



THE CASE FILES
OF

JEWELER
RICHARD

WRITTEN BY
NANA KO
TSUJIMURA

7

NOVEL

ILLUSTRATED BY
UTAKO
YUKIHIRO

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Seven Seas Entertainment

HOSEKISHO RICHARD-SHI NO NAZOKANTEI

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Illustration by Utako Yukihiro

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Seigi Nakata

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



Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian

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



That was the first non-English word I heard from my grandmother's mouth.

The funny thing was, in retrospect, I don't think I was imagining things when I felt like we really had a connection. Even when she retreated to her little forest hideaway of an estate after her husband passed, the sound of Sinhala had to bring back warm memories. When she used that word to describe a sparkling, pale pink gemstone, and I repeated it back to her, her wrinkled face softened—a rare sight. It was a pleasant surprise, considering she was at a point where both her son and grandson seemed like strangers to her.

"Your pronunciation is excellent."

I replied that I probably had the governess, a Japanese woman who looked after me at the family estate, to thank. She smiled, though in her usual distant, cynical way this time.

"She's Japanese, isn't she? You seem to have a wonderful relationship—but take care not to get too close to her."

I asked if it was because she was someone who came from very far. My grandmother shook her head scornfully, and the white hair ornament, which she always wore, rippled. Something about her expression seemed oddly sad.

"Because someday, she will *leave* you."

She put a great deal of stress on the word *leave*. I asked her what she meant by that, and she paused for a long time before smiling at me. She looked just a little sad, like a diver who had to go fetch a shiny stone from the sea floor. I'd never seen her make a face like that before.

"Beauty and sadness go hand in hand—if there is no sadness at all, there is no beauty. In the end, all things return to their rightful places. Do you understand that, Richard?" she said, deliberately calling me by my name.

My name, which also happened to be her late husband's name. My

grandfather, the man who took her away from her home on a tropical island to become a prisoner of this cold land of stringent class divides. I couldn't tell you if they truly loved each other. No one in our family knew the truth of their relationship.

But I did always like the faint glimmer of joy in her eyes whenever she said my name.

Even now, twenty years later, I still haven't found my "rightful place."

■ Prologue ■

A_{PRIL 6TH}

Hello. This is my first attempt at blogging, so I figure I should start off by introducing myself: I'm a twenty-year-old East Asian man who started working in a town in Sri Lanka three months ago. I decided to start this blog to practice my English writing skills. I can usually get by in business emails by referencing online dictionaries of set phrases, but my boss tells me that trying to write my own thoughts in English would make for better practice—hence this blog. I'm not going to lie; I'm still kinda intimidated by the idea. I wanted to come up with some sort of handle, but I couldn't think of anything. I wonder what would be good...

It feels a little empty with just text, so I'll post some photos of the garden of the house I'm staying at. There are a lot of fruit trees: mangos, papayas, and some palms, too, but most of the houses in this area are like this. I don't know what else to call it but "paradise." Admittedly, it sometimes feels a bit wasted on me when I'm all alone.

Anyhow, I think I'll keep going with this. Wish me luck!

APRIL 10TH

Watalappan!

I'm writing it down because I don't want to forget it.

Watalappan! I learned a very important word.

APRIL 13TH

Wow, a lot more people have been reading this than I expected. Thank you!

And thank you to the person who suggested I call myself Watalappan in the comments. I can't believe I'm getting comments. But just the thought of someone addressing me as "Watalappan" makes me want to die laughing, so I

think I'll have to respectfully decline the suggestion. By the way, if you didn't know: *Watalappan* isn't a greeting or a place name. It's a food.

But on that note, I did come up with a name to go by on this blog: Iggy.

So to introduce myself again, I'm Iggy from Sri Lanka, and I hope you enjoy my posts.

There's no deep meaning to the name, really. Just like in Sri Lanka, my name wouldn't be written in the Roman alphabet in my home country. But unlike some of the other options I was considering, like Justin or Julius, this felt like a name I might actually be able to get used to.

While I'm at it, I should probably actually talk about Sri Lanka a bit.

I wonder how many people there are for whom the words *Sri Lanka* conjure an image? I feel like it's probably worth mentioning that when I told my friends back home that I was going to Sri Lanka, about 80 percent of them responded with "You're going where?"

Sri Lanka is an island country off the coast of India with a population of around twenty million. If you open up an atlas, you'll find it off the right of the Indian subcontinent. Off to the left, that's the Maldives—they're really famous for their resorts.

The country is known for its tea and gemstones, and it has three official languages: English, Sinhala, and Tamil. About 70 percent of its citizens are Buddhist, but the country is also home to a large number of Hindus and Muslims—you'd be astonished to see all the colorful Hindu temples, golden figures of Buddha, and statues of Christian saints when you walk around town. It really feels like a bunch of different religious cultures coexisting side by side without intermingling too much—kind of like a marble cake. There are stray dogs all over the place, too.

There are really only two seasons here: summer and even-hotter summer. Though I hear the tea plantations in the inland valleys are a great place to beat the heat. There's a rainy season as well, which is soon approaching, but we've

had a lot of sunny days this year, so it should be pretty comfortable.

The thing that surprised me the most when I arrived here in March was the Lotus Tower in Colombo (a big city near the international airport—it used to be the capital). It's a massive lotus bud reaching out into the sky! Unfortunately, it's still under construction, so you can't go up to the top yet, but the tower is an emerald green and the petals are a perfect pinkish-orange.

By the way, lotus blossoms are my favorite flower. For some reason, when I saw that building, it made me feel like maybe I could make it here.

I didn't know the first thing about this place when I arrived, and I have no friends or family here, but it's where I'm working. Kinda like running away from home to escape messy personal or family issues! Though I moved here with my family's full approval.

As far as my job goes, I guess the simplest way to put it is that, umm, I'm a jeweler. I hesitate to wear that label because I'm still in training, and I'm nowhere near on the same level as my boss, so I feel a bit awkward about using that title. Maybe I should just go with "jeweler in training" for now.

I guess it's a pretty typical job for Sri Lanka, a place known for producing sapphire and tourmaline, but I think the overwhelming majority of people aren't familiar with this line of work. I think I'll use this space to write about what the work is like and what's interesting about it as I learn and grow in the field. But I think I'll stop here for today.

Anyway, this has been Iggy from Sri Lanka. I feel horribly embarrassed by my handle, but I'm going to try to get used to it.

"...Ahh, my eyes are so tired."

I pulled my eyes from the computer screen and got up from my office chair.

I started feeling pangs of regret after making my third post. Why had I started blogging again anyway? Blogs are for people with much more interesting lives

or people who want to share their personal information with lots of people, not someone staring at stones in some little town in the middle of nowhere and sorting them into sapphire, tourmaline, and aquamarine, or whatever—like a chick-sorting machine. Admittedly, it probably will help with my English writing skills. I have been using a lot of vocabulary I don't use in day-to-day conversation.

I still wasn't used to living all alone in a three-story house. The main room had a vaulted ceiling and the second and third floors had personal rooms, while the living/dining area, study, and other more shared spaces were down on the first floor. Right now, the third floor was completely unoccupied. It really felt less like a small hotel and more like a multi-generational summer home.

I stepped out of the study, which had a Buddha decal on the wall, and passed through the living room with its set of three white sofas and a coffee table, into the green garden. The afternoon sunlight was pouring in. Green fruits dangled from the limbs of the papaya trees, but they weren't ready to eat yet. The owner of this house, a certain chocolate-skinned Sri Lankan gentleman, taught me that they start to smell a lot more fragrant when they're ready to eat.

I dragged one of the rattan lounge chairs out into the verdant garden and collapsed into it. I closed my eyes. The sunlight felt nice and warm against my eyelids. I could hear birds off in the distance, but it wasn't a sound I was familiar with. I took a gentle breath and let it out as a sigh.

It was one of those moments that made me want to ask who the hell I thought I was.

My name is Seigi Nakata. I'm a natural-born Japanese man, and I'll be twenty-three this May.

I picked "Iggy" as my internet handle because my given name is Seigi—it sounds kind of similar, so I figured it'd be easier to get used to. I started off considering names based on my name's meaning, like Justin and other real names that are connected to the word *justice*, but they all felt weirdly

embarrassing. For some reason, I was intent on an English name, not a Tamil or Sinhala one, and I just couldn't pick. No matter what country's language I decided to go with, my name was still my name, so I felt awkward about making a decision without at least some reasoning behind it. Eventually, I figured sound is, well, still sound. Even if it does sound a little like English.

Anyway, you're probably wondering what I'm even doing in Sri Lanka in the first place. I've got to take you all the way back to April of last year to tell that story—the April of my fourth year of college, and the day of the first round of the national civil service exams.

I was aiming to become a government bureaucrat. My reasons were exceedingly simple: It would be a steady job with a steady income. The scope of the exam and the number of hopeful entrants were both terrifying—some people even took it just for the hell of it. But unbelievably, I passed the first round.

I was sure someone had made a mistake somewhere. I mean, my college life was anything but normal at the end—the summer of my third year was total chaos. I had to look for jobs and work on graduating while moving apartments to avoid an annoying stalker. It felt like jumping hurdles and running a three-legged race at the same time. That said, though it might well have been the roughest period in my life, I'd learned that if I could get through that, I could get through anything.

Of course, I couldn't have done it without the faithful support of my family and friends and colleagues. I was lucky to be able to afford to concentrate on my studies and focus on making them proud, since they all believed in me. But somewhere deep down, I didn't really think I would pass.

So at the end of May, I faced the second round of the exam: the interview. And that's where I got dropped.

What an anticlimactic failure, huh? My boss from my part-time job took me out to Shiseido Parlor afterward and talked to me—though it was a pretty one-

sided conversation—about how even if you work really hard, things don't always go your way.

And then he asked me something.

He asked if I would be interested in an overseas internship.

An internship at, say, the headquarters of his jewelry business in Sri Lanka.

My boss ran the jewelry shop in Ginza where I'd started working part-time in my second year of college. I was just a normal college kid who didn't know the first thing about gemstones when I signed on—well, sort of. Not to do a disservice to my grandmother's padparadscha or anything, but it was the *only* gemstone I knew anything about, so it's still basically true.

My boss and his impossible beauty changed my life in more ways than I could count. I'd known him for three years by now, but still felt blessed just to be in his presence. He had pale blue eyes and fine golden hair. His skin was a smooth, milky white that made any woman walking past him mutter under her breath, wondering what kind of skincare routine he used. His overwhelming intelligence surpassed even his immense beauty. And right now, he was still speaking softly as he gobbled down his strawberry parfait.

He explained that my salary would be paid in yen and that my living expenses overseas would be covered by the company. The length of the internship would be up to me, but I should expect it to be measured in years, and since there was an age cut-off for the civil service exam, I would be free to return during the course of my internship to take the exam whenever I felt like it. The job primarily involved acting as a chauffeur and developing my eye for gemstones, so an international driver's license would be required. Other qualifications were up for discussion.

Even the most "stringent" conditions he laid out were actually positives. Honestly, it didn't really feel like they were conditions. It was just an extremely generous offer. It felt odd to even call it a job.

I insisted to my boss, as he finished off his strawberry parfait and moved on to

his baked cheesecake, that he didn't need to make such a fuss over me. He'd already done so much to help with my stalker situation, and I wanted to take it from here on my own.

The cheesecake was an extremely sweet dish topped with chocolate sauce. My boss put his spoon to work with a serious look on his face.

He nodded. "I see," he said, then added, "However, I have no intention of making you an overly generous offer."

After all, he explained, the world of the gem trade is much harsher than the small corner of it I had gotten a glimpse of in Ginza.

He explained that the shop in Ginza was one of the endpoints of the jewelry trade. Many gemstones are produced in Sri Lanka, and his boss, Saul, just so happened to be Sri Lankan himself. He added that the process for a "stone" that comes out of the ground there to make it into human hands, get processed, pass through dealers to be purchased by jewelry companies, and installed in appropriate settings before ending up in jewelry shop display cases—and ultimately into the hands of customers as *gem*-stones—is a vast one. He ate his cheesecake with speed and grace, and before I knew it, he'd placed an order for another helping of seasonal cake and tea. Sometimes I really believed his stomach must have been connected to an alternate dimension.

"You're making a grave error if you're imagining a fun vacation on a tropical island," my boss said, his voice like a silver knife. He also recommended against taking him up on the offer if I was intent on passing the civil service exam for certain next year. But if I wanted to spend a full year or two studying while living abroad, he felt that the experience could be a brilliant one, as valuable as a gemstone.

I know I'm in no position to say this as a lowly part-timer, but my boss is an absolute genius at making customers feel like they want to purchase gemstones. He was an expert in the art of gentle persuasion. You didn't even need to be a simpleton like me to find yourself feeling like agreeing to whatever

he said, and it was because he always responded to people's emotions with the utmost sincerity and care. We should all thank our lucky stars that con artistry wasn't his calling.

"All right, sure. Thanks," I declared so swiftly that it astonished the man sitting across from me. He called me thoughtless, told me to think it over some more after I was done eating, and then told me to order some cake. He probably felt embarrassed about ordering a fourth dessert for himself. But even after eating some of the seasonal specialty cake myself, my decision didn't change.

In the end, I think I spent the next six months or so preparing for the move. There was a lot to do. I applied for a visa online. I collected all the paperwork I'd need to be able to drive a car. I sought out Sri Lankan restaurants and movies to acquaint myself with the culture. Even if it was the kind of place where you could get around with just English in major cities, I learned some basic Sinhala words and phrases. "Hello" and "goodbye" are both *āyubūvan*. "Thank you" is *istuti*. And "delicious" is *rasai*.

The time until graduation flew by. When I told the guys in my exam prep class what I was doing, they looked at me like I was speaking an alien language. Thankfully, a bunch of them burst out laughing and said, "Yeah, that sounds like something you'd do, Nakata."

And I was managing somehow, now that I was actually here. When Saul came by at the beginning of the week and spread out the gems he'd purchased on the table, it was a sight to behold. Every single stone was packaged neatly in a little plastic bag. There were numerous little sapphires, almost like beads, forming what looked like a sea of gemstones. After showing me several reference books in both English and Japanese, he opened with a very basic lecture that amounted to "examine the stones closely." And then I'd have a look at the "good stones" Saul had acquired, and if he had any other similar-looking stones on hand, he'd teach me how to spot the differences. This house seemed to be Saul's base in Kandy, and I guess it was my job to protect his stones while they took a rest here in the safe and get to know them a little better. As far as

Sinhala went, Saul wasn't exactly the most enthusiastic teacher, so it was mostly self-study with an English-based textbook that I'd picked up in a bookstore in Colombo.

Basically, six days out of the week were self-study. I had an inordinate amount of free time on my hands.

But it'd only been a month since I'd arrived. Saul seemed incredibly busy with his own work, so it felt like he hadn't quite decided what to let me do yet—though he did say I'd be extremely busy next month.

If I were to look at things positively, I had a ton of free time to study, but if I'm being completely honest, I had so much free time, I felt like I was being strung along at a dead-end job. My English writing skills have been an issue for a while, but even starting that blog to work on them left me with way too much time.

I didn't have anyone to talk to, either. Saul had a Sinhala housekeeper, a middle-aged woman named Kumara who spoke a bit of English. She came to the house every other week to clean and replenish groceries. Sometimes she'd cook for me, too, but she wasn't exactly a friend—she was staff.

I knew enough to chat with people I passed on the street, but being able to talk to someone and being able to actually *communicate* were two entirely different things. I'd never *really* understood that until I found myself in a foreign country.

I had no idea what their lives were like. I couldn't even imagine what they were going off to do after we exchanged smiles and went our separate ways.

"I'm an étranger. In the present progressive tense."

Was this experience really going to be a brilliant moment in my life, as valuable as a gemstone? I had a feeling it would be. I was already confident of that. I mean, this wasn't something that just anyone got to experience. Internships usually expect you to do at least some work, but luckily for me, I have the luxury of studying gemstones.

But I really wanted to be useful.

I didn't want to be just some foreign tourist, I wanted to do something—anything—to help the people who cared about me so much. A little voice in my head was trying to cheer me on, reminding me that that's exactly why I was here, honing my eye for gemstones. But where I was at the moment made it hard to understand how I'd ever develop those skills to the level that I'd be useful in the business, or if I'd even develop them at all, and it was getting me down. I knew what I should do was give Saul a call. I knew that, but this strange sense of pride was getting in the way—the thought made me feel like a pathetic whiner when he was letting me stay here in this little annex in the middle of a beautiful garden.

That voice in my head took the opportunity to remind me that I did have one other person I could ask for advice.

One other person. Yes, I did have one other person I could and should rely on. The person who kept repeating over and over, "If anything happens, contact me," "Don't hesitate to call me," "Just get in touch, okay?" like a broken record when we last saw each other.

He should be in Ginza right now.

There was a three-and-a-half-hour difference between Japan and Sri Lanka. Time zone-wise, as a country in the far east, Japan had one of the earliest mornings in the world. It was one in the afternoon in Sri Lanka, which meant it was 4:30 p.m. in Japan. Was he with customers right now? Or was he cleaning the shop already? I'd probably cry if I could go back to Japan for just a moment to help him clean. I hope he could forgive me.

Would he have even a little time to talk if I called?

I had a feeling just hearing a word or two from him would cheer me right up. But no, I couldn't make that a habit. If I called that genius of listening to people and getting them to talk about their worries, I don't think I'd be done in even an hour, and that would be an obstruction of business. I knew I'd probably have a

chance to have a long call with him soon enough, and I wanted to tell him about my blog once I improved my English composition skills a little more, but that wasn't now. Right now, I needed to transform this indeterminate, gooey mass of gloom into something more like a neat block of red bean jelly.

Well, my problems weren't really worth thinking about right now.

"Am I actually of any use to...anyone right now?"

That was the crux of my issue.

Interning in Sri Lanka. I'd genuinely thought it sounded cool and wanted to give it a shot. I'd run a lot of calculations before making my decision, but the desire to go for it and give it my all still burned in my heart. Except that fire had nowhere to go, so it was burning *up* my heart.

At the moment, the more I tried to think calmly about exactly where in the world I was and what I was doing, the more unreal it felt. I searched through my memories of changing schools in elementary school, moving on to high school, living alone for the first time in college, and so on, for some point of similarity, but I'd never had such a drastic change in environment before. But of course I hadn't. In all those circumstances, I spoke the same language as everyone around me—who were all Japanese—and even if I accidentally got off at the wrong train station, I didn't have to search through signs in English, Sinhala, and Tamil to find the station name.

If I'd been hired by a private company and sent to Singapore for training, I think I would have had an easier time adjusting. I probably wouldn't be the only Japanese person there in a situation like that, and I'd have plenty of "role models" in the form of people who'd been working at the company for a while, to see where I'd be and what I'd be doing in a few years in my career. *Role model* was a term that had been beaten into my skull during my job hunt.

But this was nothing at all like that.

Maybe the issue was that being a jeweler wasn't an organized, routine type of job. I should have known that—and yet... When you had too much time on your

hands, your anxieties loomed bigger, like shadow puppets hit by the light.

This wasn't homesickness, either. I didn't feel like going home. What I felt was something different entirely.

I just couldn't help thinking, *What the hell am I doing here?*

What did I even *want* to do? Why did I come to this place?

I mean, I knew the answers. I was here to apprentice to become a jeweler while studying for the civil service exam. But my goals were so far out of reach, it was hard to even imagine where I would be just two years from now. I could wish I'd prepared more all I wanted, but that ship had sailed. I just wanted this pointless unease to go away.

The sunlight was no longer pleasantly warm but uncomfortably hot. I decided to get some cool water to drink, but as I passed through the living room on the way to the kitchen, I noticed something flickering on my computer screen. I must've gotten an email while I'd had my eyes off it. I wondered who it was from. Saul, maybe?

I checked my mail and noticed the sender's address was unfamiliar. It ended in ".uk" the same way a Japanese email address might end in ".jp," which presumably stood for United Kingdom. I guess it was a British domain?

The address wasn't in my contacts, but the account had the name Jeffrey in it. I almost felt like laughing. That sure was a familiar name. Although my boss might have described him as his personal nemesis, Jeffrey was his overprotective cousin, an extremely wealthy man who worked for an American investment firm and liked to play the role of jovial older brother. I was surprised he'd gotten my new email address, when I suddenly realized what the strange subject line said.

It was two words in English:

Help Richard

What on Earth was that supposed to mean?

I opened the message. Its contents were even more mysterious.

It wasn't a simple text-based email but like a colorful advertising flyer turned into an email. There was something written in an ornamental gold script at the top. I wasn't sure if it was a company name or what. And beneath it was an itinerary that looked like it had been laid out in a spreadsheet program. Of course, it was all in English.

Day 1: Departure from Fort Lauderdale. Boarding begins, ticket sales are closed.

Day 2: Party. See attached for dress code.

Day 3: Arrival at Charlotte Amaile, 1 p.m.

The itinerary had six days listed. Fort Lauderdale and Charlotte Amaile seemed to be place names. When I looked it up, Fort Lauderdale was in Florida, a state in the U.S. The first day had a departure scheduled from there, the second day would be spent entirely on the water, arriving in Charlotte Amaile, the capital of U.S. Virgin Islands, on the afternoon of the third day, and then a return to Fort Lauderdale was scheduled on the sixth day, where it had departed from.

I scrolled further down and saw a map attached.

It was a map of the ocean.

A pink line started from Florida, extending out into the Atlantic Ocean before turning around in a narrow almond shape. It was near the Caribbean and just as hot as Sri Lanka year round. I hadn't answered all those geography questions for the civil service exam for nothing. It was the kind of place you got fish and sharks and coconut juice and the smell of rum—and I didn't have even the faintest connection to it.

It looked like a map for a cruise. A six-day trip around the Caribbean.

In the upper right corner of the map was the name of the person it was for.

Mr. Richard Claremont.

If I'm being honest, I still wasn't used to that name. I was a lot more familiar with what I guess was his business name, Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian. Of course, Claremont was his real surname, and if you were to ask me which of the two was easier to remember and pronounce, it wouldn't even be a contest. But that was the name he gave me when we first met. And it was the name that best described him as a jeweler.

A living gemstone.

The embodiment of the concept of beauty.

And a man whose knowledge and kindness far exceeded even his beauty.

I could sing his praises all day and it still wouldn't be sufficient—and it was this very same Richard, the man with all these unbelievable qualities wrapped up in an impossibly beautiful package, who was none other than my boss. The blond-haired, blue-eyed Englishman who spoke perfect Japanese and ran Jewelry Étranger on Nanachome in Ginza. He would humbly assert that he was no match for the shop's owner, Saul, but they seemed to have a pretty equal relationship from my perspective. They felt more like business partners than anything. Richard's family are genuine old-blood aristocrats—there was a quarrel about inheritance with them a few years ago, but thanks to that incident, it felt like our relationship took a step beyond just boss and employee. Label-wise, I guess you could say that we're "colleagues" under the same employer now, but in reality, it's pretty different.

But setting that aside: The email was an itinerary for a cruise. The departure date was April 16th, three days from now. I still didn't understand what it was supposed to mean, but if this really was an itinerary for a trip for Richard, it meant he'd be away from Japan for six days. Étranger only operates on weekends, so did that mean Saul would be covering the days he'd be out? The last time I'd seen that mustachioed Sri Lankan gentleman was four days ago. They were both unusually agile when it came to this sort of thing, so it didn't seem that unusual.

At that point, I realized I hadn't read all the way to the end of the email yet, so I started scrolling again. Beneath the itinerary was a picture of a gemstone. A cruise and gemstones?

After I'd read to the end of the email, I scrolled back up to read the text in ornamental script. It was a company name, the name of an American jewelry company that even I knew. If you did an image search for diamonds or rubies, or any gemstone name, really, you'd be bound to find some of their products in there. It was an ultra-luxury brand.

Both three-million-yen ruby rings and five-million-yen diamond necklaces existed in this world, but those weren't "high-end" prices for goods in this industry. I knew it sounded crazy, and it *was*. There was jewelry out there that cost far more than even a car. Like thirty-five-million-yen rings and hundred-million-yen necklaces. Yes. The kind of jewelry that made you want to ask, "Are you sure there aren't a few extra zeroes on that price?" —*that* was ultra-luxury jewelry.

"High-end" signified products that were both the highest price and highest quality in a given industry. This wasn't stuff you could just buy at a department store—you'd be lucky to even get a glimpse of it in your average specialty store. At this level, it was almost less jewelry and closer to fine art, produced by workshops with extremely skilled artisans. I remembered saying it sounded like fancy chocolates when my boss explained it to me, and he looked a little annoyed, but he eventually smiled and agreed. Of course, even the fanciest of chocolates probably didn't cost a hundred million yen for a single morsel.

There was no strict distinction between what's ultra-luxury jewelry and what's not. It was closer to a genre label than a formal title, but there were some brands that were generally recognized as ultra-luxury. Like the companies that announced their fabulous collections at France's Place Vendôme, or like Gargantua here.

Gargantua. Their trademark was a golden giant, like some kind of god of good fortune. It served as a symbol for their company, one of the world's foremost

producers of jewelry. The words “100 years” were written in ornamental script next to their logo.

I guess the cruise was some kind of celebration for the 100th anniversary of a famous American jewelry brand where it’d be unveiling some new products too. They were probably inviting customers as well, not just dealers. At least I bet they were. It seemed like a bit much just for business clients. Was this an ultra-luxury brand thing or just how their company did things?

It was hard to imagine Richard taking an extended absence from the shop—I’m not saying he’s a workaholic or anything, although I do think he loves his job—but if it was a business trip, *that* I could understand. Admittedly, the idea that he did this kind of work too was a little surprising. You see, Étranger’s parent company, Ranasinghe Jewelry, offered good stones at reasonable prices, and even sometimes hooked customers up with designers they were on good terms with—a totally different business model than department stores and the like. Did Richard ever even have the opportunity to deal in such high-end brands? Or did he have some other, non-gem-related connection to the company?

That’s when I remembered the most important thing of all of this—the subject of the email.

Help Richard.

It was unsettling, no matter how many times I read it. As far as I could tell, it was nothing more than a luxurious business trip, but I guess the person who forwarded this email to me was saying Richard needed help. But no matter how much I scrolled, there was no message from the sender, and no additional information. Maybe it would have taken too long to write something. I didn’t know the time zones for America or England off the top of my head, but I was sure they were further in the “past” than Sri Lanka was.

I made some plain tea to enjoy in the dining room, still unable to shake the feelings of unease. That was when I received a follow-up email from the same address, once again with no body text. This one had no subject, either.

The only thing it contained was a digital ticket for a flight from Sri Lanka's Colombo International Airport, with a connection via Dubai, to Florida for tomorrow. The name on the ticket was Seigi Nakata. He certainly had everything covered. The return flight was for April 21st—timed to leave just after the six-day cruise to get me back to Sri Lanka.

And then I got a third email. A luxury cruise itinerary addressed to me. The contents were identical to Richard's. *I see*. This must serve as a ticket.

I guess by "help," the email meant "accompany on the trip." The assisting kind of help, not the rescuing kind of help. I shouldn't overthink this—it probably just meant carrying things and stuff like that. And maybe having some fun while I'm at it?

It didn't seem like saying no was an option, either. You only got emails like this after the transaction was complete. I had given Richard my passport so he could buy me tickets home after my stay at the Claremont estate in England, so maybe Jeffrey had procured my information back then, too?

When I thought it through like that, something seemed a little odd.

Richard and Jeffrey didn't get along all *that* well. I couldn't imagine he would have given him a copy of my passport information during my trip to England. And I mean, was Jeffrey really the sort of person who would send me this kind of information out of the blue with no explanation, from an email address he'd never contacted me from before?

Frustratingly, I couldn't decisively say he wasn't. He was the person who'd set up not one but two massive surprises for me in the past. The first was through less-than-pleasant means, but for the second, he'd conspired with Richard to save my life. So I kind of owed him, just like I owed Richard, and I did want to be helpful to him if I could, but—

But there was just something off-putting about the way he went about it. It didn't feel as slick as his usual schemes. The address had his name in it, and it was from a British domain, but were these emails really from the person I

knew?

Then again, if it wasn't him, then whom? Who would do this? I mean, how much would a trip halfway around the world from Colombo to Fort Lauderdale cost? Definitely not less than 100,000 yen, that's for sure. Maybe in the chaos of my move during third year, I handed over my passport as a form of identification. My memories from back then were pretty hazy, and my brain still refused to remember details. It's a real pain.

I gave it a brief thought and then dialed Jeffrey's number. This was probably the first time I'd tried to call him, if we forget about the mess during my move. I wasn't even sure if it'd connect, but I figured I'd give it a shot anyway. He didn't pick up. Swing and a miss. Saul was next on my list. I wanted to consult with him, but no dice there, either. He was really busy, too. I could probably expect him to call me back, but definitely not right away. I decided to leave a message just in case.

I heard birds chirping in the distance. I could see the afternoon sun enveloping the garden from the living room. It was about lunchtime, but I guess frozen pasta would just have to do again. I still didn't know a lot about Sri Lankan cuisine.

I let out a sigh.

As I read over every word of the email with my itinerary for tomorrow again, I printed it out on the rickety two-generation-old printer.

■ Day 1 ■

WHEN I GOT TO Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport, I really did have a seat on the flight to Dubai. I would spend almost the entire day in the air on the connecting flight from Dubai to Fort Lauderdale—Hollywood International Airport. It felt kinda weird. When I bought that ticket to go to England all by myself, I got up the courage to do it by telling myself that it would be a once-in-a-lifetime spur of the moment trip—and now here I was on another such trip just a few years later. How many more of these would there be in my life? I'd actually grown pretty fond of air travel and I'd gotten in the habit of imagining I was giving myself over to some massive living creature during takeoff. I'd decided it was better than having a phobia of flying.

The only person to call me back was Saul. I just honestly explained the situation to him. He knew about Jeffrey, too. I told him about the "Help Richard" email, about the luxury cruise itinerary, about the tickets. He was much harder to please and much harder to read than Richard, but he just let out a little *hmm* in his charming tenor, then asked, "So? What do *you* want to do?"

He didn't seem at all surprised by what I'd told him. I guess that meant Richard's travel plans were real, and he'd probably notified Saul about it beforehand. I could tell he was concerned about something. I was, too. I was worried about not being able to confirm that it had actually been Jeffrey who'd arranged it, either. Richard was impossible to contact as well—he was going to be with customers all the way up until the afternoon of the 16th, and when he wasn't, he'd be in the air.

Saul told me that if I wanted to go, I should. That's just the kind of person he was. He left the decision entirely up to me. And, of course, the responsibility. I appreciated it.

I washed my face and changed my clothes in the arrivals lounge of Fort Lauderdale Airport and headed to the seaport. I was concerned about what I'd do if the harbor was a long way from the airport, but when I asked my

sunglasses-clad taxi driver, he immediately reassured me. Apparently, it was only fifteen minutes away. He asked if I was going on vacation, and I replied, “Something like that.” He laughed and asked what that was supposed to mean. I gave a vague response about going on a cruise for work, and he just smiled and said, “Okay.” I felt a little relieved. The only person who I usually spoke English to spoke British English, so I had no confidence that I’d be able to be understood in America. In retrospect, it was a pretty stupid thing to be worried about. I was sure my English teacher would be laughing about it with me soon enough.

“I guess it’s a frame-of-mind thing,” he said. “It’s work if you think of it as work, and it’s fun if you think of it as fun.”

I think he had the right idea about that. Though, if I’m being totally honest, I still didn’t really know what was going on.

Was this trip some jewelry fun?

Or was it something more serious with a spoonful of sugar to help it go down?

I had to wonder if Richard really was okay. I wish people wouldn’t use words like “help” so lightly with people whose native language wasn’t English. That was the same word you’d use when you needed to call an ambulance. All sorts of thoughts ran through my head as the car made its way to the seaport.

Fort Lauderdale’s harbor didn’t look like any harbors I’d seen before. The boats were just so massive. If Tokyo Bay was a water resort for small animals, this was a meeting ground for gargantuan dinosaurs. They were massive and white and looked like skyscrapers rising out of the water.

My driver encouraged me to give him the name of the boat I was headed for—it sounded like he’d done this a lot—as he moved through the intersections at the harbor without hesitation. Each ship had its own port. We drove for probably another five minutes before I saw an electronic sign for check in.

“This is as far as I can take you,” the driver said with a smile. I paid him, and he left, wishing me a good trip as he drove off. He was probably in his late

forties. He had what looked like the names of family members and loved ones tattooed on his bear-like arms.

Deep down, I was still wondering what the hell I was doing. Why was I here? There was no point in thinking about it. And it didn't really matter if the "help" Richard needed was for something frivolous or serious. All that mattered was that if Richard needed me, I wanted to be there.

But also incidentally—and I do mean just incidentally—I guess I was looking forward to seeing him.

My feelings toward Richard were complicated. He was both the first and last person I wanted to know about my current situation. I wanted to thank him because my life had changed so much for the better all because of him, but I didn't have the mental fortitude to say something like that even insincerely. I still hadn't adapted to my totally new environment yet. It was pretty pathetic, if I do say so myself. I'm not arrogant enough to demand even more after I've been given more than I could have ever asked for. I just wanted to get a little advice from him. Nothing that would worry him, just something light, like asking him for some general advice as a newbie to the field. Like maybe asking him what it was like when he first started studying gemstones seriously. Or something like that.

Even if he wouldn't have been able to pick up, I was kicking myself for not calling Richard first before Jeffrey or Saul. I tried to justify it to myself like this: The thing about Richard was that he's a very nice guy. And by very nice, I mean so nice that it should be triple underlined in big fat red Sharpie. If he realized I wasn't settling into my new environment, he might tell me to quit.

And *that* would be a real problem. The ship named Seigi Nakata had only just begun its voyage out into uncharted waters. I couldn't be calling in a tugboat to tow me to safety this early. And he had a real talent for persuasion, too. It wasn't exactly like in the North Wind and the Sun, but in the face of the concentrated sunbeams of his passion, my resolve was about as strong as a chocolate bar that had been in the fridge for a while. And I didn't want my

determination to go to waste in a gooey puddle.

That's why I couldn't make that call. I know...even I wanted to laugh at how pathetic that was.

I concluded that I was definitely in for a lecture as I followed the sign for the check-in gate. The ship's name was written beneath the sign: Utopia on the Sea.

The inside of the building labeled "check-in gate" looked basically like an airport. It was bafflingly massive. There were people inspecting carry-ons, a passport check counter, and a large luggage handling area. My only bag was my backpack, so I declined the option to check it. When I asked an older male staffer why the place was so big when there were so few people there, he just sighed and shrugged, explaining that there weren't any other people there because I was late. Crap. I guess I'd made it just in the nick of time.

I half jogged through the building and up the long ramp to the ship. When I finally made it to the boarding gate, I showed them the ticket that had been emailed to me. The ticket machine lit up green—ticket accepted. I felt relieved. It wasn't just a prank. I was like 70 percent sure the whole thing was real when the airline tickets turned out to be true, but I still had some lingering doubts.

"Welcome, Mr. Nakata. I understand you're here on business."

When I showed my invitation at the amber-colored counter just beyond the gate, I was greeted with a dazzling smile. I nodded awkwardly in response, and the man behind the counter flashed me a courteous smile. He introduced himself as the floor manager and then gave me a rundown of the ship in extremely clear and easy-to-follow English.

This ship, Utopia on the Sea, was a cruise ship owned by Amin Karlsbrook, a member of Gargantua's board of directors. The ship was over a thousand feet in length, nearly two hundred feet wide, and weighed over two hundred thousand tons. I felt like I was getting a physical description of a dinosaur. It could carry up to 5,000 passengers, of which 1,800 were crew.

This ship was regularly used for Caribbean cruises as part of Amin's business,

so there were normal passengers on this six-day cruise in addition to the customers and members of the jewelry industry that had been invited by Gargantua. But apparently Gargantua's guests were afforded some special privileges that the normal passengers didn't get. Like how the guests could use all of the ship's facilities—the restaurants, the internet café, the gym, the pool, the spa, the pro photographers, and the medical facilities, along with entry into the casino, entirely free of charge. I asked, as naively as an elementary schooler, if a ship could really hold all that stuff, and the manager smiled at me without so much as a hint of scorn. Thankfully. I'd lived my whole life without ever having to think about what made a luxury cruise so luxurious, but I felt like I understood in just those few seconds. The jewelry show was tomorrow, and I was cautioned to keep in mind that entry times were different for regular guests and vendors.

The manager wished me a wonderful six days and gave me the key to my room. It was a key card, and it came in a paper sleeve with the room number on it. Room 1128. I guess there were a lot of rooms. I was already so overwhelmed, I couldn't do anything but nod my head like a bobblehead toy. The ambiance on the floor was incredible with its opulent lamps and lavish ornamentation—it reminded me of a lounge in a hotel lobby.

“By the way,” the manager added, “your traveling companion has already embarked. Shall I call him for you?”

I turned him down, saying there was no need because I would be calling him, and he smiled and handed me what looked like some kind of event pass. A case with a slip of paper the size of a business card dangled from a red lanyard. My name was printed on the paper—“Seigi Nakata,” in Roman characters.

I tensed up when I saw it. Here I wasn't just an apprentice jeweler. I was an employee of a jewelry company who had traveled here from Asia.

Just as I took the pass and hung it around my neck, a man entered the lobby lounge through what looked like some kind of staff door and glared at me. He looked like he was in his fifties, dressed in a classic navy three-piece suit. What

was his problem? Did I have the spirits of a bunch of murder victims clinging to my back? I checked behind me and found no such source of bad luck.

The man continued to glare at my face like I'd horribly insulted him, before swiftly slamming the door and disappearing.

I was a little startled, and the manager asked me what was wrong. I didn't think telling him that someone was giving me a nasty look would do any good, so I just laughed it off. *Forget about it. He was probably just in a bad mood.*

"Please don't hesitate to call me if you need anything. If you dial 8 from the phone in your room, that will connect you directly to a member of our staff. I hope you have a wonderful stay."

We shook hands, and I set off into the ship. My feet sank into the thick carpet. I felt nervous as I was greeted by beautiful men and women with gleaming white smiles, but I somehow managed to find the nerve to smile back.

The space opened up as I walked along the fluffy carpet. The ceiling was incredibly high. A luxurious mall lay before me.

Somewhere in the back of my head, I was reminded of Japan's most famous theme park. I know it's a land of dreams with a lot of repeat guests, but I'd only been once for a middle-school field trip. But I still had the vivid memory of feeling like I'd set foot in another world. Everywhere you looked in that place, nothing was just there to begin with and left as-is; every single detail was designed and built by human hands. It's the kind of place that makes you feel uncomfortable, precisely because everything's so perfect and otherwise free of discomfort.

And this massive space inside the ship was just such a place.

Big glass shop windows lined the five-meter-wide walkway. Most of them were restaurants—pubs, pizzerias, sushi bars, and so on. There were probably about thirty people leisurely strolling through the area, myself included. The elderly white folks and the young (probably Chinese) Asians stood out among them. I came wearing a white button-up, but clearly my choice of attire was in

the minority. Most of the other guests, both young and old, were wearing tank tops and shorts with sandals on their feet. I really felt like I'd been sucked into another world.

When I looked up, a large advertisement for Gargantua hung over the mall. It featured a massive red gem—probably a ruby—being embraced by a beautifully crafted golden woman. Her long flowing hair was inlaid with diamonds. I guess it was a brooch or something. It was so impressive that it was almost overwhelming. And then there was the company logo. Both the stone and the workmanship were beautiful. I was too scared to even think about what it might cost.

I walked along, entranced by all the sights, and found myself getting on the wrong escalator, which took me outside the building and onto a rooftop space. In front of me, beneath the scorching sun were two massive round pools separated by a several-meter-wide walkway. People in swimsuits were playing in the water with pool floats. There were pools on top of a boat sitting on the ocean. It didn't make any sense. My eyes were dazzled by the folks tanning in the lounges. I had no idea where I might run into Richard, but it definitely wasn't here. If he was tanning in a swimsuit, he'd have a huge crowd of people around him. For the moment, I decided to head back where I'd come from.

I tottered through the otherworldly space, glancing occasionally at the restaurants and amusements as I passed them, and finally, with the help of a staffer, I made it back to the lobby lounge. They even greeted me with a carbonated beverage in a glass, no less. I felt pathetic. This time, I decided to look for an area that seemed like it would be frequented by business people. I headed toward the bow of the ship, took a right turn into a space lined with probably over a hundred lounge chairs, and ran into a double door. There was another door behind it. When I moved through the first set of doors, I could faintly smell the sea. And when I opened the second, I felt wind against my face. I'd come out onto the deck. It was covered with a roof so the sun wasn't beating down on me, but the world outside spread out before me on the other

side of the handrails.

I could see the harbor from the deck. The surface of the ocean was so far down. This ship was way too big. The sound of the steam whistle pierced my ears. I guess I really was the last person to board and the ship was setting sail as soon as possible. That was quick. I still wasn't ready for this. That said, I guess I'd been in the thick of this ever since I got that email. I should just let it happen.

There were people on the pier waving and holding up a sign that read, "Bon Voyage!" The people standing on the deck in resortwear waved back to them. It didn't really feel like we were moving. I didn't hear any engine noise from the ship, either, and it wasn't swaying. I guess this is what makes it a *luxury* cruise?

At which point—

My phone began to vibrate in my pocket. It was a phone call—from Richard. Wait, what? Why? I still hadn't even contacted him. Oh, maybe Saul passed the information along to him.

I didn't want to disturb the people who were enjoying the departure, so I started walking along the length of the ship. The ship was supposed to be 350 meters long, so surely I'd make it to the bow if I walked about 300 meters, right? How long did this deck go on for, anyway?

"Hello, Seigi Nakata speaking!"

"It's me. Do you have time to talk on the phone right now?"

"I do! Plenty of time!" I responded, and it sounded like Richard laughed a bit. I knew from what I'd been told in the lobby that he was already on board, but not where specifically he was at the moment. So I asked him.

"I'm at my destination."

Destination. Well, that was pretty vague. If Saul had told him I was coming after him, that wasn't the kind of expression he would have used. I was more prepared for a "What on Earth were you thinking, you idiot?"

I kept walking aimlessly as I continued talking, wondering if Saul really hadn't

gotten in contact with him yet.

“Richard, why did you call me now?”

“Just because. I didn’t really have a reason. I figured you were probably feeling a little lost right about now, being in an unfamiliar country—and I felt like chiding you for your indolence. I told you that you could contact me at any time, and that you should think of it as part of the job, didn’t I? You have some nerve, going silent on me all this time. Are you well? Has anything been troubling you?”

The power of his concentrated sunlight was really living up to its reputation. Even I was surprised at how high my anxiety had shot up in just a few seconds. I guess I was pretty overwhelmed. I was rendered speechless, staring out into the ocean. I panicked to get out of the way when some people bumped into me from behind.

“Seigi?”

“O-oh, wh-what?”

“What do you mean ‘what’? That’s my line. What is going on? I believe it should be nighttime in Sri Lanka right now. Are you still out?”

Even his initial questioning was perfect. I was amazed. I kept walking aimlessly, worried about getting in the way of the people behind me. It felt like the deck was gradually getting wider.

“I guess I am out, kind of... I’m just taking a little stroll.”

“You’re out walking in Kandy at night? Go home at once. That area is more wild and mountainous than you think. Dangerous wild animals don’t show up often, but not often isn’t never. Or you could run into drug addicts. Don’t take needless risks.”

“No! Not that kind of out! I’m taking a walk in a safe place.”

“You mean in the garden?”

“Well, um, yeah, I guess!”

Walking in the garden? What was I even talking about? I was walking on the deck of a luxury cruise ship. The smell of ocean brine was getting gradually stronger. I encountered another double door and pushed it open with my free hand.

My body was immediately enveloped by the sea breeze. There was no roof from that point on. The sun was almost blindingly bright. And it was just a straight drop to the ocean beyond the handrails. I was a little shocked at how high up I was. The person on the other end of the line probably heard me catching my breath.

“Seigi, what’s wrong?”

“I—I’m just still half-asleep! I’m fine, I promise!”

“Oh, you were sleeping? Perhaps I should call back later. That seems rather early to be going to bed, but when does Saul usually start your lessons?”

“Lessons? Oh, no, he’s not really doing much of that. Saul seems really busy right now, so I’m kind of just visually comparing stones against pictures in textbooks by myself at the house in Kandy right now.”

“...Huh? You’re alone? That’s not what we agreed to—never mind, that’s for me to worry about.”

“Look, I’m fine. Everything’s going well.”

The little voice in my head was getting mighty irritating, scolding me for digging the hole I was in deeper. I knew I needed to find some opportunity during this call to tell him that I was actually in Florida right now, but I was just so happy to be talking to Richard again that I was having a hard time ruining the mood. It wasn’t even funny. I wasn’t some elementary school kid the day before going off on a field trip—I needed to be clear and say what I needed to say. I kept my feet moving and walked through the narrow deck between the benches and the lifeboats. The further I went, the fewer people there were around.

“Uh, um, so, Richard, there’s something I kind of need to tell you.”

“I owe you an apology.”

“Huh?”

“Seigi,” he said my name. Oh, stop, please, how am I ever going to tell you that I’m actually in Florida right now if you keep going like this?

“I’ve put you in a much more uncomfortable situation than I had imagined. I realize now that I put too much trust in my mentor. Saul is, of course, very interested in and supportive of your training, but there is a great gulf between his philosophy of education and mine. Perhaps it would be best to say his strategy is to toss his students into a bottomless ravine.”

“I wish you wouldn’t say such ominous stuff. He hasn’t thrown me off anything.”

“Indeed, but you have never spent an extended amount of time abroad before. I’m quite acquainted with how different Japan and Sri Lanka are. Let’s talk a bit longer. What have you been eating lately? Have you been sleeping well?”

If I could just tell him that the kebab I just had on the flight over was incredible and I’m on the boat right now, that would solve everything. But I couldn’t get a word out. I didn’t want to tell him that I’d been eating premade soup or frozen meals I’d bought at the supermarket. I wanted to try more Sri Lankan cuisine, but I wasn’t skilled enough in the kitchen to make food from a country I’d never lived in before, and I didn’t have the first clue where to go out for food. The house I was living in was up on a hill, so it was a ways down to town, and just walking to the supermarket was quite a hike. Admittedly, I hadn’t asked to borrow the car yet.

“Oh, umm...”

“I’ve heard enough. I’ll be visiting soon. Is there anything in particular you’d like to eat? If you can’t think of anything in particular, I’ll just buy whatever you usually eat and bring it with me.”

“You don’t have to, I’m fine, I swear. You don’t need to worry about me. Oh...I would be really happy if you brought me some oyster sauce though.”

“Don’t they have it at the Chinese supermarket in the city center? Or at one of the supermarkets in Colombo? I know the roads there are about as tricky as Rome’s, but you should be able to handle driving there once you get used to it.”

“Huh? I don’t have a car. There aren’t a lot of shops within walking distance.”

“...I may have to wage all-out war with my mentor.”

I kept trying to tell him that he had misunderstood as I reached a dead end on the deck. Or at least I thought it couldn’t have been anything other than a dead end when I saw a steep set of stairs rise up along the wall. There were probably about thirty steps. I decided to go up, since it was right there, after all.

“Richard, I’m fine, really. I guess I just feel like maybe I’ve hit a bit of a plateau in developing my eye for gems, so maybe that’s why I sound a little down.”

“When I imagine you staring at gems in a foreign country with essentially no means of transportation and no one to talk to, it’s very difficult to imagine you’re ‘fine, really.’ I will demand that Saul take steps to improve your situation immediately. I would visit you sooner, but it’ll be at least a week before I’m able to go anywhere.”

“It’s fine.”

“It is decidedly not fine.”

“Really, it is! And look, even if it’s not, I don’t care, so let’s just put that to the side for now and talk about you. How are things at Étranger?”

I started climbing the stairs, trying my best to conceal the sound of my footsteps. They were so steep, it felt like I was surfacing from the sea floor. I didn’t realize that these were *probably* not stairs that guests were meant to use until I had started climbing them. But I was too scared to try to go back while I was still on the phone. I just had to commit and keep going as far as I could.

“It’s still operating on weekends, but staffing is a bit less consistent.”

Sometimes I'm there; sometimes Saul is. We do let our customers know who will be seeing them in advance, but..."

Richard paused for a moment and chuckled like he was remembering something. I wondered what it was.

"They often tell me that they miss you."

"Huh? Me?"

"I think some customers, especially those coming in alone, feel quite a bit of pressure when they're one-on-one with a salesperson."

Well, now that he mentioned it, I met Richard the very day he opened the shop in Ginza. It was hard to imagine Richard operating alone in the shop.

"...Are you managing okay alone? Or have you found another part-timer already?"

"I'm considering it. But I can run the shop alone. It's not that much of an issue at this point, so I think I'll leave things as they are for the time being."

"Are you sure? What about just from a security perspective?"

"I've been renewing the surveillance camera maintenance and security firm contracts as well as the shop's insurance as needed. More importantly, are you at home now? I thought I heard something."

"I, uh, there might be a dog in the yard! Haha!"

"A dog, huh..."

I kept steadily climbing the stairs. Then suddenly, the world opened up around me. What awaited me at the top of the stairs was the ship's bow—the pointed front end of the ship. There was a big H-shaped mark on the triangular piece of deck. I guess it could be used as a helicopter landing pad in an emergency? It might not get much use otherwise.

The vast blue ocean stretched out to either side of the bow. And the light-blue sky met the sea at the horizon—it almost looked like it was painted in

acrylic. The contrast between the colors almost made me dizzy. But that wasn't all.

Right at the spot where the sky and the sea met...

"Well, no matter where you are or what you're doing, you do always end up doing whatever you feel like doing."

...stood a very familiar figure with his back to me.

He was wearing a pair of brown moccasins without socks, white linen pants, and a blue shirt with thin vertical stripes. His jacket was just slung over his arm. He wasn't wearing a hat, but I was sure he had to have sunglasses on. I'd heard that blue eyes had a much harder time with the sun than brown ones did. The sea breeze teased his golden locks. I was looking at him from behind, from over ten meters away, and I was already dazzled...although it probably wasn't so much an overdose of beauty as of joy.

"Seigi?"

"Oh, um. Right, sorry. What did you say?"

"...It seems that you're a bit distracted at the moment. I'm hanging up. Goodbye."

"Wait! Just wait, please."

I didn't even know what I was saying anymore. I knew what I should be doing was hanging up and saying something like "Hi Richard," to him or something, and explaining that I was actually here in Florida. Well, I guess I could leave that second part out if I'm talking to him face-to-face. That said, either way I was going to be met with some extra intense hellfire for sure.

I saw him pull the phone away from his mouth a bit to let out a little sigh.

"If you have something you want to say, hurry up and say it already. I'm not the kind of person who can sit here and keep up a cheerful face while someone continues to waste my time."

"I'm not sure I buy that, coming from the world's most—"

"You don't need to finish that sentence, I know what you're going to say. Get to the point."

"...Richard, so, um, there's something I really need to tell you."

Come on Seigi, the ship has already left the harbor. And it just so happens to be the luxury cruise liner you're on. Man up!

"This may come as a surprise, but just hear me out."

"What is it now? What happened?"

I saw his blue shirt flutter. Was he about to turn around? He didn't. The wind coming onto the bow must have been concealing my voice behind him.

"It's probably not really a big deal, but I don't quite know how to put it... I do think it's going to surprise you, though."

"Whether it surprises me or not is up to me to decide. Out with it."

I felt like a little kid about to confess to pulling a prank on someone. But this was all Jeffrey's fault—or should I say I had him to thank? I had no idea anymore. My heart was pounding. I'd never felt so uncomfortable in my life.

Right before my eyes, the beautiful man softly shook his head. I was very familiar with that gesture. But something about that one little thing put me at ease—the person standing before me was the same person I knew.

"You haven't changed one bit, you know? I wish you wouldn't worry about me so much."

His voice was so tender. It almost sounded like he was saying he wouldn't be mad at me.

I'd already come this far, there was only one thing left for me to do. I hung up the phone and closed the distance between us. Richard looked bewildered, pulling his phone from his ear and looking at it. Just as he took off his sunglasses and set them atop his head, I gently tapped him on the shoulder twice. I had to say something. I had to greet him.

The moment he set his blue eyes on me, I raised one hand.

“Long time no see...?”

It sounded like a joke, the way I said it as I smiled awkwardly.

I would never forget the look on Richard’s face in that moment for the rest of my life.

His blue eyes went wide, filled with absolute shock and amazement. But also...

...despair.

And a little fear, too.

Like an animal caught in a trap, having realized its fate.

I didn’t understand. I mean, after the way that guy in the lobby earlier was looking at me, I was starting to wonder if I had turned into a ghost or something. Was there like some kind of cursed mark on my face? There shouldn’t have been. So why?

Richard froze. It was hard to believe he was just surprised.

What was wrong? What on Earth had happened? I kept asking with my eyes, and after a few moments, the beautiful man let out a lengthy sigh.

“...I see. So that’s what was going on.”

“What does that mean?”

Richard didn’t answer. The intense sound of the steam whistle pierced my ears. When I looked down, a little tugboat was pulling away from the ship. The ship was finally heading out onto the open ocean. I could see the little black dots of the crew on the smaller ship waving to us to wish us a safe journey.

My gaze, which had wandered for a moment, returned to its previous position. Richard was there. This time, his blue eyes were looking at me with their normal calmness and tranquility. Well, no, they did seem a little colder than usual.

“It really has been too long. I’m sure we have a lot to talk about.”

“Richard, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to surprise you at the last minute like this.”

“We can talk about that later. Come, this isn’t exactly the best place for a lengthy conversation. Especially when there is a litany of things that need to be said lining up for their turn.”

Having said that, Richard spun around in front of me and began to briskly walk to the back of the deck. Apparently, those steep stairs weren’t the usual route into this area—there was a door connecting it directly to the interior of the ship.

I had been expecting to get an earful ever since I got onto the plane, but judging from Richard’s demeanor, it probably wasn’t going to be that simple. Maybe I’d inserted myself into a much more complicated situation than I’d imagined.

I followed him, unsure of what to do. Richard paused in front of the door and turned to me. What was it?

“Just one thing,” he said, raising the index finger on his right hand. Somehow, I felt like I’d missed seeing his graceful figure. It was strange. Until very recently we’d seen each other all the time.

I froze, expecting a scolding, and Richard smiled.

“I’m very glad to see you,” he said, smiling a smile so dazzling that surely even the Florida sun would want to hide behind a cloud in shame.

He spun right back around and went inside the awfully artificial town that was the ship.

Anyway, this was my first cruise.

For the next six days, I’d be assisting Richard, or helping him, or both. Either way, I intended to do my very best. Or at least I *had* intended that.

Right now, it finally hit me that I might be doing the exact opposite of helping.

When we arrived in a mostly empty lounge, the first thing Richard did was call Saul. Apparently, Saul had sent Richard a text, but he'd not told him anything other than that he was "sending additional staff."

Only his first comment—"What's going on?"—was in English. The rest of the conversation was in Sinhala. About ten minutes after Richard ducked behind a column some distance away from me to make the phone call, he came back, looking a bit exhausted, and told me we should find a place where we could sit and talk. There were countless restaurants on the ship, but they were all pretty sparsely populated, since it had just departed. Everyone was out exploring the ship or enjoying the view from the deck.

We settled on a café bar on the second floor of the ship near the stern with porthole windows looking out at the ocean. It felt like being in a submarine. The two of us placed our orders at the counter: two bottles of mineral water.

The first one to do some explaining was me. I told him about the urgent emails I'd gotten three days ago from someone I assumed to be Jeffrey, with Richard's cruise itinerary as well as an airline ticket and cruise itinerary for me. I told him how I'd consulted Saul and, after a 24-hour flight, arrived in Florida and taken a taxi to the harbor. Richard seemed to know more about the situation than I did from the moment he saw my face, but he also seemed to sense that I didn't know the first thing about what was going on.

He heard me out, then pulled his phone out of his pocket. His expression and gaze hardly shifted as he swiftly typed up a message and sent it off with a flick of his finger. Then he pounded another one out and sent it. And again.

Sometimes it was obvious what someone was writing and to whom from the look on their face. The person Richard behaved most uncharitably with—or rather, the only person he *could* behave uncharitably with—was his cousin Jeffrey. Jeffrey likely hadn't contacted him yet. He hadn't replied to me, either. I wondered if he was okay. Maybe he broke his phone?

After taking a short breath, the beautiful man, at whom the male staffer behind the counter kept stealing glances, finally unscrewed his bottle of water and drank from it. I moved my chair slightly to create a bit of a wall between the staffer and Richard. I knew it wasn't going to do much, but it made me feel better. The staffer seemed to realize what I was trying to do, and he apologetically moved to the opposite end of the counter.

"Hey, so what's going on with Saul? What did he say about me?"

"He said he determined that you 'were so desperate to go, it seemed pointless to try to stop you.'"

"Uh, sorry. Anything else?"

"That you're 'responsible for yourself.'"

He'd said the same thing to me before I left. As he saw me off with his usual inscrutable smile, the jeweler with the ambition to bring joy to the world through gemstones said that I'd be able to make it to Florida if I really did have a seat on that plane, and then I'd be able to get on the cruise ship, but that he had no idea what might become of me after that. But if I was fine with that, I ought to go.

I'd taken it as basically "Have a nice trip, but be careful."

"He's essentially saying that whatever happens, it's not his problem. After all, this is an issue between you and me. Deception is part and parcel of the gemstone world, and you'll never *truly* understand deception until you've been deceived yourself. He always was a sly fox."

"Deception?"

Richard didn't answer me, instead looking at me pleadingly as if to say, "Moving on."

"Just how much do you know about this cruise?"

How much did I know about it?

I knew that it was a six-day voyage. That it was sponsored by a major

American jewelry company. I knew that a jewelry show was going to be held on board. I knew that the ship itself belonged to a member of the company's board, and that in addition to regular travelers, both clients and business associates of the company were invited on the cruise. Richard and I were part of the latter group. And the show would be presenting some new ultra-luxury jewelry pieces.

I asked him if I had all that right, and Richard replied that, well, I wasn't *wrong*. But clearly what that meant was that while it might not be wrong, it wasn't exactly right, either.

I knitted my brows, asking him to explain more, and Richard's lips parted.

"Is there anything you'd like to eat? You should be getting hungry about now, right? You ought to eat while you can. The jet lag's going to hit you hard soon."

"I can take care of myself. Remember, I'm responsible for myself, after all. More importantly—"

"You must be exhausted if you don't have an appetite. Get some rest. Mind if I ask your room number?"

I silently handed Richard my keycard in its paper slip. Room 1128. I told him I hadn't actually seen the room yet, and Richard smiled, intrigued. It wasn't like he was enjoying himself without reservation or something, but he did seem to find some source of amusement in it. It was kind of scary.

I winced a bit, and Richard let out a little snort. It was at that moment I was sure. Sure that Richard was not exactly himself today. And it wasn't just because he wasn't at *Étranger*. It was hard to describe, but if I had to put it in words...

He was like a knight. A knight armed to the teeth, surveying the battlefield. He forced a peacetime sort of look on his face when he looked at me, but overall, it felt like he was preparing for war.

"Seigi, would you mind if I borrowed your key? Or did you want to go straight

to bed? I can talk it over with reception.”

“I’m not tired. If I need to do something, I’ll do it myself.”

“It would be faster for me to do it. Stay here and have something to eat. All food and drink should be free.”

“...Is there something you’re in a hurry to do?”

“Not really. Just—well.” Richard paused and smiled. It wasn’t a sunny tropical smile but one that was a perfect match for a gloomy bar. It sent a chill down my spine.

“It would be a great comfort to me if you would be so kind as to hole up in your quarters for the next six days.”

“Just FYI,” he added. I noted an uncharacteristic hint of tension deep in his smiling eyes.

If I could say one thing as someone who’s experienced jetlag, it’d be that the drowsiness you experience is tantamount to violence. Humans all have an internal clock that compels them to wake up in the morning and sleep at night, and getting on a plane shifts the concepts of day and night ingrained in our bodies out of time. But our bodies aren’t very inclined to forget things once they’ve learned them. And my body was relentless—*it’s night now, please go to sleep, please go to sleep already, you’re getting veeery sleepy*—even as the midday sun was beating down on me.

I pleaded with Richard that I was fine and to let me go with him as we, for some reason, moved from room 1128 to 1011, but Richard just looked at me like he was trying to soothe a cranky child and told me to go to sleep. “Don’t leave the room,” was written all over his face. And he never explained to me why he moved me to another room, either.

It was obvious that *something* was going on, but he wouldn’t explain. On the long elevator ride to the guest quarters, I kept telling him over and over that I’d help him if he just told me what was going on. But Richard didn’t seem very

interested and walked me all the way to the room, ignoring all the “oohs” and “wows” of passersby, without ever saying a word before he left me.

The room was huge. It'd give the luxury hotel I stayed at in Tokyo during my third year in college a run for its money. It had a couch, an absolutely massive bed, and a writing desk. There was a card on the bed with a welcome message, and a welcome basket of fruit on the dresser that probably wasn't going to get used. It had grapes, bananas, oranges, and apples. The room's lights and AC and whatnot could be controlled by a touchscreen using the keycard for the room. The interface could display twenty-five different languages, and of course, that included Japanese.

I was slowly losing all sense of the value of money and the concept of luxury. I thought back to the hustle and bustle of three-wheeled taxis in front of the supermarket I frequented in Sri Lanka and the 20-yen milk tea to try to balance things out in my mind. My old apartment in Takadanobaba probably fit somewhere in between there and this luxury guest room.

I checked to make sure there were no issues with the water and electricity, just like Richard had taught me, and finally took a seat on the couch. It was nice—but enough about the room. I started wondering what could be going on and if I could get a little more of an explanation as I began to doze off...

And then suddenly, it was midnight. I must've slept for over eight hours. Crap. If I couldn't get myself back to sleep, I was going to be in trouble tomorrow.

But then I remembered I forgot to ask Richard what room he was in.

I could contact him if he had his phone with him, and he did tell me not to leave the room. But surely he could forgive me if I went out to get some food. I took the elevator down to the first floor and poked my head into the 24-hour convenience store. I found some single-serving packets of cookies that you could find anywhere from Japan to the US, or even in Sri Lanka, as well as some sodas and energy drinks that weren't in the room fridge and some beef jerky that looked like it'd fill me up. I paid with my room key and headed out onto the

main “street” of the ship.

I thought I saw a familiar figure in the Irish pub just across from me, with blond hair and pale skin. Obviously, this wasn’t Japan, so people with those features weren’t exactly rare. But if my sensors were reacting, that meant there was a very high chance that this was, in fact, the most beautiful man in the world. I was very confident in how well my intuition in this particular area had been honed over the last year.

What had he been up to after telling me not to leave the room, anyway? I mean, the utter lack of explanation was pretty remarkable on its own. Could anyone really blame me for trying to get a few more details out of him? Maybe he’d found some good royal milk tea at the pub. Those were the thoughts running through my head as I quietly approached, plastic bag dangling from my arm.

“I was hoping you could help me.”

I paused when I heard that crisp English.

The clear liquid filling the tall glass on the counter was almost certainly water. And seeing someone with blond hair wrapping around the beautiful curve of the back of their head ordering water in a place like this made me confident that it was definitely Richard. I tried to employ the cocktail-party effect to listen in, but the low hum of the jazz in the background was too obtrusive. I took some pointless steps to the left and to the right, pretending the sign had caught my attention.

Richard seemed to be talking to someone. I could only see him from my vantage point, but he didn’t appear to be alone. Someone was next to him. I could just barely see a little shot glass on the counter, and it probably wasn’t full of water.

I could hear some more clear, crisp British English, just like Richard and Jeffrey used. The voice was somewhat lower and sharper sounding than Richard’s.

“It’s a little late for that. I’m done with you.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. You’re always so kind to me.”

“Make that ‘*was* always kind to you,’ please. Things are different now.”

“Maybe you think they are. You haven’t changed one bit.”

“I’m not joking. Being around you is nothing but hassle, hassle, hassle, and all without a moment’s rest. Unless you disagree, maybe you should consider adjusting your behavior a little.”

Richard went quiet. It was odd. It felt almost like I was listening to someone else who just happened to share his voice, even though the speaker’s intonation and word choice were definitely those of the jeweler I knew. Just who was Richard talking to? I wished my boss would be a little more honest with me, but no one would appreciate me butting into a situation like this all of a sudden.

After a pause, the beautiful man seemed to select his reply, almost like selecting a single sparkling gem from a velvet jewelry box.

“You really haven’t changed.”

The other man didn’t reply. The only sound filling the pub was the jazz music. It was stiflingly silent.

“Where are you?” the other asked. It seemed like I wasn’t the only one confused, because the person he asked didn’t respond. He sharply reiterated his question. “Your room number. Where is your room?”

“...Room 1128. What time?”

“I’ve got things to do, too, you know. It’ll depend on when I have a free moment. Is that acceptable to you?”

“I appreciate it,” Richard said, his voice full of sincerity. The man sighed in response.

“I don’t know how many times I’ve told you this before, but don’t get your hopes up too much. It just causes trouble.”

The man spat this at Richard and then seemed to leave. I was prepared for him to exit from where I was standing, but the establishment had two entrances. I guess he'd gone the other way. I should probably be grateful for that. Probably.

I hurriedly peered into the shop and saw Richard from behind. He was drinking his water. There weren't many other customers, and the few who were in there were all considerably older than him. No one seemed to be talking to him. From the way the two of them had been speaking, it probably wasn't hard for other people to guess that he'd rather be left alone.

But I wanted to talk to him. I wanted to hear him speak. I wanted to see his face. I wanted to look him in the eye and ask him if he was okay. I tried to, but —

Before I entered the pub, Richard sluggishly and rather haphazardly picked up his tall glass and knocked back about half of its contents before letting out a groan. He didn't move after that. I don't think I'd ever seen him drink like that in Shiseido Parlor before. No, he definitely had never done that in front of me.

I couldn't stand being there a second longer, so I hurried to the elevator without saying a word.

I returned to my room on the tenth floor and checked my phone, since I had nothing else to do. It was pitch-black outside my window but I didn't feel like sleeping at all. I didn't have any messages from Jeffrey or Saul. I felt like the entire world was ignoring me.

I'd been contacting my family back in Japan about twice a week. I decided against it for today. Mostly because I wasn't sure I could even explain what my situation was to myself.

“.....”

I knew I was getting preoccupied with things I didn't need to be thinking about, like who Richard was talking to earlier and what request Richard had made of him. The way they were talking, it sounded like they had some kind of

connection in the past, so just who was he? It was all stuff I didn't know the first thing about. I should probably play dumb next time I see him.

Though I was pretty sure that room 1128, which Richard had just told him about, was the room I'd initially been given when I checked in.

What on Earth was going on?

But spending too much time thinking about it would only make me regret it even more tomorrow. I decided I should try to sleep. Everything would be okay. I'm pretty tough to begin with, and I love getting a second round of sleep. Plus, tomorrow's the jewelry show. I'll get some good rest and help Richard out. I got a shower and shut my eyes. I wasn't sure if it was just lingering exhaustion from the lengthy plane ride, but I managed to fall asleep pretty quickly. I didn't dream though. Thankfully. I knew from experience that the kinds of dreams I tended to have in situations like this were the furthest thing from helpful.

■ Day 2 ■

I WAS TOLD THAT the session of the jewelry show aimed at dealers and press was at 1 p.m. I figured two hours would be plenty of time to get dressed and meet up with Richard, so I set my alarm for 10 a.m. But unfortunately my sleep was interrupted by my room phone. If only I could have slept just a little longer, then I would have gotten enough sleep.

“Are you up? It’s me. I have something I need to discuss with you. We should meet to talk strategy.”

“...Okay. I’ll be there in fifteen.”

When he realized he’d woken me up, Richard told me to take my time, but I hadn’t spent four years of college rolling out of bed fifteen minutes before I had to get to class for nothing. I rinsed off in the shower and threw some clothes on. A mere thirteen minutes later, I arrived at the designated spot—the lobby lounge.

Richard was wearing sunglasses, even though we were indoors, and he was reading a Japanese newspaper. It looked like he’d grabbed it from the free-to-take rack of periodicals. He was wearing some nondescript cream pants, a plain white shirt, and moccasins without any socks. His lips were in the shape of a straight line. His gorgeous aura was only at half intensity, but even that must have been enough, because people were still trying to snap photos of him from a distance.

I’d been thinking about this ever since I left Japan—had Richard decided to set up shop in Ginza specifically because Japan is known for having one of the least aggressive pickup cultures in the world? Maybe it was just a more comfortable place for him to exist in than Latin or North America.

“Sorry to keep you waiting! So you wanted to talk strategy, huh? Where to? We should head somewhere else.”

“You’re early. Would you like to eat, since you just got up?”

“...I’ll eat something later.”

Richard silently stood up and dragged me into a restaurant. The place seemed like it served unpretentious French food. It wasn't overly well lit, or too exposed, and it was practically empty. The biggest dining spot on the ship was the all-you-can-eat buffet, but Richard attracted so much attention that going in there would probably be next to impossible.

While I silently ate my salad and sandwich, Richard fiddled with his glass of mineral water. The way his fingers moved was graceful, but there was a prickly feeling of tension hanging in the air.

"Are you thinking a little more clearly now?"

"I was fine to begin with, like I said. I mean, I got to stay in a really nice room, after all."

"Well, I'm just glad you're doing all right, but you really don't need to force yourself."

"I wish you'd give me a little more credit. I can get along just fine speaking English now, too, you know."

"If you would indulge me, I'd prefer to speak in Japanese with you today. Do you remember the reason Saul found me so uniquely useful? It was because we could speak Japanese with each other in public and keep our conversations private."

I do remember that coming up before. Richard's lips arched into a smile, and he blinked slowly. The sparkle of his lashes seemed to make his eyes smolder.

"Well, even if people don't know *what* we're saying, they can still hear us. It's best not to get too complacent, and sometimes it can earn you some dirty looks, too."

I nodded. Richard gave me a "bravo"—I hadn't heard that one in ages—and then he switched back to Japanese, explaining everything while showing me a schedule of the day's events.

This was Gargantua's 100-year anniversary cruise. There was a jewelry show

aimed at dealers, as well as an exhibit to announce new pieces. It started at 1 p.m. and would include cocktails and light refreshments.

I asked him if we would both be attending.

Richard didn't say a word and just stared at me. I thought he might want a taste of this bizarrely delicious tomato, cheese, and salami sandwich, so I offered him a piece on a fork, but he completely ignored me. I guess that wasn't it.

And then he said, "Do you *want* to attend?"

I was bewildered. Was that really a question? I mean, an ultra-luxury jewelry exhibition was a rare opportunity for a novice jeweler like me to hone his eye. While my primary reason for coming here was because of that "Help Richard" email, my secondary reason was the jewels.

I told him that of course I wanted to come, if I could.

Richard looked at me and then pulled his eyes away.

"What's with that reaction? Would it be better if I didn't come?"

"I'm of two minds on that actually. On one hand, yes, I do think it might be better if you didn't attend, but on the other, I am inclined to agree with your perspective. Gargantua has a long history of demonstrating their skill for selecting the finest stones and their immaculate craftsmanship. As their 100-year anniversary celebration, there will be many pieces that you'll only be able to see at this exhibit. You should certainly take in every last detail."

Richard half-heartedly cut himself off at the end. The words "if you're up to it" seemed to be implicitly hidden at the end.

I pushed my omelet plate to the side and stared Richard right in the eye. The beautiful jeweler smiled back at me with a look of exhaustion on his face.

"Hey, are you sure you're okay? I know this is pretty rich coming from the guy who just crashed in on you unannounced, but, um...you don't exactly seem quite yourself."

“Well, of course I don’t. The me who fits in in Ginza and the me who fits in on a cruise in the waters off the shore of Miami should be vastly different people. But that’s exclusively with regard to what you see on the outside. On the inside, I’m still the very same me that you know.”

I hadn’t been referring to the way he was dressed or looked. But ignoring that for now, I told him his outfit today looked cool, like he was an undercover police officer on a mission, and he thanked me. I could understand why people kept wanting to take pictures of him. The thing I didn’t understand was why Richard didn’t want me going to that show. Or why he wasn’t explaining anything to me.

Richard remained silent, but for a moment, he had this expression on his face, like a mathematician struggling with a heretofore unknown equation. He glanced at me again, and then that same troubled look returned. What was it? I wish he’d just tell me.

“I think it would be fine if you attended, under one condition. Admittedly, I think you’ll find the condition rather onerous.”

Where was this coming from now? I’m the guy who moved from Japan to Sri Lanka to study gemstones. I’m well aware that recklessness isn’t anything to brag about, but how could a condition to attend a jewelry show that only lasts a few hours even compare? I can do anything, no question.

I said as much with a smile, but Richard’s expression didn’t lighten. I think it got even gloomier if anything. What was wrong? I was pretty sure he wasn’t seasick.

“Why don’t you try me? If it’s just something like not speaking a word of anything but the most polite English at the event, or not making eye contact with anyone, or anything like that, it’ll be a piece of cake.”

“I think you’ll find it a bit more difficult than that.”

“Come on, lay it on me. I can’t guarantee anything, but I’ll try my absolute best. I promise.”

“...Very well.”

“Can you promise...” Richard began.

Promise what?

“That no matter what happens, you will not try to help me.”

What?

Richard’s tone was deadly serious. His blue eyes were staring right back at me. I felt like I was going to be swallowed up by them. But this was no time to be thinking about silly things like that.

“...What’s that supposed to mean?”

I asked him if that meant that he was going to be in trouble during this cruise, and Richard just feigned ignorance and looked away. So he was. Or likely to be, at least.

Wasn’t the event just going to be a peaceful jewelry exhibition?

The wheels in my head started spinning at max speed. I mean, why was Richard here in the first place? What motive would a Ginza-based jeweler have to go on a Caribbean cruise? None of this stuff fit into Étranger’s usual price range. Plus, it didn’t seem like an event you proactively sought out. He wouldn’t have been able to come without one of those invitations like I got emailed to me. So then, who invited him? Who invited Richard onto this cruise? And why did Richard accept it? As far as I knew, he wasn’t the type of person who’d be enticed by a cruise or two.

Richard stared at me intently for a moment before looking away and covering his mouth like he was about to start laughing. What? There’s nothing laughable about my current mental state, you know.

“I imagine you’re going to have trouble keeping that promise.”

“It’s not about that. I don’t understand what you’re even asking me to do. What are you talking about? And what do you mean by ‘don’t try to help you’? Are you expecting to be in a situation where I would need to?”

Was that why I was here?

To help Richard?

I still wasn't fully confident that the person who had sent that email was actually Jeffrey. But just the thought of the kindest man I knew in the whole world possibly getting into some kind of trouble made me think I should probably throw all caution to the wind. I knew it sounded suspicious, but going seemed much better to me than knowing that someone I cared about deeply was in danger in some strange place.

Richard was still smiling as he raised his hand to attract the attention of one of the servers to order the top item off the dessert menu—key lime pie. And a water. The curly-haired young man smiled as he confirmed the order and started some small talk. He asked if Richard was here for work or for pleasure.

“Work? I see,” he replied when Richard answered. He probably wanted to get even a few extra seconds to admire Richard's face if he could manage it. I could tell what Richard was feeling from how tender his smile was with his sunglasses off.

“I'm sorry, but we were in the middle of a conversation,” I said with a smile that almost rudely told him to show some restraint. He seemed to get the message and left without a word. Thankfully.

“When did you learn to do that?”

“Huh?”

“The way you got him to leave. I see you've grown up a bit since I last saw you.”

“...Sorry, I know that was probably a little gross of me. Like, who the hell do I think I am?”

“You have nothing to apologize for. A smile is often your strongest weapon, and it can't hurt a fly.”

“You make it sound cool when you put it like that! Well, I dunno if that applies

to your smile—I think it’s got some pretty serious destructive power. Someone might miss a step going up the stairs because they couldn’t take their eyes off it, and—oh.”

I stopped myself and apologized. *Sorry for getting weird.*

I mean, it’s not like he chose to be born with that face. The way I put it made it sound like it was Richard’s fault or something. How rude and insensitive of me.

The beautiful man smiled softly and shrugged.

“I know.”

It was his usual tender voice. He didn’t mean he knew he was beautiful. He meant that he knew there was no malice behind my words. He was forgiving me in advance. It made me feel awful.

If you know me so well, then don’t make such unreasonable demands of me. You can tell me not to help you all you want, but there are some things certain people just aren’t cut out for.

Richard chuckled when he saw the fraught look on my face. I always thought he sounded a bit like a pigeon when he laughed like that.

“It looks like we’re in agreement. You won’t be able to adhere to my condition. Therefore, you should not attend the show.”

“...I just said I didn’t understand what you were talking about. But, you know, fine. You’re probably right. And you don’t seem willing to discuss what’s going on. Is this why you told me to stay in my room for the next six days yesterday? I guess I don’t have a choice, then. Maybe I’ll just sleep through the show or go to the pool or something. I hear there’s a water slide. But I’ll need you to lend me a swimsuit. Oh, I have to try the crab at the buffet, too. I’ve been looking forward to it since they told me about it in the lobby. Seems like there’s lots of fun stuff to do here.”

“Bullshit.”

The Japanese-accented English word was hurled right at me. Since when were we playing a card game? *And anyway, if you know I'm lying, just pretend you don't.*

Richard had told me not to go. I'd figured I could just sneak in, but I guess he wasn't going to stand for that, either. I announced to him that I was being deadly serious that, if he didn't tell me what was going to happen at that show, I would snatch the key lime pie he ordered straight off his plate, like an animal, and devour it right in front of him. But Richard just shrugged.

"Who knows? No one can say what the future holds. I can't predict what might happen."

"Please just stop it already. Didn't I tell you before that it wasn't fair that you get to worry so much about me, but you won't let me worry about you?"

"There's a time and a place for everything. And you really should not be here right now. Irresistible as the siren song of ultra-luxury jewelry might be, you really should not have come."

Those words, as pretty as a line from one of Shakespeare's plays, meant nothing to me. I calmly repeated that I wanted an explanation, and Richard just smiled. But he wasn't smiling at me. He was smiling at the young man who had come to deliver his pie. Richard looked as happy as a child as the curly-haired young man set his pie, heaped high with meringue, on the table and then left with a "bon appétit." Thin slices of lime were wrapped around the white mountain, almost like a chain of paper dolls. I'd finished my omelet and my plate was empty, but the last thing the server looked at was Richard's face.

"...What if I say it depends on the kind of help you might need? Like, what if I say I'll only help you if it's an emergency?"

"Are you even capable of making such a distinction?"

"I am. Just like I can tell the difference between garnet and andesine."

"We'll see about that."

He didn't seem willing to believe me. I guess that made sense. I didn't particularly believe myself. That said, I was glad Richard's tone wasn't all that severe.

As I gave him a gloomy look, uncertain of what to do, I saw the beautiful jeweler's smiling face beside the round window looking out onto the sea. What was it exactly that made his smile seem so much more defiant than it had earlier?

"You needn't worry. In speaking to you about this, I've already assumed that you'll try to follow and assist me in some manner or other. I am not your keeper. I cannot rob you of your free will. If you understand that, I would prefer it if you keep it down. Also, even I need sustenance... Hm, this is most impressive."

"...What kind of pie is that anyway?"

"It's a Floridian specialty made with key limes. It has two layers: the filling and the meringue, and it seems to be typical to garnish it with thin slices of lime. I haven't the faintest idea how it's made."

"Maybe I should order a slice."

"Be my guest," he said.

In no time at all, another slice of key lime pie arrived at the table—plus some water, of course. The eye-wateringly intense sweetness seemed to emphasize the cultural difference from inside my mouth. The flavor was that of lime and condensed milk. It didn't seem like it would be too hard to replicate, though I'd prefer to reduce the sugar content to be more health-conscious.

"...So, um."

"What?"

"I've been a little down in the dumps lately, but I feel like I'm recovering at a breakneck pace."

"Pathetic. Sri Lanka is a country with a rich dessert culture. When you return,

try to get out of the house a little more. Admittedly, Saul's laziness is rather inconvenient."

I was sure he knew that's not what I meant, but he still offered those hollow remarks. I didn't like it when he did that. I never told him as much, but I was confident that he knew that, too. As I gulped down my pie in silence, for some reason, Richard looked at me with a hint of sadness in his eyes. It probably wasn't the lime that had soured him.

"...Hey, Richard. What about this? If something seems like it's going to happen, why don't you stay in your room, and let me—"

"Seigi."

"I dunno, you could go with seasickness, or an injury, or maybe even the flu or something."

"Seigi," Richard repeated again. His voice wasn't quite the vast ocean. There were islands where one could find a foothold, but his lovely tones were telling me clearly that to start seeking those footholds would be useless.

The jeweler, whose beauty never faded no matter how many times I witnessed it, stopped eating his slice of pie and looked at me.

"I cannot rob you of your free will. However, I will say this: I want to see you spread your wings and step out into the world. I do not want to see you trip and fall into some petty little ditch. That is all I want."

"...So basically 'haste makes waste,' huh?"

"No need to overthink it. That said, perhaps... If you can manage it, only look at the jewels during the show. Only look at the wordless beauty of those crystals that the artisans worked tirelessly to create. I think you'll be able to enjoy yourself all the way through if you can do so."

And with that, Richard's fork dived back into his pie.

At 1 p.m., the jewelry show was being held in a large hall above the lobby,

which was just perfect for a party. Lavishly decorated corridors and rooms spread out like a European castle. White busts and draped curtains. They could probably hold a serious ball here. Banners featuring the company's logo hung from the ceiling, and chandeliers sparkled. Lounge chairs, champagne, and refreshments were set up against the wall. There were red-and-white flower - arrangements and, of course, security guards in suits.

Before you could get into the exhibition, you had to take off your watch and belt and take your phone out of your pockets to go through this weird gate. There were entrances on three sides of the room, but a line had formed because security was so tight. Although, just as I mentioned that, some people who looked like acquaintances of the higher-ups were let through, even with the gate sounding the alarm. I guess that was the power of connections.

If I were to compare it to my past experiences, the atmosphere at the event was similar to that auction in Tokyo, and the number of people was comparable to one of those job-hunting information sessions I'd attended, but the diversity in the faces of the people there was like nothing I'd experienced before. There was a roughly even split among white people, Asian people, and black people, though if I had to guess, there were probably slightly more Asian people. There was a dress code, so everyone was wearing suits or dresses. I was, of course, in compliance, too. The suit I was wearing today was actually a made-to-order one that Richard picked out for me in Ginza. Now that I thought about it, the first and only time I'd worn it before was to my college graduation. I never would have imagined the second time I'd be wearing it would be on a luxury cruise from Florida.

The room, which was protected by all those security gates, had a fixed route, kind of like a museum. And inside the showcases lining the walls was jewelry that glittered like the stars.

This was another thing Richard told me: Apparently, all the ultra-luxury jewelry companies, not just Gargantua, operated kind of like haute couture fashion houses. They settled on themes and motifs and spent a great length of

time producing pieces before making a grand presentation of their new work. Of course, each individual piece cost a tremendous amount, so they didn't put out seasonal collections, but it was all quite glamorous. There were all sorts of motifs in the pieces on display—fruits, fairy tales, constellations. Basically anything that might excite people.

I was a little nervous as a newbie with only a bit of knowledge to support me, but Gargantua's motif for this season was easy to understand:

Playing cards.

A card made of diamonds was on display in the first showcase. A rectangular platinum frame was packed full of white diamonds, with black onyx details marking the card as the ace of spades. I could tell it was supposed to be a ring from the barely there loop on the back, but I had no idea where you could go with something like that on your finger. Well, I guess I could see a TV star wearing it to get a reaction out of people. It didn't have a price tag on it, but it was hard to imagine it having less than seven zeroes. It was enough to make your head spin. And there were still twenty-four other showcases to go. The ring was titled "Playing Card." Each piece had a little card next to it with its title, just like you might see at an art museum.

In English, they're called playing cards, but in Japanese, we call them trumps. The four suits are spades, diamonds, clubs, and hearts. You could see the suit motifs throughout the exhibit.

I slowly moved along the cases at the sluggish pace of the crowd, feeling like I was at an art museum full of nothing but the most famous paintings.

The second case featured a bracelet design. The narrow metal band of the bracelet was full of melee diamonds in a pavé setting, and roughly every two centimeters around the band, there was a larger stone representing one of the four suits. The spades and clubs looked like onyx, and the diamonds and hearts looked to be garnet. The large marble hand in the case held three versions of the same bracelet, each with a different color of diamond set in the band—

white, pink, and yellow. White diamonds couldn't even begin to compare to the price of colored ones to begin with; it was hard to believe anyone was allowed to use so many in one piece like that. An absolute abuse of luxury. The woman walking next to me, who looked like some kind of magazine reporter or something, said she would want something like that.

The piece was titled "Aluette." Based on what she said to the person next to her, it seemed like the titles all came from different card games.

There was a rectangular brooch with all four suits made of metal, melting into one another like something out of a surrealist painting atop a card. The title was "Ombre." I think it goes without saying at this point that the white background of the card was packed full of tiny sparkling diamonds. I felt like I was losing my mind. I knew the gems were three dimensional objects, but I couldn't see the borders between each of the stones. I think I would have believed it if someone told me they had sorcerers in their employ.

The next piece was a choker with the suits delicately distorted or inverted dangling from it like Christmas tree ornaments. The title was "Gin Rummy." The choker itself featured a checkerboard pattern made up of onyx and diamond, and the suit charms seemed like they could be removed. It was cute. It looked like the sort of thing you might imagine a girl who was really into punk music wearing, if it weren't made of diamonds and gold.

And the pieces like that just kept coming.

I could hear gasps and sighs from all over the room.

All of the glittering gems were almost dizzying, but the lighting had been tuned so perfectly that the sparkle never looked vulgar.

As I looked at them all, all thoughts gradually left my head. It was almost like I was staring off into space.

Gems are minerals. They can't speak. It doesn't matter what language someone speaks, be it English, Japanese, or Sinhala—gems have the power to enchant people with their beauty. And what I was witnessing right here was like

a harem or an MMA ring full of those very same gemstones, which had been made by zealous craftspeople pouring their souls into their work to be even more beautiful, even more enchanting, even more magical. The *how* didn't matter. It didn't matter if it was Muay Thai or judo. Or if it's punk or elegant. All that mattered was winning—being beautiful. The metalwork, which was so exquisite that it seemed like it could have only been produced with magic, and the natural diamonds, which were so uniform and perfect that they looked almost mass-produced—all of it, combined with the jaw-dropping prices, made the people who could afford it think: *I want that.*

Because nothing else like it existed on Earth.

It made me realize a number of things about what the term *high-end* meant. It felt like going to visit the palace at Versailles and catching a glimpse of Marie Antionette inside, in her wig and dress, asking what treats were on the menu for the day. It was like peering into the lives of people who live in a completely different world. Every single gem was beautiful, which was crazy to think about, because unlike beads you could buy at the craft store, these were all products of nature.

The exhibit featured more than just jewelry, too. In one showcase in a commanding position, a screen showed a craftsperson's hands. No faces were in frame, but a video played for about two minutes, showing calloused fingers setting diamonds into the metal with tweezers and how the model was produced before the final piece was finished. Once the video ended, a brooch created by the craftsperson rose up into the case. It was a brooch with all four suits scattered over a fanciful playing card titled "Trick." What an elaborate display.

As I slowly walked in front of the cases, I finally made it to the final one.

This piece was treated differently from everything else in the exhibition. There was one singular item affixed to a transparent slab in a large cylindrical case, so you could view it from every angle.

It was a ring.

At the very end of the exhibition, like the finale act of the performance, was the piece of jewelry I'd seen on the banner when I boarded the ship: a ruby cut into the shape of a heart being embraced by a woman made of metal. She had slender yet shapely arms. Even the joints on her fingers, which were no bigger than toothpicks, and the backs of her hands were clearly depicted. The bridge of her nose rose prominently off her face. Long eyelashes extended from her softly closed lids, and there was a tiny smile on her lips as if she were dreaming and letting out a sigh. Her long, diamond-encrusted hair swirled into graceful curls. From a distance, she looked like she was being enveloped by a golden vortex. I was curious how much of the actual thing was scaled down from the banner, but it was much bigger than I had imagined.

It was titled "Queen of Hearts." Exactly the name you'd expect.

The smiling staff member standing next to the case explained that the ruby was a 50.42-carat stone from Mogok. Mogok was in Myanmar and is said to produce the finest rubies. Fifty carats is a little bigger than a quail egg. I'm pretty sure I had a heart-shaped caramel candy that size before. I could understand if it were an easier stone to find in relatively large carat sizes, like amethyst or aquamarine, but I'd never seen a ruby that big. And on top of the size, its clarity, color, and luster left absolutely nothing to be desired. It was a perfect, unsullied blood red. Saul had shown me a *fifteen*-carat ruby that was full of flaws, but this gem seemed like it had come out of a completely different dimension.

I was pretty sure that even a hundred million yen wouldn't be enough to buy something like that.

I quietly asked the staff member standing next to the columnar case what the number was. The answer was far beyond my wildest imagination: 3.2 million dollars. Let's try adding two zeroes—that's 320 million yen. I felt like laughing. "Three million dollars, seriously?" I marveled, and the staff member corrected me with a smile, "No, three point *two* million." But with or without that extra

\$200,000, your average person would never be able to buy something like that.

But they still made it.

Because it is beautiful.

And because this company, which was celebrating its 100th anniversary, knew that even if 99.9 percent of the world's population couldn't ever hope to afford it, a small number of people could, and they *would* invest their fortunes in it. It felt even more removed from reality than a fairy tale.

I decided to forget about the price for the moment and spend some more time looking at the ring again. The stone was immaculate, but the workmanship was also superb.

A massive ruby and a woman embracing it. At first, I had assumed that the woman was the “queen,” but the more I looked at the piece, the more certain I was that I'd been wrong. Surely the ruby, despite not being human, was the queen, and the woman was some kind of attendant, protecting the gem. I walked around the outside of the case, looking at it from all angles. The ring portion seemed to be designed to look like a continuation of the woman's hair. There were new surprises to be had from every angle. I was all too aware of how different living humans were from jewelry, but this piece was so seamlessly perfect that it reminded me of my boss. I really felt like I was viewing a painting or a sculpture—though the big difference between this display and an art museum's was that this place lacked the artists' names.

I internally gave a deep bow to the creators of the “Queen of Hearts” and the other pieces on display. I remembered the short video from earlier in the exhibit. There were the people who found the stones, the people who drew up the designs for them, the people who modeled them in 3D, the people who produced the physical models, the people who set the stones, the people who put on the finishing touches, and surely many, many more people who were somehow involved in their production. Stones passed through many hands before they became jewelry.

Beauty was just an idea, but human hands could give form to ideas. And this idea could reach someone like me who only just recently started to interact with and finally actually learn about gems, and move me so deeply that it made me want to scream. It was incredible. Truly incredible. And I was grateful for it. Grateful that I was given a chance to see a world that I never would have been able to see alone.

Deep in my heart, I felt glad that I had come, no matter what the circumstances were.

The line was starting to back up, so I moved into another room. The room adjoining the exhibition room was still pretty empty and had a buffet corner—it seemed to be used as a sort of break room. In the space connecting the rooms, counters were in the process of being set up with security standing guard as staff set up little pieces of jewelry. That seemed to be where the customer-oriented show would be doing most of its sales. I was pretty sure they'd get upset if I stared too long, so I hurried my way over to the buffet table.

I took a white plate with a roast chicken sandwich and Spanish-style omelet on it and turned down a glass of champagne before taking a seat on one of the lounge chairs. I could see the entire exhibition room from there. I noticed a commotion spreading through the crowd, but they weren't reacting to the jewelry. People were moving, startled when they looked up and saw something—it moved through the crowd like a ripple.

It was Richard.

He wasn't armed to the teeth in a tuxedo, like at the auction, but the beautiful man had made his appearance in a picture-perfect business suit. It was a black silk-satin suit, paired with a royal blue tie. I mean, who wouldn't be surprised if he suddenly showed up behind you? I think the only reason I wasn't hearing screams was because everyone was trying so hard to restrain themselves.

Richard had decided how we would behave during the show—namely, no

contact. I was to treat him like a total stranger. I was there to expand my knowledge of ultra-luxury jewelry, and Richard was there to meet with colleagues and exchange information. I could leave whenever I felt like it.

The vague instruction about not helping him never came up explicitly, but I'm not dumb enough to have not understood what his "You understand, yes?" reminder actually meant.

I still had no idea what was going to happen.

"My apologies for intruding while you're eating. Have you been enjoying the show?"

"Huh?"

I turned around to find a pair of sparkling blue eyes staring back at me from extremely close range. It startled me. The man's head and face were as smooth as a kewpie doll's, and he had sparse white stubble on his cheeks. He was wearing a white suit with a yellow-and-green geometric pattern. I think *eccentric* was the word I was looking for.

His face looked vaguely familiar. Was he in one of the ship's magazines? That's right—he was on Gargantua's board. The owner of this ship. His name was, um...crap. I couldn't remember. He wasn't wearing a name tag, either.

"Mr. Seiji Nakata. I know a conductor with the same name. His Mozart is incredible."

"Thank you very much, but it's actually Seigi. It does sound pretty similar, though," I said with a smile and offered him my business card. His name. What was his name? I never expected to end up in this situation.

The man—let's call him Mr. Gargantua for now—wrapped his hand around mine to shake it several times as he nodded, before saying something utterly bizarre with a smile still on his face.

"Mind if I steal something off your plate? I'd like to get a sense of your taste."

What?

He wanted to try some of the sandwich and omelet I'd gotten from the buffet? But, I mean, it was right there, and he could get as much as he wanted...

It was difficult to assess the situation. Was this a company executive trying to do me a favor or something? Like, you know, some corporate big shot spending some of his precious time with someone who is obviously a low-ranking grunt? Maybe that's a thing in America. You know, because it is the country of freedom and equality and all that. I suggested he try the sandwich and cut off a piece of it with my fork to offer to him, and for some reason, Mr. Gargantua opened his mouth wide and laughed.

Other people nearby looked at me, bewildered. Don't look at me! I'm just as confused as you all. Some Gargantua employees even looked over with concern, but they politely ignored me. Their stiff expressions were all telling me that they were in no position to criticize him. It seemed like they had it pretty rough.

The man, who looked to be over sixty and had a pinkish hue to his skin, chewed the piece of chicken sandwich for a disconcertingly long time as he savored it, before a smile appeared on his lips. What? I don't think I like the look of that smile very much.

"Hm, yes, very delicious. Thank you, Seiji. You really were the right choice after all. We seem to have similar taste in food."

I tried to think about what he meant before correcting him about my name again. Our taste in food? Was that some English idiom I wasn't familiar with? I'd have to look it up on my phone later. But I had something to do first.

"...I'm sorry, do you mind if I ask your name? I can't seem to remember it."

That was the number one question a student looking for a job should absolutely *never* ask a company president. You'd probably get an answer, but a rejection email for not doing enough research was all but a certainty at that point. But the man in the geometric-patterned suit opened his eyes wide and laughed heartily. It was almost like he took it as some kind of challenge.

“Amin Karlsbrook. Good lord, it has been ages since I’ve had to introduce myself. My grandfather founded Gargantua, and its current CEO is my son. Welcome to our exhibition. I didn’t think you’d actually show up.”

Now I was really confused. I was just an apprentice jeweler. I was probably the person who mattered the least in the room. So why have I attracted the attention of the one person whose attention everyone wants? Oh no.

None of the people in the area seemed particularly keen on attracting Mr. Karlsbrook’s attention. They were just going about their work as if nothing was happening at all—looking at jewelry, setting things up, talking sales, et cetera.

I started to wonder if maybe he was just lonely because he didn’t get along well with his family or employees or something, and he looked at me and smiled. I *really* didn’t like that smile of his.

“You’re welcome to leave if you want, I won’t mind. You might be doing your reputation a favor.”

I had no idea what to do. The only thing that made any sense was that I had serious issues with my listening skills. “Sorry, what do you mean by that?” I replied, tilting my head to the side.

He just chuckled before handing me his empty champagne glass and leaving without saying another word.

Was that his idea of welcoming a newcomer? It really didn’t feel like it. I decided to try asking someone about it. I stopped a random Asian guest and we had the standard “Oh, are you Chinese?” “No, Japanese,” exchange, and I explained the bizarre encounter I’d just had. He was the CEO of a Singaporean jewelry company. He had a heavy accent, but he used simple expressions, making himself easy to understand.

“Amin is, well...think about him like the CEO of a Japanese company during the height of the bubble economy. And he was always much sharper than his father, so he probably prides himself on having built the foundation of the brand as it stands now. He’s the kind of person who’s used to doing everything

himself, and when the economy was in better shape, he really could do it all. Apparently, he's still involved in the company's management, but not as much as he had been in the past. I think he was probably just enjoying pretending things were like the good old days."

"Wait, you guys know about Japan's bubble economy era in Singapore?"

"Of course we do. We get all the popular Japanese TV shows, after all."

The sunburnt CEO exchanged business cards with me and went "Oh, a Sri Lankan company," and nodded several times with a smile. "Interesting. I've seen Japanese companies employing Sri Lankans, but not usually the reverse."

"I'm working for a pretty interesting company. I'm still apprenticing, but I've learned so much already."

"I see they're taking a lot of care in training you, huh? Oh, to be young again. Well, do take care regardless—this is true in any industry, but it's not all sunshine and roses, you know." He gestured behind him with his chin.

Right toward where Mr. Karlsbrook was standing. And next to him was—

"What's wrong?"

His voice sounded so far away. I was so stunned, I couldn't respond at all.

The person standing next to Mr. Karlsbrook was a man I knew very well.

It was Richard. It was a bit odd. I'd never seen him serving a customer quite that close before. I knew from how close they were standing that he probably wasn't interacting with him as a customer, but my brain refused to accept it.

Mr. Karlsbrook was standing on Richard's right side, and the left arm of his very loud suit was wrapped around the waist of Richard's black one. The hand on his waist occasionally slid about, stroking the shirt peeking out from under the vent in his jacket. Mr. Karlsbrook would watch Richard's reaction when he did this. He certainly didn't look so drunk that he couldn't stand without support. It was strange, I felt like my back was on fire. It made me wonder if this was what werewolves felt like on nights with a full moon. I felt as though I was

about to lose myself.

What the hell was that old geezer doing?

No, I knew what he was doing. Of course I did. He was just touching something he wanted to touch. Like a child too young to understand the concept of manners, following its primal instincts to grab food off a plate with its hands and ferry it to its mouth.

I knew that. I did, but I didn't know *why* he was doing it.

And what was with that expression? Why was he staring at my boss at point-blank range like a snake coiling around its prey? He'd gotten right up in my face, too, so maybe he just had bad eyesight. If that was the case, I hope someone brought him his glasses soon. No, that's obviously not it, either. He clearly just wanted to look at Richard's face up close.

And no one was stopping him.

I was so confused by the atmosphere in the room, it was like people were just acting like this was something that happened or they weren't bothered by it. The showcases were full of beautiful pieces of jewelry, so no one was in want of something to distract themselves with when they wanted to look away. The diamonds sparkled, the onyx gleamed, and my boss was getting sexually harassed.

What even was this?

I didn't understand it at all.

The Singaporean CEO smiled awkwardly as I froze next to him.

"I mean, who is that guy anyway? All eyes have been on him since he entered the room, but I don't think he works for Gargantua. If you ask me, he's a little too eye-catching to be working in this industry, but I guess no one else has that kind of aura about them..."

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean by 'that kind of aura.' I don't think he was born with such an 'eye-catching' face because he wanted to be, either."

“Oh, uh, is he a friend of yours? You’re so normal-looking. Sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it. Bye,” he said and left, quickly finding another person to talk to in rapid-fire English.

I wasn’t even remotely concerned about that. Richard was dealing with Mr. Karlsbrook as he walked, but the place was so crowded that they were moving at a snail’s pace. I set my empty plate down and got closer, but Richard had, in the space of just a few meters, changed the direction he was walking for no apparent reason twice and casually brushed the arm away from his waist, but Mr. Karlsbrook kept up with him and wrapped his arm back around him. I felt like my fingers were about to turn into claws at any moment. I mean, seriously, what? Was there anything inside that balding head of his? I wondered what I’d find if I cracked it open and took a look. But while I was distracted thinking about that—

“Ah!”

“My apologies.”

Someone stepped on my foot, apparently. I barely felt it. I heard them apologize from behind me, but only their tone was polite. Maybe I should have thanked them for the misstep, because if they hadn’t stepped on my foot, I might have just grabbed the champagne bucket nearby. It was full of ice, so it seemed like it could have a lot of very practical uses while someone I cared about was being treated very poorly. For example, I could dump it over a certain someone who could really stand to cool their head. But if I had actually done that it’d be over for me; I wouldn’t be getting off easy from that.

He told me not to help him, but—

Richard had refused to tell me what kind of situation he had been anticipating. I hate to even think about it, but if I had been in his position, I probably wouldn’t have wanted to explain, either. But it did mean that Richard had expected this, and he had the foresight to ask me not to intervene.

Everyone was ignoring Richard and Mr. Karlsbrook. I wanted to let everyone

know—in Japanese, English, and with fervent body language—that somebody was in trouble, but no one would react, almost like they had a spell cast on them to make certain people invisible to them. Just why? Seriously, why? This ship's name was Utopia on the Sea, but it was more like hell if you asked me. I had gotten closer than I should have, so I could hear things that I really didn't want to hear. Mr. Karlsbrook was speaking in a mellower, more restrained tone than he had used with me.

“I was reading a book recently, and it said something rather interesting: ‘Useful, helpful tools are the product of God, while dangerous things of beauty are products of the devil.’ I don't think there is any other piece of art born of such devilish magic as you. The last time we saw each other was at the Royal Opera House, wasn't it? You were so beautiful, you stole my breath away. How is it that you've grown even more beautiful since?”

“I'm truly honored that you thought to invite me to this centennial celebration. I merely wanted to pay my respects, so please, don't trouble yourself over me.”

“Don't be ridiculous. I *want* to trouble myself over you. I'm grateful for the miracle that is this evening. Have any of them caught your eye? Any of them you'd like to try on? They were all designed with female customers in mind, but ultimately, beauty is unisex. A beautiful object is a beautiful object, no matter who is wearing it. The real question is whether the person clad in that beautiful item is worthy of its beauty. I love beautiful things. I want beautiful things. I don't want anything *but* beautiful things. And in that respect, nothing could be more desirable to a collector like myself than you.”

Mr. Karlsbrook looked happy, but not in the way you might be happy to reunite with someone you hadn't seen in a long time. It was the face of a five-year-old child in a toy store around Christmas. It was a look of materialistic greed. English words that I'd worked hard to learn but assumed I'd never have to actually use in real life started floating to the forefront of my mind, translating all those terrible words. It was torture.

I kept reminding myself to keep my cool. Jeffrey had introduced me to a doctor from Tokyo after the awfulness in my third year of college that made me want to forget everything. I learned that anger can be controlled, and that this was something they were starting to teach kids from a young age in America. Don't lose your cool. Anger won't solve anything. Calm down and use your brain.

Maybe I could interrupt. Would that count as helping? It might. I mean, what if, hypothetically, Ranasinghe Jewelry owed Mr. Karlsbrook an immense sum of money that I wasn't privy to? I could be single-handedly destroying the company if I made the wrong move. The logical part of my brain was shouting at me that there was no way a literal noble would be indebted to anyone, but I couldn't come up with a more persuasive argument. My heart was screaming at me, saying that I should just cut in or just say *something* already and that they'd probably just glare at me and wonder what my problem was. But I had to consider every possibility before I acted.

Richard had turned away from him, but Mr. Karlsbrook was not so easily discouraged. Stop. Just stop, you're being rude. Even children know better. But he couldn't hear my thoughts. So he wouldn't stop, and no one would stop him.

Just as a burning something began to well up from the pit of my stomach and I felt myself about to lose control—

Richard caught my eye.

I wasn't expecting his reaction. I guess I must've been making a horrible face, because for just a brief moment, the beautiful man looked like he was about to burst out laughing before catching himself and politely covering his mouth. He smiled. Richard smiled. I was actually relieved. If he'd looked at me for help, I was pretty sure I was going to run headlong down the champagne bucket route, even if it meant being thrown from the boat. It seemed like he still had things more or less under control.

I caught my breath for a moment, but I wasn't particularly happy about the

situation at all.

But also why wasn't Richard escaping? He could just run right out of the exhibition hall. Why was he giving this good-for-nothing bigwig the time of day? Did he *have to* for some reason? Is that why he told me not to help him? But why? What could compel him to do something like that? It didn't make any sense.

But despite all that, I couldn't leave. I just couldn't. I'd rather dump all the buckets of ice on the buffet table over my head than abandon Richard right now.

I braced myself against one of the tables by the wall and started hitting myself in the forehead about once every two seconds. I was acting crazy. The people walking past were glaring at me like there was something wrong with me. Don't worry, I think there's something wrong with me, too. I'm sorry. But this is the only way I can cool my head. If I didn't do something, it'd only be a matter of time before security dragged me out of the event. But I didn't know what else to do. I hoped they'd just assume I'd had too much to drink.

I looked over at Richard. Mr. Karlsbrook was still following him. No one was helping. I couldn't stand the way he had his arm around his waist, pulling him closer to him. It felt like just opening my eyes was grating down my soul.

Still? He's still going? My patience was going to run out before he stopped.

We locked eyes briefly every minute or two. Richard's blue eyes weren't sending me SOS messages but rather pickoff signals, to use a baseball term. I couldn't do anything with eye contact alone. As a last resort, I decided to try one of the games I used to play with my buddies in college at parties. Whoever was "it" would be tasked with making whoever looked at them laugh by making a funny face, and whoever did laugh was the next "it." And at the end of the night, whoever was "it" last would have to pay the remainder when we split the bill. It really was the kind of game only stupid college boys would play, but I hadn't survived all that nonsense without anything to show for it. I had a vast

repertoire of funny faces to choose from.

I knew it wasn't really something I should be doing in my current position, but I was getting desperate. If I didn't do something, I was going to turn into a monster who no one was going to be laughing at.

The first two times I tried it, Richard pretended he didn't see anything. Maybe he just didn't understand what I was doing. But the third time, he seemed to get it. The fourth time, he shot me a look for just a moment telling me to stop, but I didn't relent. I had no way of knowing if it was coming across: my twisted desire to make him suffer the way he was making me suffer.

On my sixth attempt, I finally got the beautiful man's shoulders to tremble. Mr. Karlsbrook looked puzzled.

"Is something the matter?"

"No, it's nothing."

The seventh time, the jeweler was forced to cover his mouth and cough a few times to stifle his laughter. Mr. Karlsbrook finally noticed that the attention of the person he was with had been captured by something else and started looking around to find the source. His left arm left Richard's waist. This was probably it.

"Ooh! There are dolphins jumping out of the water over there!"

Voices asking, "Really?!" rose here and there throughout the crowd. I pointed and waved toward the gate, unsure of whether there even were windows over there, repeating, "Over there! Over there!"

Someone who looked pretty drunk went over to see, and thankfully, there really were windows on the other side of the beautifully draped curtains with an unbroken view of the sea. Just then, the shadow of a small boat or something like that crossed into view. Just as some not-particularly-detail-oriented people started saying, "It's true!" I took the opportunity to move across the exhibit as fast as I could.

I slipped behind Richard, between him and a certain someone who had been trying to stick to him like glue, and pushed Richard out of the room with the same force as if I were pushing a shopping cart through the grocery store. I hoped it didn't stand out too much.

I looked back at the last moment to check if anyone was giving chase, in case we needed to run, but thankfully, no one did.

The weird thing was that the old man in the patterned suit looked at me and smiled.

He was just looking at *me* the whole time.

I didn't like the look on his face. I couldn't tell you why. He didn't seem like he was going to follow us. I didn't even smile back, I just turned away from him and kept walking out into the hall toward the deck.

"Uhh."

"Seigi."

"Uhhhhh..."

"Take a deep breath."

"Uuuh..."

"One more..."

"Haa..."

"And again."

"I'm doing it. Just, gimme a minute... Ahh..."

Breathing isn't *just* a physiological phenomenon. It's a lot like drawing water from a well. You send a bucket down a long, dark hole, scoop up something you can't really see in the depths of that darkness, and bring it outside. You aren't just letting out CO₂, but little bits of all of the absurdities of the world and incomprehensible anguish to neutralize it in the atmosphere. I think that's why people breathe. Just like I was right now.

The second-story deck, full of tropical sunshine, was structured similarly to the one on the first floor where I'd been wandering around yesterday, but it was a little wider and featured lounge chairs for sunbathing and parasols, too. If the right to relax in a place like this was also bought and paid for by Mr. Karlsbrook, I'd like to humbly request to hop on a lifeboat and return to port. The logical part of my brain was calmly reminding me that doing that would only lead to an accident at sea, but I still hadn't completely calmed down yet.

I sat down on one of the lounges no one was lying on and began to massage my temples like an office worker who'd had a little too much to drink after work. A certain somebody took a seat next to me, gently patting me on the back. *Oh, just stop it, please.* It should be the other way around.

"What the hell? How can you deal with that? I mean, what?"

"What do you mean 'what'? Of course that sort of thing happens."

"...I—I need a minute to remember how to say things in Japanese. I can't talk yet."

"English is just fine."

"Thank you very much," I replied in a heavy Japanese accent, and Richard chuckled again. I could feel my mind slowly returning to its rightful place every time I heard his little laughs. I was feeling increasingly at a loss as to what to do with myself. I needed to calm down, and I needed to concentrate on Richard.

The beautiful man was looking at me, his expression faintly troubled but with a slightly strained smile still on his face. It made me feel terrible.

"...Why did you have to come to this place all alone? Explain it to me."

"Amin is a distant relative of mine. I've met him a handful of times in the past. I was personally invited on this cruise through my family. He knew that I was working in the jewelry industry and personally invited me for the centennial—and because he wanted to see me again. I would have declined if it had been an option."

“That’s not what I’m talking about. Couldn’t you have just said hi and left?”

Richard shrugged. He’d been ordered to thank Mr. Karlsbrook for assisting with the recent family troubles. Richard neglected to mention who had given him that order, which was probably the right call, because I wasn’t sure what I’d do if I knew who was so willing to flippantly offer Richard up like a gift. But more importantly—

“That old man knew who I was. Was I invited all along or something?”

I stopped before adding, “But you decided not to tell me,” but I was pretty sure my tone got the message across. Without a moment’s pause for remorse, Richard began to speak.

“It’s unclear precisely how he got his hands on information regarding Étranger’s employees, but it is true that an invitation addressed to you also appeared in my mailbox. I imagine the intention was to suggest I bring you along with me, but the accommodations had us sharing a single room. Personally, I prefer separate rooms when traveling, even with people I’m quite intimate with. Hence yesterday’s rather hasty arrangements.”

“Uuuh...”

“Take a deep breath. In addition to his morality being frozen twenty years in the past, I think he may have gotten a bit worse ever since he took a step back from management. It must be rough for his daughter. I decided not to extend the invitation to you on the off chance some sort of situation arose. There is nowhere to run out on the ocean like this. And there was no pressing need to have you at the show. I determined that it would be best if you didn’t know about the event at all, and I kept quiet. Have I done something wrong?”

“...You haven’t. Not to me.”

Not to me.

Richard smiled faintly, as if ladling out all the meaning imbued in the words he said and those he did not. He wasn’t saying that he was used to being treated

this way. If I had to interpret, it was probably closer to thanking me for worrying about him. It was awful, but I needed to calm down.

I took a deep breath and let it out. I wasn't a werewolf. I had returned to my normal self: Seigi Nakata. I had taken back control.

"...I still don't know who sent me that email, but I'm glad I could come."

"Oh, do you enjoy laughing at my discomfort that much?"

"No. It's just that if I hadn't come, you'd never have said a word about any of this to me. So I'm glad I came. But, man, I guess hell really does exist, huh? I just don't get it. Why was everyone pretending they didn't see what was going on? What the hell??"

Richard announced in English, "In most cases, men willingly believe what they wish to be true." I was pretty sure that was a quote from an ancient Roman general. I remembered Professor Richard teaching it to me in one of our English conversation sessions. It seemed like a good phrase to sum up how people have the ability to pretend no one needs their help when helping that person might put them in harm's way. I bet I've done it myself, too. I'm sure I have that sort of filter that allows me to just go, "Well, there's nothing I can do about it," without even thinking about it. But that filter doesn't work very well when the person being harmed was someone I care about.

"I quite enjoyed myself."

"Y—you what?"

"Don't get the wrong idea. I'm saying I quite enjoyed the funny faces you were making to get me to laugh."

He added that he did *not* enjoy anything else. But from the way he had said it, I realized something that I had vaguely understood but didn't want to know:

That this was a frequent occurrence.

This was a frequent occurrence for this man, who had lived nearly thirty years of his life with that face.

For the most beautiful man in the world, as far as I knew, with a figure that could turn heads, with that gleaming golden hair, with those unforgettable blue eyes, with that smile more tender than anyone else's—

—this sort of thing happened often.

And the thing about being a person with such captivating features is that, even if he's obviously in an awful situation at a glance, the initial reaction of anyone who doesn't know him well is going to be "I wonder what kind of guy he is," and not "I need to help him."

It made me feel like dying.

"Uuuh..."

"Are you trying to give yourself a heart attack? Take a deep breath."

"Just stop, please. You really don't need to worry about me."

"Let me turn that around on you: Can you imagine me *not* worrying about you in this situation?"

"...No."

"Exactly. Why don't I get you some water?"

"...No, I'm fine. I think I've mostly snapped out of it. Just, let me ask you something: You don't need to go back into that hall again, right? Whatever you have left to do, one of us—it doesn't matter if it's me or you—can handle it alone, right?"

"My 'obligations' are largely discharged at this point. I intend to spend the rest of the trip in my room reading."

I pumped my fist. It was the most refreshing feeling I'd felt in the past hour or so. If Richard could push his remaining troubles onto me for the next four days, I'd do it happily. Actually, I should make him some tea—and bring him some key lime pie, even if he didn't ask me for it.

It felt all the more unsettling, how saturated the news the world over was

with incidents like this, though. It was all too easy to imagine the suffering of their victims, but I had to wonder if the perpetrators of sexual harassment ever considered how their behavior hurt the people who cared about their victims, too. I was always a little terrified to talk to Kumara, Saul's devout Buddhist housekeeper, because of how closely she kept to Buddhist teachings, but it made me wonder what these people thought they'd be reincarnated as in the next life.

"Just reading could get a little boring, so you might wanna take advantage of the fitness equipment in the room. I was surprised to discover that mine had a treadmill and a punching bag."

"Then maybe we should switch rooms. My room has a bench pre—oh, would you look at that, a certain good-for-nothing parasite is calling. It certainly took him long enough."

In other words: Jeffrey. The call had come in right as Richard had turned his phone back on after having turned it off for the exhibition. I hurriedly pulled my own phone out. Maybe I'd gotten a text or something.

"Hello."

"Hey, it's Jeffrey. Man, wow, I was like, just speaking French a second ago, but now I'm speaking Japanese. I'm so international!"

"Get to the point."

"Sorry. I got a message from Seigi, but I'm talking to you because I thought I should go to you first. Are you on the boat right now? I dunno if I'm too late already, but do not, under any circumstances, let him go to the jewelry show. I heard that Gargantua's number two was in a big fight with Amin, but a real bombshell might be about to go off. Have you gotten in touch yet? Did I catch you in time?"

"...Jeff."

"Oh, I'm guessing from your tone that that's a no. You're cursing me, I can feel

it. He's there, isn't he?"

I heard Jeffrey mumble, "Oh, God." What on Earth was going on?

"All right, let's shift strategies. Could you put Seigi on?"

"I'll put you on speaker, so feel free to continue."

"Got it. I'm so sorry, buddy. I'm actually still in the middle of a meeting, so it'll be difficult for me to contact you again for a while, but I'm still looking into the particulars of the situation you told me about. I don't know who sent you that email, but it wasn't me. You might be in a bit of trouble right now, but my little brother and I are gonna help you out, so don't give up. It's all gonna be all right. Okay, Richard, you handle things for now."

Richard scolded him, demanding some more specifics, but Jeffrey just hung up saying something about information leaks. Leaks? So if those emails weren't from Jeffrey, who had sent them? Someone else knew my passport number and sent me those emails pretending to be Jeffrey. Who could it be, and why would they do that?

And why *me*, of all people?

Baffled by that hurricane of a phone call, I exchanged looks with Richard, and the beautiful jeweler's expression abruptly darkened. Someone must've been standing behind me. I looked back, and there was a man in a suit and three men in navy blue uniforms wearing what appeared to be bulletproof vests. They were all looking at me with terrifying expressions. *I would really like to know what the hell is going on.*

"What is it? Can I help you with something?"

"I'm with Gargantua. You may call me Mr. Krueger. I apologize for interrupting, but I have a few questions for the young man over there."

I remembered who he was—he was a Gargantua employee and the one who told me the 3.2-million-dollar price. But why was he here?

His gentle expression from back at the show had disappeared, and he urged

me to stand up with his severe gaze. As I did so, the three men behind him surrounded me. Richard tried to step between us, but Mr. Krueger whispered something to him in rapid-fire English. All I could pick up was Richard saying that he thought it was ridiculous, but the men patting me down seemed to find something in the meantime.

It was in the right pocket of my suit jacket.

A white-gloved hand pulled something out of the spot that should have had nothing but a handkerchief in it.

“Is this it?” one of the guards asked Mr. Krueger. All of them were wearing gloves. I guess they didn’t want to touch whatever it was with their bare hands.

The thing they pulled out of my pocket was an unmistakable heart-shaped object. Something sparkled in the middle of a whirlpool of gold. Waves of blond hair and a gemstone. It was probably a ruby. It must have been about one carat. The ring was a muted gold and studded with diamonds. Yeah, it looked like a miniature version of...

...the Queen of Hearts.

A beautiful woman holding a heart-shaped gem with her eyes closed and a smile on her face.

To me, it looked like she was holding my own heart in her hands.

There was, as you might expect on such a large ship, a security office. It was like another world beyond the staff-only door in the first-floor lobby. I’d been expecting an office full of guards, like at a supermarket to catch shoplifters, but what awaited me looked more like a secret base. There was a line of small TVs displaying security camera footage—not that I could really see much, because of the reflections. A square table sat in the middle of the room surrounded by folding chairs, in the back on the right was a grey door with a small square window in it, and on the left was some kind of electrical equipment or

something, but that was it. The five people in the room all had serious looks on their faces as they rushed about. The walls were painted grey and the floor was covered in grey tile. I took a seat in one of the chairs in the middle of the room, surrounded on all sides by guards.

Mr. Krueger sat down in front of me like an interrogator and started by taking photos of the piece of jewelry that had been retrieved from my pocket from every angle. It seemed like he was checking it for damage. And because everyone else who'd handled it had gloves on, he was probably checking it for fingerprints, too. The beautiful queen was stowed away in a plastic bag, and then finally he looked at me.

"I do appreciate you joining me here. I must apologize, but I am deeply perplexed by this situation."

He then asked me to explain how, exactly, a forty-two-thousand-dollar—so about 4.5 million yen—piece of jewelry ended up in my pocket.

If anyone needed that explained, it was me. I didn't understand what was going on. Something I'd never seen before had just appeared in my pocket without my noticing. But judging from the way he and the guards standing behind me were carrying themselves, he wasn't looking for an "explanation" so much as a confession.

This really wasn't funny. I would never do something like that. I had my ear talked off about what might happen to me if I wasn't careful about maintaining control of my belongings before I went overseas. Like how, if a stranger asks you to carry a package for them at the airport, you should turn them down and run away because you might get suckered into some drug trafficking ring.

This happened not at the airport or some sketchy station but right in the middle of a lavish party—who could have even imagined someone might slip what may as well be a miniature bomb into your pocket in a place like that? Sitting on the table before me in a small plastic bag was the most beautiful bomb in the world, made of ruby, diamond, and gold. A bomb that was about to

blow me up with false charges.

“I don’t know how to explain it because I don’t know anything about it. I’ve never even touched that ring before. It just appeared in my pocket. I haven’t done anything.”

Mr. Krueger had an indecipherable look on his face. He seemed vaguely annoyed, and also like he had been granted permission to speak a little less politely. But just as the situation felt like it was about to get questionable, someone spoke up from behind me.

“Excuse me, where exactly was this piece on display in the exhibition? I can’t seem to place it.”

“This is a miniature reproduction of this season’s centerpiece: ‘The Queen of Hearts.’ While the workmanship can’t compare to the original piece, fifteen serialized pieces were produced, all fine products of the Gargantua brand. They were never intended for individual sale but as novelties offered to customers who make purchases of other jewelry pieces, which were meant to be unveiled at the show today.”

Mr. Krueger added matter-of-factly that they were going to be put on display in the show space. I guess it must’ve been that area where they were still setting up. Richard nodded and continued.

“With all due respect, he and I were together the entire time during the industry show, and he never made any suspicious moves during that time. Additionally, it would require some rather impossible sleight of hand to slip such an expensive piece into one’s pocket in the middle of the centennial celebration of the world-renowned Gargantua.”

Richard...

I told him I would be fine on my own, but he came along like it was only natural. One aggressive syllable at a time, he said everything I wanted to say. The only thing in that room that was even in reach of attendees was the all-you-can-eat buffet. The beautiful jewelry was all strictly controlled and kept behind

glass. Not even company employees could just pick it up. Even with an industry badge, it's not like that entitled you to just touch the stuff.

That said, the sales area was still being set up. So what if—and now, I don't think it's likely, since there were security guards watching, but!—just what if, by some miracle, someone waited for just the moment no one was looking and was bold enough to snatch a high-end piece of jewelry with a serial number on it? It'd be like a million times harder than getting through the crossing in front of Shinjuku Station at a full sprint without so much as brushing up against another person.

But the real issue was the fact that the miniature queen had ended up in my pocket.

I fell silent, unable to even comprehend the situation I was in yet, when there came a knock at the door. Mr. Krueger, not one of the security guards, got up and opened the door behind me. I had a bad feeling about this. I turned around to look at the door.

And the person who entered was a man in a loud, geometric-patterned suit. It was Mr. Karlsbrook.

Richard firmly grasped my shoulders as my anger started to bubble, as if to say, "Control yourself." The way Mr. Karlsbrook completely ignored me and approached Richard, I might as well have been air.

"I heard there was some kind of problem, but I never imagined you'd be in the middle of it. Just what do we have here? Would you be willing to enlighten me about what's happened?"

"There seems to have been some sort of misunderstanding that resulted in one of Gargantua's products finding its way into my employee's pocket."

"Jewelry isn't just a 'product.' It's as foolish a descriptor as calling you merely 'handsome' would be. Jewelry isn't a product or even just a gemstone—it's a much bigger, more beautiful, more precious thing. Especially the jewelry Gargantua creates. Just like your beautiful face must be the product of

something divine.”

“Semantics have very little to do with our present predicament. But on a different note, what brings you here? Isn’t the show still going on?”

“You really shouldn’t have left in such a hurry. Why do you think I’m even on this ship? I came because I wanted to see you. I believe *our* is the wrong word to use there, by the way. *He’s* the one in trouble right now, not you.”

“My employee’s problems are my problems, too.”

“What a charmed life you live. Krueger, explain yourself.”

Mr. Krueger bowed, blatantly avoiding his gaze, before giving a rundown of the current situation. I guess he was the head of Gargantua’s security or something.

During one of the checks to ensure all the jewelry was where it was supposed to be, which they performed every five minutes, Mr. Krueger received a report that one of the miniature queens had disappeared from the sales space.

It shouldn’t have been possible for it to disappear like that, but it did. They didn’t relay the information throughout the venue so as to not cause an uproar, but they quickly checked the security footage and found out who had come in contact with the counter just before the piece disappeared. And I guess I was one of those people. They also witnessed me loitering in one spot right afterward and behaving suspiciously.

Mr. Krueger immediately went to hunt me down with the ship’s security and safely secured me, leading to the current situation.

But like I said, I didn’t steal anything.

I asked to see the security footage for myself. I wanted to know if it was true. Besides, there was a good chance it would have caught the villain who slipped the thing into my pocket. But Mr. Krueger didn’t seem interested. Did he not understand what kind of situation I was in right now? I was being accused of stealing extremely high-end jewelry. I was never going to confess to something I

didn't do. I could never admit to something that would tear my grandma's dignity, Hiromi's pride, Mr. Nakata's trust, and Richard's expectations of me to shreds in one fell swoop. Because I didn't do it.

As I tried to explain myself, Mr. Karlsbrook let out a little sigh.

"Well, he looks young, and he's a new employee. It's difficult to know precisely where someone is and what they're doing even if you're very intimate with one another."

"An insult to my employee is an insult to me. Even the circumstantial evidence is flimsy at best. I would encourage you to cease this baseless speculation."

"But the jewelry was in his pocket, wasn't it? I don't see how that's speculation."

Speculation.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't thinking about things I didn't need to be thinking about. I knew thinking about it now wouldn't help anything, but my mind had a will of its own. What if one of the most prominent men in a certain jewelry company was infatuated with a certain beautiful someone. And what if this man wanted this certain someone, regardless of what others might say. He might be inclined to use any means necessary to get what he wanted. And you know that saying, "If you want the general, shoot his horse." Well, unfortunately, I was the horse.

Did he do it?

The fact that this was the first conclusion I jumped to, without any evidence, was proof of how mentally cornered I was feeling. I needed to calm down. But as much as I knew that, I had to wonder how calm anyone could reasonably be expected to be in this situation. I thought I was doing a pretty good job, honestly, but I couldn't take much more.

Mr. Karlsbrook stared at me intently before flashing an insinuating smile.

“What a scary face you’re making. Those eyes are too much for an old man’s heart to bear. Richard, I’d like to speak to you for a moment—alone. Would you join me outside?”

“If you have something to say about him, you can say it here.”

“I think it might be better if he didn’t hear this.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, but that isn’t for you to decide.”

I was glad to hear him say that. I really didn’t want him running off to have a secret meeting right now, because I’d probably have to break out of here to crash it and make things worse. Mr. Karlsbrook smiled and began talking. I know it’s weird to be feeling this way under these circumstances, but I was actually reminded of being in *Étranger* in Ginza. This was a small room, compared to the ballroom of the luxury cruise liner, Richard was here, and we had a mysterious “client.”

“I can’t even begin to comprehend what circumstances put that piece of jewelry in the hands of your employee, but this isn’t exactly a common occurrence. It would be best to—no, only natural to assume that it was some kind of mistake. I must apologize for dragging you to this filthy place. Perhaps, to make up for it, we can agree not to think too deeply about this matter. It was simply some kind of mistake. We’ll leave it at that.”

It didn’t seem like it’d be very convincing to a third party, but Mr. Karlsbrook’s assessment pretty much matched up with my own. I didn’t steal it or assist in the theft, and it didn’t look like anything like that had gone down at the event, either, as far as I could tell. It must have been some kind of mistake.

But there had to be a reason he would say that.

Richard didn’t say a word. He just stared at Mr. Karlsbrook’s face. The man, who was the third-generation head of a massive jewelry corporation, moved his eyes around with an expression on his face like he was savoring a sweet dessert. I’d already wished a million times over that he wouldn’t look at my boss that way.

Finally, Richard spoke. “Then we’ll just pretend this incident never happened, and no one will be held responsible for it?”

“Oh, someone will be taking responsibility for it,” Mr. Karlsbrook replied. “Even if by mistake, a valuable piece of my company’s merchandise fell into the hands of a third party and was even removed from the premises—something that should have never happened. The person in charge of security will probably be getting the axe. And the authority of those in charge of controlling the jewelry will also have to be checked. But none of that is your little employee’s responsibility. He is, after all, a man that you of all people have placed your trust in. However young and occasionally lacking in consideration you may be, if you trust him, I have no choice but to respect that.”

“How strange. He only recently started at the company I work for, and yet you act like you know him—like you’re his kindly uncle or something of the sort.”

“I always want to be a kindly uncle to you, Ricky. I don’t think it’s all that strange, considering our relationship. I’m quite indebted to your grandmother as well. I like you, Ricky, and I want to know everything there is to know about the things you like.”

The man clad in zig-zagging geometric-patterned fabric smiled cheerfully and said:

“So, what do you say? I’ll bring the champagne and caviar, so why don’t we just enjoy a long, relaxing evening catching up about our lives in the time since we last saw each other. Just the two of us.”

For a split second, my mind went completely blank before it was drenched in pitch black.

I couldn’t move or even groan. I couldn’t hit him, either. That was the number one thing I couldn’t do. I was glad I’d somewhat braced myself for something like this. But it didn’t seem like there was anything I could do about the look in my eyes, and when Mr. Karlsbrook looked at me, he took a step back. My apologies—apparently, I can look pretty scary in moments like this.

It was the disjointed logic that made it especially uncomfortable.

“Let’s pretend it didn’t happen. I can make it so. By the way, do you have plans tonight?”

I hadn’t moved, or groaned, or punched anyone, so I hoped I’d earned the right to say just this one thing.

“...I’m sorry, but as the person most directly affected by this incident, I would like you to look into what happened exactly. *Pretending* that something I actually didn’t do never happened isn’t really any different from a false accusation. Please actually investigate what happened. If there are security cameras, the whole thing should be on video.”

“Of course we’re going to investigate. Of course. But that will take time, and I can’t imagine you want to be locked up in here the whole time. The cell in the back is quite small.”

“I don’t mind. It’s way bigger than the apartment I used to live in.”

“You’re reminding me why I hate housing in Asia. This cruise is only six days long—well, more like four and a half now. And we’ll be arriving at our next port tomorrow afternoon. Ultimately, whatever actions were captured on the security camera footage represent only a fraction of the truth of the situation. It’ll be much easier to destroy that evidence once the ship arrives at port. I hate to even think about it, but there’s a very good chance that there are accomplices, and if that’s the case, any proof you might have of your innocence won’t mean a thing to me. You could even be arrested once this cruise is over.

“And that’s about the same as a conviction,” Mr. Karlsbrook added quietly.

I was hoping my suspicion was wrong. I was really hoping.

You did it, didn’t you?

This is why you invited me on this cruise, isn’t it? Were you behind the information leak Jeffrey was talking about? Was it you? Did you do it? All to set this up?

If I completely let go, I could punch him in the face, grab him by the lapels, and make him confess, but right now, he wasn't the one in the hot seat. It was me. This required a softer touch. I needed to hold myself back.

The beautiful man, clad in his suit, casually pushed away the arm that was trying to snake its way around his waist as he flashed a dazzling smile. Mr. Karlsbrook was about a head shorter than Richard and me, so it felt almost like he was dealing with an unruly child.

"Perhaps you've forgotten, as it has been so long since last we met, dear uncle, but I love tedious work just as much as I love gems."

"Hm?"

My heart echoed Mr. Karlsbrook's groan. Richard continued to smile. There was venom in that smile of his. There was no ease in his face. That smile was a mask, meant to keep its target calm.

"For example: checking security footage. If you would permit me, I would like to use the remainder of the voyage to go through the security footage of the jewelry show. If your grace period only extends until tomorrow afternoon, I won't be bothering you too terribly long."

I wasn't the only one shocked by this development. Mr. Krueger, who had largely been left out of the discussion so far, had the biggest reaction. His eyes had gone wide, wondering how they could be serious. He seemed about to shoot Mr. Karlsbrook a glare, but then bit his lip and cast his eyes to the floor. I wished I could be a telepath just for that moment, so I could listen in on the silent conversation they were having.

"...So you intend to break your back to prove your employee's innocence?"

"It's nothing so outrageous. I imagine there are concerns about privacy, so if you grant me permission, I would like to review the footage here, along with a trusted Gargantua employee. And while I do appreciate the offer of champagne, it would not be very conducive to the task at hand. Caviar, however, I would happily indulge in with you any time. We can spend as long as

you like in this room.”

Mr. Karlsbrook’s mood visibly improved at the sound of Richard’s voice. That wasn’t a good sign. You don’t always want people like him to feel like they have the upper hand. I wanted to ask Richard if he was sure, but his hand firmly squeezed my shoulder.

I guess that promise of mine was still in effect.

To *not* try to help him.

Mr. Karlsbrook and Mr. Krueger started talking. I couldn’t hear their voices very well. Mr. Krueger looked almost on the verge of tears as he opposed the idea at first, but eventually, he was nodding along with Mr. Karlsbrook’s suggestions. Was he really okay? Mr. Karlsbrook turned to Richard with a sunny look on his face.

“We have a deal. He’s agreed to keep you company. He seems to think it’s preferable to being fired. However, I must warn you, Ricky, the security camera footage for this ship is vast. Are you sure you still don’t mind? I would hate to stress those beautiful eyes of yours.”

“I spend as much time in the library as I ever did, dearest uncle. My eyes are much sturdier than they may appear.”

“Beautiful and strong, not unlike the jewelry my company produces. Now that you’ve reminded me of it, I do recall that your beauty when you had your head in a book was absolutely immeasurable. Just the thought of it is giving me heart palpitations... Now, as for your little employee here, hm...”

Mr. Karlsbrook suggested sending me back to my room, but Mr. Kreuger fumed, suggesting not to. I mean, of course he’d feel that way. It didn’t make any sense to cut a suspect loose once you’d gotten your hands on them. Especially not while you hadn’t confirmed they weren’t the culprit. Mr. Karlsbrook and Mr. Krueger talked for a bit and came up with a compromise: My phone and any other communication devices would be temporarily confiscated so I couldn’t contact anyone outside the ship, and I would be put

under surveillance.

I kept hearing the word *Japanese* peppering their conversation. It sounded like they were trying to figure out what to do with someone who could speak Japanese. They were probably worried about “private” conversations. Mr. Krueger had a look of disgust on his face as he pointed to one of the guards. The guard who seemed to be their boss nodded and began talking over the radio.

I knew I didn’t have much choice in the matter, but things were moving largely without my involvement. When Mr. Krueger approached, I asked him if they’d let me stay here because I wanted to check the footage, too, but Mr. Karlsbrook cut in from behind.

“Do you have any idea what position you’re in right now? Even one-in-a-million occurrences do happen. And you could very well take the opportunity to delete the footage of your own crime. Oh, my apologies, how rude of me. Do as you please. It’d be more trouble if you wandered around too much. Oh, and do try not to get too desperate. I only want to see beautiful things.”

“Seigi, are you sure you don’t mind handing over your phone? I can’t say if it would be safer to leave it with me or someone from the security firm. You ought to decide.”

I told him I wanted him to hold onto it, and Richard smiled.

Mr. Krueger looked like he could really use some stomach medication as I continued to observe him. Judging from how he reacted to the question about checking the security footage, there was a good chance he knew something that I didn’t. Which made me think that he was probably the best target to press for more information, but that would be impossible if I were kicked out of the room. I’d just have to leave it to Richard. Was there no one else who knew what this guy was doing? Or saw him at the event? We’d be out of luck if they’re bound by some kind of gag order, too, but maybe we could get some fragment of information. I decided to set that as my goal for the time being. Information. I needed more information. I didn’t even care about what

happened to me; I just needed information to pull the rug out from under that stupid, elderly baby doll who wanted to buddy up to Richard.

Just as I was starting to feel dizzy, probably from too much ocular tension, there came another knock at the door to the security office. The guard who had used the radio opened the door. Someone was standing in the doorway.

It was a young Asian man. His features—how should I put this?—didn't really scream "security guard." He was slender and had almond-shaped eyes like you might see in an ink painting. The lower half of his wavy brown hair was closely cropped—I'm pretty sure it was called an undercut. He looked like a K-pop idol. I was pretty sure he was more fond of going to the hair salon and indulging in skincare than I was. He was probably under thirty. He could even still be in his teens for all I knew. He looked like he'd be right at home at Shibuya Crossing, and while it was hard to imagine he'd be any good at arresting rowdy patrons, he was wearing an armband from the security firm.

The young man nodded upon receiving an explanation from the guard, who I assumed was his superior, and then he looked at me. His gaze was piercing. And then he opened his mouth.

"You're Japanese, yes? Can you understand me?"

"I can. Hi. I'm Seigi Nakata. I'm Japanese. Are you, too...?"

"No, I'm Chinese. My name is Vincent Lai. My boss has ordered me to guard you. As the only security officer on the ship who can speak both Japanese and English, I was the only man for the job. Do you have any issue with that?"

Guard me, huh? He'd probably gotten the nuance slightly wrong—I assumed he meant to say he was assigned to make sure I didn't run off. Well, I had no problem with that. If it came to blows, I could probably take him, too. Might as well make him think I trust him. I wouldn't want to provoke him.

"Sure, I'd be happy to have you. But what exactly does this 'guarding' involve?"

“I was told to stay with you except when you’re sleeping. I’m not inclined to follow you into the restroom, but I’ll be staying in your vicinity within reason. Additionally, we don’t want you attempting to contact anyone off the ship, so I will be keeping a particular eye on you to that effect. Any objections?”

I glanced around the area. Mr. Karlsbrook, Mr. Krueger, and Richard. It seemed like things wouldn’t be able to move forward until I gave the okay. I told him I understood with a nod, and Vincent nodded with a disinterested look on his face. It felt like he was just following orders.

No sooner than I had agreed than Mr. Karlsbrook hurried me out of the room. He didn’t even bother to tell me to leave. My boss was left behind. It was like he was taking my place.

Richard.

His blue eyes seemed to be telling me not to worry. *I know*. If there was nothing I could do even if I was allowed to stay with him, I would just need to do whatever I could on the outside. I’d dived headfirst into a completely new situation to try and grow as a person so I could make myself useful to the people who had done so much for me. I didn’t even know what I could say to explain myself if all that just resulted in false charges against me. I couldn’t allow it. I wasn’t going to let it happen like that.

Richard looked back at me with intensity in his blue eyes and smiled. It was his usual tender smile. But just before he looked away, for only a fraction of a second, I felt like I saw a flash of loneliness, like the shadow of a fish moving beneath the vast surface of the water.

Vincent encouraged me to follow, and I left the security office.

We took the staff elevator up to the lobby, and finally, I was in a bigger, brighter space again. The “main street” was bustling with smiling people moving to and fro—a complete 180 from the vibe downstairs.

“Vincent.”

“You can call me Vince. Or Lai, if that would be more comfortable—actually, no, I would prefer it if you called me Vince.”

“All right, Vince it is.”

I introduced myself once more and apologized for the trouble I was causing him. Even if there was some kind of incident, I couldn’t imagine anyone would want to have to be on guard duty for someone they literally just met. Vince had reminded me that it was his job, but I still felt like I needed to apologize. I was the one dragging him around after all.

“I’d been meaning to ask this from the start, but are you very familiar with Gargantua? Do they always hire you for jewelry shows?”

“No, of course not.”

He added that he was used to doing security for this type of show, and that having staff who knew a little something about gems could come in handy. For example, to pick out when someone was acting strangely in an area full of especially valuable jewelry. And not getting overwhelmed by the presence of extremely expensive products. I took the opportunity to ask him about the pay, and he said it wasn’t bad. Well, that made sense. Trust was critical in this kind of work, so it’d be a problem if low wages inspired negative feelings toward their employer.

He seemed like a pretty calm person in general. I wasn’t totally confident yet, but he didn’t seem like he was under Mr. Karlsbrook’s influence.

“I know they told me not to wander around too much until they cleared me, but I just can’t sit still. I still don’t understand how it even happened, so I want to gather all the information I can...so, um, how much do you know about the situation, Vince?”

“I know the gist of it. That you’re apparently a suspect. But we have something called the presumption of innocence here, so I’m inclined to respect

your opinion, Mr. Nakata.” I was about to thank him when he added “But—this is an entirely separate issue. Is detective work a typical part of a jeweler’s job these days? Or is this just a side hustle? Or is there something else motivating this?”

I explained that I just wanted to prove my innocence myself. Vince replied saying that I should just wait for the results of the security footage check, then. He wasn’t wrong, but I wasn’t in the mood to just sit around waiting. I wanted to grab the scoundrel who slipped that ring into my pocket by the scruff of the neck and bang on the door of the security office, saying, “Here’s your guy,” and then rescue Richard.

Vince listened to what I had to say, his disinterested expression not changing one bit as he declared casually, “I think you should give up on that.”

“...Huh? Oh, no, I’m not gonna actually do anything that over-the-top.”

“It’s not about it being too over-the-top. I just don’t think you should do that at all.”

“You might be right, but I still want to. I’m sorry.”

“You want to help that guy in there, don’t you?”

Vince’s comment pierced me right through the heart.

This guy, with his bored expression, had seen right through me to the thing I was sure would’ve been pointless to explain. Vince looked at me, with a face that seemed like he was about to yawn at any moment, but his eyes alone were endlessly serious.

“I hope this is just a needless worry on my part, but wouldn’t doing this put that man in a much worse position? There are times when the best course of action is to sit tight and wait. Have you never considered that that may be the wiser option over recklessly springing into action?”

His almond-shaped eyes pierced me as he looked at me.

I really didn’t think he was under Mr. Karlsbrook’s influence. His words may

have been in alignment with him, but my impression of Vince was the opposite. The way Vince spoke was similar to Richard—the way he could get to the core of a matter with one flying leap, skipping the formalities. The main difference was the flavor: If Richard's words were warm and sweet like royal milk tea, then Vince's were like bitter matcha. The bitter taste in your mouth just let you know how good it was for you.

That made me feel a little happy, and it showed on my face. Vince looked perplexed. I opened with an apology before carefully choosing my words.

"If I were the type of person who could sit still, you might be right. But honestly, I'm more of an action person. I understand that I'm in a position where I shouldn't make any careless moves, though. So I'd appreciate it if you'd stop me if I'm about to go too far. If you wouldn't mind, that is."

"I feel like I'm being asked to take the reins of an out-of-control horse."

"Oh, come on, it won't be *that* bad. I'd say more like a bicycle with broken brakes."

"Either way, if the driver makes one mistake, they're dead."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

After an awkward moment of silence, Vince began to smile like he just had an idea before abruptly stopping himself. If I was a broken bicycle, he was like a toy on the verge of breaking.

"You really are funny for a Japanese man. My job is to guard you, so I'll follow you wherever you go. But if you do anything that might interfere with me performing my duties, I will use force to stop you. If that doesn't bother you, please do as you see fit."

"Force? I don't think it'll come to that, but just so you know, I practiced karate for a long time..."

"I'm a practitioner of Jeet Kune Do myself. Are you familiar with it? You probably aren't. But I'm quite fit, so you needn't worry on my account."

“Whoa, I am familiar with it, trust me. Bruce Lee came up with it, and it has a big focus on practical applications. You’re the first person I’ve met who does it. That’s so cool!”

“Wow, I guess you do know a little something. Well, a compliment won’t buy you anything. I’m not a street performer.”

“Oh, uh, sorry.”

I was actually happy to be a little nervous about how far his “use of force” might go—not because I might hurt him, but because if he overdoes it, he might hurt me! And then I moved on to ask him something I’d been curious about since we’d met.

“Um, I can speak English, too. What’s more comfortable for you, English or Japanese?”

“Either, really. I’ve been speaking both since I was young.”

I tried speaking to him in English. I used very stiff language to tell him that considering the situation we were in, it’d probably be better to do what was more comfortable to him, rather than deferring to my needs, especially from a safety perspective.

Vince stared at me for a moment before raising an eyebrow and opening his mouth. He replied that he was merely doing his job and that there was no need to consider his comfort, but that we could switch languages if I preferred. It was in English. With an incredibly heavy accent—it reminded me of the way that Singaporean man at the show talked, both in terms of pronunciation and intonation. It didn’t sound anything like the English I heard at the pub last night.

“L—let’s stick with Japanese then.”

“All right, whatever you want.”

Well, whatever. This wasn’t really the time to be worrying about that sort of thing. There was definitely one English speaker on this ship that could make my boss sound painfully lonely, but I decided to forget about it for the time being. I

knew what I needed to do now. I needed to find the bastard who set me up and make them apologize. Surely I had the right to do that much, regardless of the situation.

They say that the culprit always returned to the scene of the crime. Who exactly said it, and whether anyone said that outside of police procedurals, I had no way of knowing, but that seemed like the only place I might find some clues. I tried hurrying back to the jewelry show, but I was stopped at the gate. It wasn't because I'd been blacklisted but because this was the session for customers. Press and industry were not welcome.

I was afraid that it had gotten around to the staff that I was a suspected thief and that it'd cause a huge commotion the second I showed up, but that didn't really appear to be the case. They all just seemed to know that there was some kind of incident during the industry show. I guess the missing item was recovered, so maybe they didn't want to make a big deal of it. Though maybe it was more that they weren't particularly concerned with where people were or what they were doing during the industry show, and no one really seemed to remember me, either. I managed to talk to five people, and while they knew that some security personnel had disappeared in the middle of the show, they didn't know why. It felt less like something was being covered up and more of a "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" sort of thing. It felt deliberate. I felt like the heat was being turned up on a boiling pot.

But that wasn't the only information I found.

Apparently, a completely different incident had occurred at the exhibition while I was gone.

"An alarm went off?"

It happened between the industry show and the customer show. As shifts were changing and cleaning was being done and tables were getting cleared, one of the metal detectors at the entrances to the exhibition sounded. From the Queen of Hearts room, of all places. The show session for customers had

only just started. So the incident must have happened in the last thirty minutes or so.

But even after the guards checked, they didn't see any suspicious persons anywhere. They assumed that one of the cleaning staff must have accidentally tripped the sensor without anyone noticing. But I never saw anyone eating or drinking in that room. Why would anyone need to go in there to clean?

"Strange things happen sometimes," a Spanish woman with a ponytail said with a shrug. She wasn't really looking at me; she seemed more interested in Vince. I couldn't really blame her. Vince did look young, even by Asian standards, and he had this mysterious charm about him. I mentally clasped my hands together in gratitude for the unexpected cover. And his meritorious service continued beyond that.

A pair of what seemed to be Chinese expats were having a lively conversation as they exited the exhibit, having finished looking at the show. When they saw Vince, they approached him like long-lost relatives and started talking to him about all sorts of things. Judging from the tone of the conversation, I figured it was your standard "Aren't you such-and-such famous person?" pickup line. The two of them, clad head to toe in high-end designer clothes and accessories, were chatting with Vince in Chinese as they walked, and once they got to the end of the hall, they handed him their business cards and said goodbye. Vince waved and gave a courteous security-guard bow, and the two of them squealed and waved back like a mascot at an amusement park had waved to them. They must've been in their forties. I walked behind the three of them like I was invisible.

When he turned back toward me, Vince's expression was 30 percent sourer than before.

"I just heard something interesting."

"About the alarm going off?"

"No, another incident."

The two women who had been talking to Vince were a pair of Chinese sisters who were running an Australian company, and without prompting, they told Vince about the current state of Gargantua's management. "The jewelry is beautiful, but the company..." they said, and when Vince asked what they meant, they started talking about M&A.

"M&A, so like buying a company, right?"

"Yes, of course. Oh, I'm sorry, I couldn't think of the term in Japanese."

"It's fine. I did study economics in Japan."

"I see. Economics, huh? Does that mean you're familiar with the specifics of Gargantua's situation?"

Then Vince asked me if I knew that Gargantua had received a large buyout offer from a European conglomerate.

"Conglomerate?"

"It's a large company formed of a variety of diverse, independent business entities."

"I thought you said you studied economics?" Vince added jokingly and smiled. I got a little flustered, and he just returned to his usual bored expression and continued talking. I guess he was the kind of person who enjoyed teasing people but wouldn't take it too far.

Vince explained that, as happens to all high-end brands the world over, Gargantua was suffering from slowing sales and had decided to accept a buyout offer from a major fashion conglomerate. And that an example of one such conglomerate was the largest fashion conglomerate in Europe, LVMH, which was born from a merger between a famous high-end leather luggage maker and a high-end liquor brand. Even I knew the names of the leather luggage company and the liquor brand that were under their umbrella. I was astonished.

So not all brands were their own company?

Vince looked exhausted when he surmised what I was reacting to.

“Mr. Nakata, you need to understand that a conglomerate isn’t the same as a regular company. Think of it more as the owner of a ranch that raises thoroughbred horses. There wouldn’t be any point in acquiring separate brands if their brand images were all going to be consolidated. As a general rule, businessmen aren’t allowed to trample on the artistic side of the business. Although sometimes, when faced with slowing sales, a company may tap a famous designer and put them in charge of the company. The conglomerate might offer other avenues for the brand to sell its products—like offering space in their duty-free shops in exchange for a cut of the profits. You can see the logic, can’t you?”

“Ohh...that’s what you meant by ‘thoroughbred ranch.’”

I’d always thought of those big brands as companies that sold things that you could only get from them, so the thought of them being operated by the same entity felt a bit strange. I guess from an economic perspective, it did make sense. There was always a possibility that a publicly traded company could be bought out, but that was not always a bad thing. Someone grabbing your company by the roots carried some risk, but sometimes it was more like repotting a flower in more fertile soil—I learned that in my economics classes. It could provide a sense of security.

Apparently, the purchase of Gargantua had made the news a month ago. A month ago, I was preoccupied with my move to Sri Lanka, worrying about not drinking water that hadn’t been boiled, and the elephants walking down the street, and how tea only cost twenty yen for a cup. I was overwhelmed by information that my eyes were giving me, rather than my phone. I didn’t think I would have remembered it even if I had seen the news.

I scratched my head as I explained that I was busy at the time, so I didn’t know anything about it, and for just a second, Vince looked at me like he was looking at a soaking wet newspaper abandoned in a back-alley gutter before resuming his usual bored expression. He didn’t seem angry. Anger is a more personal emotion. We didn’t have that kind of connection. But the harsh look in

his eyes was a little scary. I think. Either way, he didn't seem like he was afraid of anything.

I decided to test the waters by asking Vince a question: What did people in the company think of Mr. Karlsbrook?

I doubted a hired security guard like him would be that familiar with the inner workings of Gargantua. But he did know both English and Chinese. Maybe he overheard something in the locker room or something.

Vince seemed tired of standing around and chatting, so he went down the stairs to the lobby floor and took a seat in one of the numerous lounge chairs. After drinking down about half of the glass of soda a staffer offered him, he answered my question.

"Well, this is basically just gossip, so I would encourage you to take this with a large grain of salt."

He paused, looking off into the distance for a moment before he continued.

A sexual harasser. A bully. A tyrant. Oppressive. Selfish. Moody. Childish. A man without whom the world would be more peaceful. There were a lot of people who had known Mr. Karlsbrook when he was still CEO a decade prior and lamented that he wasn't always like this, so maybe it was just his age bringing out his more troubling personality quirks. A not-uncommon development, but that didn't mean much to the people who were suffering because of it. No matter how great their tormenter's past accomplishments might be.

I couldn't be the only person who felt that way.

The tense atmosphere during the show, where people pretended not to see him or know what he was doing, also included an intense disgust toward Mr. Karlsbrook. It's the sort of dynamic that develops when people don't want anything to do with him, but they know he's liable to cause them harm if they ignore him. Just thinking about it made my heart ache.

“You have quite the terrifying look on your face, Mr. Nakata. Is everything all right?”

“I’m fine. Sorry. I just have a lot going on in my head right now...”

“Hmm. Well, I apologize for adding to it while you have so much filling your head at the moment, but I haven’t quite gotten to the point yet, so I will continue.”

“Huh?”

He explained that the pair of Chinese women he spoke to earlier told him about an incident surrounding the acquisition.

While the large European conglomerate announced its acquisition of Gargantua a month ago, negotiations had begun years prior. And apparently, there hadn’t been just one company competing to purchase Gargantua—a Chinese conglomerate had thrown its hat into the ring, too. According to those women, it was the Chinese contender that had offered Gargantua more favorable terms, not the European one, and initially negotiations were leaning in its favor. But at the eleventh hour, a member of the board jumped in and put his thumb on the scale for the European option. That board member was probably none other than Mr. Karlsbrook.

“And apparently, this caused a lot of internal strife at the company. It got especially personal within the upper echelons of management.”

“Upper management... Gargantua’s current CEO is Mr. Karlsbrook’s son, right? You mean with him?”

“Oh, no, apparently the CEO is still as much of a daddy’s boy as he’s ever been. You see, it’d be more accurate to call him Mr. Karlsbrook’s son-in-law, as he is the husband of Mr. Karlsbrook’s daughter. But the vice president of the company, Marnuit, who is in charge of actually running the company was furious. I mean, who wouldn’t be mad after all the work that was done to set things up with the Chinese company was wiped away in an instant?”

The vice president.

I asked Vince if that was the number two position in the company, and Vince looked at me, confused. Sorry. I was thinking about what Jeffrey had mentioned on the phone about Amin and “Gargantua’s number two” being in a big fight, and that a huge “bombshell” might be about to drop. He wouldn’t have just mentioned that as some random financial trivia. So what was the bombshell? And what did it have to do with my current situation?

I racked my brain, but it was no use. I had no idea.

According to Vince, the women he spoke to seemed disappointed about the negotiations breaking down, especially in light of how favorable the terms had been.

As I hemmed and hawed, grasping for some sort of insight that I lacked, Vince seemed to think of something and pulled out his phone as he sipped his soda, bringing up a news site. It was the news about Gargantua’s impending acquisition from a month ago. In English. He turned it around, asking if I wanted to read it, and I gave it a look. I decided to start by scrolling to the bottom of the article. There were three photos.

The first was of Mr. Karlsbrook. The second was the logo of the conglomerate. And the third photo—

I gasped audibly, and Vince raised an eyebrow, straw still in his mouth.

“What’s wrong?”

“I—I know him.”

There was a caption beneath the third photo. The vice president conducting business—Marnuit Patel. He was a man in his prime, his tanned face dignified. But the expression I knew him with was a much more sinister, deranged one.

I was confident that this was the man who had glared at me like he was staring at an evil spirit when I boarded the ship. I had definitely seen him in the lobby.

I explained to Vince, who still looked confused, and his eyes tensed as his expression shifted.

“You must be a real big shot for a corporate bigwig to personally come out to greet you like that.”

“That’s definitely not what happened.”

“I know. That is strange.”

Why did the vice president glare at me the first time we met? He must’ve had a reason, right? Which meant he must’ve already known who I was somehow. Unless he had me mistaken for someone else? That was hard to believe. The hatred in his eyes was very certain. But why? Based on what Vince had told me, you’d think the person he’d want to glare at would be Mr. Karlsbrook, not me. That creep who should have just retired but ruined his VP’s hard work all because he hadn’t gotten his fill of throwing his weight around, and to top it all off was sexually harassing people. Just thinking about him made my skin crawl.

There was a possibility that Mr. Karlsbrook had invited me on this cruise to use as a scapegoat to pull off some kind of plot of his. If that was really it, it was beyond stupid, but I couldn’t think of any other possibilities. But that’s right, my position on this ship was as Richard’s plus-one. So did the vice president have a reason to glare at Richard’s plus-one? That said, whenever I thought about what happened at the jewelry show, it tore my mind to shreds with anger and sadness. I wanted to do something about it. If only I hadn’t been there, Richard wouldn’t be stuck in that dark security office—

If I hadn’t been there.

My mind suddenly cleared.

If I hadn’t been there, that lecherous sexual harasser wouldn’t have been able to pull off his plan to trap Richard.

And the centennial celebration jewelry exhibition probably would have gone off without a hitch.

If only I hadn't been there.

There's a saying that goes "Even the patience of a saint eventually runs out," meaning that if you keep doing inexcusable things, even someone with the personality of a saint is going to snap. But of course they would. I couldn't say how many times the vice president had to exercise saintly patience with Mr. Karlsbrook, but that patience had probably run out.

If only I hadn't been there.

Maybe it wasn't beyond stupid, then. If I hadn't been Richard's plus-one, Mr. Karlsbrook wouldn't have been able to pull off his plan to give him an excuse to sexually harass Richard, and the jewelry show wouldn't have been tainted by an incident.

If I were to title the vice president's face in the lobby like a piece of fine jewelry, I might go with "Loathing" or "Resentment." That's not the kind of expression you make at someone you've only just met. In me, he saw the shadow of a person he hated so much, he couldn't stand it. And what if he knew that Mr. Karlsbrook or someone was about to do another intolerable thing? What would happen then?

Everything he'd been holding back might explode.

"Mr. Nakata? Lost in thought again?"

"Yes," I replied. Vince made a strange face.

"Is there any way I could meet with the vice president? Like, could you call him out for me or something?"

"No way. He's the number two in the company. Just FYI, I don't have connections like that."

"Got it."

But he probably knew what Mr. Karlsbrook was trying to do during the show. And that was probably why he was glaring at me. I couldn't think of any other reason. I doubted I just coincidentally looked exactly like some sworn family

enemy or something.

“I wanna find a way to talk to him somehow. I wonder if I can meet with him... I bet he’ll be willing to talk about the situation. I’d like to discuss specifics with him.”

“Even if we assume that he knows something, whether he’d be willing to talk about it with an outsider is an entirely different issue. Admittedly, I don’t really know either way.”

“...Oh.”

Right.

Even if he absolutely loathed Mr. Karlsbrook, he still had power over him. And he’d have no reason to air his dirty laundry to a complete stranger. I mean, that only made sense. Even if I could meet him, it wouldn’t necessarily get me anywhere.

I guess there really wasn’t anything I could do.

“Are you okay? Would you like a soda?”

“...I’m fine.”

“Anyway, if you’re not going to read that, give my phone back to me. Unless you can’t read it?”

“No,” I explained, “it’s just hard for me to read when I’m under emotional distress. I’m sorry, but could you give me a summary?”

I lowered my head, and the security guard who looked like a pop star summarized the article for me. There wasn’t even a hint of displeasure on his face; he looked almost a little proud. The details of the acquisition, Mr. Karlsbrook’s tyranny, the vice president’s resentment, the possibility of his being scouted by a rival company, and what sort of “sweetener” he’d be bringing with him.

“Sweetener?”

“Information that only a former Gargantua executive could have.”

I furrowed my brow. I didn't understand at all. What use could information about a company that was about to be acquired and, art-related departments aside, was probably going to be restructured? I tilted my head to the side, confused, and Vince crossed his legs as he sat.

“May I ask you a question, Mr. Nakata? Why do you think there were metal detectors outside the exhibition?”

Vince gave me a sidelong glance while I was still blinking in surprise at his question. I guess this was the opening to his version of a lecture. I tried my best to think. Why *were* there metal detectors? They reminded me a bit of the anti-theft gates you'd see at bookstores in Japan, but why would they have those in this context? I guess the obvious thing would be to prevent someone from walking in with some kind of heavy tool to break the glass and steal the jewelry, but that had no connection to the “sweetener” thing Vince mentioned. Not to mention the fact that, even if you did try something like that, you'd have nowhere to run, since we were out at sea. So it probably wasn't about theft. Hmm.

I gave Vince a look like I was a bit lost, and he gave me a hint.

“As technology has advanced, it's now possible to steal things that would have been impossible to steal in the past. That's what I'm talking about.”

I was even more confused. Technology? Was he talking about some kind of high-tech precision equipment? I gave up. I told Vince I was throwing in the towel, and he set his empty glass on the table and turned toward me.

“Mr. Nakata, do you know anything about 3D modeling?”

“...Nope.”

“Oh, I see. Then, are you fond of anime and manga? Or figures?”

“Huh?”

That was not a question I was expecting. I wondered what he was getting at. I

didn't really have time to watch anything. I listed off the names of a few shows I'd watched when I was a kid, and Vince looked visibly disappointed and grumbled that he figured as much. I guess he likes anime. I bet that's why he learned Japanese. But what did that have to do with any of this?

"I think the easiest way to explain it would be through the example of how a figure is produced. Surely you've seen figures before. You know, they're kind of like dolls."

"I have. They're those really elaborate plastic ones, right?"

"Exactly. Many of them feature delicate waves of hair and detailed fingertips—there are some that cost several thousand dollars. What do you think is the main thing that makes them command such a high price?"

So he was asking about the main selling point I guess. Of anime figures. I mean, considering that in plain language, *figure* refers to the form, then it has to be—

"The modeling, right? The shape of the figure itself."

"Wow, you are sharp. Yes, exactly, the shape. The artists who create figures are called *sculptors*, and ultimately, the figure lives or dies based on its form. In jewelry terms, it would be like saying a gemstone's brilliance can be enhanced or hampered by the design of the jewelry it's set in."

"Oh."

I was surprised at how quickly he connected the two worlds. All that separates jewelry from jewels is the part that turns the stone into a necklace or a ring or some other form that can be worn. And while a high-end jewelry maker like Gargantua might use the same materials—gold, silver, platinum, and so on—what sets their products apart from other, lower-priced jewelry was of course the workmanship.

I remembered thinking I had no idea how they made these things when I looked at that playing card piece. What could be more marvelous than

something that exists physically before you—and having no idea how it's made?

“So, 3D modeling refers to the production of digital representation of a three-dimensional object in general, but it's relevant here in that it's possible to take photographs of a physical object along with measurements, digitizing its form in a way that can be reproduced. It's not so much a reproduction as it is a 3D copy. So with the right equipment, even a ‘form’ can be stolen.”

“Wow, it's crazy that people can do that. So you're saying that, once an object has been 3D-modeled, it can be reproduced?”

“It's not quite that easy,” Vince replied, explaining that even with detailed data, even a rival company wouldn't have a snowball's chance in hell of reproducing it accurately without top-class artisans. Which, I guess, made sense.

But with that data for reference, surely imitations could be made.

“So perhaps that's something Gargantua would be more concerned about being stolen, rather than the physical objects themselves.”

“...I guess if imitations got out on the market, they wouldn't be unique anymore.”

“Exactly,” Vince said with a nod.

He really did remind me of my boss. If Richard was classical music, then this guy was casual pop music. He may be guzzling soda while on duty, but he was kind and knowledgeable, just like Richard.

“So, if I had a grudge against Gargantua and I had intimate knowledge that only someone on the inside could have, I might pass that data along to an outside group. That'd cause some serious damage.”

“Oh, I think you wouldn't just want to pass it along. You'd want to release it to the public—like open-source software. It might blow the cover of the leaker, but for the intended recipient, the information becomes just another piece of ‘common knowledge.’”

“So, it’d be a way of secretly conveying the information to the person who wanted it.”

“That seems like the most likely explanation,” Vince said.

Despite his indifferent expression, his eyes were sharp as a hawk’s.

“...There’s speculation to that effect at the end of the article. Admittedly, it’s just based on rumors though.”

“Rumors?”

“That the vice president has been continuing to negotiate with the Chinese conglomerate on his own, behind the scenes, to ensure that he could escape the company with a job offer.”

Oh, and that’s where the “sweetener” came in.

Vince chuckled. “I happened to overhear some similar chatter in the Gargantua staff locker room while I was conducting bag checks. People were saying that, no matter how good of a manager he might be, he’d spent so long doing whatever his boss said that he’d need to come bearing a pretty substantial gift for anyone to consider taking him.”

“Haa...”

I let out a sigh. The situation really was complicated. I mean, honestly—

“Can’t people just get over themselves already...”

Come on, just sell your jewelry in peace. Is it so much to ask?

“Well, it doesn’t matter much to me one way or the other,” Vince said, “as long as they pay me.”

A sea of possibilities spread out before me. Speculation would only get me so far, though. I massaged my forehead and let out a groan. The feud among the top brass. The vice president. Mergers and acquisitions, and a “sweetener.” The metal detector going off, and 3D modeling. Whatever plot Richard and I were embroiled in.

I don't know how long I sat there groaning miserably. There was plenty of sunlight on the ship, but the view outside the window was so monotonous that I'd sort of lost my intuition for the passage of time. I shrieked when I felt something cold against my neck.

"Hrm," someone said disinterestedly in response. Well, it was a very forced disinterest, really.

I looked up to see Vince was standing there with a soft drink. It wasn't one of the free beverages in a glass. Judging from the label on the bottle, it was oolong tea. And it was ice cold. Just as I was wondering why he had that, he casually threw something at me. When I caught it, I saw that it was a granola bar. I remembered seeing both products at the shop yesterday.

"I think you should eat something. It's hard to think when your blood sugar gets low. A car can't move without gas, after all."

"Thank you."

"Oh, it was no trouble. I think you should enjoy yourself while you can. There's a good chance you're going to be tossed in jail after this, so you should relax."

"You really are a bit of a weirdo, Vince..."

"Am I? Well, thank you."

I cautiously asked Vince if he liked anime and manga, and he politely ignored me. Got it. I decided not to touch on the subject too much. I ate the not-particularly-flavorful bar and drank the tea (which was apparently beauty-enhancing), before talking to people around the exhibition where the show had been held and asking a few questions in the lobby.

Then I headed to the internet café. My phone had been confiscated, so that was my only option for researching things that were going on outside. Mr. Karlsbrook probably wouldn't have approved of this, but Vince wasn't particularly concerned, giving me the okay as long as I didn't try to message or

call anyone. He took a seat next to me and began playing games to kill time. I wanted to look into the situation with Gargantua's management. Unsurprisingly, all the articles were in English, but I had access to automated translation sites and more or less got the information I was looking for. And then it got to be about 8 p.m.

I stood up and tapped Vince on the shoulder—his eyes were red, as he was embroiled in virtual combat. He really was a free spirit. I mean, wasn't he supposed to technically be on duty?

"Mie shi ya? What's the matter?"

"Sorry, I'd like to go somewhere else."

"Got it. Where to?"

I went into the lower levels of the luxury cruise ship with him, returning to the security office. It felt even more stifling after spending time in the welcoming atmosphere of the upper decks. I had to prepare myself a bit before opening the door, but Vince paid me no mind and knocked. After a few moments, the door opened.

Inside, it looked almost like a party was going on.

"Richard, look—this golden pattern is created by mixing gold dust with limoncello, and it goes perfectly with the bavarois. Won't you have a bite? Or will I have to eat it all again? Do you mind?"

"Dearest uncle, I hope you will forgive me, but I need to keep looking at this footage for a while longer. Why don't you go ahead and have some more? Please skip ahead three frames. Play the footage from cameras ten through twelve side by side."

"You keep saying that, but you haven't eaten a thing! You've left our chess game to rot, too. You have some nerve, boring me like this."

"Pawn to F3. Your turn, Uncle. Boredom is the perfect spice when you're surrounded by such captivating events. Ironical, isn't it? I had a sandwich and a

bottle of water earlier, so you don't need to worry about me eating. Thank you for setting that up for me. Oh, what have we here..."

It was strange. When I left, this room was a cold, heartless interrogation room. But in the half day I'd been away, it had been subjected to the equivalent of the Copernican revolution. Atop the table I'd been interrogated at earlier was a lavish cake, fit for a birthday party, and a spread of elaborate finger food. A cart with a champagne bucket sat by the wall, along with a bottle each of white and rosé. The wine had hardly been touched, but there were three empty bottles of water. A chessboard with a game in progress had been set up on one of the empty chairs. There was a book of Japanese literature in English translation, a cocktail shaker that didn't look like it had been used, a bisque doll, and all sorts of other incomprehensible items. For some reason, there was a rug and a big pile of cushions spread out on the floor. Crystal and pottery flower vases overflowed with white lilies and cherry blossoms.

I had no idea what was what anymore. The first word that popped into my mind was *hell*. This looked like entertainment for demons. There were visibly fewer security guards in the room than there had been in the afternoon. They had probably been forced out by all the stuff that had been dragged into the room—there clearly wasn't enough space. The remaining guards were all intently focused on their work, with unconcerned looks on their faces, almost like monks on the verge of ridding themselves of all earthly desires. Although they sure had an awful lot of wrinkles on their brows for that.

When the man at the center of all this hospitality noticed me, he got up from his chair in front of the wall of monitors, rubbed his eyes, and smiled. I felt sick to my stomach. No matter how "sturdy" someone's eyes might be, even they can get tired. Vince bowed to his boss and said something to him. It sounded like he was reporting that I hadn't done anything suspicious. I wasn't going to rat him out about playing games, either, after all.

Shortly after that, Mr. Karlsbrook noticed I'd come in.

"Oh, if it isn't Seiji. No one asked you to come back here."

“It’s Seigi. Please don’t worry about it. I came back of my own accord.”

I opened my eyes as wide as I could muster and smiled at Mr. Karlsbrook. I’ve heard that eyes are used as a threat among a lot of wild animals, so I wondered if I could apply the idea here.

“I didn’t steal anything, but since I’m still considered a suspect, I feel like I should sleep here. There’s no reason to keep my boss here if I’m within arm’s reach.”

“You’re too clever for your own good. Is the word *discretion* not in your dictionary?”

“I’m still learning English, so my vocabulary might be a little limited. Sorry about that.”

“I like enthusiasm in a youngster. Makes it so much more worth it to break them.”

“Uncle dearest, it’s your turn,” Richard interrupted.

“Oh, it seems my grandmaster is calling me. Oh ho...ho ho ho, what a beautiful board state.”

Thankfully, Mr. Karlsbrook was distracted by the black-and-white board game with a smile on his face, so I approached Richard and whispered to him as quietly and as quickly as I could:

“Are you okay? Like, really okay?”

“Yes, I have eye drops.”

“That’s not what I mean. Also just how distant of a ‘dear uncle’ is this guy, anyway?”

“He’s related to me on my great-grandfather’s mother’s side. As distant as the stars.”

Richard’s great-grandfather, the unforgettable seventh Earl of Claremont. It felt like something that had happened far off in the history of the universe. It

was clear from the items he'd prepared to gain Richard's favor that he had been stalking him for ages. My stomach began to hurt again. I always thought being forced to associate with someone just because they were related to you was just one of Japan's awful ancient customs.

"You've done enough. I'm all right. Just run away while you can. I'm going to be fine."

"It's taken more time than I anticipated to go through the security footage, but if all goes well, everything should be clear by tomorrow morning. But no one knows I've been here looking at the footage. Sometimes my 'dear uncle's' wanton use of his power comes in handy."

Richard smiled and offered me some cake. It was a bavarois covered in a thick golden sauce. I felt like I was speaking to someone wearing a mask. Before he said a word, Mr. Karlsbrook snaked his arms around Richard from behind. Richard didn't even grimace.

"My beautiful grandmaster, let's continue our game. I'm determined to beat you this time."

"I'm looking forward to it. Well, then," Richard replied in a singsong tone before striding over to the chessboard and advancing a single white piece. Black and white soldiers were killing each other atop the checkered board. Mr. Karlsbrook looked delighted and brought his hands together, but gradually, the smile faded from his face, wrinkles appeared on his brow, and he began pacing around the board as he tilted his head. I guess he was in a tough spot. A real tough one. His hands didn't move.

Richard smiled as he watched his "uncle."

"Think carefully about your next move. I should warn you, if you make a mistake, I'll have you in check on my next turn."

"Wait, wait, wait, I don't need any advice. Hrm...how is this possible? Even the board state is beautiful."

“It would really spoil the fun if the game the two of us have worked so hard on was spoiled by a bout of impatience.”

Richard then suggested he spend the whole night thinking over his next move.

I turned toward the wall and let out a sigh where Mr. Karlsbrook couldn't read my expression. I guess this was how a modern-day Scheherazade would stay alive. Mr. Karlsbrook burst out laughing. “Yes, I see,” he said, slapping his knee. The guards no longer looked annoyed. I suppose his outbursts were no different from choppy seas or high winds.

“So that's how you suggest I spend this evening? Very well. There isn't a human alive on this Earth who could refuse a request from you. I'm quite tired myself today, but I'll be back with gusto tomorrow. Gaze at the stars tonight and rest your eyes.”

“I look forward to your brilliant response to my last move tomorrow.”

“Even that icy voice of yours is unbearably lovely to my ears.”

Richard thanked him and turned to leave the room. Mr. Karlsbrook called for Mr. Krueger and the two other young guards, who were waiting outside to carry off the refreshments that had served their purpose. Vince and I bowed and said good night to them, and Mr. Krueger looked away, almost like he'd seen something that disturbed him. I know, looking at nothing but fancy rooms all day is rough, but you don't have to go out of your way to make it worse on yourself. Even if it was ultimately my fault.

Mr. Karlsbrook disappeared first, probably trying to come up with his next surprise, so I stopped Richard. I called his name, and the beautiful man turned around.

He really was beautiful, no matter the circumstances.

But his beauty in that moment felt awfully sad.

I called his name, but I didn't say another word. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I so desperately wanted to tell him that I was sorry. It was all my fault

this happened. But I knew it wasn't the time to apologize. An apology was a kind of demand in a way—you're asking for forgiveness in exchange for the apology. And I didn't want Richard to forgive me yet, because I didn't know how this situation would play out. I was doing my best, but I didn't know if that would mean anything yet.

But I would be happy if he would let me tell him how sorry I was without putting it into words.

I'm so sorry.

As the weight of my guilt bored into my heart like a piece of construction equipment, I conveyed everything I could to him with just a few seconds of eye contact...then walked right past the beautiful man. Richard didn't say a word. Thankfully. If he had said something to try to cheer me up or console me, or anything at all, I was sure everything else I was thinking would have flown right out of my mouth.

After I watched him leave, I turned back around and surveyed the security office and was taken aback when I saw the dark eyes waiting right next to me. Vince was a little shorter than me. Richard and I were about the same height—he was probably a little taller than me, if anything—so it was kind of novel to have someone's eyes looking at me from that position.

"You really are a strange one, Mr. Nakata."

"...Huh?"

"You look much more exhausted now than after you spent all that time doing research."

He wasn't wrong. Looking at this "hospitality room" cobbled together from an unbroken string of attempts to buy someone's favor was several times more exhausting than any kind of research. But I didn't want to whine about it, so I just responded with an awkward smile, and Vince smiled back at me. It was that disinterested look again. His eyes were sharp, but I couldn't tell what was going on in his head.

“Thanks for everything today, Vince. Seriously. And thanks in advance for putting up with me tomorrow.”

“You plan on going out tomorrow, too? Didn’t your boss say everything would be cleared up in the morning?”

Yeah, but I wasn’t just doing research for fun. I was working out my plan for tomorrow. I bowed my head and apologized for planning to drag him around again tomorrow. Vince looked a little taken aback for a moment, but after he made a mysterious comment to himself—it was some other language, not English or Japanese, like when I got his attention earlier—he continued to speak, with his face turned toward the wall.

“Just one thing. There’s a legend about a fox struggling to get out of a hole, but he uses too much force and falls in deeper. Do you understand the implications of that story?”

“I think so, at least. It’s about how when it rains, it pours, right? And to not let that happen.”

“Well, I guess. Although if you could willfully prevent such a thing from happening, you probably wouldn’t be here right now. But I guess even if you were to fall into a very deep hole, a handsome and cool and clever someone would come down to neatly haul you back out again, so you have very little reason to hesitate.”

His words pierced me to the core.

He was right.

If Richard hadn’t been here...no, that was a pointless hypothetical, considering Richard was the reason I decided to pursue a career in this field in the first place. But if I’d gotten myself into this situation all by myself, I would have been utterly helpless. I could kiss my future goodbye with that stain on my record.

How much longer was I going to casually rely on him coming to my rescue?

“At any rate, get some rest. Good night. My shift starts at eight, but I’m still in charge of keeping an eye on you, so if you get up, my boss will call me. Try to get some sleep.”

I bowed my head and said I would, and the young Chinese man left me. In the back of the security office were two individual cells, probably set up in case they had to hold men and women at the same time, furnished with bunk beds. I borrowed one of the rooms. There was a security camera installed in the ceiling. I was thankful for that. I had had enough false accusations for one trip. There was a single blanket, the toilet was just exposed, the curtains didn’t fully close, and I didn’t have a change of clothes, but I would manage. Westerners don’t seem to have any qualms about sleeping without any clothes on, and I guess this wasn’t a climate where you’d freeze, even if you were stripped down to your skivvies.

I closed my eyes and tried to force myself to sleep. The faces of my friends back in Japan came into my mind. I imagined telling them the story of this trip and laughing about it. I needed to get some sleep to make that a reality. So that my mind would be able to function tomorrow.

And I couldn’t let myself forget that I came here to help Richard.

And I wasn’t about to stand for the reverse.

■ Day 3 ■

I T WAS THE THIRD DAY since the cruise had begun.

This afternoon the ship would be docking at a port—the time limit for my stay of execution, as it were.

I didn't have an alarm clock to wake me up, but I got up bright and early as usual, then received a piece of bread in a plastic bag with an expiration date of February of next year, a mysterious beverage with a finely tuned nutritional composition, and a pack of nuts. I put my hands together and dug in. The morning sun rose up out of the ocean like a big ball of fire as I finished my meal. I thought I was used to big sunrises like this from my time in Sri Lanka, but no matter how many times I witnessed it, it was still a beautiful sight to behold. I wished I could savor this beauty without any clouds looming over my head.

I focused on exercising until eight o'clock and got permission to use the security staff's shower. As I headed back into the main room of the security office with my hair still wet, Vince was waiting for me. He had a paper bag in his right hand for some reason.

"Good morning, Mr. Nakata. Would you like a fresh shirt? I'm not sure if it's the right size, admittedly."

He handed me the bag, which held a white button-up and undershirt. I couldn't have been more grateful. Genuinely. I bowed my head and told him I'd get it cleaned before I returned it, and Vince laughed, saying he hoped I'd have the opportunity to do so. With any luck, I wasn't jinxing myself...but I hoped so, too.

I went back into the cell, took off the shirt I'd been wearing for two days straight, and carefully put on the clothes Vince had lent me. The shirt was a little on the small side, but it would work.

When I got back, Vince was talking to his boss—a different person from yesterday—and Richard was discussing the security footage. They were giving him the runaround about the person in charge of the cameras not being in yet.

It didn't seem like he was going to be able to get to work without that irritating "uncle" of his around. My mouth warped into a frown as I stared at him, and the beautiful man turned around, giving me a graceful nod. His eyes looked tired. He probably would have liked to have gotten a little more sleep.

I waited until he was done talking to his boss before I addressed Vince.

"Sorry for springing this on you all of a sudden, but would you mind if we went up to the exhibition on the second floor now? I'm curious about the jewelry. We can look at the jewelry in the exhibit even after the shows for the duration of the cruise, right?"

I actually confirmed that was the case yesterday. At least according to that Spanish employee, as long as you had an invitation from Gargantua, you could come and go from the exhibit as much as you liked during the cruise.

However, unlike the main event shows, there were fewer pieces on display. They probably didn't want to have the full security detail running the whole time. That made sense. I asked her if different pieces would be on display at different times, and she told me yes with a smile. Although that smile was definitely directed at Vince, not me.

For example, the Queen of Hearts would only be on display through this morning.

"I don't mind, but it's too early. The exhibit doesn't open until ten."

Even the jewelry shops in Ginza took the jewelry out of their shop window displays after operating hours and put them into storage. They were too expensive to leave unguarded, after all.

"Actually, I'd like to see the exhibit while it's empty, too, if that's at all possible. Assuming I can get permission."

Vince gave me another intense look and consulted with his boss. He told me that they gave the okay only as long as he was with me. Thank goodness.

I waved to Richard and left the security office. I didn't have it in me to smile, I

just hoped I didn't have a frightening look on my face. A certain someone came in just as I was leaving, looking very pleased with himself and babbling about chess. If my eyes weren't playing tricks on me, he was wearing a gold lamé suit today. He had a bouquet of flowers in his hands and completely ignored me. He must've come up with a good move.

I wished I could figure out a move like that myself. Something to break this case wide open.

No matter what happened today, I was going to be presented with some hard choices.

"Are you coming, Mr. Nakata?"

"Yeah, I'll be right there."

I turned around, urged on by Vince's comment, and the heavy door shut behind me.

Three security guards were stationed at the exhibit on the second floor. The precious jewelry still hadn't arrived, but it would soon, so I guess the amount of security seemed about right. Vince greeted them and showed his ID. They told him that he could come in, but I wouldn't be allowed to. I had figured as much.

On either side of the three entrances were black plastic gates. They really did look like the metal detectors they had at the airport. But they didn't go off, even after a phone was left sitting in one of them. I guess they weren't on.

One of the guards looked at me like "What are you doing?" and I smiled and left it alone. Vince, who had gone in alone to check things out, came back out and shrugged.

"It doesn't look like there's anything out of the ordinary. It seems like we're the only people who've come by this morning too."

"I see."

So he hadn't come yet. But he would be here soon. Probably.

That was, if my wishful thinking wasn't totally off the mark.

I felt like I was about to walk into the final interview for a job. I looked toward the wall and took a deep breath, and Vince cleared his throat. He was probably trying to remind me not to do anything reckless. When I turned around, apologizing, I was greeted by a pair of angry black eyes that were much closer than I'd expected.

"I'm not about to argue that you have some obligation to explain yourself to me, but I'm curious, just what are you thinking? I *am* in the middle of this, too."

I couldn't blame him.

I still wasn't confident about my hunch, and I didn't want to discuss it publicly, but we were speaking Japanese. I never imagined that something that was so natural while I was living in Japan would carry such significance, but there weren't really any people on the ship other than me, Vince, and Richard who could understand the language.

But just to be safe, I looked around and moved about ten meters away from the exhibition area before opening my mouth.

"Um, well, this is probably just my own crazy idea, and I don't have any proof."

But I really couldn't get the rumors about the vice president finding a job with a rival company out of my head.

Yesterday evening, I had approached the concierge with a meeting request, but my hopes were dashed when I was told they didn't do that sort of thing. So I devoted myself to gathering information in the internet café. The other thing I couldn't stop thinking about was what Vince had reported from the locker room—"He's a man whose only talent is taking orders from others." I felt like following orders from your superiors in a company was kind of a given, but that sounded like ridicule to me.

Even as I dug through every English article I could find online, I couldn't find

any criticism of Mr. Karlsbrook. Image was everything, especially for a company involved in the jewelry industry. It made sense, given the nature of the industry. But judging by the atmosphere at the show yesterday, I got the sense everyone knew what he was like...and just didn't talk about it.

But that all meant there had to be someone who knew about Mr. Karlsbrook's behavior and was managing it. Someone going around cleaning up his messes and talking off the record.

It made me wonder if that might have had something to do with the vice president, too.

The reason for the vice president and Mr. Karlsbrook's disagreement as presented in the press was the abrupt shift in M&A talks. I started to hypothesize that if there *was* some sort of bombshell, maybe it had something to do with that.

Even if there are degrees to this sort of thing, I think it would be really difficult to hold a massive grudge against someone you only have a professional relationship with. It's pretty easy to compartmentalize work relationships as just that. But if you were being treated unpredictably by someone you were reluctantly cooperating with to keep a dark secret out of the public eye, then...

It really wouldn't be that hard to understand why you'd view them with hostility and loathing.

"Hmm. But what's any of that got to do with the jewelry show?"

"I was thinking it wouldn't have been odd for him to be there...but I didn't see him at the industry show at all. I don't think I just missed him, either. I recognized him in an instant when you showed me those photos yesterday."

"Maybe he had some other business to attend to?"

"On a luxury cruise? Sure he would have wrapped it up before the show at least."

But yesterday, when I secretly went back to speak to the Gargantua

employees again, they said they'd seen the vice president. It was at the end of the show. He was greeting all of the industry guests personally. So that meant he arrived late. Conveniently after Richard and I, along with a certain someone who's been pursuing Richard, were absent. Maybe his main objective was to target a time when Mr. Karlsbrook wasn't there, or maybe he just didn't want to have to be witness to his premeditated sexual harassment, or maybe both factored into it.

There was that report about the alarm going off, too. It must've been around then.

"Wait just a minute. Are you suggesting that the vice president was the one who tripped the alarm?"

"I think it's possible. It would make sense if he waited for a moment when there were fewer guards."

"But why? What would he have been doing?"

Vince raised a quizzical eyebrow. I wasn't confident, not at all, but...

"Well, for example, what if he was trying to do that 3D modeling thing you told me about yesterday...to steal the Queen of Hearts's data," I mumbled.

After a beat, Vince's shoulders drooped.

"You're joking, right? There couldn't have been a worse time for that. What kind of person tries to take a 3D scan of something with all eyes on them?"

"But if the only opportunity he'd have would be when the piece was on display, maybe he had no choice. Plus, depending on the type of device, it might not even stand out that much."

"What?"

The other thing I researched at the internet café, besides news on Gargantua, was information about the figure sculptors whom Vince had told me about. Apparently, they were worried about a 3D modeling company that was trying to scan their works, and they were sharing information with their colleagues on a

blog about how people were trying to do malicious scans. And that taught me some things.

Like how if a piece was in a case that gave a full 360-degree view, it would be possible to get very detailed data about it.

And how, since cameras that could film when hidden in a pocket and other kinds of extremely small cameras had been developed, it had become more of a concern.

The sneaky method I saw described involved sneaking a tiny camera in beforehand, on the side of the exhibition case where the glass and base met, so it wouldn't stand out too much. The janitorial staff seemed to be cooperating with the modeling company, and once the piece was placed inside the case that had been tampered with, they could start the scanning process with a remote control. Then, after the exhibition ended, the janitorial staff could retrieve the camera.

The metal detector alarm went off in the room with the Queen of Hearts. If the scan finished, the culprit would be in the clear, but what if it was interrupted?

They'd have to finish this morning, before the piece was taken off display.

Vince looked like he had a headache. He gave me a sidelong glance as he arranged his shiny locks with his fingers.

"Huh. So, according to your theory, the metal detector sounding yesterday wasn't due to a malfunction but in response to some device designed to steal the data of the jewelry on display being smuggled into the exhibition. And you think the person who did it is the vice president, who gave you a funny look, and that his reason for doing so was to procure a 'sweetener' to improve his prospects of getting hired by another company?"

"It's just a theory. I'm not confident about it at all..."

"I get it. I'm glad I'm the only person here who can understand Japanese. You

wouldn't want to add defamation to your list of charges."

"I know that. And I know that my theory is weaker than a house of cards, but —"

But if I'm right, and we wait here, the vice president might show up.

Ultimately, that was all I was after.

I didn't really care if he was trying to 3D-scan anything. The issue was that he might have been aware of Mr. Karlsbrook's wrongdoings. That's why I wanted to see him. But I couldn't. But if I did manage to meet him and he was willing to hear me out, he might understand the situation Richard and I had gotten ourselves into, and even if he couldn't help us directly, he might be able to give us some kind of advantage. I knew I was building a mille-feuille from hell from layers of conjecture and delusional thinking, piled high with hope, but it was the only lead I had to cling to until this ship reached its next port at Charlotte Amaile. Or was there something else? Anything other than just waiting?

Jeffrey said he'd help, and Richard was sure he could resolve the issue with the security camera footage. But this was an entirely separate issue—I felt like I might just die if I didn't try to do everything I possibly could until then. Even if it turned out that right now the vice president was sound asleep, best friends with Mr. Karlsbrook, and not even thinking about finding another job.

I hung my head and apologized to Vince for dragging him out so early in the morning, and Vince looked surprised.

"Why? I was pretty impressed. I hadn't even considered any of that."

"Huh? But what about the defamation thing?"

"I was being realistic. You can't just say things like that. You're not some famous detective who can gather all the suspects in one room and demonstrate your deductive reasoning skills. But I don't take issue with the discussion itself."

"...Admittedly, a big question is why the vice president of the company didn't just ask a subordinate to give him the 3D data for the jewelry piece and decided

to go the 3D-scan route instead.”

“Huh?”

“Of course he couldn’t do that,” Vince said rapidly. I gave him a confused look, and he sighed. “If there was a system to do that, all those famous workshops’ design secrets wouldn’t have stayed secret until now. There’s no way the creator of the files could just send them along to anyone at their own discretion. No way. Absolutely not. What, do you have tofu for brains?” he asked with a completely serious look on his face. “It’s impressive that you came up with that whole theory without even knowing that.”

I probably shouldn’t accept that literally as a compliment. I just felt deeply ashamed. I avoided eye contact and kept bowing like an automaton, and Vince laughed. His voice sounded much more tender than I’d heard it so far.

“But seriously, you’re something else, Mr. Nakata.”

“Huh?”

“Because you never give up.”

“...You think so?”

Really it was just that I was excessively careless.

I couldn’t forgive myself for causing more harm to someone I cared about because of something foolish like that.

That’s why I had no choice but to keep fighting.

I forced a chuckle as I explained that I had a lot of work to do on myself, and Vince suddenly turned away from me.

“I think people like you are a hundred times more respectable than people who think they have no flaws at all.”

“You really think so?”

“Oh, that wasn’t a compliment, to be clear, just a clarification. Just FYI.”

“...Thank you very much!”

I thanked him in the same tone that an enthusiastic server at a gastropub might. It felt difficult to directly convey my gratitude to him. Maybe he was just shy, though.

The two of us continued to wait in an inconspicuous spot. I didn't know what would happen, but I couldn't think of anything else to do, either. Nothing might come of it, but thankfully, Vince agreed to keep me company.

But contrary to my expectations, the alarm bell sounded. We had been waiting for about thirty minutes. We looked over toward the exhibit at the same time, and Vince stuffed his phone back in his pocket. The alarm seemed to be coming not from the exhibition hall itself but the surrounding entrances, and two of the three guards stationed at the exhibit came out of the room as they checked their radios. Vince clicked his tongue. He seemed to be suggesting that things could get dicey.

"Vince, could you hide with me?"

"...It's my job to keep an eye on you. Obviously, I'm going to stick with you."

I gave him a little bow and ran up the nearest flight of stairs, crouching behind a chair next to the handrail of the upper floor. The entrances to the exhibition were fully visible from that position, and if I hurried, I could get down the stairs and into the room in under a minute. I had picked the spot yesterday.

From Gargantua's perspective, what Vince should have done was to assist the one remaining guard in the exhibit. But from my perspective, this was our chance. Something was happening. The Queen of Hearts wasn't in her case yet, but I knew where she would be displayed and that anyone would be free to go in when she was.

The one remaining guard looked in the direction his colleagues had disappeared, unsure of what to do. He seemed anxious. There was a spot way in the back of the exhibit hall that wasn't within visual range.

I kept myself concealed as I watched what would happen.

And there he was. A man in a suit. He wasn't wearing a mask or a balaclava or anything like that, so I could clearly see his features.

I held back a groan and whispered.

"Look, Vince, it's—it's him."

"I know."

It was the vice president himself.

I felt dizzy. This is what I thought would happen. I thought it could be him, but the more I thought about it, the more I started to figure that, if he had the time to organize a plot like this, surely he'd send an underling to do his dirty work while he pulled the strings behind the scenes.

But that was actually him in the flesh. He looked like he was going about it very brazenly, too.

As I was trying to figure out what he planned to do if he was caught, I came to the conclusion that I had it all backward. If you're an important VIP, it'd be a lot easier to look like you're not doing anything suspicious by acting more openly than trying to be secretive about it. If one of the guards tried to stop you, you could just explain it away. You'd need balls of steel to pull it off, though.

The besuited man seemed to be concealing a box-shaped object in his pocket. It was probably smaller than a smartphone and about as thick as the palm of your hand. The alarm didn't sound. The detectors for that room weren't on yet. After he was sure that none of the guards were looking, he strode around the Queen of Hearts's case, took the object out of his pocket, nimbly opened it up, and affixed something to the enclosure. It was extremely tiny. Was that really a camera? I'd heard of cameras that operated on a timer, but were there really ones *that* tiny? No, this wasn't the time to get hung up on details like that.

He attached three little dots in different spots around the case before he started to leave. If I was going to try it, this was my only shot.

"Excuse me! Sir! Do you have a moment? I'd like to talk to you about

something.”

The vice president froze, startled, when I called out to him. A few moments later, he retrieved whatever he’d stuck on the case without a word and returned the objects to his pocket. Then he speedily walked out of the room. Crap. I’d wanted to make contact without scaring him, but this looked like I was trying to catch him red-handed.

The vice president sped up to a jog as I started coming down the stairs, and Vince began to run like a black wind. I guess I had no choice but to start running, too.

The man in the suit began running away. *Wait, please.* Even if, for the sake of argument, he really was doing what I imagined, the number one thing I wanted to ask him had nothing to do with that. None of this would be a problem if I could explain what Mr. Karlsbrook was up to while running.

I ran, begging him to stop because I just wanted to talk, but the vice president got into an elevator that was just about to leave. “Stairs,” Vince urged me on, but I went down too far and had to go back up a flight. I never imagined I’d end up in a high-speed race against a guy in his best suit. Let’s hope it didn’t get torn or anything.

As we split up on the lobby floor to search for the target we’d lost sight of, we heard the familiar sound of that buzzer. It was one of the metal detectors. This time, the alarm was shorter. But where had it come from? The exhibit shouldn’t have extended out here. I hurriedly ran in the direction the sound had come from and arrived at the far back of the lobby floor.

There was a large metal detector gate along with sparkling electric lights and security guards. Despite what you might think, it wasn’t a staff-only area at all.

“...The casino.”

“Indeed it is. I think he’s got us beat. Our company doesn’t have jurisdiction over this area.”

“Does another company run it?”

“There are specialty firms that handle attractions like this one.”

The welcome lights were blinding. It wasn't even noon yet, but it was already packed with older folks in casual clothes. I guess there wasn't a dress code. I could see a figure in a business suit in the back.

Vince spoke to a security guard in sunglasses who was considerably better dressed than he was, asking if he'd seen Gargantua's vice president. The guard initially gave him a puzzled look, but Vince pulled up a photo of the vice president on his phone, and the guard replied, “Oh, you mean the guy who just came in?” as he pointed to the back of the establishment.

Why would he run in here, of all places? Was there some kind of VIP suite that would be impossible for us to follow him into or something? Vince just clicked his tongue and folded his arms, looking quite menacing.

“...I see.”

“What's wrong? Can we not go in?”

“Mr. Nakata, can you see that? Over there.”

I strained to look in the direction his white-gloved hand was pointing. The nearest thing I could see was a line of slot machines, kind of like you might see in a pachinko parlor, behind which were three roulette tables and a bar counter, and then beyond that...

...was something that looked like a billiards table with no balls. A man in a suit was sitting with four people who looked like tourists. They seemed to be playing a game of cards.

“That's a win-through table.”

“What's that?”

“Hm, how to explain it? Basically, once you sit down at the table, you can't leave until the game ends. No one bets any serious money on any hands, but a gallery typically forms, and it serves as a useful tool to attract customers. It's

probably the best place you could pick in here if you want to stay put.”

“Until the game ends? What does that mean?”

“Typically until someone wins big and everyone else concedes, or until the ship makes it to port.”

So it was probably going to take a while. I guess this is what people meant when they said that a bad first impression could really cost you.

“What should we do? He probably thinks we’re here to arrest him.”

“Well, why else would we be here? I’m a security guard working for Gargantua. It’s my job to catch suspicious people.”

I wasn’t really in a position to tell him that’s not what I wanted. I just wanted to talk to him. And if I just ignored the position we were in, Vince might even be punished for neglecting his duties. This was exactly the kind of situation jewelry companies hired security guards for in the first place. But I never thought I’d end up being forced to eat my mille-feuille from hell built on a foundation of sand.

I suggested that we go into the casino and make up some excuse to lure him out, like saying that his mother’s in critical condition, and figure out the rest if he agrees to talk. Vince just looked a bit displeased and laughed.

“It’s an issue of political power and time. The person with the most political might on this ship is that man with an antique for a brain and a weakness for loud clothing, and in the absence of the CEO, the vice president would be second. What if he plays dumb, even if we remind him that he hightailed it as fast as he could out of the exhibition? Maybe he’ll indulge you if you harass him long enough, but I’m sitting this one out. I’m just a hired security guard. A step or two out of line and I’m losing a reference for my next job, and I’d rather avoid that.”

“I’d take the—”

“And then comes the issue of timing. The ship will be arriving at its next port

in about two hours. People who intend to disembark typically start getting ready about an hour before, so in practical terms, you have an hour.”

“Huh?”

I checked my wristwatch. It was eleven o’clock. The ship should be docking at one. My expression darkened, and Vince smiled with only his lips.

“...Pretty clever for doing something so stupid.”

“Are you talking about me?”

“No, I mean the vice president. If I were him, I’d stick to the casino until the ship docked, and then I’d disappear into the crowd to disembark. And once he’s off the ship, even once, nothing on him would count as conclusive evidence. That would be the end of it.”

“B-but if we have an hour, then surely there’s something—”

“Do you know how long the game at the table he’s sitting at could go on for? While one round might be over in five minutes, there’s no limit on the number of rounds, and if he keeps on winning, he could hang out there for upward of ten hours.”

So, he was basically over there saying that he doesn’t want to talk to anybody about anything, end of story.

Vince said that, for the time being, he’d be radioing for backup. It seemed like he had no intention of setting foot inside the casino. Admittedly, it would be next to impossible to interrogate the vice president in a place like that. Even if we tried to drag him out, the casino being the kind of place it is, if we tried anything rough, the guards would immediately get involved.

I had two hours. Or, more realistically, one hour and change.

Mr. Karlsbrook had said that he would treat me as the culprit if I couldn’t prove that the charges were false by then. This wasn’t a joke. I was going to keep fighting even if that happened, but still. Awful thoughts filled my head. If that happened, then—

If only I could get someone who knew about Mr. Karlsbrook's devious scheme beforehand to tell the truth. Even if I was really off the mark and couldn't get him to say anything, I had to try.

I checked my pocket. My wallet hadn't been confiscated, and it was in good health. I could make this work somehow. Even if it was a kind of dangerous strategy.

"Hang on, what are you doing? What are you thinking?"

"Sorry, I need to find a counter to buy some chips."

"You what?"

I'd never been inside a casino before. But judging from the people carrying trays of colorful chips, just like those silver balls at a pachinko parlor, it seemed clear that I was going to need some of those chips for my strategy to work.

Vince looked at me like I was speaking an alien language, and I gestured at him apologetically. But I could handle the rest of this. He could just stand by and watch.

"I'll do my best to be back soon!"

"Mr. Nakata! Hey! Mr. Nakata!"

I handed my watch to the security guard and walked through the gate. My phone had been confiscated, so the only metal on me was my belt. At the counter, I showed my ID and exchanged 100,000 yen for chips. I felt like I was losing my mind, money-wise, but I wondered if it was enough. I had enough money left in my wallet to buy another round of the same amount of chips if I needed more. I didn't know what might happen on this trip, so I made sure to bring just enough cash to get by, in case my flight was canceled, just like a certain beautiful deity had taught me. And now it was coming in handy.

I approached the table in the back with a big smile on my face. I asked the dealer, a black woman with dreadlocks, if I could join, and she warned that this was a special table and that I wouldn't be able to leave until either someone

won or I conceded. She looked at me with a smile that would make anyone's heart skip a beat, adding that the game would end in about an hour, once the announcements to prepare to disembark started. I felt oddly relieved to be having an actual conversation in English with a person whose skin was a totally different color from mine. While I had been immersed in a totally new culture before this trip, I couldn't really communicate with anyone there.

I said *yes* with a nod.

There were six people at the table, including the dealer and the vice president. Sitting next to me was an older man wearing a Hawaiian shirt with a pineapple pattern and a group of three middle-aged folks who seemed to be friends—two men and a woman who was probably married to one of them. They were all friendly and greeted me as I took my seat.

The vice president looked right at me and smiled with his sparkling white teeth. It was unsettling. Surely he knew I had been the one chasing him. He looked much younger than he had the first time we'd met—a man who was still building up his career. Upon closer inspection, I noticed that he was in pretty good shape. He must hit the gym regularly. Was he really up to what I thought he was? Was it all just one big misunderstanding and he wasn't doing anything to undermine the company? I was visibly anxious, but I smiled back at him. People can smile even if they're not actually happy, after all.

The dealer asked if I needed the rules explained, to which I replied, "Yes, please." Although I had already made up my mind to play, regardless of what the rules were.

There were five community cards on the table. Everyone could see these. Each player had a hand of two cards that only they could see. You'd use the seven cards available to you to make a hand, competing against all the other players at the table. The first person who was dealt their cards would rotate around the table in a clockwise manner with each round, with the first player paying in one dollar in chips, the second person paying in two dollars in chips. These were a kind of wager. They were forced bets, so I guess it was either a

way to get all the players to pay in as the starting position rotated around, or maybe more like a minimum bet.

When I heard that, I understood that it was a poker table of some sort. You win by making the strongest hand possible with five cards. Two of a kind, three of a kind, straight flush—the hands had all these cool names. One of the older guys in my exam prep course in college was really into this one gambling manga. He invited me to play a game and beat me handily. You never knew when something you learned would end up being useful later.

In the version we played then, every player got five cards. In this one, all players shared the five community cards, and it was more about predicting your opponents' hands. I nodded, saying I understood, and the dealer began dealing cards.

I remembered something Grandma had said to me.

I was in sixth grade. I couldn't remember how this even came up now, but Grandma was in a better mood than normal and told her young grandson something a little unusual: She asked me if I knew the trick to never losing when gambling. My eyes went wide and I asked her if there really was a trick like that, and she assured me that there was. She opened by explaining what she meant by "never losing when gambling."

I looked at my hands. The dealer asked me, "What'll it be?" but I didn't really know what she was asking, so I just nodded to continue. I would soon come to understand what it was actually about, though.

The dealer dealt the five community cards and began to reveal them one by one. A jack of clubs. A three of hearts. An eight of spades. Then she paused again. She revealed the next card: a seven of spades. Then the last one: a five of spades. Three people announced, "Fold." I guess that meant, "I concede this round." The old man next to me told me that you say, "Surrender," when you really want to give up. I guess that's what you said when you wanted to leave the table? I'd like to avoid that, if at all possible.

It was just me, the vice president, and one more person left in the round. I decided to wait and see first. “Showdown,” the dealer declared.

With my two cards and the five community cards, I had a pair of eights. The old man in the pineapple shirt next to me had a pair of threes, and the vice president showed two spade cards, making a flush with the community cards. The vice president won.

The chips were then collected.

I see. So, that's how it works.

The cycle began again with the dealer starting with a different person. Community cards. Hole cards. Fold. Bet. Raise. Fold. Showdown.

I had two pairs. I called, “Raise,” making my bet ten dollars. The vice president and I squared off against each other, but I won.

Grandma's surefire way to win was simple.

Her definition of not losing when gambling was “earning more money than you lose,” and she explained the trick to it in a way that even an elementary schooler could understand. Just keep doubling your bets.

For example, if you bet 100 yen and lost, you should bet 200 yen on the next round, not 100 yen again, because even if you won, the money you got back wouldn't put you in the black again. If you bet a thousand, two thousand, and three thousand, and lost each of those bets, bet twelve thousand next, because if you won, you'd get twelve thousand back. In other words, even if you kept losing and losing and losing, as long as you kept adding that to your next bet, you'd eventually win it all back.

Because gambling was all about probability.

And in the world of probability, as long as the game was still going, there was still a chance you'd win at least once.

And that's all you need. You just have to win once.

It made sense to my child brain, and although I had no intention of violating

Hiromi's admonitions against gambling, drinking, and smoking, I was really glad I had a surefire way to win tucked away in my heart. It had been well over ten years, but I still remembered it to this day.

And my current objective wasn't just winning once. Anyone could stay at the table as long as they hadn't run out of money. I didn't know how much longer I could keep going, but I wasn't out of chips yet. I just had to do as much as I could. It was all down to luck. If only both the man in a suit sitting across from me and I were equally blessed by the goddess of lu—

"Fold."

Huh?

In the third round, the vice president folded. Saying that word meant forfeiting the round. That made sense—strategically sitting out the round when you didn't have a good hand. What did Grandma say to do in situations like this again?

While still reeling from the shock, I lost with my pair. While you may only have two cards in your hand, there were still five community cards to work with. But if I didn't have anything good or didn't think I could win, I should just fold. I decided to do that next time. Right?

If, hypothetically, either I or the vice president just kept on folding, or folded on alternate rounds, wouldn't that be a surefire way to win?

There wasn't any point in actually playing, was there?

I had to wonder exactly what kind of gambling Grandma had in mind when she gave me that advice. Probably the kind where there was no in-between. Like where you just had to pick red or black or evens or odds.

It was pretty late for this realization, but it was starting to hit me that poker was actually pretty hard. Colorful chips were lined up on the green tabletop that reminded me of the inside of a jewelry box. The dealer's hands moved so skillfully. It was obfuscated by all this, but those chips were money. And money

was important. But on this table, that money could disappear just as easily as tissue paper being blown away in the wind.

I didn't know what to do. I was a total amateur when I couldn't use my surefire strategy. I wondered how good the vice president was at poker. How would you even measure how good someone was at gambling to begin with? Was it like hardness in gemstones? If he's a sapphire, maybe I'm more like a peridot. My mind was starting to grasp for distractions. No, I needed to figure out some kind of strategy before I ended up penniless. What if there was a fire or something? What if I made a strategic retreat and started shouting about a fire? Everyone would probably try to run, right?

But that wouldn't do anything to prevent the vice president from executing the plan that Vince hypothesized: that he had to escape by disappearing into a crowd. And I had little hope of getting him to talk about Mr. Karlsbrook's propensity for sexual harassment amidst all these happy vacationers. Worst case, I might be thrown out. I needed something. How could I get him—and just him—to leave? And then question him. Before people started moving. How much longer did I have? How much longer?

“Is something the matter?”

Round four. Oh no, my mind went totally blank and I didn't pay attention to anything that was happening. I checked my hand and the community cards. Surely I could make some kind of hand. No, I couldn't. I announced that I folded, and the two dollars worth of chips I'd put out were collected. Oh, oh no. The vice president folded, too, so I guess that meant the dealer won. It was far from a small possibility that the dealer could end up taking everything in the end.

I've never considered myself to be a particularly strong person. Ever since I was born, I was told that I'm reckless, careless, and that the person I'm talking to has no idea what I'm saying more times than there are stars in the sky. So I'm pretty sure that's accurate, and I'm not going to pretend I don't believe it myself. But this was kind of not the place for making careless mistakes. Or being reckless.

I didn't know what to do.

Actually, where did Vince go? He said it was his job to watch me, but surely he was done radioing his boss by now. So that meant there was a chance that the guards might be able to use their power to take the vice president in for questioning. That was probably the last thing he wanted to do, considering his future job prospects, but maybe there was some faint hope. I scanned the room for him. Was he here? Or not? There he was.

The handsome Asian security guard was standing just behind the dealer, in front of a decorative jukebox. He was watching me closely. I was glad he was watching the outcome of my foolishness. He was holding his radio. I guess he was done making his call.

His slender hand pointed at me.

No, wait, *behind* me.

I turned around to see.

"Could you perhaps use a little help?"

I felt almost like time had stopped when I heard that elegant, perfect Japanese.

He was wearing a white button-up and a pale grey suit. The rich colors of the furniture and walls in the casino had a fall or even winter mood about them, but it felt like it was spring just in his immediate vicinity. His golden hair and blue eyes glimmered like a light rain, and in the dim light of the lamps in the room he seemed almost like a mirage. The older man in the Hawaiian shirt let out a little "Wow!" and chuckled. I wanted to shout the same myself. But at like thirty times the volume.

Richard.

"...Honestly, I could seriously use some help."

"Does your idiocy know no bounds, fool?"

Fool. That word didn't really feel apropos for anyone but a certain Sengoku-

era somebody from Owari, but I guess in Richard's estimation, it seemed like a perfectly reasonable fit for a Japanese person living in the twenty-first century. I did have a tendency to keep my head in the clouds. The dealer offered Richard a seat, but Richard smiled and said, "No." He continued in English:

"I'm a friend of his. I'll be betting with his chips. I'd be happy to pay the entry fee if required, but would you mind if we played as a team?"

The dealer replied that she didn't mind, before bashfully averting her eyes and smiling. Richard's face was right there next to my right ear, but I didn't have the courage to look at him at such a close distance to see what his expression looked like. He took the dealer's hand with one hand and gripped the seat of the stool I was sitting in with the other. I whispered to him as he was leaning over the table.

"...What happened with that creep?"

"Just shut up for a bit."

"Okay."

Richard played two rounds in silence. He folded the first time and raised the second—that meant increasing the bet. It felt like a warmup for him. But I felt like I was getting to witness a really rare sight—the chips in front of me were my money, and Richard was spending it like water. I felt kinda happy, but I was also about two times as worried. Was this really going to be okay? He certainly wasn't acting like a total beginner, but I shouldn't overestimate him. Richard did come from an extremely wealthy family. Taking a bit of a cash loss might not feel like much to him, so if his strategy was to keep betting big to bankrupt the vice president, he'd probably owe me more money than he'd spent treating me to meals at Shiseido Parlor in the past.

By the way, after Richard taking me to Shiseido Parlor became a regular thing, I realized I'd memorized the prices of their lunch menu and cake sets, tax included, at some point. I could tell at a glance, just from looking at the numbers in the account book, when he had treated me and what he had

treated me to. One cake set, one curry rice, one strawberry parfait. In the blink of an eye, three Shiseido Parlor dinners' worth of money had vanished.

"Did you know that they say that poker is a mental sport?"

And then Richard suddenly launched into an explanation. In English. Which meant that the intended audience wasn't just me.

"Calling it a sport implies there's a score being kept and that you can train for it. And that skill can be measured. But there's also another large factor that we simply cannot ignore. I know a jewelry company executive who's won big in Vegas and who would be better acquainted with this than I am: luck. Just as in all sports, ultimately who wins comes down to who is more blessed by the goddess of luck. Raise."

Richard raised the bet. One of the party of three resigned from the game. The man in the Hawaiian shirt told me it was nice playing with me and gave me a little nod. After a brief exchange with the dealer, he withdrew from the game. I returned the gesture to bid him farewell.

Hands were revealed, along with the word *showdown*. Richard had a three of a kind with the community cards, I think? No, wait, there was another pair, too. Which meant—

"Full house. Seems I have a little luck on my side."

The vice president gently touched the outside of his pocket when he heard Richard's almost-whisper of a voice.

The game continued. Richard began to initiate sophisticated small talk with his beautiful accent, as if the silence had grown too awkward. He told the story of an old company with a tyrannical leader and the man who supported him. Things had been going well for the company, but the man at the top kept pushing dirty work onto the other man. Even if standards were different back then, the constant harassment and its subsequent coverup became routine.

Another person withdrew from the game.

Perhaps the dirty work had been paying off, because the man steadily climbed the corporate ladder until he reached the number two spot, but that was as far as he got. And he was hung out to dry once the company was about to be acquired by a larger firm. Just like discarding an unwanted card.

The vice president's expression never changed as he listened to the story.

Two pairs. One pair. Folding for a bit. I guess poker's the kind of game where you might spend a lot of time not doing anything. Or at least that was my assumption, but Richard called a raise with a refreshing smile on his face and no hand to speak of, then took the pot. Three matching cards were called a three of a kind. I had to wonder if I'd ever use this information again in my life. The last other player withdrew.

The remaining players were just me and the vice president.

The vice president announced his hand under his breath: a three of a kind, all tens.

Richard let out a little sigh and revealed his cards. The first card was the three of hearts. You know, that heart symbol didn't always symbolize true love. I've heard that it used to represent a fruit. But neither fruit nor love were appropriate representations of Richard now, but an actual human heart—like how it's over for a prey animal if it gets caught by a vital area. His second card was also a heart. A face card: the queen of hearts. I felt like a character in a folk tale violating a taboo not to look at something as I looked at the face of the man next to me.

The man presenting his merciless flush of hearts had such a beautiful yet indifferent look in his eyes as he stared intently at the man across from him.

"Shall we continue?"

Richard always had fire in his eyes when he got angry. The melanin in his irises gave their blue a sort of undulating wave pattern, and when I looked at him, I got goosebumps. It made me feel like I'd laid eyes on something no mortal should ever see. Beautiful things really are incredibly powerful.

“The tables had turned” wasn’t the most accurate description.

The pile of chips before Richard grew. The vice president and I had been using the same size container for our chips, but there was hardly any left in his—it was nearly empty. The dealer seemed a bit concerned and had been gently suggesting that it might be about time to stop, but he thoroughly ignored her. How many minutes did we have left until the announcement about docking? I looked at my watch. Fifteen minutes left. We still had time until people started moving.

For a bit, the vice president seemed to be staring at something only he could see before he looked down at the queen of hearts on the table, let out a sigh, and raised both of his hands. It was a much more informal way of conveying that he was out. And then he opened his mouth for the first time. He spoke to Richard, not me.

“My name is Marnuit Patel. Would you mind if I asked yours?”

“Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian.”

“That’s not the name I know you by. Aren’t you essentially the Earl of Claremont’s third son? A man possessed of such impressive charm that he’d be a match for Her Majesty’s Cullinan Diamond, who could wrap every fool on Earth around his little finger with so much as a sigh? I’ve also heard that the women who orbit him are liable to start fistfights with each other, and he’s been barred from several salons as a result. I wonder if you might know *his* name? Rumor has it, he’s rather fed up with his own beauty and has been living out his life away from prying eyes cherishing precious gems, but I never would have imagined I’d be granted an audience with the man himself here of all places. It has, of course, encouraged the idiotic behavior of my boss as well.”

“I can’t believe a professional in the jewelry industry would dare compare a beauty that induces sighs to the unfathomable beauty of a diamond scattering light in myriad directions,” Richard replied. “And while I appreciate you entertaining us with your old stories, I think it’s rather dated to be relevant at

the moment. I should note, however, that the duel at that party thirteen years ago was not a fistfight but simply a champagne-drinking contest.”

I felt like I could hear the clatter of blades in their exchange, but the victor was already decided. It was more like the braying of a dying dog, but Richard seemed inclined to lend his ear to it. Saul would probably describe it as a “samurai’s mercy,” since he had always been fond of Japanese period dramas. Which reminded me, I found a box of *Mito Koumon* DVDs in the house in Sri Lanka. I had to wonder just how many evil local governors had been vanquished just in that one box. Just like the defeated man in front of me in that moment.

A dull smile formed on the vice president’s lips.

“I don’t know how much you’ve heard, but I think you owe me. Not only did I reject that doddering old fool’s drivel about acquiring a ‘beautiful treasure,’ but I’m about to lose my position.”

“Even if what you say is true,” Richard said, “I don’t owe you a thing. You’re an enemy to me. Even if you were simply faithfully supporting the person you worked for, you never once told him to stop.”

“You must be prepared to have the fool’s blade put to your throat when you intend to stop a fool from committing foolish acts. Everyone who works for this company is keenly aware of that fact. You may not be interested in listening to me now, but I wholeheartedly believe in that man’s aesthetic sense. He may go a bit overboard at times, but he is also an excellent businessman. But the M&A negotiations were a disaster. If only he could have thought about it rationally, he would have seen that my choice was the better one. But the fact that I’d laid all the groundwork wounded his pride, and he threw it all out and went the opposite direction.”

“It was completely ridiculous,” the vice president added. The dealer pretended not to hear a thing the whole time. “It seems that you are well loved by the goddess of luck, for me to be bested by you like this.”

“I would hate for something this small to be called a victory,” Richard said.

“Additionally, I see little connection between your company politics and the issue of morality.”

“If you feel that way, perhaps morality and business acumen are similarly unrelated. Rumor has it you’re only half-serious about this whole gem-dealing business. Is there any truth to it? Is being a good and upstanding person always compatible with the gem trade?”

“It may be difficult,” Richard said, “but I endeavor to make that the case at all times. If I did not, I would not be able to face the stones I deal in.”

The vice president burst out laughing like he’d just heard an elementary schooler recite a model answer. Richard looked unbothered.

“What an appropriately beautiful response for a beautiful person. What a joy it would be if Gargantua’s employees had the luxury of dealing only with jewelry, like you do. Now, whether it would have been able to last for a hundred years like that is another issue. If you want something to last, you’ll have to get your hands a little dirty.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that. You insult the good name of all the other jewelers who have been in operation just as long.”

“Then I should be repaid for the insults I have suffered!” Like a lake of magma suddenly swelling, the vice president raised his voice in a sudden burst of emotion before immediately cooling off and letting out a little sigh. Richard’s expression remained unchanged.

“Would you tell me one thing?” he asked the vice president. “I’m curious about what offers of employment you’ve received from other companies.”

“That’s all fake. Since you only want to ask me this *one* thing, perhaps you’ve heard the truth about a certain other situation. That old fool always did have loose lips in front of beautiful people. He wanted to get rid of me, so he leaked a false narrative to a news site that I, of all people, was going to try to steal a piece of Gargantua’s beauty. Even though I poured my heart and soul into building this company. When I saw that article, my patience ran out. Everyone

has their limits. Which is why I decided to give that old fool a show.

“It took more time to prepare than I’d anticipated,” the vice president went on, “and by the time I arrived, that old fool had disappeared chasing after you. But I still wanted to go out in front of the people who worked for the company I’d spent several decades watching over and flagrantly demonstrate my usage of an African-made 3D scanner. As if to say, ‘Are you surprised? I’m just trying to steal from the company, just like the news said.’ It’d be quite a scene, don’t you think? I wanted to see that old fool lose his mind. He always comes running to me for help when he’s gotten himself into a mess, and even though he abuses me, when he doesn’t get the numbers he wants to hear, I’m simply abandoned and discarded when he’s done with me. Which left me with only one option: to debase the very concept of beauty that old fool holds dear in the most ludicrous way possible. Because that was always, always, *always* the one and only thing he rewarded me with for my work. That’s why I endured. I made the rational decision to endure, but everything has its limit. An over-the-line insult must be met in kind. That’s what I had to teach him.”

“So, are you happy now?” Richard responded.

“Good question... I guess I am.”

The vice president smiled, vaguely proud of himself. Richard seemed disinclined to indulge him further. He removed his hand from the stool and turned toward the vice president.

“It seems that there is someone who wants to see you. Please, take your time.”

I didn’t have a chance to even think about who it might be as a sparkling figure slid in next to me. It was a man in a gold lamé suit. Actually, no, it wasn’t lamé—it was an elegant suit with gold stripes embroidered atop a white fabric, like drips on glass. The outfit didn’t really suit its wearer’s smile.

“Thank you, Ricky. Not even Raphael’s Madonna is a match for the beauty of your fingers manipulating those cards. I wish you would use those fingers to toy

with me.”

“My apologies, I’ve been suffering from some temporary hearing loss and did not catch what you just said.”

After replying with the most refined “Like hell I will,” in history, Richard stepped back and left the two men at the table. Before the dealer could back away, sensing the dangerous atmosphere, the man in the golden suit swiftly approached and tapped the vice president on the shoulder, with a smile of tender gratitude toward a friend of many years.

“Marnuit, I’m so disappointed in you. If you really wanted to give me a show, you should have written your accusations on your belly and run through the Palais-Royal stark naked. I’m sure curious youngsters would have recorded you, and you would have become a star on social media.”

“You’re saying I should have brought your half-century’s worth of wrongdoings to social media? If you think you can just get rid of me and get away clean, you’ve made a massive mistake. Have you forgotten how many times I’ve saved you over the years?”

“Yes, and you’ve made a similarly massive mistake yourself, Marnuit. I never asked for your help. You only ever helped me to advance your career. You helped me to help yourself, and I simply obliged. I don’t recall ever instructing you to do such a thing, nor is there any proof that I ever did. After all, there are a great many things in this industry that can’t be resolved cleanly.”

“It drives me crazy that, over and over again, I failed to get my revenge on you.”

“Well, that’s not exactly true, either, is it, Marnuit? If you really wanted to take a shot at me, why were you fooling around the showcase this morning? A show isn’t much of a show without an audience, is it now?”

The white-haired man smiled at the vice president, who looked wounded. He smiled like he was rubbing salt into the wound.

“Don’t worry, I know. In truth, you couldn’t even make an attempt to get one over on me. You’ve had numerous chances so far, and you never even tried. Because you’re a coward. Even if you tried to plan things, you never made them a reality. But you couldn’t bear to just leave like that, either. And that’s when the lowly idea of stealing the jewelry data crossed your pathetic little mind. And you weren’t wrong—no company in their right mind would want to take you, unless you brought something to sweeten the deal. How tragic. I love beautiful things. You may have been a useful man, but you are ugly through and through.”

The vice president’s face went deathly pale for a moment. I was bracing for a fight, but he didn’t move.

He just flashed a spine-tingling smile.

“...I don’t know who will succeed me in my position as the dirty fixer, but I hope you pick someone older, so they don’t have to consider their future career prospects.”

“You always did like to exaggerate. All right, no more standing around and chatting. Allow me to introduce you to my two loyal security guards. They’ll take you by both arms and escort you out.”

Neither of the two guards seemed to belong to the casino—they were both wearing the same uniforms that the people in the security office had on. The vice president took a bow, almost like a leading actor in a play, and handed the item in his pocket to the guards, before smiling at us and gracefully walking off.

I felt almost like I’d peered through a rift in reality to another world. It was hard to believe someone like him was real—someone who was so angry about something that his thorough contempt for it became more important than his own survival.

The thing was, he didn’t really look desperate. He seemed almost satisfied. It was like the outcome wasn’t really what he cared about. It seemed like, in some small way, he had gotten what he wanted. No matter how selfish and

meaningless it might have seemed to me.

I guess that was one path.

But where did that path lead?

Hearing my name suddenly snapped me back to reality. It was Richard. He was as beautiful as ever, but his expression seemed softer. He was no longer in battle mode. That's when I remembered the surveillance footage.

"Richard, what about the footage?"

"I finished checking through it."

Did that mean he'd found proof of my innocence? I mean, I definitely didn't steal anything. I prayed that the cameras had caught the moment someone had slipped the jewelry into my pocket. I looked at him, wondering what the outcome was.

"Calm down. I'll explain later."

The jeweler's face was cool as a cucumber. He wouldn't tell me whether I could rejoice or get angry. I wanted him to explain now, not later, but Richard wasn't the type of person to withhold for no reason. And if he had a reason, I would just have to wait, however long it would take.

Mr. Karlsbrook, who had followed the vice president out, still hadn't returned from the entrance to the casino. Just as I was about to ask what we should do, I felt a sudden and intense push against my back. What the—it was a hug. The old man in the pineapple shirt was hugging me tightly. The other people who had tapped out during the game and even some other completely unrelated people nearly tackled me into a big group hug. Richard had vanished before I even noticed. All I could hear was people congratulating me, saying "Good job!"

Oh, right—the poker game was over.

On the green table sat a pile of chips, stacked up I'm not even sure how high.

It didn't even hit me that that could all be converted into actual money until that moment. Apparently, my plan to utterly defeat my opponent had actually

succeeded because, just as my poor perception was about to lead me to crash headfirst into the ground, an unexpected ally had appeared to assist. All I could say was “I guess I did it?” Because it hardly felt real.

I thanked them all and bowed repeatedly before divvying up several of the two-dollar chips among them, and the older folks walked away happy. I let out a sigh. Richard reappeared from his hiding spot behind a pillar, and I smiled awkwardly.

“If poker’s a mental sport...then I think you’d be the equivalent of a seventh or eighth dan in karate.”

“I’m not so sure about that. Poker doesn’t have a grade system like karate. But there was one night in a Monaco casino where I got into a rather silly competition alongside my wallet, who was liable to cause serious problems due to poor information management and careless comments, to see how much money we could make in one evening. That experience did come in handy.”

Richard went on to explain that, while the scope was different, gambling and investing weren’t really all that different. You decided on an investment strategy based on the funds you had on hand and put it into practice. You took opportunities when they came and never chased unrealistic profits. Goddess of luck, my ass. I was brought to my knees when he made a comment about how people who were prone to temporary flights of emotion or to ignore logic might not be well suited to it.

“You may be right about that...”

“The important thing is that you recognize it. I would encourage you to refrain in the future.”

“Ha ha...”

He was probably teasing me like that to put me at ease. I had to tolerate being in limbo a little longer. As I (mostly earnestly) lowered my head, I had a thought about the wallet who was liable to cause serious problems due to poor information management and careless comments.

I'd realized something about Jeffrey recently.

He and Richard were much closer than even real brothers.

My impression of Jeffrey's actual older brother, Henry, hadn't changed since I'd met him two years ago, as I hadn't had the opportunity to see him since we made up with a handshake at the Claremont estate. In the meantime, Jeffrey had started doing things to help me out, all while being on the receiving end of a venom-tongued manzai act with Richard. Richard always got very formal with him when they parted ways once more.

There is a saying for when people think things will work out after a big blowup: "Time heals all wounds." But there are some rifts that even years' worth of time can't fill. Especially if either party was deliberately digging it deeper.

I had to wonder if there would ever come a day when their rift would be healed. Or if there was any way I could help speed it along.

As my thoughts were focused far away, that evil baby doll entered my field of view. This was it. Now it was my turn.

"Well, well, I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Seigi—not Seiji. It seems that I finally know what to do with you. Has Richard told you yet?"

"Not yet. He thought it would be better to wait for you to get back."

"I see, I see," he responded in a singsong tone, and my stomach immediately dropped. Vince had mentioned that the security office was a secure place because there were always security guards there. But was it really? I couldn't read Richard's expression—no, he was awfully calm.

"There was no need to check the footage in the first place."

"Huh?"

"The jewelry piece in your pocket was fake."

Fake? It was a word I'd heard a lot in the news in recent years, but somehow it just wasn't clicking in this context. I didn't even know what kind of face I was

making. Mr. Karlsbrook smiled and shook my hand, slipping something into my palm as he did. I could generally tell what it was from the feel. When I opened my hand, just as I'd expected, I found a beautiful ring sitting there. The most beautiful bomb in the world. My heart, shrunken down into a ruby and a golden queen. A miniature version of a piece of extremely high-end jewelry that craftspeople poured their hearts and souls into.

Maybe it was just how dim the lights in the casino were, but the diamonds' sparkle seemed dull. Where did the fire go? And the gleaming red heart-shaped stone in the center didn't even look natural.

What on Earth?

"You can tell, right? The ruby is glass, and those things that look like diamonds are rhinestones. My company uses them when producing models of our pieces. Think of it like a dry run before the real piece is produced. We don't use real gemstones for that, but exact replicas of the stones that are planned to be set in the final piece. They may glimmer, but they're just glass."

I felt the floor swaying a bit beneath my feet. I was pretty sure it was from the ship slowing down, and it wasn't just me. Mr. Karlsbrook's smile never left his face, and Richard was looking away.

"Who do you think it was that slipped it into your pocket? It was my drunk aunt. She always did love to play pranks. Whenever she saw a young man, she'd sneak caterpillars or acorns into his pockets."

"What?"

"Goodness, am I glad that we checked the security footage, even if it did require bending the rules a little. She didn't remember what she'd done at all, but based on the footage and the piece itself, it was clearly her doing. After all, this was a special gift I had given to her—something money quite literally can't buy. These pieces are never intended to be taken out of the workshop."

"But you still gave it to her."

“Of course I did. I love my family and friends deeply. And on that note, Ricky, I care about you very much. I would give you anything your heart desires. Oh, that reminds me! The miniature Queen of Hearts that was thought to be lost was actually found—it had fallen into a crack between the showcases! What a funny story.”

The sound of Richard’s voice thanking him slid in one ear and right out the other. I wasn’t bilingual, but a Japanese man born and raised in Japan, so even when I spent the whole day speaking nothing but English, I was translating a lot of it into Japanese in my head. Richard and Saul had both told me that I should try to think in English when listening to English, and I could do it to an extent, but my mental interpreter was still going strong. And right now, there wasn’t just one interpreter in my brain but two. One was translating Mr. Karlsbrook’s English into Japanese, and the other was translating that mysterious Japanese into words I could actually make sense of.

So the piece of jewelry that was slipped into my pocket at the show yesterday was this fake made of rhinestones that I was looking at right now, and the culprit was an innocent, drunk older woman? I guess he was trying to say that it was all an accident and it was no one’s fault. And that somehow neither Richard, nor I, nor Mr. Krueger could tell that those weren’t real diamonds?

It sounded to me like this had been a cowardly setup to get a certain somebody to do what he wanted, but there had been a mutiny in the middle of it, so he’d switched tactics and decided to find a way to wrap things up neatly instead.

Tension hung in the air as we stood around the sparkling fake ring. The workmanship was just as fine as the real piece, but the stones were decidedly fake.

Was I just supposed to accept this?

I felt magma welling up in my stomach. How many times did this man need to humiliate me before he was satisfied? I remembered the vice president’s

expression. He had a cheery look on his face as he was taken away. I wondered what would happen if I punched him in the jaw as hard as I could. It would lay waste to all of Richard's hard work, and I'd be charged with assault. If I was unlucky, I might end up in jail. If I *was* lucky, I'd end up burdening Richard or Hiromi with a massive sum for bail, my apprenticeship as a jeweler would be ended, and with a criminal record, it wouldn't even matter if I did pass the civil service exam. It would definitely, completely, change the course of my life.

I knew that.

Of course I did.

I wanted to let this old man who dressed like a tacky lounge singer know that, if he thought I was messed up enough to politely bow my head to someone who used me to hurt someone I care about, all the while insulting me, too, he'd made a huge mistake. A spark in my brain was begging me to teach him a - lesson. It was begging me to do it.

But standing just on the other side of Mr. Karlsbrook was Richard, staring at me.

I wouldn't say his expression looked apologetic. It was stiff. And his eyes, which looked like the sea just before a storm, were calmly telling me to just quietly accept whatever happened here.

And then even further beyond him was the man who looked like a pop star with his undercut, staring at us intently. His face was as disinterested looking as ever, and his black eyes were calm. His eyes were saying that, unlike gemstones, humans are living beings. They all have their own emotions, and sometimes they might make pivotal decisions based on those emotions, but from five or six meters away, those things would be nothing more than extremely commonplace occurrences, like a drunk starting a fight or an old man cursing someone out.

I had to wonder if that was the look I had in my eyes when the guards were escorting the vice president out.

After looking intently at the replica piece of jewelry, I raised my head and smiled.

“Oh, that’s all it was? I was really scared there for a minute.”

I chuckled, and Mr. Karlsbrook smiled even more deeply than before and reached out his hand. For a handshake. I shook his hand for some incomprehensible reason when we first met, too, but now I felt like I could actually greet him properly. I gently clasped his cold, bony hand, and he patted me on the shoulder.

“You’re still young. Think of this as a funny story and use it as an asset in the future. No experience is wasted when you’re studying jewelry. I went through quite a lot of hardship when I was young myself.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Please take care of your health.”

“You seem like you’ve got the makings of a good salesman. Ricky’s got a real eye for this sort of thing. I didn’t think you’d actually show up, though,” Mr. Karlsbrook tacked on, staring at me.

I was starting to feel like a smiling machine. The man in the lamé suit spoke a few brisk words to Richard before exiting the awkward atmosphere of the casino.

I took a deep breath and let out a sigh with a little shrug after he was out of sight.

And in no time, the casino had grown silent. Everyone was probably going to leave the ship when it docked. The place was deserted.

I rubbed my face with both my hands and made a mild smile when I saw Richard’s face.

“...Wanna get off the ship and do some sightseeing?”

“No, I think I’d rather just take it easy.”

“Then how about we go to one of the restaurants and get something to eat? My treat,” I said, pointing to the mountain of chips on the table. After a

moment, Richard let out a little sigh, his eyes brightened up, and his lips began to form a smile. It was a smile like honey. Even a noblewoman or a baroness would have to get into a fistfight after a champagne-drinking competition to beat that.

“Not to be pedantic, but I believe those are *my* winnings.”

“I provided 100 percent of the funds.”

“You do have a point there.”

Richard pulled my cell phone, which had been confiscated in the security office, out of his pocket, returned it to me, and started walking with a “Shall we?” His leather shoes took one step after the other away from me. I piled my chips into my tray and hurried after him. How strange, that feeling of defeat that had been filling my chest was slowly being replaced with something else. With each step came a strange feeling of satisfaction. My mind was still in shambles, though.

I still wasn't sure if I'd done the right thing. It was obvious that he had been in the wrong, though. But I didn't know what the right thing to do was. But I definitely felt like I had avoided making a fatal mistake, at least.

I looked around the area before we left the casino.

The mysterious security guard who had kept me from going off course was no longer watching over me.

This thing wasn't called a luxury cruise for nothing. The food at the restaurants was nothing short of gorgeous. And on top of that, it was free as long as we were eating on the ship. The restaurant we chose was the biggest buffet on board. It had large vaulted ceilings encouraging an open, airy mood, so there was no hope of the quiet tranquility you might find at Shiseido Parlour in Ginza. But while I had expected the room to be one open, unbroken space, like a food court, it was actually broken up into little half rooms with dividers. It

was a bit loud since we could hear the sound from the hall, but we didn't have to worry about prying eyes. There were servers who would take your order even if you didn't go to pick out your food yourself. Thankfully.

Feeling thoroughly exhausted, I ordered a nonalcoholic beer and some fried chicken, and Richard ordered a custard tart, a Mont Blanc, a cheesecake, a fruit jelly, an ice cream float, and a royal milk tea. When the server asked when our other guests would be arriving, Richard smiled and said he'd be eating alone. He didn't even say, "Just the two of us." Fine, I get it. This was a solo battle for the time being.

I devoured my fried chicken and decided to try the crown jewel of the buffet: the crab. I was glad to hear that two servings were allowed per customer, but after the man sitting across from me told me to take his and I had therefore finished four plates of the crab, I finally started to remember that I was a human being named Seigi Nakata. Humans are living creatures who need to eat and taste what they're eating. Delicious. The most beautiful man in the whole world was sitting across from me, and no one was threatening him anymore, I wasn't a suspect in a robbery or some weird joke or whatever that was, and the scheming vice president had been arrested.

I wasn't fully satisfied with how everything had ended, but I was well aware that this wasn't the time.

"This is so good. Crab is sooo good. I wish I could thank the crab."

"I'm not sure the crustacean would appreciate a thank-you from the predator who's eating it. This custard tart is rather good, too. I know that judging the sweets of the world by the standards of what's available in Ginza is a folly tantamount to looking down on the world from the peaks of Mt. Everest, but this establishment seems to employ quite an accomplished patissier."

"Wow, now that's a compliment if I ever heard one. Maybe I should try one later."

"Don't force yourself."

“Are you worried about me overeating? I’ll be fine. I’m still technically only twenty-two.”

“Would you like to go back to your room? Room service is an option, too.”

Room service. I hadn’t heard that word in ages. It didn’t really last all that long, but when I was living at the hotel, I had English-only dinners night after night with Richard and Jeffrey—we were only allowed to use English for the duration of the meal. I found it frustrating at the time but did my best, but thinking back on it now, I think it helped me improve my speaking a lot.

And I thought I was prepared to do whatever it took back then.

“...Am I really making that weird of a face?”

“The look in your eyes hasn’t entirely returned to normal.”

I didn’t need to ask him what he meant by that. It was pointless to try to hide anything from this man. After cleaning up all the crab shells, which looked like the aftermath of a massacre, and rinsing my fingers off in my finger bowl, I leaned forward a bit and whispered:

“...Can I ask you one thing that I know you probably don’t wanna talk about?”

“Be my guest.”

I didn’t preface my question by begging him not to lie to me. He promised that he wouldn’t lie to me in the past, so I didn’t need to ask him again.

“I...I don’t think this is coming from a particularly self-destructive place, but... there’s a certain old man on this ship right now who, if you ask me, deserves the same fate as the Colonel Sanders statue in Dotombori...”

“You’re being so roundabout. The point of your question is not clear.”

“I know, okay!”

“Look, I know what you’re trying to ask. What I want to know is *why* you’re asking it.”

Wasn’t that obvious? Or at least I thought it was obvious, but when I thought

about it calmly, I really didn't know why I was asking about it. I shuddered when I realized that what I was doing to Richard now was definitely another kind of harassment. I stood up from my seat, and Richard called out to me.

"Going for a fifth serving of crab? I hope you realize they'll charge for that."

"...Sorry. I'll apologize more properly once I calm down. I need to go cool my head right now, alone."

"I see. Well, if you ask me, I imagine that will be rather difficult for you."

His quip caught me off guard. I flopped down onto the table and Richard stifled a chuckle. I pretty much knew what his answer was. I let out an even deeper sigh. I don't really want to say I was relieved. I would never forget what happened on this ship for the rest of my life. I didn't want to forget it, and I didn't think I'd be able to even if I tried.

But of the worst-case scenarios I had envisioned, I had been spared the most difficult one to accept.

"You're just deplorable. Did you really think I would abandon everything to throw myself at his feet for your sake? That would make you so far beyond conceited that I would have to worry whether you were suffering from some severe cognitive dysfunction. Such behavior would only embolden that old man's habitual sexual harassment, and that would not be in the best interest of the public good. Additionally, that would have meant trusting in uncertain promises. Certainty is what matters most, be it in gemstone dealing or elsewhere."

His every word pierced my heart. But everything he was saying was true. It made me realize just how impoverished my imagination was. Was Richard the kind of man who would do something without having a good reason? No. He clearly wasn't. His beauty was overwhelming, but what I found even more awe-inspiring was his ability to face any situation head-on and change the course of things.

After eating another bite of the tart, which he had found more delicious than

he'd expected, off his silver fork, Richard wiped his mouth and looked at me with a composed expression on his face.

"Try not to underestimate me so much. I know how to take care of myself much more than you realize."

"...Thanks."

"You're very welcome," Richard said with a nod.

I really missed this. I almost felt like I was back in Ginza right now. While I was trying to figure out how to convey the complicated mix of gratitude and remorse I was feeling, Richard continued.

"Plus, had I done such a thing, you would have never forgiven me for the rest of your life."

His tone was so casual and light. He said it like it was nothing.

I was glad from the bottom of my heart that I had already finished those four servings of crab, because now my heart was full, too. A ton of people had headed out to enjoy some sightseeing since the ship had made it to port, so the restaurant was surely quieter than normal. But despite that, I could hear the noise off in the distance. I still couldn't control myself very well.

I did have someone who knew what was bothering me even better than I did.

I had to wonder how many other people could enjoy such a luxury.

Richard cleared his throat because I had been staring at him too long. Even if he was used to me acting that way, it was still pretty rude. I hurriedly looked away, but I still struggled to find the words.

"...H-honestly, there's a lot I want to say right now."

"I can imagine."

"But I feel like no matter whether I say it in Japanese or English, I'm going to give you the wrong idea, so I'll have to refrain."

"Incredible, you've learned the high-level skill of 'holding your tongue.'"

“I had a very good teacher!”

“It is unfortunate that you said that you would ‘have to refrain.’ It would have been all the more perfect had you not said that.”

“Oh...”

Before I could ask him to add that to my future lessons, Richard smiled.

“Thank you very much. I also think of you as a dear and rare friend.”

“You got it!”

“You did the work. But you ought to remedy that hopelessly rash and overly stubborn personality of yours as soon as possible. Have you ever played poker before?”

“Just a little in school... That reminds me, I owe Vince a thank-you. I should thank him again before the cruise is over.”

Richard’s expression suddenly darkened when I said that. I wondered why. He probably wouldn’t get mad if I talked a little more though.

“Oh yeah, so, when I was little, my grandmother taught me a surefire way to win when gambling, but—”

Richard raised his left hand. He didn’t seem to be trying to flag down a member of the waitstaff. He looked more like he was signaling to someone standing behind me.

I turned around and saw an Asian man with a bored expression on his face striding over toward me. Speak of the devil.

He completely ignored my attempt to greet him, looking only at Richard.

“I’m surprised you found the place. I didn’t think you were coming.”

“Well, aren’t we friendly? I’m surprised to find you eating in such a highly populated area. Why don’t you just try poking your head out from that wall? About half the people on the floor are trying to snap photos of you while pretending to take pictures of their food.”

“I can’t imagine it’s that bad, considering how long I’ve been here. Are you on break right now?”

“I’ve got another two hours to relax. Wow, you came all the way to Florida to eat crab? Surely they have crab in Sri Lanka.”

“I don’t think they get quite this large in Sri Lanka. Those are a freshwater variety.”

“Oh, right. Makes sense. You really do know all sorts of things.”

Vince spoke in smooth, easy-on-the-ears English. While I was at a loss for words, he grabbed a chair from an empty table and pulled it up between Richard and me, then sat down. If he was closer to either of us, it was me. Richard looked between Vince and me before smiling softly. His expression was harsh.

“Allow me to introduce you again, given all the chaos. Seigi, this is Vincent Lai. He served as my assistant at Ranasinghe Jewelry in Hong Kong.”

His assistant in Hong Kong? This guy? What?

Richard extended a hand toward me while I was completely bewildered. He was looking at Vince while he did.

“Vince, say hello.”

“Seigi Nakata, right? We’ve met. Although, there’s plenty I still don’t know. How old are you?”

“I’m about to turn twenty-three.”

Vince—or maybe I should call him Mr. Lai? Anyway, Richard’s former assistant covered his face, a little astonished.

“So you’re only twenty-two right now? You must’ve just graduated. What on Earth...”

“Seigi, allow me to apologize for keeping quiet this whole time. It was a complete coincidence that he ended up on this ship, and we met while

boarding. I had asked for his assistance should something happen when you unexpectedly showed up on the ship, but...I never expected anything like *this* to happen.”

“Things happen, things happen. You don’t need to thank me. Honestly, I’d have thought you were snubbing me if you hadn’t asked me for help. I think we should turn our attention to the astonished Mr. Nakata here though. How much do you know about his years in Hong Kong?”

“...Basically nothing.”

“I can’t believe you.”

Vince shot a critical glare at Richard. Richard made no attempt to explain himself. I felt a little awkward to cut in, so I timidly raised my hand. Vince cocked an eyebrow.

“Um, I am truly humbled by your concern for me, but I’m fine. I could tell you knew each other.”

Richard’s eyes went wide. Vince seemed even more dubious. I prefaced it by saying it was a little difficult for me to admit this, but explained that I had seen them talking in the pub on the first day. I hadn’t actually seen Vince, but I had heard his voice.

“Wow, you gave quite the performance, then. That’s all it took for you to figure it out? Do you have, like, perfect pitch for voices?”

“No, um, when you spoke English to me that one time, um...it was kinda bad.”

It was hard to believe that someone working in an English-speaking company, with that level of proficiency in Japanese, no less, could have worse English pronunciation than I did. So I knew he had to have a reason to make himself sound bad. And the pitch of his voice was really close to the person who was talking to Richard at the pub. But while we’re at it—

“Also, I’m not surprised to hear you’re from Hong Kong. You said, ‘*mie shi ya*’ to me once, remember? I don’t know a word of Chinese, but based on my

experience with customers at the shop in Ginza, that was a phrase that customers from Hong Kong used, while those from Beijing and Shanghai would say something like ‘*zen ma la*’ instead...”

“That would be *zen me le*,” I was corrected immediately. But I should have expected no less from the language master, Professor Richard. Sometimes my ears did serve me well. And so I concluded that he must’ve been someone Richard knew from Hong Kong. But on that note—

“Now, I didn’t think you had worked together at the other shop...*that* was a surprise.”

Richard and Vince looked at each other. Vince smiled, and Richard cast his eyes down at the table. I couldn’t get over how drastically different their reactions were.

“You really are an interesting fellow, Mr. Nakata. Let me introduce myself properly this time. The name’s Vincent Lai, and I’m twenty-six years old. My family ran a jewelry shop, so I have a pretty good eye for jade and coral, but that’s about it.”

Vince continued without me saying another word.

“I met Richard five years ago. There was a large redevelopment project happening in the area where my family’s jewelry shop was located, and they were forced to sell. Real estate prices in Hong Kong are even worse than they are in Tokyo. And guess who helped us out when that happened? Saul and Richard as they were making their first foray into the Hong Kong market.”

I’d heard a little bit about Richard’s time in Sri Lanka before. How he met Saul, and how Saul helped him run away from his family in exchange for helping him expand his shop’s operations overseas. Saul’s company, Ranasinghe Jewelry, had three locations. The first shop was in Sri Lanka, the second in Hong Kong, and the third ended up in Ginza, thanks to a connection made with a customer at the Hong Kong shop who happened to be a landlord in Ginza.

I really only knew Richard as the man running the shop in Ginza. I didn’t know

a thing about what happened in between his time in Sri Lanka and coming to Japan. I never had the opportunity to ask. Although, I was plenty confident that, no matter what country or shop he was working in, he still had the same excellent relationships with his customers.

But maybe his relationships with his former colleagues weren't like that.

Vince didn't look at Richard, but he kept smiling at me. He seemed much more friendly than when it was just the two of us.

There was something I wanted to find out, though.

"Um, so are you actually a jeweler, then, Vince? Why are you working security here?"

"Pure coincidence. Although something tells me you'll find that hard to believe, so to explain a bit more: A friend of a friend of a friend of a friend referred me to this job, and while I didn't have any personal connection to either Gargantua or the security firm, the pay was good, so I took the opportunity. It's less that I've changed careers from jeweler to security guard as much as I take jobs as the need arises. If I were to put it in Japanese terms, I guess you could say...oh, I know, it's an *arbaito*—a part-time job."

"Are you no longer working in the jewelry industry then?"

Vince smiled cheerily but didn't say another word. I guess he didn't want to go into it. He compared it to a part-time job. I guess his position in Hong Kong was pretty similar to what mine was like in Japan. And from his comment about his family's jewelry shop and his eye for jade and coral, he obviously started off at a very different level than I had, and yet—

"....."

Why had he quit working in the industry? And judging from the fact that he took a job as a security guard on a ship cruising in the waters near Florida, he might not even live in Hong Kong at the moment. Was he living in the US, then? Why?

Questions swirled in my mind, but before I could voice any of them, Vince laughed sharply. The vibes were pretty much “shut up and listen.”

“You know, I didn’t expect you to dive headfirst into a poker game.”

“...Thank you for calling Richard back at the casino.”

“Honestly, I was kind of hoping you’d surprise me and turn out to be some poker playing genius, but, well, all’s well that ends well, right? Are you apprenticing in Sri Lanka right now? How’s that going?”

“Well, I’m just getting started, but I’m getting by somehow.”

“Glad to hear it. I wonder how old man Saul is doing, anyway. I bet he’s as crafty as ever.”

“Vince.”

Richard cut in. I guess he couldn’t stand to watch me squirm, unsure of how to respond to the rapid-fire conversation.

Vince smirked. It was the cold, distant smile of a demon.

“Do I need your permission to talk to him?”

“...Of course not.”

Richard’s voice sounded strained. It was unusual to hear him sound like that when he had cake and tea. Vince shrugged and got out of his seat. Richard glared at him to stop what he was doing, but he placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Hey.”

“Huh? You mean me?”

“Let’s talk over there.”

Vince grabbed my shoulder. I guess “no” wasn’t an option. I wanted to see Richard’s reaction, but the beautiful man had his eyes cast down as he sipped his tea. I couldn’t tell if he thought it was any good. It almost felt more like he was ignoring what was going on. I stood up without saying a word and followed Vince into the back of the restaurant, where the tables on the deck were. There

were way more people out in this area, even though the ship was docked. Children were running around, too.

Vince kept going until he got to the border between the restaurant's area and the rest of the deck and leaned against the handrail. The sunlight was so strong, I thought the back of his head might burn. When I joined him, the man with the sparkling brown hair immediately opened his mouth.

"I'll just get straight to the point. I think you should quit your apprenticeship."

"What?"

"It won't do you any good."

There was nothing harsh about the tone of his voice. Vince was looking at me with sincerity in his eyes. They made me think of Richard somehow.

"Richard told me about you. About how you're studying to go into the civil service in Japan. If you still have that opportunity, you should go back and study. That's what I'd do."

Honestly, I wasn't even that surprised by the suggestion. Just before graduation, when the topic of what I was doing after college came up, when I told a few of my friends other than Tanimoto about it, about 80 percent of them told me I should stop, that I was being scammed, that it sounded suspicious. They weren't even trying to be critical; they were genuinely concerned for me. Explaining my part-time job in detail would have taken ages, so I'd just tell them that I was given the opportunity by someone I'd known for a long time and trusted, so I didn't really think it was anything to be particularly worried about. But that's when they'd ask me another question out of concern:

"Can you actually make a living as a jeweler?"

It's not like I didn't understand the underlying implications of the question—was this a job that could compete in terms of salary, benefits, and security with a government job in a country with one of the top GDPs in the world, even if it might be on the decline? And was this really worth wasting my status as a new

graduate from a private but still pretty prestigious Tokyo school to give it a shot? I had similar thoughts myself. I mean, if someone else had said the same thing to me, I'd have the exact same concerns too. But whenever people said that, this is how I would respond:

"I appreciate the concern, but I'm not going into this thoughtlessly. The thing is, when I was in college in Japan, I realized that there were so many things I didn't know, and so when I was given the opportunity to expand my horizons, I wanted to take it. I'm mostly learning chemistry as I study gemstones, and I have to improve my English, too. It's not easy, but I'm confident that it'll serve me in the future."

"So, does that mean your main goal isn't becoming a jeweler but learning to live abroad?"

"I wouldn't go that far, but...hrm, I mean, I'll be the first to admit that I'm being pretty wishy-washy about the whole thing. I haven't abandoned my dream of going into civil service yet, either. I'm studying the constitution and math while I'm in Sri Lanka. It's a pretty surreal feeling, to be honest."

"You're one smart cookie, Mr. Nakata."

"Wh-what's that supposed to mean?"

I wasn't used to getting called smart. I bashfully scratched my head, and Vince shot me a vaguely cold glare.

"You don't need to be so humble. I can tell just from looking at you that you're an elite."

"Oh no, I don't think I really qualify."

"Oh, I must've misspoken. Sorry. I didn't mean to say that you're an 'elite' but that you're too kind for your own good. Which is why there's something you desperately need to hear."

Vince paused. I could faintly hear the roar of the waves mixed into the hustle and bustle of the restaurant. I gave him a look to tell him to go ahead and say it

whenever he was ready, and he turned away from me.

“I think you’d be better off hating Richard.”

“...What?”

“I think he’s very hard to hate, but I think it’ll serve you better in the future. He’s the kind of person who’s safer to hate than love.”

What? “Safer” to hate than love?

I calmly responded that I didn’t understand what he had just said. Vince gave a little nod and stared out into the sparkling sea as he continued.

“I don’t know who first talked to you about training overseas—I assume it was Richard—but I’m positive it was old man Saul who came up with the idea originally. Richard is a valuable source of income to him, and he’s not about to let him go. If you’ve known him for a few years, I’m sure you already know what kind of person Richard is. He’s practically superhuman. It’s hard to imagine there’s anything he can’t do. He’s kind, and has an endless supply of both personal and financial resources. Spending too much time around someone like that is going to mess you up in the head.”

“He couldn’t cook to save his life though.”

“Why would a millionaire need to know how to cook for himself? Oh, right, you know his family is—”

“Literal English nobility? Yeah, I know.”

Somewhere in the back of my head, I was reminded that one of my older classmates who loved to travel had told me that Hong Kong had a really strong culture of eating out and that the food stands were especially delicious. Hong Kong was so far away. It was probably about as far from here as Japan was. But Vince’s words felt even more distant than that to me. He had always been looking at me like I was someone who needed to be pitied.

“I think you’re at least somewhat aware of this yourself, but this jeweler thing is just a hobby for him. He doesn’t *have* to do it. People like him only put effort

into a job when it's like an earl with a massive gold claim to his name starting a rice porridge stand on a lark. He can just quit when he gets bored. He doesn't have to worry about what it means for his future."

"What?"

"But you know who that would be a problem for? Old man Saul. Ranasinghe Jewelry was never a very large company, and they could get by just fine wholesaling to other retailers, even if they weren't doing any direct-to-consumer sales—but that all changed when Richard entered the picture. All of a sudden, he had developed all these new connections to overseas clients and even got a foot in Ginza of all places. The shops in Ginza and Hong Kong are Saul's achievements, but Ginza is all Richard. But by the time I had joined their little caravan, old man Saul had already left most of the management of the shops to Richard and was focusing on wholesale and other behind-the-scenes work."

Vince had just told me he was twenty-six. Which would have made him twenty-one five years ago. Younger than I was now. I had to wonder what he was like when he first met Richard. Did he always look like a pop star while being extremely chill and talented at giving that signature disinterested look of his? He spoke matter-of-factly, his face looking utterly unfazed by the beauty of the ocean before him.

"That's why Saul's biggest fear is Richard getting bored and quitting. It would be a massive loss for him. I'm told you ended up resolving a lot of the mess that was going on with Richard's family. He may have had his reasons not to go home before, but that's not the case now. That's where inspiration struck for the old man. If you wanna keep a dog on a leash, it would be best to prepare a collar that the dog loves—one that the dog loves enough to not want to tear off and that he'd feel remiss about damaging."

"...Like a troublesome apprentice?"

"You really are a smart cookie."

It didn't really sound like a compliment, but I thanked him and bowed my head nonetheless. Vince responded with an almost-joking bow of his own.

"Saul doesn't really care whether you succeed at becoming a jeweler or not. He might not even be thinking about it. All he cares about is that Richard continues working as hard as he has so far for his business, indefinitely. You should be aware of the fact that you're being used. You're young, smart, and a nice guy to boot. But if nothing else, surely this incident has taught you that the world isn't exclusively made up of virtuous people."

And that's why he thought I should quit.

Vince thoroughly and politely explained it all to me. I appreciated it. He made it very easy to follow. I think I understood what he was saying. But I still didn't understand the most critical part.

"Thank you for the explanation, but why do you think it's safer to hate Richard?"

"...I know there's no point in telling you anything right now."

Vince looked at me with pity again, before smiling in a way that barely fit the definition of the word.

"I don't say that as some repudiation of Richard's character, to be clear, but more as advice for the healthy development of *your* character."

"Wow, that sure is a phrase and a half. The healthy development of my character. Is that a psychology thing?"

"I'm sorry if I sound a bit clinical. I studied some psychology while I was studying business administration. I'm a little jealous of your economics degree."

Business administration? Why? Vince shrugged when I looked at him.

"I was still in college when I was around Richard. I think I'd be more inclined to describe myself as immature than young back then. Thinking about this now makes me want to claw my heart out, but whenever I looked at Richard back then, I got this foolish notion that I could be like him someday. I admired his

intelligence, his clearheadedness, his multilingual abilities, the way he carried himself with such pride. But he could be so frank and earnest, and that bottomless well of kindness deep within his heart. But—”

Vince cut himself off. His tone had grown harsh. Vince had been speaking as he looked out at the waves. I could tell just from looking at his eyes that he either despised the ocean or was imagining a certain someone in those beautiful ocean waves.

“But I couldn’t do it. Because he’s gifted, and the vast majority of people on this Earth aren’t. I had a pretty decent knack for foreign languages, and I’d been taught about stones since I was young, so I had confidence in that department, too. I imagine it would sound impossibly conceited to you as a Japanese person if I said I had confidence in my personality, too, but I knew I wasn’t a bad person. But.”

Vince opened his mouth wide and laughed, but he abruptly stopped, almost like a broken toy. Seagulls flew across the ocean. The sea was beautiful. The white wave crests sparkled like diamonds, and the blue went on forever.

“He didn’t need me at all. And I didn’t notice until my second year. It was just around the time when talk about opening the shop in Ginza started to feel like a reality. The Hong Kong location was really starting to take off, and the new assistant’s training was going well. Since we were both fluent in Japanese, the plan was to operate the shop just like the one in Hong Kong. But there was a period where a family member got sick, and I couldn’t come in to the shop. Every day, I was worried sick about how things were going at work. After being away for three whole weeks, my family member took another abrupt turn for the worse, and I had to take more time off. Before I knew it, I’d been away for nearly two whole months. All I could think about was how they were going to be able to make up for my absence.”

“But...nothing changed,” Vince mumbled at the end.

The plans for the Ginza shop continued to progress smoothly even without

him, and the customers seemed unbothered by his absence—if anything, they seemed happy to have the opportunity to get some quality time with Richard. Vince said he felt like he'd been abandoned out in space.

“That was the first time I'd ever felt that strongly that I wasn't needed somewhere. Obviously, this advice is based on my own personal experience, but I've never felt such heartache like the moment I realized that I could offer nothing of value to this person who was such a huge presence in my life. You should put a little more distance between yourself and that gemstone in human form. I think that'll save you from pain in the future.”

Silence fell between us for a while after Vince stopped talking. The restaurant was lively as ever—the floor shook from children racing around the deck in the distance. I examined Vince's face. He didn't have his usual disinterested look. He was just silent. I had a memory of having a meal with a man with just such an expression a few years ago in Ginza.

“Did you ever tell Richard any of what you just told me?”

“What good would that do? Have you no pride at all?”

“By pride, you mean like self-respect, right? I'm not really sure what that has to do with holding a one-sided grudge against a friend, but I think it's sad to abandon a relationship over something like that.”

“...I'm not his friend. We had a much more professional relationship than you do. And he transformed all of the jewels I had treasured since I was a child into mere stone. I wouldn't want to call someone like that a friend.”

Vince turned his back to the sea, leaned against the railing, and stretched. He let out a sigh toward the sky. His eyes were closed, probably because the sun was so bright.

“If I had stayed with him, all I could have hoped to become was an inferior copy of Richard. And I didn't want to be thought of like that. So I started putting distance between us without saying anything. And at the same time that Richard left the Hong Kong shop, I left Ranasinghe Jewelry and went to America

to study abroad like I'd been considering for a while before. Ever since I was little, I'd dreamed of owning my own shop, but if I wanted to make that a reality, I needed to firm up my foundations first."

"...You really are smart, Vince."

"Are you trying to insult me?"

"No, I'm serious. The very first thing that came to mind when the prospect of apprenticing as a jeweler came up was: What about gemology qualifications? You know, the ones that those organizations in the US and UK offer. You study gems, and then you get a certificate to prove you finished the course. Being a jeweler requires qualifications, right? That kind of thing."

"Well...I don't think you're really wrong."

"Thank you. But what I didn't know was that all of the courses cost over a million yen."

The cost listed on the page about the actual certification wasn't that huge, but when I looked into more detailed expenses, I nearly passed out. The qualifications provided by the American and British organizations were both internationally recognized, and they both had similar obstacles—training your eyes and memorizing terms were both major parts of the training, and that would take both time and money. I began to waver. The American organization was a more beginner-oriented course, so I thought about pursuing that one, but it seemed like it'd be really hard to do that and continue studying for the civil service exam at the same time. By the way, I should note that when I talked to Saul about all this, he burst out laughing and asked me if I wanted a degree or if I just wanted to develop an eye for gemstones. And that's how I ended up where I am now. But the biggest question for me...

"I...didn't have the confidence to say whether I really love gemstones *that* much or if I was willing to bet my future on them," I finished.

"I get it. You got here because you admire Richard, right?"

“That’s part of it. But the other part is a much more selfish reason.”

“Selfish?”

“Yes,” I laughed as I nodded.

I genuinely had no idea what “old man Saul,” as Vince called him, really thought of me. But even if what Vince had pointed out was some percent true, I sorta felt like it was a “you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours” situation.

Because the biggest reason I accepted the apprenticeship was so I could get away from Japan for a while.

In my third year of college, just as my job hunt was ramping up, I had an incident with a persistent—I’m not sure what else to call him—stalker, and I had to face some changes that made me begin to doubt who I was. It was a pretty unstable time in my life. Moving between hotels in Tokyo so frequently that I started to wonder if I could get a job as a hotel sommelier wasn’t a real solution to the situation, either. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was always being watched. Just taking a walk around the area would have me panting like I’d just gone for an intense swim, and I found myself feeling uncomfortable in places like train stations, where lots of people gather, things like that. I was getting sick of these changes, this new weakness of mine that I just had to live with, and the other lingering after effects of that bad influence in my life. I don’t really remember what it was like when it was at its peak, but every night, I started to wonder if I really wanted to work in Tokyo. I’m pretty sure I used my English-speaking lessons as an excuse to talk to my boss at my part-time job, who was always very good at listening to my troubles, about it.

I was so happy when I found out I passed the first round of the exam. I was sad when I failed in the second part, but I was a little astonished when I realized that part of me was relieved, too. But was I really the kind of guy who would throw out the plan I had for my future since high school for some dumb reason like not wanting to work in Tokyo?

I didn’t think it was a coincidence when the idea of going to Sri Lanka was

brought up. And I think that was the main reason Mr. Nakata and Hiromi supported me in my decision to go, too. It felt kind of like taking a gap year or a change of air to convalesce. No matter how tenacious my stalker was, I knew he was broke, so it was hard to imagine he'd make it across the Indian Ocean. Obviously, in a massive city like Tokyo, the chances of running into him weren't that big, but all it took was one weird experience for your brain to start telling you that it could and would happen again and start running wild with infinite what-if scenarios.

I didn't think it would go on forever. Even now, I could tell that I was a lot more stable than I had been before.

But I knew it was an emotional issue, so I wanted to avoid falling into a vicious circle of hating myself even more because I was convinced I could just power through it somehow. I wanted to recover efficiently. Though I still remember exactly how Jeffrey's finger felt when he poked me in the forehead, saying he didn't like that attitude.

But ultimately, I decided not to give up on becoming a civil servant.

"It's hard to explain exactly what I mean by that, but I don't think I'm being used. There's something in it for me, too, and that's why I'm staying in Sri Lanka. There's no way to know if I really won't have any regrets about my decision until later, though."

Vince frowned as I cocked my head to the side, and I panicked and started flailing my hands around.

"But right now, my short-term objective is to improve my eye for jewels and help out at Ranasinghe Jewelry, and one of my long-term goals is to be able to help Richard. And so like, from that perspective, this apprenticeship isn't really that bad."

"Where do you get these crazy ideas that you can 'help' someone who's so obviously superior to you?"

"I guess it depends on what kind of 'help' we're talking about. I know I'm

probably not the one to be saying this sort of thing, but is he really that impossibly perfect? He never really showed you his monster sweet tooth when he was in Hong Kong, did he?”

“Monster sweet tooth? I mean, he did like *tong sui*, *douhua*, and egg tarts, and I remember him eating things like that with water often.”

At that point, Vince’s expression darkened again. I guess it wasn’t a very pleasant topic for him. He shook his head as if shaking off some bad memories and continued:

“Richard was always perfect when he was in Hong Kong. And he was always anxious about being chased by something, and sometimes his face would get so severe for no explicable reason, and he never even gave me a hint as to why. You’re just too good, Mr. Nakata. But that only makes me worry for you more.”

“Thanks for your concern, but I’m going to be okay. Honestly, I’m more worried about you.”

“That sure sounds like something Richard would say. Why are you worried about me?”

“Because you’re not really worried about me; you’re worried about Richard. But you’re concerned about me, too.”

It seemed a little surface-level, but I think what he was trying to say wasn’t that being around Richard would damage my self-esteem, but that my lowered self-esteem would result in Richard getting hurt. And that I should stop while I was ahead to avoid it. And his real concern was that my presence would potentially shackle Richard. That said, I really don’t think that “old man” was plotting anything of the sort, but Vince was serious.

And I guess, even though he’d only just met me on this cruise, he was concerned for me as a younger colleague of his.

The man who was a practitioner of Jeet Kune Do smiled boldly.

“Don’t be so surprised. Maybe you really are cut out to be a jeweler. You’re

very perceptive, and you've got a talent for cleanly scooping out other people's feelings and interfering with them. It makes me worry about you."

"Well, I'm worried about you, too. Do you remember that glass coffee table?"

Vince looked confused. He seemed to be trying to figure out what I was getting at by that.

The jewelry shop, *Étranger*, in Ginza had several pieces of distinctive furniture: the red lounge chairs, the house plants, and the glass coffee table. Richard had told me that the table had come from the Hong Kong shop.

If he had bad memories associated with the shop, he wouldn't have gone out of his way to bring it along. It was clear that even if Vince had negative feelings about it, Richard didn't. So why the hesitation?

A dull glimmer flashed in Vince's eyes like he remembered something. I smiled awkwardly and suggested that we stop with this frustrating conversation, since the immediate trouble had been at least somewhat settled, and Vince silently shoved his hand into his pocket and took a business card out of his card case. It was familiar. Richard had done the same thing the night we met in Yoyogi Park. It was a simple card with nothing but his name, Vincent Lai, and his email address.

"Don't hesitate to contact me if anything ever happens. I won't give my information to Richard, but I don't mind if you contact me whenever. I think I can offer you some advice, at least."

"You won't give it to Richard? Why?"

"If you're just going to sell me out, give my card back. I don't want to deal with it."

I wasn't suggesting that at all.

I didn't have the faintest clue what he was thinking.

I sensed his desire not to be hurt again in his comment about how hating Richard would be "safer." But just how had he been hurt? If he'd been around

Richard for years, surely he was at least aware that Richard was the kind of person who gave far more than he took. I don't think their relationship could have possibly been that shallow just based on the trust Richard placed in him and how he helped me out with the mess earlier.

So what exactly was he trying to say? He was hiding something from me.

Vince completely ignored the confusion in my eyes and clapped me on the shoulder before leaving the deck without another word. As he weaved his way through the frolicking children, he walked right past the man in the pale grey suit and didn't so much as react.

Richard watched him from behind for a few moments without saying a word, then approached me.

"What's up?"

"Your little chat was taking forever."

From his tone, I understood the subtext—"I was worried about you." Both me and Vince, that is. He was just that kind of person.

I shifted over into the place Vince had been standing earlier, and Richard looked out into the sea next to me. He probably wasn't looking for details about our conversation. Vince said he'd never talked to Richard about it, but it was hard to imagine that someone who was as sensitive to the subtitles of human emotion as Richard was didn't have a good idea of why someone who had been that close to him had left.

"Um, so I never asked before, but could I ask why you moved from Hong Kong to Japan?"

"Both my mentor and I have a sentimental attachment to Japan. And it had been part of his long-held plan to expand the shop. Additionally, while this wasn't a major motivator, Hong Kong was a very popular destination for British tourists. And there had been a few incidents over time that made me increasingly uncomfortable there."

That's right, the situation with his family still hadn't been cleared up yet at that point. I shrugged. If that was the reason he wanted to move, that was good enough for me. But what I really needed to ask about was Vince.

"So what was Vince like back then? I guess he's kinda like my predecessor, huh? I wonder if he might be a good role model. Did he make royal milk tea for you, too?"

"No, nothing like that. It was more that he had specialized technical knowledge, and I was grateful to have him as an adviser. His family had run a jewelry shop, so his knowledge of local dynamics was of great use at the beginning. But things got complicated, and now we're a bit estranged."

"Yeah, he told me a little about it earlier. He said that a family member fell ill and he couldn't work for a while..."

"Yes. And I believe he got married as well."

Married? My eyes went wide. It was hard to believe that that fashionable guy was someone's husband. Maybe that's just a thing in Hong Kong. I was pretty sure it wasn't, though. In response to my surprise, Richard pulled out his phone and, after fiddling with it for quite a while, showed me a photo. It had a celebratory atmosphere. It looked like a wedding photo.

The moment I looked at it, my lips pulled taught into an incredibly straight line.

"They were both students at the time. His wife is a sweet woman who was a lowerclassman. I don't believe they have any children, but... Seigi? What's the matter? Why are you making that face?"

"Wha?! I-Is that really—is that really *Vince*?!"

Richard frowned, puzzled, before letting out an "oh" as if he'd realized something.

"He does have a slightly different build now."

Slightly? It wasn't very like Richard to make such a gross error in word choice.

There was nothing “slight” about it. He was like a completely different person!

The picture on Richard’s phone was a portrait shot of a bride and groom standing next to each other. The new bride was an adorable, petite woman with plump cheeks, clad in a red dress, and next to her, with cheeks plump enough to give her a run for her money, was her young bespectacled groom. His tiny eyes were buried in the creases of his face, and his pants strained to contain his flesh. The backdrop of the portrait shot seemed to be a beautiful night sky, but it was largely concealed by the two of them. Who was this man in the photo? His body had to be at least twice the size of the Vincent Lai I knew. But how was this actually *him* and not just a relative with kind of similar facial features?

But I guess he did have the same brown undercut and the same almond-shaped eyes.

“...How old is this photo?”

“About three years. This photo was the last contact I had with him. Two months later, I was getting doused in beer by some drunks in Yoyogi Park.”

Which meant that, at some point between when I met Richard and today, the Vince in that photo had been reborn into his current slender K-pop star form. Richard very seriously commented that he must have been through a lot, but I don’t think this was just *going through* a lot. He must have put effort into this. *A lot* of effort. He must have put his all into losing that weight. And he did it. To an insane degree.

“Did you go out to eat egg tarts a lot with Vince when you were still in Hong Kong?”

“Did he say something to that effect? No, he rarely joined me...even if I did routinely invite him.”

“...This isn’t the first time I’ve thought this, but you really can eat anything and not gain a pound, huh?”

“So it seems. I don’t know how many times I’ve told you this, but I do take

care of my health.”

I knew that, but, hrm...

When customers, especially female customers, caught sight of Richard on an eating spree rather than a shopping spree at Shiseido Parlor, they generally reacted in one of two ways. There were some who seemed to just feel lucky to run into the beautiful man, while others who seemed to curse him for being able to eat all that and stay slim. I could honestly understand both camps.

There was such a thing as chemistry between people. Although I didn't think it was so much an innate quality as it was closely linked with what people valued and found permissible. And now I knew I was probably just letting my imagination get the best of me, but I thought in Richard and Vince's case, it was how unbalanced their perspectives were between what you could do if you worked really hard and what you could do without really trying. But there were degrees to everything.

Richard looked down at the deck of the luxury cruise liner, not at the sea, and let out a somber whisper:

“Did he seem well?”

“Huh?”

“You've spent more time with him than I have on this ship. Did he seem well to you?”

I told him that he seemed like he was doing great and was a very nice guy who helped me out a lot, and Richard smiled happily. He nodded repeatedly, and he looked genuinely happy. I struggled not to frown.

“He's a very earnest person. I know he doesn't particularly want to associate with me right now, but he's just as polite as ever. He doesn't like doing things halfway, does he? I heard he's living with some American relatives of his now and is studying a new field, but what a strange coincidence this has been.”

“.....”

I didn't say anything, and the beautiful man smiled and cocked his head to the side.

"Sure, his appearance and his circumstances may have changed, but those are both years-long efforts that he decided to undertake. Personally, I don't think he's changed one bit. When we met on this ship, he even told me that he's 'nothing like he used to be,' but I think it's a good thing that people don't change so easily."

"...Yeah, I agree."

I thought Richard was right. Even if he could be a little curt sometimes, if Vince was the same back when he was assisting Richard in Hong Kong as he was when he was helping me—that is, fundamentally kind, even if he could say some harsh things from time to time, and considerate, even if he seemed aloof—then the two of them must've had a warm relationship.

That said, I did think he should have said something to him like "You really have changed," or "Wow," or even "You must've worked really hard," or something. No, well, I guess a man who'd suffered for being born as beautiful as a gemstone might find discussing changes in anyone's appearance even more distressing than I could imagine. To him, it was something that shouldn't be touched on without the greatest care. But if I'd been in Vince's shoes and had such a massive physical transformation, only to be told I hadn't changed at all, I think I'd have some pretty mixed feelings about it.

I just nodded with a sullen look on my face, and Richard silently responded with a choppy nod as a joke. Both of us burst out laughing, and I felt like I noticed some of the tension leave my shoulders.

"Have you eaten your fill?"

"I ate exactly as much as I needed to. And you?"

"Plenty. But, man, that crab was so good. Even if those crabs' spirits haunt my dreams, I don't think I'd regret eating them."

Richard smiled.

“Any plans after this?”

“Nope. If you want me to get down on my hands and knees and beg for forgiveness, I’d be happy to, though.”

“No, thank you. I’d rather make a visit to your room. If you wouldn’t mind, that is.”

“I don’t mind at all, but why?”

Richard smirked. It looked like something black was about to spill out of him. He seemed much more relaxed than he had at the casino, but at the same time it was like whatever he’d been holding back up until that point was about to overflow.

“For the equipment.”

“H-huh?”

“I recall you mentioning a bit ago after I changed rooms that you had some extremely useful equipment in your room that I didn’t in mine.”

Equipment? Extremely useful equipment? I’d only spent one night in my room, so it didn’t click immediately, but I remembered something like that after about three seconds. Right. That sort of thing really *was* perfect in situations like this.

When I reentered my room for the first time in over a day, I was reminded that there was a fitness-enthusiast treadmill in my room. And next to it was a big punching bag. I was dubious that anyone would actually use these things, but looking at Richard in that moment made it all make sense. Clearly, there were people who would. For a very practical reason.

The beautiful man threw off his jacket about 30 percent more aggressively than normal, rolled up his sleeves, and stood in front of the punching bag. He gave it a fierce one-two punch. Sometimes, humans just get the urge to suddenly practice boxing, and this seemed to be one such time for Richard. Any

comment I could think of sounded too flippant, especially considering everything was fundamentally my fault, so I didn't say a word.

After a textbook sparring presentation, Richard left the room with a refreshed look on his face. As he left the room, fixing his messy hair, a staff member carrying a bottle of champagne happened to be walking by at the same time. They took about five steps back like they had just happened upon something unbelievable. I knew the feeling. If I had to give this piece a title, I might go with something like, "Savage Beauty." I prayed for the champagne's survival.

"....."

When I turned back around, I could see that the punching bag was still swinging.

I warmed up just to be safe and then stood before the punching bag myself and started practicing roundhouse kicks. I hit two low, one middle, and finished with a high kick from a blindspot. The punching bag shook. This was perfect. I'd just kick the punching bag. That way, I could get this out of my system without breaking the social contract or making someone I care about sad.

I had a ways to go before I was completely over it, but I did feel a bit better.

The cruise proceeded without issue, and I spent most of the remaining time chatting and eating with Richard or wasting time in the ship's gym. I hadn't really thought about it until now, but I suppose I haven't been getting enough exercise lately. I felt my mind clearing. I guess I wasn't only feeling down because I didn't have anyone to talk to.

After we parted ways at the restaurant, I didn't have the opportunity to see Vince again until the ship returned to Fort Lauderdale.

As I disembarked the ship after the short cruise, I kept wondering if I might end up in handcuffs when the short old man appeared before us again with a big smile on his face. I immediately put up a smile of my own. I figured this was something I was going to have to get used to. Mr. Karlsbrook tried to give Richard a big hug, but Richard dodged, so he reluctantly hugged me instead,

since I had forced myself between them. I once again recalled the times I had spent watching videos of those Hanshin fans tossing the Colonel Sanders statue into the Dotombori river and couldn't think about anything else. At least, I didn't think I could.

"It might be a little messy for a while, but I hope you're looking forward to this new stage of Gargantua's business, Ricky. And do come visit the villa this summer. I'll prepare enough champagne to swim in."

"I happen to have a prior engagement this summer. I hope you enjoy yourself."

I kept up my smile the whole time as we were getting off the boat, and Richard looked at me.

"You look terrifying."

"I'm smiling, aren't I?"

"I'm not very fond of that fake smile of yours."

"I guess I'll have to study how to smile properly until the next time we meet."

"I think it'd serve you better to focus your efforts on restraining yourself from sticking your nose into ill-considered adventures."

"I know. I've been working pretty hard on it these past few years, so consider my progress."

"I recognize the effort you've put in. The issue is whether that has any material effect on reality."

I rolled my eyes, and Richard raised an eyebrow. His leather shoes made their way down the long slope. I don't know how much lighter my heart felt to have safely escaped that prison of a ship. I knew the boat wasn't at fault, but I'm not interested in taking another cruise this vile again.

"When's your flight?"

"Not for another three hours. What about you?"

“A longtime customer of mine has been living in Dallas for some time now. I have plans to drop by. I guess this is goodbye for us for now,” Richard said with a smile. The beautiful man promptly took the sunglasses from his pocket and put them on, as if he knew how much he stood out even at a distance, standing there on the harbor with his luggage.

We probably wouldn’t be able to see each other again for a while.

“Maybe we’ll run into each other by accident again soon.”

“We will see each other again, even if it isn’t by accident.”

Well, yeah. But Japan and Sri Lanka were far apart. And my job right now was sort of an extension of my student days. I felt like I had a lot of free time, while Richard was working all over the place.

The false smile I’d learned appeared on my face as I said, “I hope so,” and Richard snorted.

“Instead of focusing on how to improve that bizarre expression, look at as many stones as you can. Especially beautiful ones. I’m sure Saul has told you the same. That information will become your fortune.”

“...All right, will do.”

“Good. Well, then, if you’ll excuse me,” Richard said casually and hailed a taxi. He left without ever looking back. It felt almost like he was saying we’d meet again in Ginza next week. But that was probably the right way to look at things. We were both still on this Earth together.

Right after Richard left, I sent Vince another email—I had sent him one while I was still on the ship—but unsurprisingly, he didn’t reply. Jeffrey seemed like he was still busy, too. I wanted to get all the things that were bothering me off my mind sooner rather than later, but I guess it wasn’t up to me. I’d just have to be patient.

A short while after everything that had happened on the cruise, I saw the

news that the acquisition of the long-standing American jewelry brand, Gargantua, by a major fashion conglomerate had been temporarily halted. It came to light that Mr. Karlsbrook's habitual sexual harassment and its subsequent coverup were organization-wide affairs, and a group of women who had been victimized in the past were organizing a class-action lawsuit. The acquisition had been postponed until the trial concluded and a new purchase price could be negotiated. People in the industry had a vague sense that something was coming because the vice president lost his job for reasons that didn't make a lot of sense. Internally, the company was trying to settle the issue with money at first, but the victims' anger wouldn't be so easily pacified, and they hired a skilled lawyer from England to represent them, who really held Gargantua's feet to the fire.

Somewhere in the back of my head, I felt like I could hear someone saying, "We have the better lawyer." Photos of Mr. Karlsbrook, the primary defendant, and another complicit employee were included in the piece. I could barely remember that Krueger was his name. He must've been in his forties. I remembered the last thing the vice president had said to Mr. Karlsbrook. He hardly looked like he had aged.

Personally, I looked forward to the day that we lived in a society where sexual harassers of all genders were dealt with swiftly and uniformly. It was a violation of basic human rights. I thought about what Richard told me a while ago, that "you'll never be able to treat others with kindness, if you can't treat yourself with kindness," and I thought society was sort of the same way—a society that was kind to people would encourage them to be kind to others. Apparently, Gargantua had hired an outside firm to do an inquiry into the sexual harassment problem as a first step into reforming its corporate culture. As I half-heartedly listened to the commentator talk about looking forward to the company's comeback after a much-needed wake-up call if they wanted to last another hundred years, I continued grating coconuts in Sri Lanka.

■ Epilogue ■

APRIL 24TH

Hello, Iggy here. Long time no post!

I've actually been out of town for a while, and a lot of stuff happened, and I've had a bit of a change of heart. I feel a lot more positive than I did before.

I went back and reread my posts from when I started this blog, and they were so boring! So I'm going to try to write about things you can't just look up with a search engine—what I'm doing in Sri Lanka and what I'm feeling. I don't think my English is very good yet, but I'm pretty sure it's readable, at least! I hope you'll stick with me!

APRIL 25TH

I get a little depressed when I do nothing but study in an unfamiliar country, so I've decided to do something fun today. You see, I'm actually really fond of cooking, so I bought some of my favorite ingredients at the supermarket where I always buy premade meals. I'll attach some pictures.

Ta-dah! I didn't think I'd find such an extensive bakery section in a Sri Lankan supermarket. But now that I think about it, this country's most famous export is tea, after all, and you have to have delicious sweets with tea. So maybe it only makes sense.

I'd just bought powdered sugar and syrup, but they had chocolate sauce and cake mix, jelly base, pudding mix, and basically anything you can imagine. But the thing they had the most of was food coloring. I asked the cashier why they had so much of it, and I was told it was used often in religious festivals. Makes sense!

I stuffed my face with a 100-rupee (the exchange rate is pretty stable with my

home currency, which makes calculating prices very easy!) curry lunch set at a little shop next to the supermarket. It was a bit spicy for me, but I think I'd go back again. My mouth is still stinging a little, though...

APRIL 26TH

Watalappan!

The mysterious word I shouted on my blog a while ago is actually the name of a food.

It's a soft coconut-based confection made with sago palm syrup known as *kithul*. Saul's housekeeper told me that it's often eaten at weddings and other celebrations. When I was eating some I'd bought from the supermarket, she told me that it's a hundred times better homemade and gave me the recipe. Thanks! But as you might expect of a food for celebrations, it opened with "twenty-five eggs," so I think I'll try scaling it down.

APRIL 27TH

I've spent most of this afternoon just grating coconut.

It's so good if you eat curry with it.

Why had I wasted so much time up until now eating frozen meals?

I've been back to that lunch spot a few times, and once I befriended the old man who owns the place, he taught me how to make delicious curry and about the local market. It has a really retro vibe and sells bagged vegetables and spices. He told me that it was better to get processed foods at the supermarket, but the local market was the better choice for perishables and local foods. I couldn't be more grateful! And so, that's how I went to the market with the old man today and bought some coconuts.

Sri Lankan coconuts are a little smaller than ones from Thailand and places like that, and they're more orange in hue than yellow-green. They're called "king coconuts." I've never seen them back home before. But that's probably because we don't have any palm trees...

They're full of lots of clear juice, and you can eat the white flesh attached to the inside. The old man told me that it was good to eat on its own, but that if you grate it finely, you can use it to make a nice accompaniment to curry called *sambol*. And of course you can use it to make sweets, too.

I had fun saying hello to the folks from the neighborhood as they passed by while I was grating coconuts in the yard.

Up until now, I'd been so self-centered, hoping someone would talk to me, but now that I actually think about it, just talking to a random foreigner out of the blue is a pretty big ask, so I think for a little while at least, I'll try to live my life as Iggy, the extremely outgoing man.

APRIL 29TH

The road to *watalappan*.

It's pretty hard, actually. You need a sieve. Nutmeg and salt. And the real trick is cooking it over low heat.

I haven't written anything about gemstones in a while, but my studies are progressing well. Just because I'm learning to cook new things, too, doesn't mean I'm being lazy in that department!

MAY 1ST

The road to *watalappan*, part two.

I think I have the basics down, at least.

The batch was full of bubbles, but when I shared it with a brother and sister who lived in the area, they were really happy, and their mother shared a steamed rice dish called *biryani* with me. I asked if it was like fried rice, and she explained that it was steamed, not fried. It was delicious. I should learn to make this one, too.

MAY 2ND

The road to *watalappan*, part three.

Back home a very similar dish was my specialty—I could just about have made it with my eyes closed, but I guess just changing the pot and the sugar and flavoring makes it that much harder.

But I know I'm getting closer and closer to getting it right. Stay tuned!

It's kind of funny—I have an easier time studying on days that I cook.

Concentration sure is weird, huh?

It rained a lot in Sri Lanka in May, but the sun on sunny days rivaled the sun in Japan in August. I wondered why people didn't wear hats here even when the sun was beaming down.

After I had returned from my tumultuous trip to the waters around Florida, I took it upon myself to spend more time on my hobbies. It wasn't like you could concentrate on anything completely all day long, after all. So I figured I should have some fun to balance things out. At first I had just intended to indulge myself, but I got way more out of it than I had expected—I made some friends and got to eat plenty of delicious food. Because I was staying in a home that always had gemstones in its safe, Saul told me I wasn't allowed to invite people from the neighborhood over, but there was no issue with me going to visit them. I was going to get to taste some delicious home cooking soon. I couldn't wait.

Now.

I was standing with my arms crossed in the kitchen at the back of the house. This house had two kitchens—a regular one next to the living/dining room and another one in the annex outside the house. It was about a two-by-three-meter space with three wood-burning stoves, a pile of black pots, and unglazed pottery that looked like they'd been used for over a hundred years, and the three coconut vessels were all screaming, "This is Sri Lanka." The roof was made of palm thatch, and there was no electricity. I should mention that there was a bath in the back surrounded by banana, mango, and papaya trees. There's a forest back there, and sometimes I heard people wandering around in it, but I've never encountered any actual trespassers. The houses in the area were all pretty tidy, too, compared to the main part of the city, and it seemed to be a relatively safe area.

I had a silver bowl boiling in one of the black pots. Steam billowed off it, but there wasn't any ventilation in the annex, so I had to keep the door wide open, filling the entire area with a sweet smell. It made me almost feel like I was running a bakery or something. Not that I had anything to sell.

Watalappan.

It was a Sri Lankan dessert that English recipe sites described as Sri Lankan pudding.

Pudding had been introduced to the region during the British colonial period and had blended into the existing food culture—the sugar was replaced with sago palm syrup, and the caramel swapped for nutmeg and a little salt, transforming it into something much more exotic-feeling. It had a great flavor and texture just like the pudding I was familiar with, but it had this unique, refreshing sweetness, and you scoop it out of the bowl you make it in with a spoon, and everyone shared from the dish, kind of like a crumble. Also, it was, like, really good. So good that I had no notes. Well, assuming I made it right, that is.

You know how they say, “Third time’s the charm”? I hope this time I could make some smooth *watalappan*. Saul’s housekeeper told me that even if it had lumps and holes, it was still a proper Sri Lankan pudding and not a failure at all—but personally, I felt like pudding should be smooth. I wanted to make it work.

I set the timer on my phone and kept watch over the water bath as I began to grate more coconut when, unexpectedly, my phone rang. I assumed it was probably Saul. He was still really busy, but he promised to take me to a gemstone mine soon, so he ordered me to improve my eye even more before then. I just pushed the “answer” button without actually looking at the screen.

“Hello.”

“Hello. It’s me. Do you have a moment?”

Oh.

I checked the name of the caller and put it on speakerphone. When I propped my phone up against the rather low spot to rest pots above the stove, I could hear his voice more clearly. The people who used this place in the past must’ve been a lot shorter than me.

The name “Richard” appeared on my phone screen. Just seeing his name made my heart feel at ease.

“Thanks for calling. I do have time right now. But it might get a little noisy in about ten minutes.”

“Are you expecting company?”

“No, I’m cooking,” I explained.

“I see,” said Richard.

He must’ve had some news for me or something.

“Have you heard anything from Jeffrey? I haven’t heard a peep out of him myself.”

“We’ve been exchanging emails. We both concluded that text communication was the better route over verbal in this particular instance, you included. We’ll be in touch shortly, if that’s all right with you.”

“I’m fine with whatever. You should tell him not to worry too much, since it wasn’t his fault.”

“Oh, it was his fault. While it was his former secretary who leaked the information, it was his mistake for hiring them and failing to manage sensitive information appropriately. The fact that it was his personal secretary and not his work one doesn’t make me inclined to be more lenient, either.”

I nearly burst out laughing at how matter-of-fact his tone was.

We still hadn’t figured out who had sent me the “Help Richard” emails.

Whoever it was had gotten my passport number through Jeffrey’s former secretary. They had probably been bribed or something. It must have been an especially harsh betrayal, considering Jeffrey had hired this person to manage his private affairs. Even if this person had been dealt with accordingly, we were still in the dark about who they passed the information off to. Or maybe they just weren’t telling me.

It wasn’t my stalker back in Tokyo. He didn’t have the information gathering or planning abilities for something like this. It had to be someone else.

“Got it. I’ll wait for the info, then. Thanks for the call.”

“How have things been lately? You seemed a little depressed when we met on the cruise.”

“Things are going pretty well. Saul’s still really busy, but I’ve been finding all sorts of fun to keep myself occupied. I’m even getting to know the people in the neighborhood.”

“Then nothing’s been bothering you in particular?”

“No,” I asserted.

I still didn’t know the difference between Mexican opal and Australian opal

very well, or how to tell the difference between red tourmaline and garnet, or how to tell if a stone was cut well or not entirely by feel. There were all sorts of little worries I had, but in my head, these were just homework problems for my eyes to overcome. Not something I could just have someone else solve for me, in the same way that there wouldn't be much point in having someone sitting next to me, taking a test for me.

The bowl began to clatter in the pot. It might be about time. I turned off the ringing timer and took the pot off the fire before gently lifting the silver bowl out of the water. I checked inside. I wanted to give myself a round of applause, but I refrained. I didn't see any bubbles on the surface like overcooked *chawanmushi*. This was the pudding I knew. A whole bowl full of pudding was giant by Japanese standards.

"Seigi?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Well...I guess it's something."

"You're feeling more encouraged, I take it."

"Actually."

I told him that I had learned an interesting new recipe and that I *was* feeling more encouraged. Japan was three and a half hours ahead of Sri Lanka. If Richard was in Ginza, he might be on his afternoon break. He'd probably made himself some royal milk tea.

I told him that I didn't know if he'd eaten it before when he was living here, but if he hadn't, I was pretty sure he'd like it. He replied with a sigh.

"Are you enjoying your free time? What on Earth are you doing?"

"Like I said, cooking. I mostly cooked for myself in college because I needed to save money, but thinking back on it now, I think part of the reason I did it was because I like it. It's fun."

"I suppose it's similar to how, when I'm feeling down, I like to read about unfamiliar grammatical constructions to raise my spirits."

“You do that? Grammar’s fun?”

“Extremely. I find analyzing the structure of language even more fascinating than reading mystery novels. I might compare it to following the waters of human thought upstream.”

I guess I shouldn’t be surprised at how different a multilingual person’s perspective would be on that, but that made me realize that I’d been using almost exclusively English lately. Didn’t that technically make me multilingual now? I started to notice that my thoughts were a bit different when I was speaking Japanese versus when I was speaking English, too.

“Seigi? Is something the matter?”

“Oh, no,” I hesitated, but when I realized what I wanted to say, I couldn’t hold back a chuckle.

“What is it?”

“I know this is probably weird to say, but making this reminded me of you, and I kinda...oh...”

“Seigi?”

“...Maybe it’d be better to say this in English.”

Lately, English was starting to feel progressively less like words that didn’t belong to me. Maybe it was because I was starting to be able to think in English like I’d been told to. There were words that I wanted to say in Japanese and others that felt easier to express in English, but they were both becoming mine. For example, this was something that I wanted to say in English.

I wish you were here.

I wish you were here to eat the food I made.

I don’t know if you’ll like it, but I’d be happy if you gave it a try.

And if I said something ridiculous again, I wouldn’t mind if you got frustrated and scolded me.

I told him all that in a casual English tone—my accent had been slowly shifting lately from Richard’s style of pronunciation to the local Sri Lankan accent. Richard responded with silence.

“...Are you sure you still have time to chat, Richard? Aren’t you busy?”

“Up until yesterday, I was so busy, my eyes were spinning. My schedule was absolutely stuffed. But things have calmed down now.”

“Are you out on another business trip?”

“Hasn’t it been ten minutes? Didn’t you say you’d be getting busy about now?”

“Oh, right!”

I pulled the cheesecloth cover off the bowl of *watalappan* and scooped its contents out with a big spoon. It was a sight to behold. There was no caramel sauce, and the color wasn’t so much gold as it was the diluted brown of the palm syrup, but it was pudding nonetheless. A massive pudding at that. You could scoop and scoop and there was still more—all you could eat. It was a lot, even if I shared it with people in the neighborhood. I ladled the scoop out into a piece of unglazed brown pottery and spooned a lump of it into my mouth finally. It was delicious. Not too sweet, just perfect. I was sure that a certain someone that I knew very well would love it. I could hear birds chirping off in the distance.

“I’m in the kitchen in the annex out back right now, but this place really is paradise, huh?”

“You mean there are colorful birds singing, rainbow-colored gems sparkling, and all the food and drink you can consume that never diminishes, no matter how much you eat and drink?”

“...It certainly feels like it, at least.”

Of course, the only reason it felt so otherworldly to me was that I still wasn’t completely used to this country, and the house I was staying in was relatively

cut off from the outside world, and because I'd been focusing on doing the things I wanted to do. I'd have to get myself motivated and work on that again soon. But.

I didn't feel like it right now.

I picked my phone up and took it off speaker and noticed I could hear sounds other than Richard's voice from the other end. The call hadn't dropped, and it didn't seem like some kind of interference. Maybe he forgot to hang up?

"Richard? Is everything okay? What are you doing right now?"

"Getting some sun. By the way, what are you making?"

"I'm surprised you asked. I made a massive pudding that I'd never made before. It's a Sri Lankan dish, so I don't know if you'll like it, but I think it's pretty good."

"I look forward to trying it. By the way, I have something I'd like to ask you, but I don't want to anger or shock you. Do you mind?"

Anger or shock me? How could I ever be angry at Richard? What on Earth was it?

"I don't think anything you could ask would make me angry...what is it?"

"It's not that big of a deal."

"Are you finally starting to have blood sugar issues?"

"No. Who do you think I am?"

"Look, I just worry about you. Sorry for being a downer. So it's not a health issue?"

"Of course not. I'm always the very picture of health."

"Well, I hope that continues to be the case. So what is it?"

"Look up and take a look outside."

I didn't have to wonder what he meant by outside.

Because the voice wasn't coming from my phone but right next to me.

I looked from the tiny window in the annex kitchen. Someone was there. Leaning against the wall, enjoying the sunshine. A strange person. No, the figure was far too familiar to be a stranger. He wore white pants and an open-collared shirt. And when he lowered those same caramel-colored sunglasses that he'd had on the deck of the ship, the most beautiful blue eyes in the world were looking back at me. He was smiling.

I gasped and jumped back. The beautiful stranger panicked and hurried into the kitchen.

"Be careful. Don't drop the pot. You need to take care with these sorts of things."

"Who cares about the pot?! What are you doing here?!"

"What does it matter? I guess I could say I'm observing you."

I guess he was, but that wasn't really the issue. I wished he would have told me in advance. This was beyond shock. Why did he do this? I stammered out as much, and Richard looked like he was having a *lot* of fun for a moment. That's when I realized. I got it now. This was what I did when I showed up on the boat and found him.

"Now we're even."

The jeweler had a broad smile on his face, almost like a teacher scolding a student for a prank—no, like a child who was very proud of himself for pulling off a prank. I was at a loss for words.

Richard snatched the unglazed pot from my hand and began walking into the garden.

"*Watalappan* is best eaten while it's still warm. Why don't we take a break?"

"...What about the shop? Does Saul know you're here?"

"Of course he does. I guess I ought to explain the difference of opinion he and I are having. He appears to be relying far too much on you taking the initiative. I

was thinking I'd stay here for about four days to help you out. I hope to continue doing this regularly in the future. I may not have lived here for some time now, but I am still fairly familiar with the area. I'll show you around."

"What about Tokyo...?"

"I'll return on the weekend. I'm making Saul handle the weekday appointments—or rather, he agreed to take them after some negotiation."

I felt like the world was spinning around me. But I remembered that Étranger's operations were pretty flexible. Saul had no trouble taking over the shop when Richard suddenly disappeared a few years back. So I guess they could manage. Or at least that's what I wanted to believe, because even if they weren't managing somehow, it wouldn't change how I felt in that moment.

"I'm really, really happy to hear that, but don't force yourself! But that does make me really happy!"

"You're quite welcome. Why don't I go make some tea? Do you have anything else that might be appropriate for an afternoon snack?"

"Maybe the *samosas* I bought at the station? They're spicy but delicious. Also, if you wanna know what kind of fun things I've been getting up to lately, I can tell you over tea."

"Bravo. There couldn't be a more perfect dessert. I'd love to listen to that while we eat," Richard said, smiling in the sunshine.

The garden gleamed like heaven, as it was filled with midday sunlight. We enjoyed our ethnic pudding along with our royal milk tea and talked only of happy things. I savored my time with a conversation partner who was interested in what I had to say.

If heaven was defined as a place that you could only go when you died, then I hoped it was a place like this.

"So, I'm guessing the real reason you're here has something to do with that

suspicious email I got.”

“I’m glad you’re so perceptive, it’ll save me some time.”

After an unusually elegant afternoon of royal milk tea and Sri Lankan pudding, we finally got into the topic at hand.

“I’ll start with the conclusions. That email you received from that deceptive address and the person who sent you the cruise tickets was not Amin. There is a very high chance that it was the work of someone I knew personally in the past.”

“...You mean someone in your family?”

Richard’s family consisted of his two cousins Jeffrey and Henry, and then their father who I hadn’t met directly, the current Earl of Claremont. I was pretty sure none of them harbored any ill will toward Richard anymore.

Richard silently sipped his royal milk tea, which tasted just like it did in Ginza, from his flower-patterned cup. Then he set the cup down and pulled his phone from his pocket.

“I received a video message, if you’re interested?”

He flicked through screens on his phone with his thumb and pulled up a video. It was of a girl. She was sitting like a doll against the grey wall of a room with no decoration behind her. The angle reminded me of some kind of product review video. She wasn’t smiling.

Then she smiled and greeted the camera.

“It’s been ages, Mr. Richard. How have you been? I’ve been well.”

She was speaking Japanese. This probably fourteen-year-old white girl was speaking Japanese. Her hair was done up into a poofy bun, which was wrapped in a braid like a chain—it gave the hairstyle an elegance reminiscent of a period drama. Her classical lace blouse looked expensive, too. The colored gem around her neck looked like amber. It was the same color as her eyes, and it gleamed like a lump of honey. But her gaze was sharp as a knife.

"I heard that a lot of things happened after you disappeared. It was very unfortunate that your engagement was ended. I think that's very sad."

The tone of her voice never changed. She wasn't difficult to understand, but she wasn't as fluent as Richard was. Her voice sounded almost like a text-to-speech program but smoother. She continued to speak in her clear, almost inhuman voice.

"But I know the truth. I know that I'm not the one who should be sad and that you're a bad person who made someone you cared about suffer very much. You always told me that the world should be a more just place. So that's why I've decided that it's wrong that you get to be happy. Richard Claremont, Jeffrey Claremont, and Henry Claremont—I will never forgive you for what you've done, and there are many others who feel the same way. So please don't consider what I'm about to do to you as unfair treatment. This is the punishment you deserve, Mr. Richard."

She'd just said something shocking, but the video just continued like it was nothing. The girl paused, as if taking a short break, before smiling.

"My dear teacher, do look after your health. And say hello to Mr. Nakata for me. He is a truly kind person. He almost makes me wish I had a friend like him. And on that note."

I let out a deep sigh. We were in Sri Lanka, and while we were exposed in the garden, it was hard to imagine anyone else in the neighborhood could speak Japanese. I pulled my chair over a little to face Richard directly before I spoke.

"...She called you 'teacher.' Was she a student of yours in the past?"

"There's more. This is the part that actually concerns you."

I hurriedly returned my eyes to the phone. The girl brought something over from off-screen and set it up in front of her chest. A picture frame? No. It was a small tablet. She turned it on and it was displaying an image, not of her, but a portrait shot of a man.

A slender man with brown hair and an undercut.

"Um...so what did you want me to say exactly?"

"Do it properly like we discussed."

"Oh, um..."

It was Vince. He was wearing a white shirt, more stylish than what he wore as a security guard. He scratched his head with an indifferent expression on his face.

"Mr. Nakata, I assume you're watching this. I apologize for ignoring your emails. I figured there wasn't much point considering I would be sending you this. I think it would be best if you returned to Japan, because this young woman knows exactly what she's doing."

"Speak slower, your fast Japanese is hard to understand."

"Oh, sorry. Mr. Nakata, I have to tell you something that's hard to say."

And then Vince began to speak quickly.

"The person who slipped that little surprise into your pocket during the show was me. It was a request of one of the employees in the security office, not that rich old man. Although the ringleader is ultimately the same no matter what. It might ultimately be my fault that you were treated as a thief, but I couldn't bear to see him selfishly complaining about being forced to do it or lose his job, so I offered to help. Well, I'm sorry."

I'd never heard an apology so devoid of emotion before. Thinking back on it, someone stepped on my foot during the show. I didn't pay any attention to it at the time, but I guess that really was the only opportunity someone would have had to put it into my pocket.

But Richard had watched all the surveillance footage.

Had he known?

Before I had the opportunity to look at Richard's face, Vince's expression

changed on the video. I guess he wasn't talking to me anymore.

"Richard. Thank you for all your hard work checking the security footage. Once you were left alone in the security office with Mr. Karlsbrook and that one guard, you should have seen the truth. I won't ask why you covered for me. You're just as virtuous and lonesome a man as you ever were. Oh...well, I think things are going to get a bit more troublesome for you, but when you're struggling, think of those egg tarts. I'm sure it will distract you."

"You're talking too fast! Speak slower."

"I'll write it down for you. It's a video anyway, so you can just watch it again later."

"Hmph."

The little girl frowned. What on Earth? Was I really supposed to take this seriously? Or was this like some children's game at a family party? I looked to Richard for answers.

There was no expression on his beautiful face.

Richard was looking at his phone with a blank expression.

Richard let out a little sigh when the video ended and put the phone back in his pocket. The royal milk tea and the plate of Sri Lankan pudding sparkled in the afternoon sun, but it didn't feel so much like heaven anymore.

"I received this two days ago at an old email address of mine. Jeffrey received a very similar video at about the same time. I don't know the details of what was in that one, but it seemed to confirm what we have his former secretary to thank for."

"You mean the one who stole my email address and passport number?"

"So it appears."

I was at a loss for words. This was in far too poor taste to be a joke. And I mean, Jeffrey's former secretary had lost their job. That's not something you'd do for a prank.

Just what was this girl thinking? And who even was she?

Richard was silent for a bit, as if he were listening to the birds, before he slowly began to speak.

“She was our student. She was a very wise girl, raised in an extraordinarily wealthy family, and just like us, she had a great deal of love for your country’s culture. Her name is Octavia. I was just about your age when I met her, and she was just a small child.”

Octavia. She definitely carried herself like the daughter of a wealthy family. Richard and I were about seven years apart, so she would have been really young at the time. But setting that aside for now, there was something I was really curious about.

Our student?

The furrow didn’t leave my brow, and Richard smiled faintly as he softly added:

“She was a student who I and my former fiancée, Debora Shahin, taught together. Perhaps it would be better to think of her as a family friend. She was very invested in our relationship and impending wedding, and she sent us gifts and letters from the heart.”

Richard cut off there. He seemed unsure of how to continue after that. I didn’t know what to say, either. I didn’t think there was anything I should say.

After a bit of silence, Richard took a quick breath and smiled.

“...It seems like I’ll be causing you trouble for a little while still.”

I almost burst out laughing. That’s what he says with that look on his face?

“Well, that’s a relief. I’ve been running myself ragged lately. I’ve gotten really into my studies, too.”

I forced a smile. It wasn’t on purpose. I was confident that, since I was smiling because I wanted to make someone else smile, I wasn’t making that unpleasant

face like I was before.

“There’s still a lot of *watalappan* left. Want some more?”

“Yes, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Oh, I forgot I have cookies, too. They’re crispy ginger ones and they’re really tasty. They’re some Sri Lankan brand—are you familiar with them? Well, you should try them regardless.”

I sent Vince another email as I returned to the kitchen to retrieve the cookies. Just “I saw the video.” I got a reply only a few seconds later.

“You should go home to Japan.”

It was a simple sentence, so I gave him a simple reply.

“No, thank you.”

I’d heard that Vince was the type of person who overthinks everything. I wanted to convey my cheery mood, so I slapped a mountain of emojis onto the end of the message. “*Stop screwing around,*” he replied. I resisted the urge to reply with “That’s my line,” as I plated the cookies. I had no idea what was going through his head, but what reason could he have for letting a little girl who hates his former boss lead him around by the nose? What on Earth was he thinking?

He said that he’d gotten that security job through a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend, but one of those “friends” might have been whoever got a hold of my personal information.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

The cups and matching plates were definitely Saul’s taste. There was enough flatware in the house to hold a garden party without issue. Especially considering the two kitchens, maybe this house was used for more social occasions in the past. Lately, I’d been thinking it’d be fun to have a party like that here. I could invite Richard’s family from England, my friends and, of course, family from Japan, and maybe all the friends I’d make here in Sri Lanka

and in other countries, too.

I hoped I could make that a reality someday.

Now that I was on the verge of turning twenty-three, three years didn't feel nearly as long as it did when I was in elementary school or junior high. Time flew by before you even realized it. But considering how close I'd grown to someone I'd only just met in those three years, it was hard to imagine where we'd be in another three. Of course, there was always a chance that we could get into some horrible fight and not be on speaking terms, but the opposite was possible too, right? I wanted to do whatever I could to support him even more.

And that wouldn't change, whether Richard continued being a jeweler, went home and got into finance like Jeffrey, or holed up in a library to throw himself into the study of Japanese literature or some obscure language's grammar.

Maybe people would get in the way, too, but no voyage is without its storms. I'd just have to do as much as I could.

The shadow of exhaustion was hidden in the man's pale face as he asked for another cup of royal milk tea. I put on my best carefree smile as I prepared another cup and offered him the plate of cookies. The brown ginger cookies from the orange package had a spicy zing of ginger the moment they hit your tongue, but once you tried one, it was hard to stop.

"They're good if you dip them in your tea, too. You should try it."

"Perhaps if we were having them with plain tea, I might try it, but personally, I prefer to enjoy royal milk tea for what it is."

"I had a feeling you'd say that."

He shot me a look as if to say, "Then don't make silly suggestions like that." I sat back down in my chair and the relaxing teatime atmosphere returned. The verdant garden was beautiful, the sky was clear and bright, and blue-feathered birds flew by.

This moment was perfect, and I wanted to treasure it.

My desire to keep moments like this safe made me feel like I could grow however strong I needed to. At least, I wanted to think that. Like a strong gold setting protecting a large gemstone.

I didn't care if it wasn't up to "high-end" beauty standards. As long as I had the strength to protect the things I cared about...that was good enough for me.



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