By the bestselling author of *The Devotion of Suspect X*

THE DARK MAGICIAN

MURDER IN A TOWN WITH NO NAME



JAPAN'S #1 MYSTERY AUTHOR

KEIGO HIGASHINO

TUTTLE

THE DARK MAGICIAN

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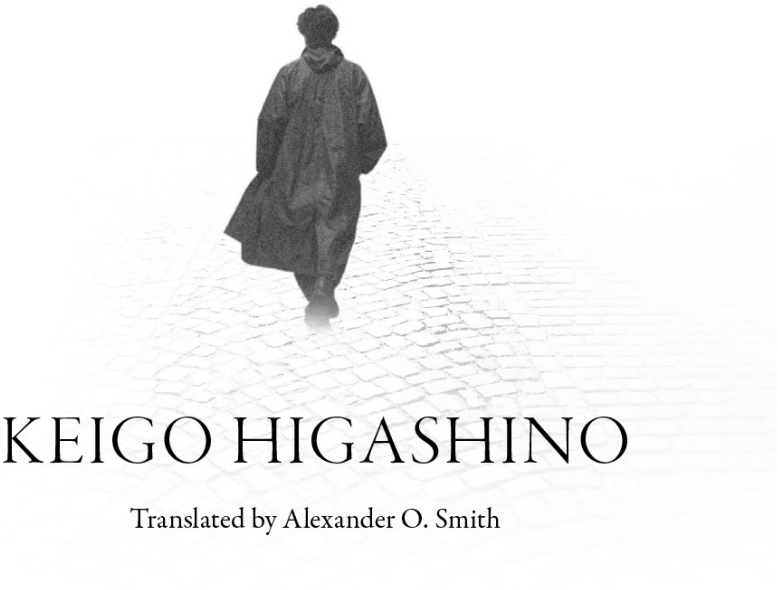
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Translated by Alexander O. Smith

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PROLOGUE

As the sound of the *shakuhachi* filled the hall, a spotlight fell onto the pitch-black stage, illuminating a lone figure. He was dressed in white, save the red sash that was tied in a cross over his shoulders and under his arms. His long hair was gathered into a ponytail that reached halfway down his back.

He stretched one arm out to the side, and for a moment, his wrist disappeared into the inky darkness beyond the light. When he brought his arm back, the audience caught its breath at the sight of what he held: a sword—a Japanese *katana* over a meter long. He gave it a swing through the air and its sharp, polished edge glimmered in the light.

He lowered the tip of the katana and at that signal, the light expanded to fill the stage. Smiles spread through the audience, especially from the men, at the sight of three blondes in glamorous, revealing dresses. This was Las Vegas, after all.

The man quickly raised the sword, and three figures dressed entirely in black appeared from the sides of the stage: ninjas, their hooded faces hidden behind masks. Each ninja carried a large rolled mat under one arm—classic *tatami* floor mats, though it was unclear how many people in the largely American audience would be familiar with the term.

The ninjas approached the women and slowly unrolled the mats, wrapping them around the women. The women acted surprised and tried to resist, but the ninjas rolled them up tightly into three bundles. While they did this, the man in white walked in a circle around them, brandishing his sword. The sound of the shakuhachi grew louder and more intense.

Soon, the three women were completely wrapped, with no part of their bodies visible. They were still standing, and you could tell from the way the mats moved that they were still inside, wriggling weakly. Then, the ninjas took out ropes and used them to bind the mats. At last, the wriggling stopped. Where the women had been, now three tatami pillars stood in their place.

The man in white stopped his pacing. He raised the sword in his right hand and stared at it for a moment, then directed his gaze toward the nearest

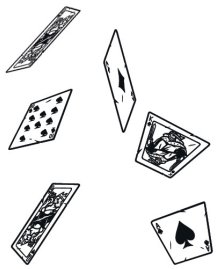
pillar. Approaching slowly, he gripped his sword in both hands and lifted it high over his head. A brief, chilling pause, then he swung the blade down hard. The sword struck the tatami with a thud, slicing it diagonally into two halves which fell to the stage.

No one in the audience made a sound, not even a stifled scream. At some point, the shakuhachi music had faded away.

Then the man stepped up to the second pillar, and this time swung the sword down without warning or hesitation. The mat tumbled to the floor in two clean pieces. The man didn't even stop to watch it fall before he was moving toward the third pillar. In silence, he swung the sword horizontally, a hiss of metal slicing through the air swallowed by the sound of the blade hitting the tatami that echoed through the silent hall. The top half of the pillar slowly tilted, then fell, leaving the bottom half standing.

The man in white glanced at the audience, then moved to the center of the stage and turned his back on the hall to face the three ninjas.

Once again, he lifted the sword high and brought it down swiftly in a diagonal cut. The ninja's masks fluttered to the floor, revealing, incredibly, the faces of the three women who had been inside the mats. A stir rippled through the audience, gradually rising to a roar of cheers and applause. Still in their ninja outfits, the women swept back their golden hair and stepped to the front of the stage, beaming. One after another, the audience rose from their seats. They shouted, they whistled, they stamped their feet. The man in white slowly turned to face the audience. Then he spread his arms wide, flashed a winning smile, and bowed.



1

Mayu felt a hot flush of embarrassment begin to spread the moment she saw her own face on the monitor. It was a photo of her and a friend in high school, taken on the way home from school one day in front of a convenience store.

“Er, maybe not this one,” she murmured.

“Huh? Why not?” Kenta, sitting next to her, asked. “I think it’s pretty good.”

“It’s also me at my chunkiest. Plus my legs are like, naked. I don’t think so.”

Both of the girls in the photo were wearing extremely short skirts.

Kenta shook his head. “You’re not chunky at all, though you do have a point about the legs.”

“It was the school uniform, but you could make the skirt shorter by folding the waistband over a few times. Until you got to school, at least, then the teachers would notice. You didn’t ever do that?” Mayu looked up at the woman sitting across the table from her. The woman was wearing a mask but Mayu had seen her face several times and knew she was probably around thirty, which would make them roughly the same age. She was wearing a hotel staff uniform.

“Oh we did, sure,” she replied, smiling with her eyes. “I haven’t thought about it since then.”

“Right?” Mayu turned back to Kenta. “What about you? They do things like that in your school?” Kenta was thirty-seven, seven years older than her —practically a different generation in high school.

“Can’t say that I remember. I was at an all-boys school, anyway.”

“And you weren’t checking out the girls from the other schools on your way in?”

Kenta said with a grin. “I glanced. Anyway, you should use this photo. It’s a good one.”

“I agree,” said the hotel woman.

“Well, if you both say so.” Mayu looked from Kenta to the woman.

“Would you like to add a caption?” the woman asked.

“Hmm.” Mayu thought for a moment. “How about: ‘In High School, Skirt Length Was Everything’?”

Kenta laughed. “Perfect.”

“Got it,” the woman said, squinting at her screen as she began to type.

Mayu and Kenta Nakajo were at a bridal planner in a Tokyo hotel. The wedding was only two months away, and there was still a pile of tasks to get through. Today was a meeting to discuss the slideshow that would play during the wedding reception. They had each brought their own photos to choose from. They could have just put together the slideshow themselves, of course, but they wanted something high quality. Besides, this way they wouldn’t have to worry about things not working properly during the event, like the sound not coming out, or a blurry picture, or any similar disaster.

The venue was outdoors and since the event wouldn’t start until after sunset, they didn’t have to worry too much about visibility, but even without a worst-case scenario, there were a bunch of factors such as subtle image quality or color balance that were best left to the professionals.

As Mayu and Kenta continued picking out photos, the door to a private room at the back of the office opened and another couple emerged. Mayu glanced at the woman without thinking, then caught her breath. She was trying to hide it, but her lower belly was clearly rounded.

The couple, accompanied by another woman from the hotel, left the salon, an aura of warm happiness in the air about them.

“What?” Kenta asked.

“Nothing, just, her belly was getting pretty big,” Mayu replied.

“Huh. Guess I missed it.”

Mayu turned to the woman helping them. “You get a lot of couples like that these days?”

The woman gave a small nod. “A few a year, yes.”

“I guess people aren’t as embarrassed about shotgun weddings anymore,”

Mayu offered.

"I'm not sure." The woman shook her head. "Most people are still a little self-conscious. I often suggest dresses that make it easy to hide their shape."

"Right, makes sense."

"You, uh, know something I don't know?" Kenta said, raising an eyebrow.

"No, it's just, I was thinking, maybe that wouldn't be so bad," Mayu said, looking at her fiancé. "Kinda takes the pressure off, right? You wouldn't have to worry about whether you'd be able to have kids after getting married."

Kenta tilted his head. "Uh...I guess? Never really thought about it that way. I mean, it's fine either way, isn't it? Say you don't have kids, then you can just enjoy married life together, the two of you, right?" Kenta turned to get the woman's agreement.

"There are all kinds of couples, and everyone has their own way of thinking," the bridal planner replied—a safe, neutral response.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Sorry, that was way off track. Let's keep going." Mayu straightened up in her seat.

They spent some more time choosing the last photos and had left the wedding planner when Kenta asked, "What was all that about?"

"What was all what about?"

"The stuff about shotgun weddings."

Mayu shrugged. "Oh, nothing really. It just crossed my mind."

Kenta shot her a sidelong glance. "You've been talking a lot about kids, lately. Like, should we have them right away, or how many I want…"

"I have?"

"Yeah, maybe you didn't realize."

She shrugged again. "Is it strange to talk about those things? We're about to get married, right? We're going to have to talk about it sometime."

"No, you're right. It's just, I thought you might be getting a little fixated on it."

Mayu stopped walking, turned, and faced Kenta. "So what? I shouldn't think about it? I think that would be irresponsible, considering that I work too."

Kenta frowned and held his hands up in defeat, palms facing her. "I get it,

it's cool. Don't get so worked up about it."

"Sounded to me like you were the one getting worked up."

Just then, the sound of an incoming message chime came from Mayu's bag. "One sec," she said, pulling out her phone. It was from a friend back home. She could already guess what it was about, and the subject line confirmed her suspicion. She sighed and rubbed her neck. "Great..."

"What is it?"

"Class reunion, junior high. It's this Sunday, and apparently I'm the only one who hasn't replied yet."

"Uh, you don't seem that eager to go. Not interested in seeing your old classmates?"

"It's not that I don't want to see them, but...Dad's probably invited too, since it's an official reunion."

"Right. Teachers get invited to those things, don't they. But I don't see what the problem is."

"The problem is it was hard having a teacher who was also my dad. I told you about how I used to try to make myself invisible, right?"

"You said you tried not to stand out. But that was years ago."

"Nothing's changed. The last time I went to my high school reunion, as soon as I saw everyone, it was like we were all back in school. Same cliques, same way of talking. And our junior high is even worse since our town was so small. I can hear it already. 'There goes Mr. Kamio's hidden mic.'"

"They called you that?" Kenta raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Behind my back, yeah. 'Do something bad when she's around and she'll tell Mr. Kamio.' Like I was a spy."

"Kids suck. But your friends weren't like that, were they?"

"No. Although I didn't have that many close friends beyond the one who just emailed me. And even we don't really keep in touch much anymore."

"Won't your dad be upset if you're a no-show?"

"He doesn't care. We see each other a few times a year anyway. What I'm more worried about is if I don't go, people will ask my dad all sorts of questions and he'll have to deal with them. Well, whatever. I'll think about it some more."

"Wait a second. If the reunion's next week, you might not be able to go even if you want to," Kenta said.

Mayu knew what he meant. “Oh, right. Covid.”

Kenta nodded. “Wasn’t the governor saying there were signs of another outbreak? There’s talk of new measures.”

“A ‘Stay in Tokyo’ order? That’d be something.”

“It’s a real possibility. People are still cautious.”

Though the peak of the pandemic had passed, like many other countries, Japan was still stuck in a purgatory where nobody could say that the novel coronavirus that first appeared in 2019 had been completely stamped out. Things were better than they had been at the beginning: there were several effective treatments, and the total number of infections was under control, so it didn’t have much of an effect on day-to-day life. Still, infection numbers never quite dropped to zero, and sometimes there were sudden spikes.

If infection routes were clear, spikes were manageable, but those “unknown source” infections were still a problem. Infections brought counter-measures, from the basics like “avoid enclosed spaces, crowds, and close contact, and refrain from unnecessary outings,” all the way to school and business closures.

These were always recommendations, not orders, but if an advisory came out saying, “avoid travel from Tokyo to other prefectures,” most people would comply unless they had an urgent reason not to, and even if there weren’t actual penalties, you could be sure people would quietly judge you. There were even cases where people had run “name and shame” campaigns online, leading to harassment.

“Well, maybe that wouldn’t be so bad,” Mayu said with a sigh. “If we can’t leave Tokyo, that would take the decision out of my hands, and no one would blame me for missing the reunion.”

“If we get another outbreak, they probably wouldn’t want you to come anyway!” Kenta said with a grin.

These days, when the two of them were alone, they usually didn’t wear masks, even outside the house. Though Mayu still kept one in her bag.

“I guess we’ll find out,” Mayu said, checking the time before putting her phone back in her bag. It was just past four o’clock in the afternoon. “Oh crap,” she said, showing the screen to Kenta. “Look at the time.”

“Whoops, we’d better hurry!”

They made a beeline for the elevator hall. The idea had been to go see a

movie after the planning session. The theater was open for business as usual, but even here, the pandemic had left a mark: there was a ribbon over every other seat to enforce social distancing so even couples couldn't sit next to each other.

The apartment where Mayu lived alone was a one-minute walk from Morishita Station on the Toei Shinjuku Line. It was a simple unit with a medium-sized bedroom plus a kitchen, bath, and toilet, and yet the rent was over 100,000 yen a month. She had always wanted a bigger place, and it seemed like marriage would finally make that happen.

She got home and sat down on her bed. The clock by her pillow read 10:40 p.m. After the movie, she and Kenta had eaten dinner together at an *izakaya* in Nihonbashi and then parted ways. On Saturdays, they would usually spend the night together at one of their places, but unfortunately, today was Sunday.

Mayu worked at a real estate company in Ichigaya, in the condo renovations department. She had originally entered university with the goal of becoming an interior designer, but halfway through, her interest had broadened to the layouts of entire buildings, so she had shifted her sights to architecture.

Kenta Nakajo was a senior colleague at the same company. He was in the detached house department, so they hadn't had much casual contact at work until two years earlier when chance had placed them on the same floor. They had begun dating about a year and a half ago. Kenta made the first move, but it hadn't come as a surprise. They'd already had a few casual conversations and Mayu was starting to get the feeling that he might like her. For his part, he must have noticed that she didn't mind the attention. Six months ago, he proposed. The pandemic had just started to settle down, and again, this next step in their relationship hadn't come as much of a surprise. More than anything, it was a relief. Ever since she had turned thirty, Mayu had grown increasingly less interested in dating for fun.

Of course Mayu said yes. Kenta hadn't expected to get turned down, but his relief was genuine.

She called her father to tell him the news. She didn't say outright that she was getting married, just that there was someone she wanted him to meet. Even so, her dad seemed to have read between the lines. "Congratulations!" he told her. "That's great news. Hey, you're probably busy, so don't worry

about coming down here. I'll go to you."

Mayu could hear a hint of loneliness in his voice. Ever since Mayu's mother had died of a subarachnoid hemorrhage six years ago, her father had been living alone.

Not long after, Mayu had introduced Kenta to him at a Japanese restaurant in Ginza. Kenta was obviously nervous—even her father's smile looked a bit stiff, for that matter. But the two of them seemed to get along well enough, and it put Mayu at ease. Later, her father mentioned that he'd "liked the look on Kenta's face when he was talking about his work. He'll make a good husband."

When Mayu asked what he meant by that, he answered: "Helping someone with home renovations means getting to know them, and putting some thought toward what kind of life would be comfortable for them. Kenta seemed to find real purpose in that. If you care about other people's homes, you won't neglect your own."

Mayu thought that was just like her father. Having been a Japanese language teacher, he had a habit of judging people's character by how they spoke and the topics they chose to speak about.

Mayu found herself thinking about what he had said for the first time in a while. The wedding was only two months away, and she was feeling more anxiety than excitement. She wasn't sure if she should just chalk it up to pre-wedding nerves. She grabbed her phone and checked a few messages when a call came in. The display read: Momoko Honma.

She accepted it. "Hey there, uh, long time no talk."

"Except for the email I just sent you! You're taking your sweet time getting back to me!" Momoko had the same high-pitched voice she'd had in junior high.

"Sorry, I just wasn't sure yet."

Momoko had been the one who emailed her about the class reunion.

"Work keeping you busy?"

"That's part of it."

"So there's something else? Don't tell me you're feeling awkward about your upcoming father-daughter date."

"It's not awkward, I just don't want people to feel uncomfortable."

"Who's uncomfortable? C'mon, we're thirty now. There's nothing to worry about. Look, just come. If you don't, I'll be lonely. Besides, it'll be

nice being back home."

"Speaking of which, you're back with your parents now, right? How's that going?"

Momoko had mentioned in her email that, while she usually lived right down the road from Tokyo in Yokohama, after her husband had been transferred to Western Japan for work, she'd come back to her family home with their two-year-old son last month. She was renting out the condo in Yokohama to a friend.

"Honestly," Momoko said, "it's kinda great. I can leave the rugrat with my parents here, so I even get some time to myself. Come down! We can hang out anytime."

"Good to know."

"Right? So come. I'll put you down as coming, okay?"

"Wait, hang on. I really do have to think about work, so give me a couple days to decide, okay? I'll let you know for sure then, promise."

"Fine."

"Actually, that reminds me, are you sure we can even do the reunion? Everyone's getting worried about another wave."

"Yeah, I thought about that," Momoko answered, her voice going unusually low. "I booked a place with a big event hall so if it comes to it, we can use that and keep everyone's seats spaced out."

"Right, the thing is, I might end up not being able to leave Tokyo."

"Ah, another travel advisory?"

"Yeah. I mean, I don't want to go back home at the wrong time and get stones thrown at me, or whatever it is they do these days."

Momoko made a little snorting chuckle at that. "Why don't you just come back before the announcement then? That's what Elite Sugishita did."

"Kaito?" Mayu asked.

"Yeah, Kaito Sugishita. He came back home last week with his wife and baby. Said he figured he'd get out of Tokyo early while the getting was good. His company is doing pretty well with remote work so even the company president doesn't have to be in Tokyo."

"President?"

"Yup. He's Elite as ever."

"Sounds like you've kept in touch."

"Just once, at the reunion planning meeting. No one actually invited him,

he just showed up. I guess he just wanted someone to show off to."

So he hadn't really changed at all, then, Mayu thought. Good grades, good at sports, rich parents, always had the best stuff. That was Kaito "Elite" Sugishita. After junior high, he'd gone to a private high school attached to a Tokyo university. She'd heard a few years ago that he'd started an IT company and was doing well.

"There's someone else of interest coming back too. Our town hero," Momoko said.

Mayu tilted her head quizzically, phone held to her ear. "Huh? Who's that?"

"You know! Kugimiya! The author of *Gen-Lab*?"

Mayu's mouth made a big "oh." "Right..."

"Come on, Mayu, he's not just, like, the most famous in our class. He's the biggest success story in the history of our school."

"I know. But honestly, it's actually almost so big a deal that it doesn't seem real, you know what I mean?"

"No, I totally get that. Anyway, everyone's super excited that he's coming." Momoko went on, growing more excited herself. "Boy, people are so fickle, you know what I mean? Everyone used to call him like, a manga nerd or 'skinny nail,' and make fun of him. Me, included, I guess."

"Right, 'cause *kugi* means 'nail.' Kids are so dumb." Mayu could still picture her friend sticking out her tongue behind Kugimiya's back in the hallway.

"Oh, right," Momoko said. "I almost forgot. So, at some point during the reunion, we're going to do a little memorial for Tsukumi."

"Oh," Mayu said, feeling a faint stirring in her chest at mention of the name but taking care not to let it show in her voice.

"We were saying that anyone who has something to remember him by should bring it. Mayu, you two were close, right? You got anything? A photo or something?"

"Huh? I don't know, I haven't really thought about it. I'd have to look."

"Great, do that."

"Yeah, no problem, just don't get your hopes up."

"Well, I kind of am. So far we don't have anything, so not to pressure you, but, the pressure's on."

"Alright, I'll look."

“Thanks.” Momoko sounded relieved. “Call me.”

“Got it.”

“And sorry for calling so late at night.”

“No problem.”

Mayu put her phone down and let the memories rise in her mind. It had been a while since she’d talked to Momoko, and some of the names she mentioned she hadn’t thought of in ages.

Tsukumi...

The image of his shoulders, stocky for a junior high student, and face that, while defined, still carried a boyish air, triggered an old ache somewhere deep inside her.

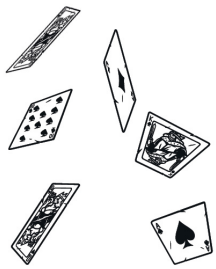
“Don’t listen to those idiots. So what if you’re Mr. Kamio’s kid? You’re still you.”

He had given her encouragement just when she had needed it. And this when he was already bedridden. He’d grown so thin and pale, yet that lively glint in his eyes was as bright as ever.

It was sixteen years ago when he died.

If he were alive and going to the reunion, I would have signed up without a second thought.

Mayu took a shower, finished her nightly skin care routine, and got into bed. Before turning off the light, she checked her phone and saw a “good night” message from Kenta. She replied, “good night,” and reached for the light switch.



2

He bent down and hooked his fingertips under the shutter. The metal felt cold, and chill air rushed in through the gap. It was still early March, after all.

Kohei Haraguchi braced his feet and lifted the shutter in one go. It rattled loudly as it went up, but there was always a spot it snagged and stopped. Probably because the middle part was bent–not surprising after thirty years of daily use.

He banged on the shutter from below to force it up. He used to think he wanted to get an electric shutter, but the urgency had faded at some point, and he'd long since abandoned the idea.

There were three shutters covering the front of the store, but for now he opened just the middle one then stepped outside and looked around. Cars were passing now and then along the one-lane road in front of the store. One truck passed by while he watched, but it was clear there was less traffic than last week.

There were hardly any people on the sidewalk either. In the distance, he could just make out a few children, probably on their way to school. Around this time last year, schools across Japan had been closed for the pandemic. He wondered if spring break might come early again this year. He remembered his friends with children complaining about politicians making decisions about schooling with no understanding of what life was like for dual-income families.

Haraguchi checked his watch. It was already past eight a.m. For a shopping street just a few minutes' walk from the station, it felt far too quiet. And it was a Monday. How long would this go on?

A sound came from next door. The sliding glass door of the pottery shop opened and the shopkeeper came out carrying a garbage bag.

"Good morning," Haraguchi said.

"Morning, Ko'," the shopkeeper replied, bowing his crop-haired head. He was more than ten years older than Haraguchi, and had already been helping at the pottery shop when Haraguchi was still in grade school.

"How's business today? Running any pottery classes?" Haraguchi asked.

The shopkeeper made a sour face and shook his head. "Hardly. We only had three groups total over the weekend. I figure this week will be even worse."

"You think? I heard about the cluster up in Tokyo, but we haven't had a single case around here."

The shopkeeper's mouth twisted into a frown. "That won't last long. Just give it a little time, we'll get some cases. It's always like that. We're just on a little time delay from what happens in Tokyo, that's all. Then we'll have to cut down on tourism and 'leisure,' whatever that means. Everyone stays home, and no one gives a crap about pottery."

"Yeah, it's not great for us, either," Haraguchi said.

"Ah, you'll be fine. Even if people go out less, they're not going to stop drinking. Just watch, your individual orders will go right up, I bet."

"It's not really like that. People who drink at home just buy cheap booze online, by the box. Our main business is regional sake, so we rely on the local restaurants and bars."

The shopkeeper shook his head. "Restaurants will have it hard again. Same goes for inns. I was at the Marumiya yesterday—they've already had several cancellations."

"That's no surprise."

"Worst part is, we never know how long it'll last. Two weeks? Might get a whole month if we're unlucky. It's tough all around," the shopkeeper said, hefting his garbage bag and walking away.

Haraguchi sighed. The Marumiya was the biggest hotel in town. Counting their cancellations was a good way to guess how much sales would drop—not just for his store, but for the whole area.

He went around to the parking lot next to the shop where his old truck was parked. The "Haraguchi Co." lettering on the side was badly faded, but he didn't have the cash to get it repainted now.

He pulled the truck around to the front of the shop and started loading alcohol for delivery. His stops today were the inn, a few bars, and some restaurants. He usually had more than ten places on his list. Today there were three. And with each customer ordering less, the bed of the truck looked almost empty.

Worse news came as he made his rounds. Every single place he stopped said they had no plans to make any orders for the next week.

"Sorry, but we're just not expecting any customers from out of town, and if we're only serving locals, we'll just have a lot of undrunk sake lying around," said one bar owner who was pushing sixty. He shrugged apologetically. "Honestly, I'm wondering if we can even keep going like this. The wife and I have been saying maybe this is the year we finally close shop."

Haraguchi could only nod in silence. Lately, it was the same story everywhere. He hadn't heard good news for some time. Not since 2020 and Covid-19.

Up in Tokyo, quite a few places in the entertainment districts had gone out of business entirely. Long-established spots, famous restaurants, even high-class clubs in Ginza that had operated for decades had closed one after another. The same was happening in smaller towns too, even where infection counts weren't very high. Those spots that relied on tourism had been hit especially hard.

With a relatively small local population, most restaurant owners in town depended on visitors for more than half their revenue. But with inter-prefectural travel shut down, every business saw sales plummet. Even after the government lifted the state of emergency, things hadn't improved, not really.

Now there were new anti-viral treatments, and effective vaccines, but many still feared the old crowds would never return. *At least, they won't come back here,* thought Haraguchi.

You could be fooled, sometimes, in the short term. Last month, a fair number of tourists had come into town. Some of the local inns and hotels filled up over the weekends. Haraguchi was making the rounds of local restaurants almost every day to restock. The restaurants felt lively, and people—the staff, owners, and especially the customers—looked cheerful.

But people knew better now. The good days wouldn't last long, and the

messaging was starting to become predictable. Like when the governor of Tokyo announced that they'd "seen a rise in cases," the next day, without fail, the vans would make the rounds, loudspeakers perched on the roof broadcasting messages like, "please refrain from unnecessary travel to and from the capital region."

And so the locals would brace themselves. *Here it comes again.* People stopped heading into the city, and the city stopped coming to them. Sales dropped through the floor and then some. They had all seen the cycle repeat multiple times in the span of just a few months.

And now, a week ago, another advisory in Tokyo. "Signs of a possible outbreak," they said, which would be a "watch" if it were a weather report. But everyone knew that a watch could easily get upgraded to a warning.

Some of the college students who'd moved to Tokyo were coming home early before spring break even started, afraid they wouldn't be able to come back at all if they lingered too long in the city. Working people, too, who had gone up to Tokyo with their companies had started moving their families back home. And remote work was now a thing, greatly expanded over the last year. If you didn't have to go into the office, why not live some place where infection risk was lower and the restrictions were looser?

His deliveries finished, Haraguchi turned into a residential neighborhood before heading back to the shop. Off the main road, every street was narrow. He stopped at a red light and noticed a sign discarded by the side of the road. It was illustrated with text that read "*Gen-Lab* House: Opening May 2021!" There was a big hole next to the writing, maybe where someone had kicked it in.

When expectations are high, the disappointment is greater when things don't work out. A lot of things didn't work out in 2021.

He stopped the truck in front of a house. He'd been coming here since he was a child, so it hadn't even registered before, but looking at the house now, he realized how the years had caught up to it. Before getting out of the truck, he pulled out his phone, brought up "Kamio" from his contacts, and tried calling. The phone rang two or three times before he hung up, puzzled. Putting his phone in his pocket, he got out and walked to the gate.

The nameplate at the gate read "Kamio." He pressed the button on the intercom just below the name.

No answer. Haraguchi pressed it again, a longer press this time, but still

nothing. *Strange*, he thought. *Maybe he went out?*

Hesitating, he opened the gate and stepped onto the property. He went up to the front door, assuming it would be locked, but when he turned the knob just to check—

The door opened easily. It wasn't locked. So someone was still home?

"Hello!" Haraguchi called out. The silence of the dimly lit hallway swallowed the echo of his voice. No reply. "Mr. Kamio? You in?"

Still no answer. Haraguchi hesitated. Had something happened? What if Mr. Kamio had collapsed somewhere? He couldn't decide if he should go in or not. The door directly across from the entrance was closed. He knew there was a larger room on the other side.

Oh, right, he remembered, *this house has a backyard.*

Haraguchi stepped back outside and followed the path along the side of the house. He'd been to a barbecue in the backyard here a long time ago. A few old schoolmates from the neighborhood had gathered. It had been more than five years after they'd graduated junior high. Haraguchi had brought some booze from the family shop to contribute, but everyone started collecting money to pay him. When he tried to refuse, Mr. Kamio said, "Just take it. Liquor is your business. Doesn't matter how good friends we are, you never give away your business for free."

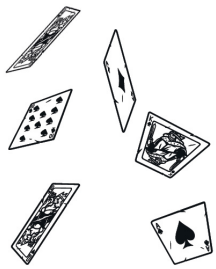
Hearing him say that, it made sense, so he accepted the money. Even with so many years between them and school, Eiichi Kamio remained a reliable mentor, always there to point Haraguchi and his other former students in the right direction.

He made his way down the path and out into the backyard. The small persimmon tree in the corner was still there, and the flowerpots next to it, just like the last time he was here. But something was clearly out of place. There was a fence at the back of the yard, between this property and the neighbor, and a stack of flattened cardboard boxes had been piled up against it, almost as if they were on top of something. Or hiding something. The stack seemed a little random, even careless, for someone as straight-laced and meticulous as Eiichi Kamio to have just left in his yard like that.

Haraguchi walked over, growing oddly nervous. The thought of pretending he hadn't seen anything and just turning around crossed his mind, but something else told him he had to look at whatever was hidden beneath those boxes. This wasn't just him being nosy, he told himself. It

was his duty as a friend.

He grabbed the topmost box. When he pulled at it, the rest of the stack slid aside in a small avalanche of cardboard, revealing what lay hidden underneath.



3

MONDAY AFTERNOON.

Mayu was leaving work to go check out a kitchen showroom when her phone started ringing. The number on the screen was completely unfamiliar, but she recognized the area code. It was from her hometown.

She answered, and a man's voice asked, "Is this Mayu Kamio?"

"Yes, who is this?"

The caller was a police officer from the station nearest her hometown. "Mr. Eiichi Kamio is your father, correct?"

"Yes—I'm sorry—did something happen?"

"Ma'am, I'm very sorry to say, but he was found collapsed at home this morning. He has been confirmed deceased."

Mayu's mind went blank and she couldn't hear the rest of what he said.

It took about an hour by bullet train from Tokyo Station, then another hour rocking in the seat of an express train before Mayu finally reached the station nearest to her family home. She walked out and looked around the area around the station. It had an unusually large parking lot with plenty of space for buses and taxis, which made sense. The main industry out here was tourism. There was the usual complement of restaurants and souvenir shops too, but from the outside, it was clear things weren't very busy these days.

Even on a good year, it wasn't like there were that many attractions in town. There was the historic temple that gave the town its name—that was the main draw—but besides that, it was just a typical hot spring town. Plum and cherry blossoms brought the older crowd flocking, but Mayu didn't see

that happening this season. She guessed that the locals were having it pretty rough.

Last year, of course, had been a complete wash. It had been the same with tourist destinations across Japan—around the world, for that matter. Thanks to Covid, tourism had come to a standstill from spring through early summer. She'd heard that a trickle of tourists had started coming back in the autumn, but even then, they were down to less than a third of peak numbers.

A lone taxi waited at the queue, an elderly driver dozing at the wheel. When Mayu tapped on the window, he pulled the lever to open the rear door with a sleepy face.

"Sorry, could you open the trunk too?"

Mayu had dragged a large suitcase with her, throwing in whatever clothes she could think of since she didn't know when she'd be able to return to Tokyo.

She got in and gave the driver her destination. He raised his eyebrows when she told him the police station.

"Where you coming in from?" He asked after they'd driven a short distance, clearly unable to hide his curiosity.

"Tokyo," Mayu answered, a little too curtly.

"Ah, so, visiting home, then?"

"Something like that."

"I see," the driver said, nodding his head. "Sounds like Covid's making the rounds again, eh?"

Mayu deflected. She was pretty sure he was still curious about why she was going to the police station, but mercifully, he didn't ask.

She took a tablet out of her shoulder bag and opened a text file. On the first line were today's date and the time she'd gotten the call from the police.

When Mayu heard that her father had been found dead, for a few moments she just completely shut down, but soon the need to understand helped her pull herself back together. She quickly pulled out a notebook and pen and jotted down what the officer said, so shaken she could barely understand what he was telling her at times and kept having to ask questions even with the officer's patient explanations.

The text file she was looking at now contained a clean copy of her written notes. She'd made it on the train, worried that she might not remember what

she'd written—her handwriting had been so jumbled.

It read:

March 8, around 10 a.m.: Report of body found
Location: Eiichi Kamio residence
Reporter: Visitor to the Kamio home (Male, former student, name ???)
Death confirmed: 10:25 a.m.
Identity of body: Eiichi Kamio
Time of death: Undetermined
Cause of death: Undetermined (strong possibility of foul play)
Close relatives: Contacted based on call history

In other words, this morning, a man who had come to visit her father found the body and called it in. The police arrived and confirmed the deceased was Eiichi Kamio, but couldn't determine the time or cause of death. However, the condition of the body and circumstances of the discovery had made it obvious that foul play was involved, thus the investigation. Since her father lived alone, they had gone into his landline phone records looking for contacts, which is where they found Mayu's number.

The visitor had been one of her father's students—well, former students, since he had retired years ago. The officer who called Mayu didn't happen to know his name, but Mayu figured a quick check at the police station would clear that up.

Mayu thought that the visitor might possibly be one of her classmates. Her father had been well-liked by his students, even if they weren't in the habit of just dropping by. Maybe someone had paid him a visit to talk about the class reunion on Sunday?

She slid the tablet back into her bag and gazed out the window. The light was already fading outside as the sun dipped behind the low hills surrounding the town. The road was narrow, no center line, with houses alternating with parking lots along the side. Cars were a necessity out here in the countryside, and it wasn't unusual for a single household to own multiple vehicles.

It was a town she knew well, and yet she felt strangely like she had just arrived in a foreign country. Maybe it was the unusual circumstances that were preventing her from feeling any trace of nostalgia. This was not any homecoming she had pictured.

The police officer who'd called had told her that while they'd identified the body, they'd like her to confirm it, so she said she would come. Still, she couldn't leave immediately. She would have to tell work first. The earliest she could be there was that evening.

After that, Mayu had immediately gone back to the office and explained the situation to her boss. Even her boss's usual non-committal smirk faded as he stiffened at the news.

She had taken off work until Friday, though she acknowledged that, depending on how things went, she might not be able to return to work for a while. She contacted clients, rescheduled appointments, and found people to handle the few tasks she couldn't push off. For any work that could be done remotely, she had packed the necessary materials together with her laptop in her suitcase.

Kenta had been out on-site so she called him before getting on the bullet train. When she told him the news that her father might have been murdered, he was speechless.

"I don't know the details yet, I'll be in touch when things settle down."

"Okay," her fiancé had replied in a strained voice. "Hey, if there's anything I can do, just say it. I can take time off too."

"Thanks, Kenta. I'll let you know," Mayu had told him. She wondered exactly what kind of situation might require his help. After all, they weren't married yet. It wasn't like she could expect him to drop everything and come just to provide emotional support. Besides, if she got caught up in a murder case, a wedding would be the last thing on her mind. She'd gotten ready for the trip in such a frantic rush that she hadn't had time to process any of it. It was only now, in the taxi, looking out the window at the streets of her hometown, that the reality of what had happened gradually sank in.

There were few intersections, so not many traffic lights. They arrived at the police station almost too quickly. She headed for the main entrance, dragging her suitcase behind her. The police station was an old, three-story building she might have mistaken for a community center if not for the row of patrol cars in the spacious parking lot. It occurred to her that this was her first time coming here.

A young officer stood at the entrance. She started to explain who she was but to her surprise, he nodded right when he saw her and said, "We've been expecting you. Please, this way."

The officer guided her through the station—something that would never happen in Tokyo. He even checked her in at the reception counter, saying, “They’d like you to wait here. The officer in charge of your case will be here soon.”

“Okay.”

Mayu sat down on an old, small sofa in the waiting room, and a moment later a middle-aged man walked up to her. He wasn’t particularly tall, but he had broad shoulders and projected an air of authority.

“Eiichi Kamio,” Mayu said, standing up. “I’m his daughter.”

The man took a deep breath and lowered his eyes a moment. “My condolences. I’m very sorry for your loss.”

“Um...is he—is my father’s body here?”

“Yes, this way.” The man set off walking and Mayu followed.

As they walked, he introduced himself as Detective Kakitani, section chief of the detective division. This was not the man she’d spoken with on the phone.

The morgue downstairs was an unfurnished room that looked more like a warehouse, with a bed in the center. On the bed lay her father’s body, a white cloth covering his face. Beside the cloth lay his trademark round-rimmed glasses from his years as a teacher.

“Um...is his face all right?”

If he’d sustained some gruesome wound, Mayu figured she’d better to brace herself before lifting the cloth.

“His face? Oh, no, it’s fine. Er, the cloth just felt like the right thing to do. His glasses were found on the ground next to him.”

Mayu swallowed, then slowly stepped closer and, hesitantly, lifted the cloth from his face.

Just as Detective Kakitani had said, there wasn’t anything unusual about the face beneath the cloth. But seeing her father’s face, eyes gently closed as if asleep, for a moment Mayu felt as though it were someone else. It was a moment before she realized it was because there was no expression. Her father had always been very expressive. By comparison, the face before her was as smooth as a Noh mask, devoid of emotion.

“Well?” Kakitani asked from behind her.

“It’s him. My father. No mistake.” As she spoke the words, she felt a heat rising up from deep inside her chest. Suddenly, it was real. Her face grew

hot and the tears began to flow. She reached for her handkerchief but she was already too late. A few teardrops rolled down her cheeks and dripped to the floor.

She forgot about the handkerchief and instead, reached out to touch her father's cheek. The waxy coldness of it only deepened her sense of loss.

Eyes closed, she tried to recall when she'd last seen her father alive. What had they talked about? No matter how far back she searched her memories, only scattered, old images came to mind.

After several deep breaths, she finally pulled a handkerchief out of her bag and wiped her eyes. Then she turned to Kakitani and asked the one thing she wanted to know most.

"What happened to him?"

"I'll explain. And, I have some questions for you as well. Alright if I took a little of your time now?"

"Of course. That's why I came."

"Let's move to another room," Kakitani said, opening the door.

He led her to a small conference room and asked her to wait there a moment before stepping out. A few minutes later, the door opened and Kakitani came back in, followed by several other men. Among them was a man in uniform who Mayu assumed was a high rank. Their expressions were grim.

Detective Kakitani sat down across from Mayu, a document in his hand. "First, I'd like to explain the details. But before that, could you tell us what you were doing during the time period beginning from yesterday morning until this morning?"

"Huh?" Mayu was taken aback. She didn't immediately understand the question. "You want to know what I was doing?"

"That's correct."

"Um, but, why would you need to know that?"

"My apologies," Kakitani said, with a curt bow of his head. "I'll explain more shortly, but we consider this an extremely serious case. It's likely there will be a rather involved investigation, which requires that we know the whereabouts of anyone remotely connected, without exception. I understand you've just lost your father, and apologize for the intrusiveness of some of our questions, but I hope you'll understand."

Mayu looked around at the other men. All of them sat with their eyes cast

downward, the same grave expressions on their faces.

This is a big deal, she realized anew. These were professional police officers, and even they looked nervous.

"Of course," Mayu said. "Uh, the day before yesterday I stayed home all day, doing chores—cleaning and laundry, mostly. Yesterday, I was out all day with my fiancé meeting people about the wedding. I can provide all the names, they're in my schedule. After that, we went to see a movie, and had dinner. Oh, my fiancé's name is Kenta Nakajo. I got home around 10:30 that night, and this morning I went to work as usual."

"Thank you." Kakitani nodded. "We'd appreciate it if you could give us the relevant contact information later."

"Right, no problem."

"Thank you. So, you said you were at home the day before yesterday—you were alone?"

"Yes, by myself."

"And you didn't go out at all? Not even out for meals?"

"No, I didn't leave the apartment. I had dinner delivered from a local place."

"Which restaurant, and about what time?"

"Uh, it's called 'Namputei'—they do pasta, things like that. I think it was around seven o'clock."

"You order from there often?"

"Well, I used to go there and eat a lot. Since Covid, they started doing deliveries, so I order now and then."

"You know the delivery person?"

"Sure, I mean, not by name, but I know them."

"Great. Sorry, what was the name of the restaurant again?"

Mayu said "Namputei," again and wrote it out for them on a piece of paper they provided.

Kakitani took the paper and nodded. "Thank you. I can fill you in a bit on the details of the case now. Are you familiar with a man by the name of Haraguchi? He was a former student of your father's."

It didn't take long for "Haraguchi" to resolve into a face in Mayu's mind. He was the son of a liquor store owner. Friendly guy. She remembered him from middle school.

"Yes," she said. "There was someone in my class...Kosuke—wait, no—

Kohei Haraguchi? I'm pretty sure that was his name."

Kakitani nodded, satisfied. "Kohei. This morning, Mr. Kohei Haraguchi visited your father's house. According to his statement, he needed to discuss an upcoming class reunion and had tried calling Mr. Kamio during the day yesterday, and then again at night, but hadn't gotten through. He called again early this morning, with the same result, which was odd, so he decided to pay him a visit.

"Haraguchi rang the intercom, but there was no answer," Kakitani continued. "Thinking Mr. Kamio might be out, he tried the front door, just in case, and found it unlocked. He called out inside, but heard no reply. Hesitant to enter without permission, he went around to the backyard to check, which is where he spotted a stack of flattened cardboard boxes in a pile. When he looked underneath, he discovered your father's body, though he didn't make an identification on the spot. He called the police immediately.

"The rest you may have already heard, but the police arrived quickly, and once they had confirmed the death, they determined based on Mr. Haraguchi's statement and a driver's license found on the body that it was likely your father, Eiichi Kamio. After searching the house for information on family contacts, they found your name and number on the landline phone, and Mr. Haraguchi confirmed you were his daughter." Kakitani looked up from his papers and asked, "Any questions about any of this so far?"

"Was my father..." Mayu began. Her voice cracked. She cleared her throat and started again. "Was my father murdered?"

Kakitani glanced at the other men—his superiors, Mayu assumed—then returned his gaze to her. "We believe it's highly likely."

"How...how was he killed? The body...uh, I couldn't tell."

"Well," began Kakitani, then he glanced at the other officers and shook his head. "We can't say for certain yet. There will be an autopsy. Anything definitive will have to wait until after that."

"So, he wasn't stabbed or something?"

"I'm sorry, I can't answer that question."

"Did someone hit him?"

Kakitani was silent, but Mayu couldn't tell whether his silence was a denial or simply a refusal to answer.

“What about the killer? I guess you were asking me for an alibi earlier...so that means you don’t have anyone in custody yet?”

Kakitani shook his head. “We’ve really only just begun the investigation...”

“You don’t have any leads? No suspects at all?”

Kakitani started a reply, but was interrupted by another voice. “Miss?” It was the man in uniform, who seemed like the highest-ranking policeman in the room. He was looking straight at Mayu. “You don’t have to worry about a thing. We will do everything in our power to catch whoever did this.”

“But can’t you just—” Mayu stopped herself from continuing, *“tell me something, anything.”* She realized the police had nothing to gain by sharing information with the bereaved. Or at least, she assumed that’s what they were thinking.

“May I ask a question?” Kakitani said after a moment.

“Please,” Mayu replied.

“I know this will sound a bit cliché, but do you have any idea at all who might have done this? Was your father involved in any disputes, any kind of trouble?”

“I can’t think of a thing,” Mayu said without a moment’s hesitation.

“Nothing? Please, take your time. Give it a little thought.”

Mayu slowly shook her head. “I’ve been thinking about it since the moment I left to come here. I mean, I never thought I’d know anyone who got murdered, least of all my father. And I did think it all through. Maybe there was a grudge, or jealousy. Even if he’d done nothing wrong, someone might still hate him. I went through all the possibilities. But...nothing. Unless it was just a random killing, someone who just happened to be passing by...that’s really the only possibility I could come up with.”

She stopped and looked up at Detective Kakitani. It was getting hard for her to keep her emotions in check. The detective blinked a couple times, then gave a small nod.

“I understand. Let me ask a different question. Do you know if there was anything of particular value, anything rare at your father’s house? Something that might be targeted for theft?”

Mayu’s eyes widened. “You mean it could have been a robbery?”

“We’re considering the possibility.”

Had they found evidence suggesting someone had broken into the house?

Earlier, Kakitani had said they found Mayu's contact information during their search. If the house had been properly locked, they wouldn't have just entered. Mayu imagined someone breaking in and messing the place up, and she grew even gloomier.

"Nothing that I'm aware of. At least, I never saw anything like that."

"I see," Kakitani replied. "I was wondering, would you be willing to check the house and see if you notice anything missing, possibly anything that might have been stolen?"

"You mean today?"

"No, it's late. How about tomorrow morning?"

"Sure, that's no problem. Should I go straight to the house?"

"No, we'll come get you. Have you arranged a place to stay?"

"I'll be at the Marumiya."

When she got the call earlier that day, the officer had asked her to avoid the house for a while, so she'd made a last-minute reservation—not a problem in a tourist town like hers in the middle of a pandemic.

"The Marumiya, got it." Kakitani took a note, then looked up. "By the way, are you aware of any plans your father might have had this past weekend? Did he mention going anywhere or meeting anyone?"

"Not especially. I hadn't been in very close touch with him lately."

"Right..." Kakitani glanced at his superior again. Mayu wondered if his question had some particular significance. Kakitani asked when Mayu had last seen her father and what they'd talked about. Like before, when she was looking at the body in the morgue, specifics fled her mind. She guessed that the last time they'd met was when she had last been home, but couldn't recall what they'd discussed.

Finally, they had her fill out various forms: permission to examine Eiichi Kamio's cell phone, to obtain copies of his proof of residency and family register, and more. It all felt like a strange invasion of privacy, but, she accepted, necessary for the investigation. By the time she was done, it was after seven in the evening. Kakitani escorted her to the entrance. He asked if she needed a taxi, and she gratefully accepted.

After calling the cab company, Kakitani tucked his phone in his inner pocket and bowed apologetically. "You must be exhausted. I'm sorry we were such a crowd in there. Murders are...rare around here. The chief and everyone, really, are all on high alert.

So the man in uniform was the police chief.

"It's fine," Mayu replied quietly.

"I can only imagine what you're going through. To lose your father is one thing, but a murder—and someone so respected, at that. A senseless tragedy, is what it is. I don't know who killed him, but what they did was unforgivable."

Respected? Mayu looked at Kakitani. "Did you know my father?"

"I did," he replied. "I'm from here myself. I had Mr. Kamio for Japanese class in junior high."

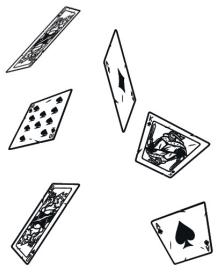
"Oh, I see."

"We'll catch the killer, I promise you."

"I...thank you. I hope you do," Mayu said, feeling only slightly comforted.

The taxi arrived before long. As she was leaving the station, the last words she'd exchanged with her father came back to her. She had called to tell him the schedule for the wedding. Just before she hung up, her father had said:

"My little Mayu, off to be a bride. Be happy."



4

At the sound of the alarm, Mayu opened her eyes. She grabbed the phone by her pillow and turned it off. It was seven a.m. Bright sunlight slipped in through a gap in the curtains.

Morning, finally.

She had woken up several times during the night. Seeing it was still dark outside she had tried to go back to sleep, but even if she had drifted off, it hadn't been very deep. Even just now, the alarm hadn't really woken her. She'd been awake for a while, lying curled up beneath the covers, unable to get out of bed.

Finally, she threw back the comforter and forced herself to sit up. The beds here were thin futons on tatami mat flooring. It had been a long time since she'd slept on tatami, but that wasn't the reason for her fitful sleep.

It was her father's face, his dead face in the morgue, burned into her retinas. It wouldn't leave. Along with that, other images came, snippets of memories from when he was alive, happy times. Each memory brought a fresh wave of grief. She felt ashamed at how foolish she had been to just assume, with no proof or reason, that her father would always be there for her.

She went to the bathroom and washed her face at the sink. Her head felt heavy, probably from lack of sleep. There weren't any dark circles under her eyes in the mirror but her face was clearly lacking energy. She slapped her cheeks with her hands, trying to bring a blush to the skin, and a lift to her spirits.

Her stay included breakfast. She wasn't hungry at all, but decided to go down to the dining hall anyway. It was going to be a long day, and her body

wouldn't hold up if she didn't eat anything. She picked up her phone and immediately, a message came in from Kenta.

"Morning. You sleep at all? Want me to come down?"

She had called Kenta the night before and told him about everything that had happened at the police station. He'd been shocked when she told him it was an actual murder investigation. She guessed he was also concerned about what this might mean for the wedding plans, but he hadn't brought it up—no doubt he'd realized this wasn't the time.

Mayu thought for a moment, then wrote back:

"I didn't sleep too great, but I'm okay. Going to check on the house today. Don't worry, I'll be fine on my own."

It wasn't that she didn't want him close. But still, she felt like she shouldn't depend on him too much. Kenta had things he needed to do too. And they weren't married yet.

The dining hall was empty when she got there. Now that she thought about it, she hadn't seen anyone else in the building since last night. It *was* a weekday, but also, she belatedly realized, Covid might have something to do with it.

A middle-aged woman in a traditional restaurant uniform greeted her with a cheerful "Good morning." Mayu recognized her as the desk clerk from check-in the previous night. She probably owned the place. Mayu was invited to sit wherever she liked, so she chose a four-person table by the window.

The proprietress brought out the Japanese-style breakfast of grilled fish. Seeing the grated daikon radish on the side, Mayu actually started to feel a bit hungry. She murmured an "*itadakimasu*," briefly put her hands together, and picked up her chopsticks.

Just one sip of the steaming miso soup and she felt as if every cell in her body had woken up. The fish was delicious, too.

I wish I was here on vacation.

She was about halfway through breakfast when her gaze fell on a poster on the wall. It was an illustration of a chisel-faced young man climbing a sheer cliff. The character Mayu knew well—he was the hero in a popular manga and anime series. The poster read: *Gen-Lab House Coming Soon! Opening Next May.* Now that she thought about it, she remembered hearing something of the sort in an online news article.

“Here for work?” a voice pulled her out of her thoughts. It was the proprietress. She came up and refilled Mayu’s cup from a teapot.

“Something like that,” Mayu replied, a bit vaguely. Saying this was home would only invite more questions she really didn’t want to answer right now.

“Well, that can’t be easy, what with things the way they are.” She was talking about Covid, of course. The woman pointed at the poster. “You know about it?”

“I do. *Gen’no Labyrinth*, right?”

That was the full name of the show, shortened to *Gen-Lab* by the kids, of course. The “*Gen’no*” part meant something like “phantom brain.”

“I know I should probably take the poster down,” the proprietress said, “seeing as how the whole plan was scrapped. But I have trouble letting go, you know?”

“It was supposed to open next May?”

The woman gave a tired smile. “Actually, that poster went up right after New Year’s, so it actually meant *this* May. Of course, no one expected things to turn out quite like they did.”

“They were going to recreate the house from the show, right?” Mayu asked.

The proprietress nodded. “Yes! As a matter of fact, the anime’s creator is from here.”

“Oh, really?” Mayu said, even though she knew it very well. She been in school with the creator, Kugimiya, after all.

“The town where the main character lives is modeled after our town. That’s how the idea came up to recreate the hero’s house exactly as it appears in the show. See? *Gen-Lab* House.”

“The house where Azuma Zero sleeps,” Mayu said. Azuma was the name of the hero of the story.

“Exactly,” the woman replied with a satisfied smile. “So you’re a fan?”

“I used to read it every once in a while.”

The proprietress looked a bit surprised. “You read the manga? I didn’t think many women went that deep. Seemed more like a guy thing.”

“Like I said, I only read it once in a while.”

“Well,” the proprietress said, “I hadn’t heard of it at all when it was still just a manga series. But my sons are really into the anime. ‘It’s super cool,’

they said, and when they told me that it was modeled on our town I started watching it a bit too. It's fun to find places I recognize, even if they're only on screen a second. Of course, most of the show doesn't take place in the town at all.

"Right...because they're in the Labyrinth."

"Still, it's impressive, isn't it? I'm always amazed when someone can just come up with something like that. What must go on in a manga artist's mind to have such ideas?" The proprietress sighed and looked back at the poster. "Imagine how many people would have come to visit the house if Covid hadn't happened."

"When was the project canceled?" Mayu asked.

"Last June, I think, officially at least. People were saying it would be canceled for sure before that, of course. No one knew what would happen with Covid a year down the line. Even if things did calm down, there was no telling how many visitors would come. And a ton of anime fans would mean a lot of infection risk...either way, the whole thing was dead in the water."

Nothing about her story was surprising. The Tokyo Olympics had been postponed, even Disneyland shut down for an extended period. The thought of opening an anime museum after just one year was nothing but a pipe dream.

"It's too bad. A lot of people must have been looking forward to it," Mayu said. She wasn't just being polite. It had been a real disappointment for her, too.

The proprietress nodded, a pained look on her face. "Disappointment is one thing, but a lot of people lost a lot of money."

"Oh?"

"Definitely. This wasn't just some big corporate project. This was supposed to benefit the whole town. People, locals, made serious investments. I heard stories about people selling land passed down for generations to raise the funds, only to have construction stall at the two-thirds mark with no way to get their money back."

Mayu shook her head. "I had no idea!"

Despite this being her hometown, Mayu hadn't heard a word about the failed project. He father surely would have known. She guessed he had probably just spared her the gossip. Why would someone living up in

Tokyo even care?

The proprietress looked up at the clock on the wall, then waved her hands apologetically. “Sorry, I’m interrupting your breakfast with all my chatter.”

“Not at all,” Mayu replied.

“Please take your time. If you want more tea, just let me know,” the woman said, walking away with a light step.

Mayu looked back at the poster and noted the name: “Katsuki Kugimiya.” She remembered a small, skinny kid who always walked with his head down. They’d been in the same class in second year. How strange that such an unremarkable boy had ended up creating such a huge sensation. It was amazing sometimes the paths people took in life.

That reminded her: Naoya Tsukumi, her late, sick classmate, had been close friends with Kugimiya. They were always together. Or rather, Kugimiya always followed the other boy. Before his sickness, Tsukumi had been a natural leader. She remembered some of the kids calling Kugimiya “Tsukumi’s shadow” behind his back.

Momoko had told her there’d be a memorial service for Tsukumi at the reunion. Maybe that was why Kugimiya was coming, even though he was probably super busy.

Breakfast finished, Mayu went back to her room to get ready for the day when her phone rang. It was Detective Kakitani. He asked if it would be all right to pick her up in about an hour. “That’s fine,” she told him. After hanging up, she used the room phone to call the front desk to extend her stay. She didn’t expect she’d be able to go back to Tokyo today.

She had just finished getting ready when Kakitani called again to say he was outside the inn.

She hurried out to find a sedan parked by the road with two men standing beside it: Kakitani and a younger man. They were both wearing suits. Mayu was a bit surprised, having expected a patrol car, but then she realized how conspicuous that would have made them.

She sat in the back seat next to Kakitani; the younger man appeared to be the driver.

“Did you get a chance to catch your breath? I know this can be hard,” Kakitani asked.

“I’m managing,” Mayu replied.

“Your cooperation with the investigation will help us catch whoever did

this quickly."

"Thank you, I understand. Just let me know how I can help."

Kakitani nodded. "Well, for starters, did you happen to remember anything last night that might pertain to the case? Anything at all could help, no matter how small."

"I did think about it a lot…"

"And…?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't come up with anything."

"No need to apologize. It's often the case."

Mayu nodded in reply, wondering what he meant. Were senseless murders without any motive common? Or was it that motives for murder were often obscure, even to family members? Somehow, Mayu felt he'd meant the latter. Surely, he'd have realized a daughter who left home for Tokyo couldn't possibly know everything about her father's life back home.

Which was unfortunately true. She really hadn't gone home much after she'd moved to Tokyo for university and found a job there. At best, she only visited once or twice a year, and even then, it was just for a night. If someone had asked her anything about her father's life recently, such as what hobbies he'd taken up, she probably wouldn't have been able to come up with a good answer.

Then again, that wasn't so different from how things had been when she was still living at home. She didn't remember ever showing much interest in what her father did. Maybe that was on purpose. It wasn't that she disliked her father. She loved and respected him. They simply had a policy of not interfering too much in each other's lives.

The Kamio family had been teachers in town for generations. Her great-grandfather taught social studies, and her grandfather, English. Her father had told her once that he'd never considered any other career, and when it came time to choose where he might go for university, his only decision was whether he should study English literature, Japanese literature, or perhaps Chinese literature. It was his belief that the classics of any country were a font of truth about human nature, and as such, could readily serve as a guide for teaching children not just a subject, but how to live. In the end, he went with Japanese literature, simply because, as he put it, "both teacher and student are Japanese."

By the time Mayu was old enough to remember, her father was already a

person of note in town. Many local families had known the Kamios from her great-grandfather or grandfather's times, but more than that, her father, Eiichi Kamio, was famous for the passion he brought to teaching his students. She'd heard stories of him taking time out of his schedule to give advice to students, even the troublemakers—especially the troublemakers, actually. There had even been times when he had taken the students' side in an argument against the school.

Mayu had been "Mr. Kamio's kid," since early elementary. She hadn't minded at the time because of the goodwill that came with it. No one minds hearing their father praised.

But things changed once she started middle school—where her father was teaching. There were only two classes per grade, which meant she had her father for some lessons. Whenever he was standing at the front of the room, she felt uncomfortable and rarely looked up from her desk.

She also learned that her father wasn't just gentle and understanding. He could be strict, too, especially when students didn't apply themselves or worse, misbehaved in class. Even minor infractions earned his ire. It was a side of him Mayu had never seen before.

One day after school, Mayu saw some of her classmates hanging out at the game arcade—against the rules for middle-school kids. One of them noticed her and whispered to his buddies, and that's how the rumors started. When they were called to the teachers' office a few days later and reprimanded, the official line was that someone in town had reported them, but no one believed it. Mayu was branded a tattle-tale and word spread. From then on, some of the kids in her class treated her noticeably colder.

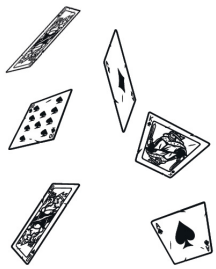
It wasn't all bad, of course. Quite a few students were fond of her father, and they treated her the same as any of their other classmates. But to say middle school wasn't suffocating would be a lie. Just because her father was who he was, Mayu felt like there was double the pressure on her not to break any rules or rub any of the teachers the wrong way. She had to keep her grades above a certain level, and she couldn't complain about school. Most of all, she worked hard not to stand out. A quiet, unremarkable honor student—that was the role she had to play. Naturally, she kept her distance from her father during the day. The same was true at home.

She felt that her father understood her feelings. Even at home, he never tried to force some kind of "father-daughter dynamic" that wasn't there. He

didn’t give her lectures or advice. For the most part, he tried to treat his middle-school-aged daughter like an adult.

It went on like that even after Mayu left middle school for high school. Maybe it would have made her father uncomfortable to try to revert to some kind of relationship they hadn’t had since she was little. It had been so long since he had been just “dad,” that role was no longer an option. Mayu was reluctant to change their relationship too. So it went, with the two of them never taking a step closer, through all of her high school years and beyond, to this day.

That’s why Mayu knew so little about Eiichi Kamio. That’s why even when she heard he had been murdered, she had nothing to tell the police. There was nothing she could do to help.



5

THE CAR PULLED UP to a place filled with memories. Except, Mayu's memories didn't include the several patrol cars and police vans that were now parked along the road. Two uniformed officers stood in front of the Kamio residence.

Stepping out, Mayu looked at her home and took a deep breath. The old Japanese-style house with its surrounding hedge had originally been built by her grandfather. The exterior walls and roof had been repaired every few years, giving parts of it a vaguely eclectic mix of Japanese and Western elements. It had been a long time since she'd really looked at it like this, and as an architect, her impression was that it was strangely charming.

The doors on the parked patrol cars and vans opened, and men in suits started filing out. Nearly all of them were wearing masks—an eerie sight, but in the wake of the pandemic, an utterly familiar one.

One man approached Mayu. He alone wasn't wearing a mask. He had narrow fox-like eyes. He stared at her, then asked Kakitani "so this is the victim's kid?"

"Yes, this is Ms. Mayu Kamio," Detective Kakitani replied, turning toward her. "These gentlemen here are in from prefectural headquarters."

"Uh...okay?" Even knowing who they were, Mayu was unsure how she was expected to greet them.

"You lived here until...when, exactly?" the narrow-eyed man asked bluntly, without even giving his name.

Old Fox, that's what I'll call him.

"Until about twelve years ago." That was the year she graduated high school, but she didn't feel a need to spell that out for him.

“How often have you been back since? Just for New Year’s and *Obon*? Something like that?”

“More or less.”

Old Fox frowned openly. “So you don’t know much about the household, I’m guessing. Assets, that sort of thing.”

It was a rude way of saying it, but Mayu didn’t let her annoyance show. “No. No idea. I said that yesterday too.” She glanced briefly at Kakitani.

Old Fox grunted, scratched between his brows with a fingertip, and sighed. “Still, might as well have you take a look. You might notice something.” He glanced at her hands, then turned to one of the other men and called out, “Hey, someone get her some gloves.”

“I have a pair,” Kakitani offered, taking white gloves from his suit pocket.

Mayu accepted them and pulled them on. It hit her for the first time that she was about to enter a crime scene.

“I’ll show you in,” Kakitani said, going through the gate in front of her.

Being “shown in” to her old home felt wrong somehow, but Mayu followed, with Old Fox and the others behind her. Kakitani opened the front door and motioned her inside.

The moment Mayu stepped onto the entryway she caught a faint scent of camphor–an insect repellent used to protect books. The smell always warmed her because it made her think of home. Today, it only made her sad.

Kakitani crossed the polished wooden hallway and opened the door to what had originally been the living room, but had later become her father’s study.

She glanced in from the doorway and blinked, mouth agape. The floor was littered. It was such a mess that there was hardly any place to step. Papers, paper bags, glasses, clocks, stationery, pills, CDs, DVDs, cassette tapes, videotapes, all scattered about with zero sense of order.

“Whoa,” she muttered.

“I hesitate to ask,” Kakitani began, “but this wasn’t the normal state of affairs for your father, was it? That is, he wasn’t always this messy, was he?”

“Of course not! Never. He was always neat and orderly. Everything had a place, and it was rare for him to leave anything lying around.”

“Of course. That jibes with the Mr. Kamio I remember.”

Mayu entered the room, careful not to step on anything, which wasn’t easy. It was a fairly large room, with plenty of space for a table, sofa, and desk. But what defined it were the built-in bookshelves running along the walls. Her grandfather had them made when the house was built, and they reached all the way up to the ceiling. The top shelves mostly held English and American books from her grandfather’s collection. The ones below those were her father’s—mostly Japanese literature. In one corner, he had lined up old school documents neatly by year, in his typically well-organized fashion.

The shelves from around the middle down had doors, many of which stood open. Peeking inside, she saw several of them were completely empty.

The Old Fox walked up to the shelves, both hands shoved deep in his pockets. “Is it safe to assume that most of what’s scattered on the floor originally came from these shelves?” he asked, glancing back at Mayu. “What do you think?”

“Probably, yes. Though I can’t say I knew the contents that well.”

Her father had mainly kept things other than books in the shelves with doors–mostly his sizable collection of CDs and videos. His interests had extended beyond literature to music and film as well.

“Notice anything missing?” Old Fox asked. “Anything of particular value, or something the deceased treasured?”

Mayu looked between the shelves and the items lying scattered on the floor, then slowly shook her head. “To be honest, I don’t know. I never really kept track of what was in which shelf. And like I said yesterday, I never heard of anything in this house being especially valuable.”

“Still,” the Old Fox said, “hard to believe he had nothing of value at all. Back when you lived here, did you ever see him putting things away in someplace secret? Like a safe?”

“Well, it’s not a safe, but I guess—” Mayu walked over to the desk. The drawers had been pulled out, their contents dumped on the floor. Among them, she spotted two bankbooks. “Anything of importance he kept in this drawer.”

She reached down to pick up the bankbooks but Old Fox’s sharp “don’t touch those!” made her flinch and pull her hand back.

“Sorry,” he said coolly. “Just, try to avoid handling anything unnecessarily. We’ve already checked those bankbooks. Any other valuables you remember? Jewelry, for instance?”

“Jewelry?”

“I understand your mother passed away some time ago. Did she have any jewelry, rings, anything like that?”

“She did, but I have them now.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. My father gave them to me when my mother died. There was no point in him keeping them, he said, and he assumed my mother probably intended to leave them to me anyway.” Mayu added, “They’re deeply meaningful to me, of course, but they’re not worth much. At least, they’re not the sort of thing anyone would break in to steal.”

“Fair enough,” Old Fox said with a nod that suggested he hadn’t expected they had much in the way of valuable jewelry anyway.

“I mean, if there’s anything of actual value in here, maybe some of the books?” Mayu looked up at the top shelves.

“Books?”

“My grandfather and father were both into literature. Between them they had quite the collection. Some of them were quite old. It’s possible they might be worth something.”

“I see,” Old Fox said, eyeing the shelves without much interest. “No sign they were disturbed. Looks like our culprit wasn’t much of a reader.”

“I guess not.” Mayu was looking away from the shelves when she heard a voice in the hall, one of the policemen challenging a new arrival.

“Sorry, sir, who are you? This is an active crime scene, you can’t just—”

“Walk in? Says who?” a second voice shot back. Mayu caught her breath; the voice was one she recognized.

It can’t be—

Old Fox frowned in the intruder’s direction, calling out, “What’s this now?”

“Someone who says he lives here,” came his subordinate’s answer from the hall.

“What?”

“Out of my way,” the familiar voice said. “Let me through. What are you all doing packed in here like this? I sure hope you all tested negative for

Covid."

A man pushed his way through the detectives and finally came into view. He was tall and skinny, with naturally curly hair that went down to his shoulders and a chin covered with his trademark unkempt stubble. He was wearing a military jacket that looked like it had seen its share of action over the years, none of it actually military.

"And you are?" Old Fox asked.

"Normally you're supposed to give your own name before asking someone else's, but whatever. Like I told those idiots outside, I live here. Go ask City Hall if you think I'm lying." He spoke rapidly, but crisply as ever. Mayu never knew if that was just the way he talked naturally, or if he had practiced it.

"Ah!" Detective Kakitani said. "I think I know who you are."

Old Fox shot him a puzzled look.

"This morning I had my men check the registry for this address," Kakitani explained. "There was one other name listed besides the victim's." He pulled out a notepad from his inside pocket. "Mr. Takeshi Kamio? Younger brother to Eiichi Kamio?"

The man in the military jacket—Takeshi Kamio, Mayu's uncle—grimaced at Kakitani. "If you knew as much, why didn't you bother telling those idiots outside? Could have saved me the trouble of arguing with them."

"Well, it's just, we didn't expect you to show up today."

"I'd think it's my business when I come back to my own house. You all, on the other hand, have no right. How about you clear out? Now." Takeshi jabbed his finger toward the door.

Old Fox glared at Mayu's uncle and pulled his phone out, tapped it quickly, and held it to his ear. "It's me. I need you to check something. You got the Kamio registry there? Right. I heard there's someone listed besides the victim...name? Hmph. How's that written? Got it." He ended the call and slipped the phone back into his inner pocket.

"And now you've confirmed it," Takeshi said.

"Got any ID? A driver's license, for example."

"Still don't believe me?"

"Due diligence."

"Um," Mayu interrupted. "I can confirm if you need it, this man is my—"

She was about to say “uncle,” but Takeshi held up his left hand to stop her. He pulled his wallet from his cargo pants pocket and slid out his driver’s license. “There. Look as long as you like,” he said, holding it out to Old Fox.

Old Fox was reaching out for the license, when Takeshi’s left hand darted into the inside of the Old Fox’s jacket with astonishing speed and pulled out something: a black police ID wallet.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?” Old Fox’s narrow eyes widened slightly.

“I showed you mine. Only fair you show me yours,” Takeshi said, flipping the wallet open. “Inspector Kogure, huh. Too bad, Mayu. I guess they can’t all be Maigrets, eh?” He angled the ID toward her.

Beneath Old Fox’s photo was the name “Daisuke Kogure.”

“Give that back,” Kogure snapped.

“Easy now. I was going to,” Takeshi said. “More importantly, did you check mine?”

Kogure gave the license in his hand a quick glance, then, looking a little deflated, offered it back to Takeshi.

Grinning, Takeshi took a step toward the detective, slipped the police ID back into his inside pocket, then took his own license back. “I’ll ask again. What are you doing in my house?”

Kogure was about to say something, then he stopped and turned to Mayu. “Could you explain things to your uncle?”

Mayu took a breath, then said, “Dad’s dead.”

Takeshi’s face was expressionless, though it was impossible to tell whether that was from shock, or that he was simply unfazed by the news.

“They found his body in the backyard,” she added. “They say there’s a good chance he was murdered.”

His face still stoney, Takeshi strode up to the sliding glass door facing the backyard, and stared out. “How’d they do it? Stab him with something?”

“Sorry, but we can’t say,” Kogure replied. “That is, we’re keeping that confidential. Given that even the man who found the body doesn’t know how it was done, anyone outside our investigation who knows how he was killed becomes a prime suspect.”

So that’s why they wouldn’t tell me anything yesterday, Mayu thought.

“What about his clothes? What was my brother wearing when he was

found?" Takeshi asked.

"Also confidential," Kogure said. "I'll be frank: we probably won't be able to answer any of your questions, though we'll have plenty of our own. There's a lot we need to know, starting with where were in the time period from Saturday through yesterday."

"Don't get all worked up," Takeshi said. "I'll answer your questions. Just give me a moment. It might not look that way to you, but I'm still coming to terms with the fact that I've lost my brother."

At a loss for a comeback, Kogure grimaced and scratched his head. Next to him, Detective Kakitani looked even more uncomfortable than usual.

After a moment, Takeshi spun around and came back to stand in front of Kogure. "Okay. Ask away. You want to know what I was doing from Saturday night through yesterday? On Saturday, I was at the bar all day and didn't step outside once. The next day—"

"Hang on," Kogure interrupted. "What bar?"

"I run a bar in Ebisu called 'Trap Hand.'" Takeshi again slipped his hand inside Kogure's suit, this time pulling a phone from his right inner pocket and holding it out to him. "Look it up, you'll get the vibe. Just don't trust the reviews. To the last one, they're the ramblings of paupers who wouldn't know good liquor if it bit them—"

"Keep your hands out of my pockets," Kogure snapped, snatching his phone back.

"I was just saving you the trouble of taking it out. What, you're not going to look it up? I'll give you the name again: 'Trap Hand.' That's T-R—"

"I'll take a good look later," Kogure interrupted, slipping his phone back into his inner pocket. "You said you didn't step outside once. Can you prove that?"

"Probably not. I didn't open the bar until nightfall, and before that I didn't see anyone. And it's not like I had a steady stream of customers once I did open."

"What about employees?"

"I don't believe in hiring help. Unless you know an eccentric drunk who'll work for free?"

Kogure snorted derisively. Trap Hand was sounding like just the kind of dingy little backstreet bar he'd thought it was. "You usually sleep at the bar?"

“Yeah. There’s a room in the back.”

“What about Sunday?”

“I got up after noon and watched movies in my room until evening. After that, it was basically the same as Saturday.”

“So you’re open on Sundays?” Kogure asked, eyebrows lifting slightly.

“Basically, I never close. Never know when some oddball’s gonna wander in off the street and start throwing money at me.”

“And yesterday?”

“Ah, I was closed yesterday.”

“Hold on,” Kogure said, pursing his lips. “Didn’t you just say you don’t take days off?”

“‘Basically,’ yes. Yesterday I had some personal business to attend to so I closed shop temporarily. As for what that business was, I’ll exercise my right to remain silent. It’s a private matter.”

Kogure folded his arms and glared at Takeshi. “Putting everything you’ve just told me together, I can only conclude: you don’t got an alibi.”

“I know? It’s a shame, right? But facts are facts,” Takeshi replied blandly.

“I got one more question,” Kogure said. “This one’s important. Why are you here, today? The incident hasn’t been in the news yet. Why did you come back?”

“That’s a weird question. Like I’ve said more than once, this is my house. You don’t need a reason to come home, do you? Do you always have a reason when you go back to your house?”

Kogure bemusedly shook his head. “Okay, next question: when was the last time you came back?”

“Who knows? Don’t remember.”

“Well, how often do you come back, then? Once a month? Once every six months? And don’t even think about lying. We’ll find out.”

“I had no intention of lying. It’s been about two years since I came back.”

“And you came back today why?”

“I just felt like it.”

“I’m sorry, you ‘just felt like it’? After two years? You expect us to believe that?”

“Believe what you want. If you’re so desperate for a reason, call it a premonition.”

“A premonition.”

“Yeah. I had a feeling something bad happened. Imagine my surprise when I got here and saw all the patrol cars out front. Seems like my instincts were right.”

Suspicion clouded Kogure’s narrow eyes. Clearly, he didn’t believe a word of what Takeshi was saying.

“Fine, we’ll leave it at that today. Should you change your mind and want to correct your statement, say so anytime. I’ll be here,” Kogure said.

Takeshi snorted. “Not going to happen. Not in a million years.”

“Oh? That’s funny, because I just had a premonition that I’ll be seeing you not long from now, panicking and tripping over your own toes in a rush to explain yourself.”

Takeshi grinned. “Wanna bet on it? Ten thousand yen says I don’t. I’d go to a hundred thousand, but that might be a bit much for a civil servant out here in the boondocks.”

“A bet I’d be happy to take. Unfortunately, police officers aren’t allowed to gamble. Lucky you. And I have another question. As you can see, this room’s been ransacked. We were having your niece check and see if anything was missing. Since you say you live here, we’d like your insight as well.”

Takeshi looked slowly around the room and lifted his hands in a shrug. “Sorry, but I have no idea. This is my brother’s room, and I make it a rule not to come in here. And like I said, it’s been a while since I was last here anyway. Even if something were missing, I wouldn’t be able to say if it’d had just gotten stolen, or if it was something my brother disposed of himself in the intervening two years.”

“Let’s not limit ourselves to this room, then. Might there have been anything of value in this house at all? Anything you’d consider a family ‘treasure’?”

“You mean like some heirloom vase or hanging scroll? Something like that?”

“You tell me. Is there something like that?” Kogure asked.

“Can’t say, but my guess would be no. Neither my old man nor my brother went in for that kind of thing. What they shared was a love of books,” Takeshi said, pointing at the shelves.

Kogure glanced at the shelves, then back at him. “What about you?”

“Do I look like an antiques collector?”

“I’m asking whether you kept anything of value here. The registry shows you as a resident. Is one of these rooms yours?”

“Second floor, south side. Don’t tell me you’ve already gone through my things.”

“Well, it’s not that we, that is—” Kakitani took a step forward, clearly flustered. “Yesterday, entirely as a precaution, we checked every room. But we only checked the locks and took a cursory examination inside each. We didn’t touch anything without reason. And as far as we could see, there was nothing out of the ordinary at all in any of the upstairs rooms.”

“So you went in. To my room. Without permission.”

“Given that the owner’s body was found in the backyard, and this room downstairs had clearly been ransacked, there was a real possibility the culprit was still hiding in the house. Searching the scene is a standard initial response. Nothing improper about it,” Kogure noted coldly. “As far as we could tell, nothing seemed wrong, but we can’t be sure until you’ve checked it over yourself. I’d like you to do that now.”

“Fine. But unless something’s obviously wrong, you don’t step into my room. You can look in from the hall.”

“We can do that,” Kogure said, then turned to Mayu. “What other rooms are on the second floor?”

“There’s my room. I used it through high school, and I still stay in there when I visit. And there’s my father’s room—originally my parents’ bedroom.”

“And you could check those for us yourself?”

“Of course.”

“In that case, lead on.” Kogure bowed slightly and extended his arm toward the stairs.

“Right, this way.”

Kogure’s manner toward Mayu had become noticeably more polite than it had been earlier. He was all deference now, in stark contrast to his rough handling of Takeshi. She assumed it was strategic. With the arrival of a trouble-making brother, the inspector’s best move was to win over the daughter. Mayu made her way up to the second floor with Kogure close behind. Kakitani followed, and Takeshi brought up the rear.

They checked her father’s room first. This room had begun its life as her grandparents’ bedroom, but by the time Mayu was old enough to remember

anything, her grandfather had already passed away and her grandmother was using the guest room on the first floor. The upstairs bedroom was given to her father and her mother, Kazumi. It was a Japanese-style room with tatami mats, and her parents had originally slept on futons laid out on the floor, but now a bed had been placed by the window. Aside from that and a chest of drawers, there was almost nothing in the way of furnishings, leaving the room rather bare. With his large study downstairs, for her father, this room had been nothing more than a place to sleep.

Like the inspector had said, there was nothing out of the ordinary. She confirmed this and Kogure nodded.

Next was Mayu's own room. This was a smaller, Western-style room, with wall-to-wall carpeting. There was a single bed, a study desk, and a bookcase so small it couldn't begin to compare with the one in the study downstairs. She noticed Kogure glancing at the cork board on the wall, covered with magazine clippings of teenage heartthrobs. She felt a flush of embarrassment and resisted the urge to bolt from the room. Why hadn't it occurred to her to take those down before today? The closet still held rows of clothes she hadn't been able to bring herself to throw away. Another thing she'd have to get rid of soon.

Just to be thorough, she checked her desk drawers as well, then turned to the detectives and said, "I don't think there's anything out of the ordinary."

"Right, now it's your turn," Kogure said, looking at Takeshi.

Takeshi started down the hall without saying a word. His room was at the very end, though his time there had never overlapped with Mayu when she lived here. He had already left the house by the time her father got married.

Mayu had always thought of the room as nothing more than a storage space, and up until a few years ago, that's exactly what it was: a pile of stuff they no longer used but hadn't gotten rid of for one reason or another. They only got around to cleaning it out after her mother Kazumi's death.

Takeshi opened the door slowly. The room beyond was dimly lit, blackout curtains drawn tight. Feeling along the wall for the switch, her uncle turned on the light and stepped in. Kogure stood in the doorway, craning his neck to see inside, leaving Mayu to peer in from behind him.

Takeshi's room was even barer than her father's. Aside from a round table with a single chair, there was only a small cabinet and a single painting hanging on the wall. Mayu looked up at it and stiffened. It was of a

woman's face, with her left eye closed. The right eye was open to reveal a pitch-black iris staring straight ahead. Mayu felt as though it was looking straight at her and unconsciously averted her own eyes.

Takeshi went over to the window, drew the curtains back, and undid the latch.

"What do you think you're doing? No touching," Kogure barked.

"What? I can't let a little fresh air into my own room?" Takeshi said, throwing the window wide open.

"It's quite likely we'll need to examine this room in detail, and if you go leaving fingerprints—" Kogure broke off, and Mayu immediately understood why. Takeshi was wearing white gloves.

Behind her, she heard Kakitani mutter, "when did he put those on?"

Just then, an electronic warble sounded from Takeshi's jacket. It was probably his phone, but her uncle acted as though he hadn't even heard it.

"Satisfied, Inspector? There's certainly nothing out of the ordinary here that I can see," Takeshi said.

"What about the cabinet?" Kogure asked. "Aren't you even going to open it?"

"No need. Nothing's been stolen."

"How can you say that without even looking?"

"Ask your boy Kakitani here," Takeshi said, jabbing his thumb toward the detective. Kogure glanced back, frowning.

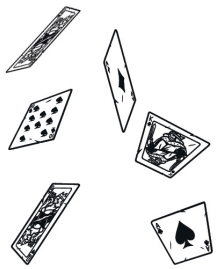
"Ah, right. The cabinet's contents should be undisturbed," Kakitani said, a little flustered. "It's locked."

"Locked?"

Takeshi held up a keyring from which dangled a small key. "Can't open it without this, and there's no sign the keyhole's been forced, so the contents are unscathed." He bent as he spoke and gave the cabinet a firm tug. It didn't budge.

Once again, Kogure seemed to be out of things to say. His mouth twisted in a frown, and he stroked his chin.

"Right," her uncle said after a moment. "If you're satisfied, Inspector. I think we're done here. And we've given the place a good airing out, too." He shut the window, turned the lock, and drew the charcoal-gray curtains closed.



6

Downstairs, the police explained that they wanted to preserve the scene as much as possible so the house would be off-limits for the time being. It was already past noon by the time Mayu was finally released by Inspector Kogure and the others. As when she had arrived, Kakitani and his colleagues offered to give her a lift back to the inn.

Takeshi turned toward her. “Wait, where are you staying?”

“The Marumiya,” she answered.

He frowned a moment, then gave a small nod. “Dumpy little inn, but I suppose it’ll do. All right, I’m staying there too. Give me a lift.”

“It’s fine by me, but, uh...” Mayu looked over at Kakitani.

“No problem, I’ll take the front seat, then,” the detective said, opening the passenger-side door.

Mayu got into the back, and Takeshi climbed in after her.

“Section Chief Kakitani, you are someone who gets it. A reasonable man. Thank you,” Takeshi said as he fastened his seat belt.

“You’re too kind.”

“Can I score one of your cards? I’d like a way to contact you if anything comes up.”

“Ah, of course.”

Takeshi accepted the business card from Kakitani and studied it closely. “Just to be clear,” her uncle said, “our lodging expenses are coming out of the investigation budget, right?”

He can’t be serious! Mayu looked over at her uncle, who, for his part, showed no sign that he thought he’d said anything out of line.

“Er, well, that might be a bit difficult,” Kakitani hedged.

“Seems easy to me. We’ve turned over our house to your little investigation. It’s only natural we should be compensated.”

“Right, well, I’ll, um, check with the office.”

“I’m counting on you, Detective. What we can afford for dinner tonight depends on it,” Takeshi said calmly. If the police were picking up the tab, he clearly intended to eat very well.

Even so, Mayu tilted her head in puzzlement. Takeshi had called the detective “Section Chief Kakitani” before even seeing his card. When had he found that out? Mayu couldn’t recall the detective introducing himself while they were at the house.

The car pulled up in front of the Marumiya before long.

“We’ll be counting on your cooperation throughout the investigation,” Kakitani said as Mayu and Takeshi got out.

They entered the main entrance of the hotel to find the proprietress standing at the counter. “Welcome back,” she said with a friendly smile that said she was utterly unaware they had just come from a crime scene investigation.

Mayu picked up her room key and said, “my uncle would like to stay as well. Do you have a room available?”

The woman’s smile wavered slightly as she glanced at the computer in front of her, then she looked up again. “Yes, we can get something ready for you.”

“Great,” Takeshi said. “In that case, gimme the best room you have. The Royal Special Suite, the Presidential Suite, something like that.”

The smile vanished from her face. “Well, we do have a suite, but that’s only available for parties of two or more. I’m afraid that for single guests, we only have one room type available.”

Takeshi clicked his tongue loudly. “That makes sense, with all of the other guests knocking down your door.” He glanced out at the nearly empty parking lot, then looked back at the proprietress behind the counter. “But fine, I get it. I’m ready to splurge, but you’re not ready to make money. Whatever. I’ll take the single.”

“I’m very sorry, sir. If you would just fill this out,” the woman said meekly, producing a registration card.

There was still time before check-in, and Takeshi said he was starving, so they walked over to the hotel restaurant for lunch. Mayu’s appetite still

hadn't recovered, but after looking over the menu she decided she could probably manage some grated yam soba. Takeshi ordered the grilled chicken plate and a draft beer.

"You're really digging in," Mayu said in disbelief. "And a beer? At lunch? Your own brother's just been murdered!"

"You disapprove?"

"It's just...it's weird. Most people would be too shocked to have much of an appetite" Mayu looked at her uncle's cool detachment and suddenly realized something. "Wait, did you already know? That Dad was murdered?"

Takeshi folded his arms and closed his eyes, saying nothing.

"Uncle Takeshi!" Mayu shouted, hitting the table with her fist. "Are you even listening to me?"

"Hey, simmer down. I'm running on fumes over here," Takeshi said, his eyes still closed.

"I need an answer. Why did you come back? You've never done anything like this before."

"Weren't you listening to what I told the inspector? I told you, I had a feeling something was wrong."

"Yeah, not buying it. Tell me the truth."

"What do you need to know for? It's got nothing to do with you."

"It bugs me. Please?" Mayu said, putting her hands together like she was begging. That got zero reaction from her uncle.

Their food arrived and Takeshi finally opened his eyes and reached for his beer mug. He took a bite of grilled chicken and gave a small nod. "Not terrible. Whether it's worth what they're charging is another matter."

Mayu glanced at the menu card where it stood near the edge of the table. The price of grilled chicken didn't strike her as particularly high. It did remind her in that moment that her uncle had one striking quirk.

"How about I treat you to lunch?" she asked.

Takeshi's chopsticks stopped midair. He gave her a suspicious look. "And for that, you want me to tell you why I came here? You really think pocket change is enough to sway me?"

Mayu said, "I'll throw in your room tonight, too, then. How about that?"

"A week," her uncle replied.

"What?"

“I’m planning to stay here until there’s at least a path forward toward solving the case. I figure it’ll take at least a week.”

“You’re serious? What kind of uncle bleeds his niece dry like that?”

“If you don’t like it, easy, negotiations are over. Makes no difference to me.”

“What about two nights?”

“That’s cutting it a little thin. A compromise: five nights.”

“Three. I can’t afford any more than that.”

“Throw in lunch on the fourth day and we’ve got a deal.”

Mayu let out a sigh. This was an expense she hadn’t seen coming, but there was no backing down now. “Fine.”

Takeshi took his phone out of his jacket. “You heard it ring, yeah? Right after I went into my old room?”

“I did. You ignored it.”

“Because I already knew what the call was about.” He worked the phone for a moment, then turned the screen toward her.

It was a video. Mayu squinted at the screen, then gave a little yelp.

It was a video of her uncle, in his room where they had just been. She watched him walk across the room and open the curtain and the window before the video stopped.

“How did you get this?”

“Remember the picture of a woman on the wall?”

“With one eye closed, right? What about it?”

“There’s a camera with a motion sensor hidden inside. If anything moves, it records it and automatically sends it to this.” Takeshi flicked his phone.

“When did you put that in there?”

“After Kazumi died and we cleaned out the room. Your dad told me I could use it however I liked, but it’s not like I was going to live there. Still, the idea of someone going in and out without permission while no one was home bothered me, so I set a camera up so I could keep an eye on things. Over the past two years the camera was triggered a few times, and every time it was just my brother airing out the room. Every time until yesterday afternoon.” Takeshi worked his phone again and turned the screen toward Mayu.

It was Takeshi’s room again, but now the person in frame was a man wearing a cap and dark clothes. Looking around the room, he approached

the familiar cupboard and put his hand on the door. “Chief, there’s a small cupboard here,” a tinny voice said over the phone speakers. The video cut off.

“See?” Takeshi put down the phone. “The man was dressed in a forensics unit uniform, which clearly indicated something bad had happened at the house, which is why I got here as soon as I could. By the time I got to the house, there was already do-not-enter tape across the gate and a police officer standing guard. So I asked around the neighborhood and found out that the police had already taken my brother’s body away.”

“How exactly did you ‘ask around’?”

“Nothing complicated. I just went to the neighbors and asked them to tell me anything they knew about what had happened at the house.”

“Didn’t they realize you who you were?”

“Hardly. It was more than thirty years ago that I lived there, and it’s not like I was particularly close to any of them. Besides, I wore a mask just in case. Of course, conveniently enough they all jumped to the conclusion that I was a detective and started telling me all sorts of things, with their own guesswork mixed in. Naturally, I didn’t try to disabuse them of the notion.”

He said it like it had been the easiest thing in the world to pull off, and Mayu had to agree, for her uncle, a trick like that would probably have been child’s play.

“So, you wanted a reveal, and you got it. Lunch is on you. And the next three nights. And lunch on the fourth day.” Takeshi picked up his chopsticks and went back to eating.

Oh well. A promise was a promise. Sighing, Mayu picked up her chopsticks as well. She lifted some soba to her mouth and thought about what lay ahead. “Oh, right.” She stopped eating and looked up. “What about the funeral?”

Takeshi froze with his beer mug in mid-tilt. “The funeral. Right.”

“We can’t just not have one, right? We’ll have to contact the relatives. That’s going to be a shock. How are we even supposed to explain it?” She shook her head. “I guess we’ll just have to figure it out. And we should probably start sooner rather than later. Except we still don’t have the body! We can’t do a funeral without a body! They said something about an autopsy, but they never said when we’d get the body back.”

“If things go quickly, we’ll have it back tonight. At the latest, by

tomorrow," Takeshi said in a tone that brooked no room for doubt.

"How do you know that?"

"Because the autopsy's already finished. The forensics department at the prefectural university is going to want that body taken off their hands as soon as possible."

"It's finished? How could you possibly know that?"

"There was a notification about it on the investigator's phone."

"Wait, what?"

Kogure's fox-like face rose in Mayu's mind. She thought back on the exchange between the inspector and Takeshi and let out a small "Ah" and shook her head, amazed. "When you took Inspector Kogure's ID...you stole his phone out of his other pocket at the same time, didn't you."

"Close. More precisely, it was when I was putting his ID back in his pocket. And don't make it sound so bad. It wasn't stealing, just borrowing. It didn't seem likely there was any other way he was ever going to share information with us. You heard him when I asked about how my brother died, or even about what he was wearing? 'Classified.' Right. If you're going to be that unhelpful, forgive me if I invade your privacy."

Mayu remembered her uncle staring out the window at the back yard, asking the inspector his questions. When he started talking about his bar, Trap Hand, he only made it look like he'd grabbed Kogure's phone out of his pocket and told him to look it up. In reality, he'd been holding the inspector's phone the whole time.

"Wasn't his phone locked?"

"Just with a passcode."

"But you got in? How?"

"I entered the passcode. If you know another way to get into someone's phone, I'd love to hear about it."

"How in the—"

"Remember when he made a call to check on who I was? He unlocked it himself then. I memorized the number."

Mayu thought back to that moment. "But you couldn't even see the screen, so—"

Before she could even finish saying that he shouldn't have been able to see it, Takeshi raised his index finger and made a pattern in the air with his fingertip. "Who needs to see the screen? Just watch how the finger and eyes

move and even an idiot can figure out a passcode," he said simply, and reached for a skewer of grilled chicken.

Mayu shook her head. Coming from anyone else, she wouldn't have believed it, but just like fooling the neighbors into thinking he was a detective, this was nothing for her uncle. It occurred to her that he had likely gotten Kakitani's name and rank from Kogure's phone, too. She asked and he admitted that was true, "more or less."

"In his contacts he was listed just as Detective Kakitani. But I figured that they wouldn't have paired Kogure with someone his same rank—that'd be awkward. Of course, if they stuck him with someone too low-ranking, that'd be insulting. So it was safe to assume Kakitani was an assistant inspector with the rank of section chief."

The way her uncle said it made it sound like what he'd done was the most natural thing in the world. She couldn't fault the logic of it, and she told him so. "That's our Samurai—"

Takeshi slammed his mug down on the table with a loud thud and glared at her. "Don't."

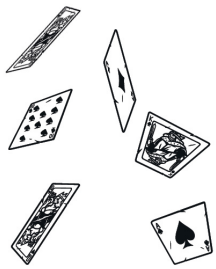
"What? Why?"

"Don't let that name pass your lips. Just don't."

Mayu shrugged, confused. "Samurai Zen" had been her uncle's stage name back when he was a stage magician.

She hadn't known that her father even had a younger brother—a full twelve years his junior—until she was in sixth grade. They had been preparing for her grandmother Tomiko's wake at a funeral hall when her father told her she had an uncle. "He won't make it tonight, but he should be here for the funeral tomorrow. I thought I'd tell you in advance."

That was all he said. That, and her uncle's name: Takeshi.



7

“I had no idea. Why didn’t you ever tell me about your brother?”

Her father had frowned and shrugged. “No reason in particular, just there never seemed to be a good time. Besides, I haven’t seen him myself in over ten years. The last time we met was before you were born, Mayu. Your mother only met him once, before we got married. To be honest, I’d halfway decided I might never see him again. Why bring it up only to confuse you?”

“Why hadn’t you seen him? Did you have a falling out?”

“Nothing like that,” her father said with a wry smile. “The reason was far more pedestrian. My brother works in America. And he travels frequently. It was just hard to coordinate our schedules.”

“I see.”

“But when I emailed him about your grandmother’s death, he wrote back to say he’d come for the funeral. I’d half expected him to say he couldn’t make it, so it took me a little by surprise.”

Her father told her that Takeshi was on his way back from Florida and would be landing at Narita the following morning; the funeral would start at noon.

Mayu didn’t ask what kind of work her father’s younger brother did in America. Just learning that she had an uncle at all was enough of a shock that she hadn’t even begun to form the next obvious question.

She had met him for the first time the next morning, in the waiting room at the funeral hall. He was tall, with a model’s build. He had handsome features, and frankly didn’t resemble her father in the slightest.

Her father introduced her and Mayu bowed her head and said hello.

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” Takeshi said with a smile. “You’re good at drawing, and you like cats, right? Nice to meet you, Mayu. Call me Uncle Takeshi.”

He held out his hand for a shake, and Mayu, a little bewildered, took it. He was spot on about the drawing and the cats. Her father must have told him.

Takeshi exchanged greetings with her mother too. Mayu caught a bit of their conversation, specifically the words “first time in fourteen years.” Uncle Takeshi was apologizing for not attending their wedding.

Her grandmother Tomiko had never kept a wide circle of acquaintances, so the funeral was a small affair, mostly relatives. It proceeded quietly, and even the line of people adding flowers to the coffin and saying their final goodbyes was over quickly.

Takeshi was the last. *That’s odd*, Mayu thought when she saw him. *He’s not holding any flowers.*

As Takeshi stepped up to the coffin, he gently cradled her grandmother’s cheeks in both hands. Then he slowly lifted his hands, and brought them together over her chest in a gesture of prayer. Then, much to her surprise, he began moving his hands up and down. What Mayu saw next was something she knew she would never forget.

Flower petals of red, white, and purple began to flutter down from between Takeshi’s pressed palms. The petals increased until they covered Tomiko’s chest. Gasps of amazement rose from the others around the coffin.

When the petals stopped falling, Takeshi bowed his head in silent prayer, hands still together. Then he opened his eyes, lowered his hands, bowed once to the body, and stepped away, leaving everyone around him stunned.

Mayu looked up at his face as he walked back toward the seats. His expression was completely blank, as if nothing of note had happened at all.

After the bone-picking ceremony at the crematorium, there was a meal for family members only. Mayu couldn’t stop thinking about her uncle. She wanted to ask what that trick with the flowers was, how he could do something like that. But Takeshi only exchanged a few words now and then with her parents and was otherwise silent. There was something in his manner that made him hard to approach, so she settled for watching him from a distance.

Her aunts sitting near her, however, had begun to whisper. Mayu listened in and learned for the first time that Takeshi worked as a magician in America.

"Can you really make a living doing magic tricks?"

"Who knows, but I heard he's pretty well known."

"Oh? I wonder how much he makes."

"No idea! I couldn't even begin to imagine. Still, that trick he did just now was something else, wasn't it?"

So it had just been a trick, Mayu thought, finally understanding. A bit of stage magic. At a funeral.

A short while later, her father stood and spoke some final words to the relatives and the meal was finished. In the end, she never did get a chance to talk to her uncle. That night, over dinner, Mayu asked her father about him.

"Heard from your aunts, did you? Well, yes, Takeshi works as a magician in America," her father told her without any particular attempt at hiding anything.

"How did he get into that?"

"I couldn't tell you, because I never found out. People do ask me about him quite a lot, though." Her father furrowed his brow and glanced over at her mother.

She imagined they had had this same conversation themselves. Her mother just smiled quietly and added nothing.

Her father looked back at her. "He was always a strange kid, even when he was little. Fascinated by psychic powers, ESP, that sort of thing."

"Psychic powers?" she asked.

"Ever heard of Uri Geller?"

Mayu shook her head.

"Uri Geller was a man who claimed to have psychic abilities—he became quite the focus of attention in the '70s. He even came to Japan, which led to a 'psychic boom' across the country. He had an especially popular act in which he would appear to bend spoons with his mind. My friends and I used to imitate it all the time."

"Could he really bend spoons?"

Her father smiled and shook his head. "It wasn't long before it came out that it had all been done with tricks. The boom faded. That's right around

when Takeshi was born."

He went on to tell her the full story. Apparently, when Takeshi was in elementary school, he heard about the long-since-faded psychic powers craze and somehow got hold of old footage of Uri Geller. He would watch it over and over on their home VCR—a relatively new invention at the time that had just started to become popular. When their parents would ask him why the sudden obsession, all he would say was, "because it's fun."

Takeshi's grades at school weren't bad—he was close to top of his class—so his parents decided to leave him to it, figuring he would tire of it sooner or later. It was before dinner one day when it happened. They had sat down around the table to eat curry rice, when Takeshi held out his spoon to their mother and declared, "Mom, something's wrong with my spoon."

Mayu's father looked at the spoon in his brother's hand. It looked perfectly ordinary. He couldn't see anything wrong with it. Their mom tilted her head and asked why he said that.

"Because how am I supposed to eat with this?" Takeshi said, giving his wrist a slight twist.

What happened next was unbelievable. The spoon in Takeshi's hand bent like it was made of soft rubber. Her father gaped. He knew spoon bending was a trick, done by secretly pressing the spoon against a hard surface like the floor when the audience wasn't looking. But Takeshi hadn't done anything of the sort. He had bent it in midair, right in front of them.

Both of their parents had been watching and were so stunned at first they couldn't speak. Then the room erupted with questions. How had Takeshi done it? What trick did he use? Takeshi said nothing. With a faint smile, he went to get a fresh spoon and calmly began eating his curry rice.

Convinced there had to be some gimmick, Mayu's father and his parents took turns examining the bent spoon. But it was the same kind they always used, and clearly not the sort of thing that would bend just by putting a little pressure on it with your fingers.

In the end, Takeshi never revealed the secret, and to this day, none of them know how he did it, her father had told her with a laugh. "That was the first and last time he ever pulled something like that on the family. And after that, I lost track of his day to day doings. There was too much of an age gap between us, and we hardly ever talked at length about anything."

"But it wasn't psychic powers at all, just a magic trick," Mayu said. "So

Uncle Takeshi's wanted to be a magician ever since back then?"

"Probably," her father said. "But it wasn't until years later that I heard about it."

He launched into another story from the past. Not long after Takeshi started his final year of high school, he had announced that after graduation he wanted to go to America to train as a magician. He told their father that it had been his dream since childhood, that he believed he'd been born to do magic, and should they forbid him from going, he didn't see any point in living.

Much to their surprise, Takeshi had already arranged a place to go in America: a magician-training school in Boston. He had even completed the application process. Then he begged their father to lend him one million yen, bowing his head, and promising to pay it back within five years. "If I can't, I'll give up on my dream and come home."

His earnestness must have made an impression, because their father agreed. What's more he offered not one, but two million yen. However, he added a condition. "Until you succeed, you are not to return to Japan. Not even once."

"Understood," Takeshi replied. "I might not come back even if I make it."

Their father had nodded and said that would be okay too.

The following spring, right after he graduated from high school, Takeshi left for America. Seeing Takeshi handling all the preparations for his trip by himself, Mayu's father felt sure that his little brother would be all right.

It wasn't long after that when Mayu's parents got married. Takeshi didn't attend the wedding. All that came from Boston was a congratulatory telegram. Takeshi had at least met her mom already–her father had introduced him to Kazumi—his fiancée at the time—before he had left for the States. The year after the wedding, the couple found out that Kazumi was pregnant, and a baby girl was born: Mayu. Mayu grew up healthy and strong. But it was not all happy times for the Kamio family.

Mayu's grandfather, Yasuhide, collapsed one day not long after Mayu was born. Tests revealed that he had lung cancer, already quite advanced. He was given six months to live. From his sickbed, Yasuhide made one request of his wife, Tomiko, and his son, Eiichi: "don't tell Takeshi."

"He's still learning, still chasing his dream. I told him not to come back until he succeeds. Don't trouble him with this. Don't shake his resolve."

As gentle as Mayu's grandfather had usually been, Yasuhide had a stubborn side to him. They respected his wishes, although they must have found it difficult—his wife, Mayu's grandmother Tomiko, most of all. But she said nothing.

Before long, Yasuhide passed away. It was only after the forty-ninth day memorial prescribed by Buddhist tradition had passed that Mayu's father made an overseas phone call to Takeshi to tell him. He also confessed that they had kept the news from him on their father's instructions.

"I understand," Takeshi said quietly. "I'm not planning on coming back to visit the grave any time soon. I trust you'll take care of things."

"I will," Mayu's father had replied.

It was about three years later that her father heard something intriguing from an acquaintance about a Japanese magician making a name for himself in America. "I think it's your brother," the acquaintance said, handing him a DVD.

On playing the disc, her father was astonished. The performer on stage in the spotlight, "Samurai Zen," was unmistakably Takeshi.

He was dressed like a mountain monk. He had a beautiful woman stand in the center of the stage then reached into a box next to her, out of which he grabbed great handfuls of straw which he began to wrap around her body. His hands moved so quickly that in no time at all she was hidden from view to the point that it looked as though a life-sized straw doll were standing there in her stead.

Next, Takeshi took a long Japanese sword in hand. Drawing it from its scabbard, he swung it to show off the gleam of the blade as he slowly approached the straw figure. Then he stopped, raised the sword high in both hands, and brought it straight down from above.

The straw figure split cleanly in two from top to bottom. Yet the cut was so sharp that it remained standing. Next, Takeshi sliced at it from the side, slicing it in half. Straw scattered everywhere, but the upper half of the "body" did not fall. From the opposite side he struck down in a diagonal cut, then again on a diagonal from below, again and again, wielding the sword with blinding speed until the stage was a whirlwind of severed straw.

At last, he stopped. The straw fell down and piled up on the stage floor. Takeshi stepped up to the mound, knelt, and struck a pose as if chanting an incantation. The next moment, the heap of straw burst into fierce flame, a

pillar of fire shooting up higher than Takeshi's head. The glare was so bright it obscured everything else from view. But the flames died away almost immediately and revealed, in their place, the same beautiful woman from the beginning. A single heartbeat of silence, and then the audience erupted into cheers and applause. Takeshi pressed his palms together in front of his chest and bowed his head.

Mayu's father let out a small sigh. "To tell the truth, it took me by surprise. We'd exchanged the occasional email, but he never talked about his work. I'd just assumed he was having a hard time of it, so finding out he'd made a real success of himself made me happy. I showed it to Grandma right away."

"That sounds incredible!" Mayu said. "I want to see it too!"

"Unfortunately, I gave the DVD back, so I don't have it anymore. I've asked myself many times why I didn't make a copy, but, well, regret always comes too late."

"So Uncle Takeshi's famous in America. I want to see him perform."

"You can go see him when you're older. Assuming he's still famous by then, that is."

"Aren't you and Mom going to go?"

"I told you, it's hard to match up our schedules. Besides, I don't think Takeshi really wants me watching him."

"Why not?"

Her father shook his head and sighed inwardly. "It's hard to put into words, but, that stage is Takeshi's world. It feels off-limits, like a place I shouldn't step into. That's why I've stayed away all this time."

Mayu didn't really understand what her father meant. They were brothers, after all, even with all those years between them.

"We haven't been in touch much at all lately," her father added. "I'm sure he doesn't know anything about what's going on with us."

"But you told him about me, didn't you?"

"About you? Why do you say that?"

Mayu said, "Because he knew things. Like about how I'm good at drawing, and that I like cats."

Her father tilted his head. "That's odd. I don't remember ever telling him that."

"No?" Then how had he known? It was a mystery, and there didn't seem

to be any way of clearing it up.

For a while after that day, Takeshi's name hadn't really come up. Mayu was busy with life, anyway. Becoming a junior high student and wrestling with the burden of being "the teacher's daughter" was a much bigger deal. Her father didn't seem especially interested in finding out how his younger brother was spending his days in America, either.

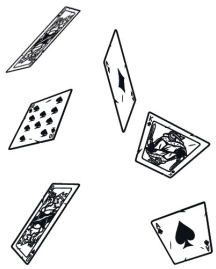
It was about eight years ago that Takeshi suddenly returned to Japan. No one knew why, nor did he offer any reason. He opened the bar in Ebisu with what must have been a decent amount of savings. He didn't seem inclined to throw any sort of grand opening party, but her father insisted they go celebrate, and Mayu went along with her parents.

It was a small place, just a counter and a single two-person table. Takeshi didn't look put out to see his brother's family walk in, but he didn't look particularly pleased, either. It had been ten years since Mayu had last seen him. The first thing Takeshi asked when he saw her was, "still drawing?"

She told him she was aiming to become an architect and had been drawing lots of houses, and a small smile came to his lips. "Good," he said.

After that, they only saw each other once every few years. Mayu knew that right after her mother died, her father and Uncle Takeshi had apparently met several times to talk about what to do with the house. It was too big for her father to live in alone, but he was reluctant to let it go.

That's what led to the revival of Takeshi's unused room.



8

"THE TIME OF MURDER is believed to have been between eight o'clock and midnight on March sixth, that Saturday," Takeshi said as he finished the last skewer of grilled chicken and set the stick down on his plate.

"Oh," Mayu replied. "So that's why."

"Why what?"

"Yesterday at the police station, they asked me about what I'd been doing since Saturday. They were particularly fixated on Saturday, going over it again and again. I told them I'd been in my room all day, and in the evening I'd ordered from a place in the neighborhood. They weren't satisfied until I told them that last part."

Takeshi listened to Mayu's story, nodding several times. "Right. It was probably a relief for them to be able to cross off the victim's only daughter from their list of suspects. His brother, on the other hand, didn't have an alibi." He jabbed a thumb at his own chest.

"I can't believe they suspect family members, too," Mayu said, shaking her head.

"Detectives don't trust anyone. That's just the kind of people they are. In fact, if they weren't, they couldn't do their job. I'm pretty sure Kogure's got me tagged as a 'person of interest.'"

"I wouldn't know about that," Mayu said, but she thought he was probably right. At the very least, Inspector Kogure probably wasn't much of a fan of her uncle.

"The cause of death was strangulation," Takeshi said lightly.

"You're kidding." Mayu grimaced. "Was that in Inspector Kogure's

phone, too?"

"Yep."

"What did they use? A cord or something?"

"They haven't found the weapon, seems like. But it wasn't a thin cord. No marks on the neck. Nor were there any finger marks, which rules out manual strangulation." Takeshi lifted his mug and drained the remaining splash of beer at the bottom. "Forensics thinks it was probably something like a towel: a soft cloth with a certain amount of width."

"A towel?" Mayu touched her own neck with her right hand.

"Really, a towel's not ideal for strangling someone. If you're trying to crush the windpipe, a thin, strong cord works best. Use something as thick as a towel and it's hard to completely collapse the airway. But you can compress the blood vessels running along both sides of the neck. If the veins and arteries are squeezed shut, blood stops leaving the brain and fresh oxygen stops coming in, and pretty soon, you're dead. Left with nowhere else to go, the blood bursts the fine vessels in the eyeballs and seeps out down the cheeks. That's what he looked like, by the way, my brother. When they lifted his eyelids, it was as if he'd shed bloody tears."

Mayu set down her chopsticks. There was still some soba left, but Takeshi's description had completely robbed her of her appetite.

"If there hadn't been anything unusual with his eyes, they might have just written it off as heart failure."

"Stop," Mayu said. "I don't want to hear any more."

Takeshi looked momentarily taken aback, then said, "All right," and took a sip of his tea. "Let's change the subject. Do you know what my brother was doing on Saturday?"

Mayu shook her head. "Of course not. I don't live with him any more."

"Makes sense."

"They asked me that at the station, too. Is what Dad was doing on the weekend such a big deal?"

"It's hard to say. But he must have gone out somewhere on Saturday. Either to something fairly official, or to meet someone important."

"How do you know that?"

Takeshi pinched the collar of his military jacket. "His clothes. When they found him, my brother was wearing a suit. He'd taken off his tie, but he still had his jacket on. I saw it in the pictures, so there's no mistake."

“Sorry, the pictures?”

“Images of the body from various angles on Kogure’s phone.”

Mayu grimaced and waved her hands in front of her face. “Please don’t show those to me, okay?”

“Sadly, I don’t have them to show. I did think about secretly sending them to my own phone, but in the end I decided it’d be a bad idea to leave fingerprints like that, so I restrained myself.”

“That’s good, at least.”

“So, what do you think? A guy who’s been retired from teaching for years, wearing a suit on a Saturday? He must have been going somewhere special, no?”

“Could be. I guess that’s why the police were asking about what Dad usually did on weekends.”

“I’ll ask again: can you think of anywhere he might’ve gone on Saturday, dressed like he was?”

Mayu folded her arms and tilted her head, thinking. “When he was still working, he wore a suit everywhere, not just to school. But now that you mention it, I don’t remember seeing him in one very often after he quit. Not that I saw him that much at all.”

“What about when he met up with old colleagues from school?”

“I don’t think he’d wear a suit for that. They’d just have drinks at some bar by the station. In the cold like this, he’d probably go in a sweater and a down jacket, something like that.”

“Was he part of any hobby or interest groups? If he was getting together with other men of letters to talk shop, say, showing up too casually dressed might not fly.”

“Men of letters?” Mayu tried saying the phrase out loud. It didn’t sit quite right. She’d never once thought of her father as anything so stuffy and intellectual. “To be honest, I really don’t know what kind of life Dad led after retirement. Sorry. I’m no help at all.”

Takeshi snorted dismissively, as if he hadn’t expected much of her in the first place. “What about women?”

“Women?” Mayu’s eyes flew open despite herself. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. It’s been, what, five or six years since Kazumi passed away? His only daughter moves out and never comes home.

Would it be so strange if he went looking for someone to keep him company?"

"Dad? No way. Impossible."

"How can you be so sure? There are plenty of sixty-two-year-olds in my circles who are in love."

"Well, maybe that's just your circles."

"Still, it's wrong to just assume outright that my brother wasn't one of them. Anyway, the police will look into that angle for sure. If there was a woman, and he met with her the day he was killed, there's bound to be some trace."

"Trace?"

"Like something he was carrying. Think: love-hotel receipts, or a pill case with ED meds. Or they might find something on his clothing, like his underwear. Semen, possibly fluids from the woman, too. If he didn't shower after sex, they could even get something directly from his genitals—"

"Stop," Mayu said, thrusting out her right hand. "Really, enough."

"Too graphic for you?"

"I don't need that picture of my father in my head, thank you. Even if there was a woman, I can't imagine it would have gone much beyond sharing a meal together."

Takeshi shook his head. "He didn't just go out to share a meal."

"What makes you say that?"

"A sixty-two-year-old man doesn't put on a suit just to take his girlfriend to a ramen joint."

"Sorry? Ramen?"

Takeshi took out his smartphone and worked it quickly. "They found partially digested noodles in the stomach, along with undigested roast pork and green onion. They say that puts his death at about two hours after eating."

A sour, unpleasant taste spread through Mayu's mouth.

"In other words," Takeshi continued, "my brother ate ramen two hours before he was killed. Given the time, that would have been his dinner. From this, we can infer the following: On Saturday, he left the house in a suit. Maybe it was to see someone, maybe he was headed somewhere that demanded proper attire. In any case, once he'd finished whatever he had to do, he ate ramen and set out for home. Meanwhile, someone had been

plotting to slip into the house while he was out. They were going to sneak in from the backyard, but before they could, my brother caught them. If whoever it was had just turned and run, all this would have ended without tragedy. But instead of running, they chose murder. There were clear signs of a struggle. Forensics thinks that there was a fight, after which he was knocked down and then strangled from behind with something like a towel. He soiled himself when it happened, and there were traces of that too in the back yard. Like I said, it wasn't a crushed windpipe that killed him, but rather the arteries and veins in his neck were compressed—hey, what's wrong? Why are you turning away?"

Takeshi broke off, finally seeming to notice that something was seriously wrong with his niece.

"What's wrong?" Mayu said, steadying her breathing before glaring at her uncle. "Are you really that insensitive? Do you really have to spell it out in that much detail? Try putting yourself in my place. I don't want to picture how my father was killed!" She could feel the tears pressing against her eyes as she spoke.

"Ah," Takeshi murmured with a small nod. "My bad. I just assumed we were on the same page. Clearly I was wrong. I won't talk about it again. Forget I said anything."

"What do you mean, 'the same page'?"

"I don't intend to leave the catching of this killer to the police. I want to find out who did it myself, if I can. Even if they do make an arrest, there's no guarantee they'll share anything with us. In fact, they probably won't tell us most of it. To the police, the bereaved are nothing more than witnesses or character references."

Mayu stared at her uncle's fine features. "How do you propose to do that? You're not a professional investigator."

"Of course not, but that's no reason to assume failure. There are things I can do that the police can't." Takeshi stood. "Anyway, I'll see you later."

"Where are you going?"

"It's check-in time. I'm going to the front desk to get my key and go up to my room."

"Wait," Mayu said, standing. "I'll help."

"Help? With what?"

"Finding out the truth. I want to know who killed Dad and why."

Takeshi turned away, a cold look to his face. “No. You’d do better to stay out of it.”

“Why? I want to know the truth too.”

Takeshi flicked his hand as if shooing away a fly. “Don’t be so naïve. There’s no guarantee you’ll like what you find. What if it turns out to be some festering tangle of twisted love and hate, or it drags an ugly side of my brother into the light? If my slightly detailed account of how he was killed was enough to make you go pale, you won’t last long. And the last thing I need is dead weight. Just sit tight and wait while I uncover the truth.”

“No. I’m fine now. I won’t complain, promise.”

“You will.”

“I won’t!”

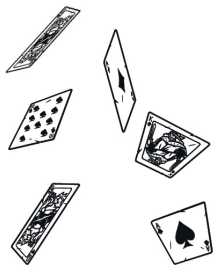
Takeshi shook his head and pulled out his phone, turning the screen toward her. “You sure about that?”

On the screen she saw what, for a moment, looked like a bumpy gray lump of clay. Then she realized it was a face. Eyes wide open, mouth twisted out of shape. Slime leaking from the lips beneath bloodshot eye. No, they were weeping blood. This was nothing like what she had seen in the mortuary, but there was no mistaking it was her father. So this was what he had looked like when they found him.

A violent sourness rose in her throat. Mayu crouched, clapping a hand over her mouth, but it wasn’t enough. The food she had just eaten splattered onto the floor.

A waitress came running from somewhere. “Are you all right?”

Mayu nodded desperately, unable even to force out an “I’m fine.”



9

"So you did send a picture to your own phone after all," she asked, pressing one of the room towels to her mouth.

"I always hide a few tricks up my sleeve. Wouldn't be much of a magician otherwise," Takeshi replied, tapping at his phone. "How you feeling?"

"I'm okay now. I'm sorry."

Takeshi had just finished checking in. They were in his room. It was laid out in the same configuration as Mayu's.

"I'll ask you once more," Takeshi said. "Swear you'll throw everything you have into uncovering the truth, putting it above everything else, and never hesitate or run away?" A sharp, intense light filled his eyes as they fixed on her. She felt like she had to keep her guard up or be swept away.

"I swear," Mayu said, raising her right hand. "I won't quit until we get the truth."

"Good," Takeshi said, nodding deeply. "You said you met with the police yesterday. Tell me everything. What did they ask? What were they trying to get at? Give your brain a good squeeze and tell me everything you can remember. No hiding anything."

"Where would I hide anything from you?"

"When did the police first contact you?" Takeshi asked.

"Yesterday afternoon. They called while I was at work."

"Let's start there." Takeshi folded his arms and leaned back in his lounge chair.

Still a little shaken by her uncle's intensity, Mayu recounted everything that had happened since the day before. Her story went right up to the

moment Takeshi had arrived at the house.

When she finished, her uncle was still sitting with his arms folded, eyes half-closed to focus his thoughts. His eyes slowly opened. “I understand the situation now. Time to analyze what happened for ourselves. But before that, you’ll need a bit more information. Since you claim to have recovered from earlier, I don’t imagine this will be a problem for you to take.”

He picked up his phone, tapped the screen a few times, and showed Mayu a new photo.

Mayu sat up straight. It was another photograph of her father, this time showing the whole body. She forced herself not to look away.

Show weakness again and Uncle Takeshi will cut you loose.

Keeping calm, she stared at the screen. Her father was wearing a suit, like Takeshi had mentioned earlier, his familiar dark brown suit. Several flattened cardboard boxes had been stacked next to the body—probably they had been used to cover him.

“Notice anything?” her uncle asked.

“Um,” she murmured, dropping her eyes back to the image. “It does look like there was a struggle of some kind. His suit’s all torn and filthy.”

“Anything else?”

She stared at her father’s body from head to toe. Strangely enough, her fear had left her at some point. After a while, something struck her. “Ah!”

“You see something?”

“He’s not wearing shoes. Just socks!”

“Exactly.” Takeshi snapped his fingers. “And look closely—the bottoms of his socks are dirty, right? That means his shoes didn’t just come off in the struggle. He was fighting without shoes on from the start.”

“So what does that mean?”

“How did my brother usually go down to the backyard?”

“He’d wear sandals. He kept them just inside the glass door in back.”

“So he didn’t even have time to put on his sandals. Or maybe he didn’t think wearing sandals was the move when fighting off a suspicious intruder.”

“Wait, what? What suspicious intruder?”

“Allow me to explain,” Takeshi said, raising his index finger. “On Saturday, my brother went out somewhere in his suit. He returned home after eating ramen. He entered through the front door, took off his shoes,

and went into his study. But before he turned on the light, he noticed someone suspicious in the back yard. Opening the glass door in the back, he challenged them. Afraid he'd call the police, the intruder rushed him. They struggled, and my brother was killed."

It was a simple enough story, but said with so much conviction Mayu thought she could see the scene unfolding before her eyes.

"But, fight? Dad never did any martial arts or anything," she said quietly.

"That's beside the point," Takeshi said, shaking his head. "What matters in a fight is how desperate you are. My brother likely had limits. I'm sure he never would have gone into a fight intending to kill. But his opponent didn't see it that way. Once he'd been spotted, he must have decided he had no choice but to kill my brother."

"What do you think the killer was after?"

"That's a key point. When someone tries to break into an empty house, the normal assumption is that they're after something to steal, and yet..."

"I couldn't tell what they took. I mean, with everything scattered around so randomly like that, I wonder if even Dad would have been able to tell."

"That's another key point: the way the place was trashed was abnormal. Unnecessary, even. Someone just searching for something wouldn't make that kind of mess. Perhaps the intent was to make it impossible to know what had been taken. But the most reasonable answer is still that whoever did it only wanted it to look like a simple burglary."

Mayu tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

"The killer's goal, from the very start, was to take my brother's life," Takeshi said. "But if they just killed him and did nothing else, the police would immediately start digging into grudges, financial ties, the usual places looking for a motive. So they tried to make it look like nothing more than a random burglary. Because they weren't actually after valuables, the way the room was ransacked ended up looking unnatural."

"So you're saying they were trying to sneak into the house for the sole purpose of killing Dad?"

"That's what it comes down to. Maybe the plan was to slip in, lie in wait, and jump him when he came home. Killing him out in the backyard was off-script. Still, they were committed to at least trying to make it look like a burglary. Thus the ransacking of the house."

"I see..." Mayu said, putting it all together.

“Still,” her uncle continued, “even if that is the case, there’s something that doesn’t sit right: the method of murder.”

“Strangulation, right? What’s wrong with that?”

“If the goal from the outset was murder, it would make more sense to use a blade. More reliable.”

Mayu found herself agreeing. “Maybe the killer figured they’d just grab something in the house to use as a weapon?” she suggested. “Like, if they went into the kitchen, there’d at least be a carving knife or something. Then they wouldn’t have to worry about the weapon leading back to them.”

“You think the killer planned to make do with something they found?” Takeshi’s mouth relaxed in a faint smile. “Sounds pretty slapdash for someone planning to kill a man. What if there wasn’t a convenient weapon? My brother was a single man living alone, after all. Maybe he didn’t cook? It’s hardly impossible. If I were the killer, I’d at least bring my own weapon, just in case. They could have bought something at a big-box store, that wouldn’t be so easy to trace back.”

“Well, maybe something happened and they didn’t have time to get a knife?”

“So they went with a towel as a substitute? That’s kind of a stretch,” Takeshi said.

“Right, so you said...”

“Right. Forensics thinks he was strangled from behind with something like a towel. That is actually the biggest mystery. If the killer couldn’t find a blade and settled on strangling as a second-best option, fine. But in that case you’d expect them to bring a rope, or an electric cord, something thinner and stronger. But a towel? I could imagine someone carrying a handkerchief or a small hand towel around, but a bath towel isn’t the kind of thing you just happen to have in your back pocket.” Takeshi stared off into the distance, lost in thought. He let out a long breath and looked back at Mayu. “Still, that’s about all we can infer from the scene and the condition of the body for now. To get any further, we need more information. Is there anything else?”

“I’ve got nothing,” Mayu said, a little flustered. She was drawing a blank.

“You said the one who found the body was a classmate of yours, right?”

“Yeah. A guy named Haraguchi. I think he came over to see Dad to talk about the class reunion next week.”

“What does Haraguchi do for a living?”

“I’m pretty sure he runs a liquor shop.”

“So, self-employed. That explains how he could afford to visit my brother on a Monday morning. All right,” Takeshi said, suddenly snapping his fingers. “Let’s hear what this Haraguchi has to say. Get things set up with him right away. He’s probably been wanting to get in touch with you, for that matter.”

“Really? You think so?”

“I’d think anyone would, in his position. Hurry up and give him a call.”

“Okay.” Mayu picked up her phone. She didn’t have Haraguchi’s number, so she decided to ask Momoko. She owed her friend a call anyway. But before she could call, a message came in. It was from Kenta.

Sorry to bother you. How are things? Any trouble?

It was just a few lines, but Mayu could feel the sense of helplessness in his words. She understood. His fiancée’s father had been murdered, and there was nothing he could do about it. He wasn’t a detective, after all. She gave it a little thought, then wrote back:

The house was torn apart. Doesn’t even feel real. But I’m okay now. My uncle’s here. Thanks.

She hit send and looked up, her eyes meeting Takeshi’s.

“I heard from my brother, you’re getting married. Maybe this isn’t the best timing, but,” Takeshi hesitated a moment, then, “I might as well say it anyway: Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Mayu answered with a forced smile, though there was no way to keep the stiffness out of her cheeks. “How did you figure out the text was from my fiancé?”

“I can’t imagine anyone else you’d bother replying to right away, given the situation. You probably wouldn’t have even read a message from someone else.”

“True,” Mayu said, realizing once again there was no lying to her uncle.

She went back to her phone and called Momoko Honma. The call connected immediately.

“Momoko speaking,” came a subdued voice on the other end.

“It’s me, Mayu. Sorry I haven’t called.”

“Yeah, um, you’ve been through a lot.”

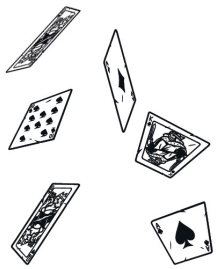
“Ah, so you know.”

“Haraguchi told me, yesterday. I was totally shocked. I’ve been worrying about you, but I didn’t know if I should call and I guess I could have sent a message, but then what would I write, and—”

“It’s okay. I get it.” Mayu would have felt the same in her friend’s position. Then she heard a strange sound on the other end of the line, something like a hiccup. “Momoko? What’s wrong?”

“Yeah, uh, yeah, I’m real sorry,” Momoko said between sobs. “You must be in shock, and here I’m the one crying.”

That was all it took. Mayu felt something surge in her chest, a force impossible to hold back. The walls she had erected around her heart came tumbling down and before she knew it, she was crying loudly into the phone. There was no point trying to stop. She sobbed until her throat hurt, while, in a tiny corner of her mind, an oddly calm part of her observed, *so, this is what it means to cry your heart out.*



10

THE LOCAL SHOPPING ARCADE was a ten-minute walk from the Marumiya. This was ostensibly the liveliest street in town, though at the moment, “bustling” would be the last word to come to mind. The souvenir shops and restaurants seemed drained of life, more casualties of the pandemic. Many of the metal shutters in front of the shops were down, and it didn’t look like they were just closed for the day. Haraguchi’s place stood right in the middle of the arcade. They had gotten Kohei Haraguchi’s contact information from Momoko. He had sounded surprised when Mayu called, but showed no hesitation when she asked if he could tell them more about what had happened. He invited them to drop by the shop anytime, so, deciding there was no time like the present, she left the inn at once with Takeshi in tow.

Mayu entered the shop with her uncle close behind, and the man inside turned from pinning order slips to a shelf to greet them. “Hey,” he said, his smile a little stiff. The way Kohei Haraguchi’s eyes and eyebrows drooped gave his face a kind of reassuring softness that was unchanged from their junior high days, but the lanky frame of the student had filled out into the solid build of a grown man.

“Hi, Haraguchi. Been a while,” Mayu said.

Haraguchi seemed at a loss for what to say; he licked his lips slightly before speaking. “Hey, Kamio. You...you’ve been through a lot, huh.”

“Yeah,” Mayu nodded. “Sorry you got dragged into all this.”

“It’s...it’s no trouble. I really don’t mind.” Haraguchi’s gaze drifted to the man standing behind her.

“Oh, let me introduce you,” said Mayu. “I think I mentioned him on the

phone: this is my uncle, my father's younger brother."

"Nice to meet you," Takeshi said from behind her.

"Nice to meet you," Haraguchi replied.

He led them over to a space in the corner of the shop, where folding pipe chairs surrounded a small round table. According to Haraguchi, the table had been his grandfather's idea, set up so tourists could sample the local sake. These days, though, it was more often the neighborhood regulars who settled in to drink.

"Sounds perfect," Takeshi said, lowering himself onto one of the chairs. "Since we're here anyway, how about it? I'll take a cup."

"Of course, no problem," Haraguchi answered, with a perplexed look on his face.

Wondering how my uncle can drink at a time like this, no doubt.

"So, what you got?" Takeshi mused out loud. "You're a dealer for Mannen Brewery, right?"

"You know your stuff."

"My brother told me. He liked his sake too—Kagamihomare was his favorite, if I'm not mistaken." Takeshi pointed at one of the bottles on the shelf. Its label read "Kagamihomare."

Haraguchi nodded. "You don't say? Actually, the president of Mannen Brewery is a relative of ours, so we stock all their stuff. Some of them you can only get here."

"I heard that too. My brother was always bragging about your place, you know. Said you had a special connection, and if push came to shove you could even get your hands on some legendary, near-mythical brews."

"Mr. Kamio said that…?" Haraguchi blinked in surprise and brightened for a moment before he seemed to remember that his beloved teacher was gone, and, in fact, he had been the one who found the body.

Mayu was even more surprised by the exchange. Mannen was indeed the only brewery in the area, but there was no way Takeshi had heard about Haraguchi's place from her father. He hadn't even known the family business was a liquor store until just now. Come to think of it, he had been staring at his phone before they left the inn. She began to suspect he had quickly googled the shop.

"In that case, care for a glass of Kagamihomare?" Haraguchi asked.

"Your call. If you have another recommendation, that's fine too."

“Got it. Uh, and what about you, Kamio?”

Still standing, Mayu replied, “I’ll pass.”

“You’re not drinking? Were you not aware this is a liquor store?” Takeshi objected.

“I know what it is, but frankly, we didn’t come here to drink,” Mayu said, taking the seat beside her uncle.

“In that case at least order a soft drink. This is Haraguchi’s shop, and it deserves respect. This is a drinking establishment, and we’re customers. Even if it is just some folding chairs around a makeshift table, it still counts. At my bar, no one sits and chats without ordering something.”

“No, really, it’s fine, don’t worry about it,” Haraguchi said, flustered, waving his hand. “Plenty of folks drop in to shoot the breeze and never buy a thing. One sec, I’ll be right back.” He walked away.

Watching him leave, Mayu leaned toward Takeshi and muttered, “you sure are a smooth liar.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb. I’ve never once seen Dad drinking sake at home. And ‘getting your hands on some legendary brew’? What if he finds out you’re just making things up?”

“Just a little technique to help build rapport. Besides, my brother’s dead. There’s no way he’ll find out. And even if someone pointed out a contradiction, I’ll say I was mistaken. Simple,” Takeshi said coolly.

“Seriously? How do you live with yourself—”

Haraguchi arrived, carrying a tray in both hands. On it were a medium-sized bottle and a tumbler. Setting the tumbler in front of Takeshi, he poured the sake from the bottle. “There you go.”

Takeshi drew the glass toward him, his expression suddenly serious. He lifted it to his nose to savor the aroma, then slowly took a measured sip, testing how it went down.

“Yeah,” he said at last. “That’s good.”

“Good, I’m glad,” Haraguchi murmured in relief.

“It reins in the sweetness and has a clean cut,” Takeshi noted. “The aftertaste is crisp and refreshing. Rather than sitting and contemplating it, you just want to keep knocking it back.”

Haraguchi nodded. “It’s basically Kagamihomare, but they’ve tweaked the ratio of brewing alcohol slightly. It’s a limited original product they’re

planning to let us sell."

"I see. It definitely has a distinctive note."

"We're aiming more at younger drinkers. We haven't even settled on an official product name yet. Mannen said they're leaving sales entirely up to us." He showed them the bottle's label: simple plain type on white paper that read "Kagamihomare — Original Special Honjōzō Sake."

Takeshi raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure it's okay, letting me drink something that special?"

"Of course. Sake's purpose is only fulfilled when it's drunk by someone who can appreciate it."

"I'm honored," Mayu's uncle said with a smile.

Meanwhile, Mayu was growing increasingly irritated. This was no time for cheerfully waxing poetic about sake. "Haraguchi," she cut in, "do you think you could tell us some details about what happened?"

"Ah…sure. Whatever you want to know."

"The day before, you tried to get in touch with my father, didn't you?"

"Yeah. About the class reunion."

"What about it?"

"Nothing major. Actually, Mr. Kamio had contacted me first. Since it was a rare chance for everyone to get together again, he said he wanted to send over some celebratory sake and asked what I thought would be good. I mulled it over and then tried calling him on Sunday, but no matter how many times I dialed, I couldn't get through. It started to bother me, so on Monday morning I decided to check on him while I was out making deliveries."

"I see."

That's just like Dad, Mayu thought. Faced with seeing his former students for the first time in ages, he wouldn't have been satisfied just being invited; he would have wanted to offer his own kind of hospitality. He had always been a bit of a show-off that way.

"When I got to the house, I called again, but still no answer. I rang the intercom and got nothing there, either. So I took a chance and tried the front door, and it wasn't locked. I called into the house, and when nobody answered I started to worry he might have collapsed somewhere inside, so I went around to the back garden. That's when, um…"

"I see, thank you," Mayu said, lifting a hand to indicate it was okay for

him to stop. He seemed to be struggling with describing the moment he found the body.

"After the police questioned me, I didn't know who I should call, so I phoned Honma," Haraguchi went on. "I remembered she'd been close with Mr. Kamio."

"Momoko told me."

"I'm so sorry," Haraguchi said. "If I'd gone straight to his place on Sunday instead of just calling, a little earlier in the day…maybe it wouldn't have ended up like it did."

Mayu shook her head. "You can't put this on yourself. Besides, they're saying he was probably killed on Saturday night."

"Killed?" Haraguchi's face tightened. "So it really was murder?"

"That's what the police are saying."

"I see," he answered weakly.

Takeshi, silent until that point in the exchange, suddenly lifted his glass up to eye level. "This really is good sake."

Mayu had to fight the urge to frown at him. Was he really going to start talking about sake again?

Oblivious, Takeshi glanced at Haraguchi as if something had occurred to him. "Come to think of it, I do remember my brother mentioning this sake."

"What?" Haraguchi let out a startled sound. "He did?"

"He said something about a former student coming to him for advice about a new product line. I'm guessing that was you?"

"Sensei talked about that?" Haraguchi asked, using the honorific term *sensei* to refer to his old teacher.

"Yes, something about it being a bit of a tricky problem. Let me think, what was it again…" Takeshi set his glass down and pressed his fingers to his brow as if trying to dredge up the memory.

Mayu was bewildered. This was almost certainly another fabrication. Takeshi hadn't seen her father recently at all, and he certainly hadn't spoken with him on the phone either. Yet even though she knew it was a lie, she couldn't begin to imagine why he had suddenly started spinning this story.

"So what did Sensei say about the sake?" Haraguchi asked, touching the bottle.

"Not so much about the sake as about you," Takeshi replied. "He said you seemed to be having a hard time. Ah, that's right, I remember now. He told

me one of his former students was struggling with a new sake and that he wanted to help somehow. But when he started talking about the plan, my immediate reaction was, yeah, that's a pretty big ask. After all, my brother was just a schoolteacher. It's not as if every last one of his students felt indebted to him to that degree."

"Oh. So I guess he told you about it?" Haraguchi murmured.

"Only in broad strokes. Still, launching a new product sounds like a real ordeal. Above all, it takes money."

"That's true. Of course it takes money, but…"

"You don't have to spell it out. Money's an issue, but there's something even more important than money, isn't there? That's the real headache when you're in business," Takeshi said, abruptly turning to Mayu. "When you try to bring a new product to market, what could possibly be more important than money, speaking strictly in business terms?"

"Huh, you're asking me?"

"Yes. What do you think it is?"

"I…don't know," Mayu said, tilting her head.

"You could at least guess," her uncle chided.

"I wouldn't even know where to start!" she protested, completely at a loss. *Why are we having this conversation, anyway?*

"Tell her, Haraguchi."

"Publicity," Haraguchi said to Mayu.

"Publicity?"

Takeshi snapped his fingers. "Exactly. When you're trying to sell something, that's the most important thing of all. All the more so with a new product. But you're up against a particularly tough opponent. They're not going to say 'yes' so easily."

"I know. That's why I asked Mr. Kamio for help," Haraguchi said.

"Figured as much. Even my brother was agonizing over it. After all, the target is…well, hard to approach."

"Stuck-up, you mean," Haraguchi said in a slightly lowered voice.

"That's it, stuck-up. Couldn't put it better myself. There are plenty of proud women in the world, but from what I hear she's especially so. My brother said it was tricky to even broach the subject."

"I see." Haraguchi sighed. "Then I guess Sensei hadn't spoken to her yet?"

“It sounded like he hadn’t, last I heard. But things might have changed after that. That’s why you wanted to check in on him Sunday, correct? To see how it was going?”

Haraguchi grimaced, flushing slightly. “Yeah. Sorry.”

“Thought so.”

“But it’s also true that Mr. Kamio consulted me about the sake he was planning to bring to the reunion.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll take your word on that.”

“Hold on a second,” Mayu cut in. “What are you even talking about? I’m completely lost here.”

“The publicity campaign for this sake,” Takeshi said, jerking his chin toward the bottle on the table.

“I got that part, it’s the rest that isn’t making any sense.”

“Don’t feel too bad. My brother was clear he didn’t want anyone knowing about it. Haraguchi, mind explaining it to my niece?”

With a resigned look, Haraguchi nodded and began. “When I was trying to come up with a product name for this sake, it occurred to me that maybe…maybe we could use *Gen-Lab*.”

Mayu’s eyes widened. “*Gen’no Labyrinth*? How?”

“Just straight-up calling it ‘Azuma Zero’, after the hero,” Haraguchi said. “The head of the brewery thought just using ‘Zero’ would work, but that wouldn’t really stand out, would it. You only get that special feel if you use the protagonist’s full name: ‘Original Special Honjo¯zo¯ Sake: Azuma Zero’—and of course we’d print a color illustration of Azuma in his combat suit on the label. What do you think? Packs a punch, right?”

Mayu pictured it in her mind as she looked at the bottle: *Japanese sake paired with the hero of a hit SF anime. It might not be a bad idea.* “It sounds amazing, but wouldn’t you need the author’s permission?”

“That’s the problem,” Haraguchi said. “Obviously we’d have to get permission. And if possible, I’d want Kugimiya to draw a brand-new illustration just for us.”

“And you don’t think he’d do it?”

“Well…” Haraguchi sighed, then glanced over at Takeshi.

“Were you not listening to anything I said?” Takeshi furrowed his brow. “I told you, your opponent’s tough. This isn’t going to move forward so easily. We’re dealing with a proud woman artist here.”

“That’s where I’m losing you. What woman?”

”Why, the author, obviously.”

“But the author’s Kugimiya, and he’s still a guy last I checked. Who’s this woman you’re talking about?”

Takeshi clicked his tongue—tch, tch, tch—and wagged a finger from side to side. “Who’s talking about Kugimiya? You’re really slow on the uptake, you know. Think: among your classmates, who’s the girl with the biggest ego? This isn’t a trick question.”

“Sorry, who are you talking about?”

“Kokonoe,” Haraguchi supplied from the side. “You know. We used to call her Kokorika?”

“Ririka Kokonoe!?”

“The very same,” Haraguchi said.

Mayu recalled the girl’s ponytail and catlike eyes. Kokorika—a flashy nickname for a flashy character. She was showy, strong-willed, and a natural leader amongst the girls in her class.

“So glad you’ve finally caught up. You’re hard work, you know,” Takeshi said, shaking his head in mock exasperation.

“She’s at Hotsu now,” Haraguchi went on, naming the famous Tokyo-based advertising agency. “She’s the one in charge of all the *Gen-Lab* accounts. She probably made a big deal about having gone to junior high with Kugimiya and somehow leveraged that into becoming his de facto manager. You want to do business with *Gen-Lab*, you gotta go through her. Did you know Kugimiya’s back in town right now?”

“I heard from Momoko. He’s coming to the reunion too, right?”

“Yeah, but the thing is, Kokonoe came back with him. Thanks to that, I can’t get a moment alone with the guy. He does whatever she says now—wherever he goes, there she is, tagging along. I’m pretty sure he’s in love with her, but honestly, I wish he’d snap out of it.”

“I had no idea.”

“Are you following the conversation now, Mayu?” Takeshi asked. “That’s why Haraguchi asked my brother to act as a go-between. Isn’t that right, Haraguchi?”

“That’s exactly it. If it were just Kugimiya, I think I could manage to ask him myself. It’s his so-called manager who’s the problem…”

“You’re calling her his ‘manager,’ but that’s actually off the mark,”

Takeshi said. “According to my brother, she’s an artist in her own right, and considers herself a co-creator. So maybe, calling her a ‘so-called artist’ hits a little closer to the mark.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” Haraguchi agreed. “I wondered what you were talking about earlier. Now it makes sense.”

“Sorry I didn’t explain it properly.”

“Not at all,” Haraguchi said, then looked from Mayu to Takeshi and back again. “I do have a favor to ask you both. I’d like you to keep what we’ve just talked about to yourselves, at least for the time being.”“Why?” Mayu asked. “Because it’s some top-secret sales strategy?”

Haraguchi gave a wry smile. “I wish it were something that cool. I just don’t want it to look like I’m jumping the gun on everyone else.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, you know about the *Gen-Lab* House, right?”

“I heard it got canceled,” Mayu said.

“Yeah,” Haraguchi replied with a small nod. “Thing is, right after that project was announced, this town went crazy. Everyone thought it would be a huge boost, a real coup for town revitalization. For a while it was ‘*Gen-Lab*’ everything. Everyone was trying to cash in. Then the pandemic hit, the plan vanished, and the whole thing went up in smoke. But there are plenty of folks who couldn’t quite let it go. So a group of volunteers started talking about what they might be able to do on their own. The core members are us, Kugimiya’s old classmates, but the one really breathing fire is Kashiwagi. He’s vice-president at Kashiwagi Construction these days.”

“I see,” Mayu said. It wasn’t exactly shocking. Her classmate Kodai Kashiwagi’s father was president of Kashiwagi Construction, one of the largest companies in the area. Kashiwagi was just following in his father’s footsteps.

“Kashiwagi Construction was the contractor lined up to build the *Gen-Lab* House, so you can imagine how much it stung for him,” Haraguchi went on. “And you know how Kashiwagi’s always liked playing the big boss. So he was out there like, ‘I’ll save this town!’”

“But from what you said earlier, doesn’t anything to do with *Gen-Lab* have to go through, uh, Kokorika first?” Mayu asked.

“Exactly. So even Kashiwagi, annoying as he finds it, says we have to go through the proper channels, which means her. But I don’t have the luxury

of taking it that slow," Haraguchi continued. "If I don't settle on a sales plan for this new sake soon, I won't have anything to present to Mannen Brewery. But if Kashiwagi finds out I quietly worked things through with Kugimiya and Kokonoe via Mr. Kamio, he'll blow his top, saying I went rogue."

"He might," Mayu agreed. "But once the sake actually went on sale, he'd find out anyway."

"Once we've secured the rights to the product name, I don't care what Kashiwagi says. I can make excuses however I need to. What I don't want is for him to butt in early and mess up the contract negotiations."

"I see," Mayu said, nodding. The more she learned about the situation, the more confusing all of the conflicting motives became.

"I don't see a problem with keeping this under wraps," Takeshi said, turning to Haraguchi. "You haven't told the police about any of this, right?"

"I figured there was no need."

"Correct, there is not. We'll keep quiet too."

"Thank you. That really helps," Haraguchi said, bowing his head.

Takeshi drained the rest of his sake and set the glass down. "Thanks for the drink. It was excellent."

"How about another?"

"No thanks," Takeshi said, slipping a hand inside his jacket. "What do I owe you?"

"There's no charge. It's on me."

"That doesn't feel right," Takeshi said.

"Really, it's fine," Haraguchi insisted.

"Well then, if you say so," Takeshi replied, reluctantly pulling his hand back out of his jacket.

Mayu couldn't help casting a suspicious glance at her uncle. She doubted he had ever really intended to pay.

"Um, so, Kamio," Haraguchi said, "I'm sure you've already heard from Honma, but we've been talking about what to do with the reunion. With Sensei dying like that, some people think we should cancel."

Mayu tilted her head. "That's up to you. It's not my place to say one way or the other. But since you've gone to the trouble of arranging it, I feel like my father would be happier, wherever he is now, if everyone got together. That said, I think I'll sit it out. I don't want everyone worrying about me.

And I imagine some of them will come to the funeral anyway."

"Oh, I'll definitely be there. When is it?"

"Not decided yet."

"Let me know when it is. I can help get the word out."

"Thanks. Momoko offered to help too. Okay, Uncle Takeshi. Time to go?"

Takeshi nodded, then pointed at the bottle on the table. "Next time, I insist on paying for the sake."

"I'll be waiting," Haraguchi said with a smile.

They left the shop and had walked some distance when Mayu rounded on Takeshi. "What was all that about?"

"What was what about?"

"That story about Haraguchi consulting Dad on the product name for the sake—you didn't actually know anything about that, did you?"

Takeshi snorted. "Of course not. I just sensed he was hiding something and thought I might drag it out into the open."

"How did you know he was hiding something?"

"Nothing too fancy. There was just a point in what he said that caught my attention."

"Which point?"

"When he said he tried calling several times on a Sunday to answer Mr. Kamio's question about sake for the reunion, but couldn't get through."

"I remember that. Seems pretty normal?"

"If you take the story at face value, it makes it sound like the one with business to discuss was my brother, not Haraguchi. But picture this: if your teacher asked you an opinion about some sake, and you have an answer for him, all that's required is for you to leave a message at his place saying 'call me back if you can.' There's no reason to keep calling."

"When you put it that way…I guess not."

"On top of that, he went out of his way to swing by the house on Monday. That made me think: maybe it wasn't my brother with the urgent business, but Haraguchi. That narrows the question down to 'what is he hiding'? When a man hides something, it usually boils down to two factors: a woman, or money. And given this was an old junior-high teacher we were talking about, romance seemed the lesser likely option of the two.

"Furthermore, there was no way he'd gone there to ask for advice about

some scandal. And if it was about money, it was hardly likely to be gambling or anything shady. Which really only left business. So then I had to ask, what work is he most focused on right now?"

"That new sake of his!" Mayu said with sudden realization.

"Which might suggest he was going to my brother for financial help, but who would go to a retired schoolteacher—a man who isn't even rich—for financial backing on a new product?" Takeshi went on. "If he wanted something from my brother, it would have to be as a go-between. In other words, he didn't really need my brother, but someone my brother knew well: a former student. He mentioned there was a class reunion coming up, so it seemed likely the person was a classmate. But Haraguchi himself wasn't all that close to this person, which is why he needed my brother to mediate."

As they walked, Mayu studied her uncle's face with open curiosity. "You worked all that out that quickly?"

"It's not that challenging of a deduction, really. Human behavior patterns don't have all that many variations to begin with."

"But at that point, you didn't know the person he wanted to talk to was Kugimiya, right?"

"How could I know that? I just figured there was some rich former classmate he was hoping to approach about investing. So I tried needling him a bit, saying that bringing a new product to market must take a lot of money. Haraguchi agreed, but it was clear that wasn't his main concern. That's when I realized money wasn't the real issue and changed tact."

"Ah, which is when you dragged me into the conversation. Now I get it."

Mayu mentally replayed the exchange. Come to think of it, her uncle had been talking a mile a minute, but had said very little of substance. Everything had come out of Haraguchi. Uncle Takeshi had merely steered him gently toward a confession.

"But you did think Kugimiya was a woman, didn't you," Mayu noted.

"I mentioned the target, and Haraguchi referred to them as 'stuck-up.' That phrase, and the way he said it, made me realize were talking about a woman, not a man. What I hadn't counted on was that the person my brother was supposed to approach would have a manager attached."

"But you handled it beautifully. Haraguchi didn't suspect a thing."

"Nothing to it. More importantly, now I've added two candidates to my

list of people I absolutely have to meet."

"Kokorika, that is, Ririka Kokonoe and Kugimiya, right?"

"Exactly. And he did say both of them had come back to town. It's quite possible they'd already seen my brother."

"Right. I'll try to arrange some way to talk to them. They might even come to the funeral."

"Do that. By the way, there's one thing I want you to tell me."

"What?"

"What's this *Gen-Lab* thing you were talking about? I gather it's called 'something-or-other Labyrinth,' but what is it?"

"What?" Mayu stopped in her tracks. "You kept that whole conversation going without even knowing what *Gen-Lab* is?"

"Is that so surprising?"

"Very. It's very surprising."

"Fine. So what is it? Explain it to me."

Mayu let out a long sigh. "I'll tell you when we're back at the inn," she said, and began to walk again.



11

Gen'no Labyrinth was Katsuki Kugimiya's first serialized work and, to date, easily his greatest achievement. The fact that it had run for nearly ten years, even with several breaks in between, spoke volumes about its popularity.

The story was science fiction, adventure, and mystery, with a heavy dollop of human drama as well. An online encyclopedia summarized the opening of the story as follows:

"Azuma Zero was a former adventurer who solo-climbed many of the world's highest peaks, Mount Everest included. But while attempting a solo crossing of Antarctica, he fell into a crevasse. Though he was miraculously rescued, he lost both his hands and feet. His adventuring days were over. He returned to his hometown, where he spent his days being nursed by his younger sister, Reina. Having lost his reason to live, however, he remained inwardly consumed by despair. Worse, he knew that Reina, despite having received a proposal from the man she loved, could not bring herself to marry out of worry for her brother. Feeling there was no point in someone like him going on living, his thoughts turned constantly to death.

"Meanwhile, strange events were happening around the world: unexplained blackouts and power grid failures.

"One day, a government agent calling himself Mannami came to see Azuma, telling him: 'Humankind is on the verge of destruction. You are the only one who can save it.'

"There the story went back two months earlier to when a world-renowned theoretical physicist had gone missing. There was a search, and the scientist was found asleep in a top-secret research facility, his brain connected via

computer to a massive network.

"He wasn't alone, either. Several of the world's top scientists had also fallen asleep linked to the network. They called themselves the 'Stray Sheep' and via the network, they continued to live their lives as avatars within a virtual space known as the 'Labyrinth.'

"In time, the Stray Sheep's astonishing plan came to light. In order to halt the destruction of Earth's environment, they had sent a list of demands to the leaders of the major advanced nations. These demands included the complete abolition of nuclear power, reductions in CO2 emissions, and a massive ocean cleanup program. Each of these was accompanied by a series of deadlines, and if the required measures were not taken within the specified time, they would begin shutting down the world's power supply, block by block. As it turned out, the Labyrinth had already seized control of the entire global power grid.

"The demands were extreme, and not easily carried out. Heads of state opposed compliance. The only way to stop it was for someone to enter the Labyrinth and persuade the Stray Sheep to stand down. Several negotiators had already accessed the network, but every one of their attempts had ended in failure.

"It turned out that the world of the Labyrinth was far vaster and more complex than anyone had imagined. It closely resembled the real world, yet in many ways it was entirely different. Worst of all, there was no way to meet directly with the people they needed to negotiate with. The Labyrinth had many inhabitants, but most of them were nothing more than fictional computer-generated entities. The first step was to locate the Stray Sheep and make contact with them.

"After much difficulty, the negotiators had managed to learn the Stray Sheeps' location within the Labyrinth, but a formidable obstacle stood in the way. To reach their location, they would have to cross a massive mountain range known as the Great Cosmos: a chain of peaks thousands of meters high, impossible to traverse without aircraft. However, any unauthorized flight would be picked up by surveillance cameras and shot down.

"The Labyrinth Countermeasures Committee concluded that their only hope was to find a negotiator who had the skill to cross Everest-class mountains alone. They conducted a survey of mountaineers around the

world, eventually settling on Azuma Zero in Japan. Though he had lost both his hands and feet, as long as the parts of his brain that controlled movement remained intact, he would be able to move freely with a whole, uninjured body inside virtual space.

"Azuma was given a mission: enter the Labyrinth, negotiate with the Stray Sheep and persuade them to halt their plan—or else locate and destroy the program controlling the world's power grids.

"Of course, the mission carried grave risks. Even in a virtual space, suffering severe damage could be fatal. When the body suffered an impact, it felt pain, and if it bled heavily, the brain would fall into an anemic state. In reality, the brain was merely being tricked into hallucinating the injury, but even that could still affect the body's actual physical function and, in severe cases, it could be fatal. It was a brutal mission, but Mannami told him that he was the only one who could possibly pull it off.

"Azuma agonized over the decision. Could he really accomplish something so daunting? Yet faced with spending the remainder of his days immobile, the mission offered something he hadn't had since the accident: a reason to live. More than anything, the thought of taking on those life-or-death climbs once more, even in virtual space, set his blood racing. In the end, Azuma accepted.

"Because his physical body had to remain as still as possible while his brain accessed the network, a massive access portal was installed in his home. Under the watchful eyes of the Countermeasures Committee members and Reina, countless electrodes were attached to Azuma's brain until, at last, he was ready to enter.

"After infiltrating the virtual Labyrinth, Azuma arrived in an unfamiliar city, where he encountered all manner of enigmatic characters. Most of them were nothing more than fictional entities generated by the computer, yet they each possessed such a strong sense of self and acted so independently that it was hard for him to believe they were artificial. He faced many enemies, but there were also a fair number who sided with him and lent their aid; still, even those who seemed trustworthy could never be taken at face value, and at crucial moments he would be betrayed by someone he had not expected, only to be saved from a tight spot by an unexpected ally.

"At regular intervals, Azuma returned to the real world to report his

progress to the Labyrinth Countermeasures Committee. Time in the virtual space flowed at one-hundredth the rate of reality, so a single day in the Labyrinth corresponded to about fourteen and a half minutes in the real world. Azuma would wake up, deliver his report, and then once more dive back into the virtual world.

"At length, Azuma reached the Great Cosmos and was finally poised to attempt a crossing of the range. Which is where the real ordeal began…"

Lifting his eyes from the wiki article, Takeshi rubbed at both his eyelids with his fingertips.

"You read the whole thing?" Mayu asked.

"Just the beginning." Takeshi set the phone down in front of her. "Seems like a pretty long story. I'm guessing this Great Cosmos range or whatever isn't going to be crossed all that easily."

"Of course not. That's where the real story starts." Mayu flicked the screen back to the earlier page. "There are thirty-five volumes in all, you know."

"And you've read all of them?"

"No way. Maybe the first five or six, and even then I was skipping around, so I don't remember them that well."

"And the story's set in this town?"

"Right. Well, most of the story is Azuma's adventures in the Labyrinth, but since he comes back to the real world at regular intervals, it shows in parallel how messed up things have gotten out here, too. That's when you get little glimpses of the scenery based on this town. The traditional Japanese house where Azuma and Reina live, for example. The plan on this poster was to recreate that house." Mayu pointed at the poster on the wall.

The two of them were in the Marumiya's dining room. There was still time before dinner, but they were meeting with someone from the funeral home there on short notice. Kakitani had called to say the autopsy was finished and the body could now be released.

When Kazumi died, Mayu had helped with the wake and the funeral arrangements, so she already knew which funeral home to use. She called them right away and explained the situation, including the fact that her father's death was a suspected homicide.

The man in charge sounded surprised, but remained calm. "In that case, we'll confirm with the police on our end and then come out to you," he told

her. Given his line of work, he was probably accustomed to somewhat complicated circumstances.

"Recreate the *Gen-Lab* House, huh? A dying tourist spot pinning all its hopes on a manga for a miraculous comeback—talk about a drowning man clutching at straws," Takeshi said with a little shrug.

"It's not such a bad idea. *Gen-Lab*'s on a whole different level popularity-wise," Mayu replied. "At least after they made the anime." The serialized manga's run had already ended when the anime adaptation came out and interest in the original flared back up.

Mayu checked the time on her phone; the person from the funeral-home should be arriving any time now. "By the way, Uncle Takeshi—what about the relatives?" she asked.

"What about them?"

"When are you going to tell them Dad's dead?"

"I've already told the Kamio side of the family," he said.

"What? When did you do that?"

"While you were on the phone with the funeral people just now. I called your uncle in Saitama."

Now that he mentioned it, she remembered him making a call beside her, though it hadn't taken very long.

"And? How did it go?"

"How did what go?"

"Didn't you tell him Dad was murdered?"

"Of course not. I told him it was heart failure."

"Heart failure?" Mayu's voice jumped in spite of herself.

"It's the truth, isn't it? His heart stopped, so it was heart failure."

"And that's okay?"

"What's the problem? When people hear 'heart failure,' no one starts digging. There's nothing for them to get curious about." Takeshi glanced around, then leaned in close.

"When a celebrity dies and the news says 'heart failure,' it's either suicide or foul play, one of the two. If it's neither, then they died in bed during sex. Count on it. 'Heart failure' is a magic word."

How much this claim was based on anything concrete was anyone's guess, but he sounded entirely sure of himself.

"What did you say about the wake and the funeral?" Mayu asked.

“I told them we’d be keeping it to immediate family only and asked for their understanding. That was that.”

“What, so none of Dad’s relatives are coming?”

“Did you want them to?”

“It’s not that I wanted them there, I just assumed they would come.”

“Relatives you hardly ever see are nothing but trouble when they show up for this sort of thing. It’s a hassle for them too. This way’s better for everyone.”

“Then what should I do about the Shibagaki side?” she asked.

Shibagaki was her mother’s maiden name, and Mayu still had a decent amount of contact with that side of the family.

“As you like. Feel free to use my explanation if you want to avoid a headache.”

“That it was heart failure? And they don’t have to come to the wake or funeral?”

“That’s right.”

“Won’t that blow up in our faces? I mean, it’s a murder. It’ll end up on the news sooner or later, won’t it?”

“No need to worry about that. Judging from how Kogure handled things today, the police have no intention of making the cause of death public. Even if it does hit the news, it’ll be after they’ve identified a suspect.” Once again Takeshi spoke in that flatly certain tone of his, though there was no telling how much of it deserved to be believed.

“Still, Aunt Mikiko and the others are going to say they want to come to the wake or the funeral.” Mikiko was her mother Kazumi’s older sister and had always been the helpful type.

“In that case, tell them there’re rumors going around about a new wave of Covid infections, and they’re discouraging visitors from other prefectures.”

“Oh. Covid. Right, that works.”

“If you tell them people will give them nasty looks from being out-of-prefecture, that’ll scare ‘em off a little.” Takeshi tapped a finger against his temple. “Also, try using your head more.”

The remark stung, but she had no comeback. “Okay, I’ll call them later.”

“Good. The last thing we need is a bunch of outsiders underfoot.”

“Outsiders?”

“Anyone who’s clearly not involved in the case is an outsider. All of

them."

The curt way Takeshi said it gave Mayu's heart a jolt. After checking that none of the inn's staff were nearby, she asked, "Uncle Takeshi, do you think the person who killed Dad might show up at the funeral?"

"Or the wake. I'd be crazy to *not* think that," Takeshi shot back. "It wasn't a simple robbery, which means the killer is someone your dad knew. Maybe they were close, maybe they weren't, but unless we're talking about some kind of secret liaison, there's a good chance they'll show up."

Mayu swallowed hard. "They'd come to the funeral of someone they killed?"

"Think about it from the killer's perspective. Even right now, they're jumping at every shadow, wondering when the truth of what they did will all come out. Most people in that position will figure it'd look suspicious if they didn't attend. They're going to want to know how far along the investigation's gotten, too."

"Maybe…but how are we supposed to pick them out?"

"That's the problem. You can't just spot them on sight. But over the course of the wake and funeral, we'll map out all your dad's various connections. And the condolence register everyone signs when they come is basically a ready-made list of potential suspects."

The sharp look in her uncle's eyes almost made Mayu shrink back. This was another face of many she had seen her uncle wear, and it made her uneasy.

The person from the funeral home arrived not long after. He was a short, slight man named Nogi. His broad face, reminiscent of a fava bean, stirred a memory—he had been in charge of Kazumi's funeral, too. When Mayu mentioned this, Nogi nodded deeply.

"Indeed. It's my honor to assist you again in this difficult time. I'm truly sorry for your loss. Please accept my deepest condolences."

Nogi told them that he had already cleared everything with the police, who had requested that the body be picked up by eight o'clock the following morning. "We can take your father directly to the crematorium, but perhaps you'd like to be present when we move him?" he asked. "When someone passes away in a hospital or a care facility, the family will sometimes come along. However, when the police are involved, there tend to be various restrictions."

“There’s no need to be there,” Takeshi cut in from the side. “There’s nothing to be gained from seeing the body just as it’s come back from the autopsy. The stitching will be rough, you can count on that. It’s better to have your last look after the mortician has put everything properly in order.”

Mayu winced at her uncle’s utter lack of delicacy and turned to Nogi. The little man dipped his head at once.

“I tend to agree,” he said. “You can leave your father’s appearance to me; I’ll see to it that he’s properly prepared.”

A body straight from an autopsy was not something one wanted to look at if it could be helped, Mayu gathered. Even so, she wondered again how her uncle knew all these details.

“I’ll leave it in your hands,” she said, bowing to Nogi.

“Very good. In that case, I’d like to move on to the arrangements. Is there anything you absolutely want, any particular wishes? For example, when there are few relatives, these days many families choose a one-day funeral without a wake. Naturally, that keeps the costs down.”

“You can do everything in a single day?” Mayu said.

“No, we’re not doing that,” Takeshi cut in. “We should hold the wake and the funeral on separate days. That way, more people can come. But we can ask them not to attend both. They’ll have to choose: wake or funeral. That’ll cut down the number of people each day and help with Covid precautions.”

Mayu immediately grasped what her uncle was after. The more names they had on the list of possible suspects, the better.

“Understood,” Nogi replied. “We’re also taking particular care with regards to Covid measures. Given that the deceased was a schoolteacher, I imagine we’re not just talking ten or twenty mourners. That is why I would like to suggest an online funeral.”

It was a phrase Mayu had heard a lot lately. She asked him what exactly that involved.

“In the service we recommend,” Nogi began, “the altar is set up and the priest chants the sutras as normal. The only people physically present in the hall, however, are the immediate family; the other mourners wait in a separate room. It’s a large, well-ventilated space with plenty of distance between the chairs, and the wake or funeral is filmed with cameras and streamed as video.

“People who can’t attend in person because they live far away or are elderly can still watch the service online. For the mourners who do come to the venue, we set up monitors in the separate room so they can watch from there, and you can even watch on a smartphone from outside. It helps keep the rooms from becoming too crowded. At reception, each mourner is given a numbered ticket. Next to the hall, we place a digital display board showing the number of the person currently going up for incense offering. People enter the hall in order as their number comes up, and when they’ve finished, they leave through a different door. This, too, is to avoid having the mourners packed together.”

It was Mayu’s first time hearing about any of this. Covid had changed things across society, and nothing was spared—not even weddings and funerals.

“Back when the pandemic was at its peak, we also offered drive-through incense,” Nogi added. “Mourners could offer incense without getting out of their cars…but at this point I don’t think that’s really necessary anymore.”

“We’ll go with the recommended service,” Takeshi said. “I can’t see any reason why we shouldn’t.”

“I think it sounds good, too,” Mayu agreed.

“Excellent,” Nogi said, jotting something down on his forms.

“There is one request I’d like to make,” Takeshi said.

“What would that be?”

“Could you set the incense stand right next to the casket, so that each mourner can come up, face the body, and offer incense before they leave? With the lid of the casket kept open.”

“I see, so you want them to, er, see the body?” Nogi said, looking a little uncertain.

“It’s not unusual for close friends and family to gather around the casket for a last look once the formal part of the service is finished, but that kind of crowding isn’t ideal now, is it?” Takeshi said. “If you’re going to handle the incense offering in such a systematic way anyway, it’s safer and more rational to fold the final viewing into the same flow.”

Nogi nodded. “You’re quite right. Consider it done. Will you want to do it that way for both the wake and the funeral?”

“Yes. And I’d like everything on video—every mourner as they view the body and offer incense,” Takeshi said. “Nothing that gets shared. We just

want a recording for ourselves."

"Understood." Nogi's pen flew across the page.

Mayu glanced sidelong at her uncle. He obviously had some purpose in mind with this request, but she had no idea what it was.

After that, they went on to settle the finer points of the service. In practice, all it amounted to was Nogi making suggestions and Mayu agreeing to them. At some point, Takeshi stopped speaking altogether and seemed to lose interest.

They chose the photo for the memorial portrait from the images on Mayu's phone. It was from three years earlier, at a relative's wedding. The picture wasn't especially good, but it was the best they could find. In the end, the meeting took a full hour. If Nogi hadn't already been familiar with the Kamio family's Buddhist sect, their family temple, and their burial plot, it might have taken even longer.

It was past seven in the evening by the time they finished, so they decided to have dinner. The proprietress herself brought out the food. "You must really be going through it," she said.

Mayu replied, "We'll be fine." They had already told her they would be discussing funeral arrangements in a corner of the dining room.

"Well, if you need anything at all, just say so. Happy to help however I can," the woman said.

"Thank you."

"So many things to worry about these days," she muttered as she walked away. They hadn't told her the cause of death, but it was clear she assumed an illness, and these days, that meant one thing.

"What was that all about just now?" Mayu lowered her voice and asked Takeshi.

"What was what?"

"Wanting everyone to face the body before they offer incense. You must have had some reason for that."

"You think?" Takeshi said, pouring beer from the bottle into his glass. "When someone kills a person, it's very hard for them to act completely calm when they have to stand in front of the body later. There's bound to be some kind of change in their behavior."

"So that's what you're going to watch for? A change in behavior?"

"That's right. Keep your eyes open, don't miss even the slightest tell.

We'll have it all on camera, but your own impressions in the moment are crucial."

"Got it."

For all his rough edges, Uncle Takeshi was razor sharp and, in his way, dependable.

Mayu's phone rang just as they were finishing their meal. It was Detective Kakitani, asking about their meeting with the funeral home. She told him they had finished about half an hour earlier, and that the wake would be held the next day and the funeral the day after.

"I see. Actually, I had a question for you," he said. "Would it be all right if I came over now?"

"Uh, sure, that's fine," Mayu replied.

"Thank you very much. Be there right away, then." He hung up quickly, as if he were afraid she might change her mind.

Mayu told Takeshi, and the left corner of his mouth curled upward. "They're probably thinking the same thing we are," Takeshi said.

"The same thing?"

"You'll see when he gets here. Works out nicely, actually—there are a few things I want to ask him for, too."

"What kind of things?"

"All sorts of things," Takeshi said, draining the rest of his beer with a crooked smile.

Kakitani arrived only a few minutes later, sooner than Mayu had expected; he must have really been rushing. She moved to sit beside Takeshi so she could face the detective across the table.

"Thank you again for everything earlier today. I truly appreciate your cooperation with the investigation," he said, bowing as he took his seat.

"I hear you have a favor to ask us," Takeshi said, brushing aside the pleasantries.

"Yes. I understand you've already made arrangements for the funeral, and I was hoping to ask something in connection with that…"

"And that is?"

"Before that, may I ask what scale of funeral you're expecting? Just family, only relatives, something along those lines?"

"The relatives aren't coming," Takeshi said. "Aside from us, it will mainly be folks who knew my brother, people from the junior high where

he used to work, that sort of thing. Tomorrow, I plan to let the neighborhood association know, too, but I've no idea how many of the neighbors will actually show up."

"How many people in total would you expect that to be?"

"Who knows. My niece's friends are handling the calls to the school people, but as for who's coming and who isn't—no way to tell at this point."

"But we're not talking about just five or six people, right?"

"Hard to say. Depends how well-liked my brother was when he was alive," Takeshi replied.

Kakitani turned to Mayu. "What do you think?"

"My classmates, I think a fair number of them will come. But I doubt it'll be as many as twenty," she said. "As for graduates from other years or his fellow teachers, I really can't guess."

"I see, I see," Kakitani said with a satisfied nod.

"So, what's this favor of yours?" Takeshi asked. "Or are you going to keep us guessing?"

"Oh, apologies." Kakitani rubbed his hands together like a shopkeeper. "What I'd like to ask is whether we might be allowed to post investigators at the wake and the funeral. Naturally, they wouldn't be in uniform. We're thinking of having them blend in among the mourners and the funeral staff."

"Ah, so, undercover?" Takeshi said with a short laugh.

"Nothing so dramatic," Kakitani said, holding his palms out toward them as if to stop her uncle from charging. "But there's a strong possibility that the culprit, or someone otherwise connected to the case, will attend. So the police would like to know, as far as possible, who comes, and how they behave at the venue. How does that sound?"

Mayu realized this was what Takeshi had meant earlier when he said the police were thinking the same way they were.

"What do you think?" he asked her.

"I'll leave it to you, Uncle Takeshi," she said.

Takeshi gave a small nod, then turned to face Kakitani. "All right, I understand. Your detectives can mix in with the funeral staff all they like. But I'd rather you didn't put anyone in among the mourners."

"Any particular reason?"

“Because of how the wake and the funeral are going to be held.” Takeshi explained the online setup and the numbered-ticket incense system to the detective. “As you can see, the mourners will be coming in from a separate room, one after another, just to offer incense,” he went on. “If the detectives are disguised as mourners, they’re the only ones who’ll be left when it’s over. If the other mourners see that, it’ll raise questions we don’t need.”

“You may be right,” Kakitani said. “We could have the investigators themselves go up and offer incense, but…”

“I’m saying no to that. My brother wouldn’t be happy having total strangers with no connection to him offering incense.”

“I feel the same way,” Mayu said, raising her hand. “I really don’t like that idea.”

“I completely understand,” Kakitani said. “In that case, I’ll speak with the funeral company and have the investigators pose as staff. Any other conditions?”

“We’re fine with the undercover operation,” Takeshi said. “But there’s something we want in return. Before the wake, we’d like to go into my brother’s house once. My niece tells me he had a few belongings he treasured, things he asked to have placed in his casket when he died. We want to fetch them. Right?”

Put suddenly on the spot, Mayu flustered, then managed a quick “Yes.” It was her first time hearing anything about this.

“Ah, I see… All right. What time tomorrow would be best?”

“Let’s say ten in the morning. No need to send a car.”

“Understood. I’ll let the officers on watch know. However, I must ask that you touch as little as possible in the study. We believe some of the killer’s traces remain there, and we want to preserve the room in its current state as much as we can.”

“Well, you’re kind of asking the impossible. We’re going there to collect my brother’s belongings. There’s no way we can avoid touching *anything* in his study.”

“That’s why I said ‘as much as possible,’” Kakitani replied. “The room itself is important evidence. I hope you can understand.” He put both hands on the table and bowed his head.

Takeshi let out a loud breath and shrugged. “Right. We’ll do what we can.”

“Thank you. In return, I should say that you’re free to go into any of the other rooms as you like.”

“Of course we are. It’s our house.”

“Anything else?”

“That’s all for now.”

“Great,” Kakitani said, looking visibly relieved—no doubt worried he was about to get hit with some outrageous demand. “Well then, we’ll leave it at that.” He started to rise from his chair.

“Good work setting up the undercover thing,” Takeshi said. “Inspector Kogure should be pretty happy with you.”

“We’ll see about that,” Kakitani answered with a wry smile.

“How’s the investigation going? Turn up anything yet?”

“It’s only just begun, so I can’t really say… but we’re doing our best,” Kakitani replied.

“I’m counting on it,” Takeshi said.

“Yes, well then, if you’ll excuse me.” Kakitani turned on his heel.

After watching him leave, Mayu asked Takeshi, “What are we really going to the house for?”

“For what I said. To pick up the things for the casket. You can think of one or two items like that yourself, can’t you?”

“Well, sure. But that’s just the reason you told Detective Kakitani. What’s the real one?”

“To take a good, long look at the scene, of course. With the police there during the day there was no way to really look around.”

“True,” she admitted.

The two of them left the dining room. Takeshi rolled up his sleeve and checked his watch. “Look at the time. It’s been a long day, and tomorrow will be even longer. We’ve got the wake, after all. Best be ready for it,” he said, and started toward the inn’s front entrance.

“Where are you going?” Mayu called after him.

“Convenience store. I’m going to buy some underwear and socks.” He turned his back to her and strode off.

He didn’t even bring a change of clothes.

Now that she thought about it, her uncle had shown up earlier in the day empty-handed. Yet he’d said he’d been going around the neighborhood asking questions the night before. Where had he stayed that night? Or had

he gone all the way back to Tokyo and then come out again? No, he wasn't the type to waste that kind of time.

Mayu shook her head. *This man is full of mysteries*, she thought, and not someone she could afford to underestimate.

Back in her room, she sent Momoko Homma a message with the detailed schedule for the wake and the funeral. A reply came almost immediately, saying she understood. Momoko added that a recent funeral for someone she knew had also been held online; apparently that was the norm these days.

After that, though she dreaded it, Mayu decided to call her aunt Mikiko. When her mother died, Mikiko had helped with all sorts of things, and Mayu still had her cell number saved in her phone.

As soon as the call connected, a cheerfully carefree voice burst into her ear. "Mayu, long time no see!"

"Hello…it's been a while," Mayu said, deliberately lowering her tone, hoping her aunt would sense that something was wrong.

Her efforts were in vain.

"I heard the news! Office romance, huh? Congratulations!" Mikiko rattled on at machine-gun speed before Mayu could get a word in edgewise. "The wedding's in May, right? I hear you're having the reception outdoors, what with the way things are these days, but that time of year it'll feel just wonderful. I'd be delighted to come. Hope the weather's nice!"

"No, um, Auntie, that's not what this is about today," Mayu cut in.

"Oh? Then what? Wait, don't tell me—are you expecting? Mayu, are you pregnant?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Mayu said, waving her free hand in the air even as she held the phone to her ear. "Listen, Auntie, I need you to calm down and hear me out. This isn't very good news."

"What? Don't tell me the engagement's off?"

Mayu felt her knees threaten to buckle, but this was no time to collapse. "No. It's…" Mayu swallowed before she went on. "My father passed away."

For a moment, there was such complete silence that she thought the call had dropped. "Hello?"

"Ah, sorry. Mayu, what did you just say? It sounded like you said—"

"I said my father died. I know it's sudden, so I'm sure it's a shock."

She heard her aunt draw in a deep breath. “How? Was it an accident?”

“Um, well,” Mayu swallowed again. “It was heart failure.”

“I see. Really… He seemed so healthy, too.” Mikiko’s tone grew heavy all at once, and after that she didn’t press for any more details. “Heart failure” really were magic words, just as Takeshi had said.

Mayu went on to explain about the online wake and funeral. When she added that people from outside the prefecture weren’t exactly being welcomed right now, even Mikiko could only say, “That’s a shame, but if that’s how it is…”

After hanging up, Mayu checked her phone and found a message from Kenta.

Sorry for silence, didn’t want to pester you too much. How are things? Call me when you get the time.

She could hear the restraint in the wording of his text. He must really be worried. Mayu thought back on the day. She hadn’t even been on her socials at all. When she called, the line connected at once. He must have had his phone right next to him. “It’s me, Mayu. Is now a good time?”

“Yeah, it’s fine, I’m in my room. So, how’s it going?”

“Well… It’s rough, as expected.”

“I figured. Anything in particular giving you problems?”

“Well…” she began, though of course she couldn’t say, *I’m having trouble because we don’t know who killed Dad.* “Right now my head’s just full with trying to get through everything—the wake and funeral—without messing it all up.”

“Oh, so the plans are set. When are they?”

“Wake’s tomorrow. It starts at six p.m.”

“Tomorrow…”

She could hear the dismay in his voice.

“I’ve got a meeting with a client in the evening. They need to see the actual flooring materials, so I have to meet them in person.”

“Don’t worry about it. There’s an app.”

It wasn’t the first time Kenta had heard of an online funeral. “So, I can at least watch the wake online. I should be able to make it later that night. Can you send me the address?”

“I’ll text you later. But really, don’t push yourself. There’s the whole Covid thing to think about, too.”

“Well, I’ll push myself a little. My fiancée’s father just died—there’s no way I could skip both the wake and the funeral.”

“That means a lot, but…”

“I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

“Okay. Got it.”

“Good night.”

“Good night.”

After ending the call, she let out a long breath. The word “fiancée” sounded strange in her ears, stirring both a sense of reassurance and a flutter of unease.

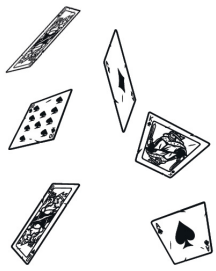
She had lost her father, tragically, but she would soon have a new family—that was undeniably a source of strength. Yet at the same time, there was the uneasy knowledge that they weren’t technically family yet. In the wake of what had just happened to her father, she couldn’t shake the conviction that everything could change at the drop of a hat.

Mayu gave her head a small shake. This was no time to be thinking about that. All she could do was focus on what she had to do. She sent Kenta a text with the venue’s address and contact information. On a whim, she checked her email inbox and found an impressive number of new messages. Assuming they were all meaningless, she skimmed through them.

Her fingers froze. A subject line reading “To Ms. Mayu Kamio” jumped out. She recognized the sender’s name. Hesitating, she opened it. The message itself was not very long.

“Sorry to bother you again. Have you spoken to him yet? If you have, what did he say? Do you still feel the same?”

Mayu deleted the mail and tossed her phone aside.



12

SOMEONE WAS CRYING IN the distance. A little girl.

Mayu was walking down a long corridor. The wooden floorboards creaked with age beneath her feet. The crying was coming from somewhere at the far end. At the end of the corridor waited a tatami room where futons had been laid out. Her mother, Kazumi, was sitting on them, wearing a Japanese-style sleeping gown and holding a baby in her arms.

Kazumi lifted her face, a look of mild distress in her eyes. “Every time I try to lie down, she starts crying,” she said, though there was a smile at the corner of her mouth.

Sorry, Mayu said, apologizing. She had no intention of causing trouble.

The baby’s eyes were closed. Yet she could still hear the sound of crying coming from somewhere.

Waaah. Waaah. Waaaaaaah.

Beep. Beep. Beeeeeep.

Mayu opened her eyes. In the dimness, she could see where a shaft of light slipping through a gap in the curtains of her room fell across a hanging scroll on the wall.

The scroll showed a plum tree. This area had many famous spots for viewing plum blossoms. This time of year should have been peak tourism season. She reached out and, still half-asleep, switched off the alarm clock, wondering at the ability of her own brain to transform a sound like that into a baby’s crying.

She sat up and stretched her neck. It wasn’t the most pleasant awakening, on account of the dream. Or rather, she realized why she’d had the dream in

the first place, and she didn't like it. In any case, she resolved to forget it as quickly as she could. It was only a dream.

She washed her face and went down to the dining room, where, as usual, she was the only guest. Takeshi was nowhere to be seen either. The proprietress greeted her with a "Good morning."

"Has my uncle not come down yet?" Mayu asked.

The woman blinked, looking slightly surprised. "He left just a little while ago, right after he finished breakfast. You didn't know?"

"Oh, I see. No, it's not like we'd promised to eat together or anything."

While she waited for her food to arrive, she tried calling her uncle. After several rings, the line connected. "What is it?" he answered.

"Where are you?"

"Outside."

"I guessed that much. I'm asking *where*."

"Here and there. Hard to sum up in one word."

"You can use multiple words."

"How about: I've got my own shit to take care of, so back off? Actually, that reminds me—there's something I want you to handle. Call Kakitani and ask him when they can return my brother's phone. They'll probably say it's important evidence and they can't give it back for a while."

"So basically, ask even though we know he'll say no?" Mayu said.

"Right. But that's where the play really starts. When they say no, tell them that in that case, you'd at least like to see his emails, SNS messages, and call history. Tell them that as the bereaved family, you have a right to know."

"Okay, but that sounds kind of hard to pull off," Mayu said, scratching her head. "Wouldn't you be better at that kind of negotiation?"

"I can't. I don't have an alibi."

"An alibi?"

"They'll just say they can't show investigative material to someone who still might be a suspect. It's a standard line. That's why I didn't bring it up last night."

"But it's all right if it's me, because I *do* have an alibi?"

"At the very least, they can't use that excuse on you. Instead, they'll say it would be a problem if anyone else saw the information. So you tell them you absolutely won't show it to anyone else, and just keep pressing."

“Got it. I’ll give it a try.”

“I’m counting on you. The difference between us having that info and not having that info is everything. Anyway, let’s meet at the house, front door, ten a.m. Don’t be late.”

Takeshi finished rattling off instructions, then hung up.

Ugh, this is going to be a pain, Mayu thought, staring at her phone as breakfast arrived.

She finished eating and went back to her room to put her makeup on when a message came in from Momoko. She’d contacted every school-related person she could think of. It was anyone’s guess how many graduates would actually come, but apparently most of their classmates were planning to attend the wake that evening.

Mayu finished getting ready and sent a message thanking her. Then she took a deep breath and called Kakitani. The line connected at once. “Has something happened?” His voice sounded tense.

When she asked about the phone, the tension in his tone dropped. “Oh, that. I’m afraid we’ll have to wait until we’re closer to solving the case before we can discuss returning it,” he said—politely phrased, but exactly the refusal Takeshi had predicted.

“I understand. In that case, I’d really appreciate it if you could at least show me his emails, messages, and call history,” she said.

“Ah, that’s what you wanted?”

“Please,” Mayu pressed.

“Hmm,” Kakitani murmured, clearly torn. “In that case…one moment.”

He was probably conferring with someone—most likely Inspector Kogure. She could hear his voice faintly in the background, but not enough to make out the words.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” he said at last. “I’m afraid that’s not possible right now, either.”

“Why not? I mean, I have an alibi. It’s absolutely certain I’m not the killer, and I’m family. Don’t I have the right to see?” Mayu said. “I swear I won’t show anyone else. I won’t even show my uncle.”

She repeated, word for word, what Takeshi had told her to say.

“I understand. I really do understand how you feel,” Kakitani replied. “But even if you don’t *show* it to anyone, there’s always the possibility you might let something slip in conversation.”

“I won’t. Please trust me.”

“It’s not a matter of trust or distrust,” he said quickly. “From an investigative standpoint, it’s a risk we can’t take. I hope you can understand. I’m sorry, but I have a meeting starting now, so I’ll have to let you go. My apologies. We’ll talk again.”

“Wait, but—” She never got as far as repeating, *I’m family*, before the line went dead.

Sighing, she called Takeshi and told him how the conversation had gone.

“So they turned you down, huh? I was kind of hoping Kakitani might bend a little—he seems like a decent enough guy,” Takeshi said.

“He did ask someone for advice,” Mayu added.

“That would be Kogure,” he said, and she heard him click his tongue. “Right then. We’ll drop that line, at least, for now.”

“*That* line?”

“I’ll explain later. See you.”

After he hung up, Mayu checked the time. It was a little past nine. She stood up and took her mourning clothes out of the closet. She’d gotten them out of her suitcase and hung them the night before. It was the same outfit she’d bought when her mother died. She hadn’t worn it since.

A message notification popped up on her phone from Kenta:

Morning. I guess you’re lead mourner. Good luck, and see you tonight.

Mayu replied:

Thanks. Heading out now.

She took a large tote bag from her suitcase, tossed her black handbag into it, slung it over her shoulder, and left the room. She had learned from her mother’s death that funerals generated all sorts of small items—envelope after envelope of condolence money, bundles of condolence telegrams, contracts—and that a big bag was essential.

She had the proprietress call a taxi and checked the news on her phone while she waited. An article saying that the latest Covid spike in Tokyo had eased off caught her eye, and she felt a measure of relief. That would make it easier for Kenta to leave the city.

When the taxi arrived, she headed for her family home. Looking out the window at the street, she thought there seemed to be a few more people walking around than there had been the day before. Maybe the fall-off in cases in Tokyo was already having an effect. After so many rounds of

restrictions and relaxations, people were getting quicker to adjust.

She reached her old home about five minutes before ten. A young uniformed officer was standing by the gate. She went up to him and explained who she was.

"I've been informed. You're free to go inside," he told her.

"Actually, I'm supposed to meet my uncle here first."

"Ah, the gentleman is already inside."

"What? Really?"

"He went in about ten minutes ago."

"What?"

Mayu hurried through the gate and opened the front door. A masked officer was standing outside the study; when he saw her, he straightened his posture.

Two pairs of shoes had been left in the entryway. The worn-out pair clearly belonged to the officer. The other pair was relatively new dress shoes. *Takeshi.*

Mayu gave the officer a small nod and peeked into the study, but her uncle was nowhere to be seen.

"Ah, the victim's brother went upstairs," the officer offered, a little hesitantly.

"Right, thanks."

Mayu started down the hallway and saw Takeshi coming down the stairs. To her surprise, he was wearing mourning clothes.

"Uncle Takeshi, you said we were meeting in front of the house," she said.

"Got here a bit early. Seemed like a waste of time to just stand around waiting. No harm done?"

"I guess not… More importantly, where did those mourning clothes come from?"

"Is it so strange? I'm family. Of course I'm going to wear mourning clothes to the wake."

"That's not what I mean. I'm asking where you *got* them. Did you rent them?"

"They're mine. A person can at least own a set of mourning clothes."

"Then where were you keeping them?"

Takeshi twisted his mouth as if annoyed. "Does it really matter?"

“It does to me. Where?”

“In a coin locker at the station. I left them there so I wouldn’t have to lug them around.”

“What’s that?” Mayu pointed at Takeshi’s right hand. He was holding a small bag.

“You sure are nosy. Does your future husband know this about you?” he grumbled.

Sighing for effect, Takeshi unzipped the bag. When she saw what he took out, Mayu caught her breath. It was a condolence-money envelope.

“Should I give it to you now? I was thinking it might be better to hand it over when you’re gathering up all the envelopes from the other mourners.”

“I’ll take it now. Thanks.”

Mayu slipped the envelope into her own bag and drew a slow, deep breath. The fact that she was the one *receiving* condolence money drove home, all over again, the reality of her loss.

When the two of them returned to the study, the officer on watch handed them gloves. Apparently, controlling fingerprints was still a concern.

Takeshi opened the door and they stepped inside and took a look around the room. It was just as ransacked as it had been the day before. As Takeshi had pointed out, it didn’t look like someone had been in there searching for something specific; it looked more like a random mess made just to give the impression of a robbery.

“Damn it,” Takeshi spat.

“What’s wrong?”

He pointed at the desk.

“The phone fax is gone. The police must have taken it. When my brother made calls from home, he mostly used the landline.”

“Now that you mention it, he was always saying he didn’t trust the cell reception at the house,” Mayu said.

“Probably an old habit from back when cell signals *were* unreliable. If we can’t get at his phone, I was hoping we could at least check the call history on the landline,” Takeshi bit his lip, his expression sour.

Mayu went over to the desk. The drawers had been pulled out, their contents scattered across the floor. Among them she spotted a Montblanc fountain pen and picked it up. This was the pen her father used to write particularly important letters. Her mom had given it to him for their tenth

wedding anniversary. His present to her, Mayu recalled, had been a pearl necklace. She remembered the three of them going out to dinner, to a restaurant with a beautiful view of the city skyline. The fried shrimp had been huge and delicious, and she'd been over the moon.

Next she picked up her father's reading glasses. He had a pair of round-framed glasses he usually wore for his astigmatism when he read. The first time she'd seen him wearing them low on his nose must have been just before he turned fifty. It had struck her then, with a pang, that her father was getting old.

Looking up, she saw Takeshi standing squarely in front of the backyard window, arms braced, surveying the room.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Trying to get into the killer's head. Figuring out why he wrecked the room like this," he said, slowly folding his arms.

"Oh, come on," Mayu said, knitting her brows. "You're still going on about that? Wasn't it just to make it look like a burglary? You're the one who said so. Unless you changed your mind?" She kept her voice low and glanced toward the doorway. The officer hadn't come into the room, but he kept casting furtive looks inside.

Takeshi let out a low grunt. "It's too clumsy."

"Clumsy?"

"For a staged scene, it's sloppy. Overdone. If they just wanted it to look like they'd been after valuables, it would have been enough to pull out a few drawers and knock things off a couple shelves. No reason to go this far."

"Now that you mention it, it *was* weird that they left the bankbook," Mayu said.

"The bankbook?"

Mayu told him how she'd tried to pick up her father's bankbook from the floor the day before and Kogure had stopped her. It was gone now, presumably collected by the police.

"That is strange," Takeshi said. "Even if you can't withdraw money anymore without proper ID, your typical petty thief would grab it out of habit—especially if they really wanted it to *look* like they were after money. And the fact they didn't come with a weapon at the ready is odd, too. Lots of things aren't adding up. I'm not even sure they broke in with the intent to

kill my brother." Still mulling it over, he walked over to where Mayu was standing. "Have you decided what to put in the casket?"

"I was thinking these two, for now." She took the fountain pen and glasses out of her tote bag. "He'll need something to write with and his glasses in the next world, right?"

Takeshi shook his head. "Not those."

"Why not?"

"Glass or plastic will melt during the cremation and stick to the bones. You'll regret it when you have to pick them up later. If you really want them buried with him, put them in the urn *after* the cremation."

"What *does* work, then?"

"Your safest bet is over there," Takeshi said, jerking his thumb toward the bookcase behind him.

"Books, huh." Mayu got to her feet and walked over. "That'd be fitting, at least."

She scanned the row of spines, thinking about which work her father had cared most deeply for. Before long, one volume caught her eye: a paperback of *Run, Melos!* by Osamu Dazai.

When she turned, Takeshi was already standing just behind her. "Looks like you've decided."

"I'll go with this one," she said, holding up the paperback.

"A tale of burning friendship, huh. Not a bad choice."

Mayu looked back at the shelves. "There used to be a lot more books like this. Looks like this is all he kept in the end."

"Books like what?"

"The kind junior high kids can read. Sherlock Holmes mysteries, Arsène Lupin. He'd bring students back here and recommend books to them."

"Bringing junior high kids into your own house? I can't imagine it. They'd just mess up the place or break something. Might even steal."

That reminded her of something. Still gazing at the cover of *Run, Melos!*, Mayu tilted her head.

"When I was in grade school, I remember a boy–a junior high kid, I think–sitting in this room reading," she said. "When I asked Mom, she told me he was one of Dad's students." The memory was a faint one from more than twenty years ago. She'd never thought about it until now.

Her uncle, apparently uninterested in her reminiscence, was looking at a

different set of shelves, the one lined with school-related files. “Mayu, which graduating class were you?” he asked.

“Me? Forty-second,” she said.

He pulled out one of the files. On the cover, written in felt-tip pen, were the words “Forty-Second Graduating Class—Graduation Essays.”

“What are you doing?”

“Just taking a look.”

“Don’t read mine.”

“So I should only read essays by people I don’t even know? Where’s the fun in that?” he said, turning his back to her as he opened the file. He flipped briskly through the bound manuscript paper.

“Hey, cut it out!”

“Oh, here we go. Third Year, Class Two, Mayu Kamio. Very neat handwriting,” he commented.

“Stop it! I’m serious!”

Mayu tried to snatch the file away, but her much taller uncle just stretched both arms up at an angle and kept it out of her reach. “You wanted to be an illustrator?” he said.

“Is that so terrible? Just give it back already.”

When Takeshi finally lowered his arms and closed the file, Mayu snatched it away and slid it back onto the shelf.

“Hm?” Takeshi frowned, eyes moving to the other file spines.

“What is it?” she asked.

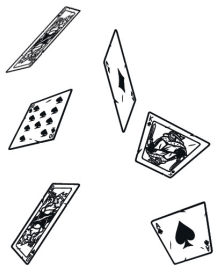
“These two are out of order,” he said. He was pointing at the file for the thirty-seventh graduating class. It had been swapped with its neighbor, thirty-eight.

“You’re right,” Mayu said, and rearranged them so they were in the proper sequence.

“Still, I’m surprised he went to the trouble of keeping all this,” Takeshi said, looking over the row of files.

“If you could ask Dad what he wanted to take with him to the next world, I bet he’d say all of these,” Mayu said.

“Maybe so,” Takeshi replied, planting both hands on his hips with a sigh. “But it’s a bit much to be cramming into a coffin.”



13

THE FUNERAL HALL STOOD on a low hill at the edge of town, a clean-looking three-story building with white walls and glass doors. The crematorium was next door, linked by a covered passageway. It had rained on the day of her mother's funeral, but they hadn't needed umbrellas to move between buildings, Mayu remembered.

Nogi was waiting in the entrance hall. Behind him stood several masked men who looked like employees, but were, according to Nogi, all investigators. "There are only three real employees here besides me," he said. "Our actual staff are in the hall right now, getting things ready."

That made sense. The fake employees all looked at loose ends. There would be nothing for them to do until the mourners arrived.

Takeshi gave the detectives a cool, appraising look, then turned to Nogi. "There's something I'd like to add to our arrangements, if it's not too late."

"What might that be?"

"One more location for video recording. At the reception counter. I'd like to be able to review what goes on there afterward. Just for our own records, no need to stream it."

"I see." Nogi took a phone from his inside pocket. "Understood. I think it can be done. I'll make the arrangements right away."

"I appreciate it. I'll give you detailed instructions later about exactly where the camera should be placed."

"Very good."

While Nogi was off contacting someone, Mayu asked her uncle about the additional camera. The only answer she got was, "I'll tell you when you need to know."

Nogi came back. It seemed adding the camera would not be a problem. Takeshi nodded, satisfied.

They went into the hall, where the altar was still being decorated. Mayu stopped when she saw the plain white-wood coffin that had been set out. The lid was off, placed to one side.

Mayu walked up to the coffin slowly, until she could see her father's face. His eyes were closed, his expression peaceful. He looked nothing like he had in the police morgue. He looked almost alive, as if he might open his eyes at any moment and sit up. *Morticians are really something*, she thought.

On a sudden impulse, she took the paperback of *Run, Melos!* from her bag and set it down in the coffin beside the body. They were skipping the send-off ceremony, so she wanted to do it before she forgot.

"You have the death certificate?" Takeshi asked Nogi.

"Yes," Nogi replied, taking a sheet of paper from the file tucked under his arm.

Takeshi took the document and stepped a little away from him. Mayu went over and heard him murmur, "thought so."

"What is it?"

"I was wondering what they'd written for the cause of death."

"And?"

"Cardiac arrest due to compression of the cervical blood vessels. So it wasn't just a simple case of asphyxiation."

"So he wasn't killed with a thin cord or anything like that," she whispered, keeping her voice low so Nogi wouldn't hear.

"Right," Takeshi said, and went back over to Nogi to return the document. Then he walked up to the altar and raised his eyes to the memorial portrait. It was a photo of his brother facing the camera and smiling. It was a shot from his wedding reception with the original background neatly erased.

"Ms. Kamio," Nogi said, turning to Mayu. "There are a few things we should go over. Might now be a good time?"

"Sure," she said.

"Then, if we could move to the waiting room?"

"All right. What about you, Uncle Takeshi?"

"I'm good. I'll leave the logistics to you," Takeshi said curtly, still gazing

up at the portrait.

In the waiting room, Nogi went over what would happen from here on. Compared to her mother's funeral, everything felt much more stripped down, and engineered to minimize contact between people as much as possible. When he was done explaining everything to her, they went back into the hall. The decorations were mostly finished, and there was no sign of the memorial hall staff anywhere. Two folding chairs for the family of the bereaved stood side by side. Takeshi was sitting in the one on the right.

"Uncle Takeshi, want an *onigiri*?" Mayu asked, taking a convenience store bag out of her tote. On the way there she had stopped at a convenience store and bought rice balls and bottled green tea for lunch.

"Sure, don't mind if I do," Takeshi said, turning toward her.

Mayu sat down beside him and handed over a salmon-and-roe rice ball and a plastic bottle she'd taken from the bag. Hers was tuna mayonnaise.

"It feels kind of weird, you know? Eating right next to the coffin," she said, looking toward it as she peeled the wrapping off.

"I don't see a problem with it," Takeshi said. "Think of it as the two of us getting a head start on the wake meal." Again, due to Covid there would be no formal wake meal that night.

They ate in silence for a while. Then something occurred to Mayu, and she found herself looking at her uncle's profile.

"What is it? Something on my face?" Takeshi asked.

"I first met you at Grandma's funeral," Mayu said.

"I remember."

"The night before that, when we were getting things ready for the wake was when Dad told me for the first time he had a younger brother. It came as quite a shock, really."

"That so."

"Ever since then there's been something I've wanted to ask you."

"What's that?"

"When we first met, you told me you already knew a lot about me. You said I was good at drawing and that I liked cats. Do you remember?"

Takeshi took a drink of tea from his plastic bottle and tilted his head. "Can't say that I do, but I suppose I might have said that."

"At the time, I figured you must've heard about me from Dad. But when I asked him about it later, he said he hadn't really ever said much to you

about me. So how did you know? That I was good at drawing, and liked cats?"

"Hmm, good question." Takeshi gave a little shrug. "Sorry, I don't remember."

"No way. You're lying."

Takeshi put on a hurt look. "What makes you so sure?"

"There was some kind of trick to it, right? And you're not the sort who'd forget a trick."

"Hmph." Takeshi snorted. "You're catching on."

"Tell me how you did it."

Takeshi gave her a sharp look. "You sure you want to know?"

"I wouldn't be asking if I didn't." Mayu shot back.

"How much you willing to pay?"

The question almost made her choke. She glared at him. "Money again?"

"What? You expect a magician to give his secrets away for free?"

"The nerve! Unbelievable."

Takeshi let out a sigh, crumpled up his rice-ball wrapper, and dropped it into the convenience store bag. "Fine, just this once. Think of it as condolence money. First, how I figured out you liked cats. Ready? I've lived a long time, and I've never once met a girl who hated cats. At the very least, no girl who'd be offended if I said they liked cats. That's all."

"What?" Mayu's eyes widened. "That's it?"

"That's it."

"So you were just guessing?"

"Call it statistical inference."

Her shoulders slumped. To think that the answer to a mystery she'd carried around for nearly twenty years would be something so banal. How was that even a magic trick? "What about the drawing part? There might not be many girls who hate cats, but there are plenty who are bad at drawing."

"That's true."

"So what's the explanation for that one?"

"That I'll tell you another time."

"What? Why?"

Mayu was sticking out her lower lip in a pout when a sound came from behind them. She turned to see Momoko, dressed black, peeking into the

room.“Momoko!” Mayu cried, jumping to her feet.

“Long time no see,” Momoko said, hurrying over. The two of them clasped hands.

“You’re here pretty early,” Mayu said. She had asked Momoko to handle the reception desk.

“I thought there might be something else I could help with, but did I come too early? I’m sorry!”

“Not really. With all the Covid stuff, there’s a ton that has to be explained to people in advance.”

“In that case, good. Mayu, don’t overdo it, okay? Anything you can leave to someone else, you should. If you don’t slack off a little, you’ll wear yourself out.”

“I’ll be careful, thanks.”

Takeshi came up behind them. “So this is Ms. Momoko.”

“Yeah. Momoko, this is Uncle Takeshi, my dad’s brother,” Mayu said, introducing them.

“Nice to meet you,” Momoko said, her expression tightening.

“I’ve heard about you from Mayu. You’re a real chef, I hear?”

“Who? Me? No, not at all,” Momoko said, waving her hands and shaking her head.

“You don’t say? I could have sworn Mayu was telling me about something delicious you cooked for her once upon a time. What was it again?”

Takeshi turned to look at Mayu, but she had no idea what he was talking about.

Why does he always have to say such weird things?

“Ah,” Momoko said, her face lighting up as she remembered something. “You mean the gyoza?”

“That’s it!” Takeshi said, pointing at Momoko before looking over at Mayu. “You told me you’d never had such delicious gyoza before. Remember?”

Mayu had absolutely no memory of ever telling her uncle any such thing, but she did faintly recall going over to Momoko’s house in junior high and being treated to gyoza. “Oh,” she said, with a vague nod.

“That was forever ago!” Momoko raised a hand to her mouth. “They weren’t anything special. Now I’m embarrassed.”

“You’re too modest. Your husband’s a lucky man to have such a good cook for a wife. I hear you’ll be handling the reception desk today. Thank you for that. I’ll see you later,” Takeshi said.

He headed for the exit, glancing back with a sly grin before he went around the corner and out of sight. Mayu frowned. It was the same trick as telling her she was good at drawing. Any grade-schooler drew something in arts and crafts class. All he had to do was say that someone had praised one of her pictures—her father, for example—and even at worst no one would take offense. He might even score some points.

“He seems like a really nice uncle,” Momoko whispered.

Mayu wagged a finger in front of her friend’s face. “Don’t be fooled by the slick exterior. He’s not to be trusted.”

The new-style wake and funeral meant even the reception area needed special handling. The guest book was in card form, with spaces for name, contact details, and relationship to the deceased. Mourners would fill one out at one of several tables and then hand the card in with their condolence envelope at the reception desk. For the pens, they would take one from a box marked “Unused,” and when done, drop it into a box marked “Used.” There were several pens, which were disinfected and rotated regularly. Momoko, working reception, was wearing a mask, face shield and even gloves. The condolence envelopes and name cards were lined up on a tray, and once they reached a certain number, the whole tray was put into a case, where the contents could be disinfected at the push of a button.

“Sorry it’s all such a production,” Mayu said to Momoko.

“Don’t worry about it,” Momoko replied, setting a freshly written name card and condolence envelope on the tray. On the envelope was written “Ryosuke Ikenaga,” with “Momoko” added beside it. Seeing that, Mayu was reminded that Momoko’s surname was now Ikenaga. Because she only ever called her by her given name, she always forgot.

“My husband’s coming later, too,” Momoko said.

“What, really? But he’s in Kansai for work, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, but when I told him Mr. Kamio had passed away, he said there was no way he wasn’t going to attend.”

“Oh, that’s right, your husband went to our junior high too, didn’t he?”

“Yep. Sounds like Mr. Kamio was his homeroom teacher in both first and third year. He always said he owed your father a lot.”

“Oh, maybe you did say something and I forgot. I had no idea.”

Over the past few years, Mayu and Momoko had only exchanged emails a few times a year and as such hadn’t really had a chance to sit and talk. When she heard her friend had gotten married, she’d simply sent a congratulatory email. She had never even met her husband.

“Is your husband going to be posted down in Kansai much longer?” Mayu asked.

“I’m not sure,” Momoko shrugged. “Probably.”

“You never thought about moving down to be with him?”

“Well…” Momoko tilted her head. “With Covid still not under control, to be honest I was scared of moving somewhere I didn’t know the lay of the land. You know, better to stay put at home and just wait for him. We’ve got a kid, too.”

It made sense. There had been soft bans on travel to other prefectures over the course of the pandemic. You could easily end up stuck in an unfamiliar place without much recourse.

She found herself wondering what she would do in the same situation. Her company wasn’t in the practice of transferring employees to other branches like Momoko’s, but if Kenta changed jobs and ended up far away, would she be obliged to go with him? If she went, it would mean quitting her job.

“So you’re not working at the moment, then,” Mayu said.

“Yeah, but...” Momoko went on, hesitating. “To be honest, that’s not really by choice. I know I didn’t say anything, but the place I was working for went under.”

“What, really?” This was news to Mayu. “You were at a travel agency, right?”

“Yeah. It went bankrupt last fall. Tourism got hit hard by Covid. Small travel companies didn’t stand a chance.” She gave a little shrug and a wry smile.

Just looking at her friend’s face Mayu could tell she’d been having a hard time, as much as she tried to hide it behind a smile. Being thirty wasn’t like being in high school.

While they were talking, her uncle had reappeared with Nogi. The two of them were engaged in a discussion of some kind near the reception desk. It looked like he was giving instructions about where to place the camera that

would film the mourners checking in. It was unclear what he was plotting, but one look at his face as he whispered into Nogi's ear gave Mayu the impression that he was up to no good.

Before long, people in mourning clothes began to start showing up. The first person to come over to greet Mayu was an elderly man she did not know. It turned out he had been the principal at the time when her father had last been teaching. In a voice that was hard to catch, he said something to the effect that "Eiichi's loss was a great blow" and that he prayed the "culprit would be caught soon." So he did know that her father had been killed. There hadn't been anything in the news, but rumors spread quickly in a small town.

Haraguchi from the liquor store arrived with three other men—former classmates, Mayu guessed, but it had been years, and with all of them wearing masks, Mayu had no idea who was who.

A broad-shouldered man stepped up in front of her.

"Hey Kamio, sorry for your loss." Seeing her blank look, he added, "It's me, Kashiwagi," and took off his mask for a moment before fitting it back on. This was Kodai Kashiwagi, now vice president of Kashiwagi Construction.

"Hey... Long time no see."

"Haraguchi told me what happened. Man, what a shock. There are some real bastards in this world." In a reassuring tone he added, "If there's anything I can do to help, don't hesitate to say so." She noticed that he carried himself with a presence befitting his title these days. Back a little straighter, shoulders a little broader.

"Thank you," Mayu said, bowing in gratitude.

The other men greeted her in turn. Slightly chubby Numakawa ran a restaurant, while Makihara, with his thin face and glasses, apparently worked at the local credit union.

Mayu recalled what Haraguchi had told her. After the *Gen-Lab* House project had been cancelled, Kashiwagi had taken the lead in coming up with an alternative scheme to revitalize the town. Seeing them together, she suspected that Numakawa and Makihara were involved as well.

The four of them headed over to the reception counter, but Makihara seemed to think of something and came back to Mayu.

"Hey, Kamio, had you talked with your dad about anything lately? About

his former students, I mean."

Mayu shook her head. "Not really. I hadn't had many chances to talk to him lately. Why?"

"Well, um, with the class reunion coming up, I was just wondering if he'd said anything."

"Like what?"

"You know, stuff like, 'Makihara's doing such-and-such now,' or 'Sounds like Numakawa's restaurant is having a hard time because of Covid'... Basically, I wanted to know how much he still had us in mind."

"I'm surprised that's a concern."

"Just a little. I mean, I was going to ask him at the reunion, but now I can't. Anyway, if you haven't heard anything, no problem. Sorry to take up your time." With that, he hurried away.

That was weird, Mayu thought, watching his narrow back as he left.

The mourners were arriving one after the other now, but then Nogi called her over and kept her busy greeting the chief priest and so on, until it was time to go to the hall to start the wake. She went in to find Takeshi already in his seat, one leg crossed over the other. As soon as Mayu sat down, he leaned over and asked, "So, how's the turnout from our list of suspects?" He kept his voice low, glancing at one of the funeral staff with a camera nearby.

"Don't call them suspects, it's rude. These people came a long way to pay their respects." Mayu protested.

"Still suspects," Takeshi replied.

The MC from the funeral home announced that the wake was about to begin, and a short while later the head priest entered and began chanting a sutra. It was all standard funeral fare, but what was different was that, apart from the funeral staff, there were only the two of them present. Everyone else was attending via a video stream.

When it came time to offer incense, Mayu rose first, followed by Takeshi. There was a short pause, then it was time to admit the general mourners. The first to enter was the former principal, the elderly man from before. With unsteady steps he approached the coffin, peered inside, then pressed his hands together with a sorrowful expression. He then calmly offered incense and, following the marks on the floor, headed toward the exit at the front. As Takeshi had requested, one of the funeral staff was filming the

entire sequence from a slightly low angle.

After that, the mourners lined up lengthwise, keeping proper physical distance, and each in turn faced the body, offered incense, then walked past Mayu and the others. Remembering what Takeshi had told her, Mayu watched them when they looked at her father in the coffin, doing her best to casually but intently observe their reactions.

Then it was her classmates' turn. Kashiwagi gazed into the coffin with a grim expression and pressed his hands together. The mask hid his mouth, but she could almost see his lips drawn in a hard, straight line.

Numakawa, Makihara, and the others went through the ritual just like everyone else. Nothing about them especially caught her attention.

The very last pair was a couple: Momoko and a tall man, who must have been her husband, Ryosuke. Mayu remembered seeing the name on their condolence envelope: "Ryosuke Ikenaga." She wondered what exactly her father had done for this man to make him feel indebted enough for him to come all the way up from Kansai.

The two looked tense as they approached the coffin. Peering inside, Momoko drew her brows together in a pained expression. Next to her, her husband reacted much the same way, except for a brief moment when his eyes opened wide in what looked like surprise. A moment later he was back to normal, and there was nothing unnatural in his behavior afterward; he offered incense, bowed to the bereaved family, and left.

When the chanting was over and the chief priest had withdrawn, one of the funeral home staff announced that the wake had concluded. Outside, Mayu spotted Momoko and her husband and hurried over.

"Thanks for helping at the reception desk. Was it rough?"

"Not a problem at all. And now I've got the hang of it, tomorrow should be even easier," Momoko replied.

"Okay, that's a big help. Um..." Mayu looked up at the man standing beside Momoko. "Thank you so much for coming all this way today. Sorry to keep your wife so busy."

"Not at all," Ikenaga said, waving a hand in front of his face. "I owe Mr. Kamio a great deal, so this is really the least we can do. More than that, I just want—I want to offer my condolences even though it feels like those words aren't nearly enough. What a shame, what a waste... I'm sorry, I don't know what else to say."

Even through the mask, Mayu could see the frustration twisting his face.

"Your words are more than enough. Father would be glad to hear it, too," Mayu said.

"I really hope so," he replied.

"Ryosuke," Momoko said, pointing at her wristwatch, "you okay for time?"

"Oh, right." He turned back to Mayu. "Well then, Ms. Kamio, I'll be taking my leave."

"Are you staying at Momoko's parents' place tonight?"

"No, I'm heading back."

"Back... to Kansai? You mean, tonight?"

"It's a hit-and-run trip," Momoko put in from the side. "His work's really busy."

Mayu blinked and looked up at Ikenaga again. "And still you came all this way. Thank you, truly."

"Please don't mention it. It's fine. I'm used to it." He gave a small wave. "Well then, Momoko, see you later."

"Later," she answered.

Ikenaga gave a small nod, said, "Nice to meet you," to Mayu, and headed for the main entrance.

"He must be really busy," Mayu remarked to Momoko.

"Try 'workaholic,'" Momoko sighed.

Mayu glanced around and noted that the other mourners had already left. She went back to the reception desk and confirmed the next day's arrangements with Nogi. The condolence envelopes had been collected in a disinfected case which Mayu slipped into her tote bag.

"Where is the guest book?" she asked.

"I handed it over to your uncle," Nogi said, shifting his gaze to a point behind Mayu.

She turned to see Takeshi facing two men. Except it was more like they were facing off. The atmosphere was tense. The men were fake funeral staff —plainclothes detectives, in other words.

"What's he doing now?" she murmured.

"No idea," Nogi said, overhearing her. "Well then, Ms. Kamio, I'll see you again tomorrow."

"Ah, right, the funeral. Tomorrow."

Nogi gave a polite bow, cast a quick glance toward her uncle, then briskly walked off, clearly wanting no part of any trouble.

"Well, I'll get going too," Momoko said. "See you tomorrow."

"Yeah, see you."

Mayu waited a moment for Momoko to leave then walked over to where Takeshi and the two men were still arguing.

"What is it? What's going on?" she asked.

"Nothing, other than a ridiculous demand that we are *not* agreeing to, as I've just finished telling them," Takeshi said.

"It's not ridiculous," complained the older of the two detectives, sounding exasperated. "It's necessary for our investigation."

"Mind telling me what this is about?" Mayu asked.

The detective sighed and turned toward her. "All we want is to borrow the guest book. If that's not possible, then at least let us take photos of it."

"Oh, that?" Mayu looked at the paper bag Takeshi was holding.

"The guest book contains important personal information. We can't just show it to outsiders," Takeshi said.

"Which is why we promise it will never leave our hands. You have our word," the detective insisted.

"Oh, 'your word'? And what's that worth with all the police misconduct in the news? Wiretapping, attaching GPS trackers without warrants? What else have you been up to that they haven't reported on, I wonder?" Takeshi shot back.

"Please, you have to trust us. I mean, what do you want us to say? You want to see the person who killed your brother caught as soon as possible too, right? We need to work together!" The detective was almost pleading now.

Takeshi snorted. "Ah, so we're working together now? Then do I get to make a request?"

"What sort of request?" the other detective asked.

"Simple. My brother's phone. I want it back. If you can't do that, then at least let us see the data on it."

Mayu could see the detectives' expressions change. "Er, that's a bit..." one of them began.

"Right, so, no deal," Takeshi said.

"Please, you're being unreasonable. You know I can't make decisions on

such an important piece of evidence on my own," the detective protested.

"Of course, you need your superior's approval. Which section are you with? The local precinct?"

"We're from prefectural headquarters," he replied.

"Then your direct superior is Inspector Kogure, right? All right," Takeshi said, shifting his gaze to the other detective watching from the side and pointing at him. "You, what's your name?"

"Me?" the man asked, clearly taken aback.

"Yes, you. Name?"

"Maeda," he answered.

"Okay then, Maeda, call Inspector Kogure and then give me your phone. I'll talk to him directly."

"You mean right now?" Maeda said.

"Yes, right now," Takeshi replied.

Maeda glanced at the other detective, and the older man gave a silent nod. Maeda started making the call.

Takeshi looked over at Mayu and handed her the paper bag as if to say *you hold it*.

"...Yes, this is Maeda. About the guest book, the bereaved family won't lend it to us... No, not even to make copies. They're saying they want to see the victim's phone in exchange. Yes, his phone. The victim's, right. Er, he says he wants to speak with you direct—"

Takeshi strode up and in one swift motion, snatched the phone from Maeda's hand. Pressing it to his ear, he turned his back on the detectives.

Then he paused for a beat for no apparent reason before saying gruffly, "It's me."

Another pause, after which he continued, "have you already forgotten? Takeshi. Eiichi Kamio's younger brother, who else?... Because, obviously, talking to you directly is the quickest way to settle this and time is of the essence. I've heard from your men here that you're refusing to let us see my brother's phone, and yet you expect us to just hand over personal information? That's some nerve. Just who do you think you are?"

Just as it had been back when they were at the scene of the crime, Takeshi rattled on, gruffly fearless as ever, even with a prefectural inspector on the line. Where he got his confidence from was beyond Mayu.

Suddenly, she caught her breath. He was holding the phone to his left ear

as he spoke, but she could see he was holding another phone in his right hand and was doing something with it. His jacket hid it from the detectives, but from Mayu's vantage point directly in front of him, she could see it clearly.

What's more, the phone he was using for the call was his own, which made the one in his right hand Maeda's. So right after snatching Maeda's phone away from him, he had hung up, then quickly redialed Inspector Kogure from his own phone. That explained the odd pause! What incredible sleight of hand. Even from a few steps away Mayu hadn't noticed the switch at all. The detectives surely hadn't either.

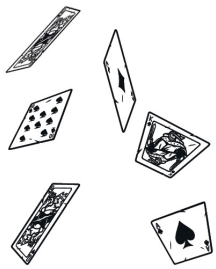
Takeshi was still talking. "...All right, fine. If you're going to insist that much, I'll let you save face. You don't have to give me the phone data. In exchange, though, I want you to tell me one thing: where was my brother on Saturday? Tell me that, and you can make all the copies of the guest book you want… No, don't play dumb. All you have to do is check the phone's location history and you'll know right away... Why do I want to know? None of your business. So what's it going to be? The location for the guest book, or no deal. I'm good either way."

Mayu's phone vibrated inside her bag. She took it out and saw a new email. She checked the sender's name and drew in a sharp breath: *Maeda.* Takeshi must have sent something from the detective's phone.

"...'Tokyo Kingdom Hotel,' huh? You're sure about that? ...What time? ...And after that? ...Got it. No, don't worry, I keep my promises. Unlike your crew," Takeshi said, and ended the call.

He turned smartly back toward the detectives. "All right, I've cleared it with your boss. Mayu, hand over the guest book. And thanks, Sergeant Maeda," he added, returning the phone to the younger detective with his left hand.

Mayu blinked. She had no idea when he had switched it from right to left, nor when he had slipped his own phone back into his pocket.



14

THE TABLET SHOWED FOOTAGE of the day's reception. Mourners stood at regular intervals in line, each stepping up to the counter in turn, greeting Momoko, then placing their name cards and condolence envelopes on the tray. Several men in black mourning dress with armbands stood nearby. All of these were not funeral staff, but detectives, according to Takeshi.

"Watch this guy. How he moves. Doesn't he seem a little off to you?" Takeshi pointed the tip of his disposable chopsticks at the man in black standing next to Momoko on screen.

Mayu stared at the small image of the man. He was just standing there. Nothing about his behavior struck her as particularly suspicious.

"Not really... looks normal to me," she said.

Takeshi's lip curled in dissatisfaction. "No eye for detail. Look closely. Every time a mourner steps up in front of them, he bows his head along with Momoko. Right after that, he touches his tie with his left hand. See, he just did it again."

Mayu leaned in toward the screen. "Now that you mention it… What's he doing?"

"Filming," Takeshi said.

"What?" Mayu's eyes went wide.

"Want to know why that detective is standing up at the reception desk? He wants a straight-on photo of every mourner's face." Takeshi spoke flatly. "There's a hidden camera mounted in his tie, probably disguised as a tie pin. He's holding the remote shutter button in his right hand and hitting it the moment each mourner steps up. Touching his tie with his left hand is

just to steady the camera. If it shakes, the image will blur."

Mayu was immediately angry. "That's awful. They didn't tell us *or* the mourners, which means they're filming without permission. That's a crime!"

"And yet they feel not the slightest pang of guilt. Anything goes in the name of the investigation, eh? But the joke's on them. Thanks to Covid, pretty much every mourner's wearing a mask. No way they're getting a clear read on anyone's face like that. Serves 'em right. Anyway, it's almost time. Keep your eyes on the screen."

"Almost time for what?" Mayu asked.

"Watch," Takeshi said, eyes still on the tablet as he popped a piece of rolled omelet into his mouth.

The two of them were in the waiting room next to the funeral hall. Once the detectives left, they dug into some box lunches and held a strategy session. The first order of business was to watch the reception footage that Takeshi had asked Nogi at the funeral home to record for them.

On screen, Kashiwagi stepped up to the counter. As did the other mourners, he greeted Momoko and the others, placed his card and condolence envelope on the tray, then moved away. The man standing beside Momoko kept touching his tie at the same suspiciously frequent intervals, though none of the other detectives showed any particularly notable movement.

Next, Haraguchi stepped forward and bowed to Momoko and the others. He set his name card on the tray and then moved to place his condolence envelope.

"There," Takeshi said, freezing the playback and pointing his index finger at the man standing right beside the reception tray on screen. He wore a mask, but Mayu recognized him as the young Sergeant Maeda, the one who had just phoned Inspector Kogure.

"Watch his left hand," Takeshi said, restarting the video.

She watched as Maeda's left hand moved. He touched the area behind his own ear, as if fussing with his mask, then lowered his hand again.

"Keep a close eye on him," Takeshi said, fast-forwarding.

Mayu narrowed her eyes at Maeda on the screen. Soon enough, he made the same motion with his left hand again. Takeshi paused the video. Standing at the counter this time was someone else Mayu recognized.

“That’s Makihara,” she murmured.

“One of your classmates?” Takeshi asked.

“Yeah. He works at a credit union.”

“A credit union, huh,” Takeshi muttered, and resumed fast-forwarding.

In the footage that followed, Maeda repeated the same movement with his left hand several more times.

“Something’s off with Sergeant Maeda’s left hand,” Mayu said.

“Told you. That movement obviously means something. All right, let’s go back,” Takeshi said, rewinding the video to the point just before Haraguchi placed his name card in the box. “Now look at Maeda’s right hand. He’s holding something.”

Mayu stared at the screen. Maeda’s right hand was positioned in front of his waist.

“Looks like a phone. He’s checking the screen, isn’t he?”

“Exactly.”

“What’s he looking at?”

“What do you think?”

Mayu shook her head. “I don’t know. Just tell me.”

Takeshi scowled. “I could tell you, or you could think a little?”

“Asking you is faster,” she shot back. “Quit dragging it out.”

Takeshi clicked his tongue. “Cutting corners in mental activity like that is a shortcut to senility. But I’ll tell you: Maeda’s looking at his phone because there’s a list of names on it.”

“What list of names?”

“A list of prime suspects, obviously. When a mourner offers their name card, Maeda does a quick check, and if the name on the card appears on the list, he touches his ear with his left hand. That’s the signal. Then the other detectives watching for it spring into action.”

“‘Spring into action’ how?” Mayu asked.

“Why do you think they’ve snuck into the wake and the funeral?” Takeshi said. “It’s not just to get face shots. It’s so they can keep tabs on any person of interest who shows up. Most likely, the moment Maeda gives the signal with his left hand, he’s also using the phone in his right to transmit which name on the list it is. So from this point on, every undercover officer in the place is watching Haraguchi’s every move.”

“Hold up,” Mayu said, raising a hand. “What exactly is this prime suspect

list, then? How did they put it together? The investigation shouldn't be that far along yet."

"That's an astute question, for you," Takeshi said. "And you're right—they don't have much in the way of solid leads. But they can absolutely compile a list of everyone our brother was in contact with recently."

"What? I'm totally lost."

"Ah. Disappointing, if not surprising," Takeshi said irritably. "Recall what I've been trying to get my hands on since this morning? I even asked you to help. And I also just asked Kogure, although he shot me down."

It finally clicked. "Dad's phone!"

"Took you long enough," Takeshi said. "A phone is a goldmine of data about someone's relationships. Email, social media, call history—every record of who they've been in contact with is in there. If the killer in this case was someone my brother knew, there's a high chance that person's name is in there. And that's where the police list comes from, and that's what I want. Thus the idea of filming the reception."

"What do you mean?" Mayu asked.

"The police are going to work their way through everyone on that list, one by one," Takeshi said. "But before they start knocking on doors, they'll want to gather as much information as they can on each target. In that sense, a wake or funeral is the perfect opportunity. So I figured there had to be at least one undercover officer assigned specifically to check names at the reception desk. And not just to check them—when someone on the list showed up, it would be his job to send a signal to the other detectives. That's why, right after the wake ended, I rushed to review this footage to find out which detective it was. Which led me to junior Sergeant Maeda here. It's a great job for someone at the very bottom of his career ladder."

Takeshi pointed at Maeda's image on the screen. "Which also led me to the realization that the list was on the phone in his right hand."

"So that's why you went after his phone specifically," Mayu said. "You made a big show of refusing to hand over the guest book just to set up that little performance."

"The other detectives probably have the same list saved on their phones, but his was the safest bet," Takeshi replied. "And I didn't steal it. You saw, right? I borrowed it properly and gave it back properly."

"You used it without permission," Mayu shot back.

“Don’t get all uptight on me now. More importantly, I believe I sent that email to you. Have you checked it?” Takeshi asked.

“Oh, right,” Mayu said.

She looked down at her phone. The mail from Maeda contained a long list of names. There were about twenty in all, with “Kohei Haraguchi” at the very top.

“He must’ve tried calling my brother several times, so his name ended up at the top of the incoming-call history,” Takeshi said. “Any other names you recognize?”

“Yeah. Makihara is on here, like I thought. And Momoko, too. They must’ve been in touch about the reunion. Sugishita’s probably in there for the same reason.”

“‘Sugishita’? That’s a new one. Another classmate?”

“Yeah. ‘Elite Sugishita,’ we used to call him. He runs an IT company in Tokyo,” Mayu said. She added that he’d only recently come back to town to avoid Covid restrictions.

“Momoko said he showed up to the reunion planning meeting and bragged about how successful he’s been in Tokyo,” Mayu went on. “So there’s a good chance he called Dad directly just to show off.”

“Ah. The classic pretentious honor student. There’s always one or two in every class,” Takeshi muttered.

“Exactly. He didn’t come today, but I wonder if he’ll show up tomorrow. I really hope not... Oh, Kokorika’s on the list too.”

“And ‘Kokorika’ is... ?” Takeshi prompted.

“Ririka Kokonoe,” Mayu said. “She works at an ad agency, but in practice she’s basically Kugimiya’s manager—Haraguchi told us, remember? And look, Kugimiya’s name is right here next to Kokorika’s. Haraguchi might have asked Dad to get in touch with them.”

That would have been about using the name “Azuma Zero,” the protagonist of *Gen’no Labyrinth*, for their new local sake.

“Other than that, I don’t see anyone else I know,” Mayu said after scanning through the list in the email.

Takeshi handed her a sheet of paper and a ballpoint pen. “Mark anyone from that mail who appears on this,” he said.

The document was a set of photocopies of name cards arranged in the order they had been handed in at reception. The actual cards were in police

hands now, “so they can take fingerprints off of them,” Takeshi surmised.

There were exactly twenty cards. Since three couples had come together, that meant there had been twenty-three mourners in all. Whether that was many or few for the wake of a former junior-high teacher, Mayu had no idea.

She began ticking off matches between the email list and the document. There were six in total, but aside from Haraguchi, Makihara, and Momoko, the names meant nothing to her.

Takeshi restarted the footage from the beginning, comparing it against the document as it played. Keeping an eye on Maeda’s movements, their theory proved true: every time one of the marked names placed a card on the tray, his left hand went up to his ear. The “Relation to the Deceased” field printed on those three non-classmate cards listed them as “former fellow teacher,” “neighborhood association president,” and “barbershop owner.”

“I think I’ve at least heard the name of this former teacher from Dad,” Mayu said. “Back when he was working, he was his closest colleague. And the barber... Dad did say they’d known each other for thirty years.” Her father had only just begun to reap the benefits of living a long life in a small town, leaning on the ties he’d built in the community to see him through retirement.

“Guess that’s our haul for the day,” Takeshi said. “If I’d had a little more time earlier, I could’ve dug further into that Maeda guy’s phone, but forwarding the list was all I could manage. Good enough.” He turned off the tablet and went back to his lunch.

Mayu reached for a fried shrimp, then paused before taking a bite. “Come to think of it, you also managed to pry Dad’s Saturday movements out of Inspector Kogure back there,” she said.

Takeshi tipped his can of beer and nodded. “According to the phone’s location data, he went to the Tokyo Kingdom Hotel at exactly six p.m.,” he said. “I checked, and it turns out the hotel’s about a ten-minute walk from Tokyo Station. He stayed there until around eight, then spent about half an hour in the Tokyo Station area before getting on the shinkansen home. That thirty minutes near the station was probably dinner.” He gave Mayu a meaningful look. “Remember what he had for dinner?”

“Ramen. Don’t patronize me, I remember at least that much. They found it in his stomach, right?”

“Digestion puts the meal at about two hours before death,” Takeshi said. “The location data says he got home around eleven p.m. on Saturday, so the timing fits. Which is why, in the theory I’ve put together, he must have been killed right after he got back.”

“Dad was killed around eleven p.m. on Saturday.” Mayu set her chopsticks down, letting the fried shrimp go. The moment she pictured the moment of the crime, her appetite vanished.

“That clears up the mystery of his clothes,” Takeshi went on. “If he was going to a top-class hotel in Tokyo, he’d put on a suit without a second thought, no matter who he was meeting.”

“Who *was* he meeting, though?” Mayu asked.

“Saturday night, six to eight p.m., at a city hotel in Tokyo,” Takeshi said. “Were he a celebrity, there’d be an obvious assumption attached to an itinerary like that.”

Mayu understood what he was getting at. “A date? I really don’t see it.”

“Shouldn’t jump to conclusions, but on that point, I mostly agree,” Takeshi said. “The Tokyo Kingdom Hotel doesn’t offer daytime room rentals in the six-to-eight-p.m. slot. Even the cheapest room rates run about thirty thousand yen a night. There’s no way Mr. Thrifty would blow that kind of money on a fling.”

Mayu flared her nostrils at him. “*That’s* your reasoning?”

“We have no grounds to flat-out deny the possibility he was in a long-distance relationship,” Takeshi said. “But for the reasons I just gave, let’s set aside the romantic tryst theory for now. The way I see it, he probably only used the hotel lounge to meet someone who lives in Tokyo.”

“Well, clearly we have to find out who he was meeting, right?” Mayu said.

Takeshi didn’t respond at first. He tilted his head slightly as he picked up a piece of sashimi.

“Uncle Takeshi,” she said with a frown. “Are you even listening to me?”

“I am,” he said, “but I don’t really agree.”

“Why not?”

Takeshi set his chopsticks down and turned toward her. “I’m not saying it’s completely irrelevant who my brother went to Tokyo to see on Saturday,” he said. “But it’s not something we absolutely have to pin down. Because whoever that person is, they’re not the killer. They might be

involved in some way, but they're not the one who actually did the deed."

"I'm not so sure," Mayu countered. "You're assuming he parted ways with them after leaving the hotel. For all we know, they went for ramen together and got on the same shinkansen."

"And then went home with him as well?"

"Yes."

"Impossible."

"Why?"

"Even in a small town like this, security cameras are everywhere. At the station, for example. There's no way the police haven't already checked that footage. If he'd been with someone, they'd be on camera, and the police would have shown you the images and asked if you recognized them. The fact they haven't done that means there is no such footage. In other words, he was alone."

Takeshi turned his cool gaze on Mayu, daring her to disagree.

"Well, then," Maya spoke quietly. "If whoever he met in Tokyo isn't that important, then what is?"

"As I've said repeatedly, the killer likely broke into the house before he arrived and lay in wait for him," Takeshi replied. "Which means they knew he'd be away from home on Saturday night."

"Oh…" Mayu let out a small sound. "I see."

"The key to the case is finding out who knew he was going up to Tokyo," Takeshi said. "The police are probably thinking the same thing. But we can't go around asking people straight up. If the killer heard, they'd get spooked. We need to feel people out casually."

"Right." For all his flaws, Mayu had to admit a begrudging respect for her uncle's powers of deduction. She started to think about who might have known her father was going to Tokyo, when something completely different snagged in her mind. "That's strange," she murmured out loud.

"What's strange?" Takeshi asked.

"Why didn't Dad contact me?" Mayu said. "If your daughter lives in Tokyo and you're coming up there yourself, wouldn't you normally let her know? It was Saturday—he might have been able to see me during the day. Worst case, he could even have stayed over at my place that night."

"Not a bad angle," Takeshi said, nodding enthusiastically. "Every once in a while you say something actually smart."

“More than ‘once in a while’!”

“Hey, take what you can get. Coming from me, that’s high praise. In any case, that’s definitely something we should keep in mind.”

Backhanded though it was, Mayu appreciated the compliment. At least she wasn’t completely off the mark. Her appetite having returned somewhat, she resumed eating. The fried shrimp had gone cold, but still tasted surprisingly good. It was one of her favorites.

Takeshi finished his lunch, sat cross-legged, and started looking at something on his tablet—another item he’d kept in a coin locker at the station, apparently.

“By the way, Uncle Takeshi, what do you think I should do about the wedding?” Mayu asked. “I’m kind of wondering if we should just stay the course and hold it as planned, even though we don’t really know which way the investigation is going to turn.”

Takeshi lifted his head, but he didn’t look at her. Instead, his gaze drifted off for a moment. Then he turned back and looked straight into her eyes. “Postpone,” he said.

His bluntness made Mayu flinch. “Really? I feel like you just said the first thing that popped into your head.”

“I’m saying there’s no need to rush,” he replied.

“Maybe you’re right,” she sighed.

“What about your fiancé?” Takeshi asked. “Think he’ll be willing to wait?”

“I don’t know. I’m planning to talk with him about it tonight. Given the circumstances, I think he’ll understand.”

“I see,” Takeshi said, lowering his eyes back to the tablet.

Mayu’s phone started to ring. It was Kenta calling to report that he’d just arrived at the station and would come the rest of the way by taxi.

“Sounds like your fiancé’s here,” her uncle remarked.

“Yeah. You could ride back to the Marumiya in his taxi if you like?” Mayu suggested.

“What about you two?” he asked.

“I’ll stay here, like a proper chief mourner. It won’t be so creepy spending the night at the funeral home if I have company.”

The room was Japanese-style tatami mats with futons folded in the closet, and it had its own shower and toilet and door lockable from the inside. It

was made for just this purpose.

“Will he be at the funeral, your fiancé?” Takeshi asked.

“I think so,” she said.

The funeral was to start at ten in the morning. According to Nogi, depending on the number of mourners, everything including the cremation would be over in a little more than two hours.

“In that case, I’ll head out soon. Big day tomorrow,” Takeshi said, getting ready to leave.

“Oh, wait, I wanted to ask you... that is, this is a little awkward, but...” Mayu pulled her handbag closer and took out a condolence envelope—the one Takeshi had given her that morning. “I think you forgot to put something inside.”

“Something?” Takeshi echoed dully. “You mean money?”

“Yes, condolence money,” Mayu said, opening the envelope. “See? There’s nothing in it.” She had secretly checked earlier and discovered the envelope was empty.

“Of course there isn’t,” Takeshi said calmly. “I already paid my condolences.”

“Paid? When?”

“This afternoon. When I explained the trick I used to figure out you like cats and you’re good at painting,” he said. “I told you then I’d teach you in lieu of condolence money, didn’t I? Forgotten already?”

“What, you were serious about that?” Mayu yelped.

“Were you seriously planning on double-dipping my condolences?” Takeshi said. “Nice try.”

Mayu looked back and forth between the envelope and his face. She was sure she’d never left her handbag unattended.

“When did you take it out?” she demanded.

“Who knows?” Takeshi said. “Slip me a little something, and maybe I’ll tell you.”

Mayu was stunned, realizing for the first time what it meant to be at a ‘loss for words.’ What kind of man was her uncle? His impressive powers of deduction were rivaled only by the depth of his depravity. He was, she had to admit, hardly better than a con artist.

Ignoring her, Takeshi finished gathering his things, slipped on his shoes, and said, “What’s wrong? Your fiancé will be here any minute. Aren’t you

going to meet him at the entrance?" He briskly walked out.

When Mayu went to the main entrance, a taxi was just pulling up. She could see Kenta in the back taking out his wallet to pay. Takeshi was standing right by the curb, ready to grab the cab when he was done. Someone else—someone nicer—might have said 'don't worry about it, I'll settle up after my ride,' but there was little chance of her uncle making such an offer.

Kenta climbed out, carrying a travel bag in one hand and a garment carrier in the other, his expression solemn.

"Hey, not too tired?" Mayu asked.

"Nah, I'm fine," he replied.

Mayu glanced at her Uncle Takeshi. He was talking to the taxi driver.

"Uncle Takeshi," she called from behind him, then turned toward Kenta.

"Kenta, this is my father's younger brother, Takeshi. Uncle Takeshi, my fiancé, Nakajo Kenta," Mayu said.

"Ah, we meet at last," Takeshi said, stepping up to her fiancé. "Mayu's told me all about you."

"Oh? Only the good things, I hope!" Kenta replied.

"Just that you're quite considerate, serious, and dedicated to your work."

"Oh! Ha! That's, I'm not that—" Kenta managed, flashing a flustered smile.

"No need to be modest. Oh, and how did she put it? That 'despite being sensitive, you take decisive action when the moment calls for it.' She even mentioned an episode, something to do with your job..." Takeshi scratched his temple with a finger and frowned as though trying to recall something.

Mayu rolled her eyes. *Here he goes again.* She'd never told him any stories about Kenta, least of all something like that.

But Kenta seemed to have something in mind. "Work? Maybe you're talking about that..."

"Yes!" Takeshi said, pointing at Kenta. "That's exactly what I'm talking about. Go on, let's hear the story."

"Kenta!" Mayu hurriedly stepped between the two men. "Don't tell him."

"Huh?" Kenta blinked.

"Uncle Takeshi," Mayu said sharply, turning toward Takeshi. "Thank you for everything today, and thanks in advance for tomorrow. Good night!" she said quickly, bowing exaggeratedly low.

Takeshi pouted for a moment at his foiled ploy, but a smile soon tugged at his lips. “Well then, Kenta,” he said, “my niece is in your hands. Good night!”

“Of course. Good night,” Kenta replied.

They watched together as Takeshi got into the taxi and rode off.

“Your uncle’s... unique,” Kenta said once he had left.

“Better if you don’t get too involved,” Mayu said. “He’s bad news.”

“Really? He seems like a fun guy,” Kenta said, looking genuinely puzzled.

It’s hopeless, Mayu thought, overtaken by a wave of exhaustion. How was it that everyone around her kept falling for that sham of a man? Why couldn’t they see what he was really like?

“Just, it’s best if you keep your distance,” Mayu insisted.

“Huh. Okay,” Kenta said with a shrug.

Kenta indicated he’d like to offer some incense, so she led him into the hall. Facing her father’s body in the coffin, he let out a deep sigh and pressed his hands together in prayer. “I never dreamed it would come to this,” he said quietly, the regret plain in his voice. “There were a lot of things about the future I still wanted to talk to you about.”

After Kenta finished the offering, they went together to the waiting room. Mayu changed into the sweatshirt she had stuffed into her tote bag. As the tension drained, she lay down on the tatami, realizing how tired she really was.

Kenta gently stretched out beside her, putting his arm over her. A faint trace of his body odor tickled her nose. It wasn’t a smell she minded at all.

“Tough few days, huh,” Kenta murmured, bringing his lips to hers. Mayu responded as naturally as breathing.

“My parents asked me to offer their condolences,” he said. “They really regret never having had the chance to meet him. And... they wanted to make sure I was here for you.”

“Please tell them I said thanks,” Mayu said.

Kenta was from Tochigi. Mayu had met his parents twice. His father was a civil servant, his mother a full-time homemaker—both of them gave the impression of having led straight-forward, steady lives. How must they feel now, with their son’s fiancée caught up in a murder case?

“Listen... about the wedding,” Mayu began. “What should we do?”

A look of uncertainty crossed Kenta's face.

"Right..." Kenta said slowly. "To be honest, I've been thinking about it too. But in the end, it's your call. What do *you* think is best?"

Mayu gave a little groan. "If it were illness or an accident, a couple months would be enough to put it behind us," she said. "But this... murder is different. What if the trial starts up just as we're getting ready for the wedding?"

Kenta rubbed his neck, grimacing. "Yeah... that would be pretty rough," he admitted.

"Right? And if they still hadn't caught the killer by then, that's its own kind of impossible. It'd feel wrong to be having a wedding while the case is still unresolved. I'd hate it if people on social media started saying stuff like, 'How can she celebrate when they haven't even found who killed her dad."

"That's all true enough. So what, then... do we postpone?"

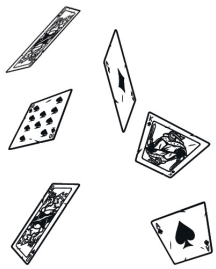
"I think… I think that's best," Mayu replied.

"Okay, then. Let's assume we're postponing and keep an eye on how things develop."

"I'm sorry," she said quietly.

"What are you apologizing for?" he asked, pulling her into his arms.

Burying her face against her lover's chest, Mayu closed her eyes. All kinds of thoughts drifted through her head. The outside world, this situation, was chaos. Who knew where it would all end up? The only thing she knew for sure was that, for now, this was where she wanted to be.



15

THE NEXT MORNING, THEY called a taxi and went into town together. They found an old-fashioned coffee shop and went in for the morning special. It felt like it had been ages since she'd last had a decent cup of coffee.

From the handbag on the chair beside her came the buzz of an incoming call. She took out her phone and saw that it was Uncle Takeshi. She answered with a "good morning."

"You with him?" her uncle asked without preamble.

"Yes?"

"What are you doing?"

"We just finished breakfast at a coffee shop, and were about to head back to the funeral hall. Why? Is something wrong?"

"Just something I wanted to check with you. Is Kenta going to help?"

"Help? You mean, with the funeral?" Mayu looked across the table at Kenta. He raised an eyebrow.

"No, I mean help us get to the bottom of what happened. You didn't talk about it last night?"

"Oh..." Mayu shifted her gaze from Kenta to the window. "No, we didn't really talk much. I was so tired I zonked right away."

"Okay, so what's the plan? It affects what I do today, so I'd like to know. Either way is fine by me."

"I think... I'd rather not get him too involved, if possible."

"Got it. I'll proceed on that assumption. He's right there with you, isn't he?"

"Yeah…"

“He must’ve heard your side of the conversation and guessed it has something to do with him. Once you hang up, he’s going to ask what that was about. If you give him a half-baked answer, it’ll only make him more suspicious, so tell him this.” Takeshi went on to tell her how to handle her fiancé. The advice was surprising, but at the same time, simple. *You know, that will probably work,* she thought. Mayu hung up.

“Your uncle?” Kenta asked.

“Yeah.”

“And you were talking about me, yeah? About not getting me involved?”

One point for you, Uncle Takeshi.

“Nothing like that, I mean, he was wondering if we should get your advice about something.”

“Advice on what?”

Mayu waited for a beat before answering. “The inheritance. What to do with my dad’s estate.”

“Oh…” Kenta’s mouth fell half open. That was clearly not what he expected her to say.

Another point for team Takeshi.

“It’s not like he left some huge fortune, but there is a bit, and when you factor in the relatives, it all gets kind of complicated. I’d talked to him—my uncle—about it before, but I figured since we’re not even married yet, there’s no point dragging you into money issues.”

“Right, I see. That’s a tricky one already,” Kenta said with a stiff smile. “You don’t need me making it even more complicated.”

“Right? Anyway, that’s enough of all that,” Mayu glanced at her watch. “We should get going.”

“Yeah,” Kenta said, picking up the check as he stood. There was no sign he suspected anything, meaning Takeshi’s advice had been spot on. Her opinion of her uncle’s character was still as low as ever, but she had to admit he was a quick thinker.

They returned to the funeral hall to find the staff in the middle of setting up. Nogi spotted them and hurried over to greet the two and go over the schedule for the day. It was almost the same as the wake the night before. The only difference would be the cremation, and that, only Mayu, Takeshi, and Kenta were scheduled to attend.

“Also, your uncle contacted us a little while ago to say there’s no need to

take photos at the reception today. Is that acceptable?" Nogi asked.

"Yes, that's fine. Thank you."

Since they'd managed to steal the list from Sergeant Maeda's phone, that had already been crossed off the to-do list.

Momoko arrived before long. When Mayu introduced Kenta, her face lit up.

"I've heard so much about you! And I hear—" She broke off, eyes widening as she brought a hand to her mouth. She was about to congratulate them on the engagement.

"It's okay," Mayu said with a quick smile from the side. "It's public knowledge."

Momoko gave an awkward smile, then turned back to Kenta. "I wish you both many happy years together," she said, brightly.

"Thank you," Kenta replied.

"Sorry, Momoko," Mayu said. "You sure you can handle the desk again today?"

"Not a problem. It's the least I can do."

"Think any of our classmates will come? I heard the Kugimiya crowd is around."

"I got in touch with Kokorika. She said Katsuki might come if he can get away."

"Katsuki? As in Katsuki Kugimiya? She calls him by his first name?"

"Apparently. She wants everyone to know they're tight." Momoko glanced quickly around, then lowered her voice and leaned in. "He gets special treatment, but she's a total bitch to everyone else. Did you hear that Kashiwagi and the others are trying to use *Gen-Lab* as PR for the town?"

"Haraguchi told me. He said if you want to negotiate with Kugimiya, you have to go through Kokorika."

"Yeah. And apparently she's making Kashiwagi and the others call Kugimiya 'Sensei.'"

"No way. Seriously? His former classmates?"

"She says if they're going to talk business, she wants the lines to be clearly drawn."

"Wow, and everyone's actually going along with that?"

"Yeah. When Kokorika's around, at least. Besides, Kashiwagi's willing to do just about anything to prop up the town. Being weirdly formal to a

former classmate is apparently not too much to ask."

"Wow."

Mayu shook her head. Up in Tokyo, it was easy to forget the drama that came with living in a small town, but as soon as she got back, there it all was, same as ever, everyone fighting their own battles.

The three of them went over to the reception desk where Nogi greeted them with a bundle of condolence telegrams. "These just arrived," he said. There were maybe twenty in all. A quick glance showed that more than half were from relatives. Most of the rest were from people Mayu didn't know, but the repeated use of the word "Sensei" in the messages made it clear they were former students.

"Your dad was really beloved," Kenta said quietly. "I can't imagine sending a telegram to the funeral of any of my junior high or high school teachers."

"Mr. Kamio's in a different league," Momoko said, her voice firm. "I'm sure the upcoming reunion has something to do with it, too, but I wouldn't expect our classmates to turn out in these numbers for the funeral of any of our other teachers."

Kenta nodded. His expression looked genuinely impressed.

"Momoko's husband came yesterday, too. Turns out he was one of Dad's students," Mayu added.

"Really?" Kenta looked at Momoko in surprise. "I didn't know that."

"I don't know the details," Momoko said, hunching her shoulders shyly, "but it sounds like Mr. Kamio helped him out a lot."

"I see," Kenta said, nodding as if everything now made sense. Then his expression suddenly turned serious. He slipped his phone out from inside his suit jacket. "Sorry, give me a second," he said, and stepped away.

"He's great," Momoko whispered. "You two aren't living together?"

"No. Both our places are tiny."

"Right. Welcome to Tokyo."

"Pretty much."

The mention of Tokyo brought back to Mayu the conversation she'd had with Takeshi the night before. "By the way, I was going to ask, had you talked with my dad recently? On the phone or anything?"

"Sure," Momoko answered promptly. "I called, and I also went over to the house to say hello and go over some things about the reunion in

advance.”

“I see. When was that?”

“Let me think... Wednesday before last?” She let out a small sigh. “He seemed well. He said he was looking forward to seeing everyone at the reunion. When I told him about the memorial for Tsukumi, he was so pleased, he said it was a wonderful idea. He even said he had something special he wanted to share at the memorial, something he’d been saving.”

“Did he say what kind of thing?”

Momoko shook her head and shrugged. “I asked, but he wouldn’t tell me. He wanted to keep it a surprise. Seriously, he was laughing like a mischievous kid. I… I can’t believe that was the last time I heard his voice.” She paused a moment, then took a handkerchief from her bag and pressed it to her eyes.

“Did you talk about anything else?”

“Huh?” Momoko lowered the handkerchief.

“Did he say anything about any plans? Anything he was going to do?”

“Plans?” Momoko frowned, puzzled. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Like, um... whether he was going to Tokyo sometime soon.”

Even as she asked it, Mayu knew how strange the question sounded. What angle would Takeshi have used, she wondered.

“Tokyo…” Momoko repeated uncertainly, shaking her head. “Not that I remember. Why?”

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“Sure, if you say so,” Momoko said, nodding, though she still looked unconvinced.

Kenta came back over, his expression clouded. “Sorry, Mayu. I can’t stay over tonight. Gotta get back to Tokyo by this evening.”

“Something wrong?”

“Nothing too serious, but it looks like there was a mistake with an order. I need to go to the client in person to explain and apologize.”

“Yikes, that’s rough.”

No matter how common remote work had become, apologizing to a client was not something you could really do through a screen.

“If you need to go, go. I’ll be fine.”

Kenta waved a hand to dismiss the notion. “Not immediately. I won’t see the client until eight tonight. I can stay until everything’s finished.”

“Yeah?”

“They’re keeping you busy, sounds like,” Momoko said from the side.

“Wringing me dry, more like it,” he said with a frown.

“Her husband had it rough, too,” Mayu said. “He’s based in Kansai now, but he still came all the way up for the wake and went straight back afterward.”

“All the way from Kansai? That’s impressive.” Kenta said looking over at Momoko. “Seriously impressive.”

“It’s not that big a deal. Anyway, Mayu, about what we were talking about earlier—”

“Sorry, yeah, uh, what were we talking about?”

“You know, whether Mr. Kamio had mentioned going to Tokyo.”

“Oh right, did you remember something?”

“Well, nothing that your father actually said, but I seem to recall Sugishita saying something along those lines.”

“Sugishita?” Their former classmate’s name caught her off guard. “When? What did he say?”

“Last Monday, when we met to plan the reunion. Sorry, I don’t really remember the details.” Momoko pressed her hands together in apology.

“No problem. Sugishita, huh? Thanks. Who else was at the meeting?”

“Let’s see... me, Elite Sugishita, plus Makihara and Numakawa, I think. None of the girls came. It’s harder for a lot of them to get out, and most don’t live around here anymore, either.”

“And a lot of them have kids.”

“Exactly,” Momoko said, nodding.

So Elite Sugishita holds the key…that could be a major lead, Mayu thought.

“What are you two talking about?” Kenta asked.

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay, but when you say that, you know it just makes me—” He broke off mid-sentence, his gaze sliding past her. “Oh, good morning.”

“You ready?” came a voice from behind. Mayu turned to see Takeshi standing there in his black suit, just like the day before.

“Morning. Looks like we’re just about set,” she said.

Takeshi glanced around the room. “I don’t see any mourners.”

“We’ve still got about thirty minutes before it starts.”

“I see.” He checked his watch. “In that case, let me borrow Kenta for a bit.”

“Borrow him for what, exactly?” Mayu stiffened.

“Chill. I’ll give him back. This is a good chance for us to talk.”

“About what?”

“Your future together, obviously. Now that my brother’s gone, you don’t have any parents left. That means it’s only natural for me to take their place as the one to hear from your intended about his plans for the future and his convictions, don’t you think?”

It was a perfectly reasonable, if a bit old fashioned, request. Coming from Takeshi, however, it sounded like a threat. *This is another one of his schemes*.

“That all right with you, Kenta?” her uncle asked him directly.

“Y-yes, of course,” Kenta replied, his voice a little tight.

“Then let’s go... Mayu, stay here to greet the guests as they arrive, if you would.”

Finally Mayu realized what her uncle was really after. She had to check the mourners as part of their plan—a plan they had decided not to share with Kenta. This way, she could focus on the task at hand while Takeshi kept Kenta away.

“Got it. Take your time.”

Watching the two walk off, Mayu found herself wondering what exactly they would talk about. Knowing Takeshi, he would mix in a few outrageous stories while steering the conversation where he wanted it to go in order to extract as much information as possible. As for how Kenta might answer him, she both wanted and didn’t want to know that.

Seeing several men come in through the front entrance, Mayu straightened her posture and got ready to greet them, but the air of unease about them told her at once they weren’t mourners. *Undercover officers, then.* Sure enough, they ignored the route markers laid out on the floor and beelined for Nogi and the other hall staff.

The first actual mourner to appear was an older woman, a little over fifty, Mayu guessed. She was tall, and her short hair suited her small face, interrupted by a mask though it was.

Following the signs, the woman filled in a name card then approached the reception desk. Momoko, already standing at her post, bowed as the woman

placed her name card and condolence envelope on the tray. Off to the side, Sergeant Maeda stood in the same spot as the day before, phone in his right hand. Mayu noted that his left hand didn't move. The woman, it seemed, was not on his list.

The woman said something to Momoko, who gestured toward Mayu with her left hand. The woman nodded and walked over at an unhurried pace.

"You must be Mr. Kamio's daughter. Mayu? Did I get that right?"

"Yes, pleased to meet you, uh…?"

The woman removed her mask and bowed. "I'm Naoya Tsukumi's mother. I was in your father's class a long time ago."

Mayu drew in a sharp breath.

"Perhaps you remember him? I believe you came to visit him in the hospital a few times."

"Of course I remember. Oh, of course, we *have* met." The memory of a woman lingering by the hospital bed came faintly back to her.

"I'm glad you remember me. I'm a lot older now than I was then," the woman said with a little smile as she put her mask back on.

"It's been a long time. Thank you so much for coming today," Mayu said, bowing.

Sorrow furrowed the woman's brow. "I can only imagine this came as a terrible shock. When I heard that Mr. Kamio had passed away, I just couldn't believe it. And then when I heard what people were saying, that perhaps it wasn't illness."

"I'm told the authorities are still investigating," Mayu replied, lowering her voice.

The woman gave a small, rapid shake of her head. "It's just unbelievable that something like this could happen to such a wonderful teacher. Mr. Kamio did so much for Naoya. He was a great source of encouragement, right up to the very end."

"Dad talked about Tsukumi a lot. Even after he passed."

"He did? Really? Naoya never got to graduate from junior high, but my husband and I still say how thankful we are that he had such a good teacher and such good friends."

"Hearing that would have made my father very happy. I've heard Kugimiya might be coming today as well."

"Kugimiya?" The woman's eyes smiled. "In that case, I look forward to

saying hello to him later. Kugimiya still sends us New Year's cards every year."

"Of course! They were best friends, weren't they."

"They were." Naoya Tsukumi's mother nodded, then added in a low voice, "I pray the case is resolved as soon as possible."

"Thank you," Mayu said, bowing again.

Watching the woman's back as she left, Mayu thought that, for her, the events of ten years ago were probably anything but distant.

Among the roughly seventy students in their year, Naoya Tsukumi had stood out from the moment they entered junior high. In fact, it might be more accurate to say he'd stood out even before that. Good at his studies, always the hero of sports day, and a natural leader besides, Naoya's celebrity began back in elementary school. If anyone got bullied in their class, all the victim had to do was step behind Naoya and just like that, the bullying would stop.

His reputation only continued on when they all got to junior high. There were other characters in their class—Kashiwagi, the class boss by sheer force of will, and model students like Sugishita—but Naoya was a different breed. He detested unfairness, always trying to make sure everyone was treated equally, and volunteering to draw the short straw himself if it looked like anyone would be left out of something. A true leader in every sense.

Back then, her father had been the head homeroom teacher for their year, and he had relied on Tsukumi in all sorts of ways. He often said that the reason his class never got out of hand and enjoyed a relative degree of peace was because Tsukumi was there exercising his remarkable gift for keeping people together.

All that made it even more difficult to believe when he got sick. Leukemia, they said. There was no warning, other than that he had sometimes looked worn out in P.E., which drew a few comments, but none of them had ever imagined it was anything so serious. The class came together. They wrote messages, folded a thousand paper cranes, and made a video letter for him. Mayu and Kugimiya were chosen to deliver it. Officially, it was because they were closest to him, but Momoko had secretly let her in on the real reason.

"Tsukumi likes you, and you're not exactly indifferent to him—none of the girls in class are."

So Mayu and Tsukumi were a thing, or at least a potential thing, in her classmates' eyes. She'd felt the heat rise in her face. She had half-suspected that was the case herself.

Her visit to the hospital that day became the first of several. She would stay hours, talking, confiding her worries to him, talking about how she had to tread carefully around her classmates because her dad was a teacher, and other things.

"Don't listen to those idiots. So what if you're Mr. Kamio's kid? You're still you," he had told her, and the words had stayed with her ever since.

Not long after they'd moved up to third year, the news came that Naoya Tsukumi had died. Mayu attended the funeral with everyone else. Many of the girls in their class were crying. Had she cried, too? She tried to think back through the years, but couldn't recall clearly whether she had or not.

A figure coming in through the front entrance snapped her back to the present. It was a man with slightly long hair in a loose perm, wearing black-rimmed glasses. Even the mask he wore was black, no doubt chosen with the funeral in mind. He walked straight up to her. "Mayu! My condolences."

Mayu almost jumped when he said her name. *Who is this guy?*

"Um, I'm sorry, but you are...?"

"Ah, right." The man pulled down his black mask, revealing a narrow face. The way the corners of his mouth turned up ever so slightly looked familiar.

"Oh! Sugishita!"

"Long time no see. Real shame we have to meet again like this." He sighed, his forehead drooping in regret. His exaggerated expressions were unchanged from junior high, too.

"Thanks for coming all this way. Momoko tells me you're back in town now?"

"Yeah, got tired of city life," he said, seizing on the question like he'd been waiting for it. "I realized a long time ago that, for online business at least, there's no real need for the boss to be physically in Tokyo. Just never found the right moment to pull the trigger, you know? Then Covid hit, and when I tried shifting things around, it went even better than I'd expected. It's only provisional for now, but I'm thinking before long I'll move my homebase here for good and scale down the Tokyo office."

Even the way he talked about himself nonstop was unchanged from junior high. Even so, it was better than having to sit through some long, canned condolence speech.

"Had you seen my dad since coming back?" Mayu asked.

Sugishita's brows pulled together and he shook his head. "Unfortunately, no, never got the chance to see him in person. One reason I was looking forward to the reunion so much."

"But you talked to him, right? Momoko said something about you mentioning Dad was going up to Tokyo?"

"Oh, that." Sugishita nodded with a look of sudden understanding. "Well, since I was finally back and all, I thought I should at least call him up and say hello. Wanted to hear how he was getting on, you know? And he sounded great! Happy as a clam."

"When was that?"

"Let's see… Pretty sure it was the Saturday before last."

"That's when he said he was going to Tokyo?"

"That's right. He asked me to recommend a hotel. Somewhere near Tokyo Station, but quiet and comfortable. I asked if he was going to see you, and he was like, 'something along those lines.'" Sugishita paused as an unsettling thought clouded his features. "You mean he never mentioned any of this to you?"

"No, actually. This is the first I'm hearing of it."

"I see. Then maybe he had some other reason for going?" Sugishita said lightly, as if it were nothing unusual.

"Did he say when he was planning to go?"

"Um, I think he said he was thinking about the following Saturday? Saturdays are crowded, so the Tokyo Station area gets hectic, right? I figured he'd want somewhere a bit quieter, so I recommended the Kingdom. The Tokyo Kingdom Hotel, right? It's a little way from the station. Use it a lot myself for meeting clients." Sugishita's explanation was as clear and measured as ever. He'd always been one of the brighter ones in class.

"And you mentioned all that at the planning session? For the reunion?"

"Yeah. Figured everyone would want to know how he was doing."

"What about outside the reunion group? Did you tell anyone else?"

"Let me think... I don't think so, no. Umm, was it a bad idea to bring it up at the meeting?" Sugishita gave her a searching look.

“No, no, not at all. It’s just, when I heard from Momoko that Dad had plans to go to Tokyo, I wondered why he hadn’t told me.”

Sugishita quickly glanced around, then leaned in a little, his voice low. “Think it might have something to do with the case?”

“No, not a chance,” Mayu said, waving a hand. “It just stuck in my head for some reason. It’s nothing, really. Don’t worry about it.”

“If you say so,” Sugishita said, but it was obvious he wasn’t satisfied. Mayu regretted having pushed so hard. She had probably dug a little too deep for someone as sharp as Sugishita not to notice.

Watching him walk back over to the reception desk, she pondered the difficulties of subtly drawing information out of people. Maybe she needed to take a page from Takeshi’s book.

After that, the mourners began to drift in ones and twos. Some were neighbors, people she had only ever exchanged greetings with, but didn’t really know. They gave Mayu a slight nod in passing, and that was all. Among them was a young woman, probably in her mid-twenties. The plain black mourning clothes didn’t really suit her; maybe borrowed, Mayu thought. Mayu found herself watching as the woman filled out a name card and approached the reception desk.

The young woman bowed to Momoko and the others and placed her card on the tray.

Just then, Sergeant Maeda’s left hand moved—that familiar gesture, touching the back of his ear. Mayu casually stepped up behind Momoko and whispered, “Any problems so far?”

“No, everything’s good.”

“Great. That’s great.”

Letting her gaze drop to the tray, she saw the name card the young woman had placed there. It read “Atsumi Moriwaki.” Her relationship to the deceased was given as “former student.”

She left the reception area and Mayu quickly followed behind her. The mourners were to wait in a separate room adjacent to the chapel. She caught up to the woman partway down the corridor there. “Excuse me,” she called out.

The woman stopped and turned, a flicker of unease on her face.

“Thank you so much for coming today,” Mayu said with a smile. “I’m Eiichi Kamio’s daughter.”

“Oh,” Atsumi Moriwaki breathed. “Moriwaki,” she said. “Mr. Kamio was my homeroom teacher in junior high, my second year.”

“I see. Which graduating class would that be?”

“The forty-sixth.”

The class numbers were based on the number of years since the school was built. *Forty-six would make her four years below us,* Mayu calculated. That would make her twenty-six now.

“It’s been more than ten years since you graduated, and yet you came all this way… Had you been in touch with my father?”

“Yes, from time to time. He was… always good for advice about things.”

“I see.”

She wanted to know what those “things” were, but asking right now would be far too awkward. She was still thinking when Atsumi spoke.

“Um… is Makihara here today?”

“Makihara…? From the forty-second class?”

“Yes, I think that’s about right.”

“He came to the wake last night.”

“Oh, I see.” She sounded faintly disappointed.

“Did you need to see him for something?”

“No, nothing important,” Atsumi said, waving her hands dismissively..

This was yet another thread Mayu wanted to tug on, but she couldn’t think of a pretext to press further, and there was no real excuse to keep the woman any longer. All she could do was say, “Thank you again for coming today,” and let her go. She turned—and jumped. An undercover officer was standing right by the wall. Maeda’s signal must have been an indication to him to keep an eye on Moriwaki, Mayu realized.

She went back into the hall to wait for more mourners. Before long, she saw a tall woman and a slightly shorter man come in. The woman had long hair gathered at the back, and a sleek black one-piece dress that suited her perfectly—she had a great figure. She wasn’t wearing a mask, and her features were even more striking than they’d been in junior high.

She walked up and Mayu felt herself tense for no reason. The man followed a step behind.

Kokorika—Ririka Kokonoe—stopped about two meters in front of her and fixed Mayu with a steady gaze that all but said, *you haven’t forgotten this beautiful face, have you?* She gave a silent, graceful bow. Mayu

returned it without saying a word.

Ririka took a mask from her bag and slowly put it on. The mask was a stylish shade of gray. “It’s been a while. You remember me?” she asked in a slightly husky, quiet voice.

“Of course. Thanks for coming, Ms. Kokonoe.”

“Mr. Kamio’s death was such a shock. I couldn’t believe it when I heard. He looked so well the last time I saw him. Please accept my deepest condolences.”

The politeness threw Mayu a little off balance. All she could do was answer in kind: “Thank you very much.” But then what she had said in between the formalities piqued her interest. “Uh, Kokonoe… had you seen my father recently?”

“Yes. There was something I wanted to consult him about, so the two of us went over to his house.” Ririka glanced back over her shoulder. “Oh, Katsuki,” she called.

A slightly stooped man stepped forward to stand beside Ririka. He wasn’t wearing a mask either, giving Mayu a good look at his face. Unlike the taller woman next to him, he looked almost exactly the same as he had in junior high, albeit with longer hair. Narrow eyes, a small, pursed mouth—a face that somehow brought a small, twitchy animal to mind.

“My condolences,” Katsuki Kugimiya said, his voice barely audible. “I… don’t know if you remember me.”

“Of course I do, Kugimiya. You’re doing amazing work. I’m always impressed.”

The corner of his mouth twitched just a little. “Thanks,” he said, his shoulders a little hunched. He was still shy, just like back in school.

“As for what we wanted to talk to Mr. Kamio about,” Ririka went on, “it was the town revitalization project that Mr. Kashiwagi and the others at Kashiwagi Construction are pushing. They kept pestering me to see if there was any way we could get Mr. Kugimiya here to lend a hand.” She drew her well-shaped eyebrows together in a slight frown.

“Ah, I heard the rumors.”

“This is the town where we were born and raised, so of course there’s a part of me that wants to help Katsuki,” Ririka said. “But as you know, he’s incredibly busy, and there’s only so much he can do. I’ve tried to tell Mr. Kashiwagi that as gently as I can, but he just doesn’t seem to get it. At this

rate, I figured he'd go running to Mr. Kamio to ask him to intercede. So before that could happen, we decided we should go to Sensei ourselves and ask him not to entertain that kind of talk. We didn't want him getting caught in the middle."

Mayu was taken aback. What Ririka had just described was almost exactly what Haraguchi had been planning. Was this simply the obvious move anyone would think of, then?

"When was this?"

"I believe it was… Thursday two weeks ago."

"And what did my father say?"

"He said he understood completely, and someone had come asking a similar favor… just not Mr. Kashiwagi. He said he'd explain things properly to them all the same."

Mayu was sure she meant Haraguchi. With that, everything clicked into place.

"We were just saying how, even though we're all adults now, we all still end up going to Mr. Kamio with our messes, and now…well, we all feel so sorry about it," Ririka went on. "I still can't believe it. I keep thinking it must be some awful dream." She twisted her body, the slightest suggestion of a swoon, as if she were overwhelmed by sadness.

"You will be able to say your goodbyes properly today," Mayu said with a polite bow, when she heard a new voice behind her.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't—"

She didn't have to turn around to know who it was.

"Here I was wondering who that might be only to find it's none other than the Katsuki Kugimiya. For you to take time out of your busy schedule to come all this way—on behalf of the Kamio family, you have our deepest thanks."

There was a swish of air, and suddenly Takeshi was standing right beside her.

"I've read *Gen'no Labyrinth*," he said. "Magnificent! The depth of the themes, the shocking plot, the moving ending—every part of it shook me. My brother used to say the same. 'There may be many manga artists in the world, but only Katsuki Kugimiya could create a story that original.'"

"Th-thank you," Kugimiya stammered, edging away with a startled look. Clearly, Takeshi's full-blast praise had caught him off guard.

“I read your interview piece as well, about how your earlier work had a much more refined, quieter tone. Your debut, *My Other Me Is a Ghost*, for example—a fairy tale about a boy, yes? But then you decided you couldn’t go on like that, that you wanted to break out of your shell, which is when you came up with that epic sci-fi adventure!”

“You…know your stuff,” Kugimiya said.

“Of course! I’m a super fan. It’s an honor to meet you.”

“And who might this be…?” Ririka asked Mayu.

Takeshi responded before Mayu could even open her mouth. “Ah! I’m her uncle, Takeshi Kamio, Eiichi’s younger brother.” He smiled, “Thank you for coming today. You must be Ririka Kokonoe. Exactly as my brother described you. It’s a pleasure to finally meet.”

One of Ririka’s eyebrows twitched. “And how, exactly, did Mr. Kamio describe me?”

“Why, it hardly needs—”

Just then, Nogi came trotting over. “Mr. Kamio, excuse me for interrupting, but we should begin the preparations…”

“Ah, okay,” Mayu perked up. “Uncle Takeshi, we should go.”

“Understood. Ms. Kokonoe, Mr. Kugimiya, please excuse me.” Takeshi bowed to them both, then strode off toward the hall.

Mayu turned to give Kokonoe and Kugimiya a brief bow and then left. When she glanced back, Kenta was right behind her. They followed a short distance behind Takeshi.

“So, what did you and my uncle talk about?” Mayu asked him.

“Oh, all sorts of things,” Kenta said. “He knew more than I expected—I guess you’ve told him a lot?”

A bad feeling crept over her. “What exactly did he say?”

“Just stuff like my ‘type’ in women. When did I ever tell you that?” Kenta asked.

Mayu wanted to look up at the ceiling and groan. For someone like Takeshi, turning a good-natured guy like Kenta around until he let slip every last secret would be as easy as twisting a baby’s arm. What on earth had Kenta told him? Worse, it wasn’t impossible that Takeshi had somehow managed to get a look at his phone, too. If that turned out to be the case, Mayu would have to negotiate with her uncle to find out exactly what he’d seen.

The funeral began much the same way as the wake. The priest started to chant, and after a time they moved on to the incense offering. Today, however, Kenta was there to follow Mayu and Takeshi at the incense burner.

Once again, they were recording the mourners as they viewed the body and offered incense, though her uncle hadn't told her what his aim was in doing that for a second day.

Then came the incense offering by the other mourners. Leading off was Naoya Tsukumi's mother. Mayu had checked at the reception desk earlier and learned her first name was Kinue. Kinue Tsukumi.

The mourners came up one after another, following the prescribed route. Sugishita went through the line first, followed by some of the neighborhood ladies, then Atsumi Moriwaki, Ririka Kokonoe, and Katsuki Kugimiya. As on the previous day, Momoko was last to finish and leave. Normally, those closest to the deceased would be given a final chance to say goodbye before the coffin lid closed, but they omitted that ritual this time.

"Is there nothing else you would like placed in the coffin?" Nogi asked. At the moment, the only thing inside was the paperback copy of *Run, Melos!*.

"That's everything," Mayu replied.

The coffin closed, and it was time for the send-off. The funeral home staff set the coffin on a wheeled bier, and began to push it out. Nogi handed Mayu the long wooden mortuary tablet bearing the name of the deceased in flowing cursive letters. She looked over at Takeshi and saw that at some point he had taken the framed photograph of the deceased into his arms.

The crematorium was in the building right next door. Mayu, Takeshi, and Kenta completed the final rites there, then went to wait in the lounge until the cremation was finished.

Kenta excused himself to go to the restroom, and Mayu took the opportunity to quickly tell Takeshi what she'd heard from Sugishita.

"That's not something we can just shrug off," Takeshi said, his expression hardening.

"You think so?"

"Well, if what this Sugishita fellow says is true, then only a very limited number of people knew about my brother's trip to Tokyo."

"You mean the people who were at the reunion planning meeting?"

“Or someone close to them. In any case, your classmates who’ve come to the funeral home yesterday and today are looking very much like persons of highest interest.”

“You’re saying the person who killed my dad is one of them? Someone he knew? That’s impossible.”

“Oh? Is there some other sort of person you’d prefer as the killer?” he asked.

“I…” Mayu faltered, unable to answer.

“The killer is definitely someone your brother knew,” Takeshi went on. “Not necessarily a classmate, but I have no doubt that whoever it turns out to be, you’ll be tempted to say the same thing: ‘That’s impossible.’ And yet the killer exists. If you don’t want to know who it is, then, for your own sake, walk away now.” There was a cold, hard edge to her uncle’s usually easygoing tone.

“No. I won’t walk away,” Mayu said flatly. “I want to know the truth.”

Kenta came back then, and their secret conversation ended.

Eventually, the cremation finished and the bone-picking began. Following the attendant’s instructions, Mayu used chopsticks to lift her father’s bones one-by-one and place them in the urn. Once everything was inside, she took a fountain pen and a pair of glasses from her bag and asked that those be placed in the urn as well.



16

Feb 24 Wed *Momoko visits Eiichi at home.*
Eiichi planning some kind of surprise for Naoya Tsukumi's memorial gathering.

Feb 25 Thu *Kokorika and Kugimiya visit Eiichi at home re: Kashiwagi and the others.*

Feb 27 Sat *Sugishita phones Eiichi to say hello.*
Eiichi asks about hotels in Tokyo.

Mar 1 Mon *Reunion planning meeting (attendees: Momoko, Sugishita, Makihara, Numakawa)*

Mar 6 Sat *Eiichi to Tokyo, arrives Tokyo Kingdom Hotel 6 p.m., returns home 11 p.m.*
Eiichi killed shortly thereafter.

Mar 7 Sun *Haraguchi calls many times, can't get through.*

Mar 8 Mon *Haraguchi discovers body.*

LIFTING HIS FACE FROM the page, Takeshi reached for his can of beer.

"What do you suppose the surprise was that my brother was planning for Tsukumi's memorial?" Takeshi asked.

"I've been wondering that too. According to Momoko, all Dad told her was that it was something special he'd been saving."

"From the way he put it, it doesn't sound like anything bad."

"Yeah. She said he had this mischievous look on his face and seemed really excited."

“Something he’d been saving, huh.” Takeshi took a sip of beer, then looked back down at the paper in his hand. “Going by this, over the space of ten days or so, my brother got in touch with quite a few people. And most of them were your classmates.”

“Nothing strange about that. The reunion was coming up, and Dad was invited,” Mayu said, massaging her right wrist with her left hand. It was the first time in a while she’d had to do so much writing, and her hand had started to ache.

They were in Takeshi’s room at the Marumiya. After leaving the funeral hall, they’d seen Kenta off at the station for his trip back to Tokyo, then returned here. Mayu had gone to her own room to shower and change, then come over to Takeshi’s to plan their next moves. When she finished telling him what she’d learned from her classmates that day, he’d told her to write it all out in chronological order, which she’d done in ballpoint on the back of an unused condolence envelope—the very same, very empty envelope Takeshi had given her.

“These people who’d been in contact with my brother—it wouldn’t surprise me if their names showed up on the Maeda list,” Takeshi said. He glanced between the paper and his phone, where the “Maeda list”—the list he’d swiped from Sergeant Maeda—was open. “Of the four people who attended that reunion planning meeting, there are two, Momoko and Sugishita, who we know for a fact were in touch with my brother. But as far as anything we’ve heard so far, there’s nothing to show that Makihara or Numakawa contacted him. And yet Makihara’s name is on the Maeda list. Any idea why?”

“I thought that was odd too,” Mayu agreed. “And there are a couple things about Makihara that bother me.”

“Let’s hear them.”

“First is the wake yesterday. He asked me something strange. He wanted to know if Dad had ever said anything about them, about their group. When I asked why, he said he wanted to know how much Sensei had cared about them.”

“That *is* strange. And suspicious.”

“Right? Who would even want to know something like that? And even if they did, they wouldn’t ask about it at a wake.”

Takeshi stared off into space, tapping his fingers on the table a few times

before saying, “If you read between the lines, it sounds like Makihara suspects my brother may have said something about him to you. And he’s worried it wasn’t flattering—that it might even have been critical.”

“Right? That’s the feeling I got.”

“If it had been something good, he wouldn’t be trying to fish for it like that. Sounds like he’s got some guilty conscience where my brother is concerned. What’s the second thing that bothered you?”

Mayu took a sheet of paper from her bag. It was a copy of that day’s name cards from the reception.

“Today at the funeral, I saw Sergeant Maeda give that signal again,” Mayu said. “It was for this woman here.” She pointed at the name Moriwaki Atsumi.

“It says ‘former student’… Would that be the young woman with the ponytail?” Takeshi asked.

“Yeah,” Mayu said, studying his face. “I’m surprised you remember.”

“That hairstyle’s a bit borderline for a funeral. If you’re going to tie it back, etiquette says you wear it lower.” Her uncle’s old-fashioned attention to detail made it hard to tell if this fact was relevant or just his peculiar obsession. “So what about her?”

“I was curious, so I went over and talked to her a little. She said she still gets in touch with Dad from time to time.”

“Did you ask her when the last time was?”

“No.”

Takeshi frowned, displeased. “Why not ask something that crucial?”

“Sorry. It just didn’t occur to me.”

“Nothing to be done about it now. What happened then?”

“She asked about Makihara. Wanted to know if he was there. When I told her he’d come to the wake yesterday, she looked kind of disappointed.”

“Hm.” Takeshi folded his arms. “So she was hoping to see him.”

“That’s how it felt to me too, but I couldn’t bring myself to pry any further.”

“Useless,” Takeshi muttered, twisting his mouth.

“Thanks. What should I have said?”

“Something like, ‘I’m going to see Mr. Makihara again soon—if there’s anything you’d like me to tell him, I can pass it along.’”

“You really think she’d open up to that?”

"Maybe, maybe not. But there's nothing to lose. If you can draw something out, you're ahead. From now on, at least try?"

"Okay…"

"Atsumi Moriwaki, huh…" Takeshi picked up his phone and started tapping. "Her name's on the Maeda list too. But look," he said, turning the screen toward Mayu. The entry read "MORIWAKI" in *katakana*, the characters usually reserved for foreign words or special emphasis. Everyone else's name was written the normal way, in kanji.

"I noticed that as well. Why is it in katakana?"

"Exactly. Why katakana? Before we get into that, let's do a bit of reasoning. Why did Atsumi Moriwaki want to see Makihara? Give me your best guess. Doesn't have to be perfect."

"Well…normally, if a woman wants to see a man, you'd think it's because she likes him," Mayu said, picturing Makihara's long, horse-like features. "No offense to him, but I just can't see it. That's not the vibe he gives off at all."

"You shouldn't judge people solely on appearances, but fair enough. If it's not that, then what?"

"She needed something from him?"

"What kind of something?"

"How should I know?"

"Try looking at it this way. You said Makihara works at a credit union, right? That makes him a bank man. When someone meets with a banker, what is it they usually want?"

"Oh, duh," Mayu said, clapping her hands. "Money."

"A most reasonable assumption."

"So maybe Atsumi Moriwaki's in some kind of financial bind?"

"That's one possibility. But the story might be more complicated than that."

"How so?"

Instead of answering, Takeshi started fiddling with his phone again and set it down on the table. A moment later, a voice came from the built-in speaker. Someone was saying, *"Thanks for your hard work."*

"Wait, what is this?"

Takeshi pressed a finger to his lips for silence.

"They said the two of them showed up around ten, right? And how long

were they here?"

The rough, casual male voice was one she recognized. She could picture his foxlike face as she listened. *Inspector Kogure*.

"Just over an hour, I think. The guy came first and spent some time upstairs. The woman turned up maybe fifteen minutes later," another man answered.

"The man was the victim's brother, right? Takeshi Kamio or something. What was he doing upstairs?"

"I'm afraid I don't really know… He went to his own room, and I couldn't exactly follow him in."

"When that happens, you follow anyway. And keep at it until they kick you out."

"Sorry, sir. I'll do that next time.

"Hold it a second," Mayu said, raising her right hand.

Takeshi, grinning, stopped the playback. "Surprised?"

"What is this?" Mayu blinked. "One of those men talking is Inspector Kogure, right? Who's he talking to?"

"You don't recognize him? You've met him yourself."

"What? Where?"

"Yesterday, at our house. When we went into my brother's study, there was a cop standing by the door on watch, remember? Him."

"Wait—so this conversation is…" Mayu looked down at the phone.

"It's from after we left. Kogure showed up and spoke with the officer standing guard."

"Dare I ask why you have a recording of that?"

"Because before I left the room yesterday, I planted a bug on the bookshelf. I figured the cops would show up after we were gone. This morning I told the guard I'd forgotten something, went back into the study, and quietly retrieved it. When I played it back, sure enough, this is what I got. And lucky for us, Kogure himself put in an appearance."

"You bugged the house? What the… Why do you have something like that anyway?"

"Leftover gear from the old job. Sometimes a bit of technology can go a long way to entertain an audience."

"Weren't you just complaining yesterday about illegal police wiretaps and shady investigations?"

"Planting a bug in someone else's house would be illegal, yes. Planting one in your own house and listening to your own room? Not illegal at all. Anyway, listen to the rest. Pay close attention." He restarted the playback.

"What did the two of them do after the daughter arrived?" Kogure was asking.

"The woman seemed to be looking for something. I think it was a keepsake of the victim's, to put in the coffin. The man was talking about the fax phone. Something about it having been taken away," the officer replied.

"What do you think he wanted with the phone?" A different voice cut in. Mayu recognized this voice too: Kakitani.

"Probably the call history," Kogure said. *"This morning, the daughter called you demanding disclosure of the data on the phone, remember? I'm sure that was that guy's idea, too. When he realized the phone was a no-go, he must've figured he could at least get the landline call records.*"

"I see. But to what end?"

"No idea. But he's not to be underestimated. Don't let your guard down around him."

"Maybe he's just trying to track down the murderer in his own way?"

"Don't be ridiculous. He's an amateur."

"An amateur, sure, but not your average amateur, Inspector. Wouldn't it be better to give him some information and ask for his cooperation, up to a point?"

"Are you crazy? Of course we want the bereaved to cooperate with the investigation, that's standard practice. But that doesn't mean we just hand out information left and right. For all we know, he could be connected to the killer."

"Still, the daughter, at least, seems trustworthy. What if we let her listen to that message on the answering machine?"

"Sorry? What message?"

"That call about her father's bank account. We still don't know exactly who made it, other than it was a younger woman. Could be one of the daughter's friends."

"We have the incoming number. If we put our minds to it, we can trace her easily enough. She might show up at the wake or the funeral, too. Right now, that call is one of our most important leads. Daughter or not, it's too sensitive to just share."

Takeshi stopped the recording and looked at Mayu. “Well?”

“I’m shocked. They still suspect us!” Mayu said.

“Suspicion is their job,” Takeshi replied. “More importantly, did nothing else jump out at you?”

“The answering machine message?”

“Exactly. They said they don’t know who left it, right? They have the incoming number, but not the exact name. But if someone leaves a message, they’re not going to *not* say who they are. How would *you* introduce yourself on a call like that?”

“Me? I’d just say my name normally. Like, ‘This is Kamio. Thank you for everything you do,’ I guess.”

“And would you go on to explain the kanji in your name? You know, like ‘*kami’* meaning ‘god’ and ‘*o’* meaning ‘tail’?”

“Of course not. I’d assume they already—Oh.” Mayu smacked her knee. “So the caller was Atsumi Moriwaki, I get it! On the answering machine, she probably just said, ‘This is Moriwaki,’ but that’s an unusual name so they wouldn’t be sure which kanji to use…which is why it’s written in katakana on the Maeda list!”

“Bingo. Thinking along those lines, it’s almost certainly her. Moriwaki tried calling my brother and couldn’t get through, so she left a message: ‘I’m calling about my father’s bank account.’”

“And she’s the same person who wanted to see Makihara from the credit union,” Mayu said, tapping her left palm with her right fist. “Things are starting to connect.”

“Consider this scenario,” Takeshi said, raising his index finger. “Atsumi Moriwaki’s father’s business fails, and he’s desperate for funds. She wonders if there’s anyone who might help and turns to my brother for advice. Hearing her out, he thinks of Makihara and contacts him.”

“Since he works at a credit union, he might be able to lean on the loans department.”

“But when Makihara hears the story, he says, ‘I’m afraid that’s impossible. I can’t help this time,’ and turns him down.”

“He’d turn him down?”

“At the end of the day, he’s just one employee at a credit union. No matter how much he owes his old teacher, there are times he simply can’t say yes. Faced with that, my brother has no choice but to back off. Still, the

refusal nags at Makihara. What does Sensei think of him now? When your former teacher bows his head to ask a favor and you brush him off, wouldn't he see you as cold and ungrateful? So when he came to the wake, he took the chance to ask you whether Sensei had said anything about him."

"Wow." Mayu actually clapped. "That's brilliant. Everything fits."

"Mind you, this isn't proper deduction, just one possibility, a story that happens to fit the facts." Takeshi spoke with a cool look on his face. "Even if everything lines up, that doesn't mean it's the truth."

"But if things happened the way you just said, it would also explain why Makihara's name is on the Maeda list." If her father had contacted Makihara, there would almost certainly be some trace of it left on his phone or elsewhere.

Takeshi rested both elbows on the table and laced his fingers together. "I'm convinced that whatever made Atsumi Moriwaki want to see Makihara involved some kind of money matter. Most likely, something to do with her father's bank account. But that doesn't necessarily mean it was something simple, like asking for financial help. What if there was a more complicated money situation already in motion, and my brother got caught up in it? In that case, this really isn't the time to be clapping our hands and getting all excited."

Mayu straightened her back with a snap. "You mean this might be more deeply connected to the case?"

"I see no reason to rule out the possibility. Kogure said it himself, remember? It's a major lead."

There was a sharp look in her uncle's eyes that sent a shudder of goose bumps across Mayu's skin. She had to admit she really had no idea what kind of person this woman, Atsumi Moriwaki, really was. She hadn't looked like a bad person, but judging by appearances alone was dangerous. As for Makihara, though, Mayu liked to think she knew at least a little about him. She had always thought of him as one of the former students who'd truly looked up to her father. But if someone like that was involved —

Then there's no one I can trust anymore, Mayu thought.

Takeshi worked his phone. The recording of Kogure and the others picked up where it had left off.

"Those two do anything else?"

Inspector Kogure was talking to the uniformed officer who had been standing guard.

"The woman put a fountain pen and a pair of glasses into her bag. After that, the two of them were whispering together, but unfortunately I couldn't make out what they were saying. They seemed to realize we were trying to listen in…"

"You didn't catch even fragments of it?"

"I might have caught a couple words. 'Robbery,' they said that. And they seemed to be talking about something having been 'faked,' but I'm not sure what."

"What? Is that true?"

"I think so, sir. Sorry. I can't be sure."

"Well they were probably talking about the way the culprit ransacked the room," Kakitani said. *"This Takeshi Kamio, I knew he was more than meets the eye. Clearly he's cottoned on to this not being a simple break-in. The culprit went in there planning to kill the victim from the very start."*

"Hmph. That's not much of a deduction. Any half-decent mystery buff would spot that. And I hear that Takeshi guy used to be a stage magician… Anyway, what else were they talking about?"

"Nothing much, sir. They seemed to be reminiscing about the victim as they looked over the books and files on the shelves, but I couldn't make out the details. The woman took a paperback from the bookcase."

"And after that?"

"They looked around the room for a bit, but left shortly thereafter."

"So the only things they took out of the room were the fountain pen, the glasses, and that paperback?"

"As far as I could see, yes."

"Got it. Good work, thanks."

Takeshi stopped the playback. "So I've been written off as just some little mystery-fan geek."

"Who used to be a magician."

"They must've checked out the place in Ebisu. Anyone would find that out with a little asking around. More importantly, this proves what I said before. The police also think it wasn't a simple robbery, but a premeditated murder."

"And my old classmates are suspects?"

“More than that,” Takeshi said flatly. “They’re prime suspects.”

Mayu unconsciously clenched both hands into tight fists when a message popped up on her phone.

It was from Kenta:

“Just arrived in Tokyo. You must be exhausted. You need anything, call. I’ll come running. Take care!”

She thought for a moment, then replied:

“Thanks for coming all the way out here. Good luck with work. I’ll be in touch.”

“Kenta?” Takeshi asked.

“Yeah. Uncle Takeshi, what did you talk about with him?”

“You really want to know?”

“I do.”

“How much are you willing to pay for that information?”

Mayu’s shoulders slumped. “That again? Give it a rest, will you?”

Takeshi gave a little snort through his nose. “He’s a serious, straight-shooting guy. No doubt about that.”

“Really? You think so?”

“The problem is, too much of a good thing can be just as bad as too little.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You’re saying he’s, what, too serious? Too straightforward?”

“Who knows? Anyway, that’s all I have to say on that subject.”

Mayu slapped the table. “Hey, you don’t get to just leave it hanging like that!”

“I’m not the one who brought it up,” Takeshi said, getting to his feet. “Let’s get some dinner.”

“Uncle Takeshi, starting tonight you’re paying for yourself,” Mayu shot back, lifting her head to glare at him.

“What are you talking about?”

“Did you forget? We made a deal at the start. I’d cover three nights of your room and lunch on the fourth day, and that was it.”

Takeshi pulled a face and started counting on his fingers. “Today’s the fourth day, huh,” he muttered under his breath, almost to himself, as he walked over to the closet and took out his jacket.

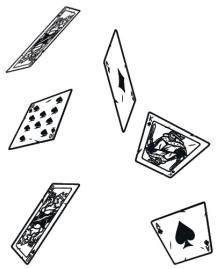
“Going out?”

“Yeah.”

“Where to?”

“Convenience store to rustle up something for dinner. The restaurant here’s too expensive.”

Shrugging on his jacket, Takeshi left the room.



17

Mayu went with the pork cutlet dinner set. One look at the photo on the menu and she was craving it. Maybe it was her appetite returning now that she could relax after the ordeal of the wake and funeral was finally behind her. She had finished every last bite of cutlet and cabbage and drained her miso soup, when her phone rang. It was Detective Kakitani.

He immediately apologized: “Sorry to bother you when you must be tired, with the funeral only just over.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“Well, something’s come up that I’d like you to confirm. It won’t take long at all, but I was hoping you could spare me a little of your time.”

“I don’t mind, but do you mean right now?”

“The sooner the better, if possible. Are you at the Marumiya at the moment?”

“Yes, the dining room on the first floor.”

“Your uncle with you?”

“No, he’s in his room.”

“Right. Do you know the old coffee shop diagonally across from the Marumiya? It’s called ‘Flute.’”

“I don’t remember seeing the sign, but I think I’ve seen the shop.”

“Can we meet there? Would, say, eight p.m. work for you?”

“Eight o’clock…” Mayu glanced at the clock on the wall. It was just past seven forty.

“There’ll be a ‘Closed’ sign hanging at the entrance, but don’t let that stop you. I’ve already spoken to the owner.”

“Understood.”

“And, if possible,” Kakitani went on, dropping his voice a little, “I’d like you to come alone.”

She understood at once what he was getting at. “You mean it’s better if I don’t bring my uncle.”

“Well, yes, sorry,” he replied, letting out a forced little laugh.

“No problem. I’ll come by myself.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.” With a final “Thanks again,” Kakitani ended the call.

Mayu stood up, thanked the proprietress for the meal, and left the dining room. She had already told the woman she might be staying a while longer, and she had replied cheerfully, “You’re welcome to stay as long as you like.”

The lodging business had been in a tough spot everywhere since the pandemic started. A long-term guest was something to be grateful for.

She went to Takeshi’s room and knocked. “Come in,” came his curt reply.

She opened the door and stepped inside. Takeshi was lying on the bed, fiddling with his tablet. On the table sat an empty convenience-store bento container. The label on the lid of the lunch box read “Three-Color Bento.” She wondered what, exactly, the three colors were. It had cost all of 440 yen.

“Detective Kakitani just called,” Mayu said, sitting down beside him and explaining that she was about to go meet him.

“Good chance to pick up some information,” Takeshi said. He sat up and began rummaging through the bag in the corner of the room. At length he took something out and set it down in front of her: it looked like a black butterfly made out of plastic.

“What’s this?” Mayu picked up the butterfly. It had a little clip attached.

“A bug. Clip it onto your handbag. See how the tail part bends? That’s the switch. Turn it on before you go in.”

Mayu flicked the butterfly’s switch back and forth a few times. “Okay. I guess it’s better if you hear exactly what he asks me than have me try to explain it all afterward. How many of these things do you even have?”

“Told you, they’re tools of the trade. Answer Kakitani’s questions straight. No need to lie. Just don’t mention that we’re running our own investigation into what really happened.”

“I know. I’m not that stupid. Still, I wonder what he’s planning to ask me.”

“I can more or less guess,” Takeshi said, rubbing his stubbly chin. “Most likely, he’ll want to know more about your old classmates.”

Her stomach clenched. “You think so?”

“The cops will have gone through all the name cards from the wake and the funeral and noticed how many of them were classmates of yours. And on top of that, it was a parade of names straight off the Maeda list. They’re going to want to dig into that as soon as they can.”

“But I’m pretty sure the name cards just said ‘former student.’ How would they know they were my classmates? They could have been in different grades.”

“Easy. As long as the police have a full name, they can run it against the driver’s-license database. Licenses have photos, so they can tell people apart even if they share the same name. And the license also gives the date of birth, so they can work out in no time which junior-high cohort they belonged to.”

“Wow, I had no idea,” Mayu murmured. She had a driver’s license herself, but she’d never realized the police could use it that way.

“If they want to dig into your classmates,” Takeshi went on, “the fastest way is to ask someone who knows them well. But it’s a problem if that person turns out to be involved in the crime. On that score, you’re currently the least likely candidate to be the culprit. So my guess is that Kakitani suggested questioning you, and Kogure grudgingly signed off on it.” Takeshi stared off into the distance for a moment, then turned back to her with a grin. “Do your best. There’s only one iron rule for gathering information through conversation: keep the silences to an absolute minimum. Chat away like you’ve been friends for years.”

Across the street from the hotel, Mayu looked up at the retro sign of the coffee shop, trying to remember where in Tokyo she’d last seen a classic shop sign like this. The letters read “Coffee Shop Flute,” with musical notes scattered around the name. *The owner must like music,* she thought. Maybe they’d even worked in the industry.

Just as Kakitani had warned her, a “Closed” sign hung on the door. Mayu bent the butterfly’s tail on her bag, hearing it make a small click, then opened the door. A bell jingled overhead.

The interior was spacious, with four-seater tables lined up in rows. Two men sitting near the center stood up. One was Kakitani; the other, unexpectedly, was Maeda. Naturally, there were no other customers, though behind the counter stood an elderly man with white hair, presumably the owner.

"Thank you very much for coming. You must be exhausted," Kakitani said, bowing his head. Maeda followed suit. "Not at all," Mayu replied, as she came to a stop facing them from the opposite side of the table.

"I'll keep this as brief as possible. This is Sergeant Maeda, here on assignment from prefectural headquarters," Kakitani said.

"Maeda," the young detective introduced himself. Mayu couldn't exactly say, "I know who you are," so she just answered, "Nice to meet you." Mayu sat, and the two detectives took their seats.

"Can I get you something to drink? The coffee here is famous," Kakitani asked.

"No, I'm fine, thank you."

"Very well." Kakitani glanced toward the counter and gave a small nod. The man, probably the owner, nodded in understanding and disappeared into the back.

Mayu let her eyes wander around the shop. Old record jackets were tacked up all over the walls.

"It's got that full-on '80s vibe, doesn't it? I hear it's been open for nearly forty years," Kakitani said.

"Really?" Mayu answered.

"These days it's rare enough to see an ashtray in a restaurant, but you hardly ever see one like this," Kakitani went on, glancing toward the edge of the table where there was a glass ashtray engraved with finely etched patterns.

"Mr. Eiichi Kamio—your father—did he smoke?" he asked, turning his gaze back to her.

"My dad? He used to, but he quit more than ten years ago," she said, remembering it had been around the same time taxis had gone smoke-free nationwide.

"Do you remember what kind of lighter he used?"

"Sorry, lighter?"

"Like, did he have a favorite? A vintage oil lighter or something like

that? Or was it just disposable lighters?"

"Oh, I don't really remember anything like that. I think he just used ordinary lighters. The disposable ones. Why?"

"Given your father's splendid study, it just got the feeling that he probably had something better than the usual," Kakitani said. "It's the kind of room where you picture an academic sort puffing on a pipe. Or maybe even a cigar."

"Huh," Mayu tilted her head. "Never even crossed my mind."

"I see. My apologies, lighters are just a hobby of mine. Still—" He straightened in his chair, squaring his shoulders as he looked at her. "You must be worn out from the funeral and everything. From what I've heard from the officers on site, quite a few people attended, even with everyone worried about Covid."

"We were fortunate," Mayu replied.

"And thank you very much for providing the name cards of the attendees for our investigation. I've been instructed by the lead investigator to convey his sincere thanks."

By lead investigator, he probably meant Inspector Kogure. If so, this message was probably best taken as ironic.

"If it helps at all, I'm glad."

"Oh, it's been more than helpful. In fact, that's exactly why we asked you here tonight. When we looked into the attendees, we found there was an especially large number who'd been your classmates in junior high. We thought maybe we could ask you a bit more about them," Kakitani said, starting just where Takeshi said he would.

"There's a class reunion scheduled for Sunday, so I imagine that had something to do with it," she answered, taking the safest line.

"I've already heard about the reunion from Mr. Haraguchi. And, let's see here…"

Kakitani took a sheet of paper from his briefcase and set it down in front of her. It was a copy of the wake and funeral name cards compiled onto one page. Several of the names had check marks next to them. She understood at once what they meant.

"The names with check marks are, as far as we can tell, your classmates. Is that correct? If there's anyone we've missed, please let us know."

Mayu looked back over the copy and nodded. "No, that looks right to

me."

Even names that hadn't been on the Maeda list, like Kashiwagi and Numakawa, had check marks by them. Just as Takeshi had said, the police had probably run driver's-license checks on everyone whose name card listed them as a "former student," then used the birthdates to work out which graduating year they belonged to.

"Let's start with Ms. Momoko Ikenaga. I understand she was helping at the reception desk for the wake and the funeral. Is it fair to say you're quite close?"

"Yes. I'd say she's the one in the class I'm closest to."

"What does she do? The address on her name card was in Yokohama."

"She used to work, but now she's a full-time housewife. Her husband's been posted to Kansai on his own for work, so she's spending that time back at her parents' place."

"Do you happen to know where her husband works?"

"'Toa Land,' I think it was," Mayu said.

Kakitani's mouth rounded. "Ah, the big theme park chain. A solo posting must be tough."

"Even so, he came to the wake yesterday. Apparently he was one of my father's former students too."

"I see, I see." Kakitani nodded repeatedly while, next to him, Maeda was hammering away at a laptop with a grimly serious look on his face. His typing was fast; he was probably recording their conversation verbatim.

"Have you and Ms. Ikenaga talked at all about the case?" Kakitani asked.

"Nothing in particular. She just seemed genuinely heartbroken about my father's death."

"Had she been in touch with your father recently?"

"She told me she'd gone round to the house to talk to him about the reunion."

"Did she tell you what they talked about?"

"She said they discussed holding a memorial for our classmate who died back in junior high. Um…" Mayu looked at Kakitani. "Are you planning to go into this much detail about every single one of my classmates? I thought you said you'd keep it brief."

"My apologies, but this is critical for our investigation. I hope you understand," Kakitani said, placing both hands on the table and bowing his

head. She felt a wave of weariness, but then remembered Takeshi's advice to keep the conversation flowing.

"Fine. Who's next?"

"Thank you. Then, could you tell me about Mr. Kaito Sugishita? He's also moved away from the area and is currently registered in Tokyo. Did he make a special trip just to attend the funeral?"

"No, not quite—"

Mayu explained that Sugishita had made it big in Tokyo running an IT company but, for various reasons, had relocated back to town. When she went on to describe how, after he called her father to pay his respects, her father asked him for advice about a hotel in Tokyo, not only Kakitani's but Maeda's expression changed.

"So Sugishita called your father…and you're sure about that?"

"That's what Sugishita told me himself. Just ask him, I'm sure he'll confirm it."

"Understood."

Kakitani drew his chin in and shot Maeda a look. Maeda, his expression tightening, resumed pounding at the keys. So the police really were focusing on narrowing down who knew about her father's trip to Tokyo. Just as Takeshi had said, point for point.

Next, Kakitani asked about Katsuki Kugimiya. "I have to say, it's cool to have such a famous person for a classmate. I was surprised. My boys love *Gen'no Labyrinth*," he said, eyes shining. "I heard he attended the funeral today?"

"Yes. Considering how busy he must be, I was really grateful he came."

"Did you speak with him?"

"Just a little. I told him how impressed we all were with his success, and he offered his condolences."

"Did he say anything else about your father?"

"He mentioned he'd seen him recently."

"When was that?"

"He said it was the week before last, I think?"

In fact it had been Thursday, February 25, but giving the exact date felt unnatural, so she kept it vague.

"Did he have some particular reason for going to see him?"

"He told me some of our classmates who are planning a town-

revitalization project might ask my father to act as a go-between to get his help, and he'd gone to advise my father not to get involved, so they wouldn't put any burden on him."

Kakitani tilted his head. "And this 'town revitalization project' is…what exactly?"

"I only know what I've heard from my classmates, so you should probably confirm the details with them," Mayu prefaced, before explaining that the vice presidents at Kashiwagi Construction seemed to be planning some new event to take the place of the original plans for the *Gen-Lab* House.

"Ah, I was really looking forward to the *Gen-Lab* House myself," Kakitani said, pulling a disappointed face. "I was sorry to hear it was canceled. Even if they come up with an alternative plan to boost the town, they'll still need *Gen'no Labyrinth* in there somewhere, right? But Mr. Kugimiya isn't exactly enthusiastic, is he?"

"He'd like to help, but he says there's only so much he can do, what with how busy he is… Oh, sorry, it wasn't Kugimiya who said that, it was Ms. Kokonoe."

"Kokone…?" he repeated under his breath, dropping his gaze. Mayu heard a rustle of paper as he opened what she assumed was a notebook under the table.

"Ms. Ririka Kokonoe, right?"

"That's right."

"And why would she be the one saying that about Mr. Kugimiya?"

"Er, that takes a bit of explaining." Mayu told him that while Ririka Kokonoe technically worked for a major advertising agency in Tokyo, she was currently acting more or less as Katsuki Kugimiya's manager.

"So when Mr. Kugimiya went to see your father, he wasn't alone—Ms. Kokonoe was with him?"

"Yes. Apparently she always sits in whenever there's any business discussion."

"She certainly sounds like a manager," Kakitani said, narrowing his eyes. "Aside from that day, did Mr. Kugimiya or Ms. Kokonoe have any other dealings with your father?"

"Not that I've heard."

"I see. Personally, I can't help thinking that if we could get Mr.

Kugimiya's cooperation, it would give the town revitalization a tremendous boost—but I suppose you can't force these things."

"Right…" was all Mayu could offer, giving a vague nod.

A ringtone sounded from inside her bag. When she took out her phone, she saw it was Takeshi. "Excuse me, would you mind if I step out for a moment?"

"Of course, go right ahead," Kakitani said, holding his palms up in a sign of permission.

Holding the phone to her ear, Mayu stepped outside. "Hi, it's me."

"They'll be getting to Makihara next," Takeshi said.

"I think so too. What should I do?"

"Answer what they ask honestly. Just don't volunteer anything extra if they don't bring it up. Like your exchanges with Ms. Atsumi Moriwaki."

"Got it."

"In return, there's a line I want you to say. I'll give it to you now; repeat it just as I say it." With that, Takeshi slowly dictated the sentence to her.

Mayu hesitated. "You sure it's okay for me to say that?"

"Don't worry about that. Just stay sharp and do it."

"Okay, I'll do my best."

When she went back inside, Kakitani and Maeda hastily straightened up in their seats. "Sorry about that," Mayu said, sitting down again across from them.

"Good to keep going?" Kakitani asked.

"Yes. Who's next?"

"Let's see…" He glanced down at his notes, then looked up again. "How about Mr. Satoru Makihara. He's local, it seems. Do you know what he does?"

"Makihara came to the wake. He told me then that he works at Mitsuba Shinkin Bank."

"Oh? So he's a banker." Kakitani didn't show any strong reaction, but Mayu caught a slight twitch in Maeda's cheek.

"I don't know which branch, though."

"That's quite all right. And what did you talk about at the wake?"

"Just the usual kind of small talk. He said he wanted to know what my father had really thought of all of us."

It was the same story she'd discussed with Takeshi earlier, but perhaps

because she delivered it so casually, it drew no particular reaction from Kakitani.

"Did your father and Mr. Makihara have much to do with each other normally? In that line of work, a banker will tap any connection he can to build up his client base. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd approached your father that way."

"I never heard anything like that from my dad," Mayu replied, and then felt sure that this was the perfect moment to use the line Takeshi had given her. "Besides, my father was never much interested in money matters or investment schemes. If anything, I'd say he was pretty out of his depth when it came to finance. He usually went to my uncle for advice whenever it came to money stuff."

"Your uncle…you mean the gentleman staying at the Marumiya? Mr. Takeshi Kamio?" Kakitani's eyes widened.

"That's right."

"You don't say. That's…quite a surprise. He doesn't exactly look the type."

"He's actually pretty particular where money's concerned," she said. In truth she wanted to say "stingy," but with Takeshi listening in through the bug, she held back.

"Come to think of it, during the crime-scene walkthrough your uncle tried to start a bet with Inspector Kogure, didn't he?"

"If there was any kind of money-related dealing between my father and Makihara, there's a good chance my father would have told my uncle. If there's anything you want to check on that front, I can ask him for you."

"No, no, that won't be necessary. Thank you, though."

After that, they talked about Kashiwagi and Numakawa. But all Mayu really knew was that Kashiwagi served as a vice president at his father's construction firm and that Numakawa ran a bar. As for the town-revitalization plan they were supposedly pushing forward, she repeated that she didn't know much about it.

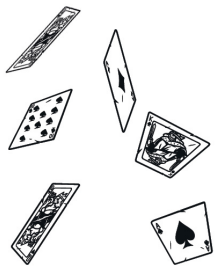
"I see. That clarifies a lot. I'm truly sorry to have taken up so much of your time. Thank you for your cooperation," Kakitani said, standing and bowing deeply. Beside him, Maeda hastily followed suit.

"If you learn anything new about the case, could you let us know? We'd like to have some idea how far the investigation has progressed," Mayu

said, picking up her bag.

"Of course. If there's any information we're able to share, you'll be the first to hear it."

It was a smooth reply, and it left Mayu feeling empty. She had learned by now that Kakitani's "you'll be the first to hear" basically meant the police had no intention of telling them anything.



18

Mayu returned to the Marumiya just as the clock slipped past nine, which meant she'd spent exactly an hour with the detectives. She didn't feel they'd gotten much for their trouble, but when she said as much to Takeshi, he replied, "I wouldn't say that."

Takeshi picked up his phone. "When I went to make that call, you left your bag at the table, remember? That was actually a pretty good idea, for you. Thanks to that, I was able to record a little bit of their conversation while you were gone."

He tapped his phone, and a voice came out of the speaker:

"Aren't we going to ask her about the call the victim made on March second?"

The muffled voice was probably Maeda.

"From the look of it, she doesn't know anything. Asking would be pointless. And didn't Inspector Kogure specifically request less noise, more signal?"

"Well, yes, but…"

"I don't think there's any hidden signal to be gleaned here. We'll stay the course."

"Right, sir."

Takeshi stopped the playback. "There you have it."

Mayu lifted her face from the phone. "What do you think this 'call the victim made on March second' is about?"

"I'm guessing they found a record of a call on my brother's cell or the fax phone at his place. Of course, a call record alone doesn't mean he actually talked to anyone—the line may never have connected. So we can safely

assume they checked with the phone company and found out he did talk to someone, which means they already know who it was."

Listening to her uncle check off boxes in an efficient, logical manner made it hard to believe this was the same man who was always looking for an excuse to sponge off his niece.

"Judging from the way Kakitani and the others were talking, the person he called must be someone who's already come up in the conversation so far. Could be Momoko, could be Kugimiya. There's also Elite Sugishita or even Kokorika. Whoever it is, they never told you your brother had called them."

"Well then, who was it? This is really bugging me," Mayu muttered.

Just then, a message came in on her phone. It was from Momoko: *"Mind if I call you now?"*

Mayu decided to ring her instead. The first thing she heard was Momoko apologizing. "Sorry, is this a bad time?"

"No, it's fine. Hey, thanks again for covering reception yesterday and today. You're a lifesaver."

"Don't mention it. Anyway, I'm at Numakawa's place right now. Haraguchi's here too."

"Oh, really? Numakawa's bar?"

"Actually, we're talking about the reunion. What we should do. It all feels kind of inappropriate, with Mr. Kamio's funeral just over, but we're running out of time."

"I see what you mean."

"Anyway, we figured we really needed to hear what you think. Which is why I was calling. I hate to ask, but do you think you could come join us?"

"Now?" Mayu glanced at the clock. It was nine thirty in the evening. Late, but not super late to go to a bar.

"I know you're tired, so I'm not going to twist your arm. But it's walking distance from the Marumiya, so I thought, maybe?"

Takeshi scribbled something on a small slip of paper and held it out to Mayu. It read: *Go*. He must have picked up from her tone that she was being invited out.

"Okay. I'll come over. Tell me the name of Numakawa's place. I can probably look up the location myself."

After getting the name of the bar and hanging up, she explained the

situation to Takeshi.

“You might be able to pick up some new information. Just don’t drink so much you dull your antenna.”

“I’ll be careful. Here, I should give this back.” Mayu handed him the butterfly-shaped bug that had been clipped to her handbag. “Well, see you.” She stood up.

She was almost out of the room when her uncle called from behind. “Mayu.” He walked up, a slight frown on his face. “Momoko’s husband works at Toa Land, you said?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Why?”

“I remember seeing something about that company in an online article. After Covid hit, they shifted to mainly remote work. And as a rule, they were supposed to phase out solo assignments. Like Momoko’s husband’s.”

“Huh?” Mayu hadn’t intended to react at all, but it came out before she could stop herself. “You sure that’s true? But Momoko said…”

“I’m just putting it out there. I did say ‘as a rule,’ remember? There are exceptions to every rule.” Takeshi smiled. “It’s been a while since you had drinks with everyone, hasn’t it? Don’t overdo it, but go have some fun.” He gave her shoulder a light pat and turned away.

Just as Momoko had said, it took her less than ten minutes to walk from the Marumiya to Numakawa’s place. The exterior was done up to look like an old traditional house, and the front sliding door stood wide open—probably a Covid precaution—to allow more air to circulate.

Inside, the bar was bright and spacious, with brand-new tables lined up in neat rows. In one corner, an older couple sat together at a table. “Welcome,” a masked waitress called out.

Momoko and Haraguchi were at the counter. A clear acrylic panel for infection control stood in front of it, and on the far side Mayu could see Numakawa. He noticed her, raised a hand in greeting. Momoko and Haraguchi turned to look as well.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Mayu said, sliding onto the stool next to Momoko.

“Mayu, I’m really sorry to drag you out like this,” Momoko said.

“It’s fine, really. I’m officially released from chief mourner duty, finally—I was in the mood for a drink anyway.”

She ordered a beer to start, clinked her mug with the others and took a

long drag. Come to think of it, this was the first drink she'd had since coming back to town.

Watching Momoko from the side, she remembered what Takeshi had said. Had Toa Land really done away with solo postings? Yet Momoko had told her that her husband, Ryosuke, was living alone on assignment in Kansai, and Ryosuke himself hadn't contradicted that yesterday. Maybe there was nothing to worry about. There were always exceptions, as Takeshi had said. Mayu decided to put the whole matter aside for the time being.

The older couple paid their bill and left. The waitress was disinfecting the table they had used. Now Mayu and her friends were the only customers.

"You're probably thinking the place is dead, huh?" Numakawa said as he set an appetizer down in front of her. "Weekends are a little better, but on weekdays it's always like this. Before Covid, we actually did pretty well. At one point I even had three staff on."

"It's the same for every restaurant," Haraguchi said. "If the tourists don't come, this is what happens. Some of the bars we deliver to are going to shut down by the end of the year."

"So all you can do is hang on until they come up with a real silver-bullet cure or vaccine?"

Numakawa gave a wry smile and shrugged. "Even then, who knows if things will really go back to the way they were. A lot of people have already forgotten what it's like to go out for a drink. And this town just doesn't have much to draw people in. If the tourists don't come, we're in trouble either way."

"Which is why we're pinning our hopes on *Gen-Lab*," Momoko said, twisting around to face Mayu. "Have you heard? Numakawa's thinking of remodeling this place to look like the *Gen-Lab* House."

"Seriously?" Mayu looked up at Numakawa.

"I just feel like I have to do something. We need something people will want to post about on social media, especially younger folks. Haraguchi here is apparently toying with the idea of naming a new line of booze after *Gen-Lab*, too. That sounds fun, right? If he does it, I'm planning to promote it big-time."

Haraguchi scratched his head. "Yeah, well," he muttered, shooting Mayu an awkward grin. His face all but said: *I've already gone behind everyone's back and asked your dad to put me in touch with Kugimiya, so do me a*

favor and keep that to yourself.

Everyone seemed to be scrambling. It looked like, even more than Mayu had imagined, *Gen'no Labyrinth* was this town's one and only ray of hope.

"So, Mayu, about the reunion—what do you think we should do?" Momoko finally got to the point. Mayu took a sip of beer and set her mug down.

"I said this to Haraguchi before, but I think you should go ahead and just do it. Although personally, I think I should sit this one out. I really don't want everyone fussing over me."

"No one's going to be fussing, promise! How many times do I have to say it?"

"She's right," Numakawa called from behind the counter. "Also, there're the ones who couldn't make it to the wake or the funeral who are going to want to at least offer their condolences to you at the reunion. Gotta think of them."

"Agreed," Haraguchi said, lifting his hand slightly.

Just then, a ringtone sounded from somewhere. Numakawa picked up his phone.

"Yeah, hello. Yeah, we're open, of course. Actually, Haraguchi and the others are here. And Honma, and Kamio just got here a little while ago. … No, no one else. Huh? …Oh, right. …Sure, that's fine. See you in a bit." He hung up and looked over at Mayu and the others. "Kashiwagi and the gang are on their way."

"Well, now, that's a coincidence," Haraguchi said. "Who else is coming?"

"Sounds like Makihara's with them. And Kugimiya and the rest, too."

Mayu, Momoko, and Haraguchi all exchanged looks of surprise.

"Apparently Kashiwagi twisted their arms. He told me to close the place so there wouldn't be any other customers to worry about. When I said you guys were already here, he said that was perfect. So for now, I'm going to hang this up at the door." Numakawa took a little sign that read "reserved" down from a shelf and stepped out from behind the counter.

"Wow, that Kashiwagi's something else. We just finished with Mr. Kamio's funeral and he's already gearing up to negotiate with Kugimiya," Momoko said.

"Nah, the timing's perfect," Haraguchi said, shaking his head. "I'd bet good money his pitch was something like 'Let's get together and remember

Mr. Kamio.' My guess is dinner's on Kashiwagi."

"And then after they eat, he'll move to a different place and start working on Kugimiya. Smooth. That's our 'Big G' for you."

"Haha," Numakawa laughed as he came back over. "That's right, we *did* call him that, didn't we."

"Yeah, and Makihara was 'Sneech.'"

"It's funny, isn't it, how that dynamic hasn't changed a bit even now that we're grown up," Haraguchi said, chuckling as he poured himself more beer from a bottle on the table.

"Kashiwagi Construction is Mitsuba Credit Union's biggest local client. Sneech is never going to be able to stand up to Big G."

Mayu listened to their banter with real enjoyment. Only classmates had the privilege of comparing someone like Kashiwagi—now a man of some standing—to characters from a beloved cartoon and laughing about it.

The personalities of the various main characters in *Doraemon*—a cartoon about a robotic blue cat, Doraemon, who helps his owner, Noby, in and out of various fixes—were well and widely known, and it was uncanny how well they matched people in real life sometimes.

Big G was physically the biggest of the core friend group in the cartoon, and could be a bully. He was often pushing Noby around only to be foiled by one of Doraemon's miraculous devices. Sneech was Big G's well-to-do lackey, who often took Big G's side against Noby, but was secretly afraid of him.

"And now here we are, with Big G wining and dining Noby. You really never know how life's going to turn out," Numakawa said, his face going a little more serious. "Though we're in no position to laugh, either. Covid's squeezed us so hard we've tossed the king of the playground aside and are all lining up to ask favors from Noby. We're pretty shameless when you think about it."

"Well, I guess. Though Noby does help a lot of people in the movies," Haraguchi said, mustering a flimsy bit of logic in their defense.

It was obvious that by Noby they meant Katsuki Kugimiya, author of *Gen-Lab*. It wasn't a perfect fit. The real Kugimiya hadn't been as lazy or slapdash like the character Noby at all, but there was no denying his presence had been faint and everyone had treated him lightly. But he had a protector in Naoya Tsukumi. When Kugimiya was with him, nothing could

touch him.

I guess Tsukumi was the helpful Doraemon to his hapless Noby in this scenario.

Mayu remembered the day she and Kugimiya, as class representatives, had gone to visit Tsukumi in the hospital for the first time. Lying in his hospital bed, Tsukumi had given them a happy "Hey, long time no see." When Mayu asked, "How are you feeling?" he'd laughed and said, "I'm in good spirits, at least!"

"With all the drugs they've got now, having leukemia isn't the immediate death sentence it used to be. I mean, a lot of people actually get better. In my case, they still don't really know which meds will work, which means the doctors are trying out different things on me. So yeah, it's still early days."

Despite the weight of his words, his tone was as laid-back as if he were talking about the game, or his favorite pitcher, as if the whole thing were happening to someone else. But one look at his face made the gap between his condition and his words clear. His hair was completely gone, his eyebrows and eyelashes had vanished. That big, solid frame that had once reassured his friends and startled his enemies had withered until he looked like a skinny boy again.

"Yeah, totally," Kugimiya chimed in. "Medicine's really advanced. Just take it easy. Sooner or later they'll find something that works for you."

"That's what I'm thinking, too. So for now, I wait. Hey, Kugimiya, speaking of waiting, isn't it about time you let me read your new stuff? Just lying in this bed all day is boring as hell. You've been writing, right? The new one. How's it coming?"

"Yeah, I guess I'm getting there, bit by bit."

"What's that supposed to mean? Get it done and bring it over, man!"

"Fine, fine, I'll get it done." Kugimiya said with a thin smile.

Mayu asked what they were talking about, and Tsukumi explained.

"Jealous, Kamio? I'm the first—and only—reader of Kugimiya's comics," Tsukumi said.

So that was it, Mayu realized. Everyone knew Kugimiya dreamed of becoming a manga artist; it was Tsukumi himself who had spread the word. But she had never imagined he was actually drawing entire stories and letting Tsukumi read them. According to their story, the very thing that

brought the two of them close in the first place was one of Kugimiya's manga. It was soon after they'd started junior high. One day they mixed up their school bags, and by chance, Tsukumi found the homemade manga Kugimiya had been carrying around in his bag.

"I mean, I was so shocked," Tsukumi said. "I could've sworn a pro had done it. Not just the art—the story was insanely good. Instant fan, on the spot. And think about it: someday, Kugimiya's going to be a top-selling manga artist for sure. When that happens, how cool will it be to say I'm his best friend?"

Kugimiya stood by the bed, a big embarrassed smile on his face. Maybe Tsukumi really had been Kugimiya's helpful Doraemon. Except, instead of offering his hapless Noby miraculous devices, he gave him something better: encouragement.

Mayu was lost in her memories when she heard a deep voice sound behind her.

"Hey, the whole gang's here!"

She turned to see Kashiwagi walk in through the door. Even in mourning clothes the night before he'd had a certain weight to him, but the cream-colored suit hanging over his broad shoulders tonight suited him even better. He looked like a well-dressed mafia boss.

"Hey Kamio, you holding up okay?" Kashiwagi asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks," she replied.

Behind Kashiwagi came Makihara, with Kugimiya following close behind. Last to make her grand entrance was none other than Ririka Kokonoe. She was wearing a camel-colored spring coat over a blue one-piece—both things you couldn't pull off without having real confidence in your figure, and it gave her an allure that her mourning clothes that morning couldn't quite manage. If you passed her on a Tokyo street, people might well turn to take a second look.

Ririka walked over, and Mayu rose from her chair.

"Ms. Kokonoe, thank you for everything this morning. You too, Kugimiya," she said. Ririka knit her brows sadly and shook her head.

"Not at all. Katsuki and I were just saying how glad we were that we got to see Sensei's face one last time. It's going to feel lonely from here on, I'm sure, but I hope you're able to get your strength back soon," she said, her delivery so smooth she might have been an actress reading lines from a

script.

"Thank you," Mayu said anyway.

"All right, first things first—let's sit down. Let me see, where would be good?" Kashiwagi gave the interior a quick once-over, then turned toward Kugimiya. "Sensei, where would you like to sit?"

Mayu blanched. Hearing a former classmate call another classmate "sensei" was just as bizarre as she thought it would be. And yet there wasn't a trace of awkwardness in his tone.

"I'm fine anywhere… Your call, Kashiwagi," Kugimiya said.

"Well then, why don't we stretch out in luxury along that wall over there. That okay with you, Numakawa?"

"Knock yourself out," Numakawa answered from behind the counter.

"Why don't you guys join us?" Kashiwagi called over to Haraguchi and the others at the counter.

"Ah, er, I guess?" Haraguchi half rose, wavering.

"I'll pass. I'm fine here," Momoko said, waving a hand. "You're going to talk work, right? I'd just be in the way."

"In that case, I'll stay put too," Haraguchi said, settling back onto his stool.

"I'm fine at the counter as well," Mayu said, and sat back down where she'd been.

Just then, she heard the chime of a new message from inside her bag. She took out her phone, looked at the screen, and her eyes widened. It was from Takeshi: "Go sit with Kashiwagi."

A sudden suspicion crossed her mind. She glanced down at the hood of the parka she was wearing and caught her breath. A little black butterfly was clipped to the edge of her hood. *The bug. He must have clipped it on when he tapped me on the shoulder just before I left the house.* Which meant he'd been listening in on everything they'd been saying up to now. Infuriating as it was, this wasn't the time to be angry. Mayu stood up.

"Actually, do you mind if I join you after all? I won't get in the way," she said to Kashiwagi.

"Of course. I mean, you're the star of the night, Kamio," he replied. "And Numakawa, everything's on me tonight. Put the tab from the counter over there on our bill too."

A few people clapped. "That's our big spender," Momoko called out.

Only Ririka Kokonoe wasn't smiling.

Mayu took the seat next to Ririka and a waitress brought over several bottles of beer and some glasses.

Kashiwagi immediately took one of the bottles in hand. "Well then, now that we've moved, Sensei, let me properly pour you a drink first," he said.

"Thanks," Kugimiya replied, holding out his glass. He, at least, didn't seem the least bit put off at being called Sensei.

Once everyone had a drink, Kashiwagi turned to Mayu with a solemn expression. "So, Kamio. I really am sorry for what you're going through. Believe me, I'm grieving too. I think we all are. At the very least, I want to pray for Mr. Kamio's peaceful rest. A moment of silence, then we raise our glasses to him."

At his words, the others each picked up their drinks. "All right, all quiet," Kashiwagi intoned. Mayu closed her eyes, fingers wrapped around her mug. For all that he was, their 'Big G' could really command a room.

"So, how is it, Kamio? Coming back to this town after so long—what do you think?" Kashiwagi asked once the small talk after their silent prayer had run its course and they had all toasted her father.

"What do I think?" she echoed back.

"I mean, it's kind of a sorry excuse for a town, am I wrong? It was never exactly booming, but it used to draw a decent number of tourists. Even this area had some life in it. And now? Look at the place. What kind of shopping street has more shuttered storefronts than open ones?"

All she could do in response was let out a noncommittal "Hmm."

"It's like that right now all over Japan, isn't it though? Until Covid settles down, I don't really see much anyone can do."

"Okay. But when it does settle down, do you really think the tourists will come back and this place will bounce back like before?"

"I don't know about that…" she said, wanting to add, *don't ask me.*

"Take Tokyo Disneyland, for example. They're still limiting how many people can get in, right? What do you think will happen once Covid's over and there's no more cap on attendance? I bet the crowds will come pouring back in just like before—no, even more than before. All the people who've been holding back will rush in. Right?"

"Yeah, that's probably true," she admitted.

"But what about here? Do you really see that happening in a town like

this? There are plenty of other tourist spots. Once Covid dies down and people can move around freely again, a low-key place like this is bound to get pushed to the bottom of the list."

"That might be so, but isn't it a bit much to compare us to Disneyland?"

Kashiwagi took the mask from his pocket and pulled it on. "Of course I know that. If Disneyland is the Tokyo Sky Tree, this town is just an acorn. And there are acorn-sized tourist traps just like it all over the country. Once the pandemic's over, that's when the acorns start lining up to see who's tallest. If this town wants to survive, it has to win that height contest. Which is why I'm saying we should stretch ourselves even a little now, and if that's not enough, then we stand on tiptoe."

Mayu was beginning to understand Kashiwagi's mask policy. He must have decided that when you were saying something important, you couldn't fuss over droplets. And for Kashiwagi, this was clearly life or death. Mayu was uncertain how even she should respond.

Kashiwagi took off the mask again and slipped it back into his inside pocket, then turned to Kugimiya with a smile. "So that's how it is, Sensei. I was hoping you might be willing to lend us a hand—for the sake of the town."

Kugimiya frowned a little and darted a glance at Ririka.

"We agreed we weren't going to talk about that tonight, remember?" Ririka said. "That's the only reason I accepted your dinner invitation."

"And we didn't talk about it during dinner, did we," Kashiwagi replied with a wry smile.

"Like I said before, Katsuki is at the most challenging point in his career right now. New projects are landing in his lap right and left. Dealing with those is almost more than he can manage."

"Which is exactly why I'm saying you can handle the traffic control, Ms. Kokonoe. That's what you're with him for, isn't it?" Kashiwagi said, an ingratiating tone in his voice that, combined with his hard-as-nails face, only made him seem creepier.

"Still, it's not as if I can shield him from all of it. I need you to understand that."

"I do, I do. Which is why we've been working up all kinds of plans that will trouble Sensei as little as humanly possible."

"What kind of plans? You did at least agree the theater idea was

impossible," Ririka said.

"Theater?" Mayu blurted before she could stop herself. "What's all that about?"

Ririka turned toward her. "There was an idea to turn *Gen-Lab* into a stage play and build a dedicated theater for it in this town. Ridiculous, right? There's no way you could adapt a work like that for the stage. For starters, who would you even cast?"

Mayu had to admit it sounded absurd, but she kept that to herself.

"I only brought that up as an example of the *kind* of thing we could do. I'm pretty sure I said that at the time. The real contender is tonight's idea," Kashiwagi said, flicking a glance at Makihara beside him. Makihara took out a tablet and set it on the table.

"We were thinking we might be able to use Aozora Hill," Kashiwagi said.

"Aozora Hill?" Ririka's voice jumped a notch. "That shabby, empty, run down park on the edge of town? What ever are you planning to do with that place?"

Aozora Hill was a park on the outskirts, the only feature its size nearby, but run down and forgettable in every other respect.

"Come on, at least hear Makihara out," Kashiwagi said with a laugh, waving his hand up and down.

"You know how they sometimes put up statues of manga characters in places connected to the work?" Makihara began. "We thought we could do something like that with *Gen-Lab*. But just statues would be a little dull, so instead of statues, we'd make properly painted figures. Life-sized versions of the characters, if you like. Make 'em out of one of those durable new materials. And we wouldn't just line up the main cast in a row—we'd recreate famous scenes. I'm convinced fans and your hardcore devotees would absolutely come out for it."

Ririka's lips relaxed ever so slightly, but her expression still read as nothing more than a faint smirk. "Maybe they'd come once," she said. "But once they've posted their photos on social media, that's it. No one's coming back a second time."

"That's why we'd update it from time to time," Makihara replied. "We'd gradually add new figures recreating new scenes to bring in the repeaters. And that's exactly why Aozora Hill is perfect. There's tons of space up there. If we keep adding famous scenes one after another, people will start

talking. How about it, Kamio?" Kashiwagi asked, turning to Mayu, his nostrils flaring. "For an acorn, it's a pretty big idea, don't you think?"

"We'd rename it, too: '*Gen'no Labyrinth* Park.' The city's in charge of the park now, but when we sounded them out quietly, they were pretty enthusiastic about the whole idea," Makihara added.

"Hey, don't go pushing things forward on your own like that," Ririka shot back, the corner of her eyes lifting in anger.

"He did say 'quietly,' didn't he? You know as well as I do this kind of thing needs groundwork. You're no amateur, Kokonoe," Kashiwagi said in a soothing tone, before turning back to Kugimiya. "So, Sensei, what do you say? Think you could look at this in a positive light?"

"What exactly is it you want me to do?"

"Katsuki!" Ririka snapped.

"In name, you'd be supervising," Kashiwagi said. "But basically you wouldn't have to do a thing. To be extreme about it, we'd just be borrowing your name. Leave it to us and we'll handle everything. We won't trouble you."

"No, Katsuki. Leave this to them, and they'll ruin *Gen-Lab*'s good name, I guarantee it," Ririka said.

"We'd never do that. Come on, we're not idiots," Kashiwagi protested, spreading his hands. "Why won't you trust us?"

"Because your best intentions aside, there's a high risk involved with projects like this. What happens if you roll out some grandiose '*Gen'no Labyrinth* Park' and it flops? If pictures of dirty, broken figures start spreading around, there's no way the original work comes out unscathed."

"We won't fail. I won't let it fail. I promise you that," Kashiwagi said, his gaze sharpening.

"And you expect me to entrust a precious work to a promise like that?"

"It's not even your—" Kashiwagi cut himself off mid-sentence.

Mayu knew exactly how he'd meant to finish it: *It's not even your work.* But saying that would sour the mood fast, and Kashiwagi understood he needed Ririka on his side if he wanted to win Katsuki over.

Still, Mayu felt Ririka had a point. Even if you lined a hilltop park in a rural town with figures from a hit anime, how many people would that really draw? Keeping all the figures in pristine condition sounded like a lot of work, too.

Ririka glanced briefly at her phone, then leaned in toward Kugimiya.

"Katsuki, shouldn't we be going? You were up early today—you must be tired."

"Ah, you're right. Yeah, maybe we should head out," he said, then looked across at Kashiwagi. "Thanks for dinner."

"Not at all," Kashiwagi said with a laugh, waving both hands. "Can I ask you out again sometime?"

"If we're not discussing *Gen-Lab*? Anytime," Ririka replied.

Kashiwagi pulled an exaggerated grimace. "I just can't win with you, Ms. Kokonoe."

"Come on, Katsuki, let's go," Ririka said, standing. "See you, Ms. Kamio."

"Thanks for today. You too, Kugimiya," Mayu said.

Kugimiya gave a small nod and, with Ririka practically pushing him from behind, they left the bar.

Kashiwagi stood to see them off, then sat back down and poured the rest of the beer from the bottle into his own glass. "Numakawa, another bottle!" he barked, slamming the empty down on the table.

"We're in trouble here. We've got to do something about that 'manager,'" Makihara muttered with a sigh as he slipped the tablet back into his bag.

"All we can do is keep at her. Judging from how they reacted tonight, we've got more of a pulse than when I floated the theater idea. Whatever Kokonoe may think, I'm sure Kugimiya sees the value in it," Kashiwagi said, loosening his tie and taking a swig of beer.

Mayu's phone chimed with another incoming message. She glanced at the screen: Takeshi again. She read it, and blinked. He was feeding her the exact line she ought to deliver right now.

"*Gen'no Labyrinth* Park—it really does sound like it'd be fun if you could pull it off," Mayu said, following her uncle's script word for word.

"Right?" Kashiwagi's brows twitched. "With the right promotion, there's no way it wouldn't draw crowds."

"If you've got the money—" Mayu began before she cut herself off with a little cough. "I mean… How are things on that front? I imagine you'd need a fair amount of funding," Mayu said.

"We'll manage. That's his job. Right?" Kashiwagi said, clapping Makihara on the shoulder.

“Once the plan’s solid, I think we can line up sponsors,” Makihara said.

“I see. That’s good, then. It’s just my uncle said something that’s been bothering me,” Mayu went on.

“Your uncle?” Makihara’s brows knit in puzzlement. “What did he say?”

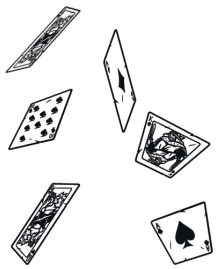
“Apparently my father consulted him. Something along the lines of a former student of his maybe being mixed up in some kind of money trouble. Don’t tell me he was talking about you two.”

The color drained visibly from Makihara’s face, and beside him Kashiwagi’s expression hardened.

“What is that supposed to mean, ‘money trouble’? I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Makihara said, his voice pitching a little high.

“I don’t know the details either. I only heard a snippet from my uncle. If it has nothing to do with you, then forget I said anything. Sorry. Please just ignore it.”

Kashiwagi grabbed the fresh bottle of beer that had arrived and poured it into his glass. He overdid it and white foam spilled over the rim. “Anyway,” he said firmly. “We don’t have a choice here. *Gen-Lab* is the first bit of good fortune this town without resources or any real selling point has ever had. This town is a single ship, and we’re all on board. If we don’t push hard now, the ship goes down and we all drown together.” He drained the glass in one gulp and wiped the foam from his mouth with the back of his hand.



19

Sunlight from the window had begun to reflect off the screen. “Hang on a second,” Mayu said toward the mic, then fiddled with the monitor angle for a while before finally turning the whole laptop ninety degrees and sliding herself over, cushion and all. A glance outside showed an evening sky blazing with sunset; the second half of the day had slipped by in no time.

“Okay, thanks, I’m good now,” she said, addressing the notebook computer, even though she knew there was no real need for her own face to be visible on the monitor.

“So, just for the system kitchen installation, the total comes to six hundred twenty-eight thousand yen,” said the woman on the screen, a junior colleague from work.

“Does that include the island counter?” Mayu asked.

“Um, no, it doesn’t. I was told we’d be using the existing island, so… is that not right?”

“That’s right, but we’ll have to take it out once. We’re replacing the kitchen flooring too, remember? I mean the labor for that.”

“Oh, that’s right. One moment.” The junior colleague glanced down at her papers. “Yes, it’s in there. Removal and reinstallation runs ninety-eight thousand yen.”

“Ninety-eight thousand,” Mayu repeated, jotting it down in her notebook. “The vent duct work for the range hood is all set, and we’ve finalized the material costs for the back cabinets. Is there anything left?”

“Just the shutoff valves, I think.”

“Make that six thousand yen. Plus tax,” Mayu said.

“Got it. That’s everything for the kitchen area. Can you see this?” Her colleague’s handwritten breakdown of the work appeared on the screen. The writing was tiny, but legible.

“That works. Can you organize it and email it to me? By the end of the day, ideally.”

“Will do.”

“Thanks.”

Mayu waited for the other woman’s face to vanish from the monitor, then let out a long sigh and snapped the laptop shut. She stared down at the spread-out plans, going back over what she’d jotted in her notes.

Her paid leave ran through today, but there were a few things she’d really wanted to clear off her plate, so she’d been working remotely since morning. This would enable her to slide back into the job smoothly next week. Sadly, there was no way she could stay fully remote forever. Architecture wasn’t the kind of work you could do without ever handling actual materials and components. The same went for explaining things to clients. You couldn’t very well hold samples of flooring and wallpaper up to a monitor and ask, “Which do you like?”

Politicians and bureaucrats who’d never done a productive day’s work in their lives were always saying everything should be done remotely, that we needed to push telework, but it only made her want to tell them: Try setting foot on an actual job site for once.

Out of nowhere, Momoko came to mind—or more precisely, her husband did. She’d heard before that employees at theme park companies sometimes had to stay on-site near a development project for a certain period. So when she heard that Momoko’s husband was on a solo posting, it hadn’t struck her as strange at all. She’d only felt sorry for how hard it must be.

But Takeshi’s comment—that Toa Land was moving to a remote-work-centered system and phasing out solo postings—stuck with her. If that was true, how was she supposed to interpret what Momoko had told her? She was still mulling it over vaguely when her phone started to ring. A call. She glanced at the display and stiffened: Kakitani again.

“Hello, Kamio speaking.”

“Sorry to bother you, this is Kakitani. Apologies for dropping in on you so suddenly last night.”

“It’s all right. Was there something else?”

“No, as a matter of fact, I’m not calling to talk to you, today, actually. Um, is Mr. Takeshi Kamio there with you now?”

“My uncle? I’m not sure. I actually haven’t seen him yet today.”

“I see. In that case, could you give me his phone number? There’s something I’d like to talk to him about.”

“Of course. Just a moment.”

It seemed the police hadn’t ever gotten her uncle’s contact information. She brought up his details on her phone and read off the number. Kakitani thanked her and hung up. Laying the phone on the table, Mayu tilted her head. What could Kakitani possibly want to talk to her uncle about?

It had been nearly midnight when she got back the night before. She’d thought about stopping by Takeshi’s room to check in, but decided it was too late. More than anything, she was exhausted. It had been an incredibly long day. This morning, after breakfast, she’d knocked on his door, but there was no answer. She had tried the knob for good measure and found it locked. Apparently he’d gone out somewhere. She considered calling him, but there was nothing so urgent she needed to say, so she had simply started in on work.

A little after noon, before going out to buy lunch, she checked his room again, but he still didn’t seem to be back. Where on earth had he gone?

Her mind never quite settled, and she drifted along with her work until her phone rang again. This time it was Takeshi. When she answered, the first thing he asked was, “You in your room?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you doing?”

“Working. Why? I assume Detective Kakitani called you.”

“I’m meeting him in thirty minutes. If you’re up for it, you can sit in.”

“You sure it’s okay if I’m there?”

“I already cleared it with him. He was a little reluctant, but he said okay. So? What’ll it be?”

“Thirty minutes? Okay. Where should I meet you?”

“Cafeteria, and make it twenty minutes.”

“Got it. Where are you, by the way?”

“In my room. I just got back. See you there.” Takeshi hung up before she had a chance to ask anything else.

Setting her phone down, Mayu put away her work files and reached for

her makeup pouch. Even if it was just to meet a detective, there was a bare minimum of getting ready she liked to do. Finishing her makeup, she went down to the cafeteria, where she found Takeshi talking with the proprietress. He was wearing his usual military jacket.

"Where have you been all morning?" she asked.

"Here and there. Had a few errands," he said.

That almost certainly meant he was hiding something, but over the past few days she had learned there was no point in pressing him. She let it drop.

"Looks like Detective Kakitani isn't here yet," Mayu said.

"We're not meeting him here. We'll be at the café across the way, Flute. I picked the spot," Takeshi replied, checking his watch.

"Oh, really? Won't there be other customers there at this hour?" It was just past five in the afternoon. Yesterday they'd gone after closing, but the place would surely still be open now.

"If business were that good, it'd be a blessing. Any customers they do have will be local retirees. If we sit off to the side and keep our voices down, no one's going to overhear us. All right, let's go."

Takeshi headed for the entrance and Mayu followed.

Just like the night before, Kakitani and Maeda were sitting side by side at the very back table, out of earshot had there been any other customers, but the place was empty. The white-haired owner murmured a soft "Welcome" from behind the counter.

The two detectives stood. "Thank you for coming on such short notice," Kakitani apologized.

"I'm more than willing to assist with the investigation," Takeshi said, pulling out a chair and casting an appraising look around the shop. "I see what Mayu meant. The place really does have a unique atmosphere. And I hear the coffee's quite good."

"I can whole-heartedly recommend it," Kakitani said with a nod.

"Well great, your treat, then," Takeshi said as he sat down. "What about you, Mayu?"

"I'll have one too," she said.

"Four coffees, then," Kakitani told the owner, raising four fingers.

A grim look on his face, Maeda flipped open his laptop. Maybe he didn't like seeing the other detective getting pushed around.

"So, what is it you wanted, exactly?" Takeshi asked.

“Yes, well,” Kakitani straightened up and cast a quick glance toward the owner. The old man had his back to them, grinding beans. At this distance, unless they started raising their voices, there was little chance he’d hear their conversation. “Last night Ms. Mayu told me that, when it came to financial matters, Mr. Eiichi Kamio would consult you. Is that correct?” Kakitani asked in a low, controlled tone.

“So that’s what this is about. It wasn’t all that often, but yes, from time to time. My brother was hopeless with that sort of thing. From what I gather, he used to let bank people talk him into buying financial products he didn’t understand at all. I don’t know the details, but I suspect he took some pretty heavy losses. My late sister-in-law used to complain about it—said he was so good-natured that when some banker he knew even slightly begged him, he couldn’t bring himself to say no, and it drove her up the wall to watch. Eventually, he must have realized he couldn’t go on like that forever, and that’s when he started coming to me,” Takeshi said, in a tone so plausible that even Mayu, who was sure he was full of hot air, found herself wondering if it might actually be true.

“That said,” he went on. “I’m not exactly some financial wizard myself, I just have a bit more experience getting by in the world than my brother did. Basically, I’m harder to cheat, that’s all.”

That, at least, was probably true. When it came to the art of the con, Uncle Takeshi was a professional.

“Has he consulted you about anything like that recently?”

“Not lately, no. Like I said, my brother was never really interested in making money through investments. He was very much the teacher type in his thinking. ‘Money is something you earn by working.’ He used to say it was dangerous for amateurs to jump into investing just because they were anxious about losing their salary after retirement. If they got burned, they’d be in trouble. In his case he didn’t have anyone to support, and I imagine he’d crunched the numbers and decided that as long as he didn’t live extravagantly, he could get by on savings and his pension.”

Whether it was true or not, this part of the story had the ring of plausibility. Her father had always been cautious that way.

“So you’re saying he hasn’t come to you with any money questions at all recently?”

“Not that I’ve heard. If I had to stretch, I’d say there was a call about

some repairs to the house about a month ago, but… oh, right." Takeshi broke off mid-sentence in a way that felt unnatural, his gaze drifting into space as if he were chasing down a thought.

"Mr. Kamio? Did something occur to you?"

"No, just something I remembered, but it didn't have anything to do with my brother's own assets. Forget it."

"What sort of thing was it? If it's not sensitive, could you tell us?" Kakitani pressed.

"It's not especially sensitive, but I can't see how it would have anything to do with the case. Feels like it'd be a waste of your time," Takeshi said.

"We have all the time we need. Please, if you don't mind?"

"Even so…" Takeshi hesitated, clearly milking the moment.

Just then, the coffee arrived. The owner carefully set four cups on saucers and placed one before each of them. The rich aroma alone raised expectations. Mayu picked up the little pitcher and poured in some milk.

"Don't be so quick with the milk," Takeshi chided. "With coffee this renowned, you always take it black, first, so you can savor the taste." He lifted his own cup to his nose and closed his eyes slightly as he inhaled the scent. "Mm, that's a wonderful aroma," he said, then took a sip, letting it slide slowly down his throat as if savoring every drop. "Just the right balance of acidity and body lingering on the tongue. I'd say the base is Colombian, yes?"

"Exactly so," the white-haired owner answered, clearly pleased. "I got my hands on some good beans and did a little blend of my own."

"The grind's perfect, too. Just enough bitterness," Takeshi said.

"You honor me, sir," the owner said.

"By the way, is smoking allowed here? I see an ashtray," Takeshi asked, pointing at the retro-styled glass ashtray at the edge of the table.

"Go right ahead," the owner answered.

"Much appreciated," Takeshi said, pulling a pack of cigarettes from inside his jacket. He slid a hand into another pocket, then paused and glanced at the detectives.

"My apologies, I forgot to ask. Do you mind? If secondhand smoke or the smell bothers you, I can refrain."

"No, it's fine. Please, go ahead," Kakitani replied.

"Good. The better the coffee, the more it makes me want a cigarette,"

Takeshi said, drawing his hand back out. He was holding an oil lighter.

Mayu had to work to keep her surprise off her face. In all the time since they had reunited, she hadn't seen him smoke once. Maybe the Marumiya and the funeral hall had simply been nonsmoking everywhere and he hadn't had the chance.

He put a cigarette between his lips and, with practiced ease, tried to spark the lighter. But only sparks flew; no flame. After two, three tries, he clicked his tongue and set the lighter on the table.

"Out of oil at last. I haven't topped it up in a while. I've been meaning to buy more, but kept putting it off. I checked at the house yesterday, thinking there might be a spare bottle lying around, but no dice," he said.

He stood and walked over toward the counter. "Excuse me," he called. "Do you have any matches?"

"One moment," the one said, taking something from beneath the counter. "Thanks," Takeshi said as he returned, holding a small matchbook.

"Absolutely classic, this place. These days, plenty of cafes don't even bother making branded matches anymore," Takeshi said.

He tore a match off the pack, struck it, and brought the flame to the end of his cigarette. The tip flared red. He shook the match out and dropped the spent stick into the glass ashtray.

"So you're a smoker," Kakitani said.

"Depending on the time and place. Only when I really want one. Don't lump me in with the types who light up out of habit, not even wanting it, and mindlessly puff out harmful smoke without tasting a thing," Takeshi replied.

"That oil lighter your usual go-to?" Kakitani asked, glancing at the lighter on the table.

"Yeah. It's cheap, but it has sentimental value. Bought it back when I was in the States," Takeshi said.

"Just now you said you thought there might still be some oil at the house. Would that have been something you left behind?"

"No, my brother's. I remembered seeing a few spare cans under the bookcase."

Kakitani shot Mayu a surprised look, then turned back to Takeshi. "Ms. Mayu told me Mr. Eiichi had quit smoking quite some time ago."

"Officially, yes. He certainly never smoked in front of people. But every

now and then he'd have one to clear his head. I saw him do it more than once," Takeshi said.

"Do you know if he still had a lighter?"

"An oil lighter, you mean?"

"That's right," Kakitani said.

"He used to have a few, I think, but I don't know about recently. Since the spare oil was gone, maybe he hadn't been using them lately," Takeshi said, sipping his coffee, taking a drag on his cigarette, and letting the smoke curl upward. He nodded several times in satisfaction. "Perfect. This is the very definition of relaxing in a café. Accept no substitutes."

Maeda whispered something into Kakitani's ear. Kakitani glanced at his laptop screen, gave a small nod, then turned his eyes back to Takeshi.

"About what you mentioned earlier…"

"Earlier? What was that now?"

"The money matter. You said Mr. Eiichi had talked to you about something," Kakitani prompted.

"Ah, that. Like I told you, it didn't concern my brother's own finances. Not really the kind of thing that needs to be trotted out here. And it involves someone else's privacy. Come to think of it, my brother specifically told me not to spread it around," Takeshi said, exhaling smoke as he nodded.

"Even so," Kakitani insisted, planting both hands on the table and leaning forward, "there's a chance it connects to the case. I give you my word, nothing will leak outside. Please, even in broad strokes, if you could tell us what kind of consultation it was?"

"Even so…" Takeshi pulled a pained face. "If I tell you the person's name, you're going to go straight to them for the details, aren't you? Then it'll be obvious I was the one who talked."

"We'll handle that part carefully. I promise this won't cause any trouble for you," Kakitani said with conviction. Beside him, Maeda bowed his head as well.

Holding the cigarette between his fingers, Takeshi lifted his gaze to a point above them and stayed that way for a moment. Then he stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray.

"In that case, how about this," he said. "I'm not keen on being the one to start talking. But if you ask the questions, I'm willing to answer yes or no."

"Er, Yes or no?" Kakitani echoed, clearly thrown.

“That’s right. How about it?”

Maeda silently tapped at his laptop keyboard. Kakitani’s eyes flicked to the screen for an instant, no doubt reading the sergeant’s take on all this, then returned to Takeshi. “The problem is, I don’t even know what to ask you about. At the very least, we need to know what *kind* of story this is,” he said.

Takeshi folded his arms, let out a thoughtful “Hmm,” and then said, briefly, “Inheritance.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said it’s about an inheritance. Someone died, and the surviving family had to inherit the estate. It’s about that. And that’s all you’re getting from me unprompted,” he said.

Mayu stared at her uncle from the side. Who could he talking about?

Maeda started typing again, and Kakitani’s eyes skimmed across the laptop screen. “What was the deceased person’s name?” he asked.

Takeshi made a weary face. “Were you not listening? I told you: I’m only answering yes or no.”

Maeda’s fingers flashed over the keys, and once more Kakitani’s gaze flicked back and forth to the monitor.

“Then, did this person die in April of last year?” he asked, the question suddenly far more concrete.

“Yes.”

The instant reply made Mayu jump.

“Was the cause of death an accident?”

“No.”

“Illness, then?”

“Yes.”

“The bereaved family approached Mr. Eiichi with some kind of request or inquiry about the inheritance?”

“Yes.”

“But Mr. Eiichi decided he couldn’t handle it himself, and that’s why he came to you?”

“Yes, though ‘came to me’ makes it sound bigger than it was. It was more like small talk. Or griping.”

“Griping… So you’d say it wasn’t a pleasant topic, for your brother?” Kakitani said.

“I’ll call that a yes, too. He said it weighed on him.”

“It weighed on him. From the sound of it, he was serving as some sort of go-between, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. No one wants to be the middleman when it comes to money trouble.”

“Did he tell you the specifics of that money trouble?”

“No. He just let a bit slip; I never heard the details.”

“I see. For example, did he say something like the deceased didn’t leave an estate at all, but a mountain of debt?”

“No.”

“Then that the heirs were fighting over the inheritance?”

“No again.”

“Or that the assets they were supposed to inherit had disappeared?”

After a brief pause, Takeshi gave a small nod. “Yes.”

Mayu heard Kakitani’s sharp intake of breath.

“Did your brother seem to know the direct cause of this trouble?”

“I don’t know how much he knew. I remember him saying something like, ‘I just hope it doesn’t blow up into a big fight.’ Beyond that, I couldn’t tell you exactly,” Takeshi replied.

“I see,” Kakitani murmured, then turned toward Maeda. The two exchanged a quick look. “You’ve been very helpful. Thank you for your cooperation,” Kakitani said with a bow.

“That’s all?”

“Yes. Thank you again,” Kakitani replied.

Takeshi lifted his cup and took a sip of coffee.

“I’ve still got some left. Since we’re here, I’d like to finish it,” he said.

“By all means, take your time,” Kakitani said.

Maeda closed his laptop and started to put it away, but Takeshi laid a hand on it from above to stop him.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Maeda said, speaking for the first time.

“You’ve barely touched your coffee. At least try tasting it. It’s an insult to the shop otherwise,” Takeshi said.

Maeda’s mouth twisted into a frown.

“Good call,” Kakitani said, lifting his cup and taking a sip. “Ah, it is delicious.”

“Never let a good cup go to waste,” Takeshi said.

“Quite right,” Kakitani agreed.

“Now, if I may,” Takeshi went on. “I’ve cooperated plenty with your investigation. Think you could answer a question or two from my side?”

Kakitani exchanged a quick glance with Maeda, then gave Takeshi a polite smile. “What would you like to ask?”

“It’s about my niece’s former classmates. She tells me you’re suspicious of them?”

“Oh, no,” Kakitani said, shaking his head and setting his cup down. “Nothing of the sort. It’s just that their names came up a lot among the people at the wake and funeral, so I asked who they were, that’s all.”

“Detective Kakitani,” Takeshi said, leaning forward and planting his elbows on the table, “we’re all adults here. Let’s skip the formalities and speak plainly, all right? Thanks to you, my niece has been tying herself in knots.”

“Huh?” Kakitani turned to her with a bewildered look. “Did we cause you some kind of trouble?” Mayu kept her eyes down and said nothing. This was clearly a ploy on her uncle’s part but she had no idea where he was going with it.

“Thanks to you, she can’t even trust her old classmates anymore,” Takeshi went on. “And can you blame her? Any one of them might be her father’s killer. She’s going to have to keep seeing them, and interacting with them, and yet she has no choice but to view every last one of them with suspicion. Don’t you feel the least bit sorry for her?”

“Like I said, I only asked for reference. We’re not treating them as suspects or anything of the sort,” Kakitani replied.

“In that case, can just tell us one thing: who has an alibi and who doesn’t,” Takeshi said.

“What?” Kakitani’s eyes flew wide.

“You’re going to talk to every classmate whose name came up anyway, aren’t you? In fact, you’ve probably already spoken with some of them. And when you did, you must have checked their alibis—don’t tell me you didn’t. You even asked me and Mayu where we were.”

“Well, yes, I imagine it will come to that…”

“Exactly. So just tell us the results. If she knows who had a solid alibi, she can at least relax around those people. Right?” he said, turning to her.

Prompted for agreement, Mayu nodded. It seemed wiser not to add anything and let her uncle handle this.

"I understand what you're asking, but sharing that is a bit…" Kakitani faltered.

"So you can't?"

"I'm very sorry," Kakitani said.

"That would qualify as an investigative secret," Maeda added coolly.

Takeshi leaned back in his chair. "Right. No sense pressing the point, then."

A look of relief crossed Kakitani's face. "Thank you for understanding."

Takeshi nodded. "We'll just have to handle it ourselves. I'll go to each person directly and ask where they were."

Both detectives stared at him, aghast. "No, no, no," Kakitani said, half rising from his seat and fluttering his hands. "That would be a disaster. Please don't do that."

"Why not? It's got nothing to do with you," Takeshi said.

"It would interfere with the investigation," Maeda cut in. "When we approach people connected to a case, we have to prepare properly. It's crucial not to put them on their guard. If you start acting on your own, all that effort goes to waste."

"Hmm. I'm missing the part where that's my problem," Takeshi said.

Maeda's brows bunched up furiously. "You don't care if we never catch the culprit?"

"Not if the price is sacrificing the happiness of the living," Takeshi shot back.

"That's a bit dramatic, isn't it?" Maeda said.

"I'm sorry, what did you say? Say that again." Takeshi said, half rising from his chair.

"Let's all calm down," Kakitani said quickly, flustered. "Okay? Let's calm down and drink our coffee."

Takeshi sat back down, took a deep breath, then leaned over the table again.

"Let's make a deal. You give us the alibis of everyone questioned, and I won't repeat it to anyone. Of course I don't want to do anything that might interfere with your investigation. That's a promise. I want you to catch the man who killed my brother as soon as possible. But it's hard watching my

sweet niece suffer like this. Detective Kakitani, Sergeant Maeda, I'd really like you to understand that," he said, his tone growing thick and cloying toward the end.

The detectives traded a helpless look. "That's not something we can decide on our own…" Kakitani said with a helpless shrug.

"I figured. Which is why, Sergeant Maeda, you're going to call Inspector Kogure," Takeshi said, pointing at him.

"Kogure… sir?" Maeda's face tightened.

"That's right. If you're not comfortable asking, I can negotiate with him myself, like I did at the wake."

"No, that won't be necessary," Maeda said quickly.

"Then I'll leave it to you."

With a sigh and a decidedly reluctant expression, Maeda stood, took his phone from his pocket, and left the shop.

Kakitani drained his coffee with a sour look and set the cup down.

"What a troublesome bereaved relative I must be to you," Takeshi said.

"No, not at all…"

"Don't dodge. It's written all over your face. But, Detective Kakitani, try putting yourself in Mayu's place, forced to suspect her own classmates. You don't think that's hard on her?"

"I do. Yes, I believe I understand that," Kakitani said.

"Do you, really? She tells me you were one of my brother's students. And yet you didn't show your face at the wake or the funeral, not even to light a single stick of incense," Takeshi said.

The jab clearly caught Kakitani off guard; his agitation showed plainly. "Well, that's because of my position," the detective said. "The job has to come first. If I showed up, it might have caused confusion at HQ…"

"Always watching prefectural HQ's mood, that it? And yet, you're able to do that and understand how Mayu feels at the same time? Hmm?" Takeshi said.

Kakitani said nothing, staring down at the table. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it to his temple.

Maeda returned. "When approaching related parties, we have to proceed carefully. We can't just go to everyone at once. And even if someone claims an alibi, we need to corroborate it. Our position is that we can't provide you with uncertain information," he said.

“In other words, you’re saying that if and when you *do* have solid information, you can share it, but it will take some time,” Takeshi said.

“That’s right. On the condition that you absolutely do not repeat it to anyone,” Maeda replied.

“I understand,” Takeshi said.

Still standing, Maeda began slipping his laptop back into his bag. He clearly had no intention of touching his coffee. Kakitani also rose to his feet.

“There’s one more thing I’d like to know,” Takeshi said, raising his index finger. “Last Saturday my brother went up to Tokyo. Who was he meeting at the Tokyo Kingdom Hotel? You’ve figured that out by now, haven’t you? I’m sure it has nothing to do with the case, so surely you can tell me.”

The two detectives looked at each other. “We don’t have that figured out just yet,” Maeda replied.

“Really?”

“Even if we did,” Kakitani said, “we wouldn’t be able to tell you.” Maeda started, shooting a sharp look at the other detective, but Kakitani went on, seemingly oblivious. “It’s a privacy concern.”

“Fine,” Takeshi said. “By the way, how long were you planning to keep a watch posted in front of our house? The neighbors are starting to notice. I’d appreciate it if you could pull them off soon.”

“I’m sorry, but we’d like to keep that up a little longer,” Kakitani said politely. “In exchange, we won’t insist on being present every time either of you goes inside anymore. We do ask that you stay out of the study as much as possible. And if you need to take anything out of the house, we’d appreciate it if you could mention it to the officer on watch.”

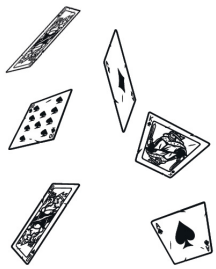
“Well, that’s a hassle, but fine. We’re planning to go over tomorrow morning. Let your watcher know,” Takeshi said.

“Understood. Are you going to pick something up?”

“My niece wants to get her class’s graduation essay collection. For the reunion on Sunday,” he said. Mayu had no memory of ever saying any such thing, but she kept quiet.

“All right. I’ll inform the officer on duty,” Kakitani said.

“Thanks. Come on, Mayu, let’s get going,” Takeshi said, standing up.



20

THE MOMENT THEY GOT back to the room at the Marumiya, Takeshi shrugged off his jacket and hurried into the washroom. Mayu peeked in to find him brushing his teeth. She shook her head and busied herself unpacking a plastic bag onto the table: convenience store bento box and bottled tea. She had decided to follow her uncle's lead and make that dinner for the night. She felt bad for the proprietress, but thinking ahead, she knew she had to start tightening her purse strings a bit.

As she peeled the wrap off her bento box, her gaze drifted idly to a corner of the room where a paper bag sat. She looked inside and found it stuffed with manga—the entirety of *Gen'no Labyrinth*, it seemed, along with some of Kugimiya's other titles.

"There. I finally feel human again," Takeshi said, emerging from the washroom.

"Uncle Takeshi, what's with these comics?"

"What do you think? I bought them. Used, of course," he said.

"You went out just to get these?"

"That's not all," he said, sitting cross-legged and pulling a spaghetti with meat sauce bento box and a canned highball from his own bag—his dinner, apparently. He cracked the can first, took a sip, and twisted his mouth in dissatisfaction. "Impossible to get that tar taste out of the mouth. This is why I hate smoking."

"I've never seen you smoke before," Mayu said.

Takeshi thought for a moment, then set his canned highball on the table. He pulled his discarded jacket toward him, reached into the inner pocket, and took out a pack of cigarettes. Flipping the lid open, he slid one out and

looked at her. “You got a hundred-yen coin on you?”

“I think so,” she said.

“Lend it to me.”

She took her wallet from her bag and placed the coin on the table. Takeshi picked it up in his left hand and slowly brought the cigarette in his right hand close to it.

When he next lifted his face, cigarette between his lips, Mayu jumped. The cigarette was sticking clean through the coin.

“Wait—how?”

Still holding the cigarette in his mouth, Takeshi pinched the coin between his fingers, slid it off the cigarette, and set it on the table. Mayu snatched it up at once, but there wasn’t so much as a pinhole in it.

“Do it again,” she said.

“Amateurs always say that,” Takeshi replied, rolling his eyes. He put the cigarette back in the pack and tossed the whole thing into the trash.

“As a magician, now and then, I have to whip out a little trick like that, so I at least need to be able to smoke,” he said.

“Please, just one more time,” Mayu begged, putting her hands together.

“Annoying.”

“You can keep the hundred yen,” she offered.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Also, priorities,” Takeshi said. “We should eat.” He reached for the spaghetti, peeled off the plastic wrap, opened the lid, and began eating with the flimsy plastic fork. Even the ordinary movement of his hands somehow looked like sleight of hand.

Mayu snapped apart a pair of chopsticks and opened her bento box: fried chicken on rice. The calories listed on the label were on the high side. Fine for tonight, she thought, but if she kept eating like this she’d put on weight in no time.

“Uncle, can I ask you something?”

“About Kenta?”

She jolted. “How did you know?”

“You’ve got that look, like you want something you don’t have,” he said.

It grated on her nerves, but she swallowed it. “Did you, um, look at his phone?”

“His phone? Why?”

“Because you love peeking at people’s phones,” she said.

“Don’t misunderstand me. I only pulled information from the detectives’ phones because I needed to know how the investigation was going. It’s not some hobby of mine,” Takeshi replied.

“So you haven’t looked at Kenta’s phone.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Then, never mind,” she said, and went back to her bento.

Takeshi ate his spaghetti in silence for a while, then suddenly stopped. “Seems like he’s popular,” he said.

The pickled vegetables caught in her throat and she almost choked. She grabbed her bottle of green tea and gulped. “Kenta told you that himself?”

“He didn’t have to. You can tell from the way he talks. He’s dated more than one or two women,” Takeshi said.

“So? I’ve heard as much,” Mayu admitted.

“And that’s a good thing,” Takeshi said. “It means he chose you after careful testing.”

“Is that how it works?” she said, shaking her head despite herself.

“What about you? Is Kenta the result of careful testing from a long line of candidates?”

“It’s not like I’ve gone out with tons of guys. But I did think it through,” she said.

“Fair enough. Not that it matters to me,” he said, and went back to his spaghetti. When he finished, he tossed the empty container and cracked open a second highball.

“All right, time to review our little exchange with the detectives,” he said.

“Good idea,” Mayu said, clearing away her own bento box. She’d meant not to overeat, but had ended up polishing the box off. “First, question: why did you smoke in front of the detectives if you don’t like smoking?”

“We’ll get to that later. Let’s start with what they wanted. Just like we hoped, they took the bait and tried to confirm exactly what kind of financial questions my brother had asked me,” Takeshi said.

“Right…what’s all this about an inheritance?”

“That I do need to explain,” Takeshi said. “This morning, I went to look at the Moriwaki place.”

“Atsumi Moriwaki’s house? You met her?”

“I’m not that brash. I just looked at the house. It’s in a residential area, quite an impressive place. Which makes sense, because the husband, Kazuo

Moriwaki, was a sharp businessman, sat on the boards of several big companies, and apparently lived in America until nine years ago. After he came back to Japan, he returned to his hometown. On paper he stayed involved with a few companies as an adviser, but in practice he was retired. His name Kazuo uses the characters for ‘peace’ and ‘husband.’”

“Who told you all that?”

“Neighbors. Kazuo Moriwaki seems to have been quite the gentleman—no one had a bad word to say. He was active in the neighborhood association, too.”

“You pretended to be a detective again, didn’t you? What would you do if you ran into a real one?”

“Nothing. I’m not doing anything wrong. And I never once said I was a detective. If the people I talk to jump to that conclusion on their own, that’s their mistake.”

He had obviously nudged them into that assumption, but pointing that out felt useless.

“And from the way you’re talking, I gather that Kazuo Moriwaki has already passed away?”

“He died last April. Cause of death was pneumonia from Covid,” Takeshi said.

“Oh…right,” Mayu murmured. That was right around when hospitalizations and deaths had been at their peak.

“Putting all that together, I figured out the ‘father’s bank account’ Atsumi mentioned on the voicemail referred to her inheritance,” he said.

“Ah, so that’s why you told Detective Kakitani it was about inheritance. But how did you know the assets had vanished?”

“I didn’t know that until Kakitani said it,” Takeshi said.

“What? But you were the one who said ‘yes.’”

“Because that’s the signal he gave me.”

“Signal?” She frowned and tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

“Remember the two questions right before that? First, he asked if the deceased had left a mountain of debt. Second, if there was a dispute over the inheritance,” Takeshi said.

“Right. And you said no to both.”

“Because Kakitani’s eyes flicked up to the left,” he said.

“I’m sorry, his eyes did what?”

“Generally speaking, when people are talking while *imagining* something, their eyes tend to go up to the left. When they’re recalling facts, they tend to go up to the right. Roughly put, left for lying, right for the truth.”

“Seriously?” Mayu rolled her eyes left and right. “I should try that on someone.”

“It only happens for an instant, so unless you’re used to watching for it, you’ll miss it. And I did say ‘generally’—there are always exceptions. But after talking with Kakitani several times, I was convinced the rule applied to him,” Takeshi said.

“So that’s what was going on,” she said.

“And I was watching Maeda, too,” Takeshi went on. “That young detective’s body reacts immediately depending on how interested he is. When he doesn’t care about the topic, the muscles in his fingers on the keyboard go slack, but the moment it’s something that matters, they tense up. His blinking also drops off sharply. When Kakitani mentioned the missing assets, the signals from both of them were a clear yes.”

Mayu studied her stubbled uncle’s face.

“What?” he asked.

“I was just thinking you could use all that talent for something better. Like actually helping people,” she said.

“What’s it to you? In any case, thanks to that, I got the rough outline of what’s going on. The police have probably already gone to see Atsumi Moriwaki and asked why she called my brother, what her message on his voicemail meant, and so on.”

Atsumi’s answer was probably that when she checked her late father’s bank account last year, she found a large sum of money missing, so she asked my brother to inquire about the reason from the bank rep. Why ask my brother to do that? Because her father had said the rep was someone my brother introduced him to—or something like that.”

“And the bank rep was Makihara?”

“If you think about it that way, it all fits. When the police heard that story, they sent Kakitani and the others to me to accomplish two goals. One was to verify whether Atsumi’s story was true, and the other was to check whether my brother knew the reason for the disappearance of the deposit from the account or where the money had gone.”

“If that’s the case, then the police failed at both goals. Because you really didn’t know anything about it.”

“True, but Atsumi’s story is probably true. I see no reason for her to lie about it, at least. The question is whether my brother knew the reason for the deposit’s disappearance. Even if he didn’t know, he might have had some inkling. After all, he was fairly knowledgeable about financial matters.”

“Huh?” Once again, Mayu let out a cry. “Didn’t you just tell the detectives that he was clueless about that stuff?”

“That was the bait that led them to tell me all about what happened. Anyway, I dabbled in stocks when I was younger, so it’s not like I’m completely uninterested in financial planning.”

“I had no idea.”

“That was in the past. Lately, with the bad economy and all the risk involved, I’ve grown more conservative. In any case, if my brother had noticed the reason for the missing deposit, the whole story would turn very ominous in a hurry. There has to be someone who doesn’t want that fact revealed.”

The moment she grasped the meaning of Takeshi’s words, a chill ran down her spine. “You mean that person’s the one who killed Dad?”

“At the very least, the police are considering that possibility.”

“No way... So, Makihara?”

“If what we just said really is the truth, then there’s no way he’s uninvolved. Think back to how Makihara reacted last night at our classmate’s bar.”

“You mean when we were talking about how Dad supposedly went to you for advice, because one of his former students was mixed up in money trouble?”

“How did Makihara react when he heard that? From what I could hear over the bug, he sure didn’t sound calm.”

“He definitely acted a little weird, but...”

It couldn’t have been him, she started to say, then stopped. She remembered how Takeshi had pointed out that she’d probably say that about anyone, no matter who the culprit was.

“If that line of suspicion is on the mark, the police will uncover it before long. All we can do is sit back and watch how it plays out.” Takeshi said

coolly, taking a sip of his highball.

Mayu let out a sigh and drank from her tea bottle. A classmate as the killer—she had wanted to reject the idea outright, but maybe she needed to brace herself. Even so, she thought, thinking back to the bar the night before, could Makihara really have been sitting there calmly talking about Gen'no Labyrinth Park in front of her, all the while having her father's blood on his hands?

Something gleamed where it had slipped out of the pocket of Takeshi's discarded jacket: an oil lighter.

"That lighter. Have you had it a while?"

"This?" Takeshi picked up the lighter. "Only if you consider a day to be a while. Did you know there isn't a single half-decent hardware store in town? I had to go to the building supplies store in the next town over to pick it up while I was out buying manga. Towns out in the sticks where the small shops are dying off really do need those big-box places."

So the story about having bought it back in America had been a lie after all.

"You still haven't told me why you smoked in front of the detectives."

"Last night, when you met Kakitani, he asked you something odd, remember? Whether my brother smoked, and what kind of lighter he carried."

"Oh, right. I did think it was a weird question. What about it?"

"A detective never asks anything without a reason. The likeliest explanation is that they found some trace of a lighter at the scene or on the body."

"A trace of a lighter?" Mayu frowned. "What does that even mean? Like a scorch mark?"

"Probably not that. I know it's a strange way to put it, but there's no better term. If they'd found an actual lighter, they would have just shown it to you and asked whether it was your dad's. So what they found wasn't the lighter itself, but some sign that a lighter had been there. My guess: lighter fluid. This lighter was just a prop so I could see how the detectives would react." Takeshi snapped the lid of the oil lighter open and closed it with a click.

"And Kakitani really jumped on it, didn't he. He asked you if Dad still used an oil lighter."

“That was what convinced me. It’s possible some of the oil got on my brother’s clothes. Even after the fuel in an oil lighter evaporates, the smell lingers. Forensics would pick up on it.”

Mayu pressed a hand to her cheek, letting her imagination run. “So the killer had an oil lighter, and in the struggle with Dad, some oil accidentally leaked—that kind of thing?”

“That’s one possibility. Who smokes, among your old classmates?”

“I’m not sure. No one lit up at Numakawa’s place last night, but that doesn’t mean anything. There might be someone.”

“These days, it’s pretty standard not to smoke in restaurants.”

“True. By the way, I want to ask you something: is it really true that Dad still smoked from time to time?”

“Of course he didn’t.”

“I knew it.” Mayu glared at him. “I’m finally starting to see how you operate, Uncle Takeshi.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of yourself. I’m not that easy to read.”

“One thing’s certain—you’re a master at getting people to talk. You handled that last bit perfectly, too.”

“You mean about the person my brother met in Tokyo?”

“Yeah. Kakitani wouldn’t give us a name, but at least we learned they’d identified him. And that, apparently, they think he has nothing to do with the case.”

“That wasn’t something I dragged out of Kakitani. He practically handed it over on purpose. Maeda didn’t look thrilled about it, though.”

“On purpose? Why would he do that?”

“Who knows. Maybe it was his way of burning a stick of incense? An offering to the deceased.”

Mayu thought about that. She found herself reassessing Kakitani, just a little.

“Well then, since the strategy session’s over, I think I’ll spend tonight with some reading.” Takeshi slapped both thighs, stood up, and pulled several volumes of *Gen’no Labyrinth* out of the paper bag against the wall.

“You’re not seriously planning to read all of those now, are you?”

“Is that a problem?”

“That’s not what I mean, but it’s going to be pretty rough, you know.”

“This manga might end up putting my hometown on the map. Even if it’s

a bit of work, it's worth reading." Leaning back against the wall, Takeshi opened a volume of the comic. The cover showed it was volume one. So back when he'd been shamelessly buttering up Kugimiya at the funeral, he hadn't read a single page.

"Okay, I'm going back to my room," Mayu said, getting to her feet.

"We're heading out first thing tomorrow morning, so be ready."

"Where are we going?"

"Weren't you listening? I told Kakitani we'd go to the house."

"That was for real? I figured it was just more of your smooth talk."

"'Smooth talk' makes it sound cheap. Think of it as finely-honed conversational technique."

"Saying we're going to pick up the class essay collection was a lie, right? What's the real reason?"

"I'll tell you when we get there."

"Hmmm... All right. Well, good night. Enjoy your reading."

Still staring down at the manga, Takeshi lifted his right hand in a small wave.

She had just gotten back to her room and was taking off her makeup when the phone rang. It was Kenta.

"Heard you had a remote meeting?" he said.

"Yeah. There was something I really wanted to get wrapped up by tonight. Thanks to that, I probably won't have to change my schedule for next week."

"You going into the office next week?"

"That's the plan. Why?"

"Just wondering if you were thinking of working out there for a while."

Still holding the phone to her ear, Mayu let out a laugh. "Not a chance. That'd be impossible."

"You think so? Going out there this time, I realized it's actually a really nice, quiet town. You've got tons of old classmates around, too. I was starting to worry you might not want to come back to Tokyo."

"No way. I'm only stuck here because there's a mountain of little chores to deal with. I still have to meet with the police, for one thing."

"I see," Kenta said, his voice dropping. "The investigation moving forward at all?"

"I don't know. I'm leaving it to the police, and they aren't saying much."

“Right. Yeah. I guess that’s all you can do.”

“I try not to think about it.”

“Yeah, probably for the best. Hey, should I come out there? It’s Saturday tomorrow, so I could head over first thing in the morning.”

“I’d love it if you came, but, maybe it’s not such a great idea yet. I really do have a ton of little things to take care of, and I don’t think we’d get much time to actually talk.”

“I see. Well, let me know when things ease up. I’ll come right away.”

“Thanks.”

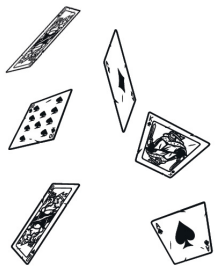
She hung up and a sigh slipped out before she could stop it.

She did want Kenta to come. But given how things stood, having him here would only cause trouble. She had no intention of telling him about the unofficial investigation she and Takeshi were running.

A nice, quiet town—she turned Kenta’s words over in her mind.

What would Kenta think of the town if the killer turned out to be one of her former classmates? What would his parents think? What kind of savage, lawless backwater gave rise to someone who could seem perfectly ordinary for years, then suddenly murder the teacher who’d guided them through junior high?

In truth, though, it was a good town, a no-name town. A plain, honest place most people would go their lives without visiting.



21

THE NEXT MORNING, MAYU was eating breakfast in the dining room when Takeshi shuffled in and dropped into the seat across from her. The exhaustion was plain on his face. There were dark circles under his eyes.

"Don't tell me you stayed up all night?"

Takeshi rolled his neck in a wide circle and kneaded his shoulder with his right hand. "Not all night. I got maybe an hour of sleep."

"What, you actually read through the whole series?"

"Of course. That ending really got me. I never imagined he'd come back from the virtual world and fight the enemy in the real one with all four limbs gone. That's crazy, in the best way."

Takeshi's breakfast arrived—it was included in the room rate. Unusually for him, though, he didn't reach for his chopsticks right away, just kept sipping his tea. "Still," he murmured, cradling the teacup in his hand, "as much as I think *Gen'no Labyrinth* is a masterpiece, Kugimiya's early work holds up, too. His debut's practically a little classic in its own right."

"You read that too?"

"Yeah, it's called *My Other Me Is a Ghost.* The setup is that the protagonist carries the soul of his twin brother who was never born, so the brother appears as a ghost and can move back and forth between this world and the next. The protagonist teams up with his ghost brother to overcome all sorts of hardships and solve problems. It's fun. One of those heartwarming stories that leaves you feeling good at the end."

"I don't think I've ever heard you praise anything," Mayu noted.

"You can see how that was the book that launched Kugimiya's

professional career. For a while after that, he kept putting out stories in the same vein, but they never really got much attention. So he finally took the plunge and completely overhauled his image, shifted to a totally different tact—and it worked. He is unmistakably a great talent."

Mayu shook her head. One night, and her uncle had turned into a Kugimiya superfan.

"I guess Tsukumi was right."

"Tsukumi—your classmate who died?" Takeshi finally reached for his chopsticks. "What exactly did he say?"

"He predicted that Kugimiya would make it as a manga artist."

Mayu gave him a quick rundown of the relationship between Kugimiya and Naoya Tsukumi back in junior high. She added that while her classmates liked to refer to Kashiwagi and Makihara as the bully Big G and the slippery Sneech she'd always thought of Tsukumi as the helpful Doraemon to Kugimiya's hapless Noby.

"Doraemon, huh?" Takeshi started in on his breakfast, but his expression didn't suggest he was tasting any of it.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Just that there was one more important character in *Doraemon*. The girl."

"Shizuka, right. Noby's dream girl."

"The attractive woman we saw with Kugimiya—does she fit that role?"

"Kokorika, you mean?" Mayu shrugged. "Mmm, I don't know about that. At the end of the day, Shizuka was always really in Noby's corner."

"You're saying Kokorika isn't?"

"It's different. She's cheering him on, sure, but it feels calculated, like she's just lying in wait for some bigger project tied to *Gen'no Labyrinth* to come along from somewhere. Back in junior high, she didn't even register Kugimiya as existing."

"What about Kugimiya? Does he have feelings for Kokorika? Haraguchi seemed to think so."

"Oh, I'm sure he does. Otherwise he wouldn't be so quick to do whatever she says."

Takeshi bobbed his chin in a nod, then went back to his breakfast.

After they finished eating, they went back to their respective rooms to get ready. Takeshi had told her to bring the big bag she'd used for the funeral,

so Mayu slung her tote over her shoulder and stepped out.

They called a taxi and rode together to the house. As always, a uniformed officer was standing watch by the gate. But it seemed Kakitani had already spoken to him; when he saw them, the officer gave a small bow and stepped aside.

Once in the study, Takeshi headed straight for the bookshelves. Mayu was surprised to see him beeline for the school-related files. She'd assumed when he told the detectives he was interested in those for the reunion, it had just been another ploy.

He pulled out one of the files: it was a sheaf of submissions for the class writing collection for the forty-second class—Mayu's year. "Put this in the bag."

The file he handed over was satisfyingly heavy in her hands. On manuscript paper it would easily run over two hundred pages, so that was only to be expected. When she slipped it into the tote, the strap bit into her shoulder.

"Let me ask you something," Takeshi said. "Don't they usually print these collections and hand them out to every student?"

"Yeah. They handed them out on graduation day."

"You still have yours?"

"I don't remember throwing it out, so it's probably still on the bookshelf in my room."

"By 'your room,' you mean your old room upstairs on the second floor here?"

"Right, my old room."

"Then go look for it. If you find it, stick that in the bag, too."

"What do you even want it for? It's the same as what's in that file, just typeset and printed. I mean, if you're taking mine, you don't need this heavy file, do you?"

"If I wanted your advice, I'd have asked for it."

"Fine," Mayu said brusquely and was about to leave the room when he stopped her with a "Hold it a second." Turning back, she saw Takeshi pulling another file off the shelf.

Mayu stepped around to look at the cover of the file. It read: "Thirty-Seventh Class."

"Why are you looking at that year's collection?" she asked, but Takeshi

didn’t answer.

With a frown, he flipped quickly through the pages until his hand stopped. “I knew it. Just like I thought.” A grin flickered across his face.

“What are you talking about? Hurry up and tell me.”

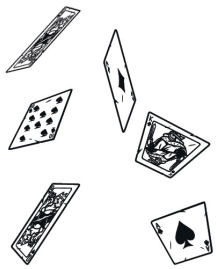
Takeshi snapped the file shut and turned toward her. His smile was gone, replaced by a grim light in his eyes. “This is a problem; the kind I’d usually rather stay out of, but if we’re going to get to the bottom of things, I don’t have that luxury.”

“What are you even saying? Stop being so cagey and explain already.”

Takeshi let out a small sigh before speaking. “There’s something I want you to do, Mayu.”

“What kind of something?”

“A bit of a tricky mission. If you don’t feel up to it, you can turn it down and I’ll think of another way.”



22

White walls, a red roof, a lawn of neatly laid grass. Had Momoko's family home always been this stylish? Tilting her head at the thought, she pressed the intercom button. Before long, a bright voice answered, "Hellooo."

"It's Mayu. Hi."

"Come on in, I'll open the gate," Momoko replied.

Mayu stepped onto the property. The front door opened, and Momoko appeared in a sweatshirt. At her feet stood a little boy in shorts. Mayu couldn't stop a delighted "Wow!" from slipping out.

"Hi there!" she said, crouching a little. "Nice to meet you."

The boy's expression turned wary and he ducked behind his mom's jeans.

"What do you say? Aren't you going to say hello?"

Prompted by Momoko, the boy managed to get some kind of words out. Mayu couldn't catch what he said, but she answered with a cheerful, "Thank you!" anyway.

They showed her into the living room, a bright space facing the garden. Mayu had come over a few times back in junior high, but she had no memory of the room at all. When she said so, Momoko laughed and said, "No wonder! We remodeled three years ago. Dad hit retirement and suddenly announced he wanted a more comfortable house. A good third of his retirement payout vanished into this place. Then he panicked and said he'd better keep working after all, so now he's rehired at a subsidiary. Dumb, right?"

"Your mom works too, doesn't she? Every day?"

"Part-time, these days, just three or four days a week. A nursing home in

the next town. Sorry, by the way. She was supposed to be home today, but they called her in at the last minute."

"It's fine, don't worry about it. I'm just glad I got to come over again after so long."

Mayu had contacted her to ask if they could meet because there was something she needed to talk about. Momoko had said she had time, but her father would be out golfing and her mother at work, so she asked if it was all right to bring her son along. If they met at a café or somewhere outside, they'd be too busy watching the child to really talk. Mayu had suggested she come to the house instead, and Momoko had welcomed the idea.

The boy, Mitsugu, was apparently turning three this year. He had a cute face with big, bright eyes. Back inside, he was busying himself with a set of building blocks In the corner of the living room.

"Mayu, can I get you some coffee or tea? Or—" Momoko tipped an invisible glass to her lips and gave a mischievous grin. "Should we go for beer? It's not even noon yet, but still."

"I mean, I'm fine with that."

"Beer it is, then!"

"Sorry I didn't bring anything. I wanted to, but I couldn't think of anything good. Bringing local souvenirs seemed kind of pointless."

"You really don't have to worry about that. Everyone knows there aren't any decent shops in this town."

Light on her feet, Momoko went into the kitchen and came back with two cans of beer and two glasses, plus a small plate of nuts arranged on a tray.

They each poured their beer into their glass and took a sip. Momoko smiled. "Day drinking on a Saturday is the best, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is."

"Oh, right. I have an update. Tomorrow's reunion—the memorial for Tsukumi—is off."

"Really? How come?"

"His mother asked us to cancel. She said she was grateful, but there might be others who've passed away over these last ten-plus years, and it wouldn't feel right to have only her son remembered."

"Right…maybe she was thinking about my dad, too."

"Could be," Momoko said, not denying it. "So, what did you want to talk about? I've actually been wondering."

“Yeah.” Mayu set her glass down and looked straight at her friend. “I have something to ask you. About Saturday, March sixth. Last Saturday.”

“Saturday?” There was a subtle flicker in Momoko’s eyes.

“That day, my dad went to Tokyo and met someone at the Tokyo Kingdom Hotel. You know who he was meeting, don’t you?”

The smile vanished from Momoko’s face. She took a deep breath, her chest rising and falling. “You hear that from the police?”

Mayu shook her head. “The detectives wouldn’t tell me. They said it was a privacy issue. But my uncle figured it out.”

“Your uncle?” Momoko frowned, puzzled.

“Takeshi. He’s eccentric, but he’s smart,” Mayu said, recalling their exchange in the study. Takeshi’s reasoning had been perfectly coherent.

“Who was the person my brother secretly met in Tokyo? Let’s call that person X. Since they’d arranged to meet, there had to be either an incoming call from X or an outgoing call to X on my brother’s phone or landline. Even if the number wasn’t saved at first, my brother, always fastidious, would have saved it on his phone by the day of the meeting, just in case something happened. There’s no way the police would miss that, so X’s name should appear on the Maeda list. But everyone on that list was here in town on March sixth. There wasn’t a single name that belonged to someone you’d have to go all the way to Tokyo to see. What does that tell us? First possibility: the police already know exactly who X is, so they decided there was no need to bother putting the name on the list. Like, say, the victim’s daughter’s fiancé.”

“Kenta?” The name was so unexpected that Mayu’s voice had cracked. *“You’re saying my dad went to see him?”*

“For my brother to go all the way up to Tokyo just for a private talk, the other person had to be someone very important to him. And if that person lives in Tokyo, it’s only natural to suspect his only daughter or her fiancé. So I casually sounded Kenta out, but no luck. Turns out he was back at his family home in Tochigi that Saturday.”

“Oh, that’s right. I talked with his parents over video that day.”

“If it wasn’t Kenta, then who was he meeting? And why doesn’t that person’s name appear on the Maeda list? So I scanned the list, and realized there was a second possibility: a single name on the list doesn’t necessarily point to just one person. For example, if the call history showed both

‘Kamio’ by itself and ‘Mayu Kamio’ in full, there’d be no need to write both. Just putting down ‘Mayu Kamio’ would be enough for the list to serve its purpose.

“See? If another Kamio shows up, the investigators could still respond appropriately. So then, what are the possible relationships between two people with the same last name? Parent and child, siblings, relatives—anything else? Husband and wife. And if my brother was in regular contact with both of them, the answer starts to come into focus.”

The Ikenaga couple—that was Takeshi’s conclusion. He had reopened the file for the thirty-seventh class essay collection he was holding. In the name field of the piece he’d opened the file to was written “Ryosuke Ikenaga.”

“Getting ready to see Ikenaga again after so long, my brother probably wanted to refresh his memory about what kind of person he was. So he dug out an old class writing collection. Then, when he put it back, he shelved it in the wrong place.”

Takeshi had pointed to the spot next to the thirty-eighth class’s collection. Mayu now recalled that, on their previous visit, those two files had been out of order.

“So the person my dad met in Tokyo was Ryosuke, right?”

At Mayu’s question, Momoko’s lips loosened into a small smile and she nodded. “Yeah. Sorry I kept quiet.”

“Can I ask what was going on? It’s okay if you’d rather not answer.”

“No, I’ll explain. I don’t think it has anything to do with the case, honest, but your dad really looked after us right to the end. I just…I never know where to start with this kind of thing. I’m terrible at it.”

“Then maybe just tell me how things are right now? My uncle says Ryosuke’s company did away with solo postings after all the Covid stuff started…”

Momoko’s face twisted. Clearly, Mayu had poked a sore spot.

“Right.” Momoko swallowed, then said, “The solo-assignment story was a lie. He’s still in the condo in Yokohama.”

“So basically, you two are living apart?”

“Pretty much. There’s…a lot more behind it, though.” Momoko’s shoulders dropped, and she began to talk.

She had met Ryosuke Ikenaga at a friend’s wedding back in their student days. During the introductions they discovered they were from the same

town and had even gone to the same junior high, though Ryosuke was five years ahead of her.

He wasn't talkative by nature, but always had the right words to say exactly what needed saying. When they talked together, his observations on whatever Momoko said were never perfunctory; she could feel his sincerity. His clean-cut looks were also just her type.

Before long, they started dating, and at the same time she learned about the harshness of his upbringing. When he was in grade school, he'd lost his parents in a traffic accident. He'd been placed in a children's home until graduation, then taken in by relatives living in her and Mayu's hometown. It was that environment that forged his fiercely independent, perfectionist approach to life.

About six months into their relationship, Ryosuke proposed. Momoko had no reason to refuse. When she introduced him to her parents, both of them approved.

"I'm amazed a serious-looking guy like that wants to marry a slapdash girl like you," her sharp-tongued mother had laughed. "Men like him are fussy about every little detail, so don't go doing things half-baked or he'll end up hating you."

Momoko had blanched at that, but it didn't take long after they started living together for her to realize how right her mother had been. Ryosuke kept pointing things out about the way she handled the housework—how the dinner dishes didn't all come out at the same time, how the room wasn't properly tidied up. Each thing was trivial on its own, and his tone was half joking, but she could tell it bothered him.

Back then, Momoko was working at a small travel agency in Tokyo, and she often got home late, which clearly didn't sit well with him either. He worked for a major firm that made her work look like a hobby, both in hours and pay. It was merit-based, so even the young employees earned good money, and Ryosuke was exactly the sort of worker that system rewarded. They wouldn't have struggled financially even if she quit. But Momoko liked working and she liked her job. She didn't see herself as cut out to be a full-time housewife.

One day she found herself in a situation where she absolutely had to attend a work party after hours. She sent Ryosuke a message saying she'd only stay for an hour. His reply came back at once: *"Got it."* At the party,

she got caught up in the fun and stayed about thirty minutes longer than planned. When she rushed home, it was obvious from the way he was sitting there in the room that something was wrong. She realized she'd messed up and apologized immediately, but his mood didn't lift.

"I want you to keep your promises," he said in a steady voice. "Being on time is basic human decency."

"I'm sorry. I just thought an extra thirty minutes would be okay."

"'An extra thirty minutes'?" She saw the color drain from his face in an instant. "Don't kid yourself. If someone you were meeting showed up half an hour late without a word, you wouldn't feel anything? You'd just forgive them when they strolled in grinning? Well? Would you?" His voice rose as he pressed her, his tone growing harsher. He was working himself up with his own words.

She felt there was a difference between coming home late and being late for a meeting, but still, she said, "I'm sorry," and bowed her head. "I'll be more careful from now on. I really am sorry."

"You're always like this."

"Huh?"

"You say you'll be more careful, but you never actually improve. Same thing with the cleaning. I say 'think about how to do things efficiently,' but you just waste time doing it the most roundabout way, every time. Think of how I feel, home on my few days off, and I can't even relax! And how many times have we agreed on a time to go out, and you've actually been ready? How many times have you made us late with one thing after another and thrown everything off? That's why I keep saying it: You can't juggle both housework and a job. Isn't it about time you faced that fact?"

It was as if all the sludge that had been slowly accumulating at the bottom of his heart had suddenly burst the dam and come pouring out. Complaint after complaint spilled from Ryosuke's mouth, all aimed directly at Momoko. And every one of them rang true, and precise, and left no room for argument. She had never imagined there could be so much resentment piling up inside him. All she could do was bow her head and listen in silence.

Then, out of nowhere, Ryosuke fell quiet. She thought he'd simply run out of spite, and she looked up only to see something she had never expected: He was crying. His head drooped, and she heard him mumble,

“Sorry.”

“You were late coming home,” he explained. “I got worried something might have happened to you. I let it get to me and I…I lost my temper. I never meant to talk to you like that. I was out of line.”

For a moment, Momoko’s mind went completely blank. The change in his demeanor was so sudden she almost wondered if his outburst moments before had been some kind of act.

Without a word, Ryosuke stood up and disappeared into the bedroom.

Momoko stayed frozen in place, stunned. There had been an apology, yes, but it was clear he hadn’t said anything he didn’t mean. He had simply been enduring it all up to now. Her chest tightened with shame and guilt.

After some time, she went to the bedroom and found him lying on the bed with his back to her. She couldn’t hear him breathing.

The next day, they were both distant. His outburst from the day before never came up. Gradually, they slipped back into their old pattern. The smiles returned, like before. But not everything went back to the way it had been. At least, not for Momoko. She couldn’t get his words out of her head, and she found herself watching every little thing she did.

The truth was that Ryosuke was a perfectionist. He liked to plan every detail and couldn’t stand it if things didn’t go exactly according to plan. That was probably the reason for his success at work and how he achieved his current position. Clearly, he wasn’t capable of restricting his perfectionism to the workplace. If only internally, he applied the same standards to his home life. To his wife.

A lingering unease that she would not be able to keep living like this sat constantly at the back of her mind. It was in the midst of that anxiety that she found out she was pregnant. Ryosuke literally jumped for joy.

From that day on, all their conversations revolved around the new life that was coming. Would it be a boy or a girl? What should they name the baby? No matter how much they talked, it seemed they never ran out of things to say. There was just one topic they both steered clear of: whether Momoko would keep working. He never said it outright, but it was obvious that Ryosuke wanted her to quit. Momoko, however, wanted to stay on the job.

For the moment, the question was kicked down the road in the form of maternity leave. After the birth would come childcare leave. Thinking about

what lay beyond that only weighed her down, so she tried not to think about it at all. Ryosuke's work got busier around that time, too. A major resort development plan had come up, and he'd been appointed project leader. Business trips increased, and he started coming home late. He made it clear, with a grim look in his eyes, that his future at the company would be decided by whether he could pull this project off.

In due course, Momoko gave birth—to a healthy baby boy. They named him Mitsugu.

Their family had grown, and a new life began. Momoko found herself run ragged by childcare. Everything was new; nothing felt familiar. Inevitably, she stopped being able to keep up with housework beyond the baby. On top of that, Mitsugu cried terribly at night and hardly let her sleep. She was always drowsy during the day, her head foggy. More and more often, she wound up late to start meals or forgetting to put things away.

Throughout it, Ryosuke said nothing. Not because he understood how hard things were for her. He didn't in the slightest. The pressure at work was so intense he simply had no bandwidth for anything else. He doted on Mitsugu, but beyond that it was as if nothing else registered. He was working more weekends, and even when he was at home, he was still doing work.

In hindsight, it was clear that neither of them had any emotional slack left. Their marriage was like a rubber band stretched to its limit, ready to snap at the slightest tug. That was their status quo when something new and entirely unexpected hit Japan—no, the entire world. The baffling pathogen known as the novel coronavirus took their everyday life and turned it on its head.

Ryosuke stopped going into the office. His work shifted to remote, and with the stay-at-home requests, he was in the house all day, even on weekdays. That alone would have been manageable. The real blow came when the massive resort development project he had been leading was put on hold. The plan had been built on the assumption of increased inbound tourism from places like China and South Korea. Once those projections became impossible to factor in, the project stalled.

In the wake of that setback, he seemed like a different person. His nerves were constantly on edge; he looked irritable all the time. He would sit in front of his computer all day, muttering to himself and nervously jiggling

his legs. He suddenly started sticking his nose in things around the house he'd previously ignored. *Dinner's taking too long. This place is a mess. Don't make me tell you the same thing over and over.* At first, his criticisms were mumbled and brief, but gradually his tone grew sharper. And the worst part was, he wasn't wrong. It wasn't baseless nitpicking—Momoko knew she'd been cutting corners on the housework ever since the days when she'd been exhausted from caring for Mitsugu. But now that her son was easier to care for, she still hadn't gone back to her former level of diligence, imperfect in Ryosuke's eyes as even that might have been.

Despite his outbursts, Momoko feared worse: he might bottling up his frustrations all over again. She tried to be careful, telling herself she had to do the housework properly, but she couldn't avoid every mistake, and every time she dropped the ball she would flinch, waiting for him to explode again.

She was careful never to make a noise while he was working, especially after once, when she mistakenly ran the vacuum while he was on a call and he came storming out of the bedroom and yelled at her. After that, she practically held her breath whenever he was in a meeting. If Mitsugu started crying, she would scoop him up and take him out onto the balcony.

Meanwhile the pandemic had begun to calm down, inside Japan at least. National and local restrictions eased, and a sliver of normal life started to return. Ryosuke began going into the office again, but with remote work now the default, he was still home most of the time. The dark look on his face never really lifted. He didn't say anything, but it was obvious the huge resort project was headed for cancellation. She'd overheard as much in his video conferences.

Bad news came Momoko's way as well: the travel agency where she worked went bankrupt. It happened just as she was starting to look into daycare options. When she told Ryosuke, all he said, in a flat voice, was, "Huh." And then, "Maybe it's for the best."

A few more months passed. The Covid situation remained unchanged: case numbers would surge, then subside, over and over. Each time, people were asked to stay home and refrain from traveling. Some got used to it; others grew exhausted to the point that they no longer cared. Momoko fell into the latter group. Outside the house she worried about getting infected, and inside she worried about upsetting Ryosuke. This wasn't the life she

had been expecting when she got married.

The breaking point came on a day like any of a dozen others during the pandemic.

Mitsugu had started crying right in the middle of one of Ryosuke's video conferences. It was January, cold and rainy outside. She hesitated to take him out onto the balcony, but her efforts to calm him down or distract him all failed. She thought about hiding with him in the toilet or the bath, but both were close to the bedroom and she worried that his crying might carry even more from there.

Mitsugu started to wail at the top of his lungs and, without thinking, she clapped her hand over his mouth and stood there, panicking, wondering what to do. She had decided she really would have to take him out on the balcony, and set him down on the sofa for a moment so she could throw on her coat, when she noticed he'd gone limp.

"Mitsugu!" Momoko shouted, her heart racing. His eyes flew open and he started crying again, even louder than before. It seemed to her that he had briefly lost consciousness before he came roaring back.

Just then, Ryosuke appeared. "Hey, what the hell happened?"

"I'm sorry. I-I covered his mouth, and he stopped moving…"

"You covered his mouth!? What were you thinking?"

"I just…I didn't want to interrupt your meeting. And he wouldn't stop crying—"

"There are other ways! Use your head for once. You call yourself a mother?"

When he said that, something flipped inside Momoko. She glared at her husband.

"What?" he snapped.

Momoko drew in a breath."I *do* think. I think about everything. About Mitsugu, about you. All the time. And you just take your frustration out on me because work isn't going well!"

"I'm sorry, you think this is me being frustrated?"

"That's what it is, isn't it? So your resort plan fell through—so what? It's not like you got fired. My company's gone under. Don't you dare act like you've got it worse."

The next moment, Momoko was lying on the floor. Her left cheek burned and tingled. She realized belatedly that he'd hit her. Ryosuke stomped back

into the bedroom.

Stunned, she couldn't move for a while. When she finally came to, Mitsugu was beside her. Ironically, he was smiling. That little face saved her. She gently gathered him up and pressed her cheek to his head. The afternoon turned into evening, and she remained stretched out on the sofa, unable to bring herself to start dinner. Ryosuke emerged from the bedroom, said, "I'm going out to eat with some people from work," and walked out without so much as a glance in her direction.

A while later, Momoko called her parents' house and asked her mother if it would be all right to come home for a bit.

"Of course, but that's awfully sudden," her mom said. "Did something happen?"

"Yeah…actually, Ryosuke's going on a long business trip. I thought it'd be lonely with just me and Mitsugu. And there's less to worry about with Covid at your place, too."

Her mother didn't suspect a thing. She knew all about her husband's frequent trips. "All right then, just be careful on the way," she said.

Momoko hurriedly packed, left a note on the dining table reading "I've gone to my parents'," and walked out with Mitsugu under her arm. If she hurried, she could get there in about two and a half hours.

At home, her parents greeted her with smiles. It had been a while since they'd seen their grandson, and they both looked delighted.

A message from Ryosuke came around one in the morning: "Can I call?" She replied, "Sure," and the phone rang almost immediately.

"What's going on?" he asked. His tone was calm.

"I just…thought it might be better if we lived apart for a while."

"How long is 'a while'?"

"I don't know. I haven't decided yet."

"I see," he said, then fell silent for a moment.

"What did you tell your parents?"

Momoko repeated exactly what she'd told her mother. "Got it," he said, a hint of relief in his voice.

"I'll tell my family the same. I'll say the trip's to Kansai. If they press for details, I'll just tell them I don't know the specifics."

"Okay."

Ryosuke's real concern was clear. He had switched to damage control the

moment he saw her note on the dining room table. If Momoko told her parents what had actually happened that day, word would get back to his family, and that he had to avoid. He saw becoming a respectable adult and building a home as his way of repaying his parents for raising him. If they learned he wasn't managing his home properly, the shame would be unbearable.

"Hey," he said then, "you're not thinking about…divorce or anything, right?"

Momoko let out a long breath. It wasn't that she hadn't thought about it—if anything, the idea had been front and center in her mind from the moment she started packing. But she didn't say that. "I don't know," she answered. "Right now, I just can't think about anything."

"I see," he said quietly.

So began their separation. Back at her parents' house, she felt the tightness in her heart ease. Her parents doted on Mitsugu, and helping her mother with the housework didn't feel like a burden. Her health improved, and sometimes, looking in the mirror, she told herself that her skin looked a little younger.

Every now and then, a message came from Ryosuke. Momoko didn't read most of them. If he apologized, she knew she might end up forgiving him. But she also knew that going straight back home wouldn't solve anything. They would just repeat the same old pattern.

"So…that's how it is," Momoko said, pouring the last of her beer into her glass.

"I…wow," Mayu shook her head. "I know marriage is a lot of work, but…just, wow."

"Sorry. I'm not trying to step on your dreams, really!" Momoko gave a rueful smile. "I think you'll be fine, you and Kenta."

Mayu studied her round face. "And you're basing that on…what exactly?"

Momoko tilted her head, then laughed. "Uh, nothing."

"There it is."

"I honestly believed I was guaranteed happiness, for real. I never imagined things would turn out like this. Though Mr. Kamio did say that you have to expect some level of difficulties in married life."

"Did you tell my dad you were living apart?"

“At first I wasn’t going to say anything. Like I told you, I was only going to talk about the reunion. But he kept asking about Ryosuke, and it got harder and harder to keep lying. So I decided to come clean. I knew how special Mr. Kamio was to him.”

“Now that you mention it, Ryosuke said he owed my dad a lot?”

“Yeah. He really meant it—called your father ‘his savior.’ Once I heard the whole story, I kind of agreed.”

“Can I hear it too?”

“Of course. It’ll be hard to explain everything without you knowing that part.”

Ryosuke had been a recent arrival from out of town in contrast to almost all the students in junior high who had moved up together from the local elementary schools. He was completely isolated. He knew no one. His classmates looked at him as the ‘weird kid from the city’ and kept their distance He hadn’t been bullied per se, just ignored, completely. It was like he was invisible as air.

Going to school gradually became painful, and he started skipping class. After one summer break, he stopped going altogether. His aunt and uncle, the local relatives who’d taken him in, said nothing. They probably had no idea how to handle him. It was his homeroom teacher, Mr. Kamio, who came to visit and first made contact. He asked how Ryosuke was spending his days, gave him the homework he’d missed, and, before he left, told him only to take care of himself.

Mr. Kamio’s visits continued. He came almost every day. He would ask about Ryosuke’s childhood memories, and about his late parents. At first, he found the visits a bother, but little by little he opened up. One day, Mr. Kamio suggested they go outside for a bit and eventually took him back to his own home. There, in the study, before the large bookcase that dominated the room, Mr. Kamio told him he could read any book he liked. “Come when classes start and go home when they finish. This will be your school. Don’t worry, I even serve lunch,” Kamio said.

Ryosuke wasn’t exactly eager, but he was suffocating at home with his aunt and uncle, so the next day, he went over to Mr. Kamio’s and met Mr. Kamio’s wife and his mother, who both welcomed him kindly. In the study, he found a book on the desk: *Run, Melos!* He’d never been much interested in reading, but he was bored, so he gave it a try. To his surprise, the book

was so engrossing he finished it in no time. Browsing the shelves for what to read next, he noticed a row of Sherlock Holmes stories. He remembered someone in grade school saying they were good, so he took one down.

At noon, they made a Mr. Kamios' special "school lunch" for him. After that, he went there almost every weekday. He discovered he enjoyed reading, and the time flew by. One afternoon about a month later, he heard lively voices at the front door. Mr. Kamio had brought five of his classmates over. They came in and stared at Ryosuke in surprise. Mr. Kamio said, "Ikenaga is the librarian here. Anything you don't understand about the books? Ask him."

Ryosuke blinked with bewilderment. It was his first time hearing anything about this. His classmates too, seemed to be at a loss, until one of the girls came over and asked, "well, which books are good?" He asked her a few questions, and when she said she liked school stories, he recommended *A Rabbit's Eyes*, by Kenjiro Haitani, about a teacher who connects with a classroom of "lost" children.

As it turned out, Mr. Kamio had invited Ryosuke's classmates there under the pretense of "an extracurricular reading lesson." Bringing the whole class would have been too much, so he chose a handful of students to bring each time. After a few such visits, Mr. Kamio asked his newly appointed librarian if he was ready to come back to school. It was perfect timing; deep down, Ryosuke had been waiting for someone to give him just that push. The following day, he walked in through the school gates for the first time in a long while.

It was almost December. After that, he didn't miss a single day of school, and he managed to lead a more or less ordinary junior high life. That didn't mean everything went smoothly—there were times he struggled or hit walls. When he overcame them, it was thanks to Mr. Kamio. His old homeroom teacher was always there watching over him, keeping him from drifting off the path.

"Ryosuke's always said it," Momoko went on. "He owes who he is now to Mr. Kamio—his greatest benefactor. Apparently they even exchanged letters now and then after he graduated. He said he wrote them by hand, not email, because he felt that was the best way to show his gratitude."

As she listened to her friend's story, the fog over Mayu's memory lifted. "Wait, I think I remember that! I was still in early elementary school, I

think, and there was this junior high boy sitting in our living room reading a book. I don't remember his face, but that must have been Ryosuke!"

"Probably, yes."

"That reminds me—" Another scene rose in Mayu's mind, from far more recent memory. "Do you remember at my dad's funeral, there was a paperback placed in the coffin? It was *Run, Melos!*"

"I saw the book, but I didn't look closely. I had no idea."

"During the wake, you and Ryosuke came up for incense. When he glanced into the coffin, I remember him looking a little surprised. I thought I was imagining it..."

Momoko nodded.

"Anyway, I get that my dad was special to him. What did my dad say when you told him about the separation?"

"Like I mentioned earlier, he said the kind of trouble we were having was par for the course. Especially in stressful times, like we were all going through with Covid. Then he asked me straight up if I wanted to leave Ryosuke."

"What did you say?"

"I told him it wasn't that I *wanted* to leave so much as I had started to think it would be better if we split. But also, I didn't understand what was going on in Ryosuke's head, which was why I couldn't decide. So then your dad said that, if I was okay with it, he could meet with Ryosuke and ask him how he felt, directly."

"I get it now. So you asked him to help."

"I wasn't sure at first, but I really couldn't see any other way forward. Yeah. I asked."

According to Momoko, last Friday, Mr. Kamio had contacted her to say he was going to see Ryosuke the day after. Since Ryosuke was in Tokyo for work, they'd decided to meet at a hotel lounge near Tokyo Station. "On Saturday I was so anxious about how their talk would go that I couldn't focus on anything. But night came and there was still no word from your dad. Sunday went by without a call, too, and I started thinking I should phone him myself. But then I thought, what if things with Ryosuke hadn't gone well, and that was why it was hard for him to call? I just couldn't work up the nerve. That's when I thought of you."

"Me? Why me?"

“I thought maybe, since he was going up to Tokyo anyway, he might have met you too. And if you’d seen him, maybe he’d told you about us.”

I see, Mayu thought, the pieces finally falling into place. “So that’s why you called me that night. The reunion was an excuse.”

“Yeah… Sorry.”

“Nothing to apologize for. So, we talked, you realized I hadn’t seen my dad, and you didn’t bring it up.”

“Right. Then Monday rolled around and…well, you know the rest. Haraguchi contacted me and told me what happened. I couldn’t believe it. I mean, the first thing I thought was whether Ryosuke had anything to do with it.”

“What did you do?”

“After agonizing over it for way too long, I sent him a message saying your father had died. He called me right away.”

“What did he say?”

“He was totally shocked, of course. Said he had absolutely no idea what could have happened. They’d just had a normal conversation on Saturday and parted ways. Your dad just said ‘See you next time,’ and went home—that’s how he put it. You know, hearing how he reacted, and how he talked about meeting your dad, I don’t think he was lying.”

“Did you ask how their talk had gone?”

“I, no, I couldn’t. It felt like…it just wasn’t the time.”

Mayu nodded. That much, at least, made sense.

“Sorry I kept it from you,” Momoko apologized again. “I thought about telling you, but I just couldn’t get the words out.”

“That’s why Ryosuke left right after the wake. I remember wondering why he didn’t even just stay to see his own son.”

“Yeah…” Momoko said. “That was us playing the happily married couple.”

“You’ve really been through it, Momoko.”

“I’m still in the middle of it.”

“So what are you going to do? Keep living apart?”

“I don’t know. I need more time to think.”

“Of course. Just, the thing is, my uncle says he wants to talk to Ryosuke.”

“Your uncle?” Momoko’s face clouded with worry.

“Don’t worry, he’s not signing up to mediate in my dad’s place or

anything. He doesn't care about that stuff in the slightest. There are just some things he wants to ask about the case."

"But I don't think Ryosuke knows anything."

"He says he gets that. Just…is it okay if we contact him?"

"If that's all it is, then I don't mind, but…" Momoko's eyes wavered with hesitation.



23

TAKESHI FACED HIS LAPTOP and gave a curt bow. “Nice to meet you. Sorry I didn’t get the chance to properly greet you at the wake.”

Three faces were on the screen: Takeshi, Momoko, and Ryosuke Ikenaga.

“No, I should apologize for leaving so early,” Ryosuke replied. His expression was stiff, only natural given what must have been going through his mind. He was clearly unsettled, having no idea of what Takeshi was going to ask.

Standing off to the side, Mayu was just as lost. Takeshi hadn’t told her a thing. Not that she hadn’t asked—Momoko had said she was fine with contacting Ryosuke, but wanted to know what his questions were. After a brief discussion, they’d settled on this arrangement. They’d do the call in Takeshi’s room, on Mayu’s laptop, and she would get to hear the whole thing.

“First off, let me say this,” Takeshi began. “I have no intention of poking my nose into your marriage. I won’t be asking you anything along those lines, so put aside any worries you might have about that.”

“Understood,” Ryosuke answered.

“What I want to know first is about the police. A detective paid you a visit, correct?”

“He did.”

“When?”

“Yesterday, a little after noon. He called in the morning and said he wanted to ask me some questions. We met at a coffee shop near my office in the afternoon.”

“Your office is in Yokohama, right?”

Looking slightly uncomfortable, Ryosuke dipped his chin. “Yes.”

“What did he ask?”

“He wanted to know whether I’d been in touch with Mr. Kamio recently. I hesitated for a bit, but since I knew it was a murder investigation, I figured I had to cooperate, so I told him we’d met in Tokyo on March sixth. He wanted to know the exact time and place, so I told him we talked for about two hours, starting around six p.m. in the lounge at the Tokyo Kingdom Hotel.”

“And what did the detective say to that?”

“He asked what I did after I left. I assume he was checking my alibi. I said I joined some friends who were having drinks.”

“Did he ask for your friends’ names or the name of the place you went?”

“No, it didn’t go that far.”

Takeshi nodded and glanced over at Mayu. “Looks like the police really aren’t treating Ikenaga as a suspect.” Then he turned back to the screen. “What else did he ask?”

“He asked if I’d told anyone I was meeting with Mr. Kamio. I said no.”

“Anything else?”

“After that…” Ryosuke trailed off for a moment, then regrouped and said, “He asked what exactly Mr. Kamio wanted to talk about, if I was willing to tell him. I asked if I had to answer, and he said it was fine if I didn’t want to. Then the detective said, ‘According to what Ms. Mayu Kamio heard from your wife, you’re on solo assignment in Kansai. But in reality, you’re here in Yokohama. Is it fair to assume what you discussed with him is related to that discrepancy?’”

“Roundabout way of putting it,” Takeshi remarked. “What did you say?”

“I told him yes, that was exactly it. But I also said it was a private matter and I really didn’t want it getting out. He promised he’d keep it confidential.”

“And the police are keeping that promise. You may have heard this from Momoko, but I’m the one who deduced that you were the person my brother met. No one told me.”

“So I heard. I’d actually like to hear how you did that.”

“I’ll explain another time. Was that all the detective asked?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks. Now, there’s something I want to ask you too, Momoko. Is that all right?”

“What is it?” On the small screen, Momoko’s expression tightened slightly. She clearly hadn’t expected to be singled out.

“A detective came to see you as well, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Yesterday evening. Around four, I think,” Momoko said, her head tilting slightly in the small window on the screen as she thought.

“What did they ask you?”

“Pretty much the same things you just mentioned. Whether I knew that Mr. Eiichi Kamio and my husband were meeting in Tokyo last Saturday, if I did know then who told me, and whether I’d told anyone else. I said I’d heard it from Mr. Kamio himself and that I hadn’t told anyone.”

“Anything else?”

“They asked about my alibi, too. I told them I hadn’t set foot out of the house on Saturday night. I said my parents had been with me, so they could check with them if they wanted.”

“Family members don’t count as witnesses,” Ryosuke put in bluntly. “Didn’t you know that?”

“Well, even if that’s true, what was I supposed to say?”

“You didn’t have to mention your parents were there.”

“But they were. Why shouldn’t I say it if it’s the truth?”

“Can we save the lovers’ quarrel until we’re finished here?” Takeshi cut in. “Have at it later, by all means.”

“Sorry,” they both mumbled at the same time.

“Question for you, Ryosuke—I want to know how it came about that you and my brother met. Did he contact you?”

“Yes. Mr. Kamio called me and asked if we could meet sometime the following week. He said there was something he wanted to talk about, and he didn’t mind coming to wherever was convenient for me. He also said it wouldn’t take much time.”

“When was that?”

“Um, hang on a second.” Ryosuke glanced down at something in front of him, probably his phone. “Friday, February twenty-sixth.”

“February twenty-sixth,” Takeshi confirmed. “And then?”

“I told him that unfortunately, my schedule was packed. The only real opening I had was the following Saturday, but even then I already had business in Tokyo and didn’t know exactly what time I’d be free. He said that Saturday was fine and that he had no problem coming into Tokyo, so if I could let him know once my plans firmed up, he’d work around them. I said ‘all right’ and we hung up.”

“And once your schedule settled down, you called him back.”

“That’s right. On the night of March third. I called and told him that Saturday from around six p.m. for about two hours would work for me.”

“What time on March third did you call?”

“I think it was around seven in the evening. I’d gotten home from work but hadn’t had dinner yet.”

“Around seven, right… Did you call his cell or the landline at his house?”

“The landline. I just dialed the incoming number from when he’d called me. On Saturday I realized I’d never asked for his cell number and panicked a little.”

“I see,” Takeshi said, folding his arms in front of the laptop. “Do you think you could recreate that phone call? In detail?”

“Um… how am I supposed to do that?”

“I’ll play my brother. You just remember how it went and say what you said then. Let’s start. You called him, right? The phone rings, my brother picks up.” Takeshi lifted his left hand to his ear as if holding a landline receiver. “‘Hello, this is Kamio.’ Your line comes next. What did you say?”

“Ah, right. ‘This is Ikenaga. Sorry about the other day.’” On the screen, Ryosuke actually held his phone to his ear.

“‘Not at all. Sorry for bothering you when you’re so busy. Have you settled your plans for Saturday?’ Something like that?”

“That’s exactly what he said. Amazing—you even sound like him.”

“Thanks. We *are* brothers, after all.”

Mayu sat off to the side, astonished. Her uncle’s measured, slightly formal tone was pure Dad. *Yet another trick up his sleeve*.

“‘Yes,” Ryosuke continued. “My schedule’s all set. From around six p.m. for about two hours should be fine. Though I do feel bad asking you to come all the way to Tokyo.’”

“‘No worries. Thanks to Covid, I’ve been cooped up at home for ages, and I was just thinking it’d be nice to get out for a change. And maybe see

Mayu while I'm at it—" Takeshi started to add, but Ryosuke quickly waved a hand in front of the camera.

"No… no, he didn't say that. I'm the one who brought up Ms. Mayu."

"How exactly did you bring her up?" Takeshi asked.

"Well, he said something along the lines of it being no trouble to come into Tokyo. So I asked if he was going to see Ms. Mayu as well, and he said something like, 'not this time. No need to tell her about this.'"

"Not telling 'her,' huh? He said 'her,' not 'Mayu'?"

Ryosuke's gaze drifted for a moment, then he nodded. "I'm pretty sure that's how he put it."

"Got it. Let's keep going. What came after that?"

"I asked which place I should go to."

"'Do you know the Tokyo Kingdom Hotel? It's a hotel near Tokyo Station,'" Takeshi said, slipping back into Mayu's father's voice.

"I said I did, that I'd stayed there a few times."

"'Then how about we meet in the first-floor lounge there at six p.m.?'"

"'The lounge at the Tokyo Kingdom Hotel, eighteen hundred. Understood.'"

"'All right, then. See you Saturday. I'm looking forward to it.'"

"Um, Mr. Kamio…" On the screen, Ryosuke looked a little flustered. "At that point, I'm pretty sure I asked him if what he wanted to talk about was Momoko."

Takeshi paused briefly, then answered, "'Something like that,'" in his brother's voice.

"'All right. See you Saturday,' I said."

"'Looking forward to it,'" Takeshi finished, miming taking the receiver away from his ear. "So that's more or less how the conversation went?"

"More or less, yes. Acting it out like that did help jog my memory."

"Thanks. Sorry for dragging you through that little exercise."

"No, it was…it really felt like I was talking to him again. And I…" He trailed off.

"What is it?" Takeshi prompted.

"Nothing. It just hit me again, that he's gone. I still can't believe it. I only saw Mr. Kamio a week ago…"

"True. Right after he left you and came home, someone killed him." On the screen, both Ryosuke and Momoko's faces tightened with grief.

“To put it another way,” Takeshi went on, “up until just before he was murdered, my brother’s thoughts were filled with the matter of his former student, and that student’s wife. He had to have been thinking about how the two of you might start over, how you could be happy, and what he could do to help.”

The young couple’s expressions went rigid, as if he’d doused them with cold water through the screen. Ryosuke’s eyes narrowed.

“Anyway, on that note, I’ll leave you to it. Argue, fight, say whatever you like after this—you can stay on this call, if you want. Just keep what I said in mind. And thank you for your cooperation.” Takeshi worked the keyboard and ended the call.

Mayu studied his face in profile. “You really went for it there.”

“Was I wrong?”

“No. I think it was good for them. And, I’m impressed. You are capable of doing something decent once in a while.”

“‘Once in a while’?” Takeshi snapped the laptop shut and slid it toward her. “Thanks. Video chats aren’t half bad.”

“Anytime you need to use the computer, just say so.”

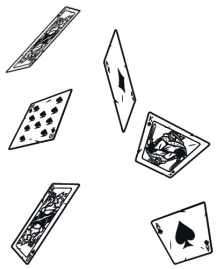
“I doubt I’ll need it again, but there is something else I want you to do.”

“Again? You’re on a roll today.”

“Got a problem with that? You’re the one who said you wanted to help get to the truth.”

“I only said you were on a roll. What’s next?”

“Next,” Takeshi said, raising his index finger, “we go to Doraemon’s house.”



24

Tsukumi Beauty Salon wasn't on a bustling shopping street, but tucked in among regular houses along one of the main roads in town. From the outside, it was little more than a house itself with a slightly large window. Without the modest sign hanging there almost apologetically, it could have easily been mistaken for a slightly stylish Western-style home.

Mayu slowly opened the door. Inside was bright, and the air smelled pleasant. A woman sitting on the sofa along the wall stood up with a smile. "Welcome." It was Naoya Tsukumi's mother, Kinue. She looked younger than she had at the funeral, probably thanks to her clothes and makeup. She wore a white shirt, a cream-colored vest, and jeans.

"Sorry for dropping in like this," Mayu said, bowing her head. "I hope you weren't busy?"

"Not at all," Kinue replied with a laugh. "Just one appointment in the morning and one in the afternoon, and no one else on the books for today. I was about to close up. Just a moment, okay?"

She stepped outside and began taking down the sign. That, it seemed, was how you could tell whether the shop was open or not.

Mayu glanced around the place. It was a compact space with just two chairs for cuts and shampoos, yet the atmosphere felt calm and composed. An antique-style clock on the shelf showed a little past five in the afternoon. She remembered hearing that Naoya Tsukumi's father had been in the Self-Defense Forces and died in a training accident when Naoya was in grade school. From then on, this salon had supported the family. For the son to follow his father at only fourteen—the cruelty of it was unbearable.

Kinue came back inside and set the sign she'd taken down against the wall. "There, now we can talk in peace," she said, walking toward the back and opening a door, beyond which was the rest of the house. "Come in. It's small, but make yourself at home."

"Thank you," Mayu said, bowing again as she stepped through.

She was shown into a dining room with a table that could seat four. A television and sideboard along the walls suggested it doubled as a living room. For someone living alone, it was probably more than enough. Checkered curtains on the bay window gave the room a bright, cheery feel. Kinue walked out from behind the kitchen island. "Please, have a seat."

"Thank you." Mayu pulled out a chair and sat down.

Kinue brought her some tea with a slice of lemon floating in it. *No day drinking here, unlike Momoko's*.

"Feeling a little calmer now?" Kinue inquired.

"I'm just relieved that the wake and funeral went off without a hitch. But until the killer is caught..."

"It must be hard. Please, enjoy your tea before it gets cold."

"Yes, thank you." Mayumi took a sip. It was a rich, herbal brew.

"Over the phone earlier, you mentioned wanting to take over what your father, Mr. Kamio, had been working on. Something about an essay of Naoya's? I have to admit, it's the first I'd heard of any of this."

"Right," Mayumi replied, placing both hands on her knees. "Well, while sorting through my dad's belongings, I found copies of essays from his former students—several of them. I guess whenever he liked one, he'd make a copy for himself before returning the original. He appears to have collected some in self-published pamphlets too. Maybe he was planning someday to compile them into a book to share with close friends?"

Kinue nodded as she spoke. "That sounds exactly like the sort of thing Mr. Kamio would do. So he meant to include one of Naoya's essays?"

"Yes. In fact, I also found a list of the names with the pieces, and Naoya was on it. Which means my father intended to include his work too. But for some reason, I can't find a copy of your son's essay anywhere. It might have gotten lost, or perhaps he simply forgot to make a copy. That's why I wanted to ask for your help."

Kinue blinked and a small smile touched her lips. "It's an honor, and it makes me very happy to hear he's remembered. I am sorry, though—that's

the first I've heard of this. I'm afraid I'd have no idea which of Naoya's essays Mr. Kamio had in mind."

So she doesn't know.

"I thought that might be the case. That's why, I was wondering—if any of the essays Naoya wrote in junior high are still around—maybe I could read them? My uncle is back here at the moment, and he says he thinks he could tell which piece my father meant to choose."

"Ah, your uncle. Would that have been the gentleman who was standing next to you at the funeral? I suppose he might understand his brother's taste in literature?"

"Well, that's what he says. I think it might also just be a way for him to connect to his brother after what happened. Might you be able to lend any of the pieces you still have to me? I'll take good care of them, of course, and return them as soon as we've made copies."

"And this is everything Naoya wrote in junior high, yes? I took a quick look just now, and there were quite a few pieces. More than a dozen, for sure."

"That tracks. My father loved having his students write essays. Not just as homework for summer and winter vacation, but every time there was a school event, he made them write something. And in regular classes as well. I've had more than one person tell me they didn't mind my dad as a teacher, but they all wished he'd gone easier on the endless essays."

"All of those, then. All right. Please wait here for a moment." Kinue stood up and left the room. Mayu heard her footsteps going up the stairs. She remembered Naoya Tsukumi's room being on the second floor, and wondered if it had been left just as it was when he died.

The story about her father carefully choosing his favorite pieces from among his students' essays and planning to self-publish them was, needless to say, something Takeshi had made up. He'd said that if she didn't put it that way, then in the midst of all the turmoil after her father's murder, asking to read all the essays written by an old classmate would only make people suspicious. Mayu agreed with that much, but the question was why they needed Naoya Tsukumi's essays in the first place. As for that, however, all Takeshi would say was, "I'll tell you once the facts are clear."

So, just as when she had contacted Momoko and Ryosuke, Mayu found herself acting strictly under her uncle's orders, doing as she was told

without really knowing what any of it was for.

Her gaze fell on the tote bag. A butterfly-shaped charm dangled from the handle—the listening device again. The little tail that served as the power switch was, of course, bent to the ON position.

Footsteps came down the stairs, and Kinue walked back into the room, holding a cardboard box in her arms.

“I think this is probably all of them.”

“Would you mind if I took a look?”

“Not at all. Go ahead.”

The cardboard box was packed with sheets of manuscript paper, each one folded in half. She took them all out and set them on the table. Stacked together, they were nearly two centimeters thick. Even allowing for the fact that they were folded, there had to be more than fifty pages.

A quick glance showed that every piece was written on manuscript paper. In other words, these were the originals.

“Are there no copies?”

“Copies?” Kinue tilted her head, unsure what Mayu meant.

“After we handed in an essay, it would be returned to us after a while, but there were some that never came back. For example, when they were submitted to a competition run by the Ministry of Education. We were told that if we wanted to keep our own work, we should make a copy beforehand. I just wondered if Naoya might have kept something like that.”

“Oh, I see what you mean. No, nothing like that. Naoya was never the sort of boy who’d want to go so far as to copy out his own essays just to keep them,” Kinue said with a wry smile.

That sounded about right. Mayu had to admit she’d been the same way. Her uncle, however, would be disappointed. He had told her that if any copies remained, she was to make sure she brought them back with her. The way he said it had implied that somehow, any copies that had been made might be even more important than the originals.

Mayu picked up the manuscript on the top of the stack, titled “The Person I Respect.” It began, “The person I respect is my father, who died when I was in elementary school.” According to the essay, some time after his father’s death, a woman whom they had never met before came from Kobe to offer incense at the family altar. She had been injured in the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake and had been rescued by his father who had

carried her on his back through the rubble for several kilometers to an evacuation center. The piece ended with Naoya talking about how this was how he first learned what kind of work his father had done, and how proud it made him feel.

"This is a lovely story. Have you read it?"

When Mayu asked, Kinue gave a small nod. "I've read it many times." *Of course she has,* Mayu thought. *And ended up in tears each time.*

"Naoya got top marks in every subject, but he was good at essay writing, too. This one is put together really well," Mayu said.

"Probably because he had a little trick up his sleeve," Kinue said, as if confiding a small secret.

"A trick?"

"It was my husband's old computer. He used a word-processing program to do his drafts, then copied them out by hand onto manuscript paper while looking at the screen. He said it was easier because he didn't have to look up any kanji. He even used it in the hospital room. I always told him he shouldn't cut corners like that."

"I see. Well, even if that's true, I still think he was very good."

Mayu's phone buzzed inside her tote bag. Murmuring a quick apology, she took it out and saw a message from Takeshi: *Get that computer.* This time, even she could see what he was after. "I was wondering, do you still have that computer?"

"Yes. I'm hopeless with that sort of thing myself, so I've never touched it."

"Would it be possible for me to borrow it?"

"That old thing?" Kinue's eyes widened in surprise. "What do you need it for?"

"There might be drafts of his essays left on it. I'd like to check."

"I see. Ah, but there shouldn't be anything left on it. Naoya told me he'd erased all the data, so I wouldn't have to bother myself with it."

"I see…" Mayu felt a small ache in her chest as she picturing Naoya on his deathbed, taking the time to erase his computer so his mom would have one less thing to worry about.

Another message arrived on the phone resting on her knees. *"Get it anyway!"*

"Even so, would you mind letting me see it, just in case?" Mayu said to

Kinue.

"Very well. I just hope it still works. It's terribly old." Kinue left the room again and went upstairs.

Mayu called Takeshi on her phone. He picked up almost at once, his voice brusque. "What?"

"You're thinking what you're looking for might be on that computer?"

"I'm praying it is."

"His mother says the data's been erased. That's still okay with you?"

"No problem. I'll figure something out."

"In that case, we don't need these, do we? The actual manuscripts. They're pretty heavy."

"Don't be dumb. Have you forgotten the official reason you're borrowing the essays? Leave them behind and you give up the whole game."

"Oh. Right."

"Just deal with it if it's heavy. Bring the whole lot back." He hung up on her.

Mayu stuck her tongue out at her phone and slipped it back into her bag just as Kinue returned.

"This is it," she said, setting a case with carrying handles down on the table. She opened it and took out a bulky, black piece of machinery.

To Mayu's eyes, it hardly looked like a computer. It was all hard edges, at least five centimeters thick. She lifted it and found it satisfyingly heavy. *Could you really even call this a laptop?* She was glad there was a dedicated computer bag. Her tote was already crammed full with the manuscripts, and if she crammed this slab of metal in she doubted she'd be able to lift it. Even the power cord had a big bulky box unit attached, adding to the overall impression of clunkiness.

"May I borrow it?" Mayu asked again, just to be sure.

"Of course. I just hope it still works."

"I'll have my uncle take a look. If it turns out to be broken, would you mind if I sent it out to be repaired? We'll cover the cost, of course."

"Oh, I couldn't ask you to do that. But if it comes to that, please let me know."

"Okay, I'll let you know then."

"Yes." Kinue's gaze dropped to the computer. "I'd completely forgotten about this thing. I wonder if there's anything on it. I don't think Naoya ever

used the Internet, so there shouldn't be anything too strange left on there."

"If we can get it running properly, you might enjoy having a look. I'll ask my uncle how to use it."

"Yes, please do. That gives me something to look forward to."

Mayu slipped the computer back into its case.

"By the way, will you be attending the class reunion tomorrow?" Kinue asked.

"That's the plan. Oh, that reminds me—I heard it was at your request, ma'am, that the memorial for Naoya was cancelled?"

"Yes," Kinue said, a faintly lonely smile on her face. "It's a class reunion, after all. I want everyone to enjoy themselves. As for Naoya, it's more than enough if you remember him at some other time."

Her words left Mayu with a tangle of feelings in her chest. "In that case, maybe I shouldn't go," she said. "I'll only end up reminding everyone about my father."

Kinue hurriedly waved her hands. "No, you should go. If anything, if you weren't there, the people who do attend would feel guilty about enjoying themselves without you. If you don't object to it, please go. I'd like to ask you that, from me."

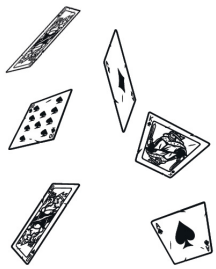
She bowed deeply, and Mayu waved her hands. "Please don't… there's no need for that…"

Kinue straightened, then added with a bright smile, "I really do want you to be there. I'm sure Naoya will be watching from the other side, too. You must have realized that he liked you, didn't you?"

"Oh, um, well…" Mayu reached up and fiddled with her hair.

"Please go—for him. I think Naoya would want to see you."

She met Kinue's earnest gaze, and realized this was no time to be acting shy for her age. "I'll give it some more thought," Mayu promised.



25

TAKESHI TOOK THE COMPUTER out of its case, set it on the table, and let out a whistle. “A Mebius, huh. Long time no see.” He gave the black rectangle a light pat.

“Will it even turn on?”

“Ever seen *The Martian*? The one with Matt Damon, about an astronaut who gets stranded on Mars.”

“I think someone told me about it?”

“Well, in it, there’s an actual Mars probe called Mars Pathfinder. It landed there in 1997. The main character digs it out from under the sand, powers it up, and manages to reestablish contact with Earth. The Mebius line first came out around the same time Mars Pathfinder landed. There’s nothing at all strange about one of these still working.”

“But that movie’s fiction, isn’t it?”

“Fiction with an extremely high level of realism, or so they say. Anyway, seeing is believing.” Takeshi plugged the power cord into the outlet and pressed the laptop’s power switch.

It took a few moments, but eventually, the screen lit up with a deep navy background crossed by a band of color and the name: Mebius.

“Boots up fine, at least. And no password prompt. Looks like Naoya wasn’t using this machine for anything he needed to hide.”

“As you no doubt heard over the bug, it didn’t sound like he even used the Internet,” Mayu said.

“Early two-thousands, huh? A precocious junior high kid back then might well have been stockpiling dirty pictures, but hospitals in those days probably didn’t have much in the way of Internet access anyway.”

Takeshi tried a few keys and the trackpad, but soon, he let out a small sigh. “His mother was right. It’s been wiped. Not a single saved file, and both the trash and the mailbox are empty. He must have pictured someone else using it down the line. Too bad he was so conscientious.”

“I thought you said you’d figure something out.”

Takeshi folded his arms, thinking for a moment, then glanced at his watch and shut the computer down. He pulled the cord from the outlet and began putting the machine back into its case. “I’m going out for a bit.”

“Now?”

“It’s only just past seven.”

“Where are you going? I’ll come with you.”

“To see an acquaintance. You don’t need to come. Instead, how about you read those.” He pointed at the tote bag beside her. The bundle of Naoya Tsukumi’s essays was peeking out.

“Read them for what? What am I looking for?”

“If any of them makes an impression on you, let me know.”

“What kind of impression?”

“You won’t know until you read them. If there’s anything that surprises you or really moves you, set it aside.”

Mayu grimaced. “That’s a pretty vague assignment.”

“Stop complaining and start reading, back in your own room, if you don’t mind,” Takeshi said, standing and taking a jacket from the closet. “Oh, right, and try calling Kakitani, would you? He should have reached out to at least a few of your old classmates by now. Ask him if he’s confirmed any alibis yet.”

“You think he’ll really just tell me? I’ve got a feeling he’ll dodge the question one way or another.”

“If you feel like he’s stringing you along, just tell him that you’ll be forced to go around at the reunion tomorrow and ask everyone for their alibis yourself.”

Coming from anyone else it would have sounded like a joke. What scared Mayu is that her uncle meant it. “I’m not exactly confident I can pull that off, but I’ll give it a try. By the way, what are you doing about dinner?”

“I’ll grab something on the way. I’ll probably be late. Once you’ve finished reading, leave everything in this room.” Takeshi tossed her his room key.

Back in her own room, Mayu immediately called Kakitani.

"Thanks again for yesterday," he answered, a wary tone in his voice.

He probably suspects why I'm calling.

"Sorry to bother you, but my uncle wanted me to ask whether you've managed to confirm any of my classmates' alibis yet." It was easier, she had realized, if she just dumped all the blame on her uncle for the time being.

"Well, the investigation's still ongoing, so we're not really at a stage where I can say anything definite," Kakitani replied. A predictable dodge.

"Could you at least tell me what you know so far? With the reunion tomorrow and all, I honestly don't know how I'm supposed to face everyone."

"I see your point. Could you hold a moment?"

The background noise on the line vanished. It sounded like Kakitani had moved somewhere more private.

"Let's see. As for people whose whereabouts on the night of March sixth we've been able to confirm, first there's Kohei Haraguchi—the one who found the body."

Mayu felt her hackles rise. Haraguchi was the last person she suspected of anything. *He thinks he can brush me aside with this?*

"Anyone else?" Her voice came out sharper than she intended.

"Next would be Mr. Numakawa. He says he was working at his shop."

Another name that was entirely beyond suspicion. She didn't need Kakitani to tell her that.

"And besides him?"

"We've confirmed Mr. Kashiwagi as well. It seems he was at a dinner with some colleagues that night." If he was saying that much, they must have already checked it.

"Anyone else? Like Kugimiya?"

"Mr. Kugimiya, right…that one's a bit tricky. If you're asking whether he has an alibi or not, I'd say he probably does." His tone suddenly lost its crispness; it was palpable that he was fudging things.

"Can you be a little clearer? If not, I'll just have to ask Kugimiya himself," she said, expecting the detective to panic, but his response surprised her.

"Hmm. It might actually be better if you did that. It's a privacy issue, so my hands are tied, but you might get something out of him."

“What kind of privacy? I won’t tell anyone—just explain it to me.”

On the other end of the line, Kakitani let out a troubled sigh. He sounded genuinely at a loss. “The thing is, at first he told us he’d been at his parents’ house. But it turns out he doesn’t sleep in the main building—he stays in an annex out in the garden, so there was no one who could vouch for him. At that point, he effectively had no alibi. Later on, however, it came to light that he’d been with someone.”

“With someone? You mean Kokori…er, Ririka Kokonoe?”

“I couldn’t say.”

So, yeah, Kokorika.

“That counts as an alibi? For all you know, they just agreed to say they were together.”

“That’s true, but there is the matter of where they met. Ah, this is awkward. Ms. Mayu, the only reason I’m telling you this much is because you’re the victim’s daughter. Normally I couldn’t share investigative secrets like this.”

“I understand. I really appreciate it,” Mayu said quickly. “So where exactly were they?”

“I told you, I can’t say that. Please, don’t press me.”

“Then at least give me a hint.”

“You’re putting me in a tough spot here. All right… It’s about a thirty-minute drive from town. Twenty if you take the expressway. The person in question owns a car and drove there themselves. Kugimiya rode along as a passenger. Once they arrived, they stayed there for about two hours before coming back. We checked the location data on their phones, so we’re confident there’s no mistake. When we presented Mr. Kugimiya with this evidence, he confirmed the account. Of course, it’s theoretically possible someone else took their phones in the car with them, but a look at the security cameras would settle that, so we’re inclined to trust the initial story.”

“They took the highway, and stayed for two hours? That would mean…”

“Please, don’t think too hard about it,” Kakitani said, almost pleading.

“Is there anyone else with an alibi?”

“At this point, no. There’s one who says they were at home, but that’s hard to verify.”

Mayu wondered if he meant Momoko. “Couldn’t you just use their phone

location data?”

“Not if they say they were at home. They could always just leave the phone in their room and go out. We do check it, but still.”

Mayu conceded the point. “So it’s only when someone says they went somewhere that you can confirm their alibi with location data.”

“In principle, yes—but not everyone is cooperative.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, some people refuse to hand over their phones, citing privacy concerns. Even when we promise we won’t look at anything else and will only check the location data while they watch, they’re not easily convinced. If we could get a warrant, that would be another matter, but we can’t without sufficient cause.”

That made sense, Mayu thought, nodding. She herself would balk at letting a detective handle her phone.

“That’s where things stand right now. As I said earlier, I’m only being this open because you’re who you are. Under normal circumstances, this would never happen. I hope you understand that.”

“Thank you. I’m grateful—on my late father’s behalf as well.” Speaking as politely as she could, Mayu ended the call.

That night, she decided to have dinner in the dining hall. She planned to return to work the following week, which meant her check-out day was tomorrow. Tomorrow morning would be her last meal here.

There were a few more customers in the dining hall than on previous nights. It was Saturday, after all; apparently that meant more tourists. The staff seemed livelier, too, and somehow that lifted her spirits.

She was sitting at a corner table eating a tempura set and looking around the room when a faint sense of dissonance crept over her. Something was off. Then she noticed it: the *Gen-Lab* House poster was gone. Mayu asked the proprietress about it the next time she walked by.

“I just thought it was about time we took it down,” the woman said, shaking her head. “No use brooding over something that’s done and this town has plenty of other good things to offer.”

“You’re right,” Mayu said with a nod. Oddly, it was the most hopeful thing she’d heard anyone in town say since she arrived.

“Please take your time,” the proprietress said as she went about her work.

Mayu had just gone back to her meal when a man and woman took the

table next to hers. Both had white hair. They looked like a married couple. No sooner had the man sat down than he started talking about a soba shop—some little-known place near a famous bamboo grove that he wanted to try. In that case, we know where we're having lunch tomorrow, his wife replied.

A bamboo grove and a soba shop…I guess even a no-name town has things it can be proud of.

Dinner done, she went back to her room and began reading Naoya Tsukumi's essays. There were twelve in all: seven from his first year and five from his second. "The Person I Respect" was one of the second-year pieces.

Sometimes the essay topics had been assigned in advance; other times they were free. "My Family," "My Summer Vacation," and "What I Want from My School" were surely the former. "Run, Hit, Field!," which praised pro-baseball player Ichiro, and "Network," which talked about the possibilities of the Internet, were probably free topics. As for "On Friends," though, she couldn't immediately decide if it had been assigned or not. Unsurprisingly, it was about Katsuki Kugimiya. One line about how happy Naoya had been to have found a true friend made her chest tighten.

What struck her again was just how good Naoya Tsukumi was at writing. Like Mayu herself, most students were too busy filling in all the little squares on the manuscript paper to worry about what they were actually saying. They didn't spare a thought for making it interesting to read. Naoya's essays, however, always had a clear point, and you could feel that he wanted to get something across to his reader. On top of that, they were concise, with no wasted words.

She remembered that whenever she had gone to visit him, there had always been books in his hospital room. He'd told her he liked to read. But they had never once talked about what kind of books he liked, or even what his favorite book was. Thinking back, Mayu realized that in that hospital room she had always talked only about herself, and not even fun things that had happened at school. It had mostly been complaints: How stifling it was to have a parent who taught at the same school, et cetera. The same old gripes as ever. It was a wonder Naoya had put up with her.

She read through each carefully. It took her nearly two hours to get through all twelve and the effort left her eyes bleary and her shoulders stiff.

Mayu stood, deciding it was high time she went for a soak in the hot spring attached to the hotel to clear her head.

Which reminds me, we have hot springs here in town, too. I guess it's not all just Gen-Lab *after all.*

Mayu soaked in the hot bath and let her mind drift back over the past week. There had been so many unexpected events it was hard to put them in order in her head. Her trip to the bridal salon with Kenta already felt like something from the distant past. That had been on Sunday, so as of tomorrow it would only have been a week.

She wondered what time it was. Her father had been killed last Saturday. Takeshi had said it had happened around eleven at night. So right around now. Exactly one week ago.

What had been on her father's mind last week? Had he been pondering ways to make Momoko and Ryosuke happy again, like her uncle had suggested, never dreaming that his own life was about to end?

A drop of moisture ticked her as it ran down her cheek. Mayu couldn't tell whether it was a tear, sweat, or a droplet of condensation from the ceiling. She returned to her room and read through the essays again. Her uncle told her to let him know if any of them stood out, but that was a tall order. Every last one was well written and memorable. Simply put, all of them qualified.

Her thoughts still in disarray, she gathered up the essays and left her room. When she went to Takeshi's room, she found the door unlocked. Maybe a member of the inn staff had come to lay out the futons and gone off without locking it again. It was pitch black inside the room. She flipped the switch on the wall and nearly screamed. Takeshi was there, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the floor.

"Uncle Takeshi, you scared the crap out of me! You're back?!"

"Just got here," Takeshi answered, his eyes still closed.

"How did you even get into the room? Wasn't the door locked?"

"Locks are hardly a barrier to entry."

So he's a lockpick, too. Just who was her uncle, really? "You could at least turn the light on."

"I don't need light to think." Takeshi opened his eyes and turned his face toward her. "Did you read the essays?"

"I did. I was impressed—they're really well written." Mayu sat down.

“Impressed, okay. But no real surprises?”

“Surprises? No, not particularly.”

“Right. Leave them here, anyway. I’ll read through them myself.”

Mayu set the stack of manuscript paper on the table. “What about the computer?”

“I restored the data and left it someplace else.”

“You got the data back! Where is it?”

“That I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?” Mayu’s lips jutted out in a pout.

A faint line appeared between Takeshi’s brows. “Because you’d want to look at it.”

“Duh, I want to look at it. Why won’t you let me?”

“Eventually, I will. Now is too soon.”

“Why does everything always have to be a mystery with you?”

“I have my reasons. Anyway, did you get in touch with Kakitani?”

“Yeah.”

“How’d it go?”

“Better than I expected. He was reluctant, but I think he told me pretty much everything,” Mayu said, and relayed what the detective had told her. “What really surprised me was that Kokorika and Kugimiya were together. On a Saturday night, no less. They drove about thirty minutes from town and stayed there for two hours. Sounds like a hotel, right? I mean, a love hotel.”

“That would be the reasonable conclusion.”

“It’s wild, isn’t it? So they really are a thing. Hapless Noby’s doing pretty well for himself. Or maybe it’s Kokorika playing the demure Shizuka while actually working him as a client.”

Takeshi didn’t rise to the bait. “Did Kakitani say anything about Makihara’s alibi?”

“No. So I’m guessing he hasn’t confirmed it yet.”

“Is Makihara married?”

She shook her head. “I’m pretty sure he’s single. I remember Momoko telling me. Why?”

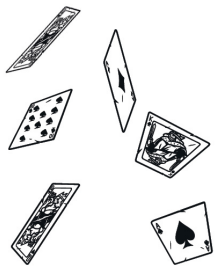
Takeshi didn’t answer. He closed his eyes again and folded his arms. Then he went completely still.

“Uncle Takeshi?” Mayu prompted.

After a while, he finally opened his eyes. The corners of his mouth loosened, and he let out a low, unsettling chuckle. “Right. Of course. It all lines up.”

“What lines up? Uh, you’re kind of creeping me out. What did you figure out? Tell me.”

“I was going to tell you anyway. However—” He unfolded his arms and spread both hands wide. “I must ask you to wait just a little bit longer. Until showtime.”



26

Noon, Sunday.

She went to the spot marked on the map. The restaurant was an exotic-looking building of simple wooden construction, surprisingly chic for this town. As Momoko had said, there was an open-air space as well. A sign out front announced that it was reserved for a private event. Just inside the entrance stood a long, narrow table, where Momoko was handling the reception.

“Reception duty again? The wake, the funeral, and now the reunion. That’s a trifecta of annoying jobs.”

“Tell me about it!” Momoko said with a laugh. “Maybe someone will hire me as a full-time receptionist?” She looked a little self-conscious, perhaps because of what had happened yesterday. Mayu wondered if she and Ryosuke had talked things through afterward.

Mayu used the bottle of alcohol on the desk to sanitize her hands and was given a seating chart. It seemed this wouldn’t be a standing buffet; they would be sitting at tables. The restaurant was spacious, with the chairs set far apart, and acrylic partitions stood on the tables between the facing seats to block aerial droplets.

Her old classmates started calling out to her as Mayu searched for her seat. Everyone seemed to know about her father, and each offered their condolences. “I’m praying they solve the case soon,” “Take care of yourself”—none of it felt hollow. Even when a few of them handed over their business cards and said, “Get in touch if there’s anything I can do,” it felt like they really meant it.

Her classmate Suzuki came over to greet her. Apparently he was serving

as MC today. “They’re going to be passing out champagne, but with what happened to Professor Kamio, I don’t think a normal toast is appropriate. I was thinking we could have a ten-second moment of silence first, then raise our glasses. Would that be okay?”

“It’s totally fine by me,” she told him. “I’ll leave it to you. Just, after that, please don’t feel the need to tiptoe around it. Just run things like normal.”

“Got it. Thanks.” Suzuki walked off with a look of relief on his face.

After hearing so many kind words from former classmates, Mayu found herself reflecting on how much she had hated having a teacher for a father back in junior high. She wished she could have found it in herself to have been a little prouder of a man who was so clearly beloved by his students.

Some of the people who’d come to the funeral began to appear. Spotting Haraguchi in a suit, Mayu went over to him. “I got a small favor to ask. Think you could help me out?”

“Sure. What do you need?”

“I’d like to give something in return to the people who brought condolence money. After we finish eating here, everyone’s going to the school, right?”

“Seems so. Guess we’re going to see what’s become of our old haunts and take some commemorative photos.”

“Right. Do you think I could get you to *not* go straight home after that? I’d only need you to stay a little while longer. Would that be all right?”

“I don’t mind, but honestly, I don’t think you need to bother with giving out gifts or anything. None of us put that much in the envelopes, right? Me included.”

“It’s not me. My uncle’s the one who wants to thank everyone.”

“Oh yeah? He’s an interesting guy, your uncle. Sure, why not?” A curious look came over Haraguchi’s face.

“So, you’ll stay behind?”

“Yeah, no problem. Want me to spread the word to the others, too?”

“I’d appreciate that.”

Watching Haraguchi walk away, Mayu let out a breath of relief. He didn’t seem the least bit suspicious. Keeping everyone behind at the school after the reunion had been, of course, another of Takeshi’s instructions. But, true to form, he hadn’t said what would happen next. She had no idea what he was planning.

Before long, everyone had taken their seats. They were just under thirty people, by the look of it. For a small school that had only two classes per grade to begin with, that was actually a pretty good turnout. Suzuki, the MC, appeared wearing a mask. He held a microphone in his right hand, but first he raised his left. In it he was gripping a large placard that read: *Please refrain from speaking in loud voices.* Another Covid-era precaution, evidently. There was a small ripple of laughter.

Lowering the placard, Suzuki brought the mic to his mouth. "Hello, everyone," he said in a deliberately subdued tone. A few people answered, just as quietly, with a hello. "Perfect volume level, everyone. Given the times, let's keep it there. I know a lot of you are seeing old friends for the first time in ages and would love to cut loose, but for today, I have to ask you to hold back a little." As you'd expect from someone willing to MC, Suzuki had a way with words.

Drinks were brought to each table. In front of Mayu sat a mini bottle of champagne and a glass. The glass was covered with plastic wrap; apparently they were expected to pour their own—another infection-control measure. Suzuki explained to everyone what he had discussed with Mayu earlier, that there would be no formal toast. No one objected. After a brief moment of silence, they all quietly raised their drinks.

The food arrived next, and Suzuki launched into another explanation. Three speakers—their old homeroom and subject teachers—would be giving short addresses, he said, but everyone was free to eat while they listened. The idea was that if they finished their meals early, they could put their masks back on and chat afterward without worrying as much.

Once the speeches began, Mayu found herself deeply grateful for that setup. The elderly teachers all tended to go on at length, and if they'd had nothing to do but listen, it would have been painfully boring. Worse, they said very little specifically about the forty-second graduating class; most of their remarks were updates on their own lives, mixed with reminiscences and a touch of boasting. Still, all three made a point of mentioning Katsuki Kugimiya's achievements, saying how proud they were that such a successful alumnus had emerged from their school. None of them, however, seemed very familiar with his actual work.

Because lunch was fairly light, most people had finished eating by the time the teachers' greetings were over. As planned, the rest of the time was

given over to masked conversation. Mayu deliberately steered clear of those who had already spoken with her at the wake and funeral, instead trading words with classmates she truly hadn't seen in years. There were a few insensitive questions about the case, but she managed to deflect those without causing offense.

Before long, Suzuki announced that their time at the restaurant was nearly up. "I'm sure you all still have plenty more to talk about, so let's continue at our alma mater. We've got permission to use the school today, and we've even arranged a charter bus to take us there. Let's check out our old haunts and let the memories flow!"

His tone was bright, but he only got a lukewarm response from the group. It was hard to expect real excitement about an afterparty at a junior high school. Even so, when the bus came, everyone dutifully filed on board.

They arrived at the school and went on a quick tour, starting with the gymnasium and moving on to the teachers' room, the music room, the nurse's office, and all the other familiar spots. Their guides were two girls currently in the second year of junior high. It seemed a bit harsh, dragging school kids out on a Sunday for this, but neither of them showed the slightest sign of displeasure. They were practically chipper as they explained the current state of the school.

They stepped into a classroom and Mayu was startled to see a large monitor set up beside the teacher's lectern. According to one of the girls, it was for projecting the teacher's computer screen so everyone in class could see it. Even out here in the countryside, tech was apparently making inroads into education.

As she was walking down the corridor, someone called out, "Hey Kamio." It was Ririka Kokonoe, with Kugimiya in her shadow as usual. "Haraguchi was saying you'd like us to stay behind after the tour?" she said. "Any chance you could tell me what this is about?" Her wording was polite, but there was an edge to her voice.

"Just, my uncle wants to thank everyone for coming to the funeral," Mayu said. "To tell the truth, I don't actually know what he plans to do."

A faint crease appeared between Ririka Kokonoe's brows. "To be honest, Katsuki and I aren't very keen on staying," she said. "There's always the risk Kashiwagi and the others will start in on us again, right? Even at the restaurant just now, it was obvious they were looking for an excuse to come

over. We decided to attend because Katsuki said he wanted to be there for Tsukimi's memorial, but then that got cancelled. At this point I kind of wish we hadn't come at all."

"Being Kugimiya's manager sounds like a handful," Mayu said. She hadn't meant it as a barb, but somehow it came out that way.

Both of Ririka's eyebrows shot up. "I hold *Gen'no Labyrinth* in very high regard," she said. "I simply don't want it cheapened as a sales gimmick. We need to find projects worthy of the work."

"I understand, I do. But my uncle is really insistent… He says it won't take long, so please, just humor us for a little while?" Mayu pressed her palms together in front of her face.

Ririka let out an exaggerated sigh. "Let's go," she said at last, prompting Kugimiya to continue walking.

The former classmates gathered in a tiered lecture room where they took a commemorative group photo, and with that, the program officially ended. Suzuki reminded them that the school gates would close at five, so they needed to be off the grounds by then. It was just after four.

Mayu called Takeshi. "We've just finished."

"Good. Get everyone together in Class 3-1 right away."

"Got it."

She passed the message on to those who were still hanging around—Kashiwagi, Makihara, Kugimiya and the rest—who all looked vaguely dubious.

"Hey, Kamio, what exactly is your uncle planning to pull?" Kashiwagi asked.

"No idea. I figure we'll find out when we get there."

Class 3-1 was on the third floor. They all trooped up the stairs. The classroom was dark, so Mayu turned on the lights. Nothing in particular seemed out of place. Everyone took seats, scattered around the room. Only Kashiwagi sat up on one of the front-row desks. Mayu stood beside the lectern and waited for Takeshi to appear.

"He's taking his sweet time. How long does he plan on keeping us waiting?" Kashiwagi complained, checking his watch.

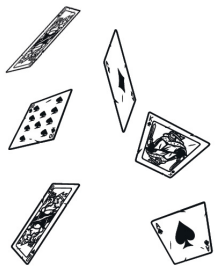
It was just then that the familiar chime signaling the start of the period sounded from the speaker above the blackboard. *Ding dong. Ding dong.*

"What the hell?" someone muttered. Just then, the door slid open with a

clatter, and every eye swung toward the front of the room.

When Mayu saw the figure who stepped into the classroom, she almost screamed. In fact, several of her old classmates actually did cry out in surprise.

Standing there in the doorway was Eiichi Kamio, Mayu's father, dead now for one week.



27

Of course, it wasn't really her father. It was Uncle Takeshi in disguise. But the graying hair, the file tucked under one arm, the slightly stooped posture, the way he held his head just a little to the left—every last detail was pure Eiichi. Mayu had seen that dark brown herringbone suit countless times back when her father was an active teacher. The figure walked toward the lectern. Even his gait, the rhythm of his steps, was identical to Eiichi's. With those trademark round glasses and a mask over his face, he might as well have been the man himself.

However close the family resemblance might have been, Takeshi's "Eiichi act" was almost too perfect. In reality, the brothers' faces and builds were completely different; Takeshi was nearly ten centimeters taller than her dad had been. But he had somehow adjusted his clothes or was using some other visual trickery so that nothing felt out of place.

"Well, I'll be damned," Kashiwagi was the first to speak. "I really thought it was him. Right, guys?" He looked around for confirmation, almost everyone nodded.

Takeshi-as-Eiichi stopped, touched his glasses, and turned toward Kashiwagi.

"Did you not hear the chime, Kashiwagi? Allow me to inform you that the thing you're currently sitting on is called a desk. It is for reading and writing, not for sitting. The smaller object behind it is what we call 'a chair.' That's for sitting upon. If this is new terminology for you, the sooner you get acquainted with it the better."

"Ha-ha!" Kashiwagi clapped his hands and stood. "You got me. Even the voice is dead-on." Still laughing, he dropped into the chair behind the desk

Takeshi next turned his gaze on Mayu. “Mayu Kamio. Are you, perhaps, the one giving class today? In that case, I suppose I should be the one taking a seat.”

“Ah… sorry.” Mayu stepped down from the lectern and took a seat by the window. She remembered her father addressing her like that back in junior high, with her full name: Mayu Kamio. It would have been odd calling her his own surname, and just using her given name alone, like he did at home, didn’t feel appropriate either.

Takeshi started walking again and stepped up onto the platform. He swept his eyes around the room, then opened what he was carrying under his arm. Looking closely, she saw it was the attendance book.

“Let’s take roll,” he said solemnly. “Kodai Kashiwagi.”

“Huh? What exactly is this all about?” Kashiwagi asked, grinning nervously.

“Kodai Kashiwagi? Not here? Is Kashiwagi absent today?”

“No, no, I’m here. Right here.” Whatever he thought of this performance, he was at least willing to play along; he raised his hand.

“Mayu Kamio.”

Here, Mayu said, lifting her hand.

“Katsuki Kugimiya.”

“Here,” Kugimiya answered.

He went on to call Ririka Kokonoe, Kaito Sugishita, Shinsuke Numakawa, Kohei Haraguchi, Momoko Honma, and Satoru Makihara in turn. Each gave their reply. Calling Momoko by her maiden name was probably his way of recreating the classroom as it had been when they were all still students.

“Very good,” Takeshi said, closing the attendance book. “It appears everyone is present. Excellent.”

“Uh, Mr. Kamio,” Kashiwagi said, raising his hand. “What exactly is going on here?”

Takeshi let his gaze sweep the room again before returning it to Kashiwagi.

“Has sixteen years really been enough for you to entirely forget what subject I taught? That’s a bit disappointing.”

“What, you’re going to give us a Japanese lesson? Now?”

“Precisely,” Takeshi said, looking around the classroom. “As you know, I,

too, was invited to today's reunion. However, an unforeseen accident forced me to leave this world before I was able to attend. Even so, I wanted to see your faces, and so I decided to hold this impromptu class. Let's enjoy this little bit of time we have together, though it be brief"

Someone raised a hand. It was Haraguchi. "What kind of class are we talking about? We didn't bring any textbooks."

"Don't worry about that. We won't be using textbooks. Today's lesson is 'letters.'"

"You mean, letters like the alphabet?" Haraguchi again.

"*Correspondance*," Takeshi said crisply, in Eiichi's voice. "Like a letter you might write to a dear friend."

Everyone looked puzzled and began murmuring to one another. The day had taken such a sudden left turn that everyone, including Mayu, was finding it hard to keep up.

"Quiet, please," Takeshi said, again in her father's voice. "Why letters? Before I explain that, there's something I should say. I understand that a memorial for Naoya Tsukumi had been planned for today but was cancelled. Still, since we're all here like this, I'd like us to hold a small memorial of our own. Now then, where is Kugimiya? Ah, there you are. Would you mind standing for a moment?"

Kugimiya looked around, then stood from his seat near the middle of the room.

"Yesterday, it seems that Tsukumi's mother got in touch with Mayu Kamio," Takeshi said. "Going through her son's belongings again, she apparently came across an old envelope. Inside was what looked like a thick letter, properly sealed, addressed jointly to Kugimiya and myself. When his mother asked what she should do with it, Mayu recommended she give it to Kugimiya. Have you heard anything about this from her?"

Mayu froze. She had no memory of any such conversation. If he was going to spin a story like this, why hadn't he warned her beforehand?

"Yes. I went to pick it up before coming to the reunion," Kugimiya answered calmly.

Mayu stared at him, stunned. That envelope had never come up yesterday. So Tsukumi's mother must have found it afterward. But then how did Takeshi know about it?

"I'm curious what's inside. Do you have it with you now?"

“Yes, right here.” Kugimiya took an envelope from the inside pocket of his jacket.

“Since it’s addressed to the two of us, I assume I’m entitled to read it as well?” Takeshi asked.

“Of course. Although—it isn’t a letter.”

“Not a letter? Then what is it?”

“You’ll understand when you see it.”

Kugimiya walked up to the front and held the envelope out. “Here.”

Takeshi took a folded sheet of paper out of the envelope. It was much larger than any letter stationery when he opened it up. Even from a distance, Mayu could see what it was: manuscript paper.

“Well, well, an essay. The title is ‘On Friends.’ I see—that’s why he wanted you to have it. Sorry to trouble you, Kugimiya, but would you read a bit of it for us?”

“Right now, here?”

“That’s right. Nothing to be shy about. You didn’t write it—Tsukumi did. He may be embarrassed in the next world, but he’ll just have to put up with it. Go on, read it out loud for everyone.” Takeshi handed him the manuscript paper.

Facing the room, Kugimiya gave a small cough and began.

“‘On Friends.’ Class 2-2, Naoya Tsukumi. ‘If you ask me how many friends I have, I’d say I have a lot. Ever since elementary school, I’ve been surrounded by many friends. Fun friends, funny friends, reliable friends, I have all kinds. They all have good qualities. If something good happens to a friend, I want to be happy along with them, and if a friend is in trouble, I want to help them however I can. I think that’s what friendship is. That’s why, if someone asks who my very best friend is, I don’t know what to say. How can I rank my friends?’”

“Um…” Kugimiya glanced back at Takeshi. “Do I have to keep going?”

“Just a bit more.”

Kugimiya sighed, turned forward again, and resumed.

“‘But after I entered junior high and met Katsuki Kugimiya, I changed my mind. I know now that Kugimiya is my best friend. Before now, no matter who it was I was hanging out with, I never once thought ‘I want to be like him.’ I thought everyone is different, and that’s how it should be. But once I met Kugimiya, I realized: he’s the kind of person I want to be.

The way he simply knows he wants to be a manga artist, his dedication to his work, and his extraordinary talent are all things I lack. I know I can't be Kugimiya, but maybe if I hang out with him, a little bit of him will rub off on me."

"Thank you. That's enough."

Kugimiya looked up with relief on his face. Taking the essay from him, Takeshi carefully folded it and slipped it back into the envelope. "Keep it safe," he said, handing it back.

Kugimiya returned the envelope to his pocket and went back to his seat.

"That concludes our Japanese class," Takeshi said. "And our little memorial for Tsukumi."

"It was pretty moving, I'll give you that. So what's next?" Kashiwagi asked.

"When class is over, there's only one thing left to do: homeroom."

"Homeroom?" Kashiwagi's voice rose in disbelief.

"You could also call it a reflection session. Sixteen years since graduation —each of you must have something to look back on. I'd like us to revisit those things." Takeshi stepped down from the lectern and walked toward Kashiwagi's desk. "Since we're here, let's start with you, Kashiwagi. No objections, I trust?"

"Fine by me. It's a pretty entertaining idea, actually. Only problem is, what exactly am I supposed to be reflecting on? Nothing exactly springs to mind," Kashiwagi said, lounging sideways with his legs stuck out into the aisle.

"In your case, there's a perfect topic: the revitalization of this town. I've heard the rumors. It sounds like you've been hard at work."

"Of course I have. I was born and raised here. Naturally I want to do what I can to bring the place back to life."

"I applaud your commitment to the town and its future," Takeshi said. "But are you sure there's nothing you'd benefit from reflecting on? Things rarely go perfectly smoothly with plans, especially when they're as big as yours. I've heard that the *Gen'no Labyrinth* House project was led chiefly by Kashiwagi Construction. I find it hard to believe there were no miscalculations along the way, no areas where you could have been better prepared, and no shortcomings in how you picked up the pieces after the plan fell through."

Kashiwagi grimaced, wrinkling his nose. “Well, you’ve hit a sore spot, there’s no denying that. And I’ve got nothing to say in my defense. I won’t sit here and blame everything on Covid, though that certainly played a part. If we’d decided to cancel sooner, sure, I think we could have reduced the impact on our partners and everyone involved.”

“A calm and objective assessment,” Takeshi said. “The question is how you intend to make use of this knowledge going forward. Any thoughts?”

“Of course I’ll put what I’ve learned to use. As you doubtlessly already know, we’re working on a new plan in place of the *Gen’no Labyrinth* House. And there’ll be no screw-ups this time.”

“But any project needs something to get it started, am I right? Money. Any thoughts on that?”

For an instant, Kashiwagi’s expression tightened, and even from where she sat Mayu saw his eyes flick sideways to the right, his gaze landing on Makihara.

“That’s not a problem,” Kashiwagi said, looking up at Takeshi with a forced smile. “As far as funding goes, we’re fine. I’ve got several ideas in play. There’s no worry about money, Sensei.”

“Well, that’s good to hear. Perhaps it was off base of me to ask about money at all.”

Takeshi pivoted and went over to stand in front of Makihara. “When it comes to money, that would be your arena, after all. You’re a professional, yes?”

Makihara’s face had already gone rigid. “What exactly do you mean by that?”

“I meant exactly what I said. Bankers are professionals at gathering other people’s money. Spinning sweet stories, laying it on a bit thick here and there, always smooth.”

“I…I admit that’s one side of the job,” Makihara replied in a thin voice.

“The real question is what happens after you’ve collected the money. Isn’t there, somewhere inside you, the idea that what becomes of it is none of your concern? That someone’s savings could vanish into thin air and it wouldn’t materially affect you at all?”

Makihara looked up at him with a cowed expression. “I’m not sure I understand what you’re getting at.”

“No? Recently, among your clients, has there been no one who, for

example, lost assets unexpectedly?"

"You're talking about the investors in *Gen'no Labyrinth* House?"

Hearing that, Mayu almost slapped her knee. So Makihara had been involved in raising funds for the project from the start.

"Exactly. Tell me, how did you explain the situation to those investors, I wonder?" Takeshi asked. "Did you tell them ahead of time that there was a risk their substantial contributions to the project might simply disappear? Or did you perhaps present the project as entirely risk-free?"

"Look, I'm not going to sit here while you cast aspersions." It was Kashiwagi who spoke, not Makihara. "The risks were explained in advance. I said earlier I don't intend to blame everything on Covid, but yes, the reason the *Gen'no Labyrinth* House fell through was the pandemic. Surely you understand that as well as anyone else here. The investors, for their part, understand. No one's complained.

"The investors understand?" Takeshi repeated. "How exactly do they go about understanding when the money they put in doesn't come back?"

Looking a little deflated, Kashiwagi scratched the back of his head. "I don't know if you're aware of this, but construction actually did start on the House. The costs we'd incurred up to that point, plus the demolition costs after the cancellation—that all had to be swallowed by the investors, right? We did have insurance, but cancellations due to infectious disease weren't covered, so we didn't see a single yen. And just so you know, my company invested, too. We took a heavy loss along with everyone else."

"And that's what you told the investors?"

"Yes. We held a briefing session."

"Did every investor attend?"

"Some couldn't be there in person, so they sent proxies. Given the situation these days, some people attended remotely."

"And what about those who were already deceased at that point?

At Takeshi's question, Kashiwagi's eyes suddenly sharpened. He shot a quick glance at Makihara, then wet his lips. "You're talking about Morikawa?"

Mayu stiffened. At last, Kazuo Morikawa's name had surfaced—and from their own mouths. So he, too, had invested in the *Gen'no Labyrinth* House project.

"Morikawa died without ever knowing the plan had been cancelled,"

Takeshi said. “Naturally, he couldn’t attend your so-called briefing session. How did you handle that?”

“We didn’t. What could we do?” Kashiwagi said, with a shrug.

“But you had a duty to explain things to his family,” Takeshi replied, turning back to Makihara. “In fact, Kazuo Morikawa’s daughter came to consult with me when she noticed a large amount of money had disappeared from her father’s account. Why didn’t you explain it to her properly?”

“Well, that’s…” A flush crept up Makihara’s cheeks. “Look. Morikawa told us he didn’t want his family to know he was putting money into the project. He said they’d only be against it. He even said he wouldn’t tell them which account he was using.”

“Ah, a secret account, then. Remarkably convenient for you, I must say.” Takeshi looked down at Kashiwagi again. “I understand about the partial construction costs and the demolition, but that can’t have brought the project funds all the way down to zero, can it? So what happened to the remaining funds?” Takeshi asked. “I assume you presented a refund plan to the investors at the briefing. But Morikawa wasn’t there. The money he contributed could have stayed entirely in your hands, and no one would be the wiser. For that matter, were your estimates for construction and demolition costs even legitimate? Kashiwagi Construction led the build, the teardown, and the removal, didn’t it? The expenses could be manipulated any way you liked. It’s like playing a game of *shogi* against yourself, isn’t it?”

“Hey,” Kashiwagi barked, springing to his feet. “I don’t care if you’re Mr. Kamio’s brother, there are some lines you don’t cross, and you are *way* out of line. Are you saying my company padded the bill? Let me tell you something—we did *Gen’no Labyrinth* House at cost. Any other outfit would’ve charged nearly double what we did. Don’t spout nonsense when you don’t know the first thing about who we are and what we do.”

“You’re right about one thing: I don’t know,” Takeshi said. “But what about the real Eiichi Kamio? Given how well-versed he was in economics and finance, might he not have dug a little deeper into this issue? Suppose he realized it wasn’t a simple matter at all, but something a little more intricate—a conspiracy, even. In that case, once the ringleaders realized he’d caught on, wouldn’t they have begun to see Mr. Kamio’s continued existence as a problem?”

“What are you saying, exactly?” Makihara’s voice trembled. “Are you accusing us of doing something to Mr. Kamio?”

“Given the line of reasoning I just laid out, you can’t claim the possibility is zero, can you?”

“This is ridiculous. I was wondering what you were getting at,” Kashiwagi spat. “What a joke. Let’s go, Makihara. At first I thought this was a clever little stunt, but this, this *farce* is a waste of time. You’re barking up the wrong tree, old man, and I’ve had enough of it. We should just leave. Who’s with me?”

“This is no farce,” Takeshi’s voice rang out—no longer in his brother’s tones, but in his own, firm and resonant.

He stepped back up onto the platform and moved behind the teacher’s desk. Then he turned his back and slipped off his jacket to reveal a pitch-black shirt underneath. When he turned to face the room again, his Covid mask, formerly white, was now black. He stepped away from the desk to reveal that even his slacks were black, now. He was dressed in black from head to toe.

“We now begin Act Two,” he proclaimed, as everyone stared in stunned silence. “In which we reveal the truth, no matter what it takes. Here and now, in this room, I will unmask the person who killed my brother.”

Kashiwagi shrank back a step. “That’s…a pretty heavy thing to say.”

Takeshi nodded. “We’re talking about murder. There’s nothing light about it. Now, if we’re all clear on our purpose here, I’d like you to *take your seats*.”

By this point, the class wasn’t sure if he was dead serious or if this was just more theatrics, but even Kashiwagi, cowed by the force in Takeshi’s voice, returned meekly to his seat. “In that case, I’ll stick around a bit longer,” Kashiwagi said. “But what’s the big idea, suddenly treating us like the culprits when you don’t have any proof?”

“I’m not treating you as culprits. I’m saying there’s a possibility. And the reasoning I laid out just now is hardly outlandish. We’re talking about sums in the hundreds of millions of yen moving through *Gen’no Labyrinth* House. It would hardly be surprising if there had been even a little wrongdoing along the way.”

“Well there wasn’t. How many times do I have to say it?” Kashiwagi sounded fed up.

“In that case, why did Makihara look away?” Takeshi turned to point straight at him. “At the wake, why couldn’t you bring yourself to look properly at my brother’s portrait?”

Makihara blinked rapidly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Takeshi turned toward the monitor at the front of the room and snapped his fingers. A moment later, an image flickered onto the screen. Mayu caught her breath at the sight: There was a monk chanting sutras, filmed from directly in front. Beyond him she could see the coffin. It was the wake venue.

When the next figure appeared on screen, her surprise deepened. There was Kashiwagi in his mourning suit. He stopped in front of the coffin, peered inside, then lifted his eyes to look straight toward the camera before beginning to offer incense.

“What the hell?” Kashiwagi’s face drained of color.

“You remember the portrait of my brother at the front of the venue? There was a camera, hidden in the eyes. What you’re seeing now is yourselves from my brother’s point of view, after a fashion.”

Takeshi spoke as if it were no big deal, but even Mayu hadn’t heard about this one. She thought back and realized that Takeshi had been alone in the funeral hall before the wake, when she’d been in the waiting room going over details with Nogi. He must have set the camera up then.

And the camera itself—she recognized it now. It was the same hidden camera he’d had tucked into the picture hanging in his room. She remembered Takeshi coming down from the second floor when she went to her father’s house to look for some of his belongings. He had probably gone up there to retrieve the device.

“But that’s not right. No one told us about this. It’s filming without consent!” Kashiwagi protested hotly.

“I’m sorry, filming without consent?” Takeshi echoed. “Now you’re the one making unfair accusations. I’m pretty sure the attendees were informed in advance that we would be recording at the wake and funeral.”

At that, Kashiwagi fell silent, jaw clenched. He clearly didn’t like it, but he had nothing solid to throw back.

“I’ll readily admit, though, that preserving a record of the day wasn’t my only aim. I also wanted to find the killer. Having everyone view the body before offering incense was part of that plan—it was meant to catch the

culprit off guard.” Takeshi’s eyes swept the room as he continued.

“If the person who killed my brother was among the mourners, the announcement that there’d be a viewing of the body must have made them quite tense. They would have told themselves one thing: Don’t look away from the body. If I avert my eyes, they’ll think it’s suspicious. But in fact, the killer likely felt a certain relief when they finally stood before the coffin—because my brother’s eyes were closed. Once they’d passed the coffin, they would then approach the incense burner where a surprise was waiting for them: a portrait of my brother with his eyes wide open, looking right at them. For the killer, that would have been far more unsettling than seeing the body. It’s a very different thing, after all. Hard not to look away.”

So that was his plan, Mayu thought, amazed once again by her uncle’s thoroughness. The body had been, in a sense, a decoy.

The camera zoomed in on Kashiwagi’s face. As the classroom watched, he pressed his palms together, fixed a steady, serious gaze on the camera—on the portrait of the deceased—and bowed before stepping out of frame.

“As befitting the heir to a top-tier company,” Takeshi said. “Composed, unwavering. You looked straight at my brother’s portrait without so much as blinking.”

Perhaps not entirely displeased by the praise, Kashiwagi’s expression softened a little. “Well, of course. Mr. Kamio did a lot for me. When I offered incense, it was with all my regret that he couldn’t have lived longer, and all my frustration that it had come to this,” he said, his tone polite again.

“Very good,” Takeshi replied, and snapped his fingers once more. The camera zoomed out again. Next to appear was Numakawa. His movements were almost identical to Kashiwagi’s. His gaze didn’t have the same intensity, but once he turned it toward the portrait, it never wavered.

Then came Makihara. He looked into the coffin, then slowly approached the incense stand. After offering incense, he pressed his hands together and closed his eyes.

The moment his face filled the screen, his eyelids opened. But his pupils were angled slightly downward, clearly not looking straight ahead. A second later, he walked out of frame.

Takeshi snapped his fingers once more, and the playback froze.

“Explain to me,” Takeshi said. “Why couldn’t you look my brother’s

portrait in the eye?"

"I… I don't remember doing that… I thought I did look. I meant to look," Makihara stammered.

"But the footage is right here. This is what they call incontrovertible evidence. So why couldn't you meet my brother's gaze? Was there something on your conscience, perhaps?"

Makihara's mouth hung half open as he shook his head. "No, it's nothing like that. Please, you have to believe me."

"Wasn't it my brother who introduced you to Morikawa?" Takeshi pressed. "That's why Atsumi Morikawa turned to him when she found her father's savings had vanished. My brother felt responsible and confronted you about it. Realizing you couldn't hide your embezzlement, you found out he would be going out on the night of Saturday, March sixth, sneaked into his house to lie in wait, and killed him as soon as he got back. And that's why you couldn't bring yourself to look straight at his portrait at the wake. Tell me that's not what happened!"

"No. No, it's not like that at all. I didn't do it! I was at home all that night. I swear."

"I'm glad to hear it. In that case," Takeshi said, "tell us here and now what became of Morikawa's money."

"Well…" Makihara's eyes flicked uncertainly toward Kashiwagi.

Kashiwagi let out a long sigh. "Unbelievable, Makihara. Couldn't you hold it together even for one night, at a wake of all places?"

"I'm sorry. Honestly! I don't even remember doing that…"

"Forget it," Kashiwagi said, shaking his head. "At this point, with this much suspicion on us, we might as well come clean. I think Morikawa will forgive us."

"Forgiveness from the deceased?" Takeshi asked. "Perhaps you'd like to explain to the class what exactly you need forgiveness for."

Kashiwagi exhaled slowly. "Tell him, Makihara."

Eyes down, hesitating, Makihara let out a long breath. "Mr. Kamio introduced me to Morikawa about two years ago," he began. "Morikawa wanted to consolidate assets he had scattered in various places, so I handled the procedures for opening a new account. Before long, money began to flow into that account, and the total quickly exceeded a hundred million yen. Naturally, as his banker, I suggested some investment options. But

that's when he brought up something unexpected: he said he wanted to donate the money to charity. He never spelled it out in so many words, but it seemed clear the funds were dirty money he'd made overseas, doing things like money laundering, back when he was active. He told me he didn't feel right leaving that money to his family as an inheritance, and wanted it used for something that would benefit society."

"The gangster reformed. That sounds awfully noble," Takeshi remarked.

"But it's true," Makihara insisted. "He said that when he was young, he thought walking a dangerous line was what business was all about, but as he grew older, he realized how badly mistaken he'd been. That's why he'd come back to his hometown—because he wanted to give something back."

Mayu didn't think this was a lie, and it matched what Takeshi had turned up by asking around about Kazuo Morikawa.

"Which is when you suggested investing in the *Gen'no Labyrinth* House," Takeshi said.

Makihara nodded. "Morikawa was enthusiastic," Makihara continued. "What better way to ease his feelings of guilt than putting money toward the revitalization of his hometown. But he didn't want his name showing up in any lists of investors, and above all else he didn't want his family to know about it. I discussed it with Kashiwagi, and we decided to treat the whole thing as a purchase of membership rights. For two hundred thousand yen, you could become a VIP member of *Gen'no Labyrinth* House. We already had several hundred real applicants. With Morikawa's consent, we used about five hundred pseudonyms and transferred all the funds that way."

"If you sold memberships, there must be certificates?" Takeshi said. "Where are those kept?"

"In my company's safe. This isn't some story we're making up," Kashiwagi said, his tone a little calmer.

"We thought that settled everything," Makihara continued, "but then something happened that we hadn't counted on. Morikawa died of Covid, suddenly. And that was before he could close off his 'secret' account. All we could do was hope his family wouldn't discover it."

"There was another miscalculation, too," Takeshi said. "Covid wiped out the *Gen'no Labyrinth* House project."

"Exactly. VIP membership fees aren't investments, so they all had to be

refunded in full. The problem was what to do about Morikawa's portion. If we refunded it, we'd have to tell his family."

"I was the one who proposed rolling it into the next project," Kashiwagi added. "I thought that would be most in line with Morikawa's wishes. And let me be clear: we never had the slightest intention of lining our own pockets. We're not so petty that we'd skim a mere hundred million yen. And we certainly never dreamed of doing anything to Mr. Kamio over it."

Watching them closely, Takeshi nodded slowly and paced in a small circle. He came to a halt and looked down at Makihara again.

"When did you first talk to my brother about all this?"

"During the day on March sixth."

"The sixth… the day he was killed."

"Yes. He called me. I couldn't answer at the time, so he left a voicemail asking me to call him back. He'd called from his landline, so I tried that first, but couldn't get through, so I rang his mobile instead. It sounded like he was on the move."

"He would've been on his way to Tokyo," Takeshi said. "What did he say?"

"He told me he'd met Morikawa's daughter the day before. She'd left a message saying she wanted to talk about her father's bank account, and that's why he'd contacted her. He then said there were some things he wanted to ask me about and asked if we could meet. I told him I was free Monday night. He said he'd get in touch again on Monday and hung up."

Listening, Mayu felt another piece slip into place. So that was why Makihara's name had appeared on the Maeda list. The police must have checked her father's outgoing calls from the landline and the incoming calls to his phone.

"And he didn't go into any more detail?"

"That's right. All he said was that he had some questions about Morikawa's account."

"And what went through your mind when you heard that?"

"I don't know. I was uneasy? I had no idea how much Mr. Kamio knew. I started to wonder if he might suspect us."

"That's why, at the wake, you asked Mayu whether my brother had said anything about you two, isn't it?"

"That's right," Makihara said. "I know it's selfish, but I hoped he hadn't

passed still suspecting us of doing something shady."

"Which is why you couldn't look the portrait in the eye?"

"Maybe, yeah, I guess. It wasn't a conscious act, I swear, but…"

"In any case, this clears us, doesn't it?" Kashiwagi cut in. "At least as far as motive goes. If you're still not convinced, we can show you the memorandum we drew up with Morikawa."

"That won't be necessary. I'll take you at your word," Takeshi said. "However," he continued, "all this only clears up the question of Morikawa's missing deposits. It doesn't remove you from the suspect list in the murder of Eiichi Kamio."

"You're dead set on pinning this on us, aren't you?" Kashiwagi shook his head in exasperation.

"As I've already said, the killer knew my brother was going up to Tokyo that day. And as far as I know, the only people who knew that are in this room. During the reunion planning meeting, only three people heard about his trip from Sugishita: Momoko, Numakawa, and Makihara. That said, it's possible they told others afterward."

"I didn't know anything about it," Kashiwagi said, clearly annoyed. "And I have an alibi. I was out drinking with a friend that night."

"What about you, Makihara? You attended the planning meeting, didn't you?"

"I did, but I'd completely forgotten what Sugishita told us. Even when I phoned Sensei on Saturday and realized he was on the move, it never occurred to me he might be heading for Tokyo. But…I was home alone that night, so unfortunately, I don't have an alibi."

"I have one," Numakawa said, raising his hand.

"On Saturday, March sixth, I was at my shop as usual," Numakawa said. "Ask my employees—they'll confirm it. I'm sure some of the customers remember as well."

"And I was playing mahjong with some friends," Haraguchi added. "I already told the detectives that."

Behind Mayu, Momoko poked her in the back.

"I don't have an alibi," she whispered in Mayu's ear. "And I knew Sensei was going to Tokyo. What should I do?"

"You don't have to say anything," Mayu whispered back. "My uncle doesn't suspect you."

“I hope you’re right…”

Takeshi began to pace between the desks.

“How about the rest of you? If you have an alibi, speak up. Well? Does no one else have an alibi?”

A hand went up quietly. Ririka Kokonoe. Takeshi stopped, then walked over to her desk.

“Miss Ririka. You have an alibi?”

“I do,” she said, eyes fixed straight ahead, not looking at him. “Which I’ve already explained to the police. And I had no idea Mr. Kamio would be in Tokyo on March sixth. You can ask the people who attended the planning meeting. No one told me anything.”

Takeshi studied her profile. “And where were you on March sixth?”

“I can’t answer that. It’s a matter of privacy. All I can say is that I was with someone, at a certain place, and it’s a matter of official record.”

“Can’t you at least tell us who you were with?”

“I’m afraid I can’t.”

“In that case, you can hardly call it an alibi. ‘I was with someone, somewhere’ doesn’t cut it. I don’t know exactly how you phrased it to the police, but as far as I’m concerned, you’re still a suspect. A highly suspicious one.”

Ririka finally turned her face toward him. “Tell me, what possible motive could I have for killing Mr. Kamio?”

“Motive?” Takeshi said. “Motive is irrelevant. I understand that detectives in mystery novels like following motives to find the culprit, but the real police don’t actually care that much about motive. Once they’ve used forensics to nail the perpetrator, they’re content to let the person explain their motives at their leisure afterward. So—how about it? Will you at least say where you were on the night of March sixth, or who you were with?”

Ririka fell silent. Then the man beside her, Katsuki Kugimiya, suddenly looked up at Takeshi.

“It was me,” he said.

“What was you?” Takeshi asked.

“The person she was with. It was me. I was with her.”

The reactions around them were mixed: a sense of *I knew it* mixed with genuine surprise, just as Mayu had experienced the night before. It was

obvious that Kugimiya was drawn to Ririka, but at the same time, it was hard imagining that Ririka's interest in him was anything more than mercenary.

"Is that true?" Takeshi asked Ririka. She gave a small, reluctant nod.

"Interesting…"

Takeshi mumbled the word and covered his eyes with his right hand. He might have been working through his thoughts, but he also looked genuinely troubled. At length he lowered his hand, tilted his head back for a deep breath, then fixed his gaze on Kugimiya.

"That essay came back to me just now," he said. "It seems you've inherited Tsukumi's best intentions. You value friendship. But covering for someone who's done wrong is not friendship. Sometimes you have to push a person away."

Confusion washed over Kugimiya 's face. "What are you talking about?"

Takeshi stepped in front of Ririka and peered down at her. "You're not a Shizuka after all, are you."

"Uh, excuse me?"

"If you were the real Shizuka, you wouldn't betray Noby like this." With that, he moved away and stopped in front of Sugishita.

"Or have an affair with Goody Sugi."

Sugishita jolted as if shocked, eyes going wide, his upper body jerking upright. "What are you talking about?"

"Let me ask about your alibi. Where were you on the night of Saturday, March sixth?"

"I—I'm under no obligation to answer that," he blurted, his voice cracking.

"But you did tell the police, didn't you?" Takeshi pressed. "They must have asked for your alibi. So what did you tell them? Or could you not tell them anything? What's wrong—you can't even say that much?"

Head lowered, Sugishita said nothing. His face looked drawn and tight.

Mayu's thoughts were spinning again. Goody Sugi was another character from the cartoon *Doraemon*: the brilliant, athletic honor student who made Noby feel inferior. The resemblance to Sugishita was obvious, even beyond the name. But an affair between Sugishita and Ririka? The idea had never once come up in any of Takeshi's conversations until now. Why had he kept quiet about something this serious? And more than that, how had he figured

it out in the first place?

Takeshi planted both hands on Sugishita's desk.

"In that case, I'll answer for you. On Saturday night, the person with Ririka Kokonoe wasn't Kugimiya, it was you. And the place was a love hotel. Am I wrong?"

As big as the impact had been to Kugimiya's earlier admission, this one got a real rise from the room. Haraguchi, for one, all but leapt halfway out of his chair, knocking it back with a loud scrape.

"This is ridiculous! Unbelievable!" Ririka snapped, slamming a hand on her desk as she rose. "Kashiwagi was right. We don't have time for this absurd little farce. I should have left when I had the chance."

"I take back what I said about it being a farce," Kashiwagi said, raising a hand. "Now things are getting interesting. I, for one, intend to see this one through to the end."

"Do as you like. I'm leaving," Ririka said, striding toward the door.

"If you run now, you'll never be able to prove your innocence," Takeshi called after her. "Is that really what you want?"

Ririka stopped, turned, and glared at Takeshi. "I told you, I have an alibi."

"You may well have one," Takeshi said. "The security cameras at the love hotel probably show you driving the car. But what about him? Do they show Sugishita getting out? Was there really anyone in the passenger seat? Or did he hide himself in the back, so no one would see him? Maybe that's how you usually do it, but this time was different. In fact, this time, there was no one else in the car."

His gaze shifted to Sugishita. "You arrived at the love hotel nearly an hour after Kokonoe. Where were you and what were you doing during that time? Let me lay out my theory. You went to Eiichi Kamio's house and waited for him to come home. There, you attacked him and strangled him to death."

Sugishita's eyes bulged and his mouth fell open. "That's not true! How can you say that?" He looked around the classroom, pleading. "It's not true!"

"You told us you called my brother the Saturday before to say hello," Takeshi went on, ignoring him. "You also said he asked you to recommend a hotel in Tokyo. But I suspect he said something else as well—something

about your relationship with Ririka Kokonoe. I don't know how he found out, but he learned what was going on between you two and told you to stop. He may even have said that if you didn't, he would tell your wife. Hearing that, you realized your life could come crashing down, and you decided to kill him."

Mayu's heart thudded violently in her chest. *No—it can't be! Elite Sugishita killed Dad!?*

"Utter nonsense!" Sugishita slammed both hands on his desk and lurched to his feet. "That's impossible!"

"Then, after successfully carrying out the murder, you went to the love hotel where Kokonoe was waiting and told her what you'd done," Takeshi said. "After that, she soothed your nerves and calmed you down, didn't she?"

"You're insane!" Sugishita shouted. "Completely insane!"

Ignoring him, Takeshi stepped closer to Ririka. "The love hotel wasn't about creating an alibi. But because Sugishita didn't want your affair made public, he couldn't tell the police he'd been there. You, however, realized that if you lined up someone to be your companion, you could claim an alibi of your own—the phone's location data would back you up. And the person you used…was Kugimiya." Takeshi turned.

"Isn't that right, Kugimiya? She asked you to lie for her. In truth, you were at home. Am I wrong?"

Kugimiya said nothing. After a pained glance at Ririka, he dropped his eyes.

Takeshi strode back to Sugishita and pointed straight at him.

"You killed my brother—Eiichi Kamio. Do you admit it?"

"No. I don't. I didn't! Absolutely not," Sugishita said, standing from his chair, his face contorting. "Okay, I admit I was with Ririka, but I didn't kill Sensei. I swear it. You *have* to believe me."

Takeshi regarded Sugishita with a cold, steady gaze. The man was clearly on the brink of tears. He gave a few small nods and walked back toward the lectern.

"There's a certain credibility to Sugishita's demeanor," he said. "If that's an act, it's an impressive one—but we can't rule out the possibility. Which means, once again, we have to appeal to the deeper layers of human psychology." He faced the monitor and snapped his fingers.

Footage began to play. Earlier it had shown the wake; now it had shifted to the funeral. Mayu could tell from the priest's position on screen.

Sugishita appeared. He stepped up before the coffin, then moved on to the incense burner.

The camera zoomed in on his face. Sugishita looked up at the portrait of the deceased, offered incense, and pressed his hands together in prayer. Then he looked once more at the portrait, bowed, and walked out of frame. To Mayu's eyes, his gaze seemed fixed firmly on the likeness.

Takeshi froze the image and turned to look around at everyone.

"Let's hear what you all think," he said. "How did his performance strike you? Momoko, thoughts?"

From the back, Mayu could feel Momoko stiffen at being called on so abruptly.

"I thought Sugishita was looking straight at the portrait," she said.

"I see. Let's ask someone else. Haraguchi, how did it look to you?"

"Same here," Haraguchi replied. "I don't think he looked away or anything like that."

"Agreed," Kashiwagi added, raising a hand.

"Very well," Takeshi murmured, walking toward Sugishita again.

"We're all in agreement, then. There was no duplicity in your eyes before my brother's portrait."

"Of course there wasn't. I didn't do anything, so there's no reason I'd look away," Sugishita said, anger edging his voice.

"So, basically, you're saying that just having an affair isn't enough to make you unable to face your former teacher."

Sugishita dropped his gaze, looking uncomfortable. Tapping him lightly on the shoulder, Takeshi said, "You may sit," then moved to stand in front of Ririka Kokonoe.

"So what about our faux 'Shizuka'? At the funeral, were you able to look properly at the portrait?"

"Why not check the footage and see for yourself," Ririka replied crisply, glaring back at him.

"A wonderful idea," Takeshi said, and he snapped his fingers.

The video began to play. Before long, Ririka Kokonoe appeared, her posture as poised as a fashion model. With an easy, unhurried stride, she walked to the coffin, then to the incense stand. Her eyes were already lifted

to the portrait. She offered a single, careful pinch of incense and pressed her hands together. When she lowered them, she looked up at the portrait once more. The sorrow on her face seemed a bit affected, but her gaze never wavered.

The playback ended and Ririka lifted her chin and asked, with a triumphant edge, “Well? How was that?”

“Flawless,” Takeshi said. “A professional actress.”

At that, Ririka’s brows drew together for a moment, but she quickly allowed herself a smile. “I’m not sure what you mean by that, but I’ll take it as a compliment.”

“Why get involved with a married man with a child?” Takeshi asked. “It doesn’t seem like you.”

“It wasn’t a romance. He was my business partner.”

“That tracks.” Takeshi turned toward Sugishita. “You’re talking about the plan at his company to turn *Gen’no Labyrinth* into an online game, aren’t you?”

Ririka’s brows twitched. “You’re very well informed.”

“I have a friend in the industry,” Takeshi said. “Apparently, several companies have put in bids to develop *Gen-Laby* the game. Sugishita’s is one of them.”

“Hey, why am I only hearing about this for the first time now?” Kashiwagi cut in.

“I have no obligation to tell you anything,” Ririka shot back coldly. “It has nothing to do with you.”

Behind Mayu, Momoko suddenly gasped, still facing forward. Mayu looked up at the monitor and saw that the image, which should have been paused, had started moving again.

Kugimiya appeared. He approached the coffin hesitantly and pressed his hands together in prayer. Then, his head slightly bowed, he stepped up to the incense stand. Still looking down, he offered incense, then closed his eyes and joined his hands. A moment later, he lowered his hands and lifted his face.

Mayu jolted in her chair. Behind her, Momoko let out a startled “What?”

On screen, Kugimiya’s eyes were closed. Without ever opening them, he bowed to the deceased, turned to one side, and walked out of the frame.

Mayu looked over at Kugimiya. He was staring blankly at the monitor,

stunned. Every eye in the room had turned on him.

"This is ridiculous," he said, half under his breath. "There's no way that's real. I didn't close my eyes. I looked straight at Sensei's face."

"Maybe that's what you want to believe, but you were deceiving yourself." Takeshi walked toward him. His voice was even, as if none of this had taken him by surprise. "Maybe you told yourself you had to keep your eyes on him, but the very guilt and fear you felt kept them tightly shut," he said. "Yet in your own mind, you met my brother's gaze without fear."

"It's not true. Absolutely not!" Kugimiya shouted, jumping to his feet and jabbing a finger at the monitor. "It's a fake! The video's been doctored!"

Takeshi leaned close and peered into his face. "Why get so worked up? You could simply say, 'I don't remember closing my eyes, but if that's what's on the recording, then I suppose I did. I don't know why, though.' That would be enough."

"That's because you said anyone who couldn't look straight at the portrait was suspicious…"

"Suspicious, yes—but mere suspicion does not a murderer make," Takeshi replied. "Take Makihara, for example. He looked away, but as we have heard, he had his own reasons. Likewise, you may well have had your own reasons for closing your eyes…reasons other than what we're all thinking right now."

Kugimiya shook his head violently. "I did nothing!"

"That's a lot of hysteria over nothing," Takeshi said. "If you ask me, your reaction all by itself is suspicious. Which reminds me, something's been bothering me. That envelope you showed us earlier. The addressee line listed both your name and Eiichi Kamio. But the only thing inside was that essay titled "On Friends." In that case, addressing it to you alone would have been enough, don't you think? Why put my brother's name there as well?"

"I don't know anything about that," Kugimiya said.

"Maybe there was something else in the envelope—something you wanted my brother to read," Takeshi went on. "Are you sure that essay was the only thing that was in there?"

"It was just that. Nothing else."

"Show me the envelope again."

Kugimiya took it from his inside pocket. Even from where Mayu sat, she could see his hand shaking slightly.

"Check what's inside."

"You're really persistent," Kugimiya said, shaking his head as he pulled the manuscript paper out of the envelope.

As he did, a folded slip of paper dropped to the floor near his feet with a soft sound.

"You dropped something."

Kugimiya picked it up and unfolded it. As soon as he began to read, his eyes went wide, and the muscles in his cheeks tightened.

"Ah, there we are," Takeshi said, coming to stand at his side. "So there was another sheet. Looks like a photocopy of an essay. Let me see it."

But Kugimiya bolted away from him, toward the back of the classroom. "This can't be! I was sure I–"

"What can't be?" Takeshi asked, advancing toward him at an unhurried pace. "What were you sure of? That you burned the paper? That you threw it away? And what does it say, exactly? 'My Dream for the Future. I have a dream'—good start—'My dream for the future is to become a manga artist. But I'm no good at drawing, so I've never told anyone. Especially not Kugimiya. He wants to be a manga artist too, but his drawing skills are way beyond mine.'"

Takeshi was still standing some distance from Kugimiya, nowhere close to being able to see the paper. Apparently, he'd memorized the whole thing. "In this essay," he continued, "Naoya Tsukumi lays out a concrete vision for the manga he wants to create. This should sound familiar: it's about a group of genius scientists, hearts broken over the destruction of the environment, who build a virtual world and plan to destroy the real Earth."

Mayu drew in a sharp breath. The letter, written years ago by Naoya, was describing the plot to *Gen'no Labyrinth*.

"On the way here, you picked up the envelope from Naoya Tsukumi's mother. But when you peeked inside, you panicked," Takeshi said. "You couldn't let anyone see that. So you rushed to get rid of it…only to find the letter whole, very much unburnt, in the envelope you yourself were carrying. I'd be rattled, too."

Kugimiya's face twisted, and he darted a wild look around the room. "This was a trap. This was all a trap…"

“No one else knew,” Takeshi said. “Just me. Time to give up.”

Kugimiya’s whole body trembled. Then he spun on his heel and broke into a run, yanking open the rear door of the classroom and dashing out.

Haraguchi lurched to his feet, but stopped when Takeshi waved a hand and said, “No need to chase him.” A few moments later, a shrill cry—half scream, half howl—rang down the corridor.

Haraguchi took off again, and this time Takeshi did nothing to stop him. Numakawa and Kashiwagi followed. Seeing Momoko dash after them, Mayu hurried out as well. Out in the corridor, she saw several men in suits pinning Kugimiya down on the tiled floor of the hallway. Kakitani stood nearby.

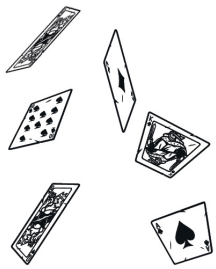
The detective spotted her and walked over. “Caught him heading for the roof,” he said. “Good thing he didn’t make it.”

“But, why are you all here?” Mayu asked.

“Your uncle called,” Kakitani replied. “Told us to watch this classroom and grab anyone who tried to run. Said whoever it was would be the one who killed his brother.”

The detectives had pulled Kugimiya to his feet and began leading him away. Before they had reached the corner, Mayu was already on her way back into the classroom.

Her Uncle Takeshi was gone. At the front of the room, a pair of round glasses lay on top of the lectern.



28

Katsuki Kugimiya ended up in the same class as Naoya Tsukumi in his first year in junior high. One was a quiet, inconspicuous boy; the other, a classroom star. Under normal circumstances, it would have been hard to imagine them ever becoming friends, until an unexpected turn of events abruptly narrowed the distance between them.

One day, Kugimiya had just arrived home from school and opened his bag, when he discovered an unfamiliar pencil case inside. He immediately realized he must have mixed up his bag with someone else's. He'd been on classroom cleaning duty that day and left his bag out in the hallway while he was sweeping. Someone with the same bag must have set theirs down next to his. He was still wondering what to do when the doorbell rang and his mother came to get him, saying a classmate of his was there to see him. Puzzled, he went to the front door and found Tsukumi standing there. The bag hanging from his shoulder told Kugimiya everything.

"Sorry, I think I took yours by mistake," Tsukumi said, holding out the bag.

Kugimiya took a quick look inside, nodded, and hurried back to his room to fetch the lookalike. Tsukumi took it without even looking inside. Then he frowned a little and said, "So, uh… Since I didn't know whose bag I'd taken, I took a quick look inside. Just because I wanted to return it, you know? And there wasn't any name on the bag…"

"Right, of course," Kugimiya said.

"And, uh, so I ended up seeing something else," Tsukumi went on, scratching his head. "Um, *My Other Me Is a Ghost*, I think it was?"

"Ah—"

My Other Me Is a Ghost was the manga Kugimiya had been working on those days. He usually never brought it to school, but that day he'd happened to slip it into his bag, thinking he might look for some reference materials in the library.

"You drew that?"

"Yeah?" Kugimiya answered, uneasily. He tensed for the inevitable mocking laughter.

But the next words out of Tsukumi's mouth were anything but. "That was amazing. Your art is seriously good. I was blown away. I mean, I thought it was professional."

"Oh…really?" Kugimiya said, caught between surprise and confusion.

"And the story, it's great, too," Tsukumi added. "Once I started reading, I couldn't stop." It was clear from his tone that he really meant it.

"Thanks," Kugimiya managed.

"You got any more?"

"Huh? More what?"

"Other things you've drawn. *My Other Me Is a Ghost* can't be the first manga you ever made. No way you could draw something that good right out of the gate."

"Well, yeah, I guess there's a few."

"Thought so," Tsukumi said, sounding impressed. He scratched his temple with a fingertip and glanced at Kugimiya. "And you've never let anyone read them?"

"I've never even shown them to anyone."

"Seriously? That's kind of a waste, isn't it? Manga are meant to be read. They don't mean anything unless someone's reading them, right?"

"I… guess you're right," Kugimiya said. He took a breath, then looked up at Tsukumi through his lashes. "If you want, I could show you."

"Really?" Tsukumi's face lit up.

"Just so you know, they're pretty rough. I drew them a long time ago."

"No problem at all," Tsukumi said, already kicking off his sneakers and stepping inside.

Kugimiya led him to his room and showed him several of the manga he'd drawn so far. It was his first time showing them to anyone. In fact, he had never even invited a friend into his room. His mother was smiling when she came in partway through with juice and snacks for the boys.

All the manga Kugimiya showed him that day were short pieces, fragments, some of them without a proper ending. Even so, Tsukumi hungrily turned the pages, completely absorbed, occasionally pausing to exclaim, “amazing,” over and over.

When he was finished, Tsukimi looked hard at the other boy’s face. “Kugimiya, you drew all this back in elementary school? This is unreal. You’re a genius.”

“It’s not… it’s really not that great,” Kugimiya said, deflecting the praise, though he didn’t dislike hearing it.

“You’re going to be a manga artist, right?”

“Well, I mean, if I could, that’d be nice.”

“Oh, you definitely can. No question about that. If you can draw like this already, you’ll be fine. Seriously, this is incredible. Having a manga artist for a friend is the best.”

Kugimiya caught his breath at the casual way Tsukumi dropped the word “friend.” He could feel his face flush red.

Tsukumi didn’t seem to notice. “It’s okay if I talk at school about you drawing manga, right?”.

Kugimiya shook his head. “Um, I’d rather you didn’t…”

“Why the heck not?”

“Well, I dunno, people might make fun of me.”

Tsukumi swung his hand emphatically from side to side. “No way that’ll happen. If anyone gives you grief, we’ll just show them this. That’ll shut them up fast. And if they still keep mouthing off, I’ll set them straight. ‘When Kugimiya’s a famous manga artist someday, you’ll be begging to apologize to him.’”

Kugimiya had never heard anyone talk about himself like that. No wonder Tsukumi was a class hero. No wonder people held him in such high regard. How could you not? He was so confident. Their friendship started from that day on. Almost everything they talked about had to do with whatever manga Kugimiya was drawing at the time. It wasn’t that Kugimiya brought it up—Tsukumi kept asking questions. How did he come up with his stories? How did he decide on what the characters would look like? He seemed fascinated by the whole creative process.

“You know those behind-the-scenes specials they show for movies?” he said once. “Sometimes I find those more interesting than the actual film.”

Kugimiya's school life grew dramatically easier than it had ever been now that Tsukumi was his friend. The difference was night and day. His quiet nature had made him an easy target for the pushier kids, who would routinely dump their school chores on him. Now, the bullying stopped completely.

It was only their second year in junior high when Tsukumi was hospitalized with leukemia. He'd always seemed so robust, the last person you'd think of as getting sick, so when Kugimiya heard the news, he thought there had to be some mistake. Kugimiya went to visit him in the hospital almost every day. Each time, Tsukumi demanded to read the next part of the manga, or a new story altogether. He grew weaker by the day, but he never once complained.

The end came abruptly, shortly after they'd started their third year. The wake was held two days later, and the funeral the day after that. Kugimiya attended with his classmates to see Tsukumi off. Lying in the coffin, his friend seemed to be only half the size he'd been in his healthy days. Only the look of calm on his face, like he was merely asleep, offered any comfort.

After the funeral, Tsukumi's mother came over to talk to him, and asked if he could come by the house sometime. "There's something I'd like you to have," she said. "Naoya asked me to give it to you when he was gone. It's sealed in an envelope so I don't actually know what it is—he said it was a secret between friends."

Kugimiya scratched his head. *A secret?* He had no idea what it might be.

The next day, he visited Tsukumi's house, and his mother gave him the large envelope. It was heavy, about the size of a book. *What if it's a journal*, Kugimiya thought. They had always been so open with each other, it was hard to believe there was anything his friend hadn't told him. But what if he had written about his illness, or his fear of dying? If that were the case, it made sense he wouldn't want his mother to see it.

He took it straight home and opened the envelope in his room. Inside was a composition notebook. One look at the cover and he caught his breath. It said "Manga Ideas."

He opened it to the first page and blinked. This was no diary or personal account. It wasn't even a manga. The lines were packed with writing—detailed outlines for stories, all original. There were around ten stories in

all. Some were short enough to finish in a single page, while others stretched over many pages. Here and there, rough illustrations of what had to be characters ideas had been drawn in the margins.

So here it is, he thought, *the answer to a long-standing mystery.*

Tsukumi had wanted to be a manga artist, too. Whether he had dreamed of going pro or not, there was no way to tell, but his passion was clear. This notebook was the groundwork. Maybe Tsukumi had taken to him so quickly because of a kinship he felt with a fellow hopeful artist.

So why didn't he just come out and say so?

If Tsukumi had told him he wanted to draw, there were plenty of things he could have done. He could have given him advice—or even just talked about the craft. He scanned the illustrations scattered along the margins and suspected that Tsukumi had just been too shy to tell him. To put it bluntly, they weren't good. The proportions were off, and the lines weren't clean. The boys weren't handsome, and the girls weren't cute. Even back in elementary school, Kugimiya had been several levels better than this.

Tsukumi must have known it, too, which was why he'd limited himself to jotting down outlines that never became proper manga. Or maybe he had tried, but after seeing Kugimiya's work, he'd been shocked at how far short he fell and given up. Hadn't he said something along those lines once? "If only I had talent like you, Kugimiya."

Kugimiya couldn't help thinking how much better it would have been if his friend had just spoken up. There were professional manga artists out there who weren't that great at drawing. With practice, anyone could learn to draw decent pictures. Sure, there were illustration styles that some readers gravitated to, but in the end, what mattered most was the story. And on that score, the stories were great. Fantastic, even. Every last story outline in the notebook was compelling. Science fiction tales and adventures, coming-of-age dramas and mysteries—all brimming with originality; not a one felt like a rehash of something already out there.

The story that struck Kugimiya most strongly was one of the longer pieces titled "Zero-One War." It was set in a near future in which a genius scientist, despairing over the destruction of Earth's environment, enters cold sleep together with like-minded colleagues from all over the world. With their brains directly linked to computers, the scientists live within a vast virtual space. From there, they take control of the global power grid in order

to bring about the downfall of the real world. The only way to stop them is for someone to infiltrate virtual space and shut it down, and the one chosen for that mission, the protagonist, was once a world-famous adventurer until an accident left him unable to use his arms and legs. Will he be able to save the Earth? That was the central question of "Zero-One War," a story of grand scale and deep emotion.

What a waste, Kugimiya lamented. If this story had been turned into manga, it would surely have been a masterpiece. He slipped the notebook back into the envelope and slid it onto his bookshelf, telling himself that if the house ever caught fire, this was the one thing he would make absolutely sure to save. And yet, for a time, he forgot all about the notebook. His head was too full with turning his own ideas into finished works.

Once in high school, he began submitting pieces to manga magazines, winning honorable mentions several times. After graduation he went on to a private university in Tokyo, but he had no intention of studying. What he wanted was time to draw manga. In time, an editor from a publishing house approached him, and he was given a chance to appear in a manga magazine. After looking over several of his trial pieces, they took a liking to *My Other Me Is a Ghost*, and a redraw of that became his debut work.

He had a few more pieces published after that, but they were all short works, and the offer of a serialized slot stubbornly refused to materialize. His editor kept telling him he was "one step short." "Don't get me wrong," his editor said. "Everything you've done so far is good work. But it's all too neatly packaged, or maybe it's just that the scale is too small. You need more impact if you're going to break through. If you had that, I'd be ready to offer you a serial right now."

The words hurt, but at the same time, Kugimiya had to admit they rang true. He'd felt the same about his own work.

"Have you started on your next project yet?" his editor asked.

"No, not yet."

"Any ideas? If you do, I'd very much like to hear them."

"Well… I've got a few things."

He started to explain the concept for the piece he was thinking of drawing next, but the look of disinterest on the editor's face made his heart sink. "Just try drawing it up," the editor said, charitably. "Give me a call when you've finished. We'll talk then. Sometimes a story feels completely

different once it's on the page."

In other words, judged on the idea alone, there wasn't much going for his idea. So what kind of story was he supposed to draw?

Back at home, he went over the ideas he'd pitched to his editor, and he had to admit they were really lacking. The subjects were all ones Kugimiya himself found easy to handle, which was precisely the problem: the worlds in his stories remained narrow, stuck in their box. They were never allowed to breathe. Even *My Other Me Is a Ghost* never dared take a step outside the depiction of everyday life, despite it literally being about a ghost.

Time passed, but no stand-out ideas were presenting themselves to him, and he began to panic. What if his editor lost patience with him? From the publisher's standpoint, Kugimiya was just one of many unhatched "potential manga star" eggs they could find anywhere. One day, while he was agonizing like this, he suddenly remembered Tsukumi's notebook. It was still packed away in a cardboard box; he hadn't opened it once since moving to Tokyo.

Without any particular intention, he dug it out. The last thing on his mind was stealing ideas. He remembered the stories seeming interesting back when he read it the first time, but after all, they had been written by a kid in junior high. How good could they really be? Still, he had a vague hope that reading them might shake something loose and suggest a path forward. He began rereading the story outlines.

Once again, he was stunned.

There were certainly parts you might call childish, or simplistic. But the sheer originality of the core concepts was something to marvel at. He found himself reliving that sense of astonishment he had felt the first time. This notebook was a treasure trove of off-the-wall ideas. Tsukumi had once called Kugimiya a genius, but now he realized it was the other way around. It was Tsukumi who'd been the genius. All he'd lacked was the technique to put his ideas on the page. Every one of the story ideas in the notebook was excellent to some degree, but the most compelling of the bunch was still "Zero-One War." There were plenty of manga, games, and movies that involved virtual worlds, but the way this one tied the virtual world to the environmental collapse of the real was felt new. It was hard to believe a junior high schooler had come up with it.

The notion of an immobile protagonist who could move freely within

virtual space was also very appealing. Perhaps Tsukumi had projected himself—bedridden with illness—into the character and expanded the idea from there. Kugimiya became obsessed with "Zero-One War." He kept telling himself he had to think up his own story, but even his idle sketches turned into explorations of characters from Tsukumi's story.

It was around then that his editor got in touch, wanting to know how things were going. Kugimiya told him he was just about ready to start drawing.

"That's good to hear. What's the story?"

Kugimiya opened his mouth and the story for "Zero-One War" came out. Even after just a brief outline, the editor's interest was clear.

"This is on a completely different scale from anything you've done so far. I like it. Just draw the opening section; that's enough. Don't force yourself to wrap it all up." There was real enthusiasm in the editor's voice when he spoke.

Kugimiya was filled with equal parts relief and guilt. Part of him was elated that he was finally about to take a meaningful step forward, while another part wondered if he really had the right to steal Tsukumi's work. But Tsukumi was no longer in this world. Unless he drew it, "Zero-One War" would never see the light of day. That, and no one would even know it wasn't Kugimiya's work. This was no time to hesitate. He decided he would draw it. If he let this chance slip away, the opportunity to get serialized might never knock again.

From that point on, he drew with singleminded intensity. It was about a month later, when he visited the publisher with his finished manuscript under his arm. His editor read it right there in front of him, his expression growing increasingly serious. At last he looked up and said, "Could you wait here a moment?" and left the room, manuscript in hand.

When he returned a short while later, an older man was with him. The man held out a business card. Kugimiya took it, and his whole body tensed. This was the editor-in-chief. What happened next was beyond his wildest dreams. On the spot, they asked him if he'd be willing to expand the manga he'd just drawn into a series. They would start with a run of about ten installments, and if the response was good, they would renew his contract for more. He could hardly believe it. His voice was shaking as he promised he'd do his best. The reality of it only really hit him after he'd gone home

and slipped the editor-in-chief's card into a desk drawer.

Over the next week, he had repeated discussions with his editor. The title was changed from "Zero-One War" to *Gen'no Labyrinth*. The characters would also be reworked. But the core story remained the same. And so the serialization began. The first installment introduced a world wracked by abnormal weather, and government officials visiting the protagonist, now bedridden after his accident. The closing scene contained the line: "You're the only one who can save the Earth."

The morning the magazine went on sale, he was too keyed up to sit still. He found himself pacing in front of the neighborhood bookstore, even though he knew foot traffic in front of his local store would tell him nothing about sales. As per usual, any new serialized manga's reception was judged by reader surveys. A few days after release, he got word that his series had come in fifth in the poll. He had no idea if that was good or bad, but according to his editor it was "not bad at all." For a while after that, *Gen'no Labyrinth* hovered around fifth or sixth place, but once the protagonist's adventures in the virtual world really kicked into gear, the ranking gradually began to climb. His editor said readers seemed to love the gap between the bedridden protagonist in reality and his almost superhero feats in virtual space.

Before long, *Gen'no Labyrinth* took the number one spot, and the publisher officially confirmed the series' continuation. That was when Kugimiya first felt real confidence that he could make it as a manga artist. He convinced his parents and dropped out of university.

With a few breaks along the way, Kugimiya's first serialization ended up running for nearly ten years. If he'd wanted to, he could probably have kept it going even longer. The core idea was that endlessly expandable. When the series finally came to a triumphant end, he did a number of interviews. The first question everyone asked was how he'd come up with such a grand story.

He answered that at the time of his debut, back before *Gen-Lab*, he'd been pulling from everyday life for inspiration, but it was his editor who told him he needed to break out of his shell. That was when, half in desperation, he decided to make the entire Earth his stage. Then he built a second, virtual, Earth and used that too. Only then did his audience respond. Of course, he never mentioned Tsukumi's notebook, but Kugimiya himself

never had any sense that he was lying. His mind had been fixated on the world of *Gen'no Labyrinth* for so long that he truly felt it was entirely his own creation.

The manga was adapted into an anime, which became a huge hit in its own right. In fact, it was the anime that truly pushed public recognition of the work to another level. Along the way, the people around him changed, too. The staff at the publisher who had once treated him with that typical "looking down from above" attitude now showered him with almost embarrassingly brazen flattery. The era when an editor might reasonably voice an objection to one of his ideas was over.

Back home, he was suddenly treated like a local hero. The *Gen-Lab* House project was the final touch. Because the contract had gone through the publisher, it was only much later that he learned the main contractor was Kashiwagi Construction. Back in elementary school, he'd been badly bullied by the vice-president, Kodai Kashiwagi. The man probably didn't even remember.

And then there was Ririka Kokonoe—the crowning surprise. She'd reached out through his publisher, apparently claiming to be the girl he'd been "closest to in junior high." Back then, Ririka hadn't been someone he liked so much as someone he admired from afar, even feared a little. She was so far out of his league that he thought it presumptuous to even hope they might ever be close. As it was, he could barely recall ever having a proper conversation with her. So when he heard she wanted to see him, the news sent him soaring.

More than ten years had passed since he'd last seen her, but she was still beautiful as ever. Even more so, with an added grown-up allure to her, so much so that when they exchanged greetings, it was all Kugimiya could do to squeak out a "Hi."

Ririka, for her part, addressed him by his first name as "Katsuki," as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He was pretty sure she'd never done that once in junior high. He knew this was a business move for her, but still, it made him happy. When she asked if she and her company could manage him, he had no reason to refuse. The class reunion came as a perfect opportunity. The *Gen-Lab* House project had fallen through, but he knew his town was still counting on *Gen'no Labyrinth* for help. He expected to be overwhelmed with proposals, but that's what he wanted.

Better to judge the ideas himself than hear them filtered through his publisher. Of course, a part of him wanted to show his old friends what a success he'd become—even as he took care to not appear entirely full of himself.

Back home, everything unfolded in a predictable way, though possibly with even more enthusiasm than he'd expected. Practically every day someone pitched him on a business idea tied to *Gen'no Labyrinth*. Having Ririka there was a lifesaver. She was quick to announce that all proposals had to come through her, effectively shutting down the flood. Even Kashiwagi couldn't get past her. And Kugimiya had to admit that hearing the man who had once tormented him daily being forced to call him Sensei was deeply satisfying.

Ririka had also suggested that they visit Mr. Kamio, because she knew that Kashiwagi and other hopefuls were bound to approach their old teacher to get him put in a good word for them with Kugimiya and she wanted to cut them off at the pass. Seeing his teacher again after so many years, it was clear that the man had aged, but he looked well. He already knew of Kugimiya's success and said he was proud of him. When Kugimiya warned him about Kashiwagi and the others, Mr. Kamio said he understood perfectly.

The following week, on March second, Mr. Kamio contacted him again. He asked if they could meet to discuss something about the reunion, so they arranged to see each other the next evening. Kugimiya had no idea what it might be about. Over the phone, his old teacher's voice had been cheerful, so he assumed it couldn't be anything too serious. The next day, he went to Mr. Kamio's house. Mr. Kamio greeted him with a broad smile and got straight to the point: at the memorial, he wanted to read one of Tsukumi's essays in front of everyone; would that be a problem?

"One of Tsukumi's essays?" Kugimiya had asked.

"Do you remember? Right after you started your third year, you had a homework assignment to write an essay. Tsukumi was in the hospital then, but he still turned his in. I never had a chance to give it back, so I've been keeping it along with the drafts for your graduation anthology."

"I see. I'm sorry, I don't really remember. But why come to me about it?"

"Because what he wrote had something to do with you."

"With me?"

“You’ll understand when you read it.” Mr. Kamio handed him a small bundle of several manuscript pages.

Kugimiya took them and looked down at neat pencil strokes lined up across the page. He recognized Tsukumi’s handwriting and felt a wave of emotion. It was his essay “My Dream for the Future.” Kugimiya began to read, his hands trembling.

After the opening, where Tsukumi confessed his hopes of one day becoming a manga artist, he began to write about the kind of manga he was hoping to draw, describing a story about a terrifying plan by genius scientists in virtual space to wipe out humanity. “Zero-One War.” It wasn’t just a rough outline; many of the details were already there.

Kugimiya finished reading and looked up from the manuscript paper.

Mr. Kamio asked, “Well? What do you think?”

Kugimiya blinked, unsure of what to say.

“You knew, Tsukumi wanted to be a manga artist, didn’t you? He writes here that he’s too embarrassed to tell you, but in the end, he did confide in you, didn’t he?”

Kugimiya was dumbstruck.

Mr. Kamio went on. “Your work,” he said. “Your signature series, *Gen’no Labyrinth*. When I read it for the first time, something struck me as odd. I felt like I’d seen it somewhere before. And then it came back to me: it was the story from Tsukumi’s essay. I wondered how it had come to pass that a story Tsukumi wrote ended up in your manga. Then I realized: Tsukumi must have entrusted it to you. Before he died, he asked you to turn his story into a manga someday, didn’t he?

Again, Kugimiya was struck dumb. It was an outrageous misunderstanding. And yet, given the circumstances, he could see how his old teacher had come to that conclusion.

His silence only seemed to confirm the truth of it in Mr. Kamio’s mind; his eyes shone even more brightly as he went on. “The moment I realized it, I was deeply moved. What a powerful bond, what an enduring friendship, I thought. To think that *Gen’no Labyrinth*, your masterpiece, is actually a joint work between you and your dear friend who died so young. Stories that moving don’t come along every day. I’ve never spoken of this essay to anyone before, but when I heard there would be a memorial for Tsukumi at the reunion, I felt this was the perfect time to share it with everyone.”

The room began to spin around Kugimiya. Mr. Kamio intended to stand up and read that essay in front of everybody.

"What do you say?" his teacher asked. "That wouldn't be a problem, would it?"

Kugimiya was struck by the sudden urge to clap his hand over his teacher's mouth. No problem? It was a huge problem!

"Um, well, Sensei," he managed at length. "There is a *bit* of a problem."

"Oh? In what way?"

"The thing is, I made a promise to Tsukumi. We agreed that his dreams of becoming a manga artist were to be kept a secret."

Mr. Kamio frowned, clearly dissatisfied. "Whyever would he want that?"

"Just like it says in the essay," Kugimiya replied. "He was embarrassed at the thought of everyone knowing."

"Maybe as a kid, sure, but what's there to be embarrassed about? It's a fine dream. And in a sense, he actually achieved it—with a little help from his best friend."

"But still… I'd really prefer you let it lie. Let *Gen'no Labyrinth* remain a secret between me and Tsukumi. Please." Kugimiya bowed his head.

Mr. Kamio frowned, unconvinced. "Well, I think it's a wonderful story. One that, if it became widely known, would help *Gen'no Labyrinth* get talked about even more. It might even lead to more sales."

"I'm not interested in that," Kugimiya insisted. "And I'd rather people didn't pick it up just for that reason."

"I see," Mr. Kamio said at last, though his expression was far from bright. "When you put it that way I can't very well force the issue. I'll give up on it for now, but, should the chance present itself again in the future, I'll ask again. You may find you've changed your mind."

"I understand. Thank you."

"Still, it's a pity. I really did want everyone to hear it." Taking another longing gaze at the essay, Mr. Kamio stood, went over to his bookcase, and pulled out one of the files lined up there before returning to his seat.

"This is the graduation essay anthology for your year. Yours should be in here. Look, here it is: Third Year, Class One, Katsuki Kugimiya." Sure enough, his own essay was folded and tucked into the folder. He had no memory of what he'd written. He skimmed a little and, as expected, it was nothing much. Only two pages long.

“Well then, I’ll just put this back for now,” Mr. Kamio said, carefully fastening Tsukumi’s essay into the file.

Kugimiya was shaken. Even after he went back home, he couldn’t get Tsukumi’s essay out of his mind. He had no idea something like that even existed. And even though he might have stopped it from being read at this reunion, Mr. Kamio was sure to bring it up again. And that was a best-case scenario. There was every possibility he’d talk about it to someone without consulting Kugimiya first. After all, what was the harm in sharing such a “heartwarming story” as an anecdote between friends? But there was no guarantee the story would stop there. And if it got out, then what? The more people heard it, the less likely it was to remain a secret. Eventually, someone would post about it on social media, or worse, put a scan of the essay up online.

A few years earlier, there had been an uproar online about a certain manga supposedly having stolen panel compositions from another famous work. Sites popped up placing scenes from the two side by side to show just how similar they were. There was no way to write it off as coincidence. The publisher issued a statement saying they were “looking into the details.” Not long after, the author apologized and then announced their retirement.

Kugimiya shuddered. The same thing could easily happen to him. He’d given interviews to several magazines, speaking at length about how he’d devised the story for *Gen’no Labyrinth*. It was all too easy to imagine readers crying foul, accusing him of deceiving them. Then there was the industry reaction to consider. There was no question his talent would fall under suspicion. He could picture his editors’ bitter disappointment. He also worried about Ririka and Kashiwagi. They’d both drop him like a hot stone. They might post about it online. Ririka might even demand compensation for unrealized business.

In short, for Kugimiya, the essay was something that could never, ever, be made public. Yet as long as it remained in Mr. Kamio’s hands, there was no telling when it might come to light. He began to worry about the upcoming reunion. What if Mr. Kamio got carried away and let something slip?

At any rate, he had to do something about it. So long as that essay existed in this world, he would never know peace.

His first thought was to steal it. He would sneak into the house and take

that one file. No, stealing the whole file would stand out too much. If he slipped out just that one essay, there was even a chance Mr. Kamio might not notice the loss at all.

But what if he did notice? Or even if he didn't at first—what if, in the near future, he checked the file again? The moment he saw that Tsukumi's essay was missing, the first person he would suspect would be Kugimiya.

Then what if he stole something of value at the same time? Make it look as though a burglar had looted the place at random and, in the midst of that, taken the file as well?

Kugimiya shook his head. That wouldn't work. Some ordinary thief had no reason to walk off with a bunch of junior high graduation essays. And it would be just as odd for only the file from his year to vanish. If he was going to do it, he'd have to strip the entire house bare—but that was impossible. Then another thought struck him.

He couldn't steal everything. But he might still be able to make it all go away. Not just gone, burned to ash. If there was a fire, no one would know what he was after. Even Mr. Kamio would never imagine that Tsukumi's essay had been the target. Mr. Kamio's house was an old, wooden, Japanese-style building. Once a fire took hold, the flames would spread in no time.

With the essay gone, it wouldn't matter what Mr. Kamio might say. All Kugimiya would have to do is play dumb. And with his home up in smoke, Mr. Kamio would have more pressing things to deal with anyway. In time, he'd probably forget the whole thing. The more Kugimiya thought about it, the more certain he became that it was a good idea. Extreme, yes, but there was no other way. He had to do it. What was more, a perfect opportunity to put his plan into action had presented itself.

As it happened, not long after he had arrived at the house for his first visit, Mr. Kamio had received a phone call. Kugimiya could only hear one side of the conversation, but even from that he picked up that his old teacher would be meeting someone in Tokyo on Saturday night. Kugimiya knew that Mr. Kamio's daughter, Mayu, worked in Tokyo. He didn't know what business was bringing him up to the city, but he would surely take the chance to see his daughter. In all likelihood, he'd stay the night. If the house was empty, any report of a fire would be delayed. Above all, Kugimiya didn't want Mr. Kamio caught in it and injured.

On the night of Saturday, March sixth, he slipped a small can of lighter fluid, a box of matches, and an old towel into his pocket and left the house. In case any security camera happened to catch him, he pulled a cap with a long brim low over his eyes, put on a mask, and wore a black windbreaker. He had bought the entire outfit for this day. Everything was generic, mass-produced; no one would ever be able to trace the buyer. He intended to dispose of them immediately after he set the blaze.

As he neared Mr. Kamio's house, he first made sure no one was around, then he darted up to the gate, opened it, and slipped onto the property. He was wearing gloves, so there'd be no danger of leaving fingerprints. No light showed through the windows. Reassured no one was home, he kept close to the wall as he made his way around to the back. The bookcase where the essay was kept stood in the living room facing the back garden. He only needed the living room to burn. Hopefully the fire wouldn't spread to the rest of the house, and with a garden, there was little risk of the fire spreading to the neighbors.

He crouched down and peered under the veranda, but it was pitch dark. Still, he figured if he lit the oil-soaked towel and threw it under there, the flames ought to spread up through the floor into the living room. He decided to try. He took the towel and the small can of oil from his pocket, opened the lid, and was carefully soaking the towel when he heard a sliding door rattle open. He jerked his head up, his whole body going rigid, and stifled a cry. There was someone standing in the darkened house.

"Who's there?" The sharp voice was Mr. Kamio's. "What are you doing back there?"

In a panic, Kugimiya snapped the lid back onto the can and tried to bolt. But as he scrambled to his feet, his legs tangled and he fell. He hurried to push himself up, only to feel a hand on his arm, holding him in a strong grip.

"Who are you? I'll call the police!" his old teacher shouted, trying to tear the mask from his face.

Acting on sheer instinct, Kugimiya flailed with his arms and legs, struggling wildly. Somehow, Mr. Kamio lost his balance and went down hard, face forward. Kugimiya jumped on his back to keep him from getting up. Then his eyes fell on the towel lying on the ground. He snatched it up, looped it around Mr. Kamio's neck, and pulled with all his strength.

He had no idea how long he stayed like that. When he finally came back to his senses, his old teacher was no longer moving. There was no rise of breath in his back.

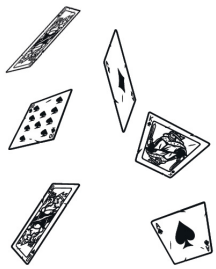
Staggering, Kugimiya got to his feet. He looked down at his teacher lying prone. He didn't have the courage to check his face.

I did it. I killed him.

How had it even happened? How could this possibly be? He didn't want this, to take life, least of all his teacher's. That was why he'd chosen a time when he knew he'd be away. All he'd wanted was for that essay to burn.

But there was no going back now. Mr. Kamio was dead. The only question left for Kugimiya to answer was how to keep himself from being arrested.

Standing there in the dark, he began to think.



29

The "Trap Hand" was about a ten-minute walk from Ebisu Station, just off the main road. It faced the street, but wedged as it was between a gas station and an apartment building, the entrance was hard to see. There was no large sign; just a block with the bar's name carved into it, sitting casually on the ground. Maybe he didn't want walk-ins, but still, this felt like overdoing it a little.

Ignoring the "Closed for Preparation" sign, Mayu opened the door and stepped into the dim interior. Behind the counter, Takeshi was polishing glasses. He wore a black vest over a black shirt.

"You're early," he said, glancing at his watch. "We agreed on five. That's nearly ten minutes from now."

"I actually wanted to get here even earlier."

"Oh? So eager to see me?"

"Hardly." Mayu slid onto a stool at the counter. "What was the big idea, just disappearing like that? Do you have any idea what I went through afterward?"

After the reunion, she'd gone back to the Marumiya to collect the luggage she'd left there, to find that her Uncle Takeshi had already checked out. He was gone, and worse, he wasn't responding to messages. She hadn't been able to reach him at all. It wasn't until five days later, last night, that he responded. There was something he wanted to talk about, and would she come to his bar in Ebisu?

"I wasn't in the mood to get grilled by the likes of Kogure and Kakitani," he said. "I'm sure you got questioned?"

"'Questioned' doesn't begin to cover it. Do you know how long it took to

explain everything that happened at the reunion? And on top of that, that video—no one can find it."

"What video?" Takeshi frowned.

"The one with the mourners facing the portrait at the wake and the funeral, remember? Without that footage, I couldn't properly explain a thing. It was a nightmare. And all the top ranking detectives were there looking furious because some amateurs had beaten them to the truth."

"Sounds great to me. That's not something you'll get to experience many times in your life."

"I hope I never get to experience that again. And the question they asked the most was the one I couldn't answer. They wanted to know how I realized what was really going on, and how was I supposed to tell them when *you* never told me anything! Which is what I want to hear today, by the way, and I'm not leaving until you come clean."

Takeshi grimaced, planted both hands on the counter, and looked down at her. "You yap like a little terrier, you know that? Have a drink first. Anything you like, it's on the house."

"Really?" Mayu blinked, surprised. Could this be generosity, from her uncle? "What do you recommend?"

"Beer."

"Huh? Not a cocktail? I drink beer all the time."

"This isn't your usual beer. It's a local brew from Hida-Takayama."

Takeshi stepped back, took a dark blue bottle from the fridge, popped the cap, and poured the beer into a glass, which he set in front of her.

Mayu took a sip and caught her breath. A soft, floral aroma filled her nose. "You're right, this is good."

"Right? I picked it up there yesterday. Brought it back in a cooler, of course. With all that yeast, it doesn't take well to heat."

"'There'? Where's 'there,' exactly? Where did you run off to? Detective Kakitani and the others were freaking out because they couldn't get in touch with you."

"I'd already shut the bar for a week, so I figured I might as well take a bit more time off. Went for a bit of a drive."

"That's right, the woman at the Marumiya told me you drove off in a car. Where were you hiding that, anyway?"

"In a paid parking lot. It wasn't hidden."

“So the bugs and all those bogus gadgets, they were all stashed in that car? Even the mourning clothes?”

“I object to calling them bogus, but yes, more or less.”

“Why didn’t you say so? Having a car would’ve made everything so much easier.”

“Easier? I wouldn’t have been able to drink a drop.” Takeshi took out another glass and poured beer into it. “So, has Katsuki Kugimiya confessed to everything?”

Mayu let out a slow breath and nodded.

“Looks that way. I heard most of it from Kakitani.”

“Then let’s start with that. Tell me everything.”

Mayu straightened her back. “Why do I have to talk first?”

“If you’ve got a problem with that, you can go home.”

“Fine, fine.” She took a sip of beer to wet her throat.

Prefacing his account with the usual, “I’m only telling you this because it’s you,” Kakitani had laid out the chain of events that had led Kugimiya to commit murder, starting with Tsukumi’s death and ending with her father’s.

Hearing the full details of his confession, Mayu had felt an ache in her chest as a fresh wave of sorrow washed over her. It wasn’t that she couldn’t understand Kugimiya’s feelings, either. The glory he had grasped after all that effort was so great that the fear of losing it must have been overwhelming.

If only he’d been honest with Dad, she thought. If he’d only said he was afraid of being condemned for stealing ideas, her father would surely have accepted that and kept his secret.

She might never truly forgive him—he had killed her father, after all—but when she thought of him, she still pictured Kugimiya, the shy kid in her class, not the man he’d become. Part of her wanted to think of the whole thing as a tragic misunderstanding.

“The only saving grace, if you can call it that, is that he didn’t go to the house with intent to kill,” Mayu said, after finishing her account. “Who would have guessed he’d gone just planning to start a fire? Had you realized that part, too?”

“It’s not a matter of ‘too’—the fire is where it all started. Or rather, the fuel,” Takeshi replied, beer glass in hand. “You remember how, from what the detectives’ were saying, I deduced there must have been lighter fluid on

my brother's clothes?"

"Yeah. Which turned out to be spot on. According to Kakitani, they'd noticed a sharp smell around the collar of his shirt. Lighter fluid."

"I remember you wondering if the killer had a lighter on him that leaked during the struggle, but oil lighters almost never leak like that. Makes more sense to assume that the culprit was carrying just the fluid. And once you realize that, arson is the obvious objective. Which answers an earlier mystery: why use a towel as a weapon? It only makes sense if he brought the towel for another purpose, such as soaking with lighter fluid to start a fire."

"Which, amazingly, matches Kugimiya's statement exactly. So, I guess, hats off to you."

"The question you have to ask then is, arson for what purpose? And why, after killing my brother, did he not then start a fire, but instead ransack the house? The answers to those two questions are obvious: the culprit's goal was to destroy some specific thing inside the house. But once he managed to get inside, all he had to do was steal that and nothing else. The oddly half-hearted way the place was turned over was camouflage, meant to make it look like an ordinary burglary. On top of that, it was a second layer of misdirection, to convince the police his aim had been theft, not destruction."

Takeshi raised a hand, ticking the points off. "But that leads us to another question. If stealing was enough, why plan arson at all? Why not just break in and take it? Smashing the glass door out back wouldn't have been so hard. Yet the culprit decided that wouldn't do. Why? Because once my brother was dead, stealing alone was enough—but if he'd remained alive, he'd have known exactly who was responsible. In other words, the item in question wasn't some universally valuable object, but A, something intensely personal, and B, something that would burn in a fire. Papers, documents, books—something like that. No backups, no data files, no copies. A one-of-a-kind object. A handwritten letter, say. Or a manuscript."

Mayu pointed at her uncle. "Which is when you zeroed in on the graduation anthology."

"Which had been printed and handed out to the students. But I figured that the original file might also contain manuscripts that never made it into the final volume. Which is why I told you to bring the copy you'd been

given.”

“And when you compared them, what did you find?”

“The manuscripts in the file all appeared in the printed anthology. But that in itself wasn’t strange—we were already entertaining the possibility that something had been removed. So the question became: what kind of manuscript might be missing? That’s when I remembered what my brother told Momoko—that he wanted to share a special story at Tsukumi memorial. What if that story was Tsukumi’s essay? What if he’d kept it filed together with the other students’ graduation pieces? Given my brother’s personality, it was exactly the sort of thing he’d do.”

Mayu stared at him, her brow furrowing. “Okay, full points for deductive powers. But if you’d figured out that much, why not let me in on it? Why not tell me earlier?”

“Because the more random thoughts and concerns you had, the greater chance they might have shown in your face or behavior. And I needed you out in the field, uncompromised by one possible version of the truth, such as it was.”

“I get that, but still… So, what happened with the old computer?”

“Once I’d restored the data, I found a folder of collected essays. The last one in the file was ‘My Dream for the Future.’ I read it, and I knew it was the one. The culprit had to be Katsuki Kugimiya.”

“That was the final proof, then, I guess. But when had you started to suspect it might be Kugimiya?” Mayu asked.

“Back when I was correlating the movements of the people on the Maeda List,” Takeshi said. “Katsuki Kugimiya’s name there snagged my attention. As far as we knew, his only contact with my brother was when he came by with Ririka Kokonoe to say hello. In that case, who would’ve contacted my brother to set that up? I assumed it was Kokorika, in her role as manager. So her name showing up in his call history would make sense. But finding Katsuki Kugimiya’s name on the list—that was strange. It meant he’d been in touch with my brother in some other way.”

He looked at her. “Remember what the detectives said the first time you met Kakitani and the others at Flute, while you were out of your seat? Something like: Aren’t we going to ask about the call the victim made on March second? I started to think maybe the person my brother called that day was Kugimiya. If so, why was he hiding it? Once I realized Tsukumi’s

essay was the key, my suspicions only deepened. I'd heard the two of them had been close friends."

He took a drink, then went on. "But if Kugimiya was the culprit, one question remained. When did he learn my brother would be going up to Tokyo? There was no sign he'd talked about it with the reunion planning group. So I came up with another possibility: maybe he'd heard it directly from my brother. If that was true, then when had that been? And why had my brother bothered to tell him that information?"

"So you figured that maybe Dad was on the phone with Ryosuke while Kugimiya was at the house?" Mayu said. "Is that why you pulled that little skit with Ryosuke?"

"I prefer 'scene reconstruction,'" Takeshi said. "I figured the timing of when my brother showed Tsukumi's essay to Kugimiya might line up with that call. Ryosuke Ikenaga said he called on March third, to my brother's landline. Which means my brother was at home. If my brother had called Kugimiya on the second and arranged to meet, there was a good chance Kugimiya was at the house on the night of the third. And when Ryosuke told me my brother had said 'don't tell her' instead of 'don't tell Mayu,' I guessed it was because someone who knew you was right there listening."

"Right. Wow."

Takeshi set his glass down and raised both hands. "That's it. That's all the deductions. I'm out."

"Hold on. There's still tons I don't get. For example, how did you figure out Kokorika and Sugishita were having an affair? That came out of nowhere!"

"Oh, that one didn't take much detective work. Anyone could have figured it out with a little thought. If Katsuki Kugimiya was the culprit, then he had no alibi. In fact, at first he claimed he'd been at home. But at the same time, Kokorika needed an alibi, and it's true she was at a love hotel, but she couldn't exactly out her real partner, so she dragged out Kugimiya's name because she had no choice."

"Amazing. And, you're right. The detectives actually told me that part. Apparently, Kokorika called Kugimiya and begged him to go along with the story. Somehow, that just makes it even sadder."

According to Kakitani, Kugimiya knew Ririka was having an affair but he hadn't known who her partner was. He agreed to backing up her story,

thinking it would give him some kind of leverage over Ririka he might be able to use in the future to seize the initiative in their business relationship.

"Which, for me left the question: who *was* Kokorika's partner? He might not have been one of the people involved in the investigation, but since Kokorika was supposed to be working in Tokyo, the odds she was seeing someone local are low. *Unless* it was a bit of fooling around with an old classmate she hadn't seen in years. According to Kakitani, there was someone who refused to let the police check their phone's location data. Who would that be? The ones without alibis were Makihara and Sugishita. Makihara's single, so he'd have no reason to hide a relationship with Kokorika."

"When you put it like that, Sugishita's the only one who fits."

"See? Just use your head a little. You might be surprised what comes out," Takeshi tapped his own temple.

Mayu rolled her eyes. "Anyway, so the mystery couple was our fake Shizuka and not-so-Goody Sugi. Oh, that reminds me—this is something else I heard from Kakitani. Apparently, Kugimiya didn't know a thing about the plans for an online game adaptation of *Gen'no Labyrinth*. Kokorika and Sugishita were running that on their own."

"That figures." Takeshi topped off her glass. He *was* being unusually generous.

"There's one more thing—kind of the main thing, actually. What was the deal with the envelope? The one with the essay that Tsukumi's mother gave to Kugimiya. You set all that up?"

"Of course. That morning I went to Tsukumi Beauty Salon and left it with his mother. I told her to contact Kugimiya and hand it over. I said it was something we'd found among my brother's effects, and since Naoya Tsukumi's name was written on the back of the envelope, I told her it had turned up among his belongings."

"But you put two essays in that envelope, right? One was "On Friends," written on manuscript paper, and the other was a copy of "My Dream for the Future." In his confession, Kugimiya revealed that he'd torn up the copy of "My Dream" and threw it in the river on his way to the reunion."

"So that's where he dumped it. A murderer *and* a litterbug. Outrageous," Takeshi said.

"Kakitani asked me to get this out of you: where did you get the

handwritten copy of the missing essay?"

"Nowhere. I wrote it myself," Takeshi said with a shrug.

"You what?"

"I looked at the draft we found on the computer and copied it out onto manuscript paper, then I made a photocopy of that."

"So it was a fake? I wonder how Kugimiya didn't notice."

"Because I imitated Tsukumi's handwriting. I figured that Kugimiya had probably destroyed the essay he stole from my brother's room without studying it that closely. It's only natural he'd assume the one in the envelope was a copy made before Tsukumi turned it in at school."

"Kugimiya still seems to think it's the real deal. The police do too, apparently. Kakitani even wants to use it as evidence…?"

"Not my problem." Her uncle drained the beer left in his glass.

"Also, about that footage I mentioned earlier—the part where people at the wake and funeral are looking at the portrait. They want to borrow it."

Takeshi shook his head. "Won't do them any good."

"Why not?"

"Because in the real footage, Kugimiya doesn't have his eyes closed."

"What?"

"I know, right? I checked the video, and that bastard was staring straight at the portrait, dead on from the front. Pretty gutsy for a Noby like him."

"Then what were we watching in the classroom?"

"I doctored it."

"You did what?"

"Hey, we got Kugimiya rattled, right? Like I said there, if he's innocent, getting filmed with his eyes closed shouldn't bother him at all. He'd say he doesn't remember doing it, doesn't know why he closed them. Oh, and by the way, Makihara looking away? That's doctored too."

"Really?"

"Had to add a few touches for dramatic effect."

All at once, she began to feel sorry for Makihara. Takeshi had dragged him into that whole thing just as part of the staging? She shook her head. "Okay, one last question."

"What now?"

"Why snap your fingers?"

Takeshi looked down at his fingers and raised an eyebrow.

“Your fingers,” Mayu repeated. “You were snapping them in the classroom, whenever you started and stopped the video.” She mimed snapping with her right hand, but she wasn’t very good at it and no sound came out. “Did you really need to do that? You were just working the remote with your other hand anyway.”

Takeshi twisted his lips in annoyance. “You can’t have a show without a performance. That’s essential.”

“And the more I think about it, the more it seems like you didn’t even need to dress up as my dad.”

Takeshi scowled at her. “You sure talk a lot. Are you done yet?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Good. Then it’s my turn.”

“Huh? You need me for something?”

“I called *you* here, remember? First, a change of stage.” Takeshi pointed toward a table in the back.

EPILOGUE

In the back of the bar sat a round table covered with a white cloth. Mayu sat down, and Takeshi set out two wineglasses into which he poured some red wine. “A special treat. Bordeaux, 2000.”

“What’s the occasion?”

No answer. She had no idea if Bordeaux 2000 was a particularly valuable vintage or not, but decided to help herself anyway. She took a tentative sip. It did have a genuinely nice aroma.

Takeshi sat down in the chair across from her. “I only really wanted to say one thing” He leaned forward, bringing his face close to hers. “Call off the wedding if you’re not into it.”

“Wha—”

She almost spat out the wine in her mouth.

“Judging from the look you just gave me, you’re wondering how I knew.” With a satisfied smile, Takeshi leaned back in his chair. “Not that I enjoy revealing my secrets, but you might say I used my go-to trick.”

“Which is…?”

Takeshi pointed at the bag resting on Mayu’s lap. “Your phone.”

“Whaaat?” Mayu pulled her phone out of her bag. “You looked at my phone!? When?”

“Remember when you were explaining *Gen’no Labyrinth*? You had me read the wiki—on *your* phone.” Takeshi said.

Now that he mentioned it, that had happened. “Damn it, I let my guard down.”

“Careless, yes. Thanks to that, I saw everything. Quite the pickle you’re in, eh?”

“You’re the worst. Reading someone else’s mail like that.”

“I only want my dear niece to be happy.” He went on. “So what’s the plan? Just keep dragging things out and kicking the can down the road? That’s hardly a way to spend the rest of your life?”

“When you put it like that, it really hurts,” Mayu said, her shoulders slumping as she looked up at him from under her brows. “What do you think I should do?”

“If you’re wavering, you should hit the brakes. Marriage is a lifelong matter, you know.”

“I figured you’d say that…”

“In my opinion, you should only take that plunge when you’re convinced you’ve found your one and only partner.” Takeshi said. “But if your feelings are swaying toward another, that’s a recipe for disaster.”

“Uh…”

“It happens all the time,” Takeshi went on, nodding like a man with a wealth of life experience to share. “You’re all ready to get married and *wham*, right then someone better comes along and it feels like destiny. No need to beat yourself up over it. It happens all the time. That’s just the kind of animal we humans are. Whether you end up with that person or not is another question, but for now, you should wipe the slate clean with Kenta. That’s all there is to it. If you want, I’ll go apologize with you. I’ll even bow my head to his parents.”

“Hold on a second.” Mayu put out her right hand. “What are you talking about?”

“Your new romance, of course,” Takeshi said. “You got a confession by email from someone other than Kenta. And you’re interested, thus the turmoil. Am I wrong?”

The comment was so completely off base that Mayu was bewildered for a moment, until she saw the smirk on her uncle’s face and realized what was going on. She shook her head. “I don’t believe it. You got me. You never actually looked at my phone, did you, Uncle Takeshi?”

Takeshi chuckled and took a sip of wine. “Well done. That said, though I never did look at your phone, I could tell there was some kind of snag between you and Kenta. You can hardly blame me for poking around a little.”

Mayu let out a sigh. “Was it that obvious?”

“I’m not blind. Sure, you might postpone the ceremony because of Covid or your father’s death, but there’s no reason to put off the paperwork itself. Yet no talk of registering the marriage ever came up. On top of that, you hardly ever contacted Kenta. That’s not how an eager fiancée acts, not by a long shot.”

“Right…”

“Look, if you want me to butt out, we can stop here.” Takeshi said. “But

if you want my advice, now's your chance. I'm busy. I don't know when I'll be able to spare time like this again."

"All right." Mayu tapped at her phone and brought up one of her emails. "If you must know, this is what's been bothering me."

"Let's have a look." Takeshi took the phone from her.

The email had arrived about a month earlier. She had just finished work and gotten on the train home when the notification came. The sender was someone she didn't know, but the subject line read "To Ms. Mayu Kamio," so it didn't look like spam.

The body of the message began: "Congratulations on your recent engagement." She had told a limited circle of people she was going to marry Kenta, so this would have to have been someone who heard it secondhand. As she read on, however, it quickly became clear this was no simple congratulatory message.

"I imagine that now your marriage is planned, you must be feeling very happy. Believe me, the last thing I want to do is cast a shadow over your upcoming wedding, but I ultimately decided that it was in your best interest that you knew the truth, thus this email.

"I cannot give my name, but I am someone who used to be in a relationship with Mr. Kenta Nakajo. This wasn't a casual fling, but a serious relationship with the possibility of marriage. At least, that is how I saw it.

"In the midst of that, something changed with my body. My period did not come. When I went to the hospital, I was told I was five weeks pregnant.

"Shock and joy struck me at the same time. I wasn't against a so-called 'shotgun wedding.' To the contrary, I know several women who agonize over not being able to have children even after they get married. Compared to them, I felt lucky.

"I immediately called Kenta to meet and when we did, I told him. I was sure he would be happy, too. I was picturing the smile he'd make when he learned the news. But that's not what happened. He said it wasn't a good time for us to have a child.

"I felt like I'd been doused with ice water. I asked him why not. His answer was that he'd always thought that getting married, having a family, and raising kids were things for later, for a far-off future. Not now.

"I was shocked. I felt faint. Maybe he had never intended to marry me. In

that case, why hadn't he taken proper precautions? When I pressed him, all he did was keep saying he was sorry. Then he bowed his head and said he'd pay for it, he just wanted me to end the pregnancy. I cried then, and he apologized again, saying 'just give me a little more time. If it happens again, you can keep the baby.'

"I didn't believe him then, to be honest, but what was I going to do? I didn't want to have the child on my own. So I ended the pregnancy, in tears.

"I didn't get pregnant again, after that, probably because Kenta became obsessed with contraception. I realized the problem hadn't been timing. The problem was me.

"My disappointment led to a cooling off of the relationship. Before long, despite barely even discussing it, we ended things."

"I'm sorry to put this on you, Ms. Kamio. I can only imagine how unwelcome this must feel. Still, I believe you should know this side of the man you've decided to spend your life with. It might not be the part of him you love, but it is a part of Kenta Nakajo.

"Should you still choose to follow through and marry him, I have nothing more to say. I only pray for your happiness.

"And if you've already heard all of the above from Kenta himself, I deeply apologize for the intrusion and wasting your time."

Mayu had felt the blood drain from her face as she read. Her heart raced so fast it was hard to breathe. She had no memory of when she got off the train or how she walked home. The next thing she knew, she was lying on her bed at home with tears in her eyes.

"I see," Takeshi said, handing the phone back to her. "Not something you can just brush aside."

"I haven't been able to get this email out of my head. But I have no idea what I'm supposed to do about it."

"What exactly about it bothers you?" Takeshi asked. "Is it wondering who sent the email? Or the fact that Kenta has something like that in his past?"

"Both," Mayu answered. "Of course I want to know who sent it. There aren't that many people who know about my marriage to Kenta. Which would mean she's still around, maybe he's even still in touch with his ex-girlfriend, right? And I had no idea. So, yeah, of course I care."

"Makes sense," her uncle said simply.

“And the fact that he got his ex pregnant and made her have an abortion—that was a shock, too. It was a side of Kenta I never imagined he had, which I guess is just like it said in the email.” Maya shook her head. “And yes, it’s true it made me wonder if marrying him was the right move.”

“I understand that feeling very well,” Takeshi said. “But you’re forgetting something important. You haven’t checked whether what’s written there is actually true. It could just be some jealous person making up a story and sending it to you.”

Mayu shook her head. “No, I don’t think that’s the case.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“If I wanted to know whether it was true or not, it’d be as simple as confronting Kenta, right? If you’re spreading false rumors, you send them to people who aren’t directly involved. There’s no point in sending a made-up story to me, the person at the center of it.”

“There’s some logic to that,” Takeshi allowed. “But you still need to confirm it. You just said you could find out anytime you wanted. So why don’t you?”

“Because I don’t want to talk to Kenta about it.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s a horrible topic, obviously,” Mayu said, her voice rising. “Of course he wants to keep something like this secret. And if he finds out I know, he’s not going to act normal. What if this makes everything awkward between us right before the wedding?”

“Okay,” Takeshi said, snorting. “Now *that’s* ridiculous.”

“What’s ridiculous about it?”

“You wanting to avoid things getting awkward,” Takeshi said. “Listen: It’s already awkward. You’re already on the fence about whether you really want to marry him or not, aren’t you?”

“Well, maybe…” This time her voice dropped.

“Try imagining what’s going on in the mind of the person who sent that email. They’re probably getting more and more irritated that the engagement still hasn’t been called off. Tell me: have you gotten any nasty, follow-up emails?”

He’d hit the mark so squarely she couldn’t say a word. Mayu only pursed her lips in silence.

“Not to mention the ex is probably sending mails to Kenta, too,” her

uncle went on. “Thus his strange behavior. It was obvious he was hiding something when I talked to him.”

“I don’t know. Maybe that’s all true. But it’s also true I don’t want to break up with him!”

“That’s neither here nor there,” Takeshi said. “If you just paper over this and get married now, you’re going to keep stewing over it. Then, when you finally boil over, things will get even more awkward. Picture this: there’s a dilapidated old house. The whole place is so rickety it looks like it’ll collapse if you slam the door too hard. So you’re trying to slip in gently, easing the door open. Not just to go inside, but to live there. You really think you can just take up a normal life in a place like that? Sooner or later, there’ll come a time when you slam that door without thinking. If getting buried in the ruins is the alternative, don’t you think it’s better to just knock the house down before you ever step over the threshold?”

“Don’t compare my marriage with Kenta to some old dump!” Mayu said, clenching her fists.

“Fine, how about a rotted-out bridge? Or a tunnel made of mud? Pick your metaphor of choice,” Takeshi shot back. Then he added, more quietly, “Whatever it is, knock it down. Then rebuild from scratch.”

With that, Takeshi suddenly stood from the table and grabbed the tablecloth on both sides. Then he whipped it away with a sharp yank. The two glasses brimming with red wine stayed just where they were as the pure white cloth vanished from beneath them.

Takeshi stepped off to the side of the chair, brandishing the tablecloth like a matador.

Mayu frowned. “A magic trick, now? What exactly are you trying to prove?”

“Only that the way forward to is to tear everything down and start anew. But you can’t do it on your own.” Takeshi draped the opened cloth over the chair he’d just been sitting in, hiding it from view. “Luckily, you don’t have to,” he said, and with a flourish, he whipped the tablecloth away from the chair. Mayu let out a cry.

Kenta was sitting in the chair.

“Kenta! What are you doing here?”

“Uh,” he stammered. “I thought, I mean I didn’t know he was going to…” Kenta hunched his shoulders, scratching his head in embarrassment.

“He’s heard everything,” Takeshi said. “All that’s left is for you to talk things through between yourselves. The old house is torn down. Now you get to decide whether to build a new one.” So saying, he quickly folded the cloth, set it on the table, then turned on his heel and headed for the door. Halfway there, he stopped and glanced back. “I’ll leave you to it. And Kenta, remember, that last trick isn’t yours to reveal.”

With that, the dark magician swept out through the door and into the night.

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