THE DARK MAIDENS

Story by RIKAKO AKIYOSHI
Art by BOOOTA

Translated by KRISTI FERNANDEZ

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THE 61st MEETING OF THE ST. MARY'S ACADEMY FOR GIRLS LITERATURE CLUB MEETING PROGRAMME

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Itsumi Shiraishi

The previous president of the St. Mary's Academy for Girls Literature Club. Passed away one week ago.

Sayuri Sumikawa

The current president of the Literature Club. Itsumi Shiraishi's best friend.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Mirei Nitani

First-year student. The only scholarship student in her grade.

Akane Kominami

Second-year student. Her family owns the traditional restaurant Kominami.

Diana Decheva

An international student from Bulgaria.

Sonoko Koga

Third-year student. The daughter of a doctor, and aiming for medical school.

Shiyo Takaoka

Second-year student. Actively working as a light novelist.

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Official Greetings & Rules for the Mystery Stew

Speaker:

Club President

Sayuri Sumikawa

Greetings, everyone. I would like to thank you all for gathering here on this stormy night.

This is the St. Mary's Academy for Girls Literature Club's last regular meeting of the semester. As president of our club, I, Sayuri Sumikawa, would like to begin with some opening remarks. Please feel free to sip on the welcome drinks I've just handed out as you listen.

Our club is small, with less than ten members to its name, but it looks like everyone is present tonight. While it may be too dark to make out your faces, I can still see that each chair is filled.

Despite the circumstances, thank you all for coming.

If this is your first time at the mystery stew, some of you may be confused as to why the literary salon is so dark today. Or, perhaps, some of you have already heard bits and pieces about this from the older members and were excited to come here today. When it's dark you can't see what you usually can, and it almost feels like you are in another world.

We gather around this oval black marble table. Normally, the black crystal Baccarat chandelier would be shining above us, but today that light has been dimmed to its lowest setting. I will turn it off completely when our meeting begins. Then, the only light left will be this candle I hold in my hands.

Our literary salon is on the first floor of the annex, and is exclusive to us. It has lavender-colored carpets and wallpaper, and French windows decorated with flowing black velvet curtains. There is an antique cabinet with clawed feet, and a Gobelins-woven sofa. This annex is a remodeled Gothic-style convent that was originally connected to the main school building, so our sophisticated décor matches perfectly. Who was it that jumped for joy, saying that the salon was "just like an Anna Sui boutique" when she was first invited here?

Ah, but our salon doesn't just *look* elegant; we also have an entire wall filled with shelves of the most exceptional books. Since this is an all-girls missionary school, the academic library has countless books on Catholicism and scholastic topics. So we have deliberately collected books

and documents from various genres that you wouldn't typically find elsewhere at school. Kind of like a small private library. But this library alone is a great asset to our club.

Then there are the sound-proof walls and windows that silence the commotion from the courtyard and allow our members to immerse themselves in their reading and writing activities in peace. We read and discuss books together, research authors and make presentations about them, read our original stories aloud to one another, chat about literature in general, and conduct all other literary activities imaginable without interruption.

We owe the creation of this unbelievably perfect salon completely thanks to the father of our former club president, Itsumi Shiraishi. Two years before the convent was remodeled and annexed into the school—and right after Itsumi entered high school—Mr. Shiraishi made a generous donation and built this salon. It's in a lovely southeast corner on the first floor and has the best access to sunlight. Of course, you all know that Mr. Shiraishi is the school chairman, right?

To me, this salon is irreplaceable. I'm sure that you all feel the same way. You feel calmer here than in any of the classrooms. This is where you can concentrate on books that you can't read at home, where you finish the stories that you're stuck on. In the cold seasons, we sprawl out on the sofa in front of the fireplace, nursing hot chocolate and critiquing each other's stories, and in the summer, we quench our thirst with homemade lemonade while debating literary theories. Yes, this is surely our private castle in the sky.

The salon has a different feel with the lights dimmed this low. Isn't it grand? Against the candle's soft flame, only the chandelier, the set of wall lights, and your silhouettes stand out, granting this room a mystical and solemn ambience.

Normally, there would be a Wedgwood tea set, freshly baked scones, and sweet-smelling jams resting on this table. But, tonight, all of those things have been put away. Did you notice something on the marble table that doesn't quite fit in?

That's right. A pot. A shiny, amber-colored, copper pot. It's from Mauviel, the French brand, you know.

We have a first-year student and an international student with us today, so I'd like to give a more detailed explanation about the proceedings. Tonight, we are having a so-called "mystery stew." Indeed, as you might have expected, we will put strange things into a pot and then eat them in total darkness. Many girls—especially the girls at our school—may not be familiar with this kind of thing. Nevertheless, it is a Literature Club tradition to meet around the mystery stew, once every term, before vacation.

What?

How did these mystery stew meetings start?

Well…Our club has a long history, so there are numerous theories as to the stew's origin. One is that some club members tried it for fun and it just kind of stuck, and another is that the members were tired of only eating luxury foods and were curious to try something grotesque—but the one that has me most convinced, the one that I believe, is that they did it to sharpen their senses.

Don't you feel your five senses growing stronger in the dark?

Take away the everyday light that surrounds you, try resuming your normal activities, and you'll find that even the most ordinary of movements feel unusual. Do not rely on sight alone—an extremely important concept for aspiring literati, don't you think? That's why I like this theory best.

Take the cocktail you are drinking right now, for example. Don't you feel strange drinking it in the dark? Is the cocktail red or is it blue? Is there something floating in it? Is it sweet or is it bitter? Is it thick or is it smooth? It takes a lot of courage to put something in your mouth when you don't know what it is, doesn't it? Ah, but do not fret. The rules say that our cocktails must only contain ingredients fit for drinking. I mean, this *is* a meeting just for girls, after all; we want something tasty to drink. But if this were the pot with the mystery items in it…wouldn't you be

terrified to bring it to your mouth?

How will your sense of smell, taste, sound, and touch react when you've lost your sense of sight? Refine, betray, and release your five senses. This is what I understand to be the goal of our meeting tonight.

Now I will explain the rules of the mystery stew.

First of all, everyone has brought an item of their choice, correct? Usually the rules only allow for edible things, but we will also be accepting inedible items tonight. Hehe. This is what makes *our* mystery stew unique. But unsanitary items, like shoes or bugs, are strictly forbidden. Everyone should remember this is a girls' meeting, after all.

All mystery stews have similar rules, but the most ironclad one is the "no spoilers" rule. You have put your items in an opaque container, and into the refrigerator in the kitchen, correct? I, the "pot bearer," am the only one who can add things to the mystery stew. Let us dine on whatever comes out of the pot with our hearts racing in anticipation.

On to the next rule. You must finish your plate before taking your next serving. It is everyone's responsibility to eat until the pot has been totally emptied.

Which mystery stew was it…the one with the terrible strawberry rice cake that really taught us a lesson? It was unbearably sweet from beginning to end. The moment the rice cake was thrown into the pot, the red bean paste inside became gooey and melted into the soup, and it was impossible to take out. Perhaps someone has brought another strawberry rice cake today. Well, no matter. The rule is that anything goes, after all.

Speaking of anything goes, do you remember the time there was a Chanel watch in the stew? Since it was dark, the member who had found it could only tell that it was a watch at first, and she complained that she barely got to eat anything because she couldn't clear her plate. Then, after we finished off the stew and had some noodles and hot porridge and turned on the lights, we found that it was a Chanel watch, and a limited-edition model at that. Everyone made quite a fuss over it. The girl who they'd laughed at and pitied instantly became the object of everyone's envy. The watch had suffered some heat damage, even though it was waterproof, and apparently cost a lot to fix. But still, that's not a model you come by every day. I'd say she got it for pretty cheap if all she had to pay were the repair fees.

Who was the lucky girl? Ahh, yes, that's right. That was also Itsumi. She was ecstatic…

I'm sorry. I didn't realize that I was talking about her again. I didn't mean to make you sad. I am truly sorry.

Well, the next rule is—oh dear, newcomers, please don't look so afraid. There will be times when the stew tastes awful, of course, but I have properly prepared desserts to cleanse your palates at the end. Tasty drinks and desserts are a must for a girls' night, right?

It is customary for the club president to make desserts for the meeting. I spent all morning baking as best as I could. Last year we had crème brûlée, honey flan, strawberry Bavarian cream, and this time we will have

—well, please save your excitement for the end.

The strawberry rice cake may have been a failure, but the melon-flavored snow cone syrup was also a disaster. The broth got all muddy and smelled like boiled-down perfume, and then, when we turned on the lights, we saw that it had turned our tongues green…Oh, what a horrible taste and smell it had! I shudder at the mere thought of it. I wonder if someone has brought syrup again today. I feel anxious about this at every meeting.

Oh right, there is one more rule: even after the meeting ends, you can't tell anyone which item you've brought, and you can't pry and ask others about theirs. If we don't do it this way, we would discover a pattern and it wouldn't be fun.

Some members have also brought wonderful things for the stew. We were most fond of the bird's nest stew. It was packed with minerals and good for your skin and felt pleasant on the tongue. The kind of thing girls tend to go crazy for. It was probably the best ingredient in mystery stew history. Everyone also loved the shark fin because it has collagen in it. Oh, I'd be delighted if someone brought us a good beauty product this year.

By the way…

You all haven't forgotten to bring one *other* important item, right?

Yes. The short stories.

This may be a "mystery stew meeting," but your short stories are the true main attraction for the night. Every meeting, we take turns reading our stories aloud while the other members listen and dine on the stew. You all wrote your short stories, correct?

Stories you only hear in the dark. Stories that you feel when you lose your sense of sight and your five senses betray you—isn't this the perfect setting? *This* is the real thrill of our meetings. I think this is really why these meetings have gone on for such a long time.

Normally, you can choose your own topic. However, after that tragic incident, I decided to pick your topic for you, just this once. You may have

struggled to write about it in such a limited amount of time, but I'd like you to think of it as an important lesson in writing.

That's right. The topic is the death of former club president Itsumi Shiraishi.

Since elementary school, Itsumi was my best friend. We spent every day together. I still can't believe that she's gone.

Everyone always told us that we were complete opposites. Itsumi was a go-getter, someone who couldn't rest until she'd settled everything in black-and-white. But I was more the type who lived a quiet life, sheltered in her shadow. I've been sickly since birth.

Don't you find that friendships between girls our age exist within two extremes? If a girl is similar to you, you'll either hate her or love her; if she's your opposite, you will either love her or hate her. There's no middle ground. I imagine you learn how to gracefully handle these kinds of things as you become an adult: you learn that whether you are similar or different, get along or don't, these relationships provide us with the wisdom we need to survive in society.

But for our generation, this wisdom is impossible. All we care about are our own selfish emotions. We have to protect our feelings more than anything else. So, do we kill, or allow ourselves to be killed? Friendships between girls are always hanging in this balance. Life-or-death survival. This is especially true at an all-girls school like ours. Right, ladies?

Itsumi was the best partner for me in that way. She compensated for all of my weaknesses. We could coexist without killing each other. She signed up to volunteer with me when I said I was nervous doing it alone, pushed me to study abroad when I felt hesitant about it, and practiced debate with me when I told her I wasn't very good at it. And, in turn, I am proud to say that I was the best partner for her too. Itsumi was bad with details—so I planned club events, looked at hotels and made reservations for her, and did research on the colleges she wanted to go to. Yes, we two were truly one. She often told me that she didn't know what she would do without me, and I felt the same way about her. There are a lot of things I

would've never experienced without her.

I think it was our advisor, Mr. Hojo, who had told us that we were like "the sun and the moon." I was initially appalled that a Japanese language teacher like him would use such an awful cliché, but, after losing Itsumi, I realized he was right. Itsumi was my sun. I cannot shine without her. She was the reason for my existence.

So, when I lost Itsumi, it felt like half of my body had been ripped away from me, and I can't find my balance even when I walk. It's like this every day.

Why did Itsumi die?

I still don't know why.

It's only been one week since her death. I really can't believe it. You're all as devastated as I am, right? It's only natural to feel this way. To think that someone as happy as Itsumi would die like that…

—I'm sorry for crying.

What?

Yes, of course, I'm aware. I know there's a rumor going around that someone in our club killed Itsumi. Do I believe it, you ask? Hmm, well…

Was it a suicide or murder? We don't even know that much.

It's true. Itsumi's death is shrouded in mystery. You all know that we weren't allowed to attend her funeral and that none of her family would tell us what happened, right? Itsumi's father, mother, and younger brother Kazuki wouldn't say a thing.

I still have dreams about it. I see Itsumi lying face-down, covered in blood—

You were all there to see the body. Why did she die on school grounds? Why had she fallen into a flowerbed on the lower terrace? And why was she holding *that* when she died? What was she trying to tell us?

This is all I've been thinking about every day for the past week.

Which is why I'd like to commemorate her tonight. In her beloved salon, with all the Literature Club members in attendance.

I may be your host for the night, but the true star of the show is none other than our dearly departed friend, Itsumi Shiraishi.

I honestly considered cancelling tonight's meeting until I remembered what a pivotal role our club played in her high school career. You could even say that this is where she spent all of her adolescence. She used to come here every day after school to read and passionately discuss various works in her earnest attempt to become a writer and literary critic. Her father was so taken by her passion that he gave her this salon. I thought it would be much better for us to mourn together as a club rather than separately and alone. It's a very Literature Club way to show our respects…don't you think? You all came here because you agree with me and don't think this is improper, right?

I think Itsumi is happy about this. I would know.

But, no matter what it takes, I need to find out what was going on.

What on earth happened?

I asked you all to write about this incident, from your own point of views, so that we can find the answer.

Short stories about Itsumi's death. Short stories dedicated to Itsumi. I wanted you to remember everything you can about that unfortunate incident and write it down, and then read it aloud to everyone in our club. We are bound to learn the truth about her death, which has sublimated into your writing. Why did Itsumi have to die? And—did one of you really murder her?

What terrible thunder. The sound of the rain is growing louder. And yet, isn't a summer storm fitting for the evening?

Well then, it's about time to begin.

I am going to turn off the chandelier. Is everyone ready?

Once the lights are out, I will only rely on candlelight to guide me as I

start to add things to the stew. Then, I will have you take turns reading aloud. I've created a space next to the sofa and arranged a candlestick near the fireplace. Please read your stories in that space.

Now, let the St. Mary's Academy for Girls Literature Club's 61st Meeting and Mystery Stew Reading begin.

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Short Story Reading
"Where I Belong"

Reader:

First-year Class A

Mirei Nitani

I can’t forget what it looked like.

A beautiful girl, covered in blood, being carried away on a stretcher. In her porcelain hand, she clutches a posy of white lily-of-the-valleys.

Even though someone has died, that death was fantastically beautiful, almost uncomfortably so, and mesmerized all those who witnessed it.

I will not forget her death for as long as I live.

I met that girl—Itsumi Shiraishi—soon after enrolling at this academy.

Since I was a child, I had always felt I had no place to go.

Whether I was at home, in school, on the route that connects those two places, or even at the convenience store that my classmates often visited, I couldn’t shake this feeling of alienation. My four family members and I live in a small, two-bedroom home where I can’t even have a room of my own, which, in the literal sense of the words, has left me with “no place to go.” I share one of the bedrooms with my little sister, who is in middle school. My two little brothers, who are in elementary school, share the other bedroom. Our mother sleeps on a pullout sofa in the corner of our eight-mat living room.

I’m not sure why my mother ended up raising the four of us by herself. Every time I come back to our cramped, 600-square-foot home, I let out a sigh and wonder why my parents couldn’t have just each taken two of us when they got divorced. Maybe my father didn’t want custody. Or maybe my mother couldn’t bear to let any of us go. My parents won’t tell us what happened, even though I think it would be better if they did. Despite the fact that my father won’t talk about the divorce, he has no problem boasting about the twenty-five thousand yen he pays for each of us every month in child support whenever we see him.

“In other words, every month a hundred thousand yen just vanishes from my paycheck,” my father always says, whenever my siblings and I are sitting in a diner booth with him, leaving us to awkwardly poke at our chocolate parfaits. It’s like his catchphrase. He’s bragging when he says this; he doesn’t sound patronizing or disappointed. He seems to

genuinely enjoy our infrequent meetings and—on days where he wins his bets on horse races—he will even take us to a high-class Chinese or barbecue restaurant instead of the usual diner. On those occasions, he won't balk even slightly at my little brothers' healthy appetites.

My mother has never said, "We don't get enough child support," or "It'd be nice if he offered to pay more," or anything like that in front of us. She just goes through the daily motions of working her part-time job and taking care of us. On her days off she does sporadic jobs and works from home.

Just because my parents aren't in a divorce war doesn't mean that our lives are easy. To be frank, my family is very poor. My father is a taxi driver, and my mother is a cashier at a supermarket, who hems and repurposes clothing on the side. Despite our financial struggles, I was able to enroll at the famous missionary school St. Mary's Academy for Girls, thanks to their scholarship program. The scholarship guidelines are as follows:

Our academy will endow one student at the Elementary, Middle, and High school levels, who is of high educational merit and has passed the academy's entrance exam, and whose household demonstrates financial need, with the necessary funds for academic courses, transportation, textbooks, and expenses for extracurricular and other school activities. Scholarships do not have to be repaid.

I have adored this academy since I was young. On the train, I'd catch glimpses of the lovely, prim uniforms of the schoolgirls. The school had a noble and dignified spirit built on Christian principles. And most of all, I liked the shining faces of the students who went there.

I was enamored with the idea of studying at the academy. *If I could just pass the entrance exam and become the scholarship student, I would be able to go to the academy*—this was my only goal. I started studying my hardest in my later years of elementary school. Since my parents couldn't afford private teachers or cram school, I only asked that they buy me textbooks, and I solved every problem in my textbooks over and over, as if painting them in ink.

I can't tell you how thrilled I was when I received the notice that I had passed the St. Mary's Academy for Girls' entrance exam and the scholarship acceptance letter in the same envelope in the mail. I had been expecting this. I had never given up hope. But, I still couldn't believe that I got to be the one and only scholarship student!

In the days before the entrance ceremony, I was measured for my uniform, picked up my shoes for school, and visited the campus for orientation. The first time I stepped onto the school grounds my heart raced so fast that it hurt. Now I looked forward to becoming like the graceful upperclassmen in uniform I had seen.

However.

Two weeks after classes started, I realized I didn't belong here, after all.

Certainly, I made friends. There were girls I had lunch with. Yet I was still haunted by the feeling that I didn't fit in. Even during the before and after-school prayers, I was the only one out of place.

At first, I thought I was just self-conscious because I was the only student who needed scholarship funds, or that I was jealous of my classmates who didn't have financial burdens like me. But after I started my part-time job, I realized it wasn't either of those.

Though the academy strictly forbids part-time jobs, I worked as a cashier in the same supermarket as my mother. But I didn't hit it off with anyone my age and ended up working in silence. When I'd first started my job, some other girls at the supermarket had come to talk to me during the lunch break. When they first heard I was a student at St. Mary's Academy for Girls they acted impressed, but the next day they started keeping their distance from me.

"Why would a girl from St. Mary's Academy for Girls work part-time at a supermarket?"

"Her mother works here, too."

"What?! She's not rich. So she's lying about the school?"

"But she was wearing their uniform the other day."

“For real? I don’t believe it.”

I overheard these conversations coming from the locker room. *No matter where I go, I’m never quite enough,* I thought.

Until I met Itsumi Shiraishi.

I often still think about the first time I met her.

I was getting better at pretending I fit in, but unable to genuinely enjoy my new life at the academy. In between periods, I often went to the terrace on the roof of the third floor of the school to peer down at the campus from over the fence.

No one was ever there. It was a quiet place. Apparently, the terrace was really popular with students until the sunroom was built in Building 1 and became the new hang-out spot. It’s only natural that the sunroom, with a glass ceiling that blocks UV rays and harsh weather, would be more popular.

On the terrace, I would always gaze at the small church on the side of the schoolyard. It’s an old wooden church with a cross on top of its triangular roof. We call the big cathedral, the one that fits the entire student body, the “new church,” and the one I would always look at the “old church.” Before class and before homeroom was dismissed in the afternoon, we would always say “The Lord’s Prayer,” and then we’d go to the old church for our religion classes, where we recited hymns and listened to the Sisters’ stories. The only things in the old church are some rough-looking wooden benches, an out-of-tune organ, and a crucifix with peeling paint hanging on the altar.

Every time I went to the old church, I felt oddly at peace. This academy was originally founded by English nuns who came to Japan after the war, on a mission to provide girls with an education based on Christian ideas and principles. Our school is integrated from elementary school to junior college, and, although it was built long ago, the architecture of the buildings and annex are so distinctive that you would never think you were in Japan. The new church, only built ten years ago, has a stunning statue of the Virgin Mary and large stained-glass windows crafted by

Christian artists behind the altar. It really casts an air of splendor and gravity over the entire campus. So the old church is the only building that doesn't have any flashy decorations, and its plain appearance reminded me of myself in a way.

I would sit on the terrace floor and occasionally look over at the old church while reading a collection of poems by Ezra Pound. This was my favorite way to pass the time between periods.

One day, a voice suddenly said, "You're always here."

I lifted my head to find Itsumi Shiraishi staring at me.

"You like books? You sure read a lot."

"Yes, well…" I trailed off. I couldn't believe Itsumi Shiraishi was talking to *me*!

I had heard all about her when I first entered the academy. This is a tiny all-girls school, with only three classes per grade, where underclassmen idolize stunning and exceptional upperclassmen like Itsumi. Plus, her father is also the chairman of our academy, which made her far wealthier than any of the other girls in school. Her father was the one who created the Shiraishi Memorial Scholarship, which, in other words, meant that it is all thanks to him that I can even attend this academy.

But whether or not you were a scholarship student, there wasn't one person at school who didn't know Itsumi Shiraishi. All of the girls in elementary, junior high, and high school admired her remarkable beauty and intelligence and looked up to her as a role model, watching every move she made.

For the first time, I looked at her up close, fascinated and hypnotized.

"I'm the president of the Literature Club. You should come check out our salon if you like books so much," she suggested.

I already knew about the Literature Club, of course. Everyone wanted to be a member. It had a special salon tucked away in its own separate building. The more rumors students heard about it, the more they were fascinated. It was every schoolgirl's dream to drink black tea in that salon,

even if just once.

Just because it's called the Literature Club doesn't mean that just anyone who likes books could join. You couldn't become a member without an invitation from Itsumi. On the other hand, even if you weren't interested in literature or couldn't read, write, or critique particularly well, you could still become a member with Itsumi's invitation. This meant that the five current members of the club had been specifically chosen by Itsumi, and consequently they were revered by everyone in school. It's one of those clubs that gives you a special social status just by being in it.

"Are you sure it's all right for me to visit?" I asked nervously.

"Of course. Why wouldn't it be?" Itsumi replied.

"It's just…" I hesitated for a moment, but answered honestly. "Well, I heard that only special people can visit the salon."

Itsumi let loose a huge laugh. She was different from what I had imagined: She was unguarded, in a good way, and brimming with friendliness.

"No, really anyone is welcome. Rumors go around the school and no one knocks on our door. That's all it is. Come on, let's go to the salon."

"No, I…"

"You don't have to be so shy. You're Mirei Nitani, right?"

Astonished, I looked at Itsumi. Even if I knew who she was, I never thought she would know about an underclassman, and what's more, an utterly ordinary one like me. She smiled brightly, as if sensing my disbelief.

"You are this year's scholarship student, right? Everyone's got their eye on you," she remarked.

Was that true?

I was mortified at the thought that everyone knew I was the scholarship student. I felt like my family's financial situation had been exposed; I was

embarrassed. I had never confided in my classmates about it or heard the professors talk about me with the other students. But I guess it would only make sense for rumors to spread in a small, all-girls school like this. I suddenly felt ashamed for trying to act like I fit in when all along everyone actually knew I didn't.

"All right, why don't we just stop by for a visit? You can decide if you want to join our club later. We have a collection of books I'm very proud of, you know."

"What kind books do you have?" I inquired. My interest was piqued.

"Well…Hmm, our books by T.S. Eliot and William Yeats might interest you. We also have Ezra Pound, of course."

She had books I wanted to read. I knew they were the expensive, hardcover editions I'd never be able to afford.

With that, I accepted her invitation and we went to visit the salon.

How can I describe how impressed I was when I first stepped into the salon? The dark, sparkling chandelier hanging from the high ceiling. The fluffy carpet. The imported, antique sofa. The luxury tableware from Ginori and Wedgwood lining the cabinets. The brick fireplace. And to top it all off, a library that stretched across the entire wall. There was a huge collection of foreign books, which looked like fine art along that wall.

My head was still reeling when Itsumi took a book from the shelf.

"*Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* by Ezra Pound. A rare book, and it's even been autographed. Take a look!"

I took the brown volume in my hands, amazed. I had heard rumors about this book before. It was a rare book published in 1920, an antique that would go for millions if sold today. I couldn't believe that I was holding it now. My fingers shook as I opened the cover to find Ezra Pound's scribbled signature on the left side of the title page.

"This is amazing. How did you get this?"

"I got it through one of my father's connections. There are a lot of

uncommon books in our salon. Please read anything you like."

I carefully scanned the shelves, thinking how lucky I was to have come to the salon.

"Why don't we take a break from the library and have some tea?" Someone spoke, and a schoolgirl came in from the back of the room carrying a tray.

"A newcomer, I see," she said. "I'm Sayuri Sumikawa, vice president of the Literature Club. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Sayuri bowed to me as she placed a tray of teacups and cake onto the table. I had also heard about Sayuri when I first entered the academy. She had been Itsumi's best friend since elementary school. Itsumi was stunning, but Sayuri was attractive in a different way. She had long, sleek black hair and white, soft-looking skin. She never wore makeup, not even lip balm, and her only accessory was the cross that hung around her neck. Nevertheless, she was as lovely and graceful as the morning mist.

When Itsumi and Sayuri were together, the air that surrounded them was unlike anything else. It felt like they were the living, breathing stars of the red carpet. Yes, that was exactly how it felt.

"Itsumi, isn't this the scholarship student?" Sayuri asked.

"Yes. She really seems to like books, so I thought I'd invite her over."

"I know there's a reading and essay section on that scholarship exam. You must be pretty clever to have passed it. Please do join our club. I look forward to it." Sayuri smiled gently as she offered me a strawberry tart. Its color reminded me of spring. I bit into it.

"This is delicious!" I automatically sighed with delight. "Did you make this, Sayuri?"

"I wish I could say I did, but I can't. One of our members is an expert at baking. Sweets are her specialty. I'll introduce you. Akane, come to the living room," Sayuri called out. I was so captivated by the interior design and the library that I didn't even realize there was a kitchen.

“I just finished baking these madeleines. Would you like to try one?” A girl in a frilly white apron and pink gloves carried a tray of baked goods into the room. She had curly hair that hung down to her waist and a face that was as adorable as a child’s. I suddenly got the sense that I was the only one who didn’t fit in here and became uneasy.

“This is Akane Kominami. She’s in her second year at the academy. She loves the kitchen so much that she experiments with recipes more than she actually reads,” Itsumi teased, with an unreadable smile.

“Hey, I do the readings. Come on, Itsumi, cut it out,” Akane pouted, puffing out her adorable cheeks in irritation.

Just then, the door swung open and three more girls entered the room.

“Wow, that smells great!” one exclaimed.

“What sweets did you make today?” another one asked, wiggling her nose. They skipped any sort of self-introduction.

“Ladies, please. You’re being rude in front of our new member,” Sayuri scolded, though she smiled. The three girls seemed to finally notice that I was there, and stuck their tongues out slightly, looking at each other like mischievous children who had gotten in trouble.

“My name is Shiyo Takaoka, I’m in my second year. I was the first member to join the club after Itsumi and Sayuri reopened it, and I’m proud of it! I’m currently working as an author.” This was spoken by an attractive and dignified girl with a sporty-looking ponytail.

“I’m Sonoko Koga, and I’m in my third and final year of high school. Itsumi and Sayuri are my classmates. It’s nice to meet you,” said a steady, rational-looking girl whose narrow eyes shone from behind pointed glasses.

“I’m Diana Decheva, the international student. I’m from Bulgaria,” said the last girl, a mystical fairy from Europe with deeply chiseled facial features.

Each member was attractive and elegant in her own unique way. *Why am I the only one who*...I started feeling self-conscious and miserable, as

if I were wilting away, but I did my best to suppress these feelings.

“Well, now that everyone’s here, why don’t we have some tea?” proposed Sayuri, setting up the Royal Copenhagen tea set. Akane stood beside her and put madeleines onto each of our plates.

It was like a dream. I couldn’t believe that an ordinary girl like me had been invited to the salon that everyone in the school idolized, and that I was drinking tea with the stunning members of the Literature Club. They laughed and chatted while I ate my madeleine in silence, feeling unable to join their conversation.

“Mirei, what kind of books do you like?” Sonoko Koga asked me.

“Umm, right now I’m trying to read Beckett.”

“Wow, you have good taste. That kind of thing is way too difficult for me.”

“What do you like to read, Sonoko?”

“Well, scientific things. I read medical books, but I’m not really picky about authors or anything like that,” Sonoko answered, smiling, combing her silky bob haircut with her fingers. A lovely fragrance danced out from her soft neck.

“Ooh…What kind of that perfume is that?” I asked.

“This? Oh, it’s Muguet from Guerlain,” Sonoko answered.

“My goodness,” Itsumi interjected. “Sonoko, you’ve already got this year’s Muguet? It hasn’t even come out yet.”

“Oh, I had it specially ordered from France.”

I had never heard of that perfume before, but it’s apparently one of those exclusive, limited-time-only perfumes sold at a few shops every spring. It was an entrancing, unforgettable smell.

“Well then, I guess that means this fragrance is all yours for the time being,” Itsumi remarked playfully.

Even their conversation sounded elegant to me.

“I ate too many tarts. Oh, I’m stuffed. You can eat mine if you like,” offered Itsumi, casually handing me her madeleines. I had already finished my portion, and I’m sure I looked like I wanted more. Although I was embarrassed, I reached for them without hesitation. They were so much more delicious than anything you could find in a store.

The madeleines were the perfect amount of sweet and filled the air with the lovely scent of rum. It felt like I was getting tipsy. Actually, I think I really was. I was drunk off the gorgeous salon, the splendid club president and vice president, the amazing and exceptional members of the club, and their sparkling conversation.

Perhaps it had been something I ate, or perhaps I had just been overwhelmed by the salon’s radiance…I’m not sure why, but I threw up everything I’d eaten when I returned home that night.

At the salon, I’d genuinely laughed for the first time since entering the academy. It wasn’t my family members or classmates or teachers, but Itsumi who had finally given me a place to belong.

Being in the club was fun.

On Mondays, we had book discussions, when we would all read one novel and talk about it together. On Tuesdays, we had debates. That might sound stuffy, but it was really just a carefree chat session about anything related to literature. The salon was closed for “library organizational purposes” on Wednesdays, the one day that we wouldn’t meet. Thursdays and Fridays were our “free activity” days. We could write if we were so inclined, or dive into any of the books on the shelves. Participation was generally voluntary, but the attendance rate was high. I’m sure that the desserts from our pastry chef, Akane Kominami, must have had something to do with this.

However, a high school student like me can only make money after school. So only one week after I had become a member of the prestigious Literature Club, I found I was almost never able to make it to the meetings.

“You’ve just become a member, but you don’t come to the salon very

often. Have you been busy?" Itsumi asked me when we passed each other in the hallway one day.

"No, umm…Actually, I have a part-time job," I replied honestly.

"A part-time job?" Itsumi frowned.

The academy strictly forbids part-time jobs. This rule also applies to scholarship students; the scholarship fund system was created so that students can focus on their studies. However, even though my family wasn't spending money on my education, they were still barely scraping by. If I didn't have some sort of income, they couldn't make ends meet.

I knew that Mr. Shiraishi might revoke my scholarship funds if Itsumi found out about my part-time job, but I didn't want to lie to an upperclassman as lovely and honest as she was.

"What kind of job do you do?"

"I'm a cashier at a supermarket. I work with my mother."

"Oh, I see…" Itsumi narrowed her eyes and thought for a while.

"Hey, I don't want to make things awkward by asking," she started to say. "But I think I might know of something more suitable for you. I'm not saying that being a supermarket cashier is bad or anything. You've just got to put the right people in the right place. And I'm just saying that your intelligence shouldn't go to waste. What if you tried using that?"

"Use that?"

"Well, we've been looking for a private tutor for my little brother. He's in fourth grade right now, but he's not very good at math or Japanese. You do well in both of those subjects, right?"

"But I'm just a…"

"If you tutored my brother, the school wouldn't have any problems with it and I'm sure it would make my father happy, too. That way you won't have to work in secret anymore," Itsumi said with a soft smile.

I was elated. She'd understood what I was going through and had immediately come up with a way to avoid problems with the scholarship

program, the academy, and my family. Her thoughtfulness meant more to me than anything.

“I’d be delighted to. Thank you for this opportunity.”

Since then, my respect and adoration for Itsumi only kept growing.

Itsumi’s house, no, her *mansion,* is in the upscale area in the hilly part of town.

I sat in the backseat of the Shiraishi family’s black car, gazing at the lush, green foliage as we went up the gently sloping hill. The driver looked to be over sixty years old and was white down to his eyebrows. He wore a navy-blue suit and white gloves and spoke to me with great courtesy.

“Shall I turn off the air conditioning, Miss Mirei?”

“Do you feel carsick, Miss Mirei?”

“How is Miss Itsumi doing in school, Miss Mirei?”

I had never been called “miss” before in my life. I could only manage to answer in a quiet and trembling voice, feeling somewhat embarrassed.

“Mr. Muro,” Itsumi called to the driver, “Mirei is going to be Kazuki’s private teacher from now on.”

“Wonderful. I am sure Master Kazuki will be happy to have another lady in the house.”

My eyes met with Mr. Muro’s in the rear-view mirror. Just from the look in his eyes, I could tell that he was a quiet man who loved the Shiraishi family and had worked for them for many years. I remember thinking how happy they all seemed.

The rumors were true: Itsumi’s mansion really did have a pool. Not only that, but there was also a pond with koi fish, a small waterfall, majestic stone lanterns, and an old, worn-out building that looked like a tea house, separate from the mansion. The place was huge, like one of the chic European-style homes that had been built before the war.

Itsumi’s family was even more fascinating than any of their possessions. Her mother was courteous and graceful. Her father’s gaze was so piercing

it felt like he could see straight through to your soul, and I found out that he also runs a general hospital and major construction company on top of the academy. (I think Itsumi got her elegance from her mother and her quick-wittedness from her father). Her little brother spoke politely and had impeccable manners for a boy in elementary school, yet was also quite playful and mischievous. No matter what they did or said, the Shiraishi family emanated elegance. Even a young, sixteen-year-old girl like me knew that this was what real "high-class" looked like; I was deeply impressed.

That night, I tutored Kazuki in math and Japanese for an hour each, and then the Shiraishi family fed me dinner. I received an envelope when I was about to go home. I got in the car and peeked in it—and was startled to find a ten thousand yen* note inside. *Is this my monthly salary?* I wondered. *This can't be for the two hours I tutored today. It's rare for even professionals to get five thousand yen an hour.*

When I asked Itsumi about it the next day at school, she told me that it was, in fact, my pay for just that day.

"It's too much. I can't accept it." I tried to give the bill back to her, but she refused to take it.

"It's fine. I mean, that's what we paid our last tutor."

"But I'm not a professional or some student from a famous college or anything like that. I'm just an ordinary high school student. Besides, I'm younger than you. I'd be happy to work for you for just one thousand yen an hour."

We went back and forth on the issue until Itsumi finally relented.

From then on, I worked as the Shiraishi family's private tutor.

Itsumi's mother was very generous and would sometimes give me gifts. She'd say "Please decorate your home with this" when presenting me with an exquisite Limoges mantle clock, or "Please use this with your mother" when giving me a lace-knit coaster, and "I bought this twice" when handing me a Kiriko glass. I was embarrassed to bring such luxury items

into a house where they stuck out like a sore thumb and frankly caused more trouble than they were worth, but my siblings were delighted the day I brought them home some Godiva chocolate.

“Oh, we’re so grateful for these fancy things. Wow, you’ve really made your way up in the world, haven’t you,” my mother remarked sarcastically as she picked at the chocolates with us. She wasn’t happy that I had quit my job at the supermarket.

“We would make even more money if you picked up a shift at the supermarket when you’re not tutoring, you know,” she groaned, nevertheless throwing truffles into her mouth.

“I can’t. I’m not even supposed to have a part-time job. I quit being a cashier to be a tutor. They might expel me if I break the rules again,” I tried to explain.

“Just lie if they catch you.”

“So you wouldn’t care if they took my scholarship money away?”

“I didn’t want to send you to a private school in the first place. So what if you do get expelled?” she retorted, wiping smeared chocolate off of my brother’s mouth. “Besides, tutors don’t usually work every day. Why do you come home so late all the time?”

“Well…because I joined a club.”

“A club?”

“Yeah. The school’s Literature Club.”

“Ahh, because you like books. Really goes well with your new fancy social status.”

“Don’t say things like that. If you hate our lifestyle so much, then maybe you shouldn’t have divorced Dad!” I flared up.

My mother went silent. I had never spoken to her like that before, let alone even mentioned the divorce. Going to an elite private school had gone to my head, and I had probably started to look down on her.

“Well look how brazen you’ve become, speaking to your mother like

that," she mumbled with a wry smile. She didn't seem angry. "Yes… Having a place of your own."

"…What?"

"I didn't have a place of my own when I married your father. And I'm sure he was just as lost as I was." My mother saw the surprised look on my face and suddenly became flustered. "Well, not in the physical sense, more in the way of emotional support—"

"I know how you feel," I cut her off. This time it was my mother who looked surprised.

"I understand you, Mom," I repeated. "I feel the same way."

At my words, her face softened. We sat across from each other at the dinner table and drank our tea in silence. *I guess I really am my mother's daughter, after all,* I thought.

If divorce had given my mother a place of her own, the Literature Club and its salon were the same for me. I wanted to thank Itsumi for giving me somewhere to belong.

"Um, I'd like to do something to repay you," I once said to Itsumi. I didn't just want Itsumi, but her whole family, to feel my gratitude for everything they had done for me.

"If you want to give back, you shouldn't give to us, but to those less fortunate," Itsumi suggested instead, grinning.

Soon after, I resumed the volunteer activities that I had given up on in junior high. Using wanted ads I found on the internet, I volunteered to talk with senior citizens who lived alone and to people who'd moved from the countryside who had no friends in the area. As someone who had searched for her own place to belong, I wanted to help those people because I used to be just like them. Of course, it takes courage to meet up with a total stranger, but I felt brave enough to do it because I knew I could distract them from their loneliness. I may not have been the most outgoing volunteer, but I do think I was good at it. I could understand their pain because I know the bitter tang of loneliness.

When I was in junior high, I was busy studying for exams and only volunteered when it was convenient. But now I was ready to follow in Itsumi's footsteps and volunteered with a renewed sense of passion. I had always thought that volunteering was just about giving to others, but for the first time I had realized that you also get so much in return. I finally saw that it was also essential for my own personal growth.

The Shiraishi family's generosity helped open my mind. I idolized them. I remember thinking that, if I were to get married and have children someday, I wanted to have a family that was just like theirs.

In my eyes, they were perfect. They had everything that my family could never have—good manners, compassion for one another, a refined upbringing—and they were everything that the ideal family was supposed to be.

I think jealousy arises when you have the conceited notion that you're entitled to something that you're not. But I never felt jealous when I saw Itsumi and her family. That's how far superior their world was to mine.

Then, it became the time when the green of the earth began to shimmer under the new summer sun. Itsumi, who was normally lively and energetic, fell depressed. She usually played a pivotal role in our conversations in the club, but now she just sat there, half-listening.

As Itsumi grew weaker by the day, the club members began to worry. Sayuri made black tea with honey and ginger to perk her up, and Akane fed her some homemade quiche she had stuffed with vegetables. Diana gave Itsumi a replenishing full-body massage with Bulgarian rose oil, Sonoko researched Itsumi's condition in her medical books, and Shiyo tried to support her with encouraging speeches.

What had happened to Itsumi? I thought about asking her about it every time I went to their residence to tutor.

Then, one night—

I saw it by chance: their perfect family falling apart.

It was the last day of exams and school had ended early, so I'd gone to

the Shiraishi residence a little earlier than I usually would have. I finished Kazuki's lesson, left the room, and headed down the stairs. Just then, I heard a heated argument coming from Mr. Shiraishi's library. "Shame on you!" a furious voice yelled. After hearing what I thought was a sharp slapping sound, Mr. Shiraishi burst out from the library, tugging a hysterical Itsumi by the arm. Her hair swung wildly as she sobbed, struggling in his grasp. I panicked and hid behind a pillar. Mr. Shiraishi's eyes were bloodshot, his neatly combed hair tousled, his shirt collar in disarray. He dragged Itsumi out of the house and threw her into Mr. Muro's car. Then, I watched the car drive off into the distance.

What on earth had happened to their happy, loving family?

I quietly put on my shoes, thinking it would be best to leave without saying goodbye, when someone suddenly emerged from the dark hallway.

"Ah!" I reflexively screamed. But the person just stood there staring blankly, unfazed by my scream.

"...Mrs. Shiraishi?"

It was Itsumi's mother. "Oh, Mirei..."

Her pale face showed no trace of her usual cheerful expression.

"I just finished the lesson. I'll be going home now," I explained quickly.

"I see..." Her eyes were distant and unfocused. She had probably heard them fighting.

I felt frightened and sped out of the mansion.

After that, Itsumi didn't come to school for a while. The teachers told us that she was in the hospital with pneumonia.

One week later, I had heard rumors that Itsumi was out of the hospital. I made my way to the salon to see her, but she wasn't there. I hurried to the terrace, hoping I'd find her there. And there she was. She looked languid and ill as she leaned her body against a handrail.

"Itsumi," I called out to her.

She turned to look at me, but she didn't seem like her normal self. Her

skin was pale, her eyelids were red and puffy, and her cheeks were sickly thin.

“Are you feeling better?”

“Yes, thank you for asking. My lungs have been weak since I was young,” she answered. It was painful watching her force a smile.

“Did something happen?”

“Something?”

“I mean, well, with your family…”

“Why do you ask?” she said, suddenly angry. I couldn’t bring myself to tell her that I had accidentally seen her argue with her father.

“No, it’s nothing. I was just wondering if anything was bothering you.”

“Bothering me…” Itsumi trailed off, looking up at the church. “Mirei… have you ever wanted to kill someone?”

I was startled. Everyone has dark thoughts at least once in their life, but I never thought Itsumi would say something like that. Unsure of how to respond, I stayed silent.

“I have. There’s someone I want to kill,” murmured Itsumi in a dark, hollow tone. I stared at her face in disbelief. I thought I had misheard her. The wind howled viciously.

“If I could kill her, I wouldn’t care if I died. That’s how much I hate her.”

“Itsumi…you don’t seem like yourself. What’s going on—”

The fight between Itsumi and her father replayed in my mind. I remembered Itsumi’s sobs as he took her away.

“My father,” Itsumi said in a detached tone, staring out into the distance, “is being seduced. Someone in the Literature Club is seducing him.”

“What?”

“I had noticed he’d been acting strange. So I searched around the library and found a school handkerchief on the floor. It wasn’t mine, of

course.”

“That can’t be…”

“It smelled like lilies. Muguet by Guerlain—there’s only one person who uses that perfume, right?”

“I can’t believe it. That would mean…”

“It’s disgusting. We have science and math together. I thought we had a good-natured rivalry, and then she does something like that behind my back. With my father.” She bit hard on her lower lip. I had never seen her make that face before.

“Itsumi…” I didn’t know what to say.

She looked beyond me, her gaze so piercing it could kill. Terrified, I tried to say something, but couldn’t. Then, as if returning to sanity, she relaxed her shoulders and turned to me.

“Let’s go to the salon. I’ll make you some hot chocolate.” She smiled calmly. Then she took my hands in hers and stressed these next few words:

“Don’t tell anyone about this. This will be our little secret.”

When we arrived, everyone in the salon was talking about the sweets we would sell at the Easter & Pentecost Festival in June. The festival is a huge charity bazaar that celebrates Easter, which is in the spring, and Pentecost, which is celebrated fifty days after Easter, at the same time. Itsumi wasn’t saying anything, so Sayuri took her place and proceeded to talk about the festival arrangements with the members.

“We make cookie bunnies every year. We should do something different this time, something new. Does anyone have any ideas?”

“Um, what about cookies shaped like eggs? We can use icing to draw patterns on them,” Akane suggested.

“Ah, that’s great. It’ll be so cute. Ooh, I want to be in charge of drawing,” Shiyo called out, raising her hand.

“Okay, that’s what we’ll do for cookies this year. How many cakes

should we bake?”

“We baked two hundred last year.”

“But we were immediately sold out.”

“All right, should we try for three hundred this time instead?”

During the entire conversation, Itsumi’s gaze didn’t waver. She stared directly at Sonoko Koga.

Did Sonoko really sleep with Itsumi’s father? I wondered.

“Well, why don’t we have three flavors, plain, green tea, and chocolate, and bake one hundred of each?” Sonoko suggested. She was acting completely normally in front of Itsumi. Didn’t she have any shame?

“Good idea. Let’s do it. Diana, do they celebrate Easter in Bulgaria?” Sayuri inquired.

“Yes. We make life-sized egg sculptures and paint them, and decorate the town square with them,” Diana answered.

“That’s interesting! I’d like to try my hand at that. I’ll ask the executive committee about it,” Sonoko replied. Itsumi still stared blankly at her.

“Umm, I have a question,” Akane chimed in, raising her hand. “I want to put some *dainogen* beans into the green tea pound cake.

What do you think?”

“Dainogen? A type of red bean, right?”

“Yeah. Beans from Hokkaido have thick skin, so I’d like to use beans from Tamba, if we can.”

“I’m sure that’ll taste great. What do you think, Itsumi? It wouldn’t be a problem if we just raised the price of the green tea cakes a little, right?” Sayuri addressed Itsumi, whose gaze didn’t even falter.

“Itsumi?” Sayuri called her name again.

Suddenly she snapped out of her trance and quickly threw on a smile. “Oh, right. That’s fine.”

After that, we all began to talk excitedly about what color our wrappings and ribbons should be, how much we should charge for our sweets, and other small details. Only Itsumi didn't join in, just staring out the window with melancholy eyes.

It only makes sense that she was depressed. I would be in utter shock if I were in her shoes. It must've been painful for Itsumi to force a smile and see Sonoko every day. What's worse was that Sonoko didn't even seem to notice that Itsumi knew what she had done.

There were times when I thought about telling Sayuri and asking her for advice, but I didn't. There are some things that best friends can't tell each other *because* they're so close. That must be why Itsumi wanted me to keep it a secret. I felt frustrated that I couldn't say anything, but I decided to keep my mouth shut.

One day, Itsumi asked me to come to the salon after school.

She was there alone, sprawled out on the sofa next to the fireplace. She looked so relieved to see me, I was reminded of a lost child who had finally found her mother.

"Thank you for coming. Please sit down. I'll make you some black tea. Actually, is chamomile okay? I need something that'll help me relax."

"Oh, sure."

Itsumi disappeared into the kitchen for a moment, and then came back holding the Ginori tea set and tray. On the dessert plate, there was an apple pie with a heap of vanilla ice cream on top.

"I tried making this recipe Akane taught me. But it's not as good as hers," she said. She carefully steeped the tea leaves, and then poured the tea into my cup.

"Yesterday," she said after a pause, "Sonoko was at my house again."

I had guessed Itsumi had wanted to talk about it after all. Sonoko hadn't been at the book discussion yesterday, so I thought that might be where she was.

“My mother was out volunteering and my brother was at his after-school club, so neither of them were home. I rushed back home after our book discussion yesterday and saw Sonoko just about to leave through our gate,” Itsumi said with disgust.

“Did you ask your father about it?” I wanted to know.

“I was going to, but didn’t. I want to gather evidence first. Last time he caught me he got angry and told me I was awful for searching through his library.”

“How are you going to find evidence?”

“I’ve actually set up a hidden camera in the library. I’m excited to see what I’ll find.”

Itsumi’s gaunt cheeks twisted into a grin that, suddenly and instantly, crumbled into tears. “Ohh, I hate Sonoko…”

Large teardrops fell from her eyes. That happy family was where she felt she belonged. Sonoko is disgraceful for recklessly trying to destroy that.

“Itsumi…Is there anything I can do to help?” I put my hand on her shoulder as she wiped her tears away with a thin finger.

“Are you worried about me? You’re a wonderful girl, Mirei. Really, you are. Maybe that’s why I feel like I can tell you just about anything. I’m glad I got to talk to you about it.”

She took a long look at me and, as if suddenly remembering something, removed a barrette from her hair. It was black and had a rainbow-colored crystal embedded in it. The sleek Rococo design really set off Itsumi’s chestnut-colored hair.

“This is for you. I think it’ll look better on you.”

“What? No way.” I politely declined, but she pushed the barrette into my hand. I imagine it was very expensive.

“I can’t accept this,” I said.

“I want you to have it. In honor of our friendship.”

With her words, Itsumi had recognized that we were friends and equals, not just a junior and senior in the same school. Those words were far more important to me than an expensive hair accessory.

“Are you really sure I can have it?”

“Yes, go ahead, try it on.”

I pushed my hair back towards my ears and fastened the barrette.

“I knew it would look good on you. Please keep it and think of me.”

Now that I look back, those words sound so ominous. It was as if she were leaving a memento behind.

Itsumi died soon after that.

I continue to feel regretful.

Why didn’t I stop Itsumi when she said she was going to collect evidence? Sonoko is devious, someone who would secretly seduce a friend’s father. Even if Itsumi had found enough evidence to incriminate Sonoko, I should’ve known that Sonoko would have done anything to silence her.

One week has passed since Itsumi’s death. Who murdered her? Everyone is searching for the truth. But I know who did it. The person who pushed Itsumi off the terrace is none other than Sonoko Koga.

I can still see it. Itsumi Shiraishi’s corpse lying in a bed of flowers. Her pale hand in the stretcher that took her away. And the lily-of-the-valley she held in her hand.

She must have picked the lily from the flower bed with her last bit of strength.

She was trying to tell me who the murderer was. That the girl who had killed her was the one who smelled of lilies.

(The End)

Thank you for reading, Mirei Nitani.

It’s nerve-wracking to be the first batter up. Not to mention that you’re

a new student here, so that was your first mystery stew reading ever. But I knew you'd be courageous enough to do it, which is why I thought you would be a nice choice to go first.

It was a straightforward story, very "you," I think. You're right. Itsumi did seem troubled these past few months. She had this serious scowl on her face every time we met, as if she had been deep in thought. And she was often in a daze in the salon.

I asked her what was wrong many times, but she always just gave me this sad smile and would never tell me anything. Here I am boasting about being her best friend, and yet she wouldn't even talk to me about what was bothering her.

I've never heard those things about Itsumi's father before. She never talked to me about her family. I only know that she respected her father a lot. She loved him so much that she said she wanted to marry someone like him if she were to settle down and have a family someday. Everyone's heard her say that more than once, right? She definitely had a "father complex." It also didn't help that he really spoiled her.

But then all of this happened. Ahh, I really should have asked her more about it. I feel guilty, ashamed, and terribly angry with myself.

What? You say that she couldn't tell me certain things *because* we were so close? Thank you for saying that. You're right, that's probably what it was. Perhaps this is territory that best friends, especially, feel they shouldn't infringe on. That makes me feel a little better.

But still, I'm shocked that you've identified the culprit so quickly. I'm sure the rest of you are bursting with questions, but let's wait until after everyone has read us their stories.

That black barrette in your hair is Itsumi's "memento," the one that you just told us about, right? It's lovely. It looks nice on you. I could see why she wanted you to have it. It looks pretty in your light hair.

Could you show it to us a bit more clearly while you're still in the light of the reading corner? Oh my, the rhinestones form a flower, don't they? It really is very nice. Thank you very much.

Well, then, please return to your seat. It's dark, so please watch your step. Everyone, please give Mirei Nitani a warm round of applause.

By the way, how's the stew? If it's really that awful, I recommend adding some curry powder or chili paste to give it a little kick. It's funny. Your other senses become so much sharper in the dark, which makes good things taste better, and bad things taste worse. If the first ingredient added to the stew tastes awful, it will be a disaster from start to finish. But come on, please keep eating.

Well then, I suppose it's time to move on to the next reading.

Akane Kominami, you're next. Please head to the reading corner.

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[*] Roughly US $100.

3

Short Story Reading
“Macaronage”

Reader:

Second-year Class B

Akane Kominami

To be honest, I didn't like Itsumi Shiraishi at first.

Actually, I hated her.

I had never spoken to or even met her, an upperclassman one grade my senior, but I knew all about her because she was basically famous at school. She wasn't just the chairman's daughter, she was also sharp-witted and stunning to look at. I used to stare coldly at her fans as they flocked in from the high school, junior high, and elementary school buildings and swarmed around her classroom.

Itsumi's slender body and vivacious smile attracted attention everywhere she went. She had it all: Perfect proportions. Lovely facial contours. Big, alluring eyes. Lips like flower-buds, which emanated charm and grace. A refined air from her excellent upbringing.

You couldn't have called Itsumi a "beauty" or some other cliché, it wouldn't have suited her. She was an idol. Gorgeous in every way. Which is exactly why I didn't find her beautiful.

Itsumi was too perfect. In confection design, for instance, bakers typically draw asymmetrical and uneven lines into dessert decorations to make them look sophisticated. But Itsumi looked *too* well-put together, as if her appearance had been meticulously calculated. She had no imperfections at all. Perfection isn't beautiful. It's tasteless.

I despised my classmates who fawned over Itsumi's so-called "beauty." They obviously had no idea what *real* beauty was.

When I heard that Itsumi revived the Literature Club after its years on hiatus, I shrugged it off as the whim of someone with too much free time. Besides, the club only had two members, with Itsumi as club president and Sayuri Sumikawa as club vice president, which only made my impression of it worse. Yet as soon as their tiny club was reopened, this magnificent literary salon was built and everyone in school was talking about the salon, which was supposedly "every girl's dream castle." However, rumor had it that you couldn't get in unless Itsumi personally approached you, which only made the students admire her and her salon even more. Although I was only in my third year of junior high school at

the time, the girls around me had already made it their goal to be invited in.

Right after I started high school, Shiyo Takaoka, a girl in my grade who won a big prize for her light novel, became the first new member of the Literature Club, and everyone was terribly jealous. What Shiyo said about teatime—the highest-quality tea leaves imported from England and France, the Meissen tea set, the Wittamer torte cake—would have made anyone swoon. The salon must have been awfully comfortable to make Shiyo want to turn down all those television appearances and magazine interviews so she could sleep in the salon after school instead. She also mentioned that she got a lot of writing done while sitting under the Baccarat crystal chandelier.

But I found it all repulsive.

The Baccarat crystal chandelier and the Meissen tea set.

Did a student literary salon really *need* all those things?

I grew up in my family's traditional Japanese restaurant, where ever since I was a little girl, it was emphasized that "flashy isn't classy." No, elegance is unadorned, it has both *wabi* and *sabi*:[*1] subdued, stately, with a quality of subtle grace and beauty that ripens with maturity. It is tasteful, unassuming, and true to itself. *That* is what real chic is.

Nothing in the gaudy literary salon of rumors seemed to have any of that chic. I looked down on the salon for its bad taste, and hated it for the same reasons that I didn't like Itsumi.

My father is a stubborn, simple, old-fashioned cook who has declined television appearances and invitations from department stores for many years. Tons of people used to ask to publish a cookbook of his recipes, but he always sent them away, adamantly maintaining that the only thing a cook should do, is cook. He refuses to open a new branch. Despite the dozens of requests for takeout lunches and catering, he insists that he wants his customers to eat their food where it was made. The only time you could eat my father's cooking outside of his restaurant is around New Year's, when he gives his best customers a take-home lunch as a gift for

the holiday season. He is the only one who can make it and it isn't on the menu, which makes it a so-called "New Year's fantasy."

My mother owns a traditional Japanese confectionery shop and has supported my stubborn father all these years. Her seasonal traditional desserts, which she has spent decades creating, add color to my father's *kaiseki* meals.[*2] To go with the changing seasons, my parents get together and decide upon a theme with which my father carefully crafts each course, and which my mother follows for her desserts and restaurant decorations, which include *ikebana* flower arrangements and hanging scrolls.

I may have inherited this from my parents, but I've loved being in the kitchen since I was a little girl.

My father's prized hearth rests on the traditional earthen floor. I was raised watching my mother wake up at five in the morning to fill the stockpot with dried fish and kelp to make three servings of broth for each of my four family members. The clear liquid she strained so meticulously became our miso soup at breakfast, the broth we had with eggs at lunch, and the stew with boiled meat, vegetables, and eggs at dinner. I was fascinated with how the liquid changed tastes and forms with each meal. I held my first knife when I was three years old. By the time I was four, I could handle knives quite well and even received a knife of my own that had my name engraved on it.

Although I was born immersed in the world of Japanese cuisine, as I grew up, I found cuisine from Western countries to be new and refreshing and eventually became obsessed. My parents had nothing to say about my new passion. They had already decided that my older brother would take over their restaurant and were training him in how to clean the restaurant in the early morning, stock up on food at the marketplace, precook and organize ingredients, and gave him a strict education that they never gave me. In fact, my father wouldn't even let me into his kitchen. I always watched my brother's training with envy. He was set to become the fourth successor of our restaurant, "Kominami," which had been established in the Taisho Era. And no matter how well I held a knife, tried to cook, or

perfected my Western sweets, to my parents, all of my efforts were nothing more than “wife training.”

My brother was a slacker who had no real interest in cooking or Kominami. He often shirked his kitchen-stocking duties to go goof off instead, and would ride around on his motorcycle at night instead of cleaning the restaurant. Even so, Kominami would automatically be his. Frustrated, I dove deeper into the world of Western cuisine. But I couldn’t bake cakes well in our old, antique kitchen.

That was when I heard rumors about the kitchen in the literary salon.

Supposedly, it was spacious, easy-to-use, and well-stocked with everything one could possibly want. Apparently, club members used to bake cakes and make mousse together in the kitchen.

I wasn’t interested in chandeliers, marble tables, fireplaces, or teatime. But when I first heard about that kitchen, I became fascinated with the club.

Of course, I will explain how I was able to catch Itsumi’s eye and join the club. But first, I must touch upon that terrible incident.

When the owner of a restaurant that my father had trained at in his youth retired, he asked my father to take his restaurant over and make it a branch of Kominami.

Although my father owed a great deal to this man, he wasn’t interested in his offer. It wouldn’t just be expensive to open a new restaurant; two restaurants would also be harder for my father to manage. My father firmly believed that there shouldn’t be another Kominami unless he was there to hold the knife. But he couldn’t flat-out refuse the old owner’s request. I saw that my father had no idea what to do, so I suggested: *What if the new Kominami served Western cuisine?*

If the new Kominami was a Western-style restaurant, my father’s guests would understand why he wasn’t overseeing the kitchen, since Western cuisine is not his specialty, And this way, he wouldn’t have to reject the original owner’s offer. My father was impressed by my idea and promptly asked me to design the layout and menu for the new Kominami. He even

said that he would eventually let me manage the new restaurant, and that he would put it under my name so I would own it one day myself.

My father had finally given me more recognition than my brother. I was ecstatic.

Whether on the train to school or in between classes, the new Kominami was always on my mind. I showed my best rendition of its menu to my father's friend, who was to be the chef at the second Kominami, and I picked out silverware to match the items on the menu. I was also set on perfecting my desserts. Cake, pudding, mousse, Bavarian cream, ice cream, tarts. *What if I had takeout desserts!* During those blissful days, I was bursting with ideas and let my imagination run free.

I had no idea how quickly my dreams would disappear.

One day, Itsumi Shiraishi approached me by the shoe cubbies after school.

"You're Akane Kominami, right?" she asked.

I am rather small, so it felt like I had to look far up to see her face. Her skin looked as smooth as freshly whipped cream, and her lips glistened red as if soaked in cherry syrup. She was shockingly beautiful. The underclassmen glanced at us as they passed.

"Yup," I answered curtly.

Most students would have probably been thrilled to be approached by Itsumi, but I wasn't a fan of hers. In hindsight, I think my response was pretty unfriendly.

"I read your report on *The Setting Sun*. It was intriguing," she complimented me.

Even though I don't read a lot of books, the report she referred to had somehow caught the eye of Mr. Hojo, my Japanese language teacher, who had it published in the school newspaper. The report was something I had just kind of thrown together, the type of essay an older teacher would've scolded me for not taking the assignment seriously enough. But Mr. Hojo, who is still in his twenties, probably enjoyed the essay as much as my

classmates did because he was closer to us in age.

“I like how you analyzed the main character, Kazuko, by comparing her to the modern-day single mother,” Itsumi continued. “It was very unique. I want to ask you more about your essay. Would you like to join me in the salon for some tea?”

I suddenly remembered the fabled kitchen. I wanted to see it, but I didn’t really feel like talking to Itsumi.

“No, that’s all right.”

“Why not? Please come for a visit. I just finished baking a pound cake.”

“Did you make it yourself?” At her words, a small twinge of rivalry sprouted inside me. I wanted to show off the kind of cakes *I* could bake.

“I did. You can’t have a book discussion without dessert. We also need to make tons of sweets so we can sell them at the school events and fund our club.”

A kitchen. A kitchen where I could make *tons* of desserts.

“Umm…is it gas or electric?”

“Is what?”

“The oven.”

Itsumi looked puzzled for a moment and then burst out laughing. “Haha! It’s a gas oven! You’re a funny one. No one’s ever asked me that before.”

So I accepted Itsumi’s invitation and we went to the literary salon.

When I saw it, it was the ideal kitchen. It was spacious and clean, and had L-shaped counters and an island. There were three large kitchen sinks with spray nozzle faucets. There was a silver industrial refrigerator. A stand mixer. Yeast leavening equipment. An ice cream machine.

“This is amazing…” I let out a deep sigh as I caressed the polished countertop. The cold marble. With a countertop like this, I could easily knead pie dough or even temper chocolate. Oh, what luxury!

“And here are the ovens. Do you like them?” Itsumi pointed at the three gas ovens lining the wall. Each one looked like it could take two or three 8-inch round cakes at a time.

“They’re incredible.”

I opened the door next to the ovens to discover a walk-in pantry. Flour, wheat, sugar, silver candy pearls, nuts, sticks of vanilla, canned fruits, jam, honey, colorful spices…How many kinds of desserts could I make with these? I could have just stared at the stylish packages of imported goods all day. I could have spent the whole day just sitting there.

Bowls, spatulas, whisks, and other culinary utensils lay in an orderly line. I knew that everything was top-notch because of the research I had done for my new restaurant.

“It’s fantastic. Way better than the one in my restaurant.”

“Your restaurant? Ah, you mean your family’s restaurant.”

“No, I’m going to have a restaurant of my own.”

“You will? Wow, that’s great!”

“I’m going to make lots of desserts at my restaurant. Oh, this kitchen is perfect. Definitely a good source of reference for me.”

After that, we ate Itsumi’s pound cake while we chatted about novelist Osamu Dazai, which was the figurative “icing on the cake.” Itsumi’s cake wasn’t bad, either, though I suppose anyone could make something tasty with the kind of kitchen, ingredients, and equipment that she had at her disposal.

We had so much fun talking that we lost track of the time.

“Oh, no. It’s so late!” Itsumi exclaimed, looking at her watch. We hadn’t realized that it was already past ten. “I’m sorry for keeping you this late. I’ll have my driver take you home.”

“No, it’s okay. I can take the train.”

“You can’t. It’s too dark. Besides, I know how to get to Kominami from here.”

With that, Itsumi and I were on our way to my house.

We also talked a lot in the car. Despite having avoided her in the past, I found my shoulders had relaxed, and I was having a normal conversation with her. She was upbeat and friendly, and I finally understood why she was so popular.

We drove past the downtown area and were almost close enough to see Kominami.

Just then, a flash of deep crimson flickered ahead of us in the night sky.

Chills ran down my spine. I heard the sirens of approaching fire trucks. Curious onlookers were rushing to the scene. Policemen outside were guiding traffic.

Mr. Muro, Itsumi's driver, rolled down his car window.

"Sir, what's going on?" he asked a policeman.

"There's a fire in the restaurant ahead."

The moment I heard that, I leapt from the car. I ran and pushed my way through the crowd—only to find Kominami completely engulfed in flames.

My father's whole world. My father's entire life burned down right before my eyes. I frantically looked around and caught a glimpse of my parents and brother gazing at the fire in a daze. The bright red flames illuminated my father's face, outlining the wrinkles and spots and the bags that hung under his eyes. He looked so small and helpless in front of the massive, all-consuming blaze. I found myself unable to call out to him. I shrank back into the crowd, watching him from afar.

The fire burned for hours, destroying everything my father had built along with it.

The next day, there was an article in the newspaper about the fire at Kominami.

It reported that a restaurant established in the Taisho Era had burned to the ground. That the restaurant had been closed at the time. That there

were no witnesses or injuries. That the kitchen was not the source of the fire. That there were strong suspicions of arson.

By the time I came to school the next day, the news had already spread across campus. Everyone comforted me and expressed their sympathy, but Itsumi seemed particularly upset. She looked like something was bothering her.

“I shouldn’t have kept you so late yesterday.”

“Don’t be silly. I might’ve gotten hurt if I went home earlier.”

“But if I hadn’t made you stay, you probably could’ve seen something, and maybe the criminal would’ve seen you and fled…I feel like it’s all my fault.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong yesterday. Please, don’t worry about it.”

“Please let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.”

“No, really…” I started to say, but then had an idea. “Well…”

“What is it?”

“Could I join the Literature Club?”

Itsumi smiled affectionately and took my hands in hers.

“Of course,” she said. “We’d love to have you.”

The literary salon kitchen was as perfect as I had imagined.

I made all the desserts I could think of, one after the other, and Itsumi bought me the finest of any ingredients and utensils that I asked for. The other members might have thought of the salon as their castle, but my dream castle was right in the kitchen.

Although Itsumi and Sayuri apparently used to bake cakes and other treats when they were in the mood, after I joined the club, all baking responsibilities were turned over to me. For me, happiness is having someone to eat my desserts.

But that didn’t mean I spent all my time simply playing in the kitchen with wheat flour and eggs. I had decent grades in Japanese and diligently

participated in the club activities.

Other members of this club taught me about the cooking in various works of literature, such as in *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder, and *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. There are also a plethora of delicious baked treats in *Anne of Green Gables*. When we read Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple,* I even recreated the corn and poppy seed pies, and everyone loved them!

I gradually started to find literature interesting in and of itself, even participating during the debates. I am grateful to Itsumi for using my love of cooking to open my eyes to the pleasures of literature.

Three members joined the club after me. There was Sonoko Koga, an upperclassman one year my senior who wanted to be a doctor; Diana Decheva, the international student from Bulgaria; and Mirei Nitani, the new scholarship student. I had even more fun showing off my skills with three new mouths to feed. When book discussions ran late, I even made them small meals, like omelets with rice, club sandwiches, and pasta.

The plans for my future restaurant had burned down with the fire. My father was busy trying to rebuild the original Kominami and it was difficult to fund the new one. I was probably trying to use the salon's kitchen to salvage whatever I could of my burnt-out dreams.

I enjoyed my time in the club. Everyone was friendly, and because we were so few, a strong sense of solidarity developed among us. When it came time to make pound cakes for the Easter & Pentecost festival—three hundred of them—we worked as a team to decide who would be in charge of ingredients, measuring, weighing, making the dough, and cleaning, and we spent three full days and nights baking them together.

Afterwards, I stared at the neat lines of pound cakes in the freezer, reveling in a deep sense of fulfillment. We put them in the freezer to preserve their freshness. Even if they were only for the school bazaar, we were still getting paid for the cakes, and I wanted them to be perfect. I am proud of my baking skills, and this kitchen filled me with that pride. Itsumi Shiraishi was the one who had made it all possible.

But we couldn't have baked one hundred cakes a day without the detailed schedule that club vice president, Sayuri Sumikawa, had made for us, directing us to *Take out the cooking utensils while the butter is melting, mix the batter while the oven preheats, sift the next ingredients into the bowl and mix them together while the cake is baking, then right after they come out of the oven, glaze the top of the cakes with rum and cover them in plastic wrap*...Thanks to her precise directions, everything went smoothly. Even I would've panicked if I had to bake a hundred cakes a day, and I'm experienced at baking! Itsumi was a charismatic leader, but she wasn't good with details and couldn't make plans like Sayuri could. Itsumi did what she pleased because she knew that Sayuri would always have her back. They were the ultimate best friends—which is why everyone adored them. If I'm lucky enough to have my own bakery someday, I truly hope that Sayuri will help me set up shop.

Sayuri always supported the club from behind the scenes.

Even after I joined the club, I sometimes still found Itsumi off-putting. When I expected Itsumi to present some bold and daring literary interpretation at discussion, for example, she'd come up instead with these ridiculously inconsistent theories that rubbed me the wrong way. She also instantly shut down any opinion that even slightly contradicted hers. That would be when Sayuri would gently chime in and remind Itsumi that it wouldn't be fun if all of our interpretations were the same.

If Itsumi could be considered "dazzling" or "stunning," then Sayuri was by contrast someone whose worldview was much more refined. She understood *wabisabi*. With her graceful, unassuming personality, Sayuri was also the type of person who knew what she wanted and never lost sight of herself. Sayuri smiled by Itsumi's side, but skillfully took over the reins when Itsumi was about to lose control. Though Itsumi had so many admirers in the Literature Club and throughout school, I always secretly wished I could be more like Sayuri.

A little over a year after I joined the club, everyone, with Itsumi and Sayuri at the core, seemed to be getting along well. We all enjoyed the activities and events, and I never imagined we'd have to deal with some of

the recent problems.

One day I was in the kitchen, sifting a mixture of powdered sugar and almond flour, when Itsumi came in looking unusually morose.

“Itsumi, is something wrong?”

“Yes, actually,” she sighed. “I’m being stalked. I don’t know what to do.”

“*What*?”

I immediately thought of the underclassmen who waited for Itsumi in the hallways and en route to school. I’d seen students give her letters and presents before, and others ask her for her e-mail address. Itsumi was always kind to these students, but deep down the constant attention must have been wearing her out.

“You can’t help standing out. Everyone loves you.”

“No, it’s not like that. This one actually follows me home.”

“What? To your house?”

“Yeah. Insisting that she wants to be my brother’s tutor.”

Private tutor. Which meant—

“You can’t turn her down?” I asked.

“I did, several times. But then she even offered to do it for free. I couldn’t possibly let her do that, so I’m giving her a monthly salary…but, even so, I don’t like it.”

“That’s so weird. Why don’t you talk to the principal about it?”

“I don’t know, I feel like that would be underhanded or something. The academy forbids part-time jobs, right? She knew that and yet still went directly to the principal and told him she *had* to have one to financially survive. He suggested tutoring my little brother as a part-time job. So she basically forced him to give her a job.”

“I had no idea…”

I added a few pinches of sugar to the bowl of thawed eggs that I’d taken out of the freezer, and then whipped the mixture together until it foamed.

“What are you making?”

“Macarons.”

“Wow, are those hard to make?” Itsumi stuck her pointer finger into the bowl and licked the sweet meringue off her finger like a child. I put the sifted cocoa powder into the bowl and smoothed out the mixture with a rubber spatula.

“How do I put this…it’s kind of sad. Pitiful, really. There’s no way a poor girl like her can ever fit in at our academy, but she still tries so desperately. She doesn’t have any money to go to the beauty salon, so she just goes to the nurse’s office and bleaches her hair with hydrogen peroxide. She embroiders brand-name logos into cheap handkerchiefs. None of the other students want to go near her and yet she thinks that she *actually* fits in. Everyone just secretly laughs at her behind her back.”

“That’s really sad,” I agreed.

The preparations were complete. The real showdown that would determine the macarons’ success or failure would now begin. I pushed the rubber spatula against the side of the bowl and folded over the bubbles in the mix.

“Why are you folding when it’s all nice and fluffy?” Itsumi asked, surprised.

“Because I have to macaronage.”

“Macaronage?”

“It’s where you fold over the bubbles so the batter doesn’t expand too much. If there are too many bubbles, cracks will form in the surface of the batter and the macaron’ll break apart. But if you get rid of too many, it’ll lose its shape and become flat. It’s difficult to figure out how much you should macaronage.”

“So, I’m guessing this is the most important part of making macarons.” Itsumi watched attentively as I tirelessly folded the bubbles over. The batter now had a glossy shine to it.

“Can I try for a little bit?” she asked.

“Sure.” I normally would never trust someone else with such a crucial step of the process, but I knew Itsumi had a good sense for these things, and I dutifully passed her the bowl. This was proof that I really trusted her intuition.

“Anyway, that’s why I can’t reject her outright,” she continued.

Itsumi evenly folded over each section of the batter as she slowly turned the bowl. After a few minutes of folding, she put down the bowl and raised the rubber spatula in her hand. The chocolate-colored batter drooped over.

“What do you think? Still not enough?”

“Nope, not yet. Try smoothing out the bubbles a little bit more.”

Itsumi listened to my instructions and kept at it. Light drops of sweat formed on her smooth forehead.

“But it’s not just that.”

“She doesn’t *just* stalk you? Showing up at your house already sounds pretty out there to me.”

“Believe it or not, some things from my house have gone missing.”

“No way!” I was shocked.

“At first it was just small things, like handkerchiefs and make-up bags, but then it escalated to a Remoges watch and fine glasses. She even stole money from my wallet.”

“Isn’t that something a thief would do?”

“Right.” Itsumi was about to go at the macaron batter even harder when I stopped her hand and lifted the spatula. The batter dripped in a pretty ribbon into the bottom of the bowl.

“Did you tell the police?”

“I can’t. The students are like family to me.” Itsumi seemed really at a loss.

I separated the batter into two pastry bags and gave one of them to Itsumi. We squeezed the batter into circles on the parchment paper.

“My circles didn’t come out as pretty as yours,” she pouted.

“Practice makes perfect.”

We were able to make over one-hundred circles on the parchment paper, but needed to let them dry before putting them in the oven.

“Why don’t we have some tea while we wait?” Itsumi put some water on to heat and placed tea leaves in the teapot.

“What kind of tea are you making?”

“I thought some Earl Grey might be nice. I heard strong aromas help relieve stress.”

Itsumi boiled the water, steeped the leaves in the teapot, and when it was ready, poured the tea into our Minton teacups. We drank our tea in the kitchen instead of the salon. I enjoyed it when teatime was more casual, like this.

“Do your parents know?”

“Of course they do. I mean, our money and possessions have just been disappearing from my house. She doesn’t care that my family wants her to stop tutoring. She just hangs around, eats our food, and then leaves.”

“Urn…Well, I can get rid of her if you want me to.”

“Huh?” Itsumi popped her eyes wide open and she burst out laughing. “Akane, you’re funny. How could a petite doll of a girl like you possibly ‘get rid’ of someone?”

She stopped laughing, and smiled with relief. “Thanks for that, I feel a little better.”

“You can come and talk to me anytime you’d like.”

Since then, Itsumi often came to the kitchen to talk to me when she had problems with the private tutor. She’d follow me to the sink, refrigerator, and oven while I moved around the kitchen. Those were the only times

where it felt like I was actually the older one in our relationship. I was surprised at how much she had let her guard down in front of me.

Itsumi had to see the private tutor in the salon even if she didn't want to.

She acted like nothing was wrong and treated the tutor as kindly as she did everyone else, but the situation must have caused her a lot of stress. She eventually stopped talking and became deeply depressed.

I often asked her if she was okay, but she would only shake her head weakly. Her worries must have been wearing her thin. If I had been Itsumi, I would have forced the tutor to quit and tell her to leave the Literature Club at once, but Itsumi couldn't do something so cold-hearted. After all, Itsumi was the one who'd taken me in when my future dream restaurant and bakery had burned away, so I'm positive that she felt she couldn't just abandon this poor and rotten scholarship student.

Itsumi was different from who I'd thought she was. She was someone who could "macaronage" her relationships. She smoothed over the bubbles of dissatisfaction and sadness, and seamlessly blended in with the other members and built strong relationships with them. She didn't fold or squash herself flat, but didn't say anything that would create cracks in her relationships either. I had always thought it was Sayuri's job to keep the peace, but I came to realize that Itsumi also had to make compromises of her own. One reason she may have been a good club president was because she knew when to back down.

One day after school, I stayed later than everyone else to make Bavarian cream for the next day. I had washed the utensils, wiped the counters, and was just about to leave until I found a checkbook that had been left on the sofa. It had a crocodile skin cover. Despite the fact that I'd slipped it into Itsumi's bag when she'd left it in the salon previously, she had forgotten it again. I was about to call her cell when Itsumi appeared in the doorway.

"Ahh, phew. *That's* where I left it." She took the checkbook from my hand and hugged it as if it were very special to her.

“I’m glad you’re the one who found it, Akane. Otherwise, *she* probably would’ve stolen it.”

“Is she still stealing from you?” I asked. Itsumi’s face went dark and tears welled up in her eyes.

“Itsumi?”

“Actually…She stole something very important from me yesterday.”

“That’s terrible! What was it?”

“My barrette. It has a white lily on it.”

“And you’re sure that your mother or driver or someone didn’t just put it away when they were cleaning?”

“I asked them about it, of course. No one’s touched it. I was keeping it safe on my dresser.”

“That’s horrible…”

“I would have been able to forgive her if she stole anything else. But not that barrette. My grandmother had it custom-made for me before she passed away.”

“I still think we should talk to the police. She’s committed an awful crime.”

“No. Jesus says that we should forgive those who have done wrong unto us.” Itsumi smiled mercifully. “I mean, what a poor child. Her financial poverty has impoverished her heart. She must be going through a lot. I’ll try talking to her. I’m sure she’s not so bad deep down. Please don’t judge her.”

A few days later, Itsumi came to me to tell me the good news.

“We’re finally going to talk tomorrow after school on the terrace. She said it’s her favorite place on campus. I don’t think anyone will be there to hear us, so I’m sure she’ll open up to me.”

I thought that that girl was nothing more than an underhanded thief, yet Itsumi was doing her best to protect her. I was sure the girl would

regret her crimes.

And yet…

Why did this happen? I was dumbfounded to see Itsumi's corpse, hidden in a bed of flowers, right before my eyes. Did their conversation go awry? Did the girl fly into a rage? Or…had the girl called Itsumi to the terrace, intending to push her to her death all along?

I was so naïve, so foolish to think that this girl would actually reflect on what she had done. While Itsumi was carried away, I stood amongst the shrieks and sobs of the schoolgirls, vacantly staring at her body. Just then, the flowers in her bloodied hand caught my eye.

Lilies-of-the-valley.

It hit me at once. This was Itsumi's dying message. She used the flowers to tell me who the murderer was, and to indicate that she had tried to forgive the girl until the very end.

It has been one week since Itsumi left us. The academy, the Shiraishi family, and the police have all been trying to understand the meaning of the lily, hoping that it will reveal the truth about Itsumi's death. I kept my mouth shut until today because I know she wouldn't have wanted me to identify the criminal, but this has, conversely, made the club look even more suspicious.

I think it is time to reveal the truth. I could not be as merciful as Itsumi, but I personally cannot forgive the culprit. Someday, I will apologize to Itsumi for my betrayal when we reunite in Heaven.

(Finish)

Thank you very much, Akane Kominami.

From the girl who peacefully smiles while making sweet treats, such a dry and sarcastic story is really unexpected. But this must be the true charm of what we call "storytelling." Objectively observe the facts. Transform them into something new. Through this process you will find feelings that you weren't aware of before.

Akane. Perhaps you didn't realize you disliked—ahh, right, you used the word "hated"—Itsumi until you had written your story? Did you only realize that you felt that way *after* you had started writing?

That's what I thought. Perhaps this is the true meaning behind our stories tonight: for us to mourn the departed with honesty.

Though I must say, your story contained some interesting details. You also say you know who the culprit is. But your story contradicts the previous one in several places. What is the truth…? It's hard to tell the difference between fact and fiction in the dark. It's easy to feel confused.

I am both terrified and excited to hear the rest of you read. I wonder what other stories are in store for us.

I'm sorry. You can return to your seat, Akane. You write eloquently for someone who says she doesn't like language studies very much. The story is filled with your girlish poison.

All right, everyone, a big round of applause for Akane Kominami.

Wow, the thunder is really loud. The storm doesn't look like it will let up anytime soon. The rain is only growing harsher. How frightening.

By the way, has everyone had enough to drink? I'll hand out some sorbet cocktails to cleanse your palates. I know it's hard to see the floor, so I'll let you light your candles for now. Come on, everyone should take seconds if they want.

Oh, Mirei, is something wrong? You look pale. And why are you taking off your barrette? Didn't you say it was a valuable memento—something Itsumi passed on to you?

Well, everyone, the stew is burnt. I understand that you're wrapped up in each other's stories, but please do continue to eat.

All right, next…Whose turn is it? Oh, yes. Diana Decheva, the international student. There's no need to rush. Take your time eating and come up when you're done.

[*1] *Wabisabi* is a type of traditional Japanese aesthetics.

[*2] A *kaiseki* is a multi-course Japanese meal.

4

Short Story Reading
"Spring in the Balkans"

Reader:

International Student

Diana Decheva

For centuries, it's been said that vampires live in Bulgaria. Everyone knows the Count Dracula stories from Romania and Translyvania. But there's a lot of folklore in Bulgaria, too, of stories like those who marry people who turned out to be vampires and things like that.

I'm from a small village called Levagrad that lies at the foot of the Balkan Mountains. In my hometown, there are legends of a vampire who assumes the appearance of a young girl. We call her "Lamia." Some say she's more like a witch than a vampire because she can use magic.

Every spring, my village has a Lamia Feast. When night falls, the villagers all gather and set fire to a pile of dead branches as high as a mountain. Then, everyone dances around the flames. Young women wear black dresses, take random villagers in their arms, and pretend to suck their blood. The huge fire flickers throughout the whole village as if laughing. We light incense, pass around alcohol and hookahs. The villagers' faces become red with heat. Their eyes mirror the flames and look like they are burning.

Vampires are the living dead. On the night of the feast, it's said that the boundary between the living and dead dissolves, leaving the souls of the dead free to roam about the earth. The more merrily you sing and dance, the more likely others may think that you, too, might be someone who has died long ago.

At this banquet, there was a girl in a dress made from black crows' feathers who was remarkably beautiful, but seemed remarkably sinister. She had glossy, jet-black eyes. Her white skin glistened like candlelight. Every time she leapt by the fire, sweat flew from her body and her long hair swung wildly in the air. The villagers were so mesmerized by her dance that they forgot to sing.

She was so alluring and mysterious that I heard someone say, "It's Lamia."

That was Itsumi.

My older sister Ema had brought Itsumi to the banquet.

Though I say my older sister, actually we are twins. Our family is a poor one who had to scrimp and save just to send us to high school. In my village, it isn't a rare sight to see children picking flowers or delivering vegetables to earn a small wage. I haven't been able to work outside since the accident that paralyzed my left leg when I was young. But Ema also worked on plantations and took care of cows in her younger days, and after entering high school, she started working a part-time job at a travel agency that was an hour away by bus so she could help provide for our family. Unlike me, she doesn't have any disabilities, and her bubbly personality made her quite popular in school. She told me she chose to work at the travel agency because one day she wanted to travel the world.

Levagrad is a tiny, tiny town, far from the capital, Sofia. It is located on the outskirts of Kazanlak, a town famous for its Rose Valley. But in my village, there aren't really any tourist attractions. The only tourists that used to come to my village were usually just stopping by on their way to the Rose Valley. But once Ema started working at the travel agency, she proactively guided tourists to our village, and Levagrad has begun to prosper a little more.

After Ema started her part-time job, she began a homestay program for tourists that let them stay with local families in Levagrad. It was a huge success. Many travelers came all the way to Bulgaria, instead of going to more typical destinations like America or England, because they wanted to understand and experience the everyday life in my country. Ema's plans to provide tourists with local lodging, to let them experience homemade Bulgarian cooking, and to show them around our neighborhood all ran smoothly. But sometimes, some tourists who were used to staying at hotels instead of local homes caused a bit of trouble. They were occasionally loud and rude, and left their homestays a mess. But the tourists from Japan were always tidy and polite, and therefore exceptionally popular with the locals. That was how Ema and I fell in love with Japan and its people.

Then, we received a request to host a high-school student from Japan for two weeks. Ema and I decided to let the student stay at our house

because we were near her in age. This was how Itsumi came to stay with us.

Even though the St. Mary's teacher Mr. Hojo escorted Itsumi to Bulgaria, he was so busy with research and school visits that Ema and I were basically left in charge of her. We didn't know much about Japan at the time, but were fascinated by the stories she told us about the little island. She told us of a country with cities built of towering skyscrapers, yet surrounded by abundant seas and nature. It was also a place where you can eat any cuisine in the world. I wanted to visit Japan with all of my heart. Ema and I also wanted Itsumi to love our country as much as we had come to love hers.

We took Itsumi to many scenic spots in Bulgaria: The majestic snow-capped Vitosha Mountains. The golden beaches of the Black Sea. The Danube River that feeds the land. The magnificent fresco paintings in the Rila Monastery. The Pirin National Park, where wild animals graze in the Pirin Mountains.

Bulgaria is not a wealthy country by any means; it is one of the weakest and poorest countries in the EU. But I am proud of Bulgaria because I know that it is the most beautiful country in all of Europe.

Itsumi was a cheerful guest, showing interest in everything. She wasn't shy when speaking with other travelers when sightseeing, and was the first to try local foods that others tourists would normally avoid. Despite her free-spirited attitude, she always matched my slow pace as I dragged my leg along, which showed, to me, that she was overflowing with compassion.

Itsumi and I spoke a lot of English together. Sometimes we'd all gather in Ema's bedroom and talk the night away. Even though she only stayed with us for two short weeks, a strong bond formed between us; we could call each other close friends.

It's an unfortunate truth that "time flies when you're having fun." Before we knew it, it was her last day. That night, we invited our neighbors over for Itsumi's farewell party. We lined the dinner table with

shish kebabs and shopskas filled with goat cheese, and treated our guests to homemade Rakia brandy. Mr. Hojo and Itsumi were delighted.

Itsumi wore a kimono with sleeves trailing to the floor, which she said was a type of formal dress for unmarried women. The kimono's soft pink fabric was embellished with brilliantly-colored cherry blossoms and cranes. The sash on her back looked like a giant blooming rose.

Itsumi was as pretty as a painting. Wherever she moved, it seemed particles of light gleamed around her. I was captivated.

"What's the matter, Diana?" Itsumi asked, grinning. She had noticed my gaze. "Are kimonos so unusual?"

"I've never seen one before. It's incredible."

"Well, thank you."

"You brought it all the way here from Japan?"

"I did."

I remembered the suitcase in Itsumi's room. I told her I couldn't imagine how two weeks of luggage and that big kimono could fit into her suitcase. Itsumi laughed. "Come to my room when the party's over," she said. "I'll show you how I did it."

Itsumi enchanted everyone at the party. All the guests praised her as an Eastern jewel, and asked her to dance. Despite her traditional Japanese sandals and the stiff cuffs of her kimono, Itsumi's steps were light, and she cast her spell on the guests through the night. "Are all Japanese girls this beautiful?" I asked Mr. Hojo, who was leaning against the wall.

He laughed. "If everyone were as beautiful as her, Japan would be the best country in the world. Itsumi is special."

After everyone left that night, I suddenly felt very lonely. *Itsumi's stay ends tonight. She'll be leaving from Sofia Airport in the morning*. I started sobbing while I washed the dishes in the kitchen. Then someone tapped me on the shoulder.

"Remember what I said? Do you want to come to my room?"

Itsumi told me Ema was helping my parents tidy up the living room. I wiped my hands on a towel and, as quietly as I could, followed Itsumi to her room.

We entered the room and she locked the door behind us. She stood in front of me and slipped off the flower that bloomed on her back. I couldn't believe how such a large, glorious kimono could become so long and narrow! I was even more surprised to see the complicated shape of the kimono fold down into a thin rectangle. Itsumi tightly wrapped the kimono and sash in cream-colored *washi* paper. This type of *washi* paper was known as "kimono wrapping paper," and was infused with turmeric leaves that repelled insects. Itsumi placed the tidily-wrapped kimono at the very bottom of her suitcase. It was only an inch thick and, even when combined with her traditional Japanese sandals, socks, and string sashes, all of her possessions only took up a small portion of the suitcase.

"See? It closes just fine." Itsumi smiled.

Oh, how wise are the Japanese! I never thought that something so complex in shape could become so simple and small. It would fit perfectly in a drawer. You could go on a trip with ten kimonos in your suitcase and still have plenty of room. They weren't like dresses, which didn't fold up into neat rectangular shapes, with their frills and puffy outlines.

I heard that everything in Japan is compact. If that is true, then I feel that the kimono, made within that compact lifestyle, is the ultimate representation of Japanese wisdom. The kimono looked even lovelier at the bottom of the suitcase than when Itsumi wore it. To have thought of this design, the Japanese must have always been a unique and dignified race.

"Okay. Now you try it on." Itsumi removed the kimono from the wrapping paper again and unfolded it. The dim and dingy bedroom instantly lit up with the brilliant colors of the kimono.

"Me? That kimono? Impossible."

I was four inches taller than Itsumi, and I am big-boned and large-chested. I wasn't petite like her. There was no way I would fit into her

kimono.

“It’s going to look great on you. Put this on first.”

She ordered me to take off my dress. She took off her own under-kimono, put it on my shoulders, and skillfully adjusted my collar through the sleeves. The faint warmth of her skin and the sweet fragrance of her body lingered in the fabric. Itsumi was now down to her underwear. She continued to pull and tug the kimono into place. I was baffled as to how she was able to adjust the kimono to my dissimilar build.

She wrapped the sash in an intricate knot. It looked like a bird about to take off.

“It looks amazing. Look in the mirror.”

I looked at my reflection in the old and musty mirror. As she said, it did look nice on me. I felt strangely natural with it on. I enjoyed looking at the kimono, but I felt an even different pleasure when putting it on. It was as if flowers were blooming, brisk rivers were flowing, and birds were coming to life all over my body.

“I can’t believe you didn’t have to tailor it or something to fit me.”

“Right? This actually used to be my great-grandmother’s kimono.”

“You’re kidding!”

“My great-grandmother gave it to my grandmother, who gave it to my mother, who then finally gave it to me. It’s never been mended, not even once. Kimonos can cover slight changes in size and height, you know. I plan to give it to my own daughter, someday.”

How delightful! This wasn’t something you could do so easily with a dress. I wonder if Western countries also possess something as culturally intelligent as the kimono. Japan secretly wields a sublime culture hidden in the depths of its skyscrapers and brand-new technology, but if that isn’t the true strength of Japan, then I don’t know what is.

Although I wasn’t very familiar with Japanese culture at the time, I was so astounded by the wisdom and insight that went into the making of the

kimono that I was under the impression that I would never experience something more culturally “Japanese.”

Though I have lived in Japan for a few months now, that impression still hasn’t changed. I’ve been blessed with opportunities to learn about tea ceremonies, *ikebana, kabuki,* and other forms of classical Japanese culture, but I still genuinely feel that Itsumi’s kimono, folded into a neat and flat rectangle at the bottom of her suitcase, was the most “Japanese” thing that I’ve ever seen.

“I’m going to take this off now. I don’t want to get it dirty,” I said.

Itsumi nodded and began to unravel the sash.

Kimonos cling tight to your body. Our arms crossed so many times while she undressed me, it was as if we were embracing. Our faces were so close I almost thought we’d kiss. I struggled to breathe. At first, I thought it was because the kimono was too tight, but I soon realized that it was having her so close—her long eyelashes, the fine hair on her soft cheeks, and the white base of her neck—that stole my breath.

She helped me out of the kimono, and I was suddenly down to my bra and underwear. Embarrassed, I hastily put my dress back on. Itsumi refolded the kimono and its under-cover, wrapped them together, and then put them back in the suitcase.

“I’m going to miss you so much when you leave,” I sighed.

Itsumi also looked forlorn. “I’m going to miss you, too. But I’ll be back. I promise,” Itsumi replied, giving me a tender hug.

My body temperature shot up as her cheek rested against mine. Her soft body. A vibration, like that of a fluttering butterfly’s wings, trembled between our chests.

I can’t count the number of times I regret not kissing her that day. If I had only slightly turned my neck, if I had only been a bit braver…I could have touched those sweet lips. But at the time I had already been struggling, trying my hardest to catch my breath. My emotions were ready to spill over at the slightest move.

Ema and I took Itsumi to the airport the next morning. Mr. Hojo was waiting for us at the airport. I couldn't stop from tearing up, watching Mr. Hojo and Itsumi check in at the counter.

"Dovižđane," Itsumi said to me and Ema, which means "goodbye" in Bulgarian. She then embraced both of us.

She held me longer than she did Ema, probably because I had been crying so much, and gently caressed my back. *I don't want to let you go. I don't want to let go of your arms,* I thought to myself. Despite my unwillingness to part, time passed in its uncaring way, and it was really time to say goodbye.

"We'll see each other again, right?" Itsumi asked with tears in her eyes.

"When?" I asked. Itsumi stopped to think for a moment.

"Next year."

"Really?"

"Yes," Itsumi said with an encouraging smile. "Mr. Hojo, I want to come back to Bulgaria next year," she announced, turning to Mr. Hojo. She must have been trying to show me that it wasn't just an empty promise after seeing how lonely I'd looked. Mr. Hojo must have sensed what Itsumi was trying to do.

"Understood. I'll start the negotiations right after we return," he nodded. "So, there's no need to cry, Diana. We'll see you again next year," he said, with a comforting grin.

While he was in Bulgaria, I didn't get to spend too much time with Mr. Hojo. On the few occasions that I did, he was always reading one of his books. Despite his young age, he had a world-weary, serious air about him, always lost in deep thought, which made it hard for me to talk to him and gave me the impression that he was quite the strict professor. After he comforted me in this way, however, I realized that he was actually rather kind.

Itsumi and Mr. Hojo headed towards their gate. I watched Itsumi get progressively smaller as she walked further away. As foolish as it may be,

I only realized I was in love with her after she had completely disappeared.

Next year. That seemed dauntingly far away.

I sent Itsumi emails almost every day, and she responded to me as much as she could. I started studying Japanese to fill the void she had left behind. Ema bought me Japanese textbooks that had learning CDs which I would listen to as I studied. I accompanied Ema when she guided Japanese tourists, and I practiced speaking to them by lining up the words that I had learned. Every day, I spent two hours copying the works of Ryunosuke Akutagawa and Yukio Mishima to boost my vocabulary skills and to try and conquer the difficulties of *kanji*. I did all of this so I could surprise Itsumi when I saw her. These trivial efforts were nothing compared to the pain of not being able to see her.

I marked the days with X's on the calendar. Then, it was finally time to reunite. Ema and I went to the airport to meet her. I was overcome with emotion when I saw my dear Itsumi in the lobby.

"I'm so glad you're back. I've been looking forward to this moment all year," I greeted Itsumi in Japanese. You should've seen how surprised she looked!

"Diana, did you really just speak Japanese?" Itsumi asked.

"Yes, I studied it to get closer to you."

"Oh, I'm so happy!" She enveloped me in her soft arms the same way she had a year ago. I looked over Itsumi's shoulder and saw Mr. Hojo standing there, smiling.

"It's been a while, Mr. Hojo."

"I'm amazed. Your pronunciation is impeccable."

"You teach Japanese, right, Mr. Hojo? Could you teach me the polite forms of Japanese while you're here?"

"*Oyasui goyo*."

"Huh?"

“Oh, that means, ‘okay.’ ”

Only after I’d spoken with Mr. Hojo did I realize that there was another girl standing behind him. She hadn’t introduced herself or joined in our conversation; she simply stood there looking bored.

“Shiyo. This is Ema and her sister, Diana. They took care of us last year,” Mr. Hojo explained to her.

The girl glanced at us and slightly moved her chin. This was apparently supposed to be some sort of greeting.

“This is Shiyo Takaoka. She’s going to be in her second year of high school this spring,” Mr. Hojo said, introducing the unfriendly girl.

“Shiyo is a popular author and she’s a member of our Literature Club,” Itsumi told us. She said that Shiyo had recently won an award for her teen novel, *Kimikageso*. She was so enthusiastic about it, it was as if it had been her own achievement.

But I was disappointed. Having another student around meant that we would have to do everything together. I figured that I wasn’t going to be able to talk one-on-one with Itsumi and would have to “play nice” with this other girl who had already rubbed me the wrong way.

“Welcome to Bulgaria,” Ema beamed, sticking her right hand out in front of her. Even an impolite student like Shiyo was an important client for Ema.

“Hello,” replied Shiyo, shaking Ema’s right hand, still not smiling.

But she wasn’t looking at me or Ema. She was staring right past us, at Itsumi.

That piercing, cold stare—now that I look back on it, that was probably when Shiyo first wanted to kill her.

As I’d feared, Shiyo tagged along everywhere we went.

I thought about pushing Shiyo onto Mr. Hojo, but he was so busy with research and school visits like he had been the previous year that he was always separated from us. With Mr. Hojo out of the picture, Ema was left

in charge of all tourist activities. She stayed up all night mapping out efficient routes and schedules, to make sure our guests could visit as many famous places as possible.

The Rila Monastery. The Rose Valley. The Museum of History. It was almost the same as last year's tour, but this time we included a visit to Aldimir's Kaleto, a fortress where Aldimir, a 14th-century Bulgarian leader, defended against attacks from the Ottoman Turks. The previous year we hadn't been able to fit it in.

There is a tragic legend about the Kaleto. When the Ottomans poured in, two beautiful girls decided to throw themselves into a river, preferring suicide over falling into the hands of the enemy. They tied their hair together so that neither of them would back out. The moment they dropped down from the cliff to their death, their bodies turned to stone. The two stones are still at the fortress, grieving their spilt blood and the loss of their souls…or so the legend goes. Rumor has it that you can sometimes still see their ghosts, which helps make this a popular tourist destination.

Itsumi seemed to be extremely touched by this legend. Tears formed in her eyes when she saw two stones that looked like they were huddling together, and she eagerly listened to Ema's stories about the Ottoman invasion. Everywhere we took her, her eyes shone with interest and curiosity. She asked so many questions that she even almost made a professional guide like Ema falter.

Shiyo, on the other hand, looked bored everywhere. The massive Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, which can hold over five thousand guests, is overwhelmingly beautiful, but Shiyo barely glanced at it before just starting to play with her camera and mobile phone. She carried a superb single-lens reflex camera, but only used it when Itsumi prompted her to. She clearly had no interest in Bulgarian history, culture, language, or even in the country itself. I was furious. Why had Shiyo chosen to study here in the first place? Sometimes I felt the urge to play a nasty trick on her, like hiding her camera and pretending it was lost. But there was no way I could get my hands on it while it dangled, completely unused, on its strap

around her neck. If she wasn't interested in scenic landscapes and historical buildings, then what *did* she like to take photos of?

In any case, Shiyo was selfish. For instance, Ema arranged for her to stay at our neighbor Bessie's house, but she complained that she didn't like the food and forced Ema to move her to a different location. Then, Shiyo got mad and complained that her homestay there was a mess, leaving us no other choice but to put her in a hotel in Kazanlak.

The first requirement in the agreement between Ema's travel agency and St. Mary's Academy for Girls is that students in the study abroad program must stay at a local residence. This makes sense, considering that the purpose of the program is to have a so-called "international exchange." Ema explained this to Shiyo many times, but she wouldn't listen. Shiyo even threatened to report Ema to the academy and claim that her services were inadequate. If Shiyo complained to the school, Ema would lose her job. We were left with no choice but to put her in a hotel and ask Itsumi and Mr. Hojo to keep it a secret. Although I dreaded Itsumi's departure, I was counting down the days that Shiyo had left on my fingers.

Even though Shiyo behaved terribly towards me and Ema, she was always friendly to Itsumi and smiled whenever they talked. But I could see the strain in her smile and noticed her eyes didn't have any laughter in them at all. At first, I just thought that Shiyo was nervous hanging around an upperclassman like Itsumi, but as time went on I realized that she always had something cruel up her sleeve.

Shiyo played childish tricks on Itsumi. Once, Itsumi dropped her earring on the floor of a tour bus. I saw Shiyo snatch the earring from the ground, hide it in her backpack, and pretend to help Itsumi search for it.

There was something else, too. Itsumi bought us good-luck bracelets from the Rila Monastery. Ema and I immediately put our bracelets on our wrists, but Shiyo simply smiled, thanked Itsumi, and then shoved the cute pink bracelet into her pocket. When Ema took Shiyo to her room the next day, as she always did, Ema apparently found the pink strings of the bracelet in the garbage. My sister and I weren't surprised; it wasn't unlike

her at all.

Even though Shiyo's nastiness was obvious to everyone around her, Itsumi still bought her presents, checked up on her health, and took care of her like a sister, as if she was the only one who didn't notice. Itsumi was so innocent, so naïve. My dear Itsumi. She was the perfect woman. At first, I couldn't understand how Shiyo could hate someone so incredible.

However, after I'd spent a few days with them, I finally put the pieces together. Itsumi was the club president of the Literature Club, meaning that she had a special aesthetic appreciation, or an "eye," for literature. While we drove to different tourist attractions, she often discussed her literary theories in the car and criticized what she didn't like about all kinds of literature, regardless of their popularity. Itsumi was generally soft-spoken, but whenever literature came up, she spoke rapidly and passionately. She even bluntly listed off the flaws of Shiyo's debut novel, *Kimikageso:*

"Realistically, the main character wouldn't have gotten mad in that situation. I feel like a Japanese person would cry before they got angry."

"The parent-child relationship lacks depth. Foreigners become independent early on in life, but Japanese parents and children still depend on each other even when they become adults. You should've delved deeper into that aspect."

Whenever Shiyo was criticized, she faked a soft smile and never argued back. Itsumi always finished off her criticisms by making an excuse for Shiyo, saying that she couldn't help make a few mistakes about Japanese culture because she had grown up in France. Shiyo played along, nodding and silently smiling because she knew it would shut Itsumi up. She pretended everything was fine on the surface while playing sinister tricks on Itsumi in the shadows; I found her behavior disgraceful, and my hatred for her intensified.

On the last day of their trip, Ema and I had planned to take Itsumi and Shiyo to the museum. But school was running late and we weren't able to go. Itsumi told me not to worry and that she would go alone with Shiyo

instead—but I thought this was a horrible idea! Shiyo was outright nasty towards Itsumi right in front of me and Ema, so I couldn't *imagine* the terrible things she'd do without anyone to watch her. I panicked and begged Mr. Hojo to cancel his meeting so he could take them to the museum.

After school, Ema and I rushed home. I was relieved to find Itsumi safe and sound.

"How was the museum? Did you get there all right? Did you have fun? Did Shiyo do anything to you?" I asked in a panic the moment I opened the door.

"That's a lot of questions," Itsumi laughed. "Well, first of all, we got to the museum just fine, thanks to the directions you gave Mr. Hojo. Second, it was great! And lastly, Shiyo didn't 'do' anything to me. Actually, she didn't even come."

"She didn't go?"

"Nope. She said she wasn't feeling well."

"Oh, okay. Well that's a relief."

"What is?"

"No, I mean, it's nothing. Anyway, I'm just glad that you had a good time."

Shiyo hadn't gone with them. I felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Falling ill on her last day must have been some sort of divine punishment for everything she had done.

We threw a small party that night, just like we had the year before. Once again, Itsumi's Japanese clothing was a feast for the eyes. Of course, Shiyo wasn't able to come because she was sick.

I was sad throughout the party. Itsumi told me that she would come back next year on her spring break before college, but that meant I wouldn't get to see her again for another whole year. I smiled as much as I could so as not to worry her, but eventually broke down in tears, unable

to hold it in any longer.

“Don’t cry, Diana. I have a present for you.” Itsumi sat me down on the sofa. She always made sure that I didn’t put too much pressure on my bad leg. “Here, this is for you. I hope you like it.”

It was a box done up in blue wrapping paper. I opened it and found a lovely little doll sitting politely inside, as if on her best behavior.

“Oh, my goodness!”

“I found this at the market today. Don’t we look alike?”

“Yes! It looks just like you.”

“Right? I was pretty surprised myself.”

“This is amazing. I’m going to take such good care of it. Thank you, Itsumi.” I took the doll out of the box and hugged it. She was only about a foot tall and looked like she was made out of celluloid. She wore an elegant, light blue dress. She had long, luxurious chestnut-colored hair, and shiny black glass eyes. Her light pink lips were curled into a small, seductive smile. The more I looked at the doll, the more it looked like Itsumi. Of course I decided to name her “Itsumi.”

It was probably because I knew I still had the doll that I wasn’t as lonely when Ema and I dropped Itsumi off at the airport the next day.

“Ema, Diana, thank you for everything,” Mr. Hojo said.

Shiyo thanked us in the same curt way that she greeted us when she had first arrived. She went off to the gate by herself.

“Will we meet again next year?” I asked Itsumi.

“Yes, we will.”

“And we also want to go to Japan someday,” Ema added.

“I would love that,” Itsumi replied with a smile.

When Ema and I returned home, I went straight to my bedroom. The doll was sitting on my bed, waiting for me.

“Itsumi. I’m home,” I said, lifting the doll to my face.

Welcome home, Diana. I hope we can be great friends, I thought the doll said to me. Overcome with happiness, I lightly caressed little Itsumi's face.

Ever since that day, that doll has never left my side. I always keep her wrapped in a cloth because it's embarrassing to carry a doll now, and I don't want anyone to know. Of course, I also brought little Itsumi to Japan.

The doll listens to me when I'm down, and rejoices with me when I am happy.

If I have my doll, I can overcome anything.

A few days after Itsumi had gone back, it turned out she wasn't just being polite when she said she really did want us to come to Japan. Itsumi told me that she negotiated with her father, who is the school chairman, and the school principal, and had successfully engineered an invitation for me to the academy's study abroad program. I was amazed and overjoyed. Moreover, since I had been invited into the program, the academy was also going to pay all my expenses and let me stay in the convent attached to the school. But only one person could go. Though I longed to see Itsumi, I was worried about my disability and recommended that Ema go instead. I didn't think that I'd be able to adjust to living abroad with my leg, and felt that Ema deserved it more; after all, if it hadn't been for her hard work at the travel agency, I wouldn't have met Itsumi or received this offer in the first place.

Ema's preparations for the study abroad program went without a hitch. She was the one who dreamed of travelling the world. She even enjoyed the complicated visa application process. She talked about her trip every day, like how she planned to visit Mount Fuji to see if it was as beautiful as the Vitosha Mountains, and how she was interested in Aomori rather than popular tourist cities like Kyoto and Nara because she felt it was similar to Bulgaria in a way. Though I felt lonely knowing we'd be apart for a year, I was excited when I thought about the strong ties she would form in Japan during her stay.

But God can be cruel. One day, leading a tour at Aldimir's Kaleto, Ema fell down a stone staircase. She suffered a severe blow to the head and broke her arms and legs. Thank heaven the wounds weren't fatal, but they did require three months of hospitalization followed by six months of rehabilitation, which left her no choice but to drop out of the study abroad program.

So I was suddenly set to take my sister's place in the program and had to prepare immediately. I was apprehensive of how I would manage, because of my leg and introverted personality, but mustered up the courage because I knew I would soon see Itsumi. Though I thought my Certificate of Eligibility for Resident Status and Visa would take a while to go through, I received both surprisingly fast and was able to make it in time for the new semester in April. Again, I was overjoyed. This must be what the Japanese call "*En ga aru,*" or what we know as "fate."

My study abroad experience was also meaningful in another way: I was going to be the first international student at St. Mary's Academy for Girls. If I could make a positive impact on the academy, they might invite students from Levagrad to come study abroad every year. This would be a huge honor for my village. On top of that, Ema would most likely receive a bonus from her company for coordinating the program with the academy. All of this depended on my experience abroad. This is why I've tried my best in classes and actively participated in school events, like the music festival and Easter bazaar.

At first I was completely disoriented. This was my first time in another country and I was attending a school with only girls.

Although there are all-girls schools in almost every country, the Japanese equivalent feels like it exists in its own world.

This is a world where schoolgirls compete to pull the strings of leadership. These strings are stretched so tautly it's painful to see. Like wires, they hurt your hands as they tie you up. Whether girls are trying to protect their station or are plotting to steal one away from others, no one goes unscathed. Yet, all the schoolgirls pretend that they're indifferent to this game and laugh as they chatter innocently away.

But it all became clear to me. In this academy—in this unique environment known as an "all-girls school"—the students spend their days tugging on these strings. Who is in charge? Who has power? Who is the leader? The girls warily sniff around, find out who's on top, then vigilantly wait for their chance to take hold of the reins. This is what my glimpse at an all-girls school in Japan told me.

It felt as if strings stretched across the classrooms. Your apathy won't help you escape; it'll only entangle you deeper. Perhaps the only one who could see these strings, spun into such an intricate spider web, was me, the only outsider at school.

These power relationships change by the day—no, by the hour—at a dizzying pace. Seconds ago, Girl A might have been the most popular student in school, but everyone started ignoring her after lunch. Or the opposite might—and did—happen.

Are there any webs of relationships as cruel and brutal as these? I was so happy to be an international student. I was a mere outsider and witness to this tug-of-war, and even then—I'm not sure if this is the right phrase in Japanese—it left a stinging, or *hirihiri,* pain, in my heart, as if it was slowly being sanded down into nothing.

In spite of that, Itsumi surpassed everyone and moved freely amongst the chaos. There were plenty of attractive girls at the academy; they were all Eastern jewels in their own refined, clever, graceful ways. But they were nothing more than pebbles at Itsumi's feet. Itsumi was so overwhelmingly brilliant that she could outshine anything.

At first, it was bewildering being at an all-girls school like this, but thanks to Itsumi, my life at the academy was really enjoyable. Joining this club and making new friends were probably my most valuable experiences here.

Even though I say I studied Japanese through Akutagawa and Mishima's novels, I didn't have the skills to read full-length Japanese novels when I first joined the club. Every day after I finished my homework, I tried my best to get through our book discussion texts,

feeling accomplished on days I managed to get through even ten pages of it. Even though I struggled, Itsumi didn't give me shorter texts or easier things to read. "With your Japanese abilities, you'll be able to read this in no time," she would say before giving me a mercilessly difficult assignment. I must confess, this did make me resent Itsumi at first. I thought she should've eased up on me because I was an international student. But as I began to decipher the texts little by little every day, before I knew it, I really had learned a ton of vocabulary, metaphors, and idioms.

As soon as I could read at that level, Itsumi said it was time for me to write.

"I'm afraid that Bulgarian literature isn't very well-known in Japan," she said. "So, I'd like you to translate some Bulgarian texts into Japanese and introduce them to us. I feel like this might be your duty, Diana."

With that, Itsumi immediately ordered a collection of short stories from Bulgaria. With a dictionary in one hand, I began translating these stories into clumsy Japanese. I realized that understanding what you've read and writing it down correctly are two completely different things. Every day, I carefully chose each particle, nuance, and tense as I plugged away at my translations.

On the weekends, Itsumi came to the salon and reviewed my Japanese from morning until night. She corrected my work in red ink, and sat so close to me that her breath touched my cheek. She politely explained how to correct my mistakes, but the sight of her collarbone peeking out of her shirt or the movement of her seductive lips proved such a distraction that I couldn't focus very well. Even so, around my tenth novel, my Japanese writing skills skyrocketed. My Japanese isn't perfect, but I wouldn't have been able to write a fifty-page story like this if it hadn't been for Itsumi.

One day, Itsumi made a suggestion at one of the club meetings. "Why don't we translate Shiyo's book, *Kimikageso,* into Bulgarian? No, not just into Bulgarian, but also into English and French and send it to publishers all over the world? It would be an international hit. Wouldn't it be great if one of our Literature Club girls spread her wings and flew out into the

world?”

All of the members agreed and were thrilled with Itsumi’s idea— except one. Surprisingly, Shiyo Takaoka was the only one who opposed her suggestion.

“Shiyo, why do you look so upset?”

“Itsumi. I’m glad you like my work, but translating it would honestly do a disservice to the original piece. I am proud to be Japanese and that I wrote it in Japanese. My work would die the moment it was translated.”

“That’s not true. You can check the English translation that Sayuri and I make, and as for French, well, isn’t that your specialty? You would be able to capture the original nuance of the piece if you translated it into French, right?”

“I told you, there’s no way to express the nuance of the original! You wouldn’t understand how a professional feels!” Shiyo shrieked. This was the first time that Shiyo, who had always appeared to be so kind to Itsumi, almost became violent. If we all hadn’t been there that day…if it had just been the two of them…something might have happened to Itsumi.

The meeting ended with the issue on hold. I was shocked that the other members casually talked and packed up their things as though nothing strange had happened.

Didn’t they notice how awfully Shiyo had behaved towards Itsumi? Maybe they assumed that Shiyo was just being selfish and immature. Or maybe I was just being petty, thinking it meant something more than it did, because of my own feelings for Itsumi.

But despite Shiyo’s opposition, Itsumi didn’t give up on translating *Kimikageso*. She kept it a secret from Shiyo and worked on it behind closed doors.

“The world needs to read her novel,” she insisted at one of our translation meetings. “Shiyo could say what she wants, but I think she’s just insecure. We should send our translations abroad and see how

publishing companies react to it. Shiyo would be so happy if she got a good offer, I just know it."

Itsumi always criticized Shiyo's work, but it was surely out of tough love in order to help her grow as an author. I loved Itsumi when she was kind and even when she was occasionally stern. Her tough love was also the reason why she'd assigned me all those difficult texts and translations. Love isn't just about being sweet. I gladly took on Itsumi's project and kept working on my Bulgarian translation.

Finally, the season for the Easter & Pentecost Festival arrived.

In my hometown, we make sculptures of eggs and use them to decorate the town square. Every year, the villagers look forward to coloring and drawing patterns on them.

Japan is not a predominantly Christian country and doesn't typically celebrate Easter. However, since St. Mary's Academy for Girls is what is known as a "missionary school," it holds an Easter festival every year. I was asked to demonstrate how we celebrate Easter in Levagrad, so I teamed up with a local museum and started working on my sculpture one month prior to the festival.

On the day of the festival, adorable children filled the campus and hunted for eggs. Ten Easter Bunnies danced around my sculpture in the center of the field. I felt quiet and peaceful watching the pink bunnies dance. I felt a wave of pity: The students who were picked to wear the costumes must have been hot, wearing those suits at that time of year. The chorus students marched as they sang:

Thank you
Thank you
We praise you
You are resurrected

Easter
Easter
Easter

Your sacrifice for our sins
Jesus' crucifixion
All is well
You are living

Among the little shops selling snacks and beverages lining the side of the campus, I saw the long line for the Literature Club's cakes. I stood next to my sculpture and admired how wonderful Easter was in Japan. Our guests were allowed to color and doodle on the sculpture however they liked. I gave crayons to the children that came by and wished them a happy Easter.

My leg started to hurt from standing for too long, so I headed towards the school building to rest. Just then, I spotted a pink bunny escorting Itsumi to the back of the gymnasium. They were just about to announce the winner of the egg-hunt, so no one had noticed that Itsumi and the bunny weren't there.

Feeling somewhat uneasy, I pushed through the crowd and hurried towards the gymnasium. I heard a deranged voice as I got closer.

"I know what you're up to. You're really just making fun of me. Laughing behind my back, calling me talentless!"

"That's not true. Please calm down, I beg you," Itsumi implored.

"You've always looked down on me. I'll never forgive you. I'll kill you."

When I rushed to the back of the building, I saw a bunny that had a friendly smile plastered on its face choking Itsumi. That contrast was incredibly disturbing. Itsumi's eyes flew open and her body writhed in pain. I screamed. The bunny, startled by my scream, let go of her neck and ran off.

I rushed over to where Itsumi had collapsed and held her as I sat her up on the ground. She coughed violently.

"Itsumi, are you okay?" I frantically rubbed her back. When she had finally caught her breath, she looked up at my face and slowly nodded in relief.

"What was that? Who was that just now?"

"It's nothing."

"But…"

“It’s fine. Seriously, it was nothing. It was just a misunderstanding. Please forget it ever happened.” She started coughing violently again. There were red finger marks clearly imprinted on the base of her neck. Then, I remembered that the bunny had taken its glove off before it left… and that the girl in the suit had been wearing green nail polish.

Even though Itsumi had told me to forget about it, I needed to know who the culprit was. There was no mistaking it. It was clear that that bunny had intended to hurt…or maybe even *murder* Itsumi.

I went to the Event Planning Committee office to put away my statue after the festival ended. Then I checked the schedule on the wall to see who had been assigned to wear the bunny suits. As I had expected, Shiyo Takaoka’s name was on the list.

I went to the salon. Everyone was totaling up the cake sales at the marble table. I wasn’t surprised to see Shiyo counting the coins on the table with her pastel green nails. Itsumi wore a scarf as if trying to hide her neck.

“Oh, Itsumi. Why are you wearing that scarf?” I asked loudly enough for Shiyo to hear. But she continued counting and pretended not to notice. She had some nerve sitting in front of Itsumi, cool as a cucumber.

“Yeah, my neck is a little cold,” Itsumi said, winking at me.

She was bent on protecting Shiyo. I felt a sudden burst of jealousy. Shiyo didn’t deserve to be close to Itsumi, and yet Itsumi would have done anything for Shiyo just because she wrote some stupid novel. While Itsumi always forgave Shiyo’s selfishness and hostile ways, there I was, finally standing by Itsumi’s side, holding back my feelings.

“*…I’ll never forgive you. I’ll kill you.*” Shiyo’s voice echoed in my head. I wanted to say that to her, myself.

As I faced Itsumi, I whispered in Bulgarian, “Itsumi, I’ll protect you. I won’t forgive anyone who tries to hurt you.”

The last syllable rang sharp with emotion. Itsumi looked up at me and tilted her head in confusion.

“What was that, Diana? What did you say?”

“It’s nothing. Just a spell for good luck. I hope you’ll always be happy.”

“Aww, thank you.” She smiled cheerfully. That ephemeral grin might have been a premonition of the future. Itsumi died just a few weeks later.

It’s been hard for me to breathe since Itsumi passed away. I didn’t come all the way to Japan to watch Itsumi die. Why did this have to happen to someone as happy and lovely as she was?

I didn’t see Itsumi’s death; I only saw her lying in the flowerbed with the lilies-of-the-valleys in her hand. I know I shouldn’t say things I don’t know are true, but it is clear that Itsumi was murdered…and it is also clear who the murderer is.

“*…I’ll never forgive you. I’ll kill you.*”

The scream I heard at the Easter festival won’t leave my ears.

Shiyo hated Itsumi with a passion. The work of a writer, who weaves words out of nothing, breathing life into fictional people and forcing them to fall in love, to despair, and to hate, must be too grueling for an ordinary person like me to even imagine. It isn’t unnatural that Shiyo couldn’t stop until she killed someone she thought had negated her work.

Itsumi told me who the culprit is. *Kimikageso* is a traditional way to say “lily-of-the-valley” in Japanese. She had said so herself.

I would have rather jumped off the terrace with her than lose her like this. If we had tied our hair together, held hands, and took that leap of faith, I know God would have gracefully turned us to stone. We would have spent an eternity huddled next to each other, like the sisters at the Kaleto. Ahh, my dear, sweet Itsumi…

I will never forgive Shiyo Takaoka.

And I also cannot forgive myself. I cannot forgive my foolishness and my inability to protect her. I will regret this for as long as I live. I regret that I failed to protect the only person I’ve ever loved. I regret that I could only watch her die as I stood by her side.

(End)

Thank you, Diana.

You're the only international student in the Literature Club. Since you're only going to be here for a year, I expected that your story would be the most objective of all.

And it was just what I had hoped. The tension that only exists at an all-girls school…I've never consciously felt something like that before. You used *"hirihiri"* to describe how you felt and then asked if it was the appropriate word, but I don't think you could have chosen a more fitting one than that. It's not "pain" you're describing; as you said, it's more like your heart is being sanded down to nothing. You've really become proficient in Japanese in the three months you've been here.

And within that short period of time, Itsumi has passed away. I learned a lot by listening to your side of the story. But all of the readings, including yours, claim something different. What in the world is going on?

Your reading was truly music to my ears. That Bulgarian accent makes your Japanese sounds very sexy. Your voice also has a lovely depth to it. And the hometown you described with that lovely voice—the towering, gallant mountains, the historical buildings and landmarks, the Rose Valley, the vibrant sea—vividly appeared right before my eyes.

Your reading was very charming. Thank you very much. Let's all give her a round of applause.

Is everyone eating enough? Let's add a few things to the stew. Please feel free to come take another drink if you'd like.

My goodness, what's all the fuss about?

—What, a watch? Someone brought another watch this year. Who's the lucky girl who has it?…Oh, Akane Kominami. I'm terribly jealous of you. But it doesn't mean that it's as high-quality as last year's, you know. It was probably cheap. Though we won't know until the meeting ends and we turn on the lights. Perhaps we will envy you. Or perhaps we'll see it's a

toy and everyone will laugh at you. This is one of the things that make our mystery stew so exciting. Let's let our imaginations run wild until the very end.

Could the next reader prepare while I add some things to the stew? Let's see, was it Sonoko who was next? Ah, yes. Sonoko, please head to the reading corner.

5

Short Story Reading
"Lamia's Feast"

Reader:

Third-year Class B

Sonoko Koga

WHEN:	The month of July, after school
WHERE:	St. Mary's Academy for Girls
WHO:	Third-year student, Itsumi Shiraishi
WHAT:	Itsumi's bloodied corpse
WHY:	Unknown
HOW:	A fall from the terrace

This is a rough breakdown of the basic facts surrounding the Itsumi Shiraishi incident. I always try to organize things using the "5W1H" technique my father taught me, no matter what the topic is. Depending on the situation, you can add "WHOM" to make 6W1H, and then "HOW MUCH" for 6W2H.

As you can see, the "WHY" in this case is unknown. Speculations are being tossed around…Was it an accident? Was it suicide? Was it murder?

I will relate my account of the incident. My story may be of value to you—because I know how it really happened.

Now, before I write about Itsumi Shiraishi's death, I must first tell you about my relationship with her.

Itsumi Shiraishi and I were in the same grade and shared a science class. We both dreamed of becoming doctors. We rooted for—and sometimes competed against—each other for better grades. We each aimed to get into a university with a top-ranked medical program. Itsumi Shiraishi was a worthy rival, as it were.

My father, who passed away two years ago, originally inspired me to become a doctor.

He was fantastic at his job. He used to work at a teaching hospital, and later opened his own small clinic to work as a family physician in our region. While he may not have had the newest medical equipment, he would peruse monthly academic magazines, attend scientific conferences and study sessions, and did everything else that he could to stay current with the latest medical knowledge and techniques. Knowing patients know their own symptoms best, he would diligently listen to his patients

as they described their symptoms, then find the cause of their illness and search for a cure. My father never stopped believing in "learning from your patients."

Masses of people attended my father's funeral. I sat with my family and watched the long line of attendees offer incense—like an elderly man who'd been my father's patient since his clinic first opened, a woman who'd been his patient since she was in kindergarten and who brought her own toddler there, or three generations of a family who all went to him for primary care—and I was surprised to see how many patients he had actually taken care of and healed. My heart swelled with pride every time I heard someone softly whisper, "Thank you, doctor," through their tears.

That day, I vowed: *I will be a great doctor like my father. I will take the clinic that shut down with his death and reopen it with my own two hands.*

The only possessions my father left me were the encyclopedias that filled his bookshelves, back issues of the *American Journal of Medicine,* and a worn-out stethoscope. It was so characteristic of him that I was moved to tears.

Since then, I've dedicated more time to my studies. Sometimes the stress is too much and I feel like giving up, but at those times I visit hospitals to lighten my mood. I hop on random buses and trains until I find a hospital I'd like to visit. When I arrive, I see people suffering from illnesses. Health care providers offering their sincere support. Smiling patients leaving the hospital. Every one of those people rekindles the fire of my motivation. You may find it strange that I take hospital tours to feel refreshed, but I think that all scientific girls are a little eccentric to begin with.

Itsumi Shiraishi was more balanced in that sense. I assumed that she was a liberal arts type because she ran the Literature Club, so I was surprised when we ended up in the same science class in our second year. I am confident that I will not lose to anyone in mathematics and science, but know I don't do well in classical literature, *kanji,* and English. But

Itsumi Shiraishi was unbeatable in those subjects, too. How irritating. She must have been right *and* left-brained.

There are many bright students at this school, of course. However, Itsumi Shiraishi was my personal rival. I spent half of each day studying just so I wouldn't lose to her. Just when I felt like I couldn't keep up this exhausting routine any longer, Itsumi Shiraishi invited me to the Literature Club in my second year of high school.

Sayuri Sumikawa, another student in my grade, warmly welcomed me into the club. At the time, the only other members included Akane Kominami and first-year student Shiyo Takaoka. (I know she's billed as a "high school author" and all, but I didn't finish her book. My head started to hurt just from reading the first page. Is that style the trend now? Honestly, I'm not into it. But of course, I told Shiyo that I read the whole thing).

The book discussions were excruciating at first. Even if I did do the readings, I was terrible at answering questions like "What is the theme of the piece?" or "How do you feel about it?" or "What is the story trying to say about modern society?" and voicing my opinion about the novels.

"You can't just say 'It was interesting,' Sonoko," Itsumi often said, disconcerted.

"But that's really all I felt," I would reply.

"That can't be. Every story has a theme and a question for the audience," she would retort. This was a plausible argument.

"Okay, then what about the legend of Momotaro?" I asked jokingly.

To my surprise, Itsumi launched into a rapid-fire discourse on Momotaro's "relevance to today's aging society, pregnancy over the age of forty, and the declining birth rate," and "the absurdity of the violent resolve to exterminate the Oni."

At first, I got Itsumi to give me easy assignments, such as medical works of literature by Robin Cook and Michael Crichton. I was so fascinated with their stories of heart transplants and rare bacteria, I could read them

from dawn until dusk. Shiyo and Akane didn't seem to enjoy them nearly as much as I did (as was clear after Akane exploded, saying that "These books are so boring that they'll ruin teatime!").

Nevertheless, human beings are, above all, creatures that can learn. Despite my apathy towards the book discussions, I gradually learned how to understand literature after reading more and listening to the members' thoughts and analyses. The trick to lengthy novels is to extract 6W1H or 6W2H instead of 5W1H, and then compare the book to modern trends and events. Once I got the hang of this, the discussions weren't so painful for me anymore.

Take Stendhal's *The Red and the Black,* for example:

WHEN: 19th Century, the Restoration period

WHERE: France

WHO: Julien Sorel, a man born into poverty

WHAT: Sentenced to death at 23 years old

WHY: Shoots his past lover to death, thinking he had been betrayed

HOW: Julien's failed plots to gain power and love cause his downfall

Humans still tend to be controlled by power and money in the contemporary era. However, modern Japanese people have lost the nobility or heroism that Julien displays when he accepts the death penalty in exchange for true love.

Here is another example for *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald:

WHEN: The 1920's, Post-WWI

WHERE: New York suburbs, Long Island

WHO: Mysterious millionaire, Jay Gatsby

WHAT: Falsely accused of a crime, shot to death

WHY: Attempts to reclaim his former lover from her current husband

HOW: After Gatsby goes to war, his lover marries a millionaire. He becomes obsessed with vindication, and dedicates his life to the

acquisition of social status, wealth, and success.

Whether it be affection, power, or social status, people yearn for what they can't have. While it is foolish to single-mindedly pursue these things, it is also, in a way, endearing. We keep searching for an innocent man like Gatsby because we know that there is no one actually like him—that he is just an illusion.

Itsumi was glad to see that I was proactive in the discussions. "You look at things in an interesting way. How do you analyze what you read?" Itsumi asked me one day. I then showed her my logical 5W1H analyses.

"This is *so* you. You read with your head rather than your heart." She laughed loudly.

I may not have a full understanding of literature, but I believe I made the right decision by joining the club. First, there are no downsides to enhancing my reading abilities. Second, I can eat Akane's handmade sweets whenever I want. And third, I get to participate in the unique mystery stew meetings.

Itsumi Shiraishi reopened the Literature Club, which had been shut down after all of its previous members quit, when she entered high school. At that time, Mr. Hojo, our adviser, gave Itsumi the "Literature Club handbook." The handbook has been passed down for generations and provides instructions for the book discussions, procedures for the debates, and rules for the mystery stew:

The mystery stew must take place in complete darkness.

The club president must act as the facilitator, AKA the "pot bearer."

Items do not have to be edible, but must be sanitary.

The club president must make delicious desserts as a palate cleanser.

A member must stand in the reading corner when reading aloud.

Members must eat as they listen to the readings.

I was initially appalled trying to imagine what kind of sick individual would think up such peculiar rules, but once I actually joined in on one, I

found the meetings exhilarating. You nervously pick up a mystery item with chopsticks and bring it to your mouth. The texture feels revolting against your lips. You get an awful rush of chills when it doesn't taste as you expected. I never thought I'd be able to focus on the members' stories with all this going on, but I was surprised to find that I remembered them even better than stories I had read in a well-lit room. Your imagination sparks, and the stories appear to you as if on a scroll rolled out at your feet. Brain activity increases in the dark and helps you see things more vividly.

You also feel mischievous. I know it's against the rules to say this, but I was the one who brought the strawberry rice cake, macadamia nuts, and the Chanel watch last year. The strawberry rice cake melted into the soup, boiling the meat, fish, and vegetables in a sweet goo, which made for a terrible stew. I have to say, I was snickering myself the whole time listening to the other members nearly shriek while they ate. Then, when I brought the macadamia nuts, someone yelled "There's rocks in it!" and I sat there thinking "Fooled you!" I also chose the Chanel watch because I knew it would take everyone by surprise. When I saw how envious everyone looked when they saw what Itsumi blissfully held in her hand, I wanted to boast and say, "It was me! *I* brought the watch!" But I had to follow the rules and keep it a secret. I still regret not having said anything.

Book discussions and mystery stew meetings weren't our only club activities; the Easter & Pentecost bazaar was also a huge task. But this year, I was chosen to be the head of the executive committee and I didn't really get to participate in the bazaar.

Last year, when I was just a regular committee member, I helped out the head of the committee because I saw how busy she was and felt sorry for her. Then this year, it was my turn to fill that position.

I was incredibly busy. I discussed poster designs with the art club, made pamphlets to hand out to our neighbors, had meetings with the chorus club, and ordered eggs for the egg hunt. I had to write an easy-to-understand description of Easter on a pamphlet for children and others unfamiliar with the holiday. In the end, I came up with:

Easter is a festival that celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The first fifty days of the Easter season is called "Eastertide," and the fiftieth day is called "Pentecost," which is the day that the Holy Spirit descends onto earth. Our academy celebrates these important events by holding a charity bazaar every year in June.

We paint eggs, a symbol of life, and hide them in the courtyard. Then, there will be an egg hunt for all children to participate in.

Please visit our bazaar and café corner at your leisure.

There will also be a donation box. Donations will be given to the Red Cross, retirement homes, and others who desperately need these funds.

Jesus Christ lives.

He is of eternal life.

I emailed parents asking for their assistance and donations, arranged the stage rental for the courtyard, and completed many other arduous tasks all for one reason: to thank Mr. Shiraishi, the chairman of our school.

Mr. Shiraishi is Itsumi's father. He runs a general hospital, a commercial building, and all other sorts of businesses in addition to this academy. In other schools, most students normally don't know their school chairman by face, but Mr. Shiraishi is different. He regularly comes to school to talk with the students and visits every semester to check on our grades. He even allows good students to undergo special training, letting them sit in on other classes, and makes sure the professors are performing at their best.

Mr. Shiraishi's motto is that "school administration is the ultimate service industry." He believes that it is his obligation to elevate students' moral consciousness and academic abilities.

Mr. Shiraishi also actively participated in school functions. Out of all the school events, the one he helped out with the most was the Easter bazaar. In fact, he planned every detail of the event himself. "This is our chance to teach our neighbors about Christ's love and spirit, and to give

back to the community," he said.

And I myself am personally indebted to Mr. Shiraishi. For a long time, I had wanted to sit in on a human dissection. My father couldn't perform dissections or surgeries in his tiny clinic. But since I decided to become a doctor, I thought I should watch a dissection at least once. Last year, when I became a member of the executive committee, I volunteered to report directly to Mr. Shiraishi. The first time we ever met face-to-face, I requested to sit in on a dissection. I figured he would say that "this isn't child's play," and prepared myself for a curt rejection.

"Understood. I'll let the chief of surgery know. Please contact my hospital any time you'd like," Mr. Shiraishi said instead, consenting immediately.

That next week, I was standing in front of an operating table with the professor and interns of an anatomy class. I wasn't holding a scalpel, of course; I simply watched from the side. But I learned so much more from studying the organs in person than just looking at a diagram or picture. The brain, heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, and arteries were silently removed and cut open. I was worried that I'd feel sick or go into a state of shock, but I was surprisingly calm. Perhaps my brain didn't connect the body in front of me with the concept of death. The tissue wasn't something grotesque, but a precious material critical for making advancements in the medical field.

When the dissection ended, I was sure of only one thing.

Souls do not dwell in the human body.

I looked at the body from head to toe, in the spaces between brain cells, in every chamber of the heart. There is no space for the soul to exist. Joy, sorrow, anger, and jealousy are emotions that occur in the small organ we know as the "brain" and are predominantly controlled by the amygdala, limbic system, and the neocortex. Humans do not exist because they have souls. They live because breathing causes oxygen to travel throughout the body, secrete physiologically active substances, create blood flow, and maintain their metabolisms. The dissection made me realize that life is

nothing more than a simple physiological function.

Even though I am enrolled in a missionary school, I was never a Christian. I don't believe in a "God" or any other unscientific being, nor do I assign meaning to the Holy Spirit or Eternal Life. I only believe what I see. However, if people find solace in the existence of God or souls—especially those who are ill and rely on these entities for hope—I feel I must seriously try and understand these things for my future patients.

I changed drastically after the dissection. It made me contemplate life—what it is, how one should die, what is God, what a doctor should do—and reconfirmed my decision to seriously pursue my path.

I decided to head the executive committee to try and repay Mr. Shiraishi for giving me that precious experience last year.

We started preparing for the Easter bazaar at the beginning of the new academic year.

Most missionary schools and churches have events in April, when Easter Sabbath typically falls. However, our academy celebrates Easter and Pentecost in the middle of June in order to avoid the chaos of the new school year.

Last year, I only visited Mr. Shiraishi at his residence a few times to report on committee activities, but, after I became head of the committee, our meetings became more frequent. I would ask for his opinion on my rough draft of the Easter poster, and gave him price quotations for and a final list of the tentative shops for the bazaar.

Even though Mr. Shiraishi surely knows "time is money," he spent his time on his students, instead of on hobbies or vacations, and I was grateful for that. He inspired me to dedicate all of my time to studying and perfecting the festival preparations, no matter what it took. I became more enthusiastic with every conversation and often found us talking in his library for three hours at a time.

Since most of these meetings and preparations took place after school, I wasn't able to attend most of the Literature Club meetings. I'm sure they also had daily meetings about the Easter festival arrangements. I couldn't

assist them like I did last year, when we baked two hundred cakes, so I imagine that they were much busier obtaining the ingredients and cooking utensils than they had been before. Maybe that's why I never ran into Itsumi when I visited her father. She must have been constantly running around like crazy. At any rate, Itsumi was, like her father, hot-blooded and persistent.

"What would you think of a bunny dance?" Mr. Shiraishi suggested one day, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Bunnies…?" I asked.

"You know, Easter Bunnies. We'll have the students wear bunny costumes and do a little dance as they walk around. Like they're in a make-believe land. Don't you feel excited just thinking about it?"

He had a point. It certainly would feel like a fairytale if we had Easter Bunnies dancing in front of the academy's European Middle-Age style architecture. It was hard to picture that this man—a cold rationalist whom many fear, who expands his businesses by aggressively acquiring other companies—would have such an innocent idea. "It sounds great," I replied, holding back laughter, trying my best to show that I agreed. Despite his silly idea, I really did enjoy talking to him and listening to his various suggestions.

So I borrowed the laptop in his library and started searching for costume rental companies.

There is a logical explanation as to why Mr. Shiraishi let me borrow his laptop. Last year, when I visited Mr. Shiraishi to talk about my progress report, I walked in on a telephone conversation between him and his secretary. He was trying to send urgent instructions to his branch office when his computer suddenly shut down and wouldn't restart. As a child, I used to disassemble and reassemble computers for fun, so I am actually quite the tech-whiz. He ordered his secretary to have his computer repaired immediately and then angrily hung up. That is when I asked if he'd like me to take a look at it. Even if I wasn't able to fix his computer, I figured I'd be able to extract some data out of it.

My hypothesis was correct. I was able to restart the computer in safe mode and put the necessary information onto a flash memory stick before the repairman rushed in with a replacement computer. Mr. Shiraishi thanked me for loading the data onto his computer, and for doing it so quickly he didn't have to waste time waiting for his files. He was so profuse in his thanks I started to feel embarrassed. From that point on, Mr. Shiraishi put his trust in me.

I am not only confident with computers; I also know that I'm good at getting things done. I ran as many errands as I could while Mr. Shiraishi dealt with the incessant calls he'd receive during our meetings. On this occasion, I had finished negotiating prices with the costume rental company and ordered ten bunny suits by the time he had hung up the phone.

"That's incredible, Sonoko. Listen, how would you like to be my assistant when you graduate?" he suggested then.

I could only take this as the highest compliment. I was delighted. *If only my father were still alive. If only I had a father like Mr. Shiraishi,* I thought—and yes—I felt jealous of Itsumi.

"It would be an honor," I said.

"I'm serious. I mean, you're better than my secretary. I hate when people mess with my things. I've never even let my secretary enter my library. In fact, you're the first person I've ever allowed to handle the library computer," Mr. Shiraishi admitted. When he grinned, his eyes crinkled. "But I know you want to be a doctor. Well, after you get your degree, I'd like you to work at my hospital," he offered.

"I'd love to!"

"Here, take this. It's a small reward for your hard work," said Mr. Shiraishi. He opened his desk drawer and took out a box wrapped in decorative paper. "I went to Paris on business last week. This is a souvenir."

"Oh, you shouldn't have…"

“Please, take it. It’s a thank-you gift for your diligent work as head of the executive committee.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Open it.”

I opened the chic wrapping paper to reveal a box of Guerlain, my favorite perfume. It’s an exclusive perfume sold every spring.

“I love it! I buy Guerlain every year.”

“I’m glad you like it. But please, don’t tell Itsumi. I could only get one bottle,” Mr. Shiraishi confessed, scratching his head.

“Thank you so much,” I said.

Aware that I’d never receive gifts from my own father again, Mr. Shiraishi must have surreptitiously taken on that role for me.

“I’ll cherish it always…” *Dad,* I almost said. I panicked and swallowed my words.

Classes, tests, Easter preparations, Literature Club, independent studies.

With all the pressure, I nearly combusted with stress. I found it hard to keep going. I tried reading my textbooks at home, but the information wouldn’t stick in my head.

This is no good, I thought.

Finally, I set my study materials aside and decided to go on a hospital tour. It was a Saturday afternoon. I figured the hospital would inevitably be crowded. I quickly switched from one train to the next until I arrived at a general hospital in the suburbs.

Sure enough, there were people everywhere. The lobby, information desk, emergency exit, cafeteria, café, shops, internal medicine, radiology department…I took it all in. I saw doctors and nurses who’d do anything to heal their fearful patients of their pain and suffering. *Right,* I thought. *I have to try much, much harder for my future patients. Someday, I need to be able to save them.*

Mission to rejuvenate: complete. Feeling recharged, I walked back down the stairs to the lobby. It was there that I noticed an unusual presence.

Itsumi Shiraishi.

Her beauty stood out in the crowded hospital. Maybe she had also come to mentally recharge. After all, she'd come all the way to the suburbs instead of going to her father's prominent hospital. Perhaps, like me, she was also burnt out.

"Itsumi..." I was about to say, but stopped myself.

Her expression was so vacant it seemed like she was unconscious. Her skin was sickly pale, and she had lost the sparkle in her eyes. She stumbled around the lobby as if sleepwalking.

When she came back to school, Itsumi didn't seem like herself.

She was morose and hardly ever smiled. She wasn't her cheerful, lively self.

"Itsumi?" I called to her between classes the following week.

"Whaat?" she answered lethargically.

Her gaze was incredibly listless.

"...It's nothing," I found myself saying.

"You're a strange one, Sonoko." She smiled, but it was weak. Itsumi was starting to look more like a patient than the doctor she aspired to be. I wanted to tell her I had seen her the previous Saturday, but decided not to.

Even at the salon, Itsumi drooped languidly on the sofa. She was normally inseparable from her books, but now just closed her eyes and listened to a piano piece by Chopin.

"Itsumi, do you feel sick?" Diana, the international student, inquired, sounding worried.

"Yeah, a little. My body feels sluggish."

"You're tired. I'll give you a massage with rose oil. Go change into a robe

and come back when you're done," Diana said. Once Itsumi came back, she had Itsumi lay face-down. Diana started rubbing the sweet-smelling Bulgarian rose oil onto her arms and back, and then lightly began massaging her.

"How's that?"

"Really good." Itsumi started to doze off. I thought she was probably just sleep-deprived. Even if she'd been sleeping well, we still had to deal with the difficult homework assignments we received every day in science class. Perhaps Itsumi was feeling the stress that came with being the chairman's daughter.

But…

I felt like there was something else at work.

I watched Diana diligently massaging Itsumi. Looking back, I felt like Itsumi had been slowly changing since the spring.

Spring—yes, right around the time that Diana Decheva came to Japan.

It had been the first morning assembly of the semester. The auditorium was enveloped with a strange excitement while the principal introduced Diana at the altar, in front of the entire student body. She had translucent white skin. Long, ebony-black hair. Her large, dark eyes were as lustrous as the waves of the Dead Sea that crash on the shore of her homeland. She had a rigid-looking nose and well-proportioned lips.

Diana was stunning. She had a mysterious Southern Slavic allure—unlike the blond-haired, blue-eyed inhabitants of the West or black hair and black eyes of the East. Our school uniform looked surprisingly nice on her. Until then, I thought no one as lovely as Itsumi could exist. But I had to say, Diana's unique beauty may have been on Itsumi's level.

The students weren't just making a fuss because they were impressed by her beauty; Diana was also identical to the painting of the girl in the new church. The painting's title is *Jesus Christ and The Devil who Fears Christ with His Servant*. The Devil's female servant looked eerily like Diana.

“My name is Diana Decheva. I’m from Levagrad, a village in Bulgaria. It’s nice to meet you,” she announced in Japanese with astonishing fluency. She demurely pinched the hem of her skirt, put one leg behind her, and bowed her head as she curtsied. It certainly wasn’t an elegant gesture; it looked more like the folk dance of a village girl, but it had its own rough charm. This gesture assuaged the students’ initial dark impression, and they welcomed her to our school with a friendly round of applause. But even with all the students clapping, I still felt that there was something dark lurking within her.

It isn’t like me to think this way, I know. The resemblance between Diana and the girl in the painting had made me uneasy. Then, when I saw her dragging her leg after stepping down from the altar, I was only more disturbed. The painting of the Devil’s servant used to hang in another convent, which was destroyed in a fire. The fire had also burned off the portion of the picture with the servant’s leg. Itsumi and Diana were close from day one.

Itsumi said that she had stayed at Diana’s house when she studied abroad. *She must be a good person if Itsumi likes her,* I thought. I felt relieved.

I tried speaking with her and found her extremely easy to talk to, which made me feel embarrassed for pegging her as some menacing character. Plus, she also spoke almost perfect Japanese. She knew quite a bit about our culture. I heard that Diana’s twin sister was originally supposed to study abroad at our school, but I had a funny feeling that Diana would have a more fulfilling experience than her sister ever could.

Diana’s village was so filled with flowers that it wouldn’t be wrong to call it “Flower Village.”

“That’s why I just love flowers,” Diana explained, decorating the academy with them. On top of the obvious places like the classrooms, she also decorated the faculty room, sunroom, bathrooms, entrances, and the hallway windows—surrounding students in a sweet aroma wherever they’d go. Seeing such delicate scenery, one couldn’t help but feel that prior to Diana’s arrival, life at the academy had been regrettably dreary.

“I want to give the school flowers from my village to thank them for letting me study abroad and to commemorate my stay,” Diana remarked as she planted seeds in the flower bed next to the new church. I anticipated that the flower of Diana’s hometown was the rose, but I was mistaken.

“Everyone thinks of roses when they think of Bulgaria, but the lily-of-the-valley is what my hometown is famous for. The village is blanketed in white during the first days of summer. It’s very lovely,” the Bulgarian girl mentioned.

“You got lily seeds all the way from your village?” Itsumi asked Diana.

“Yes. It took some time for my parents to send them to me, but I luckily got them in time to plant,” Diana replied, assiduously piling soil onto the seeds she had placed in the ground.

“When will they bloom?”

“I think around May. These lilies are resistant to warm weather. This garden will stay cool in the shade, so they might even make it through the summer.”

“Ah. I can’t wait,” Sayuri said, looking entranced.

Itsumi invited Diana to join the club, and of course she joined.

Since I had assumed that Diana couldn’t read Japanese, I was astonished to see her read through all of Yukio Mishima’s *Confessions of a Mask* and comment on it in Japanese, without even having to pause, at her very first meeting. She often put herself down for her “clumsy Japanese,” but I thought it was unbelievable that she was so fluent with just one or two years of study.

Diana was already acquainted with Shiyo, and they frequently reminisced about their memories in Bulgaria. It seemed like Shiyo had had a great time in Bulgaria, as she flaunted the pictures she took with her single-lens reflex camera, her prized possession, and told us about the history and legends of all the places she had visited.

Every one of Shiyo’s photos—which captured the naïve, lovable faces of

the wild foxes and rabbits, the mountaintops enshrouded in billows of white clouds, the lush green river banks—teemed with life. The pictures filled you with joy just from looking at them. But in the midst of these brilliantly-colored photos was one painted over in black.

I was startled.

Seeing it was as ominous as seeing the words of an obituary.

“Hey, what do we have here?” Sayuri asked innocently, picking up the photo.

“Ohh, that…” Shiyo started to say.

“That was taken at Lamia’s Feast,” Diana broke in.

Upon further examination, I realized that it hadn’t been painted over; the lighting of the photo was just so dark that it just looked that way.

“I wanna see,” Akane said. Sayuri handed her the photo and she looked at it.

“Oh, everyone’s dressed in black,” she remarked.

The photo was passed to me. Itsumi was sandwiched between Diana and a girl who looked like her (I assume her twin). All three of them had their hair down, and wore black feathers and bright red lipstick.

“What’s Lamia?” Sayuri inquired.

“Lamia is a witch. A vampire. Diana says there are a lot of legends about vampires in Bulgaria,” Itsumi answered. “Lamia’s Feast is a festival. It’s kind of like the American ‘Halloween.’ ”

Goosebumps spread over my body the moment I saw the photo. Diana was smiling creepily at the camera. The blazing flames reflected a terrifying spirit within her eyes. Diana *looked* like her twin, but her energy wasn’t kind and warm like her sister’s. What was that feeling? That menacing, unsettling feeling. It was almost as if…she wasn’t human.

I looked up and accidentally met eyes with Diana. Her gaze was abnormally sharp. As if a criminal were threatening a witness. As if she were warning me. As if she were preying upon me.

We stared at each other for a moment, neither of us looking away.

Just so you know, I don't believe in what cannot be explained by science. Which is why I am hesitant to write about what I witnessed. I still can't believe I saw it with my own eyes. Was it real? Was I half-asleep? No…but I know what happened best. It was not a hallucination, but reality.

Therefore, I must write it down. This is my account of that peculiar incident.

Diana always carried something wrapped in a cloth that seemed very important to her. She never revealed what it was or let it go. She held it tight against her chest during class. The girls around her were naturally very curious about it. Many of them asked her what it was, but she only smiled in response. Finally, one girl suggested that it might be a charm from her hometown, and everyone took that for the truth and eventually lost interest in the item in the cloth.

I only found out what it was by chance.

One day, I'd been so focused on studying I hardly realized it was morning. If I fell asleep then, I'd be late for class. I thought I should catch the earliest train to school and then rest in the nurse's office until the morning assembly. A janitor opened the school gates for me when I arrived. When I went inside, I noticed a shadow under a tree in the courtyard.

Who would be here at this hour?

I stealthily edged towards the shadow in the morning fog. A shadow slowly and stiffly—indeed, *dragged* its leg as it moved. *That's right, it would make sense for Diana to be here since she's staying in the convent,* I thought. I was just about to turn back and head towards the nurse's office.

Then, I saw Diana unravel the cloth. It was a doll.

Intrigued by the thought that Diana had been carrying a doll around all this time, I quietly tiptoed to a place where I could get a better view.

Diana held the doll against the trunk of the tree. She then took out a knife and with a powerful thrust, stabbed it into the doll's chest.

Terrified, I stretched my neck out so I could see just a little bit more—and gasped.

The doll looked exactly like Itsumi Shiraishi.

The doll was attached to a cross. Diana had pinned it against the tree. She started to mumble. It sounded like Bulgarian. The dark, melancholy intonation of her voice trembled eerily in the air. She repeated the same words over and over again. Although I didn't know the meaning of that phrase, which ended in a sharp syllable, I felt like it had torn into my heart. I was deeply uncomfortable. I took shallow breaths as I watched Diana continue to recite what sounded like an incantation. I wondered how much time had passed. Finally, Diana smirked with satisfaction and slowly pulled the knife out from the doll's chest. She wrapped the doll in the cloth, held it close to her chest, and slowly made her way back to the convent.

After she left, I couldn't move. I couldn't understand what I'd just seen.

A few hours later, Itsumi Shiraishi came in late for the morning assembly, looking pale.

"You're never late. Is something wrong?" I asked.

"I don't know, I was in a lot of pain," Itsumi answered. "My chest suddenly started hurting this morning."

…*What did she say?* For a moment, I doubted my ears.

"I panicked and rushed over to my father's hospital to have it checked out. But they couldn't find anything," Itsumi explained.

The image of the blade that stabbed the doll's chest floated into my mind. I looked back at Diana's seat. She sat there stroking the doll from over the cloth with a mysterious grin on her face.

She was mumbling something. It was the phrase that finished with the harsh syllable, the one she had just been reciting before.

My eyes met with Diana's. She looked frighteningly beautiful and far more alive than Itsumi.

That was when Itsumi's health started gradually deteriorating.

I had always sneered at the idea of fortune tellers and curses, and yet found myself worrying about Diana and her doll. According to my research, there is something called a "voodoo doll" that is used in black magic. If you cause pain to a doll that looks like your enemy, the actual person will feel the pain you inflict upon the doll. The more they look alike, the more effective it will be.

Why would Diana do this if Itsumi was her friend? After trying to wrap my brain around it, I finally came to a conclusion.

Diana did it because Itsumi had spoken with the principal and her father, the academy chairman, and recommended that this be the last year they invited a student from Levagrad to the academy.

Diana's stay was incredibly beneficial to our school. The other students were able to meet a foreigner and learn about the lifestyle and culture of a country which is hardly ever covered in the media, and this was an immensely valuable experience for the students. So Itsumi suggested that rather than continuing to bring students from Bulgaria, the academy should invite students from a different small country each year instead.

Since Mr. Shiraishi and the principal basically left the matter in Itsumi's hands, she began researching the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, and contacted their respective embassies to figure out how to make her idea a reality. If Itsumi had succeeded, Diana would've been our first and last international student from Bulgaria.

We Japanese are from a country far wealthier than Bulgaria, so it is hard for us to understand Diana's situation.

Levagrad is a tiny, poor village in a small Eastern European country. Left behind even by tourism, it has no large manufacturers and offers a low standard of living. An invitation to Japan means a lot in a village like Levagrad. Diana's sister, who works part-time at a travel agency to save her family from debt, coordinated all the travel arrangements for the

study abroad program. Diana joyfully mentioned that, despite the fact that her sister is currently hospitalized, her sister's company plans to keep her employed long-term and give her a huge bonus because they anticipate invitations to Japan in the future. In other words, without an invitation from our academy, Diana's sister would lose her job and their family wouldn't be able to survive financially.

Diana put in serious efforts to have this program continue, which is why Itsumi's idea must have seemed like an unforgivable betrayal of trust. If Itsumi was weak, she wouldn't have the strength to keep up her negotiations. If there weren't any negotiations, the academy would keep inviting students from Levagrad—this must have been Diana's thought process.

The fresh green spring outside bloomed as Itsumi continued to wilt.

Her once rosy-colored cheeks became gaunt, and it seemed like breathing was painful. I often found her lying on the sofa in the salon. Itsumi's life was being drained away—yes, that's the perfect way to describe it. Concerned about her condition, I started taking her pulse, temperature, and blood pressure every day.

One day, when I picked up her wrist to take her pulse, her nail accidentally caught my arm.

"Ouch!"

I let go of her hand and saw a single line of blood trickling down my arm.

"Goodness, I'm sorry, Sonoko," Itsumi apologized, rubbing my arm. "I didn't notice how long my nails were. It's strange, I cut them just a few days ago."

Her nails were long and sharp, indeed. I knew Itsumi trimmed them regularly, so this was unusual.

"I'll visit the nail salon today. I'm so sorry," she apologized.

But the same thing happened just a few days later.

“Ughh, this is so annoying. I just went to the salon a couple of days ago,” Itsumi sighed, staring perplexedly at her nails. “It’s so weird. Why are they growing so fast? I’m sorry, Sonoko.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I replied.

While I figured that Itsumi had simply forgotten to go to the nail salon, this incident bothered me. Carefully observing her, I realized that her nails really *were* growing unusually fast.

It can’t be. I must be mistaken.

But even though Itsumi had just cut her nails, they had grown enough to break skin in just a few days. Once I started observing her more closely, I also noticed that her hair was growing at a rapid pace. One day her hair was at her shoulders, and just a couple days later it was almost hanging down to her waist.

Something was off. Something strange was happening to Itsumi’s body…

I was going to broach my worries with Itsumi. Then I saw something happen.

It was after school. We had finished our tasks for the Easter festival early and didn’t have a Literature Club meeting that day. After leisurely packing up and exiting the building, I saw Itsumi leave the salon.

“Itsumi, let’s walk home together,” I called to her. But she didn’t respond. I thought the noise from the sports clubs had probably drowned out my voice. Itsumi continued walking and entered Building 2.

“Itsumi?”

Itsumi didn’t turn back. She proceeded forward, and I followed her.

Building 2 has very little access to sunlight and its hallways are always dark in the evening. The dim, green glow of the emergency exit is the only light in the building. Students hardly ever go to Building 2, since the only classrooms there are for science experiments, home economics, and other courses that only meet infrequently. It’s usually quiet. But the *real* reason

students don't go to Building 2 is because of the rumors about the mirror.

The mirror…There is a massive mirror at the end of the hallway. It's not just an ordinary mirror. Our academy received it as a gift from English nuns after the end of the war. It is enormous: 8 feet in height, 5 feet in width, and etched with Corinthians 1, Chapter 13, Verse 12:

> For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror;
>
> Then we shall see face to face.
>
> Now I know in part;
>
> Then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

Every school has their "seven wonders," or seven interesting aspects, but most of the rumors about our academy have something to do with this mirror. The Bible verse etched in the mirror has inspired whispers such as, you can see who you were in your past life in the mirror, or that it will show you your true self, or that it will tell you when you'll die.

Some students fear it, and plenty of others want to stand in front of it as if it were some sort of Ouija board. It's gotten to the point where I've heard someone go around the school bragging that she was "a nun in the Sengoku Period." I figured Itsumi was curious about the mirror and was finally going to see it for herself.

Itsumi turned in the hallway. The sound of her shoes squeaking against the linoleum floor became distant. I turned the hallway and followed after her.

However.

Itsumi had vanished.

I stood there with a dumbfounded expression on my face as I gazed at my reflection in the mirror. A dead-end. I could only leave from where I'd come in. But Itsumi was gone. It was as if the mirror had swallowed her up.

I wasn't just seeing things. It wasn't a dream. I'd seen her with my own two eyes and heard her with my ears, and I had followed her right to the

mirror.

I don't believe in unscientific or supernatural things. However, I *know* Itsumi disappeared. This is an indisputable fact.

I had no choice but to accept it. Something was happening to Itsumi, and Diana and her mystical dark powers had something to do with it.

Shortly after that, Itsumi was checked into a hospital. She had come down with pneumonia…an illness that affects the chest.

Itsumi seemed to have regained her energy after she was released from the hospital. But her face looked gloomy and somewhat bitter.

It wasn't the same Itsumi as before.

When it came time for the Easter festival, I still felt like something was off. I ran around the school that morning, finishing my final preparations. I had to find a way to hide all of the Easter eggs, give the children baskets, and announce the start of the egg hunt. I was only able to take a break when I saw the guests filing in through the gates.

At that point, I was ready to call the bazaar a success. I let out a sigh of relief. Itsumi was supposed to read the Bible aloud in the church after the egg hunt was over, so I started looking for her.

I found Itsumi sitting next to the flower bed, staring out into space. "Itsumi, could you come test the microphones?" I asked. A white lily-of-the-valley gently swung in the breeze with the other flowers.

"What, a mic test? What was that for again?"

"The Bible reading. You do it every year."

"Oh…yes, that's right."

Itsumi unsteadily rose to her feet. Her face stiffened, and her steps grew heavier with every step she took towards the church.

"…I can't do this," Itsumi finally said, her voice shaking.

"What?"

"I won't go to the church. I'm frightened."

“Itsumi, what are you talking about?” I pulled on her hand, thinking that she was joking.

“Stop it!” She twisted her body and forced her hand free. She held her head in her hands and started to shake.

“I…I can’t go. I don’t want to read the Bible!”

“But why? Every year you read the Bible in front of the cross.”

“Oh, the cross!” Itsumi’s cheeks turned white right before my eyes. “I don’t want to look at a cross. I’m sorry, but you’ll just have to find someone else to do it.”

Without giving me a chance to stop her, Itsumi ran off.

Why was she scared of the church, the Bible, the cross?

I entered the church alone, unsure of what had happened.

The painting hung directly in front of me. *God and The Devil who Fears God with His Servant*. The servant…the beautiful woman identical to Diana.

I felt uneasy and ran out of the church. Itsumi wasn’t there. I ran through the school grounds and searched for her. The area was packed; it was almost time to announce the winner of the egg hunt. I pushed my way through the crowds and searched the classrooms, the salon, and the courtyard. She wasn’t anywhere. The only place left was the gymnasium. Just as I headed over, Diana came from behind the gymnasium holding Itsumi in her arms.

“Itsumi!” I screamed in a panic, dashing over to her. Her body was limp.

“Wh-What did you do to Itsumi!”

“Who, me? I didn’t do anything,” Diana answered calmly.

“Well, then why is Itsumi…” Then I noticed a faint red mark on Itsumi’s neck.

Was it blood? Lamia. Witch. Vampire. Servant of the Devil…Those horrifying words swirled around in my head. Diana covered Itsumi’s neck

with her cardigan as if trying to hide it from me.

“She seems sick. I’ll take her to the salon so she can get some rest. Come on, Itsumi, it’s going to be all right,” Diana cooed. She started walking back towards the salon, Itsumi in her arms.

It was as if the servant of the Devil was bringing a corpse down into Hell.

Just a few weeks later, Itsumi was dead.

At the sight of the body, I went into shock. Screams filled the air, but I was fully convinced. It all made sense to me now. Diana controlled Itsumi with her sorcery and used her as she pleased, until she finally drove Itsumi to commit suicide. I gazed at the lily-of-the-valley in Itsumi’s hand, then at the Eastern European beauty who came from where they bloom. Masses of schoolgirls broke down in tears. But only one girl stood with a satisfied grin.

That was the chain of events that I personally witnessed. I am fully aware that my story may seem unrealistic. But I swear that these are the facts.

In summary:

WHEN:	The month of July, after school
WHO:	Diana Decheva, the international student
WHOM:	Itsumi Shiraishi
WHERE:	St. Mary's Academy for Girls, the annex terrace
WHAT:	Induced Itsumi to jump to her death
HOW:	Sorcery
WHY:	To protect her family and hometown

It may be hard to believe. However, this is the undisputable truth behind the Itsumi Shiraishi incident.

(The End)

Sonoko, thank you for reading.

Up until today, you stuck to reading and criticism and never wrote short stories or poems. We must commemorate this as Sonoko Koga's debut work. It was logical and coherent, just like you. Yes, I do mean that in a good way, of course.

But I was shocked.

Did Itsumi's hair and fingernails really grow as quickly as you said? Is it true that she disappeared in the hallway? Are you sure you weren't just seeing things?

I also noticed that Itsumi would often stand in front of that mirror. It's so striking and large and we received it from an English convent over half a century ago, so it only makes sense that people will spread all sorts of rumors about it and say that it is one of the "seven wonders" of our school —but you say Itsumi was *swallowed* by the mirror. Is that even possible?

I was surprised to hear someone as logical as you say such irrational things.

Sonoko. You know I was looking for a short story, not a fairy tale, right? I just wanted to make sure.

All right. So, you're telling me that you actually saw Itsumi's hair and nails grow quickly, that she was scared of the cross and the Bible, and then suddenly disappeared…This is what you are claiming, correct? Even though you used to scoff even at horoscopes.

How very interesting.

No, no, I'm not doubting you. I'm just a bit confused. But you say that you saw it…so it must be the truth.

Oh my, it looks like the thunder is even closer. It's unsettling. I hope the downpour doesn't trap us in here.

Now, this will be the final reading from this group. Shiyo Takaoka. Please make your way to the reading corner.

6

Short Story Reading
“Castration of the Sky Father”

Reader:

Second-year Class C

Shiyo Takaoka

Today, I wanted to write something solemn and reflective, rather than in the lighthearted literary style of my novels. But no matter how many times I try to rewrite this, I just can't seem to get rid of my original style. So I've decided to write tonight's piece just as the light novel author and high school student, Shiyo Takaoka.

It's already been two whole years since my novel debuted, in my third year of junior high. I guess fifteen is a pretty young age to make it big. I just thought up a story that I'd like to see published, scribbled it down, and submitted it for fun. Then, I unexpectedly won an award for it, and my life changed big time.

I don't mean to brag, but I've received loads of offers to have my book made into a movie, and to have it translated and sold abroad. But I've rejected them all. Look, I believe that Japanese people especially would enjoy reading my book. My writing style wasn't meant to be superficial; I was just trying to mirror the fads, trends, and colloquial expressions of junior-high and high-school girls these days. As a current high-school student, I wanted other girls my age, who *only* live in Japan, to read and understand my story *only* in Japanese. It would be such a nuisance to have it translated! I refuse to consent to that. This is my personal decision as a professional author and I plan to stick to it.

Until I won that award, I didn't stand out much at school. I wasn't an excellent student and didn't study very much. But the moment that *Kimikageso* debuted, everyone went *nuts* over it, and I really got to bathe in the spotlight.

People often tell me that the title of my novel, *Kimikageso,* sounds pretty somber and austere. But my novel isn't stiff at all; it's actually super easy to get through. I wrote it in a simpler style so that teens like me could breeze through it.

Kimikageso is about a fifteen-year-old girl who, accidentally finding out that she is adopted, goes searching for her real father and secretly writes him letters. It's an epistolary novel, told from the perspective of their letters to one another, but her father's very last letter is blank, with only a

pressed flower inside of it. In truth, her father collapsed from an illness that rendered him unable to speak or write, and he had dedicated his last bit of strength to putting all his love into the last letter…and then the story ends.

My story was born from one of my daydreams. It was something I came up with trying to imagine what it would be like if I had been adopted. Everyone has thought about this at least once, right? I decided to make the main character a very contemporary girl. The story grew from there, and I ended up writing it all in one sitting.

I wanted my novel to convey the importance of family ties. We live in a world where relationships tend to wear thin, and I wanted people to realize how precious these connections really are…Well, okay, maybe I'm exaggerating a little bit.

I was *so* surprised when I was nominated for the literary prize in the young adult novel category, and it felt even more unreal when I actually won it. I was just so grateful and embarrassed. But I was proud to know that my message had really gotten out there. I always liked to write, but I never imagined that I would actually debut as an author!

Everyone at school freaked out after I won the award. The principal publicly commended me at school and all these TV shows and magazines were doing stories on me. I became, like, famous overnight. Since my novel had become so popular, Itsumi Shiraishi invited me into the Literature Club when I got into high school.

The high school Literature Club she'd revived. No one could join this exclusive club without Itsumi's invitation. At the time, Itsumi and Sayuri were the only two members because no one was cool enough to live up to their standards.

The special salon, tucked away in the corner of the annex, sounded *so* gorgeous from the rumors I had heard! All the girls in junior high knew about the salon and *everyone* wanted in. I used to look out the window and secretly wish, not even to be a member, but just to be invited to drink tea with them someday. After all, I knew an average student like me

would never be good enough for a world of such grace.

After I won the literary prize, I half-expected Itsumi to let me join the club. And then, a few weeks into high school, Itsumi and Sayuri showed up at my classroom. It was like a dream come true.

"We read your novel. It was fantastic! Would you please join our club?" Itsumi asked.

The classroom buzzed with excitement. First of all, they were a remarkable pair. They had this aura that the underclassmen found hard to approach. They shone so brightly that they'd burn your eyes if you got too close. It was crazy to think they had come to me, stood *right* in front of me, to invite me to their club! "With pleasure," I replied, shaking Itsumi's hand. My classmates squealed with excitement. I was trying to play it cool, but secretly my legs were shaking. Also, I was so honored to be the first member of the club. *They* had chosen *me*!

Itsumi's hand was warm. My heart raced late into the night.

Itsumi loved *Kimikageso*. Well, it's kind of embarrassing to say this, but she pretty much *raved* about it. She talked about it at our book discussions and even put a copy of it in the library. "Can I have your autograph?" she asked. I played along, turned to a random page in the middle of the book, wrote my name, and:

"To Itsumi Shiraishi, the beautiful president of our beloved Literature Club."

I can't believe I had the guts to write that.

Itsumi let me write in the salon whenever I wanted to, and I was really grateful for that. The Literature Club provided me with the funds to order the books I needed from Japan and abroad, kind of like how the medieval European patrons used to be. You may be thinking, like, "Okay, stop exaggerating!" but I'd be typing in the Gothic-style literary salon and look up to suddenly find black tea and freshly baked cookies on my right, and the files I had asked for on my left. Just try and picture that. I'm sure you'd say the word "patron" without even thinking.

I made friends with the members of the club and grew closer to Itsumi, the girl I had always worshipped.

Itsumi and I became even better friends during our homestay in Bulgaria. We were only there for two short weeks, but it was really fun. Even Mr. Hojo was startled at how happy we were.

No one at school had ever asked to study abroad in Bulgaria, a completely unfamiliar country to us, but Itsumi had apparently already gone the year before, the first student from the academy to go. Most students choose to study abroad in America or England, and yet there Itsumi was, going to Bulgaria. I was dumbfounded as to why she would choose such a (I shouldn't say it, but) backwater country in the first place. She even had the guts to go alone. So, I also settled on Bulgaria. *If I'm lucky enough, I'll be able to spend one-on-one time with Itsumi!* I thought to myself. And then, my wish actually came true! "I'm so glad you're coming! I was so bored when I went alone last year," Itsumi told me. I really enjoyed going to all the different places with her.

On that trip, I discovered a lot of things about Itsumi.

It was really nice staying in a small village instead of a city. I also became besties with Diana and Ema. It was a really precious experience for me.

I was supposed to stay at this woman Bessie's house, but she told me I had to sleep in the living room. Frankly, Ema kinda messed up. She got all flustered when I asked to be moved to another homestay, and then said that she wouldn't be able to find a ready place for me to stay. At that point, I told her that I didn't mind staying in a hotel. So even though the homestay program was supposed to be the highlight of the study abroad program, which required me to stay at a local home, I ended up lodging in a hotel. I'm sure Ema would have gotten in trouble if I had reported her to the school, but I could tell that she was doing her best and told her I'd keep it a secret. "Thank you for not saying anything, Shiyo. We couldn't live without Ema's job," Diana told me. But hey, that's what friends do, right?

Speaking of friends, Itsumi once bought us all good-luck bracelets from the Rila Church. When you put on a good-luck bracelet, you're supposed to make a wish. Right arm for love, left arm for studies, right leg for friendship, and left leg for fortune, I think? I put mine on my right leg because I wanted to be closer friends with Itsumi. It was embarrassing to put it on in front of her, so I just did it, like, really fast. I watched Diana and Ema put theirs on their right arm. Ema chose her right arm because she hoped to marry her boyfriend someday. Diana didn't say anything, but I think she might have liked someone at the time.

I wished as hard as I could, hoping that my wish to be great friends with Itsumi would come true really soon, but the next day I heard a *snap,* and the bracelet was broken. These things aren't supposed to break, so I was shocked. But maybe it was the bracelet working in my favor; Itsumi and I got so close during study abroad it was almost like we were actual sisters.

When Japanese people think of "Bulgaria," they also think of "yogurt." And it turned out Bulgarians really do have yogurt with everything. In Japan yogurt usually goes with dessert, but in Bulgaria, it goes on fish, meat, and even vegetables. And, Bulgaria is famous for flowers! I bought tons of floral souvenirs: rose oil, rose water, rose jam…what girl doesn't love roses?

We had a great time everywhere we went, but the most unforgettable experience was our shoreside picnic.

Just imagine: a forest blooming with mimosas and magnolias. The calm, rolling tide. Birds cheeping sweetly. It was like we were lost in a fairytale. We sat on the grass, drinking sweet plum juice with our sandwiches. Though Ema had taken us to so many historical sights and ruins, for me, that simple picnic was the most fun of all.

I got to be alone with Itsumi on the picnic. Ema and Diana were busy with something else, so Itsumi and I decided to set off on our own adventure.

The lake was too pretty not to go in. We hadn't brought our swimsuits, so we decided to skinny-dip. The water was a little chilly, but in the

warmth of the May sun, the cold felt refreshing. And Itsumi's body was so gorgeous. Her long, glamorous hair clung to her figure when she rose from the lake, and the sunlight coming through the tree leaves glinted through the drops of water falling from her body. It was like she was Venus in William-Adolphe Bouguereau's *The Birth of Venus*. And I say that as someone who has seen that painting in person. When I lived in France, I saw it in the Musée d'Orsay. But I have to say that Itsumi's body was far more sensual even than Bouguereau's painting.

By the way, did you know that Venus was born from a severed penis? The Sky Father, Uranus, hated his son so much that he put him back into his mother, Gaia's, womb. Gaia punished Uranus by ordering her son to cut off his father's penis with a sickle. Uranus' genitalia splashed into the ocean, with liquids seeping out of it that turned into bubbles, and thus Venus was born.

Here is a poem that Angelo Poliziano wrote about this myth:

> In the stormy Aegean, the genital member is seen to be received in the lap of Tethys, to drift across the waves, wrapped in white foam, beneath the various turnings of the planets; and within, born with lovely and happy gestures, a young woman with nonhuman countenance, is carried on a conch shell, wafted to shore by playful zephyrs; and it seems that heaven rejoices in her birth.*

Most people agree it was Poliziano's poem, which I just read to you, that inspired Sandro Botticelli for *The Birth of Venus*.

Still, imagine having your genitals cut off and thrown into the ocean. Awful, isn't it. But I totally get how Venus' beauty could be born from the Sky Father's castration. And I feel like this "beauty born from male castration" somehow fits Itsumi to a tee. A world devoid of men—a divine beauty that only existed in an all-girls school. I guess unique environments breed exceptional beauty.

Emerging from the lake, Itsumi's naked body wasn't lascivious, but was pure, mystical, and bursting with light. The wind fluttered behind her, green grass sprouted from the earth, and ripples formed on the water as if

nature was worshipping her as a goddess. That naked body and gaze, as soft as the Virgin Mary's, broke all the rules! If I were a boy, I would've been so twisted by her beauty that I would've thrown myself into the lake…Ah, yes, I can probably use that idea in my next novel.

After the picnic, we were supposed to visit a museum with Mr. Hojo. But it was too much of a hassle to go after swimming. I lied and said I was sick. Then I wandered off on my own, taking pictures. And, man, I *really* took a lot.

I think the reason I feel comfortable walking alone in a foreign country is because I used to live in one for so long. Due to my father's work, I lived in France from grades one through six. I travelled to various European countries with my family: Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Belgium, England…At the time, I had taken my travels for granted, but now I realize that I had truly been blessed.

France is my second home. I want to live there again someday. I feel like it somehow suits me better than the rigid confines of Japan. I feel calm when I'm in France. I guess this is the kind of thing that happens when you grow up overseas.

Perhaps my time abroad as a child is what made me so extraordinarily picky about the Japanese words I use in my novels. Yes, I'm sure of it. Without a doubt, the six years I spent in France are as much a part of me as my flesh and blood, and they have most certainly improved my writing skills.

Even after we returned to Japan, Itsumi and I were still like sisters. We joked around in the salon and I did silly things to get her attention. But Itsumi had fun with our little games and let me depend on her as I would on a sister.

After Diana came to Japan, the three of us often reminisced about Bulgaria together. I felt bad that this left the other members out, but it wasn't intentional. Sonoko seemed especially pissed about it. But for the three of us, this was such a special memory that we just couldn't help it.

Now, we *really* acted like sisters at the Easter festival.

I had been chosen to be an Easter Bunny. (Supposedly this was Itsumi's dad, the chairman's, idea). When I went to the executive committee's office to pick up the suit, I saw the head and the torso separated, lined up on the floor. With is severed head and its creepy, plastic blue eyes, the Easter Bunny—a symbol of life and glory—looked like it had been brutally murdered. It was terrifying.

And I didn't expect the inside of the suit to be so hot and stuffy. I was super depressed and dreaded wearing it for the next few hours. I thought I had such bad luck. I put on the torso, another volunteer zipped me up in the back, and then I slipped on the head and gloves. I thought, *Ughh, and I just painted my nails, too!* Our school usually forbids manicures, but I'd painted mine with the Easter egg paint. We wouldn't get scolded for using the leftover Easter egg paint, so everyone was doing it. But the stupid costume hid my pretty green nails. And my fake eyelashes were perfect, too, but of course the costume also covered that.

As I walked around in my Easter Bunny costume, I had to do this happy-looking dance. Children sometimes called me over, and I helped them look for eggs. The costume was terribly heavy. Even though my shoulders were stiff, I still waved my arms as much as I could, and lifted my legs and shook my waist.

"Oh my, is that Shiyo in there?" I heard a voice call. I couldn't hear very clearly with all the mesh around my ears and didn't know where the sound was coming from. I spun around and searched for the source.

"Right here." Someone's hands touched my fuzzy arm. Through the hole in the head piece, I could only see her school uniform.

"Who is it?"

"It's Itsumi."

"Aah, Itsumi. You knew it was me, even though we're all wearing the same costume?"

"I knew right away!"

"How?"

“I mean, your dance is the worst,” she snickered loudly.

“Itsumi, that’s not nice. I’m sweating in here trying my best.”

“Are you hot?”

“Oh, extremely.”

“You poor thing. Here, come with me.” Itsumi hooked arms with me. She pretended to dance with me, her Easter Bunny friend, while leading me to the back of the gym.

“Nobody’s ever here,” she said. “So you can take off the costume and take a break.”

She really saved me back there. I took off my sweat-soaked gloves and tugged at the head piece. But it was stuck.

“Itsumi, it won’t come off!”

“Hnnh!” Itsumi tried pulling at the headpiece, but it caught on my jaw and wouldn’t budge.

“Owwww! That *hurts!*”

“Just bear with me. Okay, one more time.” She tugged so hard I thought my neck was going to come off.

“Oww, oww, that *hurts*. Itsumi, seriously, stop! If you don’t stop, I’ll never forgive you!” I shrieked in pain, and then I heard footsteps. *Oh, no!* If anyone found out I was shirking my Easter Bunny duties, Itsumi’s dad would definitely get mad at me.

“Itsumi,” I hissed, “what do we do?”

“You go escape from the other side. Don’t worry, I’ll distract them.”

“But—”

“Just go!” Itsumi pushed me from behind, and I scurried away. *Guuhh, why did Itsumi’s stupid dad have this weird idea to get us in Easter Bunny costumes?* I cursed at him under my breath. Back in the main festival grounds, I started to dance around a circle of kids with the other Easter Bunnies.

Whose footsteps had we heard anyway?

Behind the gym, I had totally panicked. But now that Itsumi's gone, I look back on that incident fondly. I never thought that she would die just a few weeks later.

The Easter festival closed with the Eucharist.

We bid farewell to the parents and caretakers, tidied up, and held the Eucharist in the new church. Although the entire student body was present, only the students who'd been baptized could participate. They joined the priest under the cross and were handed bread and wine.

"You have been given the body of Christ."

"Amen."

"This is the blood that Christ shed for you."

"Amen."

I was one of the baptized students. I always feel solemn when I put the bread on my tongue and sip wine from the small chalice. This ritual depicts the Last Supper and has been practiced for over two thousand years, and I always take it very seriously. Even a high-schooler like me knows how important it is. Two thousand years seems like an eternity.

Every year, Itsumi read from the Bible for the Eucharist. But this year, Sayuri stood at the altar instead. I scanned the church, but Itsumi was nowhere to be found. I thought she might have gotten into trouble for letting me take a rest in the gym.

I started to worry and, right after the Eucharist ended, went looking for her. Finally, I found Itsumi in the salon, blankly staring out a window, standing there as if nothing had happened.

"Oh, Itsumi. I'm so glad you're here," I said.

"Oh no, did mass end already?" Itsumi turned and asked.

"Yeah. I didn't see you there, so I got worried."

"I'm just a little tired. I'm sorry I worried you."

“Uhmm…was everything okay at the gym?”

“No problem at all. No one saw you.” Itsumi smiled. Her collar gaped slightly. She wore a red scarf over her neck.

“What’s with the scarf?” I asked.

“Oh, this? This goes to the top five winners of the egg hunt. They already announced the winners, so I grabbed one of these and took a little cat nap in the back of the gym.

“But actually, I’m wearing last year’s scarf. I put it on so I could give it to one of the kids that cry when they lose,” Itsumi said, sticking out her tongue mischievously, like a child.

“I’m glad that’s all it is.” The tension had left my shoulders. Just then, the door swung open and the members entered the room.

“Let’s keep this between you and me, okay?” whispered Itsumi, winking at me as she put her finger to her lips.

“Okay! I’ll keep it a secret!” I said gleefully. My voice was too loud, and she glared at me.

Our club’s Easter festival sales totaled 420,000 yen (as expected, we were sold out!). Even when we took out the 180,000 yen that went to ingredients and the 100,000 yen that the Literature Club retained for its exertions (though she had lived an easy life, Itsumi knew to claim what she deserved), we were still able to donate 140,000 yen to charity.

We all gave opinions on who we wanted to donate the profits to. The upperclassmen said it would be a good lesson for us to decide based off our own beliefs rather than on what the school tells us to do. So every year, we discuss our options, take a poll, and then donate the funds to the charity that wins the majority of votes. But this time, everyone wanted something different. Sonoko wanted to donate to underfunded hospitals, Mirei chose retirement homes, Itsumi suggested orphanages…

“I want to do something for children in need,” Itsumi said definitively. “There are many reasons why children don’t have parents. I want to make their lives easier. Just look at this picture.” Itsumi showed us a photo of

an adorable baby. “Some babies are so unfortunate they can’t even meet their parents after they’re born.” Great, fat teardrops fell from her eyes.

Everyone was moved at Itsumi’s words and agreed with her: “Yes, yes, let’s donate to the orphanage.” My opinion of Itsumi improved even more. She was someone truly filled with love.

But I gotta say, we couldn’t have sold all the cakes and cookies if it hadn’t been for Akane Kominami.

Even if someone used the exact same utensils, ingredients, and baking techniques as Akane, her desserts would still come out on top. Her timing and intuition for baking was just uncanny.

I secretly called Akane “Alice.” She wore a frilly apron and would fit perfectly in a fairy tale—just like Alice in Wonderland.

And that’s right—once, she staged a totally stylish tea party when we discussed *Alice in Wonderland*. She recreated the baked butter, molasses tarts, and the Mad Hatter’s tea. She’d given us all hats, too, saying, “You all have to put these on, please!” I don’t know where she found those pieces of headgear, but she gave Mirei a playing card’s military helmet, Sayuri rabbit’s ears, Diana cat ears, Sonoko a funky hat, and Itsumi a crown with hearts on it. Yes, we were, respectively, the Playing Card Guard, the White Rabbit, the Cheshire Cat, the Mad Hatter, and the Queen of Hearts. And it goes without saying that Akane was Alice.

It was a really fun tea party. Whenever something small happened, Itsumi would melodramatically shout, “Off with her head!” Everyone would laugh.

Come to think of it, that tea party was the first time I noticed the big red scar on Akane’s left arm. I hadn’t seen it before because her clothes cover her arms in the winter, and she wore a cardigan in the summer because she was always cold. But her Alice cosplay was half-sleeved. I didn’t realize that I’d been staring at it, but she apparently noticed my gaze and quickly hid her scar. *Oh no, I didn’t mean to be rude,* I thought, worried that I had offended her. But Itsumi took Akane’s arm and gently caressed it.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of, you know,” she said comfortingly. “It’s really very cute. It’s kind of shaped like a lily.”

Itsumi’s words lifted Akane’s spirits. They helped me out, too—I mean, she saved me from looking rude. Itsumi understood how Akane felt and instantly cleared the air. She’s super sensitive to how people felt. Again, I was touched. Itsumi was a genuinely wonderful girl.

I really like Akane, but I have to say, something has been bothering me.

When was it that Itsumi told us that she was going to close down the Literature Club when she graduated? I feel like that was what started it. This meant that the salon and Literature Club would be permanently shut down after just two more semesters.

I mean, the salon was originally *made* for Itsumi. It was sad to think about it closing and stuff, but I had always figured that everyone knew it would close when Itsumi graduated. So one day, she told us that the salon was going to be donated to an orphanage.

Then Akane, who was normally very adult-like and composed, suddenly stood up and argued with her. We were all surprised at how vehement she was. She said things like:

“Are you trying to take the salon away from us?!”

“Can’t you donate anything else to the orphanage?!”

“This is tyranny!”

The kitchen was Akane’s rock, her support system. Her house and restaurant had burned down, along with all of her plans to own her own restaurant. So this meant the salon’s kitchen, and I’m not exaggerating this time, was her only reason for living.

But Itsumi didn’t back down.

“Didn’t Jesus say to ‘love thy neighbor’?” she scolded Akane. She didn’t listen to Akane’s arguments, and the salon was still set to relocate at the end of the term.

It was around then that Itsumi started saying she “didn’t feel well” after

tea time.

Before, Itsumi used to sing lightheartedly along to the music she'd play in the salon while stepping in time with the beat, but after her argument with Akane, she just lay lethargically on the couch. She claimed reading made her head hurt and stopped contributing to our discussions. Akane fed us mouth-watering risotto and sandwiches—but Itsumi continued to wither away.

I just couldn't take it anymore. I would have done anything to revive my lovely Itsumi. The campus had become so gloomy and boring without her vivacity. Writing is the only thing I can do well, so I wrote her poems of encouragement and read them aloud to her to cheer her up. But that sort of thing didn't help her. The only thing I could do was stand there feeling frustrated as I watched Itsumi grow weaker by the day.

While thinking of ways I could cheer her up, I suddenly remembered her fondness for Mozart. I chose Peter Shaffer's play, *Amadeus,* to be the theme of our next discussion, and held a special viewing of the movie version in the salon. I brought in a Karajan CD from home, figuring that anything to do with Mozart would make Itsumi happy, but she rejected my offer, saying that she was "too tired to listen."

Then, I thought as hard as I could and it was like a light bulb went off in my head: *What if we tried making the desserts from* Amadeus? There's a scene in the movie where Mozart's wife, Constantine, eats a dessert called the "Nipples of Venus." You make the breast by soaking a chestnut in brandy, coating it in white chocolate, and then topping it off with a chocolate chip. It's a cute little dessert that was once very popular in France.

Even though Itsumi was exhausted, I knew she still had an appetite, and I was positive that she would eat our sweets if we made her some. I may be tooting my own horn here, but I thought it was a great idea. But I can't bake very well, so naturally, I asked Akane for help.

There weren't any chestnuts in the kitchen. Akane declared, "There must be a way to make it with chocolate truffles. I'll give it a try. Leave it

to me!" She skillfully began baking without even looking at the recipe. I watched her with admiration, but, knowing that I would be too clumsy to help out, decided to wait in the living room and leave it up to the pastry chef.

When I entered the living room, I saw Sonoko taking Itsumi's blood pressure. I was looking at Itsumi's pale arm when I had another brilliant idea. There's a classic French dessert called the "Arms of Venus," a roll cake that contains dried fruit. I thought it would be very fashionable to bring out both Venus' arms and nipples at the same time. Only the sweets of a goddess were fit for Itsumi.

I'm a genius, I thought, feeling all proud of myself. I rushed online, printed out the recipe for the Arms of Venus, and then flew into the kitchen.

"Akane, do we have any dried fruits?"

Perhaps it was because I'd entered so suddenly, but Akane seemed to shudder all over in surprise. And then…I saw her hiding something behind her back.

"Shiyo, don't scare me like that." Akane turned to me and grinned, her cheeks twitching.

"What were you just doing?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Are you hiding something?"

"Um, no. What are you talking about?"

"Nothing…It's fine, I must have been seeing things."

"You must have been. I'm almost done with Itsumi's desserts, so can I please finish in peace?" As she said, round balls of ganache were already sitting on the counter.

"Okay. I'll go wait outside then."

Akane didn't take her hands out from behind her back until I'd left the room. It was kind of weird. She wasn't acting like herself. In the end, I

wasn't able to give Akane the recipe for the arms, and she had only made the nipples. The little pinches of pink chocolate on top of the balls of white chocolate were really cute, and everyone loved them. Of course, Itsumi also enjoyed them as much as I'd hoped she would.

"Hey, it looks like Itsumi's the only one with big nipples," Sonoko snickered while we were eating.

Itsumi hadn't noticed it until it was pointed out to her, but it was true: the pink parts of her dessert were slightly bigger than everyone else's. For some reason, it felt like some sort of sign…

That's when I first noticed. We'd tended to eat cakes, tarts, and other desserts you would cut up and share. But now, we were only served macarons, pudding, individual treats. Meaning that it wouldn't have been hard for Akane to slip something into Itsumi's dessert if she'd wanted, right?

And, I remembered, Itsumi always said she felt ill after eating one of Akane's light meals. Then, there was also the time that Akane baked madeleines when Mirei first joined the club. Mirei showed up the next day all embarrassed, telling us that she had thrown up after eating something her body couldn't handle.

If I'm not mistaken, on Mirei's first day, Itsumi told Mirei she was full and had given her *her* madeleines. I remember that well because I'd been jealous of Mirei.

So what did this all mean? Was my dear Akane putting something in Itsumi's desserts?

I decided to observe the situation. I discovered that Itsumi's desserts were all marked in some way, and that Akane personally brought them to her. Then, Itsumi would take a few bites and say that she "didn't feel well."

One moment Itsumi would be sweating and claiming that she was hot, and the next she would be shivering and cold and lying on the sofa. After Itsumi would gulp down the black tea I brought her, she would stagger into the kitchen and munch on cakes that hadn't even been decorated yet.

I've seen people act like this before. Yes: These were the actions of someone who'd been poisoned. I know because I had interviewed people at a rehabilitation center when I was asked to write an essay for the "No more! Say no! Stop! The! Drugs!" campaign. The people at the center had staring eyes, couldn't regulate their body temperature, and were always thirsty and gorging themselves…just like Itsumi!

When I realized how serious things were, I panicked. Itsumi wouldn't just get sick if this continued, she would *die*. I knew Akane wouldn't be able to stop me if I tackled the problem head-on. I had to do something. So when *The Tragedy of Y* was mentioned at one of our book discussions, I took the chance to slip in a hint.

"Slipping people drugs and poison is *so* passé. It may have worked in the past, but now we can figure out everything with autopsies," I said.

I still remember the look on Akane's face. Her soft eyes instantly lost color, as if they'd turned to stone. I pretended not to see her reaction. She was my friend. I felt pity for her.

By then, I was convinced that she would stop poisoning Itsumi. My words were meant to help Akane and bring her to her senses.

But now I think they probably had the converse effect and made her feel trapped. Hence why I think Akane stopped drugging Itsumi and felt like she had no other choice but to push Itsumi off the terrace. If my theory is true, then my heart truly aches for Akane. I really do feel bad, you know. I kind of feel like I'm the one who pushed Akane over the edge.

If Itsumi died, all plans to donate and move the salon would naturally dissipate. And Akane has been in the kitchen every day since Itsumi's death. She's been baking caramel chiffon cakes and grape mousse because, she says, "They were Itsumi's favorites." But to me, it almost seems like a weight has been lifted from her shoulders.

And then, Akane even said that Kominami wants to purchase the salon and kitchen. If she could make this happen, the salon and kitchen would be relocated and made into a Western-style restaurant. Of course, she also said she would be one of the owners and make all kinds of foods and

desserts.

Even the finest restaurant would be no match for this kitchen. Itsumi bought all of the equipment and tools that Akane had asked for since joining the club, creating the ideal kitchen for her. A kitchen that exists only for Akane…Akane's Wonderland.

I don't know. I feel conflicted. Of course, I still love Itsumi. She was like my older sister and then died—and so young. This has left me with a tremendous sense of loss. If Akane hadn't been the culprit, I'd hate and resent and curse whoever did this…but I like Akane too. She's nice and hard-working. I want her to get her dream restaurant, I really do.

So, here I wallow in my regret, stuck wondering if I could've done something to stop this from happening. But what's done is done. My regrets mean nothing now.

It was incredibly unlucky that Akane's family restaurant burned down. That must have completely changed her life. She probably developed a deeper love for, and assigned more meaning to, the salon's kitchen than we had ever imagined she would. And once she found out she was going to lose her kitchen…Yes, I can understand her rage. Akane, too, is a poor victim here.

She may have done something terrible, but I still love her. She may have taken my older sister Itsumi away, but I cannot bring myself to hate the murderer.

But I can't deny what I happened to see the day Itsumi died. I was walking down the passageway and…

I can't forget the exultant look on Akane's face as she shoved Itsumi from behind. She squinted her eyes, as if looking at something bright, as she watched Itsumi fall from the terrace. Isn't that when Akane got one step closer to her dream? Didn't Alice have to kill the Queen of Hearts to get her hands on Wonderland?

I will not judge her. If this is what Akane felt she had to do to solve her problems, no one has the right to criticize her.

When I saw the lilies in Itsumi's hand, I prayed that no one would remember Akane's scar.

There may come a day when Akane will have to repent. But, until that day comes, I hope she can at least recover a little from the stains of her misfortune. I hope she got what she wanted by killing Itsumi.

I sincerely pray for that from the bottom of my heart.

(Fin.)

Thank you very much for reading, Shiyo.

It seems that everyone was most excited for the novelist's story after all. That includes myself, of course. That is why I had you read last.

I love your literary style, Shiyo. The rhythm and expressions you use in your piece just screams "high school girl." I read all of the middle school, high school, and college versions of the *Kimikageso* series, and I can't wait for your next story.

I didn't know the myth about the birth of Venus. Beauty born from the Sky Father's castration. That really does fit Itsumi to a tee. You could even say Itsumi was "mystical."

Your take on the events was intriguing. You put all that was in your head eloquently on paper. Shiyo, you are truly quite the talent.

Yes, I remember you looking up the recipe for the "Arms of Venus" in the salon. And also when you ran into the kitchen with the recipe in your hand. I was very curious and excited to see how it would taste. What a shame it was that we never got to eat it. If your story is true, then that must mean…

Yet another theory has emerged. But all of your stories sound true. How very strange. How are we supposed to reach a conclusion? Anyway, thank you, Shiyo. You may return to your seat. Everyone, a round of applause for the professional author.

Well, that was the last of your readings. Thank you, everyone, for your participation.

This past week, it's clear all of you have given Itsumi's death a lot of thought before bringing your stories in. This must have been very hard for you, what with final exams too. I am sure that Itsumi is pleased with all of you.

At last, it's time for the final reading. It's my turn.

But I must apologize in advance; I didn't write this next story.

It was written by Itsumi Shiraishi herself.

Everyone, please settle down. I just received it this morning. There is no question about it—this is certainly her handwriting. When did she write this? I understand why you're all confused. Anyway, I will now read it to you…

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[*] From Angelo Poliziano's "Stanze per la giostra," translated by David Quint in *The Stanze of Angelo Poliziano,* The Pennsylvania State University Press.

7

Short Story Reading "Murmurs of the Dead"

by:

Former President

Itsumi Shiraishi

Substitute Reader

Sayuri Sumikawa

Would life have any meaning if you weren't the lead?

No matter how good the story is, or how rich the ending might be, none of it would be any good if it wasn't made for you.

And if you're going to be the star, it should be when you're shining your brightest—such as, for example, in your third year of high school. When you're young and spry and bursting with life.

If you want to be the lead, you're going to need a supporting cast. But they better not be too clever. The most famous sidekicks bring out the appeal of the star. They stay by her side and don't outshine her.

Sidekicks are who determine the quality of the story. Sidekicks are only as good as their lead: the better the sidekick, the more glorious the star.

But the nasty part of having a sidekick is that they're always trying to steal the throne. One wrong move and they've taken your place.

So you need to plan ahead to retain your throne. You must always be superior to your supporting cast. So what do you do?

You seize their secrets.

If it's true that "others' misfortunes are as sweet as honey," then I'd say their secrets are the ultimate spice—spices that fill the secret bearer's life with the richest of aromas and the most unexpected of tastes.

The lovelier the person on the outside, the more grotesque the secrets they hide. What a joy it is to sniff them out!

Seize their secrets, steal their place, hunt them down. To hold someone's secrets is to take hold of their soul. There is nothing in this world more enjoyable.

When you seize someone else's secrets, your story is born.

Yes. For example.

The stage is St. Mary's Academy for Girls. The setting is the Literature Club.

And the star is me.

1

The morning sunlight from the valley illuminates the world outside the window as the lavender sky fades into a transparent orange. I lie in bed as I watch the colors change and start to drift back to sleep.

“Itsumi. You awake?” he whispers in my ear. His arms wrap around me from behind, as they did the night before.

“Yeah. But I don’t want to move just yet,” I reply.

He kisses my shoulder and buries his face in my hair. This gentle moment. This breathtaking morning in Eastern Europe. We relish in the warmth of each other’s skin, cherishing every moment we have together. We are held in a cocoon. We know that this tender moment will end.

We will be torn apart once we return to Japan.

A forbidden relationship between a student and a missionary school professor. I know everything about him, yet I have to call him “teacher” and keep my distance from him. It’s incredibly frustrating. It’s agonizing to have the one I love stand before me, but be unable to feel his touch or hear him say he loves me. Now that I know this pain, all of my classmates seem so childish in comparison.

“Shinji,” I say. His name is so precious.

“Yes? Would you like some coffee?”

“Sure.”

He gently releases me from his arms and crawls out of bed. He grinds the coffee beans and prepares the hot water as I doze, gazing at the glorious scenery out the window.

I wish we could be like this forever, I think.

After spring vacation ended and we returned to Japan, a new school year began.

We returned to our monotonous lives as professor and student.

I was in my third year. This was, finally, the last year of my high school career.

I idly stared out the classroom window. The academy campus has nothing on the gorgeous view in Eastern Europe. This was one of the days I didn’t have his class. Unless we are lucky enough to pass each other in the hallway by chance, we wouldn’t be able to meet. Though I used to make excuses to visit him in the faculty room, we paid too much attention to each other and it felt like everyone could sense our body temperatures rising. Now I only go there when it is absolutely necessary.

However, I would see him after school. My heart leapt at that thought: in the salon, after hours. The real reason I reopened the Literature Club was to spend more time with him.

“Itsumi, how was Bulgaria?” someone asked, interrupting my sweet memories. It was Sayuri, my childhood best friend and vice president of the club.

Even though the Literature Club has been around almost since the founding of our sixty-year old academy, it had been closed for a few years before I entered high school. In this small academy with only 120 students per grade, the most popular clubs are the modern and theatrical ones like English conversation, drama, and music. Reading, writing, and

other simple activities that you can perform on your own no longer appeal to the female students of today. The former club adviser, Mr. Hojo, couldn't hide a bitter smile when he told me that all the members had quit, one by one, until no one was left.

When he was younger, Mr. Hojo was a bookworm who aspired to be an author. He taught my first high school literature course at the academy. The moment I met this professor, still in his mid-twenties, I fell instantly in love. His soft hair. His languorous eyes. He was a cynic who seemed to read novels only to cement the ugliness of reality. But his smile was friendly and inviting, and could win anyone over. I steadily became more and more smitten with him.

I researched everything about him. How his hometown is in a cold area of Japan. That he has an older sister and a younger brother. That he loves Kafka. That he listens to Schubert in his spare time. And that he used to be adviser of the Literature Club.

I restarted the club so I could get closer to him. Since a club needs at least two members for the school to approve, I asked Sayuri to join as well.

Although our numbers have grown, at first it was just me and Sayuri. Right after I reopened the club, Mr. Hojo created assignments just for the two of us, making us write essays, poems, and short stories, and gave fervent discourses on literature.

I wrote poems about passionate love and read them to him, and chose sensual novels like Marguerite Duras' *The Lover* for our discussions. He gradually noticed my affection for him. And finally, I was tied to Mr. Hojo not as a student, but as a woman.

"It was wonderful. The absolute best," I answered Sayuri.

"Did you have a good time with the professor?" she asked. Of course, Sayuri knew all about me and Mr. Hojo.

"Yes. I sometimes snuck out of my homestay and got to stay with him at his hotel."

“That’s great.”

At this school, you can basically choose to study abroad anywhere. The academy will arrange your homestay in whichever country you want to go. Popular picks include America, England, Australia, France, Germany, Korea, and China, but I chose Bulgaria, which no one had ever chosen before. I knew that if Mr. Hojo came with me as an escort, we could spend some alone time together. To apply, I had to submit a short essay on why I chose Bulgaria, but I knew nothing about the country. This was when Sayuri came up with an idea.

“Ivan Vazov is one of the greatest writers in Bulgarian history,” she suggested. “Why don’t you say that you’re interested in him and want to see where his works were born?”

It was Sayuri who helped me with the entire process, from researching Vazov’s famous works to editing my application essay. Thanks to her help, I was accepted into the program and could travel with Mr. Hojo. I could enjoy my spring vacation with him without having to check if anyone was watching. However, the next year Shiyo unexpectedly joined us, and we didn’t get nearly as much alone time.

Whenever I stood at a crossroads, Sayuri always gave me the right advice. Even though we’re the same age, she is discreet and thinks like an adult, no matter what is happening around her. Sayuri was a great adviser because she was my total opposite. She supported me when I fell in love with Mr. Hojo and wanted to revive the Literature Club, and she created alibis for me when I went to go see him. Without Sayuri, our love could have never come to be.

“Isn’t there a council today?” Sayuri inquired.

“Council” was our code for my rendezvous with Mr. Hojo, which fell every week on Wednesday, when he didn’t have any faculty meetings.

“Yes, we do have a council. I guess I’ll see you later, Sayuri,” I told her.

In the activity report we gave to the school, our Wednesday “councils” were for “library organizational purposes.” Sayuri was also in charge of writing and submitting these weekly reports. None of the other members

knew of these “councils,” of course; they were convinced that the salon was only closed on Wednesdays for the reason we stated.

I always felt Wednesday was so far away. We could meet eyes only when I was in his class, three times a week, and the only time we could spend together was on Wednesdays for a few hours after school.

The place where we spent time together.

It had to be romantic, clean, luxurious, *perfect*.

This is why I had my father build the salon for me immediately after I revived the club two years ago. It has my favorite antique furniture. Curtains and matching carpets in the color of my choice. Soundproof walls to keep our secrets. A complete kitchen for an all-out afternoon tea. An extensive library of rare books that reflect my professor’s tastes.

We talked in the salon until we were tired of speaking. We cherished each other. And made love with insatiable passion.

The Literature Club was merely camouflage for our affair. I had no plans to invite any other members besides Sayuri. I wanted the salon to be a space where the professor and I could nurture our love without any intruders.

But it wasn’t enough.

Something was missing.

The salon was my castle. It was a space with everything I could want, built just for me. And yet, it wasn’t enough. What else could I want?

Everytime I closed the salon door behind me after a “council” with the professor, that was all I could think about.

As we nurtured our love, the seasons changed and I became a second-year student.

It was a dazzling spring. I leaned over the balustrade on the terrace and stared down at the courtyard. After the salon, the terrace was my second favorite place at the academy. From there I could see all kinds of girls: girls reading on the lawn, girls eating their lunches, girls lying on the

grass and chatting, girls playing badminton. They had such lovely faces. Bodies bursting with vivacity and glittering with youth.

We are beautiful.

Everything about high school girls is beautiful—our long, straight hair, our supple skin, our sparkling eyes, our soft lips, our dainty shoulders, our voices as sweet as a gentle breeze, our nearly-ripe bodies on the cusp of maturity.

I am fully aware, however, that I am lovelier than the others by far. And because my father is the chairman, this academy's students and teachers acknowledge my superiority at once.

We only have the privilege to be high school girls for three short years—a magical time protected by our campus and our uniforms. Once we graduate, our existence is no longer particularly special. Once we leave the sanctuary of a girls' high school, the magic instantly vanishes.

My first year flew by in the blink of an eye. With only two years left, a small sense of impatience foamed at the bottom of my heart.

At least while I am here, I want to be the lead.

If I can't be the star, then no one else can.

I have to shine more brightly than everyone else.

Then, it dawned on me. I realized what was missing from the salon: the supporting characters I need to glorify my story.

Sidekicks. I had to choose them wisely.

The real thrill of being the main character comes from taking people beautiful and intelligent enough to lead a story on their own, but forcing them into the role of a sidekick. So I couldn't pick just anyone.

Who would be a good sidekick for me?

I wanted a tough, intelligent, and attractive girl—and suddenly, the face of an underclassman popped into my mind.

Shiyo Takaoka. After winning a prize for her light novel in junior high,

she not only gained a lot of attention from our school, but also from the whole country. She was not only skilled, but also meticulous and chillingly alluring. When the press came to campus, the principal and nuns curtly turned them away, but take just one step outside the academy gates and you would see them: a mob of paparazzi lying in wait, cameras and microphones at the ready.

I decided to move in on Shiyo Takaoka.

Seize people's secrets, and you will command their actions.

Since I was young, this was what my father had lived by. He uses this technique in both his private life and career, and it is why his businesses are so successful.

I wanted to know Shiyo's secret.

And by sheer coincidence, my wish came true.

At first, though I studied her, Shiyo didn't seem to have any notable problems in school or at home. At the time, she had just announced the next installment of the *Kimikageso* series and was becoming enormously popular.

Hmph, so I guess Shiyo doesn't have anything to hide, I'd thought to myself, about to give up.

At the same time, I was also in contact with a pen pal from our sister school in France. Our academy lets us communicate with students at our sister schools across the globe. My pen pal asked if I'd read anything interesting lately, so I told her about *Kimikageso* and sent her a copy.

She then told me that a very similar short story had been published many years ago, and proceeded to translate it into English and send it to me. When I read it, I was shocked. The content of the two texts wasn't just similar, it was *identical.*

So I'd found it. Shiyo Takaoka's secret. And, oh, how vile it was.

"Hey, Shiyo." One day, after school, I approached her as she was packing up her things.

There was no one else in the classroom. The rays of the setting sun spilled in through the window, casting shadows of the desks and our two figures on the linoleum floor. Shiyo was surprised. It was the first time I'd ever spoken to her.

"Hey, do you know this novel?" I held up a printout of a book review from a regional French newspaper. In the light from the sunset, her face suddenly paled.

"Th-That's…" Shiyo stammered, her voice hoarse.

"I was surprised how similar it was to your book. You probably figured you wouldn't get caught if you just kept it from being translated."

"I…never thought I'd win the prize! When I lived in France, I heard someone describing that story, I never even read it. Then when I was writing my piece for the contest, I remembered it and then, before I knew it…Since everyone made such a fuss after I won, how could I say anything?"

"But I don't think they'd forgive plagiarism, do you?"

"Please don't tell anyone. I beg you." Shiyo trembled. "I'll do anything," she begged, tormented with fear. Her gaze was desperate. I was consumed with the pleasure of knowing that I now controlled her fate.

Money alone will never get you that power. Devotion. Faith. Total subordination. As long as I knew her secret, I could take anything from her that I wanted.

"All right. This is a secret between me and you," I told her.

Shiyo looked up at me with surprise. Her eyes were rimmed red with tears. Another surge of pleasure ran down my spine.

"I'm the president of the Literature Club. Would you like to join?"

"H-Huh?" She looked perplexed. "Yes, yes. Of course. I'd love to. But… why?"

"I want you to stay by my side. How does that sound?"

Shiyo nodded frantically. She must have thought it was a small price to

pay if it would cover up her plagiarism.

She must have had no idea how uncomfortable and miserable being a sidekick would be. She had no clue how much it would wear down her soul.

This brainy schoolgirl had become my puppet. She would stay near me, laughing and crying as I told her to. From that point on, she would speak the lines I wanted her to utter and follow the stage directions I provided.

I had obtained my first sidekick.

After Shiyo became a member in the second year of its revival, club activities went into full swing. The academy, Mr. Hojo, and my father, who was the sponsor of the Literature Club, were all satisfied by Shiyo's addition to the club and by the fact that our activities were really picking up. I also began to realize how interesting literature was. I spent the days I couldn't see the professor reading and experiencing the worlds of his favorite books. I thought of him as I wrote poems and stories. Sayuri and Shiyo critiqued my work, which turned out to be meaningful, even enjoyable, in its own way.

But I derived my most intimate joy from knowing that Shiyo, the girl who had captured everyone's attention, was fearfully inquiring about my health, rejecting all television appearances and magazine interviews, waiting on me in the salon, and doing every little thing she could to serve me to the fullest.

This was completely different from the relationship between my father and his maids. In the unique environment of an all-girls high school, in the castle I had built myself, I had a servant who lived only for me.

The sidekick added a splendid dimension to my story. It was only natural that I'd want a second one.

Akane Kominami.

From when she'd been in junior high, she'd already stood out for her antique doll-like cuteness. Her eyes were like big balls of transparent glass. She had soft, curly hair. Her cheeks were slightly red, as if always

flushed. Her hobby was baking. Girls sucked up to her in hopes that they'd receive one of her delectable chocolates on Valentine's Day. But behind her fairytale-like charm was an ambitious twinkle in her eye that I liked very much.

Akane is the eldest daughter of the cook at Kominami, the restaurant where her "happy" family gathered around the dinner table and where her father often hosted business events. You would never think that this girl, who looked like she had popped out of a foreign fairytale, grew up surrounded by the smell of fish broth and soy sauce. But this disparity only made me want her even more.

Oh, how wonderful it would be to control a sweet beauty like her. Besides, for a story with a female as its main character, you had to have sweets. I wanted to know her secret. The cuter they were, the uglier I hoped it would be.

So I began to investigate her. There were times when I even followed her home.

Her family's residence, behind Kominami, had an elegant charm. Yet for some reason, she always shot the restaurant an annoyed glance before sighing and entering her home.

Then, one night…

Usually, Akane went straight home from school. But on this particular night, she dawdled around a one-hundred-yen shop and café for a curiously long time, and then sat on a bench in a nearby park late into the night. While I watched her from a distance, I thought how peculiar her behavior was.

While she sat on the bench, I saw a dim light grow in her hand.

A lighter. Her gaze was fixed on the lighter that she flicked on and off in her hand.

I don't know how many times she did it. Then, she silently stood and, as if she had made a decision, briskly headed towards the restaurant.

Akane wasn't going home. She entered Kominami, which had already

closed for the night. Before long, the formerly pitch-black windows started glowing red. The light slowly grew brighter and brighter and spread throughout the restaurant. That was when Akane flew out of Kominami, pursued by the flames. The left arm of her blazer had caught fire. She panicked and smacked her blazer sleeve until the fire was out, and then ran into the darkness until she disappeared completely. The flames from the wooden building, which had been built in the Taisho period, dyed the sky red until the early hours of the morning.

The next day, the morning newspaper reported:

100-YEAR OLD KOMINAMI RESTAURANT BURNED DOWN?

Fire burst from the two-story wooden building that housed the traditional restaurant, Kominami, at about 11 p.m. last night. All 3,200 square feet of the restaurant were burnt to the ground. The fire department is investigating suspicions of arson. It has become clear that the kitchen was not the source of the fire, and no one had been in the restaurant at the time of the fire.

There were no injuries. The home attached to the restaurant, as well as the other surrounding buildings, were not damaged. Mr. Tatsuo Kominami (55), manager of the establishment, Mrs. Kominami (53), and their son (21) were home at the time of the fire and escaped without incident. Their daughter (16) was not at the Kominami residence at the time and is reported safe.

“We apologize for all of the trouble this has caused,” was Mr. Tatsuo Kominami’s comment. “Our restaurant will be closed for the time being.

“Our long-time patrons in the neighborhood are saddened over the loss of our precious building and the opportunity to eat Kominami’s food.”

Everyone at school heard about the incident and gave Akane their sympathy.

“Thank you all for worrying about me,” Akane replied to them.

Her face was pale and drawn. She was the perfect picture of a pitiful victim. But at school, she wore a cardigan instead of the blazer that had been burnt in the fire. And *I knew*. Only I knew the truth.

I caught her at lunch time. “It’s really too bad about Kominami,” I told her sympathetically.

“Yeah,” she answered. “I was lucky I wasn’t home at the time. It had already burned to the ground when I got home. I’m shocked and sad…”

“Right. The newspaper said that you weren’t home at the time. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“I am, too,” Akane replied, her brow furrowed sadly.

“But I’m not convinced.” I grabbed Akane’s left arm and pulled up her sleeve. She squirmed with pain. A white bandage was wrapped around her arm.

“What a pity. That burn really *did* leave a mark,” I observed.

Akane reeled back in horror and swatted my hand away. She pulled the edge of her sleeve back down to her hand.

“…H-How?”

“I saw everything. Starting from when you were in the park last night.”

Akane’s eyes opened wide. “You…saw everything?”

“Indeed. Every last second of it.”

“Are you serious?” Akane asked, her entire body quivering. “What the heck is this?”

“Why did you do it?” I inquired.

“I…I couldn’t take it anymore.” Weeping, Akane told me what had happened. Her father had abandoned the plans to let Akane manage her own Western-style restaurant and decided to build a second Japanese-style Kominami instead. Moreover, he was going to give the new restaurant to Akane’s brother.

“It was always just my brother. I wasn’t ever allowed to cook. My father

wouldn't even let me in the kitchen. That's why I fought to have my own restaurant. I thought I'd finally gained their approval. But then my brother stole that too. I was so frustrated. That restaurant was my life. So I wanted to take away everything they had." Her tears weakly trickled down her cheeks, but she spat her words out vehemently.

I realized this was a girl with no regrets, convinced that she'd done the right thing. I started to like her even more.

"Yes, you've been through a lot," I comforted her.

"I know it was stupid. It's only a matter of time until they realize it was me. My father didn't give the key to any of his workers, which means only family can enter the kitchen. And I was the only one in my family who wasn't home at the time. And then I have this burn…"

"Akane, don't cry," I gently comforted her. "I know how you feel."

"…What?"

"You wanted your dreams to come true. You would do whatever it takes to make them real. Akane, listen. I'll back up your alibi."

Akane looked up at me in disbelief.

"I'll say we were in the salon until late at night," I continued. "And that I had Mr. Muro—oh, that's the name of my chauffeur—drive us home because it was too dark outside."

"Itsumi…"

"Do you like any author in particular?"

"I don't really read books."

"I mean, you read a *little,* don't you?"

"I read some stuff by Osamu Dazai in my textbook."

"That's fine. We'll say that we were in the salon talking about Dazai until about ten at night," I suggested.

Akane and I hashed out the details of her alibi. We decided that we were talking about Akane's report on Kazuko's character in *The Setting Sun*.

The police questioned me and Mr. Muro about Akane's whereabouts that night, but our testimonies cleared her name.

That was how Akane Kominami fell into the palm of my hands.

I was right on the mark. As I thought, every one of Akane's desserts was exquisite, with delicate decorations that would tickle any girl. She hurried about the kitchen, whipping cream and adorning her cookies with stars and hearts. It was like playing with a real-life doll. It would have been a disservice not to give her a full-on country-style kitchen to match her persona. Akane really seemed to like her brand-new, sparkling silver kitchen.

This was how I silently and steadily built my own world. After obtaining Akane, I invited three more girls to join the club.

Sonoko Koga. There was no way a girl as logical and clever as Sonoko would just volunteer for the executive committee if there wasn't some benefit. And sure enough, after doing some research, I found that she had hacked the academy's computer from the laptop in my father's library and altered her grades and school ranking to obtain a recommendation letter that would get her into a top-ranking medical university.

Diana Decheva. I was suspicious to find that her passport was issued right before her sister's accident. When I pressed Diana about it, she tearfully confessed that she had pushed her sister off the fortress so she could go to Japan in her place.

Then there was Mirei Nitani. Volunteering to be a conversation partner over the internet was just a laughable lie: She was prostituting herself to an unknown number of men.

These young, beautiful, sinful girls.

When they joined my club my world became complete.

My sidekicks moved and spoke on my demand and made my dream world a reality. My sinners feared and respected me, held their breath as they watched every move I made, and entered and exited stage precisely on cue.

Accompanied by my fantastic sidekicks, I grew brighter and brighter with power and confidence. I was the star.

Mr. Hojo and I had another hideaway besides the salon. To get to it, I had to go through the underground parking garage.

To prevent accidents, the parking garage was closed to the students. It was no place for high school girls without a driver's license like me. I couldn't go very often because of how risky it was. First, I had to go to Building 2. I would pass the science lab and home economics classroom and make a turn in the hallway. There was a giant mirror that showed me my reflection when I got close enough to it. It wasn't just a regular mirror. It was a gift the academy received from English nuns after the war. It is etched with Verse 12 from Corinthians 1, Chapter 13.

Most students feared its immense size, archaic design, and that mystical verse. But there's another reason why this mirror was special.

I would open the glass box of the fire alarm on the wall. When I pulled the lever all the way down and pushed on the mirror, a small space opened up between the mirror and wall, just big enough for one person to slip through.

After I passed through that crawl space, I would press the mirror from behind to return it to its original position. I am the only person at school who knows this trick.

Behind the mirror, there's a wooden staircase that leads underground. When the school building was previously a convent, this staircase used to go from the underground storage room all the way to the third floor. However, when the convent was rebuilt, the above-ground portion of the staircase was replaced with the science lab. All that was left of it were the steps that led underground, but those began to deteriorate dramatically and were eventually blocked off to keep the students safe. The construction workers used this enormous mirror as a blockade, instead of a wall. The workers installed the contraption because they thought they might have to take the mirror down again someday.

Aside from me, they are the only other ones who know about it. I knew

about the false wall because the reconstruction was done by one of my father's companies.

Once in, I would cautiously close the door and tiptoe down the creaky staircase. The small door near the bottom of the staircase leads to the parking garage. The professor always parked next to the door. No one would see me when I slipped into his car.

He would be waiting for me in the driver's seat. When I got in, he'd look at me with his heart in his eyes and give me a kiss, and then we'd drive off.

This was our second hideout. We enjoyed a little drive and gazed at the night sky. To make sure no one would see us, we never left the car. If the salon was my homemade getaway, then his car was a clandestine space at his fingertips. It was wild and exciting for me.

Our secret love blossomed in the car and salon.

I wanted it to last forever.

I wanted us to have a future.

When I was with him, I always wished for one.

Perhaps all that wishing made it come true.

Soon, a new life grew within me.

"Is this true?" The professor was shocked when I told him I was pregnant.

"It is," I said. "What do we do?"

"There's only one thing we can do," he replied. He took in a deep breath and smiled. "We already know, right? Itsumi, let's get married."

"What?"

"I'll go talk to your father. I mean, you're already graduating next year, I'm sure he'll give us his permission."

"Really?"

"Why? You don't like me?"

“No, it’s just too good to be true.”

“You’re silly.” He held me tightly and kissed me tenderly on the lips. “Ahh, I can’t wait. I can’t believe we’re going to have a family together,” he murmured.

“My father is stubborn, you know. He’ll never approve.”

“Of a lowly professor like me?”

“Well, yes,” I answered honestly. At this, Mr. Hojo laughed, running his fingers through his hair.

“Then I’ll just have to keep at it until I get his approval. Until the day you stop loving me, that is.”

“Oh, that day will never come.”

“Ahh, aren’t you young. But that’s good. Your beauty is so pure because of that youth. It’s what I love about you best,” he praised me with a carefree laugh.

His ironic personality was what had drawn me to him in the first place.

“When should I visit your father?” he continued. “The sooner the better.” Just as the professor was about to reach for his schedule book, I stopped his hand with a kiss.

“Not yet. I think we should wait a little while.”

“Oh?”

“In three months…Let’s wait until August. I’ll be in my third trimester, so it would be too late for an abortion. My father won’t be able to do anything about it.”

So our plan was to lay low until August. We didn’t do anything that would make us stand out. We didn’t meet in his car. We stopped talking on the phone. We only communicated by text.

“Is it a boy or a girl?” Mr. Hojo asked.

“I don’t know. For some reason, I feel like it’s a girl.”

“I hope she looks like you.”

“What should we name her?”

“How about ‘Lily’? I want her to be as innocent and happy as a flower.”

“That’s beautiful. What a lovely name.”

My body started to change. There was the never-ending, unbearable nausea. The perpetual sluggishness. The migraines. In the salon, all I could do was rest on the sofa. Even the smell of Akane’s once-mouthwatering sweets made me so nauseous, I’d vomit until my stomach was empty.

Although I didn’t feel well, my skin had become smooth, and my hair and nails grew very quickly. My body was pale and gaunt, but even as I was throwing up and unable to eat, my eyes glistened brightly with the hormones coursing through my body.

I was already Lily’s mother. That was the happiest time of my life.

My story was perfect.

And yet, I never thought my sidekicks would be the ones to tear my world apart.

2

“Itsumi,” someone called me.

On the last day of exams, Sayuri and I were near the school gates when I heard someone say my name. It was my father. He was in Mr. Muro’s car.

“Oh, father,” I greeted him. “What brings you to the school?”

“Get in the car. We’re going home right now.”

“But exams just finished. Sayuri and I were just going to…”

“Get in.” The sharp tone of his voice suddenly made me uneasy. Sayuri and I locked eyes for a moment. Sensing my apprehension, she searched for something to say.

“Mr. Shiraishi, it’s nice to see you,” she greeted. “May I join you both?”

“No, today’s not a good day.” His curt reply exacerbated my fears.

“Okay, I’ll text you later, Sayuri,” I told her.

When we got home, my father brought me straight to his library. I was so flustered, I accidentally stepped on Mirei’s shoes as we passed the front door.

“What’s your relationship with Mr. Hojo?” My father’s sudden question was such a shock, my heart tightened as if about to burst.

“Father, what are you asking?” I said. I tried to stay calm, but my voice shook. How did he know about the professor?

“Are you two dating?” he cut to the chase, pressing me to answer. His face was terrifying. His eyes were bloodshot.

“I would never!” Even when I denied his claim, the tension in his cheeks didn’t subside.

Someone must have secretly told him about me and the professor. *Could it—was it Sayuri?* But the next moment I realized how wrong I was to have doubted her.

“Still feel like playing dumb?!” My father grabbed pictures from the top of the bookshelf and flung them onto the floor. Pictures of Mr. Hojo and I gazing at each other with the Balkan Mountains in the background. Of us smiling at the Rila Church. Of us kissing in the Rose Valley.

How? When were they taken?

I picked each of the pictures up from the floor.

“This is absolutely shameful. I didn’t think you were so stupid,” my father said coldly.

“But…but I love him.” I stammered and lifted my face, looking directly at my father.

“Your words are worthless. Anyway, I’m not letting you have that baby.”

I was startled. I must have misheard him. “What did you just say?”

My father silently took a photo from the library drawer and thrust it

before me. When I realized what it was, all the blood in my body froze.

It was a copy of my ultrasound. My name and the date of the exam were printed on it, despite the fact that I had purposefully gone to a hospital in the suburbs and hadn't given them my insurance card.

"You are *not* going to have that baby. Got it?" He tore up the ultrasound. Shreds of black paper fluttered and fell to the floor. My beautiful baby, still only a tiny sea angel. The life I meant to raise, to call "Lily."

I felt like the ground was shaking and crumbling beneath my feet. No one was supposed to know my secret. The secret I'd wanted to protect until the end…

"That damn professor. What's all this 'being in love' crap about?"

"Have you met with him?"

"Yeah. I just fired him. I made him leave town. I told him that he'll never see you for the rest of his life."

"You're evil!"

"Evil? You should be thankful that I even let him live!"

Right, my father corners people.

That's how he got to where he is today. If I made him any angrier, he might actually kill the professor.

I started crying hysterically, and he hit me across the face. I don't really remember anything after that. I was taken to my father's hospital. One week later, all I did was continue to cry in the hospital bed. I couldn't stop rubbing the empty spot where my baby had been. I didn't want to do anything. Everything was hollow and bare.

After I was released, I finally began to think straight. What, exactly, had happened?

The only members who could've secretly taken the photographs of me and Mr. Hojo in Bulgaria were either Shiyo or Diana, or possibly both. The only ones who could've furtively told my father about it were those

who had come to my home, which meant either Mirei or Sonoko, or both. The only ones who knew about my pregnancy were either Akane, who had noticed a change in my eating habits, or Diana, who had noticed a change in my body. Or both. The only ones who could get their hands on my ultrasound were either Sonoko, who helped out at the hospital, or Akane, who found my checkbook, or both.

In other words…everyone had betrayed me.

My faithful sidekicks had suddenly thrust me an ultimatum. They were telling me they wouldn't let me hold onto their secrets forever. That *they* were the ones in possession of my soul.

Indeed…they had declared war.

When I was released from the hospital and returned to school, I found out everyone had been told that I was in the hospital with chronic pneumonia and that Mr. Hojo had to resign because his mother had fallen terminally ill. No one knew the truth, except for the Literature Club members and me.

Mr. Hojo's mobile phone and email weren't working, and all the letters I sent him were returned as "undeliverable." I thought I would never see him again. And when I went back to school, Sayuri was the only one who greeted me kindly.

"I'm glad you're finally out of the hospital," Sayuri said, giving me a gentle hug.

"Sayuri. I missed you so much. You didn't even come visit me."

"I went! Plenty of times. But your father turned me away."

"What?"

"He realized that all my alibis were fake. He was really angry with me."

"Oh my gosh. Sayuri, I'm so sorry I bothered you with all this."

"It's okay, don't worry."

"Sayuri, I just want to die."

“Don’t say things like that. The Bible says, ‘Thou must not kill.’ That includes yourself, you know.”

“To Hell with the Bible!” I suddenly yelled. “I’m never going to read it again. I’ll never go near a church or cross for the rest of my life. I’m already damned for watching them murder my child.”

“Itsumi, you can’t think about the past. You’ve got to move forward.”

“No. I have no reason to live.”

“Yes, you do. You have every chance in the world to start over. Here, I have a get-well present for you.”

Sayuri handed me a postcard that had a cute picture of a kitten on it.

“Ahh…” I studied the postcard and let out an unwitting sigh. On the back were Mr. Hojo’s new mobile phone number, email, and home address.

“I asked him for his information before he left. He has yours, as well.”

“Sayuri…”

“I’m truly sorry about your baby. But you and Mr. Hojo could try again. Please try and stay positive. I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

If Sayuri hadn’t been there for me, I wouldn’t have been able to get back on my feet.

The professor was my reason for living. I returned to sanity, happy to be alive again.

But there was another thing that would make me happy.

Revenge.

Revenge on the five club members that had betrayed me and murdered Lily.

3

My revenge was calling all of you to the terrace and then jumping to my

death, holding the lily-of-the-valley, instead of a will, in my hand.

You all must have panicked. You must never have imagined that Itsumi Shiraishi would take her own life. I'm sure you all looked hard for the meaning of the lily in this puzzling suicide. If people realized that the flower represents my unborn daughter, they would also realize that all of you had duped me, and they would find out that your secrets—in other words, your *sins*—were what motivated your betrayal of me.

The lily was my warning.

I knew everyone would be tracking the other Literature Club members down after my death. I knew that you'd all share your stories and try to come to one conclusion.

I thought a homicide would be better than a suicide. I would make you think that one of you murdered me in cold blood, and that the lilies signified something different from what they actually did. You yourselves spread the rumors that I was murdered by a member of the club, and now all of you are having doubts about one another. It's hard to single one person out, since everyone is suspicious.

With those predictions in mind, one week ago, I called the five of you to the terrace and jumped to my death before your very eyes. I was carried away on a stretcher, my body coated in blood.

But I didn't die. I landed on the stone arch between the first and second floor, and jumped down from there to the flower bed—where Sayuri had piled soft mulch between the flowers, instead of shock-proof material, so as not to expose our scheme. I splattered the fake blood generously all over myself.

I was then taken to my father's hospital. I ended up spraining one of my wrists and had a few cuts here and there. After I was treated, I snuck out of the hospital. I left a note behind saying that I ran off to live with Mr. Hojo. My father, who bears the shame of his daughter's elopement, has been secretly searching for me all week. The principal and my father are hiding the truth from the students. And so, the rumors of my death went unchecked and spread like wildfire.

Right after I jumped, Sayuri brought a white bouquet of flowers to school and left them on my desk, crying—which inevitably confirmed the rumors of my death. Dramatic delusions will always trump reality at an all-girls school. And with that, I have cornered all of you until this very day. You must have been so full of anguish and terror, trying to decrypt the secret of the lilies.

Thus, I had my revenge and Mr. Hojo and I could live happily ever after.

I couldn't have planned or pulled off this perfect scheme by myself. Sayuri Sumikawa was incredibly helpful. She predicted everything—that my father probably wouldn't publicize my elopement, which would make the club members, who believed I was dead, identify a culprit to try to hide their secrets—and formulated a strategy. My beautiful mentor. I deeply admire her. She took my unformed plans for revenge and made them realizable.

I am writing this from our new home. Mr. Hojo and I live a humble life. It may not be a life of luxury, but we are happy. I should really thank you for your little ploy, in a way; if you hadn't betrayed me, I might still be hiding from people's eyes and be limited to those confining meetings with Mr. Hojo.

After I write this, I will sneak into the salon. I will furtively attend the meeting tonight and laugh in the dark as I listen to your stories.

Then—you must not forget the finale.

I will also be bringing an item of my choice tonight.

We will have a flower stew. Did you notice the strong fragrance of the lilies?

The stem and flower of the lily of the valley contains a very potent poison. They are the cardiac glycosides: convallatoxins, convallamarin, convalloside…But you would know all about this, wouldn't you, "Doctor" Sonoko?

The devious sidekicks who tried to overthrow the heroine must leave the stage. You have all come here today to commit suicide together.

Yes. That was why I had you write those stories.

Your stories will become your wills.

Stories where you mourn me, miss me, and reminisce about my life. You loved and adored me, you can't quite accept that I'm not here—and through writing them, you each gradually come to terms with my death.

Reading them aloud tonight, you scatter your young lives…This salon will be the lovely casket that adds the final touch to your deaths.

This is the climax of my story.

For such sensitive, self-conscious, adolescent girls, this will be quite the sentimental ending.

Goodbye, foolish sidekicks.

You will never leave my story.

It will be told long after you're gone. My—Itsumi Shiraishi's—story.

(End)

8

Closing Remarks

Speaker:

Club President

Sayuri Sumikawa

The readings are over.

So, everyone, how was it? Did you have a good time?

The stew is just all gone, too. We'll just finish off with the rice gruel.

Oh dear, what on earth is the matter? Why are you all so silent? I can't really tell because it's so dark…but are all of you trembling? I can hear the glasses clinking.

What? You mean the story I just read?

Yes. I most certainly did receive it from Itsumi. It is her authentic work.

That's right, Itsumi knew everything. She saw through your filthy scheme—your devious, foolish, thoughtless conspiracy.

You stupid girls. You should have just accepted your roles as Itsumi's pets. She would've taken care of you if you had stayed quiet and submissive, you know.

True, you were always afraid. She had the power to turn your lives upside-down with a single word. If she'd spilled your secrets, your lives would be over—which is why you have lived in fear all this time. But I suppose that's what you call a deal. And Itsumi had an excellent one. She had an irresistible charm and was a natural at manipulation.

Yes, Itsumi was a natural *femme fatale*. She majestically wielded your secrets with unabashed determination to remain the center of attention. You should have made a show of your weaknesses, pretended to rely on her, hid yourselves in her bosom, and just stayed her loyal sidekicks. If you had done that, you would have been safe…

Now, now. Why are you all crying? What is so frightening? Ahh, the lily-of-the-valley. The pitch-black salon. The mystery stew. Yes, no one would raise any questions if the stew tasted or smelled funny. Which is exactly why Itsumi made today her day of vengeance. Yes, that's right…I threw in the lilies.

Uh-uh, there's no use rushing to the door like that. It's been locked from the outside. And the windows, too, of course. It's true. You cannot escape

from Itsumi's revenge. This salon is the stage. You are the actors. Itsumi is the director. The actors can't leave the stage until the director calls, "Curtain!" Hm? You're beginning to sweat? Your eyes are itchy? Your stomach hurts? You can't stop shaking? You're nauseous?

Well, you can't blame me. Yes, as Itsumi's story said, I am the mastermind of this plan. When I heard she wanted revenge, I carefully predicted everything that could happen and devised a detailed plan. I wanted to find a way to scare you while making Itsumi and Mr. Hojo happy at the same time. But weren't you the fools who started all this in the first place?

Stop screaming. It's very unbecoming of you to scream like that when no one can hear you. I mean, we *are* the proud high-school girls from St. Mary's Academy, are we not?

Why don't you all sip on a cocktail and take it easy for a while? Take a good listen to what I have to say.

Come on, calm down and think about it: Why did I read Itsumi's story for her?

Itsumi said she'd be here tonight, but she didn't show. Did she abandon her plans for revenge? No. That's not it at all. Itsumi is a spiteful girl. She really did come to the salon today. She had fistfuls of flowers to put in tonight's stew.

After Itsumi and I finished preparing for tonight's meeting, she read me the story I have just finished reading to you, while I had some tea.

Her eyes gleamed, and her voice trembled with delight. "What do you think?" Itsumi asked me at the end.

"That was the best," I answered truthfully. I thought her story was incredible. It was a stunning revenge encased in a flowery fragrance. Has vengeance ever been so ladylike? I was happy to help her.

"This plan was all thanks to you," Itsumi even went as far to say.

Alluring, clever Itsumi. She manipulated anyone and anything she liked to satisfy her desires. She was cold-hearted, cruel, drastic, tenacious,

powerful, and narcissistic—but that was her appeal. It was what made her exciting.

She's been that way since elementary school. She was the polar opposite of me and, while I admired her for that, I made sure to never get too close to her. I was a frail little girl who people made fun of every time I was absent for being sick.

On one occasion, I was out sick for a week, which was not unusual for me then, and I was dreading the ridicule I would face from the girls when I went back to school. But when I got back, all of my bullies had been expelled. The holy chalice that decorated the church, the Sisters' rosaries, the students' valuables, and several other items had been stolen. They were all found in my bullies' shoes cubbies and lockers. I was still in utter shock when Itsumi turned to me with a soft smile and lightly bowed her head. That was when I knew: she had planned it all.

I don't know why she did that for me. She had everything that I lacked and I was smitten with her. I imagine she felt the same about me, too. We were completely inseparable. Then, I decided to be her antithetical partner in crime.

I was the Phantom who lurked in the shadows, making sure my Christine became a star. I was the Watson who shone the light on Holmes' logic. I was the Melanie Hamilton who supported Scarlett O'Hara in secret. These characters would do anything it took to see their partner shine. They were opposites dependent on one another—indeed, two who were always one. Their life had meaning because their partner shone bright.

This is why I have made all of Itsumi's wishes come true. I risked my body and soul to protect my shining and radiant Itsumi.

Itsumi's beauty smoldered over when she fell into that forbidden love with Mr. Hojo. Her exterior was cold, and yet passion burned within—I felt proud and satisfied as I stood close and watched her develop an erotic luster from her fiery love.

Hence why I might have been angrier than even Itsumi when I learned

of your betrayal. I didn't interfere with your plans; I only thought of how to trap you. A mystery stew meeting with a fake death, secret elopement, and tragic revenge—I worked out all these details for her. All for my precious Itsumi. I did it to protect my creation, my Itsumi Shiraishi.

My chest trembled with giddiness thinking it would all happen tonight.

"After the meeting ends, I won't ever come back," Itsumi stated.

"Yes, I know…I'll miss you, but it's the only way," I replied.

"I like living in the country. You should come over sometime."

"Sounds good."

"From now on, I'll live watching only him. We'll have a beautiful baby, many beautiful babies, and I'll be the best mom I can be. That's my only dream." Itsumi laughed softly. And then the expression of an ordinary mother flashed across her face. It was only there for a moment, but I hadn't missed it.

Itsumi sipped on her Earl Grey tea as she went on happily about her new future with Mr. Hojo, the calm life they would have together, and their simple everyday joys. Her once-hostile eyes had mellowed out, and her harsh mouth had become soft.

I never thought Itsumi's expressions could be so mundane. I was mortified. My efforts to ensure her success with Mr. Hojo had ironically robbed her of her irresistible allure. I had been trying to intensify the flames of her taboo love, but she had ended up finding stability instead.

I panicked. I didn't put in all that work for Itsumi to become like this. I couldn't take it back, it was too late—I could only stand there looking dumbfounded as she cheerfully yammered on.

But then a thought floated through my mind. It echoed in my head. Almost as if someone had whispered it to me.

I would be a better lead than Itsumi.

Was it the whisper of an angel? Or was it the devil sent to tempt me? Regardless, I was entirely entranced by that thought.

If Christina, Holmes, or Scarlet lost their splendor, then the Phantom, Watson, and Melanie would naturally step up as the lead and continue the story.

The lead had switched.

From Itsumi to me.

Yes—at that moment, the salon, Itsumi's stage of revenge, changed into the stage for a new main character, for an entirely new play.

The lead changing was no small matter. The play required a new climax. For a new star to be born, the old needed to make a spectacular exit. And an audience is also necessary to witness the swap. I immediately started planning on what I should do. Then, I had the idea to use Itsumi's little tool of revenge against her.

That's right. I didn't put the lily-of-the-valley leaves into tonight's stew.

I put them in Itsumi's Earl Grey tea.

If Itsumi disappeared, as she herself wrote, her family would simply believe that she ran off to elope, and Mr. Hojo wouldn't look for her because he would think that her family took her back. Itsumi left this world in her loveliest state, by my hand. She slowly collapsed under the bright chandelier, and lay among the lilies that had fallen on the floor…A fantastically decadent aesthetic. You could say that Itsumi Shiraishi was my ultimate work of art.

So, everyone, please be aware that today is page one of Sayuri Sumikawa's story. I want all of you to add intrigue to *my* narrative. But be careful of what you say, because now *I* am the one who holds your secrets. And what you have dined upon tonight—what I have given you is evidence of a new sin that can never be wiped clean.

As Christ gives His holy body and holy blood to His disciples and followers, He lives for all eternity. In the same way, you have all *become one* with Itsumi, and you will never forget her beauty for the rest of your life. I think it must have been your duty to betray her, since I could have never accomplished this without all of you. Already you have become the

house for Itsumi's beautiful, noble, proud, and pure soul.

Well, I suppose it's time to turn on the chandelier. I'll bring out that palate-cleansing dessert I mentioned earlier. This morning I baked the "Arms of Venus" for all of you. Who—ah, Shiyo, won't you cut these up for me? Oh gracious, why are you all shaking so much? You're all as pale as ghosts. Oh, Akane. It looks like you took the watch from the pot. It's the same exclusive Chanel watch from last year. Itsumi adored it and wore it every day. I'm glad that it's now yours.

You know, I feel really comfortable being the lead. Everyone, let's raise a toast in my honor.

This year's readings were spectacular. Itsumi may no longer be with us, but we will make sure to make full use of the salon and library she left us. This will be our greatest testament to her memory.

The storm outside hasn't lightened up in the least. Please watch your step while you make your way home. Thank you very much for participating.

This year's meeting is now officially over.

Well then, everyone, please take care.

THE DARK MAIDENS

Story by RIKAKO AKIYOSHI
Art by BOOOTA

Translated by KRISTI FERNANDEZ