Associate Professor Akira Takatsuki's Conjecture

Tales for the Living, Dances for the Dead

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Mikage Sawamura



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Mikage Sawamura
Translation by Katelyn Smith

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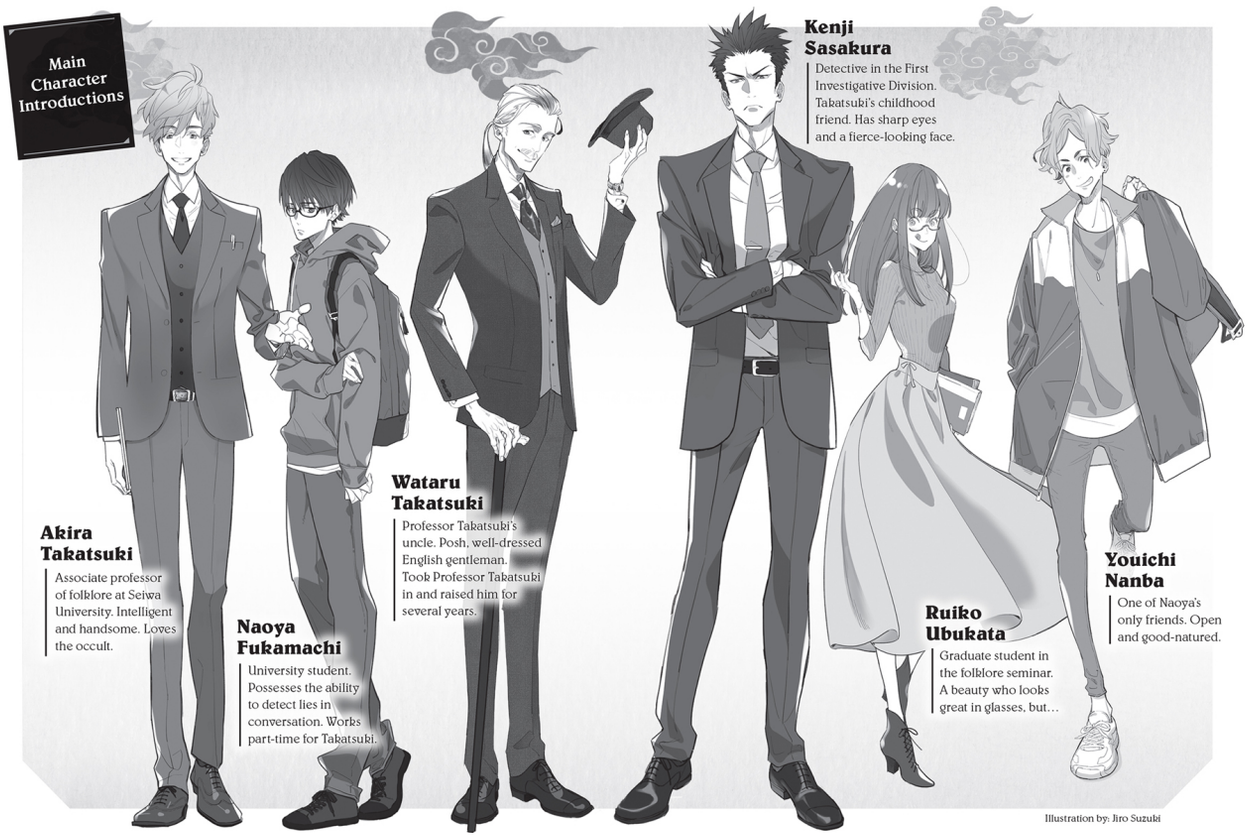


Illustration by: Jiro Suzuki



Chapter 1:
Night of One Hundred Horrors

Summer was coming.

The weather forecast for the following week, which had been full of rain symbols for days on end, suddenly displayed little suns instead. On the TV screen, the beaming forecaster announced, “The long-standing weather front has finally moved on, which means we’re looking at the end of the rainy season.”

Once the rains had ceased, summer began. The tedious days of sodden shoes and laundry that would never dry on the line would give way to the scorching rays of the sun baking the asphalt. Already, the weather reports warned of the year’s upcoming heat wave.

Summer was definitely coming.

“When summer break is here, let’s go to the place where you saw that festival, Fukamachi.

“We’ll figure out what it is together.”

Every day since he made that promise, he’d felt strange, like he was awaiting summer’s arrival with both bated breath and a roiling storm of anxiety.

…And even still.

Student life was surprisingly busy, especially in July before summer break arrived. With spring-semester exams approaching, their assignments increased in number and length.

By the time students managed—one way or another—to meet all the deadlines for their relentlessly accumulating piles of work, exams would be upon them. Unlike the fall semester, there was no mass outbreak of zombies across campus, but all the seats in the library and cafeteria were occupied by students at their wit's end, and the vending machines had been entirely emptied of energy drinks.

The end of the spring-semester exam period at Seiwa University fell on the last day of July this year.

Exiting the school building after finishing the last of his exams, Naoya Fukamachi was hit with an unexpected wave of dizziness in the glaring sun.

The sunlight was intense. Perhaps even painfully so. Its dazzling brightness poured down unsparingly from a sky so blue, it could have served as the image on a postcard. Unable to bear it, Naoya found some shade to take refuge in, followed at a tottering pace by his half zombified classmate, Youichi Nanba.

"…It's so hot. I'm burning to death," Nanba muttered, sinking into a crouch next to Naoya. He ruffled his brown hair like he was trying to shake off some heat.

Pushing up his glasses, Naoya glanced upward, where he saw a cumulonimbus cloud so massive that he couldn't help but wonder whether it was hiding a castle in the sky. The bright blue expanse made his eyes water, and when he closed them, he noticed the sound of cicadas mingling with the hustle and bustle of campus.

"…Remind me when they started chirping? The cicadas."

"Um… A couple days ago, maybe? I don't really remember."

"Gotcha."

The rainy season had been long this year. The rain had continued to fall every day even into the latter half of July, and the temperature had barely risen. The official end of the rainy season in the Kanto region was only declared several days ago.

Nanba took a handheld electric fan out of his bag, pointing the wind at his own face.

"I guess summer is here already."

"…Yeah, guess so."

Naoya nodded.

It wasn't as though the world had totally changed while he and

the other students were taking their last exams. The sky, which had been cloudy all morning, had simply cleared up. But the sweltering heat and persistent trill of cicadas made the shift in seasons impossible to ignore.

Summer had come at last.

“Wait a minute, that means it’s summer vacation!”

His energy instantly restored, Nanba shot to his feet and hollered into the air.

“All our finals are done! As of right now, it’s officially summer vacation! Whoo-hoo, we did it! Summer break, how I missed you! Summer is the best!”

“…Yeah, you’re right.”

“Geez, don’t sound so bummed! Don’t start suffering from summer fatigue all of a sudden. Go do something fun instead! What are your plans for summer, Fukamachi?!”

“P-plans? Um, well…”

Nanba turned the electric fan on Naoya, who faltered as the air blew over the tip of his nose.

“Listen, Fukamachi,” Nanba said with an exasperated look. “You said you didn’t go anywhere last summer, either, right? We don’t get a lot of longer breaks, so you should take advantage of it to travel or something. We’re college students. There’s no other time in our whole lives when we’ll be able to fool around this much. There must be something you can do. If you’re short on money, you could just bike around the country or whatever.”

“What are you talking about? I don’t own a bike anyway… Oh, but I am going on a trip.”

“What, for real? Where to?”

“Well, I mean, I said ‘trip,’ but I’m just accompanying Professor Takatsuki for some fieldwork.”

“Oh, your part-time job, huh? Wow, so you even go on outings with him? Professor Takatsuki is somethin’ else.”

Nanba’s admiration was plain. Ever since Takatsuki had helped him out with a situation, Nanba seemed to hold the man in very high esteem.

“That reminds me. Speaking of Professor Takatsuki, one of the juniors in my club invited us to some—”

Naoya’s phone vibrated in his pocket as his classmate was speaking.

Taking it out, he saw an e-mail notification on the screen and opened it immediately upon reading the sender's address.

Firing off a quick reply, Naoya said, "Sorry, Nanba. I have to go."

"Okay. Is it work?"

"No, I just agreed to meet up with someone," he replied, turning to walk away before he felt Nanba's grip clamp down on the back of his shirt collar.

T-shirt biting into his neck, Naoya almost let out a choked sound. He wrapped his fingers around the front of his collar and looked over his shoulder.

"Hey! What the hell?!"

"—A girlfriend?"

Nanba's eyes were alight. He looked so excited that it made Naoya want to squirm.

"No, it's not like that, so let me go!"

"Aw, come on, no need to hide it. Why else would you be so eager to go see this person? Wow, so Fukamachi finally got himself a girlfriend. At least show me a picture of her before you go!"

"I'm telling you, I don't have a girlfriend, so there's no picture! The person I'm meeting is a *guy*!"

"What, so it's just a friend? Boo, that's no fun."

"He's not really a friend. He's more like…my senior?"

"Senior? Like from high school?"

"…In life?"

"Huh?"

Nanba cocked his head in confusion, and Naoya took the chance to escape his grasp. After fixing the ruffled collar of his shirt, he gave a quick good-bye and walked off for real.

He made his way toward a café on the opposite side of the train station from the school. He hadn't been there before, but he was able to make it to his destination without incident after entering the shop name he read in an e-mail on his phone map. The atmosphere inside the café was relaxed, and there weren't many patrons, possibly because the store was slightly off the main road. No one there looked like a student at Seiwa, so Naoya felt a bit relieved.

He glanced around the café and noticed a man seated at a

table in the rear raise his head. Approximately in his midforties, the man was wearing silver-rimmed glasses and a neat shirt, and he had a gentle air about him.

Naoya approached his table, lightly bowing his head in greeting.

“Sorry to make you go out of your way like this, Mr. Tooyama.”

“Oh, no, I’m the one who should apologize for the lack of communication. I just happened to be in the area for a work meeting and wondered if you might be available.”

Hirotaka Tooyama’s almond-shaped eyes narrowed even further behind his glasses as he smiled.

Naoya had met Tooyama, who ran an architectural firm in the city, in April. A woman who worked at his company had consulted with Takatsuki about an incident that occurred there.

That was when Naoya learned that Tooyama had the same ability he did.

Just like Naoya, Tooyama had wandered into that festival in the dead of night as a child and paid the same price. The possibility that there were others like him was one Naoya had never even considered.

Since then, the two of them had been in touch a handful of times. Tooyama had learned to use the power to hear lies to his benefit and had been living with it much longer than Naoya, who found what he had to say extremely enlightening. Naoya told Nanba that Tooyama was like his senior in life, and he really did feel that way. Tooyama was someone Naoya could honestly look up to.

Naoya sat across from Tooyama and asked for an iced coffee when the server came to take his order. Tooyama was drinking a coffee, too, though his was hot. It seemed he wasn’t fond of sweets, either, after all.

“Has your summer break from university started already, Fukamachi?”

“Yes. I actually just finished my last final.”

“Ah, no wonder you look worn-out. I take it you were up all night studying?”

“I did get a little sleep. What about you, Mr. Tooyama? Are you okay? You seem a bit exhausted yourself.”

“The company started work on a big project, that’s all… We

still haven't been able to fill our open positions, so everything is a little hectic."

Tooyama, his face appearing just a tad thinner than it had the last time they met, gave a wry smile.

The incident in April had led to his office losing two employees. His staff hadn't been all that big to begin with, so they were probably quite shorthanded now. Naoya had sent him an e-mail at the start of July that said, "There's something I want to ask you about. Do you have time to talk?" Tooyama hadn't replied.

Not until a short while ago, that is. His response read, "I'm near your school at the moment; we could talk right now, if you'd like?" Naoya had rushed to send back an "I'll be right there."

"Um, I really am sorry. For taking up your time when you're already busy."

"Don't worry about that. I was just thinking it was time for a cup of coffee and a break. Anyway, you wanted to ask me about something?"

"…About the village in Nagano."

Tooyama fell abruptly silent at that statement.

Just then, the server arrived with Naoya's iced coffee. Naoya pulled the glass closer to him on the table, also saying nothing. Sneaking a glance at Tooyama as he put a straw in his drink, Naoya found the eyes on the other side of those glasses looking back at him.

The older man stared at Naoya, his gaze searching, then said, "Do you intend to go there? To the village."

"…Yes."

"When?"

"Around Obon."

"During that festival of all times?!"

"Professor Takatsuki said he thought it would be pointless to go any other time."

"He's got some nerve… I thought I warned him against going there before."

Shaking his head, Tooyama pressed his fingers to his temples as if he had a headache.

Naoya took a sip of his iced coffee before looking back at Tooyama.

"We already had our minds set on it. Professor Takatsuki and I

agreed to go there ages ago. So I was hoping—could you tell me, please? Why you think it's a bad idea?"

Tooyama had once told them, *"It's practically a ghost town there now. Even if you did go, an investigation would be useless."* He had followed that, in quite a strong tone, with: *"You're better off just giving up on the idea."*

The way he'd said those words had stuck with Naoya ever since.

"Did you perhaps make a visit there yourself relatively recently, Mr. Tooyama? You're speaking from experience, aren't you? What happened when you went there?"

"…You're right," Tooyama replied, his face resigned. "I did go. About three years ago."

He had gone to the village while on a business trip in Nagano, Tooyama explained.

After all his work was taken care of, when he was considering taking the chance to do a little sightseeing before going home, suddenly—he remembered that village.

"My aunt had lived there. My grandparents passed early on, so whenever I went to the countryside for summer vacation, it was my aunt's house I stayed at. A cousin I was close with wrote to me often, so I more or less remembered the address… Though, my cousin had long since married and left home, and my aunt and uncle were already dead, so it wasn't like I was planning on visiting anyone."

It had been autumn. Driving through the wooded mountains, the scenery alive with fall colors, certainly wasn't unpleasant as far as traveling by car went.

But the village he arrived at afterward was quite different from the one he remembered.

"The population had dropped a lot. There didn't seem to be many occupied houses anymore. And the people who were there looked like they were just scraping by, working the fields."

Even so, as he got out of the car and strolled aimlessly along the road, Tooyama was confronted with all kinds of sights that brought memories to mind. The stream where he swam with his cousin. The field where he trudged around with a butterfly net over his shoulder. The forest where he went to catch rhinoceros beetles. Turning his gaze skyward, he saw that the ridges of the

high mountain that surrounded the village looked just the same as before.

Feeling nostalgic, Tooyama found himself walking toward the village square—the place where that festival had been held, watched over by the mountains.

On the way there, however, he crossed paths with two people who appeared to be returning from working on a farm.

The pair—most likely a married couple—seemed quite old, their faces well tanned and heavily lined. Nevertheless, their gaits were steady as they walked with their farming tools carried over their shoulders.

When they saw Tooyama, their expressions became suspicious, but that was only natural. People from outside the village only rarely ventured that deeply into the mountains, far from any tourist destinations.

They asked Tooyama where he had come from, and he told them about how his relatives used to live in the village. Hearing his aunt's name, the pair nodded with understanding, suddenly all smiles.

He made small talk with them for a while. The couple seemed to enjoy chatting, chuckling as they said things like *"This village has shrunk so much"* and *"All the young folks move away as soon as they can, but us old-timers still have fields to tend to."*

Their demeanors changed abruptly when Tooyama brought up the festival.

"…At first, when I mentioned going to dance at the Bon festival as a child, they laughed. Said, 'That takes me back. We don't have festivals like that anymore.' Then I said, 'Now that I think of it, there was one time I went to a strange festival in the middle of the night.' And just like that, they went quiet. They glanced at each other for a moment, and it was like they were communicating something."

"That sounds a bit ominous. Don't tell me they did something to you?"

"No, nothing like that, but…"

Tooyama hesitated. He lifted his mug to his mouth, took a sip of coffee, and continued:

"…after that, the two of them—all they did was lie."

"Huh?"

“They weren’t saying anything important. Just things they had no particular reason to say to me, like ‘We’re going shopping in town tomorrow for the first time in a while’ and ‘Our grandkid is coming from Tokyo this weekend.’ And yet…everything they said was horribly distorted.”

“Which means…”

“They were telling obvious lies. And what’s more—they were deliberately doing it for me to hear.”

That could only mean, in other words, that they knew about Tooyama’s ability.

To both Tooyama and Naoya, people’s voices sounded terribly warped when they were lying. They experienced it as such an unpleasant noise that listening to it for prolonged periods of time was unbearable.

Tooyama couldn’t help but think the older couple had been trying to drive him out of the village with their behavior.

“It frightened me, for some reason. I hightailed it out of there and came back to Tokyo.”

At that, Tooyama returned the mug he had still been holding to its saucer. The ceramic dishes gave a small *clink* as they made contact. The sound startled Naoya for no reason he could name, so he stirred up the ice in his coffee with the straw to mask his alarm.

Quite honestly, Tooyama’s story left him feeling unsettled.

The old couple’s demeanor had changed right after Tooyama mentioned the midnight festival.

They knew.

They knew about that festival. They knew what became of those who attended it and came back after.

And so they had chased Tooyama away.

It was as if…he was some sort of abomination.

Tooyama spoke once more.

“I’ll say it again—I think it would be best if you give up on going there. To that village.”

“Mr. Tooyama…”

“Fukamachi, I no longer have any intention of pursuing information about that festival or about our ability. Even I wish my ears could go back to normal sometimes, but I’ve lived with this power for decades now. If it disappeared suddenly, I’m sure I

would never trust a single word out of anyone's mouth ever again… Losing the ability to hear lies at this point… The thought scares me."

Tooyama's voice was quiet.

He clasped his hands together on the table and looked down at his entwined fingers.

"I believe we have no choice but to keep living with these ears of ours. Going back to how we were isn't an option anymore. So what merit is there in trying to figure out the truth?"

Naoya looked down at his own hands. Idly, he watched the condensed water droplets on his iced coffee trace small paths down the outside of the glass to the table.

Tooyama had spoken in a detached manner. That only made the words sit in Naoya's chest all the more heavily.

He understood how Tooyama felt. He had experienced it firsthand, after all. When he'd had an ear infection, Naoya had temporarily lost his ability to hear lies.

It had caused him extreme anxiety.

Any relief he had felt over being free from hearing distorted voices was far outweighed by the worry and fear of not knowing who was lying. Not being able to distinguish liar from truthteller even added fuel to the paranoia that everyone was lying.

Indeed, there was no returning to normal.

The two of them already knew—that humans were creatures who told lies as easily as they breathed. That, without batting an eye, people would deceive those they were close to.

Even if either of them ended up with some sort of hearing loss and could no longer tell when someone was lying, in their minds, the world would still—always—be full of warped voices.

Regardless.

"…Even so, Mr. Tooyama. I—I want to know."

"Fukamachi…"

"It's not like I think my ears will go back to normal if I know the truth. I just really do want to know. Whether that was truly a festival of the dead or something else…and why it happened there in the first place."

"Isn't it actually Professor Takatsuki who wants to know all that? Not you."

"…What?"

Totally caught off guard by those words, Naoya looked up.

At some point, Tooyama had raised his own downturned gaze and was staring intently at Naoya. His kept his voice low, but there was a sharpness to it that left Naoya feeling cornered.

“If Professor Takatsuki hadn’t brought it up, the thought of going back to that village probably never would have occurred to you. I don’t see why it’s necessary for him to involve you so thoroughly in his academic interests.”

A chill in the pit of his stomach, Naoya returned Tooyama’s gaze wordlessly.

It was true; Takatsuki was the one who had said he wanted to uncover the truth behind that festival.

He had asked Naoya whether he was interested in knowing what really happened that fateful summer night when he was ten.

Takatsuki had always wanted to know. What was actually going on behind the scenes of the incidents brought to him as supernatural phenomena? And—did real monsters exist?

But the root of why he felt that way wasn’t academic interest. Tooyama didn’t know that. Takatsuki’s obsession with the occult came from his strong desire to understand the events of his own past.

So then…what about Naoya?

Was he just getting caught up in Takatsuki’s feelings?

Ever since agreeing to go to the village with the professor, Naoya had felt uneasy. Yes, it was just as Tooyama said. If not for Takatsuki’s suggestion, Naoya himself would never have entertained the idea. The truth was, he was absolutely terrified of that village; that was why he was so anxious. Seeing that festival again meant maybe never returning to this world. His instincts were telling him there was still time to back out.

Still, for all that—

Slowly, Naoya shook his head.

“…That’s not it.”

One clearly defined feeling existed deep inside his troubled heart.

Naoya wanted to know.

“I want this. I want to know the truth for my own sake.”

“Fukamachi, you—”

“You’re right,” Naoya went on, interrupting the start of whatever Tooyama was about to say. “Knowing won’t change anything, but…I think knowing is its own reward.

“Someone once told me, ‘Past, present, and future are all connected.’ I feel like I won’t truly be able to move on with my life until I know what happened to me. Because…not knowing is scary.”

For a short while, Tooyama simply gazed at Naoya without speaking.

Then, little by little, a wry smile surfaced on his face.

“You’re…a tough kid,” he muttered, a soft sigh mixed in with his words.

“That’s not true. And it’s not like I’ll be going on my own,” Naoya replied with slight panic, realizing what he had said before could be taken as criticism of Tooyama. He didn’t intend to disavow the other man’s desire to leave the past in the past.

Tooyama shook his head.

“Well, as we get older, whether we like it or not, our way of thinking trends toward playing it safe, and that’s no good. But… I’m still worried. If you’re determined to go, please be careful.”

“Yes, I will.”

“And once you come back, maybe you could tell me about it. About how it was.”

“Yes, of course—”

Just then, Naoya’s phone buzzed in his pocket.

Someone was calling him. He took his phone out and saw Takatsuki’s name on the screen.

“Um, sorry, but the professor is calling me.”

“Oh, you can answer it here. I don’t mind,” Tooyama said, as Naoya had gotten up to take the call somewhere else.

“Thank you, sorry,” Naoya responded, sitting back down and tapping his phone to connect the call.

“Hello?”

“Ah, Fukamachi! All your exams are over now, right? Congrats on getting through them! If you’re still at the university, could you drop by my office for a bit? We’re going to be holding a storytelling ritual, and I was thinking you might want to join in!”

On the other end of the line, Takatsuki’s voice was brimming with energy.

That voice must have bled out from the phone speakers, because Tooyama gave another wry smile and said, “Professor Takatsuki sounds like his usual self.”

After seeing Tooyama to the station and returning to Seiwa, Naoya found the campus unexpectedly quiet.

The courtyard, which was usually always abuzz with all sorts of student activities, was less than half full. Maybe such activities weren’t held the day exams ended, or perhaps it was just too hot. The street-performance society kept dropping the juggling clubs they were tossing up into the air; the dance club’s choreography didn’t look as clean as usual. Hoping they’d take a break before ending up with heatstroke, Naoya headed toward the faculty building, walking through the shade as much as possible.

He went to the third floor of the building, found the door labeled 304, and knocked.

“Come in,” called a soft, clear voice from inside.

Naoya opened the door.

“Ah! Welcome, Fukamachi! Sorry for calling you here out of the blue.”

Sitting at the large table in the center of the room with his open laptop in front of him, Akira Takatsuki was smiling brightly.

Though more and more of the college faculty had switched to wearing lighter clothes at the start of the rainy season, Takatsuki was still dressing in his usual suit-and-tie attire. Of course, his current suits were probably made of a summer-appropriate material, and he wasn’t in a full three-piece, but Naoya often wondered if he wasn’t too warm. It may have been the influence of Takatsuki’s uncle, who was a lot like an English gentleman, or perhaps Takatsuki just didn’t overheat easily.

Nevertheless, the air-conditioning in his office was running at just the right temperature, keeping the room cool. To someone whose body was not at all keeping pace with summer’s sudden onset, it felt amazing.

Looking around the office as he appreciated the chill, Naoya was struck by the feeling that something was off.

“…Huh? What happened to the computers that were over there?”

The two desktop computers that he expected to see in the corner of the room had vanished along with the desks they had been on. In their place sat two additional—relatively small—bookshelves, despite the room already being packed with bookcases.

“Well, you see, my graduate students and I all have our own laptops or tablets, so those computers hadn’t been getting any use lately. It was a pain to keep their systems updated, so I got rid of them recently.”

Takatsuki gave a slight shrug as he answered.

At that, Naoya realized it had been a little while since he had been to the office. He’d been busy with assignments, and the professor hadn’t contacted him, so he hadn’t visited for a time.

Looking at Naoya, Takatsuki cocked his head to the side.

“Fukamachi, don’t tell me you had already left campus when I called earlier? You’re covered in sweat. I didn’t mean to make you walk back such a distance.”

“Oh, no, this is… I was at the café on the other side of the train station,” Naoya said, wiping the sweat off his face with a little handkerchief he got out of his bag.

“Why were you all the way over there? It’s half-price crepe day at that café, but you don’t eat them, do you?”

“No, I don’t. Why do you even know that…? No, never mind. I was there meeting with Mr. Tooyama. He was near Seiwa for work and took the trouble to contact me.”

“Oh, really? In that case, I wish you would have called me, too.”

Takatsuki was pouting a little. At thirty-five years old, he was as childish as ever.

Naoya sat in the folding chair next to him.

“I asked Mr. Tooyama about the time he went to that village.”

In an instant, the professor’s expression changed.

His eyes urged Naoya to go on, so he relayed the story he heard from Tooyama to Takatsuki.

When Naoya was done, Takatsuki stroked lightly at his own chin with his eyes slightly narrowed.

“Hmm… That does sound rather sinister.”

The lips that murmured those words, however, were smiling as if amused.

“And so? Are you going to heed Mr. Tooyama’s advice, Fukamachi? Have you decided not to go after all?”

“Of course not. I’m going.”

“Good, I’m glad.”

Takatsuki’s glowing smile resurfaced.

If Naoya had said he changed his mind, the professor might have visited the village anyway, even if he had to do it alone. That was the feeling Naoya got.

The travel arrangements were already made. As usual, Sasakura would be driving.

They would be gone for two nights and three days, from the fourteenth of August to the sixteenth. The festival in question occurred on the fifteenth. According to Tooyama’s story, there was no festival held in the village anymore, but coordinating the date was likely still critical.

“I’m even more excited thanks to what Mr. Tooyama said! I really hope I meet that old couple as well. I hope they’re there when we go.”

Takatsuki’s smile hadn’t waned. This was exactly why Naoya had decided not to bring Takatsuki along on his meetings with Tooyama. If the professor got too hyped up and went into his big-fluffy-dog mode at an inopportune time, Tooyama’s patience would probably be spent.

Seeing Takatsuki behaving like he always did made Naoya, on the other hand, feel a little relieved. It was like the fear that had been putting down roots in the back of his mind was retreating. Takatsuki had his fair share of flaws, but he was still a reliable person nonetheless.

As Naoya had told Tooyama, he wasn’t going to the village alone. Takatsuki would be there, and Sasakura, too. So it was going to be okay. He chose to believe that.

“Speaking of things to be excited about, there’s another thing we can look forward to before our trip, Fukamachi!”

His eyes sparkling, Takatsuki turned to Naoya.

“Something to look forward to? What do you mean?”

“I mentioned it on the phone, remember? The storytelling ritual!”

Come to think of it, that was the reason Takatsuki had called Naoya to his office to begin with.

But a storytelling ritual? Was that really happening?

“When is it being held?”

“In the evening, three days from now, here at the school. A larger number of people is preferable for something like this, so I would love it if you participated, too, Fukamachi. After all, it’s not just telling scary stories. It’s the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual! And naturally, we plan to tell exactly one hundred stories in a single night! I get to hear a hundred ghost stories in a night—some of them might even be new to me! I wonder if something scary will actually occur when the stories are over. I hope so!”

Takatsuki looked just like a child on the day before Christmas with the excitement in his gaze.

“Why did you decide to do the storytelling ritual? Is it part of your research?”

“No, a student proposed the idea. First-year literature student, Hayama. He’s in this year’s Folklore Studies II class. We covered the ritual in a lecture, and it seemed to pique his interest, so he came to me asking if we could put one on over summer break.”

Students could apply to the registrar’s office to reserve meeting rooms in school buildings. But a storytelling ritual involving one hundred stories was not just a nighttime event; it was an overnight one. The meeting rooms weren’t available to rent at all hours; naturally, they were unavailable at night. So apparently, Hayama had decided to get a professor involved to obtain permission from the registrar.

Takatsuki, of course, agreed without a second thought.

“This is actually my first time participating in a Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual, too. After all, it’s not an easy thing to execute in practice. It’s tough on attendees if there aren’t enough people, plus you need a big space and a lot of time. This is a chance to collect data on the trends in ghost stories that current students know, which makes it a very welcome proposal in my book.”

Takatsuki looked rather pleased with himself as he spoke. Indeed, an event like this one was probably going to serve his research well.

“We didn’t cover the storytelling ritual in last year’s class, did we? I just happened to hear about it from you, I think… It’s been around since the Edo period, right?”

“That’s true, it wasn’t in one of last year’s Folklore Studies II lectures. Since you’re already here, I’ll take the chance to tell you a little about it,” Takatsuki said, getting up from his seat. “I’ll make you some coffee. It’ll have to be hot, though.”

He went to the small table under his office window. Taking some mugs from the cupboard next to the table, the professor started to speak again.

“The storytelling ritual was one form of popular entertainment during the Edo period, when ghost stories were all the rage. There are various theories as to its origin, such as that it began as a test of courage among the sons of samurai families and eventually spread to the townspeople; or that it started in the inner palace with the shogun’s harem as a way to pass the time; or that Kōshin practitioners used it to stay awake on vigil nights. Such rituals were held all over the place, and there were many ghost story collections with the words *Night of One Hundred Horrors Ritual* in their titles published. There are some books over on that shelf, for instance, called Edo Ghost Story Collection that were published by Iwanami. Go take a look at the table of contents in the last volume.”

Takatsuki gestured to a bookcase behind Naoya.

Grabbing the indicated book and opening to the contents, Naoya saw titles like *Night of One Hundred Horrors Rituals in Various Provinces* and *Popular Tales from Storytelling Rituals*. He glanced at the contents of the first compilation—an apparent collection of scary tales from here and there throughout the country, which included “The Ghost of Shichibei’s Wife at Honnoji” and “Ghosts of Iga Province During the Keicho Era.”

“It’s been said that the reason the Edo period saw the publication of so many ghost story compilations was the popularity of this ritual among the general public. Originally, a ‘story’ was usually something recited by a single, skilled individual, to the point that an entire occupation called ‘*otogishu*’ existed. *Otogishu* were servants of lords who kept them entertained with various tales and conversation. Even in villages, there were professional storytellers who recited old legends for all the gathered townsfolk to hear. The ritual’s format of telling one hundred stories, on the other hand, wasn’t suited for that kind of event. Everyone present at this type of storytelling ritual

was both teller and listener. A skilled narrator wasn't necessary. It could be done anywhere by anyone. That was how this ritual spread among the common people, and how ghost stories were increasingly considered a form of entertainment."

Takatsuki's voice flowed smoothly as he spoke, just like it did during his lectures. Naoya had heard that quite a few students who had already taken Takatsuki's class for credit would sign up to take it again the following year, probably because the topics he covered changed a little every year. Maybe they did it as a sort of hobby, Naoya thought, even if it wouldn't lead to more credits. He felt a bit regretful that he hadn't enrolled in the class again himself.

"Things like storytelling rituals saw a decline in the chaos that was the transition from the end of the Edo period to the start of the Meiji Restoration, though their popularity picked right back up about twenty years into the Meiji era during the late 1880s. Around this time, people began putting a lot of effort into the rituals' staging and production. They used decorative lights to make demonic cats with glowing eyes, devised gadgets to craft mechanical ghosts, or deliberately brought funerals and memorial services to mind with the foods and tableware they chose for the ritual venue. Things like that."

"Mechanical ghosts? It sounds like the studios where they film bizarro TV specials."

"That's exactly right. It spoils the fun of it, don't you think? Sure, it was the era of modernization and all that, but it feels like they were overdoing things."

Takatsuki returned to the table with a tray of drinks in hand.

He set a mug with a picture of a dog on it in front of Naoya and a blue one at his own seat.

Naoya's mug contained black coffee, but as usual, Takatsuki's was full of hot cocoa and topped with a mass of floating marshmallows. Wafting softly into the air of the room, the scents of coffee and sweet cocoa mixed pleasantly with the predominate smell of old books.

Taking a sip of his drink, Takatsuki smiled blissfully before picking up his story again.

"So the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual continued like that from the Edo period to the present day, but it has three

particular characteristics that other ghost story gatherings lack. First, as I said before, ‘everyone present at this type of storytelling ritual is both teller and listener.’ It’s a participatory event, in other words. Now, can you tell me what the other two features are?”

Holding one finger aloft, Takatsuki suddenly lobbed a question at Naoya.

Naoya tilted his head to the side as he brought his mug to his lips.

“Umm… Oh, is it the part where you light one hundred candles? Ah, but in olden times, it would have been paper lanterns instead of candles, right?”

“You’re close, but, well. Let’s just say you’re close enough… The second characteristic is, ‘the ritual follows a set procedure.’”

Takatsuki put up a second finger.

“For the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual, you start with one hundred lights and put them out one by one as each story is finished. In the Edo period, it was standard to use a hundred lanterns covered with blue paper. In ‘Hyakumonogatari,’ a short story by Ogai Mori from the Meiji era, there’s a description of one hundred candles being set up. The type of light differs by era, but essentially, it’s not a Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual without the lights. So…what do you think number three is?”

Two of his fingers held up in what was basically a V sign, Takatsuki looked expectant.

Naoya stared at the professor’s hand, his brow furrowed.

The ritual was a participatory event, and it followed a set procedure. What other features did the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual even have? Caught off guard by being quizzed like this, Naoya couldn’t readily think of an answer.

“It’s something you would definitely know, even if you’ve never participated in one of these rituals before. I said it earlier, too! Remember? When the hundredth story is finished and all the lights are snuffed out—”

Takatsuki’s tone was trying to lead Naoya in the right direction; his raised fingers waved lightly in the air.

Ah, Naoya thought, nodding.

“Is it that ghosts appear?”

“Yes, ‘when the hundredth story is finished, something scary

happens’! That’s the third special characteristic.”

Putting up a third finger, Takatsuki grinned.

“‘Something scary happens’… But, I mean, it doesn’t actually happen, does it? It’s not real.”

“It happening is the premise on which this ritual is performed. It seems that’s what people believed, at least, until the Kanbun era, roughly. But even after that, the idea that something frightening will take place after the last story has persisted, even if only as a pretense. Many of the ghost stories centered around the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual involve some sort of supernatural occurrence at the end of the ritual.”

“…Um. I don’t really get it. Why did people in the Edo period purposefully participate in the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual if they believed something scary would happen?”

Naoya was genuinely curious. Why would anyone do something like that when it was clearly preferable that no ghosts appeared?

But the look that Takatsuki gave him in response was a bit confused.

“Well, isn’t it obvious? Because they wanted to experience the supernatural.”

“Come on, that’s ridiculous. Are you saying the Edo period was full of people like you?”

“I rather think there’s a number of people in the world who like scary stories, you know. It’s not just me. But to give you a serious answer—I mentioned one of the origins of this ritual was as a test of courage for the sons of samurai families, yes? That meant those sons had to withstand both the frightening stories told in the moment and whatever phenomenon followed at the end without giving into fear as proof of their warrior’s courage. There are even stories with that flow of events as a plotline, in fact. ‘*Inou Bukkairoku*’ is a famous one.”

Takatsuki took another sip of his cocoa before continuing:

“‘*Inou Bukkairoku*’ is the story of a sixteen-year-old boy named Inou Heitarou who encounters various monsters over the course of a month. The origin of Heitarou’s trials and tribulations is the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual. He went up a mountain to perform the ritual with his neighbor, a man named Gonpachi, as a test of courage. Nothing happened at the time, but after a while,

monsters started appearing before Heitarou every night. In the end, after Heitarou faced down one monster after another without fear, the demon king came to extol the boy's bravery by giving him a mallet and an incantation that would summon the demon king. The moral being that good fortune will ultimately come to those who act with courage."

Naoya wondered what good would come of summoning a demon king, but it seemed like the demon king would provide protection to the summoner in case of disaster or attack by other demons. Calling on a powerful demon in a pinch sounded like something out of a manga or a video game.

"This kind of story, where the protagonist is eventually rewarded for not succumbing to supernatural phenomena, is actually rather common in ghost stories centered around the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual. There are also stories where a ghost appears at the end of the ritual and grabs hold of the protagonist, and when said protagonist reacts without fear, the ghost hands over a large sum of money and asks for a funeral service to be performed in their memory. In one case, the ghost forked over thirty thousand *ryo*."

"Now, that is the kind of supernatural phenomenon I would definitely want to experience."

"Right? Curses and blessings are two sides of the same coin in this country. If dealt with properly, the 'curses' of the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual can become blessings and bring good fortune. Although, well…even in the ones that don't result in such an auspicious conclusion, the supernatural phenomena that occur in the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual aren't all that scary. At least not insofar as the Edo period stories go. None of the participants die because of them, in any case. In later eras, you did start to see stories where people were killed."

"Why is that?"

"I suppose because things are scarier and more interesting that way?"

Takatsuki chuckled.

"As time went on, the original significance of the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual was forgotten, and it became something done purely for entertainment. And the scarier the better when it comes to telling scary stories, right? That way, the fear is

heightened. It's always more fun when the listeners have strong reactions."

This, Naoya suspected, was probably related to a point he had heard Takatsuki make on several other occasions.

It was like how letters of "blessings" became malicious chain letters, or how many ghost stories and urban legends evolved bit by bit.

Over time, as the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual spread to more people and regions far and wide, it gradually changed down to even its basic nature, becoming nothing more than a thrill-seeking venture.

"So what do you think, Fukamachi? About participating in the ritual? If you're free, you should join us! It'll be really fun—I guarantee it!"

Leaning forward in a quick motion, Takatsuki peered into Naoya's eyes from up close. With his sparkling gaze full of anticipation and his face-splitting smile, he looked like he was really enjoying himself. Naoya could practically see the image of a big dog sitting in front of its favorite toy, its tail wagging.

Backing away a little, the folding chair scraping the floor underneath him, Naoya replied, "…You seem really eager to invite me to every little event, Professor."

"Well, it's not like you have anything planned for summer break other than our trip, right? You only get so much time off, so you should use that time to have lots of fun and make good memories. And why are you backing up?"

"Because you're closing in! You really need to learn how to maintain the right amount of personal space for a Japanese person!"

Takatsuki had been making to scoot his own chair closer as Naoya withdrew, but Naoya's stern declaration stopped him. The thirty-five-year-old's sadly crumpled brow reminded Naoya of a child.

"…Anyway, since I am free, I guess I'll go."

"Really? Then I'll sign you up as a participant!"

Takatsuki crowed with open delight. He really was just like a kid.

"Making as many memories as you can" was something Takatsuki urged Naoya to do every chance he had.

The year prior, he had dragged Naoya along to a ghost scroll exhibition in Yanaka, a departmental barbecue party, and all sorts of other things.

Then, suddenly hitting upon an unpleasant realization, Naoya frowned a little.

“What’s wrong, Fukamachi?” Takatsuki asked, his head cocked to the side.

Naoya put a hand to one of his ears.

“It’s just… Well, don’t people tend to lie a lot when they tell ghost stories? Like they’ll claim to have experienced the story themselves or just completely make something up… I might not be able to handle something like that.”

“Ahh… I see. You’re right, that might happen.”

The professor’s face was mildly troubled.

Naoya’s ears interpreted things meant to increase a story’s entertainment value, such as exaggerations and false elements, as lies, too. As many as one hundred such tales in succession posed the risk of making him feel sick and causing him to collapse.

“Hmm. In that case, how about we count you in for now, and if it’s too much on the day of, you can leave partway through? Don’t worry—if you have to leave early, I’ll tell your portion of scary stories. That is my specialty, after all!”

Puffing out his chest, Takatsuki told Naoya to leave it to him.

Figuring that would be fine, Naoya nodded in agreement. Before heading home, he borrowed a few ghost-story-collection volumes from the bookshelves in the office. Unlike Takatsuki, after all, he didn’t have a huge stock of scary stories on hand.

Then three days later, in the evening—

The Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual was set to take place in Assembly Room A, which was tucked into a corner on the first floor of Building 1.

According to the event notification that went out in advance via e-mail, there were twenty-five participants, which meant each person would tell four stories. Since there was a chance they wouldn’t get through all the stories in one night if they ran too long, a guideline of approximately five minutes per story was set.

But even so, telling one hundred stories was sure to be quite a lengthy undertaking.

The event began at seven PM. There was a participation fee—for candles and refreshments—of five hundred yen.

Eating dinner ahead of time, Naoya headed to the assembly room fifteen minutes before seven to find more than half of the other participants were already gathered. Long tables had been arranged in a square shape, with metal folding chairs set up along the outside. On a table near the wall sat two-liter bottles of various drinks, paper cups, and some snacks. He didn't see Takatsuki anywhere.

Naoya found himself peering into the room from the doorway, his feet having stopped moving without his noticing. The lively, bustling atmosphere inside made him feel a bit daunted. He wasn't sure what to do; crowded places weren't Naoya's forte. Perhaps it would be best if he killed time somewhere else and returned just before things started?

As he considered that possibility, Naoya suddenly felt someone slap him on the back.

"Yay, it's Dog Boy! It's been so long!"

Startled, Naoya turned to see a short, smiling, round-faced girl standing behind him. It was Yui Machimura, one of Takatsuki's graduate students.

"…It's not 'Dog Boy.' It's Fukamachi. Are you participating in the ritual tonight too, Miss Yui?"

"Of course! As one of Professor Takatsuki's advisees, I would never miss out on an event like this! Ruiko said she's coming, too."

Yui wasted no time heading inside the assembly room as she spoke, so Naoya had no choice but to follow.

As they crossed the threshold, a male student standing near the door called them over to sign in.

"Good evening! I'm Hayama, a first-year literature student. Thanks for joining us today!"

He was the event organizer. His loosely curled hair and rectangular glasses gave him the air of someone who cared about his appearance, but his youthful facial features betrayed him as a first-year. Yui, who was always in the mood for the attention of younger boys, replied to him with an enthusiastic "Nice to meet

you!”

As Yui and Naoya signed their names on the participant list, Hayama reached into a cardboard box at his side.

“Here, take these. I tested them, but please also check for yourselves that they’re working properly. Let me know if they don’t light up—I have a few spares.”

Hayama thrust something into their hands as he spoke.

They were small LED lights in the shape of candles—the kind that were sold in sets of two at the hundred-yen shops.

It seemed each participant was allocated four of the lights.

“Are these…replacing the candles?”

“Ah, yep. Unsurprisingly, we couldn’t get permission from Academic Affairs to use real ones, so we decided on these.”

With a grin, Hayama gestured to the OPEN FLAMES PROHIBITED sign affixed to the wall.

Flicking the candles’ switches on to try them out made the flame-shaped portions light up orange. They looked more realistic than expected, but Naoya felt like they still lacked somewhat in elegance.

He and Yui headed for the table where the drinks were set up.

“LEDs instead of candles feels very modern, doesn’t it?” Naoya said.

“Right? Stuff like this is so interesting.”

Yui smiled brightly while looking down at the candles in her hands. She seemed satisfied with the use of LED lights despite it being unexpected.

Pouring tea from a plastic bottle into a cup, Yui looked up at Naoya with a puzzled expression.

“Oh? What is it, Dog Boy? Are you a bit bummed out about them?”

“Not bummed out, per se… It’s more like, these remind me of Christmas decorations, so they aren’t very scary.”

“Ah-ha-ha, you may have a point there. But,” Yui replied, “I think elements like this tend to change along with the times.”

She continued:

“This ritual originally involved the use of paper lanterns. Then lanterns became less common as candles became mainstream. Once LED lights, which are more convenient than candles, were readily available, they took over. I think that sort of

transformation is totally fine. Don't you think it really speaks to modern rationale to respond to a situation where fire and candles are prohibited by deciding to go buy LED candles at the hundred-yen shop? I actually feel like that's one reason a storytelling ritual that was popular in the Edo period has survived to this day—this approach of trying to preserve elements of it at a minimum wherever possible."

Yui held out the tea-filled paper cup to Naoya, who thanked her for it as she chuckled.

"You know you can use an app to curse a straw doll nowadays, right? And in horror movies, the evil spirits possessing a person's body show up on CT scans. I think it's cool to see how old-fashioned supernatural phenomena and rituals are adapted for the modern era! Don't you, Dog Boy?"

With her eyes lit up as she spoke, Yui bore a strong resemblance to Takatsuki. Hearing her talk like this served as a reminder that she was one of the professor's graduate students after all. Although, Naoya's typical image of her was someone who showered her juniors excessively in sweets.

Just then, Naoya spotted a familiar figure with dyed brown hair among the group of people noisily chatting across the room.

"Oh, it's Fukamachi! Hey! So you're here, too!"

It was Nanba. Waving vigorously, he made his way over to Naoya.

"What are you doing here, Nanba? Did Professor Takatsuki invite you as well?"

"Nope, Hayama did. He's a junior in the tennis club. Almost everyone else here is also a member. I was wondering if you'd be here, since it's an event Professor Takatsuki is involved in, and whaddaya know? Summer is the perfect season for telling ghost stories, isn't it?"

As he talked about the club, Nanba gestured toward the group of people he had just left. One member of the group—a girl with her hair in a ponytail who was looking their way—was most likely Nanba's girlfriend.

Nanba was in the tennis club. Naoya had thought he didn't recognize most of the participants' faces because they were first-years, but it seemed it was just that some of them were students from other departments who played tennis.

Takatsuki walked into the room at that moment with another of his graduate students, Ruiko Ubukata, in tow. Both of them were carrying bags of sweets.

“Good evening! Is everyone here already? Here, more refreshments.”

“Ah, thank you, Professor! All twenty-five participants are here, so we can start anytime!”

Hayama relieved them of the sweets and gave them both candles in exchange.

Around that time, the hubbub in the room started to shift in nature. Some of the female students had become laser-focused on something. They were, naturally, staring right at Takatsuki. Naoya could hear their comments from across the room: “Hey, who is that tall, good-looking guy?” “Wait, is *that* the ‘Associate Professor Takatsuki’ mentioned in the event notice?!” “No way! I wish I was in the Lit Department!” He had thought Takatsuki was a famous figure at Seiwa, but students in other departments seemed surprisingly unfamiliar with him.

“Okay, everyone! Please take a seat!”

Clapping his hands twice, Hayama got their attention. The participants, who’d been standing as they pleased around the room until that moment, took that as their signal to start moving.

Grabbing the back of a nearby chair, Takatsuki looked at Naoya and Yui and beckoned lightly to them. Ruiko was doing the same at his side. “Let’s sit together,” they seemed to be saying.

But before Naoya and Yui could move, something happened.

The moment Takatsuki and Ruiko took their seats next to each other, a fierce battle broke out—musical chairs–style—for the open seat on Takatsuki’s other side.

The fight was over in seconds, but it was a brutal one, nothing like the game Naoya remembered from grade school. That had merely been for fun; this was a genuine battle. Arms, shoulders, hands, and legs collided in a mix of offensive and defensive maneuvers, resulting in short cries piercing the air. The difference between the triumphant look of the girl who ultimately managed to slam her butt down into the chair and the sulky expressions of the ones who lost was incredible. Some of them had even been sent flying and tumbled to the floor, but they seemed unhurt, Naoya thought. The seat next to Ruiko had also

been snapped up by an unfamiliar male student before anyone knew what was going on.

“D-Dog Boy, let’s go sit over here…”

“O-okay…”

With a somewhat stiff face, Yui tugged on Naoya’s arm, guiding him to a couple of empty chairs. They ended up sitting basically opposite Takatsuki and Ruiko. The professor was looking at them with an embarrassed grin. Perhaps this was one of the struggles of being a good-looking man.

When he was sure everyone was seated, Hayama began talking.

“Everyone should have four candle lights, yes? Please turn them on.”

Each participant switched their LED candles on.

“I’ll turn the overhead lights off now.”

Hayama flicked the switch on the wall, leaving only the glow of the candles to light the room. Perhaps due to the room’s location in a corner of the school building, the gleam from the streetlights in the courtyard didn’t make it to the windows. In the darkness, the faces of the assembled participants were dimly lit from below in a flame-like orange cast. In practice, the hundred-yen store lights turned out better than expected, creating a suitable atmosphere for telling scary stories.

“Thank you, everyone,” Hayama said, “for coming to today’s Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual. I’ve always wanted to try something like this, but my interest only grew after hearing Professor Takatsuki cover it in his lectures. We’re able to hold tonight’s event successfully thanks to Professor Takatsuki’s support and all of you. I hope it will give you even the barest of chills on this humid summer night.”

Hayama bowed his head, and the tennis club members burst predictably into cheers.

They seemed like a good-natured group.

Holding up a hand, Hayama waved and thanked them before very abruptly pointing at Takatsuki.

“Now, let’s kick things off with a few words from Professor Takatsuki!”

“Huh? Was I supposed to prepare something?” Takatsuki replied, his eyes wide with surprise. “I didn’t know that.”

Hayama apologized.

“A lot of the people here haven’t been to your lectures, so I was thinking maybe it would be helpful to, like, you know, give a brief explanation of the ritual or something.”

“I see. Well, that’s true. Okay then, I’ll keep it light.”

Clearing his throat a bit, Takatsuki sat up straighter and smiled, looking around the assembly room.

“So I’m going to talk a little bit about the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual. This might end up taking more than ‘a few words’ to discuss, so let’s thinking of this as the first story of the evening rather than an introductory statement.”

Holding up an LED candle in the palm of his hand, the professor continued:

“We’re going to use these adorable lights in place of candles as we tell our stories, so I’d like to talk about why such things are necessary. As you’re all aware, it’s common practice to use one hundred lights for this ritual. In the *Otogibōko*, a text written in the Edo period, there’s a section called, ‘If You Speak of Mysteries, the Mysterious Shall Appear,’ which describes how to perform this ritual by detailing its ‘rules.’ According to the text, on a moonless night, the wicks of one hundred standing lanterns wrapped in blue paper would be lit. After the conclusion of each ghost story, one of the lanterns is snuffed out.”

The professor’s voice carried through the room with a peculiar clarity and a brightness that was almost too much for such a gathering. The attendees listened to him quietly in the glow of the candlelight.

“That seems to have been the standard method, but the procedure described in ‘One Hundred Tales at Umayabashi’ in *Kaidan Oinotsune* is more intricate. The blue lanterns would be set up in a room about thirty feet away alongside a hand mirror. After telling a story, the participants would have to walk alone through pitch darkness to that room. They would then extinguish one lantern, pick up the mirror, and stare at their own reflection before returning. It was more or less a test of courage. I rather admire the person who came up with this method—they must have understood human fear quite well.”

A few people chuckled. Others, perhaps imagining making that solo trek through the dark, grimaced or smiled wryly.

Takatsuki glanced around the room before speaking again.

“Incidentally, has anyone ever wondered why the ritual involves the telling of one hundred stories exactly? Why one hundred instead of ten or fifty or one thousand?”

Some of the participants tilted their heads in thought at his question.

Naoya was among them. He had never really considered that point, come to think of it. Maybe it was just that ten seemed too few, fifty somehow felt half done, and one thousand was too many?

“We use *a hundred* and *hundreds* to mean ‘a large amount’ as well as to indicate specific numbers. That’s how it’s used in *Hyakki Yakou*—that title isn’t meant to indicate that exactly one hundred demons parade through the night, but rather that the quantity of demons is very large. It’s said the name of the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual was derived from *Hyakki Yakou*. Such picture scrolls featuring hordes of demons were popular in the middle ages, but in the early-modern period, that *hundred* in the title was taken at face value, leading to a ritual in which exactly one hundred ghost stories are told.”

The professor spoke into the dim room, which was lit faintly by the one hundred LED candles.

Even though there were one hundred of them, they were too small to illuminate the whole room. Their glow extended only to the tables around which everyone was gathered; the rest of the room was lost in the inky blackness.

It was dreadfully quiet, somehow. Every time Takatsuki stopped talking, the silence became strangely evident. It was possible that, both inside and outside the school building, they were the only people still on campus. In fact, it was so quiet, it felt like the entire neighborhood was deserted.

Again, Takatsuki continued:

“However, for us as Japanese people, the number *one hundred* can be seen as a definitive sort of goalpost. We have sayings like *It’s been a century since we met here last*, and it’s common to use *one hundred percent* as an adverbial phrase that indicates completeness, like *one hundred percent accurate* and *one hundred percent aware*. There’s also the *Hyakunin Isshu*, the collection of one hundred famous poems. In addition— Yes, there’s the

tradition of *ohyakudo-mairi*, in which participants make one hundred pilgrimages to pray fervently to gods and Buddhas. The use of *one hundred* is ritualistic in this case. Praying one hundred times results in one's heartfelt wishes being granted, which means one hundred must be the number sufficient to make prayers come true."

Takatsuki smiled brightly.

He held the candle in his palm up at eye level.

"Now, back to the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual. As you'll recall, I mentioned earlier that this ritual has rules. If you don't follow those rules, you have not completed the ritual. So why are such rules necessary? Here, let's refer once more to the previously mentioned passage from *Otogibōko*. The opening lines of the 'If You Speak of Mysteries' passage read as follows: 'Gather thee one hundred ancient tales of terror and mystery and thereupon recite them, and that which is terrible and mysterious shall follow apace.' In other words, if you tell one hundred scary and strange stories, scary and strange things are bound to happen. So it follows that if *ohyakudo-mairi* is a ritual to make prayers come true, then telling one hundred ghost stories in this way is simply a ritual used to summon the supernatural."

Takatsuki's smile widened.

The light from the candle he was holding reflected in his pupils, giving them a bewitching sheen.

"Tonight, we have gathered here to tell one hundred ghost stories. If indeed 'that which is terrible and mysterious shall follow apace,' then something may happen when the final light goes out. In *Otogibōko*, countless twinkling lights flickered like fireflies before turning into one big sphere of white light, which then struck the tatami floor with a thunderous sound and disappeared. In *Kaidan Oinotsune*, the corpse of a woman who hanged herself appeared as an omen of a hanging incident that would occur in the future. Who knows what we will experience once all our stories have been told? I, for one, can't wait to find out. And with that—the first tale comes to an end."

Takatsuki extinguished the LED in his palm.

The darkness in the room deepened by one candle's worth of light, and everything was still. Everyone was keenly aware that it was the middle of the night.

Thus, the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual began.

The storytelling continued in a clockwise direction from the professor.

One by one, they each told a ghost story, then turned off a light. None of them were professional storytellers or anything of the sort, so the presentation varied in quality. Quite a few of the tales struck Naoya as ones he may have heard before, but there were some that were totally unfamiliar.

The falsehoods and exaggerations he had been worried about weren't enough to make him feel ill.

A male student who was probably from another department started to speak.

"This is something that **actually happened to me**. Once when I was in high school, **a friend and I** decided to spend the night at school without permission. We wanted to play a game of airsoft. Airsoft in a school building at night—sounds super fun, doesn't it? So around midnight, **we're** playing to **our** hearts' content by the light of the emergency lamps when **we** heard a sound coming from the tennis courts in the courtyard. It was the *whack, whack* of a tennis ball being hit. I thought, *Is there seriously someone else here besides us?* But when **we** went to look…there was no one in the courtyard. I mean, there was no way someone could have been playing tennis, y'know? It was way too dark. They wouldn't have been able to see the ball or anything. And yet from right there in front **of us**, **we** heard another *whack*. **We** didn't see anyone. There was just the sound. *Whack, whack…* **My friend and I** were both freaked out, and **we** ran out of the building in a panic."

Judging by the distortion in his voice, the student telling the story hadn't been the one staying overnight at the high school. It was probably a story he heard from someone else or read somewhere, repackaged as his own experience. Because he was merely retelling a story he knew, the tale itself wasn't all that warped; there was just the occasional distortion of sentence subjects.

The other stories thus far had been more or less the same, so Naoya was a bit relieved, thinking he could handle that much.

In fact, he was having a surprisingly good time trying to discern which elements of the stories were lies.

Next, a pale boy—he seemed like a first-year—began to talk.

“I live in a first-floor apartment that has a garden. The local street cats that I feed come to play in it. They’re these really cute brown tabbies. I end up buying food for them a lot and waiting for them to come around. Sometimes, they show up pretty late at night, so I always leave my shutters open just a little. And, well, I spend a lot of time looking through the gaps of the shutters at night, hoping to see the cats… Um, so, **the other night, I looked through the shutters before bed and saw something really freaky**. **A long-haired woman in white clothes was crawling around the garden on all fours.** ”

This one is going to be all made-up from here on out, Naoya thought, pretending to rest his chin in his hand so he could cover his ears.

“**At first, I figured somebody in my building was out there looking for something they dropped**, but everyone who lives there is a guy. **The way she was moving was weird, too. It was like she was scuttling around like a spider with her arms and legs bent… I was really scared, and I thought, *I shouldn’t be looking at this*. So I backed away quietly from the shutters, got into bed, pulled the covers up over myself, and went to sleep…** I mean—”

The distortion in his voice disappeared suddenly, catching Naoya by surprise.

“—like, if that woman had noticed me watching, she definitely would have come up to my apartment, right? I was worried she would cling to the outside of the building and peek through the shutters at me… That thought freaked me out so much, I couldn’t sleep that night… **I still have no idea what on earth that woman was.** ”

With that, the student switched off one of his candles.

Naoya watched his face for a while longer with an odd feeling in his chest.

The boy hadn’t lied about the cats coming to his garden or the fact that he left his shutters open slightly for that reason. He genuinely looked out through the shutter gaps at night. But seeing a woman in white crawling around? That was a lie. There

had been no such woman.

And yet the fear he felt toward her at the end of the story was real. What did that mean?

Even as the next story began, Naoya was still thinking about the one he had just heard.

Maybe the student had been stalked by a woman before and experienced her spying on him? But when he mentioned “that woman” peeking in at him, he had almost certainly been referring to the woman on all fours in the garden. Why would he be scared of being stared at by a woman who didn’t exist?

Or perhaps—maybe his story was one that had occurred randomly to him while he was looking through the shutters one night. Naoya got the feeling that was it.

In the dead of night, the boy peeks out through the narrow gap in his shutters.

He sees a small garden in his limited field of vision, dimly lit by a nearby streetlight. Beyond the garden is the road. It’s already quite late, so there are no passersby. A pitch-black night, steeped in darkness. The view between the shutter slats is so different from the one during the daytime that it’s like seeing another world.

He moves away from the shutters, getting into bed, and suddenly, his imagination ignites.

Wouldn’t it be scary if I saw something weird through the gap in the shutters?

A woman in white clothes crawling wordlessly around the dark garden, for example. Her limbs, crooked and spiderlike, pushing aside the overgrown weeds. Her downturned face obscured by her long, unkempt hair.

And then the next instant, that face swivels upward to turn toward him.

She notices him watching. The woman crawls in his direction at an astonishing speed. Emaciated hands grip the frame of the sliding glass door, and her twisted spine creaks terribly as she straightens up. Her deathly pale face presses against the gap in the shutters. Her eyes, opened unusually wide, peer out through her hair—

In times like that, one’s biggest enemy was their own imagination.

Most likely, the student had imagined something along those lines and gone to bed feeling extremely creeped out. Then that experience gave way to the ghost story he just told.

How interesting, Naoya thought.

Perhaps that was how the countless scary stories all over the world came to be: with a thought occurring suddenly over the course of one's daily life—*I would hate it if* that *happened*—that took shape and became a frightening tale. Even if it was nothing more than an idea, the fear such thoughts could inspire was akin to that caused by the real thing.

Naoya hadn't really used his ability like this much before, but it was rather interesting to probe into the boundary between fiction and reality and think about why that resulted in the creation of a story.

He wanted to bring up the subject with Takatsuki later. What would the professor have to say about it?

Just then, Naoya felt someone's gaze on him.

He looked up to find Takatsuki watching him from the seat opposite him.

The professor's eyes were also narrowed in interest. Just as Naoya was wondering why that was, the voice of the girl currently speaking turned distorted. Naoya pressed his hands to his ears reflexively, and Takatsuki tilted his head ever so slightly to the side. Taking in the other man's somewhat disappointed expression, Naoya realized something.

Takatsuki was probably trying to discern from Naoya's reactions whether any of the participants' ghost stories were real.

He felt a bit like he was being used, and perhaps that sentiment showed on his face, because Takatsuki shrugged a little as if in apology. Naoya just gave a minute shake of his head, however, to show he didn't think anything of it. This sort of thing happened frequently, after all.

Eventually, it was Yui's turn.

"Um, this is a story from when I was in high school."

Smiling, Yui held a candle aloft in her palm like Takatsuki had done and began to speak.

"My grandmother was hospitalized for an illness, so my mom and I went to visit her. Afterward, we left her room, and as we were walking to the elevator, we were chatting about how glad

we were to see Grandma was doing well. We got to the elevator just as the doors were closing. I could see there was someone already on it through the gap in the door before it shut, so I waited a moment before pressing the button. It would have been awkward to make the doors open back up right as they had closed, and it wasn't like we were in a hurry. But I must have moved quicker than I realized, because the doors started to open again. I was standing there thinking, *Oh no, I messed up*, watching the doors slide apart, but—the elevator was empty inside."

Without thinking, Naoya turned toward Yui in surprise.

Her voice hadn't distorted at all.

She continued.

"I figured I must have been mistaken, but my mom looked surprised, too. 'Wasn't there someone in there?' she said. 'An older lady in a long skirt?' She saw the same thing I did—an old lady wearing a floral skirt, standing with her back facing us. The woman didn't look strange or anything; I'm pretty sure she was totally normal, but… While we were talking about it, the doors closed again, and the elevator was called to a lower floor. We ended up taking a different elevator down to go home, and to this day, I think that woman may have been a ghost. It isn't that scary, but that's the story of the only ghost I've ever seen. The end."

Yui blew delicately on the light in her palm. She switched it off at the exact same moment so that it seemed to actually go out as a real candle would have.

From start to finish, Yui's voice hadn't warped even once.

"Hey, wait a minute," Naoya wanted to say, but he couldn't just start interrogating her. Feeling someone watching him again, Naoya glanced at Takatsuki, who was looking back at him with a very characteristic sparkle in his eyes. Yui was likely in for a barrage of questions from the professor later.

"Dog Boy, you're up next," Yui called to Naoya, who flinched.

Hurriedly picking up a candle, he began to recite a story from the book of true ghost stories he had borrowed from Takatsuki.

Looking around as he spoke, Naoya noticed most of the group was facing whoever's turn it was. Everyone seemed to be participating more earnestly than expected. Well, they had made the effort to show up to the event in the first place. They were probably a bunch of ghost story enthusiasts for the most part.

There was, however, one person among them who was oddly stiff.

It was Nanba's girlfriend. Naoya was fairly certain her name was Narumi.

Narumi's thin shoulders were tense, her gaze cast downward. Naoya wondered if maybe she wasn't feeling well, but then he saw that she looked like she might burst into tears at any moment, and he realized she was scared. She probably really disliked ghost stories. Had she felt obliged to come because of her club affiliation? Or because Nanba had agreed to it?

Then, at her side, Nanba poked gently at Narumi's hand.

His movements casual, he grabbed her hand from above and lowered it under the table.

Narumi's eyes widened a little, then she glanced down with a shy smile. Nanba seemed to be holding her hand, out of everyone else's line of sight. The stiffness melted visibly from Narumi's shoulders.

The sight made Naoya feel pleased somehow. *Nice one, Nanba*, he thought. *You're a good guy, you know.*

They took some breaks throughout the evening, but the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual progressed smoothly.

Speakers whose voice remained undistorted from start to finish, like Yui's, were rare, though many of their stories were enjoyable anyway.

Among them was Ruiko, whose storytelling abilities made her seem like a pro.

She mainly told well-known internet folklore stories —"Kunekune," "Saru Yume," "Hasshaku-sama." Even Naoya, who was pretty familiar with Ruiko, was a bit freaked out when she mimicked Hasshaku-sama's "po-po-po-po" laugh while the light of an LED candle reflected off the lenses of her glasses.

It was toward the end of the event that a particular story was told.

The one who shared it was the first-year boy who had relayed the tale about the woman crawling around the garden.

"…Um, someone already told the exact ghost story I was going to do next, so I'll go for a different one. This…might not really be

a ghost story. But it is true."

With that preface, the boy's story began.

"I had a sister who was three years younger than me. We played together all the time when we were little…but when I got to the later years of elementary school, my friends started making fun of me. They would say I had a 'sister complex.' So one day, I left my sister alone so I could go hang out with them instead. Apparently, my sister was playing by herself with a ball in front of the house… When the ball rolled away from her, she chased it into the street and was hit by a car. She ended up passing away. My parents never blamed me or anything, but I still felt like it was all my fault."

The student's trembling voice didn't warp once as he spoke.

His story was true.

"*…Why did I leave her behind to go play? I should have just taken her with me. I'm sure she blames me, too.* That was all I could think about every day, and I got really depressed…but then one day when I came home from elementary school, there was a flower on my bed next to my pillow."

The boy explained that it was something he and his sister had often done to make up after a fight.

They would pick a flower from the garden and place it next to the other's pillow when they weren't looking. If either of them found a flower by their pillow, no matter how angry they had been, they would forgive the other.

It was a custom he and his sister had decided upon—their own private way of apologizing that not even their parents knew about.

"I asked my parents about the flower, but they didn't know where it had come from. Then I thought, *Oh, my little sister was here*. Her ghost had picked a flower for me, her stupid older brother who was always so miserable… Surely, it was a symbol of her forgiveness."

As his voice became less shaky, the boy apologized for the story not being scary while flicking off his candle.

Certainly, the story was more heartwarming than frightening. But there had been no distortion in his words from beginning to end, which meant the story was true. Whether the ghost of the boy's sister had been the one to leave that flower or not, Naoya

didn’t know. But at the very least—that was what the boy believed.

After that story, the ritual continued.

Unsurprisingly, by that point, the stories were starting to overlap quite a bit. Some were actually pretty boring, and some could barely be called ghost stories at all.

The tension in the room was, nevertheless, only increasing.

Every time someone finished a story, the darkness grew denser. At the start, everyone’s faces had been clearly visible, but it had gotten difficult to tell people apart now. Those who had completed their turns no longer had a single lit candle in their hands. Engulfed in darkness, only their outlines were visible.

Before long, Naoya found himself keeping track of the number of remaining stories in his head. There were still five lights on. What would happen once they all went out? These were the thoughts on everyone’s minds.

After all, they were currently conducting a ritual to summon the supernatural.

Another ghost story concluded.

The darkness deepened once more by a single candle’s light.

When they had first been handed the lights, Naoya had wondered just how well these tiny, cheap-looking things would work. But with the room as dark as it was, it became painfully obvious just how reassuringly bright the little candles shone.

Someone finished telling another ghost story.

The darkness deepened once more by a single candle’s worth of light.

The tension in the air was palpable. Everyone in the room was holding their breath, staring at the three remaining lights—trying their best not to look into the surrounding darkness.

Everyone was very aware, after all. None of the ghost stories, scary tales, and creepy anecdotes they’d told had disappeared from the isolated assembly room. They had simply piled up one after another in the dark, congealing into a mass that was on the verge of taking shape. The white figure someone saw at the abandoned hospital they’d gone into as a test of courage. The one-legged figure seen from behind, standing at the scene of an

accident. The eight-foot-tall monster with the eerie laugh. They were all hiding in the darkness, lying eagerly in wait for the chance to emerge. They, too, were waiting with bated breath for the last light to go out.

Ah, that's right.

In times like these, one's biggest enemy was their own imagination.

Human fear was what allowed demons to run rampant in the darkness. The Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual was used to instill one hundred little terrors in someone's heart, a ceremony to help them see inhuman figures and forms in the dark. The scariest moment would probably be when the last light was turned off. Even if nothing happened afterward, everyone would probably be so terrified that their hearts would tremble.

Someone finished telling another ghost story.

The darkness deepened once more by a single candle's light.

Why did people share scary stories in the first place?

Stories about ghosts, about monsters, about other worlds unlike this one. Things that had nothing to do with the everyday lives of people; things that were, in fact, not supposed to be a part of ordinary life.

So why did people deliberately try to peer into the realm of the unknown?

No—that wasn't it.

The spirit realm was always just there, a hair's breadth away.

Humans merely tried not to look at it nor come into contact with it, but the truth was that it was always present, right next to them, separated from their world by a single thin membrane.

People had no idea when they would find themselves brushing up against that membrane. They might fall asleep on a late-night train and wake up in another world. Or they could be in bed with a high fever and hear the thundering of festival drums that was none other than an invitation to the other side.

Maybe in the corners of their minds, humans knew how little there was separating the ordinary from the extraordinary. And so when they had the chance, they told ghost stories so they could get a glimpse of the spirit realm and try to get used to the fear.

Someone finished telling another ghost story.

Only one light remained.

The final ghost story began.

A voice hoarse with nerves recited a scary tale. It was about someone who was running past an empty park late at night. Inside, a swing was moving of its own accord, its chains creaking. A single child's shoe was left sitting in the middle of the park. When the runner got home, for some reason, that same shoe was sitting in front of their door. The story was familiar. A conventional ghost story. And yet it felt unreasonably scary.

With that, the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual was complete.

The last candle was turned off, and everything fell into darkness.

It was too dark to see.

Not a sound could be heard.

The silence was so deafening that it hurt.

No—

There was something.

Just two little words…

…in a voice that sounded like it belonged to a young girl.

The next second, a tremendous scream rang out. It came from one of the female students. The resounding shrieks caused others to start screaming as well. Even the male students hollered instinctively. There was the sound of chairs and tables clattering and the footsteps of someone dashing toward the wall.

Suddenly, the overhead lights switched on.

It was too bright for eyes accustomed to the dark, and Naoya squeezed his eyelids shut automatically. He held his hands over his glasses, letting his vision gradually readjust.

Blinking rapidly, he looked around the assembly room, seeing the chairs and tables in disarray. Several people were standing, while the rest remained seated with almost dazed expressions on their faces, surveying the room like Naoya was. Narumi, her face pressed to Nanba's chest, was shaking. Looking distressed, Nanba stroked his girlfriend's back in an effort to soothe her.

"Hey," one of the other female students said, her voice trembling. "Everyone heard that just now, right?"

One of the guys who was standing nodded stiffly.

"I heard it. It sounded like a kid's voice."

"M-maybe you just imagined it?" a different girl responded

with a strained laugh, but the first student shook her head.

“If it was just my imagination, no one else would have heard the same voice! Right? You heard it, didn’t you?! You guys, too?!”

“…It sounded like it said, ‘big brother,’” said the pale first-year boy in a low murmur.

At that, Hayama, who was standing in front of the light switch by the wall, held up a hand.

“Um! I was actually recording! Let’s check the audio!”

In his raised hand, Hayama held a digital recorder.

All at once, the room was alive with activity. Hayama had returned to the tables and was surrounded by a number of people urging him to hurry and play the recording. As he pushed the right buttons to make the device replay the end of the last ghost story, Hayama could not conceal the way his hands shook.

“…When they returned home, they saw there was something by the front door. It was the exact same child’s shoe that they had seen at the park. A single, small, yellow shoe, placed with the heel facing the door as if someone had only just taken it off there.”

The story ended, and the speaker’s voice trailed off.

For a few moments, there was silence.

And then—

“—See! I heard it just now!” someone yelled.

Hayama rewound the audio.

Naoya heard it.

Someone saying, in the faintest of voices…

…*Big brother*.

“N-no, don’t! Please just stop! No more, no more, no more!” Narumi wailed, sounding nearly in tears, her face still pressed to Nanba’s chest. She was probably the one who had screamed earlier.

Holding Narumi close, Nanba turned to Hayama.

“Sorry, but could you hold off for now? She’s really freaked out.”

“But…”

“Sorry,” Nanba repeated, “but it’s gotta wait.”

Hayama put the recorder away without another word. The other students looked around at one another uneasily.

Then—

—Takatsuki stood up from his folding chair.

It didn't escape Naoya's notice that the professor hadn't joined in the commotion surrounding Hayama.

Takatsuki strode calmly to a window, where he opened the glass pane up with a rattling sound and looked outside.

"Hmm, it's still dark," he noted in a relaxed tone, turning back toward the room. "It's…just before four o'clock, it seems? We finished earlier than I expected."

He looked around at them with his friendly golden-retriever smile.

"Well done, everyone! That was pretty fun!"

His bright voice and expression dispersed the tension in the air. The students let out sighs like they had just been freed from a curse.

Takatsuki continued:

"Now then, Hayama. You have one more fun activity planned, don't you? If we don't get to it soon, it'll be too bright out."

"Oh, yes! That's right. Um, everybody—how about some fireworks?"

Hayama dashed over to the wall and hurried back with a cardboard box in his arms.

"I heard that fireworks can be used to ward off evil, so I got us some! Well, they're actually sparklers. Let's light them before the sun starts to come up! Everybody, outside!"

"Just to be clear, the fireworks part of this has to be kept secret, okay?" Takatsuki said, pressing a finger to his lips. "We're really not supposed to have them on campus. If Academic Affairs finds out, I'll get an earful."

It didn't matter that they were just sparklers; everyone headed outdoors right away in high spirits. The sparklers were going to be lit behind the school building, apparently. Nanba followed the other participants, too, bringing Narumi along as she continued to cling to him.

Takatsuki, Ruiko, and Yui all looked at Naoya and smiled.

"Come on, Fukamachi. Let's go."

Naoya went after them, leaving the assembly room.

As they made for the exit, Ruiko and Yui declared they were going to make a pit stop at the bathroom, so Naoya stayed with Takatsuki in the hallway, waiting.

"…Um," Naoya said. "Just now… That voice?"

“Hmm? Ah yes. That.”

The corners of Takatsuki’s mouth turned up in a smirk. He looked amused, but not very worked up.

Seeing this, Naoya thought, *He doesn’t seem to be biting.*

If Takatsuki wasn’t showing much interest in it, then—that voice…

Out of nowhere, the professor started talking nonsense.

“Fukamachi, are you familiar with ‘*Furuyamori*’?”

“What’s that?”

“An old folktale. Outside a house, there’s a bandit or a wolf secretly keeping an eye on what’s happening inside. The bandit or wolf or what have you is planning to take and eat the residents of the house or steal their livestock.”

“Well, that’s disturbing.”

“It’s an old folktale, after all. So unaware of the threat, the old couple inside is indulging in a relaxed conversation. Before long, the topic turns to ‘scary things.’ The old woman asks, ‘Of all the scary things you’ve experienced, what scares you the most?’ To which the old man replies with either ‘bandits’ or ‘wolves.’ Outside listening to the old man’s answer, the bandit or wolf thinks, *Aha! I’m your worst nightmare.*”

But then the old woman says, “If you close the door, thieves and wolves can’t get inside. But that doesn’t work against *furuyamori*. That’s why I’m most afraid of *furuyamori*.”

“When the old man hears this, he nods and says, ‘That’s certainly true.’ And then he follows up with ‘Aah! *Furuyamori* is going to come any moment now! I’m so scared!’ Still eavesdropping outside, the bandit or wolf is shocked. *There’s something scarier than me?* it thinks in alarm. *I don’t know what* furuyamori *is, but they say it’s scarier than me, and it’s almost here? What do I do?! I’m scared!* And the bandit or wolf ends up running away.”

“…So what is *furuyamori*? Some kind of big monster?”

“It’s when the roof of an old house springs a leak.”

“Pfft.”

Naoya burst out in a chuckle, which made Takatsuki laugh, too.

“I said before that there are various theories about the origin of the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual, right? Actually, one

theory is that the setting in '*Furuyamori*' led to the birth of ghost stories and the ritual."

"Huh?"

"Samurai retainers were made to keep watch all night to protect estates from frightening outside forces. It's believed that, while they did so, they probably told scary stories to demonstrate that there were even scarier things around, or that they had experienced more terrifying things."

Intentionally creating something scarier that existed inside to dispel their fear of what existed outside—it was like a sort of spell, perhaps.

Humans, powerless against a myriad of threats, tried to fight fear with fear.

"When you consider '*Furuyamori*' as the origin of the ritual, the dual narrative of 'inside' versus 'outside' is really intriguing. You have people inside telling scary stories, and outside—there are even scarier things listening to them."

Takatsuki flashed another grin.

"So then I wonder what sort of terrifying things lurked outside while we sat indoors telling scary stories?"

"Professor…do you mean…?"

Just as Naoya started to reply, Ruiko and Yui returned.

"Sorry to keep you waiting!"

"Come on, let's go! It's fireworks time!"

The girls urged them onward, so the conversation ended there. It seemed, however, that Takatsuki had some kind of inkling about the ghostly voice from before.

They went outside to find some of the students already lighting their fireworks. They were squatting on the ground, watching the sparks fly with rapt attention.

"Hurry up, Professor! It's going to be dawn soon!" Hayama called. And indeed, the eastern sky was already starting to lighten.

Their group offered their apologies and accepted their sparklers, three per person. They were also given some candles and matches, and the four of them formed a little circle a short way from the other students and squatted down.

"I didn't know fireworks were used to ward off evil," Naoya said.

“In a broad sense, they were,” Ruiko responded. “Since ancient times, fire has been considered a sacred thing that burns away impurities. It’s used in pacifying departed souls, too. I mean, we light fires to welcome and send off spirits during Obon, right?”

“Plus,” Yui chimed in, handing each of them their three sparklers, “haven’t you ever heard, Dog Boy? The story goes that the Sumidagawa Fireworks Festival began after the great famine and pestilence of 1732 as a ritual to pacify the souls of those who died, and as a prayer to drive away disease. It’s said the loud noises scared off evil spirits, and the fireworks appeased the departed. It turns out this story about the festival was only created after the fact, but its very existence is proof of how many people believed fireworks had that kind of power. In which case, surprising as it may be, it might be possible to ward off evil with fireworks. And they’re a lot of fun. Isn’t feeling joy the best way to escape from bad things?”

Takatsuki lit the candles and poured some of the melted wax onto the ground, using that to stand the candles upright on their own.

“Although, sparklers are a bit meager compared with actual fireworks. But I couldn’t allow anything that would make loud noises or send off flashy sparks, naturally. Sparklers aren’t actually allowed, either, but we’ll just have to be thorough in putting them out. Okay, here we go!”

Following Takatsuki’s instructions, they took turns sticking the tips of their sparklers into the candle flames.

Once Naoya’s was lit, he pulled it back toward himself. How many years had it been since he’d last played with sparklers? The acrid smell of smoke filled his nostrils.

Watching it closely, he could see the sparkler’s pointed tip melting in the heat of the flame, hissing as it curled. Once a vermilion ball of fire was formed, all he had to do was hold it still.

The little red sphere began to tremble while it burned.

The first spark burst out with a *pop*.

“Ooh! It’s going!”

“*So* pretty!”

Ruiko and Yui cheered.

Naoya found himself captivated by the stick in his hand, too.

Pop, pop pop pop, pop pop—intricately branching golden sparks flew from the little red ball of fire in every direction. When they started to shoot out far enough that his hand was in danger of being singed, Naoya adjusted his grip on the sparkler. The sparks danced, never once maintaining a singular shape. One moment, they looked like a shining golden *kirin* in the darkness, then they were an expanse of tangled synapses, and the next moment, the fire contracted before the next sparks scattered furiously.

Naoya's hand must have twitched while he was engrossed in his sparkler; the ball of flame fell from the stick with a *plop*, and the sparks ended. Feeling terribly disappointed for some reason, Naoya looked down at his feet.

He wanted to keep the next one going for a bit longer, he thought as he lit his second sparkler.

But then…

"An opening—"

"—What? Hey!"

…Takatsuki joined the tip of his sparkler with Naoya's.

"Do you *have* to be so *childish*?"

"Come now, it's fine. Just don't move. We're in this together now."

The professor looked like a mischievous child as he spoke.

At the end of the two sparklers, a big ball of fire started to swell up with a *hiss*.

"See, like this, you can create much bigger sparks. KenKen and I used to do this as kids. You've never tried it, Fukamachi? One time, we even lit ten of them together at once."

"This kind of thing? No, I've never done it. I mean, it says right on the packaging not to, doesn't it?"

"Sure, it does. But telling kids not to do something makes them want to do it."

The first sparks burst from the ball.

Just as Takatsuki had said, much bigger and more dazzling sparks were flying out. Crackling and popping, they danced fiercely, brilliantly, vividly. Worried it would all end if his grip so much as shook, Naoya stared at his hand a little nervously. He never knew sparklers could create such a showy display. His hand grew restless as he held it in midair, and the radiant sparks

made his eyes burn, but looking away would have been a waste, so Naoya just kept staring. Next to them, Ruiko and Yui had also joined their sparklers together and were laughing.

Before long, the sparks were spreading out less and less, a sure sign that the end was near. They rained down like water droplets in little puffs before finally disappearing. The big fiery sphere trembled and fizzed before it, too, fell abruptly to the ground and vanished.

“Aww, it’s over. Just one more now,” Takatsuki said, lighting another sparkler.

Naoya held his over the candle flames as well.

Watching the sparks intently, he felt an odd sense of relief. Maybe Hayama had the right idea with lighting fireworks after the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual. He could hear people laughing all around. Naoya cast a glance in Narumi’s direction and found her smiling as she lit sparklers with Nanba. The fear from the dark assembly room seemed to have dissipated completely with the sparks from the fireworks.

“…Ah.”

The ember on Naoya’s third sparkler never fell; the sparkler merely burned out.

Standing, Naoya looked at the sky.

The sun didn’t appear to have risen yet, though his view was obscured by buildings. Nevertheless, the night was already on its way out. The indigo of the night sky faded right before Naoya’s eyes as light began to filter through it. The thin clouds hanging in the east started to turn a pale crimson. It looked like they were going to have another day of lovely weather.

Thus, the night of one hundred ghost stories drew to a close.

It was three days later that Nanba asked to speak with him.

The campus was still open during summer break. Naoya was spending his time in the library because he could save on his home electricity bill that way. The library was air-conditioned, after all, and there was Wi-Fi. The reading room was also much less crowded than usual, so he could stay there for long periods without being a nuisance.

He was at a desk in the corner of the first floor, finishing up his

part-time work correcting essays when, suddenly, Nanba was at his side, peering at his face.

“Hey, Fukamachi… Um, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Yeah, sure. I don’t mind. I was just thinking about going to get some food.”

“Really? Then let’s go to the cafeteria. I’ll eat, too.”

The main cafeteria on campus was also open during the break, except during certain periods. The food was cheap and tasted pretty good, which made the cafeteria a key location in the lives of students.

They both ordered some chilled noodles, which were only served during summertime. As soon as they sat down, Nanba started to talk.

“Phew, I’m so glad you’re here, Fukamachi! I went to see if I could maybe find you in the library, and it worked! What a relief!”

“Did something happen?” Naoya asked, and Nanba hesitated a little.

“Listen… Would Professor Takatsuki take a phone call even though it’s summer break?”

“Huh?”

“Well, it’s just, I wanna talk to him about something.”

According to Nanba, one of his juniors had been acting a bit strange since the night of the storytelling ritual.

It was the pale first-year boy from before. His name was Ooishi, and he was in the Law Department.

When Nanba saw him during tennis club the day before, Ooishi had seemed off, so Nanba asked if he was okay.

And then…

“Ooishi, he said… He said he thinks his sister came to his place.”

“What? But I thought his sister was…”

Naoya stopped slurping his noodles for a moment and looked up at Nanba without thinking.

Nanba frowned and nodded.

“Yeah. She died in a traffic accident when they were kids, he said. During the ritual.”

Ooishi’s voice hadn’t distorted at that time. He hadn’t been lying.

His little sister had undoubtedly died in an accident.

“You remember his story? About finding a flower by his pillow after her death?”

“Yeah. The gesture of forgiveness?”

“Yep, that. He said when he got home the night of the ritual, there was a flower by the garden door.”

Ooishi had said he lived in a first-floor apartment. That was why he had a garden.

And in it, right in front of his sliding glass door, a single flower had been left behind.

“Couldn’t it just have been blown there by chance by the wind?”

“Apparently, it wasn’t a kind of flower that grows in his garden. The same kind does grow in a neighbor’s flower bed, but he said there was no way the wind could have brought it from there to his door, no matter which way it blew.”

“…Someone playing a prank?”

“If it was, who would do that? Plus, you know, right at the end of the ritual, we heard that weird voice, didn’t we? It said, ‘big brother.’ Ooishi seems to think it was his little sister’s voice.”

“But that voice was…”

Given Takatsuki’s lack of interest, Naoya had been assuming the voice wasn’t a real supernatural phenomenon.

But if that was the case, then what was with the flower in front of Ooishi’s apartment?

Nanba looked worried.

“Ooishi can be a real space case, y’know? I’ve got a bad feeling about this. I was thinking maybe there’s something Professor Takatsuki could do. Could we ask him?”

“Sure, but…he’s probably in his office.”

Naoya took out his phone and waffled for a moment over whether to call or send a message. He settled on a phone call.

Takatsuki answered right away.

“Hello? What is it, Fukamachi?”

“Oh, um…are you busy right now? Nanba has something to ask you.”

When Takatsuki said he had time, Naoya gave the phone to Nanba, who repeated the story.

The professor was silent on the other end of the line for a little

while, as if he was thinking. And then—

"—I see. In that case, it may not be a good idea to just leave well enough alone. But your timing is perfect. I've also been trying to get in touch with Hayama. I forgot to ask for his phone number, so I sent an e-mail, but he didn't reply."

"Oh! I have his number and his LINE info!" Nanba replied.

"Then would you mind contacting him for me? Ask him to come to my office with the recorder he used during the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual."

"Yeah! No problem! I'll call him right now!"

Nanba took his own phone out.

Naoya hung up and focused on eating his chilled noodles.

"Ugh, man, that guy never checks his LINE anymore. Calling him is probably useless, too… Whatever. Might as well try."

Clicking his tongue, Nanba called Hayama.

Naoya, wondering if Hayama was in the cafeteria by any chance, decided it couldn't hurt to look around.

The university cafeteria was open to nonstudents as well. Possibly because the number of students eating there decreased over summer break, there seemed to be more customers from outside the school than usual. A handful of the men and women around the room were clearly office workers. Naoya couldn't see Hayama anywhere. It would have been a pretty big coincidence if he had.

Despite that, Naoya let his gaze meander around the cafeteria a little bit longer, and just then, he noticed someone he could not believe he was seeing. His eyes grew wide.

On instinct, he shot to his feet, his chair clattering. Ignoring Nanba's dumbstruck expression, Naoya headed straight for her.

Waist-length hair. Classic Japanese features like a beautiful porcelain doll. A mole under her right eye. The last time they met, she was in a T-shirt and well-worn jeans, but today, she wore an off-white shirt dress. There was a large bowl of udon in front of her.

When she noticed Naoya, she lifted her head so that the tremendous amount of noodles she had been slurping was hanging out of her mouth.

Sucking the udon down, she gave him a broad smile.

"*Ah-ha-ha*, uh-oh! You found me."

"…*I'm* not the one who found *you*, Miss Sae."

It was, indeed, Sae.

The woman he had met in June at Inamuragasaki.

Naoya sat down across from her.

"What are you doing here?"

"Eating udon, as you can see," Sae replied, slurping up some more udon with gusto. It seemed certain the broth would have splashed, but there was not a single stain on the chest of her dress. Despite the vigor she ate with, her chopsticks were very tidy.

"Hey there, glasses boy. How've you been? The summer heat hasn't got you down?"

"I mean, I'm fine…and you?"

"Me? Well, I'm right as rain, can't you tell? The udon here has a great consistency, and it's so good. People really shouldn't underestimate cafeteria food."

"Well, um…"

"Yeah? What is it?"

Sae smiled, tucking her long flowing hair behind her ears with her fingers.

Not sure what to say in the face of that smile, Naoya kept his mouth shut.

There were so many things he wanted to ask. After the mermaid incident in June, Sae's whereabouts had been a mystery. All she had left behind were riddles. Was Yuuko really a mermaid? Was it really Sae in that old photograph?

And if it was, why hadn't Sae aged?

There were so many questions, but they were all hopelessly stuck in Naoya's throat.

Because really, every one of those questions boiled down to—

What the hell are you?

But Naoya didn't know if that was actually an acceptable thing to ask.

After all, he would have a lot of trouble answering it, too. What would he say if someone who knew about his ears asked him, "With a power like that, what the hell are you?"

As Naoya hung his head, at a loss for words, he felt something touch his head softly.

He looked up, startled, to see Sae had her hand stretched out

toward him.

“Wh-what is it?”

“Hmm. I wanted to pat you on the head.”

“Huh?”

“You’re a good kid, glasses boy. Yep, a real good kid.”

As she spoke, Sae actually did pat his head with her hand. Naoya pulled away quickly to escape her touch. What was she up to?

“Oh my, sorry, sorry. You didn’t like it? But you know, I just love nice boys like you.”

“Wh-what do you…? It’s not like I’m particularly kind or anything.”

“Mm, but you are, though. After all, you’re so attentive to a little old unidentified creature like me.”

Sae’s eyes narrowed, looking like crescent moons.

In an instant, her gaze turned pitch-black, and Naoya gasped.

Sae leaned forward a little, her dark eyes drawing closer. Naoya’s instincts screamed at him not to stare too deeply into them, but he couldn’t turn his gaze away. It was a lot like how it felt to look at Takatsuki when his eyes were indigo.

And yet it was different. Takatsuki’s eyes were like a night sky scattered with millions of twinkling stars. They were deep and dark, but they held a cold, clear radiance. By comparison, Sae’s held no light at all. It felt like looking into an endlessly deep, bottomless abyss. Suddenly, out of nowhere, the narration from a documentary Naoya saw years before sprang into his head: *“Because the sun’s rays cannot reach it, the bottom of the deep ocean is a world of absolute darkness.”* Surely, the blackness of Sae’s eyes was just like that.

“…Hee-hee. You’re quite intuitive, aren’t you?” Sae said, still leaning forward, her hand moving.

She snatched something up in her chopsticks and, before Naoya could even blink, shoved whatever it was into his mouth.

“Here.”

“…?! Wh-what?!”

Naoya covered his mouth with a hand unconsciously, and Sae gave him a smile.

“Don’t worry. It’s just a fish cake.”

“F-fish cake?”

“I don’t like them. So you can eat them for me.”

She picked up another piece of *kamaboko* from the udon and thrust it toward him again while cooing, “Say ‘aah’!”

“I—I don’t want it! Please stop!”

Seeing Naoya shake his head furiously, Sae shrugged and set the fish cake aside on the edge of her bowl. Naoya was still holding the first piece in his mouth, genuinely unsure whether he should eat it or spit it out, but ultimately, he decided to swallow it. There was no way the udon made by the nice cafeteria ladies had anything weird in it…or at least, he wanted to believe that.

Sae sat back down in her chair and resumed slurping up her udon. She had a really strong appetite for someone so slender.

Then suddenly, the conversation pivoted.

“By the way, how is Professor Takatsuki?”

“Huh? Oh—yeah, he’s fine. I think.”

“I see. Then could you give him a message for me?”

“A message?”

“Yep.”

Sae munched and slurped her noodles, then picked up the bowl and drank down the broth. And then she said—

“Tell him I don’t live there anymore. So there’s no use looking for me.”

“Huh…?”

Naoya blinked at her words.

“Wait a minute. Do you mean…?”

“He’s come to Inamuragasaki by himself a bunch of times since then. You didn’t know?”

Naoya didn’t.

But come to think of it, he hadn’t seen Takatsuki at all outside class during July. Between assignments and exams, Naoya himself had been busy, and the professor hadn’t contacted him. Now he knew why.

But why? he wondered.

Had Takatsuki really gone there alone?

He wouldn’t get lost somewhere he had been before; that was only a risk the first time he visited a place. But still.

“He must be looking for me or Yuuko,” Sae said. “But I told Yuuko that she had to stop coming out where people could see her for the time being, and I’ve already moved. That guy saw

some kites flying around and looked like he was gonna faint on the spot. He shouldn't push himself like that."

It made sense. Someone who was afraid of birds was bound to struggle at a seaside where the sky was full of black kites. If things went badly enough, he could even have lost consciousness.

And yet Takatsuki had gone there by himself.

Without saying a word to Naoya.

For some reason, it felt like something was burning and shriveling up deep in Naoya's stomach.

He took a quiet breath, trying to push the feeling down, and looked at Sae.

"…You're worried about Professor Takatsuki."

"Yeah, well. Thing is, I've taken an interest in both Professor Takatsuki *and* you, glasses boy. Even now."

Setting down her chopsticks, Sae put her hands together in thanks for her food. At some point, she had emptied the bowl completely save for one piece of *kamaboko*.

She was up out of her seat in the next moment, so Naoya followed Sae out of the cafeteria.

Sae was stretching, her arms overhead, looking content.

"Um. Are you going to see him?" Naoya asked her. "He's probably in his office right now."

"What? No way! What a pain that would be."

"A pain?"

"Because he'd just give me the third degree."

She was probably right. Takatsuki had a mountain of questions he wanted to ask Sae, which was likely why he had knowingly risked going to Inamuragasaki to find her.

"Then why did you bother to come all the way here to our school?"

"Because—"

In a flash, Sae was leaning in close to Naoya again.

He tried reflexively to pull away, but she held his face between her palms.

"—I wanted to see your face."

They were so close to each other that they could have kissed at any moment, and Naoya froze in spite of himself.

Her eyes, one with its accompanying mole, and her lips, which were red even though she was probably not wearing makeup,

were right there. So, *so* close. Naoya didn't know what to do. He wanted to push her away, but she was so small. Was it okay to push someone so thin?

Then a scent brushed softly against the tip of Naoya's nose, and he thought, *Oh*.

It wasn't perfume. It was a smell he knew.

One he had smelled just the month before, on the beach at Inamuragasaki.

That's right. She smells like saltwater, even though we're nowhere near the sea.

As if she could read the subtle shift in his expression, the corners of Sae's lips twitched into a smile. It wasn't her usual bright grin, though; it was far more bitter.

"Hey. Do you remember?" she said. "When I read your palm that time?"

"Read my palm?"

Now that she mentioned it, Naoya did remember.

At the restaurant they visited in Inamuragasaki, they had their palms read in turns by Sae the first time they met her. But was that actually palm reading? It wasn't Naoya's palm that Sae had seemed to be looking into back then, but his eyes.

"There are trials ahead… Make sure you don't get swallowed up, okay?"

Recalling what she had said to him then, Naoya suddenly felt a weight in the pit of his stomach as he stared back at Sae.

"…Miss Sae. The fortune you gave me that day—is it still the same?"

"Yep. It hasn't changed."

Sae nodded firmly.

That's what I figured, Naoya thought.

When he considered what the "trials" were, there was only one thing that came to mind.

"I'll say it again. I've taken an interest in both you and Professor Takatsuki. Enough to be pretty upset at the thought of something happening to you. So—this is a warning. Make sure you don't forget it."

Sae put her lips close to Naoya's ear.

"You must not be mistaken in whose hand you take…not ever."

The words sounded like a prophecy.

Flinching, Naoya pulled away from her.

He pressed his hand to the ear Sae had whispered into. It felt like her warning, along with her breath, was still lingering there.

“What does that mean?”

“Who knows? What, indeed?” Sae replied, flashing him another smile.

Then, abruptly, Sae looked past Naoya to somewhere behind him. She stuck her tongue out quickly, then said, “Yikes! Oh no! I’ve been spotted! Well, gotta run!”

“Huh? What, hey, wait! Miss Sae!”

“See ya, glasses boy!”

Without warning, Sae dashed away. She sprinted across the campus in the direction of the station, her long hair flapping behind her. She was fast. How could she move that quickly in those dainty little sandals? And what did she mean when she said she had been “spotted”?

Sae disappeared from view while Naoya was too busy being surprised, and he just stood there for a moment, stunned, until suddenly, someone smacked him on the back.

“Fukamachi! Who was that?!”

It was Nanba.

Oh yeah.

Naoya had completely forgotten about him.

“Ah, sorry, Nanba… Did you get ahold of Hayama?”

“Yeah, he said he’d be right over with the recor— Wait, hold up, who cares about that right now?! I wanna know about that woman! Who the hell was that pretty older girl just now?! Did I see her feed you something all cutesy-like?!”

“It wasn’t anything like you’re thinking! She just crammed a fish cake into my mouth without asking! Anyway, she…she’s just an acquaintance of Professor Takatsuki.”

“Yeah right. You seemed a little too close with her for that.”

“She’s like that with everyone.”

Naoya himself wanted to know who the hell Sae was.

But he hadn’t asked her, in the end… He should have asked her.

Takatsuki would have done it without a second thought. “What are you?” he would have said.

At that moment, Naoya was grabbed from behind yet again by someone else.

He whirled around in surprise to find Takatsuki standing there.

His hair was a little disheveled, and he was breathing heavily as if he had just run a race. His expression was quite frantic.

Takatsuki gripped both of Naoya's shoulders hard, heaved a few more breaths, and gripped him again.

"…Just now! She was here, right?! Miss Sae!"

"Sh-she was, but…she left already."

"……*Aaauuugh*, geez…!"

The professor sank into a crouch as though all his strength had left him. He was still breathing hard.

"P-Professor? Are you okay?"

"…I saw her…from my office window…so I ran over as fast as I could…but I was too late… Fukamachi, why did you let her get away…?"

"I'm sorry… Wait, you ran here? From your office?"

He didn't doubt that Takatsuki would have been able to see Sae with those eyes of his, but still—just how fast had he moved to get here? Exactly how good at running were he and Sae?

Nanba looked down at the crown of Takatsuki's head in confusion.

"Huh, um? What's wrong, Professor? Uh, are you, like, good?"

"…Right, Nanba… Did Hayama…answer the phone…?"

Takatsuki staggered to his feet and wiped the sweat running down his chin with the back of his hand. Naoya didn't think he had seen the man this sweaty before; he must have really been going at full steam.

"Yeah, he picked up," Nanba answered. "Hayama said he would come right away."

"I see. Then let's wait in my office. Both of you, come with me… Fukamachi, let's talk about Miss Sae later."

"Good idea… I have something I need to say to you, too, Professor."

Naoya spoke in a quiet tone and stared hard at Takatsuki, who looked back at him in shock.

"Huh? What? Why do I get the feeling you're angry at me for something? I'm sorry, okay?"

"If you know your actions are going to make someone upset, don't do them in the first place! Anyway, an apology from you is

basically worthless. Stop thinking everything will be forgiven if you just apologize!”

“…I’m sorry,” Takatsuki replied dejectedly, and Naoya glared at him some more.

Looking like a scolded dog, Takatsuki started walking. Naoya followed him in silence. He could tell that Nanba, alone in not understanding the situation, was trailing after them in confusion, but there was no way to explain, so Naoya just clammed up even more.

…*Sorry, Nanba*, Naoya thought. Perhaps he shouldn’t have said such things to Takatsuki when he was guilty of doing the same. Sometimes, all one wanted to do was apologize.

Takatsuki and Naoya visited Ooishi’s apartment the next day.

It was located in a quiet residential neighborhood a little ways from the station. Nanba had contacted Ooishi in advance for them, so the boy knew to expect a visit.

“Hello, welcome. It’s a small place, but please come in.”

Ooishi’s face when he greeted them was much brighter than anticipated. According to what Nanba said, he had been so absent-minded that it was worrying. But that wasn’t the impression he gave now.

His studio apartment was clean and tidy. He must have been the organized type, as he had his textbooks and magazines stored neatly in a veneer bookshelf. There was a laptop on the low table in the center of the room, but Ooishi immediately put it aside and brought out some cold barley tea from the refrigerator. It wasn’t the kind that came in a plastic bottle; it looked homemade.

At the end of the room was a sliding glass door. Next to it sat a bag of dry cat food and a cat toy.

Kneeling at the low table, Takatsuki cast his gaze toward the glass door.

“You really do get cats here, don’t you? And that garden—is that where the ‘woman in white’ you mentioned was crawling around?”

“Ah, yes. But other than the part about the cats, that was all made-up, of course.”

Ooishi gave a wry smile.

Takatsuki grinned back and nodded.

“But the story about your sister’s ghost visiting you wasn’t made-up, was it?”

“…That’s right,” Ooishi replied, casting his eyes down slightly.

“Did you save that flower?” Takatsuki asked, his voice gentle. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to see it.”

“Sure.”

Getting up, Ooishi took a travel-sized law-compendium book from the shelf and flipped open its cover. Inside was a pressed flower affixed to some backing paper.

“My sister always made these out of the flowers I gave her to apologize. This time, I made one, too.”

“Yes, it’s lovely. Ah, this is an impatiens; you see these a lot in summer flower beds. But why are there three of them here? I heard it was just the one. Your making-up tradition only involved one flower, yes?”

There were three pressed flowers, each on its own paper with its round, pink petals fixed in place.

“Well,” Ooishi said. “There’s been another flower every day since then… I haven’t seen one yet today, though it may show up in a little while. Really, what is she thinking…?”

Smiling softly, he looked down at the flowers.

There was no trace of confusion or fear in his face.

His sister’s spirit was bringing him flowers. He seemed to be accepting that strangeness at face value.

Carefully returning the pressed flowers to their place, Ooishi came back to the low table. He knelt, his posture upright, and suddenly turned to Takatsuki with an anxious expression.

“…Um, do you think I’m crazy?”

“Hmm? Why do you ask?” Takatsuki asked with a soft chuckle and a tilt of his head.

Ooishi scratched his own head and continued, “I mean, after I said my sister’s ghost came here, Nanba got worried that I might be insane, right? That’s why he sent you here.”

“Well, Nanba is indeed worried about you. But I don’t think you’re crazy. I just wanted to hear what you had to say.”

Takatsuki picked up a glass of barley tea and smiled.

“Although, if it really is a ghost coming here, I’ll be quite jealous. I’ve still never seen a real one.”

“…Oh yeah, you study scary stories, don’t you, Professor?”

Ooishi’s expression was hard to place. It seemed like he couldn’t make heads or tails of a university professor being envious of a ghostly visit. Naoya knew how he felt. In the beginning, he hadn’t even considered ghosts or urban legends as topics for academic research, and he still couldn’t relate to Takatsuki’s obsession with the supernatural.

“Aren’t you scared, Ooishi? Of being visited by your sister’s ghost.”

“No, not really.” Ooishi answered Takatsuki’s question readily. “I guess I was a little scared at first. But once I reminded myself that it’s just my little sister, I stopped being so frightened… During the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual, I ended up talking about her because I couldn’t think of another topic. While I was talking, it was like I was overcome with a feeling of guilt.”

His sister had died when she was still in the early years of elementary school, but he…

Ooishi, her older brother, had safely become a college student and spent his days having fun. Most days, he barely even thought about his little sister.

During the ritual, Ooishi had felt from the bottom of his heart that he was a horrible big brother.

He thought his sister must be furious that he still got to enjoy life.

That was why, he said, she must have come to him on purpose.

“I think she’s leaving me the flowers to say, ‘Don’t worry about it anymore. I’m not angry or anything.’ Obon is coming up, so she must have returned early.”

Takatsuki listened to him, nodding gently.

At his side, eyes slightly lowered, Naoya listened, too.

Both he and Takatsuki *already knew*—the voice they heard at the end of the storytelling ritual didn’t really belong to Ooishi’s sister at all.

The day before, Takatsuki had called Hayama to his office and asked him all about it.

When he first arrived at the office, Hayama looked rather proud of himself.

He assumed he'd been asked to bring his digital recorder there because Takatsuki wanted to use his recordings of the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual as research material.

"Ah, I'm really sorry, Professor! You e-mailed me, didn't you? I've been a little busy. I'm so sorry I couldn't reply! Here's the recorder from before. People don't do the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual often these days, so I suppose it's a valuable resource in that sense. Please feel free to make copies of the audio."

"Right, thank you, but I don't need a copy. I remember it all."

Takatsuki smiled brightly at Hayama as he was handed the recorder.

"Huh, you remember…?! What, all one hundred stories?! It took about eight hours, you know?!"

"Yep. My memory has always been a bit better than the average person's. Please sit, Hayama. Would you like some coffee? Or maybe some hot cocoa today?"

"Oh, coffee, please… Wait, you're serious about remembering it all? That wasn't a joke?"

Hayama lowered himself into one of the folding chairs, looking incredulous.

Having likely visited the office before to discuss the details of the ritual, Hayama was unfazed when he received his coffee in the Great Buddha mug. He looked more interested in Naoya and Nanba, who were sitting across the table watching him. He didn't seem to know why they were there.

Sitting down in the seat beside Hayama, Takatsuki smiled again.

"I'm sorry for calling you here while you're busy. During summer vacation, too—that must be rough. Are you working part-time or something like that?"

"Oh, no. I'm editing the audio from the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual."

"Editing?"

"Yeah! I really love ghost stories, and I want to start a video channel! There were a lot of interesting stories in the ritual we did, plus what happened at the end. So I was thinking of making a video where I listen to the audio with friends and give commentary. Oh—and if you want to, you could make an

appearance, too, Professor! I'm sure the channel's views would skyrocket just from having a good-looking guy on it! Please say you will!"

"Hmm, sorry, but that's not really my sort of thing. I like watching ghost story videos, but I don't think it's a good idea to appear in any myself."

Hayama's plea was enthusiastic, but Takatsuki politely turned him down before turning his attention to the digital recorder Hayama had placed on the table.

"Hayama, if you're going to upload that audio to the internet, you should get permission from the ritual participants. Even though it would only be their voices and not their faces, you'll want to be on the safe side."

"Oh, really? Well, I guess the internet is a scary place… Got it. I'll send everyone an e-mail."

"Also, be sure to delete the last bit."

"Huh?"

Hayama looked at Takatsuki in shock.

"Huh?! 'The last bit'—you mean the voice at the end? But why?! Delete a recording of an actual ghost?! What, do you think that uploading an actual ghost's voice to the internet might mean I'll be cursed? If it does, that would make a good topic for a video in and of itself, so I'd be pretty pleased."

"If it were the voice of a real ghost, I would happily make a copy of the audio and listen to it every day. But sadly, I'm not interested in fake ghosts, and I don't know that it's a good idea to pass that off as real and put it online for entertainment. It really would be an inappropriate topic for a video, something you planted like that. You should really reflect on your actions, Hayama."

Takatsuki's reproach was delivered calmly but clearly, his smile never once faltering.

Eyes wide in alarm, Hayama started frantically shaking his head.

"What? What do you mean?! I didn't plant anything!"

His voice distorted wildly, like a poorly played chord on an electric guitar.

"How would I even have done that to begin with?! **It's impossible—I was in the room with everyone else the whole**

time! Somebody definitely would have noticed if I did something weird!”

“Yep, and that’s why you’ve been found out.”

“Huh?”

Hayama looked comical with his mouth opened wide like that.

“It feels silly to even explain, really. You fiddled with your phone a few times during the ritual, didn’t you? You turned down the brightness and hid it under the table, so you probably thought no one would see, but no matter how soft the glow, it was still visible. It was also faintly reflected in your glasses.”

Takatsuki gestured to Hayama’s rectangular frames.

The professor spoke as if anyone should have noticed Hayama using his phone, but in truth, Naoya hadn’t at the time. With the orange light cast by the candles on top of the tables, it wouldn’t have been easy to spot another light source underneath them regardless. Takatsuki’s eyesight was simply better than other people’s. Glancing sideways, he saw that Nanba also looked astonished.

From Hayama’s perspective, though, it must have been freaky to have one’s actions revealed so easily. He opened his mouth again, speaking in a very agitated tone.

“B-but! It would have been obvious if I played audio from my own phone! Plus, it was really dark in the room at the end! Just like you said, Professor, someone would have noticed if I was messing around with my phone in the pitch black! The people sitting next to me would have seen or something! **That’s why, I’m telling you, it wasn’t me!** ”

“Yep. That voice came from somewhere far from where you were sitting.”

“See! See, didn’t I tell you?! **So it wasn’t me!** ”

“It was outside the window, right?” Takatsuki asked casually.

Hayama flinched.

“I—I dunno, was it? I couldn’t tell where it came from.”

“Really? I could. That’s why I checked as soon as the lights came on. When I did, I saw that around where the voice came from, there was a slightly open window.”

“S-somebody must have forgotten to close it, right? It was probably just open from the start!”

“No, it was closed. I know because I saw it at the start. After all,

if you leave windows open in the summer, you get mosquitoes coming in, which is a whole ordeal, you know?"

"You must be misremembering!"

"As a matter of fact, I don't misremember anything."

Takatsuki ran a finger smoothly over his own eyelid, smiling brightly.

He remembered every single thing he saw as clearly as if he was looking at a photograph. And he never ever forgot what he saw.

"You recall I opened that window and looked outside, yes? There was no one there. But—I could smell cigarettes."

"C-cigarettes?"

"Yes. There were no butts left behind, though. Why would that location, so far from the designated smoking area, smell of cigarettes at that time? It wouldn't, unless someone was outside smoking then. So, Hayama—the person who was out there was your friend, right?"

"H-how would I know?"

"You shouldn't lie, Hayama," Takatsuki said, turning his gaze to Naoya, whose hands had been pressed to his ears for some time. "You wanted something supernatural to happen at the end of the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual no matter what, didn't you? So you had a friend on standby outside as we were about to finish. You chose a suitable story from among the ones shared and used your phone to tell your friend. An audio-only illusion was your best choice for staging a phenomenon at the time. If you had, for instance, hung a will-o'-the-wisp outside the window or had someone dress up like a ghost and peer inside, someone might have rushed over to the window and exposed the trick immediately. But with just a voice, it wouldn't be instantly obvious where it was coming from, not to mention the scare factor is quite high. I think that voice saying 'big brother' was likely nothing more than an isolated sound from a TV show or an anime or something. My auditory memory isn't as reliable as my visual memory, but I believe I have heard that voice somewhere before."

At a complete loss for words, Hayama closed his mouth.

Nanba, who had been listening with his chin rested in his palm, spoke up in a disgusted tone.

“Hey, Hayama. You seriously did something like that?”

“I…I mean… Ghost story channels are popular right now, you know? If you do a ghost story ritual seriously and something scary actually happens at the end, it would be good content, I thought…”

“Was that the reason you set up the ritual in the first place?” asked Nanba.

“…Yes.”

Hayama nodded feebly.

Having listened to Takatsuki’s lecture and been interested in the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual, Hayama had apparently thought his chance had come. Actually carrying out such a ritual wouldn’t be so hard with a university population at hand, and he could get a genuine reaction from the participants if he didn’t tell them what he was planning.

Just as Takatsuki had said, Hayama had asked the friend he was supposed to start the channel with to wait outside the assembly room window just before the ritual ended.

He had sent instructions earlier over LINE on what audio to play in the event. Following Hayama’s orders, the friend had gotten ahold of the file from an online video, peeked inside the marginally open window, played the “big brother” clip just after the last story, and then took off quickly.

The decision to use Ooishi’s story had come from nothing more than the fact that it was the easiest to work with.

“You…are *such* an idiot! Don’t you think about other people’s feelings?! More importantly, Ooishi told us during the ritual that the story was true! How could you think it’s okay to use the actual story of his sister’s death as content for a video?!”

“You’re right, I’m sorry! I just thought it would be entertaining! I’m really sorry!”

Hayama had shrunk into himself as Nanba scolded him. The older boy clicked his tongue, looking away from his junior. He was pretty angry, perhaps on behalf of Ooishi’s feelings, or because of how genuinely frightened Narumi had been at the time.

“Listen, Hayama. I touched on this a little in class, but why do you think it is that we tell stories about ghosts?”

Hayama looked up when he heard the gentle tone of

Takatsuki's voice, contrasting as it was with Nanba's harsh one.

The professor picked up his mug, took a sip of his hot cocoa with marshmallows, and smiled.

"Why do you think there are so many ghost stories in the first place? Naturally, there may be people who have really seen ghosts, though I'm sure some of those cases were living people being mistaken for ghosts. But I believe that ghost stories were originally meant to explain the thing we are most afraid of—death. Just like many religions were created for the same reason. There's another reason, too. Ghost stories are a way of processing our feeling of longing for those who have passed, which is just as strong an emotion as our fear of death."

"Our longing…for the dead?"

Hayama tilted his head slightly to the side.

Takatsuki nodded.

"That's right. Death is final. Once a life is lost, it never comes back. But that's such a miserable, lonely thing to accept. That's why the idea that the dead can return to this world as ghosts was born."

Even if a life was lost, something would remain.

The soul went on existing; not everything disappeared.

That reasoning led to ghost stories being told in earnest.

"Going back to the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual, when the ritual first began in the Edo period, it was often held in winter. But over time, it became something we associate with summertime. Even now, we think of summer as the season for ghost stories, right? That's when you see the elaborate haunted house productions and occult specials on TV. I believe the popular theory is that we enjoy horror in the summertime as a way to cool off, but there's another possibility that's quite fascinating."

Hayama stared blankly at Takatsuki, his expression a bit confused. He probably didn't understand why the professor suddenly sounded like he was giving a lecture.

Takatsuki, still grinning, cradled his mug in both hands and went on talking.

"One of summer's biggest events is the Feast of Lanterns, also known as Obon. Originally, it was a Buddhist event meant to save souls who had fallen into the realm of hungry spirits by holding

memorial services, but in Japan, it became linked to our belief in ancestral spirits as it spread. They prepared mounts for the spirits, lit welcoming fires, and performed festival dances to pacify the returning souls. To Japanese people, summer is the season for remembering the dead. That's why we tell ghost stories then. The living share stories in which those who have died appear, others listen, and everyone holds memories of those deceased souls in their hearts. That was probably just one of the ways the living would associate with the dead. In fact, there are a lot of ghost stories whose roots can be traced back to Buddhist tales."

But in the Edo period, ghost stories turned into a form of entertainment.

Their ability to appease the dead became less important than their ability to entertain.

"We who live in the modern age," Takatsuki said, his eyes crinkling at the scent of cocoa wafting up from his mug, "have become rather distanced from religion and belief in ancestral spirits. Most ghost stories are consumed for enjoyment. The same holds true for the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual. In the past, whoever endured all one hundred stories and whatever followed might even have been rewarded, but these days, people expect an ending far more dreadful. Everyone wants something more interesting, more horrifying, more shocking. However, since ghost stories are centered around the dead, you can still find some whose purpose is to honor lost lives."

The ghosts of the forgotten, or the ghosts of those who died with unfinished business—those types of ghosts could be scary.

But if the ghost was someone you were close to, or someone you ought to mourn…the expected sentiment inspired by those spirits wouldn't be scintillating horror.

"Ghost stories told after major disasters, for example, are among that set. After the Tohoku earthquake, many people reported seeing ghosts of those who died as a result of the disaster. Regardless of their veracity, the ghosts those people spoke of were by no means the frightening kind that kill and curse people. Those stories were much more about grieving the lives that were lost. To give an easier example, you know how when they broadcast omnibus series about ghosts on TV, they

often finish it with a ‘feel-good story’? That’s probably because it helps the viewer to end things on a nicer note, but it’s also a fact that a number of ‘feel-good stories’ about the dead exist in ghost stories. That’s because we mourn the deaths of people we’re close to, people we care about, and because we continue to want connection with them even after they’re gone. I think it’s best that we don’t forget those feelings.”

Takatsuki set his mug down with a small *thunk* and looked at Hayama, who seemed nearly on the verge of tears.

After looking first at Takatsuki and then at Nanba, he cast his gaze down again without a word.

“Hayama,” the professor continued. “If you want to make a video channel, that’s fine. And it’s okay to upload the audio from the ritual, as long as you get all the participants’ permission. But as for the last section… Well, I don’t have to say it anymore, do I?”

Head hung in dejection, Hayama nodded.

In a faint voice, he said, “I’ll delete it.”

That was the truth behind the voice they heard during the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual, but—

As he and Takatsuki left Ooishi’s apartment, Naoya looked at the other man with an odd feeling.

Noticing his gaze, Takatsuki turned to look back at Naoya and stopped walking.

“What is it? Is something wrong, Fukamachi?”

“…No, not really.”

Takatsuki never, not once, negated Ooishi’s story.

He simply nodded gently, never mentioning what Hayama had done. He was so understanding that Ooishi even anxiously reminded him, *“Um, please don’t tell people about this. I don’t want anyone to think I’m crazy or say I have a creepy complex about my sister.”*

“Professor, you’ve gotten a bit kinder.”

“Well, that’s upsetting to hear. Haven’t I always been kind?”

“I just mean, before, once you found out a supernatural phenomenon wasn’t real, you would expose it mercilessly. Although, I guess you did do that to Hayama this time.”

“‘Mercilessly’… That’s a harsh way of putting it. Was I really so

heartless?”

Takatsuki smiled wryly.

The old Takatsuki always opted to reveal fake mysteries to the light of day. He always proved they weren’t supernatural in nature.

This change in him—it had probably occurred following the way he handled the mermaid incident with Riku.

“…In Ooishi’s case, I think it’s okay as it is.”

Takatsuki looked back at Ooishi’s apartment. They hadn’t walked far yet, so it was only a few houses away.

“I know I’ve said this hundreds of times, but the supernatural is made up of ‘phenomena’ and ‘interpretations.’ In this instance, the phenomena were the voice heard at the end of the ritual and the flowers left at Ooishi’s door afterward. And Ooishi interpreted those things as being done by the spirit of his deceased sister.”

“But that’s not what actually happened.”

“No, at least not as far as the voice is concerned. It was staged. But Ooishi doesn’t know that. He doesn’t know, so he could only interpret the phenomena that occurred based on the scope of his understanding. After telling his sister’s story, he heard a voice say, ‘big brother,’ and he believed the answer to that riddle was his sister’s ghost. Then, when he saw the flowers outside his house, he once again connected them to her spirit. That fit with his internal logic about the phenomenon that had already taken place. Until he knows the truth, his sister’s spirit visiting him is a fact, at least to Ooishi.”

“Even if it’s a fact to him, isn’t the outcome still that the truth is distorted?”

“Yes, indeed it is. But I said, didn’t I? Ghost stories also serve as a way for us to process our longing for the dead.”

Death came for everyone.

Precious family members. Loved ones. No matter how cherished someone was, they would one day be lost forever to death. Sometimes, when that happened, those left behind couldn’t come to terms with it. They were overcome by the hopeless feeling of loss.

And so humans dreamed up ghosts.

So they could believe that the people who died were still out

there somewhere.

So they could ask the dead to forgive them once more.

“I think Ooishi’s approach is an ideal way of associating with the dead. And it’s not like it’s hurting anyone. He doesn’t seem to want to tell anyone about it, so I doubt it’ll have an impact on anyone else. Even I wouldn’t dream of denying that he’s interacting with his sister in his heart.”

As he listened to Takatsuki speak, Naoya recalled Ooishi’s expression from earlier.

His face had been cheerful, amiable. There was nothing about him that inspired worry or seemed dangerous. Ooishi just appeared to be genuinely happy that his sister was visiting him.

If there was an ideal outcome, that was certainly it. There was no need to ruin it.

However—one question still remained.

“But, Professor, who exactly is leaving the flowers at Ooishi’s apartment?”

“Now that’s something I don’t know…”

Looking puzzled, Takatsuki gently stroked his chin.

Something similar had happened with the recent mermaid case. There was Riku, who was convinced that his mother had turned into a mermaid and was coming to see him in the dead of night. Fish scales had been left outside his room.

There was a definite perpetrator in that incident. It was Sae. For Riku’s sake, she had sung for him, pretending to be his mother, and scattered the scales.

But in this case, they didn’t know who was responsible.

While questioning Hayama, they had made sure to ask whether he was the one leaving flowers at Ooishi’s residence, but he had denied it. His voice hadn’t warped.

Then who was the one doing it, and why?

At that moment—

“—Fukamachi.”

Suddenly, Takatsuki grabbed hold of Naoya’s arm.

“Wh-what is it?”

“There. Look, there! You see?!”

Takatsuki was pointing ahead of them.

Or rather, he was pointing forward but also downward. Naoya looked in that direction. At the edge of the road, along the wall of

a house, there was—

—a cat.

A small brown tabby. It trotted toward them with its long tail raised. It wasn't wearing a collar, but there was a notch in one of its ears, so it had probably been spayed or neutered.

"…Oh, okay. So that's one of the local strays Ooishi was talking about. A brown tabby, just like he said. Wow, it really is cute."

But Takatsuki tugged even harder on Naoya's arm in response to his words.

"No, look closer! Look at its mouth!"

"Mouth?"

Was there something wrong with the cat's mouth?

The cat was still a distance away, not to mention it was moving. Stooping down a little, Naoya squinted.

Noticing his gaze, the cat froze.

"—Oh."

Naoya's eyes widened.

The cat was holding a flower in its little mouth.

The flower's round, pink petals looked just like the ones on Ooishi's pressed flowers.

"Wha— …*What?!* No way!"

It seemed it was a mistake for Naoya to speak louder. The startled animal hunkered down for a moment before crossing the street to avoid them, where it took off at full speed toward Ooishi's apartment.

Watching it go, Naoya felt somehow like he'd been let down. He looked up at Takatsuki.

"P-Professor, that…"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! The mystery is solved!"

Takatsuki burst into delighted laughter.

"Huh, but why would a cat be carrying a flower in its mouth? Is that a thing cats do?"

"It's common for cats to carry things in their mouths, but I imagine flowers aren't common. Ah, although, I once read an article online about a neighborhood stray in England that constantly brought flowers to a house's back porch."

Wondering how there could really be such a similar case, Naoya turned back once more to look in the direction the cat had gone.

The cat was already out of sight; it had probably disappeared into Ooishi's garden.

And then, perhaps, the cat would place the flower it was holding in front of the garden door and meow. Hearing it, Ooishi would pop his head out to the garden to feed the cat, only to find that another flower had arrived.

"No, but…hasn't that cat been getting fed at Ooishi's place for a while now? Why did it just start bringing flowers these past few days?"

"We can't know that unless we ask the cat. I expect there was some kind of impetus, though. Ooh, maybe that cat is his sister's reincarnation, and she only recently regained her memories of her past life!"

Eyes sparkling again, Takatsuki started talking more nonsense.

Would Ooishi ever know the truth?

Would there come a day when he would see the cat with the flower in its mouth and think, *So it was you?*

And if he did, would Ooishi be disappointed to learn it wasn't his sister's spirit?

Or would he laugh to himself at his own misunderstanding, petting the cat's head while it looked up at him curiously?

"In any case, that's not a bad way to wrap things up. Ah, I knew the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual would be fun! Hayama's little plan was hackneyed and in poor taste, but considering the event as a whole, I think it was really good! I learned what trends exist in the ghost stories that modern students know, and we even had fireworks! Maybe I should arrange for it to happen every year from now on."

"If you advertise it during your classes, you should be able to drum up plenty of people."

"That's true. Will you participate next year, too, Fukamachi?"

"…If I'm free, maybe."

"Yes! I'll be expecting you, okay?"

Smiling, Takatsuki started walking toward the station. He seemed serious about making the ritual a yearly event.

Naoya followed after him.

"—By the way, Professor."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"What were you thinking, going to Inamuragasaki by

yourself?" Naoya asked, his voice low.

Takatsuki looked at him, startled.

The day before, between Nanba being present and the Hayama issue to deal with, Naoya and Takatsuki never got a chance to talk about Sae.

"How do you know about that…?" Takatsuki asked, his expression painfully awkward. "…Ah, I see. Miss Sae?"

"Miss Sae told me to give you a message. She and Yuuko aren't around there anymore, so you're wasting your time looking for them. She said to stop going there if you're just going to nearly faint."

"Yeesh," Takatsuki said, his voice a peeved mutter. "Does that mean Miss Sae was watching me from somewhere? That's annoying. I guess she has me beat."

But Naoya was more concerned with another question.

"—Why did you go alone? You would have collapsed for sure if a kite had dive-bombed you! If you were going to go, you should have called me!"

"B-but, you know, you seemed really busy in July."

"Sure, but what would you have done about it if you suddenly passed out in the middle of the street or something?! Please stop doing things like that!"

Naoya didn't hold back as he scolded Takatsuki, who snapped his mouth shut before—

"…I'm sorry, 'kay?"

Tilting his head with a remorseful look, he offered that apology. Naoya hated when Takatsuki did something that reminded him so strongly of his old dog, Victor, like that. And when Naoya had told him so many times that he couldn't just apologize and expect everything to be forgiven. Takatsuki was an unbelievably intelligent thirty-five-year-old man, but he never learned his lesson when it came to these sorts of things.

"I'll make sure to call you next time, Fukamachi. Oh, but if Miss Sae isn't there anymore…then I won't be going again, so it's fine. I'm sorry for worrying you."

"I'm going to tell Mr. Sasakura about this later."

"Ergh, I wish you wouldn't… He's definitely going to dis me. And call me an idiot."

"Your guardian should reprimand you properly as well."

“Aw, come on…”

Takatsuki looked really pitiful. Naoya thought he deserved every possible rebuke he could get.

For one thing, the professor was the type of person to invite people along to any and every occasion, so it was especially bad that he’d gone by himself under such circumstances.

…Even more infuriating was that Naoya could more or less guess *why* Takatsuki had gone alone.

It wasn’t a lie that Takatsuki hadn’t called him because Naoya was busy. Takatsuki didn’t lie in front of Naoya. But that probably wasn’t the sole reason.

It was because of Sae—because she was probably the real deal.

A real supernatural being.

Though he had chosen Naoya as his companion to walk the border between their world and the next, every so often, Takatsuki would abruptly lose his nerve. Sometimes, he looked unsure of whether it was really okay to take Naoya along with him wherever he was headed.

But it was too late now for Takatsuki to leave Naoya somewhere safe and step into the eye of the unknown by himself. It was against the rules, Naoya thought.

Uncovering the truth together—that was the promise they had made.

For a while after that, the two of them walked in silence toward the train station.

Takatsuki was the first one to speak up.

“—So what else did Miss Sae say?”

“Apparently, she’s grown real interested in us. She said she’s taken quite the liking to both you and me.”

“I’m flattered. Though, I would have liked to hear it directly from the source.”

“Also, she said that my fortune from before hasn’t changed… The ‘trials ahead’ one.”

“I see.”

“She said one more thing, too—something strange.”

“Strange?”

“…She said, ‘You must not be mistaken in whose hand you take.’”

Takatsuki stopped walking and looked at Naoya.

Also stopping, Naoya looked back at him.

Takatsuki's intent gaze turned indigo right before Naoya's eyes. When his irises were fully subsumed by the color of the deep, dark night sky, he looked nothing like the childish, dejected person Naoya had been walking alongside until moments ago.

With the bottomless night sky in his gaze, Takatsuki's handsome mouth turned up in a smile.

"I wonder what in the world that must mean."

"…I don't know."

Naoya shook his head. He forced himself to turn away from those eyes and down at his own outstretched hands instead.

"I don't know, but…I'm going to make sure I don't forget those words."

Would he be forced someday to choose whose hand to take?

If so, would Naoya be able to make the right choice?

Looking down briefly, Takatsuki closed his eyes. His eyelids, hemmed with his long eyelashes, covered up the night sky.

When he raised his head again, his eyes had returned to their usual brown.

The professor sighed deeply, as if exhaling from the very bottom of his chest, and then gazed back at Naoya once more.

"Fukamachi."

"Yes?"

"Our trip… Are you excited?"

As he spoke, Takatsuki's eyes narrowed a little.

Tooyama had told him not to go.

Sae had basically said that trials awaited him if he went.

Perhaps not going was the better option. Maybe this moment was his last chance to call it quits.

And yet…

"…Yeah, I am."

After a long moment, Naoya answered.

Yes—if they were going to uncover the truth, it was going to be together.

Next week, they were going to Nagano.

Chapter 2:
Festival of the Dead

—When he came to, Naoya was running through the dark mountains, being led by the hand.

Or maybe it was a forest, and not a mountain? Why he was there, he hadn't the faintest idea. All he could make out were pitch-black rows of trees looming in the night. The underbrush rustled with every stride he took. Almost tripping over protruding tree roots time and again, he kept running.

Naoya didn't know why he was in such a place; he only knew why he had to keep moving.

They were running away—the two of them.

He could sense the presence of their pursuers. If they caught him, there would be no getting away. Of that, he was keenly aware.

Despite his maddening fear and anxiety, there was reassurance in the hand firmly gripping his. His gaze followed the flow of that hand up its arm to a familiar back—Takatsuki's. Pulling Naoya along, he ran at an incredible speed, as if the darkness was no obstacle.

Ah, Naoya thought. *As long as I'm with Takatsuki, I'll be fine.*

But then, suddenly, he felt uneasy.

—Was this really Takatsuki?

This figure who had grabbed his hand and started running single-mindedly?

“Professor,” Naoya called out to the figure’s back.

The person pulling on his hand didn’t answer—didn’t so much as look back.

The anxiety swirled in Naoya’s chest.

Was this person actually Takatsuki?

After all…

…they were running so hard; why was the hand holding his so cold?

“—Fukamachi, wake up. Let’s have lunch.”

Startled awake by that voice, Naoya opened his eyes.

At first, unsure of the time or where he was, he instinctively jerked forward only to feel something digging into his chest at a diagonal—a seat belt. He was in a car. In the back seat.

Raising his head, he found Takatsuki looking back at him from the passenger seat. He wasn’t wearing one of his usual suits, but rather a deep-blue short-sleeved shirt.

“Are you okay? You were sound asleep.”

“We’re at a service area. Let’s eat.”

Looming over the driver’s seat, Kenji Sasakura turned to look at Naoya, too. His shirt was black; his casual clothes were always black. And his face was always scary.

Seeing the two of them, Naoya finally remembered where he was.

He was in Sasakura’s car.

It was the fourteenth of August. The first day of their trip to Nagano.

Sasakura had come to pick him up in the car as usual, this time at nine in the morning. But apparently, right after settling into his seat, Naoya had totally passed out. Probably because a strange nervousness had kept him from sleeping well the night before.

His head still a little fuzzy, Naoya unbuckled his seat belt sluggishly and got out of the car. He plodded after Takatsuki and Sasakura, letting out a small yawn.

He felt as though he’d had a very odd dream, but it was already slipping out of his mind. He had been…running somewhere? With someone? Maybe.

They entered the service station—there were various restaurants and gift shops inside—to see that it was quite crowded, perhaps because of the Obon festival. Somehow locating an empty table in the food court, the three of them went to get their food in turns. Naoya had ramen, Takatsuki got a rice bowl with pork and shredded vegetables, and Sasakura had a rice bowl loaded up with a big serving of sauce-covered cutlets.

“All things considered,” Takatsuki said, transferring some barley-miso paste from a small dish onto his pork, “I’m glad you could come with us, KenKen. Since there was a chance you wouldn’t be able to.”

“Oh? There was?” Naoya asked, looking at Sasakura. The other man bit into his cutlet and nodded.

“I wrapped up a case the day before yesterday, so it ended up working out.”

Whenever they went on trips before, Sasakura had come along as the driver, but he was still a detective, after all. He had the right to take time off, but it wasn’t so easy when he had a case. And at least with this trip, they couldn’t adjust the timing to meet his schedule.

“…Wait, so if Mr. Sasakura hadn’t been able to come, what would have happened with this trip? Would we have maybe taken the train and the bus?”

“I think I would have rented a car if he hadn’t made it,” Takatsuki said.

Naoya was taken aback.

“Huh? But, Professor, you don’t usually drive, right?”

“When KenKen and I go to places together, we sometimes take turns driving. I don’t own a car, but I am a pretty good driver, you know… I just can’t read maps.”

“Still, I mean… I’m really glad you’re here, Mr. Sasakura.”

As he grabbed a piece of roast pork from his ramen, Naoya couldn’t help but cast a look of gratitude toward Sasakura.

Takatsuki’s driving skills aside, if he was to faint before they made it to their destination, Naoya wouldn’t have been able to drive in his place because he didn’t have his license. And that wasn’t even taking into consideration how difficult it would be for him to move Takatsuki’s unconscious body on his own.

“…But, Mr. Sasakura, are you going to be okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s just…we’re investigating a festival for dead people this time.”

Sasakura glared at Naoya.

Despite his tough-guy appearance, Sasakura didn’t fare well with ghosts or scary stories. Naoya wasn’t sure the other man would want to come once he heard what the subject of their investigation was.

Finishing off one of his cutlets, Sasakura muttered, “I’d be way more afraid of letting you guys go on your own, so I planned on coming from the start.”

“That’s… Thank you.”

Unsure what else to say, all Naoya could do was thank him.

Takatsuki, who had been watching their exchange with a smile, spoke up again.

“Now, let’s go over some of the details of this village we’re headed to while we eat. People call it a village, but it’s actually been incorporated into the city of Nagano, I believe?”

“Oh, yes. But the people who lived there still called it ‘the village’ back in the day. As I recall, it used to be called Koyama.”

“So you went to the aforementioned festival in the former village of Koyama when you were ten years old. That was ten years ago, but you’ve been to your grandmother’s house several times since then, yes? When was the last time?”

“Um… My grandmother died in the fall when I was fourteen, so it’s been six years now. I went to the funeral, but my parents said I didn’t need to go to the memorial services afterward because I had school.”

“Right. And Mr. Tooyama went three years ago. By that point, he said, the village had become quite depopulated. But what about when you were last there, Fukamachi?”

“It was never a very big village to begin with. Come to think of it, I feel like there’d been a steady increase in vacant houses.”

As he spoke, Naoya sifted through his memory.

When he thought of that village, the first things that came to mind were the green mountains.

Even though he must have gone there in both summer and winter, the village in his memory was usually in the height of summer for some reason. Summer vacation had been much

longer than winter vacation, so he had gotten to spend more time there in the warmer seasons, which could have had something to do with it. Far more so than memories of having fun in the snow or skiing, images of catching bugs and playing in the river were vivid in his mind. Pure-white cumulonimbus clouds floating in the blue sky, a chorus of cicadas singing. Sunflowers growing tall by the roadside. The fields and rice paddies were more plentiful than the houses, and Naoya and his cousins often hung out in the forests and streams.

It had probably been in the last couple years of visiting that he and his cousins had talked about how the festival was growing more and more desolate each year. The wooden stage was still put up in the big open space in the festival grounds as always, and the Obon dance was still performed, but the crowds were gradually thinning, the number of stalls decreasing. Naoya could recall his cousin saying that the festival used to be more exciting but it had become boring.

"The festival you usually went to with your cousins," Takatsuki said. "Did it involve anything else besides the dance? Such as a *kagura* performance or sacred rituals?"

"I don't think so. At least, not that I ever saw… Though, it's possible they did have things like that, and I just didn't know about them."

Naoya still remembered it well.

The Obon dance ended at eight o'clock in the evening. When the clock struck eight, the music that had been blaring from the speakers set up in the festival grounds abruptly stopped playing.

Then, as if shooing them away, the adults would wave their hands at the kids and say, "Go home, children. Go directly, make no stops along the way, and go to bed early this night."

It was like those were the traditional words to say—every single adult repeated the same thing. The stalls also closed at that time, so the children just left without much resistance.

Thinking back on it now, Naoya had the feeling the adults must have been doing something on their own after the kids went home.

As he recalled, there had been something known as "festival duty." And on the year his grandmother was selected for it, she didn't come home after the festival even in the very late hours.

Takatsuki's eyes narrowed when Naoya relayed that fact.

"That's interesting. I'm curious about that line the adults used, too. 'Go home, children. Go directly, make no stops along the way, and go to bed early this night,' was it? Perhaps there was something that necessitated keeping the children away. Speaking of, both you and Mr. Tooyama wandered into the festival when you were kids."

Naoya had been ten years old. They hadn't asked Tooyama how old he was in his case, but he had used the phrase *when I was young* to refer to it.

Happily stuffing his face with miso-steeped pork, Takatsuki continued:

"What I'm most interested in is when Mr. Tooyama went to the village three years ago. The villagers chased him away. I wonder if they shunned people who participated in the festival of the dead."

"Shunned… You mean because those people did something the village considered taboo?"

"That's a possibility. The issue could have simply been the matter of participation in that festival, though. Because of the impurity."

"Huh…?"

Naoya's eyes grew a little wide, and Takatsuki prefaced his next statement by saying it was in no way meant to hurt Naoya's feelings.

"But generally, 'death' was treated as 'defilement.' Maybe those who had returned after being surrounded by the dead were made to be outcasts in the village because they bore the impurity of death. Say, Fukamachi—did you ever have a similar experience in the village? I wonder if the villagers knew about your ears."

"I don't think they found out. There weren't that many people who lied a lot, and outside of my relatives, I really only spoke to the neighbors… Oh, but…"

Suddenly, Naoya remembered.

It was, if memory served, something that happened the day after he had participated in the festival.

In the morning, when he told his parents and relatives that he had been to a festival in the dead of night, everyone asked what he was talking about or said such a thing couldn't have

happened. Even when he insisted he had gone, they laughed it off and said he had been dreaming.

But afterward, Naoya's grandmother called him into the corner of the kitchen and said, *"You must not tell anyone what you just talked about."*

Naoya asked why. Why couldn't he talk about the festival? He had definitely been there. It wasn't a lie.

His grandmother didn't give him a reason, however. She merely emphasized, with a scary expression on her face, *"Listen to me. You mustn't tell anyone."* Naoya had never seen his loving, perpetually smiling grandmother make such a face, and he was only able to nod dejectedly in response.

There was one other time, too—though he couldn't recall when it happened exactly. One of his cousins told a lie about something, and when another cousin derided him for it, the first cousin simply repeated the lie over and over, too far gone to recant.

By that time, Naoya had already begun reflexively covering his ears at the sound of a distorted voice. On that occasion, too, he pressed his hands to his ears, trying to ignore his cousin's lying.

Suddenly, his hands were jerked away from his ears from behind.

Startled, Naoya whipped around to see his grandmother there wearing the same scary expression as before. *"You'll be found out if you do that,"* she said.

Then, with Naoya watching her go, dumbstruck, his grandmother had walked off somewhere else. After that, he remembered, he'd always refrained from covering his ears at her house.

"That means your grandmother knew about the festival and about your ears. She knew and tried to keep it concealed so no one else would find out."

Takatsuki's brow was slightly furrowed as he spoke.

"You know," Sasakura chimed in. "Your mother grew up in that village, too, right? She never said anything?"

"I don't remember her ever talking about it. She definitely lived there until she went to Tokyo for college, but…when I told her I was hearing distortion in people's voices, she just took me to a doctor."

“In other words, your mother either didn’t know, or she had heard the story but didn’t believe it… Hmm. I wish I could interview her.”

Takatsuki smiled wryly. He had heard before about Naoya’s relationship with his family. He was probably aware that conducting such an interview would be difficult.

Since Naoya had started living alone to attend school, he hadn’t been home other than at New Year’s. Even when he had no other choice but to contact his mother to confirm his grandmother’s address, he had ended up sending her a text instead of calling.

Sasakura looked sourly up at the ceiling.

“The more I hear about it, y’know, the fishier this village sounds…but it seems like it’s basically a ghost town by now, doesn’t it? What are you going to do? You might not be able to investigate anything even if you do go.”

“Let’s leave heading to the village for tomorrow. Today, I thought we could try to find some information at the prefectural library. Lots of local materials aren’t in general circulation and, for the sake of their preservation, aren’t loaned out, so you have to visit a local library to see them. Also—we’re able to meet with your cousin tonight, yes?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve already contacted him.”

When Naoya had asked his mother for his grandmother’s address, her text response had included a cell phone number in addition to the address.

She mentioned that one of his cousins worked in a Nagano municipal office, so he should give him a call. Naoya had said he was going to Nagano with his university professor, so perhaps his mother was fussing over him a little bit, since she’d taken the time to ask his aunt for his cousin’s number.

When he called his cousin, Naoya asked if they could talk in a roundabout sort of way—*“I’m going to be there for my university professor’s fieldwork, so I’d like to chat about Nagano”*—and his cousin readily agreed. They’d decided to talk over dinner.

“Of course, it is indeed true that even when we go to the library or to the village itself, we may not find out anything. But supposing that’s the case, isn’t it okay? It’s frustrating not to know, but even if we’re just going for a drive together, eating

good food, seeing the mountains, and heading home, isn't that a fun summer trip?"

Takatsuki smiled.

Naoya couldn't deny that there was a part of him that'd be completely fine with that. The fear that had taken root in his heart was still there, not budging.

They arrived in Nagano in the afternoon and temporarily parted ways with Sasakura in front of the prefectural library.

"I don't want you to have to go so far as doing research at the library, KenKen. Go do whatever you'd like for a while."

"Got it. I'll come pick you up later," Sasakura replied, nodding easily before driving off somewhere by himself.

Takatsuki looked at Naoya, saying, "You could have gone with him, too, Fukamachi. I could handle the research myself."

"I mean, that would be a bit much…but I wonder where Mr. Sasakura is going?"

"Who knows? But I'm sure he can find something enjoyable to do by himself, whether it's sightseeing or visiting a hot spring. KenKen's regular job is hard, so I hope he takes some time for a nice soak somewhere or something like that… Plus, if he came to the library with us, he'd probably fall asleep."

Takatsuki knew Sasakura quite well, which was to be expected since they were childhood friends.

The library was a large, three-story brick building. The local-materials section was in the general reading room on the second floor. Takatsuki had done some searching in advance on the library's website, so when he approached the counter, he began asking the employees to retrieve the desired materials from the stacks and about the library's microfilm-viewing process. At times like these, Takatsuki really came off as a respectable university professor, despite usually being a big, hopeless golden retriever of a man.

Naoya realized then what Takatsuki meant when he said he could handle the research alone.

Whether it was microfilm or books, Takatsuki was a fast reader.

He could probably get a decent idea of what things were about

from their tables of contents, but even so, the speed at which he read a single page was extraordinary. A photographic memory was one thing, but Naoya wondered what was going on with this man's brain. His information-processing rate was simply inhuman.

Nevertheless, hoping to be of some help, Naoya reached for some of the documents as well. He rifled through whatever he got his hands on, looking for anything written about the village.

But in the end, they couldn't find a thing about it in any of the documents.

Strange festivals weren't uncommon in Nagano. Though they found various interesting accounts, they were stories about places other than the one Naoya knew, and he had no memory of similar things happening in the village in question. None of the documents they found provided any useful information.

"…Well, I did think it was unlikely that we'd discover anything by looking at the materials," Takatsuki said as they left the reading room, with closing time approaching.

Sasakura had contacted them a short while before. As Takatsuki had said, he'd gone to a day spa. He was on his way to pick them up, so they decided to wait for him in the free space on the mezzanine floor. Purchasing drinks from a vending machine, Naoya and Takatsuki found an empty table to sit at.

Unsurprisingly, Takatsuki looked worn-out. Even if he did have the processing speed of a machine, his body was still flesh and blood. Leaning heavily against the back of his chair, the professor rubbed at the inner corners of his eyes, gulped down his can of iced cocoa in one go, and heaved a big sigh.

"Hmmm, I got a bit too wrapped up in the task. Aah, I can feel the sugars seeping into my brain… When you're tired, sweets really are the best."

"…Shall I go get you another one?"

"If you wouldn't mind?"

Takatsuki held out his coin purse.

Declining it, Naoya bought a cocoa with money from his own wallet and handed it to the other man. Takatsuki was always treating him to things, so he wanted to return the favor on occasion.

Accepting the chilled can, Takatsuki smiled happily.

“Thank you very much. You must be tired, too, Fukamachi. You should get some sugar in you.”

“I don’t use my brain as much as you do, Professor,” Naoya replied, cracking open the pull tab on his can of coffee. Its bitterness cleared his head better than sugar anyway.

It was, however, a little frustrating to have done so much research only to have come up empty-handed.

“I wonder if the reason there was nothing in the documents is that the village was too obscure after all, so no one paid any attention to it. It is a pretty small town.”

“Actually, documents like that are made by people who know a place has certain customs and either want others to know about them or leave records of them for history.”

Polishing off his second can of cocoa as quickly as the first, Takatsuki continued:

“Even if regional historians or folklorists wander all over the countryside to collect information, if the people living in the places they visit turn them away, saying there’s nothing of note in their village, then those areas become blank spaces records-wise. Within the village, they may have something like a manual or notes on festival procedures that has been passed down for generations. But unless the villagers are okay with others knowing about it, it’ll never end up in a library… Collecting folklore-related materials can be quite difficult. It’s common for researchers to visit the same villages for years, building trust, so they can finally have a rapport with the residents.”

“Um…so you mean the villagers keep what they do in their own village a secret from others?”

“Yep. You know, like when we went to Yamanashi, and that village had a cave where they worshipped a demon? It’s just like that. The demon legend there was kept from leaving that village for a long time. Speaking of it outside the village was forbidden, and it remained a secret—along with the truth being concealed within the legend itself.”

The truth that the demon legend was hiding was a history of murdering people.

As time passed and those days were completely forgotten, it became nothing more than an old folktale, and it was only then that the story was spread to outsiders.

It was highly likely that the same thing was happening in the village where Naoya's grandmother had lived. It wouldn't be surprising if something had been existing there for some time and was known only to the people who lived there—something that wasn't to be spoken of outside the village.

And that something, Naoya suspected, existed not just as an old story but also lived on among the villagers.

Given the story Tooyama had told them of his visit three years prior, it seemed safe to assume as much.

"Well, it's only natural that they wouldn't want outsiders knowing…if that village really does usher in the dead and hold a festival for them."

Takatsuki clutched his empty can of cocoa, his words coming out in a murmur.

"That leaves us with no choice but to go see it for ourselves."

What exactly was the secret that the villagers didn't want to talk about?

If they wanted to know the truth about that midnight festival, returning to the village was the only way forward.

After reuniting with Sasakura and checking into a hotel in front of the station, they headed to the *izakaya* where they planned to meet Naoya's cousin. Perhaps because Naoya had mentioned the name of their hotel, the place his cousin chose was within walking distance of where they were staying, causing Sasakura to mutter with a serious expression about what a "considerate, excellent cousin" Naoya had. Apparently, he appreciated the forethought, since he wouldn't have been able to drink alcohol if he had to drive.

They walked from the hotel to the *izakaya* to find Naoya's cousin waiting outside for them. He was wearing a dress shirt and slacks, as he had probably come straight over after finishing work. When he saw them, he started waving excitedly.

"Nao! Over here!"

"Kazu, it's been a while."

Naoya's cousin, Kazu—Kazuya Nishikawa—was three years older than Naoya.

His maternal aunt had two sons, and Kazuya was the younger

one. The elder was Masahiko, whom Naoya called “Masa.”

It had been since their grandmother’s funeral six years prior that Naoya had seen either of them. He was secretly worried that his cousin would have changed so much in that time that he wouldn’t recognize him, but he was relieved to see that Kazuya’s tanned face and mischievous grin didn’t look all that different than before. Naoya had missed seeing the way his canines poked out when he smiled. The only major difference was the height of their eyelines, because Naoya had grown taller. Kazu had been taller before, but now they were the same height, which felt quite strange.

“Nao, you’ve gotten so big. You’re in your second year of college already. I’m so happy to see how well you’re growing up.”

“Don’t talk like you’re my dad. Kazu—this is Professor Takatsuki, an associate professor at my school. And next to him is his friend, Mr. Sasakura.”

“Good evening, I’m Takatsuki from Seiwa University. Thank you so much for today.”

Sasakura bowed slightly, while Takatsuki greeted Kazuya with a smile.

Kazuya looked back and forth between Takatsuki—who had a gentle, soft air about him—and Sasakura—who, at first glance, absolutely came off as a guy who worked for the mob—and smiled vaguely. He probably couldn’t quite decide what to make of such a pair… Naoya understood the feeling.

Once inside, they were shown to a table for four. Naoya sat next to Kazuya, while Takatsuki and Sasakura sat opposite them.

With Kazuya and Naoya beside each other, Takatsuki started looking between their faces.

“You do look a bit like Fukamachi. Because you’re cousins, I suppose.”

Next to him, Sasakura nodded.

“The vibes are totally different, though. He’s like a cheerful Fukamachi who doesn’t wear glasses.”

Kazuya laughed.

“Yeah, back in the day, we sometimes got mistaken for brothers. Is Nao still really quiet even as a college student? He was pretty lively when we were real little, but sometime along the way, he just got way more subdued. Maybe it’s ’cause he

started wearing glasses."

Putting an arm around him, Kazuya slapped Naoya firmly on the shoulder.

Worried that Kazuya might expose his whole childhood if they continued on like this, Naoya decided to change the topic.

"Hey, Kazu, you work at city hall now, right? Do you know anything about local materials or festivals in the city? Professor Takatsuki specializes in folklore and is researching that sort of thing. If you do know anything, it would be a huge help if we could ask you about it."

"Festivals? I mean, Nagano definitely has all sorts of festivals… but I'm in the sports department, so I don't know much about that stuff."

"…I see."

Thinking they were perhaps barking up the wrong tree, Naoya looked at Takatsuki to find him and Sasakura peering at the *izakaya* menu with great interest. Eyes alight, they talked about wanting to eat *basashi* and *sakura-nabe*, almost making Naoya want to hold his head in his hands. He was only just remembering that the two of them, first and foremost, wanted to have a good time with whatever they did.

"You can drink, right, Nao? This place has great local sake. Do you and your friend like alcohol, Professor? You didn't drive here, right? Then let's drink!"

Kazuya, too, was someone who loved to party. Naoya remembered him being the most energetic and noisiest of his relatives when they were little.

They continued to chat cheerily for a while after that, drinking and eating as they went.

Naoya was a bit of a lightweight, but the other three men drank quite a lot, in his opinion. Despite that, neither Takatsuki nor Sasakura seemed all that different when they had alcohol. Naoya had still never once seen either of them in a state he would have described as *drunk*.

In comparison, Kazuya was as intoxicated as one would expect of the average person.

On top of that, it made him pretty crass.

"For real, though! Nao was *such* a crybaby when we were kids! If me or my older brother left him out of something even a little

bit, he'd practically burst into tears. In the middle of a game of hide-and-seek, he'd get worried we wouldn't find him and just start bawlin' his eyes out. He would cry if he wet the bed."

"Hold on, Kazu! Why are you even talking about that?!"

"I can't believe my little NaoNao, who was *sooooo* cute, is old enough to drink! The same little guy who laid there weeping in his futon when he got a fever and couldn't go to the festival!"

Kazuya clung to the sake bottle throughout his drunken, red-faced ramblings.

Smiling widely, Takatsuki brought his glass to his mouth.

"Wow, so Fukamachi had that sort of phase. I wish I could have seen it."

"You don't have to join in on the conversation, Professor!"

"But I mean, Fukamachi still cries a lot now."

"Excuse me, Mr. Sasakura?! Name one time I cried!"

"Do you have any photos of Fukamachi when he was little? I'd love to see them."

"Ahh, I'd hafta go get those from home. Should I do that? Go get the photo album?"

"Don't seriously offer to go, Kazu! And, Professor, think about what you're asking for!"

Kazuya made to stand up from his seat, and Naoya pulled him back down. How had things gotten so out of hand?

Having already switched to drinking oolong tea, Naoya brought his glass to his mouth and, once again wanting to hold his head between his hands, wondered what in the world they were doing. This was just a normal night out drinking. Not to mention, he was the only one being made to suffer. It was incredibly frustrating.

When he looked across the table, he saw both Takatsuki and Sasakura smirking at him. What was so fun about listening to stories about other people's childhoods? Naoya glared back at them reflexively, and the two of them burst into laughter at almost the exact same time. They seemed to be having a better time watching Naoya's reactions than listening to Kazuya's stories. Increasingly annoyed, Naoya crunched down on the ice in his tea.

Apparently satisfied after a good laugh, Takatsuki finally started questioning Kazuya.

“—That reminds me. There was a festival in the village where your grandmother lived, right? What kind of festival was it?”

“What kind? Just a regular Obon festival. There were stalls and red lanterns that everyone danced under. I really looked forward to it when I was a kid.”

“The festival was put on by a Shinto shrine, I believe? Before the dancing, were there any sorts of rituals? Like prayer readings?”

“Ahh, there may have been, but they were probably done at the shrine on top of the mountain. So I dunno. We weren’t allowed to go up the mountain on festival days. And anyway, there were so many stairs to climb up, I wouldn’t have wanted to go.”

“So you never went up the mountain, not even outside of festival days?”

“No, I did a few times. There’s an old shrine up there, at the mountaintop. I don’t remember what kind of shrine it was, though. Just that there was some kind of big rock.”

“…A rock?”

Takatsuki stroked his chin lightly at Kazuya’s words, as if in thought.

“There was?” Naoya asked his cousin. “A rock, I mean.”

“Yep,” Kazuya answered, nodding emphatically. “Oh, that’s right, it was just my brother and me who went that time. We left you behind. You were still pretty little.”

The shrine on top of the mountain was not somewhere Naoya and his cousins typically chose to play. That was partly because it was a bit far from their grandmother’s house, and partly because there were lots of other spots, more interesting ones, that didn’t require overcoming a long staircase to get to.

Despite that, even Naoya had gone up the mountain to the shrine at least once. As he recalled, it had been a time when his cousins had left his grandmother’s house early for some reason or other, leaving him bored without anyone to play with. Naoya remembered climbing the mountain stairs, which he usually didn’t bother with, as if he was off on his very own private adventure.

Just getting up the steps had exhausted him, however, so he simply rested a while at the shrine grounds before heading back

down. He had remembered hearing that if he went around to the other side of the shrine and climbed downward for a while, he could reach another village on the back side of the mountain. At that age, though, he had been too afraid to go that far. Young Naoya had been content solely with having gotten to the summit.

Kazuya looked upward as if recalling the good old days.

"It had one of those ropes around it that shrines have, so I figured we probably weren't supposed to touch it. The rope strung across the shrine itself was super raggedy, but the one around the rock seemed kinda new, like it was the more important one. But we were told not to go to the shrine too much, so that was the last time my brother or I went. Plus, when we got back and told Grandma, she got mad at us."

"Was she angry that you went into a sacred place?" Takatsuki asked, but Kazuya shook his head.

"Nope. It was because of the snakes."

"Snakes?"

"Yep. She said it was dangerous because there were tons of snakes on the mountain."

Kazuya's head tottered a bit as he spoke; he was pretty drunk. Naoya was starting to worry.

"You've had too much to drink, Kazu. Here, have some water."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha, you're mature enough to take care of your elders! You've grown up so well, Nao!"

He slapped Naoya's shoulder again. *You drunken idiot*, Naoya thought, liberating a glass that was about to fall over from his cousin's grip.

"When you went up the mountain," Takatsuki probed further, "did you actually see any snakes?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure, I might not have. But I mean, it's a village in the middle of the mountains, y'know? Snakes were always popping up. One got into Gran's house once, too. Nao was so scared that he started wailing. That was a rough one. Even when we told him the snake had been brought outside, he just wouldn't stop crying. He hid in the closet and wouldn't come out."

"How about you stop talking for a bit, Kazu?!"

This is bad, Naoya thought. At this rate, his embarrassing childhood stories would never stop being told.

Wishing he could just leave, Naoya grabbed a piece of *basashi*

with his chopsticks and popped it into his mouth. He was having an awful time, but at least there was good food.

When Naoya went to the bathroom afterward, he ended up alone with Kazuya.

Naoya had finished his business and was about to head back to their table when he ran into his cousin in the hallway.

Kazuya was waving his hands, calling Naoya's name and bumping into the wall, so Naoya hurried to grab his shoulders and hold him steady.

Just as he had taken a few tottering steps, Kazuya came to a halt in front of the bathroom door. He turned to look at Naoya.

"Gosh, those teachers sure can drink, huh? And they don't seem drunk at all. College professors are amazing."

"Only one of them is a professor."

"What does that scary-looking guy do?"

"…He's a detective."

"Detective?! Oh, that's great!"

Kazuya burst out laughing; he might have thought it was a joke.

Then, the smile still lingering on his red face, Kazuya started staring, oddly fixated, at Naoya.

"Wh-what is it, Kazu?"

"…Just, I'm glad you grew up safely, Nao."

"I told you to stop talking like you're a parent."

"No, I mean…I was a little worried."

"Huh?"

"Because, well—"

For a moment, Kazuya closed his mouth.

He stared vaguely into space, and Naoya got concerned again.

"Kazu? Are you okay? Do you feel sick? Are you going to throw up?"

"…Oh, sorry. It's not that. It's Grandma."

"Grandma?"

"Yeah. Listen, Gran was hospitalized over here before she died, right? She wasn't far from my house, so I visited her a few times."

Their grandmother had died of heart disease. There were no hospitals in the village, so she was admitted for a while at a large

hospital in the city center.

“One time, I was talking to her about when we were kids. About how we would come play at her place every summer. I said, ‘I hope Nao is doing well,’ and her face got all scary all of a sudden, and she said, ‘Naoya might not have grown up.’”

“…What?”

Naoya felt like an icy fist had grabbed hold of his heart.

Kazuya shook his head unsteadily.

“I was like, ‘What are you talking about? He’s fine. Nao’s good.’ But Gran still looked all mad. She said, ‘That boy was taken by the mountain god, so I don’t know.’”

Taken?

With an eerie chill running up and down his spine, Naoya tried to figure out what “taken” was supposed to mean in this context. *Borrowed*? *Stolen*? *Captured*? But none of them seemed to make sense.

Realizing he wouldn’t be able to figure it out until he knew who was supposed to have been taken, Naoya asked, “Kazu, did Grandma say who ‘that boy’ was? The one who was taken?”

“Who? You, of course.”

“What…?”

The answer came in such a matter-of-fact tone that Naoya was temporarily frozen in place by it.

Kazuya forced a smile.

“But look, you’re twenty years old already, aren’t you? It’s fine, I’m glad, you grew up just fine. I’m sure Gran would be happy, too!”

He slapped Naoya on the back and finally disappeared into the bathroom.

—Taken by the mountain god.

Those words resounded ominously in Naoya’s head, sending a chill through him when he should have felt flushed from drinking.

Spreading out both of his hands, Naoya stared down at them a while. His gaze continued past his hands and down to the rest of his body in turn. His grandmother was wrong. Nothing had been taken. Nothing was stolen. Everything was accounted for. He pressed his outstretched palms to his face. It was fine. He was here.

Lowering his hands, running them over his cheeks along the way, Naoya remembered with a start.

That summer night when he was ten, the one who had brought him a mask when he hadn't been able to attend the festival himself? That was Kazuya.

Back then, if he hadn't had that mask, what would have happened when he stepped foot inside that festival? The thought was too terrifying to entertain.

The next day, with Sasakura in the driver's seat, their group of three headed for the village once known as Koyama.

Naoya got a message from Kazuya over LINE first thing in the morning. He had been drunk enough the night before that Naoya had worried about him getting home by himself, but he had completely returned to his senses come morning. Having forgotten the evening's events, however, Kazuya seemed afraid that he had done something rude in front of a university professor. Naoya thanked him for the night out and sent him a sticker warning him not to overdo it with the alcohol.

In the car on the way to the village, Takatsuki spoke up.

"—About the mountain god and such that Kazuya talked about last night."

Once they'd returned to their hotel the previous night, Naoya had told the others about what Kazuya had said regarding being "taken by the mountain god."

At the time, Takatsuki, a thoughtful look in his eyes, had merely said, *"What an interesting choice of words."* Then he had smiled and said, *"It's late already. Let's talk about that after we get some sleep."* Unfortunately for Naoya, it had weighed so heavily on his mind that he hadn't slept much at all.

"It has a very homegrown sort of feel to it, doesn't it? That phrasing—*the mountain god*. And apparently, the shrine in question also had an *iwakura*, which makes me think whatever is being passed down in that village is what we would call ancient Shinto–style *kami* worship."

"By an *iwakura*, you mean the big rock Kazu was talking about?"

"Yes. *Kami* worship is essentially the worshipping of nature,

where they revere and deify things like big mountains, big trees, and the like. You know the famous Mount Miwa in Nara, yes? The mountain itself is the target of worship, the *iwakura*, and the rock where the *kami* resides… But it seems a bit strange to me."

"What does?"

"Those sorts of sacred mountains are usually quite big. But from what you and Kazuya said, I get the feeling the mountain in question isn't particularly large. After all, it had stairs going the whole way up, right? Not a climbing trail? About how many steps were there? What were they made of—stone? Or was it one of those that's crafted from big piles of logs and rock? Did it have any loops or turns on the way up?"

"Huh? Umm, I don't really remember how many steps it was, but I would guess around two hundred… It was a regular stone staircase, and it didn't turn at all. It just went in one straight shot up to the summit, and there was a *Torii* gate at the very top. It was definitely smaller than the mountains surrounding the village. I guess you could say it was more like a hill, but… When I was a kid, I heard that the village used to be called 'Koyama,' and I remember thinking, *Oh, I get it. Because there's a small mountain here*."

"That's true, the origin of the village's name might have come from that mountain. And about that 'taken by the mountain god' thing—your grandmother's 'might not have grown up' comment makes me think that this mountain god takes children. There's also the possibility that they performed Shinto rituals at the festival with the children kept away."

At that point, Takatsuki turned around in the passenger seat to look at Naoya.

"So I don't think you have to worry now, Fukamachi."

"Huh?"

"Because you're already twenty. It's unclear what the mountain god's definition of a child is, but by modern standards, you're an adult."

"Oh…right. That's true…"

Certainly, someone who was old enough to be considered an adult by society wouldn't be a target for the mountain god.

Naoya let out a sigh of relief. He somehow felt really reassured upon hearing Takatsuki say those words. Ever since Kazuya had

told him the story about their grandmother, Naoya's fear of returning to the village had been rearing its head again, but that also felt like it had subsided.

"That being said, you can't be too careful. If anything happens, Fukamachi, I'll make sure to keep you safe, but don't do anything careless. Also, from what Mr. Tooyama said, it's better if we don't let the villagers find out about your ears, so don't cover them even if someone tells a lie."

Naoya hurried to steel himself after Takatsuki's gentle warning.

Before long, they were coming up on their destination.

The ridges of the surrounding mountains were giving Naoya déjà vu. It was a sight he had seen many times before—the blue sky of summer vacation, the cumulonimbus clouds that seemed to swell up from the other side of the mountains. The curved road winding its way between the peaks that eventually led to a single village. Countless fields and terraced rice paddies carved out of the gentle slopes. The intermittent houses popping up as they continued farther down the road. Despite being incorporated into the city, this place was still a village. The view was so different from that of the city center they had been in not long ago. There were no tall buildings. The greenery was more abundant. The fields and rice paddies outnumbered the homes, and there was almost no traffic.

But the sense of déjà vu and nostalgia Naoya was feeling didn't last long.

Gradually, like a game of spot the difference, he began to notice where the scenery in his memories varied from what was in front of his eyes. It felt like the amount of foliage had increased by about 50 percent. Just as Tooyama had said, the village seemed to have become quite depopulated. Some of the places where Naoya expected to see houses had been turned into fields, which wasn't so bad, but there was also a plethora of homes that had been completely abandoned. He caught glimpses of such places—their collapsed roofs and decaying walls—through lawns and gardens so overgrown that they were practically forests, and he thought they made quite the lonely sight.

They decided to start by going to the house where Naoya's grandmother had resided.

No one lived there anymore, but it was the starting point for Naoya's memories.

Relying on no more than somewhat vague recollections, Naoya directed Sasakura into the village.

The car slowed its speed, but even when they were basically at the village center, there was hardly anyone to be seen. Naoya marveled at how the people here could take care of so many fields and paddies in such circumstances. The thick patch of sunflowers growing just where he remembered them might have been descended from the seeds he had once scattered with Kazu and Masa. Glancing sideways at the stream that ran along the road, Naoya told Sasakura to keep going straight for a while.

In the past, he would come here in a car driven by his father or mother.

Naoya would ride in the back seat with their pet golden retriever, and the two of them would watch the scenery go by the window with their face and muzzle pressed to the glass. Once they came to the second bridge over the stream, Naoya's grandparents' house would be just around the corner. Turning right, there would be a pear orchard. And beyond that would be the house itself, where his grandfather and grandmother would sit on the long porch in their work clothes, waving in his direction.

The car approached the second bridge and made a right turn.

The pear orchard was there, just as Naoya remembered it.

But—

"—Stop here, please."

Sasakura brought the car to a stop.

As Naoya got out, a chorus of cicada song enveloped him, twice as loud as in the city, just as he remembered it. The strong smell of grass wafted up from the weeds that grew unchecked along the road. That, too, was just as he remembered.

Beyond the pear orchard, however, the old familiar house was gone.

There was more orchard in its place. There wasn't even any indication that a house had ever been there.

Then a voice spoke.

"Who are you? What are you doing over there?"

Naoya saw someone approaching him slowly from inside the

orchard.

It was an old man in a straw hat and work clothes, with a towel hung around his neck. Naoya recognized his face. He lived nearby. The man's name, he was pretty sure, was—

"…Mr. Nakamura?"

"Who are you?" the old man repeated, his tone suspicious this time.

Naoya pointed at his own face.

"Um, the woman who used to live here, Midori Tahara? I'm her grandson, Naoya! I used to come visit here a lot when I was young—"

"—Ahh. Nao, eh?"

Seeming to remember him somehow, the old man smiled.

Since he lived nearby, Mr. Nakamura had doted on Naoya often. His grandmother had asked him to help the old man out in the orchard more than once. Every time Naoya and his family were preparing to head back home, Mr. Nakamura brought them a plastic bag of large pears, saying it was a souvenir.

Naoya remembered the man being older than his grandmother, but it appeared he was still working the fields. He looked thinner and more wrinkled than in Naoya's memories, but he seemed healthy nonetheless.

"Well, you're all grown-up. Are you a college student now?"

"Yes, I'm a second-year student. Um, Grandma's house…?"

"It was put up for sale after Midori passed, and I bought it. That was the deal we made. Her two daughters always said they had no intention of taking over the place, so."

"I see…"

Thinking it was probably preferable to see no trace of the house rather than to see it in shambles, Naoya turned his gaze once more to where the home had stood. It was already impossible to tell what had been garden and what had been building. Just as the lonesomeness began creeping in, Mr. Nakamura spoke again.

"So why are you here? No one lives here anymore."

"Oh, that's—"

"Excuse me, hello there."

At that moment, Takatsuki suddenly popped out from behind Naoya. Sasakura was still in the car, looking on.

“My name is Takatsuki. I’m an associate professor at the university Fukamachi attends. He’s showing me around here for my fieldwork in folklore.”

“‘Field work’? A university professor, you say?”

“Yes. I heard they hold an Obon dance every year in this village during the Obon season. Are there any Shinto rituals or *kagura* that happen along with the dance? I would be so grateful to watch them if there are—”

“—We d**on’t do th**at a**ny**more. T**he Obon** dance,” Mr. Nakamura said, cutting Takatsuki off.

There was some distortion mixed subtly in with his voice. Naoya clenched his fists in response to his hands reflexively trying to move to cover his ears and looked at the old man.

“As you can see, the village is in such a state now. The young ones keep leaving for the town, abandoning the fields and paddies. All that’s left are us old folk who are just sitting around waiting for our time to come. Even if we did hold a dance, the setup is such hard work, and there aren’t many people, so it would hardly be a festival. That’s why we all got together some years back and decided to call it quits.”

“Is that so? That’s a shame… Then what about the rituals concerning the ‘mountain god’?” Takatsuki asked with a smile.

The old man’s expression shifted slightly.

“Mountain god? Where’d you hear that from?”

“Fukamachi’s cousin. He said he heard about it from their grandmother when he visited her in the hospital.”

Mr. Nakamura looked grim.

Smile still in place, Takatsuki went on.

“He said that apparently, there’s a mountain god in this village. A mountain god that takes children, it would seem. I wonder, does *take* mean *kidnap* in this context?”

“…Who knows? I don’t.”

The old man’s voice warped violently.

Trying desperately to keep his composure, Naoya repressed the chill that ran down his spine. It wouldn’t be enough to simply resist covering his ears. Even a look of discomfort was likely to be noticed.

In as normal a voice as he could muster, Naoya asked, “Mr. Nakamura, what about the mountain shrine? What was it that

they worshipped to there?”

“The goddess of fields and paddies and such. Oogetsuhime, I think?”

“And that’s not the mountain god?”

“No, it’s not. The mountain god—that’s just an old legend, Nao.”

“But I’ve never heard it,” Naoya said, feeling like he was managing a smile that could pass for natural, “and I used to come to this village every year as a kid.”

Mr. Nakamura looked at Naoya as though he was at a loss. Taking off his straw hat, he scratched at the short white hair on his head.

“It’s a scary story, so I decided not to tell it to children. I’m sure Midori did the same, but…maybe she forgot herself when she got sick, so she ended up talking about it.”

He grumbled about being put on the spot, though he knew it was no use complaining about a dead person.

Naoya and Takatsuki glanced at each other, and the professor nodded slightly.

Mr. Nakamura’s attitude toward the two of them was like night and day. He seemed more likely to talk to Naoya, whom he had known since Naoya was little.

“I’m not a kid anymore, Mr. Nakamura. It’s fine. So…is the mountain god in the mountain?”

“…Yeah.”

The old man nodded and stared off into the distance.

As if pulled along in his wake, Naoya and Takatsuki looked in that direction, too.

Beyond the rows of fields, they could see a small mountain covered densely by trees.

That was the one. Though clearly no match in height for the tall mountains surrounding the village, its rounded form was imposing, and it bore a strange presence, as though the other mountains behind it were merely its attendants. In a village where the slopes were all filled with rice paddies and farmland, the mountain, standing unaltered with not a single terrace carved into its sides, seemed somehow extraordinary.

Digging around in the pocket of his work clothes, Mr. Nakamura pulled out a lighter and a pack of cigarettes. He lit one

and took a puff.

“In this village, they say that when people die, they go to that mountain. They say there’s an entrance to the underworld beneath the mountain, and that the mountain god ferries the dead to the underworld.”

“An entrance to the underworld…?”

“Like I said, it’s an old legend. See, I told you. Isn’t it scary?”

Mr. Nakamura smiled, and Naoya smiled back.

“Um, so then do the dead come back from that mountain during Obon?”

The moment Naoya asked that question, the old man’s mouth snapped shut as if to swallow back up the smoke he had just exhaled. He looked at Naoya with a probing gaze.

“I mean, because,” Naoya continued, flustered, “Obon is the time when the dead return from the spirit world, right? So—”

“—Ha-ha-ha, what a strange thing to say, Nao.” Mr. Nakamura cut across Naoya’s words with a laugh. “What exactly are they teaching you at university? Don’t talk such nonsense… **The dead don’t come back.** ”

The old man’s voice warped with a metallic creak, clawing at Naoya’s eardrums.

In the same moment, Naoya’s shoulders instinctively flinched.

Damn, he thought.

Mr. Nakamura’s expression changed. His wrinkle-laden eyes opened wide.

A hand, calloused from working the fields, gripped Naoya’s arm with great force.

“Nao, you—”

“Wh-what is it, Mr. Nakamura?”

He moved closer, as if to stare into Naoya’s eyes, started to say something, then bit his lip.

With a gulp like he was swallowing something extremely bitter, the old man opened his mouth again.

“I ate bread this morning. Tomorrow, I’m going to town to go shopping. My grandson is coming to stay the day after tomorrow, so I have to prepare.”

“…”

Every one of his words, spoken in the same breath, was utterly banal, and yet they were all complete lies.

Unable to help himself, Naoya had gone stiff, and Mr. Nakamura looked at him with despair blooming across his face.

“You— Nao, why…?”

“—Excuse us. We’ll be going now.”

Takatsuki stepped between Naoya and the old man from the side.

Casually removing the man’s grasping hand from Naoya’s arm, Takatsuki bowed slightly, then started walking, one hand planted on Naoya’s back to push him along.

As he went, Takatsuki’s hand keeping him moving, Naoya looked back over his shoulder at Mr. Nakamura.

The old man was still staring, dumbfounded, at him.

Then, abruptly, he shouted, “…Go home quickly!”

He flapped his hands at them as if to shoo them away.

“Go home! Go directly, make no stops along the way! And go to bed early this night!”

Those words were the exact same ones the adults always said to the children at the end of the Obon festival.

Sasakura started driving as soon as Naoya and Takatsuki got back in the car.

“It looked like you got into some kind of disagreement at the end. What happened?”

“The old man figured out Fukamachi’s ears.”

“…You’re kidding me.”

“It was unavoidable. Are you okay? Fukamachi?” Takatsuki asked, turning around in the passenger seat.

Naoya shook his head.

“I’m fine. Um, so what do we do now?”

“Good question. I think I’d like to climb the mountain first of all,” Takatsuki answered.

Sasakura glanced at him.

“Everything’s good?” he asked quietly.

Takatsuki stroked lightly at his chin.

“I don’t think that old man will be a problem. At the very least, I expect he won’t spread word around the village about Fukamachi so that they gang up to come find him.”

“What’s your reasoning?”

“He seemed worried for Fukamachi.”

“…Did he? He shouted at him at the end there.”

“That was just the thing adults in this village say to protect children. Like a sort of incantation. He probably still thinks of Fukamachi as a child who needs to be looked after. He must have been partial to you when you were young, right, Fukamachi?”

Naoya looked back through the rear windshield. The car had already been traveling down the road for some time, and all he could see was the pear orchard in the distance.

His first memory of Mr. Nakamura was probably from around the time he was in kindergarten. It was of the old man holding out in one hand a huge pear that seemed as big as Naoya’s face at the time. Naoya had hastened to take the pear with both hands, and Mr. Nakamura had stroked his head with his large palm. His bright smile had beamed down from a much higher height then.

Mr. Nakamura had fawned over and taken great care of Naoya.

Feeling as though he’d committed some terrible betrayal, Naoya dropped his gaze to his own lap.

He wondered what his grandmother would say if she was still alive. Would she tell him to go apologize right away?

Or…would she say the same thing to Naoya that Mr. Nakamura had said?

—Go home. Go directly, make no stops along the way. And go to bed early this night.

They drove through the village, this time toward the mountain.

Occasionally, they spotted what appeared to be the figures of villagers in the fields and rice paddies. They all seemed to stare intently as they drove by, probably because they immediately recognized that the car belonged to a stranger. An elderly couple standing side by side in the very center of a cabbage field watched them pass with fixed gazes. Just once, an old man approached the car along the footpath between fields, but the moment he spotted Sasakura through the window, he turned on his heel and ran.

…This guy is like a guard dog, Naoya thought, looking at the driver’s seat.

Eventually, the car emerged into a wide-open clearing.

It was the site where the festival had been held every year. In

the past, the wooden stage would have been erected in the center of the clearing several days in advance of the festivities, but now it was empty.

On the other side of the clearing was the mountain, into which a long stone staircase had been built between the dense tree growth. Either side of the mountain was engulfed in the forest that likely served as the boundary between this village and the one on the mountain's other side. A dwelling for a mountain god sounded like a frightening place, but under the blue summer sky, the slope was a perfect snapshot of Naoya's summer holidays. He even recalled using this mountain as the subject of a drawing assignment during elementary school.

"Ah, so it's not a very tall mountain after all," Takatsuki said, his tone joyful. "It feels more like a small hill. But the shape is lovely! Like a beautifully coiled snake. It makes you understand how nicely formed mountains like this one become objects of worship. You really do have to see things like this with your own eyes, you know?"

The car stopped in the corner of the clearing, and all three of them got out, Naoya with his usual bag in hand. Sasakura wasn't carrying anything extra, but Takatsuki had a small backpack slung over his shoulder for a change.

Taking some bug spray out of his bag, Takatsuki handed it to Naoya.

"Here, Fukamachi, you should put some on."

"Oh, thank you."

Takatsuki's backpack was filled with drinks and *onigiri* he'd bought for their lunch near the hotel, but it seemed he had crammed some other items in as well. It appeared incredibly bulky.

Sasakura looked up the length of the stone steps.

"We're climbing these?" he asked, sounding bored.

"Of course. Let's have lunch at the top," Takatsuki replied, hoisting up his bag. "I'm sure it'll be nice to gaze down on the village from up there."

Naoya handed the insect repellent to Sasakura, who used it with a resigned expression on his face.

The cicadas were cacophonous. They sang in a chorus so loud, it seemed to make the very mountain shake as the group of three

began their ascent up the stairs. Far from being well maintained, the stone steps wobbled in some places. Some were cracked, and quite a few had turned green in parts where moss was growing over them. There were no landings and no handrails. Climbing such steps without rest was weary work.

On top of that, there was a clear difference in stamina between Naoya and the two men ahead of him. Every time Naoya felt like he was too worn-out, Sasakura turned around to glare at him, leaving him with no choice but to pick up his feet and keep going.

“Are you okay, Fukamachi? Don’t push yourself. If you were to slip and fall, you could get seriously injured.” said Takatsuki, his voice heavy with concern.

“…Yes, I know…”

“How are you the youngest one here and also the weakest? Didn’t you say you were going to start working out?” asked Sasakura.

“…Please don’t compare me to the two of you…”

Thinking he would get serious about his fitness once he was home again, Naoya wiped the sweat from his face. It wasn’t as warm as it was in Tokyo, but hot was still hot. The only reprieve was the shade cast by the branches and leaves spreading from the trees on both sides of the steps.

Nonetheless, when they made it to the top of the stairs and stared back at the village, it did feel a little refreshing.

It was a sight Naoya had seen once as a child.

A view of the village from the mountain peak that overlooked it.

It was nice to see things from above, even if they weren’t all that high up. A pleasant breeze was blowing, cooling down their sweat-drenched bodies. Fields and rice paddies stretched far and wide under the blue sky. In the distance was a mountain ridge. Far enough away to look like little scale models were the woods and fields where Naoya used to gambol about with his cousins.

The *Torii* gate sat not at the exact top of the stairs but several steps away. Rather than eating on shrine grounds, they decided to plop down on the stone steps to have lunch.

“We have to be careful while we eat, since there could be snakes around.”

Takatsuki handed *onigiri* to Naoya and Sasakura as he spoke.

The warning made Naoya feel like a snake would pop up from nearby at any moment, and he glanced around nervously. According to Kazuya, their grandmother had scolded him for going up the mountain because there were snakes everywhere.

In the end, however, they saw not a single snake while eating. Naoya didn't remember seeing any during the ascent, either. Perhaps, he thought, the line about being wary of snakes was another incantation meant to keep children away from the mountain.

After lunch, they entered the shrine. The grounds had been roughly leveled, but there was no *chouzu-ya* for purification nor a signpost explaining the shrine's history, so the place somewhat had an air of desertion. Farther in sat a single timeworn shrine that seemed like it was on the verge of being subsumed by the surrounding trees. A rusty bell hung from its gabled roof, and the red and white cloth dangling from the bell was so tattered it looked like it would snap if pulled. Beneath the bell sat a little offering box.

There was a small board nailed to the side of the bell; its inked characters were just barely legible despite how much they had faded.

"'Oogetsuhime-no-kami'? Just like the old man said. She's an agricultural deity."

Takatsuki put an offering in the box, tugged cautiously on the barely intact cloth, and put his hands together in prayer.

He didn't seem particularly interested in the shrine, however. After a brief look, he walked over to a corner of the grounds.

There was a small path there—though it was overgrown and a little difficult to make out—that led farther into the mountaintop.

They walked a short ways down that path, which really did seem like the kind of place where snakes would appear, and found the *iwakura* that Kazuya had mentioned surrounded by trees.

The rock was flat, moss-covered, and about ten feet wide. It came up to around Naoya's chest in height. All around the stone, stakes had been driven into the ground with a rope strung between them. As Kazuya had said, though the rope hanging around the shrine's main building seemed about to rot away, this one looked newer. It must have been regularly maintained.

The god that lived in the *iwakura* was probably more important to the people of the village than the one that lived in the shrine.

“That’s odd. There are no other big rocks—just this one. I wonder why? From the looks of it, I would say it might be basalt?”

Takatsuki studied the rock from outside the rope barrier.

“That old man said there’s an entrance to the underworld beneath this mountain. That the mountain god takes the dead there… Exactly what sort of deity is this mountain god?”

There was nothing in the immediate area to shed light on that question.

There was only the *iwakura* and the rope surrounding it. That was likely enough for the people who believed in it.

Mr. Nakamura hadn’t wanted to speak of the mountain god in detail.

The people of the village had probably never talked about the matter to outsiders. That was why no documents about it existed.

The village was steadily decreasing in population. Belief in the mountain god was bound to disappear along with it someday.

Suddenly, something occurred to Naoya.

If that happened, what would become of the mountain god?

If there was no one left to worship a god, would it fall to ruin and become a demon, as a famous folklorist once said?

But the *iwakura* had probably been here since long before people inhabited the area.

If the god took up residence in the rock because there were people who worshipped it, then that deity might die off if all its believers disappeared. If the god had always been there, though—wouldn’t it just carry on existing there forever?

Even if the rope strung around the rock rotted away one day and the mountain path was completely swallowed up by the grass, if the *iwakura* was the seat of the god, wouldn’t the god continue to reside in it? Wouldn’t it stay here in this place, covered overhead by a thicket of green trees, where the sunlight filtering in through the leaves fell in scattered pinpoints of white, forever?

“—Ah!”

At that moment, something on the rock moved.

It was a snake.

A brownish snake slithered slowly up from the other side of the *iwakura*. Its long body, striped with black, crept easily over the rock's rugged surface.

As it neared the center, just once, it lifted its head.

The snake's crimson eyes stared at them imposingly.

Naoya, Takatsuki, and Sasakura all watched the creature intently, not speaking a word.

The snake stayed like that for a little while as if assessing them, its thin tongue poking out of its mouth now and then. But eventually, it began its calm, slithering descent over the front surface of the rock. It made its way to the ground, wriggling its long body across the mountain path, and disappeared into the thicket on the other side.

It was only when the snake was no longer visible that Naoya realized he had been holding his breath the whole time.

He exhaled, and at the same moment, cicada song met his ears. It was as though all the surrounding sounds had just suddenly returned. Looking up at Sasakura standing beside him, he saw the other man wearing an expression similar to his own.

Takatsuki was still staring closely at the rock.

"Professor, that was…"

"Yep, a striped snake."

Takatsuki turned to Naoya with a smile.

Perhaps he hadn't felt anything at all when he saw the snake, because he continued in his usual tone, "Maybe the warning about snakes on the mountain was genuine after all. Striped snakes aren't venomous, so they're no danger, but there could be other species—"

Then, suddenly, they heard—

Boom, boom, buh-boom.

Startled, Naoya looked in the direction of the sound.

It wasn't coming from the village. It sounded like it was resonating from deep in the mountains. But why would that be? And in the daytime?

"Ah," Takatsuki said, "I wonder if there's a festival on the back side of the mountain today, too?"

"Huh…?"

"If you go over the mountain, you can climb down to the

village on the other side, right? They're probably doing an Obon dance. It's a little too early in the day for it, so they might still be practicing, maybe? Well then—since we're here, why don't we go see? I'd like to hear what people on that side have to say as well, and a festival sounds like a good time!"

"But wait a minute, Professor—"

Before anyone could stop him, Takatsuki set off toward the rear of the mountain in high spirits.

Wondering what to do, Naoya looked up at Sasakura, but the other man simply plopped a hand on his head and said, "Just go with it." Then he followed after the professor. Takatsuki, it seemed, had always been like this, and as his childhood friend, Sasakura was always there at his side.

Emerging from the mountain path, they found themselves inside shrine grounds that looked like a mirror image of the ones from before. It was clear, however, from the state of this shrine, that it was regularly maintained. Apparently, the deity worshipped on this side was "Ootoshi-no-kami." Another agricultural god, according to Takatsuki.

On this side, too, was a long stone staircase leading down the mountain.

And when they looked down, just like on the other side, they saw a clearing spread out below.

In the center was a wooden stage covered in red and white cloth. The drumming from before had indeed been practice, evidently, as there was no one on the stage at the moment. They could see lots of people in the clearing, though. Rows of lanterns were being hung, and stalls were being set up. Everyone was preparing for the festival.

The village on this side of the mountain seemed to have more people left in it than the other one. That much was clear just from looking down on it from above. They couldn't tell exactly how the villages differed from their vantage point, but this village had an obviously greater number of houses, and the roads seemed wider, too.

The three of them descended the steps, and those closest to the staircase cast them quizzical looks.

“Who are you guys? Where’d you come from? Don’t tell me you’re from the other side of the mountain?”

“Yes. My name is Takatsuki, and I teach folklore studies at Seiwa University in Tokyo. I came here to do fieldwork.”

Takatsuki introduced himself with a smile.

His friendly expression worked, and soon, even those who regarded them with suspicion at first had relaxed into good cheer. The way the professor had with people felt like magic at times.

His appearance seemed to have a particularly tremendous effect on the women who were setting up for the festival. In no time, a crowd had begun to form around him.

“My, my. I didn’t know the college professors in Tokyo looked so much like actors. I’d love to take a class from someone with a face like that.”

“And to think you’re doing research in a little middle-of-nowhere town like this. Although, there is the festival today, so your timing is perfect. Make sure you check it out, Professor—the stalls will be opening up soon.”

“What? You’re going to help us set up? A college professor? Oh my, how lovely! Really? Are you sure? That would be much appreciated, Professor; you’re so tall!”

Standing a little ways off from the throng, Naoya and Sasakura exchanged glances.

“…Um, it looks like we’re going to be helping with setup.”

“Guess so. But that’s fine, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s fine…”

“After all, he’s probably going to gather information from these people while he helps out,” Sasakura said, slowly looking around. “Since he couldn’t get much out of anyone in the other village.”

He walked off toward the group that was working on hanging up lanterns. Despite being a little wary of his appearance for a moment, the people warmed up easily enough when Sasakura gestured to Takatsuki and said, “I’m with him.”

Naoya decided to assist with setting up the festival’s headquarters tent along with Takatsuki.

Perhaps because of his plain looks, the ladies didn’t talk to Naoya nearly as much, but they were still sociable with him,

saying things like “You’re a student in Tokyo? And accompanying your professor? How impressive.” The atmosphere in this village was the polar opposite of the one on the other side of the mountain.

Takatsuki seemed to be making good progress with gathering information while erecting the tent.

“I see. So you don’t interact much with the village on the other side?”

“Well, you see, the population on that side has decreased so much… This side is closer to major roads, so we haven’t lost as many residents. Besides, the only way to get there from here is over the mountain. The stairs are dangerous, and going up and down is tiring.”

“That’s true. Plus, there are snakes!” Takatsuki added.

The women looked a little puzzled at those words.

“Yes, I suppose. We’re in the mountains, so we do get a lot of snakes.”

“They might be startling to people from the city, but we’re well used to them here.”

The women laughed. Apparently, in this village, they didn’t warn people against going up the mountain because of the snakes.

The conversation continued, and the oldest woman in the bunch said, “You know, when I was a child, my parents would tell me, ‘There are monsters on the other side of the mountain, so don’t go there.’”

“…Monsters?”

Takatsuki was squatting on the ground, assembling the framework for the tent; his hands came to a sudden stop.

The same woman nodded, chuckling.

“Snakes aren’t particularly scary, but monsters are, you see. So all of us kids tried to stay away from that side.”

“I see. Monsters are scary, indeed,” Takatsuki said, gently setting down the frame. Naoya, assembling the pieces across from him, suddenly got a bad feeling. Looking over quickly at the professor, he thought, *Don’t tell me he’s going to…*

Takatsuki got to his feet.

“So what type of monsters are we talking about, exactly?”

“Huh? What type—?”

The woman, who had been on the verge of trying to answer, blinked in surprise.

Takatsuki had walked briskly up to her, not stopping until he was at least two or three steps over the normal distance one would leave between people, and was standing quite close.

He took both of her hands in one smooth motion. Grabbing them tightly, he pulled them toward himself as if preparing to kiss the backs of her hands at any moment.

“Are they humanoid, or perhaps something hairy? One-eyed creatures, or many-legged ones, or something very large, maybe?! And do they only appear on that side of the mountain, or do they cross over it to come here?! Excuse me, please tell me everything about them! Oh, I’m so glad I made the effort to come to this side of the mountain. I’m so lucky to have met someone like you!”

“Um, wha…? Huh…? Um…?”

Takatsuki spoke animatedly, his eyes round and sparkling, and the woman could do nothing in response but stand there, mouth agape.

Naoya rushed frantically to the professor’s side. He had not expected the man’s golden-retriever mode to activate at a time like this.

“Professor, please calm down. Let go of her hands right now!”

“What? But I want to hear about the monsters, Fukamachi! Aren’t you interested? I am! I really want to know!”

“That’s not the point, so please stop abandoning your common sense out of nowhere! It’s not okay to just grab a woman’s hands like that in Japan!”

Right as it seemed Takatsuki was going to pull the woman into a hug, someone smacked him mercilessly on the back of the head.

It was Sasakura.

“Geez, you idiot. Learn your lesson for once.”

“Ow, ow, ow, *ow*… I-I’m sorry, KenKen, Fukamachi…”

Looking crestfallen, Takatsuki clutched at his head. Traveling with Sasakura meant there were two people in charge of being the professor’s common sense, so Naoya could rest easy.

The older woman pressed her hands to her flushed cheeks.

“Oh dear, this is the first time someone’s held my hands like that since my husband proposed to me… Umm, do you like monsters, Professor?”

“Please do excuse me. I research ghost stories at the university, so I get a bit excited when I hear about monsters.”

Takatsuki bowed to the woman, who laughed and waved his apology away.

“Well then, let me tell you about them. On the other side of that mountain, there are monsters. Or maybe I should say—there are ghosts.”

“Ghosts?”

Takatsuki’s eyes narrowed slightly. Sasakura grimaced.

The woman pointed toward the mountain with one hand.

“You see how there are woods on both sides of the mountain? It’s not like we *have* to go over the top of it to get to the other side. We could go through the forest, but no path was ever made through it—because of the ghosts. They say there were folks who saw them long ago. They spotted people who should have been dead walking around in those woods. That’s why, when we were young, our parents often told us not to go into the forest or over the mountain.”

“Oh, I’ve heard that, too. Things like ‘Dead people walk through that forest on summer nights, so be careful.’”

“So have I. When I was a child.”

The other women nodded with looks of recollection.

Naoya met Takatsuki’s gaze.

—Dead people walking through the woods.

That had to mean the festival that happened in the middle of the night.

Thinking back to their conversation with Mr. Nakamura, Naoya remembered his horribly distorted words: *“The dead don’t come back.”*

In that village, though, it turned out that they actually did.

“Hey! Get back to work already, or we’ll never be done!”

A group of people setting up a different tent called out to them just then.

The women all responded in the affirmative and returned to setting up. Naoya and the others followed suit.

Ultimately, the three of them assisted with the festival arrangements, and when they were done, they were given three

seats in the headquarters tent as guests of honor somehow.

Apparently, word got around that they were a “distinguished group of scholars from Tokyo.” A steady stream of tea and sweets were brought to them, and people were constantly approaching Takatsuki and Sasakura to chat with them for a while. Occasionally, someone would even come over to Naoya, who was trying his utmost to sit unnoticed in the shadows of the other two men, posing very earnest questions to him like “My son wants to attend university in Tokyo. What is student life like there?”

As expected, most of the people who talked to Takatsuki were women, but Sasakura was more popular with the men. His height and strength had come in very handy during festival setup. There was even an old man among his visitors who was quite eager to persuade Sasakura to take over his farm. A sturdy build was the most crucial thing for a farmer, evidently.

Every time a new person approached Takatsuki, he asked them casually about the other village, but the answer he got was always the same.

—There were ghosts on the other side of the mountain.

—Therefore, we don’t go to that side, and we don’t go into the forest that separates the villages.

No one had heard of the “mountain god.” To the people of this village, the god in the mountain was Ootoshi-no-kami, the one whose shrine they had seen earlier.

Before long, it started getting dark, and all the red lanterns hung about the festival site were lit up.

Music for the Obon dance began playing from speakers set up throughout the clearing. Two people in traditional clothing climbed onto the wooden stage and began energetically beating the large drums atop it. *Boom, boom, buh-boom*—the sound rang out, reverberating down through the pit of one’s stomach. Within moments, the clearing was filled with people in *yukata*. The sellers manning the stalls, which surrounded the venue like a siege wall, also started calling out in earnest as though peak time was upon them.

The festival had begun.

“Why don’t we check out the food stalls since we’re here?”

When there was a break in their crowd of visitors, Takatsuki stood up from his seat.

Then he started rummaging through his backpack as if suddenly remembering something.

“Here,” he said, pulling something from the bag. “Take these.”

They were masks.

One white fox, one black fox, and one red demon.

Sasakura glared at him.

“…Hey, what the hell? Did you bring these all the way from Tokyo?”

“I thought they would help get us in the festival mood,” Takatsuki replied, chuckling. “I didn’t know whether there would be mask stalls here.”

Sasakura stared hard at Takatsuki for a while, then silently took the black fox mask. Instead of putting it right over his face, he shifted it to a slightly slanted position on his head.

After some hesitation, Naoya picked up the red demon mask. The mask was comical, like the ones found at supermarkets around Setsubun. Following Sasakura’s lead, he put it on at an angle.

Smiling, Takatsuki did the same with the white fox mask.

“Now, let’s enjoy ourselves. This is just a normal festival.”

Indeed, this festival was entirely run-of-the-mill.

Enticing smells wafted from stalls selling *yakisoba* and grilled corn. *Yukata*-clad children swarmed around the festival fishing games, trying to catch goldfish or floating balloons with little nets and hooks.

Somehow, it felt like time had rewound. The festival Naoya had eagerly waited for every year as a child looked just like this one. He even spotted boys in *Sentai* masks running by just as he was glancing around.

“Ah, cotton candy! Now that makes me feel like it’s a festival.”

Takatsuki laid eyes on a cotton candy machine and pointed at it.

A man wearing a headband skillfully wrapped the cloudlike spun sugar around some disposable chopsticks. Takatsuki watched him, eyes aglow, and when the cotton candy was done, the man held it out in his direction. Looking just like a kid, Takatsuki went over to buy it.

He returned with the cotton candy in his hands and a radiant smile on his face. Sasakura plucked a tuft of sugar from the candy

floss and popped it into his mouth.

"Yeesh, that's sweet."

"Well, it is sugar."

"I'd rather have grilled squid. Fukamachi, let's go get some."

"Oh, okay."

Sasakura set off toward a stall at a brisk pace with Naoya racing to follow him.

The two of them turned around after buying their grilled squid to find Takatsuki was gone.

Surprised, they looked around the area, catching sight of him in the circle of Obon dancers. The women from earlier in the day, who had changed into *yukata* at some point, had apparently kidnapped him. They seemed to be telling Takatsuki, who was shaking his head to indicate he didn't know the dance, that he just had to watch the people around him to learn. Giving up the fight, Takatsuki started imitating the dance moves he saw others doing. The professor participating in an Obon dance was quite a novel sight, enough to make Naoya want to record it on his phone so he could show it to Ruiko and Yui.

Standing at Sasakura's side and munching on his food, Naoya slowly raised his gaze.

The warm glow of the red lanterns. The almost inconveniently loud music. The lively festival drums. The smell of charred soy sauce wafting out from the stalls. The spirited laughter of children and adults alike.

Ahh, Naoya thought. *This is a festival.*

A festival for the living.

Nothing like the festival Naoya had seen once, years ago.

The world on this side of the mountain was for the living.

And if that was so, what did it mean about the village where Mr. Nakamura still lived? What about the other side?

"Ugh, I'm beat. I didn't think they'd make me dance."

After some time, Takatsuki came staggering back in their direction, having finally been freed from the circle of dancers.

Naoya and Sasakura had been outside the circle, just watching the entire time.

"Geez, I can't believe you two aren't dancing," he said

grumpily. “You should have joined in, too, instead of standing here watching me dance!”

“As if. I’ve hated Obon dancing since I was a kid. Anyway—how long do you plan on hanging around here?”

“Ah, you’re right. We should go soon.”

Takatsuki glanced at his watch.

Naoya checked his own watch as well. It was half past eight. In the village on the other side, the Obon dance would already be over, despite things still being in full swing on this side.

But going back meant…

“…Professor. We’re going to have to go over the mountain again, aren’t we?”

“Yep. After all, the car is parked on the other side.”

Takatsuki smiled brightly.

That was when Naoya realized at last: *Oh. This is what he planned on from the start.*

What happened in the village on the other side once the Obon dance ended?

In order to find out, Takatsuki had intentionally been wasting time on this side.

The masks, too, were probably a precaution he took just in case. If that midnight festival really was going on even now, they’d be in trouble without masks.

“…But it’s dark on the mountain. There are no lights.”

“I brought flashlights.”

Of course, Takatsuki was well prepared. He took three small flashlights from out of his backpack.

Bidding farewell to the people around them, they headed back toward the mountain. There were those who told them not to go in the dark, who invited them to stay at their home, but Takatsuki merely smiled and waved good-bye to them.

With the festival atmosphere at their backs, the group of three began the climb up the dark stone steps.

For a while, none of them spoke a word. Shining the flashlights where they were walking, they made the ascent in silence. The daytime chorus of cicadas was replaced at nighttime by the chirping of bush and bell crickets. Their clear, ringing calls resounded as the noise of the festival gradually began to fade away. The continued *boom* of the drums and the Obon music,

however, remained audible.

They reached the top of the stairs and stepped into the shrine grounds.

Naoya glanced up at the sky.

Even after staring for so long into the beam of his flashlight, he could see the stars clearly.

At first, only the brightest stars were visible, but his eyes soon adjusted so that the other, smaller twinkling lights stood out, too. The air was clearer here than in Tokyo, and the light pollution wasn't as bad. This night sky was truly star-studded.

The moon wasn't out yet. The flickering stars, innumerable, were scattered across the dark, cavernous indigo sky. Naoya had learned as a child, lying next to his cousins in his grandmother's garden and gazing skyward, that the light of the stars alone was quite bright in its own right. It had been Masa, he thought, who taught him that the faint white band traversing the darkness was the Milky Way.

In those days, the sky above the village was so different from the one Naoya was used to that it scared him a little. The bottomless night had forced him to confront the fact that the cosmos was endless. He remembered feeling strangely uneasy, as though if he looked up at the sky for too long, some invisible force would suddenly blow him into the void.

"Fukamachi, let's go."

Takatsuki called Naoya's name, and he looked back down.

The three of them ventured deeper into the dark mountain.

As they left the shrine grounds and stepped onto the path, the surrounding darkness somehow grew, perhaps because the branches overhead blocked out the starlight. The beams of their flashlights cut through the dense blackness. They kept walking, carefully making their way through a world that seemed to be divided into black and white. The thought that they might encounter another snake certainly slowed their pace. Passing by the *iwakura* and emerging into the shrine grounds on the other side of the path felt like it took a lot longer than it had earlier that day.

At the top of the stone steps, looking down at the clearing below, Naoya gasped.

He could see blue lanterns.

“…How?” he muttered without meaning to. The tremor in his own voice startled him.

Countless blue lanterns, like will-o’-the-wisps floating in lines, were strung through the clearing. There were no people there. The faint sounds of drums and music they heard were coming from the direction of the village they had just left. In the clearing below, all was silent.

“—Yep, just as I thought,” Takatsuki said, standing at Naoya’s side and looking down at the clearing.

Slowly, Naoya turned his gaze to Takatsuki. Illuminated by the flashlights, the professor’s eyes seemed to shine with a bluish tinge—the same color as the night sky spread out above their heads.

“What do you mean, ‘just as I thought’?”

“Should I tell you my theory? It’s about the festival in the old Koyama village. I think there were probably two Obon dances held there every year.”

“Two?”

“The first was a normal one, the one you participated in every year with your cousins. Just a regular festival where everyone danced happily under the red lanterns, like the one we were at. But that one ended at eight in the evening, which I thought was a bit on the early side. However, the adults always chased the children away from the festival grounds at that time. Why was that? Most likely—to set up the other Obon dance.”

After sending the children home, the villagers changed the red lanterns out for blue.

If the Obon dance for the living was the festival’s face, the one for the dead was its underbelly.

The adults of the village welcomed the dead who were returning from the mountain by creating a place for them to have their own Obon dance.

“In this village, they believe there’s an entrance to the underworld beneath the mountain. During Obon, the dead return from the mountain, and a venue for the Obon dance is needed to pacify them. That was this village’s way of associating with the dead.”

“…Why an Obon dance? Does the dance serve as a memorial service?” Sasakura asked, and Takatsuki chuckled.

“These days, Obon dances are done to the songs of popular *Enka* singers or anime themes, so I don’t think most people see any religious meaning in them. But the origin of the Obon dance is actually *odori-nenbutsu*. It is said to have been started by the monk Kuya in the Heian period, who would dance and beat a drum or ring a handbell as he recited the *nenbutsu*. This evolved in the early-modern period into *nenbutsu-odori*.”

“Hold up. What’s the difference between *odori-nenbutsu* and *nenbutsu-odori*?”

“With *odori-nenbutsu*, the person chanting is also the one dancing. But with *nenbutsu-odori*, those roles are separate. The *nenbutsu-odori* linked the Buddhist Feast of Lanterns to the preexisting Japanese belief in ancestral spirits and such, and it became the Obon dance as we know it today. There’s another place here in Nagano Prefecture called Niino, and in the Obon dance they put on, the songs still retain many elements of *nenbutsu*.”

Takatsuki turned his gaze back down the steps.

“In some regions, people sometimes hide their faces with hats or hoods during the Obon dance. This is said to be for matchmaking purposes between the men and women in a few areas, but there’s also a theory that the masks allow the dead who have returned from the spirit world to dance together with the living… From what Fukamachi has told us, it’s definitely the latter in this village.”

Lightly flicking at the angled fox mask on his head, Takatsuki looked at Naoya.

“And I believe that in this village, the returning dead are considered a danger to the living. In particular…to children.”

After the first Obon dance was over, the adults always, without fail, chased the children away.

Whether it was the dead or their overseeing mountain god who took the children, the villagers believed that the children should not be allowed to participate in the second Obon dance.

“Although, I think the second, secret Obon dance in this village was just a formality. They simply switch out the lanterns. They might have pretended to beat the drums, or maybe the adults danced a little by themselves. But I doubt they actually played the drums. If they had, everyone would have heard the sound in the

middle of the night, and it would be strange that we don't hear them at this very moment… The sound of festival drums that Fukamachi heard—well, that's probably something else entirely."

And that second Obon dance, the one for the dead, continued even now, when the first one had already been discontinued.

That was the reason Mr. Nakamura's voice had distorted.

"I really wish I could have interviewed the villagers here better, but it seems it's not to be. Ah well, there's no helping it."

With that, Takatsuki started down the stone steps.

Sasakura called after him.

"Hey. You're going down there?"

"Of course. If we don't, we can't go home."

"…Isn't the festival happening down there the one for the dead that Fukamachi saw?"

"I don't think so," Takatsuki answered plainly, coming to a stop and looking back.

"…Your reasoning?" Sasakura asked.

"The reason is that I can't hear the festival drums."

Holding a hand up to one ear as if searching for the missing sound, Takatsuki slowly shook his head.

"Fukamachi went to the midnight festival because he was lured by the sound of drums. I believe it was the same for Mr. Tooyama. It was probably a turn of fate for both of them… If you aren't invited in by the sound of drums, you can't cross the boundary to the other world."

Takatsuki sounded almost disappointed as he spoke.

Sasakura sighed and turned to Naoya.

"Hey, can you hear the sound of drums?"

"No—I can't hear them."

Naoya shook his head.

There was no sound coming from the village on the other side anymore, either. Their festival seemed to be over as well. All Naoya could hear was the sound of the wind blowing through the mountain trees.

Sasakura sighed again.

"Okay. Fine, then."

That settled, he also started to descend the stairs. Naoya followed.

They met up with Takatsuki, who was waiting partway down,

and the three of them went down the staircase side by side. In such darkness, it was brighter when everyone moved in a line together and lit up the ground at their feet. If there were any villagers in the clearing below, they would plainly be able to see their group's approach, but they couldn't worry about that now.

In the past, the blue lanterns would have continued all the way up to the mountain summit, but that practice was apparently no more. They descended the stone stairs slowly, one step at a time.

"…The car. You don't think anyone slashed the tires or anything, do you?" Sasakura muttered.

When the villagers came to the clearing to set up for the festival, they would have seen the parked car. Given the near-hostile looks people had sent their way from the fields and rice paddies, it was no wonder Sasakura was worried.

Takatsuki shrugged.

"I don't think that's likely. But if that did happen, we'd have to go back to the other village for help. There doesn't seem to be cell service here."

"What? Don't tell me we're going to climb up and down these stairs again?!" Naoya said, and Takatsuki laughed.

"It would be good exercise, wouldn't it?"

"No, that's a bit much… I'd worry about how sore my muscles will be tomorrow."

It was then—

Halfway down the steps, Naoya froze in his tracks.

"…Huh?"

He could hear something, he thought.

Takatsuki and Sasakura turned to look at him.

"What's wrong, Fukamachi?"

"Hey, what is it?"

Naoya put the hand that wasn't holding the flashlight to his ear.

The wind was blowing. On either side of the staircase, the rustling of the mountain trees was loud.

But within that rustling, Naoya couldn't help but feel as though there was something else mixed in—the sound of human voices whispering.

The voices were faint, but they were many. It seemed like they

were coming from every direction, as though droves of people were hiding behind the trunks of the trees.

The whispers continued in low, hoarse voices. They were so quiet, it was hard to tell what they were saying.

“Fukamachi…?”

Takatsuki was looking up at Naoya worriedly.

Naoya didn’t answer; he was listening intently to the incessant whispering.

Little by little, sounds that seemed to be words were emerging from the noise.

—ck…he…meback…

—he…back…came…ck…

—ba…me…meback…hecame…hecameback.

“Eh?”

Another noise escaped Naoya.

All of a sudden, as if someone was tuning a radio and found a working station, the whispering voices became crystal clear.

—hecamebackhecamebackhecamebackhecamebackhecame back, he came back!

In that moment, the loud *buh-boom* of a drum rang out.

Naoya flinched in surprise and felt, in the very next second, his foot slipping off the edge of the stone step.

He was falling.

Flinging out an arm instinctively, he felt someone grab on tight.

“Fukamachi!”

Takatsuki’s voice.

At the same time, the overwhelming sensation of falling came over Naoya. It was as if he were being flung into the void. Without so much as a moment to scream, Naoya’s consciousness gave way to darkness.

Someone was shaking him forcefully by the shoulders. Naoya’s eyes opened in surprise.

Both the narrowness of his field of vision and the white fox mask peering in at him from within that field caught him off guard. A scream nearly burst from his throat, but a hand pressed firmly against him, cutting off his cry.

“Quiet. Don’t panic.”

The hushed voice came from the white fox mask. It was Takatsuki’s voice.

Until just moments ago, Naoya was pretty sure Takatsuki had been wearing his mask at an angle on his head, but now it was covering his face.

It wasn’t just the professor’s mask, either; Naoya’s mask was the same. The narrowness of his field of vision was from the mask’s positioning.

The *boom* of a drum startled Naoya once again.

He appeared to have fallen on the ground. Takatsuki was leaning over the top of him, holding the mask against his mouth. Naoya tapped at his hand, and Takatsuki finally moved it away. Sitting up, Naoya looked at his surroundings from the ground.

There were blue lanterns overhead.

Why? he thought, feeling like he might cry.

They were in the clearing—the one where that midnight festival was held.

A wooden stage that hadn’t been there during the day was set up. Two adults stood atop it, beating festival drums. The *boom, boom, buh-boom* of the drums reverberated heavily in the air, making Naoya’s stomach churn.

The clearing was full of people. Some wore *yukata*; others were in Western clothes. There were women in kimono with their obi neatly tied, men in blazoned *hakama*, people in monks’ working outfits and farmers’ clothes. All of them, surrounding the stage in rings two to three people deep, were doing the Obon dance. The only sound was the beating of the drums.

Everyone was wearing some sort of mask. Demon masks, monkey masks, cat masks, round-faced woman masks. Everyone’s faces were hidden. Under the pale, cold light of the blue lanterns, the sight of them all dancing, arms swaying and feet stepping forward, was just like a bad dream.

Tugging on Naoya’s arm, Takatsuki helped him to his feet.

He thrust something into Naoya’s hand.

It was his glasses. The professor had probably put Naoya’s mask over his face while he was unconscious. His glasses had likely gotten in the way, so Takatsuki had removed them.

Naoya stuffed his glasses in his pocket.

Quietly, he asked, “Professor, what in the world is going on? How is this happening…?”

“I don’t know. You were about to fall down the stairs, so I grabbed your arm to stop you, but…I think I probably fell along with you. When I came to, we were both lying here.”

“What about Mr. Sasakura?”

“He’s not here. Kenji is probably still where we were before.”

“Where we were before?”

“—This isn’t the same clearing we saw during the day,” Takatsuki said, pointing subtly at a corner of the clearing.

Sasakura’s car should have been parked there, but it was nowhere to be seen.

“Anyway, it’s odd that we weren’t hurt after falling from that height. I think we’re probably not in the real world at the moment. This is the spirit world—or perhaps a liminal space between the spirit world and reality.”

Oh, Naoya thought, covering his masked face with his hands.

He remembered the whispers he had heard earlier while climbing down the stone steps.

—He came back.

The dead, who had let him slip through their clutches once, had been waiting for Naoya’s return.

This time, they would finally make him one of their own.

“Don’t give up hope, Fukamachi.”

Takatsuki grabbed Naoya by the shoulders.

“I said I would keep you safe if anything happens, didn’t I? We’re going back. To the world of the living.”

“…But how…?”

“First, we need to get away from this clearing before any of the dead notice us.”

“Which way should we go? To the village? Or up the mountain?”

“The mountain…doesn’t seem like a good idea. Let’s run to the village for now and wait until morning—”

With a start, Takatsuki turned to look at the circle of dancers.

At some point, the circle had begun to break up.

They could see masked dead slowly approaching. Those who were still around the stage crooked their heads at impossible angles to stare fixedly at Naoya and Takatsuki.

“—This is bad. They know we’re here.”

Behind his white fox mask, Takatsuki clicked his tongue.

Grabbing Naoya’s hand, he broke into a run.

The shuffling crowd swarming toward them stretched out their arms like zombies. Takatsuki made for the clearing exit, dodging their grasping hands, but found that route already blocked by a row of the deceased.

Clicking his tongue again, Takatsuki veered off diagonally toward the direction where the mass of dead people was thinner —toward the forest spread out at the foot of the mountain.

But just then, someone grabbed hard onto the hem of Naoya’s T-shirt.

He looked around to see a child in a *yukata* and cat mask clutching at his clothes. The child’s small hands gripped the fabric of his shirt as hard as they could, bunching it up in their grasp.

Startled, Naoya shook the child off and, at the same moment, felt Takatsuki’s hand leave his.

“—P-Professor!”

“Fukamachi!”

In the blink of an eye, Naoya was surrounded by the dead.

Someone grabbed his shoulder from behind. Fingers as cold and hard as ice dug mercilessly into the flesh of his upper arm. He knocked them away frantically, but then someone was clutching at his arm from the other side. Screaming, Naoya shoved them away, too. Everywhere he looked, there were masked faces. *Tengu* masks. Demoness masks. Masks like the faces of old men and women. Naoya felt like he had seen this in a nightmare once. Maybe he was dreaming again. He wanted to be dreaming. But then someone grabbed his ankle and tugged, and the pain he felt upon crashing to the ground was real. Racked with despair, Naoya felt tears beginning to well up in his eyes.

“Fukamachi!”

He heard Takatsuki’s voice.

Instinctively, Naoya reached his right arm out in that direction.

A strong hand grabbed onto his.

In one great pull, Naoya was heaved to his feet.

He began running again, pulled along with just as much force. Holding Naoya’s hand in his own, Takatsuki finally broke through the throng of the dead and fled into the forest.

The forest was the boundary between this village and its neighbor. They had been told there was no path, but if they could just get through it, they would end up in the other town. The one full of those friendly, breathing, living people.

The forest at night, however, was unsparingly dark. The rows of trees stood tall, their reaching branches and leaves blocking out almost all the light from the stars. Their flashlights were long since lost. In darkness so absolute it should have made every step a peril, Takatsuki ran along at a considerable speed, undaunted.

The professor's eyes weren't like those of an ordinary person, so perhaps he could see even in the inky blackness. He dodged skillfully between the trees, which Naoya could only make out by the depth of their shadowy forms, moving so quickly through the untracked woods that Naoya almost felt like he was running on air.

He could sense their pursuers behind him. What would happen if they caught up? Just the thought was terrifying enough to nearly freeze his heart and lungs in his chest. But every time Naoya's legs started to falter, a strong hand pulled him forward as if to say, "Don't stop. Don't give up."

Relying solely on the feeling of that hand in his, Naoya urged his exhausted legs to keep moving.

He squinted into the darkness desperately, hoping to see any light from the neighboring village beyond the trees. It was so dark that he thought even the faintest light would be noticeable. The light of a house, even a streetlight would do. The merest twinkle of light could become a ray of hope.

It was then—

—a haze of white light appeared in the darkness.

Takatsuki gripped Naoya's hand even tighter. Without a word, he charged toward the light, which was growing too bright for Naoya, accustomed to the dark, to look at. Without thinking, he closed his eyes—

—When he opened them again, Naoya was in the kitchen.

Huh? he thought.

At first, he couldn't make sense of it. He had just been running through the forest a moment ago, after all. Now there were

gleaming fluorescent lights. Cupboards stacked high with piles of plates and bowls. The microwave, the refrigerator. What was going on? Had it all just been a dream?

The microwave beeped, and Naoya's mother took a plate out of it. The sight of her shocked him for a moment, but then he realized there was no reason to be surprised. This was his parents' kitchen. It was only natural for his mother to be there.

"Naoya, you're in the way; could you move, please? And dry your hair properly."

He stepped to the side as his mother had asked. Seeing water drip from his wet bangs, he remembered that he had just gotten out of the bath. *Oh, that's right*, he thought. He was thirsty, so he had come to get something to drink. He took a bottle of barley tea from the refrigerator. His mother reached in from the side and grabbed a can of beer, which she took to the dining table along with the meal she had reheated.

Naoya's father, having come home from working overtime once again, was sitting at the table.

"Oh, I forgot to mention," his father said, turning on the television. "**I'm leaving for a business trip tomorrow.**"

His voice distorted. Naoya frowned and covered his ears.

Lately, his father had been lying a lot. What he said were business trips were just him leaving the house. Going off both his father's and his mother's behavior, Naoya was able to guess somehow. His father was having an affair.

"…Liar."

That word tumbled unintentionally from his lips as he passed behind his father, a cup of barley tea in hand.

In that moment, he felt two piercing stares fall upon him.

Turning around with a jolt, Naoya saw his parents looking at him.

His father's face was pale and stiff. His mother's eyes were so wide, they seemed about to pop out of her head.

Seeing the animosity burning in their gazes, Naoya realized just then what he had done.

The cup of tea slipped from his hand. The glass hit the floor and shattered with a shrill noise.

No one moved, though. Everyone was still.

The atmosphere between Naoya's parents had already been

quite strained for some time. Even what appeared to be normal conversations on the surface were loaded with an inescapable tension.

His mother had long since found out about her husband's unfaithfulness. His father, too, knew that his wife was aware of it. And yet they both continued pretending not to notice or know anything.

In doing so, they were trying, somehow, to maintain their everyday lives, treading on thin ice.

Most likely, they weren't doing it for themselves, but for their family.

They were doing it for none other than their son, Naoya, who was still in middle school.

But with a single word—*liar*—Naoya had rendered all their efforts useless.

Because by that point, both of his parents knew that Naoya's ears could tell when someone was lying.

If he said something was a lie, that was as good as indisputable proof that whoever said it wasn't telling the truth. Turning a blind eye was no longer a valid excuse. The truth was absolute.

Of course, Naoya's cheating father was the one at fault. And his mother, who had noticed but done nothing about it, wasn't without blame herself. Naoya found it extremely unreasonable that he was being made the target of their anger.

And yet, at the same time, he thought—

—maybe, if his ears hadn't been like this, if he hadn't had the ability to tell when people were lying, if he had just been normal —

—perhaps his parents wouldn't ever have glared at him like that.

—Naoya's head tipped forward for a moment, and he came to.

He couldn't believe it. He was running at full speed, and just now, it felt as though he had almost nodded off to sleep.

He was in a forest. This wasn't his parents' house. At that second, he and Takatsuki were trying to get away from a horde of dead people.

Maybe it was because they were sprinting through the dark

without even knowing which way they were going. The scenery in front of Naoya's eyes didn't seem real at all. Perhaps that had thrown his brain for a loop momentarily. Why else, at a time like this, would he be remembering something that happened in middle school? The hazy white light from before had disappeared. Either that, or his seeing the light had itself been a dream.

Takatsuki, still holding tight to Naoya's hand, ran deeper and deeper into the forest. They had yet to outrun their pursuers. They had to get away. They had to get away. They had to get away.

But then Naoya's foot got caught on a protruding tree root or something, and his body lurched forward.

Instead of his body hitting the ground, his consciousness once again left him for somewhere else.

—All at once, Naoya found himself in an elementary school classroom.

Huh? he thought.

Unmoored, he looked around. The handwriting assignments on the walls had the words "Grade 5, Class 1" written before every name. Of course, this was Grade 5, Class 1's homeroom. It was lunchtime. School rules dictated that they push their desks together into several groups to eat. When his food was served to him, Naoya put his hands together in thanks for the meal, thinking it was odd. Hadn't he just been running through the woods? Or had that just been a dream?

"Hey, doesn't this dish have shrimp in it?"

A girl in the group next to his spoke up, her tone anxious.

The girl had only just moved to the area the week prior. She had big, round eyes and a sweet face.

"I'm allergic to shrimp. I could die if I eat it."

The word *die* sent the class into an uproar. Their teacher stood up hurriedly and took the plate from the girl's hands.

The other girls in her group voiced their sympathies.

"Mai, you have an allergy? That's awful."

"Allergies are rough, huh? My cousin has one, too, and it seems like she's always having a hard time with it."

The girl, Mai, nodded meekly, hunching her shoulders. Then,

in a horribly distorted voice, she continued:

“That’s right. It’s not just shrimp. I’m really allergic to peanuts. And soba, too. So I get really nervous every time I eat away from home. If it’s food my mama didn’t cook, I don’t know what’s in it. It makes me so anxious all the time.”

“You have that many allergies? You poor thing!”

“Teacher, I think we should tell the cafeteria about the foods Mai can’t eat!”

Calls of support came from around the room. Mai thanked everyone quietly, tears in her eyes.

“Thank you. Everyone is so nice. I’m so glad I moved here.”

While the other kids all gathered around Mai and exchanged kind words with her, Naoya sat alone frowning with his hands over his ears.

He wondered why this girl lied so much.

Yes—Mai lied very, *very* often.

On another morning, she had come into the classroom with tears in her eyes.

The others had run up to her, asking what was wrong. She said she had seen an abandoned kitten in a box. The box had been floating down the nearby river. She said she had wanted to save the kitten but couldn’t, and the critter had died because of her, and what on earth should she do? Everyone took turns soothing the weeping Mai, telling her it wasn’t her fault, that she was too kindhearted.

No one except Naoya was aware that such a kitten didn’t exist.

Another day, following the report of a celebrity dying by suicide, everyone comforted Mai, who had told them about the relative of hers who had died by suicide some time ago. Of course, that relative didn’t exist, either.

Naoya couldn’t help but wonder.

He genuinely did not understand.

And so one day, when he found himself alone with Mai in the front hallway after school, he asked her: “Hey…why do you lie all the time?”

As Mai went to take her shoes out of her shoe cubby, her hand twitched slightly.

She looked up at him, smiling awkwardly.

Speaking exactly as though she was admonishing a child for

getting a bad grade, she said, “What are you talking about? **I don’t lie.** ”

“You do. You just did.”

Pointing at her, Naoya went on.

“I don’t really get it. Why do you always try to get people to feel bad for you? Do you get anything good out of it?”

Naoya asked because he truly did not understand.

But in that moment, Mai’s expression hardened.

Glaring at Naoya with a look of loathing he had never seen her wear in class, Mai turned and stormed out of the building without a word.

What was that all about? Naoya wondered as he walked outside as well, ready to go home.

As soon as he stepped out the door, he felt something hit him hard on the forehead.

He pressed his hand to it and felt, along with a jolt of pain, the feeling of something slippery on his fingertips.

Bright-red blood fell to the ground like drops of rain at his feet.

Near that was a bloody rock. Someone had thrown it right at him.

Naoya looked in the direction he thought the rock had flown from, but there was no one there.

Trembling at the blood dripping down his forehead, Naoya ran to the school nurse’s office. The nurse leaped to her feet the moment she saw his face. She tried to stop the bleeding with gauze but ultimately took Naoya to the hospital in her own car. He needed three stitches.

The next day, when Naoya got to school, the atmosphere in class was strange.

The look in everyone’s eyes as they took in the gauze on Naoya’s forehead was curiously cold.

Later, he learned that Mai had gone around spreading a story as soon as she had arrived in class.

—I saw something after school yesterday. It might be a little hard to believe, though.

—Fukamachi hit himself on the head with a rock. He hurt himself on purpose.

—I don’t know why he would do something like that. But what if —

—What if he thought that everyone would be nice to him if he was hurt?

Naoya hadn't understood why all his classmates had believed her.

But everyone was aware that Naoya had been acting oddly since the year before.

Something would happen, and his hands would fly to his ears, and he would look upset, or he'd say he felt unwell and collapse. Or he'd turn right around and declare that someone was a liar.

Now he understood.

He, the classroom nuisance, had never stood a chance against poor, kind, commendable Mai.

Even if all her popularity was built on lies, the other kids didn't know that.

Naoya was the liar. Mai was everyone's friend.

Things continued like that until Mai moved away again at the end of the semester—and in that time, Naoya lost everyone he had called a friend.

—Again, Naoya's head rocked forward.

At the same time, he felt a burst of pain shoot through his forehead.

He was in the forest again. Was it possible to dream while running? He didn't know. But he definitely felt as though he had just been dreaming. He was sprinting through the dark woods with Takatsuki, but for what seemed like only a moment, he had lost consciousness.

Still running, Naoya touched the ache on his forehead with his left hand. The demon mask he had been wearing had been lost somewhere along the way. The fingers he touched directly to the skin of his forehead felt something slippery. He was bleeding. Shocked as blood trickled into one of his eyes, Naoya shouted without thinking. What was going on? Had he hit a tree while running in his sleep or something?

He remembered being injured in that location before, though.

When he was in elementary school, someone had thrown a rock at him.

There was probably still a faint scar from the stitches. But

there was no way that injury would be bleeding now.

"P…Professor."

Something was wrong.

Something very, *very* wrong was happening, Naoya felt.

"Professor, um—"

Still clutching Naoya's hand, Takatsuki ran deeper and deeper into the forest. As if he hadn't even heard Naoya calling out to him, he made no reply. There wasn't time for that now.

They had to get away from the dead who were chasing them.

And yet, still—something was wrong.

Rather, *everything* was wrong.

No matter how far they ran, they never got anywhere in the darkness of the woods. Despite seeming completely unreal, Naoya got the sense that he had seen this exact view before. Takatsuki's unturning back. Where had he seen it? He couldn't remember.

…But then, was this really even Takatsuki at all?

That question came unbidden into Naoya's mind. A horrible feeling—like icy fingers brushing against the inside of his ribs—spread through him.

He stared at Takatsuki's back. Naoya thought it was Takatsuki. He couldn't see his face like this, though, and it was so dark, he could barely see the back of the man's head. But it had to be Takatsuki. After all, who else would reach out to save him in such a situation? He was sure it was Takatsuki.

Aware that his confidence was gradually failing him, Naoya looked at Takatsuki's hand, clasped tightly in his as they ran.

That was when it hit him—a wicked sense of incongruity.

Why was Takatsuki's hand so cold when they were running so hard?

And then—

—he heard it. A voice.

"…Fukamachi, no! Stop!"

It was coming from behind him.

"Don't go any farther down that hill, Fukamachi!"

—Hill?

What was the voice talking about?

They were in the middle of a forest. The terrain was a bit uneven, but there weren't any—

Just as he thought that, Naoya realized for the first time that the ground beneath his feet was slanted.

It was a fairly steep downward slope. Naoya almost tripped, but Takatsuki, running ahead of him, helped him regain his footing.

…No, that wasn't right.

The voice he had heard from behind him just moments ago—it had sounded like Takatsuki's voice.

But in that case, who was the person in front of him?

"W-wait! Please stop!" Naoya yelled, digging his heels into the ground.

The man kept running, trying to pull Naoya along with him, but Naoya forced them to a halt.

"Could you look at me, please?"

The man, hand still in Naoya's, turned to look at him.

Naoya could tell the man was still wearing his white fox mask, even in the dark. The difference in their heights, with the other man looking down at him, felt like what he was used to.

"Professor," Naoya said, pleading. "You are Professor Takatsuki…aren't you?"

"—Of course I am."

The man's voice distorted wildly.

Naoya's eyes opened wide.

He flung the man's hand away from his with all his strength. Trying to back away, he stumbled over a tree root or something and fell backward, flat onto his rear end.

In the same moment, the figure who had been standing right there in front of him disappeared as if melting into the darkness.

The surrounding blackness grew thicker. Before, Naoya had been able to see the vague outlines of the trees, at least, but now he could see nothing. In a total panic, he groped desperately around but felt only the hard, rough, mysteriously sand-covered ground. He thought he was in the forest, but the grass and trees had disappeared, too. Naoya had no idea what was happening.

"Professor!" he shouted into the darkness. "Professor Takatsuki, where are you?!"

There was no reply.

His ears were met with utter silence.

Feeling as though he would go insane if he just kept sitting

there, Naoya got up. He began walking blindly in the direction he thought he had come from. He'd gone down a hill, so surely, he could go back by going up a hill. He hoped as much, but when he realized the ground underfoot had returned to being entirely flat, he nearly burst into tears.

No matter how much he walked, he couldn't see anything.

There was no one around.

His forehead hurt. Lifting his hand to it without thinking, Naoya accidentally brushed the wound directly with his fingers and let out a small cry. He fumbled around in his pocket for his handkerchief and pressed it gently to the injury. He felt the cloth dampening almost immediately. Naoya stopped walking, telling himself it was because he was in pain. The impenetrable darkness spread out before him was so frightening. He didn't know if it was safe to keep going. What was he supposed to do if something worse happened while he was stumbling his way through the dark?

Again, he called out into the emptiness.

"Professor? Mr. Sasakura? Where are you?"

No one answered.

Naoya could feel his face twisting into an expression that was part laughter, part tears. His knees shook.

He couldn't take another step forward. He couldn't find the strength within to keep walking. The darkness was surely endless. He wouldn't get anywhere continuing like this. There was nowhere to get to.

After all—he'd made a mistake.

"You must not be mistaken in whose hand you take…not ever."

Sae had warned him.

Naoya had failed the test. He had reached for the wrong hand, and as punishment, he would be imprisoned in this darkness for eternity. All alone.

—You will be lonely.

That curse was well and truly in effect now.

That's it, then, Naoya thought. If that was how things were, what was the point in fighting it?

It would only be an exercise in futility.

And besides, in the event that he did return to the real world, he was sure his ears would be the same, which meant that even if

he went back, he would just end up alone anyway. The things Naoya had seen before weren't just dreams. They were his actual memories—things that had all genuinely happened. For destroying the family dynamics his parents had tried to hold up with lies, he was hated. For exposing the dishonesty of a liar, he himself was treated as a liar. And those weren't the only bad memories he had; there were countless more. There were people who lied with a smile on their faces like it was nothing. Voices that spoke of friendship and murmured affection sounded so discordant that he couldn't stand to listen to them. There were people who surveyed him with disgust. Everyone lied as easily as they breathed, but they also abhorred having their lies exposed. The same things were bound to happen again and again in the future. It was too late for anything to change. There was no going back to the way things once were.

Wasn't it better to just be alone in the darkness, then?

Wouldn't that mean he wouldn't have to hurt anymore?

At the very least, if he stayed where he was, no one would hate him, be creeped out by him, or throw stones at him anymore.

He'd had enough.

Crouching down in the dark, Naoya hugged his knees. Since he couldn't see anything anyway, he closed his eyes. If he simply melted into the darkness, so what?

But then—

—behind his closed eyelids, golden sparks erupted with a *pop*.

A sparkler.

"See, like this, you can create much bigger sparks."

Their humble fireworks display after the Night of One Hundred Horrors ritual.

Takatsuki, smiling proudly as he forced the ends of their sparklers together. Ruiko and Yui crying out with laughter.

Pop, pop, pop! More golden sparks erupted.

"Aw, come on. This is what people are supposed to do for each other."

Nanba, scratching bashfully at the tip of his nose.

Pop! Pop! Pop! More sparks burst, dazzling in the darkness.

"It's okay to ask for help when you need it. Don't forget that—understood?"

Those gentle words spoken as a large hand patted Naoya's

head.

The sound of water boiling. Someone else in his studio apartment, making him a hot meal.

There were more popping noises, yet more scattered golden flashes of light.

“If something bad happens, call me. Doesn’t matter what time.”

A business card, casually given, with a handwritten number on the back.

Pop! Pop, pop! The sparklers in Naoya’s memory kept bursting.

Each time, a gleaming fragment of recollection rose up from within his mind.

Slowly, warmth seeped in through the spaces of his closed eyes.

“I’m saying you need to find lots of things you love. Something you like, something that’s fun, something you can think of as precious—we have to have a lot of those things. They are what keep us connected to this world…”

A voice, clear and unmuddied.

Oh, Naoya thought.

Without his realizing it, a plethora of such things had already accumulated within him.

He wasn’t lonely.

He wasn’t lonely at all.

There were so many shining, golden memories in his heart.

Naoya opened his eyes. In the pitch-black darkness, it made no difference. Nevertheless, he stood up. Unsteadily, he began to walk.

As he stepped forward, he called out to the darkness once again.

“Professor.”

He has to be here, he thought.

After all, he had only just heard his voice.

Naoya was certain that Takatsuki was there, too, alone in the dark.

Sure that he was right, Naoya started to shout.

“Professor Takatsuki! Where are you, Professor?!”

“…Fukamachi?”

It was Takatsuki’s voice.

Overwhelmed, Naoya made a strangled cry and broke into a

run toward that voice.

The ground beneath his feet felt like it was falling away, as though he were running in a dream, but Naoya pushed forward desperately.

“—Professor!”

Slightly further ahead, he saw Takatsuki slumped over on his knees. He was looking at Naoya, astonished.

Takatsuki’s left cheek was somewhat swollen, like someone had hit him. His lip was cut and bleeding.

Barreling up to him, Naoya grabbed the other man by the shoulders.

“Professor! Professor, are you okay?!”

“What about you, Fukamachi?! How did you get that injury?!”

Takatsuki’s eyes had widened at the wound on Naoya’s forehead.

Naoya shook his head.

“This is nothing. But, Professor, your face… Did the dead do this to you?”

“No, this was my father…”

“Your father?”

“—Never mind. It was like I was having some sort of weird hallucination.”

Takatsuki lightly touched a finger to his split lip.

“With every vision I saw, it was like some past injury reappeared…”

Suddenly, Takatsuki’s face contorted, and he bowed his head. He was breathing heavily, as though he was enduring intense pain.

Alarmed, Naoya put a hand to Takatsuki’s back. The professor let out a small shriek, and Naoya felt something sticky cling to his fingers.

He looked at Takatsuki’s back, horrified to find two massive blood stains spreading through his shirt.

The stains filled in gradually as if someone were drawing two deep-red wings right before Naoya’s eyes. Giving Takatsuki a simple “sorry” and not waiting for a response, Naoya lifted up the back of his shirt.

Takatsuki had an old scar on his back.

Naoya had seen it once before—a scar where the skin had

been peeled from his back, like someone had clipped his wings.

That scar was bleeding. It looked fresh, as if it had only just been inflicted.

“Professor, this is… Are you okay?!”

“…Sorry, there’s no point in lying to you, so I’ll just say it… It hurts. A lot.”

Hunched over, Takatsuki spoke in a hoarse voice. Shaken, Naoya stared down at him. He knew Takatsuki needed medical attention, but he didn’t know what to do.

“I know it’s bleeding a lot,” Takatsuki said. “But…it’s not life-threatening. It wasn’t at the time, either.”

“A-at the time?”

“Besides, these wounds probably aren’t real. I think they’re illusions, too.”

Putting both hands on the ground, Takatsuki forced himself upright. Naoya could see his arms shaking. He was in pain. Of course he was, with wounds that big.

“What makes you think they aren’t real?”

“I mean, Fukamachi, don’t you think it’s strange…? It’s this dark, but you and I? We can see each other.”

“…Oh.”

The moment he said that, it made sense.

Despite the total lack of light, despite not being able to see a single thing in the surrounding darkness, Naoya could see Takatsuki, and Takatsuki could see him.

“It’s like we’re in a dream. Not that I’ve had a lot of dreams where I can feel pain… But this probably isn’t real. Although, I also get the feeling that if we die here, it’ll stick, so we have to be careful.”

“Please don’t say such ominous things. Anyway—why are we even here to begin with?”

“I don’t know. You started running really quickly all of a sudden, so I rushed after you. Somewhere along the way, the ground became a really steep slope, but you just kept thundering down it, and I didn’t know what to do.”

“…I wonder what would have happened if I hadn’t stopped.”

“In folklore, a hill is one way of symbolizing a boundary between the real world and the spirit world. Think of Yomotsu Hirasaka.”

“Please don’t say terrifying things, either.”

“I don’t think I’m wrong, necessarily… After all, we were told there’s an entrance to the underworld beneath the mountain.”

A profound chill swept through Naoya at those words.

“L-let’s go back right now! Back to the world of the living!”

“Yeah, you’re right… Sorry, could you help me stand up?”

With Naoya supporting some of Takatsuki’s weight, the two of them got to their feet. That movement alone made Takatsuki’s face twist in pain.

“Professor, can you walk?”

“I have to, or we can’t go home. You can’t carry me, right?”

“I…I will be able to, someday! I decided I’m going to get stronger! That way, I’ll be able to carry you by myself, even if you faint!”

“I wonder how long that will take, though… I mean, there’s the height difference, for one thing.”

“Well, there’s nothing I can do about that, so why bring it up?!”

Carefully avoiding touching Takatsuki’s back, Naoya somehow managed to get them moving.

But just as before, other than the professor, he couldn’t see anything. Once more walking through the darkness, Naoya began to get anxious again.

“…I know I said ‘Let’s go back,’ but I don’t even know which way to go.”

“Ah, about that—try listening very, very carefully.”

“Huh?”

“Humor me.”

Putting a hand to his ear, Takatsuki smiled a little.

Following his lead, Naoya lifted a hand to his ear, too.

At first, he didn’t hear anything.

But then, before long—

“—Oh.”

—he could hear it.

Sasakura’s voice.

He was calling to them. Looking for them.

“Ahh, I’m so glad KenKen came with us after all… We can get out of here safe and sound.”

“That’s right.”

One step at a time, the two of them walked toward that voice.

The path, which had seemed completely flat, quickly turned into an uphill slope.

“Listen, Fukamachi,” Takatsuki said, grimacing through his pain. “You must not, under any circumstances, look back while climbing this hill. Never, in all of time and space, has there ever been a case of someone looking back from the hill leading out of the underworld that ended well.”

“I understand.”

Yes, Naoya knew.

The voice calling for them was coming from the top of the hill.

That voice belonged to the person keeping himself and Takatsuki tethered to the real world.

Eventually, the ground evened out again, and the two of them found themselves back at the festival.

They were at the bottom of the stone stairs. The stalls that had been set up when Naoya had wandered in the festival years before were no longer there.

Instead, at the base of the steps, a crowd of the dead moved to encircle them.

“…Right, I suppose they can’t let us go back to the land of the living that easily,” Takatsuki muttered.

They could hear Sasakura’s voice coming from the top of the stairs. If they could just climb the staircase, there was a chance they could go back to reality, but such a feat wasn’t looking so simple with all the dead people blocking their path.

Naoya was determined to do it anyway. They were going to get up those stairs, even if he had to fight their way out.

At that moment, two figures stepped out from the crowd of deceased—one in a fire-breathing jester mask, and the other in a round-faced woman mask.

“—Naoya.”

The jester spoke in his grandfather’s voice.

Which meant, possibly, that the round-faced woman figure at his side was Naoya’s grandmother.

“Naoya. Why did you come back to this village? I told you before that you mustn’t come here anymore.”

“I’m sorry, Grandpa,” Naoya said to the fire-breathing jester mask. “But I wanted to know. I wanted to know what that festival was—I wanted to know what was happening here in this village.”

“Now that you know, are you satisfied?”

“…I’m not sure. But I think it’s better than not knowing.”

The jester and the woman exchanged glances.

Then the round-faced woman spoke.

“Nao…I wish it weren’t so, but we cannot send you back to where you came from like this.”

It was his grandmother’s voice, just as he had suspected.

“This festival is for the dead. If the living come here, they must pay a price to the mountain god.”

“…Again?”

“That’s the rule.”

Naoya wondered what it would be this time. What sort of curse would be cast upon him?

As he recalled, there had been three sweets to choose from when he was young.

The candy apple made you lose the ability to walk.

The candied plum made you lose your words.

The amber-colored lollipop made you lonely.

Naoya had chosen the lollipop once already. He didn’t expect they would allow him to pick it again. If so, what was worse? To not walk, or to not speak?

What his grandmother said next, however, was none of those things.

“The mountain god commands it—you must leave half of your lifespan behind.”

“…What…?”

For a moment, Naoya didn’t understand what he was hearing and stared, befuddled, at the round-faced woman mask.

His grandmother repeated herself.

“Half of your lifespan. That is what the mountain god demands.”

“Wh-why…?! That’s not what it was last time!”

But Naoya’s grandmother had stopped answering and was simply staring at him from behind her mask.

She was telling him to give up half of his life.

Just then, Takatsuki staggered forward in front of Naoya.

“‘Half of your lifespan’ is rather vague phrasing. How would that be calculated? After all, we don’t know how old we’ll be when we die.”

Neither of the masked figures responded.

Takatsuki looked at them for a little while, then back at Naoya over his shoulder.

“Fukamachi, how long do you plan to live?”

“H-how would I know that?! Don’t tell me you’re seriously trying to figure out an answer?!”

“Let’s see, the average life expectancy of Japanese men is eighty-one years, and I’m thirty-five now, so I have forty-six years of life left. Half of that is twenty-three. Fukamachi, you’re twenty at the moment, which means you have sixty-one years left, and half of that is thirty years and six months. Adding those up, you get fifty-three and a half years.”

For a moment, Naoya thought he had missed a step in the calculation. He looked at Takatsuki, expression sober.

“…Wait a minute,” Naoya whispered, glaring at the professor’s bloodstained back. “Why did you add them together?”

Takatsuki ignored him and continued standing so that Naoya was blocked from view as he addressed the round-faced woman.

“So why don’t we call it fifty-three years, and you can take it all from me?”

The two masked figures looked at each other again.

Naoya stepped out hurriedly from behind Takatsuki.

“What the hell are you talking about?! That equation doesn’t balance out! You only have forty-six years left! Isn’t the cost a bit more than you can afford?!”

“Well, I’m sure they’ll figure out some way to settle the difference between the average lifespan and my actual one. You know, my grandfather should be turning ninety this year, but he still seems to be going strong.”

“That’s not the point—”

Naoya started to argue, but Takatsuki slapped a hand over his mouth.

“Fukamachi, be quiet.”

Peering into Naoya’s face, Takatsuki’s eyes were the most serious Naoya had ever seen them.

“Don’t say anything else… You mustn’t speak carelessly when making a contract with a *kami*.”

That’s exactly why! Naoya thought. *Why should you have to pay the price all by yourself?*

With his mouth covered, he could only plead through his eyes.

In response to his efforts, the corners of Takatsuki's eyes suddenly turned up in his usual smile.

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it? Because I'm your teacher."

That's no excuse. What sort of reasoning is that?

Don't think you can just wave all this away with some self-sacrifice. If you're not careful, you could die the moment they take those years from you.

They could hear Sasakura's voice calling from the top of the stone steps. "Akira," he yelled again and again. Turning toward the voice, Takatsuki smiled a little embarrassedly. Seeing that expression, Naoya felt his chest ache. Takatsuki had to go back to whom that voice was coming from. And it wasn't just Sasakura—if anything was to happen to Takatsuki, Wataru would be beside himself, too. So would Ruiko and Yui.

You have so many people waiting for you there. Do you not realize that?

"…Mmmm, you know, I feel like you're saying a whole lot with your eyes, but… Listen, Fukamachi."

This time, the wry smile spread across Takatsuki's whole face.

"This is how it should be—because I'm the one who dragged you into this."

Tooyama had said something similar once.

That's not true, Naoya thought, glaring at Takatsuki, who stooped down a little to look him in the eye.

"I have to take responsibility. I'm the one who suggested we come here. I invited you. I'm the one who put you in danger. So…I alone should be the one to pay the price."

"…!"

Naoya grabbed at the hand over his mouth, trying somehow to throw it off, but Takatsuki wouldn't let him. Childishly using his height, strength, and adeptness to his advantage, he blocked every one of Naoya's movements.

"And anyway…the truth is, I actually sort of predicted this might happen."

Naoya's eyes widened at Takatsuki's words.

"Back when you told me what Kazuya said about being 'taken by the mountain god.' That night, in bed, I thought about it long and hard. I wondered whether I shouldn't just send you back to

Tokyo. But I figured you would get pretty angry again—and besides, I really wanted to see into the spirit world. I wanted to know if such a thing genuinely existed. And so I concluded that since you were already twenty years old, it should be okay, and I chose to bring you along. I prioritized my own desires over your safety. It was unconscionable… So, you see, this really is my fault, right?"

"…!"

Unable to speak, Naoya screamed at him through his gaze.

What are you saying?! Are you kidding me, you damn idiot?!

Naoya was the one the mountain god had taken. When the dead had called out as they were climbing down that stone staircase, it ought to have been Naoya alone that they'd beckoned. And yet, as Naoya started falling down the steps, Takatsuki had reached a hand out to him. That was why he ended up here.

By all rights, Naoya should have found himself at this festival for the dead all by himself.

And besides, Takatsuki would never have come to this village if Naoya hadn't told him about what happened here in the first place.

Everything began with one report Naoya wrote about something he had gone through in the past.

If anyone had been dragged into this mess, it was Takatsuki, and Naoya had been the one to do it.

Despite that, Takatsuki was bound and determined to shoulder the entire burden alone. And if that meant dying alone, he thought that was just par for the course.

You liar, Naoya thought. *I'm not letting you get away with that. I'll never forgive you for it.*

Once, Takatsuki had even said he wasn't going to let go of Naoya, and yet—

And yet he had the nerve to try giving up his own life as if it were nothing?

"…Ahh, I'm starting to feel like I should cover your eyes, too, not just your mouth. Maybe I should just knock you unconscious."

Dangerous words started slipping from Takatsuki's mouth. For a guy with such a sweet face, he was surprisingly willing to resort to violence to get his way.

Not wanting to just stand there and let the professor knock him out, Naoya started to struggle against his hold harder than ever. But just as a genuinely dangerous light began to form in Takatsuki's eyes—

"—Pardon, excuuuse me. Please let me through."

—a leisurely voice, sounding entirely out of place, called out.

Someone was walking toward them, pushing through the rows of the dead.

It was a woman wearing a tree peony–patterned *yukata*. On her face, she wore a mask made to look like a young woman. It was a Noh mask called "*Koomote*," Naoya was fairly sure.

The woman stepped briskly out in front of Naoya and Takatsuki, who stood frozen, mid-struggle with each other.

"Boo," she said, whipping her mask off in a flourish.

It was Sae.

"How…? Miss Sae?!"

"Why are you here?!" Naoya cried. He had torn Takatsuki's hand from his mouth the moment he felt it loosen in shock.

Holding her mask in front of her chest with both hands, Sae squirmed from side to side.

"Well, putting on a mask and dancing sounded, like, *soooo* fun, you know? And, like, I wanted to wear a *yukata*?"

"Stop talking all weird like you're trying to seem younger!"

"Yow. That hurts, glasses boy! You shouldn't talk to a woman like that!"

Sae looked indignant.

Takatsuki grabbed ahold of her hand.

"Miss Sae! How in the world—?"

"Yikes, Professor. You can't just hold my hand out of nowhere like that when it's been so long since we've seen each other. Relationships between men and women move one step at a time, and the first step is a shared diary that we trade back and forth, right? Don't be so impatient."

"This is no time for jokes. Do you have any idea where you are?"

"I came here to save you because I *do*, obviously," Sae said in a low murmur. "Making a deal with a god is tough. Human logic doesn't work on them."

Startled, Takatsuki slackened his grip.

Sae flapped the sleeve of her *yukata* to shake him off and turned to the figures in the fire-breathing jester and round-faced woman masks.

The jester, in Naoya's grandfather's voice, said, "You—you're one of the living, too."

"Yep, I'm alive," Sae declared, waving her sleeves prettily. "Which, I guess, means I have to follow the 'half your lifespan' rule, too, and pay up for the mountain god."

The jester nodded.

"That's right. You must leave half of your lifespan behind."

"That adding-up thing the professor did before—shall we stick with it?"

"…Fine. It applies."

"Okay! But you know, I'm not very good at math… Well, whatever. Then for the three of us together, go ahead and take one or two hundred years from me. Ah, why don't we just round it up to three hundred? How's that?"

Sae smiled brightly. Naoya couldn't believe what he was hearing. Three hundred years? This was a bad time for sloppy bookkeeping.

The jester nodded calmly, however.

"Fine."

As if taking his answer as a signal, the dead opened up a path to the stone staircase.

Sae put her mask on her head at an angle and shoved her way between Naoya and Takatsuki. Reaching out, she used both of her own hands to grab one each of theirs, clasping them tightly.

"Well then, let's go home. Thanks for the hospitality—please excuse us."

After bowing a few times to the jester and the round-faced woman, Sae started walking at a brisk pace. She was quite strong.

"Wait, Miss Sae," Naoya said as she dragged him along. "Three hundred years?! What are you thinking, saying a number like that?! What are you gonna do if you just shrivel up and die?!"

"Geez, you sure say some funny things, glasses boy. I'm not going to shrivel up. My beauty is eternal, like the shine of a diamond."

"Stop messing around!"

"I'm *not* messing around."

Suddenly, Sae turned to look at Naoya. Her eyes were jet-black.

The color of the deep, dark sea where no light could penetrate.

“The kanji that make up the *Yao* in *Yao Bikuni* don’t mean ‘eight hundred’ in the literal sense. They’re a combination of the character for *eight*, which spreads out like an open fan and symbolizes prosperity, and *one hundred*, which means ‘many.’ In other words—eternity.”

“Huh…?”

Naoya’s eyes widened. Takatsuki, too, stared at Sae with his eyes wide.

Shrugging a little, Sae started walking again, pulling them both along by the hand.

Partway up the stone staircase, Takatsuki suddenly gasped and whirled around to face the fire-breathing jester.

“—That’s right! There’s one more question I want to ask you!”

“Come on, Professor, cut it out! Just when I got everything settled all nice and neat for you…”

Sae made to stop him, but Takatsuki interrupted her with a shout.

“Before! Those…those visions! Were they just dreams, or—were they memories of the past?!”

It was a peculiar question.

But the jester looked straight at Takatsuki and nodded once.

In that moment, the expression on Takatsuki’s face was—indescribable. He looked all at once as though he would burst into tears, break into triumphant laughter, or explode in a white-hot rage.

Still, he opened his mouth to speak again.

At that exact second, however, the ground beneath their feet shifted.

For a moment, Naoya thought it was an earthquake.

But it wasn’t.

It was as though the mountain itself was shifting. A strange oscillating motion spread up Naoya’s body from underneath.

Suddenly, he was hit with a wave of vertigo. His field of vision was turned on its head. Just then, he heard Sae whisper in his ear.

“Professor. Glasses boy. You owe me one—’kay?”

That was the last thing Naoya heard before his consciousness was once more swallowed up in the darkness.

“…Hey! Hey, wake up! Wake up, Fukamachi!”

Someone was yelling.

Naoya’s eyes sprang open.

Sasakura’s face was right there in front of him. It was the same scary face he always wore, except that it was scarier than usual at the moment. There were distinct dark circles under his eyes.

When he saw that Naoya had opened his eyes, he let out a sigh of relief.

“Good, you’re awake. Hey, don’t try too hard to get up. Does anything hurt? Are you nauseous?”

“…No, I’m fine, but… Eh?”

Noticing a blue lantern hanging above Sasakura’s head, Naoya jolted in shock.

Instinctively, he sat up and looked around.

It was morning. Dawn was still breaking, so it didn’t seem like all that much time had passed. There were blue lanterns strung overhead. They were in the festival clearing.

But it wasn’t the same clearing he and Takatsuki had just been in.

There was no wooden stage.

The stage atop which a large drum had been played, surrounded by several rings of dead people, was nowhere in sight.

Instead, there was a wooden pedestal in the center of the clearing. A big, somewhat misshapen drum had been placed on top of it.

There were no signs of the dead anywhere in the area.

In the morning light, there were some blue lanterns that still shone, but it was clear that they were faded and old. Some were stained and moth-eaten, and they were completely bereft of the mysterious air they had possessed in the darkness of the night. Naoya looked to the corner of the clearing and saw, despite the fact that it hadn’t been there last night, that Sasakura’s car was parked where they had left it.

“…Wh-where’s Professor Takatsuki?!”

“I’m right here.”

Not spotting the professor anywhere, Naoya had begun to panic, but a voice called from his other side.

Takatsuki was there, sitting on the ground just like Naoya was,

looking at him with a somewhat tired smile.

“Professor, your injuries?! The wounds on your back need to be treated right away…!”

“Calm down, Fukamachi. They’ve healed already.”

“Huh?”

“The wound on your forehead has, too.”

Takatsuki pointed to Naoya, who touched a hand to his head. He expected to feel a fair amount of blood, but there was no wound there at all. He found nothing more than the faint remnant of a scar left from the stitches he’d received at the hospital all those years ago.

“I’m glad we were both able to come back safely. Apparently, we’d collapsed right here.”

“Seriously, where the hell were you guys…? I searched around here so many times, but I never found you until morning.”

Sasakura, sounding utterly exhausted, heaved a big sigh.

The nightmare started, from Sasakura’s point of view, when Naoya suddenly lost his footing as the three of them were going down the stone steps. Takatsuki had reached out at once to stop him from falling, but unable to keep his balance, he also began to pitch forward.

Just as Sasakura moved to grab the professor’s hand, Takatsuki and Naoya vanished into thin air.

Apparently, Sasakura hadn’t been able to make heads or tails of it. With identical thuds, the flashlights that the two of them had been carrying began tumbling down the stairs. Naoya’s bag and Takatsuki’s backpack were just lying in the middle of the steps. Despite that, they themselves were nowhere to be seen.

It was as though they had just been spirited away.

After that, Sasakura searched for them all night but wasn’t able to find them.

And yet, when morning arrived, there they were, in the corner of the clearing, piled on top of each other, in a spot nowhere near the base of the stairs.

“You know…if I hadn’t found you guys by morning, I was seriously thinking about calling in someone who I *really* don’t want to owe a favor to…!”

Sasakura’s tone was really nasty for some reason. Wondering who it was that the detective was dead set against owing

anything to, Naoya apologized. He had really been worried about them, it seemed.

Naoya reached into his pocket and took out the glasses he had shoved into it the night before. He put them on; the frames were a little bent.

“Oh yeah,” he said, looking at Takatsuki again. “Professor, where’s Miss Sae? Where did she go?”

“I don’t know. She was already gone when I woke up. This is all she left.”

Takatsuki picked up the small Noh mask from the ground by his side.

Sae remained a mystery no matter how many times they crossed paths. She was cheerful and kind—and utterly unknowable.

Naoya stared at the mask.

What would have happened to them if Sae hadn’t shown up?

She had saved them. Both of them.

“…She said she was Yao Bikuni, didn’t she?”

The legend of Yao Bikuni described a woman who was said to have eaten the flesh of a mermaid and stayed young for eight hundred years. But it wasn’t eight hundred years, Sae had said. It was eternity.

She said that was why it didn’t matter how much of her life was taken.

Had the mountain god really taken half of Sae’s lifespan?

The mountain was sitting just as it had been the previous afternoon. Naoya could not forget what he had felt in the very last moments before losing consciousness: a motion that felt like the entire mountain was shifting.

What they had been through that night, Naoya thought, was no dream.

That he and Takatsuki had seen the same thing was proof of that. Plus—there was Sae’s mask.

But then, where was it that they had been?

At that moment, they heard a voice calling from far off.

It was Mr. Nakamura.

He was racing toward them on his scooter, waving one hand.

“Ah, someone who might be able to explain things to some extent is coming.”

Takatsuki stood and brushed the dirt off his clothes. Naoya did the same.

Coming to a stop in front of them, Mr. Nakamura hopped off the scooter and grabbed Naoya by both of his arms—for a moment, at least. Then as though trying to ascertain that all of Naoya was accounted for, he began patting his whole body from head to toe.

“Oh, oh my, Nao, good, you’re safe. You’re safe, I’m so glad. I’m so—”

The old man repeated those words again and again, tears welling up in his eyes, and Naoya, at a loss for words, said nothing.

Takatsuki opened his mouth instead.

“Mr. Nakamura…since you’re so happy that Fukamachi is safe, I dare say you have some idea as to what happened to him last night?”

Sniffling, Mr. Nakamura looked up at Takatsuki, who smiled brightly down at him.

“Last night, Fukamachi and I experienced something incredibly strange and, moreover, dangerous… I don’t suppose you could tell us about that festival of the dead? We won’t let anyone else know. We just want to understand.”

“…You were called to that festival, too?”

“I wasn’t, no. I arrived there attached to Fukamachi.”

“…I’m glad you made it back safely, as well.”

“It was certainly a close call,” Takatsuki said, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Mr. Nakamura finally let go of Naoya and looked up at the blue lanterns decorating the clearing. He stared at the faded blue paper in the morning sun for a while before turning his gaze to the mountain.

Then the old man scratched roughly at his head and plopped down onto the ground with his legs crossed. He took out his lighter and cigarettes and lit one.

“…I told you yesterday that there’s an entrance to the underworld beneath the mountain, didn’t I?”

“Yes. The dead—they really do return to this village, don’t they? During Obon.”

“…Yes,” Mr. Nakamura said. “I’ve never seen them, though.

Most of the villagers haven't. But sometimes, there would be those who said they saw them. They said old women, old men, and children who should have been dead appear from the mountain on the night of the festival and join in the celebration."

Apparently, it had been that way for a long time.

Around Obon in the summer, the dead appeared on this side of the mountain. Such a legend had been passed down for generations. Fearing that, the village on the opposite side of the mountain cut off all contact with this side. Mr. Nakamura and the other villagers believed that the legend had probably said the entrance to the underworld only opened up on this side of the mountain.

And if the dead were going to return, they had to be met with hospitality.

"According to legend, it started as just a regular Obon dance… but children who stayed out late the night of the festival kept going missing. Or often, they would come back, but they wouldn't quite be the same, and they would die. Our ancestors believed this was because they were taken by the mountain god. The mountain god controls the dead. At times, the mountain god might mistake a living person for a dead one and try to take them away. That's why our ancestors set up two different Obon dances."

One for the living, the public one. Red lanterns were hung, as was tradition.

And one for the dead, the secret festival, where blue lanterns became the custom.

The lanterns were changed at a predetermined time. It was decided that children could only attend the red lantern festival.

The blue lantern festival was kept a secret from the children. After all, if they heard about a festival happening, children couldn't help but want to see it, and that was how they would end up being taken. And so the ancestors decided no one would be allowed to learn about the mere existence of the blue lantern festival or the mountain god until they were grown. Their village was small as it was. If they kept losing children, the village's survival would be threatened.

Someone was always chosen to be on duty for the blue lantern festival.

“Festival duty meant it was your turn on the drum. The children would find out about the secret festival if a real drum was played, so a big papier-mâché one was prepared. If you were on duty, you’d stand on the stage and pretend to beat the drum for two or three hours, then you’d be allowed to go home. Sometimes, after someone had their turn standing on top of the stage in the deserted clearing, wearing a mask and pretending to play a drum—sometimes, they would say they saw the dead. They’d say they saw the dead dancing in a circle, two to three people deep, around the stage. Like they were hallucinating, they’d say. They were frightened. After someone was done with festival duty, they’d cleanse their body with salt before going home. To wash away the impurity of the dead, you see.”

But despite everything that was done to keep it a secret from the children, every once in a great while, there would be a child who claimed to have seen the blue lantern festival.

Children like that most often came back with strange hearing. They said it sounded odd when someone told a lie. Other children would suddenly stop talking. Some would lose all strength in their legs and no longer have the ability to walk.

The majority of those children, tormented by the abnormalities in their ears or voices or legs, chose to end their own lives. Not many of them made it to adulthood. Even when they did, they often ended up being called back to the blue lantern festival, and they never returned a second time.

They were taken by the mountain god—their lives, and their souls.

“…That’s why, in this village, even if those children came back here as adults, they were chased away from here without being told about the mountain god. Those who have been called there once are likely to be called again, as if they bear the mountain god’s mark. And if they’re called a second time, there’s usually no hope for them. The dead seem eager to make the living their own.”

Eventually, however, the village reached its limit with continuing to hold both festivals.

The village’s population declined steadily, and it became difficult just to maintain the public festival.

These days, most of the village’s young people left the village

once they were adults. Some went away as early as high school, but even among those who didn't, the majority went to the city for college. After all, they had no interest in taking over the fields and rice paddies. Once they left the village behind, they were no different than outsiders—people to whom the village's secrets could not be revealed.

"That was the case for Midori. She had no sons, and both her daughters lived in the city once they began college. So I doubt she ever told them—about the festival or the mountain god… That's why I couldn't believe it when you said Kazu heard about the mountain god from Midori while she was in the hospital. It's something that shouldn't have been shared outside this place; it's a village secret."

And so, with the population dwindling, a discussion was finally held about the festivals.

A decision to stop holding the red lantern festival was reached quickly.

Talks about the blue lantern festival, however, were rough going. Quite a lot of people wanted to stop doing that festival, too, but if they did, who would appease the returning dead? What if the mountain god became angry?

Ultimately, they chose to simplify the event.

The blue lanterns would continue to be hung as they had before, so that the returning dead could have a place to hold their own festival. Since building a stage was hard work, they decided to set up just a pedestal for the papier-mâché drum, which the person on festival duty would pretend to play. Only for an hour, however. The villagers' strength was declining as well.

"Who knows if that will be kept up even when the village is down to its last resident, but…as long as we're able, we're going to hang the blue lanterns, at least. That's what we decided. I've never seen any of the dead…but I still thought it was important to make such a resolution. To think you went to that festival, Nao—I didn't know. Midori must have kept it a secret from the whole village… You didn't live here, after all."

Mr. Nakamura bowed his head. His body, already so much smaller than it had once been, seemed to shrink even more. He looked like he was apologizing to Naoya.

Believing the legend that the dead would return, the people of

this village had been holding a festival for the dead for many, many years. At first, the living and the dead shared one festival. Later on, separate festivals were held.

Perhaps, Naoya thought, it was that demarcation of the festivals that had exacerbated the blurring between this world and the spirit world.

The villagers hung up blue lanterns and provided a place for the dead to have their own celebration.

And eventually, that festival site gave rise to another world.

In the real world, they made do with pretending to play papier-mâché drums, but the dead in the underworld were not satisfied with that. And so, in their own world, they beat real drums.

Beneath the cold glow of the blue lanterns, the place for the festival of the dead was built practically on top of its position in reality, as if the two worlds were being layered one over the other. The boundary between them was vague, and that sometimes led to children getting lost. Children like Naoya and Tooyama.

But no matter how near to reality the festival site was, it was still a world under the rule of the mountain god. It was a place that led directly to the underworld.

“I see… It all makes sense now,” Takatsuki said. “Thank you for telling me. So then when someone who has participated once before in the festival is called back to it, they are taken straight to the underworld, it would seem. That’s what happened to Fukamachi last night.”

Mr. Nakamura’s eyes almost popped out of his head at Takatsuki’s words. Sasakura, too, looked at Naoya in shock.

Naoya glanced down at his right hand.

The hand that had been taken by a dead person the night before.

Had that steep slope been the path to the underworld?

“Yes, I see. If that’s the case—then I’m convinced.”

At that moment, Takatsuki laughed.

As if he simply could not contain himself, he kept laughing, a long stream of snickering from deep in his throat.

“P-Professor?”

“Hey, Akira. What’s wrong?”

Concerned, Naoya and Sasakura called out to him.

Still laughing, Takatsuki looked at Naoya.

“Fukamachi. Do you remember? When we were going down that slope. You were bleeding from your forehead… Before that, do you remember what you saw?”

“Huh…?”

“When we were leaving that festival, I asked if those were just illusions—or if they were memories of the past. Your grandfather—at the end, he nodded.”

Another little burst of somewhat unhinged laughter escaped him.

“If that hill was Yomotsu Hirasaka, then it makes sense. What we saw were undoubtedly real memories. A kaleidoscopic montage. They say that people remember their entire lives before they face death.”

“Um, Professor? I don’t quite…”

“Ah, yes, I’m sorry. Of course you don’t understand. But at that time, you must have remembered the incident in which you got that scar on your forehead. I remembered, too—the time I got these scars on my back.”

“Eh…?”

That was a memory that, until now, Takatsuki had never successfully recovered.

The *kamikakushi* incident that occurred when he was twelve. When he was found after a month of being missing, Takatsuki’s back had been cut open.

At Yomotsu Hirasaka, his wounds had once again opened.

Within the ever-shifting scenes of the montage, he had relived that time.

“I saw a big hand,” Takatsuki said, smiling maniacally. “I was crying so much and saying I wanted to go home, and I was told—‘If you want to go home that badly, I’ll send you back.’ Then that person patted my head with that big hand, and then, to my back—”

Suddenly, Takatsuki’s mouth snapped shut.

His expression froze.

The smile that had been plastered to his face melted away, and he stared blankly into space.

“…Akira?”

Sasakura called his name in a dubious tone.

All at once, one of Takatsuki's hands shot up and clutched at his face. His head bowed. He hunched over as though fighting an unbearable headache, his back rounded.

Naoya peered anxiously into his face from the side.

"Professor? Are you okay?"

"—No."

His answer came with such a peculiar firmness that, for a moment, Naoya thought he was admitting honestly to not being all right.

But he was wrong.

That wasn't it at all.

"You mustn't, Akira," Takatsuki said, his head still hanging.

That oddly clear resonance was undoubtedly Takatsuki's voice.

But it sounded like someone else entirely was speaking.

That voice was frighteningly calm and flat, as though all emotion had been drained from it.

"You mustn't. You must not remember. That would be violating our agreement, Akira."

Alarm written all over his face, Sasakura grabbed Takatsuki by the shoulders and forced his bowed head up.

Mr. Nakamura stifled a shriek.

Takatsuki's eyes were indigo. They were shining brighter than usual, brightly enough that they seemed to be emitting their own faint glow. His handsome face was utterly without emotion; Takatsuki looked like a life-size doll. Within the depths of those eyes, the shine of countless stars only made his gaze more brilliant.

Suddenly, Takatsuki's head fell back.

"Hey?!"

Sasakura grabbed his shoulders again. The professor's knees hit the ground with a *thud*, but Sasakura managed to support his collapsing frame.

Naoya leaned in to help from beside him, and together, they laid Takatsuki down on the ground.

He was completely unconscious. His night-sky eyes were hidden behind his lids and long lashes, and his cheeks were alarmingly pale. If not for the slight rising and falling of his chest as he breathed, Naoya might have thought he was dead.

It was the first time he had seen the professor faint when there wasn't a bird around.

It was also the first time he had heard the other Takatsuki speak.

After that, they put Takatsuki in the car and left the village.

They reiterated to Mr. Nakamura that they wouldn't tell anyone about the mountain god or the festival. The old man, looking somewhat fearfully at Takatsuki's form—laid down across the back seat—and nodded vaguely.

They returned to the hotel, which they had failed to go back to the night before, packed their bags, and checked out of their room, but Takatsuki still remained unconscious.

They left Nagano with the professor still passed out in the back of the car.

Traffic on the highway to Nagano had been bad, but it was even worse on the way home to Tokyo. The Obon holiday was over.

From the passenger seat, Naoya peeked at Sasakura, who was gripping the wheel in silence.

"Mr. Sasakura…are you okay? You didn't get any sleep, right?"

"Please, I'm a detective. Going without sleep for one night is nothing."

Naoya's mouth snapped shut at his low reply.

They puttered along far below highway speeds. Sasakura tapped his fingers against the wheel impatiently.

"—Hey."

This time, it was Sasakura who spoke up.

"What did he mean? About a montage."

"Oh… Um, last night, we might have almost gone to the underworld… In other words, we almost died."

"Almost died?!"

Sasakura glared sidelong at him, and Naoya stiffened at the fierceness in his gaze.

"And so, at the time, both Professor Takatsuki and I—we remembered various things from our pasts. I think he probably remembered getting the injuries on his back, and that made his memories return…from the time he was spirited away."

And yet, at that moment, the one that Wataru called the “other” Takatsuki had appeared.

Naoya had met him once before, when the professor fell off a waterfall in the demon village in Yamanashi.

But on that occasion, Takatsuki had lost consciousness on his own. Naoya hadn’t known it was possible for it to happen like this—for the “other” one to appear while the usual Takatsuki was in the middle of just talking.

And anyway—what in the world was that “other” Takatsuki to begin with?

Just then, they heard a faint groan from the back seat.

Naoya whipped his head around to look. Sasakura even glanced over his shoulder for a moment.

Takatsuki had opened his eyes.

He sat up slowly, seeming a bit vacant, and pressed a hand to his downturned face.

“P-Professor? You’re awake. Are you okay?”

“Hm? Umm… Did I fall asleep? Don’t tell me I saw a bird somewhere and collapsed? I can’t really recall… Right as *we’re on our way to Nagano*, too. I’m sorry for causing you trouble from the start.”

“…Professor?”

Not quite able to believe what he had just heard, Naoya turned around a bit more in the passenger seat to look at Takatsuki.

The professor, still somewhat dazed, looked out the car window.

Something must have caught his eye, because Takatsuki’s expression turned curious.

He leaned closer to the window, staring at the road signs outside.

“Hey…,” he murmured, dumbfounded. “We’re going back to Tokyo? Did something happen?”

“Professor.”

This can’t be happening, Naoya thought.

How could something so ridiculous—?

“Akira. Answer me.”

Gripping the wheel, Sasakura looked at Takatsuki in the rearview mirror.

“What is today’s date?”

Takatsuki returned his gaze, bewildered.

“The date? It’s August fourteenth—isn’t it?”

The date was August sixteenth.

After that, Sasakura parked the car at the nearest service station, and the three of them had a discussion that felt like a waking nightmare.

Takatsuki’s memory had vanished starting from the morning of August fourteenth.

Everything that had happened since—all the things that had occurred in Nagano—Takatsuki had entirely forgotten them.

Extra:

Marshmallow Cocoa Prince

Girls of any age loved to talk about romance.

As they entered their mid-twenties, with the prospect of marriage on the horizon, discussions of love grew more and more vivid.

The question came up at a girls' get-together of intercollegiate graduate students. They were chatting away over a pasta lunch at an Italian restaurant in Omotesando when someone asked, "Hey, Ruiko, how do you not fall for someone like that when you're always around him?"

"Someone like that" was Akira Takatsuki, the associate professor whose research lab Ruiko Ubukata belonged to.

He had a model's build and dressed himself impeccably in elegant British suits. His face was the epitome of *handsome*. He spoke in a beautiful voice that made people stop and listen, and he had a friendly, adorable laugh that rang into the air. His manner was kind and gentlemanly, and on top of all that, he was young, too.

"That professor is single, right? Are you telling me you've never thought about marrying him?"

"…Huh? No, I haven't thought about that."

Ruiko shook her head slowly, laughing.

It was a question she had dodged many times before. Similar questions had been posed to her on countless occasions. She'd

heard it from graduate students in other departments at her own university, and even from her own parents.

"I mean, I do enjoy looking at him every day, and I do like and respect Professor Akira. But marriage? Mm, nope, no way."

The other girls lamented noisily.

"A top-tier guy like that doesn't come around often, you know? If it was me, I'd definitely ask him out."

"Right?! I wish we could swap professors! I want to have a hottie for an adviser."

Ruiko stabbed her spoon into her panna cotta dessert while the others squealed and gushed.

"Okay, but listen, what if you ask out your adviser and get completely rejected? It could shatter your future as a researcher after going to all the trouble of getting into grad school."

"That's true, but…but he's really, really hot."

"But don't you think he's too good-looking to even consider as a love interest?" Ruiko said, her face serious, and the other girls looked at one another.

"…Yeah, I get that. It might be hard to go on a date with a guy who's prettier than me…"

"Now that you mention it, that may be true… Are hot guys only good for eye candy?"

The girls nodded in agreement and Ruiko joined in with a "Totally." Conversations like this one usually died down once they were steered into the "but with a guy *that* good-looking" zone, so they weren't really hard to handle.

"Listen, Professor Akira is the prince of our research seminar. Discussions about love and relationships and stuff are prohibited."

"I mean, he *does* have the looks of a prince."

"Professor Akira is the Marshmallow Cocoa Prince."

"Hold on, wait. The what? 'Marshmallow Cocoa'?"

"Because he only drinks cocoa with marshmallows in his office."

"Seriously?! Wow, what a girly drink! Now I really want to trade advisers!"

"No thanks. Please don't try to steal our prince. Anyway, we all admire him the way you would a pop idol! That's what keeps things peaceful between us. Love-related disputes in the lab are

no joke."

"Well, I guess you're right. Oh, that reminds me, not to change the subject, but the other day…"

They never ran out of things to talk about during girls' lunch, and the conversation quickly moved on to other topics.

Relieved, Ruiko scooped some of her panna cotta into her mouth. It was velvety, rich, and delicious. She thought she'd try to re-create the flavor next time she made it at home. If it came out well, she'd bring some to the lab and have everyone try it. Her mother was a chef, so Ruiko was quite good at making sweets.

Takatsuki loved sweet things, so Ruiko was sure he'd enjoy it.

Imagining Takatsuki smiling with a spoon in his mouth, Ruiko smiled, too.

When people asked her if she was in love with Takatsuki…it was difficult to give an answer.

The feelings that welled up in her heart when she thought about her prince were pretty far removed from thoughts of wanting to kiss or marry him or anything like that.

They were more—how to put it?—soft, wholesome feelings.

Ruiko was selected as part of the first batch of students in Takatsuki's seminar.

Just as she was entering her fourth year of undergrad, Takatsuki was promoted from lecturer to associate professor, thus marking the joyous start of his seminar at Seiwa University.

Takatsuki's courses had been popular even during his lecturer days, which naturally meant that there was a flood of applications to join his seminar. Ultimately, a lottery system was employed.

Ruiko later learned, however, that Takatsuki had personally selected several applicants before the lottery was implemented.

Ruiko was one of them, as was another girl in her class who ended up continuing on to graduate school, Shiori Narahara. The last was a boy who ended up becoming the seminar representative.

"I mean, you guys didn't apply because of my looks or just out of curiosity. I'm happy to take on students who want to do serious research. Besides, Miss Ubukata and Miss Narahara, you want to

go to graduate school, right? I'll provide whatever guidance I can, so give it your best shot."

Ruiko had been very surprised when Takatsuki said that.

She hadn't told anyone she was thinking about going to grad school. In fact, she was still worrying over the options by herself. When she asked later on, she found out the same was true for Shiori.

Nevertheless, she was overjoyed.

It warmed her heart to realize Takatsuki had been watching over her.

He probably had hundreds of students, but he was still able to figure out what Ruiko's and Shiori's aspirations were.

Since their first year, both of them had been frequently vising his office to ask him questions, so perhaps that was how Takatsuki was able to predict they would go on to grad school, but it made them happy nonetheless.

That may have been the first time Ruiko thought of Takatsuki as an angel.

He was like a being looking down from the clouds, watching each and every individual no matter how many people there were, extending a helping hand to those in need. Shiori had laughed when Ruiko told her this, but looking at Takatsuki's gentle smile really made her feel that way.

After a lot of deliberation, the deciding factor in Ruiko going to graduate school was Takatsuki.

She thought that given the chance to learn from him, she would take it.

Incidentally, during that year's seminar camp, there was a bit of a commotion.

The camp was held at a hot springs resort that the university had partnered with. A portion of the girls in attendance spied on the men's open-air bath from the outside and were roundly scolded by the innkeepers.

The perpetrators claimed that it "wasn't fair that only the boys got to see Professor Takatsuki totally naked," but thankfully, Takatsuki hadn't been in the open-air bath at the time.

Rather, according to the boys, Takatsuki hadn't even shown up

to the indoor communal bath, so in the end, no one got to see him naked.

…It wasn't until much later that Ruiko learned why that was.

Ruiko and Shiori passed their entrance exams and became Takatsuki's first graduate students.

Takatsuki was overjoyed for them, and they—Takatsuki, Ruiko, and Shiori—celebrated at an *izakaya* near the university.

"I'm so happy," Takatsuki said, grinning, after kicking things off with a cheers. "Now I get to say things like 'my graduate students,' too."

Shiori let out a small laugh.

"What, Professor, don't tell me you've been wanting to say that this whole time?"

"Well, when I go out drinking with other professors after conferences and research seminars, that's where the conversation always goes. 'Most of my students are so hardworking,' or 'That kid is enthusiastic, but his methods aren't so great.' They all sound like proud papas. I was a bit envious."

"In that case, from here on out, we'll look up to you as if you were our father," Shiori said, laughing.

Takatsuki blinked and scratched lightly at his cheek.

"I'm flattered, but I don't really know how to feel about that. Suddenly, I've got two totally grown-up daughters."

"Don't worry, it's not like we're going to call you 'Daddy.'"

"Yeah, I wouldn't want that. I can only imagine what others would think."

Ruiko raised her hand eagerly.

"—Oh, then maybe you could call me by my first name," she proposed, "instead of 'Miss Ubukata.'"

"Your first name? Why?"

"That's what you would call a daughter, right? Plus, everyone else in my life calls me 'Ruiko.' I think it would help us bond going forward."

"Hmmm, then just 'Ruiko' might be a bit too forward, so how about 'Miss Ruiko'?"

Takatsuki smiled.

The moment he called her that—"Miss Ruiko"—a warmth

exploded in her chest again.

A cozy, gentle, white ball of light was growing in her heart, filling Ruiko with even more joy, and she tried desperately to hold back the smile that threatened to burst forth.

Now that she was finally a graduate student, she was hoping for just a touch of special treatment from Takatsuki, but she absolutely could not allow him to know that.

Takatsuki turned to Shiori.

“So, Miss Narahara, you’ll be ‘Miss Shiori’ from now on!”

“Oh, I like that, using first names. Then why don’t we call you ‘Professor Akira’?”

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

Watching the smiling exchange between the two of them, Ruiko tried to remind herself that it was only natural. As if she alone could receive special treatment. Takatsuki was a very fair person in that way. But…if the warm feeling in her chest deflated a little, that was just another thing to keep to herself.

Once she became a graduate student and started spending more time in his office, Ruiko began to see a host of sides to Takatsuki that she hadn’t been privy to before.

For example: He actually had a horrible sense of direction. That the only thing he drank in his office was marshmallow cocoa. That he had an incredibly frightening-looking childhood friend with whom he was still very close. That he was surprisingly childish. That he quickly lost all sense of reason when excited.

And—that he was really, truly, shockingly kind.

Sometimes, ordinary people would come to Takatsuki for advice. People who had been caught up in events they could only describe as supernatural would seek his help upon learning the focus of his research.

Given Takatsuki’s trouble with directionality and his habit of succumbing to senselessness, Ruiko accompanied him on several occasions as a caretaker.

The majority of the cases brought to him weren’t actually supernatural; they were simply the work of human beings being dressed up as extraordinary phenomena. Still, Takatsuki’s

method of explaining them was often gentle.

Many faux-supernatural incidents were, put in other terms, acts meant to threaten or frighten someone. Uncovering the truth behind them could result in hurting those involved and irreparably damaging interpersonal relationships.

Takatsuki tried whenever possible to offer interpretations of events that could help people find a silver lining. He tried to show them that even truths that only caused harm when mercilessly exposed could be seen in another light if considered from other angles.

Watching Takatsuki work from the sidelines, Ruiko had thought many times, *Ah, this is someone who truly believes in people.*

He believed there was some "goodness" inherent in them.

He really was like an angel.

Ruiko hadn't met many people like him in her life.

He must, she thought, have lived his life up until that point surrounded by people who were kind like him. The Marshmallow Cocoa Prince was surely loved by everyone around him, just as his looks were, just as he was blessed by the gods, and that's why he'd become the sort of person he was.

Yes—Ruiko had thought so, at least.

She found out about Takatsuki's secret in her second year of her master's studies.

It was summer.

Shiori wasn't around at the time. She had gone back to her parents' house for a memorial service or something, if memory served. And so that day, it was just the two of them, Takatsuki and Ruiko, going to a research presentation together.

On the way back, they were caught in a heavy downpour.

The deluge came out of nowhere, as if someone had overturned a massive bucket. To make matters worse, neither of them was carrying an umbrella. The sheer amount of rain was so intense that they hesitated even to make the short dash to the train station, and instead, they hurriedly took refuge under the eaves of a nearby multipurpose building.

They were both utterly drenched from head to toe.

Looking at each other, they couldn't help but laugh.

"Professor Akira, you're positively dripping with handsomeness."

"Hmm, I hope you'll forgive me for being literally dripping in this case."

As he spoke, Takatsuki's expression suddenly changed.

He hastily took off his suit jacket and draped it over Ruiko's shoulders.

Wondering what was going on, Ruiko looked down at herself and was shocked.

Her soaked blouse had become totally see-through, and her underclothes were on full display.

"I'm s-s-s-sorry for showing you such a shabby sight, Professor…!"

"Is that really what you're worried about? Listen, just keep my jacket on for now. I know it's wet, too, but…"

Takatsuki diverted his gaze from Ruiko.

Looking a little uncomfortable, he muttered quietly, "Anyway, the issue is that it *isn't* shabby."

Face on fire, Ruiko pulled Takatsuki's jacket over her chest. She deeply regretted leaving home in a white blouse. At least her skirt was a dark color. Covered in raindrops, her glasses were basically useless. She took them off, wiped them with a little cloth, and put them back on. Checking her shoulder bag, she saw that the rain had barely touched the contents. The papers and tablet inside were safe.

"It doesn't seem like the rain will last for very long, so let's try waiting it out. Although, I do hope a taxi comes by. I don't relish the idea of people staring on the train."

Takatsuki dabbed at his wet face with his handkerchief. He was wearing a two-piece suit that day. His dress shirt wasn't that damp yet, probably because it had been covered by his jacket. His "people staring" comment was likely meant in reference to Ruiko.

The two of them stood side by side under the eaves for a while, held captive by the rain.

Staying quiet didn't help settle their nerves, so as they waited for the rain to clear, they chatted idly about their impressions of the research presentation they had just attended.

The rain kept coming down hard, the sound rushing in their ears. Ruiko furtively stroked the collar of Takatsuki's jacket as it sat around her shoulders. Slightly heavy from being rained on, the jacket smelled faintly of a particular scent—the kind of scent a grown man would wear. As soon as she noticed it, Ruiko's heart began to pound for some reason, and she turned her eyes to the road several feet in front of her.

Oh, she thought.

A taxi was in the process of passing by. Catching sight of the light indicating it was vacant, Ruiko instinctively turned to watch the taxi go with regret.

"Aw… We missed it."

"Oh, the taxi? That one was no good," Takatsuki said.

He seemed to have noticed it approaching and let it pass by on purpose. What had he meant by "that one"?

After that, Takatsuki let two more taxis pass them by with the same "no good" declaration. Wondering whether he felt some loyalty to a particular cab company or something, Ruiko obediently went along with his wishes.

Eventually, the rain started to let up somewhat.

Then, suddenly, Takatsuki dashed out from under the eaves toward the road. He raised a hand, and a taxi approaching from the opposite direction came to a smooth stop. Takatsuki opened the back door.

Ruiko started to rush frantically toward the cab but stopped short halfway there.

For a single moment, she felt her heart leap violently.

What are those? she thought.

On Takatsuki's back.

Soaked through by the rain in an instant, Takatsuki's shirt had—like Ruiko's blouse—stuck to his skin and become completely transparent.

And there, on his back, she had definitely just caught a glimpse of something.

Pushing his wet bangs out of his eyes, Takatsuki turned toward Ruiko with a puzzled expression.

The next moment, however, his face stiffened.

As if to shield his back from Ruiko's gaze, Takatsuki turned his whole body so he was facing her.

Ruiko jolted. She walked jerkily toward the professor on legs that felt like they were sticking to the ground.

Shepherding her into the taxi, Takatsuki handed the driver some bills.

“Excuse me, could you please take her home? She’s soaked, so I’d appreciate it if you turned down the air conditioning, too.”

He started to back away from the car as he spoke, but Ruiko rushed to grab his shirtsleeve and stopped him.

“U-um, aren’t you getting in, Professor?!”

“I’ll take a different cab. We live in opposite directions, don’t we? Get home quick, Miss Ruiko, and take a warm shower. I know it’s summer, but you don’t want to catch a cold.”

“At least let me pay for the taxi. I don’t mind!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Now is no time for good manners.”

Takatsuki gave her a smile, water dripping from his bangs.

The rain still showed no signs of stopping. The longer they kept talking, the wetter Takatsuki’s clothes and body would get.

“Ah…um, then I’ll…return this,” Ruiko said, taking off Takatsuki’s jacket.

Covering her still see-through blouse with one hand, she held the jacket out to him with the other.

Even if he was taking a taxi home, Takatsuki was sure to be uncomfortable without his jacket.

Looking down at her with a slightly troubled expression, Takatsuki took the garment from her.

There was water running down his cheeks. Of course, it was just rain, but for some reason, watching them made Ruiko’s chest ache, and she found she couldn’t say another word.

“…Make sure you don’t catch a cold, Miss Ruiko,” Takatsuki said, stepping away from the cab.

“Professor Akira, um—”

As if to cut her off, the door slammed shut, and the taxi drove off.

Ruiko looked back out of the rear windshield. Takatsuki was lightly waving good-bye to her as he donned his jacket.

In that moment, a horrible, inexplicable apprehension came over her, and Ruiko clutched at the back of her seat and stared out the rear windshield as though clinging to a lifeline.

She felt, without knowing why, like Takatsuki was going to

vanish into thin air.

Framed by the windshield, Takatsuki's figure grew more and more distant. Eventually, she saw him turn on his heel and walk away from the road. When he was no longer in her field of view, Ruiko felt like crying. He had probably just gone back under the building eaves to shelter from the rain. That had to be it. Despite knowing that was the most likely case, the anxiety that gripped her heart would not be shaken off so easily.

What if Takatsuki simply disappeared somewhere and never returned to his office ever again?

Stupid, Ruiko thought. Such a thing wasn't going to happen. This was just like that time in her childhood when she had almost burst into tears worrying that her mother would never come home again, simply because she was a bit late coming back from shopping. It was the same immature, baseless anxiety.

Nevertheless, for some reason, something that felt intensely like a premonition had taken up residence in her chest and would not go away.

"—Miss. Where is your destination?"

Ruiko was startled by the driver's question.

She turned around quickly to face forward, realizing she had indeed forgotten to give the driver an address.

And that was the moment Ruiko finally realized just why Takatsuki had let three taxis pass them by without hailing them.

The driver of the cab Ruiko was in was a woman… The other three cabs had probably been driven by men.

Grabbing at the front of her wet blouse, Ruiko let a tiny laugh escape along with an exhaled breath. Her body, soaked through by the rain, was, in fact, a bit cold as Takatsuki had predicted. But suddenly, Ruiko felt the warmth blooming in her chest again.

Exactly how much of an angel was that professor?

At first, Ruiko thought what she had seen on Takatsuki's back was a tattoo.

But that wasn't it.

They were probably scars.

Starting over both shoulder blades and going down to his waist, the marks spread widely from left to right. Their shape

made it difficult to imagine what in the world could make such scars.

Once, during seminar camp, Takatsuki hadn't ventured into either the communal indoor bath or the open-air bath where the others were.

And now Ruiko knew why.

He probably didn't want others to know about the scars on his back.

Returning to the apartment she rented by herself and taking a warm shower as instructed, Ruiko pondered.

What had happened to Takatsuki to leave scars like that?

It looked as though his wings had been clipped.

Ruiko had always thought of him as something of an angel.

Could that gentle man really have had wings growing out of his back once?

The thought made Ruiko ashamed of her own fanciful tendencies. Still in the shower, she squeezed both of her cheeks in mortification. There was no way. Of course, it couldn't be. This wasn't a fairy tale. It wasn't like Takatsuki could actually be an angel.

Still—she thought pure-white wings would look really lovely on him.

When Ruiko came face-to-face with Takatsuki after that, all he said regarding his own back was that he had "sustained a bit of an injury a long time ago."

That was all he offered, and Ruiko didn't feel it was right to pry.

Takatsuki was still his usual, kind, smiling self.

He still grinned after taking sips of his sickeningly sweet cocoa with marshmallows.

And the strange anxiety Ruiko had felt that day still lingered in her heart.

"Professor Akira."

"Hmm? What is it, Miss Ruiko?"

"…I don't want you to go anywhere."

The words tumbled from Ruiko's mouth. Takatsuki blinked at her.

"…Um, well, I've been called to the academic affairs office after this."

"That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?"

"I meant, if you go anywhere, please make sure you come back."

"Oh, is that it?"

Takatsuki laughed.

His smile was bright, angelic.

"Don't worry. This is where I belong. Even if I go somewhere, I'll always come back."

Pleased with his answer, Ruiko's chest swelled with that warm, tender feeling.

"—How do you not fall for someone like that when you're always around him?"

The people in her life often asked her that.

"—Don't you ever think about wanting to marry him?"

Some people asked that, too.

Every time, Ruiko was at a loss to answer.

How could she explain this feeling that was like a warm, soft light burning in her heart? She definitely loved him. That was for certain. But how she felt was a bit different than what other girls expected her to feel, she thought. Admiration. Respect. Unadulterated affection. She didn't know what to call it.

Ruiko thought that, perhaps, as long as Takatsuki was there, she would be happy.

As long as she could open the door to his office and see him there, smiling and drinking cocoa, she would be satisfied.

When the girls' lunch in Omotesando was done, Ruiko decided to go back to campus. The thesis she was working on was coming together, so she wanted to consult with Takatsuki about it if possible.

On her way to the station, however, she came across a cutesy-looking general store and stopped walking without meaning to.

Drawn inside the store, she found a section of sweets and cookies meant to be given as gifts. Among them were some plump marshmallows in the shape of a cat's paw. Snatching them up,

Ruiko went straight to the register—they were a present for Takatsuki. They would look adorable floating in a mug of cocoa, and he would definitely look cute drinking it.

Returning to the university, Ruiko made her way to the third floor of the faculty offices building and glanced at her watch. At this time of day, Takatsuki was likely in his office.

Standing in front of door 304, Ruiko took a single deep breath.

Checking that the marshmallows were still in her bag, she lifted her right hand slightly and knocked.

Knock, knock, knock.

"Come in," called a voice from inside, and Ruiko put her hand on the knob.

When she opened the door, a sweet scent wafted over her.

Takatsuki, at that very moment in the process of making cocoa at the small table by the window, turned to smile at her.

"Ah, welcome, Miss Ruiko."

Thank goodness, she thought. *He's here, as he should be.*

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