat. I can fix any broken appliance, and I'm a great listener. I know he'll never find a better wife than me anywhere in the world.

And believe it or not, I'm really upbeat and outgoing! I know I can make Vince smile whenever his troubles are too great for him to bear alone. You tell him that if you see him, won't you? Tell him that any hell is heaven so long as he's with me. Tell him I promise to make him happy, so he'd better come home to me."

She bowed deeply and said, "Please!" one more time.

There was so much emotion contained in what she'd said, and I didn't know what to do with it. I was only the intermediary in this situation. A messenger meant to convey her feelings to their true recipient. All the same, it was a serious responsibility.

Marian messaged me again just before I left to go back to Japan, telling me Vince was in Tiu Keng Leng, Hong Kong. She said that was where the Lai family used to live.

I thanked her, fondly remembering another time when I caught a plane based on a similarly vague tip-off.

For a moment, Vince stood there and stared at me in shocked silence. Then he scowled at me with that disaffected smart aleck look I knew so well. But I had one last thing to tell him. Or rather, one last thing to check with him. I needed to hold his patience for a few more moments.

"She gave me something to prove to you that I'm not lying."

"I doubt you could construct a convincing lie anyway."

"Well, thanks. You're calling me honest, aren't you?"

"Honest to a fault, but I was trying to be polite."

"Anyway, here."

I took a jewelry box out of my pocket. Marian had given it to me, along with the cotton wool packed inside to keep the contents of the box safe. I could tell it was very important to her, because she said it was a wedding present from

Vince.

Inside the box was a ring—a coral one, not metal. The first time I saw it, I thought it was imitation coral—but I knew Vince well enough to know he would never give Marian a plastic ring. But that just raised the question of how much it cost. I couldn't even begin to imagine. It was a one-of-a kind item, an enormous chunk of coral hollowed out into the shape of a ring. Honestly, it looked so incredible I thought it might be better off displayed in a Chinese museum. You couldn't resize a ring like this, not when it was carved directly out of the rock.

"You're learning to be a jeweler, aren't you? How's that going for you? Made much progress yet?"

"Shouldn't you be asking what it's like taking my first baby steps to be a jeweler?"

"Maybe so. Either way, do you know what this ring is?"

"...Why are you asking me?"

"I used to work in a jewelry store, too, and I still respect a good conversation before a sale. You started talking to me, so I thought I should talk right back to you."

This was the first time Vince had ever tried meeting me halfway. It was like he had questions for me but needed to create a pretense for himself before he could ask any of them. Why couldn't he just say what he meant? I was starting to understand that this was just how Vince worked, but that didn't help me know how to deal with him.

"What's the matter? Are you telling me you didn't get curious and do any research after she gave it to you? You ought to go into a different line of work. Maybe life as a civil servant is best for you after all."

"Well, the ring is clearly made of coral. The English word for coral comes from a Greek word for red coral, *korállion*. Most corals come from the Mediterranean Sea or off the coasts of Japan, Taiwan, and Hawaii. They're a 3.5 on the Mohs

scale of hardness and easily damageable, like pearls. In terms of the variety, I think this ring is a Cerasuolo coral.”

For most people, the word *coral* probably evoked images of reefs in videos taken by divers. They’re odd creatures that live on rocky shelves underwater, not quite stone and not quite plant life. Coral also features in the kinds of fairy tales that Japanese kids study in junior high, and the complexity of the kanji for its name makes it the nemesis of little kids.

In Buddhism, coral is one of the seven treasures. In real life, it’s an animal related to sea anemones and medusas. It lives underwater and feeds on zooplankton, using nutrients from the sea water and algae to build itself calcium carbonate shells. That means people make jewelry out of what’s basically the coral’s bones. But the corals that make up the reefs shown on TV aren’t the same kinds as the ones used in jewelry. Those are called reef corals. *Jewelry* corals, which live in deeper waters and are usually red or pink, are known as “precious corals.” Their skeletons are sturdier than reef corals, so they can stand up to polishing and careful manufacturing.

Coral can be carved into everything from rose-shaped brooches to animal-shaped scarf pins, which was one of the reasons it was so popular. Precious corals came in different varieties as well: red corals, white corals, and pink Cerasuolo corals. These days, red corals were the most expensive variety in the world. Naturally, that’s because China is the biggest consumer of corals, and red is a very lucky color in Chinese culture. It’s supposed to bring good luck, ward off misfortune, and symbolize celebrations. Chinese brides usually wear red dresses during wedding ceremonies, and coral pairs perfectly with that. Where there’s demand, a supply inevitably emerges. All that being said...

“But this isn’t a red coral. I saw lots of red corals in the jewelry stores on the way here, but those are a deeper red. More like the gates on a Shinto shrine, not this pink color. I was somewhat surprised the first time I saw this ring. You know so much about jade and coral that I wondered how you ended up with one that wasn’t a red coral.”

“Thanks for the commentary on my life choices. Can I return the favor?”

“Okay, okay. I’ll keep my opinions to myself.”

Just as red corals were popular in the Chinese cultural community, pink corals had their own fans in other parts of the world. Like Europe.

“When a coral is a pure pink color, it’s called Angel Skin. That’s a pretty name, don’t you think? They’re carved almost exclusively into lucky charms with very fine craftsmanship. This one is a phoenix. Phoenixes are auspicious in China and, along with dragons, represent the emperor. In some situations, they can also represent the empress. And this is a swallow, which represents fertility. The bat, for good luck. The gourd, for longevity. It’s very well done. It must have cost you a fortune.”

The coral rings in jewelry stores sold for less than their jade counterparts. When I had looked in the front window of one shop with a red signboard, I saw that jade rings cost anywhere from a thousand to two thousand Hong Kong dollars while corals started at five and went up to eight thousand. Eight thousand Hong Kong dollars was around one hundred twenty thousand yen and change. Jewelers preferred to stock their stores with rings in this general price range. These sorts of pieces were affordable, provided you really put your mind to it and saved. But the ring Vince had was a completely different beast.

“You can’t resize coral rings like you can for metal rings. And no one makes these sorts of good luck charms unless there’s a buyer already lined up. It’s clearly custom-made. Maybe to commemorate a wedding or an engagement? My guess is that you inherited it from a relative. You come from a family of jewelers, right? Jewelers that specialize in jade and coral.”

“I wouldn’t call it a family of jewelers...but I won’t nitpick. Keep going.”

I pursed my lips. I felt like I was playing a weird quiz game. *Name as many red things as you can. Name as many types of fruit as you can.* The more you listed, the more points you got. *Name as many facts about this coral ring as you can.* I didn’t know if I was on the right track or not.

Vince said nothing but kept listening to me intently. Oddly enough, the way he looked at me reminded me of someone I cared for very much indeed. Especially the grief in his eyes.

“I have some connections through Ranasinghe Jewelry, so I tried to hunt down any shops or jewelry makers that deal with this kind of thing...but found nothing. The closest thing I could find was the National Palace Museum in Taiwan, but their collection is all antiques. I doubt they would have any rings that someone in their twenties could afford, especially not at a time when money was tight. So my guess is that this ring was something your family made by hand themselves. That explains how you came into it and later gave it to Marian.”

I gave him a pleading look as I asked him to evaluate my work, but made my voice firm to communicate that I wasn't going to let him back out of this one.

Vince did nothing but continue to make that too-cool-for-school disinterested face. And yet, I realized he had turned to face me directly instead of looking at me sidelong. Oddly enough, it reminded me of the tension before karate matches, but I didn't feel intimidated by him.

“Well done. You're almost a perfect mini-Richard. Old man Saul would be proud.”

Vince took the ring, put it on his left hand, and stroked it with the index finger of the other. The ring was uneven all the way around, so even if Vince had been blind, he could have told what the carvings were through touch alone. Maybe touch could reveal extra information to him anyway, the same way he could glean information from Chinese characters that I didn't know. From the way Vince stroked the ring, I felt like I was right.

He sighed lightly and clenched the ring with a similarly gentle grasp.

“Marian, Marian, Marian. What am I going to do with her? I'll have to chew her out the next time I see her.”

“She ought to chew you out. You should actually talk to her the next time you

see her.”

“I don’t want to see her. Sorry, but it’s true. Nothing against your fantastic messenger skills, of course.”

He didn’t want to see her? What was that supposed to mean? After she called up a mystery man, arranged to meet him in a museum, and sobbed all over him? I gritted my teeth in frustration as Vince looked up at the sky, his mouth halfway parted in a silent sigh.

“Don’t glare at me. You don’t know what I’m dealing with. If you keep flaring up like this, you’ll give yourself a stroke one of these days. I have my reasons to avoid her, okay?”

“Reasons only go so far. I have a relative who works in health care, and when I told her you gave someone your kidney and ran away, she said that made no sense whatsoever. On the one hand, I get that you did this to save someone you care for. On the other hand, what’s the point if you’ve just left her crying because she doesn’t know what’s going on?”

“Good point. If you ever went to jail for shattering an earl’s diamond, I would say the same thing to you.”

“...What does that have to do with anything?”

“Maybe nothing. Maybe everything.”

Vince’s roundabout way of talking was as infuriating as ever, but I was still determined not to let him weasel out of this one. He looked a little chilly dressed in his skimpy running clothes. I asked him if he was okay, out of concern for his comfort, and he smirked at me like a cool popstar. Without his usual spiffy casual outfits, he had a much tougher, masculine vibe that suited him. I felt like you could run into him slurping ramen at a back-alley food stall.

“Hey, this is perfect. Want to see my surgery scar? Here, you can see it if I roll down my shorts a little. Transplants these days are incredible. They don’t need to make a big cut down your side anymore. They just stick this thing called a

laparoscope in you and pull the kidney out of your abdomen. Wait, should I have put a content warning on this conversation? Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I’m used to people getting hurt from karate. Does your scar still cause you pain?”

“My surgery was over a year ago, and I was the donor, not the recipient. It’s harder on the recipient, I hear. Plus, I didn’t have any complications later. The skin feels tight sometimes when it’s cold, but that’s it.”

“Doesn’t it affect your exercise?”

“You sure are curious. No, it doesn’t change a thing. I still work out every morning and go running. Well, I guess I need to retire the nickname ‘Sammo Hung of the Backstreets.’ That was ages ago, and I’m more into video games now, anyway.”

“Who’s Sammo Hung? Some famous Hong Kong action star?”

“...No comment.”

Okay, fine. I made a mental note to look up this Sammo Hung guy the minute Vince seemed less likely to bolt, but I had bigger concerns at the moment.

Vince wiped his neck with the towel hanging around his shoulders and looked around us. He seemed like a tourist, staring off into the distance at an unfamiliar vista. But why would it be unfamiliar? Didn’t he and his family used to live here? That’s what Marian said, at any rate.

“...This place didn’t always used to be like this.”

“Yeah, I kind of gathered that. All the buildings look new.”

“That’s not what I mean. They never used to fly the Hong Kong flag or the mainland flag here. Do you know Tiu Keng Leng’s old name? It’s pronounced the same, but it’s spelled differently.”

吊頸嶺—Tiu Keng Leng. Cantonese for “Hanged Man Mountain.” Vince said it like it was no big deal, instead of the very shocking thing it was.

“It’s an embarrassing story. Back when Hong Kong was a British territory, there was a flour mill around here owned by a person named Mr. Rennie. When his business folded, he hanged himself. Hence the name. Hanged Man Mountain, or Rennie’s Mill. Anyone, no one would want to live in a place named after a guy who killed himself, right? That’s why they changed the spelling to make it sound better. By ‘they,’ I mean the people who were forced to move here and develop this no-man’s land.”

“Wait, people were forced to move here?”

“It’s a long story. A long, long story.”

Vince began to tell me about the history of this place, in a tone that made it sound like a fairy tale.

The story took place once upon a time when Vince’s grandfather was a young man, just after Vince’s father was born. Back then, Vince’s family didn’t live in Hong Kong. Instead, they lived in a large city in a land far, far away. Every child in Japan knew the name of this country, which was renowned across the globe for having the highest population in the world, tasty food, and pandas. And yet, back then, that land far, far away did not have the same name it does now. The “republic” lacked its neighboring “People’s.”

(At the time, Hong Kong still belonged to a European land even farther, farther away. The Japanese occupation had ended, but it had yet to be transferred out of the hands of the land of black tea and scones.)

After a long series of events, that big land far, far away added a few extra words to its name. It was only a two-word difference, but the land itself underwent massive changes. Many of the older regime’s supporters fled the mainland to an island in the southeast, where they formed a new land for themselves, while some fled to other parts of the globe. However, even in that new sanctuary, there was still no end to the unrest.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is that my grandfather was the kind of man who was so talented, he wrapped back around to being awful at everything.

Changing governments equals conflict, and if you were in the middle of that conflict, what do you think a talented poor person could do to make a quick buck? What's something that's helpful in times of conflict? Yes, Mr. Nakata, what do you think?"

"Uh... What's helpful in conflict...? Weapons?"

"Good answer, but you're thinking too apocalyptic. I'm talking about recent history. So, if not weapons, what?"

"...Uh, information?"

"Bingo. You were born to work for the government. All right, now if you want information, what do you need?"

"...A computer?"

"How would he get his hands on a computer during martial law in Taiwan? He became a spy."

Spies? Like, James Bond? I blinked in surprise, and Vince sighed.

"Not like a British action movie with cool background music, thank you very much. We're talking more down-to-earth. Spies work in the shadows. They don't try to be that flashy."

"What about the spy who goes around in a phoenix jacket, huh?"

"You aren't listening to me. In Japanese, you call spies 'rats,' don't you? I heard that term once in a period drama. No one wants rats building nests in their house. You get them out of there ASAP."

Sure, if you were talking about pest control. But I thought this was a story about real, flesh-and-blood people?

Changing the character of a nation's people was no easy task, even if you included spies among those who were driven out of the country. Being a spy was tough work, too. They had to pretend to be the enemy to save their own hide. I couldn't imagine that was easy—

Wait. A horrible thought hit me. If someone who was your enemy until yesterday told you, “Actually, I was a spy the whole time. I was really on your side,” it would be extremely difficult to tell if they really meant it. Could you truly trust that person, after that? Especially after you were forced to abandon your homeland and live in a completely new part of the world?

Even schools saw their fair share of bullying and social ostracization. Thinking about how much worse those things could be out in the real, adult world made me wince.

Vince seemed to guess what I was thinking, because he gave me a sardonic grin.

“I can tell from the look on your face that you’ve figured it out. Well, that’s just how things were in those days. It was a crappy situation. Even if he tried to make it up to his old friends, they only told him, ‘You already feasted in the enemy’s kitchen.’”

“...”

“Boy, you really do look pitiful. You’re so simpleminded it scares me. Anyway, my grandfather doesn’t deserve that kind of sympathy. He was the sorriest, meanest rat of them all. Have you heard the English word ‘double-crosser’? It’s an idiom for a double agent.”

“You’re telling me he played both sides?”

“Exactly. The blues thought he was only pretending to be with the reds, but he was actually a red pretending to be blue pretending to be red. Super convoluted. A whole mess. Even worse, after he came to this new land, he spilled the beans to team blue. After everything they’d gone through together, he thought maybe they’d grown close enough that he’d be forgiven. But he was so wrong. They said it was his fault they were kicked out of their homeland. If he couldn’t have taken his secrets to the grave, he shouldn’t have been a double agent to begin with. Things would’ve been fine if it was just a regular spy, but he got greedy and started flip-flopping from one side to the other.”

So they snubbed him. Gave him the cold shoulder. With nowhere left to call home, Vince's grandfather set out to find a new safe haven all over again, eventually washing up on a unique part of Asia that was owned by Europe. A land lent out to the kingdom of tea and scones in the wake of the Opium Wars in a pact akin to a cosmic bond. The pearl of the far east, the financial hub of Asia. Hong Kong.

At the time, it wasn't terribly irregular for those of similar backgrounds to immigrate to Hong Kong. Vince claimed its doors were open because it didn't pick a side in the conflict. Money talked, and the Hong Kong government was generous enough to accept those who came with shady pasts...under the table, that was. Lots of people had already come to Hong Kong in a similar fashion. The government, forced to receive this stampede of immigrants, actually took steps to prepare places to put them all.

"Sure, there were pockets of criminals here and there. And the government didn't want to deal with them, you know? So these criminals were all picked out of the crowd and made to go to Tiu Keng Leng—Hanged Man Mountain. With a name like that, no one else wanted to live there, so the government made it a refugee settlement area. My grandfather and everyone else at the bottom rung of society worked as hard as they could to turn the place into a paradise all their own. It was an odd little village, with narrow, hilly streets and a harbor. When the blue flag flew over it, it stood out more than any other place in Hong Kong. It was always getting news you couldn't receive anywhere on the mainland, and if anything happened, all the international news picked it up. Just a strange place. My grandfather lived in that village for the rest of his life, and that's where I was born."

That was Tiu Keng Leng as Vince remembered it. I couldn't picture it at all, because all I saw were high-rise apartments, shopping malls, and parking lots. What narrow streets? What tiny village? I guessed it was all long gone.

"As you know, the land of tea and scones 'handed over' Hong Kong to the land of pandas in 1997. Had you been born by then? Or were you still a clump

of cells?”

“Yeah, I was alive at that point. Well, barely, but it still counts.”

“Really? Okay. I was alive, too, and not just barely, but I was still a kid when it happened. I only know about the rush to emigrate or marry non-Hong Kongers secondhand. Back then, you could still get a British passport if you were a citizen of Hong Kong, and my father made me get one for some reason. But here comes the sad part. My family didn’t have the connections or money to move. Nothing. Okay, not entirely—in all that chaos, my grandfather took over the jewelry store he used to co-own with some buddies of his. My father was never that enthusiastic about it, but I was. I liked pretty things.”

In the end, Vince’s family didn’t move away from Hong Kong. I couldn’t imagine what it would have been like to live in a country with a changing government. It was beyond me. If you squinted at a map of Machida, the part of Tokyo where Hiromi lived, you’d notice that part of it jutted out into Kanagawa prefecture. Some people joked that Machida was actually in Kanagawa. Now, I found myself wondering what it would be like if that joke came true?

The Tokyo metropolitan government would no longer provide the funds required to run the government. Instead, the prefecture would. Machida’s citizens would have to elect prefectural assembly members instead of representatives in the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly. Everything would change, right down to the laws about trash disposal.

All the same, I knew such a sudden shift would never happen. Japan was Japan.

But Hong Kong was not. It was a place that had once belonged to England and now belonged to China. Even if its location didn’t change on the map, I figured that the change in national culture was much bigger than any difference between Tokyo and Kanagawa.

In need of something to say, I commented that it must have been a big change. Vince barked out a laugh, the way an adult might when a kid said

something ridiculous.

“You can say that again. Oh, it was a big change, all right. The mainland saw the handover as England giving back something they’d borrowed for ninety-nine years, but a lot can change in ninety-nine years. The way people think, the way people live, even technology. Two places can’t reunite seamlessly if they’ve been apart for over a lifetime. That’s why China implemented the one country, two systems policy. They let Hong Kong govern itself, and even to this day, it’s independent from the mainland. Well, to some degree. Yes indeed, there were big changes. Take the redevelopment of Tiu Keng Leng, for example. I don’t know where the money came from, but before the handover, a huge redevelopment program began in Tiu Keng Leng. Nowadays, you can’t see a single sign of the backwater fishing village that used to be here. No blue flags, either. The elderly people who used to live here are being pushed out to make room for high-rises. I have to wonder why? Maybe they had pasts like my grandfather’s, or maybe the government just decided they were inconvenient. I don’t know how the nitty-gritty details work.”

Vince went on to explain that the house where his family used to live was gone, too. Rebuilding old houses was one thing. Old houses got rundown, they cost too much money to maintain... There were lots of reasons to knock them down and start fresh. But what did you call it when an entire village was torn down and rebuilt, one building at a time?

I didn’t know, but it sounded catastrophic to me. Too much was being lost—or rather, erased on purpose. If that was the case, then I understood. It was logical—logical to the point of forgetting the human element.

Vince and his father were moved into a tiny apartment near Tiu Keng Leng that they were given as recompense for being evicted. The apartment now belonged to someone else entirely. That had been Marian’s home, too, when she worked for them.

“Vince, thank you for telling me so much about your past.”

“I can read the look on your face. ‘Enough ancient history. Now tell me about you. Like your thing with Richard or the deal with the Swiss girl.’ My bad. I’m just too good at keeping the audience in suspense.”

“We could talk while you practice *Jeet Kune Do*. I know a bit of karate myself. Want to give it a shot?”

“Don’t kid around. This is a fitness park for seniors in an upscale retirement community. Someone will call the cops on us and get us both arrested if we start fighting here.”

“Really? But if it’s clear we’re practicing set moves and not brawling, I’m sure no one will min—”

Just then, my stomach growled audibly. Oh, come on. Way to ruin the mood. I was trying to have a serious conversation here, okay? The hotel buffet this morning offered nothing but defrosted rolls from the freezer, ham that didn’t look quite like meat, and instant soup. Ever the embodiment of rational decision making, I was too nervous to touch much of it.

I explained this to Vince by way of an excuse and apologized. He made his smart aleck face again, this time with a touch of irritation. What was that about?

“You’re in Hong Kong, but the food was so bad you went hungry? What madness is this? All right, come with me.”

“You can’t just spring that on me. Where are we going?”

“To get *yum cha*.”

When Vince said that completely unfamiliar word, he became a stranger to me for all of a second. Yeah, it was time to double down on my language studies.

Vince, now in a black-and-white zebra-print jacket, and I caught a bus instead of making another subway trip. After a ride spent staring out the window at signs whose characters I could read but not understand, we arrived at a part of

town I didn't know. Vince led me to the third floor of a building which turned out to house a packed Chinese food restaurant.

No one came to greet us, but that didn't faze Vince. He walked in, showed me a folding chair, and took his own seat on a chair attached to the wall. Then he called out, "*M goi!*" to summon a waiter. He rattled off an order as the waiter scribbled it down on a pad at a lightning pace. I felt dizzy watching them go. Bowls of food appeared so quickly I couldn't believe they were real. Everything was happening too fast for me to keep up. What was this, anyway? Oatmeal?

"Jook. It's congee. Think of it as a do-over for your breakfast, although it may be a little heavy for that."

"Ah, okay."

There were little bits of green onion, preserved egg, pork, what was probably ginger, and some other unidentified food floating in a white rice porridge. The smell wafting from that black bowl was divine. But was Vince not going to have any?

"I'm not hungry. You dig in."

I nodded, and my stomach rumbled. He didn't have to tell me twice. I used the long soup spoon to bring some to my lips, and at the first mouthful, my stomach responded faster than my head. *Hey, this is good stuff*, it said. *You should have more. Come on, eat up.* It was amazing. Seriously, what was this? All sorts of flavors were making my mouth sing. Seafood, vegetables...

With all the haste of a teenager who had just finished up sports practice, I lifted the bowl and started shoveling the jook into my mouth. I savored it silently as Vince encouraged me to try dipping a deep-fried bread item in the jook. When I finished, I sighed in satisfaction and put the bowl back down on the table.

Vince tried to act like he didn't care, but I could see a bit of a proud grin creeping onto his face.

“So, what’d you think?”

“That was incredible. If I had a spare stomach, I’d go for eight more bowls.”

“What are you, a cow? Okay, let’s hit up the next stop on our list. Tell me you can still walk.”

“Yeah, I can, but it’s still rude to rush out when we barely just got here.”

“Look around you. We’ve stayed here longer than any other customer in the place. This city is half the size of Tokyo with a population of 7.5 million. Every store needs to churn through customers or lose out. *Mai dan!*”

It immediately clicked that this was how you asked for the check in Cantonese. Even paying moved disturbingly fast, and it was only when we’d gotten on the next bus that I realized Vince had paid for me. This was followed by another bus, a third bus, and then the subway. We hopped from one form of public transit to the next without Vince ever checking the map app on his phone. He sent multiple messages to someone, but from where I was sitting, I couldn’t see who he was talking to. Still, I had a feeling it wasn’t Marian.

I wondered what his plans were, apart from the pre-activity jook.

The last bus we took dropped us off in roughly the center of Hong Kong. There were noticeably far more tourists here than in Tiu Keng Leng, and the wide streets were flanked with colossal hotels and upscale shops. It felt like the Ginza of Hong Kong, so I guessed it was one of the city’s main thoroughfares.

Vince, seeming to know exactly where he was going, cut through an arcade of high-end jewelry stores before stopping at the lounge of a luxury hotel. The maître d’ informed him in English that there were no more slots open for afternoon tea, but when Vince responded with something in Cantonese, we were taken to a table by the window. I ordered tea; Vince had water. Like a certain someone I knew.

Unlike the last restaurant, the tea didn’t show up within three seconds of ordering.

“Aren’t you hungry, Vince?”

“The food here’s not that great. But it has a lot of memories for me. It’s the spot where I got my first ever thousand-pound check.”

I almost spat out my complimentary tea in shock. Vince was so nonchalant about everything that he caught me off guard whenever he dropped these truth bombs. It felt like a game of catch where the ball could explode at any time.

Vince kept talking.

“Mr. Jeffrey was a very unpleasant man. I could tell he was trying to make himself appear that way so he could take the blame for the entire deal. He seemed like a powerful guy, but there’s such a thing as too much power. It got on my nerves. I guess he won me around in the end, though. Fancy restaurants and a thousand pounds will do that to you. At the time, that would have been a little under two hundred thousand yen, and that was good money right under my nose.”

“ ... ”

“I know what you’re thinking. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, huh?”

“No, not at all.”

“You sound pretty sure of yourself.”

“Yeah, and I stand by what I said, because that’s not true at all. Everyone has their own reasons for the things they do, and blood doesn’t mean anything.”

“That’s fair, although I don’t completely agree with you.”

“Did I ask?”

“Hey, here comes the tea. Complete with treats. That’d make someone we both know very happy, huh?”

“ ... ”

The English tea came served in white cups with gold and lapis lazuli rims alongside matching plates bearing miniature madeleines and financiers. Vince’s

water was served in a fashion just as European as the rest of our order. The waitress asked Vince a question in rapid-fire Cantonese, and he responded with a lightning-fast answer. If Cantonese speakers had to listen to a Japanese conversation, they would probably think we talked like sloths.

“The best part about Mr. Jeffrey was that even though he noticed I wasn’t cashing the checks, he kept acting concerned and saying, ‘I hope your father has a speedy recovery.’ Blech. It made me sick.”

Blech. A short and sweet insult. But who was that directed at? Jeffrey? Or Vince himself? My gut told me it was both.

But had Vince really done anything so bad? What was wrong about wanting to hold onto a sudden windfall to pay for your education? I didn’t come from money, either. Hiromi’s salary hadn’t been enough to pay for tuition at the university a teacher I admired taught at, so I had to work my way through school. I remembered the sobering thought “*Money sure doesn’t fall from the sky, huh?*” crossing my mind often in those days.

To me, Vince was upset because he had made money through less than upstanding ways. But again, was that really so bad?

I must have had a pretty angry expression as I gripped the handle of my teacup, because Vince looked surprised.

“Let me just say this—I don’t wish I’d done anything differently. Even if I’d bought my father the medicine, he wouldn’t have lived beyond eighty. Another, what, ten years? And he’d still be entirely dependent on Marian and me the whole time. That’s why I wanted to hurry up and get it over with. I don’t think I made the wrong decision, and if I could go back and do it over again, I’m positive I’d make the same choices. I like doing the rational thing.”

“...This might sound weird, but...is it hard for you to admit that?”

“Now that you mention it, I would feel reluctant to say this in Cantonese. Japanese is fine, though. Kind of obnoxious, huh?”

Vince smiled, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. I thought back to that word of Richard's. *Étranger*. Maybe Vince was trying to find his own heart in the space between languages, too.

I waited for a moment when the waitress wasn't checking on us to sit up straight and lob the conversational ball back into Vince's court.

"Please go see Marian. If you don't, I'm sure she'll try to hunt you down herself once she's healthy enough."

"Tell her that's a waste of her time. Or don't tell her. I'm a big boy; I can tell her myself. Does it matter if it's over the phone? Anyway, consider the message delivered. I apologize that my wife put you up to this."

"...Why are you acting like this with me?"

Vince raised an eyebrow. Challenging me, asking me what I meant. What, did he want me to spell it out for him? He was a miniature version of Richard.

"Jeffrey's money wasn't enough to pay for Marian's surgery, was it?"

"Huh?"

"I thought I told you. I have family in the medical field. You may be able to get a spot on the operating table in America, but that doesn't mean that a kidney transplant comes cheap. Unless you have some kind of super insurance, getting surgery right away costs a ton. For everything from the deposit to the surgery fee itself, you're looking at a few ten to hundred million yen. Ten 200,000-yen checks is nowhere near enough. So where did you get the rest of the money?"

There was only one answer I could think of: Penniless Vince, meet rich girl Octavia. Marian's surgery happened right before Vince stopped working for Richard. Maybe Vince borrowed money somehow and Octavia stepped in to pay back the debt. If my guess was right, then Octavia had paid him far more than the peanuts he got from Jeffrey. I was talking sums in the hundreds of millions of yen. For money like that, I could understand why you would jeopardize the career you'd been building up for years to be someone's puppet.

What else could you do if you needed to save a loved one?

Vince's expression didn't so much as flicker. He stared at me with that same cool, smart-aleck look. That seemed to be his way of telling me I was dead on. If I had been completely off, no doubt he would have looked far more fed up with me.

"Vince, let's put an end to this. The more this drags on, the more it hurts you, me, and Richard."

Marian's surgery was already done—Vince had been paid in advance for his work, I guessed. Marian said her prognosis was good, too. Simply put, Vince no longer had good reason to let Octavia eat him up. Unless something else compelled him to carry out her orders? If so, maybe it was something Richard or I could solve? If only he would tell me what was going on.

I stared down Vince in silence for several seconds while he poured himself a glass of mineral water from the jug and took a sip. His slender fingers traced a line on the sweating glass with all the boredom of a child drawing in the condensation on a window on a rainy day.

"...Right up until the end, my grandfather constantly thought about what could be done to make the world a better place. Not like it ever amounted to much. Only neighbors came to his funeral, because he had no friends or anything of the sort. He must have been a lonely man. My father often blamed him for our hardships, claiming my grandfather lived his life wrong. You can try to balance ideals and reality, but the scales always tip in reality's favor. When you ignore reality to chase after your ideals, it takes a toll on you, mentally. He shouldn't have tried to shoot for the stars. He should have tried to make at least one of his wives happy so he wouldn't have had to give his son his mother's ring and tell him, 'I want you to think of this as your mother.'"

A mother's ring, going to the son?

Vince smiled faintly. His hand was still in his pocket. The same pocket he had put the ring in earlier. When he held it in the palm of his hand, it seemed so

small and delicate that it might vanish on the spot. The pale pink color almost made it look like a child's toy.

"You did a very good job appraising my ring. However, you got one thing wrong."

"Which is...?"

"That it's fake. This ring is made to look like real coral, but it's just costume jewelry."

I pouted. Vince continued, with the same blank expression.

"Though to your credit, my grandfather loved this ring. The proof, my father always said, was that my grandfather never sold it when he fled the mainland. He wasn't big on jewelry otherwise, my grandfather."

"..."

"As you and I both know, that land of pandas used to be the capital of fake jewelry. Because the mighty dynasties commissioned such magnificent works of art, fake copies have also proliferated for centuries. You can find pieces with this level of workmanship sold in the Forbidden City gift shop. It's nothing that impressive."

Vince didn't look at my face as he spoke. His smile was nothing more than a quirk of the lips.

Nothing that impressive, said Vince. Of all people.

I silently raised my hand and called for a waiter. One approached on silent feet.

"I'm so sorry for the sudden request, but could I perhaps borrow a lamp? I'm not trying to cause any problems. I won't take it anywhere, and I only need it for a few minutes."

"A lamp?" Vince asked. "What do you need that for?"

I ignored him and continued speaking to the waiter. "I'm a jeweler, and my

client here has a coral ring. We normally heat coral in a fire to tell if it's real, but we can also use a light bulb in a pinch."

"Mr. Nakata? Hey, Mr. Nakata!"

"Most imitation coral is made from plastic, rosin, or glass. All of these melt at much lower temperatures than calcium carbonate. Even without a fire, if you put fake coral in a hot place long enough, the outer layer will start melting off. But real coral will be perfectly fine."

"Seigi Nakata!"

Every diner in the lounge stared at us. Vince was breathing like a winded bull as he half rose from his seat and glared at me. I stared him right back down, not saying a word. My heart was beating itself out of my chest, but I knew that in my place, Richard would also call Vince's bluff.

The waiter, recoiling, asked if I still needed a lamp. I shook my head. No, I already had my answer.

Once the waiter left us alone again, I scowled at the death glare Vince was sending my way. Even now, I was Richard's best student. Well, he had no other students at the moment, so I got the title by process of elimination. Which made me feel a bit lonely.

At any rate, Richard's reputation depended on me. Did Vince really think I wouldn't do my homework just because I'd been on nonstop flights from the US to Japan to Hong Kong? My journey had forced me to show up weary and jetlagged to a drinking party, but now, it was finally paying off. I wasn't about to let this fancy lounge trick me into confusing the real thing for a counterfeit item. And even if I had let the elegance of the restaurant go to my head, I had felt the ring when it had been in my possession. It was cold to the touch, so it clearly wasn't plastic or rosin. The coral was real, just like the kindness Vince showed Marian.

In the end, I guess I just couldn't find it in myself to hate Vince.

“...You thought the same thing, didn’t you?”

“What?”

“About your dad. Did you think of him the way he thought of your grandfather?”

Did he think his father lived a lonely life, a life gone wrong? Did he think his father should have tried to keep his wife happy? No, I didn’t think so. If nothing else, Vince seemed to be following in the footsteps of the man whose life story he’d told me earlier.

Vince didn’t say anything for a few moments. Maybe he was trying to suppress his anger, or maybe there was some other reason I didn’t know. But he didn’t want me to keep talking, so he finally spoke up, sounding as if he’d had a revelation.

“That’s a good question. Yeah, I used to think like that a while ago. But not anymore. I don’t think it matters if I’m lonely. That is,” he added, “so long as I don’t regret my decisions.”

Regret his decisions?

“Reality always wins over ideals. It’s just common sense. Reality is a pressing concern that exists right under your nose, and perfection only exists in your head. But if I know that and chase after perfection anyway...then who cares what happens to me? As long as I’m prepared to deal with the consequences, why does it matter? Sorry, I know you hate talking about things in abstract terms, but this is Richard’s signature move. Blame my old training, if you’d like.”

“...Please don’t predict what I’m about to say.”

“Sorry. Once again, blame the old training.”

“Maybe that is to blame, but I doubt Richard ever taught you that you’re better off hating someone who never did you any harm. I’m still thinking about that. Seriously, what was that all about?”

What Vince told me on the cruise ship haunted me: *You’d be better off hating*

Richard.

Like hell did I believe that. It was clear as crystal to me that Vince was wrong, to the point where I was ready to print it out in bold, 72-pt font on imitation vellum. Those words didn't hold true for anyone, not even Vince. Not even after the constant troubles he'd faced since meeting Richard. Richard wasn't the kind of man who would let someone suffer like this right under his nose.

"...Are you telling me you've never been afraid of him?"

"Huh? Afraid of whom?"

"Who else? Richard."

Those words were so shocking, I couldn't believe my ears, but Vince looked serious. Even sad.

"...You're not talking about the way he's scary beautiful, right?"

"I *will* hit you."

"I'll hit you back. Anyway, sorry. I don't think I ever have. Being scared's probably related to hatred, but I've never felt either about Richard."

"Look at this softie here. Fine, here comes a different question. Have you ever wanted to be with Richard forever? To be his confidant? Do you want to help him, assist him?"

Well...yeah, loads of times. All the time. The answer came easily.

It wasn't a question of being scared of Richard. If anything, my reservations were related to wanting to be his friend. Luckily, that matter had been settled for me in France—and thank goodness for that. It was such a fond memory that I kept looking back on it whenever I fell on hard times. It made me feel like, no matter what happened, I'd make it through somehow.

I left the second half of that unspoken, but told Vince that these thoughts crossed my mind every day and that I worked hard to make them a reality. Vince stared at me with an even sadder and more exasperated expression than before. The low music they were playing in the lounge became a deafening

silence between us.

“You’re one lucky guy, Mr. Nakata.”

“What?”

“Most people wouldn’t think the way you do. You’re not afraid of Richard. You want to be a pillar Richard can lean on for support. I doubt there’s anyone else out there who feels the same way.”

“...Why not?”

“I misspoke. More accurately, Richard doesn’t *want* there to be anyone else who feels the same way. He never wanted someone who cared for him in that way...until he met you. I guess that explains how you wouldn’t know, considering you were the cause of this change.”

Vince had once told me that the Richard I knew was not the same person Richard had been before he met me. He never wanted that? It sort of made sense, but also...sort of not.

“The Richard I remember was not as good of a person as the Richard you know. He was always smiling, beautiful, and perfect. He never showed me any of his insecurities. It was like he wasn’t human at all.”

“That can’t be right.”

“No, I’m serious. Even if we belonged to the same species, he was so vastly beyond me that I couldn’t compare. I felt like a commoner trying to do an act of charity for an aristocrat. He always smiled at me like I was mocking him, like the way I felt about him was the punchline of a joke.”

“That can’t be right.”

“Maybe not for you.”

“No, I mean it. He wouldn’t do that to anyone. There must be some misunderstanding here. He’s suffered so much because he’s too kind.”

“You’re stubborn.” Vince laughed.

Me, stubborn? Vince needed to look in a mirror.

He still looked fed up with me, but he grinned again. “Here. Want me to give you a good tip?”

What could that possibly be? Given the context, I doubt it could be that good. I frowned at him.

Vince smiled back. “Go ask Richard why he hired you.”

“...Huh?”

“What’s not adding up? It should be simple, right?”

Well, he needed someone to run odd jobs when he opened *Étranger* in Ginza, of course. I started to say just that, but Vince cut me off with a shake of his head.

“That’s only one reason, but he has more. Knowing him, I’m positive he remembers.”

Uh, remember what exactly? I asked him to clarify, though by now I knew better than to expect an answer. However, much to my surprise, Vince actually responded.

He grinned. “Believe it or not, I went through a phase when I was more open and compassionate too. When I left him, he made me a promise. To do what? That’s a secret. But it may or may not have something to do with you.”

“...”

“If you want to know more, ask Richard about it. This is all that I can tell you.”

Before I could snap at him, Vince changed the topic, which had the effect of dousing my hot head with a bucket of cool water. “Before I forget, I don’t spell things out for you because it’d be a waste of my time. What’s the point in telling you something you’ll find out soon enough, anyway? Treat me like next week’s episode of a reality TV show and focus on studying your gems and exam topics. Best way to live a healthy life, am I right? Don’t worry, it won’t be that bad.”

His voice remained low from beginning to end of that speech. What was he seeing that I didn't? *"It won't be that bad"* suggested trouble brewing on the horizon, right? All I wanted to know was whatever he was alluding to, but Vince's lips were sealed.

I frowned at him, but he only grinned back, amused. He raised his hand. "Maidan." *Check, please.*

When I offered to pay, Vince refused to let me.

"In Hong Kong, older apprentices need to help out their younger coworkers. That means I handle the tab, got it?"

"You think we'll ever be close enough to go grab a meal together?"

For a split second, Vince's bewilderment was clear on his face. *What is Seigi going on about?* Surprise and nervousness. Just then, the waiter came over, and Vince took care of the bill with his credit card. He snapped his go-to look back on and muttered in a low voice.

"You startled me. Someone else once asked me the same question. Don't tell me he's trained you to do that."

"No, not exactly."

"Ah, so it's just mind melding. Tsk, tsk. Well, I already told him, but I'll tell you too: never. We never 'grabbed a meal' together, either. I can't define what our relationship is, but it's definitely not that. I've never been a fan of going out to eat with other people to begin with."

"Does that mean you made a special exception just for me?"

"Super special. It's a Hong Kong thing, though. We're a country of foodies, and we could never let someone come away from Hong Kong with no food memories besides a bad breakfast. Enough of that. Let's get a move on."

When we left the dim lounge and stepped out the hotel's front doors, the sunlight along the waterfront dazzled my eyes. Across the way were numerous skyscrapers and bank billboards. We were on the Kowloon Peninsula, and we

could see across the bay to Hong Kong Island and its financial district, the heart of the region. It was close enough that we could have swum back if we had really wanted to, but I assumed there were ferries to take people across. I didn't see any swimmers at all. Just skyscrapers, skyscrapers, and more skyscrapers. The waterfront was nothing but an endless parade of skyscrapers.

"The view from here must be pretty when the sun goes down and all the lights come on."

"If you have the time, you should come back and see it for yourself. But the guided Vince tour ends here."

"Where are you going now? Off to follow another one of Octavia's orders?"

"I have the day off today. If a certain someone wasn't following me around, I'd be asleep right now."

"What, are you sick?"

"No. Don't be ridiculous. I just like reading manga, playing video games, and napping on my days off. Octavia isn't a tyrant. So long as I do what needs to be done on her orders, she lets me do whatever I want the rest of the time. Anyway, I'll give Marian a call. She needs to learn that I don't ever plan on seeing her."

"What'd you marry her for, if you don't want to see her?"

"How else would I have convinced her to take my kidney?"

They had planned to stay together—at least on paper—long enough for there to be no question of organ trafficking before seeking a divorce. Once I got past feeling angry about it, the thought made me more depressed by the minute. Why was Vince doing this? Staying with Marian only made it harder for her. Surely no one would give a part of their body to a woman they didn't have feelings for?

The way Vince had lashed out and threatened me when I mentioned her name only supported my suspicions. Marian and Vince could have been a happy

married couple if only they tried. So why was Vince acting this way?

In an attempt to get me off his back, Vince announced he was going to catch the subway. He turned his back to the ocean and started to walk away, but I stopped him once more. I had to check. There was nothing physically stopping me from following him back. I knew he wanted to go back to wherever he was renting or at least couch crashing and get his fill of naps, manga, and video games. So no matter how much I whined or pulled faces at him, he wasn't going to tell me any of the things I wanted to know. There was no point in coming with him. That meant I had to do as much as I could right here and now.

"Vince, I never got the chance to ask you what you were doing in Tiu Keng Leng. You don't live there anymore, do you? So what brought you there?"

I added a follow-up question: Why was he practicing martial arts there?

"My grandfather was my first *Jeet Kune Do* instructor. He was a giant fan of Bruce Lee. Watched all of Lee's films, idolized him. He didn't let his age stop him from trying *Jeet Kune Do*, and he became a master. He was an endearing old guy, always bragging about how he could have been one of Lee's students himself. Now he's sleeping in a grave near the station. He taught me that being alone is difficult, but it's nothing to be afraid of. Even after I moved, I still went there in the mornings to practice. Marian knows that, so I guess she thought that if I was in Hong Kong, you could find me there. Lucky break for her, huh?"

Then he waved me goodbye and started to walk away again down the crowded street.

No. We weren't done with this conversation yet.

"Hey! You still haven't answered me! What are we to each other, huh? I don't know how things stand between you and Richard, either, because we barely talked. We'll never know unless we can talk this out. I won't give up on this, you know!"

Vince looked over his shoulder at me. *Whatever*, his body language seemed to say. His face, meanwhile, told me I was being a pest.

Still, the fact that he'd stopped spurred me on to catch up to him and pull my backpack off. Vince tensed momentarily, like I was about to hit him with it. No way. He'd totally forgotten.

"Here."

I pulled a rectangular cardboard box out of my backpack. It wasn't a gift box, nor did it have any wrapping paper. I just needed the thick cardboard to prevent the plastic bag with his shirt and tank top from getting crushed—Vince's clothes, borrowed during the cruise. After I got them cleaned, they'd sat in my closet for close to half a year.

"You can have them back. Thanks for letting me borrow them."

"You better have not stuck a long letter in there. I won't read it."

"I didn't put a letter there. I'm just giving your clothes back."

"Uh-huh. Like I believe that. Anyway, thanks. You could have just dumped them, though."

"My mother always says that there are some things you can get rid of and some you can't."

"Does she now?"

The tone of that last comment sounded slightly different than the others.

I wondered if there was anything else I could have said. Anything else I could have done. I felt like that thought crossed my mind every time I watched Vince walk away from me. Next time, I promised myself, I'd make sure to do enough that I wouldn't feel this way ever again.

Vince held the bag of clothes at arm's length, like he didn't care about what was inside it, as he walked off into the crowd of people. You know, I couldn't bring myself to dislike him. For all his faults, Vince didn't discard the things I gave him.

The signs along the Hong Kong equivalent of Ginza's busiest street, Chuo-doori, labeled it Nathan Road. The Chinese characters looked something like 彌敦道, and the Latin letters above it spelled out "Nathan Road." I understood the "road" part. 道 was "road" in Japanese, too. But how did 彌敦 become "Nathan"? Try as I might, I couldn't figure it out with my limited grasp of Chinese.

I also didn't know what to do next. I considered walking around more, hoping to bump into Vince again. My flight home was at 10 p.m., so what to do in the meantime? I wasn't in the mood to go sightseeing, but I ought to at least buy my family some souvenirs.

I couldn't shake the bad mood I was in as I walked down the bustling street. But suddenly, I heard someone trying to get my attention. It was a girl wearing a headscarf and speaking perfect English.

"Hi there! Can I ask you for directions?"

"Sorry, I'm just a tourist, so I don't know my way around, either. I could still look something up on my map app for you, if you'd like."

"Good answer. But you really need to be more careful. These days, everyone can pull up a map on their phones, so what's a young person doing stopping you and asking for directions? You're too nice for your own good. Maybe even worse than Richard in some respects."

"...Sorry, what? Who are you, exactly?"

The girl cackled with glee. Wait a moment. When I looked closer, I realized that the skin on the left side of her face was, oddly, the exact same color from top to bottom. That's when I realized she must have had facial reconstruction surgery. It was so well done that I hadn't noticed. Now I had an inkling of who this girl was.

She looked at me with triumph spreading across her smiling, red lipsticked lips. "Hi, Seigi. I'm here as a representative for someone else. What luck to run into you while I'm on vacation in Hong Kong! I've always wanted to meet you."

“Sorry, but can I ask your name?”

“Huh? Saul said he told you. Don’t tell me you forgot?”

She teased me, quipping that she hadn’t realized her backstory was *that* boring. How could I have possibly forgotten? She was unforgettable, but at the same time, her story was too terrible to be true.

She wrapped her scarf around her face and grinned at me with a more mature smile. “It’s Monica. I also go by Manika, but more people call me Monica these days. Now, come on. Dad’s waiting for you.”

One of the many stories with unknown endings that I had been carrying inside of me was finally laid to rest with the sound of a bubble popping. Saul had never told me that her operation was a success. From the looks of things, it’d gone fantastically. A beautiful smile adorned the face of this girl who’d endured such horrible treatment in her homeland.

Monica gave me an address. I punched it into my phone and brought up the full walking route, including the right subway station. This might have been a thing when I was in high school, but I knew for certain there hadn’t been such conveniences back when I was in junior high. No doubt there’d be even handier apps soon. The world marched on, always.

During the ferry ride back to the other side of the bay, I stared out across the water. Wind blew across the water, raising waves, but the only thing my phone showed was an unbroken expanse of blue. Tourists’ phone camera shutters snapped. A plastic bag from a convenience store drifted along in the breeze like a jellyfish.

My phone told me I could go by taxi or take public transit, but I chose to walk. It was less than thirty minutes away, even on foot, and since everything looked so similar to Tokyo, I wasn’t concerned about walking through bad neighborhoods. The path ran mostly uphill. The smallest plots of usable land in Hong Kong were noticeably smaller than those in Japan. In this area, known as Central, business seemed to be bustling everywhere, be it big firms or little

restaurants. Little stalls selling aquarium fish or accessories surreptitiously wormed their way into the gaps between larger buildings. The area looked like a box packed with colored pencils. The incline grew gradually steeper. I spotted a crowd around an egg tart stall, so I bought two of the tarts and ate them as I walked. They were piping hot but delicious. Maybe Richard had eaten these before, too.

When I finally arrived at the crest of the hill, I found a fantasy landscape awaiting me, unlike the earthly city through which I'd climbed. Moss and the roots of tropical plants blanketed the walls of the antique shops and furniture stores lining the streets. It was the quintessential image of Asia the way a Westerner might picture it.

It looked as if it might rain. It had been warm earlier in the morning, but wisps of clouds were beginning to gather in the sky as the breeze picked up.

In front of a large municipal office ringed by stone walls stood a familiar figure.

"Welcome, Mr. Nakata. I trust you didn't get lost."

"No, sir."

I bowed to him and said that it had been far too long. The sir in question was none other than Saul Ranasinghe: Richard's boss and mine. Former boss to Vince. As the owner of Ranasinghe Jewelry, he was also my guardian in Sri Lanka. Sort of. He did look out for me, but he was just as busy as I was in the aftermath of the arson and had had no time to spare me anything but the briefest of words.

A magnificent smile spread across the fleshy lips of this dark-brown-skinned Sri Lankan gentleman. His salt-and-pepper mustache quivered as he made a dapper noise of approval at the sight in front of him: an elegant little jewelry store with a small storefront window. The single-floor building was compact, its walls illustrated with paintings of jungle animals. I had seen other murals like this earlier, so I wondered if this area had a strong street art culture. Street art

—a pastime for young people.

This was Hong Kong's *Étranger*. The Ginza shop wasn't particularly large, either, but the Hong Kong location was decidedly snug. It had a wooden table—not glass—and three chairs. Everything conformed to a quintessentially Asian design scheme. With that furniture, there was only space for a single shelf for Saul to store the teapot and tableware. I wondered where he put the safe. A single person was more than enough to work a shop this small. If anything, I figured having two employees would lead to a lot of bumped elbows.

Were Richard to serve me here, as odd as it might sound, I would have felt trapped. Between his dazzling beauty and eloquent conversation, I would have bought any gem he recommended me before I came to my senses.

The shop was locked up today, no doubt because its owner was outside.

"You aren't on the clock, Mr. Nakata. You may simply call me Saul. Now let's get going, shall we? There's a charming café just over there."

Saul indicated the building that I had taken to be a municipal office. Near the office's unassuming stairway sat a white plaster building labeled with a sign reading "Police Clubhouse." Would civilians like us be allowed to use it?

When I asked Saul if we were allowed to go inside, he roared with laughter. The way Saul laughed was magnificent.

"Oh, that was ages ago. This building was once a dormitory for the police force, but it has since been repurposed as a commercial building for any and all shoppers."

"Some place to go shopping, way up here on this hill..."

"Were you not told to come via Central Station? You could have used the moving sidewalk. That daughter of mine! She'd forget her own head if it weren't attached."

"No, it's not Monica's fault. I just wanted to walk."

"You young people never cease to amaze me."

We walked up the building's plain concrete steps and found ourselves at a chic café that seemed to sprout up out of nowhere. It had a full bar and café tables spread out across a lawn. Since the café itself was so small, people could go outside and talk business there. Today, there weren't many people out on the terrace, probably because it was threatening to rain. When we found seats outside, a bartender who didn't look like he was from Hong Kong came over to take our order. He and Saul exchanged a few light words in a language I couldn't place before I ordered an iced tea. Saul opted for a ginger ale. He was so picky about drinks that he made Richard look tame. Still, the Sri Lankan ginger beer he'd introduced me to was delicious.

While we waited for our drinks to come, I asked him a small question.

"Did Vince tell you I was here?"

"More or less. The information passed through my senior pupil before it made its way to me."

His senior pupil. Richard.

Saul made a joke about how he'd planned to take a vacation in Hong Kong with his old friend's daughter but was here, being called to do business instead. I bowed and apologized. I also made a mental note to say thanks to Richard later.

"Enough apologizing. If you feel the need to make it up to me somehow, then put that energy into your work."

"Will do. Uh... You know, Vince didn't invite me. A...person close to Vince gave me a call. I'm just chasing him down."

"Are you referring to Marian?"

He knew her? Saul smiled again when I was silent. Once again, he reminded me of a genie in a lamp. He always knew what was going on, but that didn't mean he was willing to come to your aid at a moment's notice. Based on Monica's story and what little I'd asked, I knew he had once been a doctor.

After studying medicine in England, he'd worked with an international NGO in the medical field and once considered founding a hospice care service. Instead, he threw himself headlong into being a jeweler, which was how he had ended up here. He had lived such a colorful life I could barely imagine it all.

Vince had also talked to me about Saul the first time we met. Not too fondly, either.

And Vince wasn't the only one I'd been dying to speak to. The last time I saw Saul face-to-face was when I was running around like a headless chicken getting everything ready to go back to Japan. We hadn't had the chance to talk at all. If I didn't speak up now, I wasn't sure when I'd next get the opportunity to speak to him.

"Um... While I'm already bothering you, do you mind if I ask some more questions?"

"Not at all. That is what I am here for. That, and the unreasonable demands placed on me by my older pupil. You and I have much to talk about."

"Unreasonable demands?"

"Here, listen to these voicemails."

Saul held his phone up to my ear and opened his voicemail. The recorded message played out in English: *You have four voicemails. Now playing voicemail one.* Then came a beep, followed by a familiar voice speaking English.

"Good afternoon. Richard speaking. I believe you're in Hong Kong at the moment, correct? I received a message from Vincent just a moment ago informing me that Seigi is likewise staying in Hong Kong. Near Tsim Sha Tsui, to my understanding. Would you please go pick him up for his own safety? I will message you the details of his location for your reference. Let me know when you've received this call. Thank you, and good day."

Now playing voicemail two.

"Good afternoon. I am calling to follow up on my previous message, as I have

yet to hear from you. Please respond at your earliest convenience. The weather is lovely where I'm at, and I would like nothing more than to roll the windows down and go for a pleasant drive. I hope to hear from you soon."

Now playing voicemail three.

"Saul, I have yet to receive a response from you. However, I did receive notice that you've purchased the pending emerald and rubellite piece. I would like you to hold on to it for me, if you would be so kind. The diamond was canceled; our client was only interested in a VVS1. I've sent you an email regarding these transactions, which I would like you to look over. Good day."

Now playing voicemail four.

"...I have airline tickets for Hong Kong pulled up on my computer as we speak, but a nonstop flight will take six hours from my current location. I shudder to think how much trouble Seigi could manage to get himself into in that six-hour interim. You, however, are in Hong Kong, and thus I cannot fathom why it should be necessary for me to book this flight. That aside, I've closed the deal in Sydney. You are listening, aren't you? Then your response, if you'd please. Good day."

The messages ended there with a beep. The voicemail asked me if I wanted to delete the messages, whereupon Saul took the phone back and deleted all of them.

What was that all about? Sydney? Did that mean that Richard was in Australia?

I looked at the Sri Lankan gentleman sitting next to me, and he heaved a weary sigh. "He must be quite upset if he's resorting to statements like 'I cannot fathom why it should be necessary for me to book this flight.' Every word of that message is borrowed straight from my playbook. Now, I don't pretend to understand the way he conducts his business, but back in the good old days, I would demand you gain his permission before you set foot outside again."

"...I gave Richard a lot of cause for worry with the incident in Tokyo. He

sometimes treats me like I'm a kid. And when I was in Tokyo for a brief period, I made a phone call to him that must have worried him. Sorry. This is all my fault."

"Think nothing of it, my dear boy. I have many friends who make demands of my time on top of this idiot pupil of mine. I frequently receive requests such as these. The curse of being too kind!"

"I'm sorry. I'll try to have a word with him."

"See that you do."

I wish I could have claimed that Sri Lanka had done wonders for putting me back on my feet after the stress of the stalker incident made me fall ill. Unfortunately, the truth wasn't as pretty. To be honest, there were moments at the start of my stay in Sri Lanka when I felt awful, even though I was no longer in Japan. I had nightmares so bad they made me leap right up out of bed. But as I settled into life in Southeast Asia, discovered new favorite restaurants, and took up swapping side dishes with the neighbors, I eventually rediscovered my smile. The nightmares of my college days seemed to fade away into the past, and I questioned why I let a phantom figure in Japan frighten me when I was in Sri Lanka. Eventually, I realized the same held true no matter where I was.

Either way, I was grateful that Richard was concerned about me, but I knew I'd have to tell him not to worry. All these voicemails were a little embarrassing, especially when he got Saul involved.

Just then, our iced tea and ginger ale arrived. Mine came with the lemon I asked for as a spiral of peel on a silver skewer, just like a bar lime. Saul took his ginger ale with mint floating in it.

The clouds still threatened rain that refused to fall. And I had questions I couldn't afford to forget.

"First, I'd like to ask why you hired me."

"Because you wanted me to, of course. Why else?"

Well, he wasn't wrong. Still, Richard had been the one who had suggested the matter of me interning with him, and Saul the one who accepted me. So it wasn't all me. Yet had I not asked Saul, I suppose I wouldn't have ended up here.

Even so, that didn't answer things.

"Vince said to me on the cruise that you treat me so well because you're trying to keep Richard on a chain."

"Hmm. Perhaps that's not a bad idea. After all, you're the irreplaceable apple of the Claremont family eye. You smile. Do I sound like I'm joking?"

"S-sorry. I promise I'll talk to him about the voicemail thing. But it's just..."

I really didn't know how to talk to Saul.

"I want to know the *real* reason."

Saul made me nervous. I felt like I was facing some kind of opponent—but I also felt calm around him, like I was dealing with a jocular but dependable uncle. I had to play it by ear when figuring out how to talk to him. I wondered if my hardworking friends back in Japan felt similarly nervous when they spoke to bosses or managers whom they didn't know well.

Our conversation lapsed into silence, which I found a little frightening. I didn't know what was running through Saul's mind.

He gave me his familiar genie smile and a look that made me think he was testing me.

"Well, what do you think? What kind of person do you take me for, Mr. Nakata?"

"...I look up to you. I also feel indebted to you. But if I'm going to be honest, I still don't quite see what you get out of teaching me about gemstones and the jewelry trade. I don't think you're doing it for purely altruistic reasons."

"Bravo. No one is perfectly altruistic or perfectly selfish. We all swing back and forth from one end of the spectrum to another, flickering like the flash on a

labradorite or the luster of a black pearl.”

Saul wagged a dark brown finger at me. He could have been an actor in a play. Not a hair in his mustache was out of place, and every look he shot my way seemed calculated. The word *gentleman* was practically made for him.

“Even so, the notion of keeping Richard on a chain is foolish. That British friend of yours seems to be confusing me for a convenient manservant or something of the sort of late, what with all these messages he sends me in his every free moment. He is dictating the curriculum I should be teaching you in regard to the basics of gemstones. Were you to ask me, I would gladly say that you are several times more charming and capable an individual than my pesky senior pupil. You are honest and obedient, you are strong-willed without being insolent, and you display a marvelous hunger for learning. What do you think about owning the Ginza shop someday?”

“Sorry, what?”

That had taken a wild turn. The store in Ginza? That could only mean one thing.

“Y-you mean me? Run Étranger? ...Alone?”

“Yes, eventually. Although I have no objection to you hiring part-time help, should it prove necessary.”

It sounded like a joke. Me sitting in Richard’s spot while a part-timer made me tea. It was nonsensical, but Saul seemed to actually be considering it. Of course, it was all theoretical. But if I were to take over the shop, what would happen to Richard? Where would he go?

When I asked Saul, he shrugged.

“Who knows? Until quite recently, Richard has been living the life of a reluctant globetrotter, unable to form real relationships with anyone. I think it’s high time he comes to a decision about how he wants to live the rest of his life, don’t you think?”

Saul took a sip of his ginger ale, and a wave of relief washed over me. This talk of handing over the Ginza shop had nothing to do with me. It was all about Richard. Far from trying to tie Richard down, Saul was waiting to see what Richard wanted to do after being freed from his familial curse. Thank goodness. Despite how Saul treated me, I wasn't a puppet, and I could leave if I ever wanted to—or decide to continue making the most of these cushy working conditions. But it made me glad to realize that Saul was doing this all for my dear boss, not me. In the end, Saul was *Richard's* mentor, after all.

When I didn't say anything, Saul cracked a smile. "I knew I preferred you for a reason. This is the part where my idiot pupil would begin suspecting me of some ulterior motive."

"Do you have one?"

"Of course I do, but why should that change anything? If I tell you it is for Richard's own good, I know you will do whatever I want. Furthermore, you won't even feel like I am pulling your strings. Could I ask for anything better?"

"You may be right, but I'm just happy to do anything for Richard. That's what you'd call a 'win-win' in English, right?"

"You could always use the Japanese term, you know."

He grumbled to himself about my word choice but never stopped smiling.

If he truly did have some sort of ulterior motive, I knew he wasn't the sort of person to tell me what it was. At the same time, I didn't hear anything in his voice that made me think he was misleading me or attempting to deceive himself. And that was good enough for me. Besides, it wasn't like I had committed to following his plan, either.

While still seated, I bowed to him.

"I'm very grateful for how you watch over me and let me intern under you while I study for the civil service exam. I can only imagine what a pain it's been, given that my future's still up in the air. You don't know if you'll ever get a

return on what you're investing in me, right? I feel bad, but I still can't give up on what I'm doing."

"No return on my investment? Mr. Nakata, I have a broader perspective. I became a jeweler so I could make the world a brighter, more beautiful place. I help train you and others like you to make this dream a reality. No matter how you choose to pursue the rest of your life, it works out the same for me. My life experience has brought me to believe that putting serious effort into any field of study is well worth the effort, even if one switches to a completely different field later. In fact, the more weapons you have at your disposal, the more assets you can deploy to protect the people in your social spheres. And what would be the fun in being a jeweler if you remain ignorant of the regions of the globe or the pain of its people? I insist you take as many detours in life as you possibly can. You already understand the costs. Now be proud of your choices and pursue whatever goals you wish. Do you think my goals are too lofty? I don't. I admit that I am a man of many excesses, but a jeweler who is afraid of a little extravagance is no jeweler at all. Prioritizing efficiency under the guise of rationalism is a fool's errand."

There was nothing I could do but bow once again. I was slightly scared of how persuasive he was, but if there were more bosses in Japan with an attitude like his, job searching would be way easier. Every time it hit me anew just how cool and charismatic Saul was, I warmed to the idea of being a jeweler myself. He was really a natural salesman.

Still, there was one final thing more puzzling than all my other questions.

"...Sorry, can I ask one last thing?"

"But of course."

"Why... Why does Vince hate Richard?"

Richard wasn't the right name, exactly. To me, it seemed like Vince hated himself. He had taken Jeffrey's money and sold out Richard, only to eventually lose his family, tank his relationship with the woman he might have loved, and

begin working for a shut-in girl in Switzerland. How did he end up like this? None of the puzzle pieces fit together. I understood the individual events that had taken place, but I didn't know what had ignited the black fire burning away inside Vince. What had driven him to this point? Surely Saul or Richard knew.

Saul hesitated for a moment before raising a hand to place an order with the waiter. After requesting three plates, he turned to me with a smile.

"Mr. Nakata, I hope you'll forgive my rudeness for answering your question with another question. If you were Vincent, would you want me to tell you?"

Brief and to the point. Saul clearly knew my answer already.

"...No."

"Then that is the most detailed answer I can give you."

He meant well, and I felt embarrassed for my own thoughtlessness. If Saul had been the type to spill the beans willy-nilly, then I would never have ended up here. Saul would have told me ages ago to watch out for Vince because of such-and-such, which in turn would have made me mistrust Saul's ability to manage information and wonder if he was suited to be my boss. If he blabbed about Vince, then I knew he wouldn't keep my secrets, either.

But now I had no more leads to solve the mystery of Vince. Maybe Marian was the best option after all...but I didn't want to hurt her any more than she already had been.

The second I started to despair, Saul chuckled.

"I cannot comment about his ill will for my idiot people, but I can say he dislikes me for one very simple reason."

"Oh?"

"Because I held my tongue."

"...About what?"

"Richard was aware of the betrayal, the information leaks, and the money

changing hands all along. However, I said none of that to Vincent. Now, if you ask who gave Richard that information, then I must admit—I am guilty as charged.”

Uh. Wow. How long had he been aware? I stuttered out those questions, and Saul answered, “From the start.”

He said that Vince accepted payments from Jeffrey over ten times, which matched Vince’s story. When I imagined Vince’s shock at discovering Richard was a willing victim the whole time, I groaned.

Saul’s smile never flagged.

“I had my reasons, of course. If nothing else, the Hong Kong store had too few staff for me to lose a worker with such knowledge of the area and gemstone expertise. Likewise, Richard understood that it was only a matter of time before his family caught up to him. Thus...”

Saul mimed opening the door of a cage and then spread his hands like a bird flying away. Oh, was he trying to say, “I let him go free”? But the “bird” didn’t realize he was only flying into a larger cage. Was that what Saul was trying to say?

Vince once told me that Richard transformed every one of his treasured gems into mere stones. I got that it was a metaphor, but only now did I really understand what he meant. Vince could have lived with the guilt of outwitting his boss and coworker. It would have given him a slight sense of superiority. But if that were reversed? If Vince was being fed information to bring back to his keeper, like an exotic animal in a zoo—if Vince was the only one being kept in the dark—what would that have felt like?

As much as I hated the phrase, he’d made a fool of himself. But how else could I describe it? When it all came to light, how much anguish must he have felt?

“I’m afraid I do not know how he explained Richard’s or my involvement. I think fondly of Vincent, I do. This boy who calls me ‘old man Saul’ will always

have a place in my heart. But I am no saint, Seigi. I respond to honesty with honesty and dishonesty with similar bad faith, as is the jeweler's creed. Now, you may insult me for that dishonesty all you like, but I can do little but say that this is simply the way it is. We businessmen act as businessmen do. You might say it is how we take responsibility for ourselves."

"...Does that also apply to Richard?"

Did Richard use the same argument to help himself stomach the situation? Did he know the whole time and only pretend ignorance? Did he think he could vanish into the night before Vince learned the truth? Maybe. The Richard I knew would likely have chosen that option. But that wasn't what he did.

Saul's smile didn't reach his eyes as he silently watched my face. I felt like his eyes were looking straight through me and into my soul.

"How did you feel about Richard being dishonest right back to Vince?" I asked.

"A difficult question. I am not and was not capable of seeing the future, so I found it challenging to make up my mind on the matter."

I regretted ever asking such a stupid question. I knew it must have hurt him. I'd known Saul long enough to tell that much. What I really wanted to know was how Richard had come to terms with Vince's betrayal, but I didn't want to ask Richard himself. It felt like sticking a ruler into an open wound to gauge its depth, and I didn't want to do that. But...I still wanted to know. My cowardice disgusted me.

Saul seemed to know my internal conflict, as he chuckled. His mustache quivered as he laughed.

"Why don't you think about it this way? Recall when you asked him to identify your grandmother's ring under the pretense of being ignorant of its authenticity. You knew it was stolen and wanted only to find its true owner. How did Richard respond? Consider his response and how it might apply to Vincent's situation."

At the question, I felt something crystalize within me and tear a hole in my chest. Saul was right. I could never forget giving Richard my grandmother's padparadscha ring. I had asked him to identify it for me, when what I really wanted was to know the ring's true backstory.

When Richard left *Étranger* for England, he must have told Saul all about me. Saul must have known my backstory all along, and my first move after meeting Richard had hardly been an honest one. I was using this man I had bumped into, plain and simple.

Vince's words echoed in my mind: *Ask Richard why he hired you.* Me, a man who had given Richard a ring under false pretexts upon our very first meeting. Sometime later, I broke down sobbing in a taxi cab, which is when he must have realized I was nothing more than a broke college student. How could he have looked at all that and wanted to hire me?

I'd wondered this before. I even asked him once, and still remembered his answer, which I had interpreted as *He thinks I'm so hopeless that if he lets me go again, I'll wind up in major trouble.* From a managerial perspective, I was probably a harmless, albeit not entirely safe, choice for a single part-time worker in an otherwise nonexistent staff. Still, why choose me? Was it to, I don't know, make up for what he did to Vince? Was he trying to clear his conscience by trusting me and hiring me?

I shook my head and sipped my now-diluted iced tea. I was building castles in the sky with these growing piles of assumptions. I knew I shouldn't overthink things. Maybe that was what Saul meant.

As I felt lost and wondered what to do next, Saul chuckled.

"Seigi, might I tell you one other thing I like about you?"

"Who, me?"

"You are terrible at hiding things. This may very well spell the death of your career as a jeweler, but it could still behoove you as a salesman. When you're selling expensive products, it might very well work out in your favor for

customers to assume you don't have a dishonest bone in your body."

Was Saul trying to say that I was an open book? That's how my family raised me to be, so of course I turned out that way. Still, I felt abashed that he was treating me like a child.

Saul was still snickering when the food arrived. These modern Chinese dishes were plated like expensive French or Italian cuisine: white steamed *manju* cakes, vegetable stir-fry, and *xiaolongbao* buns.

"Eat up. Were people the world over to be equipped with proper food, clothing, and shelter before they came to the discussion table, there would be far fewer wars written in the pages of history."

"I agree. You sure are a romantic, aren't you, Saul?"

"You're starting to sound like a certain someone we both know."

I wasn't sure how to take that, but I soon let it slip my mind because the food tasted wonderful. The flavors were subtle, the plating was beautiful, and if anyone had asked me to recreate it in my own kitchen, the enormous amount of labor involved would have made me stagger. What a joy to go out and eat food like this.

For the time being, I took the question of why Richard had hired me and locked it in the safe inside my chest. If I wanted to learn the truth, my only option was to ask him. Right now, all my questions had to be the kind Saul could answer.

I felt like I understood the important details of Vince's backstory and why Richard hired me. So, what now? Saul no doubt wanted to keep away from Octavia and her schemes. Asking about her or how she related to Richard would not provide me with further information. So, what else? What else was there to ask? Puzzled, I ran over a list of everything that had happened. My first moments in Sri Lanka. The message with the subject line "Help Richard." The cruise ship. The terrible reception I received. The false accusations. Meeting Vince and Octavia's declaration of war. Provence. Catherine and the treasure

hunt. What was racist and what was complimentary. Richard, and Richard calling me his friend.

My mouth moved without any input from my brain. "...No matter where you go, life sure is tough, huh?"

That was the height of nonspecific, and Saul responded with amusement in his voice.

"Absolutely. Welcome to the club of those who've discovered the truth of the world, my dear boy."

"Sorry. I just blurted that out. Monica would laugh at me if she heard."

"Monica doesn't laugh at people who are struggling. Don't think so poorly of her. Still, I cannot deny that she is the daughter of a dear friend, and the apple does not fall far from the tree..."

"Are you sure you shouldn't have joined her today?"

"Oh, no. She went off to go clothes shopping. I would only be getting in her hair were I to hang around longer. I have no doubt she'll come wandering back once she wants to try some high-class Chinese food."

As much as he faked exasperation, I could tell Saul was happy. I felt bad all over again that I had intruded on his time with her. Maybe it was for the best if I cleared the table as quickly as possible, thanked him, and then left. I hurried to reach for a bun with my chopsticks, but Saul swooped in before I could get it and popped it down his throat. He chewed the morsel heartily yet silently.

Once he swallowed the mouthful, he gave me a smile. There was a curious look in his eyes.

"Why don't I tell you a little story of the past? Back when my wife and best friend were still alive. No, in fact, it begins far, far before I met either of them."

I had a feeling this was going to be a long tale. I could also tell this was his way of doing me a favor. Like pupil, like mentor, or at least when it came to Richard and Saul.

“I don’t suppose you have any objection to religious discussion, do you? I hear the Japanese are not especially fixated on religion, but spirituality is neither fully personal nor fully universal.”

“Well... I don’t know. Religion’s so not on my radar that I don’t even know much about it. Growing up, my family wasn’t the type to talk about religion.”

“Very well. That allows me to relay my tale with no hesitation on my part.”

Saul was born in a family of Buddhists, he began. He gave me an evil, genie-like grin that I wasn’t sure how to interpret.

Of all the taboo topics out there, religion was the worst one to bring up with someone you didn’t know very well. Many Japanese people weren’t very religious, and even we knew this much. Religion was a sensitive topic. Still, Saul was willing to talk about it with me, and I couldn’t claim I wasn’t curious.

Saul told me about Buddhism’s prevalence in Sri Lanka. Over seventy percent of the population practiced it, making it the majority religion. However, Sri Lankan Buddhism was called Theravada Buddhism, unlike the Mahayana Buddhism popular in Japan. Sri Lankan Buddhist monks are forced to live in poverty and observe strict tenets and ascetic practices. Compared to the life of a Japanese Buddhist monk belonging to an urban temple, Sri Lankan monks were a lot more hardcore. They were also highly respected. When I lived in Kandy, I often saw politicians and high-ranking monks debating on the news on TV.

However, Saul said, he renounced that form of Buddhism when he was young.

“I did not think especially long and hard about it, as is typical of the young. At the time, I was simply fascinated by the concepts of Western medicine and reincarnation, which led me to becoming charmed by more esoteric schools of thought. No doubt living in Sri Lanka and having ready exposure to other religions also played a part.”

And yet, Saul never dipped his toes in the water of those other religions. It made sense to me. If every other member of your family was a devout

Buddhist, it would be challenging to change your religion on a whim. Religion wasn't supposed to be something that casual. But then, if you were to ask me what religion *was* supposed to be, I would have struggled to provide a definition.

"In the end, I chose an approach befitting the firebrand I was. I decided to try every religion I possibly could. As one such option, I converted to Hinduism."

"Wait, why Hinduism?"

"Does that come as a surprise? I should think you'd have a better understanding of Sri Lanka by now."

Saul punctuated his comment with a smile, and I fell silent.

I had never thought about Hinduism in Sri Lanka until I went out one day to get a cup of tea by myself. I picked a somewhat popular shop in Kandy that served tourists and wealthier-looking local clientele. People-watching while waiting for my Darjeeling tea and chocolate cake, I noticed two of the waitresses, both of whom were darker than the average Japanese person. One was a young woman with somewhat lighter caramel skin, while her coworker was an older lady with darker chocolate tones. They were both employees of the same restaurant, but I didn't think they had the same social status. The younger woman kept jerking her chin to order the older woman around, much to the latter's annoyance. However, none of the other staff members seemed to notice.

Later, when I tried to speak to the older woman in my poor Sinhala, she didn't appear to understand me well. I said, "*Stutiya*," the Sinhala equivalent of "thank you," but she didn't pick it up.

Finally, after a long wait, I received my order. As I drank the tea and ate the slightly cold chocolate cake, I heard someone at the next table over tell the old lady, "*Mikka nandri*." Oh, I thought. *She must speak Tamil. Nandri* is "thank you" in Tamil. *Mikka* must have been an adverb, probably like "very much." In other words, "Thank you very much." The old lady smiled and refilled their tea

very politely.

When she finally came around to offer me a refill, I declined and tried telling her “*Mikka nandri*” myself. She looked startled, then smiled in delight and said something to me that sounded like a question. I assumed it was “Do you speak Tamil?” I didn’t know what to say, and she shrugged her shoulders like that answered her question. Then she dropped the matter and moved on. I never went back to that shop again.

As time went on during my stay in Sri Lanka, I developed a partial ability to tell Sinhalese people and Tamil people apart by sight. They had different skin colors, obviously, but I realized the way the women wore their saris also differed.

I soon learned that it came down to a matter of Buddhists versus Hindus. Sri Lankan Tamils are largely descendants of laborers brought over by the British from Southern India to pick tea leaves. Sri Lankan tea is amazing and still exported all over the world to this day. Many Tamils also continue to work on these Sri Lankan tea plantations. To not beat around the bush, there’s still an income gap between these two ethnic groups. This was one of the causes of the Sri Lankan Civil War, a long conflict that only ended with the official declaration in 2009, along with the Sinhala Only Act, a government policy that gave preferential treatment to Sinhalese people. As far as I knew, the aftereffects of both were still felt in Sri Lanka to this day. Those who started off as rich were still rich, and many of the once-poor still lived in poverty.

Following the tea restaurant incident, I used *mikka nandri* periodically. To the street food vendor who let a six-year-old child run his stall because his child was the only one who knew Sinhala. To the man who cleaned the toilets in the rest house on the way to my usual jewelry suppliers and clients. To a woman on the train with gold accessories and an enormous number of bags.

Living in Sri Lanka and converting from a Buddhist into a Hindu meant moving from the “*stutiya*” side to the “*mikka nandri*” side. Maybe *doormat*—someone who kept their head down—was the right antonym for the word Saul used:

firebrand. Anyone who paid much attention to the social climate would have been afraid to make such a choice. But that didn't stop Saul.

I was on the edge of my seat as I asked him how that went for him. He beamed.

"When I announced my intentions of converting, my family vehemently opposed the idea. They could not wrap their minds around my thought process and insisted I was bringing shame on my ancestors. They even summoned a highly devout priest to lecture me on the many wonders of Buddhism. They claimed my decision was senseless. If I wanted to study Hinduism, I could very well do so as a Buddhist. However, I'd already had my fill of doing just that. Now I wanted to experience a whole new world for myself. Goodness, I was quite the adventurous young man, wouldn't you say?"

"...Can I ask how old you were when all this happened?"

"I had yet to enter medical school. We are speaking of a time even before that."

So Saul converted to Hinduism. He demonstrated that he had studied the religious texts, received a new Hindu name, underwent the naming ceremony, began practicing the Hindu five daily duties, and worshipped the Hindu gods. This, naturally, also included visiting temples. It's easy to find Hindu temples all over Sri Lanka. They're colorful buildings, their walls carved with statues of the many gods like modern art installations. They reminded me of seeing Angkor Wat on a TV program about secluded parts of the world. Which made sense—Angkor Wat was once a Hindu building. I always loved it when I could connect two facts in my brain like that.

"Well, what happened after you converted?"

"Nothing. Everything was the same."

"Huh?"

"They did not accept me. Suppose you lived in Tokyo and decided one day

that you would like to be a bona fide Osakan. You do your best to pick up the Osakan dialect and soon begin speaking it day in and day out. How do you suppose your friends and family would react?”

They wouldn't know what to say. Or they'd go, "What do you think you're doing?" and "What a weirdo." How could I express that to my boss, though? I must have made a pretty conflicted face, because Saul understood what I was thinking from my expression alone.

"As you have no doubt surmised, I received a frigid reception from my peers. I believed that I had a perfect understanding of the faith, and even in retrospect, I am sure my mannerisms were superb. From the outside, I was a model Hindu. However, the people in my neighborhood did not agree. For better or for worse, I came from a wealthy family. My neighbors thought I was only a rich boy playing some sort of blasphemous game. In time, I decided to reconsider my goals."

"...Why did you want to be a Hindu anyway?"

"Oh, it was only the first of many experiences. I wanted to try out every religion. I thought religion provided a way to look at the world or perhaps a means through which to reconcile oneself with the world. When I decided to study in the United Kingdom, I joined the Church of England—a Protestant religion. By then, my parents were no longer speaking to me."

He talked about swapping religions as easily as changing his taste in clothes. Could you really take on and cast off a religion so simply, though?

I quickly abandoned that line of thinking. What was I a believer in, after all? I performed Buddhist rituals at graves, certainly. My mother's side of the family had only Hiromi and my grandmother, so I had very few ancestors to speak of. Mr. Nakata's side had ancestral graves in a family temple, so maybe that counted. But we still ate Christmas cake and went to Shinto shrines to pray on New Year's. Did that mean I didn't follow any religion? I certainly hadn't fully committed to one. I basically only showed up for holidays.

With only those holidays serving as the framework for my understanding of religion, I couldn't imagine myself using religion as a lens to look at the world or reconcile my place in it. I didn't have that sort of faith in anything yet. If I *had* to call myself a believer in something, I guess I could say I was a believer in Richard. I supposed my trust in him, my desire to help him, and the relief his overpowering beauty brought me amounted to something like faith. I would have to run that idea by him the next time we met.

Anyway, enough about that. What happened next, when Saul studied in the UK?

"I shall do you a favor and spare you the details of my time in medical school. I'm afraid the whole six years were a never-ending battle. I hear Japanese people often refer to such times as 'difficult, but worth it in the end,' but I believe 'self-sacrificial devotion' is a more deserving term. The residents of medical schools across the globe are driven by some sense of purpose that propels them through this series of hellish trials. And yet, as I chose to specialize in end-of-life care, I found that my branch of medicine could not be separated from religion. I'm not suggesting that Protestantism, Buddhism, and Hinduism are anything other than wonderful religions. Still, I converted to Catholicism in my fourth year and was a Christian during my years as a doctor."

Next, Saul threw himself headlong into working for a medical NGO. He struggled to provide medical care in places like the border between Pakistan and India or impoverished areas of Africa. He'd mentioned earlier that his family was wealthy, "for better or worse." It hadn't sounded to me like a snide comment, and this, too, reminded me of how Richard felt about the Claremonts.

"I encountered every sort of person you can imagine between the hospitals in England, the clinics in India that I later transferred to, and even the tents from which we worked in the Middle East. So long as people were treated like people, I found there was harmony. NGOs such as the one I worked for are needed all across the globe, but I always found that the worst, most pressingly

needed areas were places in which people no longer treated one another like fellow human beings. These were wastelands. Places without beauty. Areas without peace. I am fascinated by this word, 'human being,' *Homo sapiens sapiens*. We need other people to make us people. If we do not have basic human dignity, then being a person is challenging indeed."

But even when they lacked basic human dignity, Saul went on to say, people did not abandon their religion. In fact, people refused to give up their faith even if it divided them from their neighbors, turned them against their brothers, or spurred them into situations where they needed to fight for their lives.

"Because abandoning one's religion is choosing to belong to neither team. It is choosing to be a reckless traveler. You might say that any person with an umbrella, backpack, wallet, good pair of shoes, and their wits could go on to travel the world. But when you have nothing, are *forbidden* to have anything, religion is an undeniable asset. It is a part of you. Your identity, so to speak. When I realized that, I was struck by the shallow nature of my own perception of religion. Religion is not a window to the world but an eye. No matter the cruelties they face, very few people in the world can gouge out their own eyes when pressed to do so. Despite the persecution a person may face for being part of a certain team, it is far better to have teammates than to belong to no team at all. I assume you understand what I mean. This is the very stuff we human beings are made of."

"...Yeah, I think I kind of get it."

The less you have, the more important your identity, Saul explained. The more important your identity, the easier it was for something to shake your entire world. That part was very simple for me to understand. Those who had nothing were first in line to be hurt.

As Saul hopped from one religion to another, he discovered that being able to do so was a privilege his circumstances afforded him. Which made sense. I had to imagine changing religions was a much bigger deal than changing clothing styles. Still, I had never given religion much serious thought before. That was

the norm for people in Japan. In Japan, no one tried to risk their own life or kill anyone for religious reasons—or if they did, I simply didn't notice. Such people were so vanishingly few in number that I couldn't understand what drove them.

That was why I felt so shocked when the arson happened in Sri Lanka. I couldn't wrap my head around the concept of burning down someone's store just because they believed in a different religion. Even now, I struggled to know how to feel.

I wondered how Saul felt. What was his take on the situation? Of course, the current crisis was between Buddhists and Muslims. Naturally, Saul wasn't a Musli—

Then, the moment that thought crossed my mind, I remembered he said he was a Christian “during his years as a doctor.” So did that mean...?

“Uh, excuse me?”

“Yes?”

“I know I'm being too nosy, but when you stopped practicing medicine and became a jeweler, did you switch religions again?”

“A fantastic question. As you surmised, I did indeed convert once more. This time, to Islam. I have found much comfort in this religion whose name means inner peace.”

He told me with a chuckle that he could now read the Koran out loud in Arabic. I thought of the phrase “Oh, God” and wondered which God he addressed whenever he said it.

Saul's life history made him like a traveling backpacker, moving between religions instead of countries. With every conversion, he learned new holy texts, new religious rites, and new ways of thinking before he moved on to the next faith. His journey continued forever. I wondered what compelled him? Wasn't the whole point of religion to have a place to come home to without needing to travel like that? Even to a person with a lackadaisical, show-up-for-the-holidays

take on religion like me, it was apparent that few people were equipped to make the kind of pilgrimage through faiths that Saul had. Once a person developed a belief in something, that belief was difficult to abandon.

Maybe that concept held true for more than just religion.

“Why go to all this trouble?”

“I believe I told you at the very beginning of this conversation. Religion is a way of reconciling oneself with the world. Every religion is similar in that it is a way of answering ‘yes’ to life itself. Religion gives you affirmation from a higher being that your existence is inherently a beautiful thing. You could say it is a form of reassurance. I found myself wanting to learn as many different methods of reconciliation as I could. Perhaps it is best to say that I wished to learn as much about *people* as I could. Such thinking might charitably be called a fascination, but most call it sinful. Shallow. Irreverent. Very few people can understand my perspective.”

“...You tried out all these religions so you could discover how people all over the world feel at peace.”

“Yes, that is one way of looking at it. Granted, I did not realize that until after I met my wife.”

His wife. Here was a topic far removed from religion. A chilly wind blew in on the terrace as our conversation drifted through serious territory.

“She was a true intellectual. She brought her argumentative little sister with her into our household, but she had such a cheerful disposition. And such a no-nonsense way of speaking! I cannot count the number of times she saved me.” Saul paused. “Yet the beautiful die young, as the Japanese expression goes.”

He was in a talkative mood today, but he showed no signs of saying any more about his wife. I knew from the start that she had passed away, and I guess he didn’t want to dwell on it any longer.

“I felt like the sinner in Akutagawa’s fable who receives a thread of spider silk

from heaven, offering him salvation. This salvation came in the form of a message: People need to be saved, for there is no escape from the sorrows our destinies portend. Even one as privileged as I, studying where I did and growing up in a family so fortunate, is not exempt from tragedy. Life itself is a tragedy for the greater portion of the world, which lives in want and warfare. In that sorrow, every person needs a reason to live. Chief among them is anger. A person can sustain themselves on anger, and I, too, lived off the fury I felt toward God. And then sometimes, religion can brand this suffering as sin—a crime of the divine, so to speak. For where there is crime, there is punishment. This gives us our reason for anger, which is a marvelously rational method of being saved. Don't you agree?"

Fury, in order to live. Sin, in order to be punished. I couldn't speak. Saul was describing the inverse of cosmic cause and effect, which ran backward to everything I knew. I thought his approach was a very extremist way of looking at things, but the logic made a lot of sense to me.

But didn't it contradict all of Richard's rules for *Étranger*? We do not discriminate. We treat all customers the same regardless of religion, race, gender, or political affiliation. That was the creed for Richard's shop of solitude. If anger was necessary for life, didn't that mean that discrimination was necessary, too?

I wondered if Richard knew about Saul's caravan of religion. Had he made those rules for *Étranger* without knowing? I doubted that. Would Richard really avoid deep discussions with the man he called his mentor?

My mind spun. Whirled. Tied itself in knots as I thought. I lapsed into a long silence as I pondered before I finally came to a single conclusion.

"A penny for your thoughts, Seigi."

"...See, there's this thing that Richard taught me..."

"I assume you're referring to *Étranger*'s anti-discrimination rules."

I nodded. Saul looked at me with a smile. Like he was watching over me,

protectively, while I puzzled out the answer.

“We’ll...We’ll never see an end to discrimination, will we?”

“At the very least, not in my lifetime. Much like an end to war, I don’t see it happening for at least a few more centuries. Perhaps it’s simply an impossible dream.”

I agreed. Even a few centuries sounded optimistic to me...though maybe I was getting this wrong. Richard’s rules weren’t meant to *end* discrimination—they were meant to turn the store into an otherworldly kind of paradise. A gemstone castle, free of any fetters that might weigh it down. Was that their true purpose?

As I mumbled those last few sentences out loud, Saul considered each one individually and then chuckled.

“Paradise? Yes, my idiot pupil would certainly like to see it that way. The Western concept of utopia assumes the kind of perfection that is possible to achieve in our mortal plane. A land of milk and honey, intended as a social experiment. But the paradise described in Eastern thought, as in the writings of Tao Yuanming, is a state of mental perfection that cannot exist in reality. It is a fairyland for people, old and young alike, who seclude themselves from the rest of the world. If a visitor to that land could only bring home one of the gorgeous coral-and-jade urns he describes as a souvenir, it would be perfection itself.”

“But...”

I couldn’t stop myself from speaking out, but nothing followed that one interjection. But. But what?

Discrimination was a real thing that we would never be rid of. I knew that.

But.

But there was a place in Ginza Nanachome called *Étranger*. And there was my boss, too. He and *Étranger* were definitely real, even if that could be hard to wrap your mind around, because he was so beautiful it made you doubt your

own eyes. Likewise, there were all the customers Richard had met, talked with, smiled at, sold jewelry to, and connected with on an emotional level. And I knew they were real.

Étranger was no utopia removed from human civilization. It was a place of business, of relaxation, of Richard's battleground. Any who defied its rules or harassed Richard's customers were driven from its holy halls with no mercy. That fight had to be worth something, didn't it?

Now I felt like I understood Saul's message on another, deeper level. He didn't disagree with Richard's point of view. Richard and Saul felt the exact same way. It was just that Richard chose to conduct his store in such a way that would make this paradise be real.

"At the very least, I suppose I've never heard of any religious conflicts or hate crimes occurring in that little shop of his. We should thank Ginza for being such a peaceful neighborhood."

"Which means it's a real-life paradise."

"No, being real automatically disqualifies a paradise. Étranger is merely a utopia, the land of Thomas Moore's work. You cannot think that such a place could ever possibly exist at a larger scale, do you? Ah, pardon me, that was rude. If I were you, I would consider what could be done to make the whole world like your Étranger. What would one need to do to establish a religion worshipping the one true god known as royal milk tea? A difficult task, methinks."

"I don't think that's actually the shop's guiding principle..."

"Let's return to the topic of religion."

Oh. I guess there was more to go.

I didn't know how the death of his loved one affected his religious views, but it seemed that losing his wife made Saul give up religious backpacking for good. I asked him if that meant he had decided to settle down and accept Islam as the

one true faith, but he said no. Did that mean he'd left the faith? Was he an atheist?

Saul clicked his tongue and wagged a finger. Ah ha. There was that genie smile of his again.

"No, Seigi. I belong to a new, entirely unique religion."

"...Don't tell me it's called Saulism."

"That it most certainly is not. If you weren't aware, Saul is my Biblical name, after King Saul, who ruled the Israelites before King David. In Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, Saul is a holy figure, and thus I go by the name for its versatility. And of course, it has a lovely ring to it."

Huh. Okay. He told me he had several other names, including a Hindu name and a Muslim name. Some of my friends had Christian names, too, as did some of my classmates in college, now that I thought about it. I realized that Vincent might not be a nickname, either. Hong Kong citizens had to use their Chinese names on their official IDs, although not all of them used those names on a day-to-day basis.

The concept of someone's name was like the concept of the person themselves. A person could have a name, but without anyone else there to use it, its existence meant little. Maybe religion was the same way.

"So...what is this entirely unique religion of yours?"

"You sound doubtful. What, do you believe that a religion with only one follower is no religion at all?"

"N-no, I don't."

"Very well, then I shall answer you. The one thing I place my faith in is beauty."

Beauty.

I made an odd noise similar to an "Oh ho" or an "Ah ha" sound. Beauty. The image of Richard with a halo, dressed like a figure from Greek mythology and

making a gesture of gratitude. That was almost certainly not what Saul meant. No, no, no. Saul definitely didn't believe in that. Still, that didn't stop my brain from naturally concocting this image. Sorry, Richard. Forgive me.

"Isn't that more of a creed?"

"Yes, I have a creed as well. An extraordinarily simple one. 'Respect that which you find beautiful.'"

Oh. If that was what Saul believed in, then maybe his religion had just gained another follower. Maybe everyone was a believer if they ever breathed a sigh at the sky on a clear morning, a mountain ridge, a beach sunset, or the gleam of a colorful gemstone. But did that count as a religion?

I frowned, which made Saul smile in self-satisfaction. From the look on his face, I assumed he was enjoying my reactions. *Sorry I don't have the most thrilling responses.* But that didn't stop him from continuing to talk to me.

"It is up to every individual to determine what defines a religion. After my long journey, I've decided that religion is whatever we cannot abandon. What can I not bear to throw away? Life, of course. And what is it that drives our lives, that inflames our passions? Our values and our senses of beauty. And what is it that influences our aesthetic preferences? Love and attachment. But that's far too romantic, and she who inflamed my passion through romantic love is now gone from me. What, then, is the source of my flame? What kindles the feeling of love?" Saul smiled wryly at me. "What could it be, if not beauty?"

It was extremely simple to understand that a good thing was, well, good. You could accept that fact naturally when you looked at a gem and felt inner peace. But I didn't think that covered the full extent of what Saul was talking about.

I looked up and took in the world around the café. The benches sitting on the grass. The slight humidity in the air. The scintillating drops of water on the café's dishes. The white of the plaster against the green of the moss creeping up the walls. The bare knees of the passerby. Laughter and voices in a language I couldn't understand. The city spread out below me from my high vantage

point. The long history written in the bedrock of the city itself. The dim glow of the sea under storm clouds.

Beauty was everywhere around me. All I had to do was look for it.

Maybe Saul's faith in beauty was like never giving up hope for the world.

Life is difficult. When I was in elementary and junior high, I remember thinking, "I'm tired of being alive." I still kind of felt that way as an adult, though the feeling had changed. What remained the same was the feeling that I just wasn't cut out for life. It was painful. I felt like I never quite belonged no matter where I went. Whenever anyone was nice to me, I felt so overjoyed I could cry. But at the same time, I also worried and felt guilty. What if I could never make anyone else just as happy? Of course, I knew it wouldn't be ideal for everyone to be perfectly happy-happy, joy-joy all the time. That would be like being on drugs.

So maybe this was my only option. Maybe I would continue to see the world like this forever. I doubted I would ever wake up one day to see the sun streaming in and think to myself, "Wow, isn't it great to be alive?" The longer I lived, the more people I would meet. The more people I met, the more I would become close to. The more close companions I had, the more I'd bear witness to their terrible suffering, and the harder life would become.

But despite all that suffering, maybe the world could be a beautiful place. Maybe we could refuse to abandon ourselves to the darkness, to forsake hope, to quit fighting for all that is good. Maybe we could keep trying to discover the beauty of the world in our own ways. And if that was what Saul believed in...

"...You know, I...I think I'm a believer, too. I think I've always used these concepts as a kind of moral support."

"No doubt you have. I always knew you had promise."

I agreed with his creed. I was a muddled mess of Buddhist, Christian, and Shinto beliefs, but from now on, I would be a believer in beauty. Even in Sri Lanka, no one ever asked me what religion I practiced, but I had asked *myself*

that question. Was I Buddhist? An atheist? Neither seemed to fit right.

Saul's words, however, struck home. Maybe I was just broadening my definition of the word "beauty," but that didn't change the fact that beauty was good. Nothing could change that.

I bowed and thanked him, making Saul laugh again. I imagined Richard had a different reaction to this speech: a sarcastic quip, a witty retort. No doubt Saul served one right back. But that wasn't my style. A bow and a thank-you worked for me.

Life is hard no matter where you are in the world. Even so, that was no reason to throw it all away. That's because beautiful things are there to offer us their quiet, unobtrusive support.

Saul went on to talk about the state of religion in Sri Lanka, delivered in a series of intermittent facts. How the majority religion had connections in government. How religious minorities were persecuted. How civil war broke out once WWII ended, and how a growing number of children never knew about the civil war at all. How their parents worried about the renewed outbreak of violence. How, as a small country off the shore of a major power, they could not escape the conflicting demands of the global powers they interacted with. All of these were problems far out of Saul's and my control.

I offered Saul a weak smile, and he reached out to clap a palm on my shoulder. His hands were always strong and warm, with a weight to them that almost frightened me.

"There is too much here for you to understand at once. The urge to try and conceptualize it immediately is very difficult and dangerously tempting. If anyone tells you they have a single answer that explains everything, that they alone possess the only beauty in the world, then that person is *not your friend*. They may mean well, but if you accept their truth and stop thinking, you will spend the rest of your sheltered life in a box. The world is infinitely beautiful. It bursts with beauty you have never seen that is waiting for you to discover it."

“...I’m a pretty simple guy, so I’m happy to hear that.”

“No doubt you are. This is one of the virtues of religion.”

He nodded, as if to say, *good*. His smile was that of a teacher.

“Take your time to understand. Do not ignore the things you don’t comprehend, or the things you believe you already have a firm grasp on. This will lead you, in time, to grow as a person. Don’t give up. You are allowed to work it out, little by little. Don’t rush, and don’t be afraid to stop every so often and sit with ideas that trouble you. Such things, too, are irreplaceable, and will do their part to shape who you become. We have much to learn about being shaped from the gemstones we handle, do we not?”

Oh. Like he said, the history of stones was the history of the earth. Rocks were basically the oldest things on the planet, and some of them were gemstones shaped by hundreds of millions of years of pressure or geological change.

Diamond, ruby, sapphire, emerald, opal, garnet, tourmaline, topaz, alexandrite, zoisite, jade. Even gemstones made by living things, like pearl and coral. They were all pieces of stardust that had formed on this earth over the span of many, many years. A very small percentage of them became large, imperfection-free crystals that would be picked up by human hands and labeled gemstones. How many of those that remained would survive thousands of years worth of additional erosion and geological weathering?

No one expected gemstones to serve a useful purpose. They weren’t valued for their ability to do *work*. Naturally, some people cared about turning them into cash, but even then, the gemstone itself was valued for nothing more than its beauty. Gemstones were valuable simply because they shone.

Was that why beautiful things were always sad? Were they just like us, in how we struggled to cope with all the pressure the world put on us?

Saul believed that dealing with beautiful things in this line of work was a beautiful act itself. He and Richard helped people and stones find one another, like a person introducing two friends. Through this work, Saul had faith that he

cheered on the world, revitalized it, and led it to a brighter future. If that was what his faith compelled him to do, then perhaps that could also work for me. It sure sounded nice. It didn't depend on me becoming a jeweler, either. It was a matter of how I saw the world.

I bowed again and told Saul how grateful I was. He smiled like a hawk and then spoke up, like he was just waiting for me to say that.

"Welcome, Mr. Seigi Nakata. You have now become another of my dear pupils."

"Wait, what? ...I have?"

"Yes, indeed. Now that we have discussed what constitutes worldly beauty, we don't need such unromantic notions as tact—forgive me, that sounds dreadfully rude. Rather, let us dispense with reservation purely for politeness's sake. As I do with that idiot friend of ours, I shall now treat you to a lineup of things I wish to teach you. I hope you look forward to it. Of course, you will be remunerated handsomely."

Being paid on top of receiving training? Honestly, it didn't even sit right with me to have my current salary when I was still studying under him. Anything more was just too much.

When I said that to him, Saul shook his head no. Weirdly, his smile had an oddly frightening look to it that I'd first noticed earlier in the conversation. It was too...smiley. Too...fatherly and affectionate.

"Rewards come in other forms besides banknotes. Take names, for example."

"Names?"

"Yes, indeed. If you are not opposed, I could give you a new name, as a fellow scholar of the sacredness of beauty."

"You want to give me a new name?"

"Yes. You may now use this name should the need ever arise for it."

Seigi Ranasinghe Nakata.

Almost on impulse, my gut clenched. I knew he really meant this. Already, I thought Saul's words were moving, the kind I would never forget for as long as I lived. But who could ever have predicted this turn of events? Not me. Not Seigi Ranasinghe Nakata. Wow, that sounded cool. But why did it hit me with the force of a blunt weapon? Was this one of those words of power people talked about? A name of power, maybe?

I didn't know. All I knew was that I didn't dare laugh. Seigi Ranasinghe Nakata. Oh no. Repeating it in my head was dangerous. Was this the same moment when Richard took Saul's name? Had he already planned to change his name, or could he simply not refuse Saul's offer? I would need to ask him once I had the chance.

Miraculously, I managed to hide my turbulent emotions and keep from groaning out loud. Maintaining a calm expression, I tried to sound as neutral as Richard always did.

"I don't think I'm worthy of that name yet."

"Come now, don't be shy."

I didn't want to be rude, but I found it too difficult to speak up. So I gestured no with a shake of my head instead. Saul nodded back, accepting my refusal, and after a few more minutes of lighter conversation, I excused myself to use the restroom. There I played off a certain uncontrollable reaction as a coughing fit. I coughed a lot, but that was all right. I'd gotten to hear something wonderful today. Yes, it had almost made me laugh, but I hadn't. I was in the clear. I had been perfectly polite, and I was going to control myself here in this restroom as best I could.

After a decently long stint in the stall, I stepped out and resumed my conversation with Saul about Sri Lanka and Hong Kong. I did not start thinking about that moment and laugh. Not once. I knew I wasn't the paragon of politeness or consideration. I knew I tended to speak without thinking and accidentally offend other people. But this incident gave me a surprising

confidence boost. If I could contain myself this well, maybe I *was* actually cut out for work in the service industry.

I enjoyed talking with Saul so much we ended up ordering three more drinks before we were done. We never brought up the topic of giving me his name again.

Too many flights in too short a time always made me lose my sense of what was normal. For instance, I often lost track of the days or when it was day vs night while I was on a plane. Some other things, like my sense of scale, also got messed up. Many people who come back from trips overseas are often a little unsteady at first, like they've had too much to drink, and I don't think fatigue is the only thing to blame. Some senses just get weaker, like your ability to judge where you are in the world, where you're walking, what time it is, and what the weather is like. It all gets scrambled, and everything can take on a dreamlike quality.

"Over here, Seigi! Wow, you look amazing. You're so tan."

Things felt especially dreamlike right now.

It took me forty-five minutes on the bullet train to reach Shin Osaka from the Kansai International Airport. From there, the trip to Okayama Prefecture went without a hitch. I had been to England and lived in Sri Lanka, but never to Okayama, which was only halfway across the same island. I hadn't been to Kyushu or Shikoku, either. One of these days...

A person was waiting for me in front of the statue of Momotaro that stared off into the distance at the eastern exit of Okayama Station. She waved at me.

It was Tanimoto. Shouko Tanimoto, my close college friend who had gone on to become a junior high science teacher.

She wore a plain outfit today: a white shirt, a navy skirt, and sneakers. Her hair was a little different now. It used to float down and around her ears, but

now she wore it in a half-up style. It added a touch of maturity to her cuteness and made her facial features stand out more.

“Tanimoto! It’s great to see you after so long. And come on, am I really that tan?”

“Absolutely. You look like you do sports. You must get a lot of sun in Sri Lanka.”

“I wasn’t in Sri Lanka the whole time. I made a couple of trips to other places. Provence, the East Coast of the United States.”

“Tell me all about it. I can’t wait.”

“Of course!”

She giggled. “Let’s get going.”

Tanimoto was delighted to give me a guided tour of the neighborhood near the school where she worked. We took a bus from the station, and the view was so familiar it felt dangerously nostalgic. An old sign marking a school route. A bank covered in flowers a class might trek to for a field trip. The area around Okayama Station was as bustling a big city as anywhere in Tokyo, but once we left the central part of town, we stopped seeing so many people. It felt like a place where time passed slowly, unlike Sri Lanka, Tokyo, or Hong Kong.

“People tell me they used to have fireflies here until recently. That means the creeks around here are in good health. I’m supposed to be the teacher, but my students are the ones teaching me. I feel like I learn something new every day.”

“I bet you must be busy, being a teacher and all.”

“Yeah, I am. Very busy. There’s too much for me to do. I can work and work and still never be finished. But we all grow up so fast, don’t we? I don’t even have the time anymore to complain about being busy. All I can do is try and stay afloat.”

“...Do you think you’ll settle down in Okayama for good?”

“I’m not sure, really. At first, I didn’t think I would stay forever. The teacher

employment exams have different hiring quotas per city and prefecture, but as long as I have my license, I can take an exam anywhere. I took the test here because my grandma lives in Okayama. I thought it'd be simpler to live with her. I planned on waiting for a good moment to go back to Tokyo, but it's so nice here that I keep thinking I want to stick around longer. Besides, whenever I think about Tokyo, I realize that I used to accept so many things as the default when that really isn't true at all. I guess I'm broadening my horizons, as people say."

"I know exactly what you mean. I had that same thought once I started living someplace else, too."

"You're so worldly, I feel like I'm looking at Earth itself. See? There's an orogenic belt."

I laughed.

It was funny, I thought. When we talked in the college cafeteria or lounge, Tanimoto was always just a girl who liked cream soda. But now, she looked every inch a teacher who watched out for her students. Her smile was as angelic as it'd ever been as she complained about how being the youngest teacher in the school meant she had her work cut out for her. At the same time, I now saw the steel in her more than ever. She was just as cool as I remembered.

We hoped to find a nice coffee shop to sit down in, but none turned up, so we started on back to the station. We stopped at a family restaurant with an orange sign. I had never seen the brand before, and when I looked it up later, it turned out to be a major chain of stores in Kansai and the rest of Western Japan. I guess there were still new places to discover in Japan, too.

The hamburger lunch was so absurdly cheap, it didn't even cost five hundred yen, but every bite was delicious. It couldn't have been more different than the restaurants in Sri Lanka which all served the same thing: several varieties of rice and curry dished up on a single plate. After lunch, I ordered an orange juice, and

Tanimoto got herself a cream soda. It was kind of relaxing. Maybe now was a good time to bring out my souvenir for her.

“Here, Tanimoto, as promised. It’s a little unwieldy since it’s a whole bottle.”

“Wow! You remembered. I’m so happy.”

“Of course I did. This bottle is a Seigi Nakata original, with soil from all over the world. This is sand from a beach in Florida, and this is lime dust from Provence. Most of the sand is from Sri Lanka. I got it from a beach in a port city called Negombo. It’s one of those places with lots of surfers, pretty sunsets, and resort hotels. Oh, and I got this sand in Hong Kong just the other day, but the whole waterfront is so developed, it was hard to find a real beach.”

Tanimoto had seen me off with a smile when I told her I planned on going overseas. She claimed that a smile was the best way to celebrate a friend leaving on a long trip.

Then she added, “I’ll always support your decisions. Just be careful out there, okay? It can’t be easy.”

Her words overflowed with kindness and were filled with a kind of power that was quintessentially Tanimoto. The kind that told me if I was going to fall, I should make sure to land on my feet. I was moved, so I told her I’d bring her back a souvenir. She said I didn’t need to, but I insisted.

When she finally gave in, she hesitantly asked for something that was also as quintessentially Tanimoto as could be. Soil. Once the president of the school rocks and minerals club and now an assistant teacher in a junior high science department, Tanimoto asked for stones. Just not gemstones. Something slightly different—ground-up bits of earth.

As she lifted the bottle that still said it contained mineral water in the language of the place I’d bought it from, she swished it around reverently. Her eyes gleamed in excitement.

“Wow, this is incredible. This is so cool! They’re all completely different from

the sand you get on Japanese beaches. They don't sell sand like this, you know. You have to actually go to the beach in question if you want any of it for yourself. This is the best thing ever. Is this a shell? Wow, a shell from the Indian Ocean! I've gone beachcombing in the Pacific Ocean before, but I've never found any shell of this size or from the same kind of animal. Oh my gosh. Thanks, Seigi. I'll have to use this in my classes later. My students will love it."

"I wish I could be a fly on the wall for that."

"I'd love it if you showed up for one of my classes someday. I'll have to train hard to make sure they're even more fun and educational by the time you arrive."

"So long as I wouldn't be intruding, I would be honored."

"Mr. Nakata, I think we have a deal."

At the culmination of this oddly formal exchange, we bowed to one another and then immediately burst out laughing. It felt odd. It was just like... Oh. I realized what it reminded me of, but maybe it was better not to say anything. I just chuckled to myself instead.

But then Tanimoto spoke up.

"You know what's weird? It almost sounds like we're talking with a matchmaker to set up a marriage."

"...Yeah, I was just thinking the same thing."

Tanimoto once said she never planned on falling in love. I liked her. She'd trusted me with her deepest secret—that she didn't think she was made to be in love. That she didn't think she would ever change her mind on the matter. However, Richard told her that she shouldn't fear change. I felt like that was rooted in the same idea of not fearing stagnation. It was okay to stay as is, change or no change, and accept yourself for who you were.

I probably still had feelings for her. I definitely looked up to her. But once I learned she wasn't interested in dating, I wasn't sure how to handle my feelings

for her. I remained uncertain on that front all the way through graduation, and now, we were locked in as friends. I didn't mind that at all. This way, I wasn't hurting her. If Tanimoto enjoyed being around me, then I was happy, too. Naturally, the happiness I felt when I saw her was different from the happiness I felt around Haruyoshi, but I couldn't explain what exactly the difference was. Maybe that wasn't a bad thing, either.

"Hey, you know what, Seigi?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"There's something I need to tell you. First off, this is none of my business, so let me apologize in advance. You don't need to forgive me, though."

Starting things off with an apology. Tanimoto was just as sincere as she'd been in our college days. Wondering what someone was about to tell me in moments like this always made me feel like a criminal waiting for the guillotine blade to fall.

"Are you seeing anyone right now, Seigi?"

"No, I'm not."

"Well, do you think you might? Later on."

"Hmm. I don't know. I've never been that eager to date. Speaks to my lack of drive, I guess."

"So you don't want to get married someday?"

"...Huh? Where'd that come from?"

"I don't think you've ever forgiven yourself for breaking up my engagement."

My insides twisted like an eagle had grabbed my heart in its talons. Emotions gushed out of me like a halved grapefruit being juiced. Why? Why did she think that? How did she ever find out? Because I had sworn that I would never, ever breathe a word of that to her. I didn't even want to tell Richard.

When I froze up, it all but confirmed that she had hit the nail on the head. She

gave me her usual gentle grin. Her mouth formed the words *Hey, Seigi?*

A part of me thought that this moment might stick with me for the rest of my life. Time felt like it slowed down.

“You don’t need to beat yourself up about it.”

“...”

“You really don’t. You didn’t do a good thing or a bad thing. You just gave me your advice. I didn’t choose to break things off just because of you. And in the end, things turned out better this way. I would have been way too overwhelmed if I was trying to juggle a family and a teaching career, so I love the life I have now.”

I felt like there was a silent halo effect happening to the world around me. Everything seemed to be lunging at my eyeballs with a billion times more force than normal. Tanimoto grew and shrunk before my eyes as she talked.

I’ll be okay. This will go away in a moment. This happens sometimes when I get too worked up. Just focus on what she’s saying, Seigi.

“Of course, it’s not like everything’s been easy for me. Whenever I befriend anyone older than me, they always ask, ‘Aren’t you going to get married?’ I’ve actually started answering, ‘No, I’m not.’”

“...I’m impressed. That must take guts.”

“Doesn’t it? It feels like there’s a huge load off my shoulders. And not just that. There’s something kinda nice about it.”

I’d heard that one in every thirty people is a sexual minority—if you defined “sexual minority” as anyone who wanted to express their love in a way that’s not falling in love with the opposite sex, marrying, and starting a family. That was such a broad definition, though, that I couldn’t help but wonder why such people were considered the minority. The different forms love took should be like a spectrum, I thought. In my second year of college, Richard told me that the only reason I thought I had never met a gay person was because all the ones

I'd met had never told me.

In a world where you were the odd one out, it took much, much more courage to say, "I don't fit in the way you do," than it did to order a nonalcoholic drink when everyone else at the party chose beer. That was especially true in a culture where it was considered honorable to sand down square pegs to fit in round holes.

"It's because I know those differences must exist among my students, too. If I can help them in some way, then it gives me the courage to keep going as I am. I'm not really waging a war. But I also sort of am. It's like... Hmm..."

While she searched for the right word, she smiled at me bashfully. I waited for her to think it over. Meanwhile, the ice silently bobbed in her cream soda.

Then she lifted her head and looked me straight in the eye with a beaming smile.

"This is the first time I've ever considered that I could help people just by being who I am."

Like how she liked rocks.

Or how she liked cream soda.

How her favorite color was white.

How she didn't fall in love.

Who she was just by existing.

I nodded.

"I agree with you. Honestly, I really do. I feel like that must take a lot of courage."

"...Thanks. I never would have thought this way if not for you and Richard. There are too many people I want to thank, but out of all of them, you're special. I really care for you, and I respect you a lot."

"You're going to make me blush."

“So don’t wait for me, okay? Please don’t feel obligated to wait for me. You don’t need to be on standby to show up like my Prince Charming if I ever decide down the line that I’d like to try having a relationship. I know you’ve never told me because you plan on disappearing without a word if I take too long to want a prince.”

“ ... ”

“I don’t want you to do that, Seigi. But you know...I really do hope we can be friends for life. I mean it. I respect you, and I love you. I mean, well... Maybe things would have been better if I was born a guy, you know? Then it wouldn’t be so weird for me to say this to you. Oh, who am I kidding? I’ve never minded being a girl, but when I think of you, I just feel so guilty.”

“Please stop, Tanimoto.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. My grandmother always used to tell me girls shouldn’t cry over things like this. We’re supposed to cry when we’re happy. I guess it’s a good thing we’re in a family restaurant. Free napkins, am I right?”

“...People should cry whenever they need to. Regardless of gender.”

“Oh no, are you crying too? Here, take a napkin.”

“Thanks.”

She and I sat across from each other, each dribbling silent tears. We looked like messes. Anyone seeing us would think we were discussing our breakup. I worried that someone she knew might be here, since we weren’t far from her workplace. If nothing else, I didn’t want to look like such a total disgrace in front of her.

In the time it took for me to pull a tissue from my pocket, blow my nose, and make myself look presentable, Tanimoto had resumed sipping on her cream soda with her usual expression. She really was just as cool as I remembered her.

“Too bad we didn’t have pizza for lunch. Then people would have thought we were wiping tomato sauce off our faces. Might have been good for a laugh.”

“That sounds, uh, like it would attract a lot of attention...”

She laughed.

“Maybe so. I say things like that sometimes, and my students always look like they’re fed up with me. But I don’t think I’m ever *this* much of a space case in class.”

“I don’t think that’s a bad thing. I kind of like it, actually. I love you for your strange comments.”

“...You do, huh? Well, thanks.”

Those were the words that televised the complete exchange of two people’s feelings. *I love you. Thanks. I love you.* The last remnants of my college-era love for her, which I still hadn’t laid to rest, turned to tears in this family restaurant and poured out of me. *Thanks.*

“If anyone’s saying thanks, it should be me, Tanimoto. I want to be your friend, too, so I’m happy to hear that. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“...”

“But I guess I made a mess of everything. I was never trying to be your Prince Charming, but I bet it was still obvious what I was thinking. I’m sorry. I can’t imagine I’d enjoy it if someone treated me the way I treated you. I’m really happy that you still want to be my friend.”

“You don’t owe me an apology. I mean, some people think that sort of thing is *gorgeous*.” She said that last in English. “You know? Look at you, Seigi. You can speak all kinds of languages, you passed the first round of the civil service exam, you can do karate, you’re so kind, you’re so cool... Anyone would be lucky to have someone like you waiting for them, right? Wait, that sounds weird when I say it myself.”

“Did Shinkai tell you that?”

“Oops. Cover blown. I’m sorry. Yeah, I talked about this with Aki, and that’s what she said.”

Tanimoto shook her head. Shinkai was a ballerina who was undoubtedly currently dancing with a different company than when I knew her. Even so, she and Tanimoto were as close as ever. That made me glad. It helped to know that someone so talented thought that highly of me.

“*Gorgeous*, huh? Have I ever been *gorgeous*?”

“You have such a good English accent.”

Her compliment inspired me to pronounce the word the way Richard would. I liked how he voiced the *gee* sound in *gorgeous*. I apparently used my tongue too much when I said it, but I was making progress on saying it right. Tanimoto smiled at me for my efforts.

We then ordered dessert, each paid for our own meals, and then set off down the road back to the station as Tanimoto pointed out rocks to me, an eager audience for her lectures. I didn’t have it in me to spend the night down here. Truth be told, my original plan was to come back from Hong Kong, see Tanimoto, and then spend a little while in Tokyo figuring out my next steps. Plans change, though.

“You’re taking another bullet train back?”

“Yeah, my plane flies out of Kansai International. If I had a choice, I’d have wanted to try Fukuoka International Airport.”

“That’d be a grand tour of the archipelago for sure. Sounds fun. Did you know you can take a ferry from Yamaguchi Prefecture to Okayama Prefecture?”

Hiromi would have chastised me for my random comments, but Tanimoto genuinely found them entertaining. I likewise enjoyed the assorted facts she taught me. *You can see these mountains if you take this train. Check out those geological features.* In her eyes, the world was marked up in bright colors with the names of soil types and stones.

“Hmm? Seigi, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. It just hit me that Japan’s not that small a place after all.”

“It sure isn’t. So...what’s the plan? Are you going back to Sri Lanka?”

I nodded.

Tanimoto came with me all the way to the bullet train platform to say her goodbyes. From city to city, from country to country. It was the exact same routine, whether I was in the United States, France, or anywhere else in the world. It made me glad that I had people who cared enough about me to see me off.

“Will you be okay?”

“I’m not a hundred percent sure, but I think so. They’ve already lifted martial law and ended the curfew.”

“But that news article you showed me earlier said things are still tense.”

“I think it might be the other way around. Things have always been tense in Sri Lanka. I just didn’t notice.”

“Really? Okay. Well, be careful.”

Tanimoto was so pure. She just asked her questions, then kept her misgivings to herself and bade me goodbye. Just like the first time I went to Sri Lanka, or that winter in my second year of college when Richard left me alone and I didn’t know what to do.

Just then, I remembered that apartment building in Hong Kong with all the tiny windows. Knowing she would love it just as much as I did, I told her about it and how it looked exactly like a slice of meteorite with forsterite crystals. When I told her that this human dwelling had sparkled with all the radiance of a gemstone, she gave me a sunny smile.

“You’re already a rockhound and a half yourself.”

“...Maybe.”

“You are. If you see something beautiful and think about rocks, that makes you a rockhound. It’s not like there’s a test you need to pass to call yourself one. All you need is a love for rocks. You just need to find them beautiful.”

Suddenly, I recalled Saulism all over again: the doctrine of finding beauty in beautiful things. It was exactly like being one of Tanimoto's rockhounds. They were saying almost exactly the same thing.

Saul and Tanimoto both valued their aesthetic sensibilities, which in turn led to them caring about people's value systems. If those two teamed up, there would be no duo more frightening on earth.

"Thanks, Tanimoto. I'll talk to you later!"

"Sounds good. I'll read your blog, too. Take care now."

The station bell rang so loudly it hurt my ears. I scrambled aboard just in time for the station attendant to blow their whistle, as if they were waiting for me. The glass doors slid closed on their own. I could still see Tanimoto on the other side of the window. When would I see her next? Would we even be able to meet up again? Next year? Or the year after? Even later? Or, conversely, much sooner? I didn't know, but...

"See you later!"

...I knew she couldn't hear me, but it was such a short phrase, she had to have been able to lip-read it.

She grinned, and her mouth formed the same words back. *See you later.*

Until we meet again.

As the train pulled steadily away, I pressed my face to the window and waved. She waved back. *Thank you. I love you. I love you. I'm done waiting behind the curtain for the chance to be your Prince Charming. Let me be the friend of this woman giving me a big wave goodbye.*

I love you. I did then, and I still do. I'm sure I always will.

I let out the breath I was holding, then walked down the central hallway of the bullet train as it started to pick up speed. I found an empty seat and sat down before pulling out my phone. Even though I was in Japan, my keyboard was still set to English. It was probably going to have to stay that way for a

while.

All right. Time to check the luggage I'd stored in a train station locker. Plane ticket. Passport. Backpack with all my essentials.

I already had my next destination in mind.

Le Troisième Jour:
Day 3

“A_{LL}Ô?”

The man answered the telephone in French, sounding almost aggressive, before switching to English for the rest of the conversation. English, English, English with a smattering of interspersed Japanese.

English is fantastic for conveying information rapidly, particularly for the degree of confidence it lends declarative statements. By contrast, Japanese excels in vowel-rich emotive language: *ureshii* for happiness, *kanashii* for sadness, *chotto komatteiru* for apprehension, *sabishii* for loneliness. These long words require more mouth movements, thereby slowing the conversation and forcing Japanese speakers to take more time to convey their emotions.

The man and his correspondent conversed in an odd mix of languages: English, French, Japanese. The man used English for the facts, witty French for his jokes, and Japanese for the connective tissue—“however,” “but with that being said,” “be that as it may,” and other crucial emotive parts of speech.

This method of communication outstripped each of the individual languages and ensured nothing was lost in translation. Most people would have struggled to understand it, but that made no difference for the man on the phone. Especially not now. Not when he was speaking of highly confidential secrets.

In Japanese: “Even so...”

Another language.

Japanese: “...which is my present understanding. However...”

Another language.

Japanese: “...which is to say that I am not certain. Yes. You are correct. But if I may...”

Another language.

On through the conversation.

By the time the man left his car and walked inside, the call was already well

underway. The pair spoke nonstop for over thirty minutes, and the conversation threatened to stretch on for an hour or more.

The man finally hung up after another forty-five minutes. He took in a deep breath, held the air in his lungs for a few moments, and then exhaled with a great rush. The sigh, which sounded like something he could not verbalize in any language, flowed from him in a silent, muddy stream. He tossed his phone aside onto the couch and strode back out to the yard where his car sat parked to grab his bags.

I heard the door of his blue Aston Martin open, along with the click of the trunk opening and the slam of it shutting. I slipped out of the dining room pantry and poured a cup of tea, which I placed on the table next to a sandwich from the fridge and a plate of freshly cut fruit. Then I waited for the man.

When he—Richard—walked inside and saw me, his eyes opened wide. He staggered back. I guess I should've been grateful he didn't drop his bags. If I was in his shoes, I would have run away immediately.

"Hello. It's me, Nakata the milkman. Remember me?"

"What are you doing here?"

"It's difficult to explain."

"I said, what are you doing here?"

"I'm serious. It's a long story."

"I demand to know!"

"First, let me apologize. I'm sorry. I've actually been here for a while, and I was waiting for you to come home. I hid myself so I could give you a surprise. I didn't understand all of it, but I caught some of your conversation. Sorry about that. I really didn't mean to eavesdrop on you."

Richard still made no reply. He wore a casual beige shirt and purplish-blue tropical pants. His natural coloring provided light tones of gold, white, and blue, and he understood that similar shades brought out his best features. Even when

he looked so exhausted. My heart ached to see him like that.

At any rate, it looked like my surprise had worked. No shock there. He didn't expect me to know his location, much less to be hiding in the house waiting to ambush him.

"...Uh, since today's Thursday, I guess you had six house calls to make, right? Starting with the Sajans and ending with Mr. Rajendra. While I was out of the country, Saul must have asked you to tell our clients in Hiriketiya. So there'd be no issues in our supply chain. Which is supposed to be my job, but oh well."

"You are supposed to be in Japan. I was told you returned there after your trip to Hong Kong."

"I planned to stay longer, I swear. It's just..."

I'd connected the dots.

First, there was the phone call with Richard when I was on the roof of Ginza Six. He picked up the phone almost immediately, and he was in a good enough mood that I clearly hadn't woken him from sleep. That indicated he most likely wasn't anywhere with an opposite day/night cycle like North or South America. He also talked about driving but didn't use the same voice he used for night driving, and he was too cautious to drive much at night to begin with. I had also heard him talk to customers over Bluetooth when he let me ride in the Jaguar around Ginza. I knew how to tell his night and day driving voices apart.

The next clue came from the voicemails Saul played for me in Hong Kong. Hong Kong was an eight-hour plane ride from Japan. The jet stream could bump that number up or down, but Sri Lanka to Hong Kong was otherwise around the eight-hour mark as well. There weren't many nonstop flights, so a series of connecting flights could make the trip drag out even longer.

And the most definitive piece of evidence was his comment about driving with the windows down. The weather wouldn't have been nice enough for that. September in Sydney was winter on the cusp of spring, because summers and winters are flipped in the Northern and Southern hemispheres. So it was winter

sports season all across Oceania. I bet Richard never expected Saul would play those messages for me.

Therefore, I knew it was in the Northern Hemisphere, a six-hour direct flight away from Hong Kong, with little to no time difference. That made the answer obvious. Richard was in Sri Lanka to take over my work while I was in Japan.

“We’re coworkers now, more or less. If I actually decide to pursue being a jeweler, I’d be getting off on the wrong foot by letting you cover all my work now.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Comparing the resources Saul or I can deploy in an emergency is like comparing an irrigation ditch to the Indus River. Only a madman would throw a fresh soldier with no sense of danger onto the battlefield. No matter what career you choose to pursue, it will take time for you to build up the necessary experience. I am not known for marching green boys into battle.”

“Right, I know that. I’m sorry I came here without checking in with you first. I really am. You’re right, and I know I did the wrong thing. It’s just...”

I wouldn’t have done anything different.

“Going back to what you said earlier... You know what, never mind. Let’s move on. Dig in! Food will cheer you up.”

“...What is all this?”

“The Nakata special with a side of fruit and royal milk tea. Among other things.”

I gestured for him to try the food. I hadn’t known how soon he would be back, so I put a dome over the food to protect it from insects—something you needed to do in Sri Lanka. These domes, which were mosquito nets woven into basket shapes, were great to have on hand if you had to get up during a meal. They were transparent, so you could tell what was underneath even when covered.

First, there was the iced royal milk tea. I cooled it down in the fridge after I

made it on the stove. Next, we had the fruit: bananas, mangoes, and a number of sour red berries that grew in the garden. And it went without saying that the Nakata special was pudding. Since I had just made a trip to Japan, that meant I also had souvenirs. Before my trip to Okayama, I'd done a run to the Ginza department-store-basement dessert shops and bought an assortment of the latest trendy desserts, both Japanese and Western varieties, and some travel-safe jellies. These were all arranged on a plate next to the pudding. The spread felt like a menu a rich pair of grandparents might offer to their young grandchild.

Even with the fatigue creeping into his mannerisms, Richard was still as beautiful as ever. In a reluctant tone, he said, "I'll pay you back."

"Oh, not again. I thought we moved past this years ago."

"I have no other means by which to repay you for your generosity."

"I'm the one trying to repay *you*. I mean, I'm sure you'll still insist on paying me, but now we're even."

"I really and truly have no other options."

That was an odd way to put it. I could sense a powerful storm of emotions in him that he was too tired to hide, so I braced myself. I was here for him, ready to take on anything. It would be okay. I tried to tell him as much with the look in my eyes, and Richard turned away, unsettled. That was odd indeed. He clearly needed support if he was falling for my obvious trap.

"...It has to do with Deborah."

Aha.

I'd only understood half of his earlier phone conversation. The Japanese was easy, and I managed to get the English, too, but the French was still beyond me. I didn't have the listening comprehension to follow two people talking rapidly in casual French. That said, I'd definitely caught mention of Deborah—the woman Richard might have married.

I knew she'd gone on to marry someone else and have two children after the end of her relationship with Richard in the inheritance debacle. I also knew who Richard was speaking to earlier. There was only one person who could keep up with that mix of languages.

"What did Jeffrey have to say about Deborah?"

"...He was providing me with news about her."

As grave as his expression was, his voice was even more somber. He sounded like he didn't even have the strength to eat the pudding.

"She has divorced her husband."

"Say what?"

"There was apparently an issue on her husband's side of the family, and she is now separated and raising the children alone. In Berlin. She works as a translator for Japanese governmental and political documents. She and I have... kept each other abreast of matters in our respective lives. Or so I thought. She never breathed a word of this to me."

I felt a chill spread through my chest. Such things vary a lot around the globe, but this much holds true: A woman with young children who divorces her husband must have a very drastic reason to do so. Like my grandmother's. Or my mother's.

Even worse, Deborah was connected to Octavia and her ongoing smear campaign against Richard. What happened? Did Jeffrey know? Maybe it was only a matter of a marriage falling apart for ordinary reasons. Or maybe not.

I couldn't bring myself to ask any further questions. Richard said nothing either but simply sat down in a dining room chair. He made no move to touch any of the food.

"...I am so very tired."

That was all he said and nothing more. The words fell from his lips like drops of freezing rain from the branches of a tree on a dreary winter's day. Cold and

frosted-over, they spilled from him without waiting for my reaction.

“Why do these things keep on happening? The problem is that I read too much into it. Rationally, I know it has nothing to me, just as the sun rises and sets every day with no hidden meaning behind it. And yet I find myself wanting to ask—why, oh why, do these things keep happening to me? What have I done to have some god curse me so? What must I do to lift that curse? I want rest for my weary body and answers for my weary mind. Why?”

I stayed silent. I knew that nothing I could say now would be welcome.

Richard let the silence build for a moment before he lowered his head and enunciated clearly.

“I didn’t want to see you.”

“...”

“I really and truly did not want you to be here. The fact that you found it so easy to imagine me in distress leaves me disgusted with myself. And now that I have proven that mental image correct by presenting myself so hideously, I want to turn into smoke and vanish.”

“...No, you’re... You’re all wrong.”

“What, do you mean to say I’m beautiful? The way you always do?”

Richard finally looked up at me. And he *was* beautiful. If his voice earlier had been ice water, then he himself was as ephemeral as a doll made of snow. He looked so cold, so fragile that I hesitated to get close to him. However, I knew that wasn’t what he needed to hear right now.

“No, that’s not what I mean. I’m talking about how badly I wanted to see you.”

“...Is that so?”

“Yes, as you put it, that is so. I knew you’d be upset with me, but I’ve been wanting to say something to you for a very long time. Not so much that I want to help you. It’s more that I want to be a cushion to catch you when you fall. So,

sorry and all, but I'm very happy I got to see you like this."

"That is an inappropriate comment."

"I apologize."

"You don't mean it."

"Well, you're not doing so hot. So I'm glad that I'm here."

"I want you to say it like you mean it."

"Gee, I wonder who this reminds me of?"

"...I'm sure I've mentioned any number of times that you should not take me for a role model. But it seems it slipped my mind."

"I get to decide who my role models are, so you don't have to tell me anything. I won't copy the parts where you try too hard or care too much, but the rest? Yes, I'll model myself after you."

"You needn't copy me. You try far too hard and care far too much on your own."

"Good, we agree."

Richard raised his head and offered me a limp smile. He didn't seem especially pleased or displeased with me. And he still didn't start eating his food.

As I began to wonder what my next move should be, I heard a scratching sound and a high-pitched whining from the entranceway. It sounded like a dog. Was it...?

"Jiro?"

"Yes, I collected him from the neighbors so that I could take care of him. He's still in his cage."

"Jiro! Right, I told Saul who I was leaving him with, didn't I? Can I let him out?"

Richard replied, "Of course," in English. It required less mouth movement than its three-syllable Japanese counterpart. He must really have been

exhausted. This was normally where I stepped in with sweets, but if Richard was even too tired for sugar, my cute dog might have to be my secret weapon.

The small Sri Lankan street dog grew excited when he smelled me and started jumping around with yips and yaps. I picked him up to let him lick my face, and he slobbered all over me. It was nice to have someone to come home to again.

Thinking he might be hungry, I put some food in his bowl—but he didn't seem to care about the food and was focused on getting underfoot, to beg for more of my attention instead. What a good pup.

“Who's a good boy? Let me pet you. You must have been scared, huh? I was scared, too.”

“...”

“This guy is my mentor. His name's Richard. I think he likes dogs, so don't be shy.”

I asked Richard if he still liked dogs, just to be on the safe side.

His reply was brief. “Very much so.”

Good. I picked Jiro up under his hind legs and gently offered him to Richard. The last time I weighed him, he had been about four kilograms, but I thought he'd gained weight since then. Being a house pet would do that to a dog. Richard took the short-haired mutt and buried his face in Jiro's fur. Jiro's hind legs scratched at the knees of Richard's expensive suit, which I hoped wouldn't be an issue. The pup looked back at me, his cute black eyes begging me to step in and make Richard stop. I felt bad seeing Jiro look so distressed. Meanwhile, Richard hugged my dog tight and refused to look at me.

“So, what's it like hugging Jiro?”

“He feels warm.”

“Yeah, most dogs are.”

“He does not appear to like me.”

“That’s because you’re squeezing him.”

“...I would prefer a dog that does not mind tight hugs, then.”

“I think you’d need a bigger one for that.”

I took Jiro back and set him on the floor before putting an arm around Richard’s shoulder. I leaned in, putting my head on his shoulder, and hugged him. I didn’t have any special words to say, so I said nothing at all. Richard likewise was silent.

“Want me to do my best barking impression for you?”

He didn’t respond. I probably shouldn’t have said that, either.

Now that I looked back on it, I realized he had once helped cheer me up in the same way. In England. His version of cheering me up also included chastising me, but it occurred to me now that maybe Richard had been happy I stepped in. I was so wrapped up in my own feelings that I hadn’t thought at all about how he felt, but he’d still come to be with me, even knowing I was probably just going to be a pain. Even now, he still let me tag along with him.

I guess he never disliked me that much to begin with. And now, he liked me quite a bit. That was why I could never betray Richard.

Jiro, having had enough of our attention, went to eat his food. Once it was all gone, he came begging to ask for more, and Richard voiced the opinion that his desire for a well-trained dog was over. He sighed once more, but this didn’t have the same heavy pallor over it as the last one.

“...I am better now. Thank you very much, and I deeply apologize for my pitiful behavior.”

“Nah, you can keep coming to me in times like this. Mr. Nakata’s teaching me to be a better hugger.”

“When I was a very young boy, Lord Godfrey would likewise hug me to make me feel better.”

Lord Godfrey was, if I remembered correctly, Jeffrey and Henry’s father,

who'd raised Richard alongside his sons. He was the current Earl of Claremont and also happened to be on his deathbed.

The impending death of a close family member was bad enough. Adding this mysterious divorce to the mixture made for so much stress that, if I had been in Richard's shoes, I might've started screaming and cracking coconuts with a machete. Unlike Thai coconuts, raw Sri Lankan coconuts were orange and, funnily enough, about the size of a human skull.

I spread my arms to offer Richard another hug, but he primly ignored me and turned back to the table. Finally, the pudding's time had come.

"You don't need to eat it if you don't want to. I'm sure it'll all go down easily, but it's pretty sugary."

"Well, now that you mention it, I haven't had a chance to sit down for a meal since I arrived in Sri Lanka."

"Never mind! Get to eating. Eat whatever you want."

"It isn't like I haven't eaten at all. I've had snacks on the go."

"Stop arguing and eat, would you?"

"Whatever you say."

Richard smiled at me. It was a masterful look, as he knew how to get the desired effect out of me with every grin. In this case, the desired effect was relief. His smile was as beautiful as ever. If all it took to make him smile like this for me was to peel a few pieces of fruit and make pudding, I'd chase after him all across the globe to make that possible.

Happy as I was, I knew this didn't actually make his situation better. But it was all in how you looked at things, right? And as I looked at him, I knew I liked his smile.

I tried to stay out of the way and play with Jiro in the corner, but I eventually began to feel uneasy when Richard, eating with perfect posture, noticed me sitting there in silent consternation.

“Is something wrong? What are you making that face for?”

I couldn’t shoot back with “You can’t even see what face I’m making,” because I realized I was reflected in the glass windowpane embedded in the door leading out to the garden. I thought Jiro would have cheered me up, but some amount of worry still showed on my face. I also noticed that I still had a tan. The Sri Lankan sun made gemstones sparkle and skin burn.

“...I’m trying to decide what to ask you.”

“Then why don’t I start the conversation? Jeffrey is currently attempting to determine what caused Deborah’s divorce. We simply need to find out if their relationship ended on its own terms or had help from an outside party.”

That made me feel sick. The “outside party” Richard had alluded to was probably Octavia or one of the Claremont family servants. As Richard had told me in Provence, the servants were using Octavia’s desire for revenge in order to reclaim the false jewelry Richard’s grandmother had once lent out. Richard thought the servants were using Octavia’s passionate outburst as a shield for their own activities, which was also my understanding of the situation.

But what if Octavia was also behind this sigh-inducing turn of events? I would need to rethink my feelings for everyone involved. Of course, kind Richard would have to do the same.

Seventeen-year-olds are still kids but not babies. A girl Octavia’s age could do just about anything she put her mind to, and also be held accountable for her actions. Richard may have been kind, but I wasn’t as sympathetic as he was. I was rash and impulsive, too. I couldn’t forgive someone who hurt my loved ones, and I didn’t *want* to. But of course, I thought—as did Richard and Jeffrey—that I needed to have all the facts before I took any action.

“...What do you think about me going to Switzerland?”

“You?”

“Well, that’s where Octavia is, right? I think it’d be a good idea to talk to her.”

At this stage, wouldn't it be fastest to skip the rest of the investigation and talk to Octavia herself? Richard gave me a wan, exasperated smile. It suited him much better than his earlier delicate snow-sculpture impression.

"And what if Octavia pretends to know nothing about it? Say she claims ignorance of Deborah's family situation. What would you do then? Octavia is a remarkably clever girl. If you put questions to her without any proof of your claims, I see no reason why she wouldn't play the innocent and skate on by to enact the next part of her plan."

"Whoa. She's that crafty? I thought, well, she's only a high-school girl. I would feel bad for throwing accusations at someone so young, so I wanted to go easy on her."

"You have made a grievous error in your judgment of her. She may indeed be the age of Japanese high schoolers, but her genius made her unfit for school, as she often said herself. Understanding the reality of your situation and your desires can grant you quite a bit of power. Without a battle strategy, your attempt to go toe-to-toe with her will not end in your favor."

"...You sound like Sherlock Holmes talking about a worthy adversary."

"She and I have played those roles before. Deborah and I would be twin Watsons to Octavia's Holmes."

"That must have been a beautiful pair of Watsons. Anyway, do you want anything else to eat? I happen to be a Watson who knows his way around a kitchen. I can make you anything you want, just like old times."

"I haven't stocked the house with anything for cooking..."

"Don't worry, I picked up groceries on the way here."

Eggs, veggies, and all the other perishables? Already taken care of, thanks to the nearest supermarket. I also loaded my luggage to the brim with food before I flew out of Japan and stocked up on seasonings in a Columbo supermarket before coming to Kandy. By the way, oyster sauce sold for close to a thousand

yen. That horrified me.

Since I had already done most of the prep work, I whipped together a sauce, cooked the eggs, and served up my second Nakata special. Omelet rice. Curry. Milk-flavored ice cream, jam, and fruit served up in parfait glasses I bought in the cookware-shop-filled neighborhood of Kappabashi. They were the closest ones I could find to the glasses at Étranger.

“Thank you for waiting. I present omelet rice à la carte, served with demi-glace, and a parfait for dessert. For strawberries, the best I could find were dried ones or strawberry jam. Please pretend it’s fresh.”

“...”

“I also have four different kinds of pickled vegetables. If you don’t want any of them, then I’ll take them. We’ll split any of the ones we both want to try.”

I hadn’t cooked in the Sri Lankan house for a long time. A really long time, actually. Just like how first coming home to Japan had taught me about nostalgia, soaking up Sri Lanka reminded me all over again how much I liked living here. As scared as I had been about the crisis and frustrated by my own lack of understanding, all my efforts to make myself at home here hadn’t gone to waste.

Richard sized up the food on the table, his lips drawn tight in a pout. I knew that meant I’d done well, because it looked just like the face he made when he was trying to choose a dessert. At times like this, he looked even more like a kid than me.

It was my favorite of the many wonderful expressions Richard could make. It made me feel better inside. At the same time, I didn’t know what he was pouting for.

“What’s the matter?”

“...I am not in the right mindset to properly appreciate this.”

“You crack me up. Don’t act like I’m forcing you to be a ray of sunshine.”

“But have you not been doing your utmost to make me feel better? This confession shames me utterly and may further tarnish your impression of me, but I would be immensely grateful if you could let me languish in my low spirits for just a bit longer. You see, prior to your arrival, my plans had been to utterly collapse and take a nap with the dog.”

“I love the way you word things. Okay, then go ahead and act upset. I’ll pretend I never heard anything and keep working to cheer you up.”

“...My ears may be deceiving me, but it sounds like you’ve really grown up.”

“All thanks to you! Boy, I’m so happy we’re together again.”

Richard smiled and picked up his spoon. Finally. Eat up already. Eat up and feel better. Of course, I wasn’t saying that because I wanted him to get back to work. Nothing of the sort! We’d long since moved on from the hunter-gatherer era when a soldier’s starved companions urged him to eat their precious supply of meat so the soldier could return to battle and risk his life for the good of the company. No, I wanted Richard to eat up and feel better for his own sake. To save that energy for himself and then be richly, luxuriously happy.

If he did that, then I would be happy, too. That was why I’d come to Sri Lanka—to set up whatever it was he wanted to do.

Richard silently consumed the food at a surprisingly quick rate. If one had a very active imagination, this white-cloth-covered table could resemble a long-standing Western food restaurant in Ginza. Unfortunately, we were in the tropics. We even had a cute dog sitting at our feet. Well, what could you do? Some differences were inevitable. The Nakata special could do wonders, but even that had its limits.

I wondered when he and I could share another meal in that Ginza restaurant again. “Never” was not an option. Soon, definitely. But how soon, I had no idea. This meal was just the first step to get there. Also, I made this so we could have something to smile about the next time we walked into that red building. We would think to ourselves, “Hey, remember that?” when we ate dinner there. I’d

have to take notes about what else they put in their omurice besides green onions and chicken.

The meal was comically serious, as if we were both waiting for the other person to crack the first joke. I had the curry, while Richard ate the omelet rice. I made enough parfaits for two, so we moved on to dessert without any fuss. Richard drank copious amounts of iced royal milk tea throughout the entire meal. I was used to the Sri Lankan sweet milk tea called kirithe now, and Richard-style milk tea tasted terrifyingly bland.

After our stomachs and souls were satisfied, Richard began to speak without preamble.

“I feel positively rotten and would very much like your help.”

“Okay. What can I help you with?”

“Please take these chairs into the garden.”

“Will do.”

Sure thing. I nodded and helped Richard set up for whatever he was planning. I moved the rattan lounge chairs from their spots on the porch into the garden, lit a Japanese brand of mosquito coil, and brought a big white cardboard box down from the storage room on the third floor. I had never opened this box before, and I wondered what it could hold. Expensive clothes, maybe? No, it felt too heavy for that.

I opened it now and found something that looked like a glass gourd nestled among white packing material. It looked like it could hold about twenty liters of water, but I doubted it was meant as a water jug. The gourd had silver-colored metallic fixtures at the top, but the glass itself was a beautiful coral color. Lovely gilt patterns swirled down its sides, punctuated here and there with drawings of flowers in white or pastel paint. A Turkish arabesque pattern. From the metal piece on top extended two hose-like tubes with tapered tips ending on silver, whistle-like mouthpieces.

“Is this what I think it is?”

“Yes, it’s for smoking. Even children can use such a device. It is called a hookah, a narghile, or a shisha depending on their region of origin.”

“So it’s a water pipe! I’ve never seen one before.”

My excitement aside, this was still a form of smoking. Inhaling nicotine into your lungs. I had never smoked before, and whenever I walked by someone with a cigarette and breathed in their secondhand smoke, I always devolved into violent coughing fits.

I never knew Richard smoked. Since there were two mouthpieces and two chairs, I wondered if he was about to suggest we do it together. Just as I started to wonder if I could take a hit without choking and losing my cool, Richard pulled the metal piece off the top of the gourd with a pop and nonchalantly poured in ginger beer from a large bottle with an elephant logo on the side. That was clearly not the way you were supposed to use a hookah. But just as I started to wonder what Richard was doing, the level of beer rose high enough that the ends of the tubes connected to the mouthpieces vanished into the beverage. Oh. This was a way to drink ginger beer in style. A Turkish person might deplore what we were doing, but if nothing else, this was much better for our health. It was even nonalcoholic.

“Would you like some?” Richard offered.

“Yes, please.”

I sucked on the end of the metal mouthpiece and was delighted to find that the ginger beer actually shot through the hose and into my mouth. It made for a ridiculously long straw, so it took a decent amount of time to suck up any liquid. But it still tasted good. From afar, we must have looked like we were smoking the pipe.

It was such an odd, fancy idea that I found my mood lifting, too. Maybe this was the same reason people were inspired to buy new cars or clothes, go see movies, or put on jewelry—though those were all extreme examples. This

wasn't as substantial as a meal, and it didn't help with lack of sleep. It wouldn't keep us warm when we were cold. All the same, these luxuries made it a little easier to get by.

"What a great way to smoke," I said. "I could never smoke cigarettes, but I love this."

"One of Saul's inventions. He used to enjoy partaking in a drink in the garden in such a fashion. My mentor enjoys his little jokes."

"Wait, you and Saul used to do this together?"

"No, he imbibed alone. Periodically, he also used it as a regular shisha. Saul is a resourceful fellow."

Earlier, I'd brought in a small round table to support the shisha masquerading as a drink stand. Now we had an impromptu relaxation station in the garden. We set the rattan lounge chairs on either side of the shisha, and Richard sprawled out across the right one. I took the left. Jiro was still inside, eating.

I held the long hose between my fingers and took a "pull" on the ginger beer. *Mm-mmm*. It was nice and cold, and I couldn't get enough of the over-the-top elegance of the presentation.

Not even a month ago, there was fire in the streets of this very town. Murders. Martial law. White-gloved soldiers patrolling the streets with automatic rifles in their arms. But no trace of that remained. Everything was as serene as when I first moved here.

Well, not exactly. Police still made a conspicuous appearance on every street corner, but if I were a tourist freshly arrived in Sri Lanka, I doubt I would have looked at them twice. Peace was all a matter of perception. It rested on thin ice.

But peace was peace, and unrest was unrest. No matter which you lived in, it was sweet to have someone to share a good drink with.

I exhaled to steady my nerves and then broached the topic.

"You know, I saw Vince in Hong Kong. He and I talked."

“...So I’ve heard.”

“Actually, I met his wife before that. Her name’s Marian, and she seemed really nice.”

“My goodness, you sure do get up to mischief. I’d expect as much from Vince, but you’re another story.”

In an offhand manner, he added that I was a rascal.

The unbreakable record of the Nakata Expedition would stick with me for quite some time. From Sri Lanka to the United States, Japan, Hong Kong, Japan again, and finally back to Sri Lanka. It had eaten through my savings, but I was glad to make a dent in the absurdly large sum of money sitting in my bank account. There wasn’t much for me to spend it on in Sri Lanka.

Now it was time to finish Vince’s so-called homework assignment.

“Can I ask you a question?”

Richard looked over at me, the water pipe languid and dangling between his fingers.

I began by acknowledging that this should have been brought up earlier and then made myself look serious.

“Why did you hire me after we met in Tokyo?”

It felt like it was yesterday. Yoyogi Park in the spring. A blond-haired man stumbling, beer raining down on his head under the light of a streetlamp. I knew I would remember that moment for as long as I lived.

“Did Vince tell you to ask me?”

I nodded confirmation. The same way his question provided confirmation for me.

Richard took another lazy sip of the ginger beer and tilted his head into the soft afternoon breeze. His blond hair swayed in the wind, like the fluff on an out-of-season dandelion.

“I was in a position where I needed someone to work part-time for me. Someone who wouldn’t balk if they lost the job for odd reasons, so long as they received severance pay. Someone outspoken and cosmopolitan but with the sensitivity and honesty that behooves a jeweler.”

Outspoken and cosmopolitan. Sensitivity and honesty. Back then, I was a dead ringer for the first part. Even without Saul’s reminder, I clearly remembered asking Richard to identify Grandma’s ring. I guess I was the one who got identified, instead.

But sensitivity and honesty? Well, I’d discovered a number of my own talents after Richard hired me, like my ability for making pudding or milk agar-agar. Maybe those weren’t the only two traits he uncovered in me.

Choosing his next words carefully, Richard held the straw from his face and exhaled a sweet-smelling breath. Even if all we were doing was drinking ginger beer, this shisha was a great prop for this serious conversation.

“How much have you heard about my falling out with Vince?”

“I know the thing about him and Jeffrey’s checks. That Vince took his money and that you and Saul knew the whole time.”

“Just about all of it, then.”

Due to that, Richard had no choice but to bid Vince farewell. Vince’s pride had already taken a heavy beating, and any words from Richard would only have rubbed salt in the wound. After committing such an unforgivable betrayal, being forgiven would have felt awful. Vince must not have wanted to see Richard ever again.

But, Richard told me, vanishing without saying anything wasn’t an option, either. This triggered a vague memory in the back of my mind. What Vince said to me: *Richard had changed...since he met me.*

“...Vince was my teacher in compassion, something every person ought to study. How do we make one another feel respected? Or, conversely,

demeaned? Being 'sweet' may seem like stuffing your mouth with a spoonful of sugar, but it is a very different thing altogether. I was not aware of that at the time. No, that is not quite right. I suppose I understood it intellectually. However, when I became preoccupied with my own worries, I was not mature enough to make it apparent in my actions."

Richard was eight years older than me, whereas Vice was three years older. With some simple math, that made Vince and Richard four or five years apart. Richard must have been twenty-seven and Vince around twenty-one when they said goodbye in Hong Kong. Twenty-one. That wasn't far off from how old I was now.

Though I knew it was pointless, I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if I'd gone back in time and met Richard in Yoyogi Park at my current age. Would I still consider him a cool adult? Would he still treat me like a clueless kid?

No one can be anyone but themselves. So maybe there was no point in entertaining these thoughts, but without putting myself in their shoes, how else was I supposed to understand someone else's feelings?

"Once it was all over, I considered asking Vince to not let it trouble him. Keeping mum was a business decision, nothing personal. If anything, I felt I owed him an apology. However, Vince approached me before I could say anything."

Richard held up three fingers.

"I have three things to tell you," said Vince from the past.

He modified his voice slightly for his Vince impression, making it less emotive and a tad more gravelly than normal.

"Quit thinking that everything that goes wrong in your life is bad luck."

"You're a really lonely guy, but you're not a bad person."

"If you land yourself a second chance, don't mess it up all over again."

Richard took another sip of ginger beer from the fancy straw.

I pursed my lips. My mind scrambled for a way to sugarcoat *No, no, no! He betrayed you! Where does he get off talking like that?* and a thousand other frank reactions. Richard's lips quirked as he watched the surreptitious twitches on my face. He could tell what I was thinking, apparently.

"Not everyone can be as straightforward as you are. And you weren't so honest yourself when we first met, were you? Neither you nor I are fine examples of modern society and its mastery of social skills. Of course, neither is Vince."

He paused. "This was Vincent's way of forgiving me."

Then Richard went on to say, "The relationship between a wrongdoer and their victim is far from simple. That is why we need the courts. It can be challenging to determine the punishment and the crime. In this instance, Vince and I were each both wrongdoer and victim. I chose to go above Vince's head, and I was wrong to do so. I avoided talking to him about it, treating it instead like it was something outside our control. I told myself that was simply the way things were and carried on."

Richard hadn't blamed Vince for his betrayal or been saddened by it. He'd rationalized it, telling himself life was long and things like this happened. That made sense to me, and it wasn't like anyone not involved in the situation had any right to criticize his decision. After all, it would be horribly selfish and insensitive for the person who had caused the injuries to go after the injured party and ask them to do more.

All the same, I knew Vince well enough to know I couldn't pin all the blame solely on his or Richard's shoulders.

"As with any other relationship, ours was ruined from the moment he and I failed to recognize each other as fellow human beings. I did not uproot my life and start over because I was so used to being dehumanized. It becomes second nature when you are constantly told, 'You're beautiful,' and, thanks to that

beautiful face, 'It disgusts me that you cry and laugh just like anyone else.' I could not comprehend why people would not treat me like a person but merely admire me from afar before leaving. I could not fathom why I, and I alone, could not be considered a human being. Forgive me, I know I'm making horrid excuses."

"No, you're not making excuses at all. It must be awful to have to make excuses for the way you feel. You know, I think it's okay to uproot your life. You're just clearing the way to plant something new, right?"

"I disagree. It is an excuse. Being hit by someone does not justify turning around and striking at a third party. And I certainly don't think I planted anything new..."

Since we were already on a heavy topic, I asked him about his time in boarding school. After his parents fought over him, Richard was chastised for the argument, even though he was none the wiser. Then someone on the school's staff, who should have acted like one of his guardians, started making passes at him. When Richard ignored that staff member, his relatives were called in.

It didn't surprise me much to hear it now, but I felt sad listening to him talk about this like it was just another episode in his daily life. This was just a fight over a trophy, I couldn't help but think, where everyone had forgotten that the trophy had a personality and a mind of its own. As much as I hated to consider it, I was amazed at how well he had managed to hold up. If I had faced a never-ending string of these incidents, the words "human interactions" and "relationships" would soon have lost all meaning for me.

I said nothing as I sipped the ginger beer and felt the liquid rise from the glass into the tip of the straw. Richard also took a lengthy sip. The unruffled expression on his face reminded me of the way he looked when he was busy demolishing desserts, which made me feel slightly relieved.

"Even then, Vince did not give up on me. Now that it is all over, I wonder how

much I might have been able to do for him? I fear I only gave him an example of what *not* to emulate. And despite all that, he did give me a piece of homework. I mentioned it before”

Richard raised three fingers again. Those pretentious instructions? Those were homework?

“The third one,” Richard clarified.

“...Oh, I see.”

First: Stop telling yourself you have bad luck. Second: You’re lonely, but not a bad person. And third...

“If you get a second chance, don’t mess it up?”

“*Again*, I believe he said. Once more, we are talking about relationships.”

A second chance at relationships. What did that mean? As someone who’d experienced job-hunting in Japan, “second chances” made me think of selling your strengths and landing interviews. But if I thought about it in the context of the Ratnapura gemstone trade, maybe it was like getting the split-second opportunity to make the decision to buy a stone after all. So what was Richard’s second chance?

I waited for him to continue. Richard, the mouthpiece still in his hand, finally said, “I wanted a friend.”

“A friend?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself. I am terrible at judging emotional distance. I did not know what true friendship looked like, but it seemed to me that everyone else had such friends. That was why I once wanted one, too. I wanted someone I could share my insecurities with, exchange trivialities with, and laugh all my worries away. An almost mythical being that existed purely to serve my own needs. I understood on some level that such a thing was impossible, but I never gave up on the hope that it might turn out to be real. I sought to make a friend, wearing rose-colored glasses all the while, and so when I thought I finally

found one, I was positively delighted. And deeply terrified. I was frightened they would leave me all alone.”

For once, Richard made no attempt to hide his difficult feelings from me.

I knew who he was thinking of. The woman whose name had come up in the earlier phone conversation. She was someone who understood Richard and laughed his worries away. She was the person Richard had once held most dear.

I think this concept of a “friend,” as Richard put it, was someone you could give your soul to. It felt closer to the relationship Mr. Nakata and Hiromi had than my friendships with Haruyoshi or Tanimoto. I wasn’t sure what to classify that kind of relationship. Friends? Boyfriend and girlfriend? The more modern term, partner? Either way, a relationship like that wasn’t formed overnight.

“In the end, Vincent said he had always wanted to help me.”

But, Richard went on, Vince had failed. And then, at the very end of his speech, Vince gave him a sardonic smile.

“He said, ‘If you ever meet someone who can do for you what I couldn’t, don’t you ever let them go. I struggled with it and ultimately failed, but it’ll be as easy as breathing for them.’”

“...Wait, what?”

“He meant that if I ever found someone who automatically lent a helping hand, I was to cherish them. You once mentioned that you would like to send a gift to the drunk men in Yoyogi Park, but I had that same thought long before you brought it up.”

And that meant...

Vince was one of the reasons Richard hired me? *Someone who automatically lent a helping hand*—me? ME?

Looking back on it, Richard did call me his friend when we were in Provence. Well, I didn’t know if he meant it in the same way as he was defining “friend” now. Still, that didn’t change the fact that he called me his friend. Me?

“Isn’t it strange? You appeared before me as a stranger in a chance encounter, then became a shrewd college-aged client, then a coworker, then an extoller of my virtues, and then my younger partner in Saul’s business. I should have been hard-pressed to call you a friend at any one of those stages, but now, when I think of any of the previous terms, you are the first person to come to mind.”

“I am?”

“You are.”

“...Do you really mean it?”

“I do.”

I felt so happy I wanted to jump for joy and dance on the spot. But that would have ruined the conversation.

Richard seemed to step further down memory lane as he folded in on himself.

“Deborah was my first ever friend. I cared for her so much I wanted to be with her for the rest of my life, which was why I proposed to her. But odd as this might sound, I didn’t care whether or not she was my wife. It didn’t change how important she was to me. I only chose to marry her because it was the simplest and most effective way for me to cherish her. When it backfired, I cursed my rash decision. And in my anger, I lost sight of the idea of us being together *without* being married. I was filled with such rage at all the ways my life had gone wrong that I eventually left indelible scars on Deborah’s life, in turn. My self-serving pity and self-serving grief ultimately led to a self-serving conclusion...though perhaps part of me rejoiced at scarring her. Perhaps a part of me was pleased to know she could never forget me.”

Richard sighed, almost in mockery of himself. I wished he hadn’t. I didn’t want him to beat himself up like that. I tried my best to keep my expression neutral as I scooted closer to him.

“Hey, you know...I don’t think you need to worry about that anymore.”

“About what, pray tell?”

“About everything that happened with Deborah. See, I met an old friend when I was back in Japan.”

“Miss Shouko Tanimoto, I presume.”

“That’s the one. This time, she turned me down in no uncertain terms. If you were me and this was Tanimoto we were talking about, I’m sure you would tell me not to jump to any conclusions. Because...”

Because you still love her, don’t you?

When I said the question out loud, Richard went silent.

“If you care about her this much, I don’t think you should be too quick to give her up. We’re not playing musical chairs. We’re still trying to learn more about the situation, and once we have a better idea of what’s going on, then we can figure out what to do. If life wasn’t complicated to begin with, good people would never get divorced or married at all. Let’s start by talking to her first, okay?”

I was sure life had thrown Deborah a curveball, somehow. Richard didn’t usually jump to conclusions and blame himself, and I wanted to remind him of that. So I talked to him in the most grown-up fashion I could.

Which raised the question... Why did my cheeks keep twitching throughout my whole speech? Wasn’t the whole point of keeping my face blank to help Richard calm down? What was this about? I didn’t know, and I didn’t want to examine it too closely.

Before I could say, “Okay?” one more time and smile at him, Richard suddenly leaned forward until his face was right in front of mine. Uh-oh. It cast a magic spell on me which destroyed my self-control.

“Seigi Nakata.”

“...Yeah?”

“Please explain yourself. What did you mean by ‘You still love her’?”

Huh? I mean, didn't he? Of course he did.

"I thought you still wanted to marry her. Right...?"

I apologized in case I'd gotten the wrong idea. I probably shouldn't have brought it up, since it was none of my business, but I don't think I was wrong. When Richard had talked about her, there was a beautiful pain in his words, like the jewel of his soul had split open and his lifeblood came gushing out. If you cared about someone that much and had a second chance to make things right, maybe it was worth going for? Maybe everything would be better this time around? Becoming a father to two young kids might be a bit of a learning curve, but I could always tag along and help out as a housekeeper. Although maybe that wasn't realistic.

If Richard married Deborah, I knew he might never come back to Étranger. Saul probably knew that too when we talked. After everything we shared, I knew Richard would never forget me, but if he and his loved one had a child together, I was sure things would change.

Change in what ways, though? I could still barely picture myself running Étranger, but all the same, what would happen if I took over the Ginza shop?

I imagined myself, cleaned up and dressed in a nice suit, sitting on the red sofa. When the doorbell rang, Richard would be on the other side, with a beautiful Turkish woman standing behind him. Two children with little resemblance to Richard would run into the shop. One of the kids would ask if this was where he used to work, and Richard would say yes, but it was a long time ago. I would bring out pudding for the kids. Richard wouldn't mind that there wasn't any for him. In fact, he would be glad to see his children enjoying his favorite treat. I wouldn't mention the fact that I had really wanted to give it to him. The children might even smile at me and say, "Thank you, Seigi!"

And what then? How could I respond to that? What could I even say? What, oh what, could I possibly say? I would have to smile, I knew that. But beyond that, what could I *ever* say to Richard?

Something fell and landed on my knee. It looked like a raindrop cake, I thought. Raindrop cakes were a Shinshu specialty, a dessert that looked like a quartz crystal in the shape of a large water droplet.

Was it a tear? My tear?

“Huh? Wha—oh, sorry. I’m not sure what’s happening.”

“Seigi.”

“Sorry, give me just a moment. Let me go wipe my face, and I’ll be right back.”

“Here, take my handkerchief. Or I have tissues.”

“Thanks, and sorry for the trouble. Could I get a tissue?”

But Richard did not pass me the tissues. Instead, when he reached over to the other side of the water pipe, he grabbed me by the hand and pulled me into his arms. He cradled my head in his embrace. Oh, give me a break. I wasn’t a kid.

“I’m sorry. I’m getting your shirt wet.”

“Don’t worry about that.”

“...Is it just me, or did you change your cologne?”

“A while ago. I would have preferred if you’d noticed earlier.”

“Sorry.”

As I squirmed, a sudden thought seemed to occur to Richard.

“I hear you had quite the interesting time in Tokyo.”

“...What now?”

“Mr. Nakata gave me a call and said something about...ah yes, you’re a kept man now?”

At once, a chill ran down my spine. I wanted to go back in time and beg Mr. Nakata to shut up, but it was too late now that I was here in Sri Lanka. Of course, I knew I was to blame for telling him everything in the first place, but even so, that kind of thing was way too personal to be shared. I couldn’t even

begin to imagine the tone of voice Mr. Nakata had used to tell Richard that his son was depressed because people were calling him Richard's kept man.

No. No, I wasn't his kept man at all. Richard and I did not have that kind of relationship. For starters, I wasn't even in love with him—

Well...or so I thought.

But then why was I crying? Why did the thought of him marrying and leaving me make me cry?

"Words and phrases have histories as fascinating as any country's. This phrase 'kept man' has a particularly intriguing history behind it. Now, I hear you've been to Hong Kong. How go your efforts to learn Cantonese?"

"I...I haven't started learning at all..."

"Oh? Is that so."

Professor Richard muttered that he'd best teach me and sipped the ginger beer again. The corners of his mouth quirked up slightly, no doubt because had something suitably evil in mind. All the same, the thought of him teasing me lifted my spirits a little. I was doomed. I'd never expected to be so happy at someone giving me attention in the form of awful teasing.

No...I had it backward. I was scared that all the affection I had come to take for granted would one day be gone.

Richard and I had only known each other for a little over four years. That was nothing compared to how long Hiromi and Mr. Nakata had been together, but before I'd realized it, I'd become completely transformed by this man's generosity and kindness. Now I openly prayed for his happiness.

"In modern Japanese, the word *ajjin*—in the masculine, a 'kept man'—refers to someone of the opposite sex with whom one engages in relations outside of a legitimate marriage. It carries a rather negative connotation. However, the reverse is true in China."

There, he explained, the same kanji meant a husband, a wife, or another

romantic partner. It was a word you used for someone you love. That meant that Vince and Marian were each other's *airens*, as Richard claimed it was pronounced in Mandarin. Learning languages sure was tough.

"I do not need to waste my time on those who mistreat others due to prejudice or envy, and I hardly think I need to explain why. However, if we consider the word in its Chinese sense, perhaps this term is not so poorly applied after all."

"What, you think I should introduce myself at my next drinking party with 'I'm a kept man?'"

"If you do, let me know. I'll come pick you up with a bouquet of roses."

"Knowing you, I'm scared you might actually do it."

"You mean I can't? What a pity."

As I laughed, my tears started to dry up. Richard was a man who put actions before words, and he went above and beyond whatever he promised. If he said he'd do something, I knew he would follow through.

Likewise, I knew he hadn't been lying when he said we would need to stay in touch so long as we had each other's white sapphire and padparadscha. And as long as I could call him, that meant I could always hear the kindest voice in the world, no matter where either of us might be at the time. If I wanted him to teach me something, we could use an app to video chat. If I told him I would make him pudding, he might come visit me. That would be enough. Wouldn't it be? Wanting any more would be unreasonably greedy.

Maybe this was like when children of divorcees didn't want their parents to remarry. Did that mean I thought this person who'd been a complete stranger only four years ago was my parent? Was I going to follow him everywhere? Even newborn ducklings didn't imprint on people that strongly.

But I couldn't laugh these feelings off. Having come this far with him, I had to admit the truth—that if Richard and I went our separate ways, it would ruin my

life. Moments before his wedding, I might find myself clinging to him in tears, begging, "Please don't marry her!" The thought was deathly mortifying, but I guess it was just the truth.

I whimpered and wiped my tears on the expensive fabric of Richard's shirt. Then I looked up, and Richard pressed a kiss to my forehead. I felt the sweet pang of an old memory. This was the second place he'd kissed me, after my cheek. I had always assumed he had only kissed me because I had a fever, but I suppose this dazzling prince of the kingdom of kindness also bestowed his kisses on those who were feeling sad.

"...Sorry for breaking down on you like this."

"Don't worry. If you hadn't fallen to pieces, I very well might have done it myself."

"Huh? But why?"

Richard didn't explain. Instead, he suggested we continue the conversation. I sat back upright on my chair and snuffled.

"Uh, right. What were we talking about again?"

"I asked you to explain what you meant by 'You still love her.' I believe I've figured it out now, for which I must thank you. However...you are half-wrong."

He continued, "And indeed half-correct, in the sense that I do still care about her deeply. As for whether I still wish to marry her, that is a dreadfully tricky question. It is likewise half-correct, but these remaining halves are not so easily settled. Not for me, and, I dare say, not for her, either."

Richard rolled the metal mouthpiece between his fingers. He looked thoughtful.

"Just as I have my own life now, so too does she. My physical possessions are few enough that I could bring them along to build a new life together with her. But there are too many other things that I care for dearly and wish to keep with me, and not all of them would fit into a life with Deborah."

“But you love her, don’t you? Oh, sorry. Can I get a tissue after all?”

“In the same sense that I love many people.”

It was a lucky thing to love too many people, Richard said. I didn’t hear anything in his voice that made me think he was trying to act tough. If anything, it sounded more like he was talking to himself rather than me. The tone of his voice gave me hope.

“...Oh. Well... So, what’s the plan for things with her?”

“I do not intend to be so impudent or insensitive as to court her at such an inopportune moment. It is clear she has plenty on her plate already, and there must be a reason she hasn’t divulged this information to me. At present, I would like to wish her all the best and keep as much distance as she desires.”

“Okay. I guess that’s an option.”

“Does it make you feel relieved to hear this?”

I wanted to say, “Not at all. Relieved? No way.” People who couldn’t wish for other people’s happiness were terrible.

But deep down, I was very relieved. And Richard was close enough that I couldn’t hide my feelings from him when I was so distressed. If only I had an ace up my sleeve to distract him.

“Hey, can I ask...”

“Yes?”

“...Okay, never mind. Forget I said anything.”

“Well, now I’m interested.”

“You sure don’t sound like it.”

“I suppose not. But I have my reasons.”

Richard added that he could imagine at least part of what I was about to say. He sounded so calm that it upset me. Did he really know? When I hadn’t even considered that he might not marry Deborah until a few moments ago? Did he

really mean that? Could he really imagine the sensation of offering a delicious pie to someone, all while wanting to smash it in their face? Really? Did he really know how I felt?

“You... I... It’s that... I...”

“You sound like a Japanese language learner struggling with grammar.”

“I know that! It’s just... I... Um, I... If I...”

“Yes?”

“...If I asked you to go out with me, what would you say? I mean that in a romantic, dating sense.”

The pie hit home. But not in Richard’s face. In mine.

Richard looked at me with his gorgeous features and air of gentle charm. *Don’t look at me like that when you’re so beautiful*, I thought. Compared to him, I must look hellish right now.

This brilliantly beautiful man graced me with a polished smile.

“How fascinating. I have never heard you sound so nervous before. Your voice didn’t tremble this much even when you were doing your mock interviews for the civil service exam.”

“Oh, come on! That’s what matters. I’m asking you a serious question.”

“You know, I find this matter of ‘confessing’ one’s feelings an odd custom. The British do not have a formal step leading from confession to dating. Should you find yourself developing a sort of chemistry with someone, you progress automatically to the relationship stage. It’s a simple cultural difference, but I’ve heard cute stories of the trouble Japanese students sometimes find themselves in when they study abroad in England and don’t realize they’ve begun dating someone.

“Poor them,” he added, like an actor reciting a soliloquy.

I didn’t want him to blink. This man had no idea of the power he exerted on

me when the brilliant blue of his eyes vanished momentarily only to reappear again. His existence was a magnificent, deadly weapon in and of itself.

Richard leaned back on the rattan chair, tilted his head, and shot me a look.

“So do you mean to say we aren’t dating already?”

I produced a squeaking sound from the back of my throat.

Stop. Please, actually stop. This was not the first time I had almost died from the violent force of his beauty, but that never prevented the alarm bells from going off in my head and chanting, “This time, Seigi Nakata, you are actually going to die.” He was so handsome. There was always a fresh brilliance to his beauty like I was seeing him for the first time. Those blue eyes, that blond hair, and that alabaster skin all added up to create a dangerously beautiful picture. It was strange. You shouldn’t be able to admire the beauty of a gemstone or a gorgeous person with your eyes closed. The eyes take in beauty the same way vitamins are taken orally. Yet even so, my mind was screaming that I could still feel his beauty with my eyes tightly shut. Some intuitive part of me even understood this logic. Perhaps this peerlessly flawless man’s source of beauty was not his face at all.

Richard watched my reaction with a somewhat sullen expression before slowly opening his mouth. It looked like a rose blooming in the evening air captured by slow-motion photography.

What was he about to say? What? What?! And how could I respond to him?

“...Um...I...”

“I was joking.”

“...Come again?”

“That was British humor for you.”

“Whoa! You made me stop breathing!”

I wheezed, my chest heaving, as I looked off into the distance. This was bad for my heart. Naturally, I was the one to blame since I had popped the question

in the first place. But I really hadn't expected him to respond like that. I didn't know the first thing about how to handle this man.

"Hmph," Richard scoffed. "You have much to learn before you can make jokes about being in a romantic relationship with me."

"I wasn't making a joke, though. I was serious."

"No doubt you were. Because you thought if I was your romantic partner, you wouldn't have to worry about me marrying the girl I once loved? Does that not suggest you would break up with me once these current troubles are resolved? Tsk, tsk."

I was at a complete loss for words. I took my shoes off, pulled my legs to me, and buried my face in my knees. Richard reached over and ruffled the hair on the back of my head like I was a dog. That made me feel better. Like he was telling me we could still be together in our current state of relationship. That really was a relief.

"I suppose that's what I get for asking you to take care of yourself. And bravo. I see you've made fine progress if I am your choice of romantic partner. As conceited of me to say this as it is, I cannot think of anyone else in your circle of peers who considers you so seriously or wants your happiness more. I am, as you might say, your best choice. I am not especially unwealthy at present, I have a flawless academic record, and we share similar tastes in food. Picking me is quite reasonable. Alas, I do not think you are devious enough to choose a romantic partner based on such mundane concerns."

"...Neither are you."

"Well, that part goes without saying."

With that, he shut the conversation down completely.

He was right, though. If I had been weighing my options in concern for my financial future, I would have stumbled upon the idea of dating Richard sooner or later. Richard treated me well, that was for sure. We knew each other's flaws

and insecurities, we always came running when the other was in trouble, and we'd never argued more than once or twice even in the most stressful scenarios.

Besides, Richard had never actually said he wasn't gay. Or at least, he'd corrected himself in his London bedroom to politely inform me that he "had never had a romantic partner of the same sex thus far." I had wondered ever since why he had worded it like that. If I deliberately misinterpreted it, I could understand it as "If you fell in love with me, I wouldn't be opposed to dating you. In that sense, I simply am not gay at this precise moment in time." As if anyone would be that nice. If that were true, I'd fall in love with him on the spot. It could only work out in my favor, right? Let's fall in love romantically and start dating. Then share all your overwhelming affection and assets with me.

But I hadn't meant that question as a joke. I didn't want to be the kind of person who would joke about that. Recently, I had started to wonder if a guy who pretended to kiss someone only to pull away at the last second wasn't so awful after all. If you were to ask me, the most awful thing you could do was pretend to kiss someone, suck up every drop of their sweet nectar, and then run. Like a greedy hummingbird. Anyone who used their partner like a pipeline for love and trust and took advantage of their physical assets was a thief in the guise of a gentleman.

I had the vague concept that it would be nice for kisses to be a form of artificial respiration. It'd be horrible if taken literally, what with your partner dying. But as a more abstract notion, the concept made sense—when you were kissing someone, you were giving them everything inside of you. Breathing life into them. In that sense, a relationship was like two people performing artificial respiration on each other. That is, according to this stretch of logic my brain was obsessed with.

Therefore, I shied away from trying to pursue a relationship of that sort with Richard. It felt insincere because I would get too much out of it. If push came to shove, I worried that this kind man would get carried away in doing things on

my behalf. Honestly, that was my biggest fear. He was always telling me to look after myself better, but that was the pot calling the kettle black. But maybe it was past the point to say things like that.

“...Hey, Richard?”

“Yes?”

“You know, worrying about losing you wasn’t the only reason I asked that question.”

“Is that so?”

I nodded. The composed expression on his face no longer ticked me off. I just wanted to say my piece.

“In order to practice my Japanese, I flipped through a lot of magazines in the airports. They had all kinds of stuff in them, as you can probably imagine. Articles called things like *Who Would You Want to Spend the Last Day on Earth With?* or *Your Life Partner*. I guess those are synonyms for things like *spouse*, *boyfriend*, or *girlfriend*. But see...”

I wasn’t Richard’s kept man. Nor his boyfriend, husband, or partner. But if the world was about to end, there was no one else I’d rather spend my last day with. And I would do my very best to someday be worthy of the title of his life partner. I loved him in that sense. Why wouldn’t I? I loved, cared for, and looked up to him. If it were within my power, I wanted to watch out for him until the end of my days. So, starting at this conclusion and working my way backward, maybe things were okay just the way they were. No matter what label we put on our relationship.

“You know, I’ve been racking my brain trying to think of the best way to take care of you, and I still don’t have a good answer. What do you think I should do?”

If I could’ve ranked every question I could have asked him from least to most concerning, this one would be at the very top of the list. Yet Richard took my

words in stride, pondered them, and then answered with a serious expression.

“If that is something you want, I suggest you continue to give it thought. Likewise, I encourage you to continue to care for me as you are doing now. That is what brings you happiness, isn’t it? If you ever tire of thinking about it, move on to something else.”

“What if I never get tired of thinking about you?”

“...What a question.”

There was a slightly heavy tone in this latest response. Richard’s eyes flicked from left to right, the motion of a piece of candy dancing on his tongue, before the gorgeous jeweler looked at me with a smile.

“If that day should ever come, then perhaps we can come up with a new solution.”

And then, Richard added one final word: “Together.”

I wanted a moment to think over what he had just said—but the sound of a phone ringing interrupted us. Richard took his phone from the pocket of his shirt.

“It’s Jeffrey.”

Jeffrey had a different ringtone, I realized. Richard must have set up a system to only accept calls from certain callers. I sighed in admiration of his attention to order.

His graceful fingers unlocked the phone. Reclining while talking on the phone was difficult, so Richard stood up and marched inside with brisk footsteps. I followed him, leaving the water pipe behind.

“Allô?” I heard Jeffrey say. “Ricky, is Seigi there? Put yourself on speaker phone.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Just a hunch. Well, more like a little bird told me. I got a message from a

Japanese acquaintance that a certain someone was off to the airport.”

Halfway through that speech, Richard adjusted the audio settings so that I could hear Jeffrey better. He propped his phone up against a basket on the table, turning it into an impromptu phone stand.

I realized I should probably say hello.

“Hello, Jeffrey. Thanks for your concern. As you guessed, I’m here, too.”

“Hey there, Seigi! It’s your big brother figure Jeffrey calling. Breaking news. Our dear little queen, Octavia, has come out of her room. And get this, she’s stepped off the estate. It’s almost the first time she’s done that since the accident.”

The accident? I’d never heard about that before. But more importantly, what did her leaving her room mean? If she was no longer hiding, did that mean she would try to talk to Richard, Jeffrey, or me? Maybe this was my big break.

Richard started to ask a question, but Jeffrey beat him to the punch.

“And that’s not all. When I say she’s stepped off the estate, I don’t mean on foot. Right now, she’s on board her private jet.”

“On a plane, you say? Does her health allow that?”

“I think she’s trying her best to endure it. She needed to apply to the authorities to leave the country, so it was easy to figure out her destination, even without that little bird’s help. She’s heading south, with staff in tow to take care of her. To be more specific, she’s heading southwest to the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka.”

Richard and I exchanged a look. Sri Lanka. So, here? Octavia was coming here?

Richard seemed to find this as hard to believe as I did.

“Just to be sure, is this current information, Jeffrey?”

“It’s the latest update I have. That’s why I skipped out mid-meeting and called

you. If this makes Father's people think poorly of me, would you hire me as an accountant for Ranasinghe Jewelry? I'll take a salary of three hundred million a year to start."

"If you are unconcerned enough to be able to make asinine jokes, then you and Henry must be perfectly fine."

"Of course we are. Nothing's changed on our end, and I see no signs of this being a trap. I'm concerned about what the servants are up to, but Henry's taking care of that. Father's situation isn't dire enough that anyone else has the right to tell us what to do. We have him on intravenous feeding. It won't last forever, but it'll do for now."

"Do you know the flight plan and estimated time of arrival for this private jet of hers?"

"She won't get to Sri Lanka today or tomorrow. They're keeping her health in mind as they travel and making three stopovers. It looks like it'll take her about two days in all. I'm still trying to learn more details, but I'm guessing she'll stop in Sicily and Dubai. Talk about a grand adventure, huh?"

Plane rides took a lot out of people, so I gathered that they planned on making periodic stops to let Octavia rest. Considering the distance, you could probably fly from Switzerland to Sri Lanka in half a day. I tried to understand how frail seventeen-year-old Octavia might be. Naturally, I was also curious about the accident Jeffrey had mentioned. None of this gave me the image of a healthy, active girl.

When I'd seen her on the video, she looked sickly. Not with all the politeness in the world could I have described her as healthy, then. Still, maybe that was just a byproduct of shooting such a threatening video.

At any rate, she would be here in the country in two days. What could I do to prepare?

I shook my head as Richard asked another question.

“Jeff, what about the Deborah issue?”

“Are you sure you want me to bring that up now?” The question was in Spanish.

“But of course,” Richard said back in Japanese. I detected some anger in his voice.

I realized Jeffrey didn’t know that Haruyoshi was teaching me some Spanish.

“...No new developments. No new info, either. I’m not running around like a headless chicken trying to get updates, but I *am* investigating the situation as fast as I can. I still find it hard to believe that her relationship changed because of some deliberate conspiracy. If anything, I doubt that Octavia even knows about her divorce.”

“Are you suggesting it was a sudden turn of events?”

“It looks complicated. I’ll send you a message later. Boy, I’ve never wished more that I could clone myself.”

“Be serious. If there were multiple of you, I can only imagine you would end up in a cycle of foisting work off on one another. For now, I will see if I can contact her as well.”

“...Good luck.”

Jeffrey’s voice didn’t have the same quality it always did. His cheerfulness sounded forced, which made sense to me, as he was the one who had broken up Richard and Deborah to begin with.

I heard a burst of noise from the other end of the receiver, and Jeffrey hung up with a “Later!” His comment about ditching a meeting wasn’t metaphorical, apparently.

Silence once again descended over the house in Sri Lanka. Kandy was a very quiet place in general.

Richard and I looked at one another, and I grinned weakly.

“Good thing she caught us while we’re home, huh?”

“A stroke of luck.”

That was another one of his jokes. I laughed but still forced myself to walk past Richard with gritted teeth. I really wanted to go ask this reclusive Swiss girl what her goals were, but I’d never thought she would come to me instead.

Richard picked his phone up, gave the screen a light buffing, and slipped it back into his pocket. He suggested we put the things in the garden away and started to walk out onto the porch, but I grabbed his sleeve and stopped him.

“Hey, Richard?”

“Yes?”

“...Can I ask why Octavia started hiding in her room to begin with? Or should I not bring that up around her at all?”

“Octavia does not appreciate people walking on eggshells around her. She would not mind me telling you, and she would most likely take it as an insult if she learned you were never informed. Do you have any objection to hearing?”

Now the question was turned around at me. Did I really have it in me to face off against a seventeen-year-old girl and fight with all I had?

Adults had a lot of options at their disposal if they wanted to get serious. Yelling and throwing things weren’t the only ways to escalate a situation. Taking the other person’s position, past, and possible future into consideration before choosing your course of action was a way of getting serious, too. A very sophisticated sort of fighting. Still, the other person might not agree. They might tell you to stop playing around. Even so, you had to be the bigger person and ignore them.

Richard was asking me if I thought I could do that. He was checking to see if I could keep from letting my feelings for him get the better of me. If I could avoid one of my typical careless comments around a girl who would be on this planet longer than I would. And he was asking this because he believed in me.

And so there was only one response I could give.

“Of course.”

Richard nodded and said, “Excellent.” He warned me that it would be a long story, so we took care of the chores first. We moved the chairs back inside, washed the dishes in the sink, petted Jiro, ran the vacuum cleaner, played with Jiro, made the beds, tried to get Jiro to fall asleep before ultimately giving up, shaved coconuts to make into sambal tomorrow, gave Jiro some of the leftovers, and did all my other daily tasks. As I worked, I felt increasingly more ready.

I also realized that Professor Richard had taught Jiro to lie down, wait, and shake. Richard was just as brilliant at training dogs as he was at training people.

After I told Jiro he was a good boy enough times, he finally fell asleep on my mattress. His only source of excitement used to be me playing with him, but now that he’d learned all these new tricks, he slept as deeply as an office worker at the end of a long day of work. I could almost hear him saying, “Phew, what a day!” I guessed dogs needed a good work-life balance, too.

“Everything’s just about done. Tell me about Octavia.”

“Already? Did you clean the bedrooms?”

“Yes, the ones on the second and third floor. We’re ready for guests. But...”

It’s not like she’ll be here soon, I indicated with a shrug of my shoulders.

Richard gave Jiro’s triangular ear one last pat, as if he was reluctant to part from the dog. A growling noise came from Jiro’s throat. *Stop bothering me,* I figured.

Richard stood up with a look of resignation and went back to the dining room with me. Figuring I would let him take care of the tea, I left him to it. Richard could make better tea than me anyway. For our tea snack, I brought out jaggery—a caramel-like brown sugar sweet that had sat in the fridge while I was out of the country. Jaggery is basically a big lump of sugar made from the nectar of the

Sri Lankan fishtail palm. It flaked off in our hands when we grabbed it.

Royal milk tea and a brown-sugar-flavored sweet. We enjoyed the tranquil moment for a few minutes before Richard put on his jeweler's face. I mentally sat up straight as well.

"Shall we begin?"

"Please."

But before he began, Richard said one last thing to preface his tale.

"I know no girl who loathes the champions of justice with such a fierce passion as Octavia Manorland."

Then my beloved boss began to tell me the dramatic story of the girl he once tutored.

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