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NOVEL
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THE CASE FILES
OF
JEWELER
RICHARD

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THE CASE FILES OF JEWELER RICHARD

NOVEL 2

WRITTEN BY
Nanako Tsujimura

ILLUSTRATED BY
Utako Yukihiro

Seven Seas Entertainment

HOSEKISHO RICHARD-SHI NO NAZOKANTEI:
EMERALD WA ODORU
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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-63858-751-4
Printed in Canada
First Printing: October 2022
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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CAST

Seigi Nakata

A dedicated college student hoping to go into civil service after graduation, he has started working part-time for Richard. Just as his name—Seigi, meaning "justice"—implies, he's an earnest young man always looking to help others, even if he may be a bit lacking in tact at times.

Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian

An Englishman from Sri Lanka who speaks Japanese more fluently than your average Japanese national and is an accomplished jeweler. While his precise age remains a mystery, his incredible beauty would strike anyone, regardless of gender, utterly speechless.

case 1 The Cat's Eye of Insight

MANAGING THE MILK was a battle against time itself. One corner of the fridge would turn into a disgusting white hell if I just ignored the expired cartons. In the middle of summer, it was an especially frantic battle to keep things hygienic.

The Ginza jewelry shop I was working part-time at, Jewelry Étranger, was in a space that used to be a café. The large refrigerator was convenient, but managing its contents was a decidedly human job. The shop only operated two days out of the week—Saturday and Sunday—but thanks to its owner's predilections, we went through at least a liter of milk a week. More if we had a lot of clients scheduled. And so, here we were now.

"I thought you said today would be a good day to buy two cartons?"

"Our appointment for the day, the Satomuras, called to cancel just now. They've moved their appointment to next week."

"If you'd texted me ten minutes ago, we could've avoided this…"

"I only received the phone call five minutes ago."

My boss scolded me with his eyes as he sat in one of the shop's red lounge chairs. As much as I should have been used to it by now, his beautiful blue eyes were still breathtaking. As were his porcelain skin and gentle blond waves. It was 10:30 a.m., and soft morning light was streaming in through the window.

Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian—I'd only recently gotten the hang of saying his tongue-twister of a name. This man, who was plying his trade on the second floor of a building off Ginza's Nanachome, described himself as a British jeweler. He used to run a shop in Hong Kong, so international customers were a regular sight here. He was my only boss, though I guess it was worth mentioning that I was also his only part-time employee. My job mostly entailed serving tea, cleaning, and buying sweets. I always swung by the supermarket on my way to work on Saturdays to buy milk. Richard would text me on Friday to let me know how many cartons we'd need.

"We're definitely gonna have leftovers. What are we gonna do with all this?"

"You procured a receipt as usual, correct? You'll be fully reimbursed

regardless.”

“That’s not really what I’m concerned about.”

I had no idea if Richard even lived in Japan, let alone exactly where he lived. Did he have an apartment in Shinjuku? Or did he commute from Oomiya? Or did he go straight to the airport after closing up shop on Sunday to head to America or something to do business before returning to Japan the following Friday evening every week? Whatever it was, there was no way he’d take the extra milk home with him. And throwing away something that was still edible didn’t sit right with me.

“So, uh, this is totally random, but I was thinking I’d use a little extra milk in the royal milk tea today.”

“Absolutely not. You must not deviate from the specified proportions. Ever.”

“I figured you’d say that.”

As much as Richard was a mild-mannered and perceptive gentleman, he was a hardcore extremist when it came to the topic of royal milk tea. It had to be made with the tea in the orange tins he carried around and required one teaspoon of tea per serving. One cup of milk had to be heated in the special pan he’d brought in, and only non-homogenized milk would do. Just under one teaspoon of sugar per cup. I learned during my training that he’d know immediately when I was slacking. He was as bad as a little kid who was a fussy eater, but I had a feeling his pickiness about tea was somehow related to the impressive powers of observation he occasionally displayed with respect to both gems and customers, so it was hard to be too upset about it.

After I put the milk away in the refrigerator, I went to speak to Richard again. He was still sitting in one of the lounge chairs, reading an English newspaper.

“There’s this black cat I see near the lot where you park your Jaguar. I don’t know its name, but I see it eating from a bowl sometimes, so maybe it’s not entirely a stray? Maybe we should give it some of the extra milk.”

“I’m not impressed. You should only give cats milk designed for their consumption. Not to mention, feeding an animal that doesn’t belong to you and whose owner you don’t know is just asking for trouble.”

“I am terribly sorry for mentioning it.”

“As long as you understand.”

I had a feeling he’d say something like that. I was pretty sure someone from the family that operated the parking lot was taking care of the black cat in question, but it was so friendly. Whenever I happened across it on my way home, it’d let me pet it. I loved cats and dogs, but the apartment I grew up in never allowed pets, so I’d never had one of my own. And wouldn’t you know it, even though I was living on my own now, my landlord still didn’t allow pets.

“So, totally random question number two: Do you like milk agar jelly and stuff like that?”

“Sometimes, I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re saying. Milk what?”

“Agar jelly, it’s like a firm gelatin. You just heat the milk with some sugar and the agar agar and that’s it. We have the bowls in the kitchen, and I can get some agar agar from that fancy supermarket—I can probably make it tomorrow.”

“Did you convert to Hinduism or something? Is cow’s milk so sacred to you now that you can’t let it go to waste?”

“Oh, don’t be dramatic. I just don’t like wasting food. And just taking it home would feel weird—like I was stealing supplies from the shop or something.”

“Now *I* have a ‘random’ question for you. How does an average Japanese college student have the culinary expertise to produce sweets from leftovers?”

“You just heat it up and then let it chill. There’s no expertise involved. A little kid could do it.”

Richard averted his eyes without saying another word. He was staring down at the carpet with an awfully intense look in his eyes. Perhaps he had some negative memories associated with cooking.

“Oh, maybe this is just a cultural thing? I dunno, I just remember I started making it when I was a kid as a way to save money. It made my mom happy, too. Sorry, I didn’t mean to get so far off topic. I know I’m probably in the minority when it comes to this sort of thing, though I’m not sure why…”

“…I’d prefer pudding.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

With that, Richard stopped talking and abruptly turned away from me. I had no idea what he meant, sometimes. He might not be a native Japanese speaker, but his pronunciation was so on point that if you closed your eyes and just listened to him talk, you’d think he was. And he knew all sorts of obtuse words, which made it kind of hard to believe he could struggle with basic communication like this. But, well, whatever. No reason to sweat the small stuff.

I should note that I had asked him questions before—do you have a family? How old are you? How did you get so good at Japanese? Why gemstones? But he uniformly responded to all of them with a resounding, “If I were to answer every one of your inane questions, we’d be here until morning.”

It didn’t make me mad, though. Instead, I just felt the strange power of his inhumanly beautiful face. I knew the person I was talking to was just another human being, just like you and me, and I was pretty sure he was just a slightly eccentric foreigner with a sweet tooth. But despite all that, I still had a hard time believing he came from the same dimension as me. It felt like if I tried to touch him, my hand would go right through him. Maybe a better way to put it was that he didn’t quite seem real. Perhaps all beautiful things had that sort of quality.

But Richard was a good guy at heart. He wasn’t one to snicker and sneer at people behind their backs or hate them for no reason. That was mainly why I didn’t get mad when he treated me a little unfairly, like now. Plus, my late grandma had taught me that everyone was going through something. She’d always say, “You know, Seigi, everyone’s got things they can’t talk about.”

Seigi Nakata. And yes, it was read “Seigi,” like “justice,” not “Masayoshi.” It might be a painfully straightforward name, one that reflected the hope I would always do the right thing, but I’d only recently found out whose hope that was. I owed a lot to this jeweler here, too. He’d kinda changed my life.

That said, it wasn’t like we were close enough to just put all our cards on the table. Working at this shop had made me realize that intimate relationships

came in a variety of shapes and forms.

I was making royal milk tea for the two of us. Just as the tea was done steeping the right amount, the shop's doorbell rang. The front door was secured with an electronic lock, so it wouldn't open without someone inside unlocking it.

I stuck my head out of the kitchen and shouted, "Coming! I'll be right there."

"This isn't your home," Richard said, getting up, as if to imply that I should keep my eyes on the pot. His elegantly pinstriped shirt disappeared from view.

Strangely enough, though I heard the door open, there was no "welcome" from Richard. Instead—

"Hello. Is this a jewelry shop?"

The speaker sounded very young.

"Is this a jewelry shop?" they reiterated, demanding an answer. I turned off the stove—I couldn't take my eyes off the tea with the flame still on. If it boiled over, it'd make a huge mess of the kitchen, and make my boss quietly boil over with rage while it was at it. Honestly, I was more worried about the latter. But with the tea safely taken care of, I headed out into the parlor to see what was going on.

Standing in front of Richard was a child.

He was clearly at least two heads shorter than me. The leather bag on his shoulder had a reflective key chain in the shape of a cat's face, and he wore shorts with white socks. He had big, round eyes and kinda bushy eyebrows. His hair looked soft. Outwardly, at least, he looked like a student from a private elementary school. He had a clever-looking face, too. Maybe he was a child star or something. *No, wait, I'm getting off track.*

I crouched down to get on eye level with him and smiled.

"Hey, buddy, where'd you come from? Where are your mom and dad?"

"Do you not comprehend the words coming out of my mouth? I'm here because I would like to do business with a jeweler."

"By yourself?"

The boy nodded. He was very articulate for his age. I glanced back at Richard and saw him shake his head a bit. Didn't seem like he knew the kid. The shop had only just opened this April, and I'd been here every day it was open. There were several customers who'd brought children along with them, but I'd never seen this kid before.

Richard looked a little concerned for a moment, then made up his mind and courteously bowed to the child.

"Good afternoon. My name is Richard, proprietor of this establishment. This is my assistant, Seigi. Would you care to share your name with me?"

The child seemed momentarily overwhelmed by the porcelain-skinned beauty before promptly turning away.

"…I don't give my name to every shop owner I do business with."

I couldn't exactly fault him there, but it was suspicious. He must've had a reason.

I frowned, not sure what I should do, and Richard calmly offered the boy a seat. The boy promptly and politely thanked him and took a seat in one of the red lounge chairs. His feet didn't reach the ground.

"Seigi, get him something to drink. What would you like, young man?"

"No tea. I don't do bitter. No soft drinks, either. It's not good for my teeth."

I suggested milk, and the kid gave a curt nod. I took it as an "okay." One hot milk coming right up. He insisted on no sugar but asked for me to make it sweet. *Is that supposed to be some kind of riddle? I guess I'll use honey.*

"Now, may I ask what brings you here, young man?"

"I want a stone just like this one."

I paused on my way to the kitchen to look back at the kid. He pulled something wrapped in a cloth out of his shorts pocket and showed it to Richard. Inside was a fairly large stone. Richard's eyes narrowed.

"That would be a cat's eye chrysoberyl you have there."

"Yes, it's cat's eye."

My eyes went wide. He had a real gemstone? What was a little kid who should be more worried about taking naps, video games, and playing dodgeball doing with a real gemstone? Maybe he really wasn't lost.

I walked back over to them, wanting to get a closer look at the gemstone, but the kid noticed me and shot me a nasty glare.

"Where's my milk? Aren't you supposed to be his assistant?"

"I am, but I don't just make drinks. I clean the shop and run errands. Admittedly, I'm not a professional jeweler or anything."

"I understand. There's no particular reason for me to converse with you."

I somehow managed to force my customer service smile back on my face. Just who was this spoiled brat? It was hard to imagine something more suspicious than a little kid with a cat's eye gem in his pocket showing up at a jewelry shop and refusing to give his name. I couldn't hold back a little cough of frustration.

"Hey, Richard, there's a police box across from the clock tower, maybe I should run over."

"Why?"

"His parents might be looking for him! I'm sure they're worried. Who wouldn't be if their precious son suddenly disappeared? Don't worry, we'll get you home soon."

The small child looked at me with a blank expression for a moment before turning to Richard, "Is he a little slow or something? I'm a customer, here to buy a gemstone. I have no business with *you*, so you may take your leave."

I felt a twinge in my temples. *Who's he calling slow? Who even talks like that anyway? He's like a miniature Richard, complete with the sharp tongue.*

Richard held back a little chuckle when he saw my expression, then apologized to the child who had so rudely insulted his employee.

"He's just worried about you. You came here all by yourself? Might I ask where you heard about my shop?"

"I heard about it from, um, I'm not telling. But don't worry! I have money. In my own name. I've been saving up my New Year's gifts… They said I should use

it to buy something important, so I think it should be okay. This is important."

"Oh, if he has a bankbook, that should make things easier. It should have his personal information in it. Hey, little man, why don't you let me see your bankbook?"

"No, thank you. I know better than to hand something that important over to a stranger. You sound just like one of those shady men in the street safety videos we watch at school."

"Seigi, get him his milk. And I would like my tea."

"Whose side are you on, anyway?" I mumbled under my breath.

Richard just repeated his request for tea. Royal milk tea. The same thing he always had. I didn't need a reminder. And I didn't need a reminder that my only job when customers were around was making tea and serving desserts either.

"…That's not fair. We both introduced ourselves properly. I'm pretty sure the only shady person here is the one hiding his name! Of course, that's just the opinion of a 'slow' assistant!"

"Seigi, are you a child?"

"But—"

"Is that even a question that needs asking?"

That last comment came from the kid. He was looking up at me with his big black eyes. He had perfect posture, too. Describing him as composed was probably a little excessive, but he hardly carried himself like a child.

"I must admit that you may have a point. I have seen reports on the news of stuck-up customers causing trouble in shops. Of course, I don't think my behavior even compares to this stubborn assistant of yours, but I'll give you my name: it's Hajime. But that's all you're getting. I won't tell you my last name. Are you happy now?"

I had to wonder if all elementary schoolers were like this these days. They couldn't be, right? He was almost too clever.

"…I'll take it. Nice to meet you, Hajime."

“No. You should be calling me ‘sir.’ Try it again.”

I take it all back. I’m going to the police after all. That’s the right thing to do.

Just as I was about to make my case to Richard, Hajime looked at me with icy eyes.

“If it’s that big of a deal, I don’t really care. Go to the police if you want. You could physically overpower me rather easily, and you’ll have to, because I won’t go willingly. I’ll cry and scream the whole way, too, and say you’re a bad man trying to kidnap me. Do you *really* want to go to the police? It’ll be quite a scene. Not that *I’ll* particularly care.”

What in the—he’s threatening to blackmail me? His voice faltered a bit at the end there though.

Now that he mentioned it, I was 175 cm tall, and thanks to my history with karate, strong enough to defend myself against unruly drunks. I didn’t think I looked particularly intimidating, but that might be different from a child’s perspective. Even Richard’s slender figure might seem a bit scary, since despite how fluently he spoke Japanese, he was still obviously a foreigner.

I glanced over at my boss, and he rearranged his crossed arms, subtly pointing to the ceiling with one hand. There were surveillance cameras in the shop. The footage would probably be sufficient proof that I wasn’t trying to kidnap him. But I couldn’t exactly drag him kicking and screaming to the police box, so I gave him a deep bow.

“You have my most…humble…apologies.”

“…As long as we’re on the same page. I am a reasonable customer after all.”

“Haha, well, I am most grateful, m’lord.”

“I didn’t ask you to talk like it’s the 19th century. It sounds forced. Mr. Richard, I’d like to see some stones. You have nothing on display.”

“I’ll retrieve some that fit your request. We keep our stock stored safely in the back to protect it from thieves. Seigi, entertain our customer, would you?”

Richard admonished me with his eyes. *You had best not mistreat him,* they were saying.

I know. Hajime was a customer. But if he wasn't, he'd just be a little kid hanging around two grown men, and that's not a good look. It'd be a scary situation for a kid to be in, too. Still, he must've come to the shop for a reason.

I took a deep breath. If we just had to settle whatever that reason was before we could get his address out of him, I guess that worked.

Richard disappeared into the back room that housed the safe. Hajime stiffened up a bit, and I tried talking to him casually,

"Sir, would you care to pick out a snack with me? We have a variety of options, but I'm at a bit of a loss because I don't know what you like."

"Bribery isn't going to work on me. I'm not saying anything I don't intend to."

"You sure know a lot of grown-up words, don't you…"?

Despite the comment, Hajime got up from his lounge chair and followed me to the kitchen. There was a tall brown cabinet next to the refrigerator. It was probably used to store tableware back when this place was a café, but currently it served as a paradise of the owner's favorite sweets. Boxes of chocolates, cakes bundled up in golden wrapping paper, delicate baked goods that were safe to store at room temperature. Air-tight packages of fruit jelly. Canned fruits and all sorts of other things.

"Whoa…"

I had a feeling my bribe was going to end up working, after all.

Hajime initially picked a baumkuchen. A limited summer edition orange-flavored one. I asked if he wanted that with his milk, and he frowned and went silent. He seemed deeply conflicted about it. The shelves of sweets, which had become something of a sampler platter of the best confections in Tokyo, were entirely the result of the owner's personal tastes. I never imagined it'd come in handy like this.

"…I think I'll go with this after all."

Ultimately, he settled on a chocolate-covered puff pastry confection. I bowed and told him, "Excellent choice."

Hajime seemed happy. All that remained was the drink.

“You didn’t want sugar in your milk, right? Is honey okay?”

“…I love honey milk.”

“Got it.”

I filled a mug with milk and put it in the microwave. It spun around in circles.

“Thank goodness you came by today, sir. I bought a little too much milk today and wasn’t sure what I was going to do with it.”

“When the assistants make mistakes, they feel it in the office. You had best be careful.”

“Yes, I’ll take that under advisement.”

The office? Someone in Hajime’s family must run some kind of white-collar business. *He’s got nice clothes and is carrying around a precious gem—certainly doesn’t look like he’s from a poor background.* Maybe a law firm or a real estate office?

Hajime mumbled as he watched the mug spin in the microwave, “…If only Milk were here, none of this would’ve happened…”

“Milk?”

Hajime looked startled, like he didn’t think I could hear him. I wondered what he meant.

“Nothing.”

“Is Milk the name of a pet?”

“…It’s nothing.”

Sounds like I hit the nail on the head.

“Lemme guess, a cat?”

Hajime was startled. Crap. I didn’t want to put him more on guard.

“Well, you have a cat reflector on your bag. I just figured you probably like them. And I mean, that stone you have is a cat’s eye, right?”

“I do know what the words mean, I’m not a toddler.”

There was a certain brazenness in the little prince’s voice. I was somewhat

irritated at first, but that quickly looped back around to a kind of sadness. I felt weirdly guilty for some reason. If I were as clever and eloquent as Richard, I probably could have gotten an answer out of him.

I apologized, a tired look on my face. Hajime told me not to worry and that it wasn't a big deal. I was kind of shocked that a kid his age understood how to be considerate of other people. It had to be tiring to be surrounded by adult problems all the time—but just as I was thinking that, Hajime interjected to add that he was quite smart for his age, so he wasn't surprised that I thought he might not know. Is that so? Maybe his innate intelligence helped him navigate adult situations without much trouble.

"…Do you like cats?"

"I love all kinds of animals. But I've never had a pet of my own. We weren't allowed to have them where I grew up."

The microwave chimed as it finished. I dribbled honey into the mug and stirred it in, checked to make sure it wasn't too hot, and then handed it to Hajime. He gave a little bow of his head. It seemed he might be starting to warm up to me a little.

We headed back into the lounge, but Richard was still busy in the back room. I could hear him talking when I put my ear to the door. He was in the middle of what sounded like a long phone call. How unusual. I couldn't quite tell what language he was speaking though.

"Looks like it'll be a while before he has stones for you to look at. Maybe I'll join you for a snack."

"I don't really think you should be eating on the clock, mister."

"…Yes, you are probably right about that, sir."

I bowed deeply, and Hajime chuckled. It was the first time I'd heard something cute come out of his mouth.

"You're not a bad person, mister, but you sure put your foot in your mouth a lot. People are going to think you don't take your job very seriously. Seems like a real shame. The honey milk you made is very tasty."

“You mean it? You’re gonna make me blush.”

“There you go again. You should really watch your mouth.”

“…I’ll take that under consideration.”

I hung my head, and Hajime laughed again. As much as he might have felt like scolding me for not taking my job seriously enough in his eyes, he didn’t seem to mind having fun with such a non-serious person. He didn’t get upset when I sat down next to him but just took a sip of honey milk from the mug, which looked oversized in his hands.

He looked down at the table where his cat’s eye gem still lay. It had been polished into a round shape, almost like a shiny acorn. It was about as big as my thumbnail. It had a sharp line of white down the middle, making it obvious to even a rank amateur like myself what kind of stone it was.

I guess when the boss is busy, the part-timer’s gotta do what he can.

“So, like, if you don’t wanna talk about it, you don’t have to. But does the reason you came here have anything to do with that cat I was asking you about earlier?”

“……”

I waited. As my friend from college, Tanimoto, said, children are much calmer, smarter, and more observant than adults give them credit for. If they think an adult is actually going to listen to them, they’ll open up about their problems, but they’ll shut right down if they don’t think you’re trustworthy. She laughed when I told her I was pretty sure I was like that as a kid, too. At any rate, the best thing I could do as the adult in the situation was make sure he knew I was actually listening to him—basically borrowing Richard’s signature move.

Hajime’s expression became a bit grim as he stared at the contents of his mug and mumbled, “Are you going to take me to the police if I don’t tell you?”

“No, of course not.”

“Why do you care then?”

“Because when I see one of our customers in trouble, I want to help them. I may just be an assistant, but I do still work here, after all.”

“…Oh.”

After he had finished off all three pieces of chocolate covered pastry on his plate, Hajime started talking about a mysterious white cat named Milk.

Milk was originally a stray. No one knew how old he was, but Hajime’s neighborhood was his territory, and he carried himself like he owned the place. Hajime’s family had basically adopted him around the time Hajime started elementary school. His fur was soft, he had honey-yellow eyes, and he was as graceful as can be. But most notably of all, he possessed a strange power.

“When I was in first grade, our car was having problems and had to go to the shop for repairs. We were all going to go for a drive when we got it back, but Milk was napping on the roof and kept hissing at us. He wouldn’t come down, so we had to cancel the drive. Then someone from the repair shop hurried over to the house and started apologizing—there was a mix-up, and the car’s brakes weren’t fixed. My mom said that Milk saved us. And before that, Milk kept biting my dad’s arm, and when he went to the hospital, they caught a bad disease before it got serious. Dad got better with medicine, but he was always very grateful to Milk for that.”

I listened intently to his story. It almost sounded like something you’d see on TV—a clever animal saving people and predicting disasters. Maybe animals really did have mysterious powers, since they were closer to nature than humans.

Hajime’s little eyes glimmered as he spoke.

“Milk is incredible. He always knows when something bad’s going to happen. He has this little habit where he stares at us for a bit before we leave the house. My mom says it’s how he wishes us luck.”

It sounded like Milk was Hajime’s family’s guardian angel. I timidly asked if the cat’s eye had anything to do with Milk, and Hajime looked a little pained for a moment before he started talking again, voice grave.

“My parents said they decided to buy the stone, so it’d be mine someday…to take Milk’s place.”

To take his place? That’s right, I did hear him mumble, “if only Milk were

here," when we were in the kitchen.

"Where's Milk now?"

"……"

His expression suddenly darkened. He took another sip of his milk before the words spilled out of him.

"He's…he's gone… My dad, he…"

"Your dad did what?"

Hajime wouldn't give me a straight answer. The next thing he talked about wasn't the cat but his father, for some reason. Apparently, he was a white-collar worker who worked in an office somewhere and was very busy, so he often came home very late. I asked him if that meant his father had given Milk to someone else to look after him, Hajime silently shook his head. His expression was dark. He explained that his father had taken Milk somewhere but didn't say where or why.

"You must be worried about him. What did your mother say?"

"Mom's…in the hospital right now. Because she's going to have a baby."

Well, that's a shocker. Hajime's going to be a big brother soon. Things must be crazy at home. I'm sure his parents would be very worried if they found out about his little expedition today.

Hajime snapped at me when he saw me frowning, "What?"

"O-oh, nothing. Just thought things must be difficult right now."

"They really are. We need more luck now than ever, but Milk's gone…"

It sounded like Hajime's mom went to the hospital right after Milk went missing. I guess from Hajime's perspective, it made sense that he'd think losing their guardian angel could mean something might happen to his mom.

"Did you try asking your dad about what he did with Milk?"

"How can I even ask him when he's so busy?! I hate him!"

When Hajime noticed that his outburst had startled me, he looked embarrassed and quietly apologized. The situation with his family was probably

putting more stress on him than he'd ever been under before, and neither his beloved cat nor his parents were there for him. He was probably very lonely and scared. But how did all that lead to him coming to the shop? He'd asked for a matching stone, but why?

Hajime's expression stiffened up again. This time he looked out the window instead of at me as he spoke.

"But I can't be a little crybaby. I'm gonna be a big brother, so I have to be strong. That's what made me think of it—Milk has two eyes, so even if one stone can't take his place, maybe two will do. Of course, I didn't read that anywhere or anything, but…anyway! I need it! I can't rely on my dad. That's why I'm here. Is your boss still not back yet?"

"Apologies for the wait," Richard chimed in with terrifyingly perfect timing.

He leaned over Hajime's shoulder, carrying a velvet box. The truth was that he'd poked his head out of the back room a little while ago, but I pretended not to notice so as to not interrupt Hajime—it was a team effort.

Richard switched places with me, taking a seat next to Hajime and opening the lid of the black box of wonders. Inside were two rows of gemstones. The first row had four small cat's eye specimens, none of them as big as Hajime's. Some of them were yellow, and some of them were, for lack of a better word, a sort of pale green. The characteristic stripe down the middle varied in thickness among them. The second line had several green and black stones, none of which resembled cat's eyes in the slightest. All of them were cut as cabochons—smooth and round with no sharp corners.

Hajime fell silent for a bit before the words softly spilled from his lips, "…I want a stone like this one."

Based on what he'd told me, it sounded like what he really wanted was a stone to make a matching pair with the one he already had—just like how a cat has both a right and a left eye. But Richard acted like he hadn't heard any of Hajime's story. Instead, he began telling him about the small cat's eye specimens in front of him, just like he usually would.

"Sir, you wouldn't happen to know why cat's eye is called 'cat's eye,' would you?"

“Because the stone looks like a cat’s eye.”

“Precisely. Now, do you know why these stones have a line in them that resembles the pupil of a cat’s eye?”

“No…”

“Well, that’s quite a relief. If you’d said otherwise, I’m not quite sure what I would have done. You see, when I was your age, I thought someone had drawn it on with a white marker.”

Hajime smiled a little. I tried to imagine a ten-year-old Richard. He must’ve already been unfathomably beautiful. And I guess he’d already been in close contact with gemstones, too? Admittedly, you’d never assume he came from a poor family to begin with—but still.

As he sat next to Hajime, Richard took one stone into his hand and demonstrated the effect by changing its angle. It reflected the shop’s lights, creating a bright white line right down the middle, no matter what angle you looked at it from.

“This particular stone is a variety known as chrysoberyl, but it has a bit of another mineral called rutile mixed into it. Rutile crystals are shaped like tiny needles, and they reflect the light very well, creating the cat’s eye effect. This blue stone is apatite cat’s eye, and this green one is tourmaline cat’s eye. They may not be chrysoberyl, but they are all cat’s eye stones.”

“I’m not very good at science.”

“Then might I suggest you consider chocolate cake as an example? Eclairs, chocolate brownies, gâteau au chocolat, and opera cake are all composed of the same ingredients, so in that sense you could consider them all ‘chocolate cakes.’ But I very much doubt that anyone going about selecting a cake would consider all those items part of the cake category. The ‘essence’ of a chocolate cake isn’t merely its component parts.”

“Oh, so in this case the rutile is the chocolate and the cake is the whole stone…? Am I understanding that correctly, Richard?”

“Precisely.”

Wait, did that mean “cat’s eye” wasn’t the name of a specific stone? I timidly posed the question, and Richard nodded.

“It’s quite fortuitous that the person who gave the stone its Japanese name settled on *nekomeishi*—literally ‘cat’s eye stone.’ As you can see, thanks to the rutile inclusions, many minerals other than chrysoberyl also exhibit chatoyance—the property of these stones to reflect light reminiscent of a cat’s eye—and it’s not uncommon for people to think of such stones as ‘cat’s eye.’ When a term becomes so ubiquitous, it’s difficult to say that it’s incorrect, so ‘cat’s eye’ has essentially become a generic term for the chatoyance effect. If there are *multiple* rays of light in a stone forming a starlike shape, that’s called asterism. Rather than ‘cat’s eye’ the stones exhibiting it have the ‘star’ moniker—star sapphire and star ruby, for example.”

I nodded haphazardly, gesturing at Richard to stop. I noticed Hajime’s expression had tensed. The beautiful jeweler might have been blessed with the gift of gab, but it wasn’t really suited to an elementary school kid. I mean, even I had trouble following all that.

Or at least, that’s what I thought, but Hajime seemed to have a decent grasp on it.

“I get it. So it’s like how both a white haired Ragdoll and a white haired Persian are ‘white cats’ even though they’re totally different breeds…right?”

Richard smiled tenderly and bowed to Hajime.

“Incredible. I’m grateful that you understood me. You are a very clever boy, Mr. Hajime.”

Hajime looked flattered, but his expression grew more anxious.

“So…cat’s eye isn’t really the name of the stone, is it? And the cat’s eye effect has nothing to do with cats? It doesn’t give you good luck or anything does it?”

“Does this stone not look almost identical to a cat’s eye?”

“But if it just looks like that because of other stuff in the stone, then it has nothing to do with anything…”

“How did your parents explain the nature of this stone to you, Mr. Hajime?

Did they tell you a tale about an ancient cat's eye being turned into a gemstone?"

Hajime shook his head and just repeated that it was a good luck charm and that they said it was a stone that would keep him safe. The more I thought about it, the less sense it made. It wasn't exactly going to do the same job as a safety alarm.

Richard smiled warmly at the anxious Hajime.

"They're not wrong. Cat's eye has been prized since ancient times as a charm to ward off evil. Of course, whether stones resembling eyes are in fashion depends on the local culture and the taste of its people. In the past, they were considered ominous in Europe. But here in Japan, as well as India, China, and many other countries in Asia, they've been regarded as auspicious stones for many hundreds of years. It's a fascinating cultural divide."

"Wow, that really is different… You sure do know a lot of stuff."

Richard gave a little bow in response to the compliment. I was in awe of Hajime's level of understanding. I mean, he was just in elementary school. I'd be less surprised if he just completely lost interest because he was bored. But maybe even kids could take things seriously if an adult got on their level and talked to them like an equal. Kids didn't like being treated like they were "just" little kids, after all.

Whenever I was near Richard, I kept finding that all the things I'd locked away deep in my heart just started spilling out. He really was an enigma of a man.

"Is the stone one of ill omen to you or one of good fortune?"

"…Good fortune, because it's supposed to keep my family safe."

A faint smile graced Richard's face.

"Stones are what people want them to be. They're a mirror for one's hopes and desires. If it makes your wish come true, one stone or two is much the same, don't you agree?"

Hajime was a very smart kid, so even if Richard's words were difficult to follow, he wasn't going to give up. He listened intently to the blond man's

words and took them all in before shaking his head slightly.

“I don’t want a mirror. I want a stone that’ll keep my family safe. Milk had two eyes that he used to watch over my family, so one isn’t enough.”

“Forgive me if I’m mistaken, but it does not seem to me that you want a second stone simply because cats have two eyes. Am I wrong?” Richard pressed him for an answer.

Hajime took a breath and pursed his lips tight, like he wasn’t sure if he should say something or not. Richard waited. After a brief moment of silence, Hajime shouted,

“Mom and Dad said that this stone would be mine someday. But one stone isn’t enough! There won’t be anything for my little brother. And I can’t just split the stone in two… I’m gonna be a big brother soon, so I want to do everything I can for my little brother. Mom and Dad might get mad at me for taking the stone without asking, but I had to. Without Milk around, my little brother’s going to need a stone to keep him safe, too.”

“What exactly is it that you’re so desperate to protect your family from?”

“Bad things…all of them… Just like Milk did…”

“And that thinking is what’s made you feel that you need to protect them all by yourself?”

The silence lasted longer this time. Hajime balled up his little hands, grasping the hem of his navy shorts. He looked like he was on the verge of tears but doing his best to hold them back. With a fierce look on his face and reddened eyes, he glared at Richard.

“Dad just doesn’t get it! He doesn’t understand anything! I know he doesn’t because he took Milk away!”

This again? Just what did his father do with Milk? When I asked Hajime to explain, his little eyes burned with fury. He took a short breath and growled,

“…He kidnapped him.”

“What?”

“Dad kidnapped Milk! He locked him in a cage! And took him somewhere!”

This was what Hajime told us: One morning, around 6 a.m., he woke up to the sound of a strange voice. He found his father's bed empty and heard a cat crying loudly outside. He carefully made his way to the front door, trying to avoid waking his mother, and peered outside where he saw his father in the driveway…loading a cage with Milk inside into the back seat of the car. Milk struggled and cried the whole time, but Hajime's father seemed not to care.

Hajime froze in shock. Before he could react, the car left, driving off to who knew where. He returned to bed but couldn't fall back asleep. Thirty minutes later, his father returned. Hajime acted like he had just woken up and went down into the kitchen, pretending to look around for Milk, before asking his father where he was.

His father stayed silent for a moment, expressionless, and then answered, "Looks like he's not here right now." As if it didn't concern him at all, "He must be around here somewhere. I'm sure he'll show up before you know it."

"He's such a liar! He's been working too hard, and it's making him crazy. That's why he thinks a rock could replace Milk! Mom went to the hospital after Milk disappeared, too! More bad things are going to happen at this rate! That's why I have to keep everyone safe!"

Tears began to flow down his pale cheeks. Hajime quickly wiped them away with the back of his hand, as if it were something shameful, and sniffled softly. I brought him a box of tissues, and he promptly blew his nose and handed the balled-up tissue back to me. He really was like a little prince. Proud, merciful, and weighed down by duty.

I was pretty sure he didn't actually want a gemstone. And deep down, he probably didn't actually believe that a gemstone had the magical power to keep his new brother safe, either. Really, this was probably more a way for him to act out and get back at his father for taking Milk away—a way for him to say, "I don't trust you anymore, so I'm going to have to do this myself!"

Honestly, I could kind of understand that. My mom, Hiromi, had divorced my biological father because he used to hit her. He was a violent man. I never really thought of him as my dad. It must've been when I was in elementary school, or even before that, that I started feeling like I couldn't trust my parents. A lack of

faith like that can take root at any age, no matter how young.

Of course, I didn't think Hajime's father, who went out of his way to buy a gemstone like this for his son, was remotely on the same level as a wife-beater. The more intimate your relationship with someone, the more complex feelings of apathy and hatred can become.

Richard quietly gazed at Hajime for a bit, but Hajime continued to glare at the jeweler without flinching.

"Please, give me a stone just as good as the one I have. I want to give it to my little brother. I can't rely on my dad. I just want to buy it for my baby brother. I would take him to a restaurant when he's hungry and buy medicine from the pharmacy for him when he's sick. Is it really that weird to go to a jewelry store to buy a gemstone when you need one? Is that wrong?"

Richard shook his head. Hajime's expression relaxed, and Richard picked up a large cat's eye stone off the table and placed it in his palm. It was the big one Hajime had brought.

"I would just like to confirm: You would like a cat's eye chrysoberyl that's identical to this one?"

"Yes. Is that going to be hard?" Hajime said, putting on his best serious expression and looking into Richard's blue eyes.

I was pretty sure it wouldn't be impossible to get one. I mean, this was Richard we're talking about here. I doubted there was a gemstone he couldn't get his hands on. I remembered a client coming in and laughing a bit as they asked, "I'd like a star ruby, but that's probably not available," only for their eyes to nearly fall out of their head when presented with the finest specimen a mere two weeks later. There was no way Richard wouldn't be able to find a cat's eye chrysoberyl.

But that wasn't really important right now.

As I saw it, there were really only two options. Option 1: get him to go home by telling him we didn't have any in stock right now and that he'd have to come back later. He probably wouldn't come back again, and the situation would naturally resolve itself. Option 2: convince him to give up on the idea, since cat's

eye chrysoberyl doesn't actually have immense protective powers. The adult option. But doing that to him would mean bluntly refuting a belief he had in something he cared about deeply. Was that how the owner of this shop would treat a customer?

Richard thought for a moment and then smiled warmly.

"If you need a stone to adequately protect your family, I believe you already have a perfectly adequate answer. Is that stone you already have not sufficient?"

"Ugh! How many times do I have to tell you?! This one's mine! I need one for my little brother!"

"Mr. Hajime, did your father actually say that stone was yours and yours alone?"

"He said it'd be mine someday."

"And do you intend to take all of the protection granted by that stone for yourself, sharing none of it with your little brother?"

"Of course not! But…"

Richard quietly waited for Hajime to continue. If it were me, I'd have felt compelled to try to get an answer out of him. I guess picking the right moments to push a client wasn't just important when dealing with adults.

Hajime began to speak, as if forcing every word out. "But…if the stone really can protect us…then Mom wouldn't be in the hospital even though Milk is gone… I can't put my faith in a stone my dad bought me. If I need a stone to keep my family safe, I need to find it myself!"

He wasn't going to give up on the idea so easily. This wasn't something strangers could sort out. Before I could start thinking about what to do, Richard had already started talking again.

"Faith is a tricky subject. Humans have no way of knowing what anyone other than they themselves are thinking, and consequently, it is most difficult to ascertain truthfulness. However, there is one thing I can say with certainty: Your father cares for you from the very bottom of his heart."

“How can you say that?! You’re lying. If he really cared about me, he wouldn’t lie to me and take Milk away!”

“Even the wisest and most eloquent of people would find it difficult to continually express love in unceasing waves. Life has a tendency to get in the way. There are a great many things I cannot possibly know, but just as you want to protect the family you love very much, I believe your family also wants to protect you. No matter the time or the place, people don’t give protective charms to those they don’t care about,” Richard gently admonished him.

He wasn’t going to tell him that the stone was nothing more than a stone. But he wasn’t about to definitively assert that a beautiful stone had mysterious powers, either. Instead, he simply reiterated that stones reflect their owners’ feelings. That humans are creatures that constantly grow to reach their true desires, and gemstones can only help them along that journey. What was Hajime really trying to do? Richard seemed to be able to tell, at least.

Hajime’s small black eyes filled with tears.

“How can you say that… You didn’t listen to anything I said at all… Ngh, so what if he cares about me? It doesn’t mean anything!”

Richard returned the stone to where it had been sitting. He reached for Hajime’s little head and stroked his hair. Hajime couldn’t hold it back anymore, and tears spilled onto his lap.

I got up and crouched down next to Hajime. Richard glared at me, as if to warn me not to meddle again. *So what if I am?*

“Hey, Hajime, I have an idea. Would you hear me out?”

“…What.”

“Why don’t you try talking to your dad again? You know for sure that he put Milk in a cage and took him away, so why don’t you try talking to him about it? Tell him you saw what happened. You have to start there if you want to have an honest conversation. Adults will generally listen if you engage them in frank and open discussion. I’ll even go with you if you want.”

“Seigi.”

“I know how you feel. So why don’t you try telling your dad about it? Instead of keeping quiet and running off on your own like this, you should tell him how much you’re suffering.”

“Seigi. Brew me some more tea.”

“Shoo with your brew! I was just getting to the good part.”

“Mister, you’re ruining things by running your mouth again…”

“Oh, did I just hear you laugh? If I made you laugh even a little, I’ll call that a win. Anyway, don’t worry about me. I’m a college student, so I have plenty of free time.”

“What if he’s already dead?! You’re so stupid! Milk wasn’t a very young cat! What if Dad took him away because he was going to die! Maybe he didn’t want Mom to worry!”

Ah.

I hadn’t realized that was part of it, too.

What should I do now?

Running away and letting Richard pick up the pieces would be the worst thing I could do. Even if Milk was dead, there wasn’t anything anyone could do about it. Maybe Hajime’s father didn’t want to make him sad. No, maybe he already had another cat ready to replace him? Like he was planning to bring home a new kitten along with Hajime’s new brother. *No, that’s awful. You can’t just “replace” a beloved family member like that. And why is my brain so much more talented at coming up with awful scenarios than good ones? I know, I just have to console him.*

“Y-you don’t know that for sure! If…if there’s anything, anything at all I can do to help, I will. How does that sound, Hajime?”

“Tissue please. My nose is runny…”

“Coming right up.”

I knelt on the floor next to him like the footman of an aristocratic family and reverently offered him the tissue box. Just as Hajime blew his nose, the intercom rang. Another customer?

“Seigi.”

My boss indicated the door with an unruffled expression. *You could get it yourself, you know.* Not to mention, it was strange for more than one customer to show up at once like this. We didn’t have any appointments scheduled.

I squinted at the LCD screen that showed who was outside. It was a man and a woman, both looking a bit out of sorts. They seemed to cling to the door like they were desperate for it to open. I wasn’t so sure about this.

“Hello, Jewelry Étranger at your service,” I said through the intercom.

“Excuse me! We heard you had our son Hajime in there!”

The woman’s voice came over the intercom speaker. Hajime looked up from his chair. I was completely caught off guard.

Richard calmly got up from the lounge, released the electronic lock, and opened the door. The couple nearly tumbled into the shop. The woman was visibly pregnant.

“Hajime! What on earth are you doing here!”

“Mom! Dad!”

Hajime stiffened up, used tissue still in his hand as his mother hugged him. The man, who was dressed in a suit, politely closed the door and slowly walked over to them. He looked mortified. He must’ve been worried.

Hajime’s mother looked like she was in her mid-thirties, while his father looked about forty. His mother was wearing what looked like a nightgown with a jacket over the top. Wasn’t she in the hospital?

Hajime seemed bewildered by the sudden turn of events. “Why are you here? Weren’t you at work?”

“I left early. I was so shocked when Richard called. How did you even know where the shop was?”

“…There was a business card…”

“I could have sworn I put that in the safe,” Hajime’s father said in his deep voice. Hajime twitched and hung his head before Richard stepped in.

“It has been far too long, Mr. Yasaka.”

“Richard, I’m so sorry. I couldn’t believe my ears when you called me.”

“I was in much the same position with my own eyes, earlier.”

I gave him a puzzled look, and Richard shrugged a little.

“I was quite certain Mr. Yasaka had purchased this particular piece of cat’s eye chrysoberyl,” he said with a courteous bow.

The extremely long phone call he’d been on earlier was probably with Hajime’s parents. Did he really remember the stone, even though it wasn’t set in a ring or a pendant but just loose?

“I see,” Hajime’s father said, before taking a knee next to his son to look him in the eye. “Hajime, there’s a lot we need to talk about.”

“Dear, I don’t think now is the time. You’re going to scare him.”

“…Mom, aren’t you sick? Weren’t you in the hospital because you didn’t feel well?”

“It is called ‘morning sickness,’ but I’m not sick. Feeling a little unwell is kind of part of the job when you’re pregnant. Your father called me to tell me what was going on and picked me up from the hospital by taxi. We had to push them to get me discharged temporarily. Hajime, I was so, so worried.”

Hajime’s mother embraced him, and he began to cry again. As he sobbed “I’m sorry,” over and over, I hoped his parents would wonder what compelled him to come all the way here. I hoped that he wouldn’t be scolded too badly, even though running off with a valuable item like that wasn’t the best idea. I’d say as much if I had to, too. But I had to wonder if Richard had already explained most of it during that long phone call.

Hajime bawled his eyes out, repeatedly apologizing to his mother. “I thought I had to do something, since Milk is gone…”

“Huh? What are you talking about, Hajime?”

“We lost our guardian angel, so I had to—!”

Hajime pushed through the tears to explain everything to his parents. He told

them how anxious it made him when Milk disappeared shortly after a stone meant to “replace” him entered the home. And how his father lied to him even though he saw him take Milk away, so he felt like it fell to him to keep his family safe.

Mr. Yasaka listened to the end with a calm expression on his face. His wife, moved to tears by her son, stared intently at her husband. Her eyes were full of reproach, but Mr. Yasaka didn’t flinch. He stroked his son’s hair and began, “Listen, Hajime, Milk can’t stay in the house right now. It would be a problem. That’s why I had one of the secretaries from work look after him for a while. He’s fine.”

“Liar! How is Milk being at home a problem?! It’s more of a problem without him!”

“It generally isn’t a good idea to have stray cats around someone who’s pregnant.”

I frowned at Richard’s follow up. Mr. Yasaka nodded too. Wait, was that just common knowledge? I didn’t know that.

I mouthed “Please explain,” and the jeweler began speaking slowly, probably to make it easy for Hajime to understand.

“Have you ever heard of the Toxoplasma gondii parasite? It’s a protozoan carried by stray cats, and it can make someone who is pregnant ill if they come in contact with it. As I understand it, the risk of contracting the disease is rather low, but as Milk is an indoor-outdoor cat, I imagine someone recommended that it would be best not to keep the cat around your mother for the time being.”

“Really?”

“Yes. They gave your mother an antibody test, and the doctor suggested that she stay away from cats just to be safe,” Mr. Yasaka said, his expression not changing much. Hajime looked flabbergasted, and I was right behind him, similarly dumbfounded. Why didn’t they just explain it like that in the first place? He would have understood.

Hajime seemed to be thinking the same thing, because he asked his father

why.

Mr. Yasaka murmured with a pensive look on his face, “He wasn’t going to be away for long. I was worried that explaining would upset you or that you might want to go visit him and I wouldn’t have time to take you.”

Hajime still didn’t seem to believe his father. His distrust was so deeply rooted at this point that it was probably going to be difficult to dispel it.

Mr. Yasaka looked intently at Hajime, who was staring daggers at him. “Hajime, let me start by apologizing. I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize how anxious I made you. It’s all my fault.”

“…It’s not your fault you’re so busy, Dad. You don’t have to apologize.”

“I’m always making you worry, aren’t I, Hajime? You always go out of your way to thank me for how hard I work when I’m busy. You really are a good kid, you know? That’s why I feel like even more of a failure as a father for not noticing when you were hurting. I’m so sorry. I’m sorry for lying about Milk. I didn’t want to make you worry, but I ended up hurting you more in the process.”

Mr. Yasaka didn’t seem to be blessed in the art of conversation like Richard was. He was just stringing together simple words as best as he could. I had a lot of guy friends like him. Not everyone was good at explaining how they felt. But it wouldn’t really be fair to expect a child to understand that.

Mr. Yasaka glanced at the stone on the table, picked it up, and showed it to Hajime.

“So you already figured out the combination to the safe, huh? You really are incredible, Hajime. Were you surprised when you realized it was your birthday?”

Hajime nodded aggressively. He looked like he was about to cry again. He struggled to get out an “I’m sorry,” and bowed his head. *He’s been through enough, just forgive him already. My heart can’t take this anymore. Please.*

Ms. Yasaka looked anxious, too. It couldn’t be good for the baby, either.

Finally, Mr. Yasaka began to speak, “I bought this stone after I discussed it

with Kanako because I thought it would make you happy, Hajime. That's all. I shouldn't have said anything about it 'replacing' Milk. But there will come a time when Milk, and even your mother and I, will be gone. I thought it might give you strength. Just like how Milk discovered my illness, you never know what could happen. But if it's my fault this stone is causing you pain, maybe I should return it to Richard."

"It's not… It's not the stone's fault. It didn't do anything wrong. So when Mom comes home from the hospital, I can see Milk again?"

"Yes, of course."

"…Thank goodness."

That was the first time Hajime really sounded like a little kid to me. Hajime's mother, relieved from the very bottom of her heart, hugged him tight. About ten seconds later, she seemed to realize Richard and I were still there and hurriedly adjusted her clothes. We pretended not to notice.

"Did Richard tell you about this stone?" Mr. Yasaka said, as if he'd just remembered.

Hajime's eyes went wide, and he turned around to look at Richard behind him. Richard was standing a reasonable distance away, sipping his iced royal milk tea, as the touching family reunion unfolded before him. He set his glass on the table and turned to Hajime.

"As you can see, cat's eye chrysoberyl comes in many colors, but there is a standard for especially fine specimens: The central line must be a beautiful, clear white, and the rest of the stone should be a rich gold. People in my profession call this the 'milk and honey' effect. I'm sure you understand why."

"Because one side is like honey and the other is like milk…"

Hajime's eyes went wide. His mother smiled, "Honey milk is your favorite, after all."

His little head hesitantly nodded. It really was the perfect stone for the Yasaka family.

"I knew we had to get it the moment I heard that. It would be wonderful, like

it was our Milk's third eye."

"Kanako's always had an interest in the supernatural."

While Hajime remained silent, Mr. Yasaka stroked his son's black hair. His eyes were gentle but serious.

"Hajime, I want you to promise me one thing. Promise me that you'll never run off on your own like this again. You can't put yourself at risk like that, even if you're trying to protect Milk. I'm sure you already understand this, but just think about how worried we were knowing our precious, adorable little boy who we'd both gladly lay down our lives for had run off somewhere without us knowing. I promise I'll never lie to you again or treat you like you're too young to understand. So please, Hajime, promise me that much."

"…I promise. I'm sorry."

"It was all my fault. I'm just glad you're safe."

Mr. Yasaka embraced Hajime. *Oh no*. I had to look away, or I might have started crying. Seeing a father and son sharing a tearful hug was too much for me. I had to force myself to think about something else. *I know, the milk. I need to figure out what to do with the extra milk in the fridge.*

Richard, perhaps unable to bear the sight of me standing there biting my lip with a stupid look on my face, addressed Mr. Yasaka.

"What would you like to do, then? Did you come by car?"

"No, I took a taxi from the office to the hospital, and…I really should have asked the car to wait, shouldn't I have?"

"I'll call you a car."

"Thank you, Richard. I know you came to us last time, but your shop really is wonderful. The three of us will have to come by again when I'm out of the hospital."

"…I think you mean four of us—you, me, and our *two* sons."

"Oh, goodness, you're right."

Ms. Yasaka, who had been on her knees on the floor to be at eye-level with

her son, braced herself on the lounge chair and stood up with a “hyup.” Even that simple action must’ve been rough, with her belly that big. I knew from my mother, a nurse, that it was easier for pregnant women to break bones, since they often become calcium deficient.

Oh.

“Um! Could I get you something to drink while you’re waiting for the car?”

“…He puts his foot in his mouth a lot but he’s a good guy.”

“Oh, goodness, when did you get so arrogant, Hajime?”

Hajime looked a little grumpy while his mother laughed, before he walked over to me and bowed his head.

“I’m sorry to impose on you while you’re trying to work, but I would like a glass of water if it’s not too much trouble.”

“…Hey, mister, Mom can’t have coffee or tea, okay?”

“Coming right up! But I have to ask—” I cleared my throat, “Would you like some honey milk?”

“Oh, that’s just perfect!” Ms. Yasaka said, clapping her hands together.

While they waited for their car to arrive, Mr. Yasaka sat with his family in the red lounge chairs, enjoying honey milk together. Hajime’s mother and father sat next to each other, and Hajime sat in his father’s lap. They chuckled, wondering what kind of stone their soon-to-be-born child would like as Richard carefully introduced each of the stones in his box of wonders.

“That was a real stroke of luck. Did you just happen to remember?”

“Remember what?”

“That you’d sold that stone and to whom.”

Richard gave me an incredulous look. I waited and waited, but he didn’t say another word. Wait—

“Don’t tell me you remember every single stone and every single customer.”

“I remember them all.”

“A-all of them?”

“All of them.”

I was at a loss for words. Well, admittedly, it wasn’t like he was moving hundreds of products a day…but even then, after a few years, it would add up. There had to be hundreds, at least.

“Do you keep a book of your clients or something?”

“I keep the necessary records for transactions, but nothing beyond that. Whether I encounter a client again, and if so, when, is entirely dependent on them. If I were to forget what they had purchased previously or what their preferences were, I wouldn’t be a very good salesman, now would I?”

“I was foolish for thinking otherwise.”

“Thank you,” Richard said with a bow. It was a bow devoid of emotion, like an automaton, but graceful, nonetheless. I felt like I’d been given a glimpse into the pride he had for his profession.

“I was surprised at first, but I’m just glad nothing bad happened.”

“You look like you had fun.”

“I guess because it was a little unusual? It’s not like we don’t see younger customers frequently, but children are pretty rare. I think Hajime’s probably the youngest we’ve had, unless you count the baby still in his mother’s belly.”

“How carefree. I wasn’t quite sure how that was going to go for a bit.”

“Well, you knew Mr. Yasaka’s number, right? It was never going to be that bad, then. It’s just a little slice out of family life that’ll make a funny story in the future, don’t you agree?”

Richard stared at me for a moment as if in utter disbelief before nodding a few times, like something had finally clicked for him.

“Seigi, it’s been a reasonable amount of time since you started working here. Have you started to get a sense for the pricing of gemstones?”

“Where did that come from? I still don’t really know anything, but I guess…

rubies are more valuable than sapphires, stuff like turquoise and lapis are priced lower than other gemstones, and quartz is even more affordable. I know that much. Wow, I guess you really do pick up stuff without realizing, huh!”

“I see. Then what would you guess cat’s eye chrysoberyl is worth?”

“Probably not as much as rubies or sapphires. Those can go for like five million apiece.”

“The cat’s eye in question was worth more than ten million yen.”

I reacted by letting out a strange squeak. More than ten million? That cat’s eye chrysoberyl is worth more than ten million yen?

“It was that valuable?”

“Really, I should be asking you why you thought cat’s eye *wasn’t* very valuable.”

“I mean, it’s not that rare, right? All sorts of places sell it. I’ve even seen it before. Those places that sell bracelets made of stone beads sell cat’s eye ones for like 500 yen. They’ve got all sorts of colors, like pink and blue, too.”

“Those are man-made. What an unfortunate mistake to make. Cat’s eye is quite rare, which is precisely why we developed technology to synthesize it artificially. The difference between a natural and artificial specimen is obvious to the naked eye. Genuine cat’s eye chrysoberyl comes almost exclusively from Brazil and Sri Lanka, and it’s exceedingly rare. I believe it goes without saying that the larger and higher quality the stone, the greater the value.”

But still, *over* ten million yen?

“I’m not sure if I really want to know the answer, but…how much is it exactly?”

“I’ll just say you could buy several Jaguars for the price.”

The company car Richard used was a Jaguar. He could have just gotten a nice, safe domestic car, but for whatever reason, he picked a sports car. I recall him telling me that I could get a used one for around five million when I asked him to drive it. A roll of banknotes unfurled in my mind’s eye.

“36.42 carats and from Sri Lanka. It was by far the largest and finest cat’s eye

chrysoberyl I've ever encountered in my career. I did not believe my eyes when the child pulled it from his pocket."

My imagination shifted to the image of an innocent elementary schooler pulling roll after roll of bills out of his pocket. It was a bone-chilling image. When Hajime pulled out that stone, it must've looked completely different to Richard than it did to me.

Hajime had threatened to call me a kidnapper if I took him to the police, but I was really glad he didn't *actually* get kidnapped. That would have been all the more awful.

"But there's one thing I don't get. Were they really so wealthy that they could just drop ten million on a gemstone like it was nothing? Um, if I'm crossing a line with this, please just ignore me, but is spending tens of millions on gems, like…I dunno how to put this in a way that doesn't sound awful, but is it a rich people hobby or something?"

"Are you familiar with the concepts of investing and asset management?"

"Well, of course. However low your opinion of me might be, I am still a student in the college of economics at Kasaba University," I declared with pride, but Richard just ignored me and kept on talking.

"Now, just as a hypothetical, let's say you get a good job as a very talented bureaucrat at the Ministry of Finance with a steady salary of several million yen a year—what do you do when you break thirty million in savings?"

"Is this what Mr. Yasaka consulted you about?"

"This is merely a hypothetical. It bears no resemblance to the Yasaka family's financial situation."

"O-oh, okay. Sorry."

Managing money was a topic anyone could relate to—though maybe it would be better to say it was a worry no one could escape. In my case, it mostly came down to dividing the income from my part time job and the money my mother, Hiromi, sent me between rent, electricity, water, food, travel, and entertainment expenses. Hiromi paid my tuition directly. I was slowly saving up in the hopes of paying her back some day. Plus, if I ever got married and had

kids, I'd probably need to save up for their education, and if I bought a house, I'd have a mortgage to pay. The need for a budget never ends.

Richard's hypothetical supposed there would be money left over after all those basic needs were met.

"Good question… I guess you could buy stocks, some of those shareholder perks are pretty enticing. But if you still had cash to spare, maybe real estate or something? Ugh, this is too abstract, it's hard to think about it."

"You ought to start thinking about it now, while your future prospects are still wide open. Furthermore, I find it rather concerning that you described a realistic discussion of finances as 'too abstract.' At any rate, the hurdles to investing are much lower in the west than in Japan."

"Well, of course they are. They basically invented capitalism, after all."

"My point was more that the concept of storing wealth in the form of something other than paper money exists all over the world. The value of hard currency is entirely dependent on the country that issued it. Diversifying your assets is a form of risk management and arguably a means of avoiding taxes as well."

So basically, what he was getting at was that no matter how many digits your bank balance had, it was ultimately still representative of a national currency. If that country were to fall, it would be worth less than the pieces of paper it represented, so investing that money in some form of asset was a way of protecting against that. *I get it. That's how it connects to gemstones*.

"No, I dunno about that, man. If you brought a diamond ring you spent a million yen on to a pawn shop or something, they wouldn't give you a million yen, right? You'd be taking a loss."

"Your reasoning is sound. Now imagine we're talking about an exceedingly rare gemstone, a masterpiece the likes of which we're highly unlikely to see produced again. What would you think then?"

I asked Richard if he was referring to the cat's eye chrysoberyl from before, and he responded with a silent nod before continuing:

"Common goods have readily determined prices, but how would you

determine the price of a unique item?”

“…I guess I’d let the potential buyer set the price. No, wait, other way around. The seller sets the price and gives others the opportunity to buy… The ball’s really completely in the seller’s court for that, isn’t it?”

“Precisely.”

I must’ve made a weird face, because Richard asked me to stop.

“It’s just hard to believe. There can’t be that many cat’s eye collectors to begin with, right?”

“Let’s suppose for a moment that we’re not talking about the cat’s eye but an impressionist painting or an apartment in a Shanghai skyscraper, would that make it easier to understand?”

“Oh…uh, I think I get it…”

It was starting to come together for me. You didn’t have to be a collector or own an apartment to invest a fixed sum of money in gems or real estate—whether it was for the purposes of risk management, avoiding taxes, or speculating on the asset increasing in value.

“I guess gemstones are an ‘asset,’ too. I never thought about it that way before. Kind of embarrassing considering how long I’ve been working here now…”

I had to wonder how many of our customers who’d purchased stones worth several million had that sort of thing in mind. There had to be some, at least. Spending several million on something just because it was pretty would be ludicrous, after all.

“No need to make it complicated. It’s just another way that people appreciate gemstones. For a stone to be considered a financial asset, hmm, I’d say it would probably have to be valued at over ten million at least. Stones in that value range only increase in value. An exceedingly productive and high-quality new mine would have to be discovered for the value to drop. You don’t need to do much to maintain the value of the asset, either. This practice hasn’t become very common in Japan yet, but the passing down of jewelry in families has been a cultural practice for generations. It’s small, light, easy to carry in an

emergency, and can be converted into cash in any country, after all.”

I thought back to what Mr. Yasaka had said. He said the stone was meant to keep his son safe. A stone that would give him strength.

I didn’t know what kind of illness Milk had discovered, but I had some ideas. I could feel Mr. Yasaka’s clumsy expression of love. Even though Hajime was still so young, he probably wanted to make sure he had something to leave behind for him.

It was kind of sad to think about.

Richard continued, as if trying to dispel the gloomy atmosphere that was beginning to hang over the shop, “I wouldn’t necessarily say that gemstones are easier to convert to cash than bonds or real estate. But in my humble opinion, the essence of a gemstone isn’t in its value as a replacement for real estate or gold but in its beauty.”

“I can agree with that.”

Richard looked at me and smiled. He had such a nice smile. My body wasn’t exactly built to feel joy every time I saw a beautiful person smile, but Richard’s smile in particular had a peculiar soothing quality to it.

“Want some more tea? There’s still a ton of iced royal milk tea left in the pot.”

“Why not?” Richard replied, and I went back to the kitchen to fill a glass.

Assets that maintain their value—considering all the instability in the world these days, it was easy to understand why you’d want to put any leftover money you might have into a safer format, especially if you had a kid to think about passing it on to. I had just never conceived of using gemstones like that before.

Suddenly, a dark cloud of anxiety filled my head.

The Yasaka family was expecting their second child. I’d dismissed Hajime’s demands for a second stone to match as a cute, childish desire, but what if there really was something to that? I mean, he wasn’t wrong. You couldn’t just split the cat’s eye in two. Couldn’t an asset that couldn’t easily be shared

become a source of discord between the two of them?

I served Richard his tea, opened by saying that I was pretty sure he could tell something was bothering me, and on to explain what was going through my head at the moment. Richard paused for a bit, giving me a baffled look, before smiling and taking a sip of his tea. The ice clinked against the glass. His smile in that moment was incredible. It was a stony beauty, like a cathedral painted by an impressionist master with every ounce of passion in their body. I did not voice this thought, of course.

“Cat’s eye is a talisman that protects against evil. It drives off ill will between people. If the two of them can maintain hearts as pure as that stone, as the years add up, they’ll realize that having someone with whom you can appreciate beauty for beauty’s sake is more valuable than any stone.”

“…They have Milk, too.”

“Indeed.”

I had to wonder what the Yasaka family’s guardian angel would think of the whole affair. I loved cats and dogs, but I’d never had one as a pet myself and had always been a little jealous of people who had bonds like that with their pets. I hoped the divine protection Hajime believed Milk granted him continued to protect him long into the future.

“But, man, that really solved my problems. We used up a good amount of that extra milk already. We should run out in exactly two days now. It’s perfect.”

“……”

I smiled, but Richard’s face was sullen. I had to wonder why. I frowned, and Richard made a strange face, mirroring my expression.

“No, your face just tensed up. What’s wrong?”

I waited for his answer, a serious look on my face, and Richard spoke sounding weirdly embarrassed.

“…I’m only asking out of curiosity, but this milk agar jelly thing you mentioned. What kind of food is it, exactly?”

My brain went into high-speed rewind back to earlier this morning. Milk agar

jelly. Right, because I bought too much milk, and I was trying to figure out how to use it up. So I suggested milk agar jelly.

Right.

I smirked as I stood up, and Richard made an even more awkward face at me.

“Why are you making that face?”

“I’m going to Meidi-ya to pick up some agar agar and milk. I just need to get a receipt, right?”

“Cease this at once.”

“I’m sure they have agar agar. I knew you’d be interested. You are the Emperor of Sweets, after all.”

“I am not! …Pardon the outburst, I’m sorry I don’t understand what you’re saying. My earlier comment was merely a question.”

“It ends up super sweet if you use condensed milk, and it gives you a real boost, kinda like an energy drink.”

“I never asked you to make it. And the contract you signed didn’t include anything of the sort in your job description, either!”

Richard’s speech had lost its usual, practiced elegance. I didn’t hear him talk like this very often. He was absolutely serious. I wiped the teasing smirk off my face and turned back to my boss. Richard glared at me intently.

“…Got it.”

“Very well, then.”

“I’ll make it at home and bring some in.”

Richard looked completely at a loss. His handsome face had “that damn idiot,” written all over it. I’m not gonna lie, I kinda liked how stuffy and formal he could be sometimes.

“I just hope, for your sake, that you have no good-looking friends who might one day approach you for your help robbing a bank.”

“That’s a completely unrelated topic. You worry about some pretty ridiculous things, you know.”

“Well, do what you will, but I’m not raising your salary.”

“Aw, you won’t? I was kinda secretly hoping it might work.”

“You couldn’t be more transparent. This isn’t a restaurant, and you’re a college student. I believe a college student’s primary job is studying, but I’m not sure how you feel.”

“Can’t really argue with you on that one.”

Richard turned his head away with a “hmph!” When it came to the topic of sweets, his reactions got three times more childish than usual. Honestly, I secretly kinda liked it.

“…You don’t even remember that I said I’d prefer pudding.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

Richard was cold and pointy as an icicle. He refused to say another word.

The following day, the shop was awash in customer appointments, and I served more cups of rich royal milk tea than I could count. Richard used his winning smile and silver salesman’s tongue to show off gemstones, make sales, and entertain customers by chatting about jewelry. If there was such a thing as a perfect human being, it would be Richard when he was working at the shop. I couldn’t comment on what he was like in any other context.

I was a little envious of the Yasaka family’s guardian angel, Milk, the white cat who could see the future. Cats don’t speak human language, so even if they can see the future, they couldn’t possibly have the same human relationship concerns that people do. I had to wonder if Richard would let me see more of the real him if I were a cat. If he’d let me see sides of him other than Richard, the perfect jeweler, in contexts other than sweets.

As I went through the parking lot behind the shop on my way home that way, I learned something that made me happy. The black cat that would let me pet it sometimes had a name. I heard a woman call to her, saying “Sakura, dinner’s ready,” and the black cat elegantly slipped out of my hands and toward the voice.

If I ever moved to an apartment that allowed pets—no, if I ever got my own house and was with someone who also loved animals, I wonder what I'd name our pet? Maybe I'd give it a child's name?

Richard did tell me I should start thinking about my future while my prospects were still wide open. I found it a little hard to believe my future was quite that rosy looking, but I guess he had a point. I didn't have mysterious powers like that cat, Milk. I may not know what the future holds, but was that really such a bad thing? Dreams are a human privilege, after all.

case 2 The Fighting Garnet

JEWELRY ÉTRANGER was located on the second floor of a mixed-use building on a Ginza back street and only opened on the weekend. The first floor housed an office of the real estate firm that managed the building, and the third floor and above were full of offices and empty units.

Today, there was a construction notice in the shop's mailbox. The first-floor office was having its air conditioner replaced. Just some minor renovations. The notice said that several construction workers would be coming and going and there might be banging on the ceiling. The work was scheduled to start next Saturday at 2 p.m. It'd probably be difficult to sell gemstones with all that racket, so we'd probably be closing up early that day.

"If we don't have any appointments, maybe it'd be better to just close for the day."

"I'm not fond of temporary closures. If it would be too inconvenient for you, you're welcome to stay home."

"Oh, come on, I'll be in, okay?"

"Will you, now?" he said with a nod. He may have had a face of peerless beauty, but on the inside, he was an old curmudgeon, hopelessly set in his ways. He also had an unusual fondness for sweets. I had to go all the way out to Kabukiza Theatre to get him some of their ningyo-yaki. They weren't scalding hot from right off the iron or anything to begin with, but they cooled down to just the perfect temperature on my way back. They were so good.

I explained that you're supposed to eat them with green tea, but he insisted on royal milk tea. It was basically a religion to him, I'd concluded at this point. And I wasn't about to win against a fanatic's religious beliefs. There was no point in trying. Plus, they were delicious when we enjoyed them together.

"…You know, I've been thinking this for a while, but don't you think this lounge is a little dreary?"

My beautiful boss didn't say a word as he sipped the royal milk tea I'd made him. His face was saying, "I can hear you, but I'm not about to dignify that with a response." I was *very* familiar with that face.

“I just think it’d be nice if there was a little something else in here. Like how Kabukiza Theatre has a souvenir corner. We could do all sorts of stuff. I’m sure all our foreign clients would appreciate a little taste of Japan, too.”

“I believe I mentioned this before, but I am not about to fill my shop with clutter. There would be no end to it.”

“Oh, come on, not even one little cat sculpture?”

“I can tell from that one comment that you’ve never been bombarded with trinkets under the premise that someone ‘thought you’d like it’ before.”

“Urgh, sorry.”

Richard ignored my lukewarm apology. I was pretty sure this man had a wide variety of experiences that the vast majority of the world’s population would never share.

I cleaned up the food, and our next appointment arrived. It was Ms. Yamamoto.

“Welcome. I hope we didn’t keep you waiting.”

“Thank you…”

The week before last, a new customer came to the shop. She was a woman in her mid-twenties who only gave the name “Yamamoto.” She had called for an appointment, asking to look at garnets. She worked at a foreign investment firm. She said that her fiancé was looking to buy her a ring, but she wanted to find something she liked first. Budget-wise, the sky was the limit. Ideal conditions for a sale.

Her black hair was tied up in a ponytail with a scrunchie, and she was wearing a grey skirt and plain blouse ensemble today. I wouldn’t say she looked boring, exactly. More that she probably just liked understated colors that didn’t stand out too much. I remembered thinking the same last time she was here, too.

I made some fresh tea and made small talk with her—*it’s getting warm out, isn’t it? AC must be rough if you’re sensitive to cold*—that sort of thing. Meanwhile, Richard disappeared into the back room and returned with his box of wonders.

He popped it open atop the glass table, and we were met with a flood of color.

Red, yellow, orange, green, and even purple. They were all garnets, some deeper in color, some paler. That's right—garnets came in every color but blue, right? The box contained the stones she'd liked on her previous visit, along with a few new friends.

Richard always managed to pack his box of wonders with gems, even when the customer hadn't made a particular request. Garnets made pretty regular appearances in those selections. It depended on the specific variety, but generally speaking, it didn't appear to be a particularly difficult stone to acquire.

"Oh my…"

"I've included several top-quality specimens of rhodolite garnet in this selection. The demantoid stones are the same ones from your last visit."

Richard bowed, and Ms. Yamamoto leaned forward without a word, intently looking over the stones sitting atop the black velvet. The mood lacked the strangely solemn gravity of someone searching for the perfect quartz for fortune telling.

She was just…looking.

Intently and without saying a word. Her gaze was extremely serious.

She used the little flashlight Richard had lent her to look inside as she touched each stone with her fingers.

I couldn't help imagining her as a detective from a mystery novel, combing through a pile of fake gemstones among which a real one belonging to her client was hidden. The detective would have to correctly identify the right stone—with dire consequences for failure! I knew I was being ridiculous. This was a jewelry shop, and Ms. Yamamoto was just a regular customer. Plus, I was sure Richard would be able to pick out the right one in a snap, anyway. He wasn't the kind of man who would offer up stones to customers that he didn't have the utmost confidence in.

A heavy silence hung over the dreary room.

You could've cut the tension with a knife.

I mean, shouldn't the mood be a bit lighter for picking out an engagement ring? Then again, it was probably a once in a lifetime thing, so maybe it made sense to be super serious about it.

Ms. Yamamoto suddenly looked up and let out a little gasp. Maybe she noticed my eyes had started to wander.

"Sorry, I…I get a little quiet when I'm focused… Please don't mind me and talk about whatever you like."

"Oh, no, this is my shop, and you are my customer. Please behave however you like."

"I just can't decide. Garnets sure are pretty, too."

Too? That was a strange word to tack on there. I thought about it for a moment before forcing a smile. Ms. Yamamoto came to the shop specifically asking to see garnets, so it seemed odd that she was so torn about it. Maybe she just needed a gentle push.

"You know, I think any garnet would suit you perfectly! I can't think of a stone that would be more 'you,' Ms. Yamamoto. Don't you agree?"

I put on my best smile, and Ms. Yamamoto—almost immediately—frowned.

What? Why? I turned to Richard to save me. He looked like a porcelain doll in a suit. Noticing his customer's discomfort, my boss gently asked her what the trouble was. Ms. Yamamoto looked at Richard, her face still contorted into a grimace.

She looked distressed, almost like she'd just stumbled upon a bitter, long-time enemy.

"…Um, would you mind if I asked you something?"

I twitched, having a very bad feeling about what was to come, but Richard was completely unaffected as he smiled warmly at her. "Of course not. Ask anything you like."

"Do beautiful people have it easier?"

Excuse me?

For a brief moment, Richard's expression and mine were identical. If I were to title the piece, I'd call it "Bewilderment." *What on earth did she just say?*

Richard managed to change gears first. "That is quite a question," he said, pausing for a moment to set his tea cup down on the table and cocking his head to the side quizzically. "Did you mean to ask me that personally? I'm honored if you meant to praise my appearance, but personally, I don't believe it's made my life much easier. If anything, it's made it harder."

Oh, come on, I mean, there's no way you haven't benefited at all, right?

Apparently, I wasn't the only one thinking that, judging from the incredible expression on Ms. Yamamoto's face. It was neither shock nor hatred but a look of despair and frustration. I had to wonder why.

"Then let me put it a different way: Who do you think has it harder in daily life, a plain-looking person or an especially attractive person?"

"That is a rather difficult question. Whether in the context of professional ability or communication skills, physical appearance has little to nothing to do with the content of a person's character. Human beings are all unique, irreplaceable individuals irrespective of their external appearance, race, sexual orientation, and so on—much like each individual gemstone is unique."

"Humans are like…gemstones?"

I wasn't sure if she was actually okay. Ms. Yamamoto's voice kept getting lower. I tried to change the topic by asking if she'd like more tea, mentioning that I could make either iced or hot royal milk tea. She looked at me with gloomy eyes.

"You served me this tea last time I was here. It doesn't taste like it's bottled or instant—do you make it here? That must be a lot of work."

"Oh, yes, I make it right in the kitchen back there. It's my boss's favorite."

"I guess even beautiful people can be unreasonable at times…"

Even an awkward smile and a "That really doesn't have anything to do with it," didn't sway her. I shrugged a bit, and Richard chuckled softly. At which

point, Ms. Yamamoto snapped.

“You don’t have to laugh at me! I was just asking a question!”

“I am so terribly sorry.”

“Y-you shouldn’t have to apologize. I’m being irrational!”

“Thank you for your consideration.”

“Going back to the previous topic: As one of the non-beautiful people, I can say with confidence that beautiful people have it easier.”

Richard lowered his head without saying another word. I stayed silent, too. All we could do was wait for the storm to pass. Last time Ms. Yamamoto was here, she seemed like a sensible and quiet—if not *too* quiet—young woman, but today, her face was full of bitterness. I had no idea what she was so mad about.

“…I know that the stones that make their way to this shop are a tiny fraction of the ones they dig up. Despite being the very same material, stones that are too small or the wrong color end up being used for industrial tools or pulverized to make paint. Not every stone can become a gem, not even most of them. So if you insist on your metaphor, it would be more accurate to say that humans are like *stones* not *gemstones.* Don’t you agree?”

“You’re talking about the classification process. You are quite well informed on the topic.”

My beautiful boss smiled at her, and Ms. Yamamoto hung her head with a huff to hide her face. Even her eyes were red. For some reason she couldn’t seem to control herself—but why? Wait, I know. Her attitude suddenly changed when—

—I complimented her.

I…I did it again. I caused Richard trouble with my careless actions. Oh, come on! What the hell did I even say to her? I couldn’t remember. I was pretty sure it must’ve sounded innocuous to me, at least. I think I’d said something about garnet suiting her? Something like that. It was hard to see what was so wrong with saying that. But whatever it was, it had blown back on Richard.

My handsome boss took another sip of his tea and spoke in a calm tone. “Of

course, inorganic matter like stone and living, breathing creatures like human beings couldn't be more different. You are correct that there are stones that are excluded from the label of 'gemstone,' but even gemstones are evaluated on a variety of criteria including carat, quality, and clarity to assign them a monetary value. The world of gems is a world of constant comparison. However, I believe that every gemstone is unique and that the gemstones we hold close to our hearts bear a striking resemblance to individual human beings. One thing human beauty and gemological beauty share in common is that neither is bound by a strict set of standards. I believe that one of the myriad ways to appreciate gems is in communing with stones, thus allowing us to imagine a world in which beauty is not defined by stereotypes. And in that sense, I am rather confident in echoing my employee's sentiment that garnet is a stone that would suit you most admirably, Ms. Yamamoto."

That's right. I remember now. I told her, "I can't think of a stone that would be more 'you,' Ms. Yamamoto." I only said it because I thought she wanted a garnet and figured it might give her the nudge she needed to make a purchase.

But maybe that's not what was really going on.

Ms. Yamamoto bit her lip and clenched her fists so tightly her hands trembled, but she opened her mouth again, resolved to make her point.

"Thank you very much for the explanation! You've done a very good job convincing me that you're a jeweler with a silver tongue! So humans are like gemstones, and I'm a garnet, huh? Then why don't you try guessing my background? If your theory is sound, then a know-it-all about gemstones should know everything there is to know about people, too, right?"

I was completely at a loss. Generously, she was being unreasonable. *What do I do? Maybe she'll calm down if I bring out some ningyo-yaki.* Then again, she wasn't Richard, the Emperor of Sweets, so it probably wouldn't be quite so easy. I glanced over at Richard as I wondered what to do next, looking for guidance.

The jeweler of unequaled beauty had a smile on his face, almost like he was enjoying himself.

"Your background, did you say, Ms. Yamamoto?"

“Who am I? Where am I from? What do I like? That sort of thing. You can’t tell me because you don’t know, do you? Or is a worthless stone not even worth the time it would take you to appraise it?”

“Of course not,” Richard replied.

“Then you should be able to answer my questions,” she bit back.

But just judging by the tones of their voices, Richard seemed like he had a real chance at winning.

“Well,” my boss said, buying some time. “If you insist, I will proceed, but do know that I mean no offense. You’re quite knowledgeable about plants, specifically flowers, are you not, Ms. Yamamoto? You’re skilled with your hands and enjoy making crafts. You live at home, and while you want for very little in terms of your basic needs, something you simply cannot let go of happened to you recently, and you struggle to contain your anger—I hope that much is sufficient to make my point.”

I think “speechless” would be the best way to describe her subsequent silence.

What the hell did he just say? was what the look on Ms. Yamamoto’s face said as she sat next to me, completely dumbstruck, almost like she’d been hit in the head. Her eyes looked a little bleary and wet. I guess he’d nailed it, huh?

“I am so sorry!”

Even as she completely ignored me and prostrated herself on the table, Richard just continued looking out the window with a cool, collected expression on his face.

Ms. Yamamoto, who had claimed to be working at a foreign investment firm, was apparently actually employed at a train station flower shop. She lived at home and had both an older and younger sister. Her parents were still with them, and her entire family was in good health and still working.

“Why did you lie about your job like that?”

“Seigi. I must apologize on his behalf. He doesn’t mean to pry.”

“Oh, no, if anyone should be apologizing it’s me… But how did you know?

You're not one of our customers…are you?"

"If I must reveal my secrets, one clue was the fragrance—you smell of freshly cut flowers, not a floral perfume. Perhaps you could say it's the perfume of life itself. You've always had the fragrance of flowers about you. The second clue was, to be blunt, the state of your hands. It would not have been so telling had it been winter, but chapped skin on the hands around this time of year tends to be indicative of someone who works with water."

Now that I thought about it, flower shops did have this very unique, hard-to-describe scent. *So that's the scent of a flower shop, huh.* Richard added that he noticed the crocheted charm on her bag and intuited that it might be her hobby, and her skill with her hands from the fact that it was very likely handmade. I guess, to Richard's eyes, we were all basically walking billboards for all of our personal information.

"So, um, how did you know I live at home?"

"A little intuition and a little knowledge of demographics. You see, in present-day Japan, it is not uncommon for women your age to still be living at home. On that note, I must beg your pardon for overstepping."

That last one made sense to me, at least. The last time Ms. Yamamoto was here, the previous customer had left a newspaper behind. She'd mentioned, "Oh, we get this at home." It was unusual for someone living on their own to have a newspaper subscription, so I was about 30 percent sure she lived at home.

Ms. Yamamoto looked like someone who'd picked a fight and lost, badly. Teary-eyed and humbled, at least she'd calmed down a bit. She glanced over at me briefly,

"Um…are you sure this isn't actually a detective agency?"

"Oh, don't be silly. We're an ordinary jewelry shop. Well, I guess my boss's beautiful face is anything but ordinary, but still."

I put my foot in my mouth again. Richard was staring daggers at me. Before he had the chance to scold me, Ms. Yamamoto sighed and mumbled under her breath:

“Beautiful people, huh… So, my full name is Mito Yamamoto, but the way my first name is written is kind of embarrassing…”

“Ooh! What characters did your parents pick? I’m Seigi Nakata, but the ‘Seigi’ is written like the word ‘justice,’ as if I’m some sort of superhero or something. It’s kind of ridiculous. What’s your name, Ms. Yamamoto?”

“It’s Mito, written with the characters for ‘beautiful’ and ‘person’! What kind of person names their kid ‘beautiful person’?! It’s like spending your lottery winnings the moment you bought the ticket! It’s so ludicrous, it’s not even funny.”

I took a step back when she shouted. The conversation moved quickly after that. She was the type of person who could just keep talking if you left her to her own devices.

Her story went like this: She started working at the flower shop after she got her associate’s degree. She met her romantic partner, they dated for seven years, and then oh-so auspiciously this May, she was unceremoniously dumped. She had a real way with words. I couldn’t help getting sucked into her story.

“It was humiliating. He found a younger woman, and that was that! We’d long since lost the spark between us, so I wasn’t even really sad, just humiliated. I wanted to beat her. But how could I? I wasn’t a high school student, and you can’t turn back time to make yourself younger…”

I did some mental math—an associate’s degree plus seven years would make Ms. Yamamoto around twenty-seven. My mother got remarried to Mr. Nakata well into her thirties, so twenty-seven still seemed plenty young to me, but I guess she felt differently.

“That’s why I decided to buy a garnet. I was born in January, so it’s my birthstone. I don’t think I’m going to have another chance in my lifetime for someone to give me a ring, so I decided to take matters into my own hands.”

Richard cast his eyes down and slowly nodded. The gesture suited his elegant expression perfectly.

“Whatever path you decide to walk, I believe making that decision for yourself is most commendable.”

“Thank you very much.”

Ms. Yamamoto lowered her head, almost like a student might to a teacher. But Richard continued:

“Gemstones tend to stay with us longer than any of our romantic partners. Naturally, as this is my jewelry shop, I have the utmost confidence in any of the pieces I carry. However, when a customer is more concerned with making a purchase than selecting the piece that’s right for them, I would generally recommend giving it some more time.”

I thought he’d do that. He didn’t like selling gems to people who’d just buy something because money is no object. Kind of like a breeder who won’t sell a puppy to someone they don’t think would take care of it. When I asked him why, he told me that stones don’t just have the power to make people happy, and that when someone is confused about their own desires, gems can lead them across a dangerous bridge. What a disturbing metaphor.

Going back to Ms. Yamamoto… When she started arguing about how beautiful people have it easier, despite the frustration on her face, her eyes were downcast and full of embarrassment.

“I’m sorry. I know all too well that I’m obsessing over something stupid, but it’s just…I guess it just feels like it’s easy for you to say things like that because you’re one of those beautiful people…”

I think she was trying to say that Richard couldn’t possibly understand how she felt. The battle-hardened jeweler simply smiled. Was this really “easy” for him? I felt like it had more to do with his sales experience than anything. And since he was born with that face, he’d probably had no choice but to get used to dealing with irrational misplaced anger like this.

Richard gave a polite, subtle bow and attempted to change the topic.

“You mentioned earlier that garnet was January’s birthstone. I take it you’re already quite well acquainted with the stone.”

“I only know that because my birthday’s in January. Garnets are supposed to represent hard work and perseverance, right?”

She had a smile on her face, but her tone was bitter.

“When I was a kid, I always got excited when we got ads for jewelry shops in the mail. I used to cut out just the gemstones from the pictures and collect them because I thought they were so pretty. I didn’t find out what my birthstone was until junior high, and to be honest, I wasn’t very happy about it. Garnets just don’t have the same impact as diamonds or rubies. Am I wrong?”

“I believe that would depend entirely on whom you happen to ask. The word ‘gem’ evokes a variety of different images in people.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. We live in a world of inequality, you know. When I was old enough to understand the value of money, I realized garnet wasn’t a particularly valuable stone, either.”

“And yet you still made up your mind to buy a garnet. Why is that?”

Honestly, lying about having a rich fiancé and lying about being born in April as an excuse to look at diamonds didn’t seem all that different to me, but Ms. Yamamoto kept repeating, “but I just had to be born in January” with a bitter chuckle. I really didn’t think she was lying about that.

“Plus, once I started looking into it, I wanted to see one in person. Garnets are pretty funny stones. They’re literally ‘pomegranate stones’ in Japanese, so you’d think they’d all be red, but there are yellow ones, too, and demantoid garnet is green. But even though almandine garnet and pyrope garnet are both similar shades of red, they have different names. I don’t even know what I’m talking about anymore.”

“Garnets have different names depending on the slight differences in their chemical compositions—the distinction is largely a mineralogical one. You can’t distinguish them by eye, so it’s common to start by sending them to a lab to figure out what type of garnet you have. But ultimately, the fine-grained distinctions are not particularly relevant to one’s personal enjoyment and appreciation of a stone. That said, your knowledge would put some professionals to shame, Ms. Yamamoto.”

“Thank you very much. But you really don’t have to be so considerate of me…”

Richard forced a smile. If I had to guess, he probably would have liked to say the same thing to her. Ms. Yamamoto seemed to struggle with taking

compliments. It was like she was always comparing herself to someone “better” than her, just like you might measure a garnet against another stone. It was almost like Richard’s beauty scared her.

“Honestly, I’d rather you tell me about how your attractiveness has helped or hurt you in life than gemstones. I don’t get the opportunity to talk to someone like you very often. If it’s not too rude of me to ask…which experience have you had more of?”

“Overwhelmingly the latter.”

He didn’t even hesitate before responding. *Oh, I know what’s next. We’re going to get a taste of Richard’s smooth and eloquent venom.*

“I think the worst of it is people not even considering me human. I recall being told, ‘I wish I could have had the chance to talk to you at least once,’ during my high school graduation. What a ludicrous thing to say to a person. Why not just talk to me in the first place instead of saying that to me?”

“They probably couldn’t. You were just too out of their league.”

“I think you just made my point for me.”

His words were clear and precise. He looked her square in the face as he wove his web of words. He wore a beautiful smile, but his blue eyes were clouded with a faint tinge of sadness.

“Even if they truly did want to speak to me, the underlying implication of desiring to talk to someone because of their atypical appearance is not all that dissimilar to wanting to go to the zoo to see an okapi or some such animal out of curiosity. As you can see, at times, overly remarkable external physical characteristics can be a hindrance to socialization.”

“Then, um…is that really that bad? Are you really saying it’s nothing but trouble?”

Richard just smiled. Ms. Yamamoto smiled meekly and cast her gaze down to her lap.

“Even if that is true, I… If I had a choice in the matter, I’d rather have been born beautiful.”

I was starting to feel awkward standing there, so I escaped to the kitchen. We still had some of the specialty ningyo-yaki from Kabukiza Theatre left. They were round, sweet, and tender traditional Japanese pastries, filled with the typical red bean paste and shaped like the Seven Gods of Fortune's faces. Ms. Yamamoto ate three of the little cakes while "appreciating" the garnets Richard had picked out for her, before declaring that she would make her decision next time and leaving the shop, looking a bit guilty. Her next appointment was for Sunday morning.

"Hey, Richard, were you being serious about your looks bringing you nothing but trouble?"

"Just as an example, what would you do if you were walking down the street, minding your own business, when an older gentleman whom you've never seen before in your life suddenly clings to you in tears, begging you to inherit his fortune?"

That sure was a sudden punch to the gut. It'd be pretty funny if it were the justification for a character in a comic book becoming a millionaire on the next page, I guess, but if I were to be put in that position for real, it'd be a mess. *Man, there really isn't an easy answer to that one. Just awful.*

"Beauty is kind of terrifying, isn't it? Especially the way some people think of it like a currency that can be exchanged."

"Precisely. The concept of beauty is such a vague, intangible thing, yet somehow, it seems to have the power to attract all manner of simpletons, fools, buffoons, rabble, and ghouls like moths to a flame. Absolutely ridiculous."

I was well aware of that much, at least. Once, when I went out to eat at a nearby restaurant with him after staying late to clean, someone sitting on the other side of the restaurant came over asking to join us and offering to foot the bill. I was still in the middle of eating my curry, but at Richard's urging we left the place immediately. At the time, I didn't think of it as anything more than some once-in-a-lifetime freak occurrence, but it later dawned on me that Richard had hardly reacted to this "freak occurrence." What was, to me, something I'd never have to deal with in my whole life was something entirely different for him.

It was awful. Truly awful. Awful like when an elementary school classmate said my grandma was a yakuza. She wasn't a yakuza; she was a legendary pickpocket. But it didn't matter.

"Hey, so, I'm not just saying this to try to make you feel better, and I don't mean any offense, but—"

"I think I know what you're about to say."

Does that mean I shouldn't say it? I held my tongue, but Richard gestured for me to go ahead with a cool and collected look on his face. I guess that's an okay.

"Personally, when I look at your face, it puts me in a good mood. It cheers me up and inspires me."

"Well, thank you."

"Oh, no, if anything, I should be thanking you…"

"Perhaps then my supposed beauty, or whatever you'd like to call it, has the power to bring happiness to those around me."

His tone was as sarcastic as he could muster. This really wasn't a good topic. I hated awkward situations like this. And I definitely hated talking about things I couldn't do anything about.

"Why don't I make you some royal milk tea? Red bean paste sure goes better with black tea than you'd think. I always thought green tea was basically traditional Japanese sweets' other half—I feel like I've been missing out."

"Other half, hm? Have you ever thought about what else that phrase is often used for?"

"Um, I'm not really sure."

"I see, well, it can also refer to one's soul mate."

Soul mate. I guess like your significant other or something?

Thinking about Ms. Yamamoto again made my mood sink. She did say she wasn't all that sad about the breakup, but I know if I were her, I'd be really broken up about it. But how did she jump from that to concluding she'd lost her

chance at ever being given an engagement ring and deciding to buy one for herself? I guess that solo wedding thing had been trendy lately. Maybe that was it. It wasn't like I didn't understand the idea of just buying something for yourself if you wanted it, but getting a ring made cost a few tens of thousands of yen to begin with, and picking a stone with no budget limitations could mean spending upward of 300,000 yen on a sparkling green demantoid garnet. You can spend that money in an instant, but the sting of the expense will stick with you for a while. Plus, if you only bought it because you got dumped, won't looking at it just bring back bad memories after the initial novelty's worn off?

"Richard, are you actually going to sell her a garnet?"

"I do sell jewels. It is my job to guide my customers to buy the item they need when they need it."

By which he meant he'd only sell when he was confident it wouldn't bring the customer unhappiness. I knew as much from watching him work since I started here. Maybe that meant he didn't think it's going to be that much of an issue in Ms. Yamamoto's case?

I peered into the box of wonders before Richard put it away. There were red stones, green stones, candy-colored oranges even—and they were all garnets. It was hard for a newbie like me to believe.

"The red ones are almandine garnet?"

"Yes. The pomegranate color they're named for. They're quite abundant, and the supply is reliable, making them relatively more affordable."

"And the orange ones?"

"Mandarin garnet. They're a rare form of spessartine garnet. The gems we call tsavorite and hessonite are also all categorized as types of garnet. Garnet is conventionally thought of as a less expensive stone, so when rare colors are discovered, they're given unique names in order to set them apart from that image."

"Isn't that confusing? I mean, even if you tell your customers they don't need to worry about those little details, you have to."

"It's not so bad once you get used to it. In much the same way, you have dark

miso, white miso, and red miso, which all differ in color and texture, yet are all forms of miso. I'm sure someone unfamiliar with Japanese cuisine would find it difficult to keep them straight, but the differences become obvious with more experience."

I guess that made sense.

Garnet was named for pomegranate because of red almandine garnet. In nineteenth-century Europe, garnets were so in fashion that the word gemstone was practically synonymous with garnet, but lately the green-colored stones have been popular. They come from Brazil, Madagascar, Russia, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia—all over the place. Before more advanced identification techniques were developed, red garnets were frequently confused for rubies, and it's not uncommon for the "rubies" in antique jewelry to turn out to be garnet or spinel. When you consider the price difference, it's pretty devastating to think about.

Ms. Yamamoto found garnet kind of disappointing, but I wonder if she knew all of this.

"Richard, do you think all women know their birthstone? I feel like that's not the sort of thing you'd know if you didn't have a particular interest in it."

"At the very least, I think more women than you realize have an interest in birthstones. It's not terribly unlike astrology. Why don't you try asking that girlfriend of yours and see what she says?"

"Tanimoto's not a representative sample. She'd know everything about it, obviously. I mean, she used to be the president of the geology club, so—wait, she's not my girlfriend! Don't get the wrong idea. I mean, at least she isn't yet."

"I see. I should have said the woman you hope will become your girlfriend, then," Richard dutifully corrected himself. *You really didn't have to do that. I'm very sensitive, you know.* Plus, I knew her birthday was in April, so her birthstone is diamond. I just knew a sparkling diamond would suit her delicate, fuzzy, adorable aura. What about a rose gold ring, absolutely encrusted with melee diamonds? With my savings, something like that was less a dream and more a delusion, though.

"She must really want a ring if she decided to buy one for herself instead."

“I’m not so sure about that. Seigi, I’m going to put these back in the safe. Please make some tea in the meantime.”

“Roger that.”

He was concerned about her but opted not to pry too much. That was how Richard did things. And my general inability to do the same had gotten me in quite a bit of trouble from time to time. We were selling a pretty expensive product, after all, it was probably important to keep professional and personal matters separate.

As I prepared my second cup of royal milk tea for the day, I hoped that Ms. Yamamoto would be able to select the garnet she wanted without issue.

The following Saturday, employees from the construction firm doing the remodel on the first floor came up to apologize for the impending disruption. Richard and I prepared to head home, planning to close up shop at 1:30 p.m.

A woman clad in jeans and a light sweater with her hair in disarray raced up the stairs past the men in coveralls. It was Ms. Yamamoto.

“Um! I know I don’t have an appointment today, but could you show me some stones?!”

“Oof, sorry, they’re going to do some work on the AC downstairs soon, so we’re closing early,” I told her, and Ms. Yamamoto’s knees began to wobble. I hoped she was okay. There was a handrail, but the stairs were still pretty steep. I hurried to support her so she wouldn’t fall, and she began to sniffle.

“I’m sorry… I don’t know why I’m like this…”

Ms. Yamamoto sank to the floor where she stood and began crying. I didn’t know what had happened to her, but whatever it was, it must have been quite a shock. She ground her teeth as she wept.

I didn’t know what to do. I looked back at Richard as he was locking up, and he gently cleared his throat. He had his big black suitcase with him. It had all the gems from the safe stuffed into it. Ms. Yamamoto looked up from where she sat. Her face twitched awkwardly as she wiped away her tears.

Richard smiled and invited her to have some tea until she settled down. Her eyes went wide for a moment before she began looking around a bit aimlessly, ultimately settling her gaze on me, seeming a bit desperate. They seemed to be saying, “Please come with me.” I certainly could understand why she felt that way. Richard was so beautiful that even though I was pretty used to him by now, the thought of sitting across from him like that still made me nervous. I was happy to oblige.

When we sat down at a back table in a café off Chuo-doori, words spilled forth from Ms. Yamamoto’s mouth almost like a dam bursting. Her mother and sisters had found out about her plan to buy a ring for herself. They’d found a brochure for the shop with notes she’d scrawled on it. Ms. Yamamoto, who hadn’t even told them about the breakup yet, was cornered by all three of them. They ended up insulting her, asking if she was stupid, and she ran out of the house, unable to bear it any longer. Apparently, she had the day off from work too.

“I just felt so frustrated and humiliated…and I know. I know I’m being stupid!”

She hid her face in her hands. She was all too keenly aware of how childishly she was acting.

“I just want to scream, ‘Leave me alone!’ I’m the ugliest one in my family as it is. Just let me live the rest of my life sad and alone until I die. I’ve already made up my mind!”

Our corner of the café was dominated by a strange atmosphere as Ms. Yamamoto drank her tea. I got orange juice, and Richard had ordered mineral water. In a tone that didn’t really fit the elegant atmosphere of a Saturday afternoon in Ginza, Ms. Yamamoto apologized repeatedly.

“I’m so, so sorry. There’s pathetic and then there’s whatever I am. I just couldn’t figure out what to do with myself until my appointment tomorrow and before I knew it, I…I’m so sorry…”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. We were going to be open tomorrow, anyway. Right, Richard?”

He just nodded and silently drank his water, his usual mild-mannered smile on his face. The gentle sunlight shone on his blond locks, making them sparkle like

golden threads. It felt like there were two humans at the table and one angel. No matter when or where he went, his face turned the space around him into another dimension. *All right, enough of this. I need to do something.*

"Um… So, uh, I don't know how to put this exactly, but don't be so discouraged! There are still good things out there! There are as many decent men as there are stars in the sky!"

I didn't hear Richard when he grumbled my name, but I did notice his threatening glare and shut my mouth. Ms. Yamamoto smiled faintly, her eyes dark and gloomy.

"I know my market value, more or less… I know there are plenty of even better people out there, but I also know that they wouldn't want someone like me."

The man who was attracting all the attention in the café, just by drinking his water, suddenly looked at Ms. Yamamoto. He wasn't smiling.

"I have a question for you, Ms. Yamamoto. How did you feel when you decided you wanted to purchase a garnet?"

"How did I feel? I felt…resigned."

"Resigned to what?"

"To the fact that I'm not a diamond or a ruby."

She laughed again. I finally understood when she laughed—it was when she'd given up on something. She laughed out of frustration when she was telling herself, "It's hopeless, just give up."

Richard responded to her ragged smile with his finest. It was a little scary. I wondered what he was going to say.

"I know it may be a bit tactless of me to bring this up outside the shop, but when I think of garnets, my mind turns to ancient Rome. Are you familiar with ancient Roman society?"

"Um, the Romans… I've seen *Roman Holiday*, but I'm not sure that's relevant."

"I see," Richard said with a nod and a smile that could make even a princess in

disguise blush, before setting his glass of water down on the table. He was changing gears into his Serious Sales Talk mode, I guess.

“Red garnets were particularly beloved by the ancient Romans. But they weren’t loved merely for their beauty—garnets were carried by Roman soldiers as a talisman.”

“A talisman? You mean like a good luck charm or protective ward?”

“Exactly,” Richard nodded.

While Ms. Yamamoto remained silent, he continued with what he had to say. He’d already convinced me he was an expert on the topic.

“Given the time periods we’re talking about here, this is really less the domain of a jeweler than that of museums and antiquarians, but gold rings adorned with garnets have been discovered at archeological sites dating back to the very beginning of the Roman Empire. The technology to facet gemstones to make them sparkle had not yet been developed, but they had invented cameo and intaglio engraving—forms of carved ornamentation—at that point. They would use very fine needles to carve images into stones. Many featured the images of Roman deities and were said to be used to pray for victory or one’s safe return. Whenever I see one of those rings, I can’t escape the thought that people haven’t really changed all that much, even compared to those who lived two thousand years ago. That is to say, as much then as now, people harbored a strong desire for victory—to survive and live on.”

“To survive…”

“Indeed. The thing about beautiful stones is that to enjoy them in any meaningful capacity, one must have enough spare resources to do so. Of course, our lives must be peaceful ones to afford those spare resources. And just as the Romans did, we too live in a society where we must fight to preserve that peace. Life is a battle, after all.”

“A battle…”

“To live is to fight,” Richard said with an intrepid smile.

The café suddenly got quiet when he started talking. But my boss, accustomed to attracting attention like this, paid it no mind and continued, as if

reciting lines from a classical play,

“As you work in a flower shop, it’s not hard to imagine that if you were to make a mistake regarding which flowers to stock when and in what quantities, you could cause your shop some rather significant losses, yes?”

“Huh? That is true. We’d be deep in the red if we made a big order of carnations outside of Mother’s Day, for example.”

“Gemstones operate much the same way.”

Huh?

I wasn’t the only one astonished by what Richard had said. Ms. Yamamoto was giving Richard a puzzled look as well. The beautiful man continued, unbothered.

“There are countless steps that happen before a jewel reaches a customer’s hands. It all begins with miners and mine owners, after which products are sold locally, typically bought up by an intermediary of sorts, passed through wholesalers and to retail vendors—the list goes on. They have to consider when to bring stones to market based on their current popularity, market price, and saturation. Losses can be dire if they make a single mistake in timing. Of course, sellers who make a profit by deceiving their customers are far from uncommon. Sometimes, there’s simply nothing you can do about it but lament your poor lot. Naturally, the turnover of gemstones is nowhere near as fast as fresh flowers or cakes, but it is a field that fluctuates along with supply and demand. You must always be aware of that.”

Both Ms. Yamamoto and I just watched Richard in silence.

It was the first time I’d ever actually heard him talk about, like, the *work* part of his work.

The Richard I was looking at was a man in an elegant suit who sat in a Ginza shop eating sweets and drinking royal milk tea. But that was just who he was on the weekend. On every other day of the week he traveled all over Japan, or maybe even the world, with his suitcase stuffed full of gems in tow. Unlike food and water, gems weren’t something everyone in the world desperately needed. It’s not a stable line of work by any definition.

Ms. Yamamoto gulped. “It sounds like selling gemstones is quite a battle, too.”

“To work is to live. And to live is to fight. Wouldn’t you agree that interpersonal relationships are much the same? If, for example, one were to seek out a life partner as a survival strategy, they would be forced to fight any rivals that might appear.”

“Yeah, but if your rival is younger and more beautiful than you, you’ve lost the fight before it even started…”

“While youth and beauty are certainly powerful weapons, they are no more than individual pieces of the innumerable qualities that make a person attractive. If we were to compare it to a boxing match, those qualities would be like a scorecard with a few good marks recorded on it, but there are plenty of other sources of points—one’s virtues, personality, conversational skill, the feelings they engender in those around them, their circle of friends, their hobbies, and so on. Even if your opponent appears undefeatable at first glance, you’d be surprised how often you find that once you actually throw a punch, they’re not all that different from a punching bag. The hardest part of all is steeling yourself against the fear of battle. At times such as those, I firmly believe that beauty would be of little use compared to such qualities as hard work and perseverance. Naturally, choosing not to fight is also an option, but to me you look like a valiant warrior, fighting to hold her ground.”

A warrior.

Ms. Yamamoto was at a loss for words.

Thinking about it more clearly, that was a pretty intense curveball he just threw. Now, maybe this was just me making assumptions here, but I can’t imagine there were a lot of women in the world, let alone in Japan, who would particularly enjoy being called warriors. I think being called “lady” or “princess” would probably land with more women in general. But if I were in Ms. Yamamoto’s shoes, I think I’d say thank you and offer Richard a handshake for that. Because Richard himself was a warrior, it felt like he was suggesting she was standing in the ring right beside him.

Ms. Yamamoto seemed a little confused at most, but definitely not offended.

The look of frustration and humiliation had also disappeared from her face.

“I’m a warrior? Because I work?”

“Because you sought out a garnet. You wanted a garnet, your birthstone, not any other. It’s proof of your passion and self-reflection—not unlike reforging iron. It is no simple task. For as much as you say you are no diamond or ruby, you refuse to run from that fact. I called you a warrior because you possess the will to fight.”

Richard smiled humbly, and Ms. Yamamoto looked a little bashful.

“I wish I’d had a teacher like you in junior high or high school. Thank you very much. And I’m so sorry for my behavior. I’ve truly embarrassed myself…”

“Is it not ultimately up to you to decide whether your behavior was embarrassing or, in fact, rather charming?”

“I-I think that’s going a little too far for me!”

Ms. Yamamoto finally relaxed and smiled when some new customers came into the café behind her. It was a couple—a man and a woman. When they passed behind Ms. Yamamoto, they both brazenly ogled Richard. I shot them a “what’s your problem?” look, and the two of them took a seat in the back of the café—right behind Richard.

In an instant, Ms. Yamamoto’s expression crumpled. *What is it this time?* I was about to turn around to look when Ms. Yamamoto stopped me.

“Don’t! Please!”

“Do you know the people who just came in or something?”

“He’s—”

Her ex-boyfriend. It took her quite a bit of time before she could manage to say the word. Well, this was just perfect. We definitely picked the wrong café. I guess that meant the girl with him was his new “younger, prettier girlfriend.”

I tried my best to look at the table behind us without moving my neck. I saw a man wearing slightly wrinkled clothes who could’ve had a supporting role in a romantic comedy. He must’ve been in his thirties. Sitting next to him was a visibly younger woman with black hair, wearing cute, casual Shibuya-style

clothes. The smile on her face was almost terrifyingly fake.

The café wasn't all that big to begin with. Every word the couple said was practically thrust into my ears. The man did most of the talking, mostly showering his new girlfriend with affection, but every comment was tainted with comparison to something else—you're so cute, you're not like *other* girls. You're so honest and nice, unlike *some people* who are rotten to the core. I'm so glad you're with me, I know I made the right decision breaking up with her. And so on. You know the drill. His new girlfriend was just sitting there, listening to him pick at every little thing about his ex. I didn't get it. She just sat there, smiling and nodding. I desperately wanted her to tell him that she didn't appreciate compliments like that.

Ms. Yamamoto's eyes were vacant, with a partial smile on her face. It didn't look like she was about to run over there and punch anyone, at least. She was just shocked. I wanted to say something, anything to distract her, but the funerary mood had already sunk in, and I couldn't bring myself to speak.

I looked over at Richard, wondering if we should just leave. But the jeweler just sat there, totally aloof, sipping his mineral water as if he couldn't hear a thing.

Once the man finished monologuing at her, the woman spoke for the first time.

"Um, so, that was like, fun and stuff, but maybe we can move on."

"Huh? Oh, sure."

The man asked if she wanted to go somewhere else. *Yes, do that. Or just cut the date short, whatever.*

But what the woman said next was not at all what I'd expected.

"That's not what I meant. We should go back to being friends so we can move on with our lives."

"Huh?" Ms. Yamamoto's ex-boyfriend said. That wasn't just my mental reaction. The man sat there, frozen in confusion, as his adorable girlfriend smiled at him.

“I gave it two months to try us out as a couple, but it’s just not working out. So I wanna end things.”

Her voice was as sweet as an idol’s as she spoke. All the blood gradually drained from the man’s face. I stopped holding back and flagrantly turned my head to look at him, but he was too busy to notice.

“T-try us out?”

“Huh? I’m pretty sure I told you that when we started dating. You’re a nice guy, so I thought you’d be a fun fling, but that I’d need to try things out before I know if I wanna be with you forever.”

“I-I broke up with my girlfriend!”

“Look, it’s not you, it’s me. I’m soooo sorry. Let’s just stay friends from now on, ’kay?”

“Stay friends?! D-dude, come on, you can’t be serious!”

“By the way, people are going to think you’re like a million years old if you keep calling girls ‘dude,’ so you should probably work on that. Anyway, I’ve got another date, so I gotta run, bye!”

She waved goodbye and practically skipped out of the café. The man hurried to go after her, but he ran into another patron on his way out, and she vanished while he was apologizing. When he got to the register, he was detained further because the check hadn’t been paid. He paid up and rushed out, but I was dubious that he could catch up with her.

Ms. Yamamoto and I were both completely stunned, but Richard just sat there and took another sip of his water like nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

“A-all right, where are the cameras? Th-that couldn’t have been real, right?”

The tone of her voice was about 30 percent confusion and 70 percent, perplexingly, sadness.

“Are you okay, Ms. Yamamoto?”

“I-I’m…not fine at all…”

Her reaction was intense. Her eyes went wide as she sopped up her tears with a napkin. She was really crying. Maybe she felt some sort of sympathy for him. For that awful man. I was in no position to judge her, but sympathy for *him*?

Ms. Yamamoto shook her head.

“I-It’s just…the way he was unceremoniously dumped just now, that’s just like what he did to me!”

Oh, I get it. She saw herself in what just happened. She wailed a few times before wiping her tears and coughed a little before looking up at me.

“He’s such an asshole, isn’t he?”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Richard responded ruthlessly, without a moment’s hesitation. Ms. Yamamoto wiped away her tears with a bitter expression.

“He didn’t think of her as anything but a shiny new accessory to show off…”

She sobbed again. She wasn’t mocking him. Her tone was more like…like if you looked in the mirror and you were astonished to see you looked way more tired than you thought you did.

“I… The thought of not being beautiful brought me to the point of thinking about taking my own life, but I’ve never felt as stupid as I do right now.”

I thoughtlessly asked her if she felt that way because of how long she’d dated him, but she just forced a smile and shook her head.

“No, it’s because I wasn’t any better. I was just like him. I don’t know how many times I thought to myself that I’m not beautiful or cute, so I just have to put up with an imperfect guy. But the more I think about it, I didn’t get treated like I was worthless by a man because of my looks or my age, did I? It’s not a competition to determine my worth, but I spent so much time assuming I’d already lost, that I just had to give up—but looking at things like that, doesn’t that just make you see your partner not as a person but an object to evaluate the worth of to determine how you should treat them? It’s just so awful. I…I’m such an idiot…”

She was laughing as she cried, repeating “I’m such an idiot” over and over. But for some reason she sounded happy.

“I do have to agree with one thing he said, though. Breaking up was the right call!”

Richard gave her a deep bow with a satisfied smile on his face.

We’d been there for quite a while at that point, so we decided to call it a day ourselves. Ms. Yamamoto, who’d been in complete disarray when she showed up at the shop unannounced, seemed to be in better spirits and had a cheerful expression on her face.

She bowed to us when we left the café and turned to Richard.

“Thank you for everything. I’m going to use my perseverance and strive to become a fighter.”

“I pray for your success in battle and that you are afforded the spoils you well deserve.”

She looked a little awkward, as always, but she had a smile on her face and looked like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders as she bowed to us again and left.

“Um, so.”

“My name is not ‘Um, so.’”

“Sorry, my bad. Hey, Richard, so like…I don’t really know much about beauty standards for women’s faces and stuff, but I think she looked like three times prettier when she was having fun chatting with us than when she was all sullen and quiet in the shop… Am I crazy?”

“I think discussing a woman’s beauty at length is more foolish than lighting a match in a warehouse full of fireworks. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, after all.”

Obviously, I agreed, but as an economics student aiming to become a civil servant and a part-timer working at Richard’s shop and a “warrior in training,” I wished I could have told her one thing:

I think your name suits you far better than you think it does.

After I said goodbye to Richard and got onto the Yamanote line from Shimbashi Station, I thanked the gods that I didn’t get the chance to say that to

her after all. I'm so glad I didn't put my foot in my mouth again. That would have been like sexual harassment. And who do I think I am anyway? It's such a condescending thing to say in the first place. I did realize one thing, though—while words like "pretty" and "beautiful" are words of praise, they're also words of judgment. The difference in position between judging and being judged is inescapable. The first to say it wins. One careless remark, one wrong step, and you're approaching verbal abuse. I never thought about any of that before and just kept calling Richard beautiful. But he was *really* beautiful.

I figured it was best to strike while the iron was hot, so I took the opportunity to text Richard an apology for my habitual rudeness. He responded three hours later: "I'm used to it."

I couldn't have felt more ashamed of myself. I decided to buy him some kind of rare confection in the near future to make it up to him.

It was Saturday around eleven o'clock, right after we opened, when an unusual express delivery was made to Richard's shop. The box was labeled "live plants." Plants? Not an assortment of confections?

"What did you buy?"

"I'd encourage you to look at the sender's name."

I read over the pink invoice. The address was in Tokyo, and the sender was Mito Yamamoto. I was glad her name was so easy to remember. When I opened up the secure packaging, a potted plant came out. Long, narrow leaves were growing out of a short brown trunk. I guess it was some kind of house plant. There was a card with it, too.

"Whoa, apparently this is a pomegranate tree! That's so cool. I wonder if you can keep it inside."

"Let me guess. The card says, 'I'm sorry, I decided not to buy a stone after all'?"

As you'd expect of the grizzled veteran jeweler, he was absolutely correct. Five tiny message cards meant only for a single line were stuffed into the envelope. The message was written in ballpoint pen, presumably in Ms.

Yamamoto's own handwriting. She thanked Richard for his hospitality and for showing her so many stones and apologized for the incident at the café. Ultimately, her letter concluded with her candidly admitting that she had thought about it some more and decided not to buy a gem after all. It was all very her.

She said that the way she was now, she wasn't confident that she'd be able to pull off a gemstone yet. "Yet" being the operative word there. I hoped she'd be back to buy one soon.

"I guess that's just how things work out sometimes. A ring's a huge expense after all."

"Both gems and flowers are best enjoyed when one can afford them."

"No," Richard continued, bringing a delicate hand to his chin as a gentle smile formed on his lips, "Perhaps the reverse is true as well. No matter the circumstances, both flowers and gems can bring peace of mind."

So, wait, if Ms. Yamamoto had said that she really wanted a garnet, he would've sold it to her? I asked Richard as much, and he replied, "Do you know the etymology of the word 'garnet'?"

I shook my head, and Richard let out a sigh. I'll take that as a "you're working part-time at a jewelry shop, you should study a little." I am studying as best as I can, I'll have you know. I've read *Gemstones: An Illustrated Guide* from cover to cover three times now. I just kinda glossed over the technical stuff that went over my head, so admittedly I'm not sure how much good it did me, but still.

"So, what is the etymology of the word?"

"The Latin word *granatus*. It means 'seed.'"

"Oooh."

That's right, he figured out who Ms. Yamamoto really was before she told him.

"…It really was the perfect stone for her, huh?"

Richard nodded. I wasn't saying that just because she worked with flowers either. But it was just something about the word *seed* that seemed to just fit

her.

“For as much as she wanted to disparage garnet and consider it inferior, she certainly did her research—probably because it’s a stone so intimately connected to her. I believe that is a wholesome approach. You wouldn’t put so much effort into researching something you truly despised—you’d simply try to ignore it.”

“Wholesome?”

“There are some things you simply cannot change, no matter how great your dislike,” Richard continued, “Like the place you were born or your physical features. You cannot escape those realities, but what you can choose is how you face them. To my eye, despite everything she said, deep down, she was trying to accept herself for who she was, or perhaps already had. Maybe *constructive* would have been a more appropriate term. I misspoke earlier.”

“No, you didn’t. I’m pretty sure I know what you mean.”

I was pretty sure, no, definitely sure that the number one thing Richard had to deal with that he “simply cannot change” was that face of his. He sure didn’t look like he was lying when he said it brought him nothing but trouble in life. But the way he carried himself now with such grace, it was like he had been born with a personality that perfectly suited his perfect face. Like he was born of gemstones.

But I’m pretty sure he’s been through a lot.

A lot that I couldn’t possibly even imagine.

As I gazed at my extremely handsome boss, Richard raised an eyebrow. I could practically hear him saying, “Did you need something?” in his usual tone. He really had sharp eyes. Maybe I should just ask him about how he felt when his classmate made that comment about wanting to talk to him, and stuff like that. Though if Richard were in my position, he probably wouldn’t ask.

Don’t ask people things they don’t want to be asked. Don’t poke at their sore wounds. I guess it only makes sense when you’re doing business with people from different cultures with different social norms all the time. I guess you could say that, in a sense, it’s just a professional relationship, so he’s not

interested in the personal.

But despite all that, he does care about me. With a sort of warm indifference.

Basically, what I'm saying is: He's a nice guy.

"Oh, nothing."

So I should just try to follow his example.

Richard looked a little exasperated for a moment, before picking up the pomegranate plant and setting it down next to the biggest bookshelf in the shop. He stepped back to look at it, then examined it from up close and nodded several times. I guess he'd decided on a spot for it. I like it. You can see its nice, fresh leaves when you sit down in the lounge.

"I'll leave its care to you. You can take it home when it gets too big."

"You got it, boss."

"And get me some tea."

The little pomegranate seedling that Ms. Yamamoto had sent us was getting bigger, drinking up all the nutrients in its pot. Even now, the tree's beautiful green leaves were growing—a power that gemstones decidedly lacked—gradually taking over that corner of the shop.

case 3 The Dance of the Emeralds

THE SECOND FLOOR of Shinjuku Station near the west exit was mostly full of women's clothing shops, but there was a single café right in the middle of that area. They served adorable little cakes and other light fare. It was early on a Friday afternoon, and I was sitting at the counter where it overlooked the bike parking area, nervous as can be.

"Tanimoto, I…I'm… We're—!"

"You're? Seigi, are you okay? You're not choking on a piece of cake, are you?"

"No! Sorry…I'm trying to say something important, but my throat has a tendency to close up when I'm nervous."

"Oh! Well, don't worry about it too much. Take your time."

Tanimoto was sitting next to me.

My heart felt like it was about to explode, but I managed to suppress it somehow and string the words together. Just start with the "we" then get the "-'re" out. It'll be fine, just get the "not" out and you're practically there. You can do this, Seigi. Let's go.

"We're not dating!"

"Huh?"

I said it. Good.

For context, it all goes back to the end of spring this year. It's a long story, but I asked Richard to bring his Jaguar around to the back gate of campus, but there was an unfortunate misunderstanding, and Tanimoto had come under the impression that the handsome foreigner and I were dating. It was a problem. A big one. But I wasn't worried about it annoying Richard and getting fired—that wasn't the problem.

The problem was that I was in love with Tanimoto, and I wanted to date *her*. So it didn't really matter whether my supposed partner was Richard, a Hollywood actress, or an alien—it was a massive problem that she thought I was taken, period.

I watched for her reaction as I trembled in fear, and her black eyes opened

wide, looking at me a bit puzzled.

“Um, who is we?”

“Huh? Oh, me!”

“And?”

“That foreigner, the man!”

“…Oh! Right. Now that you mention it, I guess I remember something like that,” Tanimoto said in her usual languid tone and smiled.

I felt like my soul was going to spill out of my mouth. Thank goodness. It didn’t seem like she’d really thought much of it. I guess she had a pretty neutral view of interpersonal relationships. That said, I couldn’t let myself consider the possibility that she just didn’t feel anything for me at all. I mean, she agreed to go to a café in Shinjuku with me for lunch today since we both had a free period, didn’t she? Going out to eat together’s a big step. Thank you, whatever gods made this possible. Thank you.

“I must’ve gotten the wrong idea and said something weird. Sorry about that, Seigi. This happens with me a lot, and my friends always get so annoyed at me. I’ll try to be more careful.”

“Oh, no! I’m not annoyed at all! I’m just glad I could clear it up is all! Anyway, uh, these cakes are so cute and tiny, it feels almost like a waste to eat them, huh?”

“I know, right?! This orange-and-chocolate tart looks just like a pallasite meteor specimen.”

“…I’ve never seen one of those before.”

“Hang on.”

Tanimoto nimbly pulled out her phone and opened her images folder to show me a picture. It was a cross-section of a meteorite, with sparkling orange crystals suspended in rock.

“It’s pretty, isn’t it?” She said with a smile. She sure was pretty when she smiled. I could see the intensity growing in her eyes as she explained that it was a stony-iron meteorite—a very rare kind of meteorite.

She was a second-year at Kasaba University, just like me, but she was in the college of education. She was a petite girl with a gentle disposition and a remarkable love of rocks. In high school, she got her fellow rock-lovers together, started a club, and acted as its president. When she was talking about rocks and minerals, her eyes would always light up, and she'd get this really intense look on her face. Yes, just like—

"Wait, is that you, Golgo?"

"Aki? It is you! It's been ages!"

—a certain grizzled old snipe—wait, what?

A woman with long black hair sat down in the empty seat next to Tanimoto. She was wearing a tank top with a bright green cardigan, skinny jeans, and ballet flats. She had pale skin and almond-shaped eyes. She was very beautiful.

"Oh, my God, what are you even doing here! You're in college, aren't you? Don't you have class today?"

"You don't have classes every period in college. I have third period off on Fridays, so I go out with my friend sometimes. We decided to get lunch today."

"Your friend, huh…"

The woman whom Tanimoto had called Aki gave me a casual "hi." She didn't seem like a very pretentious person.

"The name's Aki Shinkai. I was friends with Golgo here in elementary school."

"But we're still good friends, aren't we, Aki? We haven't seen each other much lately, but I miss hanging out with you."

"I see you still have that same habit of saying embarrassing stuff like it's nothin–uh. Oh, I'm sorry! I guess I just spilled your nickname to your boyfriend…"

She was extremely apologetic, but I told her that I already knew and that she got it from her geology club. While I was talking, Tanimoto cut in:

"Aki, Seig's not my boyfriend. We're just friends."

"Oh, sorry."

“Yeah. I just didn’t wanna be rude and create any misunderstandings. Seigi here likes stones, too.”

She doesn’t want to be rude and create any misunderstandings.

I get it. Tanimoto felt really bad about the misinterpretation of my relationship status earlier, so she was taking care not to create a similar misunderstanding again. That’s what she meant.

There’s no way I’m *nothing* more than a good friend to her, right?

I know. It’s okay, I basically knew as much. It’s too early to consider saying yes to going out to eat some tasty food to be a date. Plus, this is Tanimoto we’re talking about. An angel of rocks and minerals. I don’t really know what kind of angel that is, but she’s definitely an angel, and going for the subtle hint approach is definitely not going to work. I guess I really don’t have any options but to directly ask her out. But I’m just not brave enough. Pathetic.

While I was wallowing in self-pity, Shinkai had a strained smile on her face,

“She’s not easy, is she? Shouko’s always been like this, though. You must have it rough.”

“Huh? Me, have it rough? Why?”

“I wasn’t talking about you, Shouko. I meant, um…what was your name?”

“Seigi. Seigi Nakata.”

“Wow, what a cool name! That’s like a superhero name or something! This Nakata guy sure has a name, huh, Shouko?”

Tanimoto just blinked and went, “What?” and Shinkai laughed and told her, “Never mind.”

“But you know, this is the last thing I was expecting—finding Shouko having cake with a guy who likes rocks, too? There must be less than ten men in all of Japan who know more about rocks than you do.”

“Seigi is still learning because he’s working part-time at a jewelry store.”

“Ooh, is it a family shop or something? Those places don’t usually hire part-timers. I always thought they only hired people they can trust full-time. That’s

pretty unusual, isn't it?"

"I kind of just fell into it, really. The shop I work at is pretty special, and most of my job is just serving tea. But…I guess I have had a lot of unusual experiences as a result though…"

"Unusual experiences? Like what?"

I glanced over at Tanimoto, and she was smiling at me, asking me to talk. I casually recounted several of the unusual incidents I'd gotten wrapped up in since the spring to Shinkai—omitting any identifying personal information, of course. Judging from how close the two of them were, I figured Shinkai must've had at least a little interest in rocks, and she was a close childhood friend of Tanimoto's, too. For the sake of my future romantic prospects, getting to know her better seemed like the obvious thing to do. My brain was shouting at me, "if you have time to worry about crap like that, just tell Tanimoto you're in love with her and you want to date!" Well, I wouldn't be suffering so much if I could manage that, now would I?

I told her about our foreign clients and my boss, the Emperor of Sweets, and his incredible powers of insight that let him see right into people's hearts. Tanimoto was already used to hearing about it, but it was new to Shinkai, and she leaned in, listening intently at first before her expression soured.

"…I wonder what it is about gemstones. People say they have powers and stuff, so maybe it's normal for there to be weird stuff about them? No way, right…"

"Did something happen, Aki? Is something bothering you?"

"Hm, kinda. That's right, you're basically an apprentice to a gemstone pro, right, Seigi?"

"It's just a part-time job!"

"Oh, don't be so humble. Think you can solve this?"

"It's just like a little quiz," Shinkai said as she rummaged around in her bag. Her white shoulder bag was unusually large. Just what was she carrying around all day? I smelled a faint hint of perfume—what was she, a princess in disguise or something? She wasn't in college, so maybe she was attached to some talent

agency?

She pulled out a folder, and inside was a sheet of printer paper with an illustration in colored pencil.

“Wow!” Tanimoto exclaimed, “You drew that, didn’t you? You always were good at drawing. What’s it for?”

“Rejected ad concept. I worked really hard on it, too.”

I pushed my cake plate to the side and set Shinkai’s hard work down in the middle of the counter. It looked like a fill-in-the-blank quiz. There were two rows of images with arrows connecting them. Three pairs in total.

The rightmost column had an illustration of one of those round-roofed Eastern Orthodox churches that you often see associated with Russia in the financial news. The arrow beneath it was pointing to a white gemstone. It was a sparkling brilliant round cut, so it was probably a diamond.

In the middle was an illustration of the Statue of Liberty and a hamburger. The arrow beneath it was pointing to round red stones that I assumed were rubies. There were several of them.

And then in the leftmost column was the question—the illustration on top was what looked like the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe. France. The arrow beneath it was pointing to a blank spot. I guess the point is to figure out what’s meant to go there.

“Diamonds for Russia, rubies for America, and for France…?”

“Ooh, you could tell that was supposed to be Russia? That makes me so happy. I worked really hard on that one in particular.”

“What are these pairings?” Tanimoto asked. “I can’t figure it out. It’s not the localities where they’re produced, and they’re not the national gemstones either. Do you think anyone familiar with gemstones would get it?”

“Good question, I think it’s less people who know about gemstones and more…maybe another genre of trivia that would understand. Haha, well, it’s not surprising it got rejected when it’s so obtuse. They ended up going with the usual photos for the ad.”

“If you have any copies left, I’d like one. You’re in the pictures, right?”

“Sorry, I’m all out,” Shinkai replied. “I think there are some more back at school though. I’ll bring you one next time I see you.”

The mysterious image association quiz was weird enough, but I was increasingly confused about just who exactly this Shinkai person was. She was in a photo on an ad flyer? So maybe my first hunch was correct and she really is working at a talent agency. But why would she be drawing for an ad? Even if it was an ad for some kind of performance or something, I have no idea what that would be.

“Did you figure it out, Seigi?”

Tanimoto looked at me anxiously. If only I could have said, “Of course I did!” but unfortunately, I had to give up. For now.

“Not yet, but I bet I’ll have it figured out by tomorrow. I’m 99 percent sure of it.”

“Wow, Seigi, you’re incredible!”

“You sure are confident. If you’re just gonna Google it, go ahead and try it now.”

“No need,” I said, holding up my hand. She let me take a photo of it with my phone. A pair of women had come up to the counter next to us, squealing “Oh, my God!” as they took picture after picture of the adorable cakes on display. I responded to Shinkai’s defiant smile with a self-assured, confident one of my own.

I had an ace up my sleeve just for times like this—that human font of trivia, the owner of Jewelry Étranger.

Richard looked at me with a completely deadpan expression and, without missing a beat, announced:

“I’m only asking to be absolutely sure, but you wouldn’t happen to be confusing me with a certain blue, cat-shaped robot, would you?”

“*You* watch cartoons?”

“Spare me.”

At 10:40 a.m. on Saturday morning, my boss was not particularly forthcoming. I had dug around online trying to figure out the solution to the riddle, but my search was not very fruitful. My search terms were too vague to bring up anything useful. But I hadn’t lost hope yet. I still had my secret weapon named Richard. I’d prepared countermeasures, in case my secret weapon was in a bad mood, too.

I set the bag I’d brought with me on the glass coffee table. Its contents: a delicately iced cake sprinkled with finely minced orange peel. Tanimoto liked it because she thought it looked like hessonite in matrix.

“I got this from a cake shop in Shinjuku Station. They sell all sorts of baked goods. Have some if you’d like.”

“Emerald.”

“Huh?”

“The answer to that picture association game you showed me earlier. France is emerald.”

What a calculating man. No, what a *knowledgeable* man. I knew I hadn’t misjudged you, Richard. You really do know everything there is to know about gemstones, and you’ve never met a dessert you didn’t like. Thank you. Thank you!

“Explain it to me, too, please! I’ll make you some delicious tea.”

I practically skipped back into the kitchen, but before I filled the pot with water, I shot off a text to Shinkai—she’d given me her number yesterday.

“Emerald!”

I got a reply just as I was adding the tea to the boiling water.

“Bingo!”

She’d added a bunch of emojis on either side of the word. She kind of reminded me of Tanimoto in terms of how open and friendly she was. She had to be popular. I was kicking myself for failing to ask her what the game was supposed to represent.

I added the milk and brought the tea back to a boil, cutting the heat just as the froth reached the edge of the pot—at which point I got a follow-up message.

“I figure this might be the universe trying to tell me something, so I had them set aside two tickets under your name. If it’s not too much trouble, you should bring Shouko along!”

There was a photo along with the message. It was probably the flyer that Tanimoto had asked about. It had a picture of a ballerina on it.

The woman was wearing a long green chiffon skirt, along with a bejeweled tiara and necklace, as she struck a magnificent pose in the spotlight. It was an ad for a performance by the Kataura Ballet Company. I guess “Jewels” was the name of the performance? The date was a Sunday three weeks from now. Oh, so Shinkai is a dancer. A professional…ballerina?

The shock took a moment to land. Why didn’t Tanimoto say anything? She told me about how they used to split lunches when they were kids, but why didn’t she ever mention her current occupation? As much as I liked how much of a space case she could be, it could be a bit of a problem sometimes.

A ballerina. Something about that word seemed to turn her immediately into some unreachable, otherworldly presence.

When I returned to the lounge with the royal milk tea I’d meticulously prepared, my boss was sitting in one of the lounge chairs, legs crossed. He was looking at me as if to say, “Do you have something to say to me or not?”

I reverently served him his tea and plated the dessert I’d brought him, and Richard brought his hands together and let out a little “hmph.”

“And the receipt?”

“It’s just a little gift. I wasn’t planning on expensing it.”

“I appreciate the thought, but I would prefer it if you refrained from doing this sort of thing.”

“You really are by the book, huh? Anyway, what was the deal with that picture? What did it mean?”

“I’m more interested in why you brought that to me today of all days.”

“…What’s that supposed to mean?”

The doorbell rang. That was odd. We didn’t have any appointments scheduled before noon. We were getting more walkins lately, but since we never did anything even resembling flash sales, it was probably the first time we’d had a walk-in customer show up right when we opened.

A woman in a grey suit came in very quietly.

She was small in stature but carried herself in a dignified manner. Her extremely long black hair flowed down her back, nearly coming to her waist. She looked about fifty. Her back was almost disturbingly straight, her expression stiff. It didn’t look like she’d come looking for a wonderful gemstone.

“We spoke over the phone last night. I’m Ayako Kataura…and you are?”

“Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian. Please, have a seat.”

“I’m sorry, I’m just a little surprised. You’re much younger than I imagined.”

I wondered who she was. I guess that means Richard got a call for an appointment last night? I shot Richard a look to ask if I should give them some privacy, but Richard didn’t even look at me. That was weird. Was he flustered, maybe?

Ms. Kataura looked at Richard intently without taking a seat.

“Am I to assume from your presence that you’ve brought the item in question?”

“No, our insurance won’t allow it, and I haven’t the power to do anything about it.”

“…Then what brings you here exactly?”

“There is something I need to ask you in person.”

The two of them ignored me and continued talking. Richard had a grim expression on his face as she bowed to him deeply. I thought her hair might touch the floor.

“If you could only just take a look at it once, I would be happy. If you could

just offer me some advice—”

“As I mentioned over the phone, I believe this is remarkably outside the scope of my expertise.”

“I know, I’m quite aware of that, but—”

She pleaded, asking if he’d be amenable to discussing this somewhere else. She sounded tired. Richard offered her a seat again, but she refused, her voice growing increasingly desperate.

“Please, I’m begging you. I need to dispel the emeralds’ curse.”

At first I thought I misheard her.

Curse?

While I was standing there dumbstruck, Ms. Kataura opened up her bag and pulled out her business cards and formally introduced herself. I even got one. Ayako Kataura. Artistic Director of the Kataura Ballet Company. The one from the flyer?

“You work for the ballet? Is there an Aki Shinkai at your company?”

“You’re familiar with our Aki Shinkai? Goodness…what a welcome twist of fate.”

She smiled happily before slowly turning to Richard and adding, “Isn’t it?”

Oh, this seems like it’s getting a bit…messy.

My ever-beautiful boss glared at me morosely.

The Kataura Ballet Company was founded right after the war. Apparently, Japan had quite a few prominent ballet companies with long histories. They were pretty active about thirty years ago and even toured overseas quite a bit, but with the changing economic landscape, they were operating comfortably but much more modestly with the support of their donors.

The school, which wasn’t far from Gotanda Station, had massive windows. The two-story building almost looked like it’d been plucked right off a street in Europe. The sign on the wrought-iron gate flanked by security guards read

“Kataura Ballet School” in gold lettering. The same flyer with the ballerina on it that Shinkai had sent me was posted up on the bulletin board.

“This is a private school operated by the company. It also serves as the training grounds for the company and offices for the management of the foundation.”

I asked her just what the job of art director involved, and she replied that in the context of a ballet company, it meant doing a bit of everything. Her voice was delicate, like the twittering of a small bird, but her posture had this unusual sense of stability. Just in terms of general vibe, she reminded me a lot of my old karate instructor. He was a master—you could throw a punch at him head-on and he wouldn’t even flinch.

She really only had business with Richard, but I was invited along because I knew Shinkai. I felt a little weird about it though, like I’d been put on a leash to lure my boss out. That Sunday, Jewelry Étranger was forced to temporarily close, much to Richard’s displeasure, and the two of us made our way to the offices of the ballet company in Gotanda. If we’d had even one appointment, I’m sure he wouldn’t have closed. Richard had driven us to the parking lot, where Ms. Kataura was waiting for us, in his Jaguar without saying a word.

I could hear a piano being played somewhere in the distance when we entered the building. I felt nervous, I’d never been in a place like this before. We climbed the stairs, adorned with a stylish scrollwork handrail, and headed down a long corridor. The walls were full of black-and-white photos of dancers. Ms. Kataura led us into a room at the end of the hall. It felt like a principal’s office. There was a little reception area in front and a desk in the back.

Black tea and confections had been set out on the table, but I couldn’t imagine Richard would be partaking. Richard said one thing before we sat down:

“Before you show me anything, I have one question I must ask. Which of my clients, exactly, introduced you to me, Ms. Kataura? I am but a humble jeweler, and this is quite outside my purview.”

“Well, of course. Are you familiar with Homura Trading? And specifically Mr. Takayuki Homura?”

I knew about Homura Trading, I even had one of their business cards. There was that big mess involving a huge ruby that happened right after the store opened this past spring. The guy involved worked for Homura Trading, his family's company. I don't think his name was Takayuki, though. He was the representative director of the company though, so maybe it's his dad? I do remember Richard mentioning that, after that incident, Mr. Homura had become an avid gem collector and that he'd developed a close relationship with the family as a result.

Richard nodded slightly, a grim look still on his face.

"It is wonderful to know that Mr. Homura is recommending my services; however, I still do not understand why you came to me. Are you under the misapprehension that all British folks are adequate standins for Sherlock Holmes?"

"His company has been supporting our company as part of their philanthropic activities. I'm well acquainted with the whole family. When last we met a few days ago, I asked for advice on this matter, and your name came up. 'I can't imagine he'll turn you down if you have a request relating to jewels,' I was told."

"…Mr. Takayuki told you that?"

"Oh, no, the rather enthusiastic recommendation came from his son."

Ms. Kataura smiled; Richard forced one in return. There's no way Mr. Takaura was doing this just to take his mind off the ruby incident, right? He wouldn't do that. Grown adults with real jobs and social standing don't do that sort of thing. At least I think they don't. Now that I think about it again, I kind of made that mess worse by meddling, didn't I?

Richard reluctantly took a seat, and Ms. Kataura opened a cabinet door behind what looked like a principal's desk. Behind the double doors of the cabinet was a massive safety deposit box. She put a little key into the door and typed in a PIN at an angle that we couldn't see. With a big *ker-thunk*, the door to the safe opened.

Ms. Kataura pulled out a black velvet box. It looked a lot like Richard's box of wonders, but a little less wide and a little more deep. I quietly moved the tea

set that was sitting on the table off to the side.

“This is the item in question.”

She knelt on the floor between us, setting the box on the table and opening the lid.

Inside was a necklace. It was made up of five layers of delicate silver chain. Opposite the clasp hung a set of five lacy snowflakes made up of green stones dangling off the piece. It was quite a large piece, so you’d need to have something on that exposed most of your upper chest to wear it. Right, the ballet costumes. The ballerina in the ad was definitely wearing something like this.

Assuming I wasn’t mistaken, the stones adorning the necklace were all beautiful emeralds.

Wow. They were flawless. I’d seen plenty of emeralds in Richard’s shop, but emerald is a heavily included stone—meaning it has internal flaws—so a lot of them have bubbles and obvious black marks and things inside. It must’ve been hard to find so many flawless stones. I had to wonder if it was really a good idea to keep them in that little safe.

“It was lent to us by our North American sister company, Marienbad Ballet. They had a change in management several years ago and currently aren’t performing, and instead are primarily trading in rentals like this, but…”

Borrowed jewels. Is this the thing Ms. Kataura was talking about?

“Are those the ‘cursed’ emeralds?”

“If you believe the rumors, they are. The current issue plaguing us is that this necklace…how to put this…it keeps disappearing and reappearing.”

Richard frowned, and Ms. Kataura began speaking in a softer tone.

The strange phenomenon began two weeks ago, right after it arrived with the rest of the stage costumes from their sister company by air. Somehow, the safe, which only Ms. Kataura had the PIN to, was being carried out of the office. The *safe*. It must’ve weighed over 200 kilos. Even a really strong man would have to exert a lot of effort just to drag something that heavy. Ms. Kataura cast her eyes

down when she mentioned that the safe had ended up in the hall. When Ms. Kataura and the performers noticed something amiss, they hurried to call security, but, somehow in the meantime, the safe returned itself to its original location. It hadn't even been five minutes. Ms. Kataura shook her head as she noted that security cameras hadn't been installed in the area yet.

Ms. Kataura concluded that it must've been a random attack by a vile burglar that didn't go as planned, so the attempt was abandoned. She consulted with the guards, and they agreed to increase the patrols in the area, after which the company members collected themselves to start dress rehearsals. But then it happened again. When the ballerina who was meant to wear the necklace entered the dressing room—the necklace was gone. I never knew this before, but since losing or misplacing props and costume pieces for a production is considered absolutely inexcusable, every item is placed in a numbered plastic box to keep inventory under control. If items were just thrown into one big pile, they'd never be able to keep track of them—that sounded a lot like my mother's closet, to be honest.

But this wasn't a case of the necklace being misplaced into the wrong box.

Rehearsal was paused, and all of the performers went about looking for the necklace. After about thirty minutes, it was found. The truly bizarre part was that it was found in its proper box like nothing had happened. This was about a week ago.

Ms. Kataura smiled, noting that was everything she'd told Richard over the phone. Richard just looked at her with not even the slightest hint of warmth on his face—almost like a porcelain doll.

"And as I stated the last time we spoke, I don't believe it's anything more than a failed robbery attempt. You ought to interrogate your staff who handles the jewelry."

"There are multiple people who handle it, and they're all so busy with their various tasks that they didn't have specific alibis. Additionally…if there was any sense to the thefts, we'd have some idea of where to start. The security patrols didn't see any suspicious persons, and I know just thinking about the situation logically, there's a high chance the culprit is an insider, but…nothing about this

makes any sense to begin with.”

“Why is that?”

“Because the item being stolen has no value.”

No value? This beautiful thing?

I was the only one who looked confused. Ms. Kataura let out a strained chuckle and took the emerald necklace out of the box to hand it to me. It was a lot lighter than I’d imagined.

“It would be worth an incredible amount of money if those were all real emeralds, not simulants. Notice how flawless they are? It’s proof that they’re not natural.”

“Oh…”

“But because of the whims of an old jewelry designer who viewed the necklace as a sort of art piece—and this is obvious if you look at the documentation—there are several real emeralds among the simulants,” she said, pointing at the central stones of the five snowflakes.

I guessed those were the only real ones. I looked at the necklace more closely and those stones definitely had a different texture. They looked dense and almost soft, and their interiors weren’t uniform and clean.

“…But if you didn’t know any better, you’d assume it was really valuable. Does everyone know they’re fake?”

“Of course. Everyone is well aware of the fact that it’s a very well-made fake. Despite that, we’ve rented it from overseas routinely for many years for our production of Jewels. The designer was my grandfather, who founded this ballet company and served as an advisor to the art director of the Marienbad Ballet for many years. The five real emeralds were a point of pride for him. That was the most he could financially muster at the time. But regardless, this necklace is beautiful, isn’t it? And just as both tradition and history are nurtured by human hands, the more use one gets out of even artificial gems, the more real their sparkle becomes.”

“But I haven’t the faintest idea why someone would want to steal it,” she

added in a melancholy tone.

I was curious, so I asked how much the necklace was worth. Ms. Kataura said that at today's prices it would cost around a million yen, but noted that the cost was based on how much it cost to produce the necklace thirty years ago and that it would likely fetch a much lower price if it were to be sold today. Not to mention the fact that most people would consider the combination of simulants and natural gemstones in one piece like that unthinkable. There wouldn't really be any point in using natural stones in something like that. Even if they tried, there was a pretty good chance it wouldn't sell.

An old necklace made of simulated gems with little to no resale value. The idea that old gemstone simulants might suddenly shoot up in price was unheard of, too. Hm, I guess maybe a real hardcore fan would buy it.

"On the off chance this necklace really were to vanish…we do have insurance for it, but the world we operate in is a small one. The breach of trust could have dire consequences for the company's management in the future. In this day and age, when most organizations are struggling as it is, they can't afford to be hamstrung by strange incidents. I hate to even consider the possibility, but were we forced to cancel the production and refund tickets, it could very well bankrupt us. Even if we could cover the hit financially, losing the one connection to my grandfather—the cornerstone of this company—would be devastating, let alone losing it for some incomprehensible reason. I think I would know if it was someone within my own company. Furthermore, I don't even know if it could be sold in the first place…"

Strange things were happening around the necklace, even though there was no conceivable value to stealing it, hence the curse theory.

I glanced at Richard to see how he was doing, and he had his usual calm expression on as he spoke in a detached tone.

"Now, this is ultimately just conjecture on my part, but the quality and authenticity of the stones seem decidedly unrelated to this situation. Even if the jewelry itself harbors little inherent value, if we consider it as part of a stage costume, it could fetch quite a premium. If it has a history of being worn by famous dancers or was used in historically significant performances, it could

have quite a significant value that a layperson couldn't even hope to estimate."

"You are correct that the piece has a long and proud history of being worn by numerous prima ballerinas on stage, but…that's about it. Neither of you could name a single one of our dancers, could you? I don't believe it would fetch a premium because of the history of who wore it. There's no motive, no reason, nothing. I could almost understand it from the perspective of the necklace as a collector's item, but would that really motivate someone to move a heavy safe like that in an attempt to steal it? I'm at a complete loss…"

Her voice trembled at the end there. She got up and took a tissue from the desk to blow her nose.

Richard asked her one more question when she turned around. "Why do you call it a curse, then? If it really is just a failed attempt at theft, wouldn't that be more of a mystery than a curse?"

Ms. Kataura's stiff expression seemed about to crack for a moment. Richard must've noticed.

She looked pale as a doll as she ground her teeth briefly, before speaking in a low, dispassionate tone. Like she was desperately trying to hold something back.

"…The ballerina who should be performing this role in 'Jewels' passed away suddenly last year from illness. There are…rumors that her lingering desire to dance the part may be… I'm sure you can fill in the rest."

"I don't mean to be rude, but do you yourself believe this 'rumor,' Ms. Kataura?"

"Of course not! I would never. But—"

She raised her voice for just a moment before cutting herself off, clenching her teeth in frustration.

"My condolences," Richard said, bowing his head. Ms. Kataura responded in kind. She looked very exhausted. Just completely at her wit's end. That must've been why she wanted Richard's help. Even if the person who recommended him was a close friend, she was still consulting a stranger—and a foreigner no less—who she'd never met before. She must have really been out of options.

Perhaps moved by her desperation, my beautiful boss seemed to have accepted the position he was in.

“Would you mind if I examined the item?”

“Of course not. Please go ahead.”

Her expression suddenly became brighter. I turned to the man next to me to give him a pat on the back but immediately swallowed my words. I’d never seen Richard look this serious before.

I stared vacantly at him as he pulled a pair of gloves out of his bag, nimbly put them on, and bowed before picking up the emerald necklace. I thought I’d be used to it by now, but this man—no, this human, no, this *creature*—was impossibly beautiful. He was beautiful even when he wasn’t doing anything at all, but he really shone when he was up against something difficult like this.

His blue eyes glimmered brightly as he focused intently on inspecting each and every one of the gems. Richard could speak more languages than I could count. Maybe he knew the language of stones too, and, in this stifling silence, he was really conversing in a language I didn’t understand with the simulated gemstones.

After Richard spent about twenty minutes painstakingly examining the necklace with five supposedly genuine stones, he shook his head.

“Upon visual inspection, I cannot identify anything of note with this piece.”

“…I see.”

It seemed more or less the outcome both of them had anticipated. Ms. Kataura seemed simultaneously disappointed and relieved as she apologized for the trouble. Richard seemed concerned for her. And the one thing all three of us had in common was that we weren’t satisfied with the answer—or lack thereof.

I mean, stranger things have happened. It was probably just a series of staged burglary and theft attempts. At least that’s what I wanted to believe. On the off chance it really was a curse, though, how would you even begin to deal with that?

Afterward, I waited for Richard and Ms. Kataura to finish talking. When we left her office, a long-legged somebody was waiting in the hall beneath the portraits. She was wearing white tights with leg warmers and shearling boots even though it was almost summer. She had a flowy athletic dress and pink hoodie on, too. She had the vibe of someone who'd just come running from a construction site. She had a large green pendant dangling from her neck. It was a ring of what looked like malachite or something hanging off what looked like a strip of leather.

She had her long hair done up, so I didn't recognize her right away, but it was Shinkai. She called my name when she saw me.

"Whoa, it really is you. Surprised to see you here."

"Me too."

I had wanted to thank her for the tickets, but I never expected to bump into her like this.

"Oh, sorry, I know I look like a mess. I was just in rehearsal."

"I should be apologizing for catching you at a weird moment. If you're looking for Ms. Kataura, she's still in her office, but she's just finishing up."

"I'm not waiting for the director. Who's this?"

Shinkai said, casually pointing at Richard standing next to me. I had to wonder if she knew why he was here. Richard stepped forward,

"I operate a jewelry shop on Ginza's nanachome. Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian at your service."

"Oh, I know a dancer with the last name Vulpian. She's French."

Shinkai finally cracked a smile and started conversing with Richard in a western language I couldn't understand. Richard countered her surprise attack splendidly. I just watched, mouth half-agape, as they exchanged incomprehensible words. Shinkai smiled at me apologetically.

"Sorry about that. This sure is weird, though—the person who the director mentioned to us this morning was supposed to be British. Are you mixed or something?"

“For a variety of personal reasons, I am quite intimate with the languages of many countries.”

“Your Japanese is, like, super good, but do you mind me asking what those personal reasons are? I’m not trying to be rude or anything, but it is kinda spooky. I mean, everyone’s freaking out, and then some guy who’s, like, almost too perfect shows up?”

Richard was a bit dumbfounded. I couldn’t stand to watch it keep going, so I cut in.

“Well! My boss is just really good at learning foreign languages. He had a shop in Hong Kong before he came here, so he knows Chinese, too. And we had some customers wearing turbans or something show up the other day. Of course, it’s not just about learning languages with him, it’s his dedication to customer service. He’s like the gemstone version of Tanimoto. I’ve been working with him for almost half a year now.”

“He’s like Shouko? You mean he can eat more food if he has a side of gemstones?”

“Huh? D-do I wanna even know what that means?”

“As long as I have a trapiche emerald by my side, I can eat three whole servings.”

Richard said this with a straight face. I was just amazed. Shinkai burst out laughing.

“Sorry, I didn’t take you for much of a comedian. Right, what did he call you again, the ‘Emperor of Sweets’?”

Shinkai smiled, and Richard glared daggers at me. Right. I guess I did mention that.

Shinkai relaxed a little and introduced herself again.

“The name’s Aki Shinkai. I’m the prima ballerina of the Kataura Ballet Company. I got a little spooked when I heard the director had called in a jeweler I’d never heard of, so I came to check it out. My favorite mineral specimen is a piece of fluorite, and I’m currently hunting for a pentagonite specimen. I wanna

put it next to my cavansite.”

“Huh? You’re into rocks, too?”

“Didn’t Shouko tell you? I was also in the geology club.”

A ballerina who loves rocks and minerals. That’s a thing? People who I thought lived in completely different worlds ended up having a completely unbelievable connection. I guess rocks really do connect the world.

“Ms. Shinkai, have you worked in France before?”

“I studied there. I won an international competition in high school and earned the right to attend whatever ballet school I chose for a year. I picked one in France, and that’s when I learned the language. Also, sorry, I thought I could put a little pressure on you and get you to spill your guts…”

“You really are scary sometimes…”

“Look, I said I’m sorry.”

Tanimoto had mentioned that she went to a combined junior high and high school, so I did think it was weird that Shinkai wasn’t there for high school, but this explains it all. She won that competition and then took off on the road to becoming a ballerina. No wonder she seemed so much more mature than me even though we were the same age—she must’ve known exactly what she wanted all the way back then.

“I heard about what’s been going on, too. It sounds like you guys have had it really rough.”

“Seriously. It’d be a lot more interesting if it turned out to be a powerful ghost or something.”

“This whole thing about the curse of a dead ballerina is pretty spooky, huh?”

“…Oh, the director didn’t tell you the whole story, did she?”

Shinkai walked down to the other end of the hall and motioned for us to join her. We did as we were instructed. Since the numerous photos of dancers hanging on the wall were in black and white, I’d assumed they were all pretty old, but apparently not all of them were. She’d stopped at the furthest photo to the right. It was of a ballerina in a white costume, eyes closed, hands clasped in

prayer as she leaned forward with a crown of flowers on her head. Upon closer inspection, the frame looked extremely new.

“Who’s that?”

“Minako Kataura. She passed away last year.”

“Kataura… Wait, does that mean—”

“She was the director’s daughter. People kept saying it was nepotism for a while, but it didn’t take long for everyone to learn that she really did have the chops as a dancer. She was so beautiful and graceful—like an angel.”

She had developed an osteosarcoma and went to heaven last year at the young age of thirty-three. Shinkai’s voice trembled when she joked that God probably mistook her for an angel. But she wasn’t on the verge of tears. She was angry.

“Our upcoming production has been in the works for a few years now, and if that hadn’t happened, Minako would be dancing this role in Jewels. Why did she have to die at her peak as a dancer? It’s so unfair. But that’s also why I can’t imagine she’d be haunting us and trying to cause the ballet company trouble. Minako would never do something like that. We miss her more than anyone—and I can understand why people want it to be her ghost, but calling this her ‘curse’ is an insult to her memory.”

I looked up at the photo again. White clothes. Pale skin. The extent of my knowledge of ballet was limited to *Swan Lake* and it being “that thing rich girls learn,” but fundamentally, in my mind, ballerinas were supposed to be graceful and delicate and that’s about it. But for some reason, this photo looked like a photo of a ghost.

Shinkai turned to Richard and put her hands together, pleading. It was strange. It almost felt like she was casting a spell on us as she intertwined her fingers one by one. The air around her and her alone seemed heavier.

“Everyone’s holding on by a thread, so please, if you find out anything—anything at all—please let me know. Nakata already has my number. And if somehow we really do need an exorcism, you can count on me to find a temple to perform it.”

“I have no idea how much help I’ll be, but I have heard that you have a performance coming up. I sincerely hope that all goes well.”

“Thank you. All of us are hoping it goes off without a hitch, too.”

“But, man, that must be rough. I mean, this whole thing involves one of the costumes—there’s a ballerina who’s supposed to be wearing it, right? That must make it so much harder…”

“You think so? Well, I happen to be that ballerina, and it doesn’t really bother me at all.”

My eyes went wide, and Shinkai burst out laughing. She wasn’t bothered at all. Almost too unbothered. I know how rude this is gonna sound, but it seemed kinda…fake. Like she was putting on a brave face.

“I really looked up to Minako. I had given her this pendant as a good luck charm. It’s cute, don’t you think? Malachite’s supposed to ward off sickness, and Minako always loved the color green; it feels like it couldn’t have been more perfect…”

“I guess it doesn’t really work though, huh,” Shinkai added with another laugh. She continued, saying that Minako had worn it to the bitter end, and Ms. Kataura had returned it to her after she passed. Her good luck charm had become a memento of a lost friend.

“Whenever I wear it now, I feel like Minako’s watching over me, keeping me safe.”

I felt like I was starting to get a sense of just who the ballerina named Minako Kataura was already. She was Ms. Kataura’s daughter and a friend who Shinkai looked up to. The heart of the ballet company. Just looking at the building we were in, the ballet company seemed like a place where people were much closer to each other than they would be in a corporate context. And it seemed like the hole left by the central pillar of the company still hadn’t been filled.

And then while everyone’s trying to fill that space—this happens.

Richard bowed to Shinkai, looking at her with sympathy.

“My deepest condolences for your loss.”

“Thank you. I think it was hardest on the director though. But I feel like, since she’s still standing, the rest of us have no excuse. Apparently she gave me this role in ‘Jewels’ after talking to Minako about it. Minako approved of me taking over, saying she knew I could do it… I know she’s cheering me on from up there, so I have to give it my best… Ugh, I’m sorry. I’m getting so sappy. Anyway, Nakata, I don’t feel like this is hard for me. From the very bottom of my heart, I want to dance to make Minako proud! That’s how I feel.”

“I’m sorry, I had no idea what I was talking about and said something cruel. I’m really sorry.”

“You’re so conscientious, just like Shouko.”

Shinkai had that same, slightly exhausted look on her face that she had back in Shinjuku as she smiled. It really seemed like she’d stretched herself thin. Someone called Shinkai’s name from downstairs. She called back to them, leaning over the railing. There was an older man in overalls on the first floor. He shouted something about *Generalprobe*—something and marks? I had no idea what language it was. Shinkai shouted back, “I’ll be right there!”

“Looks like I got busted for slipping out. Sorry, but I’ve gotta run.”

She bowed to the two of us. Watching her was steadily changing my image of what a ballerina was. She just seemed like a typical female athlete. And I thought only faeries were ballerinas.

Richard leaned over the railing and spotted an old man on the first floor.

“Who might that be?”

“Old Yoshida. Oh, uh, his grandson works here, too, so we call him ‘Old Yoshida’ and his grandson ‘Young Yoshida’ to keep them straight. If you have any questions, just ask him. He’s worked backstage with our company for ages. He’s done a little bit of everything—stage managing, props, scenery, you name it.”

“…Wait.”

Doesn’t that make him the number one suspect? I gave her a look, and Shinkai burst out laughing.

“I think this goes without saying, but there’s no way someone his age could move that safe. Plus, when the necklace disappeared from the changing room, he went so pale, I thought he was having a heart attack—he started begging us to kill him, even. Everyone was freaking out, thinking he’d die if the necklace didn’t turn up. Oh, but I guess where there’s light, there’s always shadow, right?”

“We’re not attempting to play detective here…”

“Sorry. But he did manage the props, so if you wanna know anything about the quality of the stones or the insurance policy or any documents like that, you should talk to him. Anyhoo, gotta run!”

Shinkai ran down the stairs. She twirled around back toward us when she got to the dance hall and bowed gracefully. In that moment, the air around her changed—it was like a spell had been cast, making her limbs seem to float. But as she descended the stairs and disappeared down the hall, the cheerful smile had vanished from her face, leaving only a stiff, pallid expression in its wake. I guess I wasn’t wrong about her overextending herself after all.

The emerald ballerina—the dancer who’ll be wearing the jewels at the center of all the trouble ends up being Tanimoto’s good friend. I let out a groan without really thinking about it. It was weighing on me heavily.

There was a cheap Italian chain right outside the ballet company’s building. We chose a booth that was pretty out of sight. I got us some water and sat down. Richard tented his fingers and asked, “Yes?” I guess he knew.

“Any questions?”

“I have questions about everything. I don’t understand any of it.”

“Where shall we start?”

“From the phone call the other day, please.”

Richard looked annoyed but said, “All right,” and started explaining.

He received a call from Ms. Kataura on Friday night. She asked him if he’d be willing to take a look, considering it was gemstone related, but Richard turned

her down, saying that regardless of whether it called for an exorcist or a private detective, he was decidedly neither. On Saturday, she suddenly showed up at the shop, and since I'd mentioned I knew Shinkai, he agreed to take a look—but only a look, no other promises.

"So what did you think of the emeralds?"

"Just from a visual examination, they looked like perfectly ordinary emeralds. I imagine you'd need someone who possessed some manner of occult powers to determine whether they're cursed or not though."

"Good point…"

I feel like Richard would probably have a slightly easier time making money if he could determine stuff like that just from looking at gems. I opened the images folder on my phone and pulled up the picture Shinkai had sent me.

The one with the word "Jewels" written on it.

"Explain, please."

"Are you unfamiliar with the concept of a search engine?"

"Please! I'm not good at reading western script. I'll pay for your drink!"

"Remind me again who was incredibly smug about having memorized *all* of my names?"

"That's not western script—that's your name! I'm capable of remembering the names of important people in my life."

Richard aggressively averted his eyes, grabbed his cup, and began drinking his water. He must've been really thirsty because he downed the whole thing. I started to get up to get him a refill when he told me to sit back down. I must've set him off.

"Long ago in a place far away, there was a man named George Balanchine."

"Please keep the difficulty level set to easy. Gimme the CliffsNotes version and only include the most important characters."

"Shut up and listen."

"Yes, sir."

George Balanchine was born in Russia, worked in France for a time, and founded a ballet company in the US. Apparently, his name was even harder to pronounce in his native Russian, so I guess the English pronunciation stuck around the most after he ended up in the US. Foreigners sure have tricky names.

“Typical ballets are based on fairy tales, with the lead ballerina playing a princess and it all coming to a happy end in the finale. We tend to associate these conventions with classical ballet. But Balanchine was known for popularizing a new style of ballet, and his piece ‘Jewels’ is one such work. There is no story. They’re known as plotless ballets.”

So, dancing without a story. Isn’t that just dancing? Like the high school dance club’s training drills? No, I mean, there’s gotta be a huge difference in technique between amateurs and pros at least.

Balanchine was in his prime when he choreographed “Jewels.” He took inspiration from the three countries that had a great influence on his life using different gemstones to represent them in a three act ballet.

The motif of act 1, “Emeralds,” is France.

The motif of act 2, “Rubies,” is America.

And the motif of act 3, “Diamonds,” is Russia.

“Oh, so that’s what Shinkai’s quiz was about.”

“Precisely.”

After she showed us the necklace, Ms. Kataura showed us the emerald tiara, too. It looked like it was meant to be a set with the necklace. She showed us the diamond and ruby accessories as well—all those gems were fake, though. Even I could tell they weren’t real at a glance. Both the fake diamonds and rubies were too transparent to be real. They just looked like tinted glass. The real thing isn’t that see-through. I feel like the fake emeralds were better made. I guess they were used in different acts.

“The gemstones and countries don’t have any concrete relation to each other—they’re merely based on the choreographer’s image of each country and jewel. It’s simply a piece of trivia.”

“You really do know everything, don’t you?”

“Perhaps only everything with regard to gemstones.”

“If you were going for humble, you kind of missed the mark there.”

“Well, humility isn’t considered a virtue in England.”

England…England… You know, this is the second time I’ve seen someone ask Richard if he was French. I guess the surname “de Vulpian” sounds French to people familiar with it. But whenever anyone asks him where he’s from, he always says England and nothing more. He did mention to me that his grandmother was from Sri Lanka, but he never talked about that sort of thing with his regulars. Maybe his family situation is really complicated. I guess if your family was into international marriages, then it’d probably take hours just to explain the basics.

Or maybe it was simpler than that and he just didn’t think it was anyone else’s business. I know I’m not very fond of talking about my family situation. I remember hating my junior high English classes because they were full of privacy-invading practice questions like “When does your mother get home from work?” and “What are your father’s hobbies?” I could definitely understand if he was in a similar position.

When I didn’t say anything for a while, Richard continued as if I’d asked him to keep going.

“In each of the acts, the dancers do not perform the roles of the gemstones but embody their beauty through dance. While there is choreography, there is no clearly defined plot. There are no flags or castles in the set either. The graceful dances simply play out amidst a dreamlike space.”

“That sounds a little complicated, like, philosophically…”

“It’s quite simple, actually. It’s just an attempt to combine human beauty and the beauty of gemstones into a performance.”

Combining the human beauty and the beauty of gemstones. Hm. I guess I can just think of the ballet kinda like Richard. I don’t know anyone in the world who’s more like a gemstone than him. He exudes such beauty that it just makes you want to bask in his presence. I caught the cashier earlier stealing glances at

his face when we got our cups. He's so beautiful, it's actually a problem. I panicked a bit when Richard noticed I'd been staring at him. He glared at me.

"Is there something on my face?"

"N-no, nothing. Dancing gemstones, huh? It probably would've been better if he'd picked the places the stones come from. Like Thailand or Myanmar for ruby, and Africa for diamond, and for emerald… Where *do* emeralds come from anyway?"

"Primarily South America. Colombia is the most famous producer of emeralds. They're found in Brazil and other countries as well, but the finest stones have always come from—"

Richard stopped abruptly mid-sentence. He stopped moving, almost like a malfunctioning machine. Not even his eyes moved. What on earth was going on? I waved my hand in front of his face, and he abruptly looked up.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I was just thinking."

Suddenly falling into deep thought like that had to be something only people like Edison or Einstein did, right? Richard shook his head. I guess he couldn't stand looking at me frown at him.

"Well, let me see, the man Ms. Shinkai introduced us to earlier was Old Yoshida—no, Mr. Yoshida? It may be of great interest to us to speak to him. I believe Ms. Shinkai mentioned documentation on the jewelry and the like."

"Hey, now, that's a totally different topic. Why'd you suddenly jump back to the ballet company?"

"I think I may understand something now that I didn't previously."

"I thought you said there wasn't anything of note."

"*At the time,* there wasn't."

In the short span that this jeweler had fallen into deep thought, he made some kind of connection. I had no clue what it could possibly be though. I wasn't entirely convinced he was really okay either. I got the check at my boss's behest and sat in my seat for a moment, looking at him. Richard scowled.

“You know, even though you looked so unhappy about this whole thing, you really do give it your all once you decide you’re going to do something, huh?”

“You don’t need to feel responsible for this situation.”

I looked at him confused, and he responded with frustration all over his face. He relaxed slightly and faintly raised an eyebrow.

“You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?” He said, “You may have dragged me into this, but there isn’t much I can do about it at this point. You recall what Ms. Kataura said, don’t you? That you had provided her with a ‘welcome twist of fate.’ That’s all. It appears that the stars you were born under have fated you to help others.”

“Oh, come on! You know, I, uh, I hear it all the time that I have a bad habit of sticking my nose into other people’s business, but that’s also why I would never deliberately try to drag anyone else into something. Plus, this time I was really trying to—”

I stopped myself. What am I even talking about? This doesn’t matter to anyone but me, but I’m getting all worked up over it.

“You were trying to?”

Richard wouldn’t let it go. What do I even say? I guess I could just say that I felt bad about causing him trouble, so I reflected on my actions and decided to try not to let it happen again, but apparently, I went and did it anyway. It’d be a hollow apology. But I also wasn’t trying to do anything bad either.

As I fumbled to find the right words, Richard cocked his head to the side and smirked.

“Let me guess. ‘I think I did you wrong, and I’m sorry’?”

My eyes went wide in shock, and Richard chuckled half out of exasperation. As for the other half, he seemed almost proud.

“I had a feeling all day today that a certain someone had an uncharacteristic look of guilt on his face—looks like I was right. I know you well enough to figure that much out.”

“B-but—”

“Honestly, what a bizarre situation. You didn’t exactly trick me into it, yet you feel guilt for having gotten me involved in something troublesome. I think you’re being ludicrously overly self-conscious if you’re feeling bad that you—through no ill will—created an opportunity for me to be pulled into an annoying situation. By that same logic, would you expect someone who unintentionally disadvantaged you to react in the same manner? It’s utterly pointless.”

“…I just worry about you, you know. You’re just so delicate, you might collapse if you end up taking too many weird jobs.”

“Even without your misplaced concern, I am neither delicate nor frail. What do you intend to do now? I will be returning to the ballet company once again, will you be going home by train?”

Do you even have to ask? I’m pretty sure you know what this meddlesome troublemaker’s answer is going to be.

I picked up my bag, and Richard smirked at me. Round two was about to start.

At the end of that very long day, I made a phone call from my tiny apartment in Takadanobaba. It wasn’t to my mother, Hiromi, but Tanimoto. It was the first time I’d called her in the evening about something other than class, so I was extremely nervous until she picked up, but considering what I was calling her about, my fears quickly proved groundless.

“The emeralds are cursed? That sure sounds weird. I can’t believe Aki didn’t talk to me about it either. Aren’t we supposed to be friends?”

Whenever the topic turned to stones, my beloved Tanimoto was always extremely debonair. Reportedly, she’d always had this habit, ever since she was president of her geology club. Her club members, aforementioned, had even nicknamed her Golgo Tanimoto. She really was too—austere, suave, dependable. It sounds like a kind of crude title for a girl, but once you actually see her in action, it’s hard to think of a nickname that could possibly fit better.

“You know, it really sucks though. This was gonna be Aki’s big moment.”

“Don’t worry, the two of us are on the case.”

“I can’t get out of my practice classes…”

Tanimoto was in the college of education and occasionally she’d be off campus for practical training—teaching at a partner school, apparently. But considering the nature of the work, she couldn’t exactly just take off whenever.

There were only two weeks left until the Sunday of the performance of “Jewels.” It must’ve been a stressful time under normal circumstances, but the people at the ballet seemed stretched especially thin.

“Seigi?”

“O-oh, nothing.”

I returned to the original topic and asked her about Shinkai. Tanimoto confirmed what she’d told us, that they were in school together until partway through their first year of high school, when Shinkai won that competition and transferred to a school in France.

“I found out about her big starring role from the club group chat. She told us she was going to work extra hard since it was her first leading role. She talked a little bit about her friend in the company who was fighting an illness. She even asked if there were any stones that were good for that sort of thing. But I never realized how serious it was.”

Tanimoto sent me a link to a video. The ballet competition that Shinkai had participated in had an official channel on a video site and had posted videos of past finalists.

Shinkai was a little shorter than she is now, wearing a white ballet costume, dancing on a stage with the competition’s logo on it. She was trying her best to maintain a smile, but her expression was a bit stiff from nerves.

Ballet is so…graceful.

Every step and every arm movement was completely fluid. Her arms and legs were stretched out straight as can be, and even though she was dancing on her tiptoes, she never fell. The faint smile that always remained on her face made you think she was never in danger of falling either. It was hard to imagine she was anything other than a creature that was born like that, just frolicking about for fun. Even though I knew that it was really the product of intense effort and

endurance.

“What’d you think?” I heard Tanimoto say on the other end of the line. I guess we’d both ended up watching it at the same time. I switched my phone back off of speaker mode and brought it to my face—that way it felt like she was talking right into my ear.

“She’s incredible. I know I don’t know the first thing about ballet, but I thought she was great. But…I got to see Shinkai practicing today, and I think she’s gotten, like, a million times better somehow.”

“Well, of course she has. This competition was several years ago now.”

Tanimoto was right, of course. I thought back to what happened after we went back to the ballet company.

Richard pretty much dominated in the second round of the gemstone mystery. We lucked out and caught Ms. Kataura by the front gate. She was willing to help us out and introduced Richard to Old Yoshida. Old Yoshida was very insistent that outsiders not be let inside so late, but he dropped his objections when Ms. Kataura mentioned Homura’s name. I guess Homura Trading was a pretty important sponsor. Ultimately, our persistence won out, and Richard was let into the office again, probably to look at those documents he was talking about.

But he was only let in on the condition that he went alone, so I ended up waiting outside by the entrance. Ms. Kataura didn’t like the idea of leaving me out there with nothing to do, so she invited me to the lesson room. Shinkai was in the middle of rehearsal. I asked her, wide-eyed, if she was sure it was okay for me to be there. I caught the strained smile when she replied that I could be there if I liked. She’d mentioned that there were surveillance cameras, but they must’ve only been in limited locations. It could be a problem if an outsider like me was out of sight, so I decided to do as I was told.

The lesson room was about as big as one of the classrooms at my university, but all four walls were covered in mirrors. Shinkai was dancing in the middle of a group of about twenty other dancers. They didn’t get distracted when I timidly entered the room and continued dancing as the person sitting in a chair, who I assumed was their instructor, told them to continue. They kept practicing

the same scene over and over, so the pianist had to keep playing the same part of the piece repeatedly. The surrounding dancers, clad in T-shirts and tights, were moving about the room, confirming their positions. There were only two male dancers. They were all around my age and so slender, with small, beautiful faces, but they were practicing movements that seemed completely incomprehensible to me. The only thing similar between me and them was our general human form. I couldn't imagine we were the same creatures on the inside.

Several female dancers were moving around Shinkai in the center. She slowly brought one leg up to her head, and, without missing a beat, the instructor told her she raised it too fast. She repeated it three more times but never showed a hint of strain on her face. She was smiling. After that, the instructor continued giving Shinkai specific instructions and corrections.

I thought it was weird at first. To my untrained eye, she seemed like the best dancer there, but the instructor kept picking at every little detail. But I thought about it some more, and it only made sense that the best dancer was in the center. And standing in the middle meant she had to be completely flawless and perfect to be there.

When they took a break from the repetitious practice, she smirked at her male dance partner who was trying to console her.

"I'm fine. I have to give it my all. Minako's up there smiling down on me after all."

Minako Kataura.

The atmosphere in the lesson room shifted dramatically the moment that name was uttered. I could feel it on my skin. Some of the people looked at her in disgust for deliberately mentioning that name, some people hung their heads finding the whole situation too much to bear, and some people looked at Shinkai with concern. It was only for a brief moment, and once the break was over, they were all back to being sparkling dancers. But I was sure that they were all wondering the same thing.

Whether the strange incidents really were the result of a curse.

Shinkai didn't seem to believe it, or at least she claimed not to. Impossible,

she said. I'd probably do the same if I were in her position. I mean, she's standing at center stage, taking the place of a close friend who passed away with unfinished business—how could she use her as an excuse to pin her "bad luck" on?

Something about Shinkai's smile pained me. It was like it was her last line of defense to keep from being crushed by the dazzle of the stage. I know I'm just overthinking things.

After I spent about an hour watching the rehearsal, Richard clapped me on the shoulder, and we left the ballet company again. I didn't really contribute anything to the case of the cursed emeralds, but I did get a glimpse into an incredible world I'd never seen before.

"You and Shinkai have been friends since you were little, right? Was she always such an incredible person?"

"Yeah. Always. She always gave things her all. The kind of dancer Aki aspired to be was someone who'd dance tomorrow and the next day and the next day—and keep on dancing until the day they died. I wasn't the most sensitive person back then, so I told her that sounded really crushing. And she just laughed and said it is, but it's fun. She was always such a nice person."

Tomorrow and the day after—it kind of made her sound like a marathon runner. It made me wonder if all dancers felt the same way. And it made me wonder just how sad and how frustrating it must have been to a dancer to die in her prime like that.

No, no, no, I couldn't just assume that the curse was real from that. I mean, Shinkai said it herself: Minako Kataura was a nice person. If I died, I don't think I'd try to do bad things to the people I cared about in life. It'd probably be the opposite even. I'd probably wanna do things to help the people I cared about, no matter how small—no, I needed to stop thinking about this. This was getting into occult territory again.

I asked Tanimoto what she thought of the emerald situation again. Two mysterious incidents. One dead ballerina. On the outside, she may have been a soft, sugary fairy, but at her core, Tanimoto was a strong, composed person.

"Hey, Seigi, do you know about that old French theater superstition?"

From her tone of voice, it sounded like the other Tanimoto had returned. I told her I'd never heard of it. A French superstition?

"They say actors who wear green die young."

Green. Emerald green. Wearing it means you'll die young? I asked her if it was some kind of supernatural phenomenon, and Golgo Tanimoto assured me that it wasn't.

"A substance called verdigris was used to dye clothes in the past. It's basically copper rust. We know now that it's virtually nontoxic, but until pretty recently, it was thought to be extremely poisonous."

"Oh, that makes sense. Wait, then—"

"Of course, I know it's just a superstition. The idea that a stage costume could determine someone's life span is total nonsense. Human culture has slowly but steadily advanced through the ages, and that's why I don't believe in stories that get in the way of people trying to make progress. Things don't curse people. Not clothes, and not stones either. I firmly believe that."

There was power in her voice. I was reminded of the thing Richard always said.

That humans are creatures that constantly grow to reach their true desires.

Whether that's a good thing or a bad thing will vary from person to person. I guess it's like saying that fortune is unpredictable and ever-changing. But I don't think he meant that in the cynical sense, like you should just give up when things are looking hopeless, but rather a kick in the pants to demand that you demonstrate the strength of your determination if you have a goal you're aiming for. Wait, does that mean he's actually pretty hot-blooded, despite that beautiful face of his? Kinda like me? There's no way, right?

"I think this performance of the Emeralds act will serve as a second big touchstone for Aki. She's been working as a professional dancer ever since she came back from studying abroad in France, but at least as far as I've seen, she hasn't really had any opportunities at a lead role like this before, so this kinda feels like it came out of nowhere."

"You and Shinkai really are close, huh?"

“Yeah. She’s kinda like, um, like my birth parent.”

“Uh, *birth* parent?”

“Oh! No! I meant godparent! You know because she gave me my Golgo nickname.”

Oh. Yeah, that sounds like Shinkai. I just about burst out laughing.

“She sure has a sense for names, huh? Was that in junior high?”

“Yeah. The local hairdresser had a bunch of old comics lying around in the waiting area, and that’s the one most of my friends went to, so… It’s kinda embarrassing, but I don’t mind it when Aki calls me that.”

“I like your nickname, too. It’s cool.”

“You think so?”

“Makes you sound dependable and, like, debonair.”

“…I’ve never heard anyone say that about me before.”

Her voice made my heart skip a beat. Did I just create a mood? I’m too used to long evening phone calls like this. The moment I realized what I said, my heart was pounding and my blood pressure was sky high. Crap. I’m gonna start stammering.

“Seigi, please be good to Aki. She’s a really nice person.”

“…I’ll do whatever I can.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate it. Night!”

“Good night,” I replied.

Nothing had really been resolved about the emerald curse yet at all. There was no solution in sight. But I felt like I was dreaming. I hopped into the cheap bed I got on sale from a big box store and slammed my head into my pillow. This was bliss. I couldn’t have been happier. My joy continued until I received a text from Shinkai a few minutes later.

“Nakata, I got a call from Shouko just now. She told me she thinks you have a crush on me. Are you sure didn’t give her the wrong idea? You should probably try a little harder.”

Ahhhhh!

No. It's not like that. You have it all wrong, Tanimoto. That's not what's going on at all. Why do you always assume my affections are intended for someone else? This is the worst. The absolute worst. What did I do to earn the ire of the god of love? Thankfully, Shinkai was intuitive enough to figure out what was going on. I whined to myself as I typed out an apology to Shinkai for the misunderstanding, promising to try harder in the future. I let out a silent groan before I was surprised by an unexpected addendum.

"Richard contacted me. He said that he'd be coming by again on Friday. Have you heard anything? The director looked freaked out. I'm kinda scared."

He's going back again on Friday?

I replied to her, saying that I hadn't heard anything about it, but she didn't say anything else. I wondered what was up with that. I knew how much Richard hated getting random texts, so I hesitantly sent him something—"I got a text from Shinkai. Are you really visiting the ballet again on Friday?"

I got a reply immediately. In his usual style of rapid short texts.

"I will be going to the ballet in Gotanda at 1 p.m. next Friday."

"I'll pay you overtime if you're available to join me."

"I'll explain the day of."

"Depending on how things go, it could get a little dangerous."

Dangerous? How?

I asked if I could call him, and he said he was indisposed. I guess it was late, or maybe he was out, or maybe he was still working even. I asked him to explain more, but he never responded. Please stop stressing me out for no reason. Just tell me it's not a big deal, please.

Unless…it's not nothing.

I took a shower and returned to my room and found a single message from Richard.

"Are you coming?"

Of course I am.

With that brief reply, I went to bed. I had no idea what Richard was concerned about, but I'd already made up my mind. I was going with him, no matter what. Plus, I promised Tanimoto I'd keep her friend safe.

I sleepwalked my way through class, and then on Thursday night, I got another text from Richard.

"There was another failed attempt at stealing the necklace. That makes three."

Honestly, I had kind of expected that to happen. Not that I actually wanted it to, of course. I had no idea what was going on anymore. A third failed attempt. If it really was an inside job, it's hard to believe they'd be having this much trouble. Maybe it really was something supernatural? No, it couldn't be. But what if it was?

Well, it didn't really matter if I didn't know what was going on anymore. I'm sure it'd all become clear tomorrow.

Right, Richard?

It was Friday afternoon. I went in through the gates of Kataura Ballet Company. Richard was wearing a suit and his usual calm, collected expression. They must have been expecting us, because the guards didn't ask us anything and just let us through. They did greet Richard, though, so I guess they'd gotten acquainted at some point.

Evidently, Richard had come by a third time without me this past Tuesday. That's what Ms. Kataura said.

She didn't seem to believe what Richard told her at first, but opening night was only a week away. As much as she didn't like it, it was now or never, so she ultimately agreed to go through with his plan.

We walked past the string of small lesson rooms on the first floor and found ourselves in front of a set of bulky doors. On the other side of them was what looked like a small concert hall. Richard signaled me with his eyes, and I opened the doors. The sound of piano playing flooded out—they were in the middle of rehearsal.

The lights were down in the small auditorium. The only area that was illuminated was the stage. We'd walked in right in the middle of a dress rehearsal. As we slipped into the darkness of the auditorium, I saw Shinkai appear on stage. She wasn't wearing the necklace. People in costume were dancing about on stage, while several long-legged observers in hoodies were sitting in the audience. Ms. Kataura was sitting in the front row, and the pianist was seated below the stage, playing according to her instructions.

The scene unfolding before me was the epitome of this world's beauty. But this was no time to be getting distracted.

The piano stopped, and the lights went up in the auditorium. Ms. Kataura clapped her hands as if to scold the performers for starting to chat amongst themselves.

"I need your ears for a moment. I have something important to discuss with all of you."

Her voice was soft, her face white as a sheet, and her expression stiff as could be.

I was holding my breath near the door. Richard was standing next to me, stock-still, too.

"It's regarding this emerald necklace."

Ms. Kataura had the velvet box on her lap. It held the emerald jewelry that Shinkai wasn't wearing. The room was tense.

"It went missing again during rehearsal the other day. This is the third unexplained incident involving this necklace. As you might imagine, the situation has caused me a great deal of stress, so I consulted with Marienbad about it."

Whispers filled the room. I couldn't imagine that she actually asked them for advice because the necklace they'd loaned them was cursed and all sorts of strange things were happening involving it—they probably would have thought it was just bad luck or some kind of joke. But considering how dire things were getting, maybe she really did.

Ms. Kataura continued in a stiff tone. "This is a very important piece of

jewelry to our company, but I suggested that if these strange occurrences are liable to continue, it may be safer to temporarily return the item. But unfortunately, they replied that they do not want the necklace returned to them."

Before the chatter could start up, she went on. "Whether the necklace is cursed or not, if there is some possibility of some mysterious phenomenon happening with the piece, they would prefer we deal with it. Naturally, I can't imagine they believe in supernatural phenomena, but they likely do not want to retake possession of such an unsettling item. After much deliberation, it was decided that our company would take possession of the emerald necklace indefinitely, until the issue is resolved."

There was one voice among the crowd that was louder than the rest: "That's impossible!" I mean, yeah. The jewelry's supposedly insured. And there's gotta be an agreed-upon time frame for the loan. There's no way they'd lend it outside the scope of that agreement. Not to mention, Ms. Kataura explicitly acknowledged the whole "curse" story. Like Shinkai said, there's no way the ballerina who was beloved by the whole company would do something like that. Shinkai stood on the stage in the heavy atmosphere, silently staring at her toes. I shifted my gaze from Kataura to her, and in that moment—

An "Um, excuse me…" echoed through the auditorium.

A small man stumbled out of the stage right exit. It was Old Yoshida.

"…Is that true?"

The little old man in overalls timidly approached Ms. Kataura. She nodded.

"It is. After the run ends, I intend to find a powerful temple to assist with this issue."

"Oh, you can't be serious. Surely it would be better to return it."

"That's what I thought, but they were against it, so there's not much I can do."

"Why don't you try talking some sense into them? I mean, that necklace is important."

“And isn’t that precisely why we can’t return it with some kind of curse on it? This was a mutual decision that cannot be rescinded. I don’t know how long it will take, but I imagine at least two or three months, perhaps longer, before we can return it.”

My face tensed up. If there was ever an appropriate moment to jump in, it was about to pass me by. Just as I was about to recklessly stick my nose into the situation, someone grabbed me by the waist and pulled me back.

It was Richard.

He slipped out from behind me and approached Old Yoshida without making a sound, then gently put his hand on his shoulder from behind. The old man’s tiny frame shuddered and turned around.

“Good afternoon, Teruaki Yoshida, I believe.”

“…Aren’t you that jeweler?”

“Indeed, that is who I’ve claimed to be.”

Richard’s voice was so sharp and clear, it almost felt out of place. Old Yoshida’s expression stiffened. After a strategic moment of silence, Richard smirked.

“It was quite a brilliant scheme. You really gave the DEA a run for their money with this one.”

“Uh!”

“Seems as though my intuition was right all along.”

I heard Old Yoshida gulp, and then he fell to his knees, sobbing and wailing.

“I’m finished! This is it for me! They’re going to kill me!”

After a deathly moment of silence, commotion filled the auditorium.

The word *unrest* came to mind. No one involved in this had a chance to rest, not for the past ten days—not for the ballet company, not for me, and not for Richard. Really, it had been going on for a month already before last Sunday. A lot had happened.

I waited in the lobby of the massive nine-story building. It was already 2 p.m. so I'd been there for nearly four hours already. I'd already flipped through almost every magazine available at the nearby convenience store. It reminded me of a hospital waiting room, but there were police officers with clubs patrolling the entrance. They'd changed shifts several times already. Thank you for your service. This was the third time I found myself waiting for Richard like this. The first time was at the police box in front of the station when we first met, and the second time was when we went to turn in Old Yoshida.

The elevator suddenly came down to the lobby, and out came a blond-haired, blue-eyed man wearing a chic black jacket and slacks and sparklingly polished tan shoes. All eyes in the lobby were naturally drawn to him. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary, but somehow in here, it almost felt like he was in a cage of gazes. I raised my hand, and Richard came over to me. He told me I shouldn't wear jeans, so I put on my best brown pants, along with a collared shirt.

"Nice work. That must've been rough, but it's still before three, so we're good."

"…How long have you been waiting here?"

"I mean, if we were planning to meet up there anyway, waiting here really isn't any different. You know, this really takes me back. You said something like that the first time, too."

"The first time?"

"At the police box in Harajuku. You told me I didn't need to wait with you until everything was done. Are we good to leave now?"

"Naturally. I don't care if they try to stop me. I'm leaving."

"Got it. Let's get going, then."

I felt like he could use it, so I offered Richard the mineral water I'd bought from the vending machine. I wondered if they offered him a bowl of katsudon like they do in those classic police shows. Nah, Richard would never eat it even if they really did do that. He'd just casually demand royal milk tea.

"That took far longer than I'd anticipated."

“I’m not surprised it took that long. You’d definitely be a worthwhile interview subject, after all.”

“……”

Richard glared at me like he wanted to say something, but he never said a word. He must’ve been tired. I felt a bit bad for him when I saw him down the bottle immediately. I figured they’d at least let him have water whenever he wanted.

He’d been at the police station today to be interviewed about the incident at the Kataura Ballet Company. Richard wasn’t a suspect, but they were calling him a material witness. He gave a statement that Friday, but the situation was so complicated they had to bring him back in. I never knew they could call in someone who wasn’t a suspect so many times. Sounds annoying.

We got into Richard’s Jaguar that was parked in the parking lot. I noticed Richard was driving a little more aggressively than usual, so I spoke softly when I addressed him. There was still a lot left unexplained about the whole situation.

“So, they were questioning you about the emeralds, right?”

“What else would they be asking me about?”

“Don’t get mad at me. So what was up with the necklace?”

“The case is being handled by the Ministry of Health’s Narcotics Control Department. I guess, in Japan, drug cases are under the Ministry of Health rather than the police. Before I continue, I believe this goes without saying, but —”

“This is all off-the-record. I know.”

Old Yoshida was involved in drug trafficking. And it wasn’t just like pot or designer drugs but cocaine. And a lot of it.

He started begging for forgiveness after he broke down in that auditorium. He even started begging us to turn him in to the police. The dancers were all shocked, but Richard and Ms. Kataura remained unmoved. There was only one person who tried to take advantage of the commotion to run, but I was there to stop him, just like we’d planned—it was Old Yoshida’s grandson.

Because no one was hurt and we hadn't caught him in the act or anything, we didn't call the police. Instead, we got into Ms. Kataura's van and headed to the police station.

With the emerald necklace in tow.

Things moved quickly after that. Old Yoshida confessed almost immediately and started shouting at his grandson, saying that none of this would have happened if it wasn't for him.

"It's still hard to believe. I mean, why would a frail old man like that get involved in the drug trade? And how?"

Richard held his tongue. He was probably tired of talking about it all day. I guess even he has moments when he'd rather not talk. All right, time to change tactics.

"Hey, do you like soft caramel? I bought some yesterday."

"…Where?"

"There was a showcase of products from Hokkaido in the station's event space. I have a receipt and everything."

I pulled the square box of caramels out of my bag. The brick-red box had six pieces of light-brown caramel wrapped in plastic. They had a lot of rich butter flavor, but some of them had fruit mixed in, too, so the aftertaste was surprisingly refreshing.

It took about ten seconds for Richard to let out a groan. He looked like a certain old scholar about to make a deal with the devil. But he said he would refrain since he had his hands full at the moment. But I knew just what to do. I plucked a caramel from its wrapper and reached over to the driver's seat. While we were waiting for the light to change, this massive, beautiful fish ate it right out of my hand. After savoring it for a moment and ultimately swallowing, Richard reluctantly continued talking.

"After we returned to the ballet company together, Ms. Kataura told me about something she had remembered—the necklace was damaged when it arrived via air from the Marienbad Ballet. A specific vendor was stipulated to perform the repair in their insurance agreement, but this was all set up as part

of the deal.”

The Marienbad Ballet had been around for quite some time. While they were active in the performance space in the past, they had largely stopped due to financial troubles and were continuing to operate primarily as a lender of stage costumes and props. At least that’s the story Ms. Kataura was told, but the investigation revealed that the truth was almost entirely different. After the management had completely changed, it was highly likely that the ballet company had become a US-based shell company for a narcotics trafficking organization.

Ms. Kataura hadn’t known anything about it and was completely shocked by the news, but Old Yoshida, who had been executing the transactions, knew everything about it. He hadn’t spent all that time working for the ballet just for show, and he was fluent in English, too. He was actually the one who suggested using the long-standing rental agreement for the deals.

“The arrangement went something like this: The setting for the emeralds was damaged from the very beginning, and it would be repaired by a vendor conspiring with the organization behind the Marienbad Ballet.”

“It was repaired? You noticed that?”

“Indeed.”

Richard casually explained that one of spots on the piece that was meant to have a simulant in fact featured a single, natural emerald. It was so clean and flawless that it could be easily mistaken for a lab-grown specimen. When he went back for the second time that day, the documents that Old Yoshida had shown him included a diagram of the necklace that noted that only the five center stones were natural and the rest were fake, and the piece was valued at a few thousand dollars in the insurance documentation. There weren’t any other real emeralds in the piece. Or at least there shouldn’t have been, but Richard’s eyes picked out the genuine emerald that shouldn’t have been there.

“How could you tell when you looked at it a second time? I read that even top experts have a hard time picking out simulants by eye. Is there some kind of trick to it?”

“It’s just experience. On my initial inspection, I had made the faulty

assumption that they were all fake, but it was a different story when I looked at it again with the thought that one of the emeralds looked of suspiciously high quality."

"Well, everything after that's a total mystery to me. How did you figure all that out at that point?"

"Let me finish. Old Yoshida would take the necklace with the real emerald smuggled into it and return it to Marienbad when the show's run ended, then at a prearranged location, the people smuggling the actual narcotics would trade the emerald for the drugs. This arrangement allowed them to safely trade traffic the illegal substance. I guess you could think of it as a type of money laundering. Old Yoshida was paid in cash for his trouble."

Things went off the rails when his grandson started working backstage at the ballet, too. He didn't have a steady job, so his grandfather put in a good word for him to do odd jobs around the ballet company, but despite that, he was strapped for cash and the investigation discovered that he was a bit of a drug addict.

When his grandson who was living with him started begging him for some spending money, Old Yoshida accidentally let it slip that he was expecting a big payday soon. His grandson's eyes lit up at the sound of money and asked his grandfather for details, saying he'd be willing to help. Old Yoshida told him he could help by just sitting tight and waiting. As you might expect, Young Yoshida couldn't even manage that. He started snooping and cracked the encryption on an email that was written in English. He ran it through a translator and figured out that there was something going on with the emerald necklace.

"Shinkai told me about that over the phone. Ms. Kataura had talked about it, apparently."

"Perhaps we should be thankful that Old Yoshida didn't let his grandson in on the whole plan."

"…It's such a surreal story. A drug-smuggling grandpa and a grandson attempting a theft, even though he had no idea what was actually going on."

Young Yoshida was planning to run off with the emerald necklace. I don't really know the details, but he probably thought everyone was wrong and that

the necklace really was worth a fortune so he could just pawn it off for cash and figure out the rest later. Of course, it didn't go smoothly. He gave up on his first attempt when he tried to pull the safe out when Ms. Kataura and Old Yoshida spotted him. When Old Yoshida volunteered to stand guard over the safe in the hall, he and his grandson—who was hiding behind the safe—worked together to return it to its original spot before the director returned.

He made another attempt to steal it during the dress rehearsal, but he was moved by his grandfather's tearful pleas for him to stop—even though he wouldn't explain why—and ultimately, that plan ended in failure, too.

Of course, if Old Yoshida had reported his grandson's attempted thefts to Ms. Kataura, his plan wouldn't be able to proceed either. Since he didn't have any other options, he got together with his grandson to get their stories straight and use the supernatural phenomenon explanation to cover their tracks.

"I guess it all turned out okay in the end. Their family quarrel ended up exposing everything…or…maybe it didn't?"

That's right, if everyone had just bought the curse story and run with it, they never would've been found out. The transaction would've been complete the moment the necklace was returned.

If only it hadn't been for Richard.

And that's why the police deemed him a material witness.

"Back in the restaurant, what inspired you to go back to the ballet anyway? You, like, suddenly fell deep into thought—it was kinda startling."

"I wouldn't say there was any particular stroke of inspiration. While I was speaking with you, I simply thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to take a look at the necklace again. I thought I might have missed something in the antique design of the setting or some unique feature of the stones. I wasn't quite kicking myself about something in particular. I just felt something was vaguely off."

And then when he took another look at the necklace, he noticed a likely fake but possibly real emerald that was suspiciously placed in a part of the piece where it wouldn't stand out. After that, he heard about the damage the

necklace had sustained on arrival from Ms. Kataura, which only made his doubts stronger. When Old Yoshida, who'd been keeping a watchful eye on Richard, left him alone in the office for a moment to go to the restroom, Richard just happened to see some documents laying out on the desk—that's Richard's story and I know he would never rummage around in someone's desk to snoop at documents. So—of course—when Richard saw the name of a jewelry repair shop he'd never heard of before, he looked up the number and called it only to discover that it wasn't a repair shop at all but a broker. He pretended to be Old Yoshida and inquired about where the ballet company's necklace had been sent for repairs, and he turned out to be right on the money. According to the police, the place that "repaired" the necklace had connections to organized crime.

"It's a pretty unfortunate story. They probably would have gotten away with it if you hadn't noticed something was off. You're really lucky, like a superhero getting there right in the nick of time—oh, I swear I'm not imagining anything weird!"

"The investigators said something quite similar. I simply do not understand why both the guardians of the law and certain students of economics colleges find the concept of emerald appraisal so fascinating. If instead of reading the newspaper in the morning, the first thing you did was look at stones and you continued doing that for five years or more, what do you think would happen? I can assure you it would make you develop quite a discerning eye for the subject."

"Look, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. Do you want another caramel? There's butter-flavored ones and orange-flavored ones!"

"If you wouldn't mind," Richard replied. I peeled open a different flavor caramel from the first one, and the blond-haired, blue-eyed carp gobbled it up, stifling his displeasure. I could kinda see what'd happened. He may have told them that he could tell one of the stones was off and that was suspicious, but unless one of the detectives knew a thing or two about gemstones to begin with, I can see why they wouldn't believe him so readily. It probably wasn't a very pleasant position to be in.

"You probably just surprised the investigators because your eyes are a little

too sharp. I mean, a normal person wouldn't be able to tell, right? And who uses gemstones in drug trades anyway? I can't imagine all jewelers have such sharp intuition, or do they?"

"This has nothing to do with intuition. Considering where most emeralds are produced, they have a long and storied history of being used in deals of that nature."

"Huh? Emeralds are used for drugs? What are you talking about?"

"Caramel."

"……"

"I would like another one."

"Which flavor?"

"Orange."

After he downed the fruit-flavored candy, Richard continued talking about drugs, gemstones, and where they were both produced.

The South American country, Colombia, is the highest producer of emeralds in the world, but it's also where cocaine is produced. Cartels that have built their fortunes on the drug aren't at all uncommon there. Until recently, the government even had a campaign to support farmers who had given up growing coca—the plant cocaine is produced from—by offering them farmland. I found myself picturing the tea fields in Shizuoka, but as if they were fields of drugs the government was trying to ban. Crazy.

"Over the past decade, the Colombian government has placed harsh restrictions on the export of emeralds. While there are issues regarding mine management and other complicated situations surrounding the emerald trade, the largest problem in my estimation is how deeply intertwined emeralds are with the drug trade. I'm sure a student of economics like yourself is at least familiar with the concept of money laundering."

"…It's a technique to conceal the source of income for tax evasion purposes or illicit drug transactions or whatever you might need to cook the books for, right?"

Richard gave me one of his “bravo”s for the first time in a while. “Good job.”

It wasn’t really something I’d ever thought about until I started studying economics, but fundamentally, banks are really businesses before they’re financial institutions. They’re part of the service industry, and they make a profit through lending, deposits, and investing. It’d be a huge liability if a subset of a bank’s customers were participating in illegal activities, so they’d need to crack down on that sort of thing. Like, banks freeze assets and stuff sometimes. And they cooperate with the police sometimes to keep an eye on suspicious monetary transactions. And one of the tricks criminals use to circumvent that is money laundering, at least I think it is. I don’t think I slept *that* much in my business ethics class.

“It may be difficult to imagine, but let’s suppose there’s a drug that commands millions, if not tens of millions of yen per kilogram. You’d need cash if you wanted to make a purchase, but moving such large sums of funds would attract the attention of your bank. And depositing a large sum like that into a foreign account would send up even more red flags.”

“So you’re saying you’d get caught if you weren’t careful about how you moved your money around.”

“Exactly. And to that end—and this isn’t restricted to emeralds specifically—gemstones would be extremely useful, don’t you agree? The jewelers who are connected to those drug cartels sell gemstones to their foreign clients, not drugs. You could think of them like prepaid credit cards. The buyer takes the gemstone and returns to Japan, finds the person peddling the actual narcotics and hands the gemstone over. And thus…”

The trade is completed successfully, without compromising your bank account. You can trade gemstones for cocaine. I never would have imagined beautiful stones would have such a utilitarian application.

“…I really hate this stuff.”

“You’re absolutely impossible.”

“I mean, it’s just beyond the pale. Come on, I’m begging you, crack down on this stuff harder…”

“What do you think they’re doing? Every country has extremely strict drug trafficking laws. There are many countries around the world where drug trafficking is a de facto capital offense. It doesn’t even matter if you’re not a citizen of that country, ‘oops I didn’t know’ isn’t a valid excuse. But despite all that, there are numerous organizations that use cowardly tactics like we saw in this case.”

I felt so bogged down by the whole thing. Which really sucked because we were on our way to what was supposed to be a really exciting event.

“I gotta wonder why they had to drag a ballet company into this whole mess, though. Not that I think it would’ve been better if they’d used some other kind of organization, but like, where did they even get the idea?”

“I’m sure they arrived at the idea primarily because international dealings in the name of art are unlikely to raise much suspicion. Additionally, the opportunity to transport gemstones across borders without needing to smuggle them is a sensible approach to protecting valuable assets. I think it’s rather clever actually.”

For as much as that sounded like praise, Richard was furious. I was, too. Why did people have to use something beloved for its beauty for such an awful purpose? I bet Tanimoto would be mad about it as well. I mean, even my blood was boiling. Those poor, beautiful stones.

“It was kinda anticlimactic in the end though. You were pretty scary there when you confronted him, you know.”

“I was simply trying to throw him a bit off balance.”

Old Yoshida wasn’t going to be paid until after the deal went through, but he was told to prepare for them to exact a “fitting punishment” if the necklace wasn’t returned to Marienbad on time. Old Yoshida probably thought it was a good thing that the curse scare would mean the necklace would be returned sooner rather than later, so that’s why Ms. Kataura saying it wouldn’t be returned sent him into such a panic. He probably thought they’d have him killed. He probably thought it’d be hard for the police to come after him since he wasn’t directly handling the drugs, but the moment he was in police custody, his tune changed and he spilled the beans on the whole operation. He was just

being detained at the moment, but a prison sentence seemed pretty much inevitable.

“That act Ms. Kataura put on was your idea, wasn’t it? How much had you figured out at that point?”

“I had a very bad feeling when I discovered the fake broker. I couldn’t brush it off as just vague misgivings anymore at that point, so I just presented her with my conjecture about what was going on without any pretense. Ms. Kataura was the one who told me that it would be too late once something that couldn’t be undone happened, so she had to do what she could now. No one hated the curse rumor more than her, after all.”

“She really is brave. What was that thing you mentioned to Old Yoshida? DE—something? Is that some kind of gemological term?”

“The DEA is the American Drug Enforcement Administration. I figured he’d be familiar with the name, so it seemed like it’d make for a useful threat.”

The DEA—what was this, a foreign TV show? Well, I mean, this *is* Richard we’re talking about here. Even if it was just a bluff, when a mysterious blond man suddenly claps you on the shoulder like that, I’m pretty sure anyone would think they’re about to pay for their sins.

But still.

“I know I’m just being crazy, but you’re not like an undercover agent or something…are you?”

“Caramel.”

“I’m all out,” I said, showing him the empty box. Richard glanced at the empty box and then my face in the reflection on the windshield, before returning his eyes to the road.

“I believe people in such fields typically have less attention-grabbing appearances.”

There was a tinge of loneliness in his voice even though on the surface he sounded like a total narcissist. I mean sure, he was extraordinarily beautiful and had extremely sharp eyes, but was he really just a regular old jeweler? And here

I thought I might get a little clarity on why he's so mysterious. But I'll take this over forcing him to reveal something he's not comfortable with.

We were in the car for maybe fifteen minutes when we arrived at the Ueno parking lot. Richard parked across from the theater near Ueno Park. They must've already started seating, since beautifully clothed people started going inside one by one. Shinkai said she'd reserved tickets for me, so I figured I'd be able to pick them up at the counter.

"How do I look?"

"What?"

Richard got my attention and spun around in front of the ticket counter.

"It's not terribly strict, but there is a dress code. Do I look all right? Nothing on my suit or in my hair?"

"You look perfect like you always do. The most beautiful man in the whole world is standing in front of me."

The woman behind the counter suddenly started coughing really loud. Maybe she had a cold. If I had any caramels left, I would've offered her one. Richard gave my name to the woman behind the counter and got our tickets. He passed me mine over his shoulder and began walking at impressive speed into the theater. Maybe he was excited to be going out, or maybe he was nervous? He sure has some nerve when he's just a last-minute replacement for Tanimoto.

"Don't leave me! I'm nervous, too, okay? I've never been in a place like this before."

"…We need to have another talk, but I'll save it for after the show."

"Yeah, it's just about to start."

The program was "Jewels," with Aki Shinkai performing the act titled "Emeralds."

Today would be its one and only performance.

The police investigation happened unbelievably quickly. They ultimately concluded that it was exceedingly unlikely that anyone else in the ballet was involved in the incident. Old Yoshida had kept his confidence well, not even

revealing the particulars to his grandson, after all. And to top it all off, since this was an international case that organization that starts with a D got involved for real, too. Or at least they might have. It was hard to draw firm conclusions because everything had happened in secret.

They were dealing with a large scale drug trafficking organization, and they couldn't let the opportunity to catch the dealers Old Yoshida was supposed to deliver the emeralds to pass them by. So, apparently, the cops told the members of the ballet not to do anything that might raise suspicions. They couldn't even explain what happened to the people who weren't in the auditorium that day yet. They had to act like everything was normal so they wouldn't tip the dealers off. If the performance was canceled and tickets had to be refunded, just as Ms. Kataura had feared the company could very well go bankrupt. So in a sense, maybe these measures were a sort of blessing in disguise. That said, it was hard to even describe what the ballet members went through in those ten days. They were busy enough as it was to begin with preparing for the premiere, but they had the Ministry of Health investigating a drug trafficking ring on top of it, too. But despite everything that had happened, I could see the professional pride and determination of the dancers as they fought to put on the ballet on schedule.

I asked Shinkai if there was anything I could do to help, and she texted back only one thing:

Just make sure you come and watch.

Because it could be our last performance.

I asked her if it was because of the drug investigation around Old Yoshida, and she said that wasn't it. She told me that the company was struggling financially —prefacing that with the comment that most performing arts companies were in a very similar position. Fewer people were coming to the theater. Their old regulars were getting older, and young people didn't have much exposure to ballet in the first place. No one can know what the future holds. Every performance could be their last. It was hard to hear, but there was no sadness in her voice. As someone who strived to be a ballerina that would keep on working as hard as she could tomorrow and the next day, she was always running at full speed. It could be tomorrow, it could be the day after that—

there were no guarantees—so she was giving every single day and every single performance her all.

I told her I wouldn't miss it for the world.

"Whoa, this place is huge. How is the ceiling so high? This is nuts…"

"Watch your step."

The seats that Shinkai had gotten us were in the middle of the first floor of the five-story theater. The view was great. The last time I was in a theater was for a class in high school, but I was confident that even if it was hard to understand, if I tried my best I could stay awake for the roughly two-and-a-half-hour program.

"Oh, yeah, I almost forgot. That third attempted theft, was that another failed attempt by Young Yoshida because his grandfather sabotaged him? That was the one thing Shinkai never really told me about."

Richard looked at me a little annoyed from the seat next to me. I guess this was probably a bad topic, considering where we were seated—there could be other people related to the ballet nearby. I put my hands together and apologized, but Richard just said "no" and gazed off into the distance.

"I heard something rather odd when I was being questioned earlier. Reportedly, the addict grandson had something peculiar to say when he was arrested."

Yoshida's grandson, Shigeo, was so convinced that the money would all be his if he could just sell off that necklace, so when he saw an opportunity while his grandfather was preoccupied, he made his third attempt to steal it. Of course, just walking straight out of the building like that would have been too conspicuous, so he claimed he was running to a local shop to pick up some supplies that they were low on and tried to slip out through the staff entrance in the back.

But then—

"He claims that someone called out to him to stop him the moment he took a step out that back door."

From far away, someone asked him what he thought he was doing. It was a woman's voice. He turned around in a panic and saw a figure clad in green tulle in the hall leading to the fire escape, looking at him from over five meters away. He screamed and ran back into the building. He testified that it was Shinkai he'd seen there, and he returned the necklace because he thought she'd come looking for it.

However.

"The investigation concluded that at the time of the theft, all of the dancers wearing green costumes were on stage. The rehearsal was being recorded on video, so there's no room for doubt. No one fitting that description should have been by the back door at that time."

"Wait, then who—"

No, come on. I mean why would he assume someone wearing a green ballet outfit was Shinkai specifically?

Richard went a little quiet, staring at the curtain obscuring the stage. The lights were beginning to go down in the theater. The performance was about to start.

"The necklace."

"You mean the emerald necklace?"

"The malachite one. He said that the ballerina he'd seen off in the distance had a large green stone hanging from her neck, so he assumed it had to have been Shinkai."

The malachite pendant that was supposed to be a good luck charm but ended up becoming a memento of a late friend. I recalled Shinkai's smile when she said that it made her feel like Minako was watching over her.

"…Wait."

There's no way.

"I was asked if I knew anything about this particular incident or had any undercover help planted at the time."

Richard shook his head.

I couldn’t say a word, and Richard continued like it was some kind of afterthought.

“Emeralds have been prized since ancient times as stones that bring happiness to their owners—as a stone that encourages peace among family, harmony between lovers, intimate friendships, spiritual growth, the deepening of bonds, and protects and nurtures those one loves. Emerald is called the ‘queen of gems’ because the dense inclusions give the stone a soft, feminine impression. Almost as if it’s the guardian angel—or even goddess—of happiness. In a way, it’s not unlike what the living hope becomes of those who pass on.”

I sat there, completely dumbfounded, and Richard added one more thing,

“Perhaps we could consider this a welcome twist of fate as well.”

All the lights went down in the theater. It was time for the performance to start. The curtain rose.

Shinkai stood in the center of the stage clad in green, wearing the rehearsal jewelry that her dear friend who had died so young had worn. She looked like a queen of gems.

When I heard it was a “plotless” ballet, I assumed it’d probably put me to sleep because it sounded like it’d be hard to understand. I was told it just meant that choreography trusted the audience to follow it, but I had no idea what I was supposed to get out of dancing without a story. I had zero confidence in my ability to keep up.

But Shinkai and her peers handily rid me of that misconception.

The girls on stage didn’t even look human. They seemed more like gems magically given human form. There really was no story, only dance. But the performance that unfolded before me was the beautiful product of the choreographer’s mind working at full capacity to figure out which motions would make the human body look optimally beautiful and what steps would make the already dreamlike accompaniment seem even more dreamy.

Gems are so beautiful.

And so are dancers.

This kind of beauty, where you just want to bask in its presence, is hard to put into words. I wasn't even sure any words would be able to convey it in its entirety. I knew exactly why the man who choreographed this piece decided to use dance without words to connect the two. Why use words to express something that can't be put into words, after all?

"Emeralds" ended after the first thirty minutes or so. The act was followed by the fiery "Rubies" and the sublime "Diamonds," which was like being granted an audience with a snow queen. Before I even knew it, the performance was over, and I was surrounded by applause.

It reminded me of that fantasy movie trope, like I'd been transported to a fantasy world and spent a little over two hours running around with beautiful faeries, only to find myself back in the same chair I was in before I'd left, feeling like no time had passed at all.

"That was insane. Holy crap! People turned into gems!"

I couldn't settle down when we got out of the theater. I just kept saying "holy crap" over and over. Richard smiled at me awkwardly. People apparently kept mistaking him for a dancer because he was such an intensely beautiful man at a ballet premiere, and he had several of them asking him to sign their programs. Richard turned them down with a smile.

"You're acting almost as if you saw the same thing I did."

"Huh? Of course I did…? I mean, it was incredible and totally mind-blowing!"

Richard nodded, "I agree. It was a wonderful performance. And it pleases me to no end that they got through it without any trouble. But I do have to wonder if the performance that has moved you so deeply and the one I watched weren't the same thing at all."

"B-but we did watch the same performance just now."

"The question of what people feel when they watch something beautiful with no narrative is a fascinating one. There must be myriad possible reactions even to a single solitary gemstone. What you saw in that performance was not the world of the choreographer's intent but the inner workings of your own heart."

I had no idea what he was talking about or what it had to do with the ballet

we just watched. I mean, it was about people expressing the beauty of gemstones through dance—at least, I thought it was.

Maybe Richard really had seen something completely different.

“Are you free after this? Or do you have plans?”

“Why?”

“I was just thinking it might be nice to go out to eat somewhere outside of Ginza is all. I’d like to talk some more, too.”

Just what *did* Richard see?

The jeweler, who was as beautiful as a gemstone himself, vacantly stared at me in the dim light before he smiled like he realized something. I frowned. What’s that supposed to mean?

“I’ve offered you this advice before, but take care to ensure you aren’t offering your consideration to the wrong party.”

“Look, if you’re busy we don’t have to.”

“I believe you’re the busy one here, Mr. Knight in Shining Armor.”

While I was still confused by what he meant, Richard began walking off into the evening in the opposite direction of the parking lot. What? Where the hell was he going? And what was I supposed to do?

I could hear someone running up to me from the parking lot behind me while I was at a loss for what to do. They were coming up on me really fast. I turned around before I had the opportunity to put my guard up, and someone stopped abruptly in front of me. Panting, with her hands on her hips.

“There you are, Seigi!”

“…Tanimoto?”

“I’m glad I caught you. I hurried over as fast as I could when my practice class ended. Aki told me there was going to be, like, an after party? Or celebration? I dunno, something like that, and she invited me to come. You’re coming, too, right? Aki said she contacted you about it.”

I hurriedly pulled out my phone. I’d turned it off for the performance.

Tanimoto smiled when she saw how flustered I was.

“Well, if you’re free, why don’t you come with me? Aki wanted to thank you for your help. It looks like it’s in Ameyoko,” she said, peering at her phone. I smiled awkwardly and turned around. Was he trying to give me a hint about this before?

“Hey, Richard, why don’t you—”

But he was already gone.

Darkness had almost completely blanketed Ueno Park that evening. I tried calling his name again but got no response. I took a few steps in the direction he’d wandered off and heard my own name.

“Seigi, what’s wrong? It’s this way.”

“Oh, right… I’ll be right there.”

At Tanimoto’s behest, I started walking toward Ameyoko. Since the ballet company was still under investigation, they couldn’t have a huge celebration, but I guess a little after party at a restaurant was okay. I had to thank Shinkai for the tickets and letting me get a glimpse of a world I’ve never seen before. Plus, I was with Tanimoto. With her big practical training session over, she was over the moon.

But I felt kinda weird for some reason.

Like a necklace missing one of its stones.

It wasn’t something I was certain of, or even just a bad feeling—I knew it was all just in my head. I couldn’t tell you why, but I had this sense that one day, Richard would walk out of my life like that just as suddenly as he had walked into it without saying a word.

Just what had he seen in the wordless beauty on the stage that night?

case 4 The Opal of Reunion

“AND THEN HE HIT HIM with a swift slug to the jaw! That threw him off balance and he fell on his ass. A one-hit KO. You don’t see matches that clean very often. It’s really hard to pull off big moves like that. Just watching it made my heart race.”

Richard’s shop was practically a different world when there were customers in it compared to when there weren’t. When customers were here, it was a practical yet comfortable customer lounge, and when they weren’t here, it felt more like a private home. I could talk as much as I liked.

I was telling my beautiful boss about karate matches. The karate school I went to still held tournaments with other similar schools once in the summer and once in the winter, like it did when I attended. The tournaments were useful to encourage students to improve their skills. They were big events that even included demonstrations by masters of the art, but a lot of kids came to them, too, so they required a lot of people to run. They called me up to help out, and I judged a few matches before coming in to work a little after noon today. The most exciting one was the last match of the morning session between two instructors.

“It felt less like a sparring match and more like a fight to the death. I really missed this. I wasn’t supposed to be paid for my work today, but getting to see that incredible roundhouse kick was payment in full with some to spare! Oh—”

Richard was sitting in the lounge, silently sipping his royal milk tea. I was pretty sure this wasn’t the first time I started going off on an extended monologue like this.

“Oh, I forgot, were you more into boxing? Sorry, I didn’t mean to bore you by talking your ear off about karate.”

“I found it quite interesting, actually. I was listening respectfully. However, I must admit, I think I find watching you talk at such length more interesting than the subject matter,” Richard said in a completely flat tone before taking another sip of the tea I’d made. The snack to accompany tea today was not excessively sweet sugar-covered doughnuts or something like that. They tasted like honey. They were sold in cute illustrated wrapping paper featuring a retro looking train

flying through space. I guess it was supposed to make the doughnut look like a star in the night sky. It was very ornate.

“I don’t think I’m normally as quiet as you’re making me sound with that comment… Maybe it’s just because I got excited about that roundhouse kick.”

“I take it that wasn’t your signature move back then.”

“You’d be right on the money there. If I could pull one of those off, I’d be a total monster.”

Now, there was this older boy in my class in junior high who really was a monster.

One year at the annual summer tournament, I’d hit a growth spurt, so I was put on the same team as some of the guys two years my senior for the class competition. I was up first, so if my team wanted to take an undefeated victory, I absolutely couldn’t lose, but I was a complete and utter failure. It put my team on the back foot right from the start. It made me feel miserable.

But next up was my friend, a boy two years older than me, and he was up against such a highly ranked opponent that even our hardass of an instructor wouldn’t have blamed him if he lost. But he KO-d him with a perfect roundhouse kick. His form was shockingly perfect. It was a lightning-fast underdog victory. He bowed to his downed opponent and ran over to me excitedly and said—

“‘I beat him good enough for the both of us!’ It makes me tremble every time I remember it. What kind of junior-high schooler talks like that?”

“A well preserved memory, crystallized before its beauty fades, is more valuable than any antique.”

“You’ve gotta have one or two of those of your own. Like some fun memories from when you were a kid.”

“So, are the two of you still good friends?”

“No, we went to different high schools, and both of us stopped taking classes before we went on to university. I didn’t even have a cell phone back then…”

When I agreed to come in and volunteer, I was kind of hoping I might bump

into him again. I miss the days when we'd hang out and play video games until the sun went down. I reconnected with a lot of the guys from class through the group chat, but he wasn't in it. I had to wonder what he was up to now. I hope he's doing well. If his job transferred him to some remote location I might never see him again.

Richard must've noticed my expression change, because he popped his stardust doughnut into his mouth and said, "I wouldn't worry about it too much. The universe has a way of bringing people together when it's meant to be. Perhaps if you hope to see him strongly enough, it might answer you."

"So you're saying I'll meet him sooner or later? I sure hope so."

"Well, now, whether you get the exactly reunion you've been hoping for is a different issue."

"Don't be so negative. Or do you mean like, he's already got a wife and kids and stuff so our relationship might not be anything more than a nice memory to him?"

"Excuse me…?"

Richard's expression gradually changed. His brows knitted, he closed his mouth and brought his hand to his chin. Did I really say something worthy of such deep thought? I was really shocked when I ran into one of my high school classmates again. I knew he didn't go to college, but it was a little crazy how fast he got married and became a dad. I must've been further from his mind than space debris, even though we used to see each other every day and joke around about all sorts of dumb stuff. Friendship really is fleeting, huh?

"…I apologize if this sounds rude, but what exactly did you mean by your 'relationship'?"

"Huh? Just what it sounds like?"

Richard stared at me intently again. I knew he was confused about something, but not what that something was. I wonder what it could have been. I can't imagine he was trying to start a staring contest with me. While I was still hopelessly confused, determination filled Richard's face as he opened his mouth.

“Asking about this sort of thing directly is typically against my principles, but am I correct in my understanding of what you said earlier as a hypothetical example of a reunion with someone you were close to in the past that had sudden and drastic life change, making you grieve for your past friendship?”

“What else would I have meant?”

“…Absolutely nothing. Tea.”

I started simmering the water with tea in it while I pondered what could have possibly confused Richard so badly. Before the pot started boiling, I realized how awkward my example was. Crap. But I was glad Richard went out of his way to clarify things. In the past, when we’d gotten wires crossed like this, things would veer off in a strange direction and Richard would end up getting mad at me. I really didn’t want that to happen again. So I was very grateful that he’d taken precautions against that happening.

Admittedly, his misread wasn’t totally off the mark. I do remember that back in my first year of junior high, I was pretty convinced that if I had to marry someone, he probably wouldn’t have been a bad choice. Maybe he would have actually kept in contact with me if I had jokingly tried to sell him on the idea with my cooking skills.

After we’d finished showing a spinel necklace to a customer who’d dropped by on the way back from shopping at one of the department stores in the area, I cleaned the store, said goodnight to Richard, and headed to Shimbashi Station like I always did. It was 6 p.m. on a Saturday. The station was pretty empty compared to how it was on weekdays, but all the people in suits really dominated the space, signaling that this really wasn’t a part of town for young people. This was a place of business.

I was standing in front of the ticket gate for the regular train lines where the exhibit of the massive old train wheels was. Normally, I’d go right through to the platform, but for some reason I couldn’t take my eyes off this man in a grey suit.

“…Is that him?”

My friend with the perfect roundhouse kick, the person I'd always look up to forever. I kept staring at him, wondering how he could be here *now*. He had the same short brown hair as he did back then, and those striking facial features like a burnt-out rock musician. I was pretty sure it was him. But he didn't look like he was feeling all that well. Like he was tired or had suddenly aged. I wasn't sure if I should say something. It seemed weird to feel that way. I mean, it's your old friend Hase—just run up to him and give him a nice punch. That's what you always used to do. But, I mean, how many years ago was that now?

While I was wondering what to do, the man in the suit noticed me staring and looked in my direction. When I saw the way he was sizing me up, I was sure. There was no doubt left in my mind. That was him. No matter how many times I sparred with him, I never beat him. My eyes went wide, and he seemed to realize who I was, too, shouting, "Hey!" and running over to me. In an instant, his face looked like it got ten years younger.

"Seigi! It's me! Keigo Hase! From karate class! Do you remember me?"

"H-how could I possibly forget you?"

"So you do remember me!"

I felt so intensely relieved. Holy crap. The adrenaline made my heart feel like it was about to pound out of my chest. Thank you, Richard, you really were right. I guess the universe really does have a way of bringing people together.

We smacked each other on the back and he let out a big, happy laugh. I told him I was just at the dojo for the summer tournament for the first time in a while and it had made me think of him. He told me I looked like I was doing good as always and ruffled my hair. I felt like I might cry.

"What year are you in college now? Second? You must have your hands full looking for a job."

"No, none of that yet—wait, you're in college right now, too, aren't you? Shouldn't you be in your fourth year?"

"Some stuff happened with my family, so I had to drop out and start working last year. But things are working out pretty well. You better study hard while you can. You free right now? Why don't we grab some dinner, my treat?"

“I can’t say no to that!”

He ended up taking me to an expensive barbecue joint in the station building. All the employees had cooking aprons on and the charcoal crackled in the grill at our table.

“Eat up. What else is my paycheck good for?”

“Thanks, bro!”

“You really don’t have to keep calling me ‘bro.’”

“Then what would you like me to call you?”

“Why not like ‘Mr. Hase’ or something?”

“Ooh, that’s so cool!”

“What about ‘Mr.’ is cool? Look, I give up, you can keep calling me ‘bro’ if you want. You can keep calling me that for the rest of your life for all I care. It’s kinda refreshing, honestly. I’ve been saddled with some weird nicknames lately.”

“What, like ‘The King of Carnage’?”

“I don’t think anyone’s ever called me that outside the dojo.”

I had so much I wanted to talk to him about, but we were grilling and eating and talking so fast I kept choking on my food. I bet it’s gonna be a real pain to get the smoke out of these clothes, but I’m not sure I really care.

I told him about everything that happened while we’d been out of touch. I told him about how my beloved grandma had died and that I was living on my own now and attending the college of economics at Kasaba University. And then about the gemstone. Not about Richard, but the story about how I found the rightful owner of the ring I got from my grandma. I’d told him a little about my grandma’s situation in the past, but admittedly, it was mostly about how she and my mother didn’t really get along.

Hase may not have been the type to cut through bullshit to deal with issues swiftly like Richard was, but he was like a big brother to me. He’d done so much for me, and I could never forget about him.

“Wow, so that ring your grandma left you ended up being…uh, belonging to someone else, huh? And the real owner was living in Kobe the whole time? What a wild story.”

“I was pretty surprised by how it all went down, too. I guess the universe really has a way of bringing people together, huh.”

“Oh, knock it off with all that sentimental nonsense. Man, that’s such a bummer though. You coulda made bank if you’d held onto it for yourself.”

“Oh, no, the owner didn’t want it back. She actually told me I should keep it.”

Hase’s eyes went wide as he asked if I still had it. I nodded bashfully. Sometimes, truth really is stranger than fiction. He looked like he didn’t believe me at first, but when we heard the sound of fat dripping down through the grate and sizzling on the coals, we both hurried to evacuate the meat to our plates. The beef tongue ended up a bit charred.

“That’s crazy. Guess she must’ve been real rich. You sure are lucky. ‘Justice’ really is the perfect name for you.”

“Oh, you’re embarrassing me.”

“So, how much did you make off the ring in the end?”

Huh?

Hase offered me the plate of beef tongue while I was still confused by what he’d just said. After I ate a couple pieces, I told him I still had the ring and that I hadn’t sold it because it reminded me of my grandma. And thankfully, I wasn’t in a position where I really needed the money. He looked at me like I was crazy for a moment, before nodding.

“Right…sorry. I just thought I could ask your advice about something is all.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just about a gemstone. But don’t worry about it, buddy. Eat up!”

“W-wait! I think I can help! Tell me about it, please.”

“What’s with you, man? You’re almost too excited. It’s creepy.”

“Maybe this is why the universe brought us back together!”

He laughed and asked me if I knew of any good jewelry stores. I asked if he was looking to buy or sell, and he looked a bit sullen for a moment before replying “buy” with a smile.

“You’re getting married? Congratulations!”

“Don’t pry, man. Have you ever heard of privacy?”

“Sorry… Wouldn’t a department store or something like that be a better choice then?”

“I’d rather go to a specialist. Some place where the people working there have a good eye, you know?”

I wasn’t sure what to do. If I suggested Étranger, it’d be kind of awkward to talk about how I was working there part-time. He might think I was trying to sell him something or make money off him. I didn’t want him to think that about me. Richard wouldn’t take advantage of anyone, and I had the utmost confidence that it was obvious how skilled he was, but the timing of the question made it awkward.

I ended up suggesting several jewelry shops in Ginza—I’d never been inside any of them, but I always ended up stopping in front of the stores to do some window shopping because I’d get a little excited by the idea that they were Richard’s business rivals—and capped it off by casually mentioning Étranger. The chances of him actually dropping by the shop seemed pretty low, but I would be really happy if he did end up coming in. Obviously, it’d be a little awkward if I was there when he showed up, but I could just casually serve him some royal milk tea and make him laugh. Maybe he’d even have his girlfriend with him. Just imagining it made me happy.

Hase never so much as frowned when I indulged in all the best cuts of meat—he just told me to eat more and pulled out his credit card at the end.

“Thank you for the meal. I’ll pay you back next time.”

“Don’t worry about it. By the way, are you always at Shimbashi Station around this time on Saturdays?”

“I guess I do take the train from here…”

“Seriously? Dude, why don’t we grab dinner again next week, then? Chatting with you really made my day. Being a working man is so lonely sometimes—you have all this money but no one to spend it on.”

“It made mine too! We could even invite some of the other guys from the dojo. I bet a lot of them are free.”

“Nah, I don’t wanna be a pain in the ass. You’re more than enough company for me.”

“…You got it!”

I didn’t think any of the guys would think an invitation from Hase would be a pain in the ass, but I guess if he wanted to pay, it was kind of a different issue. There would be other opportunities. The sun was setting, and by the time we got back to the ticket gate, the white light of the fluorescent lamps was bright enough to hurt my eyes. The station usually started getting really crowded around now.

“See ya next week, then.”

“Yeah! See you here next week!”

I gave him a deep bow and watched him walk off. I got his number, too. We could figure out when we were meeting whenever. I looked up at the sky peeking out between the buildings and let out a sigh. What a good day. What an incredibly good day.

I was humming in the kitchen as I prepared royal milk tea when Richard came in to get a snack. My organizational skills were the only reason there wasn’t an avalanche of sweets the moment he opened the door to the cabinet. It was like a game of Tetris.

“I put the ones closest to their expiration date in front. Just grab something easy to pull out.”

“I’m aware. On another note, you’ve been rather chipper on Saturdays lately.”

“Have I?”

“You have. I’m certain of it.”

He really did have sharp eyes. It’s not like I was that crazy about barbecue—I just really enjoyed hanging out with Hase again. It made me feel like we were back in junior high.

“Well, I guess the universe really wanted to bring me back together with someone. How’d you know?”

“You look more relaxed than usual. You should watch your step.”

“Yeah, I’ll be careful,” I said, and the bell rang. A customer. I decided to finish making the royal milk tea. Just as I was about to pull the milk out of the fridge, I moved a little too quickly and banged my knee into the storage shelves, making my beautifully organized boxes of sweets come crashing down. Crap. I have to put this all back. I’ve gotta hide the evidence fast.

I heard a customer come into the shop as I was crawling around on my hands and knees picking up boxes in the kitchen.

“Welcome. My name is Richard, and I’m the owner of this shop. How may I be of service?”

“Oh, uh, hey. Man, I didn’t think this shop would be so empty.”

The voice sounded familiar. Was that Hase? No, it had to be someone else. The voice sounded kinda gloomy.

I started working as quickly as I could to return the boxes to the shelves, but I couldn’t just jam them in all willy-nilly—they wouldn’t fit. I tried looking for a spot where I could stack them temporarily, but there just wasn’t any space in the tiny kitchen. I heard the voice that sounded suspiciously like Hase continue:

“I came to inquire about selling a stone. Would you be interested? It’s an opal.”

“…We don’t typically make purchases directly from clients, but I would be willing to take a look at what you have.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

Selling? I thought he was looking to buy something.

It sounded like he took a seat at Richard's suggestion. Normally, this was my cue to serve the tea, and I could hear Richard waiting a beat for me, but I just couldn't. There was still a sea of cookie boxes around my feet. I had to hurry.

"That appears to be a fire opal you have here."

"Y-yeah, that's it. I inherited it from my grandmother, see."

"I see."

Richard seemed receptive, so the customer's story came flooding out of his mouth.

"So, my granny hadn't been in good health for a while and sadly left this world when I was in my second year of high school, but before she passed she gave me this keepsake. She told me that—long story short—it didn't exactly belong to her and she wanted me to try to get it back to its original owner. Anyway, it took a while, but I finally found the owner who lived way out in the boonies, but you know what she told me? 'Please, I want you to have it.' And, like, obviously, I was happy to hear that, but what am I supposed to do with this thing? I don't know the first thing about gems."

"That is a very *interesting* story. I don't mean to pry, but would you mind enlightening me about where the owner lives?"

"She was in Kobe, but—I mean, that's it, really. Crazy story, am I right?"

I heard a cheerful laugh afterward.

I felt really strange. It was like the walls of my mind were slowly being painted over with a roller full of white paint. Like my insides were twisting and warping. I felt oddly dizzy. A memento from his late grandmother? "Please, I want you to have it"?

That was my story.

The situation with my grandma was messy, so I never told any of my college friends about it. I only told Hase about it because I thought he was trustworthy. He *was* trustworthy. I was sure of that.

So why?

Richard's tone was soft and almost distant in its formality, "Is that so?

Personally, I think it might be best to treasure something that came into your possession by such a strange twist of fate."

And he was telling this to Richard of all people, the one who helped me find the original owner of Grandma's ring. The customer let out a laugh.

"What kind of salesman are you? What do you care, anyway? How much is it worth?"

"I could not give you a valuation on the spot. This shop does not specialize in third-party purchases, after all."

"I heard you were supposed to have sharp eyes."

"If it isn't too much trouble, would you mind giving me the name of the person who referred you to my establishment?"

"…I do mind. That's personal."

"My most humble apologies, then."

My heart was doing something weird. *Is this what palpitations feel like? Tea. That's right, I need to serve the tea. That's my job after all. Tea.* My hands were shaking, and my legs felt like they were made of lead. *What the hell are you doing? Get that tea out right now.*

Just as I had finished preparing the two cups of tea, the customer put the opal away and left the shop, complimenting Richard on his looks on the way out.

"You sure are pretty, but do you really sell gemstones here?" he said.

It was awful. I felt awful. I didn't need to check the surveillance footage, I knew that was Hase. I wish he could have at least left with some dignity instead of making it worse.

I came out with the tea way too late, and Richard got up from the lounge chair he was sitting in and took the tray from me. I must have looked extremely unsteady on my feet.

"I'm…so sorry for taking so long."

"Just try to be faster next time."

"I will," I groaned in response. Richard didn't say anything else. He probably—

no, definitely—already picked up on what was going on. He knew that customer must've had something to do with me. The Kobe detail sealed it. He wasn't naive like I was, there's no way he'd think anyone else but me would have had that experience. But he had his principles as a businessman.

Don't ask someone a question you don't want to know the answer to.

And for that I was glad. So glad. So glad I felt like I could just about die. I felt like there was gunk stuck in my throat and it wasn't going to budge. I felt restless. If he'd just ask me I could explain everything. But that was selfish of me, wasn't it? I just wanted to get this weight off my shoulders. But what would I even say if he did ask? Oh, that's the friend I was talking about, I told him the story about the ring a little while back, and I don't know why he came in here pretending it happened to him, but I was so shocked when it happened that my hands started shaking and I couldn't make the tea, and I'm so, so sorry. Is that what I should say?

Why would he do this? What was even the point?

"……"

There wasn't anything left to clean up in the kitchen, but I just stood there for a while. It was a Saturday. I was supposed to meet Hase later. I could ask him about it. Assuming he really did show up at the ticket gate today.

I didn't feel like it'd be better if he didn't show up.

But even if he did, I wasn't sure what to say to him.

Hase looked and sounded the same as he always did. Well, what did "always" even mean in this context? I hadn't interacted with him on a daily basis in over five years. I had no idea what he'd been up to during that time. Last time we went out to eat, he told me he was working for a real estate firm, but he never said anything about wanting to sell a gemstone. But why would he have gone out of his way to mention it? Especially without a particular reason to.

I mean, just like there are people who want to buy gems for no particular reason, I'm pretty sure there are even more people who'd have no deep reason to want to sell them. It's just about timing. I was a little shocked when he used

my grandma's story like that, but you know, if it was useful to him, so be it.

It really sucks when you think someone might need help, but they aren't letting it show at all, so you can't do anything. I couldn't concentrate. I just kept thinking there had to be something else I could do.

"Your stomach hurting or something? Go on, eat some more of those ribs. Are you holding back for some reason?"

"…No, nothing like that."

I had no idea how to broach the topic.

He didn't exactly look like he was struggling financially, but if he was trying to sell a gemstone, maybe he was? Even though he was being so generous to me. Then again, I still remember how he'd go out of his way to buy me a soda even with his last 100 yen.

"Um, so, just being able to eat with you makes me really happy, so…why don't we split it this time?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, uh, the bill."

"Don't get ahead of yourself, college boy."

His voice was low and his gaze ice-cold. I froze. That was how he always looked during matches. The glare of the King of Carnage. Our instructor always told us to become a different person in battle. During everyday life, we should be more polite and courteous than anyone, but in combat, we should be as brutal as can be. It's up to us to find our purpose in life, but our only goal in a fight is to win. When I told all that to my grandma, she smiled and said that I had a good teacher. I'd burned those words into my heart ever since then. Or at least, I had meant to, but I'd pretty much forgotten about them lately. I haven't been in a sparring match in a long time, after all.

So, which side of himself was Hase showing me right now?

"…Sorry."

"Oh, don't be scared. Come on, I was just screwing with you, man! Feels weird hearing you try to take care of me. Eat up! Enjoy yourself and eat your fill!"

I thanked him and bowed my head. If eating my fill will make him happy, I'd do it in a heartbeat. But why does this make me feel like livestock being fattened up for market?

We didn't really talk too much that day. He kept changing the subject and getting frustrated when I didn't bite, so he ended up telling me about how he'd gotten a weird nickname recently: "Mr. Rabbit." When I chuckled and asked who on earth would call him that, he looked a little confused and said it was someone from work. And that's about where that conversation hit a dead end again.

For just a second, I thought I saw an extremely exhausted look cross his face, but I must've imagined it. I was probably wrong. It had vanished as soon as I'd noticed it, so I didn't pursue the topic.

When the check came, Hase paid with his card like usual. Previously, he'd laughed it off and said that carrying around cash or his bankbook was annoying, so that's why he always put it on his card. If I were Richard, I could say the reason I didn't push him on it was my principles, but the real reason was just that I was a coward.

"Hey, so…is there anything, like, bothering you right now?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"N-nothing."

I had no idea what kind of face I was even making, but I forced myself to smile, and Hase's expression softened a bit. He looked so kind and gentle, it almost made me want to cry.

"I see you're still playing superhero like always."

"Like always?"

"I mean, you really haven't changed since junior high. Oh, I guess there is one thing that's been eating me."

"Try me!"

"You ever heard of the 'shell pyre?'"

"Huh? Shell what?"

“Shell pyre. It’s a strange phrase I heard, and it’s bugging me that I don’t know what it means.”

He laughed, saying that he couldn’t find anything when he searched online. His face looked like it always did. It was my bro Hase’s face—a little quick to start a fight but wearing his heart on his sleeve.

I shook my head and apologized for not having any idea either. He put his hand on my head and pet my hair like I was a dog. We walked to the station, and he vanished through the gate.

I never managed to bring it up.

Right after I got onto the Yamanote line, I fired off texts to each of the guys I’d run into again at the karate tournament, asking them if they knew what Hase had been up to lately. It wasn’t the sort of question to just throw at the group chat. I contacted fifteen guys about it, but only three responded. Two said they didn’t know but were worried about him. And the third, Uemura, who was in the same year as Hase, mentioned that he’d gotten drinks with him at a bar in Tokyo about six months ago. He said the story about having to drop out of college because of some issue was true and that he’d had a hard time finding a job. Uemura had listened to him complain about it all.

Like how he got a job at a real estate firm and was supposed to be a broker there, but they pushed him into home care nursing. And that he’d never had a management role before, but he was the only employee on-site, and stuff. like that And how he might have gotten hired by a black company.

He added that he hadn’t heard anything from him since, so he assumed he was doing all right, and ended the conversation because it was late and he needed to get to sleep.

Six months ago, he got hired by a real estate firm, but he was doing nursing? It didn’t make any sense. That definitely didn’t sound legal. Maybe he’d changed jobs since then and was really working as a broker at a real estate firm.

Looking up the term “black company” made my stomach churn. There were so many. Too many. What the hell? There were countless message board posts from people complaining about the companies they worked for driving them to depression and records of people currently “surviving” working at black

companies. It's not like I didn't know they existed, I did, but just the sheer volume of posts made it hard to believe there weren't black companies in every industry.

Why wouldn't you just quit if you were working for such an awful company? Well, I guess money's always a concern, but even if you couldn't quit right away, surely you could look for another job. What's the Ministry of Labor even doing?

I wasn't the only one who felt this way. Blogs by people working at these black companies were full of comments telling them to just quit already. And those comments were followed by replies like "If I had time to look for another job, I wouldn't be complaining," or "When they work you to the bone every day, all you can do when you get home is sleep." It's a labyrinth with no way out. Is there really nothing you can do but wait for the machine to crush you?

I put my phone down and hopped into the shower. I shouldn't think about it too much. I always crash into things without thinking and just end up causing people more trouble. Whatever's going on with Hase is his own business. But was my friend who was treating me to dinner every Saturday really toiling away at a black company? I mean, the fact that he had free time to do that seemed like pretty solid evidence to the contrary. Even the opal could be explained by some kind of family thing—maybe they asked him to sell it—or it could just be some other complicated personal situation. I decided to try casually bringing up what Uemura had told me about from his encounter with Hase six months ago. I mean, he might just laugh and say, "Oh, I quit that job ages ago." But there was one more thing…

"…The shell pyre."

That mysterious phrase.

He did say he didn't get any results when he searched for it. I picked up my phone when I got out of the shower and tried looking for myself. Shell pyre. Maybe it's from something. Or maybe it's some kind of riddle. Shell pyre. I'm SOL if it's some kind of historical term, though. Wait, maybe, just maybe—

I waffled on it for several minutes, did some exercise, but I still wasn't sure what to do, so I just grabbed my phone again and typed out a text. To Richard.

It was my first time bugging him about something non-work related. And in the middle of the night to boot.

“Does the phrase ‘shell pyre’ ring any bells?”

Please don’t let him get mad at me. And please let this blond-haired foreign man with such a good grasp of Japanese that you’d never know he wasn’t a native speaker, who knows everything there is to know about various cultural things, know the meaning of this mystery phrase.

I tried to distract myself by watching some videos and ended up falling asleep. Saturday wasn’t a particularly strenuous day for me, but on this particular Saturday, both my stomach and my mood were unsettled. I ended up having a weird dream and waking up at 4 a.m.

I got up to drink some water and noticed a notification on my phone out of the corner of my eye.

It was Richard.

“Was this intended for me?”

Can you believe this guy? I half expected it. But I was surprised by the time. He’d sent it only 15 minutes ago. What the hell was he doing up at this hour? “Bad skin” was probably a totally foreign concept to that face of his, but it was hard to believe he liked staying up until all hours of the night. I had to wonder if he was still awake.

For a second, I contemplated if I could get away with calling him but quickly reconsidered. That’d be going beyond just a little inconsiderate. Even if he’s my boss. He’s not some blue cat-shaped robot, after all.

“Sorry, wrong number.”

I felt a little better when I sent off that reply and went back to sleep. I woke up three hours later and remembered that since it was Sunday, I’d be seeing him in person at work.

Richard kept a pretty relaxed schedule for the shop, so it was extremely rare to have customers piling up in succession, but it wasn’t uncommon for one

customer to stay for several hours. I guess he was trying to make the shop a place where the customers could do as they pleased and enjoy it at their leisure.

Today's customer was the housewife, Ms. Yonehara. This was her third time at Étranger. She seemed to have taken a liking to me and often asked me for my thoughts on various stones. Jewelry design was a hobby of hers, I guess. Today, she was after an opal.

"What do you think? From right to left: black opal, white opal, and fire opal."

"…There really are a lot of kinds of opal, huh?"

The stones sparkling on the black fabric were, oddly enough, the very same kind of stone I was most interested in at the moment—the same kind of stone that Hase had come to the shop trying to sell. While they were all opals, the black opal was a greenish tinged black stone, the white opal was a soft white almost like a yogurt-covered candy, and the fire opal was a vivid orangey-red, almost like an open flame. It was hard to believe they were all the same stone. The two things they all had in common though was the round cabochon cut and the marvelous specks of color inside the stones. It was almost like crumpled strips of light were embedded in them. At one angle, they'd flash red, at another green, and so on. It looked like they had tiny rainbows inside of them.

"Um…what's that stuff inside them that makes them sparkle like that?"

"Ah ha ha, why don't you explain it to him, Richard?"

"Do you understand the difference between amorphous and crystalline material?"

"Dumb it down so even I can understand it, please!"

Ms. Yonehara giggled, amused. She wasn't as knowledgeable about gemstones as Richard and Tanimoto were. She probably just liked having fun wearing pretty stones. Today, she was wearing the blue tourmaline brooch she'd bought on her last visit on her collar. She matched her shoes and blouse to the color, which gave her the air of a highly fashionable and wealthy lady. Richard cleared his throat a bit and began his lecture.

"There is no foreign substance within the stones that makes them sparkle.

That would not be able to explain how the color changes depending on your viewing angle. The color shifting is an inherent property of the stone itself. Opal is an extremely unusual type of gemstone. The structure of the stone is made up of a mixture of microscopic spheres of silica—silicon dioxide—and water, rather than the crystal structure we see in crystalline gemstones like diamond or sapphire. We use the word 'amorphous' to describe materials like this. While the stone doesn't exactly readily break apart, the comparatively weaker internal structure results in a middling hardness of just under 6 on the Mohs scale."

"What does that have to do with the sparkle, though?"

"The phenomenon you're describing is known as 'play of color.' The silica spheres that make up the opal cause interference and diffraction as the light passes through them, creating various colors. The specific colors a stone will flash depends on how uniform in size and spacing those microscopic spheres is. There are opals that only flash green, and there are opals that display rare red fire as well."

"Fire?"

Richard explained that that's what an opal's sparkle is called. Ms. Yonehara waited for me to say something. Hm, what do I say?

"…Well, that was definitely a lot of chemistry stuff."

Ms. Yonehara giggled. She seemed to like it when I said ridiculous things to Richard. I shot Richard a resentful look—I didn't say something silly on purpose, okay?

"You try your best, but you really are a funny boy. Richard, I can't imagine all those big science words come up in Japanese language textbooks very often. How'd you learn all that? Did you grow up in Japan?"

"…The person who taught me about gemstones was also fluent in Japanese. I learned both the language and about stones at the same time, so the two have become rather inseparable in my mind."

That was news to me. So he had a teacher. I can't just assume they were Japanese though. They could've been British, French, or from some other country and been fluent in Japanese. Ms. Yonehara smiled and didn't ask

anything else. She was good about knowing when to drop something.

“Now, which stone would you pick? I think I want a pendant.”

“I think any of them would look great. It’d probably be easier to pick if you knew what you wanted to wear it with…”

“Oh, I can just buy new clothes to match the stone.”

We had a lot of customers like her—wealthy folks of leisure who could just do whatever they wanted to do. Honestly, I kind of liked the way they just enjoyed life. But with Hase on my mind the whole time, it made me feel kind of weird. I need to stop. It’s just not worth thinking about.

“What about the fire opal? It looks like it’s got a scattering of pretty green holographic foil in it.”

“Nice choice. Fire opal isn’t as highly prized as black opal, but I’ve always been a fan.”

With that, she set the red opal atop her fingers and encouraged me to take a look at it. As she moved the stone from side to side on her hand, the flakes of color danced across its surface. It almost looked alive.

“Isn’t it just wonderful? When you look at it from here, it almost looks like the Milky Way, but from another angle, it’s like a burning flame. How magnificent.”

“You could be a poet, Ms. Yonehara.”

“Oh, you flatter me. I just borrowed the imagery from my favorite author.”

Fire opal. The same kind of stone Hase had. I hadn’t seen what it looked like. I had to wonder if this stone or the one he had was the better opal.

Richard just silently watched her enjoy herself playing with the stone.

After Ms. Yonehara selected a few opals, she smiled and told Richard that the next time he came to her home, he and her husband should talk money. Richard thanked her and bowed before seeing the VIP off.

Richard let out a sigh when the door closed.

“Good work. By the way, Seigi, about that text.”

“Sorry, I just need a second.”

That actually took a lot of effort on my part. Richard sounded a little frustrated with me, but I collected the cups that Richard and Ms. Yonehara had been drinking tea from and rinsed them off in the kitchen before running to the bathroom. It felt a little weird to use the bathroom while we had a customer, but that was going to be a serious problem if we ever had a session go on much longer than that. I needed to come up with a strategy to casually excuse myself.

When I was finished, I poked my head out into the hall connecting the lounge to the kitchen, and to my surprise, another customer had arrived. That was quick. I wondered if Richard had even had time to put the opals away.

“That’s why I’m asking you to take another look at it. Gimme a little something on the price here.”

“I’ve already given you the rough value of the item. I’m afraid I simply can’t afford to offer you more.”

“More like you’re trying to fleece me. And here I thought you were supposed to be a generous man.”

I recognized the voice. It was Hase. But he sounded different from how he had at the barbecue place. His voice sounded almost like a snake waiting for an opportunity to gobble up its prey whole. Even Richard sounded a bit confused and alarmed.

“As I told you before, this establishment does not specialize in purchasing items from clients. We primarily show stones to prospective buyers. I do not believe we will be able to adequately serve your needs.”

“What, is this place aimed at tourists or something? You lookin’ down on me because I’m Japanese? You’re really breakin’ my balls here. I’m not just here to fool around, you know.”

“I can assure you we would never discriminate against a customer on the basis of their nationality in this establishment.”

“This shop of yours sure is quiet. Just you here?”

I didn’t have any more time to hesitate out of fear that I’d regret it, I had to act. Just as I’d made up my mind, the doorbell rang and I’d lost my opportunity. We never got customers like this. Was there an ad for Richard’s shop

somewhere? But based on my past experience, this was not a good thing.

Richard opened the front door, almost as if he was trying to dispel the threatening atmosphere that had briefly been building in the shop. A woman immediately started talking.

“Good afternoon! My name is Toshiko Hata, and I believe that man right there is one Mr. Keigo Hase, is he not?”

I timidly poked my head out and saw the back of Hase’s hair. Both he and Richard were taken aback by the woman who’d suddenly crashed in. She looked like she was in her fifties. She had round and healthy-looking features that made me think of Momotaro for some reason. A man wearing glasses who looked about her age was standing awkwardly behind her. They were both wearing suits.

“…So what if I am?”

Hase hadn’t noticed me. Ms. Hata’s eyes went wide, and she grabbed Hase by the arm—the one attached to his grizzled hand, which was holding the black jewelry box.

“Thief! I knew I made the right choice to chase after you, you filthy burglar.”

“Now, let’s slow down here. Who are you and what are you talking about? My name is Keigo Hase, but—”

“My maiden name is Sugano. If I were to tell you that I’m Hisa Sugano’s niece, would that ring any bells? Or do you think I don’t know who the manager of her nursing center is? The man standing behind me is my husband, and he’s a legal professional, so you had best mind what you say next. I apologize for causing trouble in your shop, sir, but this is a serious matter. He stole a gem from my aunt.”

“I did not!”

Hase twisted his arm out of her grip and tried to leave, but he froze when our eyes met.

“…Seigi? What are you doing here?”

“I, uh, work here,” I squeaked out. I wasn’t even sure if he could hear me.

This time, the husband gently grabbed Hase's arm, and he gave up and took a seat in the lounge. Richard folded his arms.

"I believe you said your name was Ms. Hata? I'll have you know, this is my shop."

"We'll be done before you know it. Is this man a client of yours?"

Richard let out a sigh of defeat and had me prepare tea. Hase already knew I was here anyway, there was no reason for me to loiter around in the kitchen. But my mind felt like it was about to go blank. I wanted to run away. Right that instant, I wanted to run as far away as I could get. I could barely think straight, but Richard wanted tea, so my hands set to work preparing four glasses of royal milk tea. As you might expect, no one was going to drink any of it.

Ms. Hata aggressively shoved the red stone in Hase's face.

"Just to be abundantly clear, this opal belongs to my aunt, Hisa Sugano, doesn't it?"

"…Ms. Hisa gave that to me."

"Don't you lie to my face like that! Oh, I'm sorry. We should go through it step-by-step, but this is a place of business, so we need to hurry it up and get out of their hair."

She pulled some documents out of her bag with detailed information about Hase and began to confirm each detail, one by one, in front of him. He was employed by a daytime nursing facility in the city. The other employees were all contractors, but Hase was the only actual employee of the parent company there.

"And who went to this facility? One Ms. Hisa Sugano, my aunt," Ms. Hata said forcefully. "I visited the facility and noticed that you're rather close to my aunt, aren't you?"

"No…it's against policy for our staff to show preferential treatment to any particular client."

"You're shameless. I know full well how close you and my aunt were. There was a small fire in the laundry behind the facility recently, wasn't there? And

when the facility was being evacuated, you were so kind as to carry my aunt out on your back since she has trouble walking. It's not surprising that my aunt, who has an extremely difficult time understanding things now, would become convinced that the person who did that had saved her life."

"…She was terrified and uncooperative during the evacuation, but she calmed down when I was with her."

"Spare me. I have several witnesses to corroborate that she was pleased because she thought you looked like her late husband. She used to be impossible to please before her mind started to go, but look at her now."

So, Hase had been serving as assistant manager of a daytime dementia care facility and had developed a friendship with Ms. Sugano. Hase looked pained every time the topic of the facility came up and would do his best to turn away from me. Apparently, Ms. Sugano had been wheelchair bound after she had a fall on the stairs. Her mental faculties started to fail her after her husband, who had been her caretaker, passed away. Her condition had improved a bit recently, which is why she was accepted into the day facility. She had always been shy and difficult to please, but for some reason, she started doting on Hase and calling him "Mr. Rabbit."

"Honestly, I'm furious. There's no way you don't understand what someone like that trying to 'give' you an expensive item means. You work at a kind of nursing home for goodness sake, or are you just completely morally and ethically bankrupt?"

"She really did give it to me. I turned her down numerous times, but she would always bring it to the facility with her, so I was just holding on to it for her to keep it safe."

"Oh, you were just keeping it safe by taking it to a jewelry shop in Ginza? I'm sorry, sir, I know we've been talking entirely in Japanese this whole time—are you following all right? Do you know why this man is here? Did he come to talk about gemstones? Or did he just come here to meet a personal friend?"

He glared at me for just a moment. I might be able to save him if I tried.

But then the words that Grandma had bored into me flashed in my head:

Don’t do bad things. They’ll always catch up to you.

But which is it? Which option is the bad thing? I couldn’t tell. Richard answered in my stead while I hesitated.

“This man came to inquire about making a sale.”

Ms. Hata glared at Hase triumphantly. I just stood there, back against the wall.

“Thank you very much. Not that I really needed the confirmation. You tried several other shops in the city, didn’t you? My husband and I tailed you last Saturday. If it had only happened once, we could’ve brushed it off as a misunderstanding, but you did the exact same thing this week. I can’t even believe it.”

“…How do I know you’re actually related to Ms. Hisa? She’s living off her pension…and she’s all alone. She told me that since her family lives in Iwate, she’s been all alone ever since her husband passed…and she was worried she might not be able to afford the day facility much longer. I thought, maybe if I sold the gem, I could help her out a little…”

“Do you really think you’re in any position to question anyone’s motives? Who do you think you are? My aunt’s lived alone for ages. She’s the one who said no when her family in Iwate suggested she move in with them. And my family can’t afford to take her in right now. But you know all that, don’t you? Things are complicated. Did my aunt really ask you to sell that stone for her? Do you have it in writing?”

“No, I don’t, but…”

“Then you might as well be a thief,” Ms. Hata spat.

I was about to step up and say something, but Richard stopped me in my tracks with a glare. I guess he was telling me to keep my mouth shut. But why? You didn’t know what was going on. Oh—

But I guess I really didn’t either.

I didn’t know any of this. I didn’t know where he worked. I’d never heard of this Ms. Hisa. He didn’t tell me anything. Why didn’t he try talking to me about

it? Do I look that unreliable?

“How dare you do that to a poor ninety-year-old woman who loved you? This could go on for ages. We should finish this elsewhere.”

Ms. Hata got up. I just couldn’t take it and stepped in.

“Please, wait. You’re not even listening to his side. Just hear my friend out, please.”

“Your friend? You know each other? Goodness, is this some sort of organized crime ring? Is the shop part of it, too?”

“He has nothing to do with this! It’s just a coincidence that he’s here. Seigi, shut your mouth right now.”

“Oh give me a break. Ganging up on the elderly? Could you get any lower?”

“Why you—!”

Hase’s eyes burned with rage. No. It’s all over if he hits her. I had to do something, but what?

In that moment that felt like an eternity, a single word sliced through the tension.

“The shell fire.”

“What?”

“Ms. Hata, are you familiar with the phrase ‘shell fire?’”

Richard calmly looked at us, still sitting in one of the red lounge chairs. He spoke as though he couldn’t have had less to do with the fistfight that was on the verge of breaking out in front of him, and his eyes were cool and collected as ever.

“I’m sorry, I’ve never heard of it. If you’re struggling with Japanese, you can talk in English, you know.”

“While I am honored by your thoughtfulness, I would appreciate it if you would permit me to continue this conversation in Japanese. So, what of you?”

Hase shook his head, utterly dumbfounded. Richard brought a hand to his chin.

“Perhaps if I were to say ‘shell *pyre*’ would that ring any bells?”

Wait, that’s what I texted him. But why now? I never even mentioned Hase to him.

Hase nodded, “That, I recognize. Ms. Hisa said that when she gave me the stone. ‘Shell pyre, this is a shell pyre,’ she said. But I had no idea what she meant.”

“Pyre and fire sound rather similar, is it at all possible that you misheard or her pronunciation was a bit muddled?”

“What on earth are you talking about? Are you trying to stall for time?”

I looked at Ms. Hase, pleading with her with my eyes to just listen. He figured something out. Richard found something in the stone.

Hase groaned as he looked at Richard. “I guess. Probably, I might have… Ms. Hisa has bad gums and couldn’t wear dentures. Sometimes she struggled with words. That’s right, she’d even mispronounce her own name as ‘Shisa’ sometimes.”

“Enough! What does this have to do with anything?”

“I see. That fits. I believe I know what happened,” Richard announced, completely disregarding Ms. Hata’s outburst. The four of us were utterly transfixed by him. Just what did he figure out?

“I only know a few bits and pieces of the story, but am I correct in my understanding that Ms. Hisa was born in Iwate Prefecture? Ms. Hata, do you know if Ms. Hisa was fond of minerals or children’s stories when she was young?”

“Uh? Well…I guess she probably liked children’s stories. She worked as an illustrator for children’s picture books when she was younger. I have no idea what she thought of rocks though.”

“Are you familiar with Kenji Miyazawa? Does that name have any particular meaning to you?”

“It does. It absolutely does. Ms. Hisa loved the picture books of ‘Yamanashi’ and ‘Night on the Galactic Railroad.’”

“Be quiet, no one asked *you*. Could you keep this brief?”

The blond-haired, blue-eyed jeweler bowed and gave a brief summary of the life of a certain children’s author from Iwate Prefecture. I never knew that Kenji Miyazawa liked stones. Richard told us that his stories featured many real stones that a mineral enthusiast would pick up on immediately—amethyst, azurite, the list goes on.

“And ‘The Shell Fire’ is the title of another of his works. The title refers to fire opal—it’s a description that Miyazawa coined himself. He described the combination of glittering fire and rainbow sparkle in the stone as shell fire. The story is about animals, and its cast includes talking birds and mammals.”

“If this story has anything at all to do with the current situation, I would appreciate it if you’d enlighten us already.”

“In short: In this story, a rabbit saves the life of a skylark and is rewarded with a stone—and that stone is the shell fire of the title.”

All of the tension drained from Hase’s body.

I unfurled my fist, and Ms. Hata just looked stunned.

“What? It was given to the rabbit?”

Ms. Hisa had affectionately nicknamed Hase “Mr. Rabbit.” When he first mentioned it when we were out eating barbecue, I just had to wonder who would think this big, muscular guy resembled a rabbit at all. But now it all made sense.

The stone was a gift for saving someone’s life.

I turned my attention to the startled Ms. Hata. After a few moments, she frowned.

“So what? Are you saying my aunt sincerely intended to give him the opal?”

“I am in no position to assert what her intent was, but you did mention that she suffers from a mild case of dementia—perhaps examining her again to determine precisely her level of cognitive impairment at the moment would be sufficient to resolve this dispute.”

Richard bowed politely, and Ms. Hata went silent. Her husband, who hadn’t

said a word that whole time, awkwardly spoke up.

“Hey, why don’t we get out of here already? We’ve caused them enough trouble as it is.”

Ms. Hata went bright red at her husband’s comment. Hase got up from his seat, looking like he was on the verge of tears and bowed to Ms. Hata. It was a deep bow, like you would make at the end of a karate match.

“I never thought it would snowball like this. I am so very sorry.”

“…Oh, stop it. You’re making it sound like *I* did something wrong. Really rich coming from the person abusing his power.”

“I’ll return the stone to Ms. Hisa at once if that’ll convince you that I’m not a thief.”

“Your employer will be hearing from me regardless. Let’s go, honey.”

Hase hung his head and picked the jewelry box up off the table. There was a red stone sitting on the white cushion inside. It was the first time I’d seen it. It was smaller than the stone Ms. Yonehara was looking at and didn’t have nearly as much play of color. But it had obviously been treasured. The box looked very old.

If I was going to say something—it was now or never.

“Um…”

“Were you here the last time I came to this shop?”

He turned around and hung over me, staring down at me from above. His voice was deep. I didn’t answer right away, but he seemed to figure it out from the expression on my face. I went pale as a sheet, and he looked at me with a self-deprecating smile on his face,

“This couldn’t get any worse.”

And with that, he left the shop right after the Hatas.

This wasn’t just limited to Shimbashi Station, but there was something unique about how Tokyo felt at night. During the day, anywhere you looked was full of

people, but the moment night fell, it looked like nothing but nearly deserted buildings. It kind of reminded me of the way the university library felt when I was there late at night wrestling with a paper. It was a little later than last time—nearly 10 p.m.

We hadn't actually set a time, just a "see you here next week." I wasn't trying to become the next Hachiko or anything, but I couldn't bring myself to leave either. It felt like my feet had been sewn to the ground so I couldn't move.

I didn't have anything better to do, so I looked up Kenji Miyazawa on my phone and found a site where you could read public domain literature. I looked up *The Shell Fire* because I was curious and read the whole thing. As a thank-you for saving a skylark drowning in a river, a young rabbit was given a beautiful stone called the shell fire. But there was a catch: If he used the stone improperly, it would lose its sparkle. At first, the rabbit was afraid of doing anything that might make the stone lose its light, but after the stone retained its beauty, even after a series of bad decisions, the rabbit became convinced that he was free to do anything he liked. The rabbit grew cruel and arrogant, and suddenly, one day—almost like some sort of divine punishment—the stone lost its sparkle. And the rabbit lost its eyesight.

And that's how the story ends.

The site included a note that said the story had elements of Buddhist teachings in it, but just what was it trying to teach exactly? How was this story supposed to help anyone? Was the moral that it would have been better if the rabbit had never accepted the stone in the first place? But, I mean, he wasn't really in any position to refuse. How are you going to say no when an emissary from the Skylark King showed up on your doorstep, saying he'll be forced to disembowel himself if you didn't accept?

Then would he have been better off just letting the skylark die?

There's no way that's the moral. This is no good. My brain isn't working.

I decided to think of it as a story about a series of coincidences piling up toward an outcome no one could have anticipated. You hear about that sort of thing all the time. Like a once-in-a-lifetime—or even a many-times-in-a-lifetime—occurrence. Like some kind of sitcom story where all anyone can do is laugh

about their misfortune. If only Hase hadn't been working at that daycare facility. If only Ms. Hisa hadn't taken a shine to him. If only she didn't have that stone. If only he hadn't accepted it.

But I guess in the end, the universe happened to bring all those things together for better or for worse.

I was feeling my lack of sleep catch up with me and was starting to think I'd be spending the night at Shimbashi Station, when I saw a man in a suit standing at the ticket gate. He'd come from the platform in the opposite direction of the office workers on their way home—it was Hase. I wasn't convinced he wouldn't come, but I wasn't confident that he would either. I approached him like everything was normal, and he laughed.

"Wow, you really were waiting for me. You scared me."

"Are you okay…?"

"Like hell I am. I just got a call from my boss—guess who's been put on a temporary leave of absence?"

He threw his arms up in frustration and looked up at the night sky. He stumbled over to the big train wheel like he was drunk and leaned up against the handrail, looking up at the sky again.

"This is just how stuff tends to go at my company. Their main thing is real estate, but they throw a bunch of the new hires out to work at the nursing facilities they own, and if any of 'em say they wanna quit, they're put on leave for 'personal reasons.' And then after that, they always resign 'for personal reasons.' That way even if they develop depression or whatever from the experience, the company's off the hook for worker's comp, since they can say it happened while they were on leave, not while they were working. They teach you that stuff at your economics school?"

He looked at me. He was making a weird face, almost like he was blaming me for something. What did I do? Wait here for you? That's stupid. I mean, he showed up after all.

"So you weren't in sales, huh?"

"That's what you're concerned about? I was for about the first three months."

Something about his tone made him almost sound like a different person.

“But I guess this was a little step up. I never got Saturday afternoons off when I was in sales. I gotta work at the daycare facility until noon, but that’s a joke. I don’t even need to wear a suit to work, but everyone treats me like a company employee, not a caretaker, so I wear a suit because that’s what people expect when you’re visiting a ‘client’ company. It’s so stupid. Supposedly, I have a manager, but he never comes in, and even if he did, he wouldn’t do anything.”

“Is there anything I can do? We could go to the Ministry of Labor, or you could talk to one of my professors in the economics department—they could have some advice. I dunno if there’s anything I can do to help, but I’d rather try than not.”

“You really are a little superhero, huh?”

He smiled at me.

Maybe I was just imagining it, but I thought that maybe, just maybe, the emotion lurking behind that strange look on his face could be hatred? But why? I was completely at a loss, but he continued with that same look on his face.

“Ever since we were kids, you’d never say or do anything wrong. I used to look up to you, you know? But do you really think everyone can be like you? Do you really think everyone can always do the right thing, make the right choices, stay on the right path no matter the circumstances?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I thought you were trying to get that money to help Ms. Hisa.”

“You didn’t actually buy that, did you? My dad’s sick and my sister’s still in school, I just wanted to help out a little with expenses back home. Say, Seigi, do you remember that time when you were in either sixth or seventh grade when we were on the same team for a match? It was right around this time of year. You went first, and I went second.”

“Of course I remember. How could you even suggest that I could forget it?”

Hase’s mouth twisted into a smile.

“That was the most fun I’ve ever had in my entire life. I wish someone woulda

told me beforehand. And, man, that look on your face when I told you, 'I beat him good enough for the both of us'—your eyes sparkled with joy like a little puppy dog."

He laughed again. But the happiness was only on his lips and in his voice. I couldn't look him in the eyes because they were terrifying. It was like a deep dark abyss looking back at me, and if I looked into it, it'd swallow me whole.

"And that's why it made me real happy to treat you to a meal, Seigi. Once a week, I got to go back to that moment. Back when you still looked up to me as your cool older friend. It made me feel like I was dreaming even while I was awake."

What do I even say to him? What could I even do for him? I had no idea. If only Richard were here. I don't have any idea what you're supposed to say in situations like this. Even though I knew exactly what I *wanted* to do.

"Are you sure there's nothing I can do to help you? I want to help you. I'll do anything in my power to."

"I'm just glad you let me have some fun."

He got up off the handrail and looked me straight in the eye and smiled.

"But I never wanna see your face again. Hurts too much."

And with that, he went down the stairs to the subway transfer station without ever looking back.

I felt like I'd been punched in the face. I felt dizzy. And my heart was pounding so hard, it didn't even seem like it was my heart. I didn't know what else to do, so I headed back down the street I came from. There wasn't much neon in Ginza, so it felt especially hollow and empty at night. Taxis drove past, but they'd never stop. There aren't any tourists out now. The department stores were silent as could be. The clocktower faintly stood out against the night sky.

"……"

What did I want to say? I couldn't unclench my fist, even though all I wanted was to talk to someone.

I just kept walking, not knowing what to do with myself. I heard the soft

sound of a siren that didn't quite sound real approaching me from behind. Then I heard it again—it wasn't a siren but a car horn. A familiar one.

A green Jaguar slowly pulled up beside me. A man in a suit was sitting in the driver's seat. He slowly rolled down the window.

Maybe I really was dreaming.

"I have a random question for you. You wouldn't happen to be free right now, would you?"

It was Richard.

I didn't understand what was going on. I got off at five. I didn't really even remember what I did after that. I remember cleaning up the shop and turning off the gas stove. I must've worked until the end of the day and said goodbye to Richard and everything. That was five hours ago now.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was bored, so I thought I'd go out for a drive. What about you?"

"…How many hours were you waiting for me?"

"I'm pretty sure waiting is *your* specialty."

I felt something break deep inside my chest. I clenched my teeth as hard as I could. I only noticed I felt like crying after that. I didn't understand why. Why was I crying? No one hit me or anything.

I went around to the passenger side, opened the door, and sat down. Richard reminded me to put on my seatbelt. I did up the seatbelt, and the car slipped off into the dark of the city at night. It got a bit lighter around us as we drove toward Tokyo Station.

Richard chuckled a bit when he saw me gritting my teeth. I wasn't in any mood to laugh though.

"You're…not gonna be mad if the person in your passenger seat has a breakdown…right?"

"I don't care for unsightly things."

"…Maybe you should let me out."

“Nonsense. I can’t let you out all alone at this hour.”

“Then why did you pick me up in the first place when my face is an unsightly lump right now?”

“Personally, I’d recommend singing. Any preferences?”

Richard said and turned on the radio. The sound inundating my ears was death metal. I couldn’t understand the lyrics. Richard turned up the volume as high as it would go and shouted at me over all the noise to sing.

“This is totally unreasonable! Even for you, Emperor of Sweets! What language even is this?!”

“Finnish. If you can’t sing along, just scream.”

“That’s ridiculous. You’re so stupid…”

I didn’t know what else to do, so I started reciting the twenty precepts I’d learned in karate class. It was really the only thing I could recite from memory. Never forget that karate begins and ends with a bow. First know yourself, then know others. Do not forget the modulation of force, the flexibility of the body, and the tempo of technique. Not that reciting any of this would accomplish anything.

“I…I’m no superhero! I’m just scared of being called coldhearted! I’m scared of being a disappointment to the people I love when I can’t do anything to help them! It ‘hurts too much’? That’s my line, you big stupid asshole! I don’t do everything right!”

The metal singer screamed on and on through the radio. I didn’t care anymore. I started breathing heavily, and Richard adjusted the volume again without ever taking his eyes off the road. The death metal growl quickly faded away.

“You’re not wrong.”

“Huh?”

“People who try to do the right thing are often lonely. It’s not a path just anyone can walk, and sometimes such people shine so brightly, others have trouble tolerating it. People talk behind your back, calling you a hopeless

idealist. But you're not wrong. The core of your idea of what's right isn't some stubborn adherence to continuing on your own path but the noble desire to be kind to others even in the depths of darkness. And I think that is a most commendable way to live your life. I mean that from the very bottom of my heart. To the point that I find myself feeling envious at times."

Richard said that.

It was so weird. My chest was burning up, and there was no way I was going to be able to hold back anymore. It was impossible. I was at my breaking point.

"Please put on some music again. Anything is fine."

"There are tissues in the glove compartment."

That was the finishing blow. Richard blasted another mysterious song over the car stereo. The car continued driving through Tokyo at night as I bawled my eyes out and blew my nose. The Jaguar melted into the night as it sped through the city. Countless headlights and taillights playfully streamed by my window. It just looked like a sea of light through my blurry eyes. A sound came out from deep in my throat—I don't know if it was a cry or a shout—but the music covered it all up. After about the fourth track, I finally managed to calm down. I laughed in an attempt to cover up how hoarse my voice was.

"Man…that was like some cliché scene out of a soap opera. You know, like where the heroine's walking down the street at night crying and then a handsome guy in a sports car gallantly whisks her away while the theme song plays. I'm not on camera, am I?"

"Are you sure we shouldn't stop by an ophthalmologist that's open late? If you're seeing a soap opera heroine when you look in the mirror…"

"I was joking. But how often does this kind of thing happen, right? That could be a new idiom—'crying in a sports car' to mean something that rarely happens… Sorry, that wasn't a very good joke, huh?"

"Perhaps it's a synonym for 'encounter with a superhero on the street at night.'"

His jokes were just silly enough and his voice just gentle enough to tell me that even if I wasn't doing a great job of covering it up, he wouldn't mind if I

cried a little more.

He was the one who told me not to say things that could give people listening to what I was saying the wrong idea—like calling him beautiful or pretty. But surely he meant that in the context of when other people were around. We were alone in his car. There was no invisible person sitting in the back seat.

“I don’t know what the hell I’m saying right now, so just wipe this from your memory in ten seconds. I’m really glad I met you. I feel like I owe those drunks from Yoyogi Park a box of cookies. I’m just so glad I met you…thank you.”

Car stereos sure are useful. The seconds count on the display let me know exactly how many seconds had passed. I let out a sigh when the ten-second mark passed. Orange light passed by my window.

“So, um, where are we actually going? Your house?”

“I only ate a light dinner, so I’m rather hungry.”

He asked if there was anything I wanted to eat. I went quiet, and he added that anything was fine. I see, this extremely kind man was in comfort mode. Got it.

“How about a real sushi place?”

“You’re not familiar with the word ‘restraint,’ are you?”

“Didn’t you just say anything was fine?”

“Then let’s find a place that serves delicious cake and delicious sushi.”

“Cake? I don’t want cake.”

“But *I* do.”

“That sounds like it’d have to be a pretty weird restaurant. I’m happy as long as the sushi’s good.”

“Well, I guess we have no choice but to find a place that only makes good cake.”

“Fine! I agree! Let’s find a place that serves both good cake and good sushi!”

“It pleases me to see that we agree on something.”

I couldn't think of any places that even served both cake and sushi *and* were open at nearly 11 p.m. other than karaoke joints and family restaurants, but Richard had prepared a completely different option: a massive hotel in the middle of the city. The top floor had a sushi bar that was open until late in the evening, and the chef was chatting in fluent English to a Thai family. We sat at the counter eating sushi for about an hour, and around midnight, we headed down to the first floor where the people who couldn't sleep were gathered around a massive bar counter. They served light fare there. An old man dressed like a bartender smiled and told Richard that was the first time he'd seen him bring anyone else with him. I guess he was a regular. He didn't even have to ask for a royal milk tea to be served to him.

"…So, is it good?"

"Extremely."

"I'm not sure what I think about eating a Mont Blanc right after toro sushi though."

"It's not appropriate to comment on the political beliefs, hobbies, or dietary preferences of others."

Richard ordered another dessert like it was the most normal thing in the world. I looked up at the ceiling of the atrium and saw the sparkling chandelier. I assumed it was some kind of foreign hotel chain from the name. I got the sense that there was no such thing as night in this building. The orange indirect lighting on the walls filled the space with a sunset-like warmth. I was too scared to look at our tab, but otherwise, the place was very comfortable. I bet Tanimoto would like to come here. And Hase.

But I was pretty sure no matter where I invited him, he'd never come.

I turned away so Richard wouldn't see me clench my teeth again, when suddenly I felt a smack on my back. It was Richard. That was weird. He's never done that before. That's like something I'd do.

"Wh-what?"

"Let me let you in on a little secret. When someone invites you out to spend time with them, it is very rude to start getting depressed thinking about

someone else. The polite and courteous thing to do is to have fun in the moment. Your memories will haunt you more than you could possibly hope for even if you don't go out of your way to ruminate on past events," Richard said and took another sip of his tea.

I had no idea how old he was or what his family was like. But regardless of where he was born and how he was raised, he was unquestionably an extremely kind person. If anyone's always trying to be kind to others, it's him, not me. But that's why I was sure that, even if he was only being partly serious about feeling jealous of that quality of mine…he had definitely suffered for his kindness.

"Um, so I wanna ask you something that I definitely, absolutely, could never ask you except in this one specific situation. Do you mind?"

"Depends on what it is."

"I'd prefer a 'no problem.'"

"As I said, it depends on what you're asking."

"…Look, you'd really be helping me out."

Richard furrowed his brow, but when I bowed my head and begged again, he let out a sigh, looked around the ceiling, and answered me, "Fine. Let's hear it. What do you want?"

His face looked intense, but I could hear the smile in his voice. Thank goodness. I raised my head.

"Could we split the check?"

The bartender who was about to refill our water glasses, pretended not to notice when he saw the serious look on my face and walked to the other end of the counter. He probably thought we were in the middle of a very serious conversation. Richard looked a bit puzzled for a moment before nodding his head and smiling.

"Be my guest."

"Thanks!"

"That was my plan from the beginning, I'll have you know."

I wanted to say that I knew he wasn't the type to do that, but I stopped myself. I didn't have the energy to argue. I just didn't want to eat on anyone else's dime today.

They couldn't actually split the bill at the hotel, so I paid Richard back in the car, and he was kind enough to drop me off in front of Takadanobaba Station. The sky was already starting to get brighter. Richard told me to take care and then disappeared like the wind.

I learned one thing tonight: There are some things you can't change. No matter whether I criticize someone's choices, praise them, or say nothing at all, in the end, the only thing I have power over is what I decide to do. Otherwise, I'm just going to cause myself a lot of unnecessary pain. I guess that's a kind of selfish reason, ultimately.

I wanted to be able to help my friend. I wanted to be able to do more for him. I wanted to be that guy who could be there for him and support him when times are rough. Maybe I should have made an effort to reach out to him a long time ago.

I might get depressed when people call me inconsiderate or that something's none of my business, but in times like that, I always remember what my grandma told me—"I'm proud of you, Seigi." But when that doesn't work, I think I'll remember what Richard told me today—"I think that is a most commendable way to live your life." Even if it was all one big misunderstanding that earned me that glowing praise from him, let me just take it for what it was.

Because it made me very happy.

"All right."

Next Saturday, I'm going to bring a little something special with me to work. I don't think it'll begin to cover the five hours he spent waiting for me, but I feel it's my duty to try to repay him in any small way I can, and I'm sure I heard him say it back then. It was quiet and I could just barely make it out but—

He definitely said he'd prefer pudding to milk agar jelly.

case

EXTRA

The Serendipity of Euclase

THE FIRST THING I thought about when I looked at the stone was my childhood. The color looked familiar.

“It’s Blue Hawaii. That’s what that color is…”

“The cocktail?”

“No, the shave ice flavor. Like the kind with the blue syrup that they sell at stalls during summer festivals. Have you ever seen it before? It’s a pretty standard flavor.”

It was just bits of ice with this sweet blue syrup that makes your tongue change colors, but when I was a little kid, something about that blue made me think it was the fanciest luxury I could imagine.

While I was in the kitchen preparing the pudding I’d brought in with me, Richard had gone into the back to retrieve a small case. He set the small box on the glass coffee table. You could see the gemstone through its clear lid. It was a loose stone, the color of Blue Hawaii. If my eyes weren’t playing tricks on me, it looked like the stone wasn’t all one shade—both of the pointed ends looked like a deep blue, but the area in the middle looked crystal clear. It was tiny, too. There was a white label on the box on which Richard had written the stone’s name in Roman characters. Euclase. Ee-you-class? No, you-klace?

“Oh, Mr. Part-Timer, would you mind removing it from its container? It’s not a proper pudding unless it’s standing free on a plate.”

“You got it, boss.”

I thrust a small knife down the side of the grey container that the pudding was in and tried my best to get it out clean. Richard was sitting in one of the red lounge chairs.

It was a very basic pudding recipe—if you could even call it a recipe—that I’d learned from Hiromi. She called it my “baby food,” and when I was still living at home, it was our go-to when either of us wasn’t feeling well. I found myself missing the flavor from time to time once I started living on my own, so I always looked forward to days when the grocery store put eggs on special.

The pudding came out with a pop and slid neatly out onto the plate. The

caramel stuck to it just like it should. I set the plate down with a spoon right next to his cup of royal milk tea and flashed the most triumphant pose I could muster. Richard didn't seem to notice at all. He was entirely focused on the pudding.

"…I'm impressed. The texture is so delicate."

"That's because I strained it. I hate lumpy pudding."

"I would expect as much from a commercial product, but—"

"Well, that's a surprise. You can make this sort of thing, too, can't you?"

Richard finally looked at me, his blue eyes wide.

"…What gave you that impression?"

"I mean, normal people wouldn't comment on the 'delicate texture' of a pudding. I'm pretty sure you can get it nice and smooth like the kind they sell at the convenience store no matter how you make it. I mean, if I can do it, anyone can."

The handsome jeweler fell silent. He looked like the kind of man who should be sitting down to a meal with a silver bell to ring to call servants to bring him dishes on lovely china plates.

So why pudding, of all things?

I waited for an explanation. Richard had this listless look on his face and began speaking hesitantly. He looked so pathetic, like the son of a ruined noble family telling the tale of their downfall.

"…I hadn't even considered this when I first started living in Japan, but no matter where I looked, I couldn't find any pudding, or jelly, or puff pastries, or anything—I was in hell, and I was going to be living in it for a long time. But I did have access to all manner of minerals, rocks, sugar, fresh eggs, and a small kitchen—what would you do in that situation?"

"Well, I guess I'd be very motivated to make what I wanted to eat."

"Precisely how I felt."

Richard remained completely deadpan when I looked him in the eye and

asked him how it turned out, before facing the window to avert my gaze. I moved my head to look at him again, and he crossed his legs and tried to change the subject.

“Now, about this stone. Seigi, do you know what it’s called?”

“So how’d the first pudding you made turn out?”

“It is called euclase. Did you know that? As you can see, it has subtle variations in color. While there are many other stones that possess this bicolor property, I feel that the particular shades that euclase displays are a perfect match for early summer.”

“How did your first pudding turn out?”

“It is beloved by many a collector as a mineral specimen, but faceted examples like this one are exceedingly rare. Why is that, you ask? That would be because it is quite brittle and possesses perfect cleavage—a tendency for a mineral to cleanly break along specific planes, meaning that a careless cutter might find themself with less of a gemstone and more shards of one.”

“You know, you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, but I’m just going to assume that pudding defeated you in an honorable battle.”

“Thank you for your supposition, made using vocabulary too inappropriately archaic for a jewelry store.”

“That bad, huh?”

His pale skin flushed faintly red, and his blue eyes quivered. He was pretty as a picture even when he was making a face like that. He turned away from me as he sat in his red lounge chair and covered his face with his hands.

“Just as I have a talent for learning languages, you have a talent for cooking. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“It feels a little wrong to put your language skills and my cooking on the same level. It’s just a hobby.”

“Well, I enjoy learning languages partly as a hobby. I would not have learned so much if it hadn’t interested me.”

Huh, I guess it wasn’t just a practical thing for him but a hobby, too. Still, it

must have taken a lot of intense training to become fluent in so many languages. The level of effort seems drastically different from learning to cook so you can eat good food.

And on that note, Richard began eating the pudding. He would always get mad if you tried to talk to him while he was eating, which meant the conversation was over. I went back to admiring the refreshing blue gemstone.

“Euclase, right? It’s such a nice color. A really tiny one like this is probably in my price range, right?”

My boss didn’t react even when I turned to look at him. He was frozen for some reason.

“Richard?”

Richard’s gaze flitted between me and the gemstone like he was wavering over something. He let out a little cough to clear his throat and turned to me to say, “…Just to be absolutely clear, you did not simply purchase this somewhere, did you?”

“Of course I didn’t. Why are you asking?”

For a moment, Richard looked like he’d received a slight electric shock. He bit his lip and swayed side to side slightly. It was a familiar reaction. It was the jeweler’s expression of joy.

He liked it. He really liked it.

“Excellent…”

“Aww, yeah!”

I got a little ahead of myself and told him to praise me more because it made me happy, but Richard just silently looked away. I’d expected as much. He liked to disappear into his own little world when he was enjoying something delicious. Nothing could have gotten me more excited than his silent “very delicious” reaction. There was just something about this man who seemed like he’d conquered every sweet treat in the world having a surprising fondness for something so basic and simple.

“…I don’t mean to meddle, but perhaps you should consider using this talent

of yours to impress your would-be girlfriend? I'm told that men who are good in the kitchen are popular with women in Japan."

"Now, look, when people talk about guys who are 'good in the kitchen,' they mean, like, someone who can make French food without a recipe or the kind of guy who's really particular about exactly where all the ingredients he's using come from. Anyway, that's an extremely embarrassing suggestion and definitely none of your business, anyway."

Richard fell deep into thought for a moment, mumbling about French food and being particular about ingredients under his breath. That wasn't supposed to be a concrete example of a real person, just—I'm pretty sure the kind of guy who's "good at cooking" that girls idolize isn't the same as the sort of guy who builds economical meals around what meat's on special. If nothing else, I certainly didn't qualify. I remember using all my allowance around Valentine's Day in elementary school once to make the best chocolate cake I could muster, but the girls just looked at me like I was an alien and the boys distanced themselves from me. I even worked really hard on the filling and everything. But I was so happy when my grandma told me I should open a bakery. She always gave the best compliments.

Richard's eyebrows twitched a bit before he let out a defeated sigh.

"Is that so? I apologize for any offense my lack of knowledge on the subject may have caused."

"You're overreacting. I don't think you were *that* far off."

"It's said that euclase is quite useful in these situations."

"You really can bring any conversation back to gemstones, huh?"

It's said that euclase is a stone of wisdom that fosters the power of insight. It's supposed to heighten talents and support calm and rational judgment. I guess it was a stone that can help you keep your cool. Is that really the impression this little stone that looks like a piece of rock candy gives people?

"The name euclase derives from Greek words meaning 'to fracture easily.' At a 7.5 on the Mohs scale, it is harder than opal, for example, but as I mentioned before, it's quite brittle. Rough euclase is much more common than polished

and faceted examples for that reason.”

Rough euclase? I cocked my head to the side, confused, and Richard whipped out his phone and image-searched it in Roman letters. I shouldn’t have been surprised that the results he pulled up were written in English. A stream of images of icy white and blue rocks flowed down the screen. It reminded me of all those pictures of mineral specimens that Tanimoto had shown me. There were some emerald green and faintly yellow ones, too.

“It sure is pretty. I bet it’d be popular in jewelry.”

“It probably would be if it were only a bit more sturdy. Normal cutters won’t even touch euclase. You have to find an especially confident craftsman to do it. On that note, I should mention that the person who faceted this stone is excellent. Their work is perfection.”

My eyes were drawn to the refreshingly colored stone once again. The sort of pointy almond shape was called a marquise cut, and the stone was so tiny that if you were to drop it on the floor, you might never find it again. Though, based on what Richard just said, it might break if you did drop it.

And yet, a material like that had been cut with many tiny faces and polished to a beautiful shine.

It was a finicky crystal and the skills of a talented artisan—without both of those things, you wouldn’t bother attempting something so dangerous.

“I know I said I thought I might be able to afford it earlier but…I’m guessing it’s not actually that cheap, is it?”

“Very perceptive of you. Even acquiring specimens to sell is quite a lot of work.”

“What’s something this size cost, a hundred thousand yen?”

Richard held up four fingers. Forty thousand?

“Roughly four times the price you guessed. It is a much rarer stone than you realize.”

I was in awe. I didn’t want to be anywhere near it for fear that I might accidentally touch it wrong. If I were a jeweler, I think I’d probably avoid dealing

with such an expensive and fragile stone to begin with. Better to go with something sturdier. It's not like it's even a popular stone. I didn't even know what it was called until now.

"Do you already have a buyer for it?"

"Indeed. Do you recall that couple from the Kansai region who came in recently? They requested a faceted piece of euclacs."

Of course I remembered them. They were a cheerful couple that could keep talking for ages without you saying a word, and they were more interested in rare gemstones than things like diamonds or rubies. Of course, I'd known from my experience working here so far that prices for stones can vary dramatically, but rare stones like that didn't seem as valuable as especially rare diamonds or rubies. They probably wouldn't be very useful from an investment standpoint either.

They were just beautiful.

It was the joy and wonder of knowing such a stone existed on this earth.

Just like this stone, euclase.

"Why did you bring it out to show it to me?"

"Why? It's not as if you have no interest in gemstones."

"Well, yeah, but."

Richard wasn't the type to try to impress me by showing me a rare stone he'd recently gotten a hold of. Except for when this mysterious jeweler determines that it's something I *should* see. But why?

I stared intently at his beautiful face, and Richard turned his attention back to the table in a huff. He slowly sipped his royal milk tea.

"I believe this stone I have here is an extremely rare and beautiful stone. Nothing more, nothing less. Are there any other stones you're curious about?"

Wait, was this his way of thanking me? For the pudding.

If that's what's going on, this was going to be annoying. The pudding was supposed to be a thank-you for him picking me up in the middle of the night in

his Jaguar and cheering me up. Come on, man, don't pile more onto that. It'll never end.

"…You don't have to worry about me so much. We're just boss and employee, after all."

"I believe that's my line. The more irritated I am, the better it tastes, and the more I eat, the more irritated it makes me."

The two of us might as well have been a textbook example of the "beautiful Japanese culture" everyone likes to go on about. You know, like getting stuck in an infinite loop of bowing to each other on your way into someone's house and you never actually make it inside. I think on some level, humility and restraint are a kind of protective barrier—they're a reasonable check telling you not to proceed further. I guess it can feel a little lonely sometimes, but there's a certain warmth to it, too. And I'm happy to have it.

"Anyway, I'm glad. It makes me feel a lot better to know that there are people who wouldn't be put off by this sort of thing."

"Put off? What do you mean?"

I gave him the extremely short version of my bittersweet elementary school memories. Richard seemed a little shocked about the idea of little kids exchanging homemade treats—I heard him mumble that he thought that you didn't do that sort of thing until you were a bit older. And here I thought that plenty of people outside Japan were familiar with these kinds of Japanese cultural conventions. It was kind of surprising that he was unfamiliar with that.

I concluded the conversation by saying that while I don't know what it's like for kids now, male characters who cook regularly were pretty uncommon ten years ago, so maybe that's what did it. Richard silently set his tea cup back down on its saucer.

"…Well, I could understand being a bit terrified or suspicious upon receiving free jewels, but cake?"

"You're really going overboard with these compliments."

"I don't believe so. Any color of euclase is considered rare, but the rarest and most prized of all is bicolor euclase like this example—where the stone has

distinct color zoning. Rarity is a clear source of value. It's extremely hard to come by. Admittedly, not as hard to come by as a part-timer who is proficient in both karate and cooking."

I blushed, and Richard went to town on the pudding. He ate every bite very neatly, but very, *very* quickly. I did have three more left in the fridge, but he was like a pudding-eating machine.

"Thank you for that. It was extremely delicious."

"I'm just glad you liked it. Oh… Oh…"

"What?" Richard raised an eyebrow. This time, I had a *really* smug look on my face.

"I was just thinking, for a second there, we were kinda like a cute married couple, huh?"

In that moment, I felt the temperature in the shop plummet. I had definitely stepped on a land mine.

"I'm docking your pay."

"No! Forget I said anything!"

"I'm reducing your salary for harassment."

"I'm so very sorry. I was just making a comparison. I'll never say it again, I swear! Hell could freeze over and you could still never get me to repeat it!"

"Just be more conscious of your words in the future."

I got on my knees and apologized, and Richard scoffed and glared at me.

"I see you've done nothing to amend your thoughtless behavior over the past ten years. While I find no fault with your cooking skills, has your careless disposition not caused you difficulties at all?"

"I don't think I'm that bad. Anyway, I'm sorry, okay?"

"One's self-image is often somewhat at odds with how they are seen by others. While a bit of mismatch is acceptable, there are limits. In order to facilitate smoother social interaction, I would strongly recommend you work to correct your hopeless tendency to speak without thinking."

“I brought some milk agar jelly, too, but I guess I should just take it back home with me.”

Silence.

Richard froze for a moment. This man who just called me thoughtless may have been impossibly handsome and confident, but everyone has their weak points. And I knew his.

“…Why didn’t you say anything earlier?”

“Why? Well, I am so very thoughtless after all. I thought you might find it troublesome, so I was going to just take it back home without saying a word. You don’t have to worry. I’ll take responsibility for my mistake and get rid of it for you.”

“…I never said I didn’t want to eat it.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I mean it’s just a dessert made by me, a thoughtless, careless person. Who knows, maybe I mistook a white sauce for the condensed milk by accident when I was making it. Though it did taste pretty good when I sampled it yesterday. Well, I guess I should get started on some more royal milk tea for the day.”

“The way people see you is generally colored by the tinted glass of expectation. Perhaps humans need things like this euclase here in order to understand their own image as something more concrete. The beauty of its transparency and array of colors strongly encourages us not to put too great a value on outward appearances. A person’s virtues and flaws are like two sides of the same coin, and because we are fragile beings, we must take great care to cultivate the many aspects of ourselves.”

I watched Richard nod with a serious look on his face as I frantically suppressed the urge to laugh. I don’t know what I would have done if he’d told me he was docking my pay again. It felt like we’d more or less worked it out.

“Understood. If I were to plate it up now, would you have some?”

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

Richard gave me a heartfelt bow, and I responded with a polite one of my

own.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been so glad to be a guy who knows how to cook before. Thanks, Richard, you really are a great guy.”

“You’re quite welcome, Seigi. I am simply no match for your bottomless modesty.”

After that very strained retort, I headed into the kitchen, trying desperately not to laugh, and took the container of milk agar jelly out of the fridge. It was nice and soft. Unfortunately, just as I’d finished plating it in a glass bowl, a customer arrived. I heard Richard greet them and give his very familiar introduction. It sounded like it must’ve been a new customer.

I covered the bowl with plastic wrap and put it back in the fridge before preparing tea. I’d serve the dessert to Richard whenever he was done. It’d make for the perfect mid-workday sweet treat.

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