THE CASE FILES
OF
JEWELER
RICHARD
WRITTEN BY
NANAKO
TSUJIMURA
3
NOVEL
ILLUSTRATED BY
UTAKO
YUKIHIRO

Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyrights and Credits

Table of Contents Page

Case 1: The Sought-After Topaz

Case 2: Unsettling Turquoise

Case 3: The Jade Inheritance

Case 4: Angelic Aquamarine

Extra Case: Fluorite by Your Side

Newsletter

THE CASE FILES OF JEWELER RICHARD

NOVEL 3

WRITTEN BY
Nanako Tsujimura

ILLUSTRATED BY
Utako Yukihiro

Seven Seas Entertainment

HOSEKISHO RICHARD-SHI NO NAZOKANTEI
© 2016 by Nanako Tsujimura
Illustration by Utako Yukihiro
All rights reserved.
First published in Japan in 2016 by SHUEISHA Inc., Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged by SHUEISHA Inc.
through TOHAN CORPORATION, Tokyo.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: T. Emerson
COVER DESIGN: H. Qi
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
COPY EDITOR: Meg van Huygen
PROOFREADER: Jade Gardner
SENIOR LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Nibedita Sen
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-63858-869-6
Printed in Canada
First Printing: February 2023
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

case. 1 THE SOUGHT-AFTER TOPAZ

case. 2 UNSETTLING TURQUOISE

case. 3 THE JADE INHERITANCE

case. 4 ANGELIC AQUAMARINE

extra case. FLUORITE BY YOUR SIDE

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.

case 1 The Sought-After Topaz

I'D BEEN WORKING part-time at a jewelry shop for almost six months now. Étranger had opened in April of this year on Ginza's Nanachome, and I worked there every weekend. You might be surprised by the idea of a college student working part-time at a jewelry shop, but it was a small business—I was the only employee, other than my boss. Besides, my work mainly consisted of serving tea and cleaning up. There were probably plenty of shops like this, and I'd just never been aware of it before.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Oh my, iced milk tea? Goodness, this could be a little café."

"It's royal milk tea. The milk isn't added to the tea after it's brewed, but the tea is actually steeped directly in the milk. Is it to your taste?"

"Of course it is, but it's definitely an unusual choice."

"Hagino, enough about the tea. Please focus on the stones—they're what we came here for."

"I know, I know."

It was a Saturday. The sun's rays were still intense, but in another month, we'd be in weather more suited to warm drinks than iced ones. Well, maybe that was wishful thinking. The weather had stayed warm into October last year, so maybe it'd be more like two months. While the only extra step involved was chilling it in the fridge, making iced royal milk tea took longer. So as the resident tea monkey, I was looking forward to cooler weather.

"Seigi, you can serve the dessert later."

"She'll just get distracted. Right, Hagino?"

The man currently giving us his best customer-service smile was Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian, who held some rather extremist opinions about the preparation of royal milk tea. He was also some sort of mysterious creature that never gained an ounce of weight despite consuming no less than four cups of said tea a day, along with the fanciest of desserts. To add insult to injury, he was beautiful—like a living gemstone. And despite being a white guy with blond hair and blue eyes, he spoke Japanese, and several other languages, fluently. I

had no idea exactly how many languages he spoke, but I was sure I didn't have enough fingers to count them all.

The Tamuras, who'd come by that afternoon, looked like they were both in their mid-fifties. They'd made an appointment two months ago to see some imperial topaz. This was their first visit to the shop, but Étranger had apparently earned itself a good reputation among their acquaintances, so they were looking forward to seeing my boss's skills firsthand. Richard matched their enthusiasm by preparing a number of high-quality stones for them to look at.

Several orange stones, the color of summer sunshine, were lined up in his velvet box. They came in a variety of sizes, ranging from no bigger than the tip of my pinky finger to the size of my thumbnail. There were greyish, beige, and even pink stones, all lovely, but the ones that really caught my eye were intense orange with hints of brown. All the stones were extremely clear, so they reflected the light well, making them sparkle. They looked so cool. I bet it'd be easy for a man to carry off wearing a stone that color.

In my limited layperson's knowledge of gemstones, I'd thought topaz was blue. But it seemed the "imperial" variety was this color. *Does that mean orange is some emperor's color or something? But the emperor of which country?*

Richard flashed a dazzling smile, as if to keep my burgeoning curiosity in check. The inscrutable beauty of his smile was quite frankly terrifying. *I know, Richard, I know.* I knew I had a tendency to get a little too comfortable and say things I shouldn't. I'd lost count of how many times Richard had scolded me for it at this point, but it was an uphill battle and I hadn't made much headway yet. Not every customer enjoys being treated like a friend, after all. I decided it was best if I stayed quiet for the time being.

"Wow, what wonderful specimens. Unlike amethyst and garnet, you rarely have the opportunity to look at so many pieces of imperial topaz in one place. Does Étranger have ties to a Brazilian mine or something?"

"You are correct that most of these stones originated in Brazil. However, we're a Sri Lankan company. You're quite well versed in the origins of various stones, Mr. Tamura."

“Am I? Ah ha ha! Well, I have been collecting for over ten years now—loose stones, I should specify, not jewelry. I just really love stones. I know it’s not a terribly masculine hobby. My friends make sure I never forget that.”

“Is that so? The collectors I’m personally familiar with, at least, are more men than women. The most famous of them donated his collection to the American Museum of Natural History.”

“J.P. Morgan, right? I know the collection. The blue topaz at the museum in New York was incredible. Do you remember that, Hagino? We saw it together.”

“I don’t remember. That was so long ago.”

“As you can see, my wife doesn’t really share my passion,” Mr. Tamura said with a smile, before going on to tell us more about himself. His name was Teiichi Tamura and he was 53 years old. He was the assistant manager of a large department at a securities firm and had a loud, boisterous manner.

His wife Hagino, on the other hand, was a slight, pale woman wearing a loose-fitting dress with a white shawl around her shoulders. Her salt-and-pepper hair was done up in a bun with a beaded hair pin. She was beautiful. And while she may have seemed a bit at odds with her husband, Teiichi, in his business shirt and slacks, she was clearly someone who had her own strong opinions about things. But she didn’t speak much, come to think of it.

“Hey, Hagino, what about this one? It’s beautiful. Pick it up.”

“You can say that all you like, but I don’t know how to tell good from bad where these things are concerned. Sir, are these all the same type of stone?”

“Indeed, they are all imperial topaz.”

“Of course they are! I told him to show me imperial topaz, after all. Come on, look at how pretty it is—pick it up and actually look at it. I’ll get my flashlight.”

“I just don’t know what I’m even looking at…”

Teiichi seemed like the kind of person who wanted everything his way. Not even Richard could get a word in edgewise, let alone Hagino.

The black flashlight he pulled from his bag was the same kind Richard used. Jewelry Étranger seemed to be mainly frequented by enthusiasts—we rarely

got window shoppers, and many of our customers were quite familiar with gemstones. There were some regulars from when Richard was working in Hong Kong, collectors of particular kinds of jewels, the sort of people who were more interested in getting a nice stone for their jewelry than brand-name items, and so on. As a random layperson who only got this job by coming to the owner's rescue on the side of the road by complete coincidence, I was often the least knowledgeable person in the store. Whenever I asked Richard stupid questions after the customers left, he always explained things so a layperson like me could understand and never looked annoyed to have to do so. And he'd answer each and every one of my questions. I enjoyed his lectures—he was so good at talking that I could listen to him forever. I appreciated that special talent of his.

"Hagino, topaz isn't a soft stone like opal, so you don't have to be so scared about handling it. You're holding it wrong, too—this is how you should do it to get a better look at it. The cut is immaculate. Do you have a lapidary in-house?"

"This stone and that one came from an American, but they were already cut when I acquired them. They were cut in Sri Lanka."

"This one is a lovely safflower color. Ooh, and that pink one is so cute."

"They didn't used to call the pink ones imperial topaz! They say that the best color is that pretty sherry brown, right?"

"Well, I guess that's true."

"See, I told you! Look, orange stones are rarer than the pink ones, and the brown ones are even better than that. They really are incredible."

Teiichi was as excited as a little kid in a toy store. Richard managed to keep up with him, never letting his smile falter, but Hagino's expression only grew darker as she sat next to him.

With Richard's permission, Teiichi rearranged the stones in the box into a single line. Apparently, this was his way of rating them, with the worst at one end and the best at the other. The best one in his estimation was the sparkling one with the rich brownish-orange color. He put the pink and pale orange ones on the low end—the pink one Hagino had liked was third from last.

"How'd I do? Did I get it right?"

“Well, I’m not sure ‘right’ is the best way to put it. Every customer has their own preferences.”

“That’s not what I mean. I’m talking about price. Did I get the order right?”

“In that case…” Richard said with a nod, “…you were rather close.” He swapped two of the orange stones in the middle. Teiichi made a face like he was one point off a perfect score on a quiz, pounding his fists in his lap in celebration. Then he looked at Hagino like he was expecting praise, but her expression had completely soured by that point.

“So, Hagino, did you pick one yet?”

“Why are you asking me? Why don’t you just pick?”

“Huh? But it’s for your ring.”

“You’re the one who’ll be paying for it, after all. Pick whichever one you prefer.”

“…I wish you wouldn’t say things like that. I thought we talked about picking one together. We’re supposed to be celebrating thirty years together.”

“Oh, please, not here.”

Teiichi apologetically explained that their thirtieth wedding anniversary was coming up with a bashful smile on his face.

“Huh? I thought the thirtieth anniversary was pearl, not topaz,” I said.

“Oh, you may be young, but you do know your stuff. There probably isn’t a topaz anniversary. I know there’s a sapphire and ruby one. But she already has a pearl necklace, and she was born in November, so I figured her birthstone, topaz, would be nice instead.”

Hagino looked away without saying a word, as if to say she had no interest in looking at stones. Teiichi hurried to try to cheer her up. They looked like such a cute married couple to me, but I knew if I said that out loud, my boss would strike me down where I stood.

Richard gave me a look, signaling me to serve some snacks as a change of pace. But before I had the chance to do so, Hagino sighed and seemed to give in. She leaned over Richard’s box of wonders to look over the stones, then

sighed again. She seemed unable to bring herself to examine the stones this way.

"…I imagine this is the stone you'd recommend?"

"Yeah! That's the best one!"

"I don't have an eye for this sort of thing at all. They all look the same to me, but…isn't this one nice, too?"

"Uh, I guess."

Whether you're in a college course with only a few other students, a high school debate, or a junior-high assembly, there are certain unwritten rules that everyone just understands. For example, when a teacher or moderator or whoever happens to be in a position of authority claims that they want to hear people's honest opinions, but clearly favors one particular position, you know no one is actually going to give them an honest opinion. They're not going to go out of their way to say something they don't think will be well received.

I scrambled to figure out how to get a man in his fifties working at a large company to listen to a sanctimonious lecture, but Teiichi seemed to assume the cause of my strange behavior was something else entirely. He smiled at me cordially.

"You don't know a lot about gems, do you? Is there anything you were curious about?"

"No, uh… Well… Y-you know, I have been wondering why they call it *imperial* topaz."

It was going to be a while before I forgot the look of joy on Teiichi's face and the look of disappointment on Hagino's in that moment.

Teiichi cheerfully reassured me that it wasn't really common knowledge before proudly launching into the history of imperial topaz. Apparently, topaz had always been popular in Europe, all the way back to ancient Rome. But in the middle of the eighteenth century, it was discovered that heat could be applied to amethyst to produce a yellow stone resembling topaz, which we now call citrine. It was sold on the market as "golden topaz." Quartz was a common mineral, so it had always been less expensive than topaz, but yellow topaz and

citrine were so similar that they were easily confused for one another. These days, that was the sort of thing the Consumer Affairs Agency in Japan would step in to deal with, but there was no such body back then. And so, “imperial topaz” was given its name to differentiate it from the stones that weren’t truly yellow topaz.

“Imperial topaz comes from Brazil, but at the time of its naming Brazil was an empire. And it was named ‘imperial’ topaz in honor of Emperor Pedro II. Brown stones are especially rare, even among imperial topaz. Make sense?”

“It does, thank you. You really…do know your stuff.”

“Aw, shucks!”

Teiichi proudly lifted his beaming face. I imagined he was an easy boss to get along with, since you could make him this happy just by praising something he liked. Meanwhile, his wife Hagino had been totally left out of the conversation. She was now asking Richard about how royal milk tea was prepared, and Teiichi was not amused.

“Did you follow that too, Hagino? There’s a reason it’s called ‘imperial’ topaz.”

“That’s wonderful, honey. You know everything there is to know, so there’s no need for me to know it, too.”

“What… I don’t even know why we’re here if you’re going to be like that.”

“That’s my line.”

Her beautiful face snapped into a grimace. This was definitely not good.

“Oh, you want to know why we’re here? Trust me, I know why we’re here—you just wanted me to tag along while you buy another one of your precious gemstones. I don’t know anything about this Brazilian emperor’s stone, or whatever it is. I’m only here because you asked me to come with you to pick a stone for my ring together. If you want to pick it on your own, who am I to stop you from enjoying the process to your heart’s content? I’m going to go have some tea at Mitsukoshi in the meantime.”

“Huh? Wait, you’re serious?”

“I hope you have a nice day.” She waved her hand and rose from her seat. The

door's electric lock opened promptly, and Hagino slipped out of the shop, like a cat sneaking through a cracked open door. The closest café to the shop was on Hanatsubaki-douri, but Mitsukoshi was a ten-minute walk. Was she really going all the way over there?

Teiichi let out a faintly remorseful sigh and apologized to me and Richard.

"She just…seems to be in a bad mood today."

"I should really be apologizing, I'm the one who asked a silly question."

"Oh, no, it's not your fault. You know, we've been married for thirty years, and I still don't feel like I understand her at all. Look at all these quality stones we have to look at, too. I just don't get it."

"……"

It was a little concerning to think that he might be completely serious. I had the feeling their relationship wasn't going to last much longer.

Richard was a half step ahead of me before I had the chance to snap at our customer. "Sir," he said, sounding like he was about to ask a question in an extremely gentle but resolute tone. "I noticed you seem to be quite preoccupied with the idea of 'quality' stones or the 'best' stones. Did you come here simply to acquire the 'best' stone?"

"Huh? Well, of course I did. It is for our thirtieth anniversary," he said with a smile.

I noticed he'd gotten a lot quieter once Hagino had left. I guess when his wife was sitting next to him, he relaxed and acted like he was at home.

"I mean, who wouldn't want the best for someone they love?"

I understood how he felt there. It was a positive impulse, if anything. My doubts weren't about whether his love was real but whether he would be able to effectively convey it to the object of his affections.

As I struggled to keep myself from saying anything, Richard smiled again, "You are correct that a stone's value will directly impact the financial value of the ring it's set in. I certainly understand your desire to offer something of the greatest value as a gift, and I'm sure you can be even more assured of that

stone's value given your excellent eye, Mr. Tamura."

"Oh, you flatter me."

"However."

Richard's voice was like an ice-cold knife as he interrupted Teiichi, giving him no opportunity to object. His friendly smile remained as perfect as ever.

"Why, exactly, is it that humans desire to gift items of significant value to others?"

Teiichi fell silent. Richard's point must have gotten across to him, because he blushed awkwardly and got up with a little groan.

"Sorry, I'm a little worried, so I'm going to go check on her. She made it a point to mention that she was going to Mitsukoshi, so she's probably waiting for me to join her, acting like nothing happened. I should be back in twenty minutes."

He apologized and bowed to us before leaving the store. I let out a little groan. Richard wordlessly picked up his glass of tea, which he hadn't been able to drink while customers were present, and downed it silently and rapidly. I had to imagine the European socialites of old probably used similar techniques when they were hungry. There was a certain, familiar elegance to his actions.

"…You went easy on the sugar today."

"Well, you mentioned this morning that today's customers were on the older side, so I figured they might be a bit health conscious. Sorry if that was the wrong call. Should I add some more?"

"No, this is quite all right," Richard said, drinking it down to the last drop.

"I don't want to complain about our customers, but that was kinda… I mean, I just feel so bad for his poor wife. You really are an incredible conversationalist. You never upset people when you talk to them, and you're always so considerate."

"Of course. Did you never learn to practice your conversational skills alone, just as you might practice your tennis swing against a wall in school?"

"Most Japanese people aren't very good at that sort of thing."

“I’m aware, but you’ll never get better at something if you keep avoiding it.”

He seemed to be implying something. And not just about public speaking. But before I could pursue the topic to find out exactly what he meant, there came a knock at the door. Someone had deliberately *knocked* on the door, even though there was an intercom. It would be odd behavior, even for a new customer—but if it *was* a new customer, I’d have to tell them we were booked for the day and they should come back another time.

I took a look at the feed from the camera at the front door. *Oh.*

“…Hagino is back.”

Richard calmly told me to open the door for her. When Hagino entered, she looked pleased with herself.

“Hello again. Did he leave?”

Why was she here? What happened to going to Mitsukoshi?

Richard flashed her a triumphant smile, bowed, and offered her a seat—specifically, the seat Teiichi had been sitting in earlier, directly across from himself. I frowned and Hagino smiled impishly.

“Sorry for scaring you like that. I wanted an opportunity to actually look at them for myself. I don’t dislike gemstones, but when he’s around, he just takes over, you know?”

But why wasn’t Richard surprised to see her back already? The fastest route to Mitsukoshi was down Hanatsubaki-douri, hanging a quick left on Chuo-douri, where you’d arrive under the clock tower. It was pretty much a straight shot. Teiichi left only a minute or so ago, so he absolutely should have spotted her on the street. Did that mean she’d gone into a nearby café instead and come back out immediately?

Richard smiled gently at Hagino, seeming to sense my doubts.

“I didn’t hear you walk down the stairs when you mentioned going to Mitsukoshi earlier. Sounds echo so very loudly in this building—you can always hear footsteps outside the shop. I don’t mean to pry, but am I correct in assuming you waited on the landing for Mr. Tamura to leave?”

“You’re quite handsome, Mr. Detective. That’s exactly right.”

I see. So it was a diversion. I didn’t think she was so crafty.

Hagino pushed Teiichi’s glass of royal milk tea aside and picked up her own, taking a long, weary sip before setting it back down on the table.

“You know, he wasn’t always like this. And he was especially bad this time. It’s all your fault, too. I’m sure everything you’d present to a customer is equally wonderful.”

“That pains me to hear.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. It was a compliment. I may not have an eye for this sort of thing, but I’m more than confident that you do. It is your trade, after all,” Hagino said, pulling a jewelry box from her handbag. It was a small, velvet box, just the right size for a ring. She popped it open to show the single ring that sat inside, then laughed and set the box on the table, presenting it to us.

“What do you think when you look at this ring?” Richard asked.

I came around behind Richard and peered into the jewelry box over his shoulder. The ring had a rather thick gold band with a single blue stone set in it. It was a dazzling shade of blue, but also kind of opaque, with a beautiful, subtly asymmetrical cut. I wasn’t sure what to say, so I waited to see Richard’s reaction. The beautiful jeweler flashed me a gentle smile.

“Was this a common design for rings sold in Japan thirty to forty years ago?” I asked.

“I guess it might have been? You must’ve seen many similar examples. Goodness.” Hagino looked briefly astonished, then laughed again.

I didn’t understand her reaction at all. Had I said something wrong? It was something a customer brought in, after all.

“I believe that’s a blue topaz in the ring, but am I correct in assuming it’s your engagement ring?” Richard asked.

“You would be correct. He bought it for me when we decided to get married. Its origins might surprise you, too—it was purchased during a major sale at a big box store in rural Saitama that’s long since shut down. I believe it cost about

55,000 yen.”

She giggled happily. I had no reference for what a rural big box store thirty years ago might have looked like. Maybe it was something like a garage sale? It *was* a little hard to believe that Teiichi had bought something like that for Hagino.

Hagino continued, telling us stories of their early married life. Teiichi had found a job at a not-terribly-prestigious finance company right before they got married. As a young man, he’d lacked self-confidence, and though he tried to make everyone around him happy, he probably failed at that about 70% of the time. But, Hagino noted, he would probably never have gotten his *current* job if the company he’d been working for back then hadn’t gone under, so you never really knew where life would take you.

Hagino’s parents were running a little import store at the time. They had *opinions* about jewelry, and they were extremely critical of the ring their daughter’s fiancé had selected—the stone wasn’t worth what he paid for it, the gold of the ring didn’t go with the blue stone, and their poor daughter was going to be stuck with it for the rest of her life. But despite all that, Teiichi supported them when their shop closed down. They now had a relatively amicable relationship.

“It never really bothered me, but he’s probably never been able to forget all the awful things my parents said. Ever since he started at his current job and began earning enough for us to live comfortably and then some, he suddenly developed this obsession with collecting gemstones. And the more he looked at them, the more he seemed to learn. He’d go to mineral shows, jewelry exhibitions in Vegas, all sorts of places—all of it with the express intent of buying faceted gemstones.”

“Faceted stones that aren’t set in a piece of jewelry are called ‘loose’ stones. Mr. Tamura described himself as a collector of loose stones. It’s not an uncommon hobby. There are some particularly passionate creators with a special interest in rare stones, as well.”

“I’d be fine with that if he had any sense of restraint. I have nothing against beautiful gemstones, of course, but, well…” Hagino mumbled her next words,

imitating Teiichi. “‘Quality stones, the best stones…’”

I asked her if he was always like that. She replied that he wasn’t—not all the time—but then shook her head.

“But I guess that sort of behavior isn’t limited to gemstones. You see it in people who are ardent baseball fans or a band’s groupies, too. They’re completely normal when it comes to any other topic, but when the subject of their obsession is brought up, they forget everything around them and can only talk in technical jargon. I suppose it’s not so bad in moderation, but when you’re married to someone like that and have to see him every day, it gets a little trying.”

“…I think it’s impressive that you can describe that as only a ‘little’ trying.”

“Really? Goodness. You must not be in a relationship, I take it.”

The gut-punch of a comment shut me right up. Richard chuckled. Hagino wasn’t a bad person. I knew that. But maybe her tendency toward bluntness was a “little” trying for Teiichi, too.

“This ring must mean a great deal to you, Mrs. Tamura.”

“It does, even if my husband seems to have forgotten that. I have to keep it hidden, because if he catches sight of it he’ll start yammering on about having it remade.”

“If I may ask…why did you bring it with you today then?”

Richard’s question was uncharacteristically direct. While she might not have shared Teiichi’s lack of restraint, Hagino clearly didn’t struggle to talk to other people. She spoke like a pitcher throwing easy balls to the batter, which was probably why Richard had decided to take a swing.

And sure enough, Hagino smiled.

“Good question. I haven’t the faintest idea, myself. I’ve never been the type to wear jewelry like this in the first place, and I always found it hard to wear a ring my parents had such strongly negative opinions about. I never even wore it on our big day. Maybe I just feel kind of sorry for it. Or maybe it’s because it’s our thirtieth anniversary and I’m feeling nostalgic. That said, I’d never even

consider comparing this stone to an imperial topaz.”

“Are you at all interested in having it recut?”

“You mean having it reshaped to be more beautiful? No, thank you.”

Hagino rejected the notion immediately. I had a feeling I knew why she brought the ring along. To her, the ring was more than just a ring—it was almost like a pet or a family member, one she’d known for almost thirty years.

“You see, I’m more than satisfied with it just the way it is. Nothing about it displeases me. And I don’t feel that surrounding yourself with gemstones you find aesthetically pleasing is bound to bring you greater happiness. That’s all there is to it.”

All there is to what, though?

But before I had an opportunity to ask her anything, Hagino continued in an enthusiastic tone, “Now, while the cat’s away, why don’t you show me what you have?”

“Please, take all the time you need.”

“Um, not to be a wet blanket, but…are you sure you shouldn’t at least text him to let him know you’re okay?”

Teiichi was probably running around the cafés in Mitsukoshi right now. It’d be one thing if there were only a couple places to check, but if I remembered correctly, Mitsukoshi had a bunch of restaurants on the upper floor. It’d be a lot of work to go through all of them.

“I’ll contact him in five minutes,” Hagino responded, looking mildly irritated. “He needs to reflect on his behavior a little.”

She proceeded to examine the stones in a manner that bordered on petty. She seemed fonder of the sunset orange stones than the sherry-colored ones Teiichi had been interested in, saying cheerfully that they reminded her of summer. I supposed it was worth remembering that she was the one who’d be wearing it, not Teiichi. It seemed only appropriate that she pick one she liked.

It also made me feel like they needed to hurry up and reconcile, but maybe this was just part of their relationship. Just part of the way they negotiated with

each other, which someone like me, who had no girlfriend, couldn't possibly understand.

No—I couldn't keep getting hung up on that comment. I mean, I *did* have someone I liked, after all. My adorable, angelic Tanimoto may have been knowledgeable about rocks, too, but she would never force her own opinions on someone else. She was too sweet for that. So even if the specific, unique qualities of a husband-wife relationship escaped, I didn't think it was because I was single.

That said…I couldn't deny the fact that I did *not* have a girlfriend.

Hagino ran the light over each of the stones, making them sparkle, and announced to Richard that they had such wonderful colors. The blue topaz she had brought with her reminded me of one of those excessively blue American sweets. It had an entirely different vibe from the imperial topaz.

"The majority of inexpensive blue topaz on the market is manufactured by irradiating white topaz. In all likelihood, this is one such stone, though they tend to be a much softer blue these days. All but two of these imperial topaz specimens, in contrast, have not been treated."

"Goodness. Well, despite all that, the two treated ones are quite beautiful, too. The golden color looks quite natural. How are they so different?"

"The treatment process has evolved remarkably in the last thirty years."

The skill of the craftsman probably made a difference, too. My previous discussion with Richard before about the processing of gemstones came to mind. He'd explained that it wasn't like cooking from a recipe—there was no single fixed process. So much of it came down to an artisan's intuition: deciding how many seconds or minutes to heat a stone, how long to irradiate it, how much oil to infuse into it, and so on. It was an art. Which meant that for all the stones that were successfully treated, there were many more that didn't survive the process.

Richard went on to talk about the beautiful blue topaz in the American Museum of Natural History in New York that Teiichi had brought up. Larger specimens of topaz were relatively common, compared to other gemstones, but the topaz in the Morgan Collection was massive even for topaz. Apparently, it

had been mined in Japan. Though it was only produced in a few places now, topaz used to be mined in Japan in the past. Richard even knew about people who had built their fortunes on topaz during the Meiji period—he knew just about everything, as usual.

Hagino had narrowed her selection down to three favorites. She examined them each in turn, letting Richard's lecture play out like background music.

"…Perhaps it would have been better if he'd become a jeweler like you. I guess it's been five minutes."

Hagino abruptly pulled her phone out of her handbag and fired off a quick text before tossing it back in. What had she sent him?

"I like this one the best. I believe my husband placed it third in his ranking. May I ask you the price first?"

Richard hesitated for a moment, then told her that he'd spoken to Teiichi over the phone earlier and that she shouldn't worry about the price. Hagino smiled like she'd known he would say that.

"Oh, just tell me. I'll worry myself silly if I don't know what something I'm going to be wearing costs. I don't mind doing things to make him happy, but even that has a limit. I promise I'll pretend not to know."

I really couldn't hack it at this job. Unable to endure this any longer, I opened my mouth. Hagino looked at me, puzzled.

"Umm, don't you think you should be honest with Teiichi about it? I mean, you love each other. Surely, he cares about how you feel?"

"What? Are you telling me I should stop trying not to hurt his feelings?"

"…Not just that. I think you should tell him how you don't like it when he goes on and on about stone trivia, and stuff like that too…"

"Should I, now? It's true that I'm a bit exhausted by his little impromptu lectures, but I wouldn't exactly say I hate them, either."

Really? But you went to all the trouble to set up that ruse about going to Mitsukoshi and everything.

"Not to mention, I have to see him every single day. If I came clean about

something like that with him, we'd just end up having a big fight and complaining about everything we don't like about each other. I would never do something like that."

"Really? I guess it just feels kinda like you've given up on him…but maybe that's just harder for a man to do."

"Seigi."

There it is. I bowed my head and apologized profusely to Hagino, but she just giggled.

"I don't mind. I think it's kind of cute. I suppose if I did tell him everything that was on my mind, and he *did* change his behavior as a result, it might be worth it. But do people really do that? He's the kind of person who just can't settle down unless he tells someone everything he knows on a topic. He loves to talk. And the thing about all that stuff he said earlier is that I don't *hate* it enough to want to force him to stop being himself."

"I…I think I get it."

"That's all there is to it."

The intercom at the shop's front door rang just as Hagino finished talking. It had to be Teiichi, but it did seem a little early. Maybe it was another customer? If it was, I'd have to tell them we were busy at the moment and suggest they come back another day.

When I checked the camera and opened the door, however, it was Teiichi after all. He was bright red and drenched with sweat. He must've run all the way here.

"Welcome back."

"…I was so worried. So I didn't just miss you."

"You did not."

"Seigi, bring him some water. Unless you'd prefer something else to drink."

"No, um, I'll just keep working on my tea from earlier. That'll be plenty."

Teiichi bowed his head to me apologetically. That was when I noticed

something odd. Upon closer inspection, the sweat was *only* on his face. His shirt was dry and his hair was tidy. It really didn't look like he'd run *all* the way back. Had he turned around at once when he didn't see her in the store? He sure had good timing, if that was true.

Wait.

You could hear footsteps outside the shop—which meant it also worked the other way around. Maybe he arrived early and heard Hagino and I talking through the door. Did that mean Teiichi had heard her say his extensive lectures were irritating, but she didn't hate them because she loved him?

"…I wish you would have contacted me sooner."

"Do you now?"

"Did you find a stone you like, Hagino?"

"I did."

"I'm glad, then."

Teiichi's tone had done a 180, and even though he seemed to have noticed the blue topaz ring sitting out on the table, he didn't comment on it. Yeah, that confirmed my suspicions.

Man, they really were an adorable couple.

I looked over at Richard, not sure what I should do, and he mouthed an instruction to me: sweets. *You got it, boss.* I kept missing my chance to serve it earlier. The shelf of sweets that was a veritable collection of the finest sweets in Ginza at any given moment was this jewelry shop's hidden treasure. The refrigerator's been stuffed to the brim because it's been so hot lately, so I pulled something from there to help alleviate our storage issues.

I plated two people's worth of delicate, yuzu-flavored traditional Japanese confections, complete with little toothpicks. Hagino was delighted and said they looked adorable, but for some reason Teiichi seemed a little embarrassed as he sat next to her, bowing his head and thanking me.

Even after he finished the confections and polished off a second glass of royal milk tea, Teiichi hadn't changed his mind. He seemed to be trying to persuade

Hagino, albeit without using the phrase “best stone.”

“I really think I want you to have this stone after all, Hagino. I know topaz comes in many colors, but I don’t think we’ll have another opportunity to acquire a stone of this size in this beautiful sherry color again. That’s how rare it is. We have several topaz specimens at home, but the best of those…I mean, the highest quality of those are about equal to this one. This ring is to commemorate an important anniversary, so I want you to have something that incredible for it, Hagino. Of course, everyone has their preferences about color and shape, but even if this isn’t the one you like the best, I want to give you something with a great deal of objective *value*.”

I nearly clenched my fists. *Well, I guess that’s all there is to it, in the end*. If he always took this approach with her, being frank about understanding where she was coming from, surely she wouldn’t get mad at him.

Hagino looked upset again, but she was quiet for a moment, like she was carefully considering his words before she spoke.

“May I ask you one question?”

“Go right ahead.”

“Were you thinking ‘objectively’ about picking the ‘best’ wife when you chose me thirty years ago?”

My heart clenched into a ball of ice. Just how would he respond?

“O-of course I did!”

Hagino began laughing, not because she was pleased but because she thought it was funny. That question basically had only one answer—what was she expecting? What an awful position for a man to be in.

“Well, I certainly never had such lofty expectations of you. Thirty years ago, you didn’t have the kind of confidence you do now—you were still young and had no idea what life had in store for you like the average dime-a-dozen man you were.”

Hagino continued, explaining pointedly just how ordinary a life they’d led for the next thirty years was. An ordinary life: getting married, raising three kids

and putting them through school, working until retirement so they could keep living in a humble, quiet home afterward. Sometimes fighting, sometimes getting sick, living out their days renovating their little home. It sounded pretty idyllic to me—but maybe that was what the generation after the baby boomers considered ordinary. If nothing else, I felt like I could understand what she was getting at.

"You see? Both you and I are completely and utterly ordinary. No different from an ordinary, common stone."

"So you're saying we're worthless?"

"Of course not. Just that, despite being completely and utterly unremarkable, we've managed to make something of ourselves. It's not like I wish I'd married Alain Delon or Sean Connery. I'm not sure either of them would have managed as well as you have, anyhow. Ultimately, what anyone thinks is 'best' is just what seems like the best option in the moment, don't you agree?"

"…But we can know objectively what that imperial topaz is worth."

"So? What if an even *better* mine that produces even *better* topaz is discovered—what would you do then?"

Hagino pressed him for a response, but Teiichi didn't so much as squeak. Was this always some kind of contest? I supposed Hagino's argument was essentially that something's value could change—it wasn't some absolute, immutable property. But regardless of all that, shouldn't a piece of jewelry be to the liking of the person who'd be wearing it?

That was how I felt about it, at least. Hagino suddenly chuckled.

"Well, I'm not one to force my opinions on others."

Huh?

She picked up the sherry-colored imperial topaz Teiichi had been advocating for and handed it to Richard.

"Use this for the ring. Make sure it's the *best*."

"H-Hagino!"

"Oh, please, don't make that face at me. It's fine. I'm not just giving in, all

right?”

And with that, Teiichi was completely defeated. End of story, everyone lived happily ever after. Or at least, so I thought.

“N-no, I can’t let you do that! I completely understand what you were saying earlier! After all that, you should get the stone you like the best. You don’t have to pick the one I like.”

“What are you talking about? I said this one would be fine. Isn’t that good enough?”

“It is not! Ugh, you always have to make things so complicated!”

“Maybe you’re just too simple.”

Ah, now it’s a mess again.

The schedule today was unusually packed. Richard would call our next customer before their appointment to tell them to come in, but today’s was coming from overseas, and they didn’t seem like the type to want to wait. Étranger had essentially been turned into the Tamura family living room, as the two of them bickered over stones. Richard was in stand-by mode. He really had been awfully quiet today. Even if he was being considerate of Hagino’s feelings and letting Teiichi take center stage, it felt unsettling. Wasn’t the illustrious jeweler Richard the one who should know just what to do in a situation like this? Not that I had any idea what that would even *be*, but—

Wait. I’ve got it.

“Umm, what about a twin setting?”

“Huh?”

“What’s that?”

The quarreling couple turned to look at me. I hurried over to the shelf next to the shop’s houseplant, pulled out a bulky pamphlet about ring production, and hastily flipped through the pages—*I’m sure it was in here somewhere*. I found what I was looking for about thirty pages in.

“Here, take a look. This example is garnet, but you get the idea.”

The ring in the picture had two identical stones set beside each other. The stones weren't set in a straight line with the band but at a slight angle. That was all there was to the design. While most of the ring designs I was familiar with—aside from the ones with accents like melee diamonds—were rings with single stones, that was far from the only kind out there. This one was going to be made to order, too, after all.

"So this design is called a twin setting?"

"Oh, no, sorry, I just came up with that myself. I just remember seeing it before and thinking it was a cool design. What was it actually called again…"

"This is called a 'toi et moi,' or a 'you and me' ring. It has a simple, youthful feel to it."

Richard returned to the fray, offering me a hand. Instead of complaining he'd taken so long, I just flashed him an awkward smile, but he didn't even look at me. The Tamuras looked intently at the pamphlet for a bit. Then Hagino smiled.

"…Not half bad, if you ask me."

"Really? All right, then. Richard, let's talk numbers."

"Very well. Right this way."

Teiichi got up, looking very excited about his pending purchase, and Richard ushered him into the back room to negotiate. This wasn't particularly unusual. One time, an Arab client who had brought along four young women and a bodyguard went into the back with Richard to talk money and left me alone with a group of people whose language I didn't speak and nothing to do but serve them tea.

Hagino glanced at me and smiled.

"Looks like we've been left to fend for ourselves."

"Y-yeah, I guess we have."

"Oh, don't be so nervous. You must think I'm a scary old hag. I promise I won't eat you."

I really didn't think anything of the sort. Honestly. I just wasn't comfortable around her yet. My frame of reference for older women I was friendly with

began and ended with my mother Hiromi. Admittedly, I felt a bit weird about putting Hagino in the same category. It was immediately apparent from how she spoke earlier that she was a strong woman, but in a different way from Hiromi. Ever since the divorce, my mother had been fighting her way upstream against double the current. If was thanks to her valiant efforts that I could live the life I did now. She would never describe a life in which a husband and wife could happily go ring-shopping together as an “ordinary” one. She was well aware of the fact that this was an “ordinary” only a tiny fraction of very lucky people were afforded. And as her son, I knew it, too.

I couldn’t really say anything about either of their personalities beyond the fact that they were “impressive.” But if I had to choose between Hiromi’s bluntness or Hagino’s round-about approach, I’d pick Hiromi any day. Well, then again, maybe that was just because I didn’t know Hagino very well. What was I even supposed to say?

Hagino smiled at me like I was an elementary schooler left home alone, bewildered by a sudden visitor, and stood up. *Huh? Is she going to Mitsukoshi again?*

“I have a favor I’d like to ask of you: Could you show me how you make that royal milk tea you served? You see, I just love tea. I’d appreciate it if you could show me the brand of tea you use, too, if you don’t mind.”

“O-of course. I don’t mind at all. Keep in mind it’s just a normal kitchen, though.”

“Oh, goodness, do jewelry shops normally have kitchens?”

“This unit used to be a café. We have all sorts of sweets and snacks back there, too.”

I timidly led her back into the kitchen. Hagino was a little surprised to see how small it was and that there was no one else there. She asked me if I did all the kitchen work myself, and I awkwardly nodded. She blinked a few times, looking amazed.

“If only one of my sons had turned out like you. You see, all three of my children ended up being boys, and not one of them lifts a finger to help me out around the house. I’m sure they’ll come to regret that before long.”

“Ha ha…”

I pulled out the tin of tea she wanted to see, and she thanked me but seemed a bit surprised.

“What is it?”

“I was right, it wasn’t Uva. I could have sworn royal milk tea is usually made with Uva Ceylon.”

“S-sorry I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, goodness.”

She spun the tin, which was covered in mysterious foreign lettering, around as she examined it, mumbling the word “Dimbula,” whatever that was.

“This is a local Sri Lankan brand, not something produced by a foreign company. I don’t think it’s commonly sold in Japan…you must be quite the enthusiast. Are you really that fond of it? You seem more like a chai tea kind of person than a royal milk tea fan.”

“R-right, chai tea…”

“I take it I should ask that handsome boss of yours later.”

That was an unexpected development—the tea I’d been using to diligently make royal milk tea every week was special. I really shouldn’t be so surprised, given Richard did carry it around in that big black suitcase of his. He always produced a number of tins and restocked our kitchen, so I’d figured it was something easy to pick up at a specialty shop.

Since Hagino had asked me to show her how to make it, I went to work while she watched. I brought a cup of water to a boil, added three spoonfuls of tea, three heaping spoonfuls of sugar, and three cups of milk, and let it all simmer, cutting the heat when the froth reached the edge of the pot.

“It’s a pretty basic procedure, huh? If you were to add cinnamon and cardamom next, it’d make it a chai tea, with a kind of flavor that just invigorates you. It may not be to everyone’s taste though, so it’s probably much safer to serve royal milk tea to customers.”

“I, uh, I’ll try it sometime.”

But only when Richard isn't here, I added in my head. Richard didn't walk around with tea, cups, and spoons just for show. This didn't happen anymore, but when I first started working here, he'd give me this icy glare with those blue eyes of his if I ever messed up the magic ratio he taught me or even slightly over-steeped the tea. I almost found myself missing it.

"The girl you marry is going to be getting an excellent deal—she'll have so much help around the house."

"O-oh, I, uh, you think so?"

"I do."

I wasn't a fan of this nonstop teasing. I must've been failing at customer service to feel this way about a customer, but I supposed it was ultimately still an interpersonal relationship.

"If you ask me, I think Teiichi must be much happier than I could ever make anyone," I said.

Hagino chuckled like I'd just told a funny joke, but for some reason she gave me this look as if to ask why I felt that way. It was so embarrassing.

"I mean…like, based on what you said earlier, you already know all of his faults and everything, right?"

"Well, we are married."

"The thing is…I think you have something pretty rare and special. I mean, stuff like that would be a dealbreaker for a lot of people. I think both people in a relationship probably have to pull their weight if they want to stay together in spite of things like that, so…um…I think he's very lucky to have someone who's been willing to stick by his side for thirty years. I think it's kind of incredible."

I ended by bowing my head, but Hagino laughed and asked me why I was being so formal. I had a feeling she tended to be a lot less bubbly around Teiichi than she was with me, but maybe that was just part of how she showed her affection for him. At least I thought it could be. I mean, as much as everyone would love to be happy and smiling as much as possible, it wasn't like you could smile *all* the time. Or maybe it was just that, to her, Teiichi was the one person she didn't feel like she had to force a smile for.

“Well, I certainly hope that you find a woman like that for yourself one day.”

“I-I’ll try my best.”

“You really are adorable.”

Just as Hagino was enjoying some of Richard’s and my secret specialty drink, The Chilled By Force Royal—which was basically just dumping ice into some piping hot royal milk tea fresh off the stove—Teiichi and Richard returned from the back room, having finished their negotiations. Teiichi gave two cheerful thumbs-up. He must’ve cut a deal with Richard.

“I got him to get a really good artist to make that twin ring for us! I can’t wait!”

“I have to apologize for how unreasonable he’s been. Thank you for putting up with him.”

“I appreciate your patience as well. It may take a bit of time, but I will do everything in my power to ensure that this fine piece to commemorate your anniversary is completed as fast as possible and to the highest standard possible.”

Richard bowed deeply and saw them out. The Tamuras mentioned that they’d be stopping by Mitsukoshi on their way home. I was just glad to see them getting along. I had a feeling that they’d probably end up getting in another fight but would make up just as quickly.

“What great customers. Even if they were a bit of a handful,” I said, expecting to get a “Seigi” in his usual scolding tone, but wait as I did, it never came.

“Richard?”

I turned around to see what he was doing and saw Richard standing absentmindedly next to one of the red lounge chairs. He gave me a bewildered look, like he’d only just noticed I was there.

“…What?”

“Are you, uh, okay? You seem kinda…out of it.”

“Do I?”

Maybe the summer heat was getting to him. I mean, I was pretty sure the worst of the summer heat was behind us, and we were in the tail end of summer where the lingering heat was fighting for its life against the onslaught of fall, but still.

“I know, you need some sweets. You should eat something you like. What would you like? I have some pudding in the fridge.”

“Are you under the impression that I’m some sort of machine that consumes sugar?”

“Of course not. I’m just going by the established fact that the man named Richard standing before me tends to feel better after he eats something sweet. Just gimme a sec.”

“Don’t call that ‘established’ fact…”

“All right, all right, just sit down.”

I took the pudding out of the fridge and prepared him a glass of the freshly brewed and iced royal milk tea I’d made and set it on the table. Richard took a sip of the tea without saying a word and started eating the pudding like a well-behaved preschooler who had been waiting patiently for his afternoon snack.

“…Did he drive a hard bargain?”

“Not in the slightest.”

All Richard gave up was that he was a little tired. I’d never heard him say that before. He was a human being, so of course he got tired and hungry and all that, but I’d never seen him let it show on his face until now, let alone voice it.

Concerned that he might be ill, I suggested finding a hospital in a bit of a panic, but Richard just frowned and told me to lay off. I guess he didn’t mean physically tired, but mentally. *I see.*

“Um…can I ask you something weird?”

“Depends on what kind of weird.”

Richard’s tone was professional but displeased. It was the tone he used when I asked him something he couldn’t possibly say “yes” to, but I decided to take it as an “okay.”

“…Stuff like this can be rough, huh?”

“Excuse me?”

“Look, I just mean like how sometimes when you see people who are like really happy it just makes you feel all ‘urgh,’ you know?”

“And what language exactly is this ‘urgh’ word from?”

“Use feelings to understand!”

I couldn’t explain it very well. It was like the feeling I had this one time when I was little: I’d gotten on the train with my grandma and spotted this grumpy elementary schooler drowning himself in a handheld game console, while a group of people who looked like his parents and grandparents carrying a bag from an electronics store with a game console in it waited on him hand and foot—it made my stomach go “grr.” *“Grr” is just “grr,” just like “urgh” is just “urgh.” I can’t explain it any other way.* I didn’t think they were feelings everyone can understand, either. But I had the feeling that Richard could.

Richard stared at me for a moment before flashing a half-hearted smile.

“Someone’s happiness isn’t something a third party can judge. And as you so expertly illustrated just now, both happiness and unhappiness are feelings—something only the person experiencing them is capable of expressing.”

“……”

I get it. You’re not going to give me more than that.

“On a different note, do you know the origin of the word ‘topaz’?”

“Oh, we’re doing this again. I’m guessing it’s Latin or Greek?”

“Correct. You’re learning. Well, correct insofar as anyone could be—this is just one theory of many.”

After prefacing his explanation with that comment, Richard went on to explain that the stone got its name from a Greek word meaning “to seek.” An ancient king gave the name to an island in the Red Sea where topaz was mined because it was shrouded in mist and difficult to approach. Unfortunately, the stone thought to be topaz at the time was actually a different stone called peridot. What a messy story.

“To seek, huh… I guess people have been fond of the stone for ages.”

“Beautiful stones delight the eye with their beauty and are often sought after as gifts to offer the powerful. Perhaps you could say that those who seek such beautiful stones see in them what they seek *through* them—praise, rewards, or any number of other things.”

“That which they seek.” Just what was it that Teiichi was seeking, I had to wonder? Hagino’s happiness, probably. But what about Hagino? She seemed satisfied with the life she has, so maybe all she wanted was the continuation of her existing happiness.

“Seeking happiness, huh? That kind of makes me think of The Bluebird.”

“Yes, exactly. Just as those living on an island that produces topaz might think their bounty of ‘treasure’ as nothing of note. But when one tries to approach from the outside—it seems so utterly alien. People seek many such things. I hope that made sense.”

Oh.

I was right. He did understand what I was saying. Yeah, that’s it. That’s probably what I was trying to get at with the word “urgh.”

“Thanks. You know, you really are incredible.”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you mean. I would like more tea, though.”

“Yessir.”

In the break between customers, Richard cleaned out the fridge, gobbling up sweet after sweet. It’s a universal truth that humans don’t perform as well when they’re hungry, but maybe the reverse is also true. When you’re feeling tired, even if you’re not especially hungry, eating something you like can reinvigorate you.

I quietly thought about the Tamuras again as I drank my iced royal milk tea made from Dimbula, not Uva, tea. If they’d been married for thirty years, they’d tied the knot before I was even born. I had to wonder what an adventure it must be to spend that long with someone you chose—not someone related to you.

“Hagino’s rooting for me, too. She told me she hopes things go well for me romantically. Timing’s everything though, huh?”

I smiled, Richard told me “bravo” again—I hadn’t heard that in a while. It was an expertly pronounced “well done,” but he seemed to be implying something with his tone. What could he have meant?

“To the best of my knowledge, you’ve spent the last six months letting this right timing slip by. I have nothing but admiration for your ability to blame everything on a lack of opportunity.”

“It’s not my fault! What kind of person isn’t anxious when it comes to the person they’re in love with?!”

“You can lament letting a fish get away all you like, but it won’t bring it back.”

“You can say whatever you want. Romance…isn’t exactly easy for me.”

“Is that so?”

Crap. I’d almost said something stupid like, “Unlike you, I’m the most average average-looking guy there is, so of course romance is hard for me.” No matter how close you are to someone, there are some things you just shouldn’t say. As someone who never thought terribly deeply about any of my interpersonal interactions, I never really realized that until I got to know Richard.

The document I signed when I took this job included a clause about not discriminating against people on the basis of nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other similar reasons. It was an extremely low bar to clear. At the same time, Richard did tell me that he wanted to avoid being alone in the shop with a female employee, so that’s why he hired a man. While I figured it was just reasonable for someone as attractive as him to want to avoid adding even more fuel to a potential fire, maybe there was more to it than that. Maybe…but that was probably why it was a topic better left alone.

I owed Richard massively for helping me out not once, but twice. Maybe it was old-fashioned of me, but I could never feel comfortable until I paid him back—though I suspected I’d end up owing him even more before I managed that.

I struggled to find another topic to shift the conversation to.

“Oh, now I remember—the tea! Apparently, it’s Dimbula tea, not Uva. Do you know what that means?”

I abruptly changed the subject, but Richard wasn’t particularly fazed by it. He smiled faintly, almost like he had been expecting it.

“It’s the locality the tea comes from.”

Apparently both Uva and Dimbula were places in Sri Lanka. I never realized there were that many places that produced black tea. Working here, I’d only ever thought of Sri Lanka as an island that produced tons of gemstones, but apparently, they also grew tea. An island of tea and gems. For some reason, I felt like they probably had a sizable population of stylish people like Richard.

I said as much, and Richard laughed out loud—not something I heard very often.

“You should visit Sri Lanka sometime. There are several impressive tea rooms from the colonial period, but there are far more places where sandals and a linen shirt are the expected attire. As far as the language goes, the pronunciation can be a bit tricky, but you can get by with English, too.”

“Is it, like, tourist-friendly?”

“Of course it is. Do you just assume every place you haven’t heard of before is some uncivilized backwater?”

“Well, no.”

That reminded me, though, that I hadn’t ended up going anywhere for summer vacation this year. I did go to the beach with my classmates from my prep class, but there were so few women in the group that it just ended up feeling like we were screwing around on a junior high club trip, with the addition of beer.

Maybe I could go sometime soon, though. Even if it wasn’t Sri Lanka specifically—just some country I didn’t know much about. Maybe I could even go with a certain girl who really liked rocks.

Richard must’ve noticed my attention wandering, because he loudly cleared his throat. My apologies. Our next customer could arrive at any moment. I

needed to get to cleaning.

I glanced at him to see if he was all right yet, and the Emperor of Sweets had the same impossibly handsome face that he always did. He looked like he was doing okay, and I was sure he'd be his usual eloquent self once the next customer arrived. That said…though I wasn't sure how to describe it, an air of unhappiness, almost like a looming thunderstorm hung over his beautiful face for a moment before vanishing. He really wasn't his usual self. I decided I'd make another batch of pudding to bring in tomorrow.

For some reason, this beautiful jeweler truly delighted in eating that humble little confection of mine, despite looking like he'd tried every sweet in the whole of Japan, let alone Ginza. It almost made me wonder if I possessed some hidden talent. Judging from my mom's reactions to my food, it wasn't a talent for cooking, but maybe it was specifically a talent for making pudding? As cruel and unforgiving as the world we live in could be, maybe this meant I could consider going into the food service industry if I failed the civil service exam.

No, there was no way that was the reason. The idea was completely ludicrous. Ultimately, I concluded that the only reason he enjoyed my pudding so much was because he had gotten too used to extravagant sweets from eating them every day that it must've been pretty novel by comparison.

Richard stood up and straightened out his suit, looking out the window. I glanced back at him as I collected the tableware and trash on a tray. He looked like he was in much better spirits than before.

"I'm much better now. You needn't concern yourself anymore."

"I got it. But don't push yourself too hard."

He didn't reply. But just before he withdrew into the back room, he turned his head ever so slightly and said, in the quietest voice possible, "Thank you."

Thank you.

Thank you for what? Not prying into his business this whole time? If that was it, I should be thanking my own idiocy. But the loneliness I felt at the notion that the distance between us would never shrink certainly wasn't going anywhere. I supposed it could be worse. It wasn't like I didn't know how badly trying to

force a friendship could go.

If topaz was “an object of desire,” then Tanimoto was my topaz. But that did make me wonder—what exactly did Richard desire?

I kept myself busy cleaning the shop, watering the plants, and reorganizing the fridge until the next customer arrived. But in all that time, Richard never came out of the back room once.

case 2 Unsettling Turquoise

JUST HOW EARLY should I start studying for the civil service exam?

I had upperclassmen telling me I'd have more than enough time if I started in the summer of my third year, but I also had people telling me that you were screwed if you didn't start going to an exam prep academy starting in a year, because it was way more competitive than the college entrance exams. And to top it all off, anytime I received someone's opinion on the matter, it always came with one of two addendums—either, "Well, I do know someone who did that and still didn't pass," or, "I know someone who didn't and passed anyway, though."

It sounded like you could get by in whatever way worked for you, as long as you were taking it seriously. At least, that was what I chose to believe. I could start in third year and it'd be fine.

That said, I couldn't deny that I felt anxious, going into the fall of my second year of college. I was in the lounge of the college of economics building, flipping through pamphlets for prep schools for which I had neither the time nor the money, when someone suddenly clapped me on the shoulder.

"Yo, Seigi. You free?"

"…Sure? What do you want?"

"Actually, I could use your advice."

The man smiling at me with his hands pressed beseechingly together was Takahashi, from my international law class. I'd gone out drinking with him a few times before, so I had a decent idea of what kind of guy he was, but it wasn't like we were particularly close. Was I really the person to go to for advice?

Upon closer inspection, I noticed that there was a girl peering at me from behind him. She looked extremely put-together—everything from her clothes to the curls on her head were flawless. Was she in our department? I was pretty sure people would have noticed if such an eye-catching woman was in one of Kasaba University's political science, economics, or other crowded colleges. Maybe she was attending classes at the college of arts' campus.

She timidly stepped forward, and Takahashi introduced her as Ayumi Okita.

She wasn't in the college of arts but a second year at the neighboring Senjiyuin Women's College. I knew she couldn't have been in one of our classes. Though, judging from the atmosphere, it didn't seem like he was just here to show off his girlfriend.

Okita looked like something was really bothering her.

"So, I heard people talking, and they said you work part-time at a shop that deals in unusual stones?"

"Huh? Oh!"

I quickly rewound my memories. It might have been back in May that my friend from prep class, who I used to work the night shift at the TV station with, asked me where I'd been when we were all out at a bar. Telling the whole story of how I ended up working for Richard was a pain, and I knew he and the others would keep asking questions if I just said I was working part-time at a jewelry shop, so I made something up on the spot and ultimately ended up digging myself into an even deeper and more suspicious hole than the one I was trying to avoid. Now, they were under the impression that I was a poor college student with a mysterious high-paying weekend job. I didn't want false rumors getting around, so I explained that I worked at a jewelry shop right before summer break, but I guess the game of telephone had made it all the way to Takahashi.

"Well, I suppose you could say that we deal in unusual stones. But not in the sense of mineral specimens or spiritual items—just as regular gemstones. What about it?"

Okita's expression relaxed, and she clutched my hands between hers, like a nun seeking salvation from a priest, "Please, I need your help! I've lost the person I love! Please help me find him!"

She looked like she was on the verge of tears. Completely overwhelmed, I looked at Takahashi for some guidance.

I'd never called Richard to make a reservation before. Normally, I only contacted him while outside the shop to ask how many cartons of milk to buy or when to restock the paper towels—mundane stuff like that. I never imagined I'd be in the position to refer a client to Étranger myself.

I took the first train on Saturday to show Okita to the shop. Our first reservation was at 11:30, so we had 30 minutes to spare.

“Welcome to Étranger. Please take a seat. My name is Richard, and I’m the owner of this establishment.”

“Ah!”

Her mouth froze for a moment when she saw my boss’s face before she told him “thank you” in English for some reason and took a seat in one of the red lounge chairs. It wasn’t an unusual reaction. I was pretty used to it by now, but this man’s face was so beautiful, it was almost inhuman. He’d cringe if I said this to him, but I had a hard time believing we were members of the same species. I mean, like, genetically—setting aside things like height, weight, and ethnicity and stuff—we were almost identical, both *homo sapiens*, but for some reason, that felt difficult to believe.

“My employee tells me that you’re looking for some help with a gemstone.”

“Y-yes, I am. Would you take a look at this, please!”

Okita pulled a small drawstring pouch out of her Gucci purse. It had an earring in it, made of a vivid light-blue stone. Even I knew what that stone was—turquoise.

“My boyfriend, he…he suddenly vanished after he gave this to meee…”

Overcome with emotion, Okita almost began to cry. But she began to tell her story, regardless.

She started dating a man named Yoshio Sasaki about two months ago during summer vacation. He lived in Tokyo, worked at some kind of tech company, and always treated Okita with a great deal of love. They went to the beach and out to events and had all sorts of fun together. They were at the stage of their relationship where they were starting to think about what to do after she graduated.

And then he vanished like a puff of smoke.

This Yoshio Sasaki guy looked fairly handsome in the photo of the two of them that she showed us. With those soft eyes and handsome face, lightly sun-

kissed skin, and neatly waxed black hair, he was certainly the very picture of a popular guy. *I know how this sounds, but he looked a little shady, too—like the kind of guy who likes to fool around.*

I was sure Takahashi had probably already tried this, but I attempted to—as gently as possible—imply to her that there were all sorts of people in the world, and a truly honest man probably wouldn't disappear without a word, but she just stubbornly shook her head. My concern fell on deaf ears.

"I mean, if he really was that kind of guy, I don't think he would have given me something like this."

"…You mean this turquoise earring?"

"He said it was the real deal."

The real deal.

The only thing that mattered to her was the fact that the person she cared about more than anyone in the world had said it to her. The veracity of the claim was secondary. I glanced at my boss's face from across the table.

"I don't think you'd give someone a gemstone as a present if you didn't actually care for them! That's why I'm sure something must've happened to him!"

"……"

Richard remained silent. He was still listening.

To begin with, comparing the products Richard sold to his clients, who were often looking for investment pieces, to a gift given between romantic partners in a casual relationship was like comparing the merits of soccer players and track and field athletes. But on top of that, even I knew that turquoise wasn't an especially valuable stone. It might not be quite as cheap as crystal glass, but it couldn't compare to the price of garnet or topaz, for example.

"Um, is there any chance you could tell me what shops might sell something like this? If I can figure out where he bought it, I might be able to figure out what happened to him."

“Do you not still have the box from the shop?”

“He put it on me when he gave it to me…so I never had the box to begin with.”

Hrm…

I’d be the first to admit I had a bad habit of sticking my nose into other people’s business without thinking, but even I knew I couldn’t just crash headlong into a situation like this. I mean, even if we did find the guy like she wanted, then—no, I really shouldn’t even be speculating.

I glanced over at Richard again, hoping for confirmation that he felt the same way, but my handsome boss just gave a few somber nods in time with Okita’s expression changing. He was completely focused on being polite to his customer.

“If I understand correctly, this Mr. Sasaki gifted you this earring before he disappeared?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Very well. I believe it would be best to leave it at that,” Richard announced, calmly and in a soft tone. Okita was completely spellbound, following along. “You see, a gift of turquoise is a wish for the recipient’s happiness. If he gave you up out of a desire for your own happiness, perhaps his leaving could be considered a beautiful act of love in and of itself.”

Okita was shocked for a moment, then started to cry. That was the cue for tea and sweets.

Reinvigorated by the sweets and with the pile of tissues on her lap disposed of, she bowed her head and apologized.

“It’s just that hearing you say that made me wonder if that’s what my friends were trying to tell me. I was in such a panic, I didn’t understand anything they were saying, even though they did give me a ton of advice…”

“Your friends?”

“I asked my friends from school for advice at first. But they all told me I should just give up on him. How could they say something like that when they

don’t know the first thing about him? But maybe that’s not how they meant it… Maybe they were trying to tell me that I’m not a child anymore, so I should consider his feelings, too.”

Just to be sure, I asked Okita what she’d told her friends when she went to them for advice. She had, of course, told them about the disappearance of her older boyfriend, but when she mentioned a few other details like how the two of them would split the bill for dates, or how Okita would end up paying for his meals pretty often, her friends suddenly changed their tune, and that had upset her.

“I mean, I have a part-time job, and I’m not exactly hurting for money—doing that made him happy, so what’s the big deal?”

What an incredible thing to hear a young lady say. I had to admit, I was in agreement with her friends—she should just let him go. Even if it made him happy, I can’t imagine it made *her* very happy.

Richard continued to listen to her, his expression remaining much the same, before very naturally cutting in. “Do you have any clues other than the present he left?”

“…No, nothing. I’m sorry.”

“I see. Then I think it will be difficult for me to provide more assistance.” Richard bowed his head.

He really was picture-perfect no matter what he did. Okita seemed entranced by the incredible grace of his bow. As I saw her out of the shop, my mind was occupied not by thoughts of the bittersweet tribulations of love but by the grace with which Richard had turned down her request. Telling her that she should give up on a guy like that was the sort of advice her friends should be giving her, not someone she’d only just met. So simply telling her that he couldn’t provide her the information she was looking for was the only kind and courteous thing to do.

Of course, I wasn’t as mature of a person as Richard, so if it turned out that Okita’s boyfriend really did just mooch off the person he was dating for free food before disappearing without a word—as a fellow man, I think he deserved what was coming to him. At any rate, I flashed my best imitation of Richard’s

winning customer service smile at her.

“Thank you for coming. I’m sure you know the way back to the station, but if you just follow this street you’ll hit Chuo-douri.”

“I know, but thank you. By the way, um…so you work here, Nakata?”

“I do.”

“Are you guys hiring?”

She couldn’t have been more transparent. I told her I was the only part-timer at the moment, and I didn’t think there were any open positions. Okita looked, unsurprisingly, a little disappointed but picked herself right back up again.

“Hey, Nakata, do you have any interest in going to mixers? My friends are trying to get a group together to cheer me up.”

“Huh? What about Takahashi?”

“Takahashi? I just know him from some club activities between our schools, that’s all.”

Oh, poor Takahashi, may you rest in peace. I guess that’s really all there was to that.

“So, if it’s not too much trouble, do you think you could invite Richard along, too?” she said with a sparkle in her eyes.

I politely explained to her that we have a very strict business-only relationship—he talked to me as little as he could manage, and it wasn’t like he relaxed around me just because I worked for him. Okita looked a little disappointed, but didn’t press the issue and vanished into the Ginza streets. I felt a little bad for lying.

I was utterly shocked at what I found when I hurried back to the shop—Richard’s attitude had done a complete 180. He had an intense look on his face. Maybe he was mad that I’d brought her to the shop—no, that wasn’t it. He was more furious than that. But why? Did the fridge get unplugged when I wasn’t paying attention, ruining all the sweets inside? It had to be something on that level. That’s how angry he looked.

“Wh-what’s wrong?”

“…I’m hesitant to discuss this topic with you.”

“Whatever it is, please just tell me. I promise I’ll pay for whatever food was lost.”

“Excuse me?”

Apparently, that wasn’t it. I shook my head, *never mind*, and urged him to explain.

After hesitating for quite a while, Richard let out a little sigh and went into the back room. Just when I thought he was about to leave me hanging, he came right back out with a small plastic case in hand. I wondered what it could be.

“It’ll be faster to just show you,” he said and opened the case. Inside was a turquoise earring. Identical to the one Okita had brought in.

“Huh? Do you know her missing boyfriend then?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. They’re both fakes—imitation turquoise.”

“……”

It wouldn’t exactly be fair for me to say I had a feeling that was the case. The only reason I had doubts was because of who Okita’s boyfriend was—I didn’t have any particular feelings about the stone itself. We had a customer come in once whose hobby was making bracelets out of natural stone. She let me hold the turquoise bracelet she was wearing. I remembered that it was almost hard to tell it was blue from a distance, and it was surprisingly light when I held it. The bracelet was an immediately obvious fake, but the stone in the earring Okita had brought in was surprisingly hefty. It didn’t have turquoise’s characteristic cracks, but I’d learned from even my limited experience that not all turquoise had those.

But setting that aside for a moment: If Richard didn’t know Okita’s boyfriend, why did he have this piece?

Richard sat down in one of the red lounge chairs, crossed his legs, and set the case on the table.

“I borrowed this from a colleague in Tokyo. From what he tells me, there’s a group of grifters posing as a jewelry company to systematically target young

people with fake products.”

“What?”

A group of grifters? They’re the ones selling these fake turquoise earrings? Did that mean Okita’s boyfriend was one of them? Was he a con man? No, come on, there was a chance that he was just scammed by the shop and told that the earring was real. It was really suspicious though.

“So, what’s the deal with these grifters? Are you saying Okita was one of the young people targeted by them?”

“Are you familiar with romance fraud?”

I was. I knew all about it. It was like that scam where a pretty lady gets you to come with her and then you end up in some dump full of scary old men where they force you to buy a case of water for a thousand yen a bottle, or one of the blackmail scams that the yakuza ran. But the bait wasn’t always a pretty woman—sometimes it was a man, sometimes even an old person. I’d been targeted once when I was still living at home and twice since I moved out on my own by people like that. They nearly reeled me in until I got angry and stormed out.

It was such a cowardly tactic. When someone told me they’re in trouble—even if they didn’t explain how or why—I felt utterly compelled to go along with them to help. Okita hadn’t mentioned anything about getting sucked into something like that, though. What did her situation have to do with romance fraud?

“I am, but what’s that got to do with anything?”

“The colleague who lent me this earring told me one other interesting piece of information—the men they employ as bait to manipulate their prey will pawn off their excess stock of their worthless, fraudulent products for a little extra cash on the side. I never thought I’d lay eyes on one of their ‘pieces’ so soon.”

After a wave of rage washed over the pit of my stomach, I quickly collected myself.

I hadn’t been imagining it—Richard really was acting strange.

He was angry. But why?

Richard cleared his throat, as if to clear the air, too, but his expression was as severe as ever.

“That woman earlier didn’t describe being victimized in that way. But that is likely precisely why she still has such a positive opinion of this Yoshio Sasaki after he disappeared without a word.”

“Don’t tell me you have an idea where he might be?”

“We wouldn’t be having this conversation if I did.”

Based on the information from Richard’s acquaintance, the scammers were moving between abandoned storefronts. Even if the neighborhood tried to drive them out, they just set up shop again in a similar location and kept on doing that as many times as it took. They were a tenacious bunch. They might not be right out on the main thoroughfares, but there was no shortage of empty storefronts these days, even in a place like Tokyo. If you just took a few steps off a main street, you’d find tons of shops whose opening hours were hard to guess. I’d just learned about people getting scammed into cosigning leases in one of my classes, too.

“By the way, Seigi, could you tell whether the stone was real or fake earlier?”

“I couldn’t. It definitely felt heavy enough that it wasn’t immediately obvious.”

“You didn’t think the color looked odd? Like it had been painted?”

“……”

I mean, if he told me the color was unusually flat, it would probably look that way to me. But that was just hindsight. I honestly couldn’t tell, and it wouldn’t mean anything if I couldn’t tell on my own.

Richard pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket and handed it to me with the earring. I wasn’t sure what he wanted me to do with it. Polish it, I guess?

I finally realized what was going on after I brought the soft cloth to the stone and rubbed it a few times—it left a blue spot on the ivory handkerchief. I

couldn’t believe it.

“It came off! The color rubbed right off!”

“It was probably colored in with a marker or something similar.”

“It’s like a child’s art project.”

“It’s more common than you might think. If you ever find yourself traveling alone abroad and a young child approaches you offering to sell you a piece of turquoise, it’s best to assume that it’s a piece of colored howlite.”

“Howlite? What’s that?”

“An inexpensive white stone that happens to bear some resemblance to turquoise in terms of luster.”

“I guess that must be a big issue in Turkey.”

“Turkey? Oh, don’t let the name fool you—turquoise doesn’t actually come from Turkey. The stone earned its name from the French *turquois*—meaning ‘Turkish’—because it first entered Europe via trade with Turkey. Originally, it was just an adjective to describe items that came from Turkey, but it ultimately became the name for both the stone and the color. Most of the turquoise in the market now actually comes from America. Though it’s also found in Mexico, Iran, China, and a variety of other locations throughout the world.”

Then Richard explained that this colored “turquoise” howlite is quite a common imitation for turquoise. I noted that he seemed to prefer calling it “turquoise,” the English word, rather than its Japanese name. He tacked on at the end that it obviously wasn’t all as low-quality as this example, which was a pretty significant outlier.

“There’s actually quite a history of other imitations of turquoise. It’s a fascinating subject.”

“So there’s a lot of fake turquoise out there, huh?”

“Of course. So much so that it is perhaps the stone with the longest history of fakes. That said, imitations aren’t exclusively a bad thing, but I’m sure you understand that by now.”

I knew what he was getting at. I mean, I’m pretty sure plenty of people picked

a cubic zirconia to get the same look as a diamond, despite knowing it wasn't the real thing. It was really only a problem when the seller didn't disclose upfront that a stone wasn't real. I despised people who did business like that—you had to be plain evil or just not care about anyone but yourself to do that to someone, and I couldn't stand it. Now more than ever.

"Richard, um, what are you thinking about right now?"

For a moment, he didn't seem to understand what I was asking. He stared at me blankly for a moment before letting out a chuckle that could almost be mistaken for a sigh.

"What am I thinking about? The discussion we were just having about turquoise. Was I really making such a strange face?"

"No, just—"

Normally, Richard was extremely controlled in everything he did—he was calm, mature, and always a consummate professional. But now that image seemed a little frayed. He looked on the verge of giving into impulse. Was this my fault?

I hesitated for a few seconds before pretending not to care and blurting out, in the most casual tone I could muster, "Well, who cares! This sort of thing happens all the time."

Richard's face in that moment was a sight to be seen. He glared at me with roiling scorn in his blue eyes, like I'd just told him I was going off to rob a convenience store. His outsized reaction perturbed me, which in turn made my very handsome boss realize he'd fallen for my trap. He smiled sweetly at me with just a hint of frustration on his face. I'd never seen him make a face like that before—it made me feel like he really was a flesh-and-blood human, just like me.

"…Yes, it does. But that doesn't make it acceptable. Now, get this table cleaned up before our next customer arrives."

"Is there, uh, anything I can do to help?"

Richard silently stared at me for a moment. His expression remained the same—tense, yet intensely beautiful. I was curious about this group of grifters, but

even more curious about the reason for Richard's sudden transformation. There had to be something driving him to this point.

I looked him right in his blue eyes and waited, but he said nothing, so I shrugged and gave in. "You wouldn't happen to know where this group of grifters is operating right now, would you? It'd be great if they turned tail and ran after washing their hands of such an immoral business."

"I couldn't agree more. Well, I am looking into it," Richard mumbled before withdrawing toward the back room.

Wait, that was weird. *Did he mean to say he's already* been *looking into it? Not that he's going to look into it now?* I'd never heard him make a grammatical mistake in Japanese before. Honestly, if he made the occasional mistake, it'd probably make me feel better about my status as a native speaker. Did he really mean to say that?

My brain was throwing up strange images, like a malfunctioning computer. I saw a metallic green Jaguar moving at incredibly high speed across the asphalt —so fast, it made me worry the brakes had gone out.

I called to Richard from behind as he was closing the door to his office.

"Richard, did you eat the pudding I made today? How was it?"

"Excellent. It was delicious."

And then he vanished through the door.

This man, Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian, was very good at giving compliments. In much the same way, he could be scathing in his criticism of a mistake, he was quick to compliment good work, and his compliments had tremendous variety. He was the kind of boss who made pleasing him feel worth it. Richard was surprisingly fond of the flavor of down-to-earth home cooking, and he ate the mundane little confections I made with joy. He would never settle for a simple, "It was delicious," either—it'd need at least two more lines. And that wasn't me being conceited. It was just Richard's standard of courtesy.

Richard did say he was envious of me once. He said that I shone bright when running headlong down the path I wanted to take. From my perspective, going off by yourself to a foreign country to sell gemstones seemed a lot more like

running headlong down your own path than anything I'd ever done, but I did realize now that he probably wasn't talking about career choices but the ability to be honest with your own emotions. If he thought simply being able to call a bad person bad, or offer to help someone when they're in need was enviable, he must be holding a lot back every single day.

I did believe in moderation, but I also had a tendency to just take off running, led by emotion. But Richard had, like, a set of mental brakes that kept him from doing things just because he wanted to. Like a safety button, to keep himself in check. You wouldn't put your foot on the brake unless you needed to.

So maybe he was restraining himself because trouble was brewing. Maybe, if he were to take his foot off that brake, he'd run off to become a knight in shining armor even faster than I would.

The fact that the praise he'd just given me was two lines shorter than usual was probably Richard holding himself back.

My interest in gems couldn't even compare to Richard's passion for them. It was terrifying to even imagine the depths of his anger toward people who would dare use them for fraud.

All I, a mere part-timer, could conceivably do for my boss, who I'd known for only six months, was probably to make his tea a bit on the sweet side. I'd just have to let Richard be mad about Okita's situation for now. I wasn't giving up or washing my hands of it, just delegating tasks.

After all, if he ever got truly angry, he'd probably be more than angry enough to cover me too and then some.

It was the following Saturday. When Richard said he'd "found it," I knew exactly what he meant. Étranger was filled with the same sense of tension as the day Okita had come by.

"Happy Étoile? What's that?"

"The front we were talking about."

I guess he meant the shop the group was using romance scams to bring

customers to. The name could have just as easily belonged to a jewelry shop or a pharmacy. It apparently changed whenever they switched locations, but this was what they were operating under at the moment. There was even a map of the rather rustic shopping district they were located in.

"…Did you have someone look into it for you?"

"Of course not. I simply put the pieces together from information given to me by my acquaintances. It didn't take much effort to find it, from that."

So he *had* looked into it on his own. There was no way he'd had much free time since talking to her last week, either.

I noticed something strange on the sheet of printer paper. In the part of the ad that looked like product information printed off a website, there were phrases set under pictures of gemstones.

"What's this stuff all about? This 'brings happiness' and 'dispels bad vibes from your past lives' stuff."

"They seem to use a variety of ploys to attract customers."

Oh, I see, a one-two punch of romance and spiritualism. I couldn't let myself get angry now. While I was focusing on trying to keep myself calm, Richard pulled out another sheet of paper and folder. What was it this time?

"The man's real name isn't Yoshio Sasaki but Yoshitsuna Sasaki."

So this is the guy.

The folder held photos of a man that looked like they'd been taken from a distance. He was holding a horse-racing paper with betting slips scattered on the ground. His face was in profile, but it was definitely the same man in the photo Okita had shown us.

He seemed to earn a living as something of a freelance con man, working jobs for various places as bait in romance scams, as a barker outside establishments, and so on. What happened to that tech company? At the end of the dossier was a note that he was in debt from illegal loans and got by mooching off other people before making a run for it—multiple times. If all this was true, he really was the full package. If there was a derby for guys you should absolutely never

date, I'd probably put my money on him.

"…Did you get this from one of your 'acquaintances,' too?"

"I just so happen to have an acquaintance who works in this field."

I can't get mad. Not yet. The part of my brain in charge of common sense was sounding the alarm. Under normal circumstances, I'd probably have snapped already, but I couldn't. Not now. Because *Richard* was angry. He may have looked calmer than he did last week on the surface, but I could see the shadow of the rage boiling within. If I were to take my foot off the brake, too, who knows what kind of crash we could get into? Even if I was worrying for nothing, it was still scary to think about.

"When's our appointment for the day supposed to be here again?"

"Eleven-thirty."

We still had a whole hour. I had to put on my usual work face until then. I mean, this wasn't a detective agency, after all. Sure, we got dragged into strange cases involving gemstones a little too often, but Richard was a jeweler and I was a part-timer who served tea. Admittedly, this particular case was a bit of a departure.

Before I had an opportunity to say something, Richard interrupted my train of thought.

"By the way, Seigi, I have some news I'm sure you'll find intriguing—tomorrow is Sunday, and we don't have a single appointment."

"I thought Ms. Yonehara was scheduled for Sunday?"

"She called yesterday to cancel. Apparently, a family member was suddenly taken ill."

"Oh, that's unfortunate…"

On some level, I knew what he was trying to imply, but I was slow to make sense of it. *So if we do show up at this shop selling fake gems, then what? We're not police or even private detectives—we don't even have a client related to all this.*

"…Are you being serious?"

“Very.”

“Do you have any experience raiding criminal enterprises?”

“Raiding? I’m not sure I’m familiar with that term.”

When I explained that it was jargon you hear in violent movies to mean invading a hostile faction’s base, Richard’s icy expression remained, but his lips contorted into a smile. That was terrifying. Terrifyingly beautiful. I was still totally convinced that he was half living in a completely different world from us mortals.

“I see. No, I do not have any experience ‘raiding’ anyone. But I am an experienced thespian—I come from the country of Shakespeare, after all.”

“What’s acting got to do with anything?” I asked, and Richard smirked.

“Making a direct assault on these villains who are deceiving good and honest consumers is unlikely to go particularly well, but I do believe these wicked folk, who spew inane words that make neither logical nor financial sense deserve, a taste of some similarly foolish medicine.”

I’d learned a lot of lessons since I started working at Étranger, but this might have been the hardest of all. The absolute last person you want to piss off is probably someone who you can’t tell when they’re going to snap.

I kept telling myself everything was fine. A vague sense of foreboding hung over me—like that feeling you get when you’re aimlessly walking around an unfamiliar city, worrying that one wrong turn and you’ll find yourself lost on the streets of hell. I couldn’t hold in an awkward chuckle.

The shopping district was a few minutes from Nishi-Shinjuku Station by car, and the place had an eerily laid-back atmosphere. It wasn’t all that far from the hustle and bustle of Shinjuku, but here was a street littered with the rusty, hand-painted signs of small businesses and some surviving tobacco shops. As a shopping district neighboring a residential area, it felt a lot closer to where I grew up in Machida than Shinjuku.

Before pulling into a parking lot a little ways outside the area, Richard

stopped his Jaguar behind a residential building where he could observe the shop in question for a bit. Happy Étoile was open for business. They didn't have a handwritten sign out front indicating as much, and you really wouldn't realize they were selling anything at all at a glance. We were waiting to see if Sasaki was in. Two women had entered the storefront about five minutes prior.

"This is reminding me of Halloween."

"Does that mean you partake in the festivities in Shibuya?"

"No, but all the clubs go wild at school—it's like campus turns into a giant costume party for the day. The student lounges are full of mummies and vampires and stuff. It's nuts."

"If you want out, this is your last chance."

"Don't be ridiculous. Don't you need a translator for your bit to work?"

"Very well."

We got out of the car. I was well aware of the fact that we were about to do something extremely ridiculous. If anyone else had suggested this to me, I would have told them to reconsider, but the one spearheading this insanity was Richard. There was no way I was going to be able to stop him, so I figured I might as well join him.

"Welco—"

The employee didn't even manage to finish the word—he was literally at a loss for words. I knew the feeling. In fact, I felt the same way when I met up with Richard this morning. Today he was wearing a pair of white slacks, a white belt with gold-colored fittings, and a pale cream shirt topped off with a white linen jacket. His typically gentle, fluffy curls were slicked back with wax, and his blue eyes looked even more vivid and piercing than usual. It was the polar opposite of his usual mild-mannered and hard-working look. It gave his beauty an intimidating quality. On my end, I'd paired the loudest red-collared shirt I owned with the black pants I'd bought for my school entrance ceremony and a belt with a big golden buckle. Richard lent me a pair of pale brown sunglasses in the car. If I had to give our costumes a title, it'd probably be something like "The Gangster Odd Couple." I certainly wouldn't want to run into anyone who looked

like us on the street.

Richard gave the clearly startled employee a serious look and rapid-fired off a lengthy string in some foreign language. It definitely wasn't English, and it didn't sound guttural enough to be French. I didn't hear any rolled Rs, so it probably wasn't Italian or Spanish, either. Though it was kind of funny that working at Étranger had kind of let me taste-test languages, so to speak. Even if I couldn't actually speak a word of any of them.

Just like we planned, I walked right next to him and said, in a deeper tone than my usual voice, "Apologies for the sudden intrusion. May I present to you the magnificent Master Edward Baxter—a man gifted with the miraculous power to read the auras of gemstones, which he uses to bring happiness and good fortune to all. And you can call me Mr. Yamada."

"E-excuse me?"

"When we were passing by your place of business, Master Baxter told me he felt an extremely intense aura coming from this very location. We know this is very abrupt, but could you possibly show us some of your wares? Specifically your stones. That's what he wants to see."

"Um? O-oh, you're here to shop. Understood. Um…this isn't some kind of setup for a hidden camera show or something, right? I'm not sure we're interested, if that's the case…"

"We're simply here to take a look. This way, I believe, sir."

I ushered Richard into the shop, and he said, "Thank you," with some bizarre accent and smiled. He said it in English, so maybe he wanted to make sure I could understand it. But what was that thank-you even for? Was it because I had faithfully executed his plan to pretend to interpret for him, since a foreigner who doesn't speak would seem like less trouble for the receptionist? Also, where'd he get "Edward Baxter" from, anyway? Maybe it was the name of a friend from his neighborhood when he was a kid? Speaking of fake names, I couldn't decide whether to use Yamada or Tanaka, so I had Richard pick for me.

The shop was…well, it didn't really look like a shop at all. There were just tables and chairs. I guess Richard's shop didn't have any product on display, either, but the cold, impersonal tables of this place would have looked right at

home covered in trays filled with fries and sodas in a fast food joint. It could have passed for a conference room too if a bunch of people in suits came in and started doing a boring presentation. It seemed like they were using everything they'd rented as is, so it'd be easy to pick up and move out at a moment's notice.

There were three tables on the other side of the room, and a woman who'd been brought in by a man was seated at one of them. The man looked back at us. Maybe they had a policy of only having one customer in the shop at a time.

It was Yoshitsuna Sasaki.

The woman with him was about my age or maybe a little older. She seemed a little shaken by this costumed duo crashing into the shop. Now, now, don't let us bother you, just sit back and pretend you're watching a little play.

The female staff member who came to deal with us didn't seem to be a salesperson and wasn't about to show these two strange looking men to a table, either. Maybe they were all reserved for customers or something. But Richard, who was pretending not to understand Japanese, just grabbed the seat closest to the receptionist's desk and sat down. He smiled and asked to see their wares in broken English.

Richard flashed a beautiful smile, and I didn't even have to translate for her to say, "One moment, please," and return to the back of the shop. If there's anyone who could take a blast of that smile head-on for the first time and not be dazzled, they must be an angel, or maybe a sculptor specializing in handsome young men. Or his mother, I guess. Beauty really was power.

After making us wait about five minutes, she came back carrying a black cushion with several pieces of turquoise on it. The color would probably come right off if you rubbed these, too. They didn't have price tags on them.

"What kind of stone is this?"

"Turquoise."

"Is it the real deal?"

"Indeed, it is."

That was all the confirmation I needed. I checked Richard's expression. His blue eyes were cold as ice. *That settles it. Let's do this.*

"All of the stones we sell have an aura of great happiness and are full of radiance to make your future bright."

"What do you think, Master Baxter?"

Richard forced an unnatural frown and shook his head before firing off another round of rapid mystery language at a relatively loud volume. When he was sure he'd gotten Sasaki's attention, he looked the salesperson in the face and announced, "They're cursed."

"Huh?"

"Each and every one of these stones is cursed. It pains me to even lay eyes on such dreadful things."

The woman seemed startled when he demanded that they be removed from his presence. Well, I couldn't exactly blame her, she was under the impression that he couldn't speak Japanese at all, and now here he was, speaking fluently *and* causing problems. I followed the plan and just repeated the same set phrases.

"My apologies, this is Master Edward Baxter—a man gifted with the miraculous power to read the auras of gemstones, which he uses to bring happiness and good fortune to all."

The saleswoman nodded awkwardly in response to what I'd said and asked Richard how she could help him. Richard, or should I say Master Baxter, cut her off and continued his routine.

"I thought I would have the opportunity to discuss stones of good fortune at a shop with a name like 'happy star,' yet this is what I find? Cursed stones that will invite naught but misfortune."

"Are you all right, Master Baxter?"

"I think their blighted auras are affecting me," Richard said, momentarily lowering his head as he did.

I knew it was completely impossible, but I had to wonder if Richard was in this

line of work in the past. Because if he was, it would explain how he could talk like this completely off the cuff. I mean, if he really was ad-libbing this whole schtick, it would call everything I knew about him into question. Was the Emperor of Sweets thing an act, too? No, that had to be real. There was just no way.

The saleswoman brought out a second set of stones at the behest of Edward Baxter, but for the third set, a scary-looking man came out in her place. The tanned man wouldn't have looked out of place in a martial arts uniform with his chiseled physique. I guess they finally realized we weren't real customers and that was just a cover. Up until we walked in, Richard kept trying to tell me I didn't have to come with him, but I'd expected something like this to happen, so I insisted on coming. I could at least act as a shield.

"I don't know who the hell you are, but if you're here to interfere with this honest business, you're gonna have to leave. You're not gonna like what happens to you if you don't."

"Will I now? Mr. Yamada, what on Earth do you think that could mean? Is he really implying that there's something more dreadful than being in this shop?"

Richard made himself sound genuinely scared. He cut the man off before he could threaten us again. "Take this stone, for example. I was told it was turquoise, a stone which by all rights should bestow good fortune upon whomever receives it as a gift. However, I cannot feel a shred of such emotion from these stones… Yes, their aura suggests they were mass-manufactured in a factory. I can't even imagine what manner of tragedy might occur upon giving a loved one such a gift."

"You're makin' some bold accusations—"

"The person receiving the gift isn't the one upon whom calamity will fall, but the giver."

The man held his tongue and glared at the blond foreign man with his beady eyes. Richard stood up, unfazed, and looked the man right in the eye as if to express his genuine and heartfelt concern for his well-being. As Yamada the bodyguard, I didn't want to let him stray too far from me, but it was not the appropriate time to throw a damper on things.

“There’s a famous anecdote about turquoise being an effective ward against falling from one’s horse, but that only worked because it was a gift from father to son. It’s almost as if the stone has the ability to be imbued with the desire to keep someone safe and emit that in the form of a protective aura. Conversely, it does make you wonder what might happen to a stone imbued with the desire to deceive and defraud people for money. Of course, not only would such a stone never serve as a talisman; it would also never forgive the person who defiled it with such vile thoughts. Mr. Yamada, what do they say about what happens to those who wish ill upon others?”

“They end up digging two graves, Master Baxter.”

“Precisely. Every one of these stones exudes a black aura. How tragic. Being passed around from one person to the next, unaware of the ever-growing misfortune they carry.”

“If you don’t shut your damn mouth…”

“And worst of all, that man at that table over there—” Richard abruptly pointed at the table in the back. Yoshitsuna Sasaki looked at Richard, utterly shocked, like he couldn’t imagine he would be involved in this mess.

“I sense a peculiar aura from this man. I sense deep-seated resentment clinging to him that makes me think he has gifted a great many people with false stones. Gemstones will bless those who treat them properly, but those who treat them as mere tools will be repaid in kind. They’re no different than people in that regard. I sense no such aura from the woman sitting across from him, so either she hasn’t associated with him for very long, or there’s no mutual desire for an intimate relationship between them…it’s difficult to determine from the aura alone, but I would count her rather lucky regardless.”

The woman who had been sitting across from Sasaki bolted out of her chair and left the shop. The first thing I heard out of his mouth was him calling after her, “Miki, babe—” His voice wasn’t too deep or too whiny. It was pleasant to the ear and seemed well suited to laughter. But judging from his babe’s reaction, Richard must’ve hit the nail on the head.

Richard turned to the man trying to threaten him and flashed a graceful smile.

“I don’t sense nearly as intense an aura coming from you. Admittedly, it’s

merely a question of severity, but I would encourage you to be cautious. We humans are only afforded one life, after all. There are no second chances. To defile that life with misguided actions would be an undeniably irreversible folly."

"If you keep spouting this nonsense, I'm calling the police."

"Please, call them! They probably should be here. We may even need a rescue squad with how thick the miasma is here!"

"Why, you—"

"Now, now, let's not be hasty."

I stood up, lifting up my sunglasses and drawing the attention of the angry man from Richard to myself. This wasn't part of the plan, but it was *my* plan from the start, to step in if it was getting a little too dicey. Direct eye contact was particularly useful in situations like this. I was pretty sure humans had been using it that way since before recorded history. It seemed like my message got through loud and clear: that if he laid a finger on Richard, I'd make him regret it. It would be a matter for law enforcement if it really did end in a fistfight. People working at the nearby shops might report it, and I couldn't imagine such a questionable business would want the police investigating.

Just as I predicted, he backed off.

The other staff peered out from behind the man in question one after the other. Well, there were admittedly only three of them, two of whom were the women working the reception desk. I guess that was everyone in the shop?

"What shall we do, Master Baxter?"

"To you, you, the two of you over there, and of course, you as well—"

Richard pointed at the man in front of him, the three staff members in the back, and lastly Sasaki with intensity in his blue eyes.

"—I strongly recommend you find a new line of work post haste and then purify yourselves at an appropriate venue. I have no doubt about the power stones harbor, but their misuse can invite great misfortune. It is most unfortunate for the stones themselves as well. This *power* is neutral and

colorless to begin with, so why attempt to paint it such an unbecoming color?”

The man’s face suddenly contorted. I just assumed the people painting the stones and selling them were different people, but it seemed like he was involved in both aspects of the grift. I guess it made sense, if they didn’t have a lot of people. Maybe it really wasn’t that big of an organization after all.

In the awkward atmosphere, Richard smiled, trying to press the matter.

“Is something wrong?”

“Tch. Hey, you in the sunglasses, you hear what this psycho’s saying? You sure he doesn’t have a few screws loose?”

“Not at all! He is none other than the magnificent Master Edward Baxter.”

One of the receptionists was on her phone, probably trying to look up “Edward Baxter” and coming up empty-handed. The man trying to intimidate us was starting to give off some genuinely threatening vibes, so it was feeling about time to withdraw. But I didn’t even have to give him the signal—Richard stood up promptly and gave a grand, over-the-top bow.

“And on that note, everyone, I bid you farewell. I pray that at the very least, you lend an ear to the whisperings of the stones. I have said my piece.”

Richard gave another courteous bow like an aristocrat on a balcony and turned on his heels. I followed close behind. I heard one of the voices behind me shouting to bring out the salt, but I was pretty dubious that any place that wasn’t a restaurant would have a bunch of salt lying around. After I was sure no one was coming after us, we took a different route from the one we’d taken in, to return to where the Jaguar was parked. Richard never even so much as flinched on the way back. He really had some serious guts.

“Are you sure you’re okay? I think it’s probably safer to assume your cover’s been blown.”

“Oh, you’re talking about me?”

Sitting in the driver’s seat of the Jaguar, Richard looked like it had only just occurred to him. Give me a break, man. I felt like I was talking to a polar bear or something, with him dressed all in white. It didn’t seem like anything I said was

getting through.

“I was a little surprised when you just called that sketchy number without hesitation during that thing with the emeralds a little while back, but this is a whole other level. You’re running full speed across a very dangerous bridge.”

“I do feel guilty for dragging you into this, but you’re just an innocent college student employed by a mysterious foreigner. If anything comes of it in the future, you should be fine if you just tell the authorities you don’t know anything.”

“You didn’t drag me into anything. I came with you because I wanted to. Even if I can talk myself out of it, what about you and your business?”

Richard buckled his seatbelt without saying a word and smiled. I hadn’t seen him smile like that before—it spread across his lips eerily but didn’t reach his eyes. It was an alarming smile.

I stopped talking, and Richard tacked on an almost hurried, “I’m sorry.”

“But the jewelry industry isn’t as clean as you think.”

He stepped on the accelerator, and the car started moving with hardly a sound. It didn’t look like anyone was following us, so I guess it was safe to assume that was the end of it—at least I hoped it was.

“…When I heard where you were going, I knew I had to go with you, no matter what. Do you wanna know why?”

“Because you like to play the knight in shining armor?”

“No, not at all. It’s because you were playing that role this time. And way more seriously than anything I’ve ever done.”

Richard went quiet. He looked taken aback by my comment.

Sure, the emerald thing ended up being a big deal, but Richard had refused to take the case right up until the end, saying he was a jeweler, not a detective. He only got involved when he learned the truth of the situation and felt he had no other option but to act. But this time was different. It seemed almost like he’d made up his mind to jump into the fray from the very start. That wasn’t the Richard I knew. He may have sounded as cool and collected as he always did,

but he was acting like a completely different person. I had to wonder what was so different about this situation, compared to the previous ones.

The Jaguar pulled onto Yasukuni-douri. We were going to be on that road for a while. I casually tried to get Richard's attention as he drove.

"So, um…did like…something happen to you in the past? With, like, turquoise or something…and fraud…?"

To my eyes, he looked like he was completely out of control this time. There was probably a whole other Richard I didn't know, lurking behind the cracks in his beautiful face. I wasn't about to force him to reveal anything, but I couldn't help feeling worried after all this.

"Not really," Richard said curtly before continuing in a slow, calm tone. "However, I do detest people who use the power of stones for selfish ends. It goes without saying that I harbor similar feelings for con men who similarly abuse the goodwill of others."

"That feels a little…broad."

"You're not going to drop this, are you?"

I swallowed my words and hung my head a bit, feeling ashamed of myself. Richard stared off into the distance and mumbled, "When a gemstone dealer tells a customer something is 'real,' that comes with a great responsibility. It's a professional's guarantee of quality to an amateur. Perhaps you could almost compare it to a couple exchanging 'I love you's.'"

"…Because it depends on both parties trusting each other, right?"

"Precisely. How unusual, you're rather fast on the uptake today."

"Have you always been this ornery?"

"You really *are* getting good at this."

Okita was adamant about her earring being real, but I don't think that's really what she was concerned about believing. I don't think she really cared about the stone itself.

What she really wanted to believe was that she was loved.

“Those who use false words will one day be rewarded with similarly false words. It’s karmic justice. I merely helped it along.”

“But weren’t you looking into that operation before Okita even came by?”

“I wouldn’t call that looking into. I simply received something of a warning from a colleague about them.”

“So, you weren’t planning to do anything at first? Was it only after Okita came by the shop?”

Richard didn’t answer. I must’ve hit the nail on the head. But why did her story have such an effect on him? I didn’t say another word, and Richard stared straight ahead down the road as he mumbled, as if remembering something,

“You’d agree that that Sasaki fellow was rather attractive, yes?”

“Uh?”

I asked Richard what he meant by that, but he ignored me.

“Whether one is born with it or acquires it through their own efforts, beauty carries with it a heavy burden of responsibility. So, seeing that man use his good looks to sell women phony gems with a smile on his face disgusts me. And for him to use the ‘the real deal’ as some kind of pickup line is just laughable. I might not feel this way if he was just a con man working for an underhanded business.”

Oh.

So that’s what it was.

I didn’t feel particularly inclined to compare Sasaki’s face to Richard’s, but I guess it infuriated Richard to see another man using his looks to sell gems. I’d figured he just wanted to get a con man off the streets, but I guess that wasn’t really it.

“Now, we’ll be returning to Ginza and opening up shop. Mr. Namikawa made an appointment for 4 p.m. I’d appreciate it if you got right to work cleaning when we arrive.”

“…You’re going to take clients dressed like that?”

Richard frowned at me like I'd just told a ludicrously unfunny joke. I was pretty sure I made the same face when he told me he wanted to crash the fraudulent jewelry store.

I really liked Richard. That much wasn't in question. But I still had no idea why this man was selling gems in Japan. He had worked at a shop in Hong Kong previously—was it just as simple as some connection from that position making Japan the logical next stop? Did that mean he'd eventually be moving on to another location? Was that why he didn't seem to think causing trouble with the people here would be a big problem?

I already knew from experience that he wouldn't give me a full answer if I asked about it, so I decided to dig into his disdain for people who use the power of gemstones for selfish reasons instead.

Étranger was so quiet today that it was hard to believe our ridiculous outing last week ever happened. We weren't expecting our first customer until noon, so I was just cleaning the store at a leisurely pace. The pomegranate tree kept growing, and I was starting to worry about how much longer we could keep it inside in a pot.

"Hey, Richard, I think we might need to repot it soon."

"It's too early for that. I read up on it on a botany site. Apparently, the season for that is autumn."

The front door chime interrupted our conversation. It was a customer. I checked the intercom camera and saw that it was a single man. We don't usually get customers so early in the morning. Maybe he forgot his girlfriend's birthday or something?

I opened the door with Richard's permission and found a weary-looking man with a medium build standing outside the shop. Was he up all night on a dare or something?

"Excuse me…a hostess in Roppongi told me that you give advice about gemstones here…"

"You're looking for advice about gemstones? I think we can help. Come right

in.”

“Thank you… Anyway, this stone I’ve got…supposedly has a real bad aura…”

Bad aura?

The weary man stumbled into the shop and plopped down in one of the red lounge chairs. He didn’t even glance over at Richard as he bowed to him and pulled a plastic case with an earring in it out of his bag. It had a piece of turquoise in it. No, it looked like turquoise but it was pure white.

Wait a second… I didn’t recognize him at first because of his more mature hairstyle and the plain polo shirt and chinos he was wearing, but…it was Yoshitsuna Sasaki?

“I mean…I’m talking, like, real bad vibes here. I’ve been working these like random freelance gigs, but the last place I was working for suddenly skipped town and ghosted me… They didn’t even pay me… Now I don’t believe in ghosts or any of that crap, but this crazy dude came to the shop and freaked out everyone, and even my boss turned tail and ran after that…”

“That sounds just *awful*.”

My word, that sounds like the work of one Master Edward Baxter. What was even crazier was the fact that Sasaki spent the whole time muttering with his head down, staring at the box with the earring in it, so he didn’t even see the face of the man he was talking to.

“That psycho said he could see auras… I was there when it happened, and he pointed at me and said my aura was bad. Honestly, I thought he was nuts, but I’m the only one all this awful crap happened to, so maybe he really was on to something…”

Richard nodded, saying, “I see,” in the warmest tone he could muster. “Well, they do say that gemstones are wont to guide people down the path they desire, after all.”

“Y-yeah! That dude was saying all sorts of weird stuff like—wait.”

“Hello.”

Richard smiled sweetly. It was terrifying. You couldn’t take a direct hit from a

face like that—he was a beautiful monster. Sasaki froze for a few seconds, like he'd just seen a ghost, before he started shouting,

"Ah… Ahh! Ah! It's you! You're that Edward what's-his-face!"

"I understand the situation, but I believe you would have better luck looking for advice about that fake turquoise from the Consumer Affairs Agency than a jeweler."

"Y-you're gonna regret this!" he spat. I don't think I've ever heard that line outside of a TV show or a movie. And on that note, Sasaki snatched up the earring and left the shop. I guess the whole outfit vanished and left one of their con men behind. Though if bringing customers to a shop counted as work, he'd probably qualify as a victim of wage theft. What a mess.

"Are you sure you should leave it at that? He might try to retaliate."

"And just what do you suppose I do? Give him a pair of cement shoes and toss him in the Kandagawa? I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. There are surely debt collectors after him as well, and I would be more than happy to provide his whereabouts to the people who are most interested in finding him," Richard said, utterly detached. There was no hint of levity in his voice at all.

Was he really okay? I thought about this last week, too, but Richard seemed a lot more comfortable with violence than I would have thought. I'd done some research on the gem buying industry and read that it's so full of cutthroat backstabbing that you really have to be on your toes, so I guess it kinda made sense how closely related it was to a pretty scary world.

But none of that mattered. I couldn't help feeling unsettled by the way Richard was acting.

"Just…call me if anything weird happens."

"Why? I'll be calling the police if anything happens."

"Well, yeah, but…"

I thought I had at least gotten across that I was worried about him, but I guess not. I frowned, and Richard smiled faintly.

"I would call on you for help when I think I need it, even without the

invitation.”

“…Leave it to me! You know, this whole thing made me realize it’d probably be safer if you had someone keeping an eye on you.”

“That is absolutely none of your concern. Tea!”

“Coming right up.”

I spent the rest of the day on edge, but the con man Sasaki never showed his face again.

In my opinion, the phrase, “Those who wish ill upon others end up digging two graves,” is about guilt. Guilt will follow you around everywhere as long as it’s lurking somewhere in your heart. That thought was what made this so scary. Because when I saw Richard dressed up in costume, even though it wasn’t Halloween, to go destroy someone who deserved it, he was more of a “knight in shining armor” than I ever could be.

He’d told me he envied me once. I hadn’t been able to get that conversation out of my head lately. I think I was finally starting to understand what he meant, though my take on it is a little different now than it was before.

Maybe he envied me in the sense that if he had my physical strength, it wouldn’t be such a big deal for him to, for example, go after someone like that. In much the same way that if a compact car floored it into a wall, it’d leave a very different impression than an eighteen-wheeler doing the same.

Our last customer of the day was a woman wearing a blue ensemble with a big turquoise brooch pinned to her chest. The stone had what looked like cracks in it, but weirdly enough, they were a matching pale blue color that gave the piece a really impressive feel. Looking at it reminded me that one of the charms of large stones is getting to enjoy the textures created by nature.

“That’s an incredible piece of turquoise you have there.”

“Isn’t it just? My older daughter gave it to me because she was worried about how many times I’ve been in car accidents! Did you know, a long time ago, a king wore a piece of turquoise, and, thanks to its mysterious power, he was never seriously injured even when he fell off his horse? Pretty ridiculous, huh?”

She opened her mouth wide and guffawed cheerfully. The woman seemed to be in her fifties and looked like she worked in some government office. There was no chance someone like her would get swindled.

“You’re the guy from Kasaba University who my daughter mentioned, aren’t you?”

“Huh? Who’s your daughter?”

“I’m Ayumi Okita’s mother.”

I was dumbstruck. Okita’s mother forced an awkward smile, explaining that her poor daughter had a habit of dating “interesting” men who would eventually dump her. It sounded like this sort of thing happened to her fairly often. I wasn’t sure if “interesting” was the word I’d use there, but talking to her mother did put me slightly at ease. It sounded like Okita was a bit more of a free spirit, probably at least partly because her older sister was more straitlaced.

“Well, for as much trouble as she gets herself in, she’s good at getting back on her feet, so I’m not terribly worried about her. On that note, I’m here to find a present for my less-than-cautious daughter. Let me see everything you recommend,” she smiled.

Thanks to her, that day became Étranger’s most profitable since the day it opened.

When she was ready to leave, I walked out of the store to see her off. I took the opportunity to ask her something I’d been dying to from the moment she introduced herself.

“Um, so, I’m hoping to go into civil service myself.”

“Oh, are you now? Are you looking to get into national politics or just go into local government?”

“National, at least for the moment, but I don’t really have the money for test prep courses. So, um, I was wondering…”

“Go right ahead.”

“How soon should I start studying for the test?”

It was only after I'd asked the question that I realized how stupid it was to ask it of someone who'd passed what was probably a totally different test over ten years ago. But Okita's mother laughed heartily and patted me on the back.

"You'll be fine! You're still in your second year of college, right? Even if you don't go to some fancy test prep school, as long as you study the same material, you'll be fine. Just start whenever and you'll figure it out. There are even idiots like this one friend of mine who didn't even start until a month before the test and crammed like a madman, but still passed."

And with that, she said "bye" and walked off. She taught me a very important lesson—and it wasn't that you could pass with only a month's worth of study. It was that gifts don't always have to be physical items. Her enthusiastic words of encouragement lifted a huge weight off my shoulders.

If there are stones that had a special effect when they're given as a gift, I think you could say the same for human kindness—just like how the person you like telling you they love you can have a special effect on you.

And that was what made me think that maybe Richard calling that guy "cursed" was a kind of gift, too. But maybe that also made it a curse.

He used the phrase "karmic justice." The con man had received his retribution. But Richard had used another phrase, too. A phrase I'm sure he knew without having to ask me.

Those who wish ill upon others end up digging two graves.

You see, the person who ends up in that second grave is the one who did the digging.

It was a fleeting feeling—one that I could just laugh off the next moment—but deep in the bottom of my heart, I felt truly unsettled by the handsome jeweler, with the doll-like beauty, who loved sweets.

case 3 The Jade Inheritance

THE JEWELRY SHOP Étranger opened at 11 in the morning.

As the resident part-timer, I arrived at 10:30, cleaned the shop, and prepared to make royal milk tea for customers. My boss, Richard, arrived before I did, so whenever I got to the store he unlocked the door for me from the inside. No one else was in the shop but him.

At least, that's the way things normally operated. But today, on this particularly fine Saturday, the person who unlocked Étranger's door from the inside for me was a tall and lanky man around 40. I'd never seen him before. He looked like he could be the head librarian at a small library with his gentle demeanor, old-fashioned bolo tie, and vest. Who was he, and what was he doing here? He certainly didn't look like a customer. It was far too early for that. I saw Richard sitting in one of the red lounge chairs. There was a large book of some sort open on the glass coffee table. I'd never seen it before, either. It didn't look like one of the books from the shop.

"Umm…who are you?"

"My name is Kanetoshi Itou. I take it you're the part-timer? Sorry for surprising you like this. I ended up dropping in a little early today."

"Seigi, take a walk around the block and be back in fifteen minutes."

"Got it."

This wasn't really the kind of situation where pushing for more answers immediately was the right call. Admittedly, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little annoyed. Normally, Richard would be a *little* more considerate of me.

As I closed the automatically locking door as slowly as possible without seeming unnatural, I caught an alarming phrase.

"I'm terribly sorry, but thirty million is the most that even our shop can manage for this."

Thirty million?

The door closed just as I wondered what they could possibly be talking about.

I walked out onto Chuo-douri and pondered the situation as I drank an orange

juice I bought from a chain café. It sounded almost like a fantasy. “Thirty million is the most that even our shop can manage.” I guess this Mr. Itou must run some kind of business. Thirty million yen was an insane amount of money. And why was he talking to Richard about it? Also, just by the rules of Étranger customers, nine times out of ten, mysterious early-morning customers brought nothing but trouble.

Maybe it was money problems this time?

I waited a full twenty minutes before returning to the shop, where Richard greeted me with a bow. Whether he meant it as a “sorry” or a “welcome back,” it all felt a little cold.

“Seigi, are you free next Friday? Before 4 p.m. would be ideal.”

There it was. His tone was the same as it always was. I couldn’t tell if it was good news or bad news.

“I’m pretty much free after 12:30. Do you need someone to carry stuff for you?”

“Something along those lines.”

“Does it have something to do with that customer from earlier?”

“Oh, he isn’t a customer. If I were pressed to say, I’d call him a colleague.”

A colleague. Did that mean he was a jeweler, too? He didn’t really look like my idea of a jeweler. Richard aside, I typically imagined jewelry store employees in Japan wearing suits. Richard let out a little laugh almost like a sigh; I guess he didn’t like the dubious look I was giving him or something.

“I’ll tell you more about him in a moment. Shouldn’t you be more interested in asking where we’re going and what we’ll be doing?”

“Okay, so where are we going next Friday?”

“To an auction.”

Richard responded to the puzzled look on my face with an exhausted smile.

“It’s a bit of a long story.”

There were all sorts of different collectors in the world—stamp collectors,

pennant collectors, people who collected laser discs, stuffed animals, and anime figures. And there were also people who collected antiques.

This August, the former director of a company that owns a mountain in Kamakura, Souichirou Azuma, passed away. He was 88 years old. Supposedly, he died peacefully. He'd always had a profound interest in cultural landmarks, and such a large collection of jewels and antiquities that he was one of the foremost collectors in Japan.

The pricing for gemstones and antiquities and stuff like that still confused me, as a mere college student with a part-time job. The reason a particular item was given a particular price was not as easy to understand as the costs of things like vegetables or stationery. How could you even put a number on the products of nature or history itself? You're putting a price tag on something to make it into a product—it has nothing to do with how much it cost to produce the item. It's not like gems or antiquities were created deliberately to be gems or antiquities.

And on that note, there was, as Richard put it, "a little dispute" over the inheritance of Souichirou Azuma's estate. That didn't really surprise me. The law demanded that the deceased's estate be split fairly among the surviving relatives based on how closely related they were, and while cash and stocks and things like that would be fairly trivial to do that with, unique antiques with their own specific value would be impossible to divide as equally as slicing a cake.

And so, Azuma's eldest daughter, Yoshimi Azuma, a competent executive at his company who was feared as the "Lady of the North," had an ingenious idea: put it all up for auction. If she put her father's entire collection up for auction, she could turn those complicated assets into simple old cash. The Azuma family got along well and were wealthy enough to want for nothing, but as the new head of the family, she probably didn't want to cause any unnecessary trouble. And so, she probably wanted to avoid any squabbles over how to divide up these difficult to value items. From a tax perspective, it would probably have been more economical not to immediately liquidate the collection, but she had surely weighed that option and put keeping the peace in her family above minimizing their tax burden. It sounded like the rational choice to me.

I guess there were auction houses that operated in Japan. This whole thing really felt like something from a completely different world—and she probably

picked the one among them that would fetch her the highest prices. It was a British company that boasted of an over-100-year history. They had a showroom in Ginza where they conducted most of their domestic Japanese business.

“By the way, Seigi, are you familiar with the idea of the export of cultural property?”

“Yeah, that sounds familiar. I think it came up in one of my classes briefly. It’s like how the biggest collection of ukiyo-e is in a museum in America and not Japan, right? I don’t really think it’s a big deal, though.”

“Why is that?”

“Why? Well, uh…”

I guess I felt that the place that would take the best care of Japan’s cultural treasures wasn’t necessarily in Japan. Plus, it’s not like museums in Tokyo didn’t have famous paintings from France and England and stuff. And because of stuff like that, you could see foreign art without having to take a trip overseas, too—it seemed like a win-win to me. Plus, those museums legally purchased those pieces

I explained the gist of how I felt, and Richard nodded, saying, “That is true.” We were traveling by foot instead of car this time. We were headed deeper into Ginza, so it wasn’t really far enough from Étranger to take the car, but boy, did we stand out. Walking next to someone so attractive that random people on the street might stop to ask him if he was advertising a brand of suits was kind of fun at first, but it got uncomfortable fast, even if you were used to it.

“I am inclined to generally agree that cultural property ending up in a foreign museum isn’t typically liable to be an issue, but there are plenty of other types of applicable situations.”

“Like what?”

“For example, when such items fall into the hands of a private collector and thus unavailable to the general public. It’s not at all a problem if the property is managed properly, but it’s not uncommon for items of this nature to be purchased to resell or launder money and then vanish into thin air. Of course,

the auction houses ban people intending to make purchases for those purposes, but they can't exactly dictate what a private individual does with their own property."

"…Is that why that Mr. Itou from earlier was visiting Étranger? To prevent something like that from happening?"

"Perhaps you could say that."

The gentle-looking man I ran into at Richard's shop, Kanetoshi Itou, was apparently not a jeweler. He was a dealer of antiques and ancient art, the fourth-generation owner of one of the most prominent shops in Japan, Ginza's "Itou Shoubin Co." It kind of made me think of the phrase "shop window," and I was sure Richard would get mad at me if I said so. Mr. Azuma had purchased so many items from them that he was easily one of their most prominent clients, and he'd been shopping with them for a very long time. That much I understood, but the rest of it…

Apparently, Mr. Itou had asked Richard to win the auction for a particular item.

The book I had seen in the shop was the auction catalog. It was five centimeters thick and was full of color photos of the thousands of treasures in the collection. The item in question was toward the back of the catalog. It was a precious gemstone. Below the English text that read "jadeite" was "hisui"—Japanese for jade.

It didn't look like a piece of jewelry you'd wear. It was a carved ornament, so calling it an antiquity rather than a gemstone didn't feel odd. According to the description, it was about 15 centimeters in length, so it was pretty big as far as gemstones go. It was a deep green and had been carved into a strange hand shape.

It wasn't a members-only auction, so I figured he could have just bid on it himself, but the story was Mr. Itou had gotten into a very public dispute with the Azuma family. He'd offered a large sum to buy that one item, but because the Lady of the North had decided to offer the entire collection in total to the auction house, the offer was ignored. Apparently, the auction house offered a discount on the various fees to do the entire collection together.

Exhausted as she was after her father's funeral, the empress of the Azuma family decreed that Mr. Itou would be banned from the auction to avoid adding to her already heavy load. Given the circumstances, and the fact that members of the Azuma family would certainly be in attendance at the auction, Mr. Itou's attendance would be bad news for the future of his business. He really was a consummate businessman, to be focused on keeping the Azumas as customers even after getting banned from the auction. But at any rate, that's why he came to Richard asking him to bid on the item on his behalf. He would be putting up the money himself, all thirty million yen of it.

And that was the whole of it.

"You know, I don't really get it. Why is Mr. Itou so hung up on that one piece? Does he have a customer who really wants it or something?"

"That appears to be the case, but I suspect it has more to do with the history of that particular piece of jade. Seigi, do you have any guesses about how you might write the 'shoubin' in Itou Shoubin Company in kanji?"

"Shoubin… Shoubin Co."

I told him it sounded kind of like "shop window," and Richard chuckled slightly. *I have no idea, I give up.*

"The answer I was looking for is the same as 'hisui,' jade. 'Hisui' can also be read as 'shoubin.' I never knew that either until he told me."

"So, that piece of jade is related to the name of his shop?"

"Precisely. The piece of jade in question has a great deal of history behind it, which Mr. Itou's great-grandfather, the founder of the business, acquired. He must have been quite enchanted with it to name his business after the piece."

Hrm. But still, thirty million. Even if he did have a buyer for it, why would that buyer go through Shoubin Co. to get it? It was an open auction, why would they need to rely on a third party to acquire it. I asked Richard.

"You've got it backward. The buyer likely had no particular interest in the jade to begin with, but Mr. Itou approached them with the idea and convinced them to make the purchase. Perhaps it would be best to think of the buyer more as a sponsor for this endeavor."

But that made even less sense to me. I could see how the fourth-generation owner of the company might feel not knowing where his business's namesake might end up, and I could also understand how maybe an item like that passing through his company's hands multiple times might improve the shop's image. I could see why he might want it, but the real question was: Why Richard? That's the part I still didn't get. Why couldn't it be someone else?

I asked Richard, and he just shrugged. I guess that meant there wasn't any particular reason? Did Mr. Itou pick him in an attempt to find someone with no connections to him or his company to take the job? But regardless of how much of a fee Richard was getting or how special the item was, the task seemed kind of beneath him.

"…You don't find this sort of job kinda insulting?"

"Not at all. It's quite typical."

"Typical…in Ginza?"

"Of course not—it's common practice everywhere."

I didn't have time to ask a follow-up question because we had arrived at our destination.

All that walking had brought us to a space nestled between an office building and a shopping center right on the outskirts of the heart of Ginza. It was a sturdy-looking silver building with six floors. Upon closer inspection, there was a gilt sign above the door. Beneath the auction house's name was a sign that read "showroom." This was the place. The space belonged to the auction house, too, they weren't just renting it. They were holding everything from the preview being held today to the actual auction itself in this building. Admittedly, it did seem safer to do it that way, with such a large collection to keep an eye on.

I pulled the catalog out of my bag to show to the receptionist at the front desk, flanked by security guards, and Richard signed the paperwork they handed us. He was writing quickly in English, so I couldn't really catch much of it, but it was probably just, like, his name, phone number, address, that sort of thing.

Richard handed the documents back, and the receptionist thanked him in

English before directing us to the elevator. When the elevator doors opened on the exhibition floor, there were security guards waiting there. An imposing man in a suit who looked like he worked for the auction house stood behind them, handing out what appeared to be some kind of ID badge on a lanyard. I took one and put it around my neck.

It felt like I'd been transported to another world inside the showroom.

The space would have looked like an office if it were filled with desks and chairs, but it was filled with rows of glass museum display cases. It reminded me of the jewelry section of a department store, just with the sales people replaced with security cards. The display cases only held things like watches and other accessories. The only other things on display were the paintings on the walls. The rest of the items from the hefty catalog—the statues, ornaments, hairpins, scrolls, and the like must have been on display on other floors. I looked for the gemstone section and found it off to one side. The gemstones were arranged very mechanically—rubies with rubies, diamond jewelry with diamond jewelry, irrespective of carat or quality—and it really did feel like an auction preview. But in the corner with the jade items, the piece we were looking for was nowhere to be found.

"Seigi."

I looked up when I heard Richard say my name. I guess he'd found it. A little ways away from the lot cases was a group of cases displaying individual items by themselves. There was enough space left around each small case to allow people to view each item from every angle.

"Is that…"

The jade from the catalog. It was about 15 centimeters long and was carved into a strange hand shape. The first thing that drew my attention was the color. Or maybe less the color and more how translucent it was.

"Richard, are you sure that's really jade?"

"What does it look like to you?"

"Like emerald. Is jade usually this translucent? I mean—"

I turned back toward the case with the jade pieces in it. Sometimes, it could

come in pink or even lavender, but jade was fundamentally a pretty opaque stone. The first image jade usually conjures in my mind is *magatama*. It's the sort of thing you think of when someone talks about colored stones, like turquoise or agate. But this piece of jade was really translucent. You could almost see straight through it like an emerald.

"Bravo. That proves you've got a sharp eye for this sort of thing. Did you know that the finest quality jade is called 'imperial' jade? It has the color of young bamboo, and only a scant fraction of the jade that exists is quite so translucent green—this piece is an extremely fine example of that type of jade."

"So it's not just green crystal?"

"That's a rather bold assertion to be making. If this were colored quartz, which is commonly used as imitation imperial jade, perhaps you would be able to afford it, but considering this piece has been handled by experts since the Meiji period, its chances of being fraudulent are vanishingly low. Take a very close look at it. You rarely have an opportunity to see such a fine example in person, even in a museum."

The color of young bamboo. It really was a very fresh shade of green. The words "Buddha's hand citron" were written on a white piece of paper off to the side of the case. I didn't really understand the citron part, but I guess it's supposed to be Buddha's hand? It pulled in tightly around where the wrist would be with some mysterious leaf-like objects sticking out of the area. It had probably been carved from a single stone. Whoever carved it must've been incredibly talented, and had nerves of steel.

The description on the case had "Qing dynasty" written where I was expecting to see the name of a Japanese era, so it must be from China. Beneath that was the price in three different currencies—yen, dollars, and yuan.

Thirty million was written on the yen line.

The figure made me dizzy. This weird glove-shaped piece of jade was worth more than your average office worker made in a decade. Richard always said the price of gemstones wasn't determined by their inherent value, but that number was so massive, it still made me break out in a cold sweat.

"Wait…does that mean it *starts* at thirty million?"

I mean, auctions make the price go up, right? And Mr. Itou said he could only muster thirty million. Would that be enough?

“The starting price is much lower. The prices you see here are estimates of roughly what the items are expected to sell for, if not a bit higher.”

“…Well, that’s a relief to hear. But that number still makes my head spin. Should I even be in a place like this? It feels like outsiders shouldn’t be in here.”

“What do you think the glass cases are for? Although, if you asked one of the attendants here, you could even hold the items in your very hands.”

That sent a chill down my spine. I wasn’t doing anything to feel guilty about, but I couldn’t help checking over my shoulder. There were two attendants in suits holding up an oil painting for one of the guests. Even I knew the artist of this one—I’d seen it in an art history textbook before. It was a painting of a person and a horse flying through the sky. *Umm, the name sounded like an action star’s name. That’s right. Umm, the name sounded like an action star’s name. That’s right.*

“…Is that a Seagal?”

When I turned back around, Richard wasn’t there anymore. In his place was a very confused man in a pink linen shirt with a deep tan. His hair had obviously seen a lot of sun, too, and the tips were light brown. Maybe he spent a lot of time on the beach in the south? Not that any of that particularly mattered right now. What was I doing, just saying something like that to someone I’d never met before?

The puzzled man smiled at me a little awkwardly. “No, I think you’re thinking of…Chagall, I think?”

“Chagall! Th-that’s right!”

“Glad I could help.”

“Thanks.”

We exchanged awkward bows, and he slipped past me to approach the jade case. He walked all the way around the case and stopped in a position that let me get a good look at his face. His expression warped as he stood in front of the

part of the carving with the strange leaf-like objects sticking out of it. I wondered why.

He looked like he was about to cry—like he'd been reunited with an old friend.

It took me a moment to remember that staring was rude, but once it hit me, I went looking for Richard. The space wasn't so big. I spotted him at the entrance.

He seemed to be talking to someone.

He didn't look Japanese and was a little shorter than Richard. He had smooth brown skin and black hair. He was probably around fifty, and he wore a reserved grey suit. He didn't have the attitude of one of Richard's customers. Richard's expression, if you could even call it that, was ice cold, like he'd tried his best to eliminate any shred of emotion from his face.

"What an honor to be graced with your presence, Lord Claremont."

"I believe you have mistaken me for someone else."

"For Richard Claremont? I recognize you from Mr. Ranasinghe's place."

Richard just stared at him without saying a word. The man smirked and gave a little bow, before walking past me toward the jade case. Lord Claremont? Who's Lord Claremont?

I hesitated to ask him if the man was someone he knew. Richard was prickly as a hedgehog, his eyes fixed intently on the man's back as he left. Not good. Especially when I couldn't just toss a sweet into his mouth. Well, I'm not sure even sweets could fix this though.

I'd never seen him like this before.

"Uh, um, Richard?"

"Seigi? I was wondering where you went."

I couldn't bring myself to tell him that I was in the room the whole time, so instead, I dramatically let my arms flop to my sides.

"Does this place have anywhere that we can sit down? I'm kinda tired."

“How unbecoming. There’s a café on the first floor, but I’m told there’s a lounge on this one as well.”

Richard didn’t even look at me as he spoke and briskly walked out of the showroom by himself.

I racked my brain as I followed him. The name on Richard’s business card was Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian. Ignoring for a moment the question of who the “Mr. Ranasinghe” that man had referenced was, it seemed very unlikely that he had mistaken Richard for someone else. I mean, who could possibly be mistaken for Richard? It’d be like mistaking the moon for a star. Richard’s face was so iconic, you’d never forget it once you’d seen it.

Maybe Richard’s name was longer than I thought it was. Like, maybe it was Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian Claremont or something. Yeah, that’s extremely long, so maybe that’s why the whole thing wasn’t on his business card. It sounded plausible.

Alternately, maybe everything but his first name was fake? Kinda like how Edward Baxter was a fake name.

“…I only have some cookies, but would you like some?”

I offered Richard a package of cookies when we got to the lounge. My weary-looking boss took a seat on the black leather sofa and quietly nibbled on the cinnamon sugar cookies, which were a recent gift from a customer. The little office kitchenette was free to use, but the only drink available was a carafe of green tea. It would have been perfect if they’d had royal milk tea. As I suspected, the Emperor of Sweets refused the green tea and began drinking the mineral water he’d brought with him.

“You really don’t drink anything but water and royal milk tea, huh?”

“I do drink other things. It would, after all, be rude to refuse a beverage served by a client at their home.”

“Right.”

“Indeed.”

I could’ve cried. It was such a trivial piece of information, but it was news to

me. I felt like I'd been running circles around the moat of a castle, and the fact that he wasn't willing to broach the topic himself essentially meant he'd issued me a standby order. But I couldn't just wait forever, and I'm sure he knew that, too.

Just as I'd thought he was starting to snap out of the shock of running into the mystery man, the second wave of the attack commenced as the little man poked his head into the lounge.

"Oh, fancy meeting you again here."

He filled a paper cup with green tea and drank it while he stood. Richard didn't look away, but he also made an effort never to meet the man's gaze.

"I knew it. You're after that jade, too, aren't you? Where's your client? France? Or England? Or do you want it for yourself?"

Richard's expression was terrifying, but the man laughed, delighted. *Who is this guy?* I stood up. Richard warned me with a quiet "Seigi," but I ignored him.

"Good afternoon. I'm Seigi Nakata. You can direct whatever business you have with my boss to me."

"…Your *boss*? So you're working for him?"

"What's it to you?"

His reaction was way beyond anything I'd anticipated—he burst out laughing. I had no idea what was so funny, but whatever the joke was, it'd clearly landed well with the man standing in front of me. To be frank, I didn't like it.

The man tossed his paper cup into the trash and gave a perfunctory apology for being rude, before pulling a business card from his breast pocket and handing it to me.

"Apologies for not introducing myself earlier—the name's Singh Ganapati Bertuccio. I'm Indian-Italian. I've been doing business in East Asia for eight years now, but I'm still working on my Japanese. Pleasure to meet you."

"Seigi, you're not under any obligation to humor him."

"Interfering with others' business always was your specialty, Lord Claremont. What a riot! I see you've given up on finding happiness with your own kind, so

you settled on a foreigner this time.”

Richard reacted violently. He stood up, grabbed me by the shoulders, and pushed me behind him to stand between me and this self-described Indian-Italian man, Singh. Singh walked out of the room laughing like he’d just heard the funniest joke in the world, but just before he left, he turned to me.

“Mr. Nakata, my good fellow, choosing your place of employment is a matter of grave importance. Stick with him too long and you’ll regret it. On that note, Lord Claremont, give my regards to your mentor.”

After the hurricane of a man left, Richard just stood there, staring out of the room. I couldn’t see his face, but I knew exactly what his expression looked like regardless.

“……”

I stayed silent, gazing into the empty room. Richard’s name. His title. His life history. That man. What was any of it? It felt like the place we were standing in had suddenly turned into a minefield.

Richard took a single deep breath, put his bottle of water back into his bag without saying a word, and started walking. I hurriedly followed him. I didn’t have any idea what was going on with any of this, but the one thing I did know was that it was nothing Étranger’s snack cupboard and a fresh pot of royal milk tea couldn’t help.

After we left the preview, Richard took me to Shiseido Parlor, promising to treat me to a meal. The silence hanging between us made our walk down the street feel more like a tour through hell, but that mood vanished the moment we entered the red Shiseido building. The building, decorated with seasonal ornaments, felt almost like a different dimension. It felt like a place where only good things could happen, no matter how heavy one’s heart might be.

I ate a plate of curry rice while Richard immediately ordered pudding à la mode, then a cake sampler with a side of cookies, and a strawberry parfait for good measure. He had already downed two slices of cake by the time he started on the pudding, which had been a bit delayed.

“Are you really going to eat just that? Not even a little rice or bread?”

Richard ignored my question. *Well, if it works… If he can fill up on nothing but parfaits, more power to him.* Cautioning him about nutrition, the perils of too much sugar, or upsetting his stomach was a job for someone he was closer to—decidedly not me.

I couldn’t explain it, but for some reason, I felt really on edge. No, that wasn’t the right word for it. I was actually pretty angry. Like, on-the-verge-of-losing-it angry. But why? Was the stuff that strange man said getting to me? That didn’t make any sense. A random stranger being rude to you was like getting unlucky and stumbling on a rock. If I got mad about that sort of thing, I’d be snapping at the gods every time it rained. That was why I thought it had to be something else. Why was I so mad? And at what?

“Are you really that curious?”

“Huh?”

“About me.”

Oh. That made it all make sense.

I was angry because he wouldn’t let me worry about him.

“Well, of course! Who do you think I am?”

“I thought you were a Japanese college student.”

I started to lose my cool, but Richard brought a finger to his mouth, reminding me to keep it down. Being treated like a child always upset me. I mean, he couldn’t be that much older than me, could he? Then again, that was just an assumption. He could be a 200-year-old vampire for all I knew.

It wasn’t really the time for jokes like that, anyway. Richard was finishing off his pudding à la mode, and it was painful to just sit there, waiting for the right moment to say something.

“…So if I told you that I would never make you pudding or milk agar jelly again, and that I would keep putting the wrong amount of sugar in your royal milk tea, would you fire me?” I said in the most threatening voice I could muster. Richard just chuckled softly.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard such an adorable threat before.”

“Knock it off. I’m trying my best not to blow my lid right now.”

“Well, you’re more than welcome to ask me whatever you like once I finish eating.”

“Huh?”

Richard flashed me a beautiful smile, spoon still in hand. Did that mean he was going to come clean with me?

“Now, where shall we begin? There’s so very much to cover, so please, just ask questions as you see fit. I’ll try to answer as best as I can. Will that satisfy you?”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. I wasn’t expecting this at all. Plus, wasn’t his strawberry parfait going to be here soon? If I didn’t say something before it did, I was sure I’d lose the opportunity for good. I was starting to panic—where would I even start?

“…So, that Indian guy. Who was he? Does he hate you or something?”

“He was a competitor in an establishment I worked for quite a while ago. Considering the fact that he routinely accused me of poaching his best customers, I imagine he does harbor a grudge of some sort. That said, this sort of thing was so common that I’m not sure I’d remember every individual incident of the kind.”

“What sort of thing?”

“Oh, competitors claiming, ‘Customers would buy a pebble off the road if you were the one selling it. They’re so enamored with your face, they can’t see what’s in their hands.’ Any other questions?”

It was uncomfortably easy to imagine someone saying that. But Richard seemed completely unperturbed, so I tried to keep my cool and think up another question.

“So, is this ‘establishment you worked for quite a while ago’ where you met him? Ranasinghe’s shop?”

“Indeed. It’s my mentor’s business. The main location is in Sri Lanka, with the

second shop in Hong Kong, and the third Étranger here in Tokyo."

"So it's a chain!"

"They're a bit closer to sister stores, but essentially, yes."

Ranasinghe was part of Richard's surname. Did that mean his mentor was related to him? I asked Richard, and he shook his head.

"No, I met my mentor in Sri Lanka. We aren't related, but due to certain circumstances, I'm borrowing his name at the moment."

"…So it's an alias."

"Indeed."

Was that really the sort of thing you just casually said "indeed" to and left it at that? I asked him why, but he didn't answer. I guess that was still off limits. Or maybe it just meant he'd answer it later. Either way, I needed to keep moving.

"Who's 'Lord Claremont?'"

"You certainly have a keen memory. 'Claremont' is the name on my passport. 'Lord,' meanwhile, is my father's family title in England. I come from a rather old family, and the eldest son and heir is afforded that title. The aristocracy is alive and well in England, if only in name."

So he was the son of an aristocrat. It was surprisingly…unsurprising. It felt right, considering that his beautiful face seemed like it'd be more at home in a foreign period drama than walking the streets of Ginza. But, judging from Richard's tone, he wanted me to drop that topic quickly. Maybe he wasn't entirely comfortable with it.

"I take it you've been through a lot. So…wait. Why, though?"

"Why use a name that means I have to keep going out of my way to explain that I'm English?"

Yeah, that. In the time I'd known Richard, people had asked him if he's French twice. It wasn't like he struggled with French, and if he hated being English so much, you'd think he'd just go with it and say "yes" instead of correcting them. Or was it just the name itself, not his nationality, that he was trying to conceal?

I didn't say any of this aloud, but Richard seemed to guess from my body language. He gave me an exhausted smile. He was so beautiful, even in moments like these, that I could hardly bear it.

"One name is easier to use than the other. That's all there is to it."

"…Why not just 'de Vulpian' then?"

"That's my mother's name, and her family can be quite troublesome. It might have been best to choose an entirely different name in the first place, but that comes with its own set of problems. Using a name that doesn't feel like it belongs to you, day in and day out, can be rather stifling."

"So 'Richard' is your real name?"

I was beginning to regret asking, but Richard didn't seem surprised. Instead, he simply nodded his assent.

"Anything else?"

I could hear my gut groaning at me. *But why?* it seemed to say.

"……"

Anything else? I felt like I'd played all but one of my cards. But it would take a lot of courage to actually play that last one, because I knew that if I were in his place, I wouldn't want to be asked that question.

"……"

I wanted to know what that man had meant when he said Richard had "given up on finding happiness with his own kind."

Richard waited. I was sure he knew exactly what I was about to ask, too, but still he waited for me to say it.

"…No, I…I think I'm good. It'll probably take me a while to process everything you already told me. I'm good. Thanks," I said with a smile.

Not a moment later, Richard scoffed loudly at me. What was his problem? This was the second time I'd seen him make that face. The first time, I remembered, was this spring, when I first started working for him. During the incident with the ruby brooch. He'd cut right through my ridiculous nonsense

with that displeased face when we were talking about choosing romantic partners.

"Thank you for being so *considerate*. You always were a very *sweet* person. Almost like a man getting cold feet and pulling back just before going in for a kiss."

"What?"

Going in for a kiss? What kind of example is that? I'm *supposed to be the angry one here—why is Richard going off on me now?! Well, fine. If he's gonna be like that, I have no obligation to pull my punches.*

"Fine. You wanna know what's pissing me off? I'll tell you. It's not the fact that you hid your identity from me. You think I didn't know that from the start? It's not normal to be with someone this long and not know a single thing about their family. But it's not because I don't care. The opposite, in fact. I just don't want to force you to tell me anything you don't want to."

"I honestly can't tell if you're being motivated by benevolence or cowardice."

"Does it matter?! My point is, I'm not the kind of man who gets cold feet and pulls away from a kiss. I just hate the idea of valuing yourself so little that you feel like you have to kiss someone you don't want to. I'm done."

The waitress who was bringing Richard's parfait over to him paused a couple of steps from the table in surprise. Unfortunately, the strawberry atop the dessert fell off it and onto the tray, whereupon she hurried to return to the kitchen. I felt terrible about how embarrassed she looked. I almost said something to her but decided it was best to wait till I'd calmed down a little.

"Basically, I, um, I just don't want to force you to do anything you don't want to do. Especially not because of some weird jerk like that guy. But it's not because I don't care or don't want to know more about you. I like you, and I want to do whatever I can to repay all that you've done for me…"

And that was why I was backing away from this thing that could endanger the tenuous connection we'd developed.

Still struggling to find the words to express myself, I returned my gaze to Richard and was surprised to discover him looking right at me. But not like he

was trying to intimidate me. He was almost surprised. His blue eyes were open wide in astonishment.

“What? Why are you making that weird face at me?”

“Oh, nothing, I just hadn’t realized you felt so strongly about me.”

“You really didn’t know that until I said it out loud? I’m kind of shocked, honestly…”

“Well, I appreciate it. And I think you’re probably right. I should tell you more about myself.”

“Richard—”

“Don’t get the wrong idea, I’m not saying this out of some self-destructive impulse, either. I just think it’s about time.”

And so, Richard began to tell his story.

It was similar to the Azuma family situation, in some ways. It all started with Richard’s great-grandfather, a former Lord Claremont. He had accumulated a great deal of wealth through both inheritance and his business dealings, but as a result, the way that wealth would be divided among his descendants was still in question to this day. That is to say, it was still being litigated. How much would be Richard’s and how much would remain with the estate was still up in the air, and it seemed he’d have to jump through quite a few hoops to claim his inheritance. Since Richard wasn’t hurting for money, he wasn’t particularly motivated to pursue the issue, but circumstances were forcing his hand.

In short, Richard was embroiled in a lot of trouble regarding his inheritance. It had created rifts within his family and caused people he’d considered friends to betray him.

It had even made a former romantic partner break up with him.

He mentioned that so casually. That was it.

“……”

I didn’t really understand what his love life had to do with the inheritance issue. Maybe concerns about a potential spouse’s claim on it? I might have had a better idea if I’d taken more civil law classes…no, probably not. Richard was

deliberately avoiding key details. He really did astonish me, sometimes. I hadn't thought he'd hold anything back at this point.

Because deep down, I knew he was doing this for my sake. *You know, there is such a thing as being too nice.*

"Are you sure you should be selling gemstones in Japan?"

"What exactly do you think I should be doing instead, and where?"

I mean, living on your own was the obvious thing to do if you didn't get along with your family. I'd done just that myself. I was most curious about how the son of an English nobleman had ended up in Sri Lanka selling gems, but I felt like we'd be sitting in the restaurant for another thirty minutes if I broached that topic. Since that didn't feel like the best idea, I decided to save it for later.

"Good point. Anyway, thank you for opening up to me."

"You're quite welcome. That should generally explain Singh's comment."

"Which comment?"

"His advice to you, about how you would surely regret it if you stuck with me for too long."

That was supposed to be advice?

"Oh, come on, you can't be serious. I never took you for that kind of person. That wasn't advice; he was just trying to rile you up. Are you sure you're not just low on sugar?"

"And just what kind of person do you take me for, then?"

"An Emperor of Sweets who has very extreme opinions about royal milk tea, can be a handful sometimes, but also has a cute side. I think that about covers it."

The waitress reversed direction around a few steps from the table again. Which topping had fallen off this time? Though the parfait looked intact… maybe she was just trying to be polite and not interrupt us. Something sweet I could cram into Richard's mouth was exactly what I found myself wanting in that moment, though.

The man with the beautiful face and porcelain skin looked over the evening Ginza skyline, tapping his finger on the table as if flicking through items on an invisible touch screen. What bad manners. What was his deal?

“How is it that you’re so…comfortable calling someone ‘cute’ to their face like that?”

I grumbled that it was a compliment, and Richard stubbornly turned away from me. He really did look like a little kid when he got like this.

“Don’t sweat it. You’re Richard the jeweler. You’re a thousand times tougher than me, so don’t let yourself get hung up on every little thing. Anyway, shouldn’t you be focusing on getting that jade piece? Is thirty million really going to be enough?”

Richard didn’t look satisfied. But I just kept acting like everything was normal, and eventually, he let out a little sigh of resignation. *You know, that’s really rude to do that to someone’s face.*

“…Yes, I am a bit concerned. But that was the sum we arrived at within the client’s budget. That Indian-Italian fellow is a professional when it comes to acquiring East Asian art—think of him as the middleman between wealthy Europeans and sellers of fine art. The fact that he’s here means someone in Europe is angling for that piece of jade, too. It may end up being a fierce battle. You see, fine art pieces are also often considered sound financial investments because their prices don’t tend to go down.”

He added, mumbling, that it might be an intense bidding war. I would have preferred to never set eyes on that man again, but that was probably wishful thinking.

“What happens if you don’t win it?”

“I think that’s something Mr. Itou is considering as well. Doubtlessly, he will be in contact soon to discuss his budget. You needn’t worry about it.”

That was when the waitress finally arrived. This time she made it with no trouble, delivering the beautiful dessert to the table. The parfait, adorned with gem-like strawberries, was a thing of beauty that got no less dazzling the longer I stared at it. I wanted to see Tanimoto eating something like this with a big

smile on her face. It'd probably be a little difficult to get one to her, in terms of distance from campus and the cost to my wallet, but it might be worth a shot.

Richard gave the waitress a smile and a nod and pointed at his parfait.

"Another of the same please."

"Coming right up."

He was going to eat more? I was sure it's tasty, but I couldn't imagine eating three courses of desserts, let alone four. I made a "really?" face at him, and Richard chuckled.

"It's for you."

"For me? Honestly, I'd rather have a sandwich."

"Enough, just eat."

"Why…"

"Eat."

"Fine."

When the strawberry parfait showed up right around when the kitchen was closing, I resolved to take a bite. It wasn't like I disliked sweets or anything; it was just that watching someone savor their food as much as Richard was enough to make me feel full. But to be honest, the parfait was so good that I was grateful he'd insisted I eat it. The ruby-red strawberries tasted of sweet syrup, and the ice cream had the mellow flavor of milk. Oh, my sweet Tanimoto. How I wished I could feed her one of these.

"I hope you don't regret it."

"Huh? Regret what?"

"Saying that you like me."

"Should I be scared? Is your fan club going to fly over from England and kick my ass like a bunch of hooligans?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I do not have a fan club."

"Oh, I bet you do, but you just don't know about it."

I had no idea exactly how much Richard's family was fighting over his inheritance, but he was more than a little paranoid if he was genuinely concerned that people in a country ten thousand miles away would have any influence over here. I had a feeling he was remembering some specific incident that made it hard for him not to worry. In which case, the least I could do was be grateful for his concern.

"I won't regret it, okay. Also, this is, like, really good."

"…It's almost like manna from heaven."

"I don't know if I'd go that far."

With the dessert banquet finished, we walked to Shinbashi Station together before we went our separate ways. The auction was to be held the following week, and I'd be accompanying Richard as his bag boy. I was sure Richard would be meeting Mr. Itou and his client before then. Their current budget of thirty million yen was already preposterous, but they might need to finance even more if they wanted to be sure they could acquire the item.

But still, how could that piece of jade shaped like Buddha's hand be worth thirty million yen?

If someone asked me if I wanted an old piece of jade worth over thirty million yen, I didn't think I'd say yes. I'd rather have the money. If I had that kind of money, I could make both myself and my mom Hiromi happy. I imagined the Azuma family's "Lady of the North" felt the same way, too. We were probably closer to being on the same page than me and Richard's client. That said, I could tell working part-time in a jewelry shop this long was changing the way I thought about these things.

That piece of jade was more than an art object with a great deal of financial value, and it was more than just an antique, too. It had a gentle kind of charm to it, and not just because of its enchanting color. That piece of jade was just beautiful. It was a piece of art produced over a hundred years ago that had survived to today without a single scratch. Even a layperson would find that incredible. Jade was a much softer stone than diamond, and yet, those delicate leaf-like adornments remained fully intact.

When I looked at it through the glass, I was impressed by the fact that it was

worth tens of millions of yen, sure—but I also felt a strange sort of energy emanating from it. It was the feeling of knowing that this thing had passed through the careful hands of many, many people, long before I was born. That piece of jade shaped like Buddha's hand was almost like a physical incarnation of the care taken by the innumerable people who had handled it.

It was up for auction, so I understood that it was going to go to the highest bidder. But deep inside, I hoped it would go to the person who would treasure it the most.

It was the following Sunday. Étranger had only been open on Saturday this week, so Richard had spent quite a lot of time apologizing to people on the phone yesterday.

For some reason, I was heading to a hotel in town with Mr. Itou after joining him at Shinbashi Station. The auction was being held in Ginza, but we needed to meet up with Richard first. I'd wondered why Richard couldn't just meet us at the hotel, but apparently, he had to see someone right before the auction, which made taking a car the fastest option.

Once Mr. Itou was done greeting me, he asked me a question in the back of the taxi. "What's your relationship to Richard?"

"Relationship? We're just boss and employee…"

"Really? I thought you might be a relative. Of Mr. Ranasinghe's, that is."

"Um, isn't he Richard's…"

"Mentor is what he calls him."

The Sri Lankan man who had come up before. Mr. Itou must've thought I was Sri Lankan-Japanese. That was a pretty funny misunderstanding. I wondered what kind of person Mr. Ranasinghe was? The fact that Richard looked up to him suggested he was very particular about certain things, too.

"Shoubin Co. has ties with Mr. Ranasinghe's shop. I think it's been about twenty years now that we've been doing business together? It was through that connection that I made this request of Richard—and I do apologize for how

much trouble it's caused."

"Jewelers and antiquities dealers do business together?"

"Of course we do. Antique jewelry is the most common reason why, but it's difficult to draw hard lines between antiques, art, and jewelry. It doesn't really matter what field you've specialized in, even in the sciences—you won't be exclusively interacting with only people in your field. This is no different."

I guess things did look different, depending on how you came at them. Even where that piece of jade was concerned… I didn't think anyone would argue with you if you told them it was an antique, but at the same time, calling it a gemstone wasn't exactly wrong, either. It was probably hard to categorize.

I remembered I was curious about what had happened with the budget.

"Not to stick my nose into someone else's business, but do you think the thirty million is going to be enough?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I did get the upper limit raised just a little since the preview, but still."

Just how much was "a little"? I asked Mr. Itou this, and he quickly raised a single finger. It probably wasn't another hundred thousand. There'd be no point to them pushing for this without the funds to potentially win. It was probably thirty-one million. At least, I didn't think he could have possibly meant forty million… Just thinking about it made my stomach churn.

Mr. Itou chuckled.

"But sometimes it's just not enough, you know? And when that happens, you have to know when to give up. This is a business. Sometimes you have to just make a call and leave it up to fate."

"…I hope it goes well."

"Thanks. I mean it."

The hotel we arrived at was totally different from the fancy one he'd taken me to for sushi before. This one was just a normal business hotel, though most of the people in the lobby were foreigners. It must've been a convenient place for English speakers to stay on business trips. I was a little surprised—I'd have

thought he'd have a more permanent place to stay, considering how long he'd been in Japan. But maybe he really wasn't typically in the country from Monday to Friday.

We waited in front of some sad-looking houseplants, as a resident of a completely different world alighted from the elevator. I knew what he was wearing was called a tuxedo. It was menswear for extremely formal occasions, and seeing Richard—a human incarnation of a gemstone—wearing one was like seeing an ogre with a spiked metal bat, two pistols on his belt, and a fine Japanese katana for good measure. It was a violent kind of beauty. Mr. Itou smiled a bit. I mean, what else could you do, after all?

Richard walked up to me and cocked his head to the side, looking aloof.

"Cat got your tongue? I was expecting a deluge of inappropriate compliments from the master."

"…Are you talking about me?"

Richard quietly nodded. I guess he did mean me. He looked so young, all dressed up like that. I almost started laughing.

"When you see something impossibly beautiful, it takes your breath away. That's why I didn't say anything. You know, you probably shouldn't just wander around town looking like that—you're liable to cause a multi-car pileup if a driver lays eyes on you."

"You've developed quite the silver tongue."

"You only have yourself to blame for that. I could just say you look incredibly handsome, but you *always* look incredibly handsome, so I had to get creative. Happy now?"

"I think that's quite enough of that. Let's get going."

Before we got back into our waiting taxi, Mr. Itou looked at me with a difficult-to-describe expression. I wondered what it was. The two of us got into the back. While the driver was distracted by Richard's dazzling entrance, Mr. Itou whispered into my ear.

"Does he…like it when you compliment him like that?"

“I don’t really think so.”

He was probably just trying to throw me a bone, or maybe he’d just figured out how to keep me in check. I had a tendency to babble when something really affected me emotionally. If I just kept going on about how pretty and handsome and incredible and attractive he was, he’d get mad at me, so maybe he’d decided to let me get it out of my system now to save having to hear me going on about weird stuff later. No, wait, I had more important things to be worried about right now—

“Richard, is there a dress code for this thing? I didn’t know anything about it. I’m just wearing my usual shirt and khakis…”

“You’re my bag boy, aren’t you? No one’s going to be paying any attention to you.”

“Well…I guess you have a point.”

It did sting a little, the way he just cut me down like that. But I had other things to worry about, like that Indian-Italian man. If he really did have a personal grudge against Richard, he was bound to be gunning for him. I wanted to make sure I was nearby if that happened.

“Richard, did you bring anything sweet with you?”

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t know if this is something you’ll like, but…”

I reached up toward the passenger seat and handed a milk-tea-flavored candy to Richard. Richard wouldn’t even entertain milk tea in a can or a plastic bottle, but maybe he’d give candy a chance.

“Stash it in one of your pockets so you can eat it if you get in a bad mood.”

“…I appreciate the thought, but I’m not exactly—”

“Inclined to do that sort of thing? I figured. But you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

I was about to turn to Mr. Itou to explain, “See, that’s the kind of work relationship we have,” but the young antiques shop owner wouldn’t even look at me for some reason. He just stared out the window. I wondered why. Maybe

he'd seen a celebrity in the car next to us or something?

The auction was being held in the basement of the same building the preview had been in. A minority, mostly foreigners, were decked out in tuxedos, but most of the attendees were Japanese folks in formal suits and wedding-appropriate dresses. Mr. Itou just wished us good luck without getting out of the taxi, and Richard and I bowed deeply to him.

The last thing he asked Richard was "Are you sure that's going to be okay?"

What was that about? Richard told him not to worry, so maybe it wasn't anything too serious.

It looked like the auction had already started. The jewelry section—including that piece of jade—was about to begin. The setting looked a bit like a courtroom, being split into an audience section and a raised stage with the auctioneer and items on it. The guests bid against each other by signaling to the auctioneer with hand gestures. Once the auction started, if a guest raised their hand with their index finger out, it meant they were offering one more of whatever unit the auction is running in—ten thousand, a hundred thousand, a million, and so on—than the current highest bid. If you had the winning bid, you were required to make the purchase for that amount, which made me worry about carelessly scratching my head or something, but apparently, that sort of thing was rarely an issue as long as it didn't happen right at the end. And on that note—

"Aren't we dressed to the nines, Lord Claremont?"

"Thank you."

He really had shown up. Singh, clad in his blue silk suit, smiled pityingly at me.

"You're still sticking with him? I did warn you."

"Seigi, you don't need to waste your time on him. He loves to give people unsolicited advice."

"That's rich, coming from someone who couldn't even be bothered to remember me enough to greet me. But you wouldn't know what that's like, would you? No one who's met you has ever forgotten you. That face of yours has become your calling card. Poor thing. If only you'd been born a woman,

maybe your charms would have worked on me, too."

"Well, thank heavens for that. I never thought there would come a day when I'd be this grateful to have been born a man. So, who are you working for? And what's your budget?"

"Hah! I'm not rusty enough to let that slip. It doesn't matter who my employer is—you simply don't stand a chance because I always get my clients what they want. Valuable objects end up in the hands of those who deserve them. This auction is nothing more than a formality to my client." He added, mockingly, "Tragic that you got all dressed up for absolutely nothing."

I guess it was fair to assume he had a pretty substantial budget from that. He bowed politely, perhaps noticing the surrounding guests giving him vaguely concerned looks, and walked up to the auctioneer's podium. That said—

"Seigi, is something wrong?"

"No, just…man, you really are good at Japanese…"

Singh didn't make any grammatical mistakes in Japanese, and he was more than capable of getting across what he wanted to say effectively. But he did have this awkward intonation at the end of each and every one of his sentences. It was something I was vaguely familiar with from college—it was the way foreigners spoke when they were learning Japanese. It made me wonder if Richard had ever sounded like that.

My boss smiled at me awkwardly.

"You're not easily intimidated, are you? Playtime is over. You have my things."

"I do. Are you sure you can win?"

"Watch and learn."

The auctioneer got up on the stage and greeted the room to announce that the break in the auction was over.

The auction proceeded in order of catalog numbers. Not every item received bids, though. Sometimes, the starting price was lowered if no one made a bid, but other times, the item went completely ignored. I was guessing it depended

on the seller—whether they wanted to sell the item no matter how low the price, or if they had a firm minimum they wouldn't drop below.

Not everything started at crazy prices, either. There were several items that started in the five-to-twenty-thousand range. It was a real grab bag, each item being slapped with a price tag as hands went up. It all happened so fast. One after another and another and another.

After a ruby necklace, a diamond ring, and a sapphire brooch, the item we were waiting for finally came up. You could tell the atmosphere in the room had changed. The item was brought up to the stage still in its glass case, securely protected.

"Catalogue number 10865, the Buddha's Hand Citron, a hand-sculpted piece of jade produced during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor in the Qing Dynasty. Starting the bidding at ten million."

I knew that the items were getting increasingly valuable, but this was a whole other level. The brand-name brooch with a large sapphire in it that had been up just before this only had a *winning* bid of three million.

The price crept up in increments of a hundred thousand, until it was at fifteen million. By that point, the only bidders left were Richard and Singh. Everyone else was in spectator mode. The auctioneer swiftly changed the units from one hundred thousand to five hundred thousand and then one million. It was almost like watching a boxing match, cheering for your favorite to knock the opponent out. Not that they were actually beating each other stupid with rolls of bank notes.

Neither party said a word but just raised their hands as the auctioneer pointed at each of them, calling the price—twenty million, twenty-one million, twenty-two million—at incredible speed. It was more like an incantation than words.

When it hit twenty-eight million, Singh looked at me and smirked.

Then he raised his hand, two fingers out.

"Thirty million."

He looked completely calm, seeming to suggest he could keep going.

This was it. Even if they had gotten an extra million, this was our limit. It sucked, but I supposed Singh just had a bigger budget. Mr. Itou had said that sometimes you just had to make a call. I knew that. I knew it, but—

It still sucked.

I'd never felt this way about a sale before. It was completely different from how I felt about Grandma's ring, but I guess I really had grown fond of that enchantingly green piece of jade.

I looked over at Richard, wondering what he was going to do, but the beautiful man just calmly raised his hand again, as if he hadn't seen the unsettling smile on the other man's face. The auctioneer looked at both remaining parties and shifted back to five hundred thousand increments. Thirty-one million, thirty-one million five hundred—wait. Hold on. Didn't Mr. Itou say they had only managed to up the budget a "little"? It hadn't sounded like they'd gotten *that* much extra. Did they really have the money? I started trying to do the math of how many years it'd take me in my future job to save up that much money.

With a bitter look on his face, Singh decisively raised his hand again.

"Forty million."

It echoed through the room.

That's it. There's no way it can keep going.

Richard raised his hand again at a leisurely pace with a fiercely beautiful expression on his face. He didn't have a single finger out this time but his whole hand, held up flat. And then came the announcement.

"Forty-five million."

Upping it by five million? How did that happen?

I hurriedly looked around, but Singh's hand didn't move. The gavel came down.

The auction was over.

All the tension abruptly drained from the space. Did that really happen? Did Richard really get the winning bid? But wait, where did that forty-five million

come from? I was just the bag boy, but even my heart was fit to burst out of my chest. The jade was apparently the grand finale of the gemstone section, so the guests all began chatting among themselves. All with the exception of Singh, who just stood there, clenching his fists.

“Excellent work, Seigi. I’ll have to go in the back to sign for it, so please keep an eye on my things a little longer.”

“S-sign for it?”

“Paperwork to certify the winning bid. And then to authorize payment.”

He really did win. Which meant he was going to have to pay the forty-five million.

“Um…”

I hesitated to voice my concern. I managed to mouth, “Do you have it?” Richard smiled and silently responded, “I do.” I thought I felt my soul leave my body.

“I have some candy, if you’d like.”

“No, um, that was supposed to be for you…”

As the winning bidders were being ushered into a different room by the staff, Singh approached Richard again with a frown planted firmly on his face.

“What the hell are you thinking? Your budget was only supposed to be a little over thirty million.”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about. Would you please step aside?”

“You cursed man! Where is all your luck coming from? Once again, you invite nothing but misfortune in your wake!”

Something snapped inside me. Maybe because I’d been carrying this tension for so long now, my body just moved on its own.

“Richard, hold my bag.”

I knew it wasn’t exactly appropriate for the bag boy to make his boss hold his bag, but I didn’t really care in the moment. Sometimes a bag boy has more

important things to do than hold bags.

A vein throbbed on Singh's forehead as I stared him down. He wasn't half as scary as my karate instructor. But that was probably because I was the scarier-looking one in that moment.

"Excuse me. I know I'm very, very out of line and don't know the whole story, but—"

"I have nothing to say to *you*. Back off."

"You don't know when to shut up."

I stepped toward Singh and took firm hold of his arm. Not so hard that he couldn't pull away from me if he actually tried, but I didn't think he would. It would make him look bad.

"Don't you dare insult my boss. He's the best man I know. It doesn't matter if he invites misfortune in his wake or whatever. And I honestly don't care what you call him. I love watching him work, so if you interfere with his business, you're gonna piss me off. You should hurry up and go home. Go drown your sorrows in a nice dessert."

"You're a fool. So blinded by the flower's beauty that you don't even realize it's poisonous!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but here, have this."

I offered Singh one of the milk tea candies I had left in my pocket. He glared at me hatefully, knocked the candy onto the ground, and walked up the stairs to leave.

They wouldn't let me into the back room until Richard waved me over. The room wasn't very big, so the people who showed up later were issued numbered tickets. Richard made it to the desk rather quickly, but he wasn't the only one there to sign the documents. That guy who looked kind of like a surfer was there, too.

But why? He wasn't in the auction room earlier.

He let out a little "oh" when he noticed me approaching.

"You're the Seagal/Chagall guy."

Richard looked confused. I flailed my hands about to explain that it was nothing. Nothing, okay! The mysterious man smiled bashfully.

“I would say nice to meet you, but I guess we’ve already met. I’m Hidenori Azuma.”

“Hi, I’m Seigi Nakata—wait, Azuma?”

“Yes.”

Azuma, like the person who was selling the jade?

I was going to ask where the extra money had come from, but now I had even more questions. When the paperwork was done, we were ushered out of the room and took the elevator up to the first floor. When the door opened—

“Finished?”

Mr. Itou was standing there. Should he really be here? Wasn’t he at odds with the Azumas? I glanced back behind me at Mr. Azuma, only to see him looking at Mr. Itou like he’d just saved his life. He walked over to him and shook both of his hands.

“I can’t thank you enough.”

“No, I should be thanking you.”

Another mystery for the pile. The two of them had some kind of inexplicable friendly relationship.

Confused, I looked to the person who always solved these mysteries for me. Richard looked a little exhausted but smiled when he noticed my gaze. It was only now that I realized that this wasn’t his “usual” face at all. It was his formal—no, it was the face he made when he was trying to put me at ease.

“There’s a café on the first floor if you’d like to get something to drink. He’s been looking at me like he’s had a burning question for a bit now.”

The “he” who Richard was referring to wasn’t me but Mr. Azuma.

Mr. Azuma gave a timid smile and hesitantly asked Richard, “Um…do people ever tell you that you’re extremely handsome?”

Richard took a moment and then nodded sincerely. “Yes, occasionally.”

Once at the café, it was Mr. Itou who went on to explain, not Richard. He said it'd be faster if he did. Apparently, I wasn't the only one who didn't know the full story, as Mr. Itou turned to Mr. Azuma as he spoke.

"This is Richard. He's connected to a Sri Lankan jeweler whom my shop has done business with several times. I may have been a bit demanding when I initially contacted his mentor to ask for some assistance."

"Does he really have that much power over you?" I asked Richard.

"If there is anyone out there who can comfortably defy my mentor, I'd love to meet them."

That was news to me. So Richard wasn't on an equal footing with his mentor, huh?

Mr. Itou went on to explain what had happened, with the occasional addition from Mr. Azuma to me, the person most removed from all of it.

Hidenori Azuma. Twenty-seven years old. His primary residence wasn't in Kamakura but Jakarta, Indonesia, where he ran a travel agency aimed at Japanese folks. While he was a full-fledged member of the Azuma family, some of his more old-fashioned relatives weren't too fond of him, due to his having lived abroad so long—so much so, in fact, that he couldn't be present in his grandfather Souichirou's last moments. He didn't even get a call about the inheritance situation, just a text.

"Aunt Yoshimi is a good person and all, but because of some things that happened in the past, she's always prioritized keeping the peace within the family over everything else. My grandpa Souichirou had fought bitterly with his siblings over their inheritance, and she always talked about how much she hated that. But I never really thought she'd sell off the entire collection. Especially not this fast."

Mr. Azuma lowered his voice and hung his head as he explained some of his relatives were running businesses that were in the red, meaning they probably wanted their money fast. I could imagine having that many siblings probably brought a whole lot of problems with it, though as an only child, I had no real point of reference.

That made me wonder if Richard had siblings. I'd never asked. I glanced over at him, but he didn't look my way. He was staring off into the distance, looking beautiful as ever in his tuxedo.

"I hurried back to Japan as quickly as I could, but it was too late. Grandpa's shelves were already empty. And the Buddha's Hand Citron was gone."

"Is that thing really called the 'Buddha's Hand Citron'?"

"Yes. It's named after a citrus fruit that looks like the Buddha's hand. It's considered a good luck charm in China. I'm just repeating what my grandpa told me, but I'm pretty sure he borrowed most of his lectures from the folks at Itou Shoubin Co. to begin with."

Mr. Azuma looked almost like a little kid as he said that with a chuckle. Somehow, that put me at ease. He really did love that hand-shaped piece of jade.

"I begged my aunt not to put the jade up for auction but to let me have it in place of my share of the inheritance, but somehow, that made my other relatives get suspicious. Well, I guess I can't blame them after seeing the price it went for at auction…"

He had a point. Even if he could have been given the Buddha's Hand Citron as his portion of the inheritance, it would have gone against the Lady of the North's idea of turning it all into cash to make sure the split was even. I didn't know what the total value of the estate was, but it was hard to imagine just handing over something that went for over forty million at auction.

"Anyway, since I couldn't go through the family to get it, I decided to participate in the auction. But it was expected to sell for thirty million, and my maximum budget was only ten."

"Wow, you wanted it back that badly, huh!"

"I did."

Mr. Azuma nodded calmly. I was amazed. If there was a metric for truly loving something, this had to be close to the maximum possible value peak. He continued, saying that he just couldn't give up on it.

“I was out of options, so I went and cried to the owner of Shoubin Co. Grandpa brought me to the shop once, when I was very little. All I really remembered about it was getting some delicious snacks, so I wasn’t very confident about going to them.”

“What do you mean, you went and cried to him?”

“Oh, it wasn’t a strategic move or anything. I just remembered my grandpa once telling me that if I ever needed help when it came to antiques and antiquities, I could rely on the people at Shoubin Co.”

“We were founded in the Meiji period, after all,” Mr. Itou said proudly. After a beat, he blushed, realizing how off-topic his comment was. He must really love antiques, too. And his shop, with its long history.

“Um, well, while my company managed to make a connection with Hidenori, chronologically speaking, he didn’t come to us until *after* I met Richard at Étranger.”

“Wait, what?”

So the client to whom Shoubin Co. wanted to sell the Buddha’s Hand Citron *wasn’t* Mr. Azuma? Then why did he sign for it just now? Who was the real owner?

“I can’t talk about my client directly, but I can tell you that he’s a higher-up at a corporation that owns an art museum in Tokyo. When I brought the idea to him, he was more than willing to go ahead.”

That was in line with what Richard had told me before the preview—Shoubin Co. hadn’t been approached by a client who wanted the item but the other way around. But why? Mr. Itou seemed to have guessed my question, for he smiled at me warmly.

“Roughly 90 percent of the items this company auctions off end up going to buyers overseas. Once that happens, it can be very easy to lose track of an item. The story Richard told you about the origin of Shoubin Co. is accurate. Maybe it would be easier to make sense of if you think of that piece of jade as our business’s *zashiki-warashi*. Even though it had spent so much time in the hands of someone we’d long done business with, where it would end up next was

anyone's guess. Of course, I could have just let it go, but that would mean never seeing it again. As long as everything's above board, I think anyone should be able to sell their gems and antiquities however they see fit. But it's also a point of pride for my business—and the thought of just watching our patron deity disappear seemed somewhat tragic."

A *zashiki-warashi*—a kind of spirit that took the form of a child and brought prosperity to the home it resided in. Mr. Itou clearly considered these antiques more than mere objects. And his customers shared that passion, even if it was something difficult for many people to understand.

Mr. Itou smiled awkwardly after telling the story of how he was banned from the auction.

"I panicked. I heard there was someone who wanted the Buddha's Hand Citron but only had ten million and Richard's report that our budget might fall short at about the same time. At first, I was going to tell Hidenori that he should try persuading his aunt again."

And that's how the secret alliance was formed.

"I was allowed to play a small part in negotiating between Mr. Azuma and the man who contracted me to acquire the Buddha's Hand Citron. On the condition that the Citron would go to Mr. Azuma upon my client's death, Mr. Azuma entrusted me with this ten-million-yen portion of the bidding money. And now the jade belongs jointly to both Mr. Azuma and one other person."

"So that means…"

"Yes, it will spend the next several decades on display in a museum."

I looked to Mr. Azuma, wondering if he was okay with that. He grinned from ear to ear.

"I don't mind. It's not so far that I'll never be able to see it, and I have documentation. Really, I couldn't have asked for a better environment for it to have ended up in. The new owner even told me I could come visit any time I liked. I got in touch with him through Mr. Itou, and it turns out he was rather close to my grandpa, too, so we had a lot of fun talking about old memories."

I started doing the math in my mind. The client, Mr. Itou, put in thirty million,

and Mr. Azuma provided another ten, but that was only forty million all together. The winning bid was forty-five million. Where did the remaining five million come from? Did Mr. Itou's client increase his budget? That was right… he'd said something like that in the taxi.

"You don't see people like that often these days. I mean, even if he owns an art museum, thirty million is a huge amount of money. And then to add another five on top…"

"Oh, no, the final amount he provided was thirty million, but—"

Mr. Itou abruptly shut his mouth. I wondered why? Had he said something he shouldn't have?

The art museum guy's thirty million plus Mr. Azuma's ten million was still five million short. *Don't tell me I'm the only person in this group who can do basic math? And that a simple addition error is going to unleash the full fury of the seven hells?*

I glanced over at Richard, who sat next to me, looking for an answer. The jeweler, who was languidly leaning on the table, nodded at me.

"You're concerned that it's five million short, I'm guessing?"

I nodded, and after a pregnant pause, Richard gave me a look.

"They had some additional help."

"F-from who?"

"Me."

"What?"

"I had my reasons."

So…that meant the person who put up the last five million…was Richard?

I was flabbergasted for a moment. Not only was he playing errand boy for them, but he put up his own money, too? What was that about? Did they have something on him? That couldn't be it. Both Mr. Itou and Mr. Azuma looked a little embarrassed when they looked at Richard. I must be the only one who hadn't known.

I gazed at Richard's ever-beautiful face, wondering why. For some reason, he gave in and started talking. What was he thinking? Had he really not wanted to tell me about it?

"I know it sounds absurd, but I could understand Mr. Itou's feelings on the subject. I have some complicated thoughts on the matter."

Then Richard asked me if I was familiar with the jade craze in America around the turn of the century. Why would I have known anything about that? But it didn't look like he actually wanted me to answer yes or no—he wanted me to read into the question. The turn of the century. What was happening around then? I tried to remember the description on that piece of jade's case. There had to be something on there. Like about the Qing dynasty or something. Something history related.

"I never knew there was a jade craze, but…I'm guessing there was a reason for it. Did something happen in China around then?"

"Bravo. Exactly. Political instability and Western intervention led to the weakening of the Qing Dynasty, and greedy foreign merchants took full advantage."

American merchants acquired large quantities of high-quality jade for extremely low prices to sell as a novel gemstone in their home country. The story Richard told was one that had happened all over the world. Even I knew that many pieces of art met the same fate of being exported from their place of origin and that many of them were effectively lost as a result. But one rare exception was the Buddha's Hand Citron.

"Of course, it's not at all unusual for pieces of art to disappear. There are even structures in place to help prevent that, but things like war and terrorism make stories such as this unsettlingly common. Is it really so strange that I, being someone involved in the world of gems, wouldn't want to see that piece of jade fall victim to that fate any more than it already has?"

"But even if that awful old man won, it's not like something bad would definitely have happened to it, right? He was just working as an agent for someone else, after all."

"Those are some interesting insinuations you're making. I would be lying if I

said it wouldn't vex me to be bested by an opponent willing to hire spies to determine my budget, but are you suggesting that Mr. Azuma isn't a deserving owner?"

"N-no, of course not. It's just—"

Richard seemed to want to end the conversation as quickly as he could, but Mr. Azuma cut in with a forced smile.

"Richard, I'm sorry for playing on your emotions like that. You see, I made him listen to my sob story."

"Sob story?"

Mr. Azuma bashfully scratched his head as he explained in more detail. Shortly after the secret alliance was formed, Mr. Itou and Mr. Azuma were discussing the jade at Shoubin Co. when Richard came by to inform them that even forty million was a little dicey. Singh Ganapati Bertuccio was a powerful fundraiser, but as Richard put it, his acting was third-rate. Based on how confident he seemed, Richard thought he could easily have a budget over forty million.

Mr. Azuma had been feeling more positive about their prospects until he heard this. His mood tanked all at once, and apparently, despite being a grown man, he started crying. It wasn't even the jade itself that he was grieving but the thought that he could forever lose the one connection he had to his grandfather, who had always been so kind to him. That thought hit him all of a sudden, and he just felt utterly worthless.

And then once Mr. Azuma calmed down, Richard broached the idea himself.

"Of course, this isn't charity on my part. I expect my investment to be repaid in full in the future."

Richard looked at me as if to ask, "Do you have a problem with that?" Mr. Azuma eagerly responded that he would absolutely pay him back soon. At least they had a plan.

All right, then. I decided not to probe any further, even though I knew that wasn't the kind of money you plopped down just because you were moved by someone else's tears. Our earlier conversation had given me the sense that

Richard wasn't exactly raised wanting for money. And I didn't think that little history tangent was just an excuse to hide his embarrassment.

Richard must've really had some feelings about the matter, whatever those feelings were.

I thought back to what he'd told me in Shiseido Parlor about his inheritance. If I remembered correctly, the whole mess had started with his great-grandfather's inheritance. Maybe, even though their nationalities and specific backgrounds were different, he felt some kind of kinship with Mr. Azuma and wanted to assist. It wasn't a crazy thought—though I did think there was a limit to such things, too.

Just as our conversation was winding down, one of the people from the auction house called Mr. Itou over. They seemed to know each other. At his behest, we waited in the first-floor parlor, and he brought in the jade. It was the first time I'd seen it outside the glass. It looked almost soft and slimy, but it definitely wasn't emerald.

Mr. Azuma spoke to me when he noticed how entranced I was. "Would you like to hold it?"

"…Are you sure?"

"As long as you're careful," he said.

Of course I would be. The jade felt slightly cool to the touch when it was moved from its soft, purple cloth to my hands. There was a simple charm to the small hand. It would have made a nice piece of decor, but there also was something strangely soothing about stroking its surface like this.

My fingers stopped abruptly at the strange protrusion sticking out by the wrist. Right, I never did figure out what that was supposed to be.

"Is this supposed to be…leaves?"

"It's a bat."

"A bat? Why?"

"Bats have been considered a sign of good fortune since ancient times in China."

Mr. Azuma explained with a smile that you'd find lots of souvenirs with bat designs on them if you ever visited China. Maybe that was what Singh was referencing when he stormed off, after asking where Richard's luck was coming from.

Having witnessed the auction myself, I was scared to hold it for too long. I carefully handed it back after about ten seconds.

When I set the jade carving in Mr. Azuma's hands, he let out a long sigh and stroked it.

"I bet Grandpa is smiling down on us. He probably never would have thought his grandson would have had to buy back part of his collection."

Richard glared at me when I asked Mr. Azuma if there was no will. Maybe that was crossing a line. But Mr. Azuma just shook his head.

"No, he was the kind of person who felt like both his collection and assets should end up in the hands of the people who wanted them. I think he probably just thought of himself as a temporary stop for the many masterpieces he owned," Mr. Azuma stroked the jade as he spoke. He handled it as gently as a small child.

A mysterious scene suddenly popped into my mind. It was a similar setting to…I think it was part of a double feature I'd seen last year at the movies, about a small child becoming head of the Forbidden City. Not an actual scene from the movie, but something similar. I imagined an old man and his grandchild wearing ancient costumes in such a setting, gazing at the jade hand. The old man was explaining to his grandchild that bats are symbols of good fortune. Surely, over a hundred years ago, people speaking different languages and living in a totally different world had also poured their love into this very piece of jade.

And I was pretty sure there would be people a hundred years in the future doing the same.

Both Mr. Itou and Mr. Azuma politely thanked Richard until we left. When the taxi came to pick us up, he called me, his bag boy, over and got into the back of the taxi. I got in next to him. Richard told the driver to head to Takadanobaba Station, so I guess he was dropping me off first. His "formal" face had relaxed a bit.

“Good work.”

“You did quite a good job yourself, too.”

“…Are you really okay?”

“What makes you ask that?”

“You’ve just seemed kinda tired lately.”

Richard loosened his collar and stared at me for a bit like I’d said something in a language he didn’t understand. His eyes were rhetorically asking, “In what way do I look *tired*?” But I didn’t flinch. I’d had my fill of Richard’s face when he was in a good mood. When I remained undaunted and wouldn’t turn away, his gaze shifted around aimlessly, like I’d spoiled his fun.

“May I ask what you base that on?”

I started scratching my neck, as if I was breaking out in hives. Just the fact that I’d made him look upset was enough to make me spill my guts.

“Have you ever felt compelled to do something nice for someone else?”

“…Pardon?”

“You know, like do you ever get an urge to just do something nice for someone for no particular reason? Sorry for making this all about feelings.”

Richard thought for a moment before saying that he probably had at some point. I’d thought as much.

“Well, I have, too.”

“Have you now?”

“Whenever I’m feeling really exhausted, or when I’m in a bad mood, I just wanna do something nice for anyone I run into.”

“So this is how you deal with stress.”

“Maybe. Also, like…I think when I get a thank-you from someone, it makes me feel like I’ve been at least a little useful to someone else. I guess when I start craving that feeling, it makes me want to be kind to others.”

I honestly didn’t think it was the greatest impulse, myself, but I was ready to

die on the hill that it was better than the reverse. That said, if you took it too far, a small kindness could end in being told to mind your business, getting yelled at, and forever carrying the hurt of that in your heart. But, well, that was more a me problem.

Richard, on the other hand, is so much more level-headed than me, so I'm sure he's better at this sort of thing, too.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to make things weird. Just pretend I didn't say anything —"

"I'm tired of pretending you didn't say things. Then next time you're feeling exhausted, you should come see me."

"Huh?"

The driver asked us where to next, but no one answered. Richard just stared at me in the stifling atmosphere of the cab.

"You said that when you're feeling exhausted you want to be nice to someone, anyone, right? Well, isn't that just perfect? You can make me a great deal of pudding."

"Y-you like it that much?"

"I'm not inclined to be frugal with my praise of delicious things. Perhaps it's not too dissimilar to your inability to conceal your admiration for beautiful things. If you feel the need to do something nice for someone, I'd be more than happy to assist you in that endeavor."

When Richard smiled after saying that, I felt like time had stopped.

Suddenly, memories of the spring trip we'd taken on the Shinkansen flashed through my mind. I had only just met Richard back then. I remembered feeling like time had stopped when he smiled at me from the seat next to me then, too.

"……"

Just what was it about his smile? I saw it nearly every week. All this sweets-lover ever did was smile. I didn't think I'd react this way to it anymore, but, alas, I was up against a man of impossible beauty.

As I remained struck dumb and trying desperately not to have a heart attack,

the smile fell from Richard's face. He let out a frustrated sigh.

"You're doing it again. How long is it going to take for you to get used to looking at me?"

"It doesn't matter how used to you I am. I was just spooked by how beautiful you looked."

"Like I'm some kind of spirit, huh? Don't you ever tire of it?"

"Have you ever felt tired of seeing the sky light up at sunrise or the sun setting over the ocean?"

Richard let out a very curt "Ridiculous," but his tone didn't sound particularly upset.

It was about five in the afternoon when I got out of the taxi at the station. I decided to take a little detour on my way home—just a little one. I transferred from the JR line and rode the Odakyu line for thirty minutes and change. I hadn't dropped by my mom's house in ages. It was just as small as it ever was, and there was hardly anything in the fridge, but there was just enough to make some kind of vegetable stir-fry.

When my mother Hiromi got home around seven, she looked completely shocked to see me.

"Oh, my goodness, Seigi, you scared me. What are you doing here?"

"Don't act like your own son is a spirit or something. I just thought I'd stop by, since it'd been a while."

"Aren't you tired? Are you doing all right? You should have at least texted me."

"I just forgot. Sorry. My bad."

I took off my apron and hung it back up on the kitchen wall as I told Hiromi that I'd started a new part-time job that spring. I tried to make it sound like I'd only just remembered to mention it. I knew I'd taken my sweet time telling her, but we weren't exactly close enough to tell each other every little detail of our lives, anyway.

Hiromi let out an indifferent "huh." I had her ear, even though I didn't have

the rest of her attention.

“It’s not a dangerous job, is it?”

“Nope. You’re probably not going to believe this, but I’m working with gemstones.”

“What? That can’t be real. Who would let a total amateur lay hands on something they could damage or steal like that? I’ve never heard of a jewelry shop that just hires random part-timers.”

I knew she’d be like this. It wasn’t why I’d kept it from her—it was just that I’d already delayed so long in saying anything that explaining was going to be a pain. But for some reason, I felt ready to handle that pain today.

I gave her the rundown about how I saved someone on my way home from my job at the TV station, everything that happened with Grandma’s ring, and how I was offered the job. After she finished taking off her makeup, Hiromi took two portions of rice out of the freezer and defrosted them. She kept saying, “Richard, huh?” the whole time. It felt kinda strange.

“So you think you can trust this guy?”

“Yeah. Absolutely.”

“Huh.”

Hiromi was still interested to hear more, so I told her a bit about Richard, the handsome Emperor of Sweets. I didn’t feel like mentioning that he was also a man of many mysteries. Despite not really having any point of reference for what to expect or how to behave when working at a shop that was just one boss and one part-timer, I thought things were going well with Richard. I told her that he treated me to meals sometimes and that I would repay him by making him her pudding recipe, and she let out a deep sigh.

“…There really are all sorts of people in the world, aren’t there? Why don’t you bring him home with you sometime? It sounds like he’d enjoy some home cooking.”

“You think so?”

“I mean, think about it. Why do you think someone who’s always drowning in

fancy desserts is so impressed by the pudding some total amateur like you makes? He must be lacking something in his life."

"Hey, I'm not a *total* amateur. I've been honing my skills."

"For him?"

I was about to deny it, but I realized I wasn't really in any position to. I guess that was the reason. No, it definitely was. Richard was so good at giving compliments that it made pleasing him feel extremely worthwhile.

Hiromi lowered her voice just a little.

"…You know, I never wanted to be the kind of parent who would try to criticize my son's preferences, but don't the two of you face a lot of obstacles? How do you deal with all that?"

"No, hold on, you're getting way ahead of yourself."

"Am I? I thought you said you were dating."

"Oh, come on."

I explained the situation, and Hiromi looked even more amazed. She just stared at me right in the eye.

"You really don't have anything better to do, do you?"

"I don't understand why you jumped to that conclusion."

"I mean, you didn't make pudding for your boss at the TV station, did you?"

Now that she mentioned it… No, look, it was just that I was a nobody working the graveyard shift at the station. It was a totally different atmosphere from working at Étranger, serving tea and stuff. It was definitely different! But also, Richard was completely different from any other person I'd ever met before. No one even came close. No normal boss would have waited for me in front of the station for five whole hours without even being asked to, like Richard had.

I explained that he was a great guy and I wanted to repay him somehow, but Hiromi just put her fingers in her ears. She was done listening.

"All right, all right, maybe that's how it seems to you. But he might not see it that way. You've always had a tendency to get too invested in things no one

asked you to, without really thinking about it, and end up hurting people. You don't even realize you're doing it."

"Well, clearly that's something I get from you."

"What? This is how you treat someone when they're trying to be considerate? What, you're leaving already? You could stay the night."

"I'm heading back after I eat."

I downed the oyster sauce vegetable stir-fry I'd made, along with the rice Hiromi had defrosted, three times faster than she had, cleared my plate, and put my shoes back on by the front door.

"Seigi, if you're leaving at least take some rice with you. You look like you've lost some weight since the last time I saw you."

"I haven't. I'm leaving. Make sure you don't forget to eat, Hiromi."

"As if I ever would. Don't you forget to text."

"Okaaaay."

I half-heartedly said goodbye and left.

I was pretty sure I had Richard to thank for the fact that I could talk to Hiromi like this. I was grateful for that. I think it'd be a step too far to say that handling the jade Buddha's Hand Citron had made me long for family bonds or something, but gemstones really did have the power to make people feel things. Richard seemed to have a way of offering that power to his clients in a form that was easy to comprehend. And sometimes, the power would be so great that there would be some left over, and he would give it to me. That's why I felt so much gratitude toward him. I thought of him almost like an older brother. I guess I *had* gotten attached to him.

It made me wonder if that was causing Richard trouble, though.

As I got onto the Odakyu line, I sent off a text out of curiosity. But not to Hiromi. To Richard.

"Do you always stay at that hotel?"

I got a response five minutes later.

“No.”

That was it. No follow-up. That was the normal amount of distance in our relationship. Hiromi was worried for nothing. As they said, “a hedge between keeps friendships green.” You needed boundaries, even among friends. Even if I had wanted more, he wouldn’t have given me an answer.

I guess she did have a point about the fact that we really didn’t feel like boss and employee. But when I tried to think of a way to describe what exactly it was that we had, I couldn’t find the words.

When I arrived in Shinjuku, the city was lit up so bright, it was like night and day, compared to my home town of Machida. This was the quintessential Tokyo view. Richard was somewhere in this city, too. And that was enough for now. That was enough for me.

When I heard that the Buddha’s Hand Citron would be going on display at a certain art gallery in the city, but that it wouldn’t be happening for another six months, I was actually shocked at how weirdly disappointed I felt. Maybe it was just because so much had happened in such a short period of time.

case 4 Angelic Aquamarine

I ALWAYS THOUGHT it was weird when I visited my friends' houses as a kid. I always wondered where their mineral specimens were," Tanimoto said with a faintly bashful smile.

The white lounge table we were sitting at seated six, but she and I were the only ones there, sitting across from each other. It felt like we were off in our own little universe. I felt so dizzy and numb. Normally, just being around her would have me walking on air, but in that moment my body felt heavy, like it was made of stone.

"So, like, I was praised for knowing so much about rocks ever since I was little, but I always felt a little weird about it, about being praised for doing something that felt as natural to me as breathing. Especially when my parents knew so much more than I could ever hope to. It sounds ridiculous talking about it now, though. But maybe I've always had trouble figuring out what I do know and what I don't know. And maybe that's why everyone still says I'm kind of childish. And, hmm, maybe because I've never done the whole romance thing, either. Like, the idea of going out with a guy has always kind of, I don't know, like…I just don't know if it's just that I don't know anything about it or what. I just don't know."

"Oh, uh…y-yeah, I guess…"

"Ah ha ha! You're so mean, Seigi. But, yeah, that's basically the idea."

"Huh? S-sorry. D-did I say something weird?"

"No, you didn't. Are you sure *you're* okay? You really don't look like you're feeling well right now."

"Of course I'm okay! I'm in perfect health! Hah, ha ha…"

"Are you sure?"

The owner of those big black eyes peered at me, full of concern, for a few moments before looking at the slender metal-banded watch on her wrist and letting out a little "Ah!"

"…Short on time?"

“Yeah. I’m so bad at this. You were nice enough to keep me company while I was waiting, but I’m still all nervous.”

“……”

Before I could respond, Tanimoto got up, pushed her squeaky white chair back in, and smiled at me like a flower in full bloom. It was three in the afternoon on a Friday. Neither of us had any classes left. We’d gone to that café in Shinjuku together around this time before, too. The cake there was delicious.

“Well, I’m off to meet a prospective husband!” My angel said and waved to me as she left the lounge.

“Kill me. Just kill me now, I beg of you!”

“Practicing for another period drama?”

I was sitting in one of the red lounge chairs in Étranger on a Saturday, flopped over with my cheek against the glass coffee table. I was sure Richard had the most displeased expression he could muster on his face, because I was surely going to leave a big smudge on the table. *I’m gonna clean it up. I’ll clean it up when I’m done, so just let me wallow in self-pity for a bit.* I finally understood how people feel when they say, “Just kill me already.”

“Her parents set her up with a guy so she can find a husband…Tanimoto’s family seems really close, too… It’s basically a done deal… It’s the twenty-first century…do people really still do that sort of thing? I guess they must, since it’s happening. Ughhh…”

“I’m not taking responsibility for you upsetting yourself.”

“I know that!”

I knew this wasn’t appropriate workplace behavior, but despite being this down in the dumps, I’d still cleaned the shop and made the royal milk tea. So surely, I’d stopped short of the worst behavior possible.

Richard was pretty much the only person I could talk to about her. I did want to fess up to some of my college buddies, but there were some I knew I couldn’t —if I asked them for advice, I just knew they’d laugh at me, asking if I was an

elementary schooler with a crush. When college students talk about their love lives over drinks, no one's talking about who they *want* to date. They talk about how things went when they went out with someone. I don't understand it myself, but everyone else seems to be very direct about this sort of thing. How could everyone else just make up their mind and tell someone they liked them? Everyone else but me.

Sitting on the glass coffee table wasn't milk tea but a deep blue velvet box.

Inside it was a loose piece of aquamarine. It was cut into a faceted pear shape, but the first time I saw it, I didn't think of a pear but rather a water drop. It didn't belong to the shop; it belonged to me. I'd bought it a while back and begged Richard to let me keep it in the safe. Richard had brought it out the moment I started talking about her without my having to ask.

If you want to know why I bought it, it all went back to an anecdote Richard had told a client about it about a month ago. Because of the stone's gentle blue color that's evocative of water, it had been used as a protective charm by sailors since ancient times. It was a beryl, just like emerald, but because it had a fairly stable supply, it was on the less expensive side as far as gemstones went. There was a huge deposit in Brazil. And the best part was its other name:

Angel stone.

What aquamarine had to do with angels apparently derived from the stone's meaning of "the promise of a better future," not so much angels in the Christian sense. That "angel" in the delicate sense brought only one person painfully to mind. My angel of rocks and minerals—Tanimoto. White was her favorite color. I had fallen in love with her at first sight this spring, and my feelings still hadn't changed now that autumn had just begun.

But thinking about it now, I was pretty sure I'd just gotten myself really worked up over a one-sided crush.

"Ugh…"

"Ridiculous. If you have enough time to be sitting around, flipping through your mental photo album and groaning about it, you could just call her. I'll give you five minutes."

“Call her and then what?!”

“You figure that out. How stupid are you?”

“You’re being so mean to me today…”

Richard didn’t respond. I was so preoccupied with my own problems that I just wanted some distracting small talk, but Richard was being really harsh. Really, it was kind of weird. The normal thing for him to have been doing was telling me to get my act together because I’m at work, but he was following everything I was saying even if he wasn’t being very nice about it.

They say when someone’s more panicked than you during an emergency situation, the thing you should do is take a step back and try to calm down. This probably wasn’t the exact same thing, but when I suddenly pulled myself together and started acting professional, Richard returned to his usual Richard the Jeweler self. Maybe it was just his way of showing concern because he was such a great guy. Though, admittedly, this didn’t feel quite like that.

I remember the one thing he said when he offered me this job that worried me. It was when I asked him why he didn’t hire a woman instead, since it was more common to see women working at jewelry stores. As I recall, his answer was that he would “prefer not to be alone with members of the opposite sex” for personal reasons.

Back then, I had just assumed that something annoying would probably happen if someone found themselves alone with someone as handsome as him every week and that it only made sense for Richard to be worried about it—but maybe that’s not what it was at all. Maybe he didn’t want to hire a woman for some other reason.

Richard rolled his eyes, annoyed. I’d probably been staring at him too much.

“Is the answer to your romantic troubles written on my face or something?”

“……”

I think he would have probably dodged the question with his usual “We’d be here until morning,” if I’d asked. But what if I tried now? Maybe I should ask him what he meant by that.

Richard forced an awkward smile when I kept staring at him despite his scolding.

“I believe it was Machiavelli who said, ‘It is better to act and repent than not to act and regret.’”

“…I know that, okay.”

Richard wasn’t who I should have been thinking about anyway. I was just trying to distract myself.

I shifted my gaze, and my eyes ended up settling on the box with the aquamarine in it. I felt like it might have some answer for me—but obviously, it was just a box.

I took the opportunity to open it up. The stone was beautiful. Every time I looked at it, I remembered why it reminded me of Tanimoto. The way it sparkled, the way it looked like a clear drop of water—it was all just like her.

I snapped the box closed. When was it that I decided I’d be satisfied just watching her from afar? Humans aren’t stones. They’re alive and they have legs, so they can walk away and never be seen again.

After I freaked out as much as my brain would allow, I got up from the lounge. Richard looked like he was about to say something.

“What?”

If he was going to offer me more quotes from European historical figures, I’d already had my fill. When I turned to look at him, Richard vanished into the back room, asking only for another cup of tea. Things felt awkward. I went into the kitchen and reorganized the contents of the fridge and my mind. Just when I was considering asking him about it again, our next customer arrived for their appointment. Even I had to admit that the way I’d been behaving was embarrassing.

I didn’t feel like taking the aquamarine home with me, so I had Richard put it back in the safe again. I didn’t really want to think about it, but maybe I could return it. I probably could. But even if I did return it and recover the amount I’d so excitedly spent on it, it would only make me feel depressed.

I didn’t think there was anything I could possibly do to rid myself of this feeling, so I decided to go straight home, get a shower, and go to bed. I dreamt of Tanimoto. She smiled at me so beautifully as she walked away.

There are some things you just couldn’t change, even with your best attempts to get to the root of a problem. Lots of them, even. Like world peace or eliminating crime. The problem with that sort of thing is that for as much as you know you’re not going to solve it, sometimes you just can’t help ruminating on it. I figured, if I was going to sit around worrying about things, I’d be better off doing something else to take my mind off it—like taking a walk around the part of town where young people hang out. Even if it meant being surrounded by couples.

I was wandering around Ginza on a Sunday afternoon after work, feeling deep resentment toward the world and everyone in it, when I spotted an unusual person through a café window. It had been so long I thought I had to be mistaken, but I was sure after a second look.

It was Mr. Homura.

It was at the end of spring this year, just after I’d started working for Richard. He, the son of the owner of a large trading company in Marunouchi, had been embroiled in a big scandal relating to gemstones. I didn’t think I’d ever be able to forget the faces of the people I ran all over Tokyo with during that incident. I had a feeling the same was true for him. Oh, yeah, his company’s name came up during the thing with the emeralds at the ballet, too.

I walked up to the glass, thinking I should say hi to him, but then I froze.

He was sitting at a table for two, and in the seat next to him was none other than—

—Tanimoto.

Why? What were they doing together? I mean, sure they were both into rocks, even if they liked slightly different genres. She mineral specimens and he gemstones, but—

Oh. I get it.

Was he Tanimoto's "prospective husband"?

An office worker bumped into me from behind as I stood there, unnaturally in the middle of the sidewalk. We both bowed and apologized to each other. Apparently, I had caused enough of a scene that someone on the other side of the glass noticed me. Our eyes met. Mr. Homura looked surprised and then smiled cheerfully. He excused himself from the table and got up, coming out of the café to meet me. Tanimoto probably couldn't see me from the angle she was sitting at.

"It's you, isn't it? Seigi Nakata? Takashi Homura. It's been ages."

"…Hey."

"I heard about the thing with Kataura Ballet Company. What a shock that was. Maybe Richard should give up jewelry and become a detective—you don't look so good. Are you okay?"

"Oh, uh, no, I-I'm fine."

I tacked on that I was kind of in a hurry, and he just smiled. He really was a friendly, good-natured man. If Richard was an arch of roses, Mr. Homura was a spray of plum blossoms—he had a sort of gentle brilliance to him. He was a polite businessman in his late twenties, and he'd just had his heart broken earlier this year. It was probably all my fault, too. I couldn't even generously say that the situation had been resolved particularly cleanly, but I still think it could have been worse. Mr. Homura was probably the worst off in the end, but after that whole affair he'd apparently become a good client for Richard, but he never came back to the shop in Ginza. I couldn't really blame him. Who would want to go back to the place where they got their heart torn out and stomped on anyway?

"Um, Mr. Homura…"

"Yes, how can I help you?"

He looked at me with a courteous businessman's smile. It was almost like he was looking at me like a child. This man had a job and earned money every day. He had a pension to pay into and filed a tax return every year, and he probably talked about managing the company with his old man, the president, too.

“Uh… Um, no, actually, never mind. Sorry for bothering you.”

“Are you sure? I take it you’re curious about my date. I think you’re already acquainted with Shouko.”

“Huh?”

Shouko? I mean, I knew her full name was Shouko Tanimoto, but—I’m getting distracted. Why did he know that we knew each other? I made a face like a pigeon that had just been shot with a BB gun, and Mr. Homura explained.

“She told me about you. She said you were one of her college friends. I was so surprised when she mentioned it. I used to see her a lot back when she was just starting grade school, so her mentioning that made it hit me that, wow, she’s a college student the same age as you. Oh, that’s right—she was there when I first met you. But it had been so long since we’d last seen each other, I didn’t realize it was her. That’ll make for a funny story.”

“Yeah…”

“She told me she was happy she had a friend she could talk to about this whole matchmaking thing. She’s usually so shy, I started to worry a bit when she told me that, but now that I know it was you, that puts my heart at ease. You really are a nice guy.”

I felt a sudden rush of irrational anger bubble up from the pit of my stomach. I clenched my fists. I knew what it was. It was jealousy. Even though being jealous wasn’t going to change anything. They had been close before I’d even met her, so it was only natural that had seen sides of her that I wasn’t privy to.

“Do you think it sounds almost criminal? Because of our age difference?”

“No…I don’t think it’s that bad…”

“Ah ha ha ha! Well, I’m sure you have some opinion. Lemme guess, you think it’s a little too pragmatic to be back on the market only six months after getting my heart broken?”

“Um, are you trying to bully me…?”

“Of course not. Sorry for bothering you when you’re in a rush. I’d invite you to join me for some tea if she weren’t with me.”

Which meant that this meeting wasn't one anyone else was invited to, not even a mutual friend. I mean, of course it was. The whole point was to find that someone special, after all.

"I was just a little surprised to hear about it is all… You don't hear a lot of college students talking about getting set up with a spouse by their parents, you know."

"Yeah, I agree actually. I know how it sounds, but really this is all very early stages—it's not like you immediately get married once you're matched with someone. But her parents are on board, and I have always thought of her like my adorable little sister."

"But is *Tanimoto* on board with it?"

I opened my mouth without thinking. He was a little taken aback. But that was the one question I really wanted answered. I mean, Tanimoto was working so hard to get her teaching license. And I'd never seen her talking to her friends about romance. She only had eyes for stones.

I never would have imagined she'd want to get married as soon as possible.

Mr. Homura smiled at me.

"Yes. At least I think she is. I mean, she's the one who invited *me* out today, after all."

I felt like a heavy axe had just cracked me over the head. I wished someone would do that to me for real. I didn't want my head to be connected to my body anymore. It just wouldn't stop *thinking*.

Mr. Homura apologized for keeping me, and I bowed to him politely before leaving, trying to angle my departure in such a way that Tanimoto couldn't see me. I was sure there was a convenience store near the subway station. I wanted to go buy some water or something and drink it. My throat was so dry, I couldn't stand it.

I found myself unconsciously eyeing Chuo-douri.

It was beyond obvious, but there was no green Jaguar to be found. It was a pedestrian zone, after all. I guess I'd become quite a coward in the last six

months…probably because Richard always swept in to save me at the perfect moment.

It was all just too much. Even though Grandma had always told me, ever since I was little, that you had to face the really important stuff alone when it came down to it…I began to cry.

Today wasn't Friday afternoon. It was Monday afternoon. And it wasn't three in the afternoon but six, and it was starting to get dark just outside my university's central library. I felt awful for calling her out here at such a weird time, and I didn't even have a good excuse for it, but Tanimoto said she'd come regardless. I knew Mondays were always packed with teaching classes starting early in the morning for her, but she seemed to be in a good mood today, despite all that. The little café attached to the library had already closed for the day, so we'd gone to the café across from it. Tanimoto ordered an iced tea, not her favorite, cream soda. I asked for the same thing.

"So, um…I ran into Mr. Homura the other day."

"Oh, yeah, that's right, you know him, don't you? I was with you when you met him this spring. I was so shocked when he told me I was with you when he met you. I don't remember it at all."

"I think it was related to the thing with the ruby," I said before explaining a bit more. Tanimoto smiled and nodded. "Riiight." I guess she remembered the gemstone. Typical Tanimoto.

"That's right… I remember now… But you know, he keeps acting like I'm the only one who's grown up since we last saw each other, but he's become like a totally different person in the past ten years, too."

Her expression looked sullen today. Tanimoto was a dazzling girl with a lot of sides to her—there was her cheerful, adorable, angelic personality, and then there was the way she'd transform into suave Golgo-mode when she started talking about stones—but I'd never seen her make this face before. It wasn't awkwardness or shyness, either.

It was like she'd given up.

“Tanimoto, do you…*want*…to marry Mr. Homura?”

It was possible to be *too* direct. The little guy in my head was screaming at me to start with small talk about the weather or make a slower, more methodical approach, but listening to that idiot was what got me into this situation in the first place. So, my only option now was to just follow my gut. Otherwise, I’d be forever frustrated with my own cowardice.

Tanimoto looked a little puzzled at first, but maybe I’d just been tormenting myself about this so much, I had a terrifying look on my face—the kind of face you definitely wouldn’t want to catch a glimpse of in the mirror in the bathroom—but she didn’t look even a little suspicious. She just quietly thought about it.

After my raven-haired angel struggled for a bit to find the words, she laughed. She looked so exhausted for some reason. It was almost like she had dropped her angelic mask. Like it had a been heavy burden that she’d been lugging around.

“You know, I’ve never even talked to my female friends about this before, so I dunno if I should be bringing it up with you at all, Seigi.”

“……”

“This might get a little long,” she prefaced and then flashed me a smile like she was trying to cover for something. I had no idea what she was about to tell me. “I don’t understand love.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve been on this Earth for twenty years now, but stuff like love and romance and dating just…none of it makes any sense to me at all. Not men or women. To me, it all just feels like something that happens on TV. It’s not even that I’m not interested in it; it’s more like…like I can’t even imagine it having anything to do with me in the first place.”

Tanimoto wasn’t telling me that she had never been in love but that she couldn’t even imagine herself being in love.

“You asked me if I want to marry Homura. The thing is, I might not understand what love is, but I do want to get married. But I don’t really care who I get married to. If women who scheme to get a man for selfish reasons are

bitches, then I'm a prime example."

Did she mean she wanted to marry Mr. Homura for his money? So many thoughts were spinning around in my head, my brain felt like it'd gone through a blender. Bitch? What did she mean by that? My angel, a bitch?

"I don't think there's anything wrong with being single your whole life. Even my parents said they'd be okay with that, too, but I don't know how many times I've had people I thought were my friends tell me they're in love with me and want me to go out with them. It's always really painful. I don't understand love. I always have to distance myself from them when that happens…but if I get married, I could just say, 'Sorry, I'm married, so I can't go out with you,' you know? That's what I've always wanted, and that's why I want to hurry up and get married."

For just a moment, she smiled, but it wasn't her usual airy smile. It was a smile full of shame—like she was smiling about something she felt she shouldn't. *So she wants to get married because she doesn't want to deal with romance?*

"I don't think it's all bad. Plus, it's not like we'd actually get married right away. Homura said he'd wait until I graduated and that he wouldn't mind if I worked as a teacher for a while. Who knows. If I started living alone in the future instead, I might do nothing but think about stones all day and even forget to eat. I'm so bad at cooking. You cook for yourself, don't you, Seigi? That's so incredible."

I was confident in my cooking skills. I think my mother leaving me home alone so much since I was little set me on the right track there. No matter how many cooking classes that heir to a company in Marunouchi may have taken, I know for sure that he could never make a better oyster sauce vegetable stir-fry than me. I felt like crying. Why did I keep thinking about all this stupid, pointless stuff? Especially now. Why now?

"I'm so sorry, Seigi, I didn't mean to upset you by dumping all this on you out of nowhere. I'm really sorry."

"Y-you didn't upset me! I guess I'm just a little surprised that you'd wanna get married to someone you don't particularly like is all."

“Oh, I like Homura. He’s always looked after me ever since I was little—almost like a big brother. I like him because I know he’s a good person. My parents like him, too. But even if you try to tell me that there’s another kind of ‘like’ I could be feeling, I wouldn’t understand it at all.”

“…Is that the reason you decided you’d be okay marrying him?”

“I guess. But I have other reasons, too. Homura’s always felt like he needs to get married someday, so he’s been looking for a spouse, as well. We’re both kinda in the same boat. I’m sure we’d be on the same page about getting married even if we’re not in love, too. Apparently, he really got his heart broken this spring, so I’d be happy if I could help cheer him up a little.”

I tried to organize my thoughts bit by bit. Marriage, to Tanimoto, wasn’t something that came out of love. It was just a means to permanently avoid love and romance. And she also said that she thought Mr. Homura wasn’t really looking for love and romance, either. I knew he’d gotten his heart smashed to bits after falling deeply in love with someone, but I guess he still needed a wife. For some reason. Maybe his parents were pressuring him? Or to keep up appearances? No, enough about that. All that mattered was that Tanimoto said she and Mr. Homura were of the same mind on that topic. I supposed this was a happy ending?

I may not have been the person saying I didn’t understand love, but I sure didn’t understand whatever it was I was feeling in that moment. Was it disappointment? No, that wasn’t it. Was I angry? Not even possible. I think I was just so surprised, I couldn’t even wrap my head around it. There was a small silver lining in that Tanimoto felt comfortable enough to open up to me about something so sensitive that she’d never talked to anyone else about before.

I didn’t say anything. I just smiled a little. Richard would make this face sometimes. It was the face he’d make when a customer had talked for a while and clearly still had way more that they wanted to say. It’d always put them in a good mood, and they’d keep talking.

Tanimoto started talking again, too. She didn’t exactly look like she was in a *good* mood, but she did look a little less run-down than she had earlier.

“Seigi, do you know why gemstones come in so many different colors? Maybe you remember doing the flame test in junior-high chemistry. Well, in much the same way, gemstones contain trace amounts of metal ions that produce all those beautiful colors. There are all sorts of varieties of beryl, but I guess emerald’s the one everyone always thinks of. It gets its green from chromium and vanadium, while aquamarine’s blue comes from iron.”

“…Oh, yeah, that’s right. Emerald and aquamarine are the same mineral.”

“I had a feeling you’d know that, my fellow rockhound. But yeah, they’re both kinds of beryl. Beryls are all beryllium aluminum silicates, so in the mineral world, they aren’t treated all that differently. But I imagine they’re all pretty different from a gemstone perspective.”

I could talk about this stuff all day. Tanimoto loved stones, and thanks to Richard, I’d gotten to see all sorts of them. At some point, stones had just become our go-to topic of conversation. It made me happy, because it felt more special to me than chatting about TV or the weather. But if I ever told her I was happy that talking to her about this sort of thing had let me get closer to her, she’d probably pull away.

Tanimoto still had that tired smile on her face as she spoke.

“…You know, sometimes I feel like I’m a stone that was mistakenly put on display in a jewelry shop. Like an emerald without chromium or an aquamarine with no iron, even though neither would rightly qualify as an emerald or an aquamarine in the first place. That kind of mistake. Of course, I know there are people out there who never fall in love, but I think there’s a difference between never having something to begin with and not choosing something.” She mumbled the next bit. “That’s what makes it so frustrating.”

I didn’t say anything, because I had no idea what to say, and she smiled at me feebly.

“I’m probably just being overly self-conscious, huh? I really am the worst…”

“You are not!” I shouted reflexively.

I still didn’t know what I wanted to say at all, but her anxiety was coming through with painful clarity. And that made what I *needed* to say abundantly

clear.

“Not everyone…falls in love and gets married. There are just more of them around these days… And, like, my mother—well, that’s not what I call her. I call her Hiromi…she divorced my father because he wasn’t a very good person. Then she got remarried to this guy, Mr. Nakata, and…”

Tanimoto looked just a little surprised, but she nodded with a little “I never knew.” I wasn’t really trying to talk about my mother, though. It was a little roundabout, but I had something I wanted to convey to her.

“Now, I’ve never asked her about this, it’s just my own impression, but I think…I think Hiromi wouldn’t have gotten remarried if I hadn’t been around. I really like her new husband and respect him a lot, but he works overseas for long stretches at a time, and sometimes…sometimes I wonder if Hiromi deliberately picked someone she knew she wouldn’t have to see all that often. A lot of stuff happened to her in the past that makes me think she never really had any aspirations for a ‘family,’ as it were, but…she always worries about me…and worked so hard to raise me. I admire her, even if she pushes herself too hard sometimes…

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to drag things off topic. Anyway, my point is, I don’t think marriage always has to be the end goal of romance. Of course, people get married for all sorts of reasons. We’re all living creatures existing in their own unique and complicated circumstances. I think someone would only object to what you’re doing…”

…if they were in love with you.

I didn’t want her to get married. I wanted to tell her I loved her. I wanted to ask her to go out with me. I’d make her anything—fried rice, pudding, anything—if it’d mean she’d smile and say it was delicious. I wanted to have a special place in her heart.

But she said she didn’t understand any of that. That sort of thing scared her.

So I crushed those feelings down. The thing I was most scared of was making her scared of me.

“I think the only kind of person who would object…is the kind of person who

thinks all stones are just stones and they're all the same…"

I knew it would have been a pointless addition to tack on that I didn't think all stones were the same, so I thought what she was doing was fine. The moment I had a chance to look at her again, she was smiling sweetly. I could tell from her expression that she understood everything I was trying to say. She had the face of an angel. My angel who occasionally came to a welcome misunderstanding.

"Seigi, thank you. I'm so glad I decided to go to college. You might not remember it, but I still remember how you called me 'cool' once. That made me so happy."

"Huh? Did I say that?"

"You did! And I'll never, ever forget it. It's kind of embarrassing to admit this, but people still tell me I'm cute or pretty all the time, but isn't the underlying implication of things like that someone wondering if you're a potential romantic partner? So, I've always found words like that a little scary. But when I was talking about stones, you called me 'cool,' and that really put me at ease. I'm so glad I made friends with you, Seigi."

"…I feel like I used the word *debonair* there."

"Yeah! That! That means the same thing, right?"

"Yeah…"

"Thanks. It made me really happy."

Tanimoto looked so happy, I couldn't say another word. This was probably the face that made her friends call her pretty. I held out my hand, and she smiled from ear to ear and took it. We held hands. She squeezed my hand a few times. I'd never held her hand before. It was so soft, I wanted to cry. I pulled away almost immediately though.

"…I, uh, I'm not good with words, but, uh…I hope everything goes well."

"Thanks. I'm gonna try my best. But if you could, please don't tell Mr. Homura about any of this."

"Got it."

And on that note, we paid the bill and left the café. She said she was going to

the library to work on a paper. I just left campus. I wanted to be alone for a while, so I got on the train with no particular destination in mind within the coverage of my rail pass, but I ultimately ended up at campus again for no real reason. It felt like doing something stupid helped me calm down. As I was exiting the station, I remembered how I felt that morning, bracing to talk to Tanimoto. I'd thought I was going to tell her that I loved her. I'd wanted to ask her out. I was finally ready to do it.

But now I had prepared myself to do the exact opposite.

"I decided to support her," I declared to Richard the moment I saw him in Étranger that Saturday. My eyes were probably a little bloodshot from lack of sleep, but I bought eye drops from the pharmacy before I came and made sure to wash my face at home this morning. Richard had a grim look on his face as he read a piece of paper with Western lettering on it, but I didn't really care at that moment.

"I'm going to support Tanimoto in pursuing marriage. I think it's the right thing to do, so that's what I'm going to do."

After a few moments, Richard set the paper down.

"May I share my thoughts?"

"Go ahead."

"You're an idiot."

It was three words. A word syllable phrase that Richard had pronounced from atop his red lounge chair. There was no way I could have mistaken it for anything else—he just called me an idiot.

"What's wrong with calling an idiot what he is? Now, this is simply the meaning I have come to understand, so if I am mistaken, that would be most embarrassing, but please take it to mean 'one of feeble mind.'"

After a sudden rush of anger rushed through my chest, leaving a vacuum in its wake, my heart grew calm. I mean, he was right. Of course he was. Just thinking about how many times I'd told Richard how cute I thought Tanimoto was and

how badly I wanted to ask her out was painful. As much as I just wanted to forget it all, I couldn't exactly erase it from other people's memories.

"…Call me whatever you want. But forcing your feelings on someone else isn't love. I've made up my mind already. Life isn't a fairy tale—confessing your love to someone isn't where the story ends. Like, sure, maybe if I asked her to reconsider because I'm in love with her, something might change, but I don't wanna be insensitive enough to say that to someone who just told me that she doesn't like romance in general and wants to get married to avoid that sort of thing. It'd be like telling someone trying to escape an uncomfortable situation that they were better off suffering."

"Impressive. If this were you when we first met, you'd come straight at me with a bunch of emotional nonsense—you really have developed some rhetorical skills in the past six months."

"Yeah, I know. Who do you think made that happen? Gee, thanks!" I shouted, and Richard lowered his gaze without saying another word.

Go ahead, look at me with contempt. Call me an idiot or stupid or whatever. I love her. I know that for sure. That's why I want to do whatever I can to help her do what she thinks is best for herself. And I don't think that's me asking her to go out with me. Not at all. That's all there is to it.

I didn't know if this was a common issue, but I doubted I was the only one who'd ever been in this situation. It couldn't be that rare.

As I waited, preparing to counter whatever he would throw at me, Richard got up from the lounge. I didn't think it was actually going to come to blows, but I winced just a bit, and the man with the impossibly beautiful face smiled at me. For some odd reason, in that moment, it reminded me of Tanimoto's face.

It reminded me of her face when she smiled at me and asked me to keep it secret.

"Would you like to hear a funny story?" Richard turned to me and said.

"Once upon a time, not all that long ago, in the far-away land of England, there lived an incredibly beautiful man. As long as he could remember, people called him a prince, and no matter what he did, all anyone ever talked about

was his face—his face, his face, his face. It hung over him like a curse. About the time it had gotten to the point that he began considering ludicrous solutions like cosmetic surgery, he met someone very special."

Someone very special? My heart started pounding in a strange way. What was this story he was telling? What was he telling me about himself?

"This very special person he met during the course of his Japanese studies was a very warm yet unconventional person. This person's favorite things to say to the man who worried so over his beautiful face were that he was 'depressing' and 'surprisingly stupid for a such a smart person.' And that he was 'overly self-conscious.' It didn't take long for the man to fall in love with the person who would remind him that he only had one life, and many, many other things it would be better spent worrying about than his face. Of course, he had told himself the same things before. But never had someone told him *to his face* not to worry about it."

Richard spoke as eloquently as ever, like it was just casual small talk over tea. He may have had a face like a beautiful doll, but I could see his brow tremble from time to time. Before I had the opportunity to stop him by reminding him that he didn't need to say anything he didn't want to, Richard shot me down with a glare. What? It was like he was telling me to shut up. No, that wasn't it. He was telling me to *listen*.

"But that was where the problems started. You see, the prince didn't bear just one curse but two. He was to inherit what may as well have been the Apple of Discord from his great-grandfather. Of course, the tale of the golden apple with 'to the fairest' written on it was no more than an ancient Greek legend, but when real money is involved, it stops being a funny little story."

Inheritance. Was it something that the Indian-Italian man was involved with? I heard a little about it during the thing with Mr. Azuma, but there was more to it than that. Some of the details I could never forget—like how he had lost a relationship as a result of it.

"After a great many things had ripped through his life, passing like a storm above his head, the person he cared so deeply about said this: 'I don't think I should be with you.' When the man asked why, the reply he received was thus:

‘As much as I might not be concerned about your face, I can’t help worrying about your money. It wouldn’t bother me in the slightest if people started saying I was only with you because of your looks, but if they were to say I was doing the same but for your money, I’m not sure I would be able to deny it. My family is poor, after all. We’ve always been hurting for money, and I’ve accepted that I’ll probably struggle in the future because of it. But the thing I can’t bear is that when the time comes to weigh love and money, I think I would pick the money. I would rather end things with you than take the chance that my worst fears about myself might come to pass.’ It was an extremely noble conclusion to come to.”

With that one word, *noble*, Richard had preemptively quashed any objections I may have made. It was as if he was telling me he didn’t want me criticizing this person. It made my heart ache.

While I remained quiet, Richard took a long, slow blink and changed his tone.

“Question: If you were in that man’s position, how would you have responded?”

If someone said something like that to my face, I don’t know what I’d say. I’d probably try to laugh it off and ask if they were joking.

“I’d probably tell them not to worry about stuff like that and that we should be together forever…”

“The man tried to say as much but ultimately couldn’t bring himself to say it. You see, he felt that in respecting the other party’s wishes, he would be protecting himself also. It would have been all well and good if the inheritance had been the real reason for this person’s change of heart, but what if it was just a convenient excuse to avoid broaching some other reason for ending it? Refusing to back down and accept it in that case would only make him feel worse. And thus, he chose silence. And no one lived happily ever after. Now, what was the moral of that story? Hint: Machiavelli.”

“…What are you doing? Surely, there’s still time. You can make a phone call even from Japan. If I were that special person—”

“And were I you right now, I wouldn’t be dawdling about in this jewelry store. I’d be running to her side. How sad. You’re such a bright and charming young

man, with a talent for cooking and a mastery of inappropriate compliments, who can be caring to a fault, but I seem to be the only one who knows it. Truly, it's beyond tragic. A great loss for the world as a whole."

Despite what he was saying, it sure didn't feel like a compliment. Richard was, without a doubt, scolding me. He was scolding me while trying to lift my spirits at the same time. I wish he wouldn't do that sort of thing without warning. It made me think about my junior high graduation when the social studies teacher who always worried about me said something similar. Basically, stuff like "Don't give up when the going gets tough," and "You have a good head on your shoulders—you just struggle with follow-through." I wished people would stop saying things like that to me.

Richard probably misinterpreted the displeased look on my face. His eyebrows raised, making a neat arc across his forehead.

"You are far too inclined to choose the easy road. While I would generally agree that bringing joy to anyone is a net positive for society, I am also inclined to believe that those efforts would be best spent on people who truly matter to you. Like, for example, prioritizing the woman you hope to make your girlfriend over your boss at your part-time job. But you simply did not have the courage to take that risk. While I don't think this extends to people whose good graces you don't particularly care about, when it comes to people you desperately want not to hate you, you struggle to express your affection in a genuine way. I wouldn't go so far as to call you a coward, though. Perhaps your excellent risk management would be more commendable were you studying economics. However, continuing to spin your wheels showering sweets upon someone else to make up for your inability to express your affection to the person you most desperately want to love is a fruitless endeavor. Do you have a rebuttal?"

"…I do, but I want you to finish first. I can tell you have more you want to say."

"Very well, then. While I won't claim to have never felt grateful for your incessant comments on my appearance, it's been getting a bit excessive lately. Words like 'love' and 'beautiful' should be given to the people in your life who you'll treasure for a lifetime, not to those you simply admire for their aesthetic qualities. I will acknowledge that my appearance may be rather striking, so

perhaps I have served as the perfect outlet for the same pent-up emotions that you cannot express to the person you truly intend them for."

"That's not why I—"

"I thought you wanted me to finish. Listen," he growled almost like an animal, striking me dumb, before an icy smile appeared on his face.

"Oh, cowardly knight, you possess both wonderful ideals and the courage to enact them. Your gallant bravery to do what you think is right, no matter what anyone else thinks, is your greatest charm. But there is one person in the whole wide world that you can't seem to demonstrate that virtue to. I think you should give some deeper thought to the implications of that. That there's one woman alone with whom you can't share what makes you truly incredible. It's because you're afraid of being disappointed if you show her who you are and she doesn't like it. You're afraid because you're already well aware of the fact that letting your own emotions guide you doesn't always lead to favorable results. Is this alone not sufficient evidence that no one would be better suited to you than she is? Is drinking tea at work and telling your boss he's beautiful really that much easier than confessing how you feel to her? Of course it is.

"I don't harbor any particular aspirations of romance for you. Nor do I have any desire to become your special someone. I don't want to leave an indelible mark on your life, either. Relationships of that nature are all well and good as long as boundaries are respected, but they can come with a price. If you grow too accustomed to this manner of interaction, you will find yourself unprepared to fight when the time comes. Did any of that strike a chord?"

Fight? When would I need to *fight*? Was he saying that time was now? I had a few things I wanted to say, but Richard kept going. He was acting almost like I was a client he was trying to sell something to. But for some reason, the look in his eyes was so tender, it made me sad.

"I think you've heard quite enough, wouldn't you agree, Seigi? Now abandon your vanity and shame. Let your emotions guide you, unbind your natural disposition to meddle, and in no time at all, the people around you will find themselves walking down a path bathed in light—is that not the person you truly are? You haven't the time to hesitate forever. Especially not today."

“What’s special about today?”

Richard abruptly looked away from me when I asked.

“When I met with Mr. Homura the other day, he was in an awfully good mood because today he had a date planned at Ueno Park. You see, the National Museum of Nature and Science has the finest collection of mineral specimens in Japan. Their examples of Japan law twin quartz are especially impressive.”

“Wait, hold on. You can’t just leak a client’s personal information like that! That’s a breach of trust.”

“Excuse me, but I would never deliberately divulge information to a very specific person in particular if the person in question had not wanted me to. I am merely passing along a message.”

A message? A message from who? And for who? From Mr. Homura to me? But why? Wait, it couldn’t be.

“…Richard, are you—”

“What a baseless accusation.”

“I haven’t even said anything yet. You…you didn’t tell Mr. Homura about how I felt about Tanimoto, did you? Did you?”

“I have no idea what you’re trying to suggest, but whatever it is, your allegations are misplaced. Mr. Homura simply informed me that he ran into you rather recently. If you need something to blame, perhaps you should blame your own inability to hide your feelings.”

Did that mean in that brief encounter with him outside the café, he figured something out about me? Was he challenging me to some kind of showdown? No, he wouldn’t do that. He was probably giving me a chance. But why go to all that trouble?

I took a long hard look at Richard’s face again. Yeah, some prince you are. You love the pudding I make. Even if he didn’t divulge the personal information of his part-time employee to someone, he must’ve tried talking to him on my behalf.

“…Can I just say one thing?”

“I certainly don’t mind, but your time is running out. Make it short.”

“I know you said you don’t want to be my special someone and you don’t want to leave your mark on me, but you already *are* someone special to me, and you’ve left a mark on me that’s never going away.”

Richard smiled slightly, like he was thinking, “Why are you saying this now?” *I know.* I knew he was trying to tell me to go to Tanimoto right now. But I had things I wanted to say, too—to him.

“I’ve had so much fun since you gave me the opportunity to work with you at this store. I’m sure I’ve caused you plenty of trouble, and I’ve had plenty of unusual experiences—but I’ve been happy. Because you were there with me. Because I really like you. I’m pretty sure you know that already, though.”

“You have told me on countless occasions that you’re fond of me, but as I explained earlier, I believe your affection is misplaced.”

“You’re saying I’m using you as a substitute, right? That’s not funny. Why would I do that? Trust me, I know just how big of a coward I am. Plus, *like* and *love* can both mean a lot of different things.”

Sometimes I felt the urge to say, “I like you” instead of “Thank you.” I think it happened when I didn’t know what, specifically, to express my gratitude for. It was an almost-physical feeling that didn’t go away, like when you felt indebted to someone for a great kindness. It was the way I felt now.

Because Richard had given me so much more than pay for a weekend job.

“Thank you very much,” would be more appropriate with respect to what was written on my pay stubs. But that wasn’t where this feeling was coming from right now.

Richard had a look on his face like a parent dealing with a spoiled child. But then he turned to me and smiled. That was his winning face—it was a divine smile, perfectly beautiful from every angle, just like a brilliant diamond.

“I’m quite fond of you, too, Seigi. I’m very glad that I met you. I’ve felt that way since the moment we met, and I still feel that way now.”

“Thank you. That’s all I wanted to say. I have a stomachache, so I’m going to

have to leave early today. I'm very sorry for the trouble."

"You're not going to run away, I hope."

"I'm not running. Well, I am clocking out for the day though. But I promise I'm not running."

"…What a terribly unreliable employee I have. Give me your hand."

Was he going to shake my hand? I smiled and offered him my right hand, and Richard pulled a jewelry box from his breast pocket and set it on my palm. It was mine. My box with the aquamarine in it.

"As aquamarine is a stone closely associated with water, it has been used by sailors as a protective charm—a stone to hope for safe voyages. Our lives are often compared to voyages, but I don't think you really need to hang on to a stone like this. After all, I firmly believe that it is already quite apparent that your voyage will be a success."

"…If you're still open by the time I settle this, I'll be back as fast as I can."

"At least show her that you're mature enough to invite her to dinner."

That last piece of advice went in one ear and right out the other. I spun around and opened the front door of the shop. I didn't know how many customers would come today, but I hoped that Richard would be able to manage fine on his own. No, I didn't need to hope for that; obviously, he would. He only hired me to have someone to serve tea. He didn't need me for any of his actual work.

I ran down the stairs and paused to look up at the second floor when I got out onto the street. Richard was looking at me. I waved and shouted up to him. He looked a little startled and opened up the window. *Don't look so worried, I didn't forget anything.*

"I forgot to mention this, but I'm really glad you didn't end up getting plastic surgery! That would be like heat-treating a top-quality sapphire that didn't need it! Now *that* would be a great loss for the world for sure! I'm glad you didn't do it! So glad!"

I jumped up and down, waving my arms at Richard, fully prepared to get

reported by the people in the car showroom across the street as a suspicious person. Richard gestured at me to get going. In his hand was a white teacup with gilded edges. I hadn't made any royal milk tea today, but I guess he'd made his own batch in advance.

If I made it back before closing, I wanted a taste—surely the tea he made would be better than my own. I was sure that would go down nicely, no matter how things turned out today.

It was about ten minutes at most to get to Ueno Station from Ginza Station on the Tokyo Metro, but the walk up out of the subway was pretty long. Once I got to the turnstile in the middle of the station, I started moving as fast as I could without running until I got out of the station, and then I ran all the way to the museum. It was 10:30 a.m., so even if they'd gone right when it opened at 9 a.m., they couldn't have been in there for more than an hour and a half. And that was basically no time at all for someone that obsessed with stones. It was hard to imagine what else they might have been talking about, other than stones.

I ignored the voice in my head correcting me—*you mean you don't want to think about it*. It didn't really matter which it was. It was all ultimately the same. And either way, I'd have an answer once I got there. Unless Richard's information was fake…but I didn't even consider that possibility. If he lied to me, and Mr. Homura was at Étranger with Tanimoto looking at wedding rings right now, I'd show them a karate demo standing on my head. Richard would never do that to me, though.

It felt a little pathetic that I could be so easily persuaded out of the decision I'd kept myself up all night making. But I also felt so exhilarated, like I'd thrown off a heavy weight that had been sitting on my shoulders. This was it. This was what Richard was always saying about how stones led people in the direction they wanted to go. This was the path I actually wanted to take. And it wasn't the path of cheering her on from the sidelines. I had some reservations because it could lead directly to a path that ended in her distancing herself from me, but this was the path I chose. I was going to tell her how I felt. If I had any chance at all, I was going to take it. I wasn't going to give up.

With a 620-yen standard admission ticket clutched in my hand, I looked through the museum pamphlet to figure out where the mineral specimens were on display and started walking through the building as fast as I could. I didn't need a mirror to know what my face looked like. It definitely wasn't the face of someone wandering aimlessly around a museum. I was trembling with anxiety. The stone exhibit was apparently upstairs, so I looked for the white, Taisho-era inspired staircase and rushed up to the second floor, trying my best not to make noise. I bowed and smiled awkwardly at anyone I happened to pass. *Sorry, potentially life-changing moment about to happen.* Admittedly, it would only be life-changing to me, and all I was actually doing was interfering with a date, but still. My stomach started to ache.

My heart started readying its defenses when I caught sight of the Y-shaped Japan law twin quartz crystals on display. They weren't there. At least I didn't think they were. I didn't see them anywhere. Nothing was going to happen. I would just go back to the shop and tell Richard I didn't see them. That was probably what would happen, at least. That's probably—

"Huh? Seigi?"

It finally hit me when I heard that familiar voice from behind me.

That's not what's going to happen.

I wouldn't let it.

"Tanimoto…"

An angel in a white blouse and orangish-brown skirt came down the stairs to the landing I was standing on. I wondered why this museum had stained-glass windows in the atrium above the stairs. She really did look like an angel, bathed in that cheerful morning light. She looked so sublime, I was sure if I reached out to touch her my hand would go right through her. But she was the one who noticed me first.

"What a coincidence! Why are you here? Did you come to see something in particular? I wanted to see the meteorites."

"I, um…I wanted to talk!"

"Huh? Talk to who?"

Tanimoto looked confused for a bit before pointing to herself. “Me?”

I nodded, and someone else appeared on the stairs above. A man in a well-tailored blue shirt—it was Mr. Homura. I awkwardly greeted him with a bow, and he smiled. I was trying to act polite, but he might have seen that I was in full on battle mode from my eyes. Meanwhile, he had a polite smile on his face, but the rest of his expression was terrifying.

“I invited him, Shouko. I thought he wanted to talk.”

“Huh? Oh! I’d love to be able to talk about rocks with both of you! I’m so glad. I’ve always wanted to come here with Seigi. Seigi, have you looked at the crystal specimens over there?”

Her smile was so carefree. It was different from the way she smiled at Mr. Homura—that was more the look you’d give an older brother. How did that compare to the face she made when she looked at me? I couldn’t tell. Somehow, when I wasn’t the center of attention, I was capable of having all sorts of—often even rude—thoughts about other people. But when I was in the middle of it, suddenly nothing made sense anymore. In which case, I just had to do something.

I didn’t know how much she’d be willing to listen, but I was pretty sure talking would be worth it regardless. Remember what Machiavelli said.

“…Sorry. Um, can we talk about stones later? I have something I want to talk to you about. Alone.”

“Alone? You don’t want Mr. Homura to join us?”

“Yeah, it’d be a little awkward.”

Tanimoto looked up the stairs. Mr. Homura looked down at me and waved to Tanimoto to go ahead. He sure was confident.

We headed down the stairs, looking for a place that would be comfortable to talk in and ultimately came to the lounge near the entrance. The museum had basically only just opened for the day, so there weren’t many people around yet. We took a seat near the pamphlet rack. Tanimoto looked confused.

“Did you have something urgent you needed me for? Sorry, I haven’t looked

at my phone at all today."

"No, I didn't text you. Sorry, I'll just be straight with you."

"Okay."

She tilted her head a bit and smiled at me. Did she know? Did she know I was going to bring up her least favorite topic: romance? That smile was probably her way of telling me to avoid the topic if I could. If I confessed how I felt now, she'd probably distance herself from me. I could lose a good friend over this.

But I made a promise to Richard. I can't go back to him with my tail between my legs.

"I, uh…when I heard that…you were trying to…to get married…"

"Yeah?"

"…I thought it was such a shame!"

What the hell was I saying? My head wasn't working right. How did I even get myself into this situation? Tanimoto was right there in front of me, looking at me, and I was going to confront her head-on even though, no matter how this turned out, it'd leave a massive shadow hanging over the rest of my life. I didn't think this would happen. Why was I even here?

"I-It's just that, getting married because you don't want to fall in love is like… like you've completely dismissed love as an option? And that…that just feels like such a shame to me. What if Future You ends up falling in love with someone? I think that would be…really hard on whoever fell for Future You and wanted to make her happy, too."

Tanimoto went silent. I screwed up. I couldn't tell what I should say. Who did I think I was? Some kind of romance sommelier? Did I really just crash someone else's date just to smother her with my own feelings? I knew Richard had called me an idiot, but I didn't care if I was an idiot or stupid. I just needed courage right now.

I clutched the velvet box through my shoulder bag.

"If nothing else—it would be really hard on me!"

"Huh?"

“If you get married—no, even if you don’t get married immediately…it’ll make me sad if you decide to give up on love! Really sad!”

My words echoed for a moment through the empty museum lounge.

I was honestly astonished myself. What kind of person makes such a confusing and roundabout love confession?

“…Really?”

“Really. Sorry. I wanted to support your decision, but…I just can’t. I’m really sorry.”

I stared at the ground and shoved my hand into my bag. My fingers trembled when I grabbed the box. This was so lame. I was quite confident that if there was a competition for the lamest romantic confession in the world, I’d be looking pretty good about now. I suddenly imagined a certain someone laughing behind me. It was the voice of a wise man whose aristocratic beauty didn’t seem to mesh with his thoughtful consideration. Everyone in the whole world was lame compared to him, of course.

The thought loosened some of the tension from my shoulders.

I set the box on the table and popped it open. The stone had tumbled around a bit in my bag, so I rearranged it on its cushion and offered it to Tanimoto.

“Huh? It’s an aquamarine, isn’t it? We talked about aquamarine the other day.”

“Yeah…and, um, I’ve…I’ve wanted to give it to you for a while now.”

“For me? But why?”

“Did you know they also call aquamarine ‘angel stone’?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know why it’s associated with angels. There’s a famous mine called the Santa Maria Mine, so maybe they’re getting angels by association with the Virgin Mary?”

“Uh…r-really?”

“No, I’m just guessing. I don’t actually know the answer. Do you?”

“No, I don’t know, either. I don’t, but…”

Tanimoto had been smiling happily the whole time.

“But…whenever I look at this stone, it just kind of makes sense. This is what I think an ‘angel’ is, I guess—sparkling and beautiful, but unpretentious, and like water, something everyone needs…like something special that makes you feel love well up from deep within your heart. And I think it fits you perfectly, Tanimoto! That’s what you are to me!”

I just said it.

I held myself back from saying, “sorry if that bothers you.” I’d made up my mind to dispense with excuses and justifications already. I wasn’t someone like Richard. I couldn’t win through eloquent words, so I just had to keep quiet when it was time to keep quiet and speak when it was time to speak. Just like my grandma. She may have held her tongue a little too often, but there was always fire in her eyes that was clear for all to see, even if she never put it into words.

When I looked at Tanimoto, she had picked up the tear-drop shaped aquamarine to hold it up to the light with a smile on her face.

“So this is how you see me, Seigi?”

I nodded, and she smiled again. It was a kind of funny smile, like she couldn’t hold it in, and that made me so happy I could cry. I really loved seeing her smile like that.

“I-I—I don’t think all stones are the same. That’s something my boss taught me, but the person who taught me how deep this world is was you, Tanimoto! I know this is really presumptuous of me, but I wonder if I could do the same for you! Maybe there’s a chance that in the near future you’ll change your mind and feel like having a whirlwind romance—on the off chance that happens, I think you’ll have a lot of fun, so I just think it’s a shame if you throw that all away!”

So…

So…

“Please…don’t get married…” I bowed my head as my voice trailed off.

I couldn't see what kind of face Tanimoto was making. I started to wonder how long I could keep my head down before it got weird. Ten seconds, maybe? I waited until the very last moment and then lifted my head like I was about to open my college entrance exam results. Tanimoto looked a little puzzled.

And then she hung her head and said softly, "Oh… I guess love might be like a stone I just haven't heard of yet, huh? I see…"

She repeated that "I see," a few more times, then shifted her gaze from the stone to me and smiled ever so slightly.

"You have no idea how terrified things like love and romance make me feel, do you, Seigi?"

"S-sorry!"

I bowed again, and Tanimoto shook her head, returning the aquamarine to the jewelry box.

"Thank you, Seigi."

"……"

I looked at her, at a loss for words, and she just smiled at me. It was the same carefree expression she'd made when we first met.

"I don't know what to do now. You know, if anyone other than you had said that to me, I'd probably just try to play it off with a 'hm?' But for some reason, I can't just play dumb when it's coming from you. Maybe it's because I trust that you wouldn't say anything cruel to me. But even if I assume that, I'm still kind of stumped."

"B-but still! That's the kind of man I want to be!"

"Yeah, I know. Why, though?" she asked innocently.

This was it. I only had one option. It was the signal to throw the ball. If I was ever going to say it, it was now or never. And she'd probably already had an answer in mind, too. But was that answer the one I was hoping for? Or was it—

"…The thing is, I–I—"

"Just kidding. I already know. It's because you really live up to your name, Mr.

Justice.”

“Huh?”

I was so bewildered, I just let my mouth hang open. I was shocked. It was like I’d gotten on the Ginza Line but then suddenly found myself on the Marunouchi.

Tanimoto continued with a smile on her face.

“Seigi, I think you’re the kind of person who’s incapable of being deliberately unkind to anyone. I’m no angel, so when I find myself in a bad mood, or frustrated because something didn’t go well, sometimes I feel like taking it out on other people. Sometimes even myself. At times like that, I’ll try to help out people who look like they’re in trouble—like offering my seat on the train to someone who doesn’t look like they particularly need it or offering a hand to an old man on a crosswalk who could probably manage just fine on his own. Or I’ll indulge telemarketers by being very warm and polite to them but then shutting them down by claiming I don’t have any more time and hanging up. And then that clears my mood right up. I pretend to be a nice person, or an ‘angel,’ just for my own satisfaction. I just try to find any random person to be nice to, to relieve my own stress.”

“So…”

When I first met her on that crosswalk, Tanimoto wasn’t in a good mood? That was her pretending to be nice?

She seemed to make a deliberate effort to smile sweetly.

“So that’s why I was so surprised when the real deal showed up.”

Her black hair bounced every time she smiled. Her hair was at its longest just before summer vacation, but I guess she’d cut it over the break. Today, it was the same length it had been this spring. I liked this cut on her.

“I think you’re being too generous. I’m just—”

“The kindness you show to people is different from mine—I can tell it’s coming from a much more genuine place. It’s not like anyone’s going to die because you weren’t nice to them, or like you can’t just walk on by pretending

not to have seen anything when something that isn't right happens in front of you, but you're not the kind of person who could do that, are you, Seigi? I imagine it's not as easy as it looks, but I've always admired that about you. If only everyone in the world were more like you, nothing bad would ever happen."

"No, I, uh…I dunno about that. I'm such an idiot, it would probably turn the whole world into chaos…"

"Well, of course. If that really happened, it would probably be a mess, and I wouldn't want that."

After quickly dismissing the whole idea, Tanimoto smiled at me.

"But, you know, sometimes I think to myself that I'm glad I have you in my life, Seigi—even when it's got nothing to do with school or stones. It makes me feel like maybe I could become a better person, too."

Wait, could it be?

Was it possible that she already knew? Had I told her how I felt ages ago even without saying it out loud? Had she picked up on it with her keen observation skills but pretended not to, like the sweet, gentle angel she was? It didn't seem possible. But the path this conversation took was completely outside anything I'd expected. Only a tiny fraction of what was going on could be understood from the outside.

Wait, could it be?

Tanimoto smiled softly when she saw my startled face.

"Thank you. Maybe I'll hold off on running away for a little bit after all. Seigi, you remembered how I said that I think there's a difference between never having something to begin with and not choosing something, didn't you? I thought about it a little more after we talked. I guess I never realized that's how I thought about it before. I started to wonder if the reason I hadn't actually run away yet, even though I'd wanted to for so long, was because some part of me felt like it was a shame to. So I thought maybe I should try living with that feeling for a little longer instead of trying to bottle it up. I don't know if I can approach something I've been afraid of for so long optimistically right now, but

maybe I can make a little progress if I don't run away. Ah ha ha."

Oh, I see. This was the same old Tanimoto. She hadn't picked up on anything. My feelings hadn't gotten through to her. But I was happy about that for now. I was happy that she wasn't the kind of person who knew how much I cared about her but pretended not to. I was so happy, I felt like crying, and in an extremely lame move, I actually did.

"Th-thank you!"

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize I'd made you worry so much. But I guess it would be pretty shocking for your friend to suddenly tell you they're getting married, huh?"

"Yeah… I'm good now, though…"

I wiped my tears on my shirtsleeve and turned away from her to see a man in a suit standing in the entrance to the lounge. Richard—it was not. It was Mr. Homura.

Tanimoto shot up when she saw who I was looking at and walked over to Mr. Homura, politely bowing her head. They were too far away for me to hear their conversation, but I could see Mr. Homura's expression. Every time he nodded his head, I could see his eyes grow darker, even as the brilliance of his smile grew. Regardless of how she felt, he probably wanted to come over and punch me. I stood up, prepared for my fate.

"So I just need a little more time to think about it. I'm sorry."

"I understand. Like I said at the start, I'm not in any rush. I don't mind if you want to hold off on making a decision for a while."

"But don't you have a lot of things to worry about yourself? You don't have to worry about me, so just focus on finding someone incredible for you."

The way Mr. Homura looked at her when he gently scolded her for saying something so brazen more closely resembled the face of an older relative than a prospective husband.

After he got Tanimoto to leave by asking her to go look at the mineral specimens, his expression changed. The smiling glare he gave me was terrifying.

I hung my head.

“I’m very sorry!”

“You’re really pathetic, you know?”

“Uh? What? I could understand it if you wanted to punch me, but calling me pathetic?”

“You didn’t tell her you’re in love with her in the end, did you? I know how she can be, but I’m pretty sure under those circumstances, even she’d get the message.”

“Uh—”

He called me pathetic again, and then once he checked to make sure Tanimoto hadn’t come back, he turned to me and smirked with his best business face.

“There’s something that I’ve been wondering about for a while now. You probably don’t realize, but you’re the only man Shouko calls by his first name. At first I thought it was just because your name’s a little funny—who names their kid Justice?—but after hearing your conversation just now, I don’t think that’s all it is.”

“W-wait…”

“You know, I’m pretty sure I could have just ignored you and gotten her to marry me, but I was planning on waiting until she graduated regardless, which would give the two of you another two years together, and getting engaged to someone you might lose before the wedding is a little risky, you know? I guess you could say this was something of a test. I wanted to know what you’d do if you were backed into a corner, and it went about as I expected. You haven’t given up on her.”

“So, you really did ask Richard to send me here?”

“Richard did what? Oh, how careless of me. Perhaps I accidentally let it slip that I was going to see Shouko today the last time I saw him.”

“……”

Mr. Homura had a look on his face like a king bullying a vassal. I just had to

take it. That was all I could do. No matter what he did to me, I was in no position to complain. Plus, Mr. Homura's plot only covered a small portion of what I'd experienced today. I mean, I had that big heart-to-heart with Richard, after all.

I might be overthinking all this, but maybe Richard would have always had that talk with me when I came into work, regardless of Mr. Homura's machinations.

Ultimately, I had sat on my hands too long. I couldn't be more pitiful.

Mr. Homura laughed. "Shouko's always been an interesting girl. She has no romantic interest in me whatsoever. I don't mean to sound conceited, but I'm not exactly the type of man women tend to dislike."

"That does sound pretty conceited to me…"

"Really? Well, I don't think I'm too far off the mark regardless. One thing that's always bothered me is how indifferent she can be to human relationships. Obviously, she knows how to behave herself in public and all, but she doesn't really try to get close to anyone. Maybe you're a little alike in that regard. Or are all the kids these days like that?"

"I don't really think so," I mumbled, and he smirked at me like he was having the time of his life. *Also, you're not nearly old enough to be talking about me like I'm "kids these days."*

"So I felt like it must be pretty significant if there's a boy in her life who she's on a first-name basis with. I'm not the type to criticize how other people live their lives, and I'd never try to force someone to like me, but I do wish my dear friend and fellow stone enthusiast the greatest happiness possible," Mr. Homura declared, staring right at me. "On that note, Mr. Seigi Nakata, you should try a little harder. I'm expecting you to demonstrate to her that you could bring her a much richer life than she would have by marrying me. Now, I'm not putting *all* of it on you, but you had best not forget that this is the *second* time your meddling has had a negative effect on my life."

"I am extremely sorry for that!"

I bowed so low, my head was level with my thighs, and Mr. Homura sighed. I

saw his yellow-brown shoes change direction. It had probably been too long and Tanimoto was coming back. I guess it was about time I got back to Ginza, then.

“But you know, I’m surprised he actually told you.”

“What do you mean?”

I lifted my head, and he raised an eyebrow.

“I half expected you to not show up here because Richard didn’t pass along the message.”

I didn’t understand what he meant. Why would he think that? You wouldn’t have to be around Richard for long to know he wouldn’t do that sort of thing. He was such a softie. He’d never do something that cruel.

“He must really like you.”

“I do think of him like a great older brother.”

“Do you really think that’s what I meant?”

What *did* he really mean? It didn’t take long for me to figure it out. I *had* gotten a little better at picking up on this stuff. Yeah, I get it, *that* joke.

“It’s not like that, okay. Don’t make it weird.”

“Oh, I’m not saying that out of any personal animosity toward you. Not that I don’t harbor any at all, of course.”

“I said I’m sorry! Anyway, you’ve got the wrong idea.”

“Well, I think you might want to talk to him about that then.”

Even if I was prepared for him to bully me, that was the first time I’d ever considered that he’d go that far. Admittedly, I didn’t actually think he was saying it to be mean. I was reminded of my conversation with Hiromi. About how it may seem one way to me but not to him, or whatever. About him liking my pudding and waiting for me for five hours and all that.

My mind was in utter disarray, almost like if someone had just told me that the favorite food of the remaining few silver foxes in the world was french fries. Mr. Homura clapped me on the shoulder.

“I’ll leave Shouko in your hands. I’m pretty sure she’ll spend the rest of today talking about you with a big smile on her face. Anyway, if you ask and Richard tells you something like ‘Stop making jokes in poor taste,’ go ahead and tell him I put you up to it. You should probably hurry, though. Isn’t Étranger closing for a bit starting tomorrow?”

“What?”

Étranger is closing tomorrow? That’s the first I’d heard of it. When I looked confused, Mr. Homura sensed something was off. He abruptly shouted, “Hurry. Call him.”

“Huh?”

“Now!”

“Oh, uh, okay.”

I forgot all about the 620 yen I’d paid to get in and left the museum. The timing couldn’t have been better, since I’d always intended to head directly back to Ginza anyway. Ignoring Mr. Homura’s comment for a moment, he was right. I needed to talk to Richard.

I didn’t understand why, but my heart was pounding as I searched through my phone’s call history before opening up my address book. I’d never called him and he’d never called me, so obviously it wouldn’t be in my call history. It took me a moment to remember that we’d only texted.

It rang three times before Richard finally answered.

“Hey, it’s me, Seigi.”

“How’d it go?”

It was the same old Richard. That put me at ease for some reason. That wasn’t very nice of Mr. Homura.

“I just finished up. I don’t think things turned out badly. But I didn’t get a chance to invite her out for dinner. Anyway, I’ll tell you all about it when I get back. Sorry about the call, by the way.”

“Where are you now?”

“I’m still in Ueno, but I’m heading back right now, so, uhh…dock me for two hours of pay. Anyway, I hope I’m not bothering you by calling.”

“Come to think of it, we’ve known each other for quite a while now, haven’t we?”

“Huh?”

I paused in front of the giant whale statue outside of the museum. What did he just say?

“I’ll be depositing your salary for this month in full. Don’t worry about the rest.”

“…What are you talking about? Hang on, I’m heading back right now.”

“I should have known that telling you not to worry would make you do just that. I’ll leave you with this: You are far too trusting. And although you will get hurt from time to time, that is the nature of life. I would encourage you to listen to your head over your heart. That is all.”

Richard didn’t say goodbye. He just hung up the phone and didn’t answer even when I called back. It took me ten minutes on the Ginza Line to reach the subway station. I ran straight from the platform through the pedestrian mall down Chuo-douri at full speed.

Nanachome, Ginza. On the second floor of a mixed-use building was Jewelry Étranger.

The shop was closed. I hadn’t left my things inside, so getting in wasn’t an urgent issue—as if. It was a *huge* issue.

A piece of paper was taped to the front door with a message. “Due to various circumstances, we will be ceasing operations in Japan for the time being” was written on it in several languages. Richard had hand written the name of the shop and signed his name beneath it.

It didn’t make any sense.

I tried calling Richard again, even though I knew it was pointless. I sent him a text, too.

“Are you alive? What happened?”

But he didn’t respond.

Something must’ve happened while I was gone. No, maybe I had it backwards. Maybe Richard needed to get rid of me because he’d planned on closing shop today. Then what was that whole conversation about? No, he wouldn’t do that. But was the Richard I knew the kind of person who would abandon his employee without so much as an explanation? He wouldn’t. So what was going on?

“…Stupid jerk.”

I didn’t even know who I was directing that at. I was all alone and confused.

case EXTRA

Fluorite by Your Side

THE INTERNATIONAL DEPARTURES lobby at Terminal 1 of Narita Airport was a crucible of human emotion. Of course, there was the drama inherent in international flights, but beyond that, trouble is a constant companion of long-distance travel. Worries over having forgotten this or that, for example. Though, naturally, the terminal had drugstores and convenience stores for just such moments.

But what was one to do in this particular situation?

Surely, I was the most suspicious person of all here, crouched down in the middle of the terminal, having abandoned my luggage, looking a mess with my handkerchief spread out on my lap. A passerby stopped next to me.

“Is something the matter?”

“I’m sorry, my bracelet snapped and sent the stones flying. I’m so sorry. I’m picking them up right now. I’m fine. Sorry.”

The besuited man crouched down next to me and joined me in collecting the scattered bits of stone. He carefully picked up one piece after the other without saying a word.

“This is fluorite, isn’t it?”

“Huh?”

“The name of the stone.”

I was on the verge of tears and hadn’t gotten a good look at his face until that moment. The first surprise that awaited me was his blond hair and blue eyes. I’d say he looked like a model for a designer fashion brand that had walked straight out of an ad, but he might have actually been even more beautiful than that. His Japanese was so fluent, it didn’t seem to fit. Perhaps his parents had emigrated to Japan. The second surprise was the name of the stone. I had never known what it was called. I never even considered looking it up.

“I never knew. It was a gift. Fluo—?”

“Fluorite.”

He collected the last remaining pieces and gently set them atop my

handkerchief. They had just been a string of beads originally, but sitting in a pile in a handkerchief, they were starting to look almost like candy or something. The stones weren't all one color; they had various shades of gentle greens and blues to them, and there were even a few stones tinged with purple. Fluorite. That's what it was called. I'd have to write that down later.

"I'm so sorry for the trouble. Thank you very much…"

"Are you headed out on vacation?"

"Oh, no, I'm…visiting a sick family member."

I picked up my overnight bag and took a seat in one of the lobby's chairs. He took a seat next to me and pulled a small plastic bag out of his black suitcase. Like the kind you'd use to bring cosmetics with you in your carry-on.

"You can put the stones in here if you like. I have some cotton balls, too—it should help keep them safer from fracturing than your handkerchief. Fluorite has many planes of perfect cleavage, so it's very prone to breaking. Accidents like this aren't terribly uncommon when the stone is used in jewelry. Don't let it dampen your spirits too much."

"Thank you very much. Um, do you work with gemstones or something?"

The extraordinarily handsome man hesitated for a moment before saying that he worked as a jeweler. A jeweler. I'd never met someone in that line of work before. I bowed awkwardly to him and introduced myself. I told him my name was Kyouko Takasa and that I worked at a local bank. And then I told him about my former bracelet.

"…It was a present from my older sister."

"Your older sister?"

"Yes. Though maybe it's less a present and more a memento of the fight we had the last time I saw her."

My connection to the bracelet went back to two years ago. My older sister had suddenly announced that she was getting married to someone from outside the country, and my whole family was in turmoil over it. Ever since we were little, my sister had always harbored a variety of ambitions for herself. She

already had a plan laid out and everything. It all started when she took a working holiday in America. She fell in love with the countryside on her first visit to the Land of the Free. She even found a local boyfriend and had been working as an assistant at a car rental company, but when she came home, she announced that she had gotten engaged and they were going to start a new life together. She was going to get married over there and move permanently to Oklahoma. She said she loved her fiancé from the bottom of her heart, but she never introduced him to us so we didn't know what his intentions were.

Anyway, she didn't listen to me or my parents when we advised her to take a moment to cool her head, and she just left and never came back. We've hardly heard from her since. She had always been the kind of person who decided things on her own and did everything on her own, so I never really felt like she needed me. Even though we were sisters. She was the type of person who would go anywhere and do anything all by herself. The complete opposite of me.

But then she got sick.

The person who contacted me all of a sudden wasn't even my sister but her apartment's landlord. She'd put me down as her emergency contact. From what I managed to decipher from the English email, she had been urgently hospitalized for some kind of stomach illness and would be getting surgery in a week. Which was now the day after tomorrow. I didn't know if she had just never actually married the fiancé she claimed to be so madly in love with or if they had gotten divorced or what, but she was single and apparently had no one else who could take care of her.

Our parents were both elderly now and suffering from chronic illnesses. I was the only one who could make the trip. It wasn't hard to get the time off when I explained the situation to my boss, but I had no idea what I was going to say to her when I saw her. She might not have even known that her landlord contacted me. How was I supposed to act around someone who had spent the last two years living, I don't know how, in an unfamiliar country? For reasons I wasn't privy to?

But that's also why I had worn the bracelet.

“My sister left this behind. She didn’t buy it for me or anything and had worn it herself a ton, but when she left home, she said I could have it. That’s all. My sister…could be a little inconsiderate of the people around her, so I’d never worn this bracelet because I liked it before. But I put it on because I felt like I had to think about her. I didn’t know it was such a fragile stone. Even being generous, I don’t know if I’d say she was the type of person to take particularly good care of anything, so I wonder why she bought something like that.”

She probably let me have it because she found out how delicate it was after she bought it. I hated myself for being naive enough to think she might have bought it for some special reason. That’s just who she was. Her only concern was herself. She didn’t care about her family or her little sister. She’ll probably just look at me like I’m crazy or something for coming to her aid.

After wrapping the bits of stone in the cotton and tucking them away in the bag, I shook out my handkerchief and used it to wipe my eyes.

“I’m sorry for dumping all that on you…”

The handsome jeweler smiled sweetly, accepting my apology. All he had with him was a single black suitcase. Judging from his facial features, I’d assumed he had come from Europe or America, but considering how little luggage he had with him, I realized he must have come from somewhere in Asia.

“…Um, this is probably a weird question, but would this kind of stone go in non-burnable trash?”

“Excuse me?”

“They’re stowed away in a bag, but I’ll have to bring it through security, and they might think it’s something suspicious. It’s not like it’s anything actually important.”

I bet she wouldn’t even recognize it if I showed it to her.

The lack of sleep from the stress and preparing for the trip for the past few days made me feel especially immature. The man sitting next to me began to search through his black suitcase again. This time he brought out a cardboard box, about big enough to fit a doctor’s stethoscope set. Inside the box was a black cylindrical object. It lit up when it was twisted—it was a flashlight. It

shone purple light.

“Would you let me borrow the stones for a moment?”

“Go right ahead.”

I handed the bag with the fluorite in it over to him, and he began carefully shining the light over the pieces of stone. I wondered what he was doing. Then he turned the light off and covered the stones with his other hand, engulfing them in darkness. Then something incredible happened.

It was faint, but the stones appeared to glow ever so slightly.

My eyes went wide. He returned the stones to me and handed me the flashlight. I hurriedly shined the light on them. Would they glow again?

“That’s ultraviolet light, so do take care not to shine it in anyone’s eyes. You may already be aware of this, but the Japanese name for fluorite is *hotaruishi*—firefly stone. In new-age circles, it’s said to help cultivate spiritual wisdom and clear the mind. I’ve heard that it’s popular in Japan among students studying for exams, but it actually gives its name to a phenomenon it exhibits: fluorescence.”

“Fluorescence?”

“Indeed. There are stones that glow under ultraviolet light.”

I turned off the light, and he tented his hand over the stones again to shroud them in darkness. There was no doubt about it this time. The stones, which had irregular colors forming almost a sort of gradient, were all glowing the same faint purple.

I stood there with my mouth agape, and he asked me what was wrong. I didn’t know what to say.

“Um, you might not find this particularly interesting, but my sister’s name, it’s…”

“Yes?”

“It’s Keiko, but it’s written with the characters for ‘firefly’ and ‘child.’”

Honestly, I think my sister’s pretty hopeless. She was the polar opposite of her

delicate name—she pushed her way through life like a motorcycle ripping past cars at high speed. I was so lonely as a kid. I wanted her to spend more time with me. I was so jealous of my friends who had sisters who would talk to them about clothes and love and stuff. All my sister was interested in was the outside world. To her, dreams weren't something to long for; they were things she was running straight ahead to make happen. I used to admire her for being so strong, but it didn't take long before I started to feel like I couldn't stand her.

"…I wonder why she gave it to me."

"While fluorite is commonly fluorescent, rare examples also phosphoresce—they continue to glow after being exposed to ultraviolet light. Regardless of which, if any, of these phenomena a given stone exhibits, fluorite is typically prized for the beauty of its subtle color variations in the context of jewelry or decorative pieces. Considering all of the pieces of this bracelet phosphoresce, your sister must have had at least some knowledge of fluorite before purchasing this bracelet."

"So, not all fluorite glows in the dark like that?"

"Indeed. If you were to just buy a fluorite bracelet without giving it much thought, it would be exceedingly unlikely that any of it—let alone all of it—would phosphoresce."

When she told me I could have it, she had the same look on her face that she always did. The look of a selfish, inconsiderate person who didn't care about me one bit. It definitely didn't feel like she was giving me something important. Right after she gave it to me, she rolled out her suitcase and left home. She hadn't been back in the two years since. And now she's having major surgery over there? Gimme a break. My parents were worried, but they didn't know how to deal with her any better than I did. She probably didn't need our home, or us anymore. But—

"She's such an idiot…why didn't she just say, 'I'm leaving my fluorite with you,' instead of just 'You can have it…'"

If you never let people know that you care, you might as well not have cared at all.

Like, why couldn't she have said that she was leaving it behind to remember

her by?

Or that the fireflies we used to watch by the river behind the house were so pretty?

It was hard to imagine that my sister could have such admirable thoughts. But it was equally difficult to think she'd leave something like this with me for no reason at all. So I think it must've meant something. Something she wanted me to know in her own unique way. If she had ever told me anything like that, at least I would know that my big sister was thinking about me. I could have at least speculated about what she might have been thinking while I looked at this bracelet.

Why didn't she tell me anything?

"She's such a weird person… Why wouldn't she tell me anything?"

No, maybe that wasn't it at all.

Why didn't I ever think to look up what kind of stone it was? Was it because I'd just given up on her? That I just assumed something my sister gave me couldn't have possibly meant anything? In which case, maybe it was less that she didn't tell me anything and more that I wasn't willing to listen to what she was saying?

"I can't pretend to know anything about your sister's circumstances, but sometimes it can be difficult to say goodbye."

His voice pierced me. It was like he had read my mind.

As I covered my face with my handkerchief, wiping away my tears and snot, I could hear the jeweler sitting next to me, rummaging around in his suitcase again. I found some way to choke back my tears enough to look up just as he was pulling out one of his business cards to offer me. The name of his shop was written on the card. He took the ballpoint pen from his pocket and began writing something on the back in Western script: fluorite. The name of the stone.

"I hate to meddle, but perhaps it would help to put this business card in the bag. If they ask questions about it, I don't think they're likely to think it's anything suspicious if you're honest with them and explain that it's a broken

bracelet. It shouldn't be subject to customs fees, either, so I don't believe it should be an issue."

His blue eyes were telling me not to throw it away. I had already decided not to. How could I? I was going to take these stones with me to America and give them to my sister who's about to go into surgery. And I'm going to tell her that I know exactly why she picked this stone.

I bowed to the blond jeweler while I sat.

"Thank you so much. You know, it's almost like…you found a homework assignment I'd been too lazy to finish, and not only did you solve all the equations for me, you did it with perfect penmanship, too."

"Oh, I don't think so at all. This isn't homework, just complicated feelings. Your sister's feelings have always been right there with you."

My sister's feelings?

I stared intently at him, unsure of what he meant, and the beautiful jeweler fell silent. It was like he thought there was something it would be better not to say. I hounded him, insisting that whatever it was he was thinking, I wanted to know what it was. He let out a little sigh, prefacing his next comment by saying he was only speculating and began explaining in a faintly sorrowful tone.

"We humans cannot split ourselves in two to be in two places at once. But we can leave behind our thoughts and feelings. Perhaps she left you a stone with a similar name to her own, not in the hopes that you would solve some riddle but simply out of a desire for part of her to remain with her family—with you. And perhaps she put those feelings into that fluorite bracelet."

Come to think of it, my sister's ambitions spurred her on more than anyone else. If there was somewhere she wanted to go, she would just go, no hesitation. If there was someone she wanted to marry, she would marry them. She didn't exactly choose to be that way. Maybe that was the only way she knew how to live. But just because she wanted to be in control of everything around her, it didn't mean she actually could. Which would mean—

—my sister really was a mess. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was looking down from on high. My sister was just a person. If she had troubles just

like me, she must have also had things she didn't know and things she wanted to say but couldn't, too. Probably even more than I did.

The first thing I wanted to do when I saw her again was listen to her side of things.

I slipped the bundle of fluorite into my bag, stuffed my handkerchief back into my pocket, and stood up. I put my bag on my shoulder.

"Thank you for everything. I have to get to my gate soon. And then I'll be headed to rural Oklahoma."

"That's quite a long trip. Do take care."

"I'll be fine. I have my sister's stones with me, after all."

The jeweler smiled politely to me. He really was so beautiful that he could be a gemstone incarnate. I felt a little remiss about saying goodbye to him. If only I could have had him meet my sister and get her to tell me more about this fluorite.

"Um, my family home is near Tokyo, and my parents run a small traditional confectionery. It's called Shoubudo—*dorayaki* is their specialty, and it's really delicious. I help out at the shop sometimes, but if you're ever in Japan again, please stop by. You'll receive a warm welcome. Um, do you like sweets?"

His expression suddenly changed when I asked that. It was like it had become drained of all emotion—like a blank mask. When he saw me start to freak out a little, he seemed to snap out of it and regained his composure, smiling softly at me.

"Pardon me, you just reminded me of an acquaintance of mine. He always makes such presumptuous assertions about me, like suggesting that I 'haven't had enough sweets' when I'm in a foul mood. I'm not sure how to explain it better…"

I just nodded and listened. Whoever it was, he sounded important to him. He was probably someone who wouldn't leave his thoughts.

"I don't mean to be presumptuous myself, but I think someone who knows your tastes that well probably isn't an 'acquaintance' but a 'friend,'" I said, and

he looked at me with a bit of an exhausted smile.

“You may be right. Perhaps that is what I should call him…I believe I’ve done him quite a wrong.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. He should count himself lucky that you care enough to worry about that. This I can say with confidence as a little sister who’s spent twenty years wanting her older sister to worry about her,” I said with a smile and a nod.

The man’s beautiful face wavered between a polite smile and a completely blank expression. The mysterious jeweler replied, “Perhaps you have a point,” with a vague nod before casting his eyes down to the floor.

I felt bad for making him keep me company long enough to wear him out like that. My flight was going to be boarding soon, so we politely said our goodbyes and went our separate ways. I didn’t know when his flight was or where it was going, but after I was safely through security with my bag of broken fluorite and heading to the gate, I turned back to see him still sitting on that bench in the lobby. Maybe he had fallen asleep. No, I could just make out the blue of his eyes. He seemed to be staring off into the distance.

I spent some time waiting in the lounge, and it wasn’t until I finally boarded and took my seat in economy that I realized I never asked the jeweler his name. I hurriedly took the pouch of fluorite from my bag and pulled his business card out—his name was on there. Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian. It was a bilingual business card, so it had his information written in both English and Japanese. The shop’s address was in Ginza. I guess his shop was in Japan, not overseas. But if he was at the airport, maybe his shop would be closed for a while.

Ever since I decided to see my sister again, I’d been so anxious, trying to figure out what I should even talk to her about, but thanks to him, that one worry at least was gone. I’m sure my sister who loves unusual things will gobble up the story of how I met a mysterious and beautiful jeweler. I still would like to introduce him to my sister. Did the jeweler, Richard, have any intention of returning to the shop in Ginza on his business card? If only I had thought to ask him.

Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

Sign up for our newsletter!

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter