
Associate Professor Akira Takatsuki's Conjecture
Dark Reflections
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Mikage Sawamura

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Associate Professor Akira Takatsuki's Conjecture Mikage Sawamura
Translation by Katelyn Smith

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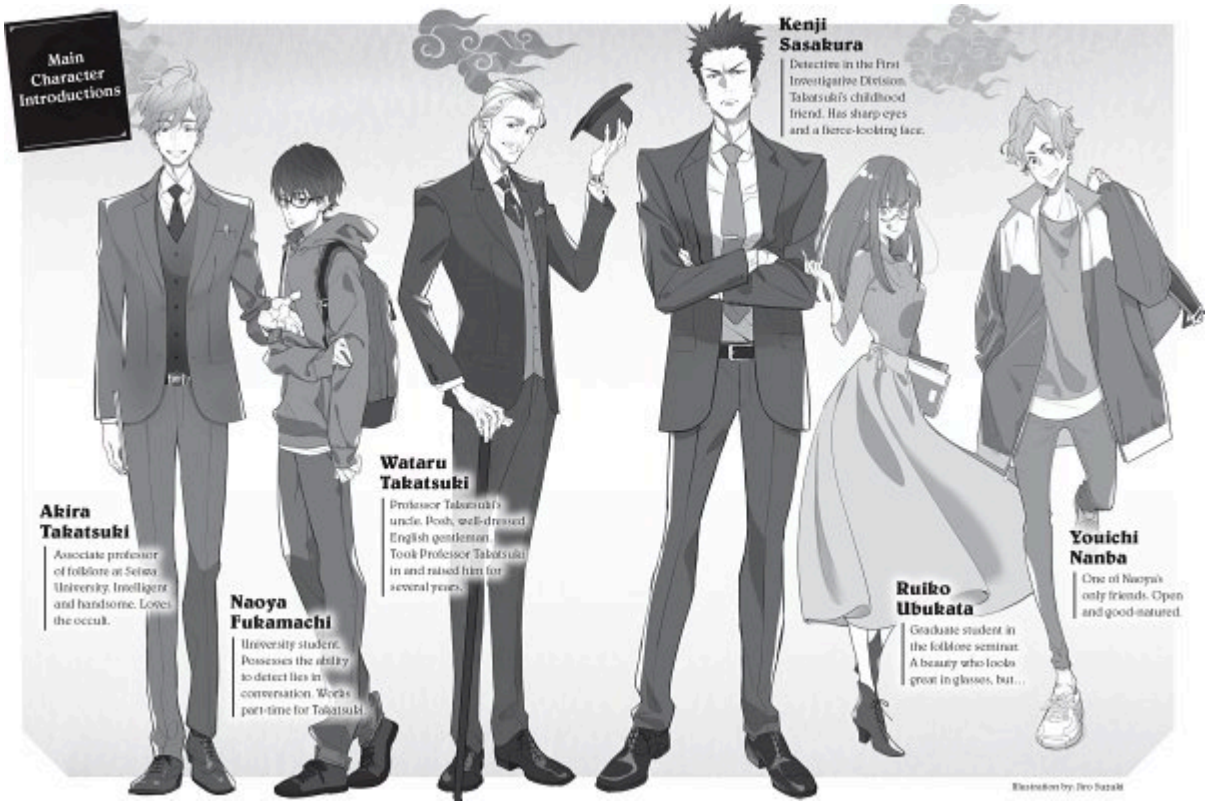
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Kenji Sasakura
Detective in the First Investigative Division. Takatsuki's childhood friend. Has sharp eyes and a fierce-looking face.
Wataru Takatsuki
Professor Takatsuki's uncle. Posh, well-dressed English gentleman. Took Professor Takatsuki in and raised him for several years.
Akira Takatsuki
Associate professor of folklore at Seiwa University. Intelligent and handsome. Loves the occult.
Naoya Fukamachi
University student. Possesses the ability to detect lies in conversation. Works part-time for Takatsuki.
Ruiko Ubukata
Graduate student in the folklore seminar. A beauty who looks great in glasses, but...
Youichi Nanba
One of Naoya's only friends. Open and good-natured.
Illustration by Jiro Suzuki

Chapter 1:
The Phantom of the Haunted House

One week had passed since then.

Removing his earbuds, Naoya Fukamachi heard the sound of cicadas fill his ears.

He squinted against the intense rays of the summer sun as he looked up at the large cherry tree in front of the university library.

The tree was a well-known spot at Seiwa University during the spring, when the cherry blossoms were in full bloom, but in the summer, it served as a gathering place for choirs of cicadas. The droves of cicadas clinging to the tree's trunk and branches were visible even at a glance, and the sight made Naoya a little weary. He wondered why becoming an adult inspired such a sentiment in him, when he had often enjoyed catching cicadas for fun as a child. Was it that their singing—a sound practically synonymous with summertime—made the heat feel just that much more intense?

Naoya shoved his earbuds into the pocket of his bag and, urged on by the cicadas' chirping, went into the library.

The inside of the building seemed oddly dim after his walk under the glaring sun, and Naoya's eyes blinked repeatedly behind his glasses. With the midsummer heat and humidity shut out and the

air-conditioning working almost a little too well, the library interior was cool and dry. There were few other people around. The first-floor reading corner, usually so crowded that it was difficult to find an open seat, was practically empty at this time of year.

Though the period generally known as the Obon holiday was over, college students' summer break was not.

There were likely students throughout the country who filled the long vacation period of about two months with leisure, travel, and club activities. The rest of the student population, however, had to figure out what to do with all that free time. As a result, many of them took on extra part-time work.

Claiming a seat in the corner, Naoya took a stack of papers and a red pen from his bag.

He worked part-time grading papers for a correspondence cram school. He could have done the job at his apartment, but coming to the university was something to do, at least, and it helped save on air-conditioning costs at home.

Referring to the answer key, Naoya marked the scoring sheets with circles and *x*'s in red pen. Though he had to take care not to make any mistakes, it wasn't work that required a great deal of brainpower. As long as he focused on keeping his pen moving, it was over in no time. In other words, it was a job he could manage to do even if there was something else occupying his thoughts.

The reading corner faced the campus courtyard, and Naoya had a good view of the outside through the large library windows.

He glanced at the faculty building that was visible on the other side of the courtyard.

…Since returning from Nagano, Naoya hadn't seen Takatsuki at all.

Even now, thinking back on it, the whole thing was like a bad dream.

That midnight festival under the glow of those blue lanterns. That dark forest where he had run for his life. The inky blackness of Yomotsu Hirasaka. Not a single one of those scenes felt real now,

but Naoya knew he had definitely experienced them.

The worst nightmare of them all, however, came after he somehow managed to return alive from the whole ordeal.

"Akira. Answer me. What is today's date?"

"The date? It's August fourteenth—isn't it?"

Takatsuki, having suddenly lost consciousness, regained it in the car on the way home. He answered Sasakura's question with an uneasy tilt to his head.

"Why are you asking me that? We're going to Nagano today, right? To investigate the festival Fukamachi told us about."

Sasakura stared ahead in silence, grim faced.

Staring back at Takatsuki from the passenger seat, Naoya had no clue what to say and ultimately kept quiet as well.

Perhaps sensing something was off from their behavior, Takatsuki reached hurriedly into his pocket, fumbling for his phone.

Taking it out, he stared fixedly at the date displayed on the screen.

"August…sixteenth?"

Takatsuki looked back up at them, his expression utterly stiff.

"Hey. What happened to me?"

"…I'm going to pull over for now," Sasakura said.

And so they parked the car in the lot of a service area, and without even getting out of the vehicle, the three of them reviewed what Takatsuki remembered against the past few days' events, like a "spot the differences" puzzle.

They told Takatsuki what occurred in Nagano, one thing after another, but he merely shook his head, dazed.

His memories seemed intact through the morning of the fourteenth, when the last thing he remembered was leaving his apartment.

Everything after that, Takatsuki had forgotten.

"…It's no use. I can't remember," Takatsuki murmured, grabbing handfuls of his own hair. "Everything you just told me…I don't remember any of it."

He continued to run his hands roughly through his hair, his face pale and downturned.

Each time he shoved his long fingers recklessly into his disheveled locks, it looked like he was trying to thrust them into his own skull, making Naoya more and more fearful.

"Professor. Please calm down… Maybe if you rest a little."

But even as he said that, Naoya knew it wouldn't offer much comfort.

Takatsuki's memory loss was likely not due to fatigue or temporary confusion.

It was his fault.

The one with the shining blue eyes—the *other* Takatsuki.

Suddenly, Takatsuki raised his head.

"Right," he said. "Let's go back."

"What'd you say?"

Sasakura turned to Takatsuki with a fierce frown.

Leaning forward toward the driver's seat, Takatsuki made his case in a rush of words.

"Come on. Let's go back right now. We'll investigate again. I want to hear more from this old man Nakamura. If we go back to where that festival happened, we might still be able to find some traces of it—"

"—That's enough, Akira!"

Sasakura's angry shout resounded throughout the car.

Takatsuki stiffened in shock, looking like he had been slapped in the face.

His already vicious gaze twisting into something even more dreadful, Sasakura glared at the professor.

"Go back? Are you kidding me? As if I'd let you go back to that place ever again!"

"…But, Kenji—"

"You almost died, you know," Sasakura interjected in a low voice, before Takatsuki could say another word. "You and Fukamachi."

Takatsuki's shoulders jerked once more in alarm.

"Oh…"

Eyes wide, he looked at Naoya. The blood seemed to drain further from his pale cheeks.

The statement Sasakura had just made was a cruelly aimed blow

to Takatsuki's heart. It was perhaps too merciless a move against someone with no memory of the incident whatsoever, but there was probably nothing else that could be said that would have stopped Takatsuki. Naoya heard the sound of Sasakura's teeth grinding together coming from beside him. The other man had taken that shot at Takatsuki knowing just how it would affect him, Naoya thought.

At that midnight festival, Takatsuki had tried to offer up his own lifespan in Naoya's stead. He'd done so readily, as if it was the most natural thing to do.

"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."

Takatsuki himself no longer remembered saying those words to Naoya or refusing to allow him even a single objection. But Naoya got the feeling those words weren't just a one-off, in-the-moment kind of thought. Takatsuki must have felt that way in general, that he was the one who had dragged Naoya into the situation.

And if something like what Sasakura revealed was said to somebody who believed that—if he thought Naoya had almost died because of him—there was no way he would keep fighting.

"…I'm sorry," Takatsuki whispered, looking down, his messy bangs hiding his face from view.

"The festival is already over. We're going back to Tokyo," Sasakura said, softening his voice somewhat. Takatsuki's only response was a quiet "okay."

A high-pitched electronic noise echoed through the eerily still library, startling Naoya, who had been lost in memories of the past, to his senses.

A cell phone was ringing. It wasn't his.

"Hello, Hiroki…? Yeah, I can talk a little."

Naoya heard someone answer the phone and begin a conversation. It sounded like a female student speaking. She was probably just on the other side of the bookshelves right behind him. Even though her voice was hushed, the library was so quiet, he

could still hear what she was saying.

"Now? I'm at school. The library… No, it's fine. I'm preparing a presentation for my seminar's group trip… What, tonight…? Ahh, **sorry, I have work** tonight."

The girl's voice abruptly distorted. It varied wildly in pitch, warping, as if a machine had applied some chaotic filter to it, and becoming an unpleasant racket that was nothing like its original sound. Naoya covered his ears reflexively.

"Sorry, I'm in the library right now, so… You know, if I stay on the phone for a while, it'll bother the other people here… Yep… Yeah, okay, **talk to you later.**"

A slender female student emerged from behind the bookshelf. A book in one arm and putting away her phone with the other, she walked over to a reading desk a short distance away.

Naoya's gaze followed her vaguely as she sat down next to a male student who was sitting by himself. The two of them began talking. He couldn't tell what they were saying because of the distance, but he could see that the girl was wearing a smile, as if the two of them were quite close.

Naoya didn't know what her relation was to the person on the phone just now or to the boy she was sitting next to.

What he knew was that the girl had turned down whatever the person on the phone had invited her to with a lie.

She may just not have been in the mood, or perhaps she was trying to ward off a man who wouldn't stop asking her out. She could even have been thinking about how to break up with her current boyfriend at that very moment. Regardless, to her, the lie was probably a mere trifle.

Everyone lied.

They did it easily, not even particularly consciously, thinking they were unlikely to be found out.

The one those lies weighed on was Naoya, who could hear any sort of lie someone told. His ears turned lies into unpleasant, grating noise.

Looking away from the pair, Naoya took his earphones from his bag and jammed them in his ears.

It had been one week since he returned from Nagano.

His daily life since then was exactly as it had been before.

He woke up in the morning, ate, did laundry, made his way to the university before it got too hot, studied, and worked at his part-time job. Depending on the day, he might go shopping, browse around a bookstore, or go see a movie, but he generally didn't speak to people very much.

When he was walking around town or riding the train, he plugged up both ears with his headphones. If he didn't, he was bound to hear whenever someone's voice warped.

It was almost anticlimactic how much nothing had changed, he thought. From the start, Naoya hadn't expected his ears to return to normal because he went to Nagano, but still.

He remembered what Tooyama had said to him before the trip: *"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."*

Tooyama had asked what point there was in trying to find out the truth despite those circumstances.

And in response, Naoya had said that he just wanted to know.

He had wanted to know for so long.

Just what was that festival that he had wandered into once as a child?

When he went to Nagano, he found out. The dead who, not just in legend, really did return to this world. The mountain god who controlled them. The mountain that led to the underworld. The blue lantern festival held to pacify the dead. The otherworldly festival grounds that formed as a result of it all.

He realized that what he had seen was not a dream, an illusion, or a delusion, but something that actually happened—something that had been happening in that village for a long, long time.

When Naoya returned from the slope that led to the underworld, his grandfather had asked him: *"Now that you know, are you satisfied?"*

Naoya's answer had been that it was better than not knowing.

But was that really the case?

As the days passed since their return from Nagano, he grew less

and less sure.

What point had there been to their trip, when things had changed so little?

Wouldn't it actually have been better if they hadn't gone at all?

…At the very least, for Takatsuki's sake.

Recalling how Takatsuki had been when he saw him last, Naoya ran his fingers roughly through his hair.

Afterward, in the car on the way back, Takatsuki had hardly made a sound. He merely stared blankly out the window, his face pale.

They made it back within Tokyo city limits, and Naoya, the first one getting dropped off, turned to Takatsuki at the last second and asked, "Are you okay?"

Takatsuki looked at him, smiled a little awkwardly, and simply said, "Well, see you."

He didn't answer Naoya's question.

At that moment, he probably hadn't been the least bit okay.

Since then, Naoya hadn't seen Takatsuki at all.

The professor hadn't really been in contact, and Naoya had no idea what to say to him, so he hadn't been able to go to Takatsuki's office.

Naoya looked out the window again.

Probably because it was summer break, the courtyard, where various club activities were usually in full swing, was quite empty. The campus felt strangely deserted as a result, but the faculty building stood there, unchanged. Takatsuki's office was on the third floor.

Takatsuki was probably there, in that room that always smelled a little like a secondhand bookstore, surrounded by tall bookshelves. Naoya got the feeling that if he opened the door to that room, he would see Takatsuki, smiling as always, looking his way with a mug of sweet marshmallow cocoa in hand. Knowing the professor, he may actually have been doing just fine.

I should go to the office after all, Naoya thought.

He wasn't getting anywhere just sitting around, endlessly thinking about it.

Packing his things away quickly, Naoya was heading for the library

exit when he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket.

It wasn't a text; someone was calling him. He looked at the name on the screen in surprise.

It was Sasakura.

Sasakura had never called him before. Naoya jogged hurriedly to the entrance hall and answered the call.

"Yes, this is Fukamachi."

"Hey, you busy?" Sasakura asked, first thing, in his somewhat husky voice.

"Wh-what's up? This is sudden."

"Sorry, but I was wondering if you could go check on Akira if you have time."

"…Pardon?"

Naoya figured the call probably had something to do with Takatsuki, but why was Sasakura going out of his way to make that sort of request of him? The man was indeed a bit overprotective of Takatsuki, but still.

Naoya exited the library and started walking toward the faculty building.

"I was actually just going to his office, so I don't mind, but… Um, don't tell me, is the professor still really bad off?"

"I dunno if I would say that, but…"

Sasakura hesitated for a moment.

Naoya heard him sigh, and then—

"…After we got back from the trip, he was laid up in bed for a while. He had a fever."

"What?"

Naoya stopped in his tracks.

"I've been busy, so I've only been able to go check on him once. He told me it was fatigue, but who knows?"

Naoya thought of how pale Takatsuki looked when they parted ways—how utterly not fine he had looked. He might already have been ill at that moment.

"Um, has he gone to the doctor or anything?"

"He did go, just to be safe, but apparently it's not a cold. When I went to see him, I got the feeling the fever reducer wasn't working

much. I called him earlier, and he said his fever was down, but I don't think he's back to shipshape. So even if you do go to his office, he won't be there. I think he's probably still taking it easy at home."

"It's really that bad?"

Takatsuki lived alone. Naoya knew just how helpless it felt to be sick when one lived alone.

"Could you just go over to his place and check on him?" Sasakura asked. "When I'm there, he just says he's fine and not to worry… But with you, he'll be honest, right?"

Despite typically having no compunctions about imposing on others, in situations like these, Takatsuki was weirdly reticent. Not wanting to bother people or make them worry, he would pretend to be okay, even if it meant lying.

But Takatsuki never lied in front of Naoya.

Even now, he continued to stick to that promise.

Nevertheless—that didn't mean he always told the complete truth, either.

"…I feel like if I ask, he'll just find a way to dodge the question."

"That's why I want you to go ask him directly."

"Got it. I'll go now."

"Sorry to ask this of you. I'll buy you a meal sometime soon."

"It's no big deal. I've been worried about him, too… By the way…"

All of a sudden, Naoya was curious.

"Mr. Sasakura—you know about my ears?"

Naoya didn't remember ever telling Sasakura about his ability.

The other man was silent.

Eventually, sounding a bit awkward, he muttered, "…Akira told me a while back."

"Ahh, that makes sense."

"Sorry. You were always holding your ears and looking sick, so I wondered. I asked Akira about it."

"It's okay. I don't mind. I heard about the professor's past from you, after all… Anyway, Mr. Sasakura."

Naoya had never heard Sasakura's voice distort.

He just wasn't the type to lie much, Naoya had thought. But what if…?

What if this whole time, he was just being extra careful around Naoya?

"Mr. Sasakura… You're a good guy. Really."

"Where's this coming from? You're creeping me out."

"Your face is scary, though."

"You don't have to go that far."

If their conversation had been in person, Sasakura might have smacked Naoya over the head.

In the end, Sasakura said, "I'm counting on you to check on Akira, got it?" before cutting the call. He really was a nice person.

Takatsuki lived in Yoyogi, in a spacious six-story apartment building. Naoya had been there several times, so he knew where it was.

After speaking with Sasakura, he headed straight for Yoyogi, but he realized something as he came to stand in front of the apartment building.

He had come here without giving any prior warning to the professor.

Was it okay to suddenly drop in on someone who might not be feeling well? Sasakura would probably have just walked inside without a care, but that was likely the sort of familiarity that came with being childhood friends.

After waffling over the issue for a while in front of the entrance, Naoya took out his phone.

He figured he would try calling first. He'd feel bad if he woke Takatsuki up, but it was probably better than just ringing his intercom out of the blue.

The call connected after three rings.

"…Hello? Fukamachi, is something wrong?"

Takatsuki answered the phone in a mildly surprised voice.

He sounded more like his usual self than expected, which was a relief.

"U-um…Mr. Sasakura told me, uh, that you had a fever."

"What? Why'd KenKen have to go and tell you that…? So you

made a note to call me? Thank you for the concern, but my fever is already down, so I'm fine."

His voice didn't warp. His fever really was gone.

"That's good, but… But, um. Mr. Sasakura told me to come check on you myself."

"Huh?"

"So I'm outside of your apartment building right now."

"*Huh?* What is this, 'Mary's Phone Call'?!"

Takatsuki's surprise was full-blown that time. It was extremely characteristic of him to reference an urban legend in a moment like this.

Naoya thought he heard a small sigh on the other side of the line.

I am bothering him after all, he thought.

"Um, I'll just go home. Sorry for coming here without any warning."

"…Huh, ah, s-sorry, Fukamachi! Don't worry about that! I'll buzz you in right now, so come on up."

"But—"

"You're already here. I'm not just going to turn you away. Besides—I was hoping to talk to you, too, so your timing is perfect. I want you to tell me," Takatsuki said, "about what happened in Nagano again. About the things I forgot."

Naoya took the elevator up to the fourth floor, where Takatsuki's apartment was, and at last rang his intercom. Takatsuki opened the door at once.

"Welcome, Fukamachi. Please come in."

He ushered Naoya inside with his usual smile.

Judging from what he was wearing—a shirt and slacks—and the absence of bedhead, Takatsuki hadn't been sleeping when Naoya called. It was somehow like the professor to be dressed so neatly even in his own home, though Naoya would have liked to see Takatsuki in some loose-fitting loungewear at least once.

"I'm sorry. KenKen is so overprotective, making you come all the way here like this."

“I understand his urge to be overprotective toward you a little bit.”

“Hold on, am I really that bad?! I’m trying to do my best, you know…”

Peeved, Takatsuki grumbled as he showed Naoya to the living room.

A faintly sweet smell wafted through the living room air. Naoya recognized the scent from Takatsuki’s office. It seemed the professor only drank cocoa at home, too. Despite the fact that he had been ill, it didn’t surprise Naoya to see that the apartment was clean. Takatsuki came across as a very tidy person, and his office at school was always orderly (except for when Ruiko messed it up). Even the kitchen, which Naoya caught a glimpse of on his way to the living room, was free from clutter, apart from a tin of cocoa.

“It’s hot outside, right? I’m out of coffee, but I’ll make you an iced tea if you’d like.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that… I mean, you’re still recovering, so you should be resting.”

“I can do this much. Besides, I’m going to be having you talk a lot, so you’d better have something to drink. I’ve already boiled some water.”

With that, Takatsuki went into the kitchen. Apparently, he was making the iced tea from tea leaves, not from bottled black tea.

Naoya was the one dropping in to check on Takatsuki, so maybe he should have brought some sort of gift. Feeling a bit remorseful, Naoya sat on the sofa. As things stood, he may as well have just been visiting Takatsuki in his office like usual.

A tad restless, Naoya looked around the room.

Just like his office, Takatsuki’s spacious living room was filled with books. In addition to a large built-in bookshelf, there were several smaller bookcases that were probably added to the space later. Unlike the office, there were lots of books that weren’t research texts or reference materials.

As he gazed upon the shelves lined with large photo books and novels, Naoya recalled the first time he had been in this apartment. At the time, he had been a little surprised that Takatsuki had so

many books at home. With the professor's memory, he should have been able to discard every book he read once he was finished with it. After all, he could remember anything he read once exactly, word for word.

The fact that he kept said books close at hand was probably due to his really loving them. There was even a book he seemed to be in the middle of reading sitting out on the low table in front of the sofa. The book, with a carefully placed bookmark in its pages, was a novel that had been published some years prior. It was a love story, one Naoya had read, too, about a man and a woman who, reincarnated again and again, continued to search for each other throughout time.

Perhaps noticing that Naoya had picked the book up, Takatsuki called out from the kitchen.

"Are you interested in that one? You read a lot, too, don't you, Fukamachi? You can borrow that if you'd like."

"Oh, sorry, I shouldn't have just grabbed it without asking. I've actually read this book before, too."

"Ah, I see. I like that book. It's been a long time since I first read it, but I still reread it now and then."

"You read a lot of novels, huh, Professor? You even reread them."

"Yep. If I like it, I'll read a book over and over."

He was no different from anyone else in that respect, Takatsuki said.

Tapping his own temple lightly with one finger, he added, "Of course, in my case, the contents are all stored in my head like a photograph. But sometimes the emotions I feel differ from one read to another, and some books make me cry at the same parts no matter how many times I've read them… I guess it's not enough just to have the story memorized. That's how it is with sentimental things, you know."

Takatsuki gave a soft chuckle as he poured tea from the pot into a glass, over a mountain of ice.

"But that's why I have a hard time getting rid of books. KenKen gets fed up with me sometimes, asking why I keep buying more books when I already have so many at home. But me, I think books

are a nice thing to have a lot of."

"Mr. Sasakura doesn't seem like the type to read much."

"You're right," Takatsuki said. "KenKen is likely to fall asleep as soon as he starts a book."

Come to think of it, Naoya recalled Takatsuki saying something similar when they were at the library in Nagano.

The professor returned from the kitchen and set a glass of iced tea down in front of Naoya.

"Here you go. Sorry there's no straw."

"Oh, thank you," Naoya said, looking at Takatsuki's face again.

He looked a little thin.

He was usually slender, but his complexion wasn't great, either. He must have still been feeling under the weather after all.

Takatsuki grinned.

"You don't need to look so concerned. I might still look a little sick, since I was feverish for a while, but I am feeling a lot better now."

"…That's good, I guess."

"More importantly, could you tell me about it? About what you saw in Nagano, what you felt. I'd like you to tell me again, in detail."

Takatsuki sat down on the sofa. In one hand, he had a mug of cocoa with marshmallows floating in it, just like when he was in his office.

As requested, Naoya talked. Mainly about what happened after they went to the village once known as Koyama.

Holding his mug of cocoa in both hands, Takatsuki listened to Naoya speak.

Every once in a while, he interrupted with a question, but he never took a sip of his cocoa.

Takatsuki's eyes began to take on a blue tinge when the story reached the part about the midnight festival.

As the story progressed, those eyes, staring straight at Naoya, grew even more indigo. Remembering that Takatsuki's gaze had also turned blue that day, just before he lost his memories, Naoya felt a chill run down his spine.

And yet the man leaning forward slightly, face serious as though

he was concentrating, intending to catch every single word Naoya said, was undoubtedly the usual Takatsuki. He was nothing like the expressionless, doll-like "other" Takatsuki.

Suddenly, something struck Naoya as curious.

Why was it that, back then, Takatsuki's eyes hadn't taken on the color of the night sky even once?

Not when they were at the blue lantern festival, nor when they were descending Yomotsu Hirasaka.

Naoya remembered the professor's eyes being dark brown the entire time.

He still wasn't quite sure under what circumstances Takatsuki's eyes turned blue, but for some reason, he couldn't help but find it strange that they hadn't changed at those times.

After all, they were glimpses of the other world that Takatsuki was always longing to see.

Wasn't it odd for those eyes, which seemed to try to peer into all that Takatsuki wanted to know, to miss out on something like that?

Takatsuki gazed intently at Naoya, listening. His night-sky eyes glowed faintly, as if countless stars twinkled deep within them. Naoya had the feeling that somewhere in there, the *other* Takatsuki was also listening carefully to his tale.

Ah, he thought then, realizing. *I see.*

Takatsuki had lost his memories, so he had no recollection of what Naoya was talking about.

And the *other* Takatsuki, too. He hadn't been watching, so he probably didn't know, either—

About what happened after they had been called to that midnight festival.

That's why he was listening quietly to Naoya from inside Takatsuki.

As if to prove as much, when the story reached the part where morning came, Takatsuki's eyes returned at some point to their normal color.

When Naoya was done talking, Takatsuki sighed and leaned back into the sofa. Slowly, he brought his cold cocoa, into which the marshmallows had already completely melted, to his mouth.

"…What a pain. I really can't remember any of that."

At a loss, Takatsuki gave a small laugh, his gaze shifting.

He looked toward the living room door.

"The morning of the fourteenth," he said, voice quiet. "I finished preparing for the trip and left through that door."

Naoya turned his gaze in that direction, too.

It was like he could see Takatsuki on that day, walking toward the door with his packed bags in hand. His expression was as cheerful as ever, and his steps were light.

"As I was walking toward the front door, I got a call from KenKen. He told me to come down because he was outside the apartment building. It was just a little earlier than the time we originally agreed on."

After hanging up on Sasakura, Takatsuki put his shoes on in a bit of a rush.

Then he opened the door to his apartment and went outside.

"That's it. That's all I remember."

The image of Takatsuki from that morning that Naoya had been picturing, like some sort of phantom, suddenly vanished.

"My next memory is from the car on the way home. You turned to me with a worried look on your face, and KenKen asked me what the date was."

Shaking his head idly, Takatsuki took another sip of cocoa.

His face looked even paler than before.

"…Are you okay? Professor?" Naoya asked.

Takatsuki laughed ambiguously and didn't answer.

He drank his cold cocoa again, looking like he really wasn't enjoying it.

"I-I've always wanted to know. Do real supernatural phenomena exist in this world…? And to be right in the middle of one and not remember it? It's too much. On top of that, to finally regain my lost memories only to lose them again."

Takatsuki was obsessed with the supernatural because he wanted to solve the mystery of his being spirited away in the past.

It seemed that at Yomotsu Hirasaka, he had regained his memories from that period of his life.

But those memories had been snatched away from him again.

By the *other* Takatsuki.

"What in the world is this 'other' me?" Takatsuki mused bitterly.

"Professor…were you already aware of the 'other' you?" Naoya asked.

"Yeah, I knew something like that existed within me. I have no recollection of the times the 'other' me appears. I realized it later when people in my life pointed it out… That sort of thing never happened before I was spirited away."

Which meant it was indeed a phenomenon connected to Takatsuki's past.

"Pragmatically speaking, this is what someone would call 'multiple personalities.' Considering what happened to me, something like that wouldn't be particularly surprising. I may have created another identity within me to protect myself from the stress of the abuse or offense. I was actually brought to a doctor because I was suspected of having dissociative identity disorder. They tried hypnotherapy and psychological counseling and all sorts of things, but the 'other' me never emerged in those settings, and none of the treatments were especially effective. And besides, even if it were dissociative identity disorder, for even my eye color to change…that's a bit much."

Takatsuki spoke in a disinterested tone, tracing the cocoa stuck to the rim of his mug with his finger.

"But considering what happened with this incident, it would seem this 'other' me is indeed the one responsible for erasing my memories of the past. Moreover, that was apparently done in accordance with some sort of promise."

Naoya remembered, at the time, the *other* appearing as if taking complete control of Takatsuki and saying, *"You mustn't. You must not remember. That would be violating our agreement, Akira."*

What kind of agreement had been made in the past?

And for what purpose had it been made?

"There's something else. One more thing I learned from this," Takatsuki said. "The words I said before the 'other' me appeared. I said, 'that person,' didn't I?"

At Yomotsu Hirasaka, Takatsuki relived the memory that involved

the scars on his back.

At the time, he said he saw a big hand.

"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—"

That was where Takatsuki's words had cut off in the moment.

"Saying 'that person' might imply that what happened to me wasn't a case of *kamikakushi* but just an ordinary kidnapping. Or perhaps there was something that I, as a child, would have perceived as a 'person.' Regardless, it means someone else was involved in my disappearance at the age of twelve. I didn't just disappear—I was taken by someone."

Takatsuki's grip on his mug tightened. His downturned eyes shone darkly.

But that tension melted away in an instant, and the professor calmly returned the mug to the table.

"But that's all I've learned. In the end, I still don't know any of the crucial details."

Takatsuki covered his face with a hand.

"…It's hopeless. No matter what, every time I think about it, I feel like I'm losing my resolve."

Behind his palm, Takatsuki let out a weak breath.

Noticing a slight trembling in that hand, Naoya felt his heart clench.

"No matter how badly I want to know, no matter how hard I try to find out, the same thing may happen again in the future. Even if I find the truth I'm seeking, the *other* me may erase my memory over and over again, and that could be the end of it. If that's the case, what am I supposed to do now? What I'm doing…is there any meaning in it?"

The desire to know was Takatsuki's raison d'être.

This man lived his life fueled by his drive to find out the truth of his own past.

For him to work tirelessly to recover his missing memories only to lose them again—what worse outcome could there be?

On top of that, the threat resided inside Takatsuki himself.

"…Ah, this really is terrible… I really did not want you to see me looking this pathetic."

Takatsuki smiled awkwardly, taking his hand away from his face.

You don't have to smile even in times like this, Naoya thought, dropping his gaze.

Why, when both his physical strength and willpower were nearly exhausted, when he looked so miserable, was this man still trying to smile?

But even so, Naoya thought this might have been the first time Takatsuki had allowed himself to complain in front of him.

In that case, was there something Naoya could do? For the professor in this moment?

Before, it was always Naoya who was being protected and helped. In the Chofu *kamikakushi* incident, Takatsuki put himself in harm's way to shield Naoya from their attackers, and when Naoya caught a cold and ended up with an ear infection, Takatsuki showed up at his apartment and took care of him. It was the same in Nagano. If the professor hadn't chased after him when he was being lured away into the underworld, Naoya was certain he wouldn't be here now.

Naoya's gaze shifted back upward. He looked at Takatsuki.

His cheeks were pale. His jaw was slightly leaner. His eyes, usually bright and sparkling, were now dark and cloudy. Takatsuki looked weaker than Naoya had ever seen him, but it was already past time to be shaken by that. There had to be some kind of way to cheer him up.

Then—Naoya realized something.

"Professor."

The only scent in the room was that of cocoa.

Naoya thought of the glimpse of the kitchen he had caught before. How neat and tidy it was. Not a single plate in the dish drainer, no pots or pans out. The only thing on the counter was the cocoa tin.

"Professor… Are you eating enough?"

Takatsuki's shoulders gave a little twitch.

Naoya asked again.

"Have you had a meal?"

"…Ah-ha-ha."

"Don't act like it's a joke!"

Naoya couldn't help raising his voice.

He had arrived at the apartment after noon. It would have made sense for there to be signs of someone eating lunch, or at least signs of breakfast being cleared. He should have realized when he saw none of that.

"Umm, well, I haven't been very hungry."

"Don't tell me you haven't eaten this entire time?!"

"No, of course not! I was eating premade porridge and soups at first, and then when KenKen came over, he made me an egg rice porridge! But, well…even after my fever went down, I was feeling tired, so it was a bit difficult."

"Then don't try to live on cocoa alone! That's how you end up losing weight and looking sick!"

Takatsuki seemed to be trying to evade the issue by missing the point entirely, and Naoya glared at him, utterly fed up. No wonder Sasakura was forced to be so overprotective, he thought.

"Ugh, fine… How about I make you something?"

"Huh?"

"As long as you don't mind my using the contents of your kitchen and fridge."

"That's fine, but really? You're going to make something for me, Fukamachi?"

"Just don't expect anything fancy."

Naoya wished Takatsuki wasn't looking at him all wide-eyed in astonishment. He lived alone, too. Cooking for oneself was a basic skill.

Going to the kitchen, Naoya took a look in the refrigerator. It was deplorably empty, even for a large fridge one wouldn't expect to see in a single person's home.

He looked back at Takatsuki, who was following close behind.

"Professor, I thought you said you'd been cooking for yourself a lot since Mr. Wataru scolded you?"

"I was! But remember, once we came back from the trip, I was laid up!"

"Well, I suppose you wouldn't have been able to go shopping, either… Do you mind if I look in the freezer?"

Naoya pulled the freezer drawer open with a clatter. It wasn't exactly well stocked, either, but there was some frozen rice inside, thankfully.

"…Maybe something like porridge would be best, since you haven't been eating much lately."

"Umm, I might be getting a little tired of porridge… KenKen made quite a large batch for me."

"Okay, in that case…"

Naoya was pretty sure he had just seen a meager amount of ham and eggs in the fridge, which meant he knew what he could make. Grabbing some of the frozen rice, he opened the refrigerator back up.

"Go sit down and read a book or something, please, Professor."

After asking where the cookware and seasonings were kept, Naoya urged Takatsuki back into the living room. He couldn't cook with someone standing there watching over his shoulder.

Takatsuki called out from the living room.

"Hey, Fukamachi? Make sure to make some for yourself, too, okay?"

"Huh? How come?"

"Because you haven't had lunch, either, right? Besides, food tastes better when you eat it with someone else rather than alone."

"Right… Got it."

There were more or less enough ingredients for two servings. *Guess I'll just use them all up*, Naoya thought, cracking the eggs and starting to stir. But then he felt someone's eyes on him.

Takatsuki was sitting on the sofa, watching him with a strangely excited expression.

"Wh-what is it? Didn't I ask you to read or do something else?"

"But I don't want to. This is a rare sight. I want to watch."

"Please don't. It makes me nervous."

"Awww. Come on, doesn't it make you happy to see someone

cooking for you?”

It wasn’t like Naoya couldn’t understand that feeling, but it was still annoying for the professor to sit there all alert, like a large dog waiting for his food. He was the spitting image of the golden retriever Naoya used to own; he could practically see Takatsuki’s nonexistent tail wagging in anticipation.

Takatsuki continued to watch him with a smile on his face, so Naoya finished up the cooking and returned to the living room, feeling uncomfortable all the while.

“Here,” he said, setting a plate in front of Takatsuki.

The professor stared fixedly at the food on the dish.

“Wow! Omurice!”

“Oh, do you not like it? Or maybe it’s still too much for your stomach?”

“No, that’s not it. I was just thinking you cooked something surprisingly cute.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice, did I? This was the only option when I compared what was in your fridge to what I know how to make! Oh, and there weren’t any onions, so all that’s inside the flavored rice is ham. So I don’t know if it’ll be any good.”

“That’s okay. I’m sure this will be delicious,” Takatsuki said, before even taking a bite. He picked up his spoon, ate a mouthful, and continued with a smile. “Yep, it’s delicious! You’re a good cook, Fukamachi. You even wrapped the eggs so neatly.”

“You think so?”

Hearing no distortion in Takatsuki’s voice, Naoya was relieved. If the food whetted his appetite even a little, that was all that mattered.

As he picked up his own spoon, Naoya suddenly remembered something.

“—One time.”

“Hmm?”

“Someone told me, ‘If you can eat something you think is delicious, it’s a blessing.’ I’m glad you’re enjoying your meal right now, Professor.”

The hand holding Takatsuki’s spoon paused, and the professor

looked at Naoya.

Smiling softly, his eyes narrowing, Takatsuki said, “Those words stuck with you, huh?”

“They did.”

When Naoya had been ill, Takatsuki had come to take care of him and said those words.

Naoya had told him all about what had happened in Nagano, but he’d never gone into detail about the things he’d seen at Yomotsu Hirasaka.

Consequently, he hadn’t yet gotten the chance to say thank you.

“Things like that stuck with me, and that’s why I was able to come back from Yomotsu Hirasaka.”

“…Is that so?”

“Yes—I’m grateful.”

If Naoya closed his eyes, he could still see the golden sparks bursting behind his eyelids.

Without onions, the omurice did end up lacking somewhat in flavor, but Takatsuki ate every bite, looking very happy the entire time.

Naoya returned to the living room after washing the dishes to find Takatsuki with his laptop open.

He was looking at the screen with a smirk.

“Geez. I hadn’t used my computer in a while, so the e-mails really piled up… It doesn’t look like there’s anything urgent, but—ah.”

Takatsuki’s hand froze.

“What is it?”

“Ah, yeah, there’s an e-mail from Neighborhood Stories.”

“Oh?”

Neighborhood Stories was Takatsuki’s website. It was mainly a site for categorizing and providing examples of urban legends Takatsuki had collected, but it also accepted general submissions. Perhaps due to the nature of the site, people often sent inquiries regarding strange phenomena in through the submission form.

“Is it the usual message asking for a consultation?”

"It doesn't seem to be as serious as seeking counsel, no. I think the client is a student. It says they're working at an amusement park haunted house as a short-term part-time job, and there's something odd happening with the haunted house."

"Odd? Like mechanical issues?"

"No, apparently, a lot of customers are screaming in parts of the haunted house where there shouldn't be any scares."

"Huh?"

"They said, 'It's possible there's a real ghost, so please come check it out if you'd like.'"

"A real ghost…? What kind?"

"They didn't include any details. The student doesn't seem to have seen it personally. Well, as far as a story goes, it's common enough."

Naoya sat down on the sofa.

"Are there really a lot of ghost stories about actual ghosts appearing in haunted houses? I haven't really heard any like that before."

"They're quite par for the course. A famous example would be the Haunted Mansion at Disneyland."

"Eh?"

Naoya had been there once as a child himself. It had been decked out in cheerful Christmas decorations and was more of a fun attraction than a scary one, but perhaps that was because he had gone during Christmastime.

"Disneyland itself is host to quite a few urban legends. The most famous one concerning the Haunted Mansion is probably the ghost in the Endless Hallway. After a room lined with bookshelves, guests pass by a seemingly endless corridor at the same time the ride's voice-over guide says, 'Even I don't know how long this hallway goes on.' The ghost of a girl appears there, beckoning. There's also a version of the legend where it's not a girl, but the ghost of a boy holding a Pinocchio doll. And there's a story about a girl with a bob haircut who looks totally out of place appearing in the scene where the translucent ghosts are having a ball. I even went looking for her once."

"What, you went there just to see her?"

"Unfortunately, even with my eyesight, I couldn't find her."

Takatsuki shrugged and laughed.

"Anyway, amusement parks are places that perfectly meet the conditions that spawn urban legends," he continued, speaking as though giving a lecture. "People encounter the supernatural far more often in unfamiliar, extraordinary places than they do in familiar, mundane ones. Amusement parks are bright, lively settings where tons of strangers gather together; everything about them is far from the ordinary. That's exactly why, if you come across a spot in one without other people, it can be frightening, and seeing something unexpected can leave a lasting impression. That's especially true in a haunted house, because people go inside them seeking to be scared. If you look at everyday things with fear in mind, they can easily become specters. It's only natural for a ghost story or two to come of it."

Naoya turned his gaze to Takatsuki's laptop.

"So are you going to accept the request?"

"Well…I'm not sure. They don't seem to be especially worried about this spawning rumors and driving away customers. I'd rather think it'd be good for a haunted house business if a real ghost were to appear."

Takatsuki cocked his head to the side slightly.

Hearing his fairly uninterested tone of voice, Naoya blurted out, "Let's take it. This case."

Takatsuki blinked at him in surprise, and Naoya leaned toward him, meeting his gaze.

"Why not? An actual ghost in a haunted house? It's the perfect case for the summertime, and it sounds interesting! Why not go and hear them out?"

Naoya tried to inject some enthusiasm into his words.

After all, ordinarily in this situation, Takatsuki would have been shouting, with his eyes alight, "A haunted house with a real ghost would be fantastic! Let's go talk to them right now!" His lack of reaction was probably because he still wasn't back to his usual self.

But just a moment ago, when Takatsuki had been talking about

urban legends and haunted houses, there had been a glimmer of amusement in his eyes—Naoya had seen it.

What Takatsuki needed to regain his energy was a good mystery, Naoya was sure.

It was true that the basis for the professor's search for the supernatural was his desire to uncover the truth about his past, but even so, he always looked overjoyed when he was talking about anything otherworldly.

Surely if they went on one of their typical investigations and found something to pique Takatsuki's interest, he would return to his normal self. Even if it didn't happen quickly, he was probably better off going out and having some fun than staying holed up forever in his apartment, brooding. And haunted houses were exactly Takatsuki's brand of entertainment to begin with.

For a long moment, Takatsuki stared at Naoya with a somewhat blank look on his face.

Then finally, he smiled softly.

"…Yeah. You're right."

His soft smile soon shifted into an oddly delighted one.

For some reason, his expression was the same as it had been while he was eating his omurice.

"Yeah, you're exactly right, Fukamachi. We might as well go and hear what they have to say. You're coming, too, right?"

"Of course." Naoya nodded.

After all, Naoya didn't have much to do over his long summer break.

They planned to meet the client a few days later in Shinjuku.

Naoya met Takatsuki at the ticket gates of Shinjuku Station and led the way to the café where their meeting was to be held, since Takatsuki would have gotten lost in no time if left to his own devices.

Dressed in one of his usual suits, Takatsuki was, by appearances at least, in good health. He seemed to be eating properly, and his complexion was good.

The meeting spot was a self-service-style café, where they

ordered drinks at a register to start. Takatsuki got an iced tea, while Naoya ordered an iced coffee, and they looked around the shop with their drinks in hand.

When they did, two girls sitting near a window waved at them. One was fair-skinned with straight, shoulder-length black hair, and the second sported a short bob that had been dyed a chestnut color.

"Here! Over here, Professor Takatsuki!"

"Wow, looks like we're in good hands! My gosh, he's so handsome. What do I do?"

They had been expecting a single client, but she appeared to have brought a friend along. The girls had probably looked up Takatsuki's face on the internet or something beforehand.

They approached the table where the girls were squealing excitedly, and Takatsuki introduced himself.

"Hello, I'm Takatsuki from Seiwa University. This is my assistant, Fukamachi. You're the ones who messaged me about the haunted house, yes?"

With that, he sat down in the chair opposite the two of them, that alone eliciting another squeal. The girls were behaving as if they were meeting a celebrity. Incidentally, it seemed that Naoya, who sat beside Takatsuki, was so plain, they didn't even notice him.

The pale girl with the black hair introduced herself first.

"Um, I'm Rino Ooki. I'm the one who sent the e-mail. Nice to meet you!"

"I'm Airi Makino, I work part-time with Rino! Ummm, I saw you on a TV special about supernatural stuff before, and I've been a fan ever since. I'm so happy to meet you!"

The girl with the chestnut bob begged a handshake from Takatsuki as she gave her name.

Sometimes, the requests Takatsuki received came from people in dire circumstances, but this one seemed to have come from a desire to meet the "handsome associate professor from the TV." No wonder the e-mail hadn't been worded all that seriously.

Still, Naoya didn't think it was likely the contents of the message would be completely made up.

"Well then, could you tell me your story?"

Takatsuki prompted them with a bright smile, and Rino and Airi began to talk in turn.

"So we work part-time at the haunted house at Riddle Park."

"Riddle Park puts on a special haunted house event every summer. The kind where it's people doing the scaring, not mechanisms. So they need a big staff, and they recruit part-timers for the summer season."

Riddle Park was an amusement park in Bunkyo.

Rino and Airi apparently attended different universities but had become friends after hitting it off at the interviews for their part-time job. Luckily, they were both hired and began working as ghosts after being given the rundown on their roles and on how to scare people.

The theme of the summer season haunted house changed every year. The elaborate design and setups always aroused a lot of interest, and the event was so popular that there were often long lines.

"I've been to the summer haunted house at Riddle Park before. It's so interesting. They set it up like there's a storyline. What's the concept this year?"

"It's called the Cursed Elementary School. The main ghost is a woman named Yoruka, who used to teach at the school."

"Here's the website for the haunted house."

Rino answered Takatsuki's question, while Airi held out her smartphone.

On the screen was a woman's bloody, severed head floating in midair against the backdrop of a weathered, old elementary school. Below that, in bright-red letters, was the title: The Cursed Elementary School. It made for quite the impression.

Takatsuki scrolled through the page, finding the section labeled "Story."

"*—There was once a female teacher named Miss Yoruka, who worked at the elementary school.*

She had a strong sense of responsibility and loved the students in her class very much.

One day, three students stayed after school to prepare a presentation.

But a bloodthirsty murderer turned up at the school. Miss Yoruka hid her students under desks and in lockers, but one by one they were found, and one by one they were killed.

The last to be executed, Miss Yoruka had her head chopped off. Her head flew through the air, however, biting into the murderer's throat and killing him.

Miss Yoruka, now merely a head, still wanders the halls of the abandoned school, looking for the students she hid. 'Come out…,' she calls to them—"

"Wow, this year's haunted house looks fun, too! I'd love to see it!"

Takatsuki returned the phone to Airi, his eyes sparkling like a child's.

The sight made Naoya feel a bit relieved. Takatsuki seemed to be returning to his usual self. It was a good thing they accepted the case after all.

"So the inside of the haunted house is set up to look like an abandoned school, yes?"

"That's right. You start in the entrance hall and go through a regular classroom, a hallway, a science lab, a music room, and the nurse's office, in that order."

The ghost actors hid, waiting, under desks and inside walls and lockers, jumping out suddenly to scare the customers. The inside of the haunted house was quite dark, on top of being complex, and guests sometimes lost their way and got so scared, they simply refused to move, so the staff also occasionally helped in guiding those people.

Outside the exit were questionnaires for the customers to write down which part they found scariest and how they would rate the scare factor overall. Not everyone filled them out, of course, but a fair few filled-out forms were turned in every day, all of which were posted on the walls in the staff room.

"I love it when someone writes that the part I work in was scary. On the other hand, when they write, 'The timing of the scare was off,' it doesn't feel so great. But once, Airi noticed a weird response that we got."

The response said, “The mirror in the hallway in front of the exit was scary.”

After customers were frightened in the various rooms, the haunted house ended with them being pursued frantically into the final hallway.

Unlike the other rooms, the hallway didn’t feature any bloody puppets or cacophonous mechanisms. It was just a simple hallway with a large old mirror hanging at the end. The hallway turned ninety degrees at the mirror, leading directly to the exit. It was a place where the customers, who until then had been met with all manner of terrifying sights, could feel a sense of relief all at once as they made it back to somewhere normal.

It was also, however, the climax of the haunted house.

After guests entered the hallway, a ghost actor appeared from behind a door hidden in the wall, moaning as it chased after the guests, getting as close to them as possible. The customers, shocked, would scream and make a break for the exit.

It was only natural to say the hallway was terrifying, but—

“The mirror is just a mirror. There’s no trick to it,” Rino said. “But the questionnaire clearly said, ‘The mirror was scary.’ All of us staff who were there looked at each other like, ‘What are they talking about?’ Finally, we figured the guest must have just been mistaken in what they saw, but…”

“Did other questionnaires have similar responses written in them?” Takatsuki asked, and Rino and Airi nodded.

“The mirror at the end was scary.” “Miss Yoruka’s reflection in the mirror was too much.” “I really wish that wasn’t what you showed us in the very last second.” “That mirror in front of the exit seriously traumatized me.” When the staff looked, they found a number of questionnaires with such comments. They weren’t all written on the same day, and the handwriting naturally differed as well. It didn’t feel like a prank someone was playing.

“And then Tamura—he’s the actor who scares people in the last hallway—said, ‘That must be it.’ Apparently, guests would sometimes scream and run before he could come out to scare them. He seemed convinced that it’s because they were frightened by the mirror.”

But there was no reason to be afraid of the mirror. It was only a mirror.

Getting ever more curious, Rino and Airi checked social media sites like Twitter and Instagram. Sure enough, they found posts that said things like, "There was a ghost in the mirror," and "That mirror is way too scary."

"So we told Mr. Terui about it—oh, Mr. Terui is a Riddle Park employee. He's in charge of the haunted house. Anyway, he said something weird."

"What do you mean by that?" Takatsuki asked, and the girls glanced at each other.

Airi was the one who answered.

"…The summer season haunted house is made with the help of an outside specialist who produces haunted houses. I guess they always use the same person, but this year, they got someone different. They seemed super eager about it, and apparently, they had gotten their hands on a mirror that came from a real elementary school that was closed down. Mr. Terui said that mirror was the one we were using… Since then, even the staff have started talking about how there might be an actual ghost haunting the mirror."

"I see. So that's why you e-mailed me."

Rino and Airi nodded again at Takatsuki's words.

"Hmm. That is quite the interesting story."

As he stroked lightly at his chin with his fingertips, Takatsuki's gaze flickered to Naoya, who shook his head minutely.

As of that point, there hadn't been any lies in the girls' words. Their consultation request wasn't just some fabrication invented to catch a glimpse of the handsome associate professor. It was real.

Takatsuki took a sip of his iced tea, which had been heavily sweetened with simple syrup.

"The mirror," he said. "What sort of mirror is it?"

"A rectangular one you can see your whole body in. It doesn't have a frame or anything, it's really just a mirror… Um, kinda like the ones you see in the changing rooms of old inns. It's pretty splotchy, so I guess you could say it's a little creepy. It says 'Donated in 1977' at the top."

"Ah, a full-length mirror, then? In a school, they're often installed in staircase landings. That type of mirror is often the subject of school ghost stories."

There had been such a mirror in Naoya's elementary school. It had been in the hallway near the nurse's office, not in the stairwell, but like so many of its kind, it had been one of the school's seven mysteries. If memory served, the story went that if you stood in front of that mirror at midnight, you'd be dragged inside of it or something like that.

"What about the staff? Are any of them scared of the mirror?"

"As of now, none of the staff have claimed to see a ghost. The actor who chases customers down the hall is always one of the men, but they all say they don't remember seeing anything strange."

"We've gone by that mirror tons of times during inspections and cleaning, too, but there's never been anything in it. I love horror and stuff, so if there is a ghost, I'd love to see it!"

Rino and Airi both shook their heads. Neither of them seemed to be afraid of ghosts, as one would expect from people who worked in a haunted house.

Fiddling with the straw in her iced coffee, Airi added, "Come to think of it, I don't really get why there's a mirror there."

"Ah, y'know, I thought the same thing!" Rino said, nodding.

Airi nodded back at her in agreement.

Takatsuki tilted his head to the side.

"Why do you say that? Isn't it that they put in a mirror like the kind you would see in schools because the setting is an abandoned schoolhouse?"

"I guess that could be it, but it's still a little weird," Airi said, chewing on her straw with a slight pout. "I mean, that hallway doesn't look anything like a school hall."

"Huh?"

"The walls are covered in black fabric, and the floor is black, too. It really just feels like a 'passage.' All the other rooms are made to look just like schoolrooms, though. Besides, a mirror doesn't even come up in the Cursed Elementary School story, so it's not like it's a key prop or anything."

“The walls are black, to make the hidden door harder to see. But it really is like that hallway was made specifically to put that mirror in… When I asked Mr. Terui about it, he said, ‘The producer said there absolutely has to be a mirror there.’”

Neither Airi nor Rino looked convinced.

The story did indeed seem a bit odd.

After all, the mirror was placed at the very end of the haunted house.

One would expect it to have been put there to showcase the attraction’s final performer, but it had no mechanism and no purpose. The fact that the producer claimed it was essential only made it all the more intriguing.

“That’s why there’s been talk among the staff that the mirror must be cursed and it was put there intentionally. They’re saying maybe people with a strong supernatural sense must be able to see something in it.”

“Too bad no one on the staff has psychic powers. What about you, Professor? Can you see ghosts or exorcise them or something?”

“Mm, unfortunately, I have no psychic powers, either,” Takatsuki replied with a cheeky smile. “But I am rather interested in that mirror. I’d love to see it. Also, if possible, I’d like to speak with the producer. Do you think that’d be possible?”

“Well, he comes by every once in a while to check on the haunted house, so I think that would probably be fine. I’ll ask Mr. Terui when he’s coming next.”

Rino nodded.

Taking in the conversation from the sidelines, Naoya cast a discreet look in Takatsuki’s direction.

Normally, he would have started getting riled up, clutching at Rino’s or Airi’s hands, saying something like, “This is amazing!” But Takatsuki was showing absolutely zero signs of going into large dog mode today. Naoya started to worry somewhat that maybe he wasn’t feeling well after all.

Still, Takatsuki seemed to have officially taken on the case. His interest in the mirror appeared to be genuine, and perhaps he’d regain his usual self over the course of the investigation. Naoya

hoped so anyway.

Takatsuki contacted him later to say he'd arranged to meet with the haunted house's producer.

And so, on a Saturday in early September, Naoya headed to Riddle Park.

He met up with Takatsuki at eleven in the morning in front of the park gates.

Summer vacation was likely over for most people who weren't in university, but as it was a weekend, the place was crowded.

Taking out the headphones he had stuffed into his ears, Naoya looked around at the throngs of families and couples and noticed two tall figures who managed to stand out, even in the crowd.

It was Takatsuki, dressed as ever in a suit, despite being at an amusement park, and Sasakura, decked out in all-black casual clothing and looking like an unsavory sort of guy.

"Hey. You're late, Fukamachi."

"There's still five minutes until our meeting time, though… Why is Mr. Sasakura here? Didn't we come to speak to the producer today?"

"Our appointment with the producer is in the early evening," Takatsuki said. "Before that, I wanted to see the haunted house as a normal patron. Besides, wouldn't it be boring to come all the way to an amusement park just for a meeting?"

Takatsuki seemed eager to enjoy himself, as usual.

"Oh, then are you going to try the rides, too?"

"That's the plan. Wait—Fukamachi, don't tell me you're afraid of thrill rides?"

"Afraid of them…? I don't know, really."

"What do you mean?"

"Um, I haven't really been to many amusement parks."

Naoya's parents had taken him to amusement parks a few times when he was little, but there hadn't been many rides he was tall enough for at the time. Plus, his parents weren't fans of thrill rides to begin with, so he couldn't recall going on any. There had been few family outings since his ears became the way they were, and

Naoya didn’t have any friends to go to an amusement park with.

“I see. Well then, we’d better have lots of fun today.”

Takatsuki smiled brightly.

Then suddenly, he looked past Naoya and waved one hand.

“Hey! Over here!”

“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

Ruiko had arrived.

She ran toward them in a hurry, her long hair flying behind her. She was in contacts instead of glasses, and her face was made up nicely. Clad in a gauzy shirtdress, a tank top, and jeans, she looked a bit more put together and energetic than she did when Naoya saw her at school.

Feeling a slight sense of déjà vu, Naoya realized this was the same group of people he’d gone to Yanaka with the previous summer. That had been his first time meeting Sasakura and also the first time he and Ruiko had a proper conversation.

“Don’t worry. You didn’t keep us waiting at all, Miss Ruiko. It’s only just getting to our agreed meetup time. Now then—shall we go in?”

At Takatsuki’s prompting, the four of them went through the gates.

They were enveloped at once by lively music and cheers as the extraordinary place known as an amusement park unfolded before them instantaneously, like a pop-up book.

White horses and carriages, straight out of a fairy tale, went in an elegant circular path on a resplendently decorated merry-go-round. Incessant cries of both joy and fear rang out from a pirate ship that was suspended in midair and swinging, pendulum-like, back and forth in big arcs. Instinctively ducking at a thunderous roar that passed overhead, they looked around to see a coaster racing along a towering track. A gigantic Ferris wheel rotated leisurely, while a free-fall ride dropped from an incredible height as its passengers let out hair-raising screams. There was so much information bombarding all five of the senses that it made one feel a little dazed. Was the sweet smell lingering in the air coming from the churros being sold at the concession stand? Or perhaps from the caramel-covered popcorn?

Suddenly a cry of "It's Riddleman!" came from across the way, and a rush of children all ran off in one direction. They were headed for a red-haired clown in a polka-dot hat. It seemed this was Riddleman, the park's mascot. With a round, plump body and a gaudy jacket covered in question marks, he tapped the ends of his large, clunky shoes together and greeted the surrounding guests with a wave. With a quick flick of Riddleman's white-gloved hands, countless soap bubbles began floating magically up from inside a hedge. The children cheered again, and Riddleman gave an affected bow.

Though it was his first time coming to Riddle Park, Naoya felt somehow terribly nostalgic. Maybe his memories of being taken to amusement parks as a child were coming back up. He remembered, back then, being utterly convinced that such a place was a land of dreams and that when closing time came, not wanting to go home, he would throw a tantrum and embarrass his parents.

"Professor Akira, where should we start?" Ruiko asked, opening up a pamphlet she'd grabbed near the park gates.

Takatsuki smiled smugly and pointed to a spot on the park map.

"We'll start here, naturally!"

He was, of course, pointing to the haunted house.

With that, Takatsuki set off at a brisk pace. Naoya wondered at first if it was okay to let someone with no sense of direction lead the way, but before long, a building with a large sign that read THE CURSED ELEMENTARY SCHOOL came into view. When it came to places he had been before, Takatsuki didn't get lost.

The haunted house's exterior was roughly built to resemble an elementary school. Spooky music and shrieking sounds flowed continuously from the speakers installed on the building. It seemed to be quite the popular attraction, as the line to get in was long enough to be doubled up several times.

Naoya glanced up at Sasakura's face as the four of them stood in line.

As expected, the man looked grim. Despite his tough appearance, Sasakura was apparently not a fan of ghosts.

“Mr. Sasakura, you must not like haunted houses, huh?”

“…I was just wondering why I’m at a haunted house in an amusement park in my mid-thirties. That’s all.”

Sasakura glared down at him. His voice hadn’t distorted at all, but Naoya found it a little suspect that he hadn’t given a clear answer to the question.

Takatsuki spoke up then.

“Haunted houses aren’t really for children, you know.”

“How do you figure? They’re basically just childish prank stuff.”

“Well, it’s true that some of the haunted houses at amusement parks are made for kids because of the parks’ clientele. But haunted houses were originally for adults to enjoy as well.”

“Don’t haunted houses have their roots in circus sideshows?” Naoya asked, and Takatsuki nodded.

“That’s what they say. But the original basis for them was the ghost story craze during the Edo period.”

The subject was one Takatsuki had covered countless times in his lectures.

What people knew as “ghost stories” had existed for ages. The *Nihon Ryoiki* and *Konjaku Monogatarishu*, written in the Heian period, both contained many stories about demons and ghosts. Vengeful and departed spirits even made appearances in *The Tale of Genji*. Artworks depicting monsters, like the *Hyakki Yakou Emaki*, were produced in droves during the Muromachi period.

It was only in the Edo period, however, that such things became associated with entertainment and bloomed into supernatural hobbies being in vogue.

“We’re talking about the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century. Pop culture fully developed from the Kansei to the Bunka and Bunsei eras, and people started taking an interest in the bizarre and mysterious. This was around the time of Kabuki having a huge influence and of Tsuruya Nanboku’s *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* being a big hit. In the art world, famous painters like Toriyama Sekien, Katsushika Hokusai, and Utagawa Kuniyoshi created many works depicting ghosts and apparitions and grotesque scenes of the supernatural. Tons of ghost story collections were

compiled, city folk amused themselves with ghost story rituals, and the ghost story craze was born. As a part of that craze, people began making monster crafts."

"Monster crafts? Like dolls?"

"Exactly. You started to see people making dolls of monsters and ghosts by covering wood carvings with silk, animal pelts, or fish skins. These sorts of dolls were used in sideshows and theaters and became very popular. Some individuals even bought the dolls, and in 1830, a doctor living in Ōmorihigashi named Hyousen set up monster dolls in a detached room of his house. He also painted pictures of monsters on the walls and ceiling. It became known as the Omori Monster Teahouse, and people came to visit it in large numbers. It may have been the forerunner of what we now call haunted houses. Although it became so popular that the local magistrate at the time denounced it, saying it was disgraceful for a doctor to behave like a sideshow peddler, and the room was apparently forced to close down within several months."

Speaking happily in his soft voice, Takatsuki smiled. He truly was animated when talking about subjects like this.

"Although just putting monster dolls on display in a room would eventually bore the customers. Showmen were racking their brains for ways to attract more guests. They came up with the idea to use elaborate mechanical dolls to reproduce popular Kabuki plays of the time. When customers entered the show tents, they'd see a number of ghost story scenes recreated. Eventually, these shows moved away from Kabuki and began depicting scenes of violent deaths and hellscapes. This 'viewing scary scenes in succession' format was firmly established as the format for subsequent haunted houses. I think there are still quite a few of that type left today. The kind where there's suddenly a torture chamber right after a graveyard for some reason, or where you encounter not only monsters but also fierce wild animals, like they've just thrown together all the scary things they can think of."

"Ah, now that you mention it, I went to a haunted house when I was little that was like that."

A memory surfaced in Naoya's head at Takatsuki's words. He

didn’t remember which amusement park it had been, but when one entered the building, they’d see things like a dark corridor with an old, unused well, a grave, and a cage with a monster inside. When someone passed in front of one of the sets, a *rokurokubi* would grow out from behind the grave, or the caged monster would struggle violently, as if reacting to a tripped sensor.

“…But why did interest in weird stuff get so popular in the first place?” Sasakura muttered. “I don’t understand people who seek out horror for the fun of it.”

“But, I mean, when it comes to amusement parks, aren’t they full of people who come to them just to scream? They’re all here because they want to be scared…not that I know why that is.”

Naoya looked up at the roller coaster whizzing by overhead with screams trailing in its wake as he spoke.

Ruiko laughed haughtily.

“Mr. Sasakura and Fukamachi don’t get it. Scary and fun are two sides of the same coin.”

“The hell does that mean?”

Sasakura glared down at Ruiko, but she just smiled back up at him, unafraid, perhaps because she had known him for a while.

“When the human brain is under stress, it secretes pleasure substances to relieve that stress. When you enter a haunted house, your heart starts beating really fast, right? You’re wondering when the ghosts will appear and how they’re going to frighten you. Your brain is already hard at work releasing pleasure substances at that point, but you don’t notice, because you’re nervous. Then a ghost jumps out, your fear and tension reach their peak, and even more pleasure substances are released. But haunted house ghosts don’t stick around for a long time. They withdraw quickly, or guests move on to the next room, and the ghosts disappear from sight. Your fear and tension ease up immediately when that happens, and all that remains in your relieved brain is a large amount of pleasure substances. That good feeling is converted into ‘fun.’”

“What, like a drug?”

“That’s right. That cycle of tension and release is repeated over and over in a haunted house, so you get more and more of a high.

It’s fun to watch the exit of a haunted house because of it—people come running and screaming out of the door and burst into laughter the moment they step outside.”

“But there are also kids who come out crying hysterically.”

“Ah, that’s because they reach their limit before their fear subsides,” Ruiko said, watching as a family passed by them at that moment. “Young children can’t really distinguish between what’s real and what’s imaginary, so they’re convinced the ghosts that appear are genuine.”

The family seemed to have just come out of the haunted house. An older brother was teasing his wailing younger brother, while their parents tried to calm him with strained smiles on their faces. The smaller boy, who looked like he was around early elementary school age, was likely too young for the haunted house. On the other hand, the older boy, who was probably in upper elementary school, was smiling excitedly, seeming to have enjoyed the attraction to the fullest.

“Once kids get a little older, they realize all the monsters in the haunted house are fake. You’re never in any actual danger, and no matter how afraid you are, the fear will inevitably end once you reach the exit. You still get to savor that fear to a certain extent, however. I think people line up for haunted houses because they get to enjoy being scared safely as well as easily. They all want the thrill of it, essentially.”

Shrugging her shoulders, Ruiko looked at the meandering line leading to the entrance of the haunted house.

The line hadn’t moved very far. Everyone in it, standing there baking under the strong sunlight that had failed to weaken despite it being September, was looking forward to being spooked inside of that shoddy schoolhouse.

“It’s just as Miss Ruiko says,” Takatsuki said. “All of us, deep down, are constantly on the hunt for excitement. Something out of the ordinary.”

He turned his head slowly, surveying the bustling amusement park with a smile.

“Originally, the circus sideshows that haunted houses have their

roots in were often held in conjunction with things like temple and shrine unveilings. They were, in other words, places of *hare*."

The term "*hare*" was used commonly in folklore studies.

People's lives could be divided into two parts: *hare* and *ke*.

Hare was used to refer to special events like rituals and festivals, whereas *ke* was for everyday life outside of such occurrences. In olden times, on *hare* days, people put on their *haregi*—the finer clothes they didn't wear regularly—and did things that weren't part of their typical lives. Put another way, *hare* meant "extraordinary."

Unveiling ceremonies that drew large crowds, and the sideshows that accompanied them, were exactly that: extraordinary happenings far removed from the usual.

"Our everyday, familiar lives are safe and secure, but they're a little boring. The extraordinary, where we can experience *hare*, is what breaks up that boredom. Even grotesque sights we wouldn't normally want to see, when encountered in places totally removed from our normal lives, become fun, as Miss Ruiko called it. What's more, those places promise fear and atrocities that will never harm us personally. That's the ethos that haunted houses inherited."

Takatsuki turned his gaze to the start of the line, toward the shoddy elementary school building. A deafening high-pitched shriek was emitting from the speakers, along with music that seemed to say, "You're in for a real fright."

"I would say that, by all rights, that's what the supernatural *should* be, as far as people are concerned. Something that doesn't hurt us, that we can safely peek at from the other side of the divide. That's what makes it entertaining."

Once someone became tangled up in the supernatural, it stopped being enjoyable.

Naoya thought back to the clients who had come to Takatsuki for help in the past. One had feared that her apartment was haunted; another had been afraid that she had been cursed by the number four. Not one of them had been in a state to find amusement in the situation they found themselves in.

It had been the same for Naoya, too. At that village in Nagano, besieged by the dead, stranded on the slope that led to the

underworld, he had been nothing short of petrified.

Suddenly, Naoya heard a voice say—

"I'm telling you, it said this haunted house **is seriously scary!**"

Instinctively looking in the direction of the voice, Naoya saw a group of four people—men and women, approximately college-aged—standing next to them in the doubled-back line, talking and gesturing toward the fake schoolhouse.

"Apparently, the mirror inside the haunted house was brought from a real school that was about to be torn down."

"They say the reflection of an actual ghost appears in the mirror's splotchy surface!"

"What? A real one? Come on, give me a break. I mean, as if that could actually happen."

"But, like, there's a bunch of people who have seen it, I guess."

The group was saying pretty much exactly what Rino and Airi had told them the other day. They were speaking loudly enough that other people were turning to listen.

Leaning forward a little, Takatsuki addressed the group.

"Excuse me, but where did you hear that from?"

Perhaps taken aback by suddenly being approached by a stranger, the group clammed up.

Instances like this were where Takatsuki's face was a plus, however. Looking up at his nicely arranged features, one of the girls spoke.

"Umm, someone posted about it on Twitter."

"Yeah, it was trending."

The guy next to her nodded. Naoya recalled Rino and Airi saying it had been posted on social media, too. The word seemed to be spreading quite a bit.

"Is this your first time coming to this haunted house?"

The same girl and guy answered in the affirmative to Takatsuki's question, and the other girl nodded in agreement.

"Is it your first time, too?" Takatsuki asked the guy whose voice they had first heard, smiling at him.

"Yeah, it's my first time."

His voice distorted wildly, and Naoya reflexively pressed one hand

to his ear.

The guy had lied just now. He had been here before.

But what was the point of lying about that?

Takatsuki glanced at Naoya, before turning back to the guy with a grin.

"I see," he said. "Thanks very much."

In the end, the line kept inching forward, and the entrance to the haunted house drew closer.

Suddenly, looking as if he had just remembered something very important, Takatsuki said, "That's right. We should decide how we're going to pair up while we have time."

"Pair up?"

"You go through here in pairs. Come on, we'll play odds and evens to decide. And shoot!"

Flustered, Naoya stuck out his hand at the sudden command.

He and Sasakura were each holding out an even number of fingers. Ruiko and Takatsuki were holding out an odd number.

Ruiko squealed and grabbed Takatsuki's arm.

"Looks like we're going into the abandoned school together, Professor Akira!"

"I'm counting on you, Miss Ruiko."

The two of them were forming the "pretty people" pair, it seemed.

Naoya looked up at Sasakura.

Sasakura stared down at him.

"Hey. If you get all freaked out in there, I'm leaving you behind. Got it?"

"You're one to talk. Please try not to punch a ghost in a panic."

"As if I would, idiot."

He slapped Naoya over the head with one big hand. Naoya glared at him. *Damn violent detective*, he thought.

They arrived at the entrance to find Airi there. Apparently, she worked not only as a ghost but also as front door staff. She was wearing a black T-shirt with the words "The Cursed Elementary

School” written on it.

“Ah, Professor! You came! Um, please take a look at this first. Does any of the following apply to you?”

She handed them a clipboard. On it were questions about whether they had been drinking or if they had any heart conditions, lower body injuries, issues such as panic proneness, and so on.

“Now then, guests are shown inside in pairs, so if the first two people would step right this way! There will be a video playing in the small room just inside, so please watch it.”

At Airi’s words, Takatsuki and Ruiko stepped into the building first. The plywood door was very thin, so the video’s sound was audible outside. It seemed to be explaining the abandoned school’s backstory.

When the audio stopped, Airi opened the door again for Naoya and Sasakura to go inside. There was an old TV set in the small room, which had been decked out in black cloth. Evidently having already moved on, Takatsuki and Ruiko weren’t there. As soon as Airi closed the door, the video began to play. It told the same story as the one they had read on the haunted house’s website, except it was accompanied by eerie images and a creepy narration.

When the video ended, a door at the back of the room opened and Rino appeared, wearing the same T-shirt as Airi.

She made a look of recognition when she saw Naoya but quickly schooled herself into a neutral expression. That was probably how she was instructed to act. In a monotone voice, Rino began to speak.

“The two of you will now enter the elementary school. Your duty is to inform Miss Yoruka, who even now haunts the halls searching for the children, that those she seeks are already dead, so that she may be laid to rest. Please collect the three children’s indoor shoes from around the school and give them to Miss Yoruka.”

With that, she handed them a cloth bag, which they were presumably meant to put the indoor shoes in.

Apparently, merely walking through and out of the haunted house was not on the agenda. Naoya worried about what he would do if they couldn’t find the shoes, and Rino’s next words only added to his

anxiety.

"Incidentally, the spirit of the vicious killer who murdered the children and Miss Yoruka is also still prowling around the school. If you happen upon him, please run away. The spirit of the killer still thirsts for blood."

"What?"

"Well then, off you go."

As Rino spoke, another door at the back of the room opened of its own accord.

"Come on."

Grabbing Naoya firmly by the back of the neck, Sasakura started forward.

"W-wait a minute, Mr. Sasakura! I can walk on my own!"

"Then get a move on," Sasakura replied, letting go.

Adjusting the neck of his shirt, Naoya looked ahead.

The inside of the haunted house was unsparingly dark. He could make out the vague shape of shoe cubbies lined up along the wall in what was probably meant to be an entrance hall. *Right*, he thought, taking a closer look, *indoor shoes*. The cubbies were empty, though; it seemed they wouldn't be finding the shoes here.

Overhead, he heard the faint voice of a woman saying, "Please… come…out…" Naoya looked up instinctively to see a severed head whizzing by high up in the air. That was probably Miss Yoruka.

"…Huh, wait, Mr. Sasakura?!"

Naoya turned his gaze back down to find that Sasakura had vanished without his realizing it. He must have hurried on ahead while Naoya was moving slowly.

Flustered, Naoya tried to catch up to him, but his eyes weren't accustomed to the dark yet, and he had no clue where he was walking. A black cloth was covering the end of the passageway. He walked to that point and felt around, but it seemed to be a dead end. Where was the entrance to the next room?

"Oh!

Naoya's still fumbling hands were suddenly grabbing at air. Losing his balance and nearly falling, he took a panicked step forward into…

…complete darkness.

What? he thought.

It was pitch-black. He couldn't see anything.

In that instant, a powerful memory overtook him.

A memory of the slope leading to the underworld.

That tremendous darkness and helplessness.

Deep in his chest, Naoya's heart clenched uncomfortably.

No, he thought. *I'm not there right now. This isn't Yomotsu Hirasaka. I got out of there. I came back with Takatsuki. So this can't be. I'm safe now.*

There was a voice in the back of his head, though.

—Are you really?

All at once, Naoya wasn't sure. Had he really come back from that hill? Was it possible that he was actually still just sitting there? Had coming back been only a dream? Had he just been sitting there this entire time with both eyes closed, lost in a vision of what he wanted to believe? He knew he wouldn't be able to see anything, even with his eyes open, so all this time, he had just been living in a dream— "What are you doing?"

Suddenly, someone grabbed Naoya by the scruff of his neck.

Looking up in shock, he saw Sasakura's face.

"The passage is this way. What were you trying to do hiding out in a dead-end wall? Come on, let's go."

Sasakura pulled him along.

Moving his gaze somewhat from where he thought there had been nothing at all, Naoya saw that there was indeed a passage to the next room, which was made up to look like an elementary school classroom. In it, the tragic corpse of a child was spread out across a desk.

Oh, right.

They were in a haunted house.

Naoya was at an amusement park with Takatsuki, Sasakura, and Ruiko.

He wasn't dreaming. This was reality.

Both of Naoya's knees spontaneously threatened to give way, and Sasakura grabbed him by the neck once more, pulling him up.

"You good? Were you that scared?"

"I…I'm not scared—it's just, it's not that."

Hurriedly pulling himself together, Naoya shook off Sasakura's hand.

He looked back over his shoulder, realizing that the thing he'd plunged headfirst into moments ago was a black cloth stretched between rooms to separate them. Thinking of himself fumbling around in there panicking was so embarrassing, Naoya thought he might die.

"A-aren't you afraid, Mr. Sasakura?! I thought you were scared of ghosts and stuff!"

"What? I'm gonna thump you, you brat."

Sasakura's hand was already moving as he spoke. A fist landed on the crown of Naoya's head with a *whack*, and Naoya clutched at his head.

"…It's like Akira said earlier. There's nothing in here but fakes."

Sasakura jutted his chin toward the corpse lying face up on the desk. Its innards, pulled from the slashed-open belly, shone in the dim light.

And yet, ultimately, the corpse was nothing more than a doll made of silicone and paint.

It was all manufactured fear and atrocities that would never bare its fangs toward them.

"The real thing is nothing like this. The smell, the texture, it's all different."

"…A detective would know, I guess."

Detectives were a far cry removed from ordinary citizens, Naoya thought.

Sasakura gestured to the body with his chin again.

"Over there. A shoe."

"Huh? Oh. You're right."

A single bloody indoor shoe had fallen under the desk where the corpse lay.

Crouching, Naoya reached for it.

Suddenly, a pale hand shot out from what Naoya thought was a wall and touched his arm.

"…*Aagh!*"

Naoya shrieked as the hand retreated. Behind him, he heard Sasakura let out a small snort.

Snatching the shoe up, Naoya rounded on the other man.

"You made me pick that up just now because you knew something was gonna pop out, didn't you?!"

"It was obvious," Sasakura said, smiling evilly.

Naoya glared up at him as hard as he could. For the first time, he was glad it was so dark inside the haunted house. If not for that, his bright-red face would have been obvious.

Once he had calmed down, the haunted house wasn't all that scary.

Sure, walking through the darkness was unsettling, and it was surprising whenever a ghost actor popped out from a nearby wall or locker. But that was it. The ghosts would never harm them, and the sobbing head that flew through the air above them countless times was just a prop.

Plus, it was surprisingly easy to hear what was going on inside of the haunted house, both in front of and behind them. Naoya could hear the voices of Takatsuki and Ruiko—walking just ahead of him and Sasakura—as well as those of the ghosts they were being startled by without having to strain his ears.

From up ahead came a loud clanging sound, followed by Ruiko screaming. Her screams, however, turned quickly into delighted laughter. Hearing their frequent exchanges—"*Ahhh!* Ah-ha-ha, Professor Akira, this corpse is pretty well-made, isn't it?" "It really is"—made Naoya feel significantly less scared. Wondering why that was, he picked up his second pair of indoor shoes.

On top of all that, he was paired up with Sasakura.

The larger man stomped through the haunted house without a care for the dark. Whether it was a noise, air jetting out from a wall, or a hand appearing from nowhere, Sasakura barely flinched at anything. When a ghost burst out of a locker with a clattering sound, Sasakura stopped it dead in its tracks with a single glare, and Naoya felt genuinely sorry for the staff member playing the ghost. He felt

he should get Rino or Airi to apologize on their behalf later.

After he retrieved the third pair of shoes, the next room they walked into looked like a nurse's office.

There was a shelf containing medicines and a first aid kit, as well as the headless body of a woman lying on a cot behind partially drawn curtains. On a desk that appeared to belong to the school nurse was a severed head with its eyes closed. A message was written on the desk in red letters: "Please line up the shoes on this desk."

This head is definitely going to move, Naoya thought, laying out the shoes.

As he did, the severed head's eyes opened wide as it let out a ghastly wail.

Rising up into the air with its long, unruly hair hanging down, the head swooped toward them and shrieked, "*Give me back my children!*"

Hold on, Naoya thought, *wasn't that supposed to lay her to rest?*

He and Sasakura stepped out of the room and— There it was. The hallway.

Just as Airi had said, there were no decorations on either the floor or walls. At the end of the all-black hall hung a large rectangular mirror. Countless spots covered the mirror's mottled surface, which reflected Naoya's and Sasakura's images as they approached it.

Sasakura snorted.

"Big whoop," he muttered. "It's just a kid sitting there."

Just as Naoya was hit with confusion at those words, another figure appeared, reflected in the mirror in between himself and Sasakura.

In the next second, a horrible snarl tore through the air.

Turning in surprise, he saw the killer standing right behind them with a bloody knife in hand. The ghost must have come from behind a hidden door in the wall, as Naoya was certain it hadn't been there until only a moment ago.

This was probably where any normal customer would run out screaming, Naoya thought.

The mirror at the end of the hall must have made for quite a frightening effect when it was reflecting a guest's terrified face back at them as they fled from the murderer, whose own dreadful expression would also be visible as he lurched their way.

In this case, however, the customer was Sasakura.

He silenced the loudly growling killer with a simple "shut up" before walking briskly toward the exit. Naoya nodded apologetically to the killer as he followed. In the mirror, he could see the actor standing frozen in place, dumbfounded. For some reason, Naoya felt really guilty.

The hallway made a right angle in front of the mirror, leading directly to the exit.

"You made it, you two. How was it? Did you enjoy yourselves?"

"It was pretty fun, wasn't it?"

Takatsuki and Ruiko were waiting for them outside the door with smiles on their faces.

The sunlight felt overwhelming to eyes that had only just left the dark, and Naoya scrunched up his face, blinking repeatedly.

"…Let's just say I don't think Mr. Sasakura and haunted houses mesh well."

"Fukamachi was pretty scared."

"Hey, Mr. Sasakura! I was not!"

"Now, now. Fukamachi doesn't have much experience with amusement parks, KenKen. This haunted house was just a bit too much for him."

"Ah, I think I heard Fukamachi screaming inside there, too. There was a voice behind me that was like '*wahhh*'!"

"I was just a little caught off guard! And please forget you heard anything…"

Just as he had been able to hear the two of them, evidently his voice had been perfectly audible to them as well. Wishing he could sink into the ground, Naoya covered his face with one hand.

Their group decided to fill out questionnaires while they were there. They completed the forms at a long table set up outside the exit and dropped them in a collection box.

"Well, that concludes our business for the time being, so all that's

left is to have a good time!" Takatsuki said. "Before that, though, I'm a bit hungry. Let's get something to eat."

With that, Takatsuki set off for the food court.

The park kept getting busier. Every guest entering and exiting had a smile on their face, and overly energetic children darted around saying, "I want to ride that one next!" Riddleman, who at some point must have moved away from the park gate, greeted Takatsuki jauntily as he passed, and the professor smiled back at him.

Places long ago lined by sideshow tents had been known as areas of *hare*.

Amusement parks were no different. They were dreamlands totally removed from everyday life.

They truly were extraordinary.

Their meeting with the haunted house's producer was scheduled for four o'clock.

Until then, the four of them made sure to enjoy the amusement park to the fullest.

As Naoya had never ridden a thrill ride before, his three companions deliberated with careful consideration about what to take him on first. Takatsuki suggested starting with a kids' ride—one where passengers rode in spinning airplanes—to see if Naoya could handle it, while Ruiko contended that a water ride wouldn't be that scary, and Sasakura said they should just put him on the free-fall ride. Before long, the discussion grew so heated that Naoya was ignored, and Sasakura, fed up with the situation, grabbed him by the back of the neck and hauled him off to the line for the roller coaster. The man was merciless.

And yet, still—

Once Naoya got on, the roller coaster, as well as the pirate ship and the free-fall ride, were all surprisingly fun.

Both the speed he could feel throughout his whole frame, something he never felt in his ordinary life, and the falling sensation that made him keenly aware of gravity's pull brought a strange rush

of exhilaration after the momentary fear. It was just as Ruiko said. Fear, at least at an amusement park, really was the partner of fun.

"This might be the first time I've seen you smile this much, Fukamachi," Ruiko said to him, after they had more or less conquered all the rides.

Surprised, Naoya put one hand to his own cheek.

Was he truly smiling that much? He hadn't really been aware of it. He did, however, feel an odd lightness in his body, as though something heavy that had been building up inside of him had completely disappeared.

Naoya had never thought an amusement park would be so fun, and he hadn't even known he could find such an experience so enjoyable.

In fact, when he had been starting university, he didn't think he had ever imagined he would end up going to an amusement park with other people like this.

As their appointment time approached, they parted ways with Ruiko and Sasakura at the gate. Ruiko had her part-time job as a cram school instructor that evening, and Sasakura didn't seem interested in accompanying Takatsuki on the investigation.

Together with the professor, Naoya went back toward the haunted house. Even though it was later in the day, the line to get in still looked long. The attraction only being available for a limited time probably added to its popularity.

Disregarding the line, Naoya and Takatsuki went around to the back of the haunted house.

"Ah, Professor Takatsuki."

"Over here!"

Rino and Airi were waiting for them in front of a thin metal door. Compared to the creepiness of the building's front, this door was much more office-like and led to the staff room.

The small staff room had a cluttered feel. There were haunted house posters plastered all over the walls, and on top of those were layers of questionnaires filled out by customers. On a big desk in the center of the room, surrounded by small round stools, were several large plastic drink bottles and stacks of paper cups. Separate from

that was a long, thin table against the wall, where a number of monitors had been set up to show footage from various security cameras throughout the haunted house. They were probably used to keep an eye on customers' movements.

A man in a T-shirt who had been checking the monitors turned to look at them and gave a slight bow.

"Ah, hello, I'm Terui, the one in charge of this haunted house. I'm sorry, Mr. Gotou isn't here yet—"

Then the metal door opened with a clang, and a man walked hurriedly inside.

While all the haunted house staff were wearing matching black T-shirts, this man was dressed in a short-sleeved buttoned-up shirt and tie. He looked to be in his late thirties or early forties and had the air of a serious office worker in his black-rimmed glasses.

"Sorry I'm late! Nice to meet you. My name is Gotou. I'm the haunted house's producer this year. You're Associate Professor Takatsuki from Seiwa University, right? It's an honor to meet you! I've been enjoying your writings on urban legends and modern ghost stories!"

The man introduced himself while taking out his business card in one smooth motion.

Smiling, Takatsuki handed his own card to Gotou.

"Thank you very much. My apologies for taking up your time today. I've been to Riddle Park's summertime haunted house a few times before, and I really enjoyed this year's as well. The abandoned school setting really does drum up fear, whether one likes it or not! I also liked the shoe-finding mission. Collecting the shoes of the dead was indescribably frightening and wonderful!"

"Oh no, **you flatter me**. There's still much to be improved on."

Gotou shook his head. There was a hint of distortion in his voice, probably because he was proud of the haunted house he'd created, despite his modesty.

At that moment, Terui, who had been watching the monitors still, spoke up.

"Oh, crap. A customer knocked the set over. Sorry, Airi, but could you go to number four for a bit? And, Rino, please go to number six

and guide the customer. She looks lost. She's just going around in circles."

"What? But our shifts are already over!"

"We're short-staffed; someone called off today! Please, we'll pay you overtime!"

Terui pleaded with the girls, and Rino and Airi shrugged.

As the two of them headed for the door that led to the rear of the haunted house, Gotou called out, "Thank you both so much. The guests are screaming again today, thanks to your efforts."

"You can count on us!"

"We got a lot of scares today!"

The girls responded cheerfully to Gotou, pumping their fists.

Gotou watched them go with a smirk.

"Compared to other facilities, haunted houses are more prone to issues. They're dark and filled with little gimmicks. Guests panic and break the installations or take a swing at the ghosts. People who are seized by fear have trouble controlling their actions."

"But it must be fun to scare people that much, right?" Takatsuki said, and Gotou grinned.

"Yes. I'm always thinking about how to scare people."

Takatsuki and Naoya both sat down on the round stools when offered. Gotou poured tea from one of the plastic bottles into some paper cups and handed them out.

"So, Professor Takatsuki, what is it you wanted to ask me?"

"It's about that mirror at the end, naturally. Did that really come from an elementary school that was closed down?"

"Ah, yes, that's right. My old elementary school had gotten old and was going to be demolished, so I spoke with a former teacher, who obtained it for me."

There was no distortion in Gotou's voice. The mirror really had been in a closed school.

"I've always wanted to collect items that might come in handy, as a haunted house producer. That mirror used to be one of my school's seven wonders. They said you could see ghosts in it. So perhaps we brought a real ghost in along with the mirror."

Gotou adjusted the bridge of his glasses as he spoke.

Takatsuki listened with a smile before replying, “Indeed, that could be the case. However, that wasn’t the reason you put the mirror there, was it?”

Gotou’s expression shifted slightly. A grin played on his lips, but his eyes were searching.

Takatsuki paid that no mind.

“The mirror—that was your experiment, wasn’t it?” he asked, smiling as ever.

Gotou was also smiling, but he said nothing.

Naoya looked at Takatsuki curiously. The way he worded that question, did that mean he already knew what the mirror’s purpose was?

Takatsuki continued.

“Some of the customers cite that mirror as the scariest thing in the haunted house. But the mirror itself has no gimmick. It’s quite the interesting phenomenon, isn’t it? What exactly is it those people are seeing that makes them scream? The part-time staff were quite puzzled. They said the mirror doesn’t seem to suit its location, and that it’s as though that hallway was built specifically to house that mirror. They’re right—aren’t they? That hallway *was* built for that mirror. You wanted to put a mirror at the end of the haunted house no matter what. And you wanted to see how customers would react in front of it.”

Takatsuki’s gaze drifted to the monitors that Terui was closely watching.

Among the monitor lineup was one that showed the hallway. Guests timidly stepping foot in the hall could be seen tottering toward the mirror, as if drawn in by it.

Following Takatsuki’s line of sight, Gotou turned his attention to the monitors and nodded slowly.

“You’re right. I put that mirror there because there were three things I wanted to test out,” he said. “The first was simply what effect the mirror would have as haunted house staging. After walking through various abandoned school sets, the guests, stepping foot in that pitch-black hallway, will probably wonder for a moment what’s going on. They’ll see themselves reflected in the mirror. Just

an ordinary mirror. But as they approach the mirror, at some point, a ghost appears behind them. The guests notice this while looking in the mirror. That's scary—don't you think? I thought it was a great setup."

"Agreed, I thought it was very effective," Takatsuki affirmed.

As if to substantiate those words, the hallway monitor showed customers running frantically from the murderer who had just popped out behind them.

Gotou watched, looking pleased, and continued.

"The second reason had to do with the effect of seeing the reflection of one's own face. Professor Takatsuki, are you familiar with the horror film *Nightmare Detective 2*?"

"Ah, the Shinya Tsukamoto film about a detective who can enter people's dreams? The suicidal detective character played by Ryuhei Matsuda was quite interesting. The scene in the first movie where the female protagonist, the police lieutenant, visits the detective only to find that he had actually just attempted suicide was very comical."

"Yes, yes, exactly! Of course, so you do know the film!"

Gotou stuck his hand out toward Takatsuki, who accepted the handshake with a smile. They both seemed pleased to find the other was well-versed in somewhat obscure horror movies.

Gotou continued talking, once he had given Takatsuki's hand a firm shake.

"In the sequel, you know how there's the motif of an uncommonly frightened female character who serves as a symbol of fear? There's the girl who is the source of all the strange happenings, the protagonist's mother, and so on. They're all terrified of every little thing. The director made an interesting comment about this. He said that the face of someone who is scared is more frightening than the thing doing the scaring. In *The Shining*, for example, the face of the wife character is scarier than Jack Nicholson attacking with an ax. That's why this director created the uncommonly frightened female character. This is actually something I've thought for quite a long time. It was the same when I watched *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* as a child. The heroine's spasming expression and wide-open eyes as she fled were far scarier than

Leatherface, the killer pursuing her with a chainsaw."

"So you wanted the scared customers' faces to be reflected in the mirror and to see their reaction to that. But wouldn't this have the opposite effect? People tend to view the reflection of their own faces objectively. There's a high chance someone would come to their senses the second they see their face distorted in fear."

"Yes, in fact, that was my intention."

"What do you mean?"

Takatsuki looked puzzled, and Gotou turned his attention back to one of the monitors. It showed footage from the last camera, installed at the exit. Customers who ran screaming out of the haunted house burst out laughing as soon as they realized they were outside.

"A haunted house has to be entertaining. It doesn't do for guests to be scared to death and come out only feeling traumatized. If you just want to feel scared, you could go to a real abandoned school or hospital deep in the mountains. People line up outside amusement park haunted houses because they want to have fun while being scared. When they step out of the exit, they need to be laughing their heads off like that."

The guests, urged forward by the killer, would run toward the mirror and see their own faces reflected in it.

And there, they would snap out of it.

Their screaming expressions looked so ridiculous.

At that moment, their tension would be released.

In that way, fear would become fun. The fearful experience of the haunted house would end in laughter.

"…But I can't say this experiment went all that well," Gotou said, scratching his head. "The instant they're scared by the killer from behind, many people lose control of themselves and run. They don't even glance at themselves in the mirror. Terui over there even proposed removing the mirror because it would be dangerous if a customer accidentally ran into it."

Terui turned at that statement to comment, "We don't want any accidents on our hands." Gotou scratched his head again.

"And the last experiment," Takatsuki prompted. "That was—

spreading false rumors, yes?”

Naoya looked reflexively toward Gotou at those words.

Gotou was grinning.

“Oh no. ‘False rumors’ sounds so scandalous. They’re one of the storylines that make up the haunted house. Or maybe I should say they’re a side story?”

Gotou’s eyes shifted to the wall this time.

It was difficult to see with all the questionnaires layered over it, but there was a poster there for the current summertime haunted house.

“Haunted houses went totally out of fashion for a time, you know. People thought they were boring, and who could blame them? Haunted houses of the past were just mechanized puppets that reacted to customers’ movements via sensors. There wasn’t much cohesion among the puppets, and graveyard scenes, ghosts, and monsters were positioned without a clear connection to what came before or after. They were no different than the sideshows of the old days. New roller coasters and free-fall rides were much more exciting. But that changed in the nineties. Haunted house producers came into being and gave haunted houses the element of a storyline. Customers were made to walk through their own scary story, like they had wandered into a horror movie. Eventually, the ‘mission’ component was added to such attractions. Customers don’t just get scared; they have something specific they must do within the haunted house. By giving them a mission, guests become more deeply involved in the story. They become one of the characters.”

In this haunted house, the mission guests faced was collecting the indoor shoes. And indeed, having an objective had made Naoya look closer at every inch of the set and given him a sense of duty.

“In this type of haunted house, it’s not just mechanized dolls but often human actors who play the ghosts. After all, it’s scariest when people are scared by other people. Our part-time staff plays the ghosts, and they’re all very enthusiastic. Here, look at this.”

Gotou picked up a notebook from the desk and held it out.

It seemed to be a notebook the staff used to communicate with one another. They had written down things to look out for and

things to reflect on regarding the areas they worked in, as well as tips on how to scare the guests.

"By sharing information like this, we hope to give the customers even more of a fright. Some of the staff even watch horror movies on their own time and study the movements of the ghosts. But even with all that, the customers' fear is often lacking."

Gotou looked at the monitors again.

Many customers were laughing the moment they set foot inside a haunted house. They made light of the ghost actors or pointed out the flaws in the corpse dolls.

"It's not as though we want them to run away crying. This is entertainment, after all. But we do a lot to scare people. We want to provide as much fear as possible."

"So what you introduced was—the 'real' thing?"

Takatsuki's words made Gotou grin once more.

Looking closely at the other man's eyes as though trying to confirm something, Takatsuki went on.

"The truth is, I did a little research before coming here. About when the rumor about the mirror started and how it was spread. The first tweet about seeing a bloody female ghost in the mirror was posted on the preopening day for the haunted house. After that, multiple accounts posted in the same vein, and those posts were aggregated and shared in online forums. Looking carefully, I realized it seemed like the same person was posting in multiple places. Of course, there are people who find such stories amusing and share them intentionally. But the person who would be happiest to see that rumor spread is—you, the creator of this haunted house. So I thought, *Ah, this must be the work of the producer.* And that became a certainty when I saw there were plants mixed in among the queue to get into the haunted house."

He was referring to the college student from before. His voice had warped when he was yammering on loudly about the haunted house being really scary. When Takatsuki had asked him whether it was his first time coming, he had lied and said that it was.

But it hadn't been his first time. He had probably gotten in that line with various friends many times before, circulating the news that

a real ghost would appear in the haunted house.

"Everything is just as you say, Professor Takatsuki," Gotou said, throwing up both hands as if to concede. "I'm the one who made the posts; I'm the one who planted a fake customer. Truth be told, the plant is my nephew."

Over by the monitors, Terui looked at him in slight surprise. He didn't seem to have known.

"Everything in a haunted house is fake, you see. Your fear inevitably fades when you're cognizant of it all being fake from the start. But if something real gets mixed up in there, it spices things up. It's quite the draw, don't you think? A real ghost that might actually exist among all the fake stuff? What's more, humans are basically made to see the world the way they want to see it. If you put rumors of a ghost into someone's head beforehand, their brain will automatically create the image of a ghost when they encounter the appropriate setting. Objectively speaking, it's not real. It's an illusion created by fear. But from the perspective of the person who is scared, it's undeniably real."

Gotou fluttered his raised hands playfully, then lowered them and sighed.

"However, this experiment wasn't very successful, either. Not everyone uses social media, and you can't guarantee that everyone will see the same posts. There are limits to advertising, even on social networks. Even if something goes moderately viral, it will continue to be unknown to those to whom it's irrelevant. Surprisingly few people came to the haunted house with the information that a ghost appeared in the mirror. My next challenge is figuring out how to casually spread such rumors to the public. I still have a lot to consider. Next time, I'll do better."

"That sounds like quite a fun challenge," Takatsuki said, smiling and nodding.

Then his expression changed somewhat, and he looked at Gotou again.

"By the way, Mr. Gotou. Can I ask you one more thing?"

"By all means, what is it?"

"Why," Takatsuki asked, "are you so obsessed with scaring

people?”

In response to the question, Gotou blinked repeatedly behind his black frames.

“Why…? Well, that’s because I’ve always loved scaring people.”

Gotou pushed up the bridge of his glasses.

“Some people say that working at a haunted house means you have a perverse disposition, but I think it’s quite important in the service industry. We safely and wholeheartedly scare a large number of people. This requires a lot of skill and effort. This job is a labor of love.”

“But if you wanted to scare people, you could work somewhere other than a haunted house, right? In horror movies or in novels or on TV shows, for example. There are many other options.”

“Oh, the answer to that is that I simply love amusement parks,” Gotou responded, smiling wide. “I know I’m saying this to a folklore professor, but don’t you think we live in an age where people are starting to lose sight of what *hare* is? In the past, people would put on their best clothes and eat lavish meals on *hare* days. They weren’t able to do those things outside of *hare* days. But after the war, when the standard of living rose, people could wear beautiful kimono and eat delicious food anytime they wanted.”

“Indeed. It’s often said that ‘every day is *hare*.’”

“That’s right. But once every day is *hare*, then it becomes ordinary. *Hare* is demoted to *ke*. It’s not special at all. But that’s boring, so people try to create something special again, something that can be *hare* to them. You don’t hear the term ‘finery’ often these days, but instead, on special days, people get decked out in their ‘nicest’ clothes. We have all kinds of events now in place of the feasts that used to accompany rituals. Amusement parks are part of that. Many guests come to them seeking the same fear that the folks of old used to look for in sideshows.”

Gotou tugged on his necktie.

“This, by the way, is my lucky tie.”

He seemed to have worn it just to meet Takatsuki.

“That’s what amusement parks are: places created to be as *hare* as possible in this era where people have lost the meaning of the

term. That's why, in this super-extraordinary place, I want to provide guests with as much fear, as much of the unusual, as possible. I suppose haunted houses could be considered corrupting, in a sense. But if you scream wildly and then laugh as hard as you can, all of the impurity that has built up in your heart can be wiped clean. I believe that's the sort of place haunted houses are!"

Speaking with his eyes alight, Gotou looked just like Takatsuki during a lecture: extremely happy and somewhat proud.

Takatsuki looked at him, seeming a bit dazzled, then lowered his eyes slightly.

Before long, another gentle smile appeared on his face.

Looking back up at Gotou, he said, "Yes, it was clear from the very beginning that you love amusement parks. You looked like you were having a wonderful time welcoming guests at the gate."

Gotou's eyes widened at Takatsuki's words.

Not understanding what he meant, Naoya looked at the professor.

The corners of Takatsuki's lips quirked up.

"Today's Riddleman. That was you, wasn't it, Mr. Gotou?"

Surprised, Naoya turned to Gotou. Had that round, red-haired clown really been the subdued office worker–like man in front of him?

Gotou scratched his head again.

"Oh dear, this is awkward… You noticed, even with my whole face covered in makeup."

"Even in white face paint, your features don't change. Also, there's still a spot of white under your chin."

Takatsuki gestured, and there was indeed a streak of white paint there.

Gotou rubbed at it with his fingers.

"How embarrassing… Truth is, I actually worked part-time as Riddleman when I was younger. I thought I'd give it a try today for old time's sake."

"Yes, the guests were all quite overjoyed, weren't they?"

Takatsuki nodded kindly.

Naoya remembered seeing Riddleman earlier that day. He had been greeting customers as they came through the park gate. The

children had been delighted, hugging Riddleman's pudgy belly. The affected movements he greeted people with had been both light and cheerful, as though he was exemplifying the *hare* of the amusement park.

"I'm looking forward to next year's haunted house, too, Mr. Gotou. I'm sure it'll be a lot of fun."

Gotou nodded vigorously at Takatsuki's words.

"Of course!" he said.

Takatsuki and Gotou seemed to get along rather well. They shook hands again and promised to meet for drinks sometime before parting ways.

When they left the staff room of the haunted house, it was getting dark. The amusement park was still bustling. The shine from the decorative lights, which hadn't been on during the day, made the rides and buildings look even more brilliant. The haunted house appeared to be attracting more and more people as night approached, and the line to get in was longer than before. Gotou was probably over the moon.

"Ah, it was fun to have such an engaging conversation!" Takatsuki said, his mood cheerful as they walked down a path illuminated by countless lights.

Without knowing why, Naoya found himself glaring at the professor's face.

"That reminds me, Professor."

"Huh? What? Why are you glaring at me, Fukamachi?"

"…Professor, did you maybe know from the beginning that this case had nothing to do with supernatural phenomena?"

Naoya had realized it while listening to Takatsuki and Gotou talk.

Takatsuki had proceeded with the conversation knowing that Gotou had set everything up. He had apparently been assuming as much since before coming to the amusement park, which meant he had already been thinking along those lines when he heard Rino's and Airi's story.

Takatsuki simply nodded.

"Oh yeah. I mean, I figured that was the case."

"…Right, of course. That's the kind of person you are, Professor…"

Takatsuki's lack of interest in taking the request hadn't been because he was feeling unwell.

Naoya had completely forgotten. The reason the professor didn't jump at a particular case was that he thought from the start that the supernatural wasn't involved.

"Then why did you accept the request? There was no need to do an investigation."

"Well, because you said to accept it."

"…I, I did say that, yes, but if it wasn't supernatural, then…"

"Plus, I just thought a haunted house would be fun. And as a result, I made a pleasant acquaintance, and you got to enjoy the amusement park. Things turned out quite well, don't you think?"

That was true, but for some reason, Naoya felt guilty, as though he had forced Takatsuki to investigate.

Seemingly unaware of Naoya's feelings, Takatsuki strolled toward the park exit. The small illuminated path eventually connected to another path running along a mirrored wall. The glittering, spinning rides were reflected in the wall's surface, making it look as though a whole other amusement park was sprawling out inside the mirror.

Looking at it, Naoya suddenly remembered something that had been on his mind for a while.

"By the way, Professor, the ghost in the haunted house mirror. It's a woman?"

"Huh? Yeah, that was the rumor that was spread. It's a female ghost covered in blood, so some people think it's Miss Yoruka, and others say it's the ghost that was originally haunting the mirror."

"So it's definitely a female ghost? An adult woman, right?"

"Yeah, that's right, but… What's wrong, Fukamachi?"

"No, it's just…"

Naoya hesitated for a moment.

He remembered—what Sasakura had said when standing in front of that mirror.

"Mr. Sasakura, when he saw that mirror, he said, 'It's just a kid sitting there.'"

Takatsuki stopped dead in his tracks.

Without a word, he took out his phone, and in a few swift motions, he called Sasakura.

Sasakura answered right away.

"Hello? Yeah, listen, can I ask you something? Kenji—what did you see in the mirror in that haunted house…? Right. A boy? Hmm… No, that's fine."

As he talked to Sasakura, Takatsuki's eyes gradually lit up.

They were sparkling, like he was having the time of his life.

"Oh, that's right. KenKen, do you have dinner plans already? No? Then do you want to eat at my place…? It's fine, right? You have tomorrow off, don't you? I'll make whatever you want to eat. I have some wine, and Fukamachi will be there, so let's all eat together…! Yeah. Okay, then I'll do some shopping before I go home, so how about you come over in about an hour? Okay, see you."

Takatsuki's voice was cheerful as he said good-bye and hung up the phone.

Thinking that it seemed to have been decided on his behalf that he was also going to Takatsuki's place, Naoya asked, "What did Mr. Sasakura say?"

"He said there was a boy sitting with his legs crossed. There were no such accounts on social media. And there was nothing in that hallway that could have been mistaken for a boy."

"Then that means…"

In other words—didn't that mean it was real?

Gotou had said so himself earlier. That there was a story about a ghost appearing in that mirror to begin with.

"Wow, this is great!" Takatsuki yelled with glee. "You see, Fukamachi, KenKen saw a ghost once when he was little, too! Ahh, I have to go tell Mr. Gotou about this! Oh, but KenKen is coming over, so I need to hurry and go shopping. I'll have to tell Mr. Gotou another day!"

"Okay, just calm down, please! You're too old to be jumping for joy, Professor!"

Naoya tried quieting Takatsuki, who was hopping around, clutching his phone. It had been a while since the man had gone

into large dog mode. There were passersby around them turning to look with judging expressions. It was embarrassing.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Fukamachi. I'm being childish."

"I'm used to it, so it's fine—just try to calm down a little if possible."

"Right, sorry. It's just that I remembered."

"Remembered what?"

"That I love stuff like this! I'm having so much fun right now."

Takatsuki's face had completely reverted to how it had been before they went to Nagano.

Seeking out and taking pleasure in the strange, he wore a childlike smile.

But soon after, that expression slowly transformed into a different kind of smile—one that held bitterness, one that seemed pained, somehow.

"…Professor?"

Without answering, Takatsuki turned his gaze to the mirrored wall.

The image of Takatsuki standing there was reflected in it.

He stared at the mirror in silence for a while, then reached slowly out with his hand and touched the surface.

"In the future, even if I were able to find out about my past, the *other* me would surely not allow that to stand."

His words made Naoya gasp lightly.

Still looking in the mirror, Takatsuki tilted his head to the side a little.

The Takatsuki inside the mirror looking back also tilted his head. Just as Takatsuki was reaching out his hand, the other Takatsuki reached out back toward him.

Takatsuki leaned his face in toward the mirror.

Peering into the reflection of his own eyes, he said, "Hey, Fukamachi. Can I ask you for a favor?"

"What is it?"

"If I lose my memories again—would you remember for me, Fukamachi?"

Still facing the mirror, Takatsuki continued.

"And would you share what you remember with me? Everything you saw, everything you heard, everything I've forgotten?"

Though his words were presumably meant for Naoya, Takatsuki never once looked away from his own reflection.

Staring intently at his own image, he spoke in a quiet voice.

"That way, I can know. Even if I can't remember…I can at least know."

He was declaring war—on the *other* Takatsuki, who could very well have been looking back at him from inside the mirror.

It was a declaration of his determination to never give up.

Ah, Naoya thought. *In that case—then I…*

"…I understand. Okay."

For so long, he had been wondering what he could do for this man.

If that was all he was asking, it was no burden.

Naoya stood next to the professor, looking at Takatsuki's reflection.

That reflection was staring back at him.

"I promise," Naoya said. "I won't forget."

In the mirror, Takatsuki's face trembled.

"Even if you do forget, I'll remember. And I'll tell you all of it. Everything we saw together, heard together, everything I remember."

It wouldn't matter how many times the *other* Takatsuki tried to take away his memories.

As Takatsuki got closer to discovering the truth of his past, Naoya would surely be at his side. Even the *other* Takatsuki couldn't reach as far as Naoya's memories.

"So don't worry. You'll be okay, Professor."

The reflection of Takatsuki's mouth turned up at the corners. Like he might have been laughing at Naoya, as if anything he said mattered.

But when Naoya looked up at the face of the man standing next to him, he could see that his smile was a result of an extremely complex mixture of emotions. He looked somehow happy and yet bitter, daring as he challenged his fate, and yet there was a hint of remorse there, too. Naoya tilted his head.

"…Professor?"

"No, it's nothing. Thank you, Fukamachi."

Looking down, Takatsuki breathed a small sigh.

Then, looking not through the mirror but at Naoya directly, he shrugged a little.

"Well, you're even more indispensable to me now. I'll need you to stay at my side from now on."

"…That's nothing new."

"Yeah, that's true—you're exactly right."

Takatsuki took one last long look at himself in the mirror, then turned away.

Once more, he set off toward the park exit.

"That's right—tell me about the trip to Nagano, Fukamachi."

"Huh? But I already told you all about it."

"You told me about the mountain god and the festival, but I haven't heard about all the details of the trip. Like what we ate, what we talked about, whether we had a pillow fight at the hotel that night."

"We didn't have a pillow fight. As for what we ate… Um, I'll tell you as much as I can remember."

"Right. Then tell me, please. About all the fun things we did in Nagano."

Takatsuki smiled.

Naoya dug through the memories in his head. He remembered most of what they ate. He wasn't sure how well he could recall the details of their conversations. He decided for the time being that it was fine to skip over the embarrassing stories Kazu had told about him as a child entirely.

Then, turning suddenly to peer into Naoya's face, Takatsuki said, "That reminds me. I kept forgetting to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"I'm glad we went to Nagano. I felt some peace of mind after hearing what you told me."

He smiled softly.

Naoya paused for a moment, then hurried to start walking again.

"Why?"

“Because that old man, Mr. Nakamura, said that even if a child who went to that festival returned to the village as an adult, they’d be chased away. Those taken by the mountain god must be kept away from the village. That means the mountain god’s influence only extends to that village. As long as they stay away from there, the people taken by the mountain god can live safely.”

“Oh…”

Takatsuki’s words made Naoya realize something.

That village’s underworld was contained only to that village.

The hordes of dead that chased after them, the hill that led to the underworld—outside of the village, they were no more than old legends. Even if they truly existed, they were of no danger as long as Naoya didn’t go back to that place.

And Naoya didn’t think he would ever be visiting that village again.

“You don’t have to be plagued by nightmares anymore, Fukamachi. I’m so glad.”

Naoya let out a sigh at that statement. He felt as though something had been building up inside his chest since his return from Nagano and that it had just left his body along with that breath.

They were almost at the exit of the amusement park. Compared to the brilliantly illuminated inside of the park, the scenery outside seemed much darker somehow.

But no matter how dark it was, Naoya didn’t think he would ever feel the same fear he had experienced inside the haunted house.

He heard a voice in his head say, “Now that you know, are you satisfied?”

He had a definite answer to that question now, he felt.

There was meaning in knowing.

Their going all the way to Nagano had indeed been worthwhile.

That was Takatsuki’s and Naoya’s interpretation of that trip.



Chapter 2:
The Face That Dwells in the Skin

The seemingly endless heat of summer eventually subsided, and September was drawing to a close.

The long summer vacation was finally over, and students were returning to campus.

There were some who were walking through the university gates for the first time in weeks, all of their faces glazed over with post-break sluggishness, having forgotten somewhere the patience and concentration needed to endure a ninety-minute lecture. Both their suntanned skin—worn like proof of a well-spent vacation—and their hair, which had changed color and shape over the break, were nothing more than the vestiges of that bygone period of *hare* that stood out strangely in the everyday setting of a classroom. The fact that they had made it to university at all was still an accomplishment, as there were some students who were extending their summer break of their own accord. The attendance rate for every lecture was far lower than usual.

That held true no matter how popular the class.

"Hmm, it's like this every year at this time, but it is unfortunate."

Standing at the lectern, Takatsuki looked around the classroom with a microphone in one hand and a knowing smile.

It was Thursday, fourth period. They were in Building 2, room 302.

In Modern Folklore I, a specialized course in the History Department, it was usually hard to find an empty seat. Today, however, there were plenty of open spots, and a somewhat listless atmosphere hung over the students in attendance.

"Everyone here seems a bit sleepy. I suppose you're tired, having just come back from break? I thought it might be nice to cover something fast-paced at a time like this, so that's the kind of topic I chose for today's lecture. I'll distribute the materials, so please pass them around."

Takatsuki handed a stack of papers to the student sitting closest to the front.

As the materials circulated, little giggles gradually spread through the formerly lethargic air.

When the papers finally reached him, Naoya almost burst into laughter as well. *This is what he meant by "fast-paced"?* he thought.

When it came to the examples in the materials, well…

"So today, I'd like to begin by talking about Jet Granny!" Takatsuki declared proudly, and the classroom erupted in earnest laughter.

Smiling broadly, Takatsuki continued.

"Jet Granny is an old woman who runs at remarkable speeds. She's so fast that she overtakes cars driving on roads and highways at night, as though she's equipped with a jet engine. There are many variations of the story about this old woman, as well as various monikers for her, such as Turbo Granny, Dash Granny, and Fast Granny. Old women are generally thought of as slow-moving, so this disparity of one running at the speed of a jet plane is interesting! Such women usually run on two legs, like normal people, but Turbo Granny sometimes runs on all fours and has a piece of paper with the word 'turbo' written on it on her back."

Though hardly what one would expect an associate professor to stand in front of a classroom and say, Takatsuki's lectures pretty much always started off like this.

The materials he had passed out contained a number of examples of the fast-running old ladies he had just introduced. The

cited sources included a collection of ghost stories for children and a subcultural encyclopedia of urban legends.

"The ghost stories about these women are often simple and short. Example one: 'I was driving my car, when suddenly there was a knock on the window from outside. I looked and saw an old woman running alongside my car. My speed at the time was sixty-two miles per hour.' Example two: 'I was driving on the highway, when an old woman came running from behind at a tremendous speed and passed me. As she passed, our eyes locked, and I could see that she was grinning.' In some cases, accidents are caused on account of the old woman, but most of the stories are just sightings or encounters. The reason the stories stand on their own, as simple tales of seeing or coming across, is probably because the appearance the women make is impactful."

Takatsuki spoke cheerfully in a soft, gentle voice. In his well-tailored three-piece suit and with a friendly smile on his model-like face, he looked just like he had before summer vacation.

Watching him from a seat in the middle of the classroom, Naoya thought the professor looked well. He seemed to have made a safe recovery since the matter at the amusement park.

"Now, are there any stories about supernatural beings who move at high speeds like this other than old women? Yes, indeed. There are cases where the person is an old man rather than a woman, as in Supersonic Grandpa. But nevertheless, in these types of stories, it's overwhelmingly common for the person to be an old woman—one who runs at incredible speeds. That's something I'd love to encounter sometime."

Takatsuki picked up some chalk as he spoke.

Once again, there was scattered laughter around the room. Takatsuki often drew characters from urban legends on the blackboard, but everyone was already well aware of his lack of artistic talent.

However, as Takatsuki put the chalk to the board, he stopped.

"Well, since we're talking about her, I'd like to draw Jet Granny, but… In truth, it's not easy to do, because we don't know what she looks like."

The students looked puzzled at his words.

Inwardly, Naoya was confused, too. She was an old lady, so wouldn't drawing a picture of an elderly woman be enough?

Instead of drawing a picture, Takatsuki wrote "Jet Granny" on the board in his neat handwriting.

Beside that, he wrote two bullet points: "old woman" and "runs incredibly fast." Then he turned back to the class.

"Those are the two defining features of Jet Granny. Or rather, those are her only two features. But then, exactly what sort of old woman is she? What hairstyle does she have? What does she wear?"

As he posed those questions, the students glanced down at the materials they had been given.

But in every single example, it simply said "old woman."

There was almost no description of her appearance.

"In stories about the slit-mouthed woman, for example, in addition to stating that she wears a mask, there are often details about her physical features and clothing, such as 'long hair,' 'wears a raincoat,' 'wears a red coat and white pants,' and so on. For Toilet-Bound Hanako-san, it's 'has bobbed hair and a red skirt' or 'wears a red kimono.' For Hikiko-san, it's 'eyes and mouth split at the corners, very tall, wears a tattered white kimono.' Including a description of their physical appearances immediately makes them scarier and easier to imagine. So why is there no such description for Jet Granny? And why are there so many stories about old women running, when we don't even know what they look like? The reason —is nothing more than the fact that they are 'old women.'"

Takatsuki tapped on the blackboard with his knuckles where he had written "old woman."

Though there had been a listlessness in the air at the start of class, at some point, every student in the room had begun paying attention. No one was dozing off or playing with their phones; they were all listening intently to Takatsuki.

"In psychology, there's a concept called 'gerontophobia.' It is the irrational fear or hatred of aging or of elderly people. Even when it's not a phobia, people feel some degree of unease or disgust toward old age. Growing old means getting closer to that which humans

fear the most: death. That's why old women, which bring to mind aging and death, are popular ghost story motifs. And there's another strong image that old women evoke. It's a more concrete and folkloristic image than the vague word *death*. I'm talking about the beings we all heard and read about as children, *onibaba* and *yamauba*."

Saying this, Takatsuki drew an arrow from "old woman" on the board and wrote "*yamauba*."

"I've said many times before in lectures that even seemingly new modern urban legends can be traced back to old folktales and legends, yes? *Yamauba* lives in a house deep in the mountains, catching and eating anyone who passes by. And *yamauba* is also very fast. As in 'The Onibaba of Adachigahara' and 'Sanmai no Ofuda,' she chases the protagonist at incredible speeds. To us, living in the modern era, the *yamauba* that attacks travelers and temple monks is nothing more than an old legend. However, when she comes from deep in the mountains into areas of human habitation and finally down onto the highway, a new ghost story is born. Jet Granny is a continuation of the *yamauba*'s—that is, the running old woman's—lineage. That's why, even if all we have to go off of is 'an extremely fast old woman,' we can naturally picture what she looks like, because we already have the image of her predecessor, the *yamauba*, in our minds."

And indeed, Naoya realized that when he pictured Jet Granny in his head, she didn't look like his own grandmother or any old woman he saw around town, but instead like a kimono-clad demon woman with disheveled white hair. She looked exactly like the *yamauba* he had seen illustrated in picture books and in folktales as a child.

It seemed that in modern society, deep in the mountains was no longer *yamauba*'s active zone. Even so, Naoya felt like there was no need for her to come all the way to the highways to taunt drivers.

"Incidentally, why do you think it is that *yamauba* run so quickly in the first place? There's actually another lineage we can trace here."

Takatsuki turned back to the chalkboard.

This time, he drew an arrow from "runs incredibly fast" and wrote

“woman who pursues” at the end.

“Jet Granny usually appears from behind and chases your vehicle. The *yamauba* in old tales also chases after story protagonists as they flee. There are many stories with this ‘woman who pursues’ motif. An old example comes from the ‘Yomi-no-kuni’ chapter of the *Kojiki*, when Izanagi is chased by Izanami and the *Yomotsu-shikome*.”

Pursued by the demon hags of the underworld that Izanami let loose, Izanagi had thrown down a hairpiece and the teeth of a comb.

Wild grapes and bamboo shoots sprouted from the objects he threw, and Izanagi had escaped while the *Yomotsu-shikome* feasted on them.

“The story of Izanagi making his escape by throwing talismans has been passed down in various ways in subsequent stories. In the old folktale I mentioned, ‘Sanmai no Ofuda,’ a temple monk being chased by a *yamauba* throws paper talismans to create streams and fires in much the same way. There are no such incidents involving Jet Granny, but there is another famous urban legend that inherited this element. Does anyone know what it is? How about you there?”

Takatsuki pointed to a female student sitting several rows from the front.

Flustered at suddenly being singled out, the girl hesitated, and Takatsuki tapped lightly on his own mouth.

“Your hint is: mask.”

“…Oh. Um, the slit-mouthed woman?”

“Correct.”

Takatsuki smiled at her and wrote “slit-mouthed woman” on the board alongside “woman who pursues.”

“The slit-mouthed woman also runs very fast, doesn’t she? But there are specific incantations and talismans you can use to get away from her, such as saying the word *pomade* three times or throwing hard candies at her. Another feature of the slit-mouthed woman is that she is ugly. In this, she echoes the image of Izanami, with her decaying body, and the demon hags of the underworld. In the case of Jet Granny, she is never directly described as ugly, but

we can assume ugliness is included as a part of her ‘old woman’ distinction. Furthermore, although it comes from a different lineage from the tale of Izanagi’s escape, there is a perfect example of the ‘woman who pursues’ trope in the famous story of Anchin and Kiyohime from the *Dōjōji* legend. A young woman falls in love with a traveling monk, and as she chases after him, she transforms into a giant snake, eventually burning him to death by heating up the temple bell he has taken refuge in. This is another widely spread story that has spawned many variations, but the face of the woman-turned-serpent is usually depicted as ogre-or dragon-like. These women who chase after their targets with tremendous speed are always ugly and terrifying… So then why is this the case? What on earth is the source of this fear?”

Putting down the chalk, Takatsuki brushed the powder from his fingertips.

He turned back to the students.

“As you might expect, this fear originated from the male perspective. Japan used to be a patriarchal society, much more male dominated than it is today. Moreover, in Buddhist thought, women were considered impure. Women were weaker beings of lower status than men. Or rather, I should say that they were expected to be weaker than men. Beings rejected from the core of society in this way are easily transformed into monsters, because those in power are constantly in fear that the societal value system will be reversed. In other words—they fear that the oppressed will rise up against their oppressors.”

The students, both male and female, listened to him with solemn expressions.

Takatsuki looked around at them slowly as he went on.

“The men of the past, when confronted by a being they expected to show deference to them instead of opposing them and displaying extreme obsession and selfishness, probably shuddered with fear at what they saw as unthinkable. Then they likened said being to a monster. The conferment of ‘ugly’ as an attribute was also an expression of their contempt and fear. Their feelings gave rise to numerous ghost stories, and those stories permeated people’s way

of thinking. As a result, even in today's world where male-dominated thought is fading, the fear of such female supernatural phenomena continues to be passed down as a story format and an archetype."

Just then, for only a moment, Naoya thought he saw Takatsuki frown.

Curious, he followed the professor's gaze to the back of the classroom.

The university's lectures had unreserved seating. In most courses, the seats filled up from the middle to the back, but Takatsuki's always filled up from the front, perhaps because of his good looks. With today's low attendance, Naoya had thought the back few rows were empty.

But now that he looked, he saw that there was a man in a suit sitting in the corner of the very back row.

His face was unfamiliar.

He seemed relatively young, like he was perhaps a graduate student or faculty member from another university who was dropping in on the class. He didn't really give off the vibes of a researcher, though.

Naoya continued to look over his shoulder, wondering who the man could be, when Takatsuki gently cleared his throat.

Hastily turning back around, he locked eyes with Takatsuki, who was continuing with his lecture as though nothing had happened, for just a moment. Naoya shrank down into his seat, feeling like he'd been scolded with a look. Takatsuki was, as always, very observant.

"Hey, Fukamachi! Long time no see!"

After class, as Naoya was packing up his things, a voice called out to him from behind.

He turned around to see Youichi Nanba, another student in the History Department, standing there.

"It's been a while… Wait a minute. Don't you take the same class as me during second period, too?"

"I overslept. It was past two o'clock when I woke up."

"Two o'clock…?"

"Come on, you can't expect my internal clock to reset to pre-summer vacation time that quickly."

"Make it reset. I mean, what were you even doing over summer break?"

"You should be praising me for doing my best to make it to Professor Takatsuki's class, at least," Nanba said, puffing out his chest.

Offering Nanba some half-hearted praise, Naoya looked back to see that the man in the suit was already gone. Takatsuki also seemed to have left the classroom in a hurry.

Picking up his bag, Naoya left the room with Nanba.

"As usual, Professor Takatsuki's lectures are so interesting!" Nanba said, stretching both arms over his head. "I'm seriously thinking of majoring in folklore, starting next year. I want to write my thesis on Jet Granny!"

His arms and his face were both much more tanned than they had been before summer break. Looking at his darkened complexion, which spoke to just how much he had enjoyed his vacation, Naoya asked, "Nanba, you're really tan. Did you go on a trip?"

"Ah, this is from my club's training camp. We went to the beach, so I got seriously cooked."

"…Wait, remind me what club you're in again?"

"Tennis."

"Why would a tennis club go to the beach for training camp?"

"We played tennis, too. I mean, technically. Our club is pretty laid-back. We do actually practice and play friendly matches with other clubs, but it's not like we train hard and try to enter tournaments or whatever. Our motto is 'Let's enjoy our youth!'"

Nanba grinned. That kind of saying certainly did seem to suit him.

"You're not that tanned, Fukamachi. Didn't you say you were going on a trip? You went with Professor Takatsuki on some fieldwork, right?"

"Oh yeah, I did. But we went to the mountains, not the sea."

"Huh. So then how did it go? The fieldwork."

"…Well. A lot happened. But I managed to make it back."

"What's that mean? Did you go somewhere super deep in the mountains? Like to some scary haunted ruins?"

"There were no ruins… But I guess you could say there were ghosts."

"Wait, really?! What? Come on, spill— Ah, sorry."

Nanba took out his phone. It looked like he had a LINE message.

"Oh crap, I gotta go. Tell me about your trip sometime soon! See ya!"

Nanba ran off in a hurry. He was already at the end of the corridor when he turned around and called, "Sorry!" one more time in a loud voice, causing other students to look around in surprise.

Naoya saw him off with a grin. Nanba probably hadn't called out to him originally for any particular reason, so Naoya didn't think there was any reason for him to apologize so much.

Or more to the point, Nanba was the only person who would call out to Naoya without a reason.

Among the other students, Naoya was simply the "plain-looking glasses guy."

Naoya was careful not to get on anyone's bad side, and he responded normally if someone spoke to him, but he always endeavored to be as inconspicuous as possible, so that the people around him would have no more awareness of him than, "Yeah, I'm pretty sure there's a quiet kid who wears glasses like that." The university was a big place with a lot of people in it, so it was easy to go unknown if one wanted to. Naoya was pretty sure that there were very few people, even in his same year and department, who remembered his name.

That was the sort of life Naoya had chosen for himself long ago.

He didn't mind it, and he thought it was a bit late to change things now.

Originally, his connection to Nanba had been that they were in the same language class their first year. Nanba was naturally the sort of guy to talk to anyone, but ever since a certain incident had happened at the end of the previous year, it felt like they had gotten closer than before.

Naoya had even turned to Nanba for help before—and frankly, he

was aware that he was breaking the rules.

Don't get too close to anyone. Keep to the lines drawn around himself and don't reach beyond them.

Those were the rules for living with the power of his ears.

And yet…

Naoya remembered the bright golden sparks that had flashed in his mind in the impenetrable darkness, and he turned his gaze reflexively in the direction Nanba had gone.

Nanba had been there, too—in the memories Naoya had recalled at Yomotsu Hirasaka.

"Aw, come on. This is what people are supposed to do for each other."

Surely, to Nanba, that moment hadn't been a big deal at all.

But to Naoya…it had truly made him happy.

Readjusting his bag on his shoulder and continuing down the hall by himself, Naoya let out a small sigh.

"Tell me about your trip sometime soon," Nanba had said.

Naturally, Naoya couldn't tell him the whole story. Even if he did, there was no way Nanba would believe it, and telling him the entire thing would mean having to tell him about his ears as well.

But—someday…

Just for a moment, Naoya thought, by some chance—over drinks or something, in a half-joking way, for instance—if he could tell Nanba all about it…that would be fine.

Not too long after that, Takatsuki sent him a message.

"*I want to talk to you about work a bit. If you're still at the college, can you come to my office?*"

Naoya had just been about to go home after wrapping up some work in the library. He sent back a "*Be right there*" and headed for the faculty building.

He knocked on the door of room 304 on the third floor.

"Come in," a soft, clear voice called, and Naoya opened the door.

Takatsuki was standing in front of a small table with a kettle and a coffee maker on it. He turned with a smile, holding out Naoya's

mug in one hand.

"Ah, sorry for the sudden summons. But I'm glad you were still here."

"…Did you have a client?" Naoya asked, seeing the Great Buddha cup sitting on the corner of the small table, looking as though it had been used. That was the mug visitors used when they came to the office. The smell of coffee hung thickly in the air.

Most of the requests Takatsuki received came by e-mail through his website, Neighborhood Stories. But this time, unexpectedly, it seemed someone had come to talk to him in person.

"Yeah, he just left. He said he wants me to deal with things as quickly as possible, so I thought I would tell you about it right away. Oh—the graduate students brought me gifts from their summer vacations again, so feel free to eat whatever you'd like. There are unsweetened rice crackers."

Takatsuki waved at Naoya to sit down as he spoke. The pile of regional snacks stacked up on the large table was a regular feature of the office after summer break. Naoya gratefully accepted a rice cracker.

Takatsuki put a dog-patterned mug of coffee in front of Naoya and sat down beside him with a blue mug of marshmallow cocoa in one hand.

"So actually, this request…it came from a relative of mine."

"A relative?"

"Yep. I think you saw his face earlier. Remember, there was someone who came into the classroom during the middle of the lecture?"

"Oh, him."

The man in the suit.

Leaning back in his folding chair, Takatsuki took a sip of cocoa.

"He's my cousin, actually. He's five years younger than me."

"Huh?"

"There's no need to be so surprised."

Takatsuki smirked.

As Naoya apologized, he thought back to the man in the suit. He had been a little far away, and Naoya didn't remember his face very

clearly, but he didn't think the man had looked very much like Takatsuki.

And given Takatsuki's family situation, it was a tad surprising that any relative of his would come to him directly with a request.

"I mean, I was surprised, too," Takatsuki said, sardonic expression still in place. "After all, I don't usually have any contact with my family or relatives. The last time I saw my cousin was before I went to England. It's been over twenty years. We weren't particularly close, so it really caught me off guard that he suddenly dropped in."

"If that's the case, what kind of request did he bring to you?"

"About that…"

Taking another sip of cocoa, Takatsuki frowned.

"Fukamachi, do you know what a human-faced tumor is?"

"A human-faced tumor…? Um, isn't it a growth in the shape of a human face?"

"Yeah. Well, it seems that's what's happened."

"What?! To your cousin?"

"No, to his fiancée… Yuuto isn't the kind of guy who would go out of his way to come tell me something like that as a joke. He's always been a very serious kid."

Takatsuki began to explain.

Yuuto Takatsuki—that was his cousin's name.

Takatsuki's mother had two younger brothers. The older of the two brothers was Wataru. The younger was Hiroya.

Yuuto was Hiroya's only son.

"Uncle Hiroya is the president of a group enterprise that my father runs. Yuuto also works there. It seems a marriage proposal was raised recently. The other party is the daughter of an executive at one of their client companies, a woman named Mikako Takamura. She's twenty-six."

"Is that what they call a 'political marriage'?"

"Yes, well, I suppose so. So the two of them got engaged shortly after their arranged meeting. They're still in the dating phase, meeting up when possible and getting to know each other."

"What, they're getting to know each other after getting

engaged?”

“It was already decided between their families that they’re getting married. That’s how political marriages work. I mean, they’ve at least been acquainted with each other since they were little because of their parents’ connection. But they only really started talking after getting engaged, and it’s still quite early days, apparently. They were thinking they’d just get to know each other gradually from now on—but then something strange happened.”

It had happened several days ago.

Yuuto had gone to Mikako’s apartment, where she lived alone, and for a moment when she opened the door to greet him, he had thought she was someone else.

“Yuuto had been away on business for a while, so they hadn’t seen each other in a month. Miss Mikako became very thin in that time. She looked pale, too, and Yuuto was worried she had gotten seriously ill or something like that.”

Apparently, Mikako had tried at first to brush off his concern with, “I’m fine,” and “I just caught a little cold.” However, seeing that she was also less talkative than usual and in low spirits, Yuuto told her, “If something’s wrong, I want you to tell me about it.”

When he did, Mikako burst into tears.

As she cried, she opened the front of her blouse and showed Yuuto her right shoulder.

Stuck there, on the rounded edge of her shoulder, was some blood-stained gauze.

The moment Mikako pulled the gauze away, Yuuto gasped.

Sobbing, Mikako had turned her face away from her right shoulder and said, “Look. It looks just like a human face, doesn’t it?”

The skin near the top of her right arm was uneven, swollen, and dark red. Once it was pointed out, there was indeed a resemblance between a human face and the irregular bumps of the growth. A vertical bulge down the middle formed the nose, two sagging bumps on either side were like closed eyelids, and beneath that, the gaping slash of split skin looked exactly like a mouth spitting blood.

When Yuuto asked why this was happening, Mikako had cried and said she didn’t know. She told him her shoulder had felt itchy for a

few days before the skin started swelling rapidly, and then the night before, it had suddenly split open.

Mikako had shaken her head when Yuuto asked if she had been to a doctor. She hadn't wanted anyone to see her arm, it was so repulsive, she said. They couldn't simply ignore a wound that was bleeding, however. Yuuto had wanted to bring Mikako to a doctor, even if he had to drag her there.

Mikako had resisted.

She had shaken her head back and forth, crying, saying she wouldn't go, no matter what.

"Why is Miss Mikako so reluctant to go to a doctor?" Naoya asked, finding the situation odd. "She clearly has a skin abnormality. And it's bleeding, so it must hurt."

Takatsuki's eyes narrowed a little.

"That's because, apparently, Mikako had previously read a book about human-faced tumors. She's convinced that's what the growth on her shoulder is. It seems she's adamant that she doesn't want a doctor or even her parents to know she has something like that on her body."

"But then… To consult you… No matter how much of an expert you are in folklore…"

"As a matter of fact, it was Miss Mikako who wanted to consult me."

"Huh?"

"She asked Yuuto to contact me, apparently."

Takatsuki dropped his gaze to the mug he was holding in both hands.

Slowly, the corners of his lips turned upward.

It wasn't his usual bright smile, though. Instead, a slightly warped grin formed on his mouth, and Takatsuki said in a dry voice, "Mikako told Yuuto, 'I'm sure *Tengu-sama* will do something about this.'"

"What…?"

Naoya's eyes widened at those words.

—"*Tengu-sama*."

It was a name Takatsuki used to be called.

A fantasy that his mother had forced upon him when he returned from being spirited away.

A month's disappearance and no recollection of that time. Strange scars on his back and eyes that sometimes changed color. An abnormally improved memory and an excessive fear of birds. Takatsuki's mother had desperately wanted to know what had happened to her beloved son to cause such things, but neither the police nor the doctors had been able to give her a clear answer. With no leads whatsoever, the case went unsolved. Not even the cause of Takatsuki's eyes changing color was known.

And so his mother had escaped.

She had escaped into the fantasy that her son had been kidnapped by *tengu*.

In her mind, Takatsuki had been turned into a *tengu* before having his wings cut off and being returned to this world. That was how she interpreted the scars on his back.

And to further strengthen her own fantasy, his mother tried to spread it to the people around her.

As the daughter of the president of a large company, she had connections to the wives of the executives at the companies her father managed and to the wives of their clients. She introduced Takatsuki to those women as the "*Tengu*'s Child" and put his special abilities on display.

To those women, the beautiful young boy who could easily pinpoint the location of lost items and solve any problem must have seemed as if he had clairvoyance.

Before long, they were devoted to Takatsuki, hailing him as "*Tengu-sama*."

"Miss Mikako came several times to the tea parties my mother used to host, accompanied by her own mother… I remember her, too. I think she was still in kindergarten then, but she was always dressed up like a doll and holding a teddy bear, listening quietly to the adults' conversations with a vacant look on her face. She only came to those tea parties a few times, but maybe those occasions left a strange impression on me. It's been more than twenty years, and I still remember."

Takatsuki sighed softly.

To a small girl, Takatsuki may truly have appeared to be a deity—the *Tengu-sama* who could do anything and helped those in need.

Naoya looked at Takatsuki's profile.

"Professor… Did you accept the request?"

"Yeah. I did," Takatsuki said, smiling brightly and turning to Naoya. "If it works for you, I'd like to go to Miss Mikako's place tomorrow or the day after—"

"—You should turn it down."

Takatsuki fell momentarily silent at Naoya's interruption.

Then he smiled awkwardly.

"Why? I already said I would take it, so it's too late to turn it down."

"But I mean…"

Takatsuki's memories of being the *Tengu*'s Child were likely a big open wound he shouldn't touch. On a previous trip to Yamanashi, a woman who used to attend those tea parties had called him *Tengu-sama*, and that alone was enough to give him nightmares.

It was bound to be a burden for Takatsuki to face someone who not only referred to him as *Tengu-sama*, but who was also counting on his "divine" abilities.

"…You're such a worrier, Fukamachi."

Takatsuki's face crinkled up into a smile.

He leaned forward, one elbow on the table, resting his chin in his hand, and looked at Naoya through narrowed eyes.

"KenKen's overprotectiveness has totally rubbed off on you. Good grief, I'm surrounded by worrywarts."

"That's because you're always on the verge of some kind of trouble."

"I'm telling you, I'm fine… See? I'm not lying, am I?"

Takatsuki pointed at his own face.

It was true that his voice hadn't distorted. It was as soft and clear as ever.

But this was Takatsuki. There was a good chance he was neatly dodging the truth.

And besides, even if he himself thought he was fine, that didn't

mean he was right.

Then, after watching Naoya for a little while, Takatsuki made a big show of letting out a sigh and suddenly said, "Hmmm, I see. Since my part-timer isn't feeling too keen, I guess I'll just go deal with this request by myself."

"Huh? What are you talking about, Professor?"

"Well, you see, Yuuto will come to pick me up anyway, so I won't need help navigating. And I'm sure I won't lose my sense of reason and get carried away this time."

"H-hold on a minute—!"

Naoya glared at Takatsuki in a little bit of a panic, wondering how they had gotten here. It was obviously way worse to let Takatsuki go on this job alone.

But Takatsuki shook his head, looking disappointed, and said, "I'd really like you to come with me, Fukamachi, but if you really don't want to, then I guess there's nothing I can do. Well then, sorry for calling you here today, but this time—"

"—*Augh*, fine, I get it!" Naoya yelled, resigned. "I'm sorry for interfering, since I am just a part-timer, after all! I'll go, too, so please let me accompany you!"

Takatsuki grinned triumphantly at him. The man really was so childish. *I should tell Sasakura about this*, Naoya thought.

The following evening, Yuuto Takatsuki came to pick them up in front of the university gates. When he saw Naoya, his brow furrowed suspiciously.

Not even getting out of the driver's seat, Yuuto merely rolled down his window and looked at them questioningly. Takatsuki smiled and introduced Naoya.

"Yuuto, this is Fukamachi. He's a student who assists me. He'll be coming along today."

"…I intended for this consultation to be private," Yuuto mumbled.

Takatsuki continued to smile.

"I accepted your request about human-faced tumors purely as a folklore specialist. You don't really believe in the whole 'power of the

Tengu-sama,' do you?"

"…"

Frowning, Yuuto silently jutted his chin toward the back seat of the car. He seemed to be telling them to get in.

Once Takatsuki and Naoya had climbed into the back seat, Yuuto started driving.

From his seat diagonally behind Yuuto, Naoya stealthily examined the man.

Even looked at up close like this, he really didn't resemble Takatsuki at all. That fact might have been made even more evident because Wataru, their uncle, looked so much like the professor. Yuuto had stiff, jet-black hair, smooth eyelids, and somewhat thinnish facial features. Even though they were both wearing suits, Yuuto really just looked like an office worker when compared to Takatsuki, who could have been a model… Although Takatsuki and Wataru were probably the ones who were outside the norm.

To make matters worse, there was a clear aura of prickliness surrounding Yuuto.

Even though he had been the one to come ask for help, he didn't seem inclined to speak to Takatsuki in the car. On the contrary, Yuuto stared straight ahead, as if to discourage them from speaking to him. He seemed, quite frankly, unpleasant.

Despite this, Takatsuki appeared totally unbothered and began to reminisce to Naoya with a smile on his face.

"Fukamachi, Yuuto may be like this now, but when he was really little, he was pretty cute, you know. He would call me Aki and follow me around."

"…Is that so?"

In other words, Takatsuki was to Yuuto what Kazu was to Naoya. But at least from looking at the Yuuto of the present, it was really hard to imagine him following the professor around and calling him Aki.

Even so, Takatsuki smiled nostalgically and went on.

"We used to play together at family gatherings. Yuuto was the only cousin I had, so I adored him. This was a long time ago, mind you."

"—It's ancient history," Yuuto said in a low voice, still facing forward. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't bring up stories from when I was in kindergarten now. I'm thirty years old already."

"Unfortunately, I don't have many memories of Yuuto after that time. At some point, he started to avoid me."

Takatsuki gave a slight shrug of his shoulders. There was no malice in his voice.

Yuuto didn't say anything more but simply turned the wheel a little roughly as he rounded a corner.

Watching him, Naoya thought, *Oh, he probably never wanted to come to Takatsuki at all*. He had had no choice but to do so because his fiancée had begged him. Takatsuki himself had said that he and Yuuto weren't particularly close, that it had been over twenty years since they last met… That alone was proof of how estranged they were.

Perhaps Takatsuki shouldn't have accepted this request after all, Naoya thought, glancing over at the professor.

He didn't have a very good impression of Takatsuki's family and relatives.

Given what Naoya had heard from Sasakura, Wataru, and Takatsuki himself, it didn't seem like a single member of his family had been kind to Takatsuki since the *kamikakushi* incident.

Beside him, Takatsuki was gazing out the window at the passing scenery. His usual smile was on his face, but Naoya had long since learned not to trust that smile.

Takatsuki was constantly standing on the boundary line.

Recently, Naoya had begun to feel that more strongly than before.

The boundary between reality and another world, between the ordinary and the extraordinary.

And—the boundary between a kind world illuminated by bright light and a dark world so cold, it was almost freezing.

Sasakura, Wataru, and Ruiko were in the brighter world. As long as Takatsuki was facing that side, he could keep smiling and living happily.

On the other side, however, the darkness surrounding Takatsuki's

past swirled around in an ill-boding maelstrom, stretching out cold, grasping fingers to drag the professor into its midst.

Next to Naoya, Takatsuki was still looking out the window. Night was spreading out before his gaze.

Rows of streetlamps and car headlights shone through the window onto Takatsuki's pale cheeks. His eyes seemed to flash blue, and Naoya startled.

"…What's wrong, Fukamachi?"

Takatsuki looked over at him, quizzical, and his eyes were the same kind dark brown as usual. Hastily shaking his head, Naoya replied that it was nothing.

Eventually, the car stopped in front of a small white apartment building.

They followed Yuuto to Mikako's apartment where, as though she had been waiting for them, the door opened immediately to reveal a long-haired woman.

She was a beautiful woman with Japanese features and large, striking almond-shaped eyes. Her hair was down, untied, and deep black. It gave her a somewhat serious appearance but also accentuated the paleness of her skin, making her look just like a doll. Just as Yuuto had told them, however, it was obvious at a glance how thin she was.

Her sunken cheeks were prominent enough to make her bone structure stand out. A large diamond ring sat sparkling on the ring finger of her left hand.

"*Tengu-sama*…!"

The moment she saw Takatsuki's face, Mikako covered her mouth with both hands, overcome with emotion. Blood rushed to her cheeks, and her dark eyes shone with heat. Seeing this, Yuuto frowned slightly.

Takatsuki smiled amiably.

"Good evening. It's been quite some time, Miss Mikako Takamura."

Both hands still over her mouth, Mikako's shoulders immediately

began trembling, and her eyes opened wide.

"*Tengu-sama*… You…remember me…?"

"Of course. I met you a few times at my mother's tea parties, although we were children at the time. Please don't call me that, however. My name is Akira Takatsuki. I teach at a university now."

"…Ah, I, I'm sorry. How rude of me!"

Mikako suddenly straightened up, as if coming to her senses. She put her hands to her cheeks, like she was embarrassed at herself for getting excited, and bowed her head vigorously.

Her hair slipped off her right shoulder, and Naoya couldn't help but glance at it. She was wearing a thin red cardigan over her white blouse, so it was impossible to tell from the outside whether there was anything particularly odd about her shoulder. According to Yuuto, though, that's where the human-faced tumor was.

"Um, you're an associate professor at Seiwa University, right? Yuuto told me. Thank you for making time to see me today, Professor Takatsuki. Please come in."

She welcomed Takatsuki inside, and Yuuto and Naoya followed him.

The one-bedroom apartment was neatly organized. The furniture and carpet were a soft, calming color, and the casually placed items around the room were all elegant, but for the worn-out, old teddy bear sitting on the sofa. It was charming, somehow. In one corner of the living room sat a bookshelf and a desk that seemed to be for working at, with books on English conversation and interpretation placed on them.

"I'll make some tea, so please have a seat," Mikako said, offering the sofa to Takatsuki and Naoya. She seemed to remember the bear was there immediately after and hurried over to the sofa to remove the stuffed animal with surprising carelessness.

Takatsuki picked up the bear, which had been tossed to the floor.

He stared at its rather well-loved muzzle, and Naoya cocked his head to the side.

"What's wrong, Professor?"

"Oh, no, it's nothing," Takatsuki replied, carefully setting the bear back down on the carpet, before sitting on the sofa. Naoya took the

seat beside him.

"Do you work as an interpreter, Miss Mikako?" Takatsuki asked, and Mikako gave him a stiff smile from the kitchen where she was preparing the tea.

"I used to work at a company, but I studied abroad last year, and now I'm studying to become an interpreter… It seems I'll be marrying Yuuto before that, however."

"Mikako is a really hard worker. I'd like to give her my support even after we get married."

Yuuto was in the kitchen helping Mikako when he chimed in.

"She told me about her time studying abroad with a lot of enthusiasm at the matchmaking session, too. I also studied abroad when I was in college, so we had a lot to talk about. Her younger sister is studying abroad now instead. They're both very studious. I think it's great."

As he smiled at Mikako, Yuuto's face was gentle and warm. Naoya had thought he was a bit of a nasty person in the car, but apparently, he was just cold toward Takatsuki.

As the couch only sat two people, Yuuto and Mikako sat down on the carpet, facing each other, with a low table between them. When tea was served, the scent of Earl Grey wafted into the air.

"Now, then," Takatsuki said. "Let's get to the matter at hand. Miss Mikako—if you don't mind, I'd like to see the human-faced tumor that you have."

Mikako looked at Yuuto.

He nodded, and Mikako took off her cardigan. The blouse underneath was sleeveless.

There, on her right shoulder—or perhaps more accurately, in the area of the root of her upper arm—was indeed a human face.

No—that wasn't right.

The skin in that area was raised like a keloid. It was discolored, a dark shade of red, and swollen in irregular lumps, merely giving it the appearance of a human face.

The problem was, once Naoya was aware of the likeness, it was hard to see it in any other way. The long, narrow bump in the center looked like a nose, the sagging wrinkles on either side of that made

for two closed eyelids, and the straight cut running beneath it was like a pursed mouth. The entire thing was approximately three inches in size.

It was truly something that could only be called a human-faced tumor.

"—Excuse me. Can I take a closer look?" Takatsuki asked, already standing up from the couch to kneel beside Mikako.

Takatsuki didn't seem to notice the startled Yuuto, who had for a moment looked like he was about to object. Grabbing Mikako's arm and pulling it toward himself, Takatsuki leaned his face in to peer at the tumor.

Then he began touching it with his fingers. Unheeding of Mikako's self-conscious squirming, he pressed the tumor's various features—the eyelids, nose, cheeks—in turn, just like a doctor palpating something.

"Does this hurt?" he asked.

Mikako, her expression bewildered, said it didn't.

Lastly, Takatsuki touched the wound that looked like a mouth, and it was only then that Mikako's face contorted.

"That hurts," she said in a small voice.

"I see. Thank you very much."

Takatsuki left Mikako's side and returned to the sofa.

Yuuto turned to Takatsuki while helping Mikako put her cardigan back on.

"So then, what exactly is this? Is it really, you know, a human-faced tumor?"

"—First, I'd like to hear from Miss Mikako about it for a bit.

The professor smiled and looked at Mikako.

"It seems you already have some knowledge of human-faced tumors, yes? Which books did you read?"

"U-um… In college, I studied early modern literature," Mikako replied, lowering her gaze. "I read *Otogibōko* and *Ehon Hyaku Monogatari*…"

At that, Takatsuki leaned forward, his face brightening.

"I see, so you've read those two! There are indeed stories about human-faced tumors in both. And they're both very interesting,

aren't they?"

"…What books are those?" Yuuto asked, his expression saying he wasn't following.

Takatsuki smiled.

"They're both collections of ghost stories that were published in the Edo period. There's a story in *Otogibōko* that is actually called 'Human-Faced Tumor,' which tells of a farmer from Ogura in Yamashiro Province who developed a sore in the shape of a human face on his left thigh. The text says the sore is 'alike to a human face in form, with eyes and a mouth, but no nose or ears.' That makes it a bit different from Miss Mikako's, which seems to have a nose."

Takatsuki looked to Mikako with a smile, as if for confirmation.

Mikako tilted her head slightly with a baffled face. She probably didn't understand why the professor had suddenly started talking in such a delighted tone.

But Takatsuki was in his element like this. He went on, speaking just as he did during lectures.

"This farmer had been sick for six months before the human-faced tumor appeared. He suffered from chills, fever, and pain all over his body. Those symptoms stopped once the tumor grew, but the tumor hurt. If he fed it something, the pain stopped, but if he didn't feed it, the pain worsened. By the way, Miss Mikako, did you experience any similar illness?"

"…No, not really."

"I see."

Takatsuki smiled again.

Despite stating that he wasn't going to get carried away this time, he seemed to be quite enjoying himself. Naoya wondered for a moment whether to stop him. He appeared to be calmer than he was in his usual large dog mode, so Naoya figured it was probably fine to leave him be for a while longer.

"In the *Ehon Hyaku Monogatari*, the story about a human-faced tumor is titled 'Two-Mouthed Woman.' Although the term 'human-faced boil' is used rather than 'human-faced tumor.' The two-mouthed woman is a monster with an additional mouth on the back of her head, but in this book, the extra mouth is said to be a human-

faced boil and is treated as a malady. As examples, it cites a woman who starved her stepchild to death and grew a mouth on the back of her head, as well as one who develops a human-faced boil after tripping during an argument with her father, in which the boil is considered a consequence of the woman's malicious thought. The text says that human-faced boils are a disease seen in callous, wicked, selfish, shameless people… Is this perhaps why you didn't want your parents or a doctor to know, Miss Mikako?"

At Takatsuki's question, Mikako drew her shoulders in and nodded.

Yuuto put a hand on her shoulder and glared angrily at Takatsuki.

"Hold on, that's the kind of woman you think she is? You think that's why something like this is happening? There's no way that's true!"

"Of course, the idea that human-faced tumors are a disease that occur as recompense for one's wrongdoings is an old way of thought. We modern people must interpret them differently."

Takatsuki spoke in a calm tone, returning Yuuto's gaze head-on. Cowed, Yuuto fell silent.

Shrugging his shoulders slightly, Takatsuki continued.

"Although a realistic interpretation of human-faced tumors was already given in the Edo period. In *Fude no Susabi*, a collection of essays written by Kan Chazan, an article about human-faced tumors written by court physician Katsuragawa Hoken is cited. It clearly states that the wounds, depressions, and dents of the affected area merely resemble mouths and eyelids and noses. It also says that any apparent breathing is the result of the area twitching, and that the tumor is called a human face only because of its shape. People are naturally susceptible to seeing things as human faces. For example, we recognize three circles arranged in an inverted triangle as a human face. Or we may associate two entirely different things with each other simply because their visual impression is similar, and those associations may become fixed in our brains. This is the kind of psychological phenomenon that causes us to see a human face in a stain on the ceiling or in a power outlet, or a rabbit on the moon. It's just an optical illusion. Unfortunately, most pictures of ghosts can

be explained this way."

Naoya had learned about this topic in one of the previous year's lectures.

As he recalled, it had been a lecture on dogs and fish with human faces. The three circles was an example of the simulacra phenomenon, and the ceiling stain looking like a human face was due to the pareidolia effect.

"Some theories posit that human-faced tumors may have been elephantiasis. It's a disease caused by parasitic filariasis that was rampant in Japan during the Edo period. There's a story that Saigo Takamori had it. When you have elephantiasis, your skin thickens and swells a great deal and becomes tough, like an elephant's. But that's probably not what you have, Miss Mikako. The symptoms are different."

Takatsuki leaned forward, looking at Mikako.

"Now, Miss Mikako, I'm a folklore expert. But that doesn't mean I'm going to buy all sorts of salves and shove them into the wound on your shoulder like they do in *Otogibōko*. Even if that's how human-faced tumors are said to be treated, I really don't think that will heal your shoulder."

Mikako, who until moments before had looked confused, had at some point lifted her head to stare at Takatsuki. In her eyes, Naoya could see a gleam of passion similar to the one she'd displayed when first seeing the professor.

A slight chill ran through Naoya at that look.

What in the world was this woman thinking as she gazed at Takatsuki?

"So, then," Mikako said in a lightly trembling voice. "What on earth should I do?"

"Please go to a doctor," Takatsuki answered with a bright smile. "I recommend treatment from a dermatologist. You may be left with a scar, but I believe you could expect some results."

Mikako shook her head slowly.

"I don't want to go to a doctor. It won't work."

"Ah, so you have already been to the hospital, then?"

At Takatsuki's words, Yuuto looked at Mikako in surprise. From

what he knew, she hadn't been to see a doctor.

"Yuuto said that you only developed the human-faced tumor several days ago… But that's not true, is it? When I touched it earlier, you told me it didn't hurt in most parts. Only the cut that had bled recently hurt, you said. I suspect this growth on your shoulder has been there for quite some time."

"No, it's recent."

Mikako's voice distorted as she answered, and Naoya reflexively put a hand to his ear.

The corners of Takatsuki's lips turned up in a grin.

"Miss Mikako, you shouldn't lie."

"I'm not lying."

"You can claim as much, but a lie is a lie, and I'm not interested in the lie itself. If the growth on your shoulder was like the ones you often see in ghost stories, which talk or something, that would be one thing, but as it doesn't, it makes no difference to me what condition your shoulder is in."

"Hey…!"

Perhaps thinking Takatsuki's words were too much, Yuuto raised his voice.

Takatsuki, however, merely looked at Mikako, paying Yuuto no attention.

"What I am interested in is the reason you told that lie. What on earth are you hoping for, to go as far as making up a bizarre story about having a human-faced tumor on your shoulder?"

Takatsuki's gaze was fixed on Mikako's eyes.

"Your aim—it was me, wasn't it?"

Yuuto looked at Mikako in shock.

Naoya stared at her, too. For some reason, he had a terrible sense of foreboding.

Mikako sat up straight under their three gazes, and—slowly, her mouth turned up into a beguiling smile.

"It's because…I've wanted to see you. For so long."

Her cheeks flushed, and her eyes glistened.

She called out to Takatsuki, her voice like a sensual sigh.

"*Tengu-sama*. I…wanted to see you."

At that moment, Takatsuki stood up from the sofa.

With a smile that didn't reach his eyes, he looked down at Mikako and said without preamble, "I'm leaving. We will not be meeting again."

"Please wait, *Tengu-sama*!"

"Let's go, Fukamachi."

Naoya got up at Takatsuki's urging. Yuuto, unable to keep up with the situation, looked back and forth between Takatsuki and Mikako in confusion.

But as Takatsuki and Naoya were heading for the door—

"Please wait!"

From behind them, Mikako called out.

As he stopped and turned to look back, Takatsuki's face suddenly stiffened.

What now? Naoya thought, also turning to look, only to see Mikako standing there holding a large birdcage.

"*Tengu-sama*, I remember. I remember when I met you as a child."

The door to what appeared to be a bedroom had been thrown open at some point, and Mikako seemed to have brought the birdcage from there. Inside was a red bird that looked like a large parakeet. Startled at suddenly being moved, the bird flapped its large wings wildly. The sound echoed in Naoya's ears.

Takatsuki's body swayed violently, and Naoya hurriedly moved to support him from the side.

He wasn't unconscious, but his face had gone pale. Yuuto shot to his feet in alarm. One hand pressed to his forehead, Takatsuki looked at Mikako with his face distorted in anguish.

"Miss Mikako. What are you…?"

"*Tengu-sama*. You're still afraid of birds, aren't you? You really haven't changed at all since those days."

Mikako spoke in a singsong voice. In the cage she was holding, the parakeet continued to flap its wings. Takatsuki shook with powerful tremors.

"I wonder where your fear comes from? You know everything, but perhaps this is the one thing you still don't understand."

Smiling, Mikako held the birdcage out toward him.

"*Tengu-sama*. Auntie waits for you, even now. Let's go back together, to those garden tea parties… Please, *Tengu-sama*…"

Mikako's sugared whispers mixed with the flapping of the bird's wings.

Takatsuki's knees gave way.

"Professor!"

"…Aki!"

Yuuto rushed over to support Takatsuki from the other side.

As they held up the professor's limp form, Naoya looked at Mikako.

Still holding the birdcage, Mikako was giggling softly. The shoulders of her cardigan had slipped down, revealing the strange, face-shaped growth. She seemed to have hit it against something, as the wound underneath it was once again opened wide. The red, torn gash looked just like a mouth spitting blood and cursing them. Even though he knew it was just an optical illusion, a chill coursed down Naoya's spine.

He shouldn't have brought Takatsuki here after all.

Leaving Mikako's apartment like they were making an escape, Naoya and Yuuto carried Takatsuki to the car.

Thankfully, Takatsuki didn't seem to have completely lost consciousness, though he looked quite unwell. At Yuuto seeing him resting limply against the window, breathing shallowly, his face turned pale as well.

"Are you okay? Maybe you should go to a hospital or something."

"…It's like a minor bit of anemia, so I'll be fine if I rest," Takatsuki replied with a weak smile. "I'm sorry, Yuuto… I wasn't much help, and I've caused you trouble."

"I'm the one who should be apologizing," Yuuto muttered. "Sorry for dragging you into it… I never imagined things would end up like this."

The sharpness that had been present in Yuuto's voice on the car ride to the apartment was gone.

“I’m sorry,” Naoya said as Yuuto sat in the driver’s seat. “If possible, it would be really helpful if you could give us a ride to the professor’s apartment.”

“Yeah, of course.”

Giving an immediate reply, Yuuto made to start driving.

The moment he gripped the steering wheel, however, he turned around.

“…Where are you living now?” he mumbled, his expression a little embarrassed.

When Naoya gave him the address, he nodded wordlessly and took off.

Mikako’s apartment receded into the distance. Naoya had the feeling Mikako was watching them go from her window and wished the car would just make a turn already. The sound of her giggling mixed with the bird’s flapping wings seemed to echo in his ears, making him feel ill. The sweetness in her voice when she called Takatsuki *Tengu-sama* was practically poisonous.

What was it? Just what on earth had that woman been trying to do?

“…Hey, Yuuto,” Takatsuki said. “Does Miss Mikako still meet with my mother?”

Earlier, Mikako had said, “*Auntie waits for you, even now.*”

That “Auntie” was probably in reference to Takatsuki’s mother.

“I don’t know,” Yuuto replied. “Because of work, my parents probably have more direct contact with the Takamura family than yours, but…I can’t say for sure that she doesn’t.”

Putting a hand to his forehead, Takatsuki exhaled slowly and met Yuuto’s gaze through the rearview mirror.

“My mother, what’s she like now…? She wasn’t able to leave the house for a while, I believe.”

“She recovered a while back. I’m pretty sure she’s socializing a fair bit. I see her at family gatherings, and—from what I’ve seen—she seems normal.”

“I see… Well, that’s good.”

Takatsuki’s quiet response came out on an exhalation.

Naoya knew that Takatsuki’s mother had once had a complete

break with reality.

Her delusion that he was the *Tengu*'s Child was born of her love for her son. It was the only interpretation she could accept to explain the void in his past.

But that only ended up driving her son, Takatsuki, into a corner.

After all, no one suffered more because of that void than Takatsuki himself.

Every time his mother called him the *Tengu*'s Child or hailed him as a living deity, Takatsuki became even more confused. Was he human? A god? Or a monster with clipped wings?

And so, one day, Takatsuki told her—

"I'm done."

He said that he wasn't the *Tengu*'s Child, that he couldn't behave the way she wanted anymore.

That, however, was a direct denial of the fantasy she lived in.

Her already taxed nerves took it as a rejection from her son.

She couldn't bear it, and so she began to deny the very existence of the boy right there in front of her.

There was no way her beloved son would have rejected her.

The "thing" in front of her couldn't possibly have been her son—that was what she thought.

Takatsuki's mother found a new fantasy and shut herself away inside of it.

In that fantasy, her son had not yet returned.

Eventually, she was no longer even aware of Takatsuki. She didn't reply when he spoke to her, didn't react when he touched her; she didn't even seem to be able to see him. No—to her, Takatsuki had truly disappeared.

Unable to bear it, Takatsuki's father had sent him to live with Wataru. Since then, Takatsuki hadn't seen his own mother even once.

Naoya looked at the professor. He was leaning fully into his seat, with his eyes closed. His breathing seemed better than before, but his face was still a little pale.

"Professor, are you okay? You're not feeling carsick or anything, are you?"

"I'm fine. I'm already feeling a lot better."

Takatsuki opened his eyes and turned to Naoya with a small smile.

"So don't even think about reporting to KenKen about today, Fukamachi."

"Wh-what do you…? It's not like I'm a spy."

"Lately, I feel like you and KenKen have formed an overprotective alliance toward me."

"Don't worry; no such alliance exists," Naoya told him.

Takatsuki shot him a sidelong glance, however, as though he couldn't trust him. Naoya did his best to keep a straight face.

It wasn't like he had lied. He didn't recall forming any alliance like that… It was just that, as someone often near Takatsuki, he felt it necessary to share information with his guardian, to a certain extent.

As he drove, Yuuto spoke up again.

"—Listen. About Mikako."

Takatsuki and Naoya looked at him, and he kept his gaze facing forward.

"Just…I don't want you to get the wrong idea. She's usually not like that at all. She's a very kind, sensible person. I think the reason she's acting strange is because of that weird growth on her shoulder."

"But the thing on her shoulder must have been there for a while," Takatsuki said. "You said you hadn't seen her in a while, but that wasn't something that developed just in the last month or so. It's a lot older than that… You didn't know about it?"

"That's because…I mean, until now, she hadn't told me anything about it," Yuuto stammered, his tone becoming oddly evasive.

Takatsuki tilted his head to the side.

"Wait, is it possible you never saw Miss Mikako's shoulder before this incident?"

"Uh, it's… Well, I hadn't had the chance."

Yuuto's stammering grew worse at Takatsuki's question. Takatsuki looked at him, puzzled. Yuuto wasn't just dating Mikako on the assumption that they would get married; they were already engaged. Naoya wondered how it was possible to never see the

shoulders of the other party in that situation.

"Um…Yuuto, when was it that you and Miss Mikako got engaged?"

"…July."

"…You're a late bloomer, huh?"

"…Like I said! We're both busy, so we haven't been able to see each other that much! We've only been on a few dates!"

"Yuuto, eyes forward! You're driving! It's dangerous!"

Bright red, Yuuto had turned around, and Takatsuki shouted at him in a panic.

Yuuto quickly faced forward again, but it was clear even from behind that he was blushing all the way to his ears. Exchanging glances with Takatsuki, Naoya almost burst out laughing. He had thought Yuuto was an unpleasant person at first, but it turned out he was actually surprisingly adorable.

By the time they arrived at the apartment, Takatsuki's complexion had improved considerably. His legs no longer seemed wobbly as he got out of the car.

Yuuto also got out and turned to Takatsuki to apologize once more.

"I'm really sorry about this… I'll meet up with Mikako when things have calmed down and talk to her. She really isn't normally like that. I'm sure something must have happened. I'll listen to what she has to say and try to find a good doctor for her shoulder issue."

"Yeah, sure. I think that would be a good idea," Takatsuki said, nodding.

Then, looking at Yuuto again, he smiled brightly.

Yuuto, tucking his chin in slightly, stared back at him.

"Wh-what is it?"

"I was just thinking that you must really like Miss Mikako."

"…What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. It's just that when you first came to consult with me, I thought it was because you felt you had to, as her fiancé, or that it was for the sake of the company… I thought it was just a political

marriage arranged between your families, but could it be that she was actually your first love?”

“Sh-she wasn’t my first love!” Yuuto said, blushing again.

Takatsuki glanced over at Naoya, who shook his head to convey that Yuuto wasn’t lying. There was no distortion in his voice. As if to say, “That’s no fun,” Takatsuki shrugged, like he was bored. His sense of humor was twisted.

“…I mean, I’ve at least known what she looks like since we were kids. But she wasn’t my first love, and the first time we had a proper conversation was at the matchmaking session.”

Yuuto averted his gaze and mumbled as he spoke.

“But at the matchmaking session… You know, there’s the point where they say, ‘Why don’t we leave the young people alone to chat?’ We were walking by ourselves in the hotel garden, and… As soon as we were out of the others’ line of sight, she suddenly stretched her arms up really high and said, ‘I actually don’t like tofu salad.’”

“Tofu salad?”

Feeling as though the conversation had taken an abrupt turn, both Takatsuki and Naoya blinked at Yuuto.

Still red in the face, Yuuto continued in a mutter.

“They served tofu salad in the meal at the matchmaking session. When we were eating, she ate every dish like it was delicious and left no food behind.”

But when she was alone with Yuuto in the garden, Mikako had said with a wry smile, “I pretended to enjoy it because it was a matchmaking party. Growing up, I was taught to be good at lying like that when necessary. So I’m sure I could pretend to like you, too.”

Yuuto had been quite taken aback at her unexpected remark.

But Mikako hadn’t been done speaking.

“But I think it would be tiresome to keep lying to my spouse my whole life. I don’t want to pretend to like you. I want to actually like you, if I can. So could we try speaking more candidly? We can start with just the time it takes us to make one lap around the pond in this garden. During that time, if we can find even one thing that we

like in each other, then we might be able to live a bit happily together.”

For a while, Yuuto had been speechless, staring at Mikako with a dumbfounded expression.

This was an arranged marriage, where the option to refuse was off the table from the start.

At the matchmaking session, Yuuto had only been thinking about as far as the fact that he was glad his future spouse was at least someone he knew the face of.

“Hey. Did you hear me?”

Coming back to his senses when Mikako waved a hand in front of his face, Yuuto had opened his mouth in a panic and said—

“…P-plum dressing.”

“Plum dressing?”

“No, I mean, well…I…I don’t like pickled plums. So plum dressing is…”

Immediately afterward, Yuuto had realized he should have said something more tactful.

It wasn’t like they were supposed to be sharing foods they didn’t like with each other, but Yuuto had just sort of gone along with that after Mikako had said she didn’t like tofu salad.

Mikako had stared at him with wide eyes, and Yuuto had shaken his head and both hands back and forth, flustered.

“No, I mean, I meant to say!”

At that, Mikako had doubled over and started laughing.

She ended up laughing until she was in tears, and with no way to explain himself, Yuuto had thought it was all over. He was certain that, rather than liking him, she would think he was stupid.

But as she wiped away the tears at the corners of her eyes with her fingertips, Mikako had said, “Until a moment ago, I thought you were kind of stiff, serious, and boring, but… You’re actually surprisingly cute.”

“C-cute? Me?! I’m a guy!”

“But your face is bright red… It’s cute,” she had replied, pointing at his face and smiling. Her expression in that moment was bright and somehow so lovely, and that was when Yuuto first thought, *Ah.*

I like her.

"—So that's how it went, and that's why we were talking about how we could grow to like each other little by little, and it would be fine. Our parents had said that as long as we got engaged, they didn't care if the marriage came later on, so we figured, let's not force it, we can meet whenever possible, get to know each other a little at a time, and build our relationship while liking each other in degrees…"

Yuuto sighed.

He must have been quite confused by Mikako's recent behavior. Indeed, even from the story they had just heard alone, Mikako seemed rather different from the person they had met earlier.

"I don't know why Mikako just remembered the *Tengu-sama* thing now… But even I can kind of understand why she would think *Tengu-sama* could help her when something strange is happening."

Yuuto looked at Takatsuki as he spoke.

"I was brought to those *Tengu-sama* tea parties a few times as a kid, too. Back then, A— …You seemed godlike in some way even to me when I was a child. No matter what anyone asked of you, you had an answer right away. It felt like there was absolutely nothing you didn't know."

"…I was only pretending to be like that," Takatsuki said with a bitter smile. "I'm not the *Tengu*'s Child. I don't have the power to help anyone and everyone. That's the truth."

"Yeah, I know… I'm going to tell Mikako that, too."

"I'd be glad if you did. Oh—hey, Yuuto?"

Suddenly, Takatsuki looked as if he'd just thought of something.

He held his hand out toward Yuuto.

"You've been on a few dates with Miss Mikako, right? Show me some pictures of your dates."

"Wh-why should I have to show you something like that?!"

"As your cousin, I want to see you deepening your relationship with Miss Mikako bit by bit. It's no big deal, right? So why not?"

Takatsuki smiled widely, snatching Yuuto's phone from his reluctant grip. "Let's look at them together," the professor said, so Naoya peered in from the side.

The photo app had several shots of Yuuto and Mikako together saved to it. There weren't many, since they had only been on a few dates, as Yuuto had said. But even so, it was clear from their expressions in the photos that the distance between the two of them was gradually lessening.

"Oh, you went to Disneyland. Those Mickey Mouse ears look good on you, Yuuto."

"W-well! Mikako insisted that I wear them!"

Takatsuki looked quite happy as he swiped from one photo to the next. Kazu came to Naoya's mind, for some reason, and he wondered if all older cousins were like this. He felt sure that Kazuya would say the same thing as Takatsuki if Naoya ever got a girlfriend.

It was at that moment—

Abruptly, as if startled, Takatsuki turned around.

Curious, Naoya turned his head, too—and his eyes landed on a face he had never wanted to see again.

"Good evening, sir. I take it you've been well?"

Straight-backed posture. Jet-black hair that was neatly combed back. A dark suit that seemed to melt into the nighttime darkness. A shallow smile plastered to his face for appearance's sake only.

It was Takatsuki's father's secretary, Kuroki. The man in charge of keeping an eye on Takatsuki.

"What are you here for today?" Takatsuki asked in a low voice, handing Yuuto's phone back to him.

"Oh, I had some business nearby, so I just came to see how you were. But that aside—"

As he approached them, Kuroki's gaze turned to Yuuto. His eyes were strangely sharp in his plain, nondescript face.

"My, my. What on earth are you doing here, sir?"

"…"

Yuuto's expression had gone blatantly stiff.

Kuroki, his superficial smile still in place, went on.

"I hate to find fault with some cousinly bonding, but…I can't say I think much of what's happening here. Does your father know about this?"

It was as though he was scolding Yuuto for meeting with

Takatsuki.

"F-father has nothing to do with this!"

Yuuto's voice was a bit shrill. He seemed to dislike Kuroki.

Kuroki nodded slightly, as if to say, "Is that so?"

"Your cousin has already cut all ties to members of the Takatsuki family. There is no need for you to be meeting now. Wouldn't it be better for you to go home early today? You have an appointment to go golfing with a client tomorrow."

Indirectly ordered to leave, Yuuto looked between Takatsuki and Kuroki.

Takatsuki smiled at him.

"Good night, Yuuto. I wish you and Mikako happiness."

"…Right. Thanks for today."

With that, Yuuto got in his car, as if he couldn't get away from Kuroki fast enough.

As he watched the car drive off, Takatsuki said to Kuroki, "Mr. Kuroki, if you only came to see how I am, could you leave already? As you can see, I'm the same as ever."

"What business did you have with Yuuto, sir?"

Kuroki stood next to Takatsuki, also watching Yuuto's car drive away.

"It's none of your concern, Mr. Kuroki. I was just consulting with him about something personal. It wasn't regarding work."

"Oh? Don't tell me you see Yuuto often?"

"No. We hadn't seen each other in about twenty years. You don't have to worry, I usually have no contact with members of the Takatsuki family."

"I see, that's good. I was simply a bit surprised that mediocre clone of his father would have any business with you now."

Kuroki's smooth words were laced with venom, and Naoya looked at him in shock.

Takatsuki glared at the man silently.

Kuroki looked utterly unbothered by it.

"Like his father, Yuuto is hopeless. Some say he could be a candidate company president someday, but unfortunately, he lacks both ability and charisma. He's the poster child for how companies

cannot run on lineage alone. You're far superior to him, sir, so it truly is regrettable. If you were in the same position as he is now, his fiancée might have become yours."

"…If you have no business with me, please leave. Talking to you makes me feel sick."

Takatsuki's voice was plain with disgust.

Naoya didn't know anyone other than Kuroki to whom Takatsuki behaved like this. It was only natural, he thought. He couldn't understand Takatsuki's father. Why would he put a man who was the embodiment of nastiness in charge of keeping tabs on Takatsuki? Every time Kuroki opened his mouth, Naoya couldn't help but feel as though a dark blade was being swung in Takatsuki's direction. This man had been like this the first time Naoya met him, and he was certain he had always and would always be this way. He just wanted Kuroki to leave already.

"Ah, that reminds me, there is one thing I needed to speak with you about," Kuroki said, taking something out of the bag he was carrying.

He handed Takatsuki a plastic document sleeve with what looked like a flyer tucked inside.

"This is an announcement for a photo exhibition. The exhibition will be held in Hatsudai for a week, starting tomorrow."

Takatsuki's face stiffened as he took the flyer.

The exhibition seemed to be by a photographer who had followed overseas ballet companies. There was a large photo printed on it of a ballerina in a white outfit and of a magnificent, palace-like building.

Spotting the word "Takatsuki" on the flyer, Naoya gasped.

His eyes strayed to the text printed on the paper. It was information about a talk show.

"To commemorate this photo exhibition, we will be conducting a talk show with legendary prima ballerina, Sayaka Takatsuki."

Wasn't that the name of Takatsuki's mother?

"What are you trying to say with this?" Takatsuki asked in a low voice. "I have no interest in ballet."

"I'm aware," Kuroki replied. "This is a precautionary notice. Please

be sure to stay away from the venue not just on the day of the talk show, but for the duration of the exhibition as well. This is to avoid any unnecessary commotion. You understand, I'm sure?"

"…As if I need to be told."

Takatsuki gave one small puff of laughter.

There were limits to how much Naoya could endure, and he never wanted to see Takatsuki laughing in that way.

Before he knew it, Naoya had stepped forward to put himself between Takatsuki and Kuroki.

"Um, could you please stop?"

Behind him, he heard Takatsuki call in a startled voice, "Hold on, Fukamachi—!" But Naoya didn't turn to look at him, instead replying inwardly with, *Shut up, don't say a word*. He wanted to reprimand the professor, to tell him that he needed to stop laughing whenever something bad happened, that if he was going to laugh in such a self-abasing way, he might as well cry instead.

Kuroki's expression said that he was only just noticing Naoya now that he was standing in front of him.

"…Ah. I believe you're the student who was at his apartment before."

"Please leave now," Naoya said, glaring at Kuroki.

Kuroki's eyes widened in mock surprise.

"I don't think a student should be interfering with adult matters."

"What 'adult matters'?" Naoya growled. "You're just trying to hurt Professor Takatsuki."

Kuroki chuckled.

"I'm just **trying to be considerate** in my own way. **I'm worried about** your professor."

Naoya frowned at the distortion mingling in with his words.

You liar, he thought.

He wasn't being considerate at all. He wasn't worried a bit about Takatsuki.

"Consideration is what people do when they care about others, even just a little bit… You don't care one bit about Professor Takatsuki, do you?"

"That's not true. He is President Takatsuki's son, after all."

Kuroki's eyes narrowed.

"I want him to keep quiet, not get in the way of his father, not cause any trouble, and live his life in such a way that doesn't involve the company or the Takatsuki family… That's all I'm asking."

Such were Kuroki's true feelings, without a trace of untruth or exaggeration.

Naoya knew it with certainty.

When was the last time he had seriously wanted to punch someone?

Naoya's body moved before he could think.

It all happened without his being conscious of it—his foot stepped forward, his arm raised, his fist clenched. Naoya hadn't realized he held such violence inside him. All he wanted was to hit the other man until his face was crushed in.

Kuroki looked shocked. He took a quick step back, and Naoya advanced forward again, aiming for the man's head.

But then he felt an arm holding him back firmly from behind.

It was Takatsuki.

He had Naoya in a headlock and was not curbing his strength. At that point, between the differences in their physiques and their pure physical power, there was nothing Naoya could do. He tried to shout at Takatsuki, demanding to know what he was doing, but all that came out was a strangled groan. Even so, Naoya thrashed in his grip, refusing to give up.

Still holding Naoya back, Takatsuki addressed Kuroki.

"Good night, Mr. Kuroki. I'd appreciate it if you could stay out of my sight for a while."

For a few long moments, Kuroki stared at the two of them. And then—he burst out laughing.

"…Good night, sir. I'm glad you have such an adorable guard dog."

Still laughing, Kuroki turned on his heel.

Even once he had turned a corner and disappeared from sight, Takatsuki kept holding on to Naoya. Perhaps he thought Naoya would chase after Kuroki and punch him. Struggling in his arms like a child, Naoya cried out.

"…Why?! Why'd you do that?!"

"Why? Because I can't let you get caught red-handed committing assault."

"Why didn't you stop him from talking to you like that?! You haven't done anything wrong!"

"…Because I don't personally have anything to back up that assertion," Takatsuki muttered from behind Naoya's ear.

The heaviness in his voice made Naoya hold his breath.

"Listen, Fukamachi, I still don't know the circumstances of my disappearance. Even if someone kidnapped me, that doesn't rule out my own will or negligence being a factor. Besides, it's indisputable that I'm the one who broke my mother. I'm the one who destroyed our family."

Takatsuki kept his hold on Naoya the whole time he spoke.

Was that why he hadn't said anything back to Kuroki? Was his demeanor, which was so unlike him, the result of his feeling guilty? Had Takatsuki been living his life this entire time feeling that way?

But, but that's—that's wrong. Because—

"It wasn't your fault, Professor!"

"I'm telling you, we don't know that."

"You're wrong…! I'm sure of it! It's not true!" Naoya shouted, and it was like the rage that had built up in his throat was spewing forth.

Suddenly, Takatsuki's arms loosened.

Naoya shook Takatsuki off immediately and rounded on him, wanting to smack him across the face instead.

And there he saw a smile on Takatsuki's face that he hadn't seen many times before.

Lips pursed, the corners of his mouth were slightly downturned, as though he was restraining himself from something. His gently narrowed eyes, however, were lit with a warm glow… His smile looked troubled, but he also looked just a little like he was trying to hold back tears.

"…Ugh. Good grief, you're such a handful."

Unexpectedly, Takatsuki reached out a hand and put it on Naoya's head.

And then he started petting Naoya's hair, aggressively ruffling it in

the process.

"H-hey! What are you doing? Seriously, knock it off!"

"Bear with it. I just really feel like doing this right now."

"You 'just feel like' it…?"

With his head being pressed down, Naoya couldn't see Takatsuki's face. When he tried to escape, Takatsuki only pressed down harder, obstinately stroking his head. His hand moved just like he was petting a dog.

Come to think of it, Kuroki had called Naoya a guard dog.

Naoya thought Takatsuki was already enough like a dog for the both of them, though.

"…You've changed, you know?" he heard Takatsuki say. "Since we came back from Nagano. The fact that I've forgotten the events that changed you like that… I really can't stand it."

With that, Takatsuki patted Naoya's head one more time.

The following day, Saturday, Naoya headed to Shinjuku before noon.

He was planning on seeing a movie.

But when he got to the small theater he often went to near the southeast exit of the station, he realized there was still a lot of time before the next movie screening. Thinking he should have checked the showtimes before coming, he walked over to Books Kinokuniya. He wandered around the bookstore aimlessly for a while, bought two paperbacks, and had lunch at a curry shop in the belowground level.

After that, he headed back to ground level, navigating the crowds and passing right by the movie theater. He went up the stairs at the southeast exit and came out onto the road along Kōshū Kaidō.

He was content with buying the books and no longer felt like watching a movie.

That was what Naoya told himself as he kept walking. Intending to go on a light stroll, he made his way along Kōshū Kaidō in the direction of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building. The curry he had just eaten was sitting heavy in his stomach, so he was in the mood to walk a little. That was all.

After walking twenty minutes from Shinjuku Station, he was in Hatsudai.

Realizing at that point that he had run out of any excuses, Naoya glared ahead at the large, towering building complex. It appeared to be called Tokyo Opera City. Along with restaurants and offices, the building contained cultural facilities such as playhouses and concert halls.

The photo exhibition was being held in a gallery on the third floor.

The talk show Takatsuki's mother would be on was at two PM that day.

Naoya himself wasn't sure why he had bothered to come all the way here.

He was aware that he was intruding too much into Takatsuki's privacy. This wasn't something he needed to know, and Takatsuki probably wouldn't be too happy if he found out.

Still, just once, Naoya wanted to see what Takatsuki's mother looked like.

He had heard stories about her from various people. From what he had gleaned, she was like a tragic heroine, but she also seemed to be a very selfish person. It was said she had once utterly broken down, but now she was appearing on a talk show. As Yuuto had mentioned, she must have recovered.

What would she look like now? Naoya wanted to know.

But when he was actually at the gallery entrance, Naoya felt a powerful urge to turn and run. Maybe he shouldn't be doing this after all, he thought. He was disgusted with himself for being driven by such vulgar curiosity.

There were flowers displayed at the entrance and a small signboard announcing the talk show. Naoya could hear people talking on a microphone from inside the gallery. He checked the clock to see that it was shortly after two o'clock.

The show must have already started. Inside, that very moment, Takatsuki's mother was speaking. That thought made him lose his nerve even more.

Plus, Naoya wondered what he would do if he ran into Kuroki. He

didn’t think the odds were high, but they weren’t nonexistent, either. If he found Naoya hanging around here, he would probably go to Takatsuki’s place and say something nasty to him, right on the heels of the day before.

I can’t, Naoya thought. *I’m going home.*

Just as he was about to turn and go, someone grabbed him firmly by the shoulder from behind.

Startled, Naoya turned his head.

“—What’s this? What a coincidence! It’s been a while, kiddo.”

A thin man with a stubbly face stood there, his overly familiar words reeking of cigarette smoke. For a moment, Naoya wondered who the hell he was, but then his disheveled hair and shady-looking sunglasses rang a bell.

It was Iinuma. The man introduced himself as a freelance journalist, but he was basically just a reporter who penned trashy articles for gossip mags about celebrity affairs and such. The first time Naoya had met him, in fact, was when Takatsuki had accepted a case from an actress.

The last time they’d come across Iinuma was on a trip to Yamanashi. As a result of diving into freezing cold water to save Takatsuki, who had fallen over a waterfall, Iinuma had caught a terrible cold and been taken to the hospital by Sasakura.

“…So you’re still alive?”

“That’s the first thing you say to me? That’s cold! I sure am alive, though I was laid up in the hospital with pneumonia for a while. Speaking of, you guys were a bit heartless, don’t ya think? I got pneumonia because I saved Professor Takatsuki. I’m a lifesaver, so to speak. Normally you’d come visit with a big fruit basket and bow your heads in thanks, y’know? But you guys left me behind and just went back to Tokyo!”

Iinuma was as insincere and chatty as ever. Naoya brushed his hand away.

“You did help the professor, that’s true, but then you almost ended up drowning along with him, and Mr. Sasakura saved *you*.”

“No, no, I’m pretty sure that prof would have died if I hadn’t jumped in first and grabbed him! But anyway, forget about that.

What's up, kiddo, did you come here to see the photo exhibition?"

Suddenly, Iinuma leaned in close and grinned.

Naoya glared back at him.

"What about you? Are you still investigating the professor?"

The reason Iinuma had originally started skulking around Takatsuki was because Takatsuki's father had pressured a magazine into suppressing a tabloid photo of Takatsuki together with an actress.

After that, Iinuma had started investigating the professor, hoping to write an article about the truth behind his being spirited away, sniffing around in this and that like he had a grudge. Naoya hadn't seen the man in a while, so he had figured he'd given up already, but apparently not.

Iinuma shrugged.

"I'm a busy guy, y'know. It's not like I'm constantly looking into him. But my journalist's intuition tells me there's something up with that teacher. I'm not gonna ignore the chance to gather info. If you wanna see the exhibition, kiddo, I've got a free ticket. I got it through some connections. I'll give it to you."

"I don't need it. I'm going home now."

"Aw, come on, don't be like that. Let's get along!"

"W-wait a minute!"

Grabbing Naoya by the shoulders, Iinuma steered them quickly toward the entrance. He waved his ticket at the receptionist, as if flaunting it, and dragged Naoya into the gallery.

The gallery was divided into a maze of photo panels. There weren't many visitors, perhaps because the talk show had already started. In the big, blown-up photographs, foreign ballet dancers were striking various poses. Their outstretched arms were elegant, their backs gently arched, their legs unbelievably high reaching. As they leaped through the air, their flexing muscles cast sharp shadows in the black-and-white pictures. Naoya didn't know much about ballet, but it was hard for him to imagine the ballet dancers as being human just as he was. It was like he was looking at much freer, fiercer creatures.

"Now where is this talk show happening? Where is Mama

Sayaka?”

Iinuma went deeper and deeper into the exhibition, barely sparing a glance for the photos on display.

Dragged along after him, Naoya stiffened as the voices on the microphones got ever closer.

A calm male voice was coming from the other side of the panels. A soft, clear female voice was answering him.

“Yes, that’s right. It’s been a long time since I danced, but—”

No. I can’t do this. I need to leave now.

But heedless of Naoya’s thoughts, Iinuma held his shoulders even tighter, surging forward.

Eventually, the panels came to an abrupt stop, and the view opened up. They had arrived at the talk show venue.

“—Look, kiddo,” Iinuma whispered in his ear. “That’s your professor’s mom.”

For a moment, Naoya stopped breathing.

It wasn’t a very large space. There were probably fewer than twenty chairs lined up for the audience to use. There were some spectators standing, too. Iinuma stepped into the venue with Naoya in tow, blending into the standing-room-only crowd. Naoya stared, dazed, at the two conversing speakers sitting in their own chairs in front of the audience.

One of them was likely the photographer. He was a sturdy man of about fifty, dressed casually in a T-shirt and jeans.

And the other was—a very beautiful woman with soft-looking light-brown hair that hung down around her shoulders. Her slender, long-limbed body was clad in an elegant beige dress. Every time the photographer spoke to her, she would put a delicate hand to her mouth and smile softly or answer in a clear voice.

That was Sayaka Takatsuki.

“She seems young… She’s gotta be in her sixties already. What, does she drink the blood of virgins or something?” Iinuma muttered.

Takatsuki’s mother would be around that age, but perhaps because they were looking at her from a distance, she didn’t appear that old at all. Her beautiful features were really very similar to Takatsuki’s. Enough that it was quite clear she was his mother.

"I still can't forget your performance of *Giselle*," Naoya heard the photographer say to Sayaka. "You were so lovely and light that I thought, *Wow, she really is a fairy.* I thought I'd be able to see Sayaka Takatsuki perform for a long time to come, but you retired so early. To be honest, it was a shock. I heard you had injured your leg, but I was surprised that you completely retired from the ballet world afterward. Didn't you miss it at all?"

"I got married soon after that," Sayaka replied with a bashful smile. "It's not that I didn't feel any attachment to ballet but that my love for my husband was greater than that… When you're doing ballet, you know, you end up being away from home a lot. But it was indeed a surprise to me, too, that I would find happiness in becoming a wife and a mother."

Naoya stared blankly at her smile.

This woman spoke of her family with the same face as Takatsuki.

As she smiled happily.

"But when I held my newborn son in my arms, I realized I would live my life protecting him. At that moment, I knew I would never be Giselle again."

There was not the slightest distortion in her voice, but hearing it made something in Naoya's chest creak.

After that, the talk show went on to discuss overseas ballet performances and life in a ballet company, before eventually coming to an end.

As the audience applauded, Sayaka and the photographer stood up, bowed slightly, and headed toward the back to make their exit.

At that moment, Iinuma made his move.

Naoya struggled in his grip, but Iinuma had his arm in one hand and dragged him forward, pushing other audience members aside to chase after Sayaka.

"Mrs. Sayaka Takatsuki! Hello! I was so moved by the talk show just now!"

Sayaka, who was about to leave, turned around in surprise when she heard her name called loudly. In his brightly patterned shirt and sunglasses, Iinuma stood out clearly among the gallery guests. A woman who seemed to be an attendant spoke to him with a blatant

frown on her face.

"Pardon me, you can't do that. Please step back."

"I mean, especially the part about retiring from ballet and realizing the love you had for your family? That was great! I was so touched that I cried!"

Ignoring the attendant trying to keep him away, Iinuma moved even closer to Sayaka, who looked at him with wide eyes. Then, however, she smiled politely.

"Thank you very much. But I am a little sorry for talking so much about my family. I'm sure everyone wanted to hear more about ballet."

"No, no, no, that kind of stuff is just what I wanted to hear! It really struck a chord! So—Sayaka, do you still have a close relationship with your son?"

Iinuma grinned broadly. Taken aback, Naoya grabbed ahold of Iinuma's clothes.

Iinuma shook him off, annoyed, and asked yet another question.

"Your son, how is he doing?"

The soft smile Sayaka had been wearing suddenly faded. A shadow fell over her dark-brown eyes.

With a sad smile, she said, "Well—my son disappeared when he was a child."

Naoya's eyes widened, and he stared at Sayaka, who continued.

"The truth is, we still haven't found my son… I still believe that he will come back someday."

At that moment, something inside Naoya once again creaked jarringly.

The female attendant urged Sayaka farther back. Sayaka gave a slight bow to Iinuma, then looked at Naoya's face with a somewhat curious look in her eyes before taking her leave.

Iinuma saw her off, ripped his sunglasses from his face, and clicked his tongue.

"…The hell? She wouldn't be joking about that, right?"

Turning to look at Naoya, he nudged him roughly with an elbow.

"And what's with that look on your face, kid? You know something, don't you? Come on, tell me. I'd like to hear it."

Naoya looked down without saying a word and shook his head. He simply started heading for the exit. Iinuma followed, but every time he tried to grab Naoya by the arm or shoulder, he shook him off, hurrying out of the gallery.

Sayaka had seemed normal.

There hadn't been anything strange about her.

And yet, even now, she was living in a fantasy world.

In that world, her son had been kidnapped at the age of twelve and had never returned. The more she turned her eyes away from reality, the more cruelly the world around her distorted.

Takatsuki, living in the real world, still didn't exist to her.

It was on Monday morning that Yuuto contacted Takatsuki to say that Mikako had disappeared.

Late Monday afternoon, as Naoya was headed to the professor's office to return a book he had borrowed, he ran into Takatsuki just as the other man was about to head out somewhere and heard about the situation.

"It seems he can't get in touch with Miss Mikako at all."

Yuuto had called Mikako on Saturday night, but she hadn't answered. He'd left a message on her answering machine but never heard back.

He had called again on Sunday afternoon, but Mikako still didn't answer. That evening, he'd gone straight to her apartment, but there was no response when he rang the intercom, and when he checked from the outside, there were no lights on in her apartment.

At that point, Yuuto had tried casually checking in with her family, thinking she might have gone home, but Mikako hadn't been there.

Monday morning, as a last resort, Yuuto had tried calling the English conversation school he knew Mikako attended. Nearly mistaken for a stalker, all Yuuto had managed to get out of the school was that Mikako had an unexcused absence that day.

And so, at his wit's end, Yuuto had contacted Takatsuki.

Takatsuki had briefly returned to his office to explain everything to Naoya. As he was about to leave again, he said, "I don't have any

more lectures today, so I thought I'd go look for her, too. Ah, you don't have to come, of course, Fukamachi. This has nothing to do with the investigation at this point—Fukamachi?"

Takatsuki had turned to stare at Naoya, who had instinctively grabbed him by the arm to stop him.

Naoya stared up at him.

"I don't think you should get involved in anything concerning Miss Mikako anymore, Professor."

"…I'm afraid that's not an option."

"Don't you think this should be left to Yuuto, Mikako's family, and the police?! There's no need for you to go. You remember how you almost collapsed, right?"

"I remember. But it'll be too late by the time something happens, and it's possible that something is already happening," Takatsuki replied, his face serious. "Or rather, by the time this issue came to me, it may already have been well past its starting point."

"Huh?"

"I should have pointed it out to Yuuto sooner," he muttered, stroking his chin lightly.

Just as Naoya was about to ask what he meant, there was a knock on the office door.

Takatsuki, who usually responded right away, for some reason immediately stopped talking and stared at the door. The person on the other side knocked again.

"…Come in," Takatsuki called out, and the office door opened from the outside.

Standing there—was Mikako.

She was wearing a wine-red dress and carrying a shoulder bag. Her heavy black hair framed her face, and her large almond-shaped eyes glittered with heat. Almost instinctively afraid of her face, Naoya grabbed on to Takatsuki's arm again. For some reason, he felt he had to keep the professor away from her.

But Takatsuki plucked Naoya's hand off his arm and took a step forward.

"Ah, it's a good thing I didn't leave… Well, I had a feeling you might come to see me, somehow."

"*Tengu-sama*," Mikako said.

Her voice was like a sweet poison.

"I've always adored you, *Tengu-sama*. Ever since we met as children. You're the only one who understands me."

Her gaze full of fixation, Mikako threw herself at Takatsuki. So thin that it was evident even through her clothes, her arms twined around his back, snakelike.

Takatsuki didn't resist her, but he didn't return her embrace, either.

He spoke in a quiet voice, looking into space rather than at the woman clinging to his body.

"Indeed. I did meet you a long time ago. At a tea party my mother held in our garden."

The look in Takatsuki's eyes as he stared into the distance was the one he wore when he was replaying memories of the past.

The scenery he was gazing at now was that of a tea party held in the garden of his home more than twenty years before.

"Tea, sandwiches, and sweets were laid out on a large white table. The adults were chatting happily, but you were sitting quietly, looking bored and eating snacks. Eventually, you got up from your chair and walked by yourself to a flower bed in the garden. I had more or less finished listening to all of the ladies' concerns, so I followed you."

"That's right, *Tengu-sama*! So you remembered me after all!"

Mikako hugged Takatsuki tighter and tighter, sounding pleased.

"Yes. I remember you. But I don't know your name."

Finally, Takatsuki moved.

He unwound her arms from his body and grabbed them with both of his hands instead. Returning his vision from scenes of the past to the present happening right before his eyes, Takatsuki peered down at Mikako's face.

"You're not Miss Mikako, are you?"

Naoya was confused by his words.

Mikako didn't reply. She simply looked up at Takatsuki, her eyes brimming with even more passion than before.

Takatsuki continued.

"Miss Mikako came to my mother's tea parties several times. She was always holding a teddy bear in her arms. She was always doted on by the surrounding adults. That day—you didn't have a teddy bear, but all the adults thought you were Miss Mikako. And you didn't deny it. I thought that was strange. After all, you weren't the same girl. That's why I followed you to the flower beds and asked you who you were."

"Yes… Yes, that's right. That's exactly right, *Tengu-sama*."

Tears had welled up in Mikako's burning gaze and began to spill over.

Naoya looked at her and then at Takatsuki.

"Professor, then… This person is Miss Mikako's…?"

"That's right, Fukamachi," Takatsuki said. "She's Miss Mikako's twin sister. I'm not sure which is the elder sister, though. I never got to ask her name back then. A bird flew out from under the shade of a tree in the garden, unluckily, and I collapsed."

That was how she had known about his fear of birds.

This woman, with a face identical to Mikako's, gazed up at Takatsuki with tears streaming down her face.

"My name is Yuriko… I'm Mikako's younger sister."

Naoya recalled Yuuto saying that Mikako's younger sister was studying abroad.

But that didn't make sense. Why didn't Yuuto recognize Yuriko?

"I'm…defective. That's why I've been hidden away so people won't have to see me."

Yuriko continued to cry.

"Is that because of what's on your shoulder?" Takatsuki asked.

"At first…probably. But I don't think it was only that."

Mikako and Yuriko were identical twins.

Everything about them should have been the same. Their faces, their voices, everything, like they were reflections of each other.

But there was a single difference between them.

Yuriko was born with an unsightly growth on her shoulder.

The doctor explained it was an abnormality that occurred in the womb. For some reason or another, the amniotic membrane must have torn off and adhered to that spot. It could have resulted in a

much more serious impairment, so they were lucky it only ended up being as bad as it was.

Naturally, her parents sought treatment. They consulted the doctor about whether something like surgery could be done for it.

Yuriko, however, was prone to keloids, and even if the abnormality was removed through surgery, there was a possibility that the operation scar left behind would be even larger. Shaking his head, the doctor had told them he didn't recommend surgery.

"It didn't really bother me much when I was little. But when I got a little older, when I was with other children in kindergarten… All of the other kids pointed at my shoulder and said it was gross. Mikako protected me and yelled at them on my behalf, but I sobbed and blamed her. I asked why she wasn't the same as me, when we were twins, why she had such beautiful shoulders… Mikako tried comforting me with an awkward look on her face, but that's when I realized. We're twins who look exactly alike, like looking in a mirror, except I'm the one who's the reflection. Mikako is the real one, and I'm her mirror image. On top of that, the mirror is distorted."

That idea took root deep, deep within Yuriko.

Eventually, she began to shut herself away in her room. She said she didn't want to go to kindergarten, and when she was forced to go anyway, she would curl up in a corner by herself. She started to dislike talking to people and stayed perpetually silent, with a gloomy expression.

After all, Mikako was the real article.

As long as Mikako was around, there was no need for Yuriko.

In contrast to her sister, Mikako grew up to have a bright and carefree personality. At a loss for how to deal with Yuriko, their parents began to dote entirely on Mikako. Mikako alone continued to pay attention to Yuriko; everyone else left her almost entirely alone.

It's said that twins are the same at the genetic level.

But ultimately, a person's circumstances were what made them who they were.

Although their faces remained identical, everything else about the girls had inexorably diverged.

"It was only Mikako who was brought to your tea parties, *Tengu-*

sama. But one day, Mikako came to me and said she'd come up with a great prank. She said I would pretend to be her and go to the tea party, that there were lots of delicious sweets to eat, so it would be nice if I got to go, too… I had also heard about *Tengu-sama* from Mikako, and I had sort of wanted to meet you. So I put on Mikako's nice dress and pretended to be her and went to the tea party."

Before Yuriko had gone, her sister had told her she had to act like her or it wouldn't work.

In front of the dresser in her childhood room, Mikako had helped Yuriko get dressed, combed her hair and put a ribbon in it, and pointed to the mirror, saying, "Look."

"We're so alike," she had said. "Now, smile. If you do, no one will notice."

Those words were like magic.

Reflected together in the mirror, Mikako and Yuriko had indeed switched places.

Wearing a smile like Mikako always did, Yuriko had left the room, and when she tried hugging her mother, her mother was readily convinced that she was Mikako.

The spell Mikako had cast was perfect. At the tea party, everyone thought Yuriko was Mikako and doted on her.

But before long, she grew bored listening to the adults' chatter. She'd eaten too many sweets, and her stomach was full.

So Yuriko had gotten up from the table by herself. Drawn to a butterfly flapping around the garden, she had walked toward the flower beds.

It was there that *Tengu-sama* had asked her, "Who are you?" It had shocked her.

Mikako's spell was perfect, after all.

"It was only you. Only you could tell who I was. You didn't see Mikako; you saw me. Ah…do you understand? How happy I was at that moment? Only *Tengu-sama* looked straight at me, the fake reflected in the distorted mirror, the unnecessary one! That was the moment I realized that *Tengu-sama*'s clairvoyance was real!"

"You're wrong, Miss Yuriko. I'm not at all clairvoyant."

Yuriko's voice trembled when she spoke, and Takatsuki responded

to her, his tone cold.

"All I did back then was pay attention. Your faces were the same, but your typical mannerisms were different from Miss Mikako's. Miss Mikako was the type to never put down her teddy bear, but you didn't have one. Also, Miss Mikako had a habit of picking up the crumbs that had fallen onto the tablecloth one by one and arranging them in a row. You didn't do that… All I was doing was watching."

"There, so you were looking at me after all!"

Yuriko laughed with delight, utterly missing the point with her response.

"I wanted to go to another tea party in Mikako's place, but soon after that, I heard that *Tengu-sama*'s tea parties were canceled because Auntie Takatsuki had fallen ill. It was such a shame."

That was most likely because Takatsuki had quit being the *Tengu*'s Child.

The tea parties for *Tengu-sama* were never held again.

Yuriko grew up without ever meeting *Tengu-sama* a second time. The growth on her shoulder changed shape little by little as her body grew. It stretched out, beginning to resemble a human face in a way, and even Yuriko found it creepy.

Her dislike of being around others and her preference for being alone only grew as she went through elementary, middle, and high school. Mikako, on the other hand, made a lot of friends and became a cheerful, sociable person.

As before, Yuriko was only a distorted shadow reflected in a mirror.

And then as an adult, an incident occurred that made Yuriko realize that fact all the more clearly.

When Mikako returned from studying abroad, their parents suddenly told Yuriko to study abroad as well.

"I had no interest in studying abroad. I'd practiced English conversation through school, so I could speak it, to some extent, but I never thought of becoming an interpreter like Mikako. And yet I was forced to quit my job and study abroad."

It soon became clear why that was.

An arranged marriage proposal had been made for Mikako.

Yuriko had the same face as Mikako, and they were the same age. It shouldn't have been a problem. But their parents hid Yuriko. They sent her overseas, as if they had no such daughter.

Solely because Yuriko was defective.

"I kept in contact with Mikako even after I went abroad. She told me about the arranged meeting, and when I heard the other party's surname was Takatsuki, I couldn't contain myself. I knew he wasn't *Tengu-sama*, but still, my heart fluttered… I came back to Japan without telling a soul and met with Mikako."

Mikako worried over Yuriko, who had become thin from the stress of studying abroad.

Yuriko heard from Mikako all about her fiancé. What kind of person he was, what they called each other, where they went on dates, what they talked about. She listened to it all in detail.

"That was to take Miss Mikako's place, I assume?" Takatsuki asked.

Yuriko merely nodded.

"As we were talking, I saw us reflected in the mirror in the room. I had lost a little weight, but our faces were still the same. The magic could still work, I thought… It fooled Yuuto. That man must not love Mikako all that much after all."

Yuriko snickered. The diamond engagement ring that Yuuto had given Mikako shone on her left hand.

As he looked at the ring, a chill ran down Naoya's spine.

If Yuriko had swapped places with Mikako—then where was Mikako now?

"Yuuto is also from the Takatsuki family, so I figured he would at least be able to contact *Tengu-sama*. But if he was going to do that, he would need to have something special to consult about. Something difficult that he couldn't bring to just anyone… When I met with Mikako, I got a little injured. I fell on top of a broken wineglass and cut my shoulder. At that moment, I thought, *Ah, I have just the thing right here. This can be what he consults with him about*. When Yuuto told me later that *Tengu-sama* was teaching folklore at a university, I was so excited, I could have shaken out of my skin! What more appropriate consultation topic could there be

than a human-faced tumor? Hee-hee-hee. It was the first time this thing came in useful!”

Yuriko looked down at her own shoulder happily, noting cheerfully that even such things could happen.

Naoya, however, had stopped really listening to her talk about halfway through the story.

A broken wineglass. Yuriko had fallen on top of one. It seemed as though there had been a struggle between her and Mikako, and Naoya could not help but imagine the worst.

Was it possible that Mikako was no longer in this world?

Could Yuriko have killed her and taken the engagement ring from her finger?

Holding on to Yuriko’s arms as if he was arresting her, Takatsuki stared down at her with a rigid expression. Unheeding of that, Yuriko went on talking proudly.

“I begged him while crying, and Yuuto really did get in touch with *Tengu-sama* for me. And then he brought you to me. At first, you couldn’t quite tell me apart from Mikako, and I was a little shocked… But you are *Tengu-sama*, all the same. In the end, you realized that I wasn’t Mikako!”

The feverish gaze Yuriko looked up at Takatsuki with made Naoya utterly horrified.

Yuriko had only met Takatsuki one time, when she was very young, no less. Had she really been thinking about him ever since?

Was that why, more than twenty years later, she had come all the way here in pursuit of Takatsuki?

Had she even gone as far as to sacrifice her own twin sister?

One of Takatsuki’s lectures came to mind. It was about women who pursue and the fear they inspired. At the time, Takatsuki had said such things were the result of a patriarchal society. For men, the oppressors, it was terrifying when women, the oppressed, exposed their selfishness and obsession, he had said.

But even without that reasoning, this bizarre preoccupation, with no thought for the consequences, could only be frightening. A woman pursuing someone with dreadful dedication was, in and of itself, terrifying.

Then—

Takatsuki let out a single sigh.

"Ah…I see. So that's how it is."

Yuriko blinked in confusion.

Takatsuki, looking as though he had finally understood, stared down at her.

"This entire time, I didn't understand. Why had you changed places with Miss Mikako?"

Gently, Takatsuki released Yuriko's arms, which he had been holding on to all the while.

Instead, he took Yuriko's left hand and raised it.

A diamond ring sparkled on her ring finger. Looking closely, it was evident to him that the ring was the wrong size. Mikako's ring was slightly loose on Yuriko's thin finger.

"Even if you became Miss Mikako, the one you'd marry would be Yuuto, not me. Besides, if you just wanted to use Yuuto to get to me, there was no need for you to impersonate Miss Mikako. You could simply have gotten Miss Mikako to ask Yuuto for you. So why did you deliberately appear before me as Miss Mikako?"

Takatsuki looked down sadly at the ring.

"You just wanted me to tell you apart again—didn't you? To tell the difference between you and Miss Mikako?"

In that moment, looking up at Takatsuki, Yuriko's face crumpled.

In a heartbeat, her face had contorted like a child's on the brink of tears. A long, lingering cry escaped from between her slightly parted lips.

"…B-because…"

Her face screwed up like a five-year-old's, and large tears trailed down Yuriko's cheeks.

"Because…not even…my parents…noticed. Only you…noticed… *Tengu-sama*."

—That day, at the tea party at the Takatsuki household.

Everyone had thought Yuriko was Mikako.

And Yuriko had tried her hardest to imitate her sister. She acted more cheerful than usual and smiled adorably at those around her.

And yet it was Takatsuki alone who had realized that it wasn't

Mikako who was there, but Yuriko.

"I felt like…the world changed…at that moment… It was like a miracle."

Only Takatsuki had seen Yuriko, who was practically invisible.

That miraculous moment was burned into her mind. She had lived her life holding that single moment inside her heart.

Yuriko embraced Takatsuki again. Wrapping her thin arms around him, she cried out in a pleading tone.

"*Tengu-sama*. Please, look at me and only at me. Please grant my wish! Let's have another tea party with Auntie Takatsuki! And let's repeat that moment and live in it happily! Forever and ever and always!"

Once again, Takatsuki did not return Yuriko's hug.

He merely unwound her arms slowly, put his hands on her shoulders, and spoke.

"Ah, there was something else I didn't understand, but just now I've figured it out… I can't comprehend it, though."

"*Tengu-sama*…?"

Yuriko looked up at him.

Meeting her gaze, Takatsuki continued.

"I've wondered this entire time what you were planning to do after I recognized that you weren't Miss Mikako… You thought that if you met with me, I'd find you, like a prince in a fairy tale, and fall in love with you at first sight, didn't you? But that's no more than a fantasy that suits only you."

"*Tengu-sama*—"

Yuriko began to speak, but Takatsuki cut her off with a shake of his head and said firmly, "I can't be with someone who calls me *Tengu-sama*."

Placing a hand on one of Yuriko's cheeks, Takatsuki peered closely into her eyes.

The gesture looked just as if he was about to kiss her, but it wasn't going to happen the way Yuriko wished. Reality wouldn't end with "the prince kissed the princess, and they lived happily ever after."

"I decided a long time ago to exist as a human. Not as a *tengu*. I

wanted to be with people who allowed me to be human. So I cannot be with you. I'm truly sorry, but I'm not the person you're looking for, and you're not the one I want, either."

Still gazing into her eyes, Takatsuki spoke as if trying to reason with her.

Yuriko had been looking up at Takatsuki blankly, as if not understanding what he was saying. Then, all at once, comprehension dawned in her gaze.

In that moment, her face froze.

"…"

With a *smack*, Yuriko batted Takatsuki's hand away.

Staggering backward, she reached into her shoulder bag.

The thing she took out of it was—a paring knife.

"Miss Yuriko."

Takatsuki pushed Naoya farther back into the room, reaching out toward a nearby bookshelf.

Yuriko, her expression unmoving, pointed the knife at Takatsuki.

"*Tengu-sama*."

She called out to him, the tip of the knife trembling.

"*Tengu-sama*… That was a lie, wasn't it? *Tengu-sama* wouldn't say such a thing."

"Miss Yuriko. I am not *Tengu-sama*."

"*Tengu-sama* grants everyone's wishes, and—"

"Such a being never existed in the first place."

"—he loves…me…"

The tears running down Yuriko's cheeks fell to the floor.

Suddenly, Yuriko bit her lip.

She thrust the knife at Takatsuki while, almost simultaneously, Takatsuki held up in front of himself a file that he had grabbed from the bookshelf.

The blade slid along the surface of the file, and a surprised Yuriko tried to draw her hand back.

Before she could, however, Takatsuki had grabbed ahold of her wrist and twisted. With a cry, Yuriko dropped the knife.

With her arm still twisted in his grip, Takatsuki asked, "Miss Yuriko, where is Miss Mikako?"

“I don’t…know…”

Her voice was distorted.

“Is Miss Mikako safe?”

“I don’t know… No, she’s not alive anymore. I killed her!”

Yuriko’s voice creaked and warped violently.

Takatsuki glanced at Naoya, who was covering his ears, and let out a sigh of relief.

“Thank goodness…Miss Mikako is okay.”

Yuriko looked up at him, her face blotchy from crying.

Lowering her twisted arm, Takatsuki helped her gently into a chair.

Perhaps no longer possessing the energy to fight, Yuriko covered her face with both hands and began to sob quietly.

Noticing blood flowing from Takatsuki’s fingers, Naoya startled.

“Professor, you—”

“Hmm…? Oh, I miscalculated a little just now, with the file.”

He licked lightly at the cuts running diagonally across his index and middle fingers. That didn’t stop the bleeding, of course, so Takatsuki took out a handkerchief and applied pressure to the wounds.

He then stooped down slightly to be at eye level with Yuriko, who was hunched over in her chair.

“Miss Yuriko, where is Miss Mikako now?”

Still covering her face, Yuriko shook her head.

“I told you. **Mikako is already dead. I killed her.**”

“That’s a lie. I may not have clairvoyance, but I know that you didn’t kill Miss Mikako and that you actually know where she is.”

“How do you know that?”

“Well, that’s… How, indeed?”

Chuckling, Takatsuki looked at Naoya.

Feeling as though he was being used for his ability, Naoya dropped his hands from his ears.

Although as far as he was concerned, Takatsuki could use him for his ability all he wanted. That’s what Naoya was here for, after all.

“I’m no *tengu*, so all I can do is speculate, but I think the fact that you didn’t kill Miss Mikako is worth noting. I expect you could

have killed her if you had wanted to, because I imagine that when the two of you met up, you were alone. But you didn't do it… Isn't that because Miss Mikako is someone you wouldn't be able to kill even if you wanted to?"

From behind the hands Yuriko was using to shield her face, they could hear her sniffling.

Takatsuki looked down at the blood from his fingers that was soaking through his handkerchief with an uninterested expression.

"You said I was the only one who looked at you, but that isn't true. Because you had Miss Mikako. She was the one who helped you get dressed and sent you off to the tea party that you hadn't been allowed to go to before. She was the one who worried over you when you came back from studying abroad looking thin. Only Miss Mikako—only your twin sister—was always there looking out for you, right? That's why you couldn't kill her. You couldn't swing a knife at her like you did at me… Of course, this is all conjecture on my part. But—well, am I wrong?"

With that, Takatsuki held out his fingers, sans handkerchief, in front of Yuriko.

"Someone you want so badly, you'd even kill to have them, and someone you can't kill no matter what. Which one do you think is truly precious to you, Miss Yuriko?"

Blood began flowing from Takatsuki's deeply cut fingers again the second he stopped applying pressure. Looking at them through the gaps in her own fingers, Yuriko shuddered.

"…Mikako is never going to forgive me," she whispered, her voice hoarse.

"Well, I wonder about that. Not that I would know."

Gently, Takatsuki touched Yuriko's hands.

He lowered them away from her face and tucked her hair, which had stuck to her damp cheeks, behind her ears. Peering into her crying face from up close, he said, "But there is one way to find out. Let's go get Miss Mikako. Where is she?"

In a small voice, Yuriko replied that she was in the basement of the villa.

Contacted by Takatsuki, Yuuto came to pick Yuriko up before heading straight for the Takamura family villa in Hakone.

A few days later, Yuuto visited Takatsuki's office. As someone who was more or less involved in the situation, Naoya was also summoned.

Yuuto bowed deeply to them both.

"Thank you… I managed to make it in time."

According to Yuuto, Mikako had been held captive in the basement of the Takamura family's vacation villa.

Yuriko, home in Japan for a time from studying abroad, had invited Mikako to the villa, and after they chatted for a while, she had apparently mixed a sleeping pill into Mikako's wine.

She then attempted to carry the sleeping Mikako to the basement by herself, but that turned out to be more difficult than expected. People were heavy when they were asleep, and regardless, Mikako was likely heavier than Yuriko. The moment Yuriko tried to move her sister, she fell to the ground along with Mikako, breaking a wineglass and injuring her shoulder… Naoya had thought for sure the two of them had gotten into a fight to the death, and he was relieved to hear the reality was a bit more peaceful.

Still, Mikako had been held captive for several days. There was some emergency food and water in the basement, but not much. When Mikako was found, she was quite weak, and Yuuto immediately took her to a hospital. Fortunately, her condition was not life-threatening, so she was recovering well and had been discharged from the hospital the day before.

The Takamura family was shocked and infuriated by Yuriko's actions, but apparently, they hadn't taken the matter to the police… They probably felt the incident would disgrace their family. Given that they were in charge of a company, they likely feared causing an uproar.

"…How did I not know that she wasn't Mikako? Even if we hadn't seen each other for a month… I was so disappointed in myself."

Yuuto hung his head as he spoke. In front of him sat the Great Buddha mug, filled with coffee.

Takatsuki grinned.

“Well, this isn’t a mystery novel, so I guess one wouldn’t normally imagine it was her twin. But did Miss Mikako not tell you that she had a twin sister?”

“She told me she had a younger sister. She said I wouldn’t be able to meet her now because she was studying abroad, but I would be in for a shock when we did meet. She sounded kind of proud…”

Mikako might have been planning to surprise Yuuto. She wanted to brag about having a sister who looked just like her.

Yes—from Mikako’s point of view, Yuriko’s existence may have been something to be proud of.

A distorted image reflected in the mirror—perhaps Mikako hadn’t thought of Yuriko that way.

“By the way, A— …Um, when did you notice? That she wasn’t Mikako? You only met Yuriko once, and that was a long time ago, right?”

Takatsuki’s brow furrowed a little at Yuuto’s question.

“Even I couldn’t tell right away, seeing as how they had gone from being kindergartners to adult women. And they are identical twins, after all… But there were still lots of little things that felt off. That she was Miss Yuriko is beside the point; it was just that the impression she gave was too inconsistent.”

“Inconsistent?”

“Yeah… The first thing that seemed wrong was that bear,” Takatsuki said, bringing his mug of cocoa to his mouth. “Do you remember how there was a pretty old teddy bear in her apartment? That was the one Miss Mikako was always holding as a child. It had been mended in several places, like she couldn’t bring herself to throw it away even after it was damaged. I figured she must have treasured it quite a lot. But then that day, she just tossed the teddy bear off the sofa without a second thought.”

Hearing this, Naoya realized something.

That was why Takatsuki had taken the time to pick up the upturned bear from the carpet.

“Also, it raised some flags for me when she said she studied early modern literature. The way she said it made me think she must have majored in it, not just taken some classes as electives. But Miss

Mikako is aiming to be an English interpreter, right? I mean, it's not as though there aren't people who study Japanese literature and become interpreters, but I imagine studying English literature would be the norm."

"I'm pretty sure Mikako did graduate from the English lit department… That didn't catch my attention at all in that moment. I just thought she might have taken some classes in early modern literature while in college, but… Huh. So she said it like that."

Yuuto frowned, but, well, it wasn't like most people paid as much attention to the details of what someone was saying as Takatsuki did.

Takatsuki continued, after soothing his discouraged cousin.

"So the sense that something was off built up, and I asked you to show me pictures from your dates so I could check Miss Mikako's face. When I did, I realized she looked different from the person I'd met that day."

"So that's why you suddenly asked me to show you those pictures… Were their faces really that different?"

"If you were looking at them from the perspective that there were two people with that face. Even twins will have some differences as they grow. Even you, Yuuto, when you saw Miss Yuriko after she had switched places with Miss Mikako, you thought she was someone else. You were able to tell after all."

Takatsuki put down the mug he was holding, leveling a serious look at Yuuto.

"But really, in regard to this matter, I genuinely regret not pointing it out to you sooner. If I had, Miss Mikako could have been rescued sooner… I'm sorry. That day, Mr. Kuroki showed up, and that exhausted me, and I forgot to tell you."

"No, it's fine. Without A— …Without you, Mikako might actually have died."

Yuuto sipped his coffee.

Curious without knowing exactly why, Naoya turned to Yuuto and said, "Um, may I ask something?"

"What is it?"

Yuuto looked at him with a face that didn't resemble Takatsuki's

in the slightest.

"…Where is Miss Yuriko now?"

"She's at the Takamura house… I heard she's going to be receiving psychiatric treatment. Apparently, she was originally diagnosed with depression from the stress of studying abroad. That's why she had the sleeping pills, I guess."

"I see…"

It was true that Yuriko had not appeared to be in a normal mental state. Naoya had wondered what they would do when she pulled out that knife… Although things had somehow turned out fine, thanks to there being someone present who had received various training from his violent detective of a childhood friend.

"Still," Yuuto said. "For some reason, I can't bring myself to blame Yuriko."

"What, even though she almost killed your fiancée?"

"I really wish she hadn't done that, of course, but I spoke to Yuriko in the car on the way to the villa… She said that she wanted to be Mikako. That she'd wanted to be her for a long time, not just for this swap incident."

"Not the reflection in the mirror, but the real thing?"

"No—I think she just meant that she wanted to be *like* Mikako. A bright, sociable woman that everyone likes."

Mikako and Yuriko had grown up with two opposing personalities.

Cheerful, positive Mikako. Obsequious, gloomy Yuriko. The fact that their faces were basically the same must have made Yuriko feel even more inferior.

But looking at what she felt from another perspective—ultimately, it was adoration.

A longing to be like her sister, an admiration for her.

"Even I…can understand that," Yuuto murmured, dropping his gaze to the Buddha mug.

Takatsuki tilted his head.

"What? You wanted to be someone, too, Yuuto?"

"A— …You."

His voice still a mutter, Yuuto glared at Takatsuki, who looked bewildered.

"Huh? Hold on. But you hated me? The last time you liked me was probably kindergarten, wasn't it?!"

"I'm telling you! That was… I mean, could you try putting yourself in my shoes for a minute? You have an older cousin you're proud of when you're really little, but eventually you start getting compared to him in everything! Your school grades, your extracurriculars, even your looks! And not just by your parents, but by everyone around you! Just imagine being constantly told, 'Akira could have done it better.' Or 'Akira has such a pretty face, but you…' You'd be totally devastated!"

Yuuto had gone bright red.

Takatsuki continued to look taken aback.

"Wh—? …*What*? Are you serious? I had no idea…"

"Of course you didn't, because I was the one they were saying those things to! And now, even just looking at A—…at your face—makes me depressed!"

"Whaaaat? I'm so sorry, Yuuto…"

"Don't apologize! It'll just make me feel worse!"

Yuuto turned his face away, and Takatsuki took a sip of his cocoa, clearly at a loss for what else to do.

Looking back and forth between the two of them, Naoya almost couldn't help but laugh. Once again, he was struck by how normal they were as cousins. In Naoya's case, his cousin Masahiko had been an excellent student, and Naoya and Kazuya would often sulk together over being compared to him.

But this meant that the relationship between Takatsuki and Yuuto hadn't broken down because of the *kamikakushi* incident.

It was just that their childhood resentments had festered, and as a result of that being a reality as they grew up, they no longer knew how to behave toward each other… Maybe that was exactly why Yuuto was here now, talking to Takatsuki normally.

Takatsuki looked at Yuuto, who was drinking his coffee, with his face still turned in the other direction.

"That reminds me. I wonder when you'll start calling me 'Aki' again?"

Yuuto spat out his coffee.

He sputtered and coughed, taking the tissue that Takatsuki hastily held out to him.

"Hey now. Yuuto, are you okay? You didn't get it on your suit, did you?"

"I-it's fine… Wait, no it's not! As if I could call you that childish nickname now!"

"But you kept starting to say 'A—…' and then stopping, so I was curious."

"Yes, I've been wondering, too," Naoya chimed in. Yuuto shot him a sharp glare.

"…It's not easy to figure out what to call a cousin you haven't seen in twenty years. You'll understand someday."

"Well, I don't have any cousins I haven't seen in that long a time period."

Naoya shook his head, and Yuuto wiped up the coffee that had landed on the table with the tissue while looking cross. The impression Naoya had gotten of Yuuto as an unpleasant person had completely disappeared, and he looked at the older man, thinking that he was a rather interesting guy.

But he could understand why Yuuto would have difficulty calling Takatsuki "Akira." He probably felt uncomfortable just using his first name like that, so he kept falling back on "you."

"But you did call me 'Aki' once, Yuuto."

"I did not!"

"You did so, when I was about to collapse… And you helped hold me up, right?"

Takatsuki smiled.

Yuuto turned away again. Apparently, he really wanted to do away with the Aki nickname.

Then glancing at his watch, Yuuto finished his coffee and stood.

"Sorry. I should get going."

"Okay. Later, Yuuto."

Takatsuki waved a hand at him.

As Yuuto reached for the office door, he paused before opening it and turned to look back at Takatsuki.

"Hey. I really owe you one… And I'm sorry for getting you

involved in everything."

"Don't worry about it. I was glad."

Takatsuki's smile was full of genuine happiness.

"It had been a really, really long time since my cousin came to ask me for help. I wanted to give it my all. Oh, by the way—Yuuto, send me pictures after the wedding."

"…Okay. I will."

His expression somewhat complicated, Yuuto nodded at the smiling Takatsuki.

Watching him, Naoya realized that Takatsuki definitely would not be invited to Yuuto's and Mikako's wedding.

"Later."

"Yeah."

Neither of them said "see you" or "good-bye" to each other.

There was a chance they would meet again.

But that, most likely, would not be supported by the Takatsuki family.

Yuuto left the office. Staring at the door that had just shut with a *clack*, Naoya felt lonely, for some reason. The man wasn't even his relative.

But perhaps, just a little bit, he also felt relieved.

He had learned that Takatsuki had a relative other than Wataru who spoke to him normally.

Kuroki had said he wanted Takatsuki to live his life while keeping quiet. It was as if he had said he wanted the professor to erase his own presence.

Takatsuki's mother had wiped his very existence out of her mind.

But inside Yuuto, Takatsuki was still there. As Aki. Or maybe…as the cousin he was proud of still.

Standing up, Takatsuki grabbed the Buddha mug that Yuuto had been using.

Chuckling, he turned to Naoya.

"Hey, Fukamachi. Did you notice the white stains on the back of Yuuto's jacket?"

"Huh? Oh yeah, those. On the back of his left shoulder."

He had noticed it when Yuuto turned his back to them to leave

the office. There had been two fairly large white splotches on his jacket.

"I thought I should say something about it, but I couldn't figure out the timing, and I missed my chance… I wonder what they were from."

"They were parakeet droppings, I think?"

"What? You mean…?"

"Yep, that red parakeet."

He meant the big red parakeet that Yuriko had wielded in Takatsuki's direction when they went to Mikako's apartment. Yuuto had said the bird wasn't Mikako's, which meant Yuriko must have bought it somewhere.

"Miss Mikako was in the hospital," Takatsuki said. "And Miss Yuriko's situation must be tough, so I've been wondering what had become of that bird… I'm glad it seems Yuuto is looking after it now. I hope he's taking good care of it."

The image of Yuuto being toyed with by the large bird came into Naoya's head. Given that there was feces on the back of his jacket, he must have let it out of its cage.

"Even though you hate birds, Professor, you were worried about that parakeet?"

"Well, I mean, it's not the bird's fault… I wasn't thinking of taking care of it myself, though."

Looking toward the door Yuuto had left through, Takatsuki smiled.

"Yuuto was always a kind boy. He's my cousin—my adorable, hardworking cousin that I'm proud of."

Nodding, Naoya brought his coffee mug to his mouth.

He wished that Yuuto could have heard what Takatsuki had just said.



Chapter 3:
The Purple Mirror

The atmosphere on campus in September, which was like an extension of summer break, returned to normal once October arrived.

The students' wardrobes were still in summer mode, however. Even though it was autumn, in recent times, the boundary between summer and fall was blurred in Japan, and the lukewarm air—like a watered-down version of summer's heat—did not inspire people to break out their autumn clothes. In the school courtyard, everyone was wearing short sleeves. It was only when being surprised at how early the sun was setting that one was conscious of autumn already having begun.

Time passes without our realizing it, and the seasons change right under our noses.

"—So today's theme is 'ghost stories with a fixed deadline.' We'll be focusing primarily on 'Purple Mirror'!"

Takatsuki stood at the lectern, smiling broadly as he spoke.

It was Thursday, fourth period, in Modern Folklore I.

"How many of you know this story? If you know it, raise your hand. Ah, that's most of you. Now raise your hand if you're already twenty years old or older… Right, I believe we have a lot of second-

years in this class, so those who haven't had their birthdays yet aren't twenty. Well, I apologize to those of you who are still under twenty, but the story we're discussing today says that 'if you still remember it by the time you're twenty, you die.'"

The students burst into laughter at Takatsuki's delivery.

Nanba, sitting next to Naoya, whispered, "Wait, my birthday hasn't come yet." When Naoya replied with a quiet, "My condolences," Nanba glared back at him.

"'Purple Mirror' or 'The Purple Mirror,' as this urban legend is known, follows a simple basic pattern. If you still remember the phrase 'purple mirror' or 'the purple mirror' by the time you're twenty, you die or experience misfortune. Other variations include not being able to get married or seeing ghosts. The February eighth, 1996, issue of the *Yomiuri Shimbun* covered this story and theorized, based on reader submissions and experiences, that it originated 'about seventeen years ago.' If this is to be believed, that means 'Purple Mirror' must have been around as early as 1979. As the slit-mouthed woman originated around 1978, this story could be said to be a product of the ghost story boom at that time."

As usual, Takatsuki looked like he was having fun.

"Various stories that include an origin for the 'purple mirror' term have been created using this basic pattern. Examples are included in the handout, but please read them on your own later, as they're quite long. I'll sum up a few as an introduction. Example one is about a young woman who died just before the age of twenty. Her favorite mirror was purple, and disaster followed after her death. Example two is about a girl who painted her beloved hand mirror purple on a whim. No matter how much she tried to wipe off the paint, it wouldn't come clean, and the girl passes away of an illness at twenty years old, regretting her choice. In a nice little ghost story–esque detail, the girl is said to have muttered the words 'purple mirror, purple mirror…' until her very last moments. Example three is about a girl who dies in a traffic accident. Her favorite mirror ends up covered in her blood, which stains it purple. Women and girls appear in many of these origin stories, perhaps because we think of mirrors as things that women tend to use. From this, we can

also speculate that it's mainly girls who are the primary storytellers of these urban legends."

When studying ghost stories and urban legends, considering the demographic of those responsible for sharing the story was of utmost importance.

In the case of "Purple Mirror," it was mostly women and children. Such stories were often told in schools, particularly in elementary schools.

The first time Naoya had heard it had indeed been when he was in elementary school. He had overheard some girls talking about it during recess. Within two days, the "Purple Mirror" story had swept through the class.

"However, it's probably fair to assume that these origin stories were created after the fact. That's why there are so many variations, and moreover why so many of them are of a narrative nature. Originally, I doubt there was any meaning behind the 'purple mirror' phrase. It began as a phrase of unknown origin, and the legend's original form likely started with someone asking another person, 'Have you heard of purple mirror?' Naturally, the recipient of the question wouldn't know the phrase and would probably ask, 'What do you mean?' Without answering that question, the first person simply says, 'If you still remember this phrase by the time you're twenty, you'll die!' The second person feels shocked at suddenly being cursed like that. The more they try to get the phrase out of their heads, the more it sticks, tormenting them for days."

Takatsuki smiled and gave a light shrug.

It had been the same at Naoya's elementary school. When the story was popular, everyone tried desperately to forget it. After a few days, when everyone was finally starting to put it out of mind, one of the boys in class purposefully whispered the phrase loud enough for everyone to hear.

The class had been in an uproar.

The other children shouted at him, asking why he had said it. Some of the girls even started crying. During that time, the curse of "Purple Mirror" was unmistakably real in Naoya's class.

Takatsuki looked around the classroom.

"We tend to think that words that appear to be meaningful are, in fact, meaningful. Even if a word or phrase has no meaning whatsoever, we look for meaning in it, imagining its context. The 'Purple Mirror' ghost story taps into this psychology. Recently, there's been an urban legend called the 'Samejima Incident,' yes? It's not one where remembering it curses you, but its psychology is similar to that which forms the basis for 'Purple Mirror,' since it involves talking about words that seem meaningful as though they have some dreadful context."

Oh, I get it, Naoya thought as he listened to Takatsuki speak.

The "Samejima Incident" was a sort of meme. It had started with a post on an internet message board titled, "Let's talk about the legendary 'Samejima Thread.'" It was now customary to talk about it as though it was some incredibly horrifying incident that was covered up for some reason. People would post things like, "That was a terrible incident," but no one would explain the circumstances, because in reality, there was no "Samejima Incident."

Perhaps because it was fun to discuss fictitious events whose circumstances were unclear, as though one knew the details, the phrase "Samejima Incident" continued to pop up here and there online. Both "purple mirror" and "Samejima Incident" were phrases that came across as having meaning, and that attracted people's interest and stirred up their imaginations. Those musings turned empty words that actually had no substance whatsoever into a ghost story.

Takatsuki went on.

"The stipulation in 'Purple Mirror' of 'if you still remember by the time you're twenty' also exists in variations where the age is fifteen, twenty-three, twenty-four, and so on. The overwhelming majority of them, however, are set at twenty. It's likely that the significance behind this is that you must forget by the time you're grown up or by the time you reach adulthood. It's said that the story is most feared by children from the middle and upper years of elementary school up to junior high. To kids of that age, turning twenty is something so far in the future that they can't even imagine it. They can only vaguely picture what it means to become an adult. That is

why, conversely, they end up considering the age of twenty as something incredibly significant. But for high school students and new college students, twenty is only a few years away. Many people end up looking at it with an attitude of 'Okay, I guess I'll remember it and find out whether it's true.' Although I can imagine it might be unnerving for those who learn about it just before their twentieth birthday."

At Naoya's side, Nanba clutched at his chest, as if in surprise. "When's your birthday?" Naoya asked, and Nanba replied with, "The day after tomorrow…" Naoya really did feel sorry for him.

Then, at the lectern, Takatsuki broke into a bright smile.

"Incidentally, I first heard this story when I was in elementary school. I've remembered it ever since and even reviewed it when I entered university and started studying folklore. Just like those of you who raised your hands earlier, who know the story and have already had their twentieth birthday, I am living proof that the 'Purple Mirror' story is no more than a legend."

Nanba looked relieved. Naoya stared at him, astonished, wondering if he had seriously been worried about it. He had thought Nanba was only pretending.

Takatsuki, who seemed to have been watching Nanba's face, chuckled.

"Well, I mean, even if we know the story is fake, it's still unpleasant to be told you're going to die. It makes you feel cursed. The children who tell such ghost stories create curses every day. But there's no malice in them, none of the desire to make someone truly unhappy, such as what curses are meant to be like by nature. To children, ghost stories and curses are just a tool of communication. In the classroom, on the bus to their school camp, in the hotel room on their school field trip, they cast curses upon one another in the same way they tell one another who they have a crush on. In this way, the number of ghost stories increases every day, and new variations are born and expanded upon. Since they're given the same treatment as romantic gossip, ghost stories must be something that everyone finds exciting! I can really relate to that feeling!"

Takatsuki's eyes sparkled as he spoke.

Naoya had a feeling everyone else in the classroom was thinking that whether or not ghost stories were that exciting was dependent on the person in question.

After the lecture was over, as Naoya was getting ready to go home, Nanba turned to him.

"Fukamachi, since it's my birthday two days from now, do you think you could show me your notes from second period? As a birthday present?"

"…Fine," Naoya said, pulling out second period's notes from his folder. "You really should show up to that class at some point."

Stuffing the paper cheerfully into his bag, Nanba replied, "Once you skip once, it becomes a habit, y'know? It's like my body just won't do it. Must be because I'm getting old."

"You're a few months younger than I am. The professor takes attendance in that class sometimes, so be careful."

"Yep, got it. Oh—that's right. Listen, I finally got my license!"

"Huh? Like to drive?"

"Yep. Only for automatic transmission, though."

Nanba held up two fingers in a V sign.

"Wow, I want to see it. You have it on you, right?"

"No way, the picture is weird. Are you not gonna get your license, Fukamachi? It's cheaper to get while you're a student."

"Hmmm…I was thinking I should probably have it, but…"

With a sour expression, Naoya tilted his head to the side.

He definitely thought he'd be better off having a license, considering the future, but Naoya was of two minds after seeing the cost. He'd heard many other students say they got their parents to pay for it, but he felt awkward asking for money from his, when he didn't usually have contact with them.

"I feel like it's best to get it in your second year. You'll start having to do a bunch of stuff related to job hunting in your third year, right? You'll have more mental and emotional bandwidth for it now."

It was unusual for Nanba to say something that serious.

He's more concerned with his future than I expected, Naoya thought, slightly adjusting his opinion of his classmate. *Although if that's the case, he should go to his classes, too.*

"Have you already decided which industry or company you want to work in, Nanba?"

"Not really yet. What about you, Fukamachi? Are you thinking of doing an internship?"

"…I was thinking, if I'm going to aim for something, it'll probably be civil service."

"Oh, solid choice. Why, though?"

"Well…I heard there aren't as many interviews as there are at other companies."

Naoya casually put a hand to his ear.

Whenever he heard about the ins and outs of job hunting, it was always the interviews that seemed like his biggest obstacle.

It was common to hear about stressful interviews and such wearing people down mentally, but even before that, in Naoya's case, there was the chance that he would collapse at the venue if he wasn't careful. There was no guarantee that the interviewer or any other students participating in a joint interview with him would only tell the truth.

Naoya was thinking about consulting Tooyama, his life mentor, about the matter. Tooyama had once half jokingly said, "If you're having trouble finding a job, you can just come work for me." But Naoya, a liberal arts student through and through, didn't think he'd be suited for much more than part-time work at an architectural design firm. When he had consulted Takatsuki about the issue, the professor had readily replied, "Why not go to graduate school?" That cost money, however, and Naoya had also heard people say it was difficult to find a job after finishing grad school.

"But you know," Nanba said. "I can't even imagine job hunting yet. I mean, I still can't even picture what I'll be like after college."

"Yeah, true."

No one knew what the future held, it was said.

Even though time continued to flow by and the future became the present in the blink of an eye, Naoya still couldn't even fully

imagine what he would be like in a year.

And that was to say nothing of what he'd be like in ten or twenty years. Despite being so scared as a child when someone told him, "If you still remember this when you're twenty, you'll die," he felt like if someone said to him now, "If you still remember this when you're forty, you'll die," he would reply, "I don't even know if I'm going to live that long." The future remained unclear, but Naoya's sense of acceptance that things were going to happen as they would was stronger. Perhaps because he didn't have as many expectations for his future self as he had when he was a child.

Then Naoya's phone vibrated in his pocket.

He took it out and saw a message from Takatsuki.

"Oh, sorry. I have work."

"Okay. Work hard."

"Yep. See you."

Waving to Nanba, Naoya left the classroom.

He couldn't imagine himself in a year, but one thing did feel certain.

Naoya was sure that somehow or other, he'd end up working for Takatsuki next year, too.

When Naoya arrived at the professor's office, Takatsuki, in extremely high spirits, handed him his laptop with a smile.

"Welcome, Fukamachi! This request overlaps directly with the content of today's lecture. Or I should say that I decided on the material for today's lecture because of this request."

"What? You mean the 'Samejima Incident'?"

"No, no, the 'Purple Mirror.'"

As he usually did, Takatsuki stood up and started making drinks.

Naoya took a seat in a folding chair and scanned over the e-mail that was on the laptop screen.

It appeared that, once again, the request had come in through the contact form on Neighborhood Stories.

Hello, sorry for sending this message out of the

blue.

I found your website through searching for the term "Purple Mirror."

It was very interesting to learn that there are many different kinds of "Purple Mirror" stories.

The reason I'm e-mailing you is because there is a Purple Mirror in my house.

My family has run an inn in Asakusa for a long time, and we have lots of antiques.

One of them is a mirror called the Purple Mirror.

Actually, my biological mother disappeared when I was a child because of this mirror.

If possible, would you come and check whether or not this is a real Purple Mirror?

I'm nineteen years old right now. There are stories on this site that say if you still remember the Purple Mirror by the time you're twenty, you'll die. They have me so scared, I can't sleep at night.

Thank you for your time.

When Naoya was done reading the e-mail, he looked up, unsure how to describe what he was feeling.

What on earth would it mean to have a Purple Mirror in one's house?

According to the lecture he'd just sat through, the phrase "purple mirror" wasn't supposed to mean anything.

"It's an interesting e-mail, isn't it?" Takatsuki said, placing a cup of coffee in front of Naoya. "In the typical 'Purple Mirror' urban legend, an actual mirror never makes an appearance. It exists only as words, so there's never any need to identify a real mirror as '*the* Purple Mirror.' And yet there's a mirror in her house called the Purple Mirror. It's quite intriguing!"

"I mean, she wrote that her mother disappeared… What's that about?"

"The most common version of 'Purple Mirror' is the 'you'll die if you remember' one, but there is a variation where you disappear. Example one from today's lecture materials is one such story."

Naoya took the materials from the lecture out of his bag. He'd only given them a once-over in class, since Takatsuki had told them to read the stories later.

Example one said:

"*In the postwar period, a woman who was about to turn twenty died before her much anticipated coming-of-age ceremony. The woman had habitually used a purple mirror that she loved, but for some reason, after her death, the mirror was never found.*

On the day the woman would have turned twenty, an acquaintance of the woman's went missing, and a purple mirror was left sitting alone on the floor of the acquaintance's room.

It is said that if you still remember the words 'the purple mirror' by the time you're twenty, the woman who owned the mirror will be summoned to you, and you will be taken into her world inside the mirror, like her acquaintance was."

Stories changed as they were told. As long as their core parts were preserved, other elements could be changed. That was why stories were altered to become more frightening or interesting, depending on their narrator. Such was how ghost stories and urban legends spawned so many variations.

What would happen to someone if they remembered the phrase "purple mirror" was a part of the story that the narrator could change as they pleased. All that mattered was that it was some kind of misfortune. In the case of this example, the idea of being "taken to a world inside the mirror" was probably inspired by the phrase "the purple mirror" and contrived as its origin story. Since the most common version involved death, this disappearing variation was a minority pattern.

The sender of the e-mail, however, had written that her mother had disappeared because of the Purple Mirror.

"The part about being taken to a world inside the mirror was probably an image evoked by the 'mirror' part of the key phrase. Originally, it was believed that mirrors reflected other realms, things

that weren't of this world."

Takatsuki took a sip from his mug of marshmallow cocoa.

"There are all sorts of 'other realms' reflected in mirrors. In the *Sarashina Diary*, written in the Heian period, for example, there's a story in which a mother worried about her daughter's future has a small mirror made. Receiving a divine message, the mother looked into the mirror and saw the death of her daughter's husband. The future, in other words. Stories about mirrors showing the future are common in modern urban legends. There's 'if you look into a mirror at midnight, you'll see your own face as you die' and 'if you peer into a basin of water in the middle of the night while holding a razor blade in your mouth, you will see the face of your future spouse.' The mirror is made of water in the case of the second one, but there are a lot of stories where mirrors show the future. The future is a type of 'other realm' in the sense that it's not a reality happening in front of your eyes in that moment."

"There's a mirror that reflects the past, too, isn't there? That one that the King of Hell holds that shows the dead the deeds they committed when they were alive… What's it called again?"

"The Mirror of Judgment. Yes, that's a mirror that reflects the past. And mirrors can lead to places that are neither the past nor the future. There are many stories in addition to 'Purple Mirror' where people are drawn into a mirror. Mirrors serve as both windows and doors to other realms. If you pass through the mirror and go to the other side, the self on this side disappears… I wonder just where this client's mother ended up?"

Takatsuki chuckled softly.

His eyes seemed to carry the slightest tinge of blue, and Naoya tensed a little.

When Takatsuki blinked, though, his eyes returned to their usual dark brown. With a friendly smile that brought a golden retriever to mind, he spoke in an excited tone.

"If it's okay with you, Fukamachi, let's go together to hear this girl's story. And then we can see the Purple Mirror that's in her house. I mean, opportunities like this don't come often, do they? A real Purple Mirror! It's even more exciting than seeing a mummified

kappa!”

They arranged to meet with the client that Saturday.

It was decided that they would talk before heading to the inn, and a coffee shop in front of Asakusa Station was chosen as the rendezvous point. Since the area was a tourist destination, the inside of the shop was crowded. Even so, as soon as Takatsuki and Naoya set foot inside, someone waved at them from a table in the back.

They ordered their drinks at the counter. As they approached the table, the client shot to her feet. She had pin-straight hair that was cut at a diagonal over her shoulders, and she wore an oversized shirt and faded jeans on her small frame.

“Um, so you’re Professor Akira Takatsuki, right?”

“Yes, I’m Takatsuki from Seiwa University. This is my assistant, Fukamachi. And you must be the one who e-mailed me, Miss Shiho Matsui?”

“That’s right. Thank you for meeting me today!”

Shiho put both hands on her knees and bowed emphatically to Takatsuki.

Then, as if concerned about the shop’s raucous atmosphere, she glanced around and gave a knowing smile.

“…I’m sorry for asking you to meet at a coffee shop chain, when you took the trouble of coming to Asakusa. There are some nice cafés around, but they always have long lines to get in, and… A lot of the owners are acquainted with my father. If it got around that I was consulting with a strange man about something weird, I’d be in a little bit of a bind.”

As the daughter of a well-established innkeeper, Shiho had no choice but to worry about what others thought. And it was true that in the shop they were in, none of the staff would overhear their conversation, so they could talk freely.

“I don’t mind. I only came here today to talk to you. I can come back another day to enjoy the lovely shops of Asakusa. Ah, but if there are any you recommend, please tell me about them later.”

Takatsuki smiled.

Shiho's shoulders relaxed, as though that smile had calmed her. She must have been a bit nervous after all.

"Now then, why don't you tell me your story?" Takatsuki prompted, and Shiho nodded once before speaking.

"Um, so there's that mirror in my house. But before that, can I tell you about the household rules?"

"Hmm? Of course. What are they?"

"Well… There's been a sort of weird rule in my family for a long time. It's that no one may enter the back storeroom except the head of the household."

"The back storeroom?"

"There's a storeroom at the back of the first floor. Apparently, it's got things like old tableware that isn't used very often and antique kimono in it. So it's pretty much a room no one needs to go into, but… Anyway, no one is allowed in there except the head of the household. Currently, that would be my father, so no one can go in there except him. Not family members, not even people who work at the inn. And the reason no one can go in there—it's because that's where that mirror is."

"If you're not allowed to enter that room, does that mean you haven't seen the mirror?"

"Oh, no, sometimes we leave the door to the room open to air it out and let out moisture, so I've seen it from outside of the room."

"So you have seen it! What kind of mirror is it?"

Takatsuki leaned forward suddenly. Surprised, Shiho reared back a little.

"Um, it's an old Japanese-style full-length mirror, covered in a purple cloth."

"Full-length? Not a hand mirror?"

"Right. It's a rectangular mirror big enough to see your whole body in. And, um, it's just a mirror; it doesn't have drawers or anything like a dresser. There's a wooden base underneath."

"Huh…I see."

Takatsuki stroked lightly at his chin as he listened to Shiho talk.

"What is it, Professor?" Naoya asked.

"Ah, well… A full-length mirror is a bit of a surprise," Takatsuki

said. “Generally, the mirrors that come up in ‘Purple Mirror’ stories are hand mirrors. In stories that talk about the origin of the phrase ‘purple mirror,’ it’s common for them to tell of the death of a woman or girl who cherished a mirror, and they almost all explicitly describe the mirror as a hand mirror. Even in versions that don’t use that term and simply refer to it as a mirror, there are descriptions of the mirror being carried close to the owner at all times or of it being put away inside a bureau. In which case, it would definitely be a hand mirror or at least a small one. Of course, such stories were probably thought up after the fact, based on the phrase ‘purple mirror,’ so they don’t really mean much… But still, the mirror in your house, Miss Matsui, doesn’t seem to fit into the typical ‘Purple Mirror’ story.”

Then Takatsuki turned to Shiho.

“Apologies, I’ve derailed the conversation. The mirror in your house—is it usually referred to as the Purple Mirror?”

“Ah, no. It’s usually just called ‘the mirror.’ It’s supposed to be a family heirloom, but it hardly ever gets mentioned in the first place. It’s basically always just, ‘Don’t go into the back storeroom.’”

“Then why is it that you think it’s a Purple Mirror?”

“…Because my mother said it was.”

For a moment, after saying those words, Shiho fell silent.

She bit her lip hard, then started to speak once more.

“When I was little, my mother pointed to the storeroom door and said, ‘Don’t play in that room.’ When I asked her why, she told me, ‘Because there’s a Purple Mirror in there.’ Then she giggled and said, ‘If you still remember the phrase “purple mirror” by the time you’re twenty, you’ll die, so be careful.’ I remember getting freaked out and scared and starting to cry.”

That was a standard telling of the “Purple Mirror” story. Just a pronouncement that the listener would die if they still remembered those words when they were twenty.

Lowering her gaze a little, Shiho continued.

“…My mother disappeared when I was seven years old.”

Shiho said that when she came home from elementary school that day, she noticed that her mother was nowhere to be found.

Setting down her schoolbag, she had walked around the house,

looking for her mother.

Half of the first floor of Shiho's house was used as the living quarters for her family and the inn employees. In the middle of those living quarters was a courtyard, and the storeroom in question faced the courtyard.

After peeking into the kitchen and the living room, she came finally to the courtyard. It was there that, without a doubt, she saw her mother going into the storeroom on the other side.

She had thought it was odd, since her mother wasn't allowed in that room.

But it wasn't as if she could go and peek in. After all, she wasn't supposed to go in there, either.

And so Shiho had decided to play in the courtyard while she waited for her mother.

But a long time passed, and her mother still had not come out.

"Eventually, my father came home and asked where my mother was. I pointed to the storeroom and said she was in there… His expression changed immediately."

Her father had walked with long strides down the corridor, stopping at the door to the storeroom.

From the courtyard, Shiho had watched.

Her father slid the door open—but her mother wasn't inside.

Instead, she saw a mirror.

"It was usually covered with a cloth, but that day, it wasn't… It looked like it was glowing red, maybe because the setting sun was hitting it just right, and it kind of scared me… I called out to my father. 'Where's Mom?' I asked. And then…"

Shiho's father had turned and stepped down into the courtyard without stopping to put shoes on and grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Forget about this," he said.

Shiho looked toward the storeroom once more.

No matter how many times she looked inside, her mother was nowhere to be seen.

It was so strange.

She had definitely seen her mother enter that room. And she had waited the whole time for her mother to come out, while playing in

the courtyard.

The storeroom door had remained closed until her father had opened it.

And there was no other entrance or exit to that room.

Despite all that, Shiho's mother had vanished from the storeroom like a puff of smoke.

A thought had popped into her mind, somewhat subconsciously—*it was the mirror's doing*.

Her mother shouldn't have gone into that room after all. Because there was a Purple Mirror in there.

"That mirror made my mother disappear. It must be a cursed Purple Mirror after all, and if I don't forget about those words and what I saw by the time I'm twenty, I'll disappear like she did… I think that's why my father told me to forget about it back then. I'm scared."

As if overcome by a sudden chill, Shiho wrapped her arms around herself. She hung her head, her small shoulders trembling.

It was then that Takatsuki spoke.

"Miss Matsui."

Takatsuki's soft, clear voice came out just as there was a lull in the hustle and bustle of the coffee shop, and Shiho raised her head, as though drawn to the lovely sound.

…*Uh-oh*, Naoya thought.

Takatsuki held his right hand out to Shiho like he was asking for a handshake. An intelligent-looking smile formed on his handsome face.

Though she looked confused, Shiho extended her right hand as well.

Leaning over the table, Takatsuki took her hand in both of his and began to talk in a tone that sounded just like he was about to confess his love for her.

"This is really wonderf— *Augh!*"

"Okay, that's enough."

Just as Takatsuki had started to say something, Naoya put his palm in the center of the professor's face and pushed him back forcefully. Hovering half off his seat, Takatsuki's butt landed back in

the chair with a thud. He turned to look at Naoya with teary eyes, rubbing at his nose. Noses were sensitive spots. Getting struck there unexpectedly hurt quite a bit.

"F-Fukamachi! What on earth are you doing?!"

"How many times do I have to tell you? Handshakes and hugs are not common in Japan! Besides, Miss Matsui might know someone here, so don't do anything weird!"

It would be bad news for Shiho if rumors spread about the daughter of a well-known local innkeeper having her hand held passionately by a handsome stranger.

Seeming to have regained his senses, Takatsuki turned to Shiho, who was sitting all the way back in her chair, looking at them as if to say, "What is up with these guys?"

Takatsuki was quite flustered.

"Ah, I-I'm sorry. It's just, your story was so wonderful that I almost lost my sense of reason for a bit there!"

"Huh? You lose your sense of reason that easily?"

"I almost did, but it's come back already, so I'm fine now! I'm really sorry. Please forgive my behavior."

At Takatsuki's apology, Shiho looked back and forth between him and Naoya with a bewildered expression. Naoya bowed his head to her as an added apology on his professor's behalf.

Takatsuki cleared his throat.

"—Um, Miss Matsui. Let's start with what I can tell you for now."

His nose was still a little red, but he looked calm.

"First of all," Takatsuki said to Shiho, "it really seems as though the Purple Mirror that's been passed down in your family is quite unrelated to the typical 'Purple Mirror' story. So you don't have to worry about the whole forgetting before you turn twenty thing."

"What? But—"

Shiho looked doubtful.

"My mother definitely said, 'If you still remember it by the time you're twenty, you'll die,' and my father told me to forget about it, remember?"

"Do you remember how old your mother was when she disappeared?"

"Huh? Probably in her thirties… Oh."

A look of understanding dawned on Shiho's face.

Since the story's condition was that the listener had to forget by the age of twenty, it meant that the curse of the Purple Mirror would take effect at that age. It made no sense, therefore, to think that the mirror's curse was the reason Shiho's mother, who had been in her thirties, disappeared.

"Still, we still don't know at present why your mother disappeared. Or why your father told you to forget it. So—Miss Matsui," Takatsuki said with a bright grin. "I think the only way to know more is to see the actual mirror in question. Could we go to see the Purple Mirror at your house now? If it's all right, I'd like to speak to your father and the people at the inn a little bit."

Shiho's family's inn was located near Nakamise-dori.

Nakamise-dori was a shopping street that led to Sensō-ji Temple. Along both sides of the stone-paved road that stretched straight out from Kaminarimon were rows of shops selling various goods such as sweets, souvenirs, wooden sandals, hairpins, and toys. There seemed to be kimono rental shops, too, as they saw people wearing kimono sort of as though they were cosplaying. Between the people stopping in the middle of the street to take pictures and those who were pausing to eat the sweets they had bought, the street was very crowded. There were lots of foreign tourists as well.

They made their way down Nakamise-dori for a while, before turning onto a side road where Shiho's house was located. The house was a Japanese-style inn with a traditional townhouse exterior, and despite its small size, it had an elegance to it. According to Shiho, her family had been running the inn here since her great-grandfather's generation.

"—Um, before we go inside, there's something I have to ask of you."

Shiho had turned abruptly to face Takatsuki and Naoya.

"The truth is, my father and I haven't been seeing eye to eye lately. He wants me to take over the inn, but I don't want to… Or

rather, I'd like to leave home someday, if possible."

Faltering somewhat, she went on.

"I don't know what my father would say if he knew I invited a professor from a random university to come look into the Purple Mirror… So could we just say that the reason you came here today is because you're researching Asakusa?"

"Sure, I mean, I don't mind…"

Takatsuki glanced quickly at Naoya, as though checking that he was okay with the decision to lie.

Thinking there was no way around it, Naoya nodded. He could imagine it would indeed be hard to tell one's parents about contacting an associate professor from a different school for advice on something that bordered on occult.

Shiho opened the lattice door to the house, revealing the reception area just inside. The interior of the inn was decorated with ukiyo-e prints and paper lanterns, giving it the atmosphere of an Edo era establishment. Next to the front desk were Edo era trinkets for sale that tourists from abroad were likely to enjoy.

A kimono-clad woman behind the front desk looked up when they entered.

"Welcome back, Shiho. And these gentlemen are?"

"I'm home, Mom," Shiho said, confusing Naoya for a moment. Hadn't her mother disappeared?

In a low voice, Shiho explained, "My father remarried when I was in middle school."

I see, Naoya thought, looking at the woman again.

She seemed a tad young to be Shiho's mother, but she had clearly both donned her kimono and done up her traditional Japanese-style hairdo with great skill. She had the air of an innkeeper.

"Mom, this is Professor Takatsuki. **He's researching Asakusa** and decided to come to our place while he was in the area. He can come into the back with me, right?"

Shiho's introduction of Takatsuki to the woman was well executed. By Shiho's simply referring to him as a professor, the woman was likely to assume he worked at Shiho's university.

The woman in the kimono bowed to Takatsuki.

"Oh my, hello there. Thank you for looking after my daughter. Please make yourself at home. Shiho, I believe Natsuko is in the kitchen, so have her make some tea."

"Got it. Oh, hey, Mom? Is Dad home right now?"

"He's out for a bit. Did you need him for something?"

"Nope, that's fine. It's better if he's not here."

"Shiho. You've got to stop talking like that."

The woman in the kimono frowned, and Shiho stuck out her tongue. She had said she didn't get along with her father, but she seemed close with her stepmother.

"Well then, follow me, Professor."

Shiho opened a door next to the front desk and beckoned to them. On the other side of the door, which was labeled EMPLOYEES ONLY, seemed to be the living quarters. Just inside, Shiho took off her shoes and stepped up into a wooden corridor.

"Let's go check out the storeroom while Dad's not here. It's this way."

They followed Shiho's lead down the corridor until they reached the courtyard she had spoken of. It was surrounded by a wall on one side and the house's corridors on the remaining three sides. Inside the courtyard was an old stone lantern and a small pond full of swimming goldfish surrounded by moss-covered rocks.

"That's the storeroom."

Shiho pointed across the courtyard from where they were standing. Half concealed by the tree growing in the courtyard was a room closed off by an old-looking two-leaved door.

Walking down the corridor around the courtyard, they stopped in front of the storeroom.

The blackened wooden door was tightly shut, truly giving the impression of one that was forbidden to enter. Probably because of the shade cast on it by the courtyard tree planted right in front of the door, the corridor outside the storeroom seemed a little dim. Naoya moved his gaze along the tree to a corner of the courtyard where there was a small door in a section of the wall that seemed to

face the outside. It was bolted shut from the inside, but it looked like a door one could use to leave the property.

Suddenly, he heard Shiho call out in alarm.

"H-hold on, Professor Takatsuki?!"

Bringing his line of sight back from the courtyard, Naoya turned to see Takatsuki with his hand on the sliding door.

"Oh, it's not locked. You can just open it."

"Professor," Naoya said in a rush. "You can't just go opening that without permission!"

"It's fine. The rule is that you can't go inside, right? So I won't go in. I'll just look from the outside."

As Naoya wondered whether that sort of logic would stand, Takatsuki threw the door open with a clatter.

The effect was immediate.

Feeling a strange tightness in his chest, as though the air around him had all at once gotten heavier, Naoya instinctively took a step away from the storeroom. *What is this?* he wondered. Whatever was happening, he didn't know, but the sensation was wildly unpleasant. The air felt so bizarrely oppressive that he wondered whether a poisonous gas had been released inside the storeroom.

Takatsuki, on the other hand, seemed completely unaffected by it as he turned to Shiho to ask, "Is that the Purple Mirror?"

"Yes, that's it," Shiho answered, keeping her eye on the corridor from where they had just come. She was probably worried they would be spotted having opened the storeroom door.

Seeing how calm they both seemed, Naoya wondered what was going on. Was he the only one who could feel the odd change in the atmosphere?

Not wanting to breathe the air in, he covered his nose and mouth with one hand and looked ever so timidly inside the room.

The floor was made of tatami mats—about half a dozen of them—and the room was quite dark, likely because there were no windows. Old-fashioned Japanese chests and wooden shelves, on which a number of paulownia wood boxes were kept, lined the walls. Naoya had been expecting the room to be full of such antique items, but when he looked closer, he noticed that in the corners of the

room were carved wooden bears and Hakata dolls that had probably been moved here for lack of a better idea of what to do with them. It was just a regular storage room, he realized. He didn't see anything in particular that seemed to be the source of the unpleasant atmosphere.

The mirror in question was in the center of the room.

They had been told it was big enough to reflect a person's whole body, but it was larger than expected. It possessed quite a sense of presence in the room as a result. A purple floral cloth that seemed to be kimono fabric was draped over the top of the mirror so that its glass face could not be seen. The wooden base had been decorated with intricate fretwork. Curiously, there were small white ceramic jugs and plates sitting in front of the mirror. They looked like the kind often placed on Shinto altars, and unlike the carved bears and Hakata dolls in the corner, they did not seem as though they had been put there simply because their owner didn't know where else to store them. They clearly appeared to have been placed there like offerings.

For a little while, Takatsuki stood in front of the doorway and gazed at the mirror. Then he slid the door closed once more. With the oppressive atmosphere blocked off, Naoya lowered his hand away from his face and let out a sigh of relief.

Takatsuki looked at him, puzzled.

"Fukamachi, what's wrong? Do you not like the smell of camphor?"

"Camphor?"

"It's an insect repellant," Takatsuki said. "There might have been some inside the chests or something. It smelled a bit like it."

Had that been the reason for the strange tightness in Naoya's chest? He *was* pretty sure he had caught a whiff of something, but…

Takatsuki turned to Shiho.

"Now then, since we can't go inside this room, it's difficult to investigate the mirror directly. Next, I'd like to speak to an inn employee. Is there someone I could talk to? Preferably someone who's been working here for a long time."

"There are a few people, but…it's right around the time they

clean the guest rooms, so they might be busy. Oh, but Mom said that Natsuko is in the kitchen. Should we go see her?"

"Natsuko?"

"She's our most senior employee. She…she even knew my biological mother."

They followed Shiho to the kitchen.

It wasn't particularly big. There was probably a separate kitchen used to prepare meals and such for guests. An older woman wearing a cook's apron over her kimono stood in front of a double-burner cooktop, stewing something. The scent of soy sauce blanketed the entire room.

"Natsuko, do you have a minute?"

"Oh, Shiho, you're home?"

"Yep. Are you busy right now, Natsuko?"

"I'm just making *tsukudani*. We ran out. Are these customers?"

"He's a university professor, and this is his assistant. They said they want to talk to you for a bit."

"To me? I wonder what for."

Stepping away from the cooktop, Natsuko approached them.

Takatsuki smiled brightly at her.

"Hello. Have you been working here for a long time, Ms. Natsuko?"

"Yes, over thirty years already," Natsuko said in a gentle tone, nodding.

"I see, thirty years! A lot must have happened in that time!"

"Well, it's like I blinked and thirty years had passed by. All the people who were hired before me, and the ones who were brought on at the same time as me, over time, they all quit. Now they call me the most senior employee. It's embarrassing, like they're calling me 'granny.'"

"Oh, that's not true, it just means you know more about this inn than anyone else. I think it's a compliment. By the way—have you ever been inside the back storeroom, Ms. Natsuko?"

Natsuko shook her head in disbelief at Takatsuki's question.

"Of course not! No one is allowed in there except the head of the household!"

"Do you know the reason for that?"

"No, I just heard that that's the rule. Sometimes the employees here joke about it being because there are treasures or something in there."

"Treasures! This is an old inn, so it wouldn't be surprising if that were true. Incidentally, I heard that Miss Shiho's biological mother was in that room before she disappeared. Could she have had some business that required her to go inside, despite the fact that only the head of the household can go in?"

Gradually, Takatsuki arrived at the real matter at hand. Natsuko had been smiling placidly as they spoke, but at that, her expression stiffened slightly.

"Well—**even if you ask me, I'm sure I have no idea.**"

Natsuko's voice creaked and warped. Naoya put a hand to his ear.

She knew.

She knew why Shiho's mother had needed to go into the storeroom.

For just a moment, Natsuko's gaze flicked to Shiho. Was she not answering because she was worried about Shiho?

Just then, they heard Shiho's stepmother call from the front of the inn.

"Shiho, sorry, but could you come here for a bit?"

"Huh? What is it? You know I have company right now!" Shiho responded loudly, popping her head out of the kitchen.

"You see, there's a customer here who speaks English. He's lost and wants directions. I can't help him!"

"What? You're kidding…! Ugh, fine, I guess I have no choice!"

Ruffling her bangs, Shiho turned to look at Takatsuki.

"I'm sorry, Professor, but I have to go for a little while. I might need to take the customer where he needs to get to, so it could take some time…"

"Oh, that's fine. I'll take care of things here. If I figure anything out, I'll let you know later."

"I'm really sorry! See you!"

Shiho ran off.

Watching her go, Natsuko said, "We get a lot of foreign guests at

inns like this. Sometimes even people who aren't staying here come to ask for directions."

"You go as far as guiding people who aren't even staying here?"

"Yes. After all, they've come all the way to Japan from some faraway place. We want them to go home with a good impression, don't we? Shiho is great at English, so that's a big help."

Natsuko's eyes narrowed affectionately. Perhaps she thought of Shiho as a grandchild.

"Ms. Natsuko," Takatsuki said, looking at her. "You know something about Miss Shiho's mother's disappearance, don't you?"

"…What are you talking about?"

Laughing stiffly, Natsuko pulled at the hem of her apron and returned to the cooktop.

"I don't like that tone, Professor. You sound like a private eye or a police detective. What is it you're investigating?"

"Miss Shiho is concerned about the reason behind her biological mother's disappearance. She thinks it may be because of the mirror in that storeroom."

"Mirror? Oh, you mean the one with the purple cloth over it?"

"Yes. Miss Shiho called it the Purple Mirror."

"What's with that name? What a strange thing to call it, Shiho…"

Natsuko shrugged and looked into the stewing pot. Much of the liquid had already boiled out of it. She poked at the *tsukudani* with serving chopsticks and shook her head, as if to say it wasn't quite done yet.

Then, glancing in the direction Shiho had run off to, she let out a soft sigh.

"…Professor."

"Yes?"

"I don't mind telling you," she said. "But I'd prefer it if you didn't tell Shiho."

Takatsuki nodded.

"Understood. I won't tell her, so could you please share what you know with me?"

"—Shiho's mother isn't the only one who disappeared back then," Natsuko said in a rushed tone. "Someone else, a young man who

worked here at the time, also disappeared… You understand what I'm saying, don't you?"

"You mean—they ran away together?"

Takatsuki's eyes narrowed.

Picking up some *tsukudani* in the chopsticks, Natsuko popped it into her mouth.

"I always thought those two were up to something. They were often seen holed up in that storeroom together."

"The one that says only the head of the household is allowed to enter?"

"It's not like it's locked or anything. If they wanted to go in, they could, of course. Some people saw Rika—that's Shiho's mother—coming out of that room while adjusting her kimono. And it goes without saying what a man and a woman would be doing behind closed doors together."

At Natsuko's words, Naoya felt the entire premise of the case turn on its head.

A room at the back of the house where no one but the head of the household was allowed to enter—

In other words, it was also a room people wouldn't usually barge into.

Had Shiho's mother used it as a place to meet with the employee she was having an affair with?

"Ahh… So that's why Ms. Rika always told young Miss Shiho not to go into that room?"

Natsuko shrugged dramatically.

"Well, I suppose she couldn't let her daughter see her having an affair. So then one day, the two of them vanished. According to Shiho's father, they took some of the inn's money, too."

"…But Miss Shiho said she was in the courtyard the whole time," Naoya interjected, without thinking. "Wouldn't she have known if the storeroom door had opened?"

Natsuko waved his question away.

"To think! Shiho was seven at the time. There's no way she would have been able to keep an eye on the storeroom door that entire time. She might have gotten distracted by the goldfish in the pond

or run off to the bathroom at some point."

"But…"

Despite Naoya's misgivings, it was indeed possible that Shiho's memory was flawed.

It was, after all, a memory from her childhood. If she had believed that was how things went when she told them about it, even Naoya's ears wouldn't have been able to tell the difference.

Takatsuki sighed.

"Now that you mention it, there's a tree growing right in front of that storeroom. If it was there at the time, it certainly could have served as a screen."

"What, so then Miss Shiho's mother's disappearance wasn't caused by the mirror…?"

"Right. She probably eloped, like Ms. Natsuko said. And remember, there was a door leading to the outside near that storeroom. I expect it would have been possible for them to leave the storeroom using the tree as a cover and escape through that door. Although the door was bolted from the inside, so if they really did leave that way, it should have been immediately obvious. I think the mirror in that storeroom simply reminded Ms. Rika of the 'Purple Mirror' story, and that's why she told Miss Shiho about it to discourage her from the room."

That was why no one except Shiho's mother had referred to the mirror as the Purple Mirror.

Her mother hadn't wanted her to wander into that storeroom.

But children were more likely to want to do something they weren't supposed to do.

And so Shiho's mother had made use of the fear that ghost stories inspired.

For young children, scary stories created real terror. If someone told them there was a cursed mirror, they weren't likely to go anywhere near it.

"Hmm, the truth is surprisingly boring… Plus, I definitely can't tell her about this. What am I to do?"

Takatsuki looked at Naoya and smiled.

Shiho still hadn't returned. She was probably kindly guiding the

foreign tourist who had lost his way. Takatsuki had said he would contact her if he found anything out, but if he told her what he had just learned, it was sure to hurt her. Leaving things at "her mother disappeared because of the mirror's curse" might be preferable to telling her the truth—that her mother had run away with a young man she was having an affair with.

Suddenly, Takatsuki turned toward the hallway.

"Is there someone there?" he called.

After a short time, a small middle-aged man in work clothes peered around the kitchen doorway. His hair was graying above his stubbornly set brow.

Natsuko turned back around to face the pot with a look of clear worry. She stood with her back fully facing them, as if to say she was uninvolved in the situation, and poked at the *tsukudani* with her chopsticks.

The man glared sourly in their direction, and Takatsuki smiled at him in return.

"Are you Miss Shiho's father, by any chance?"

The man nodded wordlessly at Takatsuki's question.

He did bear a vague resemblance to Shiho when one looked closer. They had been told he was out of the house, but he must have come home at some point. Given that he had been outside the kitchen, he had probably overheard their conversation with Natsuko.

Shiho's father jerked his chin toward Takatsuki.

"…Who're you?"

"I was asked by Miss Shiho to come investigate the mirror in this house. Miss Shiho believes her biological mother disappeared due to the mirror's curse and was afraid that the same curse would befall her."

"…That's ridiculous," Shiho's father muttered.

"Her mother vanishing was a huge event for Miss Shiho," Takatsuki said. "She wasn't satisfied with merely leaving it as a mysterious disappearance. At the time, I hear, you told her to forget about it. But Miss Shiho couldn't forget. It's still bothering her."

"She's better off forgetting it anyway… Rika is never coming back."

Shiho's father sighed.

Looking back up at Takatsuki, he continued, "That's enough. Please leave. Regardless of what Shiho believes, **that mirror isn't behind her mother's disappearance.**"

Naoya startled at the sudden distortion in his voice.

Takatsuki's eyes widened.

He put a hand on Naoya's shoulder, then turned to Shiho's father and asked, "Do you know the truth about Ms. Rika's disappearance?"

"Of course I do. **As you were just talking about—she ran away with a lover, to my embarrassment.**"

"Isn't Ms. Rika's disappearance the fault of that mirror?"

"I just told you, **the mirror had nothing to do with it. Rika ran off somewhere with a male employee and some of the inn's money. When she disappeared, the bolt on the corner door of the courtyard was unlatched. There's no doubt about it.**"

Lies.

Shiho's father was lying.

But what in the world did that mean?

With both of his hands covering his ears, Naoya stared at Shiho's father.

He knew the truth of Rika's disappearance.

Shiho's mother didn't elope with someone.

Did that mean—that the mirror was the reason she disappeared?

The next moment, Takatsuki started laughing. Loudly.

"Ha-ha-ha… Ah-ha-ha-ha. I see, so that's it! So that's how it is…!"

Naoya looked up at the professor's face and felt a chill run down his spine.

All at once, Takatsuki's laughter stopped. He looked at Shiho's father.

"Mr. Matsui, I have a favor to ask."

Takatsuki was significantly taller than the other man. As if trying to loom over him, the professor leaned in close to stare into Mr. Matsui's face.

"Could you show me that mirror?"

"…Why?"

Shiho's father took a small step backward, as if intimidated by Takatsuki.

Takatsuki, however, only moved in closer.

"Because I want to know the truth. The truth about that mirror and about this inn."

Suddenly, Takatsuki's eyes turned blue. Shiho's father gasped.

That deep, dark indigo gaze peered into Mr. Matsui's eyes.

"You know, don't you? What that mirror really is. I was told it's a rule that no one can enter that storeroom except for the head of the household. That's you, at present. That means you're the one making offerings in front of that mirror."

"Yes, but…"

Speaking stiffly, Mr. Matsui stared up into Takatsuki's eyes, as though he couldn't look away. He probably had no idea what he was looking up at. The bottomless night sky spread out inside Takatsuki's gaze. If he looked closely, he would clearly see the twinkling of real stars. Shiho's father stood there, stock-still, a single tremor shaking his body. Natsuko had turned to look at them, her expression bewildered. But from where she was standing, Takatsuki's face probably wasn't visible. She wouldn't notice those indigo eyes or the genuine night sky they held in their depths.

"Please, Mr. Matsui. If you could. No matter what it takes, I want to know the truth. Please let me see it—that mirror."

"…I, understand," Shiho's father murmured, still looking into Takatsuki's eyes.

Then Takatsuki blinked. In an instant, the night sky disappeared from his gaze.

Startled, Mr. Matsui stumbled back. Takatsuki reached out to grab his arm, holding him upright.

"What is it? Are you okay, Mr. Matsui?"

"Y-you… What are you?"

"—Well then, let's go to the back storeroom."

A stark smile stood out on Takatsuki's face. Mr. Matsui looked at him with frightened eyes and shook off the professor's hand.

They started walking, with Takatsuki taking the lead and Shiho's father following after him. They were headed for the storeroom.

Naoya followed behind the two older men, but he didn't want to go. He didn't want to feel that strange tightness in his chest ever again.

Nevertheless, Takatsuki's long legs made short work of the walk to the storeroom.

The moment Takatsuki opened the sliding door, Naoya was hit with that unpleasant sensation once more.

As before, the air was heavy. Naoya couldn't believe how calm Takatsuki was. Shiho's father didn't seem to be feeling anything in particular, either. Apparently, it was only Naoya who felt it. But how was that possible?

Takatsuki stepped into the storeroom. Shiho's father did, too. Reluctantly, Naoya followed suit.

He had no sooner set foot on the slightly worn tatami floor than he felt his heart tremble. Everything in the room, from the air to the feel of the tatami mats, was unbearable. Naoya was so frightened, all he wanted to do was turn and run, but he had no idea where his fear was coming from. He didn't think the smell of camphor had anything to do with it.

It was just that, somehow, he felt as though he had experienced a similar sensation before.

"Mr. Matsui. What exactly is this mirror?" Takatsuki asked, standing in front of the mirror draped in purple cloth.

"...It's an ordinary full-length mirror."

Shiho's father's voice warped as he answered. Reflexively, Naoya covered his ears.

Looking at Naoya's expression, Takatsuki furrowed his brow quizzically. He seemed to have noticed that something was off with Naoya, and Naoya tried to tell him: *We need to leave this room. This place is bad news.* But for some reason, the words were stuck in his throat.

Takatsuki returned his gaze to Shiho's father.

"This cover was off when Ms. Rika disappeared, I believe… Can I remove this cloth?"

"Don't!"

For the first time, Mr. Matsui raised his voice.

"Why? If it's just a regular full-length mirror, it should be fine."

"…It's said that if anyone other than the head of the household sees their reflection in that mirror, their image will be taken."

"Their image?"

"It means—their life. Or their soul. The mirror sucks them up."

Takatsuki turned to Naoya, who shook his head. Mr. Matsui's voice hadn't distorted.

For a little while, Takatsuki lowered his eyes, as if in thought. Then suddenly, he reached for the purple cloth.

Instinctively, Naoya tried to stop him.

"Professor, don't do that—!"

But he was too late.

Takatsuki grabbed the mirror's cover and ripped it off in one motion.

The mirror appeared from underneath the cloth. It was large, rectangular, and rimless.

The figures of Takatsuki, Naoya, and Shiho's father were all reflected in its spotless, well-polished surface.

It was just a mirror. There was nothing strange about the images reflected there.

But the next moment—

The surface of the mirror suddenly fogged up as though someone had breathed on it. It was like the whole mirror was covered in a white mist; they couldn't see anything in it.

His eyes widening, Takatsuki tried to lean in closer to the mirror. Without his even thinking about it, Naoya's hands shot out and stopped him. He mustn't get any closer to the mirror. This mirror was no good. Naoya could see that clearly, so why couldn't Takatsuki?

And then—

As quickly as it had appeared, the mist obscuring the mirror's surface cleared up.

But something was off.

Neither Takatsuki, Naoya, nor Shiho's father were reflected in the mirror. The storeroom itself wasn't even reflected there.

The image in the mirror was a landscape Naoya had never seen before.

The ground was a strange reddish brown, with only sparse patches of grass growing here and there. Beyond that was a smooth white wall. The wall had one single large gate with a Chinese-style roof. The roof of the building visible on the other side of the wall was also the kind often seen in Chinese movies.

What is this? Naoya thought.

They were looking at a mirror, but it was like the mirror was showing them an image of some other place.

Naoya remembered Takatsuki saying that mirrors served as both windows and doors to other worlds.

Mirrors, it was said, could lead to the past, the future, and even to other places entirely.

In that case, where exactly was this world they were seeing now?

Before long, the gate inside the mirror began to open. It made no sound. But for some reason, in his head, Naoya clearly felt as though he heard the creaking of hinges.

There were a lot of people on the other side of the gate.

They were all dressed quite differently. Some of them matched the scenery in Chinese-style dress, while others wore Western or Japanese clothes. There was even an old man in long underwear and *haramaki*. At his side, Naoya heard Shiho's father whisper, "Rika." Confused, Naoya looked closer and noticed that among the people standing in the gate, there was a woman in her thirties, wearing a kimono. Next to her stood a young man in work clothes. Were they really Shiho's long-lost mother and the male employee?

None of the people moved forward through the gate; they merely stood there in a line. Their ashen faces were expressionless, and their eyes, like black holes, stared blankly toward Naoya and the others.

The moment his gaze met theirs, Naoya's entire body went oddly cold, and he startled.

An image flashed briefly on the inside of Naoya's eyelids—blue lanterns. Deep in his ears, he heard the *boom*, *boom*, *buh-boom* of drums, and his knees shook helplessly.

It was obvious now why he hated this room.

It felt similar, the atmosphere in the storeroom.

It felt like—like that midnight festival.

The people in the mirror weren't wearing masks, but Naoya knew.

Not a single one of those people was alive.

"Pr— …Professor."

Naoya called out to Takatsuki. The sweat pouring out of him from head to toe was cold.

We can't, he thought. *We can't be here. We have to get away from here right now.*

"Professor, let's go…"

Feeling like he was going to vomit, Naoya pleaded with Takatsuki.

But Takatsuki just kept staring into the mirror, as if mesmerized.

At that moment, all the people standing inside the gate reached toward them in unison.

At the same time, countless hands came bursting out of the mirror. Half transparent, the hands seemed utterly unreal. The hands were also unmistakably trying to grab hold of them.

"Professor!"

All of a sudden, Takatsuki's eyes glowed blue.

His hands shot out toward the mirror, crossing through the spectral arms. He gripped the edges of the mirror in his long fingers and—with no small amount of force—knocked the mirror backward.

The mirror fell.

The spectral hands went with it, waving through the air wildly, like a flesh-colored anemone.

A huge *crash* resounded in Naoya's ears, making him jump.

He felt like someone had dumped a bucket of cold water over his head.

Looking down, he saw the mirror lying on the tatami floor with huge cracks running through it. Parts of it had shattered completely, scattering tiny shards everywhere. There were no longer any phantom hands to be seen, and all that was reflected in the broken surface of the mirror was the ceiling of the room.

Staring down at the sight, Naoya let out a trembling breath.

The atmosphere in the storeroom had obviously shifted. Traces of fear lingered in Naoya's heart, but the strange tightness in his chest

had disappeared.

With the mirror shattered, the door to the other world had closed.

Naoya looked up at Takatsuki standing beside him.

Takatsuki was looking down at the mirror, his face blank.

His eyes still shone with blue light. Gradually, the blue faded from those intense indigo eyes like receding waves. The moment his eyes returned completely to their original color, Takatsuki's shoulders twitched.

He blinked. Naoya thought he heard a small "huh?" escape through Takatsuki's lips.

Once more looking down at the mirror lying at his feet, Takatsuki took a startled step back.

"Huh…? Oh, um! I'm so sorry, Mr. Matsui…!"

In a panic, Takatsuki turned to Shiho's father with pronounced bewilderment in his eyes and started apologizing.

"I'm sorry. I think I accidentally bumped into it. I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, um, I don't know whether or not I can pay for it or something. Oh, what do we do…?"

"—It's fine," Shiho's father said, trying to stop Takatsuki from repeatedly bowing in apology.

"Huh?" Takatsuki said again, looking at Mr. Matsui.

"It's okay… Really, I should have done this a long time ago."

"B-but this is a family heirloom, isn't it? So…"

"It's not a family heirloom. It's a curse that was put on my family. We should have destroyed it right away."

Mr. Matsui's tone was firm.

Takatsuki stared at him, confusion still present in his eyes.

"This mirror… How did it come to be in your family?"

"—I heard it was taken from someone back in my grandfather's day as payment for a debt. The truth is that many people have disappeared because of this mirror. My grandfather called it the 'man-eating mirror.'"

"Man-eating mirror…?"

"I've seen it take someone right before my very eyes," Shiho's father said. "My grandmother was combing her hair in front of this mirror and suddenly disappeared. When I told my grandfather, he

told me to forget about it. He said, 'You didn't see anything. It wasn't your fault. Just forget about it.'"

Forget—that was the same thing Shiho's father had said to her when her mother vanished.

But how could someone forget a beloved family member disappearing?

"Why keep it if you knew it was man-eating?" Takatsuki asked.

"Because business has been good ever since we got it," Shiho's father said, practically spitting the words out. "I think my grandfather probably learned what kind of mirror this was when he took it from the debtor. This mirror obeys the head of the household. It doesn't eat the head of the family. So 'Put it in a room where no one goes and make offerings to it.' That's what my grandfather said when he left it to my father. And after my father, I… Business has indeed been going well for a long time. Even when all the other inns around us were struggling, our family—our family alone—was always fine. But that's because…this mirror, with its power to eat people, has been protecting us."

Shiho's father covered his face with both hands.

"The people reflected in the mirror earlier… Rika was among them. So was my grandmother and the man who disappeared along with Rika, too. Everyone…they were all eaten by this mirror."

He looked down at the mirror again and continued in a tearful voice.

"Breaking the mirror now was the right thing to do. If you hadn't, I would have forced Shiho to inherit this inn along with its curse… If only I had broken it sooner…Rika wouldn't have…"

Suddenly, they heard the lively sound of someone running down the corridor.

"Hold on, oh no, Professor! Why are you in the storeroom?! I told you no one is allowed to go in there…! Wait. Dad? Huh? What's going on…? What the—? Wait, the mirror broke?!"

It was Shiho.

She seemed to have just returned from showing the foreign tourist around. Seeing the devastation inside the storeroom, she cried out.

“What the heck happened?! Professor, you’re not hurt, right? And Dad, are you crying?! Oh no, no, no, gosh, what’s wrong? You’re a grown man. Don’t tell me you’re crying because a mirror you don’t even use broke…”

Surprised at the crying face her father wore when he turned around, Shiho spoke in a flustered voice. Walking over to his side, she patted his back as if to comfort him. She looked at Naoya with an expression that said, “What is going on here?” But Naoya had no idea where to begin explaining it to her.

Shiho’s father sniffled loudly.

“…Shiho. You don’t want to take over the inn?”

“Huh? Um, I mean…I’m not cut out to run an inn. I could help out sometimes, but there’s no way I could run it all by myself.”

“I see. Then I guess there’s nothing to be done,” Mr. Matsui said, rubbing at his face with the sleeves of his work clothes.

Shiho’s eyes widened.

“What?! Dad, what did you just say?! Did you just say it’s okay if I don’t take over the inn?!”

“If you really don’t want to, I just thought that might be fine… We can talk about this more later. More importantly, can you bring me a broom and dustpan? I need to clean this up.”

“Oh, yeah, got it. But—hey, you better not forget what you just said! Don’t tell me later that you don’t remember, okay?!”

Shiho ran back down the corridor. Her father wiped at his face with his sleeves again and muttered, “It might have been impossible for her to take over in the first place, as unsettled as she is.”

“Are you sure about this?” Takatsuki asked. “Truly…? Miss Shiho, she’ll be really pleased.”

“Yes. I’m sure.”

Shiho’s father nodded and knelt on the tatami floor. He reached for the base of the fallen mirror.

Naoya had thought only the mirror had broken, but its wooden base, with its intricate fretwork, was also shattered in places. Seeing that made Naoya wonder, had the impact really been strong enough to cause damage to that extent? If it had fallen from a high place or onto a concrete floor, that would have been one thing, but was

toppling over onto a tatami mat enough to break it that much?

No—something was strange.

Looking closely, Naoya saw that the wooden base was blackened, as though it had rotted through. Taken aback, he turned his gaze to the mirror to see that, where only a short while ago it had been sparklingly clear, its surface was now cloudy and riddled with brown spots. It looked like it had aged hundreds of years.

The mirror seemed to have completely lost its power.

"I always thought that this inn would have to continue on because of this mirror. If someone didn't become head of the family and inherit this mirror, it would surely eat people indiscriminately—at least, that's what I thought. And yet."

Mr. Matsui casually tossed aside a fragment of the mirror's broken base.

"If the mirror is gone…if the curse is gone, then there's no need for that anymore… Although the family business is the family business, so I'll have to discuss the details a bit more with Shiho."

The look on Shiho's father's face was bright.

He had probably been bound by the mirror's curse—his family's curse that he continued to bear even after the mirror took his grandmother and even his wife—for a long time.

It was possible he and Shiho would still have some small disagreement over whether or not she would take over the inn. But that would amount to no more than a conversation between parent and child.

Shiho returned shortly after with a broom, dustpan, and gloves. Together, father and daughter began cleaning up the broken mirror. The shattered pieces were gathered and tossed into a garbage bag. Noticing the cracked and dirty fragments, Shiho grimaced.

Takatsuki watched the two of them work for a little while before he spoke.

"Well then, I think we should be going now."

"Oh, thanks a bunch, Professor…! The mirror broke, but well. It turns out it wasn't a Purple Mirror after all, huh?"

Shiho turned to Takatsuki, still holding the broom.

"No, it wasn't," Takatsuki replied. "This isn't a Purple Mirror, and

of course you won't die when you turn twenty. You can rest assured… Well then, take good care of your father, okay?"

Shiho called out in the affirmative. Behind her, her father bowed deeply.

As they left the inn and started walking, both Naoya and Takatsuki were silent for a while.

It was still early for the sun to set, but somehow their surroundings felt gloomy. Perhaps because the alley they were walking down was a narrow one, the nearby buildings may have been blocking out the light.

Instead of going back the way they came, Takatsuki just went where his feet took him. From what Naoya could tell, they were headed roughly in the direction of the station, so he merely followed behind the professor.

Takatsuki walked a step ahead of him.

Staring at his back, Naoya called out.

"…Professor?"

"What is it, Fukamachi?" Takatsuki responded without turning around.

"—Earlier, when you broke the mirror, do you remember it?"

Takatsuki was silent.

Naoya asked again.

"A memory of breaking the mirror. Do you have it?"

"…No."

Takatsuki stopped walking and turned slowly toward Naoya. His face was a little pale.

"I remember up until the hands came out of the mirror. But…after that, the next thing I knew, the mirror had fallen over and broken."

I knew it, Naoya thought.

The way Takatsuki's eyes had glowed in that moment when he knocked the mirror over. The unfamiliar expressionless look he had worn.

That had been the *other* Takatsuki.

"Professor…are you okay?" Naoya asked, wondering how many

times those exact words had come out of his mouth.

Takatsuki didn't answer.

A faint smile played on his lips—and he turned slowly back around.

He started walking again at a slow pace, and Naoya trailed after him.

If the *other* Takatsuki hadn't appeared, both Takatsuki and Naoya might have been drawn into the mirror. After all, they were told that the mirror would devour anyone reflected in it who wasn't the head of the Matsui family.

Naoya imagined how it happened the day that Shiho's mother disappeared.

She had met with that young man countless times in that storeroom. They brought their lips, their bodies together. They whispered sweet nothings, using that room as their treasured but immoral secret spot.

She probably hadn't known what that mirror really was.

Or even if her husband had told her, she probably hadn't believed him.

When she met with the young man, the mirror stayed covered. It remained there, its magical powers hidden, as though it were nothing more than a simple piece of furniture.

Why had the cover come off the mirror that day?

Had she reached for the cloth unconsciously while entwined with her lover, grasping at its edge and pulling it down? Or perhaps, after the deed was done, she had tried to use the full-length mirror to fix her hair or her kimono.

When the purple cloth slid off, the mirror's surface was revealed. What had Shiho's mother thought of the scene reflected there? Naoya wondered.

And so she was swallowed up by the mirror, along with the man she had been having an affair with.

Even though the mirror was broken, the people it had eaten didn't come back. Whatever the world inside the mirror was, there was no way to save someone from it once they'd been taken.

Naoya and Takatsuki had been protected. By the *other* Takatsuki.

"…As if I'd allow it."

Naoya looked up, thinking he'd heard someone say something.

Takatsuki was walking a few paces ahead of him.

He heard another low mutter.

"As if I'd allow anyone to do that to Akira."

Naoya felt all the hair on his body stand on end.

That voice was Takatsuki's; he knew it well. A voice that was strangely clear and resonant.

And yet it was also completely unlike Takatsuki's usual tone. Takatsuki didn't speak like that, in a voice devoid of even the barest shred of emotion.

Without thinking, Naoya reached out and grabbed his arm.

Takatsuki turned around.

His eyes, so deeply indigo that it seemed like they would draw Naoya in, stared down at him coldly.

"Professor."

Looking up into those eyes, Naoya called out.

"Professor…Professor Takatsuki!"

When Naoya had met this *other* Takatsuki for the first time, back in Yamanashi, he'd called the professor's name forcefully like this, and Takatsuki had come back to himself. So, he thought, that was sure to work now.

But Takatsuki just tilted his head slightly and continued to stare down at him. His eyes were still the color of the dark night sky, and Naoya shuddered.

"Professor…"

Suddenly, Takatsuki bent down, bringing his face in close.

Looking at his handsome features, which he knew so well and yet which felt like they belonged to a stranger in that moment, Naoya couldn't help but tense up.

He heard Takatsuki inhale softly through his nose.

"—As I thought. You still smell like the underworld," Takatsuki said.

No—this wasn't Takatsuki. This was the *other* one.

"It's because you got nearer to the underworld than Akira did. That's why you remember it so well—the air of the land of the dead."

Staring at Naoya from inches away with his faintly glowing night-sky eyes, the *other* Takatsuki turned up the corners his lips ever so slightly.

He was smiling—at least, Naoya thought he was.

"I must thank you," that emotionless voice murmured. "You have my gratitude for bringing Akira back from the underworld back then."

That voice, which belonged to Takatsuki but somehow was not his, sounded somehow dreadfully terrifying.

Unable to move, Naoya continued to look up at the *other* Takatsuki.

His instincts were screaming at him that it was dangerous to stare into those eyes any further, but Naoya couldn't stop looking. That gaze, with the real night sky cradled in its depths, peered at him from a mere breath away. Desperately, Naoya searched those eyes for the regular Takatsuki. He had to be there, somewhere in there. Naoya was sure of it.

But before he could find him, the *other* Takatsuki suddenly pulled away. He dislodged Naoya's grip on his arm with a small movement and, once again, turned slowly back around.

He started walking.

Leaving Naoya behind, he set off alone, going who knew where.

"P-professor!" Naoya shouted so loudly even he was surprised.

From behind, he saw Takatsuki jolt.

"—Eh? What's wrong, Fukamachi?"

Takatsuki turned around, his expression full of alarm. Naoya rushed over to him and looked up into his face.

His eyes were their usual dark brown, and his features were as kindly as ever.

The moment he saw Naoya's face, however, Takatsuki gasped softly.

He'd realized, likely because of the way Naoya was looking at him.

"…Fukamachi, was I, just now…?"

Naoya clenched his teeth.

Right, he thought.

Every time the *other* Takatsuki appeared, there were gaps in the

professor's memory, like a moth-eaten old coat.

Naoya wondered if this had happened before and he just hadn't noticed.

Somehow, it felt like the *other* Takatsuki was coming out more frequently.

For him to just smoothly switch places with Takatsuki like that, when he wasn't even unconscious, was…

"—Fukamachi."

Takatsuki grabbed Naoya's arm.

"What did I just do?"

The grip on his arm hurt, and Naoya grimaced a little.

Takatsuki didn't seem to notice. Expression unrelenting, he asked again.

"Did I say something to you…? Did I…do something to you?"

"You thanked me, actually."

"…Thanked you?"

"Yes. And that hurts."

He shook Takatsuki's hand off gently.

Takatsuki stared at him in bewilderment.

Naoya rubbed his arm, which continued to ache a little.

"He said he was grateful that I brought you back from the underworld."

"……Umm, it sounds like the 'other' me is surprisingly conscientious."

"I wonder. I think the *other* you probably likes you quite a bit. Also, he said I smell like the underworld. Apparently, it's because I got closer to it than you did… He sort of…sniffed me."

"What does the 'other' me think it's doing, using my body like that…?" Takatsuki replied, covering his face with one hand at the *other* Takatsuki's shockingly unrestrained behavior.

Then roughly shoving his bangs back away from his face, he sighed.

"Seriously, I guess I can't let my guard down. I really wish it wouldn't just take over my body without permission."

Takatsuki said those words half jokingly, but at the end, just a little, Naoya thought he heard them tremble.

…It was scary. Even to Takatsuki.

He had no memories of the periods when the *other* Takatsuki was out.

"Professor," Naoya said.

He looked back up at Takatsuki, lifting his head.

"—See? It's fine, right?"

"Huh?"

Takatsuki looked puzzled.

Naoya met his gaze.

"I remembered, so it's fine," he said, pretty sure that he had managed to put on a smile. "You know."

For a moment, Takatsuki was quiet, staring down at him.

Then suddenly, the corners of his mouth turned up, and he put a hand on Naoya's head.

"…That's right. You promised."

"I'd like a raise for my increased role as your external memory device."

"…You've been getting more and more impertinent lately, you know."

"Ah, hey!"

As he often did, Takatsuki ruffled Naoya's hair. Naoya hurried to escape from his hand.

Takatsuki turned on his heel, not bothering to pursue as Naoya fled.

"Professor? Where are you going?"

"Well, I thought I'd do a little shopping on Nakamise-dori before heading home. I want to get souvenirs for my grad students and KenKen. And for you, Fukamachi, as compensation for your work as my external memory device today, I think I'll buy some sort of toy with a really Showa era vibe. I'm sure I saw a shop selling things like that. You'd better treasure it."

"No, I don't need something like that!"

Naoya chased after Takatsuki, who was laughing as he made his way swiftly toward Nakamise-dori.

As they walked, Naoya recalled the words the *other* Takatsuki had said earlier.

—"As if I'd allow it."

Those words spoke of a strong attachment.

There was one thing Naoya had learned from this incident.

Setting aside the memories issue and such, Naoya didn't think that the *other* Takatsuki was actually an enemy to Takatsuki at all. Considering the thanks for bringing the professor back from the underworld and the protection from the mirror at Shiho's house, in a sense, they could consider the *other* Takatsuki to be Takatsuki's guardian.

But nevertheless—as long as they didn't know what the *other* Takatsuki really was, they couldn't let their guards down.

After all, the *other* Takatsuki could continue to steal the professor's memories.

…*Try it*, Naoya thought.

Even if Takatsuki's memories kept being erased, Naoya would continue to relay what was lost.

He had promised.

Even if Takatsuki forgot what he saw with his own eyes.

No matter how many times the *other* Takatsuki stole his memories away.

Naoya had promised that he would remember it all.

That meant no matter what happened in the future, Naoya would be at Takatsuki's side, seeing things through.

As he followed in Takatsuki's wake, Naoya was full of quiet resolve.

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