



THE CASE FILES  
OF  
JEWELLER  
RICHARD

WRITTEN BY  
NANAKO  
TSUJIMURA

1  
NOVEL

ILLUSTRATED BY  
UTAKO  
YUKIHIRO



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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 dedicated college student hoping to go into civil service after graduation, he has started working part-time for Richard. 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 Englishman from Sri Lanka who speaks Japanese more fluently than your average Japanese national and is an accomplished jeweler. While his precise age remains a mystery, his incredible beauty would strike anyone, regardless of gender, utterly speechless.







c a s e

1

The Pink Sapphire  
of Justice

**A** FRIEND HAD INVITED ME to join him working the night shift part-time at a TV station. Specifically, our job was to guard the studio's many keys. At least two people had to be on duty at all times, but all the job entailed was lending out keys to people using the studio and making sure they got back to their appropriate spot on the rack when they were done. That was it. The shifts were irregular, but the work was easy. It was in Shibuya, too, so I got to brush shoulders with celebrities from time to time—not that I could exactly say anything to them, since they were there for work. The job felt like a surprisingly good fit.

I started over winter break, but once I was going to class four days a week during the day, then straight to my job in the evening, taking a morning nap in the break room and heading right back to school, it really did a number on my internal clock. I could never quite think clearly. My wallet was full, but I had nothing in particular to spend the money on. I don't think I'd ever heard someone use my actual name at work—both my friend and I were uniformly addressed as “guard.” Even food was starting to taste bland. I knew I couldn't keep it up much longer.

I'd signed up for a hardcore prep course for the civil service exam but hadn't even been able to start studying. I'd never thought of myself as the kind of person who was very sensitive to this sort of thing, but I got the feeling it was just an issue of time management. Come April, it would have been two full months of this.

I guess I'll just try to get my shifts reduced or find a new part-time job if I can't manage it? Yeah, that's the plan.

All of that swirled through my head as I walked through Yoyogi Park that evening. I heard the voices of some drunks coming from one of the paths off the main road. They seemed to be arguing about something, but a wall of high shrubs made it impossible to see anything. I had gotten off early that day, so it was about midnight, and there was nothing in particular going on that might lead one to expect this sort of rowdiness.

I crossed the road and ran toward the voices. There were four or five people

—men in worn-out suits—raising hell. The man in the middle of the group, carrying a suitcase, had tripped and fallen.

One of the drunks cackled and dumped his beer on the man's head. I took a deep breath.

“Officer! Right over there! Hurry! Someone's being attacked!”

The over-excited drunks scattered and escaped into the station. The man on the ground remained. He pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket to wipe himself off.

“Are you okay?”

“...You're a lifesaver.”

Under the light of the bug zapper, the man turned around. He had blond hair, blue eyes, and an impeccable command of Japanese, but his features were most captivating of all. I prayed he hadn't caught the little “whoa” I'd let out under my breath.

I'm going to make a bold assertion: I've never laid eyes on a more beautiful human being in my life. He had high cheekbones and a perfectly sculpted nose, gently curled blond hair, and his skin was pale and silky smooth. His eyes were a shade of blue that I felt like I could stare at for hours. It was like someone had taken individual parts from all the most beautiful people in the world and combined them in immaculate balance to create this creature. Time and space—even down to the tiny particles of dust in the air—all flowed at a different pace around this man. It was almost enough to make you believe in the divine. It might have been some kind of fated meet-cute—if he'd been a woman, that was.

The most beautiful man I'd ever seen in my life was standing before me in a grey suit.

He told me his name was Richard.

The two of us walked through the park together until we got to the police box in front of the station. I encouraged him to file a report. One of the wheels on his black cloth rolling suitcase was broken. I offered to carry it for him, but Richard stubbornly refused.

“Richard... Rana, uh... Sorry, could you say that again?”

Being stationed in Harajuku, the officer wasn't terribly accustomed to foreign names as he struggled to file the report on his neglected computer. The blond man handed him a card from his wallet. His name was written in roman characters on one side and Japanese script on the other: Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian. The difficulty certainly shot up in the second half of his name—it almost sounded like a tongue twister—and the officer had to make constant reference to the business card as he typed. The other officer offered us bottled green tea but didn't say a word. He didn't look nervous, though. Maybe it was a religious thing or something.

“Are you a Japanese citizen?”

“British, actually.”

“Are you here on vacation? Business? What line of work are you in?”

“Business. I deal in precious gemstones. I'm a jeweler.”

A jeweler. I had no idea how you'd even get to know someone in that profession, other than going to a department store or a jewelry store or something. What was he doing out here at this hour, anyway?

The office asked if he was a street peddler, and Richard responded by opening up his suitcase. It was packed to the brim with countless little boxes. He pulled one out and removed the rubber band holding it closed. Inside were a number of little vinyl bags.

Both officers gasped and leaned forward, thinking it might be illicit narcotics. I took the bait, too, but the bags didn't contain nefarious white powder. Inside were blue stones, each about the size of a watch crown and a shade of blue that looked like the deep ocean in crystal form. There must have been about thirty in one bag. They looked almost like beads. Stones of different shades were in other bags. And there were dozens of them.

“Oh. What are those, emeralds?”

“Sapphires. I typically sell these through appointment at clients' homes. Most of these appointments are made for after a client gets home from work, so I am often out quite late.”



“You walk around town with this stuff? That seems a little careless.”

“There were some rather...unique circumstances today.”

Richard, the jeweler, began to tell us a story that made it sound like this might very well have been the worst day of his life.

Once he'd finished making a house call to one of his clients, Richard took a taxi, like he usually did. But this time, he happened to get a new driver—one who didn't know the route to the Shimbashi Station exit near the hotel. Despite this, the driver was full of baseless confidence and ultimately got them progressively more lost. The meter kept running up, with the driver showing no signs of stopping. Finally running out of patience, Richard had the driver let him off outside Yoyogi Park. This was when he encountered the ill-mannered drunks, had beer poured all over him, and broke his luggage.

One of the officers started to laugh in the middle of the story. I glared at him, and the older one shrugged.

“You really oughta be grateful to this young man here. Things could have ended much worse for you if he hadn't been there. I'm sorry, young man, but could you give us your name? We need your eyewitness testimony, too.”

I wrote my name on the notepad on the desk with a ballpoint pen. The officer looked at my first name—written with the same characters as “justice”—and guessed “Masayoshi” for the reading, but I shook my head and wrote the pronunciation down, too: Seigi Nakata.

“Wow! You really did your name *justice*, huh? I'm impressed!” The older officer, named Suzuki, chuckled heartily. I just smiled awkwardly.

It was 12:45 a.m. by the time they finally let us go. I told him I'd wait with him until the taxi got to the police box, and he gave me this look, like he was utterly baffled by me.

“Are you sure you're not a knight?”

“A night?”

“A *gentleman*,” Richard pronounced expertly in native-sounding English. “You accompanied me until I was finished with the police even though they said you

could leave earlier.”

“Well, it would’ve been annoying if I’d left and they realized they still needed me for something, right?”

The taxi was taking its sweet time, so Richard went into the convenience store next to the coin-operated lockers in front of the station. He bought two bottles of water and returned to where we’d been waiting. The moment he handed one of them to me, the taxi finally arrived.

I let out a loud “um” without really thinking, and he paused.

“I, um, I know you’ve been through a lot today, but please don’t let this experience make you hate Japan. Not everyone’s like those idiots.”

“I’m quite aware. Not to mention, making sweeping generalizations about people is a rather foolish endeavor. You shouldn’t feel responsible for their behavior.”

Foolish. I hadn’t heard that word in a long time.

The blond man with a much greater command of my own native language than I placed his suitcase in the back seat of the taxi instead of the trunk. This rather unusual meeting was coming to an end. Deciding this might be my only chance to bring up what was on my mind, I took it.

“Excuse me, just one last thing! Mr. Richard, you appraise jewelry, right? Like rings and stuff...”

Richard looked a bit surprised at first. His eyes, blue like the sapphires he’d pulled out at the police box, gazed at me. The taxi driver grumpily announced that he was closing the door from the driver’s seat, but Richard stuck a leg out, setting his gleaming leather shoe on the asphalt. He took a business card from his breast pocket and gave it to me with one hand.

“Jewelry Étranger” it said. I had to wonder what “étranger” meant. It had an e-mail address and phone number on it as well.

“Call me any time. I’m fairly easy to find near Nihonbashi.”

“But—”

“Until we meet again, my knight in shining armor,” Richard said with a smile. I

was speechless, probably because it was absolutely impossible to argue with him. And it wasn't just his face but all of his mannerisms, too.

The taxi vanished into the night, leaving nothing but a streak of orange from its taillights. I got on what was nearly the last train on the Yamanote line and returned to my apartment in Takadanobaba, where I finally checked my phone to see I had a text. It was from Hiromi, my mother.

*"How are you? I've been well. I'm heading out to work!"*

She seemed to be in good spirits. I was living on my own, so I was diligent about answering her texts. Sitting in my underwear and a tank top, I typed out, *"I helped a stranger out tonight. He was shockingly beautiful. I wonder if he was a model."*

Ultimately, however, I deleted that and sent her my usual, *"Good luck at work. I'm doing fine. Heading to bed now."* My mother wasn't really the person to be texting about every trivial detail of my day, anyway.

After that, I looked up the name of the jewelry shop from the business card. Apparently *étranger* meant "stranger" in French. The shop had a website, but it was only available in English and Chinese, so I didn't get very far there. They didn't sell anything online, either. It must've been a physical location. Regardless, it was definitely a real jewelry shop.

Maybe the whole incident was a blessing in disguise, though.

I opened the fridge. I'd been skimping on cooking lately, so there was nothing but pickles and condiments in it. And one other thing in my unused freezer—a small black box. It had been ages since I'd even taken it out.

Inside the cloth-covered box was a platinum ring with a tiny pink jewel in the middle.

I patted the muzzle of the Mitsukoshi Ginza lion statue for the first time. It was nice and smooth. An unfamiliar world lay before me as I emerged from the Ginza subway station: Chuo City, the second-smallest of Tokyo's twenty-three wards, after Taito Ward. It had a different atmosphere than Shinjuku, with its variety of businesses, and had the polar opposite of Shibuya and Harajuku's

lively, youthful vibes. All the buildings were around the same size, with each storefront perfectly aligned, like an expensive bento box. It was almost like the city was an intricate diorama built to display beautiful buildings and advertising that humans were merely allowed to borrow. Though a few things had seemingly slipped through the cracks, like the retro clocktower and bronze statues.

I waited on the second floor of a chain coffee shop near Mitsukoshi. Right on time, the man whose face I would never forget in a million years, even though I'd only met him once, appeared with a brand-new black suitcase in tow. With each table he passed, the customers turned their heads, one after the other—like toppling dominos—to get a look at beauty incarnate. What was this, a zoo?

Richard greeted me with a casual hello and a raised hand. He was wearing a dark blue suit and a button-down shirt. He'd immediately agreed to meet me when I called, saying that it was pointless to discuss an item without being able to look at it. Being a student, my schedule was pretty flexible, so I left the location to him. That was how I ended up in the middle of Ginza.

And so, the man who looked like he could be a walking billboard for a high-class menswear line sat down in front of me. I, on the other hand, was wearing a pair of khakis and a cardigan.

"Thank you again for the help the other day. I hope you've been well."

"I have, thanks. Man, you really are good at Japanese."

"Language is an important tool of my trade, after all."

Richard's tray only had sweets and water on it. It was a little unusual, given drinks were definitely cheaper than the food here. I hadn't even touched my coffee yet, but I sat up straight and got right to it.

"I brought the ring. I want you to grade it for me."

I took the small black box out of my backpack, popped the lid open, and showed him the ring with the pink stone in the middle. It was no bigger than the plastic head of a sewing pin, but it glimmered as the light reflected off its facets. It was roughly the same dimensions in terms of length and width—a brilliant, round stone. The silvery metal of the ring was unadorned, with no

trace of engraving. It was the singular piece of jewelry I owned.

“It appears to be a pink sapphire.”

“Huh. I did try researching what it might be online, but I was never sure.”

“I see,” Richard said with a nod.

I continued, “It’s a keepsake from my grandmother on my mother’s side. She passed away when I was in high school... She was always convinced it was a fake.”

The jeweler looked a bit surprised. I kept going.

“I mean, it’s weird, right? But my family doesn’t own any other precious jewelry, so neither my mother or I had any idea what to do with it. I couldn’t stand the idea of leaving it unresolved forever, so I wanted to take it to an expert to have it appraised.”

“For stones other than diamonds, we don’t call it ‘grading’ but ‘identifying.’ What you’re looking for is an identification report, unless you were interested in more than the question of the stone’s authenticity.”

“Can you tell if it’s a fake just from looking at it?”

“To a degree,” he nodded. He really was a professional. I guess I shouldn’t have expected anything less. “That said, fakes have gotten quite convincing as of late, so I can’t be one hundred percent confident of my assessment. I would prefer to give it a more thorough examination to be sure.”

When I asked if he’d hold on to it to do just that, Richard’s expression soured for a moment.

“...No?”

“Normally, people aren’t so quick to entrust something so valuable to a total stranger.”

“But we’re not total strangers.”

“Perhaps ‘total’ was a bit of an overstatement. I could be a much wickeder person than those drunks in Yoyogi Park, for all you know. What if I were accepting the ring under false pretenses to defraud you? You would never see



your precious heirloom again.”

I didn’t mean to, but I nearly burst out laughing. Was that his problem? I remembered reading in a magazine ages ago that since gems held such value, trust was paramount in the industry. And Richard was an established member of that industry.

“You’re probably right, but I don’t think a bad guy would go out of his way to say something like that. Did you ever consider the reverse, though? What if I were a swindler who gave you a fake before demanding you give me the ‘real’ one back? Well, don’t worry. I took thorough photos of the ring and even made two sets of printouts. You should take one. What else should we do just to be safe? Add some kind of seal, maybe?”

Honestly, I didn’t really expect an *almost* total stranger to trust me, but I did really want to know more about the stone. Richard remained silent even after I made my case. I hoped he would believe me. After all, he did see all my personal information at the police box that night.

“So, I don’t have a lot of money, but could you give me an estimate?”

“Somewhere between three and five thousand yen on the high end if I use a domestic lab.”

“That’s so cheap! Oh, uh, sorry. Whenever I looked into it online, the quotes were always in the tens of thousands.”

“That sounds about right for a formal identification report from an American lab. If you don’t mind using a domestic one, it should be in the range I mentioned. Is that acceptable?”

“That’s fine by me. I just want some answers to set this to rest. How long will it take?”

“It could be as little as a week or closer to a month, depending.”

I asked him to go ahead, bowing my head, and he nodded in response. Glad we’d managed to work something out, I began to drink my coffee, but then Richard cut in with a question.

“Are you in college, Mr. Nakata?”

“Huh? Didn’t you call me Seigi before?”

“Is your name not Seigi Nakata?”

“It is, but you don’t have to be so formal. I’m younger than you, after all.”

“Perish the thought. You are my customer now.”

“...Are you sure you’re not Japanese?”

Richard forced an elegant smile and brought his glass of water to his lips. He showed no inclination to touch his baked goods. They were wrapped up, so maybe he planned to take them home with him. I guessed people who didn’t want to order any of the drinks at a coffee shop needed an excuse to be there. Or maybe he was just picky. He did go out of his way to buy a particular brand of bottled tea after we finished with the police.

I pretended not to notice and continued drinking my coffee. I hadn’t had a coffee that didn’t come out of a can in ages.

Richard pulled a folder of documents and a ballpoint pen out of his suitcase. There was a three-letter abbreviation on the document, which must’ve been the name of the company that would be producing the identification report. While I was signing and putting down my address in Takadanobaba, Richard proceeded to take several photographs of the ring with a digital camera. I reminded him that I’d brought photos and took them out of my backpack to hand to him, but he said he wanted to take his own shots, too, just to be safe. You can never be too careful, I guess.

“Is this a kind of tradition in the trade?”

“Precisely. The history of precious gems is one of theft and fraud. Since the olden days, the principle of prioritizing safety—for both the customer and the dealer—has remained paramount.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that.”

I gave him several days I’d be available to pick it up, but Richard just told me he’d call. Just as I rose from my seat to end our meeting, he stopped me to ask one last thing.

“You mentioned that your grandmother passed while you were in high school.

Is there a reason you never considered taking it to a local jeweler? Any shop should be able to send a piece out for an identification report.”

“I guess it just wasn’t meant to happen yet. I almost forgot about the ring, to be honest. But when I met you by complete accident, I thought it might be the universe trying to tell me something.”

Richard’s expression grew somber. This man in a suit, who could bewitch a passerby just with the gesture of casting his eyes down, took a sip of water and looked up at me.

“Thank you for your business, Mr. Nakata. I expect the results should be in at the beginning of next month, but I will call you when they arrive.”

“You really don’t have to be so overly polite with me, you know? Thank you, though, Mr. Richard.”

I lowered my head a bit, and the jeweler narrowed his eyes slightly. Why though? Did I say something funny?”

“I don’t believe I’ve ever met someone in this country who considered simply using someone’s family name as ‘overly polite.’”

“In this country? Right, I guess it’s normal in England to just call everyone by their first name. I guess I’m just not used to people calling me ‘Mr. Nakata.’ My first name’s pretty easy to remember, don’t you think?”

“I’m not terribly accustomed to being called ‘Mr. Richard’ myself.”

“Just ‘Richard’ then?”

“Perfect,” he replied with a broad grin. He looked like he was in his thirties when he had a neutral expression, but the smile made him look a bit younger. It made me wonder how old he actually was. I would have asked, but I missed my opportunity.

We shook hands and left the coffee shop. Richard headed toward Shimbashi Station. I found myself watching him walk off for some reason. It was probably a kind of longing. For the ring in his suitcase.

I gazed at the jeweler’s back, silently praying that he would get the job done.

My first two weeks as a second-year college student went by with terrifying speed. The cherry trees had bloomed and dropped their blossoms, and I'd swapped my light coat for a hoodie. Everyone in my prep course was already talking about the summer jobs they had lined up.

The Ginza coffee shop I was called to this time was behind the Wako clock tower. The walls were the color and texture of a chocolate bar, and the way the space was lit was very stylish. It was the middle of the day on a weekday, so there weren't very many customers.

Richard had arrived early. I apologized for making him wait and took a seat across from him. "So, what did the report come up with?"

"Some rather unusual findings." Richard started by returning the pink sapphire to me. His expression was serious. "I must ask, are you certain this ring came from your grandmother? You wouldn't happen to know anything unusual about its history, would you?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

Richard's expression didn't change as he continued, "Are you aware that this ring might be stolen?"

I looked up at the ceiling the moment I heard him say it. I sighed before looking back at Richard. He was beautiful as ever, even with a frown on his face. He looked like he wanted to call me baffling. I supposed my reaction was pretty unusual.

I couldn't stop smiling. I felt so happy. It was a huge weight off my shoulders.

"You're... You're amazing! You really are a jeweler! That's just incredible!"

"Keep your voice down."

He shot me an icy glare, and I shut my mouth. I'd let myself get a little too excited. Richard was silent as a forest as his marvelously colored eyes gazed at me. Beautiful things had a mysterious power, one strong enough to strike a person dumb and render them unable to transgress. It reminded me of how I used to feel compelled to put my hands together in prayer every time I walked past the temple near my house, despite not even knowing what denomination it belonged to. Richard had that quality, and so did the ring.

“Do you have an explanation for this?”

“I should apologize for lying to you. The part about my grandmother insisting it was a fake was something I made up to justify having you take a look at it. Everything else I told you was true. It *is* a piece that belonged to my grandmother, and it *is* stolen. It’s a long story, though. I don’t want to bore you.”

“Why do you think I’m here?”

I thanked him and bowed my head. This time Richard ordered mineral water, and I ordered a café au lait. I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to get through the whole story before we finished our drinks.

“Well, the story starts when my grandmother was living in Tokyo for some reason or other. To be clear, this would have been about fifty years ago.”

My grandmother’s name was Hatsu Kanou. She lived in Tokyo, and she worked as a pickpocket. She was born before the war and married a veteran after it ended. He’d barely escaped the South Pacific with his life, losing his home and family in the war. Everything he knew burned down in the air raids. It was an awful story, but probably a tragically common one back then. My grandmother was no different.

She and her husband thought they could support each other through their shared pain and move forward with their lives, but her husband suffered from what we’d now call PTSD, which drove him to drink and hit his wife. He kept finding work and getting fired, over and over, and they had no relatives to fall back on. His military pension was their only lifeline. Before she had my mother, she gave birth to two boys, but neither of them lived very long.

My grandmother put up with this for a long time, but when her daughter was born, she decided it was time to do something about it. I think she did it all for her. She washed her hands of the dead-end marriage and moved to Tokyo alone with her child. Unfortunately, she couldn’t find work she could do while raising a child. They continued to struggle for meals, and as they were just barely scraping by, my grandmother made another decision.



She decided to become a thief.

She might have always been good with her hands, but her pickpocketing abilities were sublime. She started out working on bus routes but graduated to working the Yamanote line. She'd even earned herself a nickname from the police: Slippery Hatsu, because she was so talented that she could slip your wallet out of your pocket without you even noticing. She only targeted affluent men, typically only took watches and cash, and wouldn't even empty wallets out, usually leaving about twenty percent of their contents behind.

My grandmother used that money to raise my mother. She was a generous person and would share her bounty with others in need. She didn't fear the yakuza, either. She had her principles. You might even call it an art.

This isn't a story from some far-off land. This was Tokyo in the 1960s. I'm sure when most people think of that time, they think of the 1964 Olympics and movies set in the "good old days." But those "good old days" came with a price, like the rampant industrial disasters of the era. Everyone was poor, and so everyone was scrambling to make it big. With the majority of people so focused on winning the race, they had no time left over to think about things in detail, leaving nothing but destruction and those who couldn't keep up in their wake.

My grandmother was one of the people left behind. One of the people crowded out of the post-war prosperity. Left to fend for herself on the outskirts of society.

One spring evening, while my grandmother was scouting out marks, she noticed a young woman waiting alone for a train. She was a well-dressed and probably well-off woman who had to be close to twenty. She seemed a little out of place somehow, and had a ring on the ring finger of her left hand. The brilliant pink stone glimmered when she brushed her hair out of her face. It was beautiful, almost like it was infused with the essence of the clouds in the twilight sky.

In that moment, that woman didn't seem like a creature who occupied the same plane of existence to my grandmother. She looked almost like an angel who had unsteadily descended the stairs from heaven out of curiosity about the mortal world.

My grandmother followed her onto the train. And before the Yamanote line made it to the next station, she had made the ring hers.

Normally, my grandmother wouldn't hold on to the items she stole but would turn them into cash immediately. But for that one night, she put that ring on her own finger and admired it. It was an age when only the rich could afford wedding rings. The barely seventy square foot apartment in the bad part of town that she lived in with her daughter had a single bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling, and it always flickered. She had been so far removed from the world of the fashionable for a long time.

The next morning, my grandmother still didn't sell the ring for cash. Instead, she hid it in her rice bin. That afternoon, a train suddenly stopped while my grandmother was working. There was a huge commotion. When she asked a savvy friend what was going on, they knew immediately. The answer took my grandmother's breath away.

A woman had thrown herself onto the tracks. A young woman from a good family.

She had lost her engagement ring and tried to atone for her carelessness with her own life. My grandmother's friend chuckled and quipped, "What era does she think she's living in?" But my grandmother didn't even smile.

The source of all the commotion was a relative of the girl, who'd rushed in and was currently down on their hands and knees. The girl had survived, just barely, but was seriously injured.

My grandmother ran home almost immediately, apparently thinking she ought to return the ring. But before she made it home, a police officer caught up to her and arrested her. She had no defense to speak of, since she still had her spoils for the day in her pocket.

Instead of a ring, my grandmother's hands were adorned with a pair of handcuffs. She was going to prison. Her sentence was five years, which was high for a pickpocket, but her "earnings" were far too high for her to get a pass for being a single mother. They probably wanted to make an example of her, too.

When she finally got out of the women's prison, my grandmother was in her forties. Her daughter, Hiromi, was in elementary school. The other children had

nicknamed her “outlaw” since everyone knew why her mother was absent and the people looking after her were her mother’s “colleagues.”

Hiromi hated her mother more than anything in the world.

My grandmother’s old colleagues had a present for her when she got home. When she unwrapped it, inside the paper she found a ring with a pink gem in the middle. It was the one thing the police never found. I had to wonder how she felt when she got that ring back.

As time went on, Hiromi graduated school and became a nurse. She got married and moved from Tokyo to Saitama, finally getting what she wanted—to be away from home and to have a new name. Maybe that was the only reason she wanted to get married in the first place. Unfortunately, her first husband, my father, turned out to be a wife-beater. She divorced him not long after giving birth to me.

But my mother was stubborn. She never went home, though she continued sending my grandmother money to live off of. When she was in her mid-forties, she married her second husband and my new father, Mr. Nakata. He spent the last decade developing oil fields in Indonesia with a drilling equipment company. Their house is in Machida now, on the border of Tokyo and Kanagawa.

Hiromi continued to live apart from her mother. Things only started to change when I was in eighth grade. My grandmother’s landlord had contacted my mother to let her know my grandmother had been acting odd lately. Thinking back, that was probably when her dementia started. Apparently, she was wandering around at night, cooking at all hours, and talking to herself in a loud voice, among other things.

Hiromi had been working at a general hospital in the city. She started researching nursing homes in Tokyo, but nothing ultimately came of it. That summer, she welcomed Grandma into our home, and the three of us started living together. It didn’t last very long, though. Maybe it was the sudden change of scenery, but that fall, her condition took a turn for the worse. Grandma wouldn’t stop crying and shouting and bashing her head into walls. Hiromi had her hospitalized at the facility where she worked so she could keep an eye on

her during her shift.

In the summer of my first year of high school, my grandmother passed away at the hospital. Her funeral was an understated ceremony with just the two of us and the people around the neighborhood who'd looked after her. Hiromi was resolutely against allowing her old colleagues from attending.

Three years later, Slippery Hatsu's grandson started college in Tokyo. I had a modest dream of becoming a civil servant to please my mother while working a part-time job at a TV station where, by a strange coincidence, I met a certain blue-eyed jeweler.

"I never took it to one of the bigger shops because I was scared they might contact my mother about it. A young man with a ring like that all by himself would probably be suspicious. And I'm sure I wouldn't look particularly trustworthy knowing all this, either."

"Your mother doesn't know about the ring?"

"If she'd known about it, she would probably have donated it to the Red Cross or UNICEF by now. My grandmother kept it hidden in the back of one of her drawers and only showed it to me in secret. I took it when I left home. I thought that was better than it getting thrown away."

Richard had been slowly sipping at his water, almost like it was hard liquor, while I had maybe an inch of café au lait left in my cup. This was the first time I'd ever told anyone the story.

"You heard this directly from your grandmother?"

"Yes."

I took karate classes from third grade until I had to quit to focus on high school entrance exams. Even though my instructor was strict, I enjoyed it, but my favorite thing by far was that Hiromi wouldn't get mad at me when I got home late on days when I had class. I'd take the train after karate to visit Grandma at her apartment.

I really loved her, though Hiromi hated having to visit her for Obon and New Year's. Even as a small child, it was clear that she was avoiding her mother, but Grandma was always kind to me. She was strong for her small frame and scary

when she was angry. She was nothing like the grandmas at my friends' homes, but she was overjoyed to see me every time I came to visit.

She would always tell me, "Don't do bad things. They'll always catch up to you."

Her eyes would look so lonely.

I'd heard that she was a pickpocket from one of her old colleagues. On my way home from her apartment, a strange old man suddenly approached me to tell me my grandma was an incredible woman. That was also when I learned a number of people had acted as foster parents to my mother and that they weren't in a particularly "respectable" line of work. I learned about her prison sentence, too.

"Little by little, she told me about her past. I was pretty persistent. She didn't get to the story about the ring until much later, but I think I might be the only one she told about that, too..."

It was like a dream come true when she moved in with us, since I had no idea about the dementia at the time. Grandma was my hero back then, while my mother was never home. And when she was, she was bossy and mean.

My mother laid into me when, in the fall of eighth grade, I told her I wanted to start working instead of going to high school. "I work my ass off to make sure you can go to college, and this nonsense is how you repay me?" That sort of thing. Furious, I snapped back at her that I didn't need her help because I was going to stand on my own two feet, just like Grandma. We both lost our tempers, and it almost came to blows, but my grandma intervened and Hiromi flew out of the house.

Grandma was bawling.

"I was angry. I was so angry. I can still vividly remember Grandma's face and voice. 'I'm a bad role model. You shouldn't try to be like me, Seigi.' That was the day she told me the story about the ring. She was crying the whole time. She was so frantic to get the whole thing out, almost like there was a spell on her compelling her to finish... It was terrifying."

*Don't do bad things.*

*They'll always catch up with you.*

Hiromi didn't come home that night and went straight to work in the morning. I didn't see her again until the evening of the following day. I apologized. She looked at me like she'd forgotten our whole fight and made me a heaping plate of curry. Ultimately, I stayed on track to go to college.

I remember being at Grandma's funeral, watching the smoke from the crematorium, and wondering why she never sold the ring. There was a hidden compartment in the back of one of her drawers. It housed not only the ring but also the tag from her prison uniform, with her name and prisoner number on it. I left that behind in the drawer.

If only punishment could truly free our souls of our wrongdoings...

"If you had enough information to know the ring might be stolen, there's probably a record of the original purchase, right? I tried looking through newspaper archives for failed suicide attempts by train but came up empty-handed. I never thought there was a chance I'd be able to find the owner."

"I do wish you wouldn't use a humble jeweler for such peculiar purposes. That said, you'll be happy to hear that even old records remain for a very long time."

"I'm so glad to hear that. Please, could you help me find the original owner of the ring? I desperately want to return it to her. I know you can't change the past, but still..."

I was sure that both my grandmother and the ring itself would want it to go back to its rightful owner.

Back in elementary school, I didn't like my name very much. When the kids at school saw me helping an old man cross the street, they mocked me. "Look at what a good boy Mr. Justice is!" I was so embarrassed I wanted to die. It wasn't like I was helping people *because* of my name.

That incident happened on a day I had karate class, so I confided in my grandmother about it. I asked her why people laughed at me for helping people. Why they mocked me. Grandma looked at me with fire in her eyes. I tensed up, thinking she was angry, but she just smiled sweetly and stroked my head.

“I’m proud of you, Seigi,” she said.

Those words were my salvation. Wanting to help people wasn’t a bad thing. But looking back now, it made me think of something else—my grandmother’s regret. Her pain. The past she could never escape.

“Please. I just want some closure.”

Richard set down his water glass. He closed his eyes very deliberately, and his expression grew serious.

“Going forward, I will no longer be treating you as a customer but as an acquaintance. Is this acceptable to you?”

“Go ahead.”

“Very well, Seigi.”

His blue eyes were looking straight at me. They were so piercing they made me sit up straight.

“Um, so what’s the deal?”

“I have someone I’d like you to meet. In Kobe.”

“Kobe... You mean *Kobe* Kobe?”

“The Kobe in Hyogo Prefecture, yes.”

That was sudden. My knowledge of Kobe began and ended at Kobe beef. I didn’t know anyone there, either. My junior high and high school trips were limited to Kyoto and Nara.

Richard stared at me intently.

I think it was already too late.

“...Does that mean you know? About the ring’s history? And about its rightful owner?”

“Please contact me when you know what your schedule looks like. Preferably sooner rather than later. I’ll respond promptly. I don’t mind if you bring your mother along, either.”

I gazed at Richard’s blue eyes, comparing them to the pink sapphire.

It felt like time, which had frozen in Tokyo fifty years ago, had begun to tick forward again.

I finally got through after hitting her voicemail three times.

*"What's wrong now? Did you catch a cold? Or is this one of those phone scams?"*

"It's really me, and I'm fine. I hope you're well, too, Hiromi."

*"Well, good."*

I'd gotten over my rebellious phase. After spending high school running what felt like a three-legged race on uneven ground with her, Hiromi and I felt more like comrades in arms. I probably talked to my mother and went home more often than most college students did, but it wasn't like either of us was sticking our nose in the other's business. As long as we were both happy and healthy, that was all that mattered. Part of the reason I visited so often was that I felt having a young man frequently around would deter criminals, since she was a woman who lived alone and wasn't home very often. Not that there was much of interest to a thief there. Even when things were tight, Hiromi always made monthly donations to the red cross and UNICEF. We were a frugal family.

"Anyway, I know I was supposed to come home tomorrow."

*"Oh, that reminds me, I'm covering for a coworker tomorrow. I don't mind if you come over, but I won't be home."*

"....."

Richard had asked me to contact him as soon as I could. I was at a loss for how to broach the subject to her. The subject of Grandma's past was a land mine for Hiromi. She might even stop talking to me. But I knew that if I missed this opportunity, I'd never get another one.

"Um, so... I wanted to talk about Grandma."

*"Why would you want to talk about that?"*

"Look, just..."



Talking about Grandma. Talking about Grandma's *past*. Those were two things Hiromi absolutely hated. We had a small altar and a place for offerings but no photo of Grandma.

"How did you feel about Grandma?"

*"What kind of question is that? She was my mother."*

"Obviously."

*"Why is it any of your business anyway? Out with it already. I'm exhausted."*

None of my business... I started to feel sick to my stomach.

That was the thing, though. In this world, there were some—no, many—who believed people could be beyond redemption. Hiromi was definitely one such person, and as far as she was concerned, her own mother was one of those people who could never be redeemed. She'd eat with her if she had to. She'd take care of her if she had to. She'd even talk to her if she had to...if she had the time.

I'd learned from watching her that living together and being a family weren't the same thing. But to me, Grandma was my only blood relative other than Hiromi. I'd spent far more time with her than with my father. She was my real grandmother.

But I guess it's none of my business.

"I don't think I'll be coming home tomorrow."

*"Got it. That it? If you don't need anything else, I'd like to get to bed."*

"Yeah, that's it. Night."

Hiromi hung up first.

I texted Richard next. I told him that my shifts hadn't been set for the next month yet, so I could take off whenever, but my earliest day off was tomorrow. Perhaps that last comment was a little too much, though?

I got a response just as I was thinking about having some tea. It was surprisingly fast.

*"Tomorrow, 10 a.m. Meet me at the Yaesu Gate at Tokyo Station. Be sure to*

*bring the ring with you.”*

He signed it “Richard,” but that was really the wrong thing to be distracted by. *Tomorrow? Seriously? Can you just do that?* And where in Kobe were we going anyway? He did say he wasn’t going to consider me a customer anymore, so I guessed he planned to treat me more casually from here on.

I boiled some water and made myself tea for the first time in ages. I set the box with the ring in it on the table, opened it, set my cup in front of it like an offering and put my hands together. Then, I replied “got it,” to the text and drank my tea.

Richard was waiting at the Yaesu gate. I was three minutes late, and he scolded me for it with an indifferent tone. He was wearing a grey three-piece suit and had a leather bag with him instead of the suitcase. Having shown up in a collared shirt and jeans, I felt underdressed, and therefore flustered, but he didn’t even seem to notice. He handed me a light blue ticket, proving he’d gotten us reserved seats. We were headed to Hakata.

I ate a bento of marinated beef and scrambled egg. Every last grain of rice was delicious. I was left utterly dumbfounded, however, as the jeweler—who’d taken the window seat next to me and hung his suit jacket up on the hook—stuffed his face with an unusually delicious looking fruit sandwich full of strawberries, melons, and peaches, and then almost immediately fell asleep.

I don’t know how many times I heard a high-pitched voice say, “Oh my God, you’re so hot!” and turned around, only to be met with a strained smile and a “Sorry, I didn’t mean you.” I was so irritated I considered waking Richard up and claiming it was an accident but decided that was extremely childish and thought better of it. He’d probably been preparing for the trip late into the night, after all.

It was 1 p.m. when we arrived at the Shinkansen platform at Shin-Kobe Station. Richard looked refreshed when he woke up. He called a taxi as if it was the obvious thing to do and handed the driver the address.

“We’ll be there in about twenty minutes.”

“So, uh, I know this is probably a little late to be asking, but who are we going to see?”

“You’ll find out when we get there.”

Maybe I should have woken him up.

The taxi pulled out of the station. After we’d been driving for about ten minutes, we came to a strange part of town. The street was lined with nothing but homes with massive yards, all in what looked like antique western architecture. It must’ve been a wealthy neighborhood or a foreign enclave or something.

The taxi came to a stop in front of a garden absolutely bursting with flowers in bloom. I kept mumbling over and over, “Are you sure? Are you sure this is the right place?” while Richard paid the driver, got out of the vehicle, and rang the intercom at the gate. The surveillance camera over our heads made a noise, and the gate automatically opened. I braced myself when Richard looked back at me. I just had to follow his lead, that’s all.

A fresh green scent filled this watercolor painting of a garden. There were pots of pansies, an arch of pale pink climbing roses, and a cherry tree that looked older than the house. There were also some blue flowers whose name I didn’t know, red flowers with round petals, and some sort of white double flowers. A stone path meandered through the vegetation, leading to a two-story house built in pseudo-western style. When we reached the entrance, the door opened abruptly.

“Coming! Oh?”

The elegant forty-something woman smiled. “Oh, it’s you, Richard,” They seemed to know each other. She had long hair and wore a straw hat and a yellow apron, probably because she’d been planning to work in the garden. “You’re back in Japan, I see. Here to see my husband?”

“I must apologize for being remiss in keeping contact. We’re here to see the lady of the house.”

“My mother-in-law? Interesting. Who’s he?”

“A guest of hers.”

“Oh, that’s right... Yeah, she did say she was expecting guests today. Guess she meant you. I was sure it was her tea tutor or something... Goodness. Goodness gracious.”

I bowed my head, and she introduced herself as Kimiko Miyashita.

“Relax. Come on in. I’ll have someone bring you some tea.”

On the other side of the door was a massive space that perfectly matched the impression you got from the garden. There were oil paintings on the walls and porcelain vases full of flowers I’d never seen before. I’d bet you could find maids somewhere, if you looked.

“Right this way. Is something the matter?”

I’d been entranced by the imposing mansion when the man addressed me. I followed his suggestion and left the massive dining room, heading deeper into the house, and found Richard standing in front of a mirror, straightening out his suit. He glanced over at me as if to suggest I do the same. I hurriedly brushed my hands over my hair, trying to neaten it up, and Richard proceeded to knock on the heavy door. A young woman, who looked like some kind of servant, announced that guests had arrived, and bowed.

I followed Richard into the room.

A pure white room.

With lace curtains and a round, long-pile rug. Sofas of various sizes with white covers. Small trinkets set by the windows. The faint, sweet smell of flowers.

And in the midst of it all was a woman in a wheelchair.

“Welcome. I’m Tae Miyashita. I apologize for not getting up to greet you properly.”

The beautiful older woman sitting in the wheelchair wore a white blouse with a green cardigan over it. Most of her white hair was put up in a tortoiseshell comb, and a lace lap blanket covered her legs. She must have been about seventy. She was tiny.

Richard took a knee and bowed his head, almost like a knight who had been granted an audience with a queen.

“I can’t express how pleased I am to see you again. I brought the item I promised. Seigi, here.”

“...Nice to meet you, I’m Seigi Nakata.”

Ms. Miyashita smiled as I bowed my head, completely flustered.

“Richard spoke to me about the situation on the phone. I see you know all about me already.”

She—

She was the young woman who’d thrown herself onto the train tracks as penance to her family because Grandma stole that ring from her. Or, more precisely, she was that young woman fifty years later.

“Seigi, tell Madam Miyashita the story about your grandmother. Just try to keep it a bit shorter than the version you told me in the coffee shop.”

“Oh, I don’t mind taking our time. Seigi, dear, please take a seat wherever you like. Richard, if you’re not otherwise occupied, I’d recommend taking a look at the garden. The roses are almost done blooming, but they’re still quite beautiful right now.”

“If it isn’t too much trouble, I would prefer to stay.”

Ms. Miyashita smiled. I looked at Richard, desperate for some kind of reassurance. He gave me a look as if to say, “a little late to be worrying about that now,” followed by a slight nod.

I sat down on one of the cloth-covered sofas, and Ms. Miyashita slid her wheelchair over next to me. A gentle smile graced her almost translucent white skin.

I began to tell the tale of my grandmother’s past one more time.

I told her why she became a pickpocket, what kind of person she was, how much she suffered, how kind she was to me. I wanted her to understand just how regretful Grandma had been and how badly she wanted to make it right, but I had to take extra care to make sure it didn’t sound like I was making excuses for her.

I had no confidence I did a good job, but Ms. Miyashita quietly listened to me

speaking. Her frail hand gripped mine the whole time as she nodded and wiped away tears every so often. Just as I got to the part of the story where I met Richard by coincidence and entrusted the ring to him, the house's cuckoo clock chimed softly. That was the second time I'd heard it. I guess it sounded every thirty minutes, which meant a whole hour had gone by.

I glanced over at Richard and saw him standing with the woman from earlier in the entrance to the room, silently watching us. The servant brought over coffee on a tray. Ms. Miyashita caught her attention with her eyes.

"Ms. Katakura, could you bring me some water? I've lost quite a bit, it seems."

"Seigi, I thought I asked you to keep it short. Madam, please don't overtax yourself on our account."

"It's quite all right, Richard. Perhaps I've lived as long as I have just for this very moment."

While Ms. Miyashita rehydrated herself with her flower-patterned teacup, I got up, retrieved my coffee, and quenched my thirst. It had gotten cold. I'd done a lifetime of speaking in these two days. And to top it off, I was telling people—someone I'd only just met, no less, a literal total stranger—things I thought I'd take to my grave. Though I guessed, in a sense, I'd known her for a long time.

I set the cup back down and just stood there, spacing out a bit when Richard poked my shoulder. Right. The ring.

I took the jewelry box out of my bag and showed the pink sapphire ring to Ms. Miyashita. She smiled gently and held out her right hand. I set the ring in her palm. She picked it up with her other hand and held it up to the lily-shaped chandelier. The beautifully cut stone glimmered in its rightful owner's hands.

Ms. Miyashita smiled contentedly before returning the ring to me.

"I think you should hold onto this."

My eyes went wide. She encouraged me to take a seat.

This time, she told her story.

The tale took place in Tokyo during the post-war economic boom. It was a chilly April. Ms. Miyashita may have been turning sixty this year, but she'd been twenty back then. And her surname was Uemura, not Miyashita, though that was set to change in three months' time. After the war, her family had established a food import business. Things went very well when the business started, but the allure of more riches was too much to resist, and some ill-conceived investments put the family deep in debt. They were in such dire straits that family suicide or disappearing into the night to start over somewhere new were quickly becoming their only options. Just like today, where one person succeeds, another fails.

Her father had come up with a desperate, last-ditch plan to escape their plight: selling to a competitor. He was, however, stubbornly committed to retaining his seat on the board, and as part of his maneuvering to make that happen, he ordered her to marry the president of the purchasing company, a man more than thirty years her senior, who already had a number of mistresses.

She said it had felt like her life was about to end before it had even begun. The pink sapphire engagement ring was apparently a rare specimen from abroad—it must be worth the value of a woman's life, she thought.

She began vacantly wandering around Ginza, gazing at the women working at the department stores. Eventually, she made her way to Shimbashi and got on the Yamanote line—in the opposite direction from her home. She waited for several stops to pass before picking a random one to get off at.

That was when she noticed that the ring had vanished from her left hand.

"I still remember that moment like it was yesterday. I didn't feel even the slightest bit of sadness. The ring hadn't done anything wrong, but as far as I was concerned, it might as well have been a collar with a chain attached." She chuckled. "It was like someone had opened the door to my cage."

Unfortunately, this wasn't just a funny story. There was a huge uproar when her family found out. Her father even hit her. But when she still didn't feel sad, even after all that, it just made her feel like she was horribly selfish and ungrateful. She couldn't bring herself to suffer a little unhappiness to spare the

rest of her family.

“I didn’t see a way out. I was useless to my family at that point. It felt like there was no reason to keep living anymore, so I figured I’d go back to the same station the next day and die. I jumped and everything, but I only lost a leg, not my life. The people who saved me said it was a miracle, but that day just made me a bigger burden on my family. The engagement was off, and I couldn’t use my right leg anymore. I hoped they’d let me live out the rest of my life locked up in a tiny hospital room...but a doctor with a cute southern accent happened to take a shine to me.”

“Life can take some unexpected turns, huh?” she said with a smile. She looked truly happy. She had a son, and he and his wife were living with her now. Her grandchild was in elementary school.

That was a face...

A face I never once saw my grandmother make.

Ms. Miyashita seemed to notice my surprise and tilted her head as if to ask if something was wrong. I bowed my head and apologized. My thoughts were in complete disarray. The pink sapphire in my hand sparkled.

“I...I think my grandmother held onto this ring her whole life because she thought she’d done something irredeemable. But I...I loved my grandmother. That’s why I want to bring some closure to this whole thing. Please, take it back.”

I couldn’t say another word after that. Ms. Miyashita said my name. The servant tried to interrupt several times, but Ms. Miyashita paid her no mind and continued.

“Seigi, do you like gemstones? Are you knowledgeable about them, like Richard is?”

“No, I don’t know anything about them... The only piece of jewelry I know at all is this ring.”

She smiled softly.

“Apparently, gemstones all have a particular meaning. Like how diamonds are



supposed to represent eternity, emeralds clarity and joy, and so on. Of course, the very same stone could have drastically different meanings depending on the country or era, too. Remind me,” she said to Richard, “what was my favorite pink sapphire supposed to symbolize again?”

The jeweler replied like a well-trained butler, “Justice for the weak, I believe it was.”

Justice.

I was completely awestruck. Ms. Miyashita reached out and gently stroked my cheek.

“Back then, your grandmother, my family, your mother, and I were all ‘weak.’ But no one was there to help us. All we could do was grit our teeth and bear it. I’m sure the same is true for people suffering now.”

“But because of what Grandma did, you—”

“It was simply fate. I bear her no grudge. Seigi, all I want is for you to help those in need, just like you helped Richard. It’s just the right thing to do. And from now on, whenever you look at that stone, I want you to remember my request. And I’d like you to pass her a message at your family altar. Tell her I said thank you for lifting that burden from my shoulders and that I hope she rests peacefully. Promise me you will.”

“I’m counting on you,” she added with a smile before throwing a, “*Now we’re finished,*” at the impatient servant.

I was so embarrassed the whole time I was in the mansion, but I got through it. It took a lot out of me. Though, admittedly, I was bawling like a baby when we actually left.

“Good lord, pull yourself together.” Richard sounded exasperated as he passed me an expensive-looking handkerchief. The taxi driver seemed unsettled by the whole thing but couldn’t muster the courage to ask what had happened of a crying man and a foreigner who looked like a model. I felt so ashamed of myself.

I didn’t recognize the scenery at all until we arrived at Shin-Kobe Station.

“Would you like one?” Richard asked, offering me a Chinese bun. Individually packaged items of Chinese food were packed into a bag with the logo of a chain from the Kansai region. Half of them were frozen. “Apparently, these pork buns are their most popular item. People can’t get enough of them, they claim.”

“...Is there anything you don’t know?”

I tried bringing up the topic of the ring, but Richard just casually stuffed his face with a bun. Whoa, handsome men in suits walk around in public with food in their mouths? The sheer baseness of the thought brought a tear to my eye.

When he finished eating, Richard began to speak:

“I’ve been acquainted with Ms. Miyashita’s family for a very long time. I’d even already heard the story of the gemstone deeply entwined with the grave misfortunes of her life. The moment I saw that ring of yours, I thought it had to be impossible...but when I got the identification report back, it all matched. The cut of the stone and the age of the setting were a perfect match for her story. The moment I knew there was a padparadscha from that period in Japan, I was certain. I sent a photo of it to Ms. Miyashita, and she immediately asked to meet you.”

“Papa—what?”

“Padparadscha. That’s what we call sapphires of that uniquely orange-pink hue.”

“Papapa... Paparazzi...?”

“Padparadscha. It’s Sinhalese—the language of Sri Lanka—for the lotus flower.”

Sri Lanka. I felt like I’d at least heard that name in my high school geography class.

Richard could tell I wasn’t really following. “It’s an island nation on the eastern side of the Indian Ocean. Its capital is rather famous for its long name.”

As I finished my bun, Richard continued on his tangent.

“...This is more of a personal piece of trivia, but my grandmother was born in the city of Ratnapura. Ever since production began in the 1950s, padparadscha

sapphires come almost exclusively from the city's mines."

Which would mean the stone in the ring came from there, too. I glanced at him, seeking confirmation, and he gave a silent nod. My grandmother's ring had a stone in it from the city Richard's grandmother was from.

"It's honestly fascinating—a stone mined in Sri Lanka and cut in Europe ultimately lands in faraway Japan. To borrow a turn of phrase from you, perhaps the universe is trying to tell us something."

Once our train home was on its way, Richard looked at me suspiciously as I opened my wallet, pulled out cash in the sum of the price printed on my ticket and handed it to him.

"For the ticket. I'm sure you paid with your credit card, though."

"It was a favor for Ms. Miyashita, a valuable client of mine. Not charity."

"I don't care. This is why I work a part-time job."

"I think I'd use the word stubborn to describe you, not virtuous."

"It's just how I am. You know we have this thing about 'honor' here in Japan."

"Well, as I'm sure you can see, I am not, in fact, Japanese, so I know little of your ways."

"Good one," I chuckled, and Richard looked entirely unbothered. We agreed to disagree on that topic, so I asked him about one thing I couldn't get out of my mind.

"The second time we met at the coffee shop, you said that the ring *might* be stolen. Why did you take such a roundabout approach? It seems like a waste of time if you already knew everything."

"At the time, I didn't know your true intentions behind having the stone appraised."

"Intentions?"

Richard took a sip of the bottle of water he'd bought and explained, matter-of-factly, "Lately, it's become popular to resell Japanese jewelry in places like India and China, but those buyers won't offer large sums for stones without a

formal identification report. Not all that glimmers is gold, after all.”

“I did tell you that it was a keepsake from my grandmother.”

“Con men typically say the items they’re peddling are keepsakes or family heirlooms. Not to put too fine a point on it, but that ring *was* actually stolen. If you think about it logically, it makes perfect sense to assume the item had ended up in the hands of an unrelated party. In the vast majority of cases like these, you wouldn’t have had anything to do with Ms. Miyashita. You’d just be a random stranger trying to figure out how to pawn off a ring you didn’t know anything about. Leaving an opening in my questioning created an opportunity to learn the other party’s intent: A bad actor would try to make excuses, while an ignorant patsy would panic and simply deny the possibility. Of course, it isn’t the most useful technique when it comes to people who are earnest to the point of foolishness.”

“.....”

“Perhaps you could say it’s a tool not unlike a touchstone but for assaying hearts rather than metals.”

“...All right, you win. Thank you for the train fare.”

Richard flashed me a knowing smile. In the same moment, I noticed the chatter of the saleswomen on board get noticeably higher in pitch. It couldn’t have been a coincidence. The fiercely handsome man with the classical features put his arm on the back of his seat, as if he were about to roll over to go to sleep. But instead, he turned to look at me in the aisle seat next to him.

“I do think your innocent charm will make your life more interesting, my *knight in shining armor*,” Richard said with a smile, emphasizing every syllable of that last phrase. He looked almost proud.

Before I could reply, Richard announced that he was going to sleep and rolled over. He *did* actually fall asleep almost immediately and didn’t wake up until we arrived in Tokyo Station. I was extremely tempted to slip the money for the train fare into his jacket pocket but didn’t want to risk looking suspicious, so I opted not to.

When we were about to part on the platform, Richard shoved the bag of

Chinese food into my hands. I told him I couldn't possibly take it, and the jeweler said one more mysterious thing:

"I'm not suggesting you eat it alone."

"...Uh, you mean you want to eat it with me?"

"No. I think you should consider visiting your mother," Richard suggested. Specifically, he probably meant I should tell her what happened today. "I'm sure you have much you need to say to her. Probably much more than you realize."

And with that, the besuited jeweler bid me farewell and disappeared into the crowd.

I felt almost like a magic spell had been cast on me as I took the Chuo Line to Shinjuku Station and headed to the Odakyu platform. It was at most a forty-minute ride to the town on the border of Tokyo and Shinagawa.

"Wow!" Hiromi shouted when she saw all the Chinese food laid out on the table. Her reactions to things like this were a little more childish than mine. "Wow, Seigi, I can't believe you bought all this. Are you sure you can afford it?"

"I can afford it just fine. I have a part-time job, remember?"

"You're not going to college for a part-time job. Make sure you study."

Around the time Hiromi's shift was ending, I'd heated up a bunch of food Richard had given me—stuffed rice cakes, steamed dumplings, soup dumplings, pepper steak, and steamed buns. It was a little short on vegetables, so I took a trip to the local supermarket for the first time in ages and bought some spinach, which I stir-fried with a little oyster sauce. It was a recipe I'd learned in my first year of high school.

"Um, so, Hiromi..."

"I wish you wouldn't call me that. What?"

"Did you know about this?"

I took the jewelry box out of my bag, set it on the table, and opened it. Hiromi's expression abruptly shifted from excitement over the Chinese food to icy coldness. I'd always believed she didn't know anything about the ring, but maybe that was just because she'd been hiding it for the past forty years.

Today, for the first time since I moved out, I opened that drawer again. Grandma's prisoner tag was missing.

I didn't say a word. Hiromi began to mutter:

"I knew. I knew you took it when you left. You should just keep it. I don't have any attachment to it."

"...Does that mean you know about the woman it belonged to, as well?"

"Somewhat. Your stepfather doesn't, though."

"You knew but you never got rid of it?"

"There are some things you don't just throw away."

Hiromi piled the rest of the pepper steak onto her rice and shoveled it into her mouth. Grandma, Hiromi, and I had gone out to eat together before, but only once. It had been in the winter of ninth grade, to celebrate my getting into high school.

"...Was Grandma the one who named me?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Just curious."

My name, Seigi—"justice." Ever since I was pretty young, I'd always assumed my mother named me that to spite her mother, a criminal.

"It wasn't just her idea. I thought it was a good name, too."

I knew it.

I let out a deep, profound sigh in my mind.

Hiromi played innocent. Just like she did the day after our big fight, when she made me curry. She let Grandma decide my name? Really? But why?

"Why did you never forgive her?"

Hiromi set down her chopsticks and bowl and gulped down her tea.

"...It's not really a question of 'forgiveness' when it comes to family, because we're bound by blood whether we like it or not. She could have had a comfortable life as a single woman."

“But she wasn’t. She had a family.”

“I know that.”

*You know that? What do you know?*

Grandma took all those risks *because* she had a family—because she had a daughter. She had to work for a long time just to earn enough for the two of them to eat. And she went to prison. Society had already decided she was irredeemable. But—and this was just how I saw it—I didn’t think she regretted her choices or would have done anything differently if she had the chance.

I mean, if she hadn’t done that, my mother wouldn’t be here right now. And no one should know that better than Hiromi herself.

Grandma was hospitalized in the winter and died the following summer. For those six months, Hiromi practically lived in the hospital, making sure Grandma wouldn’t die alone. I used to wonder why she was doing all that after treating her so coldly for so long, but I think Hiromi’s grim face back then wasn’t from anxiety or regret.

She was being driven by duty. Hers had been the face of a monk trying to honor an extremely strict training routine.

Hiromi’s eyelid twitched as she struggled to maintain her composure, looking down at the table of food. She let out a little sigh, and I worked up the courage to ask, “Hiromi... Mom, did you really hate Grandma?”

“There’s such a thing as a lost cause.”

“I guess all criminals are just lost causes to you?”

“More or less. This has been bothering you for a long time, too, hasn’t it?”

“More or less? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“And that’s why...that’s why I can never forgive her for what she did. Never.”

I looked up and saw Hiromi pursing her lips, trying not to cry.

“You know, everyone in this world goes through hardship—everyone. It doesn’t matter why you did it. If you steal, you’re a criminal.”

“Well, yeah, but if you really needed something, you’d do it, wouldn’t you?! If

you had no other options.”

“So you’re saying it’s okay to hurt someone else just because you were out of options? Are you saying the people whose wallets were pilfered on the train should have let her off just because she was the single mother of a little girl? A repeat offender with a bad attitude? Even though the young hooligans she taught the tricks of the trade would tell her daughter, ‘Your mom’s a real hero’?”

Hiromi was practically shouting, tears streaming down her face. I’d never seen her like this before, and I couldn’t believe my eyes. Hiromi was crying. Her, of all people.

This was the same house and the same spot where Grandma had cried, too.

And my mother was making the exact same face that she did.

Grandma may not have been a “good role model,” but she lived her life trying to make sure the people she loved were safe and happy. They might have died if she hadn’t done what she did. No one would unilaterally condemn her actions. No one except Grandma herself...and her dear daughter.

“If by some snowball’s chance in hell, I, the person who ate up all her money, were to simply smile and say ‘thank you’ for what she did...she’d be rolling in her grave.”

“.....”

“Seigi, hand me the tissues.”

I handed her the box of tissues from on top of the TV. Hiromi blew her nose and crudely wiped her eyes. She balled up the tissue and tossed it into the trash, then casually ate a dumpling, forcing an “oooh, delicious.”

She was thirty-five when she had me. She probably thought she couldn’t get pregnant anymore, but she still had me and raised me. She had always been like this, as long as I could remember. Always strong, stubborn, and tenacious, no matter the circumstances.

She always seemed to be fighting something.

“So, uh...how’s the food?”



“Mmm, delicious. Where’d you get it?”

“Shin-Kobe.”

“Oh, I didn’t know they had a shop there. But I know this stir-fry is yours. That’s oyster sauce, I’m sure. Delicious food really makes you forget how exhausted you are.”

“...Let’s talk more next time I visit.”

“If you’re not in a rush, I’d prefer it. I’m beat today.”

“Sure.”

It’s not like you had to put everything out on the table at once. To me, family meant holding each other close, even through awkward situations like these, when nothing seemed to make sense. I felt the same way when Grandma was still here.

Before we split the offering on the altar between the two of us, I rang the bell and brought my hands together, praying to the person who’d taught me that when you bring your hands together in prayer, you should relax them a bit, so they form what looks like a lotus bud.

I remembered the long message I was meant to relay. When I opened my eyes, my mother was next to me, her hands together, too.

It was the end of April, and I was walking around near Nanachome in Ginza. I went past Chuo-doori and came out next to an old bathhouse as I made my way to a part of the city with retro-looking buildings. I felt more at home in that area.

I kept walking, looking at the map I’d been sent on my phone, and finally arrived at a seven-story mixed-use building. I was headed for the second floor. I walked up the stairs and pushed the button on the intercom. The door opened with a clink. I guess it was an electronic lock?

I heard someone tell me to come in.

“I hope you didn’t have any trouble finding your way here.”

“Oh, no, your directions were easy to follow.”

A blond-haired, blue-eyed man in a suit stood in the middle of the room. That one room alone had to be almost two hundred square feet. There was a door in the back with a sturdy-looking knob, and to the right was a corridor that must’ve led to a bathroom or something like that. Near the windows on the left side of the room were four plush red chairs surrounding a glass coffee table with an attaché case on top of it. There were bookshelves on the walls full of books in western languages. The fluorescent lighting made the space as bright as an office, but for some reason, the place had the mood of a coffee shop with only one table in it.

I held up the gift I’d brought.

“The cake shop near my college is kinda famous. Their stuff’s pretty tasty. It’s best fresh out of the oven, admittedly, but if you’re interested...”

“I’m grateful for your consideration. So, shall we conclude our business?”

Two days after our adventure to Kobe, Richard sent me two texts. First, that the identification report was in and he needed to give me the original, and second, that it was an exceedingly high-quality specimen and he’d like to purchase it if I was amenable. It sounded like he’d offer a good price, too.

“...I think I understand your offer, but I just came here to pay you and say thank you for the help. I have no intention of parting with the ring.”

“Indeed, just as I predicted.”

*Just as you predicted?*

Richard looked around the room before looking me straight in the eye.

“I have a different proposal for you. For a while now, I’ve been wanting to set up shop in Japan. I want to create a space that isn’t a showroom for gemstones but a place where I can talk to clients. At present, I plan to utilize the space on weekends.”

“You’re setting up shop here?”

“Precisely. And I’m hoping to hire some part-time help. Specifically for one position. The job would primarily be simple chores, like cleaning the shop, and

would require at most ten days a month. In terms of dress code, anything is appropriate as long as it's not too worn-out."

A part-time job at a jewelry shop. I didn't hesitate to ask what the pay would be like, and Richard gave me a number that blew my salary on the night shift at the TV station out of the water.

"What do you say?"

Richard pressed me for an answer with his eyes. It seemed like he wanted one right that second. But he *was* making a very compelling offer. To me, at least.

"Are you sure you want me?"

"Have you never cleaned a room before?"

"No, I mean, I have, but...I mean this is a jewelry shop, right? I don't know anything about jewelry."

"I'll be doing the selling and talking to clients. I may have you run some errands to buy stationary or mail things at the post office for me, but that will be roughly the extent of your responsibilities. If you were hoping for something more fulfilling, this might not be the right position for you."

"I think most shops in Japan hire women, though."

"I'm well aware, but for personal reasons, I would prefer not to be alone with members of the opposite sex."

*Oh, so something must have happened.* I nodded at my own thought, and apparently I had a weird look on my face, because Richard frowned a bit.

"What?"

"I guess I was just thinking you must have problems I can't even begin to understand... I'm sure I was making a ridiculous face. I mean, there are all sorts of words like 'handsome,' or 'hot,' 'beautiful,' and 'attractive,' but none of them are quite right. What word would you even use? There's gotta be something that's just right... Ugh..."

It was on the tip of my tongue. I knew what I was trying to describe, but what was the word? What was it that Richard reminded me of? It wasn't someone else's name. It was the way he looked perfect from every angle. It was

something else entirely.

*I know.*

“A gem! You’re a living gemstone!”

It was perfect. I pointed at him, feeling very pleased with myself for figuring it out—for about two or three seconds, before I realized what an insane thing I’d just said out loud and hurriedly put my hand down.

I bowed my head and apologized, but Richard just said not to worry about it.

“Um... Anyway, I don’t really have any skills to speak of, and you really don’t need someone with such an overactive imagination. I’m sure there’s someone better suited to the job.”

“I disagree.”

His reply came immediately. My eyes went wide, and Richard smiled sweetly. His smile shone like a gemstone when held up to the light.

“To be perfectly honest, anyone could do the job I’m asking you to do, but I wouldn’t ask just anyone to do it. If I wanted an expert in gemstones, I wouldn’t be looking for a part-timer. Gemstones may be objects that people treat with love and care, but the concept of beauty doesn’t fit into some neatly defined box. Beauty comes in myriad forms. It is a concept as rich as it is broad, and being able to recognize and appreciate that is a talent. A talent that I believe you already possess. And I can personally vouch for your honesty. Going out of my way to find another candidate when I have someone who’s both available and qualified right here would be foolish.”

“Huh? Uh, hold on, is this because I—”

Did he decide to hire me because I said I thought he was beautiful?

Richard looked a bit taken aback but didn’t say a word. Oh, right. He must have meant the way I cared for Grandma’s ring won him over. *Well, that’s embarrassing.* The jeweler raised an eyebrow,

“So, what do you say? Is that a yes?”

“Yes. I couldn’t ask for a better job. Though, you know, it probably would be better if I referred to you a bit more formally.”

“And why is that?”

“It’s pretty unusual for an employee to be on a first-name basis with his boss.”

“Well, if you want to make a numbers argument, I think there are fewer workplaces where coworkers *aren’t* on a first-name basis.”

“Oh, you mean in the whole world?”

“Indeed. And this very room just so happens to be part of that great wide world. I’m happy to have you on board,” Richard said, offering a hand.

We shook, and then he pulled a set of folders out of the attaché case.

The first was the identification report for Grandma’s ring. 0.382 ct. Pinkish-orange. Certified authentic. The second folder had the contract for the part-time job.

“Please read the agreement thoroughly. You’ll be required to take out some insurance. You don’t need to sign it today—either a seal or signature is fine. On another note, do you have some free time today? I would like to give you some basic training.”

I nodded, and Richard took off his jacket and stood up. Training, huh? I suddenly started to get nervous as he rifled around in the attaché case.

He then took an orange box out of the case. It probably had a bunch of gemstones inside. Richard took me down the corridor, where I was surprised to find a small kitchen with a big sink and a gas stove. Red pots hung from the ceiling, and there was a large refrigerator, too. It seemed like enough to run a small restaurant with.

Richard grabbed a pot and took some milk out of the fridge—500 mls, not homogenized, with a picture of happy cows on the front.

“I’ll teach you how to make royal milk tea. It’s quite simple.”

The orange box wasn’t full of gems but tea leaves. Was that really something he needed to carry around with him all the time?

He plunged a large plastic spoon with a heaping scoop of tea leaves into the boiling water and simmered it over high heat. Once the water began to take on

the color of tea, he added the milk and then cut the heat once the froth began to reach the rim of the pot. Watching him flick the stove knob off was the first time I felt like this living gemstone was truly human.

There was a round plastic tray and a set of unadorned white teacups with matching saucers in the cupboard next to the stove. Behind them, I saw several faceted, stemless glasses.

Richard set two cups on the tray and held the tea strainer over each in turn as he poured the milk tea through it. He took one spoonful of granulated sugar from the bag in the fridge and stirred it into each cup. He finished by taking two pieces of ice and quietly placing one in each cup before returning to the main room. I timidly moved the attaché case from the coffee table onto one of the chairs, and Richard nodded.

“Drink up.”

“Thanks...”

I had a nervous look on my face as I sat down and had a sip.

“Whoa! That’s delicious! How is it so tasty?!”

“This is authentic royal milk tea. All the rest are mere imitations.”

*Mere imitations.*

The way he said it was so funny, I couldn’t hold back a little laugh. Richard frowned, perplexed.

“Let me guess, you didn’t drink the tea they offered us at the police box because it was a ‘mere imitation’?”

“I have no intention of defiling my palate with sacrilegious flavors. Tea dies the moment it enters a plastic bottle.”

“It *dies*?”

“It is simply not fit for human consumption. Understood, Seigi?”

My new boss said my name. Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian. A British man fluent in Japanese. His grandmother was born in Sri Lanka. His beauty was unparalleled. And he had very strong opinions about royal milk tea.

I had a hard time believing such a strange creature lived in the same world as me.

When I started taking fewer shifts at the TV station, one of my friends at my prep class asked me what was up with a smile.

“You look like a weight’s been lifted off your shoulders.”

I had to wonder just what that “weight” was. My unresolved questions about Grandma? Or maybe my issues with my mom? Every now and again I’d take the ring out of the box I’d hidden it in and hold it up to the light. There was a strange depth to its pretty pink coloring that almost felt like it might pull me in. I had no idea where life was going to take me, but something about the cheerful sparkle of that stone put my heart at ease. Whatever hardships might await me in the future, I was sure thoughts of Grandma and Ms. Miyashita would help me get through it.

Grandma said she was a bad role model, but I still wanted to be strong like she was. I loved my grandmother, and I thought her willingness to let the person she loved more than anyone in the world hate her was painfully beautiful, even if it wasn’t right.





c a s e

2

The Ruby of  
Truth



**G**INZA: the area of Japan with the highest rent in the nation. Until this spring, that was all I really knew about the place. But in one corner of Ginza, there was a shop that was only open on weekends in a mixed-use building a block off Chuo-doori. To its left, a knick-knacks shop, to its right, a sushi place. The sign on the second floor of the building read, "Jewelry Étranger." The entrance was a simple door with no windows to peer into the shop. The shop itself had no display cases to look at, either.

The shop's main feature was a set of four lounge chairs and a glass coffee table. The rest of the space was occupied by low bookshelves filled with volumes of information on gemstones written in foreign languages. Beyond that was a kitchen and a bathroom, and in the back, a safe and an office.

On my first day of work, not a single customer showed up.

I was sure the place was in trouble already.

The shop's owner was one Mr. Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian, a man so elegant he looked like he could have stepped right out of a BBC historical drama, with an impeccable command of the Japanese language. And I had no clue what he was thinking. As much as I figured it wouldn't be long before he looked at the books and decided to close up shop, I diligently did my job cleaning the place and boiling milk with tea in it. And honestly, it didn't really matter what was going on with the shop. I had to work to get paid. I was still working twice a week at the TV station, too.

But in two weeks' time, my pessimistic predictions were proven very wrong.

Customers came via taxi. They'd probably come to Tokyo on the Narita Express and took a cab from there. They would set up an appointment by phone with Richard before coming. There were clients from all around the world: China, Korea, India, the middle east. There was a Latino who spoke a language with rolled R's and a Black person who used words with sounds I couldn't even replicate. Occasionally, there were English-speaking White people. And Richard spoke to every single one of them in their own language as fluently as if he were a native.

Once I actually set foot in the area, I found Ginza was the top international

tourism destination in Japan. When I headed down to the main street to buy some tea cakes, all I could see were tour buses and tourists filling the UNIQLO, Shiseido, and Kyukyudo locations. But Richard's clients all had their sights set on this shop.

While I was serving royal milk tea and confections to the client seated in one of the red lounge chairs, Richard was busy retrieving a black velvet box from the back room. In it were stones that were originally packed into his black suitcase. It was like a box of jewels straight from the Palace of the Dragon King. There were no price tags. It was all done by memory. Aquamarine. Sapphire. Garnet. Jade. Coral. Amber. There were 5,000 yen stones, 50,000 yen stones, 500,000 yen stones, and sometimes stones that were even more valuable. Richard primarily dealt in loose stones but occasionally sold rings, pendants, and other pieces of finished jewelry. If the client had placed an order in advance, he'd change the selection to fit their request.

Some made a selection and purchased it on the spot, but there were plenty who'd just eat and have tea while having a friendly chat. I never saw Richard try to pressure a customer into making a purchase. He'd keep a courteous smile on his face and politely bow, saying he hoped to see them again when they left.

Now, I knew I was just a part-timer who hadn't seen the store's books or knew what the rent was, so this was just a hunch—but I really didn't think this weekend jewelry café in Ginza was Richard's main job. I was sure he had customers like Ms. Miyashita in Kobe all over Japan, if not the entire world. He probably spent the week going from house to house showing off gems and selling them. With the profit from those sales, it wouldn't really matter if this shop was here or not.

So maybe this place was just meant to be a tax write-off or something? I'd learned about those in my business admin class. Then again, Ginza seemed way too expensive for that. Days like this one, with no customers coming in, made me think about that sort of thing.

"Oh Mr. Part-timer, you're frowning. Whatever is the matter?"

"Uh...just thinking about stuff."

Richard came back from the safe room and sat down on the lounge by the

window to sip his royal milk tea. Lately, he'd grown willing to at least have a sip of the tea I made. The first three times, he was very critical—I didn't use enough tea, or I over-steeped it, or burned the milk. It wasn't until my fourth attempt that he said it was passable. It would be a long way off before we were on comfortable enough terms for me to ask him how the business was doing.

"So, what's the deal with carats? I was really shocked when I learned about it last week. It's just a unit for measuring weight. One carat is 0.2 grams."

"Indeed, it is. And what exactly is it that troubles you about this fact?"

"I guess I don't get why you need another unit. Couldn't you just use grams?"

"...It'll make more sense to you later."

Richard's attitude seemed to suggest that if I wasn't actually interested in it, there was no reason to force myself to learn about gemstones. But he would still answer my questions, and he got mad at me when I told him I'd been keeping the pink sapphire ring in my fridge because the box might get moldy, and gave me a new box and cloth for it. He must really love gemstones. I'd been flipping through the pages of *Gemstones: An Illustrated Guide*, which Richard left out for customers, in my free time. It was the only book written in Japanese in the whole store.

Richard suddenly looked up at me and set the teacup down. I could hear footsteps coming up the stairs. High heels, by the sound of it. I cleared the plates and wiped down the table.

The intercom rang. Richard opened the lock, and the customer came in. How unusual. A Japanese client without a reservation.

"Good afternoon. You're open, aren't you?"

It was a woman with long black hair, fair skin, and narrow eyes. She was beautiful, in her late twenties, wearing a pencil skirt and a white blouse. She must've come straight from work. She made me feel a little nervous.

"Um, this is a jeweler's. The rental office is on the first floor."

"...Yes, there is a sign out front. Or, what, do you only accept customers by appointment?"

“Welcome. You’ve made no mistake. We would be happy to accept your business.”

She seemed momentarily overwhelmed by hearing a blond-haired, blue-eyed man speak such fluent Japanese but quickly regained her composure. Typically, women reacted in one of two ways when they meet Richard for the first time. They either got this indiscreet smile on their faces, like they were about to dig into a delicious meal, or they got very quiet in an attempt to hide their embarrassment. This woman didn’t fit into either category. She seemed utterly unmoved by him. Or rather, she seemed utterly devoid of any emotion at all. Like an empty husk of a human being.

She seemed pretty thin, and on closer inspection, I could tell that the shoulders of her shirt didn’t fit quite right. Her voice was steady but her gait wasn’t. I had to wonder if she was okay.

At any rate, I showed her to the seating area and started making tea. I added extra sugar in hopes of making her feel a bit better. The tea snack of the day was leaf-shaped pies that I’d picked up in the basement of a department store.

When I returned from the kitchen, she was sitting across from Richard, not looking the least bit awkward.

“Is this a foreign-owned business?”

“I am the shop owner, Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian.”

“I’m Mami Akashi.”

Ms. Akashi said she wanted a jewel appraised. She pulled a rather large black jewelry box out of her brown shoulder bag and casually snapped it open, almost like it was a wallet or something.

Inside was what looked like a brooch. The design was impressive. Diamond-encrusted ribbons emanated from the central red stone, as if it were emitting an aura. It looked like a gemstone flower, its petals blowing in the wind.

“I assume you want me to check the diamonds.”

“I don’t care about the diamonds. I just want to know about the ruby in the middle.”

“Very well. Not to be overly particular, but what you’re looking for would be an identification report.”

“Hmph. Let’s do that, then.”

Ms. Akashi’s tone made it sound like her mind was elsewhere. Her gaze was focused on the wall behind Richard. It was like her eyes were open but she wasn’t looking at anything.

“I did some research online, but is it true that most rubies are cooked?”

“I believe you’re referring to heat treatment.”

“Yeah, that. I want to know if this stone was heat treated or not. That’s all.”

Heat treatment. I’d never heard of it before. Richard pulled out documents for the identification report process, explaining the costs and time involved. Ms. Akashi immediately filled out the required forms and then got up.

“All right, it’s in your hands now. I work during the day, so I’d appreciate it if you only contacted me after 6 p.m. I’m sorry, but I’m a little pressed for time, so I’ll be going now. Thanks.”

Before I could even offer her some tea, Ms. Akashi had already left. I’d studied up on how to handle a situation where a customer tried to run off with a product they hadn’t paid for, but this was basically the opposite. She left something and ran off.

“...Is this a new kind of scam or something? Like she’ll come back and insist that we stole from her and have some scary people beat us up?”

“I have surveillance footage of the entire exchange. No need to worry.”

“She really made an impression, huh?”

I guessed jewelers got clients like these, too.

I took a closer look at the item she left behind. It was a brooch arranged around a central, pure red, oblong ruby. The metal was a polished silver. When I counted, I found there were twelve diamond-encrusted ribbons emanating from the central red stone. There were at least ten small diamonds on each ribbon. The design was elegant.

“I know I’m a total amateur when it comes to this stuff, but...this is a really high-quality piece, isn’t it?”

“Indeed it is.

It was hard to believe. Was this really the kind of thing someone would just casually drop off their first time in the shop? What would she do if she came back and it was gone?”

“She should take a little better care of it.”

“I don’t think leaving gems in the refrigerator is a particularly good idea, either. But for better or worse, gems reflect the feelings of their owners. So perhaps it’s no wonder that those sentiments come out in how they’re handled.”

I ignored his little jab at me and drank the milk tea the customer hadn’t even touched. Richard didn’t typically complain about me doing this sort of thing when there were no customers in the store.

“Richard, I think this is the first time I’ve ever seen a ruby in person.”

He said he didn’t mind, so I didn’t hesitate to gaze at the brooch. The thing that really caught my eye was the red stone in the middle. It was probably more than twice the size of my pink sapphire. It had been about a month since I started working at *Étranger*—though I’d only actually worked five days so far—but in that time, numerous gems, the names of which I’d never even heard of before, had crossed my eyes. But a ruby had thus far never appeared in the box of treasures.

“It really is red... Like when you find a spot of blood in raw chicken.”

“Was that some sort of joke? Or do you actually understand what you’re saying?”

“Huh? I’m not sure I follow.”

“Pigeon blood,” Richard enunciated every last syllable.

I still didn’t follow.

“It’s a term used to describe the finest of rubies. Just as exquisitely blue sapphires are called ‘cornflower blue,’ the vivid red of the most highly prized

rubies is compared to the blood of pigeons. For you to come up with that analogy completely unawares, well, *bravo*.”

Bravo? *That’s a good thing, right?* My mother, Hiromi, didn’t have much time to cook, and my grandmother didn’t exactly have the most sophisticated palate, so as far as I ever knew, cooking was just a survival skill. But sometimes it was more than that. Like when I’d remove the tendons from chicken thighs to make fried chicken. The real trick was to fry them at a high temperature. Which reminded me—

“What’s this heat treatment thing you were talking about earlier? Why would you heat up a stone?”

“In the case of rubies and sapphires, heating them makes their color more vivid.”

“Wow! So it must be a chemical reaction, huh? Do you think the first person who thought of trying it was scared? Seems like a pretty big gamble, right? Or do the gems not get burned if you mess up?”

“The process is conducted under extremely high temperatures. So if the stone can’t handle the heat, it’s less that you’ll end up with a scorched stone and more that you’d end up with nothing at all.”

*Thought so.* Richard smiled slightly when he saw my face tense up.

“There are records from the 17th century of people in India heating stones. The relationship between the stones’ color and heat appears to have been known since ancient times. That said, more reliable technology for the heat-treating process has only been developed in the last fifty years or so.”

It made me kind of happy when he asked me if I had any other questions. Richard was good at explaining things. When I first started, I just assumed that anyone coming to a jewelry shop must love gemstones and know a lot about them. But plenty of the customers seemed to be normal people like me, who just seemed to enjoy beautiful gemstones and chatting with Richard. I mean, Richard was so eloquent he could probably sell anyone a decade-old vacuum cleaner. If I’d had a teacher like him in my junior high science department, I think it would’ve made my high school entrance exams a little easier.



“So when you say extremely high temperature, how hot are we talking and for how long?”

“It depends on the artisan and the specific stone being worked on, but it’s typically around a thousand degrees for anywhere from a few tens of seconds to several minutes. Of course, this isn’t the sort of thing that can just be repeated indefinitely. Whether a piece of corundum has been heat treated or not has a significant effect on its value. Padparadscha, like in that ring of yours, is typically a name given to natural—that is, untreated—pink sapphires.”

“Corundum? Natural pink? Wait, I’m confused.”

A storm of question marks filled my head. Richard sighed and pulled out *Gemstones: An Illustrated Guide*. He opened it to the page on rubies. The opposite page was about sapphires.

“Let’s start from the basics. Do you know the difference between rubies and sapphires?”

“...One’s red and the other’s blue?”

“Indeed. That is essentially the only difference.”

“What?”

“You could think of these two stones like siblings. Corundum is the general name for the mineral. Red corundum is called ruby, and all other colors of corundum are called sapphire.”

So it really was just a difference in color. But then why did they need different names? Why was pink sapphire, “sapphire” and not pink ruby?

“Isn’t pink a kind of red?”

“Ruby derives from the Latin, ‘rubeus,’ meaning ‘red.’ The Romans associated the color red with Mars, their god of war, and the color of fire and blood. Do you know anyone who bleeds pink?”

“All right, I get it. Pink isn’t red.”

Gemstones could be so complicated. But they could also be extremely simple. Beauty reigned supreme.

Richard held up the book on the table. He'd opened it to a page that looked like a catalog of gems. Each square of the grid had a photo of a different ruby in it. The upper-leftmost ruby was a deep red, clear, and sparkling stone. The further lower and to the right you went, the whiter the rubies got, with more obvious spots in them.

Richard pointed to the top leftmost image like an ophthalmologist giving an eye exam. It was the same color as Ms. Akashi's ruby.

"Pop quiz: Which of these two stones is considered more valuable? Ruby A, which was this color when it came out of the ground and hasn't been heat treated, or ruby B, which became this color through heat treatment?"

"Well, the one that wasn't heat treated, right? I mean, you didn't have to do anything to it."

"Excellent. Now..."

Richard slid his finger over two squares to the right, pointing to a picture of a stone that was more purple than red and not particularly clear.

"If it were between this ruby, ruby A, which has not undergone heat treatment, and ruby B, a stone of a much higher grade that has, which do you think would be considered more valuable?"

"Uh... Hm..."

Which one *would* it be? The natural stone? No, it couldn't be that easy.

"I think someone would prefer to wear the redder one, and a layperson wouldn't know anything about heat treatment, so I guess ruby B, the higher-grade stone that's been heat treated."

"Correct again."

"Ooh!"

"Obviously, it depends a bit," he added before closing the book and taking another sip of tea. "The main thing I want you to understand is that heat treatment is a process designed to bring out a stone's beauty. Only a small number of quality stones can withstand such high heat, and it's extremely difficult for both laypeople and experts to tell if a stone has undergone the

process with the naked eye.”

“...Does that mean you can’t tell if the stone’s been treated yet, Richard?”

“Not with any confidence. The only way to be certain is to use laser tomography to identify traces of the heat-treatment process.”

“I don’t really understand this stuff, but aren’t treatments like that basically cheating?”

“As I explained, what ultimately matters is beauty. Imagine for a moment that there was a death in the family, and you found a ruby ring hidden in your late family member’s dresser—would you be particularly concerned about whether the stone had been heat treated or not?”

“I wouldn’t. The ring would have value to me regardless.”

“Exactly. It’s something people are very rarely concerned with, and it’s even rarer to see someone come in specifically to check for it.”

Richard added matter-of-factly that over eighty percent of the rubies on the market had been heat treated. Eighty percent? That many? I guess there wouldn’t be much point in caring about it in that case. So why, then, was Ms. Akashi so concerned about it?

“...What do you think her angle is? Maybe it was a gift?”

“I’m generalizing here, but people typically want to know the value of something when numbers are more important than feelings.”

Meaning when people wanted to let go of something and turn it into cash. But would someone just looking for quick cash really go out of their way to visit a jewelry shop in Ginza? Judging from her behavior when she was in here, she didn’t seem very concerned about money. The more I thought about it, the more mysterious it became.

Richard snapped the lid of the jewelry box shut. The very standard black box still looked brand new.

“So this is your first ruby, huh? You should consider yourself lucky. You’re one of the few people to ever lay eyes on a ruby of such high quality.”

Richard headed into the back of the shop with the brooch. I cleaned up the

teacups while he was putting the brooch away in the safe. I didn't feel like I was any closer to understanding what Ms. Akashi was after, let alone the powerful emotions people attached to gems. For some reason, things felt tense in the shop. I needed to change the topic. Change the topic...

I know.

"Hey, Richard, do you have some kind of trick for learning foreign languages? I spent seven years learning English starting in junior high, and I don't feel like I've gotten any better."

Richard replied—in English—that it was because I was living in Japan and speaking Japanese every day. And that if I were using English on a daily basis, it'd be different. He enunciated each syllable slowly and precisely to make it easy to understand, almost like the listening section of an exam. I could understand well enough, but *speaking* English was pretty much out of the question. Taking notes and actually communicating were completely different beasts.

I replied with a stilted "thank you" before reverting to Japanese. "...I guess that's the same idea behind dating someone who speaks another language."

"Excuse me?"

"One of my classmates in my exam prep class suggested it. Said that the best way to get good at English is to date a foreigner. I guess the logic is you'll be more motivated to learn it, so you'll learn faster..."

"Now, I don't have quite such a low opinion of you, but I would hope you don't choose your romantic partners on the basis of whether they might help advance your career or not."

"Don't get the wrong idea! It's just something I heard, is all."

"Ridiculous. Utilitarian relationships are what we call business, and romance is the furthest thing imaginable from business. Or do you think using something meant to put your soul at ease to further your selfish, worldly ambitions will bring you closer to happiness?"

"...Well, what if you fall in love while you're dating?"

“And if you don’t?”

Richard ended the conversation by declaring it would be a fruitless endeavor. I actually liked how uncompromising he could be. Maybe he was so resolute about his opinions because he worked in an industry that involved dealing with people from all over the world, who might not share the same ideas of what constituted “common sense.” It was such a simple, yet valiant attitude. He was so unreasonable that he wouldn’t drink anything but water out of a plastic bottle, and he was very particular about cleaning, but he was a good guy at heart. Well, I was pretty sure he was, at least.

No other customers came by after that. After we closed up shop at five and I said goodbye to Richard, I wandered around Ginza on my way home.

If I were being honest, I’d never really thought much about my criteria for selecting a romantic partner. There were just two callous options: You either have a girlfriend, or you don’t. And I’d never had one. Though, truthfully, I was always so busy I never really felt all that desperate to start dating.

But as of this moment, I already knew where my happiness lay.

As a student enrolled in the economics department of Kasaba University, I couldn’t help being excited for Mondays. I had my compulsory English class on Monday. The professor was brutal, especially when it came to attendance, and to make matters worse, it was in building 15—the one without an elevator. The class was harsh enough that you might even be forced to retake an exam if you didn’t score high enough. Still, I enjoyed it. The reason was simple...

“Morning, Seigi.”

“Good morning, Tanimoto!”

...I’d fallen in love with someone who I only ever saw in this class.

Shouko Tanimoto. She was the same age as me and a second year in the education department: a delicate, raven-haired angel with soft curls styled into a bob. I was pretty sure her favorite color was white, since I frequently saw her wearing skirts and blouses in that color. I thought it looked very good on her.

We'd first met last month, after an information session about the different departments at the university. The crosswalk across the main street near campus was always incredibly crowded during breaks—I was pretty sure only Shibuya and Shinjuku Station had crosswalks to rival it. At any rate, I was at the crosswalk when I saw a little old man walking toward me. He looked unsteady on his feet, like he could fall at any moment.

That was when a short girl who'd been walking in front of me turned as she passed him, offered him her arm and asked if he was all right. She supported him as he walked, even though her bag was heavy with textbooks and she was heading in the opposite direction. I'd initially meant to just pretend I hadn't seen anything and keep walking, but I slipped over to the other side of the road, grabbed the old man by the arm, and threatened him. "Sir, I don't know how many times I've seen you cross this road today, but it's been more than a few. And you're always clinging to a different girl."

The old man let out a little squeak and took off so fast in the opposite direction that it was hard to imagine he was the same person. The area was too crowded to go after him.

After I'd crossed to the side I was originally headed for, I regretted what I'd done. If I hadn't said anything, the girl would have been none the wiser and wouldn't have had to feel gross about the whole incident.

I bowed my head and apologized, and her eyes went wide.

"Why are you apologizing? You helped me. I should be thanking you."

Her carefree smile made me worry, so I ended up sticking my nose in someone else's business again. "Even if people look like they're in need of help, there are good ones and bad ones out there. So you should be more careful."

She tilted her head as she walked and smiled again. It was strange. Every time she smiled, I felt like the world got a little brighter.

"You're not wrong. But I can't tell a bad person apart from someone who really does need help just by looking at them, so I'd rather help regardless. I wonder if there's a better way to go about it..."

The moment she got this bashful look on her face was the moment I fell for

her. It even made my own encounter with that old man on the way to class, when I'd offered to walk him to his destination and he scrambled for an excuse and ran off, seem like a sign from the universe or something. I got her name and what department she was in, and the moment I found out we had one class in common, I knew it was fate. She came in first thing in the morning, and I wanted to talk to her, so I came in early on Mondays.

Tanimoto spoke slowly. There was always this gentle air about her, and only her. Her friends would tease her, calling her an airhead, but that didn't seem to bother her at all. If Richard was a crystal-clear gemstone slumbering at the bottom of a lake, Tanimoto was a powdered sugar fairy living in the ceiling of a bakery. I felt like I could smell the sweets just sitting next to her.

From what I could hear from the other girls, it didn't sound like she was dating anyone, either. I wanted to date her so badly. If only I could. I desperately wanted to ask her out. I wanted to walk down the street with her, holding hands. I wanted to go places with her—to the beach or the mountains, anywhere.

I couldn't shake the feeling that if I brought it up out of the blue, she'd shut me down in two seconds flat. For as hot as the fire of love was burning in my heart, I had no way to put it out, either.

"Seigi, what's that?"

"Huh?"

She was pointing at the reference book on minerals I had sitting next to my textbook. I'd borrowed it from the university's main library on my way in, but it was all chemical formulas and stuff—a futile effort for a liberal arts student like myself.

"Seigi, do you like rocks?"

"Huh?"

Tanimoto flashed me a smile in my confusion. The way she was looking at me made it seem like she was hoping for something. Maybe, just maybe...

*...Tanimoto likes gemstones?*

“I’m researching heat treatment right now!”

I began to babble. Tanimoto’s chunky bangs swayed softly as she tilted her head to listen. She squinted at me, like someone wearing glasses that weren’t the right prescription.

Maybe I was being too forward. Maybe I’d made the wrong call. Why the hell did I bring up heat treatment, of all things? Is that really what you talk to a girl about when you’re all alone together in a classroom? I screwed up. *This is it. I’ve messed it all up.*

While I was panicking, Tanimoto turned her head again and said, “Heat treatment for what kind of stone? Or are you just researching it in general?”

“Huh?”

“Heat treatment is pretty typical in the world of gemstones. Beryl, quartz, and corundum are the obvious ones, but there are plenty of other stones that change their properties when they’re heated.”

I was so surprised I felt like all the air had been sucked out of the room for a few seconds. Then, I was overcome with intense joy. It was like finally seeing the light break at the other end of a very long tunnel. That was the level of emotion I was at. I’d gotten through to her. The bits and pieces of things I’d picked up at my part-time job since this spring helped me get through to her.

I wished for just that day—that moment—that I could be Richard. Face included.

“Yeah, I was looking into the heat treatment of rubies!”

“So corundum, then. That’s the scientific name for ruby and sapphire.”

“Right, I’ve heard that before! I stumbled on the term ‘pigeon blood’ recently, too.”

“...Seigi, you know that term means something very special.” Tanimoto said with an impenetrable expression and smile on her face, turning into a completely different person than the one I’d known. “Pigeon blood rubies are extremely valuable. They’re only found in a particular mine in Myanmar. Rubies are found elsewhere, like Thailand, Sri Lanka, and other parts of Asia, as well as



Mozambique in Africa, but the highest quality rubies have always come from Myanmar.”

She continued, saying that due to geopolitical and supply instability, the prices of the highest quality specimens had skyrocketed. With a smile, she added that even the most beautiful of lights still cast shadows. Her tone wasn’t one of half-hearted small talk—it was the tone of someone with strong opinions. So was her expression.

“Did you know that rubies and sapphires are technically the same mineral, Seigi?”

“I-I did, but...I still don’t understand why they’re different colors.”

“To put it simply, they have different impurities in the stone. Corundum is a kind of aluminum oxide, but if a stone has trace amounts of chromium in it, it’ll be red, while iron and titanium will produce blue and purple stones. Which means there are techniques for manipulating color, too.”

“Wow...!”

The more she talked, the faster she spoke. Her expression was stern and her voice low—there was a vague atmosphere of solemn dignity about her. She hunched over, crossed her legs, and tensed her eyes so much that it almost looked like someone had drawn a straight line in permanent marker under each of them. This was no bakery fairy standing in front of me but something else. Something more—

“Oh, I’m so sorry!”

Before I could put my finger on just what she reminded me of, Tanimoto stomped on the brakes. I was so startled I actually gasped. She giggled bashfully, and her face momentarily returned to her usual fairy-like state, though traces of the stern wrinkles about her eyes remained.

“I, uh, just really love stones is all. Once I get going, I just can’t stop. I’m really sorry.”

“You really know a lot about them, don’t you, Tanimoto?”

“Well, I am a rockhound.”

“A rockhound! Wow, that sounds like rough work for a part-time job. You must be strong. I work at a jewelry shop, though all I really do is serve tea.”

“No, not like that. It’s my hobby. I like rocks. I’m a rock collector. Just like someone who likes minerals and precious gems like you might be a gem collector. You could say we’re all amateur geologists—people who like stones. Kinda like how we call people who are really into fishing ‘anglers.’ You get the idea.”

Amateur geologists.

“I had no idea there was a whole hobby. I really don’t know anything...”

“Rocks are cool. They’re the work of this wonderful planet called Earth, after all. Oh, um, if there’s anything I can help you with, feel free to ask. Working part-time at a jewelry shop sounds pretty unusual. Tell me all about it.”

I took a moment to vigorously pay my respects to Richard in my mind—*thank you, my beloved boss. You may be difficult and even a bit of a narcissist at times, but it’s all thanks to you that my college life is starting to look much brighter. I’ll make you a hundred, no, two hundred cups of royal milk tea if you want!*

As I told the tale of my work at the mysterious jewelry shop, Tanimoto listened intently, nodding repeatedly. I even told her about the ruby that was brought in recently for grading. Tanimoto knit her brow.

“So, I guess that means she didn’t confirm whether it was heat-treated or not when she bought it? Seriously?”

“...Apparently, a lot of people don’t care enough to ask. But I’d think that would be a normal thing to look into when you buy something, right?”

“Hmm, I think it’s less that you’d have to look into it specifically and more that you’d just know. I mean, we’re talking about an order of magnitude’s difference in price.”

An order of magnitude. I couldn’t imagine a ruby selling for a mere 10,000 yen, which meant it’d be a difference between something more in the range of 100,000 and a million or 500,000 and five million. The thought alone made my blood run cold.

“I had no idea. Maybe it was a gift? Or something she inherited from a relative she barely knew.”

“Maybe, but why would she care about whether it was heat treated or not, then? If she just wanted to sell it, I think she’d have other priorities.”

“Good point. My boss said the same thing.”

“Hmm.”

Tanimoto let out a listless sigh, and her eyelid twitched.

“...Seigi, lemme ask you something. Do you think of gemstones as assets? Or accessories?”

“I think they’re a little of both, but they can be more than that, too.”

“Why?”

Why? Because I wouldn’t consider my grandmother’s ring an “asset” or an “accessory.” But how was I supposed to explain that? I’m just a part-timer who doesn’t know the first thing about gemstones.

Tanimoto giggled as I got flustered. She was so cute. So damn cute. “Sorry, I guess I kinda brought the conversation to a weird place. But stones really aren’t that complicated. I mean, you’re not gonna die without precious gems after all, and I can’t think of anyone who really hates them, you know? I think stones have a kinda, like, inherent goodness to them.”

“Yes! Exactly! I think so, too. They might be accessories, or useful ways to bank value, but they’re so much more than that...I think they have the power to connect people. And I think that’s what I like about them...yeah.”

I didn’t think my explanation was elegant enough to justify even an extremely generous comparison to Richard, but I’d said what I wanted to say. I figured as long as I got the idea across, that was good enough. While I was thinking, Tanimoto tensed her eyes up again and leaned forward—the “other” her was back.

“Now I don’t want you to think of this as the opinion of an amateur geologist but just as a personal, touchy-feely opinion.”

“Sure...”

After repeating her lengthy preamble again, Tanimoto began, “Stones that are considered ‘good’ as assets or accessories are usually especially beautiful or rare ones. Like pigeon blood rubies. And that’s why we developed the technology to find and reproduce stones of the highest standard of beauty. But there’s something kind of cold and sad about chasing beauty defined only by numbers and standards.”

“You think it’s sad?”

I asked her why. She brought a slender finger to her chin and replied, bashfully, “Well, all stones are unique—one-of-a-kind. And all stones, regardless of grade, have this boundless sense of fantasy about them. Or at least, I think they do.”

Her black eyes glimmered fearlessly. And I felt like she’d just shot me straight through the heart twice over. “I just really love stones,” she’d said, but it wasn’t until that moment that I realized her “love” and my vague enjoyment of looking at precious gems weren’t at all the same. She had a sort of professional air about her. It wasn’t quite like Richard’s, but she loved the stones of the world with all her heart in her own way.

The realization kind of stung for some reason. I got pretty quiet after that, and she let out a little yelp.

“I did it again... I’m so sorry. You really don’t have to think too deeply about what makes stones great. You’re just supposed to look at them and think, ‘Wow, that’s cool!’ But I just... When I get started talking about stones, I just can’t stop myself... Ugh, I really need to work on that...”

“Why? I wanna hear more! I wanna learn more about stones, but I have no idea where to even start. Honestly, I’m so happy right now that I don’t even know how to say it.”

“...You mean it?”

I told her “thank you,” and she flashed me a divinely sweet smile.

Then she told me that she was the president of her high school geology club, and for some reason they’d given her the nickname “Golgo Tanimoto.”

I spent class with my head in the clouds, but afterward, we exchanged

numbers. I finally, finally did it. And the cherry on top was that she invited me to join her for lunch. Campus was like an alternate dimension when we walked together. I was almost too happy. I had a hard time believing it was real. I felt like someone might throw water in my face at any moment to wake me up and tell me it was all a dream.

Unfortunately, reality really did come knocking.

“Excuse me, are you Mr. Seigi Nakata?”

A man I’d never seen before stopped me just as we stepped out of the gate. He must’ve been about thirty. He had bright, childlike eyes and wore an expensive suit. His clothes seemed suited to a more mundane job than Richard’s. And, of course, I’d never met him before.

“I am, but who are you?”

“I’m sorry for dropping in on you like this, but I only need a moment of your time. It won’t take long.”

“How did you know my name?”

“I can explain, but let’s go somewhere a little more private. If you don’t mind.”

“Um, Seigi, maybe I should bow out here.”

“It’s about the jewelry shop in Ginza. If you don’t mind.”

The man didn’t seem to pay any attention to how upset I looked. Clearly this guy didn’t know what the phrase “If you don’t mind,” meant. Maybe Richard should give him a Japanese lesson.

Painful as it was, I watched Tanimoto leave and followed the man into a local coffee shop. He ordered two coffees. *Why am I here with a strange man and not Tanimoto?*

“...So, what do you want from me? Who are you?”

“My name is Takashi Homura. I’m sorry for approaching you out of the blue like that.”

He handed me the second business card I’d ever received in my life. The first

was, of course, Richard's. The company listed on the card was Homura Trading and the address was in Marunouchi—a business district with rents to rival Ginza's. I didn't ask, but he told me that he worked for his family business. Apparently, he was training to become assistant manager. I couldn't have cared less.

He pulled a file from his leather bag and showed me a photo. It was a picture of him and a woman with long black hair. They stood in front of a fountain surrounded by tulips, awkwardly linking arms. The woman's face was familiar.

She was Ms. Akashi, the woman who brought the ruby in for appraisal.

"She's my fiancée. She came by the shop you work at part-time, right?"

"...How do you know where I work?"

"It's a long story, but I had someone investigate her recent activities. I'm sorry for scaring you."

"You had 'someone' investigate her? You mean a private investigator, right? If one of my friends was dating someone like you, I'd tell her to break up with you because she could find someone better."

"I can explain. You don't have to stay long, but please hear me out."

He bowed deeply and began to explain. He'd met Ms. Akashi almost exactly a year ago. He fell in love with her when she started working for Homura Trading last spring, they got to know each other and eventually became engaged. The parents were on board, and they were on the verge of getting married.

"But it's just not working out. She said yes, but she's been dragging her feet, and we're not getting anywhere on making arrangements. I was so excited for the ceremony, and we decided to hold it in August of this year, but there's no way it's happening at this rate. I think it's been going on way too long for it to just be anxiety about the wedding. It's driving my mother crazy... I told her she could just talk to me about it if there was some reason for all this, but she won't tell me anything. I didn't know what else to do."

"Why are you coming to me about this? Your behavior is bizarre."

"I'm not doing it anymore, but I had her followed for a month."

“More like stalked.”

“During that month, the one thing she did that was different from her usual routine was visit the jewelry shop you work at.”

“So you decided to follow me to school?”

“I’m so sorry. I’ll get right to the point. If you have any idea why she was there, could you please tell me, if you don’t mind? I just need some kind of clue, however small.”

The heir to a corporation in Marunouchi had his fiancée followed and investigated by a private detective. What the hell? Was this really happening in the 21st century?

“...I’m sure you know that my boss is a good-looking guy. A hundred times more attractive than me.”

“I’ve seen photos. I take it he’s English? I don’t stand a chance compared to him on the appearance front. But I’m not about to give up. Your boss, Richard, doesn’t know that I exist. Or that I’ve come here, either.”

“You want me to keep my mouth shut.”

I instantly regretted being so nasty about it. I didn’t touch the coffee he had brought me. This was probably going to be my lunch. I really should have ordered some pasta so I wouldn’t be distracted during my afternoon classes, but I didn’t want to eat in front of this guy. He was so stressed I couldn’t help feeling bad for him.

“I don’t expect you to understand. I know full well how selfish I’m being, but this was the only lead I had.”

“...Do you have any idea what your fiancée might have been doing in a jewelry shop?”

“Last winter, I gave her a ruby. A brooch with diamond accents. She really liked it...or at least I thought she did when I gave it to her. Maybe I was wrong, though...”

He trailed off. I thought so. She hadn’t bought that brooch for herself. That’s why she wanted to know if the stone had been heat treated and why she didn’t

know what it had cost. Maybe she really did intend to sell it.

“Please. Not knowing is the worst thing in the world. I can’t bear the thought of losing her.”

“Look, I’m sure Ms. Akashi has her reasons. Why can’t you just accept that?”

“Ms. *Akashi*?”

Huh?

The two of us referenced the photo again, and I pointed at Ms. Akashi. She did look a little less gaunt than she was when I saw her at Richard’s shop, but her smile was identical—kind of stiff.

“Isn’t her name Mami Akashi?”

“No, it’s Mami Sasu.”

“Sasu?”

The two of us exchanged confused looks. He definitely didn’t look like he was lying, and he didn’t have any reason to lie either. Which meant she’d used a fake name.

“I wonder where she got the name ‘Akashi’ from. There’s no one at the company with that name.”

“Maybe it’s a relative’s name?”

“No, no one related to her is named that, either. Or...at least no one she introduced me to.”

Suddenly, he looked like an elementary schooler who’d been given the homework for someone in junior high. Funny, considering I thought he was a deplorable villain just moments ago. I thought back to Ms. Akashi storming in and out of the jewelry store.

“...Sorry, I have to go. I’ve got class.”

I bowed and got up. I knew I couldn’t stay there any longer. I’d probably already said something I shouldn’t have.

*I hate this. I really hate it. I’d never shop at a place with an employee who’d sell out customers.*



I heard Mr. Homura say “thank you” as I left. If I were him, I wouldn’t wanna thank the person secretly reporting on a person I loved. I didn’t even know who the bad guy was in this situation: the man who hired a private detective to follow his girlfriend around, the woman who used a fake name to get a gemstone she was given as a gift appraised in secret, or the part-timer with loose lips?

I left the coffee shop and noticed I’d gotten a text from Tanimoto. It was short, “Everything go okay? We should talk again sometime!” I was so, so happy. Too happy. I realized that if we did start dating and she started acting weird, I could see myself hiring a private investigator, too. I guessed the more you liked someone, the more it could go to your head.

After I finished my afternoon classes, I made up my mind: The next time Ms. Akashi aka Ms. Sasu came to the shop, the first thing I would do was tell her what happened today and apologize. She would probably be mad, and I was sure Richard would fire me, but it was the right thing to do.

I used to be naive and stupid enough to think that since gemstones were pretty, anyone would feel happy looking at them.

It was Sunday. 10:30 a.m. Thirty minutes before the shop was going to open. And it was also the day of her appointment.

I came off Chuo-doori and went up the stairs to the second floor of the mixed-use building, where I found someone standing in front of the door. Two people, to be precise. One of them was Richard, while the other had their hand on the back of Richard’s neck, slamming him into the door. They had long hair and wore a black leather jacket. Was it a robbery or just an assault?

“Who the hell are you?! I’ll call the police!”

“Shut your damn mouth!”

“Hold on, Seigi.”

My eyes went wide at Richard’s response, and the person in the leather jacket glared at me. They had on skinny jeans and combat boots. I went back down the stairs, taking a ready stance on the white cobblestone. As the assailant

slowly made their way down the stairs onto the sunlight walkway, I realized why I thought my ears were playing tricks on me when they spoke—the attacker was a woman. She was much smaller than Richard, too.

Her hair was tied back in a ponytail. It was blonde fading to purple at the ends. She wore bright red lipstick and had sharp eyes.

“This your shop? Which one of you is the dirty, woman-stealing bastard?”

She must’ve been in her twenties, and she really looked like she belonged more in Harajuku than Ginza. Why on earth was someone like that attacking Richard?

Richard fixed his shirt and came downstairs. The suitcase he was never seen without was fine. It didn’t seem like the assailant had been trying to steal the gems.

“...Lover’s quarrel?”

“Don’t be foolish, I’ve never met this woman before.”

Apparently, she’d come at him just as he was about to enter the shop. Bizarre. The strange woman glared at me beneath the dull shine of the overcast sky.

“You wanna go? This is gonna be fun. Come at me. Underestimate me and you’ll regret it.”

“I’m opposed to using violence against women. Please state your business. Who is this ‘woman-stealing bastard’ you’re so concerned about? And just who are you?”

“Tatsuki Akashi. Twenty-seven years old. I’m a bassist working as a studio musician in Shibuya.”

Akashi?

This Tatsuki Akashi opened her wallet and took out a photo to show us. It was a picture of two women, having fun in what looked like a bar.

“Do you know this woman? Tell me everything you know, I don’t care how minor. I’ve got a situation I’m dealing with.”

The photo was of Tatsuki Akashi, wearing a Japanese national football team uniform, with a big smile on her face and an arm around none other than Mami Sasu. Just as I was getting over the shock of that revelation, I heard someone drop something on the path behind me. It was a brown shoulder bag. And a long-haired woman was standing there.

Mami Sasu.

Tatsuki reacted first. Mami tried to run, but Tatsuki chased after her and grabbed her hand.

“Mami! I finally found you!”

“Let go of me! I don’t want anything to do with you anymore!”

“Do you have any idea how worried I was?! How dare you just up and disappear like that!”

The two women began to grapple in the middle of the street. This was not good. Not good at all—but just as that thought crossed my mind, a black taxi pulled up in front of the building. Takashi got out, clearly panicked.

“What is wrong with you?! Get away from Mami!”

“Oh, are *you* the woman-stealing bastard? Finally, we meet. You better clench your damn teeth!”

“Don’t! He’s my fiancé!” Mami shouted.

Time seemed to freeze for the three of them. They stood perfectly still in the middle of a Ginza street, just about to explode. Richard’s shop was on the second floor, so people from the office on the first floor emerged, shocked by the situation. The area was mostly offices, and the restaurants in the vicinity pretty much all opened at noon. Even the nearest café was kind of far away.

There was only one location in the area that could qualify as a café and was completely free. The owner of the devastatingly handsome face shot the three quarreling adults an ice-cold glare.

“I will allow you to use my shop to settle this dispute on the condition that you do not damage anything inside. Understood?”

The three of them all looked in different directions and nodded.

“I’m just gonna say this up front: I don’t know any of you here except Mami, and I don’t have a grudge against any of you—and I’m not saying that as some kind of sick joke. I’d appreciate it if you overlooked my foul mouth, though. That’s just how I am, and I’ve never been able to control it when I get real mad.”

Tatsuki fired the first shot. I hastily prepared four glasses of barley tea from our stock. I didn’t really feel like they needed to be served tea like they were customers, but I figured having drinks on the table might keep things a little more in check. Admittedly, that was just for my own peace of mind.

Tatsuki and Takashi were seated across from each other in the four-piece lounge set. Richard had taken off his jacket and sat down next to Tatsuki, and across from him was Mami *Sasu*. I didn’t have a chair, so I just stood by the table. I had a good view of everyone’s faces from that position.

Mami’s hands and face looked almost uncannily pale as she sat in the chair, staring intently at her hands clenched in her lap.

“Mami and I have been seeing each other for seven years. We were even living together until the winter of the year before last.”

“...Why did you have to mention that now?”

“Because you up and left without telling me!”

“Keep your voices down. This is my place of business, not a prison visitation room.”

Tatsuki hung her head a bit, ashamed, before continuing.

She explained that in winter of the year before last, Mami, who she’d been living with up until that point, suddenly disappeared from their apartment. Her phone number had been disconnected and all her contact information had changed, and she’d gotten rid of all her things. Tatsuki frantically searched for her, to no avail. Just as she’d concluded that she must have left the city, a colleague of hers mentioned that they’d spotted a long-haired woman who resembled Mami in Ginza. Tatsuki couldn’t contain herself and rushed over. This all happened to line up today. The worst of all possible days for such a coincidence.

Tatsuki said they'd been "seeing each other" for seven years. You wouldn't phrase it like that to your friend's fiancé if you were just friends and roommates. More than anything, the vibe between them definitely didn't seem to be just friendship. So it was probably exactly what it sounded like.

Tatsuki appeared to be starting to calm down. She looked up at Richard.

"I'm sorry for tryin' to beat your ass earlier. All the info I had to go on was that there was an 'unbelievably hot man running a strange store' and that they'd 'seen Mami go into it.' The blood just went straight to my head. You really are unbelievably hot, but there's nothing strange about this store."

"I'm flattered that you think so, but I would suggest trying to use your words before you grab someone by the collar next time."

"Um, Ms. Akashi, was it? Just what are you to Mami?"

Takashi threw a straight ball, though I got the sense that he probably didn't even know how to throw a curve ball. He seemed the calmest next to Richard, even if that was ultimately just a front.

Tatsuki stared at him intently. "Would you be asking the same question if I were a man?"

Takashi flushed and hung his head, embarrassed, as she threw a straight ball right back at him. Before she could press the topic further, Mami mumbled, "I fell in love with a man. That's why I broke up with you."

An icy chill hung over the shop.

Richard and I exchanged silent glances and remained focused on Tatsuki's behavior. I really wasn't in the mood to have to kick someone out for causing trouble.

"...What are you talking about? You were just going to toss me aside like I mean nothing to you to be with him? Bullshit!"

"I was trying to be realistic about my future."

"You always did mistake pessimism for realism. You're just a coward. Or is the old, 'normal is better' Mami back again? I certainly haven't missed that side of you."

“We couldn’t keep living together like we were going to be young forever. I’d just found a new job and everything. It was perfect. You don’t mean anything to me anymore. I want to start over. Just forget about us and move on with your life.”

“Let me stop you there,” Richard interrupted. The more Mami spoke, the sicker she looked, and she never so much as glanced at Tatsuki through the whole thing.

With wide-open eyes and through gritted teeth, Tatsuki let out a little, “I see how it is. ...So, I don’t mean anything to you, huh? Fine. But you listen here, Mami, that’s not even what I’m mad about. We were dating. Dating. Remember? For seven years. Why couldn’t you have said one word—just one word—to me before you up and vanished? I thought you might be dead. I thought maybe you got mixed up in something crazy and were lying dead in a ditch somewhere. I went to the police. I talked to all your old friends. Awful thoughts kept me up at night. I was driving myself crazy asking myself if it was my fault.”

“Well, that’s all on you.”

“Just calm down, both of you. Please.”

I tried to mediate in a low tone, but really, I was thinking about something entirely different. Part of Tatsuki’s story didn’t seem to add up. Mami met Takashi in the spring of last year. If that was also when they started dating, then Mami would have left Tatsuki’s apartment the previous winter *before* she met Takashi. But then, why did she come into the shop using “Akashi” instead of “Sasu”?

Richard must’ve noticed this as well but politely held his tongue. If I was going to make up for the mistake I made when Takashi caught me at school, this was my only chance. But the moment the thought crossed my mind—

“Mami, why did you use the name ‘Akashi’ when you came here?”

Takashi beat me to it.

Mami had a look of abject despair on her face. She’d gone from white as a sheet to the color of death. She glanced at Richard and then at me, grimacing.

There was no way she couldn't know whose fault that was. There was probably nothing I could possibly do to earn her forgiveness at that point.

Tatsuki was baffled. "What? Akashi? What's he talking about, Mami?"

I couldn't say that Mami looked like she was enjoying herself in Takashi's photo from that spring, even if I was trying to be generous. But in Tatsuki's photo of her, she looked happy and healthy—almost like a different person entirely.

"This situation seems to be more complicated than I thought, so let me explain my side. She and I have been engaged for a year, and the wedding is set for August. But I have a proposal."

"Oh, shut up. Just get married or whatever."

"Mami, I don't mind if you cheat on me," Takashi said.

For a moment, I thought Takashi had lost his mind. Tatsuki seemed to have the same reaction, and the two of us just sat there in a state of wordless shock.

Mami looked up, her face expressionless. Takashi smiled, like a young father trying to reassure his small child. It was a forced smile though. You could see it in his eyes.

"I do feel a bit sad that you never talked to me about your past, but I know you had your reasons. But I have a suggestion: Couldn't you think of love and marriage as separate things? I love you, and that'll never change, no matter what happens. You can just marry me and keep going out with Ms. Akashi if you like. Then everything can proceed as planned."

His smile sent a chill down my spine. *He's proposing that his fiancée date someone else? What does marrying Mami Sasu actually mean to this man? What does he even like about her?*

Tatsuki clicked her tongue, breaking the silence. "Who the hell is this little rich boy anyway? Gimme a damn break, do you even hear what you're saying?"

"I do. I can simply think of an affair with another woman as her having a 'very good friend' rather than romance. It won't bother me."

"Well, I'm sayin' it'll bother *me*!"

“I believe Mami already said that you don’t mean anything to her anymore.”

Tatsuki snapped.

Richard intervened after Takashi took a punch to the jaw. He was about to get into it with her, and if we let him, the situation would have devolved into complete chaos from there. I got him in an armlock when he stood up, but he still fought me. Before I knew it, Mami had stood up and grabbed her bag.

“Mami! Wait!”

She glared at me in response and ran down the stairs.

While the cat and mouse were fighting, the cheese ran away. I felt like I’d seen a cartoon like that when I was a kid.

The shop had turned into an emergency field office, with Richard, Tatsuki, and I on standby. The fight had ended pretty abruptly, with Takashi chasing after Mami but being unable to catch up with her. He returned to the shop with a sullen expression. She wouldn’t pick up the phone, so there wasn’t much else to do. He grew impatient and left to check her apartment.

Richard got a text later, probably from Takashi. It wasn’t surprising that Takashi and Tatsuki hadn’t exchanged numbers themselves but ended up putting Richard square in the middle of everything.

“...It appears she hasn’t been home.”

“She always does this when she gets stressed out. She’s probably at a park or the beach or something.”

“Do you have any idea where she might be, specifically?”

“I have some idea. I’m sure I could track her down.”

“Please do. Let me help.”

“Seigi,” Richard softly scolded me. My one saving grace was the fact that we had no other appointments that day. Though it was beyond too late, I confessed that I’d told Takashi her name when he ambushed me as I was leaving campus. I thought Tatsuki might hit me, too, but she was just flabbergasted.



“Richard, I’m so sorry. I know you put your trust in me. Take it out of my wages for today or fire me, whatever you think is appropriate. I’ll do whatever’s necessary to apologize to Mami.”

Richard’s phone buzzed. I assumed it was another text, but it just kept going—a phone call. He answered in English before switching over to Japanese. I could hear Takashi’s voice over the speaker. Richard hung up after exchanging a few words and turned to Tatsuki.

“Mr. Homura says that Ms. Sasu wasn’t there and that he would begin searching in her neighborhood next.”

“...What? What does that mean?”

Richard asked her to remain calm and listen. I noticed that his preternaturally beautiful face was even more expressionless than usual.

“Mr. Homura explained the situation to her landlord, a long-time friend of his, and got the key to her apartment. Judging by the state it was in, she must not have been home in several days—everything was neatly cleaned up and an envelope with the words ‘thank you,’ containing three months of rent was found on her dresser.”

Tatsuki and I rushed out of the shop at the same time. When we got downstairs, she tossed a card at me. It had the logo of a bass clef on it, along with her contact information.

“I’ll search Shibuya. Check any place you wouldn’t think twice about a young woman being alone! If Mami dies, I’m gonna kill you, that Homura guy, and your boss!”

Tatsuki slipped into the parking lot behind the building and reappeared in front of the store on a motorcycle, racing down the street. I looked up at Richard’s jewelry shop, brought my hands together, and bowed my head before running toward the subway station.

I checked everywhere: the turnstiles, the waiting areas, the cafés and the fast-food joints for Shinjuku Gyoen, Yoyogi Park, and Toyama Park stations. That was about as far as I could get in two hours. Tatsuki and Takashi were exchanging texts with Richard. It sounded like they’d searched Shibuya Station and the area

around where she worked, respectively. Tatsuki said she'd search near Sangenjaya, and Takashi figured he'd try asking people in her department of the company on the off chance that they'd heard from her. He'd already given the police her photo, but they didn't seem to be taking it very seriously. He said he'd check Tokyo Station next if he couldn't find any leads.

There'd be no point to me searching the same places they were, and running around at random wasn't going to do any good, either. Of course, I knew searching on foot would also be pointless if she'd gotten in a taxi or taken the Shinkansen and gone somewhere far away. I knew that was a possibility, but just like Tatsuki and Takashi, I couldn't just *not* do anything.

I wanted divine intervention. Or if that was too much to ask, maybe I could just borrow an angel or the eyes of a talented sniper.

I texted Tanimoto. I kept it short, so as to not worry her.

*"I need some advice. I'm playing hide-and-seek with another adult. There are boundaries to the game and I'm 'it.' If you wanted to be alone, where would you go? I'm out of ideas."*

I ducked into a convenience store to buy a charger as my phone battery started to give out. While I was searching the crowd in front of Ueno Station's main entrance, I got a response.

*"Hide-and-seek, huh? Is this a club thing? Maybe try a park or a temple? Don't give up!"*

*Thank you, Tanimoto. I won't give up.* There's just something about knowing the person you like believes in you that gives you strength.

If I hadn't said anything to Takashi back then, things wouldn't have gotten this bad. I knew regretting it now wouldn't change anything, but I did desperately want a chance to make it right.

I asked people if they'd seen a woman with long black hair who seemed kind of unwell but came up empty-handed. Just as I was trying to figure out what to do next, I got a text. It was from Tatsuki.

*"Asakusa Shrine. We'd go there every year for the first shrine visit of the year. If you're close, take a look around there, please. There was an accident in*

*Sangenjaya, so the line's stopped. I won't be able to leave for a while."*

Asakusa. I could get there on the Ginza Line. Takashi must've had his hands full searching Tokyo Station. I replied that I'd take the express line from Ueno and hurried down into the subway.

Asakusa was crowded with tourists going to see the Skytree on a Saturday afternoon. I slipped under the massive paper lantern. The stalls were so crowded that it looked like a theme park. Kimono shops, Ningyo-yaki stalls, candied fruit sellers.

I made it back to the main hall of Senso-ji. Immediately to its right was Asakusa Shrine.

The grounds of the shrine were so peaceful and quiet, it was hard to imagine the hustle and bustle of the shopping arcade was just a few hundred feet away. The guardian lion-dog statues seemed to be almost lounging atop the white sand—and there was a woman with long black hair sitting on a bench. She was holding something that looked like a milk carton, with her legs splayed out comfortably. She waved when she noticed me. I let out a weird sound.

"Mami!"

My feet sank into the white sand as I ran across the grounds. I couldn't even laugh about it. I sat down next to her, and Mami set the carton she'd been drinking at her feet. It had "sake" written on it and was mostly empty.

"Did Tatsuki send you here? You guys really don't know how to respect a person's privacy."

"Sorry. I mean it, I'm really sorry. This is all my fault. Richard had nothing to do with it."

"I know. I don't really care anymore." She laughed.

She looked desperate. She probably didn't want Tatsuki or Takashi to see her like that.

"This reminds me of the first shrine visit of the year. This place is always full of people. Tatsuki's family makes kimono, so every year, we'd get dressed up for our visit. People would always tell us we looked so pretty or ask if we were

sisters, which would make Tatsuki a little mad, of course. She can be so funny... You know about otakiage events, right? People would bring the talismans they kept in their homes for the past year to this place to be burned and honored in a memorial service. There's always a huge pile of charms and talismans to burn..."

"I'm going to call both of them. Tatsuki and Takashi are both very worried about you."

"Just let me talk a little more. You can call them after. It doesn't really matter."

"Yes, it does matter! They're both frantically searching for you!"

"Every time I would see that pile, I'd find myself wishing someone would burn me up, too."

Mami coughed. I was about to call them when she reached out for my phone to stop me.

I knew she didn't really want to talk to me alone. She didn't really want to talk to anyone.

"...So are you just gonna sit here drinking forever?"

"That wasn't the plan at least. I wanted to finally make a decision."

She stared off into space with a dreamy look on her face as she continued. She wasn't even looking at me, "I thought I could make it work, but I guess I was wrong. In my head, I knew what I needed to do, but I couldn't make my body cooperate. I couldn't sleep. I tried to eat, but it'd all just come right back up. I started losing weight to the point that it was just disgusting. Takashi is such a nice man, too... I guess I was just never going to be capable of marrying a man. I hate myself."

"What's the big deal? You don't have to force yourself to get married! Plus, utilitarian relationships are the furthest thing in the world from romance—that's what my boss thinks at least."

"Do you think I don't know that? It doesn't matter what anyone else says, though. I don't like myself, and I'll never be happy with the way I am. I always

wanted to be a normal woman who got married to a man she loves and lived happily ever after, and I've always despised myself for not being that person."

She let out a scream, and then forced out a laugh, like she was laughing at herself. Just hearing her made my heart ache.

Around the end of April last year, I saw a big parade going down the main street in Shinjuku. There were people in costumes waving rainbow flags, with their arms around the shoulders of their same-sex partners. Someone told me it was a gay pride parade. They were campaigning to end discrimination and prejudice against women who love women and men who love men. I got the sense that Mami's struggles were a bit different than the ones on display at the parade. Even I felt like I could relate, on some level.

"I wonder...if there's anyone out there who's gone their whole life never feeling like they weren't 'normal'? I mean, it's not like you have a say in being born, who your parents are, or your preferences, right? Everyone's a little different, and there are some things that you just can't change no matter what. But still, we're tormented by the idea of 'normal.'"

"Have you ever considered becoming a therapist?"

"Please try to stay focused! I mean, you have someone you love, don't you?"

"It doesn't matter, Tatsuki..."

Mami let out another weird cough mid-sentence. She seemed unsteady.

"...I'm sorry for causing you all this trouble. This had nothing to do with you, but I didn't see any other way."

"Any other way?"

Just as I asked that, she collapsed onto the white sand. The empty paper carton toppled over without a sound, and a plastic bag full of empty pill packages fell out of her brown shoulder bag. Alcohol and pills. This was her plan from the start.

"Mami!"

I shouted at her and smacked her cheeks, but she wouldn't wake up. I don't know what to do. Make her throw it up? But how? I had no idea. *Hospital. I*

*have to get her to a hospital. Ambulance.*

I started running as I called for an ambulance on my phone. I didn't see anyone in the nearby shrine office. I ran to the closest food stall, looking for help, and they told me there was a hospital in the back. The back? The back where? There were plenty of elements here designed to mourn the dead—Kaminarimon, the garden, the pagoda, the temple, the shrine. This wasn't a joke. *Where the hell is the hospital?*

I ran back to the shrine, which was unbelievably quiet, even though someone was passed out on the grounds. I couldn't depend on the ambulance getting there fast enough. Just as I pulled her onto my back and was about to set off, I heard the piercing sound of a car's horn. A dark metallic green sports car was parked in the large bus parking lot behind the main temple building. The silver hood ornament was some kind of animal. A tiger? No, a jaguar. The motor was running, and the driver-side window rolled down. A blond man called my name. *No way.*

"Richard!"

I shouted that Mami had taken sleeping pills, and Richard opened the door to the back seat of the car. The grey leather seats glistened. The car was almost an embodiment of its owner. Richard seemed to be waiting for me to fasten my seatbelt as he adjusted his mirror and shifted gears before thinking aloud:

"As I am a foreigner, I am not very knowledgeable about Japanese traffic signs."

The back wheels of the vehicle rolled up onto the white sand as the metal steed abruptly changed course.

She arrived precisely on time for her appointment: Saturday at eleven 'o clock. The royal milk tea was just the right temperature.

"We've been expecting you. Please have a seat."

Mami had cut her long hair to just below her ears. She looked much healthier than when I first met her, but that wasn't the only reason she seemed more cheerful than before. She looked me right in the eye and smiled.

“It’s been ages. Have you been well? You know, I nearly died in Asakusa last month.”

“I’m well aware. That isn’t very funny. Have you fully recovered?”

“I’m doing great. The wedding’s off, and I’m looking for a new job.”

Just two weeks ago, we’d waited and prayed in the waiting room of a hospital in Asakusa. Even when Tatsuki and Takashi finally arrived, utterly exhausted, the door to the ER still hadn’t opened. When the sun set and a nurse finally came in to tell us she was going to be okay, Tatsuki ran into the room, threw her arms around Mami in the bed, and broke down crying. Mami, who’d regained a hazy state of consciousness, gently stroked Tatsuki’s head with her pale, white hand.

Takashi, on the other hand, was still, watching the two of them from a distance. But that was all two weeks ago.

Richard returned from the back room with a jewelry box in hand. It was the ruby she’d been gifted by Takashi and brought in under the false name of Akashi. What a mess. The box was wrapped in plastic, along with the identification report.

“The stone is 3.05 carats, AAA grade, originating from Mogok in Myanmar. It has not been heat treated. Ten million yen would be a conservative valuation.”

I almost dropped the tray of tea. Ten million. Ten *million*. The stone she so casually dumped at the shop was worth ten million yen.

Mami seemed only a little shocked by the value. She let out a half-hearted “I see,” and looked at the brooch that had finally been returned to her. She looked as though she were staring in a mirror.

After I served the tea, I couldn’t help but ask, “Why did you want to know if it was heat treated or not? Couldn’t you have just asked Takashi?”

“...I guess I was kind of using it to tell my fortune.”

She looked at me and Richard and began telling her story in bits and pieces. Takashi already owned the ruby in question and had it custom-made into the brooch to give to Mami on her birthday. He’d given it to her to try to ease her

cold feet about the wedding, and since a ring might have stirred up more emotions about marriage, he opted for a brooch instead.

“I did a little research and found out about heat treatment. I read that it was very common for rubies to be heat treated to improve their color. I was kind of surprised by that. I guess I always just figured gems were all natural except for their cut.”

Her hand under the jewelry box shifted, making the pigeon blood stone glimmer in the light.

“I also read that because we’ve only had heat treating technology for a few decades, no one knows what will happen to the stones in a century or so. Is that true?”

“If we’re talking about modern heat treatment technology, it’s conceivable someone may have said that. However, rubies have undergone heat treatment for over three hundred years. The process has a long history.”

“The history of the pursuit of beauty, you could say.”

Mami forced an awkward smile, went silent for a moment, and then began to mutter.

“I didn’t regret my decision. I always wanted to be *that girl*. I didn’t think what I was doing was wrong. But...as the wedding got closer, I started to feel afraid of my choice for the first time. And that’s why I wanted to have the ruby checked.”

She explained that if the ruby turned out to be heat treated, she would go through with the wedding. But if it wasn’t, she’d rethink what she was doing. *I guess that’s what she meant by using it to tell her fortune. What on earth?*

“Don’t you have that backwards? I mean, a beautiful, untreated stone is way more valuable.”

“All the more reason I shouldn’t marry someone who would give me something like that. If only he’d given me some cheap trinket instead...”

I was so confused, my eyebrows started to twitch. Richard didn’t say a word. Mami seemed to misunderstand the reason I was frowning.

“He’s not a bad person. Sure, I was surprised he hired a private investigator,



but it came from a good place. He might lose his cool sometimes, but...he really is a kind person.”

I still wasn’t sure exactly what sort of guy Takashi was. There were plenty of things about his behavior I wasn’t crazy about, but he didn’t seem irredeemably horrible, either. But that was probably why she considered marrying him.

Mami continued to speak, giving us more of her story little by little.

“I had this big plan to reinvent myself as a totally different person, but all I managed to do was give myself an eating disorder and destroy my mental health... I think I just wanted someone to tell me what to do. A girl at a bar in Ginza told me about this place. She said it was a jewelry store that wasn’t all that popular. I’m going to return the brooch to Takashi.”

She mumbled that he’d said she could keep it, then closed her eyes and shook her head. Her voice sounded strained as she continued, saying she didn’t know what to say to him.

“You must be tired from all that talking. Please, have some tea.”

Mami took a sip of the tea at Richard’s behest, and her eyes went wide. She stared at me.

“This is really good. Thank you.”

“I learned how to make it from my boss,” I said triumphantly.

Mami forced a smile and turned to Richard, “I believe you told him something to the effect of, ‘utilitarian relationships aren’t love.’ That’s a pretty powerful sentiment.”

Richard shrugged, “You actually remembered that?”

I made an awkward expression, and Mami said to me with a smile, “Thank you for saving my life. It feels strange to be able to say that now, when I’ve wanted to die for such a long time.”

She said it again. I had to wonder if she was really all right.

Richard pulled out the identification report and pointed to the “client” field. Mami’s eyes went wide. It said “Mami Akashi.”

“Could I trouble you to correct this? I do have to ask though, why did you use a false name?”

“...I’m so sorry. I don’t even know, myself. I would use that name for fun when I was living with Tatsuki. Not that I’ve even said it at all recently...”

Mami took another sip of the royal milk tea I’d made. I couldn’t say she was completely happy and free of worry, but she did look relieved. But what do I know, really?

“Um, so I don’t mind if you don’t want to answer this question, but why did you think it would be a good idea to force yourself to get married to a man?”

“Why? Because that is what’s ‘normal’ to most people in the world.”

I looked confused. Mami continued.

“Do any of your friends live with their same-sex partner? Probably not, right? I’m not even talking about discrimination or harassment but the constant exhaustion of knowing you’re not ‘normal.’ It’s like trying to grow vegetables in the middle of the desert. I always wondered why I had to go through all this hardship that other people didn’t, but maybe that’s ultimately a grass-is-always-greener kind of thing.”

“I mean, there are plenty of people who never get married, too.”

“I know.”

Mami told us about how she was raised. Don’t cause other people trouble. Don’t stand out too much. Live a normal life. Go to a normal school. Get married and have kids like a normal person. Raise them like normal. Grow old like normal. She was taught that this was the most comfortable, least remarkable, most trouble-free way to live. For example, she was taught to keep herself at a standard retail size when it came to clothing. Medium. The size that most people wear.

When she was on a school trip in junior high, a massive typhoon hit. Her home was destroyed, and her entire family died. News all over the country covered it as an unfortunate incident.

“That made me stand out a lot,” she said, smiling while hardly moving the rest

of her face. “Tatsuki and I are polar opposites. She hates ‘normal.’ She’s the kind of person who makes her own clothes. I found it charming when we met, but when we lived together, we were so poor. I couldn’t see a future for us, so I couldn’t help thinking that maybe ‘normal’ really was better. I wanted to have an easier life. That’s why I went back to full-time work, too.”

“But it wasn’t easier at all, was it?”

“Sure wasn’t. Deathly so.”

Mami laughed. Her laugh sounded so much brighter than her desperate voice back at the shrine, but I couldn’t help still feeling worried for her.

“I don’t think you should try that again. There are people who might die of grief if something were to happen to you. You’ll be doing them a favor by valuing yourself more. This is starting to sound like a lecture, but I really mean it. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“You’re probably right, but you know, it’s still pretty hard to believe. It’s weird, isn’t it? I’m a total stranger with no family to speak of, but there are people I hurt just by treating myself like garbage.”

“It is pretty weird. But when you love someone from the bottom of your heart, it changes you. I think that’s only natural. I mean, maybe that’s just what love is, right?”

Mami went quiet. I got the sense that she just couldn’t believe someone else loved her. There were a lot of people out there who didn’t like themselves, but I would think the ones who hate themselves so much they want to die are in the minority.

But there was just something about her in that moment, like she felt unbearably sad, guilty, and heartrendingly happy all at the same time.

Mami wiped her eyes and looked at me like a displeased queen. “You don’t look that much younger than me. Has anyone ever told you how presumptuous you are?”

“Sounds like *somebody’s* just being a little childish to me.”

“You know, you really are insufferable. Even if you did save my life.”

I smirked, and Mami let out a slightly bashful laugh. That was the first time I felt like I could understand how the people who spent that day running around Tokyo and crying over her felt. She really was charmingly awkward.

My boss, who had been silently listening the whole time, nodded, took a sip of his tea, and set the cup down.

“Ms. Sasu, do you know what a carat is?”

“You mean like how this ruby is 3.05 carats?” Mami confirmed.

“Exactly,” Richard nodded. Then he looked at me, “Seigi, do you still remember what carats measure?”

“...They’re a unit of measure for the weight of gemstones. One carat is 0.2 grams.”

He replied with a “bravo.” The question made me remember the time I’d asked him why they used carats and not grams. It was the day Mami showed up in the store for the first time.

“It’s said that jewelers in ancient Greece used carob seeds to measure the weight of stones. Each of those seeds weighed around 0.2 grams. In Greek, the word for carob seed is ‘kerátion,’ which eventually became the word carat as we know it today.”

One seed. One carat. I imagined someone with curly hair and dressed in a toga, placing seeds on a scale against a gemstone. I guessed seeds and gemstones were pretty similar in scale in terms of size and weight.

“In short, the carat is a unit of measurement created by jewelers specifically for gemstones and used exclusively for gemstones. It may not have the broad utility of centimeters and kilograms, but it’s still useful for weighing gems. Of course, you could convert it to grams, but personally I find a world with a variety of diverse units of measurement much more comfortable, beautiful, and rich for it.”

Mami giggled, like she understood something.

“Despite your cool and collected demeanor, you’re quite passionate, aren’t you? Well, I hope to be someone who makes the world a richer place, too.”

“Everyone has their own universe, but the main difference is whether they turn their back on it or embrace it to cultivate it into a deep, bountiful sea. You mentioned using the stone to tell your fortune earlier, but the thing is, gemstones are mirrors that reflect their owners. You would have never received an answer that you didn’t already desire.”

“.....”

“Ms. Sasu, I believe you already had your answer the moment you set foot in this shop.”

“...I guess I’m the only one who didn’t know that.”

Richard flashed her a gentle smile that reminded me of a calm sea. I was kind of shocked to learn he could make an expression like that. Mami smiled meekly. She was a pretty impressive person to be able to ignore that face of his.

“So, about the charge for the identification report. How much was it again?”

Richard pulled a single business card from his wallet. Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian. This wasn’t the first time a new customer had come into the shop, but it was the first time I’d actually seen him give someone his card.

“It’s on the house. I believe what you need right now isn’t fine jewelry but to turn your gaze inward to your own sparkling beauty. Should the day come that you desire a gemstone that matches your own inner luster, please contact me. I promise I’ll find you the perfect piece.”

“Thank you. You’ve really gone above and beyond for me.”

Mami bowed deeply, put the brooch away in her shoulder bag, and left the shop.

I was still a little worried, so after a moment, I poked my head out to watch her leave. I was greeted by the rev of a motorcycle engine as a bike with two people on it sped past.

“...You know, I’ve thought this ever since we were coming back from Kobe on the Shinkansen, but you really are a bleeding heart, aren’t you? You care more about your customers’ well-being than profit. Or are you thinking about how you sometimes have to take a loss to profit in the long run?”

“I’m not sure you’d call this a loss. I made a connection with Mr. Homura.”

“With Takashi?”

“I met with him once more after the incident. His family are avid jewelry collectors. We already have plans for me to show them several pieces when next we meet.”

I shouldn’t have expected anything less from a globe-trotting salesman. If someone had a stone that incredible to begin with, landing them as a customer would probably be profitable in the end. He did sound a little embarrassed about it, though.

“What’d Takashi say?”

“Just that if I had any good stones, he wanted to see them. That’s all.”

“...Huh.”

He was a pretty baffling person, too. I still couldn’t believe he told someone he was really in love with that he didn’t care if she cheated on him. Though at the same time, if you were really, painfully in love with someone who was truly hopeless...I could see how you might come to the conclusion that it didn’t matter if you weren’t number one in their heart, as long as you could be by their side. No matter what form that took, or how much you had to give up. I felt like I could understand that a little, at least.

But only just a little. I wasn’t saying I understood pain so bad that it made you want to die.

“...So, Richard, that was the first time I’ve ever spoken to a lesbian at length. Ever since I saw a pride parade in Shinjuku, I sort of just assumed people like that felt proud and happy, even if they had to hide their sexual orientation. But I guess not all of them are like that, huh?”

“Does every person in Japan love sushi and watch sumo wrestling? Generalizing whole groups of individuals as ‘people like that’ is an act of barbarity akin to caging someone’s soul. Furthermore, statistically, five to ten percent of the population is gay. You’ve simply never noticed before.”

“.....”

I guessed no one introduced themselves by specifically mentioning if they were into men or women, and I wouldn't ask. I'd just never thought about it before. It had never really even crossed my mind.

I mean to me, liking the opposite sex was just...normal. But just as something that felt like a given to me was a source of great emotional turmoil for someone like Mami, maybe I had no idea what other people, like Mami or Richard, thought of as normal. Ever since I started working here, I'd seen a side of the world I'd never experienced before. It was a total 180 from working the night shift at the TV station. Honestly, it made me feel a bit like the ground was moving beneath my feet, and sometimes that was kind of scary, but I never thought about leaving, either.

"Seigi, I believe I made this clear when I hired you, but you are to...?"

"Not hold prejudiced views or make discriminatory remarks on the basis of a person's race, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, or any other quality.' I think that's what you're referring to. I remember. Honestly, I kinda like the fact that you're so passionate about that."

"Prejudice isn't a question of preference but one of whether you are offering other human beings the bare minimum courtesy of treating them as human."

Richard cleared his throat when I said that was what I loved about him.

"I've been wondering about this for some time now. Have you ever been hurt by a careless remark?"

Hurt by a careless remark? For as long as I could remember, Grandma would tell me not to hurt others until she was blue in the face. And there was that time in junior high when I called Hiromi a hag, and she made me eat extra-spicy fried rice that really taught me a lesson. *If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all. It's better for everyone involved.*

I replied "no" with a smile and Richard narrowed his blue eyes. He looked like he wanted to say he was surprised. I just didn't get it. No, wait, was this a test of how tolerant I was? I guessed this recent mess was partly my fault for carelessly leaking a customer's information, so it wasn't like he had no reason to test me.

Richard looked at me like he was waiting for something, and I just smiled at him. “You know, you really are shockingly handsome, even when you frown.”

The implication being, “test me all you like.” I had reflected on my actions after that incident, after all.

Suddenly the displeased look left Richard’s face and was replaced with a smile—like flipping a switch. It was strange, though, like a doll made of ice smiling. So beautiful it was terrifying.

“Thank you very much. I think I have a thorough understanding of where you’re coming from.”

“D-do you now? Well, good. You know, you’re kinda...scary right now.”

“We’ve run out of our stock of sweets. Would you run out and buy some more?”

Richard handed me a shopping list and a 10,000 yen note, reminding me not to forget receipts and mentioning that I could buy whatever else I liked. I thanked him and headed out.

I opened up the list: melon jelly from Senbikiya, baumkuchen from Matsuya, soft adzuki jelly from Seigetsudo, leaf pies and limited-edition lemon cheesecake from Shiseido. How did he come up with such a specific list of sweets so fast? Did that mean he’d bought all these things before?

*“This is too much. I can’t buy all this. What are you thinking?”*

Just as I fired off that text, another one came in. It wasn’t from Richard. My heart skipped a beat the moment I saw the name “Tanimoto.”

*“Hi, Seigi! Is it true that you were in a sports car in Asakusa? My friend who works at a shop near the temple said the driving was incredible! Sounds like it was a really interesting game of hide-and-seek!”*

What a misunderstanding. What a massive misunderstanding. And it was already being embellished in the telling.

Just as I opened the message to reply to it, Richard responded to me with a series of texts.

*“Good afternoon, apologies for the length of this message.”*



*"I feel compelled to express to you the depths of the feelings I've had for you since we met."*

*"You are about as charming a partner as one could imagine."*

*"But above all else, I must mention your honest disposition, which at times leads you to offer compliments which are earnest to a fault."*

*"Whenever I watch you work, it fills my heart with sweet joy."*

What? What the hell is this? Was this a romantic confession? There was absolutely no way. Was this his idea of a joke? What was I supposed to say?

I just stood there, reading the string of messages over and over. On my fourth read, I recalled what happened before I left the shop earlier. "I love that about you." "You're handsome even when you frown."

I felt all the blood drain from my body. I guess by "careless remarks," he didn't just mean negative ones. I had it all backwards. He was testing me, but not in the way I thought. I definitely hadn't disparaged people, but—

Just as I was struggling to keep myself from hyperventilating, another message arrived.

*"Now perhaps this is a good time to learn a lesson about the effects of careless compliments."*

*"However innocent or lovely your words may be, your intentions may not always come across accurately."*

*"If you continue to make careless and insensitive comments, you will eventually find that you've run up a rather large tab and payment is due."*

*"Naturally, in addition to understanding this point, I would strongly recommend you work on amending this habit of yours. —Richard."*

How arrogant and roundabout. I wanted to reply, *Who gave you the right to speak to me like that?* My first thought was to go back to the shop and punch him, just like Tatsuki would have done, when another message came in.

I didn't even want to look at it. I didn't even notice that I was on a different message chain when I fired off a reply.

*“Is that sports car yours, Seigi? Show it to me sometime!”*

I’d sent my “got it!” in reply to Tanimoto’s message.

The phrase “just deserts” came to mind. I bought everything on the list and returned to the shop where Richard greeted me like everything was normal. He hadn’t done anything wrong. Really, he hadn’t. It was all my own fault. I’d understood the point he made but failed to put it into practice.

I swore to be more scrupulous about customers’ personal information from then on. I swore to keep it safe. So please, God, Buddha, Lord Richard, please have mercy!



c a s e

3

The Amethyst  
of Protection



**H**OW DO YOU DESCRIBE the way your stomach feels when you have a hangover? Painful? Heavy? Like it's being haunted by a melancholy ghost? It was hard to imagine this thing had been inside my body my whole life. I wanted to open up my chest, reach in, and pull out my stomach to let it dry out in the sun for a while. Surely the sun would be able to rid it of all the acrid, heavy queasiness.

I dragged myself moaning and groaning to the shop in Ginza on Saturday morning. Richard gave me a worried look.

"Good morning. Is something the matter? You don't look well."

"I went out drinking with my exam prep class yesterday..."

"Did you shower when you got back?"

"...I just fell asleep immediately."

"I see."

Richard stood up, took his wallet from his pocket, and handed me a 1,000 yen note.

"There's a public shower, laundromat, and convenience store in front of Shimbashi Station. You have fifty minutes to take a shower, launder your clothing, and chew some mint gum."

"This isn't a host club..."

"Personally, I believe cleanliness is even more paramount in a jewelry shop than a host club—what about you?"

I was powerless in the face of those blue eyes of his. There was nothing I could say at that point.

"If you take more than fifty minutes, I will consider you tardy. On your mark, get set—"

"I got it. I got it already!"

"Go. I expect the change back as well."

I angrily shouted that I'd be right back and dragged myself back down the

stairs. Richard had been so strict with me lately. It felt like he hadn't cut me any slack since the ruby incident. I didn't take this job expecting to be treated like a customer, but as relieved as I was, I did feel like he'd taken it a little too far this time.

Or at least that was how I felt until I took a whiff of my shirt. Nope, I was in the wrong. One hundred percent in the wrong. It gave rank a whole new meaning.

I mingled with the businessmen and homeless people as I shoved my head under the shower. I pulled my clothes out of the dryer and pulled them on, bought some gum at the convenience store, chewed it and spit it out into some paper before returning to the shop where I was surprised to find a customer.

It was a man.

"Wow, late to work, are we? If this were my store, you'd be chewed out."

I threw a "hey" at the man who snarkily greeted me. He was wearing a wrinkled black suit with a wine-red collared shirt underneath. Richard, who was sitting across from him, checked his watch. It'd only been 48 minutes. I was safe, right? I was still safe, I made the baseball hand signal at him, and Richard asked me to make some tea. His tone sounded civil. I guess that meant I did make it.

"Wow, no response? Where's the 'with pleasure!'?"

"I know I've mentioned this before, but this is a jewelry shop."

"Sorry, old habits."

Speak of the devil. A real host actually had showed up at the shop.

I brought out some royal milk tea with extra ice, and the customer said "thanks" with a wink. His hair faded from blond to brown, his lightly tanned skin looked a bit neglected, and he had a loud voice. He was probably in his late twenties. He introduced himself as Satoshi Takatsuki. It seemed a little plain for a working name, so maybe it was his real one.

"So, I'm lookin' for a stone that'll make for a nice conversation piece with my clients. Girls love pretty things, right? Ideally something convenient to carry

around. You know, I heard about this shop. You're pretty cheap, right?"

"I have done favors for various customers of mine, yes."

"Man, you sure talk like a real Japanese dude! Does one of your parents have some Japanese blood in 'em?"

"Neither does, actually."

"I bet you've got a hundred percent success rate with the ladies, don'tcha? Are you sure you're not in the wrong line of work?"

"Sir, what would you like with your tea? We have both sweet and salty options."

"I've got a sweet tooth. You charge extra for this?"

"No, is basic hospitality..."

"That's Ginza for ya! No one's gonna nickel-and-dime you here."

Richard gave him a polite bow and got up from his seat. He was probably going to retrieve products from the safe in the back. Mr. Takatsuki commented on how attractive Richard was, looking at me expecting agreement. I just forced a smile. The cup looked more like a glass of alcohol in his hands. I felt like my heartburn was coming back.

Richard definitely was the most beautiful human I'd ever met, but lately, I'd been making an effort not to voice that even if I did think it. I wasn't sure I could survive another of his counterattacks. I mean, saying someone's pretty didn't mean "I want to go out with you." That was the kind of thing you only said to the person you cared about most at the right time, in the right place. I mean, I wouldn't even try to hit on my angel, Tanimoto. I don't think I *could*, even if I wanted to.

Wait.

Then when *was* I going to tell her that I wanted to go out with her?

I would chat with Tanimoto over text from time to time. Mostly about rocks. Well, pretty much only about rocks. She'd send me photos of specimens she was fond of or particularly unusual rock formations. Like the cliffs in Inubousaki with big round holes carved into them or large grey rocks lined up on the shore

of Ireland. I'd never know about all these places all over the world if I hadn't met her. When Tanimoto got completely absorbed in the world of stones, she was less cute and more...passionate and dashing. And always replied to me *really* fast.

But I would feel a little depressed when our conversations ended. At the end of our longer exchanges, she'd always add, "Let me see your sports car sometime." It was gradually turning into her regular sign-off. Even if it was just a mistake, the enthusiasm on display in my "got it!" made it difficult to correct, and I would always respond "eventually" like an idiot.

I was profoundly jealous of our current customer, who wasn't at the mercy of love but could enjoy romance as a commercial endeavor. Mr. Takatsuki smiled at me.

"What's wrong, kid? Love troubles?"

"Wha—are you psychic or something?"

"Men only look at hosts with one of two things in their eyes: disgust or jealousy. And men who are in love tend to fall into the latter camp. It only makes sense."

"Well, this is embarrassing. You hosts really are incredible."

"That kind of honesty is a talent, too. I think you'd make an excellent host."

"Apologies for the wait."

Richard set a black velvet box on the table. It was about the size of a large chocolate box, and I'd taken to calling it the box of wonders. It was just like a regular jewelry box, with the top connected to the base by a hinge. It looked kind of like an alligator when the lid was open.

Mr. Takatsuki's eyes went wide when the lid slowly opened. Pretty much everyone who came into the shop had the same reaction. Gems were laid out in four rows on black cushions. They weren't part of any jewelry—just plain stones. Red, green, purple, pink, every color you could imagine. These multicolored gems were like a preemptive strike.

Mr. Takatsuki smiled for a moment before letting out a deep sigh.



“I’m kinda speechless! There must be a ton of people who’d kill for an opportunity to see stones like this just once in their lives. I’m absolutely tellin’ my guys about this.”

“That would be most appreciated.”

“I’m curious though, what would you do if I tried to rob you? I could just grab ‘em and run.”

“There are surveillance cameras on the premises, and that young man over there is a blackbelt.”

“Ah ha ha ha. I kid, I kid. You really have this thing figured out, huh? Man, they all look pricey.”

“I believe the appropriate response to that in Japan is, ‘perhaps we can find a way to make it work,’” Richard said with a shrewd smile.

“You really have a head for business,” Mr. Takatsuki said with a smile, leaning over the box.

“Every gem conceals a rich story of its own, so regardless of which you choose, you won’t find yourself wanting for conversation.”

“A rich story, huh? Honestly, to me they’re all just red stones, yellow stones, or purple stones.”

“My customers who find all their options equally attractive tend to have a rather broad and clear aesthetic sense. Please, try picking them up and taking a closer look.”

“...I really think you’re in the wrong line of work.”

Richard’s cool and collected expression didn’t falter at all. Which just made me get annoyed on his behalf. Where did this guy get off, coming into someone’s place of business and telling them “you’re in the wrong line of work”? Mr. Takatsuki shrugged and reached for a random stone, like the option had just occurred to him.

“What’s this red one? It’s not a ruby, is it?”

“That would be a garnet. You have excellent taste, Mr. Takatsuki.”

“Nah, I just saw rubies at another shop. Ruby red is a lot brighter. What’s this green one?”

“This may come as a surprise, but that is also garnet.”

“They’re the same thing?” Mr. Takatsuki asked, pointing at the two stones. Richard nodded.

“Red garnets were extremely popular in 19th century Europe, which is why their Japanese name, *zakuroishi* or pomegranate stone, references the color red. However, garnets are not exclusively red in color. This green stone, demantoid garnet, is from Russia. The blue garnet you may be familiar with from a story featuring a certain famous detective, however, is pure fiction. Garnets come in nearly every color with the exception of blue.”

“...Um, I didn’t catch the name.”

“Of the green stone? Demantoid garnet.”

“No, yours, Mr. Shopkeep.”

There was a brief pause, but Richard’s courteous smile remained untarnished.

“My apologies. My name is Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian. Garnet happens to be the birthstone for January—do you have any interest in garnet, Mr. Takatsuki?”

“Let me be real with you, Richard. Have you ever considered a change of career?”

“Excuse me, sir, would you care for a dessert? We have soft adzuki jelly if you’re interested.”

“Oh, come on kid, read the room. I’m trying to scout your boss here.”

*And that’s why I’m trying to help him out,* I frowned very pointedly so only Richard would see. My boss, whose calm smile never faltered, closed his eyes and bowed.

“Mr. Takatsuki, you have your calling just as I have mine.”

“The night life is so brilliant though. If you like gemstones, I’m sure you’ll take a shine to it. Roppongi’s rough these days. All an average-looking foreign host

has to do is speak a little Japanese, and he's raking in millions a night."

"The brilliance of a human life lasts but a hundred years, but this garnet right here was born from the Earth a hundred million years ago. Gems have long lifetimes, yet they generously accompany us for the duration of ours."

"Now that's what I'm talking about! That's the kind of host I want in my establishment!"

Mr. Takatsuki looked at me again. I knew what he was trying to say, but at the rate things were going, all of Richard's efforts to make a sale were going to be in vain. I flashed him a slightly displeased face, and Mr. Takatsuki smiled a glorious smile at Richard. It made him look young, but this was his manager side, not his host side, I supposed.

"I don't really care how old you are, with that ageless face of yours. You could keep working here on the side while you come work for me, if you want. It'll earn you a little extra cash and get you some more clients looking for jewels."

"Although I do harbor a deep desire to assist those seeking gemstones, I myself am not a product for sale, so I must humbly reject your offer."

"Then maybe I can persuade your employee here, instead."

Richard abruptly wiped the smile from his face, and Mr. Takatsuki awkwardly raised both his hands.

"Sorry, my bad. What's this purple stone then? Are they all garnets?"

"...That would be an amethyst. Crystalline quartz."

"Amethyst! Even I know what that one is! It sure is pretty."

"Please feel free to pick it up and take a closer look."

Mr. Takatsuki said, "Don't mind if I do," and picked up the amethyst with his fingertips. It was about as big as my pinky nail—probably double the size of my pink sapphire.

Richard mentioned that you could view the stone from more angles if you set it between two fingers on top of your hand. He demonstrated, setting the stone in between his pointer and middle fingers before placing it on Mr. Takatsuki's hand in the same fashion. Mr. Takatsuki finally smiled.

“You sure have beautiful fingers. Is there some kind of story behind amethysts?”

“Excellent question. Humans’ relationship with amethysts goes back a very long time. If we reach back beyond the realm of written history, we find amethysts in grave goods at prehistoric sites, and we have records of the nobility in ancient Egypt using them as stamps on documents. It’s not nearly as hard a stone as diamond, ruby, or sapphire, so they found more uses in day-to-day life. It’s the birthstone for February and is said to help cultivate an open heart, love, and intuition.”

“Where do you learn all that stuff? Is there a school or something?”

“I learn every day. In the course of my work, I have many opportunities to acquire new information, and I count among my customers some specialists who are far more knowledgeable than I.”

“Your world sure is fascinating. Just makes me want to hire you as a host even more. So, is it expensive?”

The moment Richard said the price was 5,000 yen, both Mr. Takatsuki and I made a weird face.

“Huh? Are you sure that’s not off by a zero?”

“The price is neither 500 yen, nor 50,000 yen. The prices of all goods and services, not limited to gemstones, are determined by the balance of supply and demand. And as the supply of amethysts is most steady and abundant, it is possible to acquire rather high-quality stones for a relatively low price. This particular stone came from Brazil, the world’s foremost producer of amethyst, though they were commonly produced in Japan just a few decades ago—stones from Yamanashi are quite famous.”

Mr. Takatsuki looked vaguely frustrated, saying that prefecture is known for its grapes. Richard smiled.

“Is it not a remarkable twist of fate that beautiful gem-like fruits are grown on the same land beautiful gemstones were mined from?”

“Don’t you play favorites! Yamanashi’s not the only place that makes good grapes. I mean, they’re good, but...this is getting off topic. Please tell me more

about the stone.”

Richard bowed and began speaking eloquently again, almost like a talking doll.

The scientific name for the stone was quartz. I supposed it was kind of like how ruby and sapphire are both corundum. There were all sorts of varieties of the mineral—citrine, smoky quartz, rose quartz, and so on—but they were all chemically almost identical and were all about the same hardness. A lot of mineral enthusiasts collected it. Excessive exposure to sunlight could cause the color to fade, so care had to be taken when storing them. In Europe in the Middle Ages, amethysts were prized by high-ranking members of the Christian clergy and treasured as spiritual artifacts. In the realm of fortune-telling, they were used as pendulums for dousing. And so on and so forth.

Richard talked about stones seemingly forever. If you told him to talk, he could probably go on for an entire day. If you closed your eyes and listened, you’d never know it wasn’t a Japanese person talking. His voice was neither too high, nor too low, and it had a mysterious warmth to it—like someone holding you tight. If I were Mr. Takatsuki, I’d ask him to stop, or apologize and leave. Me though, I could never do it. It’d be like being in the same cage as a ferocious beast and trying to force it to do tricks. Terrifying.

While I was refreshing their tea, I stole a glance at Mr. Takatsuki’s expression, thinking it was getting about time for him to get going. But he was utterly bewitched by Richard—he wouldn’t even look at me. His enthusiasm was tremendous.

“Your tank empty yet? Or can you keep going?”

“Hm, Mr. Takatsuki, you wouldn’t happen to know the origin of the name ‘amethyst,’ would you?”

“I wish I could respond to that with an, ‘of course I do,’ but I’m not so lucky this time. What language is it? English?”

“Greek, actually. ‘Amethystos,’ meaning ‘to not become intoxicated by alcohol.’”

It felt like the atmosphere in the shop suddenly changed in that instant. Mr.

Takatsuki's expression grew a bit more serious. Richard seemed to notice.

"Oh, so it's a gemstone that prevents drunkenness? Like a healing crystal?"

"It's an old legend. This stone has a beautiful purple color, so perhaps that's why it became associated with wine. It is said that Bacchus, the god of wine, offers his divine protection to owners of this stone."

"'To not become intoxicated,' 'to not become intoxicated,' huh? ...Yeah, I like it."

He sounded unnatural and listless as he added excuse upon excuse. I was sure he was going to buy it. He went down the line, looking at the other stones, but ultimately settled on the Amethyst, just like I expected.

"Do you just sell it like that? Or can I have it set?"

"You mean this amethyst? I can have it set in a piece of your choosing—a ring, a tiepin, bracelet, or whatever else you might like. Of course, the cost and timeframe will vary, depending on exactly what you choose. I can have a designer sketch something up for you as well."

"Yeah, I don't need anything that fancy. You've gotta have like a catalog I can pick from or something. That's good enough for me. Probably shouldn't go for a tiepin, it'd be hard to tell if I dropped it or something. What would be fastest? A necklace would be fine, too."

"If you aren't set on this particular stone, I do have finished amethyst accessories in stock."

"I like your gumption. Lemme see what you've got then."

It was only another fifteen minutes after Richard went into the back room to replace the contents of the box of wonders that Mr. Takatsuki left the shop. Richard had three amethyst pendants to choose from, and Mr. Takatsuki selected the largest one. The stone was at least the size of my thumbnail and cut into a square with rounded corners. Its edges were wrapped in gold. It was a pure purple, like a morning glory, and the back was rounded off so as to not scratch the wearer's skin when worn. The chain was the same gold as the wrapping around the stone. It was rather delicate, as it had been designed as a piece for a woman, but when Mr. Takatsuki put it on, you could just about smell

the aroma of nightlife wafting off it.

The price: 15,000 yen.

“It’s almost like a toy,” Mr. Takatsuki said with a smile.

He left the shop in high spirits, oblong jewelry box with amethyst pendant inside in hand. He couldn’t resist asking Richard to think his offer over before he left though.

“...Think he was drunk?”

“I’m quite sure he was sober. That was all an act.”

“Do you think he’ll return it later?”

“He won’t. He appeared to be satisfied with his purchase.”

Richard sat down in one of the lounge chairs and massaged his temples. That was unusual. I emptied the pot and added some fresh tea, deciding to make him some that was a hundred times tastier than my last batch.

“Do you really have surveillance cameras in here?”

“I have a contract with a security firm. I don’t particularly mind that you sing and dance when you make tea, so please, feel free.”

I knew about the camera at the entrance, but I guessed there were cameras in the shop proper, too. But there were only valuables in the store when Richard was here, so the real concern was less burglars and more customers with ill intent.

“Maybe I really should pick up karate again to get back in shape. There’s a club at my university.”

“I thought a part-time job was meant to make your life easier. I won’t raise your pay if you do that.”

“I’m just frustrated. If I were a little more imposing, that sort of thing wouldn’t happen. I mean he was so rude.”

“If anything’s rude, it’s the fact that you arrived to work hungover.”

“...I’m very, very sorry about that.”

“Just don’t let it happen again. No need to let today’s incident weigh on your mind beyond that.”

“But—”

“I’m used to it,” Richard added. His voice was as cold as a colorless gemstone.

I’ve always had exceedingly average looks, so I’ve never felt especially flattered by compliments on my appearance or particularly upset by insults to it, either. That said, I didn’t think there were all that many men who were routinely scrutinized for their appearance, unless they’re on Richard’s level.

The place my mother worked at before her current job at the hospital had a serious sexual harassment problem, and she’d often complain over a beer that she wasn’t dressing herself for their sake. Richard had the same feeling about him now.

Beauty wasn’t something people engaged with to please strangers. People were welcome to appreciate what they would, but they should know it didn’t give them the right to treat people however they wanted.

“Um, so...I swear I don’t mean anything weird by this, like, seriously, I don’t mean it like you might think, but—”

“Don’t you think that excessively long and circuitous preambles are rather rude, too?”

“I just wondered if you feel like people telling you you’re handsome and beautiful is kinda...insulting. Sorry,” I added, and Richard made a strange face. After a moment, he smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. There was something eerily childlike about his expression.

“Do you think telling someone with blond hair that they have blond hair is some kind of insult?”

“You know, I really don’t love it when you act so full of yourself! Agh, I put my foot in my mouth and said ‘love’ again!”

“Just stop talking for a moment. I know what you meant. Do not worry about it,” Richard repeated emphatically. He returned the products to the safe and took a sip of the fresh milk tea I’d made when he came back.



I never thought of myself as someone who would perpetrate sexual harassment, but I might've been a lot more insensitive than I realized. At this rate, I just knew I'm going to say something stupid to Tanimoto and ruin everything. I've gotta be better.

Richard sat alone in the lounge, eating the leftover adzuki jelly. It tasted just like red bean paste, but it was clear and there were goldfish—both common and fancy ones—swimming in the sweet, delicate substance. A little while ago, I asked him if he thought Japanese confections paired well with milk tea, and he glared at me, saying I was belittling royal milk tea. It was starting to seem more like a religious belief than mere opinion.

Richard called my name, as though he noticed I'd been staring at him. He was still looking at the dessert as he spoke.

"What? If you tell me not to look at you. I won't."

"The only relationship between you and I is that of employer and employee. Praising my appearance won't make me any more inclined to raise your wages, and I'm sure you're aware of that. Praise with ulterior motives is just sycophantic bootlicking. That said, earnest, spontaneous words of praise are an exclamation of sorts, nothing more and nothing less. The natural beauty of gemstones—even of those with little financial value—can soothe the hearts of people and grant them strength to keep going. I believe that is the true value of beauty."

"I think I get what you're saying. That's kind of how I feel whenever I look at you."

"Then perhaps it would be fair to say that your 'you're beautiful' comments are essentially the equivalent of 'I'm in a good mood because the weather is so lovely today.' They do not bother me."

"Thank you. Well, if I do say something like that again by accident, I would really appreciate it if you just brushed it off."

I forced a smile, and Richard frowned. What did I do this time?

"...While it may not bother *me*, surely you have invited your fair share of unfortunate misunderstandings by making rash comments without much

thought?”

“What do you mean, rash? It’s not like I call just anyone beautiful at the drop of a hat. Don’t make me sound like a weirdo. I’m shy, just like the vast majority of Japanese folks. I don’t say that sort of thing unless someone’s so beautiful I feel really compelled to. Well, maybe not to hosts. If I’m being honest, your face is so beautiful it’s not even human—I wouldn’t compare your beauty to nice weather but rather to diamond dust or an aurora.”

“Please, stop talking,” Richard said in a stifled voice. He silently went back to eating his confection before vanishing into the back room. It was odd to see him get up when there was still one piece left.

I didn’t think I’d really said anything that outlandish, considering his example about how calling a blond person blond wasn’t an insult, but maybe I shouldn’t have said that. Richard’s comment about running up a tab that would come due scared me, but I wanted to believe I’d be fine if I was extra careful from now on. *I just need someone to cut me some slack. Please, gods, I’m begging you, overlook my mistakes once in a while!*

I began wiping down the table, and Richard returned with a sullen look on his face. He looked a little red, even.

“Hey, were you like, punching a pillow or something? I heard a bunch of dull *fwumps* from back there.”

“I just had a sudden urge to get some boxing practice in. It had absolutely nothing to do with you, so pay it no mind.”

Refusing to look me in the eye, my boss sat back down in one of the lounge chairs by the window and clasped his hands. He looked like something was bothering him, and it didn’t seem like a sudden stomachache. The whole thing was very unusual. Richard silently stared out the window for a bit before abruptly mumbling,

“...I wonder if he really deserved to own that amethyst.”

“What?”

What was he going on about? Didn’t he land the sale he was working on that whole time? Richard hung his head, burying it in his clasped hands.

“I believe that every stone deserves to end up in the hands of someone who understands its true beauty and will treasure it—such would be a happy ending for both parties. But it makes me wonder... How should I put this... Yes, perhaps I, too, have acted rashly.”

“You mean you wish you hadn’t sold it to him?”

“Rather that I wonder if selling it to him was the right decision.”

There’s a difference? Richard was being weird. I’d never seen him question a sale like that before. I know he said he was used to it, but after the way that customer treated him, maybe it put him in a bad mood. No...he didn’t really seem *irritated*. The beautiful jewelry store owner had a weary expression on his face, like he was worried it might rain tomorrow.

“Well, he bought it because he wanted it. Gemstones are products, after all. And if he paid the price you set, he must have felt that amethyst was worth at least that much. I don’t see the issue.”

“I don’t think that’s the whole story. I think the thing he was most taken with wasn’t the stone at all.”

“...But you?”

My boss scowled at me, silently ordering me to be quiet. If I was wrong, I wondered what he was getting at? His seemingly endless well of sales talk? Or the relaxing atmosphere of the shop itself?

Richard seemed deeply distressed by the whole thing, but nothing was making sense to me. Mr. Takatsuki didn’t seem like the kind of person who particularly needed our concern. He liked his job, and sure, he was a little overbearing at times, but he seemed like a fun guy. He definitely came off as a bit impulsive, but there were tons of guys like that at my school, who ran on nothing but vibes and passion.

“I don’t really think you have anything to worry about, but...I think every person who buys gems has their own reasons for doing it and their own reasons for liking them. It probably just put him in a good mood when he put that beautiful stone on, and he’ll get over not being able to hire you.”

“There’s only so much a good mood can do. Working in that sort of industry is

rough, no matter what country you're in. I don't believe he really meant what he said. The disparity between his words and his actions suggests some kind of cognitive dissonance."

"You're reading too much into it. I don't think he was thinking that deeply about anything he said. I thought you said you were used to people making passes at you? Don't worry about it so much."

"That's not what I mean. Those who grow intoxicated with beauty far beyond their means are destined to fall to ruin."

"Intoxicated with beauty" and "destined to fall to ruin" would probably rank pretty high up there if there were a "phrases I'd love to say some day" ranking. *What is he even talking about?*

"Gemstones are just gemstones. They may be beautiful, but that doesn't mean they make people unhealthily obsessed with them. I mean, you're the most beautiful person I've ever met, but the person I'm in love with is Tanimoto."

"Excuse me?"

Crap. That was beyond stupid. Why did I say her name? Wait, no, maybe I could turn this into an opportunity. I couldn't make things worse now, so I might as well ask him about the car.

I looked at Richard bashfully and explained that I had a crush on this girl and she was my friend at school who loved rocks and was super cute. I explained that, long story short, someone told her that they'd seen me in the Jaguar. The porcelain-faced beauty stared at me as he jabbed his fork into the remaining goldfish jelly, slicing the decorative fish clear in half. *Please, I'm begging you, just get it over with.*

"So, uh, I was wondering... I have my driver's license. I drive my mom's car all the time, and I've never been in an accident or pulled over."

"That's an impressive record for someone who seems like he'd be constantly distracted behind the wheel. Fascinating story."

"Don't assume the worst about me! I believe in safety first. I'm especially careful to check for children or elderly pedestrians, I yield to vehicles behind

me, and I'll even drive below the speed limit just in case something happens. I don't get mad or panic if I hear someone honk at me from behind, either."

I'd be in trouble if someone asked me to floor it, but I was confident in my safe driving skills. I was such a safe driver that when I drove my mom to work when she had a cold, she praised me saying, "I think you drove almost *too* safe." For some reason, she didn't let me drive very much after that, though.

Richard smiled sweetly. He was like a jewel sitting in direct sunlight. I got my hopes up for a positive response.

"They're about five million used, from what I understand."

"What?"

"Jaguars. I hope the drive is worth it."

*Um, that's not what I meant. I was hoping you'd understand that I was asking to borrow yours*—is what I nearly said before I gave up. Richard skewered both pieces of the jelly with his fork and ate them in one bite. How brutal. This was bad. He had a terrifying aura about him. He had this look in his eyes like if I opened my mouth now, he'd say he'd kill me. Richard probably hated talking about personal stuff during work. I guess I should have known after how he reacted to me showing up hungover.

"My mind is exhausted from speaking so much of my non-native language. Tea."

"Yessir, I'll be right back."

"But first, where's my change?"

"...It was only 40 yen."

"Change."

I guess no matter how casual the workplace, bosses are still bosses and employees are still employees. I mean, this wasn't a host club, and I'd never been chewed out by my boss, but I supposed expecting him to be so lenient that I could get away with not following instructions was out of the question. I had to get my act together.

The following Friday, I was dragged along to go drinking with some college friends. We ended up in the same bar in Roppongi as last week. One of the older guys in my prep class was very eager to invite me. I thought the professor would be coming, but that wasn't the case at all—even the guy who invited me ended up not being able to make it. It ended up being a peculiar party made up of just six second year students. There were no girls in the class to begin with, so there wasn't even that to look forward to.

It was a trendy bar, but not the kind of place a bunch of single guys could really relax. The interior design was so overdone, all form over function. The prices were middling, and there wasn't much in the way of food. After two hours of partying, things were starting to drag.

“That reminds me, Seigi, you quit your weekend shifts. I hardly see you at all these days, man.”

“Yeah, I started another part-time job.”

“What kind of job?”

I knew if I answered honestly, saying I worked at a jewelry store mostly serving tea, it would turn into a Q&A session since everyone was bored and didn't have anything else to talk about. What should I say instead, though? That I was handing out flyers? No, that wouldn't be believable. I'd be getting paid more working the night shift than that.

“Uh, um...I'm in the hospitality industry.”

“Oh, are we doing twenty questions? Are you a host?”

“Seriously?! How much does it pay? What's the place like?”

“No hostesses there? Are there any hotties? Like among your customers?”

“You're gonna destroy your liver working a job like that. That shit is seriously rough.”

I guess the Q&A session was unavoidable after all. I was an idiot for trying to lie about it. Convincing them they were wrong was going to be a pain. I visualized the fictitious club. The owner was a foreigner, and I served drinks. We got a lot of customers from overseas and the prices were reasonable. Honestly,

it wasn't that far off the mark.

I mostly told them the truth—other than the fact that it was a jewelry shop—and my drunk classmates listened intently. I got a little carried away and started speaking triumphantly about how attractive my boss was—the blond-haired blue-eyed polyglot who was possessed of such overwhelming beauty that it was hard to believe that such a living creature even existed. The atmosphere changed when I got to that topic.

They were all staring at me for some reason.

“...So you're, like, alone with this boss of yours in the shop?”

“Whoa, that's sick. What do you two get up to when there are no customers around?”

“What do you mean, what do we get up to? I make drinks, clean, and run errands. Stuff like that.”

When they asked me how I'd gotten the job, I told them that I'd saved my now boss from some drunks on the street one night. The moment I mentioned that, the dull atmosphere did a total 180. My drunk classmates openly scowled at me and started hurling insults my way.

“Dang, dude, you really... Nah, no way.”

“What? I don't understand.”

“It's like she got handed to you on a silver platter. Let me switch places with you!”

“Just hurry up and get dumped and have your dreams crushed so you can go cry alone in your room.”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait!”

For some reason they didn't believe me when I clarified that my boss was a man. It was so unfair. I wasn't lying. They kept insisting that because I said he was attractive, I must have feelings for him. It made no sense. Why did I have to be in love with someone just because I thought they're beautiful?

“I mean it's not like there's just one type of beauty! It's like Mt. Fuji on New Year's Day, or the sun setting over the horizon, that kind of beauty! It's like one

of those things accidentally took human form by some twist of fate. Dating isn't even a question for the kind of thing I'm talking about."

"What the hell is a hottie like Mt. Fuji? You're not making any sense."

"What, is your boss some kind of literal angel?"

"Yeah right."

The whole thing was torture, but I guessed I got what I deserved for making up an elaborate story when I wasn't a good liar to begin with. I just stopped caring, cut out early, and went home. My friend, Shimomura, said he'd walk me to the station. I tried to lose him when we left the club, but he stopped me with an "um, so..." and an awkward look on his face.

"I know you probably don't know this, but the guy from our cram class who invited us here owns this club."

"What?"

"He wanted to be his own boss, so he got into the food services industry, but it's still not turning a profit. Seems like he's friends with the third years, so he's been using us as fodder."

Now it all made sense. That was why he specifically took us to Roppongi, of all places. There was supposedly a pretty strong business focus in that prep class, so it made sense that the older students might be starting up on their own. He must've been losing money.

I told him I didn't know and thanked him, and Shimomura gave a strained smile.

"You know, I think I kinda get what you were talking about earlier. I know it's dumb, but I love getting to see Tokyo Tower out the window of the Yamanote Line so much I could just die. The view from around Hamamatsucho Station is the best—it's that angle right across from the JOQR building. You only get to see it for the second because the train's moving, but it's incredible around sunset. Just a taste of that view recharges my batteries even when I'm exhausted. I think that's the kind of beauty you were talking about, right?"

"Yes. Yes, that's what I was talking about. That's exactly what I was talking



about.” I felt like my head might come off from nodding so much. Shimomura’s face crumpled into a smile that seemed like a 50/50 mixture of happiness and discomfort.

“That sorta thing is so hard to talk about.”

“...I wish you could’ve said that back at the club. Also, there’s nothing dumb about it.”

“You think so? I took a girl on the train at my favorite time during a first date and told her to look when we got to the spot, but it just confused her. Just a ‘Huh? What?’ and that was it. I guess not everyone has the same idea of what’s beautiful.”

“Well, I’m one hundred percent positive you’d be bowled over if you met my boss. I guarantee it.”

“I’m just glad you’re happy.”

“Not going home yet?”

“I’ll hang out until the last train. I don’t have any reason to go home really. See ya.”

The night had ended without me clearing up much of anything with the guys, but I thought I got through to Shimomura and that was good enough for me.

I knew exactly what he meant when he said that not everyone had the same idea of what was beautiful. There were as many models of beauty as there were people in the world. There was nothing you could be entirely certain that every single person would find “beautiful.” At least, that made sense to me. Though I wasn’t sure I’d make the leap from that to the idea that you think something’s beautiful just because of love.

I didn’t think love and beauty were the same at all. Sure, there could be things you loved *because* they’re beautiful and things you thought were beautiful *because* you loved them, but I didn’t think they were the same. If I was going to take a stance on anything from now on, it’s that. My feelings for Tanimoto were wholly unique. I couldn’t compare them to my feelings for anyone or anything else.

I wondered when I'd be able to muster the courage to tell her I was in love with her and wanted to go out with her? Maybe she'd tell me she loved me, too, with that adorable smile on her face.

Well, I shouldn't get ahead of myself. I had to deal with the sports car thing first. What was I supposed to do? I wished I could find a clever way to tell her I didn't actually own the car without disappointing her. I wanted to find a way to make a grand comeback and turn my mistake into an opportunity. The voice in the back of my mind betrayed me though, vividly reminding me that it wouldn't work and that I should just give up already.

I guessed people kind of got drunk on love and flip-flopped between visions of heaven and hell. My thoughts kept racing to either extreme. What if it made her hate me and she wouldn't text me anymore, let alone talk to me? No, I just needed a good opportunity to take her on a rock-themed date or something. But what kind of date would that even be? Going out somewhere with hammers to mine rocks?

As I let my increasingly ridiculous daydreams run wild in my head, I found myself getting lost on the unfamiliar streets. *Crap. Which way is the subway station?* Neon signs lined the road, along with women with big curly hair wearing skimpy dresses. If I got dragged into one of those scam joints, that'd be the end of me.

I just had to go back. Retrace my steps. ASAP.

In my rush to turn around, I ended up getting my foot caught on a pile of garbage bags on the corner of the street. I couldn't move my leg. I stumbled pretty dramatically but managed to grab on to a telephone pole and save myself.

"That was close!"

I would have smashed my face into the telephone pole if my hands hadn't reacted fast enough. Hiromi would have my head if I ended up getting ferried away in an ambulance because I was drunk. My more immediate concern was that I still couldn't move my leg, buried in trash bags. They seemed suspiciously heavy. I strained my eyes in the dark to see what it was.

In the pile of trash beneath my feet, atop the transparent bags of trash, was...

...a person.

“Wah!”

They’d fallen over, splayed out flat on their face. And they weren’t moving. Surely, they were just asleep, right? Just in case, I timidly touched the person’s throat with my hand and felt a pulse. But they were very warm.

“Are you okay? I can call an ambulance,” I said loudly, but their response was slow. The person just groaned. They were wearing a grey button-down shirt and a vest made of a shiny black material. And they stank of booze. “Do you remember your name? How old are you?”

“...Satoshiiii Takatsuki. I’m twenty-seveeeen.”

Satoshi Takatsuki? Wait. *That* Satoshi Takatsuki?

His body slid off the pile of trash bags and did a half tumble on his way down, landing on his butt as he hit the ground. He was positioned like an awkwardly sat up teddy bear, his face was red, and he was barely conscious. I lifted up his chin a bit to get a better look at his face. He was burning up. It was dark, so I could barely make out his features, but I knew this wasn’t good.

I used the telephone pole to confirm the street we were on, called an ambulance, and ran to the red-light district. *I feel like this has been a recurring theme in my life lately.* I asked the women for help with someone who’d passed out. They reacted quickly, like this was a common occurrence for them. Three people from separate shops came to help, but none of them knew who he was or where he worked. I told them his name was Takatsuki, but it didn’t help. Before long, one of them headed back to their shop and returned with a pitcher full of water.

Sirens and flashing lights approached while he was still vaguely conscious. Mr. Takatsuki groaned, and his head flopped over. I noticed something glittering around his neck. It was a gemstone.

It was an amethyst pendant set in gold and dangling off a delicate golden chain.

Two helmet-wearing EMTs came out of the ambulance, asking if anyone knew the man. It was becoming a bit of a scene, and people in suits and dresses

started emerging from the other shops. I timidly responded.

“...His name is Satoshi Takatsuki, and he says he’s 27 years old.”

One of the EMTs kept calling his name. I looked around, but no one else responded. Even when another call went out for anyone that might know him, people just exchanged confused glances amongst themselves. I had an awful feeling about letting them take him off to the hospital alone.

“I’ll go with you.”

“What’s your relation to the man?”

“...He’s one of our clients.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

I nodded. I wasn’t lying, either. I’d gotten a good look at his face when they laid him out on the stretcher. It really was him. His arms and legs flapped about, and he began shouting the name “Nozomi” over and over.

I sent off a text just before I got into the ambulance. It was nearly midnight, but I figured he’d still be up. My boss, that was.

The sliding door opened up, revealing a four-bed room. The morning light was blinding as it poured in through the windows. White frame beds sat atop the featureless cream floor. Only one of the four beds was occupied, by a tan man in hospital pajamas.

“Hey.”

I gave a cheerful greeting, and Satoshi opened his eyes before crumpling back into bed, bitter expression on his face.

“Oh, it’s you... Um, what was your name again?”

“Seigi Nakata. You really gave me a scare last night. Are you okay now?”

“Well, as you can see, I’m not dead. When I woke up, they told me a young man who described me as a ‘customer’ came with me and waited until I was out of the woods. I couldn’t figure out what shop it coulda been for the life of me... Um... What the hell were you doin’ out there anyway? Also, it’s Saturday,

isn't it? Shouldn't you be working in Ginza right now?"

"My boss let me come in late today. Trust me, I'm more shocked about that than anyone."

"...You know, I never wanted to be the kind of old man who makes kids take care of him."

I sat down next to his bed, and Satoshi gave a defeated shrug.

"You probably figured it out already, but I'm not actually a host."

Satoshi began to tell his story in bits and pieces. His amethyst pendant was strewn on the table next to a cup of water. It looked much duller than it had when it was back at the shop. But maybe it was just the hospital's fluorescent lighting not doing it any favors.

Satoshi explained that he was a bartender at a club in Roppongi. It was primarily a hostess club, not a host club. He said he didn't have a particularly high tolerance for alcohol, "just an average one." Two glasses of wine would have him dizzy and forgetting things, almost like he'd been drugged. But despite that, it was a point of pride for him that he had a very thorough understanding of the flavor of each alcohol. His family ran a vineyard in the mountains of Nagano. He described it as "painfully out in the boonies," in a hushed, embarrassed voice.

Anyway, after a reckless move to Tokyo, he started working at the club and fell in love.

"Nozomi Hanasaki is her working name, but her real name is Nozomi Kanzaki, and she's a real heavy drinker."

"Your *girlfriend* is a heavy drinker?"

"Why is that what you focus on and not the fact that I'm dating a hostess?"

Nozomi was more of the bubbly, cutesy type of hostess. She overflowed with powerful customer service energy. She was the type of person who couldn't say "no" when everyone was having fun. She could never bring herself to pressure clients into drinking themselves into oblivion, so she'd offer to drink for them. As a result, despite being two years younger than Satoshi, her gamma-glutamyl

transferase levels were already in dangerous territory.

“Gamma...what?”

“Glutamyl transferase.”

“I’m surprised you can remember that.”

“Of course I can, it’s about Nozomi,” Satoshi said like it was a given. It sounded as though she was like family to him already. “It’s not like you can’t make money if you don’t drink like that, but she likes having fun with her customers, and she can’t say no to their suggestions. I did tell her to just stop drinking, for the record.”

“Guess that didn’t really work though, huh?”

“You can’t survive in the business if you don’t drink at all. Honestly, if I really wanted to stop her, I’d have to get her to quit her job. But we’re barely scraping by with both our earnings right now. I know tons of kids your age who want to work part-time in the biz, but it’s really not a great line of work. Your liver can’t hold out forever.”

“But when you came to our shop, you were putting on this whole influential host act.”

“.....”

He groaned and put his head in his hands.

“Are you okay?”

“...Nozomi’s gotten obsessed with a host lately. That’s where all her money’s going—to supporting him.”

I let out a little “huh?” and Satoshi gave me a dubious look. The tone of his grumbling made it sound like it was nothing out of the ordinary, but the subject matter didn’t seem to mesh with that. His girlfriend was seeing a host?

“But you’re still together...?”

“Yeah...I’d be mad if she was dating another man, but hosts are kinda like idols. When they’re on the clock, they might technically be men, but they’re not ‘real,’ in a way. I dunno if that makes any sense to you, though. It’s just like how

someone being a hostess's number one client doesn't mean they're *dating* her."

That was true, I supposed, but was he really satisfied with that arrangement? I looked at him trying to find an answer in his face, and he just laughed with a ragged expression. I guess not.

"Nozomi lives for the night life. I know that. And I know that's why she spends money on that guy. She says that it's fun for *her* to see him having fun at the club with her money, that it makes her feel accomplished. It just sounds so depressing...but it's depressing for me, too. I mean, who is this host guy anyway? Don't you already have a bartender for a boyfriend? At most, we're talking the difference between a common goldfish and a fancy breed—they're still both goldfish."

"I guess that sounds kinda like the difference between Richard and me."

"It's torture."

Apparently Nozomi had told him that hosts were just "dazzling." This was the guy who told me that regular men only look at hosts with one of two things in their eyes: disgust or jealousy. And that it tended to be jealousy for men who were in love.

When his girlfriend essentially told him that he wasn't "dazzling," he made a decision. He would make a change. He would work to become the owner of a host club rather than a lowly bartender.

"So you decided to... Wait, are you being serious? That's so reckless."

"That's easy for you to say when you have no idea how much a popular host can make in a night. It's absurd. A club *or two* can get by on one popular guy. That's how this world works. I'm not kidding when I say attractive men can keep the world turning."

"...Still, I think it's a pretty crazy idea."

He looked a little embarrassed. Of course, I didn't know anything about the industry, but I was a little dubious that success could come so easily. I feel like host clubs would be all over the place if it really was that simple. The most laid-back person in my prep class has to be either me or Shimomura, and I just knew

even he'd be a little suspicious if I asked his opinion on this.

If a good man was enough to bring customers in, you'd first need to find that man—which was why Satoshi had been walking around Tokyo looking for “dazzling” men. He started pretending to be a host because it was hard to imagine getting a favorable response from people with, “Hi, I’m a bartender, would you like to become a host?”

“But I couldn’t find the right guy. The young ones would always get nervous at the mere mention of the industry, and when I got a bite, they’d immediately start asking me to lend them money.”

“Well...I guess that’s to be expected...”

He had zeroed in on the area around jewelry shops to hunt for host candidates. I think his theory that men going to buy jewelry either were hosts or would be interested in becoming one was pretty off the mark, but regardless, his dedication to getting something done when he put his mind to it was impressive. At any rate, he would loiter near jewelry shops and approach men going into or coming out of them. Whenever the employees chased him off, he'd move to another store. Just listening to the story was starting to get painful.

After failing more times than he could count, Satoshi found himself meandering around the shops on the outskirts of Ginza. That was when he saw something that hit him like a bolt of lightning. Richard.

“I was so shocked. A man who looked like he'd stepped right out of a classic Hollywood film was standing there, talking to a shop owner in fluent Japanese. I heard them chatting about how the sponge cake at that café over there was delicious and how he wishes the public bath nearby offered laundry services, too, and so on. After he left, I asked the shop owner about him and was told he owned a new jewelry shop in the area. I thought it must be fate. I mean, seriously, if anyone's born to be a host, it's him. Honestly, why is he in the jewelry business? He could make a living off that face alone.”

“I’m not sure he'd appreciate it if you told him that.”

“I’m being serious though.”



Put it the wrong way, and “you have a nice face” can sound like it comes with an implicit, “and it’s the only aspect of you that has any value.” Of course, Richard’s looks were definitely extraordinary, and I didn’t doubt he’d have at least the same power to attract guests that the pandas at Ueno Zoo did. But it wasn’t like he just stumbled into being an Englishman with perfect Japanese running jewelry shop by no effort of his own.

“...I mean, he came all the way from Europe to Japan to open a jewelry shop. I think he has a pretty good reason to be doing that.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, but maybe he just loves what he does?”

He went silent. I wondered why. He had a weird expression, like he’d seen the straight ball I threw him coming but still took it to the face, and hard.

I casually made the comment that if Richard wanted an easy life, he could probably go anywhere and have an affair with a member of some royal family, and Satoshi flashed a big, toothy host smile. It reminded me a bit of Shimomura’s smile when he saw me off from the bar the other day—thirty percent happiness, seventy percent bitterness, and full of resignation.

“What I wanna say is, he could just work for me, then.”

“All right, let’s say you did get him on board. What was your plan after that?”

“I decided I’d just go with the flow and figure it out from there. As far as the money goes, I could just get a loan. I think even if I confessed that I was really just a bartender, as long as I got a location rented, I could make it work somehow.”

“That’s a pretty sorry excuse for a plan. You should probably be glad it failed.”

“You’re probably right.”

This time the smile was closer to eighty percent bitterness. It hardly qualified as a smile anymore. Mr. Takatsuki wiped the sweat from his brow and his moist eyes with his pajama sleeve.

“The thing is, I really hate the person I am right now. I love Nozomi, but I can’t keep her safe and happy, and I’ll never outshine a host. I can’t even increase

our income. I don't have anything. I've been scraping by, trying not to think about it for so long, but I don't think my body can take any more of this lifestyle. I feel burnt out, like the walls are closing in on me. That's when I found your jewelry shop. I kept thinking to myself, what the hell are you doing, man? Are you just gonna be a good-for-nothing drunk for the rest of your life?"

"...So that's what the amethyst was about."

"I went in planning to buy something, not really caring what it was. It was a lot less expensive than I thought."

Almost exactly a week after he visited Richard's shop, he put on that amethyst pendant and went out. Nozomi had a client that made her drink a ton again that day, and she went into her usual routine. Normally, Satoshi would just watch from his place behind the counter, but for some reason, he just couldn't bear it that night. He put himself in the ring this time, downing all of Nozomi's drinks for her, making merry and drinking even more. The customer clapped for joy at seeing the bartender who usually rarely drank at all cutting loose, and Satoshi just kept drinking and drinking and drinking as long as the customer insisted. When he was starting to have a hard time standing, he slipped out the back of the club.

Satoshi forced an awkward smile. Apparently, I had a pretty horrified look on my face.

"Don't look at me like that. I didn't actually think that legend about the amethyst preventing drunkenness was real. It was completely my fault. You and your boss had nothing to do with it."

"That's not why I'm concerned. Do you know how many people die every year of acute alcohol poisoning? It's really not funny. And why did you leave the club like that? That was so dangerous."

"I mean, I was drunk. Plus, I didn't want Nozomi to see me make a fool of myself."

"You passed out in a pile of garbage."

"...I do remember making it two blocks down the street."

He muttered to himself that he was surprised he was still alive and put his

hands in mine.

“Your name was... Seigi, right? I remember the EMTs saying your name. Thank you. You saved my life. And I’m so sorry for causing you so much trouble.”

“You really don’t need to apologize to me. What are you planning to do now?”

“I called the club earlier. I got chewed out and fired. Dating the hostesses is against the rules, so Nozomi might be in trouble, too. I’m worried. It doesn’t take much to make her cry. She’s always bawling at every little thing.”

“Did you call Nozomi?”

“I texted her that I was in the hospital this morning. I figured she’d still be asleep.”

He smiled without reservation. He smiled again when I gave him a concerned look. It was a defiant smile. The defeat that had colored all his expressions thus far had vanished.

“It’s so weird. I’ve done something so stupid, but for some reason I don’t regret any of it.”

I gave him an indignant look, and he put his hands together and apologized profusely.

“What am I gonna do now... You know, I think I might try going back to the country. My parents have a vineyard, see. I’m the oldest son, but I kinda shirked my duties. If I help out, surely they’ll let even their good-for-nothing son sleep under their roof. Plus, the grapes my old man produces sparkle like gems. They’re delicious, to boot.”

“What about Nozomi?”

“You really know how to hit a guy when he’s down. I’m a farmer at heart. I’m a totally different breed from a hostess, and our incompatibility couldn’t be more obvious now. I’m not good enough for her. And I’m not old fashioned enough to ask her to come with me.”

“Does that mean you’re breaking up with her?”

He went quiet and thought for a moment before silently shaking his head.

“I can’t give up on her. I want her to wait for me. I’m gonna tell her I’ll come back to Tokyo someday, so if she can bear it—”

“Sounds like you’re expecting a lot of patience. How do you know you won’t meet someone else while you’re in Nagano? Are you sure you don’t actually want her to come with you?”

“Of course I do! I love her! But it’s not that simple.”

He sounded genuinely mad. I was still a little worried but figured I’d said enough.

“Did you hear that? That’s how he feels!” I said, half shouting. The door to the room opened without a sound, and a bubbly, cutesy woman tottered in. Her brown hair was a mess, and she had a seasonally inappropriate coat on over her dress. She clutched a pink towel, and her whole face was red from crying.

Satoshi shouted, “Nozomi!”

“How dumb can you be?! Why are you so stupid?! You can’t still be drunk! You big, stupid, useless idiot!”

“What are you doing here?”

“Oh, shut up, dummy! Obviously, I’m here because I was worried about you!”

I left Satoshi in his panic and got up from my seat. Nozomi sat down in my place, wiping her face with the towel while giving Satoshi a couple of gentle smacks across the face.

“You almost died! How can you act like barely anything happened... Don’t text me when it’s something that important, you oaf! Call me! You big, stupid dummy... Maybe you should just go die for real!”

“I’m sorry, Nozomi. I’m so sorry.”

“I can never leave you alone. I guess I have no choice but to go with you,” Nozomi said, clutching Satoshi’s hands and falling onto the bed in tears.

I left the room with a big grin on my face and walked down the hall. I bowed to one of the nurses near the elevator, and she responded in kind.

“I have a question for you. In your expert aesthetic opinion, is my ideal

occupation ‘having an affair with a royal’? Is that a normal occupation for Japanese college students to aspire to? I seem to have missed that in my studies.”

A man in a suit was leaning against the wall in the elevator hall, arms crossed and brow furrowed. I responded with an awkward smile.

“Look, it was just an example.”

“Some examples go too far.”

Richard checked his watch. It was 10:30 a.m. If we took the Jaguar, we could get back to the store by 11:00 easily.

“You could have gone back without me.”

“And without access to a car, you would be late to work.”

I’d contacted Richard while I was stuck waiting at the hospital. He was initially in a very bad mood because he’d already gone to bed, but when I explained the situation, he let out a sigh and asked me when visiting hours started. We’d had basically the same idea: I’d go home, get some rest, then meet up in Ginza and take Richard’s green Jaguar to the hospital.

As we were coming up into the hospital from the underground parking, we ran into a woman who’d arrived by taxi. Her eyes were red, and she had an ostentatious hairstyle that didn’t really match her hastily cobbled-together wardrobe. We ended up in the same elevator, got off on the same floor, and were headed in the same direction.

When I saw her write the name “Nozomi Kanzaki” in big bubble letters on the guest form, I remembered what Satoshi had been shouting the previous night: Nozomi.

I took her aside and asked her if she wouldn’t happen to know a Satoshi Takatsuki, and I was right. What little composure she had left dissolved. She broke down crying and told us all the dirty details of Satoshi’s rampage the previous night. He barged in on a party, got drunk, and disappeared before anyone realized. He didn’t come back by closing time. The owner was furious and fired him on the spot.

Nozomi was worried about him, so she went looking for him after closing time, only to find an ambulance had taken a bartender away and was told what hospital they'd taken him to. She cried as she disparaged him.

She had no idea why he'd done it. She broke down sobbing, saying that if he was unhappy with something, he should have just talked to her about it, and that she didn't know what to do anymore. And the person who got down on his knees to catch her was none other than my boss. When she saw Richard's face, Nozomi blushed with embarrassment, asking what club he was from again.

We had a little meeting on the bench in front of the nurses' station. A sort of strategy meeting. Richard was the ideas man. Nozomi gave the go-ahead, and I was the one assigned to execute it. The plan was simple, really, I'd use my position as the person who saved his life to get him to talk honestly about what was going on.

Honestly, I wasn't crazy about the idea in the beginning. I mean, there could be some circumstances behind the whole situation that might be better left unsaid, and Nozomi might get hurt.

But Richard looked at me with calm eyes the whole time. We might not have known each other all that long, but—and I know this sounds crazy—I didn't want to do anything that could bring him unhappiness. I almost felt like I *couldn't* do that to him. I had the feeling that Richard had already gotten a pretty solid read on the situation before he even proposed the plan.

Nozomi encouraged me, telling me to “give 'im hell!”, and I braced myself for what I was about to do. In the end, it wasn't as bad as I'd feared.

While we were in the elevator, which was big enough to fit a hospital bed, I asked Richard a question.

“What exactly was bothering you so much when Mr. Takatsuki left the shop? Don't tell me you knew this would happen.”

“Of course not. You keep surprising me with your utter inability to learn. Experience teaches you nothing—every Friday you go out drinking, because it's Friday and that's what you do.”

“Look, I made sure to bathe and change my clothes before coming in this

time.”

I put my hands on my hips, striking a triumphant pose, and Richard turned his head away. I could see his face in the mirror, though, and he was smiling.

“You could tell he wasn’t really a host though, right?”

“Someone who is confident in their profession doesn’t go out of their way to boast about it indiscriminately. He had the feeling of a buzzing mosquito, following you everywhere, yet easily charmed by the flame of a candle.”

“So that’s what was going through your head while you were talking about gemstones. Scary...”

“Excuse you.”

Richard pondered it on his own for a bit after that, saying he had the sense that what Satoshi had been after wasn’t actually a gemstone.

“So what *was* he after in the end? Maybe it really was a host.”

“I don’t think that’s the case. The thing he wanted from the very bottom of his heart wasn’t a piece of jewelry but something that would make him feel like it gave him a power-up.”

“A power-up? Like a magic accessory in a video game?”

“It’s not magic, but you often hear stories about people who don’t normally wear jewelry acting differently when they do. Wearing jewelry makes them more acutely aware of themselves and how others look at them, and they act accordingly. Beautiful gemstones have a unique power to their beauty.”

“So they can kinda influence people’s behavior. Like a fancy stone might make a woman feel compelled to act more elegantly?”

“Or it might make her more arrogant or less cautious about spending money.”

“These all sound like bad things.”

“Of course, gemstones can have a positive influence on behavior as well. Like an athlete’s good luck charm or, on the more extreme end, the way the crown jewels are said to bestow wisdom on their wearer. At any rate, humans are creatures that grow in order to accomplish their own desires. A gemstone might

act as a catalyst for action, but they are not the engine—only the heart can provide the fuel for that.”

“...That sounds kind of scary.”

“You’re absolutely hopeless.”

Satoshi had had a carefree smile on his face, but if anything had gone differently, he could have died. As the thought of how close to the brink he’d come last night sent a chill down my spine, Richard continued talking.

“While I don’t dispute that it’s up to the individual to determine what they do and where, as a simple lover of gemstones, I would like to do what I can to prevent situations where beautiful stones bring unhappiness to others. Let us be thankful for your extraordinary luck.”

My shoulders drooped. There couldn’t be many part-time jobs that came with so many extra obligations.

When the elevator arrived at the first floor, a pajama-clad elderly person and an accompanying younger person were waiting in front of the door. The way Richard startled the moment the door opened was kind of funny.

We left the hospital from there. I wondered if Nozomi had stopped crying yet.

“You know, I was wondering. I noticed when you explained what the word amethyst comes from meant you said that it meant ‘to not become intoxicated by alcohol’ and not for ‘alcohol not to intoxicate you.’ I don’t entirely understand what the difference in nuance is, but you seemed very particular about your choice of words there.”

“Oh, you have an interest in Greek grammar? It’s a difference in voice: active vs. passive. And the Greek word happens to be in the passive voice.”

“Nope, I don’t. And even if I were, I’m definitely not *that* interested!”

As we headed toward the door to the underground parking lot, the jeweler gave me a fast-paced lecture. He explained that back in the era when most people believed that gemstones possessed magical powers, people used to believe that amethysts would ward off intoxication, and thus their owners would, “not become intoxicated by alcohol.”



For however many thousands of years alcohol has existed, people have probably always overindulged and suffered for it. Even if you took Satoshi's story, for example, he acted recklessly because he wanted to protect Nozomi and didn't want her to get drunk. The way they got there was pretty awful, but I guess in the end, everything turned out all right.

"Who was that god of wine again? Bacchus? Sounds like a pretty lazy guardian deity to me."

"In various tales, Bacchus, also known as Dionysus, is a passionate god who is no stranger to drunkenly barging in on parties. Perhaps, in a sense, you could say he did bless our wayward client."

"You should definitely *not* mention that to him."

Richard gave me a look, like he was surprised I was telling him something so obvious. He pushed the button on his key fob when we got to the parking lot. The car made a couple of beeps as it awoke. I decided this might be my best shot.

"Ahh, today's been such a lovely day, huh? We saw a love story end well—doesn't it just make you feel good about the world? I gotta hand it to you, your cupid strategy was a total success. I wonder what those two are gonna do next."

"You know, I've been thinking this since I was waiting outside the room earlier, but you really are an atrocious actor."

"I'm sure that if Tanimoto and I had someone in our corner who was so smart and honorable, then—"

"There are those who say that love is a disease of the heart. Let us pray upon the power of the stone that prevents one from becoming intoxicated to swiftly quell your fever. Well, I guess people only tend to think something counts once what's behind the curtain is revealed. I think the moment satiating your vanity becomes your foremost priority, your budding romance has much more significant problems to worry about."

"Come on, it won't take long. Please?"

"Do you want to take the train back to work?" Richard asked as he rested his

elbow on the roof of his car while I tried to get in on the passenger side. His expression seemed as impenetrable as it had last week. I guessed some things were just out of the question, no matter what.

“...Fine.”

“Good.”

The car sat low to the ground and had huge windows. As I gazed out the passenger side, Tokyo looked like a forest full of iron trees. Seen from below, the Shuto Expressway looked like the belly of a dragon. Swarms of cars scurried across the forest floor like insects. I had to wonder what it all looked like to Richard.

Or what Tanimoto would say if I asked her.

I was pretty sure that even if I passed the civil service exam in one try, I'd never be able to afford a Jaguar. But I wanted to be able to experience this indescribable slow-speed rollercoaster ride with her someday, even just once. I wanted to savor the feeling of our familiar world becoming an unfamiliar space with her. Though maybe she would just go, “Huh? What?”

But maybe she would smile at me softly.

Once I knew we were in the right spot, I tried one more push.

“Hey, Richard, so...”

“Not this again. If you keep pressing the topic, I will drop you on the side of the road.”

“They sell some *incredibly* tasty sweets on the first floor of this hotel here! They have mango mousse and passion fruit cream buns.”

Without another word, the Jaguar came to a stop.

We'd stopped next to a hotel with a concert hall attached. I guessed it was a pretty fancy area. I'd never stayed at the hotel or even gone inside, so you might be wondering how I knew about it. Well, it all went back to a rather painful and pathetic moment last Christmas, when I was diligently doing research just in case I ever got a girlfriend.

I studied Richard's face. I hadn't been running errands for him for nothing. I

knew that it was just an excuse when he said the sweets were meant to make conversation flow more smoothly with customers. I'd seen him lean a little forward in one of the lounge chairs as he finished the leftovers and close his eyes, relishing in every bite.

The handsome jeweler looked at me like he was about to make a deal with the devil before reaching into his pocket, pulling out a black leather wallet, and handing me three 1,000 yen notes.

"You know where the shop is?"

"I do."

"And how long it'll take?"

"Ten minutes should be fine."

"Make it five."

"Agreed."

"On the count of three."

"With pleasure, boss!"

"And please don't forget the receipt."

I checked for traffic and then leapt out of the car. *Thank you. Thank you, past me. If I could go back in time and let you know that your lonely, girlfriendless internet browsing would pay off, I would. I feel like that could have kept you from suffering in vain.*

The customer that day was a man from the Maldives. He had a cheerful chat with Richard in a language I couldn't even recognize as they ate the tropical mousse I'd bought.

When I came into work the following week, Richard showed me an e-mail he'd gotten. It was an inquiry about getting a stone set in another piece of jewelry, signed by two people. A photo was attached. It was a picture of a couple with out-of-place bleached hair standing in front of a vineyard framed by mountains.

Soon, the amethyst pendant would be transformed into a ring.



c a s e

4

The Diamond  
of Memory



**R**ESearching something again, Seigi?” a gentle voice whispered into my ear. I turned around, startled.

It was around noon in the university library, and Tanimoto was standing in front of the big staircase leading to the second floor. She was wearing a white dress and a pale yellow hoodie. Her mischievous yet bashful smile was cuter than any angel’s. It took me a few seconds before I could breathe again and finally speak.

“I’m just finishing up an essay for my business admin class about corporate governance.”

I’d set up camp in the study area on the first floor, with my notes and outline spread out all over the table. There was another bespectacled man sitting diagonally across from me at the six-seat table. He was probably from the literature department, since he was wrestling with an old-looking text written in foreign script.

“Then what’s that?”

She pointed to an atlas of minerals sitting next to my outline. It had a big “not for loan” sticker stuck on the back cover.

“You’re studying stones? Are you aiming for a GG or FGA certification?”

“G what?”

The other man at the table cleared his throat. Whoops.

Tanimoto and I left the study space and went into the library’s café. The café was always pretty dead—only visiting instructors really used it—but at times like this it was an oasis. No one else was there. I got a coffee, and Tanimoto got a cream soda. What an adorable choice. In the indirect lighting—though maybe it was just a light bulb about to go bad—the green melon syrup drink sparkled like a melted green garnet.

“Umm, so, those letters I mentioned earlier, they’re gemstone appraiser certifications. GG stands for Graduate Gemologist. It’s a certification offered by a large American gemological institute that proves that you’ve been properly educated about gemstones. FGA is the equivalent from the UK. They both have

physical schools, but they probably offer distance learning, too. There are all sorts of specialist institutions and qualifications for various stones as well.”

“Wow! I wonder if my boss has any of those.”

“I can’t imagine he doesn’t.”

Tanimoto flashed an innocent smile, commenting that I must really love gemstones. It made my chest ache a little. I hesitated to answer, and she gave me a quizzical look. I didn’t think anyone other than her would understand what was weighing on my mind.

“There’s something that’s been bugging me for a while about stones.”

“What’s been bothering you?”

“So, like, ‘gem’ isn’t a real category of stone, right?”

“If we’re speaking in terms of scientific classification, no, it isn’t.”

I could see the intensity growing in Tanimoto’s eyes. Her voice was getting lower, too. It was like a switch had flipped inside her. The ice clinked in her cream soda glass.

She explained that stones were categorized as either rocks or minerals. Minerals were a single, specific chemical substance, while rocks were an aggregate of various minerals, sand, and other material. Most of the transparent, sparkly stones in Richard’s shop fell into the mineral category. But lapis lazuli, for example, was a rock.

In short, “gems” were just what humans called minerals or rocks that they could polish and make into something beautiful. But that made me wonder...

“Then why are gemstones, and specifically gemstones, so expensive?”

Tanimoto had transformed completely into Golgo mode. She had this suave, relaxed atmosphere about her that made me gulp. It was pretty natural for your heart to race when you were confiding something to a girl you liked, but I didn’t think this feeling was quite the same as love.

Tanimoto gestured at me to continue, and I nodded.

“When we talked about heat-treating rubies before, you told me how you



didn't really like how arbitrary standards for an 'ideal' gemstone are. I agree, and I think it applies beyond just rubies. I mean, stones are ultimately all stones, right? Like, I can understand wages being high, but natural stones being particularly valuable is just... I mean, I do get that they're considered gemstones because there are people who want them, but, like, just what is the *value* of a gemstone? The more I think about it, the less I feel like I know."

"Is it the notion that people process them to make them more valuable that bothers you?"

"...Maybe. I definitely can't talk about this at work."

"Seigi, have you ever been to a mineral show?"

"A mineral show? No, never. I've never even heard of it before. Is it like a fashion show?"

"Not at all. Technically the catch-all term should be 'inorganic substance,' but in this case 'mineral' describes both minerals and rocks. Every year, several are held throughout Japan and all over the world to sell stones. Tables are lined up in the event space, and various shops have booths. There are shops that trade in mineral specimens but also jewelers, too. And the stones range from fragments of meteorites smaller than your pinky to massive boulders like the kind that decorate the entrance of a traditional Japanese inn. If it's a rock, it's fair game. The largest show in the world, the Tucson Gem and Mineral Show, is held in America. But the shows in Shinjuku and Nagoya have lengthy histories, too, and even the smaller ones are nice, because they give you an opportunity to speak to local sellers. They hold them all over the country, so I thought you might like to go some time."

"A-absolutely!"

Tanimoto smirked. She was so cool. If only I could have mustered the courage to say "we should go together." But for some reason the atmosphere between us felt more like I was receiving instructions for a dangerous job from a member of some shady, underground business.

Tanimoto shook her head and continued, "But you know..." Her eyes were fierce. "Just for example, Seigi, how much do you think the most expensive rock specimen at a mineral show would go for?"

“Um...by rock specimen do you mean like that piece of calcite you have?”

“Sure, but there are all sorts of other things that would qualify.”

I had several pictures of her rock collection on my phone. Whenever I looked up their names online, I'd find hundreds of beautiful pictures. There really were a lot of people who loved stones out there, so there was definitely a demand for them, but in the context of a mineral market...how much would they be worth? How much was the most expensive gemstone in Richard's box of wonders? The ten-million-yen ruby? That wasn't his stock, though. Probably five million at most, right? Surely rocks were a little cheaper than that.

“...Four million yen?”

“At the latest Shinjuku show, a sample of native gold in matrix sold for twenty-four million yen.”

“T-twenty-four million?!”

She added that even more expensive items were commonplace at the Tucson and Hong Kong shows. What would you even do with a twenty-four-million-yen rock? Set it on a shelf in your living room? Hang on to it as an asset? Though if that was your objective, you'd probably be better off looking at the market price for gold and buying it in bar form.

Tanimoto watched my confusion intently with her big black eyes. I tensed up, and she finally smiled.

“You were working on an economics essay earlier, weren't you? Do you think the price of something determines its value?”

“Uh, hm...”

When I looked at Tanimoto at times like this, I couldn't help but be reminded of my grandma when she was still healthy—the way she'd stand up straight and tall, looking cool as can be, introducing little me to things about the world I didn't know.

“I don't think so. I think it's the other way around. There has to be demand first for something to have a price. I can't believe I forgot something so obvious. You're saying that when it comes to rock specimens or gemstones, their prices

are set by the people who want them, right?”

“Exactly.” Her smile expanded to fill her whole face. “Seigi, does the shop you work at mostly deal in colored stones?”

“Colored stones? I guess gemstones do come in a lot of colors.”

“When you have some free time, I think you should look into diamonds.”

Diamonds?

I furrowed my brow a bit, and Tanimoto giggled.

“Have you ever seen them sold at the shop?”

“...No. Now that you mention it, I’ve never seen him show any diamonds.”

“The term ‘colored stone’ is used to describe any gemstone other than diamond. There are shops that only deal in diamonds, and those that only deal in colored stones. They’re each their own specialty. Interesting, right?”

Diamonds. They were practically synonymous with gemstones. I was pretty sure I’d seen some small accent diamonds, called melee diamonds, a few times at the store. I think Richard had taken charge of one or two at a time in a bag with a label noting the carat weight down to two decimal points before, but I’d never seen him handle large individual diamonds. I guessed the industry was compartmentalized in that way? I really didn’t know much at all about gemstones, still.

“If you’re interested in the value of gemstones, there’s no more interesting stone in that regard than diamond. I’m sure your boss would have an opinion on the topic, too. Whatever the historical reasons may be, there aren’t many stones that such a vast number of people in Japan are intimately familiar with.”

I didn’t really understand what she was talking about, but I think she was trying to convince me to look into it on my own. I had a feeling I could figure it out when it came to diamonds at least. I knew they were made of carbon, very hard, and sparkled like nothing else, but that was about the extent of my knowledge. Even if Richard’s shop didn’t deal in them, I was pretty sure I could find some for sale at a department store.

“Do you like diamonds?”

“I think they’re pretty mid-range as far as cubic crystal system stones go. I prefer pyrite personally.”

“Pyrite, how much does that usually cost...”

“You can get a pretty cute specimen for about a thousand yen these days. Personally, I’d recommend the type in matrix. I think you’ll be impressed if you take a look at one.”

She watched me intently and smiled.

“I’m sure you get it, too.”

“...Get what?”

“The most important thing of all: you need love,” she said very casually.

Love.

Tanimoto leaned over the table, deftly rescued her mostly melted vanilla ice cream with her spoon, and gobbled it all up. She was back to her usual adorable, fairy-like demeanor. *What am I gonna do? I’m falling for her even harder.* If only I could save her delighted smile at the deliciousness of what she was eating for eternity.

She said she had class next period and got up, leaving 400 yen on the table. I told her not to worry about it, I’d pay, but she smiled at me like an angel, “Heh, you’re gonna show me that sports car soon, right? I can’t wait.”

“O-oh, s-sure am!”

“Bye-bye!” she said in a singsong tone and left the café.

I let out a sigh and hung my head. How many times had we had an exchange like that? Was she being serious, or was that just her idea of some kind of joke? I could never be sure. I didn’t know, and I couldn’t find out, either. And that just made it all the more painful.

If only I could have said something.

After letting out another pained sigh following those wonderful few minutes with her, I left the café and went back to working on my essay. Tanimoto sent me a text that evening. It just said “pyrite” and had an image attached. It was a

picture of a white rock with pieces of a gold rectangular substance sticking out of it. What on earth? *Is that really a natural formation? It looks like something an alien might have left behind.*

She may have liked it more than diamonds, and I liked her more than any other girl in the world.

It was a clear Saturday in Ginza. Richard had a walk-in client. He wore a pair of neatly pressed white satin slacks with a blue shirt tucked in, perfectly containing his generous girth. Beneath his boater hat was tidily styled salt and pepper hair. He looked around sixty. I was pretty sure that if you looked up the word “gentleman” in the dictionary, you’d find his picture.

Richard and I gave him a hearty “welcome,” and he chuckled when he noticed me in the kitchen.

“The sign outside says this is a jewelry shop, but you’re still running the café, too?”

He examined Richard’s face, and Richard responded with his usual beautiful smile.

“You must be referring to Mr. Hamada’s business. It closed last December. I took over the location this past April to sell gemstones.”

“Oh, I see. Do you know Hamada?”

“I was acquainted with the Hamadas when I was doing business in Hong Kong. I moved to Japan this spring.”

The older gentleman nodded in agreement. It was news to me that this place had been a café before. Now I understood how he was getting clients from all over the world, though. They must have been regulars from when he was working in Hong Kong. Which also meant this wasn’t Richard’s first attempt at setting up shop. I had to wonder how long he’d been doing this for. And how old was he? I forgot to ask when we first met, and I never got around to asking since. I guess I was really working for a man I know next to nothing about.

The gentleman put his hand on the back of one of the red lounge chairs and

gazed at the carpet and the glass coffee table.

“The shop is much brighter now. You kept the carpet, I see. Never seen this lounge set before though. There used to be five wooden tables with two or three small chairs apiece...”

“Mr. Hamada gifted me the chairs to congratulate me on opening the shop, and I brought the table from my Hong Kong location. I seem to have forgotten to introduce myself, Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian at your service. I run this shop.”

“Masahiro Onodera. I apologize, I’m getting a bit lost down memory lane. Vulpian...is that French?”

“English, actually.”

Mr. Onodera had come to discuss having a piece of jewelry remade. Richard suggested he take a seat and had me make tea.

“Will royal milk tea do? We have green tea and barley tea as well, if you would prefer.”

“This is much more luxurious than when it was actually a café. I’ll have whatever you suggest.”

Mr. Onodera smiled cheerfully. It wouldn’t be surprising for someone like him to be acting more self-important given his age and appearance, but he didn’t have the faintest smudge of arrogance about him. He looked fit and youthful.

When I came back with tea, Mr. Onodera had a small black jewelry box out. Inside was a gold ring with a single gem in the middle.

It was white—no, it sparkled like a rainbow.

A diamond.

“...And this is?”

“My late wife’s engagement ring. I bought it ages ago overseas. I have a grading report, but the shop I bought it from went under. Will that still be okay?”

“Yes, that will not be an issue at all,” Richard said with a nod.

Mr. Onodera smiled cheerfully. The diamond in the ring looked odd. Both the ring and stone were partially smeared in some kind of black substance. Only half of the stone shone with rainbow light. The other half was blotted out with black. It was almost like clouded glass.

“I want to have it reset into something I could wear. I haven’t really thought about what kind of piece I’d like though... Can the gold from the ring be reused as well?”

“Of course. Let’s start with the type of piece you’d like. Allow me to make a few suggestions. I have a brochure.”

“Let’s take a look.”

Richard went into the back room and pulled out some materials on jewelry options.

Lately, we’d been getting more walkins from female clients. Most of them seemed to have heard rumors about how handsome Richard was and came in with the excuse that they were interested in getting rings or earrings cleaned, just to get a look at him. We only kept the most basic literature in the waiting room. At this rate, I could probably handle those “clients” soon.

It occurred to me that I’d been working at the shop for three months at that point. Obviously, that didn’t amount to all that many individual days, but I’d gotten used to a lot of unusual things in my time here, like my devastatingly handsome boss, all the foreign clients, and the eye-popping prices. I had to wonder if that was for the best. It felt like I was starting to become numb to certain things.

Mr. Onodera smiled when he took a sip of the royal milk tea. “It’s delicious. Are you his apprentice?”

“Oh, no, just a regular part-timer.”

“I see.”

Mr. Onodera thanked me and complimented the drink again with another smile. I bowed my head.

“The landlord, Mr. Hamada, used to run a café here. There are mostly offices

in the area, so no one typically stayed all that long, but the owner was a good man, so I took a shine to the place. Whenever my wife came to Ginza, she'd turn the place into a Shiseido parlor. Did you start working here because you like gemstones?"

"Something like that. Not that I know anything, really. I'm still learning."

"I see. Learning is good," he said with a nod. It didn't seem like he was going to explain why the diamond ring was dirty.

While he was waiting for Richard, Mr. Onodera told me about his work. He was the president of a mechanical equipment manufacture company, but rather than making large machines, they produced parts for high-precision devices. His office and home were in the same building, so he could take a thirty-minute meeting in the office on the first floor and then go upstairs to nap in his bedroom right after. He really wasn't one to put on airs.

Richard returned with three brochures to show him, presenting options for brooches, cufflinks, and tiepins. He explained that the metal of the ring could be melted down and reused. Mr. Onodera seemed interested in the tiepin idea but wasn't particularly grabbed by any of the designs in the brochure.

After I refreshed both their glasses of royal milk tea, Richard suggested having a custom piece commissioned. He explained that he was friends with a designer in Kyoto, and they could design a custom tiepin that would be completely one of a kind. Mr. Onodera asked him how good the designer was, and Richard reassured him that they did very meticulous, delicate work.

Mr. Onodera ordered a design but only after noting that he might go to another place if he didn't like what they came up with. It wasn't going to be cheap, but he didn't need to pay up front, and the design concept would be ready in two weeks. That settled things.

Richard took the diamond's measurements with a set of small calipers, took photos of it from all angles with his digital camera, and carefully returned the blackened diamond ring to Mr. Onodera. Mr. Onodera gazed at the jewel for a bit before snapping the lid shut. I wondered what was weighing on him. He looked like he wanted to talk.

Before he left, he thanked me again for the tea.



I couldn't believe I'd gotten to see a diamond the same day Tanimoto had mentioned them to me. Maybe Richard was right, and I really did have "extraordinary luck."

"That stone he brought in was incredible. Why was it all black though?"

"Fire, I imagine. It looked like soot."

"A burned diamond. Wait. Aren't diamonds made of—"

"Carbon."

I thought so. As I collected the cups and put them on a tray, I turned back to look at Richard. Charcoal doesn't do well in fire.

"...I mean, it's basically charcoal, right? Doesn't that burn the moment it comes in contact with fire?"

"It depends on the temperature. While wood charcoal and diamond are both made up of carbon, the strength of their molecular bonds is not the same. Diamond ignites at 900 degrees Celsius, but it does not burn particularly well in a normal atmosphere. Outside of rather unique circumstances like an atmosphere of pure oxygen and extremely high temperature, the stone will survive."

"Then that black stuff...will come off?"

"It will."

"Wow! How will you get it off?"

"A mild detergent."

My eyes went wide, and I pointed toward the kitchen. Richard nodded.

"Indeed. There are specialty cleaning liquids, but the ingredients don't differ much from common dish soap. Even stones in a much less sorry state than that one can become almost unrecognizably beautiful with a little polishing."

"Shouldn't he have asked for a cleaning like all those other customers do? You could've fixed it right up."

"He was looking to have the stone reset and never once mentioned the soot covering the stone. It wouldn't be difficult to find information on how to clean a

diamond in the process of researching how to get it reset. I believe he must be aware that it's an option."

"What does that mean, though?"

"Cleaning it would be simple, but it won't bring it back to the way it was."

In other words, there had to be a reason he left it like that.

The question prickled at the back of my mind again. Isn't the whole reason gemstones have value because they're beautiful? I was confused but decided to put it out of my mind. There was no use thinking about it. The number one thing working at this shop had taught me was that everyone had their own unique circumstances, and getting a small glimpse of those circumstances wouldn't give you the whole picture. While a certain someone with gemstone eyes seemed to be able to intuit the whole story from a single fragment, I was but a humble part-timer.

"That reminds me, I've never seen such a big diamond in the shop before. I was starting to think our shop only dealt in colored stones. Do you just not handle diamonds very often?"

"Not at all. Of course, it is true that not all dealers handle both diamonds and colored stones, though. I see you've learned a bit more about gemstones."

"Just kinda picked it up."

It wasn't the most overt praise, but he definitely just praised me. It seemed like as good a time as any, so I opened up to him about what was bugging me. Gemstones were pretty, but because they were pretty, they were expensive. But I felt weird because the reason for that kind of pricing didn't make sense to me anymore. I didn't mean to say it felt like a rip-off, but I was a guy who lived in a world where chicken wings cost 66 yen per hundred grams. This was just too far removed from what I was used to for it to make sense to me intuitively.

"I get the feeling you might find it inappropriate for me to ask you this, but why *are* gems so expensive?"

Richard snorted and beckoned me over to the lounge chairs. I think this was the first time I'd ever sat down next to him. No—I guess we sat next to each other on the Shinkansen.

“You want to know why gems are priced so high? Are you asking about the labor and service fees involved in the mining, processing, and distribution of gemstones?”

“No...”

I understood why things that took time and effort to produce cost a lot of money. That was the same for anything. But what was it about these stones that makes us treat them as “gemstones”?

“Like, hypothetically, let’s say I wanted to start a diamond business. What would I need to do? And how do you produce sellable diamonds and turn a profit? It’s a business question, but it feels pretty distinct from the corporate management stuff I’ve been studying.”

“Why diamonds in particular?”

“Tan—a friend of mine said that diamonds are a particularly interesting stone, like when it comes to pricing and stuff. I don’t really understand what she meant by that, but I was curious...”

Richard nodded, understanding what I was getting at. He seemed to know what Tanimoto meant, but I was still totally in the dark. I mean, what’s the difference between a diamond and a sapphire as a product?

“In the latter half of the 19th century, there was a man struggling with much the same question.”

“In the 19th century?”

“He had discovered a large diamond mine in southern Africa. Up until that point, diamonds were primarily coming out of India. While they had captured the hearts of a privileged few in the West, they were but one stone of many—but that was all about to change. You’re studying economics, aren’t you? What happens if a large amount of currency is suddenly introduced to an economy?”

“Inflation. The value of money goes down.”

I guess it would be diamond traders who would be in trouble if there were too many diamonds available. When supply exceeds demand, you can’t sell if you don’t lower your prices, but then a price war ensues and no one makes a

profit. I asked Richard if that was what he was getting at, and he nodded.

“In order to continue selling a product at the same price despite the increased supply, he had to break into a new market. But at the time, diamonds and sapphires and the like were essentially the same in most people’s eyes—they were all largely unfamiliar stones. Imagine you were compelled to go into space. Imagine you had to take a ship and sail into the sea of stars to do business with aliens—what would you do?”

“W-with aliens?”

“Do you think they would want diamonds? Not rubies, sapphires, or emeralds, but diamonds.”

This was turning into a science fiction story. A jeweler running around in a space suit selling rings. Though, now that I was actually thinking about it, I was pretty sure my economics professor had posed a similar hypothetical in class before to illustrate how hard it was to sell something new.

“I think it’d be difficult. Why would aliens want diamonds? The value proposition wouldn’t make any sense to them. They aren’t useful in the way that things like food and clothing are. It’d be easy to imagine them asking what they’re even good for. And even if there were aliens who wanted sparkly stones, there would be other options in that category that they could buy instead. I mean, diamond vs. sapphire is ultimately more of a personal preference kind of thing.”

“Exactly. Which is why this man devised a very extensive plan.”

“What kind of plan?”

“One to *create* value.”

The story Richard told after that went beyond my wildest imagination.

The business magnate who owned the diamond mine conceived of the idea of putting the entire diamond supply under his control. The plan had two parts, Richard explained, holding up two fingers.

First, he would monopolize the entire supply chain to protect his interests, starting with mining the diamonds from the ground and going all the way up to

point of sale. He bought up all the other diamond mines, one after the other, until the entire world's diamond supply moved through his hands. With the originating supply thoroughly under his control, he could sell stones at whatever price he liked. It was an impressive show of force.

The second prong of his plan involved convincing people who, up until that point, may never have seen a diamond in their lives of the stone's positive qualities. Essentially: marketing.

The hardest substance in the world. A pure stone made up of one singular element. A gemstone that sparkles like the rainbow. A girl's best friend. Eventually, newspapers and television would be plastered with what would come to be known as one of the most effective pieces of ad copy in the world: "A Diamond is Forever."

It was a simple plan, but the execution was flawless.

Somehow, without anyone really noticing, the value of diamonds crept into the consciousness of people who had no interest in gemstones. The most important moments in your life *had* to be marked by a diamond. Sapphires, rubies, and emeralds wouldn't do—only diamonds. Commercials, songs, movies all reinforced the notion. Precious rings were passed down from mother to daughter—not something you sell off.

"Then...diamonds are only expensive because..."

"Because their 'value' has been wholly manufactured. Of course, we live in the 21st century, not the 19th, so total control like that isn't possible anymore. But, as you can imagine, no large company that trades in diamonds would want to deliberately destroy the price of their product. The world of diamonds still moves in accordance with the will of a man from the 19th century, even now."

Richard asked for tea, and I stumbled over to the kitchen. I freaked out for a moment when I accidentally put the pot on the burner with nothing in it.

*Just what is a diamond anyway?*

*The idea that they're expensive because they're beautiful or because there's demand for them is nothing more than a sham, isn't it? If even the basic concept of a product's value was manufactured by the seller, then is the entire thing a*

*contrivance to make a profit?*

This must've been why Tanimoto suggested I research diamonds.

Richard blew on the fresh cup of milk tea and took a drink. I didn't realize I'd forgotten to add ice until I burned myself taking a sip and had to rush back to the kitchen to drink some water. Richard frowned at me when I returned to the sitting area.

"That was rude."

"Sorry... So, was that story you told me just now true?"

"I'm not sure why you're asking me questions if you don't trust what I have to say."

"That's not what I meant."

The story was so outrageous, I felt almost dizzy.

I sat down in one of the lounge chairs again and thought Richard would start round two of his lecture. But instead, he began to discuss the standards by which a diamond's beauty is judged.

"A written report regarding a diamond's authenticity is called a 'grading report.' For other stones, it's called an 'identification report.' I believe I mentioned this before, but do you know why this is the case?"

"...I've always been curious about it, but no, I don't."

"Because the reports cover entirely different content. An identification report simply states that a given stone is, for example, an emerald, not garnet or jade, and the written document acts as proof of the stone's authenticity. In human terms, you could think of it like a person's medical records—their size and weight when they were born and a history of any surgical procedures they've undergone. But because of everything I explained earlier, diamonds have a more codified standard of value than other stones, and thus require greater documentation. A grading report is a much more detailed assessment of value, based on the unique standards applied to diamonds. In human terms, it would be like if in addition to height and weight, the file included an assessment of your facial features, your hair color, and the quality of your skin. A grading

report describes how well a particular stone conforms to those standards. The main ones are called the four C's."

"Sorry, I can't fit any more information into my brain," I interjected, and Richard blinked a few times. My sudden interruption must've caught him off guard. He took another sip of his tea and suggested that we continue next time. I let out a little sigh.

I didn't really understand why, but I felt a tinge of sadness, like the night my mother told me to my face that Santa wasn't real. Obviously, I'd already known that was the case. I'd known it even before she told me. somehow.

"...Maybe beautiful things can make us happiest when we can just innocently call them beautiful without having to think about numbers."

"Are you implying that, as a seller of those beautiful things, I must be unhappy?"

"That's not what I mean."

"Then what *did* you mean?" Richard said pointedly.

It spooked me. I'd never heard him use that tone before.

"I indulged you in this conversation because I thought it would help you understand the real meaning behind the prices of gemstones, not to wallow in negativity. Every one of my clients has a different reason for desiring gems, but the one thing that unites them all is that they love gemstones and enjoy purchasing them. I take pride in my work as well. While I enjoy your innocence and curiosity, as your boss, I would greatly appreciate it if you remembered that you are not here on a field trip. This is a place of work."

Richard brought a hand to his chest and gave an elegant bow. I could feel the venom and sarcasm in his phrasing. *I get it. I'm here to work, after all.*

But still—

"...Are you like this off the clock, too?"

"Excuse me?"

"You're always so hard and cold. Like a real gemstone."

He didn't respond. I collected the cups, and when I returned, caught Richard heading into the back room. I heard the sound of him typing for a little while. He was probably contacting that jewelry designer in Kyoto.

Right after all that, a customer came in looking to have a garnet hairpin repaired. Richard attended to the customer, and I made tea. It was nice to be busy. But my work day ended without any closure regarding either the diamond lecture or what happened afterward.

Feeling depressed forever wasn't going to help anything. You know what they say: Seeing is believing. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

I decided to visit a department store in Shinjuku for a change of pace. Specifically, the jewelry department. The reason I didn't go to one in Ginza was simple: I'd read online that the jewelry department of this store was bigger. If I was going to browse, I might as well have a big selection to look at. Just waiting around for Richard to show me everything was no fun.

I accidentally clicked on a fortune telling app on my way out and saw that it said, "Beware of unexpected encounters! Terrible luck for meeting people." But if I paid attention to that sort of thing, I'd never get anything done. It wasn't the kind of place I'd run into anyone anyway, and it wasn't like I even believed in that stuff to begin with.

"Welcome!"

And on that note, my meager expectations were shattered within moments of entering the jewelry department. First, the atmosphere was overwhelming—all the saleswomen in beautiful uniforms, the glass showcases, the blinding lights, and the diamonds.

Diamonds, diamonds, diamonds, as far as the eye could see. It was a sea of diamonds.

Wait, hang on, why were they only selling one kind of stone here? This wasn't a jewelry department but a diamond department. Curious, I got the attention of a saleswoman on one end of the floor.

"Do you sell anything other than diamonds?"



“What are you looking for?”

Well, you never know until you try. I asked if they had any padparadscha sapphires.

The saleswoman looked a bit older than me, with black hair neatly tied back. She apologized and flashed a gorgeous smile. “I’m sorry, that is a very rare stone, and we currently have none in stock at this location.”

I couldn’t exactly respond with, *Well, I’ve got one sitting on my cheap shelves at home right now.* “Then, how about amethyst...”

“I’m terribly sorry, we don’t sell amethyst. We do have blue sapphires and rubies if you’re interested.”

“Are your rubies heat treated or not?”

“They are heat treated, but their beauty matches or exceeds that of natural stones. You are quite well informed.”

“Oh, well, it’s just kind of a hobby of mine.”

She smiled uncomfortably. I couldn’t blame her. I obviously looked like a student in my cheap casual clothes with a backpack full of textbooks, a commuter rail pass, and no more than 2,000 yen in my wallet. The items in the showcase had six or seven figure prices on them. I couldn’t have been more out of place. I started to feel a little bad about being there.

I faltered when I tried a lead-in to ask her to show me a bunch of different diamonds, so I decided to try again later. Staying there any longer was just going to be bad for my heart. It was time for a strategic retreat. Royal milk tea was the best medicine to soothe frayed nerves at times like this. But since I wasn’t at the shop in Ginza, there was no tea and no kitchen, and no boss to rely—

I saw a head of blond hair on my way down the escalator. He was wearing a pair of ochre slacks, a plain button-down shirt, and had a face of unequaled beauty.

“Richard!”

Richard’s face when he turned around was a sight to behold. He just stared at

me like “what are *you* doing here?” all the while the escalator continued to move down toward the next floor. I caught up to him at the women’s department. He had a bag from a clothing store on his arm and was wearing a pair of brown moccasins without socks. I guess he’d gone shopping today.

“...What are you doing here?”

“Studying. But I didn’t get very far. It’s weird being in the jewelry department alone. It felt like a high-stress interview. I just wanted to look at some diamonds.”

“Diamonds?”

“Experience is the best teacher, right? Come with me, please?”

Richard stared at me icily for a moment, like I was an animal who’d just performed an unusual trick. The women who passed by stared at Richard. I could hear them wondering among themselves whether he was a model. I guessed we really shouldn’t be standing around and chatting when he had a face like that.

“Fine, I guess,” Richard mumbled, “But on one condition: I will not speak Japanese.”

“What?”

“I don’t want the saleswomen to think they can talk to me. It’s annoying. If you can accept that, I’ll accompany you.”

I told him I couldn’t understand English well enough to have a conversation, so he told me he’d explain in Japanese when the saleswomen weren’t looking. This encounter was anything but bad luck! I promised to repay his kindness with some sweets from the food court in the basement, and Richard wordlessly headed back up the escalator.

Just as I’d imagined, the Richard effect was immediate. The appearance of a foreign customer who looked loaded was like someone throwing raw meat into a pool full of sharks. I went to the counter of a different brand from the one I’d been at earlier and asked to see some diamonds. The girl behind the counter flashed her best smile as she looked at Richard. She might have assumed I’d be interpreting for him.

Diamond rings were lined up one after the other. Ones with big stones and ones with small stones, all glittering with blinding, rainbow light.

“Wow. They almost don’t look like stones.”

“Right? A properly cut diamond will reflect almost all light that enters it. For example, if you were to place a diamond over a pencil line on a piece of paper, you would not be able to see the line through the stone. If you can see through it, the stone you have may be cubic zirconia or some other material.”

I glanced behind me to confirm, and the most handsome man in the world nodded. He pointed at an item in the case, gesturing that he’d like to see it. When the saleswoman crouched behind the counter to retrieve it, he whispered in my ear that I should pay attention to the letters. Letters?

She handed me the diamond ring—with one large sparkling white diamond—from inside the case. It had a paper tag attached to it.

“D...VVS<sup>1</sup>... What does that mean?”

“Those describe the diamond’s quality based on the standards known as the 4Cs.”

The 4Cs. Richard had mentioned that earlier but didn’t get a chance to explain.

The woman pulled out a piece of paper and showed it to me as she explained. All four of the metrics that determined a diamond’s quality started with C, hence the 4Cs.

Carat—the diamond’s weight, and consequently, its size.

Color—just as it implied, the color of the diamond. Pure, colorless stones were rated D, and the scale went up to E, F, G, and so on the more yellowish discoloration a stone had. There were diamonds that came in more prized colors, called colored diamonds. Pink was popular, but there were also yellow, brown, and green diamonds. Blue was extremely rare and thus extremely expensive.

Clarity—how clear a stone is. There were eleven grades, indicating how free from internal imperfections the stone was. The grades, like FL, IL, and VVS<sup>1</sup>,

were all abbreviations of English phrases like “Flawless,” “Internally Flawless,” and “Very, Very Slightly Included” respectively.

And lastly, cut—the way the stone is, well, cut. The question of how best to increase a stone’s brilliance read like a history of humanity’s technological progress. The prototypical diamond shape most people knew was a round brilliant cut with 58 facets. If the stone was cut into more of a square shape, it was called a princess cut.

“This particular stone has been graded D for color, so it’s of the highest quality in that metric. It’s VVS<sup>1</sup>, meaning inclusions aren’t visible at ten times magnification, and it’s been cut into a round brilliant cut.”

She tried to compliment Richard’s eye for diamonds in English, but he responded in some incomprehensible Western language. I had no idea what he said, but I just pretended like I did and nodded. The ruse was actually kind of fun.

I had her show me diamonds of various clarity, color, and carat. But every piece she showed me was intended for women, as if that were just a given.

“...Do you not sell any men’s jewelry here?”

The saleswoman let out a little “ah!” I was slightly confused. Was that really such a strange question?

While we were waiting for her to come back, I heard Richard let out a little sigh. I made a pleading face, begging him to put up with it just a little longer, and he shot back a vicious glare. His expression was unusually stiff and his cheeks were a little red. He was pretty lightly dressed, but maybe he was hot?

The saleswoman came back with a spring in her step, bowed, and whispered to me, “Congratulations on the Shibuya ordinance.”

Ordinance? What was she talking about? Well, whatever. I was here to look at diamonds.

I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised that the men’s ring she brought out had a big sturdy band and a tiny diamond. The metal was platinum. Not moments after she suggested I try it on, she grabbed my left hand and slipped it onto my ring finger. It made me think it was a wedding ring, but I wasn’t really

sure what finger you were supposed to wear this kind of ring on.

“It looks lovely on you.”

“Th-thanks...”

“It’ll last you a lifetime, after all.”

“Oh, right, they do say that about diamonds, don’t they?”

“They sure do. It’s a stone that tells anyone at a glance that you’re engaged. It’s there to celebrate the new life a couple sets out on together. And just as the slogan, ‘a diamond is forever’ suggests, it’ll be there, protecting you like a kind of amulet, from beginning to end. But more than anything, it’s a very beautiful stone.”

I thought back to the conversation I had with Richard on Saturday, and it put me in a weird mood. I wondered if this saleswoman knew the story of where diamonds’ “value” came from. Even if she did know about it, it clearly wasn’t the kind of conversation that would be conducive to making a sale. Even I wouldn’t be dumb enough to bring it up if I were in her position.

Her pitch and the diamond’s sparkle were all pushing one image: happiness.

She went on to teach me all sorts of stuff. I guess Richard wasn’t the only jeweler who talked a lot. It seemed like it was part of the job.

A diamond’s incredible hardness and the fact that it was composed entirely of one, singular element created an association with purity. It sparkled with the light of integrity, purity, and strength. It was all pretty much the same as I’d heard earlier, but she was talking about a particular type of idealized romantic engagement now. I guess most people came to jewelry shops when they were thinking about getting married, not because they just wanted jewelry. But diamonds were special even in that sense. They were stones that even people with no particular interest in gems had some kind of connection to.

“It’s a pretty incredible stone, right?”

When I looked back at Richard on the “right,” his face was something else. It was almost like the face of Buddha after he reached enlightenment. There was a calmness to his expression, like I could say anything to him and he wouldn’t

mind, but his eyes were vacant as he looked around aimlessly. He seemed deeply uncomfortable, for some reason. Maybe he had a stomachache? I shouldn't have dragged him along.

I thanked the saleswoman, gave her a deep bow, and we left the shop. I whispered to Richard to ask if he was okay, and he ignored me. Maybe he was just in a bad mood. The saleswoman watched us walk off with a big, cheerful smile on her face.

"Do you think she liked my face or something? She kept smiling at me the whole time. It's not such a bad feeling, huh?"

"...I don't particularly feel like talking to you for a while."

"Sorry for dragging you along with me like that, but I really did learn a lot. Wanna go downstairs and buy something to eat? There are a bunch of famous bakeries here. I owe you one after all. Or would you rather hit the bathrooms first?"

"I'm quite all right. I have something else to attend to, so if you'll excuse me."

"Okay. Well, I'll see you on Saturday."

The moment we got to the first floor, Richard went to leave the store without so much as looking at me. He was probably mad at me for making him work on a day off. Or at least that was what I thought until he turned around and came back toward me. I wondered what was up?

"If you ever go back to that department again, make sure you tell them that the wedding's off."

"Wedding? Are you sure you aren't getting words mixed up?"

Richard looked like he was at his wit's end as he headed back out into Shinjuku again. Personally, I felt the good kind of tired from the unusual experience, leaving me in a strangely positive mood as I boarded the Yamanote Line to hurry to campus. It'd be nice to bump into Tanimoto somewhere on a day like this.

The designer from Kyoto seemed to have done good work, since Mr. Onodera

was pleased with all three of their designs. They were all designs for tiepins, so they were ultimately pretty basic, but the way the stone was attached to the base—what was apparently called the “setting”—in each design had interesting angles or three-dimensional curves. They were all quite unique, not something you’d find in a store, but not to the point of being too elaborate. All three designs would be very wearable in a more casual setting.

I found myself getting excited as I looked at the designer’s illustrations and sipped my tea. A new piece of jewelry was soon to be born.

Mr. Onodera brought the diamond ring with him to the shop again, with the black smudge over its surface still there, just as it had been before. Despite the joy on his face, he seemed troubled and looked to me for advice.

“The young guys at my company are about your age—which one do you think looks the most modern? I want a young person’s perspective.”

“I think they’re all really cool looking, but hm...” I pointed at the third design, “This one, I guess.”

Mr. Onodera smiled happily and said he liked that one the best, too. It was a simple setting with no extra decoration to distract from the diamond. Richard smiled like whatever was going on with him in that Shinjuku department store never happened. I guess I shouldn’t have expected any less from a globe-trotting salesman. But maybe the berry tart I brought him was part of it, too.

When Mr. Onodera settled on the design, Richard said, a bit hesitantly, “I do have one thing to discuss with you first. I spoke to the designer, and they would like to know if you’d be interested in having the stone refinished. They wanted to recut it slightly.”

“...Is this about the soot?”

“No. Of course, the stone will be fully cleaned, removing the soot, when the piece is finished. But the designer was interested in also recutting the stone—but only if you find that acceptable, Mr. Onodera.”

What a strange turn of events. A little soap would be enough to remove the dirt, but recutting... I mean, in a world where a difference of a mere 0.2 grams, a whole carat, meant a drastic change in price, wasn’t that a really big ask?

Richard, armed with his stylish suit and warm smile, continued in a calm tone, “Did you purchase this diamond over forty years ago?”

“I did. I guess the cut was popular back then. I bought it on our honeymoon in Antwerp. We were traveling on a budget, but...back then diamond cutting was synonymous with Belgium. What’s it like now?”

“Quite a lot of lapidary work still happens in Belgium, but the Asian market has expanded tremendously, especially Thailand, Sri Lanka, and India.”

“The times really do change, huh?”

A honeymoon forty years ago. A world before cell phones and the internet. I wondered what it was like back then? Mr. Onodera couldn’t stop staring at the ring sitting on the table. He seemed to be smiling at something invisible.

When he finally lifted his head, he put on his best gentlemanly smile and said, “All right, I trust you. Please go ahead with the recut.”

“Very well. It should be completed in about a month. Regarding the budget —”

“Use your best judgment. Just e-mail me if you need to make a big change. I’m a little pressed for time today, so I’ll have to take my leave now.”

Mr. Onodera sat up and began collecting his things. And just when things were getting good. Weren’t we at the most important part of the whole transaction? He didn’t say he was short on time when he came in.

He entrusted the jewelry box to Richard, and they shook hands. I was a bit flustered, but Mr. Onodera smiled at me. On closer inspection, the hat he had on today was made of suede. It was clearly winter clothing, but we’d just gotten into summer. Strange.

“Are you still learning more about diamonds, kid?”

“Trying to. I did get to see a bunch of different ones recently.”

“Good,” he said with a smile, but it felt a bit hollow. It seemed less like he wanted to talk to me and more like he didn’t want to talk to Richard more than he had to. Or, more specifically, he didn’t want to talk about the diamond.

*I wonder why?*



“...Mr. Onodera, what does this diamond mean to you?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, engagement rings are really special, right? Diamonds are supposed to be forever, stones that stay with you from beginning to end. Recutting one seems like a pretty big decision.”

“Seigi.” Richard’s voice was like ice.

I wasn’t the only one who reacted to it. Mr. Onodera looked like he was groping around in an abyss for a moment before he snapped out of it and forced a smile back on his face.

“Thank you for your time. If you’ll excuse me.”

Richard was the only one who sent him off with a “Thank you very much.” I couldn’t say a word. It had been a while since I’d last seen that look in someone’s eyes—like they were standing on the edge of a cliff.

I heard a huff from behind me, like it came from an agitated tiger. When I turned around, Richard was standing there, arms crossed. I’d never seen him like that before. From the top of his head to the tips of his toes, he looked like a statue carved out of ice.

“I believe I reminded you, quite recently no less, that this is a place of work, not a field trip. Regrettably, you do not seem to have understood.”

Regrettably. That hit a thousand times harder than him calling me foolish.

I bowed my head deeply in the dead silence of the shop.

“I am truly, very sorry.”

“I’m putting the ring away in the safe. I want tea. Royal milk tea.”

I found myself just staring at the door to the shop after Richard disappeared into the back room with the ring. I had this feeling Mr. Onodera might come back and ask for the ring back.

I laughed off the idea as ridiculous. I mean, he was in his sixties, the president of a company, and a gentleman who couldn’t have looked better in a suit. Why would he be so bent out of shape over a little stone? He wouldn’t, would he?

But that “little stone” meant a lot to Mr. Onodera.

He’d probably left it dirty and blackened because he came here when he decided to make a big change. Obviously, I had no idea what had happened to him, and neither did Richard. Which was why I wanted to find out...but I was pretty sure just about everyone had a thing or two they’d rather someone’s unbridled curiosity not poke its nose into uninvited. Even when I, a college student who didn’t look like I had any meaningful connection to jewelry, showed Richard my sapphire, he never asked me about anything that he didn’t need to. Maybe he could be a little too cold, and a little too matter-of-fact at times, but Richard always took care not to pry into other’s hearts. This wasn’t just about stones.

Richard finished up the custard cream and blueberry tart without saying much else to me. The salesperson told me it was a really popular choice lately, but I didn’t actually know what it tasted like.

My bad feeling came true two weeks later.

It happened when Richard was grumbling about how it looked like it was about to rain just after a customer from Shanghai left the shop.

“Hello.”

Suddenly, Mr. Onodera showed up, even though the tiepin wasn’t going to be finished for another two weeks.

His clothes were much darker in tone than they had been on his previous two visits. His slacks were a nearly black navy, and his shirt was plain white. He must have just come from a formal business meeting or something like that.

He didn’t even look at me. His eyes were focused exclusively on Richard in the back of the shop.

“I’m Onodera, the one who ordered the custom tiepin...”

“Welcome back. The work is going well.”

“I would like to cancel my order after all.”

That phrase cut through the air like a knife. Mr. Onodera began speaking

rapidly.

“I’ve just been thinking about a lot of things, and I think the right choice is to just leave it the way it is. I’ll pay for whatever costs you’ve incurred so far. Just send me an invoice. I am extremely sorry for the trouble. Did I catch you in time to stop it?”

“Understood. I will contact you in short order, perhaps later tonight.”

“Sorry again. Well, um...thank you.”

He bowed, hardly looking at either me or Richard and left the shop. He was like a walking ghost. I looked back at Richard. In an instant, he’d read my mind.

“Stop this at once.”

“I’m sorry, I need to step out.”

“It is not your place to interfere.”

“It looks like it’s about to rain!”

“Seigi!”

I ignored him and headed down the stairs, umbrella in hand. My heavy steps echoed through the air.

I looked around the nearby streets and made my way toward Chuo-doori, where I saw a man in a white shirt. He was pretty far ahead of me, almost jogging, like he was running away from something. A raindrop splashed against my nose.

“Mr. Onodera.”

I didn’t want to shout for fear that he might collapse.

When I was about five paces behind him, I offered the umbrella and called his name again. Mr. Onodera turned back to look at me. He was pale as a sheet and didn’t seem to recognize me for a moment.

“I’m Seigi Nakata, the part-timer from the jewelry store. I brought you an umbrella.”

“...I don’t need it. I’m taking a taxi home.”

“Please, take it. It’s mine, not the shop’s. I came out here on my own. This has nothing to do with jewels or anything else.”

He took a step backward and stumbled on the curb. I grabbed his arm to keep him from falling just as a blue car rushed past right behind him. Both of us let out a big sigh of relief.

Mr. Onodera began to mumble, his words blending into the sound of the rain, “Today’s...the anniversary...of my wife’s death...”

“Huh?”

The day she died.

The person the engagement ring had belonged to.

The rain grew heavier as I held the umbrella over us. It was a sudden, torrential downpour, and my cheap umbrella wouldn’t keep the both of us dry for long.

Mr. Onodera steadied himself on the railing and smiled. “Why don’t we go into that café to get out of the rain?” he suggested.

He looked exhausted, like he’d been lugging around something heavy.

We went inside a nearby café. It was probably the place Richard was seen chatting to another shop owner about having delicious sponge cake. Food didn’t really feel appropriate under the circumstances, so I just ordered two coffees. The rain grew heavier outside.

“...I went to visit her today. But when it hit me that I didn’t have the ring with me...I felt like I should have left it alone...”

He looked lost as he struggled to string the words together, but slowly, word by pained word, opened up to me about what had happened.

She had died in a fire. I’d kind of had a feeling that might be the case after Richard mentioned that the black stuff was soot, but I guess that really was it. I wasn’t slick enough to offer my condolences without hesitation. Plus, it was such a stilted phrase, and I kind of felt like it would be like rubbing salt in the wound. But I had to say something, or I’d be pushing my own discomfort onto him.

He looked at me, lost in thought, and smiled a little. “You’re still so young, but you have such a thoughtful look in your eyes. You really are unique.”

“I think I get it from Grandma...I mean, my grandmother.”

“Your grandma?”

“She was the kind of person who always had a lot to think about.”

And when she was alone, she often had the same look on her face as Mr. Onodera did now.

Listening to someone’s story was to take in a little piece of their past. It may not always lighten their load, but it could help bring the formless feelings swirling about in one’s mind to light and help give them shape. Once you knew their shape, you could understand how much they weighed and maybe find a way to make that load a little lighter.

That was why I’d wanted to talk to Grandma—about all sorts of things. I wanted to do something to help her. But there was nothing I could do back then. Maybe the reason I felt this compulsion to help people in need, regardless of the consequences, was because Grandma praised me for it when I was little. But beyond that, maybe I’d just been desperately trying to fill the great, empty hole I felt in that moment.

When I held my silence, Mr. Onodera opened his mouth again.

“My wife’s name was Kyoko. She was so full of life. She made braised burdock like no one else, and even if I was making a racket with work late into the night, she never complained... Well, that’s not entirely true. We did fight occasionally. My employees adored her like she was their mother. We never had any children of our own, you see...”

He went on to explain that a fire broke out in the middle of the night.

He had been out drinking with a client when he got the call—on the cell phone he had only just started carrying—that his house was on fire. The fire had started in the reception area of the office on the first floor. An improperly put out cigarette had fallen onto the floor, and the chairs began to burn. Kyoko was the only one in the house.

The neighbors had seen her that night. She had come outside after the fire started but ran back inside before the firefighters arrived.

“She...she said she was going back inside...to get her ring...”

Diamonds are made of carbon. The same as charcoal. Even I knew that. At high temperatures, they can burn away. She must have known that, too. But diamonds aren't the only thing that can burn—human beings are also made of carbon.

After the fire, all Mr. Onodera had left of her was the blackened ring.

“We kept a little safe by the bed, and every night before bed, she would take the ring out and gaze at it lovingly. It happened at night, so...she might have had it out of the safe when it happened. You see, I found the ring in our bedroom...right next to her...and the only part that wasn't singed was the part her body had protected...”

His words faltered, and he dabbed his eyes with a white napkin. The black-uniformed waitresses pretended not to notice, apparently accustomed to scenes like this. I guessed that was the sort of relationship stores were *meant* to have with their customers. Getting too involved in others' business was bad form.

But that ship had long since sailed for me.

“I'm so sorry for upsetting you. That ring must hold a lot of memories for you. Too many to even...”

“That ring became a monster,” he said. “She was so happy when I gave it to her. So happy... Looking back on it now, I really didn't spend very much on it, but when I gave it to her she said, ‘I never knew a diamond could be so beautiful.’ But now, every time I look at that ring, my heart aches. I'm filled with bitter, hateful feelings. If only I had never bought her that ring—I can't bear to part with it, but the sight of it pains me. If it hadn't been for that ring, she would still be here. If I had just... If I had never... She...”

He apologized over and over as he pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket. It was folded neatly into a square and looked like it had been sitting in his pocket like that for a very long time. And the person who used to iron it and hand it to

him every morning was no longer here.

“...Losing someone you love is painful. So painful you can’t think about anything for a while.”

“I know. I feel like I haven’t been able to think at all for the past ten years.”

“Ten years?!”

“Does that surprise you?”

His smile felt so meek. So that meant he had spent the last ten years, looking at that half-blackened diamond ring every single day, remembering the fire.

Out of curiosity, I tried informing him that the soot would come off easily with a little soap. I would have been surprised if he hadn’t known that, but just as I’d expected, he smiled softly. It was just like Richard said. He knew but decided to leave it that way.

“While time moves by so much faster as you get older, pain and sadness never seem to move at the same pace.”

“So, um, then why did you come to the jewelry store to have the ring remade?”

Mr. Onodera’s expression darkened once again. I knew that face. It was the face people made when they acutely felt the dissonance between the person they were in their head and the person they were now. They wouldn’t respond even if you tried to talk to them, and a child would find their expression instinctually terrifying. Men and women both made the same face, too.

He set the handkerchief down and covered his face with one of his hands.

“...Because I know. I know that the thirty years I spent with her wasn’t a boundless expanse of sadness, it was full of many moments of joy and happiness. I know that, but every time I look at her ring, I can’t think about anything but the fire. That pain, and that guilt...I wanted to do something about that. But the more I thought about it...the more I felt like I was trying to forget her. And the thought of her ring coming back to me in a new form tore at my heart with pain a hundred times stronger than any joy it might have brought me.” He added, “I’m sorry, I know you probably don’t want to hear all this.”

No, not at all. Pain came in many shapes and sizes. It didn't always come in the same intensity or form for everyone. The pain of a loved one's death could sneak up on you over and over at unexpected times. It might even make you feel like crying in some totally unrelated place. Or make you angry at the drop of a hat, tire more easily, and lose sight of the other people around you.

In the midst of her grief, my mother resolved to move forward and returned to work. I still couldn't even imagine how devastating losing your only parent must be. But now she was back on the night shift and back to enjoying her favorite fried foods. And that makes me very happy.

You worried when someone you cared about wasn't feeling well, and it made you happy when they smiled. I was pretty sure that's true for everyone.

"...Um, Mr. Onodera, did you know that diamonds don't actually sparkle much, if at all, when they come out of the ground? They only became the 'big' gemstone in jewelry over rubies and sapphires pretty recently. Long after the very first diamond was cut in Antwerp."

I wasn't anywhere near as eloquent as Richard, but at times like this, when I had something I needed to get across to someone, I just had to trust in my own words.

"Since I started working at Richard's shop, I've slowly come to understand more about gemstones. I thought they were weird at first. I thought the only reason people would manufacture a natural resource like that was for money, but...if that's all it was, why would people care so much about them? Of course, anything you can sell can be a product, but the history of gemstones is one of people using them to give joy to another person."

Mr. Onodera was at a loss for words. He just looked at my face. All I could hear was the sound of the rain outside as I continued,

"I mean, just looking at something pretty makes you feel happy, right? It can touch your heart, fill you with energy, give you courage. I think the real reason people continue to desire beautiful things—the real 'demand'—comes from a desire to give those feelings to the people we love. Rubies and sapphires were beloved by the kings and queens of the past, and wine-colored amethyst was treasured for its supposed protection against the intoxicating effects of alcohol.



And with a little polish and a little marketing, diamonds became popular. I guess some people might say that cutting stones is a history of humanity's technological progress, but this is how I feel about it."

One hundred and fifty years ago, a man decided he wanted to make money off of diamonds. What he was thinking when he coined the slogan "forever," I had no way of knowing, but whatever he wanted didn't matter now. What *did* matter was that countless people had drawn their happiness in the sparkle of "forever" that he created.

The only irreplaceable value a mere stone should ever have is when its owner imbues it with love.

Diamonds wouldn't be gemstones without being cut and polished.

And so they are cut and polished—made to sparkle—all out of the fervent wish to make someone happy.

The stones can fulfill that wish and convey those emotions.

"I saw some diamonds in Shinjuku recently. They sparkled like kaleidoscopes. It felt like they contained all the happiness in the world, somehow. I don't really know what something being 'forever' really means, but I know that if I were to give one to someone I loved, it would be full of my wish for only good things to come to them and for them to be happy."

I was pretty sure that's how Mr. Onodera felt forty years ago, too.

He silently shook his head. I was a total stranger, a dumb kid who had no idea what he was talking about. He'd have every right to not say another word to me and just leave—but he didn't. He was actually listening to me.

I'm sorry. I'm almost done.

"...And I think, the person on the receiving end would feel the same way. They'd want the person they love to be happy, too. They wouldn't want them to be sad. They wouldn't want them to suffer for a long time. I'm sure the reason she went back for the ring wasn't because it was a diamond but because it was a ring full of memories between the two of you. That's why she treasured it. That's why she was willing to risk her life for it."

Silence.

Soft jazz music flowed through the café. I recognized the song: “Singing in the Rain.” *I’m singing in the rain, just singing in the rain—what a glorious feelin’, I’m happy again.* It was a song from an old movie. I’d even had it as a ringtone before. It was a nice arrangement, the notes of the piano evoking the feel of raindrops.

“...Perhaps grieving and mourning aren’t exactly the same thing.”

His words spilled out like raindrops, and they didn’t seem directed at me.

Then the gentleman finally smiled again, just like he had the first time we met.

“Your grandma must’ve been a wonderful person.”

“I dunno about wonderful, but she was a very strong person. Kinda like you, Mr. Onodera—sorry, I know I shouldn’t make presumptuous comparisons like that.”

“Oh, don’t say that. I’m honored.”

“...Wanna guess what my grandma did for a living?”

“Hmm, was she a fashion designer?”

“She was a pickpocket. A really good one, too.”

He was a little startled at first, but after a moment, he laughed. I took a sip of my now cold coffee and told him the dramatic story of everything that had happened that spring. How I’d met Richard on my way home from work, the padparadscha sapphire, the trip to Shin-Kobe, the real owner of the ring, and how I got my job at the Ginza shop.

I did all the talking, and Mr. Onodera just smiled.

When the rain had mostly let up, we headed back out into the Ginza streets and back to Richard’s shop—together.

“So, about the resetting of the stone...could you keep going with it? I’m so sorry for repeatedly changing my mind and causing all this trouble. I won’t do it again.”

“It would be no trouble at all.”

“Thank you again.”

The two besuited men shook hands again.

I saw Mr. Onodera off and was shocked when I looked at the clock in the shop. It was already 5:30 p.m. Long past closing time. I let the time get away from me while it was raining.

“Richard, I’m so sorry! I know we have to close up.”

Richard, who had been in the kitchen, came out with two cups of tea. Royal milk tea. Still steaming.

“Have a drink.”

I still didn’t really understand what was happening, but I sat down in one of the lounge chairs and sipped my tea. He had put in extra sugar, and it was nice and warm. It calmed me down right away. Just like the first time I’d come to the shop.

“You waited for me, even though I was being so stubborn and reckless...”

“I’m used to it. Or should I have locked up and tossed your bag out on the street? It was just raining. You should be happy your things aren’t soaked.”

“Oh, right...”

I thought he was going to scold me for my behavior, but Richard’s words were gentle. I looked at him, confused, and Richard responded, teacup still in hand.

“Ninety percent of the time, I find your meddlesome nature nothing but trouble. But the remaining ten percent, it’s most agreeable. This time, you did a great kindness for our client. You’re very lucky he was receptive to your aggressive brand of sincerity.”

“I’m really sorry about what happened earlier. That was an awful thing for me to say, that you were cold like a stone.”

“I hardly remember it at all.”

“...I know that’s not true. You know, we have this thing about honor and duty here in Japan.”

“Well, as I’m sure you can see, I am not, in fact, Japanese, so I know little of your ways.”

He definitely remembered. Richard sipped his tea with a haughty look on his face. All I could do was force an awkward smile.

“I noticed you’ve actually been drinking the royal milk tea I make now.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m sure the stuff you get back home is way better. How does it taste so much better now?”

“Nothing tastes better than tea someone else has prepared for you.”

My eyes went wide, and Richard averted his gaze a bit.

“When you’re done, the cups need to be washed, the store cleaned and locked up. Let’s make quick work of it.”

“You’re actually pretty shy, aren’t you?”

“You’re insufferable.”

We left the shop at 6 p.m., said good night, and bowed to each other. Richard disappeared into the Ginza streets, black suitcase in tow.

It was exactly one month after Mr. Onodera had placed the order to have the diamond engagement ring remade. The ring had made its way back to the shop in a beautiful new box, reborn.

“What do you think?”

Richard brought out a small brown velvet box in place of his usual box of wonders and placed it in front of a very nervous-looking Mr. Onodera. Inside, a silver-colored tiepin was enshrined on a white cushion. We’d seen the design in line drawing form before, but now it was a tangible, three-dimensional object.

The flat part of the tiepin was engraved with a wave pattern. The metal was an alloy of platinum and the gold of the original ring. The surface was polished to a mirror shine, practically begging its new owner to touch it.

And then there was the diamond.

I would have never known that the stone, sitting on the tiepin as if protecting it, was the same one Mr. Onodera had brought in originally. There was no trace of black soot left on it. Was it always such a brilliant, sparkling stone?

The diamond collected all the light in the shop and shone like a little sun.

“In the process of refashioning the stone into a tiepin, the culet and pavilion facets—the bottom portion of the stone—have been adjusted.”

For a while, Mr. Onodera sat in the lounge chair, staring at the tiepin in the box. His smile wasn't a sad one. After a few moments, he let out a long sigh and then looked at Richard like he was about to cry with a big smile on his face.

“...How did you do it?”

“The way light enters a stone can change dramatically depending on its cut and the way its set. The artist went to great efforts in order to return the original brilliance of the ring.”

Mr. Onodera went quiet for a moment, before the words spilled from his mouth,

“I never knew a diamond could be so beautiful.”

His voice sounded warm, like whatever was stifling his words had vanished. He wiped his eyes and looked at me and Richard.

“Thank you. You've done an incredible job. I don't know what to say.”

He stroked the diamond on the tiepin gently with his thumb.

“It was a very high-quality stone. The lapidary who worked on it was surprised.”

Mr. Onodera nodded. He took a sip of the royal milk tea I served before opening his mouth again like he just remembered something.

“...This is the first time in a long time that I could actually remember what my wife's smile looked like. There's nothing quite as beautiful in the world. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart. Thank you.”

He thanked us several times, and then bowed, saying he hoped to meet again. Just before he left the shop, he turned to me.

“Are you sure about your decision?”

“I’ve had a lot to think about myself. Thank you for the offer.”

“All right, I understand. You’re gonna be big, kid,” he said with a smile and left.

Richard was the only one looking confused. I mustered the best smug smirk I could, and his beautiful face contorted into an unsettling expression.

“...What is this ‘offer’ he referred to?”

“Oh, well, to be completely honest, he tried to recruit me.”

Richard frowned, and I slowly explained the situation.

“Mr. Onodera invited me to intern at his company. It’d be a lot of work, but I’d get paid and it would lead to a permanent position. He suggested that it would be good for my future prospects to study at a real company while I was in school. I guess like preemptive recruiting or something? I’d be a salesman.”

Back when we were hiding from the rain in that café, I ended up babbling about all sorts of nonsense, including mentioning that I was in college, studying economics. We exchanged e-mail addresses and he contacted me, basically asking if I’d come work for him.

“It was a pretty incredible offer, once I looked into it. They sell parts in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia and all over the world. They had their own niche, so they didn’t have a lot of competition and a lot of room to grow. But more than anything, the president took a liking to me—that counts for a lot these days.”

“I see.”

Richard sat down in one of the lounge chairs and resumed drinking his tea.

Huh? That’s it?

“...Don’t you wanna say anything?”

“I think you’d be well suited to the job.”

“Huh?”

“Being a salesman.”

He took another sip of his tea before slowly folding his hands on his knee. His expression was cheerful and his voice steady.

“The way people treasure gemstones is not unlike the way they treasure other people. Regardless of what you may have said to him the other day, the way you understood what he cherished and neatly returned those feelings to him is worthy of praise. I have a difficult time imagining exactly what being a civil servant is like in Japan, but as far as I’m concerned, you are much more suited to sales than some stuffy desk job. You’re a people person, aren’t you?”

“...I think I’d say so, but...are you going to be able to manage this place without me?”

“When does the internship start? I can find someone else to start then.”

He was his usual self. Neither his expression nor his voice changed at all as he spoke.

I guess that meant anyone would do for this job. But maybe that should have been obvious. It didn’t have to be me. Anyone he knew who could make tea would be good enough. Even though he’d made such a big deal about how he only wanted someone he’d hand-picked *because* it was a job anyone could do. Even though I went to all that trouble to buy him sweets. Maybe he just said that to make me feel better, though.

When Richard saw me overcome with shock, he lowered his head and covered his mouth with his hand, like he was about to burst out laughing.

“What, did you expect me to cry?”

“I’m just a little shocked. I guess I really had the wrong idea about some stuff...”

“I believe I know what you’re trying to say, but understand this: If I had not met you, I would not have hired anyone to work for me part-time.”

I lifted my head. Richard was smiling. Ever since I took that trip with him on the Shinkansen, every time I saw his smile, it felt like he had my heart in a vise. His expression was like a precious gem, cut and polished by the world’s finest craftsmen. How was he human just like me? Were we sure we couldn’t just consider this a natural phenomenon? *‘Today will be partly cloudy with a chance*

*of Richard's smile.'*

"Wh-what does that mean?"

"This is a jewelry shop. My main priority in a hire isn't knowledge or experience but someone I can trust. If I need someone with knowledge, I can hire a specialist for that. But I believe this is much the same in any field in any country."

"Umm..."

"In this regard, you pass. With flying colors. You told me more in that café than a ten-page resume could have. And the fact that you helped a strange foreigner on the side of the road did a better job of demonstrating your moral character than any certificate could. As often as you say you know nothing about gemstones, your attitude toward them is always sincere. You don't conceal your shock or sadness, you simply respect their beauty. The ability to be honest in the face of great beauty is the one absolute qualification required to love gemstones. When you're around, I can see gems with fresh eyes. And for that, I must thank you."

Richard continued, "That said, you do only live once." His habit of sipping at his tea seemed a little more forced than usual. "So you ought to do what you want to do, where you want to do it. I live my life accordingly, as well. Anyone can serve tea. I can even manage it by myself."

"You're just not gonna hire anyone if you can't find the right kind of person?"

"Why would I hire someone if I could manage better without them?"

It made sense.

Richard's brow furrowed as a big smile filled my face.

"What? You've been acting strangely this whole time."

"I turned it down."

"You what?"

"The internship. Because I want to work here. I've been able to see all sorts of stones I've never seen before and meet all sorts of customers working here. Plus, I take joy in seeing this whole new world open up to me. *And* it's not like



I'm giving up on entering civil service. And my boss isn't half-bad either."

I laughed, and the ravine growing in Richard's brow returned to normal... before furrowing again. Huh?

What was that sigh? And why was he turning away from me?

"...It seems I've hired a much bigger idiot than I thought."

"Huh?"

"Ridiculous. No, I'm sorry, I meant to say, I know little of your Japanese ways of duty and honor and whatnot. Say whatever you like, but I am not raising your pay."

"That's not what this was about! Come on, that's not what you say! Where's your spirit? Like, we're gonna do this together! Let's set out on this new journey, just the two of us!"

"Before you start criticizing someone else's choice of words, I think you should be a little more cautious about your careless use of Japanese phrases you clearly don't understand the meaning of. This is ludicrous. I thought you had at least close to average intelligence."

"I dunno if a manager who teaches their employee how to make royal milk tea before showing him how to lock up the shop is any position to talk."

"There's an order to things. Tea!"

"You already have tea."

"I want a fresh cup."

Instead of telling him to get it himself, I opened the paper bag Mr. Onodera left for us. It was full of baked treats. And two boxes. The lids seemed a little too solid for food items.

"Huh?"

"What's wrong?"

"...It's Noritake."

The boxes contained a pair of white mugs decorated with gold bands.

My second period class on Monday was my gen ed English class. It ended right at lunchtime, and I ran out the moment I was free. By the time I got back to campus, the back gate heading toward the library was crowded with people. But building 15 only had stairs, so by the time I arrived, the group of girls who were always last to leave the classroom were just coming out.

I took a deep breath and shouted, “Tanimotooooo!”

The girl, who was with her usual group of friends, turned to look at me, her bouncy black hair swaying as she did. Her already round eyes went even wider—not because of me but what she saw behind me.

“Wow, Seigi, that’s the sports car? Ooh, it says Jaguar on the emblem.”

Her fluffy white skirt billowed in the wind as she raced down the stairs. She was an angel. An angel walking the Earth. And I had to brace myself as this angel approached.

“Yup, it’s a sports car, and it is a Jaguar. But...it’s not mine!”

The moment I shouted, the green luxury car that had temporarily stopped behind me pulled away. The emblem glimmered as it drove by. By the time I turned my head, the driver was already out of sight.

Tanimoto came over to me with a puzzled look on her face.

“It’s not yours?”

“Yeah. It’s a friend’s car. I didn’t mean to lie to you about it, I just kinda fat-fingered a reply to your text... I’m really sorry.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it. That car sure was pretty, though. I read an essay in a mineral journal where the author compared the beauty of stones to a sports car, so I always wanted to see one in person. I can see how the author thought those curves could convey the beauty of stones now. And it was all shiny just like malachite...so, um, thanks a bunch!”

“So, um...”

The words caught in my throat. Come on, Seigi, you can do it. What did you bow your head to Richard and beg him to drive you to school for? Why did you

plead with him, despite the displeased look on his beautiful face, to give you the courage to make a move until he finally caved?

When it came to clearing up misunderstandings and confessing romantic feelings—it was best to just get it over with quickly.

“So, um! I...I may not have a Jaguar, but I do have a driver’s license...”

I should be able to tell someone how much they mean to me even without a Jaguar or a diamond. All you need is love, right?

“If you don’t mind a much, much less impressive car, would you like to go on a drive with me sometime...?”

“A drive?”

“Yeah.”

*Please. Please go out with me. I love you. You being here makes every day of my life a joy. You make food taste delicious. Your smile can turn my whole day around. I would do anything for you. I love you.*

I wanted to let her know all that, but I couldn’t say it. It was impossible. My tongue was frozen. Asking her out on a drive was the best I could muster.

Please, answer me. I’m begging you. Please.

Tanimoto smiled, but her eyebrows drooped.

“Sorry, I get motion sick! I can’t go on a drive with you.”

A swath of blackness opened up before my eyes. Her “sorry” kept playing over and over in my head. “Sorry,” “I can’t,” “Sorry,” “I can’t,” “Sorry,” “Sorry.” Aaaaaaah.

“But I think I’d be okay on a train.”

“Huh?”

“Have you ever heard about the rocky outcrops on the Miura Peninsula? They’re really cool. There’s this path carved out of the side of a cliff where you can see the layers of sedimentary rock—it looks like a layer cake. Do you like that sort of thing, Seigi?”

“I...I do! I love it! From the bottom of my heart!”

“I’m glad you do! I really like that stuff, too.”

I was so confused. I thought she’d rejected the idea of spending time with me, but that wasn’t it at all. She turned down the drive, but invited me on a date and just wanted to go by train instead. What was even going on? Whatever, it didn’t matter. Spring had come for me. Tanimoto was a bit of a space case, so there was a chance I hadn’t gotten across to her very well, but if we were going on a trip together, just the two of us, that counted as a date, which meant she and I were dating—

“Seigiii,” I heard a voice say from up the hill. I focused my eyes on the tree-lined walkway surrounded by thick grass. A bicycle was heading down the hill. Its rider waved at me—it was Shimomura from my prep class.

“I saw the blonde driving that foreign car! She was a total babe! Who wouldn’t fall in love with that! Best of luck, buddy!”

Shimomura made a beeline from the top of the hill to the bottom where the library was. I felt like I’d seen the face of the grim reaper for the first time in my life. Tanimoto looked at me, puzzled.

“The driver was a blonde?”

“No! No! The person driving that car is not a woman!”

“Oh, so it’s a man. A foreigner?”

“Yes! He’s a man! And yes, he is very attractive!”

Tanimoto giggled. Good. I almost thought everything had been ruined. You know, it really wasn’t very funny how the gods would knock you down, pick you up, and knock you down again. If Tanimoto wasn’t a literal angel, I didn’t know how that would have turned out. Now, I was going to get my happy ending for rea—

“I’ve seen that guy before. You’re dating, aren’t you?”

What.

Tanimoto flashed an innocent smile while I froze.

“The two of you were looking at wedding rings at a department store in Shinjuku, right? I caught a glimpse of you from behind while you were in the

jewelry department. I just assumed my eyes were playing tricks on me, though.”

“W-well maybe they were!”

“No, I forgot something on the upper floor, see. So I went up and down the escalator a bunch of times. I happened to be going up on the escalator next to you when the two of you were headed down. You asked him if he wanted to get something from the food court in the basement. I was surprised at how good his Japanese was. Mind if I ask what his name is?”

My heart was pounding at a strange rhythm. That’s what he meant about saying “the wedding’s off.” That’s...that’s what it was. That’s why the saleswoman looked so happy. That’s what she thought. I might die from a heart attack. I really should have been wary of unexpected encounters. That was right—Shibuya recently passed a same-sex marriage *ordinance*—Richard always said I’d run up a huge tab with my careless comments—

“No! It’s not what it looked like...”

“Hey, Seigi, is everything all right? Your phone’s been going off this whole time,” she pointed at my pocket. I didn’t even notice the phone buzzing against my leg until then. I just pushed the button without thinking.

A flood of messages, all from the same person, flooded the screen.

*“Mr. Seigi Nakata, did the Jaguar chauffeur service meet your expectations?”*

*“Out of respect for our honest relationship, I believe I am due compensation that ought to be paid for this generous favor.”*

*“I plan to open the shop specially tomorrow, so I’d like you to stop by to clean up today.”*

*“You don’t need to be in at any particular time, just come when you can.”*

*“I have many stones I’d like to show you.”*

*“And I will treat you to dinner. Yours truly.”*

*“Your response?”*

*“You’re taking too long.”*

*“Now.”*

When Tanimoto saw the sender on all of them was a “Richard,” she nodded.

“So his name’s Richard, huh? Hope you have a nice dinner. You better answer him already. I’ve got dinner plans with my friends tonight, so bye.” She waved to me as she walked off.

I watched her get smaller and smaller as she met back up with the other girls before disappearing into the lunchtime crowd. I stayed frozen there, even after I couldn’t see her anymore. My angel...my angel had left me. All I could see was darkness.

I cried and fell to my knees by the back gate of the school, pounding on the asphalt.

“I want a stone that’ll improve my luck in love just by having it in my possession...!”

“If a stone like that existed, I’d buy it.”

I looked out the window of the fourth floor of Ginza’s Shiseido Parlor and down at the street, groaned, and picked at my curry with four separate garnishes. After I’d made the shop sparkle, Richard showed me the diamonds he’d just gotten in. They all glittered with dazzling light, forever ignorant of the true depths of human suffering. Just as the gem of a man sitting in front of me could never understand my pain.



c a s e

EXTRA

To Wish Upon a  
Rose Quartz





ONE SUMMER DAY on the second floor of a mixed-use building in Ginza...

I groaned like a stalled car engine, and my boss cleared his throat.

“Try as you might, but those stones are never going to talk to you.”

“...I can’t decide.”

“Then do it more quietly,” Richard responded coldly.

This was a pretty normal exchange for us, but the unusual thing was that we were sitting across from each other on either side of the shop’s glass coffee table.

Atop the table sat the black box of wonders. Its contents today were three cabochons. Gems like diamonds and rubies that were cut to have many flat surfaces are described as “faceted,” while things like crystal balls or magatama beads that are polished to a rounded finished were called “cabochons.” Clear stones that reflect and refract light well were better suited to faceting, while more opaque stones tended to be treated as cabochons, just like the ones I was looking at.

Their color was a pale, milky pink. They kind of looked like candies. The stone was called rose quartz. They were pretty big, too, about the size of my thumbnail. Rumor had it that this stone was supposed to help with your love life.

This all started when I was browsing the internet on the way to class one day. I was honestly pretty surprised when I saw an article claiming that there was a stone that could treat romantic woes about as well as some medicines could treat migraines. It said that different stones had different effects. Like some kind of magical talisman. On this New Age-y website I found, their page on rose quartz featured a picture of a pretty pink stone. Quartz, a kind of crystal. Medium hardness. Not very difficult to work with.

So, of course I wanted to buy one of these stones ASAP.

I wasn’t exactly the most superstitious person around, but the object of my affection was an avid rock collector after all. I didn’t know anyone more likely to sincerely lend an ear to the voice of a stone than her. At first, I thought it might

make a nice present, but she said her favorite rock was pyrite and it wasn't really all that similar—at which point I did have to wonder if it was even possible that there was a stone that she didn't like, but under the circumstances, I wasn't taking any chances. Considering the risks involved, I concluded that it'd be best if I bought it for myself. Plus, it'd be strategically useful in other ways than as a gift. Like, if I told her that I bought a piece of rose quartz and used that piece of trivia about it being a love talisman as a stepping stone to clear up this frozen hell of a misunderstanding, maybe, just maybe, I could get the snow to melt and emerge from the depths of winter and into a verdant spring once again.

Tanimoto had acted totally normal around me ever since the sports car incident. And I acted normal around her, too. But she'd mentally categorized me as "taken," and by another man no less. I hated this. It was the absolute worst. I had to do something as soon as I could. But in a way my cowardly heart could handle.

Honestly, I was scared. Her kind of spacey personality terrified me in some ways, because there was always a chance that even if I was as direct as humanly possible with her, it still might not get through. But the direct route was my last resort. There had to be some, like, other way. At least I hoped there was.

Setting aside the complexity of the situation for now, I was frantic and used my part-timer privilege to ask Richard to acquire some stock of rose quartz, "if he happened to see any" "if there was an opportunity" "if it was convenient." He replied curtly that it would all come down to luck whether a piece of rose quartz was in the cards, but the following week he had acquired three beautiful specimens for me. Richard was a little taken aback, asking me if this was some kind of historical drama I was working on as I sat there, hands clasped and head bowed, groaning. They were all priced in the four-digit range, but none were more than 5,000 yen. Totally within my price range.

However.

"Hmmm..."

"Sir, if you don't mind my asking, what is the source of your troubles?"

"...I just don't want to screw up and pick the wrong stone."

“Excuse me?”

His tone sent me into a bit of a panic. No, I know Richard would never get something wrong. I trusted him. But, still...

“Hey, are you gonna get mad at me if I start talking about healing crystals and stuff?”

“Why do you ask? Did someone get angry at you about that?”

“No, just I saw it on a website, it warned that jewelry shops might find that kind of thing startling, so you should be careful about mentioning it. I don’t really know anything about it, but do jewelers’ exams cover like, purification rituals and auras and that stuff?”

“Oh,” Richard cast his gaze downward. It sounded like I’d gotten my point across at least. He glanced at the stones before moving his eyes, his deep blue eyes, to my face, and smiled.

“A jewelry shop isn’t a drug store, and jewelers aren’t pharmacists. We can’t exactly meet the needs of those who are exclusively interested in the ‘effects’ of stones, but if those people have any interest in them for their beauty, they’re valued customers all the same. I will humor any topic of conversation so long as it remains within the realm of good taste.

“I think I can take a guess though,” Richard added. He got me. No point in trying to hide it at this point.

“When I asked you for rose quartz, all I knew about this stone was that it was supposed to ‘help with love,’ but the more I looked into it, I found all sorts of other details. Like that it’s good for ‘relationship progress,’ or ‘meeting new people,’ or ‘unconditional love,’ and so on.”

“Are those not all good things?”

“They are, but... Yeah, like...they are good things, but...I mean...”

Richard let out a merciless little laugh which snapped me back to my senses. He crossed his legs, like he was tired of trying to help me. Like everything I had to say was of no consequence. My friends acted the same way any time someone spoke fondly about a romantic relationship. He may have been a

talented jeweler, but he was still a young man. It was hard to believe considering where he was career wise, but he could have been in his twenties just like me I guess.

“I know this is kind of random, but how old are you?”

“That’s what you’re worrying about right now?”

“No! So, I want a stone for ‘relationship progress,’ but what if I were to buy a stone that’s really only good for ‘meeting new people’...won’t that cause weird problems? I mean, it’s not like I believe all this stuff, but you never know. I mean, what if!”

“Tea.”

“Hey! What happened to the customer service you were treating me with earlier?”

“I got thirsty.”

I grumbled but went to prepare some tea, while Richard set the box of rose quartz to the side and readied the sweets. It was a new confection—these round fruit jellies with powdered sugar on top. The little sweets, each about the size of the rose quartz cabochons, were crowded into a golden package. There were four colors and not too much sugar. I’d gotten used to using the gold banded cups that weren’t for customers.

Richard thanked me with a smile. He was, as always, inhumanly beautiful. I was confident that it would be a problem if a woman worked here, but I promised myself I wouldn’t say that out loud. I can’t deal with any more misunderstandings. I had no more fouls to spare, I’d just be out.

My very handsome boss delicately picked up the jellies one by one with a white pick and ferried them into his mouth. At times like this, Richard was just a foreign man who really loved sweets. He took a sip of his tea and glanced over at me.

“I believe I mentioned this back during that incident with the amethyst, but humans are creatures that grow in order to accomplish their own true desires. If you truly wish to develop a relationship with someone special, I don’t believe that any stone will be able to aid or hinder you in that quest.”

I do kind of remember him saying something like that back at the hospital. My own true desires. That's right. Even if they don't realize it, people are always following their desires, that's what Richard—huh?

Richard frowned at my confused look.

"What is it now? Are you going to tell me that you don't know what you 'truly desire' or something?"

"Wow, how did you know?"

"Ridiculous," Richard enunciated every syllable. Was it really ridiculous though? It sure wasn't to me.

I mean 'relationship progress' wasn't limited to romance, after all.

My days have been pretty full since this spring. Even without taking into consideration the money I was making from my part-time job, Richard had opened the door to a whole new world for me, and I could talk to Tanimoto about stones now. And while these weren't the most happy incidents, I did save two people's lives. And somehow I had become something of an expert on all the sweets available in Ginza.

I'm pretty sure my mother would say that it's a bad idea to seek friendship from people you work with, because money is involved. She always had a very harsh but realistic outlook on life. She was probably right, but still. I wanted to get a little closer to Richard too if he'd let me.

I had my grandma, but I never had a grandpa. My stepfather, Mr. Nakata, was a nice guy, but he was never around. In junior high and high school, most of the guys I was close with were older boys into karate. They were always sweaty and would throw punches at me whenever they had a free moment. It's not like I didn't have anyone I could talk to, but most of the guys around my age were a bunch of idiots who were always fooling around.

The living gem of a man who always wore a suit looked at me with a curious face.

"...I'm disinclined to believe this, but don't tell me you're trying to date two women at once."

“No! I’m not! I was thinking about you!”

Richard’s expression soured. I don’t know how many times I told him I didn’t mean it like that, but given the context of the situation, that was probably a bad way to broach the subject.

“...Honestly, even I think what I’m about to say is super embarrassing, so if you just pretend I never said any of this, I’d appreciate it... I just, I’m happy that I met someone who’s maybe a little weird—in a good way—but kinda feels like an older brother to me. You know everything, and you listen to me, and you put me in my place when I’m doing something stupid. After all that nonsense I spewed, you drove me to class in your car, and you’re helping me with this Tanimoto thing...so I just...”

I barely eked out the rest of the sentence, “...I just want to get to know you better.” Richard leaned back a bit and brought a hand to his mouth. He was laughing. Please, laugh it up, this couldn’t possibly be more embarrassing.

“I’m sorry, I thought the only thing you liked about me was my appearance.”

“Please, have mercy...”

“I’m kidding.”

“You know, even though you do this sort of thing to me, I really respect you. You’re all alone in a foreign country, always wearing a suit and carrying that suitcase around with you with a smile on your face. I couldn’t do that if I tried. I know what I’m saying is really embarrassing, but I’m not joking.”

Richard didn’t say a word and stood up, teacup still in hand. He turned his back to me and drank his milk tea. What on earth?

“Wh-what’s wrong? Did your butt fall asleep from sitting too long?”

“Not in the slightest. I simply enjoy drinking my tea standing up from time to time.”

“From time to time? This is the first time I’ve seen you do that.”

“Enough, go look at those stones.”

Richard gulped down the rest of the tea in his cup and quickly vanished into the back of the shop. If he wanted more, I would have made it for him, but I

guess I had better hurry up and pick a stone. There might not have been any customers in the shop at that moment, but we got most of our traffic in the afternoon.

I returned to the three pieces of rose quartz. They were all pretty, but the one that I was most drawn to was the one in the middle. It was an oval shape—kind of like a face—and had a white vein running diagonally across it. It felt nice in the palm of my hand, too. Gently squeezing it made me smile. I'd never felt such relief from gripping a stone before. Richard slowly returned to the room, and I smiled at him.

"I'm gonna go with this one. I think it's the right one. It's a good stone. By the way, this is a totally unrelated question but...do I get an employee discount?"

"We can make a special arrangement."

I asked him if that meant taking it out of my next paycheck, and Richard shook his head. He crossed his legs and said something strange. He wanted me to bring him information on the latest sweet shops in the Shinjuku area. The catch was that it had to be information from someone who had actually visited in person, not random comments from magazines or review sites that had no meaningful value as information.

"Are you saying you want me to go do a kind of food tour and report back? It'd have to wait until after midterms."

"Don't you have any friends who might be well informed on the topic? Surely the women at your school go to such places for tea and whatnot. Couldn't you tell them that your 'strange, but in a good way' boss made an unreasonable request of you as an excuse to talk about it?"

Oh.

Was he telling me to talk to Tanimoto? Was he giving me an excuse for me to start a conversation with her about something other than stones?

My eyes went wide, and Richard let out a little huff.

"Everyone excels at different things. Just as I have my knowledge of gemstones, you currently have access to a network of college students you can use to gather information. You scratch my back, I scratch yours."

Hardly anything he was saying was getting through my head. It was going to be a while before I'd be able to talk again. Just hold on, I'm trying to come up with the biggest thank you of my life.

I know.

"Richard, I...I don't think I could possibly love you more!"

I grabbed his hand with gusto and gave him a very one-sided handshake. Richard, cup still in hand, had that weird zen look on his face again. I know this look. Wait, did I do it again?

"...Honestly, you are completely and utterly incapable of learning a thing."

"No! Don't get the wrong idea! The person I'm in love with is Tanimoto!"

"The source of your misfortune is your ill-considered words that invite misunderstanding, however true they may be. Perhaps you have simply not suffered enough to learn your lesson. They say heaven helps those who help themselves, but when a fool with no capacity for introspection finds himself seeking salvation from a stone, perhaps he will be rebuffed with a cruel 'serves you right!' instead?"

"You may have a point, but I don't think you should be talking to a customer like that..."

"Is that so? Well, then, *sir*, I think it's about time you returned my hand to me."

Just as I hurriedly let go of Richard's hand, the intercom rang. Both of us turned to look at the door at the same time. We had a customer.

Richard silently pointed at the kitchen, before closing the box of rose quartz and heading into the back. I cleared the plates, wiped down the table with a cloth, and headed to the kitchen to make some fresh tea. I heard the door open, followed by a "welcome" from Richard.

I wonder what our first customer of the day is here for.





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